

Reckless
by myheartisinohio | KH

Chapter One

“At the end of the day, other people ask themselves: Is this all there is? I don’t want to wait for the answer. I’m not stupid. I don’t wait to see if today will be better than yesterday, because I already know. And these pills are deep inside of me. What person could ever get this close? Who would want to? And I swear to you, and I don’t care how this sounds, I think it’s love. If you don’t understand, you don’t know what love is.” –Elizabeth Wurtzel

81 days sober

I am never, ever late to a meeting, but I am pretty much always *almost* late. Every Thursday night, I slip into the meeting room at the Lakewood Rehabilitation Center at exactly eight o’clock, just as Ryan says, “Okay, guys, we’re going to get started.”

There are ten metal folding chairs set up in the circle, but only seven of them are occupied. I sink into the seat between Noel and Jason, who kicks the ankle of my boot in greeting. When I shoot him a questioning look and incline my head towards the cluster of empty chairs, he shrugs. I blink back around at the other group members. It’s not that I expect a full house at every meeting, because I don’t. Sometimes people have to work instead, and sometimes people briefly switch from the outpatient meetings to even less frequent Narcotics Anonymous meetings. They all come back. Since I entered rehab in June, our group has been comprised of the same ten people— nine addicts and one counselor. In three months, there has never been more than one empty chair at any given meeting.

“Before we start sharing, I have some things I need to tell you,” Ryan says, his eyes fixed to his ever-present clipboard. “First, I want to remind everyone that we’re still taking sign-ups for next month’s dry retreat. We’re going to be heading up to the woods to camp out, try to really dig deep into our issues, have a cook-out. It should be fun, and we still have space.” I glower at him. Both he and Doc have been trying to convince me to go on that stupid retreat, ever since it came up a few months ago; I’m beginning to wonder if they’re trying to hint that it’s not optional for me. Ryan is unwilling to indulge my bad temper, so he continues, “Now... there’s no pleasant way for me to say this, so I’ll just come out with it. Two of our group members won’t be with us anymore. Anna Maria has chosen to return to inpatient treatment, so she’s going to be assigned to a new group.”

This isn’t surprising— Anna Maria showed up high to our last meeting. I hadn’t even noticed, not until afterward, when Jason and I went out for coffee and he had told me, his voice tight, that he could tell she’d shot up before coming. Then, it was almost funny to me that we had such different ideas of what *high* meant. I’d looked at Anna, with her slow, careful voice and heavy-lidded eyes, and seen a cold; Jason had looked at her and seen heroin. I bet if Shelby, the only other coke addict, showed up shifting in her seat and grinding her teeth together, Jason would see anxiety where I’d see blow. On the off chance that such a problem has presented itself, I look around for Shelby, but she isn’t there.

I know what Ryan is going to say before he says it.

“I’m also incredibly sad to have to tell you all this, but Shelby passed away last Wednesday.”

The answering silence is deafening. Henry turns his head back and forth, as if searching to make sure that Shelby isn’t just hiding out of sight; Linda has one hand clamped over her mouth, though I can’t tell if it’s because she’s trying to hold in sobs or because she’s going to be sick. And then Elizabeth leans around Noel on my left to grip my knee. I squeeze my eyes shut. That’s the shittiest thing about a group this small— everyone knows each other too well. Everyone knows that Shelby was a cokehead, and everyone knows that I still am, and everyone knows that now, it’s just me. There are so many things I want to say, and I can feel everyone’s eyes on me anyway, so I say, “Did she do it?”

"Come on, G, I can't tell you something like that," Ryan says, apologetic but unyielding. Doesn't matter, I already know the answer. I know it right down to my bones, where I can still feel the sting and shame of my own pitiful, months-past suicide attempt, still feel the weight of the Glock against my palm and the sharp pain in my nose from the one and only time Travis McCall ever hit me.

It's not fair. It's not fair that we're all supposed to be getting over this, but Shelby just gave up on herself, on all of us. It's not fair that she left her family to pick up the pieces, and it's sure as shit not fair that she left me here as the lone cokehead in the group.

"Garen, what are you feeling right now?" Ryan asks me.

"You know what I'm feeling."

"No, I don't. Not if you don't tell us."

He wants me to say that I want to use. He wants me to say I'm craving it, bad. I open my mouth to spit back all the lines he wants, about feeling *tempted*, and *anxious*, and *pressured*, but what comes out is, "I'm feeling like Shelby is a selfish cunt."

Elizabeth makes a soft noise of protest and finally releases my knee. I look around at her, and she says, in her fluttery whisper of a voice, "That's so inappropriate, G."

"No, 'inappropriate' is killing yourself when you've got a fucking family to take care of," I say. My tone is flat, but my heart is pounding. Everyone is staring at me. Maybe I should be embarrassed, because I'm sort of having one of those outbursts that Doc is always telling me I need to learn to control, but I'm not embarrassed. Not at all. I'm just furious, and I'm on a roll, too. "'Inappropriate' is forcing your husband and your children to spend years watching you wallow in your addiction, and then offing yourself the second things get a little hard. 'Inappropriate' is the fact that a week ago, when I told everybody that I was scared I wouldn't be able to deal with starting school again this week without using, that little *bitch* told me I needed to be 'stronger than my cravings.'"

"She was right," Jason says, letting his head loll on his neck so that his face is turned towards me. "Maybe she didn't take her own advice, but what are the rest of us supposed to do? Are we all supposed to give up on trying to stay sober just because Shelby and Anna Maria couldn't cut it?"

I slouch down in my seat and cross my arms over my chest, refusing to say another word. They always do this to me. They act like I'm a child, just because I'm the youngest person here, but it couldn't be further from the truth. I've been through as much as the rest of them, if not more, and I don't even lie about it. Elizabeth declared bankruptcy last year. She tells us it's because her family abandoned her in her time of need, but really, it's because she spent all her money on wine coolers. Noel got a DUI. He pretends that it made him see the light and want to change his ways, but he's only here because it satisfies his court-mandated rehabilitation. Henry constantly whines about only being able to see his kids every other weekend, and acts like his stingy visitation rights are tantamount to being nailed to the cross.

In the past three years, I've survived one attempt to shoot myself in the head, three comas, eight broken bones, two fractured ones, three separate acts of prostitution, twenty-six fistfights, two sexual assaults, two accidental drug overdoses, one abusive relationship, countless beatings, and endless blackouts. If a single one of these junkies or drunks is unwilling to think of me as a man, it's not because I haven't earned the right.

When the meeting ends at nine o'clock, most of the group immediately heads out into the parking lot for a smoke. It's a ritual at this point, something they tell me is typical of sobriety groups; the only reason we don't spend every meeting in a cloud of smoke is because LRC bans smoking anything indoors. Jason puts two cigarettes in his mouth, lights them both, and passes me one of them. I accept it, but continue towards my car. At Jason's questioning look, I make a face. "My dad told me to come home as soon as the meeting's over. I think he invited my mom over again, for some late dinner."

"Weird."

"You have no idea," I agree, tossing off a wave goodbye to everyone as I peel out of the parking lot.

Ever since I moved to outpatient, Mom has been coming over more and more frequently. First, to make sure the lease on the new house was settled properly; then, later, to drop off some things I left at her house last winter, after Dad kicked me out. Most recently, her excuse is the divorce. Personally, I think it's kind of twisted that Dad is having Mom, the woman he was married to for fifteen years and has been divorced from for four, act as his lawyer during his divorce from Evelyn, the woman he was married to for two months. Every time I mention it, Mom just smiles at me and tells me Dad will regret refusing to let her be awarded alimony payments when he sees how much her retainer is.

Dad swears he didn't choose the new house for its proximity to the LRC, but I know he's full of it. Regardless, I'm pulling into the driveway within ten minutes, parking my Ferrari next to Dad's car, the only other one there. I shuffle into the house, head for the kitchen, and announce, "Therapy on Tuesday? Check. Sobriety meeting on Thursday? Check. I have officially met my 'talking about my feelings' quota for the week, so don't expect me to exhibit any tolerance for or understanding of human emotions until my next session with Dr. Howard."

"Hey, kid," Dad says, glancing up from the stove.

I peer over his shoulder into the pan. The amount of vegetables in the stir-fry is way more than enough for the two of us, so Mom must be around here somewhere. Instead of mentioning this, though, I say, "Hi. Smells good."

"Hopefully it'll taste good. How was your meeting?" he asks.

I shrug and hop up onto the counter, banging the heels of my boots against the cabinets below. One of the boots slides halfway down my foot, and I pause to kick it back on. I've really got to get around to finding the laces that the LRC made me take out when I first checked in, this is getting ridiculous. Dad looks around at me, clearly expecting a further answer, so I say, "It kinda sucked, actually. I don't really want to talk about it right now, though."

"Hmm," is all he says at first. Then, after a brief glance over his shoulder, he says, "I noticed you didn't change the board today. Are you okay?"

Ah. The recovery board, a plain, nine-by-twelve dry-erase board with a thin ledge on the bottom side, just big enough to hold one fat marker and a fluffy gray eraser. Another one of Dr. Howard's brilliant ideas to keep reminding me of how far I've come. Most days, it just feels like another reminder of how much further I have to go (e.g. the rest of my life) but sometimes, replacing the daily tally is kind of fun. It was purchased just after I hit my sixtieth day sober, and in a little over a week, I'm sure I'll be practically pissing myself when I finally get to mark my ninetieth day. Now, though, I hop back off the counter, erase yesterday's message, and carefully print *81 days clean/sober*. Capping the marker, and I turn back around and say, "Forgot. Sorry. Are we having company for dinner?"

"Yeeeeeah, we are," Dad says slowly, like he was hoping I might not notice. When I just blink at him, he adds, "Your mom came down again today to go over some new details that The Other Lawyers have just presented her with."

Dad always says The Other Lawyers like it's a title of some huge, secret society, instead of just the duo of douchebags that my soon-to-be-former stepmother has hired to make sure she walks away from the divorce with as much as humanly possible, including all of my dad's assets, his income from long before their bullshit, two-month marriage, his savings, whatever he inherited when my grandfather died, and whatever I'm supposed to inherit when Dad someday eats it. There's no way she'll actually get everything she wants, and even her own kids think she's being unreasonable; Travis told me so himself, the last time

we spoke, a week ago.

"Evelyn still being a huge cunt about everything?" I ask.

Dad pokes me in the ribs with the clean end of the wooden spoon he's holding and scolds, "Garen, that's a completely inappropriate thing to say, and I don't like hearing such a crude, sexist word out of my son's mouth." I pretend to look properly chastised, and after a moment, he adds, "But yes, she is."

I roll my eyes. "God, I don't get it. You're letting her keep the house. You're letting her keep everything in the house that hadn't already been ours before everybody moved in. What else does she want?"

He is spared answering by the return of my mother, who doesn't bother to knock or ring the doorbell before she comes in, announcing, "I barely made it before they closed the store. Really, nine o'clock? I hate this puritanical little wasteland of a state." She appears in the doorway of the kitchen with a bottle in each hand. "Sauvignon blanc, not that there was much to choose from. You really should consider just moving to New York. Or at the very least, back to Ohio."

"You know, most moms would avoid double-fisting wine bottles when they're showing up to dinner with their alcoholic son," I say, smiling sunnily at her. "But not you, Mom. You're special."

"And you're having cider, provided you drop the attitude," Mom says, passing me one of the bottles. I make a face at the label. Sparkling Apple Cider. What am I, a five-year-old celebrating New Year's Eve? She adds, "If you'd prefer that your father shelves the wine, that's perfectly fine. We only bought it because you told me last week that you didn't want us to feel like we had to walk on eggshells around you."

I scowl. "I was just joking about the wine thing, Mom. Seriously, I'm fine now, I don't care if you guys want to drink around me. God."

Mom sets the wine bottle on the kitchen table, but doesn't open it. She gives me a pointed look, and I roll my eyes before starting to set the table for three. By the time I finish, the food is ready; Dad spoons some of the stir-fry out onto each of the plates, Mom dumps a pre-made salad into a bowl on the table, and I sit down across from my father and start to eat, even though my sobriety meetings pretty much always kill my appetite. After several minutes of silence, I finally set down my silverware and say, "So, what was the news from The Other Lawyers?"

"God, don't even get me started," Mom says, even though she loves when people get her started on her casework. To Dad, she adds, "The woman's a troll. I can only assume you found her through a mail-order bride website and didn't actually bother to speak to her before the wedding, because there's no other excuse for that marriage."

"She seemed much more reasonable at the time," Dad hedges.

"No, she didn't," I say, then after another bite of dinner, I repeat, "What happened?"

Dad sighs. "Right now, our issue is the college fund I set up for Travis."

I fumble my fork at that, and it clatters down onto my plate. Thankfully, both my parents have enough tact to pretend it hasn't happened. God, the fucking college money. I've had this conversation before, with my father and with Travis. Without that money, without the two hundred grand that Dad gladly set aside to fund his stepson's education, Travis can't afford to go to college, not without making plans to spend the rest of his life drowning in student loans. Knotting my fingers together under the table, I say, "Yeah? Are you um... trying to make sure you get it all back?"

"Not at all," Dad says quickly. "Whether he's part of my family or not, I still believe that Travis deserves the best education possible, at whatever university he chooses. And I'm happy to pay for that myself."

The *'because who the fuck knows if you'll even get around to graduating high school'* goes unsaid.

"The problem all comes down to your father and Evelyn McCall being unable to reach an agreement about how the money should be handled," Mom says. She finally grabs the waiter's corkscrew near the salad bowl and opens the bottle of wine. From the second the cork squeaks out and gets dropped onto the table, the light, fruity scent of the wine is almost overpowering. Sauvignon blanc is one of my favorite wines, with all the dry, citrus flavor I favor in white wines, with none of the sometimes-overpowering sweetness of something like riesling. I take a long sip from my water glass and try to focus on what my dad is saying.

"—most practical thing would be to set up a trust that he can access gradually. Something to the tune of fifty thousand at the start of each fall semester for the four years he's in college. From what I understand, he's more than comfortable with that idea and has no interest in actually collecting all of the money at once, but his mother's having none of that. She says the money should be hers to control, so that she doesn't have to worry about Travis going off to college and using all the money recklessly, for something unrelated to school. She says it's unreasonable to put thousands of dollars in the hands of someone so young."

Travis McCall, with his color-coded note-taking systems and his driving-with-his-hands-at-ten-and-two ways, is maybe the only person on the planet who would use his two hundred thousand dollar college fund for something as boring as actually paying for college. Probably on a carefully scheduled payment plan. I say, "It's not like he's going to run away and drop almost a quarter of a million dollars on strippers and blow, or something. He's not me."

Mom cuffs me hard around the head, but Dad just cocks his head to the side and says, "Your sarcasm has been on overdrive ever since you got home. What happened at the meeting to put you off so badly?"

"Dad, it's been almost nineteen years at this point. You're really just going to have to get used to my piss-poor attitude sooner or later," I say. Neither of them says anything, so I spend a few minutes carefully shredding my salad. Once I've gotten to the point where my fork tines can't catch any of the destroyed bits of lettuce, I chance a glance around at them. They're both watching me and waiting. I scowl, but I've never really been one for the virtues of silence, so I finally say, "Group got smaller."

"Is everyone alright?" Mom asks, as if there's ever a good reason for an addict to abandon treatment.

"Nope," I say, letting the end of the word come out as a pop. "One of the heroin junkies went back to in-patient, and the um—" I cough, then try again, mouth dry, "Shelby, the other person who was dealing with the coke thing? Do you remember me mentioning her?"

"Of course," Dad says.

I shrug. "Yeah, she's dead." Silence. "Ryan didn't say she killed herself, but he also didn't say she *didn't* kill herself, and it kind of goes without saying that he would've denied it when I suggested it, if it hadn't been the case. In my head, she shot herself. I mean, that's how I keep picturing it. But I'm probably just projecting my own issues there. Don't women tend to overdose?" I point my fork at my mom. "You should bring that up in court, if Ev starts to get fresh with you."

"Garen."

"Travis was straight until your faggot son came along! Like, really? Because at least I had the balls to pull out a Glock when I lost my mind. No wonder I topped the kid, considering—"

"Garen." I fall obediently silent and eventually roll my eyes in Mom's general direction so she knows I'm listening. "Are you okay?"

"Of course," is my immediate, untrue response. Lies come so easily sometimes, especially to questions

like that. Mom's mouth is drawn into a tight line, like she knows I'm bullshitting her, but she wants to wait for me to acknowledge. After a minute, I relent, "It just sucks. You know... being the only cokehead left. It's me, four drunks, and two junkies. The drunks are just, they're clueless. They act like they have such serious addictions, but most of them are only there because they don't want to serve jail time for DWIs. Plus, it's a little hard for me to take them seriously, when I was admitted for alcoholism, too, but that wasn't even the worst of my problems. How many more times am I going to have to listen to Linda bitch about how she'd kill for a martini, when the three people who came in for hardcore drug abuse are actually *jonesing*? And whatever, I get the heroin junkies a little more, because at least we're on the same page in that we're all addicted to shit that's illegal. Jason's cool, and I don't really have a problem with Henry, but at the end of the day, we're riding different animals. I like to go up, they like to go down. I like to have energy, they like to zone out. I like stimulants, they like opiates."

Dad interrupts, as gently as possible, "You were admitted to LRC for three things, Garen. Cocaine may have been your biggest problem, but you were also an alcoholic and a prescription pill addict. Vicodin is an opiate. Even if the group seems divided based on what people abused—stimulants, opiates, or alcohol—you should be able to find common ground with anyone, because you're going through all of those at once."

"They treat me like a kid," I say stubbornly. "I don't like it."

"Maybe that's not such a bad thing," Mom says, hands already raised in surrender. Clearly, after this many years, she knows that a protest is bubbling up in my throat. When I don't try to cut her off, she continues, "You've been through a lot in these past few months, and I know that you're doing your best to get better. But you're still in high school, and perhaps it's time for you to start acting like it. You know the lifestyle you've been living for years now, and recovery is a difficult enough process without trying to skip to adulthood. Personally, I think it might be a good idea to take advantage of your teenage years while you're still in them. Make some new friends at school. Maybe get a part-time job, something not too stressful. Join a club at school, try out for a sport, get a hobby."

"I hate all my classmates, and I suck at scrapbooking," I say.

Dad sighs, and guilt curls in my gut. I know they're both just trying to help. I know they're my parents, they love me, they want what's best for me, I get it. But it's so hard, every day, just waking up and being sober and having to stay that way. They don't understand what it's like. No one but another addict could understand how badly I am just aching to go back to how I was—even now, how desperate I am to reach out, grab that bottle of wine, and toss it all back in one smooth swallow. How much easier it was to measure my ability to be happy in grams of cocaine and fifths of whiskey.

How much I crave it.

I stand abruptly, dump my plate in the sink, and say, "I'm going to my room. It's getting late or whatever, and I need to be up early for school in the morning."

Neither of them says goodnight, but neither tries to stop me. I kick my boots off by the front door before I trudge downstairs. That's my favorite thing about the new house—instead of being split into a main level with a living room, kitchen, and study, and an upper level with all the bedrooms, like the last house had been, this one has a main level with the living area, kitchen, my father's bedroom, and the main bathroom. The entire lower level—basement, I guess?—is mine. The staircase ends in a small entryway, with my bathroom set off to one side and the door to my actual living space on the wall adjacent. The room is essentially divided in half by a hip-high shelving unit that runs perpendicular to the wall the door is set in, stretching from the far wall to just short of the door itself. On the right half, my bed is set back in the corner, with a plain nightstand just to the left of it, and my desk against the opposite wall, with my closet door perpetually hanging open near it. The left side is for my musical equipment; my guitar stand, amp, and recently acquired keyboard are staggered random around the space, with a long gray couch pushed against the front wall, just to the left side of the door. It's a big change from the set-up I had in the house that Evelyn has kept, and right now, change is good. Change is what I need, more than anything else.

I actually am nervous about school tomorrow, but not nervous enough to bother preparing for it. My backpack is somewhere around here, possibly out in my car, and I've got a few blank notebooks and new pens scattered across the desk. I've never been the type to give a shit about my clothes, so it's not like I'm going to lay anything out in advance, or even bother to give it much thought when I dress in the morning. Every single pair of dark-rinse, maybe-a-little-tighter-than-necessary jeans that I own matches every single solid color—mostly black, or red, or sometimes dark green, if I don't feel like I'm getting enough attention and want someone to tell me how *oh my god stunning* my eyes are— v-neck t-shirt that I own. Every day, I stuff my feet into my unlaced boots, because they're the only pair of shoes I own, and if it's cold, I throw on my black leather motorcycle jacket, because it's the only non-short-sleeved thing I own.

Except, of course, for the LHS Varsity Track sweatshirt that I liberated from Travis' closet before I left town last winter, but I haven't been able to stomach wearing it since the day before I went into rehab. It had come back from my trip to Ohio as disgusting as I felt, covered in dirt and tears and a little bit of blood and possibly some truck-stop stranger's cum—like I really wanted to toss that in my bag to bring to LRC. No, the sweatshirt had been washed, folded, and carefully tucked away on the top shelf of my closet. Sometimes, things are better left alone like that.

For the hell of it, I type out a short text to Travis--*tell ur mom to quit being a bitch & stop trying to steal ur college \$\$\$ before you even get it*—and set my phone up to charge on the nightstand. Even if he does text back, it probably won't be until later, around the time I begin my nightly ritual of pretending to sleep. The truth is, I don't sleep. Not much, anyway; ever since I moved back home from LRC three weeks ago, I've spent most nights rolling restlessly in my bed and staring up at the ceiling. Jason says the same thing happened to him after he first detoxed, while his body was still trying to figure out how to run itself again, but Doc Howard says it's a psychological issue, not a physical one. She says I can't sleep because every time I close my eyes, my mind is running wild with memories and regrets and demons I should be trying harder to free myself from. Needless to say, the psychiatrist I met when I checked myself into a drug rehabilitation center after threatening suicide is unwilling to prescribe me medication to help me sleep.

On the nightstand, my phone starts to vibrate. I lean over to check the caller ID. Travis. I hadn't wanted to get my hopes up for a text message, and now he's actually calling me. I unplug the phone, flop down onto my back, and answer, "Hello?"

"So, can I assume that you're being treated to the same divorce proceedings play-by-play that I get from Mom every single day?"

"I'd wager we're getting very different versions, but yeah, Dad won't shut up about it," I say, stretching. "How much has she told you about the tuition money?"

"Not much," he admits. There's a pause, during which the only thing I hear is the faint scratch of shitty contemporary music leaking out of low-quality speakers. He must be at work, maybe on his break. The pause is probably him stopping to take a sip of the plain black coffee he chugs compulsively during every shift; I picture the roll of his Adam's apple as he swallows, and it makes me feel warm right down to my toes. I'm blushing like a twelve-year-old when he finally continues, "She says Bill is trying to tie the money up in trusts so I'll barely be able to access it. I guess the account was set up in my name, so the money is technically mine? But Mom says your dad is trying to limit the amount that can be touched so that he has time to have your mom figure out some legal argument that would take it all back. Then she started ranting about your mom—I think it's really getting to her that your dad's got his first wife helping him divorce his second."

I snort. "Let me guess: she's made some pretty choice Jew jokes about my mom trying to get her hands on everyone's money."

"Of course," Travis replies. He spits the words out, like they leave a bad taste in his mouth. "You'd think she would have learned her lesson with that one, considering it's a huge part of what prompted the

divorce in the first place.”

“You ever going to tell me what she actually said?”

“No.”

I roll onto my side and grin, saying, “Oh, it must have been a harsh one, if you still won’t say it even after two and a half months. I know it was a Jew comment, but Dad won’t tell me what, he just says he wouldn’t have married her if he had known she would say something so bad about his son’s cultural identity, or whatever. Was it an oven joke? I bet it was an oven joke, some cheesy drug-and-Holocaust pun about me getting baked. Either that, or something about gas chambers?”

He sighs. “Do we have to talk about this? You already know that she made a comment about you being Jewish, but you know that wasn’t the worst thing she said. At least, it wasn’t the thing that made Bill file for divorce. And anyway, I’m the one who has to live with her, not you, which means I’m the one who feels infuriated every time I have to hear the way she talks about you. I’d prefer not to think about it, if at all possible.”

“Fine, fine,” I say. I contemplate pouting, but I don’t know how much longer his break is, or how much longer he’ll want to talk to me. I settle for neutral territory. “Scale of one to ten, how excited are you for school to start tomorrow?”

“A scale of one to ten cannot fully encapsulate my enthusiasm,” he deadpans, and I grin. “Honestly, though? I feel like school has already started. I’ve been doing track conditioning for two weeks already, and it’s *killing* me. Jack’s varsity captain this year, and yesterday, he had everybody meet at school to do suicide sprints for two straight hours. Three guys passed out from heat exhaustion.”

“Did you?”

“Oh, no, I got off way easier. Just, you know, disappeared around the side of the gym and vomited so much I almost blacked out. But considering half the team was doing the same thing, I didn’t get much sympathy.” Another pause, another sip of coffee. “If that’s how Jack’s new regime is going to be until graduation, I may not stick with it. I like track, I really do, but the guy’s such an ass. He’s the one who wrote ‘cocksucker’ on my gym bag last year, right after I came out. And, of course, he’s the first to make comments in the locker room. ‘Hey McCall, girls’ locker room is next door.’ ‘Hey McCall, you must be in heaven, surrounded by this many naked dudes.’ ‘Hey McCall, stop checking out my cock.’”

I frown and shift into a sitting position on my bed. “I hope you tell him to go fuck himself when he says shit like that.”

“Told him if I wanted to check out somebody as poorly endowed as he is, I might as well just go back to dating girls. Got punched. That was, what, a week ago? I still have a black eye. I have no idea how you can put up with getting into as many fights as you do, because that was the first time anyone’s ever punched me, and it hurt like hell.”

I tactfully opt not to point out that most of my recent fighting took place in the context of an abusive relationship that left me hospitalized and comatose. Instead, I say, almost idly, “If the captain’s going to be that much of a dick, maybe you should quit. I like that you do track, though. All that running is why your thigh muscles are so toned.”

The second the words are out of my mouth, I wish I could take them back. I clamp my teeth together over my lip ring and brace myself for the rebuke, but his response is a laugh and the hushed words, “Shut up, man, I’m at work. The last thing I need is to be sitting here, thinking about you thinking about my thighs.”

He’s flirting. It’s been happening ever since I left rehab, always in rushed, quiet tones and half-sentences full of intent, like he’s too afraid to speak clearly enough for anyone but me to hear. But I’m not an idiot,

and I know not to push him, so I say, “Yeah, well, I think you’d be bored if you didn’t have some sort of extracurricular. So, if you quit track, you should join something else, instead.” I pause, but he seems to realize there’s more to say, so he remains silent. After a minute, I add, “My mom says I should join a club or something. You know, at school? I think I might do it. That, or get a job, just so I’ve got... something to do with my hands.”

That’s the real problem. This—just sitting in my room, or strumming aimlessly on my guitar, or hanging out doing nothing—is driving me batshit. I’m too restless for a life like this.

“It sounds like a good idea. Just make sure you don’t take on too much at once, the way you tend to—” He stops abruptly, and I can hear someone talking to him in the background on his end. To them, he says, “Yeah, sorry. One second.” To me, he says, “Sorry, my break’s over. I’ll see you tomorrow at school, okay?”

“Yep. See you then,” I say before ending the call and dropping my phone back on the nightstand. I wonder if my mom has left yet—the basement is soundproofed so that Dad doesn’t have to put up with me playing guitar until odd hours of the morning, which means I can’t hear any footsteps above me. I dig my iPod out of the nightstand drawer, plug in my earbuds, and try my best to sleep.

It doesn’t work. I zone out, I think, but I’m conscious enough to keep rolling onto my side to check the time on my phone. Eleven o’clock. Quarter after one. Three twenty-five. Four fifteen. Five thirty. Six after six. Close enough. I tumble off my bed and onto the floor, still groggy even as I make my way through the same morning workout I’ve done every day since I was fourteen: a little bit of stretching, fifty push-ups, a hundred crunches, fifty chin-ups on one of those stupid bars you can hook above your door frame. After all that, I’m feeling vaguely more awake, or at least more aware of my body, so I shuffle out to the bathroom to take a shower. The pulse of the hot water doesn’t do anything to wake me up, so I turn it to cold and finish as quickly as I can. By the time I step back out, my skin is pink from the chill. I dig my cache of hair products out from under the sink and set to work. Heat protecting spray, blow-dry. More heat protecting spray, flat iron. A dab of wax rubbed between my palms and combed into my hair, then careful arrangement; everything on the sides pushed forward, towards my face, everything on top gets arranged into a mess of spikes, a half-assed fauxhawk. To finish, a decent twenty-second blast of the strongest hold hairspray money can buy. Satisfied, I head back to my room and exchange my towel for the same pair of jeans I “slept” in, a fresh black v-neck, and a pair of mis-matched socks—okay, one black sock makes sense, but why the fuck do I even own a purple striped sock? Who am I, the Joker? Whatever. I grab my notebooks off the desk, stuff my phone in my pocket, and head upstairs.

Dad is gone already, presumably headed to work, and we’re out of coffee, so clearly this is going to be a great day. But I still get to replace *81 days sober* with *82 days sober* on my board, so I count it as a win. I cram my feet into my boots—seriously, what the fuck did I do with my laces?—put on my sunglasses, and head for the Testarossa. It is only by speeding, rolling through a couple of stop signs, and the grace of God that I manage to make it downtown, into the Daily Grind, Lakewood’s only coffee shop, for two of the largest cups of plain black coffee they will sell me, and into a space in the LHS parking lot as the warning bell is ringing. Swearing extensively and creatively under my breath, I shoulder my backpack, grab my coffee—one of which is already half-finished—and follow the mass of people down to the auditorium.

Huh. Did we have an auditorium last year? Is this new? Should I have paid attention more while I was a student here, or bothered to show up for the second semester? I can only assume the answer to all of those questions is “probably.” Most of the seats are already occupied, especially towards the back. I polish off the last of my first cup, toss it into a trashcan near the door, and trudge up to the front, where a bunch of student council members are pseudo-cheerfully directing us stragglers into the remaining seats in the front row.

“Take a seat right here, please!” one of them orders me, in what I can only assume is his best commander-in-chief voice.

I squint at him through the near-black lens of my aviators and say, before I can think better of it, “Eat a

dick, dude. Don't tell me what to do."

It's sort of a joke. The statement itself—minus the "eat a dick, dude" preface—is a running gag between my parents and I, a jab tossed back and forth with exaggerated petulance, the response to literally almost any request. Garen, put your boots in the hall closet, not in front of the door, please. Don't tell me what to do! Dad, can you pick up more milk the next time you're at the store? Don't tell me what to do! Garen, pass me that pen. Don't tell me what to do! Mom, you should come over for dinner, we're having lasagna. Don't tell me what to do! It's not funny to anyone except the three of us, and perhaps I should have considered that before saying it to a stranger.

A hand clamps down on my shoulder, and I glance back to see Vice-Principal Jacobs smiling at me a little too broadly as she says, "Congratulations, Mr. Anderson. You've just earned yourself Lakewood High's first detention of the new school year."

"What, seriously?" I say. "I'm getting a detention because I told some random not to tell me what to do?"

"No, Garen, you're getting a detention because you told your student council president to 'eat a dick.' Not exactly appropriate language for a school assembly, is it?" she asks.

I have to admit, "No, but I am a little impressed that you just quoted me on it. I think you've just earned yourself Lakewood High's first 'teachers totally shouldn't say that in front of their students' award. Which, hey, maybe calls for a high five?"

She ignores my raised hand. "I'm so lucky that expulsion and re-admittance hasn't dimmed your dazzling sense of humor and complete inability to grasp appropriate interpersonal relations. Really, I've missed this. Now, sunglasses off and sit down. You can pick up your detention slip in my office after school today."

I roll my eyes one last time before I take off my sunglasses and sink into a seat one over from the one the student council tool ordered me into. Before I can even stuff the sunglasses into the front pocket of my backpack, my phone buzzes in my pocket. A text from Travis: *Seriously? Detention already? If you get expelled again, your dad is going to be so pissed he'll try to give my mom full custody of you in the divorce.* I twist around in my seat, scan the room, and there—three rows back, smirking at me from an aisle seat next to Corey Copicetti. The skin around his left eye is still the sickly yellow shade of a fading bruise, from getting punched by his track captain. Sparing a brief glance around to make sure I'm not about to earn a second detention before first period even starts, I flash him my middle finger before sinking back into my seat.

When the assembly starts a few minutes later, I'm unsurprised to discover that it's more of the same thing as every other "new school year" lecture. *Welcome to our newly constructed auditorium, isn't it so shiny and nice? This is going to be a very exciting year, try to branch out and make new friends, be all you can be, blah blah blah. Pick up your class schedules, locker combinations, and homeroom information at the tables outside after this is over. The freshman and sophomore class trips will be combined this year into one trip to Washington, D.C.; the juniors will be heading to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (seriously?) over spring break; the senior class trip will be to Boston, Massachusetts, over February break. All seniors will be required to attend at least two college counseling sessions this fall semester to help them through the admissions process, but we'll make up for that awfulness by letting you all have lunch outside or off-campus on Fridays. Now, please welcome some of your fellow classmates to bore the shit out of you with useless information about extracurricular activities.*

I try to listen to the clubs and activities speeches, I really do. I am ridiculously attentive to the sports teams, and to the student council, even though the president spends the whole talk just sneering down at me. By the time we get to Chess Club and Badminton Society, though, I'm done. Luckily, I discover that I can make myself much more comfortable by slouching down in my seat and just propping the heels of my boots up on the edge of the stage. Shouldn't it be further away than that? This must be some sort of fire hazard. A few people in my row must be bored to shit, too, because I glance sideways and notice that half

the people in the front row are copying my posture. The announcement of the final club presentation, however, catches my attention. Principal Hammond beckons some Mormon-looking chick up on stage and says, "Please welcome Mary-Alice, president of our newly formed SAD Club!"

Sad club? S.A.D.? Is that like, the emo kids finally got some funding? I pull my phone out of my pocket to send a mocking text to Ben, but Mary-Alice is now saying, "Hi, everybody. I'm here representing um, S.A.D.D. That's 'Students Against Destructive Decisions.' We're a new group this year, and we're a um, an anti-drug and alcohol group on campus? We're trying to support students who choose to live a clean and healthy lifestyle. And we're going to do some cool programs this year—later, around prom time, we're going to do a mock car crash to teach everybody about the dangers of drinking and driving. We've hired some great guest speakers who are going to do some presentations later this semester, about the consequences of drugs and addiction and stuff—"

"Why bother hiring anybody when we could just ask Anderson?" calls a voice from behind me, followed immediately by an exaggerated sniff, clearly someone's impression of doing a bump of cocaine. I twist around so suddenly that my back actually cracks, but I doubt anyone hears it, because people are too busy *laughing*. They're laughing, and oohing, and clapping vaguely, the way eighth grade boys do after someone makes a 'your mom' joke. It's not a joke. It's not funny, but everybody is staring at me and grinning, like I'm the asshole for looking around to see who said it, instead of laughing along with the rest of them.

And then, out of the corner of my eye, I see movement a few rows back. Travis is craning back in his seat to seize the t-shirt of some guy a row behind him and three seats over. Even over the continued chuckling, I can hear Travis say, "Say something like that again, and I will beat the shit out of you, Jack. I'm serious."

"Everyone, be quiet," Principal Hammond barks. People fall silent, but Travis hasn't let go of the guy—Jack? Track captain Jack? No wonder he wants to quit the team—and I haven't turned around. The principal clears his throat. Reluctantly, Travis releases Jack's t-shirt, though he remains turned around to glare at the guy even after he has returned to his seat. Still burning with shame, I turn back to the stage once more. Mary-Alice is watching me with sad, apologetic eyes. I close mine so I won't have to see that.

When the assembly is dismissed ten minutes later, I am the first person standing. I swing my backpack onto my shoulder, slip my sunglasses back on so that I don't have to make eye contact with anyone, and head back up the aisle towards the doors. Travis makes a grab for my arm as I pass him, but I shrug away from his touch and make my way back out into the lobby. There are half a dozen tables set up, each manned by a member of the office staff; I walk up to the A-C table and say to the smiling, middle-aged lady behind it, "Hi. Anderson?"

"Anderson... Anderson..." She thumbs through a box of file folders, then looks expectantly up at me. "Garen?" I nod, and she hands me a manila folder, smiling broadly. "Have a great first day!"

"Thanks," I say dully. The odds of that happening seem very slim. I wander a few steps away and flip my folder open to peruse the documents inside—I'm in homeroom one-twelve, which I don't recall being anywhere near where I'll find my assigned locker, three-eighty-nine.

My schedule is a shit-show, mainly because, as Vice-Principal Jacobs called my dad this summer to explain, LHS has a concrete policy of never allowing a student to repeat a class that he or she has previously been registered for. It makes sense to refuse to allow me to repeat the classes I've passed already—Genetics, Calculus, Senior English, French V, Musical Theory—but it also makes me unable to take any of the classes I registered to take during last Spring semester, the classes I never even set foot in before leaving for New York again. With all of those—Chemistry, World Music, Statistics, Economics, AP French, and Political Thought—eliminated as well, the administration has been clueless as to how to drag my senior year out in new classes. At first, their solution must have been to bump me up a level; I'm taking AP English and AP Government & Politics, but from there, it gets random. There's a film and literature course, a trial law course, intro psych, and, at the bottom of my schedule, a line that reads

"Freshman Survey of Musical History: PA." They can't honestly be thinking of sticking me in a class with freshmen, can they? It's going to be weird enough taking a bunch of electives that I never elected; the last thing I want is to take some basic level course with a bunch of thirteen-year-olds.

"Hey," Travis says, appearing in front of me and offering me a forced smile that indicates he hasn't yet forgotten what happened during the assembly. "Taking any good classes this semester?"

I pluck his schedule from his hands, scan it, then hand it back to him. It's a little difficult to force down the tiny spark of happiness I feel as I say, "Looks like we're in two of the same classes this semester. Guess that's what happens when I let administration assign my courses—they stick me in AP English and trial law with the rest of the losers."

"I didn't realize you were interested in taking AP courses," he says, now taking my schedule and looking over it.

I shrug. "I'm not. But the school wants every senior to take an English course, and I've already passed the regular senior English assignment. Guess they had to have me take that one. Hey, can you figure out why the hell they stuck me in some freshman music class? Look, it's right at the bottom."

Travis frowns down at the paper, but when his eyes land on the last line of text, the corners of his mouth twitch up into a smile. My heart stutters. When he looks back up at me, however, he schools his expression into one of mild confusion and says, "Hmm. I have no idea what that is."

"Liar," I say, jabbing him in the stomach. "I saw that look on your face, come on. What is it? Are you just laughing at me? Are you laughing because it's going to look like a cartoon, me stuffed into some miniature desk next to a bunch of children?"

"G, they're freshmen, not kindergartners. There are no 'miniature desks' in this school. And you'll see what it is later—for now, just shut up and go to homeroom," he says, passing back my schedule and heading upstairs to the main level of the school. Still frowning, I trail after him.

Most of the morning passes without event. My first class turns out to be AP Government, which seems to be boring as hell, followed by introduction to psychology. Mr. Esteves, my trial law teacher, lets us sit wherever we want, and I reluctantly allow myself to be dragged into the front row, where Travis wants to sit. My last class before lunch is the film and literature course, which actually seems kind of fun. The teacher, Ms. Markland, is objectively kind of MILF-y, and she explains the class itself to us; for the first three days of a week, we'll do in-depth study of different readings, and for the last two days of the week, we'll watch and discuss clips from film adaptations of the readings, or other things from within the same genre. She mentions the possibility of a foreign film unit later in the semester, then asks if anyone speaks another language. There's a resounding lack of response until I awkwardly flick my hand upward. She jerks her chin at me and says, "Garen. What do you speak?"

"French," I say, and I like bragging, so after a second, I add, "fluently."

"Oh, that's awesome. Where did you learn?" she asks eagerly.

"At uh, my last school. Patton Military Academy, up in New York. And I spent a summer in France between my sophomore and junior years."

"So that was, what, last year?"

I blink at her, trying to figure out if she's asking me this just as an attempt to embarrass me in front of the class. That seems to be the general consensus, because a few people are already kind of smirking at me. But Ms. Markland seems legitimately clueless. Does she really not know? She's still waiting for a response, so I say, slowly and carefully, "No, the year before that. This is my second go at senior year, I was expelled last spring, missed the second half of the year."

"Oh," she says again, blinking back at me. "Sorry, I didn't realize."

After that, she launches right back into her enthused discussion of some French psychological drama that literally no one in the class has ever heard of. I slouch down in my seat a little, frowning at my open but still blank notebook. I hadn't realized that there was anyone left in this town who didn't know what kind of trainwreck I had become; I had assumed that everyone was just waiting for their opportunity to make a comment like that Jack moron did during the assembly.

When the bell rings, dismissing us for lunch, I don't bother to go to my locker or the cafeteria. This whole 'seniors can eat wherever they want' thing is presenting me with the perfect opportunity to head out the front doors and sprawl out on the lawn across the street, where a few people are already hanging out, eating sandwiches. Instead of considering whether or not I should be eating, I fish my mildly crumpled pack of cigarettes out of my backpack and light one. I can feel a few sets of eyes on me, but it doesn't matter—I'm eighteen and no longer technically on school property, so it's not like it matters. Unsure if I should even bother, I slip my phone out of my pocket and send a quick text to Travis: *lunch? am across street from school if you wanna join*. I slide my phone back into my pocket without waiting for a reply. Either he'll come or he won't, there's no point getting my hopes up.

"Um. Hi. Do you have a few minutes to spare for the drama club?"

Ugh. My immediate instinct is to say no, I don't, but it's fairly obvious that I'm not doing anything other than lying on the ground and smoking a cigarette. I raise a hand to shield my face from the sun and squint up at the intruders. Standing above me are three nervous-looking kids, two boys and a girl. One of the guys is hanging back slightly, offering me what's probably supposed to look like a smile, but comes across more as a sneer. The girl has elected to focus on carefully braiding her long, dark hair over one shoulder, rather than actually meeting my eyes. Only the other boy, the youngest-looking of the group, is speaking directly to me.

I close my eyes and let my hand drop again. "Go for it, kid."

"Okay, awesome!" the kid practically chirps. Good god, of course this kid is in the drama club. Guys like us always are. "So, my name is Nate, Nate Holliday, and I'm the publicity secretary for the drama club's executive board. This is Joss Pryce, and that's Gabe Alberti. We're going around and reminding people that auditions for the school play are this weekend. It's really sudden, I know, but performances start in the last week of November, so we only have about three months. You can participate even if you don't want to be in the play. We need a lot of stage crew and set painters and stuff, so people who either don't want to or can't sing—"

"I sing just fine," I interrupt, trying not to be offended. It's not like I expect everyone to look at me and think, *well, he's clearly going to be a rockstar*, except for how I actually *do* expect that.

Any offense I have taken drains away, however, when Nate says, in a somewhat hushed voice, "I know. I saw you perform at a coffee shop downtown, last year. You're really, really talented."

"I am," I agree. None of them speak, so I sigh. "Fine. What play are you doing?"

"*Grease*," Joss says, speaking for the first time. Her voice is sharper than I expected it to be.

"An adaptation of *Grease*, actually," Nate amends. "We actually um, we had complaints from people when we wanted to perform it last year, because people said that it's outdated and sexist and stuff. Which, I guess, is kind of the point. But people were angry that we wanted to do a play that depicts women as um... frigid, sexless bitches who would then change everything about themselves just to please a man. So, we couldn't do it last year. But this summer, some of us got together, and we rewrote it to include a gender reversal of all the characters. You know, like... like Danny Zuko is Danielle, and the badasses with the cool cars are the Pink Ladies. And Sandy Olsen is now Andy, and at the bonfire, he's with the

football team instead of the cheerleaders, and he's the one who has to learn to like, be cool at the end, or whatever."

I'm not a theater fag, never have been, but I've at least seen the movie. Everyone knows what *Grease* is about. That's why I can't help but prop myself up on my elbows so that I can stare incredulously up at Nate. "Dude, what are you, fifteen?" A nervous nod. "Okay, listen, someday, someone is going to explain to you where babies come from, but it probably shouldn't be some queer on a sidewalk outside a high school. There are after-school specials about that sort of thing. So for now, let it suffice to say that you better have a damn good explanation for how your male Rizzo is going to think he's knocked up."

Nate is starting to look a little pissed now, with his hip cocked to the side and his arms crossed over the front of his weird, designer-looking vest. "I told you, we rewrote it. Now that Rizzo's a guy, he's going to think that he got Nikki—that's Kenickie, in the original version—pregnant, and he's going to be worried that all of his golden-boy buddies will think he's an irresponsible moron for knocking up a girl who they all think is kind of slutty. We changed a lot of the play. That's the point of an adaptation. It's not like we just typed it all up in Microsoft Word and did 'find and replace' on all the names to change the genders. That would be stupid."

"The whole thing sounds stupid," I say, before I can stop myself.

A dark red flush is creeping up Nate's neck now, and Gabe is still glaring at the ground like he'd rather be anywhere in the world than here, talking to me. Or someone like me. Nate mutters, "If you're not interested, you could've just said so. You don't need to be mean to people just because you're unhappy all the time."

I blink at him. What the actual fuck, I haven't been berated by a fifteen-year-old since I was one, three and a half years ago. And it's not that I'm unhappy... I'm just not happy either, per se. Without my meaning or wanting them to, some of the things Doc told me during our last session rise up in the back of my mind. *You say that you want to live a normal life, but it's not normal for a high school senior to go to classes, therapy, and outpatient drug counseling, and do nothing else. You need a hobby—not your music—something that will get you out of your head for a while.* Sometimes, it's like that bitch goes out of her way to have the universe tell me what to do. I sigh and hold out my hand for one of the fliers that Nate is clutching. "What time are the auditions?"

"Ten to four, this Saturday. Tomorrow, I guess," says Nate, then, all in a rush, "It's a three-part audition for every person—you'll need to do a song, a reading, and a dance. The song is your choice, so bring whatever accompaniment you might need, and the reading should be a soliloquy, but if you can't find one you like, we have some standard ones on hand for people to use. The dance is the same for everybody, and it gets taught at the beginning of the day, so make sure you're not late."

"I have a, um... prior engagement. I wouldn't be able to be there until eleven o'clock," I say. I wonder if Doc would let me skip out on the stupid "progress meeting" she wants to have with me and my dad at ten.. Probably not, she's such a stickler for participation. Like I can get an "A for effort" in fighting an addiction.

Joss is the one to respond. "If you don't care enough to be there on-time, then don't bother coming at all. We only want people who understand the value of commitment."

"I liked you better when you were pretending not to notice me," I say. I will not be out-bitched by some sixteen-year-old girl. Then, to Nate, "That prior engagement is an appointment with the psychiatrist from my rehabilitation center. I get that you guys want people who are going to be committed, but right now, the most important commitment I have is to staying clean and sober. If that doesn't work for you guys, then fine, I won't audition. But showing up at ten o'clock to learn a dance is not an option for me."

Joss looks somewhat remorseful for her comment, but she doesn't apologize to me. Gabe appears mildly disgusted, as I'd figured he would—my dislike for him is instant and intense. Nate's golden brown eyes

are as wide as teacup saucers, but he's fairly quick with a recovery. He clears his throat and says, "That's fine. Eleven o'clock is fine. If you miss the dance instruction, I can just, I'll teach it to you after. While everyone else is starting their auditions or something. I'd be happy to work with you."

I bet you would be. I smile blandly at him, but before I can bother to offer my thanks, Travis appears at my foot and nudges the sole of my boot with the toe of his—what, flip-flops, really? I have no idea how this kid was ever in the closet to anyone who actually bothered to look at him. But in all fairness, between the shoes, the dark gray and white raglan shirt, and that gorgeous, perpetually untidy blond hair, he's the picture-perfect image of the golden-boy jock that most of the people in this town want him to be. He grins at me, all straight white teeth and nose crinkling under the light dusting of freckles across his summer-tanned skin.

I ache for him.

"Hi," I say.

"Hi," he echoes, then, noticing my reluctant companions, he extends his hand to Gabe, the nearest one, and says, "What's up? I'm Travis."

"Hey. Gabe. Uh, we're handing out fliers, trying to get people to come out for auditions for the school play. We're doing an adaptation of Grease, if you're interested," Gabe says. His vitriol must be reserved for drug addicts or super-seniors. He hands Travis one of the fliers, then adds, "This is Nate, and that's Joss. They're in drama, too."

Nate immediately dissolves into another speech about the audition process, but Joss remains silent. She continues to twirl the end of her braid between her fingertips, but unlike her refusal to meet my eyes earlier, she can't seem to look away from Travis' face. It only takes him a minute or two to notice, and then he smiles politely at her. She bites her lip, and I hope to God I'm imagining a flush rise in his cheeks. When Nate finally pauses to take a breath, Travis cuts in, "That sounds like it'll be a really great play. I don't think I have enough time this semester to try out for a part or anything, but you mentioned stage crew? I might be able to help with that, instead. Are you trying out?" he adds, turning his focus back to me.

I shrug. "Apparently. Young Nate here heard me sing at the Grind last year, and he made the grave mistake of telling me I'm talented. My ego kind of took over at that point."

"You're obliged to participate," Travis agrees. Then, with a wry smile, he says to Nate, "So, which hateful songs about me did you get a chance to hear?"

"Um. I saw him perform in June, so..." Nate trails off with a spastic half-shrug, and I cringe. June. In other words, he saw me a few days before I went into rehab, when I was emaciated, double-pierced, high out of my mind, absolutely shit-faced, and running on nothing but adrenaline and cocaine for my third day without sleep. I'm surprised he had any positive impression of me at all, but it's not like I actually remember that performance.

Presumably sensing my discomfort, Travis reaches out a hand towards me and, when I accept it, hauls me to my feet. He plucks the cigarette from my fingers, stubs it out against the bottom of his flip-flop, and says, "Alright, well, we're going to head back in. Thanks, though, for the info. Good luck with your play."

"Thank you," Nate says, smiling broadly. "Bye, Garen. I hope to see you at auditions tomorrow."

I nod, but I'm having trouble focusing right now; Travis still hasn't let go of my hand. He pulls me towards the cross-walk, and I let myself be towed back across the street to school. Once we've moved inside the front doors, I tighten my fingers briefly around his, just to remind him that he's still touching me, in case he hadn't realized and wants to stop, or whatever. I wouldn't blame him, I mean. But Travis just squeezes back for a half-second and most definitely does not let go of my hand. The entire way back to our lockers,

I can't stop myself from sneaking almost constant glances at his face, and he can't stop himself from reddening a little, even as he continues to stare pointedly ahead. We reach my locker first, and he bumps his shoulder against mine before untangling his fingers and saying, still looking down the hall, "See you in English."

It's stupidly confusing, but by now, that's par for the course with Travis, so I just go with it. English passes without much event, other than the teacher making us sit alphabetically, so I'm of course in the front corner, and then assigning a shitload of reading even though it's our first day. My last class of the day is the as-yet-to-be-deciphered "Freshman Survey of Musical History: PA," which turns out to be in my old Musical Theory classroom downstairs. It also turns out to be with my old Musical Theory teacher. He greets me with a wide smile and a warm handshake. "Hey, Garen! It's great to see you again."

"Hey, Jeff," I say cautiously. There are a few other people in the room, but they're definitely all barely teenagers. "Um... so, I was assigned this class by administration, and as much as I'd love to have you as a teacher again... the fuck am I doing in a class full of nothing but freshmen?"

Jeff brays out his awful, donkey-like laugh and claps me on the shoulder. "Kid, you're crazy." Yes, well, that's exactly what I pay my psychiatrist a lot of money to say a lot more delicately. "Can I see your schedule?"

The schedule is already sort of crumpled and torn—I'm so bad at organization, maybe I should work on that. But Jeff is unfazed by this, and simply jabs his finger at the line of text where this class is listed. "See that part right there, the PA?" I nod. "Most schools would just call that a TA, a teacher's assistant. But I guess the admins here want me to feel special because I wasted thousands of dollars getting my doctorate, so they're calling it a professor's assistant. Students here take six classes a semester, and since this is your second senior year, they had to scramble to find twelve extra classes they could stick you in. Since you can't jump back down any levels, they're probably going to put you in a bunch of stupid electives next semester, but I made an appeal to the principal and requested that they give you a class credit for helping me out with teaching one of my ninth grade classes. Kind of like an internship, I suppose. I hope that's okay."

"It's more than okay," I say quickly, but my conscience won't let me rest if I don't at least warn him. Quietly, reluctantly, I say, "I might suck at this, though. You know me, what I'm like. And you probably know what I've done, how I spent my summer, what I am now."

His brow furrows, and he says, "I know that you're in recovery, if that's what you mean. It's not exactly a secret, either in this town or amongst the faculty members. We all know that after you got expelled, you were going through some family stuff, and that you ended up in the hospital. I know you got addicted to cocaine, and to booze, and to pills, but I also know you're working on it, yeah? And I know you're crazy talented, and it would be stupid to let that go to waste just 'cause you had a bad year. I didn't turn you away when you showed up to my class last year because you set the Home Ec classroom on fire, so I can't exactly turn you away now just because you're dealing with some issues."

"I'm kind of fucked up," I admit.

Jeff laughs, ruffles my hair, and says, "Kid, I figured that out the day I met you. But can you name one rockstar who isn't?"

Chapter Two

“Bravery is the capacity to perform properly even when scared half to death.” –Omar N. Bradley

83 days sober

“Dad. Dad, hang on. Pay attention to me. Dad.”

“We’ve been waiting on the same bench for fifteen minutes now, Garen. You are literally the only thing I can pay attention to, other than a copy of *O Magazine* from three years ago. What?”

I reach over and pinch my dad’s wrist until he puts down the battered magazine and looks at me. I frown down at my hands and say, “So, it’s been like, a month since you talked to Doc Howard, right?”

“Yes,” he says slowly, waiting for the catch.

“Well, she just... she kind of likes to give me a hard time, I think. And she gives me shit, because she always wants me to push myself harder, and do better, and be more self-aware, bullshit like that. She sometimes says stuff that makes it sound like I’m not really putting that much effort into recovery, because she really wants me to do my best. So, before we go in there, I just want to let you know that I really am trying. And like, I’ve been so good, Dad. I’m still clean, I have been for months now. I’m at eighty days now, just like it says on my board, so don’t... you know, don’t get mad at me, or think that I’m screwing around just because Doc is a hardass.”

The door to Doc’s office opens and a woman steps out—she must be one of the eating disorder patients from the other wing, because she’s five and a half feet tall, but no more than eighty-five or ninety pounds soaking wet. If I get off the bench too quickly, the shifting of air molecules in the hallway might knock her over. She shoots me a nervous glance, then scuttles off down the hall. A moment later, Doc pokes her head out of the office and says, “Garen, Bill. Come on in.”

I stand and take a step towards the door, but Dad grabs my arm, saying in a low tone, “I know you’re trying, Garen. Watching you go through this process has been hell for your mother and I, because you’re our only child, and we love you more than anything. But no matter how hard it’s been for us, I know it’s been even more difficult for you. You’ve been incredibly brave, and incredibly dedicated to your recovery. I know that, okay?”

Face red, I nod and duck into Doc’s office. It’s nice to know that Dad appreciates the severity of my

particular circumstances, but it's still embarrassing as hell that I even have to go through this. It's absolutely humiliating that people think I'm strong now that I have to get over these addictions, when I should have just stopped myself from being weak enough to give in to them in the first place. I flop down in my usual seat and say, "Hello there, Doctor. How are you on this fine morning?"

"I'm just peachy, Garen, how are you?"

"Tired. Preemptively bored. Can I have my machine?" I ask. Her eyebrows shoot towards her hairline, and I amend, "Can I have *the* machine?"

The fact that Doc owns the coffee machine is a mere technicality, in my opinion. I know for a fact that I'm the only person who uses it, because it's one of those single-serve numbers with the pods of grounds, and sometimes I leave them in the machine even though she tells me not to, just to see if someone will take them out before my next appointment. No one ever does. I turn them in weird directions, or rip off the foil on top once they're done brewing, just to be one hundred percent positive, but seriously, nothing ever happens. And she only bought it after I came to LRC. It's mine.

She unearths it from the big drawer in her desk and hands me a water bottle. I plug the machine into the power strip along the side of her desk and fill the reservoir with water from the bottle. The coffee sets to brewing into the chipped Daily Grind mug I appropriated from Travis during my one and only trip to the old house after rehab, where I nervously sifted through some of the remaining contents of my old room and the den I had been living in while I was too injured to go upstairs. Evelyn had followed me around the entire time, making these disapproving little clicks with her tongue every time I touched anything, until I had finally burst out, "For Christ's sake, Ev, I'm not contagious. You can't catch fuck-up, alright?" She had stormed back downstairs to scream at my dad, and I had taken the opportunity to sneak into Travis' room and steal something lame, just to see if he'd notice. So far, he doesn't seem to miss the old coffee mug he'd been using as a pen-holder on his desk, which is weird, considering I had just dumped the pens out on the floor and walked out. It sits on the shelf in Doc's office now.

Doc flips to a fresh page in her yellow legal pad and sets it down on the desk, though this is more of a matter of habit than anything else; she rarely takes notes during our sessions, opting instead for a normal conversation peppered with some prying questions. I like that—the normal part, not the questions. It makes me feel less like I'm talking to a psychiatrist. She says, "How's school going?"

I shrug. "Fine. I've only had one day of it, so far, but I guess that went okay. Some of my classes are cool—I've got this one film class that seems like it'll be interesting, and the teacher's nice enough. And

my old music teacher got me this... I don't know, internship thing? I'm assisting with his class for credit. I listened to you, too, about branching out with my activities or whatever. I'm auditioning for the school play later today."

"That's great," Doc says. "Have you made any attempts to branch out socially yet?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because all my classmates are assholes," I say earnestly.

She flicks her eyes upward for a half-second, as though praying for patience, but at least she doesn't scoff. It's taken a lot of practice and sixty-four sessions—sixty-five, now, I guess—but we've moved past scoffing, and we're *mostly* past eye-rolling, on both our parts. She asks, "Did something specific happen to prompt that particular sentiment?" I shrug again. "Alright, I'm assuming that's a yes. What happened?"

I slouch down in my seat and kick my boots up onto the edge of her desk. She hates that, but I must look unreasonably miserable, because she doesn't tell me to put them down. After a minute, it becomes clear that I'm not getting out of answering this, so I say, "Someone may have made a comment during the welcome address yesterday morning, before they gave us our schedules. There's a club on campus, apparently. They call it 'S.A.D.D.,' which changes meaning, based on who you ask. Students Against Destructive Decisions. Students Against Drunk Driving. Students Against Drugs and Drinking. That kind of thing. Some chick was presenting about it during the clubs and activities part of the assembly, and some guy yelled out a comment. About me. By name."

"What did he say?" Dad asks.

I don't want to meet his eyes, because I can tell from his tone that he's not pleased that I didn't mention this last night when he asked me about my day. And I can tell that if he knows what people are saying about me, he'll be ashamed to have such a magnificent screw-up for a son. Any father would be. But Doc never lets me out of answering questions, even the really shitty ones, so I say, "He said they would never need to hire speakers to come present about the effects of drug use, because everybody could just ask me, instead. And then he made a noise like—you know. Like, he was doing coke, or whatever. Like he was doing a bump." I'm not sure if they know what I mean, not sure if that's a common noise to be aware of, so I reach up, press my thumb to the side of my nose and give a quick snort, then let my hand fall

again. "That."

"Little shit," Dad mutters.

Doc frowns, but for once, I'm pretty sure it's not because of what I've done. *Take that, Jack Thorne; the woman I pay to listen to me complain thinks you're a dickbag.* She says, "What did you do when this person did that?"

"Nothing," I say, then amend, "I didn't have to do anything. Travis did. He knows the guy, they do track together. He grabbed him, threatened to beat the shit out of him. It was kinda cool."

"Hmm," Doc says, because that's what she says every time I mention Travis.

"Shut up," I say, because that's what I say every time she does that. "Jesus, Doc, it wasn't a *thing*. He was just helping me out. Defending me, or whatever. Don't make it weird."

She leans back in her chair, uncrosses her legs and recrosses them in the other direction. "I'm not making it weird, Garen. The fact that you're getting defensive before I've even had a chance to say anything is pretty telling, though. It's been a while since you've mentioned Travis during one of our sessions, and I think that's great. It means you're moving on." She pauses, then addresses Dad, "One of the worst things that an addict can do for his sobriety is get involved with someone before he's ready. Oftentimes, people who are in the beginning stages of recovery can start substituting addictions; instead of obsessing over going to bars and clubs, he'll obsess over going to meetings and therapy sessions. Instead of being addicted to drugs, he can become addicted to people and relationships. Garen has already shown a predilection for relationships that are unhealthy or destructive. I'm very worried that he might start dating before he has learned how to process his emotions without the aid of drugs or alcohol."

It's a valid concern; I know that, which only makes me dislike hearing it more. If I get involved with someone and things start to go badly, how will I deal with it now? How do normal people wake up every morning and know how to function without putting some sort of controlled substance in their body to make this world more bearable?

Doc has less to worry about than she thinks she does, because my capacity to get involved, in any way, with anyone is kind of limited right now. It has been since before rehab, since the afternoon I blew some guy in a truck stop parking lot for drugs. Something shut off in me when that happened, and I trust Doc not to judge me for it, but I haven't found the right words to explain it to her. It's humiliating to be eighteen

years old and be so unbelievably disinterested in letting anyone touch me, to be a high school senior who has That Problem, as I have cautiously begun to refer to it in my own head. And if I can't tell it to Doc in the confines of our weekly sessions, I sure as hell can't tell it to her now, with my father sitting next to me.

I sit up a little straighter in my seat, finally taking my feet off Doc's desk. "But that's the thing: I'm not trying to get involved with anyone, including Travis. We're just friends. We talk sometimes. We're not even hooking up anymore, haven't been since last winter. I'm telling you, it's not a big deal. It's just... I don't know. I thought it was cool that he stood up for me, is all. He didn't have to, especially not after all the shit I've put him through in the past year."

"I know that. I'm not accusing you of anything, Garen. I only bring it up because I want to make sure that you're still in line with your goals. We've agreed in past sessions, it would be—"

"—unwise for me to get into a relationship before I've been sober for a year," I finish. "I know. 'Emotional and psychological dependency can be as damaging as chemical dependency.' I get it. Can we move on?"

For a nice change of pace, she allows my deflection and turns her attention towards my dad. They discuss my recovery, my sessions, how they're both oh-so-thrilled with how much progress I've made. Doc tells him that, after almost three months of regular sessions, she thinks we can be secure in my diagnosis of borderline personality disorder, but she also thinks we can be secure with the fact that I don't—as of right now—need anti-depressants or anti-psychotics or anything to keep me functioning. They're both just thrilled about that. Like I should be proud of myself for being able to make it through a day without needing to stuff my body full of drugs to make me normal. Like that's not a basic human skill.

When Doc dismisses me at quarter to eleven, she hands me a sheet of paper. "Your homework for Tuesday."

"You already gave me homework for Tuesday, last week," I protest. "Besides, I have actual homework, you know, from school?"

"You can add this to the pile, then," she says. I glance down at the assignment—it's a bulleted list of things, but I don't have time to read it now, before the audition I'm already late to. I fold it into quarters and stick it in my back pocket.

Only once we're outside and climbing into the Benz does Dad chance a sideways glance at me and say, "Do you talk to Travis much, then?"

"No," I say, buckling my seatbelt and turning to scowl out the window.

Dad presses, "How often, would you say?"

"I don't know, Dad," I exhale. "I talked to him yesterday at school, and he called me Thursday night, but other than that, we haven't really spoken much for the past week or so. He's busy with school, and I've been mostly hanging with Alex and Ben. Speaking of, you don't need to pick me up after the audition. Alex's dad wants him to move his drum kit out of the basement because he says it takes up too much space, so I said he could keep it downstairs at our place. We've got room for it, and my room's soundproofed, so he could come over and play whenever he wanted without bugging anybody. He and Ben are picking me up at four o'clock, 'cause Ben's CR-V is obviously going to hold way more than my car." I flick my eyes towards him, then add, "Is that okay?"

The question hangs heavily between us. For the past three weeks, we've been treading lightly around the idea of me being an adult, but still asking permission to go out or have people over or whatever. Every time I ask, I can see an instinctive *no* forming in Dad's mind, but today, as every other day, he swallows it and says, "Of course. That's fine."

Everyone keeps telling me that building trust is important. They neglect to mention that it's also uncomfortable.

When I finally arrive at school, a few taped-up papers lead me down to the auditorium. There, I find forty or so people, some on the stage, some in the chairs, some just wandering around chatting to each other. Like something out of a cheesy teen movie, they all look over at me when the auditorium door creaks shut behind me. They blink at me; I blink back from behind my sunglasses and shift the strap of my guitar case from one shoulder to the other. Then, on stage, Nate, the overenthusiastic kid, waves at me and says, "Hi, Garen! Glad you could make it. You can join this last group on stage, we're about to get started."

I set my case on a seat in the fourth row, where I'll be able to keep an eye on it during the dancing part. When I'm halfway down the aisle, someone says, "I didn't realize you were planning to audition today, Garen."

Ms. Markland, my film and lit teacher, is hanging out in a seat in the middle of the front row, a clipboard balanced on her lap.

“Yeah. Kid on stage found me at lunch yesterday and convinced me to try out. Are you um... the director, or whatever?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “No, Nathan Holliday—the boy on stage, the one who you say convinced you? He’s taking the lead on this whole production. He wrote the script and made all the changes, he’s directing the show, he’ll be helping me with casting. Now, it’s Anderson, right? Garen Anderson?” I nod, and she pencils my name into the list on her clipboard. “If you don’t have a speech prepared for your spoken audition later, take one of the papers from the edge of the stage. They’re just stock audition monologues.” She smiles politely as she gestures towards the stage.

I grab a paper from the stage, hoist myself up onto it and hover awkwardly at the edge of the group. Most of the other people seem to be friends, or at least know each other; I wonder if they’ve all been in the club together for years now. Maybe I’m intruding, just by existing. Maybe this’ll turn into some *Showgirls* shit, and I’ll get thrown down a flight of stairs by a chorus-girl. Maybe it’ll be more like *Drop Dead Gorgeous*, and someone will drop a stage light on my head. Or maybe I shouldn’t have spent half my junior year smoking pot and watching Bravo with Jamie.

Nate moves to the front of the stage and claps his hands for attention. Once we’re all looking, he assumes what I can only consider to be his default position, with one leg locked out to the side and his hip cocked. I look away; it’s always so weird when I meet other gay guys who actually fall into the stereotypes that people are constantly criticizing me for, because none of the other guys I’m friends with are like this. Even the bottoms I’ve fucked have just been... well, regular dudes. Travis is a varsity athlete who seems as baffled by fashion or whatever as any other guy I know. Ben wears skinny jeans and eye makeup, sure, but I’ve also seen him both giving and taking a beating in the middle of the gen-ad section of hardcore shows. I mean, Jamie loves dick more than almost anyone else I know, but after he graduates from college, he’s joining the Marines, for fuck’s sake. Regardless of sexual orientation, I don’t know anyone who stands with anything like the effeminate tilt in Nate’s hips.

Oblivious to my evaluation of him, Nate says, “Now, for everybody who’s seen the movie version of *Grease*, I’m sure you remember that there’s a school dance scene where everybody does something called the hand jive. It’s a really simple move, so that’s what we’re going to start with.”

Next to him, a pretty girl with a dark red ponytail says, “With both hands, you’re going to slap the tops of your legs two times, then clap your hands twice. Next, you criss-cross your hands over each other twice, first with the right hand on top, then another two times with the left on top. Now, make two fists, and hit them on top of each other twice, first right on top, then left on top. Then you’re going to do this—” Nate

and the girl both make a double thumbs-up gesture, “—and you’re going to jerk your thumb over your shoulder, first on the right, then on the left. And that’s it!”

They lead us through the steps again, slowly, and I’m frowning the whole time. The dance seems familiar, but I can’t place it. It’s gnawing at the back of my mind, a memory that’s trying to rise to the surface. Have I done this before? Is this another of the stupid things my friends and I used to get drunk and make fun of in the dorm rooms? I know I’ve seen *Grease* before, I can remember catching it on TV once with Andrew when we were sort-of-together-but-not-really-together, during the first semester of sophomore year, right before I ended things with him to date Dave. There are some half-remembered flashes of it beyond that, though; split-second images of being high off my ass in the Whitman Hall common room, dancing on a coffee table while Jamie shouts, “No, you ass-clown! It’s hand over hand, *then* fist over fist. You’re fucking it up so bad!”

I haven’t blacked out in months, but I still always feel like I’m losing time. The truth is that for the first time in years, I’m actually sober enough to start remembering nights that I thought I’d lost years ago. I’m not sure I like it.

“Okay, guys. Thanks, that was great,” Nate announces, and I start. I’ve been going through the motions, but only the sound of his too-high voice brings my mind back to the task at hand. He says to the redhead, “Annabelle, do you want to take the lead on the swing?”

“Yeah, sure. But um... are you sure you’re going to be able to dance in those shoes?” the redhead, Annabelle, asks me, nodding to my boots. “I mean... they don’t have laces and there’s a lot of footwork in swing. So, they might, you know. Come off. Or something.”

I glance towards the wings and see a toolkit sitting near an electrical box. I walk over, flip it open, and unearth a handful of cable ties. Twine would probably be less trailer trash, but three cable ties through the empty hooks manages to secure each of my boots to my feet. I return to my place in line, between two girls wearing little high-heeled dance shoes. I’m apparently the only idiot here who thought this was a fucking high school play, not a Broadway audition. Silly me.

Annabelle begins to talk us through our next dance, a series of basic swing steps. Basic must be a pretty relative term, because the rest of us are dancing like we’ve got nerve damage. When John, a guy a few place down from me, trips over his own shoes—shiny dance shoes didn’t save him from that, the little show-off—and almost pitches off the stage, Nate sighs and turns to Annabelle. “Divide and conquer?”

The group is split by gender at that point. Nate stands with his back to us and exaggerates the footwork very slowly until we're all able to shuffle along in an acceptable way. The girls are making way more progress than we are, and occasionally, someone turns to glare at me for the clomping of my boots. Every time, I just sneer back. After a few minutes, I look up to find that Annabelle is watching me, her head cocked to the side. Immediately, I halt and say, "What am I fucking up?"

"No, I'm actually... well, Nate," she says, turning to call across the stage to him. He looks over, and she points at me. "I'm wondering if maybe he could handle doing a belt flip."

Flips? I never bargained for doing flips. I tried one once during junior year, while hammered; I almost broke my collarbone. I'm opening my mouth to protest, but Nate says, "Maybe. He looks like he has really great upper body strength." He's staring at my arms. I snort. He snaps out of it to add, "I don't know. Try it?"

Annabelle takes me by the wrist and tows me towards the middle of the stage. She stands on my right so that we're facing the same direction, though I'm about half a step behind her. "Turn towards me like, thirty degrees, and put your right foot behind both of mine. No, perpendicular. Right. Okay, now, lean forward a little and put your right arm around my front."

"Like this?" I say, settling my right arm across her stomach and wrapping it just enough to press my forearm and palm to the small of her back.

"Yep. Left hand behind my knees. Good. Now, I'm going to count—five, six, seven, eight—and after eight, I'm going to bend my knees a little, then pop up. Move with me, and when I'm up, I'm going to flip my legs back over my head at the same time that you're straightening up and pushing my legs, to help me. Whatever you do, *do not let go of me* until my feet are back on the ground, okay?"

"Okay," I say, even though everyone is watching, and I'm pretty sure I'm about to accidentally snap her neck. God, they're going to be so mad at me if I kill the choreographer.

But Annabelle must have more faith in me, because she gets into position and says, "Five, six, seven, eight, down-UP!"

The flip is over faster than I expect it to be. One second, she's crouching down a little, then suddenly her full weight is on my bicep as we both swing her feet back over her head. I hear the soft thump of her feet hitting the stage again, but I still check to make sure she's stable before I release her. She's stable, she's

alive, everything is fine. No snapped necks, no sir, not today. I'm so busy celebrating my ability to not kill a woman that I almost miss the gleeful smiles that she and Nate are exchanging.

From the front row, where she is sitting with her arms crossed, Ms. Markland says, "Can you do that again?" We do, a little more smoothly. "How about an angel?"

"What the fuck is an angel?" I ask.

Annabelle says, "Once I've completed enough of the flip that my legs are over and I'm facing the ground, you hold me in place on your shoulder. I keep my torso and legs parallel to the floor, and put my arms out and back. Then, instead of completing the flip behind you, you turn me back down the way I came up. Think you can manage that?"

No. "Yes."

Turns out, I can. They spend the better part of the next quarter hour forcing me and my apparently rippling biceps through a series of flips and turns and twirls—a bunch of stupid shit they keep calling "aerials." Once satisfied with my ability to not murder someone as talented as Annabelle, they begin to partner the rest of the cast off so that I end up with a girl named Miranda. She's the same height as Annabelle, but weighs about thirty pounds more, and she keeps shooting me these apologetic looks. Finally, she steps close and whispers, "I'm sorry. I know I'm fatter than the other girls, and if you don't want to lift me—"

"Come on. I haven't had any trouble lifting you yet, have I?" I say. Neither of us points out that this might be due to what Nate so lustily referred to as my "great upper body strength." She still looks embarrassed, so I add, "Also, shut up, you're not fat. You're beautiful."

For half a second, she looks like she's going to cry, and then she's breaking into a blinding smile. Girls are so weird. Rather than voice my confusion, however, I take her hand and return to our dance. We work well together, right up until the middle of some move called an "around the world," in which she jumps into my arms bridal-style, then swings her legs to the right around the back of my body to hook them around my left arm. With her knees locked around my bent elbow, I'm supposed to then swing the rest of her body around until she can grab my right arm and flip over it to dismount. It's a complete pain in the ass, and I spend the entire movement tensed and terrified of not locking my arms enough and dropping her.

Halfway through our fourth execution of it, she miscalculates where my right arm will be and, instead of

grabbing it, her left hand smacks hard into my jaw. I'm left scrambling to catch her, and it's only by sheer dumb luck that she doesn't eat hardwood in front of everyone. I straighten up, lower her to the ground, and rub my mouth, saying, "Dude, you just punched me in the *face*, what the fuck."

"I'm really sorry," she says quickly, but she looks a little too amused to really mean it. I stick my tongue out at her, and she mirrors it.

No one wants to dance much more after that, so the rest of the group begins to filter off the stage. I take a seat next to where I left my guitar. Annabelle and Nate are already chatting excitedly about how aeriels will make the school dance scene more dynamic, but Ms. Markland clears her throat and says, "It depends who the cast includes. We'll have to wait and see how the rest of the auditions turn out."

She barely spares me a glance, but there's a private smile on her face, and I feel a small spark of hope. I might actually have a chance at this, provided that Miranda doesn't crack me in the face again.

When it's time for us to move into the monologues and songs, I'm so used to Anderson being the first name called that I'm already sitting up when Ms. Markland calls out, "Gabe Alberti?"

Right. The anti-drug douche who barely acknowledged me. He's annoyingly good—he uses a monologue that he pulls from his pocket, and actually manages to make a few people laugh. He follows it up by singing some soaring Broadway number. It's a great audition, overall, save one note of pitchiness on the song. When he finishes, he exits to stage to applause and resumes his seat in the front row, along with the rest of the drama club main players.

"Garen Anderson," Ms. Markland calls, and I stand.

On my way past the group in the front row, Gabe snags my arm. "Hey, Garen. What reading are you going to do?"

I shrug. "Just one of the standards they handed out earlier. Why?"

"Oh, I was just wondering if you'd treat us to a rendition of some coke-fueled rant from *Requiem for a Dream*," he says, returning my shrug. Some of the people in the group snicker, but most look around at him in bemusement. Even that uptight bitch Joss turns her head sharply towards him and digs an elbow into his side.

It's hard not to be embarrassed, especially since most of them know exactly where I was this morning, but it's even harder not to be pissed. And I am a man of many faults, so I don't feel any guilt for snorting in derision and saying, "First of all, *Requiem for a Dream* is about heroin, you moron, not cocaine, so your little quip falls kind of flat. Second of all, keep laughing, kid. Haven't you been doing this theater bullshit for years, trying to work your way up to leading man? This is my first audition ever, and between the moves they had me doing with Annabelle on stage earlier and the song I'm going to be singing in about two minutes, I'm about to put your punk ass back in the chorus. So, *shut the fuck up*, and maybe you'll learn something."

My last experience interacting with drama club kids was maybe in my sophomore year of high school, so I'm rusty. I have no idea what constitutes an insult with these people; fuck, I'm half-expecting some sort of finger-snapping, jazz-hands rumble, straight out of *West Side Story*. But I must get it at least most of the way right, because even the rest of his friends are roaring with gleeful abandon, grinning at me and ruffling Gabe's sandy-blond hair. I continue up the side stairs to the stage, feeling just a little bit braver.

"Hi, Garen. Are you ready?" Ms. Markland says. I nod. "Great. I see you've got one of our sample soliloquies. Is that what you'll be—"

"Nope, changed my mind," I say, crumpling the paper and tossing it off the edge of the stage. "I'm suddenly feeling a bit more Shakespearean. *Henry the Fifth*, act four, scene three."

I launch into the St. Crispen's Day Speech with such gusto that a few of the idiots in the front row can only stare, their mouths gaping open. They don't know how many times I've heard this stupid speech, how Sergeant Smitt used to torment us during PT by reading it into a megaphone to either motivate us, teach us about the military's "band of brothers," or drive us insane with Old English. These people don't know about the countless times everyone in my squad would get completely shitfaced and recite it at each other in increasingly elaborate accents. I know the speech by heart, even if it might come out a little smoother with a fifth of scotch in me.

Once I have finished, there is a brief, stunned silence, during which I can't help but turn to Gabe and throw my arms out to the sides in what can only be interpreted as a *what now, bitch?* sort of gesture. He turns purple. Ms. Markland clears her throat, but when I roll my eyes back in her direction, she's warring between amusement and disapproval. I get that face a lot, especially from teachers. She folds her hands together and says, "That was lovely, thank you. Have you prepared a song?"

"Yeah," I say, even though I haven't actually given it much thought. I jerk my head upstage, towards the

carefully staggered musical instruments. “I was going to just play along on guitar as my own accompaniment. It cool if I use one of those, so I don’t have to bother grabbing mine?”

She nods her head once and gestures towards them, indicating that I should help myself. I slip the strap of the black, beat-to-shit Les Paul Standard over my head, take about ten seconds to tune it, then launch into the first song that comes to mind, some punk-pop band’s cover of an old Don Henley song. It’s good with just the guitar, but it’d be better if I had thought to ask Alex along to play the drums for me. Ben would work, too, that obnoxious little prodigy with his six-instrument-playing self—piano, guitar, drums, bass, clarinet, and mentioned casually the other day that he taught himself the basics of violin over the summer because he got *bored*, what the fuck—but Alex is the best drummer I know, way better than the Patton dipshit I’ve been “in a band with” since freshman year, even though I barely see them anymore. Al and I could fucking kill this song.

In my defense, I’m kind of killing it on my own. That’s not a surprise—to me, having a good voice or being able to shred the shit out of the guitar is pretty much on par with having green eyes or spending way too much time flat-ironing my hair every morning. Parts of who I am, things I don’t even think about anymore. Right now, I’m more concerned that I’m putting on too much of a show. I’m a musician, not an actor, and I know I should probably be performing this in that stock-still, occasional-arm-lifting way that all Gabe performed his song, but that’s not *me*. When I play guitar, I rock out, throwing my whole arm and shoulder into every chord I bang out, sometimes bouncing or rocking a little on boots planted two feet apart, face full of expression, jerking my head in an occasional semi-head-bang. It’s more fun that way, for me, the band, and whoever’s watching, but I know it’s not how I’m supposed to be doing this in a theater audition.

I wrap up the song and, without waiting for any acknowledgment, return the guitar to its stand and scuff across the stage back towards the stairs, hands stuffed in my pockets. I’m belatedly aware of applause, and of Gabe glaring daggers at me, and of Ms. Markland calling after me, “That was great, Garen, thank you!”

At the base of the stage stairs, I spin to give her a salute, then head back towards my seat in the fourth row to watch the rest of the auditions. It takes about fifteen seconds before Miranda, my dance partner, scrambles out of her seat in the front row and bolts back to where I’m sitting, sinking into the seat next to me and saying, “That was awesome.”

“Thanks,” I say, genuinely surprised that she’s admitting that.

She rakes her hair back and casts a somewhat mournful look at the stage. “Man, I wish I had your balls.

Basically nobody auditions with songs that aren't Broadway. I told my mom I wanted to audition with Joan Jett, but she was like, 'fuck that, you're doing something from Les Mis.' So, here I am." She wrinkles her nose and shrugs.

I raise my eyebrows at her. "So? Unless your mom is Ms. Markland or the Holliday kid, I really don't think her opinion matters much right now. If you wanna do a Joan Jett song, do it."

"I brought the music for the Broadway number, not the rock one," she says, shrugging. I stare at her; she stares back. I incline my head towards the guitar case on my other side; a slow smile spreads across her face. "I couldn't."

"Oh, but you could," I press.

She shakes her head, but she's still smiling. A beat. Then, "Do you know 'I Love Rock 'n Roll'?"

I snort. "What are you, new?"

When her name is called almost a full hour later, I follow her up the aisle with my case and sit down on the edge of the stage while she performs her monologue. A few people seem distracted by my presence; even though he's supposed to be watching Miranda, I can feel Nate's eyes flicking towards me every few seconds. It's starting to get annoying. I turn to face him properly, and when his eyes land on me again a moment later, I wink at him. He turns an unholy shade of red, but his attention returns to Miranda for the rest of her speech.

"Lovely," Ms. Markland says after a moment. "Do you have a song?"

"Y-Yes," Miranda says, shooting me a nervous look. I'm not surprised; the most rocking thing anyone has auditioned with since me was something from *Rent*. Before she can change her mind, I stand, cross the stage to the amp, plug my guitar into it, and start to play.

Miranda doesn't let me down. She fucking wails on that song, absolutely slaughters it. It's fantastic, and by the time she's done, I'm grinning like a little kid. The applause she receives is significantly more than I got, but hey, they're her friends, not mine. I pack up my guitar and head back to my seat, though Miranda stretches out a hand to ruffle my hair as I pass her.

The rest of the afternoon passes in something much like silence. I'm not mocked by anyone, but I'm... not exactly spoken to at all. Just like yesterday during my classes, I'm ignored, and I *hate* it. When I was

growing up in Cleveland, most of my classmates were constantly terrified of me blowing something up, but at least that meant they noticed me. At Patton, half the guys in the grade wanted to either be me or bed me. Last year, I had Ben, and Alex, and the rest of the guys, and Travis. Now, it's just me. I'm alone.

It's quarter after four by the time everyone has auditioned, and Ben and Alex are both sending me impatient texts from the parking lot. I send one to both of them that says, *am finishing up now. jerk each other off for 5 minutes or something, i'm not gonna be THAT ASSHOLE who leaves right before we're dismissed.*

But it appears that we are not being dismissed. Nate and Ms. Markland are arguing in hushed tones while the rest of us just sit around doing nothing, and after a few too many minutes of that, she sighs and says, "Can I have John Nielson and Garen Anderson back on stage, please?"

The touch of alarm that I feel at that is standard; anytime someone calls me by my first and last name, a lecture usually follows. But I haven't done anything wrong in forever, so it is with great trepidation that I approach the stage. John, the guy who almost face-planted during the dancing but followed it up with a serious ass-kicking on the spoken and sung auditions, gives me a polite smile as I join him onstage.

Ms. Markland says, "Alright, we'd like each of you to do one more song, at a different tempo. John, you need to speed it up, and Garen, you need to slow it down. Do you think you can do that?"

"Of course," John says, then turns to me and says, "Do you mind if I go first?"

"Knock yourself out, man," I say, dropping down to sit on the edge of the stage.

He launches into an a cappella rendition of some other Broadway song that sounds like it might be from the sixties. I must be the only person who doesn't know this song, because most of the other audience members are clapping along or bopping around in their seats.

Okaaaay...

When he finishes, he is treated to a heavy round of applause as he sits down at the edge of the stage near me. Everybody looks over at me, and I'm suddenly, bizarrely uncomfortable. I shrug at my teacher and say, "I mean, I can do a slower song, for sure, but I... musical theatre's not my thing. I don't actually know any Broadway stuff, if that's what you're going for."

There's a general tittering of disapproval, and I roll my eyes. Jesus, it's like being surrounded by a bunch of church ladies in the House of the Holy Showtune.

"That's fine," Nate says, though his eyes make it clear that it is not nearly as fine as he'd like me to believe. "Just use any slow song you know well enough to play on the spot."

I'm not John; I don't sing a cappella. I stand and walk back over to the instruments, select an acoustic guitar, and sit back down on the edge of the stage. After a brief hesitation, I start to play an old Nine Inch Nails song, in the way it had been covered by Johnny Cash. I don't care if the song was by NIN; only the Man in Black has made me *ache* with it, so that's how I play it.

Almost immediately after beginning to sing, I wish I'd picked any other song. This one leaves me feeling exposed, like I'm sitting naked on the stage in front of everyone. In truth, I might actually be more comfortable being naked than singing a song about pain and addiction. There is certainly no clapping along, no seat-dancing, no smiling from the audience, and when I finish and return the guitar to its stand, there is silence. I hop off the stage, and the sound of my boots on the ground must trigger a reaction, because people are clapping politely after that. I've taken two steps when John grabs my sleeve and says, "Hey, good job. And don't worry about being asked to perform again. Usually, that just means they're considering us both for the same part, but wanted to see how we'd interpret it different. It's a theatre thing, I guess."

His smile is encouraging, and I try to imitate it before I slink back to my seat alone.

"Those were some really great auditions, you guys," Nate says, beaming around at us all. "It's left us with a lot to think about, but we'll be making our decisions this weekend. The cast list will be posted on the announcement board by the main office on Monday, before first period. Everyone have a good weekend!" I'm halfway up the aisle when he catches up to me. "Garen! Garen, wait."

I rotate slowly in place, and he seems surprised, but pleased, like he had half-expected me to book it out of the auditorium and leave him hanging. I peer at him over the top of my sunglasses, now back in place. "What's up?"

"I just um, wanted to say that I thought you were really good," he says, already turning red. "Obviously it's not just up to me, I mean, Ms. Markland gets a major say in casting, too? But I think you did really well. And you shouldn't worry about not getting a part, because you're definitely going to be in the cast."

Was I ever this much of a virgin? The kid told me yesterday that he's fifteen, but I was already fucking Jamie by the time I was his age. I can't help but ask, "What grade are you in?"

"I-I'm a junior."

I blink. "You're one grade below me but three years younger? I know I'm repeating my senior year, but that's kind of weird. I thought you said you were—"

"Fifteen, yeah, I know," he says, gritting his teeth. "I'm about to turn sixteen, though. My birthday is in October. And then, I'll be, you know... legally allowed to, um." I raise my eyebrows. He clears his throat. "Drive. And stuff."

"And stuff," I echo, cocking my head to the side. No human being has ever blushed as much as this guy is blushing right now. If he's not bullshitting me when he says I'm going to be in the cast, this little crush is going to get old quick, but for now, I flash him a brief smile and head for the auditorium door, saying over my shoulder, "Be sure and let me know when that birthday arrives. Maybe I'll teach you how to drive stick."

Outside, Ben's car is idling in the fire lane near the front doors. Alex, sitting shotgun, is the first to see me, and rolls down his window to ask, "How'd it go? You get a part?"

"Director says yeah, but it's probably not going to be a good one. It was so weird, dude, there were people there who like, actually gave a shit. I didn't realize any people actually gave a shit about drama club, I thought that was just a TV thing. The cast list goes up on Monday, though, so I'll find out then," I say. I hitch my chin at Ben. "Pop the trunk, I need to put my guitar in there."

He obeys. After I have safely stored my guitar case, I climb into the trunk and shut it behind myself, crawling over the back of the bench into the backseat rather than walking around. Ben scowls at me in the rearview mirror. "I hate it when you do things like that. You're going to ruin my seats if you don't stop manhandling the leather."

"Weird, because you never complained about me 'manhandling the leather' when I used to screw you in this very backseat," I say, stretching my legs out sideways across the seat and leaning back against the closed door. I reach up to pinch Alex's shoulder. "Hey, is your dad going to be home when we get there?"

Alex's dad is kind of a dick. He's a *gigantic* dick, actually; he's nice enough to me, but that's even worse

than if he were mean to me, because after three visits to the house, I realized that I'm actually the only one of Alex's friends who Mr. Baker doesn't treat like shit. He'll sneer at Ben—tiny, adorable Ben, with his eyeliner and too-tight jeans—but I'm always greeted with a genial smile and a "Garen, kid, how're you doing?" Shortly before last New Year's, I made the mistake of asking Alex why his dad seemed to only like me. His reply had been a tight smile and the words, "Because you're the only one he thinks is straight. He's never even met Mason or Jer, but he fucking hates Ben, he's been giving me shit about him since we were fourteen. Every time he gets drunk, he comes up to my room to give me his big 'you better not be fucking that faggot kid in the makeup' lecture. He likes you because you went to military school and you have a deep voice and you're built like a fucking Marine. He likes you because he thinks you fuck girls." I kind of started avoiding Mr. Baker after that.

In the front seat, Alex shrugs. "He's not supposed to be, but I can't be sure. It's not a big deal, we're just going around back to the basement anyway."

If either Ben or I had wanted to take Alex's word for it, we're both sorely disappointed when we pull into the driveway. Mr. Baker is camped out on the back patio, sitting on a deck chair halfway between a box of Corona bottles and the pool that Alex has yet to let me swim in. When he sees us all getting out of the car, he waves and says loudly, "Garen, buddy! How've you been?"

"Fine," I say, waving back. It's almost impossible to ignore the fact that has acknowledged neither Ben nor his own son. When it becomes clear that he doesn't intend to remedy that matter, I add, "How are you?"

"Can't complain, can't complain. What are you boys doing here?"

Steadying himself a little for the interaction, Alex takes a deep breath and says, "We're packing up my drum set and moving it to Garen's house. He has a music space in his basement, and I thought you might like having it out of the way."

Mr. Baker snorts. "You thought I might like having it out of the way, yeah? Only been asking you to clear that shit out of my basement for a month now. I should've sold it the first time you ignored me, that would've taught you a—"

"Alright, Mr. Baker, we're going to go handle that now," I speak over him, grabbing Alex and dragging him towards the basement door. "It was nice seeing you again."

The basement door has barely shut behind us before Alex is saying, "Don't do that, Garen. Don't fucking

be nice to him. He's an asshole."

"He's your dad, what the fuck am I supposed to do?" I say.

Whether he consciously intends to separate us or not, Ben moves to stand between us and says, "Can we just do this? Seriously, the last thing we need to do is have you two pick a loud enough fight with each other that he comes down here to intervene. Because I have a feeling he'd blame it all on me, and his 'conflict resolution' would probably involve taking a bat to my skull."

"Fine," Alex says, stalking over to the shelving unit where he stores all of his drum cases. Over his shoulder, he says, "Ben, remove all the cymbals and put them in the bag, with the dividers between them. Make sure you don't lose the wingnuts for them, alright? Once you're done with that, collapse the stands and put them in the duffel I left by the door."

I bounce lights on the balls of my feet. "Can I help?"

"Not with the cymbals, no. Ben plays, and he's packed my kit before, so he knows how to handle the pieces. And I don't trust you not to drop them and scratch the shit out of them, because you're a complete spazz. Seriously, I swear you had less energy when you were still doing coke all the time."

"Am I here for any reason other than to eventually let you guys into my house, then?" I demand.

Alex grins. "Yes, Garen, calm down. Right now, gather up all my sticks and brushes and shit, and put them in a bag to bring out to the car. Then put my pedals in their cases, the ones right here. Put all that in the front seat. Can I trust you to not fuck that up?"

"Can I trust you to not be a dick?"

"Probably not, to both of those questions," Ben says.

I glare at both of them, but they're too busy working to pay attention. Collecting the sticks and packing the pedals takes about five minutes, and then my job involves a lot of sitting around, bored, while the guys pack up the rest of the kit and line the cases up by the door. Slave labor is apparently a job I'm qualified for, because Alex graciously allows me to assist in moving the cases from the basement to the car. Once my guitar is moved from the trunk to the backseat, the two bass drums fit nicely in the trunk. Al gets bitchy when I ask if we can stack any of the cases, so most of the rest end up in the backseat.

When we're finally done, the only free space is the very front of the car. For several long minutes, we survey it from the back steps. Alex frowns. "We maybe should have brought two cars. Or less people."

"It's fine, Al. You and I will go drop this off at Garen's house, and he can hang out here for a while we unpack. I'm sure he and your dad would love a chance to get some bonding done," Ben says, clapping me on the shoulder.

I shrug him off and say, "Or we can just tie me to the roof of the car, and I'll ride along that way. Or underneath it. Or, all else failing, I'll just *hide* underneath it, and then you can back over me? I'm sure literally any of those things would be on par with hanging out here and getting treated to another talk like, 'Garen, son, you must be a real hit with the girls at that school of yours. I bet you get more ass than a toilet seat.'"

Alex makes a strangled noise in his throat and covers his face with both hands. "Dude, please tell me that my dad has never actually said that to you."

"I passionately wish I could tell you that, Alex. I really do."

"Looks like everything's packed in there pretty good," Mr. Baker booms from a few feet away. I jump; I hadn't realized he'd come closer on the deck. Alex stands, presumably so we can go find some way to shove me into the backseat underneath a snare drum, but his dad barks, "Alexander, where are your goddamn manners? You don't have to chase your friends off the second they get here. Why don't you bring them inside, stay for a while? How 'bout you, Garen? Wanna come upstairs, watch the game, have a beer?"

"No, thank you," I say, though it's hard to force the words out around my stiff smile. "I don't drink."

Mr. Baker booms out a laugh. "Oh, come on. You're a teenager, of course you do. It's just a beer, kid. What kind of man doesn't drink?"

"The kind of man who got out of rehab three weeks ago," I say.

For a very long moment, there is nothing but silence. Then Ben settles his palm between my shoulder blades and pushes me towards the car. "We should get going."

Seeing Ben touch me in such a familiar way seems to piss Mr. Baker off, and I can hear him stomping along behind us on the way back to the car. There are too many cases in the car for me to fit in the backseat, where I was on the way over. Wordlessly, Alex opens the front passenger door and shoves me into the seat, wedging himself in next to me and slamming the door shut again. One of us could maybe be comfortable if Ben was here instead of driving, but I'm six foot one and Alex is six foot three, and the seat just isn't built to be shared by two full-grown, adult men. Alex is halfway on top of me, and I just know that that's the worst possible thing right now.

"You know, maybe I should've taken some more time to get to know you before I decided I was alright with my son spending so much time with you," Mr. Baker says evenly. "That way, I might not have mistaken you for a man. I might've noticed you're just as much of a faggot as that mascara-wearing little bitch in the driver's seat."

Pure, unadulterated rage flares up in my chest, and before I can think better of it, I'm crawling over Alex, leaning out the window and snarling, "Don't talk about Ben like that, and don't assume for a second that you know more about what makes a man than I do. I'm a faggot because I fuck guys, not because I don't drink, and I don't drink because it recently came to my attention that I'm an *addict*. It's called 'recognizing that you have a problem' and 'sobering up.' Maybe you should fucking try it sometime, you homophobic, alcoholic piece of shit."

Ben throws the car into reverse and peels out of the driveway before I can say anything else. Only once we're rounding the corner at the end of the block do I realize the immense awfulness of what I've just done. I reach over and grip Ben's shoulder. "Pull over."

"No," he says.

"Ben, pull the fucking car over right now," I order. He doesn't obey until we're two streets over, like he thinks I want him to pull over so that I can run back to Alex's house and scream at Mr. Baker some more. When the car rolls to a stop at the curb, I twist around in place so that my ass is on the dashboard, my boots are braced on the seat on either side of Alex's knees, and my head is pressed to the ceiling, but at least I'm facing him, at least I can *look* at him. Even if he won't look at me. I crowd into his space so he can't ignore me, even though he looks furious. I grab the sleeve of his shirt and say, "I'm sorry. Alex, I swear, I am so fucking sorry, I shouldn't have said all that shit to your dad. I can't believe I—"

"I'm mad because I didn't say it, not because you did," Alex says, now glaring down at his hands. "I can't stand up to my own dad when he insults my best friend right in front of me. What the actual fuck."

"It's fine, Al. I don't care," Ben says quietly, reaching for Alex's wrist.

Alex shakes him off. "It's not fine, and you should care. Can we... I don't know. Can we just go to Garen's house now? I wanna get this set-up over with so we don't have to worry about it anymore."

The rest of the ride to my house takes place in silence. Ben drives, Alex stares out the window, and I try desperately to think of something I can do that will make up for screaming at his dad. Doc says I have to stop doing that—the outburst thing, not the remorse part. I have to figure something out; Ben and Alex are the only real friends I have left, besides Jamie, and I can't lose them, too. Not over something like this.

The first step of my apology is dead silence. When we get to my house, I let them in, clear out some space in the music half of my room, and begin to carry the drum cases downstairs, all in silence. Once we switch from bringing the drums in to setting them up, I sit down on my bed and wait like a punished child as they rebuild the kit.

It's almost seven o'clock by the time they finish, and then Ben is saying, "That should be good, right?"

"Yeah," Alex says, examining the kit. He seems to be in better humor as he adds, "This will be fine. I can change anything that needs to be changed later, after I play it."

Sensing the opportunity to present the rest of my apology, I quickly say, "You can play it now, if you want. I've been practicing some metal stuff for you, in case you wanted a chance to like, really bang on that shit."

My friends are a lot of things, but they're not stupid. They know what I'm doing. They know that, in my mind, the only two forms of conflict resolution are sex and music; I think they're both just sort of grateful I'm not trying to initiate the world's most remorseful threesome right now.

"Alright. We'll try it out," Alex says, smiling at me.

I don't smile back, just slip the strap of my guitar over my head and start to play.

Chapter Three

“Sex is the consolation you have when you can’t have love.” –Gabriel Garbia Marquez

85 days sober

My desk jolts forward a quarter of an inch as someone sinks gracelessly into the seat behind me, knocking their desk into the back of my chair. The words *I will kill you if you bump my chair again, you asshole* are already on the tip of my tongue, but a chin hooks over my shoulder and a warm, familiar voice says in my ear, “It would appear that congratulations are in order.”

It takes everything in me not to turn my head and move straight into a kiss. I grip the edge of my desk until Travis has sunk back into his own seat, then turn to face him and say, in a tone of forced calm, “Why’s that?”

“Um,” he says, disbelieving, “Wow, I have no idea. Maybe because the cast list for your play was posted this morning?”

What I mean to say is, *Did I get a part?* What comes out is, “You checked the cast list just to see if I got a part?”

“No,” he says, almost before I’m done asking the question. I raise my eyebrows, and he relents, “Okay, yes. Do you want to know what part you got?”

“Yeah, right after you tell me when you checked the list,” I say. There is no response. Something warm and stupid is blooming in my stomach, and I can’t swallow down my smile. “Did you check it when you first got into school? You totally did, didn’t you? That’s the first thing you did this morning. You came in and went right to the announcement board to see if I got a part in our retarded gender-bending school play.”

Through gritted teeth, Travis repeats, “Do you want to know what part you got?”

I shrug. “Only if it’s a good one. If it’s some chorus bullshit, I can just check that out for myself later.”

He opens his mouth to reply, but at that moment, Mr. Esteves calls for attention, and I reluctantly turn to face the blackboard. I spend the better part of the class drawing kangaroos in the margin of my notebook—just because—and eating gummy bears, meeting Mr. Esteves’ glare with blank eyes until he gives up on the idea that I’m going to put them away. One seat over, a girl named Chelsea keeps blinking

at me; I'm almost certain she's trying to figure out whether or not I'm stoned. I smile beatifically at her, and she looks away. Travis kicks my chair leg. At first, I assume he's just trying to get me to actually pay attention—and really, why? Trial law is such a bullshit class, we haven't even been assigned our teams for the mock trial competition yet, we haven't done anything—but then I feel something digging into the small of my back.

Without bothering to give it much consideration, I reach back to take whatever he's handing me. His cell phone. When Mr. Esteves turns around to write something on the board, I look down at the phone screen. It's a mediocre-quality picture of a white sheet of paper covered in Times New Roman. The cast list. I want to turn around and ask why he bothered to take a picture of it, but instead, I opt to read straight down the list. The first line informs me that all cast members must attend the first read-through on Tuesday, and that anyone interested in helping out with crew should also attend for a brief informational session. Then, after that, the cast list.

Josslyn Pryce as Dani Zuko. No surprise there; Joss seems crazy uptight, but her audition had been fantastic.

John Nielson as Andy Olsen. Again, unsurprising. His song had been awesome. Or, songs, rather, since he'd been the other one to audition twice. His voice rises unbidden in my mind: *Usually, that just means they're considering us for the same part.* That's what he'd said, right? Had I actually had a shot at getting the lead, even over a ton of other people who have actually bothered to give a shit about drama club for years?

And there, the third name down, *Garen Anderson as Bobby Rizzo.* A main role, multiple solos, ultimate fucking bragging rights to any of those tools who glared at me for not singing Broadway. Because I am petty, I read down until I find Gabriel Alberti as Martin Maraschino. Swallowing a grin, I pass the phone back to Travis, who leans in again to whisper, "Told you you'd be great." His lips brush the shell of my ear.

Well. Alright then.

86 days sober

The read-through is a shitshow. Only half the cast members seem to have remembered to show up, I end up getting stuffed into a chair next to Gabe, and Nate Holliday keeps panicking whenever a missing cast

member has a line. If only to shut him up, I offer to read some of the other times as well, though he makes the mistake of telling me to read for Christine, the girl who will be playing Nikki. It's fine, up until we get to a scene that rapidly dissolves into me talking to myself, worrying about whether or not I should wear a condom when I fuck myself, so that I don't get myself pregnant. I can't take it seriously; no one can. When Nate complains that I'm reading everything in monotone that makes it impossible to tell which character's lines I'm reading, I immediately switch to reading all of the Nikki lines in a *much sassier* monotone two octaves higher than my own. Across the room, Joss Pryce loses it.

"If no one is going to take this seriously, we don't need to have a play at all," Nate snaps, throwing his heavily-marked script down.

I try to straighten my face, but too many people are still snickering, so I settle for flashing Nate my most charming, self-deprecating smile and saying, "Sorry, man, I was just trying to lighten the mood. I'll take it seriously."

I totally won't, but he doesn't need to know what I'm thinking.

It's another hour before we're dismissed. Most of the people stand up and amble out into the hall, but I stay awkwardly put. I still don't know any of them, so it would feel strange to follow so closely. It would feel even stranger to try to engage them in conversation on the way out of the building, especially since I know that most of them must still just be vaguely wondering why the cokehead bothered to show up to rehearsal.

Surprisingly, though, only a few seconds pass before someone near me says, "I swear to God, I thought Nate was going to punch you in the face when you used that voice."

I look up from my script. Joss is hovering near the edge of the table I'm sitting at, as though she hasn't quite made up her mind about whether I'm safe to stand near. I offer her a wry smile. "That's not terribly shocking. From what I hear, I've got a very punchable face." She responds with a polite half-smile, but doesn't say anything. It's just a conversation; this shouldn't be so hard. I've never had trouble talking to people before, never been the guy who hangs out at the edges of a group without befriending anyone. I clear my throat and try, "How many plays have you done here, other than this one?"

"All of them?" she says, shrugging. "I'm a senior now, and this is the fourth year in a row that I'll be doing both plays, the fall one and the spring one."

I want to ask her if she always gets the leading role, but I don't have to. The glint in her eyes tells me that she must; it's the same look I can feel on my face when someone finds out I play guitar and asks the asshole question, *So, are you any good?* My response is always a smirk, that look that Joss has got right now, and the words, *Yeah, I'm good.*

There's a brief knock on the doorframe, even though rehearsal's over and the door's still open. I turn and can't stop a smile when I see Travis hovering just outside. He hitches his chin at me. "Hey. I thought you'd be here."

"Makes sense, considering I'm the one in the play. Stalker," I add the insult as an afterthought.

He cocks his head to the side a bit and says, "It's not stalking if I have a reason to be here. I told you I might be giving up track for something with a few less douchebags involved with it, and well, that Nate kid said they were looking for more people to do stage crew."

"Your obsessive-compulsive need for order will be very beneficial," I say, even though what I mean is, *I'm glad I get to spend more time with you, even if we're both pretending it's totally normal that you would suddenly decide that senior year is the reasonable time to join a random club at a school you've attended since you were fourteen. You are cute, I still want to touch you, like me back.*

"And I'm sure that your obsessive-compulsive need for attention will be beneficial to your performance as well," he says. I'm choosing to interpret that as, *I totally like you back, let's go screw around in the backseat of your car.*

My phone buzzes in my pocket. I pull it out and find a text from Jamie. *Too fucking thrilled to be seeing you on Saturday. What are your thoughts regarding me greeting you with a blowjob in the middle of the train station?* I smile and tap out a reply, *Ooh, stop, you're making me hard. Am equally thrilled (re: seeing you and public fornication). Will text you that night once I'm done with lame mom dinner.* I hit send and glance up, saying, "Sorry. James. We're supposed to be hanging out this weekend."

"Are you going there, or is he coming here?" Travis asks, somewhat warily. Understandable. The first time he and Jamie were in the same state, I came back to try to ruin his relationship. The second time, Jamie essentially strong-armed him into going to visit me in rehab, something Alex has only recently admitted to me. It makes sense that Travis would kind of cringe at the idea of Jamie being in Connecticut at all.

"I'm going into the city. My mom wants to get dinner and talk about my life—like she doesn't already hear

enough of that from her creepy, constant phone calls to my dad—and then Jamie and I are going out,” I say. Then, feeling a little thrill as I say it, I admit, “We’re um... sort of celebrating, I guess. This Saturday is my ninetieth day clean and sober.”

Joss jumps a little, like she doesn’t think she was supposed to hear that. Whatever—I’m glad she heard. It’s nice to know that some of the idiots around this school might actually find out that I’m doing well these days. If Travis notices her reaction, he doesn’t point it out. Instead, he grins, bright and genuine, and says, “Yeah, I know.”

I’m about to ask him if he knows my sobriety date in the same way he just happened to check the cast list, the same way he just happened to show up today after rehearsal. Before I can open my mouth, though, my phone rings, alerting me to a call from Jamie. I hold up one finger, signaling Travis to wait, then answer, “Hey, Jamie.”

“What lame mom dinner?”

“I told you, my mom’s making me go out to eat before I can do anything else. She’s meeting me at the train station and everything, like a fucking predator.”

Jamie huffs. “Does Marian not realize that she is cutting into valuable James-and-Garen time? Seriously, do I need to send this bitch a schedule?”

“Pretty sure she’d cut your balls off, if you did that,” I say. I glance back up. Left to their own devices and with nothing much else to do in the room, Travis and Joss have taken to making awkward small talk. Figuring I can leave them to that for another minute or two, I say, “So, do you have any big and exciting plans for us this weekend?”

“I’ve told you, Garen, you can’t just bring your cock up in conversation like that. God, here I am trying to talk to you about your visit, and you just want to talk about things that are *big* and *exciting*.”

I roll my eyes. “I swear to god, you need to get a boyfriend, or a girlfriend, or some better fucking pay-per-view channels, because your lines get cheesier and more pornastic every time we talk.”

“I know,” he admits. “About the lines, that is. We’ll talk about the trainwreck that is my romantic life when you’re here on Saturday. Obviously your little interlude with your own stepbrother will forever take the cake of inappropriateness, but I’m beginning to wonder if there’s something in the water in that state,

because my current... *situation* is a bit less than ideal. And involves way more people than it should."

"Sounds like my friends are rubbing off on you."

"You have no idea."

I don't catch anything he says after that, because Joss laughs then, a clear, pretty laugh. Travis seems to be stopping himself from grinning only by biting his thumbnail. But... he only does that when he's nervous.

"I have to go," I say very slowly, not appreciating a single second of the sinking feeling I'm suddenly unable to escape. "I'll see you this weekend, yeah?"

I end the call and make a sort of big procession out of putting my phone in my backpack, just to see if I can draw some of Travis' attention away from Joss. He has barely blinked. I cough, and he finally looks over, edges of his mouth still quirked up in a half-smile at something Joss said. I say, "I'm going to head out. Want me to walk you to your car?"

"Um," he says. He blinks at me, then looks at Joss, then reddens a little bit and says, "I'm okay. I'm just going to, uh—" He makes a half-hearted gesture towards Joss, an indication that he plans to hang back and talk to her some more. I don't get why. She's barely nice. "I'll see you in class tomorrow, okay?"

Without bothering to reply, I walk away, feeling stupid and unsatisfied.

88 days sober

I haven't slept since Monday night. My sleeping schedule has been shaky at best since rehab, but this is drawing me closer to the breaking point. I've been awake since six thirty on Tuesday morning, the day of the first read-through. Fifty hours awake. Fifty hours of trying to doze off, only to have something jolt me back awake. In the first days of rehab, my insomnia had come from cravings. Not physical cravings, but psychological ones. The dull ache in the back of my brain, the constant hunger for something to *take the edge off*. After rehab, the problem had been the fear, and the questions—can I do this? Can I stay clean? What if I fuck up? Will LRC take me back if I relapse? Will my dad kick me out again? Will any of my friends forgive me for what I've done? Will they forgive me later, for the things I know I'll eventually do? Now, though, there's only one question rolling over and over in my mind.

Why did he look at her like that?

89 days sober

Half an hour before the final bell rings, I almost black out. The world is going dark at the edges, and my hands feel numb, and I'm just so fucking tired. I've been sitting in the back of the music room for twenty minutes already, grading quizzes according to the neatly printed answer sheet, but all the words are blurring together now. Without bothering to explain myself under Jeff's questioning gaze, I stand up and walk out into the hall, trying to shake some feeling back into my limbs. I jump up and down a few times, rub my eyes, then go upstairs to see if I can wheedle some coffee out of whoever's in the teacher's lounge.

I'm not a teacher, obviously, but Jeff keeps sending me into the lounge to make copies of stuff for him. I barely ever get glared at anymore, even when I flop down in one of the armchairs to wait for the machine to finish running off worksheets. This afternoon, the room is empty and the door is locked, but all I want is some fucking coffee. It's not too much to ask. I'm so tired that I walk into the nearest empty classroom to snag a few paper clips off the teacher's desk, drop to my knees in front of the teacher's lounge door, and pick the lock.

Coffee has never tasted so fucking perfect.

When I get home after school, I make it halfway across the living room before I pass out. I'm conscious again in seconds, because there's nothing to jolt you back to reality like staggering into the side of a couch and then collapsing on hardwood floor. For several minutes, I lie there, trying not to cry. By now, I've been awake for almost ninety hours, and my eyes are burning, the way they did during my brief experimentation with colored contact lenses—because really, there were only so many times I could hear the words “oh wow, your eyes are so green!” before I was just over it and bought myself a pair of dull brown lenses—during sophomore year. My hands are shaking as I press the heels of my hands to my closed eyelids.

I don't understand what's *wrong* with me. I don't understand why I can't just sleep like a normal person, why I can't lie down and close my eyes without seeing Gabe's supercilious smirk, or the way Joss kept tilting her head towards Travis every time she made a joke, like it was just for him, or the way Travis' lip kept catching between his teeth for half-seconds at a time, nervous but *wanting*.

I manage to stand long enough to drag my still mostly limp body downstairs and collapse on my bed. All I want is to be rested enough to stomach dinner and interrogation with my mother tomorrow, and to enjoy going out with Jamie afterward. Sleep still doesn't come. Even now, it lurks just out of reach, getting chased away by my inability to shut my brain up. This is so much worse than even the most unbearable drug crash I've ever had, and an enormous part of me wants to trudge back upstairs and drive myself to the nearest liquor store to get some whiskey or something. Just a finger of it so I can feel warm and sedated enough to knock myself out.

Instead, I roll over to bury my face in the pillows and wait for sleep.

And wait.

And wait.

And wait.

90 days sober

Mom is waiting in the Main Concourse when I get off the train at Grand Central. It's only been a little over a week since she's seen me, but she hugs me anyway before she says, "What, no overnight bag?"

I shrug. "James has stuff I can wear. We're basically the same size." Not really. Jamie and I have completely different bodies; our weights aren't that different, and we might wear the same size jeans, if not for the fact that he's three or four inches taller than me, but his shirts tend to pull too tight across my slightly broader shoulders and more muscular chest. Still, we've been sharing clothes for years. I cuff his jeans, he shrinks my shirts. It's a thing. Besides, what's the point of bringing clothes to sleep in, when I know I'll barely sleep anyway? The five hours I managed to steal last night practically made me cry with relief, but I'm not an idiot. I'm refusing to get my hopes up that sleep will go back to being a regular thing for me.

But Mom is looking too pleased with herself, so I'm not that surprised when she says, "Don't worry about it. I have clothes for you at the apartment."

"Mom," I say warningly.

"Garen," she says, in the same tone. I sigh and let her drag me out to the street to get a cab, but show my displeasure by spending the whole ride back to her apartment texting Jamie, who wants me to meet him back at Grand Central once dinner is over.

True to meddlesome form, Mom has taken the liberty of spreading a host of beautiful new clothes around the bedroom I claimed in her penthouse apartment when she moved there. All of the price tags are turned carefully downward so I can't see the cost of anything, but I can still see the labels. Yves St. Laurent. Hugo Boss. Roberto Cavalli. Christian Dior. Marc Jacobs. Apparently my mother assumes I won't be graduating this spring after all, because this bitch has definitely spent my college tuition buying me a ton of shit I would never voluntarily wear. She has never looked prouder of herself. "Do you like them?"

I scratch the back of my neck and admit, "Not really."

"Good," Mom says, smirking at me. "You wear nothing but jeans, t-shirts, and boots. If you don't like this outfit, that's probably because it's something more tasteful than you'd ever choose for yourself."

I scowl and say, "You know that Hugo Boss supplied uniforms for the Nazis, right? Hitler Youth, the SS, all of 'em. And some dude who designed for Dior was filmed doing a drunken, anti-Semitic rant a few years ago. He said he loved Hitler." *Thank you, Nate, for your insistence on filling my head with useless fashion information during our brief conversation before the read-through.* "I mean, I'll wear it, if you want me to. I'm just saying... every single article of clothing on this bed was made possible by racial hatred and the attempted genocide of our people."

"I suppose you're going to try to convince me that Brooks Brothers is run by Nazis, too?" she says dryly, handing me a pair of navy trousers.

"Yes," I say, somewhat desperately. "For fuck's sake, Mom, can't I just wear what I have on now? We'll go to a diner or something, we don't need to go anywhere nice."

She flings a pale blue button-down at me, then a tie. "Shut up and get ready. Our reservation is for eight o'clock."

Said reservation turns out to be at a restaurant situated in a luxury hotel in Midtown. From the moment we step through the door, I am uncomfortable, a feeling that only intensifies when we sit down at our table. Facial piercings and rocker-boy hairstyles don't tend to go over too well in places like this, and the

questioning looks from the other diners make it clear that they are as aware as I am of the fact that I'm a complete black sheep around here.

Our waiter arrives before I've really had a chance to look at the menu. His French accent is thick and his tone sharp, but I've been speaking French for years now; I know for a fact that it doesn't need to sound nearly as condescending as this guy has managed to make it sound as he says, "Welcome. What will you be having this evening?"

"Um," is all I can stupidly manage for a moment. I'd like to be having a moment to fucking think, but that does not appear to be on the menu. I don't miss the way the waiter's eyes flick upward in a half-roll.

"What about the braised bass?" Mom suggests.

I open my mouth to reply, but the waiter speaks over me, "Our *bar au champagne et coquillages* is a dish of braised striped bass, shellfish, and a champagne sauce."

His tone is somewhat demeaning, but not unfamiliar. Even in Brooks Brothers and J. Press, I've still got spiked hair and a lip ring, which means I still always get looks of disdain in establishments like this. Like a guy who rocks couldn't possibly have good breeding. I respond in French, voice tight but pronunciation perfect, "Je sais ce que c'est, mais je vous remercie pour votre sollicitude. Je prendrai le turbot poêlé, et un autre verre d'eau, s'il vous plaît."

To his credit, the waiter takes my abrupt change of languages in stride. He turns to my mother and asks, "Et pour la dame?"

"Ma mère ne parle pas français. Elle prendra le canard aux figues, et un verre de vin. Beaune 2004, s'il vous plaît," I say. He nods once, and I flash him a smile. "Merci." Once he has left, I glance back at Mom and add, "You usually get the duck, right? I ordered you that and another glass of pinot noir."

"It seems like your French is still excellent. I take it your skills haven't gone rusty, even though you haven't taken classes or gone back to Paris anytime lately?" she says.

I shrug. "Apparently not."

She takes a sip from her water glass, then pauses, her head cocked ever so slightly to the side. "Are you alright?"

"Fine."

"Have you been sleeping well?"

"No." The truth is out before I can even remember that I want to lie. But now that I've verbalized it, I can't exactly take it back. Even though I know that my disregard for etiquette won't endear me to the waiter, I prop my elbows up on the table so that I can rub my face, trying to ease some of the tension away with my fingers. It doesn't work, and Mom is still waiting for an explanation. I sigh. "This week has been rough. School, I guess. I'm trying to focus more in my classes, and I'm a little nervous about the role I got in the school play. I'm exhausted, that's all."

They're all half-truths. I have been trying to focus (on staying conscious) during my classes. I have been nervous (that some skank is trying to steal my not-boyfriend's attention, even though he keeps half-flirting with me, like he did after he told me) about the role I got in the school play. I'm (angry and sad and lonely and) exhausted, that's all. Mom buys it well enough, and we spend the rest of dinner bullshitting about my schoolwork, the play, Dad's divorce, whatever. And I love my mom, but I'm still relieved when she hugs me goodbye and lets me clamber into a cab back to Grand Central.

When I get back to the station, Jamie is waiting for me in the dining area. He's sitting at a table, a half-eaten cupcake in front of him, scrolling through messages on his iPhone. Instead of saying hello, I swing a leg over him and sit down on his lap, facing him. He leans in to press a quick kiss to my grinning mouth, then says, "Hello, darling. Took you long enough to get here. I was starting to wonder if you'd decided to ditch me."

"And spend the whole night letting my mom grill me about school? Yeah, right. Now, be nice to me and tell me how much you've missed me."

"I've missed you very much," he says solemnly.

I wrap my arms around his neck and drag him properly upright so that I can hug him. "Tell me how awesome I am."

"You're very awesome," he says. "And gorgeous, good Lord. I had a bunch of things on the agenda for tonight, but now that you're here, I kind of just want to take you back to my place and get you out of these nice clothes of yours. I like this tie."

"I'm glad. Maybe later I'll use it to tie you to your bed while I fuck you senseless," I say.

Two tables away, a soccer mom clears her throat, and I swallow a laugh. Jamie and I have been talking dirty to each other in public since we were a pair of fifteen-year-old boarding school brats, and the reaction from strangers is always the same. A cleared throat, a cough, an exaggerated sigh; some way of saying, *excuse me, but you're in goddamn public right now*. I push Jamie's hair off his forehead and say, "It's good to see you, James."

"You, too. You really do look good. Better than the last time I saw you, that's for sure. Looks like you're finally starting to get back to your normal weight and muscle tone, which is a nice change from that brief impersonation of a concentration camp victim you were doing in rehab," he says, squeezing my upper arm. Humored, I stand up again and pull him to his feet. He slings an arm across my shoulders to lead me out of the station, and I can't help but burrow deeper into his hold. Seeing Jamie again always feels like coming home; since I met him, his love and loyalty have been unwavering. I am sure of his friendship in a way I've never been sure of anyone else's. The other people in my life always feels like they have one foot out the door, even Ben, who has protected me and chased me and supported me through every suckish thing about the past year. There's no logic behind my certainty that everyone who loves me will leave, but that never makes me less certain, except with Jamie. I know he will always stay.

"First thing's first? Take me back to your apartment and lend me some fucking clothes. Mom decided I had to play dress-up before dinner tonight. I look like a tool," I say.

Jamie slips two fingers under the collar of my shirt to check the label, then snorts and says, "I have this same shirt, sweetheart. Hate to say it, but you'll be as disappointed as ever with your options at my place."

That, it turns out, is a complete lie. Back at Jamie's apartment—a gorgeous, modern loft all done up in colorblind coordination; white walls and carpet, black leather couch and chairs, glass and chrome tables—I find a neatly organized stash of my clothes hanging in his closet. I strip out of the Brooks Brothers trousers and J. Press shirt, tossing them onto the floor near the bed. Scowling, Jamie picks them up, brushes them off, and drapes them neatly over the back of his desk chair. After several minutes spent murmuring sweet nothings to the collection of nearly identical black v-neck t-shirts, I select one at random, pull it on, and steal a pair of Jamie's jeans. I have to cuff them twice before they're short enough for me, but that particular embarrassment is hidden by my boots, once I tug those back on.

Jamie is lounging out on his bed, still wearing the jeans, button-down, tie, and wingtips he wore to meet me. At my blank expression, he rolls his eyes and stands, heading to the bathroom to mess himself up a little; he untucks his shirt and pops the first button, loosens his tie a little, and rakes his hands through his hair. He looks more like a disheveled prep school kid than anything, but that's about as casual as Jamie gets—not exactly a match to my tight, borrowed jeans, worn-in v-neck, scuffed boots, and lip ring.

“So,” I say, shadowing him into the bathroom, “where did you say we’re going tonight?”

“I didn’t say.” He’s still frowning at his own reflection, carefully adjusting the untidiness of his hair. A pause, then he gives me a searching look. “I heard about this show I thought you might like.”

“What, around here?”

He snorts. “If by ‘here’ you mean ‘in this city.’ Not *here* here. Were you paying attention at all during the cab ride? Because newsflash, darling—I live in the fucking Upper East Side. So, no, I don’t think you’re going to be able to find a filthy hipster bar around here.”

My heart quickens—I hate that. I lick my lips and echo, “A bar.”

“Yeah,” he says, then, after a moment’s hesitation, “I know that’s kind of fucked, okay? To be bringing you out to a bar on the night when you’re celebrating your ninetieth day of sobriety. But I swear, I checked the place out first, and you’d be fine. They have a ton of non-alcoholic shit you can drink, and it’s not really a big drug hangout. I’ve been there a few times, and I’ve never seen anybody using anything. I just thought that you’d get a kick out of the place, because some of the bands are kind of cool.”

“Plus, nothing beats getting jerked off by a dude with an ironic mustache tattoo on his finger. It’s an orgasm and a chance to bump up my indie street cred, all at once.”

He hesitates again, then says, “We can go somewhere else, if you want.”

“No,” I say quickly. “Jamie, you know me better than anybody. And if you think it’s the type of place I can handle hanging out without relapsing, I believe you. I trust you.”

“I trust *you*. And you should trust you, too,” he says, eyes back on his own reflection.

The music on the stereo kicks over to a sickly sweet acoustic pop song that has me biting back a delighted laugh and looking around at Jamie, who is very purposefully not meeting my eyes in the mirror. I lean back against the counter and say, "God, I haven't heard this song in years. Hey, Jamie. Know what was kind of hilarious?" "What?" he asks reluctantly, even though he already knows what I'm going to say.

"That time in sophomore year when you thought you were in love with me because you've still never figured out the difference between 'first love' and 'great sex'."

"That shit never happened. You're lying, because you're a drug addict, and that's what you people do. I watch Intervention, I know how it is. Stop lying, Garen."

I poke him hard in the side, and we're both grinning now, even though a dark red flush is creeping up into his skin, still darkly tanned from his summer in the Savannah sun. "It definitely happened, you know it did. For two weeks straight, all you wanted to do was fool around while this godawful song played in the background. I'm pretty sure you were giving me like, three blowjobs a day towards the end there."

"First of all, you're making all of this up," he lies, shoving at my shoulder as I move to stand behind him, my chin hooked over his shoulder so that I can watch both our reflections in the mirror. "Second of all, if this had happened, *which it didn't*, it would've been four months in junior year, not two weeks in sophomore, you ass."

That should sober me up, but it just pulls another laugh from me. "What, seriously?"

"Yes, seriously! I was obsessed with you for the entire fall semester of junior year. That's why Kelsey broke up with me. She said—" He hitches his voice into an approximation of the breathy whine of his ex-girlfriend from Patton's sister school, "'All my friends say you're in love with your roommate, and don't get me wrong, it was totally hot to watch you guys make out at that party that one time, but I've walked in on you with his dick in your mouth like five times since then, and I've also come in once when he was actually doing you in the ass. I just can't date a guy who is more interested in having his friend put it in him than he is in putting it in me.' Little bitch. It was by far my most awkward breakup conversation. Anyway, shut up, I was trying to woo you."

"Really? 'Cause it mostly just felt like you kept sucking me off to Sixpence None the Richer," I say, but he continues to glare at me in the mirror. I slip my arms around his middle and pull him so that his back is pressed to my chest. Smiling against the edge of his jaw, I say, "Come on, I'm just fucking around. Don't get mad at me, Jamie." He sticks his tongue out at me, and because I know it's just going to annoy him, I

raise my head to sing softly into his ear, “--*out on the moonlit floor, lift your open hand—*”

“I hate you.”

“--*strike up the band and make the fireflies dance, silver moon’s sparkling—*”

“I can’t wait until your inevitable overdose.”

“--*so kiss me.*”

He shrugs and says, “If you insist.” He turns to scoop me up and fling me over his shoulder—we nearly topple over, because Jamie may be bizarrely graceful, but he’s also too tall to have a normal center of gravity, and I’m fairly heavy—to cart me back out of the bathroom, down the hall to the living room. He drops me unceremoniously on the couch, and I’m already opening my grinning mouth to call him an asshole when he sinks down to cover my body with his own. Without preamble, I pull him down into a lazy kiss.

The truth is this: I know I’m the closest Jamie has ever come to being in love, and that’s why I make fun of him for it. Until I moved—until I met Travis, that is—neither of us had ever really felt any genuine affection for the guys we’d slept with, except for each other. There have been times over the years—usually in brief flashes, like the way his eyes darken when I sing to him, or the way I can’t stop myself from climbing all over him whenever I see him, or the fact that we’ve never had a hookup that didn’t end with the half-whispered exchange of *‘I love you’s*—when both of us have been tricked into thinking that our unimaginably close friendship is the same thing as being in love. It’s not, and even if it was, it would never be worth giving up what we already have. So, instead of doing the “best friends, boyfriends, exes, people who never speak again” thing, we stick to “best friends, people who fuck each other senseless, still best friends” thing.

“You want to fuck before we go out?” Jamie murmurs against my mouth, already reaching for my belt. It’s not an unexpected offer; this is actually the longest we’ve ever gone without fucking, including the eight month lapse between the day we met and our first time. We stopped hooking up after I met Travis, with the exception of one handjob in his dorm last winter, right after I got kicked out, dumped Travis, and left Lakewood.

I got drunk and cried afterward.

It was awkward.

Now, my throat tightens, and I grab his hands to stop him. He's already hard, I can feel him against my thigh, but I'm not. For months now, there's been some sort of... block. Something's been off, only I can't figure out what, so I can't fix it. Fuck, even getting myself hard to jerk off has been about fifty-fifty lately, and the last thing I need is for my best friend to find out that I'm the only eighteen-year-old in the world who can't seem to get off normally anymore.

He is looking down at me with questioning eyes—makes sense, I pretty much never turn down sex with him—but I do my best to play it off by pushing him off me and into a sitting position. I sink onto my knees on the floor in front of him, looking up at him through my eyelashes and saying, “Kind of just want to suck you. Is that cool?”

“The coolest,” he agrees, already unzipping his jeans, and I find myself thankful for the fact that my oral fixation isn't exactly a secret. I hook my fingers over the top of his jeans and pull them down to his knees, then press a few rough kisses to his naked hips. This is the first time I've seen his (unfairly big) dick in about a year, but I still only take a few seconds to appreciate the view before I lick my lips and duck down to taste him.

He tangles his fingers in my hair and presses deeper into my mouth; the head of his dick hits the back of my throat, and I pull off, coughing. Obviously unimpressed, he raises his eyebrows, and I punch him in the stomach. He scowls at me and rubs at his stomach with the hand that's not already wrapped around his dick. “Ass. So, since when do you have a gag reflex? I could've sworn we trained that out of you when we were freshmen.”

“I don't, and we did, I'm just out of practice. This is the longest I've gone without a dick in my mouth since I was fourteen. I haven't blown anybody since the day I let Seth—” I clamp my mouth shut around the rest of the sentence, but the damage is already done.

Jamie's jaw is set as he asks, “Hayden?”

“No, one of the other Seths we know, you cunt,” I say. A normal guy's erection might be flagging by now, but Jamie is still stroking himself, which I can only assume means that I'll get to continue, as long as I make quick work of the story. I sigh. “When I bailed on Connecticut for the second time, right before rehab. I went to go see Seth for more coke, but I was running low on cash at that point—also, side note? Apparently that's the breaking point for my dad. Seriously, the man put enough of a monthly allowance in

my bank account to fund three and a half years of fake IDs, drinking binges, and your bail that one time in Georgia, but I go and get one little coke addiction, and then it's like I'm cut off from—”

Jamie interrupts, “Anderson. Less rich white kid problems, more telling me how Seth Hayden’s dick ended up in your mouth. And then more shutting the fuck up and putting *my* dick *back* in your mouth?”

“Right,” I say, nodding and wiping my now sweaty palms on my—Jamie’s—jeans. “Uh, so, long story short, I couldn’t afford the drugs, so he let me pay with a blowjob instead.”

“Seth isn’t even gay,” Jamie says.

I shrug and try not to think of Travis, hanging outside the drama room and flirting with Joss Pryce. “Yeah, well, lots of guys aren’t gay, up until I offer to swallow, and then suddenly the Kinsey Scale doesn’t seem too relevant anymore. Whatever. I think with Seth, it was more about, um... it wasn’t fucking me that got him off, I guess. It was the idea that he had something I wanted. Something I couldn’t deal with not having. And, I mean, Seth’s always hated me, so...”

Not, of course, as much as he hates Jamie. But to be fair, I’m not the one who put a bullet in him.

“G,” Jamie says, reaching for my hand—his other is still jerking off, which is actually kind of impressive.

“Do you want to talk?”

I roll my eyes and say, “Yeah, sure. And then after we’re done talking, I’ll go back to eating your pussy, since that’s what I must be doing down here, because God knows nobody with a penis would rather talk about feelings and sexual trauma than get off. I don’t want to *talk* about my problems, Jamie, I want to *suck your dick* about my problems. So shut the fuck up, stop beating off, and let me have this so we can go out.”

With a scowl and an eyeroll to match mine, he lets me take him in my mouth again, and this time, I have no trouble deep-throating him. I chalk that up to a win, and neither of us mentions Seth again. I try to pull out a few of my better tricks, if only to make up for my total failure of a start, and soon, Jamie’s knotting his hands in my hair and all but fucking my mouth, his breath coming out in hitches and gasps now. I’m half-hard, not enough to want to draw attention to it, but enough that my jeans are uncomfortably tight. I reach down to briefly palm my crotch, then run a hand—the hand that’s not busy playing with his balls—up Jamie’s thigh, scraping my nails into his skin. It’s that little twinge of pain that sends him over the edge. He’s still yanking on my hair as he comes, but one of his hands has dropped onto mine to tangle our

fingers together; even with his cum sliding down my throat, I can't help but roll my eyes. Dude gets so *handsy* when we screw around.

He hauls me up to kiss me, his tongue slick in my mouth, tasting himself on me. He nips at my lower lip and brushes my hair away from my face, staring hard into my eyes as he says, "You give the best head of anyone I've ever been with." It's probably true, but what he really means is, *I'm sorry I pushed you to talk about your issues. I'm here if you need me.*

"You bet your sweet ass I do," I say, though I know he's hearing, *You're forgiven, but we're still not talking about this.*

"I love the way you look when you're sucking me off. Seriously, if it were possible, I'd spend days at a time just staring at the way your lips look when they're stretched over my cock." *I don't want to go out tonight. The look on your face scares me, and I'm afraid that if we go out, I might lose track of you, and if you're left alone, you could relapse. I'm not going to jeopardize your sobriety just for the chance to rub up against some slut in a downtown bar.*

"Jamie, you're so fucking hot." *Shut up. We're going out, because I'm fine. If things get bad, I trust you to look after me.*

He brushes another kiss across my lips and says, "Love you, G."

"Love you, too."

Those are the only parts without a hidden meaning.

During the cab ride to the bar, I give my dick a silent but still very stern talking-to. *Listen, kid. It's time to man the fuck up. I don't know what your problem has been lately, and I don't know why you're not cooperating, but you need to get over it. This is supposed to be fun for everyone, but if you're going to just sit there all night, ignoring whatever new friends I find for you, I'm going to be pissed. Yes, it sucks that we don't get to fuck Travis anymore. Yes, it sucks that rehab had so many open-door, anti-jerk-off policies. Yes, it sucks that neither Seth nor the random truck stop dude were interested in helping us get off after they did. Whatever. Get over it. You haven't been this useless to me since I was ten, so don't fucking start now.*

"G, you alright?" Jamie says, and my eyes snap towards him. "You look like you're annoyed."

"Nah, I'm fine," I say, smiling easily at him. He smiles back at me, then turns his focus once more to the world outside the window.

Seriously though, dick, I will hate you forever.

Getting into the bar is not a problem. I've kept the fake ID that brands me as twenty-two, even though I swore to my dad that I lost it. Jamie and I make it past the burly man at the door with no trouble, and once inside, I take a deep, steadying breath. We get drinks from the bar—a beer for Jamie, a bottled water for me— and push our way back to a table by what might be the dance floor. There are drinks everywhere. Which, okay, no shit. Of course there are drinks everywhere, I knew there would be—it's a bar, for fuck's sake—but I'm still vaguely unprepared for the pulsing sense of want I feel when some drunk coed saunters by me and slops some beer from her bottle onto the floor. Even from six feet up, I can smell the liquid on the ground. A guy walks by with a plastic cup of clear liquid, ice, and lime; it must be a G&T, because all I can smell is that Christmas pine scent of gin. Another girl—a Long Island Iced Tea. Vodka, tequila, triple sec, gin, rum. Fuck. I almost *moan*.

"Are you okay?" Jamie asks, settling his hand into the small of my back.

I force my brightest smile and say, "I'm fine." He looks unconvinced, so I settle for a distraction. "Are we looking for people to play with tonight, or are you seeing somebody these days?"

"Shouldn't you have asked me that earlier, before the portion of the evening where you swallowed a pretty substantial amount of my cum?" he asks. I shrug, and he grins, probably interpreting it as the *has that ever stopped me before?* gesture I intended it as. After a moment, he adds, "I'm seeing someone, but we're not exclusive yet." The accompanying eyeroll says there's a story attached to the comment.

"Do you *want* to be exclusive?" I ask.

He shrugs. "I asked him to be, but he says he needs some time to think about it. Maybe it's because I'd be his first boyfriend or whatever, but I honestly kind of get the impression that he's more interested in his best friend than he is in me. He's already copped to liking the guy, and I don't mind that at all. God knows I made enough of my boyfriends and girlfriends put up with my weird crush on you all through freshman year." I stick my tongue out at him, and he returns the face before continuing, "Point is, if he'd rather date his friend than me, he should just tell me he only wants the sex, not the relationship."

"Sounds like a dick," I say, and he laughs. I take a sip from my water bottle. "So, question still stands. Wanna play?"

"Always."

"You in the mood for a guy or a girl tonight?" I ask. Unbidden, the image of Joss flirting with Travis rises in my mind. I make a face and take another, longer sip of water.

"Well, I've already had you, so I might as well collect the full set. Girl, I think. Ideally, a blond with great legs," he says. He pauses to take a sip of his beer, then flashes me a smile. "The longer the legs, the better they look wrapped around my waist."

I smirk back at him, then begin my search of the room. The band playing on the main stage isn't great; the drummer is good, and the bass player is cute, but it's hard for me to enjoy any band that has a guitar player who's worse than I am. Still, the lack of good music makes it easier to focus on finding a decent pair for us. There are a few girls clustered near the speakers, and some of them are definitely eye-fucking the both of us, but there's not a dick to be had among the group. In a twist on the same problem, a pair of guys who've just come in the front door are staring blatantly at Jamie's crotch, but one has a seriously busted face, and the other's too effeminate to be my type. It's a gamble to expect that I'll be able to fuck anybody tonight; I need to at least find the hottest guy I can manage. Besides, Jamie wants a girl tonight.

"Hey," Jamie says in my ear. "Turn ninety degrees to your right and check out the hipster couple by the bar. The girl with the flower-print dress, guy with the Buddy Holly glasses and embarrassing studded belt. What do you think?"

I lean my elbows back on the table behind us and do a slow scan of the room, letting my eyes linger on the couple he must be referring to. I can't actually see the girl's face; she's turned away from me, folded into her boyfriend's arms and chatting away with her mouth against the front of his navy v-neck. The boyfriend meets my eyes over her shoulder, flushes dark red, and quickly looks down. Cute. I turn back to Jamie. "Good call. Girl show any interest yet?"

"Oh, yeah. A very purposeful lip bite. And her boy's checked out your ass twice."

"It's a good ass to check out," I agree. I pause to drain what's left of the water in my bottle and say, "Who are we this time?"

"Your name is Greg, and you're twenty years old. You're studying to be a photojournalist, but you're taking the semester off from art school to do an internship with an indie record label, traveling around the country and taking pictures of their bands. You have a girlfriend who you've been dating since you were a freshman in high school, and you've never done anything with another guy, but you've always been a little curious about what it would be like. Me?"

"You're my older brother, your name is Jack, and you're twenty-two. You did your undergrad at Yale, in Environmental Studies, and you've just started your first semester in law school. Someday, you want to enact legislation that would provide further protection for endangered species."

"Which ones?"

"All of 'em. But your favorites are polar bears, and when you think about the icecaps melting, you sometimes tear up. You were engaged, but you ended things over the summer because you realized she wasn't The One." I toss my empty bottle into the nearest garbage can and incline my head towards the bar. "Still so thirsty. Wanna head to the bar?"

"But of course," Jamie says, gesturing for me to lead the way.

I make my way across the room gradually. When we're feet away from the bar, the couple breaks apart, almost involuntarily, leaving a small gap between them. I wedge myself into it and lean across the bar to order another bottle of water for me and another beer for Jamie, who waves his wristband at the bartender's prompting gaze. Once I've paid, I look around at the couple, now standing awkwardly on either side of me. I feign surprise and say, "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get in your way."

"It's alright," the girl says, eyes on Jamie even as she says to me, "I really like your boots."

"Thanks!" I say brightly, even though it's obvious that she's only extending the compliment as a way of initiating conversation with us. Like anyone has ever gotten thrilled over a pair of unlaced combat boots. I extend a hand to her. "I'm Greg. This is my brother, Jack."

"Danielle," she says, looking up at Jamie through her eyelashes. A beat passes, then she adds, "This is Patrick, my boyfriend."

I turn towards the boy, who smiles shyly at me. I give him a very slow, deliberate once-over that leaves him blushing once more, then look back at Danielle. "How did you guys hear about this show?"

"My friend Chelsea knows the bass player. You?"

"My girlfriend heard about it at school—she goes to FIT. She couldn't come tonight, so I was going to just stay home, but Jack needed to blow off some steam, so we came out anyway," I say.

"Second week of school and I'm already bombed with work," Jamie adds, smoothing any trace of Georgia drawl out of his voice. He's so much better at faking the Yankee accent now than he was when we were younger; at Patton, whenever he tried to imitate my voice, he came out with this awful New York slur that made him sound like a drunken Manhattan cab driver. Danielle says something to him that I don't care enough to listen to, and he launches into a long line of bullshit about his fake law school career.

I turn my focus to Patrick, who very quickly averts his eyes from staring at the way my t-shirt stretches across my chest. I ask him if he goes to school—he does—and what he's studying—photography, for real. I pretend to be thrilled at that, and steer the conversation towards my fake internship before he can ask what kind of camera I use, or some other dumb question I'm not qualified to lie about. He listens to me talk, staring at my mouth the whole time, and when he reciprocates with a story about one of his professors, I step closer. He stops speaking suddenly, bewildered at my invasion of his personal space. I brush my knuckles across his in what might be a vaguely apologetic gesture and say, "Sorry, it's crazy loud in here, I was having trouble hearing you. What did you say?"

He restarts the boring story, though he is accommodating enough of my pretend hearing deficiency to step even closer. By the time the story is over, our torsos are practically aligned. I can already feel him getting hard against my hip, and suddenly, a deep shudder runs up the length of my spine and closes around my throat. *Get off me*, I think. *Get off, I'm fucking sober, I don't want whatever it is that you're trying to sell me.* He hasn't made a single move to slip a bag of cocaine from his pocket to mine, or buy me a drink, or anything, but it's just a matter of time before the drugs come out. It has to be. That's how this works, right? That's how it worked with that guy, the one at the truck stop. That's how it was when I was on my hands and knees for Seth fucking Hayden, letting him drill into me so I could get a line. What else am I good for? What else is this worth?

I don't remember what the point of sex is, if it's not about making a deal.

Patrick is staring at me, uncertain, and I force myself to snap out of it. It's fine. I can do this. I hooked up with Jamie earlier, didn't I? He never expected anything from me, so this guy might not either. I twist around—press my ass against him as I do so, earn a sharp intake of breath for my trouble—to say to

Jamie, "I'm going outside for a smoke. You alright here?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine. Either of you going with him?" Jamie says, glancing at the couple.

Danielle seems startled to remember that her boyfriend is here, particularly since I can see from here that Jamie's hand has managed to make its way onto her thigh, halfway up her skirt. At my questioning look, she shakes her head quickly and says, voice faint, "No, I'm fine here. I'll just wait with Jack a-and—"

"You wanna come with me?" I murmur over my shoulder to Patrick, who nods jerkily. I throw myself into the crush of bar patrons, hooking two fingers over the waistband of his jeans to drag him after me. I'm almost positive that smokers are supposed to use the main door and stand in the fenced off section of sidewalk, but near the bathrooms, there's a side door that's propped open.

We slip through it, out into an empty alley that's blocked at both ends, a fence at one side and a dumpster at the other. I lounge back against the brick wall of the club and fake a stretch that leaves a half-inch of my flat stomach exposed between the hem of my t-shirt and the top of my jeans. Patrick has to blink several times before he can make himself stop staring at it. He glances up, catches me looking, and I shift my eyes quickly to the ground, biting back a smile. He laughs. "What's that look for?"

"Nothing," I say, softening my voice to little more than a whisper. Pretending to be some shy guy who's never touched a dick except his own is pretty easy; right now, I'm just pretending I'm a taller, sexier, manlier version of Nate Holliday. "It's just... my girlfriend would kill me if she knew what I was thinking about right now."

And cue the bedroom eyes.

Patrick shuffles closer until he's standing in front of me and flattens his palms on the brick wall behind me, one hand above each of my shoulders. "What are you thinking about?" I reach up and brush my fingers along the length of his arm, finally curling them over his bicep and digging my nails into his sleeve like I just can't help myself. I still don't say anything. He leans in, just close enough that our noses brush. "Greg... have you ever kissed another guy?" I hesitate for one, two, three seconds, then shake my head. "Ever wanted to?"

In answer, I shift both my hands to his waist and pull him towards me so that our mouths crash together. He melts against my body, and I do my best to make my hands seem shaky and hesitant as I move them across the smooth planes of his back. He's a decent kisser—a little too much tongue, but not enough to

really kill it for me. And he gets right to the point; within a minute, he's grinding his hips against mine so hard that the bricks behind me are scraping my back raw through my t-shirt. Inhaling sharply, as though summoning all my courage, I slip a hand between us and give a gentle squeeze to the bulge in the front of his skinny jeans. "Patrick, I—I want to—I don't—"

He silences me with another kiss, both hands jumping from the wall to his studed belt. He grabs my wrist and all but shoves my hand down the front of his jeans, letting out a small groan of encouragement when I curl my fingers around his dick. I twist my wrist just so and whisper, "Am I doing this right?"

Of course I'm doing it right. What am I, new? But Patrick nods sharply and fumbles for my belt, pushing my jeans down over my hips as he mutters, "Yeah, that's great."

I'm hard. Thank you, God, I am fucking hard. He jerks me off roughly, with the abandon and enthusiasm that I pretty much only get from straight boys. I put on a show for him, practically keening with every snap of his wrist, digging the nails of my free hand into the small of his back under his t-shirt. He keeps thrusting his hips forward, which makes it a little harder to move my hand—which is fucking obnoxious enough, given how tight his jeans are—but whatever. I think he's mostly trying to get off as quickly as possible, terrified that his girlfriend will come outside and find him fucking some dude's fist. He's hot and all, but I'm not fourteen anymore, so a handjob isn't really cutting it. I slip my hand away from the small of his back, down the back of his jeans to squeeze his ass. His response is a gentle tug on my lip ring with his teeth, which *oh fuck* feels nice. I mutter, "God, you've got a nice ass."

"You wanna fuck it?"

Huh. That was easy enough. I give a frantic nod, careful not to let the desperate virgin routine slip. "Yeah. I don't have a condom, though, I wasn't planning on—"

"I've got one in my wallet, it's fine, come on," he says. I pull his wallet out of his back pocket, fighting another surge of revulsion that threatens to make me go soft—this is too close to what I was afraid of. Just touching this cheap piece of leather where he keeps all his money makes this act feel so much closer to the way I whored myself out last summer. I find the condom stashed behind his driver's license. While I tear it open and roll it over my dick, he shoves his jeans and briefs halfway down his thighs and reaches back with spit covered fingers to prep himself. I take a minute or two to enjoy the show as he fucks himself with his fingers, but we've been gone for a while now, and the last thing I need is for his girlfriend and my "brother" to finish with the hetero-humping and come outside and leave me with a serious case of blue balls. I grab him by the shoulders and reverse our positions so he's facing the bricks.

I open my mouth to ask if he's ready, but he reaches back to line me up, then sinks back swiftly enough to leave me balls-deep in one motion.

Well, alright then. Clearly I'm not the only one who's been pretending to have a lot less experience with banging guys than I really do. Time is sorta of the essence right now, so I fuck him quickly and efficiently, and I'm feeling generous, so I actually bother to give him a reach-around. Thankfully, the music from inside the club is thumping loudly enough to drown out most of his noises, and when I press a hand over his mouth to muffle his cries when he comes, it's mainly so I don't have to hear that irritating grunting. I'm not too far behind, and I'm planning to just make quick work of it from here, but he grabs my hips and--

It's to pull me deeper into him, I think. He must be trying to help me, or something, trying to get me to fuck him harder so I can get off, but it does the complete opposite. I can't feel any part of my body except for my hips, where he's reaching back to grip me. I can't focus on anything but his fingers digging into me with bruising strength.

Suddenly, I am not in an alley, and I'm not with Patrick, and it isn't now. I'm home, or at least, at the old house, in my old bedroom, and it's right after the last time I had sex—and I mean really had sex, not those coke-fueled seconds of prostitution in June. It's mid-May, and Travis and Ben and Alex and everybody are at their prom, and I'm home and angry, and Dave's there. He fucks me, roughly and without asking, and I'm not saying yes, but I'm not saying no, either, I'm just kind of lying there and wishing I was anywhere else. And it's not as bad as it was the first time he fucked me, the time when I really said no, the time I tried to get away, but it's also not as good as it would be if he would just stop. He finishes, and I don't come, but we both shrug it off, because who cares if I get off, as long as Dave does? And then I'm in his face, and I'm hoping he hits me, but still kind of stunned when he starts and doesn't stop. It's not what I need anymore, not what I want, not that sort of hurt that makes me feel better and helps me know I'm alive. It's the kind of hurt that is my ribs cracking and my leg breaking and my fingers getting smashed and my face, god, my face, him hitting me over and over again. There's blood, everywhere. That's the only thing I'm really aware of after a while, that there is blood in my eyes, and I can taste it in my mouth, and all I want is for someone to come home and stop this. All I want is for my dad or Travis or somebody to walk in and make it stop, but they don't. I can't even be sure I'm awake anymore, but I must be, because why else would I be able to feel that Dave's hands are no longer fists on my face, they're splayed open across my hips as he drags me off the floor and back up onto my bed. After a while, I can't even yell anymore, I just have to disappear.

Patrick digs his fingers in again.

"I can't do this."

I don't realize I've spoken—or that I've pulled out, that I'm going soft, that I feel like I'm seconds away from actually blacking out—until Patrick turns around, eyes sharp and confused. "Greg? What's wrong?"

"I can't do this," I repeat, louder. My stomach is rolling, like I'm about to be sick, and I have no idea why. I don't know what the fuck that was, or why I'm feeling numb all over, except for the ghost of hands that left my body months ago. But there is a part to play, and I can't fuck this up now. I strip off the condom and flick it towards the dumpster, tucking myself back into my pants and zipping them back up. Patrick's eyes are wide, and I don't really care if he's offended, but there's something... wrong. There's an ache in my chest, the same creeping sense of guilt and shame and awfulness that I've been feeling too often lately. I'm still waiting for the prompt, the moment when he gives me drugs, or money, or something. There has to be an exchange, because otherwise, why would I feel so fucking cheap right now? Sharing my discomfort is the quickest way to get rid of him, so I blink down at the ground like I'm shell-shocked and say, "Fuck, my girlfriend will kill me if she ever finds out about this."

"Sh-She doesn't have to find out, man," Patrick says, shooting me a sideways glance. "I mean, neither does Danielle."

I shake my head quickly and widen my eyes at him. "Of course not. I'm not going to tell her, if that's what you're worried about. But we should probably go back inside, I mean, if you don't want her to—"

"Yeah, yeah. Let's go." He follows me back to the club door, though he can't stop himself from yanking me into one last kiss just before I open the door, leaving me feeling sicker than ever by the time we get back inside and find our companions seated at the bar. Danielle is smoothing her dress down over her thighs almost compulsively; the collar of Jamie's shirt is popped, though it still doesn't do much to hide the bite mark on the side of his neck.

"It's getting late," he says, clapping me on the shoulder, "and I've got a ton of case readings left for Monday. You cool with heading out?"

"Yeah, totally," I say. I turn to face Danielle and say brightly, "It was great meeting you."

"You too, Greg," she says, enveloping me in a hug. She smells like Ralph Lauren Polo Black cologne, and I can't help but smirk at her boyfriend over her shoulder. He reddens, still looking pissed off and confused, but when I release his girlfriend and step forward, he accepts my handshake. God, his hand is

fucking sticky. If his girl figures everything out, it's his own damn fault.

Jamie repeats my motions—the hug, then the handshake, and while Danielle seems unable to speak to him, Patrick says, “Have a good night.”

“I think we all did,” Jamie says, slinging an arm around my shoulders and heading for the door. Seconds after we step out into the warm September night air, he releases me, lights a cigarette, and says, “How was he?”

“He was alright. Fucked him in the alley.” I don't tell him I never finished. “Her?”

“I locked us in the bathroom and bent her over the sink. Dresses are so convenient that way.”

“Skinny jeans aren't,” I say, plucking the cigarette from his fingers to take a drag from it. He doesn't respond, and when I look at him, he's watching me carefully. I roll my eyes and pass the cigarette back. He knows me too well to play off whatever expression I've got on my face, so I say, “I'm fine, Jamie. It was just... weird, I guess. I haven't gotten laid since before rehab, since back when I was still using. It felt different. That's all.”

His face falls. “I'm sorry. If I'd realized it would be weird for you, I wouldn't have suggested we play.”

“I suggested it, not you. And playing wasn't the problem. It was the fact that he was... I don't know. He just wasn't that good, okay? Can we drop it?” I say. This is stupid, and I'm starting to get a little embarrassed. Who freaks out like this because of something as simple as sex? I've done this literally hundreds of times, possibly thousands at this point, so why is it suddenly going so wrong? When the hell did I stop being Garen fucking Anderson?

Jamie presses a very soft kiss to my temple and suggests, “Want me to make it up to you? We'll go back to my place, shower off the stains of our sins, and I'll suck you off while we watch *Walk the Line* or something. It'll be just like prep school.”

I sneak another drag off his cigarette, trying to act like I'm considering the idea for a minute or two before I say, “Maybe later. I kind of want to stay out a little longer. You hungry?”

“I could eat. Pizza?”

We set off down the street.

Chapter Four

“Every habit he’s ever had is still there in his body, lying dormant like flowers in the desert. Given the right conditions, all his old addictions would burst into full and luxuriant bloom.” –Margaret Atwood

91 days sober

“Hello?”

“I’m in New Haven right now. Come out and play.”

There’s a vague sound of something shifting on the other end of the phone—probably books, then probably a body stretching out in bed—before Ben says, “Why are you in New Haven?”

“Just got off the train at Union Station, I was visiting James in New York,” I say, switching my phone to speakerphone and dropping it on the dashboard so that I can peel out of my parking space. It’s about a minute and a half until the clock hits one, and I am not about to pay for another hour of parking. The garage attendant makes a big deal out of scowling down at the clock, then at my ticket. I ignore him in favor of saying to Ben, “Figured I’d see if you were free before I made the drive back to Lakewood. Do you want to grab lunch?”

“Kinda just ate. Alex asked me to make lasagna last night, and we’ve got a ton of leftovers. Come over and have some of them. You eat like a fucking football player, so that should take care of about half of what’s in my fridge.”

Ben’s lasagna—the same recipe his mom uses at her catering business—is the best food in the entire world, and I would cut the throat of anyone who dared to disagree. The first time I stayed at his house for dinner last October, I took one bite and said, without thinking, “*This lasagna is come-in-your-pants delicious.*” Mr. McCutcheon had choked, Ben had stabbed me under the table, and all of his little sisters had wanted to know what that meant. I’m still kind of surprised that they ever let me back again, let alone allowed me to babysit the girls with Ben a few times.

Even though Ben can’t see it over the phone, I make a brief jerking-off pantomime to show my approval of this meal idea. The garage attendant shoots me a bewildered look, and I sneer at him, take my change, and pull up to the traffic light. “Alright, I’ll be there in like, two minutes. Is Alex there? ‘Cause if not, I’m stealing his space in your lot, you know I fucking hate parking on the street.”

“He’s here, but you can have my spot. My dad needed to borrow my car to pick up some donations to the store today, so as long as you’re gone by five when he gets back with it, you won’t have to park on the street.”

“Thanks, man. You’re a rockstar,” I say, and he laughs. It’s how he used to tell me I was awesome when we first met—more often than not, the announcement was followed immediately by sex, because apparently that’s all it takes to get me going. I hang up the phone and make the short drive to his building. The lot behind it is almost full, but there’s a free space next to Alex’s car. I pull into it, lock my car, and head for the front door. A woman is exiting the building just as I step around the corner, so I don’t bother to call up for permission to enter. A few floors up, the apartment door is similarly unlocked, so I let myself in.

Ben’s not in the kitchen or the living room, but Alex is set up in front of the television, playing Xbox. He barely glances up at me, but does take a second to say, “Hey, G. Didn’t know you were coming over.”

“I’m a total whore for Ben’s cooking, and he said you guys had leftovers. I was in town anyway, so I figured I’d do the martyr thing, come help you guys free up some fridge space. He in his room?” I ask, not bothering to wait for a response before I shuffle down the hall to Ben’s room. His door is slightly ajar, so I

nudge it the rest of the way open with my hip. He is sprawled out on his bed, frowning down at a worn paperback and wearing his dark red reading glasses. He always looks so serious when he reads—I feel a surge of affection for the kid, which I demonstrate by crawling onto his bed with him and pressing soft kisses to his jawline. He doesn't much react, except with a vague hum of acknowledgment. Unsatisfied with the attention I'm getting, I burrow under his arm and curl up against his side, peering at the book. “--*the great delight that each of them had in using the other's body.*” Sounds like my kind of book. So, you're paying Yale how much per semester to go read erotica for credit?”

“It's neither erotica, nor for credit. Alex is supposed to be reading this for school, and I figured he's going to get me to proofread his paper eventually anyway, so why not refresh my memory? It's been a few years since I've read it. Also, most of the book is about God.”

“God and sex?” I say.

“Sort of,” he admits. “Also, food. And illness.”

I jab a finger into his side. “Speaking of food...”

“Uh, am I your slave? Pretty sure you know where the kitchen is,” he grumbles, but he lets me haul him off the bed and joins me out to the kitchen. He ducks out from under my arm to open the fridge, tosses a tupperware container of lasagna into the microwave, and begins to heat it up. His glasses are still perched on his nose, even though he's no longer reading; I pluck them off, fold the arms back, and slip them into the pocket of his hoodie before folding him back into my arms. He rolls his eyes, but still tucks his hands into the back pocket of my jeans as he says, “You know, you were a lot less grabby before you got clean.”

“I know. My therapist says the fact that I can show affection for people without snorting cocaine off of their naked bodies or getting my dick out means that I'm *evolving*,” I tell him proudly. Another eyeroll. I add, “Also, shut up, I'm a free spirit. Is my food done yet?” In answer, he reaches over and pops open the microwave door. The smell of the sauce hits me instantly, and I groan, “Oh my god, Ben. Seriously, I think I just got a little bit hard.”

“I'm sure my mom would be thrilled to hear that her recipes have such an effect on you,” Ben says dryly.

“She totally would, your mom thinks I'm so hot,” I say, dodging the swing he takes at me. “But honestly, it's a shame you and I gave up on each other and both went after McCall, because this lasagna? This one right here? Makes me want to marry you. I mean, you cook me delicious Italian meals from scratch, you understand that sex is so much better when it leaves you with a few bruises, and you once drove ten hours to drag my drug-addled body to rehab. If that doesn't make you husband material, I don't know what would.”

I grab a fork out of the cutlery drawer and take a bite out of the lasagna, still in the tupperware. Ben, who has taken a plate out of the cupboard and is now just awkwardly hovering next to me with it, says, “Uh, do you plan to stop eating long enough to actually use a dish?”

I blink at him. “No? You'd just bitch at me for getting an extra dish dirty, and I'm not planning to hang around and help you load the dishwasher, so I figured this would make the whole process less irritating for both of us.”

“Garen, you didn't say why you were in New Haven anyway,” Alex says, and I trudge back into the living room.

“I was just over at the train station, just got in. I was in New York, visiting Jamie.”

That earns me a glance. “Yeah? How is he?”

I flop down next to him on the couch, kicking my feet up onto the coffee table and digging into my container of lasagna—though Ben protests both with a growl of, “Seriously, Anderson? Are you a goddamn savage?”—as I shrug and say, “He’s good. Well, he started off good, and then he fucked some hipster chick at the club we went to, so then he was *great*.”

“He fucked a chick while you guys were out?” Ben says, now seated comfortably in his homework armchair and absorbed in his book again. “Wasn’t that... I don’t know. Weird?”

I snort. “Dude, it’s not like I watched. I was out back, nailing the chick’s boyfriend.” That earns another eyeroll. Annoying Ben with my lack of morals is always kind of funny to me, so I add, “Anyway, by that point, I had already had Jamie earlier in the evening. I figured it was time to share.”

Alex stills just long enough to get killed by a zombie onscreen. The level offers to start over, but Al switches it off and sets the controller down on the table. He scratches the back of his neck a bit awkwardly, then turns to me and says, “You and James still hook up?”

“Um,” I say, because that sounds a lot better than, *yeah, dude, all the friggin’ time*. I can only assume that he’s thinking about his own half-hearted attempts to drunkenly seduce Ben every few months. It’s... kind of pathetic, honestly. Maybe it wouldn’t be too bad, if Ben didn’t still think Alex was straight. Or if Alex hadn’t reluctantly admitted to me last spring that he has feelings for Ben. Or if he hadn’t been enough of a fucking idiot to phrase it as, *So, I guess I sort of like Ben. Or whatever. God, stop looking at me like that*. And because I’m an asshole, but also because I try to be a good friend and help my buddies out when they’re too lame to make their own moves, I smile widely at him and say, “Best friend sex is always pretty great, ‘cause the other dude already knows all your turn-ons, even if he doesn’t realize it. For example, back when I was at Patton, I had no idea I would be into roleplay, until Jamie pointed out that I’ve had a crush on one of my teachers almost every year since I was like, ten. He put on a suit and his reading glasses and gave me detention, which involved significantly more oral sex than any actual detention I’ve ever gotten. It was really fucking hot. Maybe you and Ben should try that.”

“Student-teacher roleplay?” Ben says, not looking up from his book.

I have to resist the urge to go over and cuff him upside the head. “The best friend sex thing.”

“I’d kind of rather just do the roleplay part,” Ben says. When my only response is to glare at him, he finally looks up, exasperated, and says, “What am I supposed to say? ‘Yeah, you’re right, I should have sex with my straight best friend?’ ‘Hey, Al, put it in me?’”

I look over at Alex, mainly to see if he looks a little bit titillated by the offer, but he’s still just looking at me with something close to hesitation in his eyes. He obviously wants to say something, so I make a vague *spit it out* gesture. He coughs. “Do you guys hook up a lot?”

“Who, me and this sarcastic piece of shit?” I say, jerking my thumb towards Ben. “Not since last October. Well, December, I guess, if we’re going to count making out as—”

“Not you and Ben,” Alex interrupts. “You and uh, James. Do you guys hook up often?”

I shrug once more. “I mean, it’s all relative. It’s not like we fucked last night or anything, I just gave him head. Other than that and one handjob after I got kicked out, we haven’t done anything since I left Patton. So, recently, no, we haven’t been hooking up often. But before I moved here, it was like... a couple times a week, unless one of us was exclusive with somebody—”

“Define ‘a couple,’” Alex cuts across me again, and now I’m starting to get annoyed, because how is this his business? “Do you mean once or twice? Or—”

“No, I mean that if I wasn’t practicing with my band, he wasn’t at lacrosse practice, and we were both in our dorm room at the same time, odds are really good that I was in him. Why do you care?” I say sharply.

His response is a very blunt, "I don't," followed immediately by straight-up silence. I glance over at Ben, who is dutifully reading, clearly unwilling to participate in this sudden and confusing bitch fit. I look back at Alex. The way he's looking at me is making me feel a little uncomfortable, so I break the tension by forcing a forkful of lasagna into his mouth. He rolls his eyes and bats me away, but swallows it anyway. Mouth empty once more, he mutters, "It's like you're five, man."

"Nah, I'm way cooler now than I was when I was five."

Ben snorts. "I can't even picture you as a little kid, to be honest. I'm just seeing you as you are now, only two and half feet tall, without the lip ring, and wearing way smaller combat boots."

I laugh along with him and Alex, but there's a pinch of embarrassment in my stomach. Sometimes, I forget that my parents are the only people in my life who actually know what a loser I was when I was a kid. It's not like any of my friends realize that the things that make me *Garen* now—my recklessness, my impatience, my inability to sit still, my unreasonably active sex drive, my penchant for singing at random moments, my addictions, my flaws—are all the same things that used to make me some mostly-friendless dork in Ohio. They've all been fortunate enough to miss the "before," but they're all so familiar with the "after." Me, after I lost my virginity, and formed an alt rock band, and started getting high—freshman year. Me, after I got pretty into drinking, and got better at pulling pranks without getting caught, and got my ass kicked enough times to get good at fighting—sophomore year. Me, after I got my semi-signature, spiked and ironed haircut, and bought the Testarossa, and gave up on normal dating—junior year. Me, showing up in Lakewood, seducing my own stepbrother, setting school property on fire, rocking out at coffee house open mic nights, partying like a rockstar, and burning out, hard and fast, violent and pretty.

The problem, I guess, is that I don't know who I'm supposed to be, if I'm not the Garen they know, the one who's all about sex, drugs, and rock and roll. I don't know what's left of me.

92 days sober

Monday's late evening rehearsal is so much better than the read-through, up until it's not. Once we've all gathered together in the auditorium, Nate does his best to get us to shut up—Ms. Markland seems to be our leader in title only, because she's nowhere to be found, which means absolutely no one is bothering to give a shit what Nate has to say. He tries to silence us for almost two full minutes, getting progressively pissier, until I get bored of watching him pout. I let my head loll back and say, very loudly to the ceiling, "Can you all just shut the fuck up for five minutes so Holliday can talk? Jesus Christ. No wonder I hated this place enough to just stop showing up last year."

The silence is broken only by a laugh that someone tries to disguise with a cough. I glance over my shoulder, even though I already know who I'm going to see grinning at me. Travis is seated a few rows back with a handful of the other people who have agreed to do stage crew. He shoots me something akin to a smirk, but then his eyes are flickering off to the side, like someone else is trying to get his attention. I turn in time to see Joss lowering her hand from a small wave, then look back to see Travis biting back a smile. I slump down in my seat and look at Nate, who is watching me with thankful eyes. I scowl and say, "You know, a desire to hear my own voice wasn't the only reason I said that. Are you going to fucking talk to us, or are you just going to stand there all evening?"

"Oh. Yeah, I'm going to, um... thanks," he says, like that makes any goddamn sense. He takes a deep breath, then addresses the group at large, "So, as you all know, today is the first day of our consistent rehearsals. I want to make these next few weeks as productive as possible, so here's what we're going to do. For the next three weeks, we're going to split into two groups. All of the cast members who are playing named characters will be doing script work on Mondays and Wednesdays, and music on Tuesdays and Thursdays. People who are in the chorus will be doing music on every day except Thursdays, when you'll be helping the crew with set construction and stuff. After this first month, we're going to start doing full scene rehearsals and choreography. Is everybody clear on that?"

There's a general murmur of assent; like a good military schoolboy, I salute him. He dismisses us to work in smaller group, or pairs, or whatever. I should probably find Christine, the girl I've got most of my scenes with, but I assume that she'll be working with Joss, since their characters—Dani and Nikki—are supposed to be best friends, or whatever.

I've barely had time to fish my script out of my bag when Nate pops up in front of me, saying, a little too eagerly, "Do you want help running your lines?"

"Uh," I say, trying to find a more humane way of saying *back the fuck off*. "I think I'm actually going to just find someplace quiet to read through everything by myself, if that's cool? I wanna try like, getting in the headspace of my character."

He smiles, all white teeth and dimples. "How method of you."

"It is," I agree, because I'm not sure what else to say. Rather than continue to engage in conversation, I duck backstage to find someplace to hide. It's quiet here; I can barely hear my castmates' muffled voices through the thick velvet curtain. It's nice. Behind the second curtain, a huge scaffold is set up, presumably to work on painting the background. I curl my hands over the side of it and give it a testing shake to make sure it will support my weight. It doesn't move, so I climb up it. The top level makes for a perfect little reading nest. I curl my legs up under myself and prop my script open on my lap. The truth is, I've barely bothered to read through my lines so far. I've highlighted them all, I've glanced at most of my big scenes, and I've downloaded both of the songs I'm singing lead on to my iPod—a gender-switched "There Are Worse Things I Could Do," and a completely unchanged and now much more offensive "Sandra Dee"—but that's kind of it. There are still weeks left until I need to even get rid of my script, so why start freaking out over it now? But whatever. I took the part, I might as well read through it when my director tells me to.

"Do you mind if I ask you something personal?"

For a second, I think that the question is directed towards me. I look around, only to see that the speaker is Joss, standing in the right wing and slowly circling the rumpled pile of canvas that we've been told to spread out before any set painting. I open my mouth to respond, but the sound catches in my throat when I see Travis—my Travis, Travis McCall—stepping away from the shadow of the curtain. He sits down on the wooden bench and swings one leg over it so he's straddling it. "Yeah, go ahead."

Joss sits down across from him, but the bench is really only built for one person. Her knees are knocking against his. What the fuck, where is her concept of personal space? The edges of my script are slicing tiny papercuts into my palms because I am gripping it too tightly. I set it down on the scaffolding next to me, smooth my palms across my thighs, and try not to move enough to make my presence known.

"How do you know you're really gay?" Joss asks.

Travis laughs. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, you and I have been going to the same school for years now, and I never saw you show any interest in another guy until last year. Obviously you dated Garen in secret, and everybody knows you went to prom with what's-his-name. Ben?" Travis nods once. Joss shrugs, a half-smile playing at the corner of her mouth, as though that makes up for the fact that she's being really rude right now. "Of course, it's your life, so you'd know better than anyone else what you are. But, like... Gabe says you're gay. Garen says you're gay. Everybody says you're gay. But I've never heard you say you're gay. So, I guess what I'm asking is... are you?"

For a very long moment, Travis just blinks at her, though perhaps not in the offended way he should be. He's blinking at her in that slow, thoughtful sort of way he has about him, the same as when he's choosing the wording of his response to an open-ended question on a study guide. Finally, he says, "I can't remember anyone asking me that without already assuming they knew the real answer. Look..."

Garen was the first person I ever fell in love with. He's always going to be that, no matter how much of a pain in the ass he might be now."

My heart constricts painfully.

He continues, "Garen and I only really dated for about two months, until he left for New York. Ben and I dated for four—it wasn't just prom, it was a legitimate relationship, and I loved him. So, I don't think you're going to be too surprised when I say that I slept with both of them, multiple times. And hey, maybe I'm wrong, but I don't think that falling in love and having sex with other guys is something that straight people are known for. I like guys, Joss."

"I know that," she says, laughing. She has a great smile; that makes things so much worse. "I'm not trying to say you're straight, not at all. Of course you like guys. I'm just wondering if maybe you like girls, too."

No, I am bellowing at him in my head, willing him to say the words aloud. No, no, no. He does not like girls, too. He likes boys. He's gay, completely, unequivocally gay. He isn't interested, so stop it, stop it, stop it. Leave him alone. But Travis isn't saying any of those things out loud. He isn't saying anything at all, he's just staring at Joss, smile gone. I'm shaking so hard that I'm worried the scaffolding is about to collapse underneath me.

Joss says, "Do you think I'm pretty?"

It feels like a trick question, because she is. I don't want her to be, but she's pretty, anyone can see that, even a guy who isn't interested in women. And Travis isn't a liar, so she already knows what she's about to hear.

"Yes," he says. His voice cracks.

I know that Joss is going to kiss him before she actually does it, and I think he knows, too. Still, I can't convince myself to look away, can't even blink until she has leaned forward and brushed her lips against his. He doesn't kiss back, but he doesn't pull away. His eyes are closed, and his eyebrows have drawn together, as though he's in pain, or he's confused.

Please pull away from her. Please stop doing this to me.

Joss is the one to break the kiss. I'm not expecting that. Neither is Travis; when she leans back, he follows her almost involuntarily, and has to catch himself by bracing one hand on the bench between them. His eyes are still closed. From my place in the scaffolding above them, I can barely hear her when she whispers, "I hope that was okay. Ever since we started talking last week, I've just thought you seemed like a really great guy. I thought maybe you were interested, but didn't know how to bring it up because everybody thinks you're gay. If I've been misreading everything, you can tell me, and I'll—"

Travis hooks his hands under her bent knees and drags her across the bench towards him so that she is seated on his lap, her thighs on either side of his hips. This kiss is so much more frenzied, so much more desperate than the last, with her arms twined around his neck, and his hands shifting against her waist. I have only ever seen Travis kiss one person, other than myself, but at least seeing him kiss Ben was bearable. At least those kisses were brief, or chaste, or—more often than not—a wordless thank-you for Ben dragging me back from my latest attempt to escape myself. At least I never had to see Travis dip a hand under the back of Ben's shirt to palm at the small of his back, like he's doing to Joss right now. I never had to watch Ben knot his fingers in Travis' hair and tug it hard enough to make Travis' breathing hitch.

If I have to keep watching this, I'm going to be sick. Moving as quickly but silently as possible, I stuff my rolled-up script into my back pocket, stand, and make my way to the other end of the scaffolding. Once I'm sure I'm out of sight, I climb down and cross the stage, nearly stumbling over my own boots as I cut through the left wing. Just outside of the stage door, I collide with Nate, who visibly brightens. "Hi, Garen.

Do you have any questions about the script?"

"No, Nate, the script is perfect," I say, flashing him a brief and incredibly forced smile. He glows. I have to clear my throat before I can speak again. "Listen, I'm not really feeling well. I know I'm supposed to be staying here a while longer, running lines with people, whatever. Do you mind if I cut out early instead? I promise I'll stay late tomorrow."

"O-Oh. Yeah, that's fine. Um, if you stay late tomorrow, you might end up just running your lines with me, instead of Christine. But I'd be happy to hang back, spend some more time with you. I mean, so you're sure you have everything under—"

"That's fine," I cut him off. I don't have time to deal with his painfully obvious crush on me, or whatever ideas he's suddenly entertaining about us cozying up together over a script. He looks a little sheepish, clearly realizing his enthusiasm is misplaced, so I offer him another smile and beg off with another complaint about not feeling well. Snatching my backpack off the seat I left it on, I barrel out into the hallway, already pulling out my cell phone and selecting the first safe number in my contacts list.

Alex picks up on the last ring before voicemail. "Hey, I can't talk long. I'm supposed to be in class, just stepped into the hall."

"What time do you get out?" I ask.

"Not until ten thirty. It's my once-a-week, three-hour political science class. Why, what's up?"

"I'm suddenly having an incredibly shitty day, and I need something to take my mind off things. Can I come over after your class?" I ask. I pull the phone away from my ear to check the clock on it— nine thirty. An hour. I can put up with an hour.

Alex says, "Yeah, that's totally fine. But right after class, I have a chapter from the textbook that I need to photocopy in the library, because I'm too cheap to buy my own textbook. I've just been using the one on reserve in the library. I probably won't get back to the apartment until eleven, but Ben's there now. I think he got out of class at six? Just head on over, I doubt he's doing anything."

I have to practically bite back a gasp of relief. When I can speak, I say, "Thanks. Seriously, Alex, thank you."

"No problem," he says slowly. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I lie, "I'll see you in a few hours, I'm leaving rehearsal now.""

Once outside, I lock myself in the Testarossa, turn the radio up as high as it will go, and peel out of the parking lot, gunning it out of Lakewood. At my first red light, I text my dad to say, *I'm heading to Alex's now, might end up staying over. Don't wait up. See you later.* My high school is only half an hour from downtown New Haven, maybe ten minutes more with traffic. With Ben already parked and Alex coming home in a few hours, there's nowhere behind the building for me to park, and I'm still wary about parking an eighty thousand dollar Ferrari at a meter, so I pay ten bucks to park in a private lot three blocks over. It's still only a few minutes after ten. I dig a semi-crushed pack of cigarettes out of my backpack and light one as I set off down the street in the direction of their building.

The image of Travis and Joss and their awful, frantic kissing is still burned into my mind. It makes no sense. Why would he suddenly decide he wants Joss, of all people? Why would he kiss a girl? She's right, he never explicitly told me he was gay, but he never told me he was bisexual, either. I was there. I remember how disinterested he was in Blaire Kennedy, especially when she tried to kiss him at their pathetic ring dance last fall. Even after I left, he didn't go off and find a girlfriend. He found Ben, he found a guy, not a girl. Why is he suddenly interested in Josslyn?

Halfway down the block, the door to a pizza parlor swings open and three girls in sky-high heels tumble out. One of them—a brunette in a glittery dress—almost eats it, but her friend—a blond in shorts and some weird, sparkly top—hauls her upright at last minute, hissing, “Jesus, Amanda, keep your shit on lock. We’re not going to get in if they can tell we’re drunk already.”

“It’s fine, ‘s none of their business,” the brunette, Amanda, slurs. I can’t stop an eyeroll. Even at the worst part of my addictions, I could at least stay upright. But Amanda keeps talking, props herself up on the blond’s shoulder and says, “Besides, everybody knows New Haven clubs totally serve underage people. It’s fine!”

Christ.

Before I’m quite aware of why I’m doing what I’m doing, I jog a few steps closer and say, “Excuse me. Ladies, can I ask you a question?”

The third girl, the second brunette, seems to be the only sober one. She gives me a once-over, smiles, and says, “Of course. What’s up?”

“Well, I’m not really from around here,” I say, flashing her my most bashful smile. She melts. “I couldn’t help but overhear your friend just now. Do the clubs around here really not card people?”

“Oh, they definitely card people to get in,” she says, shrugging. “They check IDs at the door to make sure you’re over eighteen, and if you’re over twenty-one, you get a stamp or a wristband, depending on the place. But once you’re actually in the door, the bartenders barely care at all, and the shot servers care even less. My boyfriend, Steve? His roommate dragged us all to this crazy gay bar one time, and I straight up told one of the shot boys that I’m only nineteen, but he was like, “So? I’m not your mom, it’s not my job to tell you what to do.’ If you go to the right places, you can drink as much as you want, and as long as you’re not passing out or throwing up, nobody cares how old you are.”

How did I not know about this? How is it possible that I’ve spent almost a month coming to visit Alex and Ben in their apartment here, but I’ve never once felt the aching temptation that’s rolling in my gut now? I force a smile, give the girls my thanks, and edge past them, setting off down the street once more. My cigarette has burned away to ash now; I smash it against my boot sole. Only two blocks between me and my friends’ apartment now. It’s fine. I’m fine. Everything’s fine.

I turn a corner and skid to a stop. Halfway down the block—the official halfway point between my car and Alex’s apartment—an imposing black metal door is propped open and draped with a rainbow flag. Dance music is thudding violently out from within the club, and a few people are lined up outside, having their IDs checked by a large man with a bushy mustache. That must be it, the club the girl mentioned; it’s not like there can really be that many gay clubs in a city this size. It’s not New York, or anything.

This is the type of thing that Ryan is constantly warning us about in our meetings. This is the kind of temptation that seems bearable, that seems easy enough to get through, until we’re in the thick of it. Until it’s too late to escape. But I can’t not know. I can’t not at least check it out. Even with all of my better instincts screaming at me to keep walking until I get to Ben’s, I dig into my pocket, pull out my driver’s license, and join the end of the line to get into the club. The bouncer checks my ID, scribbles a large X across each of my hands, and says, “Ten bucks cover.” I pass him a bill, he waves me into the building.

The club is almost pitch-black, lit only by the glow of strobe lights and beer signs above the bar. God, the bar. There must be at least a hundred bottles against the back wall, and now I feel like I can’t breathe. Against the far wall, a door is open, and beyond it, I can see what seems to be a smoking courtyard. I edge through the club—surprisingly crowded for ten o’clock on a Monday night—and out into the courtyard. Thirty or so people are scattered about, drinking, smoking, laughing. A few of the guys give me vaguely appraising looks, one actually touches my wrist and murmurs a soft, “How are you?” I shoulder past him and slump against a bare stretch of brick wall.

This was so stupid. I have no idea what I'm doing here, but I know this isn't healthy. I know I should be anywhere else. I extract another cigarette from my pack and move to dig my Zippo out of my front pocket, but someone flicks a Bic in front of me. I lean into it, take one long drag from my cigarette, then glance at the man now pocketing the lighter. He's older than a lot of the other people here, but not old old. Mid-thirties, maybe. He's fit, but his smile is kind of creepy. He extends a hand. "Hello, beautiful. I'm Scott."

"Garen," I say.

He seems much more intrigued by that than necessary. "That's a great name. Is it Irish?"

"Yeah," I say, even though it's actually Armenian. In an ideal world, he would realize I'm not interested and go away. In this world, however, he slips a hand into his pocket and removes a ten dollar bill. In a surprising show of balls for such an average-looking guy, he takes a step closer and folds the bill over the top of my jeans, his fingers lingering over my belt buckle. He moves even closer to murmur, "Can I buy you a drink, Garen?"

Oh, Jesus. Yes, yes, you can buy me all the drinks. But I'm a better man than that. I am ninety days sober; I'm not going to fuck that up because some random guy in a club wants to get in my pants. I stub out the cigarette and say, "Sorry, I'm only eighteen."

"I won't tell," Scott says, shrugging.

"Alright, then, sorry, I don't drink." My tone must be enough to dissuade him from the drink idea, but it's not enough to dissuade him from the hook-up idea. Without any further comment, he ducks down and presses his lips to mine. Whatever. I've kissed people I was less interested in for worse reasons than boredom and loneliness, so I stay there, slumped against the bricks and letting him roll his tongue around in my mouth for a few minutes. It's not doing anything for me, but I'm not surprised. I guess I'm not like Travis; I can't just let a veritable stranger kiss me and be practically dry-humping them in a few seconds. After a while, though, Scott makes a grab for my crotch, and I knock his hand away.

"If you're trying to get anything more than a kiss, it's going to cost you a lot more than that ten you stuffed down my jeans," I mutter.

It's meant to be a joke, even if it's said in monotone, but Scott pulls back enough to give me another appraising look. He reaches back into his pocket and folds a twenty over the ten. I don't move. A beat, and then he folds a second twenty over the first. I still don't move, and then he brushes his lips over my earlobe to whisper, "I'm not looking to fuck anybody tonight. But I wouldn't turn down head, for that."

I blew Dave in exchange for beatings and a coma.

I blew Seth for a line of cocaine.

How is fifty dollars any worse?

My answering shrug must count as consent, because just inside of a minute later, I'm on my knees in a bathroom stall, watching Scott roll a condom on before he shoves himself into my mouth. It's not the first time I've blown a stranger, and I doubt it will be the last, but right now, even with this guy not bothering to stifle his groans as he fucks my throat, all I can think about is Travis. Did he come to his senses and take back the kiss? Or is he still kissing Joss right now? Has he taken her home, is he touching her, is he going to fuck her, is he going to fall in love with her and forget all about me and leave me here, in New Haven, blowing strangers for money? Fuck that. If he can move on, if he can fool around with some stranger without a single thought to how it might impact me, I can do the same thing.

Or, at the very least, I can make sure that this man gets his money's worth.

I nudge Scott back against the stall door and pin his hips in place. Even after sucking Jamie on Saturday,

I'm a little out of practice with giving head. By the time I relax my throat enough to swallow down his entire length, he's already babbling above my head. One hand fisted in my hair, he mutters, "That's right, just like that. God, you're so fucking sexy."

And it's pathetic, but this piece of shit, this sleazy, disgusting man who pays barely-legal boys for sex in public restrooms—he's the first guy besides Jamie who has called me sexy since I ended things with Travis. Seth was content to call me a cheap piece of ass, a filthy, drug-addicted slut. Dave didn't call me much of anything, not once he realized how eager I was to get back together with someone who would hurt me the way I needed. What's his name—Patrick, from the bar in New York, didn't have to say a word, he just needed to pass his girlfriend along to Jamie first. And this guy may be paying me, he may be a stranger, but at least he wants me right now.

With one last grunt, Scott empties himself into the condom. Before he even has time to remove it, I stand, brush the grime off the knees of my jeans, and leave the stall. I take a few quick swallows of water from the sink, trying to get the taste of latex off my tongue; I don't acknowledge Scott as he washes his hands next to me, or when he leaves the bathroom. For several long minutes, all I do is stand at the sink, my hands braced on the side, my eyes locked on my reflection.

Then, from behind me, I hear hushed voices in another of the stalls, then a loud sniff. I freeze. One of the people makes a soft comment to the other, there's a break for chuckling, and then another sniff. I can't do this, not now. I can't be *here*, I can't do what I just *did*, I can't have *that* in the stall right behind me and not -

I spin around and knock very gently on the stall door. One of the guys inside immediately shushes the other, loudly and unnecessarily. Like I can't hear them? Like his attempts to silence his buddy did anything other than draw more attention to them? But the bathroom is still empty except for us, so I say, quietly, "How much for a bump?"

"We don't know what you're talking about," one of the men says, affecting a shrill, obviously fake accent, for reasons I can't figure out. His friend giggles madly. The man adds, "There's no one in here! Sorry!"

"I'm not an idiot, I'm not a club employee, and I'm not a cop," I say, squeezing my eyes shut. "I just need some blow."

"Honey, it sounds like you already just *got* some blow," says the man, dropping the accent. He cracks the stall door, peers out at me, then grabs my arm and drags me in. There are two men—one's a ginger, and the other's a short Puerto Rican, both closer to my age than Scott was. The Puerto Rican gives me a once-over. "Five bucks a bump, ten for a line."

"How 'bout I give you a twenty instead, and you make it a long line?" I say. He blows me a kiss and plucks one of the twenties from the waistband of my jeans. I hold my hand out flat, palm facing down, and allow the ginger to tap a decent amount of cocaine from a small plastic bag. Using my driver's license, I cut the coke into a line that stretches from the base of my little finger diagonally across to the base knuckle of my thumb.

"Cheers!" the Puerto Rican says brightly. The last thing I need right now is for half my nose to feel fine and the other half to be numb, like I'm some sort of fucking stroke victim, so I snort the line in two halves, first into my left nostril, then the right. And I know I shouldn't be able to feel it yet, I know it takes about a minute to start to feel the full buzz, but I swear, the second it's in me, I'm *gone*.

"Oh, fuck," I gasp, closing my eyes again and falling back against the side of the stall.

"Easy, honey," says the Puerto Rican, clearly amused. "You new to this, or something?"

"No," I whisper. "I just haven't had any since before I went into rehab last June."

Neither of the men seems to know how to react to that, and that's fine, because I don't care what their reactions are. I let myself back out of the stall and pause to check my nose in the mirror, just to make sure there's no powder left on my face before I leave. Just outside the door to the bathroom, a shot boy, wearing nothing but a pair of hotpants and a pair of Chucks, saunters past me. On one hand, he balances a tray carrying a rack of shots in test tubes.

When it rains, it pours. Right now, it looks like it's time to splash around in the puddles.

I follow the shot boy back out into the courtyard, because really, what's the point of pretending that this night can be salvaged? What's the point of pretending sobriety is even an option for me anymore? There are a few iron garden tables set up, each surrounded by a couple of chairs. The shot boy pauses next to one of the tables where three people—two dark-haired men and a woman with long blond hair—are sitting, and asks them, "Do you guys want shots?"

Before they can respond, I sling an arm around his shoulders and ask, "How much for the entire tray?"

He laughs. "Two bucks a shot, and I've got fifteen here."

"Perfect," I say, transferring the remaining thirty dollars from my pants to his and lifting the tray straight out of his hands.

"A boy after my own heart," exclaims one of the men at the table. "Sure can drink, for a kid."

The other man is frowning. "I wanted one of those."

I shrug and swing a leg over the remaining chair at their table, sitting down so I'm straddling the back of it. I place the tray on the center of the table and say, "Knock yourself out, man. It's not like it's even my money that paid for it."

"Whose was it?" the drinker asks, punctuating his question by taking one of the shots.

"Just some guy I blew in the bathroom," I say. That remark earns a smirk from the blond woman, but she still says nothing, just takes a long drag off the cigarette pinned between her fingers.

The first shot tastes like regret, and self-loathing, and shame, but the second one tastes like coming home. They're somehow sickly sweet and a little bit sour at the same time—Kamikazes, I think. I slip the empty test tube back onto the rack, toss back another, and another, and another. By my fifth, the man who isn't drinking reaches out and grips my wrist. "You sure you can handle drinking that much, kid?"

"I'm not a kid, and yes," I say shortly.

Ignoring his friend, the drinker extends a hand to shake mine. "It's mighty generous of you to share your drinks with us. My name's Charlie. This is Mike, and that's Stohler."

"Pleasure to meet you all," I say. I take another shot, swallow, pause, and add, "My name's Garen. Garen Anderson."

By now, I can really feel the coke, and it feels absolutely delicious. All I want is to stay in this chair, talking to these people, and drinking, and I can't think of any reason not to, so I do. Mike tells me a little more about the club, and the owners, and the shot boys, and the area, and Charlie launches into a story about his day. I flirt shamelessly with both of them, and within ten minutes—twenty minutes? More?—they're both practically melting every time I open my mouth. Everything I say seems to amuse them, or fascinate them, or give them boners, I don't know, and I'm worried that I'm starting to come down from the coke, but I'm even more worried because *why did I ever stop?* Everything about this feels flawless.

Eventually, though, Charlie and Mike both excuse themselves to the bathroom—most likely to talk about

me and debate the chances of at least one of them going home with me—and I find myself alone at the table with Stohler. She still hasn't spoken, but now, around a mouthful of smoke, she says, "So, Garen." My name rolls off her tongue in what might be sarcasm. I wonder if she thinks it's a fake name. "You must have had one hell of a rough day at the office to show up and drink like that."

I shrug. I wonder if those guys with the coke are still in the bathroom. "There is no office. Just school."

"Where do you go to school?" she asks.

"Lakewood High School. It's about three towns over," I say. Her eyebrows shoot towards her hairline, so I shrug again. "I'm a senior. Supposed to be a freshman in college, actually, but I was expelled last spring, so I'm repeating my senior year now. I'm eighteen. It's legal for me to be here."

"Yeah, it is legal," she says slowly. I watch as she stubs out her cigarette in the ashtray on the table, and she watches me watch her. For a very long moment, I feel as though she's just sitting there, undressing me with her eyes in a completely nonsexual way. It's like she's digging into my brain and reading all my worst thoughts, and she must be, because eventually, she says, "Tell me what happened to you."

I force a shrug; my muscles feel stupid, and it takes a little more effort than it should. "It was just a bad day."

"I don't mean today," she says, lighting one cigarette that she hands to me, then lighting another for herself. "I mean, tell me what happened to you to make you look so utterly fucked about your entire life."

I laugh. "That's going to be a long story."

"What, like you've got somewhere else to be?" I really, really don't. The two guys come back at that moment and move to sit down, but Stohler snaps her fingers at them and flicks her wrist. "I'm sorry, we're having a discussion here. Thank you for your company this evening. I'll see you around."

I've never seen anyone but me or Jamie dismiss people so casually. They must be used to it, however, because they slink away, scowling but unsurprised. Not entirely sure whether I'm talking to her or myself, I say, "You should be nicer to your friends."

"They're not my friends. They're just some idiots I know. I don't... really do the friend thing. Not well, anyway." She sucks on the end of her cigarette. "You must not, either, or you'd be with them now, instead of sitting here drinking with strangers."

Choosing my words as carefully as I can, I say, "I have friends. But they don't know that I'm here, because they don't really like me drinking. I'm supposed to be hanging out with them now, but... whatever. I don't know. I'm going to head out, I'll just go sleep in my Testarossa."

I manage to make it out of the club and halfway down the block to the lot where I'm parked before I realize that I'm being followed. Turning around feels like it would be incredibly hard right now, so instead, I lean against a building and wait for whoever's stalking me to just..... I don't know. Catch up and kill me?

"You're an idiot," the girl, Stohler, says by way of greeting. I just stare blankly back at her. She rolls her eyes and hooks an arm through mine, pulling me away from the wall. "Come on. You said you drive a Testarossa? No way am I letting some shitfaced high schooler near a Ferrari. I live five minutes from here, you can sleep on my couch."

She's a total stranger, but it's not like it matters. I've let weirder people take me home before. I slump against her side and let her guide me down the street.

Zero days sober

The alarm on my phone goes off at six thirty, as always. For the first time since rehab, I wake up in a room I don't recognize. It only takes a breath for the hangover to hit me full-force, followed immediately by the realization of everything that transpired the night before.

Oh fuck.

"Rise and shine!" chirps a voice from about twenty feet away. I blink around—fuck, this room is so bright. Some girl with dark bobbed hair is drinking tea and smiling sunnily at me from a nearby kitchen table.

I open my mouth to speak, but nothing comes out. I clear my throat and try again, "Is this your place?" My voice is hoarse, which I guess is what I get for letting strangers fuck my throat in public restrooms. The girl nods. I cough again. "Do I know you?"

"Nope. My name's Angie. One of my roommates brought you back last night," she says.

"Do I know your roommate?" I ask. There's a vague blur of a woman in my head, but I can't remember much beyond that. Some blond hair, maybe. Cigarettes and a short dress.

The girl shrugs. "I don't know. I hope so? Sara, Meagan, and I are always telling Lindsey not to bring randoms back. Like, she doesn't really have friends, so the guys she brings back are hardly ever here a second time. Pretty sure she just lets them do her and then never talks to them again."

She's giving me a pointed look, so I bury my face under a throw pillow and say, "I like men, so I doubt I came back here to do your roommate. And I don't know anyone named Lindsey, so uh... I really have no idea why I'm here."

"You're here because your car was way too awesome for me to let you wrap it around a tree in a drunk driving accident," says a second girl, walking out of a room to my left and sweeping her long blond waves up into a messy ponytail. The tiny black dress and stripper heels she was wearing last night have been replaced with denim shorts, flip-flops, and a Poison t-shirt. She hitches her chin at me and says, "Hey, kid. You remember my name?"

"Stohler," I say, only remembering the name as it rolls off my tongue. "Lindsey Stohler, apparently. Yeah. Thanks for letting me crash here."

"No problem. What time do you have school?"

I check the time on my phone. Six thirty-five. "In like, an hour and half."

"I'll walk you back to your car. But first, go shower. You smell like a fucking brewery. I'll try to find a t-shirt that'll fit you."

The odds of that working out are slim; out of her heels, she's five nine or so, and maybe a hundred and twenty pounds. Rather than argue, I roll off the couch and slowly drag myself upright. God, *my head*. "Holy shit, I'm so hungover. Do you care if I go jam my fingers down my throat in your bathroom so I can get some of this fucking booze out of my system?"

She's silent for a beat too long before she says, "Knock yourself out. Bathroom's through there."

I stagger through the door she has indicated. A shower won't really help—the dirtiest parts of me are all inside, anyway—but it might give me time to figure out what I'm going to do. While I'm waiting for the water to heat up, I kneel down in front of the toilet and stick two fingers as far down my throat as I can manage. What I really need is to get what's left of the vodka and triple sec out of my stomach so I'll stop feeling so foul, but my lack of a gag reflex is definitely working against me right now. It's only through a

very purposeful combination of pressing my middle finger to the very back of my tongue and remembering the horrible events of last night that I manage to make myself vomit and yes, an empty stomach does give me a slightly clearer head. Grimacing, I flush the toilet and climb into the shower to scrub myself raw.

I'm not sure how long I spend in there, but it must be a while. There are like, six thousand different bottles of shampoo, body wash, and face wash, and what the fuck is "invigorating apricot scrub"? What part of your body could you possibly want to scrub to the point where it feels *invigorated*? Even after washing my hair, face, and body, I'm still not ready to face the world, so I settle for sitting down in the tub and watching my fingers turn progressively more prune-like. Eventually, though, when my skin is burning red from the heat of the water and I can hear Stohler and her roommate bitching at each other in the living room, I turn the water off and step out to dry myself.

When I step out into the living room wearing just my jeans, Angie stops sniping at Stohler and blinks at my chest. Unfazed, Stohler tosses me a still-folded thrift store Sex Pistols shirt. I pull it on, locate my boots by the door, and follow her out off the building. The sunlight is blinding enough that my stomach starts to roll again, but there's nothing left in my body to throw up, so I settle for whining, loudly and at length. Stohler watches in unimpressed silence from behind a pair of white Wayfarers. Only once we have made it back to the lot where my car is parked does she twirl the end of her ponytail around her fingers and say, "You know, you never did get around to telling me what had you so fucked up last night."

"Kamikazes and cocaine. That's what had me fucked up last night," I say grimly. She doesn't say anything as I fish my keys out of my pocket and unlock my car door, but when I climb into it and look up at her, I realize her eyebrows are ever so slightly raised. I raise mine back. "What, you actually give a shit?"

"Do I strike you as the sort of woman to ask questions I don't care about the answers to?" she asks.

I dig my aviators out of the cupholder and put them on. It doesn't do that much to block out the sun, but it helps a little. After a moment, I sigh and say, "I wasn't kidding when I said it was a long story. And I also wasn't kidding when I said I've got to get to school."

Stohler isn't looking at me any longer; her brows are drawn together and her face is pointing towards the ground, like human contact is more than she's really prepared for at this time of morning. She says, "You could tell me about it another time, then. We could get drinks or something."

"Uh," I say, "are you trying to ask me out?"

The revolted expression on her face is actually kind of offensive, but not nearly as offensive as the part where she says, "Don't be disgusting." I snort, and she adds, "Look, all I'm saying is that a normal eighteen-year-old wouldn't have spent a Monday night in a nightclub, sucking off 'some guy' for money to buy shots, and leaving with a chick he's never met before. You're obviously a few cards short, man, and you're going to have more luck explaining that to a twenty-two-year-old with some actual life experience than you will trying to make any of your high school buddies understand. So, if you have shit you need to figure out, if you want some help, whatever. Offer stands."

I've been eighteen for almost six months now; I haven't spent a single day of it being normal. I haven't even tried, and now hardly seems like the time to start. Not when I'm so hungover I feel like dying, and not when I still don't know how I'm going to handle this day. I reach over and pluck her phone out of the pocket of her shorts, open the contacts list, and add my number in. I hesitate at the name, then finally type, *garen (drunk high schooler)*. She tucks the phone back into her pocket when I'm done, wiggles her fingers in a very brief wave, and saunters back out of the lot without another word.

I turn my attention to my own phone, and the three new texts—all from Alex—and two missed calls—one from Alex, one from Dad.

Alex, texting, quarter after eleven. *you still going 2 come by tonight?*

Alex, texting, eleven forty. *you alive?*

Alex, calling, eleven fifty.

Alex, texting, one thirty. *seriously hope your bitch mood just made you change your mind about hanging, bc if youre lying in a ravine somewhere, im going 2 feel so guilty.*

Dad, calling, ten minutes ago, presumably while I was showering, probably to make sure I still planned to get to school on time.

I silence my phone and bury it deep in my backpack. There's just enough time for me to get back to the house and make it to school before homeroom. I want to believe that I'm going home for the Trial Law notebook I forgot to bring in yesterday, but I'm not good at lying to myself. By the time I pull into the driveway, I'm nervous, and by the time I let myself back into the house, I'm shaking. To stall, to delay the inevitable, I jog down to the basement to retrieve the notebook from my bed and my jacket from the desk chair.

I have no valid reason to go into my closet and dig through the few still unpacked boxes of shit I removed from the old house after rehab. There's no excuse for it, none that makes sense. Logically, I am completely aware of the fact that what I'm doing is wrong, but when my hand closes around the cool stainless steel of my old flask, it doesn't *feel* wrong.

Back upstairs, I let myself into Dad's study, kneel down on the floor, and pick the lock on his liquor cabinet with a paper clip from the desk. That makes me feel guiltier than anything—Dad has no idea that I can pick locks. He has no idea that locking up the very few bottles left in the house does nothing to stop me from drinking. Up until now, the only thing stopping me from drinking was me. Now, that seems irrelevant.

There are only three bottles—a half-empty bottle of Tanqueray gin, an almost empty bottle of Johnnie Walker Double Black scotch, and a very full bottle of Bacardi 151 over-proof rum. The 151 is actually mine, not his; I haven't had it in ages, not since I was at Patton, because it's not exactly the type of thing one drinks while moping around and writing depressing love songs about an ex. It burns like hell when you swallow it, and it gets you very drunk, very quickly. Carefully, I curl my fingers around the opening of the flask as a makeshift funnel and pour the 151 in up to the top. Once the screw-top has been replaced, the flask is the perfect size and shape to be tucked nicely into the inner pocket of my leather jacket. I should return the bottle to the cabinet—fuck, I shouldn't have taken it out in the first place—but instead, I tuck it under my arm, lock the cabinet, and return to the car, stashing the bottle on the floor on the passenger's side.

It's okay, I tell myself over and over on the drive to school. *It's okay. I haven't had anything to drink yet today. It's okay. Today, I'm sober.*

Except I'm not. I'm not sober, because to me, there are two kinds of addicts: those who are on the wagon and those who are off, and right now, I'm rolling around beneath the wheels. There are still some decent parking spaces left in the lot at school, and I've got five minutes until homeroom. A lot of drinking can happen in five minutes. I take the flask out of my pocket and unscrew the lid.

I take a sip.

Chapter Five

“We are not punished for our sins, but by them.” –Elbert Hubbard

The flask is emptied and refilled before I even walk into the building. For good measure, I pour a generous amount of the rum into an empty water bottle I find in my backseat, and tuck that into my backpack. I manage to make it through half of the morning announcements during homeroom before I ask permission to run out to my locker—I suck down another half of the flask right there in the hallway, because no one's around, and I'm not sure I'd care, even if someone was here. The process repeats during AP Government, and by the time second period starts, I'm shitfaced. I actually have to leave the room at one point to take a ten-minute trip to the water fountain because I'm drunk enough to giggle at some term definition that's not even remotely funny.

I sober up a little bit, metaphorically speaking, for trial law, but only because the idea of having Travis sit down next to me draws me out of my stupor. It isn't as if I've paid attention during any of the seven previous sessions of this class, but I still take out my notebook and pen so that I can sit in silence and pretend I'm not just killing ten months until graduation.

My plan is mildly fucked when Mr. Esteves announces, “I'm sure you'll all be absolutely thrilled to hear that you'll be getting your mock trial team assignments today.” He makes a vague celebratory gesture that none of us return. “Alright. I briefly explained the mock trial process on your first day, but I'm sure that a lot of you have forgotten since then. So, can I get a volunteer to remind us all? Anyone? How 'bout you, Anderson?”

“I respect you way too much to lie to you, sir, so let me take this moment to admit that I wasn't paying attention at all when you explained it,” I say, not lifting neither my gaze nor my pen from my notebook. The comment earns me a few snickers from my classmates, even though—last time I checked—they all hate me. In fairness to myself, though, this is how I made almost all of my friends at Patton; a penchant for inappropriate humor and drunken ramblings.

“And are you paying attention now?” Mr. Esteves asks.

“Uh, barely.”

I don't realize he's in front of my desk until he reaches down to tap the edge of my paper. “Is that a kangaroo you're drawing there?”

“Nah, it's a wallaby. Kangaroos have way longer legs than wallabies, 'cause they need to be able to hop on open terrain, not in forests and shit. Wallabies live in forests. And have short legs.” I twist around in my seat to face Travis, who has been glaring at the back of my head and steadily jamming the cap of his pen between my shoulder blades in what I can only assume is an attempt to silence me. “McCall, I swear to god, if you don't stop trying to shut me up by stabbing me in the spine with your pen, it is going to join my dick on the list of ‘things that have been shoved up your ass.’”

“Anderson!” Mr. Esteves barks over the shocked and delighted noises my classmates are making.

Travis is staring at me, red-faced and open mouthed. Unable to stop myself from getting in one last dig, I reach out, hook a finger under his chin, and says, “You look like an idiot like that. Close your mouth; I'll tell you when I need it open again.”

“Anderson, turn around and shut up. I don't want you to say another word for the rest of this class. Or *after* the class, during the minute it will take me to write up your detention slips for the rest of this week. Your comments are completely inappropriate, and the only reason I'm not sending you to the main office for the rest of the day is because your mock trial scores make up a large portion of your grade, so you need to hear this. Understood?”

I straighten up in my seat and give him my best former-military-school-brat salute. He rolls his eyes, but continues with the explanation of the trial process—he'll be passing out summaries and testimonies of a fictional trial we're supposed to be studying. We'll all be divided into four groups of six, with two teams arguing for the prosecution, two for the defense. On each team, three people will be acting as attorneys, three will be acting as witnesses, but it's everyone's job to prepare their own statements and take this as seriously as possible, blah blah blah.

In the end, I'm assigned to one of the prosecuting teams as a witness, along with five randoms I've never met. I glance around, expecting them to be annoyed to have to work with me, but I'm surprised to find that some of them actually look... what, pleased? Tentatively hopeful, at least. It takes me until the end of class to realize that they're probably hoping that my previously demonstrated ability to make a scene and keep attention on myself will work out in our team's favor.

After class, while I'm hanging around waiting for Mr. Esteves to finish writing up my four detention slips, Travis bolts from the room, still avoiding my eyes. Whatever. Like I even fucking want him to look at me, after what I had to see him doing yesterday with Joss. Like I ever want to speak to him again.

I skip lunch to sneak out to my car and drink some more—security around this building is seriously lacking—but discover that afternoon that Travis is still studiously ignoring me throughout English. Good. The only thing that means to me is that I don't have to worry about trying to hide how drunk I am. When the last bell rings that afternoon, I shuffle off to detention with Mr. Esteves, which just involves a lot of me sitting at my desk and trying to look like I'm disappointed in myself. He eventually dismisses me around three o'clock, and that's when I realize I've backed myself into a bit of a corner. Rehearsal doesn't start until seven, but I can't exactly drive anywhere before that. I'm not drunk—more like buzzed, but still not sober enough that I want to go out on the road. Instead, I make my way out to the parking lot, like everyone else, then climb into my backseat and spend the next four hours alternately napping and drinking rum. It's one of the worst and best afternoons I've had in a while. When I wake up again, sometime around six forty-five, my head is starting to pound. I force myself to finish off what's left in a too-warm water bottle I find under the passenger seat before I allow myself to have some more of the rum.

It still burns going down, which I'm grateful for. I don't want this—drinking, the rum, the relapse, any of it—to stop hurting. I don't know what I'll do if I let it stop hurting too soon.

I refill my flask, tuck it away in my jacket, and stagger in the general direction of rehearsal. Though I'm drunk as hell, I have the sense to stop off at a bathroom, splash some cold water on my face, chew some gum so I don't reek of booze, and try not to look too hammered when I finally step into the auditorium. There are less people than I expect there to be—oh, right. This is only half a rehearsal, isn't it? Still, there's a little collection of people milling around. Travis is one of them. So is Joss Pryce.

God. If ever I were to suddenly turn into someone who throws up after drinking too much, this would probably be that moment. It's not, though. Glaring around at everyone, I make my way up the aisle towards the stage. Travis must finally be over his embarrassment at what I said during trial law, because he glances up and actually has the balls to fucking smirk at me as he says, "Hey, Garen. Done being a bitch to me yet?"

"Don't talk to me, slut." The words fall out of my mouth before I can even process them, but I'm not sorry for them. He may be over it, but I'm not.

There's a half-second of hurt on Travis' face—I still don't feel guilty—followed by irritation. "What the hell is your problem?"

"My problem is with you," I say shortly. "And if you're too stupid to figure out why, that's not my issue."

"Is everything alright?" says an uncertain voice behind me. I rock back on my heels to turn around—almost stumble, but steady myself with a hand to the stage, whatever—and find Nate watching me with worried eyes.

Eyes like that put me in more detentions, and suspension, and rehabilitation. Everyone who worries about me always ends up trying to save me, or fix me, and I can't do that right now. I can't be fixed, and I need to make him too distracted to try. Smiling as brightly as I can, I take a few steps forward to invade his personal space. He's already blushing when I reach up to card my fingers through his hair—I can tell it takes everything in him not to bat my hand away, he's so gay about his hair—and he stops breathing when I duck down a few inches to press a kiss to his temple. I drop my voice a half-octave to murmur, "Everything's perfect, Nate. Why do you ask?"

"No, I, um—" He pauses, takes a deep breath—even though I'm still standing too close—and tries again, "I just wanted to make sure. It sounded like you and Travis were fighting."

I fake a laugh as convincingly as I can, then brush my thumb over his lower lip. "It's cute that you were worried." He tries to smile. I step back. "So, what song are we starting with?"

"Well, first you should warm up. You know, with some runs or something? And then you can pick whatever song you want. That's how we generally do our music rehearsals. Everybody sings one song of their choosing—it can be something modern, something old-school, it doesn't have to be from the play—so that we can loosen up, and then we start work on the songs from the play."

I cock my head to the side. "Do you want me to sing a capella? Or should I grab my guitar?"

Nate lights up like the world's gayest Christmas tree. "Actually, neither! Riley—that's the head of our tech crew—compiled a database of instrumental versions of almost every song you can imagine. It's all hooked up to the main sound system, so all you have to do is search it on the laptop in the sound booth, and if it's there, you can cue it up and sing along."

"Cool," I say, because it sort of is. I pause until he blushes and points me in the direction of the sound booth. Once I'm up there, I realize there's already someone sitting at the sound board—some guy wearing a backwards baseball cap, like this is a frat party. Or, you know, the nineties. I blink at him. He blinks back. I say, "I'm Garen."

He snorts. "Kinda know who you are, man. Pretty sure everyone does. I'm Riley, I'm in charge of tech. So, what song do you want?"

"Some angsty alt-rock or pop-punk song that'll annoy my ex-boyfriend," I say.

Another snort, but he scrolls through his laptop a bit and says, "What are your thoughts on Sugarcult?"

"What are your thoughts on being awesome? 'Cause my thoughts are that you're *great* at it."

He rolls his eyes, gestures back towards the stage and says, "Whenever you're ready."

I trudge back down to the stage and take my place behind the microphone onstage. Nate is set up in the front row, clutching his clipboard like he's really going to take notes on my performance. Most of the other people are seated near him. Travis is in the second row back, sitting next to Joss. She leans in to whisper something in his ear, and he allows her a quick smile. My blood fucking *boils*. I jerk my head at the sound booth, and Riley cues up the song.

It's a good choice, and I'll have to remember to thank him later, if I can remember any part of this day. It's a slow enough start that I can warm up my throat a little bit before the soaring screams that I know come later. By the time I get to the chorus, even Travis can't ignore me anymore, which is fucking fantastic, because god knows I haven't taken my eyes off him since this song started. I do make one allowance, though; I turn ever so slightly to lock eyes with a somewhat confused-looking Joss as I sing, *Pretty soon she'll figure out, you can never get him out of your head*. And then I launch into the last chorus. It's the way that he makes you cry

*It's the way that he's in your mind
It's the way that he makes you fall in love
It's the way that he makes you feel
It's the way that he kisses you
It's the way that he makes you fall in love*

The second the lyrics have run out, before the song itself has drawn to a close, I hop off the edge of the stage and take a seat in the far end of the front row. Once there, I dig my script out of my back pocket and thumb through it, just for something to do.

"That was um, that was good," Nate says. He must be somewhat reluctant to criticize me, because his tone is dull when he says, "Did you warm up before you sang, or did you just go right into the song?" I shake my head no, and he correctly interprets which part I'm denying. "You should make sure you do some vocal runs before you sing in the future. Especially on a song that's that... I don't know. Loud? You could hurt yourself. I mean, your voice sounds a little hoarse already."

I shift around so that I'm upside-down in my chair; back to the seat, head lolling over the edge of it, thighs to the back of the chair, and knees bent over it. I say, "My voice isn't hoarse because I don't warm up. My voice is hoarse because I let some guy fuck my throat in a public restroom last night. Tends to aggravate the whole area a little, even for somebody as lacking as I am in the gag reflex department."

No one really knows what to say to that. I didn't exactly expect them to. Once enough time has passed for the moment to become sufficiently uncomfortable, Nate clears his throat and says softly, "Okay. Well. You should still rest your throat a little. Have something to drink."

"I'm on it, boss," I say, saluting him with one hand and extracting my flask from my jacket with the other. I've barely had time to raise it to my mouth—which is a process in and of itself, considering I'm still upside down—before the flask is knocked hard from my hand. I look up.

Travis is standing over me, practically vibrating with fury. "What the fuck is that?"

"That *was* a delicious treat for me, but it now *is* a stain that the janitorial staff is going to be none too pleased about," I say, scrambling upright once more and going to retrieve the flask. A joke. That's what I have to do—I can make this a joke, and then it will be okay. Everyone will laugh. Everything will be funny. It won't be scary and pathetic anymore, if I can just make them laugh. But he isn't laughing. He's just staring at me, wide-eyed and shaking. He knows. Obviously he knows, how could he not? I swallow hard and say the first—and dumbest, most illogical—thing that comes to mind. "Stop pretending you know me."

"I know you well enough to know that you're completely wasted right now," he says. I fumble my script. No one says anything. I haven't protested, but Travis still continues, "Don't lie to me, either, because you spent all last spring trying to convince me that you were fine, but you weren't. Not then, and not now. I don't understand what's going on, why you would do this to yourself." He waits again for a response that my tongue won't let me give, and when he speaks next, his voice is almost desperate. "You were getting *better*, Garen. You've been so good for so long, you've been sober for ninety days—"

I explode, "Oh my god, Travis. You're not my mom. You're not my fucking boyfriend anymore, and you're not my brother either, and you're barely my friend, so how the fuck is this your business? If I want to have a drink, I can do that. It's my life, not yours. So, whatever, fuck you. I'm leaving." Leaving the building, maybe, but not the property. I'm too drunk to drive, and just sober enough to realize it. When rehearsal officially ends at nine o'clock and the cast and crew make their way out to the front parking lot, they find me hanging out in the driver's seat of my car, dangling my feet out the window and singing along to angry girl rock from the nineties. It might be either embarrassing, or maybe funny, under other circumstances. Under these, though, it's probably just sort of depressing.

Someone grabs my boot and says, "What are you doing?"

"Alanis Morissette is my spirit animal. She understands my pain," I grumble, shaking whoever it is off. I slump sideways so that my head is in the passenger's seat and the gearshift is digging into my ribcage. When I peer up at the person who's hovering outside the window, surprise, surprise—it's Travis. I scowl. "Oh. It's you. Go away." He doesn't move. I feel around on the floor until I find the iPod that's hooked up to the retromodded stereo and start the song from the beginning. I point my flask at him and sing along, *"I want you to know that I'm happy for you. I wish nothing but the best for you both."*

"How much have you had to drink?" he asks.

"--is she perverted like me? Would she go down on you in a—"

"Garen, I'm fucking talking to you."

I drain what's left in the flask and toss it into the backseat. The rest of the booze is around here somewhere... I dig around under the passenger seat until I surface with the bottle of 151, now halfway empty. When he reaches for it, I shrug away and crank the volume of my stereo, singing-slash-yelling, *"And I'm here to remind you of the mess you left when you went away--"*

"Give me the bottle," Travis says, though he has to shout a little to be audible over the music. I stop singing long enough to take a pull from the bottle, and it burns so perfectly. He leans in the car to try to take it away from me; I plant my boot in the center of his chest to hold him at bay. That's too much for him to abide by. He yanks open the driver's side door—with my legs no longer supported by the window, I overbalance and tumble out of the car. Now finally within reach, Travis grabs the bottle out of my hands, turns, and pitches it towards the lawn nearby. My throat tightens. Five hundred milliliters of over-proof Puerto Rican rum, wasted on a school parking lot. But no—the bottle hits the grass with a thunk, but the earth must still be somewhat soft from Sunday night's rain, because the glass doesn't shatter.

"You seem very well, things look peaceful," I keep singing, *"I'm not quite as well, I thought you should know."*

Travis leans over me into the car and cuts the engine; the music shuts off abruptly enough to leave my ears ringing. He drops my keys on the floor mat and says, "Enough."

There's no music, and I'm not so much singing as speaking the lyrics, but I look up at him with dead eyes and finish the verse anyway. *"Are you thinking of me when you fuck her?"*

"Stand up, Garen."

"Don't tell me what to do."

"Stand up right now, and talk to me like a man. You're eighteen years old, and you're sitting in the middle of a parking lot, drunk as shit, slurring song lyrics at me. I want you to stand up and tell me what the fuck is going on," he orders.

Reluctantly, I move to stand up, but—oh, this is going to be so much harder than I expected it to be. I crawl back up into the driver's seat, then use the door to pull myself out and onto my feet. The rum has all gone to my head. At the very least, it's gone to my nerve endings, because I can barely stand. I try to steady myself, but almost topple over, and have to settle for leaning against the side of the car. I point at him—I hope I point at him, the real him, because there are at least three of him swimming in front of me right now. I hedge my bets, focus on the middle Travis, and say, "What's going on... is that you now owe me a bottle of Bacardi. Because you're a selfish little life-ruiner. Which, I am assuming, is also the reason why you're wrecking Joss Pryce."

Travis is silent for a very long, very tense moment. Then, he licks his lips and says, "I'm not 'wrecking'

Joss. All we did was kiss. Now, first, you're going to tell me how you know that. And then, you're going to tell me how it's any of your business."

"I know because I was there, Travis!" I burst out. "You know, maybe the next time you decide to just start making out with some random girl who should be studying her lines, you might want to take a fucking look around and make sure your ex-boyfriend isn't studying his script in the scaffolding above your head."

He has the grace to look ashamed of himself. Good. One of us needs to start feeling some shame, and it's sure as hell not going to be me. I start to fall over again, and he grabs me by the shoulders to steady me. It doesn't work; I hit the ground anyway, and Travis goes to his knees to... what, keep me company on the pavement? He says something, but I'm too out of it to listen at this point. I'm vaguely aware of his hands leaving my shoulders, and then of more talking. When I manage to remember which direction is up, I blink at him—he's now standing a few feet away, looking upset and talking into his cell phone. That is so like him, to ask for help from other people when he really needs it. What a quitter.

Since he's no longer focused entirely on me, I crawl across the pavement to the edge of the lawn. The change of terrain does nothing for my sense of balance, and I faceplant at least once before I manage to find the bottle of rum that Travis tossed. I take a long slug from it, hoping that maybe for once, my body will do the right thing and make itself sick. That's the problem with drinking—I never, ever get drunk to the point of throwing up. I pass out, sure, but that takes so much longer, and by the time it happens, I've usually already gotten alcohol poisoning. I think I might be in that stage right now. But even now, my body refuses to actually reject the booze. The only way I can make that happen is by forcing myself to do it, like I did this morning.

That's what I'm contemplating doing when Travis finally ends his phone call—and really, where are his priorities?—and comes over to say, "Where's all your stuff? I need to move it to my car."

"You need to suck a dick," I say, though my words are muffled by the fact that I'm still facedown on the grass. He sighs and walks away. Good. He should just go find Joss. I bet Joss never gets drunk in public. I bet Joss never causes a scene at play rehearsal, or drinks anything that's seventy-five-point-five percent alcohol by volume, or listens to music sung by people who have been hurt. Because Joss, with her cute, delicate features and her dark hair and her stupid leading role in the play and her way of making Travis' breath hitch when she kisses him... Joss is just too fucking perfect to ever do any of the screwed up shit I've done today.

There are hands on my arms now, hauling me to my feet. "Come on. Your backpack and guitar are in my car. I've got your keys. You're coming with me, let's get you into my car."

I don't protest this time. I must be fading in and out of consciousness, though, because one moment, I'm standing on the lawn, and then I'm stumbling on the sidewalk, and then I'm slumped over in the passenger's seat of Travis' car. Bree's car, actually, maybe. The glass of the closed window is cool against my face, and I may actually make a noise of appreciation. Travis must mistake it for a noise of impending vomit, because he says, "If you're going to throw up, I'd appreciate some warning so I can at least roll the window down for you."

"I don't throw up when I'm drunk," I mumble. "'s a waste of alcohol, and I'd rather keep it all inside my body, where it belongs. But if you're paranoid about it, you can pull over again, and I'll jam a couple fingers down my throat and make myself hurl on the side of the road. Then you don't have to worry about there being anything in my stomach."

"Is that what you do after you drink? You make yourself vomit?" he asks. It feels like a trick question, but I don't have the energy to lie.

I nod. "Sometimes. It's—I did it this morning, when I woke up at um..." Fuck. What was her name? "Um. I did it this morning, so my hangover wouldn't make me feel sick. 'Cause last night, after I saw you and Joss, I went to New Haven, 'cause I was gonna hang out with Alex? But then, on my way there, I found

this nightclub that doesn't card people who wanna drink. And I—" I look around, and it occurs to me that we've definitely left Lakewood. We're at least one town over. I find it hard to make myself care. "I had twelve shots and a huge line of coke. And Travis? Ask me how I paid for it. Ask me what I did to get the money for the shots."

He doesn't ask, and I don't tell him. I fade out, at least for a little while, until I'm suddenly aware that the car is no longer moving, and that there are people arguing right outside it. I look over at where Travis should be, in the driver's seat, but he's gone. Slowly, I turn my attention in the other direction, towards the noise on the sidewalk. Travis is outside, looking like he's *losing his mind*. His face is flushed, and he's maybe yelling, but he's mostly just trying not to cry and letting himself be hugged by—oh.

Ben.

And then, I'm still in a car, and still shitfaced. The signs speeding by on the side of the highway tell me that I'm on Interstate 86, somewhere in Pennsylvania. Ben is in the driver's seat, not saying a word as I whisper to him, "I'm never going to forgive you for this. Ben. Ben, are you listening to me? I'm never going to fucking speak to you again after today. You should have just let me go, you should have left me there. This is none of your fucking business, okay? It's my life, I can do whatever I want to do. If I want to go to New York, I can go to fucking New York. If I want to go to Cleveland, I can fucking well go to Cleveland. If I want to fill my body with so much coke I can't remember my own goddamn name, I can do it. Who the hell do you think you are to try to stop me?"

"I'm your friend, Garen," he says evenly. "I'm your friend, and I'm trying to help you, because I love you."

My reply is sharp, "Well, I hate you." No response. I need him to respond, though. I need him to get mad enough that he'll pull over and ditch me somewhere, so I can get out of this car, because if he takes me back to Lakewood, everything is over for me. "Did you hear me?" Still nothing, and then I'm yelling, my voice painfully loud in the otherwise silent car. "Benjamin Brendon McCutcheon, I fucking hate you. Meeting you was the worst thing that ever happened to me in Lakewood. Worse than getting kicked out, worse than losing Travis, worse than Dave almost killing me. Seriously, if I could change one thing about my entire time in that pathetic waste of a town, it would be you. I can't believe you were actually stupid enough to believe I'd be friends with a piece of shit like you. It was all bullshit, and you made it even worse, because you had no idea how much you were embarrassing yourself. Do you think I really ever gave a shit about any of your stupid problems? Do you think I actually liked spending time with those obnoxious little shits you call sisters? Do you think I ever enjoyed fucking you? Because I didn't. I was just pretending, about all of it, because I fucking felt sorry for you. I pitied you, because you're a self-loathing little faggot who has to slash your wrists every time you get hard for another guy, because you're too fucking dumb to realize that everyone—your friends, your family, your fucking God—everybody hates you. Even being in this car with you is making me want to kill myself. You should just pull over right now, because I'd honestly rather get out and get hit by an eighteen-wheeler than have to sit here for one more second."

"One day, you're going to be clean," Ben says softly, and I'm already laughing, because how can he possibly think that anything about me will ever be clean again after this? He continues, stubborn as ever, "You're going to be clean, and I'm going to have my friend back... and you're going to remember this conversation. And you're going to be so fucking sorry, and you're going to hate yourself for all the things you're saying to me right now. And I'm going to forgive you. Because that's what you do for people you love, and who love you. You forgive them for the things they say that hurt you when you know that the only person they're really interested in hurting is themselves."

Forgive, sure, but never forget. Now, Ben has his back to me, but I want him to know that I'm still so sorry for the things I said to him that day. I fling the door open and hit the sidewalk. Ben's at my side in a second, pulling me upright and saying, "It's okay, Garen, you're alright. Travis and I are here, he's going to help me get you upstairs."

"I don't want to go upstairs," I mutter.

Ben swallows and pulls at my arms. "I know that, I do, but we need to get you off the street, okay? You're really fucking drunk right now, and you're underage. I don't want anyone to call the cops. Can you stand up for me?"

I don't respond, but I do allow him to hoist me upright. I'm aware of another pair of hands on me, but I'm not one hundred percent sure that it's Travis, even though I hear his voice saying, "Calm down, G. It's just me. Can you walk?"

The answer to that question is a resounding 'no.' It doesn't matter; Travis slings my arm across his shoulders and grips my waist, allowing me to rest most of my weight on him as he guides me up the stairs, into Ben's apartment. In his haste to come downstairs, Ben hadn't even bothered to close the door. I let the pair of them drag me inside and deposit me on the couch; they move away to talk in the kitchen, and I accidentally roll off the couch, onto the floor. Ben scurries back into the room. "Are you okay?"

Isn't that the million-dollar question? I crack a smile and say, "I'm absolutely fantastic, gorgeous. How are you?"

"He's not fantastic, he's drunk," Travis says.

Ben's eyes are sharp and his tone is flat as he says, "Thanks, Travis, I realize that. But in case you haven't been paying attention for the last, I don't know, five months? He's an alcoholic. He has a goddamn problem, and you freaking out and being *mean* to him isn't going to make that any easier to deal with." Travis turns away. He still looks like he's going to cry. Ben sighs. "Look, I'm sorry. I'm not trying to take this out on you, okay? But we can't take it out on him either, at least not right now. I can't snap my fingers and make him sober right now, so all I can do is take care of him tonight, and address the bigger issue in the morning."

He extends a hand to me, and when I take it, he hauls me to my feet. The world goes one hundred percent lopsided, and it takes both of them to get me upright. They start to lead me down the hall, but once we've made it to Ben's room, I am allowed to flop unceremoniously onto the bed with a loud groan.

Ben shoots an alarmed look at his bedspread and says, "Are you going to be sick?"

I drag both hands through my hair and mutter, "I really fucking wish people would stop asking me that. I've told you, I don't get sick. Pretty sure that the two of you can testify to the fact that it's almost impossible to trigger my gag reflex."

Travis sighs and heads for the door. Part of me—a tiny, vulnerable, useless part of me—panics and I say, "You're not staying?"

That sounds pathetic, even to me. Especially to Travis, I guess, because there's pity in his eyes when he turns to look at me. "Garen... I can't," he says, voice so soft I can barely hear him. "I can't do this anymore. I can't be your motivation to stay sober, and I sure as hell can't be the reason you relapse. I want to help you, but the longer I know you, the more I realize that even... god, just *knowing* me is hurting you. I'm done. This—this friendship, or whatever it is, everything between you and I? It's over. It has to be over. I can't do it anymore."

I want to argue with him, and I may be drunk enough to do so, but I'm not an idiot. I know that there's no convincing argument that can be made right now, considering how drunk and awful I am. There's nothing I can say that will make anyone believe it's right for him to stay. Without bothering to say goodbye to him—I'm so, so bad at saying goodbye to him—I roll onto my side and close my eyes.

There's a shuffling of footsteps, then faint voices down the hall. I'm not alone for long, though; only a few minutes pass before I hear the faint click of the bedroom door shutting again, and then Ben is slipping into the bed behind me, curling an arm around my waist and brushing the back of my neck with kisses I don't

deserve.

"You're going to stay with me?" I practically croak.

I feel him nodding on our shared pillow, and then another kiss touches my skin. "All night, G. Now go to sleep. If you wake up during the night and need me for anything, just shake me, okay? I want to help you."

Help me, I think, already halfway sucked into what I'm sure will be the deepest sleep I've experienced in ages. Everybody wants to help me. I want to help me. I wish it were possible to help me. I can't be helped. I am helpless.

When I wake up, the glowing red numbers on the alarm clock tell me that it's one fifty-six. Ben is asleep, curled up next to me with one arm draped across my chest; he doesn't seem to have moved in hours. Probably not even to greet Alex, who must be home by now, because I can hear music playing down the hall, in his room. I don't think I can sleep anymore, but I don't feel completely awake, either. It takes me longer than a couple of hours to sober up, especially when I've downed most of a bottle of 151 with no chaser or mixer. I'm still... kind of shitfaced, but with all the aching in my head and my stomach that comes with a hangover. I very carefully lift Ben's arm just enough to slip out from under it, then make my way down the hall to the bathroom. I still haven't eaten all day, unless rum is (finally) considered a food group, so it's not too hard to force myself to throw it all up again. After I'm done, I feel a little better, but not by much. I manage to find a spare, still-packaged toothbrush in the cabinet under the sink, so I curl up on the tile floor and spend a good ten minutes trying to scrub the taste of vomit and booze out of my mouth. Once I've finished, I move back out into the hall, but that's as far as I go for now.

I know what I need—I know the only way to find the absolution I need right now—but I don't know how to get it. Ben won't help me; he's too pissed, too upset, too asleep. A whole bunch of things that aren't conducive to me getting my needs met at this moment. Alex, though... if Ben has been in bed with me for the entire night, then Alex has no idea I'm here. He has no idea that I've relapsed, he has no idea that I'm drunk right now. He has no reason to refuse to help a friend out. If I can stay upright, if I can stop slurring my words, if I don't mention it, I can convince him I'm sober, can't I? Without stopping to consider the prospect of this turning out even remotely badly, I turn and approach the second bedroom door.

I knock once softly, then push open the door without bothering to wait for permission to enter. The light is off, but the room is illuminated by the glow of Alex's computer on the desk. Some cover of a Led Zeppelin song is playing on the stereo. Alex himself is sprawled out on his bed, texting someone even though he looks like he's half asleep. That makes sense—it's almost two in the morning, isn't it? This is when normal people are letting themselves fall asleep, isn't it? He looks up at me, a lazy smile on his face. "G, you spend so much time here, we should start making you pay rent." "Okay," I say, because whatever, it's not like I couldn't afford it. "Do you want to fuck?"

That gets his attention, because, well, how could it not? He sits up, moving jerkily enough to seem a little spastic, and says, "Do I... wait, what?"

"Do you want to fuck?" I repeat. He's still just staring at me, wide-eyed, so I clarify, "Me, that is. Do you want to fuck me?"

"Uh. Now?" he says, looking at the clock, then at his phone.

I roll my eyes and say, "It's not like I'm asking you on a fucking date, bro. I'm asking you to put your dick in my ass. That's not the sort of offer I need to make a few days in advance."

"I thought you were a top," he says slowly.

"I am, usually," I say. I don't tell him that there hasn't been much of a point to that lately, that the main reason I'm offering myself up in this way is because I think I'm drunk enough to trick my body into getting

hard, but not necessarily sane enough to stay hard, and it will be so much simpler to get through this if I'm facedown on a mattress and he's too busy fucking me from behind to notice what I've got going on in front. I add, "Sometimes, I change my mind though. Like tonight. Tonight, I think you should get your goddamn cock out, because it's two in the morning, and we're both single, and we're both hot, and your roommate is asleep, and I want you to fuck me. If you don't have condoms, that's fine, because I do. If you don't have lube, that's fine, because I don't care if you're rough, okay? You can just use a little spit or something, it's fine, I just really want you to fuck me. Are you cool with that or what?"

"I, um..." Alex hesitates, still looking at his phone. Even if he hasn't agreed yet, I know he will; I can see from here in the doorway that he's shifting a little, probably because he's starting to get hard. Not many eighteen-year-olds would refuse such a direct offer, not even ones who still spend most of their time claiming to be straight, like Al does. Since I assume it can only help my case, I reach behind myself to shut the door before I take a step towards the bed and strip off my—or, Stohler's, I guess—Sex Pistols shirt. Not a bad idea, since it still kind of smells like the rum I must have spilled on myself at some point. But I know I have a nice body, and I know that, if there's any chance of Alex saying yes to me, this can only kick that into high gear. His eyes are fixed on my abs even as he says, "I'm, um... I'm sort of involved with someone, is the thing. We're not exclusive, or anything, but we've been hooking up for a few months now, and I don't want to make him—"

"Good," I interrupt, even though a not-too-small part of me is surprised to realize he's not still a virgin. It's good to know that someone around here knows how to keep quiet about his sex life. I continue, "If you've been hooking up for a few months, you should be pretty decent at this by now."

"I'm making progress," he agrees.

Unable to bite back my frustration, I kneel on the edge of the bed and order, "Then take your fucking clothes off, Alex. It, it's not weird. It doesn't have to be a *thing*. People hook up with their friends all the time, and it doesn't have to mean anything. Look at you and Travis, or me and Ben. We're all fine. For fuck's sake, I've been completely wrecking Jamie since we were fifteen. He and I are best friends, and we've had literally *days* of sex, and it's not a big—"

He surges up to meet me. We kiss clumsily at first, both of us unsure of how to fit our mouths together. I'm still so drunk, and I'm hoping he can't tell, but he doesn't exactly have any experience kissing me to notice if it's different now. I shove him flat onto the bed—his head narrowly misses connecting with the headboard—and fumble my way through unbuttoning his shirt. He must notice my gracelessness, because he frowns and says, "Dude, are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine," I say shortly, curving a hand over the back of his neck and lifting him up slightly so he can yank his arms free of the shirt. "I'm *fine*, I just haven't gotten laid in a while."

"You got laid Saturday," he says, almost laughing as he reaches for my belt.

"I haven't bottomed in a while."

Before Seth in June, the only guy who had ever topped me was Dave. Sometimes, it wasn't that bad. Sometimes, I came—I think maybe fifteen out of the hundred times we slept together. If it was the perfect combination of him giving me a reach-around and putting the right amount of pressure against my prostate and not beating me until I was almost unconscious right before, I could actually enjoy it; even if that didn't get me off, he'd usually compensate by getting me off with a blowjob or something after he came. It's not like Dave was a bad lover—between beatings or assaults or whatever—but we were both very definitely tops, so it was never going to work out well for me. I don't like having things inside of me; the very nature of the act makes me feel uncomfortable, too exposed, violated.

Jamie says it's because my first experience with it was so bad. He says it's no wonder I can't stand getting topped, considering that the first time it ever happened, I was fifteen years old, terrified and struggling against the heated backseat of a Lexus. He says I might never be able to enjoy it, because

almost all of my experience with being on the bottom has been in the context of violence. Before a fight, after a fight, sometimes (and these were the worst ones) while a fight was happening—the times when I'd be yelling and swearing and shoving and hitting and then suddenly I'd be facedown on the floor with my ex-boyfriend behind me, shoving into me and murmuring, "For fuck's sake, Garen, stop struggling, it's fine, we do this all the time, you'll like it in a minute," against the back of my neck. I'm usually inclined to let Jamie rant, up until he inevitably uses the 'R' word, and then the conversation always ends immediately.

And I don't care what Jamie says--*that* never happened to me. I don't care if I fought, I don't care if I refused, I don't care if I didn't want any of it. I'm a full-grown, adult man, not some teenage girl at a frat party or a scared housewife in a dark alley. I had a fucking choice—I could have fought harder, I could have made it stop, I could have done something, so it's not... *that*. *That* doesn't happen to guys like me, *that* doesn't happen to men who are six-foot-one and a hundred and seventy pounds of hard muscle, *that* doesn't happen to people who everyone knows would never say no. I'm not a victim; I never have been.

By now, I can feel that Alex is fully hard where he's pressed against the thigh I have slipped between his legs. I rock down against him—I should write a 'thank you' letter to the fine folks at Bacardi, because I'm hard, too—and he lets out a gentle noise of approval. But I don't want gentle. I shift off him to pull his jeans roughly down over his hips, and usually, I'd start in with the foreplay. Jerk him off, maybe give a little head. That's not what's going to make me feel better, though. That's not how you earn forgiveness; you earn forgiveness by letting someone fuck you until you feel like you're going to die.

Not wanting or knowing how to verbalize this, I grab Alex's hand and push it down the back of my jeans. He must get the hint, because we quickly finish undressing, and then he's rolling onto his side to reach towards the milk crate he uses in lieu of a nightstand. Guess he does have condoms and lube after all. I bury my face against his neck and sink my teeth into his skin, drawing a quiet groan from his throat. When I murmur his name against his jawline, he gives a brief shake of his head and says, "Don't."

I pull back slightly, resentment already curling up inside my brain. "Don't what? Don't say your name?" Every guy who has ever asked me not to say his name has turned into an asshole about hooking up, the second it's over. It's a way of distancing himself from me, from the fact that he's actually sunk low enough to get with me, like me avoiding his name might mean he's not slumming it like he really is.

But Alex shakes his head again and adds, flushing a little like he knows what he's about to say is stupid, "Don't, um... look, guys tend to call me by my real name when I'm, you know, hooking up with them, or whatever. Ben always did, when we used to make out. And the guy I've been sleeping with, he does it too, always. So, could you...?"

I'm shitfaced enough that it actually takes me a second to figure out what the hell he's even talking about, but once I do, I say, somewhat tentatively, "What, you want me to call you Alexander?" He gives a quick, embarrassed little nod, and I duck back in to repeat the name as a whisper against his collarbone. That earns me another sound of approval, and I allow him to roll me onto my back. The second he settles himself between my legs and reaches for the lube, though, I scramble out from under him. He gives me a confused look, and I turn onto my stomach, reaching back with one arm to pull him down on top of me. "Like this," I whisper. "I don't—I mean, it feels better this way, I like it better than face-to-face. Is that okay?"

"Yeah, it's okay. Whatever you want," he says, pressing a kiss to my shoulder and sort of rutting up against the back of my thigh as he reaches down again. Getting fingered is sort of my least favorite part of getting fucked; it feels like it *should* be intimate, but it's not, it's always just too tight and painful and uncomfortable, which is actually sort of ironic, considering I *love* fingering other people. But I realize it's sort of a necessity, so I don't complain while Alex does it. I even make a few sounds that might imply I'm enjoying it. Still, it's not what I'm after, so the second I'm pretty sure he's opened me enough to be safe, I pick up the condom he left on the pillow, tear open the package, and reach behind myself to roll it onto him. He pauses, fingers still inside me, and says, "Will it make things weird if I tell you I'm impressed that

it takes you less than five seconds to open and put condom on another guy, without even facing him?"

"Will it make things weird if I tell you I'm impressed with your sort of gigantic dick? Stop making casual conversation and fuck me," I order. I vaguely hear him say something that sounds like, *it's proportionate to my body and I'm just really tall*, and I'm muttering into the pillow, *oh my god, now is really not the time, man*, and then he's slipping an arm around my middle to hold me in place while he presses into me. The last time this happened, I was so fucked up on coke that I barely knew what was going on; this time, I'm not drunk enough to ignore the fact that it hurts a little. I don't try to hold back my noises, but I do try to make them sound more pleasure-based than pain-based. I reach up with one hand to brace myself against the headboard so that I can fuck back onto Alex's dick.

He must not be lying about having been hooking up with someone for the past few months, because he's actually pretty good at this, objectively speaking. One arm is wrapped tight around my waist to hold me against him, and his other hand is braced against the mattress so that he's holding at least some of his weight off of me. It takes a little bit, but he eventually manages to find a good angle at which to thrust into me. I twist in place a bit so that I can kiss him over my shoulder. His eyes have long since rolled shut, but I keep mine open. Close up, I can only see the fuzzy outline of his face, but holding onto that image, reaching back to tangle my hand in his soft blond hair, whispering his name over and over... it's the only thing that keeps me here. It's the only thing that reminds me who he is, and that it's okay that he's doing this to me.

It's Alex. It's okay. It's Alex, I like Alex, Alex is my friend. It's okay. I want this. I want this. I want this. It's okay.

I slip a hand between my hips and the mattress so that I've got something to fuck down into. Between the buzz of rum in my bloodstream, and the hand I've got wrapped tight around my dick, and the pinch of Alex's teeth on my shoulder, I'm almost able to surrender to the sensations. I can almost forget how much I hate bottoming—Alex isn't *bad* in bed, not really, it's just that his dick is a lot bigger than I'd anticipated, and it's kind of hard to ignore something that long when it's actually inside you, which is making it really fucking difficult to pretend I'm not in the middle of a sex act I hate—and I can almost forget how painful this relapse is going to be for everyone who thought I could be better, and I can almost forget about the freckled, "bisexual" little *slut* who drove me to this point in the first place.

That's all good, but that's not what gets me off.

What gets me off is the moment where I call up the memories of last night, in the bathroom stall at that club. What gets me off is remembering that first instant of having cocaine back in my bloodstream, of having those drugs deeper inside me than Alex is now. What gets me off is thinking about that *beautifulsexypainfulperfect* thrum under my skin when I finally had my chance to go back to using. What gets me off is pressing my tongue to the roof of my mouth and imagining that I can still taste the 151. What gets me off is knowing that there's still a fake ID in my wallet, in case I decide I want to go buy myself something else from the liquor store when I leave here. What gets me off is knowing that I don't have to stop.

I come with a broken, desperate groan of something that might sound like *please*, or maybe yes, or possibly even *Alexander*, since he's there too. He arches forward to keep kissing me over my shoulder, swallowing up my moans as I ride out my orgasm, spilling onto his sheets—not my bed, not my problem. I'm lying sated and boneless on the bed when he comes a few minutes later, his forehead pressed to the back of my neck and his breath hot and shaky against my spine. He rolls off me a minute later to dispose of the condom, and when he returns to the bed, I have the presence of mind to lean in and kiss him, slow and dirty. There's a half-smile on his face, like it's been a while since he's had a quality orgasm with anyone but his own hand, so I figure he won't mind too much if I stay here. That, and I'm not sure I can actually move to leave. I know I should head back to Ben's room and pretend this hasn't happened, but it's so much easier to just bury my face in the pillows and let my body dissolve back into unconsciousness.

First day sober

The next morning, I wake up to a splitting headache and Ben's harsh, low voice as he says, "What the fuck is going on?"

Next to me, Alex is upright in an instant, a blush in his cheeks and more than a few bite marks sucked into the skin of his neck. I'm guessing those are from me. Oops. He says, "Ben, I—"

"Did you guys fuck?" Ben interrupts.

I try to crawl back under the blankets to block out the sunlight streaming in through the window and say, "Well, obviously."

"What the hell is wrong with you?" he says.

For half a second, I want to laugh, because really. Shouldn't it be obvious by now that *everything* is wrong with me? But when I roll over to face him, I realize that his words are directed at Alex, not at me. Alex, who is still looking embarrassed, but now uncertain, upset. He says, very carefully, "What do you mean?"

Ben's words are too loud in the small room, and I cover my ears instinctively when he repeats in a yell, "*What the hell is wrong with you?*" For god's sake, Alex. How could you do this to him, knowing what kind of condition he was in last night?"

"Knowing... wait, what? What are you talking about?" Alex says. His uncertainty is rapidly dissolving into panic. Ben doesn't say anything; neither do I. Alex turns to look at me, and I can tell he's taking in all the bits of my appearance he didn't seem able to process last night. My bloodshot eyes. My flinching away from the light. The way I'm cradling my head in my hands to try to calm the pounding. The deep sense of regret and shame that I'm sure must be filling the room now. He whispers, "G, are you hungover?" I don't say anything, which is probably exactly the same as saying, Yes. "Oh my god. You—You were *drunk* last night? That's why you came in here, that's why you wanted us to have sex?"

"Does it matter why I wanted it?" I hedge. When he doesn't immediately respond, I resort to my usual method of distraction and reach for him, voice low as I say, "It's—Alex, it's fine. It was good sex, okay? It—"

"No," Alex says very slowly, very carefully. "No, I'm pretty sure that 'good sex' is only possible when both parties are going into it with a clear head and a full understanding of what the fuck is going on."

I want to hit him, I really do. It's only by clenching my hands into fists around the bedsheets that I'm able to stop myself from belting him across the face, because how dare he say this? I snap, "So, what, I didn't put a warning label on my dick that said, 'caution: drunk,' and you're saying I fucking assaulted you? Is that it?"

He retorts, "Kind of the opposite, actually. I'm saying that the fact that I fucked you while you were in the middle of a relapse is making my skin crawl like you wouldn't believe, because I'm pretty sure that means *I* assaulted *you*."

I shove the blankets off, not caring that it means both of them are getting a serious eyefull of my naked body, and clamber off the bed to get dressed. Neither of them tries to stop me, or talk to me, or whatever. I pull on my shirt, my jeans, but my hands are shaking too badly to button them. I look around for my boots, but realize they must be back in Ben's room, or out in the living room; it's not like I remember the part of the evening where I took them off. The odds of Alex following me out of the room while still undressed are unlikely, and I'm still so furious at him, so it seems as good a time as any to turn to him and say, "You didn't assault me, Baker. Believe me, I know the fucking difference. I know I was drunk, and maybe I should have told you that, or warned you or whatever, but I know what happened between

us, and I know from way too much personal goddamn experience that *that's not what that feels like*, okay? So, fuck you, and fuck what you think happened last night, because you're an idiot, and I'm leaving."

Only belatedly do I realize that I've finally done it. I've finally fucked up enough to acknowledge *that*. Even that passing phrase is too much, and I stumble out of the bedroom, refusing to look either of them in the eyes. I make it down the hall, into the living room where my boots are, and halfway down the building stairs before Ben catches up to me, still trying to tie his Converse and almost pitching down the stairs in his haste. My life—more specifically, the conversation I know we're about to have—would be so much easier if I just let him fall, but I grab his arm to steady him. He nods his thanks, and for a long moment, we just stare at each other. When I turn to continue down the stairs, he squeezes in front of me and says over his shoulder, "I'll drive you back."

"I can—"

"No, you can't," he interrupts, "Travis brought you here in his car yesterday, so unless you're planning to walk all the way back to Lakewood, shut up and get in my car."

I don't point out that I could easily call a cab and put the fare on my card, and he doesn't point out that I can't really call anyone else I know for a ride, on account of how I only have two friends other than him, and Jamie lives in New York and Alex might not want to keep hanging out with me after this. Instead, we both walk around the building to the parking lot and get into his car.

Most of the drive from New Haven to Lakewood passes in silence. Only when he keeps going straight on the town's one main road do I point out, "You missed the turn for the school. I have homeroom in half an hour, and anyway, my car's still in the lot."

"I have your keys, I can figure out how to get the car back to your house later. You're going home," he says.

My hands tighten on the leather of the passenger seat. "Ben, I have school."

"No, Garen, what you have is a fucking problem. I mean, are you seriously not getting the severity of this situation?" he demands. I look around at him, but he refuses to blink away from the road. His bright blue eyes are stone cold. "Do you want to know the worst part?"

"No, I don't. Ben, can you just shut—"

He continues over me, "The worst part is that you were doing so well. I guess that's why the rest of us stopped worrying about you, you know? You'd been fine since going into rehab, and you were adjusting so perfectly to sobriety, and I took it for granted. I just assumed that if you could make it to ninety days, you'd be good for the rest of your life. Only, that's not really how it turned out. You're not good, Garen. You're not sober. And you're not putting yourself or anyone else through another relapse. So, I'm bringing you home, and you're going to talk to your dad, and you two are going to figure out how to get through this. Because you need to fix this again. You're not okay."

The entire speech is so similar to what I'm sure he must have said when he was dragging me back from Cleveland this past summer. But the truth is, my entire recollection of that experience is still only so-so. I have a vague understanding of it, and I have half-memories, and I have his version of events, but that's it. I'm so fucking tired of not remembering things. Especially important things.

"Okay," I whisper, turning to stare out the window. "Okay, I'll, um... I'll tell Dad what happened. We'll work something out with the LRC, I guess. They have like, emergency check-ins and stuff. Forty-eight hours, or a week, or whatever you need. You know, for people who get off track. I'll tell him I need it."

"Okay," Ben echoes, and that's that. We don't say anything for the rest of the drive to my house, and

when he pulls into my driveway, the only goodbye I offer is a muttered, *I'm really sorry. Pass it along to Alex. And Travis.* Dad's car is still in the driveway, so I can only assume that he hasn't left for work yet this morning. I take a deep, steadying breath and push open the front door.

"Garen," is the immediate, reproachful greeting from the kitchen. "I've told you before, if you're going to be staying out all night, you need to call me or send a text message so I know you're safe. Where have you been?"

"I was at Alex and Ben's apartment," I say, shocked at how normal my voice sounds. I step into the kitchen; Dad is standing near the counter, loading all of the dishes from the sink into the dishwasher. He pauses long enough to give me a long stare. His eyes settle on my neck, and the marks that I know Alex bit into me last night while we were fucking.

"Alex and Ben's apartment," Dad echoes, then adds, "Again. You've been spending a lot of time there lately." I nod. He hesitates. "I'm pretty certain that Doctor Howard was clear with you. It's not a good idea for you to get involved with anyone before you've been sober for a year." I don't say anything. He sighs. "Garen. I know that you were involved with Ben once upon a time—you made that abundantly, uncomfortably clear last summer, when you took the liberty of discussing your... relations with him at the dinner table, when he and your stepbrother were dating. I know that you're grateful to him for all he's done in the past few months, and I know he's become a very good friend to you. So, I want a straight answer: is Ben your boyfriend?"

I want to laugh, but I don't. Maybe I should, though; I mean, it is sort of funny, that Dad would assume that I'm dating Ben, when we both know that someone as sweet and loyal as Ben is way too good for me. It's funny that he would guess that I'm involved with the guy whose bed I *left* last night so that I could go down the hall and get fucked by his roommate. Instead of laughing, though, I shake my head no and move to stand in front of my sobriety board.

Monday's writing is still up on the board. *92 days clean/sober.* Dad knows enough not to touch my board, even if it's just to help me change the day or clean it or something. I can hear him moving at the sink behind me, and he can hear me not moving at all, so that means I can hear him eventually stop in the middle of loading the dishwasher. I know he's watching me. Neither of us speaks. Finally, I take a step towards the board. There's a tiny eraser on the ledge of the board, but I just smear the letters away with the side of my fist. I pick up the marker, uncup it, and very carefully print *first day clean/sober* in the center of the board.

When I turn around, I can't meet Dad's eyes, can't bring myself to see the anger and disappointment I know will be written all over his face. All of it—seeing the resentment in Dad's eyes when he found out about me and Travis all those months ago, waking up in the hospital after I let Dave kick my ass, Ben's confusion and Alex's sneer when they first saw me after I dyed my hair black and hacked half of it off, Bree's tears when she saw the gun Travis had wrestled away from me, the taunts at school, the bitchy comments from Jack Thorne and Gabe Alberti and everyone else. It all pales in comparison to this moment right here.

I have never been this ashamed in my entire life.

And when Dad drops a plate back into the sink, not caring when it shatters, and folds me into his bone-crushing embrace, I know I don't deserve his comfort, but all I have left in me to do is bury my face against the lapel of my father's suit jacket and try not to die.

Chapter Six

“God is cruel. Sometimes, He makes you live.” –Stephen King

First day sober

The process for a two-day, emergency check-in at the LRC is almost identical to my initial check-in last June; I tell them I need help. I fill out some paperwork. They search my backpack. They strip-search me for drugs and weapons. I make lewd comments to my searcher. They show me to a mostly empty room so that I can shove my backpack into a dresser drawer. Then, quicker than you can say *this whole experience is making me super uncomfortable*, I’m sitting in a chair across from Doc, my arms curled around my legs to hug them to my chest. I rest my chin atop my knees and say, “Sorry if I messed up your schedule. I know I’m supposed to only see you on Tuesday evenings.”

“Tuesdays are typical,” she agrees, “which is why I was concerned that you missed last night’s appointment.”

“I know. But I was kind of blackout drunk at the time,” I say softly.

To her credit, Doc takes this in stride, just like everything else I’ve ever told her. I can only assume that someone at the front desk explained my situation when they were setting up this last-minute appointment. Doc laces her fingers together in her lap and tilts her head to the side. “I think we should talk about how that all started.”

I shake my head and take a deep breath, hoping it will steady me. It doesn’t. Still, I press ahead, “I think that, um... there are some other things that I need to tell you. Important things, stuff I should have told you a long time ago. It’s... not like I’ve been lying to you, exactly. But I haven’t really been telling you everything, either. And there are things you should know.”

It’s against LRC policy for the doctors to ever touch the patients, but Doc is looking at me like she would reach out and give my hand a comforting squeeze, if she could. Instead, she says, “Start wherever you think you need to start, Garen.”

“I’ve been having trouble sleeping,” is what I settle for saying, instead of anything of substance.

If Doc is unimpressed by this anticlimactic confession, she doesn’t let it show. “For how long?”

“A while.” That’s such a vague answer, one that I know won’t satisfy her. I sigh. “Since I left here after my first sixty days, I guess. I, um... sometimes, it gets really bad. Last week, I didn’t sleep for three days straight. I passed out once or twice. It’s not—I mean, I’m trying. I’m trying to go to sleep, but I can’t turn my brain off. Every time I lie down, my thoughts just magnify to the point where I can’t block them out, and I start to panic, and I lie in bed for hours just thinking about like, what if I fuck up? Where is my life going? What if I can’t stay sober? How can I do this for the rest of my life? It goes on and on like that, until it’s morning, and then I have to get up for school anyway. These past two nights are the only nights I’ve had a decent amount of sleep in weeks, but that’s because I was passed out from drinking, not because I was actually on a decent sleep schedule.”

“Well, I—”

“I have sex with strangers for drug money,” I say, before she can offer any advice. She blinks at me, and I can feel the dam inside of me starting to break. I squeeze my eyes shut and say, all in a rush, “I know I told you about the guy at the truck stop, the one who I blew last June, but it happened again the night before last. It wasn’t for drugs, not at first. He gave me fifty dollars to give him head in the men’s room of a nightclub in New Haven, and I did it, but I didn’t realize that someone in the club even had the coke until after I’d already gotten the money. That’s how I bought the line I did. Before I did it, I had no plans to drink or snort anything, so I’m not sure why I even agreed to do it. It’s not like I need the money. I think I just

wanted to know that someone could still want me, because I'm beginning to realize that Travis really doesn't, and I'm so used to being *his*, or *Dave's*, and I don't know who I am if I don't belong to somebody. I didn't really want to blow this guy, but I still agreed to do it. I... do that a lot, I think. You know, consent to sex that I don't want to have? I think it's because I'm afraid that, if I say no, the guy might do it anyway, and I'd rather be easy than be a victim. But that's not what it's always like, obviously. A lot of the time, the sex is great, and it's my idea, and it's fun. But not, um... not lately. Lately, I can sort of barely have it, because I can't really get hard a lot of the time. Or, if I can, I can't *stay* hard, because inevitably, there comes a point when the guy I'm with will like, grab my hair, or touch me in a way I'm not expecting, and I can't deal with it. If I'm not completely in control of everything that is happening in bed, I freak the fuck out. This... I mean, I'm sorry. This is probably too much information."

"I'm your doctor, Garen, there's no such thing as too much information. Please keep going," Doc says. I think she's just worried that, if I stop talking now, I won't be able to start again. I'm worried about the same thing.

"Okay. Um... when people touch me here—" I brush my palms over my hips, "—I sometimes have panic attacks. I don't know why. It's the only part of my body that I can't stand being touched anymore, and it's so fucking weird, because I used to be fine with it. I used to like it. But ever since I got out of the hospital, after Dave beat me up this last time, I keep having these... I don't know if they're memories or what, but they fucking terrify me. I'm scared that something happened to me that I'm blocking out, or something, because the truth is that I don't remember any of that day. When I woke up from the coma, Travis told me what my injuries were, and I made up some bullshit version of what I figure must have happened, but the last thing I really remember about that day is smoking pot in my bedroom with Dave and then wanting nachos. Travis says we argued about me dating Dave, but I don't remember it, and I know Dave beat me up, but I don't *remember* it. I-I think maybe something happened with him, something to do with sex, but sex with Dave was always a problem anyway, because, um..." I pause to suck in another deep breath.

When Doc realizes that I'm having trouble with this, she opens her desk drawer, takes out the coffee machine, and sets about brewing me a cup. After it finishes and she passes it to me, I offer her a small smile. She returns it, but when I don't say anything, she presses, "Why was sex with Dave a problem, Garen?"

I hate that doctors always say my name so much when they talk to me. I take a sip of the coffee, but I can't really taste it. The silence is getting to be too much. I say, very softly, "Because I said no, the first time." She says nothing. I chance a glance at her face, which is expressionless. Brow furrowed, I frown down at my coffee cup and say, "I was fifteen years old the first time... *that* happened. We had been dating for about a month, so it was still a month before he started hitting me. We were making out in his car after a date, and he wanted to fuck me, and I said no, but he did it anyway. And, okay... I'm sure you understand the mechanics of gay sex, and even if you didn't before, you sure as hell do now, after all the sessions we've had."

"Yes, you've gone to great lengths to inform me about that particular topic," she says drily, and I actually have to close my eyes for a moment, because I am so fucking grateful that she's still kind of making fun of me, even while we're talking about this. I don't think I could have this conversation with her, if she started telling me how sorry she feels for me.

"Yeah, well, in regards to those mechanics, I pretty much always prefer to top. At least, that's how it was with Jamie, at first. Dave was only the second person I ever slept with, and I told him I didn't want to bottom, but neither did he, so he just sort of... did it. Made me, I guess. And there were times when we'd be arguing, and then we'd be fooling around, and then arguing, and then fooling around, and it would just go back and forth until they were basically the same thing, and he'd be hitting me and fucking me at the same time, and now, every time somebody wants to top me, that's all I can think of. Even when I consent to it, I still hate it. I still feel like I'm being... I don't know. Forced? And I know it can be good. I know that there are some guys who can't get enough of it—Ben loves it, he says he wouldn't ever want to top somebody, and Jamie is kind of the same way. Travis is a switch, and he always liked it when he and I were together, but it's like... even when it's good, it's still bad for me. I know that makes no sense, but it's

how I feel.” I sigh. “That’s it, I guess. That’s everything you need to know.”

“Now, I want to run through the list of things you’ve just told me, so that we can both be very clear on what you’ve said. If you feel like I’m getting anything wrong, or leaving anything out, please correct me, okay?” she says. I nod. She begins ticking the items off on her fingers. “You’re having intense difficulty sleeping. You have engaged in acts of prostitution in order to buy drugs. You agree to have sex with people, including strangers, because you’re worried that you might be forced into it regardless of your decision. You have difficulty performing sexually, and have panic attacks when people touch certain parts of your body. You have blocked out the memory of last spring’s assault almost entirely. You were raped at the age of fifteen by—”

“Can you please not use that word?” I whisper, tightening my hands around the coffee mug again.

Her voice is soft when she says, “Garen. It’s the only word there is for it. You told me that you refused to have sex with Dave, but then he forced you to participate anyway. I don’t think I would be helping you if I tried to ghost over that issue by using a euphemism for it.”

She can use that word all she wants, but I’m not going to. I will never, ever believe that that happened to me, not even if Dave Walczyk himself admits that that’s what it was. But I shrug, and Doc picks up where she left off.

“You were raped when you were fifteen years old, by an eighteen-year-old man who went on to assault you—physically and sexually—for an additional three months, as well as another month almost two years after that. You are completely incapable of enjoying the act of being penetrated, and have admitted that the action in itself makes you feel violated, yet you continue to consent to it on occasion. That sums up everything you’ve just told me. Is there anything that either of us has left out?”

“I had sex with my friend Alex last night, and sometimes, I stick my fingers down my throat to make myself throw up,” I say quietly. Then, quickly, I add, “Those two things are unrelated. But I left them out, so I figured you might want to know.”

Doc looks understandably baffled. “There’s never been anything in your paperwork or our previous sessions to indicate the presence of an eating disorder. Have you brought this up during group?”

“No, because it’s *not* an eating disorder. I’m not trying to lose weight or whatever, I’m not bulimic. I just sometimes need to make myself sick, because otherwise, I feel like I can’t get bad things out of my system. Like booze.” *Or feelings.*

“Any time a patient tells me that he forces himself to vomit for any reason, I’m going to call it an eating disorder,” she warns. Eating disorder. Rape. These words don’t feel like they have any bearing on my life, but she keeps using them, and they keep crawling up under my skin.

I draw my legs up to my chest and wrap my arms tight around them, resting my chin on my knees. “I think you’re wrong, but you’re the one with the degree, so you can call it whatever you want. As long as you don’t tell my dad.”

“You’re eighteen years old, Garen. I have neither the power nor the desire to tell your father anything you say in these sessions. I just wish you could start being more honest with yourself, even if you don’t want to be honest with the people around you,” she says.

I don’t say another word for the rest of our session. Hope her bitchy one-liner was worth it.

2 days sober

Only on Thursday afternoon, when I’m killing time with the rest of the addicts and psychos in the common

room before lunch, do I realize how well and truly fucked I am for my confessions to Doc. Free time at LRC is great in theory, but shitty in practice; I'm not allowed to have my guitar, they barely let us watch TV, and most of my other hobbies involve drugs or sexual contact, both of which are kind of prohibited here. The counselors are constantly trying to get me to join them for cards—I'm godly at blackjack and poker—but I reject them on principal. I'd love to be mature enough to be able to get along with the staff here, but Doc is always telling me I have "issues with authority figures," so mostly, I spend my time refusing to acknowledge them and stubbornly insisting I be allowed to color with the teenage girls from the eating disorder unit.

Halfway through the free time block, I stand up, but I've barely made it halfway across the common room before Cheryl calls after me, "Garen, where are you going?"

I've never really had any of the staff members question me in that tone of voice before. Not during free time, and sure as hell not when it was fairly obvious where I was headed. Still, I pause and answer, "...to the bathroom?"

"Alright. Allen, do you mind going with him?" she says, nodding to Allen, who shrugs genially and heads for the door. It takes him a moment to realize that I haven't moved.

"Something wrong, kiddo?" he says.

"Uh, that's what I'm trying to figure out. Why are you coming with me? Are you planning to hold it for me?" I say.

"Standard policy," Cheryl says blandly.

"No, it's not," I argue. "You guys searched me when I came in, you know I'm not holding. For fuck's sake, Cher, I'm just going to take a piss. I've never needed supervision for that before."

Cheryl now looks somewhat uncomfortable as she says, "That's because we weren't aware that you *needed* restroom supervision before."

"I don't," I say, trying to swallow down the sense of panic. This is stupid, and uncomfortable, and embarrassing. I don't understand what's going on, or why they suddenly think I need somebody to come along with me while I do something as basic as go down the fucking hall to use the bathroom.

Cheryl sighs and says, "If you have an issue with this, you can discuss it with Doctor Howard tomorrow."

The realization of what she must be referring to hits me like a freight train. I cross my arms over my chest. "That bitch has no idea what she's talking about. I fucking told her, I don't have an eating disorder, okay? Drinking until you get sick is not the same thing as being bulimic. It's not. She has no idea what she's talking about, and you're a bunch of fucking idiots for believing her."

"You can discuss it with Doctor Howard tomorrow," Cheryl repeats.

"This is fucking ridiculous," I snap, but my displeasure with the situation does nothing to change the fact that I've still got to piss, so I stomp out of the room, Allen trailing after me. Just to be certain that this experience is as uncomfortable for him as it is for me, I stare him dead in the eyes the entire time I'm at the urinal. He continues to beam at me. I roll my eyes, and once I've finished washing my hands, I flick the excess water at him instead of using a paper towel to dry my hands.

Halfway through lunch, I feel the prickle of eyes on my skin. The dining hall is only half full, and I've been treated to the unexpected pleasure of being able to eat alone, so I shouldn't feel like anyone is looking at me. I glance around, and my stomach drops when I realize that there are two different counselors watching me eat.

Fucking Doctor Howard.

Before either of them can stop me, I scoop up the remains of my half-eaten lunch, stalk over to the trash can, and fling the food into the bin. At once, one of the counselors lopez over to me, peers into the can, and says, "Doesn't look like you ate that much, Garen."

"Didn't feel like I was that hungry, Don," I say flatly. "How is it your business?"

Ignoring my question completely, Don says, "If you didn't like what was being served, I'm sure we could stop by the kitchen and grab you something else. Maybe some apple slices. Do you want some apple slices?"

"No, I don't want some fucking apple slices," I snap, even though oh my god, I so want apple slices. Little kid food is my *favorite*. Apple slices with peanut butter, and gummy bears, and chicken nuggets in awesome shapes, and macaroni and cheese with cut-up hot dogs in it, and those fries that are shaped like smiley faces. But if Doc is so convinced I have shitty eating habits, fine, I can show her shitty eating habits. To the counselor, I add, "Don't talk to me like I'm a kindergartener, okay? I know you're only being weird about this because Doc says I've got food issues, but we both know that's a crock of shit. Look at those girls over there." I thrust a finger towards the table of eating disorder girls, a group of frail women who are picking tearfully at their salads. "Do I look like them? No. I like food. I like eating. And I'm not exactly a small guy, alright? I'm a hundred and seventy pounds, and I could probably fucking bench-press your body weight. So, stop being ridiculous, because I've never gotten shit for not being hungry enough to finish a meal before. Now is really not the time to—"

"Garen," Cheryl calls across the dining room, and I'm already rounding on her and opening my mouth to start bitching, but I freeze before any words can come out.

Jamie is standing next to her. I'm not sure *why* he's standing next to her, because usually emergency check-in patients aren't allowed visitors, and even patients who *are* allowed to have visitors have to wait until Friday. He shouldn't be here. He shouldn't even know *I'm* here. For a long moment, neither of us speaks. Then, he inclines his head towards one of the empty tables; we both sit. I'm still not sure what I should say—it's been too long to get away with a normal greeting, and I'm not sure a 'hello' would suffice anyway.

Fuck, I can't even look him in the eyes.

Suddenly, he pushes his sleeves up to his elbows and bares his forearms—underside first, then top. It takes me a moment to realize that he's showing the counselors that he's not trying to pass me anything so that he'll be allowed to hold my hand. Taking a shuddery breath, I flatten my hands on the table. He takes them both in his, then ducks down to press a quick, dry kiss to the back of each. Settling back into his chair, he says, "I'm sorry if I surprised you by just showing up like this."

"I'm actually more surprised they let you in on a Thursday," I admit.

He shrugs. "Drug counselors can apparently be bought just as easily as anyone else. Did you know that it only costs a hundred dollars to turn 'visitors are only allowed into the building on Fridays' into 'right this way, Mr. Goldwyn?'" I allow a small smile. He cocks his head to the side. "How are you?"

"Really shitty, actually," I say, grateful to hear that my voice just sounds tired, not as defeated as I feel. "I'm, um... embarrassed, mostly. Pissed at myself. Less than a week ago, we were getting together to celebrate my ninetieth day, and now I'm supposed to be wetting myself with glee over the fact that I've managed to go two days without getting wasted."

Jamie squeezes my hands. "Tell me how this happened, G."

I tell him, but not the full story. That can wait until later, when there aren't tons of other addicts hovering

around, or counselors breathing down my neck, blatantly eavesdropping. I settle for the abbreviated version; found out Travis was interested in some girl, didn't take it well, ended up at a nightclub to distract myself, couldn't handle the temptation of drugs and alcohol, continued drinking the next day since I'd already fallen off the wagon, let Ben babysit me, told Dad I needed help. I don't mention sucking off the guy in the bathroom at the club, or going home with Stohler, or being drunk all day at school, or singing that song at rehearsal, or letting Alex fuck me. The story's bad enough without all the details.

To his credit, Jamie does his best not to patronize me during my tale of tragedy and woe. He mostly just nods along, sometimes pausing to sigh, or squeeze my hands a little too tightly. When I finish, he offers me a sad smile, but doesn't bother to give me any line of bullshit about how brave I am for accepting help, which I'm grateful for. Finally, I have to ask, "How did you even know I was here?"

"One of your friends called me to let me know," he admits.

I scowl. "McCall really needs to learn to mind his own fucking business."

"It wasn't Travis," he says. I blink, because to my knowledge, he doesn't really talk to any of the other people who might know about the relapse. Sensing my confusion, he says, a shade too casually, "It was Alexander, but you shouldn't get pissed at him over it. I needed to know."

"Well, Alex—" I freeze. Alex. Alexander. Suddenly, a series of memories hits me like a ton of bricks.

Me saying, *Sounds like my friends are rubbing off on you, before my visit to New York*, and his vague reply of, *You have no idea*. At the bar, when I asked if he wanted to be exclusive with whatever guy he'd been sort of seeing, *I asked him to be, but he says he needs some time to think about it. Maybe it's because I'd be his first boyfriend or whatever, but I honestly kind of get the impression that he's more interested in his best friend than he is in me*. Alex getting so weird about me still hooking up with Jamie. Alex, in his bedroom, *I'm, um... I'm sort of involved with someone, is the thing. We're not exclusive, or anything, but we've been hooking up for a few months now*. Him only kissing me after I mentioned Jamie. Alex hesitantly admitting, *Guys tend to call me by my real name when I'm, you know, hooking up with them, or whatever. The guy I've been sleeping with, he does it too, always*. And Alex--Alexander--screwing me less than thirty-six hours ago, probably the same way he's been screwing Jamie for I don't know how long.

Oh, fuck.

"Are you sleeping with him?" I ask. In another situation, I might try to ask it a bit more artfully, but getting an honest answer is so much more important.

"Am I sleeping with whom?" he asks, which is just about the dumbest thing I've ever heard. Even my nervousness at his next answer isn't enough to stop me from rolling my eyes.

"The only guy we're talking about, you idiot. Are you sleeping with Alex?" I ask. For a long moment, he remains silent. Eventually, though, he gives me a sheepish smile and nods. I lick my lips. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I'm telling you now, aren't I?" he says, but his easy grin falters a little when he bothers to actually look at my expression.

I swallow hard and repeat, "But why didn't you *tell* me?"

Jamie bites down on his bottom lip, even though he's still half-smiling. It's a very uncomfortable, unnatural expression. There's too long of a pause, and then he lets out a strained, breathy laugh and says, "Does it really matter?"

"I don't know. You tell me," I say. He knows what I'm trying to tell him. He has to. We've been friends for

too long, we've been through this same scenario before—during sophomore year, when we both got head from Parker in the same week and only realized it later, and again during junior year, when he slept with Andrew while I was sort-of-dating-him-but-mostly-just-fucking-him-a-lot. That last one had been a total shitshow, considering I'd actually been starting to *like* Andrew before it happened. Andrew, who I actually bothered to take on dates to places other than my bed. Andrew, who I only semi-reluctantly let hold my hand while we were walking down to the quad every morning for training. Andrew, who met my fucking father on Parents' Day that spring, three days before I found out about him and Jamie. Andrew, who could have been my first love, if he hadn't screwed my best friend, if I hadn't broken it off with him and ended up in Lakewood with Travis just a few months later. At the time, Jamie had been genuinely confused as to why I was pissed at the two of them. He'd just kept saying, *I didn't realize you gave a shit, I didn't realize he was off-limits*. I'm tempted to throw those words back at him now, but instead, I say, "How did it happen?"

He coughs and says, "He came to my hotel room to bring me my jacket. I had, ah... I'd left it at the hospital while I was visiting you."

I jump. "That was four months ago, Jamie. You've been doing it since May? How—you haven't even been in the same *state* as him, you were in Georgia for half the summer and New York the other half."

A sigh. Then, he says, in an even, somewhat reluctant tone, "It happened four times that week, while you were in the hospital and then getting settled back at the house. I was worried about you, and I needed to relieve some stress, and he needed to get over his little fixation on Ben, so we started hooking up. That was supposed to be it, but we started texting each other, and it was... I don't know. Nice? I liked talking to him. When Travis brought me back to talk to you the day before you disappeared to Ohio, I—"

"Oh, Christ," I mutter, tugging my hands from his and raking them through my hair. "The bag, you had a fucking overnight bag with you, but you didn't stay at my house that night."

"I was still at his house the next morning when Travis called to tell me you'd gone missing. It was sort of funny, actually—right after we got off the phone, I went to go take a shower, and by the time I got out, Alexander was on the phone with him. If I'd known we were both going to hear about it, I would've just rolled over, woken him up, and put the first call on speakerphone." He hesitates, then admits, "That's why I wasn't able to stop you from leaving Patton after you found Seth. I was still on a train to New York when you left there."

"I was probably already gone by the time you heard about me being there. It's not like I stuck around to cuddle after getting hate-fucked by the technically heterosexual drug dealer you shot that one time," I say.

He allows a tiny twitch of his lips that I assume is meant to be a smile. "I still should have been there. And I figured at least *that* would be it, that maybe we'd stop after that, but then I kept coming back to visit you, and it kept happening, and once I moved to the city, I figured... I mean, why not? The sex was good, and he turned out to be a really cool person, and it's not like it's a far ride from New York to New Haven. So, at that, uh... the cookout you had the day after you left here—" He gestures around the room. "I pulled him aside, and I told him that I wasn't sleeping with anyone else—I hadn't in almost a month, at that point—and that, if he wanted me to, I'd be willing to keep it that way. I, you know, asked him to be my boyfriend. He turned me down."

"Ass," I can't help saying, and Jamie laughs a little, even though I'm sure he doesn't mean it.

"Well, it wasn't a big deal. He explained that he wasn't ready to date anyone, and I said that was fine. He said I could sleep with whoever I wanted, and I told him the same, and we agreed to keep hooking up occasionally. Except, 'occasionally' has turned out to be fairly often. He's... sort of taken the train up to New York three times in the five weeks since then, and I've come down twice. We've stayed at the Pettigrew Hotel both times, because it seemed easier than putting up with McCutcheon's questions. It's not—that is, he's not my boyfriend."

"But you like him," I say, sounding like an absolute fourth grader. "Like, you *like him*, like him."

"I might," he says stiffly. This is getting worse by the minute. Ever since we were fifteen, Jamie and I have had a habit of getting unnecessarily graphic in our descriptions of our recent fucks; he'll tell me exactly how big the guy's dick was, including a comparison to mine, and I'll tell him a minute-by-minute recap of everything I did to the guy. Sometimes we even draw diagrams, or, if one of us is describing a particularly acrobatic position, we'll act it out, full clothed, on a couch or something. It's weird to everyone else, but it's funny to us, because we are each other's best friends, and we like to tell each other everything. The only time he gets uncomfortable discussing a hook-up is when he thinks he already likes the person too much.

It's the same way I was with Travis at times, and the thought of Alex being Jamie's Travis is absolutely terrifying.

Jamie seems to realize I'm figuring this out, because he clears his throat loudly. "It-It's fine," he stammers, but Jamie doesn't fucking stammer, he has *never* stammered, so it must be even less fine than I thought it would be. His smile is too forced when he adds, "It's not like we haven't hooked up with the same guys before, right? Besides, they can never really compare us perfectly, since I always bottom and you always top. It's not—" He cuts himself off, staring at me. God damn my expressive face. I try to remain impassive, but he says, "Are you... I mean, you let him top you? Seriously?"

"It was sort of my idea," I admit. "I, um... I don't know. I just kind of went into his room and asked him to fuck me. And he did."

"No," Jamie says. "Tell me the real version. Not that Cliff's Notes bullshit."

I sigh. "The night before last, when I was at the apartment, I left Ben's room while he was sleeping and went to go see Alex. He didn't know I was drunk, and I didn't volunteer the information. I asked him to fuck me, and he said he wasn't sure it was a good idea, because he didn't want to piss off the guy he was sort of involved with. You, I guess. It was kind of a weird conversation, because I still thought he was a virgin up until that point, but whatever. I told him hooking up with friends is no big deal, and he kissed me. I don't know what else you want me to say, dude. He fucked me, it was fine, we slept, we woke up, he got pissed when he realized I'd been drunk, and I came here. That's all there is to the story."

Jamie leans back in his chair and drags his long fingers through his hair. "I always knew you'd eventually find a way to get back at me for—"

"No," I interrupt. "No, that's not fair. You're the one who decided not to tell me that you were fucking one of my best friends, a guy you know I see almost every day, and you should have—"

"I should have what, Garen? I should have realized that if I didn't stamp 'property of James Goldwyn' on Alex's cock, that you wouldn't be able to stop yourself from having sex with him? Are you really that much of a—" He cuts himself off, eyes wide.

My heart stops for half a second before it resumes pounding with a ferocity I didn't think possible. The word is still on the tip of his tongue, I can tell. *Slut*. He's not the first person who has thought it about me, and he won't be the last. He's never said it before, though. I always knew he would eventually, but he hasn't. Not yet. Suddenly, all I want, more than anything else I've ever wanted in my life, is for him to just fucking say it so that I can know that he feels the same was as everyone else. So that I can punch him and we can make up. I order, "Say it."

Slut.

"Garen."

Slut, slut, slut.

"Fucking say it, Jamie. I've been waiting four years to hear you call me a slut, and it's just not going to give me the same satisfaction if you don't actually use the word."

He sighs. I know that his impulse to say it has disappeared by now, but he seems to realize that even if he doesn't need to say it, I need to hear it. But then, to my great chagrin, he says, "I wasn't going to call you a slut, Garen. I was actually going to call you a self-loathing, terrified *kid* who tries to use sex to make people stay, even when they're not trying to leave you."

"The fuck is that supposed to mean?" I say tightly.

"It means that every time you get into a fight with someone, or you disappoint them, or you hurt them, you think that sleeping with them will make up for it. For fuck's sake, I'm honestly surprised that you didn't slide under the table to suck me off the second you realized you had slept with the guy I'm seeing. You solve every problem by trying to stick your dick into it, and it's fucking *unhealthy*. And it's not how you used to be," he says.

Face burning, I turn my attention to a particularly fascinating knot in the wood on the table. "Fuck who I used to be. Who I used to be was a pathetic, friendless little troll who nobody wanted to talk to. I know the truth, Jamie. I know that nobody is interested in getting to know me until I get my dick out—"

"First of all, that's bullshit, and second of all, that's not what I'm talking about," he says. "I don't care who you sleep with, G. God knows I'm not about to judge you for having a high number, considering mine is probably the same. If you want to fuck every last man in Lakewood, go for it, but be honest about why you're doing it. When we started at Patton, I was the one who kept having guys over, remember? I was the one who everyone would talk badly about, because I—"

"That's because I couldn't *get* any guys," I lean forward to hiss at him. "That's because when we started at Patton, you were already hot, and I was this skinny little kid with a Jewfro. The only reason I didn't have as many guys as you did at first was because I was uglier than—"

"You were *beautiful*, and you were *nervous*," James says, and his tone leaves so little room for argument that I find myself snapping my mouth shut again, no matter how much I want to speak. "When I met you, I didn't think you were pathetic, or ugly, or a loser. You were an awesome friend, and you were so fucking cute that just waking up every morning and looking across the room at you made me smile so much it hurt. And I don't care how many years it's been—I will never forget the way your hands shook the first time you kissed me, and the way you smiled so fucking brightly afterwards. And it was okay, because you were fourteen goddamn years old, and it was your first kiss, and you were scared. You used to be so... I don't know. Shiny. New. And then—"

"Don't say it."

"—sophomore year came around and you met—"

"Don't fucking say his name, I swear to—"

"—Dave."

I fall instantly silent, slumping down in my chair. I want to keep snapping at him, but I can't; my throat has closed up completely. Even breathing is hard right now. Jamie must just take that as a cue to continue, because he leans as close as the counselors around us will allow and murmurs, "Please don't forget that I know the truth about what he did to you. I was in the room when you came back after that date, the first time he did *that* to you. I saw your face. You were a fifteen-year-old kid, and he was an abusive, violent, eighteen-year-old *rapist*. I don't know what he said to you during those four months you were with him, but I know that whatever it was, it made you hate yourself. It made you think that you're worthless, and that

the only thing you're good for is sex, and that no one will ever love you, and all of that makes me so fucking sick, because *I* love you. I love you, and your parents love you, and your friends love you, and all we want is for you to believe that so that you'll stop treating yourself like the only thing you've got to offer is your dick. That's why you let my boyfriend fuck you, it's why you hook up with randoms, Garen. Not because you just love sex, not because you like any of the people you fuck. You do it because you think it's all you've got."

I actually laugh out loud at that. "That is possibly one of the dumbest things I've ever heard come out of your mouth, and considering how many times you've gotten stoned and made me listen to you talk about *Homeward Bound: The Incredible Journey*, that's really saying something. It's—you're inventing this alternate reality, where I'm some needy little victim, and that's not true. I enjoy sex. Maybe not if I'm bottoming, maybe not with Dave, maybe not lately, but in general, I really fucking love it. You, of all people, should understand that. I mean, in all the times you and I have fucked, did you ever feel like you were pressuring me? Did you feel like I was in any way reluctant? Did you feel like I was just going through the motions to satisfy you?"

"No, but if you *did* want me to stop, I would. And you need to realize that that's an option," he says. "In the moments when someone wants to sleep with you and you don't want to sleep with them, you need to stop convincing yourself that you have to say yes and pretend you like it anyway."

My own words to Doc yesterday are burning in the back of my mind. *I consent to sex that I don't want to have*. Fuck, I knew that Jamie's too-accurate understanding of my mind would bite me in the ass eventually. I open my mouth to attempt to force out a reply, but before I can, Cheryl appears at the edge of our table and regretfully says, "I'm sorry, but Garen, you need to move on to your private session with Doctor Howard."

Jamie and I are still staring at each other with wide, nervous eyes. This is such a precarious conversation, and part of me wonders if we'll ever be able to finish it, if we don't get that chance now. I'm not sure I can do this over again. Sensing my fear, Jamie reaches back across the table and wraps slim fingers around my wrist. "When you get out tomorrow, please call me. I know you need to spend time at home for a little while, but will you come stay with me again? Next weekend, maybe, or the one after that—"

"I'll need to talk to my parents about it first, but I'm sure... you know, they'll agree." I hesitate, and because the moment is too tense, I can't help but offer him a wry smile and add, "Maybe I'll get our dear friend *Alexander* to come along with me. Don't think for a fucking second that I didn't notice you calling him your boyfriend a minute ago."

Jamie barks out a laugh and says, "God, you're impossible."

Cheryl clears her throat somewhat loudly, and I stand and allow her to lead us back into the hall. I don't even argue or anything. There are only twenty-four hours left before I'm back out in a world I don't know how to handle—I should probably make the most of them.

3 days sober

"I baked cookies for Alex," is the first thing I say when the apartment door opens, "to tell him that I'm sorry for all the relapse sex. But you can have some, too, because I'm sorry that you walked in on it."

Ben snags one of the cookies from the plate in my hands, takes a bite, and gags. "These are fucking disgusting, dude. Why are they so chewy and fruity?"

"Because I put gummy bears in them," I say, beaming.

"What is *wrong* with you?"

“Uh, objectively? A lot of things. Seriously though, is Alex here?” I say, shifting from foot to foot.

Ben steps aside to let me into the apartment, and calls down the hall, “Hey, Al, come out here. Garen’s here to apologize, he’s got something he wants you to put in your mouth.”

I tread very purposefully on Ben’s foot as I enter the apartment, because honestly, an introduction like that isn’t going to make it any easier to convince Alex he shouldn’t hold the sex against me. Regardless, Alex comes out of his bedroom and into the living room, where I’ve taken the liberty of draping myself all over the couch. His eyes are a little bloodshot, and I breathe a sigh of relief. “Oh, thank god, you’re stoned. Here, try one of these.”

“What are they?” he asks, joining me on the couch and peering suspiciously down at the cookie I’m holding out to him.

“Gummy bear cookies,” Ben says, grimacing.

“You’re disgusting,” Alex tells me, accepting the cookie anyway and taking a bite. He pauses, then points at it, “But these are not. These are delicious.”

“I need new friends,” Ben mutters, disappearing down the hall. I’m pretty sure he’s going to go brush his teeth.

Now alone together, the silence between Alex and I is deafening. We kill a few minutes making our way through the gummy bear cookies, but his high must be starting to wear off, because he looks more and more disgruntled with every bite. Finally, I push the plate to the other side of the coffee table so that we might actually have to acknowledge each other. He’s the first one to speak.

“You should have told me you were drunk. I wouldn’t have slept with you, if I’d known.”

“You should have told me you were fucking my best friend,” I say, and his eyes snap to meet mine. I give a brief, one-shouldered shrug and finish, “I wouldn’t have slept with you, if I’d known.”

The cookie that’s still clutched in his hand is slowly turning to dust in his fist. I reach out and take him by the wrist, using my free hand to unclench his fingers and brush the crumbs back onto the plate. When I release him, he says, “When did he tell you?”

“He didn’t,” I say. “I figured it out on my own. He uh, came to visit me yesterday when I was at the LRC, and he told me that you were the one to call him and let him know.”

“That doesn’t mean anything,” Alex says quietly.

“He called you Alexander,” I say, “and I realized you’d both already told me the same story, about seeing a guy for a few months, but not being exclusive, and I remembered how weird you both get whenever I mentioned the other one hooking up with somebody else—namely, myself. It just... I mean, you’re not exactly subtle, you know.”

He snorts and says, “Are you sure? Because Ben is still unwilling to acknowledge that I like dudes, so I must be doing something right.”

“Uh, or he’s just a fucking idiot. The guy has made out with you like, a thousand times. He knows you put Travis’ piece in your mouth. Two days ago, he found us naked in bed together. He should have noticed that you’re not exactly clocking in at a zero on the Kinsey Scale, you know?” I say. We share an eyeroll, but I sober up to add, “So, I assume he doesn’t know about you and Jamie.”

Alex cringes, like he hadn’t been the one to bring Ben up in the first place. “No. We... it’s not like we’d been planning to broadcast it. I don’t think Jamie’s told anyone, and I’ve only mentioned it to like, one—”

"Who?" I demand. Who the hell could possibly be important enough to hear about this before Ben and I? But Alex gives me a guilty look, and I mutter, "Oh, you've got to be kidding me."

"I didn't plan to tell him, okay? We were arguing after Ben took off to Ohio to get you, and he started in on me about how—shit, what were his exact words? Oh, you'll appreciate this, actually. He told me, 'Just because you need to get wasted before you're man enough to kiss another guy doesn't mean you're not as queer as the rest of us.'"

I can't hold back a snort at that, but I try to disguise it as a cough. "Sorry. That, uh. That was very offensive, he should be ashamed of himself."

"Yeah, whatever. Anyway, I finally told him, you know, how I feel about—" Rather than actually say it aloud, he inclines his head to the hall where Ben disappeared about ten minutes ago. "It just sort of came out after that. I didn't mean to tell him, but... I don't know. We haven't talked about it too much since then. Seriously, *James* and I don't even really talk about what's going on with us. And... look, it's not like I cheated on him, alright? We agreed on the terms. We said that if we were both always safe, and if we were both getting tested regularly, and if we were both staying technically single, we could hook up with other people and it wouldn't have to affect us hooking up with each other. He said I could fuck anybody I wanted to fuck."

"I don't think he meant me," I say mildly. "Like, how would you feel if he boned Ben?"

"That's different."

"How is it different?"

"I don't know, because *I'm* not fucking Ben?"

"You're really not," Ben agrees, finally coming back into the room. "And what the hell are you guys talking about?"

Alex freezes, but I can tell by how relaxed Ben's posture is that he didn't hear anything worth hearing. Still, Alex doesn't seem likely to answer, so to distract Ben from the awkwardness, I quickly say, "We're discussing the etiquette regarding banging your friends, your friends' friends, your friends' exes, whatever. But, okay, hang on. While you're here, there's something that I think needs to be said, okay?" His brow creases, which I can only assume is his sign that he's listening. I can feel the couch shifting as Alex tenses up next to me. And I'd love to be one of the politically correct people who thinks it's never okay to out someone without their permission, but I'm taking Alex's inability to verbalize the statement like a human as tacit approval. I turn my attention back to Ben and say, "So, when you came into Alex's room the other morning, you realize we had totally fucked the night before, right?"

"Yes, I gathered that," Ben says dryly. "Especially since I, you know, asked you if you had, and you said yes."

"Like, we *fucked*," I say, making a vaguely obscene hip motion, just to be sure he understands. "I don't mean some weird, giving-Travis-McCall-thirty-seconds-of-head-on-Valentine's-Day-'cause-we-were-both-wasted sex. No, I mean that male-on-male anal intercourse occurred in that room—" I point down the hall to Alex's bedroom door, "—probably four hours before you walked into it. This—" I reach over and palm Alex's crotch, and he smacks my hand away, staring at me in alarm, "—was in my ass. Are we all very clear on this?"

Ben blinks at me for several drawn out seconds before he says, as if he's waiting for a punchline, "...yes?"

"So, we're also all very clear on the fact that Alex has sex with men, right? He enjoys the company of both

gentlemen and ladies,” I clarify.

Exasperated, Ben says, “Garen, I’m not a fucking idiot. I’ve woken up naked in bed with you before, I’m fully aware of the activities that tend to precede that experience. So, yes, Alex is bisexual. I get it. But none of the rest of us just walk around talking about being queer, so why should he have to?”

“Uh, are you high?” I say. “We talk about being queer all the—”

“No, *you* talk about *your sex life* in exceedingly graphic detail. That’s different. And seriously?” He imitates first my hip motion, then my voice to say, “‘We *fucked*.’ God, what is even wrong with you?”

“Shut up, that’s like the third time you’ve asked me that today. You’re going to give me a fucking complex,” I grumble, grabbing another one of the cookies just for something to do, even though I’m already uncomfortably full. Doc would probably be thrilled if she could see me now, shoveling cookies into my mouth like a greedy toddler.

Unless she thought I was going to just go throw them up later.

I’m not, but even the thought of it makes a streak of shame knot up in my stomach. And when Ben drops down onto the couch on my other side, it feels wrong to sit here between them, watching TV and acting like there isn’t something else I’ve been told is wrong with me that they don’t know about. It feels like lying, even if it’s not. Before I can talk myself out of it, I say, “Do you guys remember that first party I went to, last October?”

Alex considers the question and pops another piece of cookie in his mouth before answering, “The one where you boned Ben in my guest room? Yeah, I remember it.”

“Vividly,” Ben says, smirking at me.

I try to return a smirk of my own, but it just sort of ends up being a shaky half-smile. I look back down at my hands. “Do you, um... Al, do you remember the next morning, how Ben said that every time you’re hungover, you eat French toast until you puke?” Brow furrowed, like he’s trying to figure out where this is going, Alex nods. “Do you do that on purpose?”

“Which part? The eating or the puking? Because yeah, I mean, you can’t accidentally eat five slices of French toast—”

“The puking,” I interrupt. “When you’re hungover, do you make yourself throw up on purpose so that you can feel better?”

“No,” he says slowly.

I’m still staring at my hands. First, I flatten them together like I’m praying, then turn them over so that all I can see is the back of my right hand. I spread my fingers a few times, then rotate my hands so that my palms are still pressed together, but the fingers of each hand are touching the wrist of the opposite side. Unsatisfied with the distraction this provides, I crack each of my knuckles individually, still kind of hoping that one of the other guys will say something. When I’m all out of knuckles and neither of them has spoken yet, I lick my lips and finally say, “Would it be weird if someone did?”

“If someone made themselves throw up every time they had a hangover?” Ben says. Not trusting myself to speak, I nod. There’s a beat before he says, “I’m not sure if ‘weird’ is the right word for it. But that would definitely be... unhealthy.”

Even though he looks the part and listens to the right music, he’s never really been part of the scene—in fact, he rolls his eyes and denies it every time I say it—but a refusal to acknowledge his lifestyle doesn’t change the fact that Ben is straightedge. He doesn’t drink. He doesn’t smoke. He doesn’t do drugs. He

doesn't know what he's *talking* about. I turn my attention to Alex, hoping he'll say that his best friend is wrong, that this is a frequent occurrence in the world of binge-drinking. He doesn't. I say, "So, um... so it's not like, a normal thing. That's not a thing that most people do." He shakes his head. I look back down at my hands. "Oh."

"Garen," Ben says. When I don't look up, he repeats my name, a little louder.

"I didn't realize that it wasn't normal to do that until my therapist told me during the check-in. She says that, um... I don't know. I guess a lot of the things that I thought weren't a big deal actually sort of are."

"Like what?" Ben asks.

Like the fact that I haven't been able to sleep all the way through the night since before I got kicked out last January. Like renting my body out to strangers for drug money. Like Dave beating me to the point of unconsciousness and me only coming to as he's shoving inside of me. Like my inability to stay turned on during sex, even though I'm eighteen years old and should pretty much *always* be turned on. Like guys fucking me even when I say no. Like not remembering huge portions of the last year of my life.

I shrug. "I don't know. Just stupid stuff, I guess. Can we watch a movie or something?"

Alex looks like he wants to protest or urge me to continue, but Ben shoots him a warning look, and they both fall silent. I hate that I do this to my friends. I hate that lately, I'm always the one who ends up bringing everybody else down. There must be some way to apologize to them—some way that doesn't involve letting Alex put his dick in me, or baking shitty cookies, because I've already tried both of those things, and I still feel guilty—but right now, I don't know what it is.

Still, they can't be too mad, because Alex lets me put on *Almost Famous* even though he hates it, and Ben lets me curl up with my head on his lap. Halfway through the movie, when I make my usual comment of, "I don't care if she's fictional, and I don't care if she's a chick, I would nail the shit out of Penny Lane. She's so fucking hot," they both agree with me, whether they really feel that way or not. Later, when I say, "I want this. All I want is to do this, to make music, for the rest of my life, only without the part where I become a sell-out, and turn into even more of an asshole, and betray my fans and my art form," Alex reaches over to squeeze my knee, and Ben cards his fingers through my hair and leans down to press a brief kiss to my temple and says simply, "You will."

They are better friends than I deserve.

6 days sober

School on Monday is every bit as soul-suckingly awful as I expected it to be, but in a very different way than I had anticipated. Apparently, the members of drama club who know that I was drunk at rehearsal are actually capable of keeping their mouths shut, because the fact that I was in rehab has yet to make it to the grapevine. My teachers all give me knowing, sympathetic looks and hand me my makeup assignments without comment, but amongst the student body, there is massive speculation around why I missed the ninth, tenth, and eleventh days of the school year.

By the time I finish fourth period, it seems pretty clear that the leading theory is that I managed to get myself expelled again, which makes no sense. I don't think any of my classmates realize that I was expelled for missing too many days of class, not for disciplinary reasons. The second most popular theory is that I eloped with Travis McCall. Considering I don't think he's missed a day of school since he tried to off himself as a freshman, I'm not sure why people would overlook the fact that he wasn't actually absent with me the past few days.

Or the fact that he's very blatantly not speaking to me.

By the time my last morning class is done, I'm no longer amused by the gossip, and I just want to go home. That feeling only intensifies when the bell rings and Ms. Markland calls after me, "Garen, would you mind waiting a moment? I'd like to speak to you privately. And don't worry, I'll write you a hall pass if it looks like you're going to be late to your next class."

"I have lunch next period," I say, shrugging. My standard operating procedure for lunch is to go to the cafeteria, get something to eat, and take it to the music room so I can spend the hour dicking around on my guitar. Jeff doesn't give a shit, and it's not like I have friends who will notice my absence. It feels stupid to admit that to a teacher, though, so I remain silent. When she gestures for me to sit back down in the front row, I do.

"I assume you know what I want to talk to you about," she says. Her tone is even, like she's trying her best to keep from yelling at me. I'm sort of used to that tone from teachers, but it doesn't make it less embarrassing.

I duck my head and say, "So, I guess you heard about Tuesday's rehearsal."

"I did," she confirms. "I'm not going to give out any names—" *Gabe, Nate, Joss*, "—but multiple members of the club have come to me over the past few days to tell me that you were obviously and admittedly intoxicated at rehearsal, you were unnecessarily aggressive towards a member of the stage crew, you consumed alcohol on school property in the presence of the cast, and then left early."

A small part of me is amused that 'leaving early' even ranks on the list of shitty things I'm getting in trouble for. I squash my impulse to smile and say, "I won't deny it."

"I didn't expect you to," she says. "Furthermore, none of us have seen you since that day. You've missed two rehearsals in a row."

"I know," I say flatly. "I was in rehab."

"I know," she echoes. Whatever I was expecting her to say, that wasn't it. She adds, "The ladies in the main office called your father regarding your absences, and, well... officially, you were away for health reasons. On Wednesday afternoon, however, one of your classmates pulled me aside before the start of rehearsal to tell me that he had spoken to your father, who informed him that you had checked yourself into a forty-eight-hour session at your rehabilitation center. He told me not to expect you at rehearsal until this week."

I bob my head in vague acknowledgment of her words, but my blood is rushing in my ears. Nothing that son of a bitch has done has ever made me as angry as this. I say, "Travis McCall, right? He's the one who told you where I was? Christ, that kid needs to learn to mind his own business."

"I had rather thought that you were his business," Ms. Markland says mildly.

I scowl. "If that's your way of saying you think I'm still fucking my stepbrother, you're wrong."

She holds up a hand. "Please, Garen. I'd much rather not hear the details of my students' personal lives, thank you." She hesitates, then asks, "But if you do intend to get personal for a minute... how are you?"

"How am I?" I say, blinking.

"Yes, how are you?" she repeats impatiently. "Are you feeling any better than you were last week? Was your time in rehab helpful?"

She even seems like she might really want to know the answer. Slowly, I say, "Yeah. It was helpful. I'm, um... I'm six days sober now. It's not much—nothing compared to the ninety-two days I'd been sober as of last Monday, but... I don't know. It's a start?"

"It is," Ms. Markland agrees. She walks over to her desk, sits down, and says, "Well, I'll be seeing you at rehearsal tonight, yes? You've only missed one script reading, so you should be able to—"

"Hang the fuck on," I say, which she glares at, so I quickly amend, "Sorry, hang on. You're still letting me be in the play? You're still letting me be in this *school*?"

"Well, I don't actually have the power to expel you, you know. And I haven't taken the details of last Tuesday to anyone who does have that power. Rest assured, there will be a penalty for what you've done, but the finer points of it have yet to be determined. Now, if you don't mind, I have another class to teach. I'll see you later today."

I bolt from the room before she can change her mind.

That afternoon, when I arrive at rehearsal, no one speaks to me. I'm not even remotely surprised, but I'd be lying if I pretended it doesn't still sting a little. I sink into a seat in the front row and try to focus on reading my script. The only script sessions I've attended were the initial read-through and that trainwreck rehearsal where I saw Travis and Joss kissing. Both of those had been more casual than this; I don't even know if we're working on blocking yet.

Just as I did when I was in the dining room at LRC, I know I'm being watched right now, but I don't dare look around. Part of me is certain that even making eye contact with one of the people I've so obviously offended will provoke a confrontation, and I can't handle that yet. Not enough time has passed; I don't feel okay yet, and I don't have enough distance from the darkness to make a joke about it. I keep my eyes on either the script or the floor until rehearsal officially begins. Ms. Markland strides into the auditorium and snaps her fingers, greeting us with, "Alright, first thing's first. Garen, on stage. Now."

Alarmed at being singled out but nowhere near stupid enough to cop an attitude with her when I'm already on such thin ice, I brace my hands on the edge of the stage and hoist myself up onto it. She gestures to the microphone, and I move to stand behind it. She crosses her arms. "You're the only cast member who missed voice rehearsal last week, so we're going to start you on that. I don't want you to fall behind just because you needed to take some... personal time. I want you sing your warm-up song, then go right into practicing 'There Are Worse Things I Could Do.' Nate will catch you up, and then you'll join Christine to run your scenes together. Until then, Christine, you're with Josslyn and myself. Everyone else, break into the same groups you were in last Wednesday, alright?"

It is with great reluctance that I stand and allow my boots to carry me to the edge of the stage, where Nate is standing with his arms crossed over the front of his celery-colored blazer. I very generously say, "Hi," instead of *holy shit, dude, what are you wearing*.

"Hi," he says dully. "Look, I just need a yes or no on this: are you going to bail on us again? Because if you're going to just get drunk and disappear for a few days again right before opening night, tell me now. I'll recast Rizzo, and I'll put you in the chorus, and we can pretend that none of this ever happened."

It's the perfect out. I can accept his offer, I can disappear from the play, and none of us will have to put up with each other. They won't have to bother pretending they're not disgusted by me. I won't have to bother pretending I'm not deeply, painfully ashamed of myself every time one of them looks at me and remembers how I acted. If I were a smarter man, I would bow out with what remains of my dignity. But I guess I'm an idiot, because I say, "No. I want to be in the play, I swear. I'll be better. Can we just... focus on the song right now? I'm willing to take whatever direction you see fit to give me."

He sighs. "Fine, we'll get started. And... I get that rock and roll is kind of your thing, okay? And it works for 'Sandra Dee,' because when we decided not to change all the gender-specific pronouns and phrases in that song, we kind of turned your character into an asshole. That whole number makes it seem like Rizzo is making gay jokes about Andy, so yes, it makes sense for you to be like, growling and posturing, and whatever."

"I hadn't realized that my standard way of singing makes me seem like such a douchebag," I say, raising my eyebrows.

Nate raises his right back, and I think he's mainly trying to challenge me when he retorts, "Well, it does. And that's fine. It works. But not for this number, okay? This is supposed to be your one moment of vulnerability in the play, and you can't screw it up by turning it into a joke."

I wasn't going to. Despite what the rest of the world seems to believe, I actually am capable of taking things seriously; I just prefer not to. Especially things as definitively *not* serious as a school play. But everyone here is already so pissed at me—especially Nate, who I can tell took a chance on casting me in the first place—so I gnaw on my tongue for a few seconds until I think I can speak without being verbally abusive. Finally, I say, "Alright. No rock. Got it. Do you have something specific you would like me to do instead?"

"Let's start with a warm-up. Do you have anything in a higher register than the songs you've done so far?" he asks.

"Uh," I say. I know music, I really do, but I'm so used to just writing my own shit or singing along to songs I already know that sometimes I don't give much consideration to the technicalities of it. Nate's hands shift from gripping his own biceps to clenching into fists that he plants over his waist. He actually starts tapping his foot at me, like that's going to make me decide my response any faster. God, he is such a *drama queen*. I say, "I guess so, yeah. Is it okay if it's just, you know, pop music? I've already told you I don't really do the Broadway bullshit—" His eyes bug a little at the phrase. "—but I know some chick songs from the radio that might—"

"Chick songs?" he interrupts, rolling his eyes towards the ceiling. "God, you're such a *boy* sometimes."

"Well, yes," I say, very purposefully not adding, *And you're such a girl sometimes*.

"Tell me, Garen. What's so bad about a man singing a song that was originally recorded by a female artist?"

I count to ten very slowly in my head and most definitely do not contemplate shoving him off the stage. I take a deep breath, smile, and say, "Nothing, Nathan. I am fine with it, and if you'll be quiet for a few minutes, I will *do* it."

He falls obediently silent, and I flick the mic on, ducking down to say, "Will it disturb everyone else if this is on?"

Ms. Markland waves me off. "No, I want everyone to get used to singing with the microphones on. I don't want anyone to have to adjust how they sing later, once we're doing dress rehearsals with full audio equipment."

I nod to her, then look over at Nate to confirm, "You want me high, right?" His eyes widen; out in the aisle where she's practicing, Christine's head whips around to gape at me. I hasten to amend, "Pitch. You want me high *pitched*, Jesus fuck."

"Garen. Language," Ms. Markland drawls.

I take another deep breath that scratches through the sound system. Nate takes pity on me and says, "Yes. Something higher than 'Boys of Summer' or 'Pretty Girl.' And it can still be a modern song, you won't have to do..." He hesitates, then pops his fingers up to make air quotes as he says, "'Broadway bullshit.'"

It only takes me a few seconds to settle on an indie rock song I've heard just enough times to know all the way through. I hardly ever use notes this high, and my voice seems almost higher, louder because I'm singing without any accompaniment. Usually I love to hear myself sing—I guess I'm just that much of a conceited asshole—but right now, it makes me uncomfortable. The lyrics, the tune, the way I can feel everyone staring at me even though I've closed my eyes. I handle most of the song fine, but my voice does crack at one point, and I have to clear my throat and restart the verse, *"And it's hard to dance with the devil on your back, and given half the chance, would I take any of it back? It's a fine romance, but it's left me so undone. It's always darkest before the dawn."*

It's all smooth sailing from that, and the second I've finished the song, I turn back to Nate and say, "I screwed up that one bit, I know. And I might have been a little bit sharp at the end. I'm sorry."

"No, you were fine at the end," he says, voice so soft it's barely more than a breath. "That was really good. Are you comfortable doing notes that high? I want to experiment a little bit with 'There are Worse Things' before we definitely settle on something. Try it in that same key first, and then we'll run through again with you singing it in your normal range, okay?"

I sing the song twice through—once high, once normally—and then again, halfway between. Still undecided, Nate tries to make me sing through it in the upper range again, and I glare at him. He smiles somewhat sheepishly. "Okay, okay. We'll come back to it another time. For now, can you try to practice both? I'm sure we'll be able to figure it out for sure later, when we try each out in the context of a full rehearsal." I offer him a very small smile and take a step towards the edge of the stage, only to find that Ms. Markland is standing there, waiting. There is a mild sense of foreboding in the air, like she's about to tear me a new asshole, but is waiting for exactly the right second to do it. Finally, she says, "You're very talented, Garen."

I want to say *I know*, but I settle for, "Thank you."

She holds up a hand to silence me before I can say anything else, even though I hadn't really planned on it. "You're talented, but you're probably the most self-destructive, self-sabotaging human being I've ever had the questionable fortune to meet."

My embarrassment elects to show itself in a breath of laughter and quick drop of my eyes to the floor. She's speaking as clearly as she does when she teaches film and lit, so I'm all too aware of the fact that everyone in the auditorium has heard her opinion of me. I should have expected this to be part of the punishment; after all, does it really count as a reprimand if all my classmates—the people who I've been trying so hard not to hope might become my friends eventually—don't get to see the lecture?

She continues, "I believe in giving second chances, but from what I understand of your disciplinary file, coming to Lakewood in the first place should have been your second chance. Being allowed to return this fall after having been expelled last spring? That was your third. But I'm generous, and you make a damn good Rizzo, so here it is. This is your fourth chance. If you show up drunk or stoned or anything to rehearsal again, I will report you to Principal Hammond, and you will be expelled and possibly arrested."

"Okay," I say, because what else is there?

"You strike me as the kind of guy who gets tired of people telling him he has a lot of potential, but it's true. You do. You have potential, wit, charisma, *more* than your fair share of talent, but you're throwing it all away so that you can be drunk in the auditorium of a public high school I'm sure you never wanted to come to in the first place. You need to get it together."

I want to say *thank you*, but I settle for, "I know."

"Good. Now that that's settled, come join us for script work," she says.

We all work amicably for the next few hours, but are dismissed when the auditorium door swings open at

eight forty-five and we are joined by the members of the stage crew, all laden down with sheets of paper and some large sketches. They must be starting to design the major set pieces. I try very hard not to notice Travis, or the ink smeared on his hands, or that his stack of papers is three times the size of anyone else's, or how mind-wreckingly adorable I find it that he has apparently unleashed his control freak personality and taken over the entire set design, despite knowing literally nothing about drama. I can tell that he notices me, though, because I'm halfway through the process of shoving my script into my backpack and zipping it up when he joins me in the front row and says, "We could hear you singing from down the hall because of how good the sound system is." I say nothing. "I didn't realize you listened to Florence and the Machine."

"I don't," is all I say. After all, one of the only things I remember about Tuesday night is him telling me he was done with our tentative friendship, so there doesn't seem to be any point in explaining to him just how easy it is for me to memorize songs. It would be a waste of breath to tell him that I'm an auditory learner to such a frightening degree that listening to a song just four times—first and last to just experience it as a whole, second to pick up all the nuances of the music itself, third to have all the lyrics down—can have it tattooed into my memory forever, that I have memorized almost every song I've ever heard, even in the genres I hate, even songs I just happen to hear a few times on the radio, even fucking *elevator music*. I don't think he'd care, if I told him. He made that pretty clear.

Still, rejection of our friendship notwithstanding, he tries again, "You sounded really great on—"

"Travis, I need you to just... not," I interrupt, and he falls immediately silent, eyes dropping to the floor. "You told me that you can't be friends with me anymore, and that's okay. I understand why you have to do that. But you need to understand that I can't be in between with you. It didn't work last spring, and it won't work this fall. If we're not going to be friends, I can't do this—" I gesture between us, "—this small-talk bullshit. Okay?"

"Okay," he echoes. There's a faint flush high on his cheekbones, like he knew I'd say this, but figured it was worth a shot anyway. Before I can stop him or reprimand him—because seriously, what the fuck is wrong with him—he darts forward and presses a quick kiss to my cheek, hovering close and settling his hands on my waist for a moment as he says, "I'm sorry I can't be there for you anymore, but I know you can do this on your own. You don't think you're strong enough, but you are. You're strong, and you're so fucking brave, and you deserve to let yourself get better. Goodbye, Garen."

He skitters back off into the wings, and I remain frozen in place, my eyes squeezed shut. It's just like the day he visited me at rehab, when he kissed me and told me he loves me and hates me and likes me as a person, and then he left. It's the same sort of *I'm leaving you so I'm allowed to say how I really feel* moment now, but in rehab, his words had felt like a beginning. Now, they're as much of a goodbye as the time I told him I'd miss him, walked out of the house in Lakewood, and didn't come back for a quarter of a year.

From a few feet away, a wary voice says, "Are you okay?"

My eyes snap open. Nate is watching me. My first instinct is to force a smile and tell him I'm great. To play it off and sink into my darkness later, in private. But I'm so fucking tired of faking being okay around people that I sigh and say, "Um, not really. But I will be. Thank you for asking."

"Sure," he says, turning back to the rest of his real friends to leave.

"Hey," I force myself to say, before I can think better of it. "Um. Can you guys hang back for a second?"

A few of them continue walking anyway, and I should have expected that, but it still sort of stings. Most of the group, however, at least turns around to hear what I have to say.

"What's up?" Miranda says warily.

Since she and Nate seem to be the only ones willing to acknowledge me, I allow my eyes to flicker back and forth between the two of them as I say, "I wanted to apologize to all of you for what happened last week. I could try to make up an excuse for myself, but you all deserve better than to have some line of bullshit thrown at you. And you deserve more respect than I showed you by coming to rehearsal drunk and making a scene. It was disgusting and immature, and I am deeply ashamed of myself for it. While I understand if any of you decide not to speak to me outside the context of the script, I promise that I will do everything in my power to make it up to all of you. It won't happen again."

There is a very tense silence where they all just sort of blink at me with wide, unforgiving eyes. Then, out of nowhere, John—the always-slightly-too-enthusiastic guy who's playing Andy—steps forward, claps me on the shoulder and says, "Well, that was certainly much more of a 'mea culpa' than I think any of us were expecting. You're forgiven."

I stare. "Just like that?"

"Just like that," he confirms cheerfully. "But, fair warning, if you do end up doing it again, I'll tie you to a chair and beat your skull in with a rusty hammer."

Not a single possible response comes to me.

Seeing my alarm, he smiles sunnily and says, "I take drama club a little bit too seriously, maybe. See you tomorrow for music rehearsal!"

He bounces off out the auditorium doors, and the others trail after him, not seeming terribly surprised by his reaction. Nate is the last to leave, offering me a small shrug and the words, "Everybody makes mistakes, I guess. You just seem to make more of them than the rest of us. But you're working on it, right?"

"Right," I confirm quickly.

He repeats the shrug and says, a little exasperated, "That's all any of us are asking for, Garen."

I smile, and for the first time in days, it doesn't feel fake.

Chapter Seven

“Nobody can hurt me without my permission.” –Ghandi

9 days sober

It starts with a cup of coffee. More specifically, it starts with twenty ounces of hundred-and-thirty degree coffee being shoved out of my hands and into my chest with such force that the flimsy plastic lid pops right off the cup, drenching me from collarbone to navel in liquid so hot that for half a second, all I can do is choke out, “Oh, holy fucking *sh-shit!*” I pinch the front of my now-soaked t-shirt and pull it forward, my shoulders hunched, trying to flinch away from the sopping, scalding material, but it’s no use. My skin feels like it’s on fire. My sunglasses are actually steaming up from the heat rising off my chest.

Still, I’m not too distracted by the pain to miss the unmistakable sound of two people high-fiving each other behind my back. And I’m not stupid enough to think this was an accident. I turn in place very slowly, not wanting to slip on the coffee that has dripped from my body to the floor, and find myself watching the backs of two guys retreating down the hall. One of them is wearing a Varsity Track sweatshirt. Fucking Jack Thorne, what is his problem with me?

“Oh my god, Garen. Are you okay?” says a voice to my right. I glance over at the speaker. It’s Annabelle, the redheaded choreographer from the *Grease* auditions.

I’m not okay. I’m in more pain than I have been for months, probably since the fight with Travis in my dad’s study, when he punched me in the face to get the Glock away from me. The flesh on my chest might actually be blistering up, because it’s stinging so badly that I feel like my entire torso is pulsing. The wet drag of my t-shirt against my skin feels like someone is rubbing me with boiling sandpaper. It’s fucking awful. But even under the physical pain, I’m starting to feel an even worse pain—the sting of embarrassment. Everyone is staring at me. I’ve only just gotten out of homeroom, and I’m about to be late to AP Government, and my shirt is soaked, and all I want in the world is to go chase that idiot jock down and beat the shit out of him. Instead, I grimace at Annabelle and say, “I’m, um... Christ. This is really hot. And wet. And disgusting. Do you know if there’s anywhere around here where I can get a different shirt? Or, do the locker rooms in the gym have hand dryers so I can at least make this so I’m not dripping everywhere?”

“I’ll get you another shirt, hang on two seconds,” she says, holding up a hand to signal that I shouldn’t move. Her eyes are raking the hall, then lighting up as she calls, “Hey, Ry! Come here for a second!”

We are joined a few seconds later by Riley, from tech crew. He greets Annabelle, but before she can even say anything to him, he blinks at my chest and snorts. “You’re supposed to drink it, not wear it, man.”

“Some track team douche has it out for me, and he attacked me with my own coffee. I’ve never felt so betrayed in my life. Except like, that time that I got addicted to all those drugs that had been really fun to do at first.” The numbness is fading now, replaced by more of that pulsing agony, so I don’t even feel bad when I whine, “All my favorite things keep turning against me.”

“Well, maybe you should get better favorite things. Here—” Riley drops his messenger bag to the ground, carefully avoiding any of the coffee splatters, and strips off the graphic tee he’s wearing over a long-sleeved shirt. I have never been so thankful for the ridiculous number of layers that people from Connecticut always seem to be wearing. He straightens his ever-present, always-backwards baseball cap and says, “You should see if you can rinse off in the bathroom first, though, ‘cause otherwise it’s just gonna stick to you.”

“Thank you,” I say, taking care to hold the fresh t-shirt between the tips of two fingers so I won’t get coffee all over that, too. There’s a bathroom at the end of the hall that is thankfully empty. Not like it would matter—I’m too annoyed and too comfortable with my physique to even bother going into one of the stalls

to strip off my t-shirt. I wring it out over the sink, soak it under the water for a moment, and wring it out again. It's still wet, and it still reeks of coffee, but I can't do much better. I run a handful of paper towels under the faucet for a few seconds, planning to make a few quick swipes over my chest to wipe off most of the coffee—I take it black these days, so I thankfully don't have to worry about any sugar or cream congealing on my skin. But when I glance up into the mirror over the sink, I'm suddenly unable to move.

My entire chest is a bright, splotchy shade of red. Tentatively, I swipe the dampened towels over my skin, only to flinch away from the pain. The late bell for first period rings overhead. I grit my teeth, wipe away the rest of the coffee, and pull on Riley's t-shirt. He's not much thinner than me, but my arms must be a lot bigger, because the sleeves of the shirt bunch up a little around my biceps. Whatever, it's not like I have time to worry about it. I stop by my locker to stuff the wet shirt onto the top shelf, then head to class to be berated for my lateness.

I keep getting weird looks for the rest of the morning. At first, I assume it's because people have heard about the coffee incident this morning, but when I walk into the classroom for trial law, I catch Travis blinking at my chest, looking completely bewildered. For the first time since Riley handed it to me, I actually bother to look down at the shirt. *The First Baptist Church of Lakewood, Connecticut presents: 'Summers with Scripture' Bible Study, June 2002. Creating sin-free summer fun for God's children since 1987!* Between the event title and the slogan, there's a picture of Jesus wearing wayfarers. What the actual fuck.

At lunch time, I grab a sandwich and a bottle of iced tea, then scan the room until I find Riley, sitting with the rest of the drama club. I stalk up to him and say, "I really wish I had bothered to look at this shirt before you handed it to me, 'cause I totally would have preferred the nasty, coffee-stained one. It took me until last period to figure out why the hell everyone has been staring at me all day."

Riley laughs delightedly. "You didn't realize what it was? Wow, you're really unobservant. I found it in a thrift store downtown a few years ago, and it was too awesome to pass up."

"Awesome? It's awful."

"It has Jesus wearing sunglasses!"

"I'm *Jewish*," I say, somewhat hysterically, which only makes him laugh harder.

To my surprise, Joss is the one to respond to that, though not to me. She turns to face Travis, who I have only just noticed is sitting next to her; guess he's decided to continue his tradition of adopting a completely new group of friends the second he starts hooking up with someone new. After all, isn't that what happened with him, Ben, and all my old friends? Joss says, "Is that how your parents met? Like, at synagogue or something?"

I'm glad to see that Travis looks as confused as I feel. Brow furrowed, he says, "No...? I'm not Jewish, Joss."

She frowns back at him. "You're not?"

"No, I'm Catholic. Or, at least, I'm supposed to be, I don't know. Why the hell would you think I'm Jewish?" he asks.

Unable to stop myself, I say, "If this is because he's circumcised, you should know that more than half the men in this country are, regardless of religion—"

"Please stop discussing my penis at the lunch table," Travis says tightly, but he doesn't look at me or say anything to indicate that Joss wouldn't know whether he's circumcised or not. Meaning she's seen it. Meaning they've probably screwed by now, in the week and a half since they first kissed.

Oh. So, um... oh.

Twisted into what hopefully looks like a mocking smile, my mouth is still moving of its own accord. "Why? You've got an awesome dick, dude, you should totally be proud—"

"Moving on," Joss speaks loudly over the rest of my sentence, "I wasn't asking because of that. If you're not Jewish, why do you wear a—" She cuts herself off abruptly, blinking at him. He licks his lips and pointedly does not meet her eyes.

The silence makes no sense to the rest of the people sitting at—or, in my case, standing next to—the table. Seriously, why does he wear a... what? What Jewish thing could he possibly walk around wearing? A fucking yarmulke? And then I see it—a tiny glimpse of the thin gold chain, just visible under the edge of the collar of his t-shirt.

"You'll also need to hand over both lip rings, as I assume they have sharpened points for piercing. Any other jewelry you're wearing, too," Cheryl says. I'm not entirely clear on how to remove the lip rings—they seemed like a good idea at the time, a way to make me look a little tougher, a little harder. They're supposed to be something that fucks me up a little, at least enough to make Travis stop glancing at my mouth like he wants nothing more than to kiss me every time he thinks I'm not looking. Figuring out how to remove them hadn't been part of the original plan. I manage it, though, and drop them on the edge of the LRC's searching table.

If I wanted, I could probably try to smuggle my necklace in, but I could get caught, and they could confiscate it for good, and everything could be so much worse. I can't risk losing this. I pluck it from the collar of my shirt and move to stand in front of Travis, who stares at the Star of David. I say, "You mind holding onto this? Kind of a family heirloom thing. My mom would kill me if I lost it."

I should have told him earlier. He should already know the story of this necklace, of how my mom gave it to me right before I went away to boarding school, of the grandfather I never met, of the man who suffered so fucking much in that camp in Germany but still survived, still had the strength and dignity and grace to be proud of who he was when he got out. Travis should know these things about me, about my heritage, about my life. I wish I'd spent more time talking to him, less time trying to hurt him.

It doesn't get shoved into his pocket along with the stupid lighter. He takes the necklace from me and slips it over his head, tucking it down the front of his shirt. I've never been more thankful for his ability to understand which things are important without me having to say anything.

Careful not to actually touch his skin—and he arches his neck to give me better access, oh god—I slip a finger beneath the collar of his shirt and hook it around the chain, drawing the necklace out. The Star of David pendant dangles right next to an engraved silver ring. The ring. The one I gave him, the one he practically threw at me after I came back to Lakewood and started terrorizing him, the one I had *thought* was left in the music room at school when I tried to disappear to Cleveland. The one he apparently bothered to get, and hold onto, and wear on my fucking chain every day since June.

I don't know what bothers me more: that he's been quietly wearing my family heirloom under his t-shirt for all these months, or the fact that Joss has obviously gotten under the t-shirt to know this. The idea of my dead grandfather's Star of David hanging off Travis' throat, dangling down and knocking against Joss' collarbone while he's fucking her—it makes me want to die. Or, at the very least, vomit.

Without bothering to ask permission—and why should I? It's my fucking necklace—I slip the chain off over his head and drop it back over my own. After three and a half months of not wearing it, it feels strange to have the weight of it against my—Riley's—shirt again. I move to put it back beneath the shirt, but Travis says, "Wait." I freeze. He clears his throat. "Just the necklace. The ring's mine."

My first instinct is to tell him to walk in front of a bus, because it's *not* this. I bought it, and he gave it back, he didn't want it anymore, and he doesn't want me, so why should he get to walk around with something

that I gave him as a symbol of my feelings for and devotion to him? That's fucking stupid. I hesitate, but for once in my life, I'm not in the mood to make a scene. "Sorry. My mistake." I undo the chain clasp, slide the ring off, and secure the necklace once more beneath my shirt. Travis is holding his hand out for the ring, but I still don't think I can touch him, so I set it down on the table in front of him. Out of what I can only assume to be habit, he slides it onto the ring finger of his left hand. It's the same place it sat for months, but it made sense then. It was supposed to be a goddamn promise ring, a fucking *engagement* ring back then. Now, it's just his selfish little souvenir of a relationship he doesn't want anymore. I'm not sure he's looking at me, but he must be, because when I give a jerky shake of my head, he sighs and switches it to the ring finger of his right hand instead.

That's better. It's still not good, but it's better. I smile as brightly as I can and say, "Well, it's been a blast and a half catching up with you guys. I'll see you at rehearsal."

"Hang on," Annabelle says, frowning at me as I turn to go. "Where are you going?"

I blink at her. "Um, the music room? That's where I hang out during my lunch period."

"Why?" John asks.

"I don't know. I just do," I say, because *I have no friends and don't want to sit alone in here where people can mock me for it sounds lame.*

"That's dumb. Sit with us," Miranda orders. It's impossible to miss the glare exchanged when Joss kicks her under the table.

I don't care if it's my pride talking—I'd rather eat every meal alone for the rest of my life than accept a pity invitation from a bunch of people who already think I'm a pathetic junkie. I shake my head and offer her a polite smile. "Thanks, but I'm just gonna go. I'll see you around."

I manage to make it exactly eight steps before a pair of hands collides hard with my shoulder blades, sending me flying into the wall next to the cafeteria doors. I spin around and—of fucking course—find myself looking right at Jack Thorne. Jack, who I've never actually even met, but who seems to be so goddamn offended by my existence that he can't stop himself from making comments about me, or pouring scalding coffee on me, or shoving me into walls. I don't consider myself a violent person, but I don't consider myself a weak person, either; if someone hits me, I hit back.

Well. With a few minor, masochistic exceptions.

My hand is already tightening into a fist, but before I can even pull it back, Jack says, "Don't tell me you're actually stupid enough to assault a minor in a school building. I mean, aren't you like, nineteen already?"

I freeze. He's right—not about me being nineteen, but about the fact that legally, I'd be totally fucked if I beat up a seventeen-year-old, especially while on school grounds. It doesn't matter if he's provoking me, or if he has already taken the first thing. Technically, he's still a kid, and I'm an adult. It's the sort of distinction I'm sure most high schoolers would love to gloat over, but right now, it's a strangle-hold. All of the assholes who have decided to dislike me for reasons that have nothing to do with them have finally found the loophole; they have finally realized that, as long as no teachers catch them at it, they can do whatever they want to me, and I can't hit them back, unless I'm interested in going to prison.

Jack must see the gears turning in my head, because he sneers at me. A moment later, that sneer is wiped away when someone else joins our confrontation and says, "He's eighteen, but I'm not. I'm still just young enough to punch you in the face and get away with it."

"Fuck off, McCall," Jack orders.

As much as I would rather get hit by a train than agree with him, I say, "Travis, go away. I'm fine."

Travis ignores us both and says, “Seriously, Jack, this is pathetic even by your standards. Attacking somebody who you know can’t hit back without getting arrested? Is that the only way you think you can win a fight?”

“Dunno. Managed to give you a pretty decent beatdown a few weeks ago, didn’t I?” Jack retorts.

Travis snorts. “ ‘A beatdown’? Really? You punched me once because I said you had a small dick, and I wasn’t even facing you at the time. It was a bitch move. Weird, it’s starting to seem like that’s all you’re capable of. I’m serious, though. Leave Garen alone.”

I can’t believe he’s actually dumb enough to think he’s helping. He’s not helping. I’m surrounded by fucking sharks, and he’s trying so hard to strong-arm me into the boat that he doesn’t realize he’s just spilling more of my blood in the water. I know how guys like Jack work, because I used to be dangerously close to *being* a guy like Jack. People like him are constantly looking for weakness in others, they’re looking for signs that someone needs protection, and the second that protection is gone, they attack. Unless Travis is planning to hire me a fucking bodyguard—a young one, too, one who can actually hit all the people I’m too old to beat up on—he’s just making me more of a target.

“Travis,” I say through gritted teeth, “I’m not joking. Go back to your table and sit the fuck down.”

“Come on, McCall. Listen to your girlfriend,” Jack says. God, I want to punch him.

“Right, so you can go back to beating on someone who’d be screwed if he tried to defend himself? Not likely,” Travis says. For someone who claims he can’t be friends with me anymore, for someone who agreed not to speak to me anymore, he’s doing a remarkable impression of someone who gives a shit about me. It’s annoying as hell, and it’s not what I need. Not from him. Not right now.

I duck down so that my clavicle catches him in the groin hard enough to silence him, then tighten my arm around the back of his legs, straightening up and flinging all hundred and forty pounds of him over my shoulder. He is understandably bewildered enough to stop arguing with Jack, which gives me just enough time to stride back over to the table where he had been sitting and dump him unceremoniously into his vacated seat. He’s heavier than he looks, because there’s now a kink in my shoulder, but I ignore it in favor of leaning down and snapping, “When I told you to go sit down, it wasn’t a fucking suggestion, dude. It was an order. And now you’ve gone and fucked everything up, and I’m going to have to pay the price for it, so thanks a lot.”

“Excuse me?” he hisses. “Thorne’s an idiot, and he’s not going to stop going after you unless somebody makes him. This is not an ‘ignore it and maybe it will go away’ situation. I was trying to help—”

“—I don’t care what you were trying to do. The last thing I need is to have people think that I need my scrawny, seventeen-year-old ex-boyfriend trying to defend me. So, shut up and go back to fingerbanging your new girlfriend under the lunch table, or whatever the fuck you were doing ten minutes ago, before you decided to play the hero. Remember, for the next however-many months it takes for that divorce to be finalized, you’re my kid brother, and I don’t need your help, alright? Leave me alone.”

This time, nobody tries to stop me from leaving the room.

10 days sober

On Friday, I wake to the noise of my phone chiming, which is a little surprising, considering there are exactly three people who text me, and they’re all college students, so none of them should even be awake yet. It’s a text from an unknown number; *If your life still sucks, I’m still willing to listen to you whine about it. Drinks tonight? This is Stohler, the girl whose couch you passed out on last week.* Oh, god. I’d nearly forgotten about giving her my number. It seems like a sincere enough offer, even if it’s not the

healthiest one. I text back, *Coffee instead of drinks okay with you?* It's only another five minutes before I get a reply. *Starbucks on Chapel St. @ 7:30pm.* I send back a simple *see you then* so she knows I've received her message, add her number to my contacts list, then drop my phone back on the nightstand.

I hadn't been asleep asleep. Not really. I'd been dozing, I guess, and I'm still hungry for unconsciousness, but I can tell I won't be able to get back into that blissful, dream-filled state that has been evading me for months now. Grumbling, I roll myself off the edge of my bed and lie motionless, facedown on the floor for several minutes before I can summon up the motivation to start my morning exercise.

The too-early text means I'm ready for school at six fifty instead of the usual seven thirty. When I eventually make my way upstairs, I'm vaguely surprised to see that Dad is sitting at the kitchen table, reading through some glossy papers—they might be brochures—and drinking a cup of coffee. He looks up when I enter, then smiles too widely and gestures to the seat across from him. "Good morning. You should sit down. I'd like to talk to you for a minute, if you have time."

I'm tempted to lie and say I'm late, but he knows my schoolday doesn't start until eight o'clock. I grab the half-full, lukewarm coffee pot off the burner and sit down with it, popping the lid off so that I can take a sip straight from the pot. Dad rolls his eyes, but he doesn't tell me to get a cup or be more civilized, which must mean that something is up. Choosing my words carefully, I say, "Did I do something wrong?"

"Not at all," he says. "It's just that, well... September's almost over."

I blink and agree, "Yes, it is," because, well, it's getting close. Today is the—I check my cell phone—twenty-second, so there's only a week and a few days left.

"I think it's about time we had The Talk."

"Uh, Dad? I really hate to tell you this, but you're like, four years and twenty-something guys too late," I say. "Besides, you already gave me hetero version of The Talk when I was like, ten, and that turned out to be totally useless. But don't worry, because even though you raised me with a thoroughly lacking understanding of the schematics of anal sex, you *did* raise me to be an inquisitive and experimental young man, so I've spent the better part of my high school career figuring it out on my own—"

"I meant The Talk about college."

Oh wow, that's so much worse than having to sit through another sex talk. Talking about my dick is something I'm completely comfortable with, even if I'm talking to my own parents. Talking about some hypothetical future where people keep threatening me with adulthood? Not so much. There doesn't seem to be much point in saying, *I've never given it much thought, because I never thought I'd make it to eighteen without dying of an overdose or something.* Instead, I take another long swig from the coffee pot and say, "Okay. Let's talk about it."

"Have you given any thought to what schools you might apply to? Or, at least, what you might want to study?" Dad asks.

I shrug. "Not really."

"Garen," he says warningly. "I've tried to tell you this before, and you never listen to me. You're eighteen, it's time to start thinking about your future."

I barely restrain an eyeroll. "I know, Dad, but thinking about my future isn't the same thing as figuring any of it out. I mean, it's not like I'm that good at anything except guitar, and setting shit on fire, and giving blowjobs. And I think we'd both be kidding ourselves if we pretended to think my plan was ever to do anything besides hang around here, mooching off you and Mom until you get bored of it and kick me out again. Then I can swallow my dignity and begin an illustrious career as a barista, or a music store clerk, or a... I don't fucking know, a stripper? A go-go boy? I've got nothing to offer the world except a

personality disorder and a crazy sick body. It's not like anyone ever said, 'Garen Anderson, now there's a kid who's gonna go far in life.'"

"I said that," Dad says mildly. "Your mother has always said that. I'm not sure why you try to pretend that you're not smart, or that you don't have the ability to do anything you set your mind to."

"I know, Dad. I should be all I can be. And apparently what I chose to be is a drug addict who got expelled from Lakewood High School," I say. "Do you even realize how embarrassing that is? You've met my Patton friends. You know what they're like. The fact that I got kicked out of school was lame enough, but getting kicked out of *public school*? It isn't as if colleges are going to be lining up to offer me admission after that."

"Garen," Dad says, and now it sounds a little like a plea. I very purposefully avoid his eyes. He presses on, "I know that you say that you don't care about your schoolwork, but I'm also the person who they send your report cards to, so I know that that's *bullshit*. Sure, you got into trouble a lot while you were at Patton, and it's possible that you are now actively *trying* to get detention at Lakewood, but you had a three point four GPA."

"It's lower at LHS," I say, trying to shrug it off. He doesn't let me.

"You don't know that for sure. This fall's grades have barely begun, but you only have one semester of grades from LHS. Last fall, you were still doing well. You may have gone down to a three point oh, but that's still a solid average. And your SAT scores were—"

"Didn't we agree to never talk about those?" I interrupt.

"No, *you* agreed that you didn't want to talk about those. You and your idiot self had that agreement, right after the scores came out during your junior year. *Your mother and I* agreed that we were insanely proud of you, and that you were acting like a middle-schooler for being so embarrassed to have done well. You did better than any of your friends—"

"So? I test well. That doesn't mean anything."

"You did better than Travis," Dad says. He must realize that that's gotten my attention, because he continues, "He took them twice, once in December and again in March. His highest combined score was still only a twenty-one forty. Over a million people take that test every year, and do you want to know how many of them get the score you got? About twenty."

Still craving my caffeine but unwilling to continue this conversation any longer, I stand up and stomp over to the cabinet to get a travel mug. Only half the coffee in the pot fits into it. I screw the cap on, chug the rest of what's left, and dump the pot into the sink. "Yeah, Dad, I get it. I'm a special snowflake, I did so well, go me. It's not that big of a deal."

"You got a perfect score on the SATs on your first try, Garen. That's a pretty big deal."

"We're not talking about this," I repeat loudly.

The truth is, even I was surprised by those scores. I had done well on the PSATs the year before, and I hadn't expected the SATs to be any different. I've always tested well; my stunning ability to not give the tiniest amount of shit about my scores means I'm relaxed enough to be one of the highest scorers on almost any standardized test I've ever taken. Still, I had never anticipated a perfect score. When the scores had shown up in my Patton dorm mailbox, I had been so fucking confused by them that I'd called the company in charge of scoring to confirm that there wasn't a mistake. There hadn't been, but it's not even really something to be proud of. Sure, I got most of the questions right on my own, but there were some that I guessed on, some I know I lucked out on.

I should've just shredded those scores the second they arrived in the mail. That way, I wouldn't have to hear about them for the rest of my life. I wouldn't have to have them hanging over my head as proof that all those *you could go so far in life if you would just pick a career goal and smoke less pot* lectures were true. I wouldn't have to feel so fucking guilty that I have *oh my god, so much potential*, but all I really want to do is hang out with my friends and play guitar in a rock band. You can't disappoint people if they don't realize you're capable of anything decent. They can only feel let down if you get their hopes up in the first place.

Dad hurries after me to stand in front of the door to the basement, blocking my escape. "Five schools. That's all I'm asking. Pick any five schools, send in your applications and transcripts, and we won't talk about this again until the spring, when you've gotten all your responses. Then we can—"

"Fine!" I burst out, squeezing past him and storming down into the basement. I retrieve my backpack from next to the couch and head back upstairs, because I don't care if it's still only seven o'clock—I am *not* going to hang around here and let my dad delude himself into thinking any college would want a formerly-expelled addict in their midst.

At the top of the stairs, Dad corners me again and stuffs the glossy brochures from the table into my backpack. "I've been looking at some schools. At least read the pamphlets. Give it some thought, talk to your school counselor—you already told me that seniors are required to go to informational sessions—"

"Informational *session*. Singular. A one-on-one meeting, and then one of the events later in the semester. There are going to be a bunch of gay little mixers and informational fairs where people from colleges all over the country come and try to pimp out their schools. But that's not until October," I argue.

"And October isn't that far away," Dad says, a note of finality in his voice. "I'm not screwing around, Garen, and you shouldn't be either. Read the brochures. Look at some colleges. Pick five. We'll talk in the spring. Now go to school."

I do, but I'm not fucking happy about it.

Stohler is already waiting at a table near the windows when I arrive at Starbucks that evening. She hasn't looked up from her phone, but she's somehow aware of my presence from the second I enter the shop, because she raises a hand and wiggles her fingers at me in greeting. I echo the gesture, but stop at the counter to buy myself two large cups of coffee before I join her. Her long blond hair is scraped back into a tight, conservative French braid, but her makeup is... drastic? Pronounced? I'm not sure if there's a polite way of saying *there's glitter everywhere and she's wearing more heavy black eyeliner than Ben and why are her eyelashes so long and fake-looking and that is some really fucking pink lipstick*. It's such a contrast to her torn jeans and slinky black tank top that for a long while, I just blink at her, trying to figure it out.

"How are you?" she asks without preamble, the moment I'm seated.

"Fine, I guess. You?"

Spine poker-straight, she leans her elbows on the table and steeples her fingers together, chin just resting atop her fingertips. "Can't complain. But we're not here to talk about me. We're here so you can amuse me with what a shitshow your life is."

"Alright, there's something I need to tell you, before I bother to explain anything else about my life. Because right now, this is the most important thing, and if you don't understand this, you won't understand anything else I could tell you. Is that okay?" I say. She raises her chin just enough to give a vague flick of her fingers before resuming her previous position. I assume this is her way of telling me to continue, so I take a steadying breath and say, "I'm in recovery."

She arches an eyebrow. "For?"

"I'm in recovery for a drug addiction," I amend. When she doesn't move, I continue, "I, um... I spent most of last spring alternating between coke binges and whiskey blackouts and zoning out on Vicodin. It wasn't as much fun as it sounds. In June, I had a nervous breakdown and ended up in rehab. The night you met me, I was supposed to be ninety-two days sober, but obviously, I relapsed. I went back into treatment last week, and now I'm ten days sober. You need to know that part, alright? I'm not—I can't drink anymore. Ever. And, you know, drugs, whatever. I mean, I still smoke—cigarettes, not pot, but I guess I could maybe get away with smoking a little of that if I wanted to, since it's not something I ever had to worry about. But for the most part, all the fun vices? I don't do them anymore. I can't. And from the very little I know about you, you drink, and I'm not sure how big of a part of your life that is, so if you want to end this little encounter right now, that's fine. But—"

"You're an idiot," she interrupts. "I don't have any problem with you being sober, and if you need help, it's good that you're getting it."

"Okay," I say, somewhat stunned. It's not supposed to be that easy, is it? But she's looking at me expectantly, and if I'm going to have to explain this, I might as well give her some entertainment, so I warn, "Most of the rest of this story involves my penis."

"I'd be disappointed if it didn't," she obliges.

I grin, but I'm not entirely sure where I can start. Finally, I say, "This isn't—look, do you have a pen? It'll be a lot easier if you just let me show you."

"I might have some eyeliner?" she says, digging into her purse. When she surfaces with a stick of creamy black eye pencil, I pluck it from her fingers and scribble the word *me* on the center of one of the napkins. I pause, then add Alex and Ben's names to the right.

"Alright," I begin. "Wanna go chronologically? Yeah, we'll go chronologically. Something like six years ago, Alex and Ben became best friends. I think they met at school? I don't know. Whatever. Sometimes, Alex gets drunk and kisses Ben, who's Edge, so he doesn't drink at all. Ben's gay, he's been out since he was fourteen, but up until recently, Alex has been claiming to be straight. Alex is in love with Ben, but Ben is pretty much the only person who doesn't know this. He thinks of him as a brother."

Stohler raises her eyebrows and takes a sip of her coffee. "Pseudo-incest. Depressing."

I throw my head back and laugh. "You have no idea how much worse the pseudo-incest is going to get, believe me. But alright, that's them." I draw a line between their names. "Four years ago, my parents sent me off to an all-boys, military boarding school—"

"Of course they did," Stohler says, grinning. "God, no wonder I ended up meeting you in a gay bar."

I make a face at her, but say, "I know, right? Anyway, that's how I met James." I add his name above my own. "We were roommates, we became best buds, and when I was fifteen and he was fourteen, we lost our virginities to each other." Another line connecting our names. "We spent the next few years sleeping together and... I don't know, I guess it was *like* we were dating? Everybody thought we were, because we were so close, but my first boyfriend was actually a guy named Dave." I add his name near Jamie's, then connect it to mine. "He, uh... I'm not going to get into it too much, because it still bothers me to talk about it, but he was an asshole. And he had a temper."

"A screaming temper or a beating temper?" Stohler asks.

I wince. "Both? I-I know it's, look, I'm not somebody's bitch, alright? I can handle myself. But he was—"

"Garen," she interrupts, reaching across the table to give me a hard flick to the wrist. She's clearly not used to trying to comfort people, if that's her version of a reassuring gesture. "You said you don't want to

talk about it, so move on. I'm not going to make you traumatize yourself or whatever."

It's one of the only times someone has ever told me *it's okay if you don't want to talk about it* and actually meant it. It's the first time I haven't still felt an obligation to explain myself. To show my appreciation, I offer Stohler a very small smile. She rolls her eyes, gestures to the napkin and says, "Come on. Add some more names to your slut web."

I grin and duck back over the napkin. "Okay. So, after Dave and I broke up, I... well, let's just say I got really fucking popular at school." I scribble *every dude @ Patton* onto the napkin between my name and Jamie's, then connect myself to it. Stohler snickers. "And, alright, let's just say that Jamie was already pretty popular at that point, yeah?" I connect his name to the same group. "Now... there's only one other name that really needs to be here. And that's going to make things so much more complicated, alright? So you need to swear you're not about to judge me."

"I will swear no such thing."

"Stohls, come on, this part is really weird, and if—"

"No, I'm pretty sure the weird part is right here," she says, reaching over to tap the *every dude* part. Some of the eyeliner smears off onto her fingertip; she glowers at it, then rubs it off onto my sleeve. "Anyway, how much weirder can it get?"

"I should probably mention that I'm actually from Cleveland, Ohio. That's where I lived up until I went to boarding school in New York. I moved to Connecticut last fall, because my dad decided to get a house with his girlfriend, Evelyn. And her daughter, Bree. And uh, her son. Travis." I print Travis' name below mine.

"Oh dear god," Stohler says, but her grin is so wide it looks like it might split her face in half. "Oh, god, please don't draw that line."

I admit, "It's not getting drawn yet, but it's gonna get drawn in a minute."

"Man, that is so fucked up," she says gleefully. "What is wrong with you, dude?"

"*So many things*. But first—" I draw a quick slash from my name to Ben's, "—Ben was the first person I met when I moved to Lakewood, which was great for me, because he's honestly one of the best friends anyone could ever ask for. It was *also* great for me because we have a lot in common. Namely, we both like music, we both like when he cooks me delicious meals, and we both like when I fuck him so hard he can feel it for a week after."

A man in a suit at the next table looks around at me, bewildered, then stands up and moves to another table. Stohler pauses to sneer at him before asking me, "Hang on, why haven't you connected this Travis guy in yet? Is he going to bang you or Ben?"

"You're jumping ahead in the story," I say fiercely.

"So, both, then?"

"God, shut up." I jab at the line between me and Ben. "So, yes, Ben and I slept together. And it was good—good enough that we'd probably still be sleeping together, if Halloween hadn't happened. Because last Halloween, I went to a party with Ben and Alex, and a mysterious gentleman in a mask started hitting on me. I was wearing a mask, too, but apparently my ass is just that fantastic that he was willing to take the chance that I'd be a troll in the facial region. I followed him outside and kissed him, but then he spoke, and even though he still had the mask on, I realized it was—dun dun dun! — Travis, dad's girlfriend's son, who I'd been totally trying to put the moves on for like, two weeks at that point. He didn't realize it until he came home later, and he came into my bedroom and saw me in the costume—"

"Nope," Stohler says, shaking her head vigorously. "Nope, this is bullshit. Seriously, masked men at a Halloween party? You didn't figure out each other's identities even though you were making out with each other? This isn't your life, this is an episode of *Gossip Girl*. Literally, I think they've actually had this story line before."

"It's going to get so much worse, Stohler, please just let me finish the story," I say loudly. We're both having way too much fun with this, which is kind of surprising. It's been so long since I found any of this funny, mostly because it's been ruining my life for so long. Still, I connect my name to Travis' and say, "So, yeah, Travis and I started secretly dating each other. At times, it was great. He's such an awesome guy—he's smart, he's sweet, he's fuckin' gorgeous. But then, other times, it was totally fucked. Like—I shit you not—the first night we slept together? Which, incidentally, was the first time he slept with *anyone*. Yeah, that was the night that my dad and his mom—"

"Don't say it."

"—yep, got engaged."

"Oh god, this story just keeps getting worse," she groans.

"So, he and I were doing, you know, whatever it was we were doing. And that lasted up until January. Now may be an appropriate time—if any part of this is appropriate—to mention that... alright, I sometimes get a little bit carried away with myself, I guess, because I sort of asked him to marry me?"

Stohler stares at me, eyebrows stretched up towards her hairline. "You proposed to your own stepbrother."

"Well, he wasn't my stepbrother yet."

"And you were both eighteen?"

I smile sheepishly. "No, we were both seventeen. Look, it was like, a hypothetical engagement, alright? I didn't mean 'will you marry me right now,' I meant 'will you marry me someday.' Anyway, he's just as weird, so he said yes. And the next morning was the day that his older sister walked in on us in bed together."

"Shit," Stohler is unable to stop herself from saying.

"Needless to say, our parents became aware of what was going on. And I've... never exactly been a great son. My parents tell me I'm awesome, but they have to, because they're my parents. I'm their only kid, and they don't want to believe they screwed up as badly as evidence would dictate. But I guess boning my future stepbrother was the last straw, because my dad kicked me out."

"Shit," she repeats.

I shrug and dip my fingers beneath the collar of my shirt to extract the Star of David, pressing each of its points into my fingertip over and over, just for something to do. "Yeah, well, it wasn't that bad. I mean..." I sigh. "I broke up with Travis. I didn't have anywhere in Connecticut where I could really go—my mom lives in Manhattan, and I knew that I'd head there before anywhere else, and I couldn't take him with me. His mom's a total homophobe, and she'd hate me even if I hadn't fucked her son, so I have no doubt she would have called the cops and reported me for kidnapping. And... well, the thing about Travis is this: he shines so brightly that sometimes, it's hard to look right at him, you know? He's one of the smartest people I've ever met, and he's passionate about his goals in life, and he's so wonderful, so perfect, so young. And I just sort of... let life happen to me. I'm not a total fuck-up; I get pretty good grades, I aced my SATs, I've never technically been arrested. I play guitar, I sing, so I guess I'm talented, or whatever. But I get into trouble a lot. I get into fights. And I do—or, I used to do a lot of drugs. Not necessarily while I

was living in Lakewood, but before that. And no matter how much I wanted to keep Travis, I knew he deserved better than what I was capable of giving him. So, I left. Without him.”

Without explaining herself but making a gesture for me to remain seated, Stohler stands up and walks over to the counter. I watch in silence as she buys another coffee, but instead of returning to her seat, she heads for the door, beckoning me after her. I follow her out onto the sidewalk; she taps two cigarettes out of the pack from her purse, lights them both, and hands me one. She gestures for me to continue—she’s a very non-verbal person, apparently—and I suck in a drag before saying, “I went to New York. First, I stayed with my mom—man, you should’ve heard the phone calls she and my dad had those first few days. They’ve only been divorced for like, three and a half years, so I guess they both still have a lot of... issues with each other. Anyway, by the time I even got to her apartment, Dad had cooled off enough that he wanted me to come home, but I guess Ev kept freaking out over the idea of me being in the house with the son she claims I ‘took advantage of.’ That fucking sucked. I couldn’t put up with being in the apartment when all I ever heard was my parents on the phone, talking all about the boy I was in love with, the one I’d just left. My mom agreed to let me go crash with James at Patton—my old school. And I stayed there until—oh, hang on.”

I hand her the cigarette and dart back into the coffee shop to snatch up the napkin and eyeliner I’d left on the table. When I come back outside, Stohler says, “What, another line?”

“Two more lines. Alright,” I say, uncapping the eyeliner. “There was apparently a party about a month after I left, and at said party, Alex—” I poke his name with the tip of the eyeliner, then drag a line over to Travis’ name, “—hooked up with Travis.”

“Wait, I thought you said Alex only recently admitted that he’s not straight,” Stohler says when I draw the next line.

I nod. “Yeah, I didn’t say it made sense. But that happened, and then like, a week later, Travis started dating Ben.” Stohler blinks. I nod again. “Yep. That’s the same face I made when I found out.”

“I don’t—were they friends?”

“Nope.”

“Did they even know each other?”

“Barely.” I pause, smirk, and pluck my cigarette from her fingers again. “That’s sort of par for the course with Travis. More on that in a minute. But whatever. They started dating. And I’m selfish as fuck, so when I found out, I came back. That was on the day of the wedding.”

Stohler leans back against the building and rolls her eyes towards the sky. “Of course it was.”

“The next night was the first time in months that I did coke. I thought it would be a nice distraction, and it was. It made me feel so blissfully, beautifully numb. I—maybe if it had stayed as that, I could have been okay, but I tried to—I still needed a distraction,” I say, a little bit desperately now. This is where it’s going to get really fucked, and for reasons I’m not entirely clear on, it’s so important to me that Stohler not be scared off by what I’m going to tell her. I like Stohler, she seems like such an awesome chick, and if these parts of the story are creepy enough to send her away, it’ll be just like I’m doing them all over again. I lick my lips, tap my finger against Dave’s name on the napkin, and say, “Remember him?”

“The guy with the temper?”

I nod. “After I came back to Connecticut, I looked him up. He goes to school here. *Here here*—”

“Starbucks?”

"Yale, you asshole. He goes to Yale. I looked him up, and I asked him to get back together, and again, I really don't want to get into the finer points, but it ended... badly."

Stohler is quiet. Her cigarette has burned down to nothing; she stubs out what's left and lights another. "How badly?"

I close my eyes for a moment and rest my head against the side of the building. "I ended up in a coma. Not a long one, or whatever. Just a day. I think my body just shut down, because I couldn't handle—I had a concussion. Two cracked ribs. Three broken fingers. A broken leg."

"Fuck," she mutters, smoothing her free hand over her braid and avoiding my eyes.

"Travis was the one who found me," I say in little more than a whisper. "I don't remember it, I wasn't even conscious, but he found me. A-And the doctors uh, they put me on a lot of painkillers. I'm... sort of an instant gratification kind of guy. And pills work faster if you crush them up and snort them, instead of swallowing them. So, that's what I started doing, and I was drinking a lot, and I started doing way more blow. My parents made me take out a restraining order against Dave, even though I wouldn't file assault charges, but that just meant that I was... fuck, I was so lonely. Even though he was beating me up all the time, at least he was there, you know? At least I had a warm body in my bed with me, at least I had someone telling me he loved me. And when I lost even that, I couldn't handle it, so I was using a lot more."

"Is that when you decided to go to rehab?" Stohler asks.

I shake my head and say carefully, "No. First, my stepmom sat me down and told me how worthless I was, and how I was ruining everyone's lives by sticking around, and how Travis would never love me again because I had become a disgusting little monster. And then I went to New York and let my dealer fuck me in exchange for a line of coke. And then I tried to disappear to Ohio, but Ben—" I tap his name, "—came after me, and he dragged me back, and when we got coffee at a highway rest stop, I sucked off this random guy for more drugs, and Ben flipped out on the guy, and he ended up beating the shit out of the guy, but he kind of got his ass kicked, too. And then, when I got back to Lakewood, I got out my father's gun so that I could kill myself, and Travis had to fight to get it away from me. And then I decided to go to rehab."

For several lengthy minutes, Stohler and I blink at each other in silence, each of us occasionally taking a drag from our cigarettes. Eventually, she stretches out a very tentative hand and curls it over my shoulder, squeezing tight for about half a second before she retreats. I offer her a half-smile. Neither of us is as good at this as we should be.

The story isn't over, but it's getting kind of dark, and I'm getting tired of talking. I pull out the eyeliner again and start adding names and lines, "Anyway, I was fine, up until last week, when I saw Travis kissing this girl, Joss. It's not that I expected him to wait for me forever—"

"—except for how you probably secretly did—"

"Except for how I did, yeah. Anyway, that's what led up to me going to that club the night we met. Things were still pretty fucked up the next day—I guess I sort of went on a drinking binge. Part of that binge involved me trying to distract myself by having sex with Alex. Which turned out to be even worse than it originally seemed, because a few days ago, I found out that apparently—despite all logic dictating that this would be the dumbest thing ever—Alex and James? This James?" I point to the name. "Yeah. They've been fucking for like, months. I didn't even know they *knew* each other. But I guess they met at my dad's wedding, and started boning while I was in the hospital in the spring, and so... I dunno. That happened."

Stohler plucks the napkin from my fingers and peers down at it. "I guess now all we need is to have your friend James fuck Travis and Ben, and then that's pretty much everybody, isn't it?"

"God, I think I'd kill myself if that happened," I groan, and she laughs. I sigh. "Tell me life gets easier after high school."

"Life gets easier after high school," she parrots back. She rolls her eyes and adds, "Except for how it doesn't. Well... that depends on your definition of 'easier.' I mean, it's sure as hell not what I expected life would be like."

"Do you go to college?"

"No, I work," she says. She pauses, stubs out her cigarette, and lights a third. She admits, "I'm sort of a dancer."

"Oh?" I say, because whenever someone says they're 'sort of a dancer,' what they really mean is that they're a stripper. I guess that at least explains the makeup, even if it doesn't explain the hair.

Stohler seems to realize I've understood this, because she smirks at me. "Look, I know it's a shitty job, but it pays my rent. Besides, I hate to break it to you, Mr. I-Wanna-Be-A-Rockstar, but jobs in the arts? Really not that easy to come by. I used to want to be a *dancer* dancer. I went to school for it and everything; I've been doing ballet, jazz, and contemporary dance since I could walk. But I graduated from college a year ago, and it was so much harder to find dance work than I ever thought it would be. It costs a lot of money to live anywhere, and most regular jobs wanted people with regular degrees, so I eventually realized that using my bangin' body and ridiculous flexibility to pay my bills would be the most practical solution. I make bank, and I don't particularly hate my job, but I get that a lot of people have an issue with—let's call a spade a spade—people who do sex work. So, if you're going to be a dick about what I do, get that out of your system right now so that I can walk out."

"Stohler, I'm a fucking trust fund kid. I've never had a legitimate job, my parents have paid for everything I own, and yet I still have been known to suck people off for money to fund my drug habit. I really don't think I'm in any position to judge you for what you do," I say.

She snorts. "Yeah, you really—oh, fuck." She digs her cell phone out of her pocket to check the time, then smashes her cigarette out against the sole of her shoe. "I'm about to be late for work."

"Dude, it's like, not even nine o'clock," I say, frowning.

"I know, but I *start* work at nine. Nine to five, actually," she says, and a pair of dimples appear with her smile.

I shadow her to her car, a beat-up but still pretty sexy Mustang. She flings her purse into the backseat, then surfaces with a can of hairspray, which she thrusts into my hands. I watch her tug the elastic from the end of her hair and carefully unwind the braid. She flips her head upside down, sprays it with an incredibly impressive amount of hairspray, then throws her head back again, shaking out her wild blond waves. Bam. Instant sex appeal. I can't help but grin at the transformation. If there's one thing I can understand in this world, it's the importance of hair products in the creation of a sex god. Or, goddess, as the case may be.

When she realizes that I'm watching her, Stohler exaggerates a wink at me and rounds the car to slip into the driver's seat. She leans over to wind down the passenger window, and I duck into it, bracing my elbows on it as she says to me, "Thanks for telling me your entire life story."

"Life story? Woman, that was just one year. We'd have to get together again, if you wanted to hear the rest of my life. Possibly get together more than once."

She frowns down at the steering wheel and says, "Well. I mean, we could, if you wanted."

"Are you asking me to be your friend?" I say, grinning slyly at her.

"Don't be gross," she says immediately. Then, after a beat, "I told you. I don't really do the friend thing."

I shrug. "Neither do I. Not well, at least. And certainly not with people I have no designs on."

"I'll be a new and exciting challenge for you, then," she says. "You can see what wins out: your compulsion to sleep with every single one of your friends, or your revulsion with female anatomy."

"Quite the dilemma," I agree. I lean out of the car and rap my knuckles in the roof. "You're going to be late for work. I'll text you sometime, yeah?"

Another acknowledging flick of the fingers, and then she's pulling out of the parking space. She makes it halfway down the block before I text her, *remind me to tell you about the FLAMING 15year old school play director who wants to S my D*. Apparently, Stohler has no objection to texting while driving, because just inside of a minute later, she responds, *The idea of hearing about any more of your gentleman callers both excites and horrifies me. Next time?*

nope, I reply. *next time, you get to tell me all about the childhood trauma that led to you becoming a sex worker.*

This is why I usually choose to have no friends. Fine. I'll show you mine, since you showed me yours.

Grinning, I tuck my phone back into my pocket and head for the car.

Chapter Eight

“Everything in the world is about sex, except sex. Sex is about power.” –Oscar Wilde

15 days sober

When I leave rehearsal on Wednesday night, I know that something is wrong before I even see the car. There's a crowd of people milling around my parking space—and they know it's my car, they have to. I drive the only vintage Ferrari in Lakewood. For fuck's sake, I might drive the only *red car* in Lakewood, other than Corey Copicetti's burgundy pick-up. It's a noticeable vehicle, especially considering the fact that most of my classmates have been around to see me speed into the parking lot every morning, windows all rolled down while I blast my stereo and chain-smoke. No one here should have any doubt that it's my car; that's sort of the problem, I realize now.

The first thing I notice is that someone has dented the side strakes. Those iconic, cheese grater sides—the second thing I fell in love with on this car, right after the color—are smashed in, probably with a baseball bat or a lacrosse stick or something. All of the lights have been shattered. The mirror on the passenger side is dangling halfway off. Deep, zig-zagging gouges have been keyed into the paintjob. There are words scribbled all over the hood in Sharpie.

I don't come close enough to read them. Instead, I pull my cell phone out of my pocket and dial the number for the Lakewood Police Department. Once I've connected, I say dully, “Hi. My name's Garen Anderson, and my car's been vandalized. I'm standing in the parking lot of Lakewood High School. Would it be possible for me to get someone out here so I can file an incident report? I'm going to need it for my insurance company.”

A few of the drama club members gaping at my car actually start when I speak; I don't think most of them noticed my arrival. Once I've confirmed that a cop is on his way out to meet me, I begin to slowly circle the car, using my cell phone to take pictures of every injury to it. The lights. The strakes. The scratches. The mirror. Only the words and phrases written on the hood give me pause, but I still photograph each one individually.

Faggot.

Go back to rehab, you still need it.

Cokehead.

Smoke this, Anderson.

Have fun getting AIDS!

And then, right along the seam separating the hood from the body of the car, in another person's handwriting, *is your little brother good in bed?*

On the bright side, if I ever decide I need to make myself throw up again, I can just remember how I feel right now, reading that line. The realization that the aforementioned “little brother” might be somewhere around here is enough to make me snap out of it. I look around at the collection of people and say, “Do, um... do any of you guys know who did this?”

“It was like this when we came outside,” Miranda replies. Her eyes are fixed on the writing, but after a moment of silence, she turns her attention to me. She actually looks kind of disappointed, but I'm not sure if her disappointment is directed at whoever wrote the words, or at me, because they're justified. She says, “Do you want us to wait with you until the police get here?”

“Nah, you can all go home. It's been a long day,” I say. I want to sit down, but I'm not sure that I should

touch the car yet, so I drop down onto the curb in front of my space. Without any sort of hesitation, Miranda sits down on my right side. A beat later, Annabelle sits on my other side. Nate moves to stand in front of me; clearly, his willingness to wait with me is not accompanied by a willingness to sit on a parking lot curb while wearing designer trousers. I offer them all a vague smile of appreciation, which fades to a smirk when I light up a cigarette and they all shift a little bit away from me, wrinkling their noses.

Once it's clear that I'm not going to throw a temper tantrum or do anything else interesting, most of the players who haven't bothered to speak to me decide to head out. By the time the patrol car pulls into the lot, lights flashing but no siren wailing, the only people left are Nate, Annabelle, Miranda, Riley, and myself. Travis and Joss are here, but they're not *here*—they have remained, probably at Travis' misguided insistence, but they're hovering halfway across the lot. He's leaning against his car; she's leaning against him.

I'm not entirely sure when they decided to go public with their gross little relationship, but I'm guessing it happened sometime after I bitched them out for it during lunch last week. Regardless, it's obnoxious; I've barely been able to go anywhere in the senior hallway without seeing them hanging all over each other. He walks her to class with an arm around her shoulders. She gives his hand a playful little tug every time they pass each other in the hall. They make out like, fucking constantly. Part of me is really glad that I was living in New York while Travis was dating Ben, if this is how oh-so-adorable he acts with the people he dates.

A bigger part of me is just jealous and bitter that, despite dating him for half the fall semester last year, I never got the chance to date him, not like this. Not in public, where everyone can see, where all our friends and classmates have the privilege of being nauseated by it.

The cop car pulls up next to the Testarossa, parks, and an officer gets out. "Garen Anderson?"

"That's me," I say, stubbing out my cigarette on the bottom of my boot and standing up.

The officer shakes my hand and says, "Hi, Garen. My name's Officer Lowitz, I'm with the Lakewood PD. You want to tell me what happened?"

I shrug. "I stay late after school every day except Friday. I'm in the school play—these guys are in drama club with me." I gesture to the rest of the group. "Anyway, the car was like this when we came outside, but I don't know how long it had been like that. It might've happened during the day, might've happened ten minutes ago. I couldn't tell you."

"And none of you saw who did this?" Officer Lowitz asks. We all shake our heads. "Do any of your classmates have a problem with you? That is, is there a chance that this might have been random? Some kid just wanted to mess up a car, so he picked the one that stuck out the most—"

"No," I say, shaking my head. "There's, um..." I sigh and gesture to the hood. "Whoever it is—" Jack fucking Thorne, I'd wager anything, "—wrote a bunch of stuff on it. They used my name, called me a fag, referenced some, uh... I don't know, some bad stuff about my history. It was definitely directed at me. And it was at least two people," I say. At Officer Lowitz's questioning glance, I sigh and point to the *little brother* comment. "That one's in a different hand than the rest of them."

His eyes narrow in on the words, but his voice is steady when he says, "Is there something I'm missing?"

"It's about me," says a bland voice from behind me, and I squeeze my eyes shut. I'm not going to turn around. I'm not going to look at him. Neither of us deserves that. But I can picture Travis shrugging as he says, "Garen and I used to go out, but after we broke up, my mom married his dad. They're getting a divorce now, but we still get shit for it a lot."

"Oh," Officer Lowitz says, clearly searching for an appropriate answer, but before he can process one, he freezes. After a moment, he turns to face me, eyes wide and says, "Just a minute now. You're *that* Garen

Anderson?”

“Um. Yes?” I say. “Have we met before, or have I just finally reached that point in my life where the local authorities have started keeping track of who I put my dick into?” I turn to Riley, the nearest person to me, and add, “My mom always warned me this would happen. She’d say, ‘Garen Michael Anderson, if you don’t learn to keep it in your pants, there will be serious—’”

“I was one of the officers handling the Walczyk case last spring,” Lowitz interrupts, thrusting his hand out to shake mine again. He is way too eager about this. I don’t feel like I can move, but I must be able to, because my hand is suddenly in his, and I’m letting him pump it up and down as he says, “Really, I’m glad to see you’ve recovered so well. That was the first domestic assault case I handled after joining the force, and man, I don’t think I’ll ever forget it. I saw your injuries, how much blood there was—I’m surprised you survived. You must be a real fighter, huh?”

I force a smile, but my muscles are so strained, it must look like a grimace. “I guess so.” There are so many pairs of eyes on me right now. I can feel them burning on my skin.

“Has the case come to trial yet?” Lowitz asks, ever so fucking casually, like this is obviously the only thing I’d want to discuss.

I cross my arms over my chest. “No. There’s not going to be a trial. I, um... my mom’s my lawyer? It took some convincing, I guess, but she let me drop the charges against him.”

Officer Lowitz’s excitement at getting a chance to meet the victim of his first big assault case dims a little. In fact, it sort of disappears altogether. His eyes rake over my face, my neck, any exposed bit of skin—at first, I’m sort of bewildered that he’s checking me out, but then I realize he’s not; he’s looking for scars. And I’m ashamed to admit that there are several, mostly scattered across my torso, my shoulders. The fingers on my right hand are the most noticeably disfigured—the backs of my knuckles have slightly dark, slightly raised slashes across them, the product of Dave stomping on my hand in combat boots. When I try to flatten my hand, my ring finger still looks a little bit crooked, but it hasn’t given me any trouble. I can still write, and play the guitar, and jerk off, or whatever. The only scar that really bothers me is from years ago—a thin, almost invisible line along the right side of my nose. Dave had broken it during The Fight—the first one—and it had healed sort of... wrong? Crooked? Ugly? I’m not sure if the scar is from the punch he landed that was hard enough to break it, or if it’s leftover from the nosejob my parents let me get during the summer after sophomore year to return my face to what it had looked like before. Most people can’t even see the scar, but any time I look in the mirror, it’s the only thing I can look at.

It’s pretty obvious that Officer Lowitz doesn’t notice it now. He does, however, say, “Is there any chance that he could have been the one to vandalize your vehicle?”

I shake my head. He raises his eyebrows. Reluctantly, I explain, “I have a restraining order against him. He can’t call me, text me, email me, add me as a friend on any social networking sites, or come within a hundred feet of me, my school, or my house at any point during the next two and a half years. It’s in effect until my twenty-first birthday. Look, David’s a lot of things, but he’s not an idiot. He comes from an old money family, he’s a Patton Military Academy legacy kid, he goes to Yale—those things, that lifestyle... it all comes with certain expectations. He risked enough by dating some trashy little queer from Ohio in the first place, and getting arrested for assaulting said faggot? Didn’t exactly endear him to his parents, trust me. He’s not going to risk ruining the rest of his life just to piss me off.”

“It’s still worth looking into,” says Travis’ stupid, stubborn voice from behind me.

“No, it’s not worth looking into,” I say flatly, taking care to address the cop instead of my ex. “Whoever did this to my car did it because he wanted the repairs to cost as much as possible, but Dave knows that getting even this amount of damage fixed will barely put a dent in my monthly credit card allowance. When trust fund kids fight each other, they break each others’ bones, not each other’s shit, because physical possessions? Money? It all means nothing to us. I wouldn’t drive a fucking vintage Ferrari if I

couldn't afford to maintain it. Trashing my car isn't Dave's style. Besides, *that*—" I take a few steps closer to the car to point at the words on the hood, "—isn't his handwriting, and *this*—" I wrap my knuckles against the *little brother* comment, "—isn't something Dave would need to ask, because I already *told* him how my stepbrother is in bed."

That's enough to make Joss turn around and stride back in the direction of Travis' car. I sneer at her retreating back, and once she has settled herself into the passenger seat of his car and looked through the window again, she meets my eyes and sneers right back. Travis sighs, but he neither follows her nor speaks to me. Officer Lowitz clears his throat and says, "Alright, I'm going to call a tow truck to move this to a garage, because I can't let you drive it anywhere without working lights and mirrors. Then, I'm going to take some pictures, fill out an incident report, that sort of thing. Can you get one of your friends here to give you a ride home?"

They're not my friends. They're in the same club as me, sure, and they're civil to me, but every time one of them meets my eyes, I can tell that they're not my friends. I shake my head and say, "I'll call somebody. It's fine."

He nods and steps back towards his car. Miranda reaches out and tugs on my sleeve. "It's fine, Garen. I can drive you home. You'll need to give me directions, but—"

"I'll call somebody," I repeat, extracting my sleeve from her grasp. She frowns at me and opens her mouth again, presumably to protest. I cut her off once more with, "Look, I appreciate that you guys decided to wait with me, but I can handle it, alright? I'm not actually friends with you guys. We put up with each other because we've got this stupid fucking play to put on. So, thank you, but you can leave. I'll call one of my *actual* friends."

In a truly stunning display of the best timing ever, the display on my cell phone lights up at that moment. And thank god, because I really don't want to have to look at the hurt expression on Miranda's face anymore.

"Hey, jackass," Alex greets me when I finally answer. "Where the hell are you? We've been parked outside your house for half an hour. I thought you said you'd be home so we could play together before we head to the train station."

Fuck, the train station. I'm supposed to be using my now-fucked car to drive to Union Station to pick up Jamie, who has finally agreed to blow off his Thursday and Friday classes to come spend a few days in Lakewood. Perfect. I squeeze my eyes shut and drag my fingers through my hair, yanking a little on the strands to distract myself from how infuriated I am right now. "I'm still at school. And I need a ride. Can you come pick me up?"

"Don't you have your car?" he asks, and I can hear the frown in his voice.

"If it's a problem, I can try to get the cop to drive me home, but like... we know how well I do with people in positions of authority, you know? I'll probably end up getting myself shot, and—"

Alex cuts in, "Dude. Cop? What happened to your car?"

"Trashed it," I say flatly.

"Are you okay?" he asks, and when I make a noise in the affirmative, he hesitates before asking, "Accident?"

"Nope," I say, letting the word fall from my lips with a small pop. "No, I am pretty certain that someone didn't *accidentally* key my car, smash out the lights, dent the sides in, take off one of the mirrors, and write 'have fun getting AIDS' on the hood in permanent marker. Pretty sure that was all on purpose. Can you please come pick me up?"

"Fuck," Alex breathes, and I can hear him muttering something to Ben before he says to me, "Yeah, man, we'll come pick you up now. Be there in ten."

I hang up without another word. The next ten minutes pass in relative silence; Miranda is the first to leave, probably still smarting from my rejection. Nate, the fifteen-year-old baby gay, is picked up by a minivan that I can only assume is being driven by his mom. Riley claps me on the shoulder and heads out with a murmur of sympathy. By the time the tow truck arrives, I'm alone with Officer Lowitz, Annabelle—who remains stubbornly seated on the curb—and Travis, who has spent the last ten minutes leaning against the nearest lamp post, watching me in silence. Joss is still waiting in his car, becoming steadily and obviously more pissed off. I don't bother to make small talk with the guy driving the tow truck; he gives me a business card with the location of the garage he'll be bringing it to, with instructions to call the next morning to work out what we'll do next. He's in the process of bringing my car up onto the lift when Alex's silver Honda swings into the lot.

I'm too busy scowling and shoving my backpack into the trunk to really notice that Travis has moved, but by the time I've flung myself into the backseat and opened my mouth to start in on my bitching, he has ducked down to speak to Ben through the passenger window. "Hi. Thanks for picking him up. Other people offered, but he was being a bitch about it."

"He's like that," Ben says dryly, waving me off when I slug him hard in the shoulder in response. "He wouldn't even let you bring him home?"

Travis shrugs. "He's not talking to me anymore."

Alex twists around in his seat to ask me, "Why aren't you talking to him anymore?"

"I'm not talking to him because I don't make a habit of talking to guys who think it's cool to tell me they don't want to be friends with me anymore when I'm blackout drunk, in the middle of a relapse. He started this, not me, but he's spent the last week trying to make small talk with me," I say. "So, I guess I'm not talking to him 'cause he's a fuckin' tool."

Travis says, a shade too calmly, "No, he's not talking to me because he's been acting like a petulant child for weeks now."

"Maybe I'm not talking to you because you started fucking flirting with me the second I got out of rehab in August, and you started holding my hand at school, and you joined the goddamn stage crew so that you could spend more time with me, but then you started banging some girl you barely know, just because she was there. Maybe I'm not talking to you because you're a fucking tease. Maybe I'm not talking to you because I thought you liked me, but you don't, and I don't know what to say to you anymore, okay?" I snap. Silence. I finally manage to force myself to look over at him. He's just staring at me, like it hurts him that I'd actually acknowledge what a dickbag he's been lately. I slump down in my seat and say, "Whatever, McCall. See you at tomorrow's rehearsal. Have fun fucking your bitch of a girlfriend in the backseat of your car."

A muscle in his jaw twitches a bit, but then he's making it so much worse, because he's leaning back and saying, "Thanks. I will."

"Alex, if you don't run over that asshole right now, this friendship is over."

"Alright, well, we're going to head out now," Ben says loudly over whatever snide retort Travis was planning to say. He smiles benignly at his ex-boyfriend and says, "I'll text you later."

Travis stalks back to his car without even saying goodbye to the two people in this car he's actually friends with, because he's just the rudest. Alex shifts back into drive, but he's not able to make it out of the parking lot quickly enough to prevent us all from seeing that, the second he's in his car, Travis knots a

hand in Josslyn's hair and hauls her into a bruising kiss. Scowling, I lean forward to crank up the stereo and try to lose myself in the noise.

We actually manage to make it all the way to New Haven before Ben is unable to keep silent any longer. He punches the power button on the stereo, instantly cutting off the music, and turns around in his seat to stare at me with wide eyes. "Does he really have a girlfriend?" "I'm sorry, did you miss him sticking his tongue in her mouth in the parking lot? Because I didn't," I say. Ben's teeth clamp down on his lower lip. I sigh and nod, turning to stare out the car window. "Yeah. He's really got a girlfriend."

"Oh," is all Ben says, and now I feel like an asshole. The truth is, sometimes I forget that I'm not the only guy who's still trying to make himself let go of Travis McCall.

And I know he won't ask, so I force myself to offer, "Her name's Joss Pryce. She's playing lead in the play, they met at rehearsal a few weeks ago. They hooked up about two weeks ago. That—" I suck in a deep breath, let it out slowly. "I saw them. Their first kiss? I saw it. That was, um... what made me freak out. The night I relapsed. That's what prompted it."

Though he has to twist at an awkward angle to do it, Alex reaches back to squeeze my knee. I give him a weak, thankful smile in the rearview mirror before returning to staring out the window. And then, realizing where I am, I say, "Hang on, can you pull into this lot?"

"What, this apartment complex?" Ben asks.

"Yeah. Just for a minute, there's something I wanna do," I say. They've been my friends for too long to really care about questioning me, so they follow me easily when I direct Alex to a parking space and climb out of the car. Just inside the building, I thumb the intercom button, and after a moment, Stohler's voice crackles from the speaker. "What?"

"It's Garen. Be nice and open the door, I need to whine," I say.

"Don't you always?" she snipes, but there's a loud buzz, and the door unlatches. I gesture for Ben and Alex to enter, and they do so without comment. I lead the way up to Stohler's apartment—I'm still always a little surprised at myself for remembering which one it is. I've been over twice since we got coffee last Friday, and both times, I've felt like the place would be more familiar if I were drunk. Regardless, I find the right apartment and hammer on the door. When Stohler answers, her hair is tightly braided, she's clutching a coffee mug the size of a mixing bowl, and she's wearing nothing but a red lace bra and an unbuttoned pair of denim shorts. If she's even remotely fazed by being topless in front of two dudes she's

never met before, she hides it well. That's probably an occupational hazard of taking one's clothes off for a living—lack of modesty. At least she has an excuse for it. I say, "That asshole at school, the one with the weird hate-boner for me? Jack? Keyed my car and smashed out all the lights."

She takes a long sip from her mug before saying, "I know a guy who'll kneecap him for thirty bucks. And if violence isn't your thing, I can set him up with this bitch I work with who'll give him a wicked case of crabs."

"Both. I want both," I say. "He keyed my Ferrari. I want him to get kneecapped *while* he's fucking a chick with crabs, because I want him to spend the rest of his life associating orgasms with an itchy cock and the sensation of his patella shattering, so that every time he gets hard, he starts sobbing. Also, will you help me break into my shrink's office so I can go through her files until I find a psychopath who'll be glad to tie him to an electric fence and rip out his fingernails one by one and pierce his testicles with rusty fish hooks?"

"Honey, you need to pay more attention to the stories I tell you about the guys who come into the club. I know like, four people who will do that just 'cause they get off on it, and we won't have to commit felony trespass to get their info. Hang on, I'll get my phone," she says. I follow her into the apartment, and only once we're both polished off whatever coffee's left in the pot does it occur to her to blink around at Alex and Ben and say, "Also, hi. I'm Stohler. You're allowed to actually come into the apartment, if you want."

"Oh, right. These are my friends—"

"All two of them?"

"Fuck you, Stohls, I have *four* friends, counting you. You just have me."

She shrugs. "One friend and no taste. I knew there was a reason my parents were never proud of me."

"Maybe they're not proud of you because you used your years of classical dance training to become a sex worker," I suggest. We spend a solid minute kicking each other; I'm wearing combat boots and she's barefoot, so I win pretty easily. I kick off my boots so it won't hurt her too much when I stomp on her bare foot. "Anyway, if you're done making it all about you, these are my friends. Short one's Ben McCutcheon, tall one's Alex Baker."

"It's nice to meet you," Ben says, stepping forward to shake her hand, a gesture that is then echoed by

Alex. Stohler quirks an eyebrow at me, clearly her way of saying, *Look at you, with your little gentlemen friends*. I smirk back instead of saying, *Right? I may be mostly friendless, but the dudes I do hang out with are totally rad*.

We are interrupted by the sudden appearance of one of her roommates, the girl with dyed red hair, who seems to have decided to travel from the living room to the kitchen expressly for the purpose of glaring at Stohler and saying, "Lindsey, the roommate agreement is really freaking clear. I don't get why you refuse to obey it."

"Which part?" Stohler sighs.

"The part about not having more than one guest over at a time," the girl snaps. She pauses, gives Stohler a once-over, and says, "Also, the part about you not wearing your *work clothes* in the common areas. Like, sorry, but the rest of us don't necessarily want to see your boobs hanging out all the time."

Stohler sets the now empty coffee mug in the sink and grabs two bottled waters from the fridge, passing one to me before she says, "First of all, these aren't my work clothes. These are my 'I'm getting *ready* for work' clothes. My work clothes don't involve pants, which you are both aware of and disgusted by, so don't pretend. Second of all, that roommate agreement is bullshit, and you know it. You can't just type up a list of things you don't like about me and slide it under my door and expect me to give a single, solitary fuck about what you say I should or shouldn't do. Third of all, I'm pretty sure that I'm way more offended by the fact that you're wearing a t-shirt with a kitten on it than you are by the fact that I'm not wearing a shirt at all. And fourth of all, my quarter of the rent is paid for by my tits. Yours is paid for by your parents, but you don't hear me asking you to keep *them* out of the apartment, do you?"

"I just think it's really disrespectful for you to—"

"Oh, for fuck's sake," I say, stripping off my jacket and flinging it at Stohler. She pulls it on, but leaves it hanging open; I roll my eyes at her, then step forward to yank the zipper halfway up, just enough to conceal most of her bra. We both make jazz hands at her torso, and I say, "Ta-da! She's moderately dressed now. Can you go back to being a bitch in the other room, please? You do this every time I'm here."

"She does this every time *I'm* here," Stohler corrects, though her roommate—fuck, what's her name? I know I've met her before, but I can't remember if she's Meagan or Angie—storms back into the living room. Right, so that was Meagan; Angie's the one who eye-fucks me constantly. Stohler shrugs at Alex

and Ben and says, "My roommates are cunts."

"I have the same problem," Alex says solemnly, and Ben punches him in the ribs.

Stohler blinks at me, but very clearly does not say, *Are they really not fucking?* Or, at least, she's not supposed to say it. But because she's a life-ruiner, she waves a dismissive hand at them and says, "These are the ones from the chart, right?"

"Chart?" Ben echoes, brow furrowed.

"Stohler. I'm going to need you to switch yourself over to 'silent' mode, okay?" I say through gritted teeth.

"Don't tell me what to do," she says, and god, no wonder we've hit it off so well. Clearly displeased with my attempts to control her, she crooks a finger at my friends and saunters off down the hall in the direction of her bedroom. They follow her; I trudge reluctantly after them.

Stohler's room is barely a room at all. It's a nine-by-nine square, with just enough room for her bed, a medium-sized dresser, and the vanity that's constantly scattered with dozens of tubes and jars of makeup. Her furniture is impersonal, probably because it was provided when she moved in, but the wallpaper is almost completely obscured by movie posters and concert tickets and programs from dance performances. Just to the left of the lightswitch, the Starbucks napkin is taped up. Stripping my jacket off again, Stohler gestures to the napkin. Alex ducks down to read it, then rounds on me. "Thank you, Garen. I was desperately hoping to find out that your newest hobby is hanging out in coffee shops, explaining the details of your friends' personal lives to people they don't know."

"But—" I pause, look from him to Stohler, and back again. *But you should know Stohler*, is what I want to say, *because she is awesome, and she's funny as hell, and you're all so cool, and cool people should hang out together.*

I'm opening my mouth to try to explain this when Ben says, voice slow and careful, "Um. Sorry, I don't mean to interrupt, but... what the fuck is this?"

His index finger is touching the line that connects Alex's name to Jamie's.

Oh, shit.

"That's nothing," I say sharply. "That was a mistake, I didn't mean to—"

"Muscle spasm," Stohler says, taking a sip from her water bottle. "He wasn't trying to draw that line at all."

"Yeah, I was trying to draw the line from Alex to Travis, but I forgot where I'd written Travis' name, and just, you know, oops. It was an accident."

Alex levels a very unimpressed look at both of us, then turns to Ben, shrugs, and says, "Or, if these two are done being idiots and really terrible at lying, this could be the moment when I tell you that I've been sleeping with James Goldwyn for a few months now."

I'm expecting Ben to be shocked. I'm expecting him to be confused. I'm not, however, expecting him to be angry. He crosses his arms over his chest and says flatly, "Cool. So, for your next conquest, do you want a new list of guys who are complete assholes, or will you be working off of your own?"

"Hey," I say, tone sharp as glass. "Don't talk about Jamie like—"

"Really, Garen?" Ben says, rounding on me. "Do you want to know what the first words your best friend ever said to me were? He came up to me at your dad's wedding reception and said, 'Nice eyeliner, midget. Garen told me Freckles was bi, but I didn't realize he was trying to find one person who could satisfy his desire to be with a man and a woman at the same time.' He spent the next twenty minutes humming that fucking Killers song every time I was near him. That *'somebody told me that you had a boyfriend, who looked like a girlfriend'* thing. Every time we're in the same room, he stands as close to me as humanly possible, just so that everyone will be amused by the fact that he's like, ten inches taller than me. And he just—the fucking things he says. The comments he makes? He's a preppy, arrogant, elitist asshole. He's the kind of guy who used to beat the shit out of me in middle school, and if he wasn't your best friend, he'd probably be one of the guys who treats *you* like shit now. So, please, Garen, tell me again how I can't say anything bad about him."

I sit down on the edge of Stohler's bed, but don't say anything. Over the years, there have always been three groups of people who interact with Jamie and I. There are some people who love both of us. There are some people who love me, but despise him. And there are some people who hate me with a passion, but can't get enough of him. Ben's not the first person to tell me these things, and he probably won't be the last, but... he's also someone I don't want to lose. He's not Jamie, but he's still important to me.

And I don't know what I'm supposed to say, but thankfully—strangely—Alex does. He sighs, grabs Ben's

wrist and says, “Look, I get it, alright? I kind of thought he was an ass when I first met him, and you’re right, the things he says to you aren’t fair. But he’s—I mean, I talk to him, too. It’s not like we only get in touch when we want to—”

“Get in touch?” Stohler deadpans.

Alex rolls his eyes at her, but gives a little nod of agreement before continuing, “He’s a cool guy, if you give him a chance. I guess he’s sort of like Garen, in that regard. They both take a little getting used to, but then you can’t help but like them.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “And what exactly is it about me that takes ‘a little getting used to’?”

“Wow, I don’t know, G,” he says. “The verbal porn you spew out at regular intervals? The way you lash out like a cranky toddler when you don’t get your way? Your tendency to go on raging drug binges and then attempt to distract us with sex?”

“Well, from what I hear, his attempts have been pretty successful,” Stohler says, smiling slyly at Alex when he glares at her.

I scowl and say, “Fine. Do I have any other huge character flaws you’d like to point out?”

Ben, who has lost interest in most of the conversation and is now busying himself with examining the programs on the walls, says, “I mean, I wouldn’t say this is a ‘huge character flaw,’ but sometimes you wear your aviators when you’re getting head, and that’s kind of awful. I can’t tell if you’re looking at me or not, it makes me self-conscious.” He looks around at me and raises his eyebrows. “Also, we should get going. We’re going to be late.”

I slip my phone from my pocket to check the time, then swear under my breath. Jamie’s train is supposed to be arriving in ten minutes, which is about how long it takes to walk there from here. Stohler leads us back out into the hall, glaring at Meagan and daring her to comment about the shirt that is once again missing. At the door, I turn back and say, “Hey.”

“Hey what?” she says, cocking her head to the side.

I gesture to Alex and Ben. “We’re going to a show downtown this Friday. If you’re not working, you should come with us. It’ll be fun. It’s a hardcore show with no seating, so you’ll get to see this one—” I jerk my

head towards Ben, “—get into a fight with some metalhead a foot taller than him—”

“That’s honestly happened every time we’ve gone out,” Alex admits.

“Because people always pick fights with me,” Ben protests. “I get that I’m little, but that sure as shit doesn’t mean I’m going to just stand around and take it if half a dozen guys decide I’m that night’s punching bag. And it sure as hell doesn’t mean people can try to pick me up and force me to crowd-surf. There are basic, unspoken rules in the pit, and yes, I get angry when people disrespect me or those rules. So, yeah, if you spend the whole night stomping the back of my knee just to see if you can make me fall over, you don’t get to be surprised when I find you in the parking lot after the show and punch you in the mouth.”

That’s actually a true story. About a week after I met him, Ben and I went to a show together, and some asshole kept calling him ‘emo kid’ and trying to wail on him all night. Every time I had tried to intervene, Ben had put himself between the guy and me. I’d figured he was trying to be a pacifist about it, right up until we got outside the venue, Ben had hunted down the guy, and said—direct quote--*hey, ass clown, ready to have an emo kid beat the shit out of you?* It took me, plus three of the other guy’s friends to pull him off, and I was so impressed I blew him twice, just to show my appreciation for the entertainment value.

Now, I glance back at Stohler and add, “Plus, if hardcore’s not your thing, you can just hang in the back, get drunk, and desperately wish you were anywhere else. That’s what James is probably going to end up doing.”

“Why, what kind of music does he listen to?” she asks.

“Electropop, mostly,” Alex says flatly. “His iPod is mostly full of bands like 3OH!3, Cobra Starship—”

“I don’t want to fucking talk about it,” I snap, stomping past him out of the apartment. Jamie’s iPod is the main reason I try to only hang out with musicians. I may not love Ben’s penchant for blasting post-hardcore at all hours of the day, and yeah, Alex has made me listen to way more Five Finger Death Punch than I care for, but at least they don’t make me want to puncture my eardrums just so I don’t have to put up with any more autotune. Over my shoulder, I say, “Whatever. If you’re not working Friday night, text me and come out with us. See you around.”

She doesn’t actually say goodbye, just turns and walks back into her bedroom. The moment Alex has

shut the door behind himself, he looks over at me, gnaws on his lip for a few seconds, and says, “She seems cool.”

“She is,” I agree, “but I can tell from the look on your face that what you really meant was ‘she’s really hot.’”

“Yeah, well, whatever,” Alex says, ducking his head to hide the flush creeping into his cheeks. Ben rolls his eyes and leads the way out into the parking lot, ordering us to walk to the station instead of wasting time and gas by trying to navigate the shitshow of New Haven drivers. I’m bouncing all the way to the train station, impatient to get there so I can finally see James again, outside of the dining room at the LRC. Ben threatens to shove me in front of a cab if I don’t calm down, but I can’t help it, I’m stupidly excited. It’s only been two weeks since I’ve seen him, but I want him to see how much better I am. I want him to see that I’m okay again, that I’m healthy. I want him to be proud of me again.

When my eyes finally lock onto him, just inside Union Station, neither of us can help it; we both break into wide grins, and I burst through the station doors and attack him, flinging my arms around his neck and scrambling up onto his back so he can carry me outside to where my friends are standing, watching us with mild amusement. I press a kiss to the back of his neck and say, “How was the ride in?”

“Fingered some girl who got on the Stamford stop. So, uneventful, I suppose.” Sensing my eagerness to escape his hands, he laughs and cranes an elbow back to dig it into my side. “Oh, get over it. They have a bathroom on the train, I washed my hands. I mean, really. I may be an insatiable pervert, but I’m still a gentleman.” He unhooks my legs from his elbows and swings me around so that I’m hanging off the front of him now, my legs around his waist and arms around his neck, his hands curved under my thighs to keep me up. He grins. “Miss me?”

“Always,” I say, ducking in to kiss his forehead. He lets me clamber down out of his arms and drag him over to where Alex and Ben have remained.

And—well, okay, Jamie likes to touch people but he mostly just likes to touch *me*. I’ve walked in on him screwing several different people, I’ve participated in many ill-advised threesomes with him, but still, I can’t help but feel a jolt of surprise when he greets Alex with a soft smile, and an even softer kiss. I can only assume that the hurried texts Alex was sending for most of the walk over here were to Jamie, alerting him to Ben’s new knowledge of their... whatever this is. Their mouths are still slightly touching when he murmurs, “Hey.”

"Hey yourself," Alex says, reaching up to tug a lock of Jamie's hair. "You got back the grade for your paper today, right? How'd you do?"

I blink. Jamie hadn't mentioned a paper to me. But he grins at Alex and says, "I did wonderfully, of course. Wanna go back to your place so you can congratulate me?"

Alex ducks his head and knocks his shoulder against Jamie's. "Friday. You're still coming out with us, right?"

Jamie makes a face. "Ugh. Right. The concert."

"Dude, we've been over this," I say. "Stadium tours? Shit on huge stages? Those are concerts. Small venues, unsigned bands, parking lots full of sketchy vans instead of tour buses? Those are shows. This is why you always stand out when we go to them."

"That, and the fact that you're wearing Sperry Top-Siders," Alex says. I look down. Jamie is indeed wearing the same brown leather boat shoes I've been mocking him for since we were fourteen. Alex looks back up at his face. "Please tell me you brought other shoes."

Jamie shrugs. "I like these ones. Besides, they match the rest of my clothes."

"If we get back to my house and I open up that bag and I see a single fucking J. Crew label, I'm torching them," I say.

"Then you might not want to open up my bag," Jamie says, narrowing his eyes at me, "because I brought nothing *but* J. Crew, just because I knew you'd make some bitch comment like that. Wait, I'm sorry, that's not true—I'm fairly certain that I brought a rugby shirt from Ralph Lauren."

I let my head roll fall forward to rest on his shoulder. "You're fucking killing me here, man. Can we at least negotiate you wearing one of my black v-necks?"

"It's bad enough you want me to go to a concert—sorry, a *show* for a band I don't listen to in a genre I don't like—"

"If you don't want to go, I'm sure you could just hang around Garen's house while the rest of us go out," Ben interrupts brightly.

Jamie squeezes his honey-brown eyes shut for a moment, very obviously praying for patience. Then he turns to Ben, exaggerates a smile and says, "Why hello there, Benjamin. God, I keep forgetting that when I come here, I need to drop my eye-line about a foot to make sure I'm including everyone in the conversation. Are you expecting a kiss hello, too?"

"If you come any closer to me, I will punch you in the cock," Ben warns.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart, are you sure you can even reach anything above my knees?"

Ben opens his mouth to retort, but I sling an arm around his shoulders and drag him away, back in the direction of Stohler's building and the car. "Nope. I am not putting up with four fucking days of you two idiots sniping at each other. You're going to be civil for the ten minutes it takes for us to get back to the car. You're going to shut up about each other all day tomorrow. And when we go out on Friday, you're going to behave, or Alex and I are going to murder you both. Deal?"

They both roll their eyes at me and say nothing. I'm struck by the thought that they probably hate each other so much because their personalities are obnoxiously similar, in all the worst ways. Alex shoots me a long-suffering look and allows Jamie to tuck an arm around his waist. The walk back to Stohler's building is silent. I turn in at the entrance of the lot, but Ben ducks out from under my arm and keeps walking, tossing over his shoulder, "Alex will drive you guys back to Lakewood. I'm going to head home."

"Alright," I say, trying not to frown after him. "I'll text you later."

"It was a pleasure seeing you again, Fun Size," Jamie calls after him. Ben tosses him the finger without looking back.

I turn around and scowl at Jamie. "Do you have to do that?"

He shrugs. "We give each other shit. It's not that big of a deal. He thinks I'm an ass, I think he's a brat. That's all there is to it."

That's not all there is to it. I can tell that something else is going on, because neither of them is the type to hate another person without a decent reason. A reason more complicated than *he wears too many polo shirts* or *he's too short*. There has to be a better excuse, I just don't understand it. For now, I settle for rolling my eyes and heading back to the car, claiming shotgun without bothering to verbalize it. Jamie

moves to get into the backseat, but before he can, I see Alex grab his wrist. Even through the closed car doors, I can hear him say, “Hey. You need to be nicer to Ben, alright? He’s my best friend, and he doesn’t deserve to be treated like shit, not by anyone. Think how you’d feel if somebody acted like a dick to Garen.”

“Somebody did act like a dick to Garen,” Jamie mutters. “*Ben* acted like a dick to Garen, when he barely waited a few weeks to move in on his guy, and then didn’t even have the decency to call him and let him know. Maybe you can forgive that so easily, but it’s a bit more difficult for me, alright?”

I tight my fingers on the edge of my seat. *That’s* what the hostility is about? Jamie’s bitter that Ben dated my ex?

Outside the car, Alex says simply, “I know. I get it, Jamie, but that’s their issue to work out, okay? And if Garen can get over it, you need to, too. Because you can’t keep being an ass to Ben. It’s not okay.”

I wait for it. I wait for the retort, the sneer, the *I don’t take orders from the guys I bang, thanks for the input, though*. It doesn’t come. What comes is a hesitation, a sigh, the words, “Alright, fine. I’ll play nice with the midg—with Ben. Sorry, sorry, that was a reflex. I’ll be nice to him, alright?”

And then there’s silence, which can only be because they’re kissing.

17 days sober

They try. That’s actually the worst part—they both try their absolute hardest to get along, and they’re still complete dicks to each other. By the time I talk my dad into letting me borrow the second Benz for the night, drive Jamie and myself from Lakewood to New Haven, and lead the way up to the apartment, my best friend has managed to school his expression into a grimace that I think he hopes looks like a smile. He keeps muttering to himself, practicing saying something, and then, the second that Ben opens the door, he forces out, “Hi, Ben. How are you?”

Alex has clearly treated his friend to the same scolding, because Ben is doing his best to turn his curled upper lip into a smile as he says, “I’m fine, thanks. Come on in.”

“You guys are terrible at this. Maybe you should just not speak to each other at all,” I inform them, nudging past Ben and heading for the refrigerator to steal a Snapple.

“Alex is in his room. He should be out in a few minutes, and then once Stohler gets here, we can go,” he says. He pauses, glances over at James, and says, “I think he’s smoking up, if you wanna do that. But if you go into his room, make sure you close the door after you, because I don’t really like the rest of the apartment to smell like weed.”

Jamie nods, then looks over at me. His eyes are very obviously seeking... not permission, per se, but approval. He’s chasing the answer of whether or not it’s okay for him to still use drugs if I can’t. I roll my eyes and gesture down the hall, and he beams at me before darting off to join Alex. Ben has resumed his seat on the couch; there’s a small box open on the coffee table, along with a little mirror that stands up on three legs. I settle into the armchair to watch as Ben selects one of the sticks from the box, uncaps it, and very carefully begins to trace his waterline with it. He uses the very tip of his little finger to smudge it down into his lashes, reapplies it, then tosses the eyeliner onto the table. Next, he picks up a tiny jar of some weird, black... I don’t know. It’s like a cream, or a gel, or something. The point is, he dips the point of an angled brush into it and adds that to his upper lids, just along the base of his eyelashes. Once he’s satisfied with the amount, he drops the brush and uses the tips of his index fingers to smudge it all together, then uses a little triangular sponge-thing to wipe away any of the smears that don’t match what he usually does. It’s an interesting little process. I’ve never seen him putting on his eyeliner; I’ve only seen the final product, when his eyes are ringed in dark smudges that make his pale skin look like porcelain, and his irises exactly like the bright, clear blue I remember the Mediterranean Sea being when I spent the summer in France after my sophomore year. He is, for lack of a better word, beautiful.

The door down the hall opens, and Jamie and Alex join us, the faint scent of pot lingering in Jamie’s cologne. Alex flops unceremoniously onto the couch, and Jamie clambers up onto my lap, snuggling his face into my shoulder. I smile and run the pad of my middle finger down the back of his neck, keeping my movements steady and feather-light. He lets out a sigh of contentment and squeezes my arm. Whenever he gets high, all he wants is to be touched—he wants fingertips stroking across his shoulderblades, palms rubbing against his chest, the tip of a tongue tracing his jawline. I brush a kiss to his neck, just below his ear, and say, “Feel good?”

He makes an agreeable noise, then hesitantly asks, “Do you mind that I still smoke?” I shake my head no. Another hesitation. “You... can you? I’m not trying to push you to, obviously. I’m just wondering. Could you still smoke pot, if you wanted to?”

I don’t want to smoke pot, and that’s how I know that I *can* smoke it. There’s no craving for it, no thirst to lose myself, not like there is with booze, or coke, or pills. I’m not sure how I can be so certain about this, but I can feel it in my bones. People tell me that there are some alcoholics who can eventually work their

way up to being social drinkers. They can control themselves enough that they can have one glass of wine on holidays, and that will be enough for them. I know in my heart that that will never be me. I know it right down to my core—I will never be able to have a drink and not have it turn into something worse. But I know with that same certainty that, if I wanted to, I could go down the hall into Alex's room, take a few hits off the pipe, get a little bit stoned, and be fine tomorrow. I wouldn't *need* it.

I shrug and say, "I could, if I wanted to." In a display of nerdiness that seems to shock even former valedictorian Ben, I add, "When you snort cocaine, it takes like, half an hour to reach its full effect. When it does, it sort of makes all of your monoamine neurotransmitters start working overtime, all at once. Like, your neurons can't reabsorb dopamine, which increases the amount of time that your brain is being flooded with it—that's what controls your sense of pleasure. That's how it gets you high, makes you feel good. And it also hits you with a fucking crazy amount of norepinephrine, which is what boosts your heart rate, makes you more alert, constricts your blood vessels, ups your blood sugar, dilates your bronchioles. All sorts of shit. And all those feelings? That's what you're chasing. That's how you get addicted. I always thought I was doing coke because I needed it, but that's not true. I wanted it. I could have lived without it—obviously, because that's what I'm doing now—but doing it hit me with such awesome feelings that it seemed like the easiest, most legitimate way to feel good, and I convinced myself that I wouldn't be able to ever have those feelings without it. All because it was hitting the right part of my brain. You wanna know what part of your brain pot affects?"

"What part?" Jamie says.

I press a kiss to the top of his head and say, "The cannabinoid receptors."

He snorts. "What, seriously?"

I grin against his hair and say, "Seriously. Our brains have evolved to have a whole set of receptors that are specifically designed to react with THC. I mean, you can get the satisfaction elsewhere. There are chemicals in your brain that naturally activate it, so like, nobody *needs* pot. But my point is, your body just doesn't react the same way to pot as it does to coke. All the things that turned me on about—behave yourself," I scold, slapping his hand away when it starts to creep up my thigh.

"I can't help it," he says. "It turns me on when you say something turns you on."

"You're ridiculous," I say, lacing my fingers with his to prevent him from making another grab for my dick. Part of me wonders if Alex is going to get pissed at me, if he's going to get jealous, but when I look up,

Alex isn't really watching us. He's making periodic glances, frowning, but for the most part, his eyes are fixed on Ben. Like he's trying to figure out why, if I can be like this with my best friend, he isn't allowed to be like this with his. I clear my throat. "Anyway, yeah. What turned me on about coke isn't something I can get from pot. I can't chase those same feelings. I'm no more likely to develop a weed habit than I am to develop a habit of like, eating cake, or jerking off, or anything else that feels pretty rad."

Over on the couch, Ben cocks his head to the side and says, "Have you always known all this stuff?"

I shake my head, then shrug and admit, "I've been doing a lot of reading since I left rehab this last time. You know, skipping over the usual AA and NA surface reading—we admit that we are powerless over our whatever—and going for stuff that might actually help me. I don't like being told what to do, especially if I don't know why I'm being told to do it. So, I figure I can't expect to get better unless I know for sure what made me fucked up in the first place."

If there's any right answer, that must be it. A wide, warm smile stretches across Ben's face. Maybe it's because he's glad I'm really trying this time; maybe he's just really excited to hear that books are my solution to this, just like they'd be his. Either way, he looks like he's happy for me. He looks like he's proud of me.

It takes me a moment to realize that Jamie is watching Ben, too, but then he sighs, leans back against the arm of the chair, and says, "Hey. Mayor of Munchkinland. Get over here and make me look pretty."

"Excuse me?" Ben says, but then he pauses, presumably because he's noticed, like I have, that James has snatched up one of the eyeliner pencils from the coffee table and is twirling it between his long fingers.

"Come on," he says. "You idiots have made it abundantly clear that my particular sense of style won't exactly blend in, so help me out. Get over here and paint me up like a trashy rocker boy."

Though Ben rolls his eyes, he rolls to his feet and comes over to us, bracing one knee against the arm of the chair and plucking the eyeliner from Jamie's fingers. He makes a vague crooking gestures with his finger. "Sit up, look up, and don't move." Jamie obeys, and Ben presses a thumb to his cheek, just below his eye, pulling his lower lid down just enough to darken up the waterline. He stops almost immediately, slaps Jamie lightly across the face, and says, "Stop fucking blinking."

"It feels funny and kind of painful," Jamie whines.

Ben rolls his eyes. “Dude, I do this to myself every day. Sometimes multiple times a day.”

“Your judgment of me should not be influenced by the fact that you’re a filthy little painslut who likes stabbing himself in the eye every morning,” Jamie says. Ben quirks an eyebrow. Jamie side-eyes me and says, “Though, to be fair, I was informed of your *tendencies* a while ago—”

“Feel free to use that to gouge his eyes out,” I say, waving a hand at the eyeliner. But Ben completes his task without incident, and by the time he is stepping back and capping the pencil, the intercom at the front door is ringing.

Alex goes to buzz Stohler in, and when she enters the apartment a minute later, she is wearing motorcycle boots, the same denim jeans as yesterday, and a tight black beater that has been sliced in half so that most of her perfectly flat stomach is exposed. Her hair is set into the same wild waves she wears to work, and she’s wearing more black eyeliner than Ben and James combined. She strides into the living room and says, “Please tell me that at least one of you queers is planning to drink with me tonight, ‘cause my roommates are pissing me right the fuck off today, so all I wanna do is go to this show, get completely wasted, fight somebody, and go home with a random.”

“I’ll be drinking with you tonight,” Jamie says, launching himself off my lap. “I’m also technically a random, and I’d be more than happy to offer my services in the area of stress-relieving sexual congress.”

“I like this one,” Stohler decides, then she jerks her chin at Alex. “You guys have any booze around here? I wanna do shots before we go.” The three of them make their way to the kitchen, where I can overhear her saying, “I’m Stohler, by the way.”

“James Goldwyn. Pleasure to meet you, Stohler. You’re gorgeous.”

“Likewise.”

If the two of them don’t fuck by the end of the night, I’ll be genuinely surprised. I seem to be the lone exception to Jamie’s type, which tends to be tall, skinny, and blond—case and point, Alex. And now, Stohler. Actually, the most likely scenario is that Jamie will attempt to initiate a threesome, which is just weird. I wrinkle my nose and stand up so that I can fling an arm around Ben’s shoulders. “I hope you’re ready for a fun night of trying to stop our drunk friends from fighting anyone who comes near them.”

"I can't wait," he says dryly. "Your car or mine?"

"Yours. Dad doesn't want me to drive the Mercedes any more than necessary," I say. Probably because he lives in terror of this car being trashed just like the Ferrari was. Once the other have had the chance to take a few shots each, we make our way down to the parking lot. Alex attempts to call shotgun, but I snort and shove him towards the backseat. "Fuck that. You idiots are all riding in the back. Ben and I are going to need to stick together tonight, if we're going to get through this with our sanity."

But it doesn't really end up being that bad. We manage to find a meter fairly close to the venue where the show is being hosted, and the line outside isn't too long. It's an eighteen-plus show, and the guy at the door spends a solid two minutes examining Ben's driver's license, which sends Jamie into a fit of giggles that he tries to smother in the front of Alex's t-shirt. By the time the guy allows us inside with a reluctant, "Alright, then," Ben is scowling and Jamie has completely lost it.

I punch Stohler's shoulder and say, "Go take that loser up to the bar and get him a beer. He needs to be elsewhere for a little while. We'll probably find you in the pit, but if we don't, we'll meet back at the car after the show's over."

She grabs both of her drinking companions and speeds off in search of alcohol. I hook a finger through one of Ben's belt loops and drag him out into the pit on the floor. We slip easily into the crowd but remain towards the back for now, neither of us willing to be the kind of douchebag who shows up minutes before the music starts and then shoves his way to the front of the crowd. People like that *kill* shows.

The music starts up, and I come alive.

I don't think I even know the band. I tend not to, at smaller venues like this—I know the place, I might be vaguely familiar with some of the people, but most of these bands haven't made it yet. Truthfully, most of them won't. There are three bands up tonight, and only one of them is good. The first sort of half-asses their instruments and tries to make up for it with a lot of screeching. They suck, but that's not the point. The point is the fucking vibe, the energy, the feeling I get, and the pulsing in my soul when I know that all the other people in this room are here for the same reason as me. They love sound. They love music, and they want to be a part of something, anything. A part of this night.

Halfway through the second band's set, some bearded asshole near us suddenly attempts to start a mosh, but without any regard to typical mosh etiquette. He's head-banging and kicking his feet around and thrashing and swingings his arms like a goddamn windmill, hands balled up into fists. One of those

fists comes around and cracks across Ben's jaw.

I'm on the guy in an instant, grabbing the front of his t-shirt and shaking him hard enough to stun him into stopping his thrashing. I give him another shake, just to make sure he's paying attention, and snarl, "Knock it the fuck off, man. You're being a dick, you're gonna fucking hurt somebody, and if you touch my friend again, I'll beat the shit out of you. Clear?"

Ben grabs my arm and yanks me off the guy. "G, it's cool. Stop." I catch his face between my hands so that I can examine him, but he doesn't seem to be bleeding. His lip is a little bit swollen, but the bruise that will come from it will fade in a few days. I release him and turn my focus back to the guy. "Garen," Ben says sharply, curving a hand over the back of my neck and forcing me to look at him instead of the bearded asshole. "I'm fine. It was an accident, alright? It's a fucking *pit*, of course I'm gonna get smacked around a little. *That's why I like hardcore shows*. Just calm down."

I force a nod, but not without sneaking another glance at the other guy. Maybe I can dig an elbow into his ribs or something, when no one's looking. Ben, however, seems to realize my plan, because he remains between the guy and me for the rest of the show, an arm wound around my waist or a hand braced between my shoulder blades. Always some sort of physical contact to keep me in line.

When the show finally ends, I have half a mind to follow the ass out to the parking lot, but Ben still hasn't released me. He tangles his fingers in mine and drags me back out of the pit the second the venue lights come back on. "Have you seen the others at all tonight?"

"Not since we came in, no," I say. We check the bar for them, but they're not there. We debate checking out front, near the merch tables, but the odds of any of them deciding to drop money on burned CDs of mediocre bands are kind of slim. Eventually, we settle for heading back to the car, which is obviously what we should've done in the first place, because that's where Alex and Jamie are waiting. They're joking around with each other—both of them are completely hammered—and Jamie has a lit joint pinched between his fingers. He takes a long hit from it, holds it for a minute, then beckons Alex closer. Al crowds him up against the car and sucks the smoke from between Jamie's slightly parted lips. By the time all of the smoke has made its way from one set of lungs to the other, they're kissing yet again. I light myself a cigarette, dart up to them and tap Jamie on the shoulder, since he's the one who can speak most easily right now. "Where's Stohler?"

Jamie leans away from Alex's mouth and says, "She's across the lot with some guy I think she might want to fuck. And when I say 'I think she might want to,' what I really mean is that she said—this is a direct

quote, mind you--*If this guy can shut up and do what I say, I might be willing to give him the single greatest night of his pathetic, meaningless life.*"

"There's a possibility that Stohler has some control issues when it comes to her gentleman callers," I say mildly.

"When it comes to fucking, everyone has control issues," Ben says. "Some people need all the power, others need to give up all the power."

I suck my cigarette and say, "Which kind are you?"

He smiles wryly and says, "You know exactly which kind I am."

The second the words leave his mouth, I'm brushed by the memories of last fall, of having him spread out on his bed, desperate and aching. Of dragging him into an empty stairwell at school one afternoon, after the last bell, bending him over the banister, pinning his wrists together in the small of his back, fucking him until he could barely stay on his feet. And his words, his begging—god, the things he used to say. *Please, Garen, I need it, fuck me, I need you in me, harder, make it hurt, scratch me, harder harder harder.*

I lick my lips and say, a little hoarsely, "Yeah. I remember."

He lets his head roll back against the car, but doesn't shift his eyes from mine. I'm overcome with such a sudden urge to touch him that I'm kind of surprised I don't just reach for his belt here and now. Instead, I break our eye contact and exhale hard, looking around and announcing, "I'm going to go grab Stohler and see if she wants to head out."

"Yeah," Ben says after a beat. He nods once, then moves towards the front of the car without comment.

It only takes a minute for me to find Stohler. She's halfway across the parking lot, smirking at some guy with tattoo sleeves. He seems to be trying to flirt with her, but she's obviously only half listening.

"Hey, Stohls," I call, and she glances over at me, eyebrow arched. "You coming?"

She strides across the space between us and says, "I'm going to go home with, um—fuck, I'm not even going to pretend to remember his name. Whatever, that guy." She points back at the tattooed guy. "He

says I can spend the night at his place and he'll give me a ride home in the morning, but I don't really do slumber parties. So, I'll get a cab home later. You guys have a good night, okay?"

"Okay," I say, staring past her at the guy. He's looking back at me, but I don't blink. I'm trying to communicate, mostly through the tension in my jaw, that I will find him and kill him if he doesn't treat my slutty little friend like she's a lady. After a moment, he looks away almost sheepishly. I turn my attention back to Stohler and loop an arm around her shoulders, drawing her to my chest and saying, "Text me when you get home so I know you're not dead in a back alley somewhere, alright?"

For a very long moment, she doesn't move. Finally, she raises a hand and carefully presses it to my back, like she's not sure what the proper procedure is for something as simple as a hug. "Alright."

"Cool. Now go wreck that guy," I say. She pulls away from me with a smirk and saunters back across the lot to her future bedfellow. I head over to where the others are waiting by Ben's car. He tosses me the keys, which is a pleasant surprise, and jerks his head towards where Stohler has disappeared. I shrug and say, "She's gonna go get laid. She said she'll text me later. Let's head out."

Jamie and Alex are currently locked into a kiss goodbye that involves way more tongue than is probably necessary for a standard farewell. Ben cocks his head to the side, watching them. "Are they too drunk to realize that they don't actually need to say 'goodnight' yet? They're getting into the same car. We're all headed back to the same building."

"I kind of gave up on trying to find logic in whatever's going on with them a while ago," I admit. Then, slightly louder, I say, "James. Come on. Get in the fucking car."

"Alright, alright," Jamie grumbles at me. His scowl falls immediately into an easy smile as he turns to face Alex again. "I'll call you in the morning. You're going to let me take you to lunch."

I try to steer him away with a hand to his shoulder, but Alex refuses to release his wrist. "No, don't go. It's still early, don't go."

"Garen's making me," Jamie protests.

"Garen's a dick," Alex argues back, and what the fuck, Garen's standing right here. Before I can point that out, Alex tugs Jamie closer, out of my reach. "Come home with me."

Jamie's face breaks into a dumb little smile again. "You want me to?"

"Yeah," Alex says. "I want to hang out with you."

Jamie laughs and ducks in to nuzzle Alex's jaw with his nose. "You don't wanna hang out with me, you little liar. You want to have sex with me."

"I can't do both?"

I roll my eyes and turn around, slinging an arm over Ben's shoulders and announcing, "Fine, whatever. We'll go back to the apartment so you two can bang. But I'm using your xbox while you're doing it, and we're not staying the night."

"You're totally staying the night," Alex reassures Jamie in what I'm sure he drunkenly thinks is a whisper.

We make our way back to the car, where Jamie drags Alex into the backseat with him; they're making out before I've even turned on the engine. Ben and I exchange grimaces but remain silent. At least, we remain silent until halfway through the drive back to the apartment, when we both hear the unmistakable scratch of a zipper being lowered.

"No," Ben says forcefully, clapping his hands over his ears. "What the fuck, no. Whichever one of you is undressing, knock that off right now."

They are very enthusiastically ignoring us, and a few seconds later, I hear a faint moan. Considering I've had sex with everyone in this car, I can tell the noise is coming from Alex. Still, I chance a glance in the rear view mirror. Alex's head is tossed back against the headrest, and Jamie is... nowhere in sight. Because I don't want to be the only one experiencing this, I reach over, pry one of Ben's hands from his ear, and inform him, "My best friend is blowing your best friend right now, in the backseat. Like, a foot away from us. Awkward, right?"

"I'm going to fucking kill myself," Ben mutters.

"Don't you dare. I don't want to be left alone with those two," I say.

"Just drive faster," Ben says.

There's a lewd, wet popping sound as Jamie pulls his mouth off Alex's piece just long enough to say, "McCutcheon, can't you give G some road head so you'll both be too busy to keep bitching?"

I truly appreciate how much effort it is taking for Ben to keep silent, so I turn on the stereo to drown out the slick sound of Jamie's mouth on Alex. As I'm turning into the lot of the apartment building, Alex gives a slightly broken moan, and Ben begins banging his head rhythmically against the window. Out of pure instinct, I reach over, knot my fingers in his hair, and yank him away from the glass. Barely audible over the music, Ben chokes out a soft groan of his own. Fuck, the hair-pulling. That's—god, I'd forgotten. In an instant, we've both sunk back into that same heady tension from outside the venue. My hand is still tangled in his hair, still pulling it taught, and I shift so that I can run my thumb across the shell of his ear. He's fucking *shaking*.

I pull into the first parking space I see, release Ben and the wheel at the same time, and cut the engine. "Okay then! Alex, put it back in your pants. It's time to go up to the apartment."

"W-We'll be along in a minute, you guys go ahead," Alex says.

"I can't lock the car if you guys are still in it," I say through gritted teeth.

"Just leave me the keys, I'll lock it."

Ben is already out of the car, already striding towards the front door of the building. He doesn't seem inclined to hang around and hold it open for me, and I'd really rather not wait until he gets all the way up to the apartment to buzz me in. Not giving the slightest fuck how inappropriate this is, I twist around in my seat, haul Jamie off by the collar of his shirt, and tuck Alex's rock hard, spit-slicked cock back into his jeans. They both stare at me, two sets of comically widened brown eyes, and I snap, "Guys, *it's been inside of me*. I really don't think you should seem so shocked at me touching it. Now zip up, get out, and come inside, because it's late, and I've been awake for almost twenty-four hours now, and I was totally serious about us not staying over, so I sort of need you to both just get into the building and blow your loads so I can go *home*. Okay?"

I don't wait for a response, and I only make it halfway across the parking lot before they both come booking it after me. I raise the key fob and press the button to lock the doors of Ben's car, then roll my eyes as the two of them barrel into the building, almost crashing into Ben, who is leaning against the wall, his foot wedged between the door and its frame so that I won't be locked out. When he sees me closing in, he kicks the door wider and heads inside, leaving me to catch the door and follow him up. By the time we actually enter the apartment—the door of which has been oh so thoughtfully left ajar for us—Alex and Jamie have already locked themselves in Alex's room.

Ben sucks in a very unsteady breath, drops down onto the couch, and prompts, "Call of Duty?"

No, I want to fucking touch you, I think. But for probably the first time in my life, I don't know how to verbalize it. I don't know how to tell him, *I need you to get naked right now, and I need to fuck you, but I also need you to let me have all of the control, all of the power, and I need you to let me do this my way and at my own pace, and I will hurt you like you need me to, but only if you fucking swear you won't try to hurt me back*. So, instead, I say, "Can we do Gears of War instead? I really like the chainsaw bayonet on the machine gun."

He laughs and gestures to the console. "Far be it from me to stop you from working out your rage issues."

We play in companionable silence for about twenty minutes, and then, from down the hall— "*Fuck, harder.*"

"Oh, fantastic," I say dryly. It's not like this is the first time I've heard Jamie fooling around with someone. I mean, he has gone to town on people while I've been in the same dorm room as him, and it's never really

bothered me. But those people weren't my good friends. Those people hadn't fucked me just a few weeks before. I grab the remote off the coffee table and raise the volume a few clicks. Ben revs the chainsaw bayonet onscreen, which helps for a few seconds, but then the revving is over and we can totally still hear Alex groaning out, "*God, you feel so good.*"

"Jesus Christ," Ben says, rolling his eyes at the ceiling. "I had assumed that living in a two-bedroom apartment instead of living in a dorm room would mean there'd be more of a barrier between me and my roommate's sex noises."

"I had assumed that not being Jamie's roommate anymore would put more of a barrier between me and his sex noises," I say.

Ben sighs. "Do you want to go to my room?"

"Dude, that's the worst attempt at a solution I've ever heard," I say. "Your room is closer to the—"

"My neighbor on that side—" he points to the wall behind us, "—is probably asleep and is definitely a bitch, so I can't turn the volume up on the game. But my room is right in the middle of the apartment, so I don't really have to worry about anyone but Alex being bothered by noise. If we go there, we can turn on music."

"Or I could just fuck you until we both come so hard we stop being able to process sound anyway," I say absently. A few seconds later, his character dies on-screen, without him doing anything to try to prevent it. I look around, and only then do I realize that he's just holding the controller limply, staring at me. Now is probably the moment that I should be playing the comment off as a joke, nudging his shoulder with mine and saying, *I'm just screwing with you, man.*

But then he switches the controller off, bites down hard on his lower lip, and says, voice neutral but a little bit lower than normal, "That's definitely an option."

All I want to do right now is haul him to his feet and drag him down the hall, pin him to the door and fuck him mercilessly, but it's just— what if I can't? What if he, Christ, what if it's just like it was with that random in New York? What if he's just trying to get me to fuck him harder, but he grabs my hips, and I can't help but remember how things were with Dave, and I freak out? I've fucked Ben before, I know how rough he likes sex to be, and I can't do that. The feeling of his hands grabbing at me, of his nails digging into my back. It's not something I can handle right now.

But then he licks his lips, and I can't stop myself from staring at his mouth and thinking, *it's worth a try.*

"The thing is, I have this problem," I say hoarsely. He doesn't move, so I continue, "For the past few months--since I got out of the hospital, I guess? I've had some... issues with being touched. Not all the time, not everywhere, but, you know, if somebody starts to get rough with me, or if somebody touches my hips... if I feel like I'm not the one who's in charge of what's happening, I kind of freak out. And like, I'll have a panic attack, I guess." I still haven't looked away from his mouth, but I'm sure his eyes must be widening. "It's not like I can't get off, because I can. But if--if we do this, if we fuck you, I need to know that you're going to let me have control. I need you to do what I say, how I say it, when I say it, and if--look, I might need to stop, is what I'm trying to say. And if things get too heavy, I need to know that you won't, you know. Make me keep going. If I want to stop. Or if I say no."

"G," he says softly, "what the fuck, *of course*. If you want to stop, *of course* I'm not going to make you keep going. If you don't want to do this—"

"I want to do this," I interrupt, dragging both hands through my hair and lacing my fingers together behind my head. It's true—he's still wearing his clothes from the show, his skintight jeans and half-unzipped hoodie. His hair is messy, his eyeliner is smeared, his lip is still slightly swollen from getting smacked in the face while we were in the pit. I rake my eyes over his body and can't stop myself from practically

groaning as I say, "Fuck, you have no idea how much I want to do this. But it's just, you need to tell me that you're okay with having it be like that."

"Like—"

"You need to tell me that you're willing to just fucking *take it*," I say.

He doesn't actually say it. He doesn't have to, because my words tear a strangled gasp from his throat, and he doesn't need to say anything, because it's fucking *on*. I seize the front of his hoodie and drag him to his feet, and then we're both sprinting down the hall towards his bedroom, tripping over each other and almost running into walls. Once inside the room, he slams the door shut and locks it, and I stride over to his desk to set his iTunes to shuffle. The second the music starts roaring out of the speakers, I turn back to face him. He's leaning against the closed door, already hardening in his skinny jeans, waiting for me to make the first move.

He only has to wait about two seconds, and then I'm pressing against him, pinning him in place with my hips and catching his face between my hands. We're so close that my nose is nudging his a little as I say quietly, "You sure?" He nods just once. "You?"

"Fuck yes."

The sound he makes when I kiss him is nothing short of obscene. Only then do I realize that he's probably more starved for a proper touch than I am. Has he slept with anyone since Travis? God, has he even *kissed* anyone since Travis? When did they stop? Has it been months? I slot one of my legs between his and rock forward to press my thigh against his groin. He's already half-hard; I can feel the line of him even through both our jeans. One of his hands rises from the door handle and moves towards my waist, only to fall hesitantly and uselessly back to his side. I frown down at it and say, "Is it okay if I touch you?"

"I *want* you to touch me," he says around a breath of a laugh. "I just won't... you need to tell me what to do."

I sincerely hope that, even if it's dark, he can still see me raise my eyebrows at him. "Ben, it's real cute that you want to indulge my 'blushing virgin' kink, but I've seen the way you take a fucking. I know—"

"You need to tell me what to do so that I don't freak you out," he interrupts. I go still, and he arches up against my thigh once more, hands remaining resolutely at his sides. "Garen, I'll do any—whatever you want me to do, but you need to tell me. That's the whole point of this. If we start screwing around, and I do something you can't handle, and you end up freaking out, that's going to leave both of us upset and with serious blue balls. So, I need you to tell me what the boundaries are. What do you want me to do? What do you not want me to do?"

It's exactly the set of questions I know I need to be asked, but my jaw is working overtime to clamp shut so that I can't get the words out. There's a flush of heat creeping up my neck—I never wanted to be that guy, the one who has to have his bedfellows quiz him about every touch. The guy who needs to be coddled. The guy who actually *has* boundaries, let alone ones he needs to enforce. It was never supposed to be this difficult to get off properly. I lick my lips and open my mouth to speak, but language fails me, and I end up sighing instead. Ben pinches my forearm lightly and says, "Come on, G. Use some words."

"I need—" I pause, surprised that any words are even coming to me now. But they feel like they're a good assessment of my current state of mind, so I continue, "I need you to not be too delicate with me, okay? I still want you to touch me, I still want to *feel* it, but I also... need you to kind of keep your hands above the waist for right now, alright? Later, you can do more than that, but for right now, you sort of need to just make out with me and let me grope you a bit and possibly accept a blowjob sometime within the next ten minutes."

"One day, the Catholic Church will declare me a saint for my martyrdom," Ben says, catching my face between his palms.

"Obviously," I agree, and he pulls me into a kiss, finally responding the way I want him to. Fucking hell—I'd forgotten how fantastic his full, soft lips feel against mine. Usually, I have moves. Usually, I have fantastic, filthy lines that get me laid like sex is going out of style, but I'm really turned on, and it's been so long since it's felt like this, that what comes out instead is, "If you don't take your clothes off right now, I'm going to kill myself."

Ben snorts, and I can feel myself turning red, but still, he toes off his red Chucks and reaches for the buckle of his belt. I step back just far enough to kick off my boots and strip off my t-shirt, my jeans. As always, Ben's hoodie is the last thing to be removed, and as always, he ducks his head to avoid my gaze once the black fabric has slipped far enough down his arms to expose the mess of criss-crossed scars that line his left arm. There are so many more than the last time we slept together. They go so much higher; no longer content to make periodic digs into the delicate skin of his wrists, he has taken to carving deep lines up his forearms, above the bend in his arm, over his bicep. They're recent. They're new.

I dig my fingers into his waist and push him back onto his bed, spreading him out and settling myself on top of him. He arches up to kiss me, but I duck down and press my lips to his shoulder instead. He shudders as I trail rough, open-mouthed kisses down the length of his arm, occasionally letting my tongue dart out to trace the older, deeper scars. When I reach his wrist, I press one last kiss to his palm, then grab both his hands and lean forward to raise them above his head. I'm straddling the tops of his thighs, and with me stretched out at this angle, our dicks are both pinned between our stomachs. I take a moment to appreciate the friction of that, but then I overlap his hands and murmur against his jaw, "I want you to keep your wrists crossed over your head, like this. Can you do that for me?"

"Yeah, whatever you want," he says, sinking obediently into the pose I have outlined. I reward him, first with a kiss, and then by sliding back down his body and taking him into my mouth deeply enough that my nose brushes the trail of hair that leads down from his navel. He's unable to bit back a cry at that, and if my mouth weren't full of dick right now, I'd probably be grinning.

Truth be told, I show off a little. There are few things I do as well as I give head, and it's so good to get a chance to take my time, to feel his head hitting the back of my throat, then to pull off and work my tongue against his shaft, or the vein on the underside of his cock. And god, he's so fucking responsive. I glance up through my eyelashes to watch him, to make sure he's keeping his wrists crossed over his head like I asked him to. His hands are opening and closing almost compulsively, these little twitches to his fists that show just how much effort it's taking him to keep his arms up. He's lifting his head slightly to stare down at me, lip caught between his teeth. I sink to take him a little bit deeper, and his head drops back onto the pillows. "Garen, I'm going to—"

I pull off with a pop and sit back on my heels, folding my hands in my lap. "No, you're not."

"Fuck, G. *Please*."

"No," I repeat. It's a test—he should realize it's a test—to make sure that he listens to me when I tell him no. That's the only way this whole arrangement can work. I can't do any of this, not unless I'm one hundred percent positive I can trust him not to just knot his fingers in my hair and force my head back down anyway.

He closes his eyes and shifts so that his forearms are covering his face, but he doesn't uncross his wrists. He doesn't reach for me. He doesn't jerk his hips upward again. He just inhales and exhales slowly, returns his hands to their previous position near the headboard, and says, "Okay."

"Okay," I echo. "Good answer. Pick something else you want me to do to you."

"Will you fuck me?" he asks, turning wild eyes back to my face.

I grin and shake my head. “Not yet.” I’m not sure I could, even if I wanted to. Obviously I’m hard as hell, but still... it’s been so fucking long since I’ve been able to top anyone and actually have an orgasm. After months of giving blowjobs and bottoming, the memories of fucking Travis last January are so distant that they might as well not have happened. I duck down and scrape my teeth over Ben’s hipbone before whispering, “Pick something else.”

He makes a guttural noise and says, “*That*. I pick that, I want you to bite me again.”

The request is unexpected and weird and sexy, and I bite down hard on his upper thigh. He bucks up against my mouth, his head thrown back and mouth open, lips trembling. I fucking lose it. The next ten minutes at least are spent with my hands holding him in place as I suck bruises and bite marks into all of his exposed skin. By the time I’m done, he’s covered in them—his hips, his stomach, his chest, his shoulders. Halfway through my creation of a third mark on his neck, he cranes his head to get his mouth on mine. I roll off of him, dragging him with me so that we’re both lying on our sides, bodies flush against each other. I steal a few harsh, close-mouthed kisses from him, then say, “I want you to put your mouth on me.”

“You want me to suck your cock?” he whispers, the hottest little confirmation I’ve ever heard. He’s already mouthing down my chest, teeth scraping over one of my nipples, tongue tracing my pecs, but he seems reluctant to go any lower until I’ve given him some sort of official go-ahead. He says, “Is that okay?”

“‘Is that okay,’ what the fuck. Yes, it’s okay,” I’m sort of babbling as I roll to settle properly onto my back. The edge of his mouth quirks up into a little half-smile, and then he’s settling himself between my knees and taking my dick in his mouth. For half a second, I think I’ve actually passed out, because it’s been so long since anyone has done this for me, and I had never thought I’d forget how good getting my dick sucked feels, but apparently I did, because the feel of his tongue against me is unbelievable. But he’s only been at it a few minutes before--

On the nightstand, my cell phone starts scratching out, “*bang bang, we’re beautiful and dirty rich (dirty rich dirty rich beautiful)*—”

Ben leans back, staring up at me. “I swear to god, I’m done sucking your dick if you tell me that you actually have Lady Gaga as your ring—”

“It’s not my regular ringtone, it’s just a joke for Jamie, shut the fuck up and keep sucking me,” I say, too focused on chasing his tongue to care about the major lack of blowjob etiquette as I grab the back of his neck and push his face back towards my dick. When he has returned to his previous task, I grab my cell phone off the nightstand and answer the call with a semi-breathless, “Why are you calling me from the next room?”

“Tell McCutcheon to turn down his fucking music, screamo kills my boner,” James says without preamble. His voice hitches a little, and through the wall, I hear the bang of the headboard.

“It’s not screamo, it’s post-hardcore, there’s a difference,” I breathe, and Ben must appreciate the defense, because he pulls off enough to circle his tongue around the head of my dick in a way that makes me want to fucking scream. I manage to control myself enough to force out, “Please tell me that you didn’t actually get your phone out to call me while someone’s dick is inside of you.”

Jamie snorts. “What, like this is the first time I’ve done it? Anyway, tell him to—wait. Why does your voice sound like that? Oh Lord, please tell me you’re not wrecking the midget. Sorry, wrecking *Ben*. Are you fucking him right now?”

“No, I’m not fucking him right now,” I breathe, reaching down to push Ben’s hair back so that his bangs don’t flop down and obscure the view of his full, gorgeous lips wrapped tight around my dick. He glances up at me through his eyelashes, blue eyes dark with want. I twist my head sharply to the side so that I can

bury my face in the pillow, in hope of muffling the groan I can't manage to hold back.

"Then why are you moaning? Are you jerking off? Is he jerking off, too? You insatiable fucking perverts, you're just beating off to the sounds of us fucking, aren't—fucking *god*, Alexander."

"We're not having a foursome, and if I wanted to listen to you and Alex having sex, I would turn the music down. But I don't, so I'm leaving it how it is and hanging up the phone. Goodnight, Jamie." I jab my thumb at the end call button and toss my phone back onto the nightstand.

Ben pulls off just long enough to whisper, "You're so fucking rude, answering a phone call when your dick is in my mouth, what the fuck."

"I'll make it up to you, let me fuck your mouth," I mutter, and the words are barely out before Ben is letting out a strangled moan and grabbing both of my hands, threading them into his hair and squeezing tight. I hold his head in place, I rock my hips up, pressing into his mouth until I feel his throat start to contract around the head of my cock. It feels amazing, but my goal isn't to choke him—most guys I've hooked up with aren't as quick to deepthroat as I am—so I pull back out and let him tongue the underside of my dick for a moment before I thrust back in, as deeply as I think he can handle.

True to his word, Ben doesn't get nearly as rough with me as I'm being with him. He steers clear of touching my hips, though he occasionally curls his hands over my thighs and digs his nails in just a little. He lets me control the pace completely; sometimes I push up into his mouth, sometimes I'm yanking him down onto me, but the longer this goes on, the more I'm doing both at once. I'm starting to get close to coming, and for the first time in ages, the idea of it doesn't scare me. I'm not freaking out—I know it's not Dave, I know I'm safe, I know I want it, I know I'm sober—everything just feels so fucking good. This is Ben, and I trust him, I know he's not going to pull some filthy trick and suddenly pin my hips in place so he can be in charge. He's going to let me *take*, he's doing this for *me*. That's probably why, a second later, I'm jerking up into his mouth and muttering, "You're—ugh, *fucking greatest friend ever*, god."

He'd probably be laughing at me, if I wasn't in the process of coming in his mouth. It's the single greatest orgasm I've had in almost nine months. I hold his mouth in place while my body continues to spasm, and I can't help it, I know that I'm practically crying for how good it feels, and they can definitely hear us in the room next door, but it doesn't matter, because I feel like I've been coming for hours, and Ben is doing his best to relax his throat to accommodate the way I'm pushing up into him so he can swallow.

It's nearly a full minute before I lose my grip on his hair enough to let him pull off. He gives one last lick along my now oversensitive shaft, and I let out another faint groan. I've barely had a second to start enjoying my afterglow when a fist bangs on the wall and Jamie calls, "*Bullshit* you're not fucking him, G! You've had sex with everyone in this apartment, we all know what your orgasm noises sound like!"

"Wanna hear what Ben's sound like?" I call back, and the answering laugh breaks off into a moan.

Ben is mouthing shaky kisses over my stomach. He says, "You don't, it's fine, you don't have to do anything for me that you don't want to," but his credibility is totally shot by the fact that his eyes are squeezed shut and his hand is wrapped tight around his dick. I'm weirdly touched by the fact that he's so dedicated to keeping his promise about not pressuring me that he's willing to beat off instead of asking me to help him out.

"Don't be an idiot, get up here," I order, fisting a hand in his hair and dragging him up into a kiss.

He lets me knock his hand aside so that I can start stroking him, fast and somewhat rough, but when I try to move my other hand away, he shakes his head, sending my mouth skittering across his jaw as he gasps out, "Don't let g—I want you to pull it harder, please, Garen."

I roll him onto his back and sink my teeth into his shoulder, increasing the tempo of my hand and yanking on his hair as much as I think I can without ripping it out. His palms brush across my biceps, and I can tell

he needs something to grab onto. Part of me wants to tell him it's okay to touch me, to put his hands on my waist, or dig his nails into my back, but the thought of him moving in a way that would hold me in place, however indirectly... it sends a now too familiar bolt of panic through my gut. I squeeze my eyes shut to block it out and order, "Put your hands on the headboard."

He does it immediately, winding his fingers around the spokes of the headboard so tightly that his knuckles turn white. His obedience calms me, and after a few seconds, I'm able to focus again on stroking him. His breathing is little more than a series of gasps and shudders at this point, but he still manages to choke out, "I want, can you—fuck, scratch me—"

I only have two hands, and both are busy—it only takes me a split second to decide that, given the choice, Ben is the only guy in the world who would get off more on the part that's giving him pain than the part that's giving him pleasure. Left hand still knotted in his hair, I let go of his dick and dig my nails into his chest, right over his heart, and drag them all the way down to his navel, leaving five raging red lines carved into his skin. His entire body goes still and tense as he comes, and I hastily press my torso down against his so that his cock is trapped between our stomachs, the only source of friction left on him now that my nails are digging into the side of his ribs. I can feel him pulsing against my abs, continuing to rut against me even after he's finished coming, and eventually, I shift off of him so that I won't put any unnecessary friction against him now. I end up sprawled out next to him, my face smashed into his pillow and his cum steadily beginning to glue my stomach to his sheets. I don't even care; I'm still riding my own post-orgasm high. I mumble against the pillow, "That was the greatest idea you've ever had in your life. This is totally how you ended up as valedictorian last year, isn't it?"

"Yes," Ben replies, somehow able to call up his usual monotone even while red-faced, sweat-soaked and panting. "Principal Hammond called me into his office. I told him that someday, I would give you the first blowjob you've gotten in months, and it would be awesome. That's how I became valedictorian. It was in my speech and everything."

"Knew it," I sigh, shifting closer to bury my face in the side of his neck. After a moment, I admit, "A year." He makes a questioning noise in his throat. "First blowjob in a year. Last one I got was the last one you gave me, in October." I lean back slightly to grin at him. "Totally worth the wait, dude."

He rolls his eyes at me and turns onto his side so that he doesn't have to look at me, but he makes no complaints when I curl up behind him with my arm around his waist.

I lied; we spend the night.

Chapter Nine

**“I know God won’t give me anything I can’t handle. I just wish He didn’t trust me so much.” –
Mother Teresa**

18 days sober

When the pounding on the door begins, my first instinct is to bury my head under a pillow to block out the noise. It’s only my second instinct to look around to see where I am. That probably says a lot about my life choices. I roll over and find myself facing Ben’s shoulder. Relaxing somewhat, I bury my face in the crook of his neck; he shoves me off and mumbles, “Go the fuck away, it’s early and you’re being loud.”

“I haven’t made a sound, you twat. That’s your idiot roommate,” I say.

Out in the hall, Alex lets out a pitiful whine.

“I should’ve gotten a fucking studio by myself,” Ben says, rolling his eyes and hauling himself off the bed. He yanks the topmost blanket off the bed, burrows into it, and unlocks the door. He’s already tumbling back onto the bed and curling up against my side by the time the door swings open.

Alex joins us on the bed without seeking permission, but Jamie hovers in the doorway, all too aware of the fact that he’s unlikely to be welcome in Ben’s room. “Sorry ‘bout him. I tried to distract him with morning sex, but he wants breakfast instead.”

“There is no ‘instead.’ We *had* morning sex, I’m just too hungover to go again anytime soon. Now I want pancakes,” Alex says.

I reach over to card my fingers through Ben’s wildly messy hair and contemplate asking if he’d be up for some morning sex, too. But he still seems barely awake, so instead, I say, “You live in a city now, Al, not in Lakewood. You can get pancakes from a diner. There are like, three on this block alone.”

“Yeah, but none of those places will be as good as Ben’s,” Alex protests, and I don’t really have an argument for that. Ben’s cooking is fantastic. I shrug, and Alex turns his attention back to his best friend. “Will you make me pancakes?”

“Sure,” Ben yawns.

“And bacon?”

He shoots Alex a warning look. “Don’t push it, drunk boy.”

Near the door, Jamie straightens up. “What, *that’s* your version of ‘pushing it’? Pancakes and bacon?” He throws his hands up and walks out of the room, muttering, “You fuckin’ people have no idea how to do breakfast up here.”

Alex and Ben share a bewildered glance, and I fling myself off the bed, only belatedly deciding I should probably put some clothes on. I locate my jeans and shirt, pull them on, and say, “Come on, you don’t want to miss this. His accent gets so much thicker when he starts ranting about why Northerners suck. Ask him about traditional Southern breakfasts, see if you can get him to say ‘grits.’ He actually manages to turn it into two syllables, I have no idea how.”

“You guys go, I’ll be along in a few minutes,” Ben says, not moving from the bed. “I have to call my dad and see what time he wants me at the bookstore today.”

I roll my eyes at him—he has no idea how much amusement he’s about to miss out on—but drag Alex from the bedroom without further comment. By the time we get out to the kitchen, Jamie has already

settled comfortably into the task of transferring most of the food from the cabinets and refrigerator to the counter. Seeing us enter, he announces, “Waffles. Eggs. Bacon. Toast. Ham. Do you know how to make biscuits and gravy, or do I have to show you? This is still only half of it, there should be so much more. Y’all need to go shopping.”

“What are they missing?” I prompt immediately, crowding up against Jamie and digging my fingers into his side until he squirms away. “What else would be part of your ideal breakfast? Something that reminds you of home, perhaps?”

“Shut up and sit down,” Jamie says, shoving me off him. I take a seat in one of the two chairs at the table, but I don’t stop grinning at him.

Alex rolls his eyes and begins to move all of the food back where it came from. “Sorry, but people north of the Mason-Dixon line don’t usually start their days with binge-eating. Ben’s going to make us pancakes, and that’s it.” He pauses on his third trip between the counter and the fridge and says, “Jesus, Jamie. If you think this counts as breakfast for four people, how much is your grocery bill every week at your apartment?”

I snort. “What, like he cooks? I mean, he can. I’m pretty sure that’s the great divide among kids who grow up with too much money. Some of them end up like me, and I can—”

“—barely work a fuckin’ microwave, it’s pathetic,” Jamie informs me. He turns to Alex, flashes him a smile, “And then there are some like me. I spent most of my childhood hanging around the kitchen with our cook, just so my mom wouldn’t have to put up with me. I picked up quite a bit. But in Manhattan, I’m so busy doing other things that it’s just... easier to get food delivered. And you know something? For a city that prides itself on being so culturally diverse and having cuisine from all over the world, I have yet to find a single goddamn restaurant in New York that can make shrimp and grits the way my—” He stops speaking the moment I collapse over the table, unable to hold back my laughter any longer. His eyes narrow into slits and he hisses, “Don’t you dare say it, Anderson.”

But I’m already slumped over and practically howling, “Did you hear it? Hear how he turned it from ‘grits’ to ‘gree-uts’? It’s a fucking five-letter word, and he managed to make it into two syllable—”

“It’s been four fuckin’ years! When are you going to stop finding the way I talk funny?” he says. There’s a slightly dangerous glint in his eyes when he adds, “Especially since people from Ohio don’t know how to pronounce a double-oh.”

At first, I think he’s saying it just to mess with me, but when I catch sight of Alex, I notice that he’s trying to hide a grin. I squint. “What’s wrong with the way I say a double-oh?”

“Say ‘bedroom,’ Jamie orders. “Or ‘root beer.’ Or ‘roof.’ Oh my Lord, please say ‘roof.’”

“Roof,” I echo, and Alex snorts. I shove him off his chair. “What? How am I supposed to say it?”

“Uh, you’re sure as shit not supposed to say it ‘ruff,’ like you’re a fucking cartoon dog,” he says. “A double-oh that follows an ‘r’ is supposed to be pronounced the same almost every time, like when you say ‘choose.’ And you say that fine, but you say ‘ruff’ instead of ‘roof’—”

“—and ‘rut beer’ instead of ‘root beer’—”

“—and ‘rum’ instead of ‘room.’”

It continues like that for nearly ten minutes. *People from Ohio can’t say ‘dad’.* *People from Connecticut can’t say ‘coffee.’* *People from Cleveland don’t know enough to pronounce the ‘d’ at the end of their own city.* *People from the South can’t say fucking anything.* It’s all fairly good-natured, until we get to the discussion of pop. *Pop.* Because that’s what it’s fucking called.

"It's definitely not," Alex protests. "It's called *soda*."

I bury my face in my hands and groan, "No, it's not. It's *pop*."

"We call it coke," Jamie says, shrugging as he digs through the refrigerator and surfaces with an apple.

I round on him. "That's stupid. Every time I've come to visit you in Savannah, we go out to eat and I order a coke, and the waiter asks, 'What kind?' Uh, fucking *coke*. You know, Coca-Cola. That's what coke means. Well, either that or cocaine. But it's not just a catch-all term for every kind of pop in existence."

"Garen, it's not called pop, it's—"

"Your opinion is invalid," I say fiercely, rounding on Alex, "because you think that a sub is called a grinder."

That catches Jamie's attention once more. He turns to me, baffled, and says, "They call it a *what*?"

"A grinder. Like, 'I'm going to Subway to buy a grinder.'"

"That... but that sounds perverted."

"I know."

"It sounds *gross*."

"*I know*."

"Alright, I have to be at work in an hour and a half, so you guys need to decide whether you want regular pancakes, blueberry ones, or chocolate chip," Ben announces, finally joining us in the kitchen. Rather than pull on his clothes from the night before or bother to shower so he can get ready for work, he has dressed himself in a long-sleeved gray henley and a pair of black sweatpants that ride low on his hips. A half-inch strip of skin is visible between the two articles of clothing, and I can see the edge of one of the bite marks I left on his hip. Not, of course, as clearly as I can see the three on his neck.

Jamie hitches his chin at Ben. "Nice hickies."

"Nice screaming," Ben retorts. "If you're always that loud during sex, I'm either moving out or buying you a ball-gag."

"So *that's* why I don't recall hearing anything from you last night. Tell me: when you come, do you moan in monotone, too?" He turns his eyes on me and quirks a brow. "Or did Garen decide not to reciprocate?"

I shrug. "He doesn't make much noise when he comes, to tell you the truth. It's pretty hot to watch. He just sort of tenses up, and his mouth kinda falls open a little bit, and the very tip of his tongue comes out to touch his top two front teeth—"

"Chocolate chip, blueberry, or plain?" Ben says, banging a pan down on the stove and yanking open the refrigerator door.

"Plain," I say, half a second before Alex demands, "Blueberry."

Jamie narrows his eyes and says, just to be a contrary little cunt, "Chocolate chip."

Ben points to each of us in the order we've spoken and says, "Fine, okay, go fuck yourself."

But he makes all three kinds anyway. I'm not usually a breakfast person, but I'll eat pretty much anything Ben cooks. Plus, he buys the good syrup, the kind that comes in weird, short jugs. Once I've finished, I push my empty plate away and say, "We should probably get going. Dude, did I leave my phone in your room?"

Ben shrugs. "Probably."

"Want me to go get it?" Jamie offers, smirking at me. "I doubt Ben wants me to go into his room, but I'm fairly certain that if I let you two go in there together, you'll just end up touching each other in all the most sinful places, and I'd rather not have you get struck down by the Lord while you're driving me back to your place."

I open my mouth to make a snide comment right back at him, but before I can speak, Ben explodes, "Can you just shut the fuck up for five seconds? Jesus fucking Christ!" Then, looking more furious than ever, he shoves his plate off the counter into the sink and storms out of the kitchen, down the hall, and into his room.

The second the door has slammed shut behind him, James turns to stare at me with wide eyes. "What the fuck was that?"

"I don't know," I say. "He... Ben's not usually the one who blows up like that. I mean, I do, all the time. Travis has an even worse temper than I do, he's the one who yells at people and throws shit and storms out. But Ben doesn't—"

"It was the God comment," Alex interrupts, poking at his pancakes with the tip of his fork. At our blank stares, he adds, "The thing you said about getting struck down, or whatever. It pissed him off. And then he got more pissed at himself for blaspheming afterward."

Jamie actually looks a bit ashamed of himself. "I didn't realize he'd be that offended by it. I was just joking."

"I know you were. He's just not a fan of jokes about that." He rolls his eyes and makes a vague gesture with his fork. "He doesn't talk about it much, but his whole family is really, really Catholic. Like, they're crazy into the whole Jesus thing, it's ridiculous."

As the resident Jew, I can completely relate to his feelings about the Jesus thing being ridiculous, but I also have known Jamie for four years. I know that for all his sinning, he's still a true Southern boy at heart, which means he is obliged to love—in no particular order—his mother, his country, and his God. His eyes narrow. "What's so ridiculous about being into Jesus?"

"Uh, I don't know, maybe the fact that it's fucking stupid?" Alex suggests, shrugging. "There's no evidence to support any of it, but his family bases their entire lives on it. It's insane. I don't need some invisible dude in the sky telling me what's the right thing to do. And Ben sure as fuck doesn't need to keep hearing about how he's going to go to Hell because he likes guys. The entire concept of organized religion disgusts me."

"I'm going to go talk to him," I mutter, slipping out of my chair before I can be sucked into the impending 'Baptist versus atheist' argument. Down the hall, Ben's door remains closed, but unlocked. I slip inside, expecting to see him pouting, or pacing, or something, but he's just standing near the foot of the bed, unmoving except for his hands. His shirt sleeve is pushed halfway up his forearm, and he's repeatedly snapping a rubber band against his wrist, like the world's least comfortable bracelet. He looks up when I enter, forces a smile, but doesn't stop snapping the band. I cock my head to the side. "You alright?"

"I'm fine," he says. Snap.

"I know it sounds hard to believe, but Jamie wasn't trying to be an ass. He didn't mean to upset you."

Snap.

"I'm not upset." Snap, snap, snap--

I reach out and cover the band with my fingers, halting the movement. The skin beneath my hand is hot from the friction, and I can feel the slightly raised areas where welts from the rubber are starting to form. I tow him closer, and he moves willingly enough, though he resists when I try to wrap an arm around him. That's not surprising—Ben's ability to let himself be taken care of only goes so far. I sigh and settle for squeezing his shoulder as I admit, "My best friend is kind of a dick sometimes. It's a trait we share, I think we bonded over it when we first met."

"Not terribly surprised to hear that," Ben says.

I stick my tongue out at him, and he grins. It's the closest I think I'm going to be able to get to an acknowledgment of his discomfort with the conversation in the kitchen, and pushing him to talk isn't going to help. I do, however, pull him a little closer and use one finger to carefully brush his hair away from his eyes. He doesn't look away, which is... surprising. Surprising, but nice. Before I can think better of it, I find myself saying, "You and me... we had a good thing together, didn't we? Last fall, when I first moved here."

His forehead creases. "What do you mean?"

I hesitate. This conversation has the potential to go so horribly wrong that things could end up being uncomfortable for days—maybe even weeks. I have such a low threshold for rejection, and Ben has such a low bullshit tolerance; him denying my attempts to initiate anything he thinks is pointless or a waste of energy could leave both of us incredibly pissed off. But I can't stop staring at the purple-red bruises on his throat, mirroring the shape of my mouth, disappearing just below the collar of his shirt. Without really deciding to move, I raise a hand to brush the tips of my fingers across one of the bite marks. The abused skin there must still be sensitive, because Ben shivers a little and cranes his neck slightly, allowing me better access.

All at once, I'm crowding him back against the door, curving my hand over his throat—not tight enough to really choke him, but enough that he can feel the pressure on his bruises—and kissing him. He grabs the hem of my shirt and rucks it halfway up my torso so that he can run his palms down my chest, over my abs. I shove his hands down another few inches until they're resting at the top of my jeans, and once he has started to unbutton them, I break away from the kiss to mouth over the marks on his neck. I whisper against his skin, "When we first met, those weeks where all we did was hang out and play music together and—" I bite down right over one of the already existing marks, and he actually lets out a little cry and grinds his erection harder into my thigh. I release his throat and shift up so that my next words ghost hot across his ear, "*--and I fucked your brains out every chance we got.* You remember that?"

"God, like I could forget it," he breathes, hooking his thumbs over the waistband of my jeans but hesitating long enough to ask, "Can I?"

"Go for it," I say, grinning, and then he's on his knees in front of me, yanking the denim halfway down my thighs and sliding his mouth down onto me. I brace a hand against the door and stare down at him, momentarily losing my train of thought while I watch his mouth bobbing on my dick. It's an understandable distraction, but eventually, I manage to make myself say, "We should—that. Or, this, I guess." He doesn't take my piece out of his mouth, but he does tilt his head back slightly so that he can shoot me a questioning look. That shouldn't be hot, but it so is. My eyes roll shut and I say, "That thing—whatever it was that we had going on last fall, that whole friendship-plus-fucking thing. I want to do that, I want to go back to that."

He pulls off for about three seconds to say, "Please tell me this isn't you trying to ask me out. Because I will literally shove your cock so far back into my throat that I choke to death, just to avoid having to have that conversation."

"Oh my god, that would be the best way to die. Like, if I can't go out in a drug-induced haze, choking on cock is my second choice," I say, knotting a hand in his hair and guiding his mouth back onto me. "But dude, no, I'm not trying to ask you out. I don't want to be your boyfriend, but I-I don't think I wanna be just your friend, either. Isn't there like, some sort of middle ground we can settle for? One where we have all the awesome parts of our friendship that we have now—like, where I get to come over here and dick around on the xbox, and we go to shows together, and you proofread my English essays, and I correct you when your guitar fingering sucks—"

"My fingering is flawless," Ben says between licks at the head of my dick.

"We're talking about your musical skills, not your masturbation technique," I say, hissing a little when he scrapes his teeth ever so gently over my shaft, presumably as a warning for me to shut up. I card my fingers through his hair and say, "I'm serious, though. We should do this. We should do all the cool friend stuff, but then also, we should make out. And suck each other off. And fuck. We should fuck a lot. Like, as much as possible, probably."

From out in the hallway, I hear Jamie say, "Seriously, can you two stop touching each other so we can go?"

Before I can react, the door swings open—or, as far open as it can before it cracks into the back of Ben's head, forcing him forward so that he's suddenly sucking me right down to the base. And that feels amazing, except for how I can feel Ben's throat spasming around the head of my cock, and I can tell it's choking him. I shove the door shut so that there's enough space for him to reel back, coughing and gagging.

"What the hell just happened?" Jamie demands from the other side of the door.

"You broke Ben!" I accuse. "For Christ's sake, Jamie, you can't just go around opening doors that people are hooking up against, you cock-blocking little shit."

Ben gives one last cough and rasps out, "I'm fine. He didn't break me, I'm fine."

His voice is completely wrecked, and the fact that he sounds like that because he was just deepthroating me is almost too much for me to handle. It shouldn't be funny or sexy, but it's *both*. I sink to my knees in front of him and clasp his face between my hands, drawing him into a deep, desperate kiss. I pull back and say, "I have to go, or Jamie's going to—" Ben interrupts me with another, shorter kiss, "—to keep being a bitch. And you have—" I'm the one to initiate the next kiss, "—work. You have to get ready. And go to work."

"Fuck me," he practically growls, and I'm already nodding my agreement by the time he finishes, "I'm working from noon to six. I'm picking you up after I leave the shop, and we're going to come back here, and you're going to fuck me until I come so hard I pass out, okay?"

"So, that's a 'yes,' then? To my whole idea of us being friends who wreck each other's shit at every available opportunity?" I slip a hand up the back of his shirt and dig my nails into his skin; he silences his groan by kissing me again.

When I finally pull back, though, his upper lip curls a bit and he says, "You're not going to make this weird again, are you?"

"What do you mean?" I say. "When did I make this weird the first time?"

"Uh, when we were sleeping together last October and you tried to break up with me even though we weren't dating?" he says, laughing. I shove him over.

Admittedly, it had been a pretty awkward conversation. I had come up to him while he was at his locker before homeroom and said, *So, you and I have been fucking for a while now, but we're not dating, right? Like, I'm not supposed to be your boyfriend or anything?* He had stared at me like I was completely retarded and said, *Uh, no? Why the hell would we be dating, dude?* I had just sort of shrugged and said, *Awesome. 'Cause I think I'm in love with someone, and he seems like he's the monogamy sort of guy. So, I think I'm supposed to stop having sex with you.* He had burst out laughing and walked away, and that had been that.

It so figures he would bring that up now.

"I won't make it weird this time," I say. "We'll be doing exactly what we've been doing for ages—just the friendship thing—and then also, we'll—I want to touch you."

Out in the hall, Jamie smacks his fist against the door and says, "You can touch him later. I want to go."

"The next time you're having sex with Alex, I'm going to break into the room and kick you right in the balls, Jamie, I swear to god! You're my best friend, and I'm trying to talk my way into a friends-with-benefits scenario here, and you're not helping. You're *hindering*. So you're sleeping on the fucking floor tonight—"

"The fuck I am! Even if you kick me out of your bed, you still have a couch I can—"

"Fuck the couch and fuck you, too. The *floor*, James." I turn and flash my brightest, most charming smile to where Ben is still sprawled out on the floor, just as I pushed him. "So, what do you say?"

"I say you're a fucking idiot," he says. "But also, okay."

"Yeah?"

He nods and reaches out to scrape his nails gently down the length of my forearm. "Yeah. As long as you're sure you can handle it."

"Cocky little shit, isn't he?" Jamie says.

"*The floor*," I hiss again. I turn my eyes back to Ben and say, quietly enough that only he can hear, "I can handle it. I mean, we might need to—there will still be times when I like, need a minute, or whatever. And some stuff is still going to take a while for me to get used to it. But if that's cool with you, then I'm sure I'll be fine."

He stands, offers me a hand, and hauls me to my feet. I steal one last kiss before I grab my phone from the nightstand and head out into the hall, but before Ben can follow me out, Jamie is shoving past me and shutting them both in the room. Bewildered, I try the handle, but it's locked. I knock. "Um, sorry. But what the fuck?"

There's no response. At least, there's no response to me. I can hear muffled voices from inside, but it's impossible to make out any specifics. How the hell was Jamie strong-arming his way into our conversation? Was he standing with his ear pressed to the door, or do I just talk really loudly? Since neither of them seem inclined to tell me what's going on, I wander back out to the kitchen, where Alex is scowling down at his now cold pancakes. He glances up when I enter. "I have got to get a new type, man. First Ben, now James?"

"Uh," I say, holding one hand three inches above the top of my head and the other ten inches below that—Jamie's height and Ben's, respectively. "Because the two of them have so much in common?"

"The God thing," he groans, rubbing the back of his neck. "I'm so over being into guys who have a bunch of Jesus issues. He tore me a new asshole the second you left the room, told me I was being a disrespectful little shit for saying it's stupid to believe in God. And whatever, I still think it is. But I said he

was being a fucking hypocrite, because he didn't seem to care about 'respect' when he was making Ben feel like shit."

"Is that what they're talking about now?"

He nods. "Jamie said he wanted to apologize before he left."

I wrinkle my nose. Jamie having actual feelings is so weird. I've got half a mind to cockblock whatever religious, emotional fuckery they've got going on now, but before I've even managed to take two steps back in the direction of the bedrooms, Jamie is sauntering back into the kitchen, face neutral. "Ready to go?"

"Where's Ben?" I ask.

He gestures over his shoulder. "Still in his room, he's going to start getting ready for work. He said to tell you goodbye."

"Okay," I say slowly, turning to raise my eyebrows at Alex in what I hope he realizes is an unspoken, *I'm going to leave now, but just in case Jamie's being a sociopath and lying about that, make sure your roommate knows I say bye*. He jerks his head a little in acknowledgment, and we depart without another word.

The car ride back to my house is mostly silent, save the music coming from the stereo. Finally, as we're turning onto my street, Jamie twists to look at me and says, "Are we going to talk about how I just heard you sort-of-ask-Ben-out-but-not-really?"

"Emphasis on 'not really.' Are we going to talk about how I just heard you apologize to someone you hate for something I know you don't really feel guilty over, just because Alex wanted you to?" I ask. He doesn't say anything. I gnaw on my lip ring for a minute, but by the time we pull into my driveway, the silence is unbearable. I put the car in park, turn to face him, and say, "You really like him, don't you?"

"Can we please not have this conversation?" Jamie says tightly, his eyes fixed on his hands.

"Jamie, I'm serious. I've never seen you this into a guy—"

"I was this into you."

"That doesn't count. This is different, okay? And I don't—" I break off, not knowing how to continue without offending him. But the truth is, Jamie's one of the smartest people I know. He's not delusional. He knows what I'm going to say, so there's no point in resisting. I sigh. "He's kind of in love with Ben. I know you know that, okay? And I would rather die than see you get hurt, and I'm kind of freaked out about this whole thing, because Alex is my friend, yeah, but you're so much more than that. I don't want you to get your heart broken, and I'm worried that that's where this is headed, because... sometimes you look at him like you're, you know. Falling for him."

He turns to face me again, and right there, in his eyes, is everything I need to know. All things that are too new and terrifying for him to verbalize. All the things he thinks I'd make fun of him for. All the things he's thinking and feeling and craving. All the things I felt last fall, after I met Travis. I don't need to hear him say it, and I don't think he'd be able to, even if I asked. So when he repeats, in a softer voice, "Can we please not have this conversation?" I nod.

Once outside the car, I sling an arm over his shoulders and press a rough kiss to his cheekbone. He wrinkles his nose at me, and I grin, dragging him into the house.

"Hey, Dad!" I call once we've stepped over the threshold. "You lived in Ohio your whole life, right? I need you to say something for me. Say 'roof.'"

"Roof," James repeats, in his own horrible accent. "As in, 'Santa and his reindeer are on the roof.'"

"No, as in 'fiddler on the roof.' Respect my fucking heritage or get out of my house."

"Can you come into the kitchen, please?" Dad says. I obey. He's sitting at the kitchen table, his brow furrowed and his eyes focused on what must be a truly fascinating knot in the wood. He asks, "Where have you two been?"

"We went to a show in New Haven with Alex and Ben. I told you about it days ago, and I said goodbye to you before we left," I say, tossing the spare Benz key onto the table. "We're going to head downstairs, alright?"

"No, you're not," Dad says sharply, and Jamie and I both freeze. Dad still hasn't looked up from the table. He gestures to the seats across from him and says, "Sit down. Both of you."

I shoot a nervous glance towards Jamie, who widens his eyes back at me. Dad's using his disciplinarian voice, which I'm kind of used to—he's been using that voice with me since I was five—but it's... different from usual. It's sharper, firmer. It's like it was the day he kicked me out. Clearly this isn't up for debate, so I sink into the chair directly across from him. Jamie sits down next to me and reaches over to squeeze my knee. There's a beat of silence before I say, "What's up?"

Dad finally looks up. "Were you drinking last night?"

That must be the moment when all of my blood turns to ice. That's the only explanation for how cold I suddenly feel. Next to me, Jamie goes tense; his fingertips are digging into my leg. I swallow and stare my father dead in the eyes. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

"No, I'm not," he says. "I want an honest answer. Were you drinking last night? It's obvious that James was. He's hungover right now, I can tell by looking at him. And while I'm not exactly thrilled with that idea, because he's still only eighteen, he's neither my child nor an addict. But you are, Garen. It's clear that you two went to a venue that has no problem serving alcohol to minors. You told me that you were going to a show, yes, but you also told me you'd be home by two, at the latest. It's eleven thirty now. Where'd you spend the night?"

"Gee, I don't know, Dad. I guess I must've spent it blacked out in an alleyway," I deadpan.

James turns his head sharply towards me. "Garen, don't be like that right now." Then, to my dad, he says, "After the show, we went back to the apartment. It was my idea—Alexander and I are involved, and I wanted to spend the night."

"Well, the last time Garen spent the night at the apartment without calling to check in with me, he ended up in rehab," Dad says. "That was less than three weeks ago. I cannot believe you would expect me to be okay with this."

Part of me is embarrassed, but most of me is *livid*. "I expected you to be okay with this because it's the way things have always been. I've never been expected to check in with you before. I thought you *trusted* me."

"The last time I trusted you, you started using again," Dad says. I let out a little breath of air that might be a laugh; I still don't think I can feel most of my body. He sighs. "Garen, give me your phone."

I stare at him, but he doesn't yield. It's not like I can tell him to go fuck himself—the phone was purchased with a credit card that's technically mine, but is completely paid for by him. He pays the phone bill every month. It's my phone in name only. I tug it from my pocket and toss it onto the table. He unlocks the screen, not bothering to explain himself as he begins to thumb through it. At first, I think he's reading my

messages—and whatever, if he wants to traumatize himself by reading mine and Jamie’s horrifically explicit sexts, that’s up to him—but then he sets the phone down on the table. The screen is lit up with a dialing message; he’s making a call on speakerphone. It rings three times, then--

“I thought you were supposed to be the kind of guy who *doesn’t* call the morning after he gets his dick sucked. You know I’m at work right now, why are you bothering me?”

There’s a beat, during which Jamie has to bury his head in his arms to smother his laughter. Dad pinches the bridge of his nose and says, “Ben, this is Bill Anderson, Garen’s father.”

“Um,” Ben says, clearly trying not to panic, and I smirk. “G-Good morning, sir. Please pretend I answered the phone by saying literally *anything* else.”

“In my experience, ‘hello’ tends to work fairly nicely. Now, I’m sitting here with my son and his friend. I’d like to confirm that they did in fact spend last night at your apartment.”

I cross my arms and say, “I’m sorry, did you miss the dick-sucking comment?”

“Garen, stop talking forever,” Ben says tightly. Then, he continues, “Yes, they both stayed here last night. We all went to a show together, and we got back from the venue around... twelve thirty? Maybe one o’clock? After that, we just—I mean, it was kind of late, so it just made more sense for them to stay here, instead of driving all the way back to Lakewood. They—I’m sorry, I don’t understand. Is there a problem?”

“I’ve yet to determine the answer to that, actually. Was my son drinking or using drugs at any point during your activities last night?” Dad asks.

I am so grateful to hear the sharpness in Ben’s voice when he says, “What? No. Mr. Anderson, Garen is completely sober, he has been for weeks now. The last time he did anything like that was right before his most recent time in rehab. He’s been really good lately, and I wouldn’t—none of us would cover for him if he was relapsing, believe me. None of us want to sit idly by and watch him get hurt.”

“Right. The same way none of you wanted to *sit idly by* this past spring.”

“Dad, shut the fuck up,” I order, not caring if my harshness gets me in trouble. But it’s too late; the screen goes black as the call cuts off from Ben’s end. I snatch my phone up and try to redial, but my call is sent to voicemail after one ring. I try again. The same. Even as I’m thumbing out a text that says, *ben i’m sorry, please ignore my cuntjacket of a dad & call me back asap*, I snap, “Are you kidding me right now? Like, was that honestly supposed to be a joke? Because in case you’ve forgotten, Ben is the one who followed me all the way to Ohio to bring me back. Ben’s the one who convinced me I needed help. He’s the one who *saved me*. And no matter how pissed you are at me, you should at least show him the respect he deserves.”

“This isn’t about Ben,” Dad says. He has no idea how wrong he is. He has no idea how harshly Ben takes criticism like that, he doesn’t realize the sort of things that Ben will do to himself to assuage the guilt he’ll feel if he thinks he’s even remotely responsible for my issues. He doesn’t realize that in a few hours, Ben will be locking himself in his bedroom, and digging out the empty CD case he thinks I don’t know he uses to hide his razors, and dragging a blade across whatever free space he can find on his already shredded and scarred arm.

I dump the phone back on the table and say, “Fine. Then what’s it about?”

“James, can you please go downstairs?” Dad asks, but it’s not really much of a question. I can tell that Jamie wants to protest, but neither of us is really in any position to bargain right now. With one last brush of his palm over my thigh, he stands and slips wordlessly from the kitchen. Dad turns his eyes on me. “I’m done with this.”

"What, are you kicking me out again?" I say. "Cool. Maybe you could save us both some time and call Mom first, though. That way, she can make her two-hour, screaming phone call while I'm on my way there, and then I won't have to listen from the next room while she tells you how ashamed she is to have ever been married to a man who'd do something like that to his own son. Because that was a really shitty phone call to have to overhear last time."

Mentioning him kicking me out is a low blow; it's meant to be. I don't miss the way the muscles in his face all tighten at that, or the way his eyes dart to the ground, like he's a little ashamed of himself for having done that, too. But then he says, "I'm not kicking you out. But I am done letting you have free reign around here. I have been trying so goddamn hard to support you for the past few months. I've been trying not to smother you, or treat you—"

"—like an addict?" I supply.

He sighs. "No. I've been trying not to treat you any differently than I did before. You have to realize how lax the rules have always been for you, and honestly, maybe that's where your mother and I went wrong. We've been treating you like an adult for so long—no rules, no curfew, no punishments. But I can't do that anymore, Garen. I can't sit here and pretend that every time you stay out all night, or don't check in with me, I'm not wondering if you've run away *again*, or if you've relapsed *again*, or if you're going to decide you want to shoot yourself *again*."

The worst part is that there are so many other 'agains' he doesn't even know about. He doesn't know that he should also be worrying about me selling myself *again* or getting assaulted *again* or having my ass beaten at school *again*. Even now, he still doesn't get the full extent of the awfulness I have been through and am capable of.

When I don't speak, he says, "You have no boundaries. You have never had any boundaries. That needs to change."

"Okay. Fine. I'll get some boundaries," I say. Capitulation is always the easiest way to end a lecture, isn't it?

He shakes his head, so, guess not. "They don't count as boundaries unless I'm the one setting them. So, effective immediately, we're going to have some new rules around here. And don't even think about telling me that you're eighteen and you can do what you want, because while you're living here, being supported by me, you're going to have to put up with a little bit more parenting, whether you want it or not."

I cross my arms over my chest, but I don't say anything. Contrary to what he seems to believe, I'm not a fucking toddler. I'm not going to pull any 'I'm an adult, you can't run my life, even if you fund it completely' bullshit. I do, however, roll my eyes a little bit when he goes over to the counter and picks up a yellow legal pad that is covered in writing. Clearly he has been thinking about this a lot today.

"Rule number one: you now have a curfew. You'll be home by eleven on school nights, one on weekends. No excuses, no exceptions, no extensions. If you have a legitimate reason to spend the night at someone else's house, I need to hear about it in advance, and I need to speak with whomever it is. Rule number two: if you're going out, I want to know where you're going, who you'll be with, what you'll be doing, and when I can expect you back. Rule number three: you will be home for dinner every Sunday night by seven o'clock. At this dinner, you will tell me all about the previous week, including details about how school is going, how your sessions with Doctor Howard are going, and how you think you're handling your sobriety—"

"That's not fair," I interrupt, trying to ignore the panic that's blossoming in my chest. "My sessions are private, that's the whole point of them. I can talk to her about stuff, she gives me advice about the things I'm not comfortable talking about with my family. I'm not going to tell you what I say to her."

Dad raises a hand, palm up, like a gesture of surrender. "I'm not asking you to tell me everything, but I am requesting that you keep me informed about how things are going. If you're having a serious problem, or if there's something going on that might cause you to feel pressure to use again, I need to be aware of it. Now, moving on... rule number four: you need to greatly improve your behavior at school. We're still in the first month of classes, and you've already received three detentions. It's unacceptable. From now on, every detention you get equals one weekend you'll be grounded. Rule number five: those five colleges I told you to pick? I want your applications sent in by Halloween, and I want proof that you've met with your guidance counselor about planning for your future. Rule number six: I want a list of all your upcoming tests, projects, that trial law competition—everything. I expect you to put an adequate amount of time into studying and preparing for all of them, because I want your GPA to be at least a three-point-oh. I'd like a three-point-five, if possible."

I scratch the back of my neck. "I'm not sure a three-point-five is possible, but I'll do the three-oh. Fine. Is that it?"

"Just one more thing. Rule number seven: you need to get my approval before you decide on a new *sleeping arrangement*. That means you ask permission before a boy sleeps over here, and you ask my permission before you agree to sleep at his place. If you're planning to go on a date, I want to know about it. If you're involved with someone, even though you know your doctor says that you shouldn't be, I want to know about it. I know that you're eighteen years old, and I know that you're sexually active, but you're still in high school, and you're still my son. You need to be more appropriate and respectful about the things that you do. And—this isn't on the list, obviously, but—I asked you two weeks ago if you and Ben were involved. You said no. Clearly, that's not the truth."

"You asked me if he was my boyfriend," I argue, kicking at the leg of the table. "You didn't ask about being involved, whatever that means, you just asked if he was my boyfriend, and he's not. Like—okay, yeah. We hooked up last night, obviously. But it's the first time he and I have done anything since last fall, since before I dated—" *Travis*. God, I don't even like thinking his name, let alone saying it. Based on the way Dad blinks away from my face, he knows what I'm talking about, so I switch to saying, "I'm not dating Ben. I was telling you the truth then, I'm telling it now. And I don't really get how it's any of your business, but yeah, we screw around. It's not a relationship, and it's not a big deal."

Dad lets out a noise of frustration and bursts out, "It *is* a big deal, Garen! The last relationship you had landed you in the hospital, and the one before that was with your stepbrother. Your taste in men worries me."

"You know Ben! You know he's a good guy, and you didn't have any problem with Travis banging him last spring—"

"Travis was dating him," Dad says. "Whether or not they *banged*, as you so politely put it, is completely beside the point. Travis was respectful enough to agree to specific rules. Ben never slept over here. He had to come to dinner so that Evelyn and I could get to know him—"

"What, you want me to have Ben come over for dinner some night? Hang out with you and Mom, so you can grill him about his intentions with me?" I sneer.

"Yes."

So not the answer I was expecting. I gape at my dad, but his arms are folded over his chest, and I can tell that he's actually serious about this. Finally, I manage to force out, "I'm not going to make him come over for an interrogation if he's not my boyfriend, that's ri-goddamn-diculous. We're not dating, I just jerked him off. That's really not 'meet the family' material, especially since *you already know him*. He's even met Mom. I am not inviting one of my best friends over so that you can quiz him about all the disgusting, perverted things I do to him in bed. And I promise you that you don't want to initiate that conversation, because it'll last about five seconds before I snap and tell you things you'd rather die than hear your only son say."

"Either he comes over for dinner so that I can talk to him, or you're not allowed over there anymore. It's as simple as that," Dad says, shrugging. "Your doctor told you that an important part of your sobriety is emotional sobriety. You shouldn't be getting intimate with people, emotionally or physically, but you're disregarding that for him. I think that's worth discussing."

"We're just friends who fuck around! It's not intimacy," I say, even though, yeah, it sort of is. Not the act in itself, not the concept of it, but the fact that I'm willing to let him even put his hands on me, the fact that we can do anything without me freaking out... that's as intimate as I can get these days. But there's no way in hell I'm going to admit that to my father.

My phone buzzes on the table, and I snatch it up. It's a text from Jamie. *Do you need me to come back up?*

no, I type out. but i do need you to call/text alex and ask him if he can convince ben to call me back. i feel like a dick and a half for what my dad said to him.

Dad clears his throat, and I scowl up at him. "What?"

"You're not leaving this table until you agree to all of these rules," he says plainly.

"I'm fine with the curfew, I'm fine with you knowing where I am or who I'm with, I'm fine with Sunday dinners, I'm emphatically *not* fine with telling you what goes on in my therapy sessions, I won't get any more detentions, I'll send in the stupid college apps, you can creep on my test schedule as much as you want, I'll get above a three-oh, I'll—what was the last one? Oh, right. I'll ask your permission before I put my dick in anybody. Specifically, I will ask your permission before I put my dick in my *friend*, Ben. Did I leave anything out?"

"Dinner," Dad says, completely unfazed by my crudeness. "You're inviting him over for dinner. Ideally, either this week or next."

I open my mouth to protest, but my phone begins to buzz with an incoming call. I check the ID; it's Ben. I stand up. "Fine. I'll invite him over for dinner, but that doesn't mean he's my boyfriend. This conversation's over, I'm taking this call."

He doesn't try to stop me from stomping out into the living room and over to the door that leads to my room. Only once I'm sitting halfway down the stairs do I answer the call, but before I can say anything, Ben says, "Sorry for hanging up like that. It was rude of me."

"Uh, no, what was rude was my dad saying such stupid shit to you," I say. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he says, but his tone is too flat for me to believe it.

I sigh. "He was pissed because he didn't realize that Jamie and I were going to be staying out all night. He kind of freaked when we didn't come home, I guess, and instead of calling me, like a normal person would, he spent the morning drafting out a list of rules for my behavior."

That's enough to earn a snort. "Rules? Has he met you?"

"Guess not," I say, pinning the phone between my ear and my shoulder so that I can start methodically cracking my knuckles. "He apparently hasn't met you, either. Because I can't think of a single other reason why he would want you to come over for dinner."

"I've come over before, that's not a big—"

"No, dude, he wants you to *come over for dinner*. Like, you, and me, and him, and my mom, if she can

take time to drive in from New York. He wants you to come over so he can question you about like, your intent to steal my virtue, or whatever.”

“He had that exact dinner with me six months ago, when I was dating Travis!” Ben protests. “I’m still the same person I was then—”

“Well, to be fair, you probably never told Evelyn McCall that you sucked off her son and didn’t expect a phone call in the morning.”

“Yeah, but I’m pretty sure you made enough of those comments to cover the rest of us,” he says. There’s a beat, and then he says, “If he’s this pissed about you going out last night, I’m guessing that you coming over tonight isn’t the best idea.”

I sigh and lean my head against the railing. “Yeah, probably not. I have a curfew now, too. One on weekends, eleven on school nights.” I trace the seam on the side of my jeans with my thumbnail. “We’ll hang out, though. Sometime this week, okay?”

“Yeah. Of course. Listen, I have to get back to work. Text me later?”

I make a vague noise of agreement, then hang up and trudge the rest of the way down to my room. Jamie is kicked back on my bed, and though he sits up when I enter, I crawl onto the bed, shove him flat onto his back, and curl up against his side, burying my face in the side of his neck. He curves an arm around my shoulders and drags me closer until I’m sprawled out on top of him. “You alright, G?”

“No,” I say, though my voice is muffled by his shirt. “No, I’m really fucking not.”

He strokes his fingertips across the nape of my neck and kisses the top of my head, but neither of us speaks after that. I want to ask him how he can stand to touch me, when my own dad can barely look at me. I want to ask him how he can treat me the same way he always has. I want to ask him if he trusts me to stay clean, and if he says yes, I want to ask how he can do that, and if he says no, I want to ask what the fucking point of trying is.

Instead, I burrow deeper into his arms and remain completely silent.

20 days sober

My first attempt to fuck Ben goes so badly I actually contemplate cutting my losses and moving to a deserted island, or another planet, or rural Oklahoma, or somewhere else where no one has heard of gay sex.

Everything is set up perfectly; my suddenly-overbearing father knows I’m hanging out at the apartment, and not to expect me home until ten o’clock. Alex is wandering around, trying to find the notebook he needs for the poli-sci class that will keep him out of the apartment from seven to almost eleven. Ben is reading some gigantic, ancient book in his armchair, sitting sideways with his legs draped over the arm of it. He’s got that too-serious expression on his face, and he’s wearing his glasses, and he must realize how fucking cute he looks, because he keeps glancing up and smirking at me every time he catches me watching him instead of either pretending to do my English homework or pretending to watch the *House* rerun that’s playing on TV right now.

“How’s that essay coming along?” he asks, already knowing the answer.

I blink down at my totally blank notebook, then at the photocopy of the practice AP exam prompt my teacher had passed around and asked us to complete for class tomorrow. I scribble a quick sketch of a pony prancing across the top of the paper and say, “It’s coming along great. English is the best.”

"Have you guys seen my notebook?" Alex asks, pausing at the edge of the living room and frowning at the coffee table.

Ben shrugs. "No, but you can borrow Garen's, 'cause he's sure as shit not using it."

"I am, don't be an ass," I say. Then, to Alex, I add, "I thought I saw some notebooks or whatever on the kitchen counter when I came in. Is it one of those?"

He wanders back out of the room, and I wrap my hands around Ben's ankles, using them to pull both him and the armchair closer to the edge of the couch where I'm sitting. He kicks at me and says, "You are so annoying, oh my god, go home," but he's grinning, so I can't be in too much trouble.

"I can't help it if you're more interesting than my homework. Put down your book and get your hot ass over here," I demand.

Usually, he'd jerk his feet out of reach and tell me to go fuck myself, but at this point, I think Ben is as wound up as I am. We've both been waiting two days for a chance to fuck, and he doesn't exactly start climbing the walls when he can't get laid—not like I do—but he does get impatient. He slips an index card between the pages of his book and snaps it shut, setting it down on the edge of the coffee table. The second he's out of the chair, I hook an arm around his waist and drag him down into my lap. He settles with his knees bracketing my hips and sinks easily into my kiss.

"Alright, I'm headed to class. I'll—oh, wow. Okay then," Alex says, turning back around to exit the living room just as swiftly as he entered. Over his shoulder, he says, "Dude, remember our agreement. No sex in the common areas, that's weird."

"He's such a hypocrite, he's totally fucked Jamie on the kitchen counter," I mutter against Ben's lips.

Ben jerks back, eyes wide. "What, seriously? The kitchen counter where I prepare my fucking *food*? Are you joking?"

"I'm totally joking," I say, even though I'm not. It happened *yesterday*, right before Jamie headed to the train station to go back to New York. He texted me about it before his train had even left Union Station. Ben seems to know I'm full of shit, because he narrows his eyes, but then the front door of the apartment clicks shut, and I don't so much care about conversation anymore.

I tighten my grip on Ben's thighs and flip him onto his back on the cushions. He grabs a fistful of my t-shirt to pull me down on top of him, but I pause long enough to strip it off and toss it aside before leaning down to kiss him. He remembers my rules from last time—his hands remain above my waist, and he doesn't scratch me or grab me too hard, even though I know that must be killing him. I reach for the zipper on his sweatshirt.

And suddenly, from somewhere to my right, a terrified voice is screaming, "*Help! Help, please! He's going to rape me, he's going to kill me, help!*"

I jerk back sharply enough that Ben instinctively tightens his hold on my waist to steady me, but that makes it so much worse. I shove his hands off me and scramble to the opposite end of the couch, just out of reach. My heart is hammering in my chest, beating so loudly and so heavily that I can't seem to focus on anything else. My breath is coming in short little gasps, and I'm not sure why, because no one's holding my throat, right? No one's holding me down, or choking me, or touching me, right? Fuck, I'd be okay if I could just figure out where the screaming was coming from, and—oh. I finally manage to focus my eyes on the television, where the *House* rerun has ended and become an episode of that horrible *Law and Order: Special Rape Unit* or whatever the fuck it's called. On screen, the bloodied and beaten corpse of a woman is sprawled out on the floor of a bedroom, while the stone-faced detectives stand over her.

I don't want to see it, but I can't look away.

Part of me is vaguely aware of a voice to my left, but I'm unable to make out any of the words. Only when the television screen goes black am I capable of hearing a desperate, nervous voice say, for what might be the twentieth time, "Garen. Are you okay?"

"I'm f-fine," I say instinctively, looking around. The second I meet Ben's wide eyes, I remember where I am, what I'm doing, or... what I'm supposed to be doing, at least. I don't think I'm even hard anymore—it's really difficult to tell, because I can't feel the rest of my body—but I still shoot him a lopsided grin and move towards him, saying, "Sorry. Where were we?"

"Uh, okay, *no*," Ben says, grabbing my wrist to stop my hand from moving any further up his thigh. I yank my hand away from his, and he raises both of his palms in a gesture of surrender. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize—I won't touch you, alright? It's okay. You're safe, I'm not going to—"

"Don't fucking patronize me," I spit, standing up and grabbing my shirt from the floor. Now that the numbness is fading, I'm starting to feel a heat creeping into my face. Can't even fuck a guy without freaking out, can't even hear some shitty drama on television without practically passing out. What's *wrong* with me?

I gather up my schoolbooks and shove them into my backpack, swinging it onto my shoulder and taking a step towards the door. Ben makes another grab for my arm, but immediately thinks better of it and retreats, hands still raised. "Garen, wait. Please don't leave yet."

"Ben, this would be humiliating enough if it happened with a stranger. How do you think I feel now that it's happening with one of my best friends?" I squeeze my eyes shut, rub a palm over my face, then head for the door. "Just don't, okay? I'll call you later."

I manage to cut off his next protest with the slam of the door, and thankfully, he doesn't follow me out of the building. The repairs on my car won't be done until the beginning of next week, so I'm still driving the Benz until then. I toss my backpack into the passenger seat and lock myself in behind the wheel, but it takes twenty minutes before I can stop shaking enough to drive.

25 days sober

"Hello?"

"Nice of you to finally pick up my call, you douche," is Ben's selected greeting. He really needs to work on his phone etiquette. In the background, I hear a small voice ask, "Benji, what's a douche?" He sighs and says, to the other person, "It's a mean thing adults call each other when one of them ignores the other one for five days. That's what Garen is being right now. And you can call him it later, but only if Mom and Dad aren't around, alright?"

I snort. "You're the worst big brother ever."

"Whatever. What time are you coming over?" he asks.

"I'm... not?" I say slowly, flicking my turn signal on even though I'm still half a dozen cars away from the nearest stoplight. "Did we have plans?"

"No, we didn't. And apparently we're never going to, because this is the first time you've even bothered to answer the phone since Monday night. I've called you a dozen times, G," he says. His voice is as flat as ever, but I don't think I'm imagining the slight edge of hurt in it.

The light turns green, and I edge forward to make my turn into the parking lot of the Daily Grind. Ben doesn't seem inclined to break the silence, so I pull into the first available space, kill the engine, and say,

"Look, I don't know what you want me to tell you."

"This isn't really something I want to discuss over the phone while my sisters are hanging all over me," he says. "I'm at my parents' house today. My mom needed my help with prepwork for a big job her catering company is doing. Will you come over?"

"I'm not fucking you if your sisters are in the next room," I say. I'm possibly not fucking him at all, ever, because I'm too much of a bitch to get my shit together long enough to do anything more than accept a blowjob.

"It's about eleven months too late to make that rule, isn't it?" he asks, and I can't help but grin. He, however, remains unamused. "You said we'd still be friends. You said this wouldn't change anything. If that's true, you'll get in your car and come over here."

I open my mouth to protest, but the call is already cutting out. Rolling my eyes, I drop my phone on the passenger seat and get out. The Grind is the only place I go for coffee, and I've been pretty careful about making sure I don't stop by during the hours when Travis might be working. Either his schedule has changed, or I'm finally starting to forget the details of him, because when I push open the coffee shop door, he's sitting on a stool behind the counter, reading the Hemingway novel we've just been assigned in AP English. He looks up when I enter, and for a long moment, we just blink at each other. Finally, I step up to the counter, and he flips the book shut. "What can I get for you?"

I haven't heard his voice in a week and a half; it still sort of gets to me. I shove my hands in the pockets of my jacket and say, "Two coffees, black, in whatever the biggest size you're legally allowed to give me is."

He squints. "Wait, that's you?" At my blank stare, he clarifies, "One of the guys who works the early morning weekday shifts talks about you. You always order your coffee that way, he thinks it's hilarious. I didn't realize—"

"Travis, your phone is buzzing again," one of the other baristas calls from the back room.

Travis pinches the bridge of his nose for a moment before he moves to the machines to pour my coffees and says, "Just put it in the fucking bean grinder, alright?"

The back room door bangs open, and Jerry, the owner of the Grind, steps out, Travis' cell phone dangling between his fingertips. "McCall, this is the fourth time this morning. It's getting old."

"Believe me, I know," Travis says, rolling his eyes towards the ceiling and setting the two coffees down in front of me. "I told her not to call while I'm at work, but she—"

"Well, dump her," Jerry orders, and I almost snort out the sip of coffee I've just taken. Jerry finally seems to realize that I'm standing at the counter, because he reaches over to clap me on the shoulder. "Garen, buddy. How've you been?"

"Fine," I say.

"You still off the blow?" he asks genially. I blink at him. It's actually a fair question, considering the fact that I was high as balls the last time he saw me, during my last musical performance here. Travis freezes with a finger poised above the buttons on the cash register. I'm not sure I trust myself to speak, so I settle for nodding and giving Jerry a tight smile, which earns me another clap on the shoulder. "Good to hear it. Got too much talent to waste your life getting fucked up, right?" I allow another nod. He points at me, but his next words are directed towards Travis. "See that? Silence. It's a beautiful quality for a partner to have when you're working. If you ask me, you should go back to dating this kid instead of that girl who's always hanging around here. I never had to put up with *him* calling you every twenty minutes during every shift. Worst thing I ever had to worry about was the two of you sneaking off to make out in the service alley during open mic nights—"

“Okay,” Travis says loudly, face burning red, “and on that note, have a great day.”

“Uh, you didn’t tell me how much this—”

“They’re on me, as long as you’re willing to leave now, before my boss has any more time to embarrass me.”

It’s sort of impossible for me to turn down free coffee, so I nod my thanks, head out to the car, and crank my music back up. Just before pulling out of the lot, I chance a glance back through the front window of the Grind. Still standing behind the counter, still holding his cell phone, Travis is watching me. He raises one hand in a brief wave and gives what might be a smile. I look away.

And alright, it’s not like I’m supposed to care about how Travis’ disgusting little relationship with Joss is going, but except for how I *do* care. At least, I care enough to be glad that it’s not going well. But that particular train of thought leads to hope and madness, so it’s better—easier, maybe—to just bury it.

When I arrive at Ben’s parents’ house, there are already two cars in the driveway; his and his mom’s. I park behind the CR-V and head up to the front door, knocking twice before opening it and calling inside, “I’m letting myself in, because I’m rude like that.”

“We’re used to it,” Ben’s voice says from the kitchen.

I manage to take three steps in his direction before a tiny pair of arms is being flung around my waist, followed by another pair around my left leg, a third around my right. I pretend to struggle away from them, but they continue to cling. “I swear, there are more of you every time I come over here.”

“Garen, you haven’t come here in forever,” Jane says fiercely.

“I know, I’m a terrible person,” I agree, ruffling her hair. She finally releases her hold on my waist so that she can bat my hand away. Following her lead, Izzy releases me as well, but Madison keeps on clinging. I scoop her up and sling her over my shoulder. “Hey, kid. Where’s your brother?”

“Which one?” Izzy asks.

I roll my eyes. “Asher, obviously. I don’t like the other one.”

“Yeah, none of us do,” I hear Rosie say from the next room over.

I follow the sound of her voice into the living room; she’s sprawled out on the couch, reading. Apparently book obsessions are a McCutcheon family trait. She looks up when I enter, and I spread the arm not holding Madison. “What, you’re too good to say hi to me? Man. Leave town for a couple months and everybody forgets how much they love you.”

“Almost a year,” she says, frowning at me. “You haven’t been over since Christmas Eve. Where did you go?”

I dump Madison on the couch next to her sister and say, “I had to go back to New York for a while.”

“Why?”

“I just did, Ro,” I say.

She folds down the corner of her page—definitely not a McCutcheon family trait, considering Ben practically had a seizure the one time he saw me do that—and flings the book onto the coffee table. There is more than a bit of accusation in her voice when she says, “I heard Mommy and Benji talking last

spring. They said you were back.”

I hesitate. “Yeah. I came back in the spring. But I wasn’t ready to come over just yet.”

“They said you were sick.”

“I was,” I say carefully. “I’m better now, though. That’s why I can come over now.”

“Okay,” she says simply. For a long minute, we just stare at each other. Her eyes are the exact same shade of blue as her brother’s, and sometimes, she looks almost as old. Almost as mature as him—definitely more mature than me. Finally, she says, “Well, don’t go away again, at least not without warning us first. It was mean. You’re an ass.”

I burst out laughing, and of course that’s the moment that Ben chooses to come in from the kitchen, saying, “Rosie! You’re only eleven, you’re not allowed to say that word. And you’re definitely not allowed to call my friend that. Say you’re sorry.”

“Why? You call him that all the time, when you’re on the phone with him and think we can’t hear,” she insists. She has a completely valid point, and I’m about to say so, but something on the coffee table catches my eye. Ben realizes what I’ve seen, and we both dive for it, but I manage to wrestle the photo album away from him.

“Put that down. That’s private,” he demands.

I plant the sole of my boot in the middle of his chest to keep him at least a leg’s length away as I begin to flip through the pictures, but he gives up and stalks back to the kitchen, leaving me to happily peruse the photographs. There are hundreds, and most of them are of him in horrible, awkward stages of growing up. It makes sense; he’s almost nineteen, and the next oldest of his siblings is Rosie. Obviously there won’t be as many pictures of the rest of them as there are of him. I flip the page and freeze, because for half a second, I think I’m convinced that I’m looking at a picture of James. Most of the basic facial features are almost identical—the prominent cheekbones, the perfectly straight nose. His eyes are the same shade of golden brown, his skin almost as tan. His hair is much shorter, but it’s just as dark. Wide, white smile. He’s even wearing a black polo shirt with the collar popped up, a pair of dark, fitted jeans. But he’s not Jamie, and honestly, I think the only reason I know that is because I know Jamie’s face and body and everything as well as I know my own. If I were anyone else, I might not even be able to tell them apart.

I shove the photo album onto Rosie’s lap, tap the picture, and say, “Who’s this?”

“That’s—” She’s clearly a little baffled to find a picture of someone who’s not a family member, so she squints a bit before she says, “I’m not sure what his name is, but he was a boy from our church. Same age as Benji, they were in the same youth group. Hang on a minute.” She turns and calls over her shoulder, “Benji, come here. Who’s this?”

Ben strolls back out of the kitchen, wiping his hands on a dish towel as he comes. His face is pretty neutral, but the second he leans over his sister’s shoulder to look at the picture, his expression hardens for just an instant. “I think his name,” he says, slipping a finger beneath the cuff of his sleeve, hooking it around a rubber band I hadn’t noticed there before, and letting the band snap against his skin, “was Ethan.”

Ethan. The youth group kid. The person Ben lost his virginity to when he was sixteen. The guy who fucked him a few times, freaked out, and never spoke to him again. Oh, shit.

“Oh, right. Ethan,” Rosie agrees. She twists around to look at Ben again. “You guys were friends, weren’t you?”

“No,” Ben says flatly. “We hung out a couple of times. But we were never friends.”

"He looks just like James," I can't stop myself from saying. At Rosie's questioning look, I clarify, "James Goldwyn. My best friend from military school."

Ben turns and heads back to the kitchen, but I can tell from the set of his shoulders that he's lying when he says, "I never noticed."

No longer trapped under the weight of the photo album, I stand and follow him. He's standing at the counter, furiously cranking the handle on the pasta press. I crowd up behind him and wrap an arm around his shoulders to pull him more properly upright against me. "You're such a little liar. Of course you noticed, how could you not? They could be twins."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he says tightly. "And in case you've forgotten, you came over so we could talk about your problems, not mine."

I tighten my grip around his chest. "You know what my problems are, Ben. Don't pretend I didn't warn you that that was a possibility before we ever—"

"And I said it was *okay*," Ben interrupts, his hands going still on the pasta. "I told you it was fine, and that I'd stop, and we'd figure it out. That was supposed to be the whole point of this thing. I was supposed to be someone you were comfortable enough to work through this with, not somebody you'd totally bail on and not speak to for days at a time."

I shift back just enough to rest my forehead against the top of his head. He lets me stay silent, which is almost worse. I'd know how to handle this so much better if he was yelling at me, or kicking me out, or telling me he didn't want to bother being fuck buddies with a guy who might not be able to fuck him. His understanding just makes this harder. My voice is unwilling to come out as anything other than a whisper when I say, "Part of me thought it would be easier, once I found someone I was really comfortable with. I thought I'd be able to do it, because you're my friend, and you're gorgeous, and I already know that sex with you is so, so good. But then I heard... *that*. On the TV, I heard screaming, and I heard what they were saying, and it just—I panicked. I knew I couldn't do it, not after hearing that, and you have no idea how embarrassing that is, alright? Sex is supposed to be instinct, and I can't do it like I used to, and that sucks. I thought it would be easier if I just left."

"It would have been easier if you had *stayed*. That's the sort of thing you need to talk about, G," he says.

"Like how we need to talk about the fact that the first guy you ever slept with looks really goddamn similar to my best friend?" I say. He tenses up a little in my arms, but says nothing. I sigh. "Ben, they're almost identical. Is that why you get so mad every time I make you hang out with Jamie? Is that why you hate him so—"

"Yes," he hisses, spinning around and shoving me off of him. The movement leaves two floury handprints on the black fabric of my t-shirt. "Yes, that's why I don't like hanging out with him, okay? Because he looks like Ethan, and the things he says are just like the things Ethan used to say, and he treats guys the same fucking way Ethan treated me."

"You can't hate my best friend just because he looks like someone who hurt you once," I say. "That would be like me hating you just because you go to Yale, like Dave does."

Ben shrugs and says, "Maybe. But tell me you don't cringe just a little every time you set foot on my campus."

"If I do, it's because I don't want to see him. I don't want to turn a corner in one of those buildings, looking to meet you after class, and find myself staring down the guy who used to beat me."

"And I hate looking at someone who is almost identical to the guy who fucked me in the backseat of my

car a couple of times and then never spoke to me again. I hate it almost as much as I hate knowing that that's exactly what James is going to do to Alex. He's going to sleep with him and then disappear, because that's what guys like them do—"

"And what about guys like me?" I interrupt, refusing to even blink. Ben's eyebrows flick just a tiny bit upward, like he's prompting me to continue. "Jamie and I have grown up together, we're practically the same person. If you think that about Jamie, you must think it about me, too. You think I'm the type of guy who fucks somebody and leaves."

"Well, you're sure as hell not the type of guy who fucks somebody and stays. Just ask Travis."

His words hit me like a punch to the heart. I reel back, stunned, and he's already widening his eyes, closing the gap between us, saying, "Shit, shit, shit. I'm sorry. Garen, I'm sorry, I didn't mean that."

If only to avoid looking him in the eyes, I blink up at the ceiling. "It's fine."

"It's not fine," Ben says. I hear the snap of the rubber band against his wrist again, and again, and again. "I'm sorry. I'm an asshole. That was a totally fucked thing to say, I shouldn't—"

"There's a difference," I say slowly, "between people who leave because they want to, and people who leave because they have to. Last winter, when I got kicked out, I had to leave. And last summer, when I tried to bail, when I tried to go to Ohio, and you came to get me... I had to leave then, too." I let my eyes roll back down to meet his. "Please tell me you understand that."

"I do," he says, punctuating the words with another snap of the band on his skin. And honestly, if anyone in this town understands that need to disappear for a while, it's got to be Ben. There's another band snap, and it's like all of the tension is leaving my body. I just don't have the energy to be mad at him, not for this. I sigh and open my arms, hoping to fold him into an embrace, if only to prevent him from snapping another welt into his skin, but just as he steps forward, all of his sisters come barreling into the kitchen.

"Benji, how much longer until you can come play with us?" Jane asks.

Ben moves to rake a hand through his hair, though he stops short when he remembers that his hands are coated in flour. He makes a face at them, then turns back to the pasta press. "I don't know. A while. This is taking longer than I thought it would."

"Mommy should just do it herself. They're her ravioli, for her company," Rosie says.

"Mommy doesn't have time, alright? She's got a lot of other stuff to do," Ben says. "This would go a lot faster if Garen would stop distracting me, though."

"Why, what's he doing?" Rosie asks, blinking up at me.

I shrug. "I was being mean to him. But I'm done now." Ben glances over his shoulder at me, and I offer him a small smile. It's the only way I can think to say, *We don't have to talk about it anymore. I'm sorry.* He returns the smile and looks back at his pasta.

Rosie, however, is unimpressed. "Whatever. I bet he deserved it. He's a loser."

I shrug again and say, "Yeah, well, I think he's a cute loser." For good measure, I duck down and press a quick kiss to his hair.

He flinches away, and I'm already opening my mouth to berate him for not properly appreciating my love when the girls all squeal, and Jane says, "Ew, Garen, that's gross. You're both boys."

I already know what is going on, but my mind seems to be refusing to process it. I look around at them,

and all of the girls give me a look like I'm an idiot when I say, "So?"

"So, boys can't think other boys are cute. And they definitely can't kiss them," Rosie says. She blinks up at her brother and prods him in the ribs. "Tell him, Benji."

Ben turns his attention to me, and there's a warning in his eyes. Somehow managing to enunciate every single syllable, he says, "They're right, Garen. Boys can't kiss other boys. It's a rule here."

Jane snorts. "It's a rule everywhere, you dork."

"Really?" I say, trying so hard not to let myself snap at her, even though I'm absolutely shaking with anger. "Because, in my house, boys are definitely allowed to kiss other boys. Boys can kiss boys, boys can kiss girls, girls can kiss girls. Everybody can kiss whoever they want to kiss, and nobody gives a shit, because—"

"We're going to go hang out in the basement for a while," Ben interrupts loudly, barely pausing to wipe off his hands before grabbing my wrist so tightly it might end up leaving a bruise. "If Mom asks, tell her we'll be up in time for dinner." He drags me out of the kitchen, and we've barely made it down the stairs to the basement before he's shoving me hard against the wall and hissing, "First of all, don't fucking swear in front of my sisters. They're little girls, and they don't need to hear you talk like that, and if it happens again, I'll punch you in the mouth. Second of all, don't you dare try to judge my family for what my parents have chosen to raise them to believe."

"They're raising them to be *homophobes*, Ben. Why didn't you tell me you're still in the closet?" I demand.

"Because I'm not. My parents know I'm gay, and they don't care, but they don't want me to talk about my lifestyle in front of the girls. There's nothing wrong with that, okay? They shouldn't have to change their entire belief system just because their first kid turned out to be gay—"

"And what if one of your sisters turns out to be a lesbian?" I ask. "What then? Because let me fucking tell you something: if you start them off believing that being queer is a bad thing, it's going to seriously screw them up if any of them ever like someone of the same sex. What if, ten years from now, when Izzy's in high school, she gets a crush on a girl in her class? When you're fucking thirty and off in another city, still pretending you like girls whenever someone asks about your love life during holiday dinners, what if Asher is off in middle school and realizes he wants a boyfriend, not a girlfriend? What—"

"No," Ben forces out the word, shaking his head almost violently back and forth. "No, that's not going to happen, because it's fucking bad enough that I turned out to be a faggot. My parents *cannot* handle another one of their kids doing this to them. That's not happening, I won't let it."

I stare at him, stunned. "Please tell me you didn't really just say that. There's... Ben, there's nothing for them to 'handle.' You're gay, big deal. If—"

"Why do you do that?" Ben demands, voice breaking a little in his desperation. "Why do you act like this isn't something people are bothered by? Why do you act like they're the ones with the problem—because they're not, Garen. I'm sorry, but not everybody has a family like yours, okay? I can't take my little sisters out for ice cream and tell them about a guy I like. They don't even know I dated Travis. He was over here all the time, he had dinner with my family, he hung out with my sisters, and my parents are the only ones who knew he was my boyfriend, because I wasn't allowed to talk about it in front of the girls. I'm not you, I can't sit down at the dinner table and tell my entire family how many guys I've slept with. They still think I'm a *virgin*. They think I'm always going to be a virgin, because th-that's what people like us are supposed to do. It's—what we do, what we want, it's not okay. Especially me, and the things I want, but you already know that, because you've experienced it. You know exactly how sick I am, you know the disgusting things I want men to do to me, you know how wrong—"

I kiss him. I kiss him because sometimes my body is better at communicating the things that my brain is

too chickenshit to say, and because he's in pain, and I don't know how to make it better. One arm wrapped tight around his neck and the other reaching past him to open the door, I walk him backwards until we're in his old bedroom. It's completely empty now, except for a few boxes and one shelving unit, but there's privacy, and that's all I need right now. I nudge him back against the closed door and say against his lips, "Ben, when I kiss you, when I touch you like this, it doesn't feel wrong. Not to me."

"It's supposed to," he mutters. He refuses to meet my gaze, but he does let me kiss him again, slotting his lower lip between mine. I slip a hand up the front of his shirt to touch the tiny gold crucifix I know he wears most of the time. The truth is, I had no idea he had this much trouble reconciling his religion with his sexuality. I didn't realize that he thought of losing his virginity as a betrayal to his family and his faith; I didn't realize that he's all but waiting for a bolt of lightening to strike him down every time he touches another boy. I've never been so glad that the Star of David hidden away under my shirt doesn't hang as heavy against my chest as that cross seems to be against his.

I brush his hair away from his face and say, "This thing between us. This—learning how to believe that it's okay to let a guy touch you. You need it just as much as I do, don't you?"

He drags a hand through his hair, and as he moves, I catch a glimpse of what I think is a recently healed cut across his wrist. He looks up at me, blue eyes blank, and says quietly, "Sometimes, I think I might need it more."

This isn't what we had agreed upon. We'd agreed on experimentation, and kink, and just a little bit of violence, but the last thing he needs right now is to think that he should be feeling pain every time he wants to get off. He doesn't need to be punished right now, he needs to be fucking *worshiped*, and I don't care if his entire family is upstairs right now, he needs this. I swallow hard and reach for the buckle of his studded belt. "Let me touch you."

"I thought you were supposed to be figuring out how to have conversations without getting your dick out," he snipes.

"That's not what this is," I say, even if it maybe is. Belt unbuckled, I push his jeans over his hips and halfway down his thighs. I hesitate with my fingers at the waistband of his boxers and repeat, "Let me."

Wordlessly, he kicks his jeans the rest of the way off and nods. He's barely half-hard right now, but a few decent strokes are enough to change that. I slip a hand into one of the inside pockets of my leather jacket to remove the small travel-size bottle of lube I'm just enough of a slut to carry around. I nudge Ben's jaw with my nose and say, "Turn around."

He does so without objection. I'm not sure how long it's really been since anyone has fingered him, or since he's done it to himself, or whatever, but when I press one lubed finger into him, he lets out a moan that sounds practically tortured. I pause to allow him some time to adjust, but he shakes his head and rocks back against me. I wrap my free arm around his waist and scrape my teeth over the back of his neck, one of the few places available to me that can be easily concealed when we go back up to his family. Another finger, and he lets out one more of those beautiful noises. By the time I'm able to get a third in, his knees are starting to buckle. Seemingly forgetting the earlier above-the-waist rule, he reaches back and rubs me through my jeans. My eyes flutter shut, and I rock forward into his hand. He twists his head around to kiss me over his shoulder, then asks, "Do you think you can—"

"Yeah," I say, nodding jerkily enough that our foreheads knock together. I don't know how I can be so sure that I can do this—maybe it's being in Ben's high school bedroom, maybe it's the desperate look in his eyes, maybe it's all down to the way my hands are shaking as I step away from him to unbutton my jeans and push them down to my knees. All I know is that it's actually going to work this time; I'm going to be okay. I snag the condom from the inner pocket of my jacket and roll it on. Ben presses back against me, but I grab his waist and turn him around so his back is to the door once again.

"Up," I murmur against his jaw, and he gives a tiny jump, just enough for me to catch his legs and wind

them around my waist. One of his arms is wrapped tight around my neck, and his other hand drops between us, giving me a few rough strokes before he lines me up with his entrance, and then I'm pushing inside and we're both scrambling to kiss each other to silence our groans. He's so tight, so hot that I need to take a minute to get used to the sensation, but Ben makes no complaint. Only the first few inches of me are in him, but I still ease almost completely out before I push back in, bottoming out and making him shake.

"Garen," he murmurs, "can you—"

"If you're about to ask me to hurt you, the answer is no," I say, and his eyes snap open again. I press a quick, dry kiss to his lips and say, "It's not going to be like that this time, alright? This is—I just want to make you feel good. I'm not going to hurt you, it's just going to be good." Another kiss. "Trust me."

There's another second of hesitation, but then he nods. I shift again so that his knees are hooked over my elbows now, and this new position is spreading him wider and allowing me to thrust deeper. His head falls back against the door with a loud thunk, and I might be worried about the noise, but that's sort of a lost cause; the door rattles loudly every time I press back into him, and I'm finding it harder and harder to keep myself silent.

It takes *effort* to remember to make this as good for him as it is for me; usually, finding a guy's prostate, or remembering to jerk him off, or switching up positions to get the best angle—it's always been second nature to me, just as it's always Ben's instinct to scratch and bite and give as good as he gets. That's not what this is. This is graceless, and desperate, and it's exactly what we both need.

When Ben comes, it's as sudden and silent as always, but when I join him a minute or so later, it's... not. The kiss I give him can barely even be called a kiss—it's open-mouthed, and sloppy, and more a moment of sharing each other's breath than any real display of skill. He swallows up my cries and lets me grip him painfully tight. My knees are starting to buckle, and the second I've finished coming, I spin around to brace my back against the door. I'd sort of hoped that the movement might make it easier to stay upright, but it doesn't, so I give up and allow myself to slump to the ground, Ben in my lap, my dick still buried inside him. That's going to start being uncomfortable for both of us soon, but right now, I don't care. I hook my chin over his shoulder as we both try to calm our breathing.

There should probably be some big moment right about now, some profound declaration about how much this means, but instead, Ben drags his fingers through my hair and whispers, laughing a little, "I'm pretty sure there's cum all over your shirt."

I snort. "I'm pretty sure it was worth it." He sighs against my neck, and I run my palm down the length of his spine. "You alright?" He nods, then makes a questioning noise I can only interpret to mean, *Are you?* I tangle both hands in his hair so that I can ease his head back. His face is flushed and his lips swollen from kissing, but his eyes are bright and searching mine. Without him ever really having to ask it, I nod, then duck back in to kiss the smile off his mouth.

Chapter Ten

“When everything goes to hell, the people who stand by you without flinching—they are your family.” –Jim Butcher

27 days sober

Convincing my parents that Ben and I aren't really together would probably be easier if they didn't walk in on me fucking him the night of the big 'what are your intentions with my son' dinner. That being said, the sight of me sitting up against my headboard and clawing at his back while he rides me like he's a professional polo player... probably makes his intentions pretty clear. At least the blankets are pulled up and pooling around our waists so there's no visible penetration?

“Garen, your mother's here. Are you two ready for din—oh, holy mother of God,” is all I catch Dad saying before my bedroom door clicks shut again.

Ben attempts to scramble off my lap, but I reach up to grab his shoulders, slamming him back down onto me in a way that makes both of us groan, even as he hisses, “Can you *not*, Garen? Your dad—”

“—knows me well enough to realize he shouldn't come back into this room anytime soon, because there's no way I'm stopping now,” I say.

It's the second time we've fucked today—the first being a particularly fantastic christening of my newly repaired Testarossa after I sneaked out of school during my lunch period—and the sixth time we've fucked since Saturday, but I don't really envision myself getting tired of this anytime soon. I have *months* of sex to catch up on, and now that I know it's possible, now that I know I can actually do it, as long as Ben listens to me and lets me take the lead and turns off the fucking television before we do anything, I'm back to being my insatiable whore self.

It's almost better than it was before.

“What's the etiquette regarding this?” I ask, ducking down to worry Ben's earlobe between my teeth for a moment before I continue. “Are we supposed to shower after, even though it'll make us late for dinner? Or are we just supposed to go eat, even though we'll reek of sweaty gay sex? Or, in the interest of saving time, should I finish fucking you *in* the shower, and then—”

“Oh my god, stop talking,” Ben mutters, reaching down to take himself in hand.

In the end, he paints my chest with his cum and we wind up being forced to take a shower. I make a half-hearted attempt to initiate round three, and he makes a whole-hearted attempt to punch me in the balls; I'm still scowling at him by the time we're dressed—though our hair is still damp, and Ben's eyeliner is more than a little smeared—and making our way upstairs. Dad is studiously jamming a meat thermometer into one of the chicken breasts in the baking dish now resting on top of the stove; Mom is sitting at the table, sipping a glass of wine and smirking at Ben and I.

I can't help but smirk back at her; apparently sarcasm and shamelessness are traits I get from the Weisman side of the family, not the Anderson side. I nod towards the glass in her hand. “Trying to drink away the pain of what you just witnessed?”

She raises the glass in a slight toast and says, “Learned from the best.” She looks past me to where Ben is still hovering awkwardly in the doorway. “Nice to see you again, Ben. I can't say I was expecting to see as *much* of you as I did, but—”

“As you can see, both my son and my ex-wife are severely lacking in conversational boundaries,” Dad says loudly. “Garen, did you remember to stop at the store after school to pick up some salad dressing, like I asked?”

I hop up onto the counter and steal a slice of carrot, a piece of lettuce, and two olives from the salad bowl next to me. "That depends. If I say no, are you going to make me go out now and get it?"

"Probably."

"In that case, I totally remembered it, and then I put it in the fridge, and if you can't find it in there, you must have misplaced it on your own. I accept no responsibility," I say. I pop one of the olives in my mouth and add, "Besides, if you make me go to the store, I'm taking Ben with me, and I can't promise we won't pull over somewhere and spend an hour fu—"

Ben jabs his fist hard into my ribcage and says, "I can make a dressing, if you'd like." When Dad gestures to the rest of the kitchen, as if to say *be my guest*, Ben opens the refrigerator door and starts digging around inside. He glances over at me and says, "Make yourself useful and get me olive oil, red wine vinegar, honey."

"Honey? Are we doing pet names now?" I say, hopping off the counter and wandering over to the pantry. "Should I be calling you 'pumpkin' or something? Sugarplum? Sweetcheeks?"

"You make me wish I were dead sometimes," Ben says, and my mom nearly snorts up a mouthful of wine. I scowl at them both, but retrieve his desired items from the pantry anyway. When I return to the counter, he's scooping a spoonful of Dijon mustard into a small bowl. I hook my chin over his shoulder to watch as he whisks it with the vinegar and some honey, then carefully adds in the olive oil. He sprinkles a little bit of salt and pepper into the bowl, whisks again, then lifts the whisk high enough to let a few drops fall onto the tip of one of his fingers. He sucks the finger into his mouth, presumably to test the flavor, but I like watching him put things in his mouth. I press my hips forward against his ass. He glares at me, and I allow myself to be shoved back in the direction of the table.

Only when I sink down into the seat across from my mom do I realize that she's watching me with her eyebrow arched. I squint at her. "What?"

"Nothing," she says innocently. "How's the play going?"

"Ugh. It's eating dicks. We have a month and a half before opening night, right? And everyone is going crazy already. Not the rest of the cast, I mean—we're all fine, and most people are already mostly off-book, but the crew? *Nate*? It's insane. Every time somebody needs to double-check a line, he looks like he's about to go into convulsions. And from what I hear, most of the people on stage crew are losing their minds. They made the mistake of voting to have Travis be their stage manager, and he's working them all to exhaustion to build the sets as soon as possible."

Mom cocks her head to the side as Ben sets the bowl of dressing on the table and slips into the seat at my side. She glances at him, then asks me, "Do you still talk to Travis much?"

"Nope," I say. "By the way, are you almost done making Dad be not married to Evelyn anymore? Every time I remember that she's my stepmom, I feel like I'm going to start sawing at my wrists with a steak knife."

The joke is out of my mouth before I realize who's sitting next to me. I immediately go cold with guilt, but I can't exactly apologize to him without acknowledging why I'm apologizing, and that would--

I'm in the kitchen of the old house, sitting next to my dad and glaring across the table to Travis, who stares back at me with nervous, desperate eyes. I'm surprised I can even stay upright on this chair, I'm so unbelievably shitfaced, but I'm managing it. Even though I can't take my eyes off him, my words are directed towards his mom. "Wrong son, Ev. You want to talk self-mutilation, maybe you should direct your attention to Travis."

"I don't know what you're talking about," is his immediate, forced reply.

I laugh, even though I'm not actually amused, even though the motion jostles the twin lip rings I'm still not used to having jammed through my mouth yet. "The hell you don't. Alex told me you started slitting your wrists again after I left. Or, maybe it was dating Ben that got you started again. Birds of a fucking feather, right? Does cutting yourselves mean you two finally have something in common besides my cock?"

Oh. Oh, shit.

I glance over at my dad, just to see if he's remembering the same incident that I am, but his face is completely neutral as he sets the dish of chicken down on the table and commands, "Help yourselves."

"Hate to break it to you, Garen, but you're going to have to wait out that feeling a little while longer," Mom says, spearing one of the breasts and transferring it to her plate. "Our ideal scenario was to reach all of the agreements before ever going to court. You know, figure things out, get some contracts drawn up, present it to the judge, and bam. Dissolution of marriage. Unfortunately, the agreements still aren't going well."

"I'm so over this divorce thing," I mutter.

"Tell me about it," Dad grumbles, and Ben laughs.

Mom shrugs. "Would now be a bad time to tell you that I'll need you to come to a meeting with the McCall lawyers next Wednesday?"

There's a silence, during which I carefully ladle some of the dressing onto my salad. Only when that silence stretches on for an almost uncomfortably long time do I look up and realize that she's looking at me, not Dad. I say, "Wait, you need *me* to go? Why? What did I do?"

"Nothing," she reassures me. "It's just so that the other lawyers can have a chance to interview you, as I have. I'll be there the entire time, and then you'll have to wait while I interview Travis and Bridget. She's coming down from her school in Massachusetts for the evening." I've always liked Bree, but I've barely spoken to her since I got out of rehab. I wonder if Travis told her about my relapse. When I don't say anything, Mom adds, "I should probably tell you that Evelyn will be there as well. Travis is still a minor, so she has the right to be there with her son while—"

"I'd like to come along, if that's alright," Dad interrupts, though his tone makes it clear that he doesn't care if Mom objects.

She raises her eyebrows. "I told you, William, I'm going to be there the entire time."

"Yes, as his lawyer, not his mother. Garen needs a parent to support him. I don't care if he's eighteen, alright? That woman's not coming near him if I'm not around. This entire problem started because she used my absence as an opportunity to tell him he should run away—"

"No, this entire problem started because you thought it was acceptable to marry a woman who would call my son a kike and say she wished Walczyk had killed him," Mom snaps, and then suddenly, both of them are turning to stare at me.

Those words hit me like a bucket of ice water being poured down the back of my shirt. No one has ever called me that before. At least, not to my face. And no one has ever told me that they wished Dave had killed me. Fuck, not even *Dave* said he wished he had killed me. Underneath the table, Ben reaches over and grips my knee, but I can barely feel it. I lick my lips. "That's, uh... that's what she said?" No one speaks. A little louder, I say, "The day I went to rehab and you decided to get a divorce. That's the thing everyone's been keeping from me for all these months, the thing you guys wouldn't tell me?"

Again, there's no response, probably because there's not a damn thing anyone can say on this topic that will make things better. I cut harshly into my chicken, turn to face Ben, and say, "How's school going?"

"Fine," he says, and it barely comes out as a whisper. He blinks once, clears his throat, and repeats, in a much steadier voice, "Fine. I finally got back that sociology paper I handed in weeks ago. I got an A on it, but my teacher's handwriting is terrible, I can barely read her comments."

I slip a hand under the table to stroke a silent *thank you* across the back of the hand he has left resting on my knee, and he offers me a very small half-smile. Dad asks, "And how are you liking college so far?"

"I like it a lot," Ben says, nodding his head agreeably. "I mean, the course load I'm taking at Yale is obviously a lot more than I ever had to deal with at LHS, but I'm adjusting. I think it helps that I'm not living on-campus, because I don't have to worry about being distracted by other people partying in the dorms or whatever."

"Is there a lot of partying at your school?" Mom asks.

He shrugs. "I guess. Depends what crowd you hang out with, but that's true of any school. There are a lot of bars in New Haven, and I guess that's kind of popular for some people."

I don't miss the fact that Mom sets her fork down and steeples her fingers together before she asks, "Do you go out a lot?"

Ben opens his mouth to reply, then pauses, glances up. Seeing Mom's posture, he also sets his fork down and folds his hands in his lap, smiling politely. "I do go out, but I mostly go to music shows, open mic nights. Sometimes poetry readings, which I can only assume is a hazard of being an English major. But I get the feeling that what you're really asking me is if I go to clubs and bars, and if that's the case, then I assume what you're really trying to ask me is if I drink." Mom nods once in acknowledgment of the correctness of his assumption. He shakes his head. "I don't drink. I don't smoke. I don't use any sort of controlled substance. I never have, and I don't exactly see myself starting anytime soon. I have four younger sisters and one baby brother, and I-I try not to do anything that I know my parents wouldn't want them to see me doing."

All at once, I'm hit by the memory of him shaking in his parents' basement as he tries to explain to me how wrong it is for him to want who and what he wants, how important it is for him to be a good, heterosexual—and failing that, asexual—example to his siblings. Even if he can't be what his parents and his church expect him to be, he's still doing everything right, in my opinion. I say, as casually as I can, "Ben's sort of my only sober friend. He's... actually the only completely sober person I know. It's pretty impressive." I pause, then grin a little as I reach over to ruffle his hair. "He has *morals*."

"Which is a new and exciting concept to you, I'm sure," Dad says.

"Speaking of which," Mom says, taking a sip of wine, "how long have you two been together?"

"Really, Mom? That's your segue? 'My son has no morals, how long have you two been fucking'?" I deadpan. Ben chokes on a mouthful of chicken, and I reach over to clap him hard on the back without taking my eyes off my mother.

She raises a hand in protest. "'Fucking' is your word, not mine. I said 'together.'"

"Yes, but 'fucking' is a more accurate word, because we're *not*together," I say, rolling my eyes. "Look, I already told Dad everything. Ben and I are friends. We talk, we hang out, we go to shows, and yes, sometimes we get naked together. Don't pretend you're not aware of this. You saw it in action less than an hour ago."

Next to me, Ben turns to my dad and quietly asks, "So, in fifteen years of marriage, did you ever find a

way to escape that 'lack of conversational boundaries' they both have?"

Dad shrugs. "Divorce. But I don't know think that really helps your scenario."

"Maybe if I just ran away?"

"Then I'd fucking find you, total payback for that time you did it to me," I say. I turn back to my mom and say, "I don't get what the big deal is. He's a really awesome guy, we've been friends for a long time, and he takes it like a fuckin' champ."

Ben taps the heels of his Chucks together and mutters, "There's no place like home, there's no place like home."

"I don't care how well he takes it, Garen," Mom argues, and Ben gives up and bangs his head down on the table. Dad reaches over to give him a consoling pat on the shoulder. But Mom's on a roll. "The point is, you told us that your doctor recommended that you abstain from relationships during this first year. That's because—"

"It's because she's worried about me becoming dependent on anyone, or tying my sobriety to a relationship, or my emotional involvement with guys. Well, newsflash, Mom: I'm already 'emotionally involved' with Ben, because he's one of my best friends. I cared about him before the addiction, and during the addiction, and now I care about him after the addiction. I'm not tying my sobriety to him, because even if I wanted to do that, he wouldn't let me. Ben is quite possibly the only person on this planet who cares about my sobriety as much as I do, and if he thought that our hooking up was jeopardizing that, he wouldn't be doing anything with me. I'm not dating him. I've told you that, like, four million times. But if I were, there is absolutely no better person I could be involved with at this point in my life. Sooner or later, Mom, we're going to reach a point where the things that they say in the NA pamphlets don't work for me anymore, alright? I'm a person, and sometimes I need to make my own choices and do what feels right for me, instead of only following some bullshit rules that twelve-step programs and self-help books say I should live my life by."

My words are followed by total silence. Ben still hasn't lifted his head from the table, but he has reached over to stroke his fingertips across the inside of my wrist. My parents are looking at each other instead of at me. They seem to be having a very long conversation composed entirely of vague head tilts, tiny shrugs, and eyebrow twitches. Apparently four years of being divorced doesn't outweigh the fifteen years of being married, because eventually, Mom sighs and nods, and Dad says, "Fine. Neither of us is exactly thrilled with this, but if you think that being... closer to Ben won't affect your ability to stay clean, we'll respect your decision."

Holy shit. Is this what having an adult conversation feels like?

"Thank you," I say, since it feels like the right sort of closing for this conversation. I turn to Ben. "Are you done eating?"

"Yeah," he says, straightening up quickly. I stand and carry both of our plates over to the sink, scrape the remaining food down the garbage disposal, and put the plates in the dishwasher.

"And on that note, I think I'm going to head back to the city," Mom says.

I allow her to hug me and tell me goodbye, and then I grab Ben's wrist and drag him towards the door to my room. We make it halfway down the stairs before I start taking my clothes off. "If you're not naked in my bed in like, five seconds, I'm going to die."

"Are you kidding me right now?" he says, even as he wriggles out of his hoodie and kicks off his Chucks. "I mean, really, that got you going?"

"I'm a former boarding school brat who just won an argument with his parents," I say, pushing him through the door to my room—I actually bother to lock it this time—and stripping out of the rest of my clothes. "You have no *idea* how hot that makes me."

To demonstrate just how much I mean what I'm saying, I shove him unceremoniously onto the bed and crawl after him to lie between his legs, grinding my erection against his thigh.

"You have *so many problems*. By the way, nice speech, you complete and utter tool," Ben says, lifting his hips so I can strip off his jeans and boxers in one motion. "Did you practice that?"

"Not as many times I practiced saying the part about you taking it like a champ," I say. "And can we take a moment to marvel at how spectacularly I failed in my mission to convince my parents you're not my boyfriend?"

"I'm *not* your boyfriend, but I'm willing to be your 'it's complicated' on facebook," Ben says.

"Does anyone really use their facebook anymore? I'm not sure I even remember my password, I haven't logged into it in like, months." I duck down to nibble on the pale skin of his shoulder. "But I see your 'it's complicated,' and I raise you an 'in an open relationship with.' Has it been long enough that you're ready for me to fuck you again?"

Ben scowls and pinches my arm hard, but he rolls over to grab another condom from the nightstand drawer anyway. "Don't use that word. That word makes it too serious."

"What, 'fuck'?"

"Garen," he sighs.

"Again?" I suggest. Before he can get more annoyed, I snatch up the bottle of lube, drizzling a little on my hand before I reach down to start stroking him. His next sigh is one of contentment, not of exasperation, which is kind of the point.

But the solace only lasts a moment or two, and then he's muttering, "'Relationship.' We're just friends, we agreed. That word makes it sound too serious."

"Well," I say slowly, pausing to trace his lower lip with the tip of my tongue. "Maybe it is."

"What do you mean?" he asks. He tears open the wrapper and rolls the condom down onto my dick, moving my already lubed hand from him to myself so that I can slick up a little.

After multiple rounds today, he's still relaxed and a little loose, so I don't even really need to finger him before I line up and press inside of him. He makes another one of those delicious, satisfied noises, and I time my words with a particularly hard thrust. "Maybe this is serious, for me."

He goes still immediately. "Dude, I thought I was really clear about not wanting you to ask me out while your dick is in me. That wasn't a mouth-specific instruction. It kind of applied to all orifices."

"I'm not asking you out," I say, though I angle my hips to make sure that my next thrust is aimed directly at his prostate so that he throws his head back and groans, because fuck that. If I did want to ask him out, he could totally do worse. If I did want to ask him out, he should at least want to say yes. "I'm not—just, hey. Give me your hands for a second."

He releases his grip on my shoulders and obediently holds them out to me. I lean back so that I'm sort of sitting on my heels, still buried inside of him, and I take his hands, flattening them against my chest. Keeping my eyes fixed on his, I guide his hands downward, first over my pecs, down to my abs, then around so that they're framing my waist. Then, moving very carefully so as not to unsettle either of us, I

wind my fingers around his wrists and drag his hands down so that he's holding my hips. His eyes are wide and his movements are hesitant, but I squeeze down hard on his hands before shifting to brace my own against the mattress once more. Slowly, he tightens his grip on my hips and pulls me deeper inside of him. My eyes flutter shut as I bottom out, and then he's guiding me back out, dragging me back towards him; it's slow, and it's nervous, but he's the one controlling the pace, not me. He's touching my hips and I'm not freaking out; he's in charge right now and I'm still hard. I'm still okay.

"Please tell me you understand," I whisper. "Please tell me you get that this—being able to do this, it's a big deal for me. This is serious. I know you're not in love with me, and I'm not in love with you, either. It's not like that between us. It probably never will be. But I feel safe with you, Ben. I trust you more than I trust basically anyone else in my life. And with where I am now, with everything I've been through, being able to do this—" I card my fingers through his hair, run my palm down his torso, wrap my hand around his cock, "—and being able to touch you like this, maybe that's enough."

"Sex?" he says, and I can tell he's trying so hard not to be offended by that, even as he grips my hips and drives me into him a little bit harder.

"No, you idiot," I say, ducking down to kiss him briefly. "Trusting you. Feeling safe with you. Caring about you. *Loving* you, even if it's not like that. Maybe it's enough for right now."

He releases my hips and surges up to kiss me again, and we don't talk much after that. Actually, we don't say anything at all, not until almost half an hour later, when we're both dressed and I'm walking him to the door. I stop to give him a short kiss goodbye and say, "Think about it. Alright?"

He nods, and I lean in to press my lips to his cheek once more before he heads out with a quick goodbye to my dad, who is sitting on the couch and very pointedly not looking at us.

Later, when I'm sprawled out on my bed and reluctantly slogging through my homework, my phone chimes from the nightstand. I mark my page, unlock the screen, and blink down at my new message. It's a facebook alert— *Ben McCutcheon has requested to change your relationship status to 'in an open relationship.'* The 'personal message' he has elected to attach reads, *Shut up. I'm still not your boyfriend.* Even though he's miles away, I'm pretty sure he can feel me smirking at him, hear my unspoken, yeah, whatever. I accept the request.

29 days sober

It takes almost a month and a half of school for me to realize that I'm that weird music guy. Every school has one—the kid who wears his headphones pretty much all the time, even has them draped over his neck during class, the kid who's always singing along to whatever song he's got stuck in his head, the kid who's deaf to pretty much anything that isn't blasting out of the earbuds plugged into his iPod. I don't realize that that loser is me until I'm standing in line at the cash register during lunch, drumming my fingers on my plastic-wrapped sandwich and singing softly along to the Mountain Goats song playing on my headphones.

The girl in line ahead of me turns around to stare at me, and I blink back, until I realize that I've just sung along, "*guy in a skeleton costume comes up to a guy in a Superman suit, runs through him with a broadsword.*" So, all things considered, the staring is maybe justified. I gesture vaguely towards my headphones, but she still looks incredibly grateful when the lunch lady makes her change and she's able to move away from me. I try to shrug it off, but I'm still frowning—and singing—as I pay for my food and begin to make my way around the far edges of the cafeteria. It's sort of pathetic, but I have to take the same route around the tables every day, unless I want to get tripped or shoved or whatever by one of the guys who sits in the middle, at what I can only assume is the Asshole Table. Usually, I'm able to make it around without incident, but today, someone snags my arm and drags me to a stop. I instinctively jerk my arm free, but there's a faint twinge of guilt when I realize that I'm now looking down at a vaguely hurt-looking Miranda, sitting with the rest of the drama kids. She shakes it off though, and says, "Hey, Garen."

I raise my hand in a tiny wave, but continue to sing under my breath, "*I don't know why it's gotten harder to keep myself away.*"

"I saw your car in the parking lot this morning. It looks like the repairs went well. You can barely tell anything happened to it," she says.

I nod. "*And then we fell down, and we locked arms.*"

"Have the cops told you whether or not they're any closer to charging anybody with it?" Riley asks.

I shake my head. "*We knocked the dresser over as we rolled across--*"

"In case you haven't noticed, this is them trying to make conversation with you," Travis interrupts. "Will you stop singing and sit down with us?"

I cock my head to the side. "*I don't mean it when I tell you that I don't love you anymore.*" He blinks once at me, then at Joss, then looks quickly back down at his food. I sigh and pluck the headphones from my ears. "What's up?"

"What's up is that we keep trying to get you to eat with us, and you keep blowing us off," Annabelle says bluntly. "Why?"

Because I don't need your pity. I shrug. "I don't know. I've told you before, I usually spend my lunch period in the music room. Or somewhere outside of school."

Joss frowns at me. "We're only supposed to go off-campus on Fridays."

"I'm also probably not supposed to get my dick sucked in the parking lot, but that doesn't stop me from doing that, either," I say, and Riley snorts.

Nate finally looks up from his lunch tray to give me a once-over and ask, more than a little bitterly, "He comes all the way here just for that?"

I open my mouth to point out that plenty of people would travel a hell of a lot farther than the distance between Lakewood and New Haven *just for that*, but Nate's words have captured Travis' attention once more. No matter how much he might want to, he's unable to stop himself from asking, "Wait, there's a 'he'?"

"Well, there sure as shit isn't a 'she.' See, unlike some people at this table, I tend to remember that I fuck guys," I say. There's absolutely no reason for me to say something that rude, but there's no reason for me to say half the shit I say. His jaw tightens, and he looks back at his barely-touched sandwich. I don't let myself feel guilty, but I do let myself sigh and say, "Yeah. There's a 'he.'" I jerk my chin at Nate. "How'd you know that, anyway?"

"Facebook," he says, shrugging. He shifts a little closer to Miranda, leaving a space on the bench next to him. They all look pointedly at the space, then at me, then back at the space. I roll my eyes and sink down into it, unwinding the headphones from my neck and stuffing them into my pocket. Schooling his tone into what I'm sure he thinks is calm, Nate asks, "So, where did you two meet?"

I unwrap my sandwich and begin carefully dismantling it so that I can reassemble it properly. The school sandwiches are always totally lopsided, with half of it being too thick to even get your mouth around, and the other half being nothing but bread. After a few seconds of Frankensteining my lunch, I say, "Here." Nate frowns, and I add, "We met last fall, when he was still a student here. Before I got kicked out."

"But you only just started dating, right?" Miranda says.

"We're not dating," I say, stacking my tomato slices and setting them aside for later. "I mean, we sort of are? But not really. Mostly we're just really close friends who have a lot of sex." A few seats away, Joss sneers at me. I try to focus on finding the perfect angle for my lettuce. "But, in regards to your question, yeah. We only just started not-dating."

"Wait, who are you not dating? And why aren't we friends on facebook?" Annabelle asks, frowning at me.

"We're not friends on facebook because I barely use my account. I accept requests, but I never bother to send them," I say. Kind of how I ended up in this very uncomfortable scenario in the first place. I replace my tomatoes, then finally add the top slice of bread. "And I'm not-dating-but-sort-of-am-dating my friend."

Miranda shrugs. "Some Yalie named Ben."

Travis' elbow, which had been propping him up, slides right off the edge of the table, almost upending the open water bottle next to him. I take a small bite of my sandwich so I can have something to focus on besides the way his eyes are widening at me. "W—seriously? Ben McCutcheon?"

"No," I say, "but also, yes."

"What does that even mean?" Joss asks.

I look over at her with blank eyes and say, "I'm sleeping with and spending the majority of my spare time with someone who I don't have any vested romantic interest in, but who I've inexplicably decided should be the sole focus of my attention. Are you really trying to tell me that that's an unfamiliar concept to you?"

Across the table, I can see that Riley is trying very hard to keep a straight face. I'm grateful to discover that someone else finds Travis and Joss' union as random and gross as I do.

Travis should probably be defending her, or their little love connection, or whatever. But when he speaks, all he says is, "Garen. Look at me."

I do. His eyes are saying everything that his mouth has remained too stubbornly screwed shut to say. They're saying, *How could you start seeing my ex-boyfriend and not tell me? How could he start seeing my ex-boyfriend and not tell me? Why, out of everyone in the world, did you two have to pick each other? Are you starting to forget about me? Or are you just punishing me because you think I'm starting to forget about you? If I weren't with Joss, would you still be with him? Do you hurt him? Do you like it? Is it better than it was with me? When you touch him, does it make you forget how much you still want me?*

"Don't be mean," I say quietly.

Miranda looks around at me, baffled. "He hasn't even said anything. At least, nothing other than 'look at me.'"

"He doesn't have to say anything. I can tell what he's thinking," I say. Or, I can at least tell what I'd be thinking, if I were him.

Joss tosses her napkin down on the table, brushes off her hands, and stands up. "Alright, that's it. I'm over this. Garen, can I talk to you alone for a minute?"

"I'd really rather not," I say flatly, but she hooks a hand around my elbow, and I allow myself to be dragged to the far corner of the cafeteria, where we can't be overheard. I've been forced into conversations like this before—every guy or girl who Jamie has dated has pulled me aside at some point to give me the big *lay off my man* lecture, and that always ends the same way; I roll my eyes a lot, she or he gets angrier and angrier, and within a week, Jamie has chosen me over them. I'm getting the feeling that I won't come out ahead in this version of that conversation, but that doesn't mean I plan to do

anything other than scoff and maybe stomp my feet a little.

But when Joss speaks, her tone is even and her words are horribly reasonable. "I know you care about Travis, and I know it makes you uncomfortable that he's dating me, but you need to stop taking it out on him every time the two of you talk. It upsets him."

"Good. It's supposed to," I say.

She crosses her arms. "You don't mean that. I see the way you look at him, alright? And I see how pissed you look at yourself every time you say something that you know will hurt his feelings, so *stop it*. I mean, god, Garen. Do you even know what he and I do when we're together?"

I wrinkle my nose, fight the intense urge to vomit, and admit, "Back when I was still using, sometimes I'd get so high I'd accidentally click the wrong links and end up watching straight porn. Once it was playing, I'd be too lazy to change it, so I'd mostly focus on the dicks and skip around to the blowjob parts. So, unfortunately, yes, I'm familiar with the mechanics of your perverted hetero unions."

Joss closes her eyes, and I allow her a full thirty seconds to school her expression from mild amusement to indignant disapproval. When she can finally speak without smiling, she says, "I'm not talking about the sex—"

"How is that, anyway?" I can't help but ask. "Is he any good at the straight stuff? 'Cause he was fuckin' *bomb* at the gay stuff, but obviously you guys aren't really doing the same shit he and I did. Unless you're into pegging, but you don't really strike me as the type—"

She reaches out and covers my mouth with her hand. "Okay, you're done talking now. It's my turn. Clear?" I swallow a comment about *wonder where that hand has been lately* and nod. She releases me. "When Travis and I are together, we hang out. We do our homework. He helps me run lines, and I go with him to the hardware store to help him pick out fixtures for the pieces he's working on for the *Grease* set. We go out to eat, or we go to the movies. Last weekend, we went to an amusement park. A few nights ago, we went out for mini-golf. And—this may shock you—not once, during all of that, did either of us propose, run away, get high, end up in the hospital, or attempt suicide. Know why? Because we're seventeen years old. We're in high school, and we both just want to enjoy our senior year, and what we have makes him happy. There's nothing wrong with that, and it's shitty of you to make Travis feel like he should be ashamed for wanting something simple and normal."

"Not as shitty as it is for you to make him feel ashamed of the fact that what he and I had *wasn't* simple and normal," I snap. "I am so sick of people expecting us to pretend that the last year of our lives didn't happen, alright? We were stepbrothers, I'm an addict, I get it. I get that it was a screwed up relationship. But it *happened*, and I resent the fact that you seem to expect both of us to pretend that it didn't."

"That's not what I—" Joss breaks off and looks away. She drags her hand through her long, dark hair, then takes a deep breath before she allows herself to look at me again. "You don't like me, or the fact that I'm dating Travis. You've made that incredibly obvious, and you know what? I don't like you, either. You have absolutely no brain-to-mouth filter, you joined the drama club even though you don't respect the amount of work the rest of us have been putting into those plays for years, and you seem like you have the tendency to be really manipulative of the people who care about you. Frankly, being around you makes me uncomfortable. But Travis loves you."

It's pathetic how much faster my heart starts beating at those words. Based on the expression on Joss' face, she knows that it hits me hard, because she sighs, falls silent. And this entire thing is goddamn stupid—Travis and I aren't even friends anymore. We barely talk, and we're not close anymore, and it would make no sense for me to start bargaining with his girlfriend now, when I know I won't really be getting anything out of it. But still...

"I'll stop if you will," I say finally. At her questioning look, I clarify, "I'll play nice. I'll stop making comments

about how much he loved having me fuck him in the ass. I'll stop making jokes about how, before this semester, the closest he ever got to sleeping with a woman was blowing my current not-boyfriend on the days when Ben was a little heavy-handed with the eyeliner. I'll stop telling everyone that he probably only asked you out because he misheard your name as 'Josh' the first time you introduced yourself. I'll stop loudly and enthusiastically speculating about whether or not he's asked you to bang him with a strap-on yet. I will keep all my gay jokes to myself, and I will let you two go about your merry misadventures in heterosexual experimentation."

"Thank—"

"But in return, you have to stop... I dunno, expecting him to be straight. You have to recognize that what he had with me was a legitimate relationship, and so was what he had with Ben. You have to stop glaring at me every time I speak to him. You have to stop getting offended at the fact that yes, I know him better than you do—and don't protest, because that's just a fact. I dated him, I lived with him, I was engaged to him, and he and I are both changed men because of all that. Even if it's over, that's still a connection, and you need to respect it, or you can't expect anything from me. Do we have a deal?"

She isn't even looking at me; she's staring back at the table, probably at Travis. I don't dare look over at him, because I already know exactly how beautiful he is. I already know that one glance at him will send me spiraling back into the stupid, childish crush that has been plaguing me for months now. Joss must not need much convincing, either, because she looks back at me and says, "We have a deal." I nod once and am about to head back to the table when she quirks a brow and adds, "And for the record? He's *fuckin' bomb* at the straight stuff, too."

"Joss, I haven't felt my gag reflex work in almost four years, but you are dangerously close to triggering it," I warn. "Seriously, I've been inside the dude. I really don't need to know whether or not he's skilled with all the disgusting things I'm sure you two do together, like the banging and that thing with the—" I raise my index and middle fingers in a V in front of my mouth and wiggle my tongue between them.

"Okay, wow," I hear Travis say loudly from the lunch table. I look over in time to see him blushing bright red and saying, "Whatever conversation you two are having over there? I really need it to be over, if it includes that gesture."

I shrug and stride back over to the table, returning to my seat at Nate's side and picking at my sandwich again. Joss drops back down onto the bench next to Travis, and he slips an arm around her shoulders, tugging her closer to whisper something in her ear. She smiles, shakes her head, and pecks him on the lips quickly. He appears somewhat mollified and murmurs something else; her hand slips off the edge of the table, seemingly onto his lap. He grabs her wrist and wriggles away, but they're both grinning. It's cute; it's *gross*. I tear the crust off my sandwich and say, "She was giving me advice. I'm thinking of switching teams, too, and I was curious about the—" I pause, turn to Annabelle, and ask, "What's the chick version of the prostate?"

"I'm pretty sure it's illegal for you to have this conversation in front of Nate," Travis says. "You're almost nineteen, and he's still only fifteen. This might be contributing to the delinquency of a minor."

Annabelle reaches over and ruffles Nate's hair, barely batting an eye when he viciously smacks her hand away. "Not for much longer! Our little baby turns sixteen in just a few short days."

"Oh, yeah?" I say, flashing him the wide smile I've spent years perfecting to get guys' pants off. I know I'm an ass for hitting on someone I've got no interest in, just because he's obviously hard for me, but he makes it so easy; I can't help myself. He opens his mouth to respond, but no sound comes out; his lip trembles for a second, and then he has to settle for a jerky nod. I slip an arm around his waist and rest my chin on his shoulder. "Happy early birthday. What day?"

"Friday," he says softly. He hesitates, then turns to look at me, a move that surprises me with its audacity. Our noses are practically touching. He licks his lips—what, seriously? Is he expecting me to kiss him right

now, in the middle of lunch? It's not like I wouldn't, but that didn't seem like it would be his style—and says, “We're all going out that night. There's an Italian place in town that has these horrible karaoke Fridays. We thought it might be fun to go and put on a real show, since most of us can actually sing.”

“Most of us,” Miranda repeats, with a pointed look at Riley. He and Annabelle exchange high-fives, completely unashamed at their lack of vocal talent.

Nate clears his throat so that my eyes lock back onto his. He gives a tiny shrug that jostles my chin. “You could come, too. If you wanted.”

My Friday night plans are already sort of in place; I'd intended to meet Stohler for coffee after school, and then we were going to head over to Alex and Ben's apartment to hang out and play Call of Duty until she had to leave for work. Stohler's unreasonably good at it, and I'm unreasonably bad, especially considering that I had the best aim of anyone in my squad at Patton. I've already been granted permission to spend the night, though Dad had made it clear when I asked that he found the suggestive tone I used to say *can Ben and I have ourselves a little sleepover on Friday night?* completely unnecessary.

But Nate looks so hopeful, and I've never been good at rejecting people who use puppy-dog eyes on me. I release my hold on his waist and turn my attention to my sandwich. “What time?”

“We're meeting at seven o'clock,” he says.

Right in the middle of my plans. But lately, Doc has been all over my ass about branching out; apparently, the fact that I continuously reject the kids I go to school with in favor of only hanging out with the same four people—Ben, Alex, Stohler, and Jamie—is a problem. I scratch the back of my neck and say, “I sort of had plans, but I'll see if I can switch some stuff around.” When Nate continues to look hopeful, I add, “It'd be cool to hang out with you guys. You know, outside of rehearsal, or whatever.”

Nate isn't the only one who smiles at that.

30 days sober

“No.”

“Stohler, come on. You said you'd—”

“Bite me, Anderson, I'm not doing it.”

I flop down on the couch and bury my head under a throw pillow. My voice is somewhat muffled when I say, “It's at an Italian restaurant. Will you come along if I promise to buy you an entire bottle of wine?”

Stohler snorts and drags the coffee table a little bit closer so that she can rest her tiny mirror on the edge of it. Her makeup is only halfway done, but I'm already incredibly excited for the moment when Dad gets home from work and finds a painted-up stripper sitting on his couch. He should be home any minute now; I'm just hoping that Stohls gets a chance to put on that terrifying hot pink lipstick before he walks in. She selects another of the brushes from her giant train case and dabs it in a pot of glitter. “I'm not *you*, man. I can't always be bribed with alcohol. I especially can't be bribed into doing something as lame as going to some kid's sweet sixteen with you.”

“But I don't want to go alone,” I whine. “The extent of my interaction with these people—aside from play rehearsal—has been three days of lunches together, so I still barely know them. I want to be able to talk to someone I actually know and like, and we did have plans anyway.”

“Yeah, for coffee and COD. Not hanging out with a bunch of kids who are six years younger than me. I

was already in first grade by the time he was born,” Stohler says. Having successfully completed the glitter application, she is now dabbing something that looks like cum onto a strip of—what the fuck?

“Dude, are those eyelashes?” I say, staring at her hands. I don’t even know why I ask. They’re totally eyelashes. This crazy bitch is smearing a tacky white substance all over a strip of eyelashes, right here on my couch. How do you even *get* eyelashes in one big strip like that? She probably had to skin somebody. What’s next? Is she going to whip out a flesh suit? But then her hands are moving towards her face, and I start to panic, “Oh my god, *what are you doing?*”

She sighs, pauses and says, “I’m *trying* to glue on my fake eyelashes. Don’t even give me that look—I’ve seen the shit you do to your hair to get it into that ridiculous little mohawk you’ve got there, this is no different.”

“It’s a fauxhawk, you idiot. It would only count as a mohawk if I shaved the sides. And it’s completely different. You already have eyelashes, why do you need to glue on fake ones?” I ask.

She doesn’t respond until she has carefully affixed the strip of lashes to her eyelid, then repeated the process on the other. She follows it up with some more glitter, a coat of mascara or whatever. Then she says, “I glue on fake ones so it looks better when I do this—” I snort as she shoots me her best pair of bedroom eyes. She shrugs. “Works on the guys who come into the club. Come on, you’ve gone into excruciating detail about how hot it is when McCutcheon looks up at you through his eyelashes when he’s blowing you.”

I sigh and stretch out over the couch, taking a moment to appreciate the visual she has just called up for me. “Yeah, it really is.”

“Keep it in your pants, man. Anyway, why can’t you just ask him to go with you to this little karaoke thing? He’s at least remotely close to them, age-wise, and that’s what boyfriends are for,” she says.

“He’s not my boyfriend, I told you. He’s my not-boyfriend. There’s a difference,” I say. She rolls her eyes, but she’s only pretending she’s not used to it; ever since he sent me that facebook request, I’ve been tormenting Ben by calling him my not-boyfriend, my half-boyfriend, my very-merry-un-boyfriend. Every time, he threatens to not-break-up with me, but he hasn’t done it yet, so I think he’s at least partly amused. “He’s working from four to ten. My original plan was to get coffee with you, go have him let us into the apartment before he heads to the bookstore, do the xbox thing until you leave at eight thirty, kill ten to fifteen minutes until Alex gets back from class, play some more xbox until Ben gets home from work, then spend the better part of the night fucking his brains out.”

“And that’s a quality plan,” Stohler agrees. “You should stick with it instead of—”

“I already told Nate I’d go to his stupid birthday thing. And I already told him I’d be bringing along my *dear friend Lindsey*,” I say in a sing-song voice. She applies her lipstick with one hand, slaps me across the face with the other.

Of course, this is the moment when my dad walks through the front door. He blinks at Stohler. She blinks back. I beam. “Dad, this is my friend, Lindsey Stohler. Stohler, this is my dad, Bill Anderson.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” Stohler says, extending her hand to shake his. “Excuse the whore-face, I’m just getting ready for work. I don’t always look like this.”

“She kind of does,” I whisper, and she elbows me.

Dad has known me for eighteen years, which means it’s kind of impossible for him to be fazed by the fact that I’m friends with someone who is obviously involved in the sex industry. He accepts the handshake, then raises the shopping bag I hadn’t noticed him carrying until now. “Nice to meet you. If you’re not heading out soon, you should join us for... well, it’s dessert, if you’ve already eaten. Dinner, if you

haven't. I stopped at that bakery downtown and got—"

"If that's carrot cake, I'm eating it all by myself," I interrupt.

Dad levels a look at me, but says to Stohler, "Garen's mother and I made the mistake of forgetting to address the importance of *manners* while raising our son. Yes, it's carrot cake. Yes, I technically bought it for you, Garen, to celebrate your thirty days. No, you cannot eat it all by yourself. You need to share."

"Share? Sorry, I missed that episode of Sesame Street when I was younger," I say, launching myself off the couch and taking the bag from him. He and Stohler trail after me into the kitchen, and I add, "My keys are on the table, if you want to see the new tag I got at the NA meeting after school. It's kind of hideous—the thirty-day sobriety tags are orange, sixty's green, ninety's red. No idea what it is after that, considering I didn't exactly make it any further than that last time. Grab some plates—yes, plates, plural. See? I can share."

I dole out some of the dessert onto each of the three plates that Dad sets on the counter. He eats his portion normally, like a human would; Stohler eats hers carefully enough to not smudge her lipstick. I devour mine, and then I go back for more, because now that I've given up coke, the pleasure center of my brain needs to take it where it can get it. I contemplate thirds, but Dad catches me side-eyeing the cake and moves it to the fridge. Instead, I stroll back out to the living room to sprawl out on the couch and announce, "I would've gotten clean ages ago, if I'd known I could get *treats* for sobriety anniversaries."

"Sobriety should be a treat in itself," Stohler says blandly as she begins to pack her makeup back into the train case.

I aim a finger at her and say, "And in payment for *that* patronizing little aphorism, you're coming with me tomorrow night."

She sighs, stomps her feet a little, but eventually, she grunts out, "Fine. I hate you. Don't expect me to sing."

"I don't expect you to sing," I reassure her, even though I'm already trying to figure out how many glasses of wine she'll have to drink before I can convince her to do a duet on something really embarrassing with me.

She says goodbye to my dad, and I walk her to the door. The second it has clicked shut behind her, Dad clears his throat, and I brace myself for the inevitable interrogation. Nothing about Stohler says 'high school,' so of course he's going to want to know where I met her; of course I'm going to have to lie, because *I met her during the middle of my relapse, but I swear she didn't realize an addict when I was buying shots in front of her and it turns out she's a really great friend, I promise* just doesn't roll off the tongue. He's going to ask about the makeup, the outfit, what sort of career she must have that requires her to look like that for work. But, to my shock and delight, all he asks is, "Why would you be singing tomorrow night? I thought you were going to Ben and Alex's apartment for the night."

I flop down on the couch and grab the copy of *Rolling Stone* I left on the coffee table earlier. "I was just about to tell you, my plans for tomorrow night have changed. Nate—the kid who's directing the school play—is turning sixteen, and he's having a bunch of people go to that weird pasta place with the karaoke. You know, across the street from the bank?"

"Next to the chiropractor's office?" Dad asks.

I nod. "Yeah, there. He invited me the other day, and I said I'd think about it. I changed my plans around a little, so now I'm going to go to that with Stohler, drop her off at work after, and then still spend the night at Ben's." I hesitate; I'm not used to having to ask permission, but with all these new rules in place, I'm treading a very fine line with seeking my dad's approval. I reluctantly tack on, "Is that okay? I can stick to my original plan, if you want."

Slowly, Dad shakes his head and says, “No, you don’t have to stick to the original plan. Enjoy your karaoke.”

“Thanks. I will,” I say, even though I probably won’t.

He unpacks some of his paperwork from his briefcase and begins to go over it, and I return my focus to my magazine. We fall into a companionable silence for a grand total of ten minutes before the doorbell chimes, and Dad points towards the front door without looking up from his paperwork. Tonelessly, I say, “Don’t tell me what to do.”

“I didn’t tell you to do anything, I pointed. Now, shut up and get the door,” he replies. I toss my magazine down on the other end of the couch and roll to my feet, clomping across the room as loudly as possible, just so Dad knows that I’m annoyed at his disruption of my laziness. I open the door, half-expecting to see Stohler telling me she forgot her lipgloss or something, and blink through the screen.

Travis is standing on my porch, gnawing on his thumbnail and looking completely wrecked. His eyes are watery and bloodshot, his hair is even messier than usual, most likely from running his hands through it repeatedly, the way he always does when he’s stressed to the breaking point. He clears his throat, but his voice still cracks when he says, “Hi. Can we talk?”

“Uh,” I say, unable to stop myself from glancing over my shoulder at Dad, who has looked up from his papers. I turn back to Travis and say, “Yeah, we can talk. Do you... let’s go to my room. It’s just um, this way—” I take him by the wrist and pull him inside. Dad says nothing, but nods at Travis as I tow him over to the basement door. Travis doesn’t say anything as he follows me down the stairs and into my room, but I can hear his shaky breathing behind me. Once we’re inside the room, door shut, I instinctively turn the stereo on before giving a stilted, awkward wave around—fuck, I wish I’d cleaned it today like I was told to—and saying, “So, this is my room. You can—I mean, there’s a couch, if you want to sit, or whatever.”

I point to the couch, but Travis sinks right down onto the edge of my unmade bed and leans his elbows on his knees so that he’s hunched in on himself. On my bed, what the hell, and my heart is hammering in my chest, but then he says, “I fucked up. Garen, I fucked up so badly. Y-You’re the only one I could think to talk to, the only one who might know what to do.” “What do you mean?” I ask. I want to touch him, to run my hands over his arms and kiss his forehead and give him some sort of comfort, because he looks so hurt, but I’m not sure I’m allowed to do that anymore. Not with the way things are now. Instead, I sit down next to him on the bed and tug his sleeve a little. “Travis, talk to me. What happened?”

He starts to cry.

It’s the last thing I’m expecting, and for a moment, I’m stunned into stillness. But then he gives a shaky inhale, and fuck what I’m allowed to do; I throw my arms around him and drag him towards me. He winds up halfway in my lap, his face buried in the front of my shirt, and he’s still crying. He clings to my arms, and I find myself whispering stupid, nonsensical comfort into his ear. *Shh, it’s okay, I’ve got you, it’s okay.* It’s clearly not okay. If it were okay, my ex-boyfriend wouldn’t be sobbing on my bed right now. One arm still wrapped around his shoulders, I curl my other hand against his jaw to force his head up, saying, “Hey, hey, hey. Look at me. Travis, look at me. Tell me what happened.”

His face is so much closer than I had expected it to be, somehow. All I can see is freckles and tear-dampened skin. He leans forward, and for one blissful half-second, I think he’s going to kiss me. Maybe that’s what this is about. Maybe he’s this upset because we’re barely speaking, because I’m not-dating Ben, because I’m thirty days sober and he’s not really a part of it this time. Then his forehead is settling against mine and he’s whispering, “So, my girlfriend’s kind of pregnant.”

The hammering of my heart stops instantly. I lick my lips. “I’m sorry, I don’t think I... what?”

“Joss is pregnant.” His eyes are screwed shut now. There’s silence. He lets out a very shaky laugh.
“Please say something.”

Something. Okay. I can say something. I can do that, I can— “I thought I was really, *really* thorough in teaching you about the importance of using condoms every time.” Oh, Christ. *Really, Garen?* That’s the thing to say right now?

To his credit, Travis doesn’t punch me in the throat, which shows more self-restraint than I have any right to expect. He flushes a little and says, “I know. And I—we did—”

“Every time.”

“Garen, I *did*. But they don’t always—I mean, nothing is one hundred percent effective, and I just—” He stops and takes a deep breath, tugging the sleeve of his shirt down over his hand to wipe roughly at his eyes. “She came to the Grind right at the end of my shift tonight and told me. Sh-She asked me not to tell anyone, but I couldn’t... I didn’t know what to do. I still don’t. But I needed to come talk to you. And I need you to say something that will make me believe I didn’t just ruin my life. Anything.”

I can’t say anything, not just yet, because all I can think is, *I thought it was going to be us*. Part of me, a stupid, immature, selfish part thought that maybe someday we would work through this, and we’d get back together, and we’d do everything I always wanted us to do. We could get married, and we could adopt some babies, or maybe we could use a surrogate, do the whole insemination thing so that all our kids could have his freckles or my green eyes—if we wanted them to come out as blond as he is, he could always just knock up Stohler, she’d totally agree to it if I whined enough. But instead, Josslyn—a girl he barely knows, a girl he’s been fucking for a month—gets to have all that. She gets a family with the boy who was supposed to be *mine*.

I can’t make it about me right now, so I stay completely silent. When I reach up to push his hair back from his eyes, he lets me. Neither of us says much for a while. Finally, though, I lean back a little and clear my throat, saying, “What is she going to do?”

“She wanted to know what I would think of her getting an abortion,” he says, with a tight shrug.

“Yeah?” I say. He doesn’t take it as the noncommittal prompt to continue that I meant it as. I add, “What did you say?”

“I-I asked her if she would consider maybe... not. If she’d maybe let me keep it.”

There’s a violent buzzing in my ears; I think it’s because I’m still sitting too close to him. I very carefully untangle my limbs from his and stand up. He lets me pace in silence for a few minutes, but the buzzing is just getting louder and louder, until I can’t hold back the words, “July, right?”

“What do you—”

“It’s October now, and nine months is—July. Right? If she has it, it’ll be in July? Or, second half of June, maybe. Depending on how far along she is,” I clarify. He nods jerkily. I scrape my fingers through my hair. “And then what? She pops out a kid over the summer, you become somebody’s *dad*, and then... I mean, what would you do about college?”

These are the things I need to focus on. I need to focus on facts, and plans, and reason, and practicality, because I’m pretty sure I’m going to throw up if I think for even a second about a tiny blue-eyed baby that would create a life-long connection between him and Joss that I could never even dream of competing with. If I picture it, I’m pretty sure I’ll die.

He returns to his earlier pose of leaning his elbows on his knees, though his chin is now resting lightly on his fists. His eyes are fixed at a point somewhere near my desk, but he hasn’t blinked in at least a minute.

He swallows hard and says, "Not go, I guess. I don't know. Assuming I ever get access to it, the college fund your dad set up for me would handle my tuition, but I'd never be able to do all my schoolwork, and raise a baby, and work enough hours to be able to afford to support it. I have good time-management skills, but nobody's that good. School would have to wait. Besides, it's not like I could leave the state to go anywhere, not if Joss and the baby stayed here. It's—I could leave later, when it was older, maybe. Lakewood's not so bad, and I—"

"This town's a fucking wasteland," I interrupt, "and you're supposed to be getting out of it. When we talked about colleges last winter, you told me *Stanford*. You told me you didn't want to even stay in Connecticut, and you—fuck, Travis. You're too good for this. You're too good for Lakewood, too good to be that guy who knocks up his high school girlfriend and gets stuck here."

"You think I don't wish that were true?" he snaps, finally bothering to look at me. "If I could change this, I would, but I—"

"Joss asked you what you thought about her getting an abortion, didn't she?"

His eyes harden. "Yes. And I told her that it was her choice, but that I didn't want her to."

"Fine, she doesn't have to. She can have the kid, and then you guys can put it up for adoption, or for sale, or what the fuck ever. You don't have to give up your entire future so that you can raise a baby you didn't even plan to have," I say.

"Some might argue," he says, in a tone so even that I can just feel myself getting angrier, "that having a baby is a future, not that it's giving up one. Most people would consider that 'starting a family.'"

"Yeah, when you're fuckin' thirty, maybe. Not when you're seventeen years old!" I burst out. My pacing is becoming quick enough that the clomping of my boots against the floor is starting to annoy even me; I stop, kick them off, and begin pacing again. "I can't believe I'm even having this conversation with you. You're supposed to be one of the smartest people I know, and yet you're actually sitting in my room, trying to convince me that it's not a completely retarded idea for you to keep a kid you didn't want to have, with a girl you've been dating for—what, a month? If that? This is ridic—"

"It was supposed to be you," he says, and I want to break something. I want to put my fist through a window, I want to fling all my belongings across the room like a little boy would throw his toys around, I want to take advantage of these sound-proofed walls to scream at him, *I know it was supposed to be me*. But he continues, "When this all started, before we moved in together, I had wondered if I finally had a chance to start feeling like I had a family. My mom and I were still barely talking, my sister and I aren't close. Hank McCall couldn't give less of a shit about being my father... I thought maybe you guys—you and your dad—I thought you could make me feel like I had something. But once things started to become real, it was nothing like I'd hoped it might be. I met Bill, and things were so awkward between us, and then I met you, and you were so fucking *annoying*."

I can't help but let out a tiny breath of a laugh at that. He's right. I was trying to annoy him when we met, if only so he'd pay attention to me. I contemplate telling him so, but instead, I say, "Sorry."

"Don't be. Because you were annoying, but you were also just so... funny." He breaks off, and for half a second, I think he's going to start crying again. But he cracks a sad, watery smile, presses the heels of his hands to his closed eyes for a moment, then clears his throat and continues, "And you were passionate. Talented. Weirdly sweet, when you let yourself be. And so fucking hot I couldn't stand it. Or, can't stand it, I guess. You're... still all of those things."

"Even annoying?" I ask.

"Especially that one." He shrugs, letting the smile fade. "Being with you was the closest I've ever felt to having a family. You were supposed to feel like my brother, but you never did. You just felt like... e-

everything. You felt like *home*.” He looks up at me with wide, nervous eyes, like he’s afraid that I’ll deny him now, even though there’s nothing left between us to deny. He asks, “What if nothing else ever makes me feel like that again? What if having this kid with Joss is the only chance I’ll ever get to feel as close to someone as I felt to you?”

It’s a stupid thing to say, and his logic is totally flawed, but any objection I could voice right now would be hypocritical, because that same fear is the reason why I’m an addict. For months, I broke and abused myself—my body, my mind, my heart—because I believed that getting trashed was the only thing that would feel as good as loving Travis did. I thought that drugs were the only thing that I could ever get as deep into my veins as he was. And now I don’t know how to look him in the eyes and tell him it’s wrong for him to feel anything similar. I allow myself to collapse onto the couch as I say, “Don’t you think it’s sort of early to assume you’ve hit your emotional peak?”

“That’s not what I’m saying,” he protests.

It continues like that for ages; I ask him something, and he denies it. I push him for a deeper answer, he retreats. I try to force him to envision his future, he panics at the thought of losing something he barely has now. Eventually, it’s too much for me to handle, and I stand up. “I need a drink.” His eyes snap to my face, and I hasten to amend, “I need *coffee*. It’s—I need to go put on a pot of coffee. I’ll be right back.” I slip from the room and check the time on my cell phone. It’s already after midnight. Swearing, I jog upstairs; Dad is still sitting in the living room. Before he can speak, I say, “So, I know you said I have a curfew of eleven on school nights. And I know you said that I have to ask your permission before anyone stays over, but he’s—I mean, this is me, asking for permission, I guess.”

“Does Ben know?” Dad asks after a moment, and I head into the kitchen to set the coffee brewing.

“It’s not like that,” I say, even though part of me thinks it will *always* be like that with Travis. “We’re not—look, nothing is happening downstairs. We’re talking. You saw his face when he walked in, he’s not—he needs someone. And I think I’m the closest he’s got to someone right now. If you’re really not cool with this, then fine, I’ll ask him to go home, but...” I trail off, willing the coffee to drip faster into the pot. It doesn’t work. I glance over at the kitchen doorway, where Dad is now standing, watching me. I’m not ashamed to sound a little needy as I say, “Dad, please don’t make me tell him to leave. It’s your call, and I’ll do whatever you say, but I really, really don’t think I can send him home and not hate myself for it. Please, just trust me.”

Dad hesitates, and for half a second, I think I see a flash of stepfatherly concern in his eyes. He asks, “Is he safe?”

What he means, I assume, is, *If I send him home, do you think he’s going to hurt himself like he used to?* I shrug; it’s the only honest response I can come up with. The coffee machine beeps at the completion of its brew cycle, and I empty the pot into two mugs. Silence stretches out between us. Finally, he sighs. “He can stay. It’s not a problem. But neither of you can be late for school in the morning.” He takes two steps back towards the living room before he twists to say over his shoulder, in a slightly harsher voice than necessary, “I think you should text Ben and let him know what’s going on.”

I grab the handles of both coffee mugs in one hand, then dip the other into my pocket for my phone. It’s fucking stupid that he thinks I should have to text anyone—that he thinks I’m actually in a position where I’m expected to justify myself to anyone—but I still find myself thumbing out a message to Ben.

still not sure what the boundaries are of this thing between us. travis is at my house right now. he’s freaking out about stuff that’s going on in his life & he needs someone to talk to. i’m not going to touch him. but i think he might stay the night. i don’t want to ask your permission. but is this okay?

I remain upstairs for the five minutes it takes before I receive the reply. *You’re an idiot. Yes, it’s okay, and no, you don’t need my permission to spend the night with someone else, especially someone you’re not planning to have sex with. Hope everything’s okay.*

I close my eyes and once again find myself unbelievably relieved to have Ben McCutcheon in my life. I send, *thank you, see you after karaoke lameness tomorrow night*, tacking on a quick xoxo just in case he's lying about this being okay and I need to win points with him, then head downstairs with the coffee. But when I push open my bedroom door, Travis is curled up on the very edge of my bed, dead asleep. His face is pale and still slightly damp from the tears he's been unable to stop from occasionally falling over the course of the night. He looks so fucking young.

I carefully shift the blankets so that they're covering him, then sit down on the couch with my homework and both cups of coffee. No part of me is willing to pretend that I'd be able to get any sleep tonight, anyway.

Chapter Eleven

“Sex without love is as hollow and ridiculous as love without sex.” –Hunter S. Thompson

31 days sober

Travis wakes up when I’m halfway through my workout. I’m in the middle of my crunches when I become aware of his eyes on me, peering over the edge of my bed. Neither of us says anything to the other, though I continue to move, continue to count aloud. “Fifty-five. Fifty-six. Fifty-seven. Fifty-eight. Fifty-nine.”

“Sixty,” he whispers, and I freeze, mid-crunch.

It’s the same number he announced on the morning that Dad found out about us and kicked me out. That time, I had crawled up into my bed and curled myself around him and kissed him breathless. This time, I remain still. I hold the pose until my obliques are screaming, until my body is cramped up and shaking, and then I flop back down onto the floor and stare up at the ceiling. “How are you?”

“Not crying like a five-year-old anymore. So, that’s a start,” he says before giving a half-hearted shrug. “Still gonna have a kid, though.”

You don’t have to, I want to say, but I can’t go through another hour of that argument. I can’t try telling him, for the nine millionth time, what a huge mistake he’ll be making if he actually asks Joss to keep this baby. I can’t even think about this anymore. I stand and head for the door. “I’m going to go shower. You can have one after, while I’m doing my hair.”

Only then, in the privacy of the shower, do I allow myself to lose it. I don’t cry, and I don’t scream, but I do spend a solid ten minutes curled up in the tub, hugging my legs to my chest and hitting my forehead repeatedly against my knees. Part of me is still desperately hoping that this is all a hallucination brought on by insomnia. That maybe tonight, after Nate’s stupid karaoke party—god, am I really going to have to see Joss and pretend I’m not dying because of that *thing* inside of her?—and after I drop Stohler at the club where she works and after I make my way to New Haven, I’ll curl up in Ben’s bed and be able to sleep soundly, and when I wake up tomorrow morning, none of this will have happened. There won’t be some mini-McCall slotted for a life-ruining delivery in nine months.

When I finally manage to pull my shit together, I stand, shut off the water, and quickly towel off. I pull on the same jeans I wore yesterday and walk back to my room shirtless, jeans half-unzipped, nothing underneath; my arms are laden down with everything I need to do my hair, so I have to nudge the door open with my hip. Travis is still curled up on my bed, and I pretend not to notice the way his eyes track across my bare, damp chest, or the blush that rises in his cheeks. I dump the hair products on my desk—my heat protector clatters across my keyboard—and mutter, “Shower’s all yours, dude.”

He says nothing before he leaves the room, and I get dressed, then spend the next twenty minutes carefully drying, straightening, and spiking my hair. My appearance is the only thing I’m positive I have any control over right now, and I think that I might have a complete mental breakdown if I don’t get my fauxhawk just so. Luckily, I manage it, and by the time Travis gets out of the shower, I’m lying on the couch and mindlessly poking at my lip ring with the tip of my tongue. I glance over at him—he’s wearing his jeans, but he’s holding the previous day’s carefully folded shirt and boxers. I try very hard not to think about the fact that he’s going commando right now, because in less than a year, he’s going to be someone’s father. And you’re not supposed to think that way about a guy who is going to be someone’s father.

“Would it be okay if I borrowed a shirt?” he asks.

I raise a somewhat limp hand and gesture past him. “Yeah. Clothes are in the closet. Help yourself.”

There are shirts in that closet that belong to him—a few plain tees, the LHS Varsity Track hoodie,

possibly one of his Daily Grind shirts. Some of them made their way into my closet while we were still dating. We spent two months stripping in each other's rooms, then scrambling out of bed and running across the hall, half-dressed and laughing, every time we heard the crunch of tires in the driveway; after a while, things like *that's my t-shirt, yours is over there* and *have you seen my jeans* stopped mattering that much. Some of the other things in my closet are the product of more deliberate thefts, like the hoodie. I haven't been able to convince myself to wear any of them, though. God, it takes all of my self-restraint not to do something insanely pathetic, like fling them all into a pile on my bed and bury my face in them just so I can still get a chance to breathe him in every night.

I watch as Travis hesitates at one of the track shirts. He even tugs it halfway off the hanger, but then he's shoving it back into place and continuing to flip through the clothes. He eventually settles on a dark gray, long-sleeved shirt with something written in navy on the front. Wait, but those colors are—god. He pulls on the shirt and turns around, not meeting my eyes, but it doesn't matter that he won't look at me, because I can't look at anything but the words *Patton Military Academy Marksmanship Team* emblazoned on his chest. That shirt and one yearbook photo are the sole remnants of the only attempt I made at extracurricular participation at Patton; I'd been on the marksmanship team for the spring semester of my freshman year, but quit it halfway through the fall of my sophomore year, after I started dating Dave and decided that spending time with him was more important. God, that had been a huge fucking mistake—all things considered, I probably should've stuck with the guns instead of the guy.

The shirt hasn't fit me properly since my final growth spurt over the summer between ninth and tenth grade, when I'd shot from five nine to six one over the course of a single month, but it fits Travis' smaller frame just fine now. That same warm feeling that I've been trying to ignore for months is curling up in my heart again, but it makes me feel good now. It just makes me sad.

"Are you ready to go?" I ask quietly.

He finishes lacing up his sneakers and trails after me upstairs. I collect my keys, my backpack, my wallet from the coffee table, but once we're standing on the porch and I'm locking the front door, he hesitates. "Do you, um... I mean, I could give you a ride to school, maybe. To thank you for last night. And so you won't have to worry about having your car in the lot again."

"Thanks for the offer, but I usually go into town to get coffee before homeroom. I don't want to make you late," I say. *I also don't want to sit in a car with you, not if it means you trying to talk about what a great idea it is for you to keep your bastard.*

He grabs the sleeve of my jacket and tows me towards his car, parked next to mine. "Well, I'm not sure if you've heard this, but I kind of work at a coffee shop downtown. I only get free drinks when I'm working, but I get enough of an employee discount to make it worth your while. Let me buy you coffee."

The thing is, we're still not friends. We're barely supposed to be speaking to each other; each of us has made that request at one point or another, and I doubt one night of him crashing at my place and crying onto my shoulder is enough to change that. But at the same time... after I came back to Lakewood, after what happened with Dave, after checking into rehab, all I wanted was for someone to be there. I wanted someone to look at me, and hold my hand, and tell me that they loved me, even if they didn't understand why I had brought these terrible things upon myself. There's something about hitting a new low that makes a person crave closeness, even if it's with the wrong person, and I think that's what Travis is dealing with right now. He should be talking to Joss, or his family, or his real friends, but he's not—he's coming to me.

Probably because I'm familiar.

Probably because I'm the only person he knows who has made bigger mistakes than knocking someone up.

I slide into the passenger's seat of his car without further comment, and when I glance over at him as he

pulls out of the driveway, he looks relieved. It's strange—I've let him drive me around in the Ferrari, but I've never actually been inside his car before. It's... clean. Weirdly clean. There's no trash on the floor, no receipts crumpled up in the cup-holders, nothing dangling from the rearview mirror. There's one of those liquid air fresheners tucked neatly into the air vent, and one zipped CD case. Desperate for something to break the silence, I seize the case and begin flipping through the CDs. It takes me about five seconds to realize that that's a huge mistake, because every disk is a mix I burned for him.

Every.

Single.

One.

I stare down at my own handwriting, scrawled in Sharpie across each of the mixes—they're organized in the order I gave them to him, starting with the first one I burned, right after we met. *Who doesn't listen to music?* I had scribbled across the disk before giving it to him. I flip to the next CD--*songs that will make you seem cooler (even though you're not)*. The rest—the ones I made after he finally let me in—are all labeled with snippets of lyrics from the songs on them.

I can keep a secret if you can keep me guessing—I'd slipped that CD into the pocket of his Daily Grind apron during the middle of his shift on my first open mic night, his birthday, the night he agreed to give us a chance.

Our whole lives laid out right in front of us—that one had been left on his desk a few days after his junior ring dance, when I first gave him that stupid ring that's been haunting me ever since.

I want you so bad I'll go back on the things I believe in—I still don't know whether I made that mix because we'd just slept together for the first time, or because we'd just said our first *'I love you's'*. Either way, the CD had been pressed right into his hand while I kissed him desperately in his bedroom after dinner one night.

Can we take a ride? Get out of this place while we still have time—that one had been made after the first bout of rumors began flying about us, when I realized that other people were determined to claw their way into our relationship and suck all the goodness out of it. It had taken another two weeks for me to finally give it to him, the night I picked him up from work and he showed me that tiny letter G tattooed onto his wrist.

The last CD I made before I got kicked out is the last CD in the case. I think I had tried to tell him it was because we were in the middle of exam week, "music to study by" or something dumb like that, but my real message was made all too clear by the fact that I'd written, *What do you say? Would you marry me today?* No one ever said Garen Anderson was a subtle man...

I toss the zippered case into the backseat and crank up the radio instead, settling for some station that plays nothing but a constant stream of Top 40. Thankfully, Travis doesn't comment. We make the drive to the Grind in silence, and when he pulls into the lot, he leaves the car running and scurries inside with a quick instruction of, "Wait here. I'll be right back." I watch through the window as he says something to the cashier, who laughs and waves him closer. He jogs around the edge of the counter and fills two large cups with coffee and a little bit of creamer. I frown; after a year, he should know how I take my coffee. 'Black' isn't exactly a complicated instruction. But he hands those two cups to a customer, so I can only assume that it's some sort of trade-off, like he can go behind the counter and make his own drinks if he helps out for a few minutes. Finally, he sets out three extra-large cups and starts pulling shots of espresso into each, followed by a pump of some golden syrup, then filled the rest of the way with fresh coffee. He caps each of the cups, drops a couple of bills in front of the cashier, and returns to the car. He hands me the cardboard tray of coffee cups and says, "Two of those are for you. It's not what you usually get, but you'll like it."

"I'll hate it on principle. I don't like change," I say, scowling at the cups.

Travis snorts. "Yeah? Wow, I never knew that about you. Usually you adapt so well to new people, situations, and experiences." I glare at him, and he rolls his eyes. "Just... shut up and trust me, okay?"

It's the worst thing he could have said, because it's probably the only thing I wouldn't be able to deny him. I take a sip. It's delicious, with a smooth, rich, caramel flavor; it tastes like swallowing gold. Travis is watching me, so I grimace and mutter, "It's okay, I guess," but he must be able to tell I'm full of shit, because he's grinning as he pulls back out of the lot. We both remain silent for the rest of the drive to school, as well as the walk from the car to the senior hallway. We reach my locker first, and I expect him to continue on to his, but he remains at my side as I dial in my combination and unlatch the door. I stuff my backpack inside and extract the two-subject notebook I use for government and intro psych. When the door is shut once more, I lean back against the locker and finally meet his eyes.

He looks as lost as he has since he set foot on my porch last night. I can't help it; I reach for his hand, stroke my fingers across his palm, and say, "I'm sorry I was so useless last night. You came to me for help, and I tried to—I didn't know what to say. I still don't."

He shakes his head and says quietly, "It's not like I expected you to have some magical solution. I just—" He takes a shaky breath and intertwines our fingers. My hand feels like it's buzzing. "When everything falls to shit, you're still the first person I think to go to. The only person who can make me feel, you know... okay again."

"Travis?"

We both look towards the voice; it's Joss. She's standing a few feet away, staring at our laced fingers. When we immediately release each other, her eyes creep up to his chest, to the words on his t-shirt.

"Joss, hi," he says. He reaches out to touch her waist, but she smacks his hand away—hard.

"Tell me this is a joke," she says, practically vibrating with fury. "Tell me that after what I told you last night, after I told you not to tell anyone, you didn't go straight to your ex-boyfriend and talk to him about something you promised to keep between us." He opens his mouth, and she finishes in a broken whisper, "Tell me you didn't spend the night with him."

"No, I—" He breaks off and squeezes his eyes shut, licks his lips quickly before he tries again, "I didn't *spend the night with him*, not like that. I slept at his house, yes, but it was just—I needed someone to talk to. I was freaking out, and—"

"You swore you wouldn't tell," Joss hisses.

I clear my throat. "Look, I'm not going to spread it around. I'll keep it a secret, but he needed—"

"Stop talking right now," she orders, and I find myself falling surprisingly silent. She turns her eyes back on Travis. "It is hard enough trying to live up to the great fantasy romance you had with him, okay? I've had about as much as I can take. And seeing the way you two look at each other? Feeling this—" She grabs his hand and thrusts it in front of his face so that he's forced to stare at the engraved silver band, "—the goddamn engagement ring your ex gave you, feeling that against my skin every time you put your hands on me? Seeing you in his clothes? Knowing that you asked me to—" Her voice drops to a whisper for the next three words, "—keep this baby, and then your first instinct was to go sleep in your ex-boyfriend's bed? It's too much. I'm not like the other people who are content to be an interlude in the Travis-and-Garen Saga. I'm not Ben McCutcheon; I'm not okay with my boyfriend being halfway in love with someone else."

"He's not," I say sharply, and she finally looks at me.

I don't know which of us is more screwed up by the idea of Travis being halfway in love with me. For a long moment, we just stare at each other. Then she raises her hands in a gesture that looks like surrender and says softly, "Look, I've been waiting for some sort of... clue, I guess, to what I should do. And maybe this is it, okay? Maybe this is a sign that keeping it isn't a good idea."

She takes two steps down the hall, but Travis lunges after her, grabbing both of her hands and dragging her back towards him. His voice is shaking as he all but begs, "Wait, wait, wait. Joss, please don't say that. Please don't do that."

"Travis, I don't like the idea, either. You know that. I told you, even the thought of getting that done, of being someone who does a thing like that, it makes me *sick*, but I don't see how we can—"

"Please don't get rid of it. Please don't kill it," he whispers. He is very obviously just seconds away from having a complete mental breakdown, right here in the middle of the hallway, and people are starting to stare. I can tell that some of them are trying to eavesdrop, but I manage to scare most of them away with a sneer. Travis is still pleading with Joss, though I can't really hear what he's saying, because his face is buried against her shoulder. That's probably for the best, because I'm already really fucking close to losing it right now. I can't deal with the fact that he's known about this—whatever it is, this fetus, this baby, he's known about it for less than a day, and he already *loves* it with a desperate, possessive ferocity.

Joss's eyes are squeezed shut as she raises a hand to the back of Travis' head, strokes his hair soothingly. He loves it when people do that to him; god, I wish that could be my hand. He's still leaning heavily on her, still barely making any sound, but I can hear him murmuring, "I'll do anything you want me to do, I promise. I'll give him up. I-I just needed some *time*, you know, to get over everything that's happened, but I can do it, I can let him go. Just please don't get rid of it. I know this isn't something either of us expected or wanted or anything, but we can do this, Joss. It's scary, but I know we can figure this out, we can make it work. I'll do anything. I can be a good father, I promise, I can be better than mine w—I can do it. I just need you to give me a chance. Please, please, please don't get rid of it."

Joss finally opens her eyes, meeting my gaze over Travis' shoulder. There's a strange look on her face, like she's relieved. Like these are the words she was hoping and expecting to hear from him, and now that they're out, she knows... what, that this is okay? That this is right? Because it's *not*, but she still says, "We can figure this out, but not if you're not willing to try."

"I am, Joss, I—"

"I don't want you to talk to Garen anymore." She's still fucking looking at me, even though she's talking about me like I'm not standing right here. I want to start screaming so they can't ignore me. "I know you care about him, and I know you told me that you were hoping you two would be able to be friends again, once you were sure he was still on-track with his sobriety—" I really *might* start screaming soon, because my sobriety is none of this bitch's business, "—but that can't happen. Not if we're keeping this baby. I can't try to raise a child with someone who might still have feelings for his ex. Garen was your first love, and I know that's never going to go away completely. So, I need you to keep that promise you just made. I need you to give him up completely and never speak to him again, or this isn't going to work."

It's the most disgusting ultimatum I've ever heard, and that's including the time I tried to shoot myself in the head so that people wouldn't make me give up cocaine. What's wrong with her? How can she possibly think that *stop talking to your ex-boyfriend, or I'll abort the baby you desperately want me to keep* is a reasonable thing to say? I can't see Travis' face, but I can see the tension in his back. I can see the rigidity of his spine, the awkward set to his shoulders, but I can also see the fact that he's hesitating. He wants her to keep this baby more than anything, but I can tell he's thinking the same thing I am--*after all this time, is it even possible for us to stay away from each other for more than a few days at a time?* It's just like the day my dad kicked me out. This thing between us is over, but he's not going to be able to be the one to say it. I wind my fingers around his wrist and lift his hand off of Joss' waist. She tenses up at my proximity, but Travis does the opposite—he scrambles to grab my hand again, to lace

our fingers together once more, but I pry his fingers off me, then slip the silver ring off. He still hasn't released Joss or looked at me, but he does make a grab for the ring. He fucking *whimpers*.

"It's fine," I say quietly. "I'll go away, okay? It's fine."

I stuff the ring into my pocket and head for homeroom.

It's not fine.

No matter how hard I try, I can't seem to get the thought of life-ruiner babies out of my head for the rest of the day. It reaches a tipping point in the late afternoon, when Stohler and I are lounging around some hipster tea shop in New Haven, killing time until we head back to Lakewood for Nate's dinner. We're not talking about much anything—truth be told, we're debating whether our laziness outweighs our shared desire to go outside for a smoke. Suddenly, I turn to her and ask, "Do you ever think about kids?" Her forehead creases. "What do you mean? What about them?"

"Do you ever think about having them? Or, I guess, do you think about what it'd be like to be a parent at some point?" I ask.

"If this is your way of asking me if I'll have your test tube babies, I'm flattered, but I couldn't bring that child into the world in good conscience. You and I have both allowed the better part of our adult lives to be ruled by three things—alcohol, cock, and bitter disillusionment with society, masked by biting sarcasm. I can't even imagine what the 'terrible twos' would be like for whatever demon-creature we managed to produce together," she says.

I stand and haul her to her feet so we can finally go outside for those cigarettes we've been debating. "It would probably be tolerable until high school. I didn't turn awful until I went to boarding school. You remember Jamie, right? My best friend, guy who went to the show with us?" She raises a prompting eyebrow, and I light a cigarette for each of us. "He was the first boy I ever kissed, and even that didn't happen until winter break during my freshman year, when I went to visit him in Georgia for a week. I was almost fifteen, and I was a total dork about it, it was so embarrassing." I pause, then tap the ash off the end of my cigarette, considering. "I mean, he sucked my dick for the first time like, three hours later, so I guess I moved pretty quickly from there, but—"

"See? I wonder if nymphomania is hereditary," she says thoughtfully.

I shrug, and I'm only half-joking now when I say, "Well, addiction sure as hell is." We smoke in silence for a few minutes before I think I can stomach saying, "Travis and I aren't friends anymore."

Stohler smirks at me. "To be honest, I didn't realize you guys were even done with your *last* bout of 'not being friends.' What happened now?"

I swallow hard and stare down at my boots. I'd promised him and Joss that I wouldn't tell anyone, and I don't want to betray any confidences... but it's kind of hard to feel like I owe either of them anything, considering I'm the one who agreed to give up on trying to work out a friendship with Travis. They shouldn't be asking so much of someone who's so weak. I suck hard on my cigarette for a second before saying, "If I tell you something, will you swear to me that it stays just between us? You won't tell the guys, no matter how bad it is or how sloppy drunk and over-sharing you get?"

Only recently did I find out that Stohler and Alex had managed to rouse themselves from their drunken stupors long enough to exchange phone numbers on the night of the show; for the past two weeks, they've been verbally abusing each other and arguing about early heavy metal through text messages. Sometimes, they'll both text me at the same time—Alex will say, *please explain to ur hot stripper friend that drumming and pity-fucking are NOT the same thing & im not obligated to like rick allen just bc he has 1 arm*, and Stohler will say, *Tell that poorly-shaven moron you call a friend that, if he doesn't look up the 2003 live performance of "Switch 625" on youtube right now, I'm going to break into his fucking apartment*

and put live snakes in his bed while he's sleeping. The fact that they've managed to become friends so quickly usually provokes a gross, warm, happy feeling in my gut, but not if it's going to lead to them gossiping like middle-school girls and getting me in trouble.

Stohler waves me off, presumably to confirm her silence. I say, "Things have been tense between Travis and I ever since my relapse last month, but last night, he stayed over at my place. He needed me."

"I'll bet he did," Stohler says, leering.

Usually I'd leer right back and make up some ridiculous, obscene story to make her laugh. But it's not funny, and I don't want her to think it is, so I give up and just say it. "His girlfriend's pregnant."

Stohler chokes on a lungful of smoke and doubles over, coughing and gagging. Understandable reaction. It's several minutes before she's able to suck in enough air to hiss, "I'm sorry, you're telling me that a guy you used to fuck in the ass—" A passing couple turns to give her a scandalized look, "—got a girl pregnant?" Her word choice is deliberate; maybe she realizes that hearing him described as a guy *I used to fuck in the ass* is better than *am in love with*. I nod, and she hesitates before asking a question I'd never even considered. "And he's sure it's his?"

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"Is he positive that he's the father? They haven't been dating that long, so maybe they're not even exclusive," she says.

For one flawless moment, I let myself sink into that possibility. That would be fucking beautiful—if it were someone else's kid, and Travis had no obligation to it. If he could be free. But it's impossible for me to convince myself that it might be true, because this is *Travis*. There's no social networking site that says that *Travis McCall is in an open relationship with Joss Pryce*—well, mainly because I don't think Travis even has a facebook, but also because he doesn't do open relationships. He didn't with me, he didn't with Ben, and I know he doesn't with Joss. There's no way he'd be involved with her if there was even a chance she was sleeping with someone else.

I shake my head and say, "No. They're definitely exclusive. It's definitely his."

"That sucks," Stohler says, cringing, and I nod my agreement. A beat, then she says, "So, what the hell does that have to do with you two? Why do you have to stop being friends just because his girlfriend's going to pop one out next summer?"

I explain what happened in the hallway this morning with Joss' ultimatum, how I ended up being the one to agree to it, not Travis. The ring is still weighing heavily in the pocket of my jeans, but I don't take it out; Stohler's rolling her eyes enough as it is. She lets me go into an embarrassing level of detail about the entire conversation, but by the time we make our way to the car to head over to the restaurant, she has lost all of her patience with me. She kicks her stilettos up onto the dashboard and announces, "You're a goddamn idiot, you know that?"

"I mean," I say frowning, "I've heard that before? But why am I an idiot now, specifically?"

"Did it ever occur to you that just because someone tells you and Travis that you need to give up on each other, you don't necessarily have to do it?" she demands. "Like, when you got kicked out, you didn't have a choice about leaving, but you could have told him you still wanted to be with him. You could have worked around it, you didn't have to let people break you up. And today, when that little shrew said you couldn't talk to each other anymore, you both should have told her to go fuck herself."

"I couldn't," I protest. "If he didn't agree to it, she would have gotten an abort—"

"No. No, I'm sorry, but that's a crock of shit. Either she wants to keep the baby or she doesn't, alright?"

That's not a decision she would make based on whether or not her baby daddy still talks to an ex sometimes. That's stupid," she says. I scowl the rest of the way to the restaurant.

We're the last ones to arrive. Everyone else is gathered in the parking lot, waiting for us. Once I park and get out, Nate turns to me and purses his lips. "You're late."

"Almost always, yes," I agree. He must forgive me, though, because he steps forward and gives me a quick, unexpected hug. And if my hands happen to graze his ass as he pulls away, well, happy birthday to him. I gesture to Stohler and say, "This is the friend I told you I was bringing. Nate, Stohler. Stohler, Nate."

"It's nice to meet you," Nate says, extending a hand to her.

She accepts it. "Likewise. Happy birthday."

We make our way into the restaurant, where we are greeted by an enthusiastic host, who garbles at us in Italian. All ten of us blink back at him. He repeats the words, slower. When we don't respond, he begins to look distressed, though his only response is to speak a third time.

"I'm sorry, but I don't speak Italian. Isn't there anyone available who can come deal with us for just a second?" Nate says. It's fairly obvious that he's not pleased, and I can't really blame him—I've been to this place before, and I know that almost everyone who works here speaks English. It makes no sense for the one person here who speaks nothing but Italian to be acting as a host.

I sigh and edge through to the front of the group. My grasp of the Italian language has never been that great—I've always preferred French. But I did spend a few weeks in Florence when I was sixteen, so I've picked up enough to get by. I say, in poorly accented, slightly broken Italian, "*Abbiamo una... fuck. Uh. Una prenotazione per la cena... per dieci persone. Il suo compleanno è oggi. Il ragazzo fiammeggiante con la maglietta rosa.*"

The man blinks around the group, and when his eyes finally land on Nate in his pale pink Oxford and striped bow-tie, he lights up and exclaims, "*Buon compleanno!*"

"He says happy birthday," I say to Nate.

"You speak Italian?" Nate says in a hushed, slightly awed tone.

I hadn't realized how much my ability to speak foreign languages turned guys on until I met Travis, who used to turn into a complete slut the second I started whispering French into his ear. Apparently Nate is of a similar sentiment, even if he's only hearing me half-ass some Italian. I smirk and say, "You should hear me speak French." I look back to the host and say, "*Dice 'grazie.' Il nostro tavolo, per favore.*"

The host beams and leads us to a long table in the back. There's the usual awkward pause while everyone tries to figure out where the least awful place to sit is. Stohler rolls her eyes and sinks into the seat at the head of the table, and I take the chair on her right. Nate immediately sinks into the seat on my other side, and the others fill in around us.

Travis is the last person to sit down, in the only remaining chair—the one directly across the table from me. Of course. But that's not a problem—it's totally possible for me to spend this entire meal not looking forward, right? I turn to my left to address Stohler, but she's already rising from her chair and saying, "I'm going to the ladies' room. If the waiter comes by, get me a glass of wine?"

I nod, and she disappears down the hall leading to the restrooms. She's been gone for approximately three seconds before Nate turns to me and says, "She seems nice."

I snort. "Who, Stohls? Yeah, let's see if you still think that once you've had a real conversation with her."

She's a mega-bitch." It's my absolute favorite thing about her. When our waitress—a pretty, college-aged girl who thankfully speaks English—comes by to extend the management's birthday wishes to Nate and take our drink orders a few minutes later, I request a water for myself, then gesture to Stohler's empty seat and say, "The girl who's sitting here will be right back, but she asked me to order for her. So, can I get a glass of chianti for her?"

"I'll need to see her ID before I can serve her. And even if it's for her, I can't put the order in if it's being placed by someone under twenty-one," the waitress says, somewhat apologetically. Without bothering to consider whether or not she'll be pissed at me for going through her things, I dig Stohler's license out of her purse and pass it to the waitress. While she's checking the birth date, I pull out my own wallet and hand over my fake ID. Both pass inspection, though the waitress says, "Twenty-two's a little old to be going to a sweet sixteen party, isn't it?"

I smile blandly, jerk my head towards Travis, and say, "They're my stepbrother's friends."

I haven't technically lied; he is my stepbrother, and they are his friends. Even the fake license was passed over without comment—I never said it was real. Only once the waitress has taken the rest of the orders and headed back to the kitchen do I realize that the rest of the people in my group are blinking over at me warily. Christine is the first to say, "I mean, I *want* to make a comment about the fact that you just whipped out a fake ID, but I can't even pretend to be surprised that you have one."

"I have two, actually," I say, grinning. "They both say I'm twenty-two, but one is an Ohio license that I used whenever I was in New York, and the other is a New York license that I used whenever I was in Ohio. That way, the person checking it is already going to be unfamiliar with it, so any imperfections won't be noticeable."

Stohler finally returns to her seat at the head of the table. On her other side, Travis says, "I didn't put that much thought into mine, honestly. Pretty sure it's from like, Oklahoma, or something."

"You have a fake ID?" Joss says, turning to blink at him. I'm staring down the table, making somewhat awkwardly prolonged eye contact with John so that I won't have to look at my ex-boyfriend.

"Yeah," Travis says. There's a beat, and I can tell he's trying to figure out how he can backpedal enough to keep his squeaky-clean, honor-student image intact, even though he's just admitted to something that's definitely illegal. "I mean, I don't use it to buy drinks, or whatever. I've only used it twice, once to get into a concert at an eighteen-plus venue and once to get my tattoo."

"You have a *tattoo*?" Joss says, voice slightly sharper. I catch my lip ring between my teeth to restrain a smile; I'm not sure exactly how much deeper Travis is planning to dig this hole, but I'm pretty excited to find out. Almost as excited as I am to see the supremely pissed-off look on Joss' face when she realizes what the tattoo is.

"Um... no?" Travis tries, and I snort. Even without looking at him, I know he's blushing. He amends, "Okay, yes, I do. But it's really small, so it's not..."

His eyes are burning into my skin, like he expects me to bail him out. What a goddamn stupid expectation. Even if I were willing to address him right now, it probably wouldn't be to make this easier on him. But his staring attracts the attention of the others; Nate nudges me with his elbow and says, "What's his tattoo?"

In the two seconds it takes for him to ask the question, my brain and body switch into default conversational avoidance mode. I lean back slightly in my seat so that I can drape my arm across the back of his chair, just barely touching his shoulders. It's enough contact to draw his eyes away from my face, which is a good start. My fingertips are tracing the seam between the body of his shirt and the sleeve. I say, "So, now that you're officially sixteen, when are you getting your driver's license?"

It's the perfect question to ask—I see a few of the other people at the table look a little abashed for not paying more attention to Nate, especially considering we're here to celebrate his birthday. He makes a face and says, "Ugh, I have no idea. I need to get my permit first, and go through driver's ed, and stuff like that."

"What, seriously? That's stupid. You can get your learner's permit at fifteen and a half in Ohio. I got my license a few weeks after my birthday, and even *that* delay was just because I was at boarding school in New York until spring break," I say, making a face back at him.

That's a lie. I didn't get my license until summer—my broken ribs were still healing while I was home during spring break, which made using a seatbelt too uncomfortable for me to sit the exam. Besides, I'd begged my parents to let me put it off until after my surgery so that my nose wouldn't be crooked in the picture. But those details are mine, and they're private. They don't matter anyway; the comment prompts John to launch into a charming little anecdote about getting his own license the year before, which Christine follows up with a story about her older sister crashing the student driver vehicle on her first day of driver's ed.

By the time our drinks arrive and we place the order for a few pizzas for everyone to share, Travis' tattoo and the fake IDs are completely forgotten. At seven thirty, one of the managers of the restaurant steps out onto the tiny stage that's set up in the corner. He turns on an ancient microphone—it screams out a protest that causes everyone to cover their ears—and announces, "Welcome to Karaoke Friday! Anyone who wants to sing can come right up and add their name to the list. If there's no one ahead of you, just go ahead and start singing your heart out."

He has barely had time to vacate the stage before Miranda, Christine, and Joss are scurrying up onto the stage to join together in performing a breathy, Marilyn Monroe-esque "Happy Birthday" for Nate. He blushes but cheers for them anyway, and I find myself smiling more than I thought I would. Once they've finished, Christine remains on the stage to launch into a Katy Perry number that, with lyrics like *yeah we danced on tabletops and we took too many shots*, mostly just sounds like my boarding school experience. She kills it, though, and by the time she hops off the stage, everyone at our table is grinning.

"Hey, Stohler," I say, shoving the book of song options at my friend. "Wanna do a duet with me on 'Barbie Girl'?"

Riley snorts, but Stohler takes a sip of her wine and says, "Sure, but only if I get to sing the guy part."

"You're a leggy blond wearing five-inch stilettos and a minidress, and I'm a dude with a lip ring and the upper body strength to bench-press a high school freshman. Of course you're going to sing the guy part," I say. What's the point of making awful, hilarious song choices if you don't load them down with as much self-deprecating irony as possible?

There's no one else ahead of us, so we both head up to the little stage; Stohler brings her wine glass. I'm grinning like an idiot from the second she leers at me and says, "*Hiya, Barbie.*"

"*Hi, Ken!*" I chirp back, and there's a loud whoop from the back of the room, possibly from Riley.

"*You wanna go for a ride?*"

"*Sure, Ken!*"

"*Jump in!*"

It only gets better from there. We spend the next three minutes prancing around the tiny stage, singing back and forth at each other, dancing around, hanging off each other. When I trill that she *canundress me everywhere*, she yanks up the front of my shirt, exposing my admittedly sick abs; Annabelle catcalls, and Nate looks like he's going to have a panic attack. By the time the song ends, I've got one of her legs

hiked up around my waist, and she's smacking my ass in time to the words, "*Come on, Barbie, let's go party.*" Half the drama club looks scandalized, but the other half looks amused, and I'm having a blast, so who gives a shit?

We return to our seats just as the pizzas are arriving. I manage to eat half a slice before Stohler, determined not to go more than ten minutes at a time without harassing me, says, "So, I'm really hoping that that was you *joking* and mocking the song, and that's not how high-pitched your voice usually is. Can you really sing, or have you just been making that up for attention?"

I grin at her. "I can really sing, but I mostly bring it up for attention."

"Haven't you heard him yet?" Nate leans around me to ask. Stohler shakes her head. "You must not have known each other for that long, Garen never stops singing. It's kind of unbearable." I reach under the table and pinch his thigh. He jolts, almost upending his water glass, and I shoot him a smirk. He flushes dark red and continues, "How did you two meet?"

"He bought me through one of those mail-order bride services," Stohler says, shrugging.

"Dad was wicked pissed I didn't get a prenup, but things are going well so far," I agree. "She mostly spends her days doing the usual wife stuff. You know, running up my credit card bills, acting as my arm-candy at all of the country club cocktail parties—"

"—making passive-aggressive comments about his inability to live up to his father's legacy—"

"—swallowing—"

"—pretending not to notice when he ogles Lorenzo, our pool boy—"

"—sleeping with my best friend from boarding school whenever I'm out of town on business—"

"—having weekly brunches with his mother, where I mainline mimosas to distract myself as she not-so-subtly wonders what happened to that nice Jewish girl he was dating a few years back."

I look at Stohler. "That reminds me. She says you haven't been returning her calls."

"I'll return her calls when she stops drunk-dialing me at four in the morning to ask when I'm going to give her a grandchild. I'm twenty-two years old and a size zero. I'm not going to ruin my figure and my life just so she can parade Garen Junior around in a seersucker onesie," she says, and I kick her hard in the shin. Travis, who had been smiling at the exchange of barbs, goes still. Joss pales, like she can't stop herself from picturing what her body will look like once she's ballooned up at nine months.

Quickly, I turn to the rest of the group, force a smile, and say, "We met at a nightclub in New Haven a month or so ago."

"I didn't realize you could still go to clubs. You know, without using," Joss says, and for once, I don't think she's actually trying to be an ass.

I do my best to return the favor and say simply, "I can handle going to bars and clubs and stuff—places that serve booze or where people are doing drugs—but only if I'm in the right frame of mind for it. If I'm dealing with a shitty day, or I'm already feeling tempted, it doesn't work out that well." And right now, looking around at this group of people who don't seem like they're trying to judge me as much as I expect them to, I'm not ashamed of what I've been through. I incline my head slightly towards Stohler and admit, "We met the night I relapsed in September. She realized how fucked up I was, and she helped me. We've been friends ever since."

"Actually, I just realized he was a little rich kid from the suburbs and was hoping I could hold him for

ransom, but it turns out his parents didn't want him back," Stohler says, avoiding my eyes. Nothing in the world makes her as uncomfortable as someone showing genuine affection for her. That's probably half the reason I do it—because seeing her not know how to accept a hug or say *you're my friend, too* is kind of hilarious, in a sad, emotionally stunted way.

To make up for tormenting her with two seconds of friendship, I reach over and tug on a lock of her hair. "The faster I get up there and sing, the faster I can get back here and you can tell me how amazing I am. So, got any requests?"

"I want you to do whatever your best karaoke song is," she says, "because if you don't impress me, I'm bringing you to work with me and selling you to the first man who thinks you're pretty enough to buy."

The problem is, my go-to karaoke song—the one I can really rock out on—is sort of... filthy. It's full of drinking and using and fucking and no shortage of curse words, and I'm just not sure that that'll go over well with this group. But it's not like I can go up and sing a love song or something and not have everyone here know exactly who I'm singing to. So I shoot her a wide smile and say, in a sing-song tone, "You asked for it," before jogging up to the little stage.

It actually takes me a few seconds to remember the name of the song I want, and even longer to talk the karaoke DJ through finding it on the machine. But eventually, he gestures me towards the microphone, and I scuff over to it, grinning around at whoever's in the restaurant as I say, "Hi. I'm Garen, and I'll be singing 'Do It Again! You're Not Making Me Want to Touch You!' by You, Me, and Everyone We Know. So, here it goes."

The thing I like about this song is that it starts soft, with a little bit of a swinging feel, and then the third verse is all screaming excitement, and by the time I get to the chorus, I get to sing it like I mean. It's all raunchy lyrics, and dragging my fingers through my spiked hair, and tossing bedroom eyes at Nate just for the hell of it, and laughing because it's *fun*. I sometimes forget how much I love to perform like this.

*But at least I won't be out alone, I'm with my uncle and his mother
And the rest of my family's history is with me, shouting, "HAVE ANOTHER!"
And now I'm taking all the liberties I was too scared to before
I've accepted that we're just chemicals, now bend over and touch the floor*

I unhook the mic from the stand, dart off the stage and throw myself back towards the table, walking my fingers up Joss' arm as I sing, "*Plan A has got a boyfriend, but she melts to my touch--*" Joss shrugs away from me, but I'm already moving to curl an arm over Miranda's shoulders, "*--Plan B has got a crush as much as she's got a lust—*" I move on and run my fingers through Stohler's hair, using a half-second breath pause to press a hard kiss to her jaw halfway through the rest of the verse, "*--Plan C, well, God forgive me, she, she just lives to fuck. I'll just act like I'm not in control.*"

Stohler gives my bicep an exaggerated squeeze, but I'm already bolting back to the stage for the next verse. "*Well, I'm feeling reckless, and I feel the need to stress this, I'm stepping out. And I'll take this, drink this, do this, smoke this, fuck you while we're somebody else.*"

I make my way through another few rounds of a chorus, and by the time the song is finished, the rest of the patrons are clapping, and my friends are catcalling, and I'm buzzing. My blood is running hotter under my skin, and I can't stop myself from grinning as I fling myself back into my chair. Fuck, I wish I could spend the rest of my life feeling the way I feel when I sing.

Stohler prods me in the ribs. "I know I said that selling you would be punishment for singing poorly, but I think I'm going to have to do it anyway. There have got to be a few old perverts out there who would love to own a singing nympho."

"That's what I keep telling my dad every time he starts demanding that I plan for my future. But then he just bitches about how *you can't just sing your way out of all your problems, Garen, and in the real world,*

no one cares that you can deepthroat—

“Um, has he *been* in the real world? Because that was literally a question on my job application,” Stohler says.

“Where the hell do you work?” Miranda asks, alarmed, at the same moment that John says, perhaps a little too enthusiastically, “What was your answer?”

To Miranda, Stohler says, “Hot Mess, on Columbus.” To John, she cocks her head to the side, gives him a brief once-over and says, “And why don’t you come by the club sometime after nine tonight and find out?”

I raise my water glass to my lips and, before taking a sip, pause long enough to mutter, “Rein it in, Stohls, he’s in high school.”

“What, your boyfriend’s the only one who gets to troll the Lakewood High School drama club for seniors to touch?” she says, inspecting her nails.

“Uh, last I checked, I was only nine weeks younger than my *not*-boyfriend—”

“I-I’m sorry, I’m not trying to like, harp on this or whatever,” Miranda interjects, and Stohler and I both turn to look at her. She looks a little uncertain. “I just... I don’t know what ‘Hot Mess’ is. I don’t really get what you do.”

Stohler fixes her with a measured stare, and Miranda shifts uncomfortably. I don’t blame her—Stohls has this way of looking at people that makes it seem like she’s capable of seeing inside their head and reading all their secret thoughts. Finally, she says in a flat voice, “Hot Mess is a strip club. And I think that makes it fairly obvious what I do.”

No one says anything for a moment. And then, obviously addressing me even though her eyes are on the table, Joss says quietly, “I can’t believe you brought a fucking stripper to hang out with us.”

I want to flip the fucking table. I can’t believe she has the nerve to judge Stohler just for doing things that she doesn’t have enough life experience to understand. It’s the same bullshit they pulled on me when they first met me, passing judgment on my addiction without any of them ever stopping to ask me about it. I’m opening my mouth to tell them all to go fuck themselves—especially Joss—but before I can say anything, Travis turns to his girlfriend and says, speaking for the first time in almost an hour, “Who Garen hangs out with is kind of none of your business, Joss.” I get the feeling he’s really not just talking about this dinner. “Neither is what Stohler does for a living. She’s been cool to everyone all night, and then you guys started grilling her. Don’t turn into a bunch of assholes just because you didn’t like the answers she gave to questions she never intended to have you ask.”

Stohler turns her eyes to me, but jerks her head towards Travis. “Is this him?” Have I really gone an entire night without bothering to tell her that she’s sitting less than a foot away from the boy who’s the reason for everything good and bad in my life? I nod. She echoes the gesture. “I get it.”

I knew she would.

Even if I wanted to jump to her defense as well, I wouldn’t have to; Stohler can take care of herself. She jerks her chin towards Annabelle and says, “You’re the choreographer, aren’t you?”

“Who, me?” Annabelle says, jumping. “Y-Yeah, I am.”

Stohler nods slowly. “I can tell. Dancer’s build, and all that.” She cocks her head to the side. “Is that what you’re going to school for? Dance?” Annabelle nods. “Yeah, well, that was my major. I went to Tisch. I had great internships, a bunch of dance companies were interested in me, and then I graduated. And let

me tell you something: finding a job as a legitimate, professional dancer? Not exactly a cakewalk. That's true for all artists. Dancers, musicians, actors. Choreographer Girl, you might want to invest in a pair of six inch heels, because odds are real fucking good that you'll end up using your dancing talents in the exact same way I'm using mine now. This kid—" She sweeps a hand in my general direction, and I steel myself for whatever insult I know she's going to toss off to make her point, "—is talented as fuck, but he could still end up as a wedding singer, for all I know. And you—" Her eyes roll to lock onto Joss, who glares at her. Stohler lets out a soft breath of a laugh. "What do you want to be, sweetheart? Do you want to be a little singer, too? Do you want to be an actress?"

Joss says nothing. Under the table, I curl my hands into fists tight enough that my fingernails dig half-moons into my palms.

"Good luck with that," Stohler says, leaning forward ever so slightly, "because you've got 'shotgun wedding' and 'stay-at-home mom' written all over you. And I can't wait to see how well that holier-than-thou attitude suits you when you're my age, have multiple children and no college education, and are stuck in a *viciously* unhappy marriage, possibly with a guy who'll spend the rest of his life checking out the waiter during your weekly date night at Chili's, and wishing he'd worn a condom."

Both Travis and Joss look like they're going to be violently ill, and I know that if any of the other people look at them, they're going to realize that Stohler isn't speaking hypothetically. To cover for their reactions, to draw everyone's eyes away from them, I summon up every bit of lying strength I have and make myself burst out laughing. It works—the rest of the people at the table look to me, and it must be convincing, because no one seems to look shocked or appalled, except for Miranda, who is still looking *incredibly* uncomfortable. I clear my throat, raise a hand in surrender, like I'm trying to smother my amusement, even though nothing has ever been less funny. I say quickly, "Sorry, sorry. Don't mind me."

From the other side of the table, Riley thankfully attempts to diffuse the tension by interjecting, "Look, I don't care where you work. If I could get people to pay me to take my clothes off, I'd probably do it, too."

"I wasn't trying to offend you," Miranda adds, looking genuinely upset at the idea of having hurt Stohler's feelings—if Stohler even has feelings. "I was just surprised, and everything came out without me really thinking about how it would sound. I'm sorry. We didn't mean anything by it."

"This one did," Stohler says, flicking her fingers dismissively in Joss' direction, "but I accept *your* apology." She grabs her purse and stands up, turning her eyes on me. "I should really get going. It's almost eight thirty, and I have to be in at nine."

I stand up and pull my wallet from my back pocket. The food here isn't expensive—the three pizzas and all the drinks probably still don't top eighty bucks, but I don't know if they're planning to get dessert once we leave. I pluck two fifties from my wallet, toss them onto the table and say, "Dinner's on me. I'll see you guys on Monday." And then, because *why is no one acknowledging him except for me*, I duck down and press a kiss to Nate's cheek, barely half an inch from the corner of his mouth. "Happy birthday, Nate."

The instant Stohler and I have made our way outside, settled into my car, and I've pulled out onto the road to bring her to work, she says, "Sorry. For bitching out your friends, or whatever."

"It's okay," I say. "They deserved it."

We drive in silence. I chance a glance at her ever few minutes, but she alternates between staring out the window and blinking down at her hands. She only speaks when it's time to tell me to turn into the parking lot of the club where she works. Hot Mess is a complete hole in the wall; it's surprisingly large, for a strip club, but there are no windows anywhere on it. The plain brick front is painted black, and the name of the club is spelled out in glowing neon pink script on top of the building. By the street, there's a glowing silhouette of a busty woman on a pole; next to the silhouette, a real woman is smoking a cigarette and shivering. Her ankle-length coat is gaping open to reveal purple lingerie that stands out like a bruise

against her pale skin.

For a long moment, Stohler stares at the lighted silhouette. Finally, she turns to me and says, "I really fucking hated high school, you know."

I let my head fall back against the head rest. "Yeah. I hate it, too."

I want to apologize for bringing her along tonight. I want her to know that I had no idea my friends would be so weird about her job, or that they'd even find out about it. I can tell she wants to apologize again, too, for arguing with my friends, for almost revealing what I told her about Travis and Joss. But even if she did apologize, I wouldn't be able to tell her I forgive her, because there's nothing to forgive. I can't expect her to apologize for her job any more than other people should expect me to apologize for being in recovery.

Eventually, the silence is too much. She climbs out of the car without another word and goes inside. I pull back out onto the road and use the GPS on my phone to navigate my way to Ben's apartment. It's not a long drive—by quarter after nine, I'm pulling into the lot behind his building and parking in the first free space I can find. We hadn't planned a specific time for me to get here, so I lock my car and spend the next twenty minutes sitting on the hood of my car and chain-smoking. When I've finished the pack, I head inside, press the intercom button and wait. A few seconds later, the speaker crackles out, "Hello?"

"s me, babe," I say. "Wanna let me up?"

The door unlatches with a loud click, and I essentially bolt up the stairs. The apartment door is unlocked, but Ben's red Chucks and Alex's plain white tennis shoes are already next to the door, so they must both be home. I throw the deadbolt and head down the hall to Ben's room. He's sitting in his desk chair and thumbing through a paperback; he's wearing sweatpants, a plain white t-shirt, and his glasses, and his face is unusually scruffy, like he hasn't bothered to shave today, maybe yesterday either. He looks up at me with a small smile and says, "How was dinner?"

He's such a decent guy. He's cute. He's sweet. Why couldn't it have been him? Why couldn't I have just made everything easier on everyone and fallen in love with him, instead of Travis? I curl a hand around his elbow and pull him to his feet, nudging him back towards the bed. "Dinner was stupid. All I want to taste is you."

"Your single-minded dedication to achieving orgasm never ceases to amaze me," Ben says, though he strips off his t-shirt and falls back onto the mattress. I crawl up onto the bed after him and kiss him. We end up making out for ages, until our lips are almost bruised and we're both painfully hard and rutting up against each other. And the whole time, I'm waiting. I'm waiting for the moment when I'll start to really feel something for him. I'm waiting for the moment when he stops being one of my best friends and starts being someone I could want to spend the rest of my life with. I'm waiting for the sparks I felt every time Travis so much as brushed his fingertips across my arm.

They don't come.

I break away to mouth across his neck and say, "Tell me what you want me to do to you." Tonight, I don't think I can handle regular sex—sweet kisses, soft touches, simple anything. I can't deal with it right now. I need something hard and fast and maybe a little bit twisted; Ben can always be counted on to come up with some pretty sick shit, so for now, it makes the most sense to just defer to him.

"Nothing, I—do whatever you want to do to me. That's what I want," Ben replies, but his words come hesitantly, which can really only mean that he has something he's craving, but he doesn't know how to ask for it. God, it must be pretty fucked up, if after everything we've done, he's still nervous about saying it.

I nuzzle his scratchy, unshaven cheek with mine and say, "Come on, babe. Tell me. I'll do anything you

want.”

Except let you top me. Or hit me. Or make me bleed. Fuck, I should probably be setting these limits out loud, shouldn't I? But then Ben looks away and says, all in one rushed breath, “Restraint. I don't care if you tie me up, or just pin me down, and I'm not asking for anything like—I'm not asking for any sort of roleplay, or whatever. It's not like I want to pretend you're ra—” I suck in a breath, and he goes immediately still for a second. Only when I let out my breath does he continue in hushed tones, “I don't want it to be like that, okay? But I've just been thinking about it lately. Fantasizing, I suppose, about you restraining me somehow, making me feel like I can't move, fucking me from behind. That's what I want. Please tell me if that's not okay, or if any part of that makes you uncomfortable, and if that's the case, then we won't do it. Because if you're not able to enjoy it, I'm not going to be able to enjoy it, and the last thing I want is to make you feel pressured, or upset, or unsafe. Please tell me.”

The nervousness makes sense now; after all, who wouldn't balk at least a little at the prospect of asking someone who's been through *that* to hold them down and fuck them mercilessly? But he's not asking me to take that. He's not asking for me to feel what I felt when Dave used to hold me down, and he's not asking for us to play games, so I'll know if this goes too far. Still, I say, “Has anyone ever tied you up before?”

He hesitates, then shakes his head. “No. This would be my first time.”

I fucking *love* being first. First kiss, first fuck, first bondage, apparently. My dick gives an interested twitch against his thigh, and he must feel it, because he rolls his eyes. I smirk at him and roll off of him, unbuckling my belt and threading it out of my beltloops. “I need you to be vocal with me, alright? I know sometimes you get weird about asking for what you want—I'm talking about specifics, not just *yes, Garen, fuck me harder*—I need to know that if you're uncomfortable or in pain, you're going to say no so that I know I need to stop.”

“Likewise,” he says, watching the progress of my belt. “Seriously, you don't need to pretend to be into this just because—”

I grip his waist and roll him so that he is facedown on the bed, then settle myself on the backs of his thighs. I curve my fingers into little hooks and dig them ever so slightly into the tops of his shoulderblades, but don't move them yet. His back is tight and still with the anticipation of being scratched, and I can tell it's taking a lot of effort for him to stop himself from ordering me to just fucking do it already. Only when he begins to shift restlessly beneath me do I lean down to put my lips against his ear and say softly, “I'm not just pretending to be into this.”

I claw both hands down until my fingertips are resting in the space where the small of his back meets the curve of his ass. There are ten parallel lines of violently reddened skin running down the length of his back, and he whimpers, grinding his cock down onto the mattress and reaching for me. I catch his wrists and bend his arms so that they're behind his back, hands gripping opposite elbows, then carefully wind my belt around them so that his forearms are pinned together. I move to buckle the belt, but he shakes his head and whispers, “Tighter, please.” I move it a notch tighter, then buckle it into place after he nods.

It's the last instruction he gives me for the rest of the night. After that, he lets me leisurely remove the rest of our clothing, then obediently spreads his legs when I retrieve the lube and condoms from his nightstand. I spend probably close to half an hour fingering him—working him up, stretching him open, getting him to the point where he's thrashing and pleading and desperate, and then backing off completely. I want this to last; I need this to last. Finally, when the wait is getting to be too much for either of us, I use my knees to nudge his legs further open, roll the condom on, and slam into him in one swift motion. He immediately pushes up to meet my thrusts, but I press his forearms more securely to his back until he's unable to do anything but take whatever I'm willing to give him. I'm being fucking *vicious* with him, and he's loving it.

Maybe that's the problem.

All the fantasies I had about working things out with Travis, all the dreams I had of our future together... they were pointless and naive. This—pinning someone down, tying someone up, fucking someone until he's bruised and begging—is what I'm best at. I'm in my element here, in someone else's bed and half-soaked in someone else's sweat. This isn't something that Travis McCall can build a future on.

What's it like when he's with Joss? Do they do it at her place or his—the same house where he lost his virginity to me? Do they experiment, is there kink, do they switch up what position they do it in? Is it rough and desperate and sometimes painful, like it is with me and Ben? Or is it sweet and playful and perfect, like it was with me and Travis? How does he touch her? How does he feel when she touches him? Will he love her after the baby comes, after they've got that bond for their rest of their lives? Does he love her now? Does he *tell* her he loves her, when he's inside of her?

Ben sighs as I roll my hips into him. I drop my forehead to the back of his neck and contemplate telling him, *I love you*. It's not really true, but it's not really a lie, either. I could say it, and he could say it back, and maybe it could be as simple as that. We'd go from being not-boyfriends to being real boyfriends, and sure, neither of us would feel for each other what we both felt for Travis, but maybe we could someday. Maybe eventually, we could find it in us to be together forever, maybe we could be a family, just like Travis and Joss and that baby are going to be.

I try to force the words out, I *try*, but what I end up saying is, "Love the way you take it."

"Your cock feels so fucking good," he whispers. I lean just far enough away from him to slip one hand between us so that I can rake my fingernails down his back. He lets out a soft cry and arches into my touch.

Maybe I can work my way up to it. Start smaller, start with the things that don't feel like lies. I lick a stripe up the side of his neck; he keens, and I shift to whisper into his ear, "You look so hot like this. Spread out for me, hard and aching for it." That's true, that's just a fact; that's easy to say. I drag my teeth over his earlobe. "You're so fucking sexy, babe. S-So—" I press a hard kiss to the edge of his jaw, and he twists his head just far enough to the side that our eyes lock. That's enough to prompt a hesitation, but I have to at least try to do this. If Travis is moving on, if he's going to have his little *relationship* and his little *family* and his little *baby*, I need to try to do the same. I need to try to move on, and there's not a single person on this planet who I would rather do that with than Ben. I reach up to touch his jaw with the very tips of my fingers and force myself to continue in a hoarse breath, "So unbelievably gorgeous." He's tightening around me, beneath me, and I'm not sure if it's because he realizes what I'm doing, or because he's approaching orgasm, or both. My thrusts are slower now, steady but shallow, and I have to keep talking. I readjust slightly so that I can twist my head enough to touch our foreheads together even as I continue to fuck into him. My neck is cramping up, but it's important to make this meaningful, right? It's important to make it romantic, isn't it? I need to look him in the eyes. I need to make myself *talk*. "Y-Your body, your face, your eyes... god, your eyes are beautiful. All—All of you, everything, your mind and your heart, everything about you is beautiful. You're so fucking perfect." *Say it, you fucking idiot. Say it. What's wrong with you? Say it, say it, say it.* "I love—"

He surges up into a kiss, swallowing my words, and bucks against me, alternately fucking himself back onto my dick and grinding forward against the mattress. He's clenching tight around me, and he hasn't stopped kissing me, and it's not long before I'm shifting away from him and shoving his legs together again, bracing my knees outside his thighs and flattening my palms against his shoulderblades, arms locked straight as my hips piston hard down into him. He's wound up so tight beneath me, straining against the belt on his arms and gasping into the pillow, and then he's going completely silent and coming, cock still untouched except for the friction of the mattress. It only takes a few more thrusts before I fall apart completely; his hands, still strapped behind his back, brush gently over my waist, steadying my still-jerking body. He makes no complaint when I collapse on top of him, but that's probably because he's still trying to catch his breath.

As soon as I can move, I pull out and dispose of the condom, returning as quickly as possible so that I

can unbuckle the belt and toss it aside. Ben winces a little and rolls his shoulders to release some of the tension that must have gathered there in all the time he's been restrained; I kneel next to him and do my best to massage some feeling back into his muscles, then into the angry red marks left by the belt. It's not like I'm hardcore into BDSM, it's not like I'm really part of the scene, but I know that things like aftercare are important, so I'm not about to just roll over and pass out cold, even though that's sort of what my body wants to do. Besides, if I just go straight to sleep, I won't have a chance to try to make myself say the whole phrase, and I don't think I'll be able to convince myself to say it in the light of day. When Ben finally rolls onto his back, I lie down next to him and kiss his forehead. "You alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," he says, and he seems to really mean it.

"Good," I murmur, kissing his lips this time.

He lets me, but when I pull away, he says, "I can tell what you're doing, you know." I don't reply. "I know what you were going to say."

"You should have let me say it," I say. He shrugs. I scowl across the room, fixing my eyes on the door, and before he can stop me with a kiss again, I say, "I love you, Ben. I-I'm in love with you, and I want to be with you for real. I want you to be my boyfriend."

"Garen, look at me," he says, and I'm not really planning to do any such thing, but he cups my jaw in his hand and forces me to face him. I reluctantly meet his gaze. His thumb strokes across my cheekbone, and he says, too calmly, "You're one of my best friends, and what we do together is fantastic. It's honestly the best sex I've ever had in my life. I love you—" I try not to start hyperventilating, "—but I'm not in love with you."

I allow myself to laugh as I shrug away from his hand. "God, what a line."

"It's not a line, it's how I feel. And it's how you feel, too," he says. "I want to keep doing this with you, but not if you're going to keep trying to turn this into something it isn't. Not if you're going to try to force yourself to fall in love with me just so you can convince yourself you're not in love with someone else anymore. What we have is good as it is, okay? You're a really amazing not-boyfriend."

Maybe I could be an even better real boyfriend, if you'd let me. If I'd let myself. I can't say that, though, not without ruining everything. So I settle for shrugging and hooking an arm around his waist to drag him closer. "Okay. Things are good are they are, you're right. I'll stop." For a guy who claims not to want to be my boyfriend, he sinks easily into my embrace. I want to apologize, but 'sorry' seems a little cheap. Instead, I say in a small voice, "If it were up to me... if I could be in love with anyone, I'd be in love with you. I know I'm not, and you're not, but if I had a choice, I'd choose to be in love with you."

Ben smiles, but it doesn't reach his eyes. "No. If it were up to you, you'd still be in love with Travis. He'd just love you back."

Chapter Twelve

“Some couples divorce because of a misunderstanding; others, because they understand each other too well.” –Evan Esar

36 days sober

Wednesday comes more quickly than I expect it to, and with it, the meeting with the divorce lawyers. One minute, I'm hanging out with Stohler, then I'm sitting in class, then I'm trudging down the hall to rehearsal, and then suddenly, I'm wearing a suit and sitting on the edge of a chair outside the main conference room in my mom's office building. The suit is her idea, of course; she'd shoved a garment bag into my hands the second I stepped off the train at Grand Central that afternoon. Apparently, my standard attire of jeans, boots, and a leather jacket is just as shameful for a meeting as it was for the nice dinner she took me to last month. I kind of hate the suit, or at least, I hate the jacket. It's made of some too-thin material that had made the lapel bulge when I'd tried to stash my cigarettes in the inside pocket. I'd had no choice but to toss the half-full pack before coming inside, and now, all I want is a fucking smoke. I settle for sending a disgruntled text to Jamie. *this stupid meeting better not take too long, i'm already bored & it hasn't even started.*

It's a few minutes before he replies, *Have you and the she-bitch started bickering yet?*

she's not even here, am still waiting in the hall for her to show up, I type. btw, if you don't already have plans tonight, wanna get dinner after I'm done here?

Come over instead. I've been on this weird cooking binge ever since your travel-size sex slave tried to one-up me in front of Alexander by making those pancakes. I want to get back at him by cooking his boyfriend a fantastic meal and then convincing you to fuck me on my kitchen table. And possibly sending pictures of it to him. There's a beat, then another text arrives. *It's meaning the fucking, not the meal.* A few seconds, then a third text. *Maybe the meal, too.*

Before I have time to respond, a voice from halfway down the hall calls out, “Hey, Garen. Miss me?”

My face splits into a smile when I look up and find myself staring at Bree McCall. College has been good to her; her once-long blond hair has been chopped off into a pixie cut that makes her eyes look bigger and her cheekbones look razor-sharp. She's wearing a dark blue dress and a pair of gray heels that are high enough to look painful, but not high enough to stop her from trotting down the hall and flinging her arms around my neck the moment I've stood up. I hug her tightly and murmur, “You look fucking beautiful, Bridget.”

“Not so bad yourself, Anderson. Except for this,” she says, making a face and flicking my lip ring with the tip of her finger.

I laugh. “It looks dumb as shit because of the suit, but I haven't had it long enough to be able to take it out without having to worry about it healing up.”

“You say that like it would be a bad thing,” she says, moving to sit down. “So, how have you been? How's school? Are you seeing anyone?”

“Fine, boring, and yes, in that order,” I say, and she raises her eyebrows at my final answer. It's hard to miss the way her attention flickers back over her shoulder, to where her brother and mother are both lingering by the elevator twenty feet away. I shake my head once, a quick confirmation that I haven't actually started banging her brother again, like I had the last time I told her I was seeing someone. She looks... relieved, maybe, but also a little confused. In the interest of not continuing this awkward conversational train, I gesture to the conference room door. “We're all supposed to go in, now that you guys are here.”

She turns and calls, "Mom, Trav. This is the room."

Travis shoves his hands into the pockets of his dark blue trousers and edges past me into the conference room without saying a word or making eye contact. I do my best to school my face into a neutral expression, but Bree looks unconvinced, as does Evelyn. My stepmother's approach is slower, more purposeful; just outside the door, she shoots me the sort of look she might give something disgusting she's just stepped in.

I feel unimaginably small.

The moment her mother has cleared the door, Bree grabs my wrist to prevent me from following and quietly asks, "How have you really been?"

I swallow hard and try to force a smile, but it won't come. After a few too many seconds pass, I have to say, "Not that great. Kind of shitty, actually. I, um... did your brother tell you about what happened last month?" Her curious expression tells me no. I take a deep breath before I admit, "I had a pretty bad relapse in early September. I've been clean for over a month now, but it's still a hell of a lot harder than I thought it would be. And today—this fucking meeting isn't going to make it any easier. I hate the way your mom looks at me, and I hate that your brother and I can't talk to each other anymore, and—"

"Wait, why can't you talk to each other anymore?" Bree interrupts, frowning.

Fuck, of course Travis hasn't told his family about the agreement with Joss, about the pregnancy. His sister has no idea that she's going to have a niece or nephew in less than a year, his mom has no idea she'll be a grandmother right around the time her son graduates high school. My stomach is rolling, like the confession is rattling around inside of me, trying to get out, but I've kept quiet about it ever since last Friday, when I told Stohler. I haven't even told Jamie, or Ben. I can't fuck that up now. I shake my head and step into the conference room without answering.

There are six chairs at the conference table, three on each side. My mother is sitting at one end, opposite Evelyn's smarmy, balding lawyer. Evelyn herself is sitting next to her lawyer; I drop into the seat across from her, next to my mom. Travis takes a hesitant step towards the table, and his sister gives him a rough shove into the chair next to me. He scowls at her, and she smiles beatifically at him as she takes the remaining seat next to their mother.

There is a half-second of silence, and then I roll my eyes and rise slightly from my chair to extend my hand to the other lawyer. "We haven't met. Garen Anderson."

"Darryl Kimball," he says, accepting my handshake even though he seems vaguely surprised at the fact that I've actually got enough manners to introduce myself. I can just imagine all the horror stories Evelyn has told him about me. But the introduction is enough to break that instant of tension, and Kimball continues, "Well, now that we're all acquainted, let's talk about how this meeting is going to go. This is an informal interview—" I glare at my mother and wish once more that I could be wearing my own clothes for this *apparently informal* interview, "—so that we're all on the same page for the particulars of this situation. Everything that's said here will be recorded and may be referred back to in the future, if we can't reach a full agreement and need to bring this to court."

"Essentially, this is an opportunity for Mr. Kimball and I to hear a fresh perspective on the living situation that existed during the time that Mr. Anderson and Mrs. McCall were married," Mom says. "We're going to address each of you individually. If any of you is uncomfortable conducting your interview in the presence of the others, you can request that the room be cleared of everyone except for the two of us. We will both have a chance to ask you questions, but it's best if you all provide as much of your own testimony as possible. Any questions?"

Bree shakes her head. Travis shrugs. I don't move.

Kimball rubs his hands together, like a cartoon villain. "Excellent. Shall we start with the oldest, then?"

That's Bree by six months. I wait to see if we're going to be sent to wait in the hall, but she just sits up a little straighter and says, "Yes, sure."

Apparently Kimball has already gotten his share of interview time with her, because he gestures for my mom to go ahead. That's not too surprising—I doubt my mom will have many questions for me, considering she's been hearing my version of events for months now. She turns her attention to Bree and asks, "During the time you were living together, did you and William ever have any conflict? Any arguments, altercations, anything of that nature?"

Bree shakes her head. "No, Bill and I got along really well. He's a nice guy."

"Did you ever witness any conflict between him and your brother?" Mom presses.

"Um," Bree says, considering. "Sort of? I mean, when we first moved in, they didn't really talk much. Travis was kind of being a brat about the whole thing." Travis kicks her under the table, and she kicks him right back. They glare at each other, and I stifle a smile. "Anyway, the only argument I ever saw between them was, um... the day Garen left. Travis yelled at Bill, but that was it. Bill didn't even yell back. And things got better after that. I never saw them fight again."

In another universe, things could have been even better. If Dad hadn't married Evelyn, if I'd been able to bring Travis home as my boyfriend, they probably would have gotten along perfectly. He would have realized how good things were, how much better I was when I had Travis. Under the table, I ball my hands into fists tight enough to hurt.

"Did you ever witness any conflict between your mother and Garen?" Mom asks.

I can't help it; I burst out laughing. Mom shoots me a warning glance, and Evelyn glares daggers at me across the table. I clamp a hand over my mouth to try to stifle the sounds, but that mostly just results in me quietly snorting into my palm, like a total fucking moron. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see that a muscle in Travis' jaw is working as he tries to keep a straight face. I drop my hand and clear my throat, trying my hardest to be a real adult. I say, "So sorry about that. Didn't mean to interrupt. You were saying, Bridget?"

Travis turns sharply to face in the opposite direction, but his refusal to let us see his face does nothing to stop us from seeing the slight trembling of his shoulders as he tries to control his laughter. Bree shoots an exasperated look at each of us and mutters, "Honestly, you're both complete idiots. No wonder you're so perfect for each other."

That instantly sobers both of us up, and earns her another, harder kick from Travis.

Kimball coughs discreetly into his fist, and Mom says mildly, "You know, I did ask a question."

"Right, sorry," Bree says, reddening. "Um. Yes. Mom and Garen fought all the time, after he came back."

"About what?"

"Everything," Bree says with a faint laugh. She hesitates, shoots her mom an apologetic glance and says, "Mom, um... Mom used to say that Garen h-had molested Travis, and I think that caused a lot of tension between her and Bill. I heard them fighting a lot, but Garen never really got involved with that. He never denied it, he never talked about it, not after he came back from New York in April. All the arguments they had were about... I don't know. Stupid things? Mom would get mad when Garen would go out without telling her and Bill where he was going, or when he'd stay out late. She was so pissed when he got his piercings, too." She gestures to my face, and I sneak the tip of my tongue out to wiggle my lip ring at her. She rolls her eyes and says, "He had two then, and Mom told him he had to take them out, even though

he's eighteen. His dad didn't really care, but Mom did. She got mad about the tattoo, too. They had a huge blowout that night, but I didn't want to deal with it, so I went to go spend the night at my friend Molly's house. This is the first time I've seen them in the same room since then."

Mom, who has been taking periodic notes this whole time, sets her pen down and steeples her fingers together. "And what about when they weren't in the same room? What type of things did you mom say about Garen when he wasn't around, and what type of things did he say about her?"

Oh, Christ. Mom knows *exactly* what type of things I say about Evelyn when she's not around. Thankfully, I don't think Bree does—after I came back from New York, the things I said to her were pretty much limited to bullshit. *No, it doesn't bother me that Travis and Ben are together. Yeah, I'm totally sober right now. What, this black eye? I walked into a door, it doesn't even hurt.*

Bree's hesitation returns in full force, and after a few too many seconds, she says, "I think I'd like to clear the room after all. You know, if that's still okay?"

"Of course it's okay," Kimball reassures her. Travis is the first out of the room. I take my time, but mainly because I want to hear Evelyn's protests get denied. She huffs and scoffs and pouts like a kid, but eventually, we're both forced out into the hall. She spares me one disgusted look before storming off in the direct of the office's break room, presumably to make herself the cup of coffee my mom suggested. Travis is pacing the hallway; I return to my previously vacated chair, extract my iPod from my suit pocket and pop one of the earbuds in. It's the only refuge I have from this godawful silence, and I've got no idea how long Bree's going to take to say whatever it is she doesn't think I can handle hearing.

I manage to tolerate about forty-five seconds of Travis' pacing before I fling a leg out in front of him and try to trip him. He stays upright, but turns to shoot me a bewildered stare. I arch an eyebrow and incline my head to the seat next to me, offering up the other earbud to him. He casts a quick glance over his shoulder towards where his mom disappeared, but she's still missing. He sinks into the seat and accepts the earbud, and I cue up a song from some Canadian pop-punk band I know he listens to—I'd put some of their songs on the iPod I gave him for his last birthday, and I've heard him humming a few of their songs on occasion. The song has only been playing for one verse before he plucks the iPod from my hand and scrolls through the music until he has settled on another, slower, sadder song by the same band. I roll my eyes, but don't change it back.

Even with the music between us, the silence is still a little awkward. I wonder if I can get away with making polite conversation. What even counts as 'polite conversation' between people with our history? Should I ask about school, work, stage crew? Joss and the fucking *baby*? Even the idea of bringing up that topic makes me want to be violently, painfully ill, and I kind of get the impression he'd feel the same way.

Over our shared headphones, the singer is crooning out, *I know some things should just stay broken, I'm well aware this should remain unspoken*, and I can't help but agree. And that moment—halfway through the damn song—is when I realize that the song change was intentional, not just for the sake of being contrary and dicking around with my iPod. He's selected this song because of the lyrics, of what it's saying, and right now, when we're not speaking to each other, he's doing his best to communicate with me in the only language I really understand: music.

Against my better judgment, I sneak a glance at Travis' face. He's watching me, nervous eyes flitting all over my face, trying to pick up any sign that I've understood what he's trying to do. I don't know what to do, or how to let him know I understand, so I reach for his hand... and lose my nerve three-quarters of the way through. My fingers end up wound loosely around his wrist, which is arguably worse, because now my thumb is brushing shakily against the inside of his wrist, right over the tattoo of my initial. He sucks in a shuddering breath.

And we both swore we were done speaking to each other, we haven't spoken in five days now, but I think it's probably okay for me to give a little shrug and whisper along to the next line of lyrics, "*I don't want to*

see you happier with somebody else."

He opens his mouth to speak, but the conference room door swings open once more. Travis tears his hand away from mine, and I give a sharp yank to the cord of my headphones, pulling the buds from both our ears—and okay, ow, that was dumb and uncomfortable. He's still holding the iPod, but it quickly exchanges hands, and I shove it into my pocket before looking up at the door. Bree is staring down at us, unimpressed. "Where's Mom?"

"Down the hall," Travis says, gesturing.

"Can I go back inside now?" I ask.

She nods. "Yeah. It's your turn to be interviewed."

I stand up and pause outside the door just long enough to mutter, "You guys can come in, if you want. It's not like I'm going to say anything that you don't both already know. I don't really have secrets these days. But if one of you could hang out here until your mom gets back, just to make sure she doesn't think she's allowed to come in... that would be appreciated."

I trudge back into the room and sink into my previous seat. Travis enters after me and still sits down on my other side, even though there are two empty seats across the table. My hand is itching with the urge to reach over and lace my fingers with his under the table, or at least grip his wrist again, but I remain completely still.

Kimball smiles genially at me. "Alright, Garen. I don't have that many questions for you, to be frank. We all have a fairly good idea of your relationship with your stepmother—" I roll my eyes, "—so I think we can skip that. I have something I'd like you to take a look at, though."

"I'm sure I'll be absolutely thrilled to see whatever it is," I say tonelessly. The door cracks back open, and Bree slips inside, thankfully alone. She offers me a tight smile before returning to her seat across from me.

"Garen, these are copies of your credit card and bank statements from the past six months," Kimball says, sliding a stack of papers across the table. "Can you tell me how these card payments are made?"

I blink. It's definitely not what I was expecting him to ask about. "The cards are all in my name. I make the payments using the cash that my parents deposit into my account at the beginning of every month," I say. Part of me wants to ask how it's any of his business, but Mom hasn't protested, so I assume it makes sense in some roundabout legal way. Maybe because it's Dad's money—the money that's being contested in this divorce—that pays the bills. Whatever.

Kimball gestures to the papers. "Can you read through the yellow-highlighted sections and tell me what those transactions are?"

The top page of the statement is from April, when I'd been holed up at Patton with Jamie. Most of the transactions are for takeout places, putting gas in my car; at the bottom of that page, a liquor store transaction is highlighted in blue, but the douche across the table had only asked about yellow. I flip to the next page, and there's the first one—forty bucks, the day after I came back to Lakewood. Eighty bucks, the following Saturday. Another forty, the first day of May. There's a three week gap in all of the charges after that, and then they're back again in full force, forties and sixties and eighties every week or two, right up until the second week of June. And I remember exactly what each and every one was for.

I shove the papers back across the table. "They're cash withdrawals."

"Cash for what?" Kimball asks.

"How is he supposed to remember every cash purchase he's made in the past six months?" Mom demands.

"Mom, don't bother," I say. It's not like what I'm about to say will surprise anyone at this table. "I spent it on cocaine, okay? But I would wager that you already know that, or you wouldn't be bringing it up."

Kimball flips back to the first page and taps the liquor store charge. "And the blue-highlighted portions, what are they?"

"Well, let's see," I say in mock interest, paging through the documents. "Alcohol. Cigarettes. Alcohol. Alcohol. Ooh, a head shop, that's exciting. I'm pretty sure that was a glass pipe, which means that I was mistaken earlier, this next cash withdrawal was probably for pot, not coke. Anyway, alcohol again. Cigarettes. Alcohol." I drop the papers on the table. "You know something, Mr. Kimball? It looks like those blue-highlighted charges are mostly related to my questionable life choices."

"Close to two thousand dollars' worth of questionable life choices," Kimball confirms. "I just want to make sure we're very clear on something. All of the drugs, paraphernalia, and alcohol were purchased with your father's money, correct?"

It sounds so much worse when he says it like that. I sigh and rub the back of my neck. "Yeah. I bought it all with my dad's money."

"And was he aware of this?"

"Oh, totally," I say, nodding enthusiastically. "Whenever I needed it, I'd just be like, 'hey, Daddy, can I have three hundred bucks for an eight ball?' and he'd be like, 'sure, G, just make sure that shitsnack of a dealer you use doesn't cut it with Ritalin again.' That was a fucking biweekly conversation in the Anderson household."

"Garen," Bree says softly, and I slouch down in my chair, glowering at the table.

"No, okay? My dad didn't realize what I was doing with the money, and the second he figured out I had a problem, he emptied my account so I wouldn't be able to buy anything else," I snap. I haven't exactly made a secret about how bad things got for me last summer, so I don't feel bad about adding, "Except, you know, joke's on him, that just means I started fucking for cash. Pretty sure he's the only guy to ever accidentally turn his only child into a prostitute in a misguided attempt to help him." I can feel my mom and Travis both go rigid on either side of me. Their discomfort should probably rattle me more than it does, but at this point, I'm so used to saying the wrong thing that I can barely spare it a second thought. I focus my eyes on Kimball and say, "Any more questions for me?"

"Just two," he says. "What are your plans for the fall? School-wise, that is."

"Does it matter?" I ask. He merely shrugs. I drag a hand through my hair. "I'm still in the process of filling out my applications, so I've got no idea. There are five different schools I'm applying to, at my dad's request. Some are music programs, which require auditions in the winter. As of right now, I have no idea what I'll be doing next fall."

When I gesture for him to continue with his final question, he smiles and asks, "How long have you been sober?"

"Fuck you," I bite out. Next to me, Mom is clearly torn between telling me to calm down and telling Kimball to eat shit. Either way, she remains silent when I add, "Like, seriously, man? It's really shitty that you're trying to make it seem like my drug use is the reason Dad wanted a divorce, but we all know that's not true. I know what she said about me, okay? I know that she called me a kike and said she wished my ex had killed me years ago. They're getting a divorce because Bill Anderson is a good fucking father, and he didn't want to stay married to someone who could hate his son as thoroughly as Ev hates me. And, okay,

whatever—you want a fucking number? You want to quantify the progress I've made towards becoming a better man? Fine. I'm thirty-six days sober. And I wouldn't have made it through a single one of those days if I was still living in the same house as that vicious, soulless *bitch*. Feel free to put that in your notes."

Kimball sighs and turns to my mom. "Do you have any questions for your son?"

"No," she says flatly. "I'll go get Evelyn so that we can begin Travis' interview now."

Once Ev has been retrieved from the hall, Mom takes the lead on interviewing Travis and prompts, "Tell me about your initial relationship with your stepfather. When you first moved in together, was he welcoming? Hostile? Indifferent?"

"He was nice," Travis says, shrugging. "We got along fine, I guess, but we honestly didn't see much of each other. He was at work a lot, I was at work a lot, I focus on my schoolwork most of the time. We pretty much only saw each other at dinner, but when we did interact, he was cool."

"Is that how things remained, or did you become closer, more distant, what?" she presses.

He folds his hands together on the table and says, in a voice of forced neutrality, "Things got better with Bill at pretty much the same speed that things got worse with my mom." Evelyn gives him a sharp look, which I know he must feel, but he keeps his eyes on the table. "After I came out, Mom kind of had a hard time dealing with it, but Bill was already used to having a gay son. He said that me liking boys—" Evelyn rolls her eyes and shifts around loudly in her seat. Travis sighs and tries again, "He said me liking boys wasn't the problem, me liking my own stepbrother was. When I started dating my next boyfriend, Ben, Bill was completely fine with it. He wanted Ben to come over for dinner, he said it was okay if I brought him to the wedding as my date. He just made me feel like what I was going through was okay, it was *normal*. And... I don't know. I guess I just got more comfortable with Bill, as time went on. He's a nice guy. And he was a good stepdad."

Dad keeps telling me that divorce isn't a competition, but if it is, he's so obviously winning.

"What about your relationship with your stepbrother?" Kimball asks, barely managing to control a wolfish smile. "How was that?"

"My relationship with Garen is none of your fucking business," Travis says sharply. I expect some sort of reproach from Evelyn, the same as the day I'd gotten kicked out and been unable to stop myself from laughing as Travis had yelled back at her, *I just fucking told you I'm gay, and your fucking problem is with my fucking swearing?* No retort comes today, though. When Kimball's only response is to raise his eyebrows, Travis scowls and says, "Everyone in this room knows how our relationship was. It was good, and it was a secret, and then it *wasn't* a secret anymore, and then it wasn't a *relationship* anymore. That's it."

That's so not it, but I don't know how to protest.

"When your stepbrother initiated the relationship with you, did he urge you to keep it a secret from your mother?" Kimball asks.

"No," Travis says, and I blink over at him, because yes, I definitely did. Sensing my eyes on him, he clarifies, "Sorry, what I meant was—okay, I'm the one who initiated the relationship. Not Garen."

Evelyn scoffs. "That's not true."

"Mrs. McCall, your son is being interviewed, not you," Mom says sharply, and Evelyn glowers at her, but falls silent.

All eyes return to Travis, who is staring back at his mom. For a long moment, no one speaks. Finally, he clears his throat and looks down at the table. "Would it be possible to maybe clear the room for my interview? I know I'm only seventeen, and I know I can have my mom in here, but I'd... I don't know. I sort of prefer it if maybe she, you know, wasn't."

"I'm not leaving my minor child alone to be questioned," Evelyn snaps. Strangely, her words don't really seem to be directed towards Travis. I don't think any of them have been, actually.

"It's an informal interview, I'm not being questioned. I'm not being charged with anything, they're not cops, it's fine," Travis says. "I'm sorry, I'm not trying to be a pain in anyone's ass, but I am extremely uncomfortable with my mom being in the room while I'm talking about Garen."

I scowl. For fuck's sake, I'm not contagious. Being in the same room as someone who's talking about me isn't going to make Ev catch whatever it is that she's convinced I have. Evelyn begins to protest, but Kimball leads her outside under the guise of "wanting a word with her." Within two minutes, he has returned alone. He sinks back into his seat, gestures for Travis to continue.

The words spill out almost in a single breath, like Travis is convinced that he only has a few seconds to explain himself before his mom comes swooping back in to interrupt him. "When we first moved into the house together, Garen would flirt with me, but that's it. My mom keeps trying to say that he took advantage of me, or that he molested me, or whatever, but that's not how it happened. He never pressured me. Ever. The first time anything happened between us, I'm the one who came onto him. I—"

"He groped me at a costume party because he liked my raccoon costume, told me I had a nice ass, and snuck into my bedroom to make out with me when we got home," I whisper, and he blushes. His sister snorts, my mom shoots me a warning look, and I fall obediently silent.

Travis says, "That's... not *exactly* how it happened, but it's pretty close. And it's—I'm the one who was always pushing things to go further between us. Everything about our relationship—that first night, the exclusivity, the sex, everything. All of it was my idea, and he never pushed me into it. I want to be very clear on that."

For the past year, I've known that Travis was the one who initiated things between us. I've known that I haven't done anything wrong by falling in love with him. Still, it's nice to see that he remembers that, too.

"And how are things between the two of you now?" Kimball asks. "Have you remained friends even now that your parents have filed for divorce?"

Travis and I exchange a very long look; I'm the one who finally breaks eye contact. He sighs and says, "Not really, no. We did at first, but we don't really talk anymore."

"Why not?"

"My girlfriend kind of hates him," Travis admits.

I snort. "The feeling is mutual."

"They can barely be in the same room together," he continues. "They're in the school play together, and they have a lot of the same friends, but every time they interact with each other directly, they end up fighting. Last week, Joss told me that I had to choose between them, and... I mean, she's my girlfriend. He and I were barely speaking to each other at that point. It shouldn't have been that hard of a choice." His tone very clearly states that it was a hard choice, and I will cling to that knowledge with an embarrassing ferocity. But then he shrugs and says, "Besides, I'm not exactly a fan of his relationship choices, either."

That's enough of a shock to make me address him directly for the first time in five days. I turn to stare and

say, "Since when do you have a problem with Ben? He's one of your best friends. You dated him, too, you know he's a good guy to date."

"He's a good guy to date, yes, but you shouldn't be dating him," Travis says tightly. "You shouldn't be dating anyone. That's one of the most basic guidelines for your first year of sobriety—don't date anyone until you know you're secure enough with your health to be able to handle an argument, or a breakup, or anything without reaching for the substances you're supposed to be avoiding. You barely waited a month before you got involved with him, and I don't think that's okay. I don't think you should be dating him."

I roll my eyes towards the ceiling and say, "Yeah, well, it's not really any of your business, is it?"

He sighs, but says nothing. Mom clears her throat. "Moving on from that, I have a few questions about you specifically, not just your relationships with William and Garen. First of all, you have a job, correct?"

"Yes," he says. "I'm a barista at the Daily Grind, a coffee shop in Lakewood, Connecticut."

"How often do you work?"

"Every day, unless I use vacation time. I work eight-hour shifts on Saturday and Sunday, then four-hour shifts from two-thirty to six-thirty on Monday through Thursday," he answers. "I'm only allowed to work thirty-two hours a week because I'm still a minor, but my boss says that when I turn eighteen next month, he'll let me pick up the closing shift on Friday, from three to eleven."

Mom scribbles a note on her paper now, suddenly reminding me too much of Doctor Howard. I look away. She says, "Do you pay your own bills?"

Travis nods. "I pay my cell phone bill, my car insurance bill. I pay for all the gas and maintenance for my—well, it used to be Bree's car. But she doesn't need it on campus, so I bought it from her."

"With your own money?" Mom confirms. He nods again. "What else do you pay for around the house? Do you buy your own clothes, your own school supplies?"

"I pay for everything except food and rent," he says. "I mean, I try not to waste money, though? Like, I try to avoid buying stuff unless I absolutely need it, because I've been saving for college since I turned sixteen."

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Mom take a personal moment to celebrate the fact that Travis has obviously just said exactly what she was hoping he would. She clears her throat and says, "Your mother isn't going to help you pay for college?"

"The places I applied are expensive. I don't blame her," is Travis' roundabout way of saying, *no, my mom's a bitch and isn't going to help me at all.*

"Where have you applied?" Mom asks.

He ticks the names off on his fingers. "Stanford, Columbia, Harvard, Princeton, MIT, Yale, Northwestern, Brown, Dartmouth, Cal Tech."

"Jesus, Trav, what did you do? Google 'hardest schools to get into' and apply to all of them?" Bree demands.

"Googled 'hardest schools to get into' and applied *early action* to all of them," he says, and they sneer at each other.

"Well, best case scenario, where would be your first choice?" Mom asks.

Travis goes strangely silent at that. Silent enough that Mom repeats her question, and I shoot him a curious look. His jaw is set, his eyes fixed on the table once more, and then I realize—he was serious about not going to college, when he first told me about Joss and the baby. He has applied to almost every Ivy League university, and he'll probably get into most of them, but he's going to give that up so that he can live in Lakewood, work in a coffee shop, and raise his bastard with his high school girlfriend. Oh, fuck. I'm gripping the edge of the table so hard I might carve grooves into the wood; it takes everything I have in me to not start screaming at him for being that fucking stupid that he'd give up his entire future for *her*. Eventually, he swallows and says, "I don't know. I want to wait until I have all of my responses before I start thinking about that. I, um... there are a lot of things to consider. A lot of options."

"Understandable," Mom says, dropping her pen on the table again. "I just have one last thing I'm curious about. How have things been since William and Garen moved out?"

"Fine," Travis says, but his voice breaks on that one syllable.

My hands are hot from how determinedly I'm staring at them. There's silence, and then it's Kimball who asks uncertainly, "Travis? Are you alright?"

I chance a glance sideways at him; his eyes are focused on the table, and his jaw is trembling. Sensing the attention on him, he forces a bland smile and says, "I'm fine. It's just... I don't know if any of you have noticed, but Mom doesn't really talk to me anymore."

"You mean, she doesn't talk to you about the divorce?" Mom asks, brow creased.

"No, I mean she doesn't talk to me at all," Travis says, giving a delicate shrug like it's no big deal. Like it's not the *biggest* deal. "My mom, she, um... she hasn't spoken to me in forty-four days."

My hands ball up into fists under the conference table. The idea of my mom ignoring me for forty-four days is unfathomable. I don't even live with her, I haven't since I was fourteen, but I still can't remember a time we ever went more than two weeks without some form of contact. It's sick that Evelyn would just avoid him like that.

Even sicker, now that I'm piecing together memories of things Travis has told me, things Ben has told me, about the last time Evelyn pulled something like. How she checked out on her son during her first divorce and didn't speak to him for weeks just because he looked like his father. How last time, this ended with him swallowing a bottle of pills to try to escape the discomfort of living in that silent household. How lonely he must be, as lonely as I am every day I have to hide out in the music room or take the long way around the cafeteria to avoid getting beaten on by people who hate me for things they don't understand.

Just like out in the hall, I'm overcome with the urge to touch him, to comfort him in the stupidest, most meaningless of ways. Before I can talk myself out of it, I reach over and curl a hand over the back of his neck, dipping my fingers below the collar of his shirt and rubbing soothing circles into his skin. He shivers and leans into the touch, but his helpless eyes move right past me as he says to Mom and Kimball, "Look, it's not a big deal, okay? Things are just really tense at home right now, and last month, we had a bad argument, and I said some stuff that pissed her off, and it's taking her some time to get over it. It's fine, I'm fine, it's just a weird time right now."

"Travie, why didn't you tell me this?" Bree practically begs, leaning across the table to take his hands.

He shakes her off, then shakes *me* off, and mutters, "Because it's not a big deal, I told you. We're going to figure it out, it'll be fine. Don't worry about it, okay?"

It's not okay. I am so close to storming out of this room and letting Evelyn know exactly how much of a piece of shit she is, but then my mom asks, "What was the bad argument about?"

After a long minute of silence, Travis asks, "Can I take you up on that offer to clear the room?"

It's obvious that he's not asking this because he cares if his sister hears what he has to say, so I direct my response to my mother instead of him. "I don't want to leave."

"Garen, there was an agreement," Mom says reproachfully.

"I don't care," I protest. "I didn't kick him out for my questions, it's not fair for him to make me leave now."

Frowning, Kimball says, "You had just as much of a right to request an empty room as Travis does now. You've both chosen to have Mrs. McCall wait outside, and now Travis is asking you to do the same."

"I don't want—"

"Forty-four days ago, I came home from work, had dinner with Mom, and listened to her rant about the divorce," Travis interrupts, propping his elbows up on the table and resting his forehead against his upturned palms. Clearly, he no longer gives a shit whether I'm in the room or not. "She was really mad that day, and she kept saying shit about Garen. She said a bunch of things about him being Jewish, and she called him a 'cocksucking little junkie'—"

"Not an inaccurate description," I admit in an undertone, but he continues as though I haven't said a word.

"—and I kind of lost it. We started arguing, and I told her not to talk about him like that. And I guess that really got to her, because she started telling me that I've been a really shitty son for the past few months, and it's no wonder my dad doesn't call anymore, if I don't even have the decency to be loyal to my own family." God, my heart aches for him. I reach for him again, but he cringes away from my hand, like physical contact would be too much right now. I let my hand fall limply back to my side. He takes a deep breath and continues, "She asked me if I was still sleeping with Garen—well, I think her exact words were, '*Tell me you're not letting that diseased whore put his hands all over you.*' I told her that I wasn't—all we'd done lately was *hold hands*, but she didn't believe me. She said, '*I didn't raise you to be like this, I didn't raise you to be a lying little faggot.*' She said there was no other reason for me to still care what she said about him. And then she demanded to know if I was still in love with him."

Oh, fuck. I don't want to hear this. *Please don't say it. Please don't say you don't love me. Please don't say you do love me if it doesn't mean anything.* Now I know why he wanted me to leave—there is no right answer here. If he says no, I'll die a little, knowing I'm the only one who still feels this way. If he says yes, I'll still die a little, knowing it doesn't change a thing. He's still with someone else, his girlfriend is still pregnant, I still don't get to call him mine.

"I told her that, um... yes, I still was," he says, and my chest tightens around my traitorous, hammering heart. He swallows and amends softly, "Am. I still am, I always have been."

"Jesus fuck," somebody whispers, and I'm belatedly aware of the fact that it's probably me, but I can't even begin to feel anything about that. I can't feel anything at all, except for a faint buzzing all over my body. He's still in love with me. Travis Daniel McCall is still in love with me. Even though we've been broken up for almost a year, even though he's got a pregnant girlfriend, even though Ben is my not-boyfriend, even though we don't talk, even though *everything*... he still loves me like I love him. I don't know whether I want to run out, or kiss him, or cry. I settle for remaining unbelievably still.

This revelation has clearly unsettled everyone else as much as it has unsettled me, because Kimball clears his throat and says, "Alright, well... I think that about wraps it up. We, ah... it was a pleasure meeting you, Garen. I'll contact you through your mother if I have any further questions."

I give a very jerky nod and stand; my legs are almost too rubbery to hold my weight. All I need to do is get out of this room. I need to leave this building, I need to clear my head, I need to go to Jamie's place and have a quiet dinner and probably fuck him until I can forget what I just heard, because Travis loves me, and I don't know what I'm doing anymore.

"Are you okay?" I hear Bree murmuring to her little brother behind me as I slip from the room. He makes a noise of acknowledgment, and even that sound from him is enough to make my knees shake so much that I sink down into my old chair in the hall without even thinking about the fact that Evelyn is sitting right next to it. She jumps to her feet and skitters away from me, towards her children.

"Well, I hope you see why this was so necessary," she says. She's only addressing her daughter; I don't have to look up to know that, but I do anyway. Bree is still watching her brother, and Travis is pointedly avoiding her eyes by scrolling through his text messages on his phone. "Darryl told me about those bank statements. He told me that the little junkie admitted to stealing thousands of dollars of his father's money to fund his habit. I can't even begin to understand how his parents can still look at him, knowing that. I mean, God only knows what else he took!"

Without looking up from his phone, Travis says, "Mom, knock it off. The only thing he *took* was my virginity, and I'm not sure it's possible for him to give that back. But if it bothers you that much, just tell him to come over here and get his cock out, and we'll give it a shot."

She slaps him across the face so viciously that he drops his phone; the battery comes out and goes skittering across the floor.

"Evelyn!" Mom barks from the doorway of the conference room, and then, "Garen, *don't*," but I've already launched myself off the chair at Travis. I curve my hands over his shoulders and guide him a few feet away from his mother—out of striking distance, honestly. He doesn't tell me he's okay, and I don't ask. Neither of us speaks, because I'm not sure there's a single word that could pass between us that wouldn't be unimaginably painful. All I'll allow myself to do is duck down to examine his face. A dark pink handprint is blooming across the surface of his cheek, but he's not bleeding, and I doubt it will bruise.

"Get your hands off of my son," Evelyn growls, seizing my shoulder and trying to drag me away from Travis. I want to hit *her*, but I won't. I'm not that sort of man, no matter how furious I am right now. Still, I've been hit harder by stronger people than her, so I'm not afraid to step closer to her, to get up in her face.

"You forfeited your right to say those words to me the second I saw you bitch-slap him," I say. "People don't hit the people they really care about, okay? Believe me, I learned that lesson while I was blacking out and bleeding all over the floor of that pretty little house you're so obsessed with keeping. It doesn't matter what he said, or how pissed off it made you. You hit your own kid, and that is *fucked*."

Evelyn scoffs. "Not everyone is as lax in disciplining their children as your parents clearly have been with you. Thank god for that, really, because quite honestly, the world already has one too many Garen Andersons in it, and I shudder to think what might happen if there were more people like you around. And I have raised my children to respect their parents, not to say such disgusting, offensive—"

"What, the word 'cock' is really so gravely offensive to you that you needed to hit him? Or, was it the fact that he said I took his virginity? Because guess what, Ev: that happened. Hitting him or hating me won't change that, so *suck it the fuck up*, and stop being such a shitty mother," I order. She glares at me, but says nothing. I'm so close to putting my fist into the wall that I actually have to step back from everyone to make sure I keep my hands to myself. Bree reaches for my elbow, and I shake her off. "I can't fucking deal with this right now. I'm just—I have to go."

I make it five blocks before I've calmed down enough to even think about checking my phone for directions. The second my Blackberry is out of my pocket, I'm almost overcome by the impulse to call Travis. I don't even know what I'd say—I'm so sorry she hit you because of me, you are better than she'll let you believe you are, I'm still in love with you, too—I just want to talk to him. Hear his voice some more, instead of sitting through more days of complete radio silence. But his sister is with him now, and I trust her to take care of him. I sigh, open up my GPS app, and program in Jamie's address.

I'm so used to just wandering into Ben and Alex's place that I'm actually a little surprised to find that the door to Jamie's apartment is locked when I arrive. I knock, and after a few moments, the door swings open, revealing a blond girl wearing nothing but one of Jamie's button-down shirts. She smiles and says, "Hi. You must be Garen, right? Wow. You look exactly like I pictured you would."

"Uh," I say, because saying *who the fuck are you* is almost never considered proper etiquette. "Yeah. I'm Garen. Is—Jamie's here, right? James Goldwyn?"

She laughs and steps aside, leaving me room to enter the apartment. "Yeah, he's in the kitchen. I'm just about to get dressed and head out, sorry. I won't be in your hair much longer."

I don't say anything, and she pads down the hallway to Jamie's bedroom. I blink over at Jamie, who is indeed standing in the kitchen, beginning to prepare dinner. He's at least had the decency to shower and get dressed in a pair of gray sweatpants and a soft-looking blue sweater. I sneak up behind him and grab his ass, which he barely reacts to. I press a quick kiss to the back of his neck and say, "Didn't realize you had company over."

"Don't worry, I'll be ready to go again by the time dinner's over," he says, grinning at me. I open my mouth to reply, but the girl reappears, now having added jeans and a pair of heels to her ensemble. She snatches up her purse from the couch and comes into the kitchen to say goodbye to Jamie. He leans around me to kiss her—I wrinkle my nose and back away from the breeder touching—and says, "I'll call you tomorrow, okay?"

Strangely enough, he doesn't sound like he's lying.

"You better," the girl says, laughing, like it's a usual exchange between them. She offers me a sunny smile and a wave, then lets herself out of the apartment.

No explanation is offered, so I don't request one. I wash my hands at the sink and move to lean against the counter, waiting for some sort of instruction as to what Jamie expects me to do in order to help him make the meal. Honestly, I can't even tell what we're having, but it seems like it's going to involve a lot of vegetables. Possibly some noodles. Maybe some of that weird, spongy-looking shit that's sitting in a bowl near the sink.

"So," Jamie says finally, offering me a wry smile, as if he knows it's killing me not to ask. "That was Rachael. We met at the political science department' open house last month."

"Seems like she's made herself right at home here. That wasn't the first time she's been over, was it?" I ask, holding my hand out for a piece of the onion he's chopping. He hands me a knife instead.

"Cut up the peppers for me," he orders, then adds, "No. She comes over fairly often. We first hooked up towards the middle of September, but it's become a bit of a regular thing since then. She's... actually the only girl I'm involved with now. About two weeks ago, she asked me to stop sleeping with other girls, and I agreed."

I am very carefully excising that top part of the pepper, the gross one that's attached to all the seeds inside. When I have completed that task on each of the peppers, I say, "She's cool with you still hooking up with dudes, though, right?"

Jamie shrugs. "For now. Tonight, she told me she'd like it if I'd consider giving that up, too. Said I could take a few weeks to think about it, but by Thanksgiving, she wants me to have either broken things off with her, or broken things off with anyone else I'm sleeping with."

"Hmm," I say. What I really want to ask is, *What the fuck are you going to do about the guy you've been trying to get to be your boyfriend since summer?* Instead, I ask, "So, does this mean that I get to fuck you tonight, just so you've got enough empirical data to make a truly informed decision on your chick-or-dick

debate?"

He knocks his shoulder against mine and says, "Don't worry, I already told her that I'm not giving up sex with you, no matter how exclusive she wants me to get. If none of the girls in high school managed it, I doubt any of the ones in college will."

I grin. "How'd she take that?"

"She was initially displeased, but now that she's seen you, I think she gets it," he says. I pause my work long enough to give him a lingering kiss, but I can't help thinking it's sort of funny—even after seeing Jamie, none of the guys I've dated would ever have found his looks great enough to justify me continuing to sleep with him while in a relationship. Dave made that abundantly, brutally clear pretty early on in our relationship; Travis would never have gone along with the idea of me screwing anyone else while we were together. I'm not even really dating Ben, but I'm pretty sure his hatred of Jamie is enough to outweigh his insistence that we're not exclusive.

That's enough to make me stop chopping again. Shit. Am I supposed to ask Ben's permission before I do anything with Jamie? We've agreed not to be exclusive, but they honestly can't even pretend to tolerate each other. Maybe it's some sort of unspoken boundary, hooking up with someone who my not-boyfriend doesn't approve of. Or, fuck, am I supposed to ask Alex's permission? It's not like I did before, when I sucked Jamie off last month, but I hadn't even known they were involved then. And Al had still gotten sort of pissed, though nowhere near as pissed as Jamie had gotten when he found out I'd let Alex fuck me during the relapse.

Purely for the sake of covering my own ass, I pull my phone out and open up a group text, add Jamie, Alex, and Ben to the recipients list, and type out, *mass text to all concerned parties: seeking permission to have sexual relations with jamie goldwyn tonight. granted/denied?* I send off the text, and Jamie's phone chimes from the other end of the counter. He leans over, unlocks his phone, and rolls his eyes. "You know, I'm pretty sure that you've lost some of your finesse since moving to Connecticut. You used to have some decent moves."

"I still do, I just don't feel the need to waste them on you, considering you pretty much already agreed," I say.

Both of our phones chime out message alerts, and I glance down at the reply. It's from Ben: *Didn't we cover this last week? You don't need my permission to sleep with other people. But use a condom, that kid is chlamydia in a polo shirt, and I'm never letting you touch me again if you do it raw.*

Next to me, Jamie makes a barely stifled noise of outrage. "'Chlamydia in a polo shirt,' what the fuck? Who the hell is five-five-five-eight-four—is that the fucking midget? Is that his number?"

"Yeah, that's Ben," I laugh, and Jamie frantically rinses his hands under the faucet, gives them a cursory toweling-off, and begins to type out a furious reply. They trade barbs for several minutes, and I allow the text alerts to pile up in my inbox without bothering to read them. Only when Ben's texts have stopped and one from Alex has arrived do I bother to open my messages.

confiscated ben's phone until he learns how 2 play nice. its on top of our kitchen cabinets & he cant reach it. Jamie lets out a shout of laughter at that. g, i'm advising u 2 steal jamie's, they're children & cant be trusted. A minute later, another text arrives. btw, permission granted, idc.

Idc.

I don't care.

That silences Jamie's laughter. It silences everything about him for a moment, and then he says, "I don't think I like him anymore."

"Who, Ben? You *never* liked him," I say. I frown down at the massacre of vegetables, then pick up a piece of pepper and hold it questioningly in front of Jamie's face to see if it's even close to what it should look like.

He rolls his eyes and says, "No, G, that's huge. Cut them about half that size, for Christ's sake." When I return, scowling, to my chopping, he sighs. "Did you hear what I said?"

"Yeah, you don't like him anymore. Who are we even talking about?" I ask.

"Alexander. I don't think I like him anymore. In fact, I think I might actively dislike him now."

I blink and say, "Because he doesn't care if I fuck you?"

"No, that's—I'm not saying this because of that text. I'm saying it because it's something I've been thinking about for a while. Something I've been feeling for weeks now."

Fuck, this is what I'd been afraid of. Jamie is the most important person in the world to me right now, but Alex is my friend, too. I don't want to choose sides if they decide that things are going badly between them, but I'll have to. Everyone always ends up choosing a side during a breakup. I'll go with Jamie, and Ben will go with Alex, and then things will be awkward between everyone, and this is probably why everyone says it's a shitty idea to date your friends.

Eventually, I settle for the vaguely neutral reply of, "Things seemed like they were going well between you two when you came to Connecticut for the show."

"No, they were terrible," Jamie says, now sounding absolutely miserable. "It's just—everything was normal between us, but the last time I visited—the weekend of that little concert, when you and the midget started fucking again—suddenly, it was different and just... every time he looked at me, I'd feel this hideous *swooping* sensation in my stomach, like when you're going up a flight of stairs and you think there's one more step than there is, and you feel like you're going to pitch over. O-Or, when we were messing around—alright, have you ever looked at someone and found yourself getting pissed at them because of how attractive they are? Like, have you ever been making out with a guy and suddenly all you can think is 'oh my Lord, you and your perfect body and your stupid blond hair are so unfairly hot that I want to punch you or myself or both of us in the fact right now'?"

"No," I lie, squashing the mental image of Travis and his perfect body and his stupid blond hair and his unfair hotness. Travis, who is beautiful and fragile in ways I've been too blind to notice. Travis, who still *loves* me. I grit my teeth and give a particularly vicious chop to the peppers. "Nope, never thought that."

"See? Because that's *weird*. Those aren't normal, reasonable thoughts. So, I've realized it must be one of two things; either I'm entering the early stages of psychosis, or I'm over my fixation on him. At this point, I'm pretty sure it's the latter, because I'm not having this reaction to anyone else, you know? It's not a sudden aversion to the entire human race, it's just Alexander. I look at him, or I call him, or I get a text from him, and suddenly I feel like I'm going to vomit. But, you know, a weird, special kind of—I mean, maybe I'd be vomiting up a kitten, or something else furry, roughly that size. Like a *rat*. One of those giant, diseased rats I see running across the subway tracks on the nights that I'm drunk enough to let my Columbia friends convince me to use public transportation. That's not a normal reaction to have about someone, not unless you just fucking hate them, right?"

I stare very intently at my hands and continue to slice up the peppers. If I look at Jamie, I'm pretty sure I'm going to start laughing, and there are too many knives around for it to be a good idea for me to make fun of him. When I think I can speak without losing it completely, I say, "James, those are called 'feelings.'"

"What are you talking about?"

“Okay, I’m pretty sure most people would say ‘he gives me butterflies,’ not ‘I feel like there are rats inside of my stomach.’ But yeah. That missed-a-step sensation? Feeling sick, but in a warm, fuzzy way? Feeling legitimately offended that anyone has the balls to be as mind-breakingly hot as him? That’s what having feelings for someone is like. You know, real feelings, not just *I want you to suck my dick* feelings.”

Jamie looks revolted. “You mean to tell me that this is what you’ve been going on about for the past year? This—” He gestures towards his chest, presumably indicating his heart, “—is what you’re so obsessed with, why you say you need Travis so much? Because he makes you feel the fucking vomit rats?” I nod. “But this is *awful*.”

“Yeah,” I say, “but also sort of awesome, right?”

“No,” he says vehemently, even though I think that what he really means is, *yes*.

My suspicions must be wrong. With every second that passes, he’s looking more and more nervous, more and more furious at himself. I drop my knife in the sink and move closer to him, curving a hand over the back of his neck and drawing him closer until our foreheads touch. “Jamie. Hey, Jamie, stop. I don’t—what’s going on?”

“I don’t want to like anyone, especially not *him*,” Jamie protests. “This fucking sucks. Rachael’s great and all, and usually I’d be more than willing to start dating her exclusively, but I can’t, because some stupid part of me is still hoping that Alexander’s going to finally agree that we can be exclusive. I keep asking, and he keeps turning me down, keeps saying he’s not ready, but what he really means is that he’s holding out to see if he can manage a better offer. I won’t give Rach a straight answer because I’m waiting on Al, and he won’t give me a straight answer because he’s waiting on your Pygmy boyfriend. And it’s dumb, alright? It’s dumb that I’m feeling this way even though I know he’s not. What’s the point of wanting someone who doesn’t want you back?”

I don’t know what to tell him. At this point, I’m not sure what the point is of wanting someone who does want you back. So I clamp my mouth shut, take his hand, and drag him down the hall to his bedroom, abandoning the half-prepared meal on the counter and trying to make this night better for him in the only way I know how.

It’s the first time we’ve really slept together in over a year, but we’re both taking comfort in the familiarity of it. After all this time, I’m more comfortable being literally inside of him than I am with being in any part of myself. I fuck him face-to-face, and he keeps pulling me in for deep, searching kisses. And neither one of us closes our eyes for any longer than it takes to blink, both terrified we might end up imagining an unavailable, blond boy. I wrap an arm around his neck, partially because it gives me better leverage to fuck him harder, but more because he still looks kind of sad, and I think he needs the closeness. When he kisses me again, I murmur into his mouth, “You know I love you, Jamie, right? More than anything?”

He nods, knocking his forehead roughly against mine. “Yeah, I know,” he says, reaching up to lace his fingers together at the back of my neck so that I can’t move away—not that I’d even planned to. He kisses me again and repeats, “I know. Love you, too, G.”

It’s all we’ve got to give each other, and it’s still not enough.

41 days sober

“What’d you do this summer, Andy?” Geoffrey, the sophomore playing Francois—our toolish version of Frenchy, the beauty school drop-out—asks.

John-as-Andy smiles bashfully and says, “Oh, I spent most of it at the beach. I met a girl there.”

Lounging back on one of the two rickety benches we're rehearsing with until the stage crew finishes construction of the cafeteria set pieces, I-as-Rizzo scoff, "You hauled your cookies all the way to the beach for some chick?"

"Well, she was sort of special," John-as-Andy protests.

I smirk. "There ain't no such thing."

Across the stage, the girls playing the Pink Ladies start cajoling Joss-as-Dani until she finally laughs out, "Alright, alright, I'll tell you!"

"Great!" Ms. Markland cuts us off from the front row. "I don't want to waste time going over the musical number tonight, you guys are already making great progress. But this is the point where we'd go into 'Summer Nights.' Move the benches back, we're going to pick up after the song with—"

There's a collective groan. Surprisingly, it's John, who's almost always too eager to drag rehearsal out, who objects, "Rehearsal was supposed to end at eight. Are we really going to keep going?"

"Yes," Nate says in a voice that dares any of us to protest. His eyes are flashing, so none of us do. Triumphant, he adds, "We're staying until nine, alright? It's not that late, and you all had an extra-long break in the middle. So, move the benches upstage, and pick up with Mikey's line, 'She sounds real nice.'"

As usual, 'move the benches back' turns out to be an order that only I follow. I hook one arm under each of the benches, hoist them both up, and move them to the back curtain. Any time set pieces need to be moved and the crew members are busy painting or building in the hallway, I end up being the one who does all the heavy lifting. At first, Nate would bitch at people to help me, but now I think he mostly just likes to watch the way my biceps flex when I do it.

The moment I've returned to the spot downstage where the rest of the guys playing T-Birds are waiting, Mikey-as-Jon says, "She sounds real nice."

"True love, and she didn't let you lay a hand on her? Sounds like a tease to me," I-as-Rizzo remark.

"Well, she wasn't," John-as-Andy snaps. "She was a lady."

His last word is punctuated by a very faint, scratchy screaming from the front row, and I cringe. I'd forgotten to put my phone on silent before rehearsal; the noise is the ringtone I set for Ben ages ago. Usually he doesn't text or call when I'm in rehearsal, but it's not surprising that he's calling me now, not if we're really running this late.

"Garen, your phone is ringing," Nate says from the front row, like I don't know. I extend a hand, and he gives it an unimpressed look. I roll my eyes, wiggle my fingers a little, and he rolls his eyes right back, but digs the Blackberry out of my jacket pocket anyway. He frowns down at the display, hands me the phone, and snipes, "Make it quick. And can you please ask your boyfriend not to call you during rehearsal?"

"He'd be calling me *after* rehearsal, if you weren't actively in the process of ruining my social life," I protest. "We were supposed to be done ten minutes ago, and he's my ride home. Just give me thirty seconds so I can tell him to wait inside, since clearly you're planning to make us run this scene fifty more times."

Nate mutters something about *only as long as he doesn't interrupt us*, but that comment doesn't deserve a response, so I turn away and answer the call with a murmured, "Hey, man. You here?"

"Yeah, I've been parked in the lot for like, five minutes. Are you going to be done with rehearsal soon?" Ben asks.

"Not until nine. I'd have called to let you know, but I only just found out. Come inside and wait in the auditorium, your car's probably cold as fuck," I say. Behind me, I hear Nate tittering in the front row. I turn to face him; he's glaring at me, as though I've overstepped some huge boundary by allowing my not-boyfriend to come watch the last half hour of rehearsal. I grin at him and say, "Don't give me that look, Nathan."

"What look?" he says.

"That *jealous* look," I say without thinking. From across the stage, Christine shoots me a warning glare, and I belatedly realize that my comment is probably hitting a little too close to home. To cover, I pin my phone between my shoulder and my ear so that I can form my fingers into the shape of a heart. "Calm down, my beloved director. You know I only have eyes for you."

On the other end of the phone, Ben says dryly, "I thought you were supposed to have eyes for me."

"McCutcheon, you only get to claim property rights on one of my facial features, and based on what went down last night—name, me—you've chosen to claim my mouth. Don't get greedy," I say.

The sound system clicks on, and Riley's chuckling voice says over the speakers, "Seriously, dude?"

I toss him the finger and say into the phone, "Come in, sit in the auditorium, put your phone on silent if you're going to have it out, and don't distract me. See you in a few."

I end the call, silence my phone, and slip right back into the relaxed, strolling posture that Nate has coached me into adopting when I'm acting as Bobby Rizzo. Taking the cue from me, Geoffrey-as-Francois says to John-as-Andy, "Hey, what was her name, anyway?"

"Danielle," John-as-Andy replies dreamily. "Danielle Zukko."

The rest of the T-Birds start laughing, and I land a hard smack to Geoffrey-as-Francois' arm, trying to make my best *oh shit, he's talking about a girl I know and have hooked up with* face, but mostly just doing my best not to appear revolted at the mental image of myself-as-Rizzo having sex with Joss-as-Dani. Based on the semi-amused, semi-exasperated expressions on my castmates' faces, I don't succeed.

Ben enters the auditorium so quietly and carefully that I barely hear the click of the door shutting behind him. We make eye contact, and he offers a tiny wave before sinking into a seat in the back row. I want to make an obscene gesture at him, but the phone call had me on thin ice already, and I'm doing my best to convince people that I can be professional; I remain in character, offer up my fakest smile, and say to John-as-Andy, "Well, I think she sounds peachy keen! And maybe if you believe in miracles, your princess will show up again someday, somewhere unexpected... see you later." I shoot a glance at Geoffrey and Gabe and say, in my regular, slightly harsher tone, "Come on, boys."

We exit, stage right.

"Okay," Nate cuts us off. "You guys are good for right now, so if you could just go run lines in the back classrooms for a little while, that would be fantastic. I need Joss and John onstage, please."

I lean back out onto the stage and beckon to Ben, who stands and approaches the side stairs. When Nate has finally looked away, I admit, "We never actually run lines when he tells us to run lines in the back classrooms. We just hang out, listen to music, do our homework. Sometimes play poker."

"One guess whose idea that is," Ben says, and I smirk at him. He allows me to lace our fingers and tow him through the wing and down the back steps, into the hall of classrooms where we hang out and where stage crew does work on the smaller props.

Tonight, most people have congregated in an empty English classroom. The other players are hanging out in the front of the room, listening to music from Annabelle's iPhone and dancing around. The members of stage crew are set up in the back, carefully painting a long piece of wood that I think will eventually be turned into the side panel of the car. The car designs are actually sort of awesome—last week, the day after the godawful meeting with the divorce lawyers, Travis had stomped into rehearsal with a stack of sloppy sketches and an unshakable determination to build a three-quarters scale replica of a 1948 Ford Deluxe convertible. Ms. Markland and Nate had just sort of exchanged glassy-eyed glances while Travis had gone on and on about *it can do three-hundred and sixty degree turns during the Greased Lightning number if I put swivel caster wheels under the base, and blah blah install handles under the bumpers so it can be turned on its side and moved offstage between numbers, and just need people to help me build and paint the skeleton of the car, I'll install all the lights myself, how hard can it be to learn how to solder?* Eventually, Ms. Markland had approved it, but I think that was mostly to get him to shut up.

Right now, Travis is arguing with one of the sophomores about the proper placement of the lightning bolts on the side panels. I still can't handle looking at him for any longer than five seconds at a time; I duck my head and announce, "Joss, Markland wants you onstage with John."

She says nothing, but makes a bit of a show of going over to give Travis a lingering kiss on the cheek before she leaves. Travis is too distracted with his argument to even acknowledge her. Ben quirks an eyebrow at me, and I answer with a shrug.

"So," Annabelle says, cocking her head to the side and gesturing to Ben, "Who's your friend?"

"This is Ben," I say, settling a palm in the small of his back. "Ben, this is Annabelle, our choreographer. That's Christine, that's Miranda, that's—"

"Hang on, hang on, hang on," Miranda says, flapping her hands. I flap mine back at her. "This is Ben, the not-boyfriend from Yale?"

Ben snorts. "You actually call me your not-boyfriend in casual conversation? That's so lame."

"Yes, it is, but as my not-boyfriend, you're obligated to think it's cute," I say.

Travis twists to look over his shoulder, and Ben notices the movement, acknowledges him with a small wave, a smile, and a, "Hey, Travis." Travis turns back around without a word. Ben blinks and says, "Or not."

"Ignore him," I mutter, leaning down to press a kiss to his temple—Miranda places her hand over her heart, like that one little kiss is enough to melt her. I roll my eyes. Ben nods once, but still seems a little confused as to why he's getting the freeze-out. There's no right way to tell him that Travis is pissed at him for having the supposed indecency to date me before I've been sober for a year, so I don't say anything.

A new song starts up on the iPhone, a horrendous pop song I haven't been able to escape on the radio lately. Ben groans, "Oh fuck, I hate this song so much. You people have terrible taste in music."

Christine gives him a once-over and says, "I'm honestly surprised you even know this song."

Grimacing, Ben admits, "I have four sisters under the age of twelve. I have Justin Bieber's entire oeuvre memorized."

"Taylor Swift's, too," I add, dodging the kick he aims at me for disclosing that particular embarrassment. I grin and get just close enough to dig two fingers into the side of his ribs. "Are you sure, though? Are you sure you don't secretly *love* this song? Are you sure you don't want to *chill by the fire while we're eating fondue*? I can serenade you with it, if you'd like. If it'll get me laid later, I'll totally sing this whole song."

"You'll get laid later if you *don't* sing," Ben swears. "I'm serious. I will literally punch you if you start singing."

"See, now you've threatened me—"

"Garen, don't you fucking dare—"

"—and it's like you've *goaded* me into it, you really only have yourself to blame—"

"—this is not a fucking episode of *Glee*, you can't just serenade people to get them to touch your balls—"

"—I guess you'd just better prepare to *say hello to falsetto in three, two—*"

"—going to fucking punch you, I swear to—"

"*I'd like to be everything you want! Hey, Ben, let me talk to you,*" I sing as loudly as I can possibly manage. He does take a swing at me, but I've had enough warning that it's not at all difficult to catch him by the wrist and spin him into my arms so that I can grind enthusiastically against his ass as I continue, "*If I was your boyfriend, I'd never let you go. Keep you on my arm, girl—or, boy, I guess.*"

"This friendship is over forever," Ben says flatly.

He catches me with an elbow to the ribs that makes me miss a line because I'm too busy scowling to sing, but then I just pull him tighter to my chest and nuzzle his jaw with my nose. "*And I could be a gentleman, anything you want—*"

"For fuck's sake," Travis mutters from the back of the room, storming over to the box of paints and beginning to furiously repack it.

As though he's been waiting for some sort of comment, Ben wriggles out of my embrace and takes a few steps towards Travis, voice sharp as he says, "Travis, if you've got something to say to me, then man up and say it to my face."

Travis stops packing and turns around so abruptly that, for half a second, I think he's going to knock over the box. He snaps, "The idea of you telling anyone to 'man up' is fucking ridiculous to me right now, Ben."

"What does that mean?" Ben demands.

"It means you don't want to hear what I have to say, okay? I promise you that," Travis says. Ben flings both his arms out in a clear *hit me with your best shot* sort of gesture. Never one to back down when pushed in a moment of anger, our ex-boyfriend aims a finger at him and says, pronouncing each word clearly and carefully, "Seeing the two of you together makes me sick. He is going to relapse, and it is going to be your fault, and I will never, *ever* forgive you."

I look around at Ben, but I'm not actually seeing him. My mind is too focused on Travis' words to pay attention to what my eyes are doing. There's a horrible certainty in the way he says, *he is going to relapse*; it's like he's just stating a fact, something everyone else has been aware of except for me. Except for Ben, too, if the look of barely repressed shock and fury on his face is any real indication of how he feels. His voice is nothing short of deadly when he replies, "Garen's sobriety is going perfectly well, and I have been completely supportive of him. So, what the fuck are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the fact that you've been *too* supportive," Travis says. "You're letting him rely on you too much, and you're dating him, and you shouldn't be, and it's fucked up."

"Can we clear the room?" I ask, turning pleading eyes on Annabelle. "Can we—please, I think this is going to be a shitty conversation. Can we clear everyone out of the room for a few minutes?"

"Of course," Annabelle says. She stuffs the still-playing iPhone into her pocket and declares, "Everybody, we're moving to the other classroom. Seriously, get up, now."

Only once the room is empty, save the three of us, does Travis continue, "Look, if you say he wants this, that's fine, I believe you. Except I don't give a fuck what Garen *wants*. I only care about what he *needs*, and what he needs right now, more than anything else in the world—more than sex, more than friendship, more than anything you're capable of giving him—is a chance to figure out who he is. Because he's not the same person he was last fall, when you met him, and he's not the same person he was last winter, when I dated him, and he's sure as hell not the same person he was last spring, when he was using. Everything about his life is different, and he's clinging to this relationship with you because you're familiar, because you're—"

"If you call me 'easy,' I will punch you in the mouth," Ben warns, and I slip my hand into his once more to keep him in place, just in case.

Travis lets out a frustrated noise. "I was going to say that you're *safe*. You've always been like that, for all of us. You're the one who takes care of the rest of us, you're the one who brought Garen back from Cleveland, and who puts Alex to bed after parties where he drinks too much, and who first brought me into this group because you could tell that I was hurting and needed people to connect to. That's what you do, Ben. You fix the rest of us, and now you want to fix Garen. You think you understand how bad it can get, but you have no fucking clue. Last spring, you weren't the one he was clinging to. I was. And it nearly wrecked all of us."

There is a long moment of silence, during which they just stare at each other, and a panicked, furious, *jealous* part of me wonders if this is going to end with them kissing. That would be such a fucking Travis thing to do—to say he's still in love with me, to scream at my not-boyfriend, to say how toxic my not-relationship is, and then to suddenly end up with his hands in Ben's hair and his tongue in his mouth, all anger and passion, just like everyone tells me they started with. But then Ben says, almost too quietly for me to hear even though I'm standing right next to him, "I'm so sick of this from you. I'm sick of you giving up on him and expecting everyone else to do the same. He's one of my best friends, Travis, and I care about him. I'm not going to treat him the way you do, because you are always the first person to let him drown."

"No, I'm the only person who realizes he can fucking swim," Travis says flatly. "He can do this without us, Ben. As a matter of fact, that's the only way he can do this, and you're fucking it up with your stupid, selfish need to be needed. You're trying to—"

"For fuck's sake, Travis, can you just admit that you're saying this because you're jealous?" Ben snaps.

Oh, Christ. That's the worst thing he could say. Travis' jaw is almost too tight for him to grit out the words, "Excuse me?"

"You're pretending that this is all about his sobriety, but that's bullshit," Ben says, yanking his hand out of mine and crossing the room. I scramble after him, still trying to put myself in between them, because they're getting closer, and they're getting louder, and the last thing I want is to see two people I care about getting into a fistfight about whether or not it's okay for one—or both—of them to want my dick. Ben continues, "I know you still want him, okay? We all know that. I'd bet your fucking girlfriend knows it, too. Garen told me she doesn't want you two talking anymore—didn't tell me why, but I'm betting it's because she hates that look in your eye."

"What look—"

"The same one you've had every time you've looked at him since the day you met!" Ben bursts out. "That look like he's the only person in the fucking world, like you're in literal, physical pain for want of having your hands on him. The same look you gave him the entire time you were dating me."

I now have a hand pressed flat to each boy's chest, making sure they stay on my sides and not coming after each other. Travis lets out a harsh laugh and crowds closer still. "Are we really going to go there, Ben? Are we really going to make this all about you and me, and not the fact that you're a complete dick who doesn't even trust him to stay clean without you babysitting him? If you knew half as much about what's good for his sobriety as you think you do, you'd realize that he's not at a point in his life where it's okay for him to be dating anyone—"

"You're just pissed that he's not dating you!"

"That's not what this is about!" Travis shouts. In what I can only assume is an attempt to move around me so that he and Ben can be right in each other's faces as they argue, he tries to brush me aside with a hand curved harshly over my hip, and *fuck--*

Dave is shouting, yelling, giving me a rough shove with his hands on my hips. I stagger back against the edge of my desk, and the corner of it digs into my thigh, probably going to bruise me. But he comes at me again, gives me another shove, then a punch that leaves my jaw stinging and his voice still screaming, "How the fuck could you not tell me that you live with your ex?"

"It doesn't make a difference," I sneer, because my bleeding mouth is still working even though deep down, I know I should just shut the fuck up and try to wait out his rage. "Nothing's happening between us anymore. I'd know—I keep trying to get him to give up his boyfriend for me, but he won't do it."

He grabs me by the throat, and I can't breathe, I'm gasping for air, he's giving me a rough shake. "What if he did, huh? Are you telling me that if he just left his boy and beckoned, you'd leave me? You'd just dump me and go right back to being his?"

"I've never been anyone else's," I say, and he pulls back his free hand, punches me again, again, again. My head is spinning, and I curl involuntarily in on myself, hunching over. I almost fall over, but he pulls me upright again, steadies me with his hands on my hips again--

"Garen," an urgent voice says from behind me. Ben. "Garen, it's okay, you're okay."

"What's going on? I don't understand, Ben, tell me what's going on," Travis orders.

One of them places a hand on my back and I cringe away from it. I become slowly aware of the fact that I'm doubled over, leaning my elbows on a desk and facing away from both of them. I straighten up quickly and turn to face them again, try to force myself to smile and shake it off, but I can tell by the looks they're giving me that neither of them would be convinced. Besides, I'm not sure I could make a sound—I've freaked out before, but not like that. Not in shreds of memories that make me feel sick. Ben rounds on Travis, gives him a hard shove. "You can't just fucking grab him like that."

"What are you talking about?" Travis asks, seeming terrified, wrecked. "I didn't mean to do any—I don't *understand*. What did I do?"

"This," Ben says, roughly palming Travis' hip in the same way Travis himself had touched me. "You can't just touch him like that, he can't handle it."

Travis looks like he's close to snapping. It is with extreme effort that he makes himself slowly say, "You're sleeping with someone who reacts like *that* to physical contact? I put my hand on hip, and he reacted like I hit him with a baseball bat. And you think it's okay to have sex with him?"

"He doesn't react like that with me," Ben protests. "He feels safe with me, he's comfortable with me. I know how to touch him, alright? And maybe you can't understand that, but that doesn't mean—"

"I want to go," I say. Thankfully, my voice manages to be even, normal, not nearly as destroyed as I feel.

Ben is at my side in a second, and I slip my hand into his, lace our fingers together so tightly it almost hurts. "Ben, I want to go. Can we please just fucking go?"

He doesn't say anything, just nods and lets me pull him out of the classroom. I can't make myself look back at Travis. I already know the unbearable look of pity and confusion that will be painted on his face, and I can't deal with that right now. I can't bring myself to acknowledge the fact that I've just managed to humiliate myself completely in front of the guy I'm in love with. He must think I'm so weak, or weird, or insane.

Only once we've left the building and are making our way across the parking lot to Ben's car does he say, "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I just—I mean, you know what happens when something goes wrong. And I, um—" I break off, frowning down at his face. Though his tone is even, he looks stricken. "Ben, are—wait, are *you* okay?"

"We should go," he says, unlocking the car and sliding in behind the wheel.

"Not until you tell me why you look so fucked right now," I say.

He turns the car on and yanks up the hood of his sweatshirt, and I can feel him shutting down on me. "Travis was right. I'm such a piece of shit for touching you when you're so uncomfortable with contact. I'm such an asshole, I'm taking advant—"

"No, you're not, to any of that," I say. He opens his mouth to protest, and I don't know how to make him believe me, so I settle for proving him wrong with some of that contact I'm supposedly so opposed to. I hook an arm around his waist and pull him back out of the car, taking his place behind the wheel and pushing the seat all the way back. He makes no move to stop me when I drag him back into the seat with me, onto my lap with his knees straddling my hips. There's just enough room for me to close the door and close everything else out. I run both my hands down the length of his torso, then back up to tug him forward by the shoulders. He lets me kiss him, first chastely, then deeply. When he does pull back, I say, "You were right, not Travis, okay? When it's you touching me, I'm fine. I trust you, you know how to do it without freaking me out. It's fine. It's good, it helps. Being with you like this, it *helps*, Ben."

He says nothing, and I take the silence as a cue to kiss him, which he reciprocates somewhat reluctantly. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I see the front door of the building swinging open. Travis steps out, searches the parking lot for a moment before his eyes land on Ben's car. On us. Sensing the sudden tension in my body, Ben pulls away again and follows my line of sight out to the front of the building. He lets out a frustrated sigh and mutters, "I should... not."

He shifts off of my lap into the passenger's seat, but Travis is still watching us, and I've made up my mind. I bring my mouth crashing against Ben's once more, murmuring against his lips, "No, I want—show him."

"What do you mean?" Ben asks.

"I want to *show* him, I want him to see that he's wrong," I say, somewhat desperately. *I want him to know that I'm not broken, that I'm still capable of doing this.* When Ben doesn't react, I wind my fingers around his wrist and guide his hand to the front of my jeans. "Please, Ben, I need—"

"Okay," he says quietly, cranking up the stereo and fumbling for my belt, my zipper. I'm not turned on yet, but Ben is patient; he twines his fingers in my hair and kisses me while I slip a hand into my jeans and stroke myself to full hardness. He waits, traces my lips with the tip of his tongue, ducks down to nibble at the curve of my throat. When I'm gripping the front of his sweatshirt with my free hand and sighing, he whispers, "You ready?"

I look past him to where Travis is still standing on the sidewalk, watching us. His jaw is set, his hands stuffed in the pockets of his jeans. I nod, push my jeans down over my hips, and say, "Yeah. I'm ready."

In one movement, Ben leans over and swallows me down. My own mouth drops open a little, my head falls back against the headrest—it feels good, but I might be overselling it a little, because I know Travis is still watching. Truth be told, I'm pretty sure Ben's putting in more effort than usual, because he knows Travis is watching, too. And at the end of the day, in our group, no one is ever just fucking the person they're actually fucking.

I open my eyes again just in time to see Travis step off the curb towards us. "Fuck." Ben can't exactly ask me what's up, but he does make a slightly questioning hum around the head of my cock. I allow myself a second to appreciate the sensation before I say hoarsely, "H-He just moved closer."

"Still moving?" Ben pulls off to ask. His tongue is tracing me from base to top, making it sort of impossible for me to focus enough to actually give a shit where Travis is standing right now.

I push Ben's hood off his head so that I can tangle my fingers in his hair as he returns to bobbing on my dick. When he eventually makes another, slightly more impatient hum of curiosity, I force my attention back outside the car. It takes me a minute to even find Travis, but then I say, "He's in his car now. Twenty feet away, maybe, just watching through the windshield. Shit, Ben, your mouth—"

He surges up to kiss me, sweeping his tongue into my mouth so that I'm left with the taste of my own precum. He pulls back just enough to urge, "Don't look away, okay?"

"Please—"

"I'm going to, I promise, you're going to get off, but I want you to look him in the eyes the entire time. I want him to see your face when I make you come."

It's twisted, and hot, and wrong. I nod, and he kisses me again before sinking back down onto me. True to my word, I do my best to focus my eyes on Travis, who has barely blinked once. I'd always hoped I'd get another chance to see his face while getting off, but I never, ever wanted it to be like this. I never thought that the closest I'd get to sleeping with him again would be getting sucked off by his ex-boyfriend while he watched from his own car. This is so fucked up, but Ben has a goddamn talented tongue, and after a while, it's hard to remember that this is wrong. I'm fucking up into his mouth, and I chance the briefest glance down to see that he's palming himself through his jeans. When my eyes flick back up, Travis looks so, so sad, but then he licks his lips, and I'm coming.

I'm still twitching a little as Ben throws open his car door and stalks across the lot. My vision is a bit whited out, but I blink a few times, just in time to see Ben climb right up onto the hood of Travis' car, kneeling over it and bracing his hands against the windshield.

And then he spits.

It takes a fucking *lot* to shock me when it comes to sex these days, but even I can't help but be stunned by the sight of my cum and Ben's saliva splattered across Travis' windshield, of Travis' slack jaw on the other side of that glass, of Ben leaning back onto his heels and snapping, "Fuck you, Travis. You have no *idea* what he needs."

No idea what... what? I'm too dazed to fully appreciate the conversation, or what it might have to do with everything that was said in the classroom, but I do have the presence of mind to tuck myself back into my jeans and zip up before I get out of the car. I'm intending to go over and try to diffuse the tension—which will be incredibly hard to do, if I'm looking at Travis through semen-coated glass—but then Ben turns around, jumps off the hood of the car, and stomps back over to me. "Are you ready to go?"

"You need to drive," I say, my voice still barely more than a groan. "You—fuck, I'm not sure I can work the pedals yet."

"That's fine. Get in," he orders, sliding into the driver's seat and yanking it forward again so he can reach the pedals. I sink into the passenger's seat and cast one last look at Travis' car as we peel out of the parking lot. He's staring at the cum on the windshield, the muscles in his jaw working furiously, like he's trying to stop himself from screaming, or crying, or something.

I slouch down in my seat and kick my feet up onto the dashboard. Ben swats at my knees, and I catch his hand and lace our fingers together again, giving them a hard squeeze. "Feel better?"

"No," he says quietly, voice barely audible over the stereo. "Do you?"

I shake my head and turn to stare out the window. "No, I don't."

Chapter Thirteen

“In a perverse way, I was glad for the stitches, glad it would show, that there would be scars. What was the point of just being hurt on the inside? It should bloody well show.” –Janet Fitch

44 days sober

The call comes halfway through lunch on Thursday. I'm sitting next to Travis—Riley had rolled his eyes and pretended not to notice my silent pleading for him to switch seats with me—and leaning halfway across the table to engage Nate in an argument about the stupidity of forcing a costume change before the bonfire scene. “For shit’s sake, Holliday, it’s bad enough that you want us to change for the sleepover scene—I’m changing *onstage* for that, I’ve got no idea how you got Markland to approve that—and then you want us to change back into normal clothes, then formal for the dance, back into normal, and then you’re having John and Joss change *again* for the final two songs and bows? That’s insane.”

“Stop complaining,” Nate demands. “You’re wearing the same black jeans for every scene but the sleepover—”

“Changing from sweatpants and a beater to jeans and a t-shirt onstage, what the fuck. You can’t just say Rizzo left the room and let me change in the wings before I go back out for my scene with Christine?”

In what I can only assume is an attempt to find the silver lining, John shrugs and says, “You get to keep your boxers on.”

“I don’t wear boxers. I don’t wear anything,” I say, and Nate’s face goes tomato red high on his cheekbones. I grin. “You need to take a personal moment for that one, Nate? Couple seconds to picture it, enjoy it? That’s cool, you go right ahead, I’ll wait.”

“I think a lot of us need a personal moment for that,” Christine admits, and I laugh.

On Travis’ other side, Joss mutters, “A moment to fight back our nausea.”

My phone buzzes in my pocket, then again, and again, and again. A call, not a text. I’m expecting it to be a wrong number from someone who doesn’t realize I’m busy right now, but when I slip my phone from my pocket, Ben’s name blinks up at me from the display. Next to me, Travis glances at it and makes a slightly strangled noise that I try to ignore. We haven’t spoken to each other since what happened on Monday. My face heats up—I wonder if he’s still thinking about me kissing Ben, or my face when I come, or that goddamn *spitting*. I send a quick glance around the cafeteria to make sure there aren’t any teachers nearby, then answer the call, “Hey, gorgeous. I—”

“Are you at school right now?” Ben cuts across me.

“Uh, it’s noon on a Thursday, and I’m a senior in high school, so... yes, I’m at school,” I say, frowning. There’s a sharpness in his tone that makes me uncomfortable. Besides, he knows where I am. Or, he should. “Is something wro—”

“Fuck, okay,” Ben mutters, not entirely to me. “Alright. I’m sorry. I’ll talk to you—”

“Ben, wait. Something’s wrong, I can hear it in your voice. Tell me what’s going on,” I say.

For several seconds, there is nothing but absolute silence; I actually take the phone away from my ear to check the display so that I can be sure that he hasn’t hung up on me. The call is still going. I return the phone to my ear just in time to hear him take another shallow breath and say, “I-if hypothetically, someone had um... if someone had cut himself, and gone too deep, or hit a vein or something, a-and his roommate wasn’t home to help, and there was so much fucking blood that he was starting to feel sick, and he didn’t know what to do... what, um, what should that person do?”

My own blood goes cold. Without thinking, I reach over and slide my hand into Travis' where it's lying on the table next to his lunch tray. His breath hitches, and I tighten my grip, drawing a few pairs of eyes to the point of contact between us. Joss leans around Travis to snap, "Garen, can you not?"

"Shut the fuck up, Josslyn," I say tightly. I turn slightly and lower my voice enough that no one can hear me except for Travis and Ben. "How long ago did this happen?"

"I don't know. Maybe twenty-five minutes?"

"Are you still bleeding?"

That is the question that finally makes Travis realize what's going on. Maybe not the specifics of it, maybe not why Ben is bleeding, but it's enough to make him lean closer and return the grip on my hand. "Garen, what's wrong? What happened to him?"

Unable to say it aloud, especially in front of this group of people who are clearly doing their best to eavesdrop, I shake my head. He squeezes my hand tightly enough to crack my knuckles, and I can tell he's not going to let me get away with refusing to answer. I meet his eyes and very deliberately drag the tip of my thumb across his wrist, imitating the action I know he understands only too well. He looks like he's about to be sick.

On the other end of the phone call, Ben says, "Yeah, I'm still bleeding. Kind of badly. I-I thought it would stop. It always stops, especially when I'm doing it higher up on my forearm, instead of near my wrist. But th-this was a new razor, and I think I pressed down too hard when I was doing it, because this cut... god, it's so much fucking deeper than it should be."

I swallow hard. "And you said Alex isn't there? He can't drive you to the emergency room?"

"No, no, Garen, it's not that—I don't need to go to the emergency room, okay? I can't do that, I don't want to do that. It's just, I need someone to help me stop the bleeding, I need to bandage my arm, but Alex isn't here to help me. It's *fine*, I'll figure it out myself, I only called you because I was surprised by how much—it's a lot of fucking blood, G."

Ben is a lot of things, but he's not a drama queen. If anything, he downplays everything. So, if he's saying it's a lot of fucking blood, that must mean it's critical. I check the time on Travis' watch. "Okay. That's okay, that's fine, we'll worry about Alex later. But I need you to stay where you are and wrap something around your arm. A towel, or a sweatshirt, anything. I need you to keep pressure on it. I'm too far away to drive you—I'm leaving school the second I hang up, but I still can't get there for at least another half an hour, and that's too much time. I'm going to call Stohls and—"

"Please don't," Ben says, voice tight. "She doesn't know that I do this, I don't want her to—"

"This isn't a fucking debate, dude," I snap. "She lives five minutes away from you. I'm going to call her and tell her that you need her help, and I'll tell her not to ask you any questions. She'll check you out, see if she can bandage you up, but if she thinks you need it, she's going to take you to the hospital, and I'm going to meet you there, and you're not going to fucking fight either of us about this. You're going to be fine, I promise, I just need you to make sure you stay calm and keep as much pressure on the cut as possible. Can you do that for me?"

"Garen, I'm scared," he whispers. He sounds like he's going to cry; I think maybe I am, too.

At the very least, I am seconds away from freaking the fuck out, but I manage to calm my voice enough to say, "I know you are, dude. I am, too. That's why I'm going to call Stohler and have her come help you."

"I'm really, really sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Just say you'll do what I asked," I say. The moment he agrees, I hang up.

"I'm coming with you," Travis says immediately. Before I can either agree or object, he puts a hand to my shoulder and pushes until I stand and step away from the edge of the bench. He slides out after me and orders Nate, "Tell Ms. Markland we're not going to be at rehearsal. Have the crew continue painting the carnival pieces, okay? They should know what to do."

"She's going to be really upset, Travis, we're barely a month away from opening night," Nate warns, eyes fixed on our still-joined hands.

"I don't care," Travis snaps. "Tell her there was an emergency, and we had to leave school early."

I dig into my pockets—thank god, my keys and wallet are actually with me, so I won't have to stop at my locker for them. Travis takes one step closer towards me, towards the door, but his progress is halted when Joss darts out a hand and wraps it around his wrist. Her eyes are pleading as she says, "You promised you were done with him."

Really? Now? They might not have heard everything I was saying, and I doubt any of them fully understood what was inferred, but everyone at the table heard enough to realize that someone I care about—someone Travis cares about, too, no matter how much they may have hated each other on Monday night—is seriously injured. And of course it would figure that now's the moment when horrible, selfish Joss would decide to launch another episode of the 'Travis Should Choose Joss Over Garen' show. I yank away from Travis' grip and say, "I do not have time to deal with this petty, high school drama. I'm leaving."

I stride away, head pounding too much to listen to the continued argument behind me, and dial Stohler's number with trembling fingers. The phone is still ringing and I've only made it halfway to the cafeteria door when I become aware of hurried footsteps behind me. Travis runs right past me, barely pausing long enough to grab my wrist and drag me after him with an urgent, "Come on, let's go."

Us. He chose *us*—me and Ben, his real friends, not just some girl who happened to have the right sexual organs to get herself knocked up. I'm so distracted by my own gratefulness that I almost forget to speak when Stohler finally picks up the call with, "This had better be important, Anderson, I'm trying to sleep."

"Can you do me a favor?" I ask, without bothering to think of a nicer way to put it.

"Depends on the favor," she says, yawning.

"Ben's hurt, and he says he doesn't want to go to the hospital, but I think he needs to. I need someone to go over to his apartment and check him out, and if it's as bad as I think it is, I need you to bring him to the ER."

The change in her tone might be funny, if it, you know, weren't awful. "I'll—fuck, I'm getting dressed right now, I'll head right over. What happened to him?"

"I can't really explain it right now, okay? I'm still in Lakewood, and I'm on my way now, but I can't get there soon enough to be sure he's okay. I need someone to take—"

"I'm walking out of my building as we speak, and I'll text you the second I have more details, alright? Just get to New Haven. Now."

She hangs up without another word, and I take a moment to be painfully grateful for Lindsey Stohler. The sound of our running footsteps must be louder than I'd realized; we're halfway down the senior hallway when a door swings open and Mr. Esteves, our trial law teacher, pokes his head out of his classroom. "Hey, hey, boys. Why aren't you in class right now?"

I skid to a halt, but Travis gives my hand a hard yank and says, "There's been a family emergency. We have to go."

Mr. Esteves frowns. "Do you both have passes from the main office?"

"No, we don't, and we don't have time to stop and get them. You can give us both detention later. Garen, walk," Travis orders, and I allow myself to be dragged onward. A peek over my shoulder tells me that Mr. Esteves is as stunned by Travis' tone as I am—I'd bet my Fender Strat that it's the first time in the history of his high school career that Travis McCall has blown off a teacher and requested detention.

Travis releases me and slams the heels of his hands into the latch of the main door, and we both come tumbling out of the building onto the front steps. This isn't the first time I've bailed on school during the middle of my lunch period, but it is the first time I've been so obvious about it, and the first time I've had someone with me. Or, leading me, in this case—Travis is sprinting towards my car, and holy *shit*, he's fast. He reaches the car before I do, tries the handle on the passenger side door, but finds it locked. He's far enough ahead of me that it seems like a waste of time to do anything but pitch him the keys; he catches them, unlocks his own door, then leans across the center console to unlock the driver's door and start the engine. I fling myself behind the wheel, slam my door shut, and gun it out of the parking lot.

"Tell me what happened," Travis demands.

"I don't know, he just called me and said he'd cut himself, gone too deep. He's been bleeding for about twenty minutes—he says he feels sick. I didn't—"

"Alex," Travis interrupts, "Alex can—"

"He's not at the apartment. I sent my friend Stohler over to help him, she's going to see if she can fix him, but if it's too bad, she's taking him to the hospital. I just—I don't understand. We hung out the day before yesterday, I talked to him on the phone last night, and he was fine. I don't get what happened. I don't understand why he'd be so depressed that he'd do this to himself."

Travis remains silent for so long that I can't help but glance over at him. He's staring down at his own wrists, which are lying upturned on his lap. They're completely bare—at least, they're not as scarred and shredded as Ben's are. The sleeves of his hoodie are pushed up to his elbows, exposing the smooth, still summer-tanned skin of his forearms. His right arm is littered with old scars, faint, slightly paler lines that stretch across his flesh. It's like he was playing connect-the-dots with his freckles. Right below the bend of his elbow, peeking out from the bottom of his sleeve, there is one cut that was made recently enough to still be angry, red, barely scabbed over.

Feeling my eyes on him, he looks up at me and swallows. "Sometimes it's not like that. Sometimes nothing has happened, but you need to do it anyway, because there's—because just getting through the day is hard. And that's how you deal. That's how Ben deals."

You mean it's how you deal, I want to say, but even thinking those words drowns me in a wave of disgust at my own hypocrisy. I know all too well what it feels like to not know if I'll be able to make it through the day without finding something to suck out the poison in my mind. I chose coke and pills and whiskey; they choose the edge of a blade. At the end of the day, it's all just a distraction, so why am I judging their version of solace?

"Open the glovebox," I say, and he obeys without comment. At the next red light, I lean over and rummage through it until I find my cigarettes. I pluck one from the pack, stick it between my lips, and set the tip of it aglow with the Zippo I keep in my pocket.

Travis shoots me a disgruntled look and stretches an arm across me to roll down my window. "Really, Garen? Now's the time for that?"

"My not-boyfriend just slashed his wrists open and is on his way to the hospital. If now isn't the right time to have a smoke, I have no idea what is," I snap. "And it's my car, so if you've got a problem with it, feel free to do a tuck-and-roll out onto the side of the road."

He snaps the glove compartment shut and turns to stare out the window. I flick the stereo on. No matter how fast I drive, it's still a thirty minute ride from Lakewood to New Haven. Thirty minutes of dead silence would be my undoing, so I do my best to block out the awkwardness between us by alternating between singing along with the music and taking drags off my cigarette. I have just flicked the butt of the cigarette out the window when Travis suddenly darts out a hand and shuts off the music, leaving me singing along to the next lyric without accompaniment, "*—but I am too weak to be your cure.*"

The words die in my throat, punctuated by the vibration of my cell phone in the cup holder. Without waiting for my permission, Travis snatches it up, opens my inbox, and reads aloud, "*He refuses to let me bring him to the hospital, but your boy needs a doctor ASAP, or he's going to bleed the fuck out--*"

"Fuck," I say tightly. "Text back, tell her—"

"—*'Have wrestled him into my Mustang, you're paying to get the twink blood detailed out of my interior. We're going to the urgent care clinic on Elm. Meet us there.'*" He taps out a quick text, presumably acknowledging his receipt of the message, then drops the phone back in the cup holder. He takes a deep, steadying breath, then forces himself to give me what I bet he thinks is a reassuring smile. "Okay. So, she's getting him help. That's good, he's going to be—"

"How much blood can someone lose before he dies?" I can't stop myself from asking.

"Don't ask me that," Travis says sharply. "He's not going to *die*, Jesus Christ, he's going to be fine. Stohler is—"

"Can you just answer the fucking question?" I demand.

He yanks his sleeves down over his hands and rubs them over his face for a moment before saying tonelessly, "About forty percent of their total blood volume. For somebody Ben's size, that's maybe two liters."

I can't help but picture one of those big, two-liter pop bottles—it doesn't seem like much, not when it's the only thing standing between one of my best friends and death. But then again, I can't really picture that amount of blood managing to come out of a person's arm, not unless it was fucking cut off. I chain-smoke the rest of the way to New Haven.

There's an empty meter just down the block from the urgent care clinic Stohler described, which is good, because at this point, I think I probably would've just parked in the middle of the goddamn sidewalk and let them tow my car. I parallel park between an SUV and a white food truck that appears to be selling tacos, then leave Travis to stuff a few quarters into the meter while I jog inside. The clinic's waiting area is empty, which I can only assume is a good thing—if there's no one else here, Ben was probably seen by a doctor almost immediately. There's a reception desk, manned by a woman with alert eyes and a nonjudgmental smile. I step towards her, and she slides open the glass window separating us so that I can say, "Hi, um, my boyfriend came in a little while ago. Benjamin McCutcheon. Is he still—I mean, is he okay? Is he here? Can I see him?"

I must have been right about this not being a busy day, because she barely has to glance down at her clipboard before she says, "Eighteen-year-old male, laceration to the left forearm, came in with a young blond woman?"

"Yeah, that's him. Them. She's my friend," I say, and I'm kind of babbling, but I'm afraid that if I don't keep talking, I won't be able to get the words out again if she asks me a direct question later. I hear the clinic

door open and shut, and I know without looking that it's Travis who is now standing behind me.

"Yes, she said you'd be along. They're meeting with the doctor now. Would you like me to have one of the girls show you back to the exam room?" she asks. I nod, not trusting myself to say anything other than *of course I want you to show me back to the room, you fucking idiot*. As if sensing my impending hysteria, Travis places a hand in the small of my back, grounding me.

A girl in scrubs—she's barely the same age as us, how the fuck can she be qualified to work here?—steps out of the reception area and beckons us towards a set of double doors. "Right through here."

The pressure on my back increases until I have no choice but to allow Travis to guide me in the direction of the doors. We pass through them, and the girl opens her mouth to speak again, but I can already see Stohler down the hall, pacing back and forth outside an exam room. The moment she sees me, she is so overcome with a wave of relief that she actually braces herself with a hand raised to the wall. "Garen. You're here."

I'm at her side in an instant, leaving Travis to trail after me and the girl in scrubs to disappear back to the reception area. "How is he? Is he okay? Is his arm—"

"His arm is a fucking horror show. Jesus Christ," Stohler hisses. Her t-shirt is smeared with streaks of blood, and I have to look up at the ceiling so that I won't be sick. "He could barely stand up to answer the goddamn door—from what I could tell, he buzzed me into the building and just sat down in his hallway. I had to practically carry him out to the car because he was so weak from blood loss. He almost passed out in the goddamn waiting room."

"For fuck's sake, Lindsey, is he going to be okay?" I burst out.

She curves her shaking hands over my shoulders and gives me a rough squeeze. "He'll be *fine*, man. We just met with the doctor. They're going to sterilize the wound and stitch it up, but he didn't actually hit any major veins or arteries. He doesn't need a transfusion, he doesn't need surgery, he doesn't—hey. Anderson. Look at me." I allow my eyes to drop back to her pale but determined face. "He's not going to die, if that's what you're worried about. He didn't bleed out. He's going to be fine."

"Can I go in and see him?" I ask, barely waiting for her to nod before I push open the exam room door and slip inside.

I've never been to an urgent care clinic, and I've only been in the hospital three times. Every time has begun with me waking up, pained and delirious, in a bed. This room has no bed, just cabinets, a sink, two folding chairs, and a small exam table where Ben is sitting, and waiting, and bleeding. His eyes are wide and unfocused, but aimed in the general direction of the forearm resting limply in his lap. His right hand is holding a blood-soaked dish towel over where the cut must be; the sleeve of his shirt is bunched up over his elbow, but the hem of it is still stained black-red. And it's—I'm not *James*, I don't spend all my time mocking Ben for being five-six and a hundred and twenty pounds, but right now, he looks so small.

I step up to his side and press a soft kiss to his temple. He doesn't move at all, so I repeat the gesture and murmur, "Hey, babe. I talked to Stohler. She told me the doctor said you're going to be okay."

"No, I'm not," he says. "God, she must think I'm such a psycho. And the doctor, too. You didn't see the way he looked at me. He was trying to hide it, to hide his disgust, but I could tell, he thinks I'm completely crazy. This is why I didn't want to go to a doctor, okay? Because I didn't—I'm so fucked up, I didn't want them to *know*. I was fine when I could hide it, when the only people who knew about it were you, and Al, and Travis. It was fine then, but now it's all—"

"Ben, it's okay. It was an accident, it's not like you were trying to off yourself. You'll be fine. It's not a big deal," I say, parroting back the words everyone else has been using.

Ben finally looks at me, but I wish he hadn't, because he's sneering. "Not a big deal? Really?" Before I can stop him, he unwraps the dish towel and exposes the—fucking *fuck*. The cut on his arm is a diagonal, four-inch slash of screaming red raging across his skin. It's hideously deep, still bleeding even now, and oh my god, how is he still conscious? I allow myself to reel back for no more than half a second, and then I fumble to apply pressure with the towel once more. That is *not* something that should be left open and exposed. "Tell me again, Garen," he says steadily. "Tell me how it's not a big deal."

I don't have a chance to say anything else, because the exam room door opens, and an unreasonably tall Indian man steps inside, followed by the same girl in scrubs from before. She's wheeling along a cart laden down with needles and sutures and gauze. The man looks mildly surprised to see that anyone but Ben is in the room. "Hello. And you are?"

"Garen Anderson. Boyfriend," I say, and Ben gives me a look, but doesn't bother to correct me.

"Ah. My name is Doctor Mahibir. Don't worry, I'll take very good care of him," is the reply. He snaps on a pair of surgical gloves and says, "Benjamin, can you please stand and move over to the sink?"

Ben shakes me off and obeys. I hover uncomfortably at the edge of the exam table while his wound is cleaned and thoroughly disinfected. The girl in scrubs and I exchange a few awkward half-smiles whenever we make eye contact, both of us useless for the time being. It's several minutes before Ben is allowed to return to the table. Dr. Mahibir picks up a syringe from the cart and says, "This is a local anesthetic. You'll feel a slight pinch when it goes in, but then it should numb your arm enough for me to suture the wound." Ben nods, but says nothing. He lets me take his hand again, lets me perch on the edge of the exam table next to him, winces when the needle goes in. That almost makes me laugh—that someone who's here because he intentionally cut open his own arm would flinch at getting a shot.

The anesthetic is followed by another shot that the doctor claims will help prevent infection, and then the stitching begins. At one point, I make the mistake of sneaking a peek at his arm—just as the giant, curved needle pierces his flesh and hooks through the other side of the wound, suturing it together, and holy fuck. I give Ben's good hand a tight squeeze and get shakily to my feet. "I-I'll be right back, okay?"

He nods; he's been following the progress of my eyes with his, so I don't doubt that he knows what's going on. I wobble towards the door and edge out into the hallway. Travis is standing next to the door, alone. He looks around at me and says, "Your friend went out for a cigarette a couple of minutes ago. She said—dude, are you okay?"

I give a wild shake of my head and barely make it down the hallway and into a stall in the men's room before I'm sick. I can hear the shifting of feet outside the stall door, meaning Travis must have followed me in, though he thankfully maintains his distance until I'm done puking my brains out. Even after my body has stopped reflexively trying to reject any of the food that's in me, I know I can't go back into that room unless my stomach is completely empty. Ben needs me, but more than that, he needs for me to be strong, and he's not going to think I'm strong if I walk into the room, take a glance at his arm, and have to leave to be sick again. So, in what I can only consider to be a preventative countermeasure, I stick my fingers far back into my throat and press my other hand hard against my gut until my shoulders roll forward and I empty the remaining contents of my stomach into the toilet.

When I have finished and moved out of the stall to rinse my mouth and wash my hands, Travis is idling by the sink and holding a folded and dampened paper towel out to me. I don't accept it, and he rolls his eyes, steps much too far into my personal space, and drapes it across the back of my neck. I shiver—the coolness of it helps me feel significantly less disgusting, but I sort of hate the fact that even now, when I'm supposed to be taking care of Ben, I still need someone to take care of me. "He's okay," I say finally, "and I'm okay. It's just—the doctor was stitching him up. And I looked. And it was—fuck. I-I don't really do too well with blood, I guess. Or needles."

"Ironic, considering I once watched you shove a piercing into your own lip in the middle of my living room," he says.

I manage to return a weak imitation of his wry smile and say, "It was the den, not the living room. And that was different, I was high as balls. I don't think—I only know how to deal with shit like this when I'm fucked up. I don't think I can do this sober."

The confession is out without my permission or consideration of what I'm actually saying. To his credit, Travis takes it in stride; he barely looks like he's going to die as he says slowly, "Are you saying you want to use right now?"

I brace my palms on the sides of the sink and meet his eyes in the mirror. "I'm saying that... look, I'm not going to go out and score. I'm not going to hit a bar on the way home. But I'd be lying if I said that I was able to think anything right now other than, 'holy shit, I need a drink.'"

"No, you don't," Travis says simply. "I get how hard this is for you right now, because I've been there. Do you think I didn't want to do that—" He flings an arm out to the side, in the general direction of the exam room, presumably referring to the gash across Ben's arm, "—when you were in the hospital last spring? It was killing me to see you hurt like that, and all I wanted to do was find something I could do to myself that could make it feel better by making it feel worse. But I didn't. I couldn't. Just like you can't do anything now, okay?"

He makes it sound so simple; he gives me too much credit. But he's right, and I find myself nodding. Before I can make sense of the movement, he steps closer and yanks me into a tight hug. I squeeze my eyes shut. I haven't had his arms around me in—fuck, when? Since the night he told me about Joss being pregnant? Does that even count, or should I be thinking of whenever the time before that was? Him helping me stagger up to Ben's apartment after my relapse. Him holding me while I had a complete breakdown after he wrestled my father's gun away from me, before I went into rehab. Will there ever be a time when he touches me because he wants to, not because I need him to?

The moment's too heavy. I say, "Hugging someone who's just been throwing up. You're so gross."

He snorts and buries his face in the side of my neck. "That's what Josslyn says whenever she gets sick and I try to ask her if she needs anything. I'll knock on the bathroom door and be like, '*is there anything I can do? What do you want from me?*' And she'll just yell back, '*I want you to go back in time and get a fucking vasectomy.*' And then when she comes out, I'll try and hug her, and she'll usually throw something at me."

It's such a domestic thing to say; it makes me want to walk in front of a bus. Instead, I settle for asking, "Do you guys do that a lot?"

"Fight?" he asks, nodding even as the word comes out.

And okay, that makes me feel better, but I shake my head. "Spend the night together. And the mornings, when she's, you know—"

"Morning sickness isn't actually just in the mornings," he says. "And it doesn't always stop after the first couple of months, either. For her, it's mostly right after meals—that's why she's such a bitch during lunch every day. The smell of all the food in the cafeteria makes her feel nauseated."

Privately, I think she's a bitch during lunch every day because she's just a bitch. But I say, "I didn't know that. Guess I'm dumb."

"You're not dumb. You just don't need to know shit like that, because you weren't enough of a fucking idiot to knock somebody up at seventeen years old," he says.

I'm pretty sure that the issue of me knocking somebody up lies less in whether or not I'm an idiot, and more in the fact that the idea of me even being able to maintain an erection during intercourse with a

female is simultaneously laughable and vile. I raise a hand to stroke the back of his head, card my fingers through his hair; he melts into the touch. I don't think I can handle going back into the exam room until I know that Ben's arm is stitched most of the way up, so I try to distract myself by reluctantly asking, "Do you know if it's a boy or a girl yet?"

He shakes his head, still not leaning away from my body. "Won't really find that out until about eighteen weeks, and she's only at around six now. So, I won't know until the middle of January, at the earliest."

"Which do you hope it is?"

"On the record? I'll be happy with either," he says. There's a beat, and then he leans back to meet my gaze. He somehow manages to look tired, and nervous, and the tiniest bit excited all at once. "Off the record? I—having a daughter might be, um... I mean, obviously I didn't plan any of this. And not getting my girlfriend pregnant was Plan A, but that's sort of shot to hell. So... having a girl might be a good Plan B."

I brush his hair off his forehead and try not to ache. "Well, I hope you have a boy, so that you can name him after me."

He rolls his eyes. "I'm not going to name my kid anything I've ever shouted out in orgasm, dude. That's weird."

And of course he had to do that. He just had to remind me of what we had before. I let my arms drop and give him a gentle nudge backwards. "I should get back to Ben. The doctor's probably done with his sutures now."

"Yeah, definitely," he says at once. "I'll just... I'll wait in the hall, with Stohler. We'll wait until it's done."

I step around him and back out into the hall. Stohler is once again hovering outside the exam room, looking anxious, though she rolls her eyes when she sees Travis and I exiting the bathroom together. "What, seriously? Now seemed like the right time to sneak off for a quickie in the men's room?"

"No, now seemed like the right time for me to go throw up, because holy fuck, watching someone get stitches is the most disgusting thing I've ever experienced in my life. And I've done some pretty twisted shit in—"

The exam room door opens, and the girl in scrubs steps out, dragging the cart after her. She catches my eye and says, "You can go back in, if you'd like."

"Thanks," I say. "Just—before I do that, who should I talk to about billing? I, um, I'm going to be paying for this."

Her forehead wrinkles. "I thought that Mr. McCutcheon said—"

"Mr. McCutcheon's a stubborn ass who doesn't know how to accept help when he needs it. So am I; it's why we're so good together. So, I'd sort of like to handle this before he realizes what I'm doing," I say, and she chuckles a little.

"Come on up to the front. Ellen will talk you through the payment process."

Payment is simple enough; the bill is only a couple hundred dollars, and they accept my card without any hassle. I have to let them take down all of my billing information—presumably because they're curious as to how an eighteen-year-old guy with a lip ring and a fauxhawk can afford to just whip out a credit card and drop half a grand without batting an eye. By the time I return to the exam room, Dr. Mahibir is talking Ben through the aftercare of the stitches. Ben's arm is strapped into a sling, which the doctor explains will keep his arm curled against his chest enough to prevent it from being jostled, which might open the

stitches. Just before the doctor leaves, Ben receives two prescriptions—one for antibiotics, one for painkillers.

I try my hardest not to remember the dizzying, floating oblivion that comes from some quality painkiller abuse, but it doesn't work. By the time Dr. Mahibir asks how Ben will be paying, my jaw is almost clenched too much for me to get out, "It's been handled."

Ben's eyes snap to mine. "Garen—"

"Dude, can you not fight me on this? Can you just let me take care of you, and say 'thank you,' and have that be it?" I say.

"Thank you," he bites out, but it sounds a lot more like *fuck you*. The tension only increases when we step out into the hall and he realizes that Stohler isn't the only one waiting for him. He and Travis stare at each other for several too-long seconds before he says, "What are you doing here?"

"I was sitting next to Garen when you called him. And when I realized what you—I couldn't *not* come, Ben," Travis says hoarsely. "You realize that, right?"

"I hate—" Ben says, and Travis flinches. Ben stares at him, swallows, tries again, "I hate double-negatives."

Stohler throws her hands up and stalks down the hallway, muttering, "Fucking English majors."

"I had to come," Travis amends quietly. "Please—"

But Ben is already heading down the hallway after Stohler. Travis shoves his hands into his pockets, and we linger there for a moment, both of us waiting to see if the other might offer some word of comfort. Neither of us does, so eventually, there's nothing left to do but head outside. The Ferrari only seats two people, so Ben gets a ride back to the apartment with Stohler. She idles at the curb to let him out, but I swing into the parking lot and park in Alex's still-empty space. "Come on," I say to Travis; he gets out of the car without objection. The building's door has already swung shut behind Ben by the time we reach it, but he turns around and blinks at us when I rap my knuckles hard against the glass. After a moment, he pushes it back open, and I say, "I'm going to come up to your apartment now. And you're going to show me where you keep all your razor blades or safety pins or broken glass or whatever the fuck else you use. And it's all coming with me. I'm not leaving it in this building with you."

"You plan to take all my cutlery, too?" he asks.

"If I have to."

His jaw is working like he wants to protest, but he steps aside and lets us enter the building. I pluck his keys from his back pocket and lead the way up to his apartment to unlock the door. The second I've stepped over the threshold, I wish I hadn't. There are smudged red fingerprints across the intercom next to the door, and there's a trail of blood droplets leading from the door down the hall in the direction of Ben's room. For a long moment, the three of us stand in the front hall, none of us saying a word. Then Travis clears his throat and edges past me and Ben into the kitchen, saying quietly, "I'll clean up. You two go collect whatever it is you want to leave the building."

Ben hooks his middle finger through my belt loop and tows me down the hall to his room. I'm not sure how long I'm going to be here, but I shut the door anyway. If I thought the hallway was bad, it's nothing compared to the way my stomach rolls over at the streaks of blood that decorate his bed. The top blanket is smeared with dark red, as if he had panicked and tried to stop the bleeding by applying pressure with the first strip of fabric he could reach.

Fighting back nausea, I edge around Ben and strip the blanket off the bed, folding it carefully and trying

not to let it touch anything else, even though it seems like most of the blood has dried. The empty CD case that he uses to hold his razor blades is lying open on the nightstand; I snap it shut and toss it onto the folded blanket, then turn expectantly towards Ben. "Is there anything else?"

He moves wordlessly over to the desk and slides open the top drawer, extracting a black, plastic square that seems designed to hold fresh razor blades. He drops it on top of the CD case, then continues to dig through the desk, eventually surfacing with a box of thumbtacks and a couple of safety pins. At my questioning glance, he shrugs and says, "It seems like a lot, but I've used all of those things to do it before. If you really want me to stop, you might as well take everything."

"Okay," I say. Out of the corner of my eye, I spot his backpack, slumped on his desk chair and scattered with buttons. Not bothering to seek his permission first, I unhook each of the pins, most of which seem to be for past years' Banned Book Week, or his dad's used book store, or random quotes about literature and censorship.

"I've never hurt myself with any of those, you know," Ben says.

I shrug. "I'd rather be safe than sorry."

"I *like* them," he says, scowling and trying to sneak away with a pin that reads, *There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.* I pry it out of his hand and return it to the pile of confiscated items. We glare at each other for a beat, and then he says, "Fine. But your dumb ass better find me an Oscar Wilde hoodie or something, to make up for this."

I'll buy him a hoodie with a quote from whatever dead literary faggot he wants, if it'll get him to stop sawing at his wrists whenever he's left alone for too long. But I can tell this isn't about the hoodie, or the pins, or any of it. I duck my head and say, "We're about to break up, aren't we?"

If it were anyone else, now would be the time when I'd be hearing some snide comment about how we were never really together. But for all his sarcasm and eyerolling and deadpan delivery, Ben isn't a fan of bullshit. He drags his good hand through his hair and sighs. "I don't... Garen, I don't *want* to, but—"

"But we're, um," I break off and swallow hard. "We're both sort of fucked up, huh?"

He laughs, and that helps. It breaks the tension, at least, makes me smile. He says, "Yeah. We're both really fucked up right now. And—look, dude, I like what we have, you know? And other than Alex—"

"Other than Jamie—"

"You're my best friend," we say at the same time, and he makes a face. I grin and say, "Hanging out with you is really awesome, man."

"And the sex isn't too bad," he admits.

I knock my elbow against his good arm and say, "The sex is fucking amazing, who are you trying to fool? Don't think I don't remember you saying last week that it's the best you've ever had. Because you did, you totally said that. That awkward night where you shot me down when I asked you out—and really, way to stick to your guns on that one, dude, 'cause in case you haven't noticed, we're breaking up right now, so obviously we started dating at some—"

"This is the point," Ben says, wiggling the fingers of the arm he's got in the sling, then making a sweeping motion past it with his other hand, "and this is you, completely missing it."

I raise my eyebrows. "We're best bros, and we have filthy, kinky, disgustingly great sex, but we're both addicts. I want drugs, and you want to cut yourself, and if we're together, neither of us is going to be able to focus on ourselves enough to get better. Did I leave anything out? Is this still me, missing the point?"

He sighs and flops back onto the bed, wincing when the motion jostles his arm. In an instant, I'm kneeling next to him on the bed and ghosting my palm across his chest. Fucking idiot, throwing himself around when he's just had half his arm sewn back together, what the hell. He scowls but lifts his good arm so that I can curl up against his side with my head pillowed on his chest. He combs his fingers lazily through my hair for a few minutes before he says, "You should probably go soon. Travis is still out in the living room, and you need to bring him back."

"Are we going to tell him that he was right about it not being a good idea for us to hook up?" I ask.

Ben snorts. "Fuck no. I'd rather slash my other wrist than ever tell that ass he was right about anything. Especially my love life."

"If you make a joke like that again, I will punch you in the stitches," I warn. Like a good boy, he falls silent, but like an asshole, I can't resist lifting my head to shoot him a sly smile and say, "Love life, huh? You/ooooove me, McCutcheon?"

"I might, if you weren't such a dick all the time," he says. I let my head drop back onto his chest.

"Yeah, yeah. I love you, too," I say, and his hand returns to my hair. The repetitive motion is soothing, and I'm almost tempted to fall asleep right here, with my arms around Ben and his hand in my hair. My friendship with him is probably the closest I've ever been to anyone, other than what I have with Jamie and what I had with Travis. I don't want to get up off of this bed and walk out of this room and have that change. I slip my hand from his waist to the buckle of his studded belt and murmur, "You know, since you're so lightheaded from blood loss and bombed out on painkillers and whatever, you'd probably have a wicked orgasm if we fucked right now."

Ben laughs and bats my hand away from his belt. "Raincheck. The doctor said I'll be good as new in about six weeks, so let's hold off on the breakup sex until I'm not in a goddamn sling, yeah?"

Breakup sex. God. It's not like I ever expected Ben to be my boyfriend, or my not-boyfriend, or whatever, but the idea of him being my ex-boyfriend is even more intolerable. I sit up and swing a leg over him so that I'm straddling the tops of his thighs. He blinks up at me, still a bit sluggish from his painkillers, but I catch his face between my hands and hope that some of my urgency will transfer to him as I say, "This isn't going to fuck up our friendship, right? We said that things wouldn't change between us even if we couldn't make a not-relationship work out. We *promised*."

"I know, G. We're going to be fine," he assures me, and I'm somewhat mollified by that. He crooks a finger at me, and I lean down to meet him. Rather than draw me into a kiss as desperate and passionate as all the others we've shared, he gives me a simple peck on the cheek. And I guess that's the end of it. I clamber off the bed, gather up the blanket and razors, and walk out.

The trail of blood down the hallway has been scrubbed clean. I wonder how long Travis was outside the door; I wonder how much he heard. In the living room, he's waiting for me in this really weird way—he's sitting on the couch, hugging his legs to his chest, but his feet are dangling off the edge of it, like he's afraid of getting the cushions dirty with the soles of his shoes. Considering he just spent twenty minutes scrubbing blood out of the carpet, his scale of what counts as quality housekeeping can probably rest easy for a while. There's a trash bag on the ground in front of him, presumably carrying whatever cleaning supplies he had to use on the floor and the intercom. He doesn't look up until I'm standing less than a foot away from him, but when he does, he forces a tight smile. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah," I say, stuffing the blanket and wrist-cutting paraphernalia into the trash bag at his feet. "We just broke up."

He looks startled. "You, um—a-are you okay? Both of you?"

"Yeah," I repeat. "He's still pretty out of it right now, so he's just going to rest. I'll call in a couple of hours to check on him, make sure he's not, you know—" *dead*. I clear my throat. "He said to tell you goodbye. Can we go?"

He hesitates, then nods.

We make it halfway back to Lakewood with nothing but the sound of the car stereo between us. It's unbearable. It's been such a long day, and Ben's arm is fucked up, and Stohler probably thinks our whole group is crazy, and Travis hopes he's having a daughter, and I was just not-broken-up with, and all I want is for someone to talk to me, and tell me that everything's going to be okay, even when it's so obviously not. By the time we cross the Woodbridge town line, my hands are shaking so hard that it's difficult for me to grip the wheel properly. It takes all of my focus to keep myself breathing, and out of the corner of my eye, I can see Travis smoothing his palms compulsively over the knees of his jeans, as if trying to psych himself up to speak. When Woodbridge fades away and we cross into the last town before Lakewood, he gives up and gestures with one shaking hand to the parking lot of a pizza place. "Turn in here."

I do so without hesitating or asking why... or bothering to use my turn signal. The car behind me honks, but fuck him for tail-gating anyway. I've barely managed to put the car in park before Travis is unbuckling his seatbelt and launching himself at me, arms wound tight around my neck and his face buried in my hair. I clutch the back of his t-shirt in my hands and just cling to him as he chokes out, "I don't want to do this anymore. Th-This 'not being friends with you' thing, I don't want it. I need you guys to take me back."

"Trav—"

"I'm sorry, I'm so fucking sorry," he babbles right over me. "I'm sorry for everything. For making out with Joss while you were on the scaffolding, for making you relapse, for every time you felt like I was bailing on you, even when I was just trying to give you space to work through shit on your own. I'm sorry for letting my girlfriend say all that shit to you, and about you, and about Stohler, during Nate's birthday dinner. I'm sorry for agreeing to stop talking to you, just because it made Joss insecure. I'm sorry for judging what you had with Ben, and for trying to force everyone else to subscribe to my sink-or-swim mentality, and for fighting with him on Monday, and for freaking you out when I grabbed your hip in the classroom, I'm so unbelievably sorry for that. You have to believe me, I didn't know—I didn't think it would affect you like that. I'm sorry for all the times I refused to tell you what my mom had said about you that day you went to rehab, even though you kept asking, and I'm sorry for then suddenly just f-fucking *unloading* everything in front of you during that meeting last week. I'm sorry for like, telling your fucking *mom* that I'm in love with you, like you weren't even in the room with us, that was so weird, I can't believe I did that. I'm sorry for *being* in love with you—"

"I'm not going to let you apologize for that," I interrupt, squeezing my eyes shut. "Seriously, I'll accept your apology on all the rest of it, but not that."

His breath is shallow against the side of my neck as he says, "I don't know how to live my life without you in it. Please, G. Please, can we just go back to being friends again?"

I will be whatever you want me to be.

"Yeah," I say, rubbing circles into his back with my palm. "Of course, dude. We can be friends again."

It's still at least another twenty minutes before he'll release me so that I can drive us the rest of the way back to town.

46 days sober

It takes Travis about thirty seconds to get fully back into my good graces—early on Saturday afternoon, he shows up at my front door with a nervous smile and a cardboard tray holding four cups of coffee. "Hi.

So, I just got off work. And I was thinking maybe you could help me—”

“Are any of those for me?” I ask, eyes fixed on the cups.

He thrusts the tray into my hands and plucks just one of the cups back out. “Those are. I thought—”

“Congratulations, you’ve just solidified your status as my favorite friend. Get in the house, it’s weirdly cold out today.”

“Well, it’s almost November, what do you expect?” he says, but he’s got a dorky little smile on his face, and he steps over the threshold without needing to be told again. There is a brief moment of awkwardness when I lead him through to the living room and flop back into my previously vacated seat on the couch. He hesitates in the doorway, then sinks into the space next to me and offers a stilted wave to my dad, who is sitting on my other side, watching some creepy Animal Planet program about snakes, and blinking in surprise at seeing his soon-to-be-former stepson in the same room as him. Travis says, “Hi, B—uh, Mr. Anderson.”

Dad looks vaguely amused. “Hi, Travis. You know, you can still call me ‘Bill.’ You don’t need to go back to calling me ‘Mr. Anderson’ just because your mother and I are getting divorced. Speaking of, how is she?”

“Still a mega bitch,” I answer, taking a long sip from one of the coffee cups. It’s that same silky caramel combination he made for me the day we stopped speaking, and it’s just as delicious now as it was then.

Dad silences me with a glare, then turns expectant eyes towards Travis. Travis, however, shrugs and reluctantly agrees, “Still a mega bitch.”

“Yes, well...” Dad pauses, seemingly unsure of how to continue without acknowledging the truth of what’s been stated. I guess he can’t come up with anything, because eventually he just shrugs and gestures to the two of us. “I didn’t realize that you two were friends again.”

I shrug. “Yeah. He apologized for being a fucking tool, so I guess we’re good.” Dad raises his eyebrows, so I add sharply, “Don’t make it weird.” He directs his raised eyebrows back to the television, and once I’m satisfied that he’s not going to make this into a *thing*, I turn to Travis and ask, “So, what is it that you were thinking I could help you with?”

“Getting Ben to not hate me anymore?” he admits. “Things were off between us for a while, and then this past week or so has made it so much worse, and I just... I want my friend back. Look, I get that I said some things that I shouldn’t have, and sure, maybe I overstepped my boundaries by making it clear that I didn’t think you guys should be getting involved with each other right now—a point that I stand by, and seem to have been proved right about, by the way. But I mean... what he did was completely unreasonable, too.”

I frown. “What the hell did he do?”

“That, um—” Travis’ eyes flicker over to Dad, then back to me, though they’re now slightly widened to emphasize his words. “That thing. That he did. Or, that you both did, I guess. You know what I’m talking about, dude.”

I take a sip of my coffee. “What, you mean when he spit my cum onto your car?”

Dad mutes the television and turns to gape at me. “Ben did *what*?”

“Well, your horrified expression tells me that you heard me right the first time,” I say, and Travis buries his face in his hands. A little too late, I’m realizing I maybe should have waited until my dad was out of the room to discuss this matter. “I don’t see what the big deal is. That’s what they make windshield wipers for.”

"That is most definitely *not* what they make windshield wipers for, Garen Michael Anderson," Dad snaps, and I shrug. "First of all, that is just—that is rude! You shouldn't deface another person's belongings, especially with—with—"

"You really can't even begin to figure out how to yell at me for this, can you?" I say, unable to bite back a grin. "Like, I bet not a single one of those parenting books you've read ever had a chapter about 'how to chastise your child for allowing his significant other to spit his jizz at your stepson.' You are floundering so hard right now, and it is a beautiful sight to behold."

"—and what's more to the point—for Christ's sake, I can't believe I actually need to tell you this, but I was under the apparently misguided impression that you boys all knew enough to be safe. You've had two safe sex lectures already—one when you were still in middle school, another after you came out to your mother and I. I never expected that I would have to give you a third one, when you're almost nineteen years old and have already been having sex for two years," Dad says. I slowly raise four fingers into the air, and he holds a hand up to silence me, grimacing. "Please, just... let me keep my delusions, alright? Two years."

"Two years," I agree, even though, no, four. But then everything feels a bit more serious, and I say, "Look, Dad, I get the safe sex thing, okay? I swear. I never—brace yourself, 'cause if you're still trying to convince yourself I was a virgin until I was almost seventeen, you're gonna really hate this next part—I never fuck anyone without a condom. Ever. And I only have oral without a condom when I'm one hundred percent certain that the guy's clean. Ben and I have both been tested, and we're both fine."

"And you get tested regularly?" Dad forces himself to ask. "At least every six months?"

I can't help but grin as I say, "Every three, actually. You know, better to be safe than sorry, and I kind of get laid a lot—"

"I think you're doing that 'too much information' thing again," Travis mutters. I gesture in his direction.

"Hey. Since he's here, I'm pretty sure Travis is lacking a strong male role model, and you're technically still his stepfather. Wanna give him a safe sex lecture, too?" I say, and Travis turns blank eyes on me. I chomp down hard on my tongue, wishing I could take the words back—it's probably not a good idea to joke like that about someone who actually impregnated his girlfriend less than two months ago.

"From what you've unfortunately told me over the past year, you've already given him that lecture," Dad says.

"And some practical demonstrations," I say, and we sneer at each other.

Travis sucks in a deep breath and rolls his eyes towards the ceiling, uttering, "I'm going to kill myself."

It's sort of funny, and sort of not. I pull out my cell phone and say to him, "Look, if you want my help getting you and Ben back on speaking terms, you're going to have to accept as much of the blame for the fighting as he is. Yeah, he shouldn't have done what he did to your car, and yeah, in hindsight, you maybe had a *slight* point about it not being the best idea for us to rely on each other as much as we did. But in fine Travis McCall tradition, you got into a new relationship and checked out on your friends. All of us. That was a dick move, and you need to be willing to apologize for that, because if you don't—I mean, Alex will probably forgive you anyway, but Ben will eat you alive. So, you'd better start planning some big 'I'm sorry' speech for him, just like the one I got."

Before he can say anything else, I send off a group text to both Ben and Alex that says, *i have a surprise for you guys. both of you come over now & bring me a slice of carrot cake from that weird vegan lezzie cafe on your block. no arguments.*

is the surprise that ur a fuckin fatass? its not my job 2 bring u cake every time u wanna hang out, bro, Alex texts back.

Because Ben is the *nice* one, he responds with, *Ignore him. Alex is just pouting because your friend has been ignoring his texts since last night. We'll be over within the hour. This had better be a good surprise.*

I wonder if Ben will ever reach the point where he's willing to call Jamie by his actual name. I send two texts then; one to the pair of them saying, *if you bring me cake, i'll tell you why he's ignoring you :D* and another to Jamie, *alex wants to know why you're ignoring his texts. if you tell me, he'll give me cake. don't fuck up my day, goldwyn.* Mission accomplished—or, at least, mission initiated—I toss my phone onto the coffee table and announce, “Your life will be fixed before two o'clock.”

“Just like that?” Travis says, taken aback.

I shrug and confirm, “Just like that. Did you do the reading for AP English yet?”

To what I'm sure must be my father's unending delight, we actually do focus on our schoolwork—debating *The Merchant of Venice*, which I am convinced is just chock full of gay, even though Travis keeps rolling his eyes and telling me that I'm reading too much into Bassanio and Antonio's relationship—for the fifty minutes it takes for Ben and Alex to show up. When Dad peeks out the front door and sees that Ben's car has pulled into the driveway, he shakes his head and sneaks off to the kitchen, presumably so he won't have to look into the eyes of someone who he knows has recently tasted my semen.

I scramble to my feet and fling the front door open before they can ring the bell, dragging them both over the threshold and announcing, “The surprise is that I'm a meddlesome life-ruiner! Did you bring my cake?”

“Yeah, we—” Alex stops speaking the moment his eyes land on Travis, still shifting nervously on the couch. Ben quirks an eyebrow—and goddamn, I never knew it was possible to put that much disdain into a single movement. Travis shoots me a wild glance which I assume he intends to mean, *Is this really your version of fixing things? Because this is uncomfortable and you are terrible at this*, but which I have chosen to interpret as, *Garen, you're so awesome, thank you for fixing my life even though I'm an asshole who doesn't really deserve it.* It's all in the translation, really.

“I was wondering whose car that was,” Ben says finally.

“Mine. Yeah,” Travis says. “Looks a bit different when you're walking past it instead of climbing on top of it, huh?”

Ben flushes and looks away. “Right. That.”

“That,” my father echoes bleakly from the kitchen, and it's probably a good thing that I confiscated all of Ben's razorblades, because right now, he's looking pretty close to suicide.

“You told your dad about that?” he hisses.

I wave a hand dismissively in his general direction. “It just sort of slipped out.”

“What are you all even talking about?” Alex demands.

“Alex, I promise you that you do not want to know,” Dad calls. “Or, to be perfectly frank, you might. I don't know. I'm still trying to figure out where you fit into this whole group situation.”

“He fits into Jamie, mostly. And me, once, when I was super drunk,” I say, mainly because both Travis and Ben are looking mortified, and I don't want Alex to feel left out.

Dad stomps out of the kitchen and heads straight for the front door, eyes wide and intentionally not focused on any of us. "I'm going to go to the store. We need... groceries. From the *store*."

No one speaks again until the door has banged shut behind him, and then three sets of furious eyes turn to me. I shrink back into the couch cushions and am instantly on the defensive. "Well, it got him out of the house, didn't it? And I just wanted to break the ice. I was afraid things would be awkward."

"Why is it," Travis says through gritted teeth, "that your default icebreaker is trying to get everyone to talk about your dick?"

"My default icebreaker is usually trying to get everyone to *touch* my dick. Pick your battles, McCall," I warn.

His focus, however, is already elsewhere, as he turns sharp eyes on Alex and says, "Also, since when does everybody know about you and James, and when the *hell* was this 'once when Garen was super drunk'?"

"No," I say, standing up and glaring around at all of them. "No, that is not how we're doing this. We're not going to all bitch at each other about stupid—look, can you all just stop hating each other? We're supposed to be friends."

Ben snaps, "And we were, up until he decided to start passing judgment on my sex life—"

"I'm sorry," Travis interrupts, and I nod frantically, beckoning for him to continue on that track. He shoots me a warning look, and I quickly drop my hands. Satisfied that I'm going to remain silent and still, he says, more calmly, "I'm sorry for being a dick, and I'm going to take the liberty of assuming that you are also sorry for being a dick. If you can get over the fact that I've been a shitty, distant friend, and that I judged your relationship, then I can get over what you did, too. Agreed?"

It's the world's shittiest apology. To be fair, I might be biased, considering I still can't forget the heartache in his voice and the tension in his body as he clung to me and begged for my forgiveness a few days ago. But after nearly a minute, the walls surrounding Ben crack, and he sinks onto the couch, too. His voice is tired as he says, "Agreed."

Still without much comment, Alex drops down onto the couch between them. And there they are, three of my four or five favorite people, all lined up together, and no one hates anyone, and everybody forgives each other, and before any of them can stop me, I'm crawling onto the couch to join them. I end up mostly in Alex's lap, with my legs stretched out across Travis, and my head and shoulders on Ben, though I'm careful to avoid touching his injured arm. They all grumble, but I don't care—my heart is doing this embarrassing clenching thing in my chest, and I start babbling, "This is fucking *great*, I'm so glad you guys aren't all going to be cocks about this. It's like we've gotten the whole group back together, except for how, you know, we haven't, because we're missing Stohl—oh, Travis, that reminds me. I don't know if you like Stohler? You've met her twice, and she comes off kind of cunty, but she's great, and you're going to have to get used to her, because she hangs out with us now, it's sort of a thing. And even if you don't get along with her, you have to pretend, 'cause that's what we make Ben and Jamie do, except they fucking *suck* at it, it's so obvious they hate—"

"Question still stands, by the way," Travis interrupts, nudging Alex's elbow with his own. "Since when am I not the only person who knows about you and James?"

Ben leans forward slightly to frown at him around Alex. "How long have you known?"

Travis snorts. "Like, four months? He told me about it the day you went to go bring Garen back from Ohio. It's been so fucking stupid, pretending there's nothing going on. He wasn't even being subtle about it. They snuck off to make out like, ten times during that cookout over the summer. And they're constantly texting each other—"

Alex digs his fingertips into my ribs. "Wait. You swore you'd tell me why he's ignoring my texts. What's going on?"

I blink; I'd sort of forgotten about that. I lean over and snag my phone from the coffee table. There's a reply from Jamie, but it's not a regular text. It's a screen cap of a conversation with Alex. Only half of Jamie's first text is visible, *wants me to make a decision by Thanksgiving.*

thats like less than a month from now, dude, Alex had texted back.

I'm aware, is Jamie's terse reply.

well it'd probably be more convenient for u 2 have someone in nyc instead of new haven, right?

Convenient, yes.

doesnt sound like that difficult of a choice, then.

It's not a difficult choice for me at all, Jamie had texted. *Night, Alex.*

"So?" Alex prompts me now. "What's wrong?"

I want to grab him by the shoulders and shake him and yell right in his face, *You are what's wrong, you stupid fuck. Jamie is perfect, and he wants you, and you are so goddamn stupid if you don't want him back. Ben doesn't want you like you want him, so stop obsessing over him, because it's hurting my best friend, and that's making me hate you a little bit.* But it's not my place to say any of that; Jamie would kill me for interfering, and I can't exactly say that with Ben right here, his head tilted quizzically to the side at my silence. I meet Travis' eyes, and he grimaces—he has known about Jamie and Alex longer than any of us, and he knows how Alex feels about Ben. He knows exactly what's wrong.

"Nothing's wrong," I say around a tight smile. "He's just busy with school right now. I'm sure he'll text you when he has time."

"He's still coming down for the party on Tuesday, though, right?" Alex says.

I don't get why he bothers to look so hopeful, if this doesn't really mean anything to him. It's not *fair*. I snap, "I don't know, dude. I'll call him later tonight and ask, but right now, I don't know what's going on. Alright?"

"Alright. Jesus Christ," Alex mutters.

For a long moment, no one speaks. Alex and I continue to semi-glare at each other; Travis just chews on his thumbnail and regards me with wide eyes. Finally, Ben sighs and stretches his good arm across the back of the couch, behind Alex's head, to nudge Travis' shoulder. "We're having a party at the apartment on Halloween. Us, Stohler, maybe James, some people from Al's school, some from mine. It's nothing too big, just costumes, music, probably beer pong."

"Definitely beer pong," I correct. "You're amending the house rules so that each team can call in a designated drinker for one of the players, because yeah, I'm sober and all, but I'm also a fucking *animal* at beer pong."

"Doesn't that defeat the whole point of the game, if each team has someone who's never going to get drunk and start doing sloppy throws?" Alex asks.

"Yes, Garen, we'll change the house rules so you can play," Ben placates me, and I twist to press a grateful kiss to the tips of the fingers dangling out of his sling. He adds, "Whatever. Travis, are you in or

what?"

And it's easy to forget the tension of the moment when I see the wide smile that breaks out across Travis' face as he nods.

Chapter Fourteen

“Love takes off masks we fear we cannot live without, and know we cannot live within.” –James Baldwin

49 days sober

It takes eight and a half weeks of school for Jeff to let me handle one of the Music History sessions by myself; it takes ten seconds of him being out of the room for me to text Travis and say, *skip your next class and come keep me company in the music room. my freshmen have a test & jeff left me alone to supervise*. He wanders in as I’m passing out the test packets. “You’re lucky I have study hall this period.”

“Dude, if you have last period study, why are you even here? I’d go home early every day.”

“Forgive me if I don’t take attendance advice from a guy who got expelled for skipping seven straight weeks of school last year,” he says.

A handful of the freshmen giggle. I narrow my eyes at them. “No talking. I’ll be grading everybody’s homework and passing it back while you’re taking your tests, so leave room under your desks. I don’t want to have to push you out of the way just so I can put the graded papers with the rest of your shit—sorry, *stuff*. Books. Whatever. Raise your hand if you have a question, and I’ll come over to you, alright?”

Claire, one of the girls who always sits in the back and sneaks awestruck glances at me when she thinks I’m not looking, raises her hand. “Should we bring our finished tests to you?”

“Stack them on the desk in the back, okay?” I say. No one protests, so I make a vague *do your fucking work* gesture and retreat to the back of the classroom with Travis. The stack of homework is simple enough to correct—it was a multiple-choice worksheet, so all I have to do is compare the answers to the key Jeff made up for me. Only about half the people in the class turned it in, anyway.

Halfway through the stack, Travis asks, in a voice so soft I almost can’t hear it over the scratching of my own pen, “Are you going to go home after rehearsal, or are you going right to the apartment?”

I blink and say, in my normal volume, “Why are you whispering?”

“Because they’re taking a test.”

“So? Jeff and I have talked through every test and quiz they’ve had all semester. The world’s a loud place, they need to learn to adapt to their environments. I’m helping them. Making men out of them, like I did to you.”

He raises his eyebrows and mutters, “Hopefully not exactly like how you made a man out of me.”

Jessica, another of the back-row girls, turns around to give us an appraising look. I say to her, “Yeah, that was a sex joke. Turn around and focus on your test.” She quickly faces forward, and I turn my attention back to Travis. “I’m going home after. I have to get my costume ready. You?”

He shrugs. “Alex texted me to tell me that costumes are mandatory, even for—these are his words, not mine— ‘douchebags who think they’re too cool to follow the house rules.’ I’m guessing he’s talking about us?”

I snort. “He’s talking about you, not me. I fucking love costume parties. Do you have anything at your house you can use?”

“Of course. After you and Bill moved out, I took the liberty of turning your old bedroom into my own private costume den,” he says dryly.

I duck to nose at his jaw for a moment as I murmur, “Kinky. Shame that wasn’t the case when we were still dating. I bet we could have had fun with—”

“Boundaries, G,” Travis reminds me, bracing a hand against my shoulder and guiding me back to my seat. I scowl—we’ve only been friends again for a few days, but this is already a constant battle. I maintain that, if he hadn’t bailed on our friendship at the beginning of the school year, he’d already be aware of and used to my somewhat recently developed need to be constantly touching people. *He* says he doesn’t give a shit what my post-rehab quirks are, and that I don’t get to manhandle him just because I like the comfort of someone else’s skin against mine.

Thankfully, any possible tension caused by the rejection is blunted by Kyle, a kid near the windows, raising his hand. I toss my red pen down and trot over to him. “What’s up?”

He thrusts his pen at one of the questions and asks, “For this one, are we supposed to write a full paragraph, or do you just want a list?”

“A list is fine. Do you remember the handout you got last week?” I say. He nods. “There were eight bullets on that handout, so write down any five you remember, and you’ll be all set.”

He smiles his thanks, and I return to Travis, who hitches his chin at me. “Look at you, being a teacher.”

“Right? It’s like I’m a real adult, or something. So, what are you going to do about the costume thing?”

“Dunno. I’ll dig through whatever we have at the house, but I’m not really worried about it. Worst case scenario, I’ll flat-iron my hair, get wasted, and go as you,” he says, smirking at me. I don’t smirk back. Because that is the greatest idea I have ever heard. Eyes widening at the spark of delight he must see on my face right now, he gives his head an emphatic shake and says, “Nope. No, not doing it. It was a *joke*—”

“Oh my god, you have to do it. I’ll spike your hair, you can wear some of my clothes—maybe a Patton shirt, my leather jacket? What’s your shoe size?” He glares at me and says nothing, so I thrust a hand under the desk we’re seated at and grab his ankle, twisting his leg around until I can check the number stamped into the sole of his shoe. Twelve. “Dude, we totally wear the same size shoes, my boots would fit you perfectly. Shit, can I pierce your lip?”

His eyes practically bulge out of his head. “What the hell is wrong with you? No, you cannot pierce my lip!”

“Why not? I did mine twice, and that turned out fine,” I protest.

“You’d probably snorted half a gram of coke that morning, you couldn’t feel it!” he says, and okay, fair point. “Besides, I can’t go to one ex-boyfriend’s party dressed as my other ex-boyfriend. That’s so weird.”

“It’s not like Ben and I hate each other. I mean, we’ve nailed each other more recently than either of us has nailed you, so it’s not like he’s going to get jealous—for fuck’s sake, Jessica, *turn around and do your test*. Anyway, come on, it’ll be great. You can spend the whole party chain-smoking and getting shit-faced and groping Jamie,” I say, now beginning to copy out the homework scores into Jeff’s grade book.

He rolls his eyes. “I don’t smoke, dude. And I think Alex would probably punch me if I went after another guy he likes.”

“Something tells me that Alex wouldn’t really give a shit,” I say flatly.

“Things still bad between them?” he asks, cringing, and my only response is a shrug.

The truth is, I have no idea what's going on between Jamie and Alex right now. Al had still been sort of pissy and checking his phone every few minutes when he left on Saturday, and I haven't seen him since. Jamie had been relatively silent for the rest of the weekend, but had texted me yesterday with an intentionally vague, *Talked to Alexander. I think I'll be coming into town for the party after all. Still up for letting me sleep over after?* I had responded by sending him a picture of me, shirtless in bed, giving him a cheesy thumbs up, along with the words, *only if i get to be the little spoon*. Considering the fact that I've got three shitshow relationships under my belt—the psychopath who hospitalized me, my own stepbrother, and a not-relationship that never really went beyond friendship and sex—I probably shouldn't be baffled by this whole Jamie-and-Alex thing, but I am. I don't understand why Alex won't just agree to be boyfriends, and I sure as hell don't understand why Jamie is going along with that, even though he's made it explicitly clear that he wants more. The longer it goes on, the more I regret letting them get involved in the first place.

I spend the rest of the class period passing out papers and trying to overload Travis with reasons why he should dress up as me for the party tonight. He keeps shooting them down, but by the time the last bell rings, I'm pretty sure he's starting to waver. At least, I'm sure enough that I don't consider it a gamble to drive to the costume shop in the next town to buy a clip-on lip ring, and a few tubes of face paint so I can cover up his freckles and change his G tattoo to a T.

A little before six thirty rolls around, I head over to the Daily Grind to intercept him before he leaves work. The moment he glances up from the espresso machine and sees me walking in, he sets to work making me a coffee, even as he says, "I really hope you're not here because you're still trying to convince me to do that dumb costume."

"Of course not," I lie cheerfully. "I was actually thinking we could drive to rehearsal together. Since you claim not to have any costume stuff at your house, I'm sure there's something in storage at mine for you to use. I'll follow you back to your house now so you can drop off your car, we'll do the drama thing, then go back to my place. Jamie's going to take a cab there from the train station to get ready and drop off his stuff. Dad'll probably let me borrow the Benz to drive us all to the apartment. Besides—" I drop my voice a little, just because I'm not sure if he'll give a shit about me saying this loudly enough for his coworkers to hear, "—there's going to be a shit-ton of booze there, and this way, you'll be able to drink if you want, without having to worry about driving yourself home after. I can just drop you off on my way back to my house."

His eyebrows draw together, and he is so momentarily distracted that he doesn't realize he's overfilling the cup he's holding. Freshly brewed coffee spills over the lip onto his hand, and he flinches hard enough to make even more slop over. God, this kid is just not having a good day at work. Swearing, he shoves the coffee pot back onto the burner and towels off his hand, scowling down at his reddened skin.

"You alright?" I ask.

"Oh my—Christ on a cracker, that shit is *hot*," he announces, and I snicker.

"You've been working here for almost two years, and you only just now came to the conclusion that coffee is hot? Really? They're so lucky to have you on staff. You must be employee of the month," I say.

The other barista on shift perks up and chirps, "Actually, he is. Third month in a row!"

"Sara, can you not?" Travis asks, but I'm already laughing at him a little bit. I can't help it—I'm instinctively amused by anything as adorably lame as being employee of the month. I wonder if there's some gay little picture of him hanging up somewhere. Before I can ask to see it, he passes me the too-hot coffee and says, "Meet me out front, I'm just going to go clock out."

I reach into my pocket to pull out my wallet so that I can pay for the coffee, but Travis stills me with a glare, snaps his fingers to get his coworker's attention, then points to me. The girl—Sara nods, and he disappears into the back room. In about half a second, Sara is leaning across the counter to whisper

conspiratorially, "I know he does that for you all the time, but I think that's just the cutest thing ever."

"Huh?" I say, eloquent as ever.

"The coffee thing. Like, how he buys it for you, and how he has this little note for us about it?" she says. When I continue to stare blankly at her, she points at a Post-It note taped to the counter next to the register. I crane my neck to read Travis' cramped scrawl.

In regards to the guy with the spiked hair and lip ring who comes in every morning: he asks for black coffee, but what he really wants is a double shot in the dark with a pump of caramel syrup. He orders two: charge him for one, take the rest of the money out of the envelope tacked to the bulletin board in the backroom. Don't tell him, he'll never let me hear the end of it. —Travis

I blink up at the menu board, only just now realizing that yeah, I've only been getting charged for half my daily order for the past few weeks. Ever since the first time Travis made me that good coffee, the day after he told me about Joss. I take a sip of the drink and try not to smile. "Guess you suck at that 'don't tell him' part."

Sara shrugs. "If I had a boyfriend who did sweet stuff like that for me, I'd want to know about it."

"He's not my boyfriend," I say, and she frowns.

"He's not?"

"He's my stepbrother."

"I thought he was both."

I resist the urge to laugh—how fucked up is it that Travis and I have managed to make it so that half the people in Lakewood barely bat an eye over the fact that we're stepbrothers who used to bang each other? Before I can correct her, Travis reappears from the back room and prompts, "Are you completely incapable of following instructions? I said to meet me out front."

"I've never listened to you before. Why would I start now?" I ask, though I lead the way out of the building anyway. Pausing between our cars, I add, "So, do you want me to follow you home so you can drop off your car before rehearsal, or not?"

He hesitates, then admits, "I feel really weird about the idea of drinking in front of you tonight."

I shrug. "You have before."

"No, I split half a beer with Alex," he argues. "That's not drinking. Or, at least, that's not the *I'll-drive-you-home-so-you-don't-have-to-worry-about-your-car* sort of drinking. There's no way it can be healthy for you to be around—"

"Travis. Stop it," I interrupt, trying not to let my hands ball up into fists. "You realize that I've been to bars since getting out of rehab, right? Bars, and clubs, and plenty of places they serve alcohol. It's not seeing other people drink that gets to me; it's bad nights and awful situations where the only way I know how to deal with it is by getting shitfaced. It's—dude, it was never about the alcohol, alright? It was about the oblivion. And I'm fine right now, I'm in a really good place, so don't ruin the party tonight by spending the entire thing worrying about whether or not I'm going to try to get drunk. Because I'm not. But you can, and that's okay. Jamie's going to drink. Stohler's going to drink. Alex's going to drink. You can, too. It's fine."

"You're sure?" he says doubtfully, and I send him an eyeroll vicious enough to have him laughing and saying, "Fine, fine. I'd say 'follow me back to my house,' but I'm pretty sure you know how to get there anyway—"

“—on account of how it technically belongs to my father, and I used to live there? Yep. Pretty sure I can find it. But you can lead the way, if it makes you feel important.”

He sneers at me and clambers into his car, not bothering to reply. I shadow him all the way back to the old house, tail-gating a little just to annoy him, then idle at the curb while he turns into the driveway and cuts the engine. I can see him rummaging around on the passenger seat—I think he’s trying to find his script and stage crew notes in his backpack—and then, out of the corner of my eye, I see movement at the front window of the house. I blink over.

Evelyn is peering out of the curtains, her eyes wide and furious as they light on my car. She knows it’s me, even if she can’t see me sitting in the driver’s seat. I can’t stand watching her, watching me; I light myself a cigarette and crank up the stereo, singing along with the voice crooning from the speakers, “*Give me fire, give me fire, it’ll burn all your fear away.*”

I’m not sure if it’s the stereo or my singing that attracts Travis’ attention, but I see him twist around in his car, peering out at me, then noticing my pretty obvious discomfort. He looks around, freezes when he sees his mom peeking out from the living room window. Slowly, he gathers up his crew papers, stuffs them into his backpack, and gets out of the car, heading towards me. He’s about six feet away from the passenger side when the front door to the house opens, and Evelyn steps out. Travis whips around to face her so quickly that he almost falls. I can hear the faint rumble of his voice, but the music is too loud for me to make out any specific words. I let my head roll to the side so that my eyes can lock onto Evelyn. She hasn’t moved since stepping outside; she hasn’t said a word to him.

“Mom? Did you hear me?” I can hear him say. Still, she says nothing.

“*I still got my eyes on you, baby,*” I sing along to the radio. “*I still got my eyes on you, baby.*”

I wonder if she can hear my voice. I wonder if that’s why she’s still not speaking to him. I wonder if she’s punishing him for leaving with me right now. Travis says, “I said, I’m going to rehearsal now, okay? And I’m going to a Halloween party at Ben and Alex’s place after, okay?” Still nothing. *I still got my eyes on you, baby.* “Mom?” Silence, *I still got my eyes on you, baby,* then his voice again, a little desperate. “Do you even care?”

“*I wanna be close to you.*”

He yanks open the car door and tumbles into the seat, crowding up into my space and whispering in a voice I can barely hear over the music, “Can you just drive now?”

I’m not an idiot, I know exactly what he’s doing—between the height of my car, the distance from here to the porch, the angle she’s seeing us at, it must look to his mom like he and I are kissing right now. He’s doing it on purpose, presumably to punish her back. I’m nothing if not an accommodating friend. I reach up and thread my hand into his hair, cradling the back of his head in my palm the way I might if we really were kissing. I consider telling him that he might as well go for it, but I doubt he would. So instead, I say, “Put your seatbelt on,” and release him. He sinks back into his own seat and buckles up. We both sneak one last glance at Evelyn, who is glowering from the porch, but still hasn’t moved. I gun it towards the school.

Unfortunately, by the time we make it to rehearsal, Travis’ sneaker has gotten tangled up in the costume shop bag on his side of the floor, and he has realized that I was completely lying when I said I wasn’t still trying to convince him to dress up as me. We make our way into the building with him shaking his head resolutely and me pacing around him, weaving in front of him and circling him like a coked-up Chihuahua trying to get attention. “Dude, please, come on, it’ll be perfect.”

“Or it’ll be the opposite of perfect,” Travis suggests, pushing open the door to the auditorium.

I bounce in place a few times, then bolt through the doorway after him. “No, shut up. Stop being a dick. You don’t have another costume planned out, so if you agree to this one, I’ll do all the work. It’ll be just like our sex life was—”

“Fuck you!” he says, shoving me into the nearest row of seats, sending me toppling to the floor and attracting the attention of pretty much everyone who has already arrived for rehearsal. “God, you did not ‘do all the work,’ you piece of shit. Like, is that really how you remember it? Because the way I remember it, I was giving as good as I was getting—”

“I mean, do you wanna go again right now, just to remind me?” I offer, scrambling back up to my feet, but he’s still talking right over me.

“Seriously, I’m developing such a complex about our sex life,” he snaps, not seeming to notice that our friends are staring at him with raised eyebrows as he continues to head down the aisle towards him. I skip after him, delighted as ever to have people’s attention on me, where I’m personally pretty convinced it belongs all the time. “First, it was all that bullshit at the party last spring—‘oh, hey guys, this is my *little brother*, he over-analyzes sex and doesn’t pull my hair enough when I fuck him, I wonder what it’s like when he fucks his boyfriend, because they’re both total bottoms.’ Speaking of which, I am *not* a total bottom—”

“I believe you, man, I swear—”

“—and if you *don’t* believe me, you can ask your boyfriend—”

“—ex-not-boyfriend—”

“—because I wrecked that guy, alright?”

“Really, Travis? We’re going to talk about this right now?”

“—shoved him up against a wall and fucked him from behind not ten minutes after you said that shit—”

“Alright, either you need to stop talking, or you need to not get weirded out when I start jerking off, because that is actually insanely hot to picture, and I have no impulse control.” Before he can say anything else, I lean around him and say loudly, “Also, hello, friends-who-don’t-need-to-hear-any-of-this.”

Travis blinks over his shoulder at me, then at the group, then turns a deeply attractive shade of red. “Oh. Uh. Sorry.”

“Don’t be,” John says cheerfully. “More interesting than listening to Nate and Annabelle debate the best brand of dance shoes.”

“What’s more interesting than that?” Joss asks, striding out of one of the wings onto the stage.

To say that Travis appears relieved that she wasn’t around for his outburst would be an understatement. He shoves past John and hoists himself up onto the stage, looping an arm around Joss and pecking a kiss to her cheek. “Hi. Nothing. You, you’re interesting. How are you?”

Riley makes a sound like a whip cracking, and I nod my agreement before flinging myself into a seat in the third row. Nate and Annabelle are indeed debating dance shoes, which is kind of pointless, in my opinion—the costumes have already been selected for everyone, and we’re all wearing matching black Chuck Taylors for everything but the school dance and the final scene, where Joss will switch to a pair of high-heeled sandals. Still, the conversation is a welcome distraction, and by the time Travis and Joss join us back on the floor, he seems to have gotten over his irritation with me.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” Miranda says, reaching out to nudge my shoulder. “We’re doing a scary movie night

at my place after rehearsal. You should come.”

I blink. On the one hand, I’m touched that she’d invite me. On the other, even if I didn’t have plans already, I’d rather saw off my own foot than settle in for ‘scary movie night’ with a bunch of sixteen-year-olds. But I smile politely and say, “Thanks for the offer. I have plans, though. My friends are having a party at their place.”

She exaggerates a pout at me, and I shrug, grinning more easily now. She turns to Travis and says, “You’re coming, though, right? Joss said she invited you.”

Travis frowns over at Joss. “When did you invite me to a movie night?”

“Sunday? I told you about it after breakfast,” she says, and if I mutter *gross* under my breath at the idea of them having breakfast together or waking up together or spending the night together or basically doing anything together, that’s not my fault. She shoots me a steely glare, then continues, “I told you Miranda was having a big movie night, and it’s tradition.”

His response is a slow, carefully worded, “Yes, you told me about it, but you didn’t *invite* me to it. And if you had, I would have respectfully declined, because I already accepted an invitation on Saturday for something else.”

“What—” Joss starts, but she breaks off almost immediately, turning to stare at me. A Cheshire cat grin is creeping across my face, and I know I must look like a complete asshole right now, but I don’t even care. All I want is a few more seconds of her believing that maybe he’s choosing me, for once. She manages to dial her temper from ‘unadulterated outrage’ down to ‘simply passive-aggressive’ as she shrugs and says, “My mistake, I guess. I just assumed you knew I was inviting you. I thought we were going to do something together, but if you don’t want to, that’s fine.”

Travis rubs the back of his neck and says slowly, “It’s not that I don’t want to, it’s just that I already made plans to do something else. You should have said something earlier, or been more explicit in your invitation. If I’d known you wanted to do something together, I wouldn’t have agreed to go to the party, but it’s not like I’m going to back out now.”

“Why can’t you just bring her to the party with you?” Miranda asks.

I’m barely able to restrain an eyeroll as I say, “Look, it’s not really a high school thing, okay?”

“You’re in high school,” Joss snaps. “You both are.”

“Bullshit. I barely count as being in high school. We all know I should’ve graduated last spring, and more to the point, we all know I only bother to show up now because my parents will be pissed if I end up as a high school dropout after the sixty grand they poured into those three years of boarding school.” They should’ve just let me stay there. It’s not like me going to school in New York while Dad lived in Connecticut would have been any worse than the three years I was going to school in New York while he lived in Ohio. And hey, maybe I would’ve actually graduated, if I’d been able to finish out my senior year at Patton instead of getting dragged to this shitsuck of a town. But my prep school problems aren’t the point, so I add, “Anyway, I’m two months younger than Ben, and five months older than Alex. They’re not going to ban me from their parties just because I blew off a few classes last spring.”

“A few? Garen, you blew off *one hundred and seventy-five* classes. In a row,” Travis says.

“I know, right? Like, you don’t know whether to be disappointed or impressed. My dad had the same prob—”

“Travis is in high school,” Joss interrupts, arms crossed tightly over her chest now. “You might be the same age as them, but Travis is still definitely, unequivocally in high school, so if it’s ‘not really a high

school thing,' why is he going?"

Josslyn Pryce, I am so sick of your shit, I want to yell in her face. She's being such a fucking troll right now, and she knows it. Travis and Alex are closer in age than Alex and I are, it's not like Trav's a fucking freshman. Joss is just pissed because she's not invited, and I am. But I can't really say any of that, so I settle for being as passively bitchy as she has elected to be. I smile sweetly at her and say, "House rules: if both of the hosts have touched your cock, you're allowed to attend the party, regardless of what grade you're in."

"Look," Travis says hastily, seeming to realize that this forced civility can't continue much longer, "I'm sorry if you wanted me to go to Miranda's, but I made other plans, with other friends. I'm not going to back out now, so that's sort of the end of the debate, alright?" He turns to me, desperate for some sort of conversational distraction, and demands to know, "What dumb piece-of-shit costume have you picked out for yourself tonight?"

I shrug. "I'm gonna be a duck-billed platypus." There is a very long moment wherein everyone regards me with blank expressions. I sigh and say, first to Riley, then to Travis, "Give me your hat. Give me your sweatshirt. I'll show you guys."

Riley tosses me his baseball cap, and I begin to carefully flatten the brim as much as I can. Next to me, Travis stands up and shucks off his sweatshirt; the shirt he's wearing underneath rides up, exposing several inches of smooth, tanned skin that I have to work extremely hard not to lean over and lick. I must have a shittier poker face than I thought, though, because Annabelle is smirking at me from a few feet away. I roll my eyes at her and pull on the sweatshirt, popping the hood up over the cap so that only the brim pokes out. "See? You use a black cap for the bill, and a brown hoodie—stick little eyes on top of it, so it looks like a head. Then you attach a tail to the back hem of the hoodie, and you wear gloves with some sort of material between the fingers so it looks like you have webbed—fuck you guys, stop looking at me like that. I really like Halloween, okay?"

"Do you always dress up as an animal?" Travis asks.

"Not really, no. Just last year and this year."

I toss Riley's hat back to him and move to take off the hoodie, but Travis shakes his head and says, "Keep it. It's a hundred degrees in here, anyway."

I consider making a snide comment about how it wouldn't be nearly as bad if he hadn't been dumb enough to layer his hoodie over a long-sleeved shirt instead of a short sleeved one, but I'm not an idiot. I know exactly why he's always wearing long sleeves; I can't get rid of that image of the thin cut on his forearm, right at the edge of his sleeve. Besides, if I give the hoodie back, I won't have the opportunity to burrow deeper into it and try to breathe in the scent of the fabric when no one's looking. Travis always smells the same—like coconut shampoo and fresh coffee grounds. The scent always goes straight to my heart, curling up in my chest and making me feel warm right down to my toes.

Annabelle nudges my boot with the toe of her sneaker and asks, "So, what animal were you last year?"

"A raccoon," I say, and she grins. It had been an objectively awesome costume, and it's a shame that none of them got to see it. Well, except Travis. I glance over at him, and he's looking back at me, head cocked slightly to the side, as though he's remembering it, too. I knock my knee against his and say in a husky whisper, "Nice tail."

He buries his face in his hands. "Are you ever going to let me live that down?"

"Never," I say. "We'll be ninety years old, living in the same old people's home, and I'll be sending the nurses down the hall with little notes that just say 'nice tail' in huge, block letters. It was simultaneously the single greatest and worst come-on that anyone has ever used on me. It's been a year, and I'm still

trying to figure out how the hell I ended up dating a guy who dressed up as the Phantom of the Opera, copped a feel, and used that line. Like, you're lucky I'm easy, because it never would have worked on someone with higher standards."

"You guys first hooked up on Halloween?" Annabelle says, at the same moment that Miranda practically coos, "Aw, today would've been your first anniversary?"

Joss lands a hard stomp to her best friend's foot, and Miranda yelps. I know Joss wouldn't dare kick me like that, and I'm such a fan of pissing her off. I beam at Miranda and say, "Nope! It was almost another two weeks before we started dating. Wait. Birthday blowjobs count as a date, right? 'Cause if they don't, there's a strong possibility that Travis and I never actually *went* on a date." I pause, then add to Travis, "Fuck. Your birthday's next Saturday, isn't it? I have no idea what I'm going to get you this year."

He says, seemingly without thinking, "People say it's bad form to give the same gift two years in a row, but those people probably haven't met you and your lack of a gag reflex. So, I'm down for a repeat of last year's present, if you are."

That joke is too much for Joss; she stands and strides away, shaking Travis off when he immediately bolts after her, pleading, "Joss, come on. I didn't mean anything by it, I was just screwing around—"

"Oh, I'll bet you were," she says with a harsh laugh, and that's all we hear before they clear the auditorium doors and disappear into the hallway.

I look around at the rest of our group and say, "Okay, he totally dug that hole all on his own. You saw that, right? You saw that this fight wasn't even my fault?"

"Their fights are always your fault, because their fights are always about you," Miranda grumbles. "It's always Travis saying 'why are you so mean to Garen,' and Joss saying 'why are you so nice to Garen,' and oh my god, can you stop that?"

Only then do I realize that I've pulled the cuffs over my hands and cuddled deep into the sweatshirt, fists in front of my face to breathe in the fabric. It's... sort of objectively creepy. I don't even care; I tug on the drawstring until the hood eclipses my face and announce, voice muffled by the material, "I can't help it. He smells like home." It comes out sounding a lot more like, I'm an elf hat, eat sledding comb, or something equally retarded.

"What was that?" Annabelle asks, and I can hear the raised eyebrows, even if I can't see them.

I free my face from the hood and say, "Nothing. Are we going to rehearse today, or what?"

We do rehearse, and it goes fairly well—everyone is off-book now, and our vocals are pretty awesome. There's a minor setback when Nate finally talks me out of my boots and into the Chucks I'll be wearing with my costume, and we all realize that I need a serious refresher course in the choreography now that I don't have an extra two pounds strapped to each ankle, but by the time rehearsal ends, I'm a lot more comfortable with it. Everything is fine, right up until I go into one of the classrooms in the back hallway to find where I dropped my keys earlier.

The room is empty, but my keys are indeed on one of the desks, right next to a cell phone that's chirping out a random ringtone. I frown down at the caller ID—Mom. Yeah, because that's so descriptive. I hover there until the call goes to voicemail, but I'm hesitant to leave the phone here. The rest of the room is empty, and the lights had been off, so I doubt anyone is coming back for it. I pick it up, unlock the front screen, and scroll through the recent call log, figuring it'll be easy to figure out whose phone it is so I can return it if I just call a name I recognize. Thankfully, there are several—mostly Miranda, a few from Annabelle, a shit-ton from Travis, all mixed in with names I don't recognize, like Liz, Katie, a bunch from someone named Austin. My thumb is hovering over Travis' name when a hand flies out and snatches the phone from my hand. I spin around.

"Don't touch my phone," Joss snaps.

I raise my hands in surrender. "I didn't realize it was yours. I was just trying to figure out who it belonged to so that I could—"

"I really fucking hate you, you know that?" she says. My hand clenches around my keys, digging them into my palm. She's just so fucking rude. I get so much shit for ragging on her, but she doesn't even try to be civil with me. She doesn't do anything to make this easier on Travis at all. When I say nothing, she says, "Whatever you think you have with Travis? It doesn't compare to what we've got. Because at the end of the day, all he really cares about now is *this*." She settles her palm over her abdomen. It's pretty much the first time I've seen her acknowledge the baby since that first morning in the hall, and now, I'm beginning to feel as sick as I'm sure she does every morning. It kills me, knowing that the tiny little thing that destroys any chance I have of ever getting Travis back is right there inside of her. I can't believe I'm the kind of guy who can actually be fucked up enough to sort of hate a baby that has done nothing except be conceived by the boy I love and a girl I hate. She continues, "You think he'll choose you in the end, but he won't. Not if your competition is me and this baby. You think you matter, but you don't, Garen. You're irrelevant."

And then, before I can give a second's thought to what a bad idea this is, I'm opening my mouth and saying, "I'll try to remember that when I'm fucking your boyfriend tonight."

She doesn't move at all. "What did you just say to me?"

"I'm pretty sure you heard me," I say, trying to keep my voice as steady as possible. These aren't the words I want to be saying. I don't want to make this all about sex, I don't want to cheapen it like that—I wish she knew that I'm not the only person who thinks I matter, that Travis thinks it, too. My mom was recording the interviews that day we met about the divorce, and part of me wants to ask her for the tape of Travis admitting, I still am, I always have been. But I don't have the tapes right now; all I have is this mess of twisted, hateful words. "It's eight o'clock now, which means in about three hours, you're going to be at Miranda's house, watching movies, and I'm going to be balls-deep in your boy's ass. I'm going to get him down on his hands and knees, probably in our ex-boyfriend's bed, and I'm going to get him so turned on and desperate that he's begging for my cock, just like he used to. And tomorrow, when he's walking you to class, he'll still be able to feel me inside him with every step, that perfectly painful little twinge from being so thoroughly wrecked. And when you see him and realize what happened, when you kiss him and remember where his mouth has been, then I want you to look me in the eyes and tell me again how irrelevant I am."

I feel like I'm going to make myself sick. I push past her out into the hallway, and she trails after me, her much shorter legs working quickly to keep up with me. She obviously wants to continue the argument, and I just want to *win* it. I bolt out into the main hall, where I know Travis will be waiting with the rest of our friends. He's in the middle of conversation with Christine, but I don't care. Joss rounds the corner of the hall behind me just in time to see me dart up behind Travis, slip an arm around his middle, and lift him a few inches into the air, spinning us both around so we're facing the door before I set him down again. "Come on, McCall. We need to go find you a costume."

"Do I get to pick the costume?" he says doubtfully.

"Nope," I say, casting a glance around to be sure that Joss is watching. She's still frozen at the end of the hall, and Travis hasn't noticed her yet. I sling my arm around his shoulders and say, "Let's head back to my place."

He rolls his eyes, but the gesture has a hint of fondness behind it, and he agrees, "Fine, let's go."

By the time we get back to my house, Jamie has already arrived. Dad has welcomed him into the house, but he has taken the liberty of letting himself into my room, taking off most of his clothes, and sprawling

out across my bed. Still, he greets Travis and I both with a lazy smile and says, “Good, you’re finally here. Help me with my shark bite.”

“Is that a euphemism for some sort of sexual practice we’ve yet to encounter?” I ask. “Because I’m down, but I’m not sure Travis will agree to a threesome.”

“He would agree, we’re both incredibly attractive. Speaking of, *hello there*, Freckles. Don’t you just get cuter and cuter every time I see you?” Jamie says, launching himself off the bed to plant a brief kiss on Travis’ lips.

I stuff my hands in my pockets to stop them from twitching forward to separate them. A dull ache rises up in my gut at the fact that, no matter how long we’re friends, I’ll probably never be given permission to kiss Travis hello like that, like it’s nothing. Probably because it never could be nothing for the two of us. Still, Travis takes the greeting in stride and says, “Hello to you, too, James. You realize that it’s fifty degrees outside, right?”

“Yes, I’m aware.”

“And you realize you’re wearing nothing but a pair of swim trunks and some flip-flops, right?” Travis presses.

Jamie rolls his eyes and repeats, “Yes, I’m aware. But I can’t be a shark attack victim if I’m fully dressed, can I?”

“Jamie subscribes to the whole ‘Halloween is just an excuse to be drunk and mostly naked’ philosophy,” I explain. The shark attack victim thing is a new idea. Last year, he’d been Adam after the fall of Eden, completely naked except for a few strategically sewn-together fabric fig leaves; if Andrew’s descriptions of the party for the boys of Patton and the girls of our sister school were to be believed, Jamie managed to hook up with one boy alone, two girls individually, and a threesome with one of each, as well as half a dozen phone numbers.

Travis squints at Jamie. “Since when does that rule apply to dudes? Seriously, who are you, my girlfriend?”

“You know, I am *so glad* you brought her up, because I’ve been waiting for a chance to hear your side of—”

“No. No, Garen, call him off.”

“Only if you agree to wear the costume,” I say, pulling my Patton Military Academy Whitman Hall zip-up out of the closet and stroking the chest of it in what I hope is an inviting manner.

Jamie snorts. “What, you want him to be a Patton boy for Halloween?”

“A specific Patton boy,” I say, wiggling my eyebrows meaningfully.

Jamie stares at me, then down at the hoodie. He rounds on Travis and says, “That’s horrible. You have to do it.”

“No,” Travis says stubbornly.

“So, which do you prefer, sucking dick or eating pussy?”

“Jesus fuck, *okay*,” Travis says, yanking the hoodie out of my hand. I’m too busy gagging to stop him—for the love of god, I thought my bedroom was a sacred place where I’d never have to hear about such heterosexual perversions.

Jamie just beams at us both and forces Travis to help him apply the fake blood outline of a huge bite mark on the side of his torso while I make myself busy styling Travis' hair like mine. His is quite a bit shorter than mine, especially on the sides, but it's still long enough to flat-iron and spike. I have to use about a quarter the amount of hairspray I use on my own—weird. Maybe I should take mine a little shorter, just for convenience's sake. Still, his hair is very definitely shaped into something resembling my own, and he lets me dab a little bit of face paint on his freckles to blend them away. That's my least favorite part, because his freckles are one of the best parts about him, but I keep this thought to myself. He raises an eyebrow when I cover up his tattoo, then rolls his eyes a bit when I replace it with a carefully-drawn T, using a stick of eyeliner I'm pretty sure Ben left here a few weeks ago.

The clothing is the easiest part to talk him into; he's already worn my clothes so many times that he almost looks *more* comfortable with the black v-neck, Patton zip-up, and leather jacket that I stuff into his hands. He turns away before stripping out of his t-shirt, which of course earns an eyeroll from Jamie, but I'm pretty sure that the gesture is more of an attempt at hiding the cuts on his arm than an attempt at modesty. He is more relaxed once he has layered on the hoodie—left unzipped—and the leather jacket. I trade my boots for his sneakers, and he very reluctantly adds the clip-on lip ring I got from the store. All in all, it's a shockingly good me costume, except for the blond hair. And--

"Hang on," I say, snatching up my aviators from the desk where I left them, while Jamie pretends to be interested in perfecting the edges of his mostly-dried shark bite. I crowd much further into Travis' personal space than necessary to perch the sunglasses on his nose; I wonder if he realizes that, from this close up, the lenses don't completely hide the fact that his eyes dart down to my mouth for half a second. He licks his lips, tongue flickering briefly over the silver hoop, and I take a quick step back, declaring, "Wow, I'm really hot. I don't understand how you guys can stand being around me without just constantly putting your hands all over me."

"I can't," Jamie leers from across the room.

Travis just rolls his eyes and says, "Put your fucking costume on, I wanna go."

Apparently the two goddamn minutes it takes for me to find and change into my platypus costume are too much for them to handle, because I'm still in the process of stripping off my t-shirt when Jamie grabs Travis' wrist and says, "You're drinking tonight, right? Let's go break into Bill's liquor cabinet."

I can hear Travis protesting all the way up the stairs, but Jamie can be very persuasive. Even after I finish changing into my costume, I decide to dick around the basement for a few minutes before I head up, just to give them time to get a shot or two in before I find them. And really, it's not the drinking that bothers me; it's the look on Travis' face when he worries about the drinking bothering me.

Just for good measure, I shoot a text to Ben that says, *try not to jump mccall when you see him tonight. remember, you and i are broken up now!* He responds with a single question mark, so I head upstairs and sneak into Dad's study. Jamie is handing Travis the bottle of Tanqueray, which the blond is eyeing doubtfully. After a few further seconds of encouragement—okay, verbal abuse, if I'm being honest—Travis knocks back a quick gulp of gin straight from the bottle. The fake lip ring is shining bright against the green glass, and it's sort of the perfect opportunity; I raise my cell phone and snap a picture of him, mid-sip. He catches me in the act of sending the picture, and scowls. "Who are you forwarding that to?"

"Your fucking mother, Travis," I say. "I'm sending it to Ben, you idiot."

Jamie takes a very long swallow from the gin before gritting out, "Please extend my greetings to the midget."

"Shit, you weren't kidding," Travis says, raising his eyebrows at me. "They really do hate each other."

I let out a hum of agreement and send another text to Ben, this one saying, *we're leaving for your place*

now, p.s. jamie says hi and that he loves and misses you and can't wait to spend all night talking to you bc you two are besties xoxo.

The reply is two texts in rapid succession. First, *I can't believe you dressed him up as YOU for Halloween, you ridiculous, narcissistic fuck.* And then, a few seconds later, *I'd rather get skullfucked by a rabid wolverine than spend one minute talking to that unmitigated jackass. But if you're uncomfortable telling him that, just tell him I say hello.*

"Ben says he can't wait to see you tonight," I tell Jamie. "He says he hopes you two can overcome your differences and develop a treasured bond that will last until the end of time."

"Ugh," is all Jamie can manage before he dives back in for another long drag off the gin bottle. Honestly, the Christmas-y smell of the liquor is starting to get to me, so I head for the hall, gesturing over my shoulder for them to put the bottle back. I text Ben again--*seriously though, best costume ever, right?*—as I'm wheedling the keys to the Benz out of my dad with a promise to be home by one o'clock, and he responds just as I'm slipping in behind the steering wheel; *No, dumbest costume ever. But I'm uncomfortably into the idea of Travis-dressed-as-you. Or you-dressed-as-Travis. Or both, oh fuck.*

Because I'm an asshole, I toss the phone into Travis' lap the second he slides into the backseat so that he can read that text. And because Travis is an asshole, too, the first thing he does when we get to the party—which is already in full swing, with probably thirty people packed into the tiny apartment—is sidle up beside Ben in the living room, plant a quick kiss on his unusually scruffy cheek, and say, "I should've drawn some freckles on Garen, bleached his hair, and forced him into my track hoodie. Would've been an entirely different sort of party."

When Ben realizes that Travis is still holding my phone, he colors and says, "Whatever, like you've never thought about you, me, and G in a threesome before."

"I haven't," Travis protests, appearing genuinely shocked at the idea. There's a chance it really *hasn't* occurred to him, especially given the baffling amount of significance he attaches to sex.

"I've definitely thought about it," I say, joining them. It's not untrue—when I'd first moved to town, when I was still fucking Ben, knew about his crush on Travis, and assumed I had no chance of ever landing my own stepbrother, there were a few days where I thought about it obsessively. The appeal had sort of drained away when I actually fell for Travis and realized that the idea of anyone else touching him made me blind with jealousy. I shrug. "So, either he's lying, or I'm a pervert."

Ben shrugs back. "Both can be true." He pauses, jerks his chin at Travis. "Did you bring it?"

"Here you go," Travis says, extending his hand. For the first time since coming inside, I realize that he's holding his Daily Grind apron. Ben accepts it with a nod of thanks, then hooks the strap over his head. His arm is still in the sling, so Travis ties it into place for him. Ben snatches a battered copy of *The Catcher in the Rye* off the coffee table and sticks it in the pocket of the apron; it just barely peeks out over the top. Travis cocks his head to the side. "What are you supposed to be anyway?"

"He won't tell me," Alex says, appearing on my other side, "but I'm guessing he's a hipster."

"Close," Ben taunts.

Jamie joins us, already having found himself a beer and drained half of it. "A suspiciously well-employed homeless person? Because that's what you look like, with that fucking beard. You are as tall as I was when I was *eleven*, how the hell can you even grow a beard?"

Ben ignores that completely. He is several days unshaven, wearing a slouchy black beanie hat, and has left his reading glasses on. I squint at his clothes, then at the apron and the book hanging out of it. Finally, it hits me, and I snap my fingers. "Hang on, is everybody ready to go home? Because I'm about to win

Halloween right now, just like I do every year, with my awesome costumes, and my awesome costume-guessing."

"Alright then, go on. What am I?"

I say, "You're an English major after college graduation, forced to work in a coffee shop because your useless degree has left you unqualified for an adult job, trying to distract yourself from the utter emptiness of your daily life by strong-arming unsuspecting customers into pretentious literary debates about what Salinger really wanted Holden Caulfield's red hunting hat to symbolize."

I throw my hands up in triumph when he gives a silly little bow of acknowledgment, grinning at me. And then, because he is a goddamn freakshow and is forever saying weird shit that he knows the rest of us won't really understand, he says, "'*Up home, we wear a hat like that to shoot deer in, for Chrissake,*' he said. '*That's a deer shooting hat.*'"

I open my mouth to reply, but before I can, Jamie barks out a laugh and says, "*Like hell it is. This is a people shooting hat.*" I frown at him, and he shuffles around to stand behind me, hooking his chin over my shoulder and peering down at Ben, adding in an offhand sort of voice, "*I shoot people in this hat.*"

"Okaaaaay," I say, drawing out the word and shrugging him off my shoulder. "So, it looks like my friends have lost their minds, that's cool." But they're both just sort of blinking at each other warily, so I roll my eyes and turn to Alex, hoping he'll give me some attention instead. "Scale of one to ten, how rad am I for guessing that costume?"

"How the hell did you guess it?" Alex demands, but I'm too distracted by his own costume to reply. He's dressed pretty normally, but one of his arms is pulled inside his shirt so that it looks like it's missing. There's a pair of drumsticks in his pocket. Noticing my eyes on him, he adds, "Rick Allen. One-armed Def Leppard drummer."

"He's just doing it to torment me, you know. Because it's one of the only things we can't agree on," says a voice behind me. I turn around, and there's Stohler, in jean shorts and a half-shredded t-shirt, covered in glitter and makeup, holding a bottle of Jack Daniel's. She offers it to me, and when Travis makes a sharp noise of protest, she rolls her eyes. "Relax, kid. It's a prop. This thing's full of iced tea, even *I* don't drink enough to want to carry around a real bottle of Jack all night."

I squint at the bottle, then adjust my gaze to focus on the toothbrush pinned between the fingers of that same hand clutching the bottle. "Are you—is this like, *before I leave, brush my teeth with a bottle of*—are you fucking *Ke\$ha*?"

"Aaaaand she's just doing that to torment me," Alex says as Stohler rakes her mess of hair back and beams at me.

I level a finger at her and say, "You are an embarrassment to the human race. And that's coming from a guy who's dressed as a platypus right now. So, really, you need to look at your life choices, yeah? I'm going to go get a drink."

The kitchen has been mostly taken up by a folding table that people are using for beer pong. I hover at the edge of it for a few minutes, just to make sure that they're playing in a way I can actually participate in. Fortunately for my sobriety—and for basic rules of sanitation—the cups are all full of water, and the players are drinking from their own cups on the side. As long as I can convince people to go along with my designated drinker idea, I can definitely get a chance to play later, which is... reassuring. I like knowing that I won't be automatically excluded from all party activities just because of how badly I've fucked up my life so far.

I pour some pop into one of the red Solo cups and clear a space on the counter so that I can hop up onto it. Ben is the first to join me in the kitchen, wedging himself between my slightly parted knees and kissing

me on the cheek—I'm grateful that the end of our not-relationship hasn't made him forget how much I still sort of need that level of physical contact. I stroke the tips of my fingers down the length of his arm, shoulder to elbow, and say, "How's your arm feeling?"

"Fine," he says, grimacing. "Still feels a little weird, and I'd be lying if I said that showering wasn't a little bit painful, but I can't complain too much."

I duck down to brush my lips over the edge of his jaw. "Well, if you decide you need some help with the showering thing, I'd be more than happy to—"

"Did we or did we not break up last week?" he says. "Boundaries, G."

"Why does everyone keep saying that to me?" I grumble. When we're joined by the others twenty or so minutes later, each of them is holding a drink, and Jamie is attempting to explain to Stohler why he doesn't think it's weird that he basically has a girlfriend, but still fucks men.

"I'm just saying, I think it's bizarre," she says, shrugging. "If you all would just stay single or remain in committed, monogamous relationships, you'd solve pretty much all your problems."

"I'm in a committed, monogamous relationship," Travis says indignantly, though the effort it takes him to properly enunciate *monogamous* makes me wonder if the beer in his hand is his second or third.

Stohler sneers at him. "Don't even get me started on you and your little relationship, dude."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Travis says. He takes a very long sip from his beer, as though steeling himself for Stohler's words.

That's probably a good idea, because Stohls says flatly, "It's supposed to mean that you're an idiot. And you'd probably be better off dating literally anyone else in the entire world, because your girlfriend is a judgmental cunt."

I open my mouth to object—to defend Joss on Travis' behalf, even though everyone here knows I hate her—but then Travis snorts and goes, "God, you have no idea."

"So, why are you dating her?" Jamie asks.

"Sex," I say quickly, before Travis' tipsiness can lead him to do something as stupid as reveal that stupid parasite of a fetus. "He's in it for the hours upon hours of hetero-rific, mind-blowing, ball-slapping sex."

Travis just makes a face into his beer and says, "The sex is okay."

Jamie mimics the face back at him and says, "Just okay? McCall, really. Life is too short to have sex that's okay."

Travis makes a vague gesture and is apparently just drunk enough to be comfortable talking about his sex life, because he continues, "Well, it's good. It's really good, actually." I take a sip of my drink, mostly because I'm hoping that will stop me from scowling. It doesn't. "But it's sort of—it's the same thing every time, I guess? It's fine, it just gets sort of boring after a while. And it's—like, I miss *blowjobs*," he says, and Jamie snorts.

"Giving or receiving?" Stohler asks, smirking at him.

"Both," Travis decides. He pauses, then narrows his eyes and points at Ben. "You don't give them, either."

I blink, because okay, he definitely does. I'm fully prepared to defend that point, but Ben smiles serenely

and says, "I absolutely give blowjobs, but you never asked for one."

"Neither did you, but I still did it!" Travis protests.

My hand tightens on my cup. It's not that I didn't know they'd fucked around while they were together, but that idea gets to me more than I'm comfortable with. I don't like knowing that there's something that Travis did for Ben, even though Travis and I never actually got that far. Ben just shrugs and says, "Well, you should've asked. Garen asked all the time. Well, sort of." I shoot him a questioning look, and he adds, "I'm not really sure that 'let me fuck your mouth' counts as asking, per se. Still, you asked. And Ethan asked."

"Who's Ethan?" Stohler asks.

Ben shrugs. "First guy I hooked up with. He wasn't anybody important—just some asshole from my youth group at church. The kind of guy who thought that being hot as hell and the center forward on his fancy Catholic school's soccer team meant he could treat people like shit and never have to deal with repercussions."

"Hang on, I'm sorry," Jamie says, before anyone else can speak. "But—y'all aren't talking about Ethan *Hall*, are you?"

It occurs to me now that I don't actually know this Ethan guy's last name, and based on the similarly blank expressions on everyone else's faces, it hasn't been brought up before. But Ben's back has gone rigid, and his expression has turned wary. "Um," is all he manages to say at first. "Maybe. Yes. Do you know him?"

"You lost your virginity to Ethan Hall," Jamie clarifies. Ben nods very slowly. "You've—fuck, is he even queer?"

"Maybe. Yes," Ben repeats, now looking slightly panicked. "You're not even from around here. You're from *Georgia*, you went to school in *New York*. How do you know him?"

"You nailed my *cousin*, McCutcheon," Jamie says, somewhat hysterically. "That's—Ethan Hall is my *cousin*!"

Alex laughs so hard he has to sit down on the floor, because standing up just doesn't seem to be an option for him. Ben is protesting something about *this was before I even met you, how the fuck was I supposed to know*, and Jamie just keeps babbling on about *we look almost identical, how could you not know*, and Stohler has slumped against Travis' side, giggling madly into his shoulder. I stroke my palm over Ben's hat to calm him down, and it works decently well. Jamie, however, is still just shaking his head compulsively and taking frequent sips from his cocktail.

"This is horrible," he says faintly. "My god. I'm picturing sexual relations between my own cousin and probably my third-least favorite person on the planet. This is—I'm fucking traumatized."

Travis shrugs and says, "Hey, at least nobody's spit a mouthful of cum at you lately."

I choke on a sip of my pop, and Ben buries his burning face in the front of my hoodie. Alex just looks revolted and asks, "What the fuck are you talking about? What kind of person would do that?"

"Gee, I don't know. Let's ask the audience. Hey, *Ben*, what kind of person would do that?" Travis asks.

Voice still somewhat muffled by the fabric against his mouth, Ben grumbles, "The kind of person who already texted you on Saturday to apologize, *Travis*."

"Do you have any idea how close my girlfriend came to beating the shit out of me when she walked out of

rehearsal and found me sitting in a car that was—like, what word do you want me to use here? Splattered? Covered?”

“Okay, ‘covered’ is a wild exaggeration,” I say. “Can we compromise on ‘decorated’?”

“Decorated, Garen? Really?” Travis says. “It’s not like he draped Christmas lights all over it, dude. He got mad at me, so he *sucked your cock*, had you *come in his mouth*, climbed on top of *my car*, and *spit it onto my windshield*. That’s not decoration!”

Alex covers his face with both hands and groans, “Dude, please tell me you didn’t really do that.”

But Jamie, in a drunken display of glee that surprises even me, lets out a shout of laughter, flings an arm around Ben’s shoulders, and drags him away from my chest and into a sloppy squeeze that might actually be a hug. Apparently, the statute of limitations on him giving a shit about someone banging his cousin is pretty brief. Their height difference is almost comical now, and Jamie has to stoop down nearly a foot to brush his grinning mouth over the shell of Ben’s ear as he murmurs, “Oh my Lord, please tell me you really did that.”

Ben uses his good arm to elbow him in the ribs so he can wriggle away. “I did it. And if he’s going to keep whining about it, I’ll get down on my knees right now and suck Garen off so I can do it again, even without the windshield between us.”

“Doubt it would be the first time he had Garen’s spunk on his face, so—”

“My life was infinitely better when none of you guys were speaking to me,” Travis says, stomping to the refrigerator for another beer so that none of us can see how red his face is.

This only delights Jamie further. He rounds on me and says, “For the love of God, he still *blushes*. How is that even possible? I would’ve thought that anybody who’d had sex with you as much as this kid has would be immune to that. You’re the most shameless person I’ve ever met in my life, and that’s the sort of thing that tends to rub off on people, when you’re, you know, rubbing off on them.” I smile and shrug. Correctly interpreting my silence, he narrows his eyes and says, “How many times did you guys do it, anyway? Like, three?”

“Are you talking about just screwing around, or actual screwing?” I ask. He makes a vague gesture that I’m sure only I understand. “Seven and a half.”

Alex snorts. “What, seriously? I’m pretty sure you and Ben have fucked that many times in this room alone.”

“That’s not true,” I say indignantly. “We’ve fucked in the kitchen like, three times. Tops. Just that counter—”

“—and that counter,” Ben adds, pointing to the one that Stohler is leaning against. She shoots it a look tinged with distaste and moves over to lean against the kitchen table.

I shake my head. “Nope, Stohls, you’re gonna want to stand up, we did it there, too.”

“Against the fridge once,” Ben says thoughtfully. I shake my head and raise two fingers into the air. He amends, “Alright, twice. Still, that’s only five. Not seven and a half.”

But Travis waves us all into silence and says, “I’m sorry, but how do you have sex half a time? More specifically, when did we have sex half a time?” I raise my eyebrows at him, and suddenly, there’s a spark in his eyes. “Oh, god. Are you talking about that time—”

“Yep,” I say, staring hard at him over the lip of my cup as I take another sip of pop.

I am referring, of course, to the Wednesday night we'd been left home alone for half an hour while Evelyn ran to the store. We'd been sitting across from each other at the kitchen table—he had been doing his homework, I had been doing something stupid, probably playing Tetris on my phone, I don't even remember anymore—but the second we'd heard the engine of Evelyn's car stuttering to life out in the driveway, we'd been on each other. I'd shoved him down onto the kitchen table, ignoring his protests about how *for fuck's sake, Garen, we eat here, what are you doing*, and sucking him off with such enthusiasm he'd been unable to object for too long. He had made me stop before he got a chance to come, shoving both our jeans down to our knees and letting me bend him over the side of the table and press into him.

I had looped an arm around his waist and doubled over to cover his back with my chest, whispering against the back of his neck, little things like *feels so good* and *you're gorgeous* and *I love you, I love you, I love you*. He had twisted his head around to catch me up in a kiss, and when we'd heard the car turning into the driveway again, I'd tried to pull out, but he had just shoved my hand at his dick and begged, *please, I'm so close, just a little more*. Seeing him so undone that he didn't even care about the fact that his mom had been a minute from walking back into the house had been unbelievably hot; hot enough that I obeyed, and it only took a few more strokes before he was coming over my hand, and I was doing my best to catch the stickiness in my palm because how the *fuck* would we ever explain that mess on the kitchen table.

He had almost been shaking too hard to pull his jeans back into place, and I'd still been mostly undressed when the front door opened—I hadn't even had time to take the condom off, I'd just yanked my pants back up and sank into my seat, trying to smile like a normal person when Evelyn sailed back into the kitchen and started work on dinner. My cock had still been painfully hard in my jeans, still uncomfortably sheathed in latex, and I had snatched Travis' notebook away from him to scribble in the margin, *I need to come so fucking badly right now. I didn't finish, this doesn't count. Get your ass upstairs, we're going again*. He had rolled his eyes and written, *We can't just disappear upstairs right now, that'll look so suspicious. Wait until after dinner, I promise I'll get you back*.

Your cum is all over my hand right now, Travis, is all I had written back. He had blinked at the paper for nearly a minute, a slow flush creeping into his cheeks. When he had finally looked up at me, I'd chanced a glance to make sure Evelyn was focused on her cooking, and then I had stared Travis dead in the eyes and licked my hand clean. He had absolutely lost it, barely sparing a somewhat hysterical, *Mom, we're going upstairs, Garen's going to help me study for my math test*, over his shoulder as he dragged me up the staircase and locked us in his bedroom. We had both gotten off after that, though I maintained my defense that we'd fucked one and a half times that night, not twice—average number of climaxes per person involved.

Now, Travis is staring at me and swallowing hard, that same beautiful flush in his face. I hitch my chin at him and say, "You still owe me an orgasm for that night, by the way."

"Come find me after I've had about three more of these beers, and I'll let you collect," he says, a smirk twitching to life on the edges of his lips. I can't tell if he's actually tipsy enough to be flirting with me, or if he's just still trying to keep in character with his me-costume.

Either way, it makes me laugh, right up until Stohler stomps hard on my foot and hisses softly enough that no one else can hear, "Pregnant girlfriend, you fucking idiot, stop mooning over him."

Thankfully, one of the other partygoers chooses that moment to take over the stereo, cranking up some horrible white-boy hip hop song about college. The group of people playing beer pong abandons their game in favor of relocating to the living room to sing drunkenly along; I lurch towards the table and say, "I need somebody who's drinking on my team, and somebody who's drinking to be over there, on a team with Ben."

It had sort of been my intention to have Stohler on my team, and Alex on Ben's, but Stohls wanders off to

go find some SoCo state boy to flirt with, and Alex is dragged away by a girl he says is in his science class. Travis rests his chin on my shoulder and says, "I've never played beer pong before. Teach me?"

"Sure," I say, even though what I really want to say is, *I have so many more interesting things I could teach you, if you'd just dump your girlfriend, strip off your clothes, and let me take care of you.* I call across the table, "Hey, Jamie. You cool with partnering your best friend over there?"

Jamie's eyes are fixed on the hallway, where Alex has disappeared with the girl from his school. He catches an elbow to the ribs from Ben, then snaps out of it. "Hmm? Oh. Yeah, sure."

I can tell that he's off-base; it's the only excuse for why he'd agree to be Ben's teammate without any real hesitation. I offer him my most reassuring smile, and he returns with something that looks more like a grimace. What I want to do is go after Alex and punch him in the throat for making my best friend make that face again, but what I end up doing is racking the cups and digging the ball out from under the table. I poke Travis in the stomach and say, "Simple. You try to toss it into the cups at the other end. It makes it in, the cup gets taken away and the other team has to drink. Or, Jamie has to drink. If he or Ben gets it in one of our cups, you have to drink, and I just have to stand here and look sexy. There are other rules, but those are the basics. Got it?"

"Got it," he confirms with a tiny salute.

It's so fucking cute, but I attended Patton for too many years to resist repositioning his hand and saying, "You salute to the outer edge of your eyebrow, not the middle of your forehead."

He smiles and says, "I so can't picture you doing all that military school stuff."

"You should've seen me in the dress uniform I had to wear for special events," I murmur, and his eyes go dark. I smirk at him and turn my focus back to the table. I give the ball a light toss and catch it, just to get a feel for it, then shoot a semi-amused glance over my shoulder at Travis, who is practically flush against me. "Are you going to back up at all?"

He looks down at where his hips are pressed against my ass, then back up at my face and says, "Hadn't really planned on it, no."

"Garen, now might be a nice time for me to inform you of something that the rest of us learned during the last few parties, when you were still in New York," Ben says, and I look back at him. "Travis? Kind of a slutty drunk."

Jamie snorts, and Travis protests, "No, I'm not," though his words are somewhat less credible because of the kiss he presses to the side of my neck. My skin burns at the point where his lips touched. I swallow hard and toss the ball, sinking it easily into one of the side cups. Ben moves the cup to the side of the table, and Jamie raises his own cup in a toast before he drinks.

I move aside so that Travis can make his shot—he misses, unsurprisingly—then return to the counter where the drinks are to find my cup. I frown down at them. "Which one of these is mine?"

"Dunno," Jamie says, eyes fixed calculatingly on the cups on the far end of the table. "Want me to sip them and see? Just so you're sure you're not taking something with booze in it?"

"Nah, I'm good," I say, opting to just get a fresh cup and refill it. I'd rather be safe than sorry. Rather be safe than relapsed. I take a sip, set the cup down again, and return to the table.

Jamie has made his shot, and is busy preemptively berating Ben for missing the shot he hasn't taken yet. Ben finally manages to silence him with a glare, and tosses the ping-pong ball. It bounces once and sinks into the front cup. I move the cup aside and roll the ball across the table. Travis frowns and grabs my elbow. "Hang on, isn't it our turn?"

"It's nobody's turn, until you fucking drink," Jamie warns, and Travis takes a begrudging swallow. That out of the way, Jamie adds, "The midget and I each got it in, so we get a rollback."

At Travis' blank expression, I clarify, "They get to make one more throw."

Travis scowls. "I'm beginning to feel like this entire game is going to end up with me getting completely shit-faced."

I laugh, but Jamie misses the rollback, so Travis is safe for now. We play for another few minutes, and everything is fine—Jamie and Ben are winning, but I have a sneaky plan to force a draw by knocking the table over if we're too far behind when they get down to the last cup. Travis is more than a little drunk right now, and he's trying to shush Jamie's constant stream of verbal abuse so that he can concentrate on his next shot. I'm grinning, feeling warm and happy all over when I snag my cup from the counter and take a sip.

Except, it's the wrong cup.

By the time the flavor registers, I've already begun to swallow a huge gulp of the drink. Panicking, I try to stop my throat from working, mid-swallow, but that's not really possible, and all I end up doing is making myself choke. It's too late, and now, my stomach is churning with a sip of pop and probably half a shot of Makers Mark. It's not enough to get me drunk, it's not enough to make me sick, it's not enough to do anything—but it's enough for me to *taste* it, and that's all it takes.

"Oh, fuck," I say. I can't do this. I can't have this near me, not now that I've tasted it, not now that I remember.

I shove the cup into the nearest pair of empty hands—some random partygoer's. She raises it and sniffs, then cocks her head to the side. She takes a sip and says, cheerfully, "Thanks, man."

"Garen?" Travis says from behind me.

"Oh, fuck," I repeat. I'm shivering, but it's not because of the temperature in the room. I'm shaking because of how badly I'm craving that warm, almost caramel flavor, that sharp sweetness, that—fuck, *everything*. How can it possibly be this intense? How can I be totally fine one minute, and the next, I feel like I might die if I don't get some more of that perfection? And then, for a third time, "Oh, *fuck*."

There's a hand on my back, then another on my elbow—Jamie and Ben, respectively. I know the touch of all of these boys way too well to be unaware of that. Jamie says, "Did you grab the wrong cup?" I nod jerkily. "And it was—you had a drink, instead? I mean, it was booze?"

"Well, obviously," Ben snaps at him, and Christ, the last thing I need right now is to hear the two of them bitching at each other.

I spin around to face them; my eyes are watering from how painfully wide they are, but I need to tell them, I need them to *know*. "I-I didn't realize. It was—all the cups look the same, I thought it was mine, I didn't know it was one with bourbon in it. There—I wasn't—I didn't want it. I don't want this. You have to believe me."

"We believe y—" Jamie starts to say, but then Travis is shoving him out of the way and pressing another red cup into my hand.

"Drink this," he orders, and I do, without question. Orange juice. At Ben's questioning glance, he gives a jerky little half-shrug; he's still drunk, his eyes are still a little glassy, but he's so much more alert than he was a few minutes ago. He says, "You didn't have enough to get you wasted, but I know it'll still—this will get the taste out of your mouth. It's—that's the problem, right? I mean, I know that's why a lot of people in

recovery won't cook with alcohol, because of the flavor, not because of the proof. This should help, right?"

I suck down the rest of the juice as fast as I can, and that does help. It's enough to wash the real flavor from my mouth, but it doesn't change the fact that I can *feel* it. I know it's there, inside my body. Does this count? Did I just lose seven weeks of sobriety by taking a sip of a drink I didn't know was spiked? Is this what starting over should feel like?

And Travis—infuriating, beautiful Travis, who crawled into my head a year ago and never left, who is still swimming around inside my thoughts—knows, because he curves a hand over the back of my neck and says, "This doesn't count. You know that, right, G? It was an accident, not a relapse. You're fine. Okay?"

I nod and shrug his hand off of me. "Yeah. I'm just going to, um—fuck, I'm going to go rinse my mouth out."

It wasn't an invitation, but Travis loops his fingers around my forearm and trails after me to the bathroom, which is thankfully empty. The toothbrush I used after my last—no. The toothbrush I used after my *first* relapse, my *only* relapse, is still sitting in the brush holder on the edge of the sink. I brush my teeth once quickly, but I don't feel any better, so I do it again. For all his support, Travis gets kind of bored with waiting; by the time I'm done, he has climbed into the empty bathtub to hang out, and is gnawing at the clip-on lip ring. It's a nice distraction from the lingering ache in my gut, so in between multiple rinses of my mouth with water from the faucet, I ask, "Are you really drunk right now?"

"Are you really my dad right now?" he asks, so instinctively defensive that I almost choke on mouthful of water because I can't stop myself from laughing. His own mouth curves into a smile, and he admits, "That... *maybe* just answered your question without me meaning it to."

"Yeah, maybe. I'm going to head outside for a smoke. You wanna come with me, get some air?" I offer. He's not really drunk enough to need air. He's not falling down, or blacking out, or lying in a gutter, dying of alcohol poisoning, he's not *Garen Anderson* drunk, but there's no harm in taking him away from the noise for a few minutes. He nods, and I wind my fingers around his wrist, smearing off half the replacement tattoo, pulling him out of the bathtub, and guiding him out into the too-quiet hallway outside the apartment.

Once we're down on the sidewalk, I lean him up against the side of the building, then dig around in the inside pocket of the jacket he's wearing to find my cigarettes and lighter. He makes a vaguely pleased noise and shuffles closer to me, like he's half-hoping I'm trying to grope him, not just find my smokes. By the time I manage to get what I need and step back, he is palming contentedly at my waist through my hoodie, and my face is hot. I lean against the wall next to him, letting the October—or, is it after midnight, yet? Is it November?—air cool my burning skin. A cluster of children in costumes is making their way down the sidewalk towards us, so either it's earlier than I thought, or parents in New Haven really suck.

"Trick or treat!" the group of children exclaims, holding out their candy sacks.

Travis looks glumly down at his empty hands, then at the kids. "We don't have any candy to give you. All I've got in this jacket is cigarettes and what feels suspiciously like a handful of condoms. And I think that accepting either of those things from us now could really mess you up, later in life. So—"

"Sorry," I cut across him, reaching out to clamp a hand over his mouth, even though there's a wide smile stretching across my own face. "We're not giving out candy, we're at a party. But I think the next building over has some stuff, if you go there." The kids glower at us and make their way towards the neighboring apartment building. I look around at Travis, releasing him and asking, "Are you always that skilled at communicating with children?"

He flashes me a lazy smile and says, "But of course." He lets his shoulders slump back against the wall and spreads his arms out against it, fingers creeping drunkenly across the edges of the bricks as he mumbles, "Gonna be father of the fucking year, obviously."

Father of the year. Right. Because he's going to be that, he's going to be a dad. Because he has a pregnant girlfriend, so I should stop staring at his fucking mouth. *Snap out of it, Anderson, it's not the same as it was last year. You can't kiss him just because he's here, and he's gorgeous, and you want to.*

"Can I ask you a question?" I say, and he gives a genial nod. I don't even know what I want my question to be. Probably *can I kiss you*, but I already know what the answer will be, so there's no point. I hesitate, but what eventually comes out is, "Are you happy?"

He cocks his head to the side, like the word is foreign to him. "Am I happy?"

"With Joss," I clarify. "Are you happy with her?"

There is a momentary flash of agony and panic across his face; he tries to disguise it with a wide smile that, in his inebriation, he probably assumes looks less fake than it does. "Joss is a cool person. I know you guys don't get along, but sh-she and I, we're um... we're good together. I mean, it's challenging? We've both been under a lot of stress lately, because of the whole baby thing, but I-I think it's—all couples have problems, you know? Everybody fights. But we're still, it's a good relationship. *We—*" I shake my head once, and that's all it takes. The fake smile disappears, his eyes fall shut, and his head drops back to rest against the side of the building. "No," he admits softly, "I'm not really that happy with her."

"Then why are you still with her?" I demand.

"You know why," he says, a little bit miserably. "It's not like things between Joss and I are *awful*, they're just not that great, either. And that's a dumb reason to break up, okay? Especially if it might impact the relationship she lets me have with the baby after it's born."

That sends an ice-cold shiver down my spine. "S-So, what, you're going to stay with her for the next eighteen years, just so she has no shot at keeping the kid from you? You're seriously going to stay together for the kids?"

"No, I'm—stop putting words in my mouth," he says, somewhat desperately. "I'm not saying that I'm going to stay with her for the next two decades, what the fuck. I'm just thinking about my future, okay? And I think that things would be a lot easier, and a lot less stressful if she and I just make it work for right now. Even if she wasn't pregnant, I might stay with her. It's not a bad relationship just because you don't like her, alright? She's a cool person. She and I can make this work for at least a little while longer. I can be happy with her, if—"

"I think you could be happy, maybe," I say, refusing to look at anything but the glowing tip of my cigarette, "if you were with me."

His eyes finally snap open, and he inhales sharply. "G, are we really going to have this conversation?"

"We've *never* had this conversation, Travis," I snap. "You've had this conversation with Ben, and Alex, and my fucking mother, but you've never actually told *me* why you and I can't be together. You—fuck, were you lying that day, when you said you're still in love with me?" He shakes his head slowly, and I can't stop myself from ordering, "Say it. I want you to look me in the eyes and say those words. I deserve that much."

Emboldened by my frustration and the alcohol still coursing through his bloodstream, he straightens up, no longer using the wall for support, and turns to lock his eyes on mine. My jaw is so tightly locked that I almost don't hear him over the sound of my teeth grinding together, and it takes everything in me not to fall completely apart when he says, "I love you."

"I love you, too," I hurry to say, before the rejection that I know is still coming. He sighs, tries to drag his

fingers through his hair, only to be stopped by the intense amount of hairspray I had to load him down with. He makes a face at his hand and wipes it on his jeans, even though I use that hairspray every day, I know it's not sticky after the first fifteen seconds it's on. Still, it's a gesture so adorably Travis that I have to press on, "If I wasn't an addict, and we didn't have to worry about my sobriety being an issue. And if you and Joss hadn't gotten together, and she wasn't pregnant. Would you want to be with me then?" I ask. He doesn't say yes. He doesn't say no, either. He remains completely silent, because the way he's looking at me is answer enough. "Then dump her," I burst out. It's what I've been dying to say since the moment I realized they were together, and now that I've said it, I don't think I can stop myself. "Dump her and take me back. If those are the two reasons you won't be with me—you're worried about my sobriety. Okay. I get that, and I appreciate it, but I can handle my own sobriety. You saw me tonight, you saw me accidentally take that sip, you saw me start wanting, and you saw me resist it. I'm better, Trav, I'm so much better than I was before. You don't need to worry about me staying clean, so just—just table that reason for a second, okay?"

"Fine," he says, rolling his eyes. "Fine, that *huge, gigantic* reason can be tabled for a second."

He's being a sarcastic little shit, but he's also wavering, I can tell. I continue, "And if we table that, then the only thing standing in our way is the pregnant chick, and you don't even *love* her. I mean, fuck, Travis. You're seventeen years old, you're too young to make yourself unhappy by staying with someone just for the kid she's going to have. You can—I'm not telling you that she should get rid of it, or that you should bail on the kid after it's born. But you don't need to be with Joss to be a good father. I mean, my mom and dad aren't together anymore, but fuck, I have the best parents in the entire world. You and Joss could do that, have a kid but not be with each other."

"It's not just about Joss and the baby, and you know it," he protests. "It's about me, and it's about you, and the fact that I know—I know it, Garen, right here—" He palms furiously at his own chest, right over his heart, "—I know you're not ready to be with anyone. I keep telling you that, and you keep ignoring me. That's why everything went so badly with you and Ben. Because neither of you was healthy enough for—"

"You don't get to decide what I'm healthy enough to handle!" I argue. "For fuck's sake, dude, I'm an *adult*. I know about the 'one year sober before dating' rule, alright? My shrink has told me all about it, and I've read all those gay little pamphlets from AA and NA and everybody else, but I don't *care*. Those rules exist for people who get involved in really fucked up shit, not for people who—what we had together, Travis? It was good. We had a goddamn good relationship, and you can't deny that."

He hitches his chin at me and says, "Oh, yeah? And what happens when we break up again?"

"We don't," I say flatly, ignoring the additional eyeroll that earns me. "Don't make that fucking face at me, I'm serious. You and I are going to get back together, and we're never going to break up. Get your phone out, call your girlfriend, and dump her ass—seriously, I'll wait right here, you can do it in front of me, I won't mind. And then after that, you and I, we're going to go make out in the backseat of my dad's Benz until it's time to leave, and then we're going to... shit, we're going to *date*, Travis. We're going to date, and you're going to go to prom with me even though the idea of doing something as lamely high school as going to prom makes my eye twitch, and we're going to, I don't know—fucking... have a shit-ton of crazy-awesome sex and get married and be together forever, and *I'm not taking no for an answer*, because you have had a year to figure this shit out, and every time you get close to it, you suddenly get your head up your own ass, and I'm just over it. So fuck you, I'm laying down the law. Dump your girlfriend so we can date."

He squints at me. "Did you just stamp your foot?"

"No," I snarl, though I repeat the stamp even as I say it.

"Oh my god, are you *four*? Like, fuck, if this is you proving that 'I'm an adult' argument from earlier, you're doing it so wrong."

"You're in love with me," I say, and it comes out as an accusation more than anything else. "You're in love with me, and I'm in love with you, and you're a fucking idiot with a girlfriend, but I want to date you anyway, so stop fucking arguing with me so that we—"

And whatever I'm expecting him to interrupt me with, it's certainly not what he *does* say, which is, "Can you just shut the fuck up and kiss me already?"

My heart is beating so hard that I'm worried it might break my ribs, but I've broken ribs before, so I know that it would be worth it, just to have his lips on mine again. I'm pressed against him in an instant, slotting one of my legs between his and bringing our chests flush together, reaching up to clasp his face between my hands, leaning in and--

The door to the building opens and Stohler tumbles out. She lights up when she sees me and says, "Hey! I was looking for you! I'm going to head home, so I just wanted to say happy Halloween, and—" Her voice dies when she finally realizes that I've got Travis pinned up against the side of the building, that I'm literally shaking with the effort it takes to not kiss him right now. The bright smile on Stohler's face disappears in an instant. Her voice is flat as she says, "Anderson. What the fuck. We talked about this."

"I know," is all I can say.

"He has a girlfriend. He has a hell of a lot *more* than a girlfriend. Knock it the fuck off."

It's a strong enough rebuke that I find myself stepping quickly backward, because she's right. Fuck. She's right, and I'm an asshole, and this needs to not be happening anymore. I say, "Can you stay with him for a minute? I'm going to go find Jamie. I think we should head out."

She gives a curt nod, and I bolt back indoors. I stomp back up to the apartment to find Jamie, who isn't in the kitchen or the living room. Hedging my bets, I head for Alex's bedroom, fling open the door, and—oh, shit.

Alex is sprawled out on his bed, and for half a second, I think that Ben is sucking him off. Then I realize that no, the person with short, dark hair and pale white skin is actually a girl. It's just... a girl who happens to look way too much like Ben for me to be comfortable. Alex looks over at me and groans out, "Jesus fuck, why do none of my friends understand how to knock? First Ben and Jamie, now you—"

"He was here?" I say, the bottom of my stomach dropping out. "He came in here, he saw you like this?"

Alex offers a somewhat guilty nod and admits, "Yeah, like two minutes ago. Not like I think he'd care all that much."

I want to punch him now more than ever, because holy hell, does he really think I'm talking about *Ben*? I sneer down at the girl in his lap and bite out, "Your girl's technique fucking sucks. And I know for a fact that Jamie gives better head." I slam the door behind myself and storm down the hall. I know exactly how Jamie's bound to be feeling right now, minutes after seeing Alex getting off with some random who looks like Ben, which means—if I know my best friend at all—he's probably taking this special moment out of the evening to make Ben's life hell.

I throw open the door to Ben's bedroom, and sure enough, Ben is giving Jamie a hard shove in the chest, almost enough to send Jamie to the ground. They're glaring at each other so ferociously that I'm pretty convinced that someone's going to get punched if they're both still in this room thirty seconds from now. Jamie whips around to glare at me now, and I say, "Can I seriously not leave you two alone for ten minutes without you starting to push each other around?"

Presumably as part of some grand *if the guy who fucks me only wants you, I'll get back at you by making the guy who fucks you want me* plan, he shoves me up against the doorframe and brings our mouths crashing together. It's painful, and bruising, and I sink into it, because right now, I need this at least as

much as he does. I need to know that I can still be wanted. He moves away too soon, and I make another dive to get his mouth back on mine, but he just twists his hands into fists around the front of my sweatshirt and says, "I fucking hate your friends."

He shoots one last glare over his shoulder and stomps out of the room, leaving me alone with Ben. We stare at each other for a solid minute before I explode, "That's it! I'm converting to Catholicism and becoming a priest, so that I can go live in one of those little priest communes where everybody talks about Jesus and nobody fucks anybody, because *dick is ruining my life*."

"Yeah," Ben says glumly, "I think we'd be really bad at the celibacy thing, though."

"Well, it's not like we could be worse at it than we are now, right?" I say, making a vague gesture that I hope he realizes encompasses all of us. "I'm just... whatever. I'm just so fucking done with this whole group, sometimes."

He nods again, but I hope he realizes I don't really mean it.

Chapter Fourteen: Bonus Scene

Jamie Goldwyn

"You know, you're not nearly as much of a moron as I had originally anticipated you being."

This is the closest thing to a compliment I have ever received from Ben McCutcheon. It is probably the closest thing to a compliment I *will* ever receive from Ben McCutcheon. I smile, even though what I really want is to knot my fingers around that slouchy black hat and bash his head into the coffee table. I say, "It's the accent. Makes me sound like a simple country boy instead of an Ivy League university student who lives on the Upper East Side of Manhattan."

I'm bragging, name-dropping a little, but I suppose he just brings that out in me.

He is unimpressed. "No, I'm pretty sure it's the fact that every word that's come out of your mouth since we met has been an insult, a request for alcohol, or an attempt to get one of my friends to fuck you. So, forgive me for thinking you're probably intellectually on par with the average frat boy."

"What happened to your arm?" I ask, even though I suspect I already know. He doesn't wear his sadness on his sleeve, like Garen does; he wraps himself up in it like it's battle armor, like his self-loathing is a shell that will keep him safe. A way of saying, *how could you ever hurt me more than I have already hurt myself? How could you ever hate me as much as I hate myself?* I want to crack into that shell and see what's inside of him, all the parts that are shiny and secret and raw. He says nothing. I gesture at the sling, as though he'd forgotten its presence. "Did you break it?"

"No," he says finally.

"Did you sprain it?"

"No."

"Did you cut it?"

He doesn't reply at first. I smile, just so that he knows I already understand, even if he won't admit it. He doesn't look nearly as disconcerted as I'd like. I open my mouth to speak, but he interrupts me with, "*Take a writer away from his typewriter and all you have left is the sickness which started him typing in the beginning.*"

I cock my head to the side and identify, "Charles Bukowski." He ducks his head and gives a short nod, which is pointless, because I already know I'm right. "You're the only person I know who makes a habit of quoting writers in everyday conversation."

"You don't know me," is his immediate reply. There's a beat, and then he grudgingly admits, "You're the only person who recognizes the quotes. I didn't expect that, not from someone like you."

"It's the accent," I repeat, because I'm too drunk to come up with something better. His upper lip curls, as though he's noticing my conversational weakness, and before he can point it out, I ask, "So, you a writer, then?"

He's thrown by that. Good. "I, um—yeah. I am."

"Let me read something you've written."

Good Lord, you'd think I'd asked him to give me a rimjob on the beer pong table. "*No*," he says, the word tumbling so violently from his mouth that it's like he's choking it up. "No way in hell."

"Why not?" I ask, shrugging.

"Because I hate you?" he suggests.

"And I you, which means I'm the only person you know who has no reason to lie and tell you that your writing is good if it's actually shit," I say. I take a sip of my beer so that comment has time to sink in, then I stand. "Where do you keep 'em?"

"Where do I keep—"

"The poems," I say impatiently. "The stories, whatever they are. Are they in your room?" He hesitates, then gives a short nod. I gesture onward. "Shall we?"

It's nearly thirty seconds before he finally rises uncertainly from the couch and takes a step towards me. I move down the hallway on autopilot, pushing through the crowds of people until I reach the same door I'm so used to heading towards, not realizing that I've instinctively made my way to Alexander's room until I push open the door and find myself blinking down at him sprawled out on his bed, his cock in the mouth of some girl with short, almost-black hair and bright blue eyes.

And really, I can understand the desire to sleep with someone who looks like your best friend. After all, how many times have I taken a man to bed just because he had spiked brown hair, or dark green eyes, or guitar-calloused fingertips? The real difference, of course, is that I get fucked by men who remind me of Garen because it's comfortable, and familiar, and makes me happy. It's the reason I like to wear the same worn-in Oxfords I've been wearing since my freshman year at Patton; it's the same reason I sometimes fill my apartment with those candles that smell like the peach and blackberry cobbler my momma only bothers to make once or twice a year, right at the height of summer. I like Savannah sun-warmed peaches, and the over-laundered fabric of my old boarding school uniform, and the feel of Garen's smiling mouth on my skin because these things are *home* to me. Right now, Alexander isn't trying to come home; he's living in a fantasy world, fucking this girl's mouth just because she looks like a boy he wants in a way I don't think he'll ever really want me.

"I realize your experience in this apartment is pretty much limited to crawling into Al's bed and taking it, but you do know that my room is actually the other one, right?" that midget says, appearing at my side, then doing a double-take when he realizes what I'm staring at.

The sound of that horrible, bored voice is enough to finally get Alexander's attention. His dark eyes dart from the head in his lap to my face, and then, even more quickly, past me to where Ben is standing. I do not miss the fact that his hips give a sharp twitch upwards the moment they light on his best friend's face. Because my manners have been ingrained in me since birth, I find myself flashing a polite smile to the boy on the bed and sinking into a short bow. "Excuse me. Didn't realize this room was occupied."

The last thing I see before elbowing Ben back into the hallway and shutting the door again is Alexander's brief nod of thanks. It's a casual, too-friendly gesture, and I wonder how many more times I'll have to ask him to be my boyfriend before he realizes that I don't just want to be his friend. When I look around again, my eyes fall on the midget, sneaking off into his own room and crooking a finger after me, not a care in the world, except for showing me his stupid poems.

I hope they're terrible. I'll tell him they're terrible no matter what, but I hope I'm not lying when I say it. I storm into the bedroom after him and slam the door shut. He shoots me a reproachful look and says, "Don't slam my door like a five-year-old just because you and Alex can't figure out whether or not you're even dating."

Several things happen at once, almost none of which I have planned for. Something snaps inside of me, and I stride across the room to grab two fistfuls of Ben's hair and yank his head back enough to have his face tilted up towards mine, even though the ten inch height difference has never been so noticeable. A sharp, involuntary groan tears out of his throat, an unexpected sound that goes right to my groin. I can

see that he is attempting to steel himself to push me off, or at least ask what the hell I'm doing, but the question disappears from his now-parted lips and his eyes roll back a little when I give his hair another rough tug. I am seconds away from shoving him up against the nearest wall, but I can't tell if I plan to punch him in that perpetually kissed-looking mouth, or rut up against him until we both come in our pants. Or both.

"They all want you, and I don't understand it for a second," I hiss. "Show me why. Show me what is so fucking fantastic about you, McCutcheon."

"I don't even know what you're *talking* about," he grits out.

I crowd him back against his nightstand—the water glass tumbles over onto the bed, soaking one of the pillows—and pin him in place with my hips, which are nearly level with the bottom of his ribcage. "You cannot possibly be blind to the effect you have on all of them. Garen, Travis, Alexander. They all worship you, and you pretend not to notice, and it makes me sick. It's pathetic. You're pathetic."

"I'm pathetic?" he sneers. I'm surprised and disgusted, but still the tiniest bit impressed at his brashness when he wedges his uninjured hand between us to cup my half-hard cock through my costume. "Tell that to your dick, Goldwyn, because apparently he thinks I'm *asfucking fantastic* as you say my friends do."

I can't remember the last time I wanted to wreck someone's body in whatever way possible as much as I want to do that to this fucking midget right now. His palm is still working against my crotch, and I can feel his erection digging into my thigh. Usually, I don't enjoy topping the gentlemen I sleep with, but Ben McCutcheon is not a gentleman, and all I want to do is bend him over this nightstand and listen to him tell me how much he hates me while I drill into him and give him the greatest orgasm of his meaningless life. I want what I know Alexander wants.

He is reaching for the drawstring of my swim trunks and I am leaning down to bring our mouths together when the door opens. He shoves me off so quickly that I almost tumble out of my sandals. The noise means nothing to me—I'll kick the person out, lock the door, fuck this waste of humanity right here on the floor until his back is scarlet with rug burn and he can't stop himself from screaming my name loudly enough for Alexander to hear it through the walls. But when I turn around, I find myself facing a wary, moderately baffled Garen.

"Can I seriously not leave you two alone for ten minutes without you starting to push each other around?" he asks.

In that instant, I am too frustrated to speak. All I want is a moment of touch to relieve my tension, or at least the chance to show the munchkin that he's not the only one who can make these boys weak in the knees. I fling an arm around my best friend's neck and haul him into a brutal kiss. He melts into it as readily as he has since we were fourteen years old, and when I press him against the doorframe, I chance a glance over my shoulder. Ben's lip is curled in revulsion, but his eyes are dark with poorly disguised want, and he's still rock hard. It's a beautiful and disturbing balance. I release Garen, who lets out a faint whine and attempts to follow my mouth with his own. I grip the front of his sweatshirt and say, "I fucking. Hate. Your friends."

My next glance finds Ben looking so undone at the venom in my words that, for one glorious second, I think I have managed to make him come in his pants like a needy virgin. But then he sneers at me again, and I know that if I don't get out of this room immediately, I'll barely have the patience to get us both out of our clothes before I hatefuck him so harshly he'll never be able to come again without imagining my hands on him. I stumble past Garen out into the hallway.

I need a drink and an orgasm, and not necessarily in that order.

Chapter Fifteen

"If somebody puts their hands on you, make sure they never put their hands on anybody else again." –Malcolm X

50 days sober

From the moment I walk into school on the first day of November, everything is completely and utterly fucked. I manage to take about five steps down the hallway towards my locker before Annabelle is on me, dragging me into a mostly deserted stairwell and whispering, "Okay, please tell me you know. Because you need to know, but if you don't know, I really don't think I can handle being the person who tells you. So, if you don't know, you're going to need to wait here while I go get Riley so *he* can tell you."

"Tell me what?" I ask.

"About Joss and Travis. But mostly Joss," she says. There's a brief hesitation, and then she says, "She told us last night, at Miranda's. And I think you know what I'm talking about, because you're not moving at all right now, but I don't want to say the words, in case you don't—Garen, please tell me that you've heard about Joss', you know, *condition*."

My stomach lurches, because *fuck*. It's not like I thought that this would stay a secret forever—the people in this town have a collective IQ pretty similar to that of a retarded hamster, but by the time Joss starts to show, even they won't be able to overlook it. I knew people would find out, but I didn't know it would be this soon. I swallow hard and say, "Yeah. I know. I've uh, I've known for about three weeks now."

"Holy fuck," she hisses. "How could you not tell anyone?"

Because I'm still trying to figure out how to be friends with these people. Because everyone would have assumed I was making it up to make trouble for Joss just because I hate her. Because a huge part of me has been hoping that this is all a bad dream, and that when I wake up, she won't be his girlfriend, that baby won't exist, and he'll be lying next to me. "Because I promised Travis I wouldn't, okay? But that's not—look, who else knows? Just you, and Riley, and Miranda, right? Please tell me—"

But my words die in my mouth, because she is shaking her head slowly from side to side. Shit. Shit, shit, shit. I can't seem to force out the question, so I make a vague prompting gesture, hoping to communicate my desire to know how bad it really is. She shoots me a helpless look, then says, "She said it right in the middle of the party, okay? Everyone was there, we all heard—"

"Who?" I demand. "Who is 'everyone'? Just—the lunch group? You guys, Nate, Christine, John—"

"No, Garen, you're not getting it. It was a big group of us at the party, not just the regular people. It's on *facebook*. Everyone knows. The entire grade. I've been hovering by the front door of the fucking school, hoping to catch Travis before he comes inside, but he isn't here yet. I saw you first."

Hand trembling, I slip my phone from my pocket and thumb through my contacts list to select Travis' number. It rings, and rings, and rings, and finally, it goes to voicemail. *Hey, you've reached Travis McCall. Please leave your name and number after the tone, and I'll get back--* I hang up and dial again. Annabelle touches my shoulder, and I step back, out of reach. "He can't walk in here not knowing, alright? I've gotta *warn* the guy."

When my second call is also sent to voicemail, I try a third time, and a fourth. Finally, I get a text. *Oh my god, stop calling me. I have a bitch of a headache and my ringtone is really loud. On my way to school, see you in like 5 minutes.* Fuck, this is not good. The last thing he needs is to come strolling into school, hungover as shit, not realizing that the entire school knows what's going on. Shrugging off Annabelle, I abandon the stairwell and head for the front doors to wait.

The moment I see Travis getting out of his car and wandering closer, I launch myself through the doors and down the steps. It's hard to tell when he finally looks at me, because his hungover, photosensitive eyes are hidden by sunglasses. My sunglasses. He's wearing *my* aviators, the same way his jacket is layered over *my* Patton hoodie, same as *my* boots are tucked under his arm. He's got me all over him. Under normal circumstances, that'd have me grinning like a schoolgirl, but right now, it just seems... wrong. Inappropriate, I guess, though I've never really given a shit about being appropriate before. Right there at the edge of the parking lot, I kick off the borrowed pair of sneakers I'm wearing and stuff them into his hands, subbing them out for the boots. When I look back at his face, he's giving me a hesitant smile, like he's trying to see if I'm thinking about the fact that the last time we were alone together, I had him pressed against a brick wall and asking to be kissed.

"Travis," is all I can manage at first.

"Garen," he responds, and I wonder if he's mocking me. He hastily continues, "Look, about last night?"

"Wait, before you say anything, there's something you need to—"

"Hang on. Just... please let me talk, alright? Last night, I shouldn't have said any of the things I said." His tone is hushed enough that he needs to step closer for me to hear him. I can't be sure—those fucking sunglasses, how does anyone put up with me?—but I think he's staring at my mouth. "I shouldn't have told you I love you, and I definitely shouldn't have asked you to kiss me. It's—James is a lot better at beer pong than I'd anticipated, and by the time you and I were outside, I was—I was too drunk to remember all the reasons why I should have lied to you and pretended that I didn't—that I *don't* want—"

I reach out and give his wrist a hard yank to startle him into silence. The moment his mouth has snapped shut, I release him and say, as calmly as I can manage, "Last night, at Miranda's house, Joss told people she's pregnant. The whole school knows."

His entire body freezes up. It's nearly a solid minute later when he manages to unlock his jaw enough to echo, "The whole school knows?"

I nod.

"I don't understand. Why would—people were bound to find out eventually, but I don't—I haven't even told my family yet. Why the fuck would she let a bunch of strangers know before she even lets me tell my parents?" he asks, sounding *miserable*.

I want to hit him. *Because she's a terrible person*, I want to burst out. *Because she's awful and vicious and manipulative, and it's a lot easier to control you with her pregnancy, if everyone knows about it, too*. But even now, I doubt that he would really hear a word of it; he barely knows her, but she's still the mother of his baby, and that has provoked some weird sort of trust within him. There's a *Josslyn is great, Garen is an asshole* switch in his mind that gets flipped every morning, and all I can do right now is try to make sure that he's focused on the bit about Joss and not the part about me.

I force a shrug. "I don't know, man. Maybe it just slipped out in front of one person and then—I mean, you know how things like this spread. You said you only came out to a couple of people, and the entire school knew within a matter of days."

The words are meant to be placating, but he just goes pale and shakes his head violently from side to side. "No. Fuck, G, this cannot turn out like that. It's—those first few days, when everyone was just finding out about me, they were the worst, and I can't—I know people here don't really like me that much, okay? I know I annoy a lot of people, I always have, and when something shitty happens to me, like everyone finding out I'm bi before I wanted them to know, it's like—people love bringing me down a peg, and I can't deal with that right now—"

"Believe me, I know that," I say, winding my fingers around his wrists in what I hope is a comforting

gesture. “The assholes at this place have been treating me in the worst way since I came back, because I don’t know, apparently me going to rehab and fucking up my life is funny, somehow? So, I understand how much it sucks when they talk about you, but I also know that you can get through it—”

“I can’t,” he interrupts, and when I try to protest, he just shakes his head and steps closer, saying more vehemently, “No, you’re not listening to me, Garen. You can handle something like this, because you’re stronger than I am, alright? You have this overwhelming certainty about who you are, you know how to be a man in situations like this, but I don’t. I’ve been so close to just—” But what he’s been so close to, I don’t find out, because he breaks off, yanking the sunglasses off so that he can drag a palm across his face, like that might help clear his thoughts.

Behind me, the warning bell rings for homeroom, and he instinctively takes a step towards the building. I squeeze his wrists tighter—and it pisses me off so much that the few people still making their way from their cars to the school are staring at us—and say, “Hey, listen to me. I don’t care what you say, man. This situation sucks, but you’re going to be fine. So, go find your girlfriend, go talk this out, and just—you’ll get through it, yeah?”

He takes a sudden, final step towards me, bringing us chest-to-chest. For half a second, I think—hope, maybe—that he’s going to give me that kiss I should have taken last night, but he just loops an arm around my waist to keep me in place as he brings his mouth to my ear and whispers hoarsely, “About a month ago, I started planning my suicide. I had everything figured out—how I was going to do it, where I was going to do it, when I was going to do it. But I couldn’t go through with it, because after thirty-five different drafts, I still couldn’t get the note right.” My body turns to a useless pile of blood and bones so quickly that he has to tighten his grip on my waist to stop me from stumbling. There’s a tiny breath of a laugh against the shell of my ear, even though nothing about this could ever be funny. “It’s the stupidest fucking reason for a person not to kill himself, right? But the idea that people would remember me as ‘Travis McCall, the idiot who couldn’t even get his suicide note right’ was so terrifying to me that I couldn’t even off myself. That’s how pathetic I am, Garen. I don’t know how to be alive, but I don’t know how to be dead, either. Trust me when I say that I don’t know how to get through this.”

The late bell rings. His arm drops from my waist, and he attempts to take a step back, but I can’t let him. The idea of allowing the conversation to end here, after he has just dropped that bomb on me, is unbearable. I throw my arms around him and drag him back in, crushing him to my chest hard enough to force a faint *oh* of surprise out of him. My face is buried against the side of his neck, which means my voice is muffled when I say, “Don’t. We’re not going inside yet.”

“We’re late for homeroom,” he says. Sometimes, it still blows my mind that after everything I’ve been through, I still have to worry about something as trivial as being late for homeroom. Sometimes, I forget that I’m just eighteen.

I shake my head and wedge my hands under Travis’ backpack so that I can fist them around the material of his jacket. “I don’t give a fuck if we’re late to homeroom. The front office gives out late passes, I’ll just tell them we had car trouble. But right now, I need you to just let me touch you for a little while. I need to know that you’re here, and you’re alive, and you’re okay.”

It makes no difference. Me holding him now does nothing to take away from the weeks—months, maybe—of suffering that I had no idea he was putting up with. It doesn’t make anything different, or better, or bearable, but eventually, he slips his own hands under my backpack to settle them in the small of my back, fingers laced together and palms shaking so hard I can feel the vibration even through the leather. He says, “I really don’t think I can do this, G.”

“Do you want me to take you back home? You could blow off today’s classes, wait for the rumor mill to die down a—”

“I kind of meant in a more general sense. Joss keeps asking me what I’ll do to make sure the baby has a good life, and I told her—I keep telling her that I’ll do anything for her. For them. God, I’ll give up

everything I have to make this work, that's the easiest decision I've ever made, but I—things like this? People finding out, knowing what they're going to say about me? This is the part I'm really afraid of."

I kiss the side of his neck, then just below his ear, then the edge of his jaw. His breathing is shaky, though I don't know if it's from the stress of this situation, or the feeling of my mouth on his skin. My next kiss lands on his cheek, and then I say, "You'll be fine. It's going to suck so fucking badly, but you've got m—friends. And Joss. We're all going to be here for you, alright? No matter how shitty the people at school are about this, we're all going to support you. Or, both of you, I guess. You and Joss. You understand?"

He nods, jaw bumping against my shoulder. "Yeah. We, um... we should probably head inside."

"No," I say. Every time I blink, I find myself picturing him fulfilling his dreams of suicide. I see him passed out on the floor of his bedroom, clutching an empty pill bottle. I see him tying a noose and hanging himself from the banister on the stairs of the old house. I see him cutting open his wrists, bleeding out the same way I was afraid Ben would.

I see him sitting at the desk in Dad's old office, sipping a tumbler of whiskey and then sticking the muzzle of a Glock in his mouth. But there's a chance I'm just projecting, with that last one.

"Dude, we're *late*," he says.

I shake my head and say, "I don't care. We're staying out here until I know you're okay. And failing that, we're staying out here until *I'm* okay."

It ends up taking forty-five minutes, four soft kisses to the side of my neck, and one whispered apology, followed by a breath that sounds dangerously close to *I love you*. The main office secretary's expression tells me that she doesn't believe my claims of car trouble for an instant, but she writes us each a late pass anyway. After we've both stopped at our lockers, I walk Travis to his AP Spanish class, even though it makes him roll his eyes. But that's good—it's normal, at least, typical Travis, not something that leaves me worried, terrified, aching on my way to my last ten minutes of AP Government.

No one asks me about Travis and Joss, but I can tell they're all wondering how I'm still sober right now. There doesn't seem to be a point in explaining to anyone that I've been trying to wake myself up from the nightmare that is their relationship for months now; instead, I settle for scowling a bit more than usual and trying to pretend I don't feel everyone's eyes on me. When I get to trial law, I nudge Travis' arm and open my mouth to ask him how his morning has been. He silences me with a look, shakes his head slowly from side to side, and sinks low into his chair, avoiding my eyes for the rest of class. It's probably the least reassuring thing I've ever seen.

It isn't until lunchtime, however, that I realize the full extent of our classmates' reactions. People are gaping at Travis and Joss with an openness that they've never dared to stare at me with. At least my drug addiction sparks a sense of fear in these people, a wariness that keeps most of them silent; the pregnancy just leads to amusement, to taunting, to blatant staring and--

"Way to fuck up big time, McCall," says some random soccer douche, clapping Travis on the shoulder and making him grit his teeth. "Didn't know you had it in you to actually make it with a chick."

Sitting at a table about twenty feet away from us, Jack Thorne smirks and calls, "Who even knows if he can? I wouldn't be surprised if he was so busy boning his own stepbrother that some other guy slipped in and got the job done." Travis' head snaps up, his eyes locking onto Jack's. Jack sneers at him. "You sure it's even *yours*?"

Dozens of fights over the past few years have given me a pretty good idea of exactly when someone will reach their breaking point—it's the skill I used last spring to figure out just what to say to get Dave to attack me, to do something to me that might make me feel anything other than lonely. But right now, that's not how I know that everything's about to fall apart. It's Travis and my familiarity with his body that

makes me notice the tensing of his muscles, the spasm of his clenching fists, that little hitch in his breathing like he's already bracing himself to get hit. He makes it upright, off the bench, but I throw an arm around his waist half a second before he moves to launch himself at Jack, dragging him back a few feet and saying firmly, "No. Travis, no, you're not going to hit him, alright?"

"Did you hear what he said to me?" Travis demands, struggling against my grip. At the other table, Jack stands, saunters a little closer to us, and that's exactly the wrong idea.

I maneuver myself around so that I'm standing between them, my hands clamped over Travis' shoulders to keep him in place and focused on me. "I did, but that doesn't matter. You know it's bullshit, okay? Believe me, I more than understand a desire to just punch Thorne right in the face—I've wanted to do it all school year, but you can't do that without getting in trouble, alright?"

"Did you hear what he *said*?" Travis repeats, now just sounding defeated. "I can't let him say that sort of shit about her. I can't let him talk about them like that."

Them. Oh. I hadn't realized that the fetus was at a point where we were actively including it in conversation that way, like it's a real person who should be factored in. I shake my head, more to clear it than because I disagree, and I find myself locking eyes with Joss over Travis' shoulder. And it's not that I want to reassure her, but I sort of get the feeling that I can't make Travis feel better without at least trying to make her--*them*, I guess—feel better, too. I say, "I get it, dude, but you know it's bullshit. Joss wouldn't do that to you, alright? It doesn't matter what that asshole says. You know the truth, okay? You—"

There's a sick sort of smacking noise that I belatedly realize is the sound of someone taking a hard, wide swing at the side of my head. I've got no idea if it's because of the momentum of the punch, or because of the dizziness I'm feeling from my brain rattling around in my skull, but the next thing I know, I'm crumpling sideways, crashing to my knees, and then my head collides with the corner of the nearest lunch table--

No, my head collides with one of the covered caster wheels of my desk chair. That doesn't even sting that badly, not as much as the punch to the face that brought me to my knees in the first place, or the kick to my ribs that follows. I can feel the bones splintering inside my chest, an unimaginable agony rocketing outward from the point of contact. Instinctively, I try to hunch into a ball, to cover my chest to prevent any more of that pain, but Dave's next kick just crashes into my hands, and I hear the crunch of my fingers snapping under the pressure of the kick.

"Please," I beg, even though the blood and tears are making it difficult for even me to understand what I'm saying. "D-Dave, please, stop—"

"Is this all a goddamn joke to you, Garen? Do you think it's funny to try and break my heart?" he bellows down at me. "Have you been fucking him this whole time?"

I manage to make it onto my knees, crawling away with my good hand, the bad one cradled to my chest as I try to find any words that might undo what's happening right now. But god, it hurts just to breathe, let alone speak. "I haven't, I swear. I haven't—touched him since even before—before we got back together. I wouldn't—I was lying, I'm not his—Dave, I'm yours. I promise, I love you, just you, only you—"

He must be able to hear the lie in my voice, because his next kick is aimed straight at my heart.

I become aware of someone touching me, of panicked hands fluttering over my chest, like someone's trying to get me to stay still. I can't stay still, though, not until I figure out where I am and what the fuck is going on. A few seconds of blinking clears my vision enough that Nate Holliday's horror-stricken face swims in focus above me. Something hot and sticky is smeared across my temple, like—did someone spit on me? What is going *on*? I press my palm to my forehead, and it comes away red. Fuck, when did I start bleeding, and why—god, why am I on the floor? There are other faces above me now, some I recognize and some I don't, and shit, that's right, I'm at school. I'm lying on the floor of the cafeteria. Like someone

who's *weak* would be doing.

I try to scramble upright, but my balance is off, and it takes me another few seconds to realize that it's because I can't hear anything but a ringing in my ears and the ghosts of Dave's furious words. Someone extends a hand to me, and I accept it, allowing myself to be hauled to my feet. I stagger a little, but I'm fine, I'm starting to be able to make out words. Nate is saying, "Garen, are you okay? Oh my god. We need to get you to the nurse, you hit your head against the—"

"Who hit me?" I say, even though I already know.

It would be hard *not* to know. I mean, there's really only one person who is standing there, fist still clenched, getting fucking *sarled at* by Travis, who has avoided a breakdown of violence only because he's being restrained by both Riley and John right now. They're both talking loudly over him, trying to calm him down, but he's shaking and thrashing and trying his damndest to get at Jack, who is just watching him, lip curled.

I take a shaky step forward, then another. I aim my finger at Jack and say, "You hit me?"

"I hit you," he mimics, taunting. I swipe at the blood that's still trailing sticky-hot down my forehead, threatening to run into my eye. There's only one thing I can think to say to him right now, and it comes out more like a growl than a statement.

"I'm going to snap your fucking neck."

And besides the fact that they're saving him from destroying his perfect student record, the best part about Riley and John holding Travis back? There's nobody whose hands are free to try to stop me when I tackle Jack to the ground and knot my hand around the front of his shirt to hold him still enough that I can land a punch to his mouth. The next however many seconds pass in a flurry of fists and bruises and yells, and it's... not as easy as I remember fighting being. For every good punch Jack gets in, I manage to make at least two, but every time his hand connects with my skin, I feel like I'm slipping in and out of consciousness. I can't see anything, I can't hear anything but that ringing again, and I know—I know it's not Dave that's hitting me, but he's the one whose hands I feel on me.

Suddenly, my back is against the cafeteria wall, and the hands holding me in place belong to Mr. Caldwell from the history department, one of the teachers doing lunch supervision today. Even I'm not stupid enough to hit a teacher—I raise my hands, palms out, and say, over and over, "I'm done. I'm sorry. I'm done, I'm done." His mouth is moving, but I can't hear what he's saying, not over that incessant, overpowering *ringing*. I clamp my hands over my ears for a minute, to see if that might help, but his voice is still faint when I remove my hands. I just shake my head and say—why does my tongue feel so heavy, like I'm slurring my words?—"I can't hear you. Dude, I can't hear anything you're—I can't—"

The world is lopsided all at once, and I pitch over sideways. I'm too heavy for Mr. Caldwell to keep me upright, but he does get a good enough hold on me that he's able to help me sit down on the ground without me managing to crack my head open. I can still feel the blood trickling down my forehead, and I want to wipe at it, but my whole body feels disconnected from itself. I just... need to clear my head, is all.

I blink. I'm still sitting on the floor, but Mr. Caldwell is gone, and Vice Principal Jacobs is there instead, and she's saying something to me, something I can't make out, but then, "—tell me your name? Your birthday? Today's date? Anything?" And I know all of those answers, I really do, I'm not stupid. I know my name's Garen Michael Anderson, I know my birthday's March twenty-seventh, I know today's the first of November, but my tongue feels fat and sluggish in my mouth, and I'm not sure I can manage to say any of those words. Instead, I press the heels of my hands to my closed eyelids and wait for the faded edges of my world to sharpen up a bit.

I blink. There are more people in front of me now, talking to me, helping me stand up, and that's fine. Great, even. I truly appreciate their efforts. Once satisfied that I can stand, someone turns me so that I'm

facing the wall, and then—alright, those are definitely handcuffs. I'm definitely being handcuffed.

I blink. I'm on a chair just inside the door of the main office, and Jack Thorne is sitting on one side of me, Travis is sitting on the other. Neither of *them* is wearing handcuffs; at least, I assume they're not, because Travis is twisted sideways in his seat so that he can clasp my face between his hands. He's speaking to me, and the words are a hell of a lot easier to make out than anything Caldwell or Jacobs said to me. "Garen? Can you hear me?"

I blink, but when I open my eyes this time, I've stayed where I'm supposed to be. I clear my throat and say, "Yeah, I can hear you. I'm not fuckin' deaf, dude."

"I've been saying your name for five minutes now, and this is the first time you've responded coherently. Maybe not *nice*ly, but coherently, for sure," he says. His hands aren't really on my *face*, per se; his palms are settled on the sides of my neck, his thumbs stroking lightly over my jawline. It's the sort of gesture that might feel nice, if any part of my body felt nice right now.

I shrug him off and say, "Okay, so. Main office. My head feels like somebody backed my Ferrari over it. And I'm not terribly sure how I got here. What did I do this time?"

"You don't even remember?" Jack snaps. I give a noncommittal shrug, and he huffs over that for a minute before answering, "You bashed your head against a lunch table because you got in the middle of a fight that was none of your business. McCall and me got into it and—"

"McCall and I'," Travis quietly corrects.

Jack leans around me to accuse, "See, shit like that is why nobody likes you."

"Funny," Travis says blandly. "You're always saying that nobody likes me because I like guys."

"I like you because you like guys," I say, sliding my boot toe up the bottom of the leg of his jeans.

He kicks me away, perhaps a bit more fiercely than necessary. "Really, Garen? You've got a fucking concussion, and you're still trying to get in my pants? That's how you've chosen to prioritize this situation?"

"I can't help it. Most people have 'fight or flight' instincts, but I've got 'fight or fuck.' Flirting with you is my default response to stressful situations," I whine, because right now, my forehead feels like it's pulsating, and it's getting increasingly difficult to see out of my left eye, which feels like it might be blackened. I just need a distraction, and it seems like trying to engage Jack in conversation will just get me hit again, so I reach for Travis. Considering my hands are still cuffed behind my back, I don't make it very far. I frown. "Why am I the only one in cuffs?"

"Because you're the only one who yelled, 'I'm going to snap your fuckin' neck' in the middle of the lunch room?" Jack suggests, though he falls quickly silent when I turn to glower at him.

"You were really out of it in the cafeteria, and I think they were worried that you might hurt yourself or somebody else if they didn't restrain you somehow. Also, 'school security' is limited to a rent-a-cop named Ron, so, I think he only had the one pair," Travis says.

I try to leer at him, but the effect is probably ruined by the blood all over my face. "It's a shame this fight didn't happen in my bedroom. I've got some he could borrow." Travis just rolls his eyes. I test the strength of the cuffs and find myself frowning once more. "These pieces of shit are *weak*. Hang on."

I stand up—I wobble a little, but remain upright—and trot over to the currently vacant secretary's desk. There's an epic assortment of crap all over it, including—perfect. I turn my back to the desk and dig a paper clip out of a tiny ceramic frog designed to hold office supplies. The clip is a little thicker than most,

slightly more solid, which is good; less likely to break in the middle of use.

"Do you really expect to be able to pick the lock on those?" Travis asks dubiously. Jack, however, is silently intrigued.

I shrug. "If I can pick my way out of the police-issue cuffs I've got at home, I'm pretty sure I can handle Ron the Rent-A-Cop's set."

"Charming. Do I even want to know how you got police handcuffs?"

"I don't remember," I lie, even though I totally remember; I stole them off a Savannah cop who was trying to arrest Jamie for public intoxication when we were sixteen, right before we scaled a six-foot-tall stone wall, cut through an outdoor wedding, and sprinted two and a half miles back to the Goldwyn family estate. It had been a busy summer.

Travis leans back in his seat, stretching his arm across the back of the one I'd been sitting in. "I hope you realize that they're in Principal Hammond's office right now, deciding how best to punish us all. It's not like they're going to leave you in those for hours."

"It's the principle of the matter. They've insulted my honor by believing I can be contained by such a cheap-ass, flimsy pair of cuffs. It's embarrassing," I say. I dig the flattened paper clip into the cuffs and start to work it through the lock, humming under my breath about how I *can't be tamed*.

"I think the embarrassing thing is that you're singing a Miley Cyrus song while you get out of them," Jack grunts.

"The embarrassing thing is that both of you know a Miley Cyrus song in the first place," Travis says.

The left cuff pops open, and I let out a triumphant sort of *aha!* before setting to work on the right cuff, which is a lot easier, given that I can work on it in front of myself. I don't even need to look at it; instead, I take my first solid look at Jack. The skin around his eye is swollen and has the beginning of a nasty bruise. His lower lip is split open, and it looks like he had a busted nose earlier, because there are smears of dried blood on his upper lip. I hitch my chin at him. "I do that?"

"Yeah, you did that, you asshole," he snaps.

"You do this?" I ask now, flicking my gaze upward to indicate the gash on my forehead.

His scowl is replaced by a smirk. "Yeah, I did that."

"In that case, I'm not sorry, and I wish I'd hit you harder—got it! *Fuck you, cuffs*," I exclaim as the second bracelet falls open. I toss the paper clip onto the floor behind the desk and stuff the cuffs deep into the side of my boot, because if I had to suffer the indignity of wearing those now, I fully intend to get some enjoyment out of someone else wearing them later. I bet Ben would be totally into it, if we hadn't broken up. Maybe I can convince him anyway. I slip my phone out of my pocket and send him a text that says, *what are your thoughts on handcuffs?*

The door to Principal Hammond's office swings open, and he, Vice Principal Jacobs, Ron the Rent-a-Cop, and Mr. Caldeaway all file out. Travis jabs an elbow into my ribs with a pointed glance at my phone. I raise my eyebrows at him, then turn my attention to the response from Ben that has just arrived in my inbox. *I'm thinking it's a shame you didn't text me this a week ago, when we were still sleeping together. Where did you get handcuffs?*

"First thing's first. Ron, if you could—" Vice Principal Jacobs breaks off, frowning down at my wrists. "Garen, what happened to the handcuffs?"

"I don't remember any handcuffs," I say loftily. "I don't even remember walking up the stairs to get here, to be honest."

Her voice is a little more stern when she replies, "Garen, you were wearing handcuffs. Where are they?"

"That's outrageous, VP Jacobs. What kind of school administrator would handcuff a student who's got what *feels* like a grade two concussion and a severe forehead contusion? Certainly not one who valued her job, I'd wager. So, what do you say to the idea of you not asking me where these handcuffs you allegedly used on me went, and in return, I won't call my lawyer—oh, sorry, my mom and tell her that I was dragged out of the lunch room and physically restrained minutes after sustaining a traumatic brain injury?" I say, tapping out a reply to Ben's text. *got jumped defending the virtue of t's bitchy gf, now have a concussion & am bleeding everywhere, might be getting arrested? idk, whole situation is v. weird. point is, there are stolen handcuffs in my boot right now. do i get to cuff you to your bed & nail you or not?*

The response is immediate. *Not. Are you okay? Will I get a better explanation of these events if I text Travis for details?*

I slip my phone back into my pocket and elbow Travis. "You should text Ben. He's not being any fun, but he wants to know—"

"You should not text anyone," Principal Hammond warns. "Cell phones are forbidden during school hours."

"Well, we're all getting suspended anyway, right? So, what does it matter if we use them now?" I say. My knuckles are sore from bashing them against Jack's jaw, but that doesn't stop me from clenching my hands into fists in the pockets of my jeans. *Please say it's suspension. Please, please, please don't expel me again.*

Principal Hammond's frown creases even deeper into his face. "You're not being suspended, Garen."

"We're not?" Jack says hopefully, but he is met with a glower.

"Oh, you most definitely are, Mr. Thorne, as is Mr. McCall over here," Vice Principal Jacobs. "Mr. Caldwell has told us the particulars of the incident in the cafeteria, and it's been made abundantly clear that they two of you were the ones to initiate it."

"How did I initiate it?" Travis asks, stunned. "Jack punched Garen in the head when his back was turned. He could have—"

Jacobs holds up a hand, and he falls silent, like a good little valedictorian-to-be. "If you had remained in your seat to begin with, I doubt this fight ever would have gotten physical. Both of you will be suspended until Monday morning for your involvement with the fight."

"Am I suspended, too?" I ask, even though she's already said I'm not. I just want to make sure. She shakes her head. I hesitate, then bump it up a grade. "Am I expelled?" Another head shake. I decide to bump it down a few levels. "Am I getting rewarded for my valor and strength of character? Do I get a present? Can I have cake?" A third, slightly more annoyed head shake, and if I'm not getting treats, this game isn't fun anymore. "What do I get?"

"Bed rest, hopefully, though your miraculously undiagnosed ADHD might make that difficult for you," Principal Hammond grumbles. When his words are met with a blank stare, he clarifies, "We're asking that you *also* remain at home until Monday morning, but your time off from school will be logged as a necessary, excused medical absence, not a suspension. Mr. Caldwell here has informed us that you were attempting to intercede in the conflict between Mr. Thorne and Mr. McCall when you received a harsh blow to the head. Given the lack of responsiveness following the incident, the tinnitus you claimed to be experiencing, and the fact that you say you have no memory of coming up here afterward, it's clear

that you've got a concussion—"

I slouch down in my seat so that I can kick my feet up onto the edge of the secretary's desk. "I know, I already said that a few minutes ago. For the record, I'm pretty sure you're required to give me some sort of medical attention right now."

The frown now has a hint of concern behind it. "Garen, you've already *received* medical attention. When we first brought you upstairs, we asked the school nurse to look you over, clean the cut on your forehead, and check to see if you should be brought to the hospital. You were responding fine at the time." I don't know how I could have been responding fine, if I can't remember the conversation now, but I don't voice that opinion. "You were also offered something that might help with the pain, but—"

"I wouldn't let them give you anything," Travis says quietly. "It didn't seem like a good idea. Painkillers weren't the thing you really went to the LRC for, but I... remember. You know?"

He means he remembers watching me get high out of my mind on Vicodin before I switched to coke. It seems like now would be a bad time to take his hand, or kiss him on the cheek, so I settle for nudging his elbow with mine and murmuring, "Thanks." He nods.

"We'll be making a call home to each of your parents about this. Ron will escort you all to your lockers to gather your belongings; I'd recommend taking whatever you think you might need for the next few days, because after you leave this building, you will not be permitted back on campus until Monday morning. Is that understood?" Principal Hammond demands. We all nod. "Garen, once you've gone to your locker, I'd like you to return here. I know you have your own vehicle here, but there's no way I can let you drive yourself home in this condition. I'll call your father at work and have—"

"I can drive him home," Travis interrupts, standing. "Bill's office is almost an hour away from here. It just makes more sense for me to drop him at his house on my way to mine."

There is a brief silence, but eventually, Vice Principal Jacobs nods, and we are excused. Ron the Rent-a-Cop keeps shooting me baleful glances, like he's contemplating strong-arming me into giving him the missing cuffs. I return with a genial smile, but no comment. Once I've collected my backpack and most of my schoolbooks from my locker, I wander down the hall to meet Travis, who has taken it upon himself to shove literally any textbook or notebook he might ever need into his backpack, like being super prepared for makeup work will do something to lessen the sting of suspension.

"I need your keys," he says, holding his hand out. I raise my eyebrows. He rolls his eyes and wiggles his fingers, indicating a desire for me to hurry up. "Come on, I'll drive us to your place in the Ferrari. It's not like you haven't let me drive it before now."

I opt not to point out that he's the only other person I've ever let drive the Testarossa. And I opt not to think too much about the fact that I don't even flinch when passing him the keys to my baby. The drive back to the house is silent and slow; like Ben, Travis actually interprets speed limits as limits, not guidelines. It's a little before one thirty when we pull into my driveway. He cuts the engine and hands me the keys, but comes around to the passenger side to help me out of the car, like he's my prom date or something. I allow myself to be escorted up the front steps, let into my own house, and led inside.

"Need any help getting down to your room?" he asks. I shake my head, but he follows me anyway, bracing a hand between my shoulder blades the whole way downstairs. Once there, I flop back onto my unmade bed, and Travis sits down on the edge of it. I watch as he carefully unlaces my boots and slips them off, setting them down next to my nightstand. He lifts the mess of blankets and shoves my legs under it—fucking *terrible* bedside manner on this kid—before dropping the blankets back on top of me. "I'm going to head back to school for my car, alright? Text me if you start to feel worse, and I can swing by and check on you."

I yawn, then ask, "How are you going to get to school?"

He shrugs. "Walk. It's really not a big deal, I used to do it all the time, before I got my license." He leans forward to kiss my cheek, and I find myself once again fighting the urge to turn into it and capture his mouth with mine. "I'll see you around, okay?"

"You don't have to," I blurt out, and he pauses by the door. "I mean... you can stay for a while, if you want. And when my dad gets home from work, he could drive you back to school to get your car. So you don't have to walk, or whatever."

He's silent for a long moment before he says, "Okay, I guess. You should rest, though. See if you can sleep."

I frown. "Doesn't sleeping with a concussion just kill you? Is this you, trying to off me so I'll stop hitting on you all the time?"

He rolls his eyes. "I don't—no, I'm not even going to touch that one. But you can sleep with a concussion as long as someone wakes you every two hours to make sure you can return easily to coherency."

"Oh," I say. "I thought—"

"Go to sleep, Garen."

Grumbling, I roll onto my side and close my eyes. It's nearly three o'clock when I open them again, and it is not at my own insistence. Travis is standing next to the bed, shaking my shoulder gently. "Hey. You still alive?"

"You're not going to be, if you keep fuckin' shaking me, McCall," I bite out.

He laughs. "Charming as ever, I see. Alright. Go back to sleep."

The same process repeats sometime around five o'clock, and again at seven. I have barely had time to drift off again after this latest attempt when my bedroom door edges open and Dad pokes his head in, eyes flashing around the room until they land on Travis. I'm expecting him to address me, but he must think I'm still sleeping, because he whispers, "I got your message. Can we talk upstairs?"

"Yeah, we—of course," Travis says, nodding sharply. He snatches up the backpack he had abandoned by my desk, then pauses by the edge of my bed. I wonder if he's thinking about giving me another of those tiny kisses that have become so common today, but if he's hesitating because my dad is right there. I wish he'd do it anyway, even if Dad would think it was weird, or inappropriate, or dumb.

He doesn't. Instead, he brushes the tips of his fingers across my elbow and says quietly, "I'll text you later, G."

They both walk out.

52 days sober

It turns out that a year of getting kicked out of my home, going AWOL for four months, developing a raging drug addiction, getting myself beaten nearly to death, spending two months in rehab, and having a pretty public relapse all sets the bar kind of high for what constitutes a "Garen emergency." Over the next few days, I learn that getting into a fistfight that leaves me with a mild concussion and two and a half days off from school barely even ranks. Jamie doesn't offer to skip a few days of classes and take the train in to keep me company. Ben and Alex both call to make sure I'm feeling better, but refuse to *help* me feel better by bringing me cake. Travis hasn't texted me like he said he would, but it's possible that that's just because "Hey, thanks for getting your brain battered around the inside of your skull defending the virtue

of the mother of my unborn child” is such an awkward, wordy sort of message.

All things considered, I’m surprised when, a few hours after school would usually be getting out on Friday, Dad calls downstairs, “Garen, you’ve got a friend here to see you. Mind if I send him down?”

I thought my dad learned a while ago that yelling down for me is pretty pointless; the room is sound-proofed, so I can only hear him when I’ve left the door open, which is a rare occurrence. Still, it’s open now, which means he can hear my mournful reply, “I have no friends. I’ve been abandoned by everyone I know, forsaken in my hour of need. Being suspended in Lakewood is way less fun than it was when I was suspended in the dorms at boarding school, and people keep posting links to some video of the fight on my facebook wall, and my head hurts, and *no one will come out and play with me*. So, tell whoever’s up there to go eat a dick, because I don’t need sympathy visits.”

“No man is an island, kid.”

“*This* man is an island,” I protest. “This man is also not a kid, what the fuck, Dad.”

There’s a noise that might be a frustrated sigh, then I hear him say to someone, “You can go right down.”

The offer is followed by the sound of footsteps on the stairs, and then the door swings a little wider. Nate Holliday steps uncertainly over the threshold. His eyes are scanning the room, searching for me, and I remain perfectly still, sprawled out on the couch, waiting for him to make his way over to me. When his eyes finally land on me, it’s with a jolt of surprise and a hand clapped to his heart. “Jesus Christ. I didn’t see you there.”

“I figured as much. Hi. What are you doing here?” I ask.

He swings his bag off his shoulder and digs into it, surfacing with a stack of papers and a hesitant smile. “I brought your makeup work? I hope that’s okay. It probably seems intrusive, or something, but midterms are coming up, and it seemed like it’d be a bad idea to fall behind now. You’ve mentioned before that Ms. Markland is one of your teachers, so I asked her to find out the rest of your schedule so I could talk to your teachers.”

I accept the papers and thumb through the stack. There are five paper-clipped bundles of homework, one for each of my regular classes; at the bottom of the stack, Jeff has sent along the latest issue of *Alternative Press* with a sticky note that reads, *Feel better soon. -Jeff. P.S. As a teacher, I refused to watch the video of the fight that one of my juniors tried to show me. But if I had watched it, I’d tell you that you kicked that kid’s ass, man*. Grinning, I get up to stick the note to my amp in the corner, then gesture for Nate to sit. He drops immediately onto the couch, and I sit back down next to him, turned sideways and hugging my knees to my chest, chin resting atop them.

“Thanks for bringing that by. Sorry I missed the last two rehearsals,” I say, widening my eyes a little at him. I’m hoping for innocent and apologetic, but failing that, I’m hoping that he’ll be distracted enough by the dark green irises to not be mad at me for bailing on rehearsals now that we’re less than a month away from opening night.

“Don’t be sorry. All the rest of us care about is you getting better,” he says, fiddling with the buttons of the bright yellow cardigan he’s wearing. He pauses, then amends with a sly smile, “Alright, all we care about is that, and making sure the crew girls doing stage makeup for the performances can somehow manage to cover up that hideous cut on your forehead. Because that is appalling, and I just don’t know how anyone’s going to look at you during ‘Sandra Dee’ if you look like that.”

I let out a bark of surprised laughter at that. “And here I thought you were showing some concern for me as my director.”

“I thought I was showing some concern for you as your friend,” he says, quirking an eyebrow.

I smile, but don't reply, because the truth is that it's still so hard for me to consider all of these people my friends. Suddenly, though, a thought strikes me, and I find myself reaching for his hand. "Hey, dude. You might actually be the perfect person to help me with something I'm working on. You know, if you don't mind doing me a favor?"

"What sort of favor?" he asks, not lifting his eyes from my hand on his.

"Well, this—I mean, this sounds sort of dumb, but I'm right in the middle of the whole college application process. My dad made me send in all my paperwork already, but because I'm applying to a bunch of music programs, I have a whole series of auditions this December. Jeff—that's the music teacher, the one I TA for? He's helping me pick out the classic guitar pieces I'm going to use for any instrumental auditions, but two of the places I'm applying to aren't—well, they're not really music programs, not exactly. They're musical theater."

That's finally enough to draw Nate's eyes back to my face. He looks surprised, but pleased. "You're thinking of studying musical theater?"

I shrug. "I might? I don't know. It all depends which schools I get into—I've got good grades and standardized test scores, but my uh, my disciplinary record is... extensive. And I did get expelled last spring. Neither of those things is likely to endear me to an admissions committee. But I think if I kick ass on my audition and interview, I can still get into somewhere good. The musical theater auditions, though—"

"—require musical theater pieces, yes. Or... what was the phrase you used?" he wonders, the corner of his mouth twitching up into a smirk. "Oh, that's right. 'Broadway bullshit.'"

"You're never going to get over that, are you?" I ask, and he shakes his head. I grin. "Well, yeah. Joke's on me, because I'm required to audition with two musical theater pieces, in differing styles. And—like, the stuff we've done in *Grease* is really all I know, and I don't think that's enough, not by a long shot. So, I was wondering if maybe you could help me pick out a few numbers, maybe coach me through making it awesome? You know. Direct me."

He's going to say yes. I knew he would before I even asked, but it probably would have been considered tactless to say, *hey, put your raging crush on me to good use and help me get into college*. I'm not expecting any word other than *yes*—maybe *definitely*, if he's feeling really eager—so it's a bit of a kick to the nuts when he cocks his head to the side and says, "As your friend, I suppose I could do it. But as *my* friend, there's something I wonder if you might do for me."

"Blackmail and bribery. Knew there was a reason I liked you," I say, though my stomach has twisted itself into a few knots by now. Every guy who has ever asked me for a favor has wanted sex as a payment, and I—it's not that I *wouldn't* fuck Nate. He's cute enough, and I bet he'd be a good time, even if he is a helpless virgin. But that's the sort of decision I want to be mine to make, not part of a transaction. I swallow, hoping my smile hasn't slipped off my face. "What do you want from me?"

Now that he has my attention, he seems a little embarrassed. "I, um... you're the only other gay boy I know."

"Gay *man*," I correct, definitely not feeling any better about this situation. "And that's not true, you know Travis."

"Travis doesn't count, he's dating Joss," Nate says, making a face. "And this sort of favor—it's not really something I'd be comfortable asking Travis. It's just, I know you a little bit better, and you're single—you're not dating that Ben guy anymore, and—"

I interrupt, "Are you trying to solicit sex in return for helping me with my audition pieces?"

He blinks at me. I blink back. Slowly, his eyebrows ascend towards his hairline, leaving him with a spectacularly unimpressed look on his face. “No,” he says, pronouncing the word very carefully, “I was actually trying to ask you if you might consider going to my junior ring dance with me.”

“I’d rather stick my balls in a mousetrap,” I say without thinking. His face flares, and I hastily amend, “Not because—shit, no, that wasn’t a comment about *you*. Just—school-sponsored social functions like that aren’t really my thing? Like, at all. I mean, I’d assume they’re not. I’ve never actually gone to a school dance before. And I know it’s my fifth year of high school, but I’d sort of been hoping to maintain that streak.”

“Oh,” he says, ducking his head. “Okay. That’s fine, I just thought I’d ask.”

There’s a polite but completely forced smile on his lips, and it occurs to me—probably a little bit too late—that retarded school dances are exactly the sort of shit someone like Nate Holliday probably cares about. They’re not always something to joke about. And maybe he thinks asking me to this dance was as important as me asking him to help me get into my music programs. I sigh and scrub my hands over my face, wincing a little when they make contact with the cut on my forehead. “When’s the dance?”

“Two weeks from today,” he says, cautiously hopeful. “And—”

“Would I have to wear a suit?”

“Yes,” he says, hopefulness now replaced by an unequivocal determination. Apparently, fashion is not something that is up for debate. “You would have to wear a suit—a nice one—and a tie. You would have to tuck your shirt in, like a real adult. And you would have to wear different shoes.”

I narrow my eyes. “The shoes aren’t an option. These are the only pair I own.” He makes a distressed noise in his throat. “I’ll shine them, alright? I went to three years of military school, I can shine shoes like a fucking boss.”

“Only if you use polish,” he demands. “I swear to god, Garen, if you spit-shine your boots—”

“I’ll use shoe polish. Jesus Christ, dude, you watch too many movies. I do actually know how to operate in the real world,” I say. “Are there any other awful requirements I would have to meet?”

“You would have to get me a boutonniere. You’d have to ride to school in the limo with the rest of us. You’d have to dance with me and my friends, even if you don’t like to dance—”

“I like to dance just fine,” I grumble, though I can only assume that the sort of pre-sex grinding I tend to do in nightclubs isn’t really ‘school-appropriate.’ Whatever. I’m sure he won’t object once my hands are on him.

Nate ignores me and finishes, “And lastly, you would have to start the night by meeting up with everyone at my house, smiling in the pictures, and keeping all of your bitching to an absolute minimum.”

It’s that last little comment that actually tricks me into laughing. Bossiness is actually sort of a charming look for Nate, so I heave a sigh and say, “Fine. I’ll go. How much are the tickets?”

“Forty dollars each. I have to buy them in homeroom. And sign you up as my date, because you’re not a junior. You—what are you doing?” he asks, frowning at me.

I roll my eyes and pass him the four twenty-dollar bills I’ve just extracted from my wallet. “Giving you money for the tickets, you idiot. If this is the only high school dance I ever attend—and trust me, it will be—then I might as well do it right.”

A faint blush is rising in his cheeks. He stares down at the money for nearly a full minute before he tucks the bills into the pocket of his cardigan and says, "Thank you. That's—sweet. Thank you." I shrug it off and am rewarded with another searching glance. "Hopefully, your cut will have healed by then. Two weeks should be fine, right? That'll be enough time?"

"Yeah, it should be fine. I heal pretty quickly, so my eye will be back to normal by then, and... I dunno, the cut will still be *there*, but it won't be, you know, bruised and foul-looking anymore," I say. His eyes are still darting all over my face. Black eye, to forehead cut, to the faint bruise on my cheekbone, back to black eye. I snort. "For fuck's sake, Nate, it's okay to blink, you know."

He slams his eyes shut, opens them, and stares wildly around the room, attempting to find something to focus on, other than my bruised and battered face. "I'm sorry. I'm not trying to stare, I promise. It's just—you look really terrible right now." I make an indignant noise, and he hastens to correct, "I meant the cut and the black eye! Not you you. You're still gorgeous, I mean, you're always gorgeous, it's just—holy mother of God, why am I still talking right now?"

I grin and admit, "I'm kind of enjoying it. Next, you can talk about how hot it was to watch my biceps flex while I was punching Jack Thorne in the face."

"You're unbelievable," Nate mutters, turning an impressive shade of red.

I shrug. "Glad you think so." He doesn't say anything back, though he does sneak another look at the cut on my forehead. I nudge his knee with my toe and say, "Nate, I'm fine. Sure, this looks kinda gross, but it's nothing compared to what happened to me last spring."

"Well, maybe if I'd seen that, I'd have a higher threshold for this sort of thing," he says, "but as it is, I'm—"

"Do you want to?" I interrupt. His brow creases, and I clarify, "Do you want to see? I—alright, this makes me sound like a psychopath, but I have pictures. My mom has me keep a binder full of the information related to... I dunno, all the shitty things that happen to me. Pictures, hospital records, a copy of the restraining order I've got against my ex. She says it makes sense to have duplicates of everything, just in case I need them for legal purposes. And—I mean, you said it might help recalibrate the scale of what I really consider an injury. So. I mean, you don't have to. I'm not going to make you look at pictures of me in the hospital, that would be totally fucked up. But if you—"

He cuts me off with a quick nod. "No, I um... I think that might help, actually? Because, I'm sorry, but your face right now is just... it looks *sawful*, and maybe if I knew that it's not as bad as it seems, at least to you, then I'd feel less worried about you."

I laugh and stand to retrieve the binder from my desk drawer. "You don't need to be worried, dude. The damage is already done. And I've been to the doctor, he says I'll be back to normal in a couple days, once the headaches wear off completely. Well, he thinks I should probably try to avoid getting any more concussions, because this is my second one this year, but, you know, whatever. Here." I drop the binder on his lap, mostly because I'm worried about him noticing the way my hands are shaking if I try to pass it to him with any more grace than that. "Open that when you're ready."

He nods, but it takes an additional fifteen seconds before he flips open the cover. It is immediately slammed shut again. "Oh my god." It's not really funny, but I laugh anyway, then harder then he cracks it open for another peek. He's breathing heavily through his nose, like he's trying not to be sick. Like he needs to calm himself down. "What happened to you?"

"You mean, what injuries did I get? Or how did I get them?" I ask. He doesn't reply, so I opt to answer both. "Broken nose, couple of broken ribs. First concussion. And I got them in a fight with the guy I was dating at the time. He won, obviously."

"So, you um—" Nate falters, finally glancing up from the binder to meet my eyes. "He abused you?"

I shrug. "I don't really like that word." Thankfully, he lets me leave it at that. I flip to the next set of pictures, four shots of my face and torso at different angles. "When this happened, I was about five months younger than you are now. David—that's my ex—was eighteen, maybe a couple months shy of it. We broke up a few months after this happened." I page forward until I reach the next catastrophe, at which I can't hold back a wry smile. "This is what happened last spring, when I got back together with him."

"The same guy?" Nate says, disbelief dripping from his words.

"The same guy," I confirm. "But, hey—" I flip ahead to the copy of the restraining order, "—I learned my lesson eventually, right? So, believe me when I tell you that this—" I gesture to my face, "—isn't nearly as bad as it looks. Not to someone who's dealt with all of that."

He shakes his head and continues to thumb through more pictures of me after the fight, then some of me immediately after entering rehab. Those had been Doc Howard's idea, not Mom's. Apparently, a bunch of photos of me at my lowest point were supposed to serve as a reminder of how far I've come. Mostly, they just creep me out; I don't like seeing myself with choppy, dyed black hair. I don't like seeing myself paler than a corpse with heavy circles under my eyes. I don't like seeing my weight down to one forty of flesh and bone from its usual one seventy of muscle. Without waiting for Nate's permission, I flip past those to the last section. "Oh. Those are nothing important, they're not even of me. Just the car after it got vandalized, but you already—"

"Garen," he says suddenly, voice sharp.

My brow creases. "Yeah?"

"Garen," he repeats. I wonder if I'm supposed to say yeah again, or if we can cut off the back-and-forth bullshit now. But then Nate begins frantically digging through his bag, finally surfacing with the gigantic notebook where I know he keeps all of his *Grease* notes. "Do you remember when I had everyone write out their other extracurriculars so that I could be sure I wasn't scheduling important rehearsals for days when people wouldn't even be present?"

I nod, and he slaps a piece of paper down on my knee. I read aloud, "Spanish Club. Um. Alright? I'm not in—"

"I know you're not in Spanish Club," he snaps. "Gabe Alberti is."

"Cool?" I say, because *I don't give a shit about Gabe Alberti or what clubs he's in* sounds like it'd probably be considered rude. Besides, his name is right at the top of the paper, so I don't really need to be told this.

But then Nate holds Gabe's paper up next to one of the photographs of the graffiti on the hood of my Ferrari, and my breath catches in my throat. Because the handwriting that says *Gabe Alberti - Spanish Club* is identical to the handwriting that spells out *cokehead* and *go back to rehab, you still need it* and *have fun getting AIDS*. I spend several minutes staring back and forth between the papers, trying to find each of the letters on both the club paper and the pictures of the graffiti. There are a few letters on the car that I can't make a comparison, but there are enough for me to be certain that Gabe is the one who did it.

Or. One of the ones, I guess.

I flip to the last picture in the set, the one with the different handwriting, and point wordlessly to it. Nate hesitates—that makes sense. We both know whose handwriting will match up with it—I can't believe I didn't think of this earlier—and we both know that unlike Gabe, she's actually Nate's friend. We both know how severely the shit is going to hit the fan once we hold these papers up next to each other.

Slowly, Nate pages through his binder until he finds the paper that reads, in neatly curled handwriting, *Josslyn Pryce. Spanish Club. National Honor Society. Yearbook Staff Photographer.* I set it down on the opposite page of my binder so that I can compare it, letter by letter, until I have matched up everything but the letter 'd' in the phrase, *is your little brother good in bed?* It's exactly the same; she didn't even try to disguise her handwriting, not at all.

"Garen," Nate says softly, for what feels like the nine hundredth time tonight.

I shake my head and force a smile. "It's—I mean, I know I'm new to the club. And I know most of you guys don't really like me. But—"

"That's not true," he snaps. "We like you. *I* like you. The only people who don't are—I can't believe they did this, honestly. I've known them for years, and they've never done anything like this before, not that I can think of. It's insane."

I shrug and murmur, "It's fine."

It's really not.

55 days sober

Part of me had hoped that three days might be enough to calm me down, but the moment I walk into rehearsal on Monday, I know that's not the case. Gabe is lounging in the front row, shooting the shit with Riley with his feet kicked up; Joss is talking to Miranda and sitting on Travis' lap, though he's distracted with leaning around her to highlight his case notes for our trial law competition. My rage has iced over by now—I'm not feeling as white-hot and furious as I did on Friday night, but that's probably worse. Any time something bad happens to me and I end up smiling, things go very, very badly for the other people involved.

The grin stretched across my face right now is nothing short of painful.

"Hey, Alberti," I call, striding down the aisle towards the others. He spares me a glare, and I beckon to him. "Come on back here for a second, buddy. I need to talk to you about something."

"About what?" he asks warily, but he stands anyway and wanders in my direction.

I fling myself into the empty seat next to Travis and Joss. He opens his mouth to say hello to me, but I speak over him, "Hey, Josslyn. You might want to toss some of that attention over here for a minute, because this concerns you, too."

"Very little about you concerns me," she says with a tight smile.

"I think you're going to change your mind about that in a couple of seconds, because guess what, Joss. I've got a game I want to play with you two, because I just like you both *that fucking much*," I say.

"I don't want to—"

"Cool!" I say brightly, flipping open the folder in my hand and extracting two sheets of white computer paper. I pass one to each of them, then a permanent marker. "So, I'm going to read you each some words and phrases, and you're going to write them down. Gabe, why don't we start with you?" He doesn't move. "Your first word is 'faggot.'"

The rest of drama club has begun to filter over to join us, perhaps alarmed by the way I bite out the slur. Gabe is frozen, which I can only assume means he understands where this is going. Next to me, underneath his psychotic bitch of a girlfriend, Travis says, "G, what's going—"

"Your next word is 'cokehead,'" I say. "And then after that, I want you to write 'have fun getting AIDS.'"

Riley reaches out and gives my shoulder a soft punch. "Dude, I don't get what's going on."

"I just want him to write a few words. On the paper, that is, not on the hood of my car, where he wrote them last time," I say. Annabelle inhales sharply. Gabe still hasn't moved. I reach back into my folder and extract all but two of the remaining papers, passing them to him one by one. "This is a copy of your extracurricular list, in your handwriting. Which means that this picture—" *faggot*, "—and this picture—" *go back to rehab, you still need it*, "—and this one, and this one, and this one—" *cokehead, smoke this, Anderson, have fun getting AIDS*, "—are all your little love notes for me, in your handwriting."

"Oh my god," Miranda whispers, taking the photos from Gabe's hands and paging through them, comparing them to the club paper, while Christine, John, and Annabelle crowd in around her. Riley remains at my side, looking warily between Joss and myself—he must realize why I involved Joss with this, too.

"For being such a great sport in this game of ours, here's your prize," I say, digging a stapled packet of papers out of my backpack and shoving them into Gabe's hands. "Those are copies of the paperwork for all the bodywork I had to have done to the Ferrari because of what you did to it. You know, replacing all the lights, fixing the side mirror, fixing the strakes—god, that was an expensive one. Word of advice? If you're going to vandalize a car, you might not want to vandalize one that's so expensive to fix. Or so old. Did you know that it's impossible to color-match a twenty-year-old car like that? The guys at the shop had to repaint the entire vehicle because they couldn't just do the hood of it without having the whole thing look mismatched. You're holding a stack of bills for ten thousand dollars in car repairs, you stupid fuck. And since you're not me, and therefore probably can't afford that much—" I snatch one last item from my bag and flick it towards him, "—that's my mom's card. She's my lawyer, and she can't wait to talk to you, dude."

Gabe is reeling from the that information; I can practically see the dollar signs burning holes in his skin. Truth be told, the damages have already been paid for by my insurance company, and I doubt Gabe will actually have to pay anything. But I feel a special sort of *schadenfreude* at the idea of my mom tearing him a new asshole over the phone. She'll probably make him cry. He sort of looks like he's going to cry right now; maybe that's why he crumples up the papers in his hands and bolts for the auditorium doors. No matter—I've got a hell of a lot more discomfort to spread around here.

I turn to face Joss, flashing her a wry smile. "I'm betting you already know what Santa's got in his bag of toys for you, huh?"

"I didn't do anything," she says, voice so blank I almost believe her. "Gabe dented your car. He smashed out the lights. He keyed it. He took off the mirror. He wrote all the graffiti."

I slip the last photograph from the folder and hold it up. "No. Not all of it."

She doesn't take the paper. I don't expect her to. I don't expect Travis to take it either, but he does. Takes it and stares at it, eyes so wide I can see the whites all the way around his blue irises. Joss touches his wrist and says, "Travis, it's not like th—"

"This is your handwriting," he says flatly. "This—I recognize it, Joss, this is your handwriting. Don't lie to me, not about this."

"Not about him, you mean," she snaps. "God, our entire fucking relationship is just all about Garen, isn't it?"

It's like she's got no idea how badly she's fucking up everything for herself right now. I don't even need to say anything, I just need to sit here and watch her dig herself deeper and deeper into this mess.

"Get off of me," he orders. When she doesn't move, he scoops her off his lap and dumps her into the seat on his other side so that he can stand up. That accomplished, he jabs a finger at the words in the picture and says, "*This*? This is definitely about me, not Garen. *Is your little brother good in bed?* What the fuck is wrong with you, Josslyn? I haven't acted this way about *any* of the ex-boyfriends you've told me about. Not Jesse, or Brian, or Austin, or Tyler. None of them. I've got a grand total of two exes. You pretend Ben doesn't exist, even though he's one of my best friends—he should think of himself as lucky for that, though, considering the way you act around Garen."

I keep expecting Joss to start crying, like almost any other girl I know would be doing right now, but she just... doesn't. She stares back at him with more than a little bit of anger, but absolutely no remorse for what she's done, or fear that Travis is going to break up with her. I guess that makes sense—the odds of him actually dumping his pregnant girlfriend are pretty much nonexistent. Still, I'm a little surprised that she actually starts inspecting her nails, casual as can fucking be, and says, "I've got no problem with Ben. Just Garen."

"Why?" he demands, and her eyes snap back to his face.

"Because you got over Ben. And forgive me, but I'm just not a fan of the fact that every time I see you look at this piece of trash over here, it becomes increasingly clear to me that you're never going to get over him," she says. Travis actually takes a small step backwards, as though the idea of never getting over me is enough to shake him in ways he can't yet define. The movement is just enough to knock the back of his knees against the side of my thigh, and I instinctively put a hand to his hip to steady him. It's probably the worst thing I could have done, but before I can retract my hand, Joss is laughing and gesturing to the touch. "See? You two can't keep your hands off each other for a fucking *day*. How's that supposed to make me feel, Travis? Seriously, how can you possibly expect me to be cool with the fact that *the guy I'm having a baby with* is still not over his ex-boyfriend?"

Travis takes a sudden step forward and braces his hands on the arms of her chair, the better to lean down just enough to say, in a quiet, dangerous voice, "So let's make a deal, *sweetheart*. You don't touch his car, his guitar, his locker, the fucking Pokemon cards he collected when he was six, I don't care, *anything*. You keep your hands off his stuff, and I'll keep my hands off him. But if you ever do anything like that to him again, I fucking swear to you, Joss, I will show you just how 'not over him' I can really be."

Without another word to any of us, he climbs over my legs and strides towards the wings, disappearing backstage to snarl orders at the members of stage crew who haven't already begun to work on their latest pieces of scenery. Only once he's out of sight does Joss finally move to capture her audience again, letting the tears start to fall. Immediately, Miranda swoops in to comfort her, joined a minute later by a hesitant, apprehensive Annabelle, who shoots me a slightly alarmed what the fuck am I supposed to be doing look.

Joss pulls her sleeve over her hand to dab at her damp eyes and says, "I swear, sometimes I think he's the worst thing that has ever happened to me."

"No, he's not," I say, and her furious eyes snap to me so suddenly that she almost forgets that she's supposed to be crying. I shrug and say, "But if you hurt him again, I promise you that I will be."

Chapter Sixteen

**"The struggle we undergo to remain faithful to one we love is little better than infidelity." –
Francois de la Rochefoucauld**

57 days sober

"Do you like it here?" Dad asks halfway through dinner on Wednesday night.

I cast a blank glance around the room and say, "What, in the kitchen? Uh. It's okay. I... like the living room better, I guess?"

He sets down his fork without even rolling his eyes, and that's when I know that this must be a Serious Conversation, because Dad never passes up an opportunity to pity himself for having to put up with me. Instead, he says, "Not the kitchen, Garen. Connecticut. Or, Lakewood, more specifically. Do you like your school? Your life here?"

Not at all, is my instinctive thought. I set my own fork down and scratch the back of my neck, choosing my words carefully. "It's okay. There's not really much to do around town, so that's probably why I spend so much time in New Haven with the guys instead. School is... my teachers are fine, I'm doing well in most of my classes. I like doing the play, and I guess most of the people in it are pretty cool."

"You were pretty popular at Patton, weren't you?" he asks.

"Yeah. I mean, Jamie and I both were. It was kind of... us, in charge of the rest of our group," I say. Why do I get the feeling that this is some sort of test that I'm unprepared for?

"And here?" Dad asks. "Are you—do you have a lot of friends at Lakewood High?"

I snort. "Sure, Dad, everybody loves me. That is, when they're not punching me in the head, or trashing my car, or pouring my own scalding hot coffee all over my vulnerable flesh." He frowns—shit. That's right; I hadn't told him about the coffee thing. To stop him from inquiring further, I quickly continue, "It's not like I'm completely friendless. I have people I eat lunch with every day, and—Nate likes me. Riley, John, and Annabelle are all cool. The person from school who I hang with the most is probably Travis, when his psycho-bitch girlfriend lets him out of his cage long enough to play. But for the most part, no, I don't really have many friends at school. Not many people there like me."

"Are you happy here?" he asks. I respond with a shrug that we both know means *no*. "Were you happier at Patton?" I respond with another shrug that we both know means *yes*. "Would you like to transfer back there at the end of this semester?"

My heartbeat thunders to a stop within my chest. "Would I—wait, transfer back to Patton? Like, for the second half of my senior year?"

"I've been in contact with Headmaster Samuels," he says, steepling his fingers together. "He was very understanding about the expulsion from Lakewood last spring, once I explained that you missed your classes due to a home situation that had you staying with your mother instead of me. He said that, provided your GPA remains above a three point three and you prove you're capable of meeting the requirements for senior-level physical training, you would be more than welcome to finish out your senior year there, instead of here, at Lakewood."

I stare at him, utterly incapable of forming a response, or a single word, or a thought. Patton was my home for three years; Dad asking me if I want to go back there instead of staying in this wasteland is pretty much on par with the idea of Travis casually turning to me halfway through English class and saying, *"Hey, I'm kinda over this whole Joss thing. If I break up with her after school, do you wanna go for coffee and then let me suck your dick twice a day, every day, for the rest of our lives?"* It's too good to be

reality. It's too much.

"Do you think that I should?" I ask slowly.

He sighs. "Garen, I'd be lying if I said I didn't miss having you around when you were off at boarding school. And I'd also be lying if I said I was looking forward to the possibility of five more months of constant phone calls from your headmaster about the sort of things you used to get up to at that school. Do you realize he had me on speed dial?"

"He did not—"

"Number two. His *wife* was number three." Dad pauses, scowling down at the table as he relives the horribleness of that conversation. I let him have a moment to sulk before I clear my throat, and when he looks up at me again, his eyes are just... sad. "You haven't looked in the mirror much since the fight last week, have you?"

"Why would you think that?" I ask. Kind of a stupid question—I haven't spiked my hair since last Wednesday because I don't want to look at my reflection long enough to style it properly. I rake my fingers through my stupidly curly hair and add, "Does it matter, though? So I don't wanna stare at some cut across my forehead. It's nasty to look at, so I—"

"There shouldn't be a cut across your forehead in the first place," Dad interrupts. "Your classmates shouldn't be hitting you. They shouldn't be shoving you around. They shouldn't be taunting you, or ruining your belongings, or treating you like you're nothing, just because you've had a hard year. I didn't realize how bad things were for you at this school, but now that I know, I can't ignore it anymore. I think some distance from Lakewood might be good for you."

He says distance from Lakewood, I hear *distance from all the mistakes I made here*. I hear *distance from the people who hate me*, and *distance from the people who should hate me*, and *distance from the parts of me that I hate enough to make up for everyone else*.

Distance from Travis.

"Can I think about it for a little while?" I ask, standing up and scraping the remainders of my dinner into the garbage disposal. "I think I should maybe—I don't know. Maybe I'll talk to Jamie about it, see if he thinks it's a good idea? He knows me. He knows Patton. And right now, I don't feel like I know anything. So I just—I need some time, I think. Please."

Dad gives me a vague smile and says, "Of course. Headmaster Samuels told me that, so long as we made a decision by the last week of December, you could take your time coming to whatever conclusion you think would be best for you."

There aren't any other words I think I can force out right now without him figuring out the real reason I can't agree to go just yet. I return his tense smile and head for the stairs. Halfway back to my room, I pull out my cell phone and type out two texts. The first is to Jamie and reads, *can't wait to see you this weekend. i have something important i need to talk to you about*. I send it. The second is to Travis; *if i left lhs after this semester and moved back to new york to go to pma for the rest of senior year, do you think you would ever maybe miss me?* But it's too big of a question to ask. The idea of putting that sort of pressure on him, of making him feel like I'm yet another person who's putting their future in his hands... it's too much to deal with. I jump to the beginning of the text and start to erase the words one by one.

Like a complete moron, I've miscounted the steps it takes to get me to the basement, and I trip off the last stair. And because apparently Alex is wrong and there is a God, and because apparently Ben is wrong too, and He doesn't love everyone, my mad scramble not to drop my phone as I'm stumbling all over my own feet ends with me accidentally hitting send. I watch as a tiny check mark appears on the screen, alerting me to the fact that Travis has indeed received a text that reads *miss me?*

I've got half a mind to start banging my head against the wall until I give myself a fourth—and hopefully fatal—concussion, but just as I've psyched myself up to send my still-injured forehead right towards the edge of my bedroom door, my phone chimes.

His reply simply reads, *Always*.

58 days sober

Travis' eighteenth birthday sort of sneaks up on me after that. I've barely had a minute to think about it between the extra rehearsals for *Grease*, the unbearable tension that permeates said rehearsals, debating whether or not I should go back to Patton in the spring, and Nate's constant insistence on spending every single lunch period quizzing me about the details of what I plan to wear to his dance next week.

"I told you, dude. It's a suit," I say, massaging my temples in an attempt to ward off the headache I'm rapidly developing. "Am I supposed to be saying this in some language other than English? *Un costume. El traje. Der Anzug. L—*"

"Yes, I understand that it's a suit," Nate says, drumming his fingers on the lunch table. Good. I'm glad he's as annoyed by this conversation as I am. "But what kind of suit? What's the cut like? What color—"

"The cut is like whatever my best friend picked out when he talked me into buying this fucking thing a year ago. And what color do you think it is? It's black. Black jacket, black pants, black shirt, black everything because in case you haven't noticed, *I barely wear any other colors*." I snatch a plastic knife off Riley's lunch tray and hand it to Joss, saying, "I can't take this conversation anymore. I want somebody to cut my throat right now, and you're the only person I trust to really do it."

Joss lights up and makes a grab for the knife, but without missing a beat, Annabelle passes it back to Riley and leans around me to address Travis with an abrupt change of subject. "Are you excited for this weekend? Only two days left until the big day."

"What big day?" I ask, nudging his elbow when he ignores me in favor of continuing to underline a passage on his AP Spanish handout. When he finally does glance up long enough to give me an unimpressed look, I suddenly realize, *fuck*. "Your birthday's this Saturday. That's right."

"I'm offended that you're only just now remembering," he says without much feeling.

Pointing out that I've had to force myself to forget about it because I already spend too much time thinking about him—obsessing over him, as Ben has so graciously taken to calling it when Travis isn't around—would probably not go over well, particularly given that he's sitting across from the girlfriend I'm still not sure he's actually spoken to since Monday. I settle for, "You still haven't told me what you want as a present, you know."

He shrugs without comment.

"What was the best present you got last year?" John asks.

"My first blowjob," Travis says absently, still not looking up from his homework. Across the table, Joss reels back as if he'd punched her; he doesn't seem to notice. I duck my head to try to hide my smile, but... I mean, it's a really big fucking smile.

"So, how are you celebrating this year?" Miranda asks, hastily trying to steer the conversation away from a place that will infuriate Josslyn.

Travis shrugs again. "During my break while I'm at work that morning, I'm heading to town hall to submit

my voter registration forms.”

“That’s the most tragically lame celebration of adulthood I’ve ever heard of,” I declare. “There are so many more exciting things you can do when you turn eighteen, and you’re wasting a perfectly good birthday.”

“How did you celebrate yours?” he asks.

“Moped around Jamie’s dorm room at Patton, drank half a dozen Jagerbombs for lunch, and jerked off thinking about that thing you do with your—”

“Please don’t finish that sentence,” Joss says tightly.

I raise my hands in surrender, but say to Travis, “You should go out and... I don’t know. Buy cigarettes. Go clubbing. Star in porn. Get tattoos. And yes, register to vote, whatever. But do the exciting shit first.”

“I don’t smoke, I don’t know any good clubs, I blush too much to ever star in porn, and I already got a tattoo after my last birthday. So I think I’m mostly going to focus on the—”

“Seriously, are you ever going to show us this tattoo?” Christine says, raising her eyebrows.

Instead of speaking, Travis sets down his pen and stretches his forearm out across the table, baring the small letter G on his wrist. I had opted to get mine on my right wrist, and he had chosen his left. I can only assume it’s because I’m right-handed and he’s left-handed, but part of me had always secretly loved the way they lined up when we held hands.

Several people at the table try to gape at him, but he’s still focused on his homework, so their stares turn to me next. I say solemnly, “He was so fucking upset that they started inking him up before they bothered to tell him that the word ‘ghostbusters’ was too long to go around his wrist. Like, he cried. It was really embarrassing.”

My hands are folded in my lap right now, but Nate reaches over and draws them up above the table, presumably to check that I have a matching T. Annabelle snorts. “Yeah? ‘Ghostbusters’? So, what’s yours for?”

“Tasty,” Travis and I say in unison. It’s the same bullshit response I’d given him last fall, when he first freaked out about it, but I find myself looking around at him in surprise. I hadn’t expected him to remember. He’s not looking at me, but he is smirking.

It’s that smirk that makes me say, without giving myself time to really think about it, “You say you don’t know any good clubs, but, um... I mean, I do. Some places down in New Haven. And New York. A few in Rhode Island. I could take you out for the night.”

He blinks up at me, and I bite down hard on my lip ring. His gaze flickers down briefly to follow the movement, then focuses in on my eyes again. Finally he says, “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” I echo, shrugging. “We could—I mean, eighteen is a big deal. And Stohler had wanted to take me out to celebrate anyway. We’d been planning to go to this one club she goes to a lot, with Ben, Alex, and Jamie. You should come. This place—well, they don’t card people who are buying alcohol, so you could drink, if you wanted to. And I’ll be sober, so I could drive you home after, like Halloween. It’d be fun.”

“If I did drink,” Travis says very carefully, “I don’t think it would be a good idea for me to go home afterward. My mom still hasn’t—I mean, things are still weird around the house. She’d lose it if I came home late and she knew I’d been drinking.”

I pick at the label on my Snapple bottle and steady my voice as I say, “You could crash at my house after.

That's what Jamie's going to do. My dad wouldn't mind, and I have a couch in my room." He raises his eyebrows ever so slightly, but thankfully doesn't point out that he's been in my bedroom before, and has therefore already been made aware of the couch. "I could sleep on that, and you could—" *sleep in my bed*. I think Joss might punch me in the face if I actually say those words. "You could stay over, if you didn't want to go home after."

"Okay, um—" He pauses, finally chancing a glance at his girlfriend, who is purposefully shredding her lasagna with her fork. I want to do something dumb and mean, like tell her that pasta sauce is supposed to be really bad for fetuses, but I don't even know if that's something people say. I remain silent and watch as Travis very obviously weighs the pros and cons of asking his girlfriend's permission to go out, get drunk, and spend his birthday in his ex-boyfriend's bed. After a moment, he swallows hard, turns to me with a smile, and says, "Yeah, alright. We'll go out."

"Cool," I say, like the world's most loser-ish assclown. "I'll, um, text you Saturday night to let you know when I'll be picking you up, and we'll go to New Haven, grab Stohler, go from there."

He nods, then cocks his head to the side. "What did she want to celebrate, anyway?"

I almost bite my lip ring again to hold back the grin, but if he looks at my mouth again, I'm going to lose my mind. So instead, I flash him a brief smile and say, "As of this weekend, I'm sixty days sober."

"Dude," Riley says, plucking off his baseball cap to check that the brim is sufficiently curved. "You should have told us. I would have made Nate bake you a cake or something."

"You would have done no such thing," Nate says, affronted. To me, he adds, "Not that I wouldn't bake you a cake. I just don't take orders from Riley."

"It's fine, I don't need a cake," I say. Under the table, I slip my phone from my pocket and send a mass text to Stohler, Ben, Alex, and Jamie: *travis turns 18 this saturday, invited him to come to club with us. we planned on b's car, but now either a) i call shotgun & the rest of you fuckers can enjoy stuffing 4 people into the backseat or b) i need to borrow my dad's benz & bring 1 of you guys with me so i don't end up parked in an alley & fingerbanging a drunk birthday boy. 1st person to make fun of me for this is gonna get bitch-slapped.*

It only takes a minute for Ben to reply, in a group text so that everyone can see, *A bitch slap? Sounds fantastic. Add in a little hair-pulling and you've got yourself a deal. Seriously though, you're a fucking idiot sometimes. Inviting the ex you're still in love with along to a club to celebrate his birthday, what the fuck.*

eat a dick, mccutcheon, he's your ex, too, I type back furiously.

Yes, but I'm actually over him. Unlike you. How did this seem like a good idea?

it's like a riddle, i'm trying to see how many of my previous sexual partners i can get into a single room, i type. speaking of, anybody know dave walczyk's number? i'm having a hard time remembering it, it's like somebody beat me until i got a concussion, slipped into a coma, and forgot it.

That's enough to finally spur a response from Jamie. *Not funny, asshole. I've got nothing against Freckles, so if you want him to come along, it's fine by me. But when you guys end up fucking in a bathroom stall and you get all sad about it afterward, please realize that the rest of us will be too busy saying 'we told you so' to listen to you whine.*

i hate you, i'm not going to hook up with him. i can behave myself for one night, I text back, scowling.

Can you, though? Jamie responds at the same time as Ben says, *Actually, you really can't.*

Then, from Stohler, *For fuck's sake, I am trying to sleep. If I get another text from any of you homos, the*

unholy hellfire that I unleash upon you all will be something straight out of a Southern Baptist Sunday school.

text text text, I reply instantly. bitch, it is noon. get the fuck up.

SOME OF US PASSED TWELFTH GRADE THE FIRST TIME WE TRIED IT, GAREN, SO SOME OF US WORK UNTIL FIVE IN THE MORNING AND THEN JUST WANT TO SLEEP DURING THE DAY, ALRIGHT?

Work until five in the morning. Because—oh god, this is either the best idea I've ever had in my life, or the worst. Fingers practically cramping up in my haste to type out, I send her a message saying, *stohler, dude, if i wanted to hire you and possibly someone else—a dude type of someone else—to jump out of a cake and give the birthday boy a lapdance in an obscenely public setting tomorrow, how much would that cost?*

\$250 each, and if I get arrested for public indecency, you have to post my bail. Call me tonight, we'll work something out. But TONIGHT as in NOT NOW, when I want to be SLEEPING.

Jamie responds, *You know, I kind of need y'all to let me concentrate on homework instead of forcing me to watch a text argument between a recovering drug addict and an exotic dancer. That's why I have cable, not why my parents pay for me to attend an Ivy League university.*

Seconded, other than the fact that I'm not a spoiled little rich boy, so I pay for my own Ivy League tuition, Ben sends.

I'm sorry, McCutcheon, what was that? It's hard for me to see the screen on my phone properly because of the intense glare coming off every surface in my solid gold apartment building...

Are you sure you didn't just lose your phone in the gigantic pile of hundred dollar bills I assume you spend every waking moment rolling around naked in?

Don't be silly. Only poor people bother touching paper money, it's unsanitary. And rolling around naked on my black AmEx just isn't as much fun as I thought it would be.

Sighing, I type, *if your class warfare is actually rooted in sexual insecurities, i can save us all a lot of trouble & just tell you which one of you is better in bed.*

Fine by me, Ben says at almost the exact moment that James responds, *Go for it.*

I'm halfway through typing, *jamie's dick is bigger & he gives better head, but ben's kinkiness is hot as fuck & his enthusiastic participation make him more fun to top,* when Stohler sends a furious, capslock-y, *ONE MORE FUCKING TEXT, BOYS. SEND ME ONE MORE TEXT AND SEE WHAT HAPPENS.* I hastily backspace my text and stuff my phone back into my pocket.

Only when I'm leaving the cafeteria does my phone buzz again. I look down. It's the first reply from Alex, and it's a picture. More precisely, it's a screencap of the display on his phone, alerting him to twenty-three new text messages. He has captioned it, *...seriously u guys?*

59 days sober

My plan to douse Travis in a healthy serving of birthday humiliation goes even better than planned, primarily because he's too trusting for his own good. Tricking him into receiving a public lapdance really shouldn't be as easy as waiting until Nate and Ms. Markland have left the room to argue (again) and saying, "Hey, McCall, can you do me a favor and sit down in this chair right here, in the middle of the stage, just for a second?" It should be a lot harder than that; it should take at least some degree of

subterfuge.

It's not, and it doesn't.

"What's up?" he says, edging between Annabelle and Geoffrey to join me on stage. He's still wearing that dorky, adorable headset he has to wear to remain in contact with the sound booth and Riley... who actually knows what I'm planning, and might be warning him right now, that sneaky, traitorous little fucker.

I tug the headset off him and sling it around my own neck. "I want to give you your birthday present."

His brow furrows. "You know you're seeing me tomorrow, on my actual birthday, right? You could just wait until then."

"No, I really can't. Sit," I order, pointing to the chair. He sits. This is so easy, I'm actually a little embarrassed for him already. "Do you remember what I said I was going to get you for your birthday last year?"

"An iPod," he says, head cocked to the side. There's a beat, then he adds, "And a life."

"And?" I prompt.

His face is utterly blank for a moment, and then he looks terrified. His eyes dart from his chair, to me, to the fucking *fire exits*, like setting off the alarms and getting bitched out by the fire department might be worth it if he gets to flee before I have a chance to force this plan on him. Before he can, I dart over to the mic stand on the edge of the stage and say, so that my voice will be audible from the sound booth, "Hey, Ry. Wanna help me out with this one?"

A grating, electronic beat starts to squeak out of the speakers. Taking the cue from the music, the doors to the auditorium swing open, and two four-foot-tall, tiered cakes make their way into the room, each carried by four men in black Hot Mess t-shirts. The closer the cakes get to the stage, the redder Travis' face gets. There's a strong possibility that he might be close to following up on that threat of suicide, but no matter how embarrassed he seems, he also looks like he's trying not to laugh, so I think I'm mostly safe. The cakes are hoisted up onto the stage and positioned right next to each other, less than five feet away from Travis, who can't stop himself from staring back and forth between them.

"There are two. Oh god, why are there two?" he asks.

"I'm sorry, did I promise you 'stripper,' or did I promise you 'strippers'?" I demand. "Besides, on any given day, I never know if you're going to prefer chick or dick, so I figured I should hedge my bets and get one of each."

There's an explosion of dubstep from the sound system, and the top level of each cake bursts open. Travis' gaze immediately latches onto the stage, the ceiling, anything but Stohler in her glittery pink bikini coming out of the cake on the right, or the dark-haired twink in the skintight gold shorts in the cake on the left. Each of them is lifted from the wreckage of the cakes by a pair of Hot Mess assistants, and then they're both writhing and grinding and inching closer to Travis, who continues to stare at the ceiling, red-faced, as he mutters, "Oh my god."

And that just won't do. I move to stand behind Travis' chair, reaching around to catch his jaw in my palms so that I can direct his attention to the two flawless, nearly naked bodies in front of him. "Pay attention to your present, T."

"You got me strippers," he says faintly. "You brought strippers to my high school."

"I brought strippers to your high school," I agree, because, well, yes, I did. Now that I'm sure he's

watching, it's my intention to step away—maybe in a second, right after I sneak a quick brush of my thumbs over his burning hot cheekbones—but the second I start to move back, his hand darts up to catch my wrist, anchoring me in place. I swallow and chance a glance over my shoulder at the rest of the drama club.

Unsurprisingly, the focus is not on me—it's on Stohler and the boy, both of whom have finally made their way to stand directly in front of Travis. The music is still pulsing out of the speakers, and the dancers are swaying and undulating. Even as someone who isn't into women, I can tell that Stohler is incredibly sexy, and as someone who's definitely into men, I know that the twink is hot. I also know that he's exactly Travis' type—dark hair, nice eyes, pale skin, a sort of hard-ass rock-and-roll edge to him. And if that means that my eighteenth birthday present to my ex-boyfriend is a stripper who looks like me, then I guess I'm just not as subtle with my come-ons as a better man might be.

Catching sight of Josslyn at the edge of the stage, Stohler's eyes spark up with something a little bit dangerous, and one of her long legs suddenly shoots up so that Travis' shoulder is pinned beneath her five-inch stiletto. She tosses her hair, swings her hips, runs her hands across her taut body, totally milking it just for the sake of getting back at the bitch who dared to make her feel bad about having this as a job.

"Nice to see you again, Stohler," Travis says, more than a little lamely. I throw my head back and laugh, finally dropping my hands from his face and stepping away to appreciate the show.

Clearly not content to be outperformed, the twink is straddling Travis' thigh and doing the sort of dance that could probably get someone arrested in a town this conservative. And while Travis seems determined to prove his respect for Stohler by not looking at any part of her body below the neck, he's incapable of going above the shoulders on the dude. I watch as his eyes rake over the man's body in a way that's maybe a little bit desperate, and it occurs to me—why do I only ever realize these sort of things too late?—that this is the first time since April that he's seen another guy's undressed body and felt like it was okay to stare.

Oh, Christ. This was supposed to be an embarrassing joke, not some weird, existential crisis about the bisexuality his girlfriend attempts to force him to repress.

Thankfully, the song is drawing to a close, which means the pair of dancers are stepping back and gesturing to their torsos in a way that is clearly meant to draw his attention to the message that has been painted across skin in electric blue icing pens that are probably meant for decorating cookies, not people. The word *happy* is swirled across the twink's pecs—and I'm sure this little faggot's already taken at least one over-saturated cell phone picture of it for his Instagram account— and Stohler has *birthday* written across her cleavage. She grabs my wrist and tows me to her other side, hooking a finger under the hem of my t-shirt and dragging it up just high enough to expose the last part of the message; Travis' name written across my abs in frosting pen. Because his eyes seem a little unfocused, and he's sorta looking like he might need some help with this one, I read the message aloud. "Happy birthday, Travis."

"I can't believe you did this," Travis says, staring at his name on my skin.

I smirk. "I know, I'm a terrible fucking person." I jerk my head towards Stohler and the twink. "But hey, the 'happy birthday' note is totally edible. It's written in some cake-decorating pen, so if you're in the mood for a birthday treat, I'm sure one of your presents over there would be more than happy to let you—"

And then, before I can prepare myself for the movement, Travis is on his knees in front of me with his eyes still locked on mine, yanking my shirt higher up towards my collarbone, swiping the flat of his tongue across the letters, leaving nothing but a smear of blue across my skin. I'm going to fucking *pass out*. He straightens up and pecks a kiss to my cheek, leaning in just enough to murmur, "Happy birthday to me," before he turns and heads backstage.

"Not fair!" I say, unable to look at anything but the streak of frosting and spit where *his tongue just touched me*. "That was—you're a fucking tease, you know that?"

He just laughs.

60 days sober

"He wants you to go back to Patton?"

"Yeah."

"And you're just considering it?"

"Yeah."

"He wants you to go back to Patton, the school of your dreams, the school where we met, the school where you had some of the best experiences of your life, the school that you were so upset about leaving that you put your fist through a window in protest, and you're just considering it?"

"Yeah," I say yet again. The car comes to a stop-ish at an intersection, but this is fucking *Lakewood*, and there are no other cars and no cops, so I mostly just roll through it. I keep the speed low enough that I can turn to see what look Jamie is giving me from the passenger seat. His eyebrows are raised, but that's not enough of an answer. I say, somewhat uncertainly, "So, you think I should go?"

He mulls it over for a bit, lights a new cigarette—even though this is my dad's car and we're both going to get bitched at for it later—and eventually decides, "No. I don't think you should go."

I manage to shoot him one bewildered glance before I have to focus on the road again. "What, seriously? You just said it—"

"G, I'd like nothing more than to pretend that you liked Patton because it imbued you with a sense of dignity, responsibility, and faith in the great American tradition of fine military academies. It was a great school, and we got a great education, and we're probably better men for having gone there. But you and I both know that we loved Patton because it was *fun*."

"And do you suddenly have something against fun?" I ask.

"Against you having the sort of fun we had at Patton? Absolutely," he says. He pauses, frowns at the door. "How the hell do you roll down the window in this thing?"

"You press the—oh, hang on," I say, flicking the switch on my own door. He tries the button again, and the window goes down this time. I shrug. "Dad likes to keep the passenger side window locked because sometimes when he's driving me somewhere, I get bored and try to talk to strangers at stoplights."

Jamie snorts. "That's embarrassing for you."

"Most of the things I do should be embarrassing for me," I agree. "Anyway. Patton...?"

"Right," he says. "Look, you... we go out, yeah? We go to clubs, and bars, and it's okay, because I'm there for you, and I—" He breaks off, taking a contemplative drag from his cigarette and clearly trying to decide how best to phrase his thoughts without offending me.

I shoot him a wry smile and make a vague gesture towards my mouth. He reaches over with the cigarette so I can take a drag off of it as well, and I say, "You protect me, is what you're trying to say. Or, trying not to say."

"Pretty much. And we know people who are still at school there, so you wouldn't be alone, but—"

“—but there’s no one there who you trust to keep me sober,” I finish.

“I trust *you* to keep you sober,” he points out, “but it’s still not the best environment for someone who’s trying to stay sober. The only class you and I could ever be counted on to attend completely sober was PT, and that was more out of necessity than a desire to give a fuck about it. Think of all the booze we drank at Patton. Think of all the drugs we did. That’s a lot of temptation, and I’m not sure that’s a good idea, not during your first year of being clean. Patton was... it was home for us, and it was safe, but it was safe when it didn’t *have* to be safe. I think there’s a chance that you need more security than that right now. But it’s up to you, alright?”

I nod, and turn into the driveway, nodding to my phone. “Text Travis and tell him we’re here to get him.”

“No need. I’ll get him!” Jamie says brightly, flinging open his door and bounding up to the front door before I can object. He jabs the doorbell a few times, bouncing impatiently while he waits. Finally, the door swings open, and Evelyn blinks at him in thinly veiled horror. He beams at her, and even from here, I can hear how much he’s exaggerating his accent as he practically yells, “Hello, Mrs. McCall! Remember me? Garen’s friend? You know, *that* Garen?”

He flings a hand in my direction, and Evelyn leans around him to look at me. I smile so wide it hurts my cheeks, then flash her a double thumbs-up. Travis edges around his mom and says, “Uh. So, yeah, I’m going out tonight. For my birthday. With friends.”

“Friends,” Jamie agrees warmly, slinging an arm around Travis’ shoulders.

“Friends!” I have to shout to be heard, since I’m a bit further away.

Travis looks like he can’t decide whether he wants to stab us or hug us. He says, “I guess I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Where are you going?” Evelyn asks, and for a moment, Travis looks stunned that she has actually bothered to speak to him, for the first time in months. And then he realizes, at the same moment I do, that her eyes are focused on Jamie, not him. She’s fucking talking to a kid who’s almost a complete stranger, rather than her own son.

Rage flares up within me, and even though I’m the farthest away, I’m the one who answers her question. I scroll frantically through my iPod for the song I want, crank the stereo up as high as it’ll go, and let loose a scream of guitars, and then—

“You! I wanna take you to a gay bar! I wanna take you to a gay bar! I wanna take you to a gay bar, gay bar, gay bar!”

“We should go,” I think Travis is saying to Jamie, who is grinning like a madman. I can barely hear him speaking over the music, and then Travis is dragging my best friend off the porch and towards the car. Jamie shoves him into the front seat and takes the backseat for himself. Evelyn continues to glower at us from the front steps.

“I’ve got something to put in you!” the singer is screeching from the stereo. I make a few enthusiastic thrusting movements, then point to Travis, nodding to Evelyn and biting down on my lip in the most lecherous way possible. She goes back inside, and Travis smacks me hard on the back of the head.

“That is my *mother*, what is *wrong* with you?” he says.

Having lost my audience, I pull out of the driveway and set the course for New Haven to meet the others. “Whatever, your mom’s a cunt. She deserves it.”

He doesn't object, though he does say, apropos of absolutely nothing, "Join the military."

I blink over at him. "Is—was that like, an order? Like, I humped the air in front of your mom, so you want me to go join the military? Because we both know I have major issues with authority figures. I barely made it through three years of military school without getting expelled."

"No," he says, laughing. "I just realized you left that off your list at lunch the other day. You know, of things I can do now that I'm eighteen? I can join the military."

My hands clench into fists around the steering wheel. "Please don't. It's bad enough that I'm going to have to face that reality with that idiot in the backseat in a few years, I don't want to face it with you, too."

Travis turns to stare at me. "James is joining the military?"

"Yes," I say tightly.

In the mirror, I can see Jamie shrug. "I'm a Political Science major at Columbia right now. Then, I'm going to law school, taking the bar, becoming a licensed attorney, whatever. After that, it's the Marines and the Naval Justice School in Newport, Rhode Island. I want to be a Judge Advocate. Garen disapproves."

"Garen doesn't disapprove," I say through gritted teeth. "Garen just doesn't understand why his best friend needs to follow a career path that might ever, under any circumstances, involve getting *shot* at."

"G, I'm not going to get shot!" Jamie argues. "Besides, if you didn't want a best friend who planned to join the military, maybe you shouldn't have met your best friend at military school. Speaking of—" He stops speaking abruptly when I catch his eye in the mirror and give a sharp shake of my head. The Patton conversation is so not one I'm prepared to have with Travis yet. Thankfully, Jamie realizes what I'm communicating, because he says, "Anyway, happy birthday, Travis. Are you excited that Garen decided to take your gay bar virginity tonight?"

"Well, if anybody has to, it's only fitting that it'd be Garen," Travis says, and I smirk at him. They spend most of the ride like that, shooting the shit about random things, until we get to New Haven and I get... lost, actually. Or, I know where I am, but not where I can find the lot that Stohler, Ben, and Alex are parked in. Eventually, I ask Travis to just call them so I can get directions, which turns out to be a hell of a process and involves a lot of Travis snapping, "Turn right at *which* light? This isn't fucking Lakewood, they've got more than one!"

"Is that McCutcheon on the phone?" Jamie demands, leaning forward in his seat. Travis nods, and he leans even closer to say, loudly enough for Ben to hear, "Why the fuck are you driving, little one? Can you even see over the steering wheel?"

Travis twists around in his seat and mouths, *barely*, which sets Jamie off in a fit of laughter, though Travis quickly schools his expression into neutrality, like he thinks Ben will be able to tell even over the phone. He pauses, rolls his eyes, and says to Jamie, "He wants me to tell you that, if this were his car, he'd have strapped you to the roof so he didn't have to worry about fitting your obscenely tall body into it." Another pause, then he adds, "And so he didn't have to listen to you talk during the drive over. Sorry, forgot that part. Wait, stop, stop, stop, this is it!"

I turn into the lot he's pointing to, and yes, Ben's car is parked along the far side. I pay the ten dollar parking fee, then pull into the space next to them. Stohler tumbles out of the backseat in a pair of skintight jeans and heels that might look dangerous, if I hadn't seen her do significantly more acrobatic things in higher ones. She's holding a bottle of Jose Cuervo, which she aims at Travis as she says, in a tone that sounds a lot more accusatory than makes sense, "Happy birthday, baby gay."

"I figured Ben would be the baby gay, since he's the smallest," Alex says, which earns him a blinding smile from Jamie and a punch to the ribs from Ben.

Stohler shakes her head and decides, “Ben’s the littlest gay. McCall’s the baby gay, because he’s the youngest. And because he’s not as much of a filthy, cock-craving *whore* as the rest of you... guys. All of you. You all.”

“Y’all. Say it,” Jamie whispers, taking the tequila from her. “Say it, join me.”

“Please don’t say it,” Ben says. “It’s bad enough listening to that abomination of a word from an actual Southerner—”

“It’s a real fucking word,” Jamie says between shots. “It’s even in most dictionaries these days, because—”

“It’s a goddamn colloquialism,” Ben snaps. “That’s not the same thing as—”

“For the love of Christ,” Travis mutters, snatching the bottle of tequila out of Jamie’s hands and taking a pretty impressive shot.

I scurry over to stand next to Ben so that I can dig an elbow into his ribs. “If you’re going to spend the whole night debating grammar with Jamie, I’m going to need to take a shot of that, too.”

Stohler points at me and says, beaming, “No, sir! Because you, my friend, are sixty days sober. And I am very proud of you.”

“Aww,” I say, batting my lashes at her. “You just called me your friend.”

“Aaaand you just killed it,” she says flatly, scowling at me and snatching her bottle back from Travis. She pauses, frowns at it, then says, “Wait, no, that’s for you. That was my first mission for the night. Get the birthday boy blasted before we’re even in the club. Drink, drink, drink!”

“My birthday present is tequila shots in a parking lot,” Travis says. “I really... did not imagine a year ago that this would be my life now.”

“No, I’m pretty sure your birthday present was me jumping naked out of a cake for you yesterday,” Stohler says, and he chokes on a shot. I clap him hard on the back. Faced with a collection of baffled faces, Stohler clarifies, “It wasn’t my idea. Garen provided the money incentive and the soundtrack, I provided the pink bikini and awesome pair of tits to go in it.”

“Why did you not get me half-naked Stohler for my birthday?” Alex asks me.

“Because I didn’t know Stohler then. And because I got you—wait, what did I get you for your last birthday?”

“Nothing, you dick, you were in rehab,” he says, and well, isn’t *thatawkward*.

Ben shrugs. “Could be worse. For *my* last birthday, he fled the state and didn’t speak to me for a month.”

Joining in on the worst party game ever, Jamie announces, “For *my* last birthday, he had a mental breakdown and tried to shoot himself in the face.”

“Wow, he must really hate you all,” Travis says, to which Stohler whispers y’all, “because I totally got a blowjob and an iPod for my last birthday. Not in that order, though, the blowjob came second.”

Alex chuckles and echoes, “*Came*.”

I round on Ben. “Exactly how much did they drink before you got here?”

"There was another bottle, half-empty," he says dryly, "and the one Travis is holding now was full."

I turn to see how full the bottle is now, but it's a little hard to tell, because Stohler is yanking it out of Travis' hand and gesturing wildly with it as she explains the finer points of body shots. He's just frowning and saying, "Yeah, I'd definitely be up for it, but you just said we need limes. And salt. We don't have— oh, wow. You are just... unreasonably prepared for this, aren't you?"

"I told you, this was my first mission of the night," she says, and she is just the Susie fucking Homemaker of binge-drinking, because she reaches past me into the backseat of Ben's car and takes out a tiny salt shaker and a tupperware container of lime wedges. I raise my eyebrows at her, and she just raises hers back, daring me to question it. And I really can't, because I've done exactly the same thing before. She pops open the container and says, "It's easy. Look, we'll demonstrate. James, you go first. Where do you want—"

"Right there," Jamie says, pointing directly at the insane amount of cleavage she's flaunting. "Pretty sure if I lean you back against the hood of the car a bit, it'll form a nice little well for it."

"You're ambitious. I like it," Stohler says approvingly. Jamie licks a stripe up the side of her neck, and she sprinkles herself with salt, sticks a lime wedge between her teeth, and leans back against the hood of my father's car so that Jamie can pour a shot of tequila onto her tits.

"This is all happening so much more quickly than I had expected," Travis says wildly.

"Pay attention, baby gay," Stohler orders around the lime, and he falls obediently silent. Jamie licks up the salt, spends several unnecessarily lengthy minutes sucking the booze from Stohler's cleavage, then takes the lime from her mouth with his own. She straightens up, smiling serenely, and says, "See? Easy."

The first few shots seem to have begun to work their magic on Travis, because, much as he did at the beer pong table on Halloween, he turns uncertainly to me and asks, "Is it actually easy, or are they just practiced at this?"

I shrug. "Both, probably. But it's really not complicated, dude. You lick the salt, you suck up the shot, you bite the lime. Simple enough, right?"

"Right," he says doubtfully.

I beckon Jamie closer and say, "You should take yours off Jamie. My favorite spot in the world to take body shots from was right—" Without further prompt, Jamie strips off his necktie, opens the first few buttons of his Oxford, and drags the fabric aside, hunching his shoulders just enough that his collarbone pops a little, forming a beautiful dip that I know from experience is perfect for taking a large shot from. "You do it like this," I add, ducking down to mouth across the empty hollow of skin, as though I'm drinking from it. Jamie lets out a pleased little noise, and I nip his shoulder with my teeth before I retreat.

"Or," Jamie suggests, "you could take a shot out of the hole in McCutcheon's heart where his love of fun should be."

"There's a difference between not liking fun and not liking to drink," Ben says. He pauses, rubs a hand over the back of his neck, and admits, "But if I *did* like to drink, I'm pretty sure I'd want Garen spread out on the backseat of his car so I could lick the tequila off his abs."

Clearly delighted, Stohler whoops and makes a grab for the hem of my t-shirt. Even Jamie looks begrudgingly approving. I grin and say, "I'm game."

"I feel like there's something incredibly tasteless about taking a body shot off a recovering alcoholic," Travis says warily.

I narrow my eyes at him and say, "I know this may be shocking to everyone here, but I actually am an adult. I can decide for myself what I can and can't handle, and I'm pretty sure I can handle you sucking a shot off my abs."

And if I can't handle it, that will have very little to do with the alcohol.

He hesitates, then nods, though he averts his eyes when I shrug out of my jacket and strip off my t-shirt. Christ, it's cold out. I mean, it's November, so that makes sense, but it's still more than I was expecting. Since Travis seems disinclined to assist in the set-up, I gesture for Ben to come closer and say, "Everybody gets to play, and I need salt. Come on."

He rolls his eyes at me, but prompts, "Anywhere specific?" I shrug, shake my head. He smirks at me, then ducks down to drag his tongue across my left nipple, already pebbled from the cold air. I jump a little; he laughs, and I smack him, because fuck him, it's not my fault I've got sensitive nipples. Stohler douses me in salt and hands me a lime wedge.

I pop open the back door of the Benz and sprawl out on the backseat, leaving my legs hanging most of the way out so that my feet are still firmly on the ground. I crook my fingers, but Alex still has to give Travis a little shove to get him to come closer. "Just lean into the car, lick the salt—it's right here, thanks a fucking lot, McCutcheon—then take the shot off—" I hold my hand out for the bottle, which Jamie passes in. I unscrew the top and pour a little onto my stomach. Much of it pools in my navel, though a lot is indeed splashed across my six-pack, and some runs off down my sides and onto the seat, which I'm sure my dad will adore. The smell is a little more overpowering than I'd expected, so I reach up to open the other back door, just to get some air. I hand the bottle back out to Stohler, trying not to move enough to spill more of the tequila. Travis' eyes are zeroed in on my body. I lick my lips. "Like I said. Lick the salt. Take the shot. Then the lime."

I slip the wedge into my mouth, rind facing in against my tongue.

"It's—and you're sure you're okay with this, right?" Travis says. Even as he speaks, he inches closer and braces a knee on the seat, between my slightly parted legs.

Stohler cuffs him around the back of the head and says, "It's a little late to be asking that, isn't it? Go ahead. He's fine."

Travis ducks into the car, hovering over me, unwilling to move until I've answered. I nod, partially because there's a lime in my mouth, partially because I can't breathe enough to form words.

He flattens a palm against the side of the front passenger seat to steady himself as he leans down. His tongue is warm and wet and perfect against the salt, and I try very hard to convince myself that the rest of our friends aren't totally judging me for the fact that my eyes flutter briefly shut. I wonder if he can taste my heartbeat.

Before I can even get used to that feeling, he's sliding down to get to the tequila—he doesn't even bother lifting his tongue, just drags the tip of it down the length of my torso, oh god. I lift my head to watch as he laps at the liquor on my stomach, cleaning it all up with lips and tongue and maybe the tiniest bit of teeth, and he is just—he is *thorough*. He wobbles a little and ends up steadying himself with a palm pressed high on my thigh. The lime wedge definitely falls out of my mouth at that, and I have to scramble to snatch it off my chest and put it back in my mouth with one hand, give Alex the finger with the other, because that asshole is *laughing* at me, because my friends are fucking terrible people. I wish I were dead.

Tequila gone, he tilts his head up to give me another of those gorgeously uncertain looks, and then I'm catching his face between my hands and drawing him up to kiss—no. To take the lime. He bites into the wedge, and some of the juice runs down into my mouth. His body is flush against mine, covering my exposed chest with the fabric of his shirt, warm from his skin. He bites harder into the fruit, and when he

moves, I can feel his bottom lip just barely brushing mine. I've never in my life wanted anything more than I want to spit the lime wedge out of the way and taste the salt on his tongue.

My hands are shaking as I ease his head back and remove the rind from my mouth. "Okay. That was—good job. Yaaaay body shots, I guess."

"Get out of the car, baby gay, we're bordering on inappropriate now," Stohler says.

"Right. Sorry," Travis says hoarsely, scrambling back out of the car and taking the lime rind with him.

Jamie raps his knuckles on the roof of the car. "You alright in there, sweetheart?"

"Can you just shut the door for a minute?" I say, drawing my legs up and wriggling further into the car so that someone can grant my request. "I'll totally join you guys inside the club, I just need to—"

"Compose yourself?" Stohler suggests.

"Jerk off," I correct, and Jamie grabs my ankles and drags me to the edge of the seat. Still grinning at me, Alex drops my t-shirt and jacket in my lap. I clumsily pull them back on, then stand up and just... try to get my shit together, I guess. I check my pockets for my wallet, my cell phone, my keys, my... dignity? Nope, I've got no fucking clue where my dignity is.

Travis probably sucked that out of my navel, too.

"We heading in?" Ben asks, taking it upon himself to wander around the car, closing all the doors and making sure they're locked. I'm glad at least one person I know is an adult.

The walk from the parking lot to the club is longer than expected, but this might have something to do with the fact that Stohler's the only one who's been here before, and she's hammered. Still, the lengthy walk is a good thing. It gives me time to—in her words—compose myself, and by the time we get to the front door of the club, I'm fine again. Mostly.

It's a ten dollar cover charge. We each get our IDs checked, and the bouncer grunts out a *happy birthday* at Travis, who lights up. It's kind of adorable. There's a loud, pulsing beat from the dance floor, but Stohler leads us straight through to the coat closet so we can all check our jackets. That satisfied, she leads us next to the bar so that beers can be acquired for everyone to nurse. Ben and I each purchase a bottled water, and we've all been standing there for exactly four seconds when the bartender leans over the counter and says to Jamie, "Guy in the red shirt at the other end of the bar asked me to tell you he'll pay for your drinks the rest of the night if you slip him your number."

Jamie shoots an appraising look at the only guy in a red shirt at the other side of the bar; he's eye-fucking Jamie like crazy, but he's also tucked under the arm of another dude, who seems to be trying to talk to him. Jamie hitches his chin and says to the bartender, "You know if that's his boyfriend?" The bartender nods. Jamie shoots him an apologetic, but firm smile. "Sorry, not interested in that sort of thing. And I can afford my own drinks." The bartender moves away to relay the message and continue with his job, and Jamie turns to the nearest person—Ben—and says around a smirk, "See? Not nearly as much of an ethical egoist as you thought I'd be, huh?"

Ben shrugs and says, "Actually, you always struck me as someone who'd prefer social contract theory."

Jamie goes still, frowning down at his beer. He takes a sip, then manages to force himself to grumble out, "You've read Rousseau?"

"I have," Ben agrees carefully. "I preferred Hobbes' *Leviathan*, though."

Jamie actually chuckles. "Figures. Let me guess: you got a special sort of glee from the bit about life

being '*solitary, poor, nasty--*'"

"--*brutish and short*," Ben finishes, smiling wryly down at his water bottle. "Yes, well, he paints quite the picture, doesn't he?"

Jamie snorts. And it's delightful to see them actually managing to maintain some sense of civility towards each other, but it's also *boring as shit*, on account of how they're discussing *political philosophy* in the middle of a goddamn gay bar, those pretentious, Ivy League fuckers. I roll my eyes and turn to Stohler instead. She jerks her head towards an area on the opposite end of the club and says, "There's a space against that wall where they have some couches and chairs and shit, if you guys wanna sit."

I relay this information to the rest of the group, and she leads us along. The sitting area is much smaller than anticipated. There are six of us and only five seats, but Travis, who is the last man standing, simply shrugs and flings himself down onto my lap. It takes essentially all of my self control to act like it's not a big deal, when what I really want to do is throw my arms around him and bury my face in the back of his neck and breathe him in.

But, I mean. That'd be weird. So. I don't.

"This is probably not your best idea," I admit to him. He shoots me a questioning glance, and I say, "Look, if you sit on my lap, odds are really good that you're going to get touched. That's not—you know, don't take it to heart. That's true of pretty much everyone I've slept with. You're not special, don't think you're special. I just don't think people I've banged should expect me to keep my hands to myself, if they're going to be on top of me."

"You realize that means nobody's left, right?" Jamie says. "Except Stohler. But of the boys in this group, 'people you've slept with' kind of includes everyone."

"Like you can even judge me for that," I grumble.

He's actually drunk enough to look offended. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you bang all your friends, too! Like, seriously, Jamie, tell me how my dick tastes, and *then* we'll talk," I say. Travis paws at my chest and mumbles something that sounds suspiciously similar to, *I bet it tastes delicious*. I blink at him. "Wait, what?"

"Nothing," he says, widening his eyes at me and then turning to attempt to engage Ben in conversation, but Ben is busy choking on a mouthful of water, trying not to literally die laughing, so I'm pretty sure my guess was close enough. Unsatisfied with a choking midget as a conversational partner, Travis turns to Alex, who is busy chattering away at a total stranger, then turns *again* to face Stohler.

I say, through gritted teeth, "Travis, I'm glad you're doing your best to be a social butterfly or whatever, but if you're going to sit on my lap, you're going to need to sit the fuck still. Your girlfriend would really not appreciate the friction issues I'm experiencing right now." Travis glances over his shoulder at me and gives a very deliberate grinding twist downward. I dig my fingers into his hips. "Oh my god, you are such a fucking *slutty drunk*. How have you made it eighteen years without anyone ever just beating the shit out of you?"

"I haven't. I've gotten my ass kicked like, four times," he protests.

"It's about to be five, if you don't—"

"Yes, G, call him a slut and threaten to punish him. That's absolutely the solution," Stohler says.

Ben shrugs. "He does that to me all the time, and our friendship has never been better."

I wink at him, and Stohler rolls her eyes. She reaches out and hooks an arm around Travis' waist, pulling him off my lap and onto hers. "Come on, birthday boy. Your Garen privileges are being revoked for the time being."

Some godawful, ear-raping song starts up on the sound system. Jamie perks up. Forgetting whatever offense he'd taken at my earlier comment, he grabs my wrist and hauls me to my feet. "I love this song. Come dance with me, G. It's been far too long since I've been pressed up against you in all the worst ways."

"Really? Because I'm pretty sure we fucked like, three weeks ago," I say.

"I know. Almost a month, I can barely stand it," he says, squeezing my hand. I laugh and let him tow me out to the dance floor.

He ends up pressed against my back, grinding his semi against my ass, the fingers of both his hands tangled with mine, his mouth brushing against my temple. It's the way we always dance together, and it's probably why most strangers we meet in clubs end up assuming that he tops, but the truth is that it's just easier this way, given the slight but not unnoticeable height difference between us. We just never seem to dance face-to-face, and if I were behind him, we could never get at the right angle to kiss.

As if reading my thoughts, Jamie releases one of my hands—I move it immediately backward to grip his hip—so that he can cup my jaw and turn my face to bring our mouths together over my shoulder. It's a pity that both he and Travis are sleeping over tonight, because if it were just Jamie, I'd definitely be getting laid. Or, maybe it's a pity that they're both sleeping over because I'm pretty sure Travis would shoot down any suggestions I might make regarding a threesome.

The kissing stops when we're eventually joined by the others. Stohler nudges me and says, "Alex made us come after you. He was getting jealous."

Jamie snorts and says flatly, "He wasn't getting jealous."

"I was getting jealous," Alex admits, almost too quietly for me to hear him over the music. Jamie's brow furrows, like he just doesn't get it, but I step out of the way and let Alex shift closer to him, looping an arm around his waist and drawing him in. The rest of the night continues much like that, all of us dancing together in pairs and trios and various combinations of all sorts. The smokers in the group take a few breaks to head outside, the drinkers in the group take a few breaks to head back to the bar, and every time Travis gets too close to me, even if it's just by mistake, I panic and find some excuse to shift away from him.

It's not that I don't want to touch him; it's just that I don't trust myself to know how to stop.

Alex and Ben are outside or over by the bar or somewhere when the shit sort of starts to hit the fan. It's late now, and Jamie knocks his shoulder against mine and makes a gesture like he's smoking a cigarette before jerking his head towards the door to the smoking area, which Stohler is already making her way towards. I nod once and move to follow him, but my progress is halted by Travis' hand on the back of my neck, steering my attention back towards him and pulling me closer. Mouth almost touching my ear, he says, "Stay. Dance with me."

This is dangerous, and the expression on Jamie's face tells me he thinks so, too. But Travis' hand is so warm against my skin, and his other hand is brushing over my waist, gliding around to settle in the small of my back. I shoot Jamie my best *can you just shut the fuck up and go have your cigarette and have another boring philosophy debate with Ben so I can make this mistake in privacy?* look and say, "Yeah. I'll, uh... I'll stay."

"Good," he says, all slightly-inebriated confidence and satisfaction. His hips are slotted against mine, and I wind an arm around his shoulders, knotting my other hand in the front of his shirt, just so I'm sure he's

all there. His face is much too close for comfort, and I know that if I don't remedy this situation immediately, I'll be kissing him before the chorus of the song is over. The only solution I can think of is to pull him close enough that my mouth is next to his cheek instead, safely out of kissing distance.

Travis isn't a great dancer—fucking finally, something this kid isn't amazing at—but he *is* a good partner. He takes his cues from the movement of my body, and it's not long at all before we're moving against each other in a seamless grinding of hips. One of his legs is wedged between mine, and I'd be lying if I tried to even pretend I wasn't just blatantly rutting up against his thigh in time to the music, but he either doesn't notice that I'm getting hard, or doesn't care.

The hand that had been on my back has been moving progressively lower over the course of the song, and by now, his fingertips are in my back pocket. The teasing touches are hot as hell, but I sort of wish he'd just grab my ass already so that I'd have license to return the gesture, which I'm dying to do. The hand at the base of my neck glides across my shoulder, down my chest, circles my body to join the other on my back. The motion anchors me to him, and I don't *care* if that wasn't a green light, because that's how I'm electing to take it. I duck to press my lips to the edge of his jaw, and when he doesn't resist, I go for it, leaning in and mouthing down the column of his throat, sucking hard at the join of neck and shoulder. He lets out a sound that might be a curse, but I keep marking him—I don't even care what his girlfriend will say the next time she sees him and notices a hickey under the edge of his shirt collar—and he finally lets his hands drop to cup my ass through my jeans, gripping me firmly and pulling me against him so roughly that the only way I could be any closer would be if I were inside of him, *fuck*.

"We should stop," Travis breathes against my ear, and I feel the words more than I hear them. "I really only have so much self-control. And if we don't stop doing this, this song's going to end with me either coming in my pants or dragging you into a bathroom stall and begging you to fuck me."

I can picture it so vividly that I momentarily lose my rhythm because I'm too focused on the image in my mind—getting him turned around in a bathroom stall, his fingers curved over the top of the door so he can brace himself while I work his jeans down to his knees and fuck him from behind. It's an easy possibility; I'm more than shameless enough to stop by the coat-check closet just long enough to get a condom and some lube from the inside pocket of my jacket, and I wouldn't care if anyone heard us fucking in the bathroom, not if it meant getting a chance to touch him like that again.

My hand moves from his shoulder to his hair, pulling just enough to guide his head back so our foreheads are touching and I can feel his breath on my lips, which are almost brushing his as I say, voice heavy with wanting, "I would. I want to, let's go."

"I have a girlfriend," he says pleadingly. "Fuck, Garen, I want you so badly, you have no idea—" I have some idea, considering the way he's pressed up against me, dick rock hard against my thigh, "—but I can't do that. I have a *girlfriend*, and I don't want to be that guy."

"You don't love her," I say. "You don't even like her, not really, not anymore. It's okay, Trav, I don't care that you're not single, alright? I want you anyway. Let me take care of you, I can make it so fucking good for you, I swear."

I unclench the fist that's been wound into the front of his shirt, drag it down the length of his chest, press my palm to his hard cock through his jeans. He bucks against my hand instinctively, and his sudden shift bumps his lips against my chin. I'm moving in to seal our mouths together properly when a firm, familiar hand lands on my back.

"G. Not a good idea," Jamie says into my ear.

"I want," is all I manage to force out. But then there's another person's hand on my wrist, and I look down to see that Ben is guiding my hand away from Travis' crotch and wedging himself between us. He rocks up onto his toes to say something into Travis' ear, and Travis' eyes are still fixed on my mouth, still dark with desire even in the dim light of the club. He's clearly not listening to a word Ben is saying, and after a

moment, the shorter man reaches up to grab his jaw, turning his head roughly so that their eyes lock. He repeats whatever he just said, and there's a hesitation, then a nod.

Ben turns to Jamie and I and says, "We're going out to the smoking area to get some air. You coming?"

"*I want*," I repeat, still staring at Travis.

Jamie cuffs me hard around the head and says, "Yes, we're coming."

"I could be, if you two weren't such a gigantic pair of cockblocks," I grumble, but I don't think anyone can hear me over the music. I let Jamie push me in the direction of the smoking area, out of the club and into the cool November air. Alex is chatting to Stohler while she smokes a cigarette, so we end up joining them. Despite the fact that they headed for the door before us, Ben and Travis are nowhere to be found. They appear a few minutes later, and Ben's holding a water bottle, so I guess they stopped at the bar before coming out. He hands it to Travis, who takes a long sip, then pours some onto his hand and lets his head roll forward so he can brush a cold and dripping hand across the back of his own neck.

I make a somewhat embarrassing noise at that, and Jamie smacks me again, then turns me around to face the side of the building, like he's putting me in time-out. My words are playing on repeat inside my skull, over and over. I want, I want, I want.

"What do you need, G?" Jamie asks.

"I need—" That's as far as I can get. I'm pretty sure Travis has officially broken my brain with how hot he gets me. I didn't even know that was possible. I want. I need. "I need to *touch* somebody."

I reach out behind me and move my hand around blindly until it makes contact with skin. Whoever's attached to the wrist I've just grabbed is the one who gets dragged around, pushed against the side of the building, hauled into a kiss. I don't know or care who it is; I just need to taste somebody who isn't Travis. And who isn't Jamie, based on the fact that I can hear him saying behind me, "Well, I certainly never expected to see *that*."

The person I'm kissing has a slick, skillful tongue, and lips that taste like vanilla and a little bit of coconut—Christ, that's the last thing I need, to kiss someone who tastes the way Travis smells. Frustrated, I lean harder against the body, which is... softer than expected? Squishy in the absolute weirdest of places? I raise a hand to touch the person's waist, which has much more of a curve than I'm expecting, and—oh. So that's who it is.

I lean away and sigh, turning to slump against the wall and only now bothering to open my eyes. Jamie's watching me with a delighted, puzzled expression, and Alex is hanging off him, face buried in his neck to try to smother his laughter. Still leaning against the wall where I've left her, Stohler says, "Got that out of your system?" I nod. She takes a tube of lip gloss from her pocket to reapply what I've taken away with my mouth. "Good. You know, I think it says a lot about my life choices that I hang out with the sort of people who consider kissing me the equivalent of a cold shower."

"You should stop hanging out with gay guys, then," I suggest.

"Or I should stop hanging out with a gay guy whose reaction to literally any problem is to try to put his dick in it," she says. She pauses, caps the gloss, and smirks at me. "So. First boy-on-girl kiss?" I nod. "How was it?"

I shrug. "Your tits kind of got in the way, honestly."

We consider going back into the club after that, but it's nearly two, which means they're closing soon anyway. Alex and I head back inside to collect all of the jackets, and on the way back out, he pulls me into an alcove near the door. "Garen. Wait a second. I want to ask you something."

"Okay," I say warily. "What's up?"

"I know that Jamie's supposed to be staying at your place tonight, but I was sort of wondering if, uh—I mean, would it be a problem if I asked him to come back to mine, instead? With me?"

I should say, *That's fine by me*. I should say, *I'm shockingly capable of controlling myself, I don't need Jamie to babysit me so I don't jump Travis*. I should say, *It's up to Jamie*, not me. Instead, what I say is, "What are you *doing*, Alex?" His brow furrows, so I continue, "Look, I'm going to say this exactly once, alright? It is obvious to everyone in the world that Jamie is into you. And you are a fucking idiot if you're not into him, too—"

"I am!" Alex protests, looking somewhat panicked. "Dude, I'm so into him, why the fuck would you think I'm—"

"You said he should pick Rachael over you because she was more *convenient*, and then you blew him off on Halloween so you could get your dick sucked by some random chick from your school," I say fiercely. "That's not how you act when you're into someone, and honestly, I can't have this conversation with you right now, because every time I think about what a dick you're being to my best friend, it makes me want to punch you in the face, and my doctor told me that getting into another fist fight so soon would probably leave me in yet another coma, and I'm tired of those. So just... shut up, and let's go."

I manage two steps towards the door. Alex grabs my arm, dragging me back towards him, and says, somewhat desperately, "He's the one who said it was easy to choose her over me, alright? He fucking said that, not me—"

"He said it was an easy choice because he knew he wanted *you*. Not her, you fucking—oh my god, how dumb are you? Seriously."

"Me," he says, disbelieving. "He was—wait, he wanted to—when he said it wasn't a difficult choice for him, he meant it wasn't going to be difficult to choose me over her? Because he wants that?"

"You are so dumb," I growl, just in case he didn't get that message the first time. But he either doesn't hear me, or doesn't care, because he darts back outside, shoves Stohler and Travis' coats at them, and kisses Jamie hard on the lips. Jamie looks startled, but pleased. I roll my eyes, pull on my jacket, and hand Ben both his and Jamie's, 'cause fuck knows I'm not going to carry that around just because my best friend's too busy making out with Alex to put his jacket on.

It takes us a while to figure out which direction we need to go in to get to the lot where our cars are. Ben eventually has to get out the GPS on my cell phone, because we're the only two people sober enough to bother right now, and I'm effectively useless in scenarios like this. Right now, my distraction has come in the form of a Nissan full of teenage girls, who have pulled up next to us at a stoplight and are blasting fun. from their speakers. I entertain the girls—and myself, honestly—by singing along loudly, trying to get Ben to put the phone away and dance with me.

"But I still wake up, I still see your ghost, oh Lord, I'm still not sure what I stand for!"

"You are so annoying, oh my god," he says, trying to elbow away from me.

"What do I stand for? What do I stand for? Most nights, I don't know anymore."

"I hope you get hit by a goddamn truck, I'm seri—"

The rest of his sentence is drowned out by my *ohs* and *woahs*, and the honking as the cars behind the girls with the music try to alert them to the light that has now turned green. The girls reluctantly drive off, peering back at us through the windows, and I keep singing without accompaniment, shooting

increasingly pouty looks at Ben. Jamie smirks at him and says, "You realize that the look on his face means he expects you to sing along with him, right?"

"I don't sing," Ben says.

Alex shoots him an unimpressed look and says, "You're so full of shit, dude. You've got a great voice."

He actually does, though it's not as good as mine. I've never been able to figure out why he's so reluctant to sing with me, because it's definitely not for lack of talent. He glares at me, and I glare back, making my *woahs* progressively louder until he finally sighs, punches me in the ribs, and heads off in what I assume is the direction of the parking lot, joining in on the next verse, "*This is it, boys, this is war. What are we waiting for? Why don't we break the rules already?*"

My *woah* becomes a *whoop* of glee, and then I'm taking off down the sidewalk, climbing over benches and picking up the rest of the song. Travis is blinking around at Ben in surprise, like he's never heard him sing until now. Maybe he hasn't—Ben isn't as upfront about his vocal abilities as I am, presumably because he's not as much of an attention whore as I am. Alex is too busy sucking marks into the side of Jamie's neck to really pay attention, but Jamie is scowling at Ben and saying, "I can't believe they let you into Juilliard, if that's all you've got."

To my surprise, Ben laughs and shakes his head. "You try too hard to hate me, sometimes. I know that I've got a good voice, and I know you think so, too. So just shut up and go back to dry-humping my friend, alright?"

Jamie does indeed return his focus to Alex after that, though not without another mulish glare in Ben's general direction. After we've finished "Some Nights," I try to see if I can convince him to sing along with "We Are Young," but he just shakes his head and says, "If you want me to keep singing with you, you're going to have to choose another band. You know my range isn't the same as yours. I have trouble reaching the higher notes—"

"*You* have trouble reaching the higher shelves in the medicine cabinet, I bet," Jamie announces, and Stohler goes mad with giggles next to him.

"For fuck's sake, James, shut up!" Ben bursts out. "I'm not even that short! You're just freakishly tall, is the real problem. I'm five foot six, that's not exactly dwarfism."

"The next shortest person is McCall, and you're still five inches shorter than he is," Jamie points out.

"The next shortest person is *Stohler*, and I'm only two inches shorter than her."

"Stohler doesn't count, she's a girl."

"That's getting to be a recurring theme tonight, I think," Stohler says dryly.

I give her a consoling pat on the shoulder. "Sorry. If it helps, I'd probably be very attracted to you, if I were into chicks."

She returns the shoulder pat and says, "It's okay. You're not my type anyway," then laughs when I look offended.

By the time we reach the cars, Travis is ready to just pour himself into the passenger seat of my car, and Ben is still whispering mutinously about how *my doctor says maybe I'm not done growing yet, he says some people have growth spurts in their first few years of college*, which doesn't really help his case, but which amuses the hell out of Jamie. Jamie, who Alex takes aside and asks, "Hi. So. Do you want to spend the night?"

Jamie's eyebrows go up. "What, at your place?"

"Yeah," Alex says, bouncing a little on the balls of his feet. "With me. Please."

I contemplate telling him that this is maybe the sort of thing that they need to have an actual *conversation* about, not just *get naked and touch each other* about, but that's a glass house I'm not yet prepared to throw any stones from. Besides, I guess I don't need to, because Jamie shakes his head a little and says reluctantly, "I shouldn't. If I come with you, that means those two—" He jerks his head towards me and Travis, who is thankfully already bundled up in the car and playing with the radio, "—will be spending the night in bed together without adult supervision. Which means you and I wouldn't be the only people having sex tonight."

"Jamie," I say irritably, "I appreciate the concern, but I can handle it."

"Yeah, well, you *handling* it is exactly what I'm worried about," Jamie says. "You know I couldn't care less about that crazy bitch he's dating, but I care about *you*. I love *you*, and I don't want you to get hurt if you sleep with a boy who's still going to be dating someone else in the morning, alright?"

I fold my arms over my chest and scowl at him. "I'm not going to sleep with him, okay, dude? He's drunk. I'll just take him back, put him to bed, and sleep on the couch. It's fine. If you want to go with Alex, you can."

He licks his lips. He so wants to go with Alex. But he says, "Are you sure?"

I pull him forward and give him a firm kiss on the lips, then say, "I'm sure. Go. Enjoy yourself. And enjoy Alex's dick, because seriously, I know I was wasted when he and I banged, so I barely remember most of it, but I do remember that that thing is fucking *gigantic*. It's like the Loch Ness Monster of cocks."

"I know, right?" Jamie says, grinning, unable to stop himself from tumbling back and making a grab for Alex's crotch.

Ben just rolls his eyes and gets into his car, saying to Stohler as she climbs into the passenger seat, "I should probably warn you: the second they're in that backseat, they're going to start screwing around. So, keep your eyes forward, and if I look like I'm considering driving us into a guard rail, please try to talk me out of it."

"I'm depressingly used to being in a car with gay men who can't stop fucking, so I'll be fine," Stohler reassures him, then leans out her window to call to me as Ben drives away, "See you later, Anderson! Do your best not to tap that fine, freckled ass!"

I give her the finger and climb into my car. Travis is lounging against the window and has finally settled on a pop punk band I like enough to listen to, but not enough to bother taking the CD out of my dad's car most of the time. He offers me a tipsy, sleepy, beautiful smile and says, "Heading back to your place now?"

I swallow hard and nod. "Yep. My place."

Amusingly, he doesn't realize that it's just the two of us until we've pulled into my driveway and I'm guiding him through my front door. He pauses in the middle of my living room, frowns around, and says, "Where's James?"

"Not here," I say, and he makes an *I figured that part out already* face. I amend, "He went with Alex. He, um... it's just us, tonight. You and me."

"Oh," he says, seeming startled.

I edge past him before he can freak out about that, and lead the way down to my room. He doesn't seem to have bothered to bring anything to sleep in, and I'm pretty sure I'll have a heart attack if he sleeps in just his boxers, so I dig two sets of sweatpants out of my closet and toss one onto the bed, telling him, "You can sleep in those. I'll be right back."

Never in my life have I actually bothered to change into sleepwear in the bathroom, even when I've got someone over. Usually I just pull off my shirt, or strip out of everything, but right now, I think I need a minute to just... breathe. To get my shit together. By the time I return to my room, Travis is sprawled out on my bed, wearing his just t-shirt and my sweatpants, and holy god, why did I let Jamie go with Alex?

I force a tight smile, flick off the lights, and fling myself down on the couch with a simple, "Goodnight."

"You're an idiot," Travis says, because he's fucking rude and doesn't know how to say goodnight like a normal person, apparently. But then he says, voice soft in the darkness and silence, "It's your bed, dude. You don't have to sleep on the couch."

I really, really do. And he's an even bigger idiot, if he thinks that he and I can share a bed tonight, after what happened on the dance floor, without somebody getting touched in their sleep. "It's fine."

"It's not fine, you're being dumb. Come here," he orders, and I can hear the shifting of fabric, like he's pulling back the covers and beckoning me over. Because it's pitch-black and I know he won't be able to see it, I punch myself in the face, since it's honestly the only appropriate reaction. There's a pause, and then he says uncertainly, "What was that noise?"

"Nothing," I say, punching myself again, hoping that'll help me calm down and get my head out of my ass. "What noise?"

"I heard—whatever, it doesn't matter. Can you just get in the fucking bed?" he asks.

I sigh and maybe punching myself wasn't the best idea, because that must be why my body is hauling itself off the couch and crossing the room. For good measure, I stop by my computer and jiggle the mouse to bring it out of sleep mode. I'm still barely sleeping these days, so I might as well turn on some music so I'll have something to concentrate on besides how badly I want to burrow down under those covers and spoon this douchebag for the rest of the weekend.

Fortunately, the computer screen illuminates the room in a pale bluish glow that means I can crawl into bed next to Travis without accidentally touching him. Unfortunately, the moment I've settled down, he rolls onto his side so that he can face me. "Thanks for taking me out tonight."

"You're welcome. Go to sleep," I say, because if he's unconscious, I can definitely behave myself. It's him being awake and staring at me while I'm trying to stare at the ceiling that's the problem.

"I had a really good birthday," he replies.

"I'm glad. Go to sleep," I order. Maybe I should've punched *him* in the face, instead of myself.

And then he whispers, "Last year was better, though."

Last year, when we decided to give this thing between us a shot. When I got to kiss him, and touch him, and suck him, when I had his fucking beautiful dick in my hands, my mouth, my fucking throat. I squeeze my eyes shut. That's not fair. I'm just a stupid, weak, selfish man, and he's so gorgeous, and it's not *fair*. But whatever barrier I've been clinging to is broken now, and I find myself saying, "If you were single, that's what we'd have done this year, too."

He laughs, a low and throaty sound, and says, words full of promise, "You mean, it's where we would've started."

"No," I say carefully, rolling onto my own side now so that I can watch his face, make sure I'm not crossing the line with my words. "If you were single, I would've started by kissing you. In the club? When we were dancing? I'd have pulled you into a dark corner, pressed you up against a wall, gotten my mouth on yours." I lick my lips. "The last time you kissed me—in August, when I was in rehab—I didn't even get a chance to kiss you back."

"I know," he says hoarsely, "and before that—May—the last time you kissed *me*, I didn't kiss you back, either. The last time we really—"

"The night I came back. I know," I echo. "If you were single, that wouldn't be true anymore. I'd have kissed you already, dozens of times. Maybe hundreds. I'd be kissing you right now."

He closes his eyes and rolls onto his back, and for a moment, I think I've gone too far and ruined everything. But then he says, voice barely audible, "What else?" When I don't speak, he says, "If I were single, what else would you do to me?"

"If you were single," I say quickly, before he can change his mind, "I'd have kissed you at the club, like I said, and I'd have taken you home, like I did, and once we were in bed—now—I'd kiss you again, bite your lip, suck your tongue into my mouth, anything to get at the taste of you. I'd be on top of you right now, holding you down and running my hands through your hair. It'd only take that much, and then I'd be hard already, because that's all it takes for you to get me going. You bring me from zero to sixty in three seconds, and no one else can affect me like that. Y-You'd feel it, too, feel my cock pressed against you, but you wouldn't give a fuck, you'd be hard, too—"

"I *am*," he says wildly, and I can't help but sneak a glance downward. I can't really see if he's telling the truth, because he's got one of his knees bent, so the blankets are draped widely enough to conceal him. I know *I'm* hard, though, and when I roll onto my back, even the friction of my sweatpants and the blankets against me is almost unbearable.

"If you were single," I repeat, clinging to that phrase like it's making this all okay, "I'd get your shirt off. Sweatpants, too. And I'd kiss my way down your chest like I was trying to swallow every last one of your freckles. You'd want me to touch you, you'd ask me to stroke you off, but I wouldn't be able to. That wouldn't be enough for me. I'd peel off your boxers and swallow you right down to the fucking root, so the head of your cock was halfway down my throat."

He combs his shaking hands through his hair and says, "Fuck. Guess you weren't kidding about that zero-to-sixty bit."

"I really wasn't, no," I agree. I still don't know if this is okay. I still don't know if this is what he wants, and I'm so terrified of saying too much and scaring him away right now.

He takes a deep breath—at first I think it's because he's trying to brace himself, but then I realize it's just because he's so turned on that he's sort of forgetting to breathe normally. Eyes still closed, he asks, "Then what?"

"If you were single and I had your cock in my mouth," I say, and huh, that's definitely not what the set-up of this situation had been a few minutes ago, "I'd have my fingers inside you, too. Just one to start, all slick with lube, stretching you out a little. God, I bet you're so fucking tight, Travis. H-How long has it been, since you've had anyone in you?"

He gives a little jerk at that, like he's trying desperately to stop himself from thrusting up against the blankets for more friction against his dick. It takes a moment for him to focus enough to reply, "Ten months. January, not since the last time you f—you're the only one who's ever done anything like that to me. It's only ever been you and—" He falters, licks his too-dry lips, then goes for broke and whispers, "And me. Myself. I—sometimes, I *need* it, and I do it to myself, and I think about it being you—"

"*Fuck*," I groan, and then I have to bite down hard on my tongue to stop myself from coming, because the mental image of Travis fucking himself with his fingers, of him thinking about me when he's alone in bed... it's almost too much. I feel like I can't breathe right now, so it's a shock when I'm able to speak. "If you were single, and your cock was in my mouth, and my fingers were in your ass—" God, this list just keeps getting longer, doesn't it? But my voice breaks, and I can't manage to get anything else out.

Travis has the heels of his hands pressed against his closed eyelids, like that'll help him picture it better. His voice is little more than a wrecked pant when he says, "Please. Please, Garen, please keep talking."

And then the words are spilling out of me all at once. "I'd need to be inside you. Fuck, I'd want to drag out the foreplay, but I wouldn't be able to, I'd need to be in you *right now*. I'd want you on your back, right like you are now, so that I could see your face as my dick slid into you, inch by inch, so I could kiss you, taste you. You'd be digging your heels into the back of my thighs, trying to pull me deeper into you, and once I'd bottomed out, I'd need to stay there, to wait, to give you a minute to adjust to the feeling of being full of my cock again after all this time. And once you were ready, I'd get your legs up around my waist, o-or maybe get them up so your calves were over my shoulders, so your thighs would press back against your chest every time I thrust into you, and you'd be practically bent in half, spread open, taking it, a-and you'd feel so fucking good, and I'd kiss you, I'd be whispering in your ear, telling you how much I love you—"

He lets out a strangled cry next to me, and I'm certain that that's it; that's the thing I've said that he thinks is going too far. But then I look over at him, and his mouth has dropped open, and his back is bowed, and his eyes are squeezed shut, and his hands are clenched into fists around the sheets, and he gives a final jerk, and I realize that he's *coming*, all without either of us ever touching his cock. Even though I can see, even though I'm so positive that that's what is happening—I've tried so hard to forget what he looks like in climax, but I can't—I still have to be sure, I still have to breathe out, "Travis. Fuck, babe, did you just come?"

He's still too far gone to do anything other than give a frantic nod and choke out, "Y-Yeah. Christ, your *voice*, Garen."

And for all my years of bragging, I've never actually made someone come just from the sound of my voice before. It's too much—I let out something embarrassingly close to a whine and shove my hand into my sweatpants, wrapping it tight around my dick and stroking myself roughly. It's the only thing I can think to do that will stop me from stripping out of the rest of my clothes and rolling over on top of him, swiping some of the cum that's probably drying against his hip now and using it as lube to finger him open so that I can line up and press inside, fucking into him while he's still spent and oversensitive, reaching down to wrap my fingers around his beautiful dick so that I can feel when he starts to harden again in my hand--

"Oh my god," he mutters, and a little too late, I become aware of the fact that I've been saying all of these things aloud. I can't bring myself to care.

"I want you so badly," I say, my voice cracking around the words. "God, Trav, I wish I could be inside you right now."

His hips give another faint jerk at that, like his body's already trying to get hard again. I curl my hand over the head of my cock and oh, this won't take long at all, not with Travis sated and still half-twitching with pleasure next to me, not with him turning his head to watch as I touch myself, not—fuck, I need to see more of him. Neither knowing nor caring if this is overstepping a boundary, I throw my free hand out to the side and grab a fistful of his t-shirt, yanking it up to expose most of his torso.

He sits up suddenly, and for one horrible second, I think he's going to leave. That thought is almost enough to make me cry, but then he shucks off his t-shirt and sprawls back out next to me. He's stretched out over my bed, all smooth, freckled skin and faint ridges of muscle. Then he hooks his thumbs over the waistband of the borrowed sweatpants--*my* sweatpants, which are now sticky with *his cum*—and he hesitates, clearly trying to decide whether or not he should pull them off, too. Slowly, he shifts, exposing

just his hipbones, and that's all it takes before I'm practically going blind with pleasure and spilling over my fist with a cry that maybe sounds a little bit like his name.

It feels so good it almost hurts, and I find myself needing to curl in on myself a little, rolling onto my side to face him. Between the earlier heat of the club and the sweat that's slicking up my skin now, my hairspray has completely failed me. There's a shock of dark brown hair that has lost its battle with gravity and fallen down just enough to block most of Travis' face my view. It must be just as successful in blocking my eyes from his view, and that must be a problem for him, because he reaches over and cards his trembling fingers through my hair, combing it back out of the way. His fingertips are working against my scalp, and it feels fantastic, but it's that touch—that intimate brush of skin, only moments after we've both come—that makes me realize that this is going too far. This is what everyone else was afraid of. This is what Joss was afraid of.

This is what I want, and this is what I can't have, and this is what makes me say, "We should go to sleep."

I watch his throat work as he swallows, and then he nods and whispers, "O-Okay."

We both roll onto our sides, facing away from each other. Neither of us says anything for the rest of the night, but I don't think either of us sleeps, either.

Chapter Sixteen: Bonus Scene

Jamie Goldwyn

Alexander is still dead asleep when I wake up—this is unsurprising. I am always the first one to wake up, especially when I've stayed over on the weekend. He is *not* a morning person, and I wager I'd get pushed off the edge of the bed if I tried to wake him now, so I slip out from under the covers and head to the kitchen in nothing but my boxers to make myself something to eat.

The midget is sitting at the table. I have already prepared myself to glare at him when I realize that, for one of the first times since Bill Anderson's wedding last April, he's not wearing a sweatshirt, or red sneakers, or jeans that are so skintight they might as well be painted on. He's not even wearing the eye makeup. His two-and-a-half-feet-tall body is swathed in light gray sweatpants and a pale blue henley that makes his eyes look even brighter. I cock my head to the side; the whole appearance is slightly less childish and irritating-to-behold than usual.

Sensing my gaze on him, he finally looks up from his paperback and raises his eyebrows at me. "Can I help you?"

"Sorry, I don't believe we've met. My name's James Goldwyn, I'm here visiting my friend, Alex, who's asleep in bed right now, and his roommate. Maybe you've seen him. He's about this tall—" I lean over to hold my hand level with my knees, "—wears more eye makeup than a transsexual hooker, dresses like an Escape the Fate concert threw up on him?"

"Fuck off," Ben says, but he offers no further protest about the description, presumably because Garen was correct when he once tossed off a vague comment about Ben loving that very band. I help myself to one of the cubes of cantaloupe on the plate in front of him, and his hand twitches like he wants to shove me away, though he manages to curb the impulse. When I continue to send pointed looks towards his outfit, he sighs and says, "For fuck's sake, dude, it's Sunday morning. I just woke up like, ten minutes ago, obviously I'm not going to be dressed like I usually am. Who the hell would bother putting on eyeliner just to sit in their own kitchen?"

"Beats me. I'm still trying to figure out why you wear it in the first place," I say, sauntering out into the living room and flopping down on the couch. Because of how small the apartment is, we are still clearly in each other's line of sight. Perhaps that's what compels me to let my hand fall, not to the couch itself, but to my lap, where I'm still sporting the vestiges of morning wood. It's a good move, I decide a moment later. The friction of my palm's slow rocking against the hardness feels nice, and I can tell that Ben has noticed the motion; his eyes are locked on his book, but they're unmoving, so I know he isn't really reading. I kick my legs out, stretching a little, an action that draws his attention back to me, whether he wants it to or not.

Ben arches an eyebrow and inclines his head, eyes flickering downward to the progress of my hand. "Are you planning to spend the entire morning rubbing one out on my couch?"

"What can I say? Berating you for your many shortcomings *really* gets me going," I say, curling my lip at him and pressing the heel of my hand more firmly to my erection. In truth, I am just always half-hard in the mornings, but a reasonably large part of me is hoping to make him uncomfortable.

He remains unfazed. "Well, go wake up Alex. That's what he's there for. God knows you two have made me listen to enough of that through the walls at night."

The idea of him lying awake at night, listening to Alexander and me through the walls, of him thinking of Alexander that way at all sends a lightning strike of fury through my chest. Before I am quite aware of what I'm doing, I am arching my back and grinding lewdly against my hand, breathing out, "Christ, McCutcheon, do you even know what you're talking about? You've got about as much sex appeal as roadkill. I'm genuinely shocked you've managed to trick Garen into bed as many times as you have, but

I'm willing to forgive him and just chalk that up to one of the nastier side effects of four years of near-constant drug abuse. I bet that even when you're in bed with someone as skilled and gorgeous as he is, you've still got no idea what you're doing. I bet you just have to lie there and take it like a bitch because you don't know what else to do."

"You're not really one to talk, you know." He smacks the paperback down on the table, giving up all pretense of reading it and turning to face me more properly. I wonder if he realizes that, by turning, he has enabled me to see that he's at least half-hard in his sweatpants. "I mean, really, you want to give me shit for 'lying there and taking it like a bitch'? I can hear you when you're with Alex. I can hear you begging for it. *Oh, please fuck me,*" he groans out in a poor impression of my accent. "*Your cock's so big, so good, I need it in my ass, please, Alexander.*"

Hearing him groan out his best friend's name, even in the context of mimicking me, is too much to forgive. Wanting nothing more than to see if I can leave him a little discomposd, I slip my hand beneath the waistband of my boxers and wrap a hand around my cock, stroking myself the rest of the way to hardness. A flush rises high on Ben's pale cheekbones, but he is too stubborn to look away, too much of a constant pain in my ass to back down from any sort of challenge I might throw at him.

"I'm a very vocal lover," I say, as conversationally as I can. "Keeps things interesting, and you're a fool if you don't think your best friend/oves hearing me. My best friend, too. Hmm... you know, come to think of it, if I nailed McCall and went deep South enough to fuck my own cousin, I'd have the full set of everyone who was ever stupid enough to lay a hand on you. That's all of 'em, right? In your whole life, there have only been four boys who were desperate enough to even want to kiss you?"

I can see the muscle working in his jaw as he tries to keep from speaking, but I'm not sure what he would say, anyway. Possibly because it's true. Probably because he's *embarrassed* that it's true. The head of my cock is straining against the slit in my boxers, peeking out just a little, and I can see that Ben's eyes are zeroed in on it. I let out a low laugh and murmur, "It's taken you your entire life to get the sort of play I get in a weekend, McCutcheon. You should be embarrassed that you ever thought you had what it takes to satisfy someone like Garen, someone who's had so much better. For Christ's sake, I'm surprised you can even get *yourself* off. I bet every time you beat off, you have to devote an entire evening to it, because that's probably how long it takes you to stumble ass-backwards into somethin' that feels good. I can tell just by looking at you that you've got no idea what you're do—"

"You've given an *unhealthy* amount of thought to what I'm like in bed," he interrupts. "It's pretty amusing, because you're still so wildly off-base about it, if you really think that's what it's like. Because I promise you, I know exactly what I'm doing."

"Prove it."

It's a challenge and a threat and a promise, all rolled up in one, and if there's anyone in the world who I don't think has the balls to go for it, it's Ben McCutcheon. But then, all without the barest change of expression, he strides across the apartment, sinks onto the couch between my parted knees, hooks his fingers over the waistband of my boxers, and pulls them down and off in one solid motion. I am as stunned by the brashness of that move as I was last week, when I suddenly found myself standing in his bedroom with his palm against my crotch. I don't miss the way his eyes widen slightly at my considerable length, nor do I miss the slight twitch of his own hips towards me, like he is barely capable of restraining himself from grinding against my thigh until he reaches climax. All things considered, it's probably not too far off-base. I make a gesture towards myself and say, "I know it's impressive, but it's not made for staring. Are you planning to get your scrawny ass on me, or what?"

"No," he says simply, reaching forward so suddenly that I don't have time to react before he's slipping three of his fingers into my mouth and rubbing them roughly across the flat of my tongue. "Not this time."

I jerk my head away from his hand, already preparing to ask him what the hell that's all about, but then he's wedging his torso between my knees and reaching down to circle my hole with the tips of spit-slicked

fingers. The area is still a bit oversensitive from multiple rounds of fucking from Alexander just a few hours ago; I wager I might even still be just a little bit wet inside from the lube. If Ben is aware of this, it does nothing to dissuade him from sinking his middle finger straight into me, all the way up to the last knuckle.

My body instinctively thrusts back against his hand, but I manage to control myself enough to swallow down any noises that might give me away. The last thing I need in my life is Ben McCutcheon thinking he could do anything to leave me wanting. I level my most unimpressed look at him and say, "Is that all you've got, then? It's a good thing you like to take it, because Lord knows nobody could ever get off from you giving it to him like this."

The words are an obvious lie, if the way my hard-on is straining and curved up towards my belly is any indication, but the barb makes a delicious little smirk twist across Ben's mouth. He retracts his hand until just the barest tip of his finger is inside me, then thrusts back in, now with the addition of his ring finger. "Not surprised you can barely feel it, considering what a slut you are. Anybody who gets fucked as often as you do must have a hell of a time finding something that can stretch him to satisfaction."

"I can barely feel it because you've got the smallest hands I've ever had on me. I've seen squirrels with longer fingers. Come on, more—oh, fuck," I don't manage to stop myself from crying out a little when he crooks his fingers at just the right angle. He appears unsurprised by my reaction, and I find myself wondering wildly why the hell I've spent four years letting real tops fuck me, when logic clearly dictates that another bottom would better understand what I need from him.

His upper lip is curled back in what might be an ugly smile, but is more likely a sneer. "God, just look at you. I should've known you'd love this—"

"Love it? Don't flatter yourself. This isn't even the best I've gotten this weekend. No wonder Travis never got over Garen, if this is the sort of bullshit he had to put up with in bed with you—" His hand spasms against my thigh, as though he'd love nothing more than to draw back and hit me. I rock back onto his hand and say, "At least Garen knows how to finger a man right."

Ben lunges forward to hiss into my ear, "At least Alex likes me enough to return my fucking phone calls."

A nearly blinding swell of fury rises up in me at that, and there it is again—that same impulse I felt last week at the party, when all I wanted to do was find some way of touching him that would destroy him completely. It's the same feeling I had moments before Garen had walked into the room, but now, no one is walking into the room. No one is stopping me this time.

"Alexander likes me plenty," I bite out, though I'm unsure whether I'm reassuring myself or him, "and if you're actually dumb enough to have to wonder why, you can get your cock out and let me show you."

His free hand moves immediately to the drawstring of his sweatpants, though it takes him an eternity to actually get it untied; his motions are clumsy and unpracticed, as though a few weeks in a sling have been enough to make him forget how to move normally. I grow almost instantly impatient and smack his hand aside, making quick work of the string and shoving the material down to his knees so that I can wrap my fingers around his cock. Truthfully, I'm somewhat disappointed to discover that he's reasonably sized; I'd been hoping he might be poorly-endowed enough that I could have an excuse to laugh at him. Even more surprising than the fact that he's of average size is the fact that he's uncut—it seems like something Garen would have mentioned to me before, but oh *Lord*, it's not a bad thing at all.

I'm torn between wanting to get him off as quickly as possible, to prove his desperation and my own skill, or wanting to get myself off as quickly as possible so that I can leave him frustrated and wanting. Above me, Ben seems to be having a similar struggle; he thrusts a third finger into me and presses the tips of them right against my prostate, and I buck back against him, twisting my wrist a little on every upward stroke. He leans forward, bracing his hand next to my head on the arm of the couch. The shift in position has him settled between my legs and thrusting into my fist like he's fucking it, all while I continue to grind back against him and jerk myself off with my other hand. His cock head brushes over the curve of my ass

on every push forward; I wonder if he's doing that on purpose. I wonder why I want it so badly.

"Tell me you've got a condom somewhere out here," I order. By now, I am beyond the point of caring whether or not he thinks I'm desperate for this. I'm so close to finding out what it is the rest of them are all so obsessed with, I'm so goddamn close to understanding what makes Ben McCutcheon so irresistible, and I'll be damned if I let that slip away from me.

He gives his head a jerky shake in the negative and says, "My room, I keep them in my room, so does Al—"

"I know where he keeps his condoms," I snarl, and the next thrust of his hips bumps the head of his cock right up against where his fingers are still working me open. It's too much. "When's the last time you were tested?"

"What?" he barely manages to groan out as I swipe my thumb across the slit, smearing precum over the tip of his cock.

I scramble to grip his jaw between my fingers so that I can shove his head back far enough for our eyes to meet. If he's already so pleasure-blinded that he can't even carry on a simple conversation, I'm not going to be able to stop myself from beating him like he's the least favorite stepchild. I take my hand off of him—he practically whimpers—just long enough to spit into my palm to slick him up a bit more as I grit out, "I'm negative, for everything. Just got my most recent results back last week. *Have you been tested?*"

When he gives another twitchy shake of the head, this one is in the affirmative. "Yeah. I'm—fuck, I'm clean."

"Completely?"

"For fuck's sake, Goldwyn, I said yes."

Neither of us attempts to discuss the fact that, if one of us *did* have something, the other would probably have it anyway, given the convoluted permutations of this group we're a part of. Still, it's enough for me, and apparently enough for him, because when I shove his hand away from me and line the blunt head of his dick up with my entrance, he clamps his hands over my hips and pushes in, bottoming out in one swift thrust. It's only at that moment, when I am all too suddenly stretched around his cock, that I realize just what I'm doing and who I am doing it with. Above me, McCutcheon seems to be having a very similar crisis, if his panicked expression is anything to go by.

"Oh, fuck," he pants out, and I press my lips together to avoid echoing the sentiment. I can only assume it would sound just as needy and whiny on my lips as it does on his. But then he repeats, "Oh, fuck. What am I *doing?*"

His words are tinged with revulsion, as though the very concept of participating in this act is shredding his soul. As though I'm not the best he could ever hope to have. I say, "Not a damn thing, right now. You goin' to move sometime today?"

When he continues to gape at me in absolute stillness, I hook my legs around his and roll us sideways off the couch. We crash to the floor; his back hits the carpet hard enough to leave him stunned, breathless, but I find myself even less concerned for his well-being than usual—a feat in itself, considering my base level of consideration for him would lead me to step over his body if he were dying on the ground in front of me—because the motion has thrust his cock into me deeply, roughly. Ben's hands spasm on my hips, and I flatten my palms against the fabric of his shirt, the better to fuck myself down onto him as I moan out, "If you're not planning to actually screw me, at least make yourself useful by stroking me off."

"What am I, a sex toy?" he hisses.

I shake my head, face tilted up towards the ceiling, and roll my hips down over and over. “I like and respect all of my sex toys so much more than I like and respect you.”

“Yeah? Great. Go use one of them instead, then,” he says, but neither of us attempts to do anything to stop what is happening. I keep grinding down onto him; he keeps staring, awestruck, at my ass sinking over his cock with every buck of my hips.

Truthfully, even though he’s not giving it to me as hard as I love to have men give it, even though he’s weak and submissive and has no idea what he’s doing, even though it’s taken this idiot eighteen years to man up enough to top anyone—nothing ever feels as real as the first time that I sleep with someone new. Every touch, every movement is unexpected and raw, and I’ll die before I admit it, but the shock and *newness* in Ben’s blue eyes is getting me off so much better than last night with Alexander’s practiced, familiar hands. This is an experience I’d love with anyone else, but with Ben, it just makes me furious and uncomfortable enough to mutter, “It figures you’d find a way to be a bottom even when you’re topping somebody. You’re an embarrassment to—”

“I hate you,” he bursts out, suddenly and loudly enough that I clamp a hand over his mouth so Alexander won’t be woken up by his yelling. He knocks my hand away so hard that the bones in my wrist make a faint popping sound. Before I can even form a rebuke, he sits up and lunges forward, knocking me flat onto my back on the carpet. His dick slips out of me, and I *growl*, needing to get back that sensation of being filled, and hoping to God above that this boy is finally going to start taking me. He forces my knees apart and towards my chest—I hook my hands under my thighs to keep myself in the position I’m too surprised to argue with—and ducks down to spit onto my opening so that he can thrust back into me, savage with wanting. His hipbones dig into the back of my thighs as he fucks me violently, biting out the words, “I hate you so fucking much, you narcissistic little hypocrite. You—God, you make my life hell just because you’re pissed that Al won’t date you, you act like you’re so into him, but fucking *look at yourself*.” He knots a hand in my hair and jerks my head forward so I have to watch him drill into me. Truth be told, I only watch for a few seconds before my eyes roll back, anyway. But he keeps thrusting, keeps saying, “Look at how desperate you are, so fucking *needy* that you’ll spread your legs for anyone, even someone you hate—”

“Wonder what your roommate would say if he woke up and came out here, saw you fucking his boy? But that’s just par for the course with you, you selfish whore. It’s the same thing you did last spring, but at least Garen had to be in another state before you went after Travis. Alexander just had to be in another *room*. I bet he wouldn’t even be surprised to see you doing this.”

“Maybe,” Ben pants. “But I bet he’d be even less surprised to find out that you’re exactly as easy as everyone thinks you are. I know he fucked you last night—could hear your fucking bitch-moans through the walls—”

“—I bet it turned you on so much, bet you jerked off wishing someone would do you like—”

“—tell me, am I the second guy to nail you in the past twenty-four hours, or did you get it from somebody at the club, too? Maybe more than one person, I don’t know. If it’s this easy to get—”

“—you’re *lucky* I’m this easy to get, otherwise you’d be in your room right now, fucking your own ass with your fingers and probably crying over—”

Down the hall, I hear the unmistakable blaring of Alexander’s alarm clock. Ben lets out a somewhat panicked noise that has me rolling my eyes so hard I worry I might strain a muscle. He moves to pull out, but I lock my heels around the backs of his thighs and snap, “He always hits the snooze button, no matter what. We have at least five minutes. You fucking finish what you’ve started, you little troll.”

“Stop telling me what to do.”

“Clearly someone needs to. Now, take your shirt off,” I order. The request shocks him into stillness for half

a second, and he stares down at me with wide, blindingly blue eyes. A refusal is already forming on his lips, so I impatiently clarify, "Take your fucking shirt off, unless you want to spend your afternoon cleaning my spunk off your clothes, because in a few minutes, I'm going to be coming all over your chest."

"Fucking *fine*," he grits out, leaning back and stripping off the henley in one motion. He's paler than a corpse and skinny to the point of unhealthiness, but I am more disturbed than ever when my gaze lands on his left arm, sliced and scarred from shoulder to wrist. Right across the middle of his forearm is the cut that has kept him in the sling for the past few weeks—at least, it must be. It's the only one that looks like something out of the worst bit of a horror movie, it's the only part that really makes my stomach turn.

Even through my revulsion, I can't help but laugh. "Good Lord, you really are fuckin' crazy, aren't you?"

"Like you've got any room to talk," he says, finally taking me in hand and beginning to stroke me just the worse side of too rough. He's using his right hand; the left is flat against the carpet above my right shoulder, bracing himself at the same time that he puts those scars right within reach of my mouth. If he were someone else, if I were someone else, I might be kissing them now. As it is, it takes all of my self control not to sink my teeth into that abused skin, just to see if I can make him scream. He says, "You can pretend to be as disgusted as you want, but it hasn't turned you off, has it? You're still rock hard and taking it like a—"

If he says anything after that, his words are drowned out by the cry I'm incapable of containing. I am vaguely aware of him hissing at me to shut up, and much *less* vaguely aware of him releasing my cock to clamp a hand over my mouth instead, presumably to silence me. His hips are angled just so, and I'm seeing stars every time he presses forward. I fling an arm around his shoulders and drag him down so that my dick is pinned tight between our stomachs. I bite down hard on his hand—he almost can't silence his own moan at that—until he stops trying to shut me up, then snarl, too low for Alexander to hear down the hall, "I sincerely hope that this is a joke, and not what you're really like in bed, because this is pathetic. I'd—"

"Say my name," he whispers into my ear. I have never gone more silent more quickly in my life. That makes him laugh, and god, I can feel the vibration of the sound everywhere he's touching me. My eyes roll back a little, but it doesn't count; he can't see my face from this angle, and I've managed to calm my expression by the time he pulls back enough to look at me. His thrusts are shallower now, not because he's getting close, but because he's deliberately avoiding giving me what I need to get off. I clamp my jaw shut and dig my fingertips into the backs of his thighs, trying to yank him deeper into me, but he shakes his head and backs off again. "Come on, that's not the game we're playing. I know you know the rules—there's no way Garen hasn't done this to you before, this is one of his favorite things to do in bed."

I scrub my palms hard across my face and bite down on my tongue, so close to letting the words spill out. I know exactly what he's doing, and he's right—Garen does this all the time, refusing to give it to me until I say his name and ask for it. The problem with this situation is that it's hot when Garen does it, because I have no problem with begging him for all the things he pretends not to know I need; I'd rather die than ask McCutcheon for a damn thing.

My determination to remain silent must show on my face, because there's an annoyed set to his jaw now, and he drills in at just the right angle until my mouth pops open and I let out a gasp. He grabs my face in a movement that stings almost like a slap, though all he's really attempting to do is stop me from closing my mouth again. "Say it," he hisses, "I'll make you come, but not unless I get to hear—"

"Ben," I choke out, unable to hold out any longer, too far gone to care if I'm losing anymore, too gone to care about anything but getting him to just fuck me like he means it. "Fucking Christ, Ben, Ben, I'm saying your fucking name, *Ben*, are you happy?"

"Ecstatic," he deadpans, and rams into me, hard like I need it, relentless and brutal and so much better than I ever thought a failure of a man like him would be capable of. I know I'm letting loose with an embarrassing stream of whispered pleas for him to *give it to me, harder, oh fuck, right there, so good*,

right like that, Ben, Ben, his stupid fucking one-syllable name, over and over.

His name is the sound I'm trying to hold in when I finally go over, painting both our bare chests with ropes of cum and biting down on my hand so hard I break the skin. He ducks down and mouths over the column of my throat until he reaches my ear, into which he murmurs, "I'm sorry, you said something about me being pathetic?"

I swipe a hand—the one that isn't bleeding now—through the streaks of stickiness on my chest and force my fingers into his mouth, curving them over the back of his bottom row of teeth so he can't say another word. "You've got one minute to get yourself off, and if you can't manage to do that, it's not my problem. I can't even *pretend* to care whether you get off with me or with your own hand."

He jerks his head away from my hand, though I don't miss the fact that his tongue darts out to taste the smear of my cum across his bottom lip. "Fuck, is this what you're always like during sex? I can't believe Garen has managed to put up with this shit for years—"

There is another round of alarm clock wailing from Alexander's room, and I would be lying if I said I wasn't getting nervous—he always hits the snooze button once, but very rarely does he bother to hit it again. If the midget can't manage to finish soon, there's no chance of us both being dressed and decent again before Alexander comes out of his bedroom. Swallowing the panic I don't dare let show, I hiss, "Christ, McCutcheon, are you even close?"

"So close," he chokes out. Not so goddamn composed now that he's not taunting me into the most humiliating orgasm of my life, is he? "Fuck, your ass—"

"Yeah?" I can't resist growling back at him. "Funny, you didn't seem so fond of it earlier, when you were shooting your mouth off about me being a stretched-out slut. Should've known you were bullshitting me. You can't—"

"If you expect me to get off before Al comes out here, you'll shut up and hurt me."

I have been waiting seven months for him to ask me for that.

I grab a fistful of his hair and yank him closer. For an instant, he must think I'm going to kiss him, and he must be as disgusted by the idea of it as I know I am, because he makes an attempt to reel back. Instead, I use my grip on his hair to twist his head back—he groans too loudly at that—so that I can sink my teeth into the place where his neck meets his shoulder. He hammers into me at the best, worst angle, slamming against my prostate with every thrust; it's too much, too soon, and I'm certain that I'm close to passing out from the white-hot sparks of pleasure my body is in no way prepared to feel again yet, especially because of *him*. To spur him on and finish him off, I dig the nails of my other hand into the soft skin of his back, dragging them down the length of his spine and making him gasp out, "Oh, fuck, that's—harder, harder, harder," though I've got no idea if he is making a request or simply narrating the viciousness with which his hips are pistoning downward into me. Either way, I repeat the motion, digging deeper into his flesh and trying to see if maybe I can make him bleed a little. He buries his face against my neck and comes in hot spurts deep inside me, his entire body shuddering into me and then going completely still, save the pulsing of his cock in my ass.

Down the hall, I hear the creak of bed springs as Alexander stands. Ben and I scramble away from each other, both of us wincing as his cock leaves me too suddenly. I use my boxers to wipe as much of the stickiness from my chest as I can, because cum-stained underwear's a hell of a lot easier to overlook or explain away than smears of it across my torso. Once I've pulled them back on, I glance over to be certain that Ben has gotten his head out of his ass long enough to find his shirt and pull his pants back up. He's just finishing tying the string when the door down the hall opens, and we both jump to our feet, staggering apart; I step further into the living room, and he tries to stand near the kitchen counter, but it's been less than thirty seconds since he stopped coming, so I'm marginally willing to forgive him for the fact that he has to sink into his previously vacated chair at the kitchen table because his legs are shaking too

much for him to stand.

Alexander appears in the mouth of the hallway, yawning and pulling on a t-shirt as he walks. He nods to his roommate in greeting, then joins me in the living room and brushes a sleepy kiss to my lips with a murmur of, "Morning."

"Morning," I echo, surprised by the sound of my own voice now that it's not the sex-heavy growl of five minutes ago.

"We have to—" He breaks off to yawn again, then repeats, "We have to go, if you wanna catch the eleven o'clock train back. You should get dressed."

Nothing has ever been as difficult as maintaining a neutral expression as I stand here, staring into Alexander's still sleep-heavy eyes and trying to pretend that I'm not slick inside from his best friend's cum. I smile tightly and say, "Think I've got a few minutes to take a quick shower?"

He shakes his head and says, "Not if you don't want to miss the train."

"Don't use double-negatives in my presence," Ben croaks from the kitchen. Alexander rolls his eyes, but doesn't bother turning to look at him—a wonderful thing, really, since the midget's face is buried in his trembling hands.

If he's not going to keep it together long enough for me to get out of this apartment without my boy figuring out what has just transpired, then I have to maintain control. I flash Alexander my most charming smile and say, "Alright, but when nobody wants to sit next to me on the train because I smell like sex, I'm going to tell them to blame you."

Ben's hands slide from his face to his hair, gripping it tight as he stares down at the table, eyes wide and posture rigid. Back still turned, Alexander smirks at me and kisses the side of my neck, right over the spot where his best friend pressed his own mouth less than two minutes ago in an attempt to silence himself as he came inside me.

My stupid smile is starting to crack. I'm grateful when, a few moments later, he heads back down the hall to his own bedroom, assuming I will follow. I take five seconds to compose myself, then stride into the kitchen. Ben finally looks up, instinctively alarmed; he rises from his seat, though he's such a Pygmy it barely makes a difference in his height anyway. I curl my hands into fists, digging my fingernails into my palms, and step too close to him to whisper, "That was the worst sex I've ever had in my life."

"And you're the worst liar I've ever had the misfortune to engage in conversation with," he says through gritted teeth.

"I'm not lying. I've never been more serious about anything in my whole life, and if you ever touch me again, I'll—"

He touches me again. He grabs my elbow and shoves me around to face the cupboards, pressing me against the kitchen counter, and thrusting a hand into my boxers. "If I ever touch you again, you'll what?" he asks, though the roughness I assume he must be aiming for is ruined by the way his voice breaks on the last word. "You'll go right back to saying my name, over and over, like it's the only word you know?"

I cannot contain a broken moan at the feel of his fingers sliding over the abused, oversensitive edges of my hole, slick and sticky where his cum is still leaking out of me. The noise is enough to shock us both into stillness for just a moment, and then I shove him away from me again. We stare at each other, wild-eyed, for nearly a minute.

"So," he says finally. "This never fucking happened, right?"

I give a sharp, singular nod and stride down the hall towards Alexander, already doing everything I can to pretend away the memory of those hands on me.

Chapter Seventeen

“Almost nobody dances sober, unless they are insane.” –H.P. Lovecraft

61 days sober

I wake up with my face mashed against Travis' chest and my morning wood digging into his hip. His heartbeat is a too-quick thrum beneath my ear; either he's the world's most anxious sleeper, or he's awake already. The music is still playing on my computer. His phone vibrates on the bed next to his thigh, and he picks it up—so, awake, I guess. I don't move, but I do sneak a glance upward to watch as he opens the text from Ben. *I'm on my way to Lakewood now, have to be at work at one. Have you left Garen's house yet? If not, I'm coming over and making breakfast for you guys.*

Sounds good, I watch Travis type. Haven't left yet. G's still asleep.

His right arm is curled around my shoulders, his fingertips tracing gentle designs into my skin. I squeeze my eyes shut. This is why I wish I'd been the one to wake up first. If I had, I would've at least been smart enough to wriggle out of his grip and start my workout, or go shower off the dried cum that has glued my sweatpants to my skin. But no, not Travis. Travis, the beautiful idiot, is lying painfully still so that he won't wake me up. So that he won't disturb me.

There is no part of the past twelve hours that has left me undisturbed.

I roll over so that I'm sprawled out on top of him, with my face still buried against his bare chest and the lower half of my body nestled between his legs. He carefully retracts his arm from my shoulders and lets it fall limply to the bed beside him.

“Guess you're finally awake,” he says. Instead of responding, I shuffle up a few inches so that my cheek is pressed to his stuttering heart. His dick is half-hard against my stomach, and he must realize I can feel it, because he lets out an embarrassed little huff of a laugh and says, “Yeah, you can just... ignore that, please. Sorry.”

How the fuck could he possibly expect me to ignore that, after last night? Still without making a sound or lifting my head to meet his eyes, I pull myself up onto my elbows so that I can crawl further up the length of his body and collapse on top of him again. I drag my nose over the skin just below his ear and breathe in that infuriating, intoxicating *coconut-coffee-Travis* scent. Under that, there's still a tinge of last night all over him—beer, like maybe somebody spilled a drink on him at some point, and sweat from the dance floor, and cigarettes from being cooped up in the Benz with me while I chain-smoked the whole way back to Lakewood, and sex. He definitely smells like sex, too.

I roll my hips down against his, and he's more than half-hard now. He lets out a strangled sort of exhale and palms my waist. “Garen, we should—this isn't—”

“Can you just shut up and let me have this?” I grumble, slipping an arm tight around his neck. “God, just—a minute. Give me a minute—not even a minute. Give me thirty seconds, and then I'll get off you—” *or get you off, whichever you prefer*, “—and be... awake, like a real boy. But right now, we're going to pretend we're both still sleeping, and when you're asleep, Travis, you don't talk.”

“And when *you're* asleep, you don't grind your dick against me,” he grits out. Which is a fucking stupid thing to say, because this is only the second time I've ever shared a bed with him—for sleeping, that is—and I'm pretty sure this is exactly how it turned out last time, too.

“You're an eighteen-year-old guy, stop acting like you've never had a fucking boner before,” I snap. Any retort he'd planned dies in his throat when I catch his earlobe between my teeth and give it a tug that's maybe rougher than necessary. I'm still pressing down against him, movements lazy and slow and torturously good. We're not really lined up properly, but the friction is still nice. Not nice enough to get me

off, but just... good, because it's *Travis'* hard-on that's slotted against mine through too many layers of fabric. He's gripping the sheets in his fists, the action only serving to draw the material taut over my ass. I'm probably imagining it, but it's possible that he's spreading his legs a little wider to accommodate my body. I wonder how many of my thirty seconds are left.

And then he growls out, voice wild and too loud even over the music, "God, *fuck this.*"

He grips the hem of my shirt and rucks it up under my arms, palming the planes of my back for just a few seconds before he shoves my hips back to get his hands between our bodies. The drawstring of his borrowed sweatpants is knotted too tightly for him to even get it open, and when I reach down with one hand to try to help, he knocks me away and just *yanks* until the string snaps and he can wriggle out of the pants. He flattens his hands to my chest and shoves me upright.

"Shirt. Off," he orders.

It shouldn't be so sexy that he's being this aggressive and almost non-verbal. It shouldn't turn me on, but it does, it makes me harder, it makes me want him even more, it makes me *nervous*. I strip off my shirt and fling it somewhere behind me—maybe towards my desk? His shaking hands are curled into semi-fists as he strokes them over my torso, knuckles dragging over the ridges of my abdomen.

I hook my thumbs over the top of my sweatpants and pause. "Can I...?"

"Obviously," he says, looking so exasperated that I almost can't hold back a laugh. But now is really not the time for a comedic interlude, so I just push them down until they get tangled around my knees and I have to brace a hand to the mattress to kick them the rest of the way off. The only bit of clothing left on either of us is the pair of boxers riding low on his hips, but I barely have time to acknowledge them before he's shoving them down as far down as they can get with me still nestled between his thighs—not far at all, really, but far down enough that his cock springs free, flushed red and curved up towards his belly and so fucking gorgeous that my mouth honestly starts to water. He thrusts his hand in front of my face and commands, "Lick."

I drag my tongue from the tips of his fingers, down the length of them, over his palm, and past the end of his hand until I'm sucking on his tattoo. His hand drops out of mouth's reach, but I barely get a chance to miss it before he's reaching down and wrapping it around both of us at the same time. I can't stop myself from fucking forward into his fist, closing my eyes and gritting my teeth to stop myself from coming humiliatingly soon. I can feel everything, every vein and ridge, every bit of soft skin, slick with spit and sweat and precum, and holy fuck, I don't understand how this is actually happening.

I don't understand why some days, it's a firm hand pushing at my shoulder with a "*boundaries, Garen,*" and other days, it's "*can you shut the fuck up and kiss me?*" or "*what else would you do to me?*" or Travis in my bed, hand on my cock, looking up at me like he'd give me anything I asked for. Maybe he really would. I swallow hard and stare down at our dicks, pushing into his fist together, rhythm ridiculously perfect considering how long it's been since we've been together. "Can I fuck you? Please, Travis, can I—"

He's nodding before I can even get the repeat of the request out. "I want—that. You. Do you keep your condoms in the—"

"Nightstand, yeah," I barely manage to force out. My heart is close to beating right out of my chest, because he's actually reaching towards the drawer, he's going for the condoms, the lube, he's actually going to let me do this. He wants me, like I was so worried he'd never want me again. I can't stand even this bare minimum of distance between us anymore; I brush a hand to his face, lean in to kiss him.

I'm barely an inch away when he jerks his head to the side and breathes, "Don't."

I go instantly still. He doesn't. His fingers are fumbling to tear open the packaging of the condom he has

retrieved from the nightstand drawer, and his eyes are studiously avoiding mine.

“Wh—so, I can fuck you, but I can’t kiss you. Did someone forget to tell me that my life has suddenly become *Pretty Woman*?” I demand.

“Can you please, please not make any whore jokes right now?” Travis asks—begs, really. His voice cracks a little on the second ‘please.’

And just like that, I’m done. I go soft at an almost comical speed, because there is nothing sexy about the look on Travis’ face right now. There’s nothing sexy about seeing the boy I’m in love with looking so completely gutted when he’s lying underneath me. That just makes him more miserable; he abandons the semi-mangled condom packet on his chest and reaches for my cock, trying to get me hard again. I catch his wrists and hold him in place until he releases me and stops moving. I say, as firmly as I can, “You’re not a whore.”

“I’m cheating on my girlfriend,” he says softly.

My first instinct is to deny it, to protect him from his own words, but it’s incredibly hard to do that when my balls are touching his thigh. “Yeah,” I say, shifting off of him to sit next to him instead. “I guess so.”

He doesn’t move from where he’s sprawled out on the bed, except to raise a hand so that he can rub at his closed eyes. “I, um... I think I’ve been cheating on her for a while, even if I haven’t really touched you until now. Part of me hoped that it wouldn’t count, if I kept it from being physical, but—I mean, the way I look at you when I hope no one’s watching is so much worse than the way you touch me when you know people will comment on it.”

I open my mouth to reply—even though I’ve got no idea what I plan to say—but am cut off by my bedroom door swinging open and Ben entering. He takes about three steps in before he notices our undress. He blinks, eyebrows raised. Travis sighs and reaches down to adjust the sheet so he’s more properly covered, but I don’t bother; it’s not like either of them hasn’t seen my dick before. I ask, “So, what’s for breakfast?”

“Inadvisable anal intercourse, apparently,” he says. He looks a lot unhappier about this than he has any reason to. “Also, pancakes.”

“Did you get a bunch of stuff to put in ‘em? Like, fruit, or chocolate or whatever?” I ask.

He nods. “Everything’s upstairs. Your, um... your dad let me in on his way out, told me to come down. I probably would’ve stayed upstairs, texted you or something, if I’d known you two were busy.”

“We weren’t fucking,” I say. “I mean... sure, things seemed like they were progressing in that direction, but we stopped. Nothing happened last night either.” Ben doesn’t reply. Travis just continues to look quietly miserable. I sigh and dig my sweats out from under the blankets so I can pull them on, hauling myself off the bed, stuffing my Blackberry into the pocket, and not bothering to find a shirt before I head for the door. “Come on. I want food.”

Ben trails upstairs after me, but Travis remains behind, presumably to get dressed and have a mostly-silent freakout regarding his poor choices. Once we’re in the kitchen, I sit down at the table to watch Ben dig through the bag of groceries he brought along. He measures out some flour, an egg, some milk, a bunch of other shit.

“I didn’t sleep with him,” I finally say, just in case he didn’t hear me the first time. “Yeah, he touched me a little, and last night I... might have, you know, dirty-talked him to a completely untouched orgasm.” Ben shoots me a glance that’s all raised eyebrows and mild amusement. I shrug. “I know. My point is, there hasn’t been any actual sex between Travis and I since like, January.”

Ben shrugs right back. It's weird—I usually count on him to be my own little Jiminy Cricket, sitting on my shoulder and berating me for my moral deficiencies. Today, he just seems... tired. I'm frowning and opening my mouth to question him about it when we're finally joined by Travis, who is bundled into a t-shirt, a hoodie, and the sweatpants that now hang obscenely low on his hips considering he broke the drawstring that was keeping them at a more decent height.

The three of us are silent for at least a minute, except the sound of Ben measuring out ingredients and adding them to his bowl of mix, and the excessive amount of noise I make when I get up to retrieve the orange juice from the fridge.

"Are you going to yell at me?" Travis finally asks, gnawing on his thumbnail and staring hard at the back of Ben's head.

Ben snorts. "Sorry, am I your parent? No. I'm not going to yell at you. The look you had on your face downstairs makes me think you're probably going to beat yourself up over this enough as it is, and I'm just... not in the mood to pretend to be the moral authority right now. I've had a really fucked morning, and I'm not interested in being in my own head right now, but that doesn't mean I want to be in your head, either. I kind of just want to eat pancakes, and silently brood over how much life sucks, and use Garen's shower because I was in too much of a hurry to get out of the apartment to bother doing that at my place. It's been a shitty day, and it's still only eleven thirty."

"Makes sense. Jamie can be pretty loud in bed," I say, making a sympathetic noise at him.

Ben goes utterly still for a moment before he turns to look at me. "Excuse me?"

I shrug and gesture vaguely at him with the orange juice carton. "Jamie. My best friend? The guy who I'm sure kept you awake until probably five in the morning with his moaning on the other side of your bedroom wall? I shared a dorm room with the guy for three years, I know how loud he can be. I doubt you slept like, at all, which is probably why you're bitching out like somebody pissed in your Fruity Pebbles."

"He can be quiet, too," Ben says through gritted teeth. "No, I wasn't—it was fine. I slept fine. Do you want bacon, too?"

"Do I want bacon, what, seriously? Of course I do. What are you, new?" I say. I reach past him to snag a handful of blueberries from the bowl near his hand; my nose brushes the top of his head, and I freeze, because... he doesn't smell like *Ben*. He smells like sleep and sex and cologne, except Ben doesn't wear cologne. And even if he did, he sure as hell wouldn't wear Ralph Lauren Polo Black.

He wouldn't wear what Jamie wears.

Slowly, I slip an arm around his shoulders and kiss the top of his head, really just for an excuse to make sure I'm not hallucinating that smell. I'm not. He shrugs me off him; the movement pulls the collar of his blue henley aside just enough to expose a dark red-purple bruise that's been bitten into the side of his neck.

Oh, fuck. Oh, no, no, no. I take another step back and dig my phone out of my pocket, bringing up a new message to Jamie, who has been suspiciously silent, considering he should be bored on a train right now. Usually, he'd be bugging the shit out of me for some entertainment on the ride back to New York. I carefully type out, *ben mccutcheon is standing in my kitchen right now, making me pancakes.*

It only takes a moment for the response to come. *And the problem with that is...? You love pancakes.*

the problem is that he looks like he has looked like he's about to have a panic attack since he got here & there's a bite mark on his neck & he smells like your cologne, I reply. *what. the. fuck. is. going. on. please tell me you didn't have a threesome with him & alex last night. or this morning. or ever.*

I can practically see the eyeroll in the message that arrives a moment later. *I didn't have a threesome with him and Alex last night, or this morning, or ever.* But that... it's too carefully worded. It's too much of a mimicry of what I've just typed, and I don't understand why he's not joking around, or telling me I'm disgusting, or laughing at the very idea of it. So I send, *not dicking around, jamie. did you guys fuck? yes or no.*

He doesn't reply. And now I guess he doesn't really need to.

I crowd up close to Ben's back and reach around him to place my phone next to his bowl of pancake batter. The conversation remains open so that he can read it, and I brace my palms on the edge of the counter on either side of him. I'm waiting for a snort of amusement, or some pretend retching, or even something verbal, an outright *'I'd rather cut my dick off than ever have sex with him.'*

Instead, what I get is a hitch in his breathing, nearly a full minute of absolute silence, and then a whispered, "Please don't tell Alex."

"Holy fuck," I mutter, reeling back and scrubbing my palms over my face.

"What's going on?" Travis asks sharply from the table, and shit, I'd forgotten he was even here.

Ben doesn't say anything, though he starts to whisk the batter a bit more frantically. I force my face into the most neutral expression I can manage before I turn around. "Nothing. Ben's just—" I snatch up my phone and give it a little wiggle. "He and Jamie got into another one of their stupid arguments this morning. And I'm getting really sick of telling them that it's not fair to make everybody else pick sides." I shift my foot back until my heel is touching Ben's ankle, though Travis' attention remains on my face. I say, very firmly, "It's not fair to Alex to have his best friend and his boyfriend at each other's throats like that."

God, I bet the bite mark on his neck is just *aching* right now.

"James isn't his boyfriend," Ben says. "He's not—they're not dating."

"They kind of are," Travis says, "even if they're not official yet. It still counts."

"Not the way it counts that you're dating Josslyn. And not as much as you getting your dick out with Garen counts as you cheating on her," Ben snaps, and they both go suddenly still.

I take a long pull from the orange juice carton, then put it back in the fridge, smacking Ben hard on the back of the head as I go. "Don't be a dick. You said you weren't going to yell at him. And you said you weren't going to pretend to be the moral authority, right?"

Travis stands, shaking his head. "It's fine. I'm just... going to go shower. I'll be back up by the time the pancakes are ready, probably."

I reach for his arm as he passes me, but he shakes me off and continues on. I round on Ben. "Okay, what the *fuck*?"

"It just happened," he says, dropping the whisk back into the bowl and turning around. I'm a little mollified to see that he at least looks shaken up. "I don't—it just happened."

"Dude, I get it, believe me. I understand the temptation, because Jamie's pretty much the sexiest guy I've ever seen in my life—"

"He's not that hot," Ben says. I shoot him a disbelieving look. He crosses his arms stubbornly over his chest, refusing to concede even that point to me.

I roll my eyes and continue, "Okay, whatever. I'm trying to say that I get why you'd wanna hook up with him, but—"

"I didn't. I told you, *it just happened*," he repeats, and now it's almost a snarl. I really hope Travis is in the shower by now. "It's not like I rolled out of bed, wandered down the hall to Al's room, and was like, 'hey Goldwyn, let's fuck.' It—"

"Say 'it just happened' one more time, please," I say. "Because that will totally make more sense than the last dozen times you said it."

He drags a hand through his hair, staring wild-eyed at the floor. "I don't know how else to explain it. He—I know he's hot, I'm not blind. But he's such a dick that I've still never been able to find him attractive. And I still don't, is the thing. I just—he woke up and started insulting me. I was just trying to read a book and eat breakfast, and—"

"If you already ate breakfast, why are you making pancakes right now?" I ask, as part of my continued insistence on missing the point of everything.

"Because I didn't get to actually eat any of it, because your best friend started jerking off on my couch, so, sorry, I guess I figured fucking him would be a more interesting start to my day than eating some goddamn cantaloupe."

I pause. "Hang on, you fucked him? Or he fucked you?" Ben glares at me, and I raise my hands in surrender. "I'm just trying to make sure I understand the specifics of the situation. There's a really big height difference between you two, it's hard to picture it properly. Like, what position could you guys even—"

"I fucked him," Ben interrupts, crossing his arms over his chest, and okay, good *job*, McCutcheon. Took him long enough to join the rest of us in the 'men who top' club, but what an ace dude to have bottom for him on his first time. I'm maybe missing the point again; he maybe agrees about that, because he adds, "I'm not telling you what positions."

"Positions as in plural?" I say.

He punches me in the stomach. I'm doubled over for a minute, but when I straighten up and go right back to giving him the same curious look, he rolls his eyes towards the ceiling and says, face a little flushed, "Oh my god. Missionary on the couch. He rode me on the floor. But we were back in missionary by the end of it. Now, can you stop fucking *grinning* at me so we can go back to deciding how to deal with the fact that I'm a fucking terrible person who just screwed the guy my best friend is—I mean, I don't know. Hooking up with, I thought, but you and Travis think it's more than that."

I shrug. "You're right about them not really dating. But... look, I felt like shit after I slept with Alex in September. They weren't together then, either, but I think that's just because they're in this weird holding pattern. There's still something there, and they're both still supposed to be off-limits to the other dude's best friend."

Ben looks as miserable as I felt when I found out what I'd accidentally done to Jamie. "I really don't even know how it happened, G. You know me—I don't do things like this. I don't fuck over my friends like this. The Travis thing aside, I—"

"Half a year and two rehab stints later, I think I'm finally kind of over the Travis thing," I admit. "I—not *over* it, really, but I get it. I broke up with him. And I left. And you guys were, you know, good for each other. I know you weren't trying to be a dick to me when you started dating him. Just like how I'm sure you weren't trying to be a dick by—you say you don't know how it happened, but that doesn't—"

"I told you, he was jerking off on my couch and insulting me. It was weirdly hot, I don't know," he says,

already seeming defensive. "I was trying to ignore him, but he kept talking about how bad I must be in bed, and when I told him I'm not—and really, I'm not, based on the fact that he—"

"—got off like me in a liquor store that's owned by Columbian drug lords who happen to run their coke business out of the back at a really discounted rate?" I supply.

"Basically. But h-he said I wasn't—he said I must have no idea what I'm doing in bed, said I should *prove* it, when I said it was untrue. And—I don't know! The next thing I knew, my fingers were in his ass and he was jerking me off and asking where the condoms were. I was just trying to eat my fucking cantaloupe! And read Proust! Do you realize how boring Proust is? Nobody fucking likes him, of *course* I'd rather get laid than read him."

I sigh. "Alright. Let's take this one thing at a time, alright? First of all, I hope you washed your hands before you started making my breakfast." He rolls his eyes, nods, and turns back to the stove, flicking the burner on and finally starting to make the pancakes. Satisfied with that, I continue, "Second of all... can you just promise me this isn't some weird... like, you don't *like* him, right? This isn't a *liking* thing, right?"

Ben levels me a look that is so unamused I'm surprised he doesn't choke on it. "No, Garen. I didn't call your best friend a cock-hungry bitch, tell him I hate him, and then rawdog him on my living room floor because I've got a fucking crush on him."

And, okay. What I mean to say is something along the lines of, *that's awful, it's totally uncool that you're risking your friendship with Alex for something as meaningless as hate sex, and you should be using condoms anyway*. What comes out, however, is a sneaky smile and the words, "Dude, I bet he fucking loved that, Jamie's such a filthy little freak in bed."

"Yeah, I figured that out for myself," Ben says, setting the batter ladle down long enough to yank the hem of his shirt up to his shoulders, and Jesus fuck. There are five jagged scratches that stretch from the top of his spine to the small of his back. "Tell that dick he should cut his nails, by the way."

"Holy shit, dude. These look like they were *bleeding*," I say.

"They were," he replies, and he sounds maybe a little bit breathless over it.

I yank his shirt back down, spin him around to face me, snap my fingers in front of his eyes. "Woah, okay, stop that. No popping a boner over hatefucking my best friend, especially not when you're supposed to be cooking me food. That's—no. Save it for the next time he's in town, alright?"

"No," Ben says sharply. "I don't—no. It's never going to happen again, I swear to you. I swear to God. It was a one-time thing, and it was a mistake, and if you're right about him and Alex being more than just guys sleeping together, I would never—I won't. I'm not going to hurt my best friend just for the chance to have meaningless, degrading sex with a guy I'd rather hit with my car than have a conversation with."

His tone leaves no room for argument, so I don't try to give him one. Instead, I settle back down at the table and distract myself from my own completely messed up sex life by sending another text to Jamie. *lack of a denial is the same thing as confirmation, you know. bullied the details out of ben. so how was it?*

He was the worst lay I've ever had in my life. And that's including that girl in Atlanta who tried to deep-throat me and ended up tossing her cookies all over my lap, is the immediate reply, proving that he's been sitting there and clutching his phone the entire time.

I roll my eyes and send, *dude, you're such a liar. i've nailed the kid and i've nailed you, i know EXACTLY how horrifically compatible you must be. i bet it was the best you've had in weeks. since whenever you and i last fucked. nice scratches, btw, holy fuck.*

We're not having this conversation, he replies.

it was awesome, wasn't it? he swears it's never going to happen again, but i bet you're both totally lying, i bet you both loved it, i bet it's gonna happen all the time now. this is so fucked up, dude, what's wrong with you both? I type merrily away, beaming at Ben when he shoots me a disgruntled look, like he knows what I'm saying and who I'm saying it to.

The reply is an emphatic, capslock-y, *WE'RE NOT HAVING THIS CONVERSATION, G.*

Travis finally shuffles back into the kitchen, hair damp and expression still unhappy. I offer him a small smile and a shrug; Ben offers him the first plate of pancakes. He accepts the plate and sits down at the table, staring at them without taking a bite until the rest of the pancakes are done. Even once Ben and I are seated and eating, he just continues to blink down at his food. I nudge his elbow. "You alright, man?"

"I think maybe I need to grow up," he says, finally looking up at me. "I think—yeah. I think I need to grow the hell up."

I shrug; it's not like I'm the authority on maturity around here. And it's not like I'm going to say anything that might take him even further away from me, not when it already feels like I'm miles away from getting to have him back, even when we're sharing a bed.

It's Ben who says, with a shrug of his own and his eyes still fixed on his plate, "I think maybe we all do."

62 days sober

On Monday, November thirteenth, Travis Daniel McCall finally mans the fuck up. And I really wish I'd gotten some sort of warning.

It's halfway through rehearsal, and I'm standing in the middle of the stage, running through a scene with Christine. Midway through my line, I hear the sound of a door banging open, possibly the one that leads from the left wing to the hallway behind the auditorium. I glance over, and Joss is striding towards me, her hands clenched into fists and a fire in her eyes. "You slutty, lying, back-stabbing piece of shit."

"What'd I do now?" I ask warily, even though I'm pretty sure I already know.

"*My boyfriend*," she says. And then she kicks me dead in the balls.

I'm not proud of the noise that comes out of me then. It starts with a slurred stream of swears, drags out into... more swears, actually, but now they're in French, then possibly... German? I didn't know I even knew that much German other than "*Guten Tag*" and "*ein Bier, bitte*," but the sounds I'm making are definitely angry and guttural and awful, and there's for sure a "*Schwanzlutscher*" in there somewhere, which my unreasonably extensive knowledge of foreign dirty talk leads me to believe is possibly "cocksucker." Eventually, the sounds taper off into a high-pitched, broken whine that I'm pretty sure is going to attract every dog in a thirty-mile radius. I don't even care; I toppled over onto the stage at least a minute ago, curled halfway into the fetal position.

Somebody must be standing between Joss and I, because she's sure as hell still feeling aggressive, based on how much she's yelling. I swallow down on my urge to vomit from the agony that's radiating from my testicles to the rest of my body, but I don't dare try to get up yet. Instead, I resign myself to lying here and listening to her scream, "I knew you would try to sleep with him! And I should've known he'd finally let you, but I didn't—oh my god, Christine, get the fuck out of my way."

"I didn't sleep with him," I practically whimper, shocked that I can even formulate sound that counts as words. "What the shit, Joss, we didn't even fuck—"

"There's no amount of 'you getting naked with my boyfriend this weekend' that's acceptable to me!" she snaps. Which is a fair point, I guess.

The speaker system clicks on and Riley says from the sound booth, "Ex-boyfriend, if him saying '*I can't do this anymore, I want to break up*' was any indication of the, you know, state of the union." There's silence; I can picture him shrugging. "Dude forgot to turn his headset off before he talked to you. It was kind of hard not to eavesdrop. And for the record, I'm pretty sure all he said about this past weekend was '*yeah, something happened with me and Garen, and yeah, I feel guilty about it, but the specifics don't matter, because I'd still want to break up even if he'd never touched me.*' That's me quoting, by the way. Not saying that Garen has touched me. He hasn't."

"Riley, shut up," Joss snaps.

"Well, wait, that's not true. He punched me in the arm last week because I said—"

"Ry, *shut up*." This time it's Annabelle who speaks. He falls obediently silent, flicking off the sound system again with a click.

Joss is still glaring at me, and my position on my side feels too exposed. I curl up a little more and roll onto my knees so that there's no way she can get another kick in. I rest my forehead against the cool, dirty floor of the stage and say, "Your relationship—or former relationship, whatever—isn't my problem. Stop blaming me for everything that goes wrong in your life. He hates you 'cause you're a crazy bitch, not 'cause I'm good in bed." I raise my voice a little to add, "And any time you want to come out here and defend my honor, it'd be appreciated, McCall!"

The speakers click and Riley says, "Yeah, he's not coming. I'm pretty sure she hobbled him, too, if the sounds I heard him making over his headset are any indication."

Joss sneers at me. "Guess you're going to have to wait a while before either of you is feeling up for all the fucking I'm sure you're planning, now that he and I are broken up."

I may be in the worst pain I've felt in ages—seriously, I'd take another concussion and head contusion over this any day—but I still manage to lift my head and smirk at her. "That's fine. Patience is a virtue, and I'm sure we'll both be good to go by the time the long weekend comes around next week."

I'm not sure if her rage is fueled more by the idea of me sleeping with her ex, or the leering emphasis I put on *long*. Either way, she takes another run at me, and is only prevented from making me sterile for life by Miranda latching onto her and dragging her back. "Joss, stop it. Stop. You have every right to be furious at him—at both of them right now, but you're going to get in trouble. Or seriously hurt him."

"I'm already seriously hurt!" I croak. "Did you miss the part where she kicked me in the balls as hard as she could? Because I didn't."

"And did you miss the part where you hooked up with her man? Because nobody else did," Miranda snaps. I scowl at her, but she's at least sympathetic enough to tow Joss off the stage and out of the auditorium instead of letting her have her way with me.

Christine cocks her head to the side and says, "Do you want to end rehearsal early today? You... don't look like you're in any condition to act."

"Well, I'm sure as shit not in any condition to drive myself home, either. But no, I'm good to continue. As long as you don't expect me to stand up, that is," I say.

Apparently no one expects any such movement, because they let me run the rest of the scene from my position curled up on the ground. It's another fifteen minutes before I hear the wing door open again. I look over in alarm, already curling myself into a tighter ball to prevent another attack, but I don't need to

worry; it's Travis, walking gingerly and wincing with every step. He takes one look at me on the ground and says, "Guess that answers my question, then."

"You're such an asshole. God, you couldn't have just been like 'you're a fucking psycho, let's break up'? You had to be like 'hey, guess whose dick I touched yesterday, let's break up'?" I say.

He slumps back against the nearest wall and gives me a considering look. "Sorry. Are you going to be okay?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine. Someday. I hope." I sigh, then ask, "So, can we make out now? Or is it still too soon?"

I definitely deserve it when he walks away from me, and I probably deserve the look he gives me when he does it, too.

64 days sober

It takes less than forty-eight hours for me to realize that pretty much everyone expects me to swoop in and spirit Travis away for myself, now that he and Joss have broken up. Since the breakup and the unfortunate ball-crushing incident, the drama club lunch group has splintered. This is in large part due to the fact that, when Miranda made room for Travis to sit down on Tuesday, he looked at the space and said, "What, seriously? That's... no. Thank you, but no." He'd gone to sit down alone at an empty table, and once I'd realized that that escaping the awkwardness of the lunch table had been presented as an option, I'd scrambled to follow him as quickly as my still-aching nutsack would allow.

On Wednesday, we'd been joined by Riley and Annabelle, both of whom said nothing about their deflection, but seemed to take more issue with Joss' impending psychotic break than with Travis' cheating and then manning up enough to end their relationship.

On Thursday, though, I'm surprised to glance up from my lunch and see Nate standing next to me. "Hey, man. What's up?"

"Hi," he says dully. "Look, I just wanted to say that, you know, if you don't want to come on Friday anymore, I'll understand. If you've got other plans or something. It's okay."

My forehead creases. "What, the dance? I said I'd go with you, dude. Why would I have made other plans?"

Nate's eyes flicker pointedly towards Travis, who is somehow managing to eat his chips, review his English notes, and have a conversation with Annabelle, all at the same time. I feel a little pinch of affection for him—really, an ability to multi-task is probably the dumbest thing to find adorable—but Nate's eyes are on me now, so I squash whatever impulse I have to reach across the table. Instead, I frown and say, "I don't have—look, Nate, I still want to go to the dance with you. I think it'll be fun—" Wow, I must have really great friends, if they're all willing to ignore what an obvious lie that is, "—and I wouldn't bail on you like that just 'cause that idiot across the table finally dumped his girlfriend."

"I'm working anyway," Travis says absently. "Also, don't call me an idiot. Also, what? Why are you talking about me?"

"Go back to studying, McCall," I order, and he obeys without further protest. I turn my eyes back to Nate, who continues to look unhappy. This isn't the sort of thing I should be talking about right here, so I stand, curve a hand over his elbow, and guide him a few yards away so that I can say in an undertone, "Look, I like Travis. Everyone knows that; I haven't been subtle about it. Like, at all."

"Yes, I've noticed," Nate replies, voice clipped.

I raise a hand to silence him. "Still. That doesn't mean I'm going to hook up with him just because he and Joss broke up a couple of days ago. First of all, I'm pretty sure both of us are still feeling the pain of that nut-kicking. Second of all... it's just complicated, okay? Travis and I, we're really, really complicated guys, and we're even more complicated together. And that doesn't mean I don't want him, but right now, it does mean I'm not with him. And, for the record, even if I were with him, I'd still want to go to your dance with you. We're going to have a good time, alright?"

It takes him a few seconds to summon a small smile for me, but he eventually manages a nod. I send him back to his own table with a quick kiss to the forehead that still leaves him blushing. When I sit back down at my table, Travis glances up from his paper again. "You good?"

"The best," I say, shrugging. "You already knew that, though."

He shoots me a fondly irritated look, and my heart clenches in my chest. I steal the rest of his chips and turn to talk to Riley.

66 days sober

Whatever Mr. Holliday is expecting to see when he opens his front door the night of the ring dance, the look on his face clearly shows that it wasn't me, my lip ring, and the leather jacket I'm wearing over my suit. Even though I find myself wondering wildly if Nate's family owns any shotguns, I force myself to smile and extend my hand for a handshake. "Hello, sir. I'm Garen Anderson, I'm—"

"Nate's date," he intones, taking my hand in a grip that's almost painful. "Why do you smell like cigarettes?"

"Um," I say, hoping that will suffice as an answer. He stares back at me, stone-faced. Oh, no. This isn't going well at all. I clear my throat. "Because I smoke them? It's—I'm old enough to. It's not illegal. Just, you know, for the record."

His expression grows impossibly darker. "You look like you're about twenty-five years old."

"Can I pretend that that's a compliment?" I ask.

"No."

"Um," I say again. He continues to glower. My face is still twisted into an awkward smile. For fuck's sake, this is the worst meet-the-parents experience I've had since the day I awkwardly admitted to my own father that I was dating my stepbrother. "I'm not, if that helps. I'm not twenty-five." He keeps glaring. "I turn nineteen in a couple of months."

He crosses his arms. "Why are you still in high school, at your age?"

I wince and say, "...I have to repeat my senior year because I got expelled last spring for skipping seven straight weeks of classes?"

He closes the door in my face. And, okay, maybe I deserved that. I pull my phone out of my pocket and select Nate's name from my contacts list. He picks up on the second ring, breathless and excited. "Hi! Are you almost here?"

"Uh, more than almost. I'm on your porch?" I'm not sure why it comes out like a question. "Your dad kind of won't let me in, I guess. Because I'm older than he expected. And because I smoke. And because I got expelled from school last year."

"Why would you tell my dad all of that?" Nate yelps. I can hear slightly muffled voices, like he's covering

the mouthpiece as he speaks to someone else inside the house.

"Because he kept asking me questions! Look, it's fine, I'll hang out here, or you know, wait at the bottom of the driveway, hide in the woods, barricade myself in my own house, whatever. It's—"

The door swings open, and this time, it's a kind-faced woman with Nate's warm brown eyes. I frantically hammer on the 'end call' button and stuff my phone back into my pocket, staring at her with an expression that hopefully doesn't betray my nerves. "Hi. I mean, hello. I'm—"

"Garen, right?" she says, shaking my hand. "I'm Nate's mom. You can call me Elyse. Nate's so excited about the dance tonight."

Is this the Twilight Zone? Did I hallucinate the furious man who opened the door a minute ago? Still, I manage a smile and the words, "Y-Yeah, I am, too."

"Come on in," she says, stepping to the side and beckoning me forward.

I don't move. "Uh. Is that okay? I mean, I don't want to overstep my boundaries, and—"

"Oh my god, Garen, get in the house," I hear Nate snap from the next room over. I stumble over the threshold, unwilling to go against a single word he says as long as his dad might be within earshot. Elyse takes my jacket from me and leads me through to what must be the living room. There's a group of juniors in formalwear congregated in front of the fireplace; the only one I recognize is Miranda, who is smiling at me—apparently tonight is a night for ignoring the fact that she's on Team Joss, and I'm on Team It's Not Fair That I Got Kicked In The Balls And Didn't Even Get A Chance To Really Bang The Guy—and wearing a pretty purple dress with a full, fluffy skirt that ends just above her knees. And, of course, Nate, who is hovering at the fringe of the group and looking positively dapper in a light gray suit.

Mr. Holliday is sitting in an armchair by the window, *cleaning a goddamn rifle* and *staring* at me. I stare back at the rifle and say, "Hi, Nate. You look really nice. I know I'm looking at the long-range weapon in your dad's hands, not at you, but I did look at you when I first walked in. And you look nice."

"Are you actively trying to hurt your case here?" Nate asks.

"Mostly I'm trying not to piss myself," I admit. Mr. Holliday looks satisfied. And really, fuck this. If I was able to put up with living with Evelyn McCall even after taking her kid's virginity, I can handle this incredibly awkward experience of meeting the parents of a kid I'm taking on exactly one date. I flash my brightest smile and say, "I like your weapon, sir!"

"Garen, stop talking," Nate says, covering his burning face with his hand.

"Thank you," Mr. Holliday says, continuing to glower at me. "It's a Reming—"

"Remington 700 XCR Tactical, yeah," I say. "Shoots well enough, but I kinda wish it had a detachable box magazine for faster reload. Just for convenience's sake, you know?"

His hand stills on the rifle. "You know guns?" I nod. His eyes narrow. "I'm becoming increasingly uncomfortable with the idea of you taking my son out, you know."

"Because I know guns?" I say.

"Because you're a self-professed delinquent who looks like a chain-smoking psychopath," he corrects. And, okay, again, that's fair. He adds, "You hunt?" There's an expression on his face that clearly demonstrates his belief that I don't. Or, maybe that I hunt people? Just... hide in a clock tower and pick them off in crowds with a high-powered sniper rifle?

I'm really not sure why this is all going so badly.

"No," I say. He waits, then flicks his eyes down to the gun, as if that'll draw an explanation out of me. It does. "I went to a military academy in New York for a few years. We had to learn about weapons as part of the Military Leadership Education Program. And I was on the marksmanship team in my freshman year. We used Remingtons."

"Mm," he says. That's it. Just a hum of acknowledgment that I've spoken, but no indication of whether he approves or not.

I take a deep breath and finally allow myself to break eye contact to join the still-chattering group by the fireplace. Nate is watching me anxiously, like he expects me to bolt for the door just because his dad is an especially terrifying man. I offer him my most reassuring smile and step closer to him. If I couldn't still feel his dad's eyes boring into the side of my head, I'd probably greet him with a kiss on the cheek; it seems like the sort of thing you're supposed to do before something as gay as a school dance, and I think he'd appreciate it. Instead, I gesture with the clear plastic box holding the boutonniere I got him, then brush the fingertips of my free hand against his elbow.

"Hi," I say. "Sorry for... all of that. You really do look nice."

"Thank you," he says, flushing pink and looking down at my suit—all black, as I'd warned, but impeccably tailored and yes, my shirt is tucked in and my boots have been polished. "I-Is that Armani?" I nod. His eyes rake over me again, but slower, and with a little bit more... purpose. Hunger. Finally, he takes a deep breath, gives a short nod, and looks back at my face. "Yes. You'll, um. You'll do."

Now would be the perfect opportunity to make that comment into a dirty joke, but his father's still standing there with a gun, so instead, I pop open the box holding on the boutonniere and take it out. Both of our jackets have the required buttonhole on the lapel, which is fortunate, considering Nate balks at the idea of shoving a pin through an Armani suit. Once we've finished that process, we have the privilege of rolling our eyes at the rest of the couples, all of whom take at least five minutes to figure out how to properly pin on their own flowers. Finally, Elyse gestures us all into a line for the mind-numbing process of taking pictures with pretty much every camera in the town of Lakewood.

I stand behind Nate, as instructed, but Mr. Holliday glowers at me when I reach for his waist, like all the other pairs are doing. I hastily shove my hands deep into my pockets. Nate rolls his eyes, yanks my hands back out, and settles them against his jacket. "Don't be an idiot," he orders. "I'm not going to be the only person in the pictures whose date won't lay a hand on him."

Unable to resist the temptation of being a terrible person, I lean in to whisper against his ear, "I'll put my hands wherever you want me to, but not in front of your dad."

He stomps hard on the toe of my—recently shined, what the fuck—boot, but is still blushing when the next picture is taken. It feels like we're standing there for hours, but truthfully, it's probably only ten minutes. I kind of get the impression we'd be there for longer, but the limo arrives to take us to the school, so the horror of picture-taking is cut short.

I manage to make it out onto the front porch before Mr. Holliday barks, "Anderson. Hang back a moment, will you?"

"Dad, you're going to make us late," Nate says sharply.

I wave him towards the limo and say, with a bravery I'm really not feeling, "It's fine, Nate." Only because Mr. Holliday has finally abandoned the rifle. "I'll be there in a minute." He shoots me a plaintive glance but allows Miranda to shepherd him along. I stuff my hands back into my pockets and turn to face his father. "Yes, sir?"

"I don't know you," he says bluntly. "Nate's mentioned you a few times, so I know you're in the school play he's directing. I know you're older. And I know that this is my son's first... date, I suppose. And I'm guessing it's not yours."

"No, it's not," I agree. Shit, this is his first date? First ever? "But that doesn't—my intentions are completely honorable. Nate's my friend, and I like him a lot. I respect him. He's a great kid—"

"Exactly," Mr. Holliday says. "He's a kid. I don't feel too great about him going out with somebody your age."

I shrug. "Well, we're not *going out*. He asked me to the dance because he knows I'm gay, and he didn't know any other guy who'd go with him, and I accepted because we're friends. I—look, I realize how I... come across, you know? With the—" I gesture towards myself, to my hair, and the piercing, and everything else I know he's still displeased to see on his doorstep. "I get it. Not exactly a dream date. But I'm not as bad as I seem."

He frowns at me for a very long minute. I clench my hands into fists, so glad he can't see the movement. Finally, he crosses his arms over his chest and says, "Fine. But any hand you put on him will get cut off with a hacksaw. Understood?"

"Um," I say, for what is probably the nine millionth time. "Yes?"

"Wonderful. Get off my porch."

I book it for the limo and practically throw myself into the backseat, slamming the door shut and scrambling over legs and laps until I get to the window between us and the driver. I shove it open and say, "Fifty bucks if you can get us off this block within the next ten seconds."

"My dad is not that bad!" Nate protests over the laughter of his friends.

"He just threatened to cut off my hand with a hacksaw!" I say, not at all hysterically. We're off the block in six seconds; I tip the driver as promised. Nate rolls his eyes and pats my knee in what I'm sure he thinks is a consoling manner. I stare hard at his hand and say, "You get that away from me. Jesus fuck, you want me to lose a leg, too?"

Miranda whacks me in the chest and says, "Oh, stop being a baby."

"Hey, can anyone blame me for being apprehensive? This has been a tough week on my body. Christ, my balls *still* hurt from Monday," I say.

"Maybe you should learn to keep them to yourself," she says, smiling sweetly at me.

"I can keep them to myself just fine. It's my hands I've really got trouble with," I say, sneaking one onto Nate's thigh.

He shoots me a flustered, alarmed look and slaps my wrist away. Presumably to distract me from making any further advances—not that I would anyway—he introduces each of the other people in his group of friends. I pretend to care, but there are three couples I don't know at all, plus Miranda's date, and I just don't have the desire to learn seven names I won't need to remember after tonight. Eventually, Nate finishes, "Guys, this is Garen."

"Yeah," one of the girls says, giggling, "I'm pretty sure we all know who he is."

I flash her a smile and say, "So, my reputation precedes me. I'm not sure if that's a good thing or a bad thing."

"Neither am I," she admits. I don't stop smiling, but I don't respond, either.

The rest of the ride to school passes in a blur of chatter that I mostly block out. Once we've arrived and all climbed out of the limo, I follow the procession up to the main doors of the school. As the only pair—I refuse to think of us as a couple—that isn't two juniors, Nate and I have to hang back so that I can be checked off on some clipboard. There's a supremely awkward moment where I almost accidentally hand over my fake ID instead of the real one, but I catch myself at last minute, though I still get a raised eyebrow because it's an Ohio license—I really should get that changed over one of these days.

After I've been checked off, Nate and I make our way down to the gymnasium. There's a DJ, some streamers, a stupendously creepy strobe light that's flashing the school colors all over the darkened room. Nobody's really dancing yet, but I think that's because this portion of the evening seems to be reserved for wandering around and cooing over each other's outfits, gushing about how excited they are to get their rings, whining because so-and-so brought what's-her-name as his date instead of instead of some-other-bitch.

I hang back, introducing myself to Nate's friends when prompted, smiling, putting my hand in the small of his back any time he looks around at me for acknowledgment. He must realize I'm not up to my usual standard of sociability, because after around half an hour, once they've started to alphabetically list people to come up and get their rings, he squeezes my upper arm—alright, maybe that's just copping a quick feel—and asks, "Are you okay?"

"I'm great," I say, grinning at him.

I'm not great. I'm uncomfortable and out of place, and for the first time in ages, I feel *old*. All of the kids around me just seem like that—kids. They're bright and shiny and excited about something so stupid I can't even wrap my head around it, and I'm smiling along like I understand it, but I don't. It's only on nights like this that the things I've done and places I've been weigh heavy on my shoulders; I feel too ragged to be here. Usually, my discomfort in social situations makes me feel like I'm cut open, exposed, raw. Tonight, it's more than that. It feels like scar tissue.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, so I pull it out and check my messages. There's a text from Travis. *I wish I wasn't at work right now so that I could be texting you all night to torment you, like you did to me last year.* I smile and text back, *not unless we're going to exchange rings & handjobs again afterward.*

"They're getting near my name, so I'm going to head closer to the front," Nate whispers to me. "Do you want to come along, or wait here?"

I shake my head as my phone buzzes against the palm of my hand. "I'll wait here. It seems like there are a lot of people closer up, and I don't want to get in the way. Just come back once you're done, yeah?"

He nods and scurries off to get his prize. I check my phone for mine.

I liked it, so I put a ring on it.

God, what a fucking adorable loser. Suddenly, I pause. The mention of the ring has caused my thumb to twitch instinctively across my palm to rub against the band, which... isn't there. And which I can't remember being there for I-don't-know-how-long. Frowning, I type out, *uh, hate to break it to you, dude, but i think i lost that ring? bc it's definitely not on my hand right now. how did i miss this?*

You didn't lose it. I have it.

I blink. It's such a matter of fact response, but I don't understand why it's a fact. I very clearly remember taking back the silver ring from him last month, and I very clearly remember tucking it away in my desk drawer. Why don't I remember the exchange of the other ring, then? I send, *did i fling it at your head during a rage-fueled coke binge last spring?*

No, he replies. *The doctors had to cut it off your hand to splint your fingers when you were in the hospital. Your mom gave it to me.*

My hand spasms against my side. I stare down at it, then raise it to flatten my palm against the edge of the refreshment table. The once-broken fingers are still kind of ugly. I flex them, shake them out, then look at them again. Same. I stuff that hand into my pocket and use the other to type, *this is suddenly awkward. but for what it's worth, they did an ace job, bc my hand's fine now. totally functioning. fingers are a little crooked, though.*

"Nathan Holliday," Principal Hammond announces, and Nate moves forward to accept his class ring. Nobody has clapped for anyone else so far, but when he takes a peek out at the crowd, I shoot him my usual lopsided grin, which he returns enthusiastically. My phone buzzes again; I glance down at the newest message. *Wonder if they feel any different now.*

nope, feeling's pretty much the same, I reply.

Nate finally makes his way back to me, and I stuff my phone in my pocket. He's beaming at me, and I think I'm supposed to give a shit about this part; I gesture for him to show me the ring, and he thrusts his hand out in my direction. The ring is... there. And shiny, I guess. I'm not really sure what else I'm supposed to think about it, but I grin and say, "Awesome, dude."

"I'm so glad it fits," he says. My phone vibrates, and it takes all of my self-control not to reach for it right now. "I'd be so pissed if I spent all that money on it and it ended up not fitting, for some reason."

"Nah, it looks like it fits great," I say, unable to last any longer in my battle to avoid my phone.

I meant on me, Travis has responded. There's a brief pause, then he sends another text. *In, rather.*

"Holy shit," I say, and yeah, that was definitely out loud. Miranda shoots me a quizzical glance, and I shake my head quickly, saying, "Sorry. That was just—sorry." I type out a frantic, *oh my god stop trying to fucking sext me. i swear i will punch you in the face if i get turned on & nate thinks it's bc of him. you're going to get me in trouble.*

Good. This is exactly what you did to me last year, you deserve it.

Nate clears his throat and smiles politely. I look down at my phone, face flushed, and say, "I'm kind of being a dick right now, aren't I?"

"Not at all," he says, in a tone that heavily implies, *yeah, dude, obviously.*

I send a quick, *i'll talk to you later, he's feeling neglected, bye,* power the phone down, and slip it back into my pocket for good. That earns me a small smile, one that widens when I step closer to touch his forearm and say, "I'm sorry. I'm done being that asshole with the phone, I promise."

He wiggles his arm a little, and for a second, I think he's trying to shake me off. When I let my hand fall, however, he catches my fingers and smiles in satisfaction. All I can think of is what my fingers could be doing to Travis' body, if I were with him right now instead of Nate. I feel a slight pinch of guilt for thinking that, but I've got a lifetime of letting my selfish impulses overpower my conscience, so that's not too big of a deal; I suffer in silence. There's no nice way to shake him off, so I just stand there and let him hold my hand for the rest of the ring ceremony. Once it's over and the music has started up again, I use that hand to tug him towards the dance floor where I can hopefully shake him off in favor of convincing him to dance with his friends.

It takes a few minutes, but it eventually works. By the time the night is starting to wind down, Nate is dancing mostly with Miranda, but his eyes keep flickering over to me as he sings along to the sickly peppy

pop anthem playing over the speakers. I smile at him, and he gives a little shimmy in my general direction, mouthing along, *"And I love the way you know who you are, and to me, it's exciting when you know it's meant to be."*

I really, really hope he's not trying to seduce me with a Disney star's song. Because that's probably worse than the time I got drunk and slurred Alanis Morissette lyrics at Travis to show my displeasure with him dating someone else. Still, he's making an effort, and it's his night, so when the next cheesy slow song comes on, I loop an arm around his waist and pull him in.

"I assumed you wouldn't want to dance to songs like this," he says suspiciously.

I shrug, grab his hands, and plant them on my shoulders. "I don't. But you do, and it's your dance, so we're going to do what you want, no matter how gay I think it is."

He wavers in his opinion regarding that, but a well-timed eyeroll has him sighing and falling easily into the swaying. Christ, I hate dancing like this; it's mostly just hanging off each other and rocking back and forth. The only person I know who can actually dance properly is Jamie, because his mom forced him into cotillion classes when he was a kid. What Nate and I are doing right now is a lot more "awkward middle-school sway" than "proper Southern cotillion," but I grit my teeth and force a smile every time Nate looks at me.

We make it through half a song before the first bump comes. I'm not prepared for it, and most of my weight happens to be concentrated on one foot at the time, so I stumble a little. Nate steadies me, but I barely notice, because I'm busy shooting a warning glance over my shoulder at the asshole who's currently dancing innocently with his date, but who I know just steered his shoulder into my side. I tighten my grip on Nate's suit jacket, probably wrinkling the fabric; still, I'd rather wrinkle his jacket than get arrested for punching out a sixteen-year-old, and right now, those feel like my only two options.

Another elbow digs into my side, shoving me towards Nate. This isn't the same guy as before, but he does have the same shit-eating grin on his face, so I don't feel even a second of remorse for saying to him, "Watch where you're going, dickbrain."

"Garen, it's fine. Just ignore them," Nate says tightly. I return my eyes to him, but he's looking at the idiots who keep pushing into us, not at me. I give a jerky enough nod that his eyes flicker towards me. He offers a small smile; I don't return it.

When the third crash comes, I release Nate and turn, saying, "That's it, I'm fucking—"

"No," Nate says firmly, digging his fingers into my shoulders to keep me in place when I take a step towards the nearest douchebag, the same one who initiated that first hit. "Garen, *no*, I don't want you to do anything. If you get into another fight, we'll definitely get kicked out of the dance, and you'll probably get kicked out of the school. Again. Drop it."

I snap, "Every time one of those assholes smacks into me, they're pushing me into you. And I can handle the pushing just fine, but I've got—what, a couple inches and maybe forty pounds on you? I'm worried about them making me hurt *you*, and—"

"Don't be. I'm fine."

"Well, maybe I'm not. I don't like getting pushed around," I say through gritted teeth, "and in general, people who shove me once don't get the chance to do it a second time. And they sure as fuck don't get the chance to do it a third."

His face goes suddenly ashen, and I realize with a jolt that he understands—possibly better than I ever wanted him to—why I've got an issue with people shoving me around. Fuck, I should have never shown him those pictures of me in the hospital. He must feel me tensing up under his hands, because he shakes

his head and drags me off the dance floor, towards where Miranda and her date are chatting to some of their friends.

"Everything okay?" Miranda asks.

Nate nods. "Of course. I'm just kind of bored. Do you guys want to head out soon?"

They agree easily enough, so I get the feeling that the dance really is winding down anyway, and not that Nate's just trying to prevent me from assaulting someone. He doesn't look too pissed at me, as we make our way out of the school and back to the waiting limo, but he's not really meeting my eyes, either. He opts instead to make casual conversation with a few of the girls in the group. I sit there in awkward silence, staring out the window as we drive back in the direction of his house. Eventually, being silent becomes too uncomfortable for me, so I turn to him.

"Did you have a good night?" I ask, nudging Nate's elbow with mine.

He shrugs and admits, "Honestly? I did, but I wish we'd gotten to finish that dance."

I frown. "I wish you'd let me punch the idiots who were—"

"Hasn't anyone ever told you that violence isn't always the answer?" he snipes.

"I know it isn't always the answer, but it definitely is sometimes the answer," I protest.

He sighs, rolls his eyes, but still deflates a little. "I know it's just a dance. I'm being stupid. I just—I don't know. I wish we'd gotten to finish it."

This is the only school dance I've ever been to, and in all likelihood, it's the only one I ever will go to. I'll be damned if I let it go to shit just because some douche had a problem with his classmate bringing a dude as a date. I reach over and pluck Miranda's tiny purse out of her hands, popping it open and digging out her iPhone. She raises her eyebrows at me, but either she doesn't give a shit who touches her stuff, or she has some idea of what I'm doing. I scroll through her music selection—goddamn, she's got bad taste. How is this the same girl who auditioned for the school play with a Joan Jett song? I'd expect this from Annabelle, that shameful creature, but Miranda? Fortunately, she's got what I'm looking for. I thread my way through people's legs until I reach the window to the driver. I push it open and say, "Hi, sorry to bother you. Do you have an iPod hookup for these speakers?"

"Yes, sir," he says.

I make a face. "You don't have to call me sir. But could you do me a favor—by which I mean, I'll pay you to do this—and take the next right? There's a public park about two blocks away, I'd like to stop there."

He says nothing, but gives a short nod when I slip him a couple of bills from my wallet.

"What are you doing?" Nate asks me.

"You'll see," I say simply, plugging the iPhone into the stereo connector. The limo driver follows my instructions to the park and rolls to a stop right next to the basketball court. Perfect. I press play on the music to start up the same song we'd been dancing to in the gym, grab Nate's hand, and drag him towards the car door. "Come on, get out."

"What are you doing?" he asks, not following when I hop out.

"You said you wished we'd gotten to finish that dance, so we're gonna finish the dance. Come on, let's go," I say.

His eyes practically bug out of his head, and he remains seated, though Miranda and at least one of the other girls are both shoving hard at his back to get him out. "But i-it's cold out."

"Well, it's not getting any warmer, and I'm not getting back in the car. Here, you can—" I strip off my leather jacket and beckon him out again. That's finally enough to draw him out of the vehicle. I make a circle in the air with my finger until he turns around so that I can hold the jacket out for him. He slips his arms into it, and once it's properly in place, I grab his hand and drag him out into the center of the empty basketball court.

The driver obligingly rolls down the windows and cranks the stereo. I shoot him an appreciative smile, then turn my attention back to Nate, who's looking at me with apprehension. I laugh and wrap an arm around his shoulders, drawing him to me and starting to sway. "For fuck's sake, Holliday, dance with me."

"Is this really happening?" he says faintly.

I feel my forehead creasing. "Is... there a reason it wouldn't be?"

"Things like this don't happen to people like me," he says, words soft like he's admitting something shameful. There's a beat, and then he adds, even more quietly, "Boys like you don't happen to people like me."

I have the sneaking suspicion that I've fucked up in some way, but he sinks into the dance, slipping his arms around my waist and resting the side of his face against the shoulder of my suit. Apparently not wanting to be outdone by the one guy who's already confessed to not giving a single solitary fuck about this night, the rest of the guys are scrambling out of the limo, offering up their suit jackets, and leading their girls out onto the court. I roll my eyes; if I'd realized this would turn into a 'copy the cool older dude' moment, I might not have bothered.

Still, I'm pretty positive that this is the type of grand, sweeping gesture that kids like Nate appreciate. It's fucking freezing out, and he's warm in my arms, his breath a hot little puff of air against my neck. I rest my chin on the top of his head, which draws him a little closer to me, close enough to bring our chests flush together so that it feels less like we're dancing, more like we're hugging with a bit of awkward foot-shuffling to go with it. Nate is singing along softly to the music, but it takes me a moment to actually process the lyrics. "*Please don't be in love with someone else, please don't have somebody waiting on you. Please don't be in love with someone else, please don't have somebody waiting on you.*"

And now I feel like an asshole. Because the truth is, whether I've got somebody waiting on me or not, I am in love with someone else. I always have been, and I'm pretty sure I always will be. I swallow and tighten the grip I've got around his shoulders. He deserves to have a—super obvious, seriously, am I still supposed to be pretending I don't know about this?—crush on somebody who's at least capable of returning his affection; failing that, he deserves to have a good dance.

The song draws to a close, and he pulls back just enough to look up at me. More specifically, to look at my mouth. God fucking damn it. This is too much of a moment. This is seriously dangerous territory. To break the spell he seems to be under, I throw him my brightest smile and say, "I'm kind of freezing my balls off. Back to the limo?"

It works. He laughs, nods, races me to the car, but once we've safely settled into the backseat, he reaches over and laces his fingers with mine, staring purposefully out the window in the opposite direction. Shit, this was a very bad idea. A very bad, crush-encouraging, eventual-heart-stomping idea. The moment Miranda and her date have returned to the car, I say to her, "Sorry for stealing your phone. Want it back now?"

She nods, and I retract my hand from Nate's under the guise of sneaking back towards the front of the car to accept the phone from the driver. Once I've returned it to Miranda and sunk back into my seat, I stretch an arm out across the back of the seat, behind Nate's head. It's the sort of gesture I'm sure he'll be

satisfied with—I'm not touching him, which is good, but I'm also not ignoring him. He remains silent and complacent all the way back to his house. There's a general shuffling around as everyone gathers up coats, bags, wilted corsages; once we've all cleared out of the limo and it has driven away, the collection of couples all says their goodbyes so that the girls can retreat into the house, where they're apparently having some super-gay sleepover.

Considering my date is the one who actually lives here, I think I'm obligated to stay a few moments longer. I settle a palm between his shoulder blades and guide him up onto the porch. We hesitate in front of the door for a moment before I say, "Thanks for inviting me tonight. It wasn't nearly as unbearable as I expected a school dance would be."

He huffs out a laugh. "Such a high expression of delight, clearly." He licks his lips, then strips out of my leather jacket, passing it back to me. My instinctive reaction is to tell him to leave it on, because it's still cold, but I'm not an idiot; jacket-sharing is such a couple thing, and I've already accidentally done enough to give him the wrong idea, despite my continued and admitted insistence that I don't see him that way. I fold the jacket over my arm, and I've already started to turn away when he grabs my wrist and says quickly, "Do you want to kiss me?"

Son of a fucking bitch. I swallow. "Do *you* want me to kiss you?" I ask, because that seems like the only reasonable response.

"Kind of, maybe," he admits, which I'm assuming really means, *holy shit, yes, get over here*. This is a bad idea, for so many reasons, not least of which is the fact that his dad may very well be watching from the windows, lovingly caressing his rifle. And if he's not, the girls who've already gone inside are definitely watching.

I jam my hands in my pockets and say carefully, "I could do that, if you wanted me to. But we'd both have to be very clear on the fact that it doesn't—"

"—doesn't mean anything, I know," he hurries to assure me. "I know you like someone else. And I know that, you know, kissing isn't really important to you, I guess. But it's just—" He hesitates and shoots me a plaintive look. "I'm sixteen, and I've never kissed anyone before. And I sort of just want to know what it feels like. And I've had a really amazing night. And I think you'd be a good first."

"You could probably find a better first, if you waited," I say. "But—like I said, I'll do it, if you want me to. But after, you can't expect me to be your boyfriend, or get all weird and jealous the next time you see me hit on another dude, or even think this is going to happen again. If I kiss you, it's just... a nice way to end the night. Okay?"

He nods, eyes wide. There's really no chance of me getting out of this without crushing his feelings and making him think he's an absolute troll, so I take the one step necessary to close the gap between us and catch his face between my palms, brushing my thumbs over his cheeks until his eyes flutter shut. I fight the impulse to remind him, *this doesn't mean anything at all*, and press my lips to his instead. It's a brief kiss—maybe four seconds, tops—closed-mouthed and chaste. When I pull back, he doesn't open his eyes, so I duck back in to give him another half-second peck. That earns me a breathless laugh, and when I release him this time, he blinks up at me, flushed and smiling.

"So," I say. "There you go. First kiss: accomplished."

"Thanks," he says softly. "I had a great time tonight, Garen."

"Yeah, me too," I say, voice bright and a little too loud, like that will balance out the peacefulness in his expression. It doesn't, so I settle for trying to make this a guy moment; I knock my shoulder against his and say, "Alright, well, I'm gonna head home. See you Monday, bro."

Bro? What the hell is *that* about? The only guy I actually call "bro" is Alex, and that's only because we're

both stoners—well, he is, I was—so it kind of goes with the territory. What the actual fuck is wrong with me?

Nate shoots me a look like he's wondering the same thing, but I grin at him and book it back to my car before he can say anything about it. The second he has retreated into the house, I light up a cigarette and peel out of the driveway, anything to give myself some distance from the creeping suspicion that I've kind of fucked up by agreeing to come out tonight at all.

Chapter Eighteen

"I am grateful for what I am and have. My thanksgiving is perpetual." –Henry David Thoreau

69 days sober

There are right ways to tell people things that will hurt them, and there are wrong ways to tell them. At this point, I'm pretty sure Travis only knows how to do it the wrong way—somewhere between *"hey, Mom, I'm dating my stepbrother; also, I think I'm gay,"* and *"welcome back, Garen! By the way, I'm now fucking your best friend in Lakewood,"* the kid lost all capacity for tact. Somehow, though, it's different, when people pick the wrong way to tell him something. It's worse.

It happens suddenly, midway through Monday's rehearsal. There's a click from the speakers, and then Riley is saying, "I need Rizzo in the sound booth right now."

I frown. My mic—a flesh-tone strip of stiff wire that hooks over my ear and runs halfway along my jaw—is already in place and seems to be working fine. There's no feedback, no static, no awkward rustling sound of it moving against my skin. I raise a hand to shield my eyes from the stage lights and say, "What's up, dude? I'm in the middle of—"

"Now." The words are practically a growl, which is so unlike Riley that I'm stunned into motion. Shooting a bewildered glance at Christine, I hop off the stage and jog up the aisle to the back wall stairway that leads to the control booth. Riley is alone in the booth when I push open the door; he beckons for me to close it behind myself, and I do so without question. He checks to make sure all of the microphones are off, then says, "You need to find Travis. I think he's in the hall behind the auditorium. Go now."

"Uh, as much as I appreciate you playing messenger for whatever mid-rehearsal booty call he's trying to initiate, I've actually got shit to do, in case you haven't noticed," I say, gesturing through the window that overlooks the auditorium. "Opening night is in nine days. Whatever he wants me for can wait until after rehearsal's over. Or at least until my scene is over."

Riley makes a vaguely frustrated noise in his throat and thrusts a hand out towards the sound board. "A few weeks into rehearsal, Travis asked me if I could set up his headset to record everything that's said into it, so that he could keep track of his ideas and notes for the set pieces without having to stop every other minute to write things down. Every word that gets spoken near his microphone gets stored in my computer."

"That's—" *really fucking creepy*. "—nice for you. And for Travis. Wait, shit, does that mean you've got a recording of their breakup? And of him getting kicked in the nuts? Please tell me you do. And please tell me that if I steal his phone, you can set it as his ringtone, because that would be—"

"Garen. Stop," Riley says, and I fall immediately, cautiously silent. He reaches for his laptop and cues up a track on it. There's a moment of silence, and then--

"*I need to talk to you,*" I hear Joss' voice saying.

There's a pause, then, in a slightly louder, closer voice, Travis says, "*Um. Sure. What's up?*" She doesn't say anything in response. There's a faint rustling noise, like maybe he's still moving set pieces. Or like she's handing him something. Then the rustling stops, and there's a little hitch in his breathing, and he says, "*That's not funny, Joss.*"

"*It's not meant to be,*" she replies. "*I just thought you should know.*"

Two footsteps, and then another, slightly louder rustling, like he's moving after her. "*Stop. Wait, you can't—we talked about this.*" His voice sounds a little panicked now. Desperate. "*You asked me what I thought about you doing that, and I said no, I said I didn't want that, and you said okay. You said you'd*

keep it, that you'd let me keep it. Y-You promised, you said that even if you weren't sure you were ready, that you'd respect the fact that I can do it—I know I can do it, Joss, and you said you'd let me. You promised."

"I promised you that because we were together, and you swore to me you were willing to make an effort. You said you'd stop seeing him, and you'd stop speaking to him, and you didn't. You lied to me, and you cheated on me, so fuck you, if you think I'm going to ruin my life just so you can take a baby I gave birth to and try to—what, raise it with him? What is this, 'Heather Has Two Daddies: Teen Edition'? I know you don't support abortion, and I know you think you wanted to have that baby, but this is my body, and I don't owe you anything. So I got pregnant. Big fucking deal, okay? That doesn't mean you can tell me what I should do with my body for the next nine months. That's not fair. You're not being fair. So, whatever, I'm done."

"Please don't do this," Travis says, voice breaking a little. *"Please, Joss, I'm fucking begging you, please don't--"*

"Too late."

There's silence. I am gripping the edge of the sound board so hard I'm worried I might crunch the material between my fingers. Riley still hasn't moved, though he's still staring at me. I can just barely hear Travis swallow on the recording before he says, *"I don't, um. You got it done already? You... it's gone?"*

"Yeah," Joss says, voice soft enough to be almost apologetic. *"It's gone."*

Riley reaches out and stops the recording. He looks upset, but not entirely surprised. I wonder if it's because he knows Joss well enough to have expected her to eventually get an abortion, or if it's just because he's used to hearing things he shouldn't hear. Like their breakup. Like Travis kissing me on the cheek after his birthday lapdance and whispering, *"Happy birthday to me."*

"Can you talk to him?" I ask. "H-He's probably still wearing the headset, right?"

"Yeah, he, um—hang on." Riley punches a button on the board and says, "Hey, Travis?" There's no response. "Trav, bud, the light for your headset is still on. I know you can hear me. Garen's in the booth with me, we heard what happened. Can you tell me where you are so I can send him to you?"

"I'm, um," Travis says. He takes a deep, shuddering breath, and my heart breaks for him. That's it, that's all he gets out.

I gesture for Riley to connect me, and once he hits the button again, I lean in and say, "Hey, T? Tell me where you are, babe, I'm going to come find you." No reply again. I turn to Riley and demand, "Can't you use something up here to figure out where he is?"

He squints at me. "Like what, dude? A GPS? I run a high school drama club's tech crew, not a friggin' police station. Go look for him somewhere!"

I glare at him, then head back down the stairs to the auditorium. Christine shoots me an expectant glance and asks, "Is everything okay? Can we continue?"

"No," I say shortly, hoisting myself up onto the stage so I can cut through the wings to get to the back hall. I add over my shoulder, "Do a scene without me. I have something important I need to do right now."

The hall is empty. I poke my head into one of the classrooms, where most of the members of the crew are working on props. Right now, they seem to be hand-painting a collection of Styrofoam sundaes for the soda shop scenes. I say, as casually as I can manage, "Hey, guys. Anybody know where I can find your fearless leader?"

"He left here maybe fifteen minutes ago," says a girl who I think might be named Marcellina. "He said he was going to drive his car around the back of the school so he could unload the jukebox mech he made this past weekend. I think it's too heavy to bother carting through the front doors, so he's using the ones in the sophomore wing."

I have no idea what a jukebox mech is, or how he made it, or why we need one for the play, but I do know where the sophomore wing is. I mutter my thanks and take off down the hallway, looping through a side door to get to the right section of the building. The moment I pass through the wing doors, I freeze. Travis is sitting on the floor halfway down the hall, his back propped up against the wall between two classroom doors. There's a large cardboard box next to him, and a crumpled paper on top of it. I take a step towards him. "Travis?"

He doesn't speak. He doesn't move. I close the distance between us and drop to my knees in front of him. His legs are kicked out limply in front of him, spread just enough that I can wedge myself between them to crowd up into his line of sight. He still doesn't react. I carefully lift the headset off him and put it on myself. "Ry, you there?"

"Yeah, man," is the immediate reply. "Is he alright?"

"I think he might be in shock?" I say. "And I don't really know what to do. We're in the sophomore hall."

"I'll be there in a minute. Just let me grab Annabelle. Don't go anywhere, alright?"

Like I could if I wanted to. I push the headset off so it's dangling around my neck and settle my palms on top of Travis' shins. "Talk to me. Please, say anything. Do anything."

He slides his hands down his thighs onto his knees and tugs his legs up until they're bent at right angles. I take that as a sign and wriggle closer, until my own knees are touching the wall on either side of his hips and he's practically sitting in my lap. Neither of us moves for a moment, and then he gestures to the box—rather, he gestures to the paper on top of it. I pick it up.

It's a Planned Parenthood pamphlet about abortion.

"This is how she told you," I say flatly. "This is how she told you that she aborted the baby you wanted—she handed you a fucking Planned Parenthood brochure."

He nods. I sit back on my heels and drag a hand through my hair, trying desperately to resist the urge to hunt her down and murder her. Because it's not that I necessarily expected her to keep the baby, and it's not that I'm refusing to understand why she would want to get rid of it; it's that I cannot even fathom anyone being so goddamn tactless that she would think it was okay to tell the boy who *wanted* to keep this baby, who loved it already and was stupidly excited about it, that she'd gotten rid of it with nothing more than a shrug and a fucking pamphlet.

"Is he going to be okay?" says a voice just to my right. I glance up. Annabelle, anxiously peering down at Travis, with Riley at her side.

"M fine," Travis finally says, though he still doesn't move. His eyes are unfocused and staring straight ahead, somewhere in the vicinity of my neck.

Riley clears his throat. "G, I think maybe you need to take him home. He's not alright right now. And I don't think being in the same building as Joss and *that*—" He jerks his chin at the brochure, "—is going to help him at all."

That does nothing to quell the fury that's flaring up inside of me. Even the sound of her name makes me want to destroy something. I crumple up the paper and shove it into my pocket, mostly to get it out of sight. "Yeah, I know. Listen, if I drive him back to his place in his car, do you think one of you could pick

me up after rehearsal and bring me back here to get mine? I'm not—"

"I can't stay away from you anymore," Travis says suddenly, looking up at me with a still-dazed expression on his face. "I want you, every last part of you, I want to be with you. I'm in love with you, G. I think I forgot that somewhere along the way, and then... the thing with Ben in the hospital happened. And Halloween happened. The fight happened. Christ, my birthday happened. And it all just—it made me remember. It made me want you more." Riley and Annabelle are exchanging looks like *wow, this is the most inappropriate time to ask someone out*. But I can tell that's not what he's doing; he just needs me to listen to him right now. When I don't try to cut him off, he says, "I don't—I hoped I could ignore it, but after my birthday, I knew I was done. That's why I had to break up with her. Because I knew things would keep happening between us, but I didn't want to cheat on her again, so I had to end it. But I didn't think she would... I'd hoped that she'd still let me keep it. I didn't know she'd get rid of it just because I broke up with her."

He sounds so broken, so betrayed, that for a moment I don't know what to do. And then I find myself saying, "I have to go take care of something."

He laughs at that. Or, he makes a sound that might be meant to be a laugh, but mostly it just sounds strangled and painful. "What, now?"

"Yes, right now," I say firmly. I reach out and cup his jaw between my hands. "I'll be right back, though, okay? There's just one thing I've gotta do, and then I promise you, I'll come right back here so that I can get you and bring you home."

His eyes are wary, shuttered, like he's two seconds away from closing himself off from everyone and everything. Then, as if he's trying his hardest to give me an order, he says, "You promise you'll come back to me."

"Always have before, haven't I?" I say. He nods and makes a vague flickering gesture with his hand, like he's saying, *yeah, go on, then*. I tilt his head down so that I can press a kiss to his hair, then carefully clamber out from under his legs. I grip Riley's elbow for a brief second and mutter, "Stay with him for a minute, alright?"

Without waiting for a reply from him or Annabelle, I turn and stride back in the direction I came from. My legs are a little cramped from my time curled up on the floor, but they work well enough to carry me down the hallway, through the wings, and out onto the stage. Joss is sitting on the very edge of it, her feet dangling over and her eyes focused on her knees. A very large part of me wants to shove her off, even though it's only three or so feet to the ground. The part of me that's desperately clinging to control, however, wanders over to her and sits down next to her, close enough that our thighs are almost touching. Close enough that only she can hear me when I all but growl, "How the fuck could you do that to him?"

"I wondered how long it would take for him to tell you," she says simply. Neither of us is looking at the other. "You know, I'm not actually sure if you're aware of this, Garen, but my body is sort of none of your business. The fact that we share an ex doesn't mean you can tell me what to do."

I can't help it; I laugh. "You honestly think that this is some pro-life, abortion-is-bad bullshit? I'm a gay man. I can't ever get knocked up, and if the soul-crushing disgust I felt last week when I kissed a girl for the first time is any indication, I can't ever knock somebody up, either. There is no part of me that believes I've got any right to tell someone she has to keep a kid she doesn't want. I don't even know if it counts as a kid yet, to be honest. But I do know that my opinion on abortion is completely irrelevant."

There's that word again, hanging between us. Irrelevant. *And when you see him and realize what happened, when you kiss him and remember where his mouth has been, then I want you to look me in the eyes and tell me again how irrelevant I am*. I know she must be remembering it, too, because her lip curls. I clear my throat and keep going. "If you wanted to get an abortion, you should have been upfront

about that. You should have just done it from the start, or told him you were going to, or made it clear that's what you wanted. But stringing him along for a month, making him believe he was going to be a dad, and then getting rid of it the second he breaks up with you? That's fucked. You should have at least told him you were planning to do it, not just tossed it off after the fact, like it meant nothing. Because even if that baby wasn't important to you, or me, it was important to Travis. And you're a piece of shit for not respecting that."

I can't think of a single other thing I could need to say to her right now, not when Travis is still waiting for me in the sophomore hallway; I stand up again, brush off my jeans, and take two steps back towards the wings.

"I don't know how he can even stand to look at you right now," she calls after me.

I wave a hand over my shoulder without turning back. "Yeah, I get it. I'm terrible, I'm awful, I'm a waste of flesh and bone, the world would be a better place if I—"

"All true things," she agrees, "but I'm referring to the fact that it's your fault I did it."

My spine locks up, and my whole body goes rigid. Not rigid enough to stop me from turning in place to stare at her, though. "Excuse me?"

It takes nearly a full minute for her to stand up and approach me. I'm not sure if the hesitation is for effect, or because she's debating whether or not to go through with saying what she wants to say. Eventually, she shrugs, makes her way over, and says, just low enough that only I can hear her, "You ruin every single thing you touch, Garen. You're a total trainwreck, but everybody around here just acts like it's cute. Oh, Garen came to school drunk and humiliated Travis and Joss in front of everyone? That's so funny. Garen brought a sex worker to a sweet sixteen party? What a riot. Garen got his head bashed open on a lunch table and beat the shit out of Jack Thorne in front of half the school? Classic. Garen took his ex-boyfriend to bed, and made jokes about it, and ruined a relationship, and got somebody to cheat on his pregnant girlfriend, and thought it was all okay? That's just... fucking lovely."

"You don't get to put this on me," I say. Or, I think I'm the one who says it. I'm pretty sure that's my voice I'm hearing, but I'm surprised it can get out around the huge lump I feel forming in my throat. "It's not my fault you—"

"It is, actually. And sooner or later, Travis is going to figure that out. He's going to realize that you and your selfishness and your total inability to keep your dick in your pants are the reasons he's not going to be a dad anymore. Because at the end of the day, that's what really happened. I got sick of putting up with your shit, so I had to get rid of the only thing that could ever tie us together," she says. She takes one last step forward and adds, in little more than a breath, "You said you didn't know if it even counted as a kid yet. It didn't, not to me. But it did to Travis. And how much do you think he's still going to love you, once he realizes that you're the reason his baby is dead?"

"Stop," I order, but it doesn't come out the way I want it to. It comes out soft and weak and scared.

She smiles without humor. "You fuck up all the time, but this must be the first time you actually *killed* someone, huh?"

I stagger backward a step, nearly pitching off the edge of the stage. Considering my options are to either bolt or stay here and listen to her say that again, I scramble down off the stage and stride up the aisle, no goal in mind but getting away from her, from her words, from the awful, terrifying truth of what she's saying.

The first place I can think to go where I might be able to be alone is back up the stairs to the sound booth. Riley is probably still in the sophomore wing with Travis and Annabelle, so it'll give me somewhere to think. Somewhere to be silent, and still, and quite possibly sick. I push open the door to the booth and

pause just inside the room. It takes me several fumbling minutes to properly extract myself from the tangle of microphones—mine and the headset. Fucking hell, the headset. I blink over at Riley's computer; there's a new file on the screen, time-stamped to about three seconds ago, the moment I turned off the mic. Swallowing hard, I scroll through most of it, then hit play.

"—this must be the first time you actually killed someone, huh?"

"Fuck," I breathe, completely without intending to. I click the little diamond that marks the progress of the moment in the clip, drag it back, and release it. *"You fuck up all the time, but this must be the first time you actually killed someone, huh?"*

It's dead. The baby that Joss and Travis were going to have, the one I hated from the second I heard about it, is dead.

Click. Drag. *"You fuck up all the time, but this must be the first time you actually killed someone, huh?"*

Travis' baby is dead, and it's dead because Joss couldn't stand being pregnant with his kid after their breakup, and they broke up because he thought he couldn't stay away from me, and he thought he couldn't stay away from me because I wouldn't have let him. Because I've spent the past year following him, and pushing him, and pressuring him, and wanting him, and needing him, and now his baby is dead, and it's my fault.

Click. Drag. *"You fuck up all the time, but this must be the first time you actually killed someone, huh?"*

I don't know what makes me do it. All I know is that one minute I'm clicking and dragging and restarting and listening and hating, and then I'm clicking and dragging and the file is moving to a blank CD shoved hastily into the drive, and then I'm tucking that—the evidence of my failings, my crimes, my bloodied hands—into the backpack I don't remember getting from the auditorium. And then I'm walking outside. And I'm getting in my car. And I'm driving down the street. And I'm flicking my turn signal. And I'm putting the car in park.

And I'm taking out my fake ID.

And I'm walking into the liquor store.

And I'm buying a bottle of Jack.

And I fuck up all the time, but this must be the first time I've actually *killed* someone, huh?

70 days sober

I don't sleep. Of course I don't sleep. How the fuck could I, with that bottle sitting on my desk, and Joss' words playing over and over in my head and on the CD on my computer, and the chiming of my phone on the nightstand where Riley and Annabelle keep messaging me, demanding to know where the hell I disappeared to?

Sometime around seven in the morning, after I've managed to burn my hand on my flat iron for the third time because I'm too tired and distracted to notice when I'm clamping the ceramic plates around my fingers instead of my fauxhawk, Travis finally sends a text: *You didn't come back yesterday. Ry says he hasn't heard from you either. Hope you're alright. See you at school.* That, of all things, is what makes me stride from my bathroom to my bedroom to actually reach for the bottle of whiskey. It's still unopened, and my hand trembles around the cap when I finally break the seal. I raise the bottle to my lips, and the sickly sweet smell hits me like a punch to the heart, but for some reason—my hand just won't tip. It's right there, the fucking glass is touching my mouth, all I have to do is tip the goddamn bottle, and I'll be fine. But my muscles won't move, which is fucking stupid, because they work just fine when I move to put the bottle

back down on the desk.

I pick up my phone and scroll through my messages—first, I reread the one from Travis. Then I check out some of the ones from Riley and Annabelle.

Where did you go?

Dude, pick up your phone.

You said you were going to be right back, instead you disappeared completely. What the hell.

Where are you? Travis needs you.

I pick up the bottle again. This time, I get my mouth on the glass, I get the bottle tilted, but my lips remain stubbornly sealed. I can feel the booze lapping at them where they're pressed to the bottle opening, and all I have to do is shift them apart ever so slightly, and I'll be drinking. But it doesn't happen. My body won't let me. Squeezing my eyes shut tight, I set the bottle back down on the desk, screw the cap on, and wipe the back of my hand across my mouth. Christ, I can't even manage to make myself lick my lips.

Arriving at school isn't any easier. I've been standing at my locker for approximately six seconds when Travis comes up to me, touches my waist, and says, "Hey. Are you okay?"

Shouldn't I be asking you that? I say. Or... try to say. The words are rattling around in my head, and it's not that I don't want to say them. It's just that my throat seems to have completely closed up around them, caging them inside my chest. Nearly a year ago, I asked him to marry me, and he said yes, and then I left, and I took that future away from him. Now, he got his girlfriend pregnant, and I bitched and moaned and pushed until he finally cheated on her, and she aborted the baby. All I can think about right now is the spark in his eyes when he admitted he was sort of hoping for a daughter.

You fuck up all the time, but this must be the first time you actually killed someone, huh?

"Garen?" Travis says uncertainly. His hand isn't even on top of my jacket; it has slipped beneath the leather to brush over the too-thin fabric of my t-shirt. I can feel the heat of his palm, but it's not reassuring—it's *stifling*. It's burning me, torturing me, because I can't understand why he would ever want to put his hands on me when I'm responsible for the thing he's been dreading for weeks now. His grip on my waist tightens a little, and he says, "Did you hear what I—oh."

He stares down at his hand, the one I'm prying off my waist and tucking into the pocket of his hoodie. Or-- *Patton Military Academy, Whitman Hall*. Fuck, *my* hoodie, then. I grit my teeth, snatch my books off the top shelf of my locker, and slam the door. He can't depend on me right now, not when I'm the one who's at fault. Not when, soon enough, he's going to figure out every last reason why he should hate me, and then everything will be ruined.

He slips his hand back out of his pocket and reaches for me again, but I walk away without a word.

If not drinking the whiskey was hard, and not speaking to him at his locker was hard, then trial law is harder. I sit in my usual seat, and Travis sits in his, right next to me. Ten minutes into class, he reaches over and ticks a tiny check mark off in the top margin of my notebook. It's something he does all the time, multiple times during every class, honestly—it's a way to get my attention when Mr. Esteves isn't really paying attention, a way of summoning my eyes to his paper, which is where he's constantly scribbling notes to me in the margins. He says it's easier than actually trying to pass a note, but all of my papers are littered with tiny checks at the top, and looking at them usually makes me smile like an idiot. Today, they make me shift my paper further away.

"Dude, what the fuck is going on?" he whispers, the moment Mr. Esteves has turned to face the board.

Almost involuntarily, I glance over. In the margin at the top of his paper, he has written, *Why aren't you talking to me?* I do my best not to acknowledge that I've even seen it. Below that, he now scribbles, *Can you at least tell me what I did wrong?* before leaning over to slash another check into the corner of my paper. I don't move, and now it's, *You promised you'd come back yesterday, and you didn't. I deserve to know why,* and another check.

This time, when I don't react, he snatches my notebook right out of my hands, scrawls, *SAY ANYTHING, GAREN* across the entire span of my paper, and shoves it back at me, not bothering to make any attempt at subtlety.

"Travis, pay attention," Mr. Esteves scolds. Travis regards him with defiant, unapologetic eyes, but his hands remain in his own space for now, so our teacher continues. I make the mistake of meeting Travis' gaze, and he just looks... broken. And confused. And lonely. And I did that to him. I'm always doing that to him.

I grip my pen so hard it snaps in half, leaking black all over my hand and dotting my desk with ink. A bewildered Mr. Esteves excuses me to go clean up, and I spend the rest of the period shakily scrubbing my palms in the men's room. When I finally return to my desk, Travis' message is still staring up at me.

SAY ANYTHING, GAREN.

And I still can't.

71 days sober

I should be expecting him to show up. In a way, I think I am—maybe that's why, when he pushes open my bedroom door and walks in, I'm sprawled out on my bed like all of my bones are missing. My blankets are pulled halfway up my chest, and I'm wearing pajamas, even though it's the middle of the afternoon. There was early dismissal today for the Thanksgiving holiday tomorrow; I crawled into bed a little before one o'clock and haven't budged since.

"Hi," Travis says, shutting the door behind himself. "I rang the doorbell, but no one answered. I guess your dad's not home. And you're... you know, moping. Or whatever this is." I still don't move. I want to ask how he got in, because I'm positive I locked the door behind myself, but my throat is still too tight to speak to him. I want to get the words out, but I don't want to *choke* on them. Luckily, he knows me well enough to add, "So, I sort of broke in, I guess. That electronic keypad you've got on the back door? Really dumb idea. Almost as dumb as the fact that—I guess you have multiple codes? Because Bill's is actually just his name. B-I-L-L, two-four-five-five." Oh wow, that *is* really dumb. I'm almost embarrassed on Dad's behalf. "I used yours, though. Took me a couple tries to get it—there's a ten second lock-out every time you punch in the wrong code. But I got it eventually."

My code is ten thirty-one. Halloween. The first night we kissed. Neither one of us verbalizes this. I contemplate pointing out that he didn't need to bother trying to find mine, if he figured out Dad's already. I guess it was more a matter of principle than anything else. Maybe breaking into my house to see me just isn't as much fun if he doesn't use my house code to do it.

I can sense the exact moment when he notices the bottle of Jack on the desk, because he goes inhumanly still. His motionlessness is what finally prompts me to shift, to lift my head so that I can look at the bottle as well, which just draws his focus right back to me. He tips his head towards the bottle and says, "You haven't had any of it." I shrug. "That's, um... that's good. I'm glad."

Another shrug. He lets out an aggravated sigh and says, "Garen, I need you to tell me what the fuck happened. I need you to talk to me. Why won't you talk to me anymore?"

Because I don't deserve to, I don't say. Because I can't think of a single word that doesn't make me sick

with guilt and disgust and shame at my own selfishness.

Travis is running his thumbnail down the seam between the door and its frame. "You and I, we, um... we're part of this group, you know? You and me, and Ben, and Alex, and James. And when the shit hits the fan, everybody kind of pairs off. Alex and Ben go to each other first, and so do you and James, and it never bothered me that I didn't have a partner or whatever. We're not in third grade, I don't need to have a best friend. But I think that... you're the one I go to when I need somebody. You're the person I count on, and I need you, and you're not here."

I don't say, *Holy fuck, please don't count on me. Choose anybody else, because I keep letting you down, and I always ruin things, and your kid is dead, and it's my fault.*

"I'm sorry for whatever I did wrong," he says.

That almost makes me look up. I don't say, *How the fuck can you think you did anything wrong?*

"I keep trying to figure it out," he continues. "And it's—I'm sorry people found out about what happened on my birthday. I'm sorry if people are blaming you for the breakup, and I'm sorry Joss called you a slut. Though, I mean, she's mostly calling me a slut, because I'm the one who cheated on her. But if that's why you're mad, I'm sorry."

He waits for a response. I have none.

"I'm sorry I got you kicked in the nuts," he tries, and I huff out a laugh. I can feel his eyes on me, hear the sad smile in his voice as he says, "So, you *are* listening to me. I was beginning to think I was hallucinating this entire conversation. Or that you'd gone fucking catatonic. But I guess you're just deliberately choosing not to speak to me."

I finally look up at him. That's what breaks him; he sits down—collapses, honestly—on the edge of the bed and grips his knees so hard his knuckles turn white.

"I need you, and you're not *here*," he repeats, his words an accusation now. "I know you're not mad about us almost sleeping together—or mad about it not really happening. You were still talking to me last week. And you were talking to me after I broke up with Joss. So, I'm still trying to figure it out. Was it—" He sneaks a glance at me, but when our eyes actually meet, his snap back to the floor. He licks his lips. "Is it because y-you're just done with me? Because we're both single right now, and I told you how I feel about you, and now you could have me, but you don't want me anymore? Is that it? The chase is over, or it's not funny unless it's complicated, so there's no point in talking to me anymore?"

I squeeze my eyes shut. *You can't honestly be stupid enough to think that,* I don't say.

But he must take my silence as confirmation, because I hear him swallow, and then the bed is shifting as he stands. "Alright, then. I guess I should go."

The only thing that scares me more than the idea of him staying is the idea of him leaving. My eyes fly open, and I scramble out from under the blankets, startling him back a few steps with my sudden movement. I fling myself off the foot of the bed and onto my desk chair, clicking on the audio file I've been tormenting myself with.

"—how he can even stand to look at you right now."

"Yeah, I get it. I'm terrible--"

I skip ahead, because he already knows those things; he doesn't need to hear them all over again. What he needs to hear is--

“—ruin every single thing you touch, Garen. You’re a total trainwreck, but everybody around here just acts like it’s cute. Oh--” Skip ahead. “—ought a sex worker to a sweet sixteen party? What--” Skip ahead. “—actually. And sooner or later, Travis is going to figure that out. He’s going to realize that you and your selfishness and your total inability to keep your dick in your pants are the reasons he’s not going to be a dad any--” Skip ahead. “—how much do you think he’s still going to love you, once he realizes that you’re the reason his baby is dead?”

“Stop.”

“You fuck up all the time, but this must be the first time you actually killed someone, huh?”

The track ends, but I skip back to the last few seconds, playing the same six words over and over, until I’m sure he has to get it. *“You fuck up all the time. You fuck up all the time. You fuck up all the time. You fuck--”*

Travis snatches the mouse away from me and closes out of the audio player. I don’t think I’m supposed to notice that his hand is trembling. He doesn’t seem to know what to say to me, but the tightness in my throat has finally eased up enough that I can force out, “She killed it, and it’s my fault. The baby. She had an abortion because you dumped her, and you dumped her because I made you cheat.” My voice isn’t loud, but at least there are words coming out of my mouth in his general direction, for the first time in nearly two days. “I pushed you to hook up with me, Trav. That’s all I do—I push people until they do what I want them to do. B-But no one’s ever *died* because of it, and I don’t—she’s right. How can you stand to look at me? How—I never wanted you and her to have that kid, but in an ‘I wish she’d never gotten pregnant’ way, not an ‘I wish she’d abort the baby you begged her to keep’ way. Because you were going to be a dad, and you were going to be so fucking good at it, and I took that away from you—”

“That was never *mine*, Garen,” Travis says, spinning my chair to face him and dropping to his knees in front of me. “Did I want her to keep the baby? Yes. Completely. Am I sad that she had an abortion and didn’t even bother to tell me until it was too late for me to even try talking to her about it? Yes. I’m fucking *shattered* by it. But this—” He grabs the bottle and gives it a little shake, “—is probably the only thing that could make this situation hurt more. You don’t fuck up all the time, and you didn’t kill anyone, for shit’s sake. It’s not your fault that Joss had an abortion. It’s hers, and mine, and nobody’s, and this hurts me now, but someday I’ll get over it. You won’t get over this, though.” Another shake of the bottle.

I draw my legs up to my chest so that I can rest my forehead against my knees. “I’m just really, really sorry, okay? For everything. I don’t—”

“Stop,” he says, and I immediately fall silent. “You don’t need to apologize. You never made me do anything I didn’t want to do, so don’t blame yourself. And don’t expect me to blame you, either.”

If I can’t apologize, then I don’t know what to say. So instead of saying anything, I stand up, take the bottle into the bathroom, and upend it in the sink. The smell of it floods the enclosed space, but I’m not ashamed to say I pretty much bolt back to my bedroom. Travis is still sitting on the floor, though he has shifted so that his back is leaning against the foot of the bed. I sink onto the ground next to him, and he slips his hand into mine. Neither of us says anything, but neither of us leaves, either, and that’s a start.

72 days sober

“Garen, I swear, if you put your hand in that bowl one more time, I am going to chain you to the dining room table until it’s time to eat,” Dad says, dragging the bowl of cooked potato chunks out of my reach.

“It’s not my fault you’re taking *forever* to make dinner,” I say, scowling and inching towards the bowl again the moment his back is turned. “Can I help? I promise I won’t set anything on fire, or chop anything off anybody, or—”

"No," Mom says from the table, and whatever, her opinion is invalid. She's not even helping Dad cook; she shouldn't even *be* here, they're *divorced*, it's completely creepy that Dad even asked her to come for Thanksgiving dinner. But I can't say any of this—I'm pretty sure she's only here because they assumed that my first sober holiday should be spent with as many members of the family as possible, and considering they're both only children with dead parents, this is pretty much as big as an Anderson Family Holiday gets.

Instead, I glower at my mother and say, "Well, if I can't be trusted to help, maybe you should. Because, you know, eating dinner sometime before Hanukkah might be cool."

She snorts and says, "You get your cooking abilities from me. Any assistance that either of us tries to give will just ruin the food, and he'll have to start over."

"I gave up on the idea of your mother learning to cook sometime in the nineties," Dad says. "You can set the table, if you're that eager to help."

I wrinkle my nose, but he rolls his eyes and looks away, so I do it. I am just finishing arranging the silverware when my phone rings. I dig it out of my pocket and glance down at the caller ID. Travis. My heart most definitely does not jump, because that would be lame. Instead, I clear my throat and answer the call with, "Hey, man. What's up?"

"Hi," he says, voice hushed as if he has ducked out of the room and doesn't want his absence to be noticed. "What are you doing right now?"

I hop up onto the counter and snag another chunk of potato. Dad smacks my hand with the spoon he's using, so I snap, "I'm hanging out in the kitchen and being physically abused by my food-fascist father."

"He is not," Dad says loudly. "He's stealing pieces of potato out of the bowl before I can mash them properly. You'd think he was raised by wolves."

"Alright, first of all, that makes no sense, because wolves don't eat potatoes. Second of all, I am your only offspring, so stop being mean to me," I say. Into the phone, I add, "Yeah, so, I'm not really doing anything important. What's up?"

Travis hesitates, then says, "Oh. Okay. I mean, I asked because Bridget and I are, uh... we're headed to the Grind for a while. Just to get coffee, hang out, take a break from what's going on here. We were going to ask you if you wanted to come along, but if you're doing family stuff—"

"I thought the Grind was closed today," I say. I *know* it's closed; all of the baristas there have been warning me about it for a week now, like they're worried that I'm going to Hulk out and smash through the window to steal the espresso machine if I can't get my coffee in the middle of the day.

"I have a key."

I raise my eyebrows, even though he can't see the gesture. "You're going to break into your place of work during the middle of a holiday just to have coffee with your sister?"

Dad shoots me a quizzical look, but I wave him off.

"It's not breaking in," Travis says in a slightly pissier tone. "I told you, I have a key, and I know the alarm code, and I—Jerry said it's fine. I asked him about it the other day. He told me that it's cool, as long as I clean up and lock the doors after."

I slip out of the living room, lowering my voice a little as I say, "Dude, is it really that bad at your house right now? With your mom and everything?"

He laughs, but the noise is humorless enough to just make me uncomfortable. “Worse, actually. Mom’s sisters are here, and my uncles, all my cousins. Ever since they got here, they’ve been interrogating me and making all these snide comments. Uncle Marcus keeps telling me I’m an idiot for giving up a varsity sport to do stage crew. He says I’m never going to get into a good college if I make decisions like that, which is fucking stupid, because if I managed to get into Harvard early admission, I’m pretty sure I can get into—”

“You got into Harvard?” I interrupt. I don’t even wait for him to confirm it—I know he will—before I launch myself back into the kitchen and say, “Guys, hey. Parental units. Travis got into Harvard.”

“He did?” Mom says brightly, raising her coffee in a toast. “Tell him I said congratulations.”

“Likewise,” Dad says. “Maybe I should’ve asked for custody of him in the divorce, too.”

“Might as well have, considering his own bitch of a mom is still leading the charge against him,” I whisper. Dad’s brow creases in confusion, but Mom shoots me a wary glance. Sometimes I forget that she was in the room for the admission about his mom’s silent treatment, too. I can tell she’s about to start quizzing me about the comment, and I’m really not in the mood to let her harsh the buzz I’m feeling from the news of his acceptance. I duck back out of the room and fling myself down onto the living room sofa to bury my face in a throw pillow. It’s so stupid—I’m grinning like an idiot, even though I’ve got no reason to be this excited for him. He’s not mine to brag about, nothing but my friend. After a moment, I lift my head and say, “My parents both extend their congratulations. And I extend mine, obviously. I’m... really happy for you, dude. I’m proud of you.”

“Thanks,” he says, a smile in his voice. I close my eyes to picture it. After a moment, he adds, “I, um. Northwestern, too. And Brown.”

“Shit, dude. You’re a total genius, I’m feeling really inadequate right now. I won’t even find out if I’ve gotten in anywhere until January at the earliest.”

“You’ll get in,” he says immediately. “You’re one of the most talented people I’ve ever met, and you’re pretty much only applying to music programs, aren’t you?”

I make a noise of agreement and say, “Auditions start up in a few weeks. I’m stupidly nervous about—”

There’s a muffled sound of a struggle on his end, and then Bree is saying, “You can have your heart-to-heart at the Daily Grind. Be on your porch in ten minutes, we’re picking you up. I cannot tolerate another minute in this house, and it’s really cute that you want to flirt with my baby brother and wax poetic about his dreams and aspirations, but I am going crazy, Garen. My aunt asked Travié if he’s ‘feeling any better’ now that he’s not living with you anymore. ‘Better’ as in ‘straighter,’ like he caught gayness—bisexuality, whatever, from you, and now that Mom and Bill are broken up, Trav would go back to being straight. It’s a trainwreck over here.”

“Wait,” I say, scrambling upright. “Hang on a second, I need to—” I poke my head back into the kitchen and cover the mic on the phone. “Dad, how much extra food do we have?”

Dad quirks a brow at me. “That depends on you and your inability to behave like a human when faced with a dish of mashed potatoes.”

“Mashed potatoes are delicious, and if you don’t understand why I need to eat all of them, you’re no parent of mine. Question stands, though.” I pause, then reluctantly add, “If I uh, if there were two people whose relatives were totally kicking out right now, would it be cool if they came here instead, maybe?”

“Travis and Bree?” Dad says, frowning at me. The *are you seriously asking me if your ex-stepbrother-slash-ex-boyfriend can come to Thanksgiving dinner* is heavily implied.

I swallow hard and say, "Come on. You don't know what it's like over there. Their aunt asked Travis if he's feeling any more hetero now that I've moved out, okay? It's fucked, and seriously, even if you say they can just come over for pie later or something, I'd—"

"Give me the phone," Dad says, holding out his hand. I blink, but obey. He clears his throat and says, "Travis? Oh, Bree, hi. I just wanted to tell you that, if anything that's happening at your house right now is making you or your brother uncomfortable, I would love to have you both join us for dinner. It's just myself, Garen, and his mother here, and while I'm fairly certain that my son could polish off anything I put on the table, I—" He pauses, smiling, clearly having just been interrupted. "Excellent. We'll see you soon."

He ends the call and hands me the phone. I blink at it for a moment, but take it anyway. "Thanks."

"Of course," he says.

"Am I allowed to ask when you started speaking to Travis again?" Mom asks.

I fling myself down into the seat opposite her. "About a month ago."

"Hm," is all she says at first. We sit in silence for a moment before she takes a sip of her cider and says, "Am I allowed to ask if you still have feelings for him?"

I narrow my eyes at her. "No, you are *not* allowed to ask me that."

There's no point to my refusal to answer; I'm pretty sure she and Dad both know the answer, and if they don't know it then, they sure as hell figure it out ten minutes later, when Dad goes to let our guests in, Travis walks into the kitchen, and I blurt out, "Oh my god, you look so hot."

"Thank you," he says, even though it really sounds more like *wow, please stop talking*. I don't care—Evelyn must force her kids to dress up to impress the rest of the family, because Bree is wearing a short burgundy dress that makes her blond hair stand out brilliantly, and Travis is wearing a dark navy suit. He looks fucking *gorgeous*.

Bree ducks down to press a kiss to my cheek and plucks at the sleeve of my plain black t-shirt. "So glad to see you've dressed up as well."

"Just for you," I say, beaming at her. "You look beautiful, Bree. If I'd noticed you were this smoking a year ago, I might've tried to go two-for-two on banging stepsiblings."

"Congratulations. In the minute I've been in this house, you've managed to work my little brother's body into fifty percent of the sentences you've said," Bree says, smiling too sweetly.

I open my mouth, but Travis cuts across with, "I swear to god, if you make a single comment about '*working her little brother's body*,' I'm going to crawl inside the oven next to the turkey and burn myself alive." I raise my hands in surrender. Satisfied with my silence, he turns to Dad and says, "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Everything's nearly done. But if you'd like, you can grab yourself a pop from the fridge. Or grab a roll of duct tape from the desk in my study and tape your stepbrother's mouth shut," Dad suggests.

I have to fight the urge to gag as I say, "Can you please not call him that? It's gross."

"It's true," Mom says, grimacing. "At least, it is for the next few months."

"Well, speed things up a little. And Dad, do me a favor? Make sure your next girlfriend or fiancée, or wife, or whatever doesn't have a son who's got an ass like *that*," I add, gesturing in the general direction of where Travis is still standing at the fridge, his back—and ass—turned to us. "Seriously, look at it, it's

fucking perfect.”

“Please don’t look at it,” Travis says over his shoulder. Dad doesn’t look, because he is a forty-something, heterosexual man, and Travis is still technically his eighteen-year-old stepson. Mom, however, spares a glance, because hey, I had to get my filthy, boy-obsessed perversions from somewhere. I flash her a thumbs up, and she rolls her eyes; apparently ‘check out Travis’ time never lasts as long for anyone else as it does for me.

Once the food is finished cooking, the five of us scatter ourselves around the table; it’s a large, perfect square, so Travis and Bree end up next to each other on one side, across from me. It’s my immediate instinct to nudge each of them with my toes until they glare at me and kick back. It’s my Mom’s immediate reaction, however, to turn expectant eyes on them and say, “It doesn’t look like the situation with your mother has improved very much since the last time I saw you.”

Travis just shrugs, but Bree scowls and says, “She still isn’t talking to him, if that’s what you mean.”

“Your mother doesn’t speak to you?” Dad says, frowning.

“Hasn’t in two and a half months,” Travis says. His voice is tight, and he’s meticulously arranging asparagus on his plate in a way that suggests he wants to focus on anything in the world but this conversation. For fuck’s sake, he’s only been here for ten minutes, and he’s already wishing he were elsewhere.

Mom opens her mouth to speak, but I cut across her with, “Hey, if either of you guys is free tomorrow, you should come do the Black Friday shopping thing with me. Well, Ben and me, technically. His mom gave him her credit card and a list of toys he’s supposed to buy for his siblings, and he was wise enough to realize that he’s going to get trampled by a bunch of soccer moms if he tries to navigate the biggest toy stores without help from a real-sized person. And Alex is too busy whining about Jamie dumping him to provide any necessary assistance. He’d probably just stand in the middle of an aisle looking *wounded* while some cow with a fanny pack beat Ben down for the last Tickle-Me-Elmo.”

“Alex and James broke up?” Travis says, frowning.

“Alex and James were dating?” Bree says, also frowning.

“I don’t think they make Tickle-Me-Elmos anymore,” Dad says, looking thoughtful.

I roll my eyes towards the ceiling and rattle off, for everyone’s benefit, “They’ve been sort of seeing each other for months, and at first it was in secret—well, a secret to everyone except that freckled douche sitting across from me, because no one ever bothered to teach him that secrets don’t make friends—and Jamie’s been wanting to make things official, but Alex is being a bag of dicks and still won’t stop pining over Ben—”

“Wait, Alex and Ben are involved?” Mom asks, squinting. “I thought you and Ben were together.”

“You had a Tickle-Me-Elmo,” Dad continues, glaring at me. “Stood in line for four hours to get that thing, and you broke it in a week.”

“Mom, no, Ben and I were—look, we weren’t *together*, not really, but even if we had been, we stopped seeing each other weeks ago. The week before Halloween, I think. Anyway, Alex and Ben aren’t *involved*, Alex just has a total boner for Ben, which just makes that whole thing with Jamie and the living room floor so much worse.”

Travis raises his eyebrows and says, “Alright, I was following along fine until that. The floor. Is that an Alex-and-James thing?”

"Absolutely," I lie, spearing a bite of turkey and very pointedly not thinking, *you're really just better off not knowing about the hatefucking thing right now. We're all better off not knowing about that.*

Dad is still frowning at his water glass. "And it's not that children don't *sometimes* break their toys, but did you have to break *all* of them? It was like you couldn't hold onto something for a week before it ended up in pieces. God only knows how you managed to shred that Fisher-Price guitar the way you did. I was terrified when you asked for the Fender when you were in middle school—"

I snap my fingers in front of his face and say, "Dad? Focus."

He sighs. "Right. Please, Garen, go back to tell me about your sex life, because I really feel like that's the best holiday conversation we could have. Ever. Please, keep talking."

"Thanks, I will!" I say brightly, before turning back to the others and saying, "Whatever, *anyway*, Jamie's got this girl in New York who told him she wanted him to be all-in or completely out by Thanksgiving, and since Alex is still wavering on the whole commitment thing, James texted me last night to tell me he guesses he's going to call things off with Alex for good. So, yeah. That's my life."

"To answer the earliest question," Travis says, raising his eyebrows and poking at his mashed potatoes without taking a bite, "thanks for the invitation to your shopping festivities, but I have to work. We're doing this horrible all-nighter thing at the Grind so that people who are up for the midnight sales can have someplace to get their coffee before they go shopping. I'm working from ten at night to six in the morning."

"That sounds awful," I announce. He's still just poking at his potatoes, and I know exactly what he wants, but for whatever reason, he won't go get it, even though he knows where everything is by now. Rolling my eyes, I retrieve a bottle of barbecue sauce from the fridge and set it down in front of him before returning to my seat. He nods his thanks, unscrews the cap, and tips a generous amount onto his mashed potatoes. At Bree's questioning glance, I say, "What? Don't tell me you lived with the guy for seventeen years and never noticed he does that."

She shrugs. "Guess I haven't spent nearly as much time staring at him over the dinner table as you have."

"*No one* has spent as much time staring at him over the dinner table as I have," I agree. "Or touching him under the dinner table, either."

Travis looks mortified, Bree looks appalled, and Dad just stabs viciously at his turkey and grits out, "So, are they giving you some sort of bonus for working the odd shift?"

"They're counting it as a holiday so I get time-and-a-half," Travis answers. "I'm pretty much planning to leave the shop at six, go home, and pass out for a few hours before I go back for the three-to-eleven shift. I'd be totally useless with picking out toys for Ben's sisters anyway. I don't even know any kids other than the girls, since I'm the youngest person in the family."

"That's such a lie," Bree says. "What about Christian and Zachary?"

My brow furrows. "Who are Christian and Zachary?"

"Dad's kids," she says, shrugging. Travis freezes halfway through the act of accepting the bowl of green beans from Mom, who fumbles for the dish so it won't slip between them and hit the table. Bree stares back at her brother. "Okay, please tell me you know about Dad and Monica having the boys."

I gesture to him. "Is that the face of someone who knew that? Because it looks more like the face of someone who just awkwardly had that revealed to him during the middle of a holiday dinner in which he already feels disconnected from his family, but I could be wrong—"

"I have brothers?" Travis says, staring at his sister.

She looks wildly uncomfortable. "They're twins. They were born in the first Saturday of October. I don't—Dad called me at school to tell me. He said he was going to call you next."

"Travis works on Saturdays," I say, setting my fork down so that I can slip my hands beneath the table and clench them into fists. "Hank must have called while he was out, and I guess Evelyn just didn't think it was important to pass along the message."

That self-important, child-neglecting, petty little *bitch*. How the fuck could she keep something like that from him? Even taking her silent treatment situation into account, how could she not grant a reprieve for five fucking minutes to tell him that his dad had just fathered two more kids? Or at least tell him to call his dad *back*?

Travis is still just staring at Bree as he repeats, "I have brothers." It's not a question this time. It's a statement, or an announcement, like he's trying to get himself used to the idea. Fucking hell, this revelation couldn't be coming at a worse time—I can't imagine how he feels right now, finding out that there are more McCall babies in the world, right after Joss has gotten rid of his.

Not really caring if anyone realizes what I'm doing, I slouch a little lower in my seat so that I can kick a leg over towards him and slip my toes under the hem of his pant leg, just a reassuring touch to his ankle so that he knows I'm here for him. He flicks a smile in my direction and turns to his sister to ask, "How's that econ class of yours going?"

The rest of the early evening carries on like that. We wind our way through casual conversation for the duration of dinner, and then into dessert. It's a little before six, and I'm loading the dishwasher when Mom stands up and says, "I should really be heading back to the city soon. I can't even imagine how horrible the traffic is going to be, and I'd rather not be getting home at two in the morning."

"We should be going, too," Bree says, rising from her seat as well. "I was planning on hanging out at Josh's for a bit tonight, and I've got to drop Trav at home before I go. Want me to grab our coats?"

He must nod, because she strides out of the room to wherever the coats have been left—the study, probably. Dad goes with her to retrieve Mom's coat, but Mom herself comes over and pulls me away from the dishes and into a hug. "Happy Thanksgiving, Garen. Don't forget to call. I'd like to hear from you sometime before Hanukkah."

"Obviously. How will you know what awesome presents to buy me if I don't call you to tell you what I want first?" I say.

She rolls her eyes at me—*why does everyone in my life insist on doing that so much?*—and moves to where Travis is still standing next to the table. To both our surprise, she squeezes his shoulder, kisses him on the top of the head and says, "Happy Thanksgiving, Travis. I look forward to seeing you again soon."

"Yeah," he says, looking so stunned at a maternal display of affection that I have to turn quickly to face the dishwasher again. "I, um—you, too. Thank you."

Mom slips back out of the kitchen, and for a long moment, there is silence. I'm reaching for the last dessert plate when a pair of arms winds around my waist and draws me back against the warmth of Travis' chest. He buries his face against the nape of my neck and mumbles, "Today meant a lot to me. Thank you for asking us over."

I can't feel his heartbeat through all the layers of clothing between us, but I'm sure he must be able to hear mine. I dry my hands on a dish towel so that I won't ruin his suit when I reach to cover his forearms

with my palms. "Technically, Dad asked you."

"It was your idea," Travis says. I don't deny it; I'm too busy trying not to turn around in the circle of his arms and kiss him. Will there ever be a time when he touches me and I *don't* want to crawl inside his soul and stay there forever?

I can hear the click of Bree's high heels on the floor down the hall. Travis must be able to hear it too, because he sighs and steps back. I've never felt colder than I do in that moment, but I still manage to turn around, lean back against the counter, and smile. Bree sails back into the room and tosses Travis his coat. "Ready to go?"

"Yeah," Travis says, though his eyes are fixed on mine and he's practically vibrating from how hard he's mentally chanting, *ask me to stay, ask me to stay, ask me to stay*. "I'll, uh, we can head—"

"Or you could hang out for a little while longer," I say, rolling my eyes up towards the ceiling so that I can pretend not to see the smirk that Bree is shooting at me from across the room. "I don't have plans. And if Bree's taking the car to go see her boyfriend, I can just drop you off later."

He's nodding almost before my sentence is complete. "Yeah, that would be awesome."

"Awesome," Bree says, clearly mocking both of us. She snatches Travis' coat away from him and tosses it over the back of the nearest chair before stepping close to me and giving me a firm hug. "Great seeing you again, G."

"Mm. I'll text you," I offer, and she nods, whacking her brother's arm one last time before she strolls back out towards the front door, leaving Travis and I alone in the silent kitchen.

"Gotta tell you, dude, you're kind of ruining my Thanksgiving plans," I finally say. "I usually go for the cliché, post-meal sleeping."

He shrugs. "You could sleep, if you wanted to."

"And that would leave you doing what, exactly?" I ask, latching the dishwasher shut and punching the 'start' button.

"I could, um," he says, scratching the back of his neck and avoiding my eyes. "I could sleep, too, maybe. Since I've got to work a crazy shift in a few hours anyway."

The last time he slept in my bed with me, he ended up with his hand on my dick, which led to me getting kicked in the nuts. In retrospect, it was kind of worth it. But he doesn't have a girlfriend anymore. Now it's just me, and Travis, and my bed, and a pile of warm blankets I want to burrow into so that I can lull myself into a food coma with him beside me. The image is so clear in my mind that all I can think to say is, "That sounds perfect."

The smile he offers me in response is sweet and shy. "Okay."

I lead the way down to my bedroom without another word, but once we're inside and I've shut the door, he strips off his jacket and hangs it over the back of my desk chair. I try not to ogle the slim cut of his Oxford in favor of offering, "If you want to borrow some clothes so you don't have to worry about going home in a wrinkled suit, I can give you some stuff to wear."

His sweet smile turns a little bit wry as he admits, "I'm sort of looking forward to seeing my mom's face when I come home from your house in messed-up clothes."

I yawn. "If I weren't about to fall asleep, I'd offer to help you mess them up in an entirely different way."

"I'm sure you would. It's the thought that counts," he says, patting my wrist. I think I'm still smiling at him when I fade into sleep a few minutes later.

When I wake up next, probably around an hour later, my legs are tangled up with Travis', who seems to be just awakening as well, and there's only one thought in my mind. The moment he blinks over and catches my eye, I say somberly, "Pie."

He shifts to prop himself up on his elbows, though his head remains twisted to the side so that he can stare down at me in disbelief. "Pie. You ate two plates of real food, polished off three slices of pie, passed out for an hour or two, and now you're awake and ready for—"

"—more pie, yes," I say. "I'm really not understanding your confusion here, man. That's the whole point of a Thanksgiving power nap. Tricking your body into thinking it wants more delicious treats inside of it. Right now, all I'm trying to decide is whether I'm going to want pumpkin or pecan."

"Have a small slice of each," Travis suggests, and I think he's just being an asshole, but it's a good idea, and I think my enthusiasm shows on my face, because he's grinning at me.

Because it's a holiday, and holidays are a time for generosity, I allow, "You can have some pie, too. A small piece. Of the pecan. Because sometimes I can have that on random days throughout the year, but I only ever really get pumpkin pie on Thanksgiving, and you're great and all, but not as great as—"

"Can I kiss you?"

"—pumpkin pie," I finish slowly. His eyebrows are a little raised, but he's still smiling—the sort of smile that's still kind of forming, like the start of a laugh. I say, "That was me finishing my sentence, not me... doing some uh, some weird nickname thing, and can you *what* me?"

"Can I kiss you?" he repeats. His smile is fading a little, replacing itself with hesitation, as if he's honestly unsure of my answer. The answer I can't even manage to get out right now, because I'm not entirely sure that he really asked the question. I've got to be hallucinating this, right? He can't really be saying these words to me, not when I've been waiting so long to hear them. Whatever face I'm making must not be particularly reassuring, because he sits up quickly and says, "I-It's okay, if you say no. That's completely fine, I just thought maybe I'd ask, and—do you still, um. Do you still want more—"

"Yes," I interrupt once I've finally found my voice. His eyes shoot back to my face, hesitantly hopeful, but he still hasn't moved, so I sit up and repeat, "Yes."

Without another word, he curls a hand over the back of my neck and leans in to kiss me. From the instant our lips touch, I feel like I've lost my fucking mind. My hands are shaking a little, but I manage to grip the front of his shirt to keep him anchored to me. His own hand shifts from my neck to my hair, twining the strands between his fingers and tugging just gently enough to remind me that this is really happening. My entire body feels like it has been taken over by a bone-deep, earth-shattering happiness. This is what I've been craving for months now, and it's too much and not enough all at once. I break away and let my forehead drop to his shoulder.

"Is this okay?" he whispers, fingertips still working against my scalp. My heart is pounding too hard for me to speak; my breath is coming in shaky little huffs, and holy shit, this is so embarrassing. I can't believe I'm freaking out right now, like a middle-school girl who's just gotten her first kiss. Travis shifts both his hands to my jaw so that he can guide my head back until our eyes meet again. His voice is more urgent now as he says, "Garen, is this o—"

I nod sharply, hauling him in by his shirt, and our mouths crash together with enough force to almost cause us to overbalance. He just goes with it, pushes me onto my back and sinks down to cover my body with his. His hands won't stop roving over me, palms skimming up my sides, across my chest, from my shoulders down my biceps and forearms to tangle his fingers with mine. Even that contact must still not

be enough to satisfy him, because he pulls back enough to speak, but I chase his mouth with mine. He tries again, but it just keeps happening, back further and further, until we're both upright again. He's settled in my lap, his legs on either side of my hips, and I've got an arm wound around his waist, but he catches my face between his palms to push me back enough that he can finally say, in a voice so urgent it nearly breaks me, "I've missed you *so much*, G."

"I know," I say, still digging my fingers into any part of him I can reach. I just need to be sure that he's here, that he's real, that I'm not letting myself be taken over by another one of my impossible fantasies. But then he's kissing me again, it's the realest thing I've ever felt. After a moment, it's my turn to separate our mouths just enough to say, "I-I'm not going to say it right now, I don't think it's—but you know, don't you? You know how I feel about you, even without me saying it?"

He nods. "I know. God, of course I know. Me too, okay? I feel that way, too. I—"

I swallow up the rest of his words. For the first time in forever, we're kissing like we did when we were together. Neither of us is holding back, or resisting, or focusing on anything but the brush of lips and slide of tongues. I think I must be wrinkling the material of his shirt from how I keep gripping it, though Travis' solution his end of that problem seems to be to tug the hem of my shirt up and duck down to mouth across my skin. The second his tongue comes in contact with one of my nipples, I practically pass out, because it's just like it was with the body shots, but with so much more intent, like this is going somewhere right now.

Because it is. It's going somewhere. Fuck.

"Wait, stop, stop, stop," I say, catching his shoulders and pulling him back up. "This is a bad idea."

He snorts. "I'm sorry, but have you *seen* what you look like without a shirt on? This is literally the best idea I've ever had."

"No, I mean, obviously, but..." I hesitate long enough to push his hair back and press a kiss to his forehead. "I want you, but I want... slower. Please, dude, I can't—" I have to break off to swallow, even though my mouth has never been this dry before. "I can't fuck this up by rushing into something you might not want tomorrow."

His face softens a little. He pulls my shirt back into place and says, "I'll want it tomorrow. You know I will. But if you say you want to go slower, we will. Okay?"

I nod, smooth the fabric of my shirt down a little, and kiss him again. He hesitates now, though, like he thinks I'm likely to shove him off and declare the whole thing a mistake. It's the stupidest thing ever, but cute-stupid, not awful-stupid. I pull him closer and say, "Dude, that was a *yellow* light, not a red one. Fucking kiss me already."

We're both still grinning into the next kiss, and we end up tangled up together in bed for hours. Sometimes the meeting of our mouths is fun and playful, and sometimes it's heated enough to leave us both turned on and panting a little, and sometimes it's deep and slow and it matters so much that I think my heart's about to beat right out of my chest. Eventually, though, he breaks away and says, "We need to leave. I have to get home, I've gotta get ready for work."

"No, that's dumb," I protest, kissing along his jawline. "*You're dumb.*" He mutters something that might be *you're such a fucking sweet-talker, dude, what the hell*, but I'm too busy popping the top button on his shirt so that I can pull his collar aside and suck a mark into the side of his neck.

His hips stutter up against mine, and he pushes at my shoulders. "O-Okay, if you plan for us to not rush things, you're going to need to not do that right now. And you're going to need to bring me home."

"Fine," I grumble, reluctantly clambering off the bed after him. It takes more effort than it should to let him

out of the basement, but I can't keep my hands off him. It's been months since I had free license to touch him, and he already looks so debauched, just from kissing. He just keeps grinning at me, like he thinks my wandering hands are cute; really, he keeps smiling at me all the way upstairs, out into the car, for the whole ride back to his place.

Once I've turned into his driveway, I expect some sort of awkwardness to set in. Truthfully, I'm expecting him to say something about how it was nice, but it can't happen again. Instead, he says, "I'll probably see you sometime tomorrow, won't I? The odds of you making it through toy-shopping for hours without stopping by for coffee at least once are slim."

"Yeah, definitely. I'll totally stop by. I mean, if that's okay. Like, if you want me to. Because if you—"

"I want you." He catches the lapel of my jacket and drags me in, pressing his lips to mine with enough pressure to make his point clear, but still somehow just enough to tease. I don't move back to my side of the car when he releases me—I'm too dazed to handle it, really—so he pushes against my upper arm until I slump back into my seat. I'm not aware of my eyes being closed until suddenly they're open and he's smirking a little as he amends, "To. I want you to. Stop by the Grind, that is."

"Okay," I say, my voice a little higher than I'd like it to be. "That's—cool. I'll see you tomorrow, then."

He presses one last quick kiss to the corner of my mouth before he breathes, "Thanks again for dinner. Goodnight," and gets out of the car. I stare shamelessly as he makes his way up to the porch. He opens the front door, but pauses and turns back to give me a wide smile and the world's dorkiest fucking wave. I wave back. He disappears into the house, but it's another ten solid minutes before I can stop shaking enough to drive.

Chapter Nineteen

"In a perfect world, you could fuck people without giving them a piece of your heart. And every glittering kiss and every touch of flesh is another shard of heart you'll never see again." –Neil Gaiman

73 days sober

Telling Ben about what happened yesterday turns out to be more difficult than I'd expected. I spend most of the morning psyching myself up to verbalize it, and in the end, I settle for, "So, uh, full disclosure? Kinda made out with Travis yesterday."

"Full disclosure? Kinda weird to be revealing this to me in the Barbie aisle of a toy store at three thirty in the morning," Ben says, not even looking up from the two boxed dolls he's holding. "Do you think Izzy would rather have a mermaid or a... I mean, I guess it's a fairy, right? It's got wings."

"Do the wings come off?" I ask. He nods. "Does the fin?" He shakes his head. I take both dolls from him, put the mermaid back on the shelf, and put the fairy in the cart. "She's got like three thousand outfits for these things, and you know she'll be pissed if the doll can't fit into a dress because of some dumb fin. Seriously, though, do you even care about what I just told you?"

His brow creases. "Not really? It's not like I'm surprised, dude. You guys have been building up to this for months, so I kind of figured you might get back together now that he's not with Josslyn anymore. Though, if we're still doing the 'full disclosure' thing, I'd like to add that he's a hypocritical swine for giving me so much shit about dating you during your first year clean, then turning around and doing the exact same thing—"

"He's not," I interrupt. "We're not back together. We just... kissed."

"Kissed," Ben echoes doubtfully.

I shrug. "Well, made out. For like, two hours. Whatever, it wasn't a big deal."

"Don't be a jackass," he replies. "Look, you and I sleeping together sometimes? Not a big deal. Travis and Alex hooking up that one time? Not a big deal."

"You and Jamie making mad, passionate love on your living room floor? Was that a big deal?" I ask, and he glares at me. I bounce in place and toss another Barbie into the cart. "Come on, dude, it's just us. Can we please talk about this now?" He ignores me; I poke him. He darts into the next aisle; I chase him down and run over his foot with the cart. Twice. When he rounds on me like he's preparing to smack me, I say, "Come on, give me *something*."

After another minute of scowling, he finally admits in a hushed undertone, "It was embarrassing, okay? Not, you know, while it was happening. But it's embarrassing now. Before that day, I had never topped anyone, so I know I probably sucked, and it's not like he's got any shortage of guys to compare me to. Including you, and I know exactly how good you are." He pretends not to notice as I preen. "But I just—other than what I've done with you, I don't really have much... I don't know. Experience? Before we met, I'd only had sex twice. Ever." That doesn't get me as hot as having been first would, but we're definitely in danger of me getting a wildly inappropriate erection in a toy store if he keeps talking about how he was practically untouched before he met me. Luckily, he steers us away from the topic of boning with, "I'm honestly glad that he and Alex are done, not because I want it to happen again, but because I'm kind of hoping that this means I'll never really have to see him again. At least not for a little while. I don't want to have to put up with him smirking at me just because he knows I'm as much of a bottom as he always expected me to be."

"I'm sure it wasn't that bad," I say, even though I'm sure of no such thing. Picturing Ben topping anyone is

almost impossible, but I doubt that hearing that will make him any happier. I contemplate texting Jamie to see if I can wheedle something a bit more honest than *'I'd rather get fucked by a lemon zester than ever sleep with him again'* out of him, but I have a sneaking suspicion that taking my phone out right now will get me shoved into a shelf of Hot Wheels. "Would now be a shitty time to mention that he and his new girlfriend are coming into town next week to see me in the play? And that I sort of reserved his tickets at the same time I reserved the ones you and Alex asked me to get, so in a best case scenario, you're going to have Alex and Rachael between you two, and in a worst case scenario, you're going to be sitting right next to each other?"

I get shoved into a shelf of Hot Wheels anyway; Ben should really work on his rage issues. We weave our way through the aisles, hunting down the rest of the items on his mom's list—there's an extremely tense moment where some forty-year-old woman tries to actually take the last Apples To Apples out of my hands. I don't let go of it, and she snaps, "Aren't you boys a little old for this game?"

"There's no such thing as being 'a little old' for Apples to Apples. And aren't you like three times my age?" I bite back. "If I'm too old for it, you definitely are."

Ben wedges himself between us and tries to steer me back, like he's worried I'm going to get into a fist-fight with a soccer mom. It's an irrational fear, because I don't hit women, and I don't hit people who don't deserve... alright, *sometimes* I hit people who don't deserve it, and this bitch kind of does deserve it. Still, the *don't-hit-women* part stands. Maybe he's more worried about me initiating a yelling match, which is a much more legitimate possibility, especially since I haven't had my coffee yet. He wrenches the game out of my hands, drops it in his cart, and says to the woman, "I'm sorry, but I need to get this for my little sister. They might have more in the back?"

He yanks on my arm, but I ignore him in favor of continuing, "It says right here on the box—'ages twelve and up.' That's me. *And up.*"

"Garen, we're moving on with our lives now," Ben tries to sooth me.

I let myself be steered away, though I call over my shoulder, "Word association is an important skill, you know. I got a twenty-four hundred on my SATs because of Apples to Apples, and now your idiot children never will, because my *a-little-old-for-it* ass got the last—"

"And we're officially causing a scene, awesome," Ben says, ramming the shopping cart into my hip until I'm propelled into the next aisle. My last act is to grab a Candy Land off the shelf and wave it menacingly at the woman—it's not on the list, but I'm totally going to buy it anyway, Candy Land is the fucking best. Ben just shoots me A Look and says, "A twenty-four hundred on your SATs because of Apples to Apples?"

"And Monopoly, probably. For the math," I say. I wait a beat before adding, "I uh, I really did get a twenty-four hundred on my SATs, though. Don't look at me like that, and don't make it a big deal. I just test well. What else is on the list?" I snatch the paper from his hands before he can reply. "Barbies, check. Apples to Apples, check. Game for the Wii—holy shit, when did you guys get a Wii? I want to play—"

"I should have just manned up and told the girls there's no Santa so I could take them shopping instead of you. I bet they'd be more adult about this whole situation."

I scoff. "If you want me to be adult, we can go back to talking about anal sex."

"Or we could not," he snaps, sending an apologetic glance towards the strangers who are shooting us scandalized looks. He runs over my foot for good measure, but I'm not sure why he bothers, considering I'm wearing steel-toed combat boots. The action seems to sooth his aggression, though, because his voice is more neutral as he asks, "Do you really think that you and Travis hooking up again isn't a big deal?"

"I thought you didn't want to talk about anal sex," I say a shade too loudly, in hopes that I can embarrass him into silence. It doesn't work; he just raises his eyebrows at me. I sigh. "Fine. Perhaps I should have been clearer: I don't think that us making out—it wasn't *hooking up*, making out doesn't count as *hooking up*—was a big deal to Travis. To me, it was..." I drag a hand through my hair, wrecking the spikes and not giving a fuck about it. Ben waits for me to finish, even though I don't want to, and eventually I have to settle for, "It was a big deal to me. Finally getting a chance to do that again, after all this time—after leaving Lakewood, after you two being together, after Dave, and rehab, and Joss. So much has happened in the past year, and kissing him again felt like *melting*, like all the worst part of me were burning up and disappearing and becoming something so much better. But it wasn't—that. Not for him. It wasn't a big deal to him."

Ben is silent as we gather the rest of the items on his mom's list. Only once we've steered the cart to the front of the store, paid with the credit card—except for my Candy Land, which I pay for in the singles I usually use to buy my coffee, just because I'm sort of hoping the cashier will think I'm buying a board game with stripper tips—and begun loading the bags into the trunk of his car does he finally meet my eyes and say, "He loves you, you know. Always has. It's kind of annoying."

I make a noncommittal noise. It's not that I want to disagree, per se. And it's not that Travis himself hasn't said it enough times for me to be aware of it. But after so many months of not being with him, I have to wonder if it's really true; I have to question whether he still loves me like I think he did when we were together, or if he just feels some "first love" obligation to me.

"It's sort of weird," Ben says, shrugging. "You know, being the one who doesn't ever really get anyone?"

I blink at him. "What do you mean?"

He gestures to the car, and I scramble into the passenger seat. He takes his time getting in, buckling his seat belt, adjusting the heat until it's perfectly warm. As he backs out of the space, he continues conversationally, "I'm not in love with Travis anymore—I haven't been for a while. August, maybe? Definitely by September. We broke up in June, right before you went into rehab, and I didn't see much of him until you got out again. The distance was good. Did more for me and him than it ever did for the two of you, at any rate. I know he was your first love, but he was mine, too. And I think we all tend to forget that."

I don't know what to say to that, so I don't say anything. Fortunately, he seems to be expecting that; he smiles wryly before going on, "I don't doubt that he loved me back, but I also don't doubt that he loved you *more*. For four months, he'd come over, and I'd feel you in the room with us. There was never a moment where you weren't there, too. It was like having a constant threesome, only without the delicious kinkiness of getting to sleep with a pair of hot-ass stepbrothers at once." I snort, and his small smile blooms into a full-on grin. "Don't get too happy about it, dude. Dating you was just as bad. Worse, maybe, because you never even tried to hide that you were still in love with him."

"You wouldn't have wanted me to," I say, wondering if I should phrase it as a question instead.

"No, I wouldn't have wanted you to," he agrees, so I figure I'm safe. "Look, my point is that you guys are... you're fucking impossible to be around sometimes, because you try to pretend you don't belong to each other, but nobody else has ever come close to having a chance with either of you. So no matter what line of bullshit he tries to feed you, and no matter what lies you try to convince yourself of, don't for one second think I'm enough of an idiot to believe that what happened between you two wasn't just as big of a deal to Travis as it was to you."

Part of me wants to argue, but the rest of me just wants to believe he's right. I shrug and say, "I guess. Look, can we just—can we not talk about this? Let's just finish the shopping. What else is on the list?"

"The only other place I need to go is the bookstore, and they don't open until five. Do you want to swing by the Grind so you can get coffee and pretend you're not flirting with Travis?" he asks.

"No," I say.

"Does that 'no' really mean 'yes'?"

"Yes."

It turns out that I don't need to pretend, though. The time for that must be over, and maybe I was wrong about what happened yesterday not being a big deal, because once we've arrived at the Grind, parked in one of the few available spaces, and stepped into the shop, we've barely had a chance to join the end of the line to order before Sara, the barista working the register, catches sight of us and says loudly, "Hey, Trav, your boy's here."

"Awesome. After I finish the two mochas and the vanilla latte, I'm taking my break. And put his order down as mine, alright?" Travis says from in front of the espresso machine. He doesn't even bother to glance up. He doesn't correct her, or question who she might be referring to. He knows. Someone tells him that his boy is here, and he knows it's me.

Ben digs an elbow into my ribs and says, "Can you stop grinning? You look like a goddamn four-year-old."

It's his voice that actually causes Travis to look up, hitch his chin towards us, and say to Sara, "Add a medium Earl Grey, too."

Since it doesn't look like there's any reason for us to wait in line, Ben and I make our way over to the order pick-up area. Apparently being the barista's friends—his boy, I definitely don't brag inside my head—warrants line-jumping privileges, because Ben's tea is poured and passed over before any of the other drinks I'm sure were ordered first. The shop is busier than I've ever seen it before, and all of the staff look harried, but it still takes less than a minute for Travis to make my drink. He sets it down in front of me, then leans across the counter to give me a quick kiss on the lips. I don't even have time to kiss back before he's moving away again to pour milk into the metal frothing pitcher as he says, "Hey. You guys sticking around for a bit, or are you heading right back out?"

"Sticking around," I say, not bothering to ask for Ben's input before answering.

"Awesome," Travis says. "Grab a table, if you can find one. We've been swamped all morning, and people are starting to wrap up their shopping for the day, so it's only going to get worse. I'll find you guys in a minute."

We don't find a table; there are only a dozen in the shop anyway, and they're all full, so I catch Travis' eye and motion to the front door. It's still freezing out, but we have coffee cups to warm our hands as we lean back against the side of the building. I light up a cigarette, even though it makes Ben start pulling faces, and say, "So, apparently that's a thing he and I do now. You know, the kissing thing. In front of people."

"In front of me," Ben agrees.

"Was that weird?" I ask.

He shrugs. "Only because I've been listening to you two pine for each other for a year, and it's just now occurring to me that that was the first time I've ever seen you kiss."

He's right; that is weird. We wait in companionable silence for the few minutes it takes Travis to wrap up the orders he's working on and join us outside. Sharing in Ben's disapproval but opting to take a more direct route, Travis plucks the mostly-gone cigarette from my hand and stubs it out on the sole of his sneaker. I glare at him, but don't bother to light another. "Why do you always do that? You realize cigarettes cost money, right?"

"I'm hoping you'll eventually get the hint and quit," he says, shrugging.

"I've been smoking since I was like, fifteen years old," I protest.

Another shrug, and then he's stepping closer to burrow into my jacket with me, slipping his arms under the leather and wrapping them around me to share in my body heat. He says, "You didn't smoke when I first met you."

Completely untrue; the first thing I did upon moving into the new house was take the batteries out of the smoke alarm in my bedroom so that I could crack the window and smoke as much as I wanted. But the moment I realized how opposed Travis was to the practice, I quit. Am I supposed to do that again now? Are we at a point where he's allowed to have a say in my self-destructive habits? I mean, it's rapidly becoming clear that I underestimated what yesterday must have meant to him—he bought my coffee, he kissed me hello, he put out my cigarette without my permission, he's sharing my coat with me instead of wearing his own.

Holy fuck. Is this—are we boyfriends again? Did that kiss mean enough to him that we're back together now, and he didn't even bother to fucking tell me?

"You know, seeing all of this—"Ben makes a sweeping gesture to the not-really-an-embrace that we're tucked into, "—would be very confusing for me, if Garen hadn't already told me what happened yesterday. I'm surprised you didn't even attempt to play it cool."

Travis snorts. "Oh, sorry, I guess you guys haven't met. Ben, this is Garen. His favorite pastime is over-sharing details of his personal life with friends, relatives, and strangers. I knew he'd tell you. And it's not like I was planning to hide it from you, either."

I'm pretty sure he still hasn't noticed that I'm about five seconds away from having a panic attack, or dragging him into a borderline pornographic kiss, or at the very least demanding to know if I've finally gotten him back. I can't blame him—he isn't even looking at my face. He's slouched down just enough to tuck his head beneath my chin and rest his cheek against my collarbone.

Ben, however, can see whatever baffled expression I'm undoubtedly wearing. He takes a sip from his cup of tea, and I find myself thanking god for the fact that he's incapable of using vocal inflection to demonstrate anything other than 'mild amusement,' 'mild disgust,' or 'mild annoyance,' because his tone is perfectly neutral as he asks, "So, what is this, then? Are you guys getting back together?"

The question is solely for my benefit; I'm not stupid enough to pretend otherwise.

But barely a second passes before Travis shakes his head and says, "No." There is no room for argument in his tone. He must be able to feel the bewildered glance I'm aiming at the top of his head, because he adds, still without looking up at me, "Last month, when you guys started dating—"

"Not-dating," Ben and I correct in unison.

I don't need to see Travis' face to know that he's rolling his eyes. "Whatever. Last month, when you guys started *not-dating*, I told you both that I didn't think G should be dating anyone—or not-dating anyone—until he'd been sober for a year, or until he'd reached the point where he could handle all of the ups and downs of a normal relationship—"

"—or abnormal, in this group," Ben mutters.

"—without falling back on the progress he's made towards getting and staying clean." Travis shrugs and adds simply, "My position on that issue hasn't changed. We're not getting back together. You need to focus on yourself right now, not on me, or anyone else."

Ben cocks his head to the side and says doubtfully, "So, you're just friends, then."

Travis nods. I take a long sip of my coffee before asking, "Do I still get to nail you, though? Because most of my friends—"

"Okay, nope, we're done," Ben says, shaking his head. "That's definitely a Garen-Travis conversation, not a Garen-Travis-Ben conversation, and I am still standing right here. So, how 'bout we change the topic and you guys can text each other about that later?"

I shoot him my most lecherous grin before surrendering to a more reasonable conversation. I tap Travis' shoulder with my fingertips and say, "You're going to go home and sleep after this shift, right?"

He shakes his head. "Nate texted me last night to tell me that he changed his mind about the diner scene. Instead of having you guys drag out chairs to surround the booth, he wants me to make the booth bigger. I'm headed over to the school once my shift ends."

"How does he expect you to make it bigger?" I demand.

"Gonna saw it in half," Travis says, yawning. "The table, the bench, all of it. Then I'm gonna add leaves to the table and a straight section to the bench so it's all oblong instead of circular. Shouldn't take too long. Maybe two hours for the table, three for the bench. And another three, if we're counting the hardware store trip and the time it'll take me to repaint after the construction."

"So, you've been awake for almost twenty-four hours already, and you're not even going to get to go home for another nineteen?" Ben says in something much like disbelief.

Travis shakes his head again. "I've only been awake for nine hours. I slept at G's house—"

"Yeah, for an hour," I interrupt, pulling out my cell phone. "I'm going to call Nate and tell him to go fuck himself. The circular booth works fine, we've been running scenes with it for two weeks now. If he had a problem with it, he should have said something before last night. Telling you to build an entire new set piece on your own during the nine hours you've got between two eight-hour shifts is such a dick move."

Travis snatches the phone from my hand, powers it down, and slips it back into my jacket pocket. "It's fine. I can handle it. And I'll have a chance to sleep tonight, before the dress rehearsal tomorrow."

"At least let me meet you at the school and help you with the construction of it," I say. I refuse to believe I'm being stubborn, but the look on Travis' face tells me he disagrees.

"Dude, I don't know what it is with you and school, but the second you set foot in that building, you either run around like a five-year-old on a sugar high, or try to punch someone in the face," he says. "If you come to help, you'll distract me too much for me to get anything done."

"I am not that bad! But fine, if you're going to be a dick about it, I don't have to help. But I still don't like the idea of you driving yourself all over town when you're that tired," I say, crossing my arms. "Can we compromise on me picking you up from the school once you're ready to head back to the Grind for your second shift? I can give you a ride home from work and to school in the morning. You can leave your car in the school lot overnight, and this way, I don't have to worry about you falling asleep behind the wheel and crashing into a telephone pole or something."

Travis opens his mouth to argue, but his words taper off into a yawn. When he realizes that both Ben and I are giving him extremely unimpressed looks, he rolls his eyes and concedes, "Fine. That's stupid, and you're acting like you think you're my mom, but fine." I tactfully don't point out that his mom doesn't care enough to talk to him, let alone to badger him into letting her give him rides home from work. He finally steps back from the circle of my arms and says, "I need to get back inside. They couldn't get nearly

enough of us to work this shift, and I don't want to leave Sara and Mike alone at the counter for too long."

"Alright. Have fun working yourself to death," Ben says, clapping him on the shoulder and dodging the swing Travis takes at him. He heads back to the car, but I stay behind to give a slightly more heartfelt goodbye.

"Pretty sure every single one of the tools you're going to be using to do the booth construction comes with a warning label about operating them while exhausted," I say, reaching over to tangle my fingers with his. My heart still gives an embarrassing little jolt when he squeezes my hand instead of pulling away. "If you start to get too tired, will you please call me and let me come help you? Or will you call in sick to your next shift or something? Jerry would be totally fine with it. You're his favorite barista. Employee of the month for August, September, *and* October."

He narrows his eyes, but says nothing.

"Dude," I say, grinning. "Is that your 'Jerry made me employee of the month for November, too, but I don't want to tell you this because you'll make fun of me for it' face?"

"I need to get back to work," he says through clenched teeth, and I laugh until he tries to yank his hand away from me. He looks so adorably annoyed that I can't stop myself from pulling him in and giving him a series of short, placating kisses.

Only when he is mollified enough to kiss me back do I step back and say, "I'll see you this afternoon. Text me when you want me to pick you up from the school, alright?"

"Alright," he says. I make one more movement in the direction of Ben's car before Travis adds, a bit too casually, "Yes, by the way."

"Yes what?" I say.

He takes a step closer so that he's back in my personal space, bracing himself with a hand low on my waist and tilting his head up ever so slightly to say, right into my ear, "You asked me earlier if you still get to nail me, even though we're just friends. The answer is yes."

And then, with nothing more than a lingering kiss to the side of my neck and a smirk when he pulls away, he's turning and striding back into the coffee shop. I blink after him for a solid minute before Ben starts laying on the horn. I scramble back to the passenger seat, staring wide-eyed over at Ben. He quirks an eyebrow, and we both look down at my lap, where I'm clearly half-hard in my jeans.

He opens his mouth, and I raise a hand to silence him. "If you make any sort of comment about this, I swear to god, I will text Jamie right now and tell him that one round of unprotected morning sex was enough to make you fall in love with him, and now you want to adopt a hundred babies with him. And the only thing Jamie hates more than he hates babies is you, so really, McCutcheon, pick your fucking battles."

He doesn't speak, but he sure as hell keeps smirking over at me for the entire ride back to my house.

Sometime around one thirty, when I'm lounging around the house being useless, I get a text from Travis. *Running behind schedule and could use some help painting. Up for it?* Rather than respond with some creepy text about how I'm always *up for it*—and I think I deserve a lot of credit for that self-restraint—I bundle up and head to the school. The main door to the building is locked, but I manage to get in through a door that leads right into the auditorium. I follow the hum of power tools to the wings, where Travis is using a palm sander on the newly constructed tabletop and looking way too exhausted to be doing so. Sneaking up behind him while he's operating machinery seems like a bad idea, so I loop around the front and flop down onto the stage, just in his line of sight. He glances up and switches off the sander. "Hey. Give me two minutes to finish this up, and then we'll get started on the painting, alright?"

I nod. "Do you need me to start mixing anything up now?"

"Already did it. But if you could spread out the drop cloth out so we don't get paint all over the stage, that'd be awesome. I think Ms. Markland would kick my ass if I made a mess. Or, at the very least, she'd take my auditorium key back."

"Can you please explain to me how you convinced a teacher to give you a key to the school?" I ask.
"Because I'm pretty sure any teacher I tried that on would laugh until she pissed herself."

"That's because none of our teachers are morons, so they know you'd use it to do something ridiculous like—"

"—fill the auditorium with live ducks?" I suggest. "Because I totally did that once, when I was living in Ohio. Not with a key, though, I had to break in. So, all things considered, they *should* just give me the key, so that it's less of a felony when I do things like that."

Travis closes his eyes for a moment, clearly trying to figure out why the hell he even bothers to talk to me, then opens them again and returns to sanding the table. I set about spreading the canvas on the floor, though I take care to make as much noise as humanly possible while I'm doing it, just so he won't be able to pretend I'm not there.

Painting the booth turns out to be an extremely dull process. There's way less making out than I'd hoped for, and when Travis realizes that I've been drawing tiny animals all over my section of the booth in a shade of red just different enough for it to show, he makes me paint over it—even the giraffe I spent ten minutes on. By the time we finally finish, I'm scowling at him, but he just looks relieved to be done. We maneuver the bench to the back of the stage so that it can dry while we clean up the brushes, paint cans, and drop cloth. It's a little after two by the time we're done, but the paint has dried enough that we can staple the cushions down and consider our job complete.

I flop down onto the bench and say, "You know, I'm beginning to realize that I have the better role in this whole production. I just wander around, singing and dancing and making people give me attention. You have to do actual work."

"I know. How's it feel?" he asks. It takes me a moment to realize that he's referring to the bench; I beckon him closer. The moment he's within reach, I grab him by the wrists and tug him down onto my lap. He laughs. "Unless I missed a very big change in the blocking, this isn't how the scene goes."

"It should be," I say, then make a face. "Only not, actually. I can't think of a single person in the cast who should be sitting on any other cast member's lap. I was just trying to make a comment about how you being on top of me is awes—"

"I got it, Garen," he assures me. He slides back off me, but I barely have time to open my mouth to bitch about it before he throws a leg over me so that he can sink back down, straddling my hips and seated as comfortably as anyone can be on a bench like this. He kisses me before I get a chance to move in for it.

These are the moments I have craved the most—fooling around in every sense of the phrase, making out in the middle of our abandoned high school, sneaking some time together before he has to go to work. These are the things I never got a chance to experience when we were together before; secret, pseudo-incestuous relationships aren't exactly conducive to mid-afternoon playtime. On the only occasion in which we kissed where people could see us, people did see us, and they sent pictures of it to everyone, and he called me a faggot in a closeted panic, and we didn't speak for nearly two weeks.

But now, I'm not sure he'd even care if someone walked in on us, and that idea sets my heart pounding. Maybe this really is the start of something, even if he says we're not together. Maybe this is my chance to have everything I had before, but *more*—what we had, but holding hands in the hall like we did on the first

day of this school year, and kissing him in front of his locker before homeroom, and the entire goddamn staff at the Grind joining Sara in greeting me as *his boy*. Maybe I can finally take him on a real date.

I'm breaking away from the kiss to ask him—and really, suggesting a date with someone who I used to be engaged to shouldn't be this nerve-wracking—but before I get a chance to, he ducks down to mouth over my jaw, trailing harsh, open kisses down my neck until he reaches the fabric of my shirt. He hooks a finger over my collar and yanks it down to scrape his teeth across my collarbone, and asking him out can definitely wait. I dig my fingers into his waist and roll my crotch up to grind against his ass in one drawn-out thrust. His grip on my shirt tightens, and he mutters, "Thought you wanted to take things slow."

"I meant *Garen Anderson slow*, not *normal people slow*. It's been what, twenty hours?"

"Nineteen," he corrects.

I slip a hand up the back of his shirt and say, "That's slow enough. Seriously, if we hit the twenty-four hour mark, I'm pretty sure I might actually die. I just—fuck, I need to touch you."

"Can I try something?" he asks quietly. I should probably ask what 'something' he's referring to, but it's difficult to think straight when I'm between his legs and he's murmuring into my ear. When I nod, he reaches for the front of my jeans, and I can't help but grin. Now we're making progress.

"I'm not sure that jerking me off counts as 'trying something.' You've definitely done that before—successfully, I might add. There's no 'try' about it," I say.

"Trust me," he says, slipping off my lap and onto the floor to kneel in front of me. He slides my zipper down and looks up at me. "I definitely haven't done this before."

Any thought I'd had about asking him on a date, or taking things slow, or making another joke goes right out of my head at that point, because with typical Travis McCall determination and enthusiasm, he tugs my jeans down over my hips—there's no way I'm going to be able to sit through the diner scene during the final dress rehearsal tomorrow without thinking about this and either laughing or touching myself—and gives my dick a considering look. He pauses and adds, in a way that might sound more composed if his voice wasn't shaking, "I-I've never really done this before. I mean, there was one time, a few minutes with Ben, just as foreplay, but never like this. So, I'm open to, um... to constructive criticism. I won't be offended."

"Constructive criticism?" I echo in disbelief. "Dude, it's a blowjob, not a term paper. You—"

Any capacity for casual conversation escapes me after that, because now it's taking all of my energy to not knot my hands in Travis' hair and thrust up into the wet heat of his mouth. I settle for letting loose with a stream of swears so extensive and creative that he only manages to keep my dick in his mouth for about fifteen seconds before he pulls off, laughing.

There is a small possibility that my humiliating response is to whimper like a fucking animal and say, "No, no, no, please don't stop."

"You're distracting me!" he protests, resting his forehead against my thigh in what I'm sure is an attempt to hide the fact that he's still laughing. It doesn't work. "I mean, seriously, you're pretty much composing an anthem of dirty talk right above my head—"

"And this somehow surprises you? You *know* this about me, you know I'm a talker in the bedroom—the metaphorical bedroom, obviously, this isn't a bedroom, I know that. This is a stage, and really, this is like all my exhibitionist fantasies coming to life at once, and all of my regular fantasies, too, because holy fuck, I've kind of been waiting to find out what your mouth feels like since the first second I set eyes on you, and if you stop now, I think I might literally die, so—"

I give up trying to speak the moment he starts sucking me again. Just to be safe, I also make a concerted effort to keep my jaw clenched on another embarrassing stream of curses, settling instead for heavy breathing and the occasional encouraging gasp. The movement of his mouth is hesitant at first; I can tell he's experimenting, trying to gauge what he should be doing based on what pulls the best reactions from me. For a guy who's never really gone to town on another dude with his mouth before, he is making an admirable amount of progress.

I hear the scratch of a zipper, and my eyes fly open again—I didn't even know they were closed—so that I can watch as Travis yanks open his jeans and gets his dick out so that he can stroke himself with the hand that's not busy working the half of me he can't fit into his mouth. I'm bizarrely touched to realize that he's jerking himself roughly, clumsily, because he's using his right hand on himself and saving his dominant hand for me.

I shake my head even though he's not looking at me, grab him by the wrist, and shove his left hand downward. He does look up at me then, just to shoot me a questioning glance, and I have to lick my lips before I can force out the words, "I want to see how you really do it." When he still doesn't move, I hitch my chin and say, more sharply, "Show me."

He pulls his mouth off me long enough to give me a few last strokes before he obeys—not because he thinks it makes that much of a difference, I realize, but because he wants his hand to be slick with spit before he drops it to his own lap. I don't bother trying to hold back the groan that tears out of me at that. The sound pulls a shiver from him, but I barely notice that; I'm too focused on watching the practiced movement of his fist curling around the head of his cock.

I want to slide a hand into his hair, maybe give it a little tug—it seems like that would be the more reasonable thing to do, but instead, both of my hands end up threaded in my own hair, fingertips digging into my scalp as I stare down at him. This is all I'd dreamed it would be. It doesn't even matter that he's new at this, that he's lacking in experience or technique. I've been fantasizing about this since the moment we met, and now that it's finally happening, it's better than I could have hoped for. It's too good.

"T-Travis, stop," I say, and he's off me in less than a second, sitting back on his heels and looking anxiously up at me, his hand stuttering to a halt in his lap. It takes me a moment to realize that he thinks this is *ano-means-no* sort of deal, that I'm calling him off because I'm having another attack of whatever it is that makes me freak out whenever someone gets too controlling with my body. But even the few seconds lacking in contact are driving me crazy—I wrap a hand tight around myself and let my head fall back against the booth. "Sorry, just—I'm really, really close."

He snorts. "Isn't that the point?"

I shake my head. "Wanted to give you enough warning so you could pull off. Didn't want to make you feel like you had to, you know, swallow—I know this is the f-first time you've really—" I have to bite off the rest of that sentence, because if I think about him not having gotten to this point before, if I think about being the first guy who ever gets off from the feel of his mouth, I'm going to lose it.

He tugs my hand away from my dick and replaces my grip with his own, leaning in to give a lingering lick to the head of my cock, and oh, I'm practically dying. He murmurs, "Well, you're sure as hell not getting your spunk on the bench I spent all morning making. Besides—" Another lick, Christ, "—I want to taste you."

"Oh, fuck," is the only warning I manage to give, and he barely has a chance to slide his mouth back down onto me before I'm coming, digging my fingers into the bench seat hard enough to nearly tear at the material. I'm really banking on the hope that we're alone in the building, because we could probably both be expelled for doing this, and I'm not even trying to silence the sounds I'm making. He lets me ride out the sensation—would probably keep me in his mouth as long as I wanted, asked, needed him to—but then I pull out, catch his jaw in my hand and say, "Don't swallow."

He shoots me a vaguely pissed-off look that says, quite clearly, *if you didn't want me to swallow, maybe you shouldn't have just nutted in my mouth, you fucking idiot, and if this isn't going down my throat, you'd better have some sort of alternate plan here*. But his expression makes the jump from pissed to confused to unbearably turned on when I all but fall off the edge of the bench and kiss him deeply, fiercely, doing my best to lick the taste of myself from his mouth. It's a frantic, sloppy kiss, and I'm pretty sure there might be cum dripping down my bottom lip right now—a more squeamish man might be horrified by me doing this with him, but there's nothing squeamish about Travis. After all, he likes me, doesn't he, even with all my kink and filth and flaws?

Sure enough, his breath hitches at the kiss, then again a moment later when I yank his jeans and boxers halfway to his knees. He lets me drag him onto my lap so that he's straddling my hips, sitting back on my thighs. His voice is deeper than normal, a little raspier, oh Christ, when he asks, "Was that okay? Was I, um—" He breaks off, looking up at me, nervous and young and gorgeous.

"So much better than okay," I assure him, taking up the task of stroking him off. "So fucking good, T."

"Oh god," he mutters, twisting to bury his face against my neck. "P-Please keep in mind that I was jacking off that whole time, so you're not allowed to judge me for the fact that I'm going to come in like, a minute, tops."

I tighten my grip a little, and he twitches against my palm. If it were humanly possible for me to get hard again, I probably would. "Do you want this? Or do you want my mouth? Tell me, I'll give you anything you want, I—"

"This," he breathes, rocking up into my hand. Every forward push ends with his ass grinding back against me, too much stimulation too soon after I've come. It's almost painful, but the movement makes it nearly impossible for me to think about anything other than him riding me, and yes, my dick is still desperately trying to get hard again. "Want to see you, want to kiss you when I come."

And a few minutes later, that's exactly what he does. One of his arms is wound tight around my neck, his other hand knotted in my hair as he kisses me and shudders out his orgasm... all over the front of my shirt. I can't even bring myself to care about that, not when he's falling apart on top of me, not when everything I've ever wanted is right here in my hands.

Once he has made some progress towards coherency, he has the presence of mind to shift off of me so that we can both pull our jeans back into place. Zipped, buttoned, and settled, he slumps back against the base of the bench at my side, curling up under my arm.

"This," he says, still a little breathlessly, "is exactly why I said you were going to be a distraction if you came to help."

"Really? This is the exact reason? When we were standing outside the Grind at four in the morning and I offered to help you construct scenery for our school play, you were picturing blowing me on the stage and then letting me jerk you off all over my t-shirt?"

He leans away to peer at my face. "Pretty much? I mean, in all fairness, I spend a *lot* of time picturing blowing you on this stage. It makes for some incredibly awkward rehearsals."

"You're unreal," I mutter, pulling him in for another kiss.

He accepts it with a smile, but too soon, he's clambering up on shaky legs and saying, "I'm officially about to be late to work. We need to go."

One orgasm is apparently only enough to sustain Travis' consciousness for a few hours; he's fine when I drop him off at the Daily Grind—flushed and a little paranoid that he smells like sex, but fine. Awake. Alert. The opposite is true when I pull into the lot as he's wrapping up his closing duties later that night.

I'm not allowed to go inside once the glowing "open" sign gets flipped off at eleven, so I wait in my car and watch him through the window. He's supposed to be sweeping the floors, but he's stumbling on almost every step, like he's nodding off between swipes of the broom. At this point, I'm pretty sure he's been awake for around forty hours, not including that bullshit nap at my house. Even the other baristas seem to be snapping at him to just go home already, but he just resolutely shakes his head every time one of them speaks to him. My fingers are clenched into fists around my steering wheel. They shouldn't have scheduled him for two shifts in one day. Failing that, Nate shouldn't have been a tool about the booth. Failing *that*, I shouldn't have screwed around with him at the school, when I could have been doing all the painting so he could get a couple hours' rest. And failing all of that, he should've been smart enough to tell one of us—or all of us—to fuck off and let him be human.

When the baristas' coats have been gathered, the lights have been flicked off, and the door has been opened to let everyone out, I'm out of the car in a second. "McCall, get your idiot ass in this car right now. You look like you're about to fall over, and it's freaking me out."

"Kay," is all he says, his eyes barely focusing on me as he shuffles towards the Ferrari. I'm not sure he even realizes it's me; this is a total Stranger Danger moment.

"About time somebody got him to listen," one of the baristas grumbles. "He burned himself on the espresso machine twice because he could barely keep his eyes open. We've been telling him to call someone for a ride home and clock out early since six o'clock."

Travis scowls and mumbles something that I think is supposed to be, "Was scheduled to work three to eleven, so I fuckin' worked three to eleven. Mind your own business, Jesus Christ, guys." He tumbles unceremoniously into the passenger seat of my car, shuts the door, and gets halfway through the act of buckling his seatbelt before he falls asleep, head bumping up against the window. It would be cute, if it wasn't so scary.

I snatch a cell phone away from one of the workers I recognized and punch my number into his contacts list. "If this kind of things ever happens again, and one of you doesn't call me to pick him up, I will literally burn this building to the ground with all of you inside it. He's a goddamn moron when it comes to things like this, and I don't want him to pass out and drown in a coffee puddle out of some sense of duty to Jerry. Fucking Jerry, scheduling the guy to work these shifts, what the hell. I'm putting my number in here, but you can write it down on the board in the back or something. I'm his—"

"Dude, you're in here two or three times a day, every day. Pretty sure we all know you," the guy responds dryly.

Then you should have called me, it takes all my energy not to say. Instead, I let out a low noise of annoyance, just so they're all clear about the fact that they've been shitlisted for the time being. I wrench my door open and glare in at Travis' sleeping form so that he knows he's in trouble, too. He doesn't seem to care. I say, "Alright, I'm going to go drop him off. Goodnight."

I toss off one last glance at them, just in time to see one of the younger baristas looking baffled as she mouths, *drop him off?* at her coworker. The other girl shakes her head and whispers, "Not yet. They're still in school."

It's a weird exchange, one I don't begin to understand. It isn't until I'm back in the car and pulling out onto the main drag that I realize that the *"not yet"* was in response to the unasked question of, *"Aren't they living together?"* Jesus. His coworkers already have us practically married, and we're not even dating. That shouldn't send a spark of amusement, or glee, or longing through me, but of course, it does.

Travis rouses himself from sleep just as I'm approaching the turn for his house. He blinks around, covers my hand with his on the gearshift, and says, "Can we go to your house instead?"

I very pointedly do not look at him. "You wanna spend the night at my place?" He nods. I swallow. "Okay.

That's—sure. We can do that."

He's asleep again before I round the corner, and so he remains until we've pulled into my driveway. I contemplate carrying him inside so I don't have to wake him, but he gets out of the car and glares at me, like he can read my mind and is pissed at me for coddling him. He lets me steer him to the front door with a hand to the small of his back, then makes his way carefully down the stairs to my bedroom.

I get him out of his jacket and strip his t-shirt off, and the second he's free of the material, he leans in to kiss me. Laughing, I push him backward—he flops easily onto the bed, and I reach for the button of his jeans. "As much as I love your determination to turn this into an act of sexual congress, I'm really just trying to get you out of your clothes so you can sleep. Besides, I'm pretty sure that having you fall asleep while I'm sucking your dick would destroy my ego entirely."

"Wouldn't fall asleep," he mumbles. I wonder if even he thinks he's being convincing right now. Once I've freed him of his jeans and wrangled him into a t-shirt and a pair of sweats, he lets me manhandle him under the blankets. He stays conscious just long enough to watch me strip off my own jeans; the second I've crawled into bed, he curls up against my side and promptly passes right the fuck out with his head on my chest.

It's so adorable that I almost want to wake him up just so I can watch him do it again. Instead, I maneuver him into a slightly more comfortable position and start to nod off as well. My insomnia is still wrecking me these days, so the fact that I'm able to get to sleep at all is surprising in itself. What's more surprising, though, are the dreams. Vivid, embarrassing, technicolor dreams, all starring Travis. Not sexy ones—I wouldn't even bat an eye over waking up to find myself humping his leg like a dog, especially considering that's kind of already happened once this month. No, these dreams are stupid and pedestrian and perfect in their simplicity—I find myself slipping in and out of a world where Travis' coworker is right, and he and I are living together, going to bed like this every night, waking up like this every morning. I dream about us in the supermarket. I dream about us playing in the park with a dog we don't really have. I dream about kids, holy fuck, what is wrong with me?

When I surface from that dream—equal parts fantasy and nightmare—at nearly six in the morning, I frown up at the ceiling, determined not to fall back asleep. I don't need to deal with this shit, not right now; the quickest way for me to ensure that whatever I'm tentatively starting with Travis comes crashing down around us is to try to rush it when he has just explicitly stated that he's not interested in dating me now.

He must be learning to run on less sleep than a normal person requires, because sometime around six thirty—an hour and a half before the alarm is set to go off—he blinks back to consciousness. His eyes find mine, and the edge of my mouth twitches up into a smile. I lean in to give him a good morning kiss, but he shrug away and burrows into my neck, voice muffled as he says, "Not gonna make out with you until you let me brush my teeth."

"What, seriously?" I say, rolling my eyes. "I've been waiting almost a year to make out with you, and you're going to ruin the moment by worrying about whether or not you have morning breath?"

"Yes. And you haven't been waiting 'almost a year,' you liar. At this point, you haven't even been waiting 'almost a day.' Come on. You, too."

I scowl at him for the walk to the bathroom, thrust a spare, unopened toothbrush into his hands, and glare as intensely as possible for the entire time I'm brushing. He ignores me completely, smiles blandly once he's finished, and darts back to my room while I'm still putting the toothpaste back in the drawer.

After that, I kind of have to forgive him, because I make it approximately four steps into my room again before he's on me, dragging me into a kiss and steering me towards my bed. "It's cold and still too early to be up, but I'm awake now, and clearly so are you. Want to curl up in bed and make out for a few hours, until it's time to get ready for the dress rehearsal?"

Actually saying the words *I don't care, I just want to hold you* might cause me to suddenly grow a vagina, so I settle for the only-slightly-less-true, "Can't think of much else I'd rather do."

He burrows under the blankets and drags me in with him, tangling our limbs together so thoroughly that I can barely tell whose skin is whose. He's right about it being cold—the heating in the house has a tendency to kick off during the night, and it's before-sunrise on a late November morning, so it's probably thirty degrees out right now. None of that feels true in my bed. The blankets block out any of the cool air, and his hands are warm against my skin. It's not long before I'm growing hard against his thigh. It's the sort of thing he could ignore, if he were so inclined, but he opts to push my t-shirt up under my arms and say, "You're wearing too much clothing. You're always wearing too much clothing, why do you even own clothes?"

"Public nudity is generally frowned upon," I say, grinning into his mouth.

"Not in public right now," he says, pulling at the shirt again. "Off, please."

We both shiver when I shrug out from under the blankets to strip off my t-shirt, and Travis must think that one burst of cold air is enough, because he wriggles out of his borrowed shirt and sweats, then yanks the covers back over both of us. When our bodies come together again, he must be able to feel the pounding of my heart, but he says nothing. I've got no idea how far this is going—if I were with any other guy right now, I'd be diving for a condom to get this show underway as quickly as possible. With Travis, though, I'm still sort of convinced that this isn't really happening. Or that I'm going to have another freakout and not be able to keep it up. Or that he's going to change his mind before we get anywhere. Or that someone's going to come in--

Oh. Oh, hell no. If I fuck this up, I'm going to fuck it up on my own merit, not because someone barges in without knocking. The odds of my dad waltzing into my bedroom before sun-up on a Saturday are almost non-existent, but I'm not taking my chances. I launch myself off the bed and in the general direction of the door. Travis makes a half-questioning, half-protesting noise, which dissolves into a snort when I click the lock into place and say, "Sorry, I just—wanted to make sure. Do you mind if I—" I gesture towards my computer, and really, what is wrong with me? What if he thinks that's a *can I just check my email real quick* gesture, rather than the *can I turn on some music, because that's honestly the only thing that could make this moment hotter for me* gesture I intended it as?

But Travis just grins and says, "Go right ahead. Kind of surprised you managed to get it up without something playing anyway. I know how you feel about silence."

I stick my tongue out at him but turn to the computer to cue up something on iTunes. It takes me longer than it should to pick a song. I've been preparing for this moment for months in a way that only a true music dork can appreciate: by making an epic "Garen Anderson and Travis McCall Sex Reunion Playlist." Seriously, I've got this thing on my computer, my iPod, my phone, an entire book of CDs in my car. The problem is that I've been working on that playlist since last January, which means it kind of has three hundred and fifty-four songs on it, and they're not in any sort of order. I have no idea what song to start with.

"Getting a little bored back here, dude," Travis says.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," I say, in a voice that is certainly not at all panicked. "I didn't—I should have put it in order, but I didn't, because I thought I'd have a bit more warning before this happened again--*if* this happened again, I-I wasn't really sure."

I hear a drawer open behind me, some rummaging around, then the click of the drawer sliding shut again. Jesus motherfucking Christ, this shouldn't be this difficult. It's just a song, right? I can start with anything. I can start with—Coldplay, Coldplay totally works, tons of people fuck to Coldplay. Except, yeah, *tons of people fuck to Coldplay*. It's not *special* enough for this, and neither is Snow Patrol, or John Mayer, or why the fuck do I even have Sarah McLachlan on my computer, let alone on this playlist? I must've put that

one on in May or June, when I was bombed out of my mind half the time. There's no other excuse, really. I should be ashamed of myself; everyone was right when they told me that my addiction was a monster that would one day destroy everything I love.

Travis sneaks a hand past me—I hadn't realized he had gotten off the bed—to steal the mouse and start up a random song on the playlist. I turn to glare at him, but he frames my face between his palms—and alright, there's a condom pinned between his fingers, and he took off his boxers at some point, so his intent is pretty clear—and says, "It's fine, G. Just come to bed."

I swallow. "Are you sure you want this?"

He answers me with a kiss. I allow myself to be stripped of what little clothing remains and drawn onto the bed with him. He makes one attempt to pass me the bottle of lube he has retrieved from my nightstand, but I shake my head, curl up against his side, and say, "Wanna see you do it."

"What is with you and wanting to watch me touch myself today?" he asks, though the words come out a little more breathless than I think he intends.

"I think a more reasonable question might be, 'what is with me wanting to watch you touch yourself every day?' This is definitely not a new development, I just haven't gotten a chance to act on it prior to now." I nudge his jaw with my nose and splay a hand out low on his stomach. "Besides... a few weeks ago, you told me that you need this sometimes. That you do it to yourself, and you think about it being me who's doing it, and I want to see."

He shoots me a look that suggests he'd rather I just was the one doing it, rather than letting him pretend, but I don't have to argue my point any further; he turns to face away from me so that we're both on our sides, his back to my chest and my arm draped across his waist. My dick is nudging up against his ass, which is *holy fuck* a bad idea, because it's been too long since I've felt him like this, and it's already taking an uncomfortable amount of effort to stop myself from just pushing up against his skin until I come. He flicks open the bottle of lube and slicks up a few of his fingers. I'm awarded a small amount of distance between his skin and mine, but that's just so that he can reach behind himself and slowly, carefully press a finger into himself. I'm not sure if that distance outweighs the sight of his finger slowly disappearing into his body; I'm not sure whether I'm more or less in control of myself than I was a few minutes ago. Either way, I let out a breath of a laugh against the back of his neck.

He shoots a flushed glare over his shoulder and goes still. "Really, Garen? You tell me to finger myself, I start to do it, and you fucking *giggle* at me? Is this supposed to be turning me on, or—"

"I think I'm losing my mind," I say faintly. "You're too hot. I think I'm—fuck, babe, you're driving me *crazy*. Please keep going." When he continues to look uncertain, I trail a hand down his spine, lower, lower, until I can curl it around his and brush my fingertips across where his disappear into his opening. His breath hitches, and I take that as a sign to continue; I tug his hand away, then push forward once more, guiding his movements and slowly fucking him with his own fingers.

He twists to kiss me and mumbles against my lips, "For god's sake, G, I can do this to myself anytime. It's all I've been doing for months now. I don't want *my* fingers, I want *yours*—"

Anything else he'd been planning to say breaks off into a moan when I pull his hand out of the way and sink two shaking fingers into him. I take my time working him open, first with two fingers, then with three, and always with plenty of lube, partly because I want to, but partly because I know I *need* to. He hasn't done this in ten months, and as much as I want to be buried inside him *rightthefucknow*, I won't risk hurting him. I can't.

"Can you, um—" He cuts himself off with a deep breath, then says softly, "Another? I know this is taking forever, and I'm really sorry, it's just—you've got a thick cock, and it's been so long since I've bottomed, and—"

"Travis," I murmur, covering his freckled shoulder in soft kisses. "It's okay. We'll take as much time as we need, alright? Just relax."

I don't know how much longer I spend just prepping him. Long enough that I have to keep pausing to pull his hand away from my dick, because seriously, the last fucking thing I need is for him to make me come before I even get to fuck him. It doesn't take me long to find the perfect angle on his prostate, and by the time I stop to roll on a condom, he's shaking, panting, reaching back to dig his fingertips into my thigh. "Please," is all he says.

"Okay. I'm just going to—yeah," is what comes out of my mouth in reply. I swear I used to have more game than this. For fuck's sake, I *still* have more game than this, but that only seems to apply when I'm with anyone else. With Travis, when it matters, I turn into a total fucking spazz, trembling almost too much to line the head of my cock up with his ass and push inside.

And there's that humiliating stream of curses again. I manage to downplay it to a whisper against the back of his neck, but it still makes him laugh, breathless and somewhat strangled. I slip my arms around his waist, crossing my forearms over his chest and curving my hands over his shoulders for leverage as I rock forward into him.

He reaches up to wind his fingers around mine, squeezing tight and arching back to kiss me. It's the most intensely perfect combination of physical sensations I've ever experienced. I must make some sort of noise to that effect, because then Travis is smiling, nipping at my bottom lip with his teeth, saying, "Good?"

This is the best morning of my life, I think. This is everything I've ever wanted, and this is perfect, and you are perfect, and all I want for the rest of my life is to have this, over and over, always.

"Good," I echo instead.

I release one of his hands and reach for his dick, but he gives a quick jerk of his hips, as if trying to move away, and shakes his head frantically, saying, "Don't, don't, don't. Seriously, if you touch my cock, I'm going to come, I don't want to come yet. Just w-wait a second. Don't move."

"Fuck," I groan, moving my arm back up to his waist. Not moving is absolute torture, but I want to do what he says, so I stay as still as humanly possible. He twists against me, and then I can only see darkness as my eyes briefly roll back in my head. My arms are locked tight around him, and I'm saying, "Travis, please, can I—let me—" He nods, and I shift back a little so that I can grip his hips—maybe hard enough to bruise, fuck, I want my fingerprints to be dug into his skin for days—and really fuck him. There's no way I'm going to be able to last as long as he wants me to, not when I've been waiting so long to do this, not when I've never had sex this good in my entire life. I press one of my palms against his flat stomach so that I can feel his abs contracting under my hand as he tightens around me, and god, that's amazing.

"Stop," he says sharply, and I freeze in mid-movement, even though I'm pretty much balls-deep and the head of my dick is pressed against his prostate. He loses all focus for a few seconds, shudders, presses back against me. I pull out a few inches, just to see if that will draw his attention back to his desire to speak. It does. He slips a hand back between us and presses against my stomach, pushing me back until I slip out of him.

I barely have time to panic at the idea of him changing his mind and wanting to stop now, because then he's rolling us over so that I'm flat against the mattress and he's straddling my hips. He reaches down and adjusts my dick so that he can sink back onto me, and now he's bracing his palms against my chest, fucking himself down onto my dick. His eyes are closed, his mouth open, but it's not enough. It will never be enough. Even still inside him, I'm not as close as I want to be. I sit up and shift him around a bit so that his legs are wrapped around my waist and he's sitting in my lap. I wrap my arms tight around his waist, and he's leaning back over my forearms, back arched and one hand thrown out onto the bed behind him.

to steady himself as he rides me. I curve back inward to press my forehead against his chest. We rock together like that for ages, but his dick is so hard, pinned between our stomachs, and it's completely distracting me, tempting me. I grip his thighs and pull him off of me. He protests, but I ignore him, flatten him out on the bed and shift onto my hands and knees to take him in my mouth. He tastes so fucking good, warm and salty and even better than I remember, and I want to go slow, make this last. I slip off and flatten my tongue against the underside of his dick, carefully tracing it from base to tip, then covering him with my mouth and sliding back down again until his head touches the back of my throat.

"Enough, Garen, enough with the head," he says, tugging on my hair. "It's great, okay? You're so, so good at it, but I need you to fuck me."

I pull off with a pop and say, "When the hell did you become such a power bottom?"

"Shut up, come here, and put your cock back in me," he orders, hauling me back up on top of him. I can't, not yet, not while he's looking at me with fire in his eyes, because I'm pretty sure that if I do what he says, I'm going to come. I'm actually squeezing the base of my dick to stop myself from coming as it is.

"Ask me nicely," I say, burying my face against the side of his neck.

"Oh, for god's sake—will you please fuck me? Please?"

I hook his legs over my shoulders and twist to drop a kiss against the side of his knee as I press back into him. He throws his head back and lets out a groan so perfect I think I'm starting to believe in God again. I bite gently down on the skin of his calf and, even though I know this isn't really the time for conversation, I murmur, "You're so gorgeous, Travis."

"Kiss me again," he says, hands tight in my hair. I let him pull me back down so that our mouths crash together. His legs are still crooked over my shoulders, so he's practically folded in half now, his knees almost level with his own shoulders. Boy's more flexible than he looks. I stop kissing him just long enough to spit onto my palm so that my hand is slick when I reach back down and to stroke him off. My rhythm is a little off now, because I'm so fucking close to finishing, and it's impossible to keep kissing, so I rest my forehead against the pillow next to his head. When he speaks, his lips brush across my ear and his voice is barely more than a breath, like if he says it quietly enough, it can be a secret that no one will ever have to know, and it won't even count. I feel his tongue flick lightly against my earlobe, and then I hear him whisper, "Love you, G."

I come hard, buried deep inside him, with a choked-off, gasping groan. My orgasm is tearing through my entire body like a fucking hurricane, and I must be hurting him a little, with how tightly I'm gripping his hips, his dick, but all I can do is shudder as I roll my hips slowly and jerkily up into him. I try to avoid pulling out for as long as I can, until my dick is way too sensitive for this much stimulation, then strip off the condom, toss it into the garbage can under the desk. Travis is still so hard, breathing heavy and eyes dark. I settle myself between his still-spread legs, swallow him down to the root, and sink two fingers deep into him. He writhes senselessly, one hand still tangled in my hair, the other flying up to grip the headboard. One of his legs is still thrown over my shoulder, and the back of his calf weighs heavy on my shoulderblades, but I can barely feel it now. I'm still riding out the aftershocks of orgasm, and all I care about is the taste of him on my tongue and the sounds he's making as I continue to fuck him with my fingers. I sneak the tip of a third in, and then he's dropping his other hand back to my hair and pulling hard as he says, "Gonna come. Fuck, I'm going to come."

Oh, please do. I pull off just enough to give one last particularly elaborate swirl of my tongue over the head of his dick, then sink back down over him as he shudders out a climax. I've barely had time to swallow before he drags me up into a kiss, tasting himself in my mouth like I did to him on the stage yesterday. For a very long moment, we lie there, curled around each other, kissing and shaking, and then he releases me enough that I can slide back down to settle my head against his stomach. He cards his fingers through my hair, pushing it back from my face, and the soft drag of his fingertips across my scalp almost makes me keen. I press a kiss to his stomach and say, "Do you want me to—"

"I want you to wait, like... five minutes. And then I want to do that again," Travis says, his voice slightly muffled by the arm thrown over his face. I can't help it, I laugh. He raises his head slightly to give me an appraising look. "I don't know why you would think I'm joking. We're eighteen years old, it's completely possible. Sex marathons are what eighteen-year-old gay guys are built for."

"I might need more than five minutes," I admit, tracing designs into his skin with the tip of my finger. I can't remember the last time I had an orgasm that intense. I can't remember the last time anything—sex, drugs, booze—made me feel this good. Both of us are sticky with sweat and cum, but I can't let go of him yet. I scramble higher up onto the bed and curl an arm over his shoulders to pull him closer. Exhausted and complacent, he sprawls out, half next to me, half on top of me, his head resting on my chest, right above my heart, and one arm draped across my middle. It all feels so *right*.

Until the alarm goes off.

I groan and pull the blankets up over our heads. "Oh, god. Can I call in sick to rehearsal?"

"You're not sick," he protests, shoving the covers back down.

"Being totally fucked out and not giving a shit about extracurricular activities is *like* a sickness," I try. "That's what the guidance counselor, and my therapist, and my parents keep telling me. Do you think Ms. Markland will agree?"

Travis shakes his head. "Doubt it. Come on, we've got to get up."

"No, I have a better idea. We're going to hit the snooze button. Twice. That gives us ten minutes to recover," I decide. "And then we're going to go shower, because between my amazing *upper* body strength and your amazing *lower* body strength, I'm pretty sure we can manage to get you pinned up against the tile with your legs around my waist for some fantastic shower sex." I tug a lock of his hair. "I am not missing out on round two because of some stupid dress rehearsal, alright? I have my priorities, and you come first. Well—"

"Don't you dare make a 'come' pun right now," he warns, and I fall silent. We make it exactly seven and a half minutes before he raises his head, gives me a look that just might kill me, and says, "So... round two?"

We race to the shower.

Chapter Twenty

“Only enemies speak the truth; friends and lovers lie endlessly, caught in the web of duty.” – Stephen King

74 days sober

We walk into rehearsal with my arm slung around Travis' shoulders and one of his hands tucked into my back pocket. That in itself isn't enough to draw much attention to us, because I've been hanging off him for weeks now, so I think people are used to it. The reaction comes a minute or so later, when we pause at the edge of the group gathered in the first few rows of seats, and Travis says, "I'm going to go find Ms. Markland and tell her about the booth." I shoot him a cocky little *you mean you're going to tell her how you sucked my dick on it?* smile. He flushes and smacks my chest. "Not that. God, shut up. I'll see you later."

Possibly without thinking, and probably still riding an early-morning sex high, he curves a hand over the back of my neck and draws me into a lingering kiss. His lips curve into a smile against mine, and when he tries to pull away, I make a noise of disapproval and tug him back in. He laughs, gives me one last peck, and repeats, "Later." This time, it sounds like a promise.

He ducks out from under my arm and heads for the stage, hoisting himself up onto it and shooting me one last bright-eyed glance before he disappears into the wings. There is a two-second pause, and then something crashes into my side. I shoot a bewildered glance down at Annabelle, who has flung her arms around me in the tightest, most unreasonably excited hug I've ever experienced. "Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god."

"What the shit, Annabelle?" I say. I'm not sure if I'm supposed to hug back, or what. I'm not even sure *why* I'm getting hugged.

"You and Travis," she squeaks. "When did that happen? *What* happened? Tell me everything, I thought you guys weren't even talking to each other, and now you're kissing, oh my god."

I squint at her. "You're one of those horrible straight girls who has always wanted a gay best friend, aren't you?" She glares at me, which is probably more of a confirmation than she intends for it to be. I'm tempted to tell her that it's none of her business, but... it might be kind of nice to talk about this with someone who hasn't also slept with me, or Travis, or both of us, which knocks out almost all of my friends. Still, I have the presence of mind to lower my voice a little as I say, "We're not, you know, back together, or whatever. We just... worked out some issues."

"Through sex?" she prompts.

"Through *talking*," I protest. There's a beat, and then I add, "And then totally through sex, it was awesome. I can't even talk about it without giggling like a schoolgirl or getting an erection or both, so maybe we should move on to a new topic of discussion."

She grins, but raises her hands in surrender and allows me to lead her back to the group. No one else makes a comment about what has just transpired, which I'm thankful for, because I'm really not in the mood to have Joss' bitching harsh the buzz I feel from actually getting Travis... not back. Not really. But it's close.

The dress rehearsal itself goes very well. There are a few missed lines, a few fumbled props, and one instance of me chuckling like a five-year-old at one of the racier innuendos, but for the most part, we keep our shit on lock. You'd never know it, though, based on the way Ms. Markland spends the whole performance glowering at us from the front row. Once we've finished our second straight run-through of the play, sometime before noon, she calls Riley and Travis to the front row and says, "Riley, do you have any comments regarding the sound equipment?"

"Yeah," he grunts. "Guys, you don't have to project that much if you're wearing a mic. Like, that's the point of a microphone. You don't need to yell. All it does is make the speakers scream."

Ms. Markland nods once, then says, "Travis, any comments on behalf of crew?"

"The second the curtain closes, anyone who's onstage needs to get *off-stage*. We can't make our set changes if you guys are in the way, and it makes us look like morons if we spend any longer than fifteen seconds with the curtains closed. So, I know it's difficult to move quickly with the stage lights out, but you really need to do your best to get out of the way and not touch the set pieces. Or the props. Or the crew members." Travis pauses and shoots a glare in my direction. I duck my head to hide my grin. He continues, "Also, if you're holding something when you get off stage, hand it to one of the crew members. There's a very specific system to how the props are organized backstage, and it throws us all off when people mess it up."

"It only throws you off, Travis," one of the freshmen calls from upstage. "The rest of us are fine with it. You're the only one who's really anal about it."

I open my mouth to respond, because hello, if the kid's gonna just drop it in my lap like that, of course I'm going to make a comment. But Travis just points a finger directly at me and orders, "You shut your mouth right now, I swear to god. Don't say anything."

"Oh, come on, just one joke?" I say.

"No. Stop talking."

"Half a joke?" I wheedle. "You can't expect me to keep silent when somebody sets me up for an 'anal' joke like that."

"Stop talking," he repeats, more loudly and with a flush in his cheeks.

"It won't even be that explicit, I swear!"

"Is there a non-explicit type of anal sex joke?" Annabelle wonders aloud.

But Ms. Markland has clearly reached her breaking point, because she snaps, "Garen, if you're done playing some comedy version of 'just the tip' with your boyfriend, I have a play to direct."

I lose it. Seriously. Well, half the cast does, but I'm completely useless for about five minutes, just curled up on the stage floor, laughing so hard I'm genuinely worried I might piss myself. Travis just turns bright red and disappears back stage to pretend that he's someone else. Ms. Markland's comment has the opposite effect of what she intended, because by the time she finally regains control of us, the pizzas she ordered for lunch have arrived.

As I'm joining the fray to get my own slice, Marcellina, one of the stage crew girls, comes up to me and says in a sing-song tone, "Garen. Travis is refusing to come have lunch with us. He says he doesn't have time, because he needs to make sure the programming on the jukebox mech is just right. Can you drag him out here?"

I slap a slice of pizza down onto one of the paper plates and say, "I don't know why you guys seem to think I'm the Travis whisperer. My influence over that kid doesn't really extend much further than the perimeter of my bedroom." Riley snorts at me, and I smirk back. "Anyway, I'll just bring him some food and hang out back there while he works. You guys should come, too, if you want."

None of them immediately follow me, but I assume some of them will, once they've all gathered up their pizza and drinks. Sure enough, I find Travis hard at work in the the classroom that stage crew operates

out of; he's sitting at the teacher's desk and tinkering with some weird little machine about the size of a dinner plate. I set the pizza down next to him, careful to avoid knocking the greasy plate against anything important, and move to stand behind him, ducking down to loop an arm around him and kiss the back of his neck.

"Alright, somebody better tell me what a jukebox mech is, and why you keep working on it," I say. "Because I've heard it mentioned like, fourteen times, and I've still got no idea what it is."

He shoots me a half-smile over his shoulder; I catch it with my lips. When I eventually release him—which, admittedly, takes a while—he says, "This. I built a rotating mechanism for the inside of the jukebox. It's programmed to bring a record in line with the window every minute, so it looks like the juke is flipping vinyl."

I blink down at the mess of wires and buttons and bullshit. "And it works?" He nods. "You know how to do shit like that? Just—build things that can perform like that?"

He shrugs. "Not really? I mean, I didn't. We didn't have the budget to buy an actual jukebox, so I got this idea to make one, and made up a little sketch of how I thought it could work. And then I did some research, realized I had no idea what I was doing, and just read until I taught myself the right way to do it."

"Taught yourself the right way to build a tiny robot," I clarify. He shrugs again, and I can't stop myself from saying, "That's amazing, T. How did you—that's *amazing*."

"You said that already," he says, ducking his head to hide his reddening face. "Anyway, once I had the information and parts I needed, it wasn't hard to build the mech, because I was mostly working off tutorials I found online. The hardest part was learning how to solder." He points to a bit of the mech that has clearly been soldered together.

I raise a finger and let it hover over part of the machine. "What happens if I touch this part?"

"I punch you in the face for breaking my mechanism, mostly? Or you get electrocuted, I'm not entirely sure," he says, grabbing my wrist and guiding it over until my finger is above something that is much more button-like than the part I'd been indicating. "This is the part that triggers it. Hang on, let me hold it up so it doesn't break."

He slips his hands beneath the machine and gingerly raises it about six inches off the desk. I poke the button. There's a tiny beep, and then an arm at the back of the mech slowly extends and begins to rotate in a counter-clockwise direction. Every time it reaches the twelve o'clock position, it pauses, turns in place, and continues winding around. Travis shrugs. "You put the record in the little claw at the end of the arm before it starts. When it's pointing straight up, it turns, like it's being flipped. It's only visible through the window for about twenty seconds, then it's out of sight for another forty-five until it makes the rest of the rotation. Press that same button, please?"

I poke the button again, and the arm stops moving. Travis sets it back on the desk and wipes his hands off on his jeans, shrugging. I can't stop staring at the little robot. "Dude. Can you—you're a fucking genius."

He makes a face. "Caltech didn't think so." When I raise an eyebrow in question, he admits, "I'm still getting my college acceptances. Or, rejections, in the case of California Tech. It makes sense, I guess—like, my grades are awesome, sure, but I don't really have any relevant extracurriculars. If I'd started doing stuff like this freshman year, maybe I could've gotten in, but it's not surprising that they'd reject somebody whose sole focus for the past few years has been a varsity sport and a job at a coffee shop."

"They're idiots," I say immediately. "The people at Caltech are complete morons if they don't want you. You're brilliant."

He lets slip a tiny, self-satisfied smile and says, "Columbia and Princeton agree with you."

"Congratulations," I say. "Columbia, shit. That would be so weird—you and Jamie at the same school?"

"I know. But I texted him the other day, when I got my letter, to ask how he likes it. He tells me it's amazing, offered to show me around any time I feel like coming up to New York for the day." He pauses, then adds, like I've had anything to do with this, "James is actually a really good guy."

"I know," I say, and maybe that's why he acts like it's my doing. I have a tendency to act like a proud parent any time someone recognizes the awesomeness of Jamie Goldwyn. "So now you're just waiting for hear from—"

"Dartmouth, MIT, Yale, and Stanford," he supplies. "I think MIT will probably reject me, too. I mean, if Caltech did, they will, right? But I've got a good feeling about Yale. I mean, Ben got in with no problem, and my GPA's about the same as his was. And he didn't do any extracurriculars, like, at all. No sports or clubs, just the job at his dad's bookstore. So, I dunno. I think I'll probably get in there."

I kiss him again, because I don't know what to say. I'm proud of him, of course—proud, excited, everything-good-I-should-be-feeling, but there's a tightness in my stomach that I'm trying to ignore. The truth is, he's too good for me. He's so much smarter than I am, and so much more ambitious, and going so many amazing places, and not a single one of those places is here, with me. A year from now, he'll be off at one of the best schools in the country, making something out of his life, and I'll be... where? Still here? It's not like any of my college applications have actually been processed, because I didn't apply early-admission anywhere. I don't know if I'll get into any of the schools I've applied to, and even if I do, I don't know what I'm going to do there. There's nothing I'm sure of anymore, especially what I have with Travis, which is still so new and raw.

There's nothing that someone like me could have to offer someone like him, other than physicality; I sling a leg over his and settle down in his lap, facing him and drawing him into a kiss. He lets out a contented little sigh against my lips, like this is what he's been waiting for, and slips his hands beneath the hem of my shirt, flattening his palms against the small of my back. That sends a short stab of relief through me. Even if I don't get to keep him, at least he wants me enough to respond to me now. I can nip his bottom lip with my teeth and make him sigh; I can knot my hands in the short hair at the back of his head and make him shiver.

His hands leave my back in favor of scrambling across the surface of the desk and push the jukebox mechanism to the side so that he can shove me flat onto my back. I drag him down on top of me, spreading my legs so that he can slot his hips between my thighs, and reach immediately for his ass. He breaks away from the kiss, laughing, and smacks my hand away. "Are you completely incapable of behaving yourself for even five minutes at a time? Jesus."

"This coming from the guy who just threw me down on a teacher's desk like we're in porn?" I say. He's grinning, but still trying to keep me from groping him, so I drag his hands around front and shove them under the hem of my shirt, because nothing in the world distracts him the way my abs do. It works—it takes fifteen seconds before my shirt is rucked up under my arms, and another ten before I manage to get both my hands stuffed down the back of his jeans.

"You're still not behaving," he says.

His protests must not be serious, because they don't stop him from grinding his crotch against mine, or mouthing across my jawline. They also don't stop me from moving my hands around to his front, popping the button on his jeans and grasping his half-hard cock with the other. He makes a faint noise of approval, and I murmur, "Let me fuck you."

"We're at school, G," he says.

"So? I've totally fucked Ben here befo—ow, ow, okay, stop that," I whine, trying to wriggle away from where he has sunk his teeth into my shoulder through my t-shirt. When he releases me, I go right back to my propositions. "Nobody in the room but us, babe, everybody's out there eating. We could do it right here, on this desk." I lick a stripe up the side of his neck and whisper into his ear, "You could ride my dick. You'd look so hot doing that, just like you did this morning, in my bed. Want to?"

He shudders. "You're—fuck, you're incredibly convincing when you let your voice do that low, growly thing, you know that? But you must be trying to *break* me. We fucked twice this morning already, and my ass can really only handle so much."

You can fuck me instead, I almost offer, then go rigid. The thought has passed through my head completely without my permission, and now that it's there, bouncing around my skull, I've got no idea what to do with it. Because I don't *like* that, I know I don't—I didn't really like it with Alex, and I absolutely hated it with Seth, and I said *no* with Dave, but... Travis is a switch. So, isn't it a dick move to refuse to let him do something I know he likes to do? Relationships are supposed to involve compromise, and he's been really upfront about this not being a relationship, but maybe it could be, if I was willing to do that. Maybe if I showed him that I'm putting everything I've got into this, maybe if he knew I was willing to give up the control I know I need, he'd want to take a chance on me again. Maybe this is what I need to do to get him back.

"I, um," is all I manage at first. I clear my throat. "Alex."

He pulls his head back and frowns down at me, slips a hand from under my shirt to point at himself as he says, "Not Alex. Travis. I know things get a little convoluted in our group of friends, but—"

"No. God, shut up, that's not what I—" I take a too-deep breath, even though it makes me feel like my lungs are going to burst. "Alex is the uh, the last guy who fucked me. And it's—bottoming's not really my thing, it's not what I'm into, but if you wanted me to, I... could. You know. For you."

Wow, G, way to blow him away with your enthusiasm. Still, I kind of expect him to jump at the offer, like everyone else has, but his forehead is creased, and his voice is slow and quiet as he says, "Why?" I blink at him, and after a moment, he clarifies, "Why would you offer to do something we both know you don't want to do?"

"Because it's something you want to do, isn't it? I mean, you liked fucking Ben. And you liked fucking Joss, even if it's not really the same thing. So, maybe you'd um, you'd like fucking me, too. And you could. I-I'd let you," I say. *I'd do anything for you.*

He hasn't responded, except to raise his eyebrows, and I'm opening my mouth to try again, but then the classroom door swings open. It's only open for about two seconds before it's being hastily pulled shut again, right around Riley's words, "Oops. That's incredibly awkward."

Travis slides off of me and right back into his chair, curving his hands under my knees and tugging until I sigh and hop off the desk. When I circle around the desk to flop down into one of the empty desk chairs, he shadows me and sits down on top of the desk. "We'll talk about this later, alright?"

"I'd really rather we didn't," I admit, and he flicks my shoulder in warning.

"Are you guys, like... clothed now?" Riley calls through the door.

"We were clothed the first time you opened the door, asshole," Travis calls back, fixing the button on his jeans even as he speaks. "But, yeah, we're—you can come in."

The door bangs back open, and a flood of people enters; first Riley, Annabelle, John, Christine, then Miranda and Nate, and finally, Joss. The moment his ex-girlfriend sets foot in the classroom, Travis goes

stiff against my side. This is what really kills me—no matter how content he seems in the rare moments when I get him alone, he is always taut with barely controlled fury whenever he is forced to be in the same room as Joss, like he's trying impossibly hard to stop himself from remembering the abortion she had.

"So," Christine says, drawing out the word for a few seconds and then smiling slyly at me, "Garen and Travis. Again. This is new."

"It is," Travis agrees.

I snort. "Depends on your definition of 'new,' I suppose."

Miranda clears her throat, casts a nervous glance at her best friend, and says, "Can we talk about something else, please?"

Joss shrugs and offers up a placid smile. "Don't worry about it, Miri, I'm fine. I think they're well-suited for each other, honestly." No. I don't know what's going on, but no, this is wrong. This is the calm before the storm, and I can tell that Travis doesn't realize he should be battening down the hatches. His arm is still curled loosely, lazily around my shoulders, and he shoots me a bewildered glance when I dig my fingertips into his knee in warning. And then Joss' sweet smile is twisting around the words, "They'll be even better-suited once they both go off the deep end. It'll be a party—Garen can go back to doing cocaine, and Travis can go back to slashing his own arms open with razor blades."

Travis goes rigid against my side; I grip his leg tighter in an attempt to keep him still. He needs to stay motionless and silent, because he's a totally shit liar, but I'm not, and I think maybe I can salvage this. I sneer at Joss and say, "You're completely delusional, you know that? Trav doesn't—"

"—doesn't what? Need to 'go back to it,' considering he never stopped?" Joss cuts across me. Before I can get another word out, she seizes his wrist and yanks his shirt sleeve up to his elbow, exposing the neat column of slashes into his skin. I hadn't even noticed them last night or this morning, too used to seeing marks on him—honestly, too used to the much more traumatizing mess of jagged, criss-crossed cuts that cover both of Ben's arms in their entirety. Thank god Travis' aren't that brutal to look at, because the stunned expressions on our friends' faces are bad enough as it is.

Travis twists his arm out of her grasp and pins it to his stomach, like hiding the cuts against the folds of his shirt will make them unseen. "Don't fucking touch me," he spits out, and I know now that there's no way he can play this off. He looks too terrified to lie. "Seriously, don't ever put your hands on me again, you—"

"Travis," says a cool voice from the doorway. I jolt and twist around in my seat; Ms. Markland is staring in at us. Or, I guess, she's mostly staring at Travis' forearm, still nestled against his stomach. She clears her throat. "May I speak to you out in the hall for a moment?"

He shakes his head violently from side to side, retracting his arm from around my shoulders so that he can drag his sleeve back down. "No. I, um. No. I have to go." Our teacher repeats his name a few more times, urgency increasing as he gathers up his papers and shoves them into his backpack. He tries to stand, and I must make some sort of panicked, protesting sound, because he presses a rough kiss to my cheek and mutters, "Please don't follow me. I'll call you later."

And then he's gone, Ms. Markland trailing after him. Despite his words, all I want to do is bolt after him. Instead, I turn to Joss, whose eyes are wide and almost... what, apologetic? She blinks at me, then says quietly, "I didn't realize she was standing there."

"Bullshit," I say flatly. "Even if you didn't realize she was standing there, you should've—god, why the fuck would you do that to him? What is wrong with you? I swear to—"

"Garen, calm down," Miranda orders.

My eyes snap to her face, and I realize that she's actually staring at my hands; they're trembling against the desk, balled up into fists. I force them flat, because Jesus, I'm not going to *hit* her, no matter how much I might hate her right now. And it's completely fucked up—I know this is wrong, I know I'm about to cross a line, I know I shouldn't be saying this, even as the words are coming out of my mouth, but I just can't stop myself from staring Joss dead in the eyes and saying, "You are so lucky you're a female, you know that? Because that is honestly the only thing that is keeping me from going completely apeshit on you. If Travis had stuck to our team, if you were a guy, I would break your goddamn face for what you've done to him."

"Dude," Riley says sharply, but I don't even blink.

Neither does Joss. She just cocks her head to the side and says, "I guess I should be thankful you've got such a strong moral stance against hitting women. Tell me, Garen. Did you always feel that way, or is it some sort of residual trauma you've got from dating that guy who used to beat you like *you* were a little girl?"

It's like she has punched me in the chest hard enough to force all of the air out of my lungs. Worse, it's like Dave himself has punched me again—just as startling and awful and painful as that, at least. I'm sitting here, stone still, running through the list of all the ways she could have found out. The most obvious answer would be Travis telling her, but I know that's not it; he'd never be stupid or cruel enough to tell that to anyone, especially someone who hates me. The second most obvious answer is that she overheard me discussing it with Officer Lowitz the night she and Gabe vandalized my car—I know he had used the words "domestic assault," and I know I mentioned the restraining order, but I also know that we were both speaking too quietly for the surrounding people to hear any of the good parts, and I know that she was sitting in Travis' car for that, anyway. There's a chance that the town grapevine picked up the details of who assaulted me and why, not just that it happened, but I don't think that's the case. No. There's really only one possibility left.

I turn to stare at Nate; he looks horrified. I have to swallow hard before my throat will even open enough to let me say simply, "Seriously, dude?"

"I-I didn't... I just, I was trying to help," Nate stammers, like that makes any fucking sense.

But this is getting so much worse by the minute, because there's an uncomfortable shifting that's spreading over the rest of the group, like they're only just now beginning to realize that Joss isn't just shooting her mouth off; she's actually revealing my horrible, painful secret, just like she did to Travis.

It's Riley who finally says, "Wait—is this for real? Like, you guys aren't just making the worst joke ever?"

"Don't," is all I can say. *Don't*, like there's any chance in hell that people will actually stop talking about this just because I say *no*. Like my saying *no* ever fucking matters. And this is stupid, this is humiliating. I should be backpedaling right now, before they get a chance to realize how goddamn weak I am. How can I expect any of them to take me seriously after this? What kind of full-grown man lets himself get beaten and abused and turned into *nothing*?

And then, like she's burrowing right into my head, Joss leans forward and says, "I always knew you were overcompensating for something, with that little red car of yours, and that ridiculous haircut, and the way you swagger around like you think you're James fucking Dean. Based on the way my ex is so willing to bend over for you, you can't be trying to make up for a small dick, so... I guess you're just trying to prove your manhood figuratively, not literally. What happened, G? Did you mouth off to the wrong person and finally get punched out, just like you've always deserved?"

"No, what happened," I say, launching myself out of my seat so that I can hiss right in her face, "is that I was a fifteen-year-old kid who spent four months during my sophomore year of high school getting the

shit beaten out of me by my eighteen-year-old boyfriend. I ended up in the hospital and almost died twice because he 'couldn't handle how mad I made him.' I got this scar—" I point to the line that runs alongside my nose, "—and these—" I yank the v-neck of my shirt aside to expose some of the worse scrapes that never really faded from my shoulders, "—and these—" I hold up the hand that will never look quite right again, "—because that's what happens when a guy in combat boots decides to take out his aggression on the tenth-grader he's dating."

I become aware of a hand on my back. I think it's Annabelle, but it might be Christine. It's that reassuring bit of contact that finally--*finally* gives me the courage to say, words tumbling out all in a rush after three years of keeping them stuck inside my head, "And you want to know something else, Joss? Know how you're so fond of calling me a cheap whore, or a dirty little slut, or a piece of trash? He used to like calling me those things, too. The only difference is that he liked to say them while he was holding me down and fucking me, while I fought and cried and begged him to stop. Is that what you were hoping to hear? Is that a solid enough 'origin story' for the villain role you've cast me in? Are you happy now?"

My words are met with a resounding, painful silence. I can feel everyone staring at me, probably slack-jawed with horror or disgust, but I don't dare move my eyes away from Joss' face. Even she looks like she's on the verge of freaking out; her mouth is hanging slightly open, and her eyes look borderline panicked, and I can tell that this is something she never thought she'd hear from me. For a split second, I really believe she regrets saying anything.

And then I realize I don't give a shit anymore.

"I'm done," I say, straightening up and stepping away from Joss' desk. "You win, alright? You wanted me out of your life, your club, your—whatever. You got your wish, I'm fucking *done*. Good luck with your play, and I really hope there's somebody else in the cast who can pick up my part, because I quit."

I snatch my leather jacket off the desk I left it on and stride out of the room, not bothering to hunt down the script I don't need anymore. I don't care that opening night is less than a week away. I don't care that I'm dropping out on one of the lead roles and leaving them in a lurch. Right now, after what she's just done to Travis, and what she's made me admit about myself, I deserve a chance to be selfish.

I make it all the way to my car before Nate catches up to me, his eyes brimming with tears. "Garen, please don't go. I'm so sorry, I—"

"How could you do that to me?" I demand, still aware enough to be ashamed of the way my voice cracks on the words. "How could you think it was okay to tell my worst enemy something so private and so horrible about me? I told you that in confidence, dude. I fucking trusted you, and you screwed me over."

When he speaks, his words are practically a whimper. "I was just trying to help. Joss was always telling everyone how horrible you are, but I said that you have a lot of history she doesn't know about, a-and I thought that maybe if she knew more about you, if she knew why you are the way you are, you'd—"

"Why I am the way I am?" I echo, sneering at him. "Is that your sixteen-year-old way of saying maybe she wouldn't hate me for being such a slut if she knew that it might have something to do with me being traumatized by getting raped when I was a sophomore?"

"No!" he bursts out. "God, Garen, you never even told me that part. If I'd known it was that serious, I—"

"Right, of course. Because the fact that I got smacked around by my ex-boyfriend, that wasn't serious at all. Obviously that was just gossip waiting to happen, wasn't it?"

"No, that's not what I meant," Nate moans. "I thought that if she knew some of what you've been through, she'd be able to see you as a real person, and not just her competition for Travis' affections. I—" He breaks off, and oh Christ, he really is starting to cry. "I just like you so much, Garen, and it was killing me to see anyone look down on you when I know that you're so brave and strong."

I all but throw myself into the driver's seat of my car and set the engine roaring to life. "I am so honored be brave and strong enough that you feel justified in having a crush on me. Really, Nate, that totally makes the betrayal worth it." He opens his mouth to protest again, but I snarl, "Don't fucking speak to me, okay? I wasn't joking, I am done with you guys."

I peel out of the parking lot before he can try to make me stay, but I only make it two blocks before I have to pull over because I am shaking too much to drive straight. Part of me considers texting Travis to tell him I've quit the play, but I know he'd ask me why. And I may have just told everyone else what happened to me, but I still haven't told him. And I don't think I can. So, instead of getting my phone out, I pull myself together, drive myself the rest of the way home, and come barreling into the house, calling out, "Dad? Are you home?"

"In the study," is the reply. When I make my way down the hall and into the room, he looks up from his paperwork and gives me a quizzical smile. "I thought you were going to be at your dress rehearsal until late tonight."

"I quit the play," I say. His eyebrows shoot towards his hairline. I brace myself for a lecture on commitment and responsibility, but he remains silent. I guess my expression isn't as neutral as I'd hoped it would be. I swallow hard and say, a little too quietly, "There's this girl who doesn't like me—well, there are a lot of people who don't like me, but there's this one girl in particular... this afternoon, she told all of our friends a-about David. And how he used to beat me up. I'd only told this one other guy, but I guess he's been telling people behind my back. But this girl, she told everybody, and she said that's why I act and dress the way I do, because I'm trying to overcompensate for him making me feel like a bitch. And I'm not a real man. And I-I deserved what happened."

Both my parents have green eyes, too. If my mom is to be believed, that's actually how my dad first tried to pick her up in college; by coming up to her at a party and slurring, "You have beautiful eyes. So do I. We're obliged to procreate, let me take you to dinner tomorrow night," because apparently my dad is lying when he pretends to have more class than either of us. I know that Mom's eyes can cut right through someone, and I've had people tell me the same thing, but this is one of the first times I've seen it from my dad. He looks furious, and it actually makes me flinch.

He picks up his cell phone in one hand and a pen in the other, holding the latter out to me. "Write down this girl's name. And the boy who told her. I'm calling that school."

"Maybe you don't have to," I say. "You, um. I get to pick where I go next semester, right? That's what you told me a few weeks ago."

He sets the phone back down. "And have you made your decision now?"

"Patton," I say, without another second of hesitation. If I don't get it out now, I might not be able to say it later. But I need to know that he understands that I'm serious. I need to know that I mean it, so I repeat, as firmly as possible, "I choose Patton. I want to go back there after this semester."

76 days sober

I manage to take exactly two steps into my homeroom before the teacher—whose name I've never actually bothered to learn, because I don't have her for any classes—crooks a finger at me and says, "Mr. Anderson, a word?" I trudge up to her desk, and she hands me a slip of blue paper. "I've been asked to send you up to the guidance office as soon as you get in. They're expecting you. I'll call up now to tell them you're on your way."

"Don't tell me what to do," I say.

She doesn't acknowledge that I've spoken, except to press the call button on the wall behind her desk and chirp, "I'm sending Garen Anderson up, as asked. He'll be there in one minute."

I can't very well tell her that I'm not going, and I doubt Dad would be happy if I managed to get expelled from LHS (again) with only one month left. I trudge up to the guidance office and nudge the door open with my hip. The receptionist offers me a sad smile and says, "You can go right on in to Mrs. DiMarco's office, dear."

"Why am I here?" I ask. She says nothing, but gestures again towards the barely-cracked door that will take me deeper into the offices. I try again. "Why are you looking at me like I'm about to find out that one of my parents is dead? Nobody's dead. I saw my dad this morning, I talked to my mom last night. Nobody's dead."

"Nobody's dead," she agrees, waving her hand even more emphatically towards the door. There's no way I'm going to get a decent response out of her, so I stomp past her desk and kick Mrs. DiMarco's office door the rest of the way open.

I don't go inside. I'm not sure I can, because my muscles don't seem to be working anymore. There are five chairs in the office, two on the far side of the desk, facing me, and three on the near side, backs to me. On the far side, Ms. Markland is watching me warily, next to a woman who I've never met, but who I assume is Mrs. DiMarco. Nearer, Josslyn Pryce is sitting in the chair on the left; Travis is sitting in the one on the right. The empty seat between them is clearly meant for me.

"What's going on?" I ask slowly, even though I'm afraid that I already know.

"Hello, Garen. Please, shut the door and have a seat," Mrs. DiMarco says.

I stumble forward a couple of steps so that I can shut the door, but this bitch is delusional if she thinks I'm going to be able to sit that close to Joss without my skin crawling. What I want to do is pick up the chair and set it down on Travis' other side before I sit, but I know that'll seem petty. Instead, I just sink into it, tossing my books onto the corner of the counselor's desk and taking a sip from my coffee cup, daring any of them to comment on the technically-forbidden-during-school-hours coffee.

No one does. Joss isn't even looking at me; she's watching the two faculty members like she thinks one of them is about to pull out a gun and execute the three of us. Something brushes my knee, and I glance down, then over. Travis' eyes are fixed on one of Mrs. DiMarco's paperweights, but his trembling hand is bumping up against my jeans, and I lace my fingers through his without asking why he needs the reassurance of contact. And still no one says anything about it.

Instead, Mrs. DiMarco says, "Ms. Markland has asked me to call this meeting so that we can work out some of the problems that you all seem to be having. From what she has told me, the conflict between the three of you has gotten completely out of hand." None of us deny this. "I'd like to make sure I fully understand what's going on. Correct me if I'm wrong, but the issues you've had this semester started because you two—" She points to Travis and I, "—used to be a couple, but broke up, and then you two—" She points to Travis and Joss, "—became a couple, which is why there's tension between you two—" Joss and I. She pauses, glances down at my hand, then adds, "Though, from the look of things, Mr. McCall and Mr. Anderson are a couple once again. Is that correct?"

"No," I say immediately. I don't plan to let anyone in this room make Travis say a single word throughout the course of this meeting. "We're not a couple; we're just close friends. And I kind of get the feeling that you're here to talk to us all about something a bit more important than the bullshit you could find out from reading our facebook walls."

"Fine," Ms. Markland says, turning her eyes towards me. "Halfway through Saturday's dress rehearsal, I found Nathan Holliday in tears backstage because he said you had quit the play and stormed out."

I take a sip of my coffee. "It's true."

"We open in three days, Garen."

"Believe me, I would have quit earlier, if I'd known that Nate was talking about me behind my back, or that lovely Joss over here was planning to turn me into the club joke."

"You were already the club joke," Joss whispers, "but if Nate had told me the full story, I never would have said anything. I hate you, Garen, but even you don't deserve to have people find those things out about you."

Travis clears his throat, but his voice is still wavering as he says, "I'm sorry, I don't understand what you guys are talking about."

"After you walked out of the classroom on Saturday, Joss told everyone who was still there about the fact that I used to date a guy who beat the crap out of me," I say flatly. I pause, then roll my eyes towards Mrs. DiMarco and Ms. Markland. "And no, we really don't need to talk about that. I've already discussed it at length with my therapist, my parents, and my best friends. I have a restraining order against the guy, which I'm pretty sure the school is aware of, considering part of that restraining order keeps him away from this building. I'm over it, and I'm not planning to have a heart-to-heart with anybody today, so if that's why I'm here, I want to leave."

"That's not the only reason you're here," Mrs. DiMarco says. "Some of your friends—" She ignores the way I scoff at the word, "—say they have recently learned of certain information that has made them concerned for your well-being."

I cock my head to the side, trying to ignore the pounding of my heart inside my chest, and say, "I'm fine. Whatever they're concerned about is probably bullshit."

"Then please explain to me," Ms. Markland says, "why at least three members of the drama club have confided in me that they fear you are currently experiencing or have recently suffered severe sexual abuse."

Severe sexual abuse. Is there a type of sexual abuse that *isn't* severe? I don't say anything. I wish the hand I've got tangled up with Travis' wasn't shaking so badly. His eyes are boring into the side of my head, but I don't know if I'm managing a good enough poker face to make up for the fact that I still can't seem to force out a single sound.

Mrs. DiMarco opens her mouth to speak, but before she can say anything else, Joss interrupts in a watery but firm voice, "That's not true."

"Josslyn," Ms. Markland sighs.

"No, I'm not trying to say I don't believe him. I'm trying to say that that's not what he told us," Joss says. I look over at her. Out of the faculty members' line of sight, she presses the sole of her shoe to the toe of my boot, a clear warning, *shut the fuck up and let me fix this*. The same sort of warning I tried to give Travis just before she yanked up the sleeve of his shirt in front of everyone. "After Travis left the classroom, Garen and I were arguing, and I did tell people that his ex-boyfriend used to beat him up. That's true, and I'm sorry I said it, but that's where the conversation ended. We argued about that, about the physical abuse, it wasn't—he never said he was raped. I can understand how maybe some people might have misinterpreted what he said to mean that, but it's not what he told us."

I have no idea why she's trying to help me, protect me, keep the secrets it's her fault I revealed in the first place. She's probably being driven by some sort of guilt, and it's so not my job to make her feel better about what a shitty person she is, but I remain completely still and silent, smoothing my expression into one of quiet neutrality.

"And I suppose you're all going to tell me that Travis' self-injury is a figment of the collective imagination as well," Ms. Markland says flatly.

None of us speak. There's nothing either Joss or I can say that will be enough to convince everyone that it's all a misunderstanding. Travis won't lie, not right now. My knuckles are white from how hard I'm gripping his hand, like I can force him into silence if I just hold on tightly enough.

"Travis," Mrs. DiMarco says gently, "I need you to roll up your sleeve and show me your arm."

I tighten my grip even more, just in case he tries to obey. "No. You can't make him do that. Maybe if he were still underage, but he's an adult. You can't make him show you, and you can't call his parents—"

"He may be legally an adult, but he is a student whose care has been entrusted to us," Mrs. DiMarco says steadily, "and he will roll up his sleeves now."

But Travis shakes his head and says, in little more than a whisper, "I'm not going to do that. But I'm also not going to deny that you'd find exactly what you're afraid of finding. Yes. I do... that. I'll admit it, but I won't show you."

It's a concession I guess they're willing to make, because the conversation moves onward.

"How long have you been harming yourself, Travis?" Mrs. DiMarco asks. I wonder how much she paid to get the degree that taught her how to use that condescendingly sweet tone of voice.

"On and off for a few years," Travis says. When she doesn't reply, he amends, "Five years. On and off since I was thirteen years old."

"And have you sought professional help?" she prompts.

He finally looks up. "You know I have. You're the one who told me I was required to start seeing a therapist before I could come back to school after I overdosed during freshman year. And you're the one who approved my temporary leave so that my mom could send me to the treatment center, even though I missed a month of classes. So, yes, I've gotten professional help."

"Are you still being prescribed Paxil?" she asks.

"Prozac," Travis says through gritted teeth, and I release the bone-crunching grip I've got on his hand so that I can brush my fingertips across his palm in what I hope is a more soothing gesture. "I was being prescribed Prozac, not Paxil. But no, I'm off everything now."

Mrs. DiMarco turns to me. "And what about you, Garen? Are you on any medication at this time?"

"No," I say curtly. I don't tell her that Doc considered putting me on mood stabilizers in the earlier stages of my treatment; it doesn't seem like it's anyone else's business, especially since we eventually agreed that I could learn to curb my impulsive, aggressive, self-destructive tendencies without them, and that making me dependent on any drug would be the worst idea.

Mrs. DiMarco earns a little bit more of my respect when she accepts my answer and turns to Joss with no change of expression. "What about you, Josslyn? Are you currently taking any medication?"

"Um, no?" Joss says, eyes wide.

"Are you seeing a therapist?"

"I don't need to be!" she says in a tone hysterical enough to suggest she's wrong. "Look, I'm not crazy,

and I'm not unstable. I just hate these two people."

Mrs. DiMarco crosses her arms. "Well, regardless of your personal feelings for either of these boys, you need to change your behavior immediately. This school does *not* condone bullying in any form, and now that we've been made aware of the situation between the three of you, I will be monitoring you closely. If you continue to act the way you have been acting, I'll be forced to take action."

Joss scoffs. "You can't force me to like somebody."

"No, I can't. But I can recommend that you be suspended for tormenting other students, and if it continues, I can request your expulsion," Mrs. DiMarco says simply. Oh man, she's just getting cooler and cooler the longer this conversation continues.

"For the record, she's probably serious," I say quietly. "It is way easier to get kicked out of this place than I thought it would be. Just, you know, speaking from experience."

"Perhaps your experiences should have been more focused on attending your classes," Mrs. DiMarco points out. She pauses, scribbles something on a slip of paper, and passes it to me. "In fact, I think it would be a good idea for you and Ms. Pryce to continue on to class right now. Consider this the final warning for both of you."

Joss snatches her late slip and bolts without another word. I take my slip and stand, but don't leave. "What about Travis?"

"Travis needs to remain behind for a little while longer," Mrs. DiMarco says. "We called this meeting because some serious concerns had been raised. Now that we know that the issues regarding you have been resolved, you're free to leave."

"What about Travis?" I repeat stubbornly.

He looks up at me, gives me an absolutely meaningless smile, and says, "I think it's pretty obvious that my issues are anything but resolved."

I can feel the muscles at my jawline twitching with the effort it takes to keep myself from snarling something that'll get me into trouble. I don't even know what's going on, or what they'll do with him now. All I know is that last year, Ben was constantly terrified of a teacher or counselor finding out what he was doing to himself. That must mean they can do *something*, right? Maybe not kick him out, but certainly tell his mom. Fuck. His *mom*. She still doesn't speak to him, and now this delightful bit of information is going to be thrown into the mix, like that'll do anything to help the state of his mental health. It's not fair. It's not *right*.

Not giving a shit about the audience, I stroke a palm over the back of his head, curving my hand just enough to pull him close so that I can press a kiss to his temple and murmur, "You'll come find me if you need me, right?" He nods. The urge to tell him that I love him is almost choking me, but now's really not the time. I compromise with another kiss to his skin, then turn to the door.

"One last thing, Garen," Ms. Markland says after me. I pause, rotate on my heels, blink at her. "The play. You made the commitment to participate, and I'd hate to have to cancel the entire production because you're having personal problems with another cast member. Will you agree to go on in your role, provided I ensure that you don't have to interact with Josslyn unless you're on stage?"

I want to say no. I want to bargain, to tell her I'll only do it if they let Travis walk out of here with me right now. But I'm not in a position to be making deals, so instead, I find myself nodding stiffly, turning back around, and walking out of the office.

Concentrating in any of my classes is nearly impossible, especially when third period rolls around and

Travis isn't in trial law. Mr. Esteves shoots me a questioning glance, but wisely chooses not to ask when my only response is stare back at him, stone-faced. It isn't until halfway through my film and lit class that my phone finally buzzes in my pocket. I pull it out, not bothering to hide it from Ms. Markland, who frowns at me, but makes no comment, presumably because she realizes who the text is from.

His tiredness is obvious even through text. *Silver lining: my mom is finally talking to me again. Rest of the cloud: she says that I can either go back on antidepressants or go back to the institution for another month-long "rest." Apparently the "choice" is mine. But it has to be one or the other.*

where are you right now? I text back. *i'll come find you. whatever you need.*

Sitting outside Dr. Baker's office, he replies. LHS won't let me come back to class until I have a letter from a licensed shrink saying that I'm not a danger to myself or other students. He agreed to squeeze me in for an appointment during his usual lunch hour. I'm going to go back on the meds. I can't go back to the hospital.

you hated being on the meds, t, I send. you said they made you feel like you were dead inside.

I can picture the shrug I'm sure he intends to go along with his next message. *I'm not sure that really matters to anyone, as long as I keep smiling.*

79 days sober

True to her usual "when it rains, I will make it pour hard enough to drown everyone in this county" method, Evelyn makes up for three months' of silence by becoming the most overbearing mother on the planet. On Tuesday, Travis storms up to me in the hall, ranting about how his mom forced him to take his new batch of pills in front of her that morning, then demanded that he open his mouth and lift his tongue so she could be sure he'd really swallowed them. On Wednesday evening, he texts me to tell me that she has somehow managed to confiscate all of the keys to the Subaru that's got Travis' name on the title, not hers. I'm not sure how long they argue over that, but eventually, he must just get tired of the conversation, because he tells me that she's getting back into the habit of driving him to work and school so that he can never go anywhere without her permission.

Or without just calling me and having me instantly scramble out to my Ferrari to come get him.

By the time I pull up in front of their house to pick Travis up on my way to the high school for the opening night of *Grease*, their arguing has reached a level audible from the fucking driveway. I remain in the safety of my car, staring down at the steering wheel and trying to pretend that I can't hear the very distinct sound of two people screaming at each other from inside the house. I pull out my phone and send Travis a text reading, *outside now. ready to go?*

When five minutes have passed and he still hasn't replied, I grit my teeth and get out of the car. The last thing I need is to get myself involved in this, but it's *Travis*—I'm already involved. My first jab of the doorbell goes ignored, even though I'm sure they can hear it. Based on the volume of snarling on the other side of the door, they're standing right in the living room. I ring the bell again. Nothing. Again. When I'm ignored once more, I flip through the keys on my keyring until I find the one that's supposed to open the front door to the house. I'm more than a little surprised to discover that it still fits—I'd kind of expected Ev to change the locks the second Dad and I moved out. But the lock clicks, the door swings open, and then I'm standing there in the entryway, blinking at the pair of them. It takes them a minute to even notice that I'm there, but the second they do, there is dead silence.

Then, Evelyn plants her hands on her waist and demands, "What are you doing here? How did you get in?"

I raise my keys and give them a little jingle. "Still my dad's house, still have a key. Trav, you alright?"

"He's fine," Evelyn snaps.

"I'm *not*," Travis says, grabbing his jacket off the back of the couch and herding me back out onto the porch. "We need to head out now. You need to get into costume, and I need to meet with the crew."

"We are not done talking, Travis. You can be late. I'm sure the others will be fine without you," Evelyn says.

Travis throws his hands up and says, "Actually, they won't be. I'm the fucking stage manager, Mom. You'd know this, if you bothered to listen to anything I have to say about this production. Hell, maybe you would've even bothered to buy tickets. But no, you weren't interested."

"Travis Daniel McCall, if you leave this house right now, don't—"

"—even think about coming back," Travis finishes, waving her off as he backs out of the house. "I know, Mom, I get it. I love you, too."

The door closes on whatever Evelyn's response is. For a moment, Travis and I just stand there, staring at each other. Eventually, I swallow and say, "Dude, did she seriously just kick you out of the house?"

He laughs. "That's her new way of saying 'goodbye.' She says it every time I leave the house these days. Until she actually changes the locks while I'm out, I'll just keep assuming she doesn't mean it. God, I can't fucking wait until I get to move out. Only—" He takes a deep breath, holds it, slowly lets it out as he heads for the Testarossa. "Whatever. I don't wanna talk about it. And we're about to be late."

We already kind of are, but I'm not about to point that out. I let him scowl silently out the window for the entire drive to school. He's been all over the place for the last two days as his body relearns how to deal with being on meds; he gets headaches pretty much all the time, and his fuse is a lot shorter, and he sometimes zones out, staring blankly at me until I give up on talking and have to kiss a smile back onto his face. It's the tactic I use now, crowding him into a corner at the end of the hall behind the auditorium and pressing my body against his until he laughs into my mouth and says, "You need to get ready. I've seen how long it takes the hair and makeup crew to finish with you."

"I hate hair and makeup," I whine. It's true—all the dudes in the cast have to have their hair slicked back into a fifties-style pompadour. It doesn't look that bad on John or Gabe, but their hair isn't as much of *athing* as mine is. I don't look like myself if my hair isn't spiked.

Travis isn't having any of it, though. He pushes me towards the classroom where the girls in charge of hair and makeup are setting up camp, then wanders off to go do whatever boring crew stuff he's got to do. I don't say anything when I walk into the room. Riley and Annabelle are the only members of the club I'm still talking to, and neither of them are here, so I just throw myself into a chair near the back and start texting people while one of the girls comes over to carefully sculpt my hair.

how excited are you to come watch me be awesome tonight? I send to Jamie. When he doesn't immediately reply, I scowl and forward the text in separate messages to Ben and Alex as well.

The only response I get is from Alex, who sends back, *so thrilled i keep pissing myself, gonna b awkward 4 whoever has 2 sit next 2 me. ben says not 2 text him while hes driving.*

tell him not to drive while i'm texting him, I reply. *speaking of 'whoever has to sit next to you,' left your tickets at the door, all four are in the same envelope. don't let them lose jamie and rachael's.*

His reply is predictable: *can i ask them 2 tear them up on purpose?*

nope & you have to be nice to both of them. tonight (like all nights) is about ME, not YOU and the fact that

you're a dumb fucking cunt who took too long to figure out you wanted to date jamie. your punishment = you have to sit next to his new girlfriend.

no i don't. already bullied ben into letting me have the end seat & u know jamie wont make his gf sit next 2 a stranger. so ill have b/j as a buffer between me & her.

What I really want to tell him is that forcing Ben and Jamie to sit next to each other is just going to leave both of them pissed off and possibly turned on, but it's not like I can explain their entire dynamic without making all my favorite people hate each other. Instead, I text back, *lol b/j. whatever, don't be a dick to mybff.*

dont b the kind of loser who says 'bff.'

A new text arrives from a number I don't recognize--*Hi, Garen, this is Rachael. James asked me to text you because he's driving right now. We're both looking forward to the play tonight. He'll text you when we get to the school :)*

I add her number to my contacts list and reply, noted. *thanks for letting me know.*

He doesn't text when he gets to school, though; he sneaks into my classroom fifteen minutes before curtain and declares, "Garen Anderson, you James Dean motherfucker. Look at you, in your little costume. I might have to fight McCall for the rights to take you home tonight."

"You fucking faggot, you got me flowers?" I say, raising my eyebrows at the bouquet in his hands.

But Jamie has been in the room just long enough get distracted by the way Christine's pencil skirt clings to her curves. He flashes her his brightest, most disarming smile and says, "They *were* for you, until I saw your fellow cast member over here. Now I'm pretty sure they're for her. Hello there, sweetheart. You're absolutely stunning."

"Th-Thank you," she stutters, looking surprised but delighted by the attention.

I wave my hand between them and say, "James, Christine. Christine, James. Give me those fucking flowers, you dickbag." I snatch them out of his grasp and pin them protectively to my chest before he can give them away to one of my hot co-stars.

"There's a card in there somewhere," he adds absently. "Blah blah, break a leg, you probably won't fuck up too badly, whatever."

I pluck the miniature envelope out of the bouquet and flip it open, digging out the card. Despite his flippant mention of it, the tiny card is covered front and back with his neat script, sweet words preemptively praising my performance and telling me how much he loves me. As reserved as he can be, Jamie has a tendency to gush when it comes to me. I tuck the card in the back pocket of my costume—for luck—and plant a quick kiss on the corner of his mouth. "Thank you." He hums his acknowledgment without looking away from Christine. I nudge his ankle with the toe of one of my Chucks and say, "Where's Rachael?"

"Who's Rachael?" Christine asks.

"My girlfriend," Jamie says. Christine frowns, and he shrugs, still grinning. "Sorry, I tend to get ahead of myself. And my relationship status doesn't do anything to make you any less beautiful."

I clap him on the shoulder. "When that relationship status changes—which it probably will, soon, for obvious reasons—I'll give her your number. Now get the fuck out of here, curtain's going up soon. Tell the others I say hi."

That's enough to finally snap him out of it. He turns to me, narrows his eyes, and says, "Rachael

requested the aisle seat so that she wouldn't *cause a rift between me and my friends*, and Alexander's sitting in the other end seat, throwing a silent temper tantrum over having to be near me. So, thank you very fucking much for making it so that I'm stuck sitting next to the midget all night."

"You're welcome!" I say brightly as I clamp my hands down on his shoulders and steer him towards the door. Two steps into the hallway, I lean closer and whisper, "And thank you very fucking much for totally bringing the awkwardness by sleeping with all of my friends."

"You slept with them all first!" he protests, but before I can say anything, he darts off down the hall to return to his seat. I roll my eyes and head for the door to the stage wings.

The play itself goes off with a minimal amount of failure. A few of the chorus members fuck up some of their choreography, and there are one or two fumbled lines, a few flat notes during musical numbers. I manage to remember all my lines, and my version of "There Are Worse Things I Could Do" gets a solid two minutes of applause—the cheering and clapping continues even after I've left the stage and the curtains have closed for the set change.

My only real mistake is a brief break from character. After we've finished the "Sandra Dee" number, a spot appears on the girls, gathered in front of the stage and peering up at us like they're looking up at a bedroom window, calling for us to come out and go cruising with them. I act out the scene exactly as we've blocked it; I grin down at the girls, then back up into the corner of the stage to say, "*I'm gonna go get my kicks while I'm still young enough to get 'em*," as I... strip, basically. I'm supposed to swap my beater and sweatpants for a t-shirt, jeans, and sneakers before I clamber off the edge of the stage like I'm climbing out a window.

The problem is that the moment I'm standing on stage in front of a few hundred people in nothing but a pair of decently form-fitting, black boxer-briefs, there's a sudden burst of cat-calls from the audience. For half a second, I think it's just Jamie, Alex, and Ben, all being complete assholes, but then I realize that it's actually *dozens of people*, all of whom seem to be women. And it's so awkward, because my fucking mom and dad are sitting right there in the front row, looking really goddamn offended that people are objectifying their only child. That's too much for me to handle, and I laugh so hard that Riley turns my mic off from the control booth so that I won't ruin the entire scene while I quickly redress in the jeans and tee.

Beyond that, the play is a success. I get more than my fair share of applause during the final bows, and once the curtain has been drawn at the end of the night, I'm riding the most intense buzz I've ever gotten from any activity not involving substance abuse or orgasms.

Or, at least, it doesn't involve orgasms *yet*.

It takes me exactly thirty-three seconds to track down Travis backstage. He's weaving his way through the rest of the club members with enough focus and determination to make me suspect that he's looking for me, too. Sure enough, the moment his gaze lands on me, he grabs me by the front of my costume and walks me backwards—we're moving fast and I'm practically tripping over my feet, but neither of us is really bothered by it—until we're out of the hallway where everyone is gathering and in the smaller, empty hall that leads to the sophomore wing.

"You were—" he says, pressing me up against a closed classroom door and kissing me hard on the mouth between words, "—so fucking good. Best part of the entire production. Your song, Garen—people in the audience were like, *crying*, it was insane. You were amazing."

"The set was perfect," I say, reaching down to cup him through the front of his jeans. He's half-hard already, and I *love* it, I love that I can affect him this much in such a short period of time. Love that he does the same thing to me. I let my mouth trail down the side of his neck as I continue, "Everything you did, everything you planned turned out exactly the way it should have. The set was amazing, the props were perfect, everything, that fucking *jukebox*, I still can't believe you made that—"

"Can you please go change out of your costume right the fuck now so that we can go back to your place and—"

"What, you seriously think we're going to make it all the way back to my place? Think again, dude, we'll be lucky if we make it to the parking lot—"

"This classroom works just fine for me," he says, fumbling for the doorknob that's digging into my ass right now, and yeah, I'm definitely not going to bother going all the way back into the other part of the school to change out of my costume before this happens.

But then there is a very pointed throat-clearing and I hear Ben's voice saying from a few feet away, "Everyone kind of guessed that this might be happening right now. I'm fairly certain that they chose me to be the one to find you guys because I've already seen both of you naked. But can you, you know, hold off for a little bit? Because Garen's mom wants to congratulate you both on how well the show went."

"Wow, okay, I guess we're done here," I say, pushing Travis away from my body so that I can stare down at my crotch. It's actually kind of shocking how quickly I've gone soft. "Thanks for talking about my mom while I've got—or, while I *had* a boner, dude. I really appreciate that."

"Here to help," Ben says, bowing. He pauses, cocks his head to the side, and asks, "Hmm. Guess Travis isn't as disgusted by that topic as you are, though."

"That's because Travis isn't actually a blood relative, so he's allowed to acknowledge that Marian and Bill are possibly the hottest parents ever," Jamie announces, rounding the corner with the worst conversation contribution ever. "It's no wonder that Garen turned out so gorgeous, when he comes from such fine stock."

I still haven't looked away from my own crotch. "This is—I mean, that's almost impressive. I've literally never been so turned off so quickly in my life. I didn't even know that was biologically possible." Finally, I blink around at my friends and add, "Alright, so, I guess I'll get changed and find my parents, since I'm obviously not going to be using my dick anytime soon."

"That's the spirit," Alex says cheerfully as he joins the group, trailed by the blond girl I vaguely recall meeting at Jamie's apartment a few months ago. They seem to be trying to ignore each other, even more so when Jamie slips an arm around Rachael's waist and introduces her to Travis. Alex clears his throat and says, "Once you've accepted all your congratulations or whatever, you guys should come out with us. We were all saying earlier that we could go to that diner on Main, get something to eat, fawn over you."

It sounds like this will end up being an incredibly awkward experience for everyone involved, but Travis—who doesn't realize exactly how upset Jamie really was over Alex picking his imaginary possibility of a future with Ben over the real chance at a relationship with Jamie, or that Jamie and Ben are both pointedly trying not to acknowledge that Ben recently hatefucked Jamie into the floor of his apartment, or the creep factor of how I only met Rachael in passing when I was hurrying her out of her boyfriend's apartment so that I could whine about how in love Travis and I were-slash-are and nail Jamie to forget about it—just smiles brightly and says, "Yeah, that sounds great."

Which is how, half an hour later, I find myself back in my regular clothes, scrubbing stage makeup off my face with the sleeve of my jacket, and wandering from my car to the door of the Lakewood Diner as Jamie slings an arm around my shoulders and mutters into my ear, "I've slept with four of the five people I'm about to sit down with. Think we can find a seating arrangement that won't leave me wedged between my girlfriend and a gentleman I've recently had awkward sexual congress with?"

I plant a kiss on his cheek and say, "I'm working with the same percentage, and if I wasn't afraid of pussy, I probably would've found a way to nail your girlfriend, too. It's fine. We'll shove you into a window seat and stick Rachael between the two of us. Minimal awkwardness, as long as you don't look anyone in the eye across the table."

The 'minimal awkwardness' part is almost definitely a lie; I have no idea what Alex and Ben talked about on their way over here, but they're both so on-edge in anticipation of this uncomfortable meal that they've dissolved into an argument about something stupid. Travis trails after them, making polite conversation with Rachael, who keeps shooting amused but vaguely judgmental looks over at Alex, like she's trying to figure out what the hell almost made Jamie pick him over her. All in all, it's not the best start to a night.

"Table for six?" the exhausted-looking waitress says, snatching up a handful of laminated menus.

"Yes, please," I say. Travis, Rachael, and I all smile widely at her, like that'll make up for the fact that Al and Ben still haven't stopped sniping at each other. She blinks at us, so clearly, it makes up for fuck-all. She leads us to a booth in the back corner, away from the few other customers.

Before we can even sit, Rachael excuses herself to run to the ladies' room—probably to crack a cyanide capsule so she doesn't have to sit through this meal. The moment she's gone, I turn to Jamie, about to suggest that he take the window seat as planned, but the bickering must be getting to him, because he turns and says, in the sharpest voice I've heard from him in recent memory, "Both of you, shut the fuck up and sit down. Now."

Almost before the final word of instruction is spoken, Ben's mouth is shut, and his ass is on the bench. It's the most stunning display of instantaneous obedience I've ever seen in my life. Jamie stares at him. I stare at him. Travis stares at him. Hell, Ben seems like he kind of wants to stare at himself. Instead, he just ducks his head, presses himself further into the booth, up against the wall, and listens—or maybe pretends to listen—to Alex's uninterrupted muttering. There's a beat of hesitation, and then, despite the request he made when we were walking into the building not two minutes ago, Jamie steps forward and sinks onto the bench next to Ben.

It's really fortunate that Rachael's in the restroom and Alex is still plowing ahead with his attempts to win whatever debate he'd been having, because there is nothing at all subtle about the way Jamie reaches up and brushes Ben's hair away from his ear so that he can whisper something to him. There is a breath-long flash of *something* across Ben's face—he looks like he might be pleased with himself, or with Jamie. But then, like he's remembering who or where he is, his expression morphs into a scowl, and he hunches closer to the wall and yanks the hood of his sweatshirt up so that his ears are covered.

Alex must take Ben's silence as surrender, because he looks satisfied as he flops down onto the bench to sit across from his roommate. I take the seat next to him and pull Travis down next to me, because I don't see any point in forcing Rachael to sit next to anyone other than her boyfriend when she gets back. And because I get to peruse my menu with one hand on Travis' knee, and he shoots me these adorably flustered looks every time I tighten my grip.

Rachael returns, followed shortly by the waitress, and we all place our orders. We manage to make some progress with awkward small talk and discussion of tonight's play, but by the time our food is actually being served, the conversation is lagging. I have no choice but to throw myself on the sword and say, "I have something I need to talk to you guys about."

Rachael tugs on the sleeve of my jacket. "If this is a personal thing, I can wait outside for a minute. Or in the car. I don't want to intrude."

She's sweeter than most of Jamie's girlfriends have been over the years; it's a nice change. I smile politely and say, "Totally unnecessary. I'm not going to say anything weird, it's just—" I pause, then turn my attention to my friends. They're all waiting in utter silence, like they think I'm about to tell them I've got cancer. Or that I'm going back to rehab. Or... something else that's similar to any of the other creepy things I've revealed over the past year. It makes me want to smile, but instead, I shrug my shoulders and say, "I'm moving back to New York after this semester ends."

Ben's eyebrows shoot up. Jamie seems like he's wavering between happiness at the idea of me being

closer to him, and annoyance at the fact that I've clearly decided to ignore his advice about not going back to Patton. Travis is still and silent, and when I meet his eyes, his gaze drops to the tabletop. He's frowning, but not like he's pissed. More like he's thinking. Still, it's Alex who finally nudges my boot under the table and says, "What about school?"

"Transferring," I say, pausing just to take a sip of my coffee, "back to Patton. My dad spoke to the headmaster and made me the offer a few weeks ago, after that fight during lunch. I'd been planning to refuse, but after what school's been like since then... I can't be at LHS for another semester. I can't afford the risk of getting another concussion, I can't afford another ten grand in damage to the Testarossa, I can't afford to let any more of my personal history get spread around like it's nothing."

Jamie reaches across the table and rubs his knuckles against the back of my hand until I flip it over so that he can press our palms together. "Is school really that unbearable for you?"

"Yes," Travis answers for me. He still doesn't look up from the table. "You guys have no idea how they treat him. It's fucking disgusting. Everyone is constantly talking shit about him, even people who've never spoken to him. He gets pushed into lockers and tripped any time he tries to walk across the cafeteria. People have this *game* of trying to see if they can shove him hard enough to spill his morning coffee on him—and at the Grind, we serve coffee at a hundred and sixty degrees. That's hot enough to give somebody third degree burns. It's not funny, not at all, but everybody thinks it is."

"Okay, so, clearly LHS is a shitty place for G to go to school. But... you've told us all what life was like when you were at Patton last time," Ben says slowly. "I'm not sure that living in a dorm with a bunch of people who are drinking and using is a good idea. You'd be putting yourself around exactly the sort of thing you should be avoiding. And you'd be alone."

Jamie swirls the tip of his spoon through his tea and says, "I voiced the same concern when he first told me about this the last time I came here. He has yet to give me a satisfactory response to—"

"Day student," I interrupt. The progress of the spoon pauses, and I grin. "Yeah, that's what I thought. Wanna stop running your mouth and let me finish?"

He shoots me a wry smile and says, "Depends on whether or not you're going to say anything worth listening to."

"Everything I say is worth listening to," I grumble, but I still accept the apologetic kiss he presses to the back of my hand. To the rest of the group, I clarify, "Patton Military is a boarding school, but they have some day students who live off-campus and commute. Kind of like you two—" I gesture to Ben and Alex, "—do for college. Dad and I *both agreed with you*, you nosy little shits, about it being a bad idea for me to live in the dorms, so we've talked it out. He says I could get an apartment off-campus so that I don't, you know, have to put up with being around a lot of partying."

Ben is unimpressed by this news. "You'd still be alone, though. When you're here and you have a bad night, you usually come stay over at our place, or call Travis to hang out. If you have a bad night there, you'll be completely on your own. It's not like you can make an hour drive into the city to see James every time you don't feel fine."

"What if he wasn't alone, though?" Travis says, looking up from his plate. When his words are met with silence, he amends, "What if he found a roommate to live with? You know, someone who understands, who'd be there for him on the nights that are hard to handle."

Jamie's face splits into a blinding smile. "I would be *delighted* to handle Garen on hard nights. What do you say, sweetheart? Wanna strike up a sequel to 'Garen and Jamie's Excellent Roommate Adventure'?"

"You have an apartment already," I point out.

He reaches across the table with both hands to tangle his fingers with mine. "So? I'll break my lease. We can get a place halfway between your school and mine; we'd both have a half-hour commute for classes. We've already lived together, we know we get along well as roommates. Let's shack up."

"How does your girlfriend feel about that?" Alex mutters, and Jamie shoots him a warning look.

Rachael, however, smiles brightly and leans around Jamie to say, "I'm fine with it. First of all, I think it's great that James wants to be there for his best friend. They're both really good men." Jamie's eyes flicker back to me, and he grins when I flash him a thumbs up and mouth, *we're both good men*. Rachael continues, "Second of all, it's not like I think *I'm* going to be living with James anytime soon. We only just started dating, and we're still keeping things pretty casual. I mean, I don't even care if he still sleeps with boys."

"You don't?" Alex says doubtfully. Another glare from Jamie, another smile from Rachael, though this one is sharper.

"If you're wondering why I requested that James end things with you, you can ask me. I won't lie," she says. I bite down on my lip to hold back a smile; sometimes, it's not hard to see why Jamie likes her. When Alex hitches his chin at her—presumably his non-verbal way of asking her to tell him the truth—she says, "I had no problem with him having sex with you. Just like I had no problem with him having sex with Garen, or—I'm sorry, I don't actually know if he has had sex with Travis or Ben."

Travis snorts, but Ben doesn't move a muscle. His stillness doesn't escape Rachael's attention. I watch her blink at him, then shoot Jamie a thoroughly amused glance that he pretends not to see. Wow, my life would've been so much easier if Travis' last girlfriend had been this awesome.

"Alex, my point is that James having sex with men doesn't bother me at all. What would bother me is him being in a relationship with someone else. I don't want to have a boyfriend who has a boyfriend, and I think that's a more than reasonable boundary to put on a relationship. If I honestly believed that you two were just friends who happened to sleep together, I wouldn't have asked him to end things with you. And hey, if I was wrong and neither of you has genuine feelings for the other, then by all means, tell me, and you can go back to having sex. Otherwise, my request stands."

"I feel like I should start a slow clap," I whisper across the table.

"That's how I feel almost every time she talks," Jamie whispers back, and Rachael rewards him with a kiss to the cheek.

"I don't get your relationship," Alex mutters.

Ben snorts. "That's what you said to me when Garen and I were together."

"And when Ben and I were together," Travis adds.

"Kinda goes without saying that *nobody* really got my relationship with my kid brother over here," I say, ruffling Travis' hair. "But yeah, Al, you've definitely given me the whole 'I don't get your relationship' thing."

"Okay, so maybe I just don't get relationships in general," Alex snaps.

Ben shrugs. "That's not terribly surprising, considering you've never been in love."

"Yes, I have," Alex says, and Jamie flinches. Travis' hand drops off the table and onto my knee, giving it a rough squeeze. I cover his hand with mine and squeeze back. Jesus, I always knew Al would snap and tell Ben he loved him, but I never thought I'd be *there* for it. This is awkward on a whole host of levels, particularly because Ben is just blinking at him. Alex pokes at his eggs with the tines of his fork and says,

without looking up, “Just because I haven’t bothered to say anything doesn’t mean I don’t feel it. That I haven’t felt it for... a while now, I guess.”

“Oh,” Ben says blankly. Alex shrugs.

I’m pretty sure Travis’ fingers are going to leave bruises on my leg if I don’t do something to ease the tension soon. I clear my throat and lean forward to say to Rachael, “Jamie told me you’re in the poli-sci department with him. What are you planning to do after graduation?”

Alex snorts, clearly a little amused at my horrible attempts to change the subject. Ben is still just staring across the table at his best friend. After nearly a minute of Rachael’s chattering, his eyes flicker down to the table, then to Jamie’s face. I glance over—Jamie is staring back, one eyebrow ever so slightly quirked. It looks like a challenge, and if it is, Ben totally loses, because he mutters to him, just loud enough for me to hear, “Can you please let me out of the booth?”

“You alright?” I say.

“Can you please let me out of the booth?” he repeats, curling his hand into a fist and pressing it hard against Jamie’s ribs until he finally nudges Rachael to her feet and slips out after her. Ben scoots out of the booth, and I reach around Travis’ shoulders to make a grab for his arm, but he shakes me off, forces a smile and says, “Excuse me. I’ll just—I’ll be right back.” He turns and strides out of the diner.

The moment the door has swung shut behind him, Jamie turns to Alex and says, “Personally, I think that could have gone a lot worse. He could have cried or vomited or tried to kill himself.” He pauses, frowns, amends, “Could’ve done that in front of you, rather. Not too sure what he’s doing outside right now.”

“Bite me, Jamie,” Alex sighs.

“Have done. Funny how ending that still didn’t make the midget return your affections,” Jamie says, frown melting into one of his disarming smiles.

I press my hand to Travis’ shoulder until he realizes that I’m trying to get him to let me up. Once he moves, I stand, push him back into his seat, and order, “Keep them from killing each other—if Jamie doesn’t shut up soon, you have my permission to knee him under the table. I’m going to go talk to Ben.”

I bolt for the door, skidding a little on the front steps, still dusted with snow. Ben is around the back of the building, sitting on the trunk of my car and staring down at his Chucks. Usually I’d bitch at him for that—make a comment about how his hundred-and-fifteen-pound body better not dent my car, or how I’ll kick his ass if his studded belt scratches my paintjob—but he doesn’t blink once in the entire time it takes me to cross the mostly-empty lot. He doesn’t even look up until I’m standing directly in front of him, nudging his knees apart so that I can crowd in close.

“I’m such an asshole,” he says softly. “I had no idea. I swear, if I’d known he felt like that, I never would have—” He breaks off, lets out a frustrated sigh, scrubs his hands over his face. “God, I’m the worst fucking person on the planet.”

“You’re not,” I say, curling an arm around his shoulders and drawing him in. “Dude, you can’t beat yourself up for not knowing something that he didn’t *want* you to know.”

“Why the hell wouldn’t he want me to know that?” he demands, voice slightly muffled by my jacket.

I shrug. “Maybe he was afraid it’d change everything.”

He jerks his head back and says, “Of course it would have changed everything. But that’s good, because if he’d told me—fuck, G, if I’d known he felt like that, you have to believe me, I never would have slept with him.”

I burst out laughing; I can't help it. It's a hysterical, uncontrollable reaction, and he shoots me the world's most offended look, which only makes it harder for me to get my shit together. It's a solid two minutes before I'm able to make myself say, "Holy shit. When the fuck did you sleep with Alex?"

"Alex?" Ben says, squinting at me. "What are you—I'm talking about James."

"James," I echo.

"Yeah, James. Your best friend, the guy I fucked, the guy Alex was dating, the guy I just found out he was in love with—"

"No," I interrupt, shaking my head sharply from side to side. "No, you can't possibly be this fucking oblivious. I refuse to believe this conversation is happening. I refuse to accept the idea that Alex could finally tell you he's in love with you, which all of us have known for *months* now, including Jamie, and then you could actually be retarded enough to think that he was confessing his love for Jamie. Nope. This conversation isn't happening, I'm fucking walking away from you right now, alright? I'm—"

"Garen," Ben chokes out, grabbing my forearms when I attempt to step back. He looks like I just cracked him over the head with a sledgehammer. And—oh, shit.

Holymotherfuckingcocksuckingshitonastick. He really still hadn't figured it out—not until about five seconds ago, when I told him, when I fucked everything up, when I told the biggest secret Alex has ever had. What I should be doing right now is clamping my mouth shut on the words that are threatening to spill out, but it's not working. Before I can figure out how to make this situation better, I'm squeezing my eyes shut and blurting out, "Alex has been totally in love with you since you guys were like, fifteen years old, and that's why he used to like making out with you at parties in high school, and I figured it out right after I first met you guys, because he looks at you like you're everything to him, and I think Travis figured it out while you and he were still dating, but then I kind of outed Alex to all our friends right after you kissed him and left that party the night after I came back to Lakewood, and Travis and I accidentally told Jamie after I got out of the hospital, before either of us knew that he and Alex were banging, and I maybe told Stohler, too, when I was making that napkin chart you saw in her room that time, and that's why he wouldn't agree to date Jamie, because he was still holding onto this kind of creepy and obsessive love for you, because apparently four years of pining just doesn't seem like enough, and I'm pretty sure that's why Jamie hates you." I heave a sigh. "I can't believe I got that all out in one breath. I feel so much better."

"I don't!" Ben practically shrieks. "Oh my god. Alex is *in love with me*?"

"How is that still even remotely in question after everything I just said?" I yell back, even though we're still only a foot apart. I take another deep breath, clear my throat, and say, in a much quieter voice, "Yes, Alex is in love with you. He's also your best friend, so no matter how you feel about him in return, you need to be careful what you say to him when you guys speak again, because this is not worth ruining your friendship over, alright?"

It always feels so cosmically fucked when I have to be the voice of reason; I'm pretty sure I'm unqualified for the position.

Ben's eyes are dazed, unfocused. "What am I supposed to do now?"

"Nothing," says the only voice that could possibly make this situation more awkward, from maybe twenty feet behind me. I wait in silence and stillness as Jamie's wingtips click closer across the asphalt. He finally appears in the corner of my vision, letting his cigarette dangle out of his mouth for the few seconds it takes him to strip off his peacoat and drape it around Ben's shoulders; I had noticed neither that it was starting to snow again, nor that he was shivering in his hooded sweatshirt. Jamie taps the ash off the end of his smoke and continues, "I always assumed you returned his affections. But if you don't, then don't do anything. Don't make him talk about it, don't try to convince him that he doesn't feel it, and don't enter into

a relationship with him out of pity. Ignore it, and his feelings will fade. That's what Garen and I did back when I had a pathetic little crush on him in high school."

"Ignore it," Ben echoes, doubtfully.

"Alex is a grown man. He doesn't need you to coddle him, the way you coddle everyone else. It's stupid and insulting," Jamie says. He tugs me out of Ben's reach, gives me a random hug, and say, "G, go back inside. It's obvious the midget needs some tough love right now, and neither of us is going to give that to him. You're all love, no toughness, and I'm tough, with absolutely no love for him. I don't even have *like* for him. But you babying him right now isn't going to make this situation easier on anyone, so go back inside, talk to Alex, grope Travis under the table some more, and keep my girlfriend amused, since this situation is all your fault in the first place."

I throw my hands up. "How is this my fault?"

Jamie starts ticking things off on his fingers. "You asked me to come to your play, you asked my ex-not-boyfriend to come on the same night, you asked *your* ex-not-boyfriend—who my ex-not-boyfriend is in love with *and* who I had sex with a few weeks ago—to come on the same night as well, you're the reason the midget decided to stay in-state instead of going to music school in New York, you—"

"Rude, rude, rude," I snap, turning around and stomping back in the direction of the diner. "You are rude, and you are blaming me, and I hate you. I'm going to go spread lies about you to your girlfriend so that she breaks up with you and you have to sit in awkward silence on the whole drive back to the city. I'm going to tell her that you have chlamydia, and that you've got a clown fetish, and that you once ate a live rat that you found on the subway. Goodbye, enjoy your secret, special heart-to-heart, *ladies*."

The last thing I hear before I disappear around the side of the building is Ben saying flatly, "You *don't* have chlamydia, right? Because if you do, you really should have let me take ten seconds to go grab a condom before we fucked."

The moment I'm back inside the diner, Alex shoots me an anxious glance and says, "So? What'd he say?"

"He said 'My name is Ben McCutcheon, and I've got fucking Down syndrome.' Or, at least, that's what he should have said," I say, sinking onto the bench next to Rachael, who has scooted over to the window to take Ben's seat. "That tiny idiot thought you were talking about *Jamie*. Not him."

Alex blinks, like the thought of anybody being in love with Jamie is ridiculous. It makes me want to punch him in the face, because *whowouldn't* fall for Jamie? I mean, sure, I didn't, but maybe I could've, if Dave hadn't fucked me up so badly, if I hadn't been fourteen when we started sharing the dorm room, if I'd been a little older and more stable and more mature. Jamie's the most beautiful man on the planet, sharp and witty and fiercely protective, and if Alex had just been a little less blind, none of this would be happening right now.

"But he, um." Alex scratches the back of his neck. "He knows now? He finally figured it out, or you told him, or whatever? He knows I was talking about him?"

I nod and cover Travis' hand with mine again. "Yeah. He knows now."

"Is James still out there with him?" Rachael asks, brow creasing.

"Well, I think he mostly just wanted a cigarette," I admit. "But they're talking, I think. It's—I wouldn't have left them alone together if I thought they were going to tear each other to pieces. They just have a lot of shit to work out."

It must be a truer statement than I realized, because ten minutes later, they're still outside talking, and

we're all left making awkward, forced conversation. Fifteen minutes later, they're still talking. Twenty minutes later, they're still talking. At twenty-five minutes, Alex gestures for Travis to let him out of the booth and mutters, "This is ridiculous. I'm going to go talk to them both."

And then it hits me—oh god. They're probably not really talking. They're probably *talking*, by which I mean touching each other, by which I mean shit, Alex cannot go outside right now. I fling myself back out of the booth and say, maybe a little too frantically, "Nope, I've got it. It's cool, I've totally got it. I'm just going to uh, to call them, and also go outside, and yeah." I scurry towards the door, dialing Jamie's cell phone number as I go.

He picks up just as I'm stepping outside. "What do you want, Anderson?"

"Please tell me he's not in you right now," I hiss.

"He's not," is the clipped response, though his breathing is a little labored.

"Alright, awesome. Please tell me you're not in *him* right now," I say. Dead fucking silence. I groan.

"Really? He just found out his live-in best friend is in love with him, and now you're balls-deep in the kid? He's supposed to be the one with morals."

"I talked him out of those."

"He's supposed to keep it in his pants!"

"I talked him out of those, too."

"I thought you guys both promised me that this wasn't going to happen again, so why are you fucking? Wait, *where* are you fucking? It's snowing, I'm freezing my balls off." The silence continues. I stumble to a halt at the corner of the building, because they're not standing where I left them. Slowly, I slip a hand into the pocket of my jacket. My keys are missing. I stomp my foot and snarl, "James Jackson Goldwyn, if you stole my keys during that little hug of yours—if you are fucking him in my car right now, this friendship is over, I swear to god."

"Completely worth it," he breathes, "Oh Lord, why didn't you tell me he's this *tight*? If I'd had any idea he'd feel like this, I would've—"

"End the call, or I'll break your phone," I hear Ben snap.

"Is there a reason you called, G? Don't get me wrong, hearing your voice is a lot sexier than hearing this little bitch barking orders at me--*harder, faster, scratch me, choke me*," Jamie drops his own accent to mimic Ben's voice. "Only, it's a little difficult to jack him off, *and* pull his hair, *and* hold a cell phone all at once."

I cover my face with my palm and say, "Just... finish up, would you? I had to stop Alex from coming out here to check on you, everyone's getting suspicious, and—dude, you know your girlfriend wouldn't even care what you're doing right now, which means she is the raddest fucking chick in the world, right?"

"I'm aware," Jamie says. "I'm hanging up now, we'll be done soon."

"If Travis asks me why the car smells like sex on the way back to town, I'm telling him the truth," I warn, but the call is already going dead, and—oh, wow. Somebody's sure as hell putting his back into it and trying to wrap things up in there, because I can see the car rocking even from here. I roll my eyes and head back for the door of the dinner, muttering, "All I want for Hanukkah is some less slutty friends."

The moment I've flopped down into my seat again, Alex asks, "Are they arguing?"

"Of course," I say, smiling blandly. "But it's the normal kind of arguing, not a fist-fight kind. They said they'll be back in a few minutes."

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I extract it to find that I have a new text from... Rachael. I glance at her, but she's gazing innocently down at her phone, still typing. I open the text.

So, which car is being defiled, yours, mine, or Ben's?

I should probably double-check with Jamie to make sure that she's not about to get pissed and cause a scene, but I'm sure my cover is already blown because of the grin slowly creeping onto my face. I type, *mine*.

In it or on it? is her reply.

you're the perfect woman, I send. *they're in it. are you sure you don't mind? i can text them & tell them to stop*. I glance up in time to see her roll her eyes and give a tiny flick of her hand to wave off my worries. I swear, if I were straight, I'd totally steal this bitch from Jamie. She's awesome. And she continues to be awesome when Jamie returns to the diner—a little worse for wear, with a missing necktie and slightly flushed cheeks—and she says, "Did you have fun?" He raises his eyebrows; she cocks her head to the side, grinning, and adds, "With your talk, that is. You know, work out your differences, kiss and make up, whatever."

He makes a face and says, "The midget and I aren't really much for kissing." She offers him a doubtful look, and he sneers at her before saying, "He's waiting in his car, gave me a couple bucks to throw in for his food. Are we ready to head out?"

Once we've all tossed down enough money to cover the bill, we file out of the diner and around the back. Ben's car is running, and he's sitting behind the wheel, window rolled down and elbow propped up on it. His head is resting on his hand, but his fingers are shaking. Well, alright then. If Jamie's a good enough top to leave the guy shaking that much even after several minutes have passed, maybe I shouldn't have been so quick to refuse to bottom back when we were freshmen.

I lope over to the car and lean in the window, like I'm saying goodbye, but what I really whisper is, "You two are filthy, insatiable whores. And I totally expect that from him by now, but it's so new and exciting to see it from you. I'm proud of you."

"Shut up and get away from me," Ben whispers back, shoving at my shoulder.

When I lean back out of the car, Jamie and his girlfriend are *right there*. Jamie shoves me up against the door of the car—and totally into Ben's personal space, that's so awkward—and gives me a forceful but tight-lipped kiss on the mouth. He's in a pissy mood, which pretty much always happens whenever he doesn't get to cuddle with someone after sex. The demand for even more physical intimacy as and after he comes is the weirdest quirk of his, but I'm always down to be the big spoon, so I don't usually have to put up with this. Hopefully Rachael will hold his hand on their drive back to New York, calm him down a little.

When he finally releases me, he grumbles, "I'm glad I got to see you in that horrible show of yours. You were the best part of it, by far. Good luck with the rest of your performances."

"Thank you for coming," I say, dragging him into a hug, mostly because I'm an asshole and I know that hugging me when I'm up against Ben's car means that Jamie's face is less than a foot away from Ben's right now. I bet they're making the world's most uncomfortable eye contact. Eventually, the way he's digging his fingers into my side becomes too annoying to ignore, so I let him go and finish, "Drive safely. Text me when you get home."

He nods, squeezes my hand one last time, and says over his shoulder as he walks away, "Love you, G."

"You, too," I call after him. I turn my eyes to Rachael, who hasn't moved. "Thank you for coming to my show tonight. I know it's kinda lame to go see a high school play, but I appreciate it. And it was nice to get to know you better."

"Of course. I'm sure we'll see more of each other, if you and Jamie are going to be living together in less than two months," she says, smiling and opening up her arms to me. I'm expecting to be the only one who gets a hug, but the moment Rachael has released me, she leans into the window of the CRV, wraps an arm around Ben's neck and draws him in. He looks stunned at first, then absolutely mortified when she breathes just loudly enough for him and me to hear, "Jamie's a talented boy, isn't he?"

I choke on a laugh, but try to pretend it's a cough.

"I-I'm sorry," Ben stammers out, but she just releases him, winks, and strides away after Jamie. Ben shoots me a panicked glance, but I wave him into silence as Alex slides oh-so-reluctantly into the passenger seat of the Honda.

"Thank you both for coming tonight," I say. "I'll talk to you later."

I step back so that they can pull out of the space without running over my feet. A moment later, Travis steps up behind me and wraps his arms around me, resting his chin on my shoulder as he says, "Those two are going to have the most uncomfortable drive home ever."

"You think so?" I say. I wonder if he'll still feel that way in a few minutes, when he eventually realizes why my car reeks of sex or why his leather seat is sticky.

Chapter Twenty: Bonus Scene

Ben McCutcheon

He is so beautiful that you hate yourself for looking at him. You know you're weak for looking, you know you should ignore him, but you can't, not when those honey-colored eyes are burning into yours, not when he's standing so close to you, scorching your skin with those long, slim fingers. Sometimes, in your more cynical moments, you think that he's been put here solely to test you. Maybe they all have been—Garen and his beautiful green eyes, Travis and his adorable freckles, James... James, who looks so much like Ethan, so much like the one who had you *first*.

Ethan, Garen, Travis, James. Four of them. When you were little, you had thought there would be one. You had assumed that you would grow up, fall in love, get married, and have that one person for your whole life. And then you weren't so little anymore, and you realized that you wouldn't ever be getting married, and that was supposed to change everything. When you told your parents what you were, you promised them you'd still be good. You'd be chaste, you'd be virtuous. You'd be a virgin. Always.

And now you're not. You're the type of person who has to stare up at James through the cloud of smoke from his cigarette and say, "You *don't* have chlamydia, right? Because if you do, you really should have let me take ten seconds to go grab a condom before we fucked."

"I'm clean, I told you. And if we'd stopped for ten seconds, we would have realized what a mistake it was," he says, and you nod like you agree, even though you aren't certain that you do. Of course fucking James was a mistake, but you knew the truth of that as it was happening. You don't think that stopping for ten seconds would have made you change your mind.

"Am I really the only one who didn't know about Alex having feelings for me?" you ask.

James grabs your ankle and lifts your foot so that he can stub out his cigarette on the sole of your shoe. "Yes."

"And it's been that way for a long time?"

"Yes."

"And that's why you hate me?"

He grins and ducks his head, almost like he's surprised that you'd ask. "I hate you for many reasons. But yes, I suppose that's one of them."

You shake his hand off of your ankle and hop down from the trunk of the Ferrari. Standing next to him for too long will inevitably lead to an irritating moment where he steps close and smirks pointedly *down* at you, as though you could ever forget the near foot of height difference, and you're not in the mood for that brand of humiliation. You pull the coat more securely around yourself and begin to pace in a wide, clockwise circle around the entire car. After a moment, James begins tracing the trail your footsteps have left in the snow in his own counter-clockwise circle. You pass each other at the driver's side door, and again at the passenger's side.

It continues for nearly a full minute in silence before he clears his throat and says, "You really had no idea?"

"What, that Alex wanted to... date me, or whatever?" you say. You catch sight of him nodding near the trunk. "No. I had no idea, at all. It's—we were never supposed to be like that. We've kissed a few times, sure, but we were joking around. It was a dumb fucking thing we used to do in high school, and plenty of people hook up with their friends in high school. It doesn't mean anything. It's not supposed to be the start of something more."

"Perhaps you should have mentioned that to Alexander," James suggests.

"Perhaps you should have told me that I was potentially breaking my best friend's heart before I had vicious, scarring floor-sex with you," you mutter, shoving your hands into the pockets of the coat. There's a set of keys in each pocket, which is a little peculiar, but the symmetry of it is nice.

He quirks an eyebrow. "I think scarring might be a bit of an overstatement. Certainly wasn't the best I've ever had, but I'm very secure in the knowledge that you can't possibly have been *scarred* by it."

"I meant literally," you say, tracing your fingertips through the snow dusting the hood of the car. "Physically."

He staggers to a stop near the passenger-side door, but you keep walking, eyes on the ground. When you make your way back around to his side of the car and step into reach, he snags you by the lapel of the borrowed coat and says, "I don't understand."

"Let go of me," you say, not lifting your eyes. He doesn't release you. You sigh. "My back. You left—when you scratched me, when I *asked* you to scratch me, you broke the skin. Left five marks from my shoulderblade to the small of my back. It's been weeks, and they still haven't gone away. I don't know if they ever will."

"Show me," he says. Your eyes dart from the ground to his face, but you're not sure if you're staring at him because his voice sounds uneven, overly eager, or because you want to shoot him a disgusted glare. He repeats the two words, and this time, his words are an order, smooth and unavoidable, the same as the way he'd said *shut up and sit down* in the diner.

You don't know what it is about that tone that makes you want to do what he says, but there's a pinch in your stomach, like you'll be sick if you dare to ignore him. You meet his gaze unblinkingly, but your hands still tremble as you reach up to slip the coat from your shoulders. He accepts it from you and digs into the pocket to retrieve a set of keys—Garen's keys? He unlocks the car door, opens it, and flings the coat across to the driver's seat, all without even glancing down at his hands. You only look away as you turn your back to him, reaching for the hem of your hoodie to pull it up.

James freezes you with a hand to your wrist. "No. Off."

"It's thirty degrees out," you say, a token protest.

"Off," he repeats.

Your cold fingers twitch to the zipper, lowering it carefully and stripping off the article of clothing. You don't turn to face him as you toss it into the car to join his coat. You're not supposed to look at him right now. Even if you were given an hour to collect your thoughts, you couldn't find the explanation for how you know that, but it's the only thing you're certain of right now.

When you hesitate to take off your henley—it's snowing, and goosebumps are already rising on your skin, and you're in the middle of a very public place, and your friends are right inside the diner, Alex is right inside the diner—James says, very carefully, "I don't want to have to ask you again."

He won't have to. You won't make him do it. You don't understand how you can feel like you're the one drawing the lines when he's the one giving you orders in *that voice*. With one deep breath to steel yourself, you yank the shirt up and off. You're standing half-naked in the middle of a parking lot; there's snow dusting your shoulders, but behind you, there is a sharp inhale that makes your skin feel so, so hot.

"Oh, Christ. Look at you," he breathes, and you have to squeeze your eyes shut, because that reaction is more than you had dared hope for.

It has become one of your secret rituals—every morning, when you lock yourself in the bathroom and turn on the shower and strip off your clothes, you have to pause in front of the mirror and crane your neck to stare over your shoulder at those five lines down your back. Those five awful, beautiful lines. You stare at them, sometimes for so long that the water is running cold by the time you even step into the spray. You stare, the same way you used to stare when you'd make new cuts with your razor, and you'd been the one to do it, but you were still always surprised to see them somehow. You stare, and you remember the way James had clawed into you and bitten you and pinned you to him with long, graceful arms as you had gone off. You hate him more than you hate almost anyone else you've ever met, but looking at those scratches every morning makes you feel raw and real and... sexy. You *never* feel sexy, not like you know your friends must. Garen wakes up smirking like the world is lucky to have him, and Alex and Travis aren't idiots, they realize how attractive they both are. But that isn't what it's like for you. You know that you are silly and small and so dangerously fucking ordinary that sometimes you worry you might disappear altogether. But when you see these marks on your back, you remember the aggressively beautiful man who gave them to you and how he'd fallen apart beneath you, saying your name. And then you think you finally understand what sexy feels like.

If James knew any of this, he would laugh until he choked. It's a legitimate question, but you still feel compelled to adopt your most patronizing tone as you say, "Gosh, *Jamie*, you can't stop staring. Do you like them?"

"I wish you were fucking covered in them," he says immediately.

You're grateful that your back is still turned to him so that he can't see how that makes you close your eyes, lick your lips. All he can see is that you stretch your arms out a little, like you're surprised to see the scars that stretch from shoulder to wrist, and say, "How about that? Looks like I already am."

"I wasn't talking about scars that *you* made. I meant—" He breaks off, impatient and frustrated, and then you feel the brush of his icy skin against your back. You shiver, first from the cold, and then from the way he fits the tip of each of his fingers against the top of one of the marks, aligning his fingers the same way he did when he made them. He traces them, up and down, over and over, not digging his nails in to bring the pain back... just present enough to make you wish he'd make it hurt again.

"I look at these scratches on you, and it feels like I *own* you," he murmurs. "It feels like I marked you and claimed you and made you *mine*."

That is the most fucked up thing anyone has ever said while looking at your partially-nude body, including the time Ethan Hall said *I always knew you were a fucking homo* right before he came in your mouth for the first time.

You don't know what it says about you that you can't remember ever being this hard in your life.

"I'm not your anything," you snap, fumbling to get your shirt back on. It makes almost no difference, because James won't drop his hand from your back, so the hem of the henley is still rucked up over his elbow, and his fingers are still rubbing tiny circles against the tops of the scratches. You try to shrug away, but the next thing you're aware of is being pushed up against the side of the Ferrari, the door cold against your front and his body warm behind you.

"I've thought about it, you know," he says quietly. When you don't protest, he leans down and speaks right against the shell of your ear. "Not just an offhand, abstract sort of remembrance, either. When I'm in bed with Rach and she pulls my hair too hard. Or when I find some pretty, dark-haired boy to kiss in a shadowy corner of a bar, and he wants me to suck a mark into the side of his neck." He breaks off into a soft laugh, then steps closer, closer, closer, until you can feel the bulge in the front of his pants pressing against the small of your back; you don't even try to pretend you're not moving up onto your toes and bracing your hands against the window of the Ferrari so that you can rock back against him, his hard-on now grinding against the curve of your ass.

He accepts that as the signal to continue with all the things you are incapable of making yourself request. The hand on your back glides down and over your side, around the front of you to scrape his nails—finally—against the trail of hair that starts just below your navel and disappears into the waistband of your jeans. You jolt at the sensation, but not nearly as much as you jolt when his other hand settles over your crotch, rubbing you through denim. And he's still *talking*. "Lord. I've even thought about it when I was alone once or twice. Fingered myself and thought about that idiotic look on your face when you did it to me, like you were shocked at your own daring. Fucked my own hand and wish--*thought* about fucking you. Wondered what it might be like to get inside this ass."

You aren't surprised when he moves his hand away from your crotch to wedge it between your bodies, but you're expecting him to grope you a bit through your jeans—instead, he shoves his hand right down the back of your pants, gives your ass a rough squeeze, then rubs the tip of one dry finger across your hole.

You hiss something that might be, "Fuck."

He whispers something that might be, "Want to."

You give your head a wild shake and say, "Can't. No, we—dude, get *off*me." He lets you drag his hand out of your jeans and shove him off so that you can move a few steps from the car. "Do you not remember why Garen left us out here? You're supposed to be telling me how to deal with the fact that my best friend—who is right there, in that diner—is in love with me. And if he wasn't in love with me, he'd probably be in love with you, though it beats the fuck out of me why, because you are straight-up *awful*."

"I'm good in the ways that count. You remember that," James says, pushing the passenger door further open so that he take a seat inside the car, letting his long legs dangle out the side. "And it's not like you can stop having a life—more specifically, a sex life, just because it might hurt the feelings of somebody who's in love with you. Lord, if I stopped sleeping with people every time I had somebody fall in love with me, I'd never get to have sex. There's always *somebody* who's fixated on me."

"Must be your modesty and strong moral code that attracts them all," you mutter.

"Maybe. You tell me, McCutcheon. What is it that makes me so attractive?" he practically purrs. You roll your eyes at him, but he is undeterred. He catches you by the belt buckle and tows you close enough that he can throw an arm around your waist and drag you onto his lap. He's hard under you, and you make a half-hearted attempt to squirm away from him, but the movement just makes him *sigh*. "I know you want to have sex with me again."

"The fact that you're a fucking sex addict is not—" Your sentence breaks off when he skims a hand up your thigh, scraping the tips of his fingers against denim. When his palm reaches your crotch, you know your protests have been shot to hell. He can feel how hard you already are; he makes a pleased noise against the nape of your neck and reaches for your belt buckle again. You let your head loll back against his shoulder and mutter, "This is fucked, dude. This is—Alex is right inside that diner, and he's waiting for us to go back inside. He's in love with me, and—"

"Are you in love with him, too?" James asks. You hesitate, then shake your head. He finally gets your belt open, then moves on, popping open the button and sliding down the zipper. "So, what exactly do you think you're going to do to make anyone feel better about this situation? There's nothing I can tell you right now that will make you feel better about your best friend wanting to be with you. And there's nothing you can say to Alex that will make him feel like less of a damn fool than he does. Stop trying to fix things. You do that all the time, you try to make everything better, and it doesn't work. God, McCutcheon. Don't you ever get tired of being such an obnoxiously perfect person all the time?"

Yes. Yes, always, he has no idea. You swallow hard and lift your hips a little, pressing harder against his hand as you slip your own between your ass and his lap to touch him through his wool trousers. "Don't

you ever get tired of being such a shitty one?"

"No," he says simply. He kisses the back of your neck--*kisses it*, like he's your boyfriend, like it's acceptable for him to act on sweet little impulses like that—and says, "I can make it worth your while, if you let me. If you ask me to."

"I know," you say, and shit, that's not what you meant to say at all. You mean to withdraw your hand, to stop writhing in his lap, to stand up and walk back inside and talk to Alex like an adult. But then James' hand is slipping beneath the waistband of your boxers and wrapping around your length, and it's so difficult to remember why this is wrong.

No one has touched you since last month, when you fucked him on your living room floor. No one has held your hand. No one has hugged you. No one has kissed you. No one has fucked you. You think maybe a girl in your philosophy class tapped your shoulder once last week when she was handing you a worksheet, and you feel like Garen might have poked you in the ribs a few times to annoy you during your Black Friday shopping, but there hasn't been any skin-on-skin. And even if there had been, you don't think that it would compare to the feeling of James' long fingers curling around your cock now.

You don't care anymore. You *can't* care anymore, because if you let yourself remember all the reasons why this is a bad idea, you might go insane. So instead, you reach back with your other hand to work open the buttons of his fly as you say, "Close the door, we're not doing this in the fucking snow. And don't—god, don't for a fucking second think that this means I don't hate you, because I—"

"Is it wrong of me to think that makes it so much *hotter*?" he interrupts, swinging his legs into the car and dragging you in with him so that he can shut the door. You're not surprised that someone like James—someone who has money and looks and charm that most people only dream of having—would be more turned on by someone who won't fall in love with him than the hundreds of people who already have. People who have love and touch in spades are always the quickest to stop caring about it.

The Ferrari is warmer than standing outside, but just barely. You still shiver when he releases your cock long enough to hook his thumbs over the waistband of your jeans and pull them, along with your boxers, down to your knees, but not nearly as much as he squirms when the pair of you have to lift up and writhe around to get his pants down as well.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, this seat's fuckin' freezing," he practically yelps.

You dig an elbow into his ribs. "Stop whining. Or, would you rather keep your clothes on? Because I don't have to touch you, you know—"

"You do if you expect to get fucked," he says. You are so glad that you're sitting on his lap, both of you facing the windshield, because you think you'd have to be ashamed if he could see the way your lips part and your tongue darts out to wet them as he says those words.

His erection—which is, really, large to an almost *upsetting* degree—is digging into the small of your back, but you arch your spine so that there's room for you to stroke him. He mutters something you don't hear, and you're not sure that you want him to repeat it, but you don't have to ask him to; he flings an arm out and pops open the glove compartment, rifling through the registration papers and crushed, empty cigarettes packs, until he finds a tube of lube. Two tubes, actually. And a small bottle. Because of *course* Garen keeps three different containers of lubricant in his glove compartment. You are unable to stop yourself from huffing out a laugh at that, but James doesn't laugh with you. He's too busy shoving you down by your shoulders so that the back of your head knocks against his collarbone, too busy yanking your legs as far apart as your jeans will allow so that he can slop some lube across his fingers and drop them down between your legs.

"If you're expecting me to be careful with you, or some other such bullshit, now would be the time to say something," he says, pausing with the tips of his fingers at your opening.

You're so thrown by his words that you instinctively turn to stare at him, even though the movement puts your face much too close to his. He's giving you the same sneering look he always does, and you don't know what possesses you to do it, but you use your nose to nudge his head to the side so that you can sink your teeth into the smooth skin of his neck. He twitches closer to you, but you release him before he has a chance to even enjoy it.

"I *don't* want you to be careful with me, or gentle, or—don't be so fucking stupid, alright? You know that's not what I want, and it's not what you want either, so don't even think about it."

"Thank god," he mutters, and then he's sinking two of those unbelievably long fingers into you at once. You sink your teeth into your lower lip in an attempt to bite back a cry, but James catches you by the jaw and snaps, "No. I want to hear you."

"Fuck off," you hiss. "You already know I don't make much noise, so don't expect—"

"You will for me," he says. He works his fingers harder into you, twisting them to brush against your prostate, and when you groan, he laughs—it's a mean little sound. "That's right. Open up those dick-suckin' lips of yours and let me hear you."

You don't groan again, but you also don't try to hold in the heavy stutter of your breath as he fucks you with his fingers. You can tell that he likes that—he's grinding his hips upward, fucking the curve of your fist, and twisting your head up and closer so that he can mouth over the space below your ear.

"Have you been with anyone else since the last time?" he asks. "The morning after the club, in your apartment. On the floor."

You know when and where the last time was, but you wonder when it became "your apartment," not "Alex's apartment." You shoot him your most disgruntled look and say, "Are you seriously asking me if I've been *faithful* to you since our one-night stand?"

"Doesn't seem like it was a one-night stand, does it?" he murmurs, pressing into you with a third finger.

You let your head roll back. "It can be a one-night stand even if it happens again, as long as it's meaningless. As long as you don't do it like a couple. You just—there are rules." He echoes the last word in a questioning whisper, so you swallow hard and continue, "Don't lend the other person clothing. Don't have breakfast together. Don't—"

"Gave you my coat tonight. You've made me pancakes," he says, nipping your jawline hard enough to send beautiful sparks of pain down your neck.

"I made you pancakes two months ago, not after we slept together—"

"Those are the wrong rules anyway," he says. He pauses to grip one of your knees and yank your legs as far apart as your jeans, still tangled around your calves, will allow. "The real rules of a one-night stand? No contact information. No repeats. No kink you'll *have* to tell your friends about. No barebacking. Which, again, brings me to my question—have you been with anyone else since last time? Because I haven't been with anybody but Rach, and everything she and I have done together has been protected, and sweet *Lord*, I wanna fuck you bare. Please tell me I can."

Your throat tightens. So does your grip on him. No one has ever, ever done that to you. That sort of intimacy was something you had planned to save for someone special, for the one. Not for some beautiful jackass you shouldn't even let touch you. And you don't know what it means that you never did this with Travis or Garen, and James won't do this with his girlfriend, but you'll do it with each other. You think that should mean something, even though you know it doesn't. But when you hesitate, or when he *senses* your hesitation, he scrapes his short nails over your thigh and says, "You'll love it. I swear,

McCutcheon, it's so hot. Raw. Dirty, filthy. Flawed and flawless. It's too much, and it'll make everything else feel like not enough." He bites down hard on the stretch of muscle where your throat meets your shoulder. You grind back onto his fingers and cry out, too loud. He quiets you, kisses your neck--*no, too much, too sweet, why is he doing that?*—and then brushes his lips across the shell of your ear to whisper, "I want to fucking ruin you for everyone else you're ever with."

"Okay," you choke out, even though that's not what you mean at all. "Do it, now, please." But he doesn't. You're nodding, you're grabbing at his wrist, you're raising your hips so that he can shift beneath you and line the head of his cock up with your hole, but he's not pushing in. He's not fucking you, even though he must know how much you want it, how much you *need* it. You try to sink down onto him, to make that connection he hasn't made, but he grips your waist and holds you up, hovering just above him. "What the fuck, James?"

"Say it again," he says.

"*Now*," you snap, and he huffs out a laugh against your shoulder and shakes his head. You know exactly which word you're meant to repeat; you know you're meant to say *please*. The idea of it sends a spike of red-hot embarrassment through you, followed by an incredible deepening of your arousal. That's so wrong. You shouldn't be so turned on by the threat of him making you beg to be fucked and used. You should be humiliated, but you're not—or, you are, but it's a *good* humiliation, a slow burn under your skin. It's sick. *You're* sick, you're dirty, you're perverted, and you don't know how to be anything else. You close your eyes and whisper, "Please."

His fingers dig deeper into your skin, and his voice sounds almost like a growl when he says, "Louder. Say it *loudly* and *repeatedly*, until I'm satisfied, and then maybe I'll satisfy you—"

"Please," you say hoarsely. He isn't fucking you, and he isn't hurting you, and you need both. You knot your fingers in your own hair and pull until your scalp is tingling, but it's not enough. You catch a handful of James' dark, silken hair and force his mouth back to your shoulder so that he'll bite you again. He obliges, and you can feel your eyes rolling shut as you say again, "Please. Please, please fuck me, you said you wanted to ruin me, and I want you to, please, need it, please, *please*—"

And then he's yanking you down by your hips, filling you so suddenly and deeply that you fear you're going to split in two. There's no pause for you to adjust—just him working you onto his cock, fucking up into you, and it hurts so right. It isn't painful in the way the first time with Ethan had been painful, with barely any lube and both of you too uncomfortable with the idea of fingering for there to be any prep beforehand. And it isn't that *playful* sort of painful, the way it had been with Garen, because yes, G had always been willing to scratch you, pull your hair, fuck you fast and deep, tie you up that one time, but there were things you would never have asked him for. Things he would never have been able to do for you, not without driving himself a little bit mad. You think James might already be a little bit mad; it would certainly be a valid explanation for why, when you drag his hands from your hips to your throat because you want him to choke you but don't know how you could possibly verbalize something that perverse, he chuckles and says, "Oh, no. Got a much better idea than that, sweetheart."

Instinctively, you cringe at the term of endearment. You know he doesn't mean it, and that isn't the problem, except that it is. You know there have been dozens of men and women before you who have all been James Goldwyn's *sweetheart* for an hour or so, and after that, they've been pushed away, thrown out. This is not what your body was meant to be used for. You're supposed to treat yourself with the dignity and respect that God intended, but you've read your Bible over and over, and not even the most brutal scenes in the Old Testament will tell you that you're anything other than a pervert and a sodomite and a freak for wanting the things that you want. You're awful, and you're sorry, and you know you need to be punished for wanting these things, but it doesn't *feel* like a punishment when James strips off his necktie, folds it over itself, and draws the silk taut across your throat. It feels like a reward.

"Put your hands on my wrists," he orders, and you obey without hesitation. "If it's too much, squeeze down, and I'll ease up. Don't want you passing out on me before I've had my way with you."

That shouldn't turn you on as much as it does, the idea of him completely cutting off your air supply, of him making you dizzy, making you faint. It's harder to maintain a proper rhythm now that both of you are focused on the fabric at your throat. You end up kicking off one of your shoes and briefly releasing his wrists—that earns you a growl of protest and a quick jerk of the necktie against your windpipe, which earns James a choked groan and a buck of your hips—so that you can reach down and free one of your legs completely from the jeans. You can spread your legs more now, brace your weight properly, ride him hard even though every upstroke has your head hitting the roof of the car.

You're not sure if it's that repeated *thunk* of your skull against the Ferrari, or the fact that James' grip on the tie keeps tightening and tightening, but after a few more minutes, you're starting to get too dizzy to keep the rise and fall of your hips steady. You don't want to tell him to stop; you don't want him to sneer at you and tell you you're weak for not being able to handle more. You want him to see how much and how hard you can take it. A twisted, humiliating part of you wants him to leave a necklace of bruises around your throat, wants him to kiss the marks and tell you how well you're doing. Just like in the diner, when he told you to shut up and sit down, and you obeyed, and he whispered *good boy*, and it made your heart pound and your cheeks flush, and *you don't know why*.

Another minute, and your vision is starting to gray out at the edges. You can't take it anymore. You dig your fingertips into the delicate bones of James' wrists, and, fortunately and unfortunately, he immediately releases you. He soothes your throat with one cool palm, and once he's satisfied that you're alright—or, at the very least, that you're conscious—he winds the necktie around your wrists, binding them together with a series of intricate knots made by deft fingers. When you shoot him a bewildered glance over your shoulder, he smirks back and says, "Ten years of horseback-riding, six summers of sailing, eight semesters of stringing lacrosse nets, and two unreasonably long military leadership education workshops on rope skills during my freshman and sophomore years. I'm good with knots." Only once the tie is secure enough that you couldn't wriggle out of it even if you wanted to (and you don't) does he bother to blink at you and say, "This is okay, right?"

You know that it's probably good that he's checking on you, but it doesn't *feel* good. It feels too concerned, too friendly. You dig your elbows into his ribs and snap, "If I wasn't okay with it, you would've been able to tell. Mainly because I'd have pulled away and punched you in the mouth. Now shut up and fuck me, slut."

You feel guilty for calling him that—you feel guilty for everything these days—but it wipes the smile off his face, replaces it with a snarl. He forces you back up off his dick and begins to manhandle you around, bending your limbs in ways they're not supposed to move and shoving at you enough to make your joints pop, until finally, you're back on his lap, back on his cock, facing him with your knees planted on the seat on either side of his hips.

"It's really goddamn rich of you to call me that, you know," he pants, grabbing a fistful of your hair and dragging you in until your forehead knocks against his and the tip of his perfectly straight nose is brushing your cheek. "You're as bad as I am. At least I know what I am. At least I admit that I'll fuck anyone I feel like fucking. But you pretend to be so pure, you're so *saint-like*, until your best friend in the whole world tells you that he's desperately in love with you, and then your immediate reaction to that situation is to get another man's cock in you."

You don't know if you get off on the horrible things he says or not, but you know you're barely listening to them. You pull back just enough to raise your hands through the space between you, dropping them behind his head so that your arms are wound around his neck and bound at the top of his spine. He drags you right back in by the hair, and you can feel his breath on your face, sure that he can feel yours, especially once he starts to jerk you off. And then you are both making soft noises right there in each others' space, practically into each others' mouths. You might be kissing, if not for that half-inch of space, and you wonder what he would do if you leaned in just a little more and closed that gap.

His phone rings.

Any normal human being would ignore it, but James is not normal. He spares a glance to the caller ID and answers the call, pins the phone between his shoulder and his ear—you have to shift your forearm further out on his shoulder, mostly out of the way—and then his hands are right back in your hair and on your cock, and you are certain that *James is not normal*.

“What do you want, Anderson?” he snaps into the receiver. At least it’s Garen, not his girlfriend. You make a grab for the cell phone anyway, but your hands are still tied together, so you don’t make much progress. He shoots you a warning glance and says into the phone, “He’s not.”

You don’t know what the question was, but you’d bet anything that it was about you. Your knees are slipping against the leather of the seat, and you readjust, trying to see if you can hear any of what Garen is saying. All you can make out is the indistinct rumble of that smirky, smoke-wrecked growl he calls a voice.

“I talked him out of those,” James finally says, and then, a beat later, he repeats the sentence. Garen’s response continues, pauses, then continues in a yell. You roll your eyes toward the roof of the car—they’re unnaturally codependent, this isn’t even the first time you’ve had to wait out a Garen-James phone call while one of them was inside of you—but then James adjusts the angle of his thrusts, and your eyes are rolling for a completely different reason.

He’s saying something to Garen, and you don’t like to interrupt people who are engaging in conversation, but you can feel yourself getting too close, and you’ll be damned if you let Garen hear you coming on the other end of a phone call. You grind out the words, “End the call, or I’ll break your phone.”

You would, too. It isn’t as if he couldn’t afford another one to replace it. He could afford a dozen to replace it, if he wanted to, and he probably wouldn’t bat an eye as he signed the credit card receipt for them, either.

“Is there a reason you called, G?” he snarls into the phone. “Don’t get me wrong, hearing your voice is a lot sexier than hearing this little bitch barking orders at me—*harder, faster, scratch me, choke me*.” You might be embarrassed, if Garen didn’t already know that you were sick enough to want those things. “Only, it’s a little difficult to jack him off, and pull his hair, and hold a cell phone all at once.”

His solution to that problem, even as he voices it, is to stop stroking your cock so that he can take the phone in hand. He doesn’t stop pulling your hair—he pulls a little harder, truth be told—but you need to get a hand back on you. You shake your head viciously from side to side, wanting to show your displeasure without risking Garen hearing you say, *don’t stop touching me*.

James cocks an eyebrow at you, and how anyone can look so smug even while he’s panting, moving, fucking you, is completely beyond your comprehension. He mouths, *close?* You don’t want to give him the satisfaction of knowing it’s true, but you hold onto the hope that maybe he’s decent enough to touch you again if you admit that. You give a very stiff nod, and he shoots you a wide, open-mouthed smile, then says to Garen, business-like in his succinctness, “I’m aware. I’m hanging up now. We’ll be done soon.”

And then he’s finally lowering the phone, ending the call, practically flinging his iPhone across the car. It hits the driver’s-side door and clatters to the floor somewhere, maybe cracking, you’ve got no idea. James lunges forward and catches your bottom lip between his teeth, biting down so hard you fear (and hope) he might draw blood. He releases it to whisper, “You gonna come for me?” when you start to shudder, then bites back into it when you nod and jerk closer and spill mostly onto your own shirt, but somewhat onto his, too. You’ll apologize for that, maybe, later, but right now, you’re just coming so hard you feel like you’re about to start sobbing. You need friction, oh god, you need him to touch your cock, or you need to be able to touch yourself, to wring the last of your orgasm out, but you can’t. All you can do is tremble, untouched. He hasn’t stopped biting you, or gripping your hips with bruising strength, or fucking you, though his rhythm is sloppier now. You know you’re still grinding down onto him and clenching

around him, but you don't realize how much it's affecting him until he slides his hands from your hips up your spine to grab at your shoulders and yank you down against him, stilling you as he comes inside you with a groan that's nearly inhuman. You can feel it. You'd expected that, within reason, but it isn't until you're full of the dirty *heat* of it that you really understand what he meant about it being too much. You wish your hands weren't tied, but you don't know what you'd be doing differently if you were freed. You don't know *anything* right now.

He's not so much biting your lip anymore—it's more as if he's sucking on it, his teeth still clamped down on it but his tongue soothing over the pinched skin. It makes you want to scream, and not in a good way. You're a heartbeat from shoving him back or pulling away, but then his hand comes up to cradle the back of your neck, and he's tilting your head down, and his upper lip is slotted between yours, and he's kissing you. He's holding you to him, and he's giving up the biting in favor of slipping his tongue between your lips, and *he's kissing you*, like you're lovers, instead of two men who can't stand each other.

It only lasts a few seconds before you launch yourself off his lap and into the driver's seat, even though your sudden emptiness is downright painful. The two of you stare at each other for a moment, and you can't help but let your eyes travel his body—his pants are pulled halfway down his thighs, his cock is still half-hard, shiny and slick with cum and lube. There are cumstains on his Oxford. His artful haircut is mussed, and his beautiful face is flushed. There's a smear of eyeliner on his cheek, but you don't know how it got there. He's staring at your body, licking his lips, and you're only bare from the hips down, but you've never felt more naked in your life.

You shove your free foot back into the leg of your jeans, yank them and your boxers back up. It's a struggle, because your hands are still bound by the necktie, and you're just so... ashamed. Your best friend is in love with you, and here you are, filled with his ex-boyfriend's spunk, in your friend's car, tied up like an animal. You don't know how you became this person. You swear, you used to be good. Or, you think you were good. Maybe. You've spent your entire life trying so hard to make your family proud of you, and you've tried so hard to do the things you're supposed to do, to live your life the way you know He wants you to, but lately, it's like every single thing you do is more fucked up than the thing before. You're still trembling, and you wish it would just fucking stop. You wish you had more control over yourself.

James' expression is wary as he tucks himself back into his pants, zips up, and reaches for your wrists. "Here. Let me take care of you."

It's not what he means. You know that all he wants to do is get his hideous necktie back, but his words are all wrong. So unbelievably, painfully wrong. You shake your head and jerk your hands out of reach. "I can do it."

"McCutcheon," he sighs.

"I can do it," you snap. He turns to glare out the passenger window as you yank at the ends of the tie with your teeth. You pretend you don't notice that the silk smells like his cologne. You wonder how much he spent on the tie you're getting your spit all over. A hundred dollars? Two hundred? More? He doesn't even care that you're chomping down on it as if you're a puppy with a chew toy. He just waits in silence until you finally manage to open the worst of the knots, and then it's fine. You free yourself without much trouble, fling the tie onto his lap, and tumble out the driver's side of the car, wriggling back into your hoodie as you go.

You're grateful that you chose to back into the next space over, because it means that you only have to take two steps to get behind the wheel of your own car. You climb inside, slam the door, and grip the steering wheel. You will not let yourself make this worse by enjoying the afterglow. You don't deserve that—not when you've just done something you swore you'd never do again. Not when you've betrayed your best friend, the man who apparently *loves* you. Not when you've fallen to temptation yet again, in the same perverted way you've been doing since you were sixteen. It's not okay. You know that being with another man is not okay, but sometimes, you wonder if it could be, if you were in love, if it were special.

Maybe it's okay for Garen and Travis to be together. Hell, maybe it was even okay for you and Travis to be together.

But not you and James. Never you and James. Every step of the way, he asked you what you wanted, and every time, you gave the wrong answer. You wanted him to choke you, to fuck you, to come inside your body, to... kiss you. You wanted that, too, even if you hate yourself for wanting it, for wanting him. He is a test that your body is determined to make you fail.

There is a faint *tap-tap-tap* on your window. You allow your eyes to dart to the side. James is standing there, face blank, hand gesturing for you to roll down the window. When you don't move, he raises the other hand; he's holding your shoe. You'd forgotten to put it back on after dressing yourself. You laugh, but your bones have all gone away, and you can't make yourself turn on the car and roll the window down.

So, he does it for you. He opens your door, leans in to turn the keys, then presses the button to lower the window. You make no move to accept the shoe, so he hooks his hands around your calves and turns your body ninety degrees so that your legs are dangling in front of him. He kneels on the ground in front of you, seemingly unconcerned with the fact that there is snow melting into the expensive wool of his trousers. He slips your foot back into the shoe like he's the charming prince and you're Cinderella, but if your life is a fairy tale, it's the Grimm version. This isn't *Cinderella*, with singing mice and happy endings; it's *Aschenputtel*, and you're one of the evil stepsisters, cutting off your toes to fit into gold slippers and waiting for doves to peck out your eyes. You would deserve it, too. You have bled for far lesser offenses than this.

James ties your laces in a neat bow, stands, and shoves himself back between your legs. You glare at the buttons of his peacoat and try not to think about the fact that he has only buttoned it up to hide the smears of cum on his shirt. He doesn't speak, and you don't want him to, but you don't want him to stand there any longer, either, so you eventually consent to meet his eyes.

"I don't like you," he says. "I think you're a melodramatic, pretentious, boring midget with a martyr complex the size of Texas, and when you speak, I think about sticking thumbtacks in my ears, because I am nearly certain that it would be more enjoyable than listening to you correct yet another one of Alexander's grammatically incorrect sentences."

You don't say anything, because you know you deserve his verbal abuse. You might deserve physical abuse, too, but it would probably just get you off, and it's that sort of sickness that has gotten you into this mess in the first place. You lick your lips and watch as his eyes flicker down to follow the movement.

He swallows, continues, "That being said... I don't have anything to gain by lying to you again. So, I'll just come out with it: I was never supposed to enjoy having sex with you, but I do. It's wild and frantic and wrong in the sort of way that ends up accidentally feeling pretty right. I'm not going to ask you if you want to do this again, and I don't expect you to ask me that, either. All I am going to say is that I know you have my number. And if you ever happen to be in New York, I wouldn't be opposed to you using it."

He steps back and allows you to swing your legs back under the steering wheel. He shuts the car door, flicks something through the open window at you, and strides off towards the diner. You stare down at your lap, where the crumpled silk tie has fallen. You fold it with trembling fingers, wondering if you should leave it in his car for him. By the time you have prepared yourself to get out of your car, you can already see the rest of the group returning from the diner, Garen bolting ahead of the rest of them. Before he can get to you, you stuff the tie into the side pocket of the driver's side door and dig your cell phone out of your pocket to delete James' number from your address book.

Because you are a bad person, and you don't deserve to have anything that feels as good as he does.

Chapter Twenty-One

“The best way to find out if you can trust somebody is to trust them.” –Ernest Hemingway

80 days sober

“Wanna come over after school?” I ask Travis as we make our way from the cafeteria to our lockers after lunch on Friday. “We’ve got a few hours to kill before we’re due to come back for performance prep.”

“I can’t,” he sighs. “I have shit to do.”

I sling an arm around his shoulders and press a kiss to his hair, though my action coincides with us passing Vice-Principal Jacobs, who shoots us a warning look. Travis ducks out from under my grip before we can get yelled at—again—for violating the school’s “no public displays of affection” policies. I ask, “Work?”

“Nope, I’m off tonight. But I’ve got a meeting with Principal Hammond, and I have no idea how long it’ll take.”

Suddenly, I’m a lot less concerned with anti-PDA rules than I was a moment ago. I snag his arm and pull him to the side of the stairs before he can head up them; when I curve my hands over his waist, he frowns down at them, but doesn’t move away. “A meeting about what?” I ask. “Are you okay? It’s not about—”

“No, it’s not about that,” he says, voice tightening the way it does every time I bring up the therapy, or the meds, or the anything-else-he-suddenly-has-to-deal-with. “It’s just something to do with the number of credits I’ve got. You know, from all the Advanced Placements and extra labs and shit. No big deal.” I raise my eyebrows. He rolls his eyes. “Garen, I swear, everything is fine. Believe me, if I was being dragged back in for another school-sponsored psych evaluation, you’d know about it.”

I’m a little bit placated by this, so I pull him closer and kiss him until the bell rings and he squirms away, muttering about how he’s been late to almost every class this week because I can’t keep my hands to myself. It’s been totally worth it, though. He heads to his locker, I go to mine, and after school, I text him, *have fun with your lameass meeting. see you tonight xo.*

It doesn’t occur to me that he might be lying.

81 days sober

“Hey, are you doing anything tomorrow? You know, before the evening show?” I whisper, hooking my chin over Travis’ shoulder and peering down at the script in his hands. It’s a good thing I don’t really need to check my lines, because the scene dialog is almost completely obscured by his notes in the margins. “Maybe it’s just because I’ve been focused on the play, but the readings for English are kicking my ass. I mean, I’ve *done* the reading, I just don’t get how some of those discussion questions apply.”

He looks up long enough to shoot me a vaguely apologetic glance as he whispers back, “Sorry, I’ve already got plans. Maybe you could go over Ben’s? You know he’ll be more helpful than me, anyway.”

“Yeah, but English studying sessions with Ben only ever include studying English,” I say glumly. “You at least let me jerk you off most of the time.” Travis bites down on a laugh, flicking his eyes towards the stage. There are only about three more lines of dialog before I’m due on-stage. I peck a quick kiss to his cheek and add, just to sate my own curiosity, “What are your plans, anyway?”

“Other school stuff,” he says in an offhand sort of way. I roll my eyes; this is why his penchant for unnecessarily advanced classes is such a pain in my ass. Still, I give him another kiss—this one on the

lips—before my cue comes and I saunter out onto stage.

And it still doesn't occur to me that he might be lying.

82 days sober

Ben isn't willing to let me jerk him off, but he does offer to make me food while I drink all the coffee he has no reason to keep in his apartment and quiz him about the Lost Generation. It's arguably better, especially when I realize he's making gnocchi. I make up a few verses of a song I've entitled "Ben Deserves A Blowjob A Day For Making Me Delicious Treats," then follow the song with a companion piece called "I'm Going To Marry You, You Food Network Bastard (If Things Don't Work Out With Travis)." The singing is mostly so I won't have to start studying yet, but along the way, I manage to get distracted by the Christmas cards taped to the back of their door.

"Dude," I say, "I'm pretty sure these are the most Jesus-y Christmas cards ever."

"That's because they're all from people at my church," Ben replies. "I guess my mom gave my new address to the ladies in her prayer group, or whatever? I don't know, I mostly just put them up to annoy Alex. There are some non-religious ones in there, too—"

"Uh, yeah there are, because this is definitely a fucking Hanukkah card from *my mom*," I say, staring at the succinct *Happy holidays, Ben and Alex. Sincerely, Marian* on the inside of the card. Who the hell writes 'sincerely' on their holiday cards? "Why does my mom have your address? More importantly, why did I not get a fucking card? I'm her only child, she should—wow, this is really dorky. Who's it from?"

Ben takes two steps out of the kitchen to see that I'm gesturing to a bright green card that's decorated with a sketch of Edgar Allan Poe. On his shoulder, a raven in a Santa hat is saying, *Poe! Poe! Poe!* Ben laughs. "Oh, that one. I have no idea? It just kind of showed up in the mail a week or so ago, no signature or return address or whatever. I'm pretty sure it's from Travis. He's enough of a loser to think that's funny."

"So are you, apparently," I say. I take out my phone and send a quick text to Travis; *did you secretly send ben a dumbass edgar allan poe christmas card, you fuckin loser?*

Only a minute or two later, he responds with a photo of a stack of the Poe cards on a table, along with the words, *You mean these? Definitely not from me*. I grin and shove my phone back into my pocket before flinging myself back down at the kitchen table and starting to sing my made-up songs again. I get less than a verse out before I'm interrupted.

"I really wish you'd asked me to tutor you a year ago," Ben sighs, chopping up something he tells me is spinach, but which could be moss, for all I know about cooking. "I wouldn't have decided to become a teacher, if I'd known that teaching people was so goddamn irritating."

I shrug. "I'm assuming that you won't be cooking for your students every day, though. So, I'm pretty sure you can avoid the song thing. But, um, speaking of 'avoiding'... uh. Alex?"

"Holy segue, Batman," Ben says flatly. When my only response is to hum a signal to continue, he clears his throat and says, "He's out with some of his friends from SCSU. He, um... I guess he's been doing that a lot the past couple of days. I sort of have been, too—hanging out with people from Yale, instead of being here. It's been kind of awkward."

I stretch back in my seat so that I can cuff him around the head. "I thought you were given explicit instructions *not* to make it awkward."

"I'm not the one making it awkward, alright?" he snaps, shoving me back. "He's the one who—look, we

talked about it. And it fucking sucked, because he tried to *convince* me to want him back. I don't feel that way about him, and I care about the guy too much to pretend I do. But he said I should give it a chance, I should think about what it would be like to date someone who really *loved me*. Said it's been hard to spend the last few years watching me always go for guys who don't love me. Guys who just want to *hit it and quit it*—"

"Please tell me he didn't really say '*hit it and quit it*' while trying to seduce you," I choke out, practically inhaling a mouthful of coffee as I do so.

Ben waves his spinach knife in a pretty alarming fashion. "Oh, he really fucking did. The whole collection of rhymes, actually. Hit it and quit it. Fuck me and chuck me. *Hump me and dump me*."

I bury my face in my hands. "I don't—how is it possible that I've slept with someone who uses the phrase 'hump and dump'? I'm pretty sure I used to have standards. We can blame that whole thing on the relapse, right? Whatever, so not the point. But, Ben. Hey. You know that's not true, right? I mean, by all accounts, Ethan was a douche, and uh, obviously Jamie's not about to invite you home to meet the parents—" Ben makes a circular motion with his hand, clearly signaling me to move right the hell along, "—but you and Travis had something that was... annoyingly difficult to get in the middle of, if we're being honest. And you and I were never really a *couple*, but that doesn't mean I didn't care about you. Plus, you know, you're definitely my favorite ex-boyfriend to hang out with and the easiest to get along with, hands down."

"My competition being the stepbrother who spurned your advances for nearly a year, and the psychopath you've got a restraining order against? I'm touched, really." He dumps the chopped spinach into the pan of gnocchi and slaps a lid on it before turning to me and giving a jerky shrug. "Alex says I need to stop dating guys who treat me like shit, and start dating guys who will respect me, and be faithful to me, and take me out, and just... generally not be assholes. He wanted me to consider the idea of dating somebody 'decent' to me. His words."

I cross my arms over my chest and raise a questioning eyebrow towards Alex's room, even though I know he's not in it. What fucking right does he have to say any of that about me, the most recent of Ben's exes? It's like he's completely forgotten that he just finished up a six-month period of stringing Jamie along, wanting him around but never wanting all of him, hooking up with random chicks at parties he'd invited Jamie to, treating him like a piece of ass even after he realized that Jamie was starting to get invested. At least I was a good *friend* to Ben, even if I wasn't a good boyfriend.

"So, are you considering it?" I finally ask.

"No," Ben says immediately. "And I told him as much when he said that, because the more he spoke, the more apparent it became that Alex isn't really in love with me. He's—he's in love with this idea of me." I've already got one eyebrow raised, so it doesn't take much effort to twitch the other one upward. Ben lets out a frustrated groan and drags his hands through his hair. "I don't want a guy whose dream relationship can be described as 'respectable' and 'decent.' Look, I don't know what it was that first got to you about Travis, but for me, it was that *sharpness* he has about him. The guy's got like, the biggest fucking attitude problem in the world, and he's not afraid to let it out in these wonderfully barbed comments, and that—his wit. That's what I liked about him. If he'd really been the wholesome sort of golden boy he looks like, I wouldn't have fallen for him. Same with you. Not that I fell for you, obviously, but the most attractive thing about you is all the jagged edges you've got. And the fact that Alex thinks I want something safer and neater and easier... all that does is prove to me that he doesn't understand anything about what I want in a relationship."

I stand and head for the pan, peeking under the lid of it. Ben elbows me out of the way, but he must be satisfied with what he finds under the lid, because he gives the tiny dumplings a quick stir, then spoons some into a set of bowls, one for me and one for himself. We both sit down and start to eat, and it's several minutes before I can actually make myself stop long enough to reply, "Guessing he didn't love hearing that."

"Not even a little bit, no. He said it was fine. That it was up to me, and hey, I'd know better than anybody what I was looking for in a relationship. But things have sucked ass since then, and right now, it's kind of better if we just ignore each other. Or, at least, ignore the conversation."

I grin and tap the tines of my fork against the lip of my bowl. "Is this your way of telling me you'd rather babble on about F. Scott Fitzgerald than tell me more about your feelings?"

"Are you reading Fitzgerald?" he asks, widening his eyes at me like that will distract me from our previous topic. "*The Great Gatsby's* one of my favorite books. Well, favorite school-assigned books."

I snort. "Doesn't surprise me—hang on, you can probably answer this for me. Was Fitzgerald on our team? Because that book is probably the gayest thing I've ever read in my life, and that's including four years of sexts from Jamie."

"How is *The Great Gatsby* 'the gayest thing'? Please, I honestly want to hear this, because from what Travis has told me, you spend seventy-five percent of every English class telling your teacher how gay every character is."

"Nick Carraway is a fag with a capital 'f.' That's 'f' as in 'fucks dudes.' And I do *not* do this for every character, just the super gay ones. Like the guys in *Merchant of Venice*. This is like, a running argument between T and I, so if you could just settle it for me now, that'd be great. Bassanio and Antonio? Total butt-buddies, right?" I from down at my now empty bowl, then make grabby hands for the pan of gnocchi. "More."

Ben sneers. "Get it yourself, asshole. And... okay. None of the questions you've asked or comments you've made have been relevant to your homework. So, I'm going to answer those, and then we're going to talk about T.S. Eliot, okay?" I make a face, but nod. "Alright. First of all, Fitzgerald had an incredibly fucked-up marriage with a woman named Zelda. So, no, he probably wasn't gay, but if it makes you feel better about your... *interpretations*, he once got his dick out for Hemingway in a hotel men's room. And it's rumored that Zelda was worried that they were having an affair. I suppose you can take from that what you will. Second comment was about Nick Carraway being gay—really, really not the point of the novel, dude. It might be true—most of the scenes with him and Mr. McKee are pretty suggestive—and it might not be true, but that's not even a little bit what the novel's about, and your teacher will never ask you about it. Third topic was what, *Merchant of Venice*?" I nod, too busy chewing the lovely, delicious food to speak. "Open to interpretation. You need to take into account that human sexuality wasn't treated the same way in Elizabethan England as it is now, so viewing their relationship through a modern scope is obviously going to give you a different impression. But my personal opinion? Definitely fucking. Come on, '*I think he only loves the world for him?*' Or that bullshit in Act Four—'*life itself, my wife, and all the world are not with me esteemed above thy life. I would lose all, ay, sacrifice them all here to this devil, to deliver you.*' There's only one reason a man would rank another man above his new wife, and it's not because they're just close friends."

"Anyone ever tell you that it's super creepy when you do that quoting thing?" I say, pulling out my phone to text Travis, *ben says you're wrong about merchant of venice, dudes are totally fucking, HA*. Ben opens his mouth to reply, but I spear a few more of the gnocchi with my fork and cut across him, "Seriously, why aren't you on *Iron Chef* like, right the fuck now?"

"I'm pretty sure you need to be an actual chef to be on *Iron Chef*," he says, shrugging, "and not just some teenager who memorized all the family recipes because his mom used to force him to help with her catering company."

My phone buzzes on the table between us, but considering the way Ben glances at it, makes a face, and doesn't hand it to me, I'm not surprised to discover that it's from Jamie, not Travis. I am, however, surprised to discover that it says, *What time do I need to have him back to you so he won't miss the show?* I blink and send back a few question marks, because what he's said makes no sense; we hadn't

been talking, let alone talking about anyone.

His response is a picture.

His response is a picture of Travis.

His response is a picture of Travis sprawled out on the couch in the middle of Jamie's loft in the city, his bare feet kicked up onto the arm of the couch and a paper in his hands. He looks so relaxed; he looks pleased. His phone is visible on the coffee table right near him, even though he hasn't texted me back. And I don't—why the fuck isn't he wearing shoes? That must mean he's been there for a while now, long enough to get comfortable. I just wish I knew *how* comfortable.

It's like everything I thought I was certain of is crashing down around me while I sit in Ben's kitchen, so suddenly and so thoroughly that I can't think straight. I force myself to take a shaky but steady breath. No. Travis and I aren't together, we're not exclusive, but he wouldn't hook up with my best friend. And Jamie wouldn't hook up with the only guy I've ever loved. Neither of them would do that to me, I *know* this, but there's a sick burst of jealousy inside of me, which is so much worse, because *this isn't me*. I'm not a jealous, possessive kind of guy, not really. If this were anyone else, I wouldn't think twice about it. God, if it were anyone else, Jamie could've sent me a picture of his dick in the guy's mouth, and I would've laughed about it.

But it's Travis. I try so fucking hard not to get jealous, I try not to act like he's mine because he keeps telling me he's not, but... I just don't understand why he's not wearing shoes. I don't understand why he's on Jamie's couch. I don't understand why he's in Jamie's apartment. I don't understand why he's in New York. I don't understand why he didn't text me back.

And I don't understand why he lied and told me he couldn't hang out with me because he's doing schoolwork, when he's very clearly not.

"You alright?" Ben asks. I look up. He's frowning, glancing back and forth between my face and the phone. I smile and nod, but say nothing, and the phone buzzes with another text from Jamie. *What time do I need to kick this kid off my sofa and send him back to Connecticut?*

I refuse to acknowledge that my fingers are shaking as I type, *why the fuck is he on your sofa in the first place?*

There's a brief pause, then-- *...has he not talked to you?*

he talks to me every day. did you have a specific topic in mind? I reply.

His response is an uncharacteristically panicked-seeming, *Alright then! Wow. Glad to see that communicative failures are still boundless in the town of Lakewood. Not getting involved in this, forget I said a word. I'm sure he'll talk to you about it when he gets back to town.*

He doesn't, though.

When I come up to Travis before curtain that night, right before our final performance, the first words out of my mouth are, "How'd your school stuff go?"

Tell me. Tell me. Tell me.

But he doesn't. He smiles brightly and lies through his fucking teeth, "It went fine, thanks."

"What class was it for?" I press on.

He shrugs. "It wasn't for any class we have together." My chest feels suddenly tight around my

hammering heart. Why isn't he telling me he went to New York? Jamie said he would. Jamie said he'd talk to me about this. Why isn't he telling me, why is he lying, why is he doing this? He frowns. "You okay?" I nod. "Nervous about tonight?"

"Last show," I manage to make myself say. "I don't wanna fuck it up."

He leans up to give me a quick peck on the lips—nothing I have time to reciprocate, nothing real—and says, "You won't, G. You'll be perfect."

I'm not. That night is my worst performance, hands down. I miss two cues, I fumble a couple lines, I'm flat on a lyric in "Sandra Dee," I nearly forget the choreography for half my dances. It's horrible, and embarrassing, and I don't have the energy to pretend it's not.

The instant we've wrapped the last song, I disappear backstage without even bothering to stick around for bows. I'm out of my costume, into my street clothes, out of the building, and into my car before anyone else has even made it off stage. Part of me wants to drive away right now, but I can't—I'm supposed to give Travis' lying, possibly cheating ass a ride home. Or to my house. I had *hoped* it would be my house, but that's seeming increasingly unlikely, considering how he seems to have changed his mind about me already.

Ten days.

It's been ten days since we kissed, and he's already getting tired of me. He's blowing me off. He's lying to me. He's done, or he's bored, and he's so dangerously close to not being mine anymore, and I don't know how to stop this from happening. I squeeze my eyes shut and lean my forehead against the steering wheel, taking slow, deep breaths that ache through my whole body.

Eventually, there is a sharp rap of knuckles against my window. I don't lift my head, but I do turn my face to see who it is. Travis, of course. I turn the key in the ignition and lower the window. Instantly, he drops an elbow onto it and crowds in close. "Are you okay?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" I ask, but it feels a lot like I'm saying, *you tell me*.

"You walked out before final curtain, dude. You missed your bow, you missed Ms. Markland's big thank-you speech, you missed—oh. These are for you." He leans back and suddenly, the window's full of a huge, cellophane-wrapped bouquet of flowers. My muscles are barely working, but a few seconds of silently screaming at myself is enough to get me to reach up and accept the flowers so that Travis can lean back down. He shrugs, says, "We had some cash leftover in the crew budget, so we used it to get flowers for direction and choreography—Ms. Markland, Nate, and Annabelle—and the four main cast members—you, Joss, John, and Christine."

"Thanks," I say.

"Garen." He's actually starting to look upset now, but I don't know why. If he doesn't care enough about me to tell me the truth about what he was doing today, then why would he care about what's going on with me tonight? I don't say anything. He reaches in and squeezes my shoulder. "I don't understand what's wrong. Can you please talk to me?"

I lick my too-dry lips and say hoarsely, "I did a really shitty job tonight. It was the last performance, and I was totally out of it. I fucked up everything."

"No, you didn't," he lies, leaning further into the car to kiss my cheek. "There were some off moments, sure, but everyone in the cast has had a few of those. There hasn't been a perfect show this entire run. But you still did really well, and you're still incredibly talented."

Then why don't you want me anymore?

"It's been a long night," I say, turning my eyes forward to the windshield. "Do you still want me to drive you home?"

"I thought we were going to go to your house," he says. I can hear the frown in his voice, even though I'm not looking at him.

I nod. "We can do that. Get in the car."

The drive to my house is silent. My knuckles are white from how tightly I'm gripping the gear shift; Travis can't exactly hold my hand, but he does keep his fingers wrapped loosely around my wrist for the duration of the trip. Neither of us says anything as I park the car and lead the way to the front door, then through to the door down to my room. Only when we're at the foot of the stairs do I turn to him.

"I need—" is all I get out before I have to break off and clear my throat, because who gives a fuck about what I need right now? I try again, "I'm going to take a shower, get all this shit off my face and out of my hair or whatever." I make a half-hearted gesture towards the stage makeup and hair gel I didn't bother to remove before leaving the school. Travis nods, and my next gesture is in the direction of the bedroom. "You can, um... just go in, I guess. I'll be there in a bit."

His eyes flicker briefly towards the bathroom door, like he's wondering why I'm not inviting him to join me, but he nods and heads into my room without protest. Thank god. It's embarrassing, but I need a few minutes alone to figure out what I'm going to do, and the shower is kind of my only chance for real privacy. I strip down, step under the spray of hot water, and start scrubbing at my skin with the makeup-removing soap that Annabelle loaned me for after performances—though, in all hilarious honesty, I probably could've just asked Ben what he uses to take his eyeliner off every night.

I need a plan. I need a *good* plan, I need to find some way to make Travis talk to me about what's going on with him. There's a voice in the back of my head that's doing a dead-on impression of Doc Howard--*Garen, just ask him. Talk to him, like an adult.* But the problem with that piece-of-shit game plan is that I can't talk to him, not now that I know he might just lie. Besides, what the fuck can I say?

Am I really that annoying that you have to pretend to do schoolwork just to get away from me?

Did you go to New York because you suddenly like my best friend more than you like me?

When I lose you this time, will it be for good?

Fucking hell, I need a *plan*. Words are obviously out of the question, so it's—it'll have to be action. And that's fine, because I'm good with action. I might not know what I could say to him that would convince him to keep wanting me, but I've spent years learning how to do things that can prove I'm worth hanging onto. After all, what's the point of having a body like this if it can't make someone stay?

Scrubbed clean, I cut the water off and step out of the shower. The blue and gray plaid sweats I wore to bed last night are dangling over the towel rack—I pull them on, not caring when they cling awkwardly to my still-damp skin. I should probably dry off, but being in here and not knowing if Travis has gotten bored and left already is making me anxious, so I just shake my hair out like a dog would, painting the mirror with water droplets, and head for my room.

Travis is sprawled out on my bed, his shoes, jacket, and hoodie all removed. He's lying on his stomach, propped up on his elbows as he thumbs through—I can't be sure, because he's not facing me, but I think it's the procedure for the trial law competition we're both going to be doing in just a few weeks. Other than exams, that competition is the last big event I've got before I'm out of Lakewood and back in New York, and I really don't want to be reminded of it right now. I throw myself down on the bed next to him, grab the booklet from him, and fling it across the room.

He laughs. "I'm sorry, have you not gotten enough attention tonight?"

"No," I say.

"Maybe you should've stuck around for your standing ovation, then," he says, crowding close enough to curl up against me and nudge my jaw with the tip of his nose. When I don't say anything, he pecks a kiss to my chin. "You shouldn't be so hard on yourself, you know. It was a good performance, and you—"

That's all I allow him to say before my instinct to *get my hands on him and fix this* kicks in. I snag the front of his t-shirt and haul him up into a kiss that he reciprocates as eagerly as he always does. Something about that sets off another spark of confusion in me, because really, I'd assumed this would take some convincing. If he actually still wanted to be with me, none of this would even be necessary. He slips an arm around my neck and parts his lips, but when I reach down to touch him, he catches my wrist, shakes his head, and mumbles, "Can you—not yet. Just kiss me again, okay?"

"Okay," I say, and I do kiss him, even though it's not okay. Because this isn't the first time this has happened—me trying to touch him, and him shrugging away from my hands, putting me off because he's still soft. The first time it happened last week, he'd been humiliated, stammering out apologies and trying to explain to me that it's an unfortunate side effect of the medication his psychiatrist prescribes; his antidepressants completely kill his sex drive, which is why he and I only used to fuck once a week when we were having our first go as a couple, why he had no qualms about dating Ben for months before they did anything other than kiss.

When he'd told me, I'd been understanding about it. I'd given him half-truths about how getting sober had messed with my dick activities for a while—tactfully choosing not to mention that it'd mostly been the 'getting pinned down and fucked into a mattress while I was pretty much unconscious because of how stoned I was' part that had made getting hard a challenge for me—and told him that it was always up to him. If he wanted to just hang out or snuggle or whatever because he wasn't in the mood, we could do that. If it just meant we had to spend more time on foreplay before he was good to go, we'd do that. I was understanding about it.

But now I think what I'm *understanding* is that the issue isn't his meds, or his body chemistry, or his depression—it's me. Or, it's him, and how much he doesn't want me.

That's okay, though, because maybe he doesn't want *this* me, but I've got so many different versions of myself stashed away, and even after all this time, there are parts of me he hasn't had yet. I've still got one card left to play. It's the thing that distracted Dave from hitting me sometimes. It's the thing that convinced Seth to give me coke when I had no cash for it. It's the thing that made Alex finally admit to being bi and dating Jamie. And right now, with Travis so close to being gone, it's the only chance I have to make him want to stay.

I push at his shoulder until he rolls onto his back, then sling a leg across him to seat myself comfortably on his lap. I'm a little surprised—in a good way, I guess—to discover that he's actually half-hard already. Not hard enough to make a big deal out of, but it's something I can work with. Something I can rock against as I say, "Tell me what you want."

"You know what I want," he laughs, but I really, really don't. I give a faint hum, just to let him know that his answer isn't good enough, and he sighs. His fingertips are brushing across the tops of my thighs, touching just lightly enough to almost tickle. I squirm a little, and he slides his hands up to palm my waist. He tries to tug me down to kiss him, but I resist, and he rolls his eyes a little before he finally says, "I want you to fuck me."

"I don't think that's true," I say, as calmly as I can. He shoots me a quizzical half-smile, but the expression slips easily into an eyes-closed, lips-parted sigh when I grind my ass down against his hard-on. I duck down to brace an elbow on the pillow next to his head as I say, in little more than a whisper, "I don't think you want me to fuck you. I think you want to fuck me."

His fingers tighten against my skin, and he hesitates for a telling moment before he shakes his head and says, “No. You don’t—that’s not what we do together. And I *like* what we do together, I want you to—”

I lift up so that I can slip a hand down the front of his jeans and into his boxers, stroking him until he stops speaking. I press a kiss to the corner of his mouth, sure that he can feel my only-semi-forced smile, and say, “God, I love your cock. It’s so fucking perfect, when I’ve got my hand on it, or my mouth on it.” None of these are lies. The lie comes next. “I want to know how it’d feel in my ass. Bet you’d make it so fucking good, T.” I manage a shivering half-twist against him again, like even the thought of it is getting me off. Pity I couldn’t remember how to act this well when I was onstage tonight; would’ve been a hell of a good show.

Lying this close to him, I can feel his throat move as he swallows before saying softly, “If that’s really what you want to do—if you’re *positive*, G, only if you’re really—we can do that. We can do whatever you want, but I thought you didn’t like bottoming.”

I like you, I can’t tell him. I like keeping you, every little part of you that you’ll let me have, and I like the idea of you still wanting me even when I leave in a few weeks. I like you more than I like topping. I like you more than I like my dignity, and my honor, and my sanity, apparently.

Not a single one of those words can come out of my mouth right now. So I kiss him quickly on the lips and lie around my most genuine smile, “I like it sometimes. Just take your time—it’s been a while, and I’m, you know, a delicate fuckin’ flower or whatever.”

My imitation of a sudden switch to a good mood must be convincing, because he smiles into our next kiss. And he does take his time—we make out for at least another half hour, while he carefully strips us both of our clothing and I try to pretend that what’s about to happen/*isn’t* about to happen. That illusion goes right out the window when he eventually rolls over to retrieve lube and a condom from my nightstand drawer.

That’s when I pretty much check out. I... I’m making noise, I think, and I’m definitely moving, rocking back onto his hand as he works me open with slick fingers, but my mind is racing desperately in any other direction. I’m thinking about the school play, I’m trying to figure out when I’m going to have time to do the rest of my English reading before class tomorrow afternoon, I’m composing mental packing lists for the move to New York. Anything but let myself think about what’s happening, because if I think about it, I’m going to lose my mind. He preps me carefully, using an almost ridiculous amount of lube and sucking my dick while he presses his fingers into me, like that’ll distract me. It’s only a few minutes before he’s able to find the spot inside of me that makes me arch up off the bed and whimper like a bitch. He smiles—or, smiles as much as somebody can when he’s got a cock in his mouth, and repeats the movement, like it’s a good thing. And it’s not. It sends involuntary waves of pleasure through my body, but it’s a purely biological reaction, and it’s not making my heart or my mind feel any better or safer. Fuck. Even *Dave* managed to get me to this point a few times, but just because my traitorous body reacts to something doesn’t mean that my soul doesn’t feel like it’s about to crack open under the strain of *hating this*.

Travis must mistake my shuddering for a positive reaction, which is good, in a way, because he takes it as a signal to pull his fingers out. He’s kneeling between my spread legs, sitting back on his heels. He picks up the condom packet, but pauses before tearing it open. He asks, “Are you positive that this is what you want to do?”

I’m positive that it’s what I *don’t* want to do.

“Yeah,” I say, snatching the wrapper out of his hands and tearing it open. I’m proud of how little I fumble while rolling it down onto his dick, even though my hands are shaking like I’m having a seizure. “I’m positive, babe, come on.”

And alright, here's the thing about dicks: they never seem that big, until they're in your ass, and then they seem fucking gargantuan. Travis is the most gorgeous person on the planet, but it's not like he's got a huge piece. He's average. Here and now, though, when he's carefully pushing it into me, inch by inch, I feel dangerously close to dying.

The second he has bottomed out, he fumbles to curve a hand over my jaw and draw me into a kiss. "Okay?" he murmurs. His voice is strained, like he's trying to force himself to hold in any sounds of enjoyment until he's sure that I'm into it. That's what I should be focusing on right now. Getting him off, making him feel good, earning him. I must be too silent, because his brow creases, and his voice is a little sharper as he eases most of the way back out and asks, "Are you okay? Is it—can I move?"

And it's completely fucked up, but right now, all I can think about is the fact that the only dude he's ever topped before is Ben. Ben, who *likes* getting fingered, likes getting fucked; Ben, who is shy and self-deprecating and stuck in his own head all the fucking time, right up until he gets a dick in him, and then he takes off his metaphorical glasses, has some sort of sexy-librarian meltdown, and starts taking it like God created him expressly for the purpose of bottoming.

It's too much to compete with, but it's a starting point for an imitation. I thread a hand into Travis' hair, and when I speak, it's Ben's words that come out of my mouth, crackling from my lips the same way he'd snapped them at me the first time I fucked him at Alex's house last fall. "Stop treating me like I'm a doll, and fuck me like you mean it."

Travis appears momentarily stunned, like he knows the words aren't mine, but before he can figure out what I'm attempting to pull off, I hitch my legs high up around his hips, dig my feet into the small of his back, and jerk upward until he's all the way inside me again. And *holyfuck* that was a bad idea, and it hurts, and my throat feels like it's closing up, refusing to take in any more oxygen, but Travis' eyes flutter shut and he lets out a very soft, "Oh, god."

"That's it," I manage to rasp out, doing my best to rock with him. He's still moving slowly—not as slow as before, but still not anything rough enough to justify the way I'm shaking—and I'm not sure if it's because he's trying to get me used to the stretch, or because he's trying to find a good angle for me. Either way, it's not working. I'm too tense and terrified for this to get any easier, and I'm gone, in the worst way. For all I know, he could be hitting my prostate dead-on with every thrust, but I can't feel it. I can't feel *anything*, really; it's like I've gone numb from the waist down.

But I wait.

I wait for the horror and embarrassment and nervousness to subside, I wait for this to turn into what Jamie's been swearing for four years it can be when it's done right—I wait for it to feel like making a connection. I wait to feel like we're doing something nice, something intimate, something good. None of that happens. Instead, I'm treated to nothing but a steadily increasing sense of panic.

I've been kinda cupping my dick with one hand, trying to make it seem like I'm jerking off even though all I'm really doing is trying to make sure Travis doesn't realize that I've gone completely soft. The feeling is too much now, though, and I shift both my hands up to his hair, dragging him close enough to press our foreheads together. I need the contact to ground me, because my breathing is starting to get too shaky, even to my own ears. My fakeass moans have ebbed away now, and all that's left is the stuttering gasp that sounds too much like the panic attack I think it's about to become. Every inhale is nothing more than an exaggerated hitch, and I'm not sure there's any exhale at all.

Suddenly, Travis stops moving, then straightens his arms a little to pull back enough to see my face. "You're—Garen, am I hurting you? Am I—what's wrong? You have to tell me what's wrong, I don't—"

"Nothing's wrong," I try to say, but it comes out too high-pitched, like a fucking whimper, and my arms won't stop shaking where I've wound them around his shoulders. He glances at the muscles in my arms, and the way they're practically vibrating—I try to smile, try to distract him by moving my hands up to frame

his face again so that I can pull him closer. "It's—I'm fine, it's fine, I promise, I'm fine."

"Nobody says they're fine that many times and really means it," he says shortly, locking his elbows so that he has pulled as far away from me as he can. "This isn't working. We have to stop."

I fling a leg around him, digging my heel into his ass so he can't pull out any further. He shoots me another of those startled looks, but I just shake my head and yank him down on top of me so that I can bury my face against the side of his neck as I pretty much gasp, "No. No, no, don't stop. I can do this, I can handle it, please keep going, I promise I can make it good for you, I—"

"Garen, *stop*. You're not turned on, you're not enjoying this, and I-I think you might be having some kind of breakdown right now. So, can you please move your leg so that I can pull out? Because this isn't working. And I want to stop."

He wants to stop. He's asking me to stop. I need to fucking stop. Slowly, I straighten out my leg; it feels like my bones are grinding together as I move. Travis reaches down to hold the condom in place as he eases out—and fuck, I hate that sensation, the few seconds of being too exposed right after someone pulls out of me. He doesn't even bother to get up and dispose of the condom properly; he just tears it off and tosses it right on the floor, moving only enough to slide out from between my legs and curl against my side.

"Tell me what you need," he pleads, and it takes all of my willpower—and, honestly, my continued inability to breathe properly—to stop myself from snapping, *I need you to fuck off*. And I *can't* stop myself from rolling over onto my stomach so that I can bury my face in the pillows.

This was my last chance. This was the only thing I had left that might make him stay, and I fucked it up. Still, I'm not someone who gives up easily, especially when it comes to Travis, so I take a deep breath and say, "I'm s-sorry. I just need a minute. I need—just a few seconds, I swear, and then you can—we can try again, I'll be better this time, I'll—"

"Uh, or we can not do that again ever in our lives," Travis interrupts, like I'm a fucking idiot for even suggesting it. "Garen, it's... I really appreciate that you tried to do that for me, but I don't want to—"

"I'm fine! I swear I just need you to give me a minute, and then—m-maybe if we try it like this? I-If you're behind me, and it's—that's what worked with Alex, when he and I—and it's just, I can be quiet like this, if you're f-fucking me from behind, and you won't have to look at me, and we—"

"Oh my god, do you even realize what you're saying? Are you hearing the words that are coming out of your mouth?" Travis says, and fuck, fuck, fuck, he sounds like he's going to cry. Numbly, one of my hands flops out to the side, searching around until I make contact with his skin, trying to calm him down even though I'm the one who's going crazy.

It's nearly ten minutes before I'm able to say, "I-I just wanted—fuck." I swallow; Travis soothes me with a palm between my shoulders blades and what feels like a hundred soft kisses pressed to my shoulder. Eventually, I can breathe enough to finish in a barely audible voice, "I just wanted to give you a reason to stay."

There's a pause and then he says slowly, "Was I going somewhere?"

"Yeah," I whisper, "and you were lying to me about it." He goes still, but doesn't try to defend himself or talk his way out of it. That's good, I guess, him being done lying. But it doesn't really make me feel any better. I turn my head ever so slightly, just enough to peek at him. His expression is tense, nervous; I stop peeking. "James told me you went to New York."

"Did he tell you why?" Travis asks carefully, beginning to smooth his hand over my spine again.

"No. And he sure as hell didn't tell me why you lied and said you were doing school stuff, or why you lied the other day and said you had some meeting just so you didn't have to hang out with me, or—"

"Hey, hey," he cuts me off. "Neither of those things were lies, alright? Not explaining every last detail of something that is too complicated to get into at the time is not the same thing as lying. I don't lie to you, G."

"Yes you do," I say miserably. "And the worst part? I don't even have the fucking right to ask you to tell me the truth, because I know—y-you keep telling me, you keep saying we're not together, and I don't—I know I'm not anything to you, and I know we're not together like we used to be before I went away, and I've got no right to say you can't lie to me, because—"

My words stumble into silence when Travis suddenly sits up and grabs at my shoulders, shoving and prodding at me until he manages to turn me onto my back and haul me into a sitting position. For the first time in the year I've known him, I don't want to look at him, but he grabs my face between his hands and makes me, like he wants to be positive that I know he's talking to me when he says, "Let me make sure I'm understanding this correctly. You forced yourself to bottom for me in an attempt to make me want to commit to you, because you think that I've been lying to you about where I'm going and what I'm doing so that I won't have to spend time with you?"

I don't respond, because I'm beginning to sense that anything I say right now will probably just make me sound even crazier than he clearly already thinks I am.

My silence is enough for him. Or, it's too much, because he scrambles off the bed and starts gathering his clothes. I quietly try not to die. And then he flings my sweatpants at me. A pair of socks. A t-shirt, a hoodie, my leather jacket. When I don't move, he sighs and says, "Garen, get dressed. If you want to know the full story of what's going on—I *will* tell you, I would've told you earlier, if I'd known you were freaking out over this—but we have to go to my house. There are things I need to get. You can pack a bag, if you want, because you're staying over."

"We have school in the—"

"Fuck school, alright?" he interrupts, zipping up his jeans with a little more vehemence than necessary. I can't help but stare at him; it's like somebody plucked my personality right out of me and stuffed it into his body instead. I manage to get my sweats and the hoodie on without standing up, and when he realizes how reluctant I am to leave the comfort of my bed, Travis crowds back in, kneeling on the edge of the mattress and calming me with kisses before he says, "Listen to me. We're going to go to my house, and I'm going to explain everything to you—and I'm going to drive, because Christ, you're still *shaking*. You're going to stay over, because I'm not letting you drive yourself anywhere tonight, and because I like waking up with you. Tomorrow, we're going to skip school, I'm going to take you to breakfast, and we're going to talk to each other, like adults, Garen, because I'm pretty sure we're going to have a lot to talk about after what I tell you when we get to my place."

Getting me to actually leave my house turns out to be more of an ordeal than I think Travis had anticipated. I'm still sluggish and shaking, and it takes about ten minutes for me—dressed like an ass, in fucking pajamas, combat boots, and a leather jacket—to be ready to leave. Trav scribbles a note to my dad and leaves it on the counter before herding me out into the passenger seat of my car. He's still a little awkward when it comes to shifting, but we make it to his house without crashing.

And of fucking course, when he lets us in and directs me upstairs, Evelyn is standing in the hallway, frozen outside her bedroom door and gaping at me like she doesn't know whether to call the cops. All I can think about right now is the fact that the last time I was standing in this hallway, she was snapping at me to hurry up, get my shit, and get out of her house. The time before that, I was sobbing on the floor while Travis held me and Dad put his gun back in the safe.

Not exactly my fondest memories.

Behind me, Travis clears his throat and says, "Garen's going to spend the night here, if that's okay."

There is an unspoken, pointed addition of, *I'll leave with him if you tell him to go.*

"I don't like you having friends over on school nights," Evelyn says stiffly.

"It's important to me, Mom. And it won't happen again. Just tonight," Travis says.

Evelyn eyes me; I try to remain completely still. Thirty seconds pass, and then she snaps, "Don't forget to take your medication, and don't stay up past midnight. You have school in the morning."

She disappears into her room, and I finally exhale. Travis braces a hand against the small of my back and gives me a gentle shove into his bedroom.

It's exactly the same as it was six months ago, when I still lived here. I don't know why I expected it to be different. All the furniture is where it's always been, and he still doesn't remember to close his closet door or toss his clothes in the hamper instead of onto the floor. The only differences seem to be that the stack of books on the desk is taller, and there are a few pictures tacked to the wall above his headboard. He gives me another push, this time towards the bed. I collapse onto the very edge of the mattress, then shuffle back until I'm seated almost on the pillows.

"Just—hang on. Give me a minute to find—" He trails off without explaining what exactly he's trying to find, but it's apparently somewhere in the mess of papers in his desk drawers. While he searches, I turn my focus to the pictures on the wall. Of the seven pictures, three are of him and Ben, which I guess makes sense, considering they dated for four months. That's obviously when these were taken, because they're hanging off each other in all of them—Ben on Travis' lap, or the two of them holding hands, or Travis' arm slung casually across Ben's shoulders while they're curled up on a couch together. One of the non-Ben pictures seems to be a group shot of the entire stage crew for *Grease*. Next to that, there's a strip of tape holding up just a corner of a picture that seems to have been ripped down, and I'd be willing to bet anything that it was a picture of him and Joss. Another of the pictures is of him and his sister, taken in front of what looks like a college dorm, probably when she was dropped off for her freshman year.

There are pictures of me. None of us together, because I'm not sure those even exist, but there's one he took when I wasn't looking on Halloween—I'm wearing my platypus costume and playing beer pong, and Ben and Jamie are heckling me from the other end of the table. The last picture is of me. Just me, alone, not really doing anything. I can't even tell where or when it was taken; the only indication of a timeline is the fact that my lip ring is missing, but the hole is still visible, which must mean that it was snapped sometime over the last month or two, once I'd gotten to the point where I could take it out for a day or two without worrying about it closing up. I'm not looking at the camera—I don't even seem to realize there *is* a camera—but I'm laughing, smile wide and open.

I don't think I could smile that honestly right now if my life depended on it.

There's a soft *thwack* as Travis finally tosses a decently thick stack of papers onto the mattress in front of me. I glance at him, but he just gestures to the papers. I pick up the top sheet—a copy of his transcript. Even after all the pain and awkwardness of tonight, I can't help but roll my eyes.

"Yes, Travis, you're very clever," I say. "Straight A's, all Advance Placement courses, you're the best. Is there—"

"Count my credits," he interrupts. I don't have to—there's a neat little box in the bottom right corner of the paper. I stare at the number in it, then at Travis, who shrugs and continues, "Every regular class at LHS is worth three credits. Honors courses and science labs are worth four credits, AP courses are worth five. We're supposed to take twelve courses—six in the fall, six in the spring—for each of our first two years, then ten courses—five in fall, five in spring—for each of our final two years. You need to have a hundred

and thirty-two credits to graduate, but I—”

“You already have a hundred and thirty-five,” I finish. “Or, you will, once this semester’s over. How is that possible?”

Another shrug. “I’ve been taking all honors and AP courses since I started high school. It’s not—I mean, I don’t think the school really counts on people taking the sort of courseload I take? Everybody’s supposed to take eight full semesters here. But right after school started in September, Principal Hammond called me down to his office and said that, assuming I passed all my classes for the fall semester, I’d be eligible for early graduation.”

I slump back against the pillows, paging through the next few sheets of paper. More transcripts, more paperwork. “I didn’t know this was even an option.”

“They get somebody who can do that maybe once every five or six years. Hammond said the only thing I’d have to worry about would be taking my AP exams in May so that I can get college credit for them, but I could either come back and take the tests at LHS, or find another school willing to let me sit the exams with their seniors. And um—it wasn’t a sure thing. He said that it was up to me, if I wanted to graduate between semesters, or if I wanted to wait, take some more classes, maybe rack up more credits to transfer into whatever college I end up at. I told him I’d think about it, because I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do.”

“Are you sure now?” I ask.

He gestures to the stack of papers. “Keep reading. All of them.”

I flip past the rest of the transcripts and grade reports until I get to a form that has been filled out, stamped, signed. *Request for Early Graduation*. It’s been approved. I turn to the next page. Travis’ acceptance letter from Columbia. My stomach lurches, and I can’t help but look up at him. He points back to the papers and repeats, urgently, nervously, “Keep reading.”

I do. I keep reading, right through registration confirmation, and tuition deposits, and a list of classes registered for the spring semester. And then, weirdly, information from the Patton Military Academy Student Affairs office. And then Patton’s AP testing schedule. And then a list of addresses, all written in Jamie’s stupidly neat script. And then an application form. I swallow hard, tap the tip of my finger against that last page, and say hoarsely, “What’s this?”

Travis takes the stack of papers out of my hands and sets it aside. He climbs onto the bed, facing me and tucking his legs under himself so that our knees are touching. He holds his hands out for mine, and I take them, but it’s another minute before I can make myself actually meet his eyes, and then another minute before he says, pronouncing each word carefully, “That’s a rental application for a place halfway between your new school and mine. The day after you told the rest of us about transferring, I called James and said I wanted to take him up on that offer to get a tour of Columbia from somebody who already goes there. I told him that I thought it would be a good idea for you to have more of a support system in New York than just him, because yeah, you guys have already lived together before, but it might still be smart for you to have another friend living nearby, even if I was in a dorm half an hour away.”

“And he thought it was a good idea?” I say.

“No,” Travis replies. “He thought that it would be a good idea for you and I to get a place together, instead of you and him.”

I don’t say anything. My heart is going to beat right out of my chest, and I’m going to die, and Travis is telling me that Jamie says we should live together, and why didn’t anyone bother to clue me into this before right now?

But Travis keeps talking, like he's trying to win a debate I didn't realize we were having. "I'm willing to live in a completely sober environment, and he's not. If you live with him, he can't guarantee that there won't be something in the apartment that could hurt your sobriety, but I can. I'll drink at parties or clubs, sure, but it's just something to do, it's not something I really get into. If we live together, there doesn't have to be any booze in our place at all. It would be better; it'd be *safer*. Besides, James already has a really nice apartment right near his school, and he—I mean, based on what he was acting like when I was there, it seems like he's kind of... particular? About the arrangement of his stuff, that is."

I grin and duck my head. "That's such a polite way of saying 'dude will gut you like a fish if you put a glass down without using a coaster.' Like, I lived with him for three years, so I'm pretty much used to his OCD-weirdness, but yeah, I, uh... I don't think he'd like moving. He'd do it, if he thought it was best for me. He'd do anything for me. But it would throw him off pretty badly, and I don't want to do that to him."

"You don't have to," Travis says, with an awkward little nod towards the rental application.

For a moment, we are both silent. Eventually, I collect my thoughts enough to say, "Yeah, I, um... sorry. I'm just sort of trying to wrap my head around the fact that I think you're asking me to move in with you."

"I am."

"But we're still not dating or anything, right?" I clarify.

He frowns. "Right."

"We're sleeping with each other, and neither of us really seems to be interested in sleeping with anyone else, and you're graduating school a semester early so that you can follow me to my military school in New York, and you want us to live together," I tick off on my fingers, "but we're still not dating."

"Right," he repeats, scowl deepening.

"Not even a little bit?"

"For fuck's sake, dude, do you want to live with me or not?"

"Uh, that depends on whether your piss-poor attitude is going to get its own room in the apartment, because your fucking sass sure as hell isn't bunking with me," I say, and he shoves me sideways onto the bed. I pull him down with me, because my heart is still beating too fast, and I still don't feel okay—not after the night we've had—but Travis McCall just asked me to live with him, and right now, all I want to do is bury my face against the side of his neck and try to keep my freakout mostly silent.

He seems content to let me process his offer at my own speed; for several minutes, he just lies there, dragging his fingers through the soft curls I didn't bother to flat-iron after my shower. By the time I've actually prepared myself to speak, it's been long enough that his hand has gone still again, and I think he might actually be dozing off. I lean up to brush a soft kiss to the corner of his mouth, and he turns into it even though he's barely awake. I pull back, and his eyes flutter open again. I nod once and say, "Okay. We'll fill out the application in the morning."

"Okay," he echoes, and I have to hide my face against his neck again, because his smile's so bright that it hurts to look at him.

83 days sober

Waking up to find myself being enthusiastically spooned by Travis is easy. Convincing him that I'm over last night's panic enough for us to exchange good-morning-blowjobs is easy. Grabbing a late breakfast together at the Lakewood Diner is easy, and filling out the rental application is easy, and figuring out the

logistics of moving in together—the ideal time to sign a lease, whether to stock up on awesome but shit-quality Ikea furniture or invest in something that might last, how to bribe Ben into helping us move because he’s the only person we know who has access to a cargo van through his dad’s shop—is easy.

There is nothing easy about calling the LRC to make an unexpected, late-afternoon appointment to speak with Doc Howard.

When I walk into her office, the single-serving coffee machine is already on her desk, and my coffee mug is already full. Instead of flopping down in the chair, kicking my feet up, and generally taking up as much space as humanly possible, I accept the mug, say, “Thank you,” and sit down on the very edge of one of the more comfortable armchairs off to the side. In the past, I’ve always avoided those chairs because they make it feel too much like the stereotypical and-how-do-you-*feel*-about-that-Garen? sort of sessions that make me cringe; sitting in the rigid, uncomfortable chair with Doc’s desk separating us makes me feel more like I’m in the headmaster’s office, getting yelled at, which is much more familiar territory for me. Today, I’m in the mood to be treated like a psych patient.

After a beat, Doc slides into the seat across from me and says, “I was surprised when they told me you’d requested an appointment for this afternoon. I wasn’t expecting to see you again until our usual Saturday meeting.”

“Yeah, well, I sort of...” I pause and take a sip of my coffee while I try to find a tactful way of phrasing what I want to say. There isn’t one. “I sort of lost my shit yesterday. Like, even on the Garen Anderson scale of things. I know that, on a crazy scale of one to ten, a typical person’s ten is equal to my three or four, but this is... it was a ten, even for me.”

Doc frowns and leans forward slightly. “What happened?”

“You know that Travis and I are, uh... we’re involved again,” I say, blinking down at my knees so that I won’t have to see her disapproving stare. She hadn’t exactly been thrilled during our last two sessions when she’d casually brought up Travis, and I’d admitted I’m totally hitting that again. But it’s more awkward now, because it’s beginning to look like she was right. I continue, “He has enough credits to graduate a semester early, and he wants to go to college in New York so that he can live with me while I’m at Patton. He wants to make sure I’ve got a support system other than Jamie, because he—Jamie’s great. He’s my best friend in the entire world, and I love him more than pretty much anything, and I know he would never do anything to hurt me or fuck with my sobriety. But *he’s* not sober, and I can’t ask him to be. It wouldn’t be fair for me to ask him to never bring alcohol into the apartment, but Travis is willing to make that promise on his own. So, he went to New York yesterday so that Jamie could show him around the Columbia campus, only... only he didn’t *tell* me about it. Not in advance, anyway. He said he was doing school stuff, but when Jamie mentioned it, I thought that Travis h-had been hiding things from me, and I sort of freaked out.”

“Freaked out in what way?” Doc asks. Before I can respond, she raises a hand and adds, “And we’re going to come back to the idea of you and Travis living together, obviously.”

“Obviously,” I echo, running the tip of my finger around the lip of the mug. “I don’t... really know how to explain what happened, though. It was like something just went wrong in my head, like there was this switch that had been flipped to ‘fine’ for weeks, and then suddenly it got turned to ‘so not fucking fine.’ He wasn’t even acting differently, you know? And now, I know I could’ve just been like, ‘dude, why did you go to New York,’ but at the time, it seemed fucking *impossible* to do something like that. I was convinced that he wanted to end things with me again, or that maybe he was screwing around—with Jamie, I guess? Which is fucking stupid, because I know that neither of them would ever do that to me, but it seemed so easy to believe at the time. And I, uh. I wanted to come up with some way to keep him. I wanted to do something that would fix things.”

Too used to my screwed-up brand of “problem solving” by now, Doc cringes. “What did you do?”

"I offered to let him fuck me," I say softly. Then, before she can reply, I amend, "That's not—it was more than that. I figured that I could maybe keep him interested, if I proved that I was willing to let him do something he likes, even though I really can't stand it. And he doesn't—I haven't really talked to him, I guess? Not about the, uh. The Dave thing. He knows about the abuse, obviously, but not about the r—the other bit. The sex stuff. Pretty much everybody else knows; Jamie has always known, Ben knows, Alex knows, even the drama club idiots know. Travis doesn't, though. But he still kept asking if I was sure, and I kept lying and telling him yeah, I wanted it. And so he, uh... we started. You know, we started fucking? But I couldn't—I freaked out*hard*. At first, I was faking like I was into it, but then I started to panic, and I couldn't breathe, and I felt like I was going to go completely crazy. But he realized I wasn't okay, and he stopped immediately, and he helped me calm down, and that's when he told me about the early graduation stuff. And I feel like I'm okay now, but I wanted to meet with you because... it's not the panicking that scares me now. Looking back, I get why that happened. Of course I freaked out while getting topped. The thing that scares me is that *I did it in the first place*. I got so fucked in the head yesterday for absolutely no reason, and I want to know why."

To my surprise, Doc caps her pen, tosses it and her notebook back onto the desk, and instead grabs a book from the shelf by her head. She holds it out to me, and I accept it. Across the cover, in angry red letters, are the words *I Hate You—Don't Leave Me: Understanding the Borderline Personality*. I snort and say, "Cute." Without speaking, she hands me a second book. *Sometimes I Act Crazy: Living With Borderline Personality Disorder*. I sigh. "I thought you said that we couldn't be positive about a diagnosis yet."

"You've been in my care for six months, Garen. How much longer do you intend to make me wait before you're comfortable even discussing the disorder?" Doc asks gently. I try to hand her back the books, but she refuses to accept them. "If you're looking for an explanation for what happened to you yesterday, I'm not sure I can give you one, unless you're willing to discuss what happened within the scope of a borderline diagnosis. Do I need to get out the DSM again?"

"No, you need to fuck off with the DSM," I say shortly. Then, I adopt a mocking tone to add, "I get it, okay? I have unstable interpersonal relationships. I'm oversensitive to real or perceived abandonment and rejection. I engage in reckless and self-destructive behaviors. I have difficulty expressing my anger in appropriate manners, which often results in physical confrontation, or me throwing a temper tantrum like a five-year-old. You've told me all the symptoms you think I have, but has it ever occurred to you that maybe I'm just an asshole? Seriously, not everyone who has a shitty personality automatically has a personality disorder—"

"That's true, but I think it would be wise for you to consider using some of the strategies that often work for patients who have BPD. We've spoken before about your black-and-white world view, and how taking a step back from that and attempting to rationalize your decisions before you act will prevent impulsive—"

I lean over to set the coffee mug down on the desk with a loud thud. "Look, it's great that you want to put a neat little label on whatever's wrong with me, but I think you're jumping the gun in calling it a personality disorder. I think—"

"Which is more important to you: denying that you might have BPD, or figuring out a way to cope with the feelings you have?"

I cross my arms over my chest. "Well, when you put it like that, you make it sound like I'd be a dumbass for continuing to argue my point."

The corners of her mouth twitch. "'Dumbass' is your word, not mine. But I wouldn't necessarily disagree with it."

I slump down in my seat. "I just want to be able to function. And not just some of the time—I can handle that. I want to be able to function all the time, and I want to be able to have a relationship that doesn't get totally fucked every time Travis doesn't provide me with a full itinerary for his week."

"I'm glad you bring Travis up again," Doc says, with a long-suffering sigh. I get that—the Travis conversation has been going on since the first day she met me. "You already know my stance on you becoming involved with someone during your first year of sobriety, however determined you apparently are to ignore my suggestions. But I need to strongly caution against remaining involved with him if you're going to be living together in just a few weeks."

Automatically, my chest seizes up. I wish I were still holding the coffee mug, if only so I'd have something to clench my hands around, because right now, I feel like I'm not attached to anything. But this is exactly like what I'm supposed to be avoiding—the panic, the fear of being alone, the mad scramble to hang onto him even though he's not slipping away. I take a long, steady breath and ask, "Why?"

Doc hastens to say, "You're absolutely right in thinking that living with a sober roommate is a healthier option than living with someone like James, who doesn't have any substance abuse issues and is free to indulge in drug or alcohol use when the mood strikes him. I think you've taken an important step in recognizing that you need a clean environment if you hope to stay on track."

I raise a fist in the air, celebrating my own awesomeness like I'm Judd Nelson at the end of *The Breakfast Club*. Doc ignores it, because she has no joy in her soul.

"The problem isn't with you living with Travis; the problem is that the two of you are involved with each other, and if that doesn't go well, it could jeopardize your sobriety. Throughout the past two weeks, Travis has remained adamant in his insistence that you are both single. So, that begs the question, if you and he are living together and remain sexually involved, will you share a bedroom? Would you be able to cope with waking up every morning next to someone who point-blank refuses to be your boyfriend? Would you be able to cope with him bringing home someone else, as would be perfectly within his rights as a single man? Would you be able to cope with any arguments you may have with him, if you don't have any real physical or emotional space to yourself? Would you be able to cope with any changes to your dynamic, if they occurred after you'd both fallen into the routine of being live-in lovers? He could meet someone, or you could meet someone, or hell, you could just get bored of each other, or angry with each other. Whatever progress you'd made towards stability would be completely ruined by the need to change the way you two interact. In my opinion, if you really do want to live with Travis, it is essential that you end—or at least postpone—your sexual relationship before moving into your new place, and it is even more essential that you make sure that the two of you have separate beds, separate bedrooms, separate spaces where you can go to process your feelings on your own. Without the safety and stability of that solitude, it will be impossible for you to learn to rely on yourself to ensure your sobriety."

"Doc," I say quietly, "I can't—I just got him back."

"I know that, Garen," she says, sounding for once like she actually gets how much this sucks for me. "But it's more important that you find a stable, sober environment. I have no doubt that, once you've been clean for a while longer—perhaps even into that one-year mark, like I keep suggesting—and you're settled into more of a routine, you two will be able to work out the details of your romantic relationship."

I drag a hand through my hair. "After everything I've put him through—walking out that first time, and the addiction, and the relapse, and both of us taking our turns in dating Ben, and everything—I can't ask him to wait for me again."

"I honestly don't believe you'd *have* to ask," Doc says mildly. "I've met Travis. I've seen the way you two interact with each other. I know that he cares about you, which is why I believe he'll understand how important it is for the two of you to end your physical relationship for the time being."

"But if he doesn't?"

"He will."

“But if—”

“For Christ’s sake, Garen, *he’ll understand*. You just need to talk to him about it, rather than panicking and assuming that distance is the same thing as rejection.” She checks her clock and adds, “I’m sorry, but we need to wrap this up. I wasn’t able to schedule a full, forty-five minute session for you today, on account of it being outside our usual block. But if you have another episode, please don’t hesitate to make an appointment again, even if it means coming in before next Saturday, alright?”

I once again try to hand her the two borderline books, but she shakes her head and says, “Hang onto them for now. Give each one a read-through, and let me know what you think. You can return them to me at a future session. You’re still planning to come back every other Saturday once you move, right?” I nod. “If you’d prefer to find a New York doctor so that you can avoid a biweekly commute, I can get you a referral.”

I shake my head. “I’m pretty sure it’s easier to just stick with you. You’re attuned to my particular form of crazy, and hey, you won’t shut the fuck up about how I need stability, right? I recognize that. Total progress.”

“Get out of my office,” she sighs, but I think she sounds kind of fond when she says it.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“May the New Year bring you courage to break your resolutions early! My own plan is to swear off every kind of virtue, so that I triumph even when I fall.” –Aleister Crowley

93 days sober

When I open my locker on Thursday morning, there is an e-card print-out taped to the inside of the door. It reads, *Congratulations on the anniversary of your horrific alcoholic bottom*. Underneath that are the words *ninety-three days* and a smiley face, in Travis’ handwriting. I grin and glance over my shoulder, already knowing that he’s going to be hovering nearby like a creep so that he can see my reaction to it. Sure enough, he shoves his hands in his pockets and wanders over, leaning his shoulder against the locker next to mine.

“You know, it’s actually traditional to celebrate the anniversaries like thirty days, sixty, ninety. Six months, a year. Not just whatever day you happen to pick,” I say.

He shrugs. “I could’ve done it for ninety, but I figured that you’d be happier about making it to the day you weren’t able to get to last time.”

He’s right. There has been a red ‘90 days clean and sober’ NA keytag hanging from my keyring since Monday, but it hasn’t felt real until now. It hasn’t felt like progress until I reached the point where I wasn’t just trying to make up the ground I’d lost after my last relapse. And the picture taped up in front of me is exactly the sort of irreverent, tongue-in-cheek congratulations I need. To show my appreciation, I leave my locker hanging open and step closer to Travis, letting him pull me into a kiss. It’s slow, soft, sweet, not nearly as raunchy as most of the ones we’ve shared in this hallway. It’s the sort of kiss that starts a faint smoldering in my chest and keeps my heart warm for days. The sort that makes it impossible for me to sit him down and tell him we’ve got to stop *this* once we move in together in less than a month.

I’ve been trying to psych myself up to talk to him for a week and a half now, and it never feels like the right time. Our teachers are loading us down with study guides and worksheets to prep us for exams next week, and our trial law competition only wrapped on Tuesday—Travis’ team won their section, mostly because he carried them through it, and my team lost ours, mostly because one of the fake-attorneys for our side forgot her closing argument, started crying, and ran out of the competition room without finishing. And considering I’d later gotten detention for the fact that I spent the entire bus ride back to school after the competition chewing her out and making her cry even harder, I didn’t get a chance to have The Big Talk after school, either. I know I have to talk to him. I know that Doc is right about this. But between school, and his work schedule, and my sobriety meetings, and both of us having to awkwardly divide time between Ben and Alex now that Al doesn’t want to hang out with the dude who shot him down pretty hard... life is busy. And I’m a pussy. And those things combine to a whole lot of *not talking about it*.

But the bell isn’t going to ring for another five minutes, and it can’t take much longer than that to say ‘*hey, my shrink says I have to stop putting it in you once we’re roommates*,’ so I pull back from the kiss—dart back in for another quick one, because hey, one for the road—and then open my mouth to tell him. He starts speaking before I can get a word out.

“I, uh—” He breaks off into a small, self-conscious smile, like he knows that what he’s about to say is super lame, and he’d love it if I could hold off on making fun of him until he’s done speaking. “I asked Jerry to give me the night off work. I thought I could maybe take you out to celebrate. You know, dinner, a movie. Me blowing you in the back of my car, maybe.”

“Just maybe?” I say.

He smirks. “Alright, I’ll definitely blow you, but we should at least act like I’m not a sure thing.”

“I’ll pretend to be shocked,” I say solemnly.

"So, you'll go?" he says, bouncing in place like he's too psyched to stay entirely still. I nod, and there's that dorky, adorable smile again. "Awesome. I'll pick you up at your place at like, six thirty."

That's the first hint, but I don't pick up on it. The second hint is that he actually comes to my door and rings the bell when he shows up to pick me up, rather than just sending a *get your ass outside* text from his car. The third hint is that he takes me to dinner at the Lakewood Diner because the waitresses there all know me well enough not to judge me when I order the dinosaur-shaped chicken nuggets off the kids' menu. The fourth hint is that he pays for those dumbass nuggets, and the fifth is that he also pays for both tickets to the mindless action movie I mentioned a week ago that I might want to see. But I don't actually figure out what's going on until he nods towards the concession stand in the theater lobby and says, "Do you want to get anything?"

The butter on movie theater popcorn tastes like yak piss, so, that's a big 'no' for me. I could go for some gummy bears—I could always go for some gummy bears—but we just ate dinner, so I shake my head no. I'm not sure if I'm incredibly transparent, or he just knows me too well, but Travis rolls his eyes, drags me over to the counter, and buys me a bag of gummy bears anyway.

He buys them for *me*. Like, he takes his wallet out of his pocket, and he passes a ten to the chick working the counter, and she puts down a bag of gummy bears and hands him his change, and he puts it in his pocket again, and he hands me the bears, and he does that all with one hand, because his other hand is still holding mine. I blink at the bag of candy, then at our hands, then back at Travis' face.

"Dude," I say. "Are we on a date?"

"Uh, yes?" he says, looking totally unimpressed with me. "I'm sorry, was there a part of me saying 'hey, I want to buy you dinner, take you to a movie, and then perform oral sex on you in the backseat of my car tonight' that was in any way ambiguous?"

The concession stand girl tries unsuccessfully to conceal a snort. Travis shoots her a sheepish smile, as if he'd forgotten she was there, and pulls me towards the hallway that leads to our theater. We snag a pair of seats in the back, and when I slouch down, kick my feet up, and dig into my gummy bears before the trailers are even over, Travis loops an arm around my shoulders and leans closer to me. Doesn't even try for the yawn-and-reach, just stretches out over my skin like it's a given.

Now that I know that this is a real date, it's impossible for me to relax into his touch. I haven't been on a date since the beginning of May, when Dave was still trying to impress me by taking me out to rock shows and coffee outings and fancy dinners. And I've never been on a date with Travis—not recently, not when we first got together. Never. This is our first date, and when it's over, I'm going to have to sit him down and... not break up with him, because we're not together, but end things. And it's all because I couldn't keep my shit together; if I'd never gotten so fucked up on coke and drinking, we wouldn't have to worry about me staying clean. We could be together for real, but we're not, and that's all on me.

The height difference between us is minimal enough that Travis doesn't have to stretch up to keep his arm around me even after the movie has ended and we've begun our progress out to the parking lot. He only releases me once we've reached the car, but even then, he threads his fingers between mine the second we're both in our seats.

"I have to say, dude, that movie? Kind of blew. I can't believe you actually wanted to see it," he says, grinning over at me. I try to smile back, but my face feels almost numb, so I don't think I pull it off. "So, what now? Do you want me to bring you home, or do you wanna—"

"If I break up with you right now, does it not count, because we're not a couple?" I blurt out.

The smile is frozen on his face for ten silent seconds before it melts off completely and he starts to look nervous. "Garen, I don't—is this because I just—you know I was joking, right? About the movie? I don't

care if you like shitty movies, and I'm pretty sure that what I said is like, really, really not worth—"

"No, stop," I say, and he closes his mouth so abruptly that I can hear his teeth click together. "It's not about the movie. It's not even about you, or us. It's all about me—because what fucking *isn't* about me, apparently—and the fact that I can't... you remember the session I had with Doctor Howard at the beginning of last week?" He nods dumbly. "She and I talked about the move to New York, and what it would be like for you and I to live together. And I realized that what we've got right now—being together, but not being together—isn't something I can handle if we're going to be living together."

"But I told you, it wouldn't be like that," he says. It almost sounds like he's pleading with me, and that's too much; I squeeze my eyes shut, and that must be exactly the wrong thing to do, because then his hands are on my face, and he's physically turning my head towards him. "Garen, look at me." I don't want to; I do it anyway. "I told you that it wouldn't be like that. I'm not trying to *trick* you, dude. I'm not trying to make you feel like we're together just so I can pull away from you again. We'll have space, I swear—we'll have our own rooms, we'll be living our own lives, but we can keep what we've got now. If the issue is all about us living together, we—G, it's only a six month lease. For all we know, you could pick some college on the west coast, or I could hate Columbia and decide to transfer to somewhere else; we might not even still be living together after the end of June. And then once September comes, and you've been sober and single for a year, we can figure—"

"Travis, I'm not single right now," I say flatly. "We can debate semantics all you want, and this can turn into another *in-an-open-relationship-with*, not-dating situation like it was with me and Ben, but the fact of the matter is that right now, you and I are a goddamn couple. And if we go into a living situation with our wires crossed and things turn out badly, I don't think I'll be able to stay clean through it. So, you need to give me an answer right now: are you willing to give up on the idea that I need to be single during my first year of sobriety? Are you ready to be my boyfriend again for real?"

I know what his answer is going to be before he even gives it, but that doesn't make it any easier to hear it when he says, "No, I'm not."

I give a short nod. "Okay. Then... we've got two and a half weeks until the end of the year. Our lease goes into effect at noon on the first of the new year, and I think that, um... once that happens, we should stop doing this. I think we should make the best of these next few weeks, but once we're living in New York, if you're saying I need to be single for my first year sober, then *I need to be single*."

Truthfully, I've been rehearsing this little speech for nearly two weeks now, and it's not because I expect Travis needs that much convincing. When push comes to shove, he will always do what he thinks is in my best interest, even if it hurts both of us. *I'm* the one that really needs to be talked into believing that this is the right solution, because my heart instinctively shudders away from anything that will take me further away from Travis. But I've thought about this and nothing else for days.

I've checked in with Doc three times just to make sure I'm doing the best thing for my mental health. She'd been accommodating at first, but by round three, when my argument had devolved mostly to whining, *but I love him, Doc*, she started kicking me out of her office, because she is the worst therapist ever.

I've showed up unannounced at the New Haven apartment so that Alex and Ben can give me pep talks. The third time it happened, Ben had been in the middle of hosting some sort of study group with his Yale friends, which was crazy awkward, because apparently his entire social circle at college consists of objectively sexy hipster chicks from the English, Art, and Theater departments. They'd all gotten way too excited by what quickly turned into a four-hour explanation of the romantic workings of our group of friends, and Ben had just sat there glowering at me the whole time, blushing whenever I went into overshare mode about our relationship and pretending to be absorbed in his copy of *Don Quixote*.

I've taken Stohler out for coffee and had her help me compose lists of pros and cons all over the backs of Starbucks napkins, just like that first coffee meeting where I made that Chart of Sluttery. She'd gone

through two sticks of eyeliner, run out of napkins, and then charmed a University of New Haven student at a nearby table into letting us borrow his Macbook so that we could make a spreadsheet. Then she'd started making lists of my friends (I apparently have seven) and pie charts about things like *percentage of friends Garen has slept with* (fifty-seven percent), which led to *percentage of male friends Garen has slept with* (eighty percent), and *percentage of gay or bisexual male friends Garen has slept with* (one hundred percent). I'd shoved her off her chair, and the UNH student had helped her up and asked for her number, and only once he'd left did we realize that he'd taken our pros-and-cons lists with him.

All in all, my life for the past two weeks has revolved around this decision. It hasn't gotten easier, but it has gotten clearer, and it's fortunate that Travis is smarter than me, because it seems like he's processing this all a lot faster than I did.

"Eight and a half months," he says, voice slow and even. "January first through September... September twelfth, right?"

I nod and slump down on my seat, letting my skull loll back against the headrest. "Yeah. I've made it three months already, and we can have another half a month. After that, it's eight and a half months, and then I'm a year sober. And we can... we'll figure things out from there, okay?"

I don't dare voice my biggest fears in all of this—that September will come, and I'll be sober, and he'll have found someone else. Or he really will have decided he hates Columbia, hates New York, hates living with me, and he'll have moved to California to go to Stanford or Caltech or something. Or, worst case scenario, that he'll stay in New York, and we'll keep living together, and it will be fine, and he'll still be single, but he just won't *want* me anymore. My stomach is twisting up in knots at the thought of it, but I can't say a word, because there's no way I'll be able to get through these next nine months if I let that stay at the forefront of my mind.

So instead, I offer my most reassuring smile, tilt my head towards the backseat, and say, "So, making the most of the next two and a half weeks. Wanna start in on that now?"

It's like that starts the clock ticking. He's out of the car and into the backseat in a matter of seconds, and when I'm slow to follow, he grabs me by the jacket and hauls me between the seats and over the center console. He kisses me, and we have two and a half weeks, but I'm already lonely.

94 days sober

"When are you going to tell me the secret to not sucking at this game?"

"When are you going to realize that there is absolutely no skill involved in the game of dreidel?" Mom counters. She has the screen of her laptop tilted down so that the camera is aimed at the table where her dreidel is spinning. I can't see her face, but she sounds smug as fuck. "Honestly, Garen. You spin a top, it falls over, you do what it says. I don't think it's possible to affect the outcome at all, short of not playing it in the first place." I tilt the screen of my dad's laptop back up to be sure that she can see how harshly I'm glowering at her. The dreidel lands with *gimel* facing up, and I groan. She laughs. "Get over it and mark your tally. And you'd better pay up the next time you're here. Your father told me that you're going to be moving into your new place on the first?"

"Yeah, but we're heading up the day before," I say. "Jamie heard about this awesome show—well, I think it'll be awesome, he thinks it'll be lame—that some club is hosting to ring in the New Year, and he got tickets for it. So, we're going up on the thirty-first, parking in the garage below his building overnight, going to the show, crashing at his apartment that night, then driving to the new place the next day."

"And 'we' is who? You and Travis?" Mom asks.

I nod. "Yeah, and Ben and Alex. They're helping us move, 'cause Ben's dad's store has a big moving van

thing, so we're gonna fill that with all the shit that won't fit in my car or Travis'. Besides, it's only fair, considering that T and I helped them move into their place in August. Well, Travis did. I helped with grocery shopping. But that counts, so—"

"Don't think I haven't noticed that you haven't written down that I just won the pot," Mom interrupts, eyeing me over the cam.

"Skype Dreidel involves too much math," I grumble, scribbling *bitchmom takes whole pot* on the piece of paper where I've been calculating the current total of money I'll owe her the next time I see her. I spin my own top and say, "Spinning now."

"Hey, hey," Mom scolds, "Garen, you tilt that screen right now. I need to be able to see it to be certain you're not lying about what you land on."

I try to look as offended as possible, but she remains unimpressed. I tilt the screen back down to show my spinning top as I say, "Mom, what the fuck. Do you really think I'd shame our family on this, the first night of Hanukkah, by cheating at Skype Dreidel? I mean, seriously. I've got standards."

That's a lie. I have no standards, and if she wasn't watching me like a hawk, I'd be cheating every turn.

The dreidel lands on *shin*, and Mom trills, "Shin, shin, put one in," just like she does every time I fail, every year, because my mom is a dick.

"Insert obligatory penis joke here," I say, practically carving the words *my life is a failure -1* onto the paper.

"That reminds me, you should open your presents," Mom says.

I pause in the middle of writing. She doesn't retract her statement. Cautiously, I tilt the screen of the laptop back up so that she can see my raised eyebrows. "Uh. Why the everloving fuck would 'insert penis joke here' remind you that I need to open my presents? Mom, did you like—if I open these boxes, are they going to be full of dildos or something? Because I've told you before, I'm a top, I don't need sex toys to—"

"Stop talking about your sex life. This is the Festival of Lights, not the Festival of Oversharing," she interrupts. "Open the one with the white bow, first. Then the blue bow."

I obey, stripping off the shiny silver paper around the first of the two boxes. Inside, I find a sweater. A very soft, very dick-free, navy sweater with a line of dark gray circling the collar and cuffs. "This is really nice, Mom, thanks. I'm having trouble seeing what this has to do with dick jokes, but thank you. Did you get it in the Patton colors on purpose?"

She nods. "I thought it would make sense to start rebuilding your wardrobe with some basics. Obviously you need to be in School Dress for your classes every day, but during the winter months, you're allowed to wear a sweater over the rest of your uniform, aren't you?"

I bob my head in agreement. "Yep. School Dress is standard-issue boots, trousers, a polo shirt or an Oxford and tie, and an optional sweater, cardigan, or blazer if it's cold out. Once I'm up in New York, I'm sure Jamie will drag me out shopping, because I've still got my boots and pants and ties, but pretty much none of my shirts fit anymore. Everything's too tight."

"That's alright, Garen. I'm sure Travis will still love you, even if you've gotten fat," Mom says, beaming at me.

"Fuck off, Mom! I haven't gotten *fat*, I've gotten *bigger*. It's *muscle*. Once Dad said I'd have to pass all the PT requirements if I wanted to go back to Patton, I changed my whole workout routine. I've put on like, fifteen pounds in five weeks, but that's only about half of what I want to add to my total." I pause, scowl,

and take a sip of the lukewarm coffee I've been quietly nursing through this entire chat. "Travis will still love you even though you're fat,' what the actual fuck. It's such a good thing you have a son, because a comment like that would totally scar a daughter."

"I doubt an eighteen-year-old girl would be aiming to reach two hundred pounds," Mom points out.

"Of muscle. Two hundred pounds of muscle. That's not fat, that's hot—whatever. You're being mean to me. No wonder I live with Dad, not you," I say, and she just grins. "Anyway, can I open my other present? I'm still trying to figure out the dick joke punchline."

She claps. "Oh, yes, this is the one. The sweater is lovely, but I know it's not really your style. I thought this would be much more up your alley."

I tear off the paper, pop open the box, and find myself staring down at a black t-shirt that's emblazoned with bold white letters spelling out, *it's not going to suck itself*. This is my Hanukkah present. From my mother. And yet people are still somehow surprised that I turned out the way I did. "I have the coolest mom in the world, holy shit."

"Mm," Mom hums her agreement. "I saw another one that would've amused you more. It was sort of a heather gray, and it said in black writing, '*ask your girlfriend how my dick tastes*.' I couldn't find one that said '*ask your boyfriend*,' though."

"That's a pity," I sigh.

"I thought so, too," she says, reaching past the laptop and returning to the frame with a gray t-shirt that she holds up to show me. "So, I had one made special. You can have it as soon as you give me my winnings from tonight. Happy Hanukkah, Garen."

Coolest mom ever.

101 days sober

Successfully completing my last two final exams—well, completing my English final, then playing Angry Birds for two hours while pretending to supervise the freshman taking their Music History final—and, by association, successfully completing my time at Lakewood High School leaves me rocking such a buzz that I don't immediately realize that the door to Ben and Alex's apartment is locked when I show up to harass them. Instead, I sort of... try to turn the handle, then crash face-first into the wood.

"Okay, ow, fuck you guys," I call through the door. I can hear what sounds like muffled machine gunfire from inside, so I'm assuming that if I can hear Alex playing video games in the living room, he can hear me *hating him* in the hallway. "Since when do you lock your door while you're here?"

"I'll be there in a second," he shouts back, but patience has never been my strong suit. I flip through my keys until I find the one that Ben gave me back in September and let myself in.

I fully intend to go pace in front of the television until Alex dies in the game, just so that he knows I'm pissed at him for daring to lock his own door, but that turns out to be unnecessary—the fact that I've got a key makes him do a double-take just long enough for someone to take his character out with a clean headshot. "Dude, since when can you get into my apartment without my permission?"

"Since the day your roommate was dumb enough to give me a key," I say, twirling it around my finger. "Pretty sure I earned it with rimjobs."

"Pretty sure you didn't," Ben says, wandering down the hall to join us in the living room. "Why are you here?"

I flop down on the couch next to Al and kick my feet up onto the coffee table. "So that you can both congratulate me on finally joining you among the ranks of people who no longer attend LHS. Come on, I'll take you guys out for lunch or something. Like, a super late lunch, because it's already uh, two in the afternoon, but whatever, it still counts. Plus, you guys need to show me your driver's licenses so that I can send pictures of them to Jamie."

"Why?" Ben asks.

"World's weirdest jerk-off material," I say. A beat passes, then I roll my eyes. "Because neither of you has a fake ID, right? I mean, I know for a fact that you don't, Ben, because you're you. And Alex, you're marginally less of a loser, but I still doubt you've got one. The venue that's hosting the thing we're going to on New Year's is a twenty-one-plus place, so even if you're not drinking, you need a fake. I don't know anybody around here who can get quality ones made up in a week's time, which means Jamie's going to just go to the guy who made ours. I used to bang a guy who works at the DMV; he makes them there when no one's looking, and he uses all the same information, just a different birthdate. Come to think of it, this is probably *more* illegal than some shady guy who makes them in his own basement? But whatever. They work great."

Ben frowns over at the wallet he has left sitting on the coffee table, like he can't figure out which is more important: maintaining his streak of not committing felonies, or attending the shockingly rad show that Jamie managed to get us all tickets to. I'd been sort of surprised that Jamie, whose taste in music can be generously described as "unbelievably shitty," had been able to recognize the awesomeness of the all-night show when he'd seen a poster for it while waiting for the subway.

Well. He *sort of* recognized it. Mostly he called me, sighed, and said, "I'm looking at a sign for a some kind of concert that's being held on New Year's Eve, at one of those disgusting dives you like so much. You know, the ones that are full of tattooed hipsters, the stench of stale PBR, and that uncomfortable stinging sensation I feel as my dignity leaves my body? There are five bands listed here, I've never heard of any of them, and I'm pretty sure most of these names are supposed to be *ironic*. It seems horrible, but I can get us tickets for it, if you promise you'll come to the Vineyard for two weeks this summer with my family. My father keeps trying to use the trip as an excuse for me to get back together with Addison, but she's completely insane, and I'd really rather not. So. Two tickets? Three, if you want to bring Travis? Five, if you decide you hate me and insist on bringing Alexander and the midget?"

I'd said five, and he'd grunted and hung up on me, but he'd still gotten the tickets.

Now, to spare Ben the aneurysm he seems pretty close to suffering over this fake-IDs-aren't-sanctioned-by-my-church-or-my-mom issue, I snatch up his wallet, dig out his license, and snap the clearest picture I can get with my phone. I send it to Jamie, and after a few minutes, he replies, *He looks like a toddler in that picture. I'll get the ID made, but I doubt anyone will believe he's any older than sixteen. Good Lord, I need to get a higher standard of sexual partners.*

"Jamie says your picture is so gorgeous that he doesn't know whether to beat off or sob over the soul-shattering beauty of your visage," I lie. "But, uh, you also look kind of young? Both in the picture and in real life. So, maybe you should not shave for a few days. Grow yourself some hipster scruff so you look a couple years older."

"You guys only say I look young because I'm short," Ben whines. "I'm almost nineteen years old, and I look it."

"Of course you do, bro. Totally," I soothe him, even though that's just another lie. I turn towards Alex, who has been studiously massacring people on the xbox. I nudge his shoulder. "Come on, dude. Where's your wallet?"

"My room. Doesn't matter, though, considering I'm not going with you guys," he says.

I blink. Only now do I realize that his jaw is set; clearly he's anticipating some sort of argument from me, even though right now, all I can manage to come up with is, "You're not—wait, what?" He raises his eyebrows at me, like I'm the one who's being ridiculous. I feel a pinch of annoyance in the back of my mind, and I have to take a deep breath to calm myself before I continue speaking. "You're seriously not going?"

"Stohler's going to this party out in Hartford with some of her friends from college, and she asked me to go with her," Alex says, jamming his thumb down on the A button of his controller. "It seemed like it'd be more fun than the show, so I said yeah."

Ben is hovering halfway between the kitchen and the living room, looking like he'd love nothing more than to make a break for it to escape the tension in the room. It's an understandable impulse; I've got no idea what I'm supposed to say right now, especially since it's obvious that this conversation isn't going to get any less uncomfortable. He and I stare at each other for a long moment while he edges closer to the kitchen and I use the tip of my tongue to play around with my lip ring. Finally, I clear my throat and say, "I thought we settled this plan weeks ago. We were going to pack up all the shit, go to the show, crash at Jamie's, then—"

The second I mention Jamie's name, the muscles around Alex's mouth go even tighter. A wave of realization hits me, and that pinch of annoyance gets ramped up to full-blown fury. I bang my feet back down onto the floor, stand up, and stride past Ben into the kitchen, snapping over my shoulder, "I'm getting unbelievably sick of this shit, dude."

"Sick of what shit?" Alex demands. "So I don't want to go to New York for New Year's, big goddamn deal."

"So Jamie won't *sleep with you* anymore, big goddamn deal," I shoot back. I yank open the refrigerator door and steal one of the Snapple bottles. "I mean, that's what this is really about, isn't it? You're pissed that he got tired of you stringing him along and decided to stick with Rachael instead of you. And I'm sorry, dude, but get over it. He asked you out repeatedly, and you said no every time, so he moved on. You can't act like he dumped you, you can't pretend to be the wronged party, and you sure as *hell* can't throw a temper tantrum any time you have to hang out with him. If he can nut up enough to be civil to you even though you're the one who treated him like shit, you should—"

"What are you talking about? I didn't treat him like shit!"

"You sort of did," Ben says quietly. I stumble right back out of the kitchen to stare at him, because seriously, since when does he defend Jamie? Alex is gaping at him from the couch, mind similarly blown. Ben frowns down at his hands and says, "Look, I hate James more than anyone, but this group we're all in? It's incestuous. You and James, me and Travis, *you* and Travis at that party last winter. And Garen has slept with all of us, at some point or another—"

"Rude," I mutter.

"True," Ben retorts, though his voice immediately softens again as he continues saying to Alex, "The point is, if everyone stopped talking to each other when they stopped hooking up, none of us would be friends anymore. If the rest of us can be cool with each other, and if James is enough... God, never tell him I said this, but if James is enough of a *gentleman* to say that it's alright for you and I to spend New Year's at his place, even though he doesn't really want either of us there, then you should return that level of civility. It's not fair for you to... draw battle lines, I guess. Not when they're going to make Garen and Travis uncomfortable."

The second I can get my phone out without getting punched, I'm going to text Jamie and tell him that '*gentleman*' bit; at the very least, it'll amuse him, and at the very most, he'll be flattered enough that he'll suck Ben's dick to show his appreciation when we're in the city next week. But for now, I'm just grateful that Ben's bothering to try to put a stop to this bullshit. I lean against the kitchen doorframe and hitch my

chin at him. "Thank you."

"Shut up. I'm not saying this to benefit you; I'm saying it because it needs to be said." He finally raises his gaze to meet Alex's. For a moment, they just eye each other warily. Then Ben swallows and murmurs, "I also think it was unfair for you to, um. Keep sleeping with him, after you realized that he was looking for a higher degree of commitment than you were. You should have ended the physical relationship and told him that you weren't interested in him, or that you were interested in... in someone else."

These are the words that make Alex finally set down his xbox controller and let his head loll against the back of the couch, though his eyes remain fixed on Ben's face. "Are you sure you're not just pissed that it took me so long to tell you I was interested in 'someone else'?"

"That's not the issue, and you know it—"

"What I know is that you've been avoiding me for weeks now, ever since you found out that I'm in love with you," Alex snaps. "And honestly? I think it's because you're scared. I think you're so used to being with guys who treat you like shit, you have no idea how to handle the fact that you've got someone who's interested in treating you well. You give me shit for how things went down with James, but it's not like I was trying to be an asshole. I was waiting for you—"

"Yeah, and that's awesome, except I never asked you to wait for me!" Ben explodes, startling even me with his forcefulness. "I'm sorry, okay? I'm sorry that you're in love with me, and I'm sorry if there's anything I did to make you think that you and I were ever going to be together, and I'm sorry if I've been distant or weird these past couple of weeks, but for fuck's sake, man, I don't know how to be sorry for the fact that I'm not in love with you."

"But you won't even *consider* it!" Alex protests. "I mean, Christ, you're so—you and I could be good together. Believe me, I've thought about this for so long, and it's—we could be good together, if you were just willing to try. I don't get why you won't give me a chance—"

I groan loudly and drag a hand through my hair. "Seriously, dude? Do I have to buy you a copy of *He's Just Not That Into You*? Because I know it's for chicks, but I think it'll help you understand this situation. You sound like me, when I was trying to convince Travis to get back together with me last spring, but at least Travis actually loved me back. And I had the excuse of being on a crapload of drugs at the time. Your only excuse is this creepy refusal to accept that you've been in the fucking Friend Zone since you were like, fourteen."

"Garen, either shut up, or get out of my apartment," Alex orders.

I'm already midway through an internal debate about whether to leave as ordered when Ben shakes his head, grabs his wallet off the coffee table, and says, "No, this is—I think I'm going to go. My classes for this semester are already over, and Christmas Eve is on Sunday, and I just—I think I'm going to pack my stuff and go home for a couple of days, okay?"

"Ben," Alex says, like he's a step away from pleading, but Ben just shakes his head and disappears down the hall to his bedroom.

Neither Alex nor I say a single word during the five minutes it takes for Ben to pack some clothes, some books, and his laptop, and he doesn't say a single word when he leaves. By the time the door has slammed and his footsteps have retreated down the hall to the stairs, there's not much left I can do except turn to Alex and say, "If you keep doing this, you're going to ruin your friendship with him. You're going to lose all of him, for good."

Alex sighs. "Garen, just leave."

So I leave.

110 days sober

"If someone had asked me yesterday if I was excited about the prospect of living with you, I would have said yes. But now, I think I just want you to *die*." Travis slumps sideways against the interior wall of the truck, shoving his sweat-dampened hair off his forehead and securing it with his backwards ball cap. "Seriously, why do you own so much shit? And why doesn't Ben have to help?"

I give one last hard shove to the flat box that houses the pieces of our Ikea... entertainment center? Kitchen table? My bed frame? I have no idea, all of the boxes look identical to me. And all of them are loaded, so I don't get why Travis is still bitching. I show my disapproval of his attitude by flinging a leg out and kicking him in the shin. "Half of this stuff is for common areas, not just me, so quit whining. And Ben doesn't have to help because it's not his stuff."

"I'm already taking today and tomorrow off work to help you idiots move. You should be grateful," Ben says. I hop back out of the truck to sit down next to him on the bumper; my feet are planted firmly on the ground, but his are dangling a few inches above it, emphasized by the fact that he's swinging them back and forth. He looks like a little kid—or, he might, if he hadn't taken my advice and blown off shaving for a couple days to grow in a pretty sick five o'clock shadow. He nudges my elbow and adds, "Are you sure there's even enough clearance for this to fit in the garage under your douchebag friend's building?"

"Yep," I say, letting the word come out as a pop. "He called the building management to ask. They have your name and the truck description, too, so you should be set to park just fine. Honestly, I think half the spaces in the garage are unused anyway. Most people who live in the city don't have cars."

"Does James?" Travis asks, joining us on the bumper.

I nod without speaking, because I'm pretty sure they'll both roll their eyes at me if I tell them that Jamie trades in his Cadillac Escalade every twelve months so that he's always driving one from the current model year. Instead, I twist around to stare into the mostly-filled truck. "Once I bring out my amp and the boxes of clothes, I think we're good to go."

"Perhaps I'm missing something—and if the answer involves you two spooning each other, please spare me—but aren't you missing a mattress?" Ben asks.

"Got a new one. It's getting delivered right to our place tomorrow, sometime in the afternoon," I say. "I was going to just bring the one I've got here, but I need to keep my bed, because I'm going to be coming back every other Saturday for therapy, and I might stay the night sometimes. So, uh, are either of you going to help me with the rest of the stuff?"

Neither of them even bothers to respond to me. They just turn to each other and start talking about some boring-ass History Channel show they apparently watched together at Ben's house a few days ago. I roll my eyes and let the sounds of their dullness chase me back into the house. Dad is hovering in the living room, carefully adjusting the two cardboard boxes that hold my clothes. He glances up at me and asks, "Want me to bring these out while you get your amp from downstairs?"

"Yeah, that'd be great," I say, heading for the stairs.

By the time I get back up with the amp, Dad has dropped both the clothes boxes off in the truck and is idling in the doorway. He glances at me, pokes his head back outside, and yells, "Travis, come get this last thing, then close up the truck."

"I can carry it, Dad," I say.

"I know you can, but I want to talk to you for a minute," he replies. I meet Travis on the porch to carefully

hand off the amp, then let my dad steer me back into the house. I'm expecting some emotional father-son moment, maybe some gruff, manly affection. Possibly a few tears. But what I get is Dad grinning at me and sounding nothing short of ecstatic as he says, "You're moving out."

"You know, you could at least pretend to be sad that your only child is leaving the nest," I grumble. "You don't have to look so gleeful."

"Garen, between going to boarding school the first time, running away twice, and going to rehab, you've 'left the nest' four times already. I'm gleeful because this particular departure isn't going to end in tragedy and despair. Besides, you're going to be back in just a few weeks anyway. It's not like I won't ever see you again."

My eyebrows draw together. "Then what do you want to talk to me a—"

"I'm proud of you," Dad interrupts. I blink. He clears his throat, smile now smoothed away into a calmer expression. "I don't think I tell you that enough. And I don't think you... believe it, most of the time. I know that we've had our problems in the past—"

"Like that time you sent me to military school because I set the pool house on fire," I say, starting to tick things off on my fingers. "Or the time you kicked me out of the house. Or the time—"

"You know, it's very possible that *this* is why we never have heart-to-heart conversations," Dad says, frowning at me. "Can you shut up for a minute, please?" I mime zipping my lips. "Thank you. I know that we've had our problems, and I know that sometimes, I act like the bad things you've done will always overshadow the good. But I want you to know that I am... in awe of the way you've turned out, and of the man you're growing up to be. The changes you've made in the past few months, the progress you've made—god, Garen, even the fact that you had the self-awareness to realize that you needed to leave Lakewood? I'm so proud of you for that. This is what I always knew you were capable of, and being your father is a—"

"Oh my god, I feel like we're in that last scene of *Mulan*," I say, rolling my eyes towards the ceiling. I'm trying not to take this too seriously, because I can already feel that embarrassing pinch in my tear ducts, and for a pretty masculine dude, I cry like, a lot. Most people just cry when they're sad, or hurt, but I cry when I'm feeling too happy, too tired, too safe, too loved, too anything. I tear up over really good songs. I panic and sob into the telephone and donate hundreds of dollars every time I see one of those commercials with the one-eyed kittens and limping, disease-ridden dogs and the Sarah McLachlan music. I once had to hide in Ben's bedroom for twenty minutes because his sisters made me watch *Lilo & Stitch* with them, and I fucking lost it because *his family was little and broken, but still good*. Right now, I can't tell if my dad is thrown by the fact that I'm looking super emotional, or if he just doesn't get the *Mulan* reference. "You know, after she blows up the palace with the fireworks—because sometimes kids accidentally blow up buildings with fireworks, but it doesn't mean we're bad people or need to be sent to boarding school—but she, like... she comes back with the sword and that medal thing? And she gives them to Fa Zhou?" Dad keeps staring, so for good measure, I adopt an admittedly racist accent and quote, "*The greatest gift and honor is having you for a daughter.*"

Dad closes his eyes and reaches up to pinch the bridge of his nose, like that will do anything to ward off the shame of having an eighteen-year-old son who can't stop quoting Disney movies. "Thank you, Garen. I was worried that we were getting too close to having an actual bonding experience. You know, like adults?"

"Just trying to keep things light," I say, but then... whatever, fuck it. I fling an arm around his neck and bury my face against his shoulder so that my voice is mostly muffled when I say, "Love you, Dad."

"You, too," he says. The hug lasts about five seconds, and then we both step back, a little awkward, a little embarrassed. He claps me on the shoulder and adds, "Make sure you drive safely, alright? No screwing around with the radio, no texting, no racing strangers at stoplights. Text me when you get to

James' apartment so I know you made it there. And look out for your friends tonight. They've both lived in Lakewood their whole lives, they're not used to big cities like you are—"

"Bullshit, Ben lives in New Haven now," I protest.

"New Haven is still a third of the size of the city *you* grew up in, and a tenth of the size of Manhattan. Besides, I know how you and James get once you're together. I don't want to have to explain to Travis' mother or Ben's parents that my son finally got theirs killed."

"Finally? The fuck do you mean, *finally*? Has there been some sort of pool going on how long it would be before I accidentally offed one of them? And whatever, it doesn't matter. Ben's parents have like, fifty other kids, they wouldn't even notice he was gone, and Travis' mom hates him anyway—ow, fuck, stop that!" I snap, dodging the light punches that Dad is landing to my shoulder. "God, I was just joking. Fuck you, man, I'm glad I'm moving out."

Dad sighs—fondly, I think—then hands me the backpack I've left on the couch and pushes me towards the door. "Just go."

When I step outside, the truck is closed up, but the guys are still just hanging out on the back bumper. I leap off the porch and shout, "Come on, you lazy sons of whores! It's like, two hours into the city even without factoring in the ridiculous holiday traffic we're going to deal with. Get your asses up, we're leaving."

They still take their sweet time standing up, making sure they've both got the right address for the building, chattering back and forth about how they'll both probably need to stop for gas at some point. I roll my eyes and stomp around until they both turn towards their vehicles, and then I remember something else I've been meaning to do.

"Hey, wait a second," I say, catching Travis by the wrist. "I, um. I have something for you, I guess. It's not really a bit deal, I just want to give it to you for, uh... you know, the drive, or whatever." I dig his present out of my backpack but pause, turning to glare at Ben, who is standing there, watching me like a sex offender. "Do you mind, bro? I'm trying to have a moment here."

"I know, that's why I'm still standing here. You spent two months lurking around and ruining my life when I was dating Travis last spring, so consider this payback," he says, smirking. "So, what are you giving him?"

"Here," I grunt, shoving the CD case at Travis even though my glare is still fixed on Ben.

Ben doesn't even bother to hold back his laughter. "Seriously? You burned him a mixed CD?"

"It's sort of a thing," Travis tries to explain. I think he's attempting to help me out, but mostly he's making me look even more lame. "He makes me mixed CDs; they have themes based on the first track."

"What's the theme of this one?" Ben asks, leaning against the side of my car. I shove him off it.

"If I made you a themed mix, the first track would be 'Short People Got No Reason To Live,' by Randy Newman," I snap. He just continues to smile blandly at me until I sigh, "'Going Away to College,' by blink-182." Travis holds up the CD, on which I've written *I haven't been this scared in a long time* in black Sharpie.

Ben snorts. "*This world's an ugly place, but you're so beautiful to me.* Cute, G. Seriously, that's adorable. Just a quick question, though—are we in eighth grade?"

I throw an arm around his shoulder and steer him towards the driver's door of the truck, ducking down to hiss into his ear, "Better than the kindergarten, pigtail-pulling bullshit you and Jamie have got going on right now. I swear to god, the second I get back to my car, I'm going to call him and tell him that you made

him a mixed CD, and the first track is 'Every Breath You Take,' by The Police. I'm going to tell him you listen to it on repeat on your iPod while you hide on the roof of the apartment building across from his so you can peer through his windows with a telescope."

"How am I the one pulling his pigtails, if you're the one who keeps shoving us at each other?" he demands.

"I'm not shoving you at each other. I'm trying to make sure that you're still getting laid even though you and I have broken up, and I'm trying to make sure that he doesn't turn too hetero now that he's banging some chick on the regular. *This* would be shoving you," I say, planting both hands on his back, heaving him up into the driver's seat of the truck, and slamming the door. He spends a few seconds sneering at me through the window before he turns his attention to programming Jamie's address into the GPS.

I wander back to where Travis is waiting, still holding that stupid CD. I wince. "Yeah. So, he might have a point? I'm sorry, sometimes I forget that mixed CDs are sort of—"

Travis grabs me by the front of my jacket and drags me in for a kiss. I don't know if he intends to keep it short, but I sure as hell don't—I've got approximately nineteen hours left until I'm supposed to give him up for at least the next nine months, and I plan to spend every one of those hours taking as much as he's willing to let me have. I reach up and push the cap off his head so I can tangle a hand in his short hair, anchoring him to me and backing him up against my car. His hands are still clenched into fists around my jacket, like he's as reluctant to let go of what we've got as I am. Still, he breaks the kiss and murmurs, "Ben's a douchebag, ignore him. I like the CD, okay? I'm going to listen to it on the drive to the city, and later tonight, I'm going to show you my appreciation."

I grin against his lips and says, "Sounds like a good plan to me."

By now, Ben has started the truck, pulled out of the driveway, and circled around so that he can roll down the window and say, in that constantly-bored tone he's got, "So, are you guys coming? Or are you just going to stand around making out in the driveway all evening? Because I'd usually head out without you guys, but I don't want to show up at James' place and have to interact with him without you guys as a buffer."

"If I'd known you were such a cockblock, I wouldn't have become friends with you in the first place," I say, but the mention of Jamie has ratcheted up my excitement for tonight. I grab Travis' hat from where it's fallen on the roof of my car, toss it back to him, and open my door. "Alright, alright. We're going." Ben taps his horn once in acknowledgment before pulling away from the curb, and Travis gives me one more kiss before heading over to his own car.

I'm right about the time it takes to make the drive to the city—it's a little after five when I pull out of the driveway, but I don't make the last turn down into the garage under Jamie's building until quarter after eight. Travis is already there, parked next to the shiny black Cadillac with Georgia plates, though I've got no idea if it's coincidence, or if he saw Jamie's car the last time he was here. I pull into the space on his other side, cut the engine, and get out.

"Ben not here yet?" I say.

He shrugs. "Nope. I assume he's either driving really carefully, or he crashed into someone. Driving in Manhattan probably sucks even for people who are used to it, and he's never driven in the city before."

I blink. "He hasn't?"

"No?" Travis says slowly. "Dude, this is literally the second time he's ever been to New York, and he took the train in for his Juilliard audition last year."

"This is the sort of shit people need to tell me before I make my plans," I groan. "I can't believe we had

him drive a fucking moving van when he's never driven in the city before. He should have told me; I would've driven the truck, had you drive my Ferrari, and gotten him to drive your car. Dude's probably going to—"

I trail off then, because thankfully, the van has just pulled into the garage. Ben backs it carefully into a space halfway across the level, away from any of the other cars. When he tumbles out of the cab, he looks traumatized. "It's official: only people from Connecticut know how to drive properly. New Yorkers are fucking horrifying. I'm never coming back here."

"You crash into anybody or anything?" I prompt. He shakes his head. "You kill anybody?" Another shake of the head. "Then quit your bitching, and let's go up."

Because I don't have a key to the doors that lead from the garage to the inside of the building, we have to get buzzed in. I press the intercom button for Jamie's place, wait a few seconds, and then--

"What the fuck do you want?" he snarls through the speaker with such perfectly feigned ferocity that Travis actually takes a step back.

I jam my thumb against the button again and snap back, "Have some fucking manners, you cunt!"

The speaker clicks in on his laughter, and he says, "Thank God. It was a fifty-fifty shot on whether I'd be screaming at you or the Thai food delivery boy, and I doubt he'd find it as amusing as you would."

Holding down the button again, I exaggerate a moan. "Fucking hell, you ordered Thai? You really do love me. Get your dick out, I'm going to give you a great big, deep-throated 'thank you' when I get up there. Now buzz us in, this garage is fuckin' freezing." The lock clicks open.

"You two say the most inappropriate things to each other," Travis says. I grin and lace my fingers with his, leading the way through the marble-floored lobby to the elevators. The quick ride up to Jamie's floor passes in what I assume to be a comfortable silence, until I bother to glance around; Travis looks perfectly calm, but Ben's gaze is flickering all around the elevator, taking in the spotless mirrored walls and perfectly polished brass handrail, shifting in place like he can't figure out how the hell he got here, or if he's allowed to touch anything. Sometimes, I forget that he's not used to places like this, or nights like the one we might end up having tonight, or people like Jamie. People like me, I guess.

I knock my shoulder against his and say, "Dude, chill the fuck out. It's an apartment building, not a museum. You can breathe without them calling security."

"My building doesn't *have* security," Ben says quietly. "Our security is pretty much centered on the concept that the building doesn't even look like it would be worth breaking into. This place looks like a hotel."

"Only without all the gross tourists!" I say brightly. The bell chimes, and the doors slide open. I bound out of the elevator and down the hall to Jamie's door. It's locked, of course. I pull out my keys, then shrug when they both shoot me curious looks.

"I collect keys from all my favorite sexual partners, apparently," I explain. I start flicking through my keyring, pointing to each one and listing off, "Ben's apartment. Travis' house. New place *with* Travis. And here we go, Jamie's apartment." I unlock the door and burst into the apartment. Jamie is lying on the couch, head turned to face the Macbook that's open on the coffee table. I'm pretty sure he's Skyping with Rachael, because I can hear a voice that sounds like hers coming from the computer. He raises a hand to wave to me without bothering to sit up, and that does absolutely nothing to assuage my craving for attention. I dart across the apartment and fling myself down on top of him, ignoring his groan at my weight and burying my face against his neck. "Hi."

"Hi," he echoes, digging a hand into my hair and tugging gently until I raise my face to his and plant a kiss

on his lips. He lets me linger for a moment before he nudges me back enough to speak. "Say hello to Rachael."

"Hello to Rachael," I say, peeking over at the screen.

Rachael grins at me and offers a little wave. "Hi, Garen. Should I hit record? This seems like it's heading into sex tape territory, and Mama needs to pay off her student loans. I bet I could make a lot of money off of you two."

I open my mouth to tell her that Jamie and I have already made at least three sex tapes, but Jamie—presumably because he knows what I'm about to say—covers my mouth with his palm and says, "Not likely. Travis and the littlest emo are here, too. Do you mind if I sign off for now? I can text you later, if you'd like."

"Nah, I don't want to disrupt your activities for the night. I'll just talk to you tomorrow," Rachael says, waving him off.

"Alright. Happy early New Year. If you can't be sure that one of your friends is going to be sober tonight, make sure you take a cab home from your friend's party," he says. She rolls her eyes, but nods anyway. He smiles. "Y'all have fun tonight."

"You, too. Bye! Love you!"

Oh, Jesus. I hate it when Jamie's significant others say that to him. I hide my face against his neck once more so that she won't be able to see my judging eyes. But Jamie takes it in stride and simply says, "Thanks. Goodnight," and signs off.

Before I can say anything, Travis appears next to the couch and, after letting Jamie tug him down to our level to give him a kiss on the cheek in greeting, says, "Did you seriously just say 'thank you' in response to your girlfriend saying she loves you?"

"Well, I'm not going to say it *back*, am I?" Jamie says, looking revolted at the very idea of it. "Good Lord. I've only known the girl for three months. She's just—" he waves a dismissive hand towards the computer, "—started saying that occasionally. And she's perfectly accepting of my refusal to reciprocate. I've already explained to her that I don't throw that phrase around."

To my understanding, Jamie has only ever said the words '*I love you*' to three people: his parents and me. It's been a point of contention with every girlfriend or boyfriend he has ever had, and usually, his relationships end when the other person loses their shit and starts crying, *why won't you tell me you love me?* Jamie's baffled response of *because I don't* usually gets him slapped across the face. Still, I have to respect his commitment to never saying those words unless he means them.

"You love me, though, right?" I say, voice slightly muffled by the fact that my mouth is still bumping up against his throat.

"Right," he agrees. I smile against his skin, because I'm so fucking nervous about moving out here, being on my own, going back to Patton, being further away from my dad and Doc and the people I'm not supposed to know but am still used to seeing at my Narcotics Anonymous meetings. So much is changing at once, and I'm terrified by it all, but being closer to Jamie makes it easier. It makes me feel safer.

"And you missed me, right?"

"Right."

"Guys. You saw each other three weeks ago," Travis says. I mumble an objection, which he interprets

enough to amend, "Alright, four. You saw each other four weeks ago, and I'd be willing to bet everything I own that you've talked every single day since then. This is a warmer welcome than I got when G came back to Lakewood after four months in hiding."

I raise my head. "That's such a lie. I totally gave you a hug when I came back. And like, made out with you. Consider yourself lucky, because my greeting to Ben was to say '*bite me*' and then put my tongue in his boyfriend's mouth."

"Mm. Thanks for that, by the way," Ben says. He's still lingering awkwardly near the doorway, eyes darting from the leather furniture to the pristine white carpets, to the state-of-the-art appliances in the kitchen, to... well, to Jamie himself, pinned underneath me and looking every bit as beautiful and expensive as the apartment he lives in. A half-second passes in silence, and I try not to grin over the fact that, the last time they saw each other, Jamie was balls-deep in Ben's ass, in the passenger seat of my car. Ben hunches his shoulders up and jams his hands into his pockets, hitching his chin at Jamie even though his eyes are fixed on the floor. "Hey. Thanks for having me." I chuckle. Jamie hits me; Ben flushes. "Over. Thanks for having me over, for letting me crash here tonight."

"Don't mention it," Jamie says. The intercom next to the door buzzes. "That'll be the food. Get the hell off me, G. My wallet's in the bowl on the credenza—buzz the man in and pay him. I'm just going to go put this away." He gestures to his Macbook.

I roll to my feet to receive the delivery, paying the delivery guy with a few bucks from Jamie's wallet and a few from mine. When I turn around, Jamie has returned from his bedroom, and for a very long moment, we just stare at each other. Finally, we both say at once, "I'm not going out with you, if that's what you're wearing."

Travis snorts.

"Can it, Hat Boy," Jamie says, pointing a finger at him in warning before he turns his attention back to me. "*It's not going to suck itself?* Are you fucking kidding me? Where do you even get a shirt that appalling?"

"My mom bought me this shirt for Hanukkah!" I protest, which earns another snort. "Besides, dude, we're going to a fucking show out in Brooklyn."

"So?"

"So I'm not letting you leave this building wearing a five-hundred-dollar argyle sweater!" I say, my voice squeaking a little with my hysteria. "God, I've got half a mind to beat you up myself, just on principle. Whatever, we'll fight this out after we eat, I'm starving."

Travis takes the two bags of takeout containers from me and brings them into the kitchen. "James, which cabinet are your plates in?"

"Above the toaster, to the left of the fridge," Jamie replies. "And I got a mix of everything, wasn't sure what people would want. Do any of y'all want drinks?"

"Do you have pop?" I ask, wandering into the kitchen and hopping up to sit on the counter. Ben trails after me, but he still looks out of place, uncomfortable, so I snag the sleeve of his hoodie and drag him closer until he pulls himself up to sit in the space between me and the sink. Jamie opens the refrigerator door and steps to the side so that I can see the selection of cans inside. "Grab me a root beer." I elbow Ben. "Diet Coke, yeah?"

"Yes, please," Ben says.

Jamie grabs a few cans, and I reach for one, but he bats me away and lines them up on the counter before retrieving four glasses from one of the cabinets. "Fuck off for a minute, G. I'm *serving* you, be

patient.” He drops four ice cubes into each of the first three glasses, refills the ice tray and returns it to the freezer, then drops another four cubes from a second tray into the final glass.

“Patience really isn’t my strong suit. But I’ll consider making it my New Year’s Resolution to learn some,” I say.

Travis hands me a plate that’s been loaded down with a little sampling of everything. “Do you have a real one?” I raise my eyebrows, and he clarifies, “A real resolution.”

“To quit smoking again,” I say, making a face. He looks thrilled, so I poke him with the wrong end of my fork. “Don’t get too excited. I’m not doing it because I want to. It’s for PT at Patton—we have to run a couple of miles every morning, and it’ll be easier if my lungs are in better shape. What about you?”

“To get back in touch with my dad,” he says, shrugging. “Talk to him more often. Meet my stepmom and my half-brothers. Maybe go out to Portland and visit? I don’t know. I think it’d be nice to have at least one parent who I can still talk to, and since Mom’s out...”

Jamie finishes filling one of the glasses with water and hands it to him. “How does she feel about you moving out?”

Travis laughs. “I sat her down about two weeks ago and told her that I was graduating early. She was thrilled. Then I told her I was moving to New York with Garen so that I could go to Columbia. She threw a lamp at me and said, *‘don’t you dare expect there to still be a place for you in this family when he goes back to using drugs and you have to move out again.’* Sweet woman, my mother.” He shakes his head, then hitches his chin at Jamie. “What about you, dude? Any resolutions?”

Jamie scoffs. “I don’t need any. I’m flawless the way I am.”

“You could resolve to spend less money on ugly sweaters,” Ben suggests.

“Shut up, Fun Size,” Jamie says, passing me my glass of root beer. Then, tone shifting into a taunting lilt that brings out his accent even more, he adds, “What’s yours? To stop riding in cars with boys?”

“To stop riding boys in cars,” Ben corrects.

The can of diet coke slips from Jamie’s hand and hits the edge of the sink, bouncing, flipping, and splattering its contents all over the counter, Jamie’s sweater, and pretty much all of Ben. Jamie blinks at the can, then down at his sweater. The denim over Ben’s thigh is soaked through, as is the sleeve of his hoodie, and a decent portion of the t-shirt he’s wearing under it. He scowls down at his clothes, then at Jamie’s face. “Thanks for that, man.”

“I’m sorry,” Jamie says. “It was an—my hand slipped. I’ll get you a towel.”

“I’ve got a change of clothes in the truck, I’ll go get them. Give me your keys so I don’t have to get buzzed back in,” Ben sighs, holding out his hand.

Jamie gestures past him. “Same dish my wallet was in, near the door.”

Ben shoots him one last glare before clambering down from the counter, careful to avoid the puddle on the floor.

Travis and I have the grace to wait until he has left the apartment to start laughing. Jamie snatches up a roll of paper towels and starts sopping up the pop. “Shut up, the both of y’all. The can slipped, it’s not a big deal.”

“And I’m supposed to believe it had nothing to do with the comment he made?” I say.

Travis clasps both his hands to his chest in a comical expression of relief. "Does this mean we can finally stop pretending that James doesn't have a creepy, stalkery crush on Ben? Because after the whole Alex thing this past summer, I'm getting so sick of having to pretend that I don't notice—"

"I don't have a crush on him!" Jamie interrupts. "Why in the hell would you think that?"

"Because of what just happened," Travis says, beginning to tick his words off on his fingers. "Because of the sketchy way you two never blink when you look at each other. Because of that stupid Christmas card you sent him. Because of whatever went down during that half-hour 'conversation'—" I hide a grin at the fact that he actually uses air-quotes, "—you two had at the diner that one time. Do I need to keep going? Because I feel like that'll just make things more awkward for everyone."

Truth be told, I'm still a few clicks behind. I say, "I asked you if that Christmas card was from you, and you sent me a picture of it!"

"And where was I when I sent that picture?" Travis prompts, though he answers his own question with a sweeping gesture towards the rest of the apartment.

I round on Jamie, who has dropped to the floor to finish cleaning up the spilled drink. I kick him in the leg. "Dude. *Dude*. Are you fucking kidding me right now? You sent him a dorky, anonymous Poe card? That's so weird. Oh my god, I can't believe you actually like him. I thought you just wanted to get on him—"

"I don't like him!" Jamie snaps, flinging the paper towels into the trash and standing up again so that he can scrub his hands clean at the sink. "For Christ's sake, y'all are being ridiculous right now. I barely tolerate the guy. He's annoying, judgmental, pretentious, and, quite frankly, a little strange-looking."

"Strange-looking?" I echo, raising my eyebrows.

Jamie whirls around to point at me. "He's got eyes like a house-elf and a mouth like a porn star. It's not natural, alright?"

Of course, these are the words that are coming out of his mouth when the apartment door swings open again. Ben just kind of stands there for a few seconds, blinking at us and gnawing on his bottom lip. Finally, if only to break the tension, I say, "You're definitely right about the porn star mouth, but I've got no idea what a house elf is."

"It's a Harry Potter thing," Ben says slowly. "They have eyes like, um—" He shoulders his backpack and forms each of his hands into large circles, holding them up in front of his eyes like goggles, presumably to indicate the largeness of the eyes in question.

"I need to start sleeping with cooler people," I sigh.

Travis clears his throat and does his best to help out by saying, "You get your clothes?"

Ben gestures to the backpack. "Yeah. I mean, I got a clean shirt. I don't have spare jeans, so I'll just have to deal with these—"

"I have some you can borrow," Jamie interrupts. "Not mine, obviously, you'd be swimming in those. But I've got friends and exes who sometimes leave clothes here. Everything's been cleaned, and I think you might be able to find something that'll fit. Closet in the guest room, down the hall, first door on the right."

Ben disappears down the hall, and when I turn to speak to Jamie, he shakes his head and says, "I'll be back. I'm going to change out of this." He plucks at the hem of his soda-speckled sweater and heads for his bedroom, adding over his shoulder, "I'm bringing out a shirt for you, too, G. I was serious about not letting you wear that out in public."

The moment we're alone, Travis moves to stand in front of me, nudging my legs apart so that he can pull me to the edge of the counter and loop an arm around my waist. "Tell me the truth. They're screwing, aren't they?"

"Does Ben really strike you as the kind of guy who'd hook up with a random he doesn't even like?" I ask. My instinct to keep Jamie's secrets is so much greater than my instinct to tell the truth outright. Besides, I'm not lying, per se; I'm letting Travis come to his own conclusions, whether they're right or wrong.

He gives me a brief kiss on the lips, then smirks a little. "When I asked him out, do you know what his response was?" I shake my head. "He said, '*Fuck you.*' Same thing he said the first time I told him I loved him, only then, it was followed by '*you asshole,*' and later, '*god, you're such a moron.*'"

"He's such a sweetheart," I say.

"Point is, I think you're underestimating how similar insults and foreplay are to Ben," Travis says.

Down the hall, Jamie's bedroom door clicks back open and he joins us, now wearing a pale blue Oxford that flaunts the fresh tan he picked up while back in Georgia for Christmas. The top two buttons have been left open, and he's in the process of cuffing his sleeves to expose the lean muscle of his forearms.

"See? So much better than argyle. Look at you, you GQ motherfucker," I say.

"Yeah, yeah," he grumbles, flinging one of my plain, black, long-sleeved shirts at me. "Change into that. Fair is fair."

Before I can move, Travis hooks his hands under the hem of my shirt and strips me of it. It's pure reflex from that point; the second my head has been freed from the material of the shirt, I pull him in for another kiss. He's quick to reciprocate, but another door opens down the hall, and Ben says, "If you guys are having an orgy, I'm going back in that room and hiding until you're done."

I twist to snipe something back at him, but am instantly distracted—he's still in the process of yanking on one of those dark gray henleys he wears all the time, but my eyes are drawn to what looks like a smear of blackness across his ribcage. I push Travis away, tug on the shirt Jamie has passed me, and jump off the counter to join Ben in the living room. "Dude, what's that on your side?"

"Nothing," he says, worrying the hem of his shirt between his fingertips, like that will keep it in place. Not likely. I hike his shirt up and drop to my knees next to him to more fully examine the intricate, black-and-gray image of an antique typewriter that has been inked into the skin over his ribs. It's a beautiful piece, and fantastically detailed—the keys have been perfectly lettered, and the mechanics seem to be completely accurate, but the artist has also taken the time to add in signs of age and wear. There are chinks in the edges of the typewriter itself. One of the keys is cracked down the middle. Parts of it are chipped and bent; it's just skin and ink, but the image is full of character and history and an unbelievable artfulness.

"Christ, Ben. This is gorgeous," I say, glancing up in time to see a pleased little smile flash across his face. "When did you get it done? *Where* did you get it done? Did—"

"Calm down, it's just a tattoo," he says. He steps back, but allows Travis to take his turn checking it out before pulling the shirt back down. "I got it a few weeks ago. My friend, Delilah? She's in the Art History program at Yale, and she works at a tattoo parlor in downtown New Haven."

"Is it for the poem?" Jamie asks suddenly. I blink over my shoulder at him, but he's not looking back. He's down on one knee, carefully lacing up his shoes. When Ben doesn't immediately respond, he amends, "The Bukowski poem."

Ben nods. "And the H—there's this Hemingway quote I like. It's for both of them."

Jamie fucking *saunters* over and pauses right inside the invasion-of-personal-space realm before Ben. Rather than grabbing the shirt material itself, he flattens his palm against Ben's skin and slides his hand upward so that the hem is bunched up over his wrist. He cocks his head to the side, smiles a little, and says, "I like it."

"What?" Ben says hoarsely.

"The tattoo," Jamie says. He pulls his hand free, claps Ben on the shoulder, and heads back to the kitchen. "I like the tattoo. Now, y'all should eat something. We need to head out soon, unless we intend to be late for the concert."

"Show," Ben corrects, trudging after him towards the food.

Travis and I turn to stare at each other. After a minute, I reach over, slide my hand up the front of his shirt, and whisper, "*I like it.*"

He crowds close to me and buries his face against my shoulder to muffle his laughter. "This is getting completely out-of-hand," he whispers back. "Can one of them just get on their knees and get this over with? I'm starting to feel embarrassed for them."

Traffic tonight is more insane than usual, and getting a cab seems to be out of the question. Much to Jamie's loudly verbalized displeasure, we end up taking the subway. It turns out to be probably the most entertaining experience I've had in weeks. It's not like I've got my head completely up my ass—I know that Lakewood is a tiny, bullshit town of about eight thousand people, but neither Travis nor Ben has ever struck me as being as utterly *country* as they seem right now. Ben keeps getting dragged into conversations with schizophrenic homeless people and belligerent drunks because he's too polite to ignore them like Jamie and I have been doing.

Travis isn't talking much at all, but he's doing a hell of a lot of staring. I can see every light we pass reflected in his wide eyes, as if he's afraid to blink if it means he might miss anything. He has clearly forgotten that, in just a few weeks, he'll be coming here every day for classes. Once we get off the subway and start to walk the last few blocks to the club hosting the show, I decide it's better if I just slip an arm around his shoulders so that I can steer him down the sidewalk, because he's operating under a very me-like inability to focus on where he's going. He shoots me a sheepish half-smile, and I catch it with my lips.

The line outside the club is long, but not unbearable. We tack ourselves onto the end of it, and after we both light cigarettes, Jamie beckons Ben closer to him with a too-casual-to-really-be-casual, "McCutcheon, come here for a minute." Ben's expression is wary as he steps into reach, then warier still when Jamie loops an arm around him and makes a grab for his ass.

"Knew I should've grabbed one of those rape whistles they were handing out at student orientation a few months ago," Ben says, but before he has time to shove his way to freedom, Jamie snatches his wallet out of his pocket and flips it open.

Casting a quick glance around to make sure that no one is paying attention, he replaces Ben's driver's license with the fake from his pocket and slips the real one into the inner pocket of his own coat. Then, presumably just for the sake of being an asshole, he empties Ben's wallet of the remaining student IDs, library cards, debit cards, whatever, and starts rearranging them in new slots. He slides it back into Ben's pocket and says, "It's a good fake, and you look less like a four-year-old than usual, with that scruff you've got on. But if they start quizzing you, all the information is the same as what you've got on your real one, so don't panic. Your birthday's the same, but the year is three years earlier. Got it?" Ben nods, and I expect Jamie to be pleased, but he ends up scowling. "Are you fucking *shaking*? For God's sake, it's not that big of a—"

"I'm shivering, you asshole," Ben retorts. "You know, that thing that people do when someone pours soda all over their sweatshirt so it's unwearable, and then makes them stand on a New York City street corner in December?"

Jamie heaves a sigh and flicks the ash off the end of his cigarette. "Will you stop whining if I give you my coat?"

"No, but I might asphyxiate on the overpowering smell of that cologne you wear," Ben says.

"Excellent. If you die, you won't be cold anymore, and I won't have to listen to you talk. Everyone's a winner," Jamie says brightly.

Before the argument can continue any further, Travis ducks out from under my arm and pulls off one of the two hoodies he has layered in place of a jacket. He hands it to Ben, who pulls it on, tugs up the hood, and leans up to give Travis an appreciative kiss on the cheek. I frown—for the next few hours, Travis is still supposed to be *mine*. But he catches sight of my expression and rolls his eyes. "Oh, don't even try to give me that bullshit, after I had to watch you climb on top of James and make out with him on webcam for his girlfriend. Like *that* wasn't crazy weird. And you know you're going to make out with him at midnight, too."

"I never said I was going to do that!" I protest, but Jamie pinches my side.

"Of course you are. Who the fuck else would I kiss?" he says.

Travis shoots him another of those sarcastically baffled looks and says, "Wow, I don't know. It's a shame there's nobody in this group who I'm about ninety percent sure you fucked in a diner parking lot while I made small-talk with your girlfriend a few weeks ago."

I cover my face with my hands to hide my grin, but can't resist peeking through my fingers to see the reactions that statement has earned. Ben is hunched up inside his hoodie, staring up at Travis with wide, nervous eyes; he looks like a ten-year-old, waiting to be chastised. Jamie, however, stubs out the butt of his cigarette, pulls my hand away from my face to steal a drag off mine, and says, "I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about, McCall."

"The seat was sticky, James," Travis says flatly. "The windows were fogged up, the entire car reeked of sex, you left the lube on the floor, and I spent the entire ride home *sitting in your jizz*."

Jamie's neutral expression finally cracks into a smile as he admits, "Might not have been mine."

Travis rolls his eyes and turns to Ben, delivering a hard kick to his shins. "And you. You should've fucking told me, dude. Now that the shit has hit the fan between you and Alex, you have to tell me about stuff like this, because I'm clearly your back-up best friend."

"I know you are. I just... fuck, Trav, it's not something I'm proud of. I didn't know how to tell you," Ben mutters. "I mean, the guy's a total douchebag, I'm not going to go around bragging about making the mistake of—"

"You realize that I'm still standing right here, don't you?" Jamie interrupts.

Ben glares at him, and this obviously has the potential to turn into another argument, so I interject, "Ben, I thought *I* was your back-up best friend."

"You can't be—you've already got your own best friend, though you're not getting any points for taste," Ben says.

"So does Travis," I say. "What about Corey Copicetti?"

Travis shrugs. "We still talk, and we've hung out a couple of times this semester, but we're not bros like we used to be."

"That's a shame. I liked him," Jamie says. When Travis shoots him a bemused look, he shrugs. "We smoked a bowl together behind the church right after the wedding in April, while you were off having your breakdown and nailing the midget."

"You're unbelievable," Travis says. "In the course of a long weekend, you showed up at my house without warning, moved into my ex's bedroom across the hall, smoked up with my best friend, and threw a party at my house."

Jamie shrugs. "Made out with your sister, too."

Travis pales. "You did *what*?"

"I made out with your sister," Jamie repeats, slowly. When Travis continues to be too alarmed to reply, he adds, "Don't worry, her boyfriend knew it was happening. He was watching from the chair next to the bed. It was strange, but kind of hot."

"T's probably going to punch you in a minute, if you don't shut up," I whisper, and Jamie falls obediently silent.

Ben, of course, does not. He shoots Jamie a disgusted look and says, "Your opinion on what constitutes acceptable relationship behavior is completely beyond the realm of normalcy."

Jamie cocks his head to the side. "Did you figure that out before or after you realized that the only time I'm interested in sleeping with you is when there's a chance we'll get caught by someone I'm dating?"

I punch Jamie in the shoulder as hard as I can, because that's *bullshit*. He likes risk, and he likes secrecy, and he gets incredibly turned on by the idea that he might get caught doing something wrong, but I've known him too long and too well to believe that that's the only reason he wants to sleep with Ben. I know he can be an asshole at times, and I know that all of our other friends assume that he's driven solely by a desire to put his dick in people, but I also know that Jamie doesn't fuck people who he isn't attracted to. I know he wouldn't fuck someone just for the sake of almost getting caught, and he sure as hell wouldn't do that to someone he knows I care about.

But the things I know don't do anything to change the fact that, for a split second, Ben looks like he just got punched in the face. Then something closes off in his eyes, like shutters being drawn, and he turns, takes a step forward in line, and says over his shoulder, "Where's Rachael?"

Jamie frowns at his back. "Home in Rhode Island for the holidays."

"Fantastic. Guess that means you can keep your hands off me tonight," he says. When Jamie doesn't respond, he glances back again. "I'm serious. You touch me, and I'll break your fucking wrist."

"Is there a problem?" the ticket girl asks. I blink; I hadn't realized that we'd finally made our way up to the front door.

"Yes," Ben says flatly, "I'm only capable of sleeping with men who are assholes. That's a problem, right?"

The girl throws her head back and laughs. "And what I wouldn't give for the solution to it. Go on in, honey." She plucks his ticket from his hand and waves him on without even bothering to ask for ID. Jamie and Travis both make it through without anything more than the presentation of tickets.

I'm the only one who gets carded, which is fucking ridiculous, because I know for a fact that I look older than anyone else in our group. I sulk over it the whole time we're dropping off our jackets at the coat check closet, but rouse myself from my pissy mood when I spot the bar. "I'm going to go grab a water. Anybody want anything?" I point to Ben, then to Travis and Jamie. "Water, two beers?"

"Yeah, beer's fine," Travis says, side-eyeing Jamie. "Take Ben with you."

"Why?" Ben says, frowning.

I roll my eyes and grab him by the belt loop. "He needs us to fuck off for a minute so he can yell at James for being a cunt to you outside. Hey, Jamie—beer?"

"No," Jamie says, attention on Travis even as he speaks to me. "I want that life-ruining, no-mixer drink you used to make at Patton."

"The last time we drank those, we let Kevin sell us on Craigslist to some Portuguese woman who wanted to give her husband 'pretty American boys, give very good blowjobs' for their anniversary," I say. "I mean, sure, we'd had like, ten drinks each, but still. We woke up in a basement in Maine. We probably would've gotten turned into skin suits if Andrew and Colin hadn't found us and stolen us back. So, if that's what you're drinking tonight, make sure the GPS tracking in your phone is turned on."

He flashes me a smile. "I'll only have one. That won't even get me drunk. Go."

I ruffle his hair, peck a kiss to Travis' cheek, and drag Ben towards the bar. "You good with water, or you want something else?"

"Water's good," he says.

I wedge myself between two dumb bitches who don't know enough to back off from the bar once they've gotten their drinks. It takes a minute for the bartender to come around to us. "Hey, man. Two bottles of water, bottle of Sam Adams, and a Darth Vader."

"A what?" the bartender says, squinting at me.

"Darth Vader. Half ounce each of vodka, tequila, gin, rum, and triple sec, over ice, topped with a half ounce of Jager," I say. He shrugs, passes me the three bottles I've asked for, and starts mixing. I nudge Ben and say, "I swear, I'd make bank as a bartender. My brain is like an encyclopedia of drink recipes."

He snorts. "Probably not the best idea, considering you're an alcoholic."

"That's the beauty of it—I'd get to play with booze, but I wouldn't have to drink it. It'd be a chance to put years of hard-won knowledge to use without, you know, becoming a shit-show again." I pause, then cast a glance over my shoulder at Jamie, who is listening intently while Travis... tears him a new one, it looks like. "He doesn't mean it, you know. The shit he says? He still hasn't said much to me about what he really thinks of you, but—"

"I don't know why you and Travis insist on living in some alternate universe where I need you guys to protect me from James Goldwyn, but I promise you, I can handle it," Ben interrupts. "I've already been through this bullshit with his cousin, remember? I'm used to it."

"But that's the thing—he's not like Ethan was. Jamie's basically got two types of hook-ups. He's got people he nails once—literally once, one time, singular—and never speaks to again, and then he's got people who he... fixates on, I guess."

Ben's forehead creases. "What do you mean?"

"I don't fucking know, I *guess* I'm talking about dating? Look, my relationship experience is pretty much limited to David, Travis, and you. I'm more of a hook-up guy, a friends-with-benefits guy. But Jamie—he dates. And not just this thing he's got with Rachael, either. Sometimes he's legitimately committed to being with just one person, no screwing around on the side. But his relationships tend to be pretty short, because—" I sigh, dump some money on the bar when the bartender sets down the drink in front of me, grab one of the bottles of water, and gesture for Ben to pick up the other two bottles. "It's hard to explain? But the thing Jamie likes more than anything else is the way it feels to do something or someone for the first time. He likes it when things are surprising, and exciting, and raw. Naturally, that first-time excitement usually goes away after he's slept with somebody once. But sometimes, it doesn't, and those are the people he dates. Then a few weeks go by, or a few months, if they're lucky, and once there's nothing left in that person that's undiscovered, there's no reason for him to stay. So he ends it."

"Is that why he got over that thing with Alex so quickly? Because there was nothing left to discover?" Ben asks.

God, this kid is fucking stupid; I can't believe that he's pretty much the gold standard of intelligence in my social circle.

I roll my eyes towards the club ceiling. "Alex is cool. He's fun, and he's my friend, but he's about as deep as the puddle of Heineken that I'm standing in right now. I never expected Jamie's interest in him to last as long as it did, especially after I found out that he'd found someone else who was so much shinier." Ben blinks at me. I contemplate drowning myself in Jamie's Darth Vader. Instead, I force myself to take a slow, calming breath. "You, Ben. I'm talking about you. I mean, the sex alone? You're—"

"Please don't have this conversation with me in public," Ben pleads.

"—fucking *insane*. You and I hooked up for over a year, and you still managed to surprise me with some of the weirdass *how-do-you-feel-about-the-concept-of-spanking, my-safeword-is-unicorn, here-I-think-you-should-read-this-article-about-some-bondage-thing-called-subspace-because-if-you-hurt-me-just-right-my-body-might-release-too-many-endorphins-and-make-me-zone-right-the-fuck-out* shit you came up with."

"My safeword isn't unicorn," Ben whispers, trying to hide his face behind the water and beer he's holding. "And everything else you've mentioned was told to you in *confidence*, why the fuck are you bringing this up in the middle of a crowded bar?"

"I'm making a point," I say. "Look, you're appallingly creative when it comes to getting off, and on top of that, you're smart as hell. Your interests are as geeky as they are varied, and you—Christ, dude, you're like that poem you made me analyze for my final essay for English class. The Margaret Atwood one."

And there's that creased forehead again. "You're going to need to narrow it down. She kinda wrote more than one."

"The one about the orange on the table," I say. "You're like the part about the mountains and the dinosaurs and whatever."

"*There are mountains inside your skull*," he says immediately. "*Garden and chaos, ocean and hurricane; certain corners of rooms, portraits of great grandmothers, curtains of a particular shade; your deserts; your private dinosaurs; the first--*"

"Yes, shut up, I get it, stop quoting. But the fact that you do that, the fact that you've got all this fucking *poetry* just stashed away inside your head? That probably turns Jamie on, too. I don't know for sure, because he won't talk about it, but it's pretty obvious to me that you're still ages away from boring him, and that—it's weird. Because I've seen him have one-night stands, and I've seen him have relationships, but this whole hatesex-interspersed-with-random-philosophy-and-literature-debates thing that you guys have got going on? I've never seen him have that."

Ben opens his mouth to respond, but is interrupted by the arrival of our friends. Jamie takes his drink from me, takes a sip of it, and says, "What are you two talking about?"

"Safewords," I say blandly. "Ben's isn't 'unicorn,' for the record. What did you guys talk about?"

"The fact that Travis is going to kneecap me if I don't start being nicer to this one," Jamie says, jerking his head towards Ben. "Apparently, I'm a bit of a prick. Who knew?"

"Everyone?" Ben suggests, which earns him a glare, but no comment. Progress.

The first band starts to file out onto the stage, so I grab the first hand I see—pretty sure it's Ben's—and drag him after me out into the crowd of people who are inching closer to the stage to watch. My enthusiasm turns out to be for absolutely nothing; the first band is so ungodly terrible that I actually start to laugh halfway through their first song. Jamie just sighs a lot, takes heavy draws from his drink, and checks out the people around us more than anything.

After two songs of torture, Travis slips an arm around my waist and pulls me close enough to say into my ear, "Seriously? When you and Ben go to your *totally rad shows*, this is the kind of shit you've been listening to?"

"Unsigned bands are kind of fifty-fifty," I admit. "Half of 'em suck, like this, and the other half are actually good. Just wait it out. I promise at least two of the other bands we hear tonight will be cool."

The second band sucks just as much as the first, and now, Travis isn't the only one getting restless. Most of the people in the crowd are making more trips to the bar than I think they usually would, and a few douches in the back are heckling the people on stage. But then the third band comes out, and they start *rocking*. The guitarist seems like a dick who's overly impressed with himself—something Ben mutters is true of all guitarists, when I tell him this—but the singer's got an awesome voice, and their drummer is this red-haired chick who is absolutely wailing on her kit. Their five-song set is just enough to get everyone pumped up for the fourth band, who's supposed to bring us through the midnight countdown.

Jamie slings an arm around my shoulders. "Thirty seconds. You want me to go find a stranger to seduce so you can suck face with your stepbrother?"

"Nope," Travis answers for me. "You can have him. I know you two will both bitch about it if anyone tries to get in between you. Besides, I've got Ben."

"Lucky me," Ben deadpans.

Travis frowns at him. "You were a lot nicer back when we were dating." Ben raises an eyebrow in a silent response that is clearly intended to mean, *no, I wasn't*. "Okay, you were still mean, but you at least liked making out with me."

"Says who?"

"Ten seconds," I say, but it's unnecessary—the show host is already holding up a huge, ancient clock and bouncing around as the lead singer of the fourth band counts out the final seconds of the year. Countdowns are almost always anti-climactic for me. Every year, I expect to feel different, or nostalgic about the year that has just ended, or excited for the future, but then it's midnight, and I feel the same as I did a minute earlier. So, I go for my default distraction—I catch Jamie by the front of his Oxford and start kissing him when the singer calls out the five-second warning.

Next to me, Travis is laughing, but the sound of it gets drowned out in cheers when we hit midnight. Even once the majority of the noise has faded into the usual chatter, I can't hear him—probably because he

has traded in laughing for making out with Ben. I extract myself from Jamie's grip and watch them for a moment before my curiosity at finally seeing them kiss each other is completely outweighed by my desire to get my former not-boyfriend the hell off my current not-boyfriend.

"Hey. McCutcheon. Tongue in your own mouth," I say.

They break apart, both rolling their eyes, and Ben pushes Travis towards me. "He's all yours. Enjoy the taste of my saliva in his mouth, you sick fuck."

Mostly for show, I pull Travis into a quick kiss before turning him around so that we're both facing the stage as the fourth band starts to get into their set. He leans back against my chest, letting me support a bit of his weight. The brim of his ball cap is digging into my shoulder, and I have to abandon the last quarter of my water bottle so that I can settle my hands over his hips, but it's worth it to have the chance to keep him close while the music plays on.

Shortly after the fourth band finishes their setlist, a dude standing next to me fumbles his nearly-full bottle of beer, and I instinctively toss out a hand to catch it. I manage to get it before it hits the ground—he accepts it and nods his thanks to me—but I end up with a decent splash of beer across my hand. The scent of booze has already seeped into my clothes pretty thoroughly, but I'd rather not have it soaked into my skin, too. I nudge Travis with my elbow and say, "I'm gonna go wash my hands, I'll be back before the last band comes on."

"Bathroom's through there," he says, pointing to the back corner of the venue. I nod, kiss him on the cheek, and head for the door he has indicated.

The men's room is empty, except for the handicapped stall, which is closed tight and has two pairs of feet visible beneath the door. I contemplate making a lewd comment, but then I hear low voices, and I realize it's not a hookup. It's a drug deal. I turn to the sink and wrench the faucet on, but my hands are shaking under the stream of water. All I can think about is the last time I was in this scenario—that night in September, I had knocked on the stall door, I'd bought my way in, I'd *relapsed*.

But I'm not low like I was then. I can stand being around people who are drinking and using and dealing, and it doesn't mean I have to do it, too. I'm fine, or at least, I can tell myself I am. This isn't a problem, and I'll be out of here in less than a minute. It's not a big deal. Just some strangers making a buy in a bathroom stall. But then the stall door bangs open, and two dudes come out, and one of them isn't a stranger at all. The one who is—the buyer, I'd guess—doesn't even spare me a glance as he scurries back out into the club, but the non-stranger catches sight of me and freezes.

Don't say anything. Don't recognize me. Don't remember what happened the last time you saw me.

But of course, he lets out an awkward laugh, steps closer, and says, "Anderson, man. It's been a while."

"Hey, Seth. Yeah. A couple months," I say.

For a guy who fucked me in the ass, Seth Hayden is surprisingly heterosexual, so the once-over he gives me is completely non-sexual. "You look different from the last time we hung out. That's, uh... a good thing, yeah? You seemed pretty fucked up back then."

I nod and drop my eyes to my hands, scrubbing a little harder. "I was. Checked into rehab two days after you last saw me. I'm almost four months clean."

He shoots me a slightly lopsided grin. "That was more than four months ago, though, wasn't it?"

I can't help but return the smile as I admit, "Dude, you try staying sober when you're a fucking super-senior in a public school."

"That what you're doing now?"

"Hell no. Finally back at Patton, starting next week."

He nods. "Makes sense for you to finish there. Senior year was pretty weird without you there. You know, you and—" he makes a face, "—Goldwyn. He ever tell you that they tried to give him another roommate after you left? But he like, went crazy. Barely spoke to the guy, unless it was to bitch him out for leaving a sock on the floor or not letting him alphabetize the guy's schoolbooks or whatever. Fucking scared the dude out of the school. Happened three times before they were finally like, *fuck it, you can have a single*. None of us could figure out how the hell you managed to put up with three years of his weirdness."

It's hard to pull off a normal shrug with my hackles raised. "The stories are bullshit, Jamie's fine to live with." But hey, I never tried to stop Jamie from alphabetizing my shit when he wanted to, so what do I know? "He's here tonight, you know. We came together."

Seth makes another face. "No shit? I didn't know he was still in New York. Figured he would've gone back to Alabama."

"He's from Georgia. And no, he lives in Manhattan. Goes to school up here," I say.

"Good for him," Seth says, blatantly not meaning it. I make the mistake of believing that this is the part of the conversation where I can escape without any damage being done. But then he puts his hands in his pockets, and it's a completely innocent gesture, apart from how I know—as sure as I know my own name—that he's holding at least half a gram of coke in those pockets. All at once, this bathroom seems too small. I fumble to turn off the faucet and dry my hands against my jeans, but when I glance back at Seth's face, he's watching me too carefully.

"You know, I've got this uncle who ended up in rehab," he says conversationally. "He and his wife split up, and he started drinking a lot more to deal with it. Then from there, he started shooting heroin, and it... obviously, it didn't go well. Things got pretty bad, but he was able to sober up, sort all his shit out."

"Oh," is all I say, even though what I *want* to say is, *you've got an uncle who's a junkie and you're still a drug dealer?*

He shrugs. "Yeah. The thing is, though, once the divorce got finalized and he moved on, started seeing someone new, he was still okay. He can even drink now, without getting trashed or having DUIs or needing more all the time. He's a—you know, a social drinker. Ever think maybe you're like that?"

My stomach turns over. "What?"

"G, when you were crashing with Goldwyn for those few months last spring, you were totally fucked up, and it had nothing to do with drugs. You weren't even using then, but you were screwed up over your dad kicking you out, and your stepmom being a fuckin' cunt, and your breakup with that guy you were dating."

"Travis," I say quietly. "His name is Travis."

"He still treating you like shit?" Seth asks. I think of Travis asking me to move in with him, and taking me on that movie date, and packing up everything he owns to come to New York with me, and smiling against my lips minutes after midnight. I shake my head. "What about your dad? Things good with him? And your stepmom isn't a bitch anymore?"

I think of their divorce, and that Disney-esque moment in the living room, of Dad telling me how proud he is of me, my own mom buying me soft sweaters and awesome t-shirts. "Things with my parents are good. My mom and I are fine, my dad and I are fine, and my stepmom's still a cunt, but they're getting a divorce. I haven't seen her in ages."

Seth shrugs. "Seems to me like your life is a lot better now than it was a few months ago. Maybe *that's* why you're not freaking out. Maybe the drugs were never really the problem."

He's wrong. I know he's wrong, but it's like his words are taking that one last spark of hope I'd had that maybe I could party like a normal person again someday, and they're kindling it into this huge fucking fire that's burning me from the inside out. And I can see it—this alternate reality, where I can have a beer with my friends on nights like this, where I can do a bump at a crazy party, where I can get wasted on Darth Vaders with Jamie and laugh about it the next day. Where I can be *me*, like I was before.

"Maybe," I say.

He smiles, tugs his hand out of his pocket and extends it for a shake. "Well, I should get back out to my friends. Last thing I need is for Goldwyn to come looking for you and fuckin' shoot me again." We both laugh, even though it's not really amusing. I fit my hand into his, and he gives it a firm shake. "See you around, man."

I don't feel the crinkle of plastic against my fingers until he's pulling his hand away, and at that point, it's too late to refuse. I stare him dead in the eyes, my hand still hovering between us, curled into a loose fist. It's not like I have to look down to know what I'm holding—I've held enough bags of coke in my life to know what they feel like. I swallow and force out, "Seth—"

"Consider it my apology," he says quietly, "for how things went down between us back in June. I was a dick to you, bro. I knew you needed a favor, and I should've just given it to you when you asked. This is my way of showing you that I'm sorry."

If he wants to apologize, he should probably apologize for selling me the shit coke that pissed off Dave enough to beat me that first time. Or he should apologize for letting me buy from him when it was obvious I was losing my mind last year. He should apologize for getting me to whore myself out for a gram. He should *not* be apologizing for the fact that he didn't give me *more* drugs. But the look on his face is so calm, way calmer than I feel. Slowly, I lower my hand, clenching my fingers tighter around the bag. "Thanks."

"No problem," he says, grinning. He claps me on the shoulder and walks out.

My palm is slick with sweat, and the bag is sticking to it. If I had even an ounce of sense at all, I'd flush it. But I don't. I can't. I can't flush it, I can't leave it here, I can't go back out to my friends and pretend I'm not holding. I shove my fists deep into my pockets and shoulder open the men's room door, making a bee-line for the nearest exterior door. I slip through it and find myself in an empty alley. The door swings shut behind me, cutting off the music from the club.

And then it's just me, and the alley, and the silence, and the snow, and the coke.

Carefully, I extract the bag from my pocket and lean back against the side of the building, blinking down at the drugs in my hand. This isn't fucking fair. I haven't been craving anything; it's been weeks since I felt shitty enough to want to disappear back down the hole I've been crawling out of for months. It's not like I came to New York with the intention of scoring, but... I don't know how to have drugs and not use them. If this coke isn't going up my nose, I've got no idea what the hell I'm supposed to do with it.

I've been standing there for barely a minute before the door next to me bangs open, unleashing a burst of the music that's being played over the sound system between bands.

Ben stumbles out into the alley, tripping over his own feet as Jamie walks him backward until the pair of them crash into the brick wall opposite the door. They're a mess of limbs, and at first, I can't figure out whether they're fighting or fucking around. After a few seconds, though, Jamie's knees hit the pavement, and he pins Ben's shoulders to the wall with one hand pressed to his collarbone, draws the hem of his shirt up with the other. He brushes a few frantic, open-mouthed kisses to Ben's chest and stomach—one

over the typewriter tattoo—and then the kisses start to have more teeth than lip, and I realize that he's doing his best to scatter hickeys all over Ben's pale torso. He mutters something that I can't really hear, but that sounds like it might be, "You look so good when I get you all marked up like this."

"Thought you only liked to fuck around with me when you thought you might get caught by someone you were dating," Ben says, arching up into the bites. "Thought you said your girlfriend was out of state—"

"Thought you were going to break my wrist if I touched you?" Jamie retorts.

"Pretty sure you shot that plan to hell when you started groping me during the second band's set," Ben says, and Jamie laughs against the sharpness of his hipbone.

"I had to do something to entertain myself. They were terrible."

I watch the dampness from the pavement seep into the knees of Jamie's jeans. He's never been a big fan of sucking cock—not like I am, anyway. He usually does it just for the sake of fairness and reciprocation, and he never lets anyone come in his mouth, not even me. Says he hates the taste. Can't deep-throat, has no interest in ever developing the ability to. It's been years since I've seen him really eager to suck anybody off, but I guess he's forgetting all of that now, because his long fingers twitch towards the four-button fly of Ben's jeans, and he says, "You've changed your mind, right? I don't have to fear for my delicate bones anymore? Because I'd very much like to blow you right now, and—"

"Then shut the fuck up and do it," Ben orders, yanking open the last button.

I clear my throat and admit softly, "I'm not sure of a non-awkward way to announce my presence." They both freeze. I scuff the toe of my boot against the pavement. "Yeah. Kinda been standing here the whole time. You guys aren't too observant."

"You could've said something," Jamie says, turning to glare at me, but the moment he actually gets a look at my face, he realizes that something is wrong, and his entire posture changes. Kind of ironic—I came out here to avoid giving him the chance to see me before I'd gotten the chance to get my game face back on. He gets back onto his feet and takes a step towards me. "You alright, G?"

I sneak a peek at his eyes; he looks nervous, but not as nervous as I feel when I hold my fist out towards him. He frowns, but extends his own hand, palm up, underneath mine, ready to take whatever I've got. I force my fingers to unclench. The bag lands in the center of his palm, and we both stare at it. Having secured the last button on his jeans, Ben takes a step closer, only to freeze again when he realizes what I've just passed over.

Finally, Jamie says, "Who the fuck did you buy this from?"

"Nobody," I say simply. "I, um... there's someone here. And we got to talking while I was in the bathroom, washing that beer off my hands? He gave it to me. Said it was a present."

"Who gives somebody drugs as a present?" Ben asks, but right over the end of his sentence, Jamie is snapping, "Seth? Is Seth fucking Hayden at this show?"

"I didn't know he would be here. I didn't even know he was still living in New York," I say, voice pathetically small even to my own ears. "We were just talking, and then—he passed it to me in a handshake. I didn't even realize what he was doing until I was already holding it. Don't be mad at me."

Jamie's face softens, and he flings the bag off his hand and onto the ground before stepping close to me and gripping my shoulders. "I'm not mad at you, darlin'," he says. I can tell he's purposely thickening his accent, because he knows how much it soothes me when he speaks to me in a low, soft drawl. But right now, I don't feel like I *deserve* to be soothed. He continues, "I know you didn't expect him to be here—this whole night was my idea, anyway. Don't you dare think I'm mad at you, not even for a second. I'm mad at

him, which is why Ben's going to stay here with you while I go inside and find Seth. Then, I'm gonna drag him out here, and you're gonna watch me murder him with my bare hands. Does that sound like fun, sweetheart? You wanna watch me kill Seth for you?" I choke on a laugh, and the corner of his mouth twitches like he's fighting a smile. "You think I'm joking, but I'm serious as all get out. You've got no idea what it's taking for me to stay standing here with you, instead of hunting him down like a dog."

"Don't," I sigh. "I don't want you to do anything, alright? I just... I couldn't just toss it, and I sure as hell couldn't hold onto it, and I didn't know what to do."

Ben takes another step forward and catches my hand with his own. "I'm going to get Travis and bring him out here, okay?"

"Don't," I repeat, though the word is hard to get out around the panic that's squeezing my throat shut. Ben's eyebrows flick upward. I lick my lips and say quietly, "He doesn't think I can do this. I know he doesn't. And I don't want him to know how right he is—how close I came to fucking up. I can't let him know—"

"He doesn't feel that way, Garen. None of us do. I'm going to get him," Ben interrupts, and before I can stop him, he slips back into the building.

I sneak a glance at Jamie, who is still watching me with dark, unblinking eyes. I swallow. "S-So, you and Ben—"

"Don't even think about changing the subject," Jamie warns, and I shut my mouth so quickly that my teeth click together. Silence stretches between us for one, two, three minutes, and then the side door bursts open again, and Ben steps out, followed immediately by Travis.

"Hi," I say. "Sorry, it's—they're making a big deal out of nothing. Everything's fine. You don't—"

My words stutter into silence when Travis nudges Jamie out of the way and threads both of his hands into my hair, using his grip to tilt my head down so that our foreheads touch. "It's okay. Just tell me what happened."

I close my eyes. "My dealer's here. Ex-dealer, I guess? The last time I saw him, I was pretty much selling him my ass for drugs, so I was hoping he'd just ignore me when he saw me, but he—we talked. And it was normal, casual, like we were still bros. H-He said he could, you know, he said he was holding, if I wanted anything. I told him I'm clean now, and he said—he's got some uncle or cousin or brother or whatever, somebody in his family—and he said I could maybe be a casual user someday, once I was happier or more stable. I know he's wrong, okay? I know he's a dealer, so obviously it's in his best interest to make sure one of the people who used to buy from him is still using, but fucking hell, I wanted to believe him *so badly*. I wanted to believe it would be okay for me to get just a little bit high, and then he gave me—he had a bag, he gave it to me, said it was an apology for how shit went down last summer. But I didn't use it. I swear, I didn't—"

"I know you didn't," Travis assures me. "You don't need to defend yourself, I already know. Okay?"

"I don't think I can do this," I whisper. "We haven't even moved into the new place. We're not even really living in New York yet, and I'm already fucking it up. I don't—"

"You haven't fucked up anything. Somebody literally *put drugs in your hand*, and you didn't use them. You didn't hide them for later. You didn't lie about it. You gave them to James, and you told us what happened, and I am so fucking proud of you for that," he says. His hands slip from my hair so that he can wind his arms around my shoulders, drawing me in so that his lips are next to my ear. "You did exactly what you should have done. Jesus, Garen, give yourself some credit. You didn't do anything wrong. You were *brave*."

He's only saying this because he doesn't know what happened inside my head when Seth pressed that bag into my hand. None of them know, not even Jamie, who's done coke with me plenty of times before. They don't understand how hard it was to stop myself from cutting a line right there on the edge of the sink in the restroom; they don't feel the same itch I've got to go pick up the bag that's still sitting on the ground. To rid myself of that temptation and silence the buzzing in my head, I stretch out and press the toe of my boot to the bag, grinding down and dragging my foot back. The plastic splits open, scattering the powder all over the damp pavement. It kind of feels like I'm being split open, too, but I can't admit that to them.

"Do you want to go back to my place?" Jamie asks. "We can leave now, if you'd like. I'll just need a quick minute to find Seth, break a couple of his bones, maybe see if I can find somebody with a gun around here so I can shoot him again."

I huff out a laugh. "No. There's only one more band—I want to hear them play before we go."

"You sure?" Ben asks. I nod, but don't speak. This isn't the first time I've freaked out like this and forced them into taking care of me, even now that I'm sober. I made Ben put up with so much bullshit before I could sleep with him, just because I couldn't get over what happened with Dave. They all had to hover around me and make sure I was okay after I had that accidental sip of booze on Halloween. Travis had to deal with my silent treatment and near-relapse after Joss told me I was responsible for her abortion. It's not *fair*. They never asked to be my caretakers, but every time something goes even remotely wrong, I force them into the role. The least I can do is make sure they get to enjoy the rest of this night.

That plan falls apart completely once we get back inside the club, and Jamie goes completely still at the edge of the room, his eyes fixed at a point halfway across the venue. "That's him, isn't it? Heading for the door?"

"No, it's not," I say, even though it really is. "It's fine, Jamie, let's just go listen to the last band."

But he shoves away from me and grabs Ben by the collar of his shirt. "Will you go grab the coats from the coat check?" The second Ben nods, Jamie lets go of him and strides towards the bar, snatching something off one of the high tables as he passes it. He leans across the bar, empty beer bottle in his hand, and murmurs something to the bartender. The bartender shoots him a quizzical glance, but shrugs and accepts the bottle. I watch as he fills it nearly to the top with water from the beverage gun, then passes it back to Jamie.

"No. Jamie, don't," I say, but Jamie takes the bottle back and heads for the same door that we've just watched Seth leave through. I bolt after him, doing my best to weave through the crowd, but by the time I get outside, Jamie's already in the smoking area. He curls his left hand around the neck of the bottle, forming a lip level with the opening, then brings his right palm down flat against it. It's a cool little trick he learned at Patton, and it works perfectly—the small amount of air in the bottle is forced downward, and the bottom of the bottle is blown clean off, a neat circle of glass that hits the pavement a second later. If the sound of breaking glass and spilling water wasn't enough to attract Seth's attention, the way Jamie pins him to the side of the building and holds the broken bottle to his face sure as hell is.

"If you ever come near Garen again, I will shove this into your eye socket," Jamie growls, barely loudly enough for me to hear him even though I'm only a few feet away. "I shot you once, and no matter what the disciplinary committee ruled, we both know I hit exactly the mark I intended to. What makes you think I wouldn't stab you, too?"

Seth cringes away from the bottle. "Fucking Christ, Goldwyn, get off me! Garen, can't you get him to—"

"Don't you dare say his name like that, like you're *friends*. You're not his friend, Seth, you were his dealer. Past tense. He's clean now, and if I ever hear about you trying to give him coke again, I will kill you. Do you understand me?"

"Fine! Jesus Christ, just get away from me!"

"James, knock it the fuck off," I snap, grabbing for the bottle. It's not like I'm the pinnacle of grace, so I of course manage to cut my hand open, but I also manage to wrestle the glass away from him and crush it beneath the sole of my boot. "I'm not gonna stand here and watch you get your ass arrested for coming after somebody with a broken bottle." Though, we're standing outside a shady dive in Brooklyn—aren't broken-bottle-fights par for the course around here? I try again, "He used to sell to me because I used to want to buy. You can't put the blame on him when I'm the one who fucked up."

"You weren't trying to buy tonight—"

"And I didn't get *high* tonight, did I?" I say. "So we're ending this right now. Seth's going to walk away, and we're going to do the same, and he and I won't ever speak again, yeah?"

Jamie doesn't seem like he plans to agree with my terms, so I fling an arm around his neck and drag him backward. Travis moves around to place himself as a barrier between us and Seth, just in case Jamie tries to get back over to fight him, and says, "Guess we're heading out now after all. Wanna get a cab instead of taking the train?"

"Yeah. My treat," I say. "Ben, we're—"

I stumble to a halt, blinking, because Ben isn't standing next to me, like I expect him to be. He's standing in front of Seth, who eyes him warily and says, "Do I know you?"

"Nope," Ben says, and he punches Seth in the mouth.

Shit, shit, I don't have enough arms to keep all my idiot friends at bay. Luckily, Travis hasn't yet gone over to the *punching-solves-all-the-problems* side, so he's able to grab Ben by the back of his hoodie and haul him backward. "Alright, awesome, you're going to get arrested for assault. Come on, we're getting the fuck out of here."

"God fucking damn it, Anderson!" Seth is yelling after us as Travis and I drag Ben and Jamie away down the sidewalk. His voice sounds thick and wet, like he's got a mouthful of blood. "Keep your bitch on a leash!"

I shove Jamie around the corner before he can yell anything back. The moment he has calmed down enough to be released, I give both him and Ben a hard smack around the back of the head. "What the fuck is wrong with you two?"

"I'm sorry, did you expect me to shake his hand and wish him well?" Jamie demands.

"And you!" I practically howl, turning to face Ben, who is frowning and shaking out his knuckles. "You're supposed to be the adult here!"

He turns his frown on me. "Since when?"

"Since *always*. In case you haven't noticed, none of the rest of us are qualified for that position. You're supposed to be the one who we can all count on to not lose his shit and punch a drug dealer in the face—"

"I know," Ben interrupts, and yes, there's that pitiful, guilty expression I've been looking for. Finally, we're making progress. "I just—seeing him tonight made it easy to remember what you looked like when you got off that bus in Cleveland in June, right after you'd made your last deal with him, and I just got so pissed off. I'm sor—"

"Don't you even think about apologizing," Jamie warns him. "If anybody in the world deserves a punch in

the face, it's Seth Hayden. You were—what you did just now, that was so fucking good. Don't apologize for it."

Ben ducks his head, but he doesn't try to apologize again.

I give up on trying to be the authority figure of the group and join Travis in his attempts to find a cab. The streets are still crowded with traffic, packed cars and cabs and buses full of people starting to make their way home from the midnight festivities. It takes fifteen minutes of walking and waving before we're able to find a free cab, and even then, I hesitate.

"You know, I was really hoping for one of those vans," I admit. "I mean, the four of us would make the best *Cash Cab* team ever, right? Travis knows all the boring, science-y stuff, Ben's got half the library memorized, Jamie's full of useless historical facts—"

"And you'd just be along for the ride?" Ben asks.

"Uh, have you met me? Music and pop culture, dude. We'd have this in the bag."

"No, we wouldn't, because *Cash Cab* isn't even on the air anymore," Travis says, taking the seat up next to the driver. "Besides, it's not really random. They have a screening process to pick the contestants."

Jamie climbs into the backseat, and Ben goes after him, slouching down in his seat and propping his knees up against the divider between himself and the driver. The top of his head barely comes level with Jamie's shoulder. I reluctantly wedge myself in with them, even though a small part of me still thinks I could probably find the *Cash Cab* if I tried really, really hard. I yank the door shut, the driver pulls away from the curb, and the radio is turned down for about three seconds so that Jamie can give his address, then cranked back up.

We make it less than half a block before I glance over and realize that one of his hands is resting oh-so-casually on Ben's leg. Ben is staring at it in some strange combination of annoyance and arousal, which seems like it's standard operating procedure for them, so I don't say anything. Neither of them moves for three more blocks. Then the driver takes a left turn a bit too sharply, and Jamie's hand slips further up, curving more securely over Ben's thigh and absently beginning to trace the inseam of his jeans with the tips of his fingers. Ben's breathing hitches just enough to be audible.

I roll my eyes and dig my phone out of my pocket so that I can text Travis, *pretty sure there's about to be a handjob back here. trade places w/ me @ next stop light?* I can't hear the chime of his phone when he receives the message, but if I hunch down a little to peer at the side mirror of the cab, I can see the glow of his phone illuminating his smile.

Not a chance, he texts back. *Why the hell do you think I offered to sit up front?*

He glances over his shoulder at me, and laughs when I give him the finger. I'll be shocked if this cab ride takes any less than an hour in this traffic, so I steal Jamie's iPhone from the pocket of the coat I've somehow been relegated to carrying, and busy myself with playing *Temple Run* for a while.

It's another twenty-five minutes before I'm bored and curious enough to sneak a glance over at my friends, but they're not even *doing* anything. Sort of. The hard line of Ben's dick is clearly outlined in his skin-tight jeans, and Jamie's hand is... over it? Near it? His hand is definitely dick-adjacent, but he's not jerking him, or even rubbing him through the denim. He's still just carefully tracing delicate, teasing designs against the fabric with his fingertips. *Fingertip*, rather—just the middle one. It's barely a touch at all, but Ben's arms are crossed over his chest, and the hand that's tucked against the arm closer to me is trembling.

I take a peek at their faces. Ben's eyes are closed, the muscles around his jaw clenched tight, like he's gritting his teeth. Jamie's expression is utterly blank, though his head is turned in this direction, and he's

not even trying to disguise the fact that he's carefully observing Ben's reactions. When he realizes that I'm watching him, his eyes flicker to meet mine, and a slow, sly smile creeps across his face.

Usually, I'd return with a grin of my own, but my amusement with his antics is typically reserved for *strangers*. The idea of him tormenting one of my other best friends with half-touches isn't nearly as hilarious to me. Maybe that's why I whisper over Ben's head, "For fuck's sake, bro, just do it already."

"What are you talking about?" Jamie asks. I think he's aiming for innocent confusion, but his words come out more like a warning.

"Just jerk the guy off already," I say, making sure to keep my voice low enough so the cabbie can't hear. "For the past half hour, you've been torturing him like this. It's the world's most literal interpretation of the word 'cocktease.' The dude's so hard he looks like he's about to pass out—"

"Fuck off," Ben tries to say, but it mostly comes out as a breath, which doesn't do anything to disprove my point.

"I don't understand the point of dragging this out any longer," I say. "I like build-up and foreplay as much as the next guy, but this is just ridiculous. You've made your point, Jamie. You turned him on, congratulations. Now do something about it."

Jamie narrows his eyes at me. "Don't tell me how to play with my toys, Anderson. In case you're unaware of this, the midget's not the one complaining about this. He *likes* it. You can't expect me to believe that you've slept with him as many times as you have, and you've never noticed how much he loves a good tease. Now shut the fuck up, and *let me play*."

"If you're not going to take care of him, I am," I warn. The words are out before I can really consider what I'm saying, and okay, threatening to jerk Ben off in the back of a cab while Travis is just chilling in the front seat? Probably not my best idea. But it's so worth it for the way Jamie's upper lip curls back in something that's nearly a snarl.

"I fucking *dare* you."

Alright, wow, has he not met me?

Pausing only to flash him my brightest smile, I reach over, yank open each of the four buttons at the fly of Ben's borrowed jeans, and slip my hand under the waistband of his boxers, curling my fingers around his dick and starting to stroke him as much as the constricting denim will allow. He arches into my hand and exhales like his breath has been kicked out of him. Barely sparing a glance towards the front of the cab to make sure that neither Travis nor the driver are watching, I nudge Ben's head to the side so that I can fit my mouth over one of the marks Jamie must have bitten into his skin when they were up against the wall in the alley. He forces out, "H-holy fuck."

"I swear, if you make him come, I'm going to beat the hell out of you," Jamie hisses at me. "I have plans, and you're ruining them—"

"I'm just helping out my friend!" I whisper. "I mean, that's the first time I've ever seen somebody get blue balls while they were actually getting touched."

And then Jamie's hand is in Ben's jeans, too, curling around him so that our fingers are tangled together, stroking him off while we're practically holding fucking hands. It's an incredibly tight fit, but he manages to steady out the clumsy stutters in my rhythm that come from the use of my non-dominant hand.

"Oh my god, oh my god, what is *wrong* with you two?" Ben breathes out. His head is thrown back against the seat, his eyes are still closed, and if the cabbie happens to glance in the mirror, there's no way in hell he'll be able to mistake that expression for anything but what it is. "I thought the phone calls were bad

enough, I thought that having you two carry on a conversation while one of you was actually in me would be the height of your codependency, but *you are holding hands around my dick*. I don't even understand what's happening right now."

"Look at me," Jamie says quietly, then repeats it with more ice in his tone when Ben's initial reaction is to shake his head, eyes still shut. It's that coldness that finally gets Ben to swallow and turns his eyes towards Jamie. "You have three options here, McCutcheon. Option number one: you say stop, and G and I both fuck off for the rest of the night, and you won't have to do anything at all."

"Option number one fucking sucks," Ben says, voice cracking, and I laugh.

"Option number two," Jamie continues, "is that you can let Garen keep jerking you off. You can come all over a pair of my ex-girlfriend's jeans, in the backseat of a taxi cab. I'm sure he'll make it good for you, but that'll be all you get tonight, and you'll have to make it quick, because we're about five blocks away from my building right now."

I don't say anything, because I'm still jerking him off right now, but I'm not sure I really want to be. Travis must be aware of what we're doing by now—he's probably either glanced back or caught a snippet of conversation, or he just knows us all too well—and he hasn't said anything, so I figure I'm not in trouble. But this... this is my last night with him. It's the last chance I get to be with him until at least September, maybe ever. I don't really want to have some other guy's cum on my hands for any portion of this night, even if I really do think that this whole cab ride has been crazy unfair to Ben.

Finally, Jamie says, "Option number three: you can be patient for me, and once we get back to my apartment, I can make it very worth your while, like I'd been planning to, before the goddamn Handjob Police over here decided to get involved." He doesn't look away from Ben's eyes long enough to glare at me, but his tone makes it very clear he wants to. Instead, he twists our still-moving hands in a way that makes Ben's head tip back, but catches him by the jaw so that their gazes are still locked. "Call me old-fashioned," he murmurs, "but I think patience is an admirable quality in a man, and I believe in rewarding good behavior."

It's a good thing Jamie's still guiding the Creepy Threesome Handjob, because I've lost interest in this whole endeavor and am now texting Travis again. I can tell when I've been beaten, and Jamie's just given a hell of a pitch. If Ben's masochism has finally gone from *I like having my hair pulled* to *I like getting blue-balled by my own sex partners*, far be it from me to interfere any further with their weird little games.

our friends are creepy and awful, I type.

I watch the glow illuminate Travis' barely stifled smirk, then glance down after a moment to see that he has responded, *Yeah, either NYC cab drivers are immune to weirdness, or our driver is deaf, because I definitely heard all of that, and he hasn't blinked even once*.

Next to me, Ben takes a long, shaky breath before reaching down to tug both the hands out of his jeans. He carefully does up the buttons on his fly, slouches even lower in his seat, and rests his hands against his knees. Jamie mutters something that's either *good choice* or *good boy*, I can't really be sure. Either way, I make a show of throwing my hands up in surrender, because seriously. When given the choice between getting a handjob and *not* getting a handjob, what kind of idiot chooses the latter?

We pull up to the curb in front of Jamie's building, and I hand over the fare, tipping generously in case the driver heard any of what was going on in the backseat. The elevator ride up to Jamie's apartment is mostly quiet, but the moment we're inside, I say, "So, is this the part where we all pretend we don't know exactly who's going to end up in bed with whom?"

"Well, apparently it's the part where you're delusional enough to think that fucking around a couple times means that James and I are willing to share a bed, which we are most emphatically *not*," Ben says, shrugging out of Travis' hoodie and draping it over the back of one of the dining chairs.

Travis frowns and says to him, "If you two aren't okay with sharing a room, you and I can—"

"You're an idiot, and I'm not trying to cockblock anybody. You and Garen take the guest room, I'll sleep on the couch," Ben interrupts. "Besides, I don't want to share a bed with you, either. You kick like a donkey on PCP."

"He's fine, you just have to kind of... you know, octopus him into place," I say. When my words are met with blank expressions, I shift to balance on one foot so that I can wrap both arms and one of my legs around Travis. "See? Octopus. Once he can't move, he's fine."

"Ben's like, a hundred and fifteen pounds. I really don't think he's capable of holding me down," Travis says.

Jamie disappears down the hall for a moment before returning with two folded blankets and a pillow. He drops them on the couch, turns right back around, and heads for his room again, tossing off nothing more than, "Sleep well, y'all."

I blink. "That's it?"

"That's it," he confirms. I look around at Travis, who shrugs and heads for the guest room, and then at Ben, who is wordlessly retreating to the bathroom to change into the sweatpants he intends to sleep in.

I bolt after Jamie, chasing him into his bedroom. "What the fuck, man? You're *still* not going to get Ben off? He chose option number three! He chose—"

"And it seems as if I chose a fucking idiot for my best friend," Jamie says. He shoves me up against his closet door, pinning me in place with his hips and—okay, wow, his huge erection. As if I could have possibly missed this, he shakes me by my shoulders and says hoarsely, "I'm hard as a fucking rock, Garen. I'm so turned on, I can barely *speak*. Playing these games, making him wait, dragging it all out? It's fun, for both of us. I don't have the faintest idea what in the hell I'm doing, but I know that I like it, and I know he does, too. You're right; he chose option three. He chose to be patient. So I'm going to make him wait for a little bit. You're going to go to the guest room, and in a while, I'm going to go back out to the living room, and we're *both* going to have hours of unbelievable, raunchy, screaming sex. Have I made myself clear?"

"Crystal," I sigh. "I mean, you and Ben have fucked *twice*, and Travis and Ben have fucked *twice*, and your cousin and Ben fucked *twice*, and Ben and I have fucked somewhere in the realm of *fifty* times, but hey, if you think you know what gets him off better than I do, far be it from me to interfere."

Jamie rolls his eyes, but accepts my goodnight kiss and lets me steal a pair of his Patton Military Academy Lacrosse Team sweatpants to sleep in.

By the time I enter the guest room, Travis has already taken off his jeans and hat, and is lying on the bed in just his t-shirt and boxers. He watches me remove my shirt, boots, and jeans, then pull on the sweatpants. He pulls me onto the bed, dragging a hand through my hair to break up the hairspray holding my spikes in place.

"I've just been warned that Jamie intends to have, and I quote, 'raunchy, screaming sex' on the other side of that wall," I point to the wall separating us from the living room. "So, be prepared for that."

Travis smiles and brushes a kiss over my jaw. "Wanna see if we can drown them out?"

It's kind of the perfect response. That shouldn't surprise me—he's kind of the perfect guy. And I want so much to say yes, to get my hands on him, to take advantage of these last nine or so hours before we're over. I'm an idiot if I turn him down tonight. But it's easier, better, more *right* to just tuck myself against his

side and center my palm on his chest, tangle our legs together and let him wrap an arm around my shoulders, bury my face against his neck and breathe.

"No," I say. "This is good."

"Okay," he says softly, raking his fingers through my hair over and over. "Goodnight, G."

I close my eyes.

Chapter Twenty-Two: Bonus Scene

Jamie Goldwyn

It's as difficult to tease as it is to be teased. That's the thing that Garen doesn't understand. Right now, I'd like nothing more than to be out there in the living room, doing as many horrific, unspeakable things to the midget as I can manage to accomplish in one night, but I can't, because it's not time for that yet. I'm beginning to realize that sex with Ben McCutcheon is so much more complicated than I'd anticipated, not because he expects some eyeroll-inducing level of commitment I'd be disinclined to give him, but because there are parts of him that are just... different. What I'm beginning to realize is that he wants things, likes things, *needs* things that other people don't. He wants whispers that sound like curses and kisses that feel like bites. He likes to be denied and tested and pushed to the very edge of what he can take. But perhaps more than anything else, he needs to be *handled*. He needs to be given orders, pressed into position, held down, tied up, punished when he does something wrong, and praised with sugar-sweet words when he does something almost unbearably good.

And, of course, he wants, and likes, and needs to be teased.

If only to keep myself occupied, I spend a few minutes picking up my room, fixing all the things Garen has managed to fuck up in the few hours he's been here. Three years of sharing a dormitory room have taught him not to mess around with my clothing, my books, my computer—anything that I've taken the time to organize properly—but it apparently hasn't taught him to clean up his own goddamn mess. In all fairness to him, however, that's an overall theme of his life, and I suppose I should give him points for consistency.

I pick up both of the coats he carried in from the cab and then saw fit to dump on my floor. And really, what sort of person just throws someone else's belongings around? I brush off my coat and hang it up in my closet, then repeat the brush-off with his leather jacket before draping it over the back of my desk chair. My own things are already situated in their proper places, because unlike my best friend, I'm an adult.

With nothing left to fix, I settle myself into my desk chair so that I can open my computer and click lazily through the few emails I've received since this afternoon. Nothing there is enough to hold my attention, not when I know that there's a body on my sofa that's craving to be touched. My dick is uncomfortably hard in my sleep pants, but when I check the time, it's only three nineteen. Barely more than half an hour has passed, and it's been close to long enough, but not quite. I resolve to go at three thirty-two, when it's been exactly forty-five minutes—enough time for him to be desperate and aching. Enough time for him to have earned a reward, if he's managed to last this long without giving up on me and deciding to jerk off or go to sleep instead of waiting.

At three twenty-eight, I close out of the game of Solitaire I've been screwing around with. I stand, stretch, contemplate sitting back down, but mostly just stare at the clock. My hands are almost twitching, for want of touching someone else's skin. All I can say is that this kid had better appreciate the restraint it takes for me to stay here and drag this out in the way I know—without knowing *how* I know—he wants me to. At three thirty, I open my nightstand drawer and grab a bottle of slick and, as an afterthought, a couple of condoms, just in case he suddenly gets a bug up his ass and decides he doesn't like going bareback anymore. I slip the supplies into the pocket of my pants and move to stand in front of the door, though my eyes never leave the clock. I wait, my spine perfectly straight, my hands stuffed into my pockets.

The clock clicks over to three thirty-two, and I open my door. The apartment is utterly silent. I pass the guest room, but hear no voices, no moans, no crashing of the headboard against the wall. I almost laugh; a few years ago, the idea of Garen spending the night with his lover but not having sex would have floored me. Since he first got involved with Travis, however, I've had to reevaluate my expectations of his behavior. I continue down the hallway and stop just inside the living room, slipping my hands into my pockets and leaning my shoulder against the wall.

Ben is awake, not even pretending to be otherwise. He's spread out over the couch, blankets still folded and stacked on the edge of the coffee table. The lamp on the end table behind the couch arm he's using as a pillow is turned on, illuminating the book he's reading, but casting his face into shadow. I can't tell if he's noticed me, but I'm going to assume that he has; his body is too tense for him to think he's alone.

"What are you reading?" I ask.

Rather than simply answering, or angling the cover towards me so that I can see for myself, he flips to the next page and reads aloud, *"When you go out with a drunk, you'll notice how a drunk fills your glass so he can empty his own. As long as you're drinking, drinking is okay. Two's company. Drinking is fun. If there's a bottle, even if your glass isn't empty, a drunk, he'll pour a little in your glass before he fills his own. This only looks like generosity."*

Of all the paragraphs in that entire novel, I'm not sure if it's coincidence or cruelty that makes him read me something I'm already aware of. Three and a half years with Garen have taught me exactly what drinking with a drunk is like, and the last six months have given me a nice glimpse of the guilt I'm sure I'll always feel for not putting a stop to it. I don't need a reminder of this right now. I cross the room and nudge Ben's legs apart so that I can climb onto the couch and kneel between them. "Sounds like a delightful read."

"I don't like happy books. They bore me," he says. "Same goes for happy people."

"Could've guessed that from your taste in boyfriends," I reply, tilting my head towards the guest room.

Ben turns to the next page. "You can feel free to get the fuck off me any time now. I'm not going to have sex with you."

"Aren't you?" I say mildly, skimming a hand up his thigh. He catches me by the wrist before I can even reach his hip. Frowning, I shake him off and lean over him to snatch a coaster from the stack on the end table. I take his book from him, slip the coaster between the pages to mark his place, and set it down on the coffee table. He glares up at me, but voices no protest. I hook my hands under his slightly bent knees and yank him closer; his head slips off the armrest and onto the cushions. He looks good like this, flat on his back and staring up at me, but I'm not about to tell him so. At least, not aloud. I slip my fingertips under the hem of his shirt and push it slowly upward as I say, "I was under the impression that you understood that, when I said 'be patient and you'll be rewarded,' what I *meant* was that I wanted you to wait for me out here and think of all the things you want me to do to you. Then, once I was sure you were desperately, painfully hard, I'd come out here and fuck you into the floor. Or let you fuck me, whichever struck my fancy at the time." His shirt is tucked right up under his arms, baring his chest and all the perfectly-shaped marks my teeth left in the alley. I lean down to make another, and the movement nudges my stomach against the hardness in his sleep pants. "And I see that you've followed at least part of my plan."

"I might have followed all of it, if you hadn't left me someplace where I've got a perfect view of a picture of you and your girlfriend," he says, jerking his head towards the entertainment unit that holds my television and most of my books.

Someone had taken a photograph of Rachael and me at a party a few weeks ago, and for some baffling reason, she'd thought that I would appreciate receiving a silver-framed copy of it as a Christmas present. I didn't appreciate it, and every time I look at the delicate, rounded corners of the frame, I find myself increasingly annoyed at how blatantly it clashes with all the sharp edges and clean lines of the rest of my decor. But the rest of my Christmas present had involved her giving me a lapdance while wearing a red satin negligee, and I have extremely high hopes for a repeat performance on Valentine's Day, so I have dutifully allowed the frame to retain a residence on the middle shelf of the entertainment unit.

I roll my eyes back towards Ben. "Don't you dare tell me you're jealous."

He sneers. "Don't flatter yourself, asshole. I'm disgusted."

"Yes, you certainly seem to be," I say, bracing my hands against his shoulders to pin him in place while I slowly grind down against him once more. He is the king of mixed signals, fisting his hands around my shirt to push me away even as he cants his hips up to meet mine, biting back what I'm sure is equal parts an admonishment and a moan. I *like* how much he dislikes me, but I can't make myself touch any other part of him until I'm sure he's more willing. I flick my eyes towards the framed photograph and say, "You know she doesn't mind. She's said as much right in front of you."

"That was a month ago," he says. "She might have reconsidered her position on the issue."

"She hasn't," I say. He doesn't look reassured, and he doesn't look as if he plans to let me touch him yet. I sigh. "What do you want from me? Would you like me to just go back to bed? Or would you like me to text her so that she can tell you herself?" He arches a brow at me, a plain request for me to do just that. Rolling my eyes and praying for patience, I heave myself off him and drag him upright. "My phone's in my room. Come on."

He allows me to tow him down the hall by the front of his shirt, though he wriggles free the moment we've crossed the threshold to my bedroom. I snatch my iPhone off the nightstand and open a new message to Rachael, tapping out the words, *The midget is standing next to my bed. I would prefer for him to be lying in it, or possibly bending over it. He is withholding consent until he receives confirmation of your approval. Please respond at your earliest convenience.* As proof that I've really asked her, I step too far into Ben's space and turn the screen to face him as soon as the message has sent. His brow creases.

"Do you always speak to her so formally?" he asks.

"How I speak to my other lovers is none of your business," I say, tossing the phone onto my bed.

He slumps back against the door, shutting it with a click, and says, "I'd really appreciate it if you could phrase that differently." His words make no sense; I gesture for him to clarify. "How you speak to your 'other lovers.' I'm not—that's not what I am. Don't say it like that. I'm not your goddamn lover."

Despite his words, he doesn't resist when I close the small amount of distance between us to align my body with his. He doesn't resist when I curve a hand over his jaw and tip his head back. I doubt he would resist anything I did to him now, even though his instincts seem to always be screaming at him to deny me. All I do is cock my head to the side, smile ever so slightly, and say, for the second time tonight, "Aren't you?"

He opens his mouth to speak, but he's cut off by my phone chiming with Rachael's reply. My hand is still brushing over his jaw; I let it drop to his throat, curling over it for a brief second. He had let me hold him in place like this in the alley earlier tonight, let me choke the hell out of him in the car a few weeks ago. Feeling his pulse fluttering, *quicken*ing under my fingers is enough to send another spark of desire through me. To clear my head—and, of course, to get my answer—I turn, stride across the room, and fling myself down onto the edge of the bed, sweeping a hand over my sheets to locate the phone.

I read aloud, "*That's fine, but tonight's the last night, okay? I don't want him to become a habit, I think three is a good cut-off number. Have fun, I'll text you tomorrow.*" And then she's included a little heart—"

It might actually be two hearts, but I don't have a chance to double-check before Ben knocks my phone right out of my hand, onto the floor, and crawls into my lap, bracketing my hips with his knees. The rebuke I attempt to voice doesn't actually make it past my lips, because his mouth is already there to catch it, swallowing any sound I try to make. For a moment, I'm too stunned to move. This is the first time we've kissed, not counting that biting, humiliating *mistake* I'd been too turned on to stop myself from making in Garen's car. So, technically, I suppose it's just the first time we've kissed without his response being to throw himself out of a vehicle and into the snow in a shoeless panic immediately afterward.

To prevent him from attempting to repeat that graceless reaction, I wind an arm around his waist to hold

him in place as I press up against him. Rather than attempt to escape, he meets my thrusts with his own, grinding down onto my lap like his very life depends on it. Truthfully, he's a better kisser than I had expected him to be, though I'm not sure if that's because he's actually skilled, or simply because I tend to expect the worst of him, no matter the subject. It's a dangerous train of thought to let myself entertain; I cover it by twisting around to shove him flat onto his back on the bed. He goes with the motion and shoves the hem of my shirt up, laughs when I strip it off in reply. "God, you're so fucking easy."

I glare down at him, careful to maintain eye contact so that he might not notice my shaking my shirt out and giving it a quick fold before I toss it off to the side; my bedfellows always seem to make fun of me for that, if they notice, though I still don't understand why. Shirt out of the way, I hitch one of Ben's legs up over my hip and do my best to crush him with my weight as I duck down to sink my teeth into his throat. He moans, bucks up against me, and I try to be certain that he can feel my smirk against his skin.

"Doesn't seem like you've got much room to talk, does it?" I say. He shoves me halfway off him, and I smack his hand aside. "If you're quite fucking finished, you can take yours off as well."

He exaggerates an eyeroll at me, but obeys regardless. This is the third time I've seen him stripped of a shirt, and the scars on his arms still throw me. I do my best not to look at them, focusing instead on the bites on his chest. I smooth a hand over them, admiring them, counting them. He hisses when I press my fingertips against one of the darker ones, and I smile. "That hurt?"

"Yeah," he says, and, in the same breath, "Feels good."

"Turn over," I say.

His eyebrows twitch upward. "When did I agree to let you top?"

"Please, McCutcheon. We both prefer getting fucked, and we both know you were hoping I'd offer to top anyway," I say. He grins, not even bothering to deny it. Smiles look strange on his face, like they're too infrequent to belong. I shove at his shoulder to get him to turn onto his front so I won't have to look at him anymore. "Besides, not going to fuck you. Not yet, anyway. I'm just admiring these pretty marks you've got on you, and it occurs to me..." I curl my fingers just enough to dig my nails into his skin, not scratching, just hurting enough to make him inhale shakily. I smile. "I haven't done a damned thing to your back just yet."

He shoves me off of him so that he can roll over, tossing over his shoulder, "Well, get to it, then."

He's eager as hell, and nothing gives me joy like denying him; I take my time running a fingertip along the drawstring of his sweatpants, hooking my thumbs over the waistband and slowly peeling them off him. He lifts up just enough for me to pull them completely off, then squirms a little when I sling a leg over him so that I'm sitting back comfortably on his thighs.

"This would be more interesting if we were in Savannah right now," I say.

"Is this some Georgia version of 'everything's bigger in Texas'? Because it doesn't really roll off the tongue in the same—"

"If we were in Savannah, at my family's house, I could take you out to my stables and tie you to the wall in my tack room with a set of reins," I say, doing my best to keep my voice even and conversational. "Maybe get a bit in your mouth so you'll finally shut the fuck up."

He has gone completely still underneath me. He doesn't speak, but I can be patient. Besides, it's almost funny to watch him try not to react to my words, to hear how much effort it takes for him to maintain that dry, bored tone when he finally swallows and says, "Should I assume that you'd be wearing some sort of assless chaps in this scenario?"

That's enough to win a laugh from me. "I did show jumping, not rodeo, so no, there are no chaps." I lean down and nip the back of his neck, though he's so goddamn skinny that it takes a lot of effort to get a little pinch of skin between my teeth. He lets his head roll forward, exposing more of his neck for me to bite, but I've already moved on, slowly making my way down his spine. After a few inches of progress, I say, "There would be riding breeches, though." Another pause, another bite. "You know, the tan ones that are practically skintight?" Bite. I'm halfway down his back now. "Riding boots, too." Further and further down I go. "Mine are tall, almost to the knee." Another inch, and now I'm at the small of his back. "Black leather."

I lean back, fully intending to turn him over so that I can see his face, his cock, his *reaction*, but he's lying so perfectly still, and all at once, I'm overcome with the impulse to do something that will provoke the sort of response he won't be able to hide. He is hungry for the sting of another bite, but I want to see what he looks like when he's *starved*. I want another glimpse of what he looks like when he starts to come undone. I settle one palm in the small of his back to brace either him or myself—I have no idea which—and bring the other down hard against his ass. I don't know which sound is loudest in the relative silence of the room: the slap itself, the stuttering gasp he lets out, or the pulsing of blood in my ears.

"Now might be a good time for me to mention," I say, squeezing my eyes shut in the hope that it might stave off some of the embarrassment I'm feeling over the plainly audible hoarseness in my voice, "that there is also a riding crop involved in this scenario."

Neither of us moves; I can't even *breathe*, and I find myself thankful for the fact that he's still facedown and unable to see my expression, because I have no idea what it might be revealing, and I *hate* that. I hate not knowing. I hate not being in control. All I can do now is wait and see if I've somehow misread this situation, taken things too far. He likes pain, but does he like being *slapped*? Likes having his hair pulled, likes being bitten and scratched, likes being choked, likes restraints, but unless I've got a much kinkier cousin than I ever realized, this must be the first time anyone's ever held him down on a bed and spanked him. Travis isn't the type; Garen would never hit someone he was sleeping with, and Ben would never ask him to.

Finally, I hear him moving, and my eyes snap open again. He tips his head forward again to bare his neck, not in hope of receiving another bite, but in a clear act of submission. "Again," he breathes, barely audible with his face still aimed at the pillow. "Do that again."

My hand is already raised by the time I realize that instant obedience would be a mistake. I force myself to freeze. I need to keep control of this situation, and there's only one way I know how to do that right now. I ask, "How many times?"

"I don't care," he snaps, flinging a hand behind himself and digging his fingers into my hip, fumbling over and downward until he can get beneath the waistband of my pajamas and wrap his hand around my aching cock. "Until your fucking hand is numb. As many times as you can stand."

"Put your hands on the bed, level with your shoulders," I say coldly. I refuse to be the one who falls apart first, and he already has me starting to unravel. He doesn't stop stroking me until I grab his forearm and drag him away. "I'm going to choose to believe that you didn't hear me. Because if you did hear me, but intentionally ignored me, that would be a problem."

"I'm sorry," he says immediately. I can't remember ever hearing him say that to me before; I'm not sure which of us is more surprised by it. There's no chance for me to dwell on that, though, because he flattens his palms to the mattress, and I'm taken aback by how *good* he looks, arms bent like I'd asked, whole body taut with anticipation.

"Nine times," I say, not knowing where the number comes from, but liking it anyway. It's a nice, square number. It fits. "I'm going to hit you three times for giving me that greedy, barbaric answer when I asked how many you wanted. Three times for not listening to me when I told you to move. And three times for grabbing at my cock like a desperate slut. Is that fair?"

He nods into the mattress and says, "That's perfect."

"Not quite," I admit, because square numbers are nice, but even ones are *better*. I stretch out over him, bracing an elbow on the mattress above his shoulder so that I might duck down and brush my lips over his ear as I say quietly, "Let's stick with that number, though. Three. Keep it in mind, because by the time you've gotten your last slap, that's the number of fingers I intend to be fucking you with."

He nods again, but doesn't speak. Can't speak, perhaps.

I straighten up and shift off of him, nudging his legs apart so that I can kneel between them properly. The lubricant and the condom are still in my pocket from earlier; I flick the condom towards the pillow, because Ben hasn't requested it, but he might, later. I palm his ass for a moment, spreading him a little more to drip some of the lube over his opening. He shudders at the cold, but his discomfort with the temperature isn't really my problem, so I ignore it, replace the cap on the bottle, and drop it next to his knee. My middle finger drifts lazily down between his cheeks, rubbing over his hole but not yet pushing inside, just applying a little pressure. "If you want to back out, you should do so now, because I'm not going to be gentle, and I'm not going to start slowly," I say. "This is going to hurt."

He twists to look at me over his shoulder, eyes on fire, and says, "Promise?"

And I hit him as hard as I can.

He jerks back into my touch, his movement forcing the tip of my finger into him, though I'm not sure that was his intention. His head has snapped back around so that his face is buried in my sheets, and I can see that his fingers are clenched tight around the comforter. My palm stings from the contact, and when I lift my hand, there's a pink imprint of it on his skin right where I've struck him. It might be the prettiest thing I've ever seen.

"Again," I say, and it is not by any means a question, but he nods anyway. My next slap falls to the other cheek and earns another thrust backward, and I respond with a third slap before he can prepare himself for it. "Stay *still*. Or you'll get another three."

"That's the most counterproductive threat I've ever heard," he breathes. "Come on, do it again, I want--*oh*," he trails off as I press my finger the rest of the way into him. That holds my attention for several long, torturous minutes; I don't want to bring him off like this, but I don't want him to be able to anticipate the strikes, either. That would ruin all my fun. It would take away my control.

He's so tight—I'd probably think he was still a goddamn virgin, if I hadn't already fucked him myself—that I have to add another generous helping of lube to work even a second finger into him. I time my next slap to coincide with the exact moment I curve my fingers to touch him right where he needs me to, then watch him go rigid as the pleasure/pain sends sparks up his spine. Part of me hopes that whatever he is feeling will distract him from the way I have shifted to rut up against the back of his thigh, but the rest of me couldn't care less if he notices.

"In the cab, you said you could be patient for me. Did you mean it?" I ask. He nods jerkily. Fifth slap. "Use your fucking words, McCutcheon. Everyone's always telling me how good you are with them, so come on. Speak."

His words tumble out all at once. "I meant it. I did. I'm patient, I can be patient."

"Good," I say, unable to find a good reason not to lean down and kiss the back of his trembling shoulder, "because when I fuck you, I want you to wait to come until I give you permission to do so."

"Oh, fuck off, no," he says, then makes a noise of protest when I immediately pull both fingers out of him and sit back on my heels. "No, no, no, don't. Please, come back, I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what?" I ask, though I couldn't give a fuck what he says in response. I'm too busy flicking the bottle of lube back open and slicking up my fingers some more. The liquid is so silky against my skin that I can't stop myself from pushing off my sleep pants and sneaking a few languid strokes of my cock, still making sure not to touch any part of Ben.

He pushes back towards me, like he's hoping that my fingers are just out of reach and he'll be able to get them back inside if he tries hard enough. Or like he's hoping that moving around too much will get him slapped again. When my only response is to continue working my own cock, he finally tips his head forward again and says, "For telling you to fuck off."

"Speak in complete sentences, my little English major," I say, and it's as if my whole body is buzzing with power when he says quietly, *obediently*, "I'm sorry for telling you to fuck off."

I stretch out over him, even though it means that I'm pressed right up against his ass, even though it's so, so tempting to just push inside before he's received all nine of the slaps he has earned and asked for. He shoves back against me eagerly, and I bite down on the back of his neck until he goes still. I hook my chin over his shoulder so that my mouth is next to his jaw when I murmur, "Are you going to hold off until I tell you it's okay for you to come, then?"

Before I can move out of reach, one of his hands comes up to tangle in my hair, anchoring me in place as he turns his head to kiss me over his shoulder. It's a sloppier kiss than those we've had earlier in the night, more desperate, more purposeful. I bite down on his bottom lip, and he shudders before pulling back just enough to say, "I will do whatever the hell you want me to, as long as you stop touching yourself and go back to touching me instead."

"Greedy little bitch," I chastise him, but regardless of my words, I shift my hand around to push back into him, now with three fingers. It's so impossibly tight that, at first, I can only get them in about halfway. He groans and moves in to kiss me again, presumably to show his approval, but I lean out of reach, because there is a much more pressing matter at hand. My dick is unbearably hard, leaking precome against the curve of his ass, and I'd like to get to fuck him sometime tonight. I pour more lube onto the exposed halves of my fingers and carefully, methodically work them the rest of the way into him. When I'm in up to my last knuckle, I give him his sixth slap. I vary the placement of the seventh and eighth, because that's half the thrill—him not knowing where or when they'll come, and twitching in surprise when they do.

"Good Lord, I hope you can still feel this later today, when you're driving yourself back home," I say quietly, dragging my nails over the pinked flesh. "Two hours sitting in that van, feeling this sting on your skin and remembering exactly what I did to you to put it there. I bet you'll be rock-hard all the way back to Connecticut. Do you think you'll still have the marks when you wake up? I hope you do. God, I really fucking hope you do, I told you, your skin looks so fucking gorgeous when it's marked up like this."

He whimpers. This is bad. I can feel myself starting to lose it, falling too far into this moment, and I need to fix that, get my head on straight. Get back the upper hand. I twitch my fingers against the spot inside him that makes him go crazy and say, "One more. Do you want it?" He nods frantically. "Ask me for it."

"Please hit me again," he says.

The final slap is as hard as the first one. He shoves back into it and lets out a wild, strangled noise that shakes me in ways I hadn't planned for. I fumble for the lube with one hand, spilling it onto my cock even though there's already so much of it that more must be unnecessary, and tug impatiently at his hip with the other hand. "Get up on your knees, now."

He scrambles up onto his hands and knees, eager as anything, and I fit my hands against his waist, but don't push inside just yet. He huffs out a frustrated gust of air and snaps, "Is there a reason you're just sitting there like a goddamn moron?"

I reach past him and pluck the condom off the pillow, waving it just within his line of sight. "Do you want

me to use this? Or do you not give a damn?"

That's enough to put a halt to his whorish, desperate thrusts backward; he looks over his shoulder at me. "Are you still getting tested regularly enough to be sure you're clean?"

"Yes. And I don't go bare with anyone but you." I regret the words immediately. Somehow, I've managed to make it sound as if this matters—as if he matters, and he doesn't. To reassure both of us, I work my expression into a smirk, a sneer, whatever this ugly twist of my mouth is meant to be, and add, "You're the only person I know who's dumb enough to want me to do it without a condom. And it feels a little illogical to suddenly insist that we use one for the last time we do this, considering we haven't before."

"If you give me anything, I will cut your balls off," he warns. "And then I'll tell Garen, and he'll beat the shit out of you. You know he will."

I make a show of rolling my eyes, but yes, Garen *would* break at least one of my bones if I was responsible for perfect, pious Ben contracting a disease. He doesn't look reassured. I take myself in hand and rub the tip of my cock over his hole. It's a glorious tease of a touch, and for half a second, I wonder if I could get myself to come from this alone, from thrusting against his bare, slicked-up ass and running my hands over skin that's been warmed by blood rising to the surface under my strikes. But then his hips grind back once more at exactly the right moment to press the head inside, and he groans out, "God, fuck, just do it, okay? I believe you, I trust you, do whatever you want to me—"

Those words are enough to break me. He shoves back just as I'm pressing forward, and I sink into the tight, slick heat of him in one fine movement. I'm unable to hold back a cry that I'm sure must wake Garen and Travis in the next room, but Ben makes no attempt to silence me, too busy babbling a stream of curses under his breath. He drops to brace his weight on one elbow so that he can reach for his cock, but I make a disapproving noise and catch his wrists. "Not just yet, sweetheart. Might let you do that a bit later, but right now, I just want you to focus on this. Tell me how it feels." He lets out a moan that sure as hell does not count as an answer, and I pull back so that only the very tip of my cock is left in him, dig my nails into his skin and drag them up the length of his spine until I can reach his hair. I knot both hands in it and yank, using that force to thrust back into him. Thankfully, I don't think he can hear my appreciative groan over the pitiful whine he lets out at that. I grit my teeth and say, "I swear to God, McCutcheon, if you don't start answering me when I speak to you, I'm not going to fuck you anymore. Doesn't matter to me—I could call any one of half a dozen people, have someone here in ten minutes to get me off, but what about you? What would you do? Finger yourself in my living room? That's the only option you'll have, if you don't—"

"Good," he chokes out, rocking back hard against me. "Feels really good. I hate you so much that sometimes just *hearing* your voice makes me feel like I'm going to be sick, hate you so much that looking at you drives me *insane*, but my god, you've got a fucking perfect cock. Just big enough to hurt like—"

"—like you need it to," I supply, and he nods jerkily.

"*Exactly*. God. Can you—" He breaks off without finishing, but he's arching his back, trying to twist into my thrusts in a way that speaks of something less than satisfaction. I let one of my hands slip from his hair to press between his shoulder blades, shoving his upper half down onto the mattress and driving into him at a new angle that makes him shudder. That is how it goes on, both of us shoving and thrusting and grinding at each other, movements desperate to the point of brutality. I'm shocked that I last even as long as I do—I can drag my encounters out for ages, but I generally prefer not to; someone who sleeps with as many people as I do has a need for a certain degree of efficiency. When I feel myself getting close, I give another quick tug to the midget's hair to be certain I have his attention.

"You remember what you agreed to, don't you?" I say. "You're not going to come until I tell you that it's—"

"I know. I know, I know, fuck, I'm going to punch you in the mouth the second I've gotten off," he snaps. I notice he's got a hand wedged under himself, and for a moment, I think he's stroking himself off, even

though I explicitly told him not to. I'm opening my mouth to yell at him for it when I realize that he's not jerking off; he's squeezing down hard on the base of his cock, doing everything he can to hold off his own orgasm.

That's enough for me.

"Turn over," I order, and he obeys instantly. He moves as if to lie on his back, but I throw an arm around his shoulders, keeping him upright so that I can kiss him roughly, sloppily, while I stroke myself. It only takes a few more pulls before I'm coming in long spurts over his stomach, his cock, the tops of his thighs. He breaks off the kiss and drops his forehead to my shoulder to watch me push shakily into my fist, but I only allow him a few moments of the view before I sit back and beckon him in. "Come here. Still going to be hard for another minute or so, and it'd be a shame to waste it."

"*Waste it?* It's a hard-on, not food for the fucking homeless—"

I drag him onto my lap, then drag my palm over the streaks of cum I've just left on his stomach. He jolts at the touch, but it's nothing compared to the way he shivers when I smear the stickiness over his cock like it's lube and begin to work him over. I press a hard, closed-mouthed kiss to his lips, and say, "Ride me."

He lines me up with his ass and sinks down onto me again, and it feels good, but it's the sort of too good that borders on painful. That sparks a whole new line of thought in me—I wonder how close I could get him to coming without ever letting him do so; I wonder if how much he'd let me edge him before he couldn't take it anymore. Or, perhaps I could do the opposite, spread him out on my bed and spend an entire afternoon getting him off over and over, as many times as I possibly could, until he was shaking and gasping and just *couldn't* anymore, until it stopped feeling good. He'd let me, too, I think, I *hope*. Now, he shoves me flat onto my back, and all I can do is stare up at him, a bit stunned.

The truth is, it's usually so hard for me to find Ben attractive. His bright blue eyes can be mildly disarming, and that mouth of his is distracting as all hell, but he is pale and small, and tries to look even smaller. When he stands, he shoves his hands in his pockets and hunches his shoulders like he's hoping to disappear into himself, and when he sits, he nearly always draws his legs up to his chest, curling himself into a ball like a child would. He moves through his life like he's apologizing for existing, like he thinks he has no right to be here, and he's so very sorry for intruding. Most of his friends seem to think it's endearing, but I think it's *pathetic*, because how could I ever respect someone who's so incapable of respecting himself?

But then I see him like this. I see him with his spine straight, his head thrown back. I see his legs spread wide, one hand braced against my chest as he fucks himself on my cock, the other hand raking his dark hair back from his forehead, unafraid of taking up space. I see him finally seeming his proper age under that stubble, his pupils blown, his lips parted and quirked up into a barely-present half-smile. I see him looking open and raw and more sure of himself and his movements than he ever is when clothed.

I see him like this, and he is fucking *radiant*.

"Come," I say, sitting up so suddenly that he has no time to move back before I'm right there kissing him. "Now."

It's not immediate, but nearly—a few more strokes, one more sharp tug of his hair, and then he comes, fingers laced together at the nape of my neck, mouth open against mine, but not quite kissing. The moment he stops spurting against my stomach, I have to pull him off of my now much too oversensitive cock. He is too sex-stupid to be of any real use in moving himself properly, so I dump him on the bed next to me. For a minute, we both just lie there, staring at the ceiling and breathing hard, neither of us saying a word.

I contemplate asking him if he'd like to spend the rest of the night in my bed, rather than on the couch. It's not something I particularly want, but it seems like it would be the gentlemanly thing to do. But just as I'm

opening my mouth to speak, he stretches out a trembling hand towards his discarded shirt and tugs it back on. It strikes me as funny that he's more interested in covering up his top half than his bottom half, but then I realize that it's not his chest he's worried about; it's his arms. He wriggles back into his boxers and sweatpants, all without meeting my eyes. I still haven't moved a muscle.

"I'm going to, uh—go back to the couch," he mutters. "See you in the morning."

It's a sudden, depressing transition back to the boy with the hunched shoulders, the boy who feels guilty for breathing, the boy I can't stand. I don't even consider trying to stop him when he heads for the door, because this shame-faced, apologetic boy looks absolutely nothing like the man I just slept with. That man earned his place in my bed, and this boy... truly just needs to get the fuck out of my face.

Chapter Twenty-Three

“The true New Yorker secretly believes that people living anywhere else have to be, in some sense, kidding.” –John Updike

111 days sober

Maybe it's just because we went to sleep so late, but it feels unbearably early when Travis' phone alarm starts chirping from the nightstand. He rolls over to shut it off, leaving my side cold where he has shifted away. The second he returns, I squirm closer, stifling my yawn against his shoulder. “Why'd you set the alarm?”

“Honestly, I figured you'd sleep through it. I'm going to go take a shower and see if I can convince Ben to help me cook some breakfast,” he says quietly, pressing a kiss to my hair. “I'll wake you again when food's ready. That okay?”

I shake my head. “No, 's dumb. Go back to sleep for like, four more hours, and I'll blow you when we wake up for real.”

He laughs. “In four more hours, it'll be two in the afternoon. We need to get to the new place as soon after twelve as possible, because it'll take forever to unload the truck and put the furniture together, and I doubt Ben wants to be heading back to Connecticut in the middle of the night.”

I'm about to argue with him when the guest room door opens and Jamie slips inside. I have to stifle a grin at the double-take Travis does when he sees how uncharacteristically disheveled Jamie looks in the mornings—sweatpants and a Lamb of God t-shirt that used to be Alex's, glasses instead of contact lenses, and the faint red scratches of beard burn along his jaw and down his neck. Relieved to find us awake, he says, “Finally. I've been awake since eight thirty, and I'm starving, but I'm not going out to the kitchen alone, if it means interacting with the troll sleeping on my couch.”

Travis blinks at him and echoes, “Couch? Ben didn't—I figured he would've slept in your room, considering the uh, wonderful noises we were privy to last night.”

“Seriously, that was ridiculous,” I say, lifting my head to give him the biggest leer I can manage while still half-asleep. “I honestly couldn't tell if you were fucking or beating the shit out of each other.”

“Bit of both, and it was lovely, but it's morning now, which means we hate one another again. Keep up, boys,” Jamie says.

I sigh and offer up one limp arm so that he can haul me out of the bed. “You are the actual worst. And if he refuses to cook, I'm beating the shit out of you and then going back to bed while you go out to bring me back a huge stack of waffles from... somewhere. I don't even care where.”

Jamie makes an impatient, sweeping gesture with his hand, like he's trying to dismiss my words as much as possible. Travis stretches and rolls out of bed after me, but the moment we've stepped into the hall, he turns towards the bathroom and says, “I'm going to stick with my plan to shower. But if Ben does agree to make food, I want some, too.”

Ben isn't in a state to agree to much of anything; he's still dead to the world, facedown on the couch with the blankets twisted around his motionless body. I trudge over to him and raise one leg just high enough to bring my knee down on the small of his back. He grunts, tries to wriggle free, and mutters a mostly unintelligible half-sentence that probably amounts to, “Get away from me.”

“Make me breakfast?” I say, hitching the end of the sentence even though it's not really a question.

“I'm not your fucking mom, you can't just wake me up and expect me to cook for you,” he says. “Stop

touching my back. It hurts, and not in a good way.”

I shoot Jamie an accusatory look, which he pretends not to see. I shift my knee off Ben’s back and onto the couch cushion on his far side so that I can make a seat out of the back of his thighs. He makes a noise like an angry cat, and I tug at the hem of his shirt. “What’s wrong with your back? More scratches?”

“Bit me,” he says.

I frown. “This has got to be the first time I’ve ever seen you tired enough to wreck the grammar of a sentence that badly. Either you meant to say ‘bite me,’ or there were supposed to be more words in that sentence.”

Ben heaves a sigh so deep that his whole body sags further into the cushions, jostling me where I’m still perched on his legs, then flings an arm back to shove his shirt halfway up his spine, exposing a line of evenly-spaced bruises in the shape of Jamie’s mouth. “Bit me,” he repeats.

“Clearly,” I say, cocking my head to the side. “Can’t you two just stake a claim by coming on each other’s faces, like normal people? Why does it always have to be biting and scratching and—I don’t know, cattle-branding?”

Ben tries to burrow deeper into the cushions, finally succeeding in tipping me off him and onto the floor. Jamie circles the couch and leans a hip against the back of it. “Good morning, McCutcheon,” he says, voice too pleasant to be sincere. “I apologize for Garen’s rudeness. However, since you seem to be awake now, would you please assist me in the kitchen so that I don’t have to cook breakfast for everyone by myself?”

Still without lifting his head, Ben reaches into his backpack, retrieves his wallet, and drops it on the coffee table. “Go buy yourselves some sandwiches. I don’t know what I ever did to make everyone think I’m the breakfast genie, but I’m not in the mood today. Go to Starbucks. Better yet, Garen, you can cook. Or, has it still not crossed your mind that either you or Travis should probably pick up that skill, now that you’re living on your own?”

I blink. It *hasn’t* occurred to me—not until this very moment. I turn to Jamie, who smirks. “I’ve been wondering how long y’all might take to notice that.”

Ben finally rolls onto his back, shoving the hem of his shirt down again so he’s covered once more. He still looks tired, but less annoyed now that he has the chance to berate me to my face. “Travis has three job interviews lined up for coffee shops looking for baristas to work their late morning and early afternoon shifts; assuming he gets one of those jobs, he’s covered for lunch. Dinner, too, if he grabs something in the city after his classes every night. What about you? Patton has a dining hall, right?”

My deer-in-the-headlights expression melts into something that involves a lot more eye-rolling. “No, Ben. A thousand teenage boys live there for ten months out of the year, but there’s no dining hall. They send us out into the woods around campus and expects us to hunt, gather, or battle each other to the death, Hunger Games-style, for our food.”

“Fuck off.”

“Only the truly strong prevail. It’s part of the Patton method for making sure their graduates are all vicious, bloodthirsty warriors. That’s how Jamie got on the honor roll—he took out a bear, fed the whole squad for three days.”

“I’m going back to sleep,” Ben mutters, pulling a throw pillow over his face.

I yank the pillow off. “One time, I ate a freshman.”

"Stop tormenting Ben," Travis says. I jump; I'd heard neither the shower shutting off, nor him coming into the living room. He hitches his chin towards Ben. "They piss you off enough to make you not want to cook?"

"He woke up pissed off and not wanting to cook," Jamie protests.

Travis shrugs. "I'd be willing to bet that's your fault."

"Garen's the one who climbed on him," Jamie says mulishly.

"Jamie's the one who *bit* him," I say.

Travis shoots us both a bewildered look. Ben yawns and says, "Settle down, boys. I hate both of you equally." Then, to Travis, "I don't feel like doing the breakfast thing. Not here, anyway. Let me shower, and we'll find someplace nearby to grab something to eat before we head to your new place."

Travis shrugs his complacency, and I glare at Jamie again for getting us both in trouble. Ben claws himself free of the blankets, stands, and grabs the backpack with his change of clothes in it. I poke it. "You have another shirt in there, or did you use your only spare last night after the whole beverage-spilling incident? Because I'm pretty sure Jamie's got a few extra shirts of mine in his closet, if you wanna borrow one."

He nods his thanks, and I snap my fingers at Jamie. He's been there for the whole conversation, so he knows exactly what I want him to go get. I expect him to roll his eyes and make me go get them myself, but he rounds the end of the couch and heads back to his room without comment. When he returns a minute later, however, he holds out a black, long-sleeved dress shirt. Ben accepts it, takes one look at the Hugo Boss label inside the collar, and says, "There's no way in hell this is actually Garen's shirt."

"I'm aware of that," Jamie says coolly. "But the only shirts I have left that belong to Garen are all short-sleeved, and considering the fact that I've only seen your bare arms three times since I met you—all three of which were in bed—I made the assumption that you would prefer something offering a bit more coverage."

Ben swallows and smooths out one of the sleeves of the shirt. "Yeah. Thanks."

I deliver a hard smack to the back of his head. "Stop trying to have a moment, and go shower so I can get in there after you. You guys aren't getting breakfast without me."

"I'm so glad you're moving away from Connecticut," he grumbles, stumbling towards the hallway. I hear the thunk of his backpack hitting the tiled floor of the bathroom, and he calls out to us, "Alex keeps looking for that shirt, by the way!"

"How sad for him," Jamie remarks, flinging himself down onto the couch next to me. The bathroom door slams as punctuation to his words. He shrugs. "It's a rule of mine: if you don't care about something enough to hold onto it, you don't get to whine about losing it later. This applies to both relationships and clothing left in my apartment."

Ben returns to the living room fifteen minutes later, once the rest of us have gotten sucked into some television show about people who wrestle alligators—none of us can figure out whether it's for fun or profit, mostly because none of us can figure out how the hell someone could make money from gator-wrestling. Ben's borrowed clothes are almost as hilarious as the rednecks on TV. The only thing that stops the dress shirt from looking like a straight-up *dress* is the fact that he has tucked the front of it in behind the buckle of his belt, presumably to disguise the fact that it looks like it should hang down to his knees. I open my mouth to mock him, but he waves me off, like he's already filling in the blanks on all the height jokes I could make.

I roll off the couch and go to have a shower. It's still early, so I take my time—playing around with the variety of body scrubs Rachael has left in here; having a deliciously slow jerk-off session, assisted by a handful of soap suds that smell like mangoes; washing my hair with some ridiculous deep-hydration-seaweed-protein-bullshit shampoo that I'm sure Jamie would try to pretend is Rachael's too, but which he's actually been using since high school. By the time I finish my showering fun, dry my hair, straighten it with the flat-iron I find in the cabinet under the sink, get dressed, and make my way back out to the living room, my existence has been largely forgotten.

"Oh my god, he's going to die," Travis says, his words muffled somewhat by the hands he has all but clamped over his mouth. "He's going to die. Look at the teeth on that thing, he's going to die."

"He's not going to die," Jamie objects. "And even if he did, they wouldn't show it. This is television—"

"No, this is evidence that we should have just let the South secede from the Union when *y'all* wanted to," Ben says. He doesn't look away from the screen—doesn't seem to be able to even *blink*—but digs his elbow into Jamie's ribs anyway. "The only place in the South I've ever been is Disney World. Is this what it's really like there? Is this what the Goldwyn family does for fun?"

"Absolutely not," Jamie says immediately, not looking away from the screen either. "This abomination of a show is filmed in Louisiana, and I refuse to take responsibility for it just because we happen to be from the same side of the Mason-Dixon Line. I don't blame you lot for *Jersey Shore*, do I?"

I wedge myself onto the couch between Ben and Travis. "If you blame any of us for *Jersey Shore*, it's gotta be Ben."

"Why me?" Ben demands, finally looking over at me.

"Because I blame Italians for the existence of that show, and you're the only one here who's got a parent who like, came off the fuckin' boat from Italy," I say. Travis turns to squint at me; I squint right back. "Dude, did you guys talk at *all* during the time you were dating? His mom was born in Florence. She didn't move to the States until she was like, six."

"How could I possibly have known that?" Travis asks. "Seriously, why would that ever come up in conversation? She doesn't talk with an accent, and her name is *Hillary McCutcheon*. That doesn't exactly say 'ask me about my classy European heritage.'"

I roll my eyes so hard, my entire head moves. Anyone who's spent more than five minutes in the McCutcheon household—or two minutes in their kitchen—should have picked up on the fact that they're lightyears away from being an all-American, apple-pie-and-baseball sort of family. More to the point, anyone who's had Ben's totally uncut *dick* in their mouth should have picked up on the family's more European tendencies, too. Travis is fucking hopeless.

"If you want to get technical, neither of those is actually her name," Ben says, stretching and reaching for the remote. "McCutcheon is her married name, and Hillary is just the anglicized version she started using when she first moved to this country. But you can't blame her for *Jersey Shore*, either."

"Can I blame her for *Mob Wives*?" I ask.

He shoves me off the couch for the second time today. "No, what you can do is *stop talking about my fucking mother*, and get your stuff so we can go. I'd like to get out of here and get you guys moved in sometime today, if that's okay."

We end up getting coffee and bagels at a bakery two blocks over, all four of us crowded around one small table, knees bumping together with every movement. Travis and Ben are trying to map out the easiest route to the new place from here, but I'm pretty sure that's what GPS is for, so I can't be bothered to listen. I inch my chair closer to Jamie so that I can drop my head onto his shoulder. He reaches up to

scratch at my scalp like I'm a puppy, then asks, "Are you starting school tomorrow, or the next day?"

"Next," I answer. "I have to be there mad early, too. PT starts at five, and I've still got to pick up my class schedule, get my parking pass, and sign off on the student handbook—not like I'm going to follow any of the rules, but I guess I'm supposed to pretend. Tomorrow, I've gotta get my haircut to the dress code length and swing by the mall to get more dress shirts—"

"Do you want to just keep some of mine for the next few months?" he offers. "Seems like a waste to buy them, if you don't intend to ever wear them again after you graduate in May."

I shake my head. "I don't think yours would fit me. You have arms like a stick figure."

"I do not!" he says indignantly, shrugging out of his coat to bare his arms for inspection. I have no idea why he's bothering to protest; his arms are toned, sure, but they're long and thin, just like every last inch of him is. "Here, hold yours up next to mine so I can—stop flexing, you idiot—"

"I'm not flexing, ass, that's just what my arms look like—"

"Can you stop whatever the hell it is you two are doing over there?" Travis interrupts. "We're kind of in public, and you guys are like, touching yourselves and each other way more than is probably appropriate."

"Don't worry, you're still my favorite," I assure him, grabbing the edge of the chair he's seated on and dragging him close enough that I can sling an arm around his shoulders. He rolls his eyes, twists to kiss the side of my neck, and then... checks his watch.

Right. Because we'd agreed to stop this at noon, and it's eleven thirty now, which means I've got about half an hour before I need to know how to keep my hands off him. The idea leaves a twist in my gut and a sour taste in my mouth. I retract my arm and clear my throat. "We should go."

On the way back to the parking garage below the building, Jamie seems to be the only one who picks up on the sudden downturn in my mood. He doesn't say anything, but when I ask if he'll give me a piggyback ride for the rest of the block, he nods and lets me scramble up onto his back without a single word about me weighing too goddamn much for this. He lets me down again only once we're standing right next to Ben's truck. I ruffle Jamie's still-messy hair and say, "Thanks. You sure you don't wanna help us unpack?"

"As much fun as I'm sure that'll be, yes, I'm positive," he says. "Some of my school friends are coming over later this afternoon, so I've got to clean the apartment before then."

Ben leans his shoulder against the door of the truck. "You say that like that apartment is something other than spotless." Jamie glares at him, and he lifts his hands in a gesture of surrender. "Fine, fine. Minding my own business and getting in the truck. I'll see you around."

"No, you most likely won't," Jamie says. "Now that these two are in New York, I don't see any reason I'd return to Connecticut. Even if you come here to visit them, I live in the city, and they don't. I can't imagine a single scenario in which you and I will ever have to interact again."

For a longer moment than I think he means to, Ben frowns at him. Only when Jamie's eyebrows begin to rise, as if to say *is there a problem?*, does he snap himself out of it, taking a step backward as he says, "You're right. Next time Garen's in Lakewood, I'll send him back with your shirt. Thank you for letting me borrow it. And for letting me spend the night."

"You're quite welcome," Jamie says, examining his nails like they're the most fascinating thing in this entire parking garage. "And thank you for—"

"If the next words out of your mouth have anything to do with sex, I will kick you in the balls," Ben warns.

A smirk spreads slowly across Jamie's face, but Ben must not be far from the point, because the rest of the sentence never comes. Ben rolls his eyes and climbs into the truck, slamming the door shut and starting the engine. Jamie offers him a wide smile and an exaggerated wave; Ben comes back with a sneer and an obscene hand gesture before he shifts into drive and pulls out of the space.

"You guys are so sweet to each other," I say. "Honestly, it's heart-warming."

"I'm not the one who picked him out in the first place," Jamie replies, giving me a quick peck on the cheek before he turns to the door leading back to the building. "Now get out of here. Call me once your new place is all set up. I'll come by later this week, alright?"

I salute him; he returns the gesture and ducks into the building. I turn towards my car. Travis is already in his and ready to leave. He pulls up next to me and says, "You have the address, right?"

"Yep," I say. And then, because it's still not noon yet, because I *can*, I lean in through the window, kiss him, and say right against his lips, "See you at home."

He jolts a little, reaches up to catch my face between his hands, but I step out of reach and stride off towards my own car. Time to go, time to go, time to go. Time to get the fuck *out* of here, before I do something stupid, like ask him if he's sure we can't just be together now. By the time I get to my car, get the engine running and the stereo playing, and look around again, he has pulled out of the garage. I sigh, type the new address into my GPS, and point the car towards the road again.

It takes close to forty minutes to make the drive to the town halfway between Patton and Columbia. I make the turn the GPS has indicated, but something is definitely wrong, because I've managed to end up in some cute little neighborhood with sidewalks and picket fences and itty bitty houses full of itty bitty families. I snatch my phone from the cupholder, switch it to speaker, and call Travis.

"There a problem?" he answers.

"Yeah, I think I'm lost as shit," I say.

He snorts. "You are not, I can see your car. Drive about five hundred feet. Red house on the right. The one I'm parked in the driveway of, you jackass?"

I hammer on the 'end call' button and fling the phone onto the passenger seat, because I don't trust myself to stay on the line without shrieking, *wait, you chose a house for us?* I'd been expecting an apartment in some shitty building, full of other people in their late teens, early twenties. An apartment is safe, platonic. Alex and Ben have an apartment. Stohler and those random bitches who all hate each other have an apartment. This tiny house, with its dark red paint and its two cozy stories, its snow-covered lawn and its motherfucking porch swing, is not platonic. It's a *home*, and pulling into the driveway behind Travis' Subaru makes me want to get married and buy a Kitchen Aid stand mixer, even though I'm not entirely sure what a stand mixer is.

Heart still pounding so hard I'm sure my ribs are about to break, I cut the Ferrari engine and get out. Travis gestures towards the house. "So, yeah. This is the place."

"Can I go inside?" I ask.

"Uh, yeah? Dude, we live here. You have a key. Go check it out, like you should have done a month ago, when I asked if you wanted the woman from the rental agency to show you the place we were getting. But you just said you trusted me and James to find somewhere decent, so, here it is. Now go poke around, I'll wait out here for Ben."

I didn't even know that it was possible to rent a real home like this. I'd always assumed that people rented apartments and bought houses. It makes sense, I guess—this town is small, only half an hour from

Patton's sprawling, stereotypical New England prep school campus. Of course there aren't impersonal apartment complexes around here.

It takes me a few seconds of standing in front of the door to psych myself up to unlock it and go inside, but then I'm standing in the entryway, a staircase in front of me. To my right, a door opens up into the living room—soft, slate gray carpet, off-white walls, and along the back wall, a sliding glass door that opens up onto a small back deck that overlooks a neatly fenced-in backyard. Christ, I've got a fucking backyard. I cut back through the entryway to the door on the left. It's a kitchen, with white tiled floors, white cabinets and counters, and pale blue walls. It's bright, open, and way too nice for two dudes who don't know how to cook. There's enough space for a real table and chairs, which I guess means the Ikea table Travis got is just the right size, even though I'd assumed it would be too big.

I make my way up the stairs. There's a door immediately to the right that opens up to a bedroom the same size as the living room directly below it. On the other side of the staircase, a short hallway leads back towards the front of the house. There's another door at the end of it, leading to a second, slightly smaller bedroom, which I guess is above the entryway and half the kitchen. The bathroom door is along the hallway wall as well, and that's where I'm camped out when Ben eventually shows up. I'm sitting on the counter, banging my heels against the cabinet below, and he steps into the bathroom with me, nudging the door halfway shut with his hip. "What's with you?"

"I didn't realize it was a house," I whisper, just in case Travis has followed him upstairs. "I can't believe Travis didn't bother to tell me that the place he picked out is a house, not an apartment. He and I just agreed not to be together, and now we have a fucking porch swing."

"It's just a house, Garen. And it's just a swing."

"It's not, alright? I *like* porch swings, they're awesome, they—what if I want to take my coffee out there once the weather starts to get nicer? Travis drinks coffee, too—dude's a fucking barista, for god's sake. What if he decides he *also* wants to drink his coffee on the porch swing? What if we're out there, porch swingin' it up, and our neighbors see us and assume we're a couple, and then one of them stops by with a plate of cookies to welcome us to the neighborhood—"

"I thought you said you'd only go out once the weather warmed up a bit. Why would it take your neighbors like, three months to welcome you to the neighborhood? Also, I know you're from Cleveland, but the whole 'small town neighbors bringing you cookies' thing only happens on televis—"

I shove Ben at the tub, and he topples right into it, glaring up at me and trying not to bang his head on the taps. I press on, "What if *when our neighbor brings cookies*, she mistakenly asks me about my partner, thinking we're like, the fags next door—which we totally are, but not in a *married* sort of way, just a dick-sucking-stepbrother sort of way—"

"I am one hundred percent positive that there's not supposed to be any such thing as a 'dick-sucking-stepbrother sort of way.'" Ben says. "In fact, it's possible that even saying that phrase is illegal in some states."

"Probably not New York, though. Now shut up and let me finish, or I'm going to turn the shower on and drown you," I warn. He makes a vague gesture of surrender. "Good. Now, maybe she asks me about my partner-who-isn't, and it's too awkward to admit that he's my ex, so I go along with it. And what if she's a goddamn gossip, and she tells everyone on the block, and I have to simultaneously play along and try to make sure that Travis doesn't find out, because he'd be totally creeped out by it? And then one afternoon, he hears someone referring to us as the McCall-Anderson family—"

"You should go with 'Anderson-McCall,'" Ben says, yanking up the hood of his sweatshirt in case I follow through on my threat to turn on the shower. I don't. He peeks out from under the hood. "*McCall-Anderson* sounds stupid. And if you say it really fast, the first three syllables kind of make it sound like you're going to say *Michelangelo*."

I frown. "The Renaissance painter, or the Ninja Turtle?"

"Does it... make a difference?" Ben says slowly.

The bathroom door swings open and Travis blinks at me, then at Ben, who still hasn't hauled his dumb ass out of the tub. "What are you guys talking about?"

"Porch swings," Ben says, at the same moment that I reply, "Ninja turtles."

"Okaaaaay," Travis says, raising his eyebrows. "Well, if you're done with that, can you like, stop gossiping in the bathroom like a couple of preteen girls and come help me unload the truck?"

"Of course," I say, hopping off the counter. I aim a glare at Ben and demand, "What the fuck are you doing? Why are you in my bathtub?"

He snaps, "Because you threw me in it," but I'm already darting out of the bathroom and back down the stairs.

Unloading the truck is exactly as awful as I'd expected it to be. The bigger items, like the kitchen table and the couch, require all of our efforts—usually, I'm on one end, and Travis and Ben are on the other. Surprisingly, when there isn't enough room for both of them, Ben ends up being the one to do most of the heavy lifting; years of lugging around boxes of hardcover books at his dad's bookstore or eight-quart chafers of food for his mom's catering business have given him plenty of practice with moving items that should crush someone as small as him. Travis, on the other hand, spends most of the afternoon trying to pretend that he's being helpful by unpacking all of the dishes or cutlery, even though that's not exactly high on our priority list.

When he runs out of bullshit boxes to unpack, he sidles into the living room where Ben and I are taking a well-deserved break on the couch and asks me, "Do you want me to go upstairs and hook up your computer?"

I roll my head to the side to look at Ben. "Did we even bring in my desk yet?" He nods without speaking. I roll my head to the other side to look at Travis. "Do you know how to hook it up without electrocuting yourself?"

He gives me the most derisive look I've ever seen on someone who isn't Ben or my mother, then goes upstairs without bothering to reply. Ben snorts. "Dude, you realize that he's going to be majoring in engineering, minoring in computer science, right? I'm pretty sure he can handle connecting a monitor, a CPU, and an electrical outlet."

I hadn't known that Travis was majoring in that, actually. It hadn't really occurred to me to ask, which seems stupidly self-involved now. Instead of admitting this, I say, "You guys make me feel so inadequate. He and Jamie are both at Columbia, you're at Yale. I'm still reluctantly forcing my way through high school."

"You'll be graduating in a couple of months," Ben says, shrugging. "Have you heard back from any of the schools you applied to during the fall?"

I slowly shake my head. "I didn't apply early anywhere, so I can't expect to hear back until sometime in March, probably. And even once I do—"

Abruptly, I cut myself off, because the truth is, even though my dad badgered me into applying to five different colleges, even though I think I rocked the music auditions and personal interviews I had last month, even though Patton Military Academy is a prep school that expects every graduate to go directly into higher education or Armed Forces... I still don't want to go to college this fall. Or ever. I'm not Jamie,

who chose Columbia for his undergrad because he already knows he wants to go to law school there, too. I'm not Travis, who graduated high school in three and a half years and will probably finish college in two, considering he plans to go full-time, year-round. I'm not Ben, who likes school so goddamn much he wants to become a teacher so that he can be stuck in a classroom for the rest of his life. For fuck's sake, I'm not even *Dave*, who's an abusive psychopath, but still makes dean's list at Yale. I'm not my honor society friends, or my Ivy League parents—I'm just me. And I don't know if that will still be good enough come September.

"Maybe NYU, if I get in," I say quietly, reluctantly. "Stohler went there for dance. I think she liked it. Or—I don't know. Berklee seemed cool, but it's in Boston."

Ben shrugs again. "Nothing wrong with Boston."

"Something wrong with being completely alone in a city I've never really spent any time in, though," I say before I can stop myself. The moment the words are out, I want to bite my tongue out; that one sentence makes me sound so pathetic, so needy. And I try to cover it with something less awful, but what comes out is an even lamer, "Travis came to New York for me. It's not just because he wanted to get out of Lakewood. If that was the case, he could've gone to Yale, too. Moved in with you and Alex. He chose New York because of me, and I'd be the world's biggest asshole if I left for Boston after that."

"Of course," Ben says, but he's obviously being sarcastic, because Ben never agrees with anything that anyone says. "Because, you know, it's not like he could transfer schools, if he really wanted to. It's not like going to Boston could mean transferring to the engineering program at fucking MIT, which was his first choice anyway. You're right, you should totally make your college decisions based on where Travis is."

"Stop pretending that's not the exact reason why you chose Yale over Juilliard," I snap. "That's—you can't act like you weren't fucking stupid enough to turn down one of the best music schools in the country just because you were scared I was going to fuck your boyfriend."

Ben flicks his eyes towards the ceiling and sighs, "If you're trying to start a fight with me, I'd recommend selecting a topic I still care about. And I know this will be hard for you to understand, but sometimes, people make decisions that don't have anything to do with Travis or his ass."

"Trust me, you wouldn't be saying that if you'd had a chance to—" I cut myself off, because I can hear Travis heading back downstairs, and he always rolls his eyes at me when he catches me objectifying him in casual conversation.

"Computer's all set up," he says, sitting down in the bright blue, squishy armchair we bought even though it doesn't match the couch at all. "I took the liberty of hooking up your printer, too."

"You're a peach," I say, flopping over sideways and draping my legs over Ben's lap.

At my insistence, we take a dinner break. Travis hooks up the DVD player, since the cable guy isn't coming until tomorrow; Ben starts picking through my DVD collection, mocking me outright for the fact that I pretty much only own movies with car chases or singing cartoon animals. I look up the number to a local pizza place on his iPhone, then order two pizzas and a fuckload of garlic bread, because it's not like I couldn't polish off that much food alone anyway. It isn't until halfway through *Gone in 60 Seconds* that Ben turns to me and says, "Dude."

I raise my eyebrows and echo, "Dude?"

"Didn't you say that your mattress was being delivered sometime this afternoon?" he says. "Or, did that happen when I wasn't looking?"

"Um." I grab Travis' arm to check his watch. It's nearly eight o'clock, well past the noon-to-four window I

was told to expect the delivery. Slowly, I turn my eyes towards the coffee table, where my cell phone was abandoned hours ago. The little red LED is blinking, indicating a voicemail. I dial into my inbox and scowl through a bored-sounding voice telling me that there was a mix-up with my order, and my mattress won't be delivered until tomorrow. They apologize for any inconvenience, but their apologies do fuck-all for me now.

I relay the message to the others; as expected, Ben smirks, and Travis says, "That's not a big deal. You can sleep in my room tonight."

"Not a good idea," I say shortly.

He lets out a huff of annoyance. "Don't be an idiot. My bed is big enough for two people—"

"Believe me, Trav, I've fucked you in that bed enough times to be more than aware of that," I say. "And I know you're just trying to be nice or whatever, but I'm telling you, if we're really doing this whole platonic thing, we're not starting our new lease by sharing a fucking bed."

Travis opens his mouth to snap back at me, but Ben cuts him off with a casual, "G's got a point. He's constitutionally incapable of sharing a bed with someone in a non-sexual manner. The one time I managed it, he crept out of bed in the middle of the night and fucked my roommate down the hall."

"Well, *somebody* needed to sleep with Alex, since you friend-zoned him so hard without even realizing it," I say, even though I know it's a dick thing to say, and even though I know I'm going to get smacked for it.

Travis is actually the one to deliver the smack. Ben just slouches down in his seat and mutters, "The friend zone doesn't even exist. It's a bullshit term invented by misogynist douchebags to make women feel like they're somehow obligated to provide a sexual pay-off to any guy who's nice to them."

"I never should have let you sign up for that Gender and Sexuality in Pop Culture class," I sigh. "I swear to god, if you declare a Women's Studies minor, I'll cut off your balls myself."

Ben narrows his eyes at me. "It's not called 'Women's Studies,' you jackass. It's 'Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies.' And fuck you, maybe I'll double-major just to piss you off."

"Oh, so, now you're going to graduate with an English degree *and* a Women's Stud—sorry, *Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies* degree? Awesome, that's so useful. Hey, Travis, you should probably start showing him how to make those pretty leaf designs in the latte foam, because fuck knows this kid's never gonna find an adult job—"

"Coming from the super-senior who has incredibly vague plans to maybe study music someday?"

"Eat me, dude. Maybe I won't even go to college. I'll just do porn or something. Bet I could make bank nailing twinks for a living. And then you could write your senior thesis *about my dick*. Though, beats me how you'd put all your firsthand knowledge in a bibliography. What's the MLA citation for 'it's been in my ass'?"

"I'd cite it as a personal interview. Get me a piece of a paper, and I'll show you right the fuck now."

"You are not showing him how to cite his penis for a term paper," Travis hisses, yanking the pen out of Ben's hand. "Jesus Christ, dude, he's still in high school, and you know he'll find a way to turn that in for credit before the semester's over. The last thing he needs is to get expelled again."

I shrug. If I didn't get expelled for that time I gave Andrew's definitely married, definitely three-times-my-age teacher a blowjob to get him an extension on his Western Civ paper, I'm pretty positive there's nothing I could do that would get me kicked out now. But statements like that tend to go over poorly with anyone who doesn't understand how things work for places like Patton and people like me. Travis in

particular always gets that *look* in his eye, like he thinks it's goddamn tragic that I sometimes sleep with people to get what I want. It's not tragic; it's business. It's practical, and it's efficient, and it works—at least, it works for me—but Travis doesn't get that, and I'd bet anything that Ben wouldn't get it either. So for now, I turn up the volume on the movie and don't say anything.

Even though it makes Travis glare at me before he heads up to bed after Ben has headed out, I sleep on the couch that night.

113 days sober

It doesn't really sink in that I'm back at Patton until I'm standing in the quad again for the first time since heading back to Lakewood last April. It's five in the morning—still dark out, still goddamn *freezing*. Most of my classmates have already joined their squads, but I hang back. Headmaster Samuels has already told me that I'm going to be in with the Whitman Hall squad again—possibly because Sergeant Smith is one of the only faculty members who has ever managed to gain even a little bit of control over me—so I know where I should be standing, but it's... awkward. I don't actually know any of them, not like I knew my old squad. Instead of going over and introducing myself, I hover awkwardly at the fringe of the crowd, my hands stuffed into the pockets of my PT sweatshorts.

Most of the guys have noticed me by now, and a few of them are hissing at each other, like they're trying to see who should come over and demand to know why I'm lurking nearby. I probably look like a total sex offender; I really wouldn't be surprised if they called campus security on me. It takes about four and a half minutes of me standing there, watching the guys argue amongst themselves, before one of them breaks away from the rest of the group and jogs over to me. He thrusts out his hand for a shake and says, "Hey, man. You're the new squad addition Sergeant Smith mentioned we'd be getting, yeah?" I nod. "Cool. I'm Javi."

"Garen," I say, accepting the handshake.

Javi bounces a little bit on the balls of his feet and prompts, "Garen Anderson?"

"Uh. Yeah?" I say.

"The Garen Anderson who Sergeant Smith believes is the Fifth Horseman of the Apocalypse, left out of the Bible because he's a harbinger of destruction too terrifying to put into words?" he presses.

"What," I say, not up-talking even though it's sort of a question.

"The Garen Anderson who once got himself locked in the trunk of Headmaster Samuels' car and didn't manage to escape until the New Hampshire border?"

"What," I repeat, more urgently now, because *how does he know these things?*

"The Garen Anderson who broke into Mrs. Verdana's office to blast Swedish dance pop over the sound system during midterms that one year?" he asks.

Human words don't seem to be working, so I try making a distressed noise in the back of my throat, but Javi plows onward.

"The Garen Anderson who taught like, half the guys in this school how to pick locks? The Garen Anderson who smuggled in a coffee machine and almost burned down Whitman Hall four times, but still didn't let it get confiscated? The Garen Anderson who is single-handedly responsible for the twenty-thousand-dollar security camera renovation in the library because somebody tipped off administration to the fact that he used to fuck guys against the fourth-floor card catalog?"

“Okay, the phrase ‘single-handedly’ is a huge overstatement,” I say, mildly hysterically. “That is at least half Jamie’s fault. He’s the one who was obsessed with the idea of getting fucked in a library after one of his girlfriends made him watch *Atonement* with her—”

“Holy shit,” Javi breathes, and then he turns, waving his hand frantically in the direction of the rest of the squad. “Guys! You were right, it’s him!”

Before I can even process what’s happening, I find myself standing in the middle of a crowd of dudes, all of whom seem to want nothing more than to shake my hand and clap me on the back. Only two of the guys are hanging back, looking less than thrilled to see me: a guy with reddish brown hair, pretty golden brown eyes, and a smattering of adorable freckles across his nose, and another guy with hazel eyes and glasses who looks sort of familiar, but I can’t figure out where I know him from. My instinctive thought is that I’ve probably gotten drunk and nailed him before, but he’s not giving me that embarrassed half-smile that my one-night stands usually give me when we’re forced to interact in a clothed scenario.

I don’t have much of a chance to give it further consideration, because there’s a hand on my back that’s definitely slipping into Bad Touch territory, and I don’t understand why everyone seems to care that I’m here. I say, “Uh, not that this isn’t, you know—I mean, you guys are super welcoming, but do I even know any of you?”

“Probably not,” says a voice behind me—I’m pretty sure it belongs to the blond boy who still hasn’t taken his slim-fingered hand off the small of my back. “We know you, though.”

That settles it: the Whitman squad became a cult while I was away. I contemplate taking a huge step back from this group, but that’ll just put me on top of the handsy blond, so I remain still.

But Javi—who, despite his overenthusiastic knowledge of my previous escapades, seems to be more normal and less tactile than most of these other dudes—picks up on my obvious discomfort and adds, “You’re pretty much a Patton Military Academy legend, man. We all probably seem like huge creeps right now, but we’ve all been hearing stories about you for years. It’s just cool to finally meet you, is all.”

“Oh,” I say slowly. “Well, um. It’s nice to meet you guys, too. I—”

“Whitman squad! Get in formation now!” bellows a sudden and familiar voice from about ten yards away. “There are twenty-one of you now, so I want everybody in alphabetical order by last name, standing three across.”

I don’t actually know anybody’s surname here, but I hedge my bets and head for the first row. Two other guys have also moved up there, so I nudge the one closer to me, the hottass with the freckles who didn’t bother to shake my hand. “Hey. Didn’t really catch your name earlier—are you ahead of me, or—”

“Campbell,” he answers, then jerks his head to the other guy. “That’s Barrington. You’re first in the squad now.”

I offer up a quick, thankful smile and step into formation. Apparently, I should’ve done those in the reverse order, or left off the smile altogether, because Sergeant Smith barks, “Anderson, get on the ground and give me twenty push-ups, right now.”

“I haven’t even done anything yet!” I say indignantly.

He gives me a smile that comes across more like a sneer. “I know that, but something about seeing your happy face after all this time just pisses me off.”

“Is it the fact that my face is super pretty?” I ask. “Because trust me, that gets me in plenty of trouble, so, you’re not alone.”

"Twenty-five push-ups now," he replies. "Let's see how out of practice you've gotten at that public school of yours."

I make a show of stomping my feet, but only for a second or two—any longer than that, and I've got no doubt he'll make me do push-ups until sunset. Considering I do fifty push-ups every morning, it's not that difficult to drop to the ground and execute twenty-five perfect ones right now. I've barely had a chance to stand up again before I'm being ordered back onto the ground with the rest of the squad to do thirty more. By the time we're all dismissed two and a half hours later, I'm soaked in sweat, and my muscles are aching, but it's *nice*. It's been over a year since I had a solid PT session, and it feels a lot like being welcomed home. Or... okay, it actually feels a lot more like getting jumped into a gang, but still, it's good to be back.

The rest of the squad heads back to the dorm; I break off from the group and head for the locker rooms down below the gym, where the forty or fifty commuter students are given space to clean up before breakfast. Even though it's my first day back, I've still got my morning routine down to a science. I claim a shower stall, scrub off the dirt and sweat that's soaked into my skin, don my uniform—khakis, white Oxford, striped tie in the Patton school colors, freshly polished boots—and set to work on my hair in front of one of the mirrors above the sinks. Yesterday's trip to the barber hasn't left me with much to work with, so all I have to do is blow-dry it, work in a little bit of wax, and load it up with hairspray to ensure that this whole just-fucked look lasts until the end of the day. It's much less work than I'm used to putting into my hair, so I've got plenty of time to head back to my car, drop off my gym bag, and grab my backpack.

The dining hall isn't packed by the time I get there, but I still lurk near the door for a minute, trying to figure out where the hell I'm supposed to sit. Do commuters sit with their squads, or in another section? It's not like I ever paid attention; it's not like I ever *had* to.

"Yo, Anderson!"

My eyes snap towards the voice. One of the guys from my new squad is beckoning me towards one of the three smallish tables for the seniors of Whitman Hall. Slowly, I make my way over to the table. The guy who called me over pulls out the chair on his left side, the one between him and Javi.

"Have a seat, dude," he says. Then, a second later, he adds, "Sam Ellis. Didn't get a chance to say so earlier."

"Nice to meet you," I say, sinking into the free chair.

There are seven seats at the table; Javi on my left, Sam on my right, and on Sam's other side, the familiar kid with glasses, who neither introduces himself, nor looks at me. Directly across from me is a seriously built, dark-skinned boy who nods and introduces himself as Taylor. On Taylor's right is a guy who eventually mentions, in a lazy, offhand way, that his name is Steven; he's so relaxed, he looks almost boneless. Well, boneless or baked already. The only remaining seat stays empty for about twenty minutes before the guy who called himself Campbell wanders in and collapses into it without a word. Javi immediately turns towards him to engage him in quiet conversation. I can't hear much of what they're saying—I'm not really trying to—but I pick up enough to gather that Campbell's first name is Declan, and that he and Javi seem to be roommates.

I spend a little while making small-talk with the lot of them, trying to find out more about them, but it doesn't really work. No matter what I say, they manage to turn it around on me, looking painfully excited to learn more about the wonderful, whimsical life of Garen Anderson, Patton Military Academy royalty. It's as creepy as it is flattering.

The kid in the glasses is still impossible to place, and it's starting to irritate me. Halfway through breakfast, my curiosity overwhelms me, and I lean around Sam to address the guy, who tenses like he's been waiting for me to say something to him.

"Sorry, this is probably weird, but we've met before, right?" I say. He nods once, not smiling at me. I wince. "You're glaring. I totally got drunk and sucked your dick and then never called when I said I would, didn't I? Or, we fucked, and you tried to say hi to me in the dining hall the next day, and I pretended that you'd hooked up with my twin? Or that I was a foreign exchange student who only spoke French? I'm sorry, I don't even know why I do shit like that, nobody believes my lies. I swear I'm working on it—"

"We never hooked up. I'm straight," the guy says. "But we met during my freshman year, when—you know my brother. Or, you did, I suppose."

I squint at him, trying to find the family resemblance to someone I knew during my first three years at Patton, but I'm coming up blank. "Sorry. I'm bad with names, faces, people in general. What's your name?"

"Charlie," he says.

The word is like a bucket of ice water being poured over my bones, because the moment he reminds me of that, I remember exactly when we met during my sophomore year. The day after Thanksgiving, I'd told my dad I was taking the train back to Patton early, spending the rest of the long weekend in the city with friends, but I'd really taken a fifteen-hour train ride from Cleveland to New Haven. Dave had picked me up at Union Station at quarter to midnight, had kissed me on the platform and brought me back to his house. We'd only been together for a few weeks at that point; he had neither hit me nor fucked me yet. His parents had been—I don't know, out of town? They definitely weren't at the house, so Dave and I had spent two nauseatingly nice days lounging around his bedroom, watching movies on his laptop and making out in his bed.

I honestly hadn't even realized there was anyone else in the house with us until Sunday evening, when we'd loaded our bags into his car for the drive back to school, and there had been some kid waiting in the backseat. Dave had laughed at my baffled expression, then said, "This is my brother, Charlie. He goes to Patton, too. Charlie, this is Garen, my boyfriend." I had ridden shotgun, turned around in my seat to make small talk with Charlie for about twenty minutes before I got bored and turned forward to play with the radio. We'd been at a stoplight and I'd been singing along to a song by Dave's favorite band when he had leaned over to kiss my cheek and whisper, "I love you."

It was the first time he'd ever said it to me. Three years later, I know he never meant it—he *couldn't* have meant it, because no one could ever do what he did to me to someone they really loved—and I know that I was a stupid, naive kid for letting my heart skip a beat at his words, for not even pausing to think before I said it back and kissed him so deeply that Charlie whined that we were traumatizing him. It had seemed so fucking sweet then, before I knew what it felt like to have my bones crunch under his fists or have him pin me with the full weight of his body while he dragged my zipper down. In the car that day, it had felt like he was being honest.

I can't stop myself from remembering it now, and based on the look on Charlie's face, he can't, either. I admit, "I don't know if I'm supposed to ask how he's doing or not."

"Neither do I," Charlie says. "But if you actually care about the answer, he's doing well."

"That's nice," I force myself to say, and then I have to clamp my teeth together, because if I don't, I know I'll say something awful. Like, *has he found another boyfriend to beat the shit out of? Or, does he still like to assault fifteen-year-old boys? How many other guys have restraining orders against him? Do you know what he did to me? Are you going to tell him we're in the same squad now? Does he ever talk about me? Does he miss me?* I hate myself for even wanting to know the answer to that. I use a spoon to smash my scrambled eggs into a paste-like mess on my plate, then flick my eyes towards the rest of the people at the table. "Do you all hang out with the other guys in the squad a lot?"

"Nah, not really," Steven says. "We share the common room, obviously, and we've got MLEP and PT together every day, but it's not like all twenty of us are buddies. When we wanna go out and party, we

stick to this group.”

Sam claps me on the shoulder. “You’re welcome to join us, obviously. Though, based on the legends—”

“Stop calling them legends, I’m not a goddamn yeti,” I groan.

“--*based on the legends*,” Sam repeats more firmly, “Declan’s the only one who’d be able to keep up with you. *Maybe* Javi.”

“Dec’s pretty much the ‘you’ of our grade,” Taylor agrees.

I lean forward slightly so that I can look past Javi to Declan, who has been ignoring me for most of breakfast. Now, though, he glances up just long enough to flash me a small smirk that kind of makes me want to crawl under the table and swallow his cock. I refill my mug with coffee from the pot on the table and say thoughtfully, “That’s good to know. I mean, people *are* always telling me to go fuck myself.”

“He’s a straight version of you,” Sam amends. Declan isn’t looking at me like he’s a straight anything, but I’m sure I’ll find out the truth of that sooner or later, so I let it go for now. Instead, I shrug as if to say, *that’s a shame*.

“As far as I know, the only gay guys in the Whitman squad are me and Ryan Marten,” Taylor says, even though I really didn’t ask. I’m about to give him an appraising leer when he cuts me off with one of his own. “But, I’m guessing you already noticed that about Ryan this morning.”

I make a face and tilt my head towards one of the other tables full of Whitman boys. “Is Ryan the Bad Touch Blond over there? ‘Cause, yeah, I kinda figured he might be of a questionable persuasion when he tried to get himself a handful of my ass before PT even started today.”

Sam cringes. “Yeah, he’s like that. If you ignore him, he’ll eventually realize you’re not interested.”

I look over at the table where Ryan is sitting. He’s already half-watching me, so all I need to do to get his attention is lean back in my chair and stretch enough to pull the fabric of my Oxford tighter across my chest. The moment his gaze is fully focused on me, I flash him a wink, a smile, a tiny wave. He beams. Next to me, Sam snorts. I shrug and say, “What? He’s got a nice-looking mouth, and I wanna keep my options. Dunno how bored I’ll be by next week.”

The conversation moves onward, but not before I hear Javi whisper to Declan, “I told you he’d be exactly as cool as everyone says he is.”

“Reserving judgment,” Declan replies, not even bothering to lower his voice. I expect him to shoot me some unimpressed sneer, but he doesn’t even look at me. Instead, he looks directly across the table at Charlie Walczyk and quirks an eyebrow, mouthing the word, “Really?”

Charlie grimaces and shrugs. Fifteen minutes later, when we’re all wandering out of the dining hall to make our way to first period, he digs an elbow into Declan’s ribs and—not realizing that I’m right behind him—mutters, “Hey, don’t ask me to explain it. He’s my brother’s crazy ex, not mine.”

He may not have realized I’m standing so close, but Declan certainly has. He twists to look at me over his shoulder, then gives me a long, steady once-over. *There’s* the unimpressed sneer I was expecting earlier; he turns away. My skin feels too tight for the rest of the day.

114 days sober

After an entire semester of being shoved, having my car vandalized, and hearing a constant stream of taunts muttered any time I walk into a room, being back at Patton is... surreal. I’d assumed that my

classmates would have largely forgotten about me by now, considering I haven't been here for the past three semesters; I'd figured that I would have to start from scratch, slowly work my way up the social ladder by winning my squadmates over one by one.

That is pretty much the opposite of how it happens.

"Hey, Garen," Javi—sociable little ray of sunshine that he is—says during our first Thursday chemistry lab together. "Do you want to be in our lab group?"

Considering the fact that the other two people in his group are Charlie and Declan, I'm pretty sure I'm supposed to say no. But I still don't know many other guys in our class, so I shrug and say, "Yeah, cool. Thanks."

115 days sober

"Hey, Garen," Taylor leans over to whisper during AP Government and Politics. "You're talking about political action committees for your presentation at the end of the month, right?"

I nod. "Yeah. Dr. Stanford told me that you guys already covered that topic in class, but I should be able to find everything I need in the textbook."

"Right before winter break, he gave us some pretty detailed information about the Federal Election Campaign Act," Taylor says. "If you're free after MLEP tonight, wanna meet in the library and go over it? I can show you my notes, just in case there are any gaps in the book."

"That would be awesome, thanks," I say, flashing a smile that he is quick to return.

116 days sober

hey man, it's sam. bunch of us are going to a party with some of the girls from ward. wanna come? we can pick you up on the way, i'm DD tonight.

I blink down at my phone for several minutes. I can't remember giving my number to Sam—I can't remember giving my number to *any* of the guys from the squad, actually, so it's a little bizarre to randomly hear from one of them on a Saturday night. I must look as confused as I feel, because Travis laughs when he glances up from our new espresso machine, where he's been studiously working his way through recreating the Daily Grind's old drink menu in preparation for his upcoming job interviews.

"Everything okay?" he asks.

"Yeah," I say. "Just, uh—one of the guys from school texted me. Says the squad's going to some party with girls from Ward? I mean, Julia Ward Howe Academy, that's Patton's sister school. Anyway, he asked if I wanted to go."

Travis nods along, then pushes over the mug he's been practicing on; it's a latte, with a tiny image of a bunny drawn into the foam on top. I snap a picture of it with my phone, even though that makes Travis roll his eyes, then take a sip. "Tastes perfect."

"Like you have any preference when it comes to lattes, dude. I could've beat off into the frothing pitcher, and you still would've said it tasted perfect."

"Might've liked that even more," I say, winking at him.

He rolls his eyes, dumps the latte, and sets to work on preparing another. I don't say anything else, and

after a minute of him carefully dragging the tip of the tool through the foam to create his latest design, he adds, "You know you can go to the party if you want to, right? I mean, I know you say you're 'helping me prep for my interview tomorrow,' but really, you're just sitting there on your lazy ass, getting wired on espresso shots."

"I'm providing emotional support," I say, scratching the back of my neck. He shows me the latte--a bear. I take another picture, another sip. Once I've nodded, Travis gets himself a fresh cup to make something new. Finally, I add, "Besides, I uh... the guys in the squad don't really know I'm sober? I mean, it's not like that comes up in casual conversation. 'What's up, I'm Garen, I'm a recovering addict.' It's not really—I'm trying to avoid that revelation for as long as possible. So, I don't really know what to say."

"Just say you're busy. If these guys actually wanna be your friends, they'll be fine with it," Travis replies.

I don't say anything, because I don't *know* if they actually wanna be my friends. Or, if they'll still want to be my friends once they realize I'm not the legend they think I am. I add Sam's number to my contacts list, then carefully type out, *sorry, already got plans with the dude i live with*. A moment later, my phone buzzes with a reply.

oh, that's cool, Sam says. next time, yeah? :)

I push the phone towards Travis so he can see the message. He reads it, smiles, and pushes back first the phone, then the finished latte. This time, there's a heart in the foam.

118 days sober

Any fears I'd had about being rejected by the squad after turning down the party invitation are proven completely wrong during Monday's PT session, when we're told to pair up to race through one of the campus obstacle courses. I barely have time to look around before Steven literally *shoves* Taylor out of the way to get to me. Taylor elbows him, and they continue to wrestle with each other long enough for Sam to slip past them and say, "Hey, G. Wanna pair up?"

I open my mouth to agree, but Sam is dragged back into the scuffle between Taylor and Steven before I can get the words out. I take a hasty step back, shooting an alarmed glance around at the rest of the squad, just in case I'm hallucinating. A few feet away, Javi huffs a laugh and says, "If you wanna avoid the fanboys, you can pair up with me or Dec. We usually partner each other for shit like this, but at least neither of us is going to try to give you a tongue-bath midway through the course."

Again, I don't get a chance to answer before Declan rolls his eyes and says, "You guys pair up. I'll get somebody else." He turns to the group of struggling guys and barks, "Taylor, get over here."

Once Javi and I have taken our place in line at the start of the course, I take the moment away the others to mutter, "Dude, why does your buddy hate me so much? I haven't even done anything to him. Yet."

Javi snorts. "Who, Declan? He's just got a bug up his ass now that he's not the group favorite anymore. The guys weren't kidding when they said he's sort of our group's version of you. You know, he parties harder than any of us, he's always pranking the shit out of people, he hooks up with the hottest girls at Ward. He's the coolest guy I've ever met, and he just—you know, I think he's worried you're gonna give him a run for his money."

"Anderson! Santos!" Sergeant Smith yells. "Quit running your mouths, and get ready to run!"

I take my mark next to Javi and say, "I'm not trying to compete with him."

"Good," Javi says, laughing. "Declan doesn't respond well to competition."

Smith's whistle blows, and I take off at a sprint. The course is grueling, and by the time I'm done with it—ten seconds ahead of Javi, *not that I'm counting*—I'm so soaked with sweat that it seems reasonable to just strip my shirt off, even though it's January in New York. A few of the other guys have done the same, but none of them are sharing in Ryan Marten's white-hot stare. He's gazing at my abs like he wants to taste them. Almost as an experiment, I take a few steps away from the group and tilt my face down, pouring a generous amount of water from my bottle onto the back of my neck. It feels like a shock to my spine in the coldness of the air, but it's worth it for the way Ryan's eyes scrape almost desperately across my body, because all at once, I feel *powerful* in a way I can't remember feeling in so long. I get attention, but not like *this*. I get joking catcalls when I'm taking my shirt off in the school play; I get Jamie's constant, reassuring flirtation; I get Travis wanting me, but not enough to keep me.

I stand there, watching Ryan watching me, for I'm not sure how long. Eventually, Sergeant Smith dismisses us, and most of the squad starts towards the dorms. Before I can think better of it, I call after him, "Yo, Ryan." He turns to look at me again. Well, truthfully, so does half the squad. It occurs to me now that I haven't ever actually spoken to him before. Not like it matters. I jerk my head in the direction of the commuter showers and raise one eyebrow in silent question. A slow smile curls over his mouth, and he breaks away from the rest of the group to follow me.

"Guess you got bored quicker than you thought, huh, Anderson?" Steven calls after me, and a few of the other guys laugh, but their laughter doesn't matter to me ten minutes later, when I've got Ryan pinned up against one of the walls of my shower stall. The water stream is a shade too hot, and he's moaning so loudly that I want to clamp a hand over his mouth, but I can't—my hands are too busy holding his legs up around my waist, and he's got his arms around my neck, but I don't trust him to keep a solid enough grip that I can let go with one hand and still keep us both upright. I settle for kissing him, biting down on his bottom lip, then sucking his tongue into my mouth so I can swallow up all the groans that are probably about to annoy some other commuter into telling administration and getting us both expelled. I fuck him harder, faster, just to get my own orgasm out of the way. When I pull out, he's still hard enough that he must be aching, so I set him down on wobbly legs, then drop to my knees to suck him off. He comes with a shout that has another one of the guys in the locker room snapping, "Jesus Christ, get a room!"

I let Ryan's dick slip out of my mouth and say loudly, "We fucking did, you idiot. This is a locker *what?* A locker room."

Nothing gets around this school faster than news about somebody getting laid. By the time I get to breakfast—only ten minutes late, and refusing to acknowledge Ryan's attempts to invite me to sit at his table with him—word about my locker room exploits must have begun making the rounds, because Taylor gives me a mocking round of applause. Javi elbows me in the ribs as I sit down, and a few of the guys start to rag on me, but it's Sam's baffled frown that really sticks out.

"I thought you said you lived with somebody," he says. "Like, a guy. Won't he be pissed if you're hooking up with other dudes in the shower at school?"

My fork freezes halfway to my mouth. I... hadn't really considered how Travis might react, if he heard about this. It's not like we're together anymore, but there's still the promise of September, of things between us maybe going back to the utter perfection we'd gotten to have last month. Worse than that, the idea of him hooking up with someone he meets at his school when he starts there next week is enough to make me want to throw up. But my squadmates are looking at me, expecting an answer.

Or, they're expecting an answer worthy of Garen Anderson.

I force a shrug and say, "The guy I live with isn't my boyfriend. We're just roommates."

It's not a lie, but that doesn't make it feel any better to say.

4 months sober

"Gotta say, dude, this is almost as nasty as the time I watched you get stitches. And, heads up? That made me puke, so..."

"Stop whining," Ben orders, squeezing his eyes shut. "Your disgusted facial expressions are going to make me laugh, and then I'm going to end up with a gigantic scribble inked into my flesh for the rest of my life."

I chance another peek though my fingers at his side, but watching the droplets of blood and ink bead up under the needle of the tattoo gun is still enough to make me turn away, sticking my tongue out as far as it'll go so that everyone in the tattoo parlor knows how grossed out I am to be here right now.

Delilah—Ben's artist friend with the black-and-gray tattooed sleeves and the septum piercing—grins. "Guess *you'll* never be in the shop again after today, huh?"

"That's the weirdest part," Ben says, eyes fluttering open again. His pupils are blown wide, but I can't tell if it's because of the adrenaline spike from the pain, or because he's enjoying that pain in a uniquely Ben-like way. "Garen *has* a tattoo. It's not like he's unfamiliar with this process."

"Bullshit. All I have is *this*," I say, thrusting my bare wrist out to show Delilah the T marked into my skin. "It took like, ten minutes. We've been here for an hour, and we're still barely halfway done with your fuckin' rainbow pigeon."

Ben looks over his shoulder at Delilah. "Can you stop for a second, please?" She immediately rolls her chair back a few inches. Ben sits up, moving gingerly so as not to further disturb the half-finished tattoo that takes up about a third of his left side, placement mirroring the typewriter on his right side. I've been friends with this asshole for long enough that I should be expecting the hard punch he delivers to my shoulder, but I'm not, and I'm certainly not expecting the second punch to the same spot an instant later.

"Ow!" I yelp, flailing out of his reach. "The hell was that for?"

"It's not a rainbow pigeon, you scum-sucking piece of shit," Ben retorts. "It's a starling, and it's from one of my favorite poems, and it's my birthday present to myself. If you're going to be a tool about it, you can wait in the car."

Scowling, I rub my injured shoulder. "It's not your birthday until Wednesday, I can be as mean to you as I want right now. And if you hit me again, I'm not giving you the present I got you." It's a blatant lie; I have no use for the large box of piano sheet music sitting in the trunk of my car. Ben seems to know I'm bullshitting him, so I add, "Or the present Jamie gave me to give to you."

Ben blinks, pausing in the act of carefully spreading himself out over the chair once more so that Delilah can resume tattooing him. "Excuse me?"

"Yep," I say, pronouncing the word with a pop. "It was hilarious. Last time I saw him, he shoved this package into my hands, and he was like, 'the midget left his book at my apartment on New Year's—'"

"That's not a present," Ben interrupts. "*Invisible Monsters* is my book. The fact that I forgot it there a few weeks ago, and he's finally giving it back isn't—"

"And is *Invisible Monsters* a thousand pages long? Because the package he gave me is about this thick," I say, holding up my hand with my thumb and index finger about three inches apart. "I asked him how many books you left there, and he got all cagey about it and was like, 'just one, but I was at the bookstore the other day and I saw something I thought he'd like, you told me he was turning nineteen this month, shut up, don't judge our embarrassing, nerdy mating rituals.' I mean, I'm paraphrasing, but that's the gist of it."

"Jamie," Delilah muses, cocking her head to the side and looking at Ben. "Is that the same person as the James you've described?"

Ben shoots her a sharp glance over his shoulder, as if that'll silence her, but I can already feel a huge smile spreading across my face. "Why, yes! Yes, it is. And how exactly *did* our young Benjamin describe him?"

"Dee, if you say a single word—"

"Shut up, or I'll turn this bird into a yeti," she says, even though that's the least effective threat ever, because a yeti tattoo would be awesome. To me, she flashes a cheeky smile and says, "If I'm not much mistaken, James is the... what were your exact words, Ben? *'Southern boy who has a personality that's about as appealing as shooting acid into your veins, but who is painfully intelligent and has the most beautiful—'*"

"Stop talking, stop talking, stop talking," Ben groans.

"Don't ever stop talking, oh my god. The most beautiful what?"

"Don't say it," Ben pleads. "Seriously, if you tell Garen, he'll never let me live this down. I'll have to move to the west coast to escape the mockery, and I'm a New Englander, I'd never survive in California."

"You might fare well in Portland, if you stop shaving," I point out, clamping my palm over his mouth, knowing he can't struggle out of my grip unless he wants to drive the tattoo needles into his ribcage. I turn to Delilah and begin to whisper, over and over, "Tell me, tell me, tell me, tell—"

"Hands," she announces. "Apparently, your buddy James has—and I quote—" she drops her voice to mimic Ben's usual bored monotone, "*The most beautiful hands I have ever seen or felt.*"

Hearing that is like having my birthday come two months early. I turn my delighted eyes on Ben. "His hands? Really, that's what does it for you? Not his flawless face, his brilliant smile, his rockin' body, his almost-nine-inch cock. His hands? But his fingers are so *weird*. They're so skinny and long, like an alien—Jesus fuck!" I yank my hand away from Ben's mouth, staring down at the new impression of his teeth marked into my skin. I scowl at him. "I met with my shrink not three hours ago, and you know what she told me? That I shouldn't let boys abuse me, because I don't deserve to be a victim of violence. And you know what you just did? You abused me, you fucking toad."

Ben scoffs. "You're a liar. This was your first therapy session since starting at Patton. I bet all she wanted to talk about was whether or not your new classmates are being nice to you."

I snatch the latest issue of *Tattoo* off the table behind me and begin to page through it. The tattoo gun is making this hideous scraping noise as Delilah fills in part of the starling's feathers; I can't help but wince at the sound, and neither can Ben. His eyes are closed again, but after a minute or two, he slits one open to look at me. "Are they?"

"Are who what?" I ask.

"Are your new classmates being nice to you?" he asks. Sometimes, I think he forgets that he doesn't have to try to be a third parent to me, the way his own parents have always expected him to be a third set of hands to help out with his five siblings.

I groan and slouch down in my seat. "Ugh, yes, they're nice to me. And it's awful."

"You've got a weird definition of 'awful,' boy," Delilah chuckles.

"No, you don't understand. Every five minutes, they're like, hey *Garen*, come hang out with us.

Hey *Garen*, come study with us. Hey *Garen*, be on my relay team for PT—no, be on *my* team!—no, *mine*! Hey *Garen*, you have to come party with us this weekend. Hey *Garen*, let me jerk you off in the back row of Military Leadership Education tonight. Hey *Garen*, is it cool if I awkwardly hover outside your shower stall so that I can ogle you while you get changed even though it'll make us both late enough for breakfast that, by the time we get there, fuckin' Steven will have eaten all the bacon?"

"Your life is practically unbearable," Ben agrees. Both eyes are open now. "Did one of them seriously ask to jerk you off during your Leadership class?"

I drop the copy of *Tattoo* back on the table and bury my face in my hands. "Fucking Ryan. He's the absolute worst, seriously. I was only planning to hook up with the guy one time, but ever since that first time, he expects it to be a daily thing. He's not even my type—he's so goddamn scrawny, and he's kinda got, you know, one of those lisps? Not in a speech impediment way, just in a gay way, and that's fine for some people, I guess, but I like guys who are really *guys*."

Delilah carefully wets an area of Ben's skin to clear up some of the blood and ink residue that's obscuring the design. She wipes it away and comments, "You'd think that finding a manly man at a military school would be easy."

"It is," I agree. "It's finding a manly man who'll let you come in his mouth that's the problem. Like, the guy who sits next to me in English spends pretty much every class forwarding pictures of his dick to what seems to be half the girls from our sister school, which is pretty sleazy, but I guess it's justified, because dude's got a great piece. And there's another guy in my stats class who I wanna climb like a fuckin' tree, but my buddy Javi says the guy's got a girlfriend back home in Jersey, so he's obviously not going to make my 'to do' list anytime soon. For one thing, straight, and for another, *Jersey*. Oh, and there's this fucking *gorgeous* kid in my squad—he's got a great ass, got these super cute freckles, and you know how I am about freckles. He's competitive as fuck, possibly to the point of being a little bit scary and psychotic? But it works for him, because he's, hands down, the best guy in Whitman. Fast, strong, built, great shot—swear to god, first time I saw him hit a bullseye in target practice, I pitched a tent."

"Possibly too much information," Delilah says mildly.

"Oh whatever. I've only ever seen one person besides him hit the target dead-center, first shot, and that's *me*."

"So naturally, the only guy in your squad who you're attracted to is the one who reminds you the most of yourself," Ben sighs.

"The only guy in my squad who I'm attracted to is *straight*," I amend. "All the other guys think it's great, so of course they're always talking about the latest Ward chick he's fucking, or describing the random hot bitches he picks up when they're all out together. It's torture, because obviously, it would be completely inappropriate for me to say, 'hey, Declan, I know you're straight, but if you do a couple shots and let me choke on your cock a little bit, I bet I could make you forget that.' Besides, I think I annoy him."

"Imagine that," Ben murmurs. I glare at him. He hesitates, licks his lips, then adds, "Does Travis know you've got a crush on this Declan guy?"

I roll my eyes. "It's not a *crush*, man, I don't *like him*, like him. I just, you know, wanna nail him. And no, of course Travis doesn't—wait, why? Do you think I should tell him?"

Ben shrugs, and Delilah swats his shoulder, giving him a warning look. "We're in the home stretch of this piece, and I swear, if you fuck it up now by moving around, I'll knock you out and tattoo a dick on your forehead."

"Sorry," he says quickly, his whole body going still once more. "But, G... look, I was sort of under the impression that you and Travis were getting back together. Not now, maybe, but in the fall. I thought you

guys were set on your big post-year-of-sobriety reunion in September.”

I swallow and stare down at my hands, wishing I hadn’t dropped the magazine so that I’d have something to do right now. I feel like I’m a little kid, waiting to be chastised by his parent for doing something naughty. I say, “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Well, if you’re getting back together, don’t you think you should maybe keep it in your pants for the time being?” he asks slowly. “How would *you* feel, if Travis was sleeping with a bunch of randoms at Columbia?”

Devastated. Destroyed. Betrayed. But it’s easier to roll my eyes and say, “I’m not saying that wouldn’t be awkward, but that’s why I’m not going to bother telling Travis. He can do whatever he wants at school, as long as I don’t have to hear about it, and I’m free to do the same. I don’t—Ben, what do you expect from me? I’m not going to be celibate for the next eight months, for fuck’s sake.”

“It’s not *unheard* of. Before you and I first hooked up, I hadn’t had sex in nearly a year.”

“You’re not *me*. I seriously cannot go that long without sex. It’s just not an option. And if Travis won’t date me until September, he doesn’t have the right to get pissed about who I fuck until then,” I snap. “It’s not—Jesus, dude. He’s not my boyfriend, alright? He’s my friend, and he’s my roommate, but he’s not my boyfriend anymore, and I’m not doing anything wrong.”

“Okay,” Ben says simply, and I scowl down at my hands. I need a fucking cigarette, but I’m still trying to stick to that idiotic New Year’s resolution to quit. I paw through the pockets of my jacket until I find a half-empty packet of nicotine gum, then pop a piece into my mouth, chomping down on it viciously to be sure that Ben can see how pissed I am at him. He rolls his eyes and reaches over to knock his knuckles against my wrist. “Don’t be a brat, G. I just want to make sure you’re not doing shit now that’s going to ruin whatever you have in mind for the fall.”

“It’s *fine*,” I say, wishing I believed it.

135 days sober

Travis has been at Columbia for nearly two weeks before I realize I haven’t asked him a single question about it. That thought hits me like a kick to the teeth, halfway through some stupid movie I’ve got playing while I work on the posterboard for my AP Government & Politics presentation. At once, I turn to stare at Travis over my shoulder. He’s lying on his stomach on the couch, paging through his math textbook with a frown on his face. My stomach lurches—I didn’t know he had signed up for a math course. I don’t know *any* of his classes, because it never crossed my mind to ask.

There is a strong possibility that I am the worst person ever. At the very least, I’m the worst roommate slash friend, slash ex-boyfriend, slash possibly future boyfriend.

My legs are folded up under me, wedged halfway under the coffee table where I’m working; I stretch them out to relieve some of the cramping, then wriggle backwards until my back hits the couch and I can twist to drape an arm over the small of his back. The edge of his mouth twitches like the beginning of a smile, but he doesn’t look up from his work. I slump across his back, making a pillow out of his spine.

“Hey,” I say. “What’re you working on?”

“Econ homework,” he says.

“Do you like your class?” I press. He shrugs. I try again. “How many other classes are you taking?” He holds up four fingers. “Do you like them?”

He looks over his shoulder at me. There's a small smile on his lips, but it doesn't really reach his eyes. "Yeah, I guess. Some of them. I like my engineering classes, but my history class is pretty boring. One of my core requirements is this psychology course I'm taking with James, which is... nice. You know, to have somebody in my class who I'm already friends with."

Later tonight, I'll have to text Jamie and thank him for being a decent friend to Travis even though I've had my head too far up my own ass to be that. For now, the only thing I can think to do is slip my hand beneath the hem of his t-shirt and rub my knuckles over the ridges of his spine. It's not exactly appropriate, and it's sure as hell not in keeping with the platonic tone we're trying to set for life in the new house, but it's something that I know he likes. Sure enough, he pillows his head on his arms and sighs, his eyelids fluttering shut. I push his shirt higher up his back to rest my chin on his skin and ask, "Have you met any cool people? You know, made any friends?"

The relaxation of a moment ago is gone in an instant. I can *feel* him tensing up underneath me, suddenly enough that I sit up again. He shoves his shirt back down, knocking my hand off him. "I've—there are some people in my classes who are alright, I guess. I have people I talk to sometimes. But it's... I mean, I wouldn't say I'm *friends* with a lot of people? Right now, I'm mostly focusing on, you know, myself. My classes, my studying." He swallows and turns his eyes back towards his textbook. "Columbia is, uh... it's different from LHS, that's for sure. And New York is different from Lakewood."

"Well, of course. And that's okay," I say quickly. "You're making a big leap from high school to college in a short period of time, so it makes sense that you wanna, you know, get settled or whatever. You'll have a chance to meet more people later in the semester."

The moment the words are out, I realize how completely patronizing they sound. Travis' mouth is fixed in a thin line, and he nods without speaking. I wrack my brain for something to say that'll make me sound less like I'm his mother, but before I can come up with anything, he clears his throat and says, "Yeah. Exactly." He jerks his chin towards the coffee table. "You should get back to work on your project. What class is it for, anyway?"

"Government and Politics," I sigh, turning back to the posterboard. I'm not sure how I managed to fuck this up and make him shut down so quickly, but it's obvious that I did. I blink down at the scraps of paper I've been attempting to even out so that I can glue them to my poster. They sort of look like I closed my eyes and attacked them with a kitchen knife. "Um, so, there's no casual, inoffensive way to ask this," I say, "but... do you have any of those craft blades you and Ben are always using to slash your wrists? 'Cause I can't cut a straight line with normal scissors, and I'm almost nineteen. A sloppy posterboard is just embarrassing, at my age."

Travis laughs. "Sorry, I don't think we've got any razors in the house. I haven't... used any. Not since I got back on the meds. But here, let me help." He slides off the couch to sit next to me on the floor. "If you pencil in the edges with a ruler and cut along the line, you'll be fine." A ruler. Right. A basic school utensil that I should probably own. At my blank look, Travis grins and gestures to the stairs. "There's one in my room. Go grab it, and I'll fix these for you."

"You're a goddamn treasure," I say, tousling his hair and scrambling to my feet. My legs are still mostly asleep, so the jog upstairs very nearly ends in disaster, but I manage to make it down the hall without tripping and killing myself. Truthfully, I haven't spent much time in Travis' room at all, so I'm a little surprised by the lack of furniture. He doesn't have a desk; his bed is pushed up against the house's front wall, and as far as I can tell, he sits on the bed and uses the deep window ledge as a writing surface. That's where his books and notebooks are stacked, and next to that, there's a coffee mug with some pens and a ruler poking out. I crawl over the bed to steal it, but halfway into my retreat, something catches my eye.

My name is scrawled across the top margin of one of the notebook pages, like the beginnings of a letter, or the way I title my songs. Frowning, I tug it closer. Most of the words below that are scribbled out, but not well enough to make them indistinguishable.

Garen,

It sounds cliché to tell you this isn't your fault, but I need you to know that it's true. You're the only--

Writing this letter is kind of impossible. I don't know how to explain to someone as brave and strong as you why I have to do this. You've been through more in the past year than I've--

I'm terrified of what this will do to--

By the time you read this, I will probably be--

I need to start by telling you that I love you. You're the best thing that has ever happened to me, and I am so grateful to have had the chance to be with you. But as much as I love you, I think I might hate myself more--

I can't do this anymore. I know that makes me cowardly and selfish, but every breath I take feels more and more like a gasp, and I don't know how--

This is the hardest letter I've ever written. Part of me wonders if this is how you felt when you left those letters last summer, before you went to Ohio. But you came back, and I--

Everything hurts. I've never--

I don't want to be alive anymore. I can't be alive anymore.

I don't know how many minutes pass before I sit back, my bottom lip clamped between my teeth to keep me from being sick all over Travis' bed. Obviously, he hasn't acted on his impulses yet, but his pen is still resting on his notebook. These aren't old drafts, leftover from that November morning in the Lakewood High School parking lot, when he'd confessed that a poorly-written suicide note was the only thing separating him from death. These are new, written as recently as last night. Maybe even today.

I snatch the notebook off the window ledge, sending the pen through the crack between wall and bed, and head for the door, grabbing the ruler only as an afterthought. When I return to the living room, Travis says, "Took you long enough. I know my room is messy, but—"

I drop the open notebook on the coffee table, right on top of the posterboard. Travis freezes, eyes fixed on the paper, hands clutching the pair of scissors. That unnerves me; it's not like I think he's going to commit hari kari on top of my AP Government project, but I wish he wasn't holding onto a sharp object like a lifeline. Slowly, he reaches out and flips the notebook shut, slipping it under the couch and out of sight.

"Can I have the ruler?" he asks. His expression is blank, and his tone is neutral. It makes me want to hit him.

"Are you going to kill yourself?" I ask.

He squints. "With the ruler?"

I drop the ruler on the couch. "Forget the ruler. Forget the project, Travis. What the fuck was that paper? Were you—is that *practice*? Are you planning to—"

"It's just a paper, it doesn't mean anything," he snaps. "And it's none of your business. Why would you think it's okay for you to read whatever you find in my room? It's private, you—"

"Considering I'm the one who'd be finding your body, you bet your ass it's my—" I can't even finish my

sentence. The thought of that actually occurring—of finding him hanging from the ceiling fan, or bleeding out in the bathtub, or lying on his bedroom floor with an empty pill bottle in his hand, just like Bree said she found him when he was fifteen—makes it impossible to breathe.

“You wouldn’t find my body. I wouldn’t ever put you through that,” Travis says quietly, eyes on his folded hands. “I’d never do it here, where you live, where you couldn’t escape it. I’d either do it in a way that meant I’d never be found, or where a stranger would find me. Worst case scenario, all you’d have to do is identify my remains at the city morgue.”

I hit the floor next to him and yank his head around so he has to meet my eyes. “No, you moron. Worst case scenario is *you being dead*. Trust me, dude, your body’s great and all, but finding it would not be the traumatizing part of you killing yourself. Everything else would be.”

Travis’ mouth hangs slightly open for a minute while he tries to formulate a response, then clicks shut as he turns away. I watch his Adam’s apple bob as he swallows, then watch his shaking fingers comb through his hair. Finally, he closes his eyes and says, “I just don’t think I can do this anymore. I know that doesn’t make sense to you—maybe it doesn’t make sense, period. But feeling like this, like every day is more painful and unbearable than the day before it... it’s exhausting. I just want it to be over.”

“You don’t think you can do this anymore? You just want it to be over? Trav, you sound like you’re giving yourself an ‘it’s not you, it’s me’ speech. You’re acting totally blase about this, talking about it like it’s a fucking breakup—no, wait, scratch that,” I say, holding up a hand to silence him even though he hasn’t tried to cut me off. “You are—I swear to fuckin’ god—discussing suicide more calmly and casually than you discussed our breakup. You realize that, right?”

He hunches his shoulders in what might be a shrug, if his body wasn’t already limp enough to be slumped back against the couch. “Well, maybe that bothered me more than this does.”

“Being single would bother you more than being dead?” I say flatly. “Seriously?”

“Okay, wow, no? Don’t fucking say it like that, you’re making me sound like some crazy stalker—and, alright, for the record? The guy who tried to shoot himself in the head after our relationship went to shit would *not* get to judge me, if that was the case.” He scrambles up off the floor, onto his feet, and walks towards the kitchen. I follow him so closely that I step on his heels twice; he shoots me a dirty look. “And it’s—I didn’t mean that the breakup bothered me and the idea of being dead doesn’t. Of course I’m not exactly fond of the idea. I mean, I’m human. And I’m not crazy.”

It’s the second time he’s said that, but I’m still not entirely sure I’d agree.

“All I meant is that things were actually going well between us, before you told me that you wanted us to stop seeing each other once we moved here. It was a surprise. But waking up every morning and wishing I hadn’t? That’s... that’s not a surprise anymore. I’m used to feeling like everything in my life is just too much. I’m used to not wanting to be here. And th-that’s not okay, Garen. I can’t spend the rest of my life feeling this way. Christ, I don’t think I can even spend another *month* feeling this way.”

“Yeah, which is why you need to get *help*,” I say. He moves towards the kettle we keep on the back burner of the stove; I yank it out of reach and head to the sink to fill it for him. He rolls his eyes, but I don’t care—I need to feel like I’m doing something to help him, even if it’s something as lame as helping him make tea. “I think you should see someone about this.”

“I already am, you know that. I’m on anti-depressants, I have a therapist—”

“No, what you *have* is a once-monthly, fifteen-minute appointment with some guy who shouldn’t even have a fucking license,” I snap. “I mean, does he even talk to you, like, about your problems? About why you feel the way you do? Or does he just dope you up and think that’ll solve everything? It’s not normal, Trav, it’s not how you’re supposed to practice medicine.”

He sneers. "Oh, so, now you're a doctor? Because last time I checked, you were in fucking high school, not med school—"

"Yeah, and I'm also in *therapy*. Do you know how many hours I've spent dicking around Doctor Howard's office, talking to her about everything? Do you know how many weeks of daily sessions it took before she'd even consider trying to diagnose me with borderline personality disorder? 'Cause I've got news for you, dude: your shrink isn't supposed to medicate you just to shut you up. He's supposed to help you."

"The medication *does* help. I mean, it doesn't make me happy, and it doesn't make me feel like—I don't cut myself anymore, okay? Not when I'm on the right pills." He opens the cabinet above the stove and digs out a tea bag, then raises it towards me, almost in question. I nod; he grabs another for me, tosses each one into the bottom of a mug, and sighs. "The problem isn't the pills, alright? Or Doctor Baker. The problem is me."

I cross my arms over my chest. "That's bullshit." If someone as fucked up as me has to learn not to say that, then someone as perfect as Travis doesn't have a right to even consider it. "The problem is that you tried to kill yourself when you were fifteen years old, and your dumb bitch of a mom freaked out and handled it in exactly the wrong way. She sent you to some fuckin' psych ward instead of trying to understand what was happening to you, and she found you a shrink who'd put you on meds so she didn't have to deal with it. And I don't trust the opinion of any doctor who would put a fifteen-year-old boy on Prozac, okay? In three years, he hasn't even changed the *dosage*. That's not right."

The kettle starts to whistle on the stove. Travis doesn't even bother to reach for it, already knowing I'm going to elbow him out of the way and pour the water over the tea bags myself. For a minute or two, we stand there in silence, waiting for the bags to steep. Finally, I snatch them out and shove one of the mugs towards Travis. He drinks his plain, but I have to dump a few spoonfuls of sugar into mine before I can drink it. I drain nearly half my cup before I realize that he's only taken that first sip, apparently preferring to gnaw on his thumbnail while he watches me drink. I catch him by the collar of his t-shirt and tow him closer and closer, until I can wrap an arm around his waist and bury my face against the side of his neck.

"I need you," I murmur. "I don't know what I'd do without you, T. And I know you're afraid that you'll always feel this way, but you won't. I need you to believe me, and I need you to let me help."

One of his arms is still crushed between our bodies as he continues to chew on his nail, but the other arm snakes carefully around my shoulders. "How can you help me?"

Those are the words he says, but I think that *how can anyone help me* are the words he really means.

"When I first told Doc I was moving here, she said she could find me a referral to a therapist in the area. Somebody she respected, you know? Tomorrow, I'm going to call her and ask her to recommend someone for you. Stay on your meds for now, until your new doctor evaluates you and tells you whether or not you should phase them out. And when you're not okay, when you feel like you want to hurt yourself, when you feel like you want to *die*, you come fucking find me, okay? Talk to me. Trust me. It—That's what I do, I mean, with you. And I need you to know that you can do the same."

He wriggles his trapped arm free and wraps it around my shoulders, too. "Kay."

"I mean it," I warn.

"Okay," he sighs. "Jesus, Garen. I'll let you get me a referral, I'll talk to you about my pathetic problems, I'll—I-I won't do it, okay? I won't write the rest of the note. And I won't go through with it. I'll try to work my shit out."

"Good," I say, stepping back and grabbing him by the wrists, dragging him towards the stairs. I can feel his questioning eyes on me, so I glance over my shoulder and say, "Life-coaching you is exhausting."

We're going to bed."

"We are?" he asks, emphasizing the plural ever so slightly. "Did one of our bedrooms suddenly disappear?"

I shove him down the hall and into his bedroom. "Shut up and get in the bed. We're not—I'm not trying to make a move on you, okay? I just..." I swallow. *I just want to be close to you.* "I won't be able to sleep at all tonight if you're in another room. I know it sounds so fucking stupid, but I want to be able to wake up, roll over, and see that you're safe. Please, man. Come to bed."

He doesn't say a word, just strips off his jeans and crawls into bed, leaving the blankets pulled back so that I can join him.

136 days sober

I don't sleep, of course. For the next few hours, I lie awake, watching the rise and fall of Travis' chest, listening to his deep breaths and occasional mumbles, hooking a leg over his when he rolls over and kicks out unknowingly. I check the time on my cell phone every once in a while. At around quarter after four, I slip out from under the covers. I usually get my school shit together the night before—find all my books, set up the coffee maker to start brewing automatically at four, iron my uniform and pack it carefully into my duffel—but I was pretty preoccupied last night, so I have to rush around now, trying to locate everything I need to bring.

Every step that brings me further from Travis makes me feel a little bit sicker. I can't figure out which would be worse—waking him up now, just to say that I'm leaving for school, or letting him wake up alone in a few hours. He's *not* alone; that was the whole fucking point of sleeping in his bed last night, letting him know that I want to be here for him.

A note, I eventually decide. I can leave a note on the nightstand or something, just a quick *I'm here if you need me* sort of thing. But when I try to scare up a notebook, I find myself standing next to the coffee table and holding the paper that's covered in false starts to his suicide note. My stomach turns over. Fuck it. An *I'm here if you need me* isn't even close to enough.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I sink to my knees and drop the notebook back on the table. My project supplies are still scattered all over the place; I grab a fat green marker and scrawl across the top margin of the suicide draft, *REASONS TO TEAR THIS FUCKING PAPER UP*. Next, I reach for the stack of index cards and start to write down every single reason—no matter how idiotic—for him to stay alive.

Because you won't always feel this way, I start. Might as well go for honesty, right? *Because you once wrestled a gun out of my hands when I was having this same problem. Because you saved my life, so fuck if I'm going to let you end yours.*

Some of the reasons are mostly to make him laugh--*Because I can't afford the rent on this house by myself. Because our fucking espresso machine is possessed by a demon that only you know how to deal with. Because you already paid your Columbia tuition for the semester. Because your sister would kick my ass if anything happened to you.*

And then, when I've run out of jokes, I start to pour out every wish I've got. Every dream for the future, every secret hope I've been hesitating to mention.

Because I want you to introduce me to your father one day, I write.

Because I want to see you graduate from college.

Because I want my kids to blow shit up for their science fair projects, but I don't know how to do that in a

safe or legal way, so I want their other dad to be someone smart enough to swing that. Like an engineer, maybe.

Because I want you to be there when I reach ten years clean and sober.

Because I want to know what your arms will look like after your scars have faded.

When I run out of cards—because I don't know that I'll ever run out of reasons for Travis to stay alive—I stack them on top of the suicide note, grab a roll of tape, and head upstairs. His bedroom door is still slightly open, and he's still asleep, occasionally shifting further and further into the space I've vacated. I tape the note right in the center of his door, where I'm sure he'll see it first thing. Then, all around it, I tape the rest of the cards, like a giant web of reasons why he is loved. I'm going to be late for PT, but I still take the time to kiss Travis' forehead and tuck the blankets in around him before I go.

When I get home from MLEP that night, Travis has already left for school. It's an hour or two before I bother to go upstairs, but when I do, I find that my bed has been covered in the remains of the suicide note, torn up and sprinkled around like confetti, and all of the notecards are still taped up on the inside of his door.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“And though I chose to be clean, though I may not have known who I was going to become, a discordant and primal wail came up from within me in early sobriety: *I used to be a fucking legend!*” –Sacha Z. Scoblic

145 days sober

The idea hits me on—well, okay, it doesn't hit *me*, really. It's not my idea, and I refuse to take any sort of responsibility for it. The idea hits *Jamie* on Super Bowl Sunday, and he is quick to relay it to me. We're curled up on his couch under a fluffy white blanket, having spent the majority of the day carefully testing my theory that I should still be able to smoke pot without getting cravings for any other kind of drug. So far, the theory is a success; we had decided that it would make sense for me to smoke alone at first, just so that Jamie could be straight in case I started to feel off. I'd packed a bowl and taken maybe half a dozen hits over the course of about ten minutes, and then we had waited to see if I'd have some sort of meltdown. I didn't. Which was fantastic, because for the past four years, Jamie and I have had our own Super Bowl tradition of getting unbelievably stoned, eating a dozen cupcakes each, and then making out while we watch the *Puppy Bowl* on Animal Planet.

“I have the best idea,” he whispers suddenly. I slit one eye to look at him; he's staring past me, gaze focused on the television, which is so fucking *rude*, because he's supposed to be focusing on kissing me back. I look back at the screen. A Golden Retriever puppy is chewing on a stuffed squirrel. A fat little bulldog puppy waddles over and steps right on his face. I press my mouth against Jamie's neck to stifle my laughter. He tugs insistently on my hair. “Garen, I have the best idea.”

“So do I,” I say in a sing-song voice, sneaking the tips of my fingers into the waistband of his pants.

He catches my wrist and warns, “Hey, you stop that right now. I told you, we need to keep everything above the waist, or Rachael will have my balls. She's already gotten in the habit of whining about how much more time I spend with you than with her.”

“Ugh. The people you date *always* end up whining about that. It's obnoxious, you should just stay single forever.” I shove my hand up his shirt instead and tweak one of his nipples. He tries to shove me off the couch, but only after he arches into the touch, so I'm counting that as a win. He seems to have already forgotten his brilliant idea, so I sit back a little and prompt, “And the best idea is what, exactly? That we pack another bowl? Because, yes, that.”

“Yes, that,” Jamie agrees, sitting up and reaching for the plastic baggie of weed on the coffee table. “But that wasn't my idea. Listen, Garen—you should get a *dog*.”

I look up at the screen again. The camera is focused on a tiny ball of fluff that might be a Pomeranian. I frown; that seems like cheating, somehow. She's the same size as all the other puppies, but most of them are going to grow up to be five times her size, so she must be older than they are now, and that's just not fair. “Well, if I did, I sure as hell wouldn't get a Pomeranian,” I say. “Cheating little rat. No sense of sportsmanship, look at that thing. I hope it loses. Well—does anyone really lose the Puppy Bowl?”

“I imagine I'll feel very much like a loser in a few hours, when I realize that I spent my entire afternoon shame-eating half the stock of Sprinkles Cupcakes and watching a bunch of puppies play in a box.” Despite his words, he stops packing the bowl, reaches for another cupcake, and repeats, “You should get a dog.”

I smack the cupcake out of his hand and back into the box. He makes a wounded noise, but I elbow him in the ribs and say, “Oh my god, eat from your own box, you fucking idiot. That one was mine.”

“You are the worst person,” he groans. “Didn't anyone ever teach you to *share*?”

"Didn't anyone ever teach you to not eat shit you're allergic to?" I demand. "Oh wait, yes. Your mom taught you that when you were like, four. The ones with the pink frosting are strawberry, so you can't have any. Because I'm not taking you to the ER if you go into anaphylactic shock."

Jamie glares at me and selects one of his own cinnamon-sugar cupcakes. I grin as he carefully peels off the wrapper, shoves the entire cupcake into his mouth, and then delicately brushes the crumbs off his hands and into the box, like that makes what he just did any less disgusting. Whenever we smoke together, Jamie's lovely Southern manners are the first thing to go; his pants are usually second. Then, because he can't stop harping on this, he says for a third time, "You should get a dog. This bakery makes cupcakes for dogs."

"Any cupcake is a cupcake for a dog," I point out. "You just take the cupcake, and then you like... you know, feed it to a dog."

"I'm pretty sure they tend to throw up, if you do that," Jamie says skeptically. "These cupcakes, the ones this bakery makes—they don't have sugar, I suppose? I saw a sign this morning. It said the frosting is made out of yogurt instead. But I don't think they're made out of dog food, so I bet a human could eat them, too."

I let my head roll back and to the side so that I can look at him. "Sometimes you're a real fatass, you know that?" He hums his agreement and breaks off a piece of a chocolate marshmallow cupcake from his box. For a few minutes, we watch the puppies play. An Akita trips and falls into the water dish, and we both chuckle. When the kitten cheerleaders appear on screen for the halftime show, I turn back to Jamie and say, "How mad would Travis be, do you think?"

He's still staring at the screen, but after a minute of silence, he turns his eyes slowly towards me. "About what? The kitten half-time show?" I stare at him. He stares back. Another minute passes, and then he shrugs, biting down on his lip like he's trying to stop himself from laughing. "I don't know. Does he have something against kittens?"

"You're—I'm confiscating this, okay?" I say, sliding the pipe to the other end of the coffee table, where his stoned ass can't reach it. "I meant, how mad would Travis be if I got a dog?"

"Well, when I suggested it, I meant that you should talk to him about it and see if he'd like it, too. Y'all are roommates, so something like that should be a mutual decision. Not something you just spring on him."

The camera zooms in on a basset hound that doesn't seem to be doing much of anything, other than carefully nosing a tennis ball back and forth in a corner by himself. My heart melts a little bit. "No, fuck that. 'Cause like, I know Travis. He'll be all boring and practical about it, like, 'no, Garen, we only just moved here, it's too early to get a dog.' Or, 'you've never had a pet before, you wouldn't know how to take care of it.' But I'd totally take care of it, you know? I'd take it to the vet for check-ups, and I'd feed it, and I'd play with it in the backyard and take it for walks and stuff. It would totally be my bro. And I could adopt one from a shelter, instead of getting one from a breeder, because like, then I'd be giving a good home to a dog in need. Like Sarah McLachlan is always telling me to. And if I just kinda show up with a dog and shove it at him, he won't make me take it back. He'll be super pissed, but he'll let me keep it, and he'll totally learn to love it after a couple of days. It's pretty much the method I used to get him to like me."

"Let the record show that I am firmly against the idea of you getting a dog without talking to your roommate first," Jamie says, thumbing at the screen of his iPhone. "That being said... I'm currently looking at the website of an independently-owned pet store that mostly sells supplies, but also runs some sort of pet rescue service for people who'd like to adopt dogs instead of buying from a breeder. They're on 85th, which is about seven blocks that way." He points towards the kitchen.

"That's so close," I whisper. "Can we go? I want to go. Jamie, this was your idea, now you have to let me go. And you should get one, too. Then our dogs can be *friends*. Can you even have pets in this building?"

He shrugs. "Yes, but only if I'm willing to pay a truly astonishing pet fee. Which I am most assuredly *not*. Anyway, I'm fairly confident in saying that we are much too stoned to be making this decision right now," he announces. "How 'bout I call the shop to see what dogs they have there now, and you call your roommate to tell him about this horrible idea of ours? Then, we can maybe take a nap, sleep off some of the high. Shower, so that we don't smell like an impending drug conviction. And *then* we can go look at dogs. Alright?"

I nod. He wanders towards the kitchen to make his call, and I... sort of make my call. That is to say, I dial Travis' number, and when he picks up, I blurt out, "*I'm adopting a dog and you can't stop me*," freak out, and hang up on him. I hear Jamie's voice falter. When I peek over the back of the couch, he's looking at me like he's very embarrassed for me. I shrug. My phone vibrates on my lap, and I shoot it a panicked look.

"I'm sorry, can you hold on for just a moment, please?" Jamie says pleasantly into his phone. He covers the mouthpiece and hisses, "For Christ's sake, Garen, can we at least pretend you're an adult? Pick up the fucking phone!"

He returns to his own call. I sigh and answer my phone. "Hi."

"Hi," Travis says, and I can tell he's trying not to laugh. "You wanna run that by me again?"

"No," I say, and he doesn't try to hold back his laughter anymore. When he's quiet again, I say, "Jamie and I are watching the Puppy Bowl. There are so many cute dogs, Travis, oh my god. And they keep showing these commercials about pet adoption, and I want... that. I want to adopt a dog. And Jamie found this place that does like, rescue stuff? These dogs need *homes*, Travis. They need someone to *save* them, Travis."

"Stop saying my name so much," Travis says. "And uh, just because they need homes doesn't mean that they need to have a home with *us*. Pets are a big responsibility, and neither of us has *had* a dog before. Plus, you're in school all day, and I leave the house at one for work and class, so the dog would be left alone for about five hours every afternoon anyway."

"Travis Daniel McCall, these dogs are lonely and sad and homeless," I say fiercely. "And this time last year, so was I. Sort of. So I know how much it sucks, okay? Like, they just want someone to love them and play with them and be there for them, and that could totally be us."

There's a noise that sounds very much like Travis has let his forehead thunk down onto our kitchen table. "Really, G? You're playing the 'my dad kicked me out of the house and I became a drug addict because I was so sad and lonely' card? Are you trying to convince me that some German Shepherd is going to start shooting heroin if I don't let you adopt it?"

"Pets can help people cope with their depression," I say, having no idea if I'm pulling this out of my ass or not. I think I remember hearing someone say something to this effect during one of my group therapy sessions last fall, so why not? "It's because they're so friendly and affectionate and stuff. They just wanna love all over people and make friends. They, like—wouldn't that be awesome, though? If you could come home every night, and there'd be someone there who just wanted to climb all over you and lick your face and have you pet it?"

"I already have someone who does that," Travis says dryly.

"Fuck off," I say, wriggling down into the blanket. "I think it's a good idea. I think *you'd* be happier if there was someone to pick up on your mood and shower you with affection and make sure you're okay, and I think *I'd* be happier if I had an awesome buddy to go play with in the yard, and I think the *dog* would be happier living with us than in a store. Come on. It's a good idea. You know it's a good idea."

He heaves a huge sigh, like I am the actual fucking worst. I prop my phone between my ear and shoulder so that I can cross my fingers for luck. Finally, after what feels like five minutes, he says, "Fine. We can

get a dog.” My heart jumps, but he hastens to add, “You have to make sure it’s one that’s compatible with us, though, okay? We don’t know anything about training an animal, so it needs to already be housebroken. It can’t be vicious. And our neighbors are like, *right there*, so try to find one that doesn’t bark all the time, because I don’t want them to call the cops with noise complaints. And don’t get some tiny little princess dog that looks like a fucking rat, either. Even if this means you have to wait and get it some other day. Don’t just pick out a random dog because you want one right now, okay? Get a dog that’s good for us.”

I’m pretty sure that when he says *us*, he means *us as roommates*, or *our house*, but it feels like a different sort of *us*. I bury my face in the blanket. “Are you sure? You have to be positive you’re cool with this, dude, because I swear to god, I’m going to go look at dogs tonight, and I’m probably going to come home with one. So you need to be sure.”

“I’m sure, you idiot,” he says.

“Let’s get a huge pitbull and name it Princess Jellybean,” I whisper.

“Let’s do literally anything but that.”

He hangs up before I can argue for Princess Jellybean. It ends up being an irrelevant conversation anyway, because when Jamie and I get to the pet shop later that night, Brian, the enthusiastic owner, tells us that all of their current rescues already have names.

“There are currently thirteen animals available for adoption. All of our dogs are rescues between the ages of two—that’s Omelette—and fourteen—that’s Sage,” he says, bouncing a little in place, like he’s as excited about me getting a dog as I am. Impossible; *no one* is as excited as I am right now. “They’re all fixed and up-to-date on their shots. Most of ‘em are mixed breeds, and some of them have health problems, but nothing that can’t be handled by a caring owner.”

“I’m sure they’re all wonderful in their own way,” I say generously, and Brian beams at me.

“What kind of health problems?” Jamie asks, because he’s a fun-sucker.

Brian shrugs. “Various things. Sage has bad hips, Munchkin has some pretty heavy vision problems, Snowflake has sensitive skin that sometimes results in a rash, if the right dog shampoo isn’t used on her. I can give you a full report on any dog you want to know more about, but I think we’d better start with a couple questions, just so I have a better idea of what you’re looking for.”

His “couple questions” feel a lot more like an interrogation. He seems wary about this being my first pet, but thrilled that I live in a house with a decently-sized, fenced-in backyard. I tell him all about the house schedule—how the dog would be with Travis for the entire morning, but alone for four and a half hours until I get home from school—and reassure him that I’m a pretty typical eighteen-year-old dude, so it’s not like I have anything delicate that the dog could knock over and break. I admit that I don’t know anyone in the area who owns any dogs that mine could socialize with, but that I’d be totally willing to take it to the park or whatever. He starts to ask whether I’d prefer a smaller, calmer breed or a bigger, high-energy one, but Jamie laughs over the end of his sentence; for the past five minutes, I’ve been fidgeting with a tennis ball I found on the counter, tossing it back and forth between my hands, periodically bouncing it on the floor.

I flash Brian a lopsided, sheepish smile. “The thing is, I’m sort of a spazz? Like, my attention span isn’t the greatest, and I can’t really sit still.”

“If he could find a way to split himself in half, he could be his own puppy,” Jamie agrees.

“So, you want something you can really play with,” Brian clarifies. “Lots of energy, willing to chase toys, likes to play games. Maybe a breed you could take on a run, or to a dog park?” I nod quickly. “Alright!

Well, like I said, we've got thirteen dogs here, but there are maybe four with health problems that limit their mobility. Then, we've got another three who are getting pretty up there, age-wise, so they won't be able to play around as much as you seem to want. Two of our high-energy dogs are small breeds. One's a mix between a Yorkie and a Jack Russell, and the other's a mix between a Chihuahua—"

"Nope," I say, shaking my head emphatically from side to side. "Nope, I don't want either of those. I'm on strict orders from my roommate not to bring home anything that could ever be described as 'rat-like' or 'princess-y.'"

Brian grimaces. "Yeah, Cocoa Puff is a sweetheart, but he's definitely pretty princess-like. Well, why don't I bring you both back where we keep our dogs, and you can meet some that might be compatible with you?"

I practically dive into the back room after him, and holy shitcakes, it's like stepping into dog heaven. There are crates all along the back wall, and the moment we've stepped into the room, each and every one of the dogs loses their shit, barking and yipping and wagging their tails. I have to clamp a hand over my mouth to stop myself from beaming like a child, but Jamie must see me move, because he laughs and pinches at my side. I don't even care enough to pinch back, because I'm about to get a *doggie*. No amount of mockery can ruin the awesomeness of that.

Brian grabs a pad of neon orange sticky notes from the table near the door and strides up to the crates, marking four of the crates with notes. "These are the dogs I think might be a good fit for you. Bailey, Lulu, Rocco, and Omelette."

"Awesome, I'll take them all," I decide, words muffled a little by the hand I've still got over my mouth. Jamie stomps on my foot, even though he knows I can't feel it through my boot. I drop my hand and clear my throat, trying for a more adult response. "I mean, tell me about them."

The first dog, Bailey, is a gigantic monster of a mutt, probably waist-high on me. Brian tells me that she has some springtime allergies, so she needs to be bathed more frequently in the warmer months, just to keep pollen and dust and whatever out of her fur. Her tongue is lolling out of her mouth in a wide, stupid smile. After checking with Brian to be sure I'm not going to get bitten for doing so, I slip the tips of my fingers into the cage. Bailey gives them an enthusiastic lick, then beats her tail back and forth so enthusiastically that the whole crate shakes.

Lulu, the Retriever-Lab mix, is definitely the most sedate of the four dogs. She wags her tail when I come closer to her crate, but other than that, I don't get much of a reaction out of her. When I hook my fingers through the cage, just to see if she'll move, she sniffs at them, then basically decides she doesn't give a fuck, and goes back to chewing on the stuffed chicken in her cage.

"Wow, she couldn't be less impressed with you if she tried," Jamie observes.

"Yeah, I can see that," I say, frowning.

Brian laughs. "So, not for you?"

I shake my head. I get enough apathy from the humans I know; I don't need it from my own dog, too.

The next dog, Rocco, is a beautiful Doberman-Shepherd mix. He's the only one of the dogs who's sitting, but when I step closer, he barks in what I'm choosing to interpret as a greeting. I grin, and he barks again, like he's trying to prove that he knows what smiles mean. He stands up, turns in a little circle, and sits down again. I laugh. "Is he like, showing off his skills? Proving that he knows how to sit?"

"Might be," Brian chuckles. "Rocco's one of our better trained rescues. I don't imagine he'll be here long—somebody's bound to snatch him up within the next few weeks. His previous owners only gave him up because they needed to move into a new building, and their landlord wouldn't allow pets."

"Should've chosen a different building," I grumble. "This dog is rad."

Brian opens his mouth to say something, but then something else catches his attention, and he cuts himself off with a sharp, "Omelette, *no*." I turn to find Omelette, the last dog, frozen in place with one of his paws jammed through the wire of his crate. He's batting at the latch, like he thinks he's going to be able to make a break for freedom, and it's probably the only time I've ever seen a dog look *shifty*, like he was kind of hoping we'd be too distracted by Rocco to notice what he was doing. "No," Brian repeats more firmly.

"Dude, it's not like he can get himself out," I say.

"Actually, he—"

The crate latch catches under claws, and then the door swings wide open. Omelette gives himself a cheerful bark of congratulations and takes half a step out of the crate before doubling back to grab the plush, bone-shaped toy out of the corner. He trots over to us, wagging his long, fluffy tail, but seems totally unwilling to lick my hand, if it means dropping his toy.

Brian sighs and finishes, "He can. Break out, that is. So, yes, this is Omelette. He's an Australian Shepherd, Siberian Husky mix."

"What's wrong with him?" I say, dropping to my knees so that I can give a proper *hello* to the dog. He immediately drops the toy—and a heavy dose of slobber—on my knee, because apparently he has decided that licking my face is a better use of his time than playing with his squeaky bone. I duck away from his tongue but don't stop petting him. His fur is *so soft*, a long, silky coat in shades of black and tan, with splotches of bright white over his chest, face, and the tops of his paws. His eyes are a bright, icy shade of blue, and his face is more wolf-like than any of the other dogs here, but it's pretty hard to take him seriously, because he's got huge ears that seem to be bursting out of the top of his head like a wingnut. I look back up at Brian and add, "I mean, there's got to be something wrong with him, right? Otherwise, why wouldn't his last owners have wanted to keep him?"

Brian gestures towards the crate. "Well, as you can see, he's a bit of a handful. *Extremely* high-energy, needs almost constant attention. He's very intelligent, but like most intelligent dogs, he has a tendency to get himself into trouble if he doesn't get proper exercise and stimulation. His previous owners couldn't handle having a dog who's so high-mainten—"

"I want him," I interrupt. Omelette is once more engaged with the squeaky bone; I pluck it out of his mouth, wiggle it a little, and toss it a few feet away. He scrambles after it so frantically that he trips over his own too-big paws and nearly falls on his face, but manages to right himself and bolt after the toy. He grabs it, shakes it, and runs back to me, but obviously the concept of fetch is lost on him, because he won't give it back. I try to look offended, and he gives me a look that I'm convinced means, *whatever, you're the asshole who threw it in the first place, why the fuck would I give it back to you?*

"Did you hear that pitch?" Jamie asks.

"Did you?" I challenge. "He's a spazzy attention-whore who gets into trouble all the time and broke out of his own cage. He's me in dog form, dude. My life won't be complete without this dog in it." I clasp Omelette's furry, wolfish face between my palms and whisper, "You are my spirit animal."

He lunges forward and licks a huge sloppy stripe up the side of my face.

"Are there any health issues that would require concern?" Jamie asks. When I glance up, his eyes are flickering back and forth between Brian and Rocco. I think he's sort of hoping I'll load the jailbreaking dog back into his cage and go with the better-trained one who knows how to sit still.

"Not right now, but I have to warn you, there's a decent chance of him developing some vision problems as he gets older. It's a fairly common issue for Huskies and Aussies alike, especially considering his coloring," Brian admits.

I smooth back the fur on Omelette's face and say, "Well, he's still young. I can worry about that later, if it happens. Right now, he's perfect."

All of my dog-adopting fantasies involve throwing down some cash and waltzing off into the sunset with my new bro, quick as can be. Turns out? Not how it works. After that, Brian brings me back out front to fill out a fuckload of paperwork. I have to fill out like, four different forms, and that's not even factoring in the actual New York State dog license I have to file for online. Then I have to hang out and listen to what feels like a lecture about how to care for a dog; most of it is common sense, like, *if he's whining at the door, he has to go out, or make sure you check his water dish frequently so that he doesn't die of thirst*. I can't help but wonder what kind of morons must be trying to adopt dogs, if "*feed it so it doesn't die*" is considered advanced care of an animal.

While I'm doing the awful, boring part, Jamie wanders through the store, doing the fun stuff, like picking out toys and collars and leashes. When Brian pops back into the storeroom to get yet another goddamn form for me, I stage-whisper to Jamie, "There are some choke-chains over here, if maybe you wanna get one for yourself. You know, bring it to New Haven, see if Ben wants to get a little weird with you."

Jamie comes back over to kick me in the shin, and Omelette barks. I beam down at my little protector, and Jamie just rolls his eyes, dumping an armful of supplies on the counter next to me. Between the basics he's already picked out, the food I'll need to get a couple bags of, and the adoption fees, this whole event is going to cost me way more money than I'd expected. That's okay, though—Omelette is completely worth it.

It feels like we've been there for hours by the time Brian finally clips Omelette's new red collar into place, hooks his leash onto it, and passes him off to me. "Well, seems like you're all set! If you've got any questions or concerns in the coming days, don't hesitate to call here, or even bring Omelette by."

"Thank you," I say, maybe a bit too seriously. "Really, you've been awesome. Thank you."

Once outside, Jamie loads all of the supplies into the trunk of his Cadillac, but makes a noise like he's absolutely dying when we reach the part where Omelette is supposed to actually get into the car. I laugh and ask, "Dude, do you want me to just walk back to the apartment? It's only a couple blocks. Honestly, I'll probably beat you there, in city traffic. I can go right to the garage, chill by my car so we can move all the stuff into my trunk."

"No, it's fine," he sighs. I open my mouth to protest, but it's too late; he pops open the door and pats the backseat, saying, "Come on, dog."

"Omelette," I correct.

"Omelette," Jamie agrees. Omelette leaps up into the car and sits down, his tail thumping rhythmically against the leather seat. Jamie goes to close the door after him, but I catch it and slip in after the dog. My best friend gives me a look like he's judging every life choice I've ever made.

"What?" I say defensively. "I don't know how long it's been since he's ridden in a car. I can sit shotgun if you really want me to, but he might get scared, and if I'm not here to show some sort of solidarity, he might piss all over you—"

"Jesus crucified Christ, *stay back there with him*," Jamie groans, slamming the car door shut on my laughter.

150 days sober

Despite everyone's warnings, life *without* Omelette gives way to life *with* Omelette pretty seamlessly. Travis approves whole-heartedly of my choice of pet—mostly because I leave out the part of the story where he broke out of his own crate—but actually turns out to be a way less responsible pet owner than I am. For the first few days, I make a performance of measuring out Omelette's food into the dish, taking him out into the backyard every three hours so he won't piss on the carpet, and trying to be stern with him when he chews on something he shouldn't. Travis does exactly the opposite. For one thing, he dumps heaps of food into Omelette's bowl every time it looks even a little bit empty.

"Excuse me for not wanting our dog to starve!" he protests when I point this out.

"He's not going to starve, dude. You're going to make him obese, and he's going to die of heart failure before he even turns ten—oh my god, stop that," I hiss, and Travis freezes in the act of offering Omelette the last bite of his sandwich. Omelette doesn't freeze; he just darts forward and swallows the bite whole, licking a smudge of mayonnaise off Travis' palm when he's done.

There's also the issue of Travis refusing to grasp the concept of "appropriate toys" versus "inappropriate toys." We haven't even had Omelette a week when I find the two of them in the backyard, playing fetch. At first, I'm going to applaud Travis on getting Omelette to actually give up the toy when he brings it back to where he's sitting on the back porch, but then I realize that Travis is only staying on the porch because he's half-barefoot.

"I couldn't find his squeaky duck," he says defensively. "That's his favorite thing to fetch."

I contemplate bashing my head in against the porch railing. "So, rather than go find his second-favorite thing, you just... kinda took off your sneaker and pitched it across the yard?"

"My sneaker *is* his second-favorite thing to fetch."

Other than that, things are going pretty well. I find myself bolting home to check on the dog pretty much every day after MLEP, and my antisocial tendencies don't really seem to bother anyone. Except today, apparently. Today is very, very different.

Approximately thirteen seconds after I sit down at lunch, Javi turns to me and announces, "You're hanging out with us tonight."

I blink at him. "I'm what?"

"Hanging out with us—" a gesture towards the rest of the people at the table, "—tonight. You've been in the squad for a month now, and you still haven't come out to party with us, and you know something, man? We're starting to take it personally."

"I'm not," Declan offers.

I roll my eyes. "That's because I'm pretty sure you hate me, dude."

The corners of his mouth quirk into a very small smile, and he shrugs. "Not true. I neither like nor dislike you. You haven't made much of an impression on me, to be honest."

"Yeah, but that's just Dec being a douche, because you've made one on the rest of us," Steven says. "You've made one on like, PMA *history*. By the time we all showed up for freshman year, you were already like, the coolest fucking guy this school had ever seen, and you were still only a sophomore. And, you know, you weren't in our grade, and you already had your group you'd hang out with, so none of us ever got a chance to get to know you. We just had to hear the stories about the cool shit you did. Then you were here for the first month of our junior year, and bam, you completely disappear. Now you're back,

and you're not just in our grade, you're in our *squad*, and that's awesome, and we wanna fuckin' party with you, dude."

My eyebrows have been climbing steadily up my forehead the longer he talks. Now, I find myself unable to come up with anything beyond, "Steve... bro, I'm flattered, really, but I don't like you like that."

Taylor snorts. Steven elbows him hard in the side and groans, "I'm not trying to hit on you, man—"

"Kinda sounded like it," Sam says skeptically.

"Should we all move our legs back to give you more room when you crawl under the table together?" Charlie suggests.

I scoff. "Bullshit. The lab tables in the science wing are the only ones that are big enough to fuck around under."

"Are you planning to offer him a demonstration during our next chem lab?" Declan asks with that same, barely-there smile. He's talking to me, but his eyes are fixed on the salt shaker in the center of the table. When I don't reply at once, his gaze slowly shifts to my face. "Going two-for-two on Walczyk brothers?"

Charlie delivers a violent kick to his leg under the table, but Declan doesn't even blink, and I can't look away. My stomach has lurched, and all I want to know is how much of the story he's aware of. I mean, for fuck's sake, how much is *Charlie* even aware of? It's not really the kind of thing I can talk about right now, and even if I could get one of them alone to ask, I'm not sure I'd be able to stomach the answer.

Oblivious to any tension, Javi smacks my shoulder and repeats his instruction, "You need to hang out with us, alright? I mean, you talk to us during school just fine, so it's not like you're trying to blow us off permanently. I don't get why you won't just like, chill."

I'm still too on-edge from Declan's comment. I open my mouth to find some casual way of blowing them off, but what comes out instead is, "Because hanging out with me isn't like you all think it's going to be. I'm not like I used to be, when you guys would hear the stories about me."

"How so?" Taylor says doubtfully.

"I'm sober now," I say.

"Yeah, dude, it's fucking *noon*, we're all sober," Sam says. He pauses, glances across the table, snorts. "Well, not too sure Steven is, but the rest of us—"

"No, dumbass," I say, rolling my eyes and digging into the outer pocket of my backpack for my car keys so that I can flash the orange, green and red sobriety key tags to the table. "I mean, I'm *sober*. Five months, next Tuesday. I spent last summer in rehab. I don't—I mean, I still go out, to clubs or shows or whatever, but I can't drink, and I can't use, and I can't party like I used to, so if that's why you guys keep asking me to come out—'cause you want to see the infamous Garen Anderson shitshow—it's not happening."

And there it is. My entire reputation, the whole badass image I spent years trying to perfect, is gone in an instant. Now, everyone here knows exactly what a pathetic, fucked-up addict I am, just like everyone at Lakewood knew when I started back there in the fall. There hasn't been a reaction at the table yet, but I know there's about to be—there must be—so I cut my losses, shoving my keys back into the pocket, shouldering my backpack, and striding out of the dining hall before any of them can say a word.

I hide out in the library for the rest of lunch, as well as all of AP Government, so that Taylor can't try to talk to me during class. None of my squadmates are in the military history course I'm supposed to be taking to make up for missing the fall semester of MLEP, so I actually bother to attend that. I debate bailing on that

night's MLEP—Omelette would be thrilled if I came home two and a half hours early—but part of me is a little terrified that Sergeant Smith might hunt me down and drag me back. Instead of wandering around, taking my time, maybe swinging by my car to drop off my backpack, I go straight to the classroom. Maybe if I'm the first one there, I can just set myself up in the back corner, and no one will make it weird. Maybe some of the guys who were sitting at the other tables during lunch haven't heard yet, and might still talk to me. Maybe Ryan Marten will be too blinded by lust to give a shit about how badly I've fucked up my life before now.

But of course, I've only been sitting there, staring down at my Blackberry, for about two minutes before the chair next to me slides out and someone sits down in it. I don't even need to look up to know that it's Declan—he always takes up as much room as possible when he sits, splaying his legs apart like he's daring every single person in the room to stare straight at his crotch. I'm usually more than willing to take a surreptitious glance or two—or, you know, twelve, and okay, they're not really that surreptitious, and sometimes I'm pretty sure he catches me looking and just spreads his legs *wider* to put on a show for me—but right now, I'm not in the mood to play “give the straight boy an ego boost.” Right now, I'm in the mood to be left the fuck alone.

I open my mouth to point this out, but Declan cuts me off with, “We're not going to a bar tonight. We're meeting some of the girls from Ward and going to that hookah lounge off I-87. Javi's girlfriend, Vanessa likes their tabbouleh, and Sam likes the hot belly-dancer they have on Friday nights. You've been there before, right?” It's the most he's ever said to me at once, and I'm half-convinced it's not really happening. But I used to go to that hookah lounge all the time, and it's only ten or fifteen minutes from my house now. I nod without speaking. “Shisha is just flavored tobacco—we both know you can't get high off of it, despite what I'm sure some of the dumber Ward girls are going to try to convince everyone tonight. Now, personally, I can't stand half the people in this school without *some* sort of controlled substance in my system, so you can bet your ass I'll have a pocketful of narcotics and a flask stuffed down the side of my boot. But Taylor and Javi are both driving, so neither of them will be bringing anything. I'm sure one or two of the Ward girls will stay sober. It wouldn't be just you.”

Finally, I have to look up. He's watching me in that unblinking, unnerving way of his. I clear my throat and say, “Why are you suddenly acting like you give a shit about whether or not I hang out with you guys?”

“What did you go to rehab for?” he asks, instead of answering. I snort.

“Okay, go fuck yourself,” I say. One of his eyebrows twitches upward, and I shake my head. “I've been here for what, five weeks? This is the first time you've been anything other than apathetic towards me, so forgive me if I'm not planning to spew out all the details of the most private aspect of my life. The rest of the guys in the squad seem to like you—I know Javi and Charlie do, at least—and from what I hear, you've nailed every one of the hot chicks over at Ward, which makes sense, considering you are fine as *hell*. So, I get it, I get that you're like, the leader of the pack, I guess.”

“Am I?” he says mildly, and I have to roll my eyes.

“That's exactly what I'm talking about. I know your game, dude, because I spent my first three years at Patton *playing* this game. If you wanna fuck with people, go ahead. If you get off on finding out everybody's dirty little secrets and holding them in reserve until it suits you to set that bomb off, awesome. Have fun with that, 'cause I sure as shit used to. And look, I'm not trying to take your fuckin' place around here. I'm not trying to steal your friends, or your reputation, or your spot at the head of the squad. But you're kidding yourself if you think I'm going to let you play me.”

Declan tips his chair back onto its hind legs and laces his fingers together behind his head. “See, this is the problem between the two of us. This is why I haven't tried to be friends with you.”

“Because I think you like to fuck with people's heads?”

The grin he flashes me then is dangerous and secretive and *nothing* at all like the bland half-smirks I've

been catching for weeks. “Are you kidding me? I *love* to fuck with people’s heads. But if you realize that I’m doing it, then it’s not going to work on you, and that isn’t going to be fun for me.”

“I’m sure I could find another way to be fun for you,” I say without thinking. His eyebrow quirks up again, but the sound of the classroom door opening spares me from the awkwardness of his rejection.

Steven, Javi, and Sam only take a few steps into the classroom before they all freeze up a little bit, eying Declan and me warily. A beat passes, and Sam says, too casually to really be casual, “Hey, guys. What’s up?”

“Garen’s coming to hookah with us tonight,” Declan announces, despite the fact that I’ve agreed to no such thing. He looks at me and adds, almost as an afterthought, “Text Javi your address. We’ll pick you up at ten thirty.”

But despite that instruction, he’s not the one who rings the doorbell at ten thirty, and I’m not the one who answers it. Omelette immediately starts barking his head off, and I’m still in my bedroom, so I think Travis—who’s only been home from school for maybe an hour—mostly just opens the door so he’ll shut up. Even from my room, I can hear Sam’s voice say, “Hey. I’m Sam, I go to school with Garen. Are you his uh, roommate?”

“Yeah. Travis. Garen’s up—”

“Garen’s right here,” I say, jogging down the stairs. “Hang on a second, I just need to find my boots.”

“They’re by the sliding door in the living room,” Travis says. To Sam, he adds, “You can come in, if you’d like.”

“Thanks,” Sam says, stepping into the house. The second he’s crossed the threshold, Omelette rears up to paw at him, trying to lick his face. Sam chuckles. “Hey, bud. Who are you?”

I jam my feet into my boots and drop onto the couch to tie them. “That’s our dog, Omelette.”

“Both of yours?” Sam waves a hand back and forth between me and Travis, who has resumed his own place on the couch next to me, where he’s working on his homework.

I roll my eyes. “Yes, both of ours. We’re writing a children’s book about what a progressive household we have. It’s called *Omelette Has Two Owners*. Now shut the fuck up, let’s go.” I grab my wallet off the coffee table and tug one of the strings of Travis’ hoodie as I move past him. “I’ll be back later. Have fun with your homework.”

“Have fun smoking,” he says. There is a pointedly unspoken addition of *even though you said you would quit*.

Rather than respond to that, I shrug into my leather jacket and shove Sam towards the door. Taylor’s Civic is parked at the curb, and he’s grinning at me from the driver’s seat. Charlie is riding shotgun, offering me a stone-faced nod. I slip into the backseat with Sam and say, “Hey. The others meeting us there?”

Taylor nods. “Javi, Dec, and Steven headed over to Ward earlier. I think some of the girls are riding with them—Vanessa and Kaitlyn, probably. The rest of the girls are gonna take their own cars.”

I give a vague nod of acknowledgment, wondering if I might know any of the girls there tonight. Jamie made his way through a pretty big portion of the class below us, so I wouldn’t be surprised if at least one of his exes was present.

“So, your roommate seems pretty chill,” Sam says after a few minutes of relaxed silence. “Does he go to

school around here?"

"Travis? Nah, he's a freshman in college. Goes to Columbia, over in the city," I say. "But yeah, he's aweso—"

"Is that the same Travis who you were living with when you were dating my brother?" Charlie asks suddenly. I'm so thrown by the question that, for a moment, I don't know what to say. Interpreting my silence as a cue to keep talking, he turns around in his seat to face me. "Last spring, I mean. Not the first time."

"Um. Yeah. Trav and I were living together for part of last year," I say carefully.

"But you're not a couple," Charlie clarifies.

My hands feel cold, like my blood isn't quite making it to my extremities. I rub my palms over the thighs of my jeans and clear my throat. "No, we're not a couple. I already told you guys, I'm single."

"Ryan Marten doesn't seem to think so," Taylor chuckles, and I wait for him to catch my eye in the rearview mirror before I flash him the middle finger.

He mimics the gesture, but my mind is still stuck on Charlie and his stupid fucking questions. Part of me has the sneaking suspicion that he's given me some sort of test, and I've failed it already. It doesn't help that he hasn't turned back around to face the front of the car. We eye each other for a long moment of silence before I say, just quietly enough that I'm not sure the others will hear, "Have you told him we're in the same squad now?" He shrugs. It's a useless movement, but I think it must mean that he hasn't, because he'd have no reason to hide the truth if he'd already told. I swallow. "Okay. Can you... not? Like, can you not tell him they put me back in the Whitman squad? Or that I'm—can you not mention me at all, actually?"

Charlie just shrugs again. I want to grab him by the front of his shirt and shake him, want to scream in his face, *You don't understand what he did to me. I think I used to be okay before I met him, I think I used to be normal and happy and good, but he broke me into a dozen fucked up, dirty pieces, and no one will hold him accountable to that. I'm not 'his crazy ex-boyfriend,' but if I am, it's only because that's what he turned me into.* I even open my mouth to say this, but Taylor checks his cell phone at a stoplight and lets out a little burst of laughter. "Steve just texted me," he says. "They're already at the lounge, and all the Ward girls are there—apparently, Kaitlyn invited Tess."

Charlie finally turns away from me to glare at Taylor's phone. "What, seriously? And Vanessa thought this was a good idea?"

"I dunno, I guess she didn't realize she'd been invited until it was too late to tell her to keep her crazy ass in the dorms."

"Who's Tess?" I ask.

"Some psycho Declan nailed last fall," Sam explains. "He's never had a girlfriend, but he's *had* a lot of girls. It's not like it's a secret, even to the girls at their school. They all know he fucks anybody who's cute enough, and they all know he's not serious about any of 'em. He hardly ever goes back for seconds. But I guess Tess never got that memo, because when he did her and didn't want more, she lost her shit."

Taylor snorts. "She called him so many times, he had to contact his phone company and have her number blocked, because she completely ignored him when he tried to let her down easy."

The idea of Declan bothering to let anyone down easy is beyond me, but I elect not to point this out.

"Then, she started showing up on campus. It was like something out of a horror movie," Charlie adds.

"She'd bust in during study hours, when it was quiet and nobody was out of the rooms to see her sneaking in. We could all hear her pounding on his door for like, hours. But one day, she made the mistake of showing up during the middle of MLEP—"

"Shit," I groan. "I bet Smith fuckin' lost it."

"You have no idea," Sam laughs. "He called the headmistress at Ward and demanded that someone come pick her up and restrict her off-campus privileges until she 'got herself under control.' And, of course, he tore Dec a new one right there in front of everybody—"

"Oh, the old 'next time your dick interferes with my instruction, I'll have the marksmanship team use you for target practice' speech," I sigh. "I remember it well. Smith used to scream it at me every time I made one of the other cadets cry during PT."

Taylor cocks a brow at me in the mirror. "Is that something you did regularly?"

I make a face. "Only to the ones who deserved it."

Charlie flicks another glance over his shoulder at me, which is enough to make my heart skip a beat. I wish he'd stop *doing* that—giving me all these accusatory looks, making all these snide comments, like I was the one who made things go so wrong with his brother. Like I was the one throwing punches and holding Dave down and murmuring, "*I think I'd go crazy if you ever left me, baby, you can't ever leave me, I love you too much.*" Like Dave was the one with almost a dozen broken bones, with two hundred hours of therapy under his belt, with tears smeared all over his face in the backseat of a Lexus. I slouch down and stare over at Sam, just so that I can look at someone who won't blink back at me with Dave's hazel eyes.

When we arrive at the lounge, everyone else is already gathered in the parking lot, and there's already some degree of bullshit, high school drama going on. Javi and a pretty, dark-haired girl who must be Vanessa, the girlfriend, are watching in silent judgment as a short blond in too-high heels hisses out a rant at her friend. Steven is slumped against the side of Javi's car, obviously stoned and even *more* obviously annoyed at the girl for harshing his buzz. He's making conversation with a fourth girl, who's wearing black-framed Ray-Bans even though it's dark out. I'm pretty sure she's just trying to block out the hysterical girl, which I can appreciate; my own hand is twitching closer to the jacket pocket where I've stashed my aviators. Being a Corey Hart douche who wears his sunglasses at night is looking like a better option than getting caught shooting critical looks at a total stranger.

Ten feet away, oblivious to the scene unfolding nearby, Declan is sitting on the trunk of the girls' car, reclining against the slope of the rear windshield and smoking a cigarette. His legs are kicked apart to make room for a doe-eyed girl with dark, chin-length hair. The girl is crowding into his space to flirt with him, but he's either stoned, disinterested, or both, because his gaze keeps drifting away from her face. Eventually, it drifts towards where I am standing with Taylor, Sam, and Charlie. His mouth stretches into a smirk.

"Took you long enough to get here," he says. "If I'd known inviting you would disrupt the schedule so much, I wouldn't have done it."

He's really only addressing me, so I figure there's nothing to be lost by wandering over to him as I say, "Yeah, yeah. Are you done with your Whitesnake moment, or do we have to watch you roll around on a car for another ten minutes before we can go smoke?"

"I *am* smoking," he says, shooting me an annoyed look and gesturing with his cigarette. He holds it the same way most people hold a joint, pinched between his thumb and index finger. It's been over a month since I've smoked a cigarette—I can't help but stare at the thin curl of smoke trailing off the tip of it. Declan must notice my attention, because he laughs and beckons me closer, nudging the girl impatiently aside with his knee, like she's just a barstool that's in his way. "How about you help me finish it instead of

bitching about how long it's taking me?"

He's holding the cigarette out, and I could easily take it from him, but... well, I'm *me*. So, instead, I step between his parted legs and brace my hands against the trunk on either side of his hips, ducking in to take a long, slow drag off the cigarette while it's still pinned between his fingers. It's a complete invasion of personal space, but he doesn't seem to mind; he simply cocks his head to the side and watches me with eyelids at half-mast. Definitely high, but he doesn't smell like pot smoke. Besides, he's too boneless for that.

I lean back, lick my lips, and say quietly, "So, did Steven only smoke up? Or is he on the same thing as you?" One of Declan's eyebrows ticks up. I mimic the movement. "Percocet, right?"

"Good call," he says, flicking the cigarette butt away.

"It's not like I ended up in rehab because I'm inexperienced with drugs, dude," I say. I step back from the car, grab him by the wrist, and haul him to his feet before I turn to the rest of the group and announce, "Are we going inside anytime soon?"

The tiny blond girl stops her meltdown in mid-word, turns to me, and says, "I'm sorry, but can you just wait a minute? I'm talking to my friend, and this is important, and I don't even know who you are, okay?"

"I'm Garen," I say, letting my lip curl a little. "And I'm guessing you're... Tess, right?" Sam sidles a little closer so that he can stomp on the toe of my boot in warning. I snort. "Yeah, alright then. I'm gonna go inside. Feel free to join me whenever you're done with—" I wave my hand in a vague circle that I hope indicates all of her angst, "—whatever this is."

She opens her mouth to retort, but I'm already slinging one arm around Taylor's shoulders and the other around Sam's and steering them towards the door of the hookah lounge. Sam digs an elbow into my side and says, "Thank fucking god. I thought we were going to have to stand out there for another hour while she bitched about Declan hitting on Jenn."

"Why don't you guys just tell her to fuck off?" I whisper.

"What, like we want to get involved in the girl drama?" Taylor says. "None of us like Tessa, but Kaitlyn's friends with her, Vanessa and Jenn are friends with Kaitlyn, and we're all friends with Vanessa and Jenn. You know, usual high school bullshit."

I try to hide a cringe—sometimes, I really wish I'd graduated last year, so that all of this would be over with by now. The rest of the group trails after us, Tess and Kaitlyn bringing up the rear. There's only one booth that's large enough to seat a dozen people, and even that's more cramped than I'd like. I end up wedged between Declan and the girl in the Ray-Bans while Javi and Vanessa put in the requests for the shisha flavors we want.

"Nice sunglasses," I say, and the girl offers me a faint smirk.

"Yeah, I know I must seem like a douche for wearing them inside. I guess I'm that girl."

"Sorry, but I'm pretty sure the role of *that girl* has already been filled for the evening," I say, tipping my head towards my other side; the short-haired girl named Jenn is on Declan's left, and on her left, Tess watches them with vengeful eyes. Sunglasses Girl snorts. I shrug out of my jacket and dig my aviators from the inside pocket, giving them a faint wave. "Besides, I have no room to judge."

The girl plucks the aviators from my fingers and perches them on my nose, making it almost impossible to see anything in the already-dark lounge. She announces, "Twins," then a second later adds, "Aubrey. Garen, you said?"

"I said," I agree.

Kaitlyn leans across the table and says, "Garen Anderson, right?" I nod. "Are you still friends with James Goldwyn?" I nod, but don't say anything. A beat passes. "Does he still live in New York?" I slowly raise my eyebrows, giving her my best *there's no way in hell I'm telling you that* look. Sure enough, a moment later, she admits, "He and I went out for a little bit during my sophomore year."

"Jamie had eight different girlfriends during our junior year," I say blankly. "Plus, six different boyfriends. And probably half a dozen people of each gender who he fucked around with, but never actually dated. So, uh. Cool. I'm sure it was a very meaningful relationship for both of you."

"Christ," Javi laughs. "How many people has that guy slept with?"

"No idea," I say, shrugging. "We tried to come up with a list when we were stoned once, but we lost track somewhere in the forties. He ended up getting all disappointed in himself for being such a slut, so I called his mom and asked her to yell at him so he'd feel properly chastised."

It had been an incredibly counter-productive phone call, because the moment Mama Goldwyn had answered the phone, I had remembered that Jamie's parents still thought he was a heterosexual virgin. I'd ended up blurting out, *Jamie's sad because he just realized how awful he is, so you need to tell him he's a failure so that he can process his suckitude and move on with his life*. The problem with this, of course, was that Jamie's parents are possibly the sweetest people alive, so Mama Goldwyn had just gotten incredibly concerned about her only child being sad for "no damned reason," and I'd ended up spooning Jamie for an hour while his mom ranted on speakerphone about all the reasons why he's wonderful.

Later that night, we called my mom instead, and since I have a disturbingly open relationship with my parents, I had whined, "*Mom, Jamie and I are sluts, and we need you to yell at us until we feel bad about it.*" She had cheerfully obliged. So, you know. Different families work in different ways, I guess.

Right now, though, I'm kind of distracted by the way Kaitlyn has started sulking across the table from me. To get myself off the hook, I turn to Aubrey and rake my eyes over her, looking for something—anything, really—that stands out so we'll have something to talk about, other than our mutual love of sunglasses. Finally, my eyes settle on her hands, and I say brightly, "The nail on your little finger is way longer than the others! Is it for playing the guitar, or snorting a bunch of cocaine? 'Cause either way, you and I are about to have something in common."

"It's for both!" Jenn leans around Declan to inform me.

"Shut up, Jenn, I don't do coke," Aubrey says indignantly. There's a half-second pause, and then she leans closer to me so that she can whisper, "That's a lie. But Vanessa's pretty 'just say no,' and I don't want her to get pissed at me."

"Why the hell is she dating Javi, when he's best friends with this guy?" I say, tipping my head towards Declan, who is scrolling idly through his cell phone while Jenn fondles his knee under the table.

Aubrey shrugs. "Because Javi and Declan have a 'bros before hos' code that's not to be trifled with. And Javi might party when he's out with his boys, but he respects Vanessa's wishes and doesn't do it in front of her. Besides, Declan's a nice enough guy." She drops her voice to a whisper again. "That was a lie, too. Declan's actually a mean little shit. But we—that is, the girls in the group—put up with him because he's stupidly attractive."

"Isn't he, though?" I say.

Declan lets his head roll in our direction and blinks lazily up at me. Jenn is right in the middle of a sentence, and I'm pretty sure Dec should be at least *pretending* to listen to her, but he says, "You know,

I'm sitting right here. I can hear you both saying my name repeatedly. What are you talking about?"

"How fucking sexy we think you are," I say. It's the truth, but I'm pretty sure the bland smile I flash along with the words will convince him that I'm bullshitting him.

He blinks past me and says, "I'll put Aubrey on my 'to-do' list."

"How flattering," she says dryly. "What about Garen? Doesn't he get to play, too?"

"Garen is disqualified from playing," Declan says, slowly shaking his head from side to side.

"On what grounds?" I say, doing my best to sound morally outraged.

And then, in a move that surprises me enough to make me jolt, Declan slips his hand off his own knee and onto mine, drags it up my thigh, and palms my dick through my jeans and says, "On the grounds of you having *this*."

"Not sure I understand, you should probably keep your hand right there," I say, all in a rush.

And it's a joke—he's joking, I'm joking, Aubrey's joking—but if he doesn't let go pretty much right now, I'm going to start getting hard. It's basically the only reaction I'm capable of having when a hot redhead starts groping me under the table, but it's also the type of thing that could turn *me joking around* into *me getting my ass beat*. There isn't enough Percocet in the world to make a straight boy cool with groping another dude's hard-on.

Luckily, Declan just gives me a faint squeeze and retracts his hand. "Sorry, Anderson. My cock discriminates on the basis of gender."

He lets his attention drift back towards Jenn, who seems relieved to be his focus once more. The rest of the night passes easily enough. I spend most of it alternating between talking to Aubrey, calling across the table to joke with Sam and Taylor, and enjoying the frankly delicious shisha in the hookah. The atmosphere tenses up a bit when Declan asks that we let him out of the circular booth so that he can go to the restroom, and Jenn makes the same request less than a minute later. Neither of them comes back, and by the time twenty minutes have gone by, Tess is wiping angry tears off her cheeks and being soothed by Kaitlyn.

"Well, this is fun and all," Steven says slowly, staring across the table to Tess, "but we should probably head back to campus. It's what, twelve twenty? Weekend curfew is one, so..."

"Yeah, definitely," Charlie says. "Someone just needs to, uh—"

"Of course," Kaitlyn interrupts, shooting him a warning look that is presumably an attempt to silence him before he actually says the words *tell Declan to stop wrecking Jenn in the bathroom*. "We're just going to go outside, okay? Somebody else can handle that."

Somebody else, it turns out, means me. I try to pawn the job off on Javi, but he just shakes his head and says, "Nope. I interrupt Dec's sex life on an almost daily basis just by being his roommate. Not my job tonight. Tell him to hurry the fuck up, though. I wanna go."

I roll my eyes at all of them and head across the lounge to shoulder open the bathroom door. There are three stalls, and only one of them is occupied. It's... one hundred percent obvious what they're doing in there. Neither of them is doing much to stifle their sounds, and there are two sets of hands curved tightly over the top of the stall door for either leverage or balance. I trudge over and bang the heel of my hand against the door.

"Hey, firecrotch," I say loudly. "Everybody's heading out. Javi says to get it done now. I'm leaving with

Taylor, so I'll see you on Monday."

"Are you leaving with Taylor, or are you *leaving with Taylor*?" Declan asks, breath hitching.

I can't help but raise my eyebrows at the stall door. What I mean to say is, *just because he and I are both gay, doesn't mean we're going to fuck*. Or maybe, *let's be real, I'm super slutty and his standards are a lot higher than that*. Instead, what I end up saying is a taunting, "Aww, you jealous, baby?"

He chuckles. "You *wish* I cared enough to be jealous."

I make a noncommittal noise and leave for the parking lot. Everyone is still gathered around the cars, except for Kaitlyn and Tess, who are already bundled into theirs. It seems safe for me to announce, "They're still working on it, but I assume they'll be done soon. So, Javi, Vanessa, enjoy your lovely evening of standing around, waiting for your friends to stop boning. I think the rest of us are going to call it a night."

"Alright, man," Javi says, stepping closer to clap me on the shoulder. He drops his voice, but not that much, as he adds, "I'm glad you finally came out with us tonight. And I'm—we don't care, you know? That you're sober? It's not a problem for any of us. We still wanna be friends with you, so don't, you know, worry about it."

It's either a sweet thing to say, or an incredibly awkward thing to say. Maybe both. I'm not quite sure how to respond, so I settle for saying, "Thanks, dude," and bolting away to call shotgun on Taylor's car.

155 days sober

Two minutes into Wednesday's PT, Ryan sidles up to me and says, "Hey, sexy. Do you want to maybe do something tonight?"

Laughing and saying *no* seems like it'd be a dick response, so instead, I say, "Uh, I'm pretty sure I've already got plans. Sorry."

His face darkens. "You do? With who?"

"Just a friend," I hedge. A bullshit, fictional friend. Or my dog. Whatever. "Nobody who goes here, so I doubt you know him."

"So, you're doing something with another guy tonight," he says flatly.

I blink. "Am I not allowed to do that?"

"Apparently, you're allowed to do whatever the fuck you want," he snaps and stalks away.

"What," I say, because seriously, this is the weirdest non-argument ever, and I don't get why the rest of my squadmates are snickering at me. The second I stop into the dining hall for breakfast, though, I realize exactly what I've missed.

"Shit," I whisper, staring in wide-eyed horror at the overflowing cardboard boxes full of tiny teddy bears near the staff tables. "It's Valentine's Day."

"It is indeed," Javi says cheerfully. Of course he's smiling--*he* has a girlfriend, so *he's* probably getting laid tonight. *He* doesn't have to put up with his I-don't-actually-like-you-with-benefits glaring at him from the next table over. *He* doesn't have to find a way to tactfully avoid acknowledging the holiday when he sees his ex-and-maybe-future-boyfriend, slash friend, slash stepbrother, slash roommate.

"Yo, Garen," Steven says, waving a piece of paper at me as I take my usual seat at our table. "Final numbers. You want in on this?"

"What is it?" I ask.

"Every year, we bet on how many Valentine bears Declan will get from the Ward girls," Taylor explains. "Probably not what administration had in mind when they started the whole Patton-Ward fundraiser, but whatever. We go by whoever guesses closest without going over. I won last year with fifteen."

I take the paper from Steven and scan the numbers. Taylor has the lowest number, sticking with fifteen, and Charlie has guessed the highest, with twenty-one. I toss the paper into the center of the table and say, "I'm going with twenty-five."

"Go big or go home, I suppose," Steven says skeptically, marking me down.

I shake my head. "This'll be the year he gets stuff from all the chicks who were too shy to send anything in the past. Senior year and all that. I wasn't a student here this time last year, but I was crashing in Jamie's dorm, so I saw how many he got. It was like, dozens. And they all had little heartfelt, anonymous notes attached. It was nasty."

I jump when a freckle-dotted arm sneaks past me to steal the list. "Twenty-five? Anderson, you flatter me." Declan sinks into Sam's usual seat between Charlie and me. Sam, who is only a few steps behind him, stumbles a little, frowns, but switches to Declan's normal seat on Javi's left.

We get to enjoy twenty minutes of a peaceful breakfast before the student council members start weaving through the tables and doling out the teddy bears. Barely thirty seconds pass before one of them comes up and dumps a bear next to Declan's plate. He looks at it like it's covered in festering herpes sores. I pluck the card out of the little ribbon around its neck and flip it open.

"Declan—and then a little heart," I announce. "*I've never told you this, but I've had a crush on you since we were freshmen. I think you know who this is. Please let me know if you feel the same way.*"

"No idea who that's from. But I'm sure she's adorable," he says, clearly not meaning it. Before he can say anything else, another bear is delivered. And another. And another. And another. I keep removing the cards, previewing them, and reading the funny ones aloud. Some are boring--*happy v-day, baby!* or *I think you're cute*—but some are amazing.

"*We've never even spoken, but I'm in love with you.* Jesus Christ, dude, what kind of girls do you attract? I mean, she didn't straight-up say, *'I want to wear your skin as a dress,'* but it's pretty heavily implied. Oh, here's another--*text me if you want the sexiest pics you'll ever see.* She didn't give her name, but here's her number."

Declan peers over my shoulder and starts composing a new text to the number.

"Anderson?" says a student council kid at my elbow. I hitch my chin in acknowledgment. He hands me a tiny bear and walks away.

"The fuck?" I say. "Can Patton dudes send bears to other Patton dudes, or is there some girl over at Ward who didn't get the memo about me being a gigantic homo?"

Declan gets his revenge at once by ripping the card off the bear's neck and reading aloud, "*So glad you're a commuter student, because it means I get to start every day with the sight of you fresh out of the shower. Burn all your clothing, you look better without it. Happy Valentine's Day, you hot piece of ass.*"

"I've never felt more objectified in my life," I declare, unable to keep the sheer delight out of my voice. "This is—"

"You're Garen Anderson, right?"

I look over my shoulder at the sophomore, then at the bear in his hand. "That for me?"

He nods. Before I can move, Declan steals it and opens the card. "I suspect this is from a Ward girl, considering it says, *I wish you were straight so I could sit on your face.*"

Javi chokes on a mouthful of orange juice, and I should probably pound my fist on his back a couple times to be sure he's okay, but I'm too busy trying not to gag at the mental image of myself eating pussy. By the time breakfast is done, I've got almost a dozen bears shoved into my backpack, and Declan's pile is covering half the goddamn table. I'd bet anything that he's going to leave them all there, too, so that the janitors will have to just toss them all out; he doesn't really strike me as the stuffed animal type.

Taylor, who is obviously out of the running, carefully counts the bears, and eventually announces, "Twenty-four. Charlie wins."

"Pay up, bitches," Charlie says immediately.

"I was off by *one*," I groan. "That's so not fair."

"Tough shit, Anderson. Them's the rules. If you go over, you're automatically out," Steven says. We all fork over the cash that Charlie has won. I turn to whine at Declan about how he should've nailed just one more chick so I could have my guess be right on the mark, but he's busy smirking down at one of my bear cards. When he catches my curious stare, he passes me the card without comment.

Great meeting you the other night, reads the loopy script. *We should all hang out again sometime. Love, Aubrey.* Then, below that, there's a phone number and the postscript, *I'm like 85% sure we could convince Declan Campbell to have a threesome if we got a few drinks in him first. Wanna?*

I can feel my eyebrows creeping towards my hairline. Aubrey was cool enough, but the threesome thing is a little weird. If she were a dude, I'd be down; if I were a chick, I'm sure Declan would be down. It's really just a matter of gender incompatibility.

I think.

"Would you agree with that number?" I ask, tucking the card into my backpack along with the rest of the cards and bears. "Eight-five percent chance of that workin' out?"

"Guess you two'll have to get me drunk and find out," he replies. "But I must say, I'm a little disappointed that you didn't send me a Valentine. It's the sort of thing that'll make a young man feel rejected."

I dig a Sharpie out of my backpack and yank the cap off with my teeth, keeping it pinned there as I flip one of my cards over and scribble a message onto it. I cap the marker, toss it onto the table, and shove the card at Declan. He picks it up, clears his throat, and reads aloud, "*Roses are red, violets are blue. Gingers are creepy, but I'd still blow you.*" He looks up at me. "Has anyone ever told you that you're incredibly charming?"

"Several people," I say.

"All of them were lying to you. You're not. At all," he says, but he slips the card into his pocket instead of leaving it on the table. Then, he snags my Sharpie and scribbles something on one of his discarded love notes. He presses the slip of paper into my hand, but when I give him a questioning look, his only response is to briefly quirk an eyebrow. It doesn't feel right to read it now, but the moment the rest of the squad vacates the table and leaves me sitting there alone, I unfold the paper. There's some cutesy little note on it, full of I's that are dotted with tiny flowers, ending in a heart. I turn it over, and there's a

message in Declan's boyish Sharpie scrawl.

Roses are red, violets are blue. If I liked guys, I'd fucking wreck you.

I can't remember the last time I really blushed, but I can feel the heat creeping into my face now. I shove the note into my pocket and spend our entire stats class ignoring the way Declan is smirking at me from across the room.

When I get home from school that night, it's dark enough that I almost trip over something on the doorstep. Bracing one hand against the door to steady myself, I squint down at the object at my feet. It's a long, white box, like the kind florists use to deliver roses, and there's a small envelope taped to the front, my name printed neatly on it.

"Please be joking," I groan, letting my forehead hit the door. Inside the house, Omelette must recognize the sound of my voice, because I can hear the sound of his claws tearing across the hardwood of the entryway to come meet me. I contemplate leaving the box outside so that I don't have to deal with it; it's probably from creepy Ryan, or any one of the other randoms who sent me a stupid bear today. But when I eventually stoop down and lift the box, it's a hell of a lot heavier than flowers should be.

I tuck it under my arm, unlock the door, say hello to my dog, and trudge into the kitchen to set the box down on the counter. It's bound shut with a thick red ribbon, tied in a knot too tight for me to get it open myself. I grab a steak knife from the drawer and slice it open, flipping the lid off so that I can peer inside. And then I actually laugh out loud, because it's not a box of flowers at all. It's full of things I actually *like*. Bags of gummy bears, a new set of strings for my guitar, a canister of my favorite coffee grounds, a carton of my brand of cigarettes, a package of guitar picks, a burned CD in a plain jewel case. And half-buried in the middle of every thing else, there are a few red roses.

It's, you know, weird, but still kind of awesome. And obviously not from some Patton random who knows fuck-all about me. I slip the CD out of its case and wander into the living room to put it in the DVD player. By the time it loads up enough to play, I'm already back in the kitchen, tearing open one of the bags of gummy bears and popping a handful in my mouth. The first song on the CD is by one of my favorite bands, but it's... not exactly a happy song, is the thing. And it's not *ahey I think you're cute and you should be my Valentine song*, either. It's a post-break-up song. Which is kind of weird.

Frowning, I turn the lid of the box back over and pluck the envelope off of it, slipping a finger beneath the seal to tear it open. The moment I catch a real glimpse of the handwriting on the card, my stomach lurches so violently that I'm legitimately concerned I might be about to puke gummy bears all over the kitchen floor. I manage to keep my mouth clamped shut and my full-body shaking mostly under control, until I get upstairs and into the bathroom, and then I'm on my knees, retching into the toilet. I can hear Omelette bounding up the stairs to investigate the awful noises I'm making, but I can't deal with him right now, so I kick the bathroom door shut to keep him out.

No. I can't do this. I can't handle this, not now, not when I was just starting to feel normal. Just when I was starting to feel *safe*. I don't want to read this card, and I don't want to have that shit all over my kitchen counter, and I don't want to hear that fucking music anymore. Not if they're all from him. But the card that's clenched in my fist is like an infection. It's a disease, and it's just going to consume me until I man up, read it, get it out of my system. When I think I can finally move without choking, I flatten the card against my knee and smooth it out as best I can.

Thinking of you—often, but today in particular. I never got a chance to tell you how sorry I am for everything that's happened. I'd love to see you sometime, sit down and really talk, make it all up to you, even if we're supposed to wait until you're 21 to see each other again. Miss you. Call me.

Reading the card prompts another wave of nausea that has me hunching over the toilet once more. It's so fucking casual, like we had a normal breakup. Like either of us pretended that *let's be friends* was an

option after I got out of the hospital. I haven't even spoken to him him months; the last words I said to him were part of a string of pleas for him to stop beating me. So, what I really want to know is, how the fuck does he know my new address? I've only been living here a month and a half, and I sure as hell haven't called him to invite him over for tea or what the fuck ever. The fact that he knows where to have something delivered to me makes me feel like I'm going to be sick all over again. And then it hits me—the box wasn't delivered through the mail. It couldn't have been. There was no postage on it, and it was full of too many personally selected things to have been put together by someone else. For fuck's sake, his handwriting is on it. And it was on my porch. *He* was on my porch. He was at my house.

He might--

He might still be at my house.

In half a second, I'm on my feet and out in the hall. My heart is pounding so hard I think I might pass out, and I can hear the shuddering little gasps my breathing has become. Omelette noses at my leg, letting out tiny woofs to be sure I'm aware of his discomfort. I guess what everyone says about dogs picking up on their owner's emotions must be true, because he can obviously tell that I'm freaking out, and I think it's freaking him out, too. I dig my trembling fingers into his fur for a moment and say, as quietly as I can, "C'mon, puppy. We're going to go on a little trip."

I've got no idea where I'm going, but I can't stay here, not if Dave might actually be around. I need to be with someone who can protect me, because every time I think I can protect myself, I end up in a fucking coma. I'm all alone here, with the exception of Omelette, who'd be completely useless at saving me. I can't leave him here, though; if Dave was fine with hospitalizing me twice, I doubt he'd hesitate to hurt my dog. For the first time since I brought Omelette home, I kind of wish I'd gone with the Doberman mix instead. I stop by my bedroom to grab some clothes, my phone charger, and—as a last-minute decision—the switchblade I bought on a whim when I was a junior and abandoned in my nightstand drawer soon after. The knife goes into my jacket pocket, and everything else is brought downstairs and stuffed into my duffel bag. I pour some of Omelette's food into a big ziploc bag, then tuck that and his squeaky duck into the duffel, too.

The CD is still playing in the living room, though it's on a new song now. I eject it, place it carefully back inside the jewel case, and cart the duffel, my backpack, and the box out to my trunk. I don't release the handle of the switchblade for even a second. I grab Omelette's leash, but don't bother to attach it to his collar; he's well-behaved enough that I can just lead him out front, lock up the house, and guide him into the passenger seat of the car.

I'm halfway to the city before I realize where I'm going, then three-quarters of the way there before I realize I should probably call first. I fumble to get my phone out of my pocket, but my fingers are still stiff enough that I have to wait until I get to a red light before I can manage to dial Jamie's number properly.

"Why, hello there, darling," he finally answers. "Happy Val—"

"Can I come over?" I ask, my voice cracking on the question. "I'm already on my way, so I hope you're going to say yes. Well, *I'm* not on my way. Omelette and I are both on the way."

"Are you okay?" Jamie asks. I shake my head, even though I know he can't see it. I'm not sure I can speak again. He must realize this, because he continues, in a quieter, more soothing voice, "Alright. That's fine. I need to call down to the security in my lobby so that they'll let you up with the dog. Is that alright, or do you need me to stay on the line with you?"

My reply is to hang up on him, because my throat still isn't working. I park in the underground garage, as usual, and clip Omelette's leash in place before I let him out of the car. The box from Dave is the only thing I bother to get out of my trunk before I head for the door. When I step into the lobby, the doorman looks up from his desk. His eyes flicker down to my dog, and he says, "Mr. Anderson, I assume?" I nod. He gives me a polite smile and pushes a clipboard across the desk towards me. "Mr. Goldwyn called just

a few moments ago to tell me you'd be here. Since he isn't registered as one of our pet-owning residents, I just need you to sign in here, acknowledging that you are bringing an animal onto the premises." I scribble my signature across the dotted line without even reading it. Mom would probably slap me if she knew I'd done that. The doorman accepts the clipboard, then passes me a package wrapped in brown paper. "And this was delivered for Mr. Goldwyn this afternoon, if you'd like to bring it up for him."

"Sure. Thanks," I mutter. I don't even want to *touch* the package—not if there's any chance that his delivery is going to make him feel as helpless and terrified as mine has made me feel. But I can't exactly tell the doorman to go fuck himself, so I stack the package on top of the white box and head for the elevator.

Omelette, it turns out, is not a fan of elevators, and I am not a fan of dealing with his shit right now. The second the door slides shut and he starts whimpering, I say, "Stop that. It's like, a five second ride to the sixth floor. Chill." He ignores me, whining louder and louder until he finally decides it's time to let out an actual bark that's too loud and too disconcerting in the small elevator. "Omelette, knock it off," I snap. He shuts up, but all that does is make me feel like an asshole.

It only occurs to me as I'm opening the door to Jamie's apartment that I'm sort of an asshole for bringing a hyperactive dog to my obsessively neat best friend's beautiful, white-carpeted apartment. The thought sends me stumbling to a halt just inside the door. There isn't much time for me to mull over my own selfishness, though, because then Jamie's standing right in front of me, unclipping Omelette's leash and nudging the dog further into the apartment.

"What happened?" he asks.

I shove the two packages at him. "Your doorman asked me to bring that brown thing up for you. Said it was delivered for you this afternoon."

He barely spares the package a glance before he sets it aside. He gives the white box a small shake. "And this?"

"That was on my porch when I got home from school," I say. It comes out like a whisper. He removes the lid and sifts through the contents with a frown on his face. Once he has finished, I reach into my pocket and pull out the card. "That came with it."

Jamie reads it once, then again, and again. I can see his gaze flickering back to the start of it at least four times before he looks up at me again. His eyes are utterly blank. "Do you have your phone with you now, or did you leave it in the car?"

"I don't know," I say quietly. He steps closer to me, palms up like he wants me to know he's not a threat. I almost laugh—Jamie's one of the only people in the world who I could stand to trust right now, so I'm not really that concerned with the idea that he could hurt me. When I don't protest, he slips a hand into the pocket of my jacket, feeling around for my phone. He comes up empty, checks the other pocket, and pulls out my BlackBerry. I clear my throat. "What are you doing?"

"Calling your mother," he replies. I smack the phone out of his hand. He tries to catch it before it hits the ground, but fails. Scowling, he drops to one knee to retrieve it. "Garen, don't play with me."

"Don't bring my mom into this," I snap back.

"In case you've forgotten, she's not just your mother; she's also your *lawyer*. She needs to know that Walczyk violated his restraining ord—"

"He didn't, though," I protest. "N-Not really. He's not supposed to call me or text me or email me. And he didn't."

Jamie gestures to the box so emphatically that he almost knocks it off the table. "He came to your home, Garen. He went out and bought all of these things he knew you'd like, as if he's some fucking pedophile filling his van with candy, and he drove all the way from Connecticut to drop it at your door. What if you'd been home when he showed up? What if Travis had been? Marian needs to know about this, and she needs to make sure that it doesn't happen again."

"She's going to freak, James," I say.

"I know," is all he comes back with. I guess that's all there really is to it. I sigh and turn back to the door so that I can throw the bolt, just to be sure we're safe inside. Jamie starts scrolling through the contacts list on my phone and strides off down the hall to the privacy of his bedroom. Still curious about his shiny new surroundings, Omelette trots after him. I'm only alone for about twenty seconds before the dog comes right back, crowding close and bumping up against my knee. I hold out my hand, palm up, and he gives a reassuring lick to my wrist. I'm comforted, but not much.

The brown-wrapped package is still lying on the table, and I drag it closer, if only so that I can think about anything other than the phone call that's occurring in the other room. And sure enough, it provides one hell of a distraction, because the tiny precise letters spelling out *J. Goldwyn* are in Ben McCutcheon's handwriting. I blink at the return address, and sure enough, it's the apartment in New Haven. Without bothering to call into the other room to ask permission, I flip the package over and dig my fingertip under the taped flap of the paper. I mean, I've been in both of these guys; that gives me license to open their mail, doesn't it? Besides, the idea of Ben sending Jamie anything other than a bomb is kind of weirding me out, but this is way too small to be a bomb.

It's a book. Of course it is. I thumb through the pages until I find a folded scrap of paper between the twentieth and twenty-first pages. The paper is printed with letterhead bearing the name of Ben's dad's bookstore, probably torn from one of the scratch pads they keep at the counter, and the words scrawled across it have been practically ripped into the paper in anger.

STOP SENDING ME BOOKS. We're even now, alright? You've sent me four, I've sent you four. If your snide little reply is to send me anything else, I will drive to New York, murder you, cut you into pieces, and feed you to the nastiest Central Park hobo I can find. I am not joking.

Four books each, counting the one in my hands. I set it down on the table and trudge out to the living room so that I can examine the bookshelves, maybe see if I can figure out which other three are from Ben. Jamie alphabetizes all of his books by title, so it isn't like any of them stand out, but the search is a welcome distraction from the box that's still taunting me from the table. That's where I'm still standing when Jamie returns five minutes later. His mouth is already twisted into a frown, but that frown deepens when he realizes I've got a hand on the bookshelf. He catches me by the wrist and scans the shelf to be sure I wasn't reordering them just to fuck with him—I've never done that, but some of our old Patton friends got a kick out of tormenting his Type-A ass by moving his shit around when he was out of the dorm room.

Satisfied that I haven't messed with anything, he looks back at me and says, "Your mama's livid. She kindly requests that you sit your ass down on my couch and don't even think about leaving; she's on her way over here to get a good look at *that*." He jerks his head towards the box. "She also requested that I call Travis and have him come over here once he's done with his evening classes. She doesn't want either of you going home just yet."

"He wasn't there," I bite out. "He—I would've known if he was there, okay? I-I would've *felt* it."

I'm not sure that I would have, though. After all these months, I'm too used to the feeling of eyes on me, too used to panicking at the thought that Dave might be standing around the corner with his hands clenched into fists. I don't know if I trust my own instincts anymore. Not where he is concerned. Rather than verbalize this, though, I sink onto the couch and say, "What, uh... what was Travis' reaction?"

"I didn't tell him what happened, only asked that he come here immediately after class got out," Jamie says. He smiles, even though he doesn't look all that amused. "Takes instruction shockingly well."

"Not everyone is as much of a power bottom as you are," I say. "Speaking of which..."

"I can't wait to see what this is a segue into."

I cross back to the kitchen, swipe the book from the table, and give it a little wave. "Since when are you and Ben book club buddies?"

"Since when do you get to open my mail?" he asks.

"Since... always? I used to do it all the time when we shared a dorm mailbox at Patton. Now, answer my question. What's with the books?"

Jamie joins me at the table and takes the book from my hands. I watch as he pages through it, eventually finding the note. He reads it through; the corner of his mouth twitches, like he's fighting a smile. He tucks the note back inside and brings the book over to the shelf, searching through the rest of the titles until he finds the appropriate place for it, even though that means shuffling some of the books from the end of one shelf to the beginning of the one below it. Task complete, he turns to me.

"It isn't a big deal," he says. "When I returned the book he left here, I took the liberty of sending along two others I thought he might appreciate. He didn't, of course. So, the little shit ended up mailing me two *other* books—his way of balancing things between us, I suppose. I would've left it at that, but when I went to my school's bookstore to pick up a textbook I'd ordered, I happened to see another book that seemed like something he would enjoy reading. It's been an... exchange system, I guess, since then. I send him a book, he sends me another, along with some threatening little note. I'll stop, eventually, I'm sure of it. I just... keep seeing things he'd like."

"That's nice," I say. "Are you—"

"Garen, stop," he interrupts. I fall silent, save the faint *click* my throat makes as I swallow. "I don't want to talk about McCutcheon. I don't want to talk about books. All I want to talk about is *you*. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I lie immediately. "I-I'm great. I just... I freaked out, and I didn't want to be alone for like, three more hours until Travis got home. I only came here because I panicked. It's not a big deal."

It is a big deal. The look on Jamie's face says that he knows this. Thankfully, he doesn't call me out on the lie. Instead, he gestures towards the couch. "Let's sit until your mother gets here." Then, a second later, "If that fucking dog tries to climb up on my leather sofa, I will turn him into a coat."

"Okay, Cruella," I say, rolling my eyes and directing Omelette to lie down on the floor near my feet.

When my mom arrives twenty minutes later, she stalks into the apartment without buzzing into the building or knocking on the door. I'm unprepared to have anyone suddenly burst into the room; the sound of the door unlatching is enough to make me scramble closer to the corner of the couch, twisting around to stare. Jamie crowds up close to me, digging his fingers into my thigh to get my attention back on him.

"It's okay, Garen," he says. "It's just your mama, alright? I promise you, you're safe here."

I shrug away from his hands, but then I've still got my mom to deal with. She sits down on my other side and folds me into a bone-crunching hug. "Are you alright?"

"I guess," I lie, voice somewhat muffled by her shoulder. "Just sort of, um... scared. I don't even know how he knows my address."

Mom clears her throat. I pull out of her arms so that I can get a decent look at her. Her mouth is drawn into a thin line. She says, "Part of the restraining order requires that he be aware of your current address at all times, in order to ensure that he knows to stay away from it."

"So, I moved from Lakewood to New York to escape all the shit that was tormenting me in Connecticut, but you had to tell Dave my new address?" I say flatly. "The system is seriously designed to make sure that the guy who used to beat up on me always knows exactly where to find me?"

"Unfortunately? Yes. I was obligated to tell the courts, and they sent him a letter with the update."

I can't even begin to come up with a response to that. For several minutes, I just gnaw on my lip so I have an excuse to be silent while I try to process the fact that the court system that's meant to protect me is actually the only reason Dave was able to find me in the first place. After a while, I stop chewing on my lower lip long enough to quietly ask, "So, um... even if I moved again, you'd still have to tell him where I was? There's no way to make it so he can't find me?"

Mom flashes a brittle smile, but I think she's only making that face so that she won't accidentally reveal how truly upset she is. "In an oh-so-delightful twist of fate, the only way to make it so that you could move without him being informed of your new address would be to request that the restraining order be lifted. And that, of course, would mean that he could call you, come talk to you, or send you as many gifts as he wanted, with no consequence."

He could call me. He could talk to me. He could visit me. He could come right up to me, he could stand in front of me, he could touch me. My lungs constrict, and I shake my head so sharply that my neck cracks. "No. I don't--*no*, I want to keep the restraining order. I can't have him—Mom, I just want him to stay away."

"I know, Garen," she hushes me. She smooths my hair down with her hand, like I'm a little boy again. For the first time in years, I duck my head and let her do it instead of pushing her hand off. She sighs. "Alright. Here is what we're working with." She clasps her hands together in a business-like manner. "After I hung up with Jamie, I contacted the New Haven police to inform them that David Walczyk had violated the restraining order. Or, that he had allegedly done so."

My throat dries up, and I have to clear it twice before I can force out, "Allegedly? What, you think I'm making it up?"

"Of course not, Garen," Mom says, hands breaking apart so that she can reach for my wrist. "But because the package wasn't delivered through any sort of service, and because the card wasn't signed, it could be very difficult to prove that the package was actually sent by him. Even if we could conclusively prove that he'd broken the restraining order, that's all he'd be charged with. He didn't assault you, he didn't threaten you, he didn't even see you in person. The only charge that would be brought up against him would be a misdemeanor, with a maximum penalty of five thousand dollars in fines and one year in prison. And that's if we took it to court and won the case, which I doubt we could do."

"What's the point of having a restraining order, if he's not even going to go to jail for leaving terrifying presents on my front porch?" I demand.

"He won't go to jail *this* time. The New Haven PD is going to go to his home and give him his first and only official warning. If he violates the protective order again at any point during the next two years, he will be arrested. Do you understand?"

I nod, but really, all I understand is that nothing is going to happen to him. He's getting a slap on the wrist. He's not even getting community service. He's not getting a fine. He's not getting sent to jail so that he can be the one who gets assaulted on the regular. He's getting a fucking chit-chat with the cops, and I'm getting the full knowledge that I'm not really safe from him, even in New York.

As if reading my mind, Mom adds, "After I spoke to the New Haven police, I called the police in your town. I explained the situation to them, and they agreed to go to the house and do a thorough walkthrough to be certain that nothing else has been left or disturbed."

Read: they agreed to make sure my psychotic ex isn't hiding in a closet somewhere, waiting to bash my brains in with a baseball bat.

"Shouldn't I like, meet them there, then? So that I can let them in?" I say, moving to stand up.

Mom shakes her head and puts a hand to my shoulder to still me. "No need. I also took the liberty of calling Travis. Once I told him what happened, he was more than willing to leave class early so that he could go back to the house to meet a few officers there at the top of the hour."

Oh. That's... oh. I swallow. "So, he's not coming here?"

"He's not coming here," Mom confirms. "He said that he would call you once the police had cleared the house so that you could be comfortable going home. I'm sure you'll be hearing from him sometimes within the next half hour or so. Alright?"

"Alright," I echo.

There's another knock on the door, but I have no idea who else could be here, if Travis is going straight home. Jamie seems similarly confused; he frowns, but goes to answer it anyway. I sit up to peer over the back of the couch, because I'm anxious and uncomfortable and embarrassed, but I'm still a nosy little shit. The door swings open, and there's a brief beat of silence before Rachael says, "Happy Valentine's Day."

"Happy Valentine's Day," Jamie echoes slowly. "I find myself compelled to ask if you received my message about tonight, except I didn't leave a message at all. I spoke to you directly."

"I know. I was kind of there," she says. "But I don't—I mean, you said that there was Garen drama that you needed to handle. I kind of figured you would have handled it by now."

I don't have time to get offended by her dismissive tone—I don't even have time to flinch at the fact that apparently there is a whole subset of drama that is specifically considered *Garen drama*—before Jamie is crossing his arms over his chest and saying, "No, I believe that what I *actually* said was that my best friend needed me tonight, and that we would have to reschedule our date for this weekend."

Oh, shit. A date—of course he was supposed to have a date tonight. It's Valentine's Day, and he's got a girlfriend he's been with for like, three or four months now. It makes perfect sense that they would have made gross, couple-y plans to have dinner at a fancy restaurant, exchange unreasonably expensive gifts, and make sweet, tender love in front of a shitload of vanilla-scented candles.

Or, whatever couples do on Valentine's Day. Fuck if I know. I was single, drunk, and weepy last Valentine's Day; single, drunk, and slutty the one before that; and single, drunk, and nursing a black eye the one before that, though in all fairness, I probably shouldn't have dumped Dave on February twelfth. That memory sends another spike of fear through my gut, but I manage to poke my head up a little higher so that I can say, "Uh, hey, Rach. I didn't realize you guys had plans. Really, you don't need to cancel on my account. It's fine, we'll all just leave so you guys can—"

"It's not fine, and you're not leaving," Jamie interrupts. To Rachael, he adds, "I know you were looking forward to tonight's date, and I was, too. Much as my actions suggest otherwise, I do want to spend time with you. I'm incredibly sorry, but I was very clear on the phone. Garen needs me, and that has to take priority."

"Why am I getting the impression that Garen *a/ways* takes priority?" Rachael says quietly.

I sink out of sight, making alarmed faces at my mom, but Jamie says simply, "Because he does."

There is a long, awkward pause. I contemplate knocking something over, just to break the tension, but the only thing I can reach is a lamp, and Jamie would kick me in the teeth if I broke that. I hear a faint shuffling—probably the sound of arms crossing—and then Rachael says, "This isn't fair. You and I are supposed to be the ones in the relationship, James. Not you and Garen, who are determined to hang out every single day, even though it almost always means you're choosing time with him over time with me. Not you and Travis, who have become total bros since he moved here. Not you and Alex, who were so stuck up each other's asses for the entire first two months of our relationship. Not you and Ben, who keep sending each other these little message-in-a-novel gifts, like that isn't so much more irritating than you texting me on New Year's to ask if you can have sex with him behind my back."

"It's not behind your back if he texted you for permission first," I point out. Mom smacks me hard on the shoulder, and I shrink deeper into the couch cushions.

Pretending I haven't said a word, Jamie says, "I understand that you're upset with me. I told you, I'm sorry. And I promise I'll make this up to you, but not tonight. You can't ask me to choose you over my friends."

"I shouldn't *have* to ask you to," Rachael says. "If you actually care about being with me, you'll—"

"Oh, I would really recommend that you not finish that sentence," my mom is unable to stop herself from offering. "The boys are terrifyingly codependent, and if you plan to put some sort of ultimatum on the table right now... well, you would do well to prepare yourself for disappointment, frankly. They choose each other. Always."

Rachael closes her eyes and takes a long, slow breath. I can't tell if she's trying to stop herself from crying or punching my mom in the face. Either way, she manages to keep it together, because after about fifteen seconds, she opens her eyes, looks at Mom and says, "I'm sorry, ma'am, but this sort of a private conversation."

"Oh?" Mom says, arching an eyebrow. "It felt very much like a '*standing right in front of two other people*' conversation. My mistake. If it's a private conversation, perhaps you should have it privately."

Rachael opens her mouth, but Jamie shakes his head and places a hand in the small of her back. "Let's take this to my room for a moment. I don't want to have an argument with you at all, but I certainly don't want to have an argument with you in front of other people."

He guides her down the hall to his bedroom. Mom looks around at me. "This is rather exciting. For years, I've been hearing about how all of Jamie's relationships end because the two of you are obsessed with each other, but this is the first time I've actually been present for the breakup."

"Hey, woah, no," I protest. "Not *all* of his relationships end because of me. He and Jake broke up because Jake would get drunk and make out with randoms in bars. He and Addison broke up because neither of them wanted to do the long-distance, Georgia-to-New-York thing. He and Candice broke up because she started calling her kitten 'their baby,' and it scared the shit out of him. He and Pete broke up because Pete was basically just using him for his money. It's not always because of me."

But it's almost always because of me, and now definitely seems like one of those times. I can't make out the words that Jamie and Rachael are saying, but I can tell that their conversation is quickly dissolving into a fight. Her voice is getting louder and more infuriated with every sentence, but he eventually cuts her off with something very quiet, followed by a long silence. And then there is the loud, unmistakable crack of Jamie being slapped across the face. I can't help it—I flinch. Right now isn't the time for me to hear *anyone* getting hit by their significant other, even if it's a girl hitting a guy. Spine straight, Mom reaches over and squeezes my hand. I squeeze back. We both look up as Rachael storms back down the

hall, through the living room, and out of the apartment. It's another minute or so before Jamie returns, tonguing the inside of his cheek like he's testing whether or not it's sensitive.

"Soooo," I say slowly. "That, uh... that was a breakup, right?"

"Yes," he says grimly. "Yes, Garen, that is the *fifteenth* breakup I've had in the past four and a half years that was essentially the result of a conversation about our codependent friendship."

"Fifteen? Jesus, dude. Maybe you should date fewer people," I say. "But come one, tell me the truth. How much did you spend on whatever shiny little gift you were going to give her?"

"Not nearly as much as I expect she was hoping I would," Jamie replies. He pauses to pick up a small Tiffany giftbox that was sitting on the credenza, wanders closer, and tosses it to me. I untangle the white ribbon and pop open the box. It's a silver locket engraved with an elegant scripted *R*, hanging from a thin silver chain.

"Shame it's got her initial on it," I say, shrugging. "Otherwise I'd say to just give it to someone else. Like your mom."

Mom takes one look at the necklace and shakes her head. "Garen, please. Melissa would never wear something like that."

"It doesn't matter," Jamie says dismissively, flinging himself onto the couch on my other side. "I'm sure I'll eventually make my way around to Rebecca or a Renee or something."

"A very faggy Robert," I suggest, and Mom swats my knee, giving me yet another warning look for using that word. Omelette barks in protest, and for the first time since entering the apartment, Mom actually looks at him.

"And who is this?" she says, blinking at the dog, then at Jamie. "Funny. You always struck me as more of a cat person."

"Sometimes," Jamie says, ducking his head to hide a small smile. I elbow him hard in the ribs.

"If that was your attempt to make a pussy joke to my mom, I'm going to fucking beat you to death with a hammer," I warn. Then, because Mom is still waiting for some sort of explanation, I say, "So, uh. This is Omelette. And he's a dog. Specifically, my dog. That I own."

"With?" Jamie prompts, and I try to elbow him again without my mom seeing, but it doesn't work.

"With Travis," I eventually have to admit.

"With Travis," Jamie repeats, in case Mom didn't hear. "They both own the dog. Together."

"Together," Mom echoes, and Jesus Christ, why do they both keep doing that? "You moved into a house with your ex-boyfriend and adopted a dog together." I nod. "Is this a test dog?"

I frown. "A what?"

"A test dog," she says, grimacing. "You know, where you get a pet with someone you're dating because you're attempting to test their parenting skills. Is that what this is leading up to? Are you going to call me in a month and tell me that you and he have *platonically* adopted a child together—"

"No!" I burst out. God, I hope my face doesn't betray the way my insides are squirming at the idea of me and Travis doing exactly that someday. "Fuck, Mom. You're being weird."

"And you're *nesting*, with your little house and your dog-child," she says. "I'm too young to be a grandmother, you know. You're not allowed to have children until you're at least twenty-five."

I bury my face in my palms, but I'm spared having to answer by the sound of my phone buzzing on the coffee table. I snatch it up and answer without looking at the caller ID. "Hello?"

"Hey," Travis says quietly. "This is the stupidest fucking question ever, but are you okay?" I make a faint noise of assent. He snorts. "So, that's a 'no.' It's—the house is clear. The cops just left. You can come home whenever you want." When I don't immediately reply, he says, even more quietly, "Please come home. I really need to see you."

"I'm fine," I finally manage to make myself say.

"Yeah, well... remember a couple weeks ago, when you said you needed to be able to look over and see that I was safe? I think I kind of need that now. Can you please come home?"

"Yeah," I say, closing my eyes and rubbing my palm over my face. "I'll be there soon."

"Good," he says. He pauses, then adds, "And don't forget to bring back Omelette, you dipshit. It's so weird not having him in the house. I feel like I'm in a fucking country song about how my ex stole my dog."

That's enough to earn a faint chuckle from me. "Oh, so he's your dog now? 'Cause last I checked, I'm the one who adopted him."

"Maybe, but I let him chew on all my stuff, so he likes me better," Travis points out. I smile, but don't say anything. He sighs. "I'll see you in a bit, yeah?"

I hang up, but Mom and Jamie are reluctant to let me leave the city so easily. I don't know if they're worried about letting me out of their sight, or if they're hoping I'll agree to stay overnight, but they end up forcing me to stay for food, for more conversation, for way too many reassuring hugs.

By the time Omelette and I get back to the house, Travis is half-asleep on the couch, waiting for us. He sits up, rubbing sleep out of his eyes, and murmurs, "Hey. Took you a while to get back here."

I shrug. "Blame my mom. And James. I just wanted to come home."

"Do you want to talk?" he asks, eyes sharp on mine, even though he's stifling a yawn.

I scratch under the dog's chin and shake my head. "Kind of over talking, to be honest. Maybe tomorrow, but right now, I just... want to go to bed, if that's cool?"

He doesn't press the issue, only follows me upstairs and slips an arm around my waist to draw me into a hug just outside my bedroom door. It's probably supposed to be a way of comforting me before we head to separate rooms, but it goes on, and on, and on. After several minutes, it feels like it would be stupid to pretend that I don't need him to stay as long and as close as possible. Omelette has already made himself comfortable in my room, but I snap my fingers to get his attention, then lead both of them down the hall to Travis' room.

Travis says nothing, but when I sneak a glance at his face, he looks relieved at not having to be the one to suggest this. We barely manage to make it into the bed before Omelette leaps up with us and sprawls out over the comforter, taking up more space than either of the full-grown men in the bed.

"What, seriously?" I say flatly. "This is what you let him do when he sleeps in your room?"

Travis huffs and shoves at my shoulder so I'll turn over and let him curl up against my back. "Shut up. He likes the bed, okay? Just let him live his life, he's not hurting anyone."

I roll my eyes, but it's nice, having Travis behind me and our dog curled up next to me. It's nicer still when Travis sits up and leans over me to plug his iPod into the dock on his nightstand, queuing up some music to help me fall asleep. By twisted coincidence, it's the same band who sang the first track on the CD from Dave. I like the band, and I like the song, and I don't want this to turn into another thing I can't stand because it reminds me of Dave, so I don't request a song change. I squeeze my eyes shut and wriggle backwards until I'm pressed more firmly to Travis' front. He kissed the skin just behind my ear; listening is a lot easier after that.

156 days sober

Charlie Walczyk is the first person to speak to me at PT the next morning. Or, to be more accurate, Charlie Walczyk is the first person to storm up to me in the commuter parking lot before I can even *get* to PT. Sam is trying to get his attention to calm him down, but it's not working at all. Javi, Declan, and Taylor are all watching warily from a few feet away, but I don't think Charlie even notices them. He gets in my face and snarls, "Are you fucking kidding me, Garen? You called the cops on him *again*?"

I have prepared for this moment. I knew it was coming. I unzip my backpack and extract the black binder, flipping carefully through it and staring Charlie dead in the eyes as I say, "He violated his restraining order. That's on him, not me. He's fucking lucky he's just getting a warning, because he—"

"He's not even in the same state as you are!" Charlie bursts out. "Jesus Christ, man, when are you going to let this go? You guys had a fucked up relationship, and you fought all the time, and I know things ended badly, but you can't use one bad breakup as justification for ruining my brother's life."

"You," I say carefully, "are unbelievably misinformed about what happened between Dave and me. It wasn't fighting, and it wasn't a bad breakup. He beat me, and he almost killed me."

"No. That's not—look, David told me how it happened, okay? He fucking told me everything," Charlie says. I think he plans to continue, but I finally find the photograph I've been looking for, remove it from the binder, and hold it up in front of his face. He takes one look at the picture and reels back, his eyes growing wide behind his glasses. "What the fuck is that?"

"That's my face," I say, as calmly as I am capable of. "Pretty grody, isn't it? Honestly, I wish this picture didn't even exist, but nobody thought to ask me before it was taken, seeing as how I was in a coma at that point."

Charlie's eyes flicker from the picture to my face and back again several times before he swallows and says, "A coma?"

"Yep," I say. "I was unconscious when Travis found me, and I didn't wake up until sometime the next day. When I came to, I figured I was fine. They mostly judge concussions by how long you're out for and how much you remember when you wake up, so I kept telling people I was fine, because I thought I remembered everything that happened. I remembered arguing with Dave, I remembered him shoving me, I even remember the first few punches. Turns out? That's not really the whole story. No, that—the rest of it came to me in flashes over the next few months. Some asshole at school would bump into me in the hallway, and I'd feel your brother's fist against my jaw. A guy would get his hands on me in bed, and I'd be convinced I was on the floor, begging your brother not to kill me. Every time I thought I'd pieced it all together, something would go wrong, some door would open, and I'd be wrecked by it."

Charlie doesn't say anything, but that's okay, because I don't know how to shut up.

"This isn't the only picture I have, either. Look—" I open the binder again and start taking out all of the pictures one by one, spreading them out over the hood of my car so that he can see every brutal injury his brother ever left me with. "This, all of this—these are things Dave did. And these ones right here, this top row, these are the things he did to me last spring, when he finally got arrested. He broke my leg, and I

had to use a motorized wheelchair for weeks, because he also broke three of my fingers and cracked two of my ribs, so I couldn't use crutches."

I don't remember the other guys coming closer, but they must have, at some point, because they're all gathered around me now, staring down at the pictures in stunned silence. I fold my arms over my chest and grip my own biceps hard enough to hide my trembling.

"You're all wondering what I went to rehab for. You haven't asked, but I know you're all curious. Well, it started with the painkillers I was prescribed for these injuries. And then when I ran out of painkillers, I switched to coke and booze, because they were easier to get than more hydrocodone."

I gather up all of the pictures and stuff them back into the binder. That seems to snap Charlie out of it. He says, "Y-You can't blame him for the fact that you became an addict. That's not fair. There was already a no-contact order in place long before you hit bottom. You can't blame him."

"You're right," I agree, shoving the binder into my backpack. "I can't blame him for the fact that I ended up in rehab. But I can blame him for the fact that I have nightmares, and panic attacks, and biweekly therapy sessions, and more fucking scars than I care to count. And I can blame him for the fact that I came home from MLEP last night and found a fucking *Valentine's Day present* from him on my porch. No postage. No address. Delivered in person. This was attached to it."

I dig last night's card out of my backpack and hold it out. Charlie glances at it, but doesn't take it. "What does it say?"

"Oh, you can read it for yourself. I'm sure you'll recognize his handwriting, too," I say, forcing the card into his hand. "Now, call me crazy—believe me, plenty of people do, Dave among them—but not many people would want to get a *'thinking of you'* note from someone who used to beat the shit out of them on the regular."

"He was—" Charlie swallows, rereads the card, and tries again, in a hushed, strangled tone, "He was at your house? Last night?"

"Yeah. He was at my house last night," I say, taking the card back. "So, Charlie. Tell me again how *I'm* the one who's ruining *his* life."

Charlie doesn't say a single word. I didn't expect him to.

Chapter Twenty-Five

"I told her once I wasn't good at anything. She told me survival is a talent." –Susanna Kaysen

165 days sober

"Hey, what can I get for you?" the barista asks with a polite smile.

It should be a simple question, but I find myself scrolling feverishly through my text messages to make sure I'm getting all the orders right. First, my drink, which I still can't remember and therefore need Travis to text me the name of at least once a week. "I need a large black-eye with caramel flavoring in it. And a... hang on—" I click back to Stohler's text, "—a large—or, venti, whatever, Americano."

"Alright. Anything else for you today?"

"Yeah, I also need a venti—" Christ, Alex, what is wrong with you? "—White Chocolate Mocha Frappuccino with extra whipped cream. What—is that even a real drink?"

"It is," the barista says, gnawing on her lip like she's trying not to laugh at me. Whatever, Alex is the one she should be laughing at. "Is that all?"

"One of those apple things," I say, nodding towards the dessert case. The thing I want is clearly labeled with its actual name, but I feel like saying the word *fritter* is just an affront my dignity can't handle after ordering that last drink. I pay for everything and retreat to the other end of the drink bar to pick at my apple fritter while I wait for the drinks to be made. Stohler is already texting me to bitch about how long it's taking me to get to the apartment, and Alex is doing the same, whining about how he can't expect to handle Assassin's Creed without proper sustenance. I ignore them both and shove my phone back into my pocket, settling for scoping out the other patrons at the Starbucks.

There are a few girls—maybe thirteen or fourteen years old—who are spread out at a large table, slurping at iced drinks with whipped cream. Probably the same frilly shit Alex is getting. A kid who's way too young to be reading *A Game of Thrones* is curled up in an armchair, doing just that. A middle-aged man in glasses is clacking away at the keyboard of his laptop and taking infrequent sips of a cup of coffee, probably just to avoid being kicked out. And there, right near the door...

There's Dave Walczyk, staring down at the textbooks and notebooks he has spread out over his tiny table. He's halfway through a mug of coffee—an actual, ceramic mug, so I assume he's been here for a while, and has plans to be here longer still. He's working on homework, or, I guess he was; right now, he's sitting completely and utterly still, his eyes unmoving, his shoulders hunched and tense. So, he must have seen me. Or heard me. I wonder if he's been that still since I first walked in. I wonder how I didn't see him.

The barista says something at the counter behind me, but I don't hear her. It's like my ears are packed through with cotton. Like I can't hear anything over the pulsing of blood inside my skull. I turn back to her and say softly, "Sorry, what?"

"I said, do you need a tray?" She grabs a cardboard drink tray from a stack near the espresso machine and gives it a little wave. I nod, and she quickly piles the three drinks into the tray, pushing it towards me and saying, "Have a great day."

"Thanks," I say, but I wait another minute or so before I pick up the tray, worried it might tumble out of my weak and shaking hands. When I finally turn around, I find that Dave still hasn't moved. For a long while, I just stand there, watching him, waiting to see if he's even breathing. Eventually, he chances a glance at me. His eyes snap right back to his book, but it's enough to get me shaking again.

Because the thing is, Dave's a fucking psycho, and he terrifies me, and he has hurt me more than anyone

else I've ever met, but he was... first. Not the first boy I slept with, and not the first boy I loved—those honors belong to James and Travis, respectively—but Dave was definitely somewhere in between. He was the first boyfriend I ever had. First guy to take me out on a date, and open the car door for me, and pay for dinner and a movie. First guy to ever tell me he loved me, first guy to say he wanted a future with me, first guy to make me feel like I mattered. And then, later, the first guy to ever tell me how worthless and pathetic and slutty I was—am. First guy to ever *hurt* me, to break my heart, even if I'm not sure it was his to begin with.

He's important. I don't want him to be, but he is, and maybe that's why I find myself tightening my grip on the drink tray and stumbling over my boots as I trudge across the room towards him. His attention is on me, but his gaze is locked on the books. Maybe he thinks I'm heading for the exit, which is right next to him, and maybe I *should* be heading for the exit, but instead, I trip right up to him, set my tray down on the table's only remaining space, and say, "Hi." He goes so still, he might as well be catatonic. I fiddle with the straw poking out of Alex's drink. Nobody speaks. God, I hate silence. I clear my throat and say, "You can talk to me, you know."

That's enough to finally spur a response. He closes his textbook and leans back in his seat, looking up at me with tired eyes. "The last time I tried to talk to you, your mom sent the NHPD to my house."

"That's because that box was fucking creepy," I say. I have no idea from where I'm getting the balls to say this. The last time I spoke to him like this—the last time I spoke to him at all—he almost killed me. But there are more than half a dozen witnesses in the room with us, and I know that if he tries to attack me, someone will stop him, or call the cops. So I keep going. "I didn't even call her, you know that? Jamie did, after I fucking *fled* to his apartment because I thought you might be like, lurking in my fucking broom closet or something."

Dave sighs. "I didn't mean to scare you, G. I thought—it was a *present*, okay? I filled it with things I know you like because I hoped that maybe you'd reach out to me. I wanted to be sure that you were okay. I wanted to talk to you, that's all."

"Did you know I was going to be here?" I say, knowing the words are stupid even as I say them.

Based on the look on Dave's face, he thinks they're pretty stupid, too. "Yes, Garen," he says flatly. "You're supposed to be living in New York now, but I've been sitting here for two hours, pretending to work on a midterm paper, because I somehow knew that you were going to be stopping in at the Starbucks that's right around the corner from where you know I live. In fact, that's actually *why* I live there. I scouted it out three years ago, just hoping you'd someday buy a cup of coffee here."

"Don't be mean to me," I say, voice small.

"Trust me, Garen, I can get a lot meaner than that," he says.

It's an automatic, thoughtless reply, and his eyes go wide as soon as the words are out of his mouth. Not as wide as mine, I'd bet. I scramble to pick up the tray so that I can leave—or at least, so that I can go sit in my car and hyperventilate for a few minutes—but Dave throws a hand out as if to grab my wrists. He thinks better of that before he even makes contact, and suddenly we're both striking the same pose, shoulders hunched and trembling hands raised up in a gesture of surrender.

"I'm sorry," he says, and he sounds like he maybe means it for real. "Shit, I-I'm sorry, I can't believe I really said that to you. Just..." He slowly stretches his hand out like he's doing everything he can not to scare me away. My eyes are darting back and forth between his face and his approaching hand. He closes it over the back of the chair across the table from himself, the one closest to me, and carefully pushes it back a few inches. "Can you—will you sit, please? Can we talk?"

"We're not supposed to," I say. "Like, I really feel like you're misunderstanding some part of this whole 'no contact order' thing. Specifically, the part where we have no contact. Which is, you know, all of it."

"You came up to me," he points out. "If you want to go, I won't stop you, I promise. I just want to talk. Please."

Dating Dave when I was a sophomore was the third-stupidest thing I've ever done. Dating him again last year, even though I knew what he was capable of, was the second-stupidest. Sitting down across from him right now? That's the stupidest thing I've ever done. Ever. I know that, but I still do it.

He lets out a slow, steady breath of relief, then allows the corners of his mouth to twitch upward. Even though it's a tiny smile, it still cuts a pair of deep dimples into his cheeks—I quickly focus on one of the books on the table instead of his face. Dave doesn't smile much, but when he does, he looks fucking adorable, and I don't want to see that.

"How have you been?" he asks. "Last time I saw you, you weren't, um... in the best place." He swallows, then admits, "Even before what I did to you."

"I'm okay," I say. My voice is so much quieter than it normally is, and I want to choke myself because of it. Every time I try to speak to Dave, I end up sounding like the awkward, inexperienced fifteen-year-old boy he met, instead of the hardened, battle-scarred man I am now. I clear my throat and try to summon a more natural, certain tone as I continue, "Last year was, uh... it was hard on me, I guess? But I have my shit together now."

"Yeah?" is all Dave says.

Heat rises in my cheeks, and I roll my eyes, but still don't look at him. "Why, is that so hard to believe?"

His jaw tightens so much that I can hear his teeth grit together even over the cheerful alt rock playing from a speaker somewhere above my head. "It was a single word, Garen. Don't get—"

"Sorry," I interrupt. "I know you didn't mean—I'm fine, is all I'm trying to say. Things are good between me and my parents again. And my friends." This is the perfect part to finish with. This is when I should stand up, thank him for speaking to me without beating me to a pulp, and walk out. Every rational part of me knows that I shouldn't say another word, but I've got this twisted craving to let him know exactly how much he fucked me up. I want to see if he's even capable of feeling guilt. I finally meet his eyes dead-on. "I'm five months clean, too."

Dave blinks at me. "You're what?" I raise my eyebrows, but don't repeat myself. He licks his lips, and I try not to blink. "You mean—"

"I mean that I went to rehab," I cut him off. I wiggle my coffee cup out of the tray and take a long sip, even though it's hot enough to numb my tongue. "I had to take a ton of painkillers because of what you did to me, and once my prescriptions ran out, I started self-medicating with booze and blow. Shit got out of hand. Dad cut me off, once he realized what I was using his money for, so I—" I break off in a self-conscious little burst of laughter, "I had to fund a habit somehow, and I'm really only good for one thing, right? I mean, that's what you always told me."

Dave's eyes widen. "Garen, I never... if I said that to you, it was only because I was angry. You know me, you know I get--crazy when I'm angry. I say stupid things, horrible things, and I'm sorry for that. Really."

His apology—however meaningless it probably is—takes the wind out of my sails, and I find myself slouching down in my seat. When I speak again, my voice has returned to that young and vulnerable muttering from before. "It doesn't even matter anymore, alright? I'm over it. It's fine."

"It's not fine. I had no idea that you were going through so much. And I had—" He breaks off, licks his lips again, and leans forward so suddenly that it takes everything in me not to flinch back. "Garen, I never meant to hurt you like I did. I know that must be impossible for you to believe, but it's true. I know I've got

a temper, alright? I'm working on it. I *hated* myself for what I did to you, I couldn't even stand to look at myself in the mirror."

Guess that makes two of us.

"I started going to therapy," he admits, and *that's* enough to take me by surprise. I search his face to see if he's full of shit, but I don't think he is. He just looks tired. "Anger management, mostly. I don't—I don't want to be a *monster*, Garen. I don't ever want to hurt someone like I hurt you. I loved you so much, and I still—part of me is always going to—" I squeeze my eyes shut, and he must realize that he's heading down a path that's going to get him kicked in the balls, because he quickly changes tact. "You're a good person. You deserved better than how I treated you."

I don't know what to say to that, so I hitch one shoulder in a half-assed shrug and say nothing. My eyes are still closed, but they fly open when I feel the weight of his hands on my jacket sleeves. He's got his fingers curled over the leather, carefully pinning my forearms to the top of his textbook, even if he doesn't realize how caged I feel. My throat closes up, but mostly that just means I can't tell him to stop, so he doesn't.

"You don't have to forgive me for what I did," he says. "I'd understand if you never wanted to speak to me again. But I need you to know that I'm sorry. Do you hear me?" I nod, and he takes his hands off me, and I can breathe again. "You look like you were on your way somewhere, so I, ah... I shouldn't keep you. Can I walk you to your car?"

I don't want him anywhere near the Ferrari. I shake my head. "I'm not going to my car. I'm going to my friends' apartment."

"Well, can I walk you there?" he says slowly, patiently, like I'm intentionally being difficult.

I sort of am being difficult, but mostly because the idea of letting him know where Alex and Ben live is a little sickening to me. I shake my head again. "It's okay. It's not that far from here, and you're um... you look busy."

He looks like he wants to protest. Sure enough, when I stand and pick up my tray, he rises to his feet as well. I take an immediate, instinctive step back, but he either doesn't notice or deliberately ignores it. "Alright. I need a cigarette, though, so I'll just walk you out."

There isn't any reasonable, calm way to reject that idea, so I let him push his chair in and step after me. I manage two steps towards the door before his hand is on the small of my back, steering me. I hadn't been unsteady—not until he put his hands on me again. I walk faster, but short of breaking into an honest-to-god run, I can't really do much to escape. It's an unseasonably warm day, and the sun has finally come out from behind the clouds that covered it when I went inside. Without thinking about what I'm doing, I shove my coffee tray into Dave's hands and shrug out of my jacket, slinging it over my arm before I take the tray back. The second Dave's eyes flicker over me, I know it was a mistake.

"Christ, you look good, G," he says. I wish I'd worn something other than a long-sleeved shirt that clings to my arms now that I've put on muscle weight. Fuck that—I wish I'd worn like, a loose shirt, a flannel button-down, a sweater, a lumpier sweater, a parka. One of those giant bubbles that germaphobes stuff their kids into. An armored tank. Anything to stop Dave from looking at me like he's *hungry* as he repeats, "So good."

"Thanks," I try to say, but it doesn't even qualify as a real noise. It's less than a whisper. Both of my hands are clutching my drink tray, so I have to jerk my head in the direction I'm planning to go. "I should leave. But, um. Y-You can't send me anything else, okay? No more presents, even if they're—you can't contact me at all. My friends are still on high-alert from Valentine's Day, and if they think you're breaking the restraining order, they'll tell my mom, and she'll call the cops."

He makes a noise that's half sigh, half groan, like my terror is an inconvenience to him, or like we're in this together, us against them. "I know, I know. It's just—it's hard. You get that, right? It's hard not being able to see you, or talk to you. I *miss* you."

I don't tell him to leave me alone. That's my biggest mistake. I should tell him that I don't miss him, that I'm so much happier and safer and better without him in my life, but I don't, and maybe that's why his hands are on my wrists again. I draw back instantly, but that's another mistake, because it means I take my left hand off the drink tray and let it flail out to the side, out of reach but out of the way. Without three coffees to serve as a barrier between us now, Dave steps in close and moves his hands to my shoulders, then to the back of my neck. It's skin on skin, now; I wish I were dead. His hands go higher, tangling in my hair, and that's even worse, because now he's got a grip on me, he has something to hold onto if I try to run, and I want him to let go of me, but he doesn't, and I can feel the corners of my eyes starting to burn, like I'm about to start crying, and *why do I always start crying*, why do I let myself seem so weak whenever I'm with him?

My breathing hitches, and Dave makes a wounded, desperate sound and moves closer, saying, "Don't, Garen. Please, don't cry, you know I hate it when you cry—"

"I'm sorry," I try to say, and my mouth forms the words, but nothing comes out.

I guess Dave gets what I'm going for anyway, because he shakes his head and shifts up so that he can kiss my forehead. I don't know why I always forget that he's actually a little bit shorter than me. He kisses my forehead again, then my cheek, and repeats, "Don't cry."

I wouldn't have to, if he'd just let go of me. He's trying to comfort me, but I wouldn't need someone to comfort me, if he'd just leave me alone. His lips are still close, almost touching my cheek; if he wanted to kiss me, all he'd have to do is turn his head. I hope to god he doesn't turn his head.

My phone buzzes in my pocket—probably Stohler or Alex again—and all at once, I snap out of it. I scramble backwards so suddenly that I almost drop all the coffees, and Dave reaches to steady me, but I yank away from his hands and say, loud enough for people walking by to hear, loud enough for there to be uneasy witnesses, "Don't fucking touch me. Don't ever fucking touch me again, or I'll call the cops, I swear I will."

"Garen—"

"Everything okay here?" I turn towards the wary stare of a middle-aged woman who has paused with her hand on the Starbucks door. She's watching me, but I notice that her eyes periodically dart towards Dave, like she wants to be sure he doesn't make any sudden movements.

I slowly become aware of the fact that my face is cold and a little wet. I drag the wrist of my shirt-sleeve quickly under my eyes, wiping away the dampness that I'm too pathetic to learn how to control. "Everything's fine," I say, voice cracking. "Thanks for—I was just leaving."

The woman still doesn't open the door. It takes me a moment to realize that she's waiting to make sure that I have a chance to walk away without Dave following me. I want to thank her, but I don't know how, so I just turn around and speed off down the sidewalk.

I'm heading the wrong way, but it's intentional; I don't want Dave to see where I'm really going, even if it means that I have to circle around blocks and buildings to get to Alex's place. By the time I get buzzed into the building and get to the apartment, a quarter of his iced drink has melted to murky water, which pisses him off for about three seconds.

"You slow-assed piece of shit," he says to me, pulling off the cap of his drink so that he can stick his tongue right in the whipped cream. Stohler curls her lip at him in revulsion; his only reply is to exaggerate how much he has to move his head to swirl his tongue around in the cream. She turns back to the xbox,

and he adds to me, "You know, Starbucks is literally two blocks from here, I don't know how—" He stops speaking abruptly, frowning at me. "Dude, are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I say, but my voice is flat, numb, and I think my eyes are probably still watery. One of my hands is knotted in the hair at the back of my head, trying to scrape away the ghost of Dave's touch, but I must be pulling harder than I expected, because suddenly, I feel a sharp twinge of pain, and then I'm holding maybe a dozen hairs that I've torn straight from my scalp. I stare at them; so do Alex and Stohler. I drop the hairs on the leg of my jeans and return my hand to my hair.

Alex grabs my wrist. "G, what the hell are you doing?"

"I don't—" I swallow, shake him off me, and reach for my hair again. "I'm not doing anything. I just, um... I kind of ran into someone, while I was at Starbucks?" That's not right. I try again. "I kind of ran into Dave Walczyk, while I was at Starbucks?"

"Dave—your ex?" Alex says sharply. "The one who—"

"—put me in the hospital, yeah," I say, and my voice cracks. I blink hard, trying to hold down the panic that I can feel clawing its way up my throat. "It's not a big deal. H-He didn't follow me there, or anything. He was there first. I should've left when I saw him, but I figured it wasn't—his younger brother, Charlie is in my squad at Patton, and we're, uh... we're friends now, I think. He knows what Dave did to me, and he knows it wasn't my fault. We uh, we talk sometimes, we hang out. I think he's trying to make up for what Dave did, and it's not—I'm used to that. And I think I expected Dave to act the same today. I mean, I was fine. I-I even stopped and um, I said hi to him."

"You said hi to a guy who used to beat the shit out of you," Stohler says in disbelief. I nod. "Don't you have a no-contact order between you two?" I nod again. "Fucking Christ, Anderson."

"Are you okay?" Alex asks me again. I give a jerky shrug. He gestures towards the television screen, still paused on his game. "Look, we don't have to do the game day thing, if you don't want to. We can do whatever you want. Whatever makes you feel, you know..."

Safe.

Comfortable.

Like you don't have to go out and score some coke just to tolerate this moment.

"I want, uh—" I break off. What I really want is to take a fucking shower. I want to stop feeling like I've got his hands on me, my wrist, my shoulders, my back. I want to be invulnerable. I want to be bigger, I want to be stronger, I want to scare the shit out of Dave Walczyk, the way he scares the shit out of me.

Suddenly, I remember being doubled over the kitchen sink in Travis' house, scrubbing black dye into my scalp, hacking off half my hair with a pair of scissors, snorting enough coke to make my nose bleed, shoving two sharp rings through my lower lip. I remember hobbling all over the ground floor of the house to accomplish these tasks, and I remember not giving a fuck that my ribs were aching, because I remember that all I wanted was to make myself harder to look at. I wanted to look fucked up and ugly and scary. And I want that right now.

"I want to turn myself into someone who Dave Walczyk would never, ever fuck with again," I say finally, tipping my head back so that I can stare at the ceiling. "I want to look more dangerous than him."

"Finally, something I can help you with," Stohler sighs.

Alex frowns at her. "What do you mean?"

"I get stared at for a living," she says. "And trust me—the first thing you learn when you get into my industry? How to make sure that you can get from the club to the car every night without getting assaulted."

I slump down in my seat, scrubbing a hand through my hair. "If I knew how to be around Dave without getting assaulted, I wouldn't be freaking out right now. I'm open to suggestions."

"Step one," she says, holding up a single finger. "In order to look dangerous, you have to *be* dangerous. If this Dave guy is too much of a psycho to stop himself from showing up on your porch on Valentine's Day, and you're too much of an idiot to walk away when you see him in public, then you need to be prepared to defend yourself if he puts hands on you again. Open this."

She shoves her purse across the coffee table at me. I drag the zipper back, then glance at her. She gestures for me to go on. It's a small purse, maybe the size of a box of tissues. There are only a few things inside: her wallet, her cell phone, her car keys, a small black spray canister, one of those folded compact mirrors, and a retracted switchblade. Stohler reaches over and flips the purse upside down on the table, spilling the contents across it. I turn over the canister so that I can read the label—it's pepper spray. Stohls gestures towards her keys. "Look at the pink keychain."

"It's a kitten," I say flatly. It's also ugly as fuck, but I don't think she'd like to hear that. The keychain is a hard plastic outline of a cat's head, with pointy ears and big, blank circles where the eyes should be.

"No," Stohler says, reaching over and slipping two fingers into the eye-holes of the kitten's face so that the ears jut out from her knuckles. "It's what I would use to gouge out the eyes of any fucker who tried to attack me."

"Switches and knuckles are illegal in New York," I say.

"So is raping a fifteen-year-old boy, but that never stopped your ex," she shoots back.

A laugh bursts out of my mouth so suddenly that it feels like her words have punched it out of me. It takes everything in me not to deny it, even though that would be pointless—she and Alex have both known about this for months. Everybody knows about it, I guess, except for Travis. And Dave, apparently. But this is the last thing I want to talk about, so I swallow and say, "Fine, fine. I've got a switch, I can start carrying it. Is there a step two to this plan?"

She stands up and starts shoving things back into her purse. "Yes. Step two is that we're going to go to CVS, and we're going to buy an electric razor, and we're going to give you a haircut that doesn't make you look like you're eagerly awaiting your audition for a boy-band. If you want to look like someone he won't fuck with, okay. We can do that. And hey, fun fact? The 'rebellious bad boy' in the group is still only the 'rebellious bad boy' compared to the other members of the boy band."

"Plus, they're never really that badass," Alex points out, words a little bit garbled around the straw in his mouth. "Like, wasn't the 'bad boy' of N*SYNC supposed to be fuckin' JC Chasez?"

"What, I don't even get to be Timberlake?" I say.

"Be glad I'm not trying to call you Lance Bass, you big queer." Alex pauses to take a long, obnoxious slurp of his drink. "Would you rather we cast you in New Kids on the Block? I'm pretty sure that would make you Donnie Wahlberg."

"How is that better? Everybody knows that Marky Mark is the hot Wahlberg—"

"Congratulations! You've successfully named more boy band members than I can, and I was the target audience of the boy band craze of the nineties," Stohler says. "The fact that this argument is even *happening* is the exact reason why I'm about to shave your fucking head."

Alex looks around at her in alarm. "Wait, *shave*? Like, all of it? I thought you were just going to, you know, shorten it. He's going to look like a fucking felon if you shave it."

"Is that not what you're going for?" Stohler asks me. I don't say anything. My uncertainty must be written all over my face, because she reaches back into her purse and takes out the little mirror, flipping it open to show me my own face.

I stare at my reflection and try to imagine what I might look like with a mostly shaved head. When I had choppy black hair and snakebites, I would sometimes catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror and be... startled, I guess. I didn't always recognize myself, and I'm not sure how much of that was down to my actual appearance, rather than being high out of my mind and dissociated from reality. Will it feel like that now, even though I'm sober? As it is now, my hair can be a little... distracting. People are so busy looking at the mess of spikes that they don't notice the sharpness of my jawline, the deep green of my eyes, the scar on the right side of my nose, the other one just under my left eyebrow. Hell, half the guys in the squad didn't even notice I had a lip ring until I made a remark about how weird it felt when I accidentally knocked it against the mouthpiece of the hookah pipe. Without my hair, I'll have nothing to hide behind.

"Yeah," I say finally. "Let's—I want to do it. But I can't buzz it any shorter than a four. I need like, at least half an inch all over, or I'll look like a skinhead, and my mom will be pissed at me."

"And right now, it's..." Stohler pauses, frowning, and digs a hand through the spikes on the top of my head, breaking up all the hairspray. "I'd say you've got maybe an inch and a half to two inches along the back and sides, then three inches on top?" I shrug. "Jesus, your hair is long." I shrug again. She smacks me, mostly to prove that she can. "Alright, let's go. It's not like I've got clippers shoved in my purse, so we'll have to go buy some."

Alex unfolds his spindly legs and jogs off down the hall, calling over his shoulder, "Hang on, hang on." I can hear him trolling around in one of the bedrooms, then the bathroom. Another minute or so later, he comes back, triumphantly waving an electric razor and a handful of blade guards. "No need to buy a new razor, if Ben's already got one."

I blink. "Ben and I have basically the same haircut; he just doesn't spike it. How can he use clippers on his hair?"

"He doesn't use it for that," Alex says.

Stohler, who had been reaching out, yanks her hand back like the razor's made of horse shit. "Nope. We're going to the store. I am not touching anything that Ben uses to trim the hair on his—"

"It's for his face," Alex says quickly. "He uses it once or twice a week so he can keep his facial hair short without having to do a real shave—I think he's starting to enter his pretentious-Yale-indie-douche phase, 'cause he has definitely been rocking a hipster beard lately."

"He's been in that phase since I met him. One of you, grab a chair from the kitchen," Stohler says. She takes the razor and inspects the blade guards until she finds the one that will leave me with enough hair to keep me from looking like a Neo-Nazi. She snaps it into place and gestures towards the chair that Alex has retrieved; I sit. "I'm trying to picture the kid in a plaid shirt and some Buddy Holly glasses. Maybe one of those slouchy knitted hats, like he wore on Halloween for the barista costume? I bet he looks like such a little idiot."

Alex grimaces and flops down on the couch, grabbing the xbox controller and starting his game again. "He actually looks really fucking hot. It's pretty terrible."

"So, I take it that means you still wanna hit it?" I say.

"Yeah, I definitely still wanna hit it, but I don't know," Alex sighs. "It's been what, three months since he found out I was into him? Nothing has happened between us. We're not together, and we're obviously never going to be together, and I almost ruined our friendship by trying to force it. So, I guess I'm kind of trying to—"

There's a sudden blast of buzzing near my ear, and then I'm blinking down at a lap of dark hair. Alex and I have both fallen completely silent. Slowly, I reach up to touch the strip of—well, it feels mostly like it's just my *scalp*, barely covered by my requested half-inch of hair.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Stohler says cheerfully. "Did I interrupt your girl-talk?"

"We didn't mean to get feelings near you, Stohls, sorry," I say, rubbing at my scalp until she bats my hand away. "C'mon, do the rest. I feel lopsided."

She buzzes off a second section of hair, then a third, carefully tilting my head when she needs to get at me from a new angle. On the sixth strip, my head is halfway shaved, and I'm comfortable enough with the sensation to begin speaking again. "Any hot dudes at your school? Getting over someone by getting under someone is a cliché tactic, but it works."

"Is that how you're handling your Travis situation?" Alex snipes, because Alex is an asshole.

I make a face at him. "There is no Travis situation. Things are fine between the two of us. Answer my fucking question."

He shrugs. "I haven't met any dudes I'd be into, but there are some cute girls. There's this one chick in my bio class who I've been out with once or twice, but it's nothing serious. Not like Ben and his guy."

It's a good thing that Stohler is surprised enough to step away from me with the razor, because I start choking on a mouthful of my coffee. She gives me a perfunctory slap on the back to assist me, then turns to Alex. "Since when does Ben have *any* guy, let alone one he's serious about? Because when I talked to him on Tuesday, he was single."

"He is," I say sharply. "He is, Ben's totally single."

"Uh, maybe that's what he says, but it's bullshit," Alex says. He crosses the room to the bookshelf next to the television, clears his throat and announces, "I present to you... the Library of Impending Fellatio." He does some sort of Vanna White impression towards a small collection of books on the shelf. "Every couple of weeks, he gets a *mysterious package* that I *shouldn't fucking touch*, Alex, *mind your own fucking business*. And he never tells me what's in it, but I'm not retarded—he gets a new, book-shaped package, and then suddenly there's a new book on the shelf? Not hard to figure out."

"He works in a bookstore. He must come home with books all the time," Stohler says skeptically.

"Yeah, but he kinda leaves those wherever. I can't take two steps without tripping over a stack of paperbacks from the shop. But when he gets one of these little presents, he disappears into his room for a few hours, then comes out and oh-so-carefully puts a new book right on this shelf."

I snort. "Dude, has it ever occurred to you that, when he 'disappears into his room,' maybe he's just jerkin' it?"

Stohler makes a short tutting noise with her tongue. "Not if he's done this lately. Kid gave up orgasms for Lent. Didn't he tell you?" I stare blankly back at her. She smirks. "My reaction exactly. Forty days and forty long, torturous nights without even his own hand for comfort. He admitted it last weekend when I was here. On the one hand, congratulations to him for being so devoted to his faith... or whatever. But on the other hand, what kind of nineteen-year-old man voluntarily gives up having orgasms for six weeks?"

"One who's even more of a masochist than I thought," I say. I tip my head back and stare up at the ceiling, trying to wrap my mind around the concept. "That's—I wouldn't be able to go a *week* without beating off. Shit, I don't think I've even *tried* that since I was like, eleven."

"Seconded," Alex says.

"Thirded," Stohler says. "His plan terrified me so much that the day before Lent started, I offered to bring him out for a Fat Tuesday pancake brunch, then made him go to a sex shop with me afterward. I sent that little shit home with a hundred dollars' worth of porn, lube, and sex toys, and gave him specific instructions to spend the next twelve hours getting himself off in every way possible. He was so humiliated, he couldn't even speak. It was wonderful. He better have done it, though, or I'm going to kick his ass when he gets out of work."

"Should've just told him to call his little book buddy," Alex says, gesturing towards the shelf again.

"Whoever is sending the books either *is* nailing him, or *wants* to be nailing him. It's like—" He pulls the books off the shelf and starts thumbing through them, listing off, "Book about crazy writers. Another book about crazy writers, specifically: the Beat movement. Book about some crazy dude who wrote a dictionary—"

"I'm sensing a theme," Stohler says dryly.

I lace my fingers together behind my still-only-half-shaved head, because if I touch my phone, I'm not going to be able to stop myself from texting Jamie a string of insults. A stack of books about bipolar poets—that's his grand seduction attempt? He doesn't even send notes with these books. These two idiots won't even talk to each other, but they're both willing to expend embarrassing amounts of effort to pick out exactly the right books for each other.

"But the theme expands," Alex says, "because there's also a book about Jesus—"

"I wish I were dead," I groan, dragging my hands right over the top of my head and down to cover my face.

"—and one about the history of women and tattooing. I didn't even know people wrote books about the history of women and tattooing, but apparently, that's a thing. Like, what kind of guy is lame enough to try to get in somebody's pants by sending him a shitload of books about fucking grammar and women's studies?"

Part of me wants to laugh at the fact that Alex is unknowingly calling *James goddamn Goldwyn* lame, but another part of me is more concerned with... how fucking clueless Alex must be about what Ben really wants in a guy. The three of us may think that books about poetry or grammar or feminist body mods are lame, but I'd bet anything that Ben practically creamed his skinny jeans when he tore off the wrapping on each of those packages.

Stohler must agree with my unspoken judgment, because she arches a brow at Alex and says, "The kind of guy who wants to get in the pants of Ben McCutcheon, I would assume."

"Bullshit. Garen didn't have to buy him half a fucking library to get in his pants—"

"Yeah, but that's all I was trying to do," I point out. "Maybe I would've gotten him a bunch of weird grammar books, if I'd been trying to—" Oh. Oh, shit. "—to, uh. If I'd been trying to date him. Or start a relationship with him. Or get him to invite me home to meet his mama."

On the final bit, I unthinkingly slip into a mockery of Jamie's accent, even though he's not here, and even though neither of the people I'm actually talking to are supposed to know that he's the one who sent the books. Alex seems to focus more on my words than my tone, because he just rolls his eyes and turns to put the books back on the shelf. Stohler, on the other hand, has paused with her coffee cup raised

halfway to her mouth. For a moment, she just frowns at me; then, sparing only a quick glance to be sure Alex is still turned away, she cocks her head to the side and raises one hand as high over her head as she can, like she's trying to indicate the extremeness of Jamie's height.

Don't say anything, I mouth. Her eyebrows shoot upward, but thankfully, she doesn't freak out. Instead, she just stands, sets her cup down on the table, and announces, "Enough of this gossipy bullshit. Let's finish your hair."

It only takes another ten minutes for all of my hair to be neatly, evenly shorn. Just as I'd expected, looking at myself in the bathroom mirror for the first time is kind of a mindfuck. Each of my individual features is more pronounced, more severe. I look older, sharper, harder. I flatten a hand to the back of my head, spreading my fingers and trying to pull, but my hair isn't long enough to grab onto anymore. I exhale.

Six months sober

"Stop sulking," Jamie orders, "or I'll bring you home."

"I'm not sulking," I snap. It's a lie; I'm sulking harder than I've ever sulked before. But still, it's an understandable sulking, and I don't get why Jamie isn't being more sympathetic. Since he doesn't seem to be in the mood to entertain my more emo tendencies right now, I've got to come at this topic in a roundabout way. "Today was so weird. Some people from Lakewood wrote on my facebook wall—you know, 'congrats on being six months clean!'—which seems kind of inappropriately personal for a social networking site, but whatever. And I guess some of the Patton guys saw it, because some of them mentioned it to me. Javi, Charlie, Taylor."

Jamie adjusts the temperature of the air conditioner by about half a degree, then turns the radio down a little so that he can hear me. "That's nice."

"Yeah," I say, squirming around under the seatbelt so that I can turn to face him. His reaction still isn't as enthusiastic as I want it to be. "Mom called during my lunch period. She wants to have dinner this weekend. And Dad and I already celebrated last weekend, when I was in town to meet with Doc, but he still called to talk to me after school."

"They must be proud of you," Jamie says. He grabs my hand and presses a kiss to the back of it, but I think he's mostly trying to stop me from playing with the radio. "All of us are."

I bat my eyelashes at him, and he rolls his eyes. I stick my tongue out, then continue. "Some Connecticut people texted, too. Stohls, Alex, Ben. He's on spring break this week, so he might come stay with me and Trav for a couple of days, just to hang out."

"Who, Alexander?" Jamie asks before I can say anything else. "Or the midget?"

"Ben."

The light ahead of us turns red, and we roll to a stop at it. Like an utter *girl*, Jamie flips his visor down to check his hair in the mirror. "You talk to Travis at all today?"

I manage an eyeroll that incorporates my entire body, slumping hard against the passenger side door. "God, fuck you, man, you know I haven't." He flashes me a smirk and puts the visor back up as the light turns green. I sigh. "Do you know what his plans are?"

"Doesn't he have work? Or class?"

"Earlier," I whine. "He had work in the early part of the afternoon, and then he had class until seven, but he didn't—he just 'has plans tonight.' Like, what the fuck, you know? This day is a big deal to me, and it's

like he doesn't even give a shit. He cared about me being sixty days sober, but that might have just been because it was his birthday. He cared about me being ninety days sober, but maybe that was only because we were still hooking up. I don't get why he doesn't care about me being six months sober—"

"I'm sure he does care, G—"

"Six months is one of the last big ones people recognize, you know?" I continue right over him. "It's—when I was at the LRC for my session, they let me sit in on one of the NA meetings, and everybody made a huge fuss out of this, even though it was still three days early. I got my little blue key tag and everything. Next one is yellow for nine months, and then I get a totally rad glow-in-the-dark one for a full year. But like, the blue one is a big deal. He should care about it."

Jamie heaves a sigh. "Garen, he cares. I promise you, he cares. Now, I am trying to celebrate with you. If you don't stop mentioning the fact that Travis isn't here, I'm going to abandon you on the side of the road. And then I'm going to go find some other recovering addict whose six-month sobriety anniversary I can celebrate. I bet he'd appreciate it more than you."

"I appreciate it! I do, I totally do," I assure him. "I just don't understand why he had to make plans—non-Garen-centric plans—for tonight, instead of some other night."

"You are so annoying," Jamie groans. "The next time I collaborate with your idiot friends to plan a surprise adventure for you, I refuse to be the chauffeur. One of them can do that, and I'll be the one who pretends to forget about your accomplishments. It will be so much more fun for me, I'm sure."

"You're such a—" I pause, blink, rewind the last thirty seconds of conversation in my mind. "Wait, this is a surprise adventure? For me? And Travis is in on it?" Jamie shoots me a glare and flicks his turn signal on, so I hastily add, "Don't leave me on the side of the road. I swear, I'll shut up, just—where are we going? Is it going to be fun? Will there be food? 'Cause you promised me dinner, and I'm kind of starving, and if there isn't food, I'll be kind of bummed. Who's going to be there? Is it just going to be you and me and Travis, or are—"

Jamie cranks up the volume on his radio so that he doesn't have to hear me. I spend the rest of the car ride trying to talk to him over the beat of the dirty south music he's blasting from the speakers, but the second we make the final turn into the parking lot of our destination and I realize where we are, I lose it at such a volume that even the Escalade can't drown me out.

"Laser tag!" I yelp. "James, I swear to god, I'm gonna name mine and Stohler's first turkey-baster baby after you, because you are the *greatest*, and I *love* you."

Laser tag at the Empire State Laser Arena is a Patton Military Academy tradition. Upperclassmen mention it to their underclassmen brothers, friends, or boyfriends, who spend years going there on the regular, and when those underclassmen become upperclassmen, they tell *their* underclassmen brothers, friends, or boyfriends, and it goes on. On any given weekend, half the school might be here, in large part due to the fact that the arena is a *monster*. It's nearly ten thousand square feet of obstacle-ridden, black-lit, dubstep-soundtracked mayhem, and we all take it too seriously, streaking our skin with glow-in-the-dark face paint and breaking out all of our Military Leadership Education training to turn it into all-out war. Friendships have been formed and destroyed in the arena. Being selected for mine and Jamie's team used to be considered the ultimate invitation to join the Patton social elite. It was an even bigger seal of approval than sleeping with one of us, and for good reason—I'll fuck anybody with a nice body and a cute face, but we're both vicious in our selection of laser tag teammates.

"Rein in the enthusiasm a bit, sweetheart," Jamie says, grinning at me as he pulls into an empty space. "I chose the venue, but the celebration wasn't my idea."

"Whose was it?" I ask, even though I think I might know.

He rolls his eyes and points out the windshield. "Wow, Garen, I don't know. Who have you been *bitching about ignoring you* the entire car ride?"

I look around, and sure enough, Travis is right there, sitting on the trunk of his car. There are nearly a dozen other people standing in the vicinity, but I can't even register their faces, because he's looking right at me and grinning so broadly that the freckles on his nose are crinkling up a little bit. I fling open the car door and tumble out of it, overeager to get over there and talk to him. I wedge myself between his knees and say, "I didn't know you were planning something for me."

"Surprise," he says, sounding for all the world like he's mocking me. "Congratu—"

That's all he gets out; the rest turns into a muffled *mmpf* sort of sound when I kiss him straight on the mouth. My hands are hooked under his knees, and I've dragged him off the trunk so that he has to scramble to grip my shoulders and tighten his legs on my waist to keep himself upright. It only lasts a few seconds before I pull away.

"You little shit," I say, releasing his legs so that he can regain his footing. "I thought you'd forgotten."

"That's because you are a raging attention whore and assume you've been forgotten anytime someone isn't staring directly at you," he says. He's ducking his head a little, and when I twist to get a better look at his face, I realize it's because he's blushing. It's a good look for him—I press another quick kiss to the corner of his mouth to keep it there.

There's a snort from behind me, and I turn. Stohler is standing there, hands tucked into the tiny pockets of her fitted hoodie. "Is that how you two greet each other every night, even though you live together now?"

"It's none of your business what I do to him every night," I say with an exaggerated leer. "Besides, maybe that's just how I greet all my friends. Here, watch."

The rest of the group is made up of Ben and Alex—who are both leaning against the bumper of Stohler's Mustang—and my Patton squad, so I fling an arm around Steven's shoulders and smack a loud, showy kiss to his cheek. He wriggles away from me. "Get off me, you jackass."

"Dude, why are you even here?" I ask, then turn to face Travis again. "How did you get in touch with my Patton guys?"

"That would be my doing," Jamie says, coming up behind me and hooking his chin over my shoulder. "Though, I'd be lying if I pretended that I did anything more suave than walk into the Whitman dorm, grab an underclassman, and demand to know the room number of whichever senior he was most terrified of." He pauses and nods briefly towards the rest of the group. "Pleasure to see you again, Mr. Campbell."

Declan, who is leaning against Taylor's car, gives him a salute, but says nothing around the cigarette that's dangling from the corner of his mouth.

"Thanks, you guys. This is awesome," I say. "By which I really mean, this is going to be awesome for me, when I kick everyone's asses. It's probably going to suck for you all, though."

Taylor snorts. "We'll see about that. You've been off in Connecticut for a year now, so I'm betting you're more than a little out of practice."

"Is there any kind of preference for how we divide the teams?" Javi asks as our entire group begins to make the trip into the building. "We should try to keep things even. You know, some good shooters and some bad on each side."

"Jamie and I have to be on the same team," I interject, before anyone else can get a word in.

Ben rolls his eyes. "Why? Are you concerned that you might not be able to hold hands the whole time, if you're on opposite teams?"

I narrow my eyes at him. "Are you bitter about the fact that holding my hand and his laser gun would leave him without any hand to grope you with?"

Ben stomps hard on my foot, then shoots a sharp glance towards Alex, who is thankfully walking far enough behind us that he probably can't hear. Jamie, who is still plastered to my side, clears his throat and continues a shade too loudly, "Garen and I have to be on the same team because we become hostile when asked to compete with each other."

"It's true," I sigh. "We tried it once in ninth grade, and the whole night was pretty much a bloodbath. He got kind of hurt—"

"Take responsibility for your actions," Jamie orders.

"I hurt him," I amend, chastised, and Sam chuckles. "That—yes, okay, I instigated a physical confrontation that may have—"

"—that *did*—"

"—that *may have* contributed to him leaving the arena with a mildly sprained wrist. But I felt really bad about it!" I say quickly, when Travis shoots me a very exasperated look. "And I apologized. And I took over all his jerk-off duties during the two weeks his wrist was out of commission."

"A more than fair trade," Jamie agrees. "I have a clumsy left hand and a high sex drive. He was a busy boy."

"The point is, we need to be on the same team, or people are going to be maimed," I say. The building houses a sprawling snack bar and lounge area, and I'd kill for some nachos right now, but there are more important matters to attend to. I open the door to the arena's prep room and wave everyone through ahead of me. "And since he and I are probably better at this than any of you guys, how 'bout we take the Connecticut dead weight on our team? Me, Jamie, Travis, Ben, Alex, and Stohls versus Javi, Dec, Taylor, Charlie, Steven, and Sam. Fair enough?"

"I resent being referred to as dead weight," Travis says.

I quirk an eyebrow at him. "Can you shoot?"

"Of course not, but I intend to make myself extremely useful as a human shield. Besides, you—Jesus Christ," he breaks off, blinking around the room that he has just been led into. "What's with the fucking war room?"

"This is where the game starts," I say, with a sweeping gesture towards the room. "We put on our chest-pieces and get our guns, and then each team heads down its own hallway so we're starting at opposite ends of the arena. So, yeah, just grab a chest-piece and lock yourself into it."

Charlie unhooks one of the red chest-pieces from the wall and passes it to me with a hesitant smile. It takes every bit of self-control I possess to smile back instead of rolling my eyes. He's been doing this for weeks now, ever since he saw the hospital pictures and realized just how wrong he was about my relationship with his brother. He's always the first to pass me lab supplies during chemistry or whatever food I want during mealtime; he always wants to partner me for PT drills in the morning, and he saves me a seat at MLEP almost every evening—I can't remember the last time I showed up for that class and wasn't immediately directed to the chair between him and Declan. It's... weird, I guess, but nice. At least, it's sure as hell better than the animosity I'd faced from both of them during my first few weeks at school.

"Hey, G?" Travis says, frowning down at his own somewhat lopsided chest-piece. "I'm apparently experiencing some technical difficulties. Would you mind helping me out?"

I pretty much trip over myself in my haste to get close enough to grab at him—I figured out towards the end of sophomore year that helping dudes with their laser tag gear is a *shockingly* effective pick-up strategy—but the moment I actually take in the harness, I can't stop myself from rolling my eyes. He has somehow managed to get one of the straps tangled around itself in some sort of knot that looks like it'll take me ten minutes to untie. For simplicity's sake, I slip the entire harness off him, replace it on its hook, and crouch down in front of it to work through it from there.

"These harnesses are retarded," Alex announces. "I quit, I wanna go home."

"Yeah, they have buckles in weird places. Hang on a sec, and I'll do yours for you," I say, but Jamie is already coming over to begin shortening the straps on Alex's chest-piece.

There's an awkward moment in which he seemingly realizes what he's done—that this is the first interaction they've had since the diner in November—and then he glances up with a small, mostly neutral smile. "Hello there, Alexander. Been a minute since I've seen you."

"Yeah," Alex says, meeting his gaze. "You look good."

"Don't I always?" Jamie replies. The comment lacks some of the flirtation I'd expect, but Alex must not notice, because the edge of his mouth quirks up a bit.

I glance around to see if Ben is close enough to hear the exchange, but he's on the other side of the room. Rather than wait for Jamie or me to help him with his harness—and probably grope him in the process—he has taken it upon himself to make small talk with Taylor while my squadmate tightens the straps for him. The exchange is entirely grope-less. Once I've finished untangling Travis' harness and buckling him into it, I turn to help Stohler, but she's already wearing a perfectly adjusted piece and looking bored.

"I take it you've played before," I say.

She scoffs. "Of course I have. And I'm a fucking boss at it, so your little boarding school buddies should prepare themselves."

"You can shoot?" Steven says, sounding surprised as he looks around at her.

Stohler raises an eyebrow. "I can," she agrees, then raises her voice to add, "I can also pistol-whip that ginger with my laser gun, if he looks at my tits one more time."

Declan makes no effort to disguise the fact that he's staring at the inch or two of cleavage at the top of her laser gear. He slowly drags his eyes from Stohler's breasts to her collarbone, up her neck, settling on her mouth for a moment, and finally meeting her eyes. "Do you honestly expect me to believe that getting men to stare at your tits isn't the entire purpose of a shirt like that? Some might say that you're aiming for the attention."

Ben turns to say over his shoulder, "And others might say that you're a lecher and a narcissist for actually believing that. Do you pick out *your* clothes because you're trying to get people to stare at the outline of your junk?"

"Well, clearly *you* do," Jamie says, giving Ben's skinny jeans a look that's heated enough to leave Alex frowning deeply.

"I swear to Christ, Goldwyn, if I see your eyes travel south of my shoulders again, I will carve them out of your fucking skull, mash them into a paste, and make you eat them," Ben says.

Javi leans towards Sam and mutters, "Man, public school kids are violent."

In what I suspect is mostly an attempt to get Alex to stop staring at him like he's trying to piece something together, Jamie strolls across the room and claps Declan on the shoulder. "Well, if you *are* trying to get a man to stare at whatever you're packing, I think you've already taken a very important first step by befriending Garen. Once you've done that, you essentially just have to show up and let it happen."

"I can't help it," I protest. "And you shouldn't make fun of me for that. Sex addiction is a serious condition. My rehab center has meetings for it and everything."

"Have you considered attending one of these meetings?" Stohler asks.

"No point. The guy who runs them is really hot, and I wouldn't be able to concentrate," I say earnestly.

Steven scoffs and knocks his elbow against mine. "You're ridiculous. Get your fuckin' team out of here. We'll see you in the arena."

"Are we really going to forego the great tradition of pre-game shit-talking?" I say, returning to the side of the room where the rest of the red team is already gathered. "C'mon. I bet Campbell's got some snappy little retort he's just dying to get in before we start."

"My aim speaks for itself. I don't need to shit-talk," Declan says, examining his laser gun. He pauses, glances up at my team. "What about you? I've heard you've got quite the mouth on you."

I flash him a smile that's maybe a little bit more wolfish than strictly necessary. "Oh, you have no idea."

"Alright, we're stopping this right now," Taylor says sharply. "I refuse to let the shit-talk devolve into Garen shamelessly indulging Dec's sudden and alarming bicuriosity. Someone, anyone else, speak. How 'bout you, Goldwyn? Something to set the tone?"

"In the words of our school's namesake, General George S. Patton," Jamie says, eying the squad like he plans to skin them, "*May God have mercy upon my enemies, because I won't.*"

Behind us, Travis leans closer to Ben and whispers, "Do you think they realize that this is a game?"

"Apparently not," Ben whispers back.

Stohler jabs her gun into my ribs and fires off a few shots. They don't do anything, but they do make a pretty obnoxious *pew pew* sort of noise. "Let's go. You sheepfuckers can resume the dick-measuring contest after the game, once we've all seen the scores."

"Stohler, babe, don't worry," I say, flinging an arm around her shoulders and steering our group down the red hallway. "Everyone knows you've got the biggest dick here."

"You're damn right I do," she agrees.

"So, what's our strategy?" Jamie asks me. "You take Campbell, I take Santos, let the grunts handle the others?"

"Are we the grunts?" Travis asks, gesturing to Ben, Alex, and Stohler.

"You're the grunts," I confirm, then a second later, after we've reached the end of the hall where we're meant to wait, "No, wait. You, Ben, and Alex are the grunts. Stohler's with Jamie and me. And nah, I was actually thinking we could make their ineptitude work for us." I hitch my chin towards the door separating us from the blue team. "They're Patton boys who are used to playing other Patton boys. And Declan's a

tyrant, so he's probably going to try to keep them to some sort of formation. What if we just kinda... go for it, you know? Let the grunts go apeshit. We all just run around and aim for anything blue."

Jamie grimaces. "It lacks the poetry of our usual assault tactics."

"It doesn't have to," I say, as Travis mutters a disdainful echo of *assault tactics, what the fuck*. "Hey, McCutcheon, hit me with some war poetry. I know you've got some stashed away in that freaky little brain of yours."

"If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs, obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, my friend, you would not tell with such high zest to children ardent for some desperate glory, the old Lie; Dulce et Decorum est pro patria mori," Ben recites, though his attention is focused on his laser gun. "If I shoot someone on our team, do I still get points?"

Jamie narrows his eyes. "No. You just get beaten for shooting me."

"If you shoot someone on our team, their gun still goes offline for fifteen seconds, but you don't get any points on your individual score. And at the end, all our points get tallied up, and whichever team has more is the winner," I explain. "So, if you shoot anyone—by which I mean, if you shoot Jamie, you're really just making it so that our team has one less active player for a quarter of a minute. It doesn't benefit you."

"Might make you happy, though," Alex points out.

"Right up until I make him ride in the trunk the whole way back to the house," Jamie says. At my curious look, he tacks on, "The midget's going back to your place tonight when I bring you and McCall there. That *'he might come and stay with us for a few days'* comment you made in the car on the way here? It's much less hypothetical than you thought it was."

I throw my arms around Ben, narrowly avoiding giving him a black eye with my chest-piece. "You're coming to stay with me? This is the best six-months-sober-slash-pre-birthday present ever!"

"Get off me, you assclown," Ben says, trying to wriggle out of my grasp. I let him, but my enthusiasm still stands. Jamie may be my best friend, and Travis may be everything else, but Ben and I can really hang out; we like the same movies, we like most of the same music, we can go to shows and record stores. And, most importantly--

"You can meet my puppy," I realize, in a voice so thrilled it's almost a whisper. Travis frowns at me, and I quickly amend, "Our puppy. The puppy. Omelette."

"That beast is not a puppy," Jamie says. "It's nearly as big as McCutcheon."

"That's not—" I start to say, but the door to the arena buzzes and swings open, and suddenly, that's where all of my focus is. I shove Alex towards it and snap, "Go, get out there, now!"

Jamie bolts out after him, followed by Stohler, then Ben, at a much more reluctant pace. Travis is the last to leave, but not before he gives me a quick peck on the cheek and says, "You take this game way too seriously, dude."

If any part of me doubts his words, that part is proven hilariously wrong within the first ten minutes of game play. For weeks now, I've been back in PT, back on the field, back in marksmanship sessions, but I'm still out of practice. It takes me a while to get back in the swing of things, even though—with all due modesty—I'm still the baddest motherfucker in the arena.

"God fucking damn it, Anderson," Charlie groans when I black out his chest-piece for the sixth time. "You're never coming to play with us again!"

I let out a shout of laughter and duck behind him to shield myself from Steven's wild shots in my direction. "Tough shit, Walczyk, I'm in the squad. You guys are stuck with me."

Charlie's chest-piece lights back up, but he doesn't even have time to turn and try to get a shot at me before one of Steven's shots hits him instead of me, sending him right back into uselessness. He howls, "Ramsey! I'm on your friggin' team!"

I take out Steven next, then run away to stalk the arena, wild-eyed, searching for stupid fucking Declan and his stupid fucking smartass mouth. Every time I'm convinced that I've found his location, I end up being distracted by the other players. I've always been more of an offensive player than a defensive one, but this is different—I feel like I'm *hunting* him. It takes almost twenty of the thirty minutes of game play before I find him, taking cover behind an obstacle at the edge of the arena and sniping out other players. I'm coming at him from an angle, so he hasn't seen me yet. It's perfect. I take aim, fire, and nail him on the first try.

Declan's eyes snap to his darkened, buzzing chest-piece. His gun is still raised, and his mouth is slightly open, like he genuinely cannot believe that anyone managed to get a shot in on him. I can't hold back the laughter that inspires, and then those eyes are on me, on my still-aimed gun. His mouth clicks shut, and something white-hot flashes over his face as he moves towards me. He won't be able to shoot me for another fifteen seconds, so I don't hesitate to raise my gun in a show of surrender as I try to wheedle him, "C'mon, Dec, don't be like that. I've been trying to get that shot in since the game started. You can't get pissed at me just because I—"

"Not pissed at you," he says shortly, and then I've got the wall at my back and Declan pressed to my front. Our chest-pieces clatter together loudly, and for a second, I think he's going to fight me. But his hands are wound into fists around the fabric of my t-shirt so that he can pin me into place as he leans in to—fuck, *to mouth at my neck*. It starts with a simple kiss, but only a second later, his lips part, and I can feel tongue and teeth, and it feels so fucking *good*. While his mouth works a bruise into the skin just above the collar of my shirt, one of his hands releases my shirt to slip back and grab at my ass.

"Declan, what the fuck?" I manage after a moment. And then, because I don't want him to think for a second that I might be protesting, I reach up to curve my hand over the back of his head. His hair's buzzed almost as short as mine, so there's nothing to really grab onto, but fuck if I'm not gonna try.

"Have I ever told you," he breathes, pausing to scrape his teeth against my earlobe, "how much it *turns me on* to watch you shoot?"

"Wh—um, no, can't say that's a conversation we've ever had," I gasp out. Christ, I want to kiss him. I squirm in place, trying to find a way to twist so that I can get at his mouth, but he's still pressing me into the wall.

"Mm." He shoves a hand between us. "That's probably because it doesn't."

The vibration against my chest shocks me even more than the sudden coldness as Declan steps back. I follow his gaze to my chest-piece which is blacked out and buzzing under the muzzle of his laser gun. I hadn't even noticed his equipment getting reactivated, which I'm guessing was sort of the point.

"You little shit!" I protest, and he bolts away, grinning madly. I give chase, because he can bet his perfectly-shaped ass that I'm going to get him back the second my gun comes back on, but I lose him in the darkness almost immediately and don't manage to find him again before the lights come back on and the game ends.

We gather at the edge of the arena to wait for the scores to come up on the wall screen. When they do, it's accompanied by a bright red background, signaling my team's victory. I do a brief, celebratory dance. "Third place. Haven't done this in a year, but I'm still fucking awesome."

"Not as awesome as I am," Stohler says, smirking at me and soaking in the glassy-eyed stares of the Patton boys, all of whom seem equally stunned and aroused by her first-place score. "Nor are you as awesome as the ginger kid, it would appear."

"That's because the ginger kid is a filthy cheater," I say, shooting a glare at Declan. He quirks an eyebrow at me, and because I'm both a sore loser and a complete child, I stick my tongue out at him. He returns the gesture, and there's a brief flash of silver that I'm not expecting, and Jesus fucking Christ, how am I only just now finding out that *he has a pierced tongue*? I feel myself go rigid; my shock must register on my face, because Declan's expression turns quizzical for a moment before he realizes that my stare is focused entirely on his mouth. As soon as he understands what has attracted my attention, he grins, bright and nearly feral, then flicks his tongue out enough to let the barbell catch between his front teeth for half a second. Just long enough to make me let out a half-sighed, half-groaned, "*Ohmygod*."

He laughs. It's kind of a mean sound.

"Have you—" I actually have to stop and clear my throat, which is embarrassing, but nearly everyone is still too busy checking their own scores to notice. I step closer to Declan. "Have you had that the whole time I've known you?"

"I've had it since I was fourteen," he says, "but I don't wear it to school. Some of us are actually smart enough to take our facial piercings out before Sergeant Smith screams at us for having them." He reaches up and flicks my lip ring, then leans closer to me to add, "I'm surprised you didn't notice it when it was actually touching your skin."

I let out a strangled, wounded noise. I'm not even sure what type of noise it's supposed to *be*, but it's definitely enough to draw a bewildered glance from Javi. I quickly step back and turn to face the rest of my team. "So! Uh. What about you guys? Happy with your scores?"

Alex is squinting at the scores. "Honestly, I'm just trying to figure out how the hell Ben did better than two thirds of the Patton guys."

I blink up at the screen—sure enough, Ben's name is listed sixth. I turn to stare at him. "Do you have some previously unknown marksmanship skill?" He bites his lip on a smile and shakes his head. I narrow my eyes. "Did you fucking cheat?"

He shakes his head again, but slowly enough to make me suspicious. Jamie darts forward and digs his long fingers into Ben's side. "You did. You cheated, you little—"

"I didn't cheat!" Ben protests, trying—and failing, probably because he secretly likes it—to squirm away from Jamie's hands. "I found myself a strategically sound location and stuck it out there."

"What does that even mean?" Jamie asks.

"Do you really want to know?" Ben shoots back, and when Jamie doesn't stop tormenting him, he continues, "Fine, Jesus, get off me and I'll show you."

Jamie finally releases him, and Ben heads for the nearest obstacle, a seven-foot structure designed to provide cover to peer around. Travis, who has been watching our entire exchange with a wide smile on his face, follows him, then drops his hands to maybe knee-height and laces his fingers together. Ben carefully situates one of his red Chucks on Travis' hands and allows himself to be boosted up onto the obstacle. There, he tucks his legs under himself and perches above all of us, like a tiny gargoyle. "I'm just small enough to fit."

"You've gotta be fucking kidding me," Declan says flatly. "Were you up there the entire game?"

"Yep," Ben says cheerfully. "You're all incredibly unobservant. I intend to write a strongly worded letter to your squad sergeant and demand that he add 'look up, fuckwits' to your military leadership training."

"If you didn't have to worry about dodging a single shot the entire game, shouldn't you have gotten first place?" Jamie asks.

Ben snorts and kicks his legs out so they're dangling over the side. "It was a strategy, not a miracle. I still have terrible aim."

"Terrible aim and a devious streak," Alex grumbles. "Come on. That snack bar out front looks epic, and I'd murder a kitten for some fries right now."

Ben looks prepared to just slide off the side of the obstacle, but the idiot will probably break a leg doing that. I grab him by the hips and pull him off, slinging him over my shoulder and walking out of the arena with him in a fireman's carry. He snaps at me to put him down, and when I ignore him, he starts trying to kick me in the face. Once we make it back to the front room, I have to dump him back on the ground so we can both remove our chest-pieces and return them to the hooks on the walls. He's still bitching about it ten minutes later, once most of the group has gotten food and scattered themselves over the long table at the edge of the eating area.

I ignore him in favor of wandering over to where Travis is leaning against the counter of the snack bar, waiting for his burger to be cooked and passed over. I steal a sip from his pop, then gesture towards the group. "Thank you, again. For doing this."

"No problem. I'm glad you had fun," he says, grinning at me. He's standing so close that it wouldn't take much for me to lean in and give him a quick kiss. It could be a... thank you, maybe. It could be just something small and sweet, something we both want, if the way his eyes have dropped to my mouth are any indication. But then Travis' eyes flit a little lower, and his expression visibly dims. I open my mouth to ask him if something is wrong, but I fall awkwardly silent again when he reaches up to press his fingertips to the still-sensitive mark that Declan left on my neck. "Did you have this when you went in?"

The thing is, there's no right answer. I got it while we were all inside? I've been hooking up with other guys pretty much since we moved in together? It's not something we've talked about, and I don't think he really expected me to wait for him, but... he hasn't brought any guys home. Girls, either. As far as I can tell, he hasn't gotten any in months.

I offer a sheepish smile and say, "It was just one of the guys fighting dirty, trying to distract me so he could shoot me once his gun started functioning again."

"Worked, didn't it?" Declan announces, slinging an arm around my shoulders and dislodging Travis' hand in the process. He looks over at Travis and offers him one of those blank half-smiles he's so good at. "Don't worry about it, Travis. I sometimes let my competitive tendencies get the best of me, but I didn't mean anything by it. Like Anderson said—just playing dirty." He digs his fingertips into the mark, and I yelp, shoving him away. He laughs and takes off back towards the rest of the Whitman squad.

"I wasn't *worried* about it," Travis mutters. "I just—didn't realize you and Declan had like, a thing between you—"

"We don't," I say quickly. "It's not like that. The dude's not even into other guys, I swear."

Travis cringes, like he's hating himself for the words even as they come out of his mouth, and says, "Is there any dude who *is* into other guys? Like, is there somebody you're hooking up with that I didn't know about?"

I shove my hands into my pockets and shift my gaze from his face to the menu behind him, just so I won't have to see his eyes when I admit, "I, uh... I mean, there was a guy a couple weeks ago. Somebody in

the squad—the rest of the squad, not this group here—who I was hooking up with, kind of on the regular. We weren't dating, though."

"No, right, of course," Travis says quickly. The snack bar attendant places his food on the counter, and he turns to grab it, flashing me a brief, obviously fake smile as he adds, "That's fine. I mean, you can hook up with whoever you—I'm not trying to, you know—I'm not jealous."

"Okay," I say.

"Garen, I'm not jealous," he says, more firmly. It sounds like just as much of a lie as it did a minute ago. I open my mouth to reply, but he gives me another bullshit smile and weaves around me, striding off to the table and sinking into a seat between Ben and Charlie.

I sigh and follow, flinging myself down across from Ben and between Taylor and Alex, who's leaning forward in his seat to ask Jamie, in a pseudo-casual tone, "Heard you and that girl broke up."

I want to bash my head against the table so that I don't have to hear this conversation, but that would probably draw too much attention. Across from me, Ben makes a face and leans back in his seat, stretching both his arms out to the sides along the top of the booth, one behind Jamie's neck and one behind Travis', but not touching either of them. I raise an eyebrow at him, but before I can say anything, Taylor leans across the table to ask Ben some boring school question. I do my best to tune them out.

"Rachael and I broke up, yes," Jamie says.

"She dumped him on Valentine's Day," I announce, and there's a collective grimace around the table.

"That's fucking harsh, Goldwyn," Javi laughs.

Jamie gives his shoulders a delicate lift, as if to say, *what can you do?* Alex chews carefully on a French fry, swallows, and continues, "Found anyone new yet?"

"Sure," Jamie replies, shrugging. "A few boys, a few girls. Rachael and I were together for a few months, so I've had a bit of playing to catch up on."

"Anyone you're serious about?" Alex presses.

Jamie slouches down in his seat just enough to allow his head to loll back. To Alex, I'm sure it looks like he's only looking up at the ceiling in thought, but all I can see is how still Ben has gone now that Jamie is using his forearm as a headrest.

"There might be someone I find more... interesting than I expected to," Jamie says carefully.

Alex leans back in his seat. "Oh," he says, then pauses for a beat. "Lady or gentleman?"

"Gentleman. Well. Man. There's been nothing gentle about any of our encounters. He's a bit of an ass, too. I have questionable taste," Jamie says, and then jolts a little, like he's just been kicked. He waits until Alex looks back to his fries, then shoots Ben a dirty look, which Ben returns at once.

From the far end of the table, Stohler calls, "What about you, McCutcheon?"

Ben turns sharply to face her. "What? I don't—I'm not, uh—what *about* me?"

Always the epitome of subtlety, that one. On his right, Travis tries to hide his exasperation by ducking his head and shoving his burger into his mouth, but the eyeroll is still pretty obvious. Jamie's mouth is twisted into a self-satisfied smirk, like he's pleased to have his questionable taste confirmed to everyone at the table.

Stohler just smiles.

"You single?" she asks. He nods slowly. She plugs the top of her straw with the tip of her finger, then pulls it out of her cup so that she can suck the pop from the wrong end. "Still not putting out for that guy who's been sending you books as the world's most embarrassing attempt at seduction?"

Ben turns his attention upward, probably praying for patience. "First of all, *stop going through my shit every time you come to my apartment*. Second, it's not an attempt at seduction. Third, if it *was* an attempt at seduction, it wouldn't be embarrassing."

"I think it's totally on point," I say, digging the toe of my boot into Jamie's shin under the table as evidence of my continued displeasure with his flirting technique. "I mean, nothing says '*I wanna eat your ass*' like books about Jesus."

Ben retracts his arms from the back of the booth and yanks on the strings of his hood until it cinches around his reddened face and conceals his eyes. "I often dream about drowning all of my current friends so that I can start over and find new ones who aren't terrible people."

"I'd haunt you," I say automatically. "And every time you tried to hang out with new people, I'd torment them, and no one would want to be your friend. They'd all call you Poltergeist Ben behind your back, and you'd be sad all the time. Your life is better with me in it."

"My life is not better with you in it. My life is a *prison*, and you are the warden of my social experiences," he says mournfully.

I wiggle my eyebrows at him. "Wish you'd used that metaphor a few months ago. We could've incorporated it into some roleplay when I tied you up and made you my bitch."

Ben lets out an embarrassed whine and tugs harder on the strings until his hoodie has obscured his entire face.

Travis plucks a French fry off Sam's plate and whips it at my face. "Be nice to him, or when James drives us home, I'm going to tell him to leave you here."

And then, apropos of absofuckinglutely nothing, Declan says, just quietly enough that I have to strain to hear him, "That's right, I'd forgotten you're Garen's roommate." He takes a sip of his drink, possibly just for dramatic pause. "Must be strange, living with an ex."

Travis' posture is stiff as he turns to peer around Charlie at him. "Strangeness is relative. Personally, I consider it more strange that you give hickeys to other guys, even though you say you're straight."

The corner of Declan's mouth quirks upward. "Are you annoyed that I did it, or annoyed that he liked it?"

"Would you—"

"So, wait, that—" Sam leans around Taylor to gesture towards the mark on my neck, "—that's from Dec?"

"We didn't do anything," I snap. I expect Declan to confirm my statement, but he remains silent.

When I look around, he's still staring at the side of Travis' face, even though Travis has turned away from him. His gaze is too focused, too calculating; it sets me on edge that anyone—even somebody I might be starting to consider a friend now—would look at Travis that way. My muscles are tightening under my skin, but before I can move, Charlie digs an elbow into Declan's ribs and says, "Quit staring like a creep, Dec. We've talked about this. Normal people blink."

Declan's stare slowly shifts from Travis's face to Charlie's. He blinks once, then again, then gives a faint chuckle and turns away. "Right. Sorry."

"Well, on that note," Jamie says flatly, nudging Javi so that he can be let out of the booth, "I think it might be a fair time to call it a night. Hey, midget. Do you have a bag or something I should move from Stohler's car to mine?"

"Yeah. I'll go with you," Ben says, giving Travis' wrist a hard yank so he'll follow him out of the booth as well.

Stohler pitches Jamie her keys so that he can get into the Mustang, but remains sitting, as do Alex, myself, and the rest of the Patton boys. I keep my head bowed and my attention focused on counting footsteps until I'm sure the others are out of earshot. The moment I hear them clear the building's front doors, my head snaps up, but Javi is already rounding on Declan.

"Dec, when's the last time I told you what a cunt you are sometimes?" he demands

Declan considers his answer. "In the arena."

"Well, maybe I didn't make this part clear then, but you should knock it the fuck off," Javi whines. "You always do this when you meet new people. You're like a little boy who torments the new kid in preschool, just because you're pissed that your classmates want him to play with them, too."

Taylor hauls himself to his feet and heads for the door, calling over his shoulder to us, "Honestly, I don't get how I'm still surprised every time this happens, but I really am."

"I'm not," Sam mutters, following him.

There's a general movement for the rest of the group to follow them, but I don't stand just yet.

"Not Travis," I say. Declan doesn't speak, only cocks his head to the side like my dog does when I try to talk to him in full sentences. "You're my friend and all, but if you ever try to fuck with Travis' head again, I'm going to kick the crap out of you. Are we clear?"

Declan's face is expressionless, but his eyes are bright and delighted, the same way they are every time he manages to piss someone off. I don't know that he has even a shred of self-preservation instinct in him. But he inclines his head and drawls, "Of course."

I shove my chair back and head for the exit. Just as I've passed through the main doors, Stohler moves to flank me as she mutters, "You're a fucking idiot, you know that? You have exactly one real chink in your armor, and you just told that dickweed exactly where to find it."

I shake my head tersely. "No. That's—Declan's a fuckin' shit sometimes, but he and I are on decent terms now. We're friends, even. You heard Javi, he gets bitchy with new people. He's not going to do anything to me, or to Travis—I'd fucking kill him if he did, and he knows that now."

"I hope you're right," she says, but she shakes her head, like she doubts very much that I am. She and Alex head for the Mustang, but I head straight for Travis and Jamie, who are standing near the passenger side of the Escalade.

I crowd up close and say, "Hey. So, uh, sorry. About Declan. He's a dick. Are you—"

"It's not a big deal. I'm fine, I don't care," Travis interrupts. His voice is neutral, but his eyes are doing everything they can to warn me into silence. He turns and calls, "Hey, Ben! Come on!"

Ben, who is in the middle of conversation with Taylor, looks over at us and holds up one finger to signal

that we should hold on a minute. He turns back to Taylor, and they speak for another thirty seconds or so before Taylor digs his phone out of his pocket and passes it to Ben, who starts typing something into it.

I raise my eyebrows. "Dude. Is McCutcheon trying to get it in?"

"McCutcheon can hear you," Ben says loudly. He finishes typing, passes the phone back to Taylor, and flashes him a quick smile before jogging over to the car where the rest of us are waiting. He slugs me in the ribs and says, "I was not trying to *get it in*, you jackass. Taylor just got accepted to University of New Haven's criminal justice program, and I said I'd give him my number so he could hit me up this fall, if he wants someone to show him around the city."

"By 'show him around the city,' do you mean 'give him hot, sloppy blowjobs in his dorm room'?" I ask.

"No, I do *not* mean that," Ben says, shoving me into the backseat of the car and climbing in after me. "Jesus, Garen, two guys can talk to each other without it being foreplay. I don't even think he likes boys."

But Taylor *does* like boys, and more importantly, tormenting Ben McCutcheon is my absolute favorite way to amuse myself. I spend the entire drive back to the house listing all the lewd-to-the-point-of-questionable-legality sexual activities I'm sure they could get up to. By the time Jamie parks at the curb in front of the house, Ben is practically howling at me to *shut up, shut up, shut up* and trying to hit me even though I've got him pinned to the inside of his door while I talk. The second the car stops moving, he grabs his backpack and tumbles out of the backseat.

He's halfway up the front path after Travis when Jamie gets out of the car and says, "Hang back a moment, McCutcheon. I've got a favor to ask you." Travis stops in the middle of unlocking the front door to turn around and make an obscene hand gesture. "Not that kind of favor, you twat. It's a Garen favor." Travis raises his eyebrows and repeats the gesture, this time with both hands.

"What's a Garen favor?" I ask. "Is that like—you know, is it a favor for me, or about me? Will I like it? Do I have to do anything? Can I—"

"You can shut up," Jamie suggests. When I don't show any signs of letting my curiosity wane, he rolls his eyes. "In case you've forgotten, you've got a birthday in two weeks. Do you want me to find you a nice present, or not?"

I light up. Honestly, I *had* sort of forgotten about my birthday; being six months sober seems like a much bigger deal than turning nineteen. But if anyone can be talkative and idiotic enough to talk his way out of a birthday present, it's me, so I lunge for the door and slip into the house.

Travis steps after me, but doesn't close the door behind himself. "It's cold out. Come inside and talk in the kitchen. I'll keep that dumbass in the living room so he doesn't eavesdrop."

Ben takes exactly four steps into the house before he freezes; Omelette has come bolting down the stairs like a furry lightning strike. Since I'm standing closest to the foot of the stairs, he barrels into my legs and licks furiously at the knee of my jeans before moving on to Travis, who crouches down a little more to scratch him behind the ears. But the moment the dog realizes there is a new person in the house, he becomes so ecstatic that he actually *howls*.

Ben doesn't fare much better. His knees hit the ground, and when Omelette crawls all over his lap, he just laughs and digs his fingers into the dog's fur, scratching deep into his skin so that Omelette flops to the ground and bares his belly for more scratching.

I hitch my chin at Jamie, who's still lingering in the doorway because he can't really get around the Great Ben McCutcheon Belly Rub Experience. "If you'd realized that all you needed to do to get him on his knees was be fluffy, you'd probably wax less, huh?"

Jamie steps over Ben—nearly kicking him in the back as he does so—grabs my shoulder, and shoves me towards the living room. “Go. Go watch television or something.”

“I can’t,” I say, making a face. “I have to go to bed so I have some hope of actually functioning when I wake up in like, five hours. We’re doing a ten-mile run in PT tomorrow, and, you know—” I shrug, “—I want the best time. It’s tough as hell to compete with Declan, but I want to destroy him tomorrow.”

“Thought you said you guys were friends,” Travis says with a frown.

Another shrug. “We are. But... I don’t know. He was a snot to you tonight, so I want to put him in his place a little.”

Travis somehow manages to look embarrassed, annoyed, and pleased all at once; it’s a pretty complicated expression, but it looks absolutely adorable on him. I duck my head and scramble up the stairs to my room before I can do something as humiliating as telling him that.

183 days sober

When I head downstairs early the next morning, the television is still playing in the living room. At first, I assume Ben just fell asleep watching it after Jamie left, but when I poke my head around the corner, two things become immediately apparent—Ben never fell asleep, and Jamie never left. I flee to the kitchen, because it’s crazy early, and I haven’t had my coffee, so I’m incredibly unprepared for the sight of the two of them tangled up together on my couch and frantically kissing while my dog snoozes on the floor nearby.

I set about measuring the grounds and water into the machine, then assume my usual perch on the counter next to it while I wait for the coffee to brew. From this angle, I can see that they’re both almost fully clothed, but that Ben—who is pinning Jamie down against the cushions—has his shirt pushed halfway up his torso, exposing the pale skin of his back to Jamie’s nails. They’re grinding against each other, pushing into each other’s space everywhere they can manage, desperate and frustrated enough to suggest that they’ve been doing this for a while.

Jamie wrenches away from the kiss and shoves Ben’s face closer to his neck. When Ben obediently shifts to sink his teeth in, Jamie groans and says, just loudly enough to be heard over the television, “What kind of idiot gives up orgasms for six weeks?”

“What kind of idiot makes a move on someone who gave up orgasms for six weeks?” Ben shoots back. His challenging tone is sort of discredited by how wrecked he looks right now. His cheeks are flushed, and his arms are shaking as he shifts his weight to one side so that he can fumble towards the zipper of Jamie’s jeans. “Just because I can’t get off, doesn’t mean you can’t. It’s fine, I-I can blow you, if you want me to—”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Jamie says, catching his wrist and stretching out so both their arms are raised above their heads and hanging over the arm of the couch. “Even I’m not selfish enough to ask you to make me come if I can’t reciprocate.”

“How adorable,” I mutter, letting my head fall back against the upper cabinets. Thankfully, the coffee pot gurgles itself into silence, signaling the completion of the brewing process. I dump some of it into one of my oversized mugs and shuffle into the living room.

“Stop frothing in front of my dog, you fucking perverts,” I say. Ben reels back so quickly that only Jamie’s hands on his hips prevent him from hitting the floor. I snort. “Graceful. There’s coffee in the pot, if you’re thirsty. Or you can fuck in my bed, if you bitches are fuckin’ *thirsty*. Just make sure you change the sheets

if you get jizz all over ‘em. Come on, Omelette.”

Omelette rouses himself from sleep and ambles after me out the sliding door into the yard. I sit down on the deck steps and drink my coffee while he trots all over the yard, sniffs everything he encounters, and pisses in half a dozen different locations. Halfway through my cup, the slider opens behind me, and Ben and Jamie join me.

“Sorry about that,” Ben mutters, pulling on his sweatshirt and giving me an embarrassed, guilty smile the moment his head reappears from the neck hole.

“I’m not,” Jamie says. “How long did you watch us, you dirty little voyeur?”

I shrug. “Only long enough to vigorously masturbate to the sound of your tender moans.” I lift my mug. “Guess what kind of cream is in my coffee. Go on, guess.”

“You’re awful,” Jamie says, collapsing onto the deck next to me and sounding like he means it a little more than I’d like.

I’m not sure if I’m supposed to ignore it or not, so I wait in silence until Ben hops off the deck and wanders off through the dewy grass to play with Omelette and his squeaky duck. Then I squirm closer to Jamie and knock my shoulder against his. “What’s up?”

“Nothing,” he says around a frown that hints otherwise. “I was just thinking.”

“About?” I prompt. He shrugs. I wait. He rolls his eyes and gestures across the yard. “Ben?” I say. He shrugs again. I light a cigarette, take a drag, and pass it to him. “You going to finally ask him out?”

He chokes on a lungful of smoke. I bury my smile in the crook of my arm. When he can finally speak, he forces out, “No. *Lord*, no. Never. I don’t even like him.”

“He’s the smartest person either of us has ever met. He’s got a bitchy little sense of humor. He’s a polite, young Christian boy, so Mama and Daddy Goldwyn would fuckin’ love him. From what you’ve both told me, the sex isn’t exactly terrible. So, please, tell me which part of that you dislike.”

James makes a face. “I dislike the part where things would get... messy. Complicated. The sex is good, and the conversation is more than, but I’m under no delusions about how it would end. Even in a best-case scenario, he and I would never be able to manage more than a month of dating before we were sick of each other. Then there’d be a huge scene—as there always is—and you’d end up getting dragged into it—as you always do—only this time it would be worse, because you actually give a damn about both parties.”

“Or, taking a less pessimistic viewpoint, the fact that I give a shit about both of you guys might be a good thing,” I point out. “At least, it would mean there’d never be that awkward moment where the person you’re dating is like, ‘you have to stop hanging out with Garen so much, I don’t like him, choose one of us.’”

Jamie scoffs. “Yes, there would be. I don’t care if you two are friends—that moment *a/ways* comes.”

“Oh, yeah? Ask him,” I say. I make a sweeping gesture towards Ben, who is wrestling the squeaky duck from Omelette’s mouth so he can throw it across the yard for him again. Jamie gives me a dirty look, which I’m sure he hopes will persuade me to drop the issue. It doesn’t; I just narrow my eyes and do my best to communicate exactly how sick of this shit I am.

He heaves a sigh and calls across the yard, “Hey, McCutcheon?”

Ben makes a vague, unimpressed noise that I guess is supposed to imply he’s listening, even though

he's still mostly watching the dog. Well, that's how Jamie must interpret it, because he continues, "When you were dating McCall, how come you never told him to pick you over Garen?"

It's a sudden, serious enough question that Ben gives the duck one last kick across the yard, then comes over to sit down on my other side. "Because I'm neither an idiot nor a controlling asshole?" he says carefully. "You know how insufferable they are about one another. They were up each other's asses, both figuratively and literally, before I was really part of the picture, and I may have been dating Travis, but I knew they were still in love with each other. It wasn't really my place to throw an ultimatum in there just for shits and giggles."

"So," Jamie says in that same slow voice, "I wouldn't—" He pauses, sits up straighter, and asks in a more certain, animated voice, "Hypothetically, you and I are standing in an elevator that breaks free of its cables and goes crashing to the bottom floor of the building. Neither of us is mortally wounded, but we *do* both sustain enough brain damage that we decide it might be reasonable for us to maybe... well, go on an... outing. Of sorts. With one another. And no one else."

"You mean, like, a date?" I say brightly, and Jamie shoots me a warning look and says, "Of course not. Don't be appalling."

Ben's cheeks are turning red, and he must be aware of it, because he draws his legs up to his chest, hunches into his hoodie, and rests his forehead on his knees so that his face is hidden and his voice is muffled when he replies, "Uh-huh. Hypothetically: elevator accident, brain damage, outing. Go on."

"Alright. Well, let's say—hypothetically—that this outing was enjoyable for both of us—"

"—because of the brain damage—"

"--*exactly*, because of the brain damage. And let's say that one outing turned into, perhaps... a series of outings, extending over a long period of time, during which neither of us was partaking in outings of this nature with other people, and during which we might engage in frequent and enthusiastic bouts of sadomasochistic sex."

Ben makes a strangled noise, but it's barely audible over my cheerful, "You mean, like, a relationship? A weird, kinky relationship?"

"For fuck's sake, Anderson, go *inside*. You have to get ready for school, anyway," Jamie snaps.

"Not going anywhere until I hear the end of this 'hypothetical situation.' So, go on. I'm listening."

He huffs another sigh, like he's regretting every life decision that has led to him sitting on this deck, and grits out, "So, let's say that all of that were to come to pass. Would I ever have to worry about there being a moment in which you would tell me to choose between you and Garen? Or, if-and-when it failed miserably, would you be a brat and try to demand that Garen choose just one of us to be friends with?"

Oh, Christ. I roll my eyes so hard I'm worried I might get a headache.

But Ben takes it in stride, raising his face long enough to give Jamie a judgmental look and say, "So, you're saying that in this brain-damaged alternate reality, I like you more than I like Garen? Because in *this* reality, you seem to have a very shaky understanding of where you rank amongst my friends."

"Just answer the question," Jamie groans, flopping back to lie flat on the deck. "If you and I got involved, would there inevitably be some hideous argument in which you demanded that I place more value in a relationship with you than my friendship with Garen, just like there have been in nearly all of my past relationships?"

Ben squint at him. "Uh, no? That would make no sense. You and Garen have been best friends since you

were fourteen, and you and I have known each other less than a year. Obviously he'd outrank me. Besides, if I liked you enough to date you, I'd probably just want you to be happy. And if there's one thing I'm sure of, it's that you two are happiest when you're indulging in your creepy, mostly-platonic life-partner bond."

"It's not creepy," Jamie says, frowning.

"It's absolutely creepy," Ben argues. "But if someone has a problem with it, that person shouldn't date either of you. It's as simple as that. Neither of you makes a secret of the fact that you will choose each other over almost anything, so why would someone date you if they didn't approve of that? It'd be like someone going after you, even if they're not into spoiled, preppy douchebags with thick Southern accents. It wouldn't make sense."

Jamie narrows his eyes. "That was... almost an appropriate response, right up until that end bit."

"Take what you can get," Ben advises, ducking his head to hide the small smile that's playing at the edges of his mouth. They lapse into silence, and then... actually, that's it. They just lapse into silence.

"Are you kidding me?" I demand. "You get that fucking close, and the conversation's over? I feel like I was just balls-deep in a really hot guy, but right when I was getting ready to come, he shoved me off and was like, 'well, that was fun,' and fucking peaced out so I had to finish by jerking it alone. Like, what was the point of asking—"

"Jesus Christ on a piece of toast, go inside, Garen, no one wants you out here," Jamie snaps, sitting up.

And okay, yes, I'm going to be late for PT if I don't get my gym bag and leave within the next minute, but I'm so completely and utterly done with this bullshit that instead, I take a deep breath and start chanting, "Ask him out, ask him out, ask him out, ask him out, ask him—"

"Fucking *fine*," Jamie bursts out, and he leans around me to say to Ben, "Would you like to go out with me tomorrow night?"

Shit. I hadn't expected him to really *do* it. I whip around to stare at Ben, who raises his right hand like he's holding an invisible pen.

"*Dear Diary*," he says flatly, pantomiming writing in the air, "*Today, something magical happened. Garen verbally abused James into asking me out. I felt so special. Love, Ben.*"

"Come on, that was at least a semi-gentlemanly way of asking," I wheedle. "Considering the way you guys usually talk to each other, that should make you want to like, compose a sonnet in your fuckin' Moleskine."

"Oh, my mistake. I didn't realize that the bare minimum of civility was grounds for poetry," Ben says. "Would a limerick suffice?"

"I think I warrant a haiku, at the very least," Jamie admits.

"You are a douchebag," Ben says, counting off the syllables on his fingers. "But I have no self-respect, and your dick is huge."

Jamie smirks. "And thus, we find out the real reason you still put up with me. Not that there was much of a doubt." He hesitates, scratches at the back of his neck, and eventually says, "I probably would have gotten around to asking you out sometime anyway, even if Garen wasn't such a meddlesome little shit. So, it was a legitimate question, and it still stands. Do you want to go out with me tomorrow?"

"*Want's* too strong a word," Ben says, still counting syllables. "I don't have other plans, though." He

pauses, looks at Jamie, and adds, "I still won't put out."

"There are less than three weeks left to Lent," Jamie says. "I can wait."

Ben looks around at him, stares hard for a minute in silence. Jamie just stares back. I try not to let out the annoyed sigh that I can feel building in my lungs, because I'm pretty sure that this is *the moment*, as long as these two morons can nut up and stop tiptoeing around the prospect of a real date.

Finally, Ben gives a short nod and looks out at where Omelette is trying but failing to tunnel under the edge of the fence. "Kay."

"Kay?" Jamie echoes, and Ben rolls his eyes.

"Okay. Yes, fine. I'll, um—I'll go out with you, I guess."

"This is heart-warming," I declare, setting my empty coffee mug down on the deck so that I can fling an arm around each of them, but the moment is over before it even begins; they're already bitching at each other over the top of my head.

"Fine, you *guess* you'll go out with me. Sweet Lord, McCutcheon, your enthusiasm is enough to make a boy blush—"

"How am I supposed to react? Were you expecting tears of joy, or—"

"You are so annoying. When I buy you dinner, will you finally use your mouth to do something other than whine? Or should I expect you to continue doing that even whilst you eat?"

"When you *what*? You're not *buying me dinner*, dude, we're going Dutch. And I sincerely hope you're not planning on us going anywhere that would require me to wear something besides jeans and Converse, because that's pretty much all I brought with me—"

"Maybe I'll take you somewhere you can blend in, like a crust punk show in Williamsburg."

"I don't understand—was that an attempt to threaten me? Because I would *love* to go to a crust punk show in Williamsburg—"

"Well, this is, you know, cute," I say loudly, waving a hand between them, "I'm gonna go to school now, before I'm late for PT. Try not to kill each other. And when this argument dissolves into frantic handjobs in my living room, don't get dude juice all over the couch, or Trav'll be pissed."

Despite how much I speed on the way to school, I *am* late to PT, and Sergeant Smith gives me shit for it in front of everyone. My day doesn't get better after that. I'm forced to stay behind after dismissal to run laps as punishment, so I end up missing breakfast. There's a pop quiz during statistics. Halfway through chem lab, Javi accidentally drops a beaker while I'm crouching down to get a set of scales out of the cabinet under our lab station; the beaker lands half on the ground, half on the hand I'm using to brace myself. Glass gets everywhere, and I miss the rest of the class because Mr. DeCarlo sends me up to the infirmary to get tiny glass slivers pulled out of the gash on the back of my hand.

By the end of the day, all I want to do is go home, but I need all the experiment notes I missed. Declan gives me his at the end of MLEP—his version of an apology for being an asshat last night, I figure—but the copy machine in the guidance office is broken. I spend the next hour holed up in the library, copying the notes by hand into my notebook. I trudge up to Whitman Hall and bang my good fist against the door to room two-twelve. Javi answers it, and he seems to be the only one there. I hold up the notebook.

"Done with Dec's notes. Is he around?"

"No, he's outside, running the obstacle course," Javi says. At my furrowed brow, he adds, "The course all the seniors have to run as part of the PT final in May? He practices on it during study hours every day."

"That sounds like the least enjoyable thing ever," I say.

Javi snorts. "Right? He tried to get me to join him a couple times, but I gave up. He's more of a tyrant than Smitt is." He gestures towards the notebook. "You can leave that on his desk, if you want. His backpack's here, so it doesn't make much sense to bring it out to the course."

"Thanks," I say, stepping into the room and dumping the notebook on the desk that isn't littered with framed pictures of Javi and Vanessa. When I look back at Javi, he's shifting guilty from foot to foot and staring at my bandaged hand. I roll my eyes. "Dude, it's not a big deal. It doesn't even hurt anymore."

"Did they at least give you some kind of painkiller in the infirmary?" he asks.

I shrug. "No. Kinda trying to avoid the painkiller thing, you know?"

He ducks his head. "Oh. Right."

"Shut up, I'm fine," I say, reaching out and shoving at his shoulder. "When Campbell gets back, tell him I said thanks for the notes. I'll see you both tomorrow morning."

But I only make it halfway to my car before curiosity overcomes me, and I find myself changing direction, heading across campus to the obstacle course at the edge of the property. It's not a small course by any means—equal parts "typical military obstacle course" and "proof of sadism in the PMA administration." I can't fathom doing it once, let alone every day.

I hear Declan before I see him; there are sharp inhales and thumping footsteps coming from the far side of the nearest climbing wall. I only have to wait a moment for Declan's flushed face to appear at the top of the wall. He swings himself over, scrambles down the first few footholds, then drops the remaining six or so feet to the ground. He sees me the moment he turns around, but doesn't break stride in his path to the horizontal beams he needs to jump over. Once he's cleared the last one, he sprints towards the final obstacle—the rope climb. He hoists himself up so quickly I nearly miss the whole thing, beats the side of his fist against the support structure once to signal his completion, then shoves a hand into his pocket briefly before returning himself to the ground.

It seems like a moment when I should applaud, but I'm glad I refrain, because his hand returns to his pocket and withdraws a stop watch. He peers down at his time and sneers.

"Disappointed?" I say.

"Often," he replies. "Javi tell you where to find me?"

I nod. "I stopped by your room to drop off your notes. Thanks again for letting me copy 'em."

"Care to pay me back?"

"Depends how you want me to pay," I say, letting the corner of my mouth hitch into a smirk as I give him a long, steady once-over. His face is still flushed, his chest rising and falling more quickly with his labored breathing. Every inch of him is splattered with mud and sweat.

"Make yourself useful," he orders. "Time me."

I accept the stopwatch, but blink down at the numbers frozen on the screen. "Is that your time? Or at least, your most recent time?" He nods once. "Dude, the course is designed to take twelve minutes, but you can pass with anything less than fifteen. If you can do it in ten minutes and six seconds, why the hell

are you still practicing?"

"The school record is eight minutes and forty-four seconds," he says. "I've only ever been able to manage nine twenty-two."

I raise my eyebrows. Last spring, Jamie clocked a ten minute, thirty-nine second course run, and he had one of the best times in the grade. I'm pretty sure the eight minute, forty-four second run happened once in the eighties and hasn't been touched since. But hey, if Dec wants to drive himself crazy trying to beat it, that's his prerogative. "Alright, then." I reset the watch. "Ready? Get set. Go." I press the start button as he takes off at a dead sprint.

After years at this school, there are a lot of things I used to find sexy, but am now pretty desensitized to. School and military uniforms. Semi-public nudity in the dorms. Flushed, sweat-drenched boys working out or playing sports. I can't remember the last time I was really turned on by watching a guy physically exert himself outside of a sexual situation, but Christ, Declan running the course is a thing of beauty.

For months now, I've been aware of the fact that he has a nice body—freckled skin that runs tight over hard, thick muscle. His arms are toned, his torso slim but well-defined. Everything about him looks solid and healthy and *strong*. It's one thing to see that he has an attractive body; it's another thing entirely to watch him use it. He moves so... recklessly. He runs as fast as he can towards solid obstacles, and when he reaches them, he throws himself onto them or under them or at them, seemingly unaware of how badly he batters his flesh at times. He jerks his limbs around roughly, violently, and his face is twisted into a frustrated grimace. He treats his body like it's a weak and disappointing vessel, like he knows that everything that's inside of him is so much faster and stronger than his skin will let him be.

He drags himself up the rope climb faster than I've ever seen anyone manage it before. The second his palm connects with the beam at the top, I stop the clock. He looks over at me, but I wait until he has lowered himself carefully to the ground again before I announce, "Ten minutes, four seconds. That's awe—"

"I'm running it again. Time me, or give me the watch."

I reset the watch and wave him towards the start line. He takes his time walking over to it, eyes closed, breathing deep. When he finally opens his eyes and gets into a position to start from, I count him off again, and he bolts. This time, he only gets a ten and ten, which only deepens his scowl. He runs it again and gets a ten and nine. Again, and now he's up to a ten eighteen. He's panting and shaking, and he's got his teeth bared like he's an animal.

"Maybe you should take a break," I suggest slowly, because that seems like a more appropriate thing to say than *we've been out here for the better part of an hour, and I'm beginning to think you're insane*.

"You run it," he demands, breathless. "Go—you—I want to see how long it takes you. Go."

"Uh. See, I'd sort of prefer not to? I'm still wearing my uniform, and my hand is bandaged, and there's kind of a lot of mud and water and nastiness involved. It seems like a bad combination, so—"

I break off, because Declan has aimed his unblinking stare straight at me, and it's intimidating enough to make me want to be silent. Finally, once he's satisfied that I'm done protesting, he says, "Take off your jacket, shirt, and tie. Tighten up your boot laces. If your bandage gets ruined, you can go to the infirmary and get it set again before you go home. Run the course."

"I can... do that, I guess?" I say, holding out the stopwatch by the cord so that it dangles between us. Declan grabs it out of my hand and sits down hard on the ground, taking long, desperate gulps from one of the water bottles he must have set out earlier. I strip off my leather jacket, then my necktie, and after a moment of consideration, my button-down, leaving me in just my boots, my uniform pants, and a plain black t-shirt. I empty my pockets, trudge over to the starting point of the course and warn, "Uh, keep in

mind, I've never actually done this course before, so I might fall on my ass. And if I do, you're not allowed to make fun of me."

Instead of agreeing, Declan resets the stopwatch and counts down, "Three. Two. One. Go."

I take off at a run towards the first set of obstacles, a series of horizontal beams at varying heights with maybe eight feet of distance between each beam. I hop over each of them fairly easily—the course is designed to get harder as it goes on. Next, there's a long line of tires to stutter-step through, then some higher beams. From there, it's straight-up awful—tangled cargo nets to climb up, parallel bars to drag myself along like I'm a fucking two-toed sloth, rope bridges to edge along over a miniature pond that's covered in a green film. I whine aloud when I get to the crawl; it's supposed to be a thirty-foot stretch of dirt under coils of concertina wire, but it rained for three hours late this morning, so it's currently a mud crawl.

I stop and turn around to look at Declan, hoping he'll tell me I can stop, but his face is blank. I sigh and drop to the ground, flattening my body and digging my elbows and the inside of my knees into the wet, sloppy earth. I come out the other side with my entire front caked in mud.

The last big obstacle is a six-foot-tall wall that I have to scramble over, and then I'm slapping my hands down on the wooden beam that marks the end of the first half of the course. From there, it's all the same, but in reverse, which fucking blows, because it means the first thing I have to do is climb a six-foot wall from a dead stop. I manage it, drop to the ground, and keep going. Luckily, the course gets easier now, except for the last wall and the rope climb right at the end, which sucks a dick. I haven't done a rope climb in over a year, and my injured hand is already throbbing, half-bandaged and probably going to get infected if I don't clean it out soon. Declan still isn't letting up, though, so I try to haul myself up the rope as quickly as I can, ignoring the pain of it.

I slap the top beam and pretty much flail my way back to the ground as Declan says, "Twelve minutes, forty-seven seconds."

"Not bad, for my first time at it," I say, shrugging. "I'll probably forget about it for now, then practice a couple times the week before finals. All I really care about is clocking a time that lets me pass MLEP. The only guys who actually give a shit about their times are the ones who plan to enlist."

Declan stands up and looks around at me. "What are you planning to do after graduation?"

"No idea," I say, sprawling out on the grass. "I've got some—well, they might be acceptance letters, or they might be rejection letters. Either way, I've got a stack of 'em in my room somewhere. They keep coming in, only I never check the mail, so Travis puts them in my room and tries to get me to open them, but I haven't even bothered to look at them yet. I mean, I fucking hate school, so I'm really not sure I'm up for another four years of it." I cock my head to the side. "Why? What are you planning to do?"

"I'm going to West Point," Declan says, one eyebrow raised just enough to be noticeable. "Now do you understand why getting a good time on this course is important to me?"

"You're gonna look so cute in your little fatigues, I bet," I say with a sly smile. When he continues to look unimpressed, I roll my eyes and gesture towards the course again. "If you want to run it again, I'll work the clock one more time, but then I'm going home. Studying for finals is boring, and that's what this is, even if it involves a lot more sweat than usual."

He takes to the course again. The thirteen-minute break has helped him, but not by much; he manages a nine minute, fifty-eight second run, snapping at me to call out the time before he has even come down from the rope climb. The moment the words are out of my mouth, he scrapes himself halfway down the rope and lets go, crumpling to the ground and not moving. He isn't far enough away to justify standing and running; I scramble onto my hands and knees and crawl over to him, even though my hand is still screaming with every movement.

"Dec," I say sharply, "Declan, dude, are you good?"

"I'm fine," he breathes, but barely. "I'm just... exhausted. Winded."

"You'd probably be less winded if you hadn't just fallen ten feet through the air," I point out.

He doesn't reply, only blinks slowly up at me. I suddenly become aware of the fact that I'm still kind of hovering over him, sitting on my heels to one side of him, but with one palm braced on the ground above each of his shoulders. I make to lean back, to give him some breathing room, but when I shift away, he catches my wrist and turns his attention to my failing bandage.

"How's your hand?"

"Fine." My voice very nearly breaks; it's possibly the most humiliating thing to ever happen to me. I clear my throat and sit back on my heels, but Declan hasn't released my arm. My movement draws him upright, much too close to what I'd consider my personal space bubble. I force another cough into my free fist and repeat, "It's fine. I'll take care of it when I get home."

"Let me look at it," he urges.

I try to shake him off. "Dude, it's not a big deal, I can—"

"Let me *look* at it, Anderson."

"No. It's fine," I try to say, but the '*fine*' comes out as more of a huff than a word, because Declan shoves me flat onto my back and sprawls out on top of me, pinning my lower body in place with his and bracing one palm against my chest to keep me down while the other tightens around my wrist so that he can bring my hand up for closer inspection. I try to kick him, and when that fails miserably, I whine, "Get the hell off me, you fucking loser."

He snorts. "Come on, like you haven't been practically *begging* me to get on you for months now. I figured you'd be happy about this."

That right there is way, way too close to the bone. I give a slight wriggle, trying to see if I can flip him off of me without hurting him. It doesn't work. "Very funny. Seriously, that's adorable. Shut up."

"Do you think I don't see the way you look at me?" he asks. "Do you think I don't realize just how serious you are when you're flirting with me at meals, or during MLEP, or when we're out with the guys?"

And suddenly, this isn't even remotely fun anymore. I shove at his shoulders and order, "Get off. I want to go home."

"Hey, it's not a bad thing," Declan says, like he's trying to calm me down, which is stupid, because I'm not fucking freaking out, I just want to *leave*. He does this—this stupid fucking thing he's been doing since I shaved my head, where he smooths his hand over what's left of my hair, like he's fucking petting me. He does it as a wordless greeting in the morning before PT, he does it when my hair is still damp at breakfast, he does it if we bump into each other in the halls between classes, he does it when he sprawls out in the chair next to mine during MLEP, and he does it now, when he's got me on my back, squirming underneath his weight. He cocks his head to the side and gives me this little half-smile. "Truthfully, I kind of like it. I mean, when I first started school here, I used to look up to you, you know? I wanted to be like you. And now you're here, and we're friends, and you *want* me. It's like reading comic books when you're a kid, and then growing up well enough that Bruce Wayne wants to fuck you in the Batmobile."

"Glad to be of service, now get off of me, I mean it," I snap, but he readjusts his stance just enough to slip one of his legs between mine, and then he's pressing down with his hips, grinding down against me.

Completely without my permission, my back arches so sharply that I end up banging my head against the ground.

Like I haven't spoken at all, Declan ducks down and whispers right next to my ear, "That what you want, Garen? You wanna fuck me in your Ferrari?"

I do, I really, really do, but I know it's not going to happen. He's only doing this to tease me, because Declan Campbell is nothing if not a raging fucking narcissist who gets off on knowing that everyone—straight girls, gay boys, whoever—wants his dick. And I never wanted to be this guy; the gay guy who embarrasses the shit out of himself by getting a crush on the straight boy he's friends with. I've never done something this pathetic before. The closest I've ever come was falling for Travis back when he still thought he was straight, and that doesn't count, because he ended up *not* being straight. But Dec... he's getting nothing out of this. I can feel him pressed up against me, and he's still completely soft, not even a twitch of interest in the friction. That's kind of the worst part.

"If you don't get off of me within the next like, ten seconds, I swear to god, I'm gonna punch you in the fucking face," I warn.

He frowns, but it's a curious frown, not an angry one. "You're pissed at me. Are you embarrassed?"

"Of course I'm fucking embarrassed," I hiss.

He slips a hand between us and palms the still-growing hardness at the front of my mud-stained trousers. I might make a sound. He gives me an infuriatingly faint squeeze. "Are you embarrassed because of this?"

"Y-Yeah, it's because of that, you fucking idiot," I snap, writhing in place until he moves his hand away again. "Christ, Campbell. I know I joke around with you or whatever, but I kind of try not to be that faggot who shoves his fucking boner at his straight friends. It's not—I can't *help it*, not when you're on me like this, so if you'd just get off me, I could—"

"I don't *care*, Garen," he tries to reassure me. For the first time since I've met him, he seems like my discomfort actually displeases him. It's a nice change, but it would be a nicer change if he'd get off me, like I've asked. Nicer still, if he'd shut the fuck up. "I know you like me. I know you want to sleep with me. It's fine, I don't mind. You know I'm not going to treat you any differently from how I treat my straight friends. Alright?"

I close my eyes and force myself to take a slow, deep breath. I'm hoping it will help me calm down, but it doesn't. My face is still burning and my dick is still rock hard when I say, "Alright. Fine. I get it. Can I go now? Please?"

For a moment, nothing happens, and then I feel what I'm pretty sure is his thumb brushing across my lower lip, like he's smearing away one of the dots of mud splatter that have left me with an earthy version of his freckles. The touch is surprising enough to make my eyes snap open, but by the time I can focus, he's already rolling off to the side, freeing me.

"Of course," he says. "I'm sorry."

"No, it's—I'm the one who should be sorry, alright? I didn't mean to—" I blow out a harsh, exasperated breath, then haul myself to my feet and collect my belongings. "I'll see you tomorrow."

I stop by the locker room to shower, shove my muddy uniform into my gym bag, and change back into my slightly grody PT clothes from this morning. When I get home, Ben is lying on the couch, holding a book in one hand and absently reaching down to scratch the back of Omelette's neck with the other. He looks up when I enter, then makes a little noise of pained protest when I collapse on top of him and announce, "I am so fucking sick of straight people, I swear to god."

"Did something happen?" He tries to wriggle in place, but it doesn't work. At all. "Also, what the fuck, you weigh almost twice as much as me. Get off, before I suffocate."

Instead of getting off, I bury my face in the front of his hoodie. Almost immediately, I'm hit with a pretty weird sensory experience—he feels like he always does, but instead of smelling, you know, like himself, like he usually does, he smells like *Jamie*; Jamie's cologne, Jamie's shower gel, Jamie's shampoo. I draw back, blink at his chest, then roll my eyes; if the words 'Patton Military Academy Varsity Lacrosse Team' printed in navy letters across the chest of the hoodie weren't a hint to the real owner, the embroidered *Captain* on the right bicep and *Goldwyn #16* on the left are information enough.

I flop back down on him, but I guess he has appeased me enough for one evening, because he shoves me off him onto the floor. I land right next to Omelette, who thrusts his tongue out and slops it all over my cheek. I duck away from the tongue-bath, but scratch him under the jaw while his tail beats frantically against the carpet.

Ben leans over to peer at me from the edge of the couch. "Why do you suddenly hate straight people?"

I sigh and rub my palm over my face, mostly so I won't have to make eye contact. "Because they—look, you ever had a straight guy flirt with you because he thinks it's amusing that you want him, or whatever?" He shakes his head slowly. I sigh again. "Well, Declan is—I don't know. I guess I'm just sick of it being like, *funny* to him. I get it, alright? I'm into him, but I'm a guy, and he's not into guys, so it's not gonna happen. Doesn't mean I want to talk about it."

Ben raises an eyebrow. "Does that mean you'd rather I stopped asking you about it?"

"Kind of," I admit. For a minute, we both lie there in silence.

"I know something that'll make you feel better," he finally says, breaking out of his typical monotone to use a sing-song voice. "Guess what I did today."

I reach up and pluck at the sleeve of the hoodie. "Honestly? Kind of guessing you did Jamie."

"Shut up," he says, ducking out of sight again.

I sit up and grab him by the shoulder, twisting him away from the back of the couch so he's facing me again. I say, "Come on. You saw him today, right? You guys hung out?"

Slowly, Ben nods. "Sort of. I mean, he mostly just needed my help picking out your birthday present, so he picked me up and we went to the city. Spent maybe two hours doing that. Went back to his place after." I smirk. He flushes and rolls over to lie facedown on the cushions. "We didn't—I mean, we didn't fuck. Not really. But we hooked up, sort of." He rubs his forehead against the arm of the couch. From this angle, I can see that his eyes are still open, staring hard at the cushion a few inches from his face. "I really fucked up with Lent this year."

He sounds so... broken up over it, and I have no idea what to say. Sure, I believe in God, and I go to temple on the High Holy Days, but I'm not about to give up orgasms for a month and a half, and I'm sure as *hell* hot about to feel guilty for banging a guy as hot as Jamie.

"Yeah, well, Catholics have that 'get out of Hell free' card, right? When you get back to Connecticut this weekend, make sure you do that whole confession and cannibalism thing," I say. "You know, where you eat the Jesus crackers and drink the Jesus blood wine."

That's enough to make Ben lift his head and turn to squint at me. "Are you talking about Holy Communion? It—that's not *cannibalism*, you fuckwit."

"My point is that you don't need to stress yourself out over this. Whatever you did with Jamie? It's fine. Forget about it, watch a movie with me or something, do my English homework so I don't have to. Go on your date tomorrow night, and if you wanna pound it out with Jamie again, do it. Then go home, read your Bible, get your skinny ass to church and run that *forgive me, Daddy, I've been a bad, naughty boyscene* with your priest, and you'll be fine."

"You should write the Garen Anderson Translation of the New Testament," Ben says dryly. "Your religious interpretations of my faith are so enlightening."

I manhandle him into an upright position and spread myself out over the couch next to him. "I know, I'm such a joy. Now, can we stop talking about boys and braiding each other's hair? I feel like I'm growing a vagina."

"Don't worry. You're a ridiculous, boy-obsessed mess even as a man," he assures me. I try to shove him off the couch, but Omelette barks at me in his defense. Grumbling, I have to settle for kicking my legs up onto his lap and making him watch the worst, most mind-numbing reality show I can find.

184 days sober

Five minutes before the end of chem, the classroom loudspeaker buzzes loudly enough to make everyone jump. Mr. DeCarlo picks up the extension on the wall, and all of us immediately dissolve into muttered conversation. At least, we do, right up until he hangs up, turns, and announces, "Anderson. Main office."

"Whatever it is, I didn't do it," I say immediately. "Call 'em back, say I'm innocent."

Javi snorts. "You haven't been innocent since you were about twelve years old. Learn to lie better."

"You aren't in trouble, but you will be, if you don't do as you're told," DeCarlo says sternly.

I roll my eyes, stand, and kick my backpack towards Charlie. "Bring that to lunch for me, will you?"

At his nod of assent, I trudge out of the room, out of the science building, and halfway across campus to the main administrative building. The sprawling layout of Patton is a bitch and a half to deal with, especially on days like today, when it's been raining on and off all morning. By the time I get to the main office, my blue Oxford is spattered dark with rainwater. I shake off like a puppy as the secretary looks up at me, nods in acknowledgment. "Garen."

"Lisa. Been a while since we've seen each other, huh? You're looking lovely as ever," I say. I gesture towards the door separating us from the headmaster's office. "Should I go right in?"

"No," she says quietly. "You're not going to be seeing Headmaster Samuels."

I blink. "Then why am I here?"

She holds out a yellow Post-It note with something scribbled on it. "There's a family situation that requires your attention. I've been asked to have you call this number to check in."

I stare down at the Post-It. It starts with Savannah's nine-one-two area code, so I know immediately that it's Jamie's number. I am instantly disturbed. My BlackBerry is in my pocket, and it's been still almost all morning, only buzzing a few times during my earlier classes with texts from some of the guys. I pull it out and check my missed calls, just in case, but Jamie hasn't tried to contact me at all, so I don't understand why he'd call the school and have me taken out of class to call him.

Steeling myself for something incredibly weird, I smile my thanks at Lisa and select Jamie's name from my contacts list. The ringing seems to drag on much longer than it should, and when it finally stops, an unfamiliar male voice says, "James Goldwyn's phone. Who's calling?"

"Uh," I say, thrown, "Garen Anderson? I'm his best friend. I'm at school, and I just got pulled out of class and told to call him. What's going on?"

"My name is Tom Hall. James is my wife's nephew. He asked me to call you on his behalf." There's a brief hesitation, then Tom says, "There was an incident last night. His mother and father were involved in a car accident on their way home from dinner in town."

My stomach lurches. "But they're—I mean, they aren't hurt too badly, right? He—George and Melissa, they're okay?"

"I think you should come to his apartment in the city," Tom says gently.

"They're okay, *right?*"

"No."

I feel like I might be sick. I sit down on the wooden bench just inside the door of the office and rub a palm over what's left of my hair. I can feel Lisa watching me apprehensively, but I don't care. There are hundreds of horrific images running through my head right now—missing or ruined, paralyzed limbs; cuts and burns and gaping tears in flesh; brain damage, concussions, amnesia that will stop either of them from even remembering their own son's name. I clear my throat and ask, "How bad is it?"

"Melissa was killed on impact," he says, and I find myself doubling over with a shudder, pressing my forehead to my knees. "George was still alive when the paramedics arrived, but his—he suffered a skull fracture, and the bleeding to his brain couldn't be stopped. By the time they got him to the hospital, he had already died."

No. No, no, I don't *want* this to be true, I want it to be some incredibly twisted trick, but I know it's not—Jamie jokes about a lot of things, but he loves his parents too much to ever pretend this could happen. He loves them so fucking much. It must be true, and he must be *aching*.

"Can I talk to Jamie?" I whisper.

"He's in his bedroom right now. He asked not to be disturbed for the time being."

He's already disturbed, you stupid fuck, I want to scream down the line. *His parents are dead, and the only people who are there for him right now are you and your idiot wife, who are practically fucking strangers, and he needs me.* I take the deepest breath I can manage and say, "I want to talk to my friend. Now."

"I'm only following James' wishes. I'm sorry. If you want to speak to him, you'll have to come to his—"

"Of course I'm going to come there, you—" Another deep breath, another one, another one. "Just—I'm leaving school now, okay? I'll be there in about an hour. If he comes out of his room, tell him that, yeah? Tell him I'm on my way."

I hang up before Tom can say anything else that might make me want to punch him in the mouth the second I meet him. I sit up straight and look over at the secretary, who isn't even pretending to be doing anything other than eavesdropping. "I need to leave school early," I say. "I don't—I'm over eighteen, so I think I can sign myself out for the day, but if you need me to call my mom for permission, I can do that."

I need to do that anyway. I need to call Mom, and I need to call Dad, because they've both met George and Melissa Goldwyn, and they'll want to know. They've—we've all had dinner together before. All six of us have sat around restaurant tables together, when Jamie and I would get dropped off at Patton at the start of every school year and would immediately refuse to be separated again; when our parents would come to visit for Parents' Weekend in the spring; when they'd pick us up after our spring finals and Jamie and I would start whining already about how we didn't want to be apart for the few weeks before I went to visit him in Georgia. And it was always such a good time, hearing the way Jamie's accent thickens when he's talking to other people from Savannah, hearing George laugh over how much my mom and I make fun of each other, hearing Melissa and Mom have some doctor-versus-lawyer competition to see who can name-drop their respective med school and law school more times over the course of a single meal. Hearing George and Melissa call me their *noisy, Yankee bonus-son*. Mom and Dad knew Melissa and George, and they love Jamie, and they need to know.

"All I need you to do is sign out here," Lisa says quietly, passing a clipboard and a sign-out sheet across the desk. My hand is practically vibrating as I scrawl something remarkably unlike my real signature over the line. "Are you sure that you're alright to drive, dear? I think it might be better for you to call someone to come pick you up."

I could—Travis hasn't left for work yet, so either he or Ben could come get me. But it'll be half an hour before they can get here, and then another hour to get to Jamie's place, and he needs me now. I shake my head and trip out of the office and up to the dining hall. The rest of the squad is already well into lunch.

"That was quick," Sam observes, stretching. "Probably the shortest lecture the headmaster's ever given you. What were you getting in trouble for, anyway?"

"Nothing. I'm not in trouble," I say flatly. My backpack is sitting on my usual chair; I should probably pick that up, shouldn't I? I dig my keys out of the front pocket and shoulder the bag before turning my blank face towards my friends again. "Taylor, I need you to tell Dr. Stanford I won't be in Government and Politics this afternoon. And uh, somebody needs to tell Sergeant Smith I left early. He can check with the office, if he's pissed about it. They gave me permission."

Javi twists to frown up at me. "Why, what's wrong?"

"Jamie needs me," I say, and then, before any of them can dare to make some smartass comment, I add, "His parents were in a car accident last night, I guess."

Charlie turns to face me, eyes wide behind his glasses. "How are they?"

"Dead," is all I can manage to say. My words are met with absolute silence.

"Are you joking?" Steven says finally.

Very slowly, I turn my eyes to meet his. There's a flutter of movement, like Taylor has just slugged him in the hip under the table. All I can do is stare for a long moment before I say, "No. I'm not."

The drive to the city... happens. I think. I'm unaware of the entire thing, but it must happen, because one minute, I'm fumbling my key into the ignition of the Ferrari, and the next, I'm rolling into a parking space in the garage under Jamie's building. Another tenant happens to be heading inside at the same time, and she holds the door for me so that I don't need to get buzzed in. Unlike the drive from the house to here, the elevator ride from the ground floor to Jamie's seems like it takes twice as long as usual. When I get to his door, it's locked, so I have to knock. After a moment, I hear the click of a lock, and then the door is swinging open to reveal a sandy-haired man I've never met before.

"Garen?" he says, extending his hand. "Tom Hall. Please, come in." Like I need his fucking permission. Still, I give him a quick handshake and step into the apartment. He gestures towards the living room,

where three people are already seated on the couch and chairs. "This is my wife, Michelle, and our children."

The children aren't actually children; it's a guy and a girl, both my age, maybe a little older. And shell-shocked, crying Michelle looks so much like Melissa Goldwyn, so much like Jamie himself. I feel uncomfortable just looking at her; no wonder Jamie's hiding.

"Nice to meet you," I say, then, just a breath later, "I'm going to go see James. He's in his room, yeah?"

Tom's nod is all I need, and then I'm striding down the hall. The door to Jamie's bedroom is shut. I knock once, but don't wait for his permission before I push it open.

James is standing at the foot of his bed, his back turned to me as he meticulously arranges and rearranges the contents of his suitcase. He's already dressed for the day, wearing a dark gray, three-piece suit and standing as stiffly as if it were made of armor. He doesn't turn around when I enter the room, so I follow my instinctive desire to step up behind him and wrap my arms around his middle, tucking my chin over his shoulder. His hands go still on the shoe he'd been holding, and after a moment, he sets the shoe down and covers my forearms with his palms instead.

I refuse to say a single one of those trite condolences that people always throw around when someone dies. I can't say *it's okay*, because it's not, but I can't say *I'm sorry*, because that would force *him* to be the one to say *it's okay*. I can't ask him for the full story of what happened—I'll get that from Tom later, I guess, non-blood-relative to non-blood-relative. For now, I have to settle for saying quietly, "I'll do anything you need me to do. Just tell me what I can do to help you, and I'll do it. I love you so much. Whatever you need."

Slowly, he turns his face towards mine. He's almost blurry this close up, but even once I focus, his expression is still completely and utterly blank. He licks his lips and says, so quietly he's barely audible, "I need to go home for a while. I need to make arrangements for the funeral, and I need to—the house shouldn't be empty. Somebody needs to talk to the staff, and I suppose I'll have to... meet with the lawyers, at some point. To figure out what will happen to it. The house, that is." He swallows, his Adam's apple bobbing under the knot of his tie. "Will you come to Georgia with me?"

"Of course," I say, nodding. "I figured I'd—I mean, I didn't wanna stop home long enough to pack a bag, but I've got some spare clothes here that I can take, and it's... my teachers will understand. It's Patton, and you're a Patton boy, they'll understand why I have to be with you now. I can take as much time as you want me to. Do you need me to do anything? Get tickets for the next flight South?"

He shakes his head and shrugs out of my arms, returning his focus to the suitcase open on the bed. "My uncle said he would handle it. We're all going to fly down together, I guess. Him, us, my aunt Michelle, my cousins. They were the ones who—" He pauses, swallows, and attempts to speak again. "My aunt was the person who the Savannah Police contacted. I suppose she thought it was a message that would best be delivered in person, rather than over the phone."

"Yeah, obviously," I say. "I, um—Jamie, seriously, is there anything I can do for you? Please."

Slowly, he shakes his head again. "No, I'm... I'll finish packing. And I'll gather your things from the closet. Would you mind asking Tom if he's been able to reserve the tickets yet?"

I give him a lingering kiss on the forehead and let myself back out of the room. The moment I reach the end of the hallway, all of the Halls turn to me, like they're expecting an update. I shove my hands into my pockets. "What's the flight situation?" I ask. "Are we flying out tonight?"

The daughter quickly wipes the heel of her hand under her eyes and asks, "Are you coming to Savannah, too?"

"Jamie asked me to, so, yes, I'm coming to Savannah," I say. I don't add that I would've gone, even if he hadn't asked me. James and I are a package deal. We've been inseparable at the best of times, and I can't begin to think of leaving him alone at a time like this.

"We have a three o'clock flight out of JFK," Tom answers.

From behind me, I hear the sound of Jamie's footsteps, then the sound of him readjusting the hold he's got on his suitcase. He clears his throat and says tonelessly, "We should leave soon, then. It's only supposed to be half an hour from here to the airport, but... New York traffic being what it is, I'd rather not risk being late."

"Want me to head downstairs and ask the doorman to get a few cabs?" I offer.

"We have our car here," Tom says, shaking his head. "It won't seat six, though. If you'd like to get a cab for yourselves and meets us there, I think that would be a workable plan."

He seems inclined to handle the Hall portion of the group, which I guess leaves me to handle Jamie and myself. Tom gives me all of the flight information, as well as his own contact info, in case there's a problem on the way there. As sort of an afterthought, he gives me the rest of the family's numbers as well—Michelle's, and the daughter's and son's, April and Ethan. I'm not sure why I need four different numbers to be sure I can handle a half hour journey apart, but I dutifully add each one to my contacts list.

Once I've completed that task, Tom starts shepherding his kids to the door. He returns for his wife, slipping an arm around her waist to guide her. Michelle pauses in front of Jamie, who is staring at the floor, completely still. After a minute of silence, he finally looks up to meet her eyes. She reaches up to brush her hand over his cheek and whispers, "I know."

Her husband and kids may speak with a Connecticut non-accent, but her own voice comes out in the sweet drawl of a Georgia native. She doesn't just look like Melissa; she sounds like her, too. Jamie grits his teeth and nods just once.

It's a good thing that Tom knows enough to quickly herd her out into the hallway too, because the door barely has time to shut behind them before Jamie turns to me, flings an arm around my neck, and crumples.

Chapter Twenty-Five: Bonus Scene

Ben McCutcheon

You are ruined from the moment you climb into the passenger seat of the Cadillac, and James twists to lean both his elbows on the console between the two of you, putting his face much closer to yours than anticipated.

"I finished the book," he says, though it's more of an accusation than a statement. "I cannot believe you sprung that on me without telling me how good it would be."

Heat flares in your chest and spreads outward so quickly, you find yourself leaning back on the now closed door to give yourself room to breathe. "It's my favorite book of all time. If that wasn't enough to tell you it would be amazing, you're beyond help," you say. It takes you another moment to realize, "Wait, no. You can't have finished it yet. I only gave it to you this morning, and when you left here around five, you said you were going back to your apartment to sleep for a few hours before a full day of classes. You haven't had *time* to read it."

He rolls his eyes. "It was sixty-something pages of poetry. I read it while I was waiting for my logic class to start. Anyway, I only meant to read the first poem, but once I realized it was a somewhat connected narrative, I couldn't very well quit in the middle, could I?" He returns to his own side of the car and reverses smoothly out of the driveway. "You can change the radio to whatever you'd like. The godawful rock station Garen usually puts on is set to number three."

"Whatever you were listening to is fine," you say. It's the gracious answer, and something about being in a spotless Cadillac that still has its new car smell makes you want to behave yourself.

Unfortunately, when you press the power button, your eardrums are instantly assaulted by some rap song so disgusting that you contemplate throwing yourself right back out of the car and onto the sidewalk. You aren't a prude by any stretch of the imagination—you're sure you sacrificed your right to that descriptor sometime between the time Garen dragged you out of study hall so that he could fuck you in the senior stairwell, and the time Stohler made you hold a shopping basket full of bondage porn while she interrogated an unreasonably enthusiastic Luv Boutique clerk about what vibrators provided the best prostate stimulation—but you're also not a *misogynist*, and hearing a man with a voice as thick and foul as an oil slick rasping out lyrics about shoving his cock at any unsuspecting woman who stays still for five seconds is enough to make your upper lip curl back in distaste.

You flip to the rock station saved to the third button and say, "Nevermind. What you were listening to is definitely *not* fine."

"I suspected you might react that way," James says, shooting you a wry smile. "Though, in all fairness, I imagine you'd be hard-pressed to find any Georgia boy who doesn't listen to at least *some* hip-hop, given the Atlanta music scene."

"You're not from Atlanta, though," you point out.

He shrugs. "Less than four hours from there to Savannah. Not much longer than it'd take you to get from New Haven to here or Boston, but I'd wager you still grew up with an opinion on the Yankees versus Red Sox fued. Most people like things that reflect the culture of the area they grew up in."

You couldn't care less about baseball if your very life depended on it, but every teenager in Connecticut has a vehement preference for one team or the other, and you know you've got a Yankees cap somewhere in your closet at home. Rather than admit this, you hitch your shoulders in a shrug and turn to look out the window.

It isn't until James is pulling into the parking lot of a music store just outside the city's limits that you think

to ask, "What kind of budget do you want me to stick to?"

He parks the car, frowns at you, and asks, perplexed, "Budget?"

"Are you kidding me," you say flatly. "Yes. A budget. Clearly this is a word you're unfamiliar with, so allow me to explain. A *budget* is a magical number that you gives you the power to pay your rent, buy groceries, and make tuition payments, so long as you don't allow your bullshit spending to go over said number. A *budget* is the reason that I ride a skateboard to school, instead of wasting all my gas money driving there every day. A *budget* is the thing that made your parents say 'no' all those times you asked for a pony when you were a kid."

James presses his lips together in a thin line, clearly fighting a smile. And then you remember, and you have to tilt your head down, close your eyes, and pinch the bridge of your nose to try to ward off a headache as you amend, "Except that I'm now realizing that your parents actually did buy you a fucking pony. So, fuck the budget, I guess."

"His name is Boxer," James says, not bothering to hide his grin anymore. You want to brain yourself against the car window, because of course he would name his horse after an *Animal Farm* character. Of course he would do that, and admit that, and know you would be affected by that. "If you're ever in Savannah, I'll take you for a ride."

That last time he spoke to you about the stable in Savannah, you were riding *him*, and he was telling you how much he wanted to work you over with a riding crop. You tumble gracelessly from the car, slam the door, and start speed-walking towards the music store. You can hear his laughter even before he gets out of the car, and you've crossed half the parking lot before he catches up to you, reeling you back with a hand wound into the material of your hoodie.

"Alright, slow down. And for your information, I know what a budget is, I just don't know how you expect me to set one for this," he says. "I have no idea how much a guitar costs. All I know is that I'm tired of hearing Garen bitch about how he wants an acoustic one, since all he has is an electric. You're the one who plays every instrument under the goddamn sun—you tell me what a reasonable budget would be."

"Um, I bought my acoustic used, for less than a hundred bucks," you say, ducking your head so that you can check the time on your phone. You don't actually care what time it is, nor do you really absorb what the numbers are, but you don't want to look at him when you're forced to acknowledge exactly how different your financial situation is from his. "I'm guessing you want something new. And I'm guessing you want something quality."

"Obviously," he says. "It's for Garen's birthday, and he's... had a hard year. I want something spectacular. If I were aiming for mediocrity, I wouldn't have bothered to ask for your assistance; I would've wandered in and picked something myself."

You shrug. "His electric was maybe twenty-seven hundred."

You're about to point out that Garen is an ostentatious cow who could've found something just as nice for a quarter of that price if he hadn't been so focused on finding something in his favorite color, but James nods and says, "Alright. Shall we agree that three grand is a reasonable cap for a budget, then?"

Dropping three thousand dollars on a single instrument is unfathomable to you. The last time you handled that much money at one time, you were making a payment for your tuition plan; taking that much out of your savings account almost made you sick, even if it was for school. But James doesn't even blink as he suggests it, and you know you won't ever have the chance to spend three thousand dollars of someone else's money in a music store again in your life. Instead of telling him that you could find something much cheaper than that, you clamp down the lurch of guilt in your stomach and promise, "I'll find something perfect for you to give him."

James waves you ahead of him into the building. The door opens with a buzz that you only vaguely hear over the punk song playing on the sound system. The store is equal parts record store and instrument shop; the center of the room is packed with aisles of browsing bins full of CDs and vinyl. Around the border of the room, the rest of the inventory is separated by instrument type, with the guitars along the back wall. It's well-stocked, moreso than any of the stores around Lakewood. There are a few people browsing, and two clerks chatting near the register, though they look up when you enter.

"Hey," says the boy, whose nametag identifies him as Daryl. "You guys just looking, or do you need help finding something specific?"

"Something specific," James says. You hadn't noticed that his hand was still resting between your shoulderblades, but that's where he pushes you gently forward. "I need an acoustic guitar, but beyond that, I know nothing. This is Ben; he can tell you what we're looking for better than I can. Feel free to ignore my presence entirely, until the moment comes when you require payment."

You have never been good at making introductions for yourself—you tend to panic, accidentally insult the person you're speaking to, and generally embarrass yourself to the point of it being literally painful—but James' words have sufficiently cracked the ice, so all you have to do as he wanders away is step closer to the counter and raise one hand in a wave you instantly wish you could take back. "Hi. Sorry about him. But, uh, yeah, our friend's birthday is in a couple of weeks, and James—that's James, the guy I came in with—wants to buy him an acoustic-electric."

Daryl the clerk bobs his head and says, "Alright, cool. C'mon, I'll show you what we've got. Amanda, you cool to stay up here?" The other clerk waves him off, and he lopez around the counter to lead you to the back wall of the shop. "Does your friend already play, or is he a beginner?"

"He's been playing for about seven years. Right now, all he's got is an electric—you know the Vintage Hot Rod series Fender introduced a couple years ago? He's got the '57 Strat. It's a great instrument, but I'm pretty sure he considers it a blight upon his soul that he only has one."

"And what about you?" he asks. "Do you play?"

Before you can even take a breath, James' circuit of the store brings him close enough to bump purposefully into you as he answers, "Allegedly. All I've been hearing for a year now is '*Ben plays half a dozen instruments*' this and '*Ben turned down Juilliard*' that, yet I've still never heard him play a single note."

"Well, you're in luck. Can't exactly choose the right guitar to buy if he doesn't try it out first, can he?" Daryl points out. Luckily, the all-out embarrassment of being forced to show off in front of James is stamped out almost immediately. You are provided with a chair to sit in while Daryl brings you various instruments to inspect, but it quickly becomes clear to you that James has overestimated his own capacity for patience; he goes off to explore the store on his own before you've even set pick to string on the first one. You work your way through the guitars, asking questions, commenting on things you've read, looking up reviews on your phone, playing a few chords to get a feel for each one. By the time you have rejected the fifth one, James has taken to wandering over to ask you questions, then retreating until he has another.

"There's a guitar over there that's shaped like a soup spoon. Why aren't you looking at ones like that?"

"Because that's a mandolin," you say, barely sparing the instrument a glance, "and last time I checked, Garen wasn't in the Punch Brothers."

"I'm sorry, I don't—was that a joke? Because those words didn't mean a damn thing to me."

You stop strumming the guitar, take a calming breath, and look up. "The Punch Brothers are a band. They have a mandolin player. That's it, dude, that's the entire joke."

"It doesn't count as a joke, if it only makes sense to music geeks and hipsters," James says loftily. You would retort, but he's already disappearing back into the aisles. You are allowed two minutes of peace before he returns to say, "I saw a sign that said something about an acoustic-electric guitar. What's the difference between that and a plain acoustic guitar?"

"An acoustic-electric guitar is an acoustic guitar that is also electric," you say flatly.

"Don't give me a smartass answer," James says, narrowing his eyes at you. "I'm not afraid to hit a child."

You hand off the guitar to Daryl, partly because you know it's not the right one for Garen, and partly because you are afraid you might try to hit James with it if someone doesn't remove it from your possession soon. "You realize that I'm older than you, right? You can't call me *a child*, it doesn't make sense. And it's—alright, here's your two-minute musical education. When the strings of an acoustic guitar vibrate, the sound they produce is amplified by the guitar body itself. When the strings of an electric guitar vibrate, the sound they produce has to go through the pick-up system—which is electrical—and into the amplifier. Otherwise, it sounds like shit. An acoustic-electric is an acoustic guitar, but it has the pick-up system in it, which means you can plug it into an amp for more sound. Got it?"

"Yes, but good Lord, stop talking," James moans. "I wouldn't have asked, if I'd known your answer would be so unbearably boring."

"You're the dumbass who asked me a question you didn't actually care about the answer to," you retort. "Now go away."

He huffs and stomps off again. Daryl raises his eyebrows and mutters, "I can see why he needed a friend's help to pick out an instrument. Doesn't know a thing about music, does he?"

"No, he doesn't," you agree. Part of you wants to correct him, to say that you and James aren't really friends, but you don't know how you would otherwise classify your relationship. Instead of trying to puzzle that out, you turn your focus to the latest instrument you have been handed. It's a Fender dreadnought with a bright red finish, and you can't help but appreciate the idea of Garen owning a set of beautiful red Fenders. Daryl rattles off the specs while you look it up your iPhone, to positive reviews. He claims to have recently seen another review online and leaves you alone for a moment to go print it out. You start to run through some of the songs you know Garen loves the most, just to see how they'll sound when he plays. You try them unplugged, then with the amp; either way, the sound is beautiful.

Less beautiful, however, is the interruption.

"May I ask why a music store sells something that appears to be a small torture device?" James asks.

Your head snaps up, and you have every intention of tearing him a new one, but the words won't come. James is holding a silver banjo pick, brow furrowed as he examines it. You've seen one before, of course, but you never realized—well, you'd just never *considered* that, how it must look to someone who doesn't know what it is. You swallow and try not to think about it, because you *can't* think about it, not here, not with James running the pad of his thumb experimentally over the tip of the pick, not if you want to maintain any degree of sanity.

"It's a banjo pick," you say, once you can speak without allowing your voice to break. Careful to avoid any contact with his skin, you reach out and slip the pick onto the top of his index finger, positioning it so that it curves upward. "You wear it like that, usually with a few more on your other fingers, so it's easier to pluck the strings. I guess you could use it on an acoustic, but, um... it's mostly for banjos."

Apparently unconcerned with any valid use for the object, James twists the pick around so that it's facing the wrong way, curved down like a single silver claw. You can feel his eyes on your face, even though you can't make yourself look away from the pick. "Seems like it might have other uses," he says, quietly enough that you don't think any of the clerks will hear him. "Doesn't it?"

You can imagine it perfectly; one pick on each of his fingers, ten metal points too dull to draw blood, but sharp enough to leave deeper lines down your back than his short nails can manage. You can imagine him wrapping that same silver-clawed hand around your cock, working you over carefully so that he doesn't scrape against you, but still letting you feel that threat of pain, the promise that always keeps you on edge. He would drag it out, too—you know he would. You don't know how long he would make you wait before he would let you get off, but you know down to your bones that he could get you to beg.

"Do you want—" he starts to say, and you do want, whatever he's offering, you want it more than anything, but before he can finish, Daryl returns, article in hand.

"Here it is," he says cheerfully. "I think you—"

"This is the one," you say, voice hoarse. You all but shove the guitar back into Daryl's hands. "Th-this is, it's, um... this is the guitar we're going to go with." Realizing what you've just said, you clear your throat. "The guitar *he's* going to go with."

Daryl looks thrilled, but you aren't surprised by that—the guitar you've selected is barely within the three-thousand dollar budget, and you doubt he would have been this helpful if he wasn't planning on getting a commission check.

"Are you sure?" James asks. You nod, and that's the only motivation he needs to prompt Daryl to return the guitar to its case and bring it up to the front for purchase. You remain silent and at a distance for the duration of the exchange, terrified of what you might do if you let yourself step any closer.

That feeling only intensifies when James places the set of four silver banjo picks on the glass top of the counter and says, "These, too."

"Are you kidding me?" you say for the second time today, but when you say it now, you know that you must sound desperate.

"Problem, McCutcheon?" he says. You press your lips together, trying to keep yourself absolutely silent until you can formulate an intelligent response, but any chance of coherency is shot to hell when James turns to shoot you a wink over his shoulder. Not for the first time, you find yourself wishing he were less beautiful.

The moment James has swiped his black Amex—and of *course* he has a black Amex, not a fucking normal credit card—and signed the receipt, you thank the clerks for their patience and assistance, pick up the case, and stride out of the store, leaving James to gather up his damn picks and hurry after you.

He keeps smirking at you from the driver's seat, and you are so distracted in trying to avoid his eyes that you don't realize where he's taking you until he pulls into his own building's garage. You finally turn to him, but he must have been waiting for you to notice, because he cuts you off with, "I just want to stop off at my place so that I can put the guitar somewhere I know it'll be safe until Garen's birthday. Besides, I thought I might grab your book for you. You said you wanted it returned, didn't you?"

"Yeah. Not because I—it's just, I've never actually seen it in a bookstore? I had to buy my copy online, which was sort of a pain in the ass. Besides, I put some—"

"—notes in the margins, yes," he finishes. "I read those, too."

You've got no idea how you feel about that. You hadn't scribbled any of those notes down with the intention of letting someone else see them; you hadn't thought anyone else would ever *want* to see them.

James parks the car, cuts the engine and makes a brief, one-handed gesture towards the doors leading into the building. It's a clear suggestion to follow, but you hesitate with your hand on the door handle.

Every time you find yourself in this situation with James, there's a moment where you remember that there is a line, and that you are about to cross it. It only ever lasts a few seconds, but each time, you feel as if you're taking one last breath before slipping underwater. You felt it that first morning in November, when he told you to prove to him what you were capable of. You felt it that night outside the diner, when he all but begged to see the scratches down your back. You felt it in the bar on New Year's Eve, when he used the crowd as an excuse to press himself against your back during the second band's set. You felt it sometime after three this morning, when the two of you finally ran out of things to say about the books you've been exchanging, and he said that he should probably head home, though his eyes were fixed on your mouth, and he was sitting so close that you could feel the almost feel the vibration of his words as he spoke. You feel it right now, when he pauses at the door and turns to face you again, cocking his head to the side and asking, "Are you coming upstairs, or staying there?"

You follow. You don't know how you could do anything else, not when you're the one who always has to make the first move. You crossed the living room and undressed him, you stripped off your shirt in the middle of a snowy parking lot, you dragged him through the crowd and into the alley behind the club, you leaned in and kissed him because you didn't know how to say, *don't go just yet*.

Neither of you speaks during the elevator ride to his floor, though the silence is broken by the soft drumming of his fingertips against the hard shell of the guitar case. The elevator bell dings, and he leads you down the hall to his door. You're still not entirely... *comfortable* in his apartment. You've spent the night here, and you know your way around, but you can't help but think you don't have the right to stand in a room that's this perfect.

"Will it be alright if I leave this in my guest room closet?" James asks, lifting the case. "I don't want it to get damaged, but I'm sure Garen'll be around here before his birthday, and he's a nosy bastard. I can't guarantee he won't poke around in my bedroom."

Bedroom, bedroom, bedroom. It's as if that's the only word you've really heard, and you'd give anything to be able to smack yourself. You need to get it together, or you're certain you'll embarrass yourself completely by throwing yourself at him. You shove your hands into your pockets and hunch your shoulders in a shrug. "That should be fine. You should clear enough space on the floor that you can lay it down, though, just so you can be sure it won't fall over."

"Alright. A moment, please." He retreats down the hall with the guitar, while you close your eyes and try to breathe.

You have done absolutely nothing to win James' attention, but for whatever reason, you have it. You just have no idea what to do with it. No one has ever approached you as deliberately as James has been doing for these past few months. Even Travis just sort of threw himself at you, prompted by nothing but his own loneliness and desperation. Garen did the same thing, going from friend to not-boyfriend just because you were present and naked. And you care about the two of them, and you bear them no ill will for how badly things turned out, but would it have fucking killed either of them to ever actually take you out? The closest you've ever come to a date was the half hour you spent at prom before Alex's drunkenness necessitated him being brought home, and now you've got James Goldwyn planning to take you out for a night in New York City, James Goldwyn reading all the notes you write in the margins of your favorite poems, James Goldwyn questioning you this morning about what it might be like if you were to find yourselves in an exclusive arrangement.

You can't even fathom that. You try to imagine coming to visit him here, spending the night in this apartment, letting him take you by the hand and lead you down one of the crowded Manhattan streets that are always full of people so much more beautiful than you. You try to picture him coming to New Haven for you, eating vegan tofu scramble for brunch with the rowdy group of pierced and tattooed art majors you've befriended at school, sleeping in your bed at the apartment while you wrack your brain for an explanation you can give Alex for how this all happened. You think about him meeting your parents and trying not to cringe as your sisters climb all over him, and you think about meeting his parents, who you know nothing about, but would be willing to bet are as refined and attractive as he is.

It's impossible; it just doesn't fit. You made an idiot of yourself when you tried to date Travis, with his varsity letters and sunshine smile, and again when you tried to date Garen, with his cigarette-harshened voice and all his sharp edges. You don't want to do this again with James; you are so fucking sick of feeling foolish. You don't know who you think you are, that you might ever believe you've got a right to him.

"Everything alright?"

Your eyes snap open. James has returned with silent steps, and he's standing only a few feet in front of you, guitar gone and book in hand. Even his frown is stunning.

"Yeah. Everything is fine," you say.

If he senses that you are lying, he lets it go. Instead, he holds out the book and says, "Thank you again, for letting me borrow it." He gestures towards the couch in his living room. "We could sit and talk about it, if you'd like to."

"Or we could wait and talk about it tomorrow, on our... outing," you say hesitantly. "You know, so we know going into the night that we'll have at least one topic of conversation."

Something that might be a smile tugs at the corner of his mouth. "Certainly. We'll discuss it tomorrow. Though..." He takes a step closer. "I read it this morning, as you know, so it's lodged pretty firmly in the forefront of my mind. If you don't want to talk about it now, will you at least humor me by letting me know which poem is your favorite?"

He might as well have asked you to strip yourself bare for inspection.

"*Litany in Which Certain Things Are Crossed Out*," you say. "It's only maybe half a dozen poems in, but it's, uh... it's the one with the part about the dragon. It—my favorite used to be '*A Primer for the Small Weird Loves*,' but... being friends with Garen sort of ruined that one for me."

James' eyebrows shoot upward. "Oh? How so?"

"*The green-eyed boy in the powder-blue t-shirt standing next to you in the supermarket recoils as if hit, repeatedly, by a lot of men, as if he has a history of it*," you quietly recite, and James' eyes drop to the floor, almost as if you'd threatened to hit him, too. Again, you find yourself wondering how you always manage to turn conversations into something uncomfortable. In a poor attempt to salvage it, you ask, "What about you? Was there one you liked?"

"I liked nearly all of them. But yes. The last one stood out to me," he says. "I only read the book once, so I can't quit remember the title—something about snow, was it?"

"*Snow and Dirty Rain*," you answer, and your voice is maybe hoarser than you'd want it to be, because you've read every syllable of that book a hundred times by now, and that poem is still one of your favorites.

He nods slowly. He is standing so close. "Like I said, I can't remember all of it. But there was a bit about a love that transcends hunger. I liked that."

You press your lips together to keep yourself from delivering the quotation, but the words rattle inside your head. *I'll give you my heart to make a place for it to happen, evidence of a love that transcends hunger. Is that too much to expect? That I would name the stars for you? That I would take you there?*

"And later, a few lines right in a row, talking about moonlight," he says.

I would like to meet you all in Heaven. But there's a litany of dreams that happens somewhere in the middle. Moonlight spilling on the bathroom floor. A page of the book where we transcend the story of our lives, past the taco stands and record stores. Moonlight making crosses on your body, and me putting my mouth on every one.

There's a rueful smile on James' face now, and he admits, "My descriptions can't be very helpful. I wish I could remember enough to quote it for real."

"It's okay," you say, "I know the parts you're talking about."

"Of course you do," he agrees, and you aren't sure if he's annoyed by it now, or if he appreciates it, the way you've saved so much space for all these poems in your head. If he's annoyed, he hides it well by licking his lips just once—your eyes flicker down to follow the movement—and adding, "There's another part, close to the end, that I really liked. The things about the gold room. That's the part I remember."

Your attention shifts back from his mouth to his eyes. "Do you?"

"I had a dream about you. We were in the gold room where everybody gets what they want," he says. His words aren't a verbatim quotation, but they're so, so close, close enough to make your heart hurt. Your skin feels too hot. He keeps going. *"You said, Tell me about your books, your visions made of flesh and light, and I said, This is the Moon. This is the Sun. Let me name the stars for you."*

He hitches a shoulder, like that's all he remembers, and you can't anymore, you just can't, you have to at least try, even if you're not sure you're supposed to. *"Let me take you there. The splash of my tongue melting you like a sugar cube."* Your mouth is too dry, and you have to clear your throat to finish. *"We were in the gold room where everyone finally gets what they want, so I said What do you want, sweetheart? and you said—"*

"Kiss me," he says. You don't know if he's finishing the line or simply asking, but either way, his eyes are dark and your mouth is still too dry, and when you pull him towards you by the lapels of his jacket, he comes easily. He's so goddamn tall, you'd have to tilt your head straight back to get at him when he's standing up properly. You press a hand to the nape of his neck, intending to draw him down to a more reasonable height, but he has come to a solution of his own; he grips you by the back of your thighs—closer to your ass, if you're really being honest—and hikes you up against the apartment door. The movement is clumsier than it ever was when Garen did it, probably because Garen is built like a comic book character and can more easily support your weight. James needs to brace you against the door, and your legs are wound tight around him, heels digging into the back of his legs.

When you kiss him, it's not the kind of kiss you'd intended it to be. All of your interactions with James thus far have been desperate and half-violent, leaving you bruised and scratched and aching. Now, though, with one of your hands curved over the back of his neck and the other cupping his jaw, you've somehow managed to turn this into something slow, deep, and... intimate, maybe, if the two of you were any other two people on the planet. Kissing James is becoming dangerously familiar to you, but it's still electric in a way that you wish it wasn't. The same is true for him, you think, if the way he pulls back to rest his forehead against yours, breathing hard, is any indication.

"You know, all day today, I really have been attempting to behave as a gentleman should," he murmurs.

You roll your eyes. "Yeah? You were being a gentleman when you were making riding jokes in the car and buying banjo picks to be used in kinky sex? Wow, I'd hate to see you when you think you're being a cad."

"Allow me to clarify: I've been attempting to respect your torturous abstinence promise by keeping my hands to myself, even though what I want to do is bring you back to my bedroom and have you fuck me until I can't walk straight."

"You're the worst person I've ever met," you say, pressing his face between your palms and meaning every word. When you drag him back into a kiss, he's chuckling against your lips.

So it goes for several minutes—you aren't sure how many—before you can tell that this against-the-door position is starting to wear on him. He steps back a little, stops kissing you long enough to say, "Alright, we've got to—it doesn't have to be my bed, it can be the couch, or the fucking floor, but we need to—oh." He blinks down at where you have sunk straight down onto your knees in front of him. "That's perhaps a bit more of an enthusiastic vote for 'floor' than I'd expected."

He moves as if to join you so that you might resume kissing, but you grab him by the hips and twist him around, shoving his body back against the door. "Don't," you say thickly. "That's not what I—just stay there, I want you to stay right like that, I want to—"

Rather than try to stammer out the words, I swallow and reach for his belt. He makes no move to stop you, but he does say, "You don't have to. Yes, I remember your idiotic little offer of this morning, and I realize that you gave up getting off, not any and all sexual practices, but I told you: I can wait until it's not just me."

"I want to," you repeat, more urgently. "Please. I like it, I like doing it."

He lets his head fall back against the door with a thud. "It was much easier to tell you to fuck off back when I thought you were nothing but a grammar-obsessed music snob in tight jeans."

You pause halfway through the act of unzipping his pants. "I... *am* a grammar-obsessed music snob in tight jeans."

"I'm aware," he replies, "but I never expected to find that so *sexy*."

Your face burns, but luckily, you have a suitable distraction four inches from your face; you slip your hand into his pants and wrap your fingers around the base of his cock. "Shut up."

"I'm serious. You don't know how long I've been thinking of getting you on your knees like this," he says, voice deep and quiet like a confession. He's still got his head back against the door, but you think he might be watching you through eyelids at half-mast.

"Enlighten me," you say. It's a self-indulgent, awful thing to ask, but that doesn't make you want to know any less.

"First time I saw you," he says. Your head snaps up so suddenly that you feel a pinch in your neck. James doesn't seem to notice your surprise; he's too focused on what's about to happen. He hooks his thumbs over the top of his pants and pushes them down enough to free his cock. "Don't misunderstand me—I wanted to murder you and bury your corpse in the woods for having the gall to date Travis while Garen was away, and I thought you were hilariously short, and I didn't really get the eyeliner—I still don't know that I get the eyeliner. But god, your *lips*."

"What about them?" you ask. Your hand is working steadily over his cock, keeping James distracted. He's staring openly at your hand, and he doesn't seem inclined to answer you. To get his eyes back on your face, you duck forward and drag the flat of your tongue against the underside of his cock from base to tip, then let your lips linger on the head. When you pull back, he makes a frustrated noise and arches towards you, but you catch him by the hips and press him back to the door. "Answer. What *about* my lips?"

He huffs out a breath. "You *know*. You *know* how gorgeous your mouth is, I shouldn't have to tell you. That's the only reason I agreed to let Garen have that stupid party the night after the wedding—I assumed he and Travis would be getting back together, and I was hoping you'd be bitter enough to give me a rebound blowjob in McCall's bed. Now, please, will you—"

Before he can finish, you lean forward to take him into your mouth, and you're gratified to hear him let out a broken groan in response. It isn't as if this is something you could forget how to do, but you think that perhaps James has forgotten what you like, because his hands have remained useless at his sides, flexing ever so faintly against his own hips. But he isn't touching you, not the way you need him to. You give a few bobs of your head, taking him as deeply as you can before you pull off and try to confess, "I don't—I can't deepthroat, but you can still—I don't mind if, um—" The words won't come. You breathe deeply, take him by the wrists, and guide his hands into your hair. He drags his fingertips over your scalp, and it's just enough to give you the determination to finish, "You can make me choke on it. That's—I like that, I really like that. If you want to hold my head down, you can."

The first time you said that to Ethan, he blinked at you and told you that you were kind of creepy. The first time you said it to Garen, he said you could work up to that, but he didn't want to hurt you, and he wouldn't do it until he was sure you could handle it. James says neither of these things; he knots his hands up in your hair and says, "If it's too much, grab me by the wrists, and I'll let you go. Like we did in the car, with the necktie."

You couldn't forget that night if you wanted to, and your mouth is suddenly too full for you to confess this, so you compromise by humming out a muffled moan against his cock. He curses under his breath and eases you off until only the head is in your mouth, then rocks forward. He repeats the motion over and over, holding you right where he wants you while he fucks your face, and it's—perfect. It's exactly what you'd been hoping for. One of your hands is still curled tight around the bit of him you can't fit into your mouth, but the other is clawing frantically at his thigh through his pants. You don't even know *why*, because you don't know what you want, all you know is that you want more of him.

None of the sounds he's making are particularly coherent. He seems content to settle for a series of the most intense, throaty moans a human being could ever be capable of. One of his hands moves from the back of your head to the base of your neck, then circles around to press against your throat, an action that leaves you so undone that you shove a hand under his shirt to scratch at his hard, flat stomach. He sighs, then raises his hand just a little so that he can cup your jaw, rubbing his palm over your beard, tracing the corners of your mouth as he continues to shove his cock deeper and deeper into it.

He's muttering something above your head now, but you have no idea what, and you can't bring yourself together enough to care. On the off chance he's making a legitimate request for a variance in your technique, you lean quickly into the next thrust of his hips, even though it's deep enough to choke you. His other hand, already wound so tightly into your dark hair, gives a tremble and a jerk, and it's too much. The pain spikes over your scalp and down the back of your neck, down your spine, hits you like a truck. You are suddenly hovering right on the edge, your whole body tight and your skin too hot. You reel back to protest, but his fingers twist again, and all you can manage is a breathless, desperate, "J-James," and then you're gone, cock pulsing in your jeans as you try to stay upright. To stay *conscious*, really, because even drawing in a breath is becoming an issue now.

You hadn't thought that a month would be long enough to make you actually forget how good this feels, but you're sure you've never experienced anything as intense as this. Part of you is actually worried you're about to start *sobbing* for how good it is. You can't think straight, you can't even see. All you can do is press your face to James' hip and dig the heel of your hand into your crotch for friction. Somewhere above you, James is speaking, but you can't gather your thoughts enough to understand a word of it. And once you finally get yourself together, you're struck by the reality of this situation.

You just came in your pants. From getting your hair pulled. In the kitchen of someone who already mocks you for your pathetic inexperience, someone who only just this morning decided you might be worth dating. And it is becoming rapidly apparent that any chance you might have tricked him into giving you has just disappeared.

"McCutcheon," he says, most likely not for the first time. "Why did you stop? Did I—what, did I pull too hard? I'm sorry, I—" He stops speaking, and you just know he has figured it out. He's not blind, and you're not being subtle. Your face is still tucked against his side, but you're trembling so badly that his

needle-sharp hipbone is stuttering against your forehead like a tattoo gun. You're still grinding helplessly against your own wrist, you can't *stop* yourself. There's a slowly spreading damp patch at the front of your jeans. And yes, when you remain silent, James breathes, "Did you *come*?"

You whimper. And, because you are nothing if not a masochist, you allow yourself to recall all of the most embarrassing experiences of your life thus far.

When your seventh grade band teacher, in a moment of frustration, asked Will Bernard why he couldn't keep tempo like you could, and Will snapped, "Because while Ben was busy learning how to play ten different instruments, I was busy learning how to have friends." He had to sit through two days of detention, but that didn't really help you, because for the first time in your life, you actually noticed that you didn't have any friends, that you spent every single lunch sitting alone with a book, that you had never once been invited over anyone's house, that not a single person in your school liked you.

When your freshman geometry teacher found out that everyone in your grade called you *B-B-Ben McC-Cutcheon* and requested that the guidance office pull you out of study hall for speech therapy, and you tried to explain that you didn't have a speech impediment, you just got nervous about speaking in front of groups of people you didn't know well, but you tripped over all your words and only managed to stutter out, "I-It's not a problem, really. I can't, I don't, I'm n-n-not—" The guidance counselor and the special education instructor had both stared pityingly at you while you tried desperately to get a coherent sentence out, becoming more nervous, more frustrated, more clumsy with every syllable, until you started to cry. They had to call your parents, and you ended up sitting in the office for an hour, gnawing on your lip and refusing to say a single word, tears still streaming down your face, until your mom arrived and tried to explain that you didn't really have a stutter, you were just shy. It didn't matter; the school still made you sit through two months of speech therapy, until you were so detached from the whole situation that you could raise your hand in class and grit out every answer in perfect monotone.

When you took your clothes off in front of another boy for the first time in your life, and the first thing Ethan said was, "What the hell is wrong with your dick?" You did a double-take, because your dick looked the same as it always did, but then you realized what he was talking about, and you said, "Oh. I'm uh, I-I'm uncircumcised," as if that wasn't blatantly obvious at that point. But Ethan didn't look reassured, and the one time your dick actually brushed against him while you were riding him, he recoiled in poorly-concealed disgust.

When you tripped and nearly fell on your face on your way across the stage to give your valedictorian speech, and the first thing you could think to say when you got to the microphone was, "Highest GPA in the school, and I still can't remember how to work my legs properly. Doesn't really inspire much confidence in the rest of you, does it?" No one laughed, because what kind of person would laugh at the geek who thought it was clever to mock his entire graduating class in the first breath of his graduation speech?

Each and every one of those experiences pales in comparison to the humiliation that's making your skin crawl at this very moment. For the first time in your life, you truly wish that you could die.

"I-I'm sorry," you whisper. "I'm—fuck, I didn't m-mean—I'm, I can—"

You're flat on your back before you even realize you've moved. Or, been moved, as it were, because you're only in this position because James has all but thrown himself onto you, pinning you to the ground as his mouth drags over your throat. "Fucking hell, McCutcheon," he mumbles. "I know it's been a while, but I never thought you'd—"

"Please," you manage to say hoarsely, even though you're still so stunned, so humiliated, so utterly spent and useless that you can barely get a word out. "Please, do not make fun of me right now. I'm already so fucking—"

"--*hot*," he breathes, "I couldn't even tell you the last time I was with someone who was so turned on by

blowing me, they got off before I could even get a hand on them.”

The last time you made a grammar correction during sex, Garen threatened to bring you to the zoo and feed you to the ocelots, but your brain is still fuzzy from climax, and the only thing you can think to say is, “Shouldn’t use ‘they’ and ‘their’ with a singular antecedent like ‘someone.’”

“The *Chicago Manual of Style* has a neutral stance on the use of singular they to express the actions of a subject of unspecified gender,” he argues. Really, *argues*, even as he’s trying to suck a bruise into the place where your neck and shoulder join. It is possibly the sexiest thing anyone has ever said to you. You let out a noise that’s somewhere between a whimper and a groan, and James curses, bites down hard enough to make you arch off the floor, then lunges up to kiss you again. One of his hands works its way between your bodies and yanks open the button fly of your jeans. The front of your boxers is practically soaked through with cum; James’ hand presses right into the mess of it, slim fingers brushing over your sticky, softening cock. You’re still painfully sensitive, still almost buzzing with sensation, but it’s been so long since you’ve been touched this way. Instead of pulling away, you find yourself pushing into the touch with a sound you’d be ashamed to call a whine under other circumstances. The sound breaks when he moves his hand, still slick with your cum, to his own cock so that he can stroke himself.

You finally summon enough coordination to shove his hand out of the way so that you can touch him instead, muttering a mostly slurred, “No, let me, I want to.” His hands end up on your jaw, angling your face so that your mouths can align properly, though the kiss itself has too much tongue, too much accidental clacking of teeth, too many hitches of breath. He’s straddling your waist and hunching over you, but the position is too awkward for him; he moves to brace one hand on the ground and tangle the other in your hair once more. It doesn’t take more than a dozen strokes before he’s coming, rutting against the few inches of skin between the waistband of your jeans and the pushed-up hem of your hoodie. The noises he’s making are so loud, you wouldn’t be surprised if one of his neighbors came knocking on the door that’s only a foot or so to your side. You do your best to silence them with your lips, but it’s a lost cause, especially since you think you might still be making some noise yourself.

Eventually, James tips sideways off of you, sprawling out on the floor beside you. It’s a very long while before either of you is able to catch your breath.

“You alright there?” he asks finally.

You let your head loll to the side so that you can face him, and sigh, “You’re an asshole. You rubbed a handful of my own cum into my hair. And all over my face.”

“I know, you look absolutely disgusting. It’s in your beard. You look like a public service announcement about the horrors of truck stop prostitution. And I’m not sure if you missed this, but I also shot a load all over your sweatshirt.”

You lift your head to look down at your hoodie. Sure enough, there are bright white smears of bodily fluids all down the front of it. Having expended what remains of your energy, you let your head flop back down into its previous position. “You’re the worst person I know. And you’re letting me use your shower before you bring me back to the house. Garen will never let me live it down if I come back with jizz in my hair.”

“A shower won’t help you. We both know I’m going to tell him about it the next time I talk to him anyway,” he says. Then, abruptly, “This is the first time you’ve looked me in the eye after sex. Usually, you avoid any sort of acknowledgment and... well, flee, if we’re being honest.”

“I don’t flee,” you lie. “I just... I mean, what would you prefer to have me do? Hang out and snuggle?”

“I might. You don’t know. Perhaps I *like* to snuggle,” he says, narrowing his eyes at you.

You narrow yours right back, and before he can get another snide word out, you wriggle close enough to curl into his side, slinging an arm across his torso and resting your cheek on one of his pecs. Which is

hard as a rock, good God. He immediately brings his arm up to curve over your shoulders, drawing you tighter against him. You can hear his heart beating in his chest, feel the warmth of his skin through the thin Oxford cloth of his shirt. For a very long moment, neither of you moves.

"This is exactly as awkward as I think we both knew it would be," he finally says, at the same time that you pull back with a grimace and say, "Yeah, I'm going to go shower."

Your legs are embarrassingly unsteady as you stand, but James seems to be too busy stretching like a sleepy cat to notice the way you stumble a little on your way down the hall to the bathroom. You leave the door open a few inches while you shower. A small part of you assumes—but certainly doesn't dare *hope*—that James will slink in after you and join you, but he only enters long enough to place a folded stack of clothes on the counter. Once you've scrubbed off the evidence of what has transpired, you dress in the plain white t-shirt and gray drawstring sweatshorts you've been provided with. You feel completely exposed, with your scarred arms bared like this, but you barely have time to be uncomfortable; the moment you step out of the bathroom, James hands you a well-worn gray hoodie.

"I'll take your clothes," he says. "I'm doing laundry tonight anyway, so I might as well toss yours in with it. You can have them back when I pick you up tomorrow." You nod your thanks as you shrug into the hoodie. James takes a long, steady look at you, then hitches his chin. "You look good in that."

"Thank... you?" you say slowly. It's just an old sweatshirt, and the sleeves hang far past your hands. You blink down at it, trying to figure out exactly what it is about it that looks so good. There are words printed in navy across the chest, but you have to wriggle around a little so that you can read them; Patton Military Academy Varsity Lacrosse Team. Easier to twist to read are the words printed on each bicep—his name, his old jersey number, his captain status. You roll your eyes. "What, seriously? You had to give me what I'm willing to bet is the only article of clothing you own that's got your name on it?"

"Shut up," he says, not lifting his eyes from his name on your arm.

"You shut up, you're the one who's getting off on the sight of me wearing your varsity sweater, like this is a *Sweet Valley High* novel. What's next, Goldwyn? Are you going to ask me to wear your class ring? Do you want to pin me?"

He does—he pushes you right up against the hallway wall, pinning you in place with the weight of his body. "My class ring wouldn't fit you," he says, pausing to duck down so that he can press a kiss to your jawline. "You'd have to wear it as a goddamn bracelet. Your fingers are too small."

Your hands glide down his back, lingering over his ass. "They get the job done." You can feel him smirking against your jaw, then against your cheek, and finally against your lips. You nudge him backward and say, "Are you going to shower before you take me back?"

"No. No one's going to see me, and I'm only planning to come back here, once I've dropped you off. Besides, I believe you caught the brunt of the mess," he says. He's mostly correct, though his clothes are disheveled enough that anyone could guess what he's been doing. You can't help but admire the view as he leads the way out of the apartment and into the elevator.

The ride back to Travis and Garen's house passes much like the ride to the music store; James and you make periodic comments to one another, but mostly, you take the ride in silence, radio playing in the background. He parks at the curb, and you're about to thank him for the ride when he catches you by the jaw and pulls you into a kiss. For something so unexpected, it's almost... chaste. Or, it's chaste by James Goldwyn's standards. When he releases you, he gives you a warning look, like he expects you to make a smart remark. "I'll pick you up at seven tomorrow night, for our—"

"—outing. Yeah, I—"

"—date," he finishes, rather decisively. You blink. He scowls. You contemplate telling him that you haven't

done this before—the date thing, that is—but it seems like it’s exactly the sort of thing you might scare him by admitting. So instead, you nod, offer him a timid smile, and let yourself out of the car and into the house with the spare key Garen gave you months ago. It isn’t until nearly an hour later that you realize you left your book on the floor of James’ apartment. It doesn’t matter, though; you’ll see him tomorrow. You can get it then.

Chapter Twenty-Six: Part A

“A girl calls and asks, ‘Does it hurt very much to die?’ ‘Well, sweetheart,’ I tell her, ‘yes, but it hurts a lot more to keep living.’” –Chuck Palahniuk

184 days sober

The Goldwyn family home is a historical mansion in Ogelthorpe Square, with columns on the front porch and green painted shutters, and for as long as I've known them, the family has really only ever lived in half of it. The Savannah Historical Society gives weekday tours of the drawing room, the parlor—which is apparently something different from the drawing room, though they're indistinguishable to me—the formal dining room, the kitchen, one of the upstairs bedrooms, and—through the immaculately groomed garden—the carriage house and slave quarters. Six of the upstairs rooms—including Jamie's bedroom, his parents' room, and four guest bedrooms—are off-limits to the public, as are the updated kitchen, informal dining room, and living room. The rooms the family actually uses are blocked off by velvet ropes in front of the doors, which the tourists are surprisingly respectful of, though I'd credit most of that to the presence of eagle-eyed guides.

It's a weird house, even forgetting the fact that fanny-pack-wearing tourists are constantly trampling through it. The house is creepily symmetrical, which I've been told is typical of Regency architecture, but which mostly means that there are mirror images of everything; staircases that branch off in opposite directions, windows everywhere, doors that don't open because they're only there to make the building look “even.” There are bridges inside, connecting the front of the house to the back on the second floor, which surprised me into silence the first time Jamie led me over one to get to his room. The best parts, though, are the stone-cold ridiculous concessions to tourism, like the goddamn gift shop in the carriage house. I nearly pissed myself laughing the day I realized I could get postcards with pictures of Jamie's house on them.

Standing in front of the house while Jamie unlocks the front door, I'm not laughing. Not at all.

“Sorry, I don't think I asked, but... have you all been here before?” I say over my shoulder.

“Yes,” Tom says, at the same moment that both his kids say, “Not really.” Michelle doesn't say anything. Tom offers me a shrug and adds, “Well, it's been a while. My wife and I visit perhaps once a year or so, but the twins haven't been here since they were about thirteen. I guess they don't remember much about it.”

The front door swings open, and Jamie steps over the threshold. I follow him with my left hand rubbing slow, soothing circles between his shoulderblades. As much for his benefit as for everyone else's, I say, “Alright. So, uh, I can show you guys where the guest rooms are, if you wanna, you know, drop your bags somewhere. Jamie, do you want—”

Abruptly, I snap my mouth shut. I'd been about to ask if he wants me to take the fourth guest room or sleep with him in his bedroom, but I'm not sure I can bring that up in front of his aunt and uncle; to my knowledge, he's never discussed his bisexuality with anyone in his family. Including his parents, oh *fuck*. My hand tightens on the back of his shirt.

“My aunt and uncle in the room that overlooks the street, across the hall from my parents' room,” Jamie says. His voice is whisper soft, but I nod like he's given me a strict order. “My cousins in my wing. April in the room next to mine, Ethan across from her, I think. Would you mind putting my bag in my room, please?”

“Yeah, totally,” I say, taking the bag from his hand. I assume my lack of a room assignment—which would probably be the room across from his, next to the one he wants Ethan in—means that he wants me to stay with him; I'm all too happy to oblige. Even leaving him alone for the five minutes it'll take to drop everybody off in their own rooms will feel like torture. Reluctantly, I ask, “Are you going to stay here?”

He gestures down the long hallway towards the updated living room, the one the family actually uses. "I'll be in the family room, I think. I need to start making calls, don't I? The church, the people my father works with—I imagine my mother's boss is already aware, seeing as how she was brought to the hospital where she works. But I'll need to call their friends, too."

"Don't be crazy," I say quietly. "You don't need to do that—I'll handle it, I'll do whatever you need me to do. Just go, um—go wait in the family room, like you said. We'll all be in there soon, yeah?"

And fuck the audience, seriously; I kiss him high up on his cheek, close to his temple, before I nudge him off in the direction of the living room. He goes without comment, and I stride off towards the stairs, not bothering to see if I'm being followed. The first room we come to is the one Jamie asked me to have his aunt and uncle set up in. I announce this, and they step into the room; Michelle's eyes are shining with tears again, and Tom closes the door behind himself, so I doubt they'll be heading back downstairs immediately. I continue down the hall, over the weird indoor bridge, and come to a halt between the next set of rooms. I drag both sets of velvet ropes off to the side and show each of the Hall twins to the appropriate rooms. Ethan tosses his duffel bag on the foot of the bed and turns to face me expectantly, but April takes her time setting her suitcase down near the closet, her laptop bag on the desk, her purse on the bed.

I lug Jamie's suitcase into his bedroom, which is exactly the same as I remember it, even though I haven't been here in a year and a half. The first time I'd walked in here, I'd nearly choked laughing at the walls—thick, alternating vertical stripes of dark navy and charcoal gray. Jamie had rolled his eyes, pushed me down on the bed—covered in matching navy, gray, and white bedding—and grumbled that these had been his bedroom colors long before they were his high school colors. I think part of me has wondered if he might change the whole navy-and-gray combo to Columbia blue and white, but no, everything is still the same.

I set the suitcase down next to the closet, kick off my boots, and collapse onto the bed, burying my face in Jamie's pillow. Usually, it smells like him—his cologne, his girly shampoo—but right now, it just smells like whatever fabric refresher the cleaning service sprays in here once every other weekend to make sure the room doesn't smell stale in his absence. Either way, it's not comforting. I roll back to my feet and trudge out into the hall to meet the twins.

Ethan is standing in the middle of the hall, rocking on his heels so he can better peer down the hall; I guess it really has been a while since he's been here, if he's still curious about the place. April's cell phone is in her hand, and I can't help but stare right at it when it lights up with an incoming message. "If you start texting people in front of Jamie while he's planning his parents' wake, I will fucking smash that thing on the ground," I warn. "I'm serious. Either the phone stays up here, or you do, because now is really not the time."

She appears momentarily stunned, but when I don't waver, she retreats to the room just long enough to bury the phone back in her purse. The bitch has the gall to give me a sort of *so there, are you happy?* look. I ignore it and head straight to the stairs, leading the way back down through the foyer, past the tour-friendly rooms, and into the roped-off living room. Jamie is sitting on the sofa, Oxfords kicked off onto the carpet and his long legs tucked up under him. He has removed his suit jacket and carefully folded back the cuffs of the white button-down, but his waistcoat and tie are still in place, and his spine is still rod-straight, leaving him looking unbearably tense. There's a notepad open on his knee, and he is periodically adding names to a list.

"Busy already," April observes. "We were only gone a few minutes."

"I'm making a list of everyone I need to call," Jamie sighs. He adds another name to his paper, pauses, and glances around the room. "Where's Aunt Michelle?"

I clear my throat. "I, uh, think she needed a minute? I'm sure she and Tom'll be down soon. In the mean

time, though, is there something I can do for you? Anything I can get you?"

Jamie shakes his head, and he seems serious enough about it that I don't want to push the issue, so I fall silent and take a seat. I have been sitting on the couch for exactly three seconds when a tiny ball of dense, gray fur scurries out from under the coffee table and up onto my lap. I stare down at it. It stares back with bright green eyes almost the same color as mine. "Um," I say. "Jamie? There's a, uh—"

"I'd forgotten about you," Jamie says dully, reaching out with one hand to scoop the kitten off my thighs. "Are you still a vicious little cunt?"

The kitten lets out a piercing yowl and gouges its claws into the back of Jamie's hand. He curses and dumps it back on the couch. "Fucking—that's a yes, apparently. She's my—or, she... she *was* my mother's. She was a Christmas present from my daddy."

"She looks sweet. What's her name?" April asks.

"I can't remember. Lucifer, I suspect," Jamie says. He pauses, shrugs. "Mostly, I've just been calling her 'the cat.' We only spent three days together over winter holiday before I went back to New York, but she attacks me every time I'm in the room with her. Even tried sneaking into my bedroom during the middle of the night so that she might suffocate me in my sleep by sitting on my face."

"Sounds like some of your ex-girlfriends," I say without thinking. Ethan snorts, but tries to cover it with a cough.

Jamie smirks at me, but it's a cursory expression; I can tell he's getting no real amusement from my comment. "She's a bloodthirsty demon."

The kitten bats at my elbow, scrambles back up onto my lap, and flops over onto her back, bicycling all four of her limbs at me until I tickle her furry belly. She curls up around my hand, clamping it in place with her paws and nibbling at my fingers. The bites and scratches aren't actually breaking the skin; I can barely feel her. I glance up at Jamie. "Yeah, she's a real killer."

"She is," he grumbles, turning to a fresh page on the pad.

The kitten stops chewing on my fingers long enough to let out a pitiful mewl, and it hits me that she can't have been fed since last night, before George and Melissa's accident. She must be starving. I scoop her up with both hands and carry her out to the kitchen. Near the counter, there's a short, mahogany hutch with two stainless steel bowls on top of it. One has a few dregs of water, and the other is empty, except for a few sloppy smudges of food residue. The kitten squirms in my hands until I set her down on top of the hutch, then stares expectantly at me until I collect the dishes and clean them in the sink. Once I've dried them and refilled the water dish, I return them to their original location, then kneel down to check the cabinet below. There are several cans of wet cat food, each one sounding like it could come off the menu at a five-star restaurant, but probably smelling like horse shit. I grab one at random, crack the top, and dump it into the dish. The kitten pretty much face-plants into the bowl, scarfing up as much food as she can at one time. I pet the back of her neck, and she flicks her tail at me, but doesn't stop eating. Her single-minded dedication to chowing down is almost as impressive as Omelette's.

Fuck. *Omelette*. My dog, who's waiting in my house, with my roommate, my *life* back in New York. A life that, as of right now, is completely disconnected from what's happening here in Georgia.

I fumble my phone out of my pocket; it's still powered down from the flight here, and I wait impatiently for it to start up. The moment the main screen is available, I dial Travis' number, but it goes straight to voicemail. Of course it does—he's still in class now. When his inbox greeting finally ends and the beep sounds, I clear my throat and say, "Hey, Trav. It's me. I need you to call me back the second you get this. I'm, uh—I'm in Georgia right now, with Jamie. Something happened. I don't really want to say much more in a message, but it's, uh... look, just call me back as soon as you get this, okay?" I let the silence hang

there for a minute, and then add, in a quiet, hoarse tone, “I love you, T.”

After hanging up, I check my watch. It’s after seven thirty, so I’m betting that Ben expected me to get home from MLEP two hours ago. I’m sort of surprised he hasn’t called already. I dial his number, and he picks up on the fourth ring.

“Yeah?” he says dully.

I sink down onto the kitchen floor and lean back against the refrigerator door, closing my eyes and letting my head loll back. “Hey. I kind of need to talk to you about something. Are you doing—like, are you busy right now? Do you have time to talk?”

I can hear what might be fabric shifting on the other end of the line, like Ben is lying down on the living room couch. “Well, I was kind of supposed to be on a date right now,” he says, and oh, fuck, fuck, *fuck*. “But, seeing as how your best friend has made the decision to blow me off without so much as a word of explanation... yes, Garen. I do indeed have time to talk.”

“That’s not what—he’s not blowing you off. I swear he’s not, and I know that sounds dumb, because he’s with me right now instead of, you know, on a date with you, but he’s not—”

“Hang on, he’s with *you*?” Ben interrupts. I can’t make myself speak quickly enough to diffuse his quickly growing anger before he continues, “So, is that what this phone call’s about? You’re the mediator who needs to find a tactful way of saying, ‘*he only asked you out because you were blue-balling him yesterday morning, but then you sucked him off that afternoon, so it’s not like he had to bother showing up tonight.*’ I don’t—”

“We’re in Georgia,” I interrupt. My tactfulness is gone; I’ve lost all ability to do anything other than shove the raw and awful words out of my throat as quickly as I can. “Jamie and I, both of us. He wanted to be in New York—he *was*, he was going to take you out tonight, I swear, but he had to—his parents are dead, Ben. Both of them. His aunt and uncle came to his place this morning to tell him. He called me, I left school, and we got on a plane. He would’ve picked you up, but he—he’s here, now. He’s in Georgia.”

As quickly as the anger sparked to life in Ben, it’s gone again. There is a long moment of absolute silence. I don’t do well with silence; I shove a finger in my mouth and start gnawing on my fingernail to stop myself from babbling. Finally, Ben says, “How?”

“Car accident,” I say. “They were both dead before they even got to the hospital. I-It’s just him now, just James.”

“Fuck,” Ben mutters. His voice is a little muffled, like maybe he’s rubbing a distracted hand over his face. “How’s he handling it?”

“Same way he handles everything, honestly,” I say. “He’s in the other room right now, making a list of everyone he needs to call. Probably fucking alphabetical. He was on the in-flight Wi-Fi the whole way down here, emailing the pastor from his church here to arrange a suitable time for the service, picking out flowers, writing th-their fucking obituaries, working things out with the people who work here to make sure the house is clear for calling hours the next few days. He’s handling it by *handling it*.”

“When’s the funeral?” Ben asks.

I shrug, even though he can’t see. “No funeral. Not, you know, graveside, anyway. Their... *bodies* are being donated to science. Melissa—Jamie’s mom was a doctor, so I guess it was important to her. There isn’t going to be a funeral, just some sort of religious service at the church this Saturday evening, then visiting hours at the home that night and all day on Sunday.”

“Does he—” Ben stops, clears his throat, and tries again, “Travis and I can fly down. If he wants—I don’t

know, I've never—I know that neither of us met his parents, but if James needs... you know, if he wants us there, we will be."

I don't miss the careful pluralization, like he's afraid of offering up just himself. And I definitely don't miss the fact that he's making the offer in spite of the fact that neither he nor Travis can really afford to drop the money for a sudden flight to Savannah. "You don't have to do that. I know that Jamie, uh... I think he's going to want to talk to you guys, you know, separately. Away from other people. He and Travis are friends, and you and him... you've got—"

"Yeah, I know," he says quickly.

"Yeah," I echo. "So, I think he'll just want to see you when he gets back? There are going to be so many people in and out of here over the next few days, and I don't think he'll have much time to really sit down with anyone, so you guys should just... stay where you are. And we'll both see you back in New—"

My sentence breaks off the moment Jamie appears in the kitchen doorway. I blink up at him. He blinks back. In my ear, Ben says, "Garen, you still there?"

"Yeah, I'm here," I say. "Sorry, Jamie just walked in."

"Who are you talking to?" Jamie asks.

"Ben."

Jamie freezes, and then it's a pileup of thoughts playing out in his expression: realizing that he forgot about the date, that he didn't call, that Ben must have thought he was being stood up. Slowly, he holds out his hand. "May I speak to him, please?"

I scramble to my feet and pass him the phone, but don't step back after doing so. Instead, I wrap my arms around his waist and bury my face in the front of his shirt. Right above my head, he says, "I should have called and told you I wouldn't be able to make our date. I'm sorry. That was—"

"Shut up, that's not--*James*," I hear Ben say. "Look, I'm sure it would've been a great date or whatever, but that's the last thing I want you to be thinking about right now. I don't—how are you?"

"I'm fine," Jamie says at once. And I can listen to him talk, I can listen to him try to sound calm, but I can't listen to him lie. I tilt my head up to kiss him quickly on the lips, and then I slip past him, back into the living room. Michelle and Tom are still missing, and the twins are still sitting in two of the squashy armchairs.

I sink onto the couch and start running through the list of people Jamie needs to call. Shit, there are at least fifty names and numbers here—the price of being part of Savannah's high society, I guess. I debate digging Jamie's phone out of his jacket pocket, since he's on mine, and starting to make the calls on his behalf, but I decide to wait; I don't know the details of the service yet, or what he'd want me to say. Instead, I sit there uselessly, silently.

"Zooey," Jamie says when he returns to the living room less than five minutes later. "The cat's name is Zooey. There's a note on the fridge about a vet appointment she had last week."

"What are you going to do with her?" I ask. "I mean, she's yours now, right? So, is she going to come to New York with you?" Jamie glares down at the kitten; he's probably picturing her sharpening her claws on his leather couch. Quickly, I amend, "I'm sure you could find somebody to adopt her instead. She's gotta be a purebred something—"

"She's a Russian Blue," April interrupts, reaching out to scratch Zooey under the chin. Zooey stretches and purrs; April's hand goes to her pocket, like she's looking for the phone I made her leave upstairs. The

fuck was she gonna do, take a picture of somebody else's kitten purring? That's what kittens *do*. I'm liking April less and less by the second, especially when she adds, "She's so cute. If you really don't want her, I'll take her." She scoops up the kitten and raises her high over her head, beaming up at her. She's so happy, I have to wonder if she even gives a fuck that the cat's only homeless because Jamie's mom is dead.

I shove my hands into my pockets so that no one will see me clenching them into fists.

"No," Jamie says sharply. For a minute, I think he's trying to call me off before I've even opened my mouth, but then he strides across the room and takes Zooey right out of April's hands. Both April and Zooey look *pissed*, and the kitten gives a little wriggle, like she's contemplating the idea of extending her claws and going right for Jamie's face. He either doesn't notice it or intentionally ignores it, instead choosing to cradle her to his chest and turn towards the door again. "She was my momma's cat, which means she's mine now. She's going to come live with me, in New York."

"You don't even *like* her," April snaps. "You called her a demon like, five minutes ago. You should let me—"

"*You* should shut the fuck up," I interrupt, "'cause seriously, now is not the time. And if you can't have some fucking respect for your cousin right now, I swear, I will send you to your room like you're a goddamn toddler. So knock it. The fuck. Off."

April folds her arms over her chest. "I just want to know—"

"April, shut up, James isn't going to give you the cat," Ethan says. It's the first time I've heard him speak; he has the deep, awkwardly slow voice of a guy who spends probably ninety percent of his time ripping bong hits in a frat house. "Besides, you can't have a cat in your dorm room anyway."

April opens her mouth to retort, but nothing comes out; Michelle and Tom have stepped into the room. A moment of silence drags out, and finally, April says, "Hey, Mom. How are you?"

"I'll be okay," Michelle says around a thoroughly unconvincing, watery smile. She turns to face Jamie. "We should discuss the details of the funeral arrangements."

Jamie ducks his head and steps past her to dump Zooey on the couch and retrieve his laptop bag from next to it. He opens his Macbook and carefully sets it down on the coffee table, bringing up all of the emails and orders he'd been organizing the entire flight down. "I've handled it," he says quietly. "Pastor Milton will be giving the service at our church this Saturday at twelve o'clock. I've arranged to have flowers brought in for it. I expect people will expect the house to be open for calling hours this weekend, so I was thinking it would make sense to have that happen on Saturday night and Sunday, after church."

"You don't want people to come by at all tomorrow night?" Tom asks.

Jamie shakes his head and admits, "I thought I might ask the Chandlers over for dinner. They were my parents' best friends, and I've been friends with their three girls my whole life. It seemed appropriate that they should come by separately."

"Of course," Michelle says. She pauses, clears her throat, and says, very carefully, "I was thinking I might go downtown to speak to the officers who processed the scene of the accident. I'd... I'd like to know more about what happened. You're welcome to come with me, if you'd like, but I would understand completely if you thought it might be too upsetting. You can stay here."

"No, I, ah..." Jamie clears his throat, too. He looks so much like his aunt when he does it, so much like his mother. I look away. "I'd like to go. But there's a long list of people I need to inform of the service, and I think I should start—"

"No," I interrupt. Five pairs of eyes turn to me. "I'll call everyone. Just give me the names, numbers, and all the details you want me to share, and I'll do it."

"You really don't have to do that. They're my parents. It's my responsibility to take care of things like—"

"Yeah, well, it's my responsibility to take care of *you*," I say. "So, shut up and let me see the list."

The Halls look a little taken aback by that, but Jamie gives me another of those strained, meaningless smiles and shows me all the paperwork. I am given specific instructions not to call Marcus and Robin Chandler, because Jamie thinks it would be wrong for anyone but him to make that call. Once that's cleared away, his aunt and uncle step out of the living room, heading for the front door. Jamie lingers long enough to let me pull him into another tight hug. "Thank you," he says.

"Love you," is my reply, but my face is pressed to his shoulder, so it comes out weird.

"Of course," he says. He leans back, but not out of my arms, and kisses me firmly on the mouth before he releases me and disappears after Michelle.

When I turn back around, April and Ethan are both staring at me. I set my jaw, daring them to comment, and I guess April is more daring than I'd have guessed, because she says, "I didn't realize you were his boyfriend."

"I'm not," I say. "I'm his best friend. Have been since we were fourteen. Now, are either of you planning to help me make these calls, or what?"

The minute of hesitation tells me everything I need to know. Still, April says, "I'm not sure I can. It's hard. Melissa was our aunt, you know."

Yeah, your aunt who you never fucking saw, if your reaction to the house was any indication, I want to say. *Stop pretending you're in mourning, when you're clearly too self-absorbed to even give a damn about helping Jamie with this*. But I don't know them well enough to scream at them just yet, and I don't want to do anything that might cause problems for my friend. I settle onto the couch—Zooey immediately crawls back onto my lap and starts kneading her claws into the khaki material of the school uniform I still haven't changed out of—and dial the number for the first name on the list. April and Ethan are quick to escape, probably so they won't have to contribute to the process at all. The phone only rings twice before getting picked up.

"Hello?" says the voice on the other end.

"Hello, may I please speak to—" I check the list, "—Robert Cooper?"

"Speaking," says the man, voice slow and cautious, like he thinks I'm a telemarketer.

I drag my palm over my too-short hair. "My name is Garen Anderson, I'm calling on behalf of the Goldwyn family." Not like there's much of it left anyway. "James Goldwyn, I guess. Um." How the fuck am I supposed to say this? In the end, I just blurt out, "George and Melissa were killed in a car accident last night."

"Oh, Lord," Robert Cooper says softly. "Are you serious?"

No, asshole, I'm fuckin' joking, I want to snap. Instead, I grit my teeth for half a second, swallow, and say, "Unfortunately, yes, I'm serious. There's going to be a memorial service this Saturday at noon, at the First Baptist Church, on Bull Street. I'm sure your attendance would mean a lot to the family."

I'm sure of no such thing, but what else am I supposed to say? It's hard enough to piece together the right words for even this part of the phone call, and it gets harder and harder with every name on that list. I dial

number after number after number, and I give the same speech each time, but I can barely even feel my lips moving. For all I know, I could be saying--

What's up? I'm Garen. Jamie's parents are dead.

Hey, how's it going? Pretty shitty over here, I guess, 'cause Jamie's parents are dead.

Hi. I've never spoken to you in my fucking life, but my best friend's parents are dead, and now I need to pretend to give a fuck about your dumbshit reaction to it, when all I want to do is sit with him and hold him and never let him go.

But every time someone picks up, the same speech trips off my tongue, over and over, and finally, hours later, I can set the phone down and just shake.

Thirty seconds pass, and then my phone starts ringing. I look down at it—Travis' face is lighting up my caller ID, some silly, adorable picture I'd taken of him sticking his tongue out at me during *Grease* rehearsals months ago. I snatch up the phone and almost trip over my own feet in my haste to get out of the house and into the back garden. Even after sunset, it's still so much warmer here than in New York, and the flowers that line the yard are just coming into bloom. The very center of the garden is home to a huge, marble fountain that Jamie and I used to get drunk and play in during summer vacations here. I sit down on the edge of it and answer the call.

"I just got your message," Travis says before I can even get a greeting out. "What happened? Why are you guys in Georgia?"

I mean to tell him. I really do. But I hear his voice, and I open my mouth to say the words, and I fall apart. I hunch over so that I can bury my face against my knees in the hope of muffling the gasps that are coming out of my mouth now, but I must not be doing a great job, because Travis says, more than a little panicked, "Garen? Are you—Garen, baby, what's going on? Are you okay? Is James okay? I need you to give me something to go on."

James. James. This is about James, not me. I cling to that thought, swallow down the next pathetic sob that tries to work its way out of my throat, and lift my face enough to say, "James and I are fine. It's not—it's his parents. They were in a car accident, and now they're dead, and I can't—I don't know w-what to— Travis, his parents are *dead*."

"They're... dead," Travis echoes, like I fucking stuttered or something. "Both of them."

"Yeah," I croak.

"And he—I don't even know what to say. The only thing I can think is, 'is he okay,' but of course he's not o-fucking-kay. But I don't—I want to fly down," he says. "I want to be there for you, both of you."

I choke out a laugh. "That's what Ben said, too. I talked to him earlier, when I couldn't reach you at first. He said you guys would come down here if we needed it, but um... I don't think you should. I don't think that's a good idea."

"Fuck that. It's the *only* idea," Travis argues. "I want to see you. I want—"

"If I see you, I'm going to fucking lose it," I interrupt. "If I let you come here, you're going to try to take care of me, and that's not—I've got to be there for Jamie right now. That's more important than how I feel. I cared about George and Melissa, and it hurts that they're gone, but they were *his* family. He comes first. You make me vulnerable, and I can't afford that. Not now."

I listen to him very slowly inhale and exhale. It's so quiet around him, but his classes only ended maybe fifteen minutes ago, so I don't think he's left the city yet. He must be sitting in his car, probably still in the

second parking garage space Jamie's apartment entitles him to, where he parks it every night after he drives in for class. Finally, he says, "Your parents were friends with Mr. and Mrs. Goldwyn, I assume. Are they flying down for the funeral?"

The question hits me like a fist to the face. In fact, I'd *rather* feel a fist to the face than have to whisper out the truth, which is, "Oh, fuck. I didn't even—I forgot. I forgot to call them. Everybody on that fucking list, and I couldn't even remember to call my own parents. Jamie's parents are dead, and I can't even remember to call mine, what the fuck kind of—"

"Garen," Travis says sharply, "stop that. You've got a thousand different things to think about right now, you're not going to beat yourself up for forgetting to make a single phone call. And you don't have to, alright? I'll call them. I've still got Bill's number, and he can talk to Marian. It's fine. I'll ask them to text you their flight info so you know when to expect them, and they're going to come help you and Jamie both. Okay?"

I nod, even though he can't see it. He knows me well enough to know what I'm doing, though, because he continues, "I want you to be safe, G. If you—this is a lot of pressure. It's so much to deal with, too much, and if you start to feel like you're drowning, you need to talk to me."

Translation? *Don't you dare let this be the reason you start drinking again, even though it feels like such a good reason.*

"I will," I promise.

"I believe you," he says simply, and that counts for so much more than he knows. "And if you decide you want me to come down after all, all you've gotta do is call me. I'll leave my phone on all the time, no matter where I am or what I'm doing. You change your mind, I get on a plane. Do you hear me?"

"I hear you," I murmur. "Thanks. I should, um... I'm going to go wait for Jamie. He and his aunt went to go talk to some people who were at the scene of the accident, I guess, and he'll be back soon. I want to be waiting for him when he gets here."

"Yeah, of course. Do whatever you need to do," Travis says. "Call me again when you have the time, though? Even if it's just, you know, to check in tomorrow, or whatever." Another nod he doesn't see. "I love you."

The last time he said those words to me was in a suicide note that I made him tear to pieces. I hadn't been sure, until right now, that I would ever hear him say it again. "I love you, too," I say thickly. "Can you hug Omelette for me when you get home?"

He laughs quietly. "Of course. Goodnight, G."

I stuff my phone back into my pocket and go back into the house to wait. Both of the Hall kids are sitting on the couch, watching a rerun of some MTV show about internet predators or whatever. April has clearly gone up to her room to retrieve the phone I made her leave in her purse, because she's texting away. I kind of want to smash the phone on principle, but I've already called everyone who needs to know about the service on Saturday, and Jamie's not in the room, so I don't technically have anything to complain about. I do, however, pluck Zooey off April's lap and curl up with her in one of the armchairs, because fuck April, seriously.

When Michelle, Tom, and Jamie return ten minutes later, the first thing Jamie does is come into the living room to collect his suit jacket and laptop bag. He doesn't look anyone in the eye as he says, "I'm going to go to bed. I'll see y'all in the morning," but the moment he reaches the door, he glances back for half a second, just long enough to catch my eye.

I abandon Zooey on the chair and bolt after him, calling over my shoulder, "Yeah, same. Night."

James is moving quickly enough that I don't actually catch up to him until we reach his bedroom. He dumps the laptop bag on his desk and strides over to the closet to hang up the jacket. He hoists his suitcase up onto the bed and unzips it, digging into it and starting to unpack. Every single item, already perfectly folded, is unfolded, shaken out, and placed in the closet, either on a hanger or refolded into one of the many drawers set along the right side of the closet.

"Jamie," I say quietly. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he says.

He is not fine. He reaches the end of his clothes, then moves on to mine. There are four basically identical black v-necks, already folded and ready to be moved to the dresser. He unfolds all four of them, smooths them out two-by-two on the bedspread, and stares down at them for nearly a full minute before picking up the bottom-left shirt and switching it with the top-left shirt. Another minute of staring. He flips the top-left shirt over and folds the sides in, sleeves in, bottom up, just like it would be on a store shelf. He turns it right side up, then repeats the process on the top-right shirt, the bottom-left shirt, and finally the bottom-right. He stacks them in that order, pauses, unstacks them, and restacks them the opposite way. Only then does it hit me that he's trying to organize them by color, even though the fading between the oldest shirt and the newest is barely noticeable. They're all black, but that doesn't seem to matter to him. He moves the shirts to the top drawer, and I think that's going to be it. I think he's done.

He's not.

He retrieves the brown leather toiletry bag from his suitcase, packs the suitcase away in the closet, and brings the leather bag to his connected bathroom. If I were the one unpacking, I'd just dump everything in the sink and fish things out as I needed them. But this is Jamie; obsessive, perfectionist, maybe-a-little-bit-crazy Jamie. I sit down on the end of the bed; he sits right down on his bathroom floor and takes the items out one by one, lining them up on the rim of the tub. Every few items, he needs to shift everything down a few inches to make a special space for a particular item.

Body wash, contacts solution, conditioner, deodorant, mouthwash, shampoo. He hesitates. The body wash gets moved three inches to the left to make room for his cologne. The last two items are taken down, replaced with face wash and hair product, then returned to the end of the line. He looks at the items, then back into the bag, then back at the items. He takes out his razor and carefully sets it in the small space between the mouthwash and shampoo. He adds his shaving cream to the end of the line, then his toothbrush, then his toothpaste.

Finally, he breathes.

"Jamie," I repeat.

He looks over his shoulder at me and presses his lips together in a thin line for a few seconds before he says hoarsely, "Yeah. I just wanted to unpack before bed."

I very pointedly do not mention the fact that there's unpacking, and then there's taking ten minutes to alphabetize your bathroom items. Instead, I say, "Talk to me."

He puts the bag in the cabinet under the sink and stands up, snatching his toothbrush and toothpaste off the end of the line. I sigh and join him in the bathroom, retrieving one of the spare, unopened toothbrushes I know he keeps in the medicine cabinet. We get ready for bed in utter silence, and it's only once the lights are off and we're both tucked up under the covers that he takes a deep breath, rolls onto his side to face me, and says, "Aunt Michelle and I asked what caused the accident."

"And?" I say, reaching out to brush his hair off his forehead.

"Some... *kid*. Some seventeen-year-old kid drove right into the side of their car while trying to pass them on the freeway. Sent them into the shoulder, through the guardrail, right off the edge of the road," Jamie whispers. "They said my mama probably died when they hit the guardrail, because she was already gone before anyone got to her. Even the people who pulled over to try to help before the ambulance got there. My daddy was driving, and he, ah... he died later. In the ambulance."

"Did the other driver survive?" I ask. I honestly don't know which answer I'm hoping for.

I can barely see Jamie's blank face in the darkness, but I can see that he nods. "Yes. They had to take him to the hospital for some cuts and bruises, some airbag burns, a bit of whiplash. But he... he's going to be fine."

"But I don't—why did he hit them in the first place?" I ask. "How could he not have seen them if he'd just been passing them?"

Jamie is silent for a long while. Long enough for me to have a horrible moment of realization right before he finally says, "He'd been smoking up. The bowl was still hot when the police arrived and found it on the passenger side floor of his car."

My hand goes still in his hair. I have no idea what to say to him. Worse than that, I have no idea how to stave off the sudden guilt that's threatening to crush me. How many times had I driven after I'd been drinking or getting high? For fuck's sake, how many times had I used my knee on the steering wheel because I needed both hands to smoke a bowl while I was actively driving down the street? And how many times has Jamie been in the car with me while it happened, not batting an eye over it?

He's remembering it now, I can tell he is. He's thinking of every time we did exactly the same thing that got his parents killed; he's thinking of every person we could have killed, if luck hadn't been on our side on that particular day. And for once, it wasn't my stoned mistake that ruined someone's life, but I can't stop myself from whispering, "I'm sorry."

Jamie doesn't say a single word. He just shifts closer, burrows into the circle of my arms, and cries.

185 days sober

I wake up alone. Well, sort of alone—Zooey is curled up next to me on the bed, her body half-obscuring a folded note with my name on it. I wiggle it out from under her and flip it open. *Garen*, Jamie has written in neat script. *It occurred to me a moment ago that you don't have anything here to wear to the service tomorrow. Here's the name and address of my tailor in town, as well as a car service that can take you there. If you'd like to meet me after you've taken care of that, I'm taking a drive out to the stables to see the horses. You know the address. Love, Jamie.* Below that, he has scrawled in a much less neat hand, *P.S. The fucking cat bit me again. Think Travis would let you adopt her? I suspect that she would be a delicious snack for... I mean, a true friend for Omelette.*

"Hey. You have no idea how close you are to becoming puppy chow," I say to Zooey, poking her in the side. She purrs. Really, no sense of danger.

By the time I shower and get dressed—in the most faded black v-neck and a pair of too-tight jeans that I left here before my first senior year—it's nearly eleven, but when I come down to the kitchen, I find that both the Hall twins are still in their sleep clothes.

"Good morning," I say, heading straight for the coffee pot, which is thankfully already full.

"Hello," April says, drawing the word out for too long, at the same time that Ethan says, "Oh, hi there."

It's weird enough that for a second, I assume it means they were just talking about me. Then I glance

over my shoulder to find them both staring right at the skintight denim over my ass. And for the first time in the twenty-four hours since we've met, it hits me: this is Ethan motherfucking Hall. This is the soccer-star *douchebag* who took Ben's virginity after prayer group, or whatever. I almost snort up a mouthful of coffee, which is enough to get both twins' eyes back on my face.

I wave them off. "Sorry." I stop to cough. "Sorry, it's just, uh—you guys are from Lakewood, right?"

"How'd you know that?" April asks, brow furrowed.

"I lived there for about a year," I say. "Guess I must've seen you around. Or maybe we have, uh... mutual friends, or something."

Ethan tilts his head to the side. "Who'd you hang out with?"

"Look, I'm going into town," I say. "I need a suit for tomorrow afternoon. Knowing Jamie, he'd like me to dress nicely for dinner with his parents' friends tonight, too, and probably Sunday, during the calling hours. So, I've gotta go buy some stuff, and then I'm gonna go meet him at the stables where he boards his horses. Do either of you want to come along?"

This turns out to be the worst question I could've asked, because they both say yes. I spend the greater part of the afternoon waiting around for alterations to be made to a plain black suit, then letting April drag her brother and me from store to store. She claims to be searching for something suitable to wear to the service, but sometime after the fourth store, Ethan mutters to me that she has at least three black dresses back at the house.

Ethan isn't any better company. I'm pretty sure he wants to hit on me, but isn't entirely sure that the one kiss he witnessed between me and Jamie means that I'm actually into dudes. He keeps trying to brag about his life back in Connecticut, but he's bragging about all the dumbest shit. He goes to *UConn*, but I've banged guys who've ended up at every Ivy League school except Harvard. He plays *soccer*, but I spent my entire high school career pounding his cousin, the captain of the lacrosse team. He drives an *Audi*, but big fucking deal, I drive a classic Ferrari. He's in a *fraternity*, but do I look like the kind of guy who's impressed by Greek life? The whole time he's dropping these little bits of information, he keeps "casually" bumping into me, nudging my knee with his while we sit outside his sister's dressing room.

I'm about five seconds away from telling him to get the fuck away from me when my phone rings. Thank god. I answer it immediately. "Yeah, hi?"

"Hi," Jamie says. "Did you get my note?"

"Yes. I'm in town right now. Ethan and I already got our suits, but April's still dragging her fuckin' feet on finding a new dress—"

"I like this one," April announces, stepping out of the dressing room. Her dress is definitely not for the service tomorrow; it's short, tight, and bright turquoise. She turns her ass to me, gives a little wriggle, and looks over her shoulder. "Garen, what do you think?"

I look at her, then at her ass. She shimmies again. To Jamie, I say, "Dude, I think she's trying to get on my dick. What do I do?"

Jamie chuckles. "I'm about to take Boxer out for a ride. Would you like me to saddle up one of the others and wait for you?"

"Yes, please," I say, scrambling to my feet. "I'm going to leave now. Your cousins can take the car back to the house, I'll get a cab to the stables. See you in like, twenty minutes."

My plan falls to shit about four seconds after I hang up the phone. Both the twins bitch until I agree to let

them come along, and by the time April has changed into her own clothes and bought her new haul, it actually ends up taking closer to forty minutes to get to the stables. Jamie is already in the paddock with Boxer, his sleek brown Holsteiner. One of the stable assistants is off to the side, waiting with Nugget, the gray Trakehner I usually get to ride when I'm in town.

When he sees me, Jamie raises one hand in a brief wave and says, "Get changed and come back out here."

I jog into the stables and find my way to the room where helmets and riding boots are stashed away. There's no way I can ride in the jeans I'm wearing now without permanently damaging my balls, so I have to hunt down some of Jamie's spare riding breeches. Once I'm suitably dressed, I head back out to the paddock to take control of Nugget from the stable hand. I pull myself up onto the horse—Jamie watches me carefully, probably just so he can laugh at me if I tumble off like I did when I first tried it at age fifteen—and take her around the perimeter of the paddock at a walk, just to get a feel for riding again. I've barely completed my first circuit when April says, "I want to ride, too."

"Such a shame that I'm not going to let you touch any of my horses, isn't it?" Jamie says mildly, and I duck my head to hide a smile.

"Why not?" April demands.

"Because I'm riding Boxer, Garen's got Nugget, and unless you've got a talent for racing that I'm unaware of, there's no way in hell I'm letting you on either of the Thoroughbreds."

April crosses her arms, glowers at him, and repeats, "Why *not*?"

"Because these horses are collectively worth about one million dollars, and I'm not about to entrust any of them to the care of a girl who believes that a sundress and a pair of pumps are appropriate riding attire," Jamie says.

I expect April to continue arguing her point, but she just huffs and leans back against the fence. On my third circle of the paddock, I ride past the twins just in time to hear Ethan mutter to his sister, "I heard Mom say Aunt Melissa and Uncle George left *everything* to him. House, vacation home, horses, boat, all their savings. Situation sucks and all, but suddenly being worth twenty-five million is a pretty nice silver lining."

"I'd totally trade our parents for that much," April whispers back, and Ethan laughs in agreement.

"Hey, Jamie?" I call. "How hard would it be to train a horse to kick somebody in the face?"

Ethan shoots me a wary look, and I wish I could set him on fire with my returning glare. Jamie might not hear my question, but it's a lot more likely that he intentionally ignores me. For the next hour, he runs Boxer through the jumping course over and over again. I can't ride nearly well enough to handle obstacles, so I stick to circling the paddock on Nugget. She's probably bored as fuck—god knows I kind of am—but I think Jamie would stab my eyes out with a hoof pick if I tried to jump anything bigger than a pebble.

Once Jamie and Boxer have thoroughly exhausted themselves, I find myself being directed towards the building attached to the stables instead of to the riding stalls themselves. Jamie says, "You can wait along the far side of the building, if you'd like. I'll have one of the stable hands help me brush down the horses, and I'll meet you out here in a bit."

I want to offer to help, but I've got no idea how to take all the tack off the horses, so I lead the Halls to the collection of picnic tables behind the stables. Within seconds of sitting down, both of them are on their phones. Guess that means conversation is out of the question, though I can't say I'm disappointed by this. We're far enough away from the barn that I don't think I'll be in danger of setting us all on fire if I

smoke, so I pull a pack of cigarettes out of the pocket of my discarded jacket and light up.

"Oh, thank god," April says immediately, diving for her purse. "I wasn't sure if I'd be allowed to smoke around here."

She takes a Newport from a pack in her purse, but doesn't search out a lighter. I might be a faggot, but I'm still a guy, and I still know my cues; I flick my Zippo and offer her the flame. She leans into it, then winks at me through her puff of smoke. I shut the lighter and look away.

Upon taking a seat, Ethan had emptied his pockets. On the table between us are his phone, a pack of gum, and what I guess are his car keys, but it's hard to be sure. There's definitely a key or two present, but most of the rest of the fob is taken up by several rings. Actual rings, possibly *engagement* rings, which is too creepy to contemplate. I want to ask, but I'm not sure I want to know.

"We shouldn't stick around here much longer," Jamie announces when he joins us several minutes later. "My guests will be coming by the house at around six, and I'll need to shower and dress before then."

"Who are the guests, again?" Ethan asks, barely looking up from his phone.

"Robin and Marcus Chandler, my parents' closest friends. And they'll be bringing their three daughters; Addison, Morgan, and Darcy."

"Any of 'em hot?" Ethan asks. I squint at him; I'd assumed he was playing exclusively on my team, not Jamie's.

"Morgan is married and will likely be bringing her husband, Austin," Jamie says, "Darcy has been dating the same boy for about three years."

Ethan raises his eyebrows. "And the other one? Is she hot?"

Jamie's own brow twitches in response. "Incredibly. She's also been my girlfriend on and off since my sophomore year of high school."

"Well, are you on or off right now?" Ethan asks. He's wearing a sly smile that he probably thinks is cute, but is actually just sort of slimy.

Jamie braces an elbow on the picnic table and leans forward. "Off, for about a year now, but that's irrelevant. You and I will have to have words, if I find out that you've put your hands on another person I care about."

Ethan's forehead creases in confusion. "*Another* person?"

Oh, great. Because now is the time to have our big '*raise your hand if you've fucked Ben McCutcheon, oh wait, that's every guy at this table*' conversation. In an effort to salvage the situation, I scoop up the key ring on the table between us and say, "Gotta ask, man. What's with the jewelry collection?"

"What—oh, that." Ethan laughs a little awkwardly. "That's, uh—they're, you know, trophies, I guess?" I stare at him. He shrugs. "I went to a Catholic high school, and between there and church, most of the girls I've gotten on have been virgins. And a lot of them wear these purity rings. So, it's... you know, I take 'em after I bang the chicks. Like, a souvenir."

"Trophies," Jamie repeats.

"Yeah."

"Like a serial killer," I say. Ethan frowns.

Jamie reaches over and takes the key ring out of my hands. He flips carefully through them; most of them are pretty girly, with tiny gemstones, delicate bands, engraved hearts and rosebuds. But Jamie's hands falter on one of them--a thick steel band circled by a pattern that I'm guessing is supposed to be a crown of thorns, filled in with black enamel. Just below the thorns, there's an engraving of the words "true love waits" and a bible verse. It's unmistakably a man's ring.

"Which one was first?" Jamie asks. It isn't as if he doesn't know, and it isn't as if he's being subtle; he slips the tip of his finger into the ring and gives it a little twirl.

April snickers. Ethan gives an aborted half-gesture towards the key ring. "Uh, that one, I guess. The one you're touching."

"Hmm," Jamie says. He twirls the ring again. For a moment, I think that's going to be it, but then he says, oh so casually, "Does he know you have this?"

Silence. Ethan clears his throat. "What?"

"Does the gentleman to whom this ring belongs know that you have it?" Jamie asks. "It's not exactly a dainty piece of jewelry, and I'm not an idiot. This obviously once belonged to a man, and yet, I don't recall you ever mentioning that you were bisexual." Ethan says nothing. Jamie hums a little. "Though, in fairness, I haven't been particularly forthcoming about the same."

April chokes on a puff from her cigarette. When she finally finishes hacking up half a lung, she gasps out, "I guess that finally gives me a real answer on whether or not you and your 'friend' here are really a couple."

"I told you, we're not a couple. Never have been," I say.

"But you're bi, too, right?" she says, with a heavy air of *isn't every guy bi these days?*

"Nope," I say shortly. "I bat exclusively for the boys' team."

She looks pissed; Ethan looks intrigued. I roll my eyes and kick at the dirt.

"Tell me about him," Jamie says. I look over at him, but he's staring hard at his cousin's face. When Ethan still doesn't speak, Jamie rattles the keys at him. "If the rest of these rings are any indication, you switched back to ladies after him, so come on. Tell me what he was like."

I nudge Jamie's foot under the table, but he kicks me back, hard. Ethan scowls and ducks his head. "He was nobody. Just some kid who was in our church youth group when we were in high school."

"What was he like?" Jamie asks April now. She lights up at being included in the question; clearly, she does not share her twin's hesitation to gossip.

"Oh my god, he was so *weird*," she gushes. "Seriously, we all had this big bet going on for like, three years about whether or not he was autistic, because he had pretty much zero social skills. He hardly ever spoke to any of us, and when he did, he used to have this really pronounced stutter. Like, I couldn't even understand him for the first year I knew him, until he got to high school and his broke-ass family finally shelled out for speech therapy, except now he speaks in this creepy monotone, like a fucking robot. It's hilarious."

My hands are shaking almost too much for me to light another cigarette. Even after all the conversations I've had with Evelyn McCall and Joss Pryce, I've never wanted to punch a woman as much as I want to punch April right now.

I guess now that the ice is broken, Ethan is fine to contribute, because he groans, “Why do we even need to talk about him? He was just this loser I pity-fucked a couple of times. Our parents used to be friendly, so they made him give me and April rides home from youth group. She blew it off a couple times, so I dunno, we fucked around some. He sucked me off once or twice, I fucked him a couple times. It wasn’t a big deal. It wasn’t even good sex, alright? He was a fuckin’ freak, and he wasn’t even *hot*. A skinny emo kid with no friends. Pathetic. He was lucky I even gave him the time of day.”

“And I—” Jamie has to break off for a moment, because his voice is trembling. I force myself to glance at him, and he appears to be just barely restraining himself from climbing over the table and beating his cousin senseless. It’s not a look I’m unfamiliar with. He clears his throat, and begins again, “And I would wager that you made sure he knew that, didn’t you? Probably took care to tell him it to his face, right?”

Ethan snorts. “Wouldn’t you? I mean, come on. You fuck some desperate virgin, some skinny, pasty English nerd whose only friends are like, his books and a piano or whatever—you give it to him because he’s there and you’re bored ‘n horny, and then he starts thinking he matters? You’d make sure he knew what a loser you thought he was, too, wouldn’t you?”

The only reason I’m still sitting instead of launching myself at Ethan is because I need to know that Jamie won’t hate me for it. With his parents gone, he’s only got a few people left in his family, and I can’t attack one of them, not if it’ll hurt my best friend, not even to defend Ben, who’s *my* family. I am practically vibrating with the effort it is taking me to remain seated, but even my own guard-dog instincts won’t let me attack him without Jamie letting me off the leash first.

But Jamie is frozen in place, eyes blank and staring. A minute drags by, and still no one speaks. Finally, Jamie leans back and says, “Yes. I suppose I would say all of that to him, wouldn’t I?”

“Jamie,” I say sharply, but it doesn’t matter. He’s already on his feet with a muttered *excuse me*, striding back to the car he drove in and pulling out his iPhone as he goes. And that’s permission enough for me. I turn to face Ethan and snarl, “You asked who I hang out with in Lakewood? I hang out with Ben McCutcheon. He’s one of my best fucking friends, you asshole, and if I could find a way to eliminate you from the face of this earth without upsetting Jamie by forcing him to bury yet another family member, I’d do it in a heartbeat. You’re disgusting.”

And then I’m off the bench and sprinting after Jamie, barely in earshot long enough to hear Ethan’s disgruntled, “Does James *realize* he took my keys with him?”

“Jamie!” I call, but he has already reached the space where he parked the Cadillac CTS that used to belong to his mom. For one heart-stopping second, I think he’s going to drive off, furious and shaking, unbuckled, cell phone to his ear; I think he’s going to be the third Goldwyn to die in a car wreck in as many days. But instead of getting behind the wheel, he sinks into the passenger seat, starts the car, aims the air conditioner vent at his face, and begins frantically texting. I’m still shaking as I open the driver’s side door and get in.

“James,” I say. “You’re not—”

“No fucking service,” he interrupts, sounding weirdly close to laughing, even though he doesn’t look happy in the slightest. “For the first time in my life, I’m trying to call that little shit, and he’s got no service. Says he can’t get clear calls in the city.”

“Who, Ben?” I say.

I deserve the eyeroll Jamie sends my way as he says, “No, G, the fucking president. Yes, Ben.”

“Look, your cousin is an asshole, alright?” I say. “That doesn’t mean that you’re the same way. He’s—”

“Don’t give me a free pass just because I’m your best friend,” Jamie interrupts. “You’ve heard how I talk to

him, haven't you? For Christ's sake, Garen, I can't remember ever saying one nice thing to his face. I'm as bad as Ethan is. Worse, really, Ethan at least had the grace to sleep with him a couple times and bail. I've treated him like shit in the same breath I've used to ask him out. That's not fair. I haven't been fair to him."

I don't know what to say to that. Between the two of us, Jamie has always been considered "the nice one," and I've always been considered "the gigantic asshole who torments people for fun." If he's now realizing he's a selfish cunt who treats his guys like shit, then what the fuck does that say about me?

I turn to face the steering wheel. "Buckle your seatbelt. I'll drive us back to the house."

He spends most of the drive back texting someone, presumably Ben, and I spend the entire drive in silence. We make it back to the house by five, giving us both enough time to shower and dress for dinner, which I'm privately delighted to find out is being handled by the Goldwyn family chef, Magda. I set myself up on one of the bar stools in the kitchen and sneak bites of the food whenever I think she's not looking.

"I'm going to cut off your fingers if you reach into that bowl again, boy," she warns.

"I can't help it, I'm a nervous eater," I say. "The Chandlers make me anxious."

Magda smirks. "All of them, or just the one who outranks you?"

I narrow my eyes. "None of them *outrank* me, fuck off. I don't care how long she dated Jamie, I'm his best friend. His best friend *forever*. I'm still above her on the totem pole."

"Three years is a long time," Magda muses.

"Three years *on and off*. That barely even counts," I argue. "Like, they got together in what, winter of our sophomore year? They were broken up by spring break, back together for parts of the summer, broken up for fall, back together for like, November, then broken up again for most of the spring semester, back together for summer. It's bullshit. That doesn't count as a relationship. They break up so much because they're not meant to be together."

"Perhaps they get back together so much because they *are* meant to be together," Magda says. I glare at her. She smiles serenely back at me.

Suddenly, I get a brief flash of Travis in my mind. Travis, who I've been with-and-then-without at least half a dozen times. I duck my head and scowl down at the salad bowl, fishing out another slice of cucumber. "Yeah, whatever. Addison still doesn't outrank me."

Magda's reply is cut off by the ringing of the front doorbell. Jamie's still upstairs, probably fixing his tie for the nine millionth time, so I straighten my own—Christ, three and a half years in a school uniform, you'd think I'd learn to hate these less—and bolt for the front door. I fling it open, and there they are, all five of them. Well, six, counting Morgan's husband. Seven, counting the little girl standing right in front of them, and oh fuck, I didn't realize they even *had* a kid now, let alone that they were bringing her. Jamie's going to shit, he *hates* kids.

"Garen," Marcus says warmly. I'm surprised he even remembers me; we've only interacted maybe eight times, and most of those times, I was sneaking off with Jamie and some of the girls to go hang out somewhere away from whatever summer dinner party boredom we were being subjected to.

"Hey, Mr. Chandler," I say, "James'll be right down, he was just finishing getting ready. Come on in."

I've hung out with the Chandler girls every summer I've come to visit Jamie. I know them, not well enough to be best friends with them, but well enough that it isn't weird when Darcy—the twenty-one-year-old middle sister—breaks ranks and steps close enough to hug me in greeting. I give the others a quick,

blank smile over her shoulder and squeeze back. Before she can release me, Morgan—the oldest at twenty-five—latches on, too. Addison—a year younger than me, but a high school senior, too—seems about to join in, but she catches sight of something behind me and goes still. I turn to look; Jamie has finally made his way downstairs. I've never seen him look more alone than he does right now, standing awkwardly in the middle of the hallway and offering up a half-shrug, like he's apologizing for being the only Goldwyn left to attend.

Addison edges right past me and flings herself at him, winding her arms tight around his neck. He hugs her back and buries his face in her shoulder. I can't hear what she's saying to him, only that she's murmuring something in his ear, and he's nodding wordlessly. It's an uncomfortably intimate moment, and one that Jamie is quick to remedy; he releases her and steps back, holding her at arms' length as he says, "It's good to see y'all again. Please, come in. My aunt, uncle, and cousins are in the living room, if I might introduce you."

"Of course," Robin says. She steps into the house and crosses the hall to sweep Jamie into a hug of her own. It lasts much longer than Addison's, especially when Marcus steps up to squeeze Jamie's shoulder.

Wanting to give them at least the semblance of privacy, I turn to the rest of the group. Thankfully, Morgan picks up on my intention immediately and says, "Garen, I don't think you've met my husband, Austin, have you? Austin, this is Garen, James' best friend."

"Good to meet you," Austin says, shaking my hand.

"Yeah, likewise," I say. The moment he lets go, I drop to one knee so I'm eye-level with the little girl at his side. "And who might this be?"

"This is our daughter, Charity," Morgan says.

"It's very nice to meet you, Charity," I say. She mumbles some semblance of the phrase back at me and hides her face in the side of her dad's pant leg. It's fucking adorable. I stand, smiling, and lead the way to the living room door. "C'mon. Everybody else is through here."

Once everyone is gathered in one room together, introductions are made. It doesn't seem to escape Robin or Marcus' attention that Michelle looks almost exactly like Melissa did, but they dissolve into polite small talk regardless. Jamie introduces his cousins to the Chandler girls, none of whom comment on April's completely out-of-place attire—she's wearing the tight turquoise dress she bought today, before we went to the stables.

The moment Jamie steps away to check how Magda's doing with the food, I hear April say to Addison, just quietly enough for me to know she's about to be a real cunt, "So, you're my cousin's ex-girlfriend?"

"I am," Addison confirms. "Though, I like to think I'm his friend first."

April hums consideringly, then adds, "You're not really what I expected."

"Oh?" is all Addison allows in response.

"Well, you know," April says, making one brief sweeping gesture to all of Addison. It's very clear what she means; I contemplate bashing my head open on the coffee table so that I won't have to hear the rest of this conversation.

To her unending credit, Addison takes the slight in stride. She simply arches one perfectly groomed brow, turns to me, and says, "What, do y'all not have black people in Connecticut?"

"Not in towns like Lakewood," I admit, "but hey, don't lump me in with the people from that state. I'm back in New York now."

"Oh, you are?" she says, slipping a hand into the crook of my elbow and steering me oh-so-casually away from April. "Are you at Columbia with Jamie?"

I snort. "Right, like any Ivy League would have me." Addison tries to hide her smirk, but I catch it anyway. "No, I'm doing... well, I'm choosing to call it a victory lap at Patton, my true and rightful home. My parents, on the other hand, are choosing to call it, 'second go-around as a high school senior, with fingers crossed they don't expel me like my public school did.' What about you, still at Bible Baptist Academy?"

"Yep. About to finish my first-and-only senior year," she says. "I'm still deciding where I'll head after that, though. You?"

"Man, I got no idea," I laugh, rubbing awkwardly at the back of my neck. "I've got all my college letters back, but I haven't even opened 'em yet. Been kind of... busy." I gesture towards Jamie.

Addison gives me a sad smile and says, "I can imagine."

Dinner ends up being equal parts sweet and tragic. The food that Magda has prepared is delicious, and the Hall twins keep their rudeness to themselves. Everyone keeps talking about George and Melissa, sharing stories about them, talking about how amazing they were, and it's... painful. Maybe this is how they do things around here, but where I'm from, we don't torment the living by listing all the things we'll never get to experience again with the dead.

By the time dessert has been finished, Jamie looks absolutely exhausted, like he's one wrong comment away from shattering to pieces. Still, he stands and says, with a very forced smile, "Excuse me. I just, ah... I believe I need a moment to myself, if that's quite alright."

"Of course," Robin says, touching his elbow briefly.

I watch him walk from the dining room, then listen to his feet taking the stairs. I can't hear the click of his bedroom door from this far away, but I'm sure that's where he is. I look over at Addison, on the other side of his vacated chair.

"What do you think, Ads?" I say. "Give him 'bout sixty seconds, and then we stalk his ass?"

"I was thinking more like forty-five," she says.

We only manage thirty, and then we're both excusing ourselves as well and sneaking upstairs to find Jamie. He's in his room, as expected, lying back on his bed with his eyes closed. They flutter open the moment we enter, but before he even has time to sit up, I fling myself down next to him and curl up with my head resting on his chest.

"Sorry," he whispers. "Didn't mean to disappear like that."

"Don't worry about it," I mumble against his shirt.

"It's just, ah... even remembering the happy things doesn't really make it better," he says, "because what's left now? I can't remember how wonderful it felt to be home for the holidays a few months ago, because all I can think about is how empty the table's going to be this year. I can't think about all the times they were there for me, because all that does is underline the fact that now, I'm alone."

I untuck the front of his button-down so I can shove my hand up the hem of it, stroking my palm over his flat stomach because I need the reassurance of skin-on-skin. "Don't be stupid. You're not alone. You're never going to be alone, okay? You have me, always."

Jamie doesn't reply aloud, but he does nod. Addison kicks off her heels and crawls onto the bed on his

other side, curling up under his arm and not saying a word. It feels like we lie there for hours, but it's probably only twenty minutes or so. Finally, there's a knock at the door. Jamie doesn't move, and Addison doesn't seem to want to. I take it upon myself to roll off the bed and answer the door. Pretty much the entire Chandler clan is standing in the hallway, with the exception of Austin and Charity. If any of them are surprised to peek in and see Addison lying with Jamie, they hide it well.

"It's getting late," Marcus says, "and I expect that tomorrow will be a long, difficult day for everyone. We thought it might be best to head out."

"No," Addison says, finally sitting up. "I'd like to stay." She twists to look back down at Jamie. "If that's alright, of course."

He blinks up at her and says softly, "You can stay as long as you'd like."

"Addy," Robin says, voice carefully neutral, "I understand that you want to be there for James right now, and you *will* be there for him. But, given your relationship history, I'm not sure your father and I are comfortable with the idea of you spending the night here."

Sucks to be Robin and Marcus, I guess, because Jamie and Addison were fifteen when they lost their hetero-virginites to each other in the very bed that Robin is so worried they'll defile tonight. I could very easily point this out, but contrary to what everyone around me thinks, I am developing a filter. Instead, I say, "It's not a problem. I've been crashing in Jamie's room, so there's still a guest room up for grabs, if Addison wants it. She can stay here without it being... you know. Inappropriate, or whatever."

Like I have any capacity to judge what counts as "appropriate." There's a bit more hemming and hawing, but eventually, the Chandlers cave and give Addison permission to spend the night. Darcy promises to be by in the morning with a change of clothes so she can get cleaned up and ready for the service. The family departs, with Marcus stopping to give Jamie one last long, considering look.

And I guess that look is warranted, because two hours later, I'm the one crawling into bed alone in the guest room, not Addison.

Chapter Twenty-Six: Part B

"I used to advertise my loyalty, and I don't believe there is a single person I loved that I didn't eventually betray." –Albert Camus

186 days sober

It takes me a solid ten minutes to work up the balls to knock on Jamie's bedroom door the next morning. There's an awful, creeping sensation in my gut, and I'm half-convinced I'm going to open the door and find them in the middle of some revolting dude-on-chick sex act. But when a muffled voice calls for me to enter the room, I open the door to find that, though they are both in the bed, they are both fully clothed, and neither of them appears to have been recently penetrated.

"Good morning," I say, taking a cautious step into the room.

"Morning," Addison yawns. She's wearing one of Jamie's old gray t-shirts and—visible once she swings her legs out of bed and stands—a pair of his sweatpants. They're not as hilariously huge on her as they otherwise could be; Addison is insanely tall—only two or three inches shorter than my six-foot-one—with curves like a pinup model. No matter how disinterested I am in the supposedly fairer sex, even I can tell that she's beautiful. Her hair is long and inky black, her eyes gray-green, her skin smooth and dark brown. She reaches over and pinches Jamie's shoulder. "Wake up, James."

"I don't want to," he murmurs. It's not a petulant sort of response; it's more along the lines of *I don't want to do this day*. A more than understandable reaction, given the agenda for this afternoon.

I crawl onto the foot of the bed and settle my hands on a lump under the blankets that I'm pretty sure is his calf. "Want me to go make you breakfast and bring it up?"

He pulls back the covers enough to give me a look. "You know how to cook now? Good Lord, how long was I asleep?"

"Want me to have Magda make you breakfast?" I amend. "And then I can bring it up, maybe, if I can do it without spilling it everywhere."

"That's a big 'if,'" Jamie points out. He sits up and props himself up on his pillows. "If she's up for cooking something, I'll eat. But I can come down for it, I don't need to eat it here." He gestures towards Addison. "Has Darcy been by with a change of clothes yet?"

I shrug. "Not that I know of, but I haven't been downstairs yet. She might've left them with somebody else."

The three of us make our way downstairs, where breakfast is already well underway. Magda is preparing one of her great Southern breakfast feasts—eggs, grits, biscuits and gravy, sausage, everything designed to make you die of a heart attack before you turn thirty—and the twins are seated the table in the informal dining room. Ethan is wolfing down huge portions of food, and April is picking at some eggs, while pointedly ignoring the grits, gravy, and anything else with that has the same viscous, white look of jizz.

As someone who swallows *actual* jizz on the regular, I've got no problem with throwing myself down on the chair across from April, and helping myself to a little bit—a lot bit, actually—of everything with a heavy ladling of country gravy over all of it. April's upper lip curls. I grant her my widest, fakest smile and tuck in.

"Where are your parents?" Jamie asks his cousins.

Ethan makes an unhelpful gesture towards the front of the house. When no one responds, he swallows his mouthful of eggs and says, "They went out for breakfast. Dad's not really into the southern food, so I guess they're looking for someplace a little more generic."

Jamie sits down on my other side, and Addison takes the seat across from him. Despite the attitude she'd gotten from Jamie's cousin yesterday, she doesn't hesitate to turn and say, "Good morning, April. Did you sleep well?"

"Probably not as well as you," April replies with a pointed look over at Jamie. *For fuck's sake.* I know I can't give this bitch the beat-down she needs, but maybe I could get Stohler to fly down here and kick her ass. Girls are allowed to beat the shit out of other girls, aren't they?

"I'm sorry, was that a question?" Addison asks, smiling sweetly. "Because if so, yes, I slept fine. Thank you for asking."

Alright. It's not like I don't get why Jamie likes her. She's always warmly welcoming, bringing people into her conversations like she's been waiting for their arrival. She's calm, graceful, poised in a way most people aren't, and she doesn't bat an eye at bullshit. She's everything Jamie could ever ask for, but since when is he asking?

With Addison sufficiently distracted, I lean closer to Jamie and ask quietly, "So, what happened last night, after I left?"

"Nothing," he says. I furrow my brow, and he shrugs. "I'm serious. Nothing happened. I might've kissed her for a second, but it wasn't... it was just a kiss. She was only trying to comfort me."

Probably three-quarters of the "on" portions of their "on-and-off" relationship have begun with *just a kiss*, so I'm not entirely comforted by this revelation. Neither is April, that eavesdropping whore; she leans across the table and stage-whispers, "Pretty sure there are ways to comfort somebody that don't involve trying to hop on their dick."

"I was not trying to hop on his anything," Addison says, waving a fork at Jamie. "I was trying to be supportive of someone who I've been friends with since childhood. And as I understand it, I couldn't get up in his business even if I wanted to. Last we spoke, there was a girlfriend. Is she coming to the—"

"We broke up," Jamie interrupts. Both of his hands are gripping the edge of the table, like he's considering shoving himself away from it to escape the threat of someone actually using the words '*the service*.' A moment passes, and then he carefully continues, "Anyway, I've moved on from her."

Addison arches her brows. "In general, or with someone specific?"

He lifts a shoulder. "Remains to be seen. There is someone specific, but our... *relationship* hasn't really had a chance to progress beyond physicality."

"That's the most eloquent way of saying '*I've got a fuckbuddy*' I've ever heard, man. I'm proud of you," I say. Ethan chuckles, but I glare across the table at him so that he knows just how unwelcome his amusement is. I don't want someone who fucked over one of my best friends to think that he and I are on good terms, even if that only includes laughing at my jokes. Only once he falls silent do I turn my attention back to Jamie and say, "Think you might, uh... try to reschedule that first date at some point?"

"That's not up to me," he replies. "I'm not the one who was stood up."

I roll my eyes. "You had a pretty ace excuse."

Another delicate lift of the shoulder. "Still, it's not up to me. I'll ask, of course. I'm supposed to call tonight, after the, ah... after everyone leaves. You know... the visiting hours."

Watching him say those words is like watching a thousand-pound weight settle onto the back of his neck. Instinctively, I reach up and curl my palm over the top of his spine, like I can stave off that weight by

replacing it with my hand. "Yeah. About that... do you have a specific time you'd planned on that running until? Or do you just want me to hang by your side and kick people out when you start to look exhausted?"

"Pastor Milton said that the service will probably run from noon until quarter 'til. I told him I'd be willing to receive visitors at the house afterward until eight this evening. I suspect I'll be expected to do the same tomorrow; usual Sunday service in the morning, then accepting condolences until eight o'clock. I don't expect to have trouble with either of those, but I would... appreciate it if you might stick by me throughout, just in case I need a break?"

"Of course," I say, dropping my hand and digging my fork into the mess of food on my plate without taking a bite. "So, uh... I don't know if it's okay for me to ask this, or what, but I don't really know how this kind of thing goes in Christian families. The only funerals I've ever been to have been for my grandma and some family friends, but I was just a kid, and those were all Jewish funerals. I don't know what I should be expecting today."

In a movement more graceless than I think I've ever seen from him, he twists slightly and slumps one elbow on the table, propping his chin up on his hand. "Family sits in the first pew—my aunt and uncle, these two, me. You, please?" I nod, and he does the same in thanks. "People will come in and sit in the rest of the pews, but as there isn't a body to view, they don't need to come up front. Some might anyway, to say hello, but I suspect most will wait until after. The pastor will do all the talking. He asked if I wanted to say a few words, but I'd... prefer not to. It's a bit more of a private matter for me. But he'll give a eulogy. A sermon. He'll probably read the obituaries and say a bit about my parents' role in the congregation, but mostly, he'll talk about salvation. Obviously, I don't expect you to participate in any of the prayer, but general practice would suggest that you stand when others stand, sit when others sit. The whole thing should run about an hour at the most, and then people will come up and give me their condolences. A lot of hugging and hand-shaking from people who knew my parents and thus expect me to know them. Afterward, we return here. More people will come and visit. They'll want to talk about my parents. And they'll want to give me food."

"Food?" April repeats.

"Tons of it," Addison agrees. "And it will all be homemade, and probably fried. That's how we deal with tragedy down here. It's how we deal with happy things, too, actually. When in doubt, fry something and eat it in massive quantities."

"I'm going to be eating fried chicken for days," Jamie sighs. "By the time I get back to New York, I'll be four hundred pounds and leaking grease from my very pores."

I clap him on the shoulder. "You might run out of food quicker than you'd think, with me here. I can eat at least twice as much as you can."

"So glad you're here," he says, rolling his eyes, but I think he really means it.

The entire process of getting ready for the service and getting ourselves over to the church is quieter and less taxing than I expected it to be. April and Ethan are mercifully silent for most of it, and Addison reluctantly allows herself to be moved into the second row of seats to sit with her family. I expect Michelle and Tom to be at least somewhat concerned with sticking by Jamie through all of this—they're some of the only family he's got left, after all—but when Jamie settles himself onto the first pew on the right side of the church, his aunt and uncle cross the aisle to sit in the first pew on the left. My eyebrows shoot towards my hairline, but I don't dare say anything that might cause a scene.

Anyway, things get rocky enough after ten minutes of waiting, because that's when I glance back to the doors and see my parents both arriving at the same time. There's some sort of usher waiting at the back, handing out memorial cards, but Mom strides right past him without blinking away from me. For the first time since I spoke to Travis the other night, I really feel like I might be about to cry. Thankfully, Mom

reaches us before that can happen. She kisses me on the temple and loops one arm around my neck, the other around Jamie's, pulling us both into a bone-crunching hug.

"How are you?" she asks quietly.

I don't know which one of us she's talking to—probably both. Instead of responding with words, I make an incredibly undignified sort of squeak against her shoulder. Jamie has enough composure to murmur, "Not well."

"Jamie," she sighs. I can feel her shifting a little, like she might be rubbing his back in an attempt to sooth him. Dad joins us, and I detach myself from Mom's grip to shove myself at him. He hugs me tightly, but doesn't say a word. And for one horrible second, all I can think is, *I'm glad it wasn't my parents*. The moment the words have formed in my brain, I'm hit with a wave of guilt so intense, my knees feel like they're going to buckle.

Minutes tick by, and I'm sure that I've probably been hanging off my dad long enough for it to be weird, but Mom is still speaking quietly to Jamie, who looks like he's doing his best not to unravel. He's failing. When she finally releases him, I take that as my cue to shrug out of Dad's grasp. He squeezes my shoulders and says, "If either of you needs anything from your mother or I, you tell us, alright? We'll just be back there."

He inclines his head to indicate an open space a few rows back, but he only gets to take maybe two steps away before Jamie throws out a hand and catches his forearm. He releases him immediately, staring down at Dad's sleeve like he can't believe how improper it is to grab at somebody's arm like that, but when Dad doesn't make any sort of protest, Jamie says softly, "I thought perhaps, if it's not too much trouble, you both might... stay up here?" He makes an aborted gesture that I think is meant to indicate the empty pew on my other side. He swallows and adds, "Please?"

Mom takes hold of his shoulders and gives him a brief squeeze. "Of course, Jamie."

I hook a finger into the pocket of his suit jacket and tug him closer to me so that there's room for my mom to stand on his other side. Dad comes to stand next to me and leans in to ask me in an undertone, "How are you holding up?"

"M fine," I say automatically, no matter how untrue it is. "My only concern right now is how Jamie's doing."

"I understand that, and you're being a great friend," Dad continues. "But you're my son, and I need to know that you can handle this. I need to know that you're going to ask for help, if you need it."

Swallowing my nerves, I steal a glance at Jamie, but he's in the middle of accepting the condolences of a family I don't know. Looking back to Dad, I admit, "I think I might call Dr. Howard and ask if we can make our sessions weekly instead of biweekly for a while. I don't think I'll have any problems, but it's... Travis works a lot on the weekends. And I don't want to bother the guys I hang with at Patton, but I don't want to be alone, either. I don't think that'd be good for me. So, maybe if I'm in Connecticut for a few weekends in a row, I'll be so busy with my therapy sessions or spending time with you or hanging with Stohler and the guys in New Haven, I won't have time to, you know... freak out."

"I think that's a great idea," Dad says, as delicately as a father can say *I don't think you can handle this on your own without relapsing*. I open my mouth to reply, but the pastor is stepping up to the front of the church, so I fall silent instead.

I loved Melissa and George, but I hate the service. All of the people who come up afterwards and tell Jamie how lovely it was are full of shit, because the service is sickening. Only a quarter of the preacher's words actually have anything to do with Jamie's parents—the rest is all about the importance of accepting Jesus into your life before you die, or whatever. It's so fucking crass that I almost want to cover my ears to block it out, but I can't. All I can do is stand there like a statue, and then fume silently the whole drive

back to the house.

Receiving visitors isn't much better. I'm pretty sure they all realize I'm just Jamie's moral support, because nobody really talks to me, even though I'm sitting right next to him. All they care about is shoving huge platters and casserole dishes of food at him and getting their turn to remind Jamie how much his parents loved him. The first few times someone says it, he smiles and tells them he knows and goes on with the conversation. After a couple of hours, though, his smile is starting to crack. It isn't until nearly six o'clock that I realize the real reason it's starting to get to him.

It's that word: loved. *Your parents loved you so much, James. They loved you more than anything.* Loved. Past tense.

By the time eight o'clock rolls around, I don't think I've ever been more grateful for a lock on a front door. I'm pretty sure I'm not the only one who feels this way.

"Good Lord, I can't believe I have to do that all again tomorrow," Jamie murmurs, rubbing the tips of his long fingers over his temples.

"You don't," I say simply. "We'll barricade you in your room, and I'll stand outside the front door so I can tell everyone to fuck off and let you deal with this privately. They'll understand."

He snorts. "Some might, but I doubt most would." He stands up and twists his torso until his spine crackles. "What I really need to do is go put all that food in the fridge, before it spoils. Nothing stinks up a house like greasy, rotting food in warm weather."

"I can do it," I offer, but he waves me away without bothering to dignify that with a response. I end up sitting on the kitchen counter and playing Brick Breaker on my phone while he carefully covers all of the dishes, labels them with the contents and the maker's name, and stacks them into the fridge. I extend one leg just enough to nudge his thigh with my toe. "I might want something from there later. You have any method to how you'd like me to keep them arranged?"

Jamie shoots me a suspicious look, but I make sure to keep my face completely expressionless. I don't need him to think I'm making fun of his anal retentive tendencies, but I really don't need him to panic at the idea of me rearranging his shit, then feel the need to uncover every single dish to make sure they're still labeled correctly so that he can restack them.

When I don't offer up a punchline, he says, "Side dishes on the top shelf, main dishes on the middle shelf, desserts on the bottom shelf. Everything's alphabetical by the contents I've labeled them with." I nod in acknowledgment, still without making a single comment. He wipes his hands off on a dish towel and reaches into his pocket to extract his cell phone. "I'm going to step out into the garden and make a quick call. Should only be a few minutes. Then I think I might just have a shower and head to bed. Will you... would you mind staying in my room again tonight, instead of the guest bedroom?"

"I'll stay wherever you want me to stay," I say. He leans in to kiss my cheek, then heads for the back door out to the garden.

Despite his *only a few minutes* prediction, it's another two hours before Jamie actually makes it upstairs. I'm already prepared for sleep, in my boxers and t-shirt, tucked up under the blankets. His voice is hoarse from talking when he says, "You can shut off the lights. I'll be ready in a minute."

Even though he does shut the lights off, I'm still awake and waiting when he slips into bed twenty minutes later, showered and dressed. I wriggle close and say, "Who'd you call?"

"McCutcheon." That's all he offers. I reach over to rub slow circles against his stomach with the palm of my hand.

"Long conversation," I observe.

He nods, and after a moment of hesitation, adds, "Asked him about rescheduling that date. He said I could come see him whenever I want, once I get back to New York." He's quiet for a few seconds, but I can tell he has more to say, so I wait. Eventually, "I have to stay here the rest of the week. Have to meet with all the lawyers and such, start figuring out what the hell is going to be done with all this." More silence. I just keep rubbing my circles. And then, "I think you should fly back to New York on Monday."

My hand goes still. "And leave you here all alone this whole week?"

"I'll be fine. Michelle, her husband, and their kids are all headed back up north tomorrow. I think I'd like to go to the meetings with the lawyers by myself, honestly. I don't believe I'd be comfortable with sorting all of that out in front of someone I'm so familiar with. Besides, I don't want you to miss any more school than you already—"

"School can suck a dick, Jamie," I snap. "I don't give a fuck about school. All I care about is making sure you're okay, and I can't do that from eight hundred miles away."

"Yes, you can," Jamie sighs. He rolls onto his side, dragging my hand with him so that I'm spooned up behind him. "It's you, and it's me. Eight hundred miles is nothing. You know how to take care of me no matter where you are."

"It's easier when I'm right here," I grumble.

He laughs, softly and without any real humor. "Believe me, Garen. Nothing about this is easy."

188 days sober

When my plane touches down in New York, I text Travis to let him know I'm back safely and will be heading home soon. When my cab drops me off at Jamie's apartment building to collect my car, I find that Travis is already there, sitting on the trunk of his car and waiting for me. He's still wearing his stupid fucking Starbucks uniform, like he begged off work early to meet me, and he's holding a cup of coffee that he extends wordlessly in my direction.

I try to take a sip of it, but my hands are shaking too much. Travis takes the cup back, and it's a good thing, because I don't even manage to get a word out before I sink right down onto the garage floor and lose it. Still, Travis doesn't speak; he sits down on the ground next to me, curls a hand over the back of my neck, and draws me in.

189 days sober

Returning to Patton on Tuesday isn't any easier. Word about the reason for my absence seems to have spread around the entire school—gossipy little Whitman squad cunts—and I barely manage to make it out of my car before people start coming up to me to ask me about James. And the thing is, I don't even *know* half of these people, and I know Jamie probably doesn't either. They have no right to turn this into conversation fodder.

I shove my way through the cluster of people and take my usual position in the quad, even though Sergeant Smith isn't even here yet. Around me, a lot of the guys in the squad are still trying to get my attention, still trying to give their bullshit condolences. And then, cutting through the rest of the conversation like a knife through softened butter, I hear someone mutter, "I don't get what the big deal is."

Slowly, I turn to face the speaker—Eric Barrington, the guy who's always made to stand between me and

Declan when we're told to line up alphabetically. "What did you just say?"

Barrington shifts a little, glances around like he'd been hoping I wouldn't have heard him. But if he didn't want me to hear, he shouldn't have said anything. Still, he keeps going. "It's just, uh... I didn't really mean anything by it, man. I'm only saying—look, I've met Goldwyn, yeah? And I get that he's your friend, but he's an asshole. If you ask me—"

"No one did," Charlie says sharply.

"—if you ask me, nobody deserves to have to go through something like this, but if I could think of anybody who did deserve it, it'd be Goldwyn," Barrington finishes. "Couldn't have happened to a nicer guy."

Pure, animal rage comes over me so suddenly that my whole body shudders under the weight of it, and then everything... whites out. One minute, I'm standing there and looking at him, hating him, wanting so badly to hurt him, and the next second, I'm on him. I don't even get a chance to hit him before I'm being dragged right back off by my friends. My movements are so clumsy with desperation to attack that Taylor, Javi, Steven and I all end up on the ground in a pile of limbs, and even that's not enough to keep me still. I manage to wrench my arms free and start clawing my way out from under the bodies to try to get to Barrington, who is staring down at me in horrified disbelief. I'm not entirely aware of what I'm screaming at him—I might not even be saying actual words, to be honest. I think I might just be snarling, swearing, and, when Taylor makes the mistake of trying to cover my mouth to stop me from yelling out threats, sinking my teeth into his hand. He reels back with a halfway hysterical, "What the *fuck*, Garen?" but his exclamation is meaningless to me. *Everything* is meaningless, nothing matters except getting my hands on Barrington and bashing his fucking head into the ground for daring to ever say that about James.

Suddenly, there's a boot on my chest, pinning me down with so much force, I swear I can feel my ribs creaking under the pressure. My eyes dart from boot to leg, leg to torso, neck, face—Declan is glaring down at me, and he's saying something, but the blood is pulsing in my ears too loudly for me to hear him. He must realize this, because he says, with even more withering disdain, "Knock it off."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I burst out. "Did you hear what he said?"

"Yeah, and what I heard wasn't worth attacking someone over," he says. I go completely still. He digs his heel into my sternum and adds, "*Grow up*, Garen."

I'm so shocked by his betrayal that I don't even try to move after he takes his foot off my chest. I just stare up at him, my eyes burning into his, thinking over and over, *how could you do this? How could you take this asshole's side after what he just said?* Declan rolls his eyes and wanders away to clap Barrington on the fucking shoulder and say, "You alright?"

"Yeah," Barrington says shakily. "I'm fine."

Declan gives him a light push back towards formation, and I hear him mutter, "Sorry about Anderson. He's a fucking psycho sometimes. You want to partner up for drills this morning?"

"Uh, sure," Barrington says, surprised but pleased. No need for me to wonder why—Declan's the best in the squad, anyone would love the extra help of partnering with him for sparring drills. That's why I've been his fucking drill partner for the past two weeks.

I close my eyes and breathe slowly in through my nose, out through my mouth. I repeat this several times before a shadow falls over me, and I open my eyes to find that Sergeant Smith has arrived. He's standing over me, staring down at me with one eyebrow cocked. "Anderson. Are you planning to get up and join the group sometime today?"

My first instinct is to tell him to go fuck himself. It'll get me sent to the headmaster's office, so I won't have

to slog through all of PT this morning; I can just sit out and pretend to feel guilty for back-talking. But somehow, I just don't have the energy to be an asshole anymore. I sigh. "Yes, sir. Sorry."

I sit up, but before I can stumble to my feet on my own, Smitt holds out a hand to help me up. I stare for a moment before accepting the hand, but I think that's more than justified—the only times he ever touches any of the cadets are the times he takes great joy in shoving us into lines or stomping on our asses when our push-ups get sloppy. This time, all he does is haul me upright and let me go. "Thank you, sir," I say.

"I heard about Goldwyn's family," he says. My eyes drop to the ground. "How is he?" I raise my eyebrows and lift my shoulders, the only semi-polite way I can think to say, *how do you fuckin' think, dipshit?* To my continued disbelief, Smitt claps me on the shoulder and says, "Don't both stressing yourself about making up the MLEP readings you've missed. Take as much time as you need to catch up. And give James my regards."

"Yes, sir," I say to his retreating back. It's the nicest, most normal interaction I've ever had with one of the squad leaders here—figures that bodies would have to start dropping before a Patton sergeant would show any bit of humanity.

Once we've been ordered to pair up for sparring drills, Taylor weaves his way back through the group towards me. He knocks his elbow against mine and says, "Come on, G. Couldn't let you beat down Barrington, but I bet you could do with a healthy dose of violence right now, and I'm probably the only one big enough to take it from you."

"If you wanna take it from me, you'll have to buy me dinner first," I say, but my heart's not in the quip. If Taylor notices my reluctance, he says nothing before taking position across from me. He's right, it turns out; throwing my weight around does help relieve some of the anger boiling in my gut, even if it doesn't do a thing to soothe the sting of Declan's sudden deflection to Barrington's side of the argument. I try to keep my focus on grappling with Taylor, but it's hard, especially since I can hear them talking from just a few feet away. Declan is giving Barrington plenty of advice on how to better block Dec's advances, and Barrington is lapping it up like a needy little pet.

And then the conversation becomes a scream.

My grip on Taylor slips, and I nearly face-plant in my haste to turn towards the noise. Barrington is on the ground, writhing in pain, and Declan is kneeling next to him, face pale and mouth halfway open in shock. Smitt storms through the group and demands, "What the hell happened over here?"

Barrington whimpers like a baby girl, and Declan forces out, "I-I don't know what happened. We were just running through the drills, and I guess I grabbed him wrong, because his shoulder just gave." Barrington rolls onto his side enough that his ruined shoulder is visible. He isn't bleeding, and I'm betting nothing's broken, but his arm is dangling at a twisted, unnatural angle. Declan touches his boot. "I think you might've only dislocated it. Want me to try popping it back into—"

"Jesus fuck, *no*," Barrington yelps, and Declan quickly retracts his hand. A few of the guys carefully help Barrington to his feet, though he looks like he might be about to keel over again any second now.

"Campbell, make sure he gets to the infirmary," Smitt orders.

"Yes, sir," Declan says. His face is still ashen, and his hand shakes a little as he raises it to touch Barrington's uninjured shoulder. "Do you need me to—"

"It's fine, just don't touch me," Barrington groans, flinching away from the hand. He heads for the path that leads up to the infirmary, Declan trailing after him.

Sergeant Smitt rounds on us and says, "Everyone else, back to drills!"

I don't know why I keep watching them walk away. Maybe I'm hoping Barrington will trip and dislocate the other shoulder. Maybe I'm hoping his arm will fall right off. Whatever my reasoning, I'm still watching fifteen seconds later, when Declan idles by the edge of the path and turns back around to face me.

I'm still watching when he winks.

"Oh, shit," Taylor whispers beside me. I shoot him a warning look, and he falls silent, but his words are enough to raise alarm from Steven and Charlie, who are the closest pair to us right now. When they shoot him a curious glance, he nods towards Declan, who sticks his tongue out at me and turns away, grinning.

"So, breaking up the fight this morning, bitching out G, partnering Barrington—that was all so he could have a chance to attack him without anyone realizing?" Steven hisses. "Has Campbell finally lost it? Because this is insane. This is the literal, dictionary definition of insane—"

"Shut up," I snap, because we're starting to get weird looks from a guy whose last name might be Roberts? Rogers? I'm almost certain that he's Barrington's roommate, probably one of his friends, too. Unless I want everyone to think I'm part of some big fuck-Barrington's-shit-up conspiracy, my only choice is to get back to sparring.

My head is still buzzing hours later, when I take my seat at breakfast. I can't seem to grasp the fact that Declan actually dislocated someone's shoulder on purpose, let alone that he did it... what, to make me happy? To make me feel better about the comment about Jamie? It doesn't seem real, even though it's pretty much the only thing anyone at our table wants to talk about while we eat.

From several feet behind me, Declan says, "Hey, Rogers. The nurse jammed Barrington's shoulder back into place, put him in a sling, and sent him back to your room. I'm supposed to tell you to get his assignments for him. Tell him again that I'm sorry he got hurt."

Roger gives some vague reply, and there's a sound of one of them clapping the other on the shoulder, but I don't dare turn around. I don't move a muscle, I don't even *breathe* until Declan reaches our table, presses a palm to the back of my neck, and leans down to whisper in my ear, "Did you like your present?"

He slides into his usual seat next to me and snags a piece of toast from the platter in the middle of the table, but his eyes haven't left my face. He's clearly waiting for an answer, and because he's Declan, he's probably waiting for a specific answer. And the right answer takes time. I stir a spoonful of sugar into my coffee, not because I want it, but because it gives me a moment to think. I take a sip. Declan still hasn't blinked. Finally, I set my mug down and lean over to whisper back, "I loved it."

My tongue flickers ever-so-slightly over his earlobe as I speak, because why the fuck not. Declan laughs and finally turns his eyes to the spread of food, and I can't help but feel like I've passed a test.

Javi shakes his head and mutters, "I can't believe you did that on purpose."

"I have no idea what you're talking about. It was an accident," Declan says. "Just like how the bottle of Vicodin the nurse gave Barrington for the pain may have accidentally made its way from his nightstand to my dorm room."

"Accidentally," Steven agrees, earning himself an approving glance from Declan.

"You know, this is a new and exciting level for you, Dec," Charlie says dryly. "Usually when somebody pisses you off, you just revenge-fuck his girlfriend."

"Barrington doesn't have a girlfriend," Declan replies. He fills his glass with juice and takes a long sip before leaning back in his seat and continuing, "I considered fucking his sister, filming it, breaking into his dorm room, and hiding the file in the porn folder on his computer, but you give me a lecture anytime I fuck

a sophomore.”

“Because it’s gross, Dec. They’re two years younger than us,” Charlie groans.

Declan shrugs. “Two years younger than *you*. Courtney Barrington and I are the same age.”

My coffee mug is halfway to my lips, but that comment is enough to make me set it right back down. “Wait, you’re not the same age as Charlie?” Declan shakes his head. Feeling very certain I don’t want to know the answer, I ask, “How old are you?”

On my left, Javi chuckles, which only increases my dread. Declan smiles down at his plate of scrambled eggs and asks, much too casually, “How old do you think I am?”

“I *hope* you’re eighteen, considering I’m a week away from nineteen, and I’ve spent the last two and a half months trying to convince you to let me suck your dick,” I say. “But based on the way everyone is *laughing at me*, fuck you all very much, I’m guessing you’re still seventeen?” Javi laughs harder, and Declan just keeps smiling. I’m feeling more and more uncomfortable by the second, because I really *don’t* try to get on guys who are more than a year younger than me. It makes me feel like a creep, has done ever since Dave and I split the first time.

Whether he’s picking up on that same line of thinking now, or he just notices my discomfort, Charlie pushes the coffee carafe closer to me and says, “He’s sixteen, but he turns seventeen next month. Not that much younger than the rest of us. We just like to give him shit for being the baby of the group. It’s not really a big deal.”

It is a big deal, to me. For months now, I’ve been treating Declan like he’s only a couple months younger than me, like Jamie or Travis, and now I’m finding out that the age difference between me and him is almost the same as the one between me and Dave. I refill my coffee mug and scald my tongue on another sip. Not knowing exactly why, I say to Declan, “Sorry.”

His easy smile is gone now, replaced by a flat, unamused look. “It’s not like I’m a kid, Anderson. They just put me in the wrong grade in elementary school because I changed districts too many times for anyone to know where the hell I belonged.”

“Why’d you change districts?” I ask, snatching up this bead of information so I can focus on anything other than his age.

“Moved around a lot,” he says simply.

“Why?” I repeat. He takes a bite of his breakfast. I cast a brief glance around the table, but the rest of the guys seem to be waiting for an answer too, so I’m guessing this isn’t one of the blanks they can fill in for me. My attention flickers back and forth between Javi and Charlie, since they’ve *got* to know, but neither of them seems to have any idea, either. I turn back to Declan and ask, “Military brat?”

“No.”

“So why’d you move?” I ask. Javi kicks me under the table, and belatedly, I realize that my persistent questioning is probably both rude and annoying.

Declan doesn’t look offended or annoyed, though. For almost too long of a moment, he is silent. Finally, he sets his fork down, laces his fingers together behind his head, and turns towards me. “My mom was fourteen when she had me, seventeen when she dumped my dad, and twenty-one when she decided that she was too young to be a parent. We were living in Kansas at the time, in this bullshit little town up in Cheyenne County, and my dad had moved to an equally bullshit town in Yuma County, Colorado. When my mom wanted to get rid of me, all she had to do was pull me out of second grade and send me an hour across the state line to go live with him. Except my dad didn’t want me either, so he turned me over to the

state. I bounced around foster homes all over Colorado for a year or two before my birth mom's parents realized I'd been dumped into the system. By the time they adopted me and brought me out to live with them in Nebraska, I'd been through two or three dozen districts—and that's only the families who bothered to enroll me in school at all—so it was near impossible to piece out what grade I was actually supposed to be in. They gave me a round of placement tests and ended up sticking me in fifth grade, even though I was only nine. I've been a year younger than all my classmates ever since."

Declan is still focused on me, so I don't dare look around the table to see anyone else's reaction. Based on the complete and utter silence, though, I'm guessing that this is all news to them, too. And I'm guessing that they're just as clueless as I am about what to say when a friend suddenly reveals—in more consecutive words than he's spoken to me since we met—a bunch of shit about his dysfunctional childhood and the parents who never wanted him.

To buy myself one more second to think, I gulp down my coffee. This feels like another one of the moments where Declan is just waiting for someone to screw up, like saying the wrong thing will confirm to him that he was right to keep quiet about his life for nearly four years. So eventually, I think, *fuck it*, and say, "Kansas, Colorado, and Nebraska, huh?" He inclines his head, not even a real nod. "So, what sort of bullshit team does that leave you supporting? The Colorado Rockies?"

And just like that, all the tension breaks. Declan snorts and says, "Nobody likes the Rockies. You're from Ohio, so you must like, who, the Cincinnati Reds?"

"I'm from Cleveland, so I like the Indians like any good Cleveland boy would—" I try to say, but I'm practically booed away from the table. The debate is instantaneous, and I have to practically yell to be heard, "Alright, maybe they're not the best team, but they're still alright! They were like, *just at the Series*—"

"Dude, 2007 is not *just at the Series*," Sam protests. "And they lost to the fuckin' Red Sox, so what does that say—"

"Excuse me, fuck off. What's wrong with the Red Sox?" Charlie snaps.

"Uh, how about everything?" Taylor says. "They couldn't win shit for almost a century, and I swear to god, if the next sentence out of your mouth has anything to do with the Curse of the motherfucking Bambino, I'm going to—"

"Don't you dare talk to me about the Curse," Charlie warns. "You do not get to talk about the Curse. Everyone here knows who you like."

I'm about to point out that I don't, but Taylor exaggerates a lean back in his chair and says, "And you can shut right up until you guys have got twenty-seven Series titles—"

"—that you haven't won since oh-nine," Steven pipes up, and it goes on from there.

Next to me, Declan leans ever so slightly over in his chair and murmurs, "I'm impressed you managed to pull that off. I half-expected the rest of breakfast to pass in dead silence."

"Expected, or hoped?" I say, and he grins. After a moment of hesitation, I add, "I brought it up, so I figured it was my job to end it. Especially considering the way you had my back about the Barrington thing this morning."

"There's only one person who's allowed to treat my friends like shit, and that's me," Declan says, and I laugh like it's a joke, but his expression tells me it's not. "It was a simple choice to make. You're my friend, Barrington isn't. Maybe it was wrong of me to bust his shoulder like I did, but I don't have a problem with that. I'll do the wrong thing for the right person."

I think of Jamie, and the rush of blood I felt in my veins when Barrington made his remark this morning, and the total ease with which I threw myself at him, nothing left in me but a desire to shred the person who'd dare to say something about my best friend. I swallow and say, "I understand." Declan doesn't reply, but he does continue to watch me for the rest of breakfast, long after I've gone back to eating.

192 days sober

"Do you have anything going on tonight?" Charlie asks me the moment he sits down beside me at the start of MLEP. What I've got going on tonight is a plan that largely consists of spooning my puppy on the couch and watching MMA fights on TV until Travis gets home from class and lets me play him the latest version of the song I'm trying to write. I tell Charlie exactly this, and he gives me a look like he doesn't know whether to laugh at me or pity me. "Yeah, change of plans," he says. "I talked to Taylor, and we want you to hang out with us tonight. Nothing big—just go grab some food or something."

Even the idea of going out and getting a burger with the two of them sounds exhausting. I shake my head and slouch down in my seat. "No, thanks. I'd kind of rather just go home after this."

"And normally I'd accept that and fuck off, but—" Charlie breaks off with a sigh, glances around like he wants to be sure he's not being overheard, but doesn't lower his voice as he says, "Ever since you got back from your trip, you've looked like you want to slit your wrists. And I completely understand why—I understand that you're sad about what happened to James' parents, and you're worried about James himself. But we've only seen two moods out of you since you came back on Monday: foaming-at-the-mouth rage when Barrington shot his mouth off, and... this." He gestures to me. "You just look tired and depressed and like you've totally given up on your life, and... I don't know. We're worried about you. You deserve a night of fun."

I don't want to have fun. Not now, not yet—not when Jamie's still almost a thousand miles away. George and Melissa weren't my parents, but it's only been a week since they died, and I'm still in mourning for them. I can't stomach the idea of pretending that nothing has happened, even if a night out with friends would probably be fun.

"I don't like to leave the dog home alone," I insist. "Travis leaves for work at one o'clock, and Omelette's in the house by himself until I get home from MLEP at five thirty. I have to go home so I can let him out and make sure he has food and play with him outside before it gets too dark. He'll be really upset if there's nobody in the house with him until Trav gets back at ten or eleven. He gets so lonely."

"This is the shittiest excuse I've ever heard," Charlie argues. "Come on, your dog is going to get lonely? Fine, you can go home after MLEP and hang out with your dog. Feed him, play fetch, make sure he's not gonna shit all over your living room or whatever. But then come back later tonight. That way, the dog—what's his name, Omelette? Omelette will only be home alone for like, an hour or two before your boyfriend gets—"

"Roommate," I interrupt. "He's my roommate, don't—don't call him that. He'd get pissed at me."

Charlie sighs. "Dude, I doubt he'd get pissed at you."

"He would. He likes me, but he doesn't want to date me. Not until I'm a year sober or more," I say. "He'd get pissed if he thought I was letting people think he was my boyfriend now. But seriously, man, I don't know. I'm really not sure I wanna go anywhere tonight." I glance up, and Charlie's hazel eyes are round and beseeching. I wrinkle my nose. "That's the same face your brother used to make when he wanted a blowjob, but I was in the middle of doing something else."

"That's something I could have lived the rest of my life without ever hearing," Charlie says around a grimace. I shrug, because fuck him, it's something I could have lived the rest of my life without ever

noticing. He hesitates for a moment, then asks, “Do I do that a lot?”

“What, make Dave’s blowjob request face?” I ask, even though I know what he’s asking. He must know it, too, because he rolls his eyes and shifts restlessly in his seat.

“No, you know what I’m—do I... remind you of a him a lot?”

I turn to face him properly, not because I want to look at his face for this conversation, but because I really need to check. Charlie and Dave have the same eyes; that’s the only thing I’m really sure of. Charlie’s hair is a little lighter, not as curly, and his face isn’t as chiseled as his brother’s; his nose isn’t as straight, his jaw isn’t as angular, his features aren’t so carved out of granite. I might go as far as to say that he isn’t as handsome as Dave, but even after everything else Dave’s done to me, that might just be my own bias. My eyes drop to Charlie’s hands, resting flat on his desk—not clenched into fists, not white-knuckled in fury, not yanking at my clothes, not holding me down.

“No. You don’t remind me of him,” I say finally. “Not the parts of him that scared me, anyway.”

Relief flashes over Charlie’s face, then shame, probably for being so glad to be nothing like his big brother. I suspect he might want to ask more questions, but the classroom is starting to fill up around us, so instead, he says, “Hey, Declan,” the moment Dec slides into the seat next to me. “Taylor and I are going to go out for something to eat late tonight, and we’re trying to convince G to come along. You wanna go, too?”

Declan shrugs. “Sure, but only if it’s after eleven. I’ve got plans over on the Ward campus before that.”

“Who is it tonight?” Charlie asks.

Declan squints up at the ceiling and slowly remembers, “Dorm three, fifth floor, third room after the staircase, bed on the... left? No, the right. The left was last week.”

“Do you remember her name?” Charlie asks, shooting him an exasperated look.

Another shrug. “Kelly? Cassie? I don’t know. She remembers mine, though. She’s a screamer.”

“You’re foul,” Charlie sighs. “Fine. Text us after you blow a load, and we’ll come pick you up.”

‘We’ apparently includes me, even though I haven’t technically agreed to it. After MLEP, I head home to take care of the dog, but around quarter after ten, my phone starts blowing up with texts from Charlie and Taylor, both of them ordering me to drag my ass back to campus. I don’t want to. I really, really don’t want to, but I also don’t want them to keep bugging the shit out of me, so I get dressed in normal clothes, text Travis my plans, haul myself back to Patton, stomp up to the Whitman dorm, and fling myself down between them on the couch in the common room.

“You’re just in time,” Charlie says cheerfully, like he hasn’t had to force me into these plans at all. “Dec just texted, he says he’s almost done and we should head over now.”

Taylor wrinkles his nose. “Almost done? What’d he do, whip out his phone in mid-thrust so he could text you? You know what, nevermind, I don’t even want to know.”

I let myself be dragged down to the parking lot and shuffled into the backseat of Taylor’s car. The drive over to Ward is only a few minutes, so I don’t have to make conversation. Truthfully, I’m not sure they expect me to make any conversation even after we park. We’ve been idling in the back of the residence hall parking lot for maybe ten minutes before I lose my patience. I steal Charlie’s phone out of his jacket pocket and find Declan’s number in his contacts list. It rings for so long, I half expect it to go to voicemail, but eventually, Dec answers, “Yes, Charles?”

"If I'd known it was gonna take you this long to get your fuckin' dick wet, I wouldn't have agreed to this part of the plan," I say. "Also, hi. This is Garen."

He snorts. "I figured that out, thank you. Why are you calling me from Charlie's phone?"

"Because I don't have your number," I say. "Which is kind of weird, now that I think about it. Anyway, you leaving soon?"

"I'm stepping out of Dorm Three and into the res quad as we speak," Declan says. "Where are you all parked?"

"Far side of the lot. Want us to drive over and pick you up in front of the—" The rest of my question is cut off by a muttered curse on Declan's end, and then the call cuts to silence. I frown. "Campbell? You there?" I check the screen of Charlie's phone; the call has been ended. I twist around in my seat just in time to see red and blue lights igniting at the mouth of the residential quad. "Oh, *fuck*."

One of the campus security cruisers has pulled in between the open oak doors at the lot side of the quad, effectively blocking off Declan's only escape route. Even from here, a hundred yards away, I can see Dec standing stock still in the middle of the quad, his face glowing red, then blue, then red again. I feel another twinge of sympathy for him. Even though I hardly ever have a reason to come by Ward, every Patton boy knows that they go apeshit over trespassing after dark.

"Shit," Charlie mutters. "First time, too."

"First time?" I echo.

"Dec's the only one of us who's managed to maintain a perfectly clean record the whole time we've been at Patton," Taylor says. "Four years, and not so much as a detention. He's paranoid that any disciplinary action against him could cost him West Point. Guess it was just a matter of time before—Garen, *what the fuck are you doing?*"

I pause, legs dangling out the door I've just thrown open. "The fuck does it look like I'm doing? I'm going to go get my friend."

"And how do you expect to pull that off?" Charlie demands. "Nicely ask the campus security officers to pretty please overlook the fact that he's trespassing on Ward property in the middle of the night? You know the Ward cops hate us Patton boys, and—"

"I don't think they know he's a Patton boy," I interrupt, keeping my eyes trained on Declan's face to make sure he's not busy fucking himself over even more. "I don't think he's said anything the whole time he's been standing there. Look, that's why the security douche is getting pissed. Declan's not answering any of his questions."

On the seat next to me, Charlie twists around to squint through the back windshield. "That's the *worst* thing he could be doing. I've been caught on campus before—if you just tell them you're visiting from Patton, they bring you back to our school and let security there deal with you. Sergeant Smith tore me a new one, and I had detention for a week, but if they think he's just some random creep on campus, he's going to get himself arrested for real."

I turn quickly to face Charlie. "And if that happens, do you think the guard will call it in first, get some back-up out here? Or do you think he'll just take him somewhere?"

"Probably cuff him, put him in the cruiser, and bring him up to the main security booth," he says, frowning. "Why? What are you planning?"

"I'm going to go get him," I repeat. "Whether he keeps his mouth shut or not, he's going to be put in the

back of the cruiser, right? And I've been in the security cruisers both schools use—there's a cage between the front and the back, and the doors only open from the outside. He can't get himself out, but I can get him out. All I need to do is go over there and wait out of sight until they're both in the car. The second the guard shuts his door, I open Dec's, drag him out, and we make a run for it."

"You plan to outrun a fucking police cruiser?" Taylor hisses. "All the way back to Patton?"

I slide out of the car, shut the door as quietly as I can, and lean back down to say through the open window, "No, I plan to outrun a police cruiser to that wall right there." I point to the four-foot-tall stone wall that borders the parking lot. "If we can get across the lot and over that wall, we'll be able to make it to the woods before he can drive around it. Once we're there, all we've got to do is book it to the other side, and we'll be on Patton property."

"This is such a stupid idea," Taylor groans, but Charlie nods once and says, "Alright. I guess we'll stay parked here until the cop leaves, so he can't take down the license plate number. See you back at school."

And the thing is, I know Charlie's right. I *know* this is a stupid idea, and that the best thing to do is just let Declan get taken in, let him finally admit he's from Ward's brother school, let him get written up. It's not like West Point is going to rescind his acceptance because he got in trouble once his entire time at boarding school. Kidnapping him straight out of a fucking security cruiser is probably the dumbest, most dangerous thing I could do, but I think that's why I want to do it. I want that thrum under my skin that comes from doing something reckless. I want that high I get from fucking up and not getting caught. I want to feel my pulse racing and my breath quickening and my hands shaking, because what's the fucking point of being alive, if I can't *feel* it?

I cut wide across the parking lot so that I can't be seen from inside the quad, then pause once my back is to the nine-foot brick wall that boxes in the quad and dorms. From here, I can hear that the guard has left the cruiser running, which isn't good—if all he's got to do is throw the car in reverse to follow me and Dec, there's a higher chance of us getting caught. Worse still, the car is parked far enough into the quad that I might not be able to reach either of the doors to the backseat unless I'm actually *in* the quad.

I close my eyes and try to listen for something that might help. As best as I can tell, the guard is becoming increasingly frustrated with Declan's continued silence, but neither of them sounds like they're moving. If that's true, Dec might still be standing in the middle of the quad, and the guard might have his back to me. I edge closer to the entrance and chance a two-second glance around the corner. I'm right on all counts; Declan is facing me, the guard is not, and the car is completely out of reach, idling just past the massive oak doors.

Even though every brain cell I've got is screaming at me to stay where I am, I find myself stepping around the corner, right into view. Declan's eyes snap to me, then back to the guard when I shake my head and hold a finger to my lips, trying to signal that he should *not fucking draw attention to me*. There's just enough space for me to edge around the bumper of the car and into the far shadow of the courtyard doors. With my back to the brick, I'm hidden enough that I don't think the guard will notice me if he turns, but I can still see what's happening.

"You're a Patton student, aren't you? You kids are always tromping around over here. If you're from over there, you need to tell me," the guard says, trying and failing to sound authoritative. "I'll turn you over to their security, and they can deal with you. I'll wash my hands of you completely. But if you don't go there—or, if you don't say it to me, if you won't even say that much, I'll have to bring you down to the local police station and let them deal with you there."

Declan's eyes dart towards me again, clearly waiting for some sort of signal. I hold up both palms so he knows not to do anything just yet. I wait, and when he has a chance to sneak another glance at me, I hold both wrists out like I've been handcuffed and nod. It's the closest I can get to reassuring him that he can let himself get put into the car and I'll still get him out of here. He must understand me, because he looks

back at the guard and shrugs, as if to say, *go ahead, I don't care*.

The guard huffs. "Put your hands on your head and turn around." Declan obeys, albeit lazily. The guard removes a pair of handcuffs from his belt and hooks one cuff around Dec's wrist, lowers it to the small of his back, then brings the other wrist down to be secured as well. "You know, kid, you're going to regret not just answering my questions. You must think you're a real badass, huh? Baddest kid at that school, huh?"

I can't help but make a face, because *excuse you, asshole*, I'm pretty sure *I'm* the baddest kid at Patton. Like he can read my mind, Declan chuckles. The guard grabs him by the back of the jacket, yanking him towards the cruiser. I press myself further into the shadows, holding my breath and trying to disappear as much as possible. I can't be entirely out of sight, not if I can still see them so easily, but the guard is more preoccupied with dragging Dec around the passenger side of the car.

Shit. I'd been so concerned with staying hidden in the shadows of the quad doors, I hadn't bothered to think of how the hell I was going to get from my hiding place on the driver's side over to the door on the passenger side without the guard jumping out and grabbing me. The driver's door is *right the fuck there*, and if I come out when he's--

Oh.

My heartbeat quickens even more, because there's an idea that's simultaneously more and less stupid than pulling Dec out of the backseat and making a break for it. If I get caught doing this, there's no way I'll be able to escape an actual arrest. If I don't get caught, though, we'll be home free. I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to figure out what someone less fucking crazy than me would do, but I'm coming up blank. I settle for listening. The engine of the cruiser is still running. The rear passenger door clicks open. The engine is running. The guard manhandles Declan into the backseat. The engine is running. The door slams shut. The engine is running.

If this isn't God asking me to commit auto theft, I don't know what is.

Before my mind can even fully formulate the thought *holy fucking shit, what am I doing*, my eyes are open, and I'm shoving away from the wall, and it's happening. It's happening so fucking fast. I'm yanking open the driver's door—getting behind the wheel—slamming the door shut—pressing the button to lock all the doors—buckling my seatbelt. The guard starts tearing at the handle to Declan's door, but he can't get in. He's bellowing something, but I can't hear it over the sound of blood pulsing in my ears. I look in the rearview mirror; Declan is staring at me, and for the first time in all the months I've known him, he looks stunned.

"Hi there," I say. "My name's Garen, and I'll be your driver this evening."

"Garen," is all Declan can get out.

"If you can't get your seatbelt on, brace yourself against something. Now," I order. He sinks down in his seat and brings his knees up against the back of the passenger seat to steady himself. I straighten the wheel, drop the E-brake, throw the car into reverse, and stomp on the gas.

The guard reels back from the car, thankfully, so I manage to pull out of the quad without accidentally running him over. The second we're clear of the doors, I yank the wheel around and switch to drive, flooring the gas pedal and heading straight for the parking lot exit. I chance a glance over at Taylor's car on the far side of the lot. Our friends are staring at me in complete disbelief, but thankfully, they're not stupid enough to draw attention to themselves by following. A peek at the side mirror tells me that the security guard is trying to chase after the cruiser, but he's not even close to fast enough to catch us. I clear the parking lot with ease and aim for the driveway that leads away from the Ward campus. The red and blue lights are still flashing overhead, and once I've gotten far enough to feel okay about slowing to normal speeds, I flick a few switches until I find the one that shuts them off. The last thing I need is for

another security car to realize something's wrong and start following me. Only once we get to the campus gates do I realize my mistake—instead of taking the back path to the lot, I've put us on the main route, the one that passes the security booth. And there's a fucking guard inside it, frowning over at the cruiser as we get closer and closer.

"Okay, so this was definitely my 'Plan B,' and I'm realizing now that maybe I didn't think it through that well," I say to Declan. He doesn't say anything, though a glance in the mirror tells me that he's still staring at me. "Alright, uh, here's our new plan: stay like you are, keep as still as you can, because the fact that you're not wearing a seatbelt right now kind of makes me feel sick. I'm going to get us past the gate and onto the main road, but once we're far enough down the road that the dude at the gate can't catch us on foot, we need to ditch the car and head for the woods. Got me?"

"Yeah," he says, "I've got you."

The guard at the gate stands up, but there's no time for him to get out of the booth before I drive right past it. He must realize something is up, because he calls after me. I roll to a stop just long enough to make sure there are no cars in cross-traffic, and then I gun it out onto the main road in the opposite direction of the Patton gates. I can't risk having them tail me that way, not until I'm sure my friends will be able to get back without incident.

In the backseat, Declan starts shifting around. When I frown at his reflection in the mirror, he says, "I've got a clip in my wallet. I can pick my way out of the cuffs."

"Cool, cool," I say, dragging my palm over my hair in a poor attempt to steady myself. "Leave 'em on the seat once you're out, but make sure you wipe your prints off first."

We drive in silence for a few minutes, just the two of us, the clinking of his cuffs, and the pounding of my heart. Finally, he frees himself, rubs the cuffs clean on the hem of his t-shirt, dumps them on the floor, and orders, "Pull over here. Can't see it now, but if we cross the road and go about twenty yards into the woods here, we'll be on one of the paths the cross-country team uses for practice. It's only a ten-minute walk to Patton's backyard."

I guide the cruiser into the gravel shoulder and cut the engine. It only takes me about thirty seconds to wipe my prints off everything—steering wheel, light controls, gearshift, seatbelt, inside of the door—but it's apparently long enough for Declan to get impatient. By the time I get out of the car and reach for the handle, he's crowded up against the inside of the door, shifting restlessly like an animal in a cage. I open the door, and he tumbles out, grabs me by the wrist, and drags me across the empty street, into the woods.

We've only managed to pick our way maybe ten feet into the woods when we hear the sirens—the Ward security cars must be trying to hunt us down. Declan's grip on my wrist tightens. "Come on," he says, and we start to move faster. It's pitch black, and the woods aren't exactly easy traveling; there are strays roots and rocks everywhere, and I nearly get my eyes stabbed out by a few stray branches before I give up and pull out of Declan's grasp so that I can walk behind him instead of next to him. I follow his shadow as quickly as I can, trying to keep my footsteps as quiet as possible so we won't draw the attention of the guards who've probably stopped out by the cruiser.

Even once we've cleared the woods and made it to the path, neither of us dares to stop walking or start speaking. Only twenty yards of trees separate us from the people who are bound to be incredibly pissed at us right now, and I don't want to risk giving away our position with conversation, so I pull my phone out of my pocket and send a text to Charlie and Taylor both.

all good on this end. ditched the car, back on patton property. trying 2 stay quiet, DO NOT call me or dec. text when ur back @ school safe.

When I look up after sending the text, I find that Declan is taking advantage of the flatness of the jogging

path and the brightness of the moonlight, walking backwards so that he can face me. If I thought he looked like an animal when he was still locked in the back of the cruiser, it's nothing compared to how he looks now, with his teeth bared in the widest, wildest smile I've ever seen him with.

"So," he says, still cautious enough to keep his voice low, "Garen Anderson steals police cars now."

I roll my eyes and hope he can see it even in the darkness. "So, Declan Campbell's enough of a fucking idiot that I *have* to steal police cars to save his dumb ass."

"Could've left me there," he says. I don't know if it's my imagination, but his voice sounds rougher than it usually does. "It's what anyone else would've done. Christ, it's what I would've done. If I'd been in that car with you, and it had been any of the other boys in the squad who'd gotten caught, and you wanted to go get them, I wouldn't have let you. I would've let them get taken in."

"So would I," I say without thinking. "If it had been anybody else on the squad, I would've let them get taken in, too."

He lets out a breathless little noise that sounds like it might be a laugh. "Not me, though?"

I can't find the words to tell him the truth—that there's something about him that makes me think it'd be less dangerous to steal a cop car tonight than it would be to let him get brought in by the cops and risk suffering his wrath later. That the other guys in the squad would've just taken the detention, and maybe I admire the fact that he stayed dead silent even when faced with worse. That I needed to do something crazy tonight, and this just happened to be the perfect excuse. So instead of trying to find my own words, I give him his.

"I'll do the wrong thing for the right person."

Declan stops walking backwards, though it's dark enough that it takes me a few steps to notice. I manage to stop just short of crashing into him, but before I can back up, he surges forward, and for a panicked, bewildered split-second, I am convinced he's about to attack me. My hands are clenching into fists at the same time that his are coming up to grip the front of my jacket, and then he's not hitting me—he's kissing me.

My mind goes blank. I would've been less surprised by a punch to the face than I am by the feel of his lips on mine. It isn't a short kiss, either; it's not a joke, a laughing peck given in gratitude. It's hungry and hard and terrifying. Nearly three months of wanting this, and I've pictured this dozens of times—usually in a shower stall after PT, with my hand around my dick and the image of him sweat-slicked and panting still fresh in my mind—but I never pictured him *meaning* it. Stoned and snickering and putting on a show for a few Ward girls he wants to bang? Sure. Drunk off his ass and smacking a quick, sloppy kiss to the side of my mouth as a thank-you for driving him back to the dorm? Absolutely. But clutching at my jacket and backing me up against the nearest tree and serious as hell? I never, ever imagined it like this.

He pulls back, and finally, *there's* the laughter. But it's breathless and quiet, and he cuts himself off with another hard press of his mouth to mine before he pulls back again to say, "Knew you understood. The other day, what happened with Barrington, what I did to him. I *knew* you understood."

I'm beginning to wonder if maybe he's high after all, because I have no fucking clue what he's talking about. I've never seen him like this, so excited and open, and it's a little disconcerting. I'm still kind of convinced it's a fluke, but what the hell—I frame his face with my hands and yank him back in for another kiss. And he kisses me back. I think that's the most shocking part of this—that he wants to keep going. His mouth opens under mine, and when his tongue comes out to meet mine, I can feel the faintest touch of the metal barbell that goes through it.

Just like that, all of my hesitation is gone, because *fuck*. Maybe he's running on an adrenaline rush, maybe he's on a fuckload of drugs I don't know about, but maybe he just wants me *back*, and if that's the

case, I'm sure as hell going to let it ride. One of the hands I've got on his face tips his head back so I can move my mouth to his throat, and the other hand drops down to grab a palmful of that sweet ass. He flattens his body against mine, rocking up against me, and Christ, he's actually hard. I must make some sort of noise over that, because he breathes out another laugh and goes for my wrist, guiding my hand to his belt as he says, "You never struck me as the type to be afraid to touch."

"I don't wanna *touch it*, dude, I wanna fucking *choke* on it," I say.

Before he can say another word or change his mind or remember that he's actually *straight*, I sink to my knees right there in the dirt and start working open the buckle of his belt and the fly of his jeans. As soon as I've lowered his zipper, he hooks his thumbs over the waistband of his jeans and boxers and shoves both down just enough for me to get his dick out. As eager as I am to get to it, I still allow myself to take a few seconds to really appreciate everything I'm seeing here—the delicious v-cut of muscle leading down to his groin, the freckles scattered all over the paper-white skin of his hips, the closely-trimmed thatch of dark red hair at the base of his dick. And shit, his dick is *beautiful*; it's a little longer than average, cut, nice and thick. The kind of dick that makes my mouth water and all my friends make fun of me because I'm just that *gay*.

I grip his hips and pull him towards me so that I can take him right down to the root in one long swallow. Above me, he barely manages to stifle a groan, and I think I hear him bringing up a hand to brace himself against the tree behind my back. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't pleased with the reaction; it's not like I learned to deep-throat for my fucking health. I pull off and trace the thick vein on the underside of his dick with my tongue, pausing at the tip to give some special attention to the head before sinking all the way down again and starting up a steady rhythm of taking him all the way in. My blood feels white-hot under my skin, like I'm burning from the inside out, and *this* is exactly the sort of bad decision I wanted to make tonight.

In the pocket of my jacket, my phone starts buzzing insistently. I have no intention of answering it, but Declan pulls out of my mouth and hauls me upright by the shoulders of my jacket so that he can fish around in my pocket for the phone.

"What the fuck, dude, ignore it," I say. My voice is hoarse from getting my throat fucked, and Dec must like that, because his eyes darken, and he presses in for another kiss before he accepts the incoming call, pulls away from me, and says, "What do you want?"

From this close, it's easy to hear Charlie's voice on the other end asking, "Where the hell are you guys? I thought you said you were back at school."

"We are," Declan says, shifting to pin my phone between his ear and shoulder so that his hands are free to start unbuckling my belt. My pulse jumps, and I have to remind myself that pressing my dick against his hip to urge him to move faster would probably be considered impolite—I do it anyway.

I hear Charlie make an impatient noise before saying, "Okay, well, do you mind telling me *where*? We're in the senior parking lot right now, it took a couple minutes to get back 'cause we were trying to avoid any route the cops might've taken."

"Wait there for us. We'll come to you," Declan says.

"Where the hell are you guys?" Charlie repeats.

I lean in close to whisper in Declan's free ear, "Wrap up the phone call. Hearing my psychotic ex-boyfriend's little brother in the background kind of kills my hard-on."

Declan shoves a hand past my unbuckled belt and into my still buttoned jeans, circling a hand around my dick and laughing out a whispered, "Liar."

"What'd you say?" Charlie asks.

"Nothing, Charles, Jesus Christ," Declan groans, half out of exasperation, half because I've started stroking him off. His hand—big and warm and rough with callouses—is still wrapped around me, but he isn't moving it. Impatient for some real friction, I pop the button on my jeans and yank down the zipper so that I've got room to wrap one of my hands around his, tightening his grip and pushing forward into the circle of his fist. It's a little too rough with no spit or slick to ease the way, but I'm willing to forgive that, because unless I'm incredibly mistaken, this is the first time he's touched any dick but his own. That in itself is enough to get me even harder, enough to make me wish I could be back on my knees for him right now.

Once I'm sure I can let go of his hand without him letting go of my cock, I reach up and snatch the phone away from him. I say, "We left the car on the side of the road and have to make our way back through the woods. We're still walking back. We'll meet you at the—" Declan's mouth comes to my throat, and he starts sucking a mark just above the collar of my t-shirt. My head tips back to rest against the tree, and my eyes flutter shut. I have to sink my teeth into my lip for a few seconds to stop myself from making a noise that'll give us away, but I eventually manage to say, in as close to a normal voice as I can hope to get, "We'll meet you at the parking lot. Shouldn't take much longer."

"Ten minutes," Declan says, loudly enough to be heard on the call.

I hold the phone away from my mouth and whisper, "Bet I could make it less than five, if you let me finish going down on you."

He kisses me again, nips at my lower lip with his teeth, and I barely remember to bring the phone back to my ear in time to hear Charlie sigh, "Fine, fine. Ten minutes. Walk faster, assholes."

I end the call and drop the phone, not caring if I break the screen, but Declan stops me when I try to go to my knees again. Instead, we end up rutting up against one another, each of us fucking the other's fist and muffling our moans in dirty, open-mouthed kisses. When he comes, he sinks his teeth into the shoulder of my leather jacket and at least has the presence of mind to twist his hips so he's not getting off on my clothes. It's more than I'm able to remember when I follow him a minute later, but my dazed expression must be enough of a warning, because just as I start to feel that low buzz of impending orgasm, he shoves me around until I'm face-first against the tree, with his chest flat against my back and one of his hands reaching around to finish me off. I'd love to be able to say that I get off without making way too much noise and a mess all over the trunk of the tree, but that would be an out-and-out lie, and I can't really bring myself to care. For a while, all I can do is stand there with my forearms folded against the tree, my head hanging low between my shoulders and my eyes on the ground.

Suddenly, the screen of my phone lights up with an incoming call with Taylor, and a series of disjointed, disgusting thoughts all hit me at once, faster than I can even process—Taylor's calling me, and I don't even have Declan's phone number—I don't have his number because why the fuck would he give his number to some pathetic guy who's so hard up over him—he's straight, and I swore I was done with straight guys after that first night with Travis—I swore I wouldn't forget the way he shrugged me off the next morning, and how badly it hurt to think he'd just been experimenting with me, and that I didn't mean anything to him, and—god, Travis is *home* right now, in *our* house, with *our* dog, and I can't believe I forgot about them, about everyone but myself—Travis is at home with my dog, and Jamie's all alone in Georgia, and his parents are dead, and I can't believe I left him there alone—there's an entire world outside of Patton, and I'm standing in the woods, panting, my jeans gaping open, my dick hanging out, Declan's hands on me, and—why am I always so fucking selfish? Why can't I be a good person and a good friend just *once*?

I have no idea what I'm supposed to do, or where all of this is coming from. Twenty seconds ago, I was fine, I was getting off, and now, all I want to do is go home. I'm almost breathless now, crippled by the weight of everything I'm feeling. I don't know what's wrong with me, and I don't know how the fuck I'm supposed to fix it—not on my own.

"We should go meet the guys," I say, surprised I can get the words out of my numb lips. Not knowing if I'm talking to him or myself, I add, "You should put your clothes back on." I nearly maim myself in my haste to tuck my dick back into my jeans before I stoop to collect my phone and answer the call with a rushed, "Yeah, hi, we're coming."

"I know you don't live on campus, but the rest of us have got a friggin' curfew," Taylor says.

"I fucking *know* that, Lewis, Christ. Quit your bitching," I snap. I hang up without waiting for him to reply, and I jog the rest of the path without waiting to see if Declan is following. He must be, though, because when I finally get to the senior parking lot a minute later, Taylor says, "There you guys are."

"Yeah, yeah," Declan replies from just behind me. "So sorry that Garen's first-degree felony didn't fit into your schedule. Don't think I didn't notice that he was the only one who did a damn thing to help me, by the way."

"Pretty sure we wouldn't have all fit behind the quad doors," Charlie points out, then, "Hey, Garen, you're leaving?"

My car keys are out of my pocket and into the lock of my car door before I even think to glance over at them. I open the door and sink down behind the seat. "Yeah. I'm, uh... I'm gonna go home. I want—I'll see you guys tomorrow, I guess."

"Alright," Charlie replies, frowning at me. Before any of them can question my eagerness to get out of here, I start the car and peel out of the parking lot. The drive home is completely silent, without even the blaring radio to keep me company. For one of the first times in my life, I don't think I can stomach music right now. I don't think I deserve it. When I get back to the house, the first thing I do is stagger upstairs and into the bathroom. It's like I can't shower fast enough or thoroughly enough to scrub off the feeling of worthlessness I'm drowning in now. And still that chorus runs through my mind--

Why did I leave Jamie alone?

Why can't I be a better friend?

Why am I such a bad person?

I cut the water off and wrap myself up in one of the fluffy blue bath towels. When I step back into the hall, I see that Travis' bedroom door is open, and the light is on. Though I know I should go to bed—if I don't deserve the comfort of music, I sure as hell don't deserve the comfort of his voice—I find myself shuffling down the hall to lean against his doorjam.

Travis is on the bed, leaning back against his pillows, highlighting a paragraph of his textbook with his left hand and scratching behind Omelette's ear with his right. Omelette spies me first, and he gives an ecstatic little wriggle in place, thumping his huge, fluffy tail against the bed over and over. Travis glances up and gives me a faint smile. "Hey. You have fun with your friends tonight?"

Slowly, I shake my head no, and his smile fades. Omelette is still writhing around, looking for attention, but when I reach out to pet him, Travis shakes his head and gestures to his chest of drawers in the corner. "Get dressed, then come tell me about it."

I trudge over to the dresser and dig out a pair of soft, green sweatpants, pulling them on under the towel before I ditch it on the ground. All of Travis' shirts would be uncomfortably tight on me, but I'm able to find a plain black shirt that I'm pretty sure used to be mine, once upon a time. When I turn around, I find that Travis has herded Omelette to the foot of the bed, leaving the space next to him free for me. I sprawl out over it, but he curls an arm around my shoulders and drags me closer until I give up and tuck my face against the side of his neck.

"Did something happen?" he asks softly, tracing gentle circles against my shoulder with the tip of his middle finger. "Or, are you still just sad about James?"

"I didn't even *think* about James for most of the night," I whisper. "That's why—I'm just not a good friend, I think. I should have stayed home, in case he needed to call me."

"*Did* he call you?"

I shrug. "No, but he could have, and I probably wouldn't have picked up, because I would've been busy. And it—I did something kind of bad, I guess." He waits for me to explain, but I don't want to. Omelette sneaks up the bed on Travis' other side, and I reach across to pet him. A minute passes, and I grudgingly admit, "My friend was getting in trouble, so I stole the police cruiser he was in so that I could help him evade arrest, and then we fucked around in the woods, even though I know he's straight and kind of a slut and only wanted to get off."

Travis' hand goes still on my shoulder. I burrow closer to his neck, waiting for the fallout. Finally, he repeats my earlier words, "You did something kind of bad, you guess."

"Yeah."

"You stole a police cruiser with a person in it. And you fled from the cops. And you boned a slutty, straight guy who only wanted to use you for sex. And *you did something kind of bad, you guess.*"

"Yeah."

"Okay. Can I have a minute to, you know, process this?" he asks. I nod. We wait. I whisper Omelette's name, and the dog flops across Travis' chest so that he can get close enough to give my arm a weirdly thorough tongue bath. I push his face away, and he makes a muffled snorting sound before tucking himself up against Travis' side, practically the mirror image of me. Finally, Travis asks, "Which friend was it?"

He sounds like he already knows, and after what he witnessed at the laser tag arena a week ago, I guess he might. "Declan Campbell."

I can't see his grimace, but I can feel his jaw shifting near the top of my head. "I was afraid you were going to say that. He's the redhead, right?" I nod. "He's, uh... you know he's kind of an asshole, don't you? I know he's your friend, and I'm not saying he shouldn't be, but he's—"

"I know," I mumble. "It's not—I don't think I like him, not like that. He's my friend 'cause he's fun to hang out with, and he's—" I think of Barrington and his fucked-up arm, I think of the police cruiser and the way he'd thrown himself into the kiss, I think of how *I'll do the wrong thing for the right person*. "—loyal. He's a good friend. And he's cute, but I'm not—I just wanted to be a bad person tonight. And he was there to make that happen."

"You're not a bad person, G," Travis murmurs, twisting to press a lingering kiss to the top of my head. "No matter what you did tonight, I know you're not a bad person. And I know you better than almost anyone does."

Better than anyone but Jamie, is what he means, and there it is again; the curl of regret in my stomach, because I know I should have stayed in Georgia with him. But I'm here in New York now, and I can't really do anything about that. Travis keeps repeating it, over and over, but it doesn't matter—I still feel like a bad person.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“To lose one parent may be regarded as misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness.” –Oscar Wilde

196 days sober

I'm already on my way to the city to meet Mom for my birthday dinner when Jamie texts to let me know that he has just landed at JFK. *I'm sure you have plans of some sort already*, the message says, *but if you have some spare time later tonight, may I swing by the house? I want to give you your present.*

I call him instead of texting, and when he picks up, the first words out of my mouth are, “I’m about twenty minutes away from you right now. If you’re willing to wait, I can pick you up at the airport.”

“You don’t have to do that,” he says, and then, in almost the same breath, “Thank you. Meet me at the baggage claim?”

“Yeah. See you in a bit,” I say. The moment I’ve ended the call and come to a stoplight, I call my mom.

“Happy birthday,” she warbles down the line at me.

I cringe. Definitely didn’t get my singing talent from her. “Listen, Mom, I’m going to be a little bit late.”

“Are you ever on-time?” she sighs.

“Sometimes, but I don’t—no, you know what? Shut up, I was close to being early, but Jamie just called to say he’s back in New York, so I’m gonna pick him up from the airport. He might want to hang out after, I didn’t ask. I know he wants to give me my birthday present, but I’m not going to ditch him five seconds after—”

“Garen,” Mom interrupts. “I understand. Tell him he’s more than welcome to join us for dinner, if he’d like to. He shouldn’t be alone now. Give that boy a hug for me.”

I can’t see how I could ever let him go now. When I get to JFK, park the car, and make my way to baggage claim, I find that giving Jamie a hug isn’t really an option; one of his hands is holding the handle of his suitcase, and the other is clutching a pet carrier. I murmur a greeting, and he lets me wrap an arm around his shoulders, even though he can’t hug me back.

“Happy birthday,” he says. “I’m sorry if I’ve interrupted your plans.”

“I’m supposed to meet Mom for dinner, but I told her I was picking you up instead. She wants you to come out with us, if you’re feeling up to it,” I say. I press a quick kiss to his cheek and add, “How are you?”

“I can’t wait to get back to the apartment,” he confesses. “I read online that flying with animals tends to go better if you keep them in the cabin with you, stashed in a carrier under the seat in front of you. But this little bitch spent the entire flight trying to claw through the side of the damn thing to get at me. I should’ve just tossed her in the cargo hold and let her get crushed by someone’s suitcase. And did you know that you have to take kittens out of their carriers and bring them through the security checkpoint in your arms? The carrier needed to be scanned, and it’s obviously not safe to send an animal through an X-ray, so I had to try to keep a hold on her while she did her best to fight her way to freedom. An entire line of people watched me nearly lose a fight with a kitten smaller than my shoe. It was shameful.”

Given that I have no real sense of self-preservation, I poke a finger into the pet carrier and wiggle it, just to see if I’ll get attacked, too. Zooey bats at it, nibbles just once, then rubs the space behind her ears against my knuckle. Jamie looks *pissed*. I retract my hand and say, somewhat lamely, “Ow. She, uh... bit me.”

"She did not," Jamie says. He raises the carrier to face height and peers in at her. "Why don't you *like* me, you furry asshole?"

"Maybe she speaks English," I say, shrugging. "You insult her every time you talk to her, and she probably takes it personally."

"I insult you all the time as well, but that doesn't mean you bite me every time I try to pet you," Jamie mutters.

In the interest of keeping him in one piece, I take the cat carrier from him and let him be the one to carry the suitcase out to the car. He looks tempted to ask if we can toss the kitten in the trunk, too, but when I give him A Look, he reluctantly lets the cat carrier ride shotgun with him. Of course, it's with a very sternly spoken, "Zooey, if you piss in this thing while it is on my lap, I will feed you to a police horse in Central Park. I am not joking."

"Is she litter-trained?" I ask, pulling out of the parking garage. "Do you need me to stop at a Petco or something so you can pick up supplies for her?"

"She's trained. Well, she's *litter*-trained, not trained in the ways of behaving like a pleasant and respectable companion," Jamie says. "I went online a few days ago and placed an order for everything she should need—a litterbox, feeding dishes, a scratching post. It was all shipped in, and I spoke to my building's concierge, who was more than happy to use the maintenance key to my apartment so that it would all be set up when I get there. Granted, this was after I informed him that I'd finally be shelling out for that exorbitant pet fee. I suspect he would've agreed to eat his own meals out of a cat dish, for that amount."

Sure enough, when we get to the apartment, there is a full dish of kibble on the ground next to the refrigerator, and a ridiculous floor-to-ceiling climbing tree set up in the corner of the living room. It's black and white, just like the rest of the room. I stare at it. "Seriously, dude? There are like, a dozen levels to this thing. I don't think she's even big enough to climb from one piece to the next. Don't you think this might be a little... I dunno. Extravagant?"

Jamie scoffs. "What did you expect me to buy, a ten-dollar scratching post that's nothing more than a strip of carpet stapled to a cardboard tube? She's a Goldwyn; she *needs* something a bit extravagant, or she won't fit in with the family. Besides, she'll grow into it."

I unzip the carrier and scoop Zooey out of it, holding her aloft and intoning, "Everything the light touches is your kingdom."

"She's not Simba, for fuck's sake," Jamie says. "Now help me find where the doorman put her litter box, because if she pees on my white carpet, I'll toss her off the balcony and see if she bounces."

The litter box is in the bathroom, rightfully so. I plunk Zooey down on the tile in front of it and leave her there while I go search for any toys Jamie might have bought her. Sitting in a box on his bed, there are a few stuffed mice with bells and feathers and bullshit attached, and a long ribbon that dangles from the end of a stick, and a cushion full of catnip. All of that loses my interest pretty quickly, though, because Zooey's bed is on the floor at the foot of Jamie's own bed.

And the cat bed is an actual bed. Or, a sofa, I guess, because it has arms and a back, and it's only maybe two feet wide, but still, it's made of fucking memory foam. It matches the decor. I stride back out into the kitchen to say, "Are you fucking kidding me with that cat bed? I know humans with smaller beds than that."

"Speaking of..." Jamie murmurs. It's then that I notice that he's holding a folded piece of paper that was apparently left tented on the counter. I watch his eyes track back and forth as he reads, and when he

finishes, he passes it to me.

J— it reads. Travis and I took the liberty of cooking you a few meals and storing them in your freezer. We didn't know what else to do, or how else we might help. If you need anything else, please let one of us know. Thoughts and prayers with you. Ben.

The bottom half of the page has heating instructions for the food, but squeezed between Ben's name and the instructions is a short note in Travis' handwriting: *All the parts about cooking should have been singular. He did all the work while I sat on your couch and watched Mythbusters. Hope you're taking care of yourself. Love you. Ben does, too.*

The last sentence has been hastily scribbled out, probably by Ben himself. I toss the note onto the counter, but Jamie picks it right back up and secures it to the front of the refrigerator with a magnet. Since he's there anyway, he digs around in the freezer, eventually surfacing with a baking dish of lasagna and a *groan*.

"Sweet Lord, I'm going to eat this entire thing at once," he says. "I've been living off nothing but lowcounty cooking for two fucking weeks now, and I swear, if I never see another piece of fried chicken in my life, I will be a happy man."

"You're sharing that," I order, pointing at the lasagna with one hand, twisting the knob on the oven with the other. "Ben's lasagna is the food of the gods. I've proposed to him twice over it."

"If it's that good, I suppose I *have* to share," Jamie sighs. "Perhaps you could call Marian and ask if she'd like to come here, too. We could all eat this instead of going anywhere. That is, if you wouldn't prefer something a bit more elegant for a birthday dinner."

I snort. "Yeah, Jamie, 'cause if there's on thing in the world that I'm concerned with, it's the elegance of my meals. Come on. You've seen me lie down on a dorm room bed so that I could eat off of my own chest just because I was too lazy to look for a plate."

Jamie looks revolted at the memory. "You were eating *macaroni salad*. If it had been a sandwich, that would have been one thing. I could even forgive pizza, though the grease would be messy. But there was mayonnaise smeared all over you. It was disgusting."

"Fuck off. I showered right after," I say, sending my mom a text to alert her to the change of plans. "Or, well, fairly soon after. Anyway, you're the one who just said you plan to eat this entire lasagna by yourself, so who's the fatass now?"

"I was exaggerating," Jamie says loftily.

I'm not too sure he was, though. By the time my mom rings the buzzer thirty minutes later, the lasagna is ready. Jamie dons some gay-looking oven mitts, removes it from the oven, and lifts the corner of the tinfoil to sniff at it. And then, in a move that surprises even me, he whines, grabs a fork, and sits right down in the middle of the kitchen floor. When Mom finally gets to the apartment door and lets herself in, she finds Jamie reclining against the fridge and eating lasagna right out of the serving dish, and me standing over him with my phone in hand.

Mom cocks her head to the side and asks, "James, dear. Are you stoned?"

"Surprisingly, no," I say, taking another picture of him as he sucks a smear of sauce off the inside of his wrist. I send the picture to Ben, along with the message, *jamie just converted, he now worships your cooking as much as i do. marry us both, polygamy totally ok in the church of the holy cannoli*. "Ben McCutcheon is trying to prove his worthiness as a prospective mate by demonstrating his skills as a food provider, and Jamie is accepting his advances by feasting like a savage. Also, by getting severely fucked the next time they hang out, probably. It's all very Animal Planet."

"Delightful," Mom says.

"It is, isn't it?" I agree cheerfully.

A minute later, Ben sends a reply. *Cannoli are Sicilian. But I could make a tiramisu that would get your dick hard.* Almost immediately after, another text comes. *Glad he's enjoying the food.*

I show Jamie the messages. He wipes his hands on a dish towel and takes out his own phone, and I use his momentary distraction to steal the lasagna from him and Zooey, who has finished her exploration of the apartment and now seems to mostly want to explore the meal. Mom takes the dish from me and sets it on a potholder in the middle of the table. She asks, "Do we get to use plates and forks, or are we also going to be accepting Ben McCutcheon's advances by dining like savages? Because I must say, I think he's a bit too young for me. Also, a bit too interested in men."

"Don't worry, Mom, I've boned him enough for the both of us. So has Jamie," I assure her. I retrieve three plates from the cupboard, then three forks and a spatula from a drawer so that I can start doling out portions of the lasagna.

"That's a fairly recent development, isn't it?" Mom says, eying Jamie.

He glances up from his phone, hesitates, then admits, "That probably depends on how you're choosing to view the situation. The advances? Those have been going on for nearly five months. The dating is more recent, in that I have asked him out—twice—and he has accepted—twice—but we haven't had a chance to actually go anywhere."

"I'm going to Connecticut this Saturday," I say. "I've got therapy at the LRC at eleven, but I was going to head to New Haven after that. Al and I are probably going to meet up with Stohler. If you want, you can come along and hang out with Ben before he has to be at work at two. Maybe you guys could get lunch together or something. Finally get around to that first date."

Mom shoots me a warning look.

"Or not," I hastily add. "You don't have to, if you don't want to date yet. You don't have to date anybody. Ever, if that's what you want. I mean, if there's other stuff you want to focus on, or other things that are making it hard for you to uh, form an emotional connection—"

"Other stuff' like my parents being dead? You can say the words. It won't make them any more or less gone," Jamie says dryly. "Trust me, Garen. That is the absolute last thing I want to focus on. I'll come to New Haven with you—I'll be at your house to pick you up at nine on Saturday. We can take the Cadillac."

I frown. "Fuckin' excuse you, but what's wrong with my Ferrari?"

"What's wrong with your Ferrari is that it would fold like a fucking sheet of paper in a wreck," Jamie says. "Trust me, I've spent the past few days looking up the safety statistics and watching videos of crash test demonstrations for the vehicles driven by everyone I know and care about. You ever crash that Ferrari, and you're dead."

That's... incredibly twisted, but I don't think I have any right to say so. Instead, I take a bite of lasagna and stare at my plate.

Jamie adds, "You should check your email more often, by the way. I sent you a list of cars you should consider trading it in for."

And the thing is, I love my car, but I love Jamie more. I know he can be a bit... obsessive. If he's going to be picturing me totaling the Testarossa and dying a horrible, fiery death just like his parents every time I

drive around the block, it's not worth keeping. I say, "I'll look at the list. And I'll think about it."

"Thank you. The fact that you'll even do that much means a lot to me," he says quietly. "I know the car was a present."

"A birthday present," I clarify. It's the easiest way to dig our way out of this sudden mess of a conversation. "And *oh wait*, it's my birthday right now. And a little bird told me I'd be getting a present."

"A little bird did tell you that, yes," Jamie agrees. He stands up and tucks the phone back into his pocket before he strides out of the room and down the hall. A minute passes, and when he returns, he is holding a hardshell guitar case. My heart stops beating.

"What the fuck," I say. "Dude, you didn't."

Jamie looks at the case, then back at me. "I pretty clearly *did*. Perhaps now, you'll stop bitching about how badly you wish you had an acoustic guitar." He frowns at himself, then corrects, "Acoustic-electric. The midget helped me pick this out—"

"You mean, you told him you wanted to get me a guitar, he picked it out entirely on his own, and you footed the bill," I interrupt.

"Yes, that. Anyway, he was quite specific that it was an acoustic-electric. Which I would hope means something to you, because it means nothing to me," he says. He carefully sets it down on the table and unlatches it. "Would you like to see it?"

I nod. He flips open the lid, and I want to fucking cry. It's a gorgeous, cherry red dreadnought, nestled in a bed of plush red lining, and it's so perfect that I'm afraid to touch it. Instead of getting my possibly-sauce-covered hands all over it, I turn and throw my arms around Jamie's neck.

"Thank you. I love you. Thank you," I say. "It's beautiful. I can't wait to play it."

"That was an incredibly thoughtful gift, James," Mom says. "I'm sure it will come in very handy this fall... when Garen goes off to college and starts his music program."

Jamie pulls away from the hug to shoot me a curious look, like he thinks I might have planned my entire future while he was off in Georgia. I just look at Mom and sigh. "How did I know you were going to find a way to bring this up sometime tonight?"

"Because you're a clever young man," she says. "Clever enough that I'm sure any school would be lucky to have you as a student. In fact, I can think of about five schools who should have made their decision regarding that very issue."

"You mean... these five schools?" I say. I haul my backpack out from under the table where I dropped it and dig around in it until I find the five sealed envelopes. Two of them are huge, and everyone knows the huge envelope means they're sending you brochures and orientation information because you got in.

Mom practically falls onto one of them, tearing it halfway open before she realizes they're not even her letters. She freezes, then gestures to it and asks, "May I?"

"Opening someone else's mail is a federal offense," I say.

She narrows her eyes. "It's called obstruction of correspondence, and it's only applicable if the person opening the letter does so before the recipient is aware of its delivery. You are more than aware of these letters' delivery, because you handed them to me. Permission to open them is implied. Don't you dare try to use the law to stop me from invading your life, because that is not a battle you will win."

I flick my fingers towards the letters, a sort of *go ahead then* gesture. She flies into a letter-opening frenzy, and less than two minutes later, I'm staring down at four acceptances and one rejection. NYU, Berklee, OSU, and the Manhattan School of Music all want me; Northwestern wants me to go fuck myself. Mom flings this last letter in the direction of the trash can. It flutters to the floor, and Jamie retrieves it, reads it, and tosses it out.

"This is excellent, Garen," Mom says. Despite the fact that she's been telling me for months that I'm bound to get in everywhere, the relief is plain on her face. "I'm so proud of you. You should call your father, I'm sure he'll be—"

"I'm not going," I interrupt. She stares at me. I shrug. "I kept my end of the agreement, didn't I? He said he wanted me to apply to five schools, and I applied. I told you both from the beginning that it wouldn't change anything. I don't want to go to college."

There is a very long, very uncomfortable moment of silence. Jamie coughs.

"Perhaps you should take some more time before you make your final decision. Really give it some thought," he says carefully. "Two of these schools are right here in the city. Maybe you could choose one of them. Once you graduate, you won't have to live out in Pelham to be halfway between here and Patton. If you and Travis were both students here, it would make sense for the two of you to move to Manhattan." He spreads his arms to the sides, indicating the apartment. "Hell, you could move in here. It'd be a great big roommate reunion."

"There are three of us and only two bedrooms," I point out. "Plus, Omelette might eat your kitten."

"That wouldn't be much of a loss, if it would stop her from eying my sofa like she's considering the best way to shred the leather. And she's not *my* kitten, she's my ma—" Jamie breaks off and scowls down at Zooey, who is batting at my untied boot lace. "They might adapt to one another. They're both still young enough that I'm sure they'd get used to it. And as to the number of bedrooms, Travis has made it abundantly clear that he intends to be back in your bed the moment you're officially one year sober."

For a split second, I have the twisted desire to retort, *I might not ever make it to a full year sober, with my track record*. But I'm not cruel enough to say that in front of my mom, who is still rereading the acceptance letters. Instead, I say, "You're working with outdated information. A lot went down while you were in Georgia." Specifically, me, on a straight boy, after stealing a police cruiser. Another thing I'm sure my mom would love to hear. "I've got a new guy now. Travis knows about him, too. Doesn't give a shit."

Travis would hate me for saying he doesn't care, and Declan would hate me for pretending that our grope in the woods was anything more than an experimental one-off, but I just want to get everyone off my back, and making them uncomfortable seems to be the only way to ensure that.

It doesn't work. Mom looks up from the letters and narrows her eyes. "Is this new guy the reason you don't want to go to college?"

"Mom, no, that's not—Dec *has* a future, he's headed to West Point in July. This has nothing to do with him," I protest. "I just don't want to go to college. I've never wanted that, and I've never pretended—"

"Dec as in Declan?" Jamie interrupts, frowning at me. "The ginger who copped an attitude with Travis at laser tag? Since when are you involved with him? I thought he was straight."

"Yeah, I did, too, until his dick was in my mouth," I hiss, like that does anything to stop my mom hearing me from three feet away. At least she doesn't adopt that long-suffering look that Dad always gets when I start talking about my sex life. When Jamie continues to frown at me, I slouch down in my seat and say, "Look, I said I'd apply to schools, and I did, and I got in. Yay me. I'm still not going."

Mom crosses her arms. "Then what do you plan to do after graduation?"

I haven't thought that far ahead yet, is very heavily implied in my silence, but it's also the wrong thing to say. Even I realize that.

When I don't give an answer, Mom says, "Your father and I can't force you to go to college. Even if we found a way to make you pick one, even if we paid all the deposits and dropped you off at a dorm come fall, we couldn't force you to go to class or do your work, so you could flunk out in a semester, if you really dug your heels in."

"Which we all know I would," I mutter.

"Fine. Then you need to get a job," she says.

"A what?" I say, then immediately regret it for the exasperated look she gives me.

"A job," Jamie whispers. "As I understand it, it's something that most adults are expected to acquire and regularly perform at. It's how you get money to buy things, when you've been a naughty boy and the Trust Fund Fairy doesn't want to come to your house anymore."

I kick him a few times under the table. "Don't fucking patronize me. You've never had one either."

"And I'm not sure I'll ever need one, given the amount of money I've just inherited," he says. He's wearing a tight smile as he says the words, but I can tell that he's nowhere near ready to be making jokes about his parents' death. Who would be? My under-the-table kicks turn into a reassuring press of my boot sole to his shin. He presses back.

I clear my throat and say, "So, here's the thing, Mom. I'm not actually qualified for any jobs."

"And of course, refusing to go to college is the best way to remedy that," she sneers. "You can't expect your father and I to support you for the rest of your life. We've had to fight you enough just to get you to finish high school, and now you don't want to go into higher education, so you need to find a way to support yourself. After graduation, we're not going to keep depositing rent and utilities money into your account, if all you're going to be doing is tooling around New York."

"I don't know what you expect me to do," I groan. "I have absolutely no marketable skills. I have no job experience. How do you think I'm going to get hired anywhere? Especially since the economy is like, total shit right now."

"Yes, clearly we are feeling the financial pain," Jamie says dryly, gesturing once more to the beautiful furnishings of his apartment. "Good Lord, Garen. 'The economy is total shit right now.' Like that has had any impact on your lifestyle whatsoever. There could be another stock market crash so abysmal that businessmen start diving out of their windows, and you wouldn't even know about it."

"I'm pretty sure the bodies strewn all over the sidewalk outside *your* Upper East Side luxury apartment might clue me in. Don't pretend you aren't just as much of a spoiled brat as I am," I snap. "Besides, you don't know, I could understand, like... economic things."

"Economic things," Mom whispers, pinching the bridge of her nose.

As a last ditch effort, I try, "Listen, some of my best friends are, uh... poor people."

"I'm fairly certain that McCutcheon would punch you in the throat, if he heard you say that," Jamie says.

"Not as hard as he'd punch you for automatically thinking of him when someone says 'poor people,'" I say, and Jamie lifts a shoulder, conceding the point.

"I have made a huge error somewhere in raising you," Mom says. "Or at the very least, your father did. William is a goddamn tax accountant. How is it even remotely possible that you are nineteen years old, and yet you still seem to be half-convinced that money grows on trees?"

I open my mouth to agree that yes, I am nineteen as of today, because it's my fucking birthday, which means I shouldn't be getting lectured, but Mom is on a roll.

"I should have insisted you get a job the moment you turned sixteen, but it's better late than never. Find a job. Learn to support yourself. If you're enough of an adult to decide to give up the rest of your education, then you're enough of an adult to support yourself. After graduation, you either start paying your own rent, or you go back to living with your father or me."

I stare at her. "What about my roommate? Travis and I have a lease until July first. If I can't find a job and you make me come home after I graduate at the end of May, what the fuck is he supposed to do about the June rent? Or the next lease? He still goes to school here, I can't bail on him. He'd have no one to pay the other half of the rent."

"That would be Travis' problem," Mom says. It seems like it pains her to say the words, but not nearly as much as it pains me to hear them.

Travis is full-time at both school and work, but he only makes minimum wage, and even though he has saved almost every dime he has made in the past two years, I know he has been hemorrhaging money since he started school. Between tuition, textbooks, the cost of transportation, and half the rent and utilities, he's barely scraping by. I'm not even sure he's actually making more money than he's spending, and every time I hand him my rent check and see him sit down to pay our living costs, his frown looks a little bit deeper. If I stopped paying my half of the rent, he'd have to drop out of school and get another job just to hold things over until he could get a new roommate. Leaving him is not an option.

"I'll get a job," I promise. "I... I'm not sure what yet, but I'll find something. I swear."

Mom doesn't look at all appeased. "Garen, you need to at least consider your options here. Most people your age are hoping to get master's degrees and PhDs; bachelor's degrees are all but required for most well-paying jobs these days. Plenty of people don't go to college, but not people who have gone to boarding schools as prestigious as Patton. Not people who have parents who are willing to foot the tuition bill. You should at least think about it, even if you just try it for a semester."

"Mom," I sigh.

"Garen," she shoots right back. "I'm your mother. I've trusted and supported you through everything, and now, you are going to trust me when I say that this is not a decision you can take lightly. Give it some thought, give it some time, and later, after graduation, you either go to college, or you get a job. One or the other. Do you understand?"

I nod and start rereading the letters, like I'm doing as told. It doesn't matter—my mind is already made up.

198 days sober

"Hey, poor people," I say loudly, throwing myself onto one of the couches in the Whitman common room after Thursday night's MLEP. "My mom says I'm spoiled and lazy. What's a job, and how do I get one?"

The question is actually enough to draw Javi's attention away from his cell phone, which is a feat in and of itself, considering he's texting his girlfriend. "Is that a serious question? You're nineteen years old. How have you never had a job before?"

"Uh, have you seen the car I drive? It's pretty obvious that I'm a pampered rich kid who lives off my parents' income," I point out. "But they're pissed at me now, 'cause I told my mom I don't want to go to college, so Mom says I need to get a job and support myself after high school graduation. Except I don't know how to get a job."

"It's really not that hard," Steven says. "You apply to some places, and when one of them tells you they want to hire you, you go work. That's it, that's the total process."

"Do you have a resume?" Sam asks.

I snort. "No. I wouldn't even know what to put on one."

"Prior work experience, extracurricular activities, volunteer work you've done," Javi says, ticking them off on his fingers, but every item he lists is more discouraging than the one before it.

"Does turning tricks in public restrooms for drug money count as 'prior work experience'?" I ask. He raises his eyebrows and shakes his head. "Alright, so, no work experience. Extracurriculars—a semester of marksmanship team, a semester of drama club. That's... pretty much it. No volunteer work, either." I sink down into the cushions and cover my face with my hands. "Fuck. I'm totally unemployable, aren't I?"

"Pretty much," Charlie agrees.

Javi elbows him. "Don't be an ass. G, I'm sure you'll be able to find something. What about skills? You've got to have some sort of skill that'll set you apart from other people."

I squint up at the ceiling and try to give it some serious consideration, but I'm coming up mostly empty. Finally, I remember, "I speak fluent French."

"Really?" Taylor asks, surprised.

"Oui," I say. "*Mais je ne comprends pas comment cela pourrait m'aider à obtenir un emploi.*"

Silence, and then Steven says, "I only took like, two years of French, so the only part of that I understood was 'I don't understand.' Which is pretty fitting."

"I said I don't understand how that's going to help me get a job," I say. "I mean, maybe I could tutor people? But I bet I'd be really shitty at it. For one, I barely do *my* homework, let alone other people's homework. And for another, I'm not exactly a patient person. I'd probably berate the people who hired me until they decided they'd rather fail the class than put up with me."

"I was gonna suggest you could give people music lessons, since you're good on the guitar," Javi says, "but if you'd tear somebody a new one for massacring the French language, I don't even want to think about what you'd do to someone who played guitar badly in front of you. Any other skills you can think of?"

There's an answer floating around in the back of my brain, but it is firmly situated in the region of thoughts that I try my best to ignore. This answer is located in the same space where madness lies, the space that threatens to take over my whole being on a nightly basis. I don't want to say it. I'm not planning to say it. But my face must be betraying more than I'd like, because the rest of the guys are all watching me expectantly, waiting for me to speak. I clear my throat and say, very carefully, "Bartending?"

Charlie winces. Taylor looks away. Javi starts texting Vanessa again. Sam raises his eyebrows. But it's Steven who says, "I'm not sure that's a good idea, man."

"I know," I say quickly, "Believe me, I know exactly how stupid that would be. I've... you know, handled booze a few times since getting sober, so it's not like I chug everything in front of me. My parents can

have wine at dinner, and my friends can drink at bars without me freaking out. I can be around it, I guess, but I'm not sure I could put up with mixing drink after drink, night after night. I only mentioned it because I can't think of anything else I'm good at."

"What about something related?" Taylor suggests. "There are bars and clubs all over this area, especially as you get closer to the city. You're a big guy, and you'd probably look pretty intimidating, if you scowled a little bit more. I bet you could find someplace that would hire you as a bouncer."

Hope sparks up in me. I open my mouth to agree that yeah, I'd be an *awesome* bouncer, right when Charlie snorts and says, "Garen would be a terrible bouncer." I frown at him, and he flashes palms towards the ceiling in an apologetic half-shrug. "Sorry, but you would be. You'd get bored of standing in one place all night, so you'd probably fucking wander off somewhere, and you'd let in obviously underage guys, if you thought they were cute enough. You'd get into fights instead of breaking them up. And if you worked at a gay bar, you'd probably spend more time hitting on the go-go boys than actually checking IDs—"

"Oh, shit, *there's* an idea," Javi says, perking up and raising his eyes from his phone once more.

I can feel my forehead creasing. "What?"

"You could be a go-go dude at one of the clubs around here," he says. "Nessa's got this friend who works at Rush—"

"What's Rush?" Sam asks.

"That club over in the city. You know, the one that has boy and girl dancers."

I tip my head back to stare at the ceiling. I hadn't remembered the name, but I know the club they're talking about. Jamie and I used to go there all the time, mostly during our junior year. It's a cool enough place; the dance floor is huge, but always packed with bodies; the bartenders mix their drinks with twice the amount of liquor any other clubs put in; the staff doesn't care if people fuck in the bathrooms or VIP lounge; and, as Jamie informed me on more than one occasion, it's a bisexual person's wet dream, because it's one of the only clubs in the area that wants to draw in *all* queers. Most clubs around here hire cute guys in the hope of bringing in more cute guys, but this place—Rush, I guess—hires an equal number of hot, nearly-naked girls and hot, nearly-naked guys, in the hopes of attracting gay guys, gay girls, and bi kids with pretty much any naughty-bits set-up. It's a weirdly diverse crowd of people, and it's almost harder to go home alone than it is to find someone who's willing to go with you.

Steven squints at Javi. "I thought that place was called the Paradise Lounge. I mean, I know it used to be Heaven, and then they had to change the name after they got shut down for serving underage patrons, but I thought that when they reopened, they were called—"

"The Paradise Lounge, yeah, but then they had to close for a month because one of their dancers was blowing guys for thirty bucks in the VIP lounge. And when they reopened, they changed the name to—"

"Wasn't it called Oasis at one point?" Taylor says, squinting. "I could've sworn I went there a few months ago, but it was called Oasis."

Javi lets out a frustrated groan and says, "Jesus Christ, will you guys shut up? The place closes down every couple of months for something, and then it reopens, and it gets a new name. It was Heaven, and then it was the Paradise Lounge, and then Oasis, and now it's fucking Rush. They'll probably get shut down again in another few weeks and give it another name, but it doesn't matter. The point is, my girl's got a friend who works there, and they're pretty much always hiring new people. Guess they like to keep the eye candy fresh, or whatever. But Vanessa told me the guy makes bank. I'm talking like, a grand in a weekend."

My eyebrows shoot up. “A grand in a weekend for what? Taking his clothes off and shaking his ass around? That’s insane. Travis and I put up four grand a month for our house, including utilities and everything, and you’re telling me that if he and I both just stripped down and danced on a bar for one night each weekend, we could cover our entire rent from that alone?”

“I mean, I don’t know the details of it,” Javi hedges. “I’m sure it’s harder than it sounds, or else everyone would do it. You’ve gotta socialize a lot—”

“I am totally sociable,” I interrupt.

“And you’ve gotta be in great shape—”

“Fuck you, man, I *am* in great shape. Have you seen my abs?” I demand, untucking my shirt and yanking the hem up to expose my stomach. I tighten my muscles and run my hand over the ridges just for show. “I know you’re not into dudes, but come on, that is a *nice six-pack*. Taylor, you like dick. Tell the guys how hot I am.”

Taylor gives me an unamused look and says, “You’re not really my type, but yeah, you’re hot. Sure.”

Bowl me over with his fucking enthusiasm, why doesn’t he? I glare at him, shove my shirt back down and say, “I could do it. I mean, I’d basically be getting paid to take off all my clothes, dance around, flirt with random guys, and get attention. That’s what I like to do on weekends anyway. Plus, I’d be in a club, but I wouldn’t have to handle the liquor. Mixing or serving. I’d be fine.”

Javi shrugs. “If you want to try it out, I say go for it. If you end up hating it, just quit and find something else. I can ask Vanessa to find out more about the audition process from her friend. Or at least, I can find out if the guy has any tips for you or whatever.”

“No,” I say, digging my phone out of my pocket and opening up a new text screen, “I’ve got a friend who does some, uh... dance work, I guess we’ll call it. I can get advice from her.”

I have no idea how to word the message, though. Eventually, I decide on, *my mom wants me to get a job & i want to get back at her for that. have decided to become a gogo boy @ a slutty queer club in the city, have no idea what it takes to get this kind of gig. apparently there’s an audition of some sort? help me, stripper wan kenobi, youre my only hope.*

It only takes two minutes of waiting before Stohler calls, already sighing down the line at me before I can even say hello. “Do I even need to berate you for how fucking retarded it is that you’ve decided to become a go-go dancer in order to get back at your mommy for making you get a job at nineteen years old? Or can we just agree that the insults go without saying?”

“If they go without saying, then stop saying them, you vicious, bleach-blond cunt,” I say, and Sam does a double take at my words. I wave him off and mouth, *it’s fine, she deserves it.*

“Excuse you, assfucker, this is my natural color,” Stohler sniffs. “And if you want my help, you could try being nice to me.”

I roll my eyes and slouch down in my seat. “Please, oh pretty please, Stohls, light of my life, loveliest stripper in all the land,” I say. “Come on. I already know a guy who knows a guy, so finding a club isn’t the problem. And I know I’m hot enough to get a job, I know how to dance. I just don’t know—there’s got to be some tricks I don’t know about, yeah? The guys I see at most clubs are twinks, and that’s definitely not a look that works for me. So, do you think you could help me figure out something that I can do that would help me get a job like this?”

Stohler is incredibly silent for so long, I take the phone away from my ear to make sure the call hasn’t dropped. I say her name once, just to make sure she’s there, and finally, she says, quietly, “I can help

you, if that's what you really want. This weekend, when you come here, I can take you shopping for the kinds of clothes you'll need, tell you some of the tricks you'll want to know before you start a job, maybe teach you some moves or lines. Whatever you need, I can do that. But..." She stops to sigh.

I swallow. "But what?"

"Working in this industry isn't always easy, you understand? And the second you take your clothes off for money, you're in adult entertainment, whether you're a stripper or a go-go dancer or a porn star. It's all sex work. And people... they treat you differently. They see *you* differently, and if you're not careful, you start to see yourself differently, too. You need to be prepared for that, or else you're just setting yourself up to burn out, and I don't want to be responsible for that. You're my... friend." She still says the word like it tastes weird in her mouth. "I don't want you to end up losing your mind over this kind of thing. A lot of people like it. It can be fun work, and the money can be awesome, and it can be all sorts of liberating, or whatever bullshit you wanna say like that. But it can be hard, too. You need to know that before you go into it."

It's strange—I haven't heard her talk this way in months, not since that night last fall when she had to defend herself against the girls in the LHS drama club. I still remember how dark her eyes were when she stared up at the glowing sign of the club she works at afterward, but she hasn't talked about her job with anything other than a smirk since then. I guess I'd forgotten.

"I think I'll be okay," I say quietly. "I can handle it, Stohls. Especially with your help."

I don't mean to sound like a manipulative douche, but I guess it works out that way, because Stohler heaves another huge sigh and says, "They'll probably have to submit an application before they'll give you an audition. You'll need headshots for that... probably full-body pics, too. Wait until next week to do that, though. Bring your credit card this weekend, and I'll take you for some clothes and help you get the whole look going. And the pictures you take have to be high-quality, not some camera-phone selfie bullshit. Find somebody with a nice digital camera to take them for you in front of a plain backdrop. I've got a portfolio of mine that I can show you this weekend as a reference, if you think you can handle looking at barely-clothed photos of a woman without crying."

"I'll do my best to contain the horror," I assure her. "Thanks, Stohler. You're the best."

"I know," she says, and hangs up on me. *What a bitch*, I think fondly.

I toss my phone back onto the couch next to me and announce, "My friend says I need to have a porn portfolio in order to get hired anywhere." I'm maybe paraphrasing a bit. "Headshots, pictures of my—" I make a vague gesture, "—body, or whatever. Apparently, I need to prove my hotness in order to even get a chance to prove I've got the personality for this. But these pictures have to be, like, quality." I twist sideways to kick my legs over the arm of the couch. "How badly do you think my parents would want to kill me, if I used 'getting a job' as an excuse to charge a thousand-dollar camera to the credit card they pay for?"

"They wouldn't *want* to kill you. They *would* kill you. And they'd be justified," Taylor says. "Don't buy a brand new camera for the sake of using it once. Borrow one from somebody."

"I don't know anyone who has one," I point out.

Javi doesn't even look up from his phone as he says, "Dec has one he might let you use. Photography's pretty much his only hobby."

"That, and feasting on the flesh of the innocent," Charlie says with a shrug.

"And running that stupid fucking obstacle course," Steven adds.

"Is that where he is now?" I ask, and I'm answered with a few nods. "If I asked really nicely—" *and maybe offered to suck him off again*, "—do you think he'd let me borrow his camera? Just for an afternoon."

Sam chuckles. "Probably not, but it can't hurt to ask. Can you wait here and ask once he gets back from the course instead of going there now, though? He'll be coming back to shower before dinner soon enough, and I want to see the look on his face when you ask to borrow his thousand-dollar camera to take naked pictures of yourself."

I'm sure that he'll make the same cocked-eyebrow, twisted-smirk expression he does whenever I do anything, but there's no point in getting up so that I can hunt him down and make him deny my request in private. Besides, I can already hear tired, dragging footsteps coming up the stairs just outside the common room.

"Yo, Campbell!" I call.

"What?" he calls back.

I don't answer until he makes it to the landing, but I immediately wish I hadn't. He has obviously been working hard outside—his freckled cheeks are flushed from exertion, he's still panting, and there's a sheen of sweat all over his skin. He frowns down at his dirty t-shirt until he finds a spot that's clean enough to lift up and wipe his face. The hard, muscular rides of his stomach are sweaty, too, and all I want is to get down on my knees and taste the salt on his skin.

He pauses with his shirt still pressed to his face, then peeks over the top of it at me, catching sight of my hungry stare. He smirks and lets the shirt fall back into place. "What's up?"

"I'm in need of a few hours' use of a decent camera, and I heard you happen to own one. I was hoping you might let me borrow it for an afternoon next week," I say.

"What for?" he asks.

Sam claps me on the shoulder. "Garen here needs to get a job, and after much contemplation, we've come to the conclusion that he's not qualified for anything other than sex work. He wants to borrow your camera so that he can take some skin pics to score an audition as a go-go boy at a gay bar."

I stomp hard on his foot in retribution for ruining any chance I had at making this seem like a not-weird thing to ask for. On first glance, I think that Declan is giving me exactly the sort of amused, judgmental stare everyone had expected—god knows they're all giggling enough—but when I really bother to meet his eyes, I see something a bit... hotter in his gaze. Like he's really thinking about it. Picturing it, maybe.

Figuring a bit of flattery can't hurt my case, I hitch my chin towards his messy clothes and ask, "Have you gotten any closer to beating that eight forty-four course record? You managed a nine fifty-eight last time I was out there, didn't you?"

"You remembered," he says, giving me an pleased sort of look that makes me feel like I'm a puppy. "Best time today was a nine thirty-two. I got it down to nine twenty last week, but fuck if I'm ever going to manage that again."

I scoff. "You will. If you keep training at the rate you have been, I bet you'll be able to clear the eight forty-four before the month of April is over."

"You think so?" Declan says. Most people would sound hopeful when saying something like that, but he doesn't. He sounds more... approving, like he'd already come to that conclusion on his own, but is glad to see that I'm smart enough to know the same. Regardless, it gets me the reply, "I don't care what you want to take pictures of. Half the photos I've taken have been of sluts from Ward, so if Sam's trying to unnerve me by saying you want it for amateur porn, he's failing. But I don't let anyone else touch my

camera.”

I affect an exaggerated pout. “Come on, man. I promise I won’t break it.”

“You can’t promise me anything even close to that,” Declan argues. “You’re a fucking spazz, and everyone knows it. You won’t be able to take a single picture before you accidentally smash it. That camera’s one of the only nice things I own, next to my truck and my gun.”

“Your prized possessions are your truck and your gun,” Charlie mutters. “God, you become more and more of a flyover-state stereotype every time you open your mouth.”

“Your prized possessions are your truck and your gun,” I echo, in something close to a purr. “God, that’s so hot. If the truck breaks down, do you do the mechanical labor yourself? Maybe in like, a white tank top that gets all sweaty and dirty? You know, my Ferrari needs an oil change—”

“Keep it in your pants, Anderson,” Declan says.

I open my mouth to say, *That’s not what you said last Friday*, but at last minute, I remember just how pissed he’d be if I actually said that in front of anyone, especially considering we’ve done a whole hell of a lot of *not talking about that night* since it happened. I press my lips together to keep the words in.

Dec is still watching me in silence, waiting to be sure that I can keep my mouth shut like a good boy. When I don’t say anything, he gives me another of those pleased half-smiles. I guess I must deserve some kind of reward, because he says, “I don’t let people touch my camera, but that doesn’t mean I mind you using it for your pictures. On Monday, I’ll go to the art department and see if I can borrow some backdrops and lighting equipment, and then I’ll come by your place and take whatever pictures you need. I can give you everything on a flash drive after.”

Sam’s forehead wrinkles. “Wait, you’re going to take the pictures for him?”

I look around at him. “Sorry, is this conversation not fun for you if I’m actually getting what I want?”

“No, this conversation became *weird* for me the second Declan offered to take naked pictures of you,” he says.

“They’re not going to be naked pictures, you asshole,” I sigh. “I’m going to be wearing at least a *little* bit of clothing—”

I don’t mean to stop talking, but when I glance at Declan again, he’s wearing a look that makes me think I’m probably not going to be wearing anything at all. I swallow, but my throat is dry.

Declan smiles—all teeth—and says, “Of course you are. I’m going to go clean up before dinner.”

“I’m gonna head home. See you guys tomorrow,” I blurt out, and I head for the door, because there isn’t a chance in hell I can pretend I’m not already picturing him in the shower.

200 days sober

The moment Jamie shows up at the house to drive me back to Connecticut, things get a little weird. This is mostly due to the fact that it’s the first time he and Travis have seen each other in two weeks, so I’m caught in the middle of their strangely emotional reunion. There’s *hugging*. Hugging that turns into a quiet exchange of condolence and gratitude. It’s not like I’ve forgotten that they’re friends now, that they have class together and grab meals afterward a few times a week. It’s not like Jamie hasn’t mentioned that he

sometimes brings his textbooks to Starbucks during Travis' shifts so that he can sit at the drink bar and harass Trav while he works. It's not like I don't know that Travis sometimes calls Jamie for answer comparison on their homework, only to end up doing half the assignment together over the phone.

It's just that seeing their friendship in action like this has left me feeling oddly... replaced. And I'm not even sure by whom.

"We should hit the road," I say quietly.

"Right. Don't want to be late for your session, Travis says, stepping back. "I should go get started on my econ problems."

Jamie's brow creases. "Aren't you working today?"

Travis shakes his head. "Day off."

The comment is enough to give me pause. I *hate* leaving Travis alone in the house these days. His new shrink—the one Doc recommended—has him coming in for sessions every two weeks while they try to scale back his SSRI dosage, but he's still taking way more medication than I'm comfortable with. Sometimes, I come down to the living room at night and find him half-conscious, mechanically petting the dog and staring blankly at the TV because he's too exhausted to do anything else. I'm not as terrified of finding his corpse as I used to be, but I'm still uneasy about abandoning him here today.

Jamie lingers in front of the door, his hand on the doorknob. He tips his head to the side and asks, "How long has it been since you spoke to your mother?"

Travis stiffens. I can tell he wants to say, *none of your fucking business*, but having dead parents seems to have made other people's parents a lot more important to Jamie. He eventually answers, "The day I moved out. New Year's Eve. So, about three months."

"And your father?" Jamie presses.

Travis rubs a palm over his face and sighs, "Christ, I don't know. Right after my mom and Garen's dad got engaged, I think? That was, what, sixteen months ago?"

"I thought you said you were going to get back in contact with him," I say. "It was your New Year's resolution."

"Yeah, and yours was to quit smoking, but I bet you've got a pack of cigarettes in your pocket right now," he shoots back. "It's not a big deal. I'm fine without—"

"Come with us," Jamie interrupts. "Garen needs to go to Lakewood for his session, anyway. That's nearly an hour. We'll drop him off, and you can go see your mother, have a quick conversation, and we'll pick G up once his session is over."

Travis stares at him, and I can't help but do the same. I don't understand why he's suggesting this. Yeah, I get that he just lost his own parents, so maybe he's into the idea of everyone else spending as much time with theirs as possible, but it's different with Travis' family. Evelyn is pure evil, and she doesn't give a shit about Travis—I try to tell him otherwise, I try to convince him that he is loved and appreciated, and he is, but by *me*. Not by his mom, the selfish, psychotic cunt.

Travis turns to me and says, voice soft, "What do you think, Garen?"

All at once, any argument I have about Evelyn evaporates from my throat. Travis looks so young, so lonely that I can't bear to be the one who finally admits that no, his mom doesn't love him anymore. I shove my hands into my pockets and say, "If you want to see her, yeah. You should come. I think it'd be

good for you two to have a chance to work things out.”

Slowly, Travis nods and stands. “Yeah. Okay, that’s—just let me get my coat.”

“Change of clothes and shit, too,” I call after him as he heads for the stairs. “We’re going to be spending the night at my dad’s house.”

“Travis and I, making a Garen sandwich,” Jamie says fondly. “To be perfectly honest, I feel as if the past year and a half of my life has been leading up to this very night—”

“Are you fucking kidding me with this idea?” I interrupt, trying to keep my voice low so Travis won’t hear from his room. Jamie blinks, and I continue, “His mom’s a bitch. She doesn’t give a fuck about him, and she won’t hesitate to tell him that to his face. She’s going to reject him, probably won’t even answer the fucking door once she looks out the window and sees it’s him. He’s going to be devastated.”

Jamie crosses his arms. “Not as devastated as he would be if he didn’t at least try to make things right with her now, while he still has a chance.”

Just because your parents died, doesn’t mean his are about to, I want to say, but I don’t dare. There are some words I know I could never take back. Instead, I throw him another glare and wait in silence for Travis to return, old LHS track duffel slung over his shoulder.

When we get outside, Travis gestures to his Subaru. “Do you think maybe I could drive? I’ll drive us to the LRC, and then I’ll bring you guys to New Haven before I go back to Lakewood to see my mom. I just—if it goes well, I’m not sure the forty-five minutes Garen’s in session will be enough, and if it doesn’t go well, I’d like a getaway car. If that’s okay.”

“Of course it’s okay,” Jamie says. There isn’t a person alive who could fault Travis for his slow, careful driving. I let Jamie ride shotgun.

I think I’m supposed to be using these additional sessions to discuss how I feel about Melissa and George’s deaths, but today’s session goes a little off the rails the moment I say to Doc, “I’m pretty sure I’m about to join the adult entertainment industry.”

She blinks at me over the lip of her coffee mug. After a moment, she carefully sets it down on her desk, closes her eyes, and opens them. “Please explain.”

“My mom wants me to get a job, except my only real talents are physical,” I say. “My friend Javi’s going out with this girl, Vanessa, and she—I talked to her yesterday, when she came to visit him after MLEP. She’s got this friend, Paul, and he’s a go-go dancer at this club in the city. He talked to his bosses, and if I pass along a portfolio of my pictures and they think I’m hot enough—which, let’s be honest, they will—then they’ll meet with me. And if I can manage to smile pretty and keep my fucking smartass comments to myself for long enough to seem charming, I get hired.”

“As a go-go dancer,” Doc clarifies.

“Yeah,” I say. “Paul said he thinks they’re looking for, uh... guys to work in the cages?”

“So, not as a go-go dancer,” Doc says. “A cage dancer.”

I roll my eyes and say, “Dude, a cage dancer is a go-go dancer, just in a cage. It’s the same thing. It’s still just stripping down to your underwear and dancing around for cash.”

“And you think that this is something you’d enjoy doing?” Doc... says? Asks? I’m not too sure. I shrug. She says, in a pseudo-neutral tone of voice, “It wasn’t too long ago that you had trouble being on the receiving end of any physical contact whatsoever. It took a lot of work for you to be comfortable with even

your closest friends touching you—James, Ben, Travis. They all had to work their way up to it. If you're working as a go-go dancer, you'll be making some of your money through tips, and that often involves a certain degree of physical contact. Is that something you're prepared for?"

I cross my arms and say stubbornly, "Yes. Look, I know I used to have a lot of problems with being, uh... being touched, but it's not like that anymore. I can handle it. I can touch whoever I want, I can fuck whoever I want. It was a problem, but I'm okay now. I'm good."

"You weren't bad before," Doc says gently. "It's not unusual for someone who has had your experiences to be uncomfortable with physical—"

"Yeah, well, *Law & Order: Special Rape Unit* tells me that it's not unusual for someone who has had my experiences to end up a sex worker, either," I say flatly. Doc's mouth presses into a thin line, which either means I'm dead wrong, or I'm dead on. I continue, "Pretty sure I saw this exact episode. Some dude gets held down and fucked a couple times when he's fifteen, and a few years later, he's an addict who rents his body out to anybody who wants to play with it. Isn't that what everyone says? That everybody in that industry is some junkie who got fucked as a kid? Dancers, strippers, porn stars, fetish models, all of 'em. I don't get why you're surprised—the last four years of my life seem to have been leading up to this exact career choice."

"It is a *choice*, Garen. You recognize that, right?" Doc says. "You have a choice in this matter. You can choose to go forward with this plan of becoming a dancer, or you can choose to find a different job option. And even if you do take the job, you reserve the right to choose to end your employment at any time, or to stop someone who is trying to make you go further than you want to."

I snort. "Pretty sure I forfeit that right once they put the cash in my hand. At that point, I've just got to fulfill my end of the bargain."

"No, you don't," Doc says. "No one can buy the right to make you unhappy."

Maybe not, but it sure as hell feels like people are taking turns at renting it.

By the time my session's over and I'm packed into the backseat of the Subaru on the way to New Haven, Travis is nervous to the point of being annoying. He keeps drumming his hands on the steering wheel at every stoplight, gnawing on his fingernails, bouncing the foot that's not working the pedals. By the time he pulls up in front of Alex and Ben's building, I'm ready to strangle him.

Instead, I unbuckle and lean up between the seats to kiss him on the cheek. "Good luck with—" *that fucking poisonous, frigid bitch you clawed your way out of eighteen years ago*, "—your mom. Call me when you're done. I'll probably still be out with Stohler and Alex, and Jamie will be—"

"Here, probably," Jamie says, indicating the apartment building. "I'm not entirely sure what—"

He stops speaking abruptly, frowning, and I can't hold back a snort. "Sorry, dude, what was that sentence going to be? You're not entirely sure what... Ben will want to do? That's so adorable, I didn't realize you guys were at the point in your relationship where you made all your plans based on what the other wants. Oh wait, maybe that's because you're not actually in a relationship."

"Maybe they will be, if you fucking leave them alone for five minutes and let them handle this on their own," Travis points out. I make a face at him.

There's a sudden rap of knuckles on Jamie's window, and all three of us jump.

"Get out of the damn car, boys. You can suck each other off later," Stohler demands. She ducks down to peer into the car, giving all of us a thoroughly unnecessary look down the neckline of her baggy black t-shirt at her neon green bra.

I pop open my door and press a hand to her top, flattening it to her collarbone. "Cover yourself, I don't need to see your girl parts."

She snorts. "Kid, please. You and I are about to get a lot more personal with each other, if you really want the full hoochie makeover. You have a twelve-thirty appointment with Nataliya."

"Who's Nataliya?" I ask.

"The woman who waxes my kitty," Stohler says, flashing her dimples at me.

I feel all the blood draining from my face; it's an awful, cold sensation. "The woman who—hang on, I have an appointment? I don't—why do I have an appointment with your waxer? Or, with *any* waxer, actually. What the fuck do you think I'm going to wax?"

"Anything I say," Stohler says, narrowing her eyes at me. "I've got eyebrows, eyelashes, and a fucking ponytail. That's it—there isn't a single other hair on my body. Now, I might let you keep a little bit of your happy trail, because that'll get you some extra tips from guys who like more masculinity, but—"

"Hey, you know what's *super* masculine?" I interrupt. "All the rest of my body hair, too. Not just the happy trail."

"No, it's inconvenient," she snaps. "Have you ever seen a go-go boy with hair under his arms? Or on his legs? Or—"

"I am not going to wax my fucking legs!" I burst out, and I can hear Travis and Jamie both laughing at me from inside the car. "Jesus Christ, do you seriously expect me to be bald from the neck down?"

Stohler crosses her arms. "No. You can keep the hair you've got on your forearms. But everything else is going to be removed, if you expect my help with any of this."

"G, you're making a pretty big fuss about the leg hair," Travis says as he gets out of the car on the far side. "If I were you, I'd be more concerned about your junk."

Jamie finally gets out of the car and shuts the door, leaning his hip against it. "It only hurts the first time. You get used to it."

"That's a lie," Stohler says to me. "He's trying to make you feel better, but it's bullshit. Waxing hurts every time, and you will never get used to it."

"I was trying to help you calm him down, but fine, have it your way," Jamie sighs.

Stohler points one long, manicured nail right in my face and says, "If you aren't man enough to have a complete stranger pour hot wax all over your genitals and then rip the hair out at the roots with a strip of fabric, then you're not man enough to be a go-go dancer."

I turn to look at Travis. "Dude. I don't think I'm man enough to be a go-go dancer."

"I don't know what you're complaining about," says a voice above our heads. In unison, we all look up. Ben is leaning partway out his bedroom window, forearms folded on the sill. "That whole 'hot wax on the genitals' thing sounds kind of fun to me."

"That's the spirit, munchkin," Stohler says, throwing her hands up in celebration. "Do you want to join the industry, too?"

"Are you fucking kidding me? I'm half-Italian, which means that I, unlike the people you're standing with,

have more body hair than a fucking twelve-year-old. I don't care how long that appointment you booked for Garen is; it's not long enough for me," Ben says. "Also, can you guys come inside now? Because you're kind of standing outside my apartment building, screaming about Garen's balls. I had the window closed and was listening to music, and I could still hear you."

"We'll be up in a min—oh," I say, blinking in surprise as Jamie steals my keys out of my jacket pocket and strides away to let himself into the building. "Okay, then. I guess we'll be up right now."

Ben's face does something weird, like he might be daring to let himself have an emotional reaction to that. His upper half disappears back into his bedroom, and he slams the window shut. Stohler heaves an incredible, put-upon sigh and slinks off to the front door.

I turn to face Travis again. "Good luck with Ev. I'll see you later, yeah?" He nods and gets back into his car, and I chase after the others. Or, I try to. Stohler is standing in the entryway, arms crossed over her chest as she glares down at the intercom. "James didn't even stick around to hold the fucking door, and Ben's not buzzing me into the fucking building."

"You mean, we're stuck down here until they stop groping each other long enough to remember that there are other people around?" I say.

She pulls her phone out of her purse and starts tapping away at it. "I'm going to text Alex and tell him to get his stoner ass out of his room and hit the door unlock. And if he comes to investigate and finds those two fuckwads molesting each other in the stairwell, it'll serve them right."

A minute passes, and then the speaker above the buttons screeches before Alex's confused voice comes through. "Yo, where the hell is my roommate?"

"I don't know where his body is, but his head is definitely up his own ass," Stohler says. "Let us in. Now."

The door clicks unlocked, and I slip through it, taking the stairs two at a time until I have to skid to a stop to avoid crashing into Jamie. Who is frozen on the stairs. And alone.

"Seriously?" I say, snatching my keys out of his hand. "Are you hiding in the stairwell so you don't have to talk to itty bitty Benjamin? After you practically sprinted in here?"

"Shut up," Jamie hisses. "I got halfway up here before I remembered that the last time I spoke to him, he told me he *likes* me."

"Wow," I say solemnly, "I hope you don't catch cooties."

"At this point, he should be more concerned about catching chlamydia," Stohler says from just behind me. "Unless my chart is wrong, the only people in this group who haven't fucked around are Alex and Ben—"

"James and Travis," I add absently.

"—and me with anyone. The instant one of you catches something, all of you are doomed."

I twist to look at her. "Yeah, but don't you feel a little bit left out? We've got three bi dudes in this group, I'm sure you could convince one of them to go for it. I mean, Travis is off-limits, 'cause I'm trying to keep the number of non-me people he has sex with to a bare minimum, but I bet Al would be down. I'm not sure he's even full-on fucked a chick yet, though."

"Yes, he has." I glance to the top of the stairs, where Ben is lingering awkwardly, his eyes fixed on Jamie even as he addresses me. "He's hooking up with this girl from his biology class. Her name's Erika. She comes over a few nights a week, and they have incredibly loud sex on the other side of my bedroom wall. It's obnoxious enough to make me miss the days when it was Goldwyn in that room."

"That's a strange thing to reminisce over, given that I'm not exactly quiet in bed, either," Jamie says.

Ben tips sideways just enough to lean his temple against the wall. A hint of a wry smile is playing at the corner of his mouth. "I've noticed that, thanks. But at least being stuck listening to you beg for someone to fuck you is kind of sexy."

Jamie takes step after careful step up the stairs until he's standing just two steps down from Ben. It's the first time I've ever seen them exactly eye to eye. "Hello," he says.

"Hi," Ben says. "How are you?"

I grab Stohler by the wrist and pull her the rest of the way up the stairs and down the hall to the apartment. The door is barely shut, and when I push it the rest of the way open, Alex is frowning around the kitchen. "Seriously, Ben was here like, two minutes ago."

"I think he had to get something from his car. We passed him on the stairs," Stohler says dismissively. "Hurry up and get your coat. I don't want to be late."

Alex makes a point of taking his time tying his shoes and collecting his jacket, wallet, and keys. Stohler looks ready to punch him by the time the door opens again and Jamie and Ben step in. Alex blinks, surprised. "James. Hey."

"Hello, Alexander," Jamie returns. "Hope you've been doing well since I last saw you."

Alex shrugs, a sad half-smile on his face. "Better than you, from what I understand. I was sorry to hear about your parents."

I'm prepared to steer Alex and Stohler right out of the apartment to end this talk before it begins, but Jamie inclines his head a few inches and says, "Thank you," like he's been saying for weeks.

Alex frowns and gestures to the door. "Are you coming along to watch the go-go makeover?"

Jamie shakes his head and clears his throat. "Actually, I thought I might stay here a minute."

Alex's brow creases. "What, with Ben?"

"Say it again, but this time, try for even more baffled disdain," Ben says.

"Sorry, I just didn't realize that you guys had crossed over from the territory of 'tolerating each other for the sake of your mutual friends' to that of 'being friendly enough to hang out alone together without it ending in bloodshed,'" Alex says. "But that's cool, I guess. Better than the constant bitching, yeah?"

"Um," is all Ben says, while Jamie remains silent.

Alex notices nothing; he nods to me and says, "Hurry up, guys. Garen's going to be late for his appointment."

"I hope you slam your dick in the dishwasher someday," Stohler says.

"Why would I have my dick in the dishwasher in the first place?" Alex asks, leading the way out of the apartment.

Having *my* dick slammed in a dishwasher door seems like it would be a lot more fun than this waxing appointment. Nataliya the waxer gives exactly zero fucks about my personal comfort, on both a physical level and a psychological one. She smells like cigarettes and cocoa butter, and her response to Stohler's

introduction of me is to say, "Nice to meet you. Strip."

"Uh," I say, glancing around the tiny room where the torture is about to take place. Stohler and Nataliya are standing side by side, like hair removal should be a group activity, and Alex is sitting on a metal folding chair against the wall, grinning at me and recording my face with his cell phone; neither of the women seems to notice or care. I wince and say, "Does there need to be a full house for this?"

"I want to oversee the proceedings," Stohler says simply. "I told you, I'm still not sure about the happy trail, so I'm going to stick around, see how things go, and decide at the end."

"I just want to get a video of you crying when she does your pubes," Alex clarifies. "I'm gonna put it on YouTube and see how many likes it gets in the first twenty-four hours."

I kick off my boots and strip off my shirt. "Probably at least a hundred. I've got a lot of people who hate me."

"Don't worry. We start small," Nataliya assures me.

Nataliya, it turns out, is a lying whore. *Starting small* involves having me lie down on a padded table, slopping warm wax onto my pits, and tearing out all of the hair in one go. I let out an awful noise that's like a yelp-whimper hybrid, and Alex laughs. Stohler just slaps my stomach and orders, "Stop being a baby. Take your pants off."

"I don't want to," I whine. "It's fine, I'll be a hairy-legged go-go dancer. I'll start a new trend."

"If you don't do what I say, you're never going to get *hired*," Stohler says. "It's not enough to have a cute face and a nice body, alright? If you want to have steady work in entertainment, you've got to have a look. You've got to be properly groomed, and wearing the right clothes, and acting the right way, and saying the right things. If you're not willing to lose the hair and adopt the swagger you need, then you're never going to find anyone willing to take you on. Either take off your fucking pants, or find a plan B."

But there is no plan B. There's only one thing I'm sure of—one thing I gathered from the other day's conversation with my Patton boys, one thing Dave told me over and over when we were dating, one thing I learned while turning tricks in bathroom stalls and truck stops so I could get high—and that's that my body and the things it can do are all I'm good for.

I take off the rest of my clothing and lie back down on the table. Alex starts filming again, and I roll my eyes. "Knock it off, Al. I'm not going to fucking cry," I snap.

I'm wrong. I cry. I cry a lot. So does Alex, from how hard he's laughing; he has to stop filming because he can't even stay upright. Getting my legs done is bad enough, but by the time Nataliya moves on to my groin, I'm just chewing on my knuckles to stop myself from making more sound. When the time comes to determine the fate of the thin trail of hair just below my navel, Stohler oh so generously decides I can keep it. I don't even care anymore. My pain receptors must have peaced the fuck out or something, because I don't think I can feel anything below my ribcage.

To add insult to intense, mind-blowing injury, the total price ends up being more than two hundred dollars. Alex laughs so hard he has to go outside by himself, but Stohler doesn't look fazed, so I'm guessing this isn't out of the ordinary. I shove my credit card at the receptionist and tell Stohler, "I'm never going to forgive you for this. But at least it's over with, and I don't have to—"

"Would you like to book your next appointment now?" the receptionist chirps.

I stare at her. "Would I like to what?"

"Book your next appointment now. You'll need to come back in about four weeks for another session, and

Nataliya's schedule fills up pretty quickly," she says, smiling and clacking away at her keyboard. "I can schedule you for the same time on April twenty-eighth."

"Nope," I say, shaking my head so viciously from side to side that I'm starting to get a headache. "Nope, no, I thought this was a one-time thing. All the hair was just ripped out of my body, why the fuck do I—"

"It's going to grow back, dumbass," Stohler sighs. She smiles at the receptionist and says, "I think we'll hold off on a second appointment for now. He'll call when he's ready to book again. Thank you!" The moment she drags me outside, she promises me, "When it starts to grow back, you can just shave, okay? You don't have to do it again."

Alex is leaning against the side of the building and talking on his cell phone, but he springs upright as we approach. "Hang on, they just got outside. You wanna talk to him?" I hear him say. A beat passes during the response, and he holds out his phone to me, saying, "It's Travis. He tried to call you a few times, but I guess your phone—"

"—is in your car," I say. I take the phone and say, "Hey, Trav. What's up?"

"Nothing, I, um..." Travis clears his throat, but his voice still cracks when he says, "So, the talk with my mom didn't really go as planned. Do you think I could just come back to New Haven and meet up with you guys?"

I press a hand to my free ear to try to block out the noise of traffic passing me, like somehow I think being able to hear his choked breathing will help either one of us. "What happened? Did she refuse to talk?"

"No, she talked to me," Travis says. "It's just what she said that's bothering me. I don't want—it didn't work out. It's... we're not okay. We're never going to be okay, and I don't want to try anymore. Please, can I just come meet you guys?"

"Yeah, definitely," I say. My heart is beating double-time in my chest; I ache just from hearing him sound this broken. I turn and say, "Hey, Stohls. Travis is coming back from Lakewood now, but I don't know what's on the agenda. Where should he meet us?"

She steals the phone from me and gives him an address, hanging up before I get a chance to say goodbye; I pretend not to be pissed about that. The address in question turns out to be a sex shop. Or, as Stohler warns me, "The staff here get ripshit if you call it a sex shop, so if you think any of them are in earshot, make sure you call it an *adult boutique*."

"What are we supposed to be looking for, anyway?" Alex asks. He hooks a finger under the strap of a shiny purple man-thong and spins it around in the air. "Something like this?"

Stohler snatches it out of his hand and tosses it back onto the display. "No. Most nightclubs won't let their dancers wear thongs because of the laws about indecent exposure. We're looking for briefs and booty shorts, things like that. Form-fitting enough to show off what you're working with, and thick enough to support a little extra weight; if the material is too thin, your tips will fall out, and you'll lose all your cash when you're dancing."

"What a shame," I say. "I'd really been hoping I'd have a chance to parade around a New York City nightclub in nothing but a flimsy g-string. If I were *really* lucky, maybe I could have a ball come poppin' out of it."

"A perfectly hairless ball, now," Alex adds.

"Uh," says a voice behind me. I turn. Travis has arrived, and he's staring at me with wide, still eyes. "When I said I wanted to meet you guys, I didn't realize that you were standing in the middle of a sex shop—"

"Adult boutique," a bored cashier corrects from behind the counter, where he's reading an old issue of *Rolling Stone*.

"—standing in the middle of an adult boutique, talking about Garen's freshly-waxed nutsack," Travis finishes.

I hook a thumb over my belt buckle and offer, "Wanna see?"

The corner of his mouth twitches. "I'm good, thanks."

I frown. "Dude, do you realize you haven't blinked once since walking into this store?"

"I'm afraid to look anywhere but directly at your face," he admits. "I'm trying very hard to pretend that there isn't a display of anal beads behind you."

Stohler snickers. "Christ, he's even more adorably flustered than Ben was when I brought him in for a pre-Lenten shopping spree. Speaking of which—" She pauses, glances at Alex, and shoves him in the direction of another rack of men's shorts. "Al, go see if there's anything over there that Garen would look good in." Alex wanders away, muttering something about how *you put your dick in a dude one time and then everybody expects you to know what kind of booty shorts he should buy*. Stohler continues, in a somewhat quieter voice, "Speaking of the Lent thing, why did James stay at the apartment with Ben? Easter isn't until next Sunday, so it's not like they can pound it out this afternoon."

"I think they're mostly going to talk about their feelings," I say.

"That's a thing they do now?" Stohler says. I nod; we wrinkle our noses at each other. Travis snorts and goes over to help Alex sort through the clothing.

This is probably my only chance to find out what happened with Ev without putting too much pressure on Travis. I steal Stohler's cell phone and text Alex, *find out what happened w/ his mom*. Alex reads the text, then blinks over his shoulder at me. I gesture towards Travis. Alex rolls his eyes and reluctantly inclines his head to strike up a conversation.

Stohler continues to load my arms up with different outfits she says I'll look decent in—mostly black like the rest of my wardrobe, but some red, some white, some neon colors I know I'll never touch—and she mentions—in a bizarrely off-hand sort of way—that I should think about getting a cock ring, because most dancers like to increase the amount of tips they get by sporting a semi, but it's difficult to keep it up all night without some sort of assistance. From the way she says it, a lot of guys' *assistance* means drugs, but that's not an option for me, so... I get a cock ring.

"This is so much shit," I say, staring down at everything I'm holding.

"You look like you should have some sort of superhero utility belt," Stohler agrees. "Like Batman."

"Or Inspector Gadget," I say, wiggling a cock ring in her face, "considering these definitely qualify as *go-go gadgets*."

"You think you're funny, but you're not," Alex says, coming over to join us. He tosses a pair of camouflage briefs onto the top of my pile and adds, "C'mon, what kind of friend would I be if I didn't find you weird camo underwear for you to wear during your military-school-brat life crisis?"

I glance over at Travis, who is pseudo-casually wandering closer towards the toys and trying to pretend he's not scoping out some dildos. I spend a long minute imagining exactly where that might lead, but the moment I start to get interested, I'm reminded of how much I've already put my junk through for one day. I wince and turn my attention back to Alex, asking him in a low voice, "Did you find out what happened?"

"She told him that he's the one who ruined their relationship by moving out. When he left for New York, he was forfeiting his right to be a part of their family," Alex says. "She told him there was only one way he could ever hope to make things right between them?"

"Well, what is it?" I demand.

Alex shrugs. "She told him he has to cut all ties with you. For good. Says she won't have a son who's wrapped up in a—these are her words, not mine, and not Travis'—a twisted relationship with the cocksucking drug addict who coerced him into a secret relationship when he was still a child."

I feel sick to my stomach. I flip past another few pairs of shorts without really looking at them. "What did he say?"

"He told her no," Alex says simply. "He told her that you're the love of his life, and that once you two get back together, he knows it's going to be forever. Told her he's not willing to give that up, even if choosing you means that he loses any shot he has at making things right with his family. And then he left."

"Come on," I groan. "He and I aren't even together right now, but he's still willing to—"

"Look, maybe you guys aren't hooking up, or sharing the same bed, or... you know, doing any of the other stuff that people who are together do," Alex says, "but Travis doesn't act like a single guy. He hasn't hooked up with any guys or girls since you two split, because in his mind, he already *has* someone. He has you. And I guess he thinks that's worth giving up his family for."

But it's not. *I'm* not.

I turn and stride off to dump all my selections on the checkout counter. My hands are shaking, and I'm not sure why—all I'm sure of is that I want to get out of here. After I swipe my credit card, I steal Stohler's phone again to text Jamie and Ben, warning them both that we're headed back to the apartment. It turns out to be a useless action, because when Alex joins me at the door, he says, "Hey, is it cool with you if Travis brings you back to the apartment? I'm supposed to be meeting some of my friends to go out tonight, and Stohls said she'd give me a ride to the SCSU dorms after we leave here."

I shrug it off—I'd kind of figured I'd be riding with Travis anyway—and collect the bags of my new barely-counts-as-clothing. Travis is still slinking through the aisles of toys, so Stohler whistles to get his attention, then says, "Are you planning to buy something, or can we leave?"

"I'm not buying anything," Travis says, snatching his hand back from whatever he'd been touching.

Stohler lopes over to him and peers over his shoulder. "Hmm. Not a bad choice, but I'd suggest—"

"Oh my god, *I'm not buying anything*," he says. He grabs her by the shoulders and steers her towards the door where Alex and I are waiting. His face is the same color as my car. I want to make fun of him—and the glower he shoots me suggests he expects me to—but I don't have the heart for it right now. Even under the flush of embarrassment, he still looks so sad about his mom, and it kills me to know that that's all my fault.

Once we get outside and have been abandoned by Alex and Stohler, I dump my shopping bags in the backseat of the car and head for the driver's side. Before Travis can get behind the wheel, I slip an arm around his waist and pull him into a tight hug. He makes a noise like he's surprised, but it doesn't stop him from hugging me back. I say, "I love you. You know that, right?"

"I know," he says. "I love—"

"No, listen to me," I say, twisting so that my mouth is right next to his ear. "I love you. Even though we're

not together right now, you're still *everything* to me, and that won't ever change. No matter how long we've been broken up, or who else we're with, or what else happens in your life, you have me. Always."

His grip on my jacket tightens. "I—"

"It doesn't have to be like this," I press on. "Alex told me what you said about the talk with your mom. I know you're hurting right now. I know you're sad, and I know you're lonely, but you don't have to be. We can be together. Travis, I want us to be together."

He goes still in my arms for just a moment before he shifts his hands to my shoulders and straightens his arms, pushing me back and holding me at a distance. His expression is still sad... maybe even sadder than it was a minute ago. "You're doing it again," he sighs.

I blink. "Doing what?"

"You're doing that thing where you try to pretend that us getting back together is as simple as both of us saying we want it. And it's not. It wasn't that simple when you first tried this, when you came back to Lakewood and found out I was dating Ben. It wasn't that simple when you tried it a second time, after you got out of the hospital, or the third time, when you wanted me to dump my pregnant girlfriend for you, or the fourth time, we had to decide what we were going to do about living together. And it's not that simple right now, when you're only six months sober, and my mental stability is hanging on by a fucking thread, and you've suddenly decided to enter adult entertainment, and you're still fucking other guys. I've told you this before—it's not just about the date on the calendar. It's about whether or not you're ready to be with anyone, and you're not. *I'm* not. So please, don't make us have this conversation again. Don't make me be the asshole who turns you down again."

Whether we have this conversation or not, that's what he's doing. He's turning me down *again*, and I'm the fucking idiot for asking him *again*. There's a lump in my throat that I can't seem to swallow down. When I finally manage it, I give Travis a tight smile, take him by the wrists, and remove his hands from my shoulders. "Okay," I say hoarsely. "Sorry, I was just trying to... I won't ask again. You're right. I'll stop doing this, okay?"

"Okay," he echoes. We get into his car, and we don't speak again the whole drive back to the building.

When Travis and I get back to the apartment, Jamie and Ben are sitting on the couch together. Ben is sideways, his back against the arm of the couch and his knees steeped over Jamie's legs; Jamie is sitting mostly upright, though he's leaning to the side enough that he can rest his temple on Ben's shoulder. Ben's throat bears a dark bruise in the shape of Jamie's mouth, and Jamie's eyes are red-rimmed like he's been crying.

I don't know what to make of any of this.

"Did you boys have fun on your adventures?" Jamie asks, straightening up.

"No," both Travis and I say. I add, "It hurt so badly, I cried. Alex has a video of it, I'm sure he'll send it to you later."

Jamie stretches out a hand to me and crooks a finger. "Let me feel."

"If you're going to start fondling each other, you need to let go of me so that I can get off the couch," Ben warns. It's only then that I notice that the fingers of Jamie's other hand are laced through Ben's. "Seriously. I want no part of this."

"You've already had all the parts of this," Travis points out. "If that hickey on your neck is any indication, you've had parts of this within the last couple of hours."

I toe off my boot so that I can fold up the hem of my jeans leg until the bottom few inches of my calf are bared. "Look at this shit. I look like a fuckin' chick."

"Uh, no, you look like a dude with bare legs," Ben says, rolling his eyes. "Since when does the amount of body hair you have do anything to change your gender identity?"

Awesome, another goddamn lecture, courtesy of the fucking Feminist Coalition, or whoever he hangs out with these days—just what I was hoping for. I hope Jamie shoves him off the couch, but instead, Jamie gestures to a menu on the coffee table and says, "We were just discussing the idea of getting takeout delivered. Do either of you want anything?"

"Shouldn't we be heading out?" I say, glancing at Ben even as I accept the menu. "You're already late for work."

"I called in," he replies. "I wanted to—" He stops, sneaks a glance at Jamie, and shrugs. "I called in. Dad's having me pick up a few extra hours next week instead. Do you want food, or not?"

Of course I want food. I always want food. The four of us order takeout and spend the rest of the afternoon—and most of the night—feasting on Chinese and watching shitty, edited-for-content movies on TV. It's nearly eleven by the time Travis, Jamie, and I decide to head out. We gather our coats, and Ben walks us out to the car. That's weird enough, considering the fact that Ben has never once walked me to my car after a night of greasy food and bad television; it's weirder still when Travis and I both duck into the car, but Jamie lingers outside to speak to Ben. A long minute passes, and when I finally peer out at them, they're pressed against the side of the car, kissing.

Travis lays on the horn—they jump apart—and rolls down the window to say, "Ben, what is with you and *defiling my car*? Do you want to spit James' jizz on the windshield, too?"

"Dude, he probably swallowed that at like, two o'clock. That ship sailed hours ago," I say.

Jamie rolls his eyes and climbs into the backseat, assuring Ben through the open window, "I'll call you about dinner, alright?"

"What dinner?" I demand to know as Travis pulls away from the curb. "We just had dinner, why do you guys need dinner again? Where are you going? Can I come—"

"No, you may not," Jamie interrupts. "He's going to come to New York the next night he has off from work, and I'm going to take him to dinner. That's all."

"To make up for the date that never was?" Travis clarifies.

Jamie nods and repeats, "To make up for the date that never was."

I kick my feet up onto the dashboard. "When you and Ben get married, do I get to tell hilarious stories during my best man speech? Like, can I talk about how your relationship started as hatesex, but got wildly out of hand? Can I talk about how you totally told him it was the worst sex you ever had right after he boned you for the first time? Can I talk about that time you banged in my Ferrari and didn't even have the decency to get it detailed after—"

"You are revolting," Jamie says, punctuating each word with a kick to the back of my seat. "I'm not going to marry the midget. Sweet everloving Christ, Garen. And if you ever say that again, you won't be my best man, regardless of who I marry."

I turn to Travis and say, "Their first dance could be to that Ludo song you like."

"Which one?" he asks.

Jamie makes the same pissy noise that Zooey makes every time he picks her up. “There isn’t going to be a first dance, because I’m not going to—”

“Kill me romantically,” I sing over him, making jazz hands and swaying from side to side in time with the beat in my head, *“fill my soul with vomit, then ask me for a piece of gum--”*

“Yes, that’s exactly what everyone wants: a wedding song with the word ‘vomit’ in it,” Jamie says dryly.

“Kind of fitting, though, considering the way you and Ben talk to each other,” Travis points out.

“Bitter and dumb, you’re my sugarplum.” I twist around in my seat as much as my seatbelt will allow. *“You’re awful—I love you!”*

I spend the rest of the car ride back to my dad’s house belting out the rest of the song, followed by as many other insulting love songs as I can think of. By the time Travis parks, I’ve pretty much exhausted myself, and the guys seem tired just from listening to me. It doesn’t take much coaxing for me to convince them that we might as well go downstairs and go right to sleep, even though I don’t have any intention of sleeping at all.

Once downstairs in my room, I climb onto the bed between them, and they both immediately inch closer and start prodding me around until I’m posed to their satisfaction. It works out surprisingly well, actually—Travis always likes to be the big spoon, and Jamie always likes to sleep face-to-face, so that’s how we end up: Travis curled up against my back, his hand resting on my waist, and Jamie pressed to my front, his arms folded between our chests and his face tucked under my chin.

It takes both of them a while to fall asleep. Jamie nods off first, his breathing going slow and steady on my collarbone. I can tell when Travis finally taps out later because he eventually stops dragging his thumb back and forth over my skin. They’re both deeply asleep before midnight, but I don’t even close my eyes. I stay awake all night, keeping watch over my two orphan boys.

202 days sober

Declan shows up at my house on Monday night in an old but well-maintained, white pick-up truck, the bed of which is full of photography crap he has appropriated from the Patton art department. I’m sitting on the porch with Omelette, who goes berserk the second Declan climbs down from the cab.

“Nice truck,” I say, staring at it. My mind is already running away on me, conjuring up images of all the things we could get up to on that bench seat. Country music video meets gay porno.

“Nice dog,” Declan says, dropping to one knee long enough to let Omelette climb all over him, lick his face, give a valiant effort to mounting him. Sometimes, my dog and I are of one mind. Declan gives me a look like he’s thinking the same thing, and snorts, nudging Omelette back down and straightening up. “Where do you want to set up?”

I shrug. “My room, I guess? Easier than rearranging all the furniture in the living room.”

He hoists one of the bags from the truck and says, “Grab some equipment and lead the way.”

I open my mouth to tell him exactly what kind of equipment I’d like to grab—namely, his—but he’s already giving me that look, the one that says he’s filling in the blanks on my cheesy innuendos and finding them lacking. I flash him a thumbs-up and grab an oversized duffel that feels like it’s full of metal rods. Later, once we’ve carted everything up to my bedroom and I have sprawled out on my bed with Omelette to watch Declan set up, I discover that my assumption isn’t too far off base.

The rods screw together to form a giant frame that Declan sets up in front of the wall. There are little legs attached to the bottom so that it can support its own weight, and he sets about clipping a huge gray canvas to the top bar. Noticing my curiosity, he explains, "If you don't have a plain backdrop, your pictures are going to look like shit."

"Impossible. I'm gorgeous," I say immediately. He rolls his eyes and starts setting up a pair of giant lamps with funky umbrellas on them. His silence isn't an agreement, but it isn't a denial either. I stay quiet, carefully fluffing Omelette's fur into a mohawk that runs from the top of his head to just above his tail.

"You need to get out," Declan finally says. For a second, I think he's talking to me—which would be so fucking rude—but when I look up, he's staring at Omelette. When Omelette's only response is to wag his tail, Declan looks at me. "He needs to get out. He'll get his fur all over you and the backdrop. Send him downstairs and change your shirt."

Omelette gives me a wide-eyed, betrayed stare as I guide him out into the hall and close the door. I consider putting on a show while changing into a fresh black t-shirt, but Declan's attention is focused on his camera, not on me. I ask, "Is there even a point to me putting on a shirt? These pictures are to help me get a job as a go-go boy; I doubt I should be giving them a full-clothed portfolio."

"We're going to try a few different things. Some clothed, some not. Some full-body, some close-ups of your face." He hitches his chin towards the backdrop, and once I've stepped into position, he slips into a commanding (and incredibly hot) director mode. *Turn this way, turn that way, tilt your head this way, now go back, put your hands here, take your shirt off, turn again, do this, do that, stop undressing me with your eyes, nevermind, keep undressing me with your eyes, but don't smirk so much.*

"Are you any good at this?" I ask, gesturing to his camera between clicks. "Photography, I mean. Have you been doing it long?"

"Turn your head about thirty degrees to the right, and lift your chin a bit," he says. Only once I've obeyed and he has taken two more shots does he add, "Three years. But I only got into portraiture a year or so ago."

I shoot him a wry smile that he captures at once. "Portraiture. How artistic."

"Well, if I say 'portraiture' instead of 'pornography,' it's a bit easier to find girls who want to take their clothes off so I can take pictures of them," he explains. I laugh, and there's another click. He reaches out and taps a finger against the button of my jeans. "Take these off."

I pop the button, drop the zipper, and shove my jeans down to my knees. I kick them the rest of the way off, and Declan snaps a few more pictures of me in just a pair of tight black briefs, even though I'm leaning to one side and not looking at the camera—nothing I can use for a headshot. I clear my throat and say, "What do you do with the pictures you take of girls? Store 'em on your computer for a night when you can't find any good porn to jerk off to?"

"No. I don't do anything with them," he says with a shrug. "I just take them. A lot of the girls I sleep with... they like it. It makes them feel sexy. I wouldn't take pictures of anyone who didn't ask me to, and I wouldn't keep the pictures of anyone who asked me to delete them. Most of them are on my computer in protected folders, but I don't really look at them that often. It's just something to set the mood for a night. It's foreplay."

"I guess—"

"Put your arms up," Declan cuts me off. "I want to see—yeah, that's perfect."

I don't a chance to find out what he *wants to see*, because he returns his focus to the lens once my arms

are over my head, bent at the elbows with my fingers interlocked behind my neck. I give him a few different angles, turning and posing and feeling like an absolute douche, but looking pretty good while doing it, if the look of careful study on Declan's face is any indication. When I think I can get away with speaking without being interrupted, I try again, "I guess I should feel honored to be the first person who gets to star in their own nearly-naked Declan Campbell photoshoot without it being a precursor to sex."

"Who says you're the first?" he says. He takes another picture, then shifts the camera aside just enough to smirk at me around it. "And who says this isn't a precursor to sex?"

"Is it?" I ask.

The corner of his mouth tips up in a smirk. "The night's not over yet. Still plenty of time for you to join the ranks."

"Didn't realize that was something we were acknowledging," I say. His expression shifts to something questioning, but he doesn't speak. I give up on posing and let my arms drop to my sides. "You're not the first straight guy I've fucked around with. Most of the others have been sort of a one-and-done deal."

"We stroked each other off in the woods, Anderson. It's not exactly something I plan to make a big deal out of," Declan says, finally lowering his camera. He gives my body a cursory once-over, and I'd be offended by how unaffected he seems, if not for the fact that his golden-brown eyes still blaze when they lock onto mine. "Besides... I started chubbing up pretty much the second you got behind the wheel of that cop car. Especially when you said—" I find myself swaying towards him when he leans in close enough that the camera bumps between our chests, "*--my name's Garen, and I'll be your driver this evening.*"

I slip a finger under the camera strap and slowly drag my knuckle up the length of his chest. "In that case, we should go out to your truck and do some roleplay," I say. "I'll climb up into the driver's seat and say it as many times as you want me to, if the line really gets you going that much."

"It's not the line that gets me going," Declan says, and he curls his hand over the back of my neck and hauls me into a kiss.

I'm not surprised, like I was the last time this happened. I think I suspected we'd end up doing this tonight, and Declan must have, too—when his tongue slips into my mouth, I can feel the barbell shot through it, can hear the echo of him once mentioning to me that he usually only puts it in when he thinks he's going to be getting laid. And if that's what he was hoping for, that's what I intend to make happen.

"I'm going to need to you to be naked now," I say.

With my mouth still so close to his, I can feel the spread of his slow, deadly smile before he says, "Get on the bed."

He doesn't have to ask twice. I walk backwards until my knees hit the edge of the bed, and then I flop back onto it, pulling myself up to settle comfortably against my pillows, only half upright. Declan slips the camera strap over his head and moves to set it down on my nightstand, but I catch his wrist and take the camera from him. When I raise it to look through the viewfinder, he's smirking at me.

I take a picture. It doesn't faze him at all. He lets me take picture after picture as he undresses, shameless even once he's completely naked. He kneels on the edge of the bed and crawls towards me, stroking his cock in a way that could only be described as *absentmindedly*. When he reaches me, he takes the camera from me and sets it down on the bed, fitting himself between my knees and leaning in to kiss me. He skims a hand up my leg, ankle to knee, then curves over the back of my thigh and drags his palm up to my ass. I squirm and grumble, "It feels fucking weird, having someone do that to me without any hair on me."

Declan chuckles. "I think it would probably feel weird for me if you *had* hair. Almost all the girls I fuck have

smooth legs.” His fingertips dip down to trail another feather-light touch along my thigh. “Like this.”

“If you can adjust to a one hundred percent increase in the amount of dicks in the bed, I’m pretty sure you’d have no problem adjusting to that amount of body hair,” I say.

He sits back on his haunches and gives my crotch an unsettlingly long look of consideration before he shrugs and slips his hand into my underwear. “The dick isn’t that difficult to get used to, actually. I have one of my own, so we aren’t operating in entirely foreign territory.”

“And I’d assume that blowjobs aren’t foreign territory, either, right?” I say.

“Giving or receiving?” he asks, flicking his tongue out just enough to make his piercing click against his teeth. My dick is painfully hard in the circle of his fist, and I’d be lying if I pretended I didn’t want to push him down my body until I could feel that tongue ring on me. But the last thing I need is to push too far and scare him back into the bed of whatever Ward girl he crawled out of most recently.

“Both, in time,” I say, and I haul him up the length of my torso until he’s straddling my chest. I lift my neck just enough to allow the head of his cock brush over my lips. “For right now, though…”

He rocks forward—not really fucking my face, just pushing into my mouth. It’s so much better than last time. I can see him now; I can look up at him, watch his expressions and the way his eyes flutter shut, the way his lips part ever so slightly. My own eyes fall closed, and I turn my attention to enjoying every last inch of him. His cock is heavy and perfect on my tongue, weighing me down, steadying me. This is what *I need*. This is what I’m good for.

Above my head, there’s a loud *click*. I glance up and am treated to another *click*—Declan’s camera is back, and it’s aimed right at me, capturing each of my movements. I let his dick slip out of my mouth, but before I can say anything, he offers, “I can stop, if you want me to.”

Stopping is the *last* thing I want him to do. My blood pulses faster through my veins, and I feel my skin starting to heat up in that way it only ever does when I know I’m being watched. I am nothing if not a complete slut for attention.

I grab two handfuls of Declan’s ass and yank him in again, until the head of his cock presses into the back of my throat and I have to swallow around it. He lets out a faint huff of air that sounds almost like a laugh, and drops one hand from the camera so that he can stroke my too-short hair. Another few pictures from him, another few bobs of my head, and he makes another strangled sound, though this one sounds more frustrated. He abandons the camera on the bedside table so that he can get both hands on me, curving his palms against my jaw. He brushes his thumbs over my lips, feeling where his cock disappears into my mouth. I tighten my grip on his ass. He shivers. “Where do you keep your condoms?”

I let my head drop back onto the pillow so that his cock slips from my mouth again. “Nightstand drawer. Grab the lube, too.”

He climbs off me to obey, and when he returns with his prizes, he spreads himself out over me, pinning me to the mattress with his muscle weight and kissing me deeply. One of his hands returns to my knee, curling under it and hitching it up over his hip so that we can rock against each other better. He doesn’t seem at all nervous, which is sort of bizarre—I’m used to more apprehension when I fuck guys who aren’t experienced with other guys.

“You’ve never done this before, have you?” I say.

He laughs. “Of course I have.”

I pull away from him slightly, blinking in surprise. “You have?”

"Garen, I've fucked hundreds of girls. Are you really that shocked to learn that some of them liked anal?" he says. He ducks to press a kiss just below my ear and says, "I can go slow, if it's been a while for you."

It *has* been a while. It's been months—not since the night last fall when I let Travis try. Even now, I can still feel the aching fullness of him shoved inside me; I can still feel the grip of panic choking me out and making it impossible for me to breathe, let alone enjoy what was happening. And *obviously* Declan thinks that he—as the straight one—is going to be on top. Obviously he expects me to be some needy, cock-hungry bottom just because I've done this before.

My whole body feels like it's locked up tight, but the moment his fingers stray too close to my ass, I shake out the rigidness in my limbs and roll us over until our positions are reversed. I'm straddling him now, so he's still between my legs, still too close for comfort. I wriggle back until I'm seated on his thighs instead of poised for fucking.

I don't bottom, is what I should say. Simple as that. Take it or leave it. Instead, the explanation gets caught in my throat, and the first thing I can think to say is, "When's your birthday?"

His brow creases. "Why does it matter?"

"Last month, Charlie said you don't turn seventeen until April," I say. "But he didn't—which day, specifically?"

"A week from tomorrow," he says. "April tenth. Why does that—where the fuck are you going?"

"I'm not going to sleep with a sixteen-year-old," I say. I'm not sure I sound sufficiently determined enough, given that all I'm really feeling is relief at not having to explain myself or my aversion to bottoming. But it's a perfect excuse right now, and I'm going to fucking run with it. I clamber off the bed and search out my jeans near the backdrop.

Before I can pull them on, Declan leans over and catches my wrist. "I don't understand. You seemed fine with it two minutes ago."

"Because I forgot. I only just remembered how young you are," I say. "You're sixteen, I'm nineteen. And I'm not a fucking rapist."

He squints. "I know that, Anderson. And in case you haven't realized, I'm not objecting to any of this."

"Well, according to the state of New York, you can't give full consent. Not for another week. And I know that what we've already done could probably get me in trouble anyway, but I don't want to push it any further." I tug my wrist out of his grasp and get my jeans on. Once I'm covered, I feel much more secure, enough to add, somewhat apologetically, "I'll fuck you when I know I'm not going to get arrested for statutory rape."

Declan cocks his head to the side, but doesn't speak. His eyes are slightly narrowed, and I'm beginning to suspect he's about to start an argument. But instead, he reaches over to the nightstand and picks up his camera. He beckons me closer, and when I reluctantly sink onto the bed next to him, he shifts around until I can see the screen.

He calls up the most recent picture; it's one of the shots of me sucking him off. He deletes it. In full view of me, he goes through every single picture, deleting all the ones where he's even remotely in frame. Once they're gone, he removes the memory card, drops it on my palm, and leans in to kiss me. I let him, only because he isn't pushing for more.

When he pulls back, he says, "Fine."

"What's fine?" I say blankly.

"You don't want to fuck—that's fine," he says. "I wouldn't tell anyone if we did, and you wouldn't get arrested for it. But if you're not interested, that's fine."

I scrub a hand over my scalp and say, "It's not that I'm not interested, Dec. You have no *idea* how interested I am. Just not... that. Not fucking. Not right now."

Not until I can come up with a good excuse for why I won't bottom, without sending him running from the possibility of having to bottom himself.

Declan hums in consideration and sprawls back out on the bed. One of his hands lands on his stomach; he trails his fingers back and forth, drawing my eye from his pecs to his groin. He's still mostly hard. I can't help but want to reach for him. When I look back up at his face, he's grinning. He says, "For a guy who just shot me down, that's a hell of a stare."

"I shot down penetration," I correct. "I didn't shoot down jerking you off. And like, maybe having you come on my face, if the mood strikes me—"

"Get over here," he says, and I'm on him in an instant, slinging a leg over him and settling onto his thighs as my hand goes to his cock.

And then, from out in the hall, I hear a voice say, "Hey, Garen. Whose truck is out—"

The door opens, and Travis freezes. He stares at me. I stare back. Declan stops kissing my neck just long enough to say, "Oh, hey. Travis, right?"

Travis backs out into the hall and slams the door shut. I let my head loll forward so that my forehead is resting against Declan's shoulder and mutter, "Fuck."

"I hate to break it to you, but the roommate situation is definitely different for straight guys," Declan says. He opens the button of my jeans again and slips his hand in. "Whenever Javi and I walk in on each other, we can't get out of there fast enough."

I don't reply. All I can think about is Travis saying, *you're still fucking other guys*. Travis saying, *it's about whether or not you're ready to be with anyone, and you're not*. Travis saying, *please don't make us have this conversation again*.

Declan nudges my shoulder. "Do you want me to go?"

Travis saying, *don't make me be the asshole who turns you down again*.

I lift my head and flash Declan my most vicious, heart-stopping smile. "Course not, babe," I say. "We're just getting started."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“Real loneliness is not necessarily limited to when you are alone.” –Charles Bukowski

210 days sober

“Are you sure you can smoke?” Declan asks me. It’s probably the fourth time he has asked me this in the ten minutes since we climbed into the cab of his truck, parked in the farthest corner of the senior lot. Even as he asks, he continues to break up the nugget of weed and pack the pieces into the speckled-blue glass pipe. I’m sure he’s going to smoke no matter what my answer is, as he rightfully should—it’s his birthday, after all.

“I’m sure,” I say. “Only done it once since rehab, though, so a single hit might get me toasted.”

Declan snorts. “Christ, I’ll start. I don’t want you fading out before I’m even high.” He raises the pipe to his lips, lights the bud, and takes a deep hit. His chest heaves as his lungs expand, and I’m pretty sure he won’t fault me for staring at his pecs as he moves. When he eventually exhales, he lets the smoke curl from his mouth so slowly, I think he *must* be trying to get me to stare. It would work, if I hadn’t already been watching. His mouth quirks into a brief, knowing smile before he takes his second hit. Only later, as he’s exhaling his third, does he hold out the pipe. Before I can accept it, he shies away with it and warns, “You’d better not be bullshitting me about being okay to do this. If you relapse and end up back in rehab because of this, I’ll—”

“Dude, I told you. I’m completely okay with smoking up. I went to rehab because of my drinking and coke usage. And painkillers, and shit. Heavy stuff. I’m fine to smoke a bowl once every few months.”

To illustrate my point, I take the pipe from him, put it to my lips, and light it. It’s a long hit, and whoever Declan buys from grows quality hydro. When I let the smoke out, it’s clouded around a laugh.

“Fuck, Dec,” I say. “*Warn* a guy.”

“It’s awesome, right?” Declan laughs. He takes the bowl, takes a hit, says around it, “I can’t even smoke a whole bowl by myself.” Exhale. “I can only do maybe... eight hits before I’m too high to do anything but, like... get Dominos delivered to the dorm and watch old episodes of *Lost* on my laptop.”

I wrinkle my nose and take the bowl when he holds it out. “I never liked *Lost*.”

“Me neither. That’s why I have to be high to watch it,” he says. “S the only time that fucking show ever makes sense to me.”

I choke on the smoke of my second hit because I’m too busy laughing to remember to hold it in. Declan closes his eyes and smiles.

It isn’t until my third hit and his sixth that he sets the pipe in the cupholder and reaches for me, but from the moment his hand lands on my leg, he’s all in. He gives my knee an insistent tug, even as he slides across the bench seat so the steering wheel isn’t in his way. “Come here.”

We’re already sitting shoulder to shoulder, thigh to thigh, so there’s only one *here* he can be referring to. I crawl up onto my knees on the seat and swing a leg over his lap. He kisses me without any build-up or preamble, only the firm, certain pressure of his lips on mine. The truck is too small, or we’re both just too big—my head knocks against the roof of the cab a few times, and I’m debating the pros and cons of shoving him sideways, spreading him out over the bench and lying on top of him, when he breaks the kiss.

“Last week, you said you wanted to fuck, but wouldn’t as long as I was sixteen. I’m seventeen now,” he says. His fingers are scratching at the back of my scalp, trying to find something to pull on, but my hair’s

still way too short for that. Frustrated, he ends up moving both his hands to my jaw, clasp my face between his palms and tipping my head back so that he can get his mouth on my neck. At my noise of approval, he lifts his lips from my skin long enough to ask, "Are you still interested?"

Yes, I want to say, grinding my ass down against his growing hard-on. But instead, I take a deep breath and make myself repeat the words Doc helped me come up with at my last therapy session. "I like you, and I'm attracted to you, and I want to sleep with you, but I don't let people fuck me. So, if we're going to do this, I think we need to talk our way through it first, because I can't have sex unless I'm on top."

Declan leans back and tilts my head down again so that I can see his frown. "What do you mean?"

I wish I could swallow my words, but it's too late to take them back now. I say, "What you said, the last time we hooked up... gave me the impression that you thought you'd be on top. Fucking me. And I'm telling you right now, that's not happening. I don't do that."

"I don't—" He looks entirely thrown by this; it's probably the least composed I've ever seen him, other than the way he looks when he comes. "It hadn't even crossed my mind that we'd do it any other way. After all, you're the one who hooks up with guys on the regular. I assumed you had done that before."

I shift a little further back on his thighs; it'd probably be easier to think, if I couldn't feel his erection. I wonder if it'd be too awkward to climb off. "I have," I admit. "That's, uh... how I know I'm not into it. I hate it, actually, I can't get off on it. Can't even get turned on. I've tried it with a few different guys, but only ever when I was so fucked up that I was barely conscious, or with... you know, guys I was serious with."

"Travis?" Declan guesses.

I shrug. "Once. But I hated it so much, he had to stop after just a couple of minutes."

"Charlie's brother?" Declan guesses again, and no. No, nope, we're done.

I slip sideways off his lap, back into my own seat, and say shortly, "Yeah, Dave fucked me. But it wasn't good, and I don't want to talk—look, this is sort of a 'take it or leave it' deal. Either you agree to bottom, or we don't fuck. Those are your options here. You getting your dick in my ass is not on the table."

He takes the pipe from the cupholder and shuffles the bud with the tip of his pinkie finger before he takes another hit. We sit in silence for a while. I'm beginning to think that he assumes his silence is answer enough, but it turns out that he's just considering his options. Eventually, he looks at me and says in an offhand tone, "It's not like I've never done *anything* like that. I mean, I've never gotten fucked, not even close. But sometimes, I'll hook up with a girl who tries to be, you know... *daring* or *adventurous* or whatever, and she'll decide to put her finger up my ass while she's blowing me or something." He shuffles the bowl again, even though it doesn't need it, and even though he doesn't take a hit. He wrinkles his nose. "It's not really my thing. I don't *hate* it, and it doesn't hurt. It isn't that bad, but it isn't good, either. Definitely nothing I'd get off on."

"That's because girls are fucking stupid," I say. I take the bowl from him and flick the lighter. It sparks, but doesn't ignite. "They read all these articles in *Cosmo* that tell them they can *please their man* by shoving a finger up his ass when he's not expecting it, or scraping their teeth on his shaft, or slathering his nuts in peanut butter and licking it off, or what-the-fuck-ever, but they don't know how to do it right."

Declan stretches out over the seat, his legs folded up against the door and his head and shoulders pillowed on my lap. "I can't think of a single way for someone to lick peanut butter off my balls and have it be 'done right.'"

"I meant they don't know how to get a guy off right," I say. "Not the peanut butter thing. That'd probably be weird no matter what." He makes a noise of agreement. "I'm not surprised some moronic, hetero chick can't get you off by fingering you, but I bet a gay guy could. Bet I could, 'm good at it." He doesn't make

any noise this time. I flick the lighter again, but it's still dead. "Do you have another light? This one's empty."

"Check the glove compartment. There might be one there," he answers.

I have to lean over his face to reach the glovebox, and since my body is right there, he takes the opportunity to untuck my uniform shirt and suck a hickey onto my abs. I squirm, fully intending to push him onto the floor—or push his head towards my crotch, I'm not sure yet—but then I get the glovebox open, and my thought process is completely derailed, because when I lift up the vehicle registration, instead of finding a lighter, I find a Smith & Wesson 5906. I blink. "Oh."

"Hm?" Declan stops mouthing at my stomach and sits halfway up, propping himself up on one elbow and peering into the glovebox. "Oh, that. What, you're surprised? You knew I had one."

"Yeah, I just didn't realize it'd be here," I say.

"Usually, I take better care of it," he says, sounding almost like an apology. "I keep it in its case, in my room. But somebody tipped me off to upcoming room inspections, so I had to move it. The case is still in the dorm, but I filled it with pens and staples and school junk so it looks like I'm just a weirdo who uses an old gun case for his school supplies. The pistol's going to stay here until I'm sure it's safe to move it back. Probably next week, while everybody else is home for spring break."

"You're not going back home for the week?" I say.

He shakes his head, flashes me a bland smile that neither of us pretends to believe is real. "Nope. It'd be stupid to fly to Nebraska and leave my truck here so I'm stranded without one for a week, and it'd be even stupider to waste all the time driving there just so I can be bored for a few days, turn around, and drive back. Same reason my grandparents beg out of coming to visit for Parents' Day at the end of every April. Anyway, I like staying here, an hour outside the city. Especially since you, Javi, and Taylor all live in New York anyway, and Charlie's right over in New Haven. I'm the only one who's staying in the dorms for the week, but at least I can go hang out with people, if I want to."

"Sam and Steven?" I ask.

Another head shake. "Steven's from Maine, Sam's from NorCal. They're both going home for the week." He reaches for the pistol. "You want to check it out?"

I grab his wrist before he can make contact. "Uh, *no*, thanks. I'd rather not leave this truck with an extra hole in me. We're both stoned as fuck. Playing with firearms is the quickest way to turn this evening into an after-school special."

Declan twists to roll his eyes at me. "Do you really think I'm that stupid? It's not loaded, G. There's no clip in the magazine, nothing in the chamber. I don't even keep ammunition in the truck."

"Where do you keep that? Your room?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "Patton weapons room. Nobody even notices an extra box of cartridges tucked in the back of the ammo shelves, and I just slip it out whenever I need it."

I snap the glovebox shut again and say, "Need it for... murdering people in the dark of the night?"

"For target practice, you fucking idiot," he says. "I like to go out to that clearing in the woods behind the party house the Ward girls have. Charlie and Javi come with me sometimes—we steal apples and oranges from the dining hall and line 'em up on the picnic table, see how many we can hit from across the clearing. You should come with us sometime." He gestures towards the glovebox. "I could see about getting you one of your own, if you wanted me to."

I look at him. He's staring at my mouth, but not like he wants to kiss me—more like he wants to see the answer I give. At this point, I know Declan well enough to know the only right answer. "Definitely. Thanks."

He sits up, leans in to kiss me, but before he makes contact, I can't resist adding, "Besides, if I recall, you once told me it turns you on to watch me shoot things."

"That was laser tag, and I was lying," he says. Instead of kissing me, he gives a hard nip to my lower lip, then twists around until he can free his cell phone from his pocket. He sends a few quick texts, taps his thumb impatiently against the side of the phone, and smirks when it chimes with a reply. He shoves the phone back into his pocket and reaches for the door handle, then comes right back and rubs his palm over my buzzcut as an afterthought. "I'm heading out, but you should stick around campus until you sober up enough to drive."

Right—wouldn't want to start cruising around in the Ferrari while I'm high off my ass, and risk taking out another vehicle the way some kid took out Jamie's parents. But I'm still kind of stuck on the *heading out* part. I say, "Wait, where are you going?"

"Walking over to Ward." He gives me a kiss on the cheek and a smile that can only be described as dismissive. "Don't get me wrong, you've got a *great* mouth. But it's my birthday, and I want to really fuck someone. I planned for that to be you, but if it can't be, then I'm going to meet one of my girls."

"Seriously?" I can't stop myself from saying.

"Yes, seriously," Declan says. He roots around in his pocket for a minute before surfacing with his keys and pressing them into my palm. "Here, take these. You can hang around in my room while you're waiting to sober up. Javi's probably there, but if he's not, drop my keys off with Charlie or Taylor before you leave." He slips out of the truck and shuts the door, starts striding off towards the path through the woods to Ward Academy before he pauses—almost trips, really—and turns to add, "I'll see you around. And don't forget—my party is this Friday night, out at the house. I want you to come."

"If you want me to come, maybe you should stop blue-balling me," I call after him. He laughs, but turns and keeps walking.

212 days sober

My phone starts buzzing halfway through chem lab on Thursday. When I take it from my pocket to check the caller ID, it's a number I don't recognize. Usually, I would ignore it, but Charlie's being a control freak about today's assignment, and I haven't been allowed to touch anything all period. I scribble my name on the sign-out sheet like I'm heading to the bathroom, then slip into the nearest stairwell to answer the call.

"Hello?"

"Hello, may I speak to..." There's a pause, like the man on the other end is checking a list. "Garen Anderson?"

"Speaking," I say—snap, I guess. I'm going to be pissed, if I find out that I just left class to chat up a telemarketer.

The voice warms as it replies, "Hello, Garen, my name's Ken. I'm the talent manager at Rush. I'm calling about the application you submitted to our website last week."

Without thinking, I say, "*Application* is a very generous word for it. If I remember correctly, I sent you five nearly-naked pictures of myself and wrote 'deepthroating' under my '*special skills*.'" The second the words are out, I cover my mouth with my palm, like that will do anything to help me take them back.

Christ, no wonder people tell me I'll never be able to get a real job, if this is how I talk to prospective employers.

To my intense relief, Ken chuckles. "Well, you definitely caught my attention with that, especially considering that one of our current dancers, Paul, recommended you personally. I'm calling to let you know that you seem like you could be a great addition to our staff. We have about thirty different applicants, all of whom are applying for the same six dancing positions. Our standard practice would be to have all of you come in on the same night so that we can meet you face-to-face. We'll send a few people home right then, if they don't seem like they'd be a good fit, but the rest will be going into their audition."

"An audition," I echo. "Are you talking about my dancing or my special skills?"

"Maybe both, if you play your cards right," he purrs. Thank god this is a phone call, because if he could see the revolted face I make at that, there's no way he'd ever hire me. I should probably try to learn a better poker face, if I'm aiming to work at a place that clearly considers sexual harassment a goal, not a problem. Ken clears his throat, and says, in a more business-appropriate tone, "You'd be working a full, six-hour shift, from ten at night to four the next morning, and you'd be receiving all the standard dancer perks—full use of our dressing rooms to get ready, free drinks all night, *and* you get to keep any tips you receive. I'll be in the club the entire time, as will Jonathan and Mikael, the two owners. We'll be observing all of the dancers to see who stands out in a good way, who stands out in a bad way. At the end of the night, the three of us will conference and decide who our six new dancers will be. Does that sound like something you'd be interested in trying out?"

"Absolutely," I say, but the word feels strange in my mouth, like I'm speaking too quickly. I think part of my brain might still be stuck on *free drinks all night*. I give myself a quick shake and add, "Thank you, that sounds awesome. What day should I come in?"

"Next Friday, the twentieth. And we'll need you to show up no later than eight o'clock. You can get here in street clothes, but you need to bring your own costume to dance in, as well as a photo ID and a printed copy of your application, including photos. If you plan to store your stuff in one of the lockers in the dressing room, I'd suggest you bring your own lock, because we don't provide any, and I can't guarantee one of the other dancers won't try to *borrow* some of your valuables. Do you have any questions for me?" When I confirm that I do not, he says, "Great. I look forward to meeting you next Friday," and hangs up before I can return the sentiment, however much I wouldn't mean it.

I slip back into my classroom and throw myself back down at my lab table, slinging an arm around Javi's shoulders and announcing to the group at large, "Guess who has a one-in-five chance of becoming a sex worker next week!"

Seven months sober

The Ward party house is a two-story home halfway between the Patton and Ward campuses. Every spring, the graduating seniors who own it pass along the lease to the raddest chicks in the junior class, carrying on the *real* tradition that unites our schools: the ruling seniors of Ward provide the house we all party in, and the ruling seniors of Patton provide the booze to go in it. This year, that apparently means the Whitman squad, something nobody bothers to fucking tell me until I'm being forced to help Charlie and Declan load a couple of kegs into the bed of Dec's truck.

"You boys having a party?" the liquor store clerk grunts at us. His name tag identifies him as *Brian*, and he keeps shooting suspicious looks at Declan, whose fake ID brands him as five full years older than he actually is.

"Yeah, we are," I say, counting out enough bills to cover the kegs and setting them on the tailgate. "Well, our fraternity is."

The bullshit assurance that we're not in high school is enough to make Brian breathe a sigh of relief as he

scoops up the money. “Cool, cool. Which one?”

“Sigma Chi,” I say. It’s the only frat I know the name of, and I’m only aware of their existence because Travis told me some dude-bro in a ball cap cornered him outside his philosophy class the other night and told him he should *totally think about pledging next fall, brah*. I turn to the other two and ask, “Do we want to get anything harder than beer, you guys?”

Charlie shrugs and hops down from the truck bed. “No, we keep the bar at the house pretty well-stocked.”

“Did we restock the Malibu after the last party?” Declan asks as he shuts the tailgate. “Aubrey will spend the whole night bitching if she doesn’t have a steady stream of Bay Breezes, and I’m not in the mood to listen to it.”

“As opposed to all the nights when you’re so willing to listen to girls’ complaints?” Charlie says.

I push off the side of the truck and head for the door of the liquor store. “I’ll get another bottle, but one of you guys has to text Aubrey and tell her she’s on her own for the cranberry and pineapple juice.”

Brian follows me back into the store and points me towards the aisle where I can find the coconut rum. I make it halfway to the Malibu display before my heart starts to feel heavy. Five feet shy of my goal, I pause. I look around. The aisle isn’t just coconut rum—it’s *all* rum. Light, dark, gold, flavored, spiced, overproof. Myers, Bacardi, Pyrat, Prichard’s, El Dorado, Havana Club, Diplimatico. Less than a foot away from me, right at eye level, there’s an entire row of Bacardi 151 bottles, and I can feel the phantom burn in my throat, like I’ve just swallowed a whole bottle of it. It hurts as much as the real thing did, when I relapsed in September. I shuffle forward a few more steps, pick up the biggest bottle of Malibu they sell, and hug the white, plastic jug to my chest, like it’ll serve as a barrier between me and the things I *want* to drink.

I don’t want to pass the 151 again, so I loop around the end of the display with the intention of sneaking up the next aisle to get to the front counter. Instantly, I realize this is an even worse mistake, because now I’m in the whiskey aisle. And it hits me where I live. Even from the end of the aisle, I can already pick out the section with all the different kinds of Jack Daniel’s—my poison of choice, back when I was actually allowed to poison myself when I wanted to. Single Barrel, Tennessee Honey, Gentleman Jack, Old No. 7, Green Label. Every single kind, mixed with pop, on the rocks, straight, it doesn’t *matter*, I want it all. I grit my teeth and take a step forward, and there’s Jameson. I take another step, and there’s Dewar’s. Another, and it’s Diageo. Another, and it’s Johnnie Walker. I stop. The labels are a lined up in a rainbow. Red, Black, Double Black, Green, Gold, Blue. It’s this last one I can’t stop looking at.

Two years ago, my seventeenth birthday happened to fall on Easter Sunday, and almost all the other Patton boys went home for it. Jamie’s parents wanted him to fly back to Georgia, but he refused to be anywhere without me for my birthday weekend, even if that meant forcing a Jewish boy to celebrate Easter with him. We collected a bunch of hollow plastic eggs, divided them by color, and filled them with treats—Adderall, condoms, tiny bags of coke, Percocet, dimebags of weed, and (to my immense pride at my own ingenuity) a travel-sized packet of flavored lube with a note that said *this coupon can be redeemed for one filthysloppyawesome rimjob*. I hid all the pink and orange eggs I’d filled, he hid all the blue and green, and we went on a campus-wide hunt that lasted all afternoon. When we finally got back to our dorm, we dipped into our spoils—Jamie immediately redeemed his coupon—and I was finally allowed to open my present: a meticulously-wrapped bottle of Johnnie Walker Blue. We spent the entire evening playing around in bed. Jamie cued up his favorite old movies on his laptop, and I teased him about his obsessive crush on Cary Grant; we split the Scotch between us, taking long, sloppy sips right from the bottle and lapping the spilled drops from each other’s mouths.

It might have been the best birthday I’ve ever had in my life.

Hands shaking, I take a bottle of the Johnnie Walker Blue from the shelf and head to the register. Brian the clerk rings me up and nods to the second bottle. “Good stuff, huh?”

"Yeah," I say hoarsely, counting out more of my money and pressing the stack into his hand. "It's great stuff."

"You need a bag?" he asks as he hands me my change. I shake my head, grab one bottle in each hand, and go for the door. The truck is already running, and Declan is behind the wheel, Charlie standing next to the open passenger door so I can climb up into the middle of the bench seat.

"Took you long enough," Declan says, but he shuts right up when I hand him the bottle of Scotch.

"Happy birthday, you little shit," I say. "Unless you want to keep bitching, in which case, I can totally find someone else to give this—"

"Don't you dare," he says. He unbuckles his seatbelt and hip-checks me back across the bench into the passenger seat. He leans around me and says, "Charlie, go around. You're driving now."

Charlie rolls his eyes and shuts my door, then trots towards the front of the truck. The second he looks away, Declan lurches forward and kisses the corner of my mouth. "Thanks, Anderson."

"No problem," I say, and I *want* to keep kissing him, but Charlie pops open the driver's side door and slips behind the wheel. Declan cracks open the bottle of Scotch, and I roll down my window so I won't have to smell it.

Declan has made a pretty serious dent in the bottle by the time we pull up to the party, which is teeming with Ward girls and... more Ward girls. Dec disappears into the party at once, leaving Charlie and me to recruit Steven and Taylor to help us haul the kegs inside.

"Nobody told me this party was going to be such a fuckin' taco fest," I mutter to Taylor, who—as a fellow faggot—should at least sympathize with me on this.

He clearly doesn't, if his laughter is any indication. He says, "Yeah, that's what happens when Declan gets to make the invite list. His strategy is pretty much to invite all the girls he wants to fuck, plus the six guys he's friends with."

"There are other dudes here, though," I say, gesturing to some random guy I've never met before. Random Guy is the lone bro in the cluster of females on the porch; he has his arm around one girl's shoulders.

Taylor shrugs. "Some of the girls bring their boyfriends along. Doesn't really do anything to discourage Dec, but that's between him, the girls, and their boys. Here, grab the other end of this one."

We cart the keg into the house, where we're greeted by the gleeful cheers of a handful of girls. Taylor steers us into the kitchen, where a plastic tub full of ice is waiting. We've barely had time to pack the keg into the tub and tap it before a line of girls with Solo cups starts forming. The first girl makes exactly one attempt to fill her cup before she starts pouting at me. "I can't do it," she says. "Can you help me, please?"

"Sure, you lazy bitch," I say, but I say the words with a bright smile and fill her cup for her, so she seems to take it as a joke. I end up playing kegmaster for the next twenty minutes, filling cup after cup for girl after girl.

At the end of the line, I find myself face to face with Aubrey, the girl who sent me a Valentine's bear to inform me that she wouldn't say no to a threesome with me and Declan. It's dark out, but she's wearing her Ray-Bans anyway, like she was at the hookah lounge that night in February. She hooks an arm around my neck and smacks a kiss to my cheek.

"I heard you've got my 'Bu, boo," she says. "Wanna continue playing barkeep long enough to make me

an extra-strong drink?”

“No, but I have a feeling that you’re going to make me,” I say. “You bring the juice?”

She retrieves a jug each of pineapple juice and cranberry juice from the fridge. I paw through the cabinets until I find a cocktail shaker, then pour equal parts of the pineapple, cranberry, and coconut rum into it and give it a few seconds’ hard shake before straining it over ice in a Solo cup. Aubrey takes a slug of it, sighs, and says, “That’s perfect.”

“My drinks always are,” I say.

She tugs me towards the sound of dance music and says, “C’mon, we’re all in the living room. That’s where the fun is.”

The ‘we’ in question is apparently the same crowd who went to the hookah lounge. My squad, Javi’s girlfriend, her friends. I can’t remember half their names, but they all greet me enthusiastically, so I pretend to give a shit. The only one who’s missing is Declan; I can’t help but glance around for him. Next to me, Aubrey laughs.

“Sorry, babe, he’s already found his first conquest for the evening,” she says. She nods in the direction of the sound system, and I turn.

Declan’s back is to me, but he’s the only ginger in the room, so it’s not like I can mistake him for someone else. He’s talking to some girl with bleached blond hair and a lowcut top. He says something, and she laughs. He says something else, and she nods. She darts around him and heads for the stairs, shooting him a coy glance over her shoulder.

Instead of following her directly, he takes the long way around the room, wandering right towards where our group is gathered in the corner. Before I can say a single word to him, he slips a hand into my jacket, takes a condom from the inner pocket, and claps me on the shoulder. “Thanks, buddy. Enjoy the party.”

“Enjoy your slut,” I say, and he laughs, disappears up the stairs after the girl. I make a face.

Steven claps me on the shoulder too and says, “Sorry, man. But on the bright side, Dec’s probably going to get his ass beat tonight, ‘cause that was Tamara Baylour, and I’m pretty sure her boyfriend’s around here somewhere.”

“I don’t care,” I say immediately. Bullshit—I really fucking care. “Wait, why the hell are you saying sorry to me?”

Javi snorts. “G, you should probably just let it go.”

“Let what go?” I grumble, unable to stop myself from twisting to glance at the stairs.

“The whole, you know...” He gestures to the stairs and gives me a smile that’s more like a wince. “Crush that you have. On Dec?”

I immediately look away, but the first person my eyes land on is Jenn. She’s wearing a grim expression, with a faint flush on her cheeks, and suddenly, I remember the sounds I heard her making in the hookah lounge bathroom, when Declan was fucking her in the stall. She got further with him that night than I’ve ever managed, but to my knowledge, he hasn’t really bothered to talk to her much since then. And it hits me—everyone in this group must think I’m even more pathetic than the string of girls who Declan has screwed and gotten bored of.

My face heats up, and I look away from Jenn, like that’ll make me any less red. “Go fuck yourself, Javi. I don’t have a crush on anyone. Especially not Campbell.”

"Look, I'm not trying to—"

"Leave it, Javier," Vanessa says sharply, and he rolls his eyes, but falls silent like a good, pussy-whipped boy.

Jenn finishes her cup of beer and grabs my wrist, even though we're nowhere near well-acquainted enough for her to be grabbing at me. "Come on. I'll get another drink, and then we'll go dance. We can be the '*I like a dude who's totally boning someone else right now*' club."

"Are you kidding, Jenn?" Sam laughs. "We've all seen how you like to dance. Something tells me that Garen isn't too interested in having you rub your ass all over his crotch."

"That's pretty much the point. I'd like a chance to dance up on a guy who isn't going to pop a fucking boner in the middle of it, like somepeople always do, *Samuel*," Jenn says, giving him the most judgmental look she can muster before dragging me off to refill her cup from the keg.

Sam wasn't kidding; dancing with Jenn is a lot like getting a lapdance while standing, and her movements only become more obscene the drunker she gets. She's delighted to discover that I can dance, and even more delighted to discover that—true to her suspicions—I'm not even remotely aroused by her grinding against me.

"Look!" she slurs at our friends during our fourth song together, stepping away from me to stare gleefully at my crotch. "Look, he doesn't care even a little bit! Not one little bit! It's like I'm not even *here*."

I kind of wish she *wasn't* here. I don't fucking know her, and she's putting her hands on me way more than I'm comfortable with. She might be trying to cheer me up, but it's not fucking working. It's just pissing me off. The second she goes to refill her drink yet again, I cut back through our group of friends. Charlie's dancing with Kaitlyn, and I stop next to him just long enough to pick his pocket for his cell phone before I slip out the nearest door and onto the porch. I take a deep breath of the cool night air, but it just feels frozen in my lungs. It doesn't calm my anger at all. I bring up a new text to Declan on Charlie's phone and start hammering out a message so quickly, I'm worried I might break the keys.

how's the skank? I type. whats she doing, sucking you off? are you fucking her? is she good?

It's a minute or two before the reply comes. *wtf, walczyk, are you high??* Almost immediately after, Declan adds, *w/e you're on has gotta be great shit, tho, make sure you save some for me.*

this isnt fucking charlie, this is G, i stole his cell, i still dont have your goddamn #, I send, then, *how is she? whatever slut you brought up there w/ you. does she even know what she's doing?*

He replies, *hope you plan to delete these messages b4 you give charlie back his phone.*

All I can think to send in reply is a random smash of letters. When he doesn't respond to that, I keep typing out my message with clumsy, trembling fingers. *this is the same chick you nailed on your birthday, isnt it? the one you went to after you & i stopped what we were doing? hope she was worth it but im betting she wasnt. a girl like that could never be as good to you as i could be. whats she doing now? is she sucking your cock?*

His next message comes in two parts. The first is only a three-word message, *see for yrself*. The second is a picture. I nearly break the phone. I squeeze my eyes shut for a long moment until I can calm myself to look at it again without pitching the phone across the yard. The picture is shockingly well lit; I guess Declan likes to fuck with the lights on. The blond girl is on her knees in front of him, and she's *barely* sucking his dick. Only the head is in her mouth, and she looks like she's forgetting to cover her teeth with her lips. There isn't nearly enough spit, enough slickness, enough—Christ, enough *passion*. Who gives a fucking *neat blowjob*?

I type, your girl is pathetic. cant believe she has a chance with you & shes wasting it on such a bullshit blowjob. if that was me, if you were with me right now, id have you down my fucking throat. thats how you like it, i know it is, you like fucking my mouth, you like feeling me swallow your cum, like it when I taste you.

she's getting pissed at me for being on my cell while she's goingg down on me, he texts, words starting to get messy in his haste to reply. Dont have the <3 to tell her I'm only getting off bc of the fuckin perverted shit my squadmate is saying to me.

forget her. come downstairs & find me, we can go to your truck & park somewhere, we can fuck around. I slump against the side of the house and wait for a reply, but one doesn't come. I balance the phone on the porch railing so that I can rub both palms over my face. If only the air were a little bit colder, it might be enough to make me snap out of this bullshit mood I'm in. But instead, I just continue to feel like all my skin is stretched too tight. The phone beeps on the rail, and I scramble to read the text, then immediately wish I hadn't.

nope. going to fuck her, it says. gonna think about you, but 'm going to fuck her. i'll find you after, gotta go, bye.

I shove Charlie's cell into my pocket and turn around so that I can rest my forehead against the wall. Fuck. I don't know why this is getting to me as badly as it is. It's not like Declan is the first guy I've hooked up with who fucked some chick instead of getting with me again later. Jamie did it for years. Travis has even done it. I shouldn't be so bothered by this—logically, I know that—but I can't stop thinking about the fact that some random slut with a boyfriend can come up to Dec at a party and get in bed with him five minutes later, even though it has taken me three months to get nothing more than a couple of handjobs.

With a heavy sigh, I retreat to the house again, but only make it a dozen steps inside before a voice calls out, "*Garen! C'mere, I want to talk to you. I have someone for you to meet.*"

This isn't the first time I've heard that obnoxious voice practically shrieking my name, but it's the first time I've been clothed for it—it's not nearly as enjoyable as it used to be. I turn so that I can aim my grimace at Ryan Marten. "Who am I supposed to be meeting? I thought you decided on Valentine's Day that you hate me, or whatever."

"I did," Ryan says, slinking towards me. He's dragging some guy by the hand—not a Patton boy, though. Some random femme kid with a tight shirt that doesn't quite meet the top of his jeans. Ryan pushes him at me and continues, "I *did* decide I hate you, but I don't anymore, because I don't even care enough to hate you. I found someone new, alright? This is Mitchell, and he's my boyfriend now."

"Okay...?" I say very slowly. Mitchell is a skinny, tiny thing, barely taller than Ben is. He's glowering at me, one of his slender arms looped around Ryan's waist. Then, it hits me, and a surprised bark of laughter bursts from my throat. "Wait, is this—are you trying to start *fag drama* with me right now? Am I supposed to get all pissy and territorial and try to win you back? We never *dated*, dude, I just fucked you in the shower a couple times a week."

Mitchell the Micro-Queer tries to get up in my face—fails spectacularly, considering his size—and says, "Listen, asshole. Don't just come up in here and think you can talk to my boyfriend like that—"

"*Come up in here and—are you fucking kidding me?*" I snap. "This is Declan's birthday party. Last time I checked, I'm friends with him, and Ryan isn't. You little shits weren't even invited tonight. Besides, your boy's the one who called my fuckin' name—not like it's the first time, though, and I'm guessing that *that's* what this is really about, huh?"

Over the top of Mitchell's head, I can see that my friends have noticed the trouble I've gotten myself into. I shoot Javi a wide-eyed stare, but he just gives me a cheerful wave and lets the events continue to unfold.

"Don't think I won't hit you, boy," Mitchell hisses. "I don't care if you're all huge and muscular and..." He gives me a horrifically intense once-over. "*Built*. I can still fight you."

"You really can't," I say, then add to his boyfriend, "Call off your bitch, Ryan. If he hits me, I'm going to fucking waste him. You know he won't fare well in a fight against me."

Mitchell crosses his arms. "Well, you treated my guy like shit. Trust, I know what a dick you were to him, which means you and I need to settle the score right now."

His stupid Mighty Mouse rant is making me want to hit him, but I can't. I really would destroy him with a single punch, and I wouldn't put it past Ryan to call the cops in the middle of party, just to cause a scene. The last thing I need is to get the party house shut down and all my friends arrested for underage drinking. The real problem here is that I only know two ways to solve conflict, and since fighting is out...

"I'm pretty sure we can find another way to settle the score, baby," I say to Mitchell, reaching up to curl a hand over the back of his neck and tug him closer. "Do *you* want to have a turn with me?"

Ryan wedges himself between me and his boyfriend and slaps me across the face—and it really is a slap, not a punch, so it barely even hurts. I laugh, and he looks even more pissed off. But Mitchell... Mitchell looks uncertain. He sneaks a glance at Ryan, then looks back at me. Now we're making progress. I settle one hand on Mitchell's hip, one hand on Ryan's, and step closer to both of them at once. Neither tries to move away from me.

"Don't worry, guys," I say quietly. "You'll both be there. Not trying to split you up, just trying to even the score."

"You're horrible," Ryan huffs, and I shoot him a smile that's wide and raw enough to make him shiver under my hand.

"Come on, sweetheart. You *know* that's not true. Shouldn't your boy have a chance to find that out for himself?" I sneak a quick kiss to Ryan's cheek, then, before either of them can pitch a fit over that, I veer back towards Mitchell, close enough to bump my nose against his. "You're not *really* pissed about how I treated him, 'cause I didn't *really* do anything wrong. We fucked around a bit, and it didn't work out, but it's not like I tried to hurt his feelings. So there's gotta be another reason you're pissed. And I'm guessing it's 'cause you're jealous."

"Get over yourself," Ryan says, but his voice is as soft as it might be if he were trying not to scare off an animal. This is as close as I'm ever going to get to finding a way in, so I take it—my hand jumps from Mitchell's hip to his jaw so that I can pull him forward into a kiss.

Ryan's breath hitches, but the real reaction comes from across the room. Taylor calls to me, "Are you *trying* to get your ass beat?"

As embarrassed as I know I should be by his attention, I can't help but feel sort of pleased with myself. If I can pull this off, I won't be downstairs when Declan finally returns from nailing his skank; I'll be upstairs, nailing a skank or two of my own, and our friends will be down here, talking about it, and he'll realize that I might want him, but I'm not going to wait around like all of those desperate, pathetic girls who chase after him.

Almost in unison, Ryan's hand lands on my ass, and Mitchell's lips part just enough for our tongues to brush. I smile into the kiss, then break it to say, "You're not going to beat my ass, are you, Mitchell? You're going to let me bring you and your boy upstairs, and you're going to let me fuck you. He's already had you—only seems fair that you get a turn, right? I mean, I don't want there to be any hard feelings between us."

Mitchell takes another peek at his boyfriend, but Ryan is still watching me. That seems to be answer enough. Mitchell grabs one of my hands and one of Ryan's, tugs us both towards the stairs, and says, "Let's go."

"Let's," I agree, pushing them ahead of me.

Halfway up the stairs, I hear Taylor calling after me, "This is bullshit, Anderson! Someday, you're going to meet somebody you can't fuck your way out of fighting!"

"No, I'm probably not!" I shout back. Just for show, I put a hand on Ryan's ass and push him up the last few steps.

In the upstairs hall, I have to try three different doorknobs before I find one that's unlocked, and even that one has a couple inside. A guy and a girl are making out on the bed, but it seems like that's as far as it's going to go. I roll my eyes and say, "If you're not fucking, get out. You can make out in the hallway or something. Grow up."

"Fuck you, dude, we were here first," the boy protests.

I grab Ryan by the t-shirt and shove him in the direction of the bed. "Well, the three of us are about to fuck. If you and your girl want to keep necking like middle-schoolers, go ahead. But I'm warning you: it's about to get loud in here."

"The three of you?" the girl says, her eyes bugging out a bit. She looks like she's about to vomit, but I can't tell if it's because she's drunk, or because I'm threatening to start an orgy on the bed with her.

"Yes, the three of us, bitch," Mitchell snaps. "So, unless you plan to—"

I cut off the rest of his sentence with another kiss, and the breeders scramble to get out of the room. Mitchell wriggles out of my grip long enough to go lock the door, and by the time he returns to the bed, I've got Ryan's pants halfway off. At his bewildered look, I say shortly, "I'm efficient. And if I'm being completely honest with both of you, I'm mostly doing this to piss off this hetero guy I wanna bang."

It's the sort of confession I should've kept in my mind, and I half-expect them both to get pissed enough to walk out on me now. Instead, Ryan beams at me, like he's never been more flattered than he is to be used as a tool to make someone else jealous. Mitchell perks up, too, and says, "Is he at this party? Because if so, you should text him and see if you can get him to go into the next room over. I'm a screamer, and if you remind me what your name is, I can totally help you out."

"His name is Garen, sweetie," Ryan says.

I drop my eyes so that neither of them will see me rolling them, but then a thought occurs to me. I... *could* text him. Slowly, I take Charlie's phone out of my pocket and say, "If I ask you guys to let me send this guy pictures of the three of us together, am I going to get slapped again?"

"Oooh, that's good," Mitchell says, shoving his jeans down to his ankles and hopping right out of them. He climbs onto the bed on his hands and knees, then pushes his briefs down and arches his back so that his bare ass is presented to me. He looks over his shoulder. "Hey, would you mind forwarding them to me, though? I want to put them on Instagram."

I squint at him. "You're not putting pictures of my dick on Instagram, dude. I don't—that would probably violate the Terms of Service Agreement anyway."

"You're right," Ryan sighs. He beckons me closer. "Come on. You guys start, and I'll make sure I get at least a few good shots. I've totally perfected the art of the mid-coitus selfie. You should see how many new tumblr followers I get on Topless Tuesdays."

He takes about twenty different pictures in varying states of obscenity. One of me stripping Mitchell down, two of Mitchell getting me out of my clothes, too. Two of me sucking him off, two of me fingering him open, one of me pushing inside. Half a dozen of us fucking, impatiently shifting to new positions when Ryan directs. I drag Ryan into the next four shots; he sprawls out on the pillows, halfway propped up against the headboard with me between his legs, my back against his chest while Mitchell rides my dick. I'm almost impressed by the way Ryan manages to get all three of us in the same shot.

Impressed, but not aroused.

This isn't sex—it's payback to Declan, payoff to Mitchell and Ryan. I'm not sure I'm even enjoying it. My dick is hard, sure, and I'm probably going to come at some point, but it doesn't actually feel *good*. It just feels like it's... happening. It's happening, and I *guess* it's happening to me, but I can't bring myself to have any greater connection to the experience than that. I just lie there, one hand twisted around to jerk Ryan off against the small of my back, watching while Mitchell bounces around on top of me. When he starts to get frustrated and impatient, I plant my feet on the mattress for some leverage to thrust up into him.

He moans, and it's kind of annoying.

Both of them come before I do, splattering all over my back and my chest. I don't really want to be here anymore, but I can't think of a good enough excuse to escape, so I pull out of Mitchell's ass, yank the condom off, and get myself off with my own hand, as quickly as possible. In order to even make that happen, I have to close my eyes and tap into my highlight reel of the hottest things that have ever happened to me--

The noise Jamie made the first time I managed to successfully deep throat him. That guy I met in Paris who asked me to fuck him on the balcony of my hotel room in the middle of the day. The thirtysomething with a wedding ring and a kink for dirty talk, who happened to meet me at the exact right time in my poor-little-rich-boy-with-authority-issues phase for me to be turned on instead of creeped out when he told me to call him *daddy*. The way Ben gets boneless and glassy-eyed and malleable if you scratch him hard enough; the way Declan gets rough and impatient and frustrated if your grip isn't tight enough to make him come when he wants to.

And Travis. Kissing him against the side of Blaire Kennedy's house on Halloween, his stupid mask digging into my cheek and his hands tight on my hips. Sucking him off the night he turned seventeen, the first time he ever got off with another person. Rutting up against him in the service alley behind the Daily Grind because I couldn't stay away after he texted me, *I know we've only been going out for a week, but would it be okay if I maybe jerked you off tonight?* Talking him off after going to the club on his birthday, seeing him come without ever putting a hand on himself. Making love to him for the first time in almost a year, curling up in bed with him and doing all the things I thought I'd never get to do again. Travis. Christ, Travis.

I come, and immediately wish that I hadn't.

Ryan gets a picture of that, too. He and Mitchell are still scrolling through the shots, surveying their handiwork as I claw my way off the bed and use the corner of the sheet to clean my skin—party house rules require everyone to strip the beds they fuck on, anyway, so it's not like I'm making an unnecessary mess. I kick the other two off the bed long enough to get the sheets bundled up and shoved into the hamper. By the time I'm dressed, Ryan has deleted all but the three best pictures—one of me stripping, one of me and Mitchell, and one of all three of us.

I send them to Declan and hang around for a couple minutes, watching the other guys get dressed and waiting for a reply, but it never comes. I have never been so wholly unsatisfied. Without bothering to say goodbye, I trudge back out to the party to find my friends. Taylor is the first one I run into, right near the bottom of the stairs. He snags my arm and says, "Hey, most everybody else is out back. And I think Dec

was looking for you?"

My pulse jumps. I thank Taylor and press my way through the rest of the party, out onto the back porch. Sure enough, most of our group is gathered there, smoking—Javi, Vanessa, Steven, Aubrey, Jenn. Declan is perched on the porch railing, leaning back enough that he's in danger of falling off onto the lawn, even though he's got a hand wrapped around one of the posts connecting the rail to the roof. He's further gone than he was when he went upstairs earlier; his amber eyes are glazed over, and he wobbles a little every time he turns his head to look at whichever friend is speaking. When he catches sight of me, he crooks a finger at me and mouths, *get over here*.

I lope across the porch and say brightly, "Oh, hey! Did you get my texts?"

"You're a monster," he says. His tone might be stern, if he could stop himself from laughing. "What, is this a thing we're doing now? The picture thing?"

"You started it, not me," I point out, at the same moment that Javi asks, "What picture thing?"

"Nothing," Declan says around a sly smile that makes his words completely unconvincing.

He's pointedly silent for a long while after that, until Javi rolls his eyes and shifts the rest of the group further down the porch to give Declan and I a bit of privacy. Dec appears extremely satisfied with himself. He tries to adjust his position on the rail and nearly pitches over the back of it. I catch him by the elbow and haul him off the railing, onto his feet. "You're going to crack your head open, you idiot."

"You're going to crack *your* head open," he mimics, but before I can berate him for his comeback failures, he adds, "The picture thing—that shouldn't become a thing. At least, not for your sake. I'd always win."

"Oh, really? Because tonight, I'm pretty sure I saw your high card, and raised you a pair of queens," I say.

He narrows his eyes at me. "Night isn't over yet. There's still time for me to get a full house."

"I don't even understand what that would be in the context of this metaphor," I say, laughing. "What, a fivesome? Really, Dec? You think you're going to go find four girls who'll fuck you at once?"

He points over at Aubrey, then at Jenn, and says, "One and two. Give me five minutes, and I can find at least two more. Maybe three."

"Motherfucker, can you count? A poker hand is five cards." I hold up one hand and wiggle all my digits at him. "A fivesome. You only need four girls, plus yourself. You don't need a river girl, this isn't Texas Hold 'em."

Declan gives me a very serious look and says, "I could probably find a Texan, if you really want me to."

I really want you, Dec, I almost blurt out. He's got this solemn, determined set to his jaw right now, but he's still tipping sideways enough that I feel compelled to put a hand on his shoulder to steady him. It's... cute, and that's not really a word I'd use to describe him most of the time. I duck my head and say, "Nah, we'll call it a draw for tonight. I mean, I obviously won, considering I got one hundred percent more ass than you. But it's your birthday party, so your lame, sloppy hookup counts for double."

"Sloppy? You didn't seem to think I was *sloppy* when you were—" Declan at least has the presence of mind to glance over towards our friends, who are still chatting only six or so feet away. He straightens up and angles his body so that his back is to them, leans in closer and says quietly into my ear, "When you were trying to get me to bail on Tamara to come hook up with you instead."

I feel something nudging against my boot. I glance down just in time to see him kick my feet further apart so that he can slip one of his legs between mine and press his thigh to my groin. I give a considering

hum, then say, “Well, if you feel like you’ve got something to prove, I’m sure I could be persuaded to change my opinion.”

“Do you want to go park somewhere?” he asks, and I nod without really deciding to. He squeezes my elbow and steps back. “We need to get the keys from Charlie, and then we’ll go.”

I nod again, just as the phone in my pocket starts screeching—Charlie’s phone, not mine. I root around to find it; Sam’s name comes up on the caller ID, so I answer, “Hello?”

But it’s Charlie’s voice, not Sam’s that comes through the line. “Listen, asshole, I don’t know who this is, but I want my fucking phone back. You’d better be—”

“Calm your tits, Walczyk,” I interrupt. “It’s Garen, I’ve got your phone. I needed to borrow it for a min—”

“Let me talk to him,” Declan insists, snatching the phone out of my hand before I can reply. He holds it to one ear and plugs the other. “Charlie? Chaaaarlie. Come outside, we’re on the back porch. I’m sorry Anderson took your phone, he needed to talk to me about—what? ‘Cause he doesn’t have my number, dumbass. Now get out here.”

He hangs up, and it’s only a minute later that Charlie comes storming out of the house, Sam trailing after him.

“Give me my phone, dickhead,” he orders. Declan hands it to him, but his hand stays out. “Now give me both *your* phones, too.”

“Uh, no?” I say. “Why the hell would I do that?”

“Because I don’t want you to pick my fucking pocket every time you decide you need to talk to Campbell,” he says. I hand over my phone, and he dials in Declan’s number, repeats the process with mine in Dec’s before he continues bitching, “I didn’t even realize you did it until half an hour after you’d already gone upstairs. I feel *violated*.”

Sam shrugs. “In all fairness, it’s not like this is the first time G has had his hand in a Walczyk boy’s pants.”

I grimace. “Can we not bring that up, please?”

“Charles. You still have my truck keys, right?” Declan says.

“Yeah, right here,” Charlie says, patting his jeans pocket. “Why, you want to head out?” Before Declan can try to fumble his way through an explanation of the fact that no, he just wants to go somewhere with me for a few minutes, Charlie turns and says to the others, “Hey, we’re going to head on back to school, alright?”

“What, bored?” Javi says. “That’s cool—I’ll grab Taylor, we’ll all go.”

Declan digs an elbow into my ribs, like this is somehow all my fault. There isn’t any way to beg off now, so I shrug and say, “Yeah, let’s go.”

We begin the usual departure proceedings—saying goodbye to the girls who are planning to stay, getting bitched at for never helping with the cleanup, making plans for who’s going to come by for the kegs and taps in the morning. Declan takes his time saying goodbye to people, and the rest of us get kind of bored of waiting for him, so we head out front to where Declan’s truck and Taylor’s car are parked.

I’m leaning against the side of the truck, having a smoke, when the yelling starts.

I turn. Declan has finally come out of the house, but he hasn't made it much farther than the front porch, because some gorilla-lookin' motherfucker has cornered him and is screaming in his face. Declan looks thoroughly unimpressed, but still unsteady with drunkenness.

"Called it," Steven says triumphantly. "What did I say, guys? I said Dec was going to get his ass kicked for fucking around with Tamara. Everybody knows she's always bringing that public school boyfriend of hers around to parties."

"He's not getting his—" Charlie starts to say, but he pauses when the guy on the porch hauls off and punches Declan in the mouth. "Alright, *now* he's getting his ass kicked." I'm the only one who takes a step towards the house. Charlie reaches out and snags the back of my coat. "Don't worry about it. He'll be fine."

"What, you want me to just stand here and let him get hit?" I protest.

"Kind of, yeah," Sam says, at the same time that Steven admits, "It's less effort than helping."

I stare at them.

Javi shrugs. "We like to let him get stomped into the ground once or twice a semester when he's too drunk to defend himself. Most of the time, people are smart enough to avoid messing with him, but sometimes, he'll get so trashed that he can't fight back, and that's usually when people try to get in and fuck him up. Keeps him humble—he stops banging other guys' girlfriends for at least two weeks."

"That's not 'cause he's humble," Steven argues. "He's just waiting for the bruises to fade."

I look back across the lawn. Every punch is accompanied by this wet, slapping sound; it takes me a few seconds to realize the wetness is Declan's blood, tracking out of a split lip and smearing all over his jaw. He's too dazed to move his own fists, to protest, to do anything other than slump back against the porch railing and let himself get wailed on. It feels wrong to see someone like Declan getting hit and not fighting back.

I wonder if this is how I looked when Dave hit me.

It's not the same—I *know* it's not the same, I know Declan isn't getting abused by this asshole like I was getting abused by Dave. But in this moment, I look at Declan, more than six feet tall and nearly two hundred pounds, and all I can think is, *why aren't you fighting back, you little bitch?* I can't imagine anyone seeing someone built like Declan—or me—and believing that he's incapable of taking care of himself.

Or someone else.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I open the driver's side door and crawl halfway across Charlie's lap—he makes a noise of protest and tries to shove me off—to get to the glovebox. The 5906 is still there, tucked under the driver's manual. I pull it out and eject the magazine, check to make sure there isn't a clip inside, then rack the slide halfway back to be sure there isn't a bullet in the chamber. I can't cock it while it's empty, otherwise the slide will lock back, so I guess I've just got to pray that the asshole who's beating Declan up won't know enough about guns to realize I'm holding an uncocked weapon.

"Garen, what the fuck are you doing?" Charlie asks sharply, as I tumble back out of the cab and he realizes what I've got in my hand.

I have no fucking clue, I think, but I say, "Helping him, since you're apparently too much of a pussy to do it yourself."

I'm not fully aware of walking across the yard—only stepping away from the truck, then standing next to

the guy and pressing the muzzle of the pistol to his temple. He goes completely still. It's unlikely he can see even part of the gun from this angle, but he must know what it is. Not many things feel as cold as a gun to the head. The people around us have fallen into something louder than silence, but quieter than screaming. It's mostly just noise. Everyone is staring at me—I'm staring at the guy—I *want* to be staring at Declan. At least, I want to see if I've earned myself a steely glare or a wide, thrilled smile. I don't let myself blink.

"Declan," I say, as calmly as I can, given the circumstances. "Are you okay?"

"Fucking *perfect*," he murmurs, but it sounds like he's answering a different question than the one I asked.

"Awesome. Are you good to walk on your own?" I ask. Out of the corner of my eye, I see him nod. "Then I need you to go get in the truck now."

There's a beat as Declan mulls this over before deciding, "No."

"What do you mean, '*no*'?" I snap.

"I mean *no*, I'm not going to get in the fucking truck. It's my gun. If you're going to shoot someone with it, I should be allowed to watch," he says.

Unable to stop myself, I toss him an exasperated look. He *knows* the gun is unloaded and uncocked, and the longer I stand here, the higher the odds of someone realizing that and pointing it out to the guy I'm threatening. But Declan is grinning at me with a bloody mouth, and something about that face... makes me want to play. Slowly, I turn my eyes back to the guy. "I'm only going to shoot him if he refuses to apologize."

"Please," the guy says.

"I appreciate the manners, dude, but that's not a fucking apology," I say. "So, tell him you're sorry, or I'm going to have to pistol-whip you. I don't *want* to—"

"I want you to," Declan pipes up.

I silence him with a look, but oh god, I'm totally going to pistol-whip this guy. I really *don't* want to do it, but my muscles feel tight from all this adrenaline, and I'm pretty sure I left my impulse control back in the glovebox, where I *should have* left this gun. It feels like the decision about whether or not to hurt this guy is out of my hands now. I grit my teeth and shift my hand further down the grip of the gun so that the side of my palm is hanging slightly over the edge. If I hit him like this, I won't really be catching him with the gun—it'll just *look* like I am, maybe, and that's the point, isn't it? Making everyone around me fear what might happen to them if they ignore the things I tell them to do?

Right now, what I'm doing—it's not about pain. It's about power. It's about respect.

"Tell him you're sorry," I say again.

The guy turns his head ever so slightly towards me, just enough that his pleading eyes can lock onto mine. He says, "I'm sorry."

I strike the side of my palm hard against his forehead, and someone shrieks. He staggers backward a little, dazed; it might not have been a real pistol whip, but it was still a hit to the head with more force than I should've used. My heart skips a beat, but I don't know if it's a good thing or a bad thing. I jab the muzzle of the gun against his temple again and say, "I said to tell *him* you're sorry, not me. I'm not the one you hit. Now fucking do it, before I—"

"Sorry, Campbell," the guy says. "S-Sorry, I shouldn't have hit you. That was wrong, it was fucked up, I'm sorry."

"That's okay, I probably shouldn't have asked your girlfriend if she likes anal," Declan laughs. "She does, by the way. Or at least, she did tonight."

The guy flushes and lets out a tiny snarl. I press the gun harder to his head as a warning, then fling a hand out to catch Declan by the collar of his jacket. I haul him away from the porch railing and shove him in the general direction of our friends. He almost trips, but I steady him as I say, "Declan, for fuck's sake, *shut up* and go get in the truck, or I'm going to shoot you instead of this dude."

Declan scoffs and sways closer to me. "Bullshit," he says. "You'd never shoot me, you *like* me too much." And then his '*swaying closer*' mostly becomes '*falling against me*,' as he crowds in close and smacks a loud, quick kiss to my cheek. "Thanks, Anderson. You're a real knight in shining armor."

It takes all of my self control not to watch him as he saunters away.

The guy sneaks another look at me, and without thinking, I give him a light smack with the barrel of the gun. Or, at least, as light as any smack with a thirty-eight ounce, stainless steel gun can be. He lets out a little huff of pain, and I have to bite down on my tongue to stop myself from sucking in a nervous breath. I can't really hurt him. I don't know that I would want to, even if I could get away with it. But if I hit him hard enough to do any serious damage, or hard enough to get his blood on Declan's gun, I'm completely fucked.

"Here's what's going to happen," I say. "I'm going to walk away. If you try to follow me or my friends, or try to attack me when my back is turned, or try to come back to Patton and fuck Dec up when I'm not looking, I will kill you."

I can't remember the last time I made a threat like that. I'm not sure I ever have.

It feels good, though. I keep going.

"And that's not fucking hyperbole, you understand? I will kill you. If you come at me, I will empty this clip into your body. This gun has a ten round magazine; that's two bullets in each of your limbs and two in your stomach so that you're still *technically* alive when I break your skull open with the empty pistol." Jesus Christ, who says things like this? I can't even believe the words that are coming out of my mouth. The guy on the other end of the gun looks like he can't, either. I take a step back and add, mostly for the sake of one last attempt at politeness, "Any questions?"

"N-No," the guy says, shaking his head.

"Awesome," I say. *What is wrong with me?* I take a step back, then another, then another. When the guy still doesn't move, I turn and stride towards the truck as quickly as I can without breaking into an actual run.

When I get to the truck, only Charlie is actually ready to go. Declan is leaning against the side of the truck, grinning at me. "Well, that was—"

"Get in the truck," I interrupt, trying to nudge him in the direction of the cab. He doesn't react at all.

"Anderson gets to drive the truck, because he's my new favorite," he declares. "He's the only one of you fuckin' cunts who's ever helped me out when I'm getting pounded on."

"That's just because Garen's hoping to get a chance to pound you himself," Taylor says. I give him the finger, and he returns the gesture. "And, of course, because he wanted an excuse to point a gun at a total stranger."

"Yeah, which is probably why we should go. I don't want to still be here if the cops show up, and they tend to get called once weapons come out," I say. The other must agree, because they start piling into Taylor's car, but Declan hasn't moved. "Dec, get in the truck, we're leaving."

He glowers through the window at Charlie and repeats, "Anderson gets to drive the truck. He's my—"

"—favorite, yeah, we all heard you," I snap. "But in case you've forgotten, I'm the one holding an unregistered firearm in the middle of a high school party full of drunk kids, which means I'm the one who's going to get arrested if we don't get out of here."

Declan seems unmoved by my words, but Charlie rolls his eyes and shuffles sideways across the bench into the passenger seat. I shove the gun at him, and he tucks it back into the glove compartment. When I lean back out of the truck to look at Declan, I find him tipping dangerously far to one side, a single gust of wind away from falling over. I grab him by the collar of his jacket and drag him upright, stuffing him into the truck cab and climbing in after him. "Put your seatbelts on," I order.

Charlie obeys, but he's staring at me. "Christ, did you get hit, too?"

"What? No, I—" I glance in the rearview mirror and see that there's a smear of red across my cheekbone. I squint and lean closer, and then I realize that it's a bloody kiss print. My eyes drift to the side, meeting Declan's in the mirror. He grins, and there's blood between his teeth. I huff and direct my attention back out the windshield. "You suck."

"You wish I would," he retorts. Charlie chuckles, but Declan's hand drops to my thigh and gives it a tight squeeze. His fingers trace my inseam for the rest of the drive back to school, and every time I glance in the rearview mirror, he's staring back at me, gaze rapt and hungry.

Once I've pulled into the Patton parking lot and cut the engine, Declan's hand moves from my leg to the flask from the inner pocket of his jacket. He takes a long pull from it, even though the sting of the liquor against the cut on his lip makes him wince. Charlie gets out of the truck, but when I try to do the same, Declan catches my sleeve and mutters, "Hang back a bit."

"Yo, Dec. You coming, or what?" Steven calls from halfway up the path to the dorms.

"Give me a few minutes," Declan says. He shifts up onto his knees on the seat and leans halfway out the passenger window. "The dorm advisers always give us shit when we show up in a big group, and I'm too drunk to deal with that. I'll hang here for a while and go up solo. Garen can make sure I don't end up dead in the woods or something." He twists to look over his shoulder at me. "You can do that, right?"

I can't do a damn thing other than stare at his ass, which is pretty much at eye level, given the way he's kneeling on the bench. It might take me a minute, but eventually, I realize I should probably look him in the eyes. "Uh, yeah," I say. "I can do that."

He grins at me and flicks his eyes to the side, just so I'm clear on the fact that he knows exactly what I've been staring at. He turns back around and waves the guys on, but he stays in that same pose for a while, watching them retreat to the dorm. The moment the door to Whitman Hall closes behind Sam, Dec scrambles backward and lands on my lap.

"You've officially won the argument about whether or not you look hot with a gun," he says, hauling me closer by the collar of my jacket. "You do. You really, really fucking do."

"Knew you'd come around eventually," I say, grinning. He kisses me—it's a clumsy, off-center kiss, but he cups my jaw in his hands and steers me until our mouths properly align. A moment later, when he draws back to speak, I duck my head to catch two of his fingers between my lips. His eyes, already glassy, go even more unfocused as he watches me suck.

"You can do it, if you want to. I *know* you want to," he says. I'd have to stop sucking on his fingers in order to answer properly, so I end up making a distracted, questioning hum around the digits instead of pulling off to form coherent words. He answers, "You can fuck me. C'mon, you want to put it in my ass? Do it, I'll let you, I want you to—"

"Since when?" I ask when he pulls his fingers from my mouth in order to reach for his belt. I grab his wrist to stop him. "You said no before."

"I said no to *everything* before, and then you stole a police cruiser for me. I said no to getting fucked, and you pulled a gun on someone for me. I keep drawing the same lines I'd draw with anyone else, but—you're not. You're not like everyone else, you do these things, you go and do these *things* that are completely fucking crazy—"

"Be nice," I warn.

Asking Declan to be nice is like asking a wolf to put its fangs away. He gives me a quick, feral smile and presses me harder into the seat. He slips a hand up my shirt and repeats, "You do crazy things for me. Things nobody else has ever thought of doing. Makes me wanna do the same for you, let you do things nobody else has done." He ducks to get his mouth on my neck, traces the length of my jugular with his tongue, then comes in tight to say in my ear, "You want me? You want to be in me?"

His breath feels white-hot against my skin. Dazed, I nod. My hands are clutching at his hips and trying to anchor him in place so I have something to grind against, and my pulse is rabbit-quick. I don't know how much of this is adrenaline, and how much of it is just because of how much I want him. But his hands are clumsy when he reaches for my belt, and when he kisses me, he tastes like whiskey.

I plant my hands on his chest and push him away so suddenly, his back hits the steering wheel, and the truck horn blares. "Wait. Stop." He's still writhing on my lap. I grab his hips again, this time to keep him still. "Declan, *stop*. You're drunk."

"Are you only just now noticing this?" he asks, laughing.

"No, that's not—I mean, you're *too* drunk. Drunk enough that I'm not interested in doing this with you right now," I say. He blinks. I add, "Get off."

He blinks again.

And this--*this* is what I was afraid of. Saying no, and having his weight on top of me, and knowing that I might not be able to fight him off if he keeps pushing. But he doesn't. He slips sideways off my lap and sprawls over the other side of the seat, banging his head against the passenger door in the process.

"Fuck, Anderson," he groans, but he sounds like he wants to laugh anyway. "First, I was too young. Now, I'm too drunk. I hope you realize that it's really strange, the way you keep accidentally convincing yourself you're raping someone, even after the person has made it clear that he's into it."

"Better than the alternative," I say tightly. I take him by the elbow and shift him upright. "Come on. I'll walk you back to your room."

"You won't," he says, pawing at my hand until I release him, "because the fact that you don't wanna fuck doesn't mean I don't still want to get off."

I take about four seconds to be privately amused over the image of how annoyed Ben would be if he heard someone use a triple negative like that, but then I'm completely distracted from that line of thinking as Declan wriggles his way out of his jacket and t-shirt and goes for the buckle of his belt again.

"Not fucking you," I say.

"Not asking you to," he says. He shoves his jeans and boxers down just enough to get his dick out, sighs in relief at the first skin-on-skin contact. The streetlight glow slices through the windshield, falling across his face; his eyes are closed, lids twitching like he thinks he should open them but can't bring himself to actually do it. The hand he's got on himself is the same tight, slow grip he has used on me twice now. I'd assumed he was just trying to tease me, but it seems he just tries to do me like he does himself. Somehow, that makes it too much to resist.

I dig through my jacket pockets until I find an individual packet of lubricant, along with a couple of condoms; I toss the condoms aside and use my teeth to tear open the corner of the lube packet. Some of the lube drips onto my lip, but the rest gets smeared all over my palm. I pull my knees up under me and crawl across the bench seat towards Declan. When I get my slick, warm hand on him, he lets out a gravelly moan and presses up into my touch. I wedge my torso between his raised, bent knees so that I can crowd down into his space and get my mouth on his. It's taking a hell of a lot of concentration to keep my balance, because my free hand is clawing at my belt, yanking my jeans open, pushing them far down enough that I can spread myself out on top of Dec and set my erection right against his.

He pushes my shirt up under my arms so that we can grind our bodies together with nothing but a thin sheen of lube between us. Between my weight on top of him and the awkward angle he's contorted in to fit two grown men on a single bench seat, Declan can barely move. He can, however, sink his teeth into my lower lip and grab onto my ass with both hands to yank me harder down against him.

The whole goddamn truck is rocking on its wheels from the force of my thrusts, but I still draw back from the kiss—the bite, whatever—to say, "This is cool with you, right? I'll stop, if you want me to stop. I can—"

"I want you to stop *worrying*, Christ," he groans. "And I want—everyone's clearing out of the dorms tomorrow afternoon for spring break, I want you to come by after. Tomorrow night? Sunday? I don't care when, just come over, I'll be sober, I've got so many things I want you to do to me."

"I'll do them all," I promise, burying my face against the curve of his neck.

When I get home forty-five minutes later, I'm still sticky from the sweat, lube, and spunk I couldn't wipe off in the truck. I expect Omelette to come barreling down the stairs from Travis' room, waking half the neighborhood in the process, but he comes tearing out of the kitchen instead. I greet him--and shove his face away when he starts sniffing at the mess gluing my shirt to my skin, because letting my dog investigate some guy's jizz is a level of gross I don't even want to contemplate. I poke my head into the kitchen and blink.

Travis is sitting at the table, papers spread all around him, bloodshot eyes staring blankly at the screen of his laptop. I check the time on my phone; it's almost three. "Hey. I'm surprised you're still awake. Don't you have work in the morning?" I say. I head to the sink and start scrubbing my hands clean. When Travis doesn't respond, I shut the water off, dry my hands on the legs of my jeans, and take a seat at the table. "Trav. Do you even know what time it is?"

He finally looks up from the computer screen. "Yeah. It's late, I know. I just needed to finish a few things. Pay some bills, figure out some stuff for school. I'll probably head upstairs soon." He closes his eyes and arches his back until it cracks. "How was the party?"

"It was good. Parts of it, anyway," I say.

Omelette rears up to put his front paws on my knees, and I scratch behind his ears. Travis reaches out and slowly smooths the fur on the top of the dog's head. "Hooked up with him again, huh?"

This is the last conversation I ever want to have with Travis. Instead, I nod towards the dog. "Who, Omelette? Of course not, that's disgusting. I'm into some pretty questionable things, but bestiality is

fucked up even by my standards."

"Sometimes, I wonder exactly how many brain cells you lost to drug use," Travis sighs. "You know who I'm talking about. Your friend, Declan. You said it was his birthday party, so... you hooked up with him again, didn't you?"

I don't know how he could've guessed that. Am I that obvious? Can he smell it? I push the dog down and draw my legs up to my chest, like that'll do anything to make me less of a gross mess. I clear my throat. "I guess. We didn't fuck." Travis' head bobs in slow acknowledgment, but he doesn't say anything. It's just like it was the first time I told him about me and Dec, or the time he walked in on us; he seems a tiny bit surprised, but mostly like he doesn't give a fuck. I grit my teeth and look down at my hands. "We probably will, though. He said he's down, and we're on break all week. I think I'll maybe head over to campus on Sunday and make use of his empty dorm room." Travis still doesn't say anything, and my stomach starts to turn. I keep going. "He's never gotten fucked before, but virgins are pretty much my specialty at this point. I'll make it good for him."

I look up; Travis' head is still rolling in that same, slow nod. I let my legs fall back to the floor so that I can kick him under the table, and he jolts, stops nodding. "What the hell was that for?" he demands.

"For ignoring me," I snap. He opens his mouth to argue, but before he can, I burst out, "I just told you I'm going to spend the next week fucking some other guy in the ass, and all you're doing is *nodding*. Don't you care? Aren't you, like..." Christ, I wish I hadn't said any of this. But it's not like I can shut up now. I duck my head and mutter, "Aren't you *jealous*?"

The question hangs heavy and unwelcome between the two of us. Travis' spine snaps straight, like sitting up properly is the furthest away from me he can get without pushing his chair back from the table. "Is that the reason you're hooking up with him, then? So that you can make me jealous?"

"No, that's not—" *the entire reason*. I sit back in my own chair and rub one distracted hand over my scalp. "Declan's sexy, and he's a cool guy to hang out with. He's got a good body. He's fun to fuck around with. I like him—that's why I'm hooking up with him, alright? But you *know* how crazy I got when you were dating Ben last year, or when started hooking up with Joss in the fall."

"You mean, I know how much of a douchebag you can be at times? Yeah, G, I'm well aware," he snaps.

"I'm not being a—Travis, I want you more than anything. When I have to see you with other people, it hurts. It makes me miss you even more than I already do, and it makes me fucking hate whoever you're with. But you never act like that with me, and I don't understand why."

Travis leans his elbows on the table and puts his face in his hands. "I don't understand why that's a bad thing."

"It's a bad thing to me, because no matter who I'm with, or what I'm doing, you never seem to *care*. Do you even realize how many people I've hooked up with since we met? Eleven, counting you. And you've got, what—me, Ben, Al, Joss... that's it. Three people besides me, and hearing about every single one of those people broke my fucking heart. But you... I kiss Jamie at midnight on New Year's, and you laugh about it. Ben sucks me off in his car, and you just watch from across the parking lot. I tell you I'm going to fuck Declan, and you nod along. I get back together with Dave, and—"

"Don't," Travis interrupts, leaning suddenly towards me. "Don't ever think for one second that I wasn't completely devastated by what Dave did to you. My heart still stops whenever I think about any of it—hearing you tell me about it for the first time on Christmas, finding out you'd gotten back together with him after our parents' honeymoon, seeing the split lips and black eyes, finding you—fuck, finding *your* body after prom and waiting an entire day to see if you'd even survive."

It takes all my concentration to remember how to unclench my jaw enough to say, "That's not the kind of

'caring' I meant."

"It's the kind that matters, though," he says. "Do you honestly think I get *jealous* when you start going after someone new? Because I don't, Garen. I get fucking scared. That night we went to laser tag was the only time I ever spent more than a minute in Declan's presence, and he seemed like this macho, oversexed *asshole*. That worries me, okay? I just..." He takes a deep breath. "If you're going to keep hooking up with him, I need to know how much *he* knows. About what you've been through, and how to handle it."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I demand.

"I've seen you have some sort of PTSD flashback because I touched your hip, and I've felt the way you still sometimes flinch if I touch you when you're not expecting it. And then there were..." His hand twitches across the table like he's going to take mine, but after a pause, he swallows and withdraws. A minute passes. He nuts up enough to take my hand for real. "There were those, um... rumors, I guess, the ones Ms. Markland brought up in the guidance office right before the school play. The ones about Dave, about how he didn't just beat you up."

My whole body feels so cold that I actually shudder. I try to pull my hand away, but Travis' fingers tighten, and I can't. I can't pull away, and I can't stay here, and I can't think of a single thing to say right now, except, "Fuck you."

"Joss said they weren't true, but I think she was lying for you," Travis continues, as if I haven't said a word. His voice is determined now, but his hand feels like it might be shaking a little bit on mine. "Sometimes, Ben gives you these looks, like... I don't know. Or I'll say something about you or something you've done, and James will get this kind of... this tightness around his mouth? Like he's trying to stop himself from saying something? And I think they know. I think you must have talked about it with them, I think maybe you've talked about it with everyone but me, and that's—"

"Fuck you," I say again, and my voice cracks. I yank my hand out from under his and shove myself back from the table. The legs of my chair screech against the linoleum floor, and Omelette barks. "You are not asking me about this, okay? We are not having this stupid fucking conversation, because nothing—"

"All I want is an answer, G. Have you told Declan the truth about what happened between you and Dave?"

I haven't told *anyone* the truth about what happened between me and Dave. In moments of weakness, I've blurted out half-confessions to Jamie and Ben, let them work out the rest in their heads. I've hedged my way through sessions with Doctor Howard and gritted my teeth every time she says *that word*. But I haven't really said it before, and I don't think I can start tonight.

"Declan knows what he needs to know, and so do you. Everything else is my fucking business." I stand up and tuck my empty chair back into place at the table. "It's late. You have work in the morning, and I have to drive to Lakewood for therapy. We should both go to sleep."

When I get upstairs, I go straight to the bathroom to take a long, achingly hot shower. Even after I get out, Travis' bedroom door is still open down the hall, light off, bed empty. A quick glance down the stairs tells me that the kitchen light is still on. I want to go apologize to him. I want to go tell him everything that Dave did to me. Instead, I go to my room and close the door behind me.

214 days sober

I plan to write a note. An apology, I guess--*sorry for trying to make you jealous, sorry for saying you don't care about me, sorry for blowing up at you about the Dave thing even though it's none of your fucking business*. Something to that effect, anyway. I plan to write a note and slip it under Travis' door so that he's sure to see it when he wakes up soon for his Saturday shift. That way, he can read it while I'm safely

tucked away in Doctor Howard's office at the LRC, sobbing about my feelings, and when I get back to New York this afternoon, he and I can hug it out and settle our conflict so that I don't feel like an asshole tomorrow when I meet up with Declan at his dorm.

I get as far as hauling myself downstairs to find a pen and some paper before my plan falls apart.

Travis isn't in his room; he's in the kitchen still, and from the looks of it, he never left. He's slumped over in his seat, head pillowed on the table, shoulders rising and falling with every slow, even breath. One of his arms is dangling at his side, hovering over Omelette's sleeping form, like he'd been petting the dog before they both dropped off. I frown. This is insane dedication to schoolwork, even for Travis. I creep up next to him and touch his shoulder.

"Travis?" I say quietly. "Can you wake up for me?"

His eyes snap open, and he jerks upright. "Sorry. I didn't mean to, uh..." He frowns, digs the heels of his hands into his eyelids, then blinks heavily at me. "What were we talking about?"

"We weren't talking about anything," I say slowly, "because it's almost nine in the morning, and I went to bed like, seven hours ago. Why the hell are you still down here? Did you ever go to sleep?"

Travis snorts and gestures to the table. "Clearly."

"I meant in your *bed*, dumbass," I say, reaching for the nearest of his papers. "You have all weekend to do your home—"

"Don't," he says sharply, lunging for the papers.

Maybe I do it because I'm an asshole, maybe I do it because the panicked look in his eyes is weirding me out—either way, I jerk the papers out of reach and peer down at them. "Why, what's so important? Is this—"

But I trail off almost immediately, because the papers aren't homework, like I'd thought. The top page is mostly math—one large number getting smaller and smaller with each line, sometimes jumping back up a few hundred, only to deplete again a few lines later. It isn't until I see that there are several lines of the same amount labeled with the letter R that I realize I'm looking at his finances. I stare at the tiny number at the bottom, then at Travis' flushed face.

"What's this?" I ask.

He snatches the papers back and snaps, "It's my trainwreck of a life, okay? It's the fucking hole I dug myself into. I thought I could handle all this—moving to New York, living here with you, going to Columbia, working full-time. But it's all too much. I'm trying *so hard*, and I'm still fucking it up."

"No, you're not," I protest. "You've talked to me about your grades. You're doing really well in school."

"Yeah, school I can't *afford*."

I blink. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, do the math, Garen. I have to shell out almost four grand on the first of every month to keep up with my tuition payment plan. And then it's two grand for rent, a hundred bucks for bills, a hundred and twenty a week just to keep gas in my car and food in my mouth. I've got like, six thousand and one-hundred-something dollars going out on the first day of every single month, but not even *close* to that much coming in." He drops the stack of papers on the table and runs both hands through his hair, staring down at the table in something wild-eyed enough that it might be terror. "I work as many hours as they'll give me, as many hours as I can around school, but I'm still only making minimum wage. I bring home

less than three hundred dollars a week, after taxes. I'm completely fucked."

I reach for his shoulder, but he doesn't react at all. It's like he hasn't even felt the touch. I let my hand fall again. "But what about—" I wrack my brain, trying to remember any of the bullshit hoops Ben is always telling me he has to jump through in order to fund his tuition. "What about FAFSA? O-Or scholarships, financial aid. You're eighteen years old and paying for school all by yourself. You have to be eligible for something with that."

"Yeah, maybe I would've been, if I'd finished school on-time instead of a semester early," he says. "I only decided I was going to college at the end of November. It was too late for me to get cleared for any of the financial assistance I would've been good for. Besides, I'm not sure how much I can even get anyway—both my parents make too much money for me to get much in the way of need-based financial aid. I mean, they're really only looking at my mom, but still. She's definitely more than comfortably middle-class."

Those words hit me like a punch to the face. I actually have to brace my hands against the tabletop to stop myself from stumbling. I swallow hard before I say, voice almost vibrating, "What the fuck does that bitch have to do with your college tuition?"

Travis shoots me a warning look, but I don't move. He's fucking delusional, if he thinks I'm going to take back a single bad word I've ever spoken about his mom, especially when she's somehow fucking up his life even though she hasn't spoken to him in almost four and a half months. Reluctantly, he admits, "If she claims me as her dependent on her taxes—which she can, considering she did technically support me all last year—Columbia probably won't give me much financial aid. Most colleges operate under the assumption that students get at least some tuition money from their parents."

"Can't you just fight it out with the school board?" I ask.

He lets his head roll back so that his face is tipped towards the ceiling. "It doesn't matter. That would only cover me for next semester, and I'm not... I don't think I can—" He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. "I'm dropping out of Columbia after the spring semester ends. I can't do it anymore, Garen."

A year ago, if anyone had tried to suggest that Travis McCall might drop out of school, I would've laughed in that person's face. This is ridiculous, and this sure as hell isn't Travis. I reach for his arm, and this time, he leans into my hand. "That's not true. I know you can do it. Look, I understand what—"

"No, you don't," he says, voice crackling under the strain of forcing the interruption out. "I'm sorry, G, I'm trying not to point this out, but you *don't* understand what it's like to be so fucking broke that you have to make choices like this." He gestures to his computer screen. "As of this very second, I have five thousand, two hundred and thirty-eight dollars, and fifty-seven cents in my account. That's it, that's everything I have. At the start of May, it'll be up by a couple hundred, but I've got my tuition payment and my half of the rent due that same day. And I can't afford both."

"That's fine," I say immediately. "Don't worry about the rent, dude, I can cover us both this month. I've got more than enough to do it—besides, I've got my club audition on Friday, and if I get the job, I'll have more cash coming in. I can help you, I want to help you. You just worry about the tuition, and we'll figure out the rent after you've made all your payments. You've got, what—two more? The one on May first, and the one on June first? That's not so bad."

Very slowly, Travis opens his eyes and turns to face me. "I don't need your fucking handouts."

I cringe. It sounds like he *does*, but I'm pretty sure I can't say that to him without getting the silent treatment for a week. Instead, I say, "I know, I know. I was just trying to help."

"I don't need you to help me," he says. "I just need you to—fuck. It doesn't matter, okay? I've got everything figured out. I talked to a guy at a dealership in town, and he says I can get around thirteen

thousand for my car. That's—good. That's good money, that's enough to cover my rent and tuition for the next two months. And once I'm out of school, I can get another job, work more hours. But I should tell you... the lease we have on this place?"

"Travis, no," I say, but he keeps talking over me.

"It expires at the end of June, and we've been talking about renewing it, but I don't... I think you need to find another roommate. Or we could just give up the house entirely. You could move to the city to live with James, I could move back to Connecticut. Minimum wage there is more than it is in New York, and Jerry would probably pay me a little over that if I asked for my job at the Daily Grind again. I could find some shitty little studio apartment to live in, or I could see if the right amount of groveling and pretending I'm straight might get my mom to let me move back to her house." He looks down at his hands and adds softly, "You can have the dog."

"I don't want the dog," I snap. "I want *us* to have the dog, it's *our* fucking dog, Travis, not just mine. And this whole idea is--*no*. You're not leaving New York. You're not leaving me."

He rolls his eyes. "I don't really have a choice, do I? Besides, the whole point of me moving here was so that you had a roommate while you were at Patton. You're graduating in a month, so you don't need that anymore. You don't need me."

And that's the moment when I see—really see—what he's actually saying to me. I see the wide-eyed but blank expression on his face. I see the slant of his shoulders; not taught and hunched up close to his ears, like they usually are when he gets stressed, but slumped down so far that it looks like his clavicle has disappeared completely. I see the shadows under his eyes, and the paleness of his skin under his freckles. I see the boy whose suicide note drafts I found in January.

My legs are barely capable of supporting me anymore, so I sink into the same chair I sat in last night, then drag his chair closer to mine. Our knees knock together, and he shifts as if to make room, but I curl one hand into his t-shirt and the other into his hair, pulling at him until he's practically in my lap. "I need you," I say hoarsely. "You *know* I need you more than anything. From the first day I met you until the day I die, I'm always going to need you. Travis, you can't."

He tries to pry my hands off him, but he doesn't try hard enough to make it happen. "You're overreacting. We'll only be two hours apart. It's just a move."

"It's not, and we both know it," I argue, and he goes still. I swallow. "That's not what you're planning. I *know* you, Trav. You'd rather die than go crawling back to Lakewood alone, and that's not—you can't. I won't let you leave me like that."

He tries to wriggle free again, and this time, he manages it. He practically tumbles out of his seat in his haste to get out of the room and up the stairs. "I have to get ready for work," he calls down to me, "and you're going to be late for your session. You should go."

I don't. I wait for him, because I can't stand the thought of leaving him alone. And I definitely can't stand the thought of letting him drive himself anywhere in this condition, not when he casually admitted to me a month ago that, if he'd gone through with his suicide, he probably would have driven himself into a tree or off a bridge or something so that he wouldn't have to worry about me finding his body. I sit on the floor at the bottom of the stairs and pet Omelette in solemn silence until Travis returns fifteen minutes later, dressed in his Starbucks uniform and blinking down at me in surprise. I shrug. "I have to stop by Jamie's place before I head to Lakewood," I lie. "I left something there the last time he and I hung out, and I wanna pick it up. Since I'm headed to Manhattan anyway, I might as well drive you."

"My shift ends at two. You won't be back in time to pick me up," he says. He steps over me and the dog and goes to retrieve his car keys from the kitchen. I scramble after him, take the keys out of his hand, and pitch them across the room. He gives me an exasperated look and picks them up. I grab them again and

put them in the refrigerator. He goes for the fridge door, and I wedge myself between him and it, blocking it with all hundred and eighty-five pounds of my body. “Garen, *stop*. I’m not going to be late for work just because you want to have a temper tantrum.”

“I’m not going to stop having a temper tantrum until you agree to let me drive you to work,” I shoot back. “I’ll be back in time to pick you up, I promise. Please.”

“I thought you were going to go hook up with Declan tonight,” he says, crossing his arms.

I shake my head. “No, I’m—tomorrow. That’s when I was going to see him. But I’ll cancel that, too, if you want me to. I just want to spend some time with you, please.”

Reluctantly, he agrees, but the half-hour drive to the city is almost completely silent, which doesn’t exactly spell ‘*quality time*.’ I don’t even bother to turn on the radio, though Travis does, after maybe twenty minutes. When I reach for his hand, he lets me take it, but doesn’t curl his fingers around mine in return. He just keeps staring ahead through the windshield. When I pull into the garage under Jamie’s building, Travis gets out and walks away without saying a single word.

I loiter near the door for a few minutes, watching him retreat to the sidewalk. Only once he’s out of sight do I go for the intercom and press the button for Jamie’s apartment. Nearly two minutes pass before there’s a beep, followed by his curious greeting, “Yes?”

“It’s me,” I say. “I need to talk to you. It’s important. Can I please come up?”

“Of course,” he says, and he buzzes me in. I slip through the unlatched door and through the lobby, offering a stilted wave to the doorman. I’m practically bouncing in place the whole elevator ride up to his apartment. The door is unlocked for me, and Jamie is in the kitchen, pouring boiling water into a pair of white teacups. He glances up as the door closes behind me and says, “Morning. Tea?”

“I’m fine,” I say.

He picks up the second cup anyway and tips his head towards the other side of the apartment. I follow him down the hallway to the bedroom. There is a large lump under the blankets in the center of the bed. Jamie sets the second teacup on the nightstand and stoops to dig through a black backpack that is much more battered than that gay-looking, brown leather satchel he usually carries his books in. He eventually surfaces with a box of what appears to be medication. He pops a little white pill out of the plastic and foil, sets it down on the nightstand next to the teacup, and shoves the lump of blankets.

“Wake up, you twat,” he says. “Garen’s here, and he’s got his ‘serious face’ on. I brought you tea and your pill. Take it now, or you’ll start bitching in ten minutes, and I don’t want to hear that.”

The lump wriggles and utters something that sounds kind of like a threat. A skinny, scarred arm creeps out from under the corner of the blankets, takes the pill from the nightstand, and retreats. It creeps back out again a few seconds later and goes for the teacup, but Jamie intercepts it.

“No. You’ll spill it all over my bed, and then I will have to murder you. And if you think I’m joking for even a moment, then I dare you to try it,” he warns.

There’s a huff of annoyance, and finally, Ben unearths himself from the mountain of blankets and sits up so that he can sip at the tea and swallow the pill. He’s not wearing a shirt, and though the blankets pooled around his waist make it impossible for me to tell, I’m guessing he’s not wearing pants, either. He hitches his chin at me and says, “Could’ve warned me he’s a morning person. If I’d known he gets up at fucking *eight* on Saturdays, I would’ve told him to go fuck himself when he first asked me out.”

“Sorry. Guess I’m just used to it by now,” I say. I gesture to the pill. “Aspirin?”

"Antihistamines," he corrects. "I'm allergic to cats, and—"

"—the fucking thing likes him," Jamie grumbles, casting a baleful look at Zooey, who is just rising from her slumber. She stretches, then leaps from her miniature cat bed to Jamie's California king.

Ben reaches out a hand towards her, and she proceeds to rub herself all over his fingers, peering up at Jamie through barely slitted eyes all the while. Jamie narrows his eyes right back at her, like her purring under the hands of another person is a deliberate insult to him. Judging by how bizarrely smug she looks, it might be. Ben glances at me and asks, "What are you doing here, anyway?"

"What are *you* doing here?" I shoot back, even though it's kind of obvious that Jamie is what he's doing here. Or, what he was doing.

Ben shrugs. "Lent ended last weekend, and I got tired of listening to this asshole whine about how I'm blue-balling him."

Jamie's narrowed eyes shift from Zooey's face to Ben's. "Excuse me, you fucking wart on the face of humanity. I have never in my life whined about being blue-balled, least of all by you. And you could stand to give me a bit more credit than that." He turns to me and declares, as triumphantly as if he's announcing that he's found the cure for cancer, "I took him on a *date*. I showed him around the city, I bought him dinner in the West Village—"

"You did not, you lying sack of shit," Ben interrupts. He has stopped petting Zooey, who shows her displeasure for this development by trying to climb up his bare chest. He scoops her up and starts absently scratching behind her ears; he remains entirely focused on glaring at Jamie, but saying to me, "He did not fucking buy me dinner. We split the tab—"

"I *tried* to buy you dinner. I *offered* to buy you dinner, but you told me that I was being a supercilious— Lord, what was the delightful word you chose to use? Was it *goatfucker*?"

"Yeah, it was, because that's exactly what you were being—"

"You said it in front of the *waiter*--"

"This is New York. I highly doubt that was the worst thing he heard someone say that day. Besides, it was beyond patronizing for you to—"

"Wow, this is so adorable," I say flatly. "Seriously, I cannot wait to hear all the details so that I can someday perform a dramatic rendition of this very story in my best man speech at your wedding, but can you both *shut the fuck up*, because I came here for *help*, not to moderate your foreplay."

They both look around at me in surprise. I look back at Jamie—he has known me for three years longer than Ben has, he knows the nuances of my facial expressions better than anyone else does. Sure enough, whatever he sees there is enough to sober him. He steps closer, touches my elbow, and quietly asks, "Did something happen?"

I shake my head and force out, "No, not—I mean, not yet, anyway. Um..." I scrub my hands over my scalp and sigh. "I don't know if you had plans today, you know—"

I gesture towards Ben, who shakes his head and says, "I have work at eleven o'clock. I was going to take the train back soon anyway."

"I can give you a ride," I say. To Jamie, I take a deep breath and say, "Travis is only working until two this afternoon, and I'm not positive I'll be back from Lakewood by then. I need you to find some excuse to meet him at the end of his shift, and I need you to ask him to hang out with you tonight until I get back."

"Is he alright?" Jamie asks, frowning. Slowly, I shake my head. Jamie's eyebrows twitch upward. I gesture towards the bed, and he sits at the end of it, then scoots backward until he's sitting up against the pillows like Ben.

"Nothing I say leaves this room, okay? You don't talk to him or anyone else about what I'm about to say—either of you." I wait until I have received two nods before continuing. "There are some things that happened last fall that Travis and I sort of kept from you two. Things he didn't want you to know about, things it wasn't my place to tell you."

Ben's brow creases. "Like what?"

"Like him getting his girlfriend pregnant," I say. They stare at me in stunned disbelief, but I don't really want to see their shocked expressions. I duck my head and add, "That's why they stayed together as long as they did. He wanted her to keep it, and he was afraid that she'd get an abortion if he broke up with her. A valid concern, I guess, considering that's exactly what ended up happening."

I hear a muffled inhale from one of them, like a protest is being swallowed. I glance up to see that Ben's lips are pressed together in an attempt to silence himself again. I raise my eyebrows so that he knows he can speak if he wants to, but he shakes his head. Privately, I'm kind of grateful—the last thing I need is a micro-sized Catholic women's studies major getting all passionately conflicted about whether a woman's right to choose trumps Jesus's love for unborn babies, or what-the-fuck-ever he's thinking about.

"When?" Jamie asks.

I shrug. "She found out she was pregnant right around the same time Ben and I started going out, so that was... I dunno, the start of October? And she got the abortion sometime after Travis turned eighteen, but before Thanksgiving." I cross my arms. "She let him know by handing him a Planned Parenthood pamphlet, then told me that it was all my fault."

"Cruel little bitch," Jamie murmurs. "I certainly hope you handed her her ass after that."

"No, actually, I went to the liquor store and bought myself a bottle of Jack," I say. Jamie's face goes completely blank. Ben's mouth is still tightened into a line. I shrug again. "Didn't drink it, obviously, but, you know.... It was a hard semester for me. Worse for Travis, though. He, um." I take a deep breath. "At the start of November, Travis told me that he'd been planning to kill himself. He was dealing with so much at once—his mom wasn't talking to him, his preggo girlfriend was being a bitch, I was... relapsing and blaming it all on him. He couldn't deal with it. The only thing that had been stopping him was the fact that he couldn't get the wording of his suicide note right. I was so fucking scared of what he might do after Joss ditched the kid, but then he and I patched things up, and we were sort of together, and he seemed *better*, you know? And then his mom forced him to go back on his anti-depressants, and he started reacting... badly."

"Badly?" Ben echoes.

I nod. "They were supposed to help his depression, but they only made it worse. He had all these side-effects, you know? Sleep irregularity, changes in appetite, sexual dysfunction. Suicidal thoughts. He seemed like he was okay some of the time, but—when we moved, there was this night when he asked me to get something out of his room, and I saw that he'd been practicing new drafts of a suicide note. Still trying to get the words right. It was just like we were stuck in October again, and he was fucked up in October. He was planning suicide, and he was so sad all the time, and he was cutting himself again."

Ben huffs out a little breath, the way someone might after getting hit in the stomach. Jamie doesn't look at him, but he does slip a hand onto his knee, even though Zoey swipes him for doing so.

"I confronted him about the note, and he told me he was having trouble adjusting to life in New York and college and stuff. I managed to—I don't know. Talk him out of it, maybe? He met with my shrink, and she

gave him a referral to a therapist in the area so he could find a way to wean himself off the meds that are fucking him up so badly. He's... I thought he was okay. I thought he was better."

"And I take it that you're telling us all of this because he—" Jamie makes a half-aborted gesture with his free hand. "Isn't?"

I shake my head. "He isn't. Not at all. I guess he's really fucked with school right now—not his classes, but like, the finances of it? And he just—he kept saying he was *drowning*. And he looked like it, too. It—he's *scaring* me, guys. He needs help. Fuck, *I* need help. I need somebody to fucking babysit him when I'm not around, because I'm terrified that if I—"

My voice cracks, and I clamp my mouth shut. Jamie leans forward and catches my wrist, drags me closer until I've got no choice but to kneel in front of him on the bed. He keeps pulling and pulling, and eventually, I let myself be pulled right onto his lap. He releases his hold on Ben to wrap both arms around me, but I've only got half a second to feel guilty about that before Ben grabs my combat boots and tugs my legs onto his lap. I'm the biggest guy on the bed, but right now, I feel so small and childlike between them.

It takes so long, but finally, I admit, "I'm scared that, if he's alone all day, I'll be coming home tonight and finding his body."

"That's not going to happen," Jamie says, nearly speaking over the end of my sentence. "You and this one over here are going to go to Connecticut, and you're going to go on with your day. This afternoon, I'm going to march myself right on over to the shop where Travis works, I'm going to have him make me an unreasonably complicated drink that's more syrup than actual coffee, and I'm going to kidnap him. Doesn't even matter what I make him do, does it? We'll go over our philosophy readings, grab a bite to eat, maybe see if there's anything worth watching on the television. I won't leave him alone long enough to take a piss, if that's what you want me to do. He won't do anything today. I won't let him do that to himself or to you."

A weight lifts from my shoulders, but it doesn't go far.

Eventually, the two of them manage to coax me off the bed and out of the room. Ben takes a quick shower and collects his stuff, spends a long moment scratching under Zooey's chin before she's content to let him leave. For the first time, Ben is the one Jamie kisses goodbye, not me.

The drive to Lakewood is quiet and uneventful. I drop Ben off in front of the bookstore with ten minutes to spare before his shift and my therapy session. I'll have to speed in order to make it to the LRC on time, and I've almost resigned myself to being late when I reach a too-familiar intersection.

The road to my right leads to the Lakewood Rehabilitation Center.

The road to my left leads to the old house, the one where everything came together and fell apart. The one where Evelyn still lives now, alone, without a single thought spared for the son she has all but abandoned.

I make the left turn before I can consider any of the hundred reasons why this is the worst idea I've had since—alright, if I'm being honest, since last night, when I pulled a gun on someone. But right now, when I think about how broken Travis looked this morning... tearing into his mom seems like it's not a bad idea at all. Evelyn's car is parked in the driveway; I park behind it, trudge up the walkway, and press one slightly shaking finger to the doorbell.

It's less than a minute before the door swings inward. Evelyn stares at me; I stare back. There is total silence. The second she snaps out of it, she tries to close the door in my face. I shove my boot between the door and the frame. Evelyn tries once, twice, three times to slam it, but I'm wearing steel-toed combat boots, so I could stand here all afternoon, watching her fail.

"I'll call the cops," she threatens.

I snort. "And tell them what, exactly? That I'm trespassing in the house my father still owns? Right, that makes perfect sense."

"This is harassment," she snaps.

"This is a *conversation*. Or at least, it would be, if you could calm the fuck down," I say. "What's the matter? Aren't you happy to see me, *Mom*?"

She makes a noise like she's trying not to vomit. "I am *not* your mother."

"Yeah, well, right now, you don't seem to want to be anyone's mom. Not even Travis'. You remember Travis, right? Your son? The one you haven't spoken to in four months? Don't you want to know how he is?"

Her attempts to slam the door cease so suddenly that I can almost hear the hinges rattling. She peers out at me through the opening created by my unmoving foot. Her face is completely soaked in suspicion, but I have no idea if it's directed towards me or the circumstances. She asks, "Is he alright?"

"No," I say simply. "Let me in."

"No," she echoes.

"I'm not having this fucking conversation through a half-closed door. Let me in the goddamn house, Ev."

It takes a minute, but eventually, she steps back. I slip into the house before she has time to change her mind. Everything looks the same as it did months ago, the last time I was here. All of the furniture in the living room is the same, but neither of us makes a move to sit down on it. Evelyn crosses her arms. "Well?"

"Why are you dragging out the divorce?" I don't realize that that's the question I want to ask until it's already out of my mouth. Her eyebrows flick upward, and I rush ahead before she can say a word. "You hate me; I know that. You think I ruined your life and your marriage, and hey, maybe I did. You think I should suffer for that. Maybe I should. But you shouldn't take your frustration with me out on my family. My mom doesn't deserve the way you're trying to make her job impossible. My dad doesn't deserve to be stuck in a marriage that won't die, especially with a she-bitch like you. And Travis... Christ. Travis doesn't deserve *any* of this."

"Travis has made his choices," Evelyn says coldly. "He's the one who decided that moving to New York with you was more important than repairing our relationship. He's the one that abandoned any attempt at reconciliation."

I shove my hands into my jacket pockets. "He was stupid for following me to New York. I'm not worth it."

"Clearly."

I've never wanted to walk out on anyone more in my life. I find myself clenching my toes in my boots to keep my feet from moving towards the door. But I can't leave just yet, not when she's still so blind to all the pain she has caused him. I hitch a shoulder, let it fall again. "If it makes you feel any better, he's paying the price for it now. So, in the end, I guess you still win."

For a split-second, concern flickers across Evelyn's face. She quickly schools it back into neutrality. "What are you talking about?"

"You know that divorce settlement you keep dragging out for as long as humanly possible? The one that could fund his entire tuition, if you stopped trying to get the money for yourself? It's actually sort of funny, I'm sure you'll get a real kick out of this—he can't live without it! He's got just enough cash to make his tuition payment next month, and then he's down to being shit poor. Can't pay his rent, won't let me pay it for him. Each one of his tuition payments is about four grand, so hey, fuck if I know how he's going to pay for the last two. Hell, I'm surprised he can even afford to eat, all things considered. So, I guess you're getting your way, aren't you? A couple months from now, he's got no choice but to come crawling back here, begging your forgiveness. That is, of course, if he even sticks around long enough for that to happen."

"Sticks around—"

"Oh, sorry, was that too much of a euphemism for you?" I say. "I meant to say, he'll have to beg for your forgiveness, provided he doesn't try to kill himself before then."

The blood drains from Evelyn's face. For the first time since we met, she and I are on the same wavelength, feeling the same clench of fear in our guts. The only thing she and I have ever had in common is our love for Travis, and for so long, I've doubted that she even felt that anymore. Right now, though, seeing that look on her face—I know that she's as scared for him as I am.

I swallow, and when I speak again, my voice is still more hoarse than I'd like it to be. "Please, Ev. I know you hate me, and trust me, I hate you, too. But I love your son. I just want him to be okay, and he's *not*. It doesn't matter that he's living with somebody you hate, alright? Call him. Talk to him. He's your son, and he's *suffering*, so just fucking call him, okay? Because even if you don't want your kid anymore, he still needs you to be his mom."

As big as this house is, it feels too small for me and Evelyn and everything I've just said. I turn to the door.

"Wait," she says suddenly. I glance over my shoulder at her, but all she does is hold up a hand, signaling me to remain still as she retreats across the room. She repeats the word at least twice more, then disappears to the kitchen for long enough that I begin to wonder if she has somehow forgotten I'm here. Minutes tick by in fives and tens, but I still don't move. When she finally returns, she is holding an envelope. She presses it into my hand and says, "Here. This is for him."

"What is it?" I ask.

"It's for him," she repeats. "It's what he... needs. I think."

I want to say, *you have no idea what he needs, you clueless bitch*, but I get the feeling that might be considered crossing the line. Instead of saying that, I just nod.

"You give that to him," she says, "and now, you get the hell out of my house."

I don't dare push my luck by trying to stick around after that. The envelope isn't sealed, which is perfect—saves me the trouble of finding a way to open it without it being obvious, but gives me the chance to make sure this isn't something I need to hide from Travis. Halfway down the street, I pull over to the side of the road, put the car in park, turn my hazard lights on, and open the letter.

Dear Travis,

On that night three and a half years ago, when you tried to take your own life, it was your sister who found you, barely breathing, unconscious on your bedroom floor, an empty pill bottle next to you. She was the one who had to call the ambulance, because I could not remember how to move. All I could do was hold you in my arms and cry, because I was so afraid of losing my little boy. That is what you are to me, Travis, and that is what you will always be—my precious, beloved little boy.

When I think about the things you have experienced in the past year, I am sick with grief over how I am sure you have suffered. I blame myself for much of that suffering, and I blame that boy for much of the rest. Every mother dreams that her children will lead good lives. She dreams that they will grow up to be bright and and kind, that they will be healthy and happy. I know that you will never be happy with that boy. He is sick; he is mentally unbalanced, and he is deeply addicted to drugs and alcohol, and I fear for what your life will be if you stay with him. If he is sober now, it is only a matter of time before he falls back on his old habits, and I worry that he will hurt you, emotionally or physically. People who have been abused often become abusers themselves. I cannot bear to be part of your life as long as you insist on endangering yourself by being involved with someone so horrible. I cannot bear to see you experiencing the pain I know that he has inflicted upon you.

I do not believe that someone as troubled as that boy can be “fixed” after such a short time in rehab, especially in consideration of the fact that he was clearly disturbed even before he became a drug abuser. Travis, I know you believe that you are in love with that boy, but it is not real. The fact that you believe your relationship was consensual is only proof of how much he traumatized you. You were an innocent, inexperienced young boy, and he took advantage of that. He seduced you, and he tricked you into believing that his twisted fixation on you was true love. It is not. That boy is incapable of love. He does not love you, and you do not love him. I know that, had you not met him, it would never have occurred to you to experiment with a homosexual lifestyle. It is not in your nature. You are not like him, or any of the rest like him. You are not promiscuous. You are not a drug abuser. You are not a predator. You are not diseased.

I know in my heart that you will one day get married and have a family of your own. When you yourself become a father, you will understand the immense and unshakable love that a parent has for a child, and you will finally understand why I have tried to protect you in the ways that I have. I love you and your sister more than life itself, and I am proud to be the mother of two wonderful children. You are an intelligent, kind-hearted, hardworking, handsome, ambitious young man. My greatest wish is that you will be happy and live a good life. Please consider the things I have said to you here. When you are ready to talk again, I would love nothing more than to hear from you.

I love you always.

Mom

Inside the envelope, there's another slip of paper. I tip it out onto my lap and stare down at it. It's a check for eight thousand dollars, made out to Travis, with the word 'tuition' printed in the memo space. For the first time all day, I can breathe.

Jamie's Cadillac is parked outside my house when I get back to New York a few hours later. When I let myself into the house, he and Travis are hanging out in the living room, watching some movie on TV. Travis levels me with a tired and wholly unimpressed look; any hope I'd had of him not realizing that I was responsible for Jamie's presence disappears.

"Hello there," Jamie says.

"Hi," I say. "Go away."

"Don't be rude," Travis warns, but Jamie rolls to his feet without even a hint of reluctance. He gives me a hug that's more of a squeeze than anything, kisses me on the cheek, and lets himself get locked out. Travis raises his eyebrows at me. "Have I ever told you that you've got the subtlety of a swift kick to the nuts?"

"Probably, yeah," I say. I thrust the envelope towards him. "This is for you."

He frowns but reaches for it anyway. "Who's it from?"

"Your mother," I say. He freezes. I don't have time for that shit. I shove the envelope into his hand, push it closer and closer until his muscles start to work well enough for him to open it.

I don't know how many times Travis reads the letter; I think he might just be staring at the paper after a while. I join him on the couch and sit in absolute silence, tucked against his side. When he finally straightens up and looks at me, his eyes are wide enough that I can see the whites all the way around the blue of his irises. "And this is... this is real? My mom really wrote this?"

"Couldn't make it up if I tried," I say.

He looks back at the letter and traces the words with the tips of his fingers. He admits, "I don't know whether I should be moved by the parts at the beginning and the end, or furious over everything in the middle."

I reach over his shoulder and fold the letter over on itself until only the first paragraph and the last are visible. With her words about me tucked safely out of sight, all Travis can see is his mom's love for him—her fear of losing him, her grief over his depression, her dreams of him giving her grandchildren someday, her hope that he will be *happy*. I tap my thumb against her sign-off. "This is the only part that matters. Well, that, and the, uh—" I reach into the envelope and fish out the check.

Travis stares down at it. He looks like he's going to throw up, cry, or both. His grip is shaking on the check, but it's the stupid letter that draws his attention again. "I can't remember the last time my mom told me she loves me. You know, other than this?" He lifts the paper; it trembles in his fingers. "But she actually said it. She said she loves me. And it's..." He has to clear his throat, and still his voice crackles into a whisper when he finishes, "I thought she didn't anymore."

I thought so, too, but I'd die before saying that to him. After all the cruel things Evelyn has said to Travis in the last year—all the times she has called him a faggot, or told him that he was a disappointment to her, or said she was disgusted by him—I find it hard to believe she cares about him at all. But when he turns to face me again, he looks so relieved and so hopeful that I have no choice but to try to smile back.

That's all it takes, and then he's there, crushing our bodies together and gripping my shirt almost tightly enough to tear it. His face is buried against my neck, and all he can say, over and over, is, "Thank you. I can't believe you did this for me, I can't believe you went to talk to her. Thank you, G."

"Of course. Anything for you," I say. "Always."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

“I believe that anyone who says sex is overrated just hasn’t done it properly. I believe that anyone who claims to know what’s going on will lie about the little things, too.” –Neil Gaiman

215 days sober

I wake up to the sound of my phone ringing from where it’s wedged under the pillow. Next to me, Travis groans and tries to hide away under his own pillow. “Christ, G,” he says. “Not gonna let you sleep in my bed anymore, if you wake me up before the alarm.”

“Sorry, sorry,” I mutter. The caller ID bears the words *dc—dont fuckin steal charlies phone again*. I answer, “Yeah?”

“Rise and shine,” Declan says. “Still planning to come over to the dorms today?”

“Do you still *want* me to come over?” I ask. “Now that you’re sober—”

Travis rolls over and tries to shove me out of the bed. “If you’re taking a call, get out. I’ve got another half an hour before I have to get up, and I don’t want to waste it listening to you talk.”

“Hang on, Dec, Travis is yelling at me. Give me a second to get out of bed,” I say to Declan. I let myself be shoved the rest of the way out of bed.

His raised eyebrows are easy to picture. “I see. And do you always share a bed with your roommate?”

“When I’m in a bad mood and feel like spooning somebody, yes, I do,” I hiss. I slip into the hall and shut the door behind myself. It’s a strangely chilly morning for April, so I step over Omelette’s still-snoozing form, shuffle over to my own room and crawl back into bed. “It’s not even weird. It’s totally platonic.”

“Of course it is,” he says. “Now, would you like to come over this afternoon and platonically share *my* bed?”

I roll onto my back and slip a hand past the waistband of my pajama pants, idly touching myself, but not doing anything particularly thrilling just yet. “Depends. Do I get to platonically put my dick in your ass?”

“You can put it wherever you want to,” he says. When he speaks next, his voice is low and heated. “I’ve got my tongue stud in, just in case you decide you want my mouth.”

I shiver even under the pile of blankets, and the movement of my hand on my dick becomes a lot more purposeful. “That’s definitely something I could be interested in.”

“Good. I’m going to go out and run the obstacle course a few times, but... head over here in a couple of hours, maybe sometime around one o’clock?”

“See you then,” I say. He hangs up without saying goodbye, but it’s Declan, so I’m not too surprised by that. I haul myself back out of my bed and down the hall to Travis’ room. If I don’t have to worry about getting up yet, I might as well enjoy a lazy morning in a warm bed. When I lift up the edge of the covers to sneak back under, Travis’ eyelids flutter, like he’s rolling his eyes without bothering to open them. Once I’m tucked under the blankets again, he shuffles closer to resume our previous state of sprawling out all over each other, then immediately draws back.

“Seriously?” he says flatly. “Turn over. You’re the little spoon now, I don’t need you to spend the next twenty minutes stabbing me with that.”

I slip a hand under the blankets to adjust my semi-hard dick as I wriggle around to face away from Travis.

"I don't know what you expect from me, dude. I'm nineteen, and I just woke up. Of course I'm going to be at action status. You probably are, too."

"I am not," he grumbles, slipping an arm around my waist and curling closer. And it's true, he's not, but...

"Do you want to be?" I ask around a mischievous, slowly widening smile. One of my hands sneaks backward under the blankets to settle on his hip.

"Garen," he says warningly. "If you're not going to let me sleep, I might as well get up and start getting ready for work--*oh my god, fucking behave yourself.*"

"I'm not doing anything!" I protest. The words are a blatant lie, but I can't seem to stop myself from rolling my hips back to grind my ass against his groin a second time. His fingers clench around the fabric of my t-shirt, and maybe he's making some lame attempt to keep me still, but if that's the case, he's not doing a very good job of it. All he's really accomplishing is pinning me to him as I press back again.

He exhales a shaky breath against the back of my neck. "You're such an asshole. What is wrong with you this morning?"

"Nothing. I'm just in a good mood today."

Truthfully, I'm in a good mood because *he's* in a good mood. Or, I guess, he's not in a bad mood. He doesn't seem like he's ready to hang himself the second I turn my back. He seems like he might even be better—at least, better enough that I'm sure he'll live long enough to attend his next therapy session and see if there's anything his doctor can do for him. Even if he has to leave for work soon, even if I'm going to spend the afternoon in bed with someone else, it's still a good day right now.

He's still holding tight to my shirt. I reach down to cover his hand with my own. I don't *mean* anything by the gesture—it's meant to be a quick acknowledgment, like a hello—but he spreads his fingers apart just enough that mine can slip between and intertwine with his. Suddenly, all I can think of is the times I've been behind him, holding him the way he's holding me now, fucking him just like this. It feels heavy and real and too much, and I can't *help* myself.

"Trav," I say hoarsely.

He brushes his lips over the nape of my neck and breathes, "Yeah?"

"Do you want to?" I ask.

"Do I want to do what?" he asks, even though I'm sure he already knows what I'm asking.

"Do you want to?" I repeat, slowly dragging our joined hands away from where they're resting over my pounding heart and towards the top of my pajama pants. Probably without thinking, he licks his lips; I feel his tongue touch the skin at the top of my spine, and that feels like answer enough. I untangle our hands and reach back to grip his thigh so I can pull him as close as possible. If he wasn't hard before, he's getting there now. He makes a quiet noise when I grind back against him again. I say, "You want to, don't you? We can, I want to. Call in sick to work."

"I can't," he says, even though his hand is dipping under my waistband now. He wraps his fingers around me, and it's so good, I want to fucking cry.

"Yeah, that's—god, it's been so long," I say, and I can feel him nodding behind me. "Please stay. I want you to stay, I want us to spend all day in bed. Don't you want that?"

Another nod, more hurried, and he's really stroking me off now, with his free arm coming out from under the pillow to wrap around my shoulders and keep me still as he works me over. It's kind of pointless—I'm

not good at keeping still under the simplest of circumstances, and any time he gets his hands on me, all I want to do is squirm around until I find a way to get myself inside of him.

His phone starts chirping where it rests on the window ledge while it charges. His hand jerks out of my pants, and I roll right over on top of him so that I can silence the alarm.

"Don't, don't, don't," I say quickly. "Don't get up. You can call in sick, I'll cancel my plans, come on."

Part of me is expecting rejection, because every time I get caught up in the feel of him, he pushes me away and tells me to slow down. He tells me I need *boundaries*. But today, when he grabs my shirt, it's to pull me towards him, not push me away. Three and a half months since the last time we slept together, a month since the night he let me kiss him outside the laser tag arena—it must be getting to him, too, because there isn't any hesitation in the way he pulls me down into a kiss.

A kiss that is, admittedly, a little bit gross, because it's morning, and neither of us has had a chance to brush our teeth yet, but it's still perfect. This is what I've always wanted—to wake up in bed with him in our house, to feel his body warming the sheets I've slept on, to kiss him when he's still sleep-heavy and relaxed. When our mouths breath apart, one of his hands shifts from my chest to the back of my neck so that he can keep me close enough to have our foreheads touch.

"We should go to your room," he says.

"We're fine here," I say, ducking down to kiss him again.

He lets me, then nudges me back just enough to say around a tiny, breathless sort of smile, "Yeah, but there aren't any condoms in here. I haven't bothered to buy them since December.

"There aren't any—" I start to echo, and then I stutter into silence as the full, glorious weight of his words settles on me. He doesn't have any condoms. He hasn't *needed* any condoms, because he hasn't been fucking anyone else in these past few months. God, I'd hoped for that, but I'd never been sure, and now... I press another hard kiss to his mouth before swearing, "You have no idea how good this is about to feel."

He laughs. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure I do."

"Come on," I say, scrambling off him and towards the edge of the bed, excitement buzzing under my skin. "Let's go play."

Travis' fingers are tangled up with mine, but all that means is that I get yanked to a stop when he freezes on the bed. "Wait, what did you just say?"

"I said, let's go," I say, twisting to raise my eyebrows at him. "What's the prob—"

"No, you said, *let's go play*," he says. He looks thunderstruck by the words, but I can't for the life of me figure out why it matters. My face must show as much, because he pulls his hand away from mine, his surprise melting into something horrifyingly close to hurt. "This isn't *play* to me, Garen. I kind of thought you understood that this, what we have between us... it's not a *game* to me."

"No, I know, I get that," I say quickly, crawling back onto the bed with him. "I know, I didn't mean—that's just how I talk. It doesn't mean anything." I hadn't thought it would be possible, but his face falls even further at that, and I hasten to add, "The word! The word doesn't mean anything, Travis, sex with you means so—"

"Sex with me isn't on the table anymore," he says shortly. He nudges me out of the way so that he can tumble off the bed and patter down the hall. "I have to get ready for work."

I open my mouth to call after him, but he slams the bathroom door shut behind himself before I can get a word out. I can hear the shower start up, but I don't get out of the bed. Instead, I curl up under the blankets again and wait, pulling at a loose thread on the hemmed edge of his pillowcase. He can't just storm off like this, not when things were so close to getting back to where they'd been. It's impossible. He'll get out of the shower, and he'll have calmed down, and I'll make him understand what I meant.

He can't leave now—not if he really wants me like I want him.

When he gets out of the shower ten minutes later and returns to the room with damp skin and a towel around his waist, I'm still waiting patiently under the covers. I open my mouth to say, *I'm sorry*, but what comes out instead is, "You're overreacting."

He turns to stare at me in disbelief.

"I'm sorry," I say, yes, *there* are the words I was looking for. But it doesn't seem to really matter.

He opens his dresser drawer and pulls out a pair of boxers, tugs them on under the towel like he's afraid to let me see his junk for the ten thousandth time. He drops the towel on the hamper and starts to pull on an old pair of khakis that have coffee stains on the bottom hem of each pant leg. He finds himself a thin white t-shirt, then his uniform shirt, and he still hasn't said a fucking word.

"You fight just like your mom does," I say without thinking. He pauses with the shirt halfway over his head, his face still hidden beneath its folds. More than anything in the world, I wish I could rewind the last thirty seconds to keep that horrible sentence tucked away in my throat. I feel like I'm about to be sick. Very slowly, Travis pulls his shirt the rest of the way on. His face is completely blank. I claw my way out from under the blankets and all but fall out of bed, scrambling over to crowd up in front of him. "I didn't mean that. Th-That was really fucked up, I didn't mean that, Travis, you have to—"

"I know. It's fine," he says dully.

I shake my head. "It's not fine. I'm sorry, please don't be—"

"It's *fine*. I'm not mad. I just—I have to go to work now." He kisses my cheek, but I barely feel it. He heads for the door, steps over the dog, and halfway down the hall, he calls over his shoulder, "Have fun playing with Declan this afternoon."

I close my eyes, but that does nothing to alleviate the dull throbbing in my skull. Surprise, surprise—I fucked up everything with Travis. Again. Just like I always do. Downstairs, the front door clicks shut behind him; a minute later, I hear his car stuttering to start out front. I crawl onto the bed so that I can peer out the window and watch him back out of the driveway, onto the street. I can't see his face from this angle, but I'd bet anything he's frowning.

I flop back onto the bed and scowl up at the ceiling. My brain might be pissed off, my heart might be aching, but my body is still turned on. I feel restless, frayed at the edges, with no way of getting away from that feeling. And seriously, fuck Travis. *Let's go play*. Three words that aren't *exactly* what he wants to hear, and suddenly, he's done with me for the day. I'm dismissed. I act too casual, and I get *it's not a game to me*; I act too serious, and I get *you're just not ready yet*. He's not being fair to me, so fuck if I'm going to be fair to him.

The rest of my morning is spent jerking off in his bed. He isn't here to see it, but I put on a show like he is anyway—I bring myself right to the edge, but don't let myself come. I do it over and over again until my muscles are practically vibrating with tension, until I can't keep quiet anymore, until I *have* to come. When I spill over onto my hand, I don't even try to hold back the loud groan that wants to burst out of me. For a few long minutes, I lie there, eyes closed, body shaking. I thought I'd feel... better. More relaxed, less annoyed. Less keyed-up. I don't; I feel exactly the same, wound too tightly and ready to split into pieces. Just to remove any doubt he might have about what I've done here, I unhook the corner of the fitted sheet

and use it to wipe the sweat from my forehead and the spunk from my hand. I leave the sheet crumpled up like that; if he can turn me into a mess and walk out, I can do the same to his bed.

I take my time in the shower afterward, then spend maybe half an hour dicking around the house. I make a sandwich, take the dog for a walk, do a load of dishes. By the time twelve-thirty rolls around, I'm still feeling ready to jump out of my skin, and I can't for the life of me figure out why. It's not like Travis has never shot me down before; it's not like he didn't spend the entirety of last spring doing exactly that, with repeat performances every few weeks since then. I should be used to it by now. Scowl still fixed in place, I fill my jacket pockets with a handful of condoms and two different bottles of lube, then lock up the house, shuffle out to my car, and drive to Patton.

Declan is still running the obstacle course when I get there, and he's pretty gross-looking—his skin is smeared with sweat, mud, and something that looks frighteningly similar to a streak of half-dried blood on his shoulder. His face still bears the evidence of the beating he got dealt at Friday night's party; the skin around his left eye and cheekbone is swollen and mottled purple. His lower lip is a little swollen, too, split down the middle but healed over enough that I still can't wait to kiss him.

I lope over to him the second he finishes his last run; he sprawls out on the grass and takes a few long sips from a water bottle, and I collapse half-next to him, half-on top of him, slinging a leg over him so that I can seat myself comfortably on his thighs.

"Why, hello there," I say. "You know, I had some pretty exhausting plans for you this afternoon. I hope you haven't worn yourself out already."

"Not a chance," he says, even though he's panting. He hauls me in by the front of my shirt and slings an arm around my neck to steady me so that he can kiss me, but I inch just out of reach. He frowns at me, and I reach up to brush the pad of my thumb over his bottom lip.

"Not hurt too badly, are you?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "Not too badly to do this."

This time, I let myself be pulled in. His lips taste salty with sweat and feel gritty from the dirt that seems to have worked its way into every last inch of skin.

I pull back and say, "You're gross. You need a shower, and I, for one, would be *delighted* to help scrub your back."

He snorts and shoves me off of him, stands of his own accord, then helps me to my feet. "If you join me in the shower, we'll never make it to the bed. Come on, you can wait in my room."

Whitman Hall is eerily quiet. The entire building is empty, save the desk attendant in the front lobby who waves us through. By the time Declan and I reach his dorm room, get it unlocked, and get inside, my ears are ringing. I've never done well with absolute silence, and right now, my whole head feels slightly off-kilter, like it's full of cotton. Declan's laptop is open on the desk. I collapse in the chair in front of it and hit the spacebar. A locked screen comes up, and I say, "What's your password? I need to put on some music. I feel like I'm in a zombie movie, right at that part where the hero finds a seemingly abandoned building, only to realize the basement is full of shrieking, snarling undead."

"If I'm not back from my shower in fifteen minutes, you should assume they've gotten me and push the desk in front of the door to buy yourself another few minutes," he says as he strips off his t-shirt and hunts down his towel and shower caddy.

I snort. "Fuck that, I'll come save you. Where's your pistol?"

Declan leans around me to type in his password, then grabs my jaw and twists my face towards him so

that he can land a deep kiss to my mouth. When he pulls back, he bumps his forehead against mine and says, “Locked case in the closet, top shelf. Combination’s the same as the model number. They’re doing inventory in the weapons room this week, so the ammunition is in the side pocket of the duffel on the floor. Remember: headshots are the best way to waste zombies.”

To satisfy my own amusement and curiosity, the moment he leaves to go take his shower, I check the top shelf of the closet. Sure enough, there’s a locked Smith & Wesson handgun case tucked behind a carelessly folded stack of t-shirts. I shake my head and set myself up at his computer to peruse his iTunes.

It’s worse than I could ever have imagined.

Four thousand songs, and there’s nothing but country music. I didn’t even know they *made* that much country music. I kind of assumed there were just a hundred songs that got recycled over and over, and all of them were about your woman leaving you for your momma so all you’re left with is your dog and your truck, and then your dog leaves you for your truck, so you drink a lot of whiskey and blast your head open with a shotgun, or whatever. But there are hundreds of names listed here, and half of them don’t even sound real. I double-click a song at random, and a banjo starts playing. I make a face and say, “Yeah, *no*.”

It takes me eight minutes of sorting through the bullshit until I finally find the holy grail: a dozen of Johnny Cash’s albums. I immediately cue them up and step back from the computer. I won’t find anything better than that—probably anywhere, but *definitely* not on this computer—so instead of bothering to continue my hunt, I decide to make myself more comfortable. I shrug off my jacket, then my t-shirt, and sling both over the back of the desk chair. As an afterthought, I retrieve the bottles of lube from the pocket and set them down on the nightstand. I fling myself back onto Declan’s bed, then toe off my boots and socks. I’m in the middle of unthreading the belt from my beltloops when Declan returns to the room. He’s wearing nothing but a pair of sweatpants that are damp at the heels and a pair of the rubber flip-flops everyone wears in the showers. He cocks his head to the side and surveys me.

“With the exception of what is playing right now, you have the absolute fucking worst taste in music,” I say before he can even open his mouth. “And just for the record? Men who have names like ‘Travis Tritt’ and ‘Clint Black’ shouldn’t be doing music for a living. They should be doing gay porn.”

“You probably wouldn’t say that, if you had any idea what either Travis Tritt or Clint Black look like,” Declan says. He sets his shower caddy on the corner of his desk, then reaches behind himself to flip the lock on the door. “By the way, I’m curious—why are you still wearing pants?”

“Because you haven’t taken them off me yet,” I say in a sing-song voice.

The side of his mouth ticks upward, and when I crook a finger at him, he approaches me at a saunter and braces one knee on the edge of the mattress. His eyes track down the length of my body. A moment later, he taps two fingers against my collarbone and slowly walks them down my sternum, over the ridges of my abdominal muscles, right to the waistband of my jeans. He flicks the button open, drags my zipper down; he curls his fingers into my pockets and pulls my jeans down to my ankles. I kick them off before he can spend another six goddamn hours getting them off my feet. He *finally* climbs the rest of the way onto the bed, and just when I think he’s leaning in to kiss me, he ducks down to kiss my neck, then my shoulder.

Christ, this is taking forever.

I throw an arm around his waist and roll over, dragging him with me so that we end up tangled together, his back against the wall, his front pressed against mine. That must be the only encouragement he needs, because he grabs the back of my neck and drags me into a deep, rough kiss. It barely takes any time at all before my hips are rolling against his—I’ve been hard since he came back from his shower. Fuck, I’ve been hard over this kid since I *met* him, and now, all I want is for us to fucking get somewhere.

"Turn over," I say, and he makes a distracted, questioning sound. I kiss him again and repeat, "Turn over, on your stomach. So I can get to your ass." I give Declan's hip a soft push, but he doesn't budge.

"I was under the impression that there would be a hell of a lot more preparation before I was expected to take a dick in the ass," he says.

"Oh, really? I was kind of hoping I could just roll you onto your stomach and thrust around until my dick goes somewhere tight. That's how it works, right?" I say brightly. Declan does not look amused, but fuck Declan, I'm hilarious. I wriggle my fingers under his shoulder and tug until he allows me to roll him onto his side. I lean in to lay a kiss on that same shoulder. "I have done this before, you know. I'm not going to fuck you just yet."

"Then why am I turning over already?" he grumbles, though even as he speaks, he rolls the rest of the way over and pushes at his pillow a few times to get it out of the way.

"Because I want to eat you out," I say. He stops shoving at the pillow long enough to pin me under a blank, unblinking stare. My hand is outstretched towards one of the bottles of lube, but the look on Declan's face is enough to make me reconsider my words. It's not like I've asked for anything particularly weird; I came here to get at that ass, not so we could sit around and jerk each other off again like a couple of freshmen. But he still hasn't blinked, so I slowly amend, "Unless you're not into that, in which case, I don't have to do it."

He blinks, then folds his arms on the pillow and ducks his face against them even though it does nothing to conceal his grin. "It's your tongue, Anderson. If that's what you want to do with it, far be it from me to stop you."

I kiss my way down the notches in his spine until I reach the pair of dimples on his lower back. I drag my tongue over one, then the other, then lean back slightly to say, "Thought you told me you've had girls try to initiate ass stuff with you before."

"I meant a finger or two. Never a mouth," he says. There's a laugh in his voice, and it makes me want to bite him. Instead, I bite down on the waistband of his sweatpants and start to tug them down. He raises his hips and reaches down to help, pushes the sweats halfway down his legs, then kicks them the rest of the way off. "I know you're not entirely familiar with the standard method of seducing seventeen-year-old girls, but asking one of them to lick your asshole tends to get you kicked in the nuts, rather than laid."

"Girls are fucking stupid," I tell him, probably not for the first time. He laughs at me, but it doesn't matter—I'm right. Only a complete moron could see an ass like Dec's and not want to bury their fucking face in it. I nudge his legs apart and settle myself between them, then change my mind and back up enough that I can tug on his hips. "C'mon, get up on your knees."

The way Declan moves is a fucking revelation. He braces his weight on his forearms and drags his knees up the mattress in one fluid motion. For a minute, I find myself stunned by the slope of his back, the flush already rising under the freckles on his shoulders. That minute is all he lets me have before he twists to give me a bored, expectant look over his shoulder. "Any day now."

I sneer and shove his face back into the pillows. He lets me, but I'm pretty sure that's only because he can see me reaching for one of the tubes of lube. I pop the top on it and make another face, this time because of how overpoweringly sweet the scent of it is. Entirely for my own amusement, I pour a bit more than necessary onto my fingers and take my time rubbing it over Declan's hole, waiting for the smell to hit him as hard as it's hitting me down here. Sure enough, a minute later, he squirms in place and says, "Christ, Anderson, are you trying to stick a pack of Juicy Fruit up my ass? What the hell is that?"

"That would be the delightful scent of 'juicy watermelon' flavored lube," I announce. "I bought it as a joke a while back, but the joke's on me, because it's actually *delicious*." I grab his ass with both hands, spread

him open, and add, "Don't worry, the label says it's kosher."

Declan breathes out a laugh, but that breath changes into a sharp inhale the instant I actually get my tongue on him. His spine goes rigid, like he can't decide whether to move away from my mouth or towards it, and has compromised by remaining completely still. "Relax," I breathe, almost against his skin. I duck further down so that I can briefly take one of his balls in my mouth, and he nods into the pillow, almost like he doesn't realize he's doing it. The second he has been soothed by that, I go right back to his ass, spreading his cheeks apart so I can flatten my tongue over his hole, slicking him up with spit and tracing his edges so he'll let himself start to loosen up. After a few minutes of that, I pull back and say, "Are you sure you don't—"

That's all I get out before he throws a hand out to cup the back of my head and shove my face back into his ass. Which I guess is an answer in itself. The gesture is so bratty and disgruntled, I'd probably be laughing, except his hole is relaxed enough that I can work the very tip of my tongue inside him. He makes a noise like getting kicked in the stomach, then breathes out an, "*Oh, fuck.*" I wiggle my tongue as much as I can, and he arches his back like a cat, makes a noise sort of like a purr, too.

He seems sufficiently distracted, so I sneak one of my hands off his cheek and closer to his hole, pulling my face away and sinking my middle finger into him up to the second knuckle when he doesn't protest. He makes another noise, this one less pleased and more contemplative. I swipe my tongue against where my skin meets his, but it doesn't get the same pleasurable sounds it did before, so I ask, "You good?"

"Yeah, it's, uh—" He ducks his head and coughs, and okay, cool, I always wondered if being a proctologist would be any fun. Before I can make this joke aloud—even though I doubt it would be appreciated—Declan adds, "It's new. Not bad, not good. Just new. Strange."

Slowly, I twist my finger until I'm perfectly positioned to brush the pad of my finger against his prostate. His whole body *shakes* as he moans. A smile curls slowly onto my lips. I might be a fuck-up, I might make a habit of ruining my own life and the lives of everyone around me, I might be one of the world's biggest, most self-centered assholes, but they say everybody's good for something, and *this...* this is something I'm so, so good at.

"You want another finger?" I ask, and he says, "I can take it," which isn't really an answer to the question I asked.

Still, it's an affirmative, so I go for it, opening him up with a second finger, licking around and between the digits as best I can, because for all his initial argument, he seems to really love having his ass eaten. His noises are nothing but appreciative, and all of his movements are towards me, not away. But the second I try to work in a third finger, the muscles in his back all go taut again, and he says, "Two is fine. Don't—"

"Two isn't fine, if you plan to take a dick without crying," I interrupt. "M kinda thick, I usually see if guys can take four before I try to—"

"Four?" Declan repeats flatly. "You want to put four fingers—you want to put *all the fingers* in my ass? Why don't we just add the thumb, while we're at it, turn this into a *very special afternoon fisting session.*"

I grin and say, "Well, I'm not usually *into* fisting, but if you really want me to—Dec, I'm kidding, Jesus."

He stops digging his nails into my wrist, but he doesn't let go. "Look, either fuck me or don't, but I don't want to spend the entire afternoon listening to you make jokes. You're not anywhere near as funny as you think you are."

And he's not anywhere near as subtle about covering up his nervousness with meanness as he thinks he is, but he doesn't see me complaining about it. My third finger is still tracing the rim of where I've got the other two buried, slowly spreading the lube around so that I can push in the moment he okays it. For now,

I wait in silence. And it's not the longest wait. A minute passes, and he sighs, "Okay. You can go for another. But not four, alright?"

"Not four," I agree, but I doubt he can hear my words over the sound he makes when I press my ringer finger into him and go right for his prostate, curling all three digits against it while he shakes and swears and shoves his hips back.

He's a lot less contrary after that, which is fucking fantastic, because at this point, my dick's so hard that I could probably use it to chisel a block of marble into a statue. In a display of typical Garen Anderson subtlety, I rub myself against the back of his thigh and focus more on opening him up, less on making him feel good, until he finally reaches over to retrieve a strip of condoms from the box in his nightstand. Without comment, he tears one off the strip and hands it off over his shoulder. I rip off one edge of the wrapper and roll the condom on in a single stroke, then slick myself up with more of the lube.

"Any day now," Declan says for the second time, and I don't bother trying to conceal my eyeroll. But then he quietly adds, sounding truly apprehensive for the first time all afternoon, "Don't bullshit me—this is going to hurt like a motherfucker, isn't it?"

I shake my head, even though he still can't see me from this position. "Shouldn't. 's why I'm fingering you and using an epic amount of lube. It'll feel, you know, weird, sure, but it only hurts like a motherfucker if something's going disastrously wrong."

"Sounds like you're speaking from experience," Declan says.

He still can't see my face now, and thank god for that, because I have to bite down on my lower lip and fix my eyes on the freckles on his back to keep myself from sinking into memories that'll make it impossible for me to fuck anyone today. I twist my fingers to make him sigh, to distract him. It feels like at least a minute before I can unclench my teeth from my lip and say, "Yeah, I guess. But that's not—" I swallow, lean in, and kiss his shoulder. "This is going to be better. Trust me."

He lets his head roll forward so that it hangs down between his shoulders. "Yeah, okay. Do it."

I let my fingers slip back out of him. Before he can change his mind and panic his way back to virgin tightness, I set the head of my dick against his hole and carefully press inside. He makes a faint noise, something like a grunt, and I smooth a hand down his spine, but don't stop pushing further inside. "You alright?"

"Yeah, it's fine, just—" He breaks off and reaches back, digs his fingers into the side of my thigh.

"Just what, Dec?" I prompt.

He twists in place enough to shoot me an annoyed look. "Just *new*, like I said before. Can we speed this along a bit? I'd like to get to the part where it feels good, rather than the part where it just feels like I'm getting stretched."

"Not my fault you're tight," I say, and *god* is he ever tight. I haven't felt something this good in god knows how long, and all I wanna do is fuck him hard, deep—I want to *take*, but this is Declan Campbell. If I fuck this up, if I make it uncomfortable for him, if I'm not better than he ever dreamed, he won't hesitate to end whatever we've got here and move on to someone else. Declan tries to rock back onto me, but he only manages to get another inch inside before I catch him by the hips and stop him. "Slower. Gonna hurt yourself if you do that again."

"I'm going to hurt *you*, if you don't do this right, Anderson."

Seriously? What the hell does he know about doing *this* right? He's fuckin' cherry at getting done by a guy, he doesn't have any idea what he's doing. I've barely gotten in two thrusts, and he's already being a

bossy little shit. And that's really not how I do things. I'm gnawing on my tongue, trying to keep my annoyance in check, when he heaves a frustrated sigh, pushes back against me again, and says, "Come on."

"Shut up, Declan," I say, rolling my eyes even though he can't see it. For good measure, I put a hand between his shoulderblades and shove down so that his face is buried in the pillow, his hips hitched higher up against mine as I finally bottom out. I'm expecting an admonishment, or, worse, a noise of genuine pain that I'll have to apologize for and remedy.

Instead, I get a punched-out noise of total relief, and then a rasped, "Yeah, like that."

Like that is apparently Declan-speak for *like he's someone who has done this before*, because when I repeat the motion—harder, faster, *more* than I'd normally do with a guy who's new to this—he groans and moves with me. And this... this, I can do. His hard-on has gone down noticeably, but it thickens up again under my hand when I reach around to jerk him off. He reaches for my hand, like he's going to correct my grip, but then changes his mind and braces his palm against the headboard so he can use it as leverage to thrust back against me. A flush is coloring the span of his shoulders, the back of his neck. I'd bet anything it's spread over his chest, too. All of him.

I slide the hand between his shoulderblades higher up to hook over his shoulder so I can drag him back harder. He picks up that rhythm easily on his own, so I let that same hand sneak around to curl over his throat and tug him fully upright. We wobble in place a little, and he has to reach back and grab my thighs to steady himself, but it's worth it, because with his ear near my mouth like this, I can murmur, "Next time, I'm gonna get you on your back. I wanna see if that blush reaches your face."

Declan thrusts back again, a little too enthusiastically, considering our position, and I have to sit back on my heels and let go of his throat so I can throw a hand out behind myself to stop us both from falling off the damn bed. Dec must not really care—he follows my movement like it was intentional, starts to ride me. I'm torn between wanting to stare at his ass as it sinks down over my cock and wanting to stare at the ceiling, because *Christ*, he looks good. Part of me is a little worried I might come if I don't look away, and I don't want this to be over just yet. I tip my head back and close my eyes, but even then, I can't stop myself from blurting out, "My god, that's so hot."

He might laugh. I can't really tell, can't hear anything over the blood rushing in my ears. I curl my hands over his hips so I can try to guide his movements, but I must be fucking failing, because it isn't long before he starts to get... frustrated, I guess. He grinds his ass down experimentally, trying to find the angle I had him at before, but to no avail. He lets out an angry little huff of breath, and I push him off me.

"I've got you," I assure him. "Get back on your knees, I'll get you."

He gets back on knees and elbows, and I scramble into place behind him, guiding my dick right back into him, right where he needs it. He moans out *something*, and it takes maybe ten seconds for me to actually process the fact that he's moaning *my name*.

And that's when I kind of lose my cool.

I stretch out over his back with my left hand clenched around his headboard because it's the only way I can keep fucking him but get my other hand on his cock. Part of me wonders if I'm fucking him too roughly, but he seems into it—not in the *beat me, beat me, make me feel cheap* kind of rough that Ben is into. It's almost like Declan has just fucked *so many people* and done *so many things* that he needs everything to be harder and faster for it to even register, like how he always grips just a little too tight when he jerks me off. And right now, with my hips banging bruises into his ass and my teeth set against his shoulder, the dude seems goddamn euphoric.

When he comes, he clenches his own hand over mine, tightening my grip even more. He makes this gorgeous little noise, too, half-groan, half-laugh, like he's genuinely surprised at how good he feels. It

seems like he comes forever, shooting all over my hand and the bed, collapsing the rest of the way onto his forearms when he's finished.

I try to thrust in again, but he practically flinches, so I pull out instead. It's fine, I can just jerk off on his face or some shit like that—but he turns around and shoves me flat onto my back on the mattress and crawls up onto me. He tears the condom off me, flings it into the wastebasket, and says shortly, "Don't push my head down, don't try to fuck my throat, and don't come in my mouth."

Before I can get another word out, he leans down and takes me in his mouth. It's an awkward, kind of clumsy blowjob—like that initial suck is the only one he's prepared to do just yet, and then he needs to steel himself with a few languid, experimental licks along my shaft. It doesn't matter at all, because I'm so fucking close that by the time he does work his way back to actually sucking me, I have to warn him, "I'm going to come," so he can pull off and finish me with his hand. The moment I've stopped striping his hand in white, he smears the mess onto his comforter and collapses backward, a mirror of my own pose. My head is at the foot of the bed, his is on the pillows, and our legs are sort of tangled around each other in the middle.

I lift my head a few inches so I can look at him. His eyes are closed, and his mouth is slightly open. He's flushed, panting, and I can't help but be a little proud of that. Then, mostly to be an asshole, I nudge his knee with mine and say, "You know, that didn't completely suck, for your first time."

Declan doesn't open his eyes, but he does smirk.

218 days sober

It's around two in the morning by the time I crawl out of Declan's bed and head home, but he doesn't expect me to stay home for very long. At nine o'clock on Monday morning, he wakes me up with another phone call, summoning me back to the Patton dorms. I don't really need to be convinced.

It's the start of probably the most exhausting spring break I've ever had, and considering the fact that I usually spend my spring breaks in bed with Jamie, that's saying a lot. For the next three days, I head over to Patton first thing in the morning, have a few hours of incredibly athletic sex, and let Declan badger me into running through the obstacle course with him for an hour or two. On the bright side, my runtime—which wasn't exactly shitty to begin with—is steadily improving; on the not-so-bright side, being forced to repeat a military obstacle course a dozen times in a row sucks gigantic dicks, and I'm possibly beginning to hate Declan for it. After that, I can only manage to summon enough strength for a short shower and a single round of lazy, sleepy sex before I have to tap out and head home.

For three afternoons in a row, I spend the next few hours napping, doing my homework, playing with Omelette, and desperately shoveling food into my mouth in an attempt to gain back some of the calories Declan has had me working off during the day. And for three evenings in a row, I end up calling Dec right around eight o'clock and informing him that, now that my energy has been restored, he should come over and pick up where we left off.

On Monday night, he laughs at me, says he'll think about it, hangs up on me, and shows up an hour later.

On Tuesday night, he laughs at me, says he's looking for his keys already, hangs up on me, and shows up half an hour later.

On Wednesday night, he laughs at me, hangs up without saying a word, and walks through my front door without knocking less than a minute later. It isn't until that night—or, really early on Thursday morning, to be more truthful—that I realize how fucking stupid it is that he's bothering to get dressed.

"Are you going to call 'n wake me up at go-fuck-yourself-o'clock in the morning again?" I ask, rolling onto my back and watching him crouch down to dig one of his sneakers out from under the bed.

"Probably," he says.

"How 'bout you just stay over instead?" I suggest.

There's silence for a few seconds, and then Declan surfaces from his shoe quest so that I can see his grimace. "I don't really do sleepovers."

"Oh, damn, I was really hoping you'd let me braid your hair while we watch Mean Girls," I say. "I said *stay over*, not *have a sleepover*. God, I thought I was supposed to be the faggot here."

He settles back on his heels, not really sitting down, but not searching for the shoe anymore either. "I'm just saying, usually when a girl asks me to stay over—"

"I'm not a fucking girl."

"—it's because she's angling for me to start getting, you know..." He pauses, makes a face, and actually raises his hands to make air quotes as he finishes, "'*Serious*."

"Shut the fuck up and get in the bed," I say, giving him a glare that I hope conveys exactly how ridiculous he sounds right now. "We both know we're gonna do this same thing tomorrow, so we might as well save some gas money. Trust me, I've got enough condoms here to tide us over."

"Do you also have an obstacle course in your backyard that I'm somehow unaware of?" he asks, quirked an eyebrow.

I roll my eyes and promise, "We can go for a run instead. And if that's not enough to satisfy you, I can stack some boxes in the yard and have you jump over them—that's what Trav and I do for Omelette sometimes, he loves it. Afterward, I'll even put some peanut butter in a Kong toy and give you belly rubs."

Declan continues to look apprehensive. I yawn and scoot closer to the wall. "Quit being gay, dude. I'm not asking you to be the big spoon, I'm just trying to do what's most convenient for me and my lazy ass."

It takes another minute of dubious, suspicious looks before he sighs, strips back down, and climbs into the bed. I'm almost asleep when he quietly warns, "If you try to *snuggle* with me in the middle of the night, I will leave."

I'm too tired to bitch back, so I just hold up my middle finger, wave it around in front of his face a little bit, and let my arm flop back onto the bed.

It's such fucking bullshit, anyway—when I wake up right before sunrise, Declan is plastered against my back with his hand halfway down my boxers and his stupid face snoring in my ear. I snort, wrap my fingers around his wrist, and fall back asleep.

219 days sober

Declan is just getting out of the shower when my phone chimes out a text alert. The phone's charging only barely out of reach on my nightstand, and I'm too exhausted to sit up. I contemplate waiting for Dec to come back so he can hand it to me, but I've got a feeling he'd be unimpressed enough to move it further away. Instead, I unplug the cord from the wall and use that to drag it closer.

Travis and I are planning to grab dinner after class tonight, around 8 o'clock, Jamie has texted me. Think you might be able to tear yourself away from the well-muscled arms of your jailbait lover long enough to

join us?

I wince—I haven't seen Jamie since Saturday night, when I kicked him out so I could talk to Travis. I quickly reply, *of course, cant wait to see you. u pick somewhere to eat yet?* Before he can respond, I send, *dont worry, i've got someplace in mind. take the 1 to 50 st, see you later tonightttt.*

If you are trying to take us to that diner in Midtown with the singing waiters, you will be dining alone.

SEE YOU TONIGHT XOXOXO, I text back, then fling my phone further down the bed where I can pretend not to acknowledge any further protests.

"Hey, you were planning to head out soon, right?" I ask as Declan wanders back into the room in just his jeans. "Jamie wants me to head into the city and hang out with him and Travis tonight." Dec is still toweling off his hair, so I can't really see his face to know if he's glaring at me. Just in case, I add, "You could come, if you wanted to. Even though you, uh... don't really know Jamie. Or like Travis."

Declan lets the towel drop; his eyebrows are drawn together in confusion, and he echoes, "Travis?"

"Yes. Travis," I repeat. His expression doesn't change, so I grab one of my pillows and whip it at him. "The guy who *lives here* with me? My ex? You fucking know who Travis is, stop pretending."

"Oh, him." Declan shrugs, then grabs his t-shirt off the back of my desk chair and tugs it on. "Anderson, I don't even know the guy. I've met him once—twice? And to be perfectly honest, he didn't make much of an impression on me either time."

I blink. It's... insane, really, that anyone could meet Travis and not be awestruck by him. That anyone could look at him and not see how gorgeous he is, or talk to him and not hear how funny and smart he is. I'm kind of convinced that Declan just hasn't been paying attention, and my dubious expression must make that clear, because he laughs and shuffles over to kneel on the edge of my bed.

"Hey, it's nothing against him. I'm sure he's a cool guy, but there's just something so... Captain America about him. It bores me." He braces a hand on the bed and leans down to kiss my frowning mouth. "Go hang out your friends, and I'll catch up with you later. I've gotta meet someone anyway."

The spark of annoyance at him not "getting" Travis is immediately replaced by a flare of jealousy. When he tries to leave, I catch his wrist and say, "Who? A chick?"

He grins. "Not that kind of meeting. I'll explain the next time I see you, alright?"

I smirk. "You mean, tomorrow? When you call to ask if I'll come over and fuck you into your mattress again?"

Wordlessly, he leans in to steal another deep, languorous kiss, then squeezes my hip and saunters out of the room. Only when he's halfway down the stairs does he call back to me, "You should leave your phone on." My laughter follows him to the door.

I'm still loose-limbed and satisfied a few hours later, when Jamie and Travis get to the Stardust Diner. Jamie is too busy eying the building in distaste to acknowledge me, so I weave around him and sling an arm around Travis' shoulders. "Hey," I say, and smack a quick kiss to his cheek. "You've never eaten here before, right? It's so fucking cheesy, you're going to love it. How was class?"

"Class was fine," he says. He pinches the sleeve of my jacket and carefully unwinds my arm from his shoulders. "How was the fucking? Or, whatever it is you've spent the last five days doing."

I look down at my arm, now hanging limply by my side; I didn't know it was possible for me to feel rejected when I wasn't even trying to make a move. I look up again in time to see Jamie pinch Travis' shoulder

and say sharply, "We talked about this, McCall."

Does he really think that saying that is going to *help*?

"You guys talked about me?" I say, blinking. "What, on the way over here?"

"We talked about how I don't intend to spend this entire meal listening to you two idiots make passive-aggressive comments back and forth. Now, come on, let's get a table," Jamie orders.

The initial tension only lasts for maybe fifteen minutes. By the time our meals have been delivered and we've begun eating, Travis has shelved his piss-poor attitude, and my hackles have mostly lowered. At least, enough that I'm comfortable telling them, "Tomorrow's my audition for the dancer job at Rush." I glance between them. "Either of you want to come show your support for my sex worker aspirations?"

"I can't," Travis says around an apologetic smile. "I'm working until eleven tonight, and I'm opening at five tomorrow. If I'm out at a club all night, I'll pass out at the espresso machine."

"You know I'd love nothing more than to watch you put on a pair of hotpants and shake your ass about," Jamie assures me, "but unfortunately, I'm leaving town tomorrow night, after my classes get out."

I glance over at Travis, who seems to share my apprehension. I pinch the top of my straw and stir the ice around in my pop glass. "Are you going back to Savannah?"

Jamie pauses with a forkful of penne halfway to his mouth. I wish I hadn't said anything. Slowly, he lowers his fork, pushes his plate further up the table, and folds his hands together. "No. The law firm that's handling my parents' estate has a New York office, so I've been able to handle much of the paperwork through there." He unfolds his hands so that he can upend the sugar bowl on the table and fiddle with the packets. There are twelve. First, he makes a single row of twelve, then changes that to two rows of six, then three rows of four. He stacks them all together, shuffles them like playing cards, and replaces them in the bowl before finally looking up at Travis and me again. "I won't need to return to Georgia until the first weekend in May. That's when the Historical Society has their next meeting, and I've been asked to attend in my daddy's place, until everything regarding the home has been decided."

"If you decide you want company on the trip, you know I'll go with you," I offer quietly.

He nods, but says, "Thank you. I know. However, I'm sure I'll be... quite alright. And if the house gets a bit too quiet while I'm there, Marcus and Robin Chandler have said I'm more than welcome to take over their guest bedroom."

"So, if you're not headed to Georgia for another two weeks, where are you going tomorrow?" Travis asks.

The corners of Jamie's mouth curl up into the first smile I've seen from him all night. "Connecticut."

I knock my knee against his under the table. "And what exactly is it that entices you to the Nutmeg State?"

His smile turns wry. "I think you know the answer to that."

"Just for a couple of hours, or for the entire night?" I ask.

"The latter."

"Uh, how are you planning to have *that* work out?" Travis says doubtfully. "If you're still trying to keep this off Alex's radar, isn't having a sleepover kind of counterproductive? I mean, Al's kinda stupid, but nobody's *that* stupid."

"I've reserved a room at a hotel in town. We'll be spending the night there, not at the apartment," Jamie says with a shrug. "It's the same thing I did when Alexander and I were trying to keep our interludes quiet. Though, I must admit, I'm getting much more entertainment out of terrorizing Ben and his modest sensibilities than I ever did with Alex."

I leer. "If memory serves me correctly, Ben isn't too big on modesty anyway."

"I meant financially," Jamie says. "I told him I'd be happy to have the hotel send over a car service to pick him up from work tomorrow evening, and when he refused, I told him that was alright, and to simply leave his car with the valet. I've also suggested that he bring a change of clothes, so that he might '*dress for dinner*.'"

"He's going to smack the hell out of you when he sees you," Travis warns, and Jamie flashes his bright white smile.

"Well, I certainly hope so."

"Uh," says our waitress, appearing at Jamie's elbow and causing him to dart a slightly guilty glance towards her. "Is there anything else I can get for you guys? Some dessert, maybe?"

I practically dive for the dessert card in the middle of the table. "Yeah, absolutely." I scan the menu, while Travis orders a milkshake and Jamie refuses anything. I point to the menu. "Alright, see this chocolate-coconut-caramel cake thing? I want that. Except, see this apple pie you've got here? I want that, too. So, if you just like, put one on top of the other and kinda smush them down a little bit—"

"Are you serious?" Jamie demands. "That is truly revolting. I will never speak to you again if you actually eat that."

"No, you know what? Make it like a sandwich. A slice of the coconut thing—" I hold one hand up flat, then flatten my other hand on top of it, "—and then the apple pie—" I move my bottom hand to the top, "—and then a second slice of the coconut thing."

The waitress blinks. "Wait, are you serious?"

"Completely. Don't worry, I'll tip you really, *really* well to make up for how gross this is," I promise. The waitress shrugs and wanders away. I look back at my friends, both of whom are looking somewhat sick. I adopt my most innocent, helpless expression. "Come on, guys, I need to eat as much as I possibly can. Declan has been making me run that stupid fuckin' obstacle course over and over. I've lost like, three pounds in the last week from all the cardio."

"Cardio, right. Is that the euphemism we're using for the fact that you guys have barely left the bedroom for the past week?" Travis mutters.

I open my mouth to tell him that it's none of his business who I've got in my bedroom, but before I can get a word out, Jamie snaps his fingers right in front of my face, then in front of Travis', like we're a pair of naughty puppies who've just been caught peeing on the carpet.

"None of that, children," he says. "I don't want to listen to the two of you bicker."

"*Fine*, let's go back to talking about you," I snap.

"*Fine*, let's, I'm utterly fascinating, I can't wait to talk about myself," he snaps back.

"*Fine*, how 'bout you tell me why you haven't asked Ben to be your boyfriend?" I say, and that pretty much shuts him up. Our waitress reappears to deliver the dessert, and I only stop smirking at Jamie so that I can take a huge bite of my coconut-chocolate-caramel-apple cake-pie-sandwich.

It's a long time before Jamie finally recovers enough to say, very haughtily, "Because I don't want to."

I take another bite and stare at him. Travis slurps his milkshake and stares at him, too. Jamie's bravado dims, and he reaches for the sugar packets again. "Because *he* doesn't want to."

"Don't be ridiculous," I say immediately. "You're smart, you're hot, and you've the biggest dick I've ever seen on someone who wasn't an honest-to-god porn star. He'd be stupid not to want to date you. Besides, if you're worried that he'd reject you because you didn't get along well from the start, keep in mind that he and Travis couldn't stand each other when they first met, and they dated for four months. Granted, you're doing things in a different order than they did, but all the ass-fucking can only work in your favor here. You just have to ask him."

Jamie rounds on Travis and demands, "How did you do it?"

Travis freezes in the act of sucking down his milkshake through his straw. His cheeks are hollowed and his eyes are wide, and for a minute, he looks so cute that it's hard for me to remember how fucking annoying he's being today. All I want to do is reach over and drag him closer. He glances at me, then back to Jamie, then sits up straight. "How did I do what?"

"How did you get him to be your... boyfriend?" Jamie says the word like it doesn't fit safely in his mouth, but I can't figure out why; he's been *dozens* of people's boyfriend before. The label has never made him look so anxious before. He makes a vague gesture. "That is, officially. How did you make it *real*?"

"Well, if I'm being honest, I kind of just... um."

"You kind of just *what*, Travis?" Jamie prompts, rolling his eyes.

Travis winces. "I think I just told him I hated him, and then made out with him?"

I snort. "And he said he'd be your boyfriend?"

"No, then he ran away," Travis admits.

"But I've already done all that," Jamie says indignantly. "I've done those exact things, in that exact order. Repeatedly. There must be something else I'm supposed to be doing."

"I mean, the opposite of that would probably be a good start," I suggest. "Maybe you could tell him you like him, and he could *not* run away from you. I think that's closer to how relationships are supposed to go."

"Oh, did your straight boyfriend teach you that?" Travis snipes, but when Jamie turns a glower on him, he hastily adds, "After he ran away, though, I went to his house and told him all the things I like about him. Pretty sure that's why he agreed. If you just sit him down and tell him you'd like things between you two to be serious enough for exclusivity, he'll appreciate your honesty. And he'll say yes."

I scoop up one of the last bites of my cake-pie-sandwich, but before I pop it in my mouth, I add, "You should do it after you guys bang, just to be sure he's in the right mood. And make sure it's good—maybe do that thing he likes, where you edge him for nearly an hour so that when you finally let him get off, he comes so hard he cries."

"He cries," Travis repeats blankly.

"I'm not talking about like, gross sobbing or anything. Just a couple tears and some mild hyperventilation. He's crazy into it." I glance up, but Travis is still just staring. I swallow my bite of cake. "What, you never did that with him?"

Travis purses his lips slightly and says, “No, I didn’t. So, thank you for helping me add *that* to my ever-growing list of sexual insecurities.”

“You shouldn’t be insecure,” I say without thinking. “You’re phenomenal in bed.”

He goes red and ducks his face to try to hide it, and I find myself echoing the movement—not because I’m embarrassed to be talking about my sex life, but because god, when am I going to stop saying shit like this to him when I know it’s not going to bring him any closer?

Oblivious to the fact that I’m now stewing in a pool of my own self-loathing, Jamie sighs, releases his stranglehold on the sugar packets, and concedes, “I’ll speak with him this weekend. But if he laughs at me and says no, I will murder both of y’all.”

He still looks nervous and uncomfortable, but he doesn’t have any reason to be; as far as I know, I’m the only one in the group who regularly finds himself getting rejected by the guys he likes.

220 days sober

“You’d better have a fucking *ace* reason for having me meet you here!” I’m only a few feet away from Declan, but I have to shout to be heard over the sound of our combined car stereos. Both of us are playing local radio stations; I’m tuned in to alternative, he’s blasting country, and it hurts my soul that New York even *has* a country station.

He cups a hand around his ear to signal that he still can’t hear a damn word I’m saying. I cut my car engine and tumble out of the car into the clearing, both hands clutching an extra-large cup of coffee and espresso. The coffee helps with the pain of having been summoned here before noon--*worst spring break schedule ever*—but my sunglasses barely do anything to block out the early morning light. “There’s absolutely no reason for us to be in the *woods* right now. I’m from Cleveland, dude, I don’t like being in the woods. I get that you’re from the fucking Cornholer State—”

“It’s the Corn*husker* State, you dickhead. ‘Corn husking’ is what it’s called when you remove the outer husk from an ear of corn. ‘Cornholing’ is anal sex. At this point, I’m sure I’ve got enough practical experience in both to know the difference,” Declan says. He sits up in the bed of his truck—not enough to be fully upright, just enough to prop himself up on his elbows. “And if you keep complaining, I won’t give you the present I got you.”

I tip my chin down so that my sunglasses slide down the bridge of my nose enough for him to see the spark of delight in my eyes. “You got me a present?”

“I did. And if you come over here, I’ll actually give it to you,” he says. I practically hop over to him, slopping hot coffee all over my hand as I do so, but the pain barely registers. I *love* presents. I clamber up into the truck bed with him, and he points towards the other end of it, right up near the cab. The locked case for his Smith & Wesson is sitting up, balanced carefully against the front of the bed. Right next to it, there is a second, identical case.

A wide smile spreads over my face almost as quickly as the warmth spreads through my stomach. “Really?”

“Said I’d get you one, didn’t I?” he says. He rolls onto his knees and shuffles over the truck bed so that he can hand me the case. “It’s not locked right now, you can set the combination to whatever you want. Go on. Open it.”

I pop open the latches and flip the top back. It’s a SW1911, not a 5906 like his, but it’s still fucking gorgeous. The barrel is practically gleaming, and when I remove it from the case, it feels perfectly weighted in my hand. After the guitar Jamie bought me for my birthday a few weeks ago, the bar for

present perfection is set pretty high, but this pistol provides some heavy competition. I place it back in its case, set it aside, and press Declan down onto the truck bed to show my appreciation.

We spend the entire day out in the clearing together, alternating between firing at apples and cans that we've lined up on a table on the far side of the clearing, and fooling around in the truck bed. I put a stop to that country nonsense as soon as possible, but since I'm not a fan of silence, Declan and I end up arguing over what we can turn on that won't cause one of us to shoot the other. Eventually, we go right back to Johnny Cash. It's kind of brilliant, and when I loudly sing along, "*always be a good boy, don't ever play with guns,*" Declan rolls his eyes, but fights a smile anyway. When he aims, his focus is so sharp and laser-like, you'd think there was a sniper scope behind his eyes. It feels wrong to interrupt, so I wait until he's between shots to say, "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure," he says, "but I reserve the right to ignore you, if you ask something I don't feel like answering."

"What's the deal with West Point?" I ask. "I mean, why do you wanna go there and become an officer with a—what is it? Seven year commitment, minimum?"

"Eight," he says, firing off a shot that hits the last remaining can. "Five years active duty, three years reserve. But if I go for twenty years active duty, I could be retired at forty-one. And I'd probably be a lieutenant colonel by then."

"Or you'd be all sorts of dead," I say flatly. "You think you can tool around war zones for twenty years and not get your head blown off?"

He snorts. "You give this same lecture to Goldwyn?"

"Every chance I get," I say. "And I'll tell you what I tell him—if you're so fuckin' set on the military thing, you should just enlist right out of Patton and do four years. Don't re-up, don't become an officer, don't lock yourself into a career that's just gonna get your legs blown off. Or give you PTSD. Did you know the suicide rate of returning Army soldiers is higher than any of the other branches?"

Declan removes the empty magazine from his pistol, flicks the safety on, sets it down in its case, and turns to face me fully so that I don't miss the cheeky smile he gives me. "They make prosthetic limbs for a reason, Anderson. And there's treatment for PTSD."

"Says the guy who's never had it," I snap, and his face goes blank. I don't care—I'm too wound up to know how to stop myself from talking. "You think you sit down for forty-five minutes, your shrink snaps her fingers, and it all goes away? The panic attacks, the nightmares, the flashbacks that are so fucking real that sometimes, you can't even remember where you are or what day it is or if that pain you feel is happening to you right now? You think that's easy to deal with? Because it's not. And if you think I'm bullshitting you, then you're an idiot, and you deserve whatever demons come to live in your head when you get out."

Declan's eyes hold mine for nearly a minute before they slowly pan down my body, then back up to my face. "Your hand is shaking."

"No, it's not," I say immediately, even though it probably is. I don't know; I can't feel it.

Declan slowly raises both of his hands to show me his palms, then reaches for me. "Yes, it is. It's also holding a firearm, so I'm going to take this—" I let him pry the gun from my grip, "—and we're going to disarm it—" He ejects the magazine, puts the safety on, and sets it aside, "—and you're going to listen to me."

I nod dumbly. "Yeah. Okay."

He fists his hands around the hem of my t-shirt and presses his knuckles against my stomach to back me

up against the side of his truck. Once he's satisfied that I'm not going to push him away, he releases my shirt and braces his hands against the truck on either side of me.

"I want to go to West Point and become a soldier for the same reason you want to blow off college and become a go-go boy," he says. "Because we're fucked up. You and me, we like the same things—sex, drugs, fights, guns, liquor. Not much else. The difference is that you can *afford*—" One of his hands comes off the truck long enough to palm my wallet through my back pocket, "—to fuck up. You have wealthy, attentive parents who will love and support you, no matter how hard or far you fall. You have a best friend who I saw shoot a drug dealer in the leg just because he messed with you when you were fifteen years old. For fuck's sake, Anderson, you have someone who has such insane amounts of love for you, he needs to be your roommate, your boyfriend, and your sibling all at once in order to feel like he's giving you enough attention."

Oh, I'm sure Travis would be thrilled to hear that description of him.

"And you know what I have? I have a birth mom who put me on a Greyhound bus to go live in another state when I was in second grade because she wanted to be able to party with her friends. I have a father who only ever bought me one thing: a step-stool so that I could reach the stove, because he couldn't be bothered to cook dinner for his seven-year-old son during the whole month it took before he was bored enough to send me to foster care. I have grandparents who sat me down over the summer to tell me that they hope I get married before my first deployment, because they're worried that the military won't cover funeral costs if I'm killed in combat, and they don't want to have to deal with it. I have nothing, okay? And I sure as hell don't have your room for error. If I get arrested, no one will bail me out of jail. If I get addicted to drugs, no one will drag me to rehab."

A year ago, I probably would've considered him lucky for that. Right now, I just can't believe that he has managed to say all of this without his expression wavering even once. Like he's reading my thoughts, he finally lets one side of his mouth curl into a dry, blank smile. "It doesn't really matter," he says. "I'm used to being on my own, and for the most part, I prefer it. But I need West Point. I need the Army, I need something that's going to *matter*, because if I don't have that, I'm going to end up back in Nebraska. I'll go back to working construction under the table, like I did before, and I'll probably knock up some girls I don't care about, have some *kids* I can't really support, and then those kids'll end up in the system once I inevitably become a junkie, because Christ knows I wouldn't be able to stand living that life without a lot of chemical assistance." He reaches up to cradle my neck in his hands, his thumbs digging into the hinge of my jaw. "I bet you hate the idea of growing up to be just like your parents. Well... so do I."

"I didn't know your parents were junkies," I say.

He shrugs. "My father was when I lived with him, but I haven't heard from him in ten years, so I don't know if he's sober or the same as he was. My mother's parents are the ones who adopted me—I haven't seen her since I was maybe ten years old, but they still talk to her, and as I understand it, she parties and parties until she gets a DUI, and then she goes to meetings for a few weeks so she can stay out of jail." He presses his fingers harder into my jaw until my lips part and he can draw me into a long, deep kiss. When he releases me, he gives me a bright, fake smile and pats me on the cheek hard enough that it feels more mocking than affectionate. "And anyway, don't act so surprised. There's a *lot* you don't know about me."

We're out of targets to shoot, and the guns have been put away, so there isn't much else for me to do besides drag him up to the cab so we can fuck around one last time before I head out to meet Stohler before my audition. The easiest way to get this done without us falling off the bench is for him to ride me in the passenger's seat, but that means that I'm stuck in place, unable to look at anything but him and his unbelievably attractive face.

"I don't know why you think that's a good thing," I blurt out halfway through.

"What are you talking about?" he pants.

"I don't know why you think it's good that I don't know things about you. That nobody knows anything about you. I don't get why you like being alone," I say. "You say you don't have anything except for West Point, and I get that, I don't have much going for me either. But I've got people. Jamie and Ben and Stohler and T-*Travis*—" Declan circles his hips at exactly the wrong moment to have me groaning out the last name. He snorts, like he expected as much. I grab the back of his neck and haul him in close so that I can kiss him, so that I can say, "I love my friends, and they love me, and *that's* what I have. And it doesn't even require getting shot at. You could have that, too, if you weren't such an antisocial little cun—"

I'd finish the word, but Declan shoves three of his fingers into my mouth and groans, "Stop trying to talk to me about my feelings, Anderson, I don't *have* any." He slips his fingers back out after a minute, but before I can start talking again, he reaches over to crank up the stereo again, drowning me out with the only music we can agree on.

It's still all I can think about later, when I'm back out the house and packing my backpack for my audition. Stohler is lounging on my bed, pointing at things from across the room—the tiny pair of black shorts I'm planning to start in, a few other options because apparently costume changes are standard, a printed copy of my application and headshots, some bottles of water so I don't get dehydrated over the course of the night, a small jar of pomade since my buzzcut has finally grown out enough that I can sculpt the shape of it a little.

"Here, you can borrow this, too," Stohler says, pushing a small metal cashbox at me. "Hopefully, you'll be getting a lot of tips. When they get to be too much to keep tucked in your shorts or down your boot, you run to the dressing room and lock 'em up in this, then put that in your locker with a—"

"—combo lock, yeah, the guy who called me about the audition said to bring one," I say.

"Make sure you *never* leave your locker open, understand?" she says, aiming a finger at me. Her glittery gold nails have been filed into long points, like disco claws.

"Understand," I say, staring at her nails. "Is there anything else I'm supposed to bring?"

She rolls off the bed onto her bare feet and reaches for her purse, a monstrous black bag covered in pink and blue glittery lightning bolts. She fishes around in it and eventually surfaces with a pair of skinny jeans that have been absolutely shredded to shit. "I got these for you," she grumbles, looking very uncomfortable with the concept of giving someone a present. "When you first go out, you might be... uncomfortable. If you're supposed to be dancing from ten o'clock on, the club'll be pretty empty at first, and it's easy to feel self-conscious then. Even for someone like you. So, your first outfit should be the black shorts, your boots, and these, with the button open and the zipper halfway down."

"How are they going to stay up if I don't have them zipped?" I ask.

She laughs at me, and I guess that's as much of an answer as she plans to give, because she elbows me out of the way and heads for the door. I *think* I have everything I need, but I'm still feeling more anxious than I'm used to. I dig through my dresser until I find exactly what I need to get me really ready—a black t-shirt that's got a picture of Johnny Cash, flipping the bird to the camera. I put it on, throw my own reflection the finger just for fun, and chase after Stohler.

She drives us to the city in her Mustang and spends the entire drive trying to give me advice for how to get more tips from the customers, interspersed with promises that she will do everything in her power to sabotage my competition. It's both alarming and sweet. Rush is easy to find, once we get to the city, but it's not easy to get into, apparently. There are at least three bouncers at the door, and they all eye me warily as Stohler swerves up to the curb, says, "I'll be back here by ten thirty, get the fuck out of my car," shoves me out, and zooms off. I straighten up to my full height; the bouncers are unimpressed.

"Hey," I say slowly, "I'm Garen Anderson, I'm supposed to be auditioning for a job here tonight?"

“Auditions for bartending jobs happen on Sunday nights,” one of the bouncers grunts at me.

“It’s for a dancing job, not a bartending one,” I say. The three bouncers—two dudes and one giant lesbian—all look down at all two hundred pounds of me. I look down at myself, too. When I look back up, one of them is eying my lip ring. I shrug and say, in an exaggerated, campy lisp, “You’d never guess it, but I look great in a thong.”

There’s a collective snort, and once they’ve checked my ID—my real one, though I still have no idea why I can *work* in a club at nineteen, but not *be* in a club—I’m allowed inside. The first thing I notice upon walking in the doors is that there are a lot more than the thirty people I’d been told to expect. There are closer to fifty, guys and girls alike, and I hope to god that means there are more than six jobs available, or I’m screwed.

A tan-skinned boy with artfully highlighted hair hurries over to me and brushes a hand against my elbow. “Hey, you’re Garen, right? Your friend, Javi showed me a picture of you so I’d know who to look for. I’m friends with his girl, Vanessa?”

“Paul, right? Thanks for that, man, it’s good to meet you,” I say, shaking his hand.

“You, too.” Paul glances around and says in an undertone, “I’ll do everything I can to help you out, but I’m supposed to be impartial, and I don’t wanna get in trouble with the bosses. For now, just line up with the others and try to stay cool. The owners are going to go through the line and pick everyone apart. Anyone who doesn’t measure up—usually people who used a lot of Photoshop on their headshots—gets torn into and sent home now. You’ll be fine, you’re really hot, so I’ll meet up with you in the dressing room and give you some tips after that, okay?”

I nod. He smiles reassuringly and scoots off to rejoin a girl in jeans and a neon yellow bra top. I join the long line of other auditioners, drop my bag at my feet, and shove my hands into my pockets, trying to resist the urge to size anyone else up. It doesn’t matter, I tell myself. I have a hot body and a cute face. I know how to dance. I’ve got Paul giving me a recommendation, and I’ve got Stohler ready to infiltrate the crowd and help me out however she can. I can do this. I can.

But I don’t feel like I can, not when a voice booms out ten minutes later, “Oh my *god*, I can’t believe some of you made it in the door.”

My eyes snap to the door. Three men have just sauntered in together, eying us all up like they’re picking items out of a buffet. One of them looks like he might’ve been cute back in the day, but he’s at least forty now, and not in a DILF way. The other two both look to be in their thirties, total opposites; one is tall and thin, with teeth that have been bleached too many times and skin that is practically gold with self-tanner, and the other is average height, fat, and has put way too much effort into waxing his eyebrows. All three of the men are holding man-purses; I have to chew on my tongue to stop myself from laughing.

The fat one waves his hand to get our attention, but he pretty much had it from the moment he shouted. Now, he says, “Listen up, bitches. I’m Jonathan, this is Mikael.” The spray-tanned one waves, looking way too bored for a dude who’s got fifty hotties in front of him. “We own this club. This here is Ken, some of you probably spoke to him about your auditions. He’s our talent manager.”

The old guy beams at us, swiping his gaze down the line to make eye contact with each of us individually. When he gets to me, I wink. Can’t hurt, right?

“Here’s how it’s going to go,” Jonathan says. “Some of you? Are so fucking ugly, I’m not sure why you even bothered to show up. Some of you are so fat, I don’t even want to see you take your shirts off. So, we’re going to start off by kicking the uglies out, and then the rest of you can go get changed, and some of our dancers—” he snaps his fingers at Paul and the girl in yellow, “—will talk you through the rest of the night. Then, you have six hours to impress us.” He claps his hands together and yells, “Do you

understand?”

Most people just murmur some sort of agreement, but all these years at Patton have *yes sir* tumbling out of my mouth before I can think otherwise. The girl next to me gives me a strange look, but I keep my attention on the owners, who are already starting at the end of the line closer to me.

They're more vicious with their criticism than Jamie and I have ever been, even at our drunkest and bitchiest. Of the first ten people they move through, six are sent home, three of them in tears. The other four are pointed upstairs. I'm next in line, and the last thing I see before they get to me is Paul holding one finger to his lips in a very clear *don't say a word* gesture. Oh, god, if I'd known I was supposed to stay silent, I would've stayed home.

“This one's not bad,” Mikael says, his eyes skating approvingly over my face. “His eyes are pretty. Let's see a smile, I don't want any boys with busted teeth.” I flash him my brightest grin, and he hums. “Nice. Jonathan, what do you think?”

Jonathan hums right back, but his is a lot more critical than pleased. “I don't like the buzzcut.”

There's no fucking way I'm losing a job over a haircut I got on a whim, so I lie, “I had to get it because I'm a student at a military academy. I can grow it out after graduation next month.”

“Military school?” Ken echoes. “You're eighteen, though, right?”

“Nineteen,” I correct.

But it's Mikael who asks the truly important question. “Can you do a one-handed push-up?”

Without saying a word, I shrug off my jacket, drop to the ground, and do six one-handed push-ups right in a row. I jump right back up, give him a big, cheesy smile, and shove my hands back in my pockets. He smiles. “What's your name?”

“Garen,” I say, and Jonathan's sculpted eyebrows arch higher towards his receding hairline.

“Karen?” he says.

“Garen,” I say, maybe louder than necessary. “With a ‘g’, like in ‘go fuck yourself.’”

Jonathan's face mangles itself into a pinched, pissy expression. “Right. Garen. Weird name, I'm not sure the patrons will like it. That'll have to change, if you end up working here, which seems a little... doubtful.” His eyes flicker over me, and he says to Mikael, “Really *thick*, isn't he?”

He's gotta be fucking kidding—he's talking like I'm not standing right here. More to the point, I don't really speak “bitchy queen,” but I'm pretty sure he's calling me *fat*. Mikael raises his eyebrows right back. It's plain that he disagrees with the assessment, but doesn't seem inclined to start a bitchfight with his partner. I didn't expect anyone to defend me, but I don't expect to let them insult me, either.

I hook both thumbs under the hem of my shirt and hike it up to my collarbone so that everyone can see just how good my body is. One of the girls further down the line whistles; Mikael presses his lips together on a smile and looks away. I step closer to Jonathan, bare my teeth, and say right in his face, “Listen, sweetheart. There's only one part of me that's *really thick*, and you haven't seen it. So, let me go get into my audition outfit, or send me home, but either way? Quit wasting my time with your blatantly bullshit insults.”

Jonathan's lips are still pursed, but he hasn't bitch-slapped me, so that's a good sign, at least. I let my shirt drop again. Jonathan's eyes flicker down to it. A minute goes by, and he taps his finger against the face silkscreened on it. “That's what we're going to call you. Not *Garen*.”

"What, Johnny?" I say, plucking at the shirt.

Jonathan waves me off and moves on, pausing only long enough to say over his shoulder, "No. Cash. Now go get into your costume, I'm bored of you."

"You're *bored* of—"

"Conversation's over, Cash, go get ready!"

I scoop up my backpack and stride towards the stairs that all the other dancers have gone up. Halfway to the second floor, Paul catches up to me and hisses, "You need to be more careful."

"He needs to be less of an asshole," I say shortly.

"No, he really doesn't—he's the owner, and this is New York City. If you won't accept his attitude with a smile on your face, he can find someone else who will," Paul says. "Get changed and keep your mouth shut, okay?"

I resist the temptation to point out that I do some of my best work with my mouth open, because I doubt the comment would be appreciated. Instead, I claim one of the empty lockers and—because people are still being selected and dismissed right now—I send a few texts.

To Stohler, *have to impress club owners: fat guy w/ creepy eyebrows & skinny guy w/ bad fake tan. u'll recognize them, theyre mad old & bitchy looking.*

To Travis, *possible new boss called me fat & changed my name bc he thinks "garen" is dumb. stop the ride, i wanna get off. can i come visit u @ work after they reject me @ 5am?*

To Declan, a picture of my t-shirt and the message, *1 of the owners refuses 2 call me anything but Cash. the other made me do 1handed pushups. who said my time @ patton hasnt trained me 4 the real world?*

And then, as an afterthought, I text Jamie, *BEN GETS OFF WORK @ 10, IF U PUSSY OUT ON ASKING HIM TO BE YOUR BF, I WILL BREAK INTO UR APARTMENT & COVER UR CAT IN GLUE.* By the time I change into the outfit Stohler chose for me, Jamie has responded, *You will do no such thing. The little beast is spending the weekend at a "cat spa" while I am out of town. Because apparently, that is a real thing.* A few seconds after that, he sends, *I'll ask him. Probably. Maybe.*

I roll my eyes, but there's no time to reply, because everyone is being herded out of the dressing room. I lock up my belongings, take a deep breath, and follow. A few of the other auditioners are as dressed as I am, jeans on the guys, some shorts and cut-off t-shirts on the girls; most of the dancers, however, are already in their skimpiest outfits. A few are sent right back upstairs to change.

"No," says Ken, the only one of the bosses who has remained to watch this part of the process. "I'm sorry, everyone, but this isn't a strip club. If you're in a thong, go back upstairs and put something more substantial on. If you don't have something more substantial, get dressed and leave."

One guy and two of the girls actually *do* leave at that. We've been narrowed down to maybe twenty-five people at the most. No one but me seems fazed by this. Those of us who remain are guided into the very center of the dance floor. The club doesn't open for another forty minutes, but the main lights are already dimmed, the colored lights are on, and the DJ is spinning. My pulse flutters in my wrists and throat, and I grit my teeth so no one will guess.

Paul wanders out to meet us, bringing the girl in yellow with him. He has stripped down to little white shorts, and she has lost her pants, leaving her in just a pair of tiny yellow underwear.

"Alright, Marissa and I are going to give you a little crash course in being a Rush dancer," he announces, clapping his hands together. "Rule number one? Everything is your fault. A patron gets mad at you, that's your fault. A patron spills their drink on you, that's your fault. A patron *throws* their drink *at* you—"

"That's our fault?" the girl next to me guesses. I snort. Some guy throws a drink in my face, and he's going to be swallowing his own teeth.

Marissa waggles a finger at the girl next to me. "Nope. Anyone throws anything at you, hits you, or tries to fight you, one of our bouncers will throw them out. We want all our dancers to be safe here."

"Which leads us to rule number two," Paul continues. "There's still only so much our staff can do to keep you safe if you're going to be a dumbass. So, don't rawdog the customers, don't take candy from strangers, blah blah blah."

"Rule number three, don't get sloppy," Marissa says. "Come to work sober, or don't bother showing up. If you come wandering in, totally strung out, you will be sent home. We don't need to get shut down 'cause one of our own dancers overdoses in the dressing room. There's an open bar for all employees, and you should feel free to take advantage of it, but if you're falling down or throwing up, you're gonna get fired."

She says this with a gesture towards the bar, where something catches my eye. One of the bartenders seems to be doing a headcount of us all, and the other is lining up shot glass after shot glass, down the length of the bar. The first says something, and the second nods. Once there are enough glasses for everyone, each of the bartenders grabs one of the bottles of tequila and upends them, pouring straight down the line of glasses and meeting in the middle.

Tequila, salt, lime, my mouth waters, and I *want*.

I try to focus on Marissa, who is now saying, "Rule number four—and this is where I'm sure we're going to confuse at least a few of you little sluts—this isn't a brothel, and you cannot accept money for sex here. We'll have to shut down *again*, and nobody has the time to deal with that. Don't bring patrons into the bathrooms or the dressing rooms or the VIP lounge so that you can fuck them. They could be undercover cops, and there are laws about what we can and can't allow, even when you're getting tipped for dancing."

"A demonstration," Paul announces, plucking a dollar from the bar surface and flapping it around. "This?" He hooks his finger over the top of Marissa's underwear and pulls them off her skin enough to slip the dollar down the front. "Is illegal. And it will get you fired. Customers cannot put their hands on, around, or in any of your naughty places. Ladies, they cannot touch your titties or your pussy or your ass. Boys, they cannot touch your dick or your balls or your ass. A little pinch or a smack or something is fine, but if they linger, you're breaking state law. It's your job to make sure that doesn't happen."

Marissa waves dismissively. "It's simple enough. Someone goes to tip you inappropriately, and you turn out of it, like this—" Paul dips a shameless hand into her underwear to retrieve the dollar, then goes to repeat the move. Marissa twists her hips so that the dollar ends up tucked over the side near her hip. "See? Simple. Make the customer happy, but not too happy. If you make trouble for us, you'll be thrown out on your ass like *that*." She snaps her fingers.

"You'll be dancing from ten to four, and you'll get a ten minute break each hour, but that's not a fuck-off break. You have one minute to go up to your locker, stash all your money for safe-keeping—"

"—only if you brought a lock, like you were told to, because it is so not our problem if someone else steals your cash—"

"—right, so you empty your money, you freshen up, and you get your ass back down here. You can have a drink, but you *do not* sit down, and you *must* socialize. Mingle with the patrons, flirt a little, make sure everyone's happy. We've been advertising this as an audition night, and Jonathan, Mikael, and Ken will

be asking some of the regulars which of you they like, so I'd suggest being very sweet and making sure you introduce yourself."

"And if Jonathan gave you a new name, you'd better use that one, because god knows nobody cares about your real one," Marissa adds, and I scowl. *Cash*, for fuck's sake. How am I supposed to get anyone to actually tip me if I sound greedy enough to call myself *Cash*?

"At the end of the night, once we've kicked everyone out, you can change back into your street clothes and get all ratchet-lookin' again. Then, you count up all your tips and report that number to Laura, for check-in. You get to keep it all, but the bosses like to know how much you're really worth. After that, hang around for a bit while they decide who stays and who goes."

"If you don't get hired this time, you can try again in the future, but don't freak out and embarrass yourself. Our bouncers *will* throw you out, and they *will* remember your face so that they can refuse you entry in the future." Marissa looks expectantly around at our dazed expressions. "Any questions?"

There is absolute silence. Paul claps his hands again. "Fantastic. Now, let's kick this off right." He gestures towards the bar and the long line of shot glasses that have been lined up. "A toast, to your short and shameless careers as Rush go-gos!"

A second later, someone is pressing a shot glass of tequila into my hand. My stomach is churning. This was such a mistake. Once everyone has a glass, Marissa and Paul hoist theirs into the air and cheer. I raise my glass along with everyone else, but when they shoot down the liquor, I carefully set mine down on the bar in front of the bartender and lean in to quietly tell her, "I don't drink. Whoever wants that can have it, okay?"

"Thank you!" one of the other guys chirps and snatches it out of my hand. He tosses it back, squirms around in distaste, and says, "God, who turns down free tequila shots?"

A recovering alcoholic, maybe? Not exactly something I want to advertise, though, so I smile, shrug, and don't say a word.

After that, Paul and Marissa start assigning us "stations"—places they want us to dance all night. There are platforms and miniature stages and cages all over the place. Marissa touches my arm and starts to guide me towards one of the cages, but Paul stops her and says, "No, let's stick to putting the girls in heels in the cages. I don't want any of them to fall, so they should have something to grab onto. We'll put this guy on the bar. Maybe near Matty's end?"

Marissa snorts. "Good. They never put enough security over there, and this guy's biceps are as big as my waist. Maybe he can scare people into behaving themselves."

Paul puts a hand on my back and steers me towards the bar, muttering in an undertone, "Ken told me we're going to be doing a middle-of-the-night rotation of the dancers. People who are on the bar are going to be moved to the medium-height platform right in front of Cassidy in the DJ booth, and that's where the best tips are. You'll be moving there around twelve thirty, when things are at their peak and people start getting generous with tips."

"Thanks," I say. "Are we really—once everybody's in place, are we supposed to be dancing even when the doors first open and the whole room's practically empty?"

"Yes," he says urgently. "Don't ever stop dancing, seriously."

So, the second those doors open, I shelve my pride and shake my ass.

Stohler's one of the first people in the door. She scans the room and, once her eyes light on me, she makes a bee-line for the bar. She leans over it to give her order to Matty, one of the bartenders, then

straightens up and says loudly enough for me to hear, "Don't stop dancing, don't act like you know me. I saw the owners. Anything else I should be aware of?"

"They gave us the rules," I say quickly. "Everything is our fault, don't sell sex or let the customers grope you, don't get sloppy drunk, mingle with people, never sit down. A ten minute break each hour, a position swap midway through the night, and they don't like my name. I'm supposed to call myself 'Cash' instead, because of my stupid fucking t-shirt. And they gave everybody a shot of tequila already. The kid in the purple shorts took mine."

"I can probably get him drunk enough to get him kicked out. I'll buy him a drink or two as soon as he gets off the stage for his first break, he'll be gone by midnight. The shots were probably a test to see who they can trust not to get sloppy," Stohler says. "And the name's good—they told us outside that it's audition night, said we should feel free to tell them our favorites. Cash is good. Cash is memorable."

Matty delivers her drink, and she smiles, thanks him, waits until he turns to someone else before she continues, "Here's what you have to do: any time someone tips you, you smile at them, dance your way down closer to their height, and say something like, '*thanks, sweetheart, what's your name?*' And when they tell you, you say, '*hi whatever-their-name-is, I'm Cash.*' If you do that with every single person who tips you, a couple of them are bound to remember you and recommend you by name. Practice now."

She picks a dollar out of her pocket and folds it over the waistband of my shorts, right near the hip. Marissa would be so proud. I swivel my way down into something like a kneel on the bar, flash her my brightest smile and say, "Gee, thanks, lady! My name's Cash, can I interest you in some cunnilingus?"

"I will shove you right off this bar and pierce your nutsack with my stilettos," she says, smiling back just as widely. "Now fucking dance. I'm gonna go gank some of your competition."

And I don't... I don't know what I expected, but being a club dancer is fucking exhausting in every conceivable way. I feel like a tool, dancing around on a bar when the club is still half-empty—people are looking at me, but they're not coming closer or giving tips or doing anything that makes me feel like less of a zoo animal. I can see Stohler making the rounds of the room, checking out the other dancers, scoping out the owners and their attitudes, doing recon like she thinks we're at war.

Time passes, and Paul comes over to me, taps the toe of my boot so I'll crouch down to listen as he says, "It's time for your first break. You have ten minutes. Run upstairs and take off the jeans, I think it'll help you get more attention."

I climb down from the bar, and he leans closer to add, "And on your way back to the bar, make sure you stop and mingle with anyone who shows you interest. Smile, chat, make sure they're having a good time, bring them to the bar because drunk people tip better. You need to smile more and make more eye contact, you look like you're going to hit somebody."

"That's just my face," I try to protest, but he's already walking away. Swearing under my breath, I take to the stairs. The dressing room is empty, thank god, so there's nobody for me to embarrass myself in front of when I can barely get the stupid fucking jeans off. If I miraculously manage to get this job, I need to ask Ben for lessons on how to get out of skinny jeans without breaking a leg. I shove my feet back into my boots, adjust my junk so it looks as impressive as possible in the tiny shorts, then pause to check my texts.

There's a stream of them from Jamie, starting with *McCutcheon and I agreed that I'd pick him up from work instead of having him drive to my hotel, I'm leaving now*, progressing to *I'm in the parking lot, do you think he expects me to go inside the shop?*, then kind of spiraling down into *I've just remembered that his father will be in that building as well, and now I'm too frightened to get out of the car*, followed by *he came outside before I could make up my mind, now he's coming over to the car. He rolled his eyes and gave me the finger. Do you think I should drive away before he gets in?*, and ending with *I was in reverse when he opened the door, I think he figured out what I was about to do even though I hadn't taken my foot off*

the brake yet. He kissed me hello anyway. Do you think that's a good sign?

There aren't any messages from him after that, but there is one from Ben that says, I am locking his phone in the glovebox. *You can text him tomorrow, you fucking cockblock.* Neither Declan nor Stohler have bothered to text me back, but Travis has responded, *You're not fat, your name isn't dumb, and you won't get rejected. You're gorgeous, and I love the way you move. You'll get the job. Definitely come to my work after, coffee and breakfast sandwich on me. Good luck.* I text him back a solid three lines of heart emoticons, lock my phone up, and bolt back downstairs.

In the two minutes I've been gone, it seems like the number of people in the club has doubled. From the minute I clear the door to the stairs, I'm finally getting the attention I'd hoped for. I take two steps, and some girl's hand is on my back as she coos to me, "My god, you are so cute!"

"Thank you, honey," I say, flashing dimples at her and her friends. "What's your name?"

"Gianna," she says, beaming back at me.

"Hi, Gianna, I'm Cash. You girls having a good time tonight?" I ask. My face feels like it's stuck this way; being nice is so *hard*, I don't get how people do this every day. Gianna and her three friends all nod and chatter over each other, assuring me that they're having *such a good time*, and I don't know what possesses me to do it, but I say, "Glad to hear it. And if there's anything you need, let me know, alright?"

Their chatter turns high-pitched and joyous, and as I turn to leave, one of them folds a bill into a tiny square, slips down the side of my shorts and winks at me. Huh. That's... interesting. I take another few steps along the perimeter of the room and see Stohler, seated at one of the cocktail tables along the back wall, surrounded by a random gaggle of gays. It's exactly how she looked when I first met her, and when she catches my eye and beckons me over, I join her as easily as I did that night.

"Boys, this is my friend, Cash," she announces. "Tonight's his audition here."

None of the guys are gorgeous, but I give them a slow, sly smile like they're all the hottest things I've ever seen. "Hello there, gentlemen."

"Hi there," one of them purrs back, and another says, "I knew it was your first night, I would've remembered seeing you here before."

"We're regulars," a third man adds, and Stohler cocks an eyebrow at me. So *that's* why she's sitting with them; she must've seen the owners chatting with them during her little recon mission.

"Well, hopefully we'll be seeing each other around here a lot more after tonight," I say, letting my smile turn a little sweeter as I lean over to brace my hands on the edge of their table. "So, is there anything I can do for you guys?"

The one closest to me lets out a very loud, satisfied hum and says, "Well, for starters, you can bend over that table a little bit more and let my friends get a look at that booty on you, good *lawd*."

The fake little smile on my face gives way to genuine, bewildered delight. I've never had someone refer to my ass as "*that booty*," and I've sure as shit never gotten a "*good lawd*" over it. It's bizarrely flattering, so why the fuck not? I drop from my hands to my forearms so that I'm pretty much bent at the waist. "You mean something like that?"

"Look at you," Stohler whoops, louder and showier than she'd ever normally be. She produces another dollar from the pocket of her skinny jeans and pins it under the band of my shorts. She smacks a kiss to my cheek—a terrifying and creepy amount of affection from her—and says, "Earn your keep, baby."

"That's right," one of the others joins in, and before I know it, Stohler's whole collection of homos is

feeding bills into my shorts like I'm a fucking vending machine. Ones and fives and tens, finally a twenty that is delivered along with a slap to my ass.

Dangerous territory—I quickly straighten up and say, “Anything *else* I can do for you guys?”

“Actually, yes,” one guy says. “Can you please see if the VIP area is free? There were some kiddies in there earlier, I have *no* idea who let them in there. But we usually take over that area on Friday nights.”

“Yeah, and we'd like there to be bottle service when we get in there. Talk to Matty at the bar, he knows what we like,” another adds. He slips me some more money, but these bills go into my hand, not my shorts. “For the trouble. I'm Joey, this is Trent. Just mention our names, Matty'll know to add everything to our tab.”

“Sure thing,” I say, smiling again even though what the fuck, I'm here to dance, not run errands. Still, it's worth it for the fact that, when I turn away, I hear one of them say to the others, “He's a sweetie, I hope he sticks around.”

“I was thinking the same,” another says. “Cash, right? We'll have to talk to Mikael about him.”

Perfect. I readjust my collection of bills to make sure I won't be littering money all over the dance floor as I cut across the room to scope out the VIP area. It's empty, save the one security dude at the door. I tap his shoulder, slip him one of the two twenties that Joey handed me, and say, “There's a group of regulars that are going to be getting bottle service in here in a few minutes, said their names are Joey and Trent. If any randoms come over, could you just tell them the area's reserved?”

The security dude nods and tucks the twenty into his pocket. My next stop is the bar, and thankfully, Matty *does* know who Joey and Trent are and agrees to have their service ready for them in five minutes. I've only got another minute left on the world's least break-like break, and I spend it hurrying back across the club to where Stohler and her new “friends” are still sitting. I touch Joey's elbow and say to the group at large, “The VIP room's ready for you guys, and Matty said he'll have your bottle service ready for you in five. I've gotta get back up on the bar, but you guys enjoy the rest of your night.”

The one named Trent kisses me on the cheek, which is probably crossing some sort of boundary, but I don't have time to dwell on it, because my ass needs to be back up on that bar *now*. The night passes in a blur from that point on. It's hour after hour of the same thing—dance on the bar, get put on break, run upstairs to empty my money out into my locker, fix my hair and wipe some of the sweat off myself so I'm not gross, run back downstairs, spit out the same small talk, get back on the bar. The tips start coming in faster and faster as the night wears on, especially when Paul, true to his word, switches everyone around and puts me on the platform in front of the DJ booth. The dancing is physically exhausting, and my muscles are starting to ache; I wish I'd spent the day napping and stretching, not fucking and playing with guns.

Luckily, I'm not the only one who's less than prepared for all of this. During my second break, Paul finds me to inform me that two of the other auditioners have already been sent home for sitting down instead of dancing. During my third break, Stohler tells me that the kid in the purple shorts got so drunk—“off shots that might have been purchased for him by a kind stranger”—that he got kicked out. And during my fifth break, when it's a little after two thirty in the morning and I'm contemplating calling it quits, Stohler tracks me down again before I can even get upstairs. Her lipstick is smeared, and her mouth is bleeding on one side.

“Stohls, what the fuck,” I say, catching her chin between my hands and turning her head so that I can examine her injury.

She waves me off and laughs. “I might have *accidentally* spilled a vodka cranberry on a lovely young gentleman in white briefs, and he bitch-slapped me *in front of the owners*. They had security throw him out immediately, and I get free drinks all night, as long as I promise not to call the cops. I also checked in

with your friend who works here, and he says they're hoping to hire three new guys and three new girls. By my count, there are nineteen people left in the running, including you. Nine girls, ten guys. That's the best I can do without management figuring out I'm helping."

"Thank you, Stohler," I say, meaning it more than I think she knows. I swipe my thumb under her lip to rid her of the lipstick smear, then kiss her forehead. "Go clean off that blood and enjoy as many of those free drinks as you want. I'll take your keys, I can drive us back to my place in the morning."

Now that Stohler has literally shed blood in the name of getting me this job, there's no way I can bow out. Newly reenergized, I dump her keys and my tips in my locker and throw myself right back into the fray. I ride that high through the rest of the shift, through last call, through the lights coming on. Stohler, now more than a little tipsy, finds me just long enough to let me know that she'll be at a diner across the street, grabbing a cup of coffee while I change and find out my results.

"You've got this, kid," she assures me. "Couldn't have done a better job myself."

"Yes, you could've," I say, and she laughs.

It's a relief to see the doors close behind the last of the stragglers. Even after the DJ stops playing, I can hear a phantom thumping in my ears. I retreat to the dressing room with the rest of the remaining dancers so that I can wash the sweat, grime, and inexplicable glitter off my face. My body still feels pretty gross, even after I change into a fresh t-shirt and a pair of sweatpants that say "Patton Military Academy" down one leg. I pack up the rest of my stuff and cart it downstairs so that I can set myself up at one of the cocktail tables and count out my money.

I made out better than I'd expected, but I still don't know if it's enough to impress the owners. I've got more one dollar bills than anything else, a bunch of fives, a handful of tens, and only three twenties. In a move that'd make Jamie's lame, OCD ass proud, I organize all the bills by denomination, same-face them, and stack them in order before I report to Laura, the woman who's supposed to count our money. The bitch is wearing flip-flops and sweatpants, and she looks like she has spent the entire night hanging out in a back room, doing absolutely nothing.

"Hey, hon," she says cheerfully. "You count that up already?"

"Yeah," I say, bouncing a little on the balls of my feet. "It's, uh, three eighty-four? I don't know if that's good, or whatever, but—"

"This your first night?" she says. I nod. She nods right back. "That's great, then. Name?"

"Ga—um. Cash," I amend. If Laura notices the stumble, she doesn't say anything. She puts my money through a bill counter to make sure I'm right, then hands it back. She writes my number on her clipboard, smiles, and waves me off to the section of the floor where the rest of the dancers are lounging, bored and half-asleep, waiting for possible rejection. I'm tired as hell, but I can't afford to show it right now.

It takes another twenty minutes, but finally, Jonathan, Mikael, and Ken all join the fringe of our group. Jonathan announces, "Alright, kids. We've made our decisions, and they are *final*. If you don't make the cut, half some self-respect and get out. If you do, stick around for a few minutes so that Ken make sure your contact info is squared away. We'll be calling you this week to let you know your hours. Mikael, let's get this started."

"You," Mikael says, pointing at one of the girls, then moving quickly through the group and pointing out others. "You, you, you, you, you, you two in the back, and you over there. Stand up." He hasn't pointed to me. Oh, fuck, he hasn't pointed to me. The dancers he *has* pointed to all stand, and he smiles blandly. "Thanks for coming. You can see yourselves out. Don't forget to take your belongings with you." Without pausing to take note of their reactions, he surveys the ten of us who remain—six guys and four girls—then turns to Jonathan. "Your turn."

Jonathan purses his lips and points to two of the boys, then another girl. "You, you and you." His eyes land on me, and his finger twitches. My heart is beating harder than it did through any of the dancing. I have no idea why I want this so badly, but I do. Jonathan's eyes flicker over to the VIP area, then to another of the boys, who he points at. "You. Thanks for trying, have a good night."

I did it. I got the job—my *first* job, ever. I do not have the emotional maturity to hide my enthusiasm, so I draw my legs up to my chest so that I can bury my giant smile against my knees. Luckily, Ken makes the rounds with his own clipboard, so all I have to do is sit there and nod when he rattles off my phone number.

The second I'm free, I book it over to the diner across the street so that I can collect Stohler—who is happy, but unsurprised—and drag her a few blocks uptown to the Starbucks where Travis works. He's working over at the espresso station, not the register, and there's a surprising lull in the number of customers, so I lope right over to him and blurt out, "I got the job."

He sets a large cup of coffee and a breakfast sandwich down on the drink bar front of me, like he's been waiting for me to show up so he could deliver them, then leans over the bar to press his smiling lips to my cheek. "I know."

I frown. "What, did Stohler text you on the way over here?"

"No," he says. "I just believe in you. I knew you'd get it."

It's probably the best coffee I've ever had.

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Bonus Scene

Jamie Goldwyn

Ben sleeps through the alarm at nine o'clock, my shower at nine fifteen, the phone call to room service at nine thirty, and the breakfast delivery at ten. I suspect he would sleep through the rest of the morning and most of the afternoon, if I allowed him to do so. For a long moment, I consider it. He'd miss his shift at the bookstore, but he would also miss my almost certainly doomed attempts to discuss our relationship status. It might even out.

Relationship status. It sounds like something that shouldn't exist outside of an eighth grader's Facebook account, and I find myself wishing he was awake to see the way my lip curls back at the thought. I'm absolutely certain that he is going to laugh in my face the moment I try to bring this up, and I'd hate for him to think that I'm taking this whole thing too seriously.

The alarm clock goes off again, and Ben makes a sound of protest that is so vehement, I worry the guests in the next room over will call the front desk. I say over him, "Sweet mother of God, McCutcheon, you're not being tortured."

"Yes, I am," he groans, shoving his head under the pillow. The movement shakes his torso free of the blanket. His clothes are still scattered across the floor, and he is lying facedown; I can see the full length of the marks I clawed into his back last night... and again in the earliest hours of this morning... and again a few hours after that. My whole body is aching pleasantly from the exertion, but I'm certain that whatever I feel is nothing compared to the scratches on his skin. I switch off the alarm clock and crack back into bed, though I'm freshly showered and fully clothed.

"It's time to wake up," I say. I brush a kiss to his shoulder, at the very top of one of the scratches. Ben doesn't move. I repeat the kiss on the next scratch. "I ordered breakfast sent up, and it's getting cold. You're being very selfish."

"Shut up," he might say. It's a bit difficult to tell with the pillow between us. I nip at his shoulder in warning, but he obviously doesn't understand my intention, because he makes a pleased sort of sigh and releases his grip on the pillow to reach back and bury one hand in my hair, keeping my mouth on him.

Under normal circumstances, I might stay here as long as he'd like, but now that his left arm is in my line of sight, I notice that it looks a bit different from normal. It's as thin and scarred as always, but there's a thin rope of black around it, starting at his wrist and winding around and around his forearm to a point just above the bend of his elbow. I lift my mouth off him long enough to say, "Really, Benjamin? Another tattoo? Surely you've got enough by now."

"No such thing," he says. He gives his wrist a half-hearted tug away from me, but he can't be too bothered by the idea of me examining it, because he allows me to turn his arm this way and that until I can read the entire line of script.

1 Corinthians 10:13 - No trial has come to you but what is human. God is faithful and will not let you be tried beyond your strength; but with the trial He will also provide a way out, so that you may be able to bear it.

The letters are smaller than I would've expected anyone to be able to manage to tattoo without turning the whole thing into a blur. His artist appears to have done her best to position the words so that they don't draw more attention to the scars on him, but it's difficult to cover them completely, especially the one he had stitches for last October.

He peeks out from under the pillow. Moving slowly enough that he could stop me if he truly wanted to, I lean in again and kiss the delicate bones of his wrist, right where the tattoo begins. When he doesn't protest, I drag my lips down the words, muttering against his skin, "You're going to end up covered in

these, aren't you?"

He twists to smile into the pillow. "That's kind of the idea. Most of my paycheck goes right to rent and bills, so if I'm going to spend money on something that's just for me, I might as well spend it on something that I'll get to keep for the rest of my life."

"You mean, something that directly opposes your aspirations of becoming a schoolteacher?" I say. He huffs and rolls over and makes a rude gesture. I can't decide whether to hit him or kiss him, and the closest I can come to doing both is to duck down and sink my teeth into his throat. His breath hitches, and he slips an arm around my shoulders, but I slip out of his grasp and sit up. "Get out of bed, you lazy swine. Once you've gotten ready for work, come eat breakfast with me." I don't think my forced calmness is even remotely convincing, but I do my best to sound casual as I add, "And there's something I'd like to discuss with you, if you have a moment."

Ben sits up and rubs at his eyes a bit, tracking black circles of eyeliner halfway down his face. I refuse to be charmed by this. He says, "Yeah, of course. What's up?"

"Get ready first," I say firmly. There's a strong possibility I'll need to shove him out of the room after this conversation in an attempt to save face, and it's a bit harder to do that if he's naked. He shrugs and tumbles out of bed, getting himself tangled in the sheets and stumbling into the nearest wall. He doesn't even seem to notice; I think he's still almost completely asleep.

When he retreats to the bathroom to shower, I busy myself with checking my messages, but that turns out to be an incredibly bad idea. Garen seems to have spent a solid half hour texting me this morning, alternating between bragging about the fact that he successfully won himself a job at Rush and lecturing me on the proper procedure for initiating a conversation with Ben.

Proper procedure, it would appear, is to 'say that only guys who date you get to cum in your mouth, idc that you dont like the taste, itll be worth it, you can use mouthwash after.' This helpful advice is sprinkled with other, equally horrific comments, including, 'do i have to be best man 4 BOTH of you @ your inevitable wedding or do you think he'll finally tell alex by then?' and 'its a shame you guys have been going bareback since day 1 bc now youll have no way to celebrate being exclusive :(8===D~~~.' Garen is the worst person I have ever had the displeasure of knowing.

Is that meant to be a penis? I text back. More specifically, is that meant to be mine? Because if so, I believe you've done me a great injustice in terms of length.

8=====D~~~, he replies, and I close my eyes, deeply regretting the day that the Patton Military Academy housing coordinators chose to assign Garen and me to the same dorm room. My phone buzzes again, and I sneak a glance at it. *does the fact that youre not calling me in tears mean he said yes???*

Rather than reply, I toss my phone back onto the bed and set about moving the breakfast tray out to the balcony. Once it has been relocated to the small table between the two chairs out there, I take my time rearranging it. Everything is *there*, of course—the pot of tea, the fruit plate, a tiny basket of pastries and baked goods, a handful of individual jam packets, the cutlery and two small plates. It's all there, but it's a bit of a mess.

Since Ben isn't here, I take it upon myself to divide the fruit. One sliver of cantaloupe on each of the two plates. Six blueberries. Three cubes of honeydew melon. Four strawberries pitched over the balcony railing, because I'll end up in the hospital if I eat any of them, and it wouldn't make sense to leave any on his plate if there are none on mine. I'm in the process of pouring us each a cup of tea when the sliding glass door behind me opens and Ben slips outside.

The mess of eyeliner is gone, and his hair is still damp and tousled. He's only wearing his jeans and a t-shirt; his bare arms make him look practically naked, compared to how covered up he usually is. He

accepts the teacup I hand him and says, "Thanks. So, what was it you said you wanted to talk about?"

I gesture to the other seat, and he slides obediently into place. Still, the words won't come to me. I've had days to plan an entire speech for this exact moment, and my mind is completely blank. Ben stares at me. I stare back. Slowly, his eyebrows start to climb upward, and I let my eyes drop to the table. He's waiting, of course, but I have no idea how to ask this. I take a very small, pointed sip of my tea.

Ben clears his throat and says, "Okay, let's try that again, you dumbass. *So, what was it you wanted—*"

"Sleeping with you last November was a mistake," I blurt out. "I never intended for it to happen—I was jealous that the boy I wanted to date was interested in you, not me. And I was jealous that you were spending so much time with my best friend. I only slept with you because I thought it would help me see what all the fuss was about."

Ben is silent. I can't be sure if that's a good sign or a bad one, and I'm too nervous to look at him, so I continue, "My reasoning wasn't much better the second or third time it happened. In the parking lot, I only brought it up in conversation to prove that you didn't return Alexander's affections, and then I suppose I got a bit distracted by those scratches you had on you. Then, on New Year's... well, I assumed it was the last time I'd ever see you, given that I had no reason to return to Connecticut. Garen and Travis had joined me in New York, and I thought it would be fitting to end things on that note."

"Then you probably should have let them end," Ben says, and his tone is so flat that I have to glance up. He's staring at his teacup, but he must be able to feel my attention on him now, because he draws his shoulders up around his ears, like making himself even smaller will make this conversation ghost right over him.

Perfect. Less than two hundred words into the conversation, and I'm already making an absolute mess of it. I set my own tea down on the breakfast tray and reach for his hands. They're folded together on top of his knees, and he seems reluctant to allow me to move them. In the end, I have to settle for wrapping my fingers around his wrists.

"I might have," I say lightly, "if it weren't for the books. Those—you remember the books, I would assume? That's an idiotic question, of course you remember." He's squinting at me now, like he can't figure out where the hell I'm trying to take this conversation. I can't seem to let go of his wrists. I swallow. "For two and a half months, you sent me a steady supply of books, and every time I cracked the spine on one of them, all I wondered about was *your* opinion on them. I wanted desperately to know why you'd chosen those books, what you'd liked about them, what you thought I would like about them. I wanted to... talk to you. Every time I finished one of the books, I had to stop myself from calling you up just to talk about them."

"You could've called," Ben says. He blinks down at my hands and turns his wrists so that, as he withdraws, his palms drag slowly under mine. He lingers like that for a moment, my hands on his like we're playing some sort of children's clapping game. Finally, he pulls the rest of the way out of reach and picks up his teacup, cradling it in both hands but not moving to take a sip. He repeats, "You could've called. It's not like I would've hung up on you."

I laugh. "Yes, you would have. If you'd bothered to answer at all."

His mouth quirks into a wry, conceding smile.

That smile is all I need to make me brave enough to clear my throat and say, "The books made me want to be your friend. The five-hour conversation we had about them that night on Garen and Travis' living room sofa made me want to date you. And the... the way that you treated me after my parents—"

The moment Ben realizes where this sentence is going, he sets his teacup down and drags his chair closer to mine so that he can tangle our fingers together. One of his ankles is hooked over mine, and I

think I might be able to get my words back, but not enough to say that next word.

"It's okay," Ben says quietly. "You don't have to talk about it, if you don't want to. I mean, if you're just trying to thank me for that, there really isn't any need. I don't expect—"

"I'm not just trying to thank you," I interrupt, and his mouth snaps shut again so he can wait for me to continue. However annoying I've found him in the past, he's nothing if not a fantastic listener. My heart's beating in my throat, and I try so hard to swallow it. "Three weeks ago, after I'd just come back from Georgia, I spent the afternoon with you, and you took me apart in your bed. I was supposed to be mourning my parents, and for a solid half hour, all I could think about was the perfection of your tongue. I was devastated by my own selfishness, inconsolable over what I'd lost, and humiliated that you were seeing me cry. And you didn't even blink. You crawled up onto my lap, you put your arms around me, and I found more solace in that moment than I ever thought I could take in another person."

I wish that he could know what I'm trying to say without me having to say the words. I wish he'd let go of my hands, because I don't want to feel him pull away if his answer is no. He hasn't tried to move away yet, though. I take a steadying breath and say, as calmly as I can, "The books made me want to be your friend, the conversation made me want to take you to dinner, and that afternoon in your apartment made me want to take things between us seriously. I realize that must sound absolutely ridiculous, given that we hadn't even been on a date at that point. We've been sleeping together for a bit over five months now, but only seeing each other for a few weeks. It is very possible that I'm pulling a Garen here and trying to take things much too fast. But I think I'd like to be your boyfriend. In an official, exclusive capacity."

Ben's face is blank. That cannot possibly be a good sign. I contemplate throwing myself off the balcony after those strawberries, but we're only four floors up, so I doubt I'd actually die. The silence stretches on. In the end, all I can do is wince and say, "I shouldn't have brought this up, should I? Or, at the very least, I should have waited longer. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable—"

"Are you making fun of me?" he asks suddenly.

I can feel my forehead wrinkling in confusion. "I beg your pardon?"

Ben very carefully untangles his hands from mine and draws his legs up to his chest, wrapping his arms around them and resting his chin on his knees. "It's fine if you are, I guess. I'm kind of used to that from guys by now. I just don't—I mean, you're joking, right?"

I frown. "Has anyone ever told you that you are absolutely *awful* at letting someone down easily?"

"No, not really, because I've never let anyone down," he says, looking down at his cup of now lukewarm tea. "I've had exactly two guys ask me out before. When Travis did it, he came by my house and said something that basically amounted to '*I like how short you are, also, Garen's not around anymore.*' When Garen did it, he mostly just asked me if we could be '*Facebook official*' after his parents walked in on us having sex. I'm not, uh... I'm not the guy that people make declarations to. I'm the guy who people fool around with while they're waiting for their real lovers to come back to them. And as far as I'm aware, you don't have any stepsiblings. Plus, I'm sure this hasn't escaped your attention, seeing as how you're a total narcissist, but you're sort of... astronomically far out of my league. You're incredibly intelligent, you're the most attractive person I've ever seen in my life, and you usually manage to find about ten minutes out of every day where you decide to be a decent human being. I'd understand, if this conversation were reversed—if I were asking you to be my boyfriend. That'd make sense. But this way, it kind of, uh... doesn't? So I guess I'm just, um... I'm confused."

It's a good thing our chairs are so close together, otherwise I'm sure he'd hit the floor when I grab him by the legs and yank. He nearly hits the floor anyway, but I'm eventually able to get him out of his chair and onto my lap without much incident. I can tell that he's preparing to scold me, but the words never make it past his lips. Or, if they do, I swallow them. It isn't a terribly long kiss, but it's enough to silence him, giving me a chance to cup his face between my hands and say very clearly, "No, what you are is *stupid*. I'm not

in love with a secret stepsibling. I'm not waiting for someone else to come back. I am not interested in anyone other than you, though rest assured, your complete idiocy is definitely making me wish that weren't the case."

"Did it ever occur to you that being a *gigantic asshole* while you're asking someone out is maybe not the way to go?" he huffs, and *there*—there's that spirit he lost for a moment in his own wallowing. There's the boy I want.

"I am not being a gigantic asshole *while* asking you out. I have already *asked* you out. The question is a 'past tense' issue, and my being an asshole is a current one," I say.

"Actually, it seems to me that your need to be an asshole is probably a permanent condition. So, technically, you were an asshole when you asked me out, too," he says.

I wonder if *he* might die, if I tossed him over the railing. He's much smaller, I'm sure the fall would injure his tiny bones more than it would injure mine. It might not even be much of a struggle to heft him over. But then he ducks his head and says, more to my neck than my actual face, "So, can I still say yes, or did the moment pass?"

My heart stutters in my chest. "You can say whatever you'd like."

He makes a little face like he's considering saying something incredibly snide, but he ends up coming out with, "Okay, I'll, um... yes. I'll be your boyfriend. If you meant it."

As much as I want to smile at that, I've already shown more of my hand than I'd like. Instead, I slip my hand up the back of his shirt and trace the scratches from last night until he's shivering against me. It makes him late for work, but I take it upon myself to bring him back to bed and show him exactly how much I meant it.

Chapter Thirty: Part A

**“No trial has come to you but what is human. God is faithful and will not let you be tried beyond your strength; but with the trial He will also provide a way out, so that you may be able to bear it.”
—1 Corinthians 10:13**

221 days sober

“We need to get out of here right now,” Stohler says urgently the second I’ve cleared the doors to the Lakewood Rehabilitation Center. “In the hour you’ve been inside, three different people have come out here to tell me that, if I’m ready to talk, they’re ready to listen.”

“Uh, that’s ‘cause you look hungover as shit, and you’re like, half-passed out in the backseat of a Mustang that’s parked in the lot of a rehab facility,” I say. “Christ, I kind of want to offer you a cup of coffee and a first-day-sober welcome chip.”

She shrugs and rolls around in the seat a little to make herself more comfortable. “I haven’t been sober for an entire day. Jesus, I don’t think I’m sober *now*. And someone already brought me coffee.”

“Yeah?” I say, grinning at her.

She nods. “And a donut. It was good. Can we go?” She hauls herself over the middle of the seats, into the passenger seat, and I take my place in the driver’s seat.

“We still meeting Al for lunch? ‘Cause while we’re here, I kind of want to stop by Ben’s store. Jamie was supposed to ask him if they could make things official last night, and I wanna see if he followed through with it.”

“So? Text one of them and ask, it’s easier. Or we can go see them later this afternoon. But right now, we’re going to go to Al’s apartment, and we’re going to take a nap, and then we’re going to go get pizza with all the singles I convinced creepy ‘mos to tuck under your ballsac last night.”

Before I pull out of the parking lot, I shoot Jamie a text that just says SOOOOO???? But he still hasn’t replied by the time Stohler and I get to the apartment. I want to call him, but Stohler is impatient for sleep. She drags me over to the intercom and hammers the button for Al and Ben’s apartment. After a minute, the speaker crackles, and Alex grunts, “What.”

“Don’t use that ungrateful tone with me, young man,” Stohler warns, and yep, she’s definitely still at least a little bit drunk.

I bump her out of the way with my hip and say, “Let us in, we’re sleepy. We wanna nap in your bed and then take you out for pizza when we wake up.”

Stohler leans around me to coo, “Sleeeeeeeepy strippers,” into the intercom. I elbow her right in the ribs. *She* might be a stripper, but I’m going to cling to that thin boundary between “go-go dancer” and “stripper” until the day I die.

When Alex’s voice comes through again, he’s chuckling. “Uh, my bed’s kind of taken right now, but Ben’s at work, so his is free. C’m on up.”

The door latch clicks open, and Stohls and I tumble over each other through it. The apartment door is unlocked when we get to it, and Alex is definitely not alone in the kitchen. A girl wearing one of his t-shirts and what looks like a pair of his boxers is sitting at the kitchen table. She’s got a cute face, but it’s kind of twisted up right now, making me all too aware of the fact that Stohler and I aren’t exactly smartly dressed. We’re both unshowered and half-awake; she’s still wearing her slinky tank top and stilettos, and I’m still in my Patton sweatpants.

My parents taught me manners, even if I rarely use them. I step forward, smile, and hold my hand out for a shake. "Hi. I'm Garen. This is Stohler."

"Erika," the girl says, taking my hand after a beat. She barely touches me before she withdraws her hand and stands. "I'm going to, uh... go back to bed. Nice meeting you?" It's definitely a question, not a statement. When she gets to the hallway, she rubs her palm against the hem of her t-shirt.

I look around at Alex. "She's made of sweetness and light, huh?"

"What do you expect?" Alex says. "You guys are pretty gross-looking right now. Go sleep for a while, and fuckin' shower when you wake up. I'm going to go, uh—" He gestures after Erika and gives us a little smirk before following her.

"We're not that gross-looking," I mutter to Stohler.

She's leaning against the wall so that she can unstrap her battered feet from the torture chambers she calls shoes. "You might as well get used to it now." I frown, and she shrugs. "Sometimes, when I've just gotten off a long shift but haven't had a chance to go home and shower yet, I have to run errands or whatever. Hit the gas station, stop for a coffee, maybe pick up breakfast from the grocery store. People can tell—who I am, what I do. And they all give me that same look." She imitates Erika's pinched expression, then shrugs, lets the face drop. "You're a go-go dancer now, not a stripper. But a lot of people won't see the difference. You should accept it sooner, rather than later."

Her words don't make me feel any better, but after only one night of dancing, I haven't really earned the right to continue bitching, so I do my best to shrug it off. We steal some Pop-Tarts from the kitchen, then let ourselves into Ben's room and crawl into his bed. Just for the hell of it, I get my phone out and snap a picture of the two of us peeping out over the top of the blankets, send it along to Ben with the caption, *naptime bitch, guess whos in your bed*.

It's close to one o'clock by the time I finally fall asleep, and nearly dark out by the time I wake up. Stohler's still out beside me, but I can hear the television out in the living room, so Alex must be up. I elbow Stohler until she grunts at me. "Wake up," I order. "We have to go get food."

She kicks me under the blankets, first in the shin, then makes a haphazard attempt to reach my balls. "Go shower. Wake me again when you're done."

I roll my eyes and heave myself out of the bed. Alex is playing *Assassin's Creed* on the Xbox in the living room, and I'm a good enough friend to make sure I'm not blocking his view of the screen as I ask, "Do you know if I've got any clean clothes here? I'm sure I've left stuff here before, but I don't know if it would've ended up with your stuff or Ben's."

"Probably Ben's. You hang out with him more than you hang out with me," Alex says, shrugging and not taking his eyes off the screen.

I blink, because that's... weird. I've been friends with Ben for just as long as I've been friends with Alex, and when I'm here, I'm usually hanging with both of them. Most of the times I've gone anywhere with just Ben have been because Alex doesn't want to hang with us. Right now, he's still more focused on the game than me, so I trudge back to Ben's room and hunt through his clean, folded laundry until I find a pair of jeans I left here a few months ago, a t-shirt, and Jamie's old captain sweatshirt from the Patton lacrosse team. I shower, get dressed, and—because they *still* haven't responded to my texts—snap a picture of myself in the hoodie and send it along to both of them, with a caption of *wow look how cozy i am now*.

Fucking finally, Jamie replies, *Excuse me. I don't recall offering that to you*.

o rly? who did you offer it to then? I text back. While I'm waiting for his response, I crawl back onto Ben's bed and beat Stohler with a pillow until she hauls herself out of bed to go take her turn in the bathroom. It isn't until maybe five minutes later, when I'm hanging out in the living room, watching Alex on the xbox, that Jamie sends me another message.

Sweet Lord, you're absolutely insufferable when you feel like you haven't gotten enough attention. I'm in the middle of key-smashing out a message of gibberish when he sends another text. *I offered it to my new boyfriend. Are you happy, you nosy little twat?*

Happy? I'm fucking ecstatic. I punch the air like I'm starring in the final frames of a sports movie training montage, even though I almost drop my phone while doing so. That's apparently weird enough to make Alex look over at me, but his on-screen character almost dies, and he turns his attention immediately back to the game, swearing loudly.

I tap out a message to Jamie that says, *SO HAPPY. my bestest friends are a couple, lets double-date.*

Who would you even be bringing on a double-date? Travis or your redhead?

I pause and make a face at my phone, wishing he could see it without me having to take another picture. I reply, *can i bring them both & call it a triple-date?*

He sends me half a dozen sad-face emojis, and I shove my phone back into my pocket. I don't know which annoys me more; the fact that he has apparently decided he's anti-Declan, or the fact that I don't have an emoji keyboard to respond with a bunch of tiny animal icons.

Stohler wanders down the hall to join us. Her hair is a sopping wet mess hanging down over her shoulders, leaving huge damp splotches on the pale turquoise fabric of her sundress. She plops down onto the couch between me and Al, then starts finger-combing her hair until it's neat enough to be wrangled into a braid.

"You look nice," I say, and she narrows her eyes, like she's sure an insult is coming. Smart girl—I tack on, "Is that so that you can get sloppy drunk tonight at whatever restaurant we choose, and no one will judge you because you look so innocent?"

"I'm thinking I want Mexican tonight," Stohler says.

"You're thinking you want margaritas tonight," I correct, and she smiles slyly.

Alex shakes his head. "There isn't a Mexican place in Lakewood."

"Yeah, but there's one like, three blocks away from here," Stohler objects. "Why are we going all the way to Lakewood for dinner?"

"Cause we're going to pick Ben up from work first," Alex says. "His parents needed him to babysit last night, so he stayed in Lakewood and drove over to the shop with his dad this morning."

Stohler glances over at me, and Alex is still watching the screen, so I point to Jamie's name and jersey number embroidered on the sleeve of the hoodie I'm wearing. Stohler wiggles her eyebrows at me, and I wiggle mine right back. We both look quickly away from each other to avoid laughing.

"Anyway, his car's still here, so he doesn't really have a way to get back, unless he asks his dad to drive him all the way to New Haven and drop him off. I figured it's easier for us to just pick him up and go for dinner. He gets off in about half an hour, so we should probably head out," Alex finishes.

"Does he know we're going to pick him up?" I ask, and Al nods and says, "Yeah, I texted him a couple hours ago."

Just for good measure, once we're in the car and on our way to Lakewood, I send Ben a message that says, *mayday mayday mayday. al & me & stohls are en route to your store, plz dont let us roll up on you getting dicked by jamie in the stockroom. he went home already right???*

He still hasn't responded by the time Alex has pulled the car into the parking lot of the little shopping center where Ben's dad's bookstore is. I send a few more question marks, but I don't get any sort of reply. Stohler's sitting shotty and bitching about how hungry she is, and Alex is singing loudly along to Metallica on the car stereo in an attempt to drown her out. I start to compose another text to Ben, but just then, the shop door swings open, and Ben slips out. Alex raises a hand to the steering wheel, preparing to honk the horn to get his attention, but Ben doesn't even spare a glance around the rest of the lot before his face splits into a little smile and he heads towards another car—a black Caddy with Georgia plates.

Oh, fuck.

"When you texted Ben to say you were going to pick him up, did he text back?" I say sharply. "Does he know we're here?"

"Nah, I just figured he had his phone off while he was, uh... hang on, is that James' car?" Alex says, his hand frozen over the horn. "I didn't know he was in town. Since when are they good enough friends to—"

"Dunno, guess they've just been talking more for the past few weeks," I interrupt. I lean between the seats and try to get at the horn, but Alex grabs my wrist to stop me. I try to shake him off and say, "Come on, let's just get him. Let's get them both, we can all go for food togeth—"

"Hang on," Alex says absently. His eyes are still fixed on Ben, who looks like he's saying something—I guess Jamie's window must be down, which makes me so fucking thankful that ours aren't, because at least that means Alex can't hear what's being said.

Doesn't really matter, though. When Ben reaches the car, Jamie leans out of the window, cups his face between his hands, and kisses him. That pretty much says everything Alex needs to know.

There is absolute silence in our car. My eyes won't stop flickering back and forth between Alex and the scene outside. Stohler is side-eying Al, too, mostly because I think she's considering making a leap for the horn if that kiss doesn't end on its own. Alex... Alex just stares through the windshield.

"What the fuck," he says. "Seriously, what the *fuck*."

"It's not a big deal," I say quickly.

It would probably be a more convincing statement, if Ben and Jamie's kiss hadn't turned into an all-out, hands-in-the-hair makeout session. That can't even be *comfortable*, not with the door between them and both of them twisted at odd angles to get at each other. I briefly consider voicing this opinion, making a joke out of the whole thing, but before I can, Alex jerks the car into drive and stomps on the gas pedal, jolting us straight through the lot and parking a few spaces down from the Cadillac. He gets out of the car and slams the door, and Ben and Jamie *finally* break apart.

I tumble out of the car and shout, "Hey, wow, this is crazy, huh? It's a good thing that we're all such reasonable, rational people, and nobody's going to overreact, right? 'Cause that would suck, you know, if anybody blew this out of proportion—"

"Garen, shut the fuck up," Alex snaps. I don't even have time to get offended before he turns to Ben and points right in his face, the movement sharp enough to make Ben step back. "You've got about *five seconds* to explain what's going on before I lose my shit, Ben."

"It kind of seems like you're planning to lose your shit no matter what," Stohler points out, but she gets

completely ignored. She shrugs, unsurprised, and pulls a pack of cigarettes out of her purse, offering one to me.

I take it, let her light it for me, but don't inhale just yet. I'm too focused on Ben, who is looking completely and utterly *panicked*. He has definitely taken more than five seconds to compose himself, but Alex still hasn't started screaming, so I'm counting it as a win. Ben finally clears his throat, grimaces, and says, "So, um, Al, there's—there's maybe something that you and I should uh, talk about?"

He looks back at Jamie like he's already anticipating the flat, judgmental stare that Jamie gives him for such a lame response, and that look is what really ruins everything—because all at once, it seems to calm Ben and absolutely *enrage* Alex.

Al plants both hands on Ben's chest and shoves him hard enough to send him stumbling back into the side of the Escalade. Jamie is out of the car in a second, brushing a hand against Ben's elbow to be sure he's steady, then rounding on Alex with a sharp order of, "Get yourself under control, Alexander. I don't care how angry you are—you keep your hands to yourself."

"And maybe keep 'em off the Cadillac, too," I suggest. "It's like, an eighty-thousand dollar car."

It earns me another snarled, "Garen, *shut the fuck up*." I make a face at Alex, but he doesn't see it. He's only got eyes for Ben. "So, come on, Ben. Tell me the truth. You guys are... what, together now? You're a couple or something?"

To Ben's credit, no matter how uncomfortable he is with the way this conversation is proceeding or how nervous he is about his best friend's reaction, there isn't even a second of hesitation before he answers, "Yeah. We're together now."

I'm expecting Alex to say something else to him, but instead, he turns to look at me and Stohler. I squint back at him. He can't tell me to shut up again—I haven't even said anything yet.

Maybe that's the problem.

"And everybody knew but me, I guess," Alex says finally, turning back to Ben, who looks like he's trying very hard not to wince. "These two definitely did, at least. And I bet Travis knows, too?" The wince wins out. "Of fucking course he does. How long has this been going on?"

Jamie leans carefully back against the driver's door and says, "Well, I only asked him to be my boyfriend this morning. So, technically, I suppose it's been going on for about nine hours."

"And what about untechnically?" Alex snaps.

"That's not a real word," Ben says, in barely more than a whisper. I finally take a long, deep drag from my cigarette, because Jesus, Ben, *really*? I know his social skills aren't always the best, but someone as smart as him should be able to figure out that now is exactly the wrong time to be playing grammar police.

Sure enough, Alex's voice is almost a yell when he says, "You know what I'm *saying*, Ben. How long have the two of you been fucking each other? A month, two months, the entire year you've known each other, come on. Tell me the truth now, since you obviously haven't been bothering to tell me anything before tonight."

Ben rubs one of his hands over his face, like shielding his eyes for a few seconds will give him enough time to compose himself. He shoves his hands back into the pockets of his sweatshirt, takes a deep breath, and says, "Five months."

"Five months—are you fucking kidding me, Ben?" Alex hisses. "What did you do, hop on his dick the

second he and I broke up?”

“No, see, that would imply that you and I were ever a couple, which we were not,” Jamie interjects. “We slept together a bit, but you never wanted to date me, and you don’t have the right to pretend otherwise now that—”

“You weren’t broken up,” Ben blurts out.

“Ben,” I say warningly, but it doesn’t help at all.

On the best days, Ben has zero instinct towards self-preservation. Right now, he must be actively aiming for self-destruction, because he shuffles a little bit closer to Alex and admits, “It was—you were still hooking up, the first time, I—it was right after Travis turned eighteen, when we all went out together. And don’t—it wasn’t James, don’t get mad at James, it was me. I’m—I’m the one who initiated it, Al, and I know I shouldn’t have done that, I’m sorry—”

Alex punches him. I burn my own damn hand dropping my cigarette, and Stohler practically shrieks, “What the *fuck*, Alex!”

The only thing keeping Ben upright is the Caddy. He staggers back against it, stunned, both hands over his face, but it doesn’t really help; red is seeping out between his fingers, looking almost black in the low light. That’s all I need to see before I kind of snap. I grab Alex by the collar of his shirt, dragging him back until I can push him up against the side of his own vehicle.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” I demand. “Ben’s your best friend. Don’t you *dare*--”

“It’s fine, Garen, stop,” Ben says. He kind of sounds like he’s choking a little, and when I look over my shoulder at him, it’s easy to see why. Jamie has managed to pry his hands away from his face, and there’s blood *everywhere*. I can’t imagine that Alex knows how to throw a good punch, but he must have lucked out enough to get Ben right in the nose, maybe even hard enough to break it. But that still isn’t enough to stop Ben, gigantic dumbass that he is, from saying, “Let go of him, G. It’s fine. I-I deserved it anyway, and I’m fine, I’m—”

“You didn’t deserve it, and you’re not fine, McCutcheon,” Jamie says sharply. “You’re hurt, and you’re bleeding, for Christ’s sake. At least let me—”

Because we’re apparently living in the 1940s now, Jamie digs into an inner pocket of his suit jacket and pulls out a handkerchief. God, I bet his initials are monogrammed on the corner of it in color-coordinated thread. He folds it into Ben’s hand and guides it up to his bleeding face. The whole scene must be just as ridiculous to everyone else as it is to me, because Alex barks out something like a laugh.

“Wow, Ben, congratulations. That’s quite a *gentleman* you’ve got there. I mean, he wasn’t enough of a gentleman to stop himself from fucking my roommate behind my back when he was supposed to be in bed with me, but other than that, yeah, you both really hit the fucking jackpot.”

And then, the only thing that could possibly make this situation worse happens. From maybe fifty feet away, a sharp voice says, “What’s going on out here?”

I turn to see Warren McCutcheon standing in the doorway of the bookstore, squinting through his glasses to make out the faces in the dark. When I turn back to my friends, the blood is draining from Ben’s face, literally and figuratively—he’s still holding the handkerchief to his nose in an attempt to stop the blood pouring from it, and he’s paler than I’ve ever seen him.

“N-Nothing, Dad, go back inside. Everything’s fine,” Ben says, but his voice is hoarse and thick, and the second Warren realizes that his kid is injured, his eyes darken, and he storms across the lot.

"What happened to you?" he demands. He puts one hand on the back of Ben's neck, maybe to comfort him, and the other goes to his wrist in an attempt to pry the cloth away so he can see the damage to Ben's face. But I've been beaten enough times to understand Ben's panicked expression—he knows that letting anyone see his injury is only going to make things worse, so he just shakes his head. Warren repeats, somewhat louder and more to the rest of us, "What happened here? *Who hit my son?*"

Ben shakes his head again. At this point, I don't think he's silent because he *won't* speak, but because he *can't* speak. Warren's eyes flicker over the rest of us, first to me and Alex, then to Jamie and Stohler, the two unfamiliar faces. Stohler, in her sundress and giant wedge sandals, doesn't look ready to beat anyone up (though I have no doubt that she could), so Warren's attention narrows in on Jamie.

And wow, no, a whole world of *fuck that*.

"Alex did it," I announce.

"Garen, shut up," Ben finds his voice to say.

Shameless, I throw my hands up and say, "What do you want me to say, dude? He *did*."

Warren snaps around to stare at Alex. "Alex? Is that true?" Alex says nothing. "You two have been best friends since you were *twelve*. What in the world could be worth fighting over like this?"

"It doesn't m—" The letter ends up coming out a lot closer to a hum than an actual syllable. Ben huffs out a breath and closes his eyes, licks his bloody lips and tries again, "It doesn't m-matt--*matter*." The color comes back to his cheeks in a horrible, splotchy flush. I'm not sure I've ever seen anyone look as humiliated as he does when he says, in barely more than a whisper, "Dad, just *go*."

"I think we should take you to the emergency room," Jamie says quietly, stepping closer so that he can put his hand on the small of Ben's back. "Your nose might be broken, and it'd be best if you had a doctor set it sooner, rather than later."

Speaking is clearly a mistake, because Warren's focus goes right back to Jamie, to Jamie's *hand*. "Ben, if you want to go to the hospital—"

"I *don't*."

"—you'll go with me, not with some boy I've never even met before."

Alex snorts. "What, you haven't met James? He's the guy who's—"

"Baker, knock it off," Stohler interrupts at the same time that Warren says, "Alex, you are lucky that I haven't called the police. Get in your car and go. Leave Ben al—"

"—who's having sex with your son," Alex finishes. Ben's eyes fall shut, and Warren's open wider. "At least, he's the latest one, right, Ben?" Ben lets out a sound that might be a whimper, and Alex crowds closer to him, yells right in his bleeding face, "Come on, man, tell him! Tell your dad all about how you can't stop stealing your best friends' boyfriends, or how you'll let any asshole with a six-pack or a varsity jacket put his dick in your mouth, or how you're a freaky little S&M slut who thinks that none of the fucked up shit you do counts just because you wear *this*."

He hooks two fingers under the collar of Ben's shirt to fish out the gold chain that's home to a small crucifix and the silver purity ring from Ethan Hall's keychain. I hadn't realized that Jamie stole the ring when he had the keychain in Georgia; I hadn't realized he'd brought it back. Alex curls his hand into a fist, and I step forward to stop him if he tries to swing again. Instead, he yanks on it hard enough to break the clasp, then holds the ruined chain and its charms up in front of Ben's face. Ben's eyes flutter open, then dart back and forth, following the swinging of the crucifix and ring like he's hypnotized.

Alex takes a deep breath to start yelling again, but before he can, Warren snatches the chain out of his hand and steps between the two of them. He isn't much taller than his son, still half a foot shorter than Alex, but his absolute fury makes him something to be terrified of right now.

"Don't you ever touch my son again," he snaps, pointing a stern finger right in Alex's face. It's from the same hand that's now holding the chain, letting it dangle between them. Alex looks like he wants to shrink back, but won't let himself. Warren comes closer to him and says, "Now, you listen to me. You are going to get in your car, and you are going to get out of this lot right now. I don't care where you go, but I want you to get the hell away from my family. Are we clear?"

His voice leaves no room for argument. Alex throws one last disgusted look at Ben and Jamie, then stalks around to the driver's side of his car and gets in. He peels out of the lot, sending bits of gravel everywhere. For a minute, there is silence among everyone remaining in the lot.

Then, Stohler whispers to Jamie, "Yeeeah, that was kind of my ride? So, I'm gonna need a lift back to New Haven, if you guys are going back there tonight."

"Ben isn't going anywhere, except for back into the shop," Warren says. "There's obviously a lot we need to talk about."

Ben and Jamie exchange a glance. I can see Jamie's grip tightening on the back of Ben's hoodie, like he's not prepared to let go just yet. Luckily for them, manners aren't really my strong point. I have no qualms about shuffling closer and saying, "But we can come, too. Right?"

Warren sighs. "Garen, I think it would be better if—"

"What Alex said was total bullshit, Mr. M," I say. Warren winces, and Ben kicks out at my shin. Hastily, I amend, "Sorry, I know you're not big on the, uh, swearing thing. What he said was... bull... crap? Is that better?"

"No, but you shutting up probably would be," Ben hisses. "God, '*bull-crap*,' what's wrong with you?"

Undeterred, I trot after Warren as he heads back towards the door of the shop. "Seriously, I know that these aren't ideal circumstances for you finding out that Ben's dating somebody, but you have to know, Alex is being an idiot. Ben's still a really good guy, and Jamie's awesome, I swear. He's my best friend in the world, total boyfriend material, you absolutely do not have to worry about him being as much of an ass as Alex is turning out to be. He'll totally treat Ben right, I promise. And if he doesn't, I could always beat him up for—"

"You talk more than all six of my children combined," Warren sighs. He holds open the door, and I dart inside.

"Yeah, probably, but only five of 'em really count. Asher's only, what, a year and a half? He can't be saying *that* much yet. But hey, Jane's gotta be giving me a run for my money. She talks a lot, too."

"Not this much," I think Warren might say under his breath. He looks back over his shoulder and sees that Ben still hasn't moved. He snaps his fingers, points at his son, then directs that same finger to the interior of the store. "Ben. Get inside. Now."

I snort and say, without thinking, "That's what Jamie says, too. See? You guys already have a lot in common."

"Garen, shut the fuck up!" Ben howls. Usually, he'd be in a shitload of trouble for saying that in front of his dad, but Warren just turns and stares, wild-eyed, into the shop for a minute before he shuffles inside, muttering as he goes, "I sincerely hope that the bottle of bourbon the part-timers gave me for Christmas is

still in the cupboard.”

Ben darts forward to follow him, but still pauses long enough to slug me in the ribs as he passes me. I peek back out of the store at my remaining friends. Stohler has a hand clamped over her mouth, and her shoulders are shaking. I’m a little bit mollified by the fact that at least one other person thinks I’m funny.

Jamie, on the other hand, has both his arms spread out as if to say, *what the fuck*. “Garen,” he says slowly, quietly. “You do realize that I’m meeting my boyfriend’s father for the very first time, don’t you? A boyfriend who I’ve been dating for less than a day and who is covered in blood, and his father, a devout Catholic who has only just now been alerted to the fact that his eldest child is not a virgin.”

“Yeah,” I say, equally slowly. “I mean, I’ve pretty much been here for the whole thing.”

“And you still feel that now is an appropriate time to be making jokes about Ben fucking me in the ass,” Jamie says.

“Well, the punchline was more about what a powerbottom you are,” I admit, “but uh, yeah, that was maybe one of my less-awesome ideas. Do you wanna just—” I point into the shop. Jamie rolls his eyes and bumps past me into the store.

The sign on the door has been flipped to ‘closed,’ and most of the lights are off. Ben has left the ‘*employees only*’ door open behind the counter, which is enough of an invitation for me. I clamp one hand on the back of Jamie’s neck, the other on the back of Stohler’s, and steer them both through it.

The store’s back room serves as a combination office, break room, supply closet. There’s a desk and a small table, but both are too covered in books to actually be usable. There are stacked boxes of books in most of the corners and on a few of the mismatched armchairs. Stohler immediately steals a place on one of the few empty chairs, and I fling myself down on another. Jamie carefully lifts a haphazard stack of books from one of the remaining chairs, but instead of sitting down, he shuffles through the books, reordering them and neatening them.

Ben watches him do that, then watches his dad mess around with the electric kettle set up on the corner of the table. He clears his throat and says, “Just let me clean up and change my shirt, and then we can talk, okay?” He means, change the shirt that has blood all over it? Yeah, that’s a fucking *great* thing to draw attention to right now. I strip off Jamie’s lax hoodie and lean over to drape it across Ben’s arm, careful to avoid the blood smears on his own sleeves. He gives me a jerky nod of thanks before he slips through another door into the bathroom.

The four of us wait for him with no words spoken between us, the only sound coming from the boiling kettle and the running faucet in the bathroom. Warren sets the broken necklace, the cross, and the ring on the corner of the table before he switches the kettle off and gathers a few mugs from a cupboard above his head. He begins fixing cups of tea; Stohler accepts one, I refuse, and Jamie takes his with a soft, “Thank you.”

Those two words aren’t much, but at least they break the silence. Warren swallows and says, “It’s ‘*James*,’ right?”

“Yes, sir,” Jamie says, sitting down and meeting his gaze with a careful neutral look. “James Goldwyn.”

“And I’m assuming you’re not exactly a local boy, with that accent,” Warren adds. His voice is eerily calm. Like a *serial killer*.

“No, sir. I’m originally from Savannah, Georgia, but I attend school in New York City.”

At that, Warren turns to look at me. I want to protest that I’m not personally responsible for every single person on the island of Manhattan, but since I technically am the only reason Ben and Jamie know each

other, I think that argument would fall kind of flat. I give Warren a sheepish smile. His mouth tightens, and one of his eyebrows arches ever so slightly upward.

"Oh god, *that's* where he learned that look," I whisper. "Unless it's not a learned behavior. Are derisive stares genetic?"

But Warren has already turned his attention back to Jamie, who sits up a little bit straighter.

"I wasn't aware that my son was seeing anyone."

"We haven't been together very long," Jamie says.

"And yet, long enough that you've found time to get in bed together, apparently," Warren says.

Stohler and I exchange horrified stares. Jamie tries very hard not to move at all.

Ben comes tumbling back out of the bathroom. He has changed into Jamie's clean hoodie, but he hasn't gotten all of the blood off his face just yet; there are still a few smears right at the edge of his beard. "Holy Mother of God, Dad, we are not talking about this. Seriously, stop, I don't—"

"Why not?" Warren demands, slamming his tea mug down on the desk so that he can cross his arms over the front of his sweater. "If you all think that you're adult enough to be having sex, then I expect you to be adult enough to discuss it."

"I'm sorry if you feel that I have disrespected you, your son, or the rest of your family in any way. That was never my intention," Jamie says. Ben whips around to give him an incredulous stare, and I can't help but do the exact same thing from where I'm curled up in the armchair. Jamie *loves* disrespecting Ben. I'm pretty sure that consensual degradation is the foundation of every single one of their sexual encounters. Jamie meets Ben's eyes, and his mouth sort of twitches, like he wants to sneer at him but knows that now isn't really the time. He looks at Warren again, schools his face back into neutrality, and continues, "I sincerely regret the fact that he and Alex are having problems because of me. And my feelings for Ben are complicated, but... genuine. If you only take one thing away from meeting me, I'd like it to be that."

"Why are you pretending you're nice?" Ben whispers. "You're not nice, and this is weird. Stop trying to sweet-talk my dad."

"Do you think you're helping this situation at all?" Jamie demands.

"Do you think this is a situation that *can* be helped?" Ben says. His voice cracks halfway through the question, but he doesn't seem like he really notices it. "God, you heard what Alex said outside. Everybody heard. It doesn't matter how much damage control you try to run right now, I can't come back from something like that, I'm still just—everybody knows now, if they didn't before, they *know* I'm just a screwed up slut like Alex said I—"

"Benjamin, don't you *ever* let me hear you say something like that about yourself again," Warren says sharply. "I don't care what kind of things you've done, or who you have done them with; you're my child, and I love you, and I won't allow you to speak of yourself with anything less than respect. Do you understand me?"

Ben jerks his head in a nod, but it seems more like a reflex than an actual agreement. He won't meet anyone's eyes. Instead, he picks up the broken necklace and starts screwing around with the clasp. I think he's trying to fix it, but it's no use; the clasp is totally broken, and his fingers are trembling so badly that I'm surprised he hasn't dropped it anyway.

Jamie reaches out and covers Ben's hands with his until Ben stops moving. Once he's still, Jamie releases him and reaches up to one of the supply shelves for a pair of scissors and a spool of the sleek

red twine that sometimes gets used to tie off the boxes of books here. He snips off a length of about three feet, folds it over on itself once to reinforce it, and threads the crucifix and the ring onto it. He beckons Ben closer; Ben shuffles a half-step forward, just within reach. Jamie ties the twine around Ben's neck so that the cross hangs low on his throat, resting just below his collarbone.

Ben looks like he wants to say *thank you*, but can't manage to get the words out. Jamie nods like he heard it anyway and says, "We'll get the chain fixed, alright?"

"Yeah," Ben agrees quietly.

Warren watches the entire scene unfold in silence. Once my friends have lapsed back into silence, he says, "Garen and, ah..."

He looks over at Stohler, who unfolds herself from the arm chair and holds her hand out for a brief shake. "Lindsey Stohler. Sorry, should've mentioned that earlier."

"It's good to meet you, Lindsey. But I'd like to speak to Ben and James for a moment, if you and Garen wouldn't mind waiting in the store."

"Of course," Stohler says, at the same time that I say, "I guess, but just so you're aware, they're probably going to tell us everything you say anyway."

Stohler grabs the collar of my t-shirt and yanks me out into the store proper. She closes the door, but it's a tiny shop, and no matter where we try to stand, the low murmur of voices in the back room is still plainly audible. In the end, we go outside to avoid the awkwardness of eavesdropping.

Stohler lights a single cigarette, and we pass it back and forth between us in silence for several minutes before I say, "I can't believe Alex actually hit him."

Stohler grimaces. "I'm trying not to think about that, actually."

"I can't think about much else," I admit. "I mean, really. He hit *Ben*? Nobody hits Ben. I've never even hit Ben, and I hit pretty much everyone. But Ben—"

"Ben isn't delicate. And he isn't weak. I'm sure he can take care of himself, but..." Stohler sucks the end of the cigarette, considers her words carefully, and eventually exhales, "He chooses not to, I think. He'd rather take care of everyone else. If I know that after only being friends with him for six months, then Alex has definitely got to know that after six years. He knew Ben would accept that punch like he'd earned it, and that makes the whole situation even more fucked up."

I nod because that's easier than speaking right now. I keep picturing the stunned look on Ben's face when he was hit, the way he crumpled against the side of the Cadillac. I keep picturing the blood.

"Think we should kill Alex when we get back to the apartment?" I ask.

"Trying not to think about it," Stohler repeats. "Al's my friend. So is Ben, and so is Jamie. I don't want to choose sides, and pretty much the only way I can *avoid* choosing sides is by pretending that I didn't just see Alex throw a temper tantrum and punch his best friend in the face over a guy he was never really that into in the first place." She glances sideways at me and takes another drag off the cigarette. "Not that Jamie isn't great and all that. I know he's your best friend, and I'm not trying to insult him. He's a good guy, he's fun to hang with, and he's wicked hot. I'd probably fuck him, if he wasn't so embarrassingly preppy and well-groomed. Maybe if he stopped shaving, grew out his hair, skipped a couple showers, got a motorcycle—"

"Your taste in dudes is pretty troubling," I interrupt.

She snorts and gives me the finger. "Don't fucking talk to me about 'troubling taste in guys,' Anderson. You're nailing a ginger."

"Yeah, a *built* ginger with a pierced tongue. That's got to count for—"

"Look, my point is that Jamie's great, but Alex never really thought so. They were never really going anywhere, relationship-wise. It's total bullshit that Alex is *pretending* to be upset about that." Stohler stubs out the cigarette. "Like I said, if I think about it too much, I'm just going to end up hating one of the only friends I've got."

I'm spared the trouble of responding when the shop door opens and Ben and Jamie trudge out. Neither of them looks particularly pleased, but at least Jamie has an arm draped over Ben's shoulders. I give them a thumbs-up, then twist it into a thumbs-down, then back up. "How'd it go?"

"My presence has been requested at Mass tomorrow morning," Jamie says. "Apparently, all judgment is being reserved until Mrs. McCutcheon has had a chance to meet me as well."

"But that's good, right?" I say, shrugging. "I mean, church with the family—that's a relationship kind of thing, isn't it? That's got to be a good sign."

"Might be a better sign if the invitation hadn't been preceded by a brief lecture about how completely and utterly unacceptable it is that Ben and I have been sleeping together for months now," Jamie sighs. "I can't wait to see how much longer that lecture will be tomorrow, when it's both of his parents instead of just one."

"I kind of hope Hillary yells at you in Italian," I admit. "It'll make for a way more interesting story when I have to listen to you whine about it later this week."

Jamie opens his mouth to retort, but before he can, Ben tips his head up to look at him and says quietly, "Will you take me home, please?"

"Of course. But... if I'm being honest, I think your father had the right idea in suggesting that you stay at my hotel tonight. At least until Alex has calmed down a bit," Jamie says slowly. "It's up to you, though."

Ben ducks out from under his arm and heads for the passenger side of the Escalade. "Sure. I can do that, I guess."

By the time we get back to the apartment in New Haven, it's pretty fucking clear that Alex hasn't calmed down at all. The four of us all go upstairs together, even though Stohler and I are planning to head over to her place. She has agreed to put me up for the night so I can take a train back to New York tomorrow, but neither of us is willing to leave Ben's building until we're sure the situation is a bit more settled.

Ben manages one step into the apartment before he freezes in place. Alex is kicked back on the couch, surrounded in so many torn scraps of paper that it looks like snowfall. As the rest of us watch, he tears a few more pages from the book in his hand and flings them on the ground. He's moving quickly, and he has been at this for a while; there are almost three dozen empty, ruined book covers on the couch cushion next to him, and the entire middle shelf of Ben's overstuffed bookshelf is missing.

"Alex," Ben croaks. "Stop, what are you—"

"What does it look like I'm doing, asshole?" Alex snaps. "You did something you knew would make me mad, so I'm returning the favor. The only difference is that I'm not hiding it."

Jamie walks right up to him and yanks the ruined book out of his hand. The cover is hanging halfway off, but Jamie still turns it to read the title, then shoots Alex an absolutely disgusted look. "I didn't buy him this book so that you could destroy it, Alex."

"No, you bought him that book so you could get in his pants," Alex says flatly. "And honestly, you probably didn't have to expend so much effort. God knows he gave it up easy enough for Garen and Travis and your cousin and who fucking knows how many guys at Yale."

He picks up another book, flips open the cover, and tears out the first three pages. Jamie grabs that book out of his hand, too, then stoops to move the rest of the stack of books away from Alex so that his only choices are to stop ruining Ben's books, or to try to get past all of us to reach the books still on the bookshelf. The only one left near him is a thick old volume on the far end of the coffee table. It has a white cover with no title, and it doesn't seem worth the effort of reaching for.

"Th-There hasn't been anyone at Yale," Ben tries to protest. "I'm not—I know that what I did was fucked up, and I know I shouldn't have slept with James while you two were still involved, but I didn't mean, I'm n-not—" He stops, takes a deep breath, and opens his mouth to keep going, but in that pause, Alex seems to lose it.

"You didn't, you haven't, you're n-n-n-not, *fucking spit it out*, Ben. I thought you got over this stutter bullshit in high school."

Ben's face crumples, and it's too much for me to handle. I slip an arm around his shoulders and turn him right around so that he's facing the hallway. "Come on, dude, we're gonna go pack your stuff for the night."

"I can go," Jamie says quickly, but I shake my head.

"No, you have to stay here and make sure Alex doesn't go apeshit on the rest of the books. Besides, if I stay in this room any longer, I'm gonna break that fuckhead's jaw, and I might have made some good tips last night, but I didn't make enough to cover those court fees."

I herd Ben down the hall to his bedroom. He lets me, but he isn't doing too much to help. Once we're in his room with the door shut, he sits down on the edge of his bed and blinks at the scuffed white toes of his Chucks. Unsurprisingly, he doesn't have some sort of sports bag for me to pack his stuff in, so I dump his schoolbooks out of his backpack and start going through his dresser to find clean clothes. He makes a soft noise of protest behind me, but when I look around to see what the problem is, he just makes an aborted gesture and gets up to do it himself.

"Ben," I say quietly. "You can talk in front of me. I'm not going to say anything about, you know." I'm not sure if it would even be okay for me to say the word *stutter* right now. He mentioned it to me forever ago, of course—said he hates public speaking so much that he used to be completely incapable of even getting a full sentence out in a crowded classroom, explained that LHS put him in speech therapy until he learned to pave over his terror with detached monotone. The stutter, the stammer, whatever it is, it was gone by the time I met him, and I've never seen him stressed enough to let it out again. I'm not entirely sure what standard operating procedure is now.

Ben doesn't seem to know, either. He avoids my eyes and edges past me to get to his dresser, but he summons the nerve to say very, very quietly, "Not regular clothes. Church in the morning."

"Right, sorry. Do you want me to—"

"I can," he whispers. I step out of the way and watch as he gathers up pajamas and boxers and plain t-shirts from the dresser, then moves to the closet, where his nicer clothes are hanging up. He takes down an Oxford, a pair of dark navy trousers, a sweater, and a tie, then tosses them all onto the bed in a big lump. Instead of stuffing them into his bag, he just rubs both his hands over his face and mutters, "Fuck. I can't believe I couldn't even keep this going for a whole day."

I can feel my forehead wrinkling in confusion. "Keep what going?"

Ben gestures towards the hall, presumably indicating the people down it. "This. With James. I can't believe I—I mean, he's gonna break up with me. Of *course* he's going to break up with me, he barely likes me as it is, and he's not—he didn't bargain for this. A big fight with my best friend—his *ex*, a-and meeting my parents right now, having my dad find out we're fucking already, having to bring me back to his hotel for—he wanted me to come back there for *sex*, not so he could keep my friend from fucking up my face even more." Ben finally looks up at me, wide-eyed and miserable. "We've been dating for twelve hours, and he's already going to break up with me. That's how fucking pathetic I am. I know he's out of my league, but I figured that once we got together, I might be able to last, what, a fucking *week*, at least."

If he hadn't already gotten punched once tonight, I think I'd want to hit him myself, just to show him what an idiot he is. Instead, I stomp over to the door, fling it open, lean into the hall, and shout, "Jamie, get the fuck in here."

He joins us in less than five seconds, looking expectantly back and forth between us, but before he can ask what's up, I point to Ben and say, "Are you going to break up with him, or what?"

Jamie squints. "Excuse me?" His eyes flicker to the side when Ben finally starts shoving his clothes into the backpack, and then Jamie's whole face kind of twists up in annoyance for a half-second. He grabs the clothes back out of the bag and says, "Really? I'd understand if you chose not to fold *everything*, but there's no excuse to just crumpling up a dress shirt and shoving it—"

"*You* shove it, dude, answer my question," I interrupt. "Are you going to break up with Ben?"

"Why would I?" Jamie asks. He smooths out the dress shirt and folds it into a perfectly neat square, like something that belongs on a department store shelf. "I only asked him out this morning. I know we joke about how easily I get bored of people, but that would be extreme, even for me. Besides, in case you've forgotten, his family expects me for church in the—"

"I can just tell them it's not going to happen," Ben says. "It's—they'd get it, they'd be understanding of the whole *si-situation*, I think."

Jamie stops in the middle of folding the sweater. "Wait a moment. Are you trying to break up with *me*? Because if so, you can fuck right off with that idea, you little midget. It took nearly a *year* for me to start liking you, and I'll be damned if I let you break it off the second we start to figure things out."

"I'm not trying to end this," Ben protests. "I just know you don't—"

But he stops speaking abruptly, for pretty obvious reasons—the low tones of whatever conversation Stohler and Alex had been having in the living room has erupted into yelling.

"Oh, for Christ's sake," I mutter, trudging out into the hall with the other two on my heels. I don't know exactly what I'm expecting to see when we get to the living room, but it's definitely not... Stohler pinning Alex down on the couch and pimp-slapping him repeatedly across the face. Which is what's happening.

"Get her the fuck off me!" Alex snaps at us. "Come on, I'm not going to hit a chick—"

"Wow, Al, you're right," Stohler declares, punctuating her words with another backhand across his face. "It's really fucking shitty when somebody beats up on someone who can't fight back." Another slap. "It's a good thing *you're* too nice of a guy to ever do something like this, right? I mean, what kind of crazy bitch hits a guy, knowing he'll never hit her back because she's a girl?" She hits him harder, then grabs one of the couch cushions and starts trying to smother him as she yells, "What kind of *asshole* would hit his best friend, knowing he'll never hit him back because that best friend thinks he deserved to get hit?"

Honestly, I'm pretty cool with the idea of letting her go on for as long as she wants. It's kind of entertaining to watch, and it's not like Alex doesn't deserve it. But Ben must disagree, because he darts forward and

grabs Stohler around the waist, hauling her off of Alex with a lot of effort and absolutely no assistance from me or Jamie.

"Stohls, knock it off," he pants. "This isn't helping, okay? I don't want to fight with Alex. I just want to make things okay again."

Stohler's response to that is to kick Alex in the stomach with one of her giant wedge sandals.

Ben shoots me an annoyed, alarmed look. "Can you fucking *help* me, G? My neighbors are going to call the goddamn cops if everyone doesn't calm down and shut up soon."

I heave a sigh, but loop my arms around Stohler and hold her at bay. I immediately wish I hadn't, because the first thing that Ben does is turn to Alex and resume his awful, pathetic begging.

"Alex, you're my best friend. I want things between us to be okay," Ben pleads. "I'm sorry, I know I shouldn't have lied to you about this. Just tell me what I have to do, and I'll—"

"Break up with him," Alex says, pointing at Jamie.

Ben blinks. "What?"

"You want to know what you have to do? Break up with him. Right now," Alex snaps. He's still pointing at Jamie, who is watching Ben in wide-eyed apprehension. "Come on, Ben, you said you wanted to make things okay. They're not going to be okay as long as you're with him!"

Ben's eyes dart back and forth between Alex's face and Jamie's for maybe ten seconds before finally falling somewhere between them. The tattered remains of all the ruined books are lying in a pile on the floor; it's a bizarrely neat pile, like maybe Jamie spent a few minutes trying to see if they were salvageable before I called him into the bedroom. Ben stares at the pile of pages for nearly a minute before he takes a deep breath and says, "No."

"No?" Alex repeats, his eyebrows shooting upward.

"No," Ben repeats, voice quiet but firm. His hands are shoved in the pocket of his hoodie and his shoulders are hunched, but his eyes are clear and unblinking when he finally looks up at his best friend. "No, I'm not going to break up with him, and *fuck you* for asking me to. I can date anyone I want to date, and it's—that's my choice." His shoulders hunch higher, like he knows he's about to say something that'll make Alex want to take another swing at him. "You couldn't make things work with James, and that's your own fault, not mine. I didn't steal him from you, and I am tired of being asked to step gracefully aside so that other people can have their second and third chances. I, um." He takes another deep breath and looks at the floor. "I deserve a chance to get what I want, too, sometimes. And I want James."

For too long, there's nothing but a heavy silence in the room. I kind of expect Alex to question the decision again, but he doesn't. He just stares. Finally, he reaches for the last book on the table, the fat white volume. "Alright. I hope getting fucked by him is worth losing your best friend over." He flips open the cover and thumbs through a few pages that are as slim and translucent as a moth's wings. "I really, really hope he's worth it, Ben."

"Alex, don't you fucking dare," Ben say. The nervousness is entirely gone from his voice now, replaced by something bordering on fury. "Put it down."

Alex blinks at him. "What, you're the only one who gets to put your hands on things that don't belong to you?"

For the first time since leaving the bedroom, Jamie bristles. "Alright, hang the fuck on. I sincerely *hope* you're not implying that I have ever *belonged* to anyone but my damn self, because that

would be—”

“Alex, get your hands off my fucking Bible right now,” Ben cuts across him.

Alex crumples half the Book of Genesis in his fist and rips. Ben’s whole face goes blank, and so does Alex’s; it’s like he only realizes that he has crossed the line the second after the pages have been torn. He blinks down at the Bible in one hand, the stack of pages in the other. After a few seconds, he places the pages back inside the book, closes the cover, and holds it out. Ben takes the Bible from him and opens the cover, staring down at the torn pages. From where I’m standing, I can see over his shoulder that the first page bears a calligraphy inscription of the words, *This Holy Bible is presented to Benjamin Brendon Anthony McCutcheon on the occasion of his Confirmation*, with a date of about eleven years earlier. Ben closes the Bible.

“Ben,” Alex says, but Ben just shakes his head and tucks the ruined Bible into the backpack that Jamie has brought out of the bedroom. Alex repeats, “*Ben.*”

“We’re not okay,” Ben says. He shoulders his backpack, takes Jamie’s hand, and heads for the door, not even turning to look at Alex again as he says, “I need you to leave me alone now. I’ll see you around, I guess.”

Alex looks upset over that, but it’s nearly impossible for me to feel bad for him. Stohler and I let ourselves out.

Chapter Thirty: Part B

“The capacity for friendship is God’s way of apologizing for our families.” –Jay McInerney

222 days sober

Sunday afternoon finds me trapped in the uniform section of the Patton bookstore for what feels like nine goddamn hours. Parents’ Day is tomorrow, and the school requires every student to be in full dress uniform instead of the more casual, individualized uniforms we can choose from for class every day. The problem with this—other than the fact that the dress uniform is uncomfortable as shit and way too hot for a pleasant April day—is that I don’t actually have my dress uniform anymore. I haven’t worn it since my *last* Parents’ Day, during my junior year; after that, it went into storage or a dumpster or something, leaving me pretty much up a creek.

The fine fuckwits of the Patton bookstore are all too willing to replace it for me, as long as I’m equally willing to shell out another two hundred dollars and spend an entire afternoon waiting for them to find one that fits me. I spend most of that time playing Tetris on my phone, until I get a text from Declan saying, *still in CT?*

nope, I text back. got back this morning, in pma bookstore now getting uniform for tmrrw.

come 2 mine when yr done. javi still nt back yettt.

I consider texting back something about not being his booty call, but who am I trying to fool? I’m exactly that easy, especially considering that it’s been two days since I’ve gotten my hands on him. I don’t reply, and I don’t give him any warning before I gather up the garment bag with my new uniform and set off to his dorm.

The door is closed when I get there, but it’s unlocked. I shove it open and trip over the threshold. Declan is set up at his desk, dicking around on his computer; he seems pretty unconcerned by my loud, graceless entrance, so I make it even louder and more graceless. “Christ, that took forever. I get that nobody wants to work on the weekend, but if they’re gonna tell me to come by to pick up my uniform on a Sunday afternoon, the least they can do is make sure it takes less than forty-five fuckin’ minutes to—” I don’t get any further into my usual babble before I realize he’s on the phone. I wince and switch immediately to a whisper to say, “Sorry, didn’t realize you were talking to someone.”

“I’m on hold right now,” he says. He nods towards the garment bag. “Everything squared away now, though?”

“Yep. I’ll be looking just as neat and pretty as the rest of the squad tomorrow.” I hang the bag over the top of his closet door, fling my jacket off onto the floor, and drop to my knees in front of him. “You knew I was on my way over here, you useless sack of shit. Why didn’t you get yourself hard?”

“I’m not going to jerk off while I’m on the phone with a lieutenant colonel,” he says.

“Then hang up on him, ‘cause I can’t stay too long. Travis gets out of work at four, and I want to be there when he gets home. We’re getting Chinese and taking Omelette to the dog park.”

“And it would be such a shame for you to be late to your dinner-and-dog-walking date because I made you wait to suck my dick,” Declan says. He doesn’t seem like he’s annoyed or jealous, but when I try to pull his sweatpants down over his hips, he grabs my wrists. “I’m almost done. You can wait five min—yes, sir, I’m still here.”

I lean in and lap at the curve of his hip, but he’s already focused on the phone call again, and *that’s* no fun. I clamber back onto my feet, throw a leg over his, and settle onto his lap to start the long process of sucking a few hickies into his skin, just below the collar of his t-shirt. He tries and fails to bat me away,

then rolls his eyes, tucks his phone between his ear and shoulder, and dumps me on his bed before returning to his desk chair. I make a few monstrous faces at him; he flips me off and turns to face his computer again. I roll my eyes—what the fuck was the point of inviting me over, if all he planned to do was ignore me?

My phone is in my jacket pocket, over by the door, so I don't have anything to entertain me while he wraps up his call. The only thing within reach is his wallet, which is sitting on the pillow. I flick it open and poke around a bit, but it's pretty basic. A debit card, his student ID, a couple of twenties, a bunch of business cards. Those are a little weird, so I wait until he finally hangs up and ask, "Who are all these people you've got cards for?"

"A couple of 'em are Army officers the school put me in touch with during my nomination process for West Point. I was just talking to one of them now," he says. "But most of the cards are for this program thing I've got to do."

"What kind of program?" I ask.

He smirks. "Recruiting bullshit for the school."

I scramble upright, too delighted to stay lying down now. "Oh my god, Campbell. Are you the *face of Patton Military Academy*, and you never thought to mention it? Are there dorky little posters of your smiling, freckly face, with cute captions about *being all you can be*?"

"No, there aren't any posters, you tool." Declan grabs a paper clip off his desk and flicks it at my head, then turns back around to start typing something on his laptop. "And I'm not really the *face of Patton*. A couple times a semester, I throw on the full dress uniform, and they put me on a plane with an admissions rep and one of the drill sergeants, fly us out to a town in the middle of nowhere so we can spend a day or two pimping Patton to a bunch of middle-schoolers. The fact that I'm actually headed into the Service means I'm a pretty good mouthpiece, I guess. I talk about how great Patton is at teaching *strong values and discipline*, and in return, the school covers half my tuition. More than, actually—when I got into West Point, Patton comped my entire senior year."

"Sounds like a pain in the ass," I say.

"Less of a pain in the ass than working four jobs to cover tuition would be. Give me my wallet."

"No, I'm looking at it," I say. I'm not really, but I could be. The only thing left to examine is his driver's license; Declan looks all of twelve years old in his license picture. I make a face and cover the picture with my thumb; I hate seeing Dec look even younger than he is. "Culbertson, Nebraska. Is that even a real place?"

"Barely. There are less than a thousand people in the entire town," Declan says. He stops typing and turns in place so that I can see the way he squints up at the ceiling. "I think it's a village, actually, not a town."

"Gross," I mutter. I look back at the license. "Date of birth: April tenth."

"Yep," he says.

"Middle initial: L." I get another *yep*. I clamber over to lie on my back, my head lolling back off the side of the bed to look at him upside down. "What's it stand for?"

"Some weird thing my birth mom picked out."

"Yeah, that's what *all* middle names are," I say. I reach out and pinch his calf, and he bats me away. "Mine's Michael. Garen Michael Anderson." From the look on Declan's face, I'd guess he gives exactly

zero fucks. I roll my eyes. "I know it's not important, but that's the kind of shit most people know about their friends. Their middle names, favorite movies, favorite sports, how many siblings they've got, what they wanna be when they grow up."

Dec laces his fingers together behind his head and leans back in his chair. "You already know that one—I want to be a soldier. And you know why, which means you're a step ahead of any of the other guys in the squad. Isn't that enough?"

It's not enough. I'm not sure that I even know what 'enough' means anymore. But the muscles in Declan's arms seem drawn up tight, like he's keeping his tone and pose casual to distract me from how tense this discussion is actually making him. Instead of asking another question that I know I won't get an answer to anyway, I say, "I bet your middle name is Lionel. Or Larry. Something that makes you sound like a ninety-year-old man from Myrtle Beach."

"Nope," he laughs, his posture loosening just a bit.

"Lawrence. Logan. Liam," I guess. He shakes his head. "Will you tell me if I get it right?" He tips his head in agreement. "Leonardo. Or Leon. Or Leo, some variation of that."

He shakes his head again and says, "You really enjoy the sound of your own voice, don't you?"

"Who wouldn't? My voice is a dulcet, velvety siren's song, and—"

"Your voice is a warning about the dangers of chain-smoking and deep-throating every cock in a five-mile radius."

"Ten miles. Don't sell me short," I say. "Is it Lisa? Declan Lisa Campbell?"

"Yes, you're exactly right. My middle name is Lisa. You caught me," he says, inching his desk chair closer. The legs screech against the floor. He leans in to kiss me, even though I'm still upside down and our lips can't quite match up correctly.

I curl a hand over the back of his neck and sing very quietly against his mouth, "*Well, my daddy left home when I was three, and he didn't leave much to Ma and me, just this old guitar and an empty bottle of booze. Now, I don't blame him 'cause he run and hid, but the meanest thing that he ever did was before he left, he went and named me... Lisa.*"

The Cash reference is enough to earn me a deeper kiss, even though our misaligned mouths make it sloppy and silly, with an occasional clack of teeth. I don't mind it, but Declan is more easily frustrated than I am. He pulls away, bumps his nose against mine, and says, "Are you planning to sit up sometime today?"

"No, not when this is such a convenient position," I say. I nod—up for me, down for him. "Take your pants off, let's sixty-nine."

He grins and reaches for the drawstring of his sweatpants, but before he can get it untied, there's a loud thump outside the door, followed by the sound of a key sliding into the lock. Declan sighs and pushes his chair back towards the desk. "Javi was supposed to be back later than this."

"Probably got separation anxiety from Vanessa," I say, even though I don't have much room to judge. Declan spent more time in my bed than out of it this past week. He gives me a look like he's thinking the same thing, but my chance to say anything is cut off by Javi's noisy, suitcase-laden entrance.

Declan's roommate looks thrilled to see the both of us, which isn't too shocking; Javi is thrilled by most things. Still, he shoves his suitcase towards his bed and comes over to greet us both with a clap to the shoulder. "Hey, guys. You both have a good break?"

"Fine," Declan says. I make a face at him and mouth, *just fine?* He smirks at me and turns around to face his computer.

"Mine was alright, I guess," I say. I sit up and pause, trying to blink back the rush of blood to my brain. "Spent most of it in bed. But I got that job—the dance gig at Rush. Thanks again for helping me set it up with Vanessa's friend. He was a lot of help."

"Yeah, man, no problem. Glad it worked out," Javi says, beaming at me. He gestures to Declan. "Were you two planning to hang out tonight or something?"

Mostly I'd been planning to get my dick sucked, but that doesn't appear to be an option any longer. I roll off the bed and grab the garment bag. "Nope, I just had to come to school to pick up my dress uniform for tomorrow. Figured I might as well stop by and say hi, since poor Campbell's been alone here all weekend."

"Bet he missed you terribly," Javi agrees. He kicks his sneakers off and collapses on his bed. "Are both your parents coming tomorrow?"

I snort. "Neither of 'em. They both came for Parents' Day the first three years I was here, but I told them not to bother coming to this one. I see Dad almost every weekend, and I'm having dinner with Mom this Thursday. It'd be pointless for them to both take the day off work. But the school says I have to show up anyway for like, attendance purposes."

"Man, that sucks. What do they expect you to do, hang in the library all day?" Javi says.

"I guess? Dunno. Maybe I'll spend the whole day following the rest of the squad around, annoying you guys, charming your moms, bangin' your dads—"

"Don't even joke about that," Javi groans. "Declan got laid on the last Parents' Day. He won't tell anybody the details—won't tell us who it was or when he found time to get her alone, but apparently, he fucked somebody's mom. Like, somebody *in the squad*. The last thing we need is to have you going in and fucking somebody's dad."

"Wasn't your mom, not your business, Javi," Declan says. He glances over his shoulder at us. "Anyway, don't worry about what G's going to do tomorrow. He can hang out with me all day."

"Your grandparents aren't coming out?" I say.

He shrugs. "Too expensive to fly, too time-consuming to drive. It's not really worth it to come all the way out here just for Parents' Day, especially since I think they want to come to West Point for the Acceptance Day Parade in August. At least, I think they do—last time I called, they kept going on about some surprise visit."

"Do they realize it's not a surprise if they tell you about it four months in advance?" Javi asks.

"The Campbells are a good-looking family, not a smart one," I say, pulling my jacket back on and elbowing the door the rest of the way open. "I'll see you two losers tomorrow morning, nice and *late*. So fucking glad we don't have PT on Parents' Day."

Declan unfolds himself from his desk chair and shoves his feet into a pair of sneakers.

"I'll walk you out. I need a cigarette, anyway," he says. I don't know if he believes it when he says it, but the hand he puts on the small of my back as we make our way down the stairs to the lobby suggests that he has other motivations. I'm not expecting much in the way of conversation, so it's a little surprising when he asks, "Are you still fucking that guy?"

"Gonna need you to narrow that down a little, Dec. I'm fucking lots of guys," I say, even though I'm... not. Not really. It hasn't been a conscious decision, and if I happened to have an opportunity to sleep with a guy I was attracted to, I'd do it. But since the party at the Ward house right before break, Declan and I have been too wrapped up in each other to bother going after other people, the lone exception being the almost-handjob from--

"Trevor," Declan says.

"You mean Travis?"

"Whatever."

"You *know* his name, Dec, I know you do. And you're the only one who thinks it's funny to pretend you don't." I hipcheck the lobby door open and lead the way out across the parking lot to my car. Once we're both leaning against it, each of us smoking a cigarette, I finally answer, "Nah, I'm not really fucking Travis anymore. He's only interested in sleeping with me if it's going to be something serious, and I'm only capable of making things serious between us if he's going to be my boyfriend. And he's not. Says he can't be with me like that until I've been sober for a full year."

Declan taps the ash off the end of his cigarette and says, "Dick." I give him a reproachful look—I've *told* him not to say anything about Travis—but he just rolls his eyes. "Don't look at me like that. What does he expect you to do? Sit around with your thumb up your ass for the next however-many months just so he can pat himself on the back about how supportive he's being?"

"It isn't like that, Dec. It... makes sense, on a certain level. My shrink tells me the same thing—I shouldn't be making any big changes or commitments—"

"Big changes," he says, twisting around to pin me to the car with his hips. "Like... transferring schools? Moving to New York? Adopting a giant puppy with a stupid name? Getting a job in a nightclub? You're making plenty of changes, and you're doing fine with all of them. This Travis guy needs to give you some fucking credit."

I don't know how to explain that Travis *does* give me credit; he gives me more credit than anyone. Before I got sober, he was the one who told me that I could do it. He was the one who believed in me when I was at my lowest point, when I was completely ruined, when I was suicidal and on the floor. He has trusted me and loved me and saved me from the first moment we met, and every moment since.

Declan doesn't get it. Declan will probably *never* get it.

"Travis is just trying to do the right thing for me," I finally say.

"Yeah, well, sometimes you need someone who'd do the wrong thing for you, too. Just ask Barrington and his fucked up shoulder," Declan says. I start to reply, but he shakes his head, flicks his cigarette across the lot, and says, "Kiss me."

I obey gladly. It's easier than talking—especially about Travis—and it's *good*, it's so good. Good enough that we waste several minutes making out right there against the side of my car. The parking lot isn't secluded, and anyone who pulled in could easily spot us, but all that does is add some bite and urgency to the kiss. It's been so fucking long since I felt breathless and reckless, but in a way that feels distinctly *teenage*.

"I have to go," I remember to mumble at some point, but Declan pretends I haven't spoken. His hands are stuffed into the back pockets of my jeans, and he seems to be two seconds away from suggesting we crawl into my car to take things further. "Dec, come on, I have to go. Got a boy and a puppy waiting on me."

Against my lips, he says, "*Natural Born Killers*." I let out a questioning hum, my lips buzzing against his just a little. He steps back and frowns up at the lamppost above us, like looking bored and annoyed will make his words seem more casual. "You said people are supposed to know their friends' favorite movies. That's mine. And I like... baseball. I'm on the school team."

"Since when? You've never mentioned a single practice."

"Since freshman year. Hour-long practices right after MLEP every night, before I go out on the obstacle course. And I *know* I've never mentioned it before, I didn't realize I was supposed to be mentioning stupid shit like this."

"Are you a catcher on the field, too? Or just in bed?" I ask. Making a dumb, cliché joke is easier than doing anything that might give away how fast my heart is beating. I can't believe he's actually bothering to tell me this shit; I can't believe I made a list of stupid things he should tell me so that we could get closer, and he's actually trying to do it right now.

He rolls his eyes back in my direction and says, "Shortstop. I have no idea where that fits into your ass-fucking metaphor, though. What was the other useless detail you wanted to know about me?"

"Do you have any siblings?" I ask.

He shrugs. "Don't know, don't care. My birth mom doesn't have any other kids, but my bio-dad could've knocked up a dozen different women, for all I know. I haven't heard from him in ten years, so I can't be sure."

"I don't have any siblings," I say, just in case he was wondering. He probably wasn't.

"I kind of figured. This Ferrari of yours just *screams* 'spoiled only-child.'"

I crowd closer and nip at his bottom lip. "Asshole. What's your middle name?"

He presses me back against the side of my car and slips his hands under my jacket to hold me there as he kisses me. Truth be told, I get a little lost in it—lost enough that it takes me a second to even remember what we're supposed to be talking about when he pulls back and says, "Nice try. Still not telling you."

"Lancelot," I say.

He shakes his head and turns back towards the path to take him to the dorms. "Drive safely."

"Leroy."

"Goodbye, Garen."

223 days sober

"I need boot polish," are the first words out of Sam's mouth when he gets to the common room. "And a Xanax. And maybe a gun, so I can shoot myself in the fucking face."

"Pick two. I've got all three in my room, but I'm not going to waste a perfectly good Xanax on you, if you're just going to shoot yourself," Declan says. He's kicked back on the couch next to me, and one of his arms is slung across the back of it, barely a hair's width away from my shoulders.

Sam shakes one of his boots and says, "The *polish*, obviously. My parents are going to be here in like, twenty minutes."

Declan rolls his eyes and heaves himself to his feet. He makes it halfway down the hall before Sam calls after him, “Uh, and the other thing, too. The second one.”

If someone had made this request of me when I was seventeen, I would have stolen Jamie’s boot polish (kit—he had an entire fucking *kit*) and hoarded all my Xanax for myself. But Declan returns a minute later with a tin of polish, a boot brush, and handful of little white bars of Xanax. He holds the pills out, and each of the guys—Sam, Steve, Javi, Taylor, and Charlie—snatches one up.

“I knew there was a reason we kept you around, despite the fact that you’re a huge douchebag,” Taylor says.

Declan rolls his eyes, but the pills all get swallowed before he has time to steal them back as punishment. He glances over at me and says, after a long moment, “I know you still smoke up. But can you still take pills?”

I glance down. There are three pills left on his palm. I want to lean down and scoop them all up with a curl of my tongue. I shake my head and look down at the seam of the couch cushion I’m on. “I’d better not.”

“Okay,” he says simply, and tucks the pills into his pocket without taking one for himself. He doesn’t look like he’s experiencing any of the Parents’ Day anxiety the other boys are having, anyway.

“I hate this,” Sam grumbles. He stops polishing long enough to glare at me and Declan. “You guys are fuckin’ lucky your parents don’t care about you enough to show up for things like this.”

“Yeah. I’m so glad my parents only ever thought of me as their drunken, teenage mistake,” Declan says, holding out his fist to me.

“I’m so glad my parents have finally realized I’m my own drunken, teenage mistake,” I say, knocking my knuckles against his. And then, I’ve suddenly got a lapful of faggot, because Ryan Marten has thrown himself on top of me. I shove at him, alarmed, and say, “What the fuck?”

“Please tell me that one of you assholes is holding,” Ryan says.

“Right now, I seem to be holding *you*,” I point out, “and I’d really rather not be, so, wanna get off?”

“I’ve already *gotten* off with you, Anderson, get over yourself,” he snaps, then turns his focus back to the rest of the squad. “My shitsnacking older brother just got his idiot ass shot in Afghanistan.”

The bored looks and not-too-subtle eyerolls all disappear at once. I say, much more soberly, “I’m sorry. Is he going to be—”

“He’s *fine!*” Ryan wails—and not an emotional sort of wail, either; it’s a self-pitying pout at maximum volume. “He takes one little bullet to the leg, and he gets a fucking medal for it. He’s at a hospital in Germany right now, and he’s coming home next week, and there’s going to be a parade. Literally—the mayor of my hometown is holding a parade to honor him. Now *he’s* a decorated war hero, *I’m* a limp-wristed disappointment who can’t wait to graduate so I can forget everything I know about rifles, and now I’m going to have to sit through nine hours of the ‘*why can’t you be more like Kevin*’ lecture. If I’m not high within the next five seconds, I will die.”

“Promise?” I grumble, and Ryan jabs an elbow into my ribcage, but Declan leans closer and says quietly, “What are you looking for?”

Ryan opens his mouth to reply, but he’s cut off by Sam, who hisses, “Dude, since when do we sell to people we don’t even *like*?”

"Rude," Ryan huffs.

"Samuel, I've got enough drugs in my room to put down an entire hair-metal band *and* all their coked out groupies," Declan sighs. "West Point administers drug-tests to all their cadets, and I'm supposed to report for basic training on July second. In order to have a clean system, I need to stop using drugs before graduation, but that doesn't mean I want to waste them. If I try to polish them all off by myself, I'll die. And since my current partner in crime over here—" he tips his head slightly in my direction, "—doesn't use, I have to resort to spreading the wealth to the fucking amateurs."

"I'm not an amateur," Ryan sniffs.

"Yes, you are," Declan says flatly. "Look, whatever you want, I probably have, but I'm not selling you anything in the middle of the common room. Let's go."

Ryan finally gets off my lap, but I barely have a second to enjoy the comfort before Declan hooks his middle finger around mine and drags me off the couch. I blink. "Wait, why do I have to come along?"

"I need an adult, Ryan scares me," Declan says blandly, and I laugh, because the truth is, I don't think Declan Campbell is scared of anything.

Declan. Declan Campbell. It's still *weird* that I don't know his middle name, so I let myself be towed down the hallway and say, "Does the L stand for Lucifer? Because that would make me unbelievably happy."

"What makes you so sure it stands for anything? Maybe it's just a letter. Like Ulysses S. Grant," he says over his shoulder. He stops to unlock the door to his room, then gestures me and Ryan inside ahead of him. Once the door is closed and locked, he looks around at Ryan again. "What do you want?"

"Got any oxy?" Ryan asks. He looks way too cheerful about it; I wonder if he's even done it before.

If Declan's raised eyebrow is any indication, he's similarly unimpressed. "Do you really think your parents won't notice if you're on narcotics all day?"

Ryan rolls his eyes. "As long as I'm technically conscious, they won't really care. They're looking for a captive audience, not a conversation."

Declan raises one finger and turns it in a small circle. "Face the other side of the room." At Ryan's hesitation, his mouth goes tight with irritation. "Sorry, Marten, but I'm not actually a moron. I've got hundreds of dollars' worth of contraband hidden around this room, and I've got no interest in letting you see where it's kept. Face Javi's side of the room, or get out of here."

Ryan finally turns around. Half my attention is on making sure he stays facing that way, but half of me is curious to see how many of Declan's hiding places are the same as mine. He opens the closet and takes his camera bag down from the top shelf. One of the side pockets is full of film canisters, which wouldn't be at all strange, except for the fact that his camera is digital. He pops the top off one canister, taps a pill out onto the corner of his desk, then takes another two from a different container. Once he has returned the bag to the shelf in the closet, he wanders over to stand next to me.

"Have you taken oxy before?" he asks Ryan.

Ryan rolls his eyes. "Please. Don't act like you're the only Patton boy who knows how to party."

"Cut the shit and answer the question. I need to know if you've got a tolerance for this before I decide what I'm giving you," Declan says. Ryan glowers, which is answer enough. "Fine. I'll give you a ten-mill and two fives. Take the ten at breakfast after you've started eating. If you don't feel it within half an hour, take one of the fives. You can take the other five when the high starts to wear off, but this is all I can sell you in one day. I'm not giving more than twenty mills to someone who's never done it before."

"Ooh, I've done *it* plenty," Ryan purrs. "Garen can tell you that much, can't he?"

"Ew," I say. Declan snorts.

Ryan holds out his hand for the pills. Declan holds out his empty hand for the money. "Thirty bucks."

"Eric told me the standard price is a dollar per milligram," Ryan says.

"Eric's right, for once in his pathetic life. But you annoy me, so I'm selling to you at a fifty percent markup. Be grateful—he'd have to pay double the street price." Declan waits, but not for long. He snaps his fingers. "Thirty, or get out. I'm not interested in haggling here."

"Fine, fine," Ryan grumbles. He fishes the bills out of his wallet and exchanges them for the pills. Declan looks pointedly towards the door, but before he goes, Ryan cocks an eyebrow and says, "Do *you* need an adult? Everybody knows that Garen has wanted to climb you like a tree since he got here at the start of the semester."

I can't even speak because I'm so offended by the idea of *Ryan Marten* thinking I'm too aggressive with my flirtation. Declan, on the other hand, is amused enough to clap Ryan on the shoulder as he shows him to the door. "I think I've got it under control. If anyone else in the squad needs chemical assistance to get through the day, tell them I'm willing to sell until breakfast. After that, they're on their own."

Ryan allows himself to be pushed through the door, and a moment later, I allow myself to be pushed up against it. Declan's hands are trailing over my body, but not stopping anywhere with intent just yet. He says, "It's kind of funny that everybody in this school can see how badly you want my dick."

"It's even funnier that they're all too stupid to realize how much you love to take mine," I retort.

We only manage a minute of kissing—not nearly enough time to get anywhere interesting—before there's a knock at the door. It's some random asshole who wants Vicodin, shortly followed by another random asshole who wants Adderall, then Xanax, then Percocet. For half an hour, I lounge around on Declan's bed while he makes a quick two hundred dollars. Most of his treats are stashed away in the camera bag, but I see him dip into drawers and side pockets of gym bags once or twice. His new customers are coming in too frequently for us to bother trying to hook up when we're alone, so I lose interest after a while and start playing games on my phone.

At least, I lose interest until Declan says, "G, go wait in the hall for a minute."

"What?" I say, looking up from my game.

"I need you to go out into the hall," he repeats.

That's when I realize that the guy who's buying is digging bills out of his wallet not so that he can pay, but so that he can roll them up to use as a straw. I don't mean to, but I think I shiver. Declan looks at me like he knows, but I don't want to be *that guy* who can't handle being in the same room as a drug he's not even doing. I roll over onto my stomach and return to my game. "I won't watch, if that's what you're worried about. It's not a big deal."

It's a huge fucking deal, actually, but Declan obliges. I listen to him rummaging around on his desk, cutting a line or two for the guy, and finishing up the transaction. By the time the door opens and shuts again, my hands are close to shaking. Declan comes close and curls his hand over the back of my neck.

"I'm bored of playing dealer for the day," he says. Lies, probably. "Let's go outside for a bit."

We both go out to the parking lot for a smoke or two, and by the time we get back, the dorm is mostly

deserted. The lobby and common room are both empty, with all our classmates down at breakfast, meeting up with their parents. Declan is quick to take advantage of the solitude.

"Hope you had breakfast at home, because we're skipping it," he says, pinning me to the wall in the middle of the hallway, halfway to his dorm room. "Everybody else will be off with their families until after dinner. We've got my room to ourselves, and I haven't gotten any since Friday—"

"Aww, babe," I coo, putting as much mockery into my words as I can when he's got his hands on me. "Have you been *waiting* for me? That's so cute, I didn't realize you wanted to be exclusive—"

"You're an asshole," he says. He sinks his teeth into my bottom lip and gives it a sharp tug as punishment. "And I wasn't *waiting for you*. None of the Ward girls got back until last night, and then all my usual girls were too busy catching up with each other to have me over. It just happens to have worked out that you're the last person I—"

"Shut the fuck up and take me to bed, you moron," I interrupt.

At this point in my life, I sort of figured there wasn't much left that could shock me. Turns out, I'm wrong as fuck, because I'm stunned when Declan grabs at my thighs and hauls me halfway up the wall. I have to scramble to tighten my legs around his waist, but I've got no idea what to do, or if I'm doing this right, because this doesn't *happento* me. I pick guys up all the time, fuck 'em against walls and doors, bounce them on my dick in the middle of a room if they're small enough and I feel like showing off—but I can't remember the last guy who could take my weight like Declan's doing now, his hands cupping my ass, my back against the wall, and not a single word about the fact that I'm over one-eighty.

I've only ever been with one guy who was stronger than me, and when he wanted to prove that to me, he sure as hell didn't do it by picking me up to kiss me against walls.

My muscles go rigid at the thought, and I want to shove away from the wall, from Declan, I want to get room to breathe so that I can say, *put me the fuck down right now*, but I can't find enough air for that. All I can manage is a strangled, "Bed."

Declan nods and mutters something that might be a *yeah* against the mark he's sucking onto the side of my neck; he backs off from the wall, but he doesn't put me down, just turns us around and carries me a few steps further down the hall until we get to his room, then pins me to the door. I've got one arm thrown around his shoulders for support, but my free hand scrambles over the surface of the door, trying to feel around for the knob, because the faster I get this open, the faster I can be on the bed instead of up in the air. When I finally get the door open, Declan doesn't do anything other than carry me in, push the door shut, and back me right up against *that* side of it.

"Bed," I repeat, more insistently this time, trying to swallow my impending panic. Why can't he just put me down? Why can't I just ask him to put me down? It's the world's biggest relief when he finally swings me around and deposits me on his bed, crawling right on after me to cover my body with his as he kisses me again. This is better. This is good. Even with his weight on top of me, I don't feel crushed, or like he's trying to manhandle me. I'm comfortable like this, though I'm coming up with some sneaky plans to wrestle him around so that I can be on top.

He's already got my uniform jacket mostly unbuttoned when a panicked voice says from the other side of the room, "Uh."

Declan and I both look around so suddenly that our heads smack together, but I don't feel anything other than nerves and dread, because Javi is standing right next to his desk, his eyes as wide as teacup saucers. He seems mostly to be staring at Declan's face, but every few seconds, his gaze darts down to where Declan's hips are still bracketed by my thighs. Because, like an absolute fucking idiot, Declan hasn't gotten off of me. Instead, he says, in a scarily neutral tone, "Javi. I didn't expect you to be here."

Javi's eyebrows travel impossibly higher. "I can see that."

"Why aren't you at breakfast with your family?" Declan asks. He still hasn't gotten off me.

"I, um. I forgot my phone. And I wanted to come get it," Javi says. He has given up on looking at our faces and is now fully focused on the way our hips are fitted together. I don't think I've ever seen anyone look so fucking baffled. "Vanessa might text me, you know?"

"Yes, she might," Declan agrees. The dorm room is dead silent; I have to press my lips together to keep it that way. A minute passes, and I think I'm the only one who's blinking. Declan tips his head towards Javi's hand. "And I see that you have your phone now." Javi looks at him, then down at the phone in his hand, then back at Declan. He nods. I glance back to Dec in time to see his eyes flicker expectantly towards the door. "Then I guess you should be heading back to breakfast now, shouldn't you?"

"Yes?" Javi says uncertainly.

Declan gives him a bland, patronizing sort of smile, then returns his attention to the fat fucking hickey he obviously intends to leave at the join of my neck and shoulder. Javi hasn't moved, and I'm still trying to wrap my head around how supernaturally weird and blase Declan is being about this, when the dorm room door opens again and Declan mutters, "*Jesus fucking Christ*," a sentiment that is echoed much more loudly by Sam, who's standing framed in the doorway and looking simultaneously stunned and delighted.

"What the fuck, Dec?" he says, half laughing. "Uh, you know you're on a *guy* right now, right? Like, you know that Garen's a dude?"

Declan shifts halfway off me, just enough that the other two can see as he yanks open my belt buckle and shoves his hand right down the front of my pants so that he can grab my stubbornly half-erect dick. I let out an embarrassing whine that I try to muffle against Declan's shoulder, but it's barely audible anyway over his annoyed pronouncement, "Wow, what do you know? Guess you're right, Samuel."

"What—did you run out of girls or something?" Sam asks.

"You're a fucking moron," Declan says flatly. "Now, in case you both haven't noticed, I'm kind of busy here, so can you be on your way? Or is there something I can help you with?"

"Right now, you can mostly help me by taking your hand out of Garen's pants," Javi croaks, though he has dropped his phone back on the bed to plaster both hands over his eyes, so I don't get why he's complaining.

"Just *leave*, you assholes," I say, but it comes out more breathless than I'd like. Declan's hand is still on my dick, and he looks around to give me a curious, approving little stare, like he's pleased to know that I've got no problem kicking our friends out of a room that isn't even mine. At any rate, he leans in to mouth at that same spot on my neck again, despite the fact that no one else has moved. Why am I into a guy who's so *weird*? Is my taste really this awful? Is this how guys feel about getting stuck with me and my exhibitionist ass most of the time?

But Sam just shakes his head, sobering up a little as he says, "Can't. I actually came up here for—I mean, I was sent, I guess?" He doesn't get a reply to that, probably because he hasn't said much worth replying to. "Dude, your mom is here?"

"What the fuck, I'm seeing her for dinner on Thursday anyway," I say. It doesn't matter that we're talking about my mom, or that my friends are still here, staring; I can't help but dig my fingers into Declan's shoulders when I feel the hard ball of his tongue ring against my jugular. "Tell her to go away, I'm getting laid right—"

"No, uh..." Sam clears his throat and tries again, wincing a little as he says in that same questioning voice, "Not you? Declan, your, uh... your mom is here?"

Declan freezes. One of my hands is between his shoulderblades, but his back isn't moving, so I'm not sure he's even breathing. And he sure as hell isn't taking his teeth off me. His jaw is as locked down as the rest of his bones, and I can only take maybe twenty seconds of that stillness before I have to squirm and say, "Dec, *teeth*."

His jaw unlocks, and he lifts his mouth away just enough to be heard when he says, "You're mistaken."

Sam makes a face. "There are really only so many ways to interpret, 'Hi, I'm looking for my son, he's a senior here and his name is Declan Campbell.' And just for the record—why the fuck didn't you ever mention that your mom is so *hot*?"

Declan is off the bed in a fucking *second*. I scramble up after him in case he needs to be restrained from taking a swing at Sam, but he goes to the closet instead. He grabs a few of the film canisters and starts tipping pills out onto the desk in twos and threes.

"Dec, you don't have to talk to her, if you don't want to," I say, staring at the pills. "One of us can go down there and tell her to fuck off back to Kansas or Nebraska or wherever."

"It's fine. I just want to fortify myself—" Declan pops two of the ten-milligram Percocet into his mouth and swallows them down, "—and get this over with." He returns the bag to the closet, scoops the rest of the pills up, and stashes them in the pocket of his uniform jacket. He hitches his chin at Sam. "Where is she?"

"Uh, down in the dining hall. She's at the same table as Charlie and Taylor and their families."

My body goes cold, right down to my bones. "Wait, their whole families? Like, the Walczyks—are they all there?"

Sam's fear of Declan melts into something a lot closer to pity when he looks at me. It doesn't make me feel any better, not even when he says, "His brother's not there, if that's what you're asking."

Of course he's not; there's a restraining order. I don't know if that makes his absence better or worse. I scrub my hands over my face and say, "Nah, just his fuckin' parents."

"Yeah, and I'm sure they loooooove you," Sam says.

The funny thing is, they actually used to. Back when Dave and I first got together and they met me over winter break, they thought I was the sweetest, cutest little thing they'd ever seen. We hadn't even been dating for two months before they started making sly little 'jokes' about us getting married after college. Needless to say, their love for me probably disappeared around the time their son was arrested because of me.

"Hey," Declan says, catching the front of my uniform jacket and backing me up against his desk. It's so strange to have him touch me like this in front of our friends, with the door open, but he doesn't seem to notice. "Don't worry about them. Charlie's parents fucking adore me. I'll keep them off your ass, if you can do something for me, too."

I nod. "Yeah. Whatever you want."

"When you meet my mom, I want—" he says, stopping right in the middle of his own sentence to kiss me deeply. Javi and Sam both awkwardly avert their eyes. Declan pulls away, knocks his forehead against mine, and finishes, "I want you to be on your worst behavior. Okay?"

My worst behavior. Acting like a fuck-up, making somebody's family hate me, proving to the Walczyks

that I'm exactly as horrible as they want to believe I am. I can do that. I nod, and Declan kisses me again before he heads for the door.

We don't even make it to the dining hall. A woman is standing just off the path, smoking a cigarette and texting someone on her cell phone. She's beautiful in that same strange, dirty-pure way that Declan is—Midwestern wholesomeness wrapped up in something sharp and poisonous as a snakebite. She has clear, freckled skin and bright, golden-brown eyes. Her strawberry-blond hair falls halfway down her back in a thick curtain of loose curls. She has a kind of pageant queen vibe to her, but the kind of pageant queen who loses her title when topless photos of her are leaked to the press. She's wearing a white cardigan over her pale pink dress, but the Easter basket color scheme isn't enough to hide that it's a club dress: short, skintight, and showing way too much leg to really blend in at a Parents' Day breakfast. And alright, I know Declan's story, I know his mom was young when she had him, but I didn't expect her to look *this* young. She looks like she'd be more likely to hang out with Stohler than with my mom.

She finally catches sight of the four of us on a random glance up from her cell phone, and her face splits into a smile. "Surprise!"

"Hi, Alicia," Declan says. He doesn't return her smile.

"Declan. God, look at you," she laughs. She slips her phone back into her purse and holds her arms out. "What, I don't get a hug?"

Declan seems very inclined to tell her that no, she doesn't get a fucking hug, but it must not have been much of a question, because she gets her arms around him before he can say anything. He doesn't move, and after a few seconds, she releases him and holds him at arm's length. "Jesus Christ. You've gotten so tall."

"Yeah. Weird how that tends to happen between the ages of like, ten and seventeen," I say. I look over at Declan. "Wanna go in for breakfast?"

"No, wanna skip it," he says. He turns his head towards Alicia, but his eyes are fixed several inches above her head. "I can give you a tour of the school, if you want. Show you around. And then you can, you know. Leave."

He takes a step towards the path that will lead him further into the residential quad, but I snag his arm so he can't go any further. "We don't have to do a full, sit-down meal, but you still have to eat something." I give him a look that I hope says *you just stuffed a bunch of drugs in your mouth*. He returns with a look that is probably meant to say *eat me*. "Oh, fuck off with that face, Campbell. Wait here for like, thirty seconds. I'll go grab something for us to eat as we walk."

The second I get inside the dining hall, my eyes go right to the table where Declan and I are supposed to be sitting. Charlie and his parents are seated so that their backs are turned to the door, and the idea of getting any closer and drawing their attention to me is making my stomach turn over. Instead, I head for the closest table, which happens to be full of freshmen and their families, all of whom blink up at me as I wedge my arm between a couple of them.

"Hello there, frosh parents. Don't mind me, I'm just gonna steal some food so I don't have to go to my own table," I announce. The conversation only falters briefly before they let me get on with it. I build a quick sandwich out of a bagel, some scrambled eggs, and a few slices of bacon, then stuff a couple of bananas in my pockets—a dick joke I can't wait to make once I'm back outside—and shove a muffin in my mouth. I grab the coffee carafe out of a freshman's hand and say around the muffin, "You're too young for coffee anyway." The words are totally garbled, but whatever, nobody tries to stop me from leaving with it.

Outside, Declan is still refusing to look at Alicia, even as she continues to talk at him. I try to hand him the breakfast sandwich, and he glowers at it. He looks fully prepared to snatch it out of my hand and smash it on the ground. I set the coffee carafe on a nearby bench so that I can take the muffin out of my mouth

and say, "Dude, eat it."

"Eat *me*," he says, and I smirk.

"Maybe later, if you ask me a bit more nicely. And if you fucking eat the sandwich I so generously made for you," I say. He sighs like I'm the worst person alive, but he takes the sandwich anyway. I retrieve my coffee carafe and take a long sip right from the mouth of it.

My unexplained presence is apparently too much for Alicia, because she says, "And who are you?"

"I'm Garen," I say. "I'm the nineteen-year-old cokehead go-go boy who's been tryin' to fuck your kid for the last three months."

Alicia stares at me. I chug my coffee. Declan smiles serenely and says, "So, this is the residential quad. The dining hall is behind you, and the dorms are all back that way." He gestures vaguely over his shoulder. "I live in Whitman Hall. Garen's a day student, so he doesn't live on campus. He has a house with his step-boyfriend and their dog."

"Step-boyfriend?" Alicia echoes.

"Stepbrother-slash-ex-boyfriend," I say. "It's kind of a thing. Anyway, let's go, I can run this tour better than your bastard-child can. Been here longer—I'm a super-senior."

I lead the pair of them in a big, zig-zagging circuit of the campus, ignoring the usual landmarks in favor of pointing out different places I've had sex or gotten wasted.

There's the dorm room where I lost my virginity to my best friend, there's the gun room where I had a threesome with these two guys whose names I don't remember, there's the roof where I smoked pot for the first time, there's the academic building where I blew a teacher one time, there's the administration hall where the bathrooms have marble counters that are great for snorting lines.

Declan trails along next to me, too lazy and high to contribute much to the conversation. Whenever I say something particularly awful, he touches my arm like he's trying to thank me. I don't know why he bothers, though; the worse I get, the more entertained Alicia seems to be. She laughs at my stories, asks questions that I ignore. It's really not going at all as planned.

I manage to waste the entire morning dragging her all over campus, insulting her, and talking over her attempts to make normal conversation, but when noon rolls around, we bump into Javi and his family, who are on their way to the dining hall for lunch.

"Oh, that's great," Alicia says. "I'm starving."

"I thought you were going to go after you saw the campus," Declan says flatly. He seems to be sobering up, which I know must be the exact opposite of what he wants.

Alicia shrugs and follows Javi's mom into the dining hall. "I can stay for a little while longer."

Once she has disappeared inside, Declan rubs a palm over his face and says, "Christ, I wish she wasn't here."

"Do you want me to tell her to leave?" I ask, but he shakes his head.

"No. I don't want to tell her to leave, I just want her to not have come here in the first place. She stopped being my mom when I was seven years old, and she hasn't even fucking spoken to me since I was ten. I don't want her here, but I shouldn't have to tell her to get out. She should fucking know she's not welcome."

But Alicia plainly has no idea. When we go inside, she has already made herself comfortable at the table with Javi's family... and Charlie and his parents, of course. Any hope I'd had of Mr. and Mrs. Walczyk not noticing me is shot to hell when Javi says, "This is Garen. He's new in our squad this semester. Garen, this is my dad, and my sisters, Gabi and Adriana."

His sisters seem to be a couple years older than him, thankfully; I'd feel weird about being an asshole in front of kids, but as it is, I think I'm good. I say, "Nice to meet you all. Where's Mrs. Santos?"

Javi shrugs. "She's not a fan of Parents' Day. She'll be out here for graduation next month, but her accent's pretty thick, and she doesn't like to feel like she's holding up the conversation."

"Oh? Where's she from?" I ask. I sneak a glance across the table at Charlie's parents. They are both just flat-out *staring* at me.

"Tijuana," Mr. Santos answers.

"No shit? Cool city, I bought an eight-ball there once," I say, and next to me, Declan snorts. Javi's dad doesn't seem to have any idea how to reply to that, but Charlie's parents and Declan's mom don't look nearly shocked enough for my liking, so I plow onward. "It's a shame she's not here, I would've liked a chance to meet her. My Spanish is really basic, though. It's pretty much limited to, like, '*hola, papi, yo quiero chupar tu polla.*'"

One of Javi's sisters chokes on a bite of her food, and the other bursts out laughing. Javi kicks me viciously under the table, then again even harder when I wink at his dad, who looks away, alarmed.

Declan taps the tines of his fork against the back of my hand. "What does that mean?"

"I'll teach you later," I say before tonguing the inside of my cheek a few times. I'm having fun, up until I hear Mr. Walczyk muttering something that might be *for Christ's sake* across the table. And then I just sort of feel like shit.

"Declan, I have something for you. Your dad gave it to me," Alicia says suddenly. She unclasps her purse and begins digging around inside of it, eventually surfacing with a garish orange envelope that she props up against the water pitcher. When Declan doesn't react, she adds, "We don't talk much. Only when he's *bored* of his new bitch. Kelsey, Chelsea, whatever her name is. Sometimes I go to Colorado, and we hang out."

I reach over and feel around in one of the inside pockets of Declan's uniform jacket until I find a condom. I tuck it into Alicia's purse and say in a stage-whisper, "Might want to remember that the next time you two are *hanging out*. I'm pretty sure your parents won't be willing to adopt the next one, too."

Declan shrugs. "Wait a couple years. Maybe I'll get my head blown off in the Middle East, and they'll get empty nest syndrome."

"Declan, you shouldn't say things like that," Mrs. Walczyk says reproachfully. Declan mouths, *sorry*, but obviously doesn't mean it. She clears her throat and politely asks Alicia, "What does Declan's father do?"

"He's in, ah... horticulture? Colorado's a great place for, uh. Certain types of farming," Alicia says hesitantly. We all wait, but she doesn't offer anything further.

I'm the first one to get it, and the second I do, I blurt out, "Wait, Dec, your dad's a fucking *weed farmer*?"

"If I'd known that, I might've tried a little harder not to get myself thrown in foster care," Declan says. He flicks the corner of the envelope in front of him. "But I guess that would explain how he can suddenly afford seventeen years of child support. Kind of expected a bigger envelope, though."

"It isn't child support, Declan," Alicia snaps. "He just wanted to send you something for your birthday. Belated birthday, whatever."

Declan turns the envelope over a few times, but it's unmarked. He tears the flap back and pulls out a bright blue and green striped card. There's a glittery white birthday cake in the center of it. He flicks the card open and blinks down at the message inside. He's very still for a moment.

I bump his shoulder with mine. "Dec?"

His jaw is locked tight, so when he makes a noise of acknowledgment, all it comes out as is a hum. I crowd closer so that I can read over his shoulder. *Happy 18th, Dylan. From: Bryan (Dad)*. Below that, there's a crookedly taped, five-dollar gift card to Foot Locker.

"What can you buy at a sneaker store for only five dollars?" I ask.

"Pair of shoelaces, maybe," Declan says.

"Great. You can use them to hang yourself the next time you're reminded of the fact that your dad can't remember your name or how old you are," I say. He doesn't say anything. I pluck the card from his hand and hold it above one of the tealights. The glitter begins to glow and crackle, peeling away under the touch of the flame. It takes a few seconds, but eventually, the corner of the card flares up.

"Set the flowers on fire," Declan suggests. I move the burning card closer to the centerpiece, but Javi snatches the card out of my hand and dunks it in the water pitcher.

"Garen," he warns, then sharper and quieter, "*Declan*."

I look back over at Declan just in time to see him slip two little white pills into his mouth. He catches my eye and sticks his tongue out so I can see the perfect row of circles—two Percocet nestled on either side of the bright silver ball of his piercing. He swallows, flashes Taylor a bored smile, and says, innocent as anything, "Sorry. Family time gives me a headache, needed some medicine."

I don't know how many milligrams those pills were, but they must be strong, because within fifteen minutes, Declan is completely and obviously stoned. The conversation has carried on—Javi's dad and Charlie's parents seem perfectly eager to return to more appropriate lunch discussion, Alicia is texting someone again—but Declan has completely checked out of it. He isn't even checking his phone or paying attention to me, anything that might be a suitable explanation for his silence; he's just sitting there, blinking slowly at whoever is talking, a vacant half-smile on his face.

My hand rests half-curved on my own knee, and my chair is pushed so close to Declan's that our thighs are flush against each other. It doesn't take much to slip my hand onto his knee and squeeze. Declan turns to face me, his torso twisted enough to brace an elbow on the table. He props his head up on his hand and watches me eat for several minutes. I'm mostly operating under the assumption that he's too high to remember to look away, but on the off-chance that he expects something in return, I take a sip of water and meet his eyes over the rim of the glass. He doesn't look away. Instead, he licks his lips and mouths, *touch me*.

I am, I mouth back. He shakes his head slowly from side to side; I mimic the movement. He sighs and digs his phone out of his pocket. The screen is angled towards me so that I can see as he types into a blank message window, *want you 2 touchh my dick. get me off. get creativ & i bet we could find a way 2 get yr fingers in my ass*.

With my right hand still settled on his knee, I lean in and cup my left around his ear so that no one else can hear me whisper, "You do remember that your mother is on your other side, right?"

He snorts and says, "And you do remember that I have *issues* when it comes to my parents, right?"

He really must, because when I give in and slowly work my hand up his thigh and under the napkin on his lap, I find him already hard. He inches his chair forward until his body is flush to the table edge so no one can see my hand on him. I drag his zipper down and pull his dick out; it seems like a better idea than just putting my hand in, because I don't trust him to remember not to come all over his pants, and anyway, the napkin is covering everything up.

I'm still picking at the food on my plate, but I'm more focused on watching everyone at the table, Declan included. He's still mostly facing me, and he's doing a pretty good job of keeping his expression blank while I stroke him off, but every now and then, he seems to forget himself. His eyes will flutter shut, or his lips will part, and I'll have to stop touching him until he can get himself under control. The closer he gets to coming, the more pissed off he seems when I stop. He's staring at the table with his teeth clenched together and a flush rising in his cheeks when, across the table, Mrs. Walczyk says, "Are you alright, Declan?"

Declan gives a jerky nod, but doesn't seem prepared to speak... possibly because he's in the middle of coming all over my hand and trying not to let it show on his face.

I clear my throat so that everyone who is looking at Declan will look over at me instead. "He's fine. He just hasn't been feeling that well today, I guess. Maybe—"

"I was speaking to Declan, not you," Mrs. Walczyk says coldly, and my mouth clicks shut. They're the first words she's said to me in years, and I had no idea she'd be able to make me feel so small this quickly. I guess she and her eldest have that in common. Shaking, I withdraw from Declan's lap and carefully wipe off my hand on my own napkin under the table, leaving Declan to get himself sorted on his own. Neither of us really talks for the rest of the meal.

Alicia sticks around for most of the afternoon, too. There's another round of the campus, this time with the other families. She asks to see the dorms, and Declan reluctantly allows her to poke around his room for a bit. I sprawl out on his bed, trying to look as slutty and comfortable there as I possibly can. When that doesn't get a reaction, I climb up on Javi's desk and disable the smoke alarm so that I can have a cigarette without leaving the room. Alicia doesn't blink, but she does pluck the cigarette from my mouth and sneak a quick drag at one point.

As the drugs wear off, Declan gets closer and closer to the breaking point. When we're back outside and have met up with Javi's family again, Mr. Santos asks to be shown the senior obstacle course. Javi leads the way, but Declan doesn't move. He just snaps.

"Why?" Declan asks, grabbing Alicia's arm and pulling her to a stop before she can follow the others. "Why are you *here*?"

Alicia's smile dims. "Declan, don't ask me something like that. I'm your mom, and I feel like I've hardly spent any time with you. Now Gram tells me you got into West Point, and you're going off to the Army. I was so *proud* when I heard that, I went right out and told all my friends how—"

"Oh, so *that's* what this is," I interrupt when it finally dawns on me. "That's why you finally started giving a shit about your kid after all these years. You're, what, thirty? Thirty-one? And you're single, too, right?"

"So?" she says.

"Soooo, I'd bet all your friends are starting to settle down, aren't they? They're getting married, having kids, and they're in the *gross* part of having kids—they've got these useless little babies that don't do anything but cry and puke and eat and shit all over themselves. But you really lucked out, I guess, because hey, you've already got a kid, and the hard part's all over!"

I grab Declan by the shoulders and drag him out so he's standing between his mom and me. "Turned out pretty good, didn't he?" I say, hooking my chin over his shoulder and gliding my hands down his arms from biceps to wrists. "Good enough for West Point, at least, and that's what really matters, isn't it? Having something to brag about to all your friends. When their kids are taking their first steps, you'll be saying, '*Declan's doing so well at the Academy, top of his class.*' When your friends' kids are a bunch of preteen brats, your boy will probably be *U.S. Army Captain Declan L. Campbell*. And it doesn't fucking matter to you that you haven't taken care of him since he was seven years old. You'll take the credit anyway, 'cause that's what works best for *you*. But you know what would work best for Dec? For you to get out of his fucking face. He doesn't need you here, and he sure as shit doesn't *want* you here. So just leave. Okay?"

Alicia's bottom lip is wobbling, and her golden eyes are shining wetly. She's staring at Declan, not me, but when I glance sideways at him, he looks bored. Sober and tired and so fucking bored.

"Do *you* want me to leave, Declan?" Alicia asks.

He's back to avoiding her eyes; I think he might be staring at the strap of her purse instead. "Yes. And this time, I'd appreciate it if you could refrain from showing up in seven years and trying to pretend you didn't fucking bail when I was in second grade. I'd kind of like you to just stay gone."

"I'm your *mom*, Declan," Alicia whispers. One of the tears has finally tripped over the rim of her lashes and led a bead of mascara down to her chin. Declan doesn't seem at all fazed, and I can't let myself feel bad for Alicia if her own kid won't. When her words and her waterworks don't change anyone's mind, she looks away and says, "Alright. I'll go. But it's for *you*, it's because *you* want me to."

"Whatever you have to tell yourself," I sneer. And she leaves. She moves slowly, obviously hoping that someone will have a change of heart and try to stop her, but no one does, and eventually, her only option is to fuck off, once and for all. Declan's shoulders drop, like he's finally letting himself breathe. I'm still mostly plastered up against his back, so I say very quietly into his ear, "You good, dude?"

"Just glad the bitch is gone," he says.

"Tell me, Garen," says a voice behind me, and oh god, I don't have the energy to do this right now. "Do you make a habit of trying to tear families apart? First your own, then ours, now Declan's. Does that make you feel good?"

I release my grip on Declan's wrists and turn slowly on my heels. Mrs. Walczyk's eyes—her sharp hazel eyes, so similar to her sons'—are roving over my face like she can't decide which part she hates the most. I hope she notices the scar that Dave left on the side of my nose.

"Trust me, Mrs. Walczyk. Nothing that Dave did to me ever felt good," I say. "Don't try to blame me for the fallout of other people being *assholes*. It's not my fault that Declan's mom is a selfish cunt, and it's not my fault your son turned out to be a violent psycho."

"You pursued our son," Mr. Walczyk snaps, edging forward to stand next to his wife. They've got their arms around each other, like they have to stand in solidarity against me and what an asshole I am. "You seduced him, you fought with him, you baited him, you tormented him."

Something in me breaks, and I spit out, "Yeah, maybe I did all that. But even at my absolute worst, I never raped a fifteen-year-old boy in the backseat of a Lexus my daddy bought me, so I'm still doing better than one of your kids."

Mrs. Walczyk goes white with shock, and Mr. Walczyk reels back like I've taken a swing at him. Just over his shoulder, I can see Charlie staring at me, his face blank. And behind Charlie, there's Javi, and Javi's dad, and Javi's sisters, and Sam, and Sam's family, and Taylor, and Taylor's parents, and Taylor's brother, and Steven, and—I've still got Declan standing right behind me. There are so many people, so

many stunned faces, and every single one of them is probably picturing me crying in David's car, with my wrists pinned and a dick stuffed in my ass. They're seeing everything I never wanted anyone to see.

I can't breathe, and I can't be here anymore. I turn and walk, and I think somebody tries to grab my arm to stop me, but I shake whoever it is off and keep going. There are voices, maybe, some conversation and some arguments, but I can't really hear any of it. I don't think I can drive right now, not with my hands shaking this badly. The only place I can think to go right now is Declan's room.

The instant I have cleared the doorway and realized where I am and what's in here with me, everything is okay.

I go for the camera bag first. There are still a few pills in each of the little cannisters in the side pocket—Oxycontin, Ritalin, Percocet, Xanax, Valium, Adderall. I might go for that last one, if I can't find what I'm really looking for, but I'm not ready to give up my search just yet. Once I'm sure there isn't anything else in the bag, I shove it back onto the shelf and sit down in the desk chair. That's where he was right before he surfaced with the coke, right? Somewhere around here.

I don't remember hearing him open any drawers, but I go through them anyway, just in case. They're neat and mostly empty, so I don't have much to search through. There's a tiny bag taped to the underside of the top drawer, only accessible through the drawer below it. My heart jumps when my hand brushes the plastic, and I scramble to pry it free from the tape. But it turns out to be H, not coke, and that's the last fucking thing I want. I don't need opiates to bring me down, not when I'm so fucking low already. I jam the bag back in place with a half-torn piece of tape and slam the drawer shut.

Think, Garen, think, fuck. I was here for it, I should be able to remember this. He was at the desk, and I didn't hear him open the drawers, I didn't hear him move the desk to get something he'd taped to the back, I just heard... what was it, a click? That's it. A faint little click, plastic on plastic. His desk surface is almost bare. Just a few textbooks, his laptop, and an electric pencil sharpener on the back corner. I grab that and yank the front cover off. Tucked inside the compartment where the pencil shavings should collect, there's a little baggie with about a gram of cocaine in it.

A choked, too-loud sound tears out of my throat, something kind of like a sob. I've never been so fucking relieved in my life. I open the bag and tap a little bit of the powder out onto the desk surface. Truthfully, I sort of just want to pour it all out and faceplant into it, but I need to control myself. That's why I'm *doing* this, to get some fucking control. I reseal the baggie and grab an index card from the top drawer so that I can form the powder into a long, fat line.

The door opens, and I barely glance up. Thankfully, it's Declan, not Javi, or Taylor, or anyone else who's going to give me shit for this. The most he'll do is snap at me for going through his stuff. I preempt the complaint by saying, "Hey. My wallet's in my backpack, over by the bed. You can take however much you think is enough to cover this. I promise I wasn't trying to steal it, or anything."

Instead of reaching for my backpack, he reaches for my wrist and steers my hand away from the desk. "Don't touch my coke."

I roll my eyes and try to push him off, but his grip is too strong and my hand is shaking too much anyway. "Dude, I told you, I'll pay for it. I'll pay as much as you want. Please, I just need to do this, just once, and I don't know who else in the squad might be holding right now. I promise I can pay for it, Dec, please just let me—"

"You know, the more you say '*please*,' the more you sound like a desperate addict who's doing everything in his power to throw himself back down the rabbit hole," Declan interrupts, cocking his head to the side. "Funny how that works, isn't it?"

Nothing about this is funny. A lump forms in my throat, and I have to look down at the desk, because if I look at Declan, I'm going to cry, and if I cry in front of Declan, he's going to realize how fucking pathetic I

am, and if he knows how pathetic I am, he's going to start thinking about how someone bigger and stronger and better probably could've stopped Dave from doing what he did, and if someone else could have stopped Dave, then that means / should have stopped him, and I couldn't, I didn't, and I fucking hate myself for it every day.

The line of coke is still sitting on the desk. I stare at it, and it feels like it's staring back.

"I need this, Declan," I say hoarsely.

"I don't care. You're not getting it from me," he says. "I told you this weeks ago, when we smoked on my birthday. I'm not going to be responsible for you ending up back in rehab."

"I take full responsibility," I say, and I'm not entirely sure, but I think I might be laughing? And that's weird, I shouldn't be laughing, but I don't know how to handle this if I can't make it into a joke. I say, "I'm an adult, okay? I know what I'm doing. I know what I want. You don't have to make a big deal out of it. You do coke all the time, you know it's not a—"

"Shut up," he sighs, and he ducks down and swipes the coke right off the edge of the desk, into the palm of his hand, then brushes it off into the trash can under his desk.

Just like that, a perfectly excellent line is wasted. I stare at the trash can for a minute or two—as long as it takes for me to convince myself it would be totally fucked up to go after it. Finally, I look up at Declan and say, "You're such an asshole," and go for the rest of the bag.

"Don't touch my coke," he says again, snatching it away from me and stuffing it in his pocket, slapping my hand away when I reach for him now. "Christ, Anderson. No one's ever—I've never heard someone say what you said back there—"

"Fuck you."

"—and I don't know exactly how I'm supposed to react to this, but I'm pretty damn sure it shouldn't involve letting you go on a drug binge. Is there someone I should be calling?" he asks. When my only reply is to stare blankly back at him, he makes a very vague, frustrated sort of gesture. "Do you have a *sponsor*? Someone whose job it is to talk you off a ledge?"

"My friends do that," I say hoarsely. "That's—I don't have a sponsor, I just have my friends."

"Okay. I'll... where's your phone? You can call Goldwyn—"

"No. He'd drop everything to come take care of me, and I don't want that."

"You can call your roommate—"

"He'd do the same as Jamie, and I don't *want* that."

"What about the hot girl? The one who's good at laser tag—"

"Stohler. She helped me out this past weekend with getting the dance job, I don't want to bother her again."

"Fine, the short guy who *cheats* at laser tag—"

"Ben. He's got enough going on in his life right now. I told you, I don't want to bother anyone."

"Fucking Christ, Anderson, at least try to work with me on this. You can—" He breaks off and glances towards the door, then the window, like any way out of this room would be preferable to standing here

and trying to talk about emotional trauma with me for the second time in one day. It would be funny, maybe, if it were under different circumstances. Or if he didn't try again, in a tight, uncomfortable tone, "You can talk to me about it. If that's what you need. If that's a... *thing* that people do with their, uh—" He winces and waves a hand vaguely towards his own chest.

For a very strange second, I think he's trying to say *tits*, but that doesn't make sense, because I don't *have* tits, and anyway, Declan says that word just fine, usually about three times a day. Then I realize that I think he's trying to gesture towards his heart. "Feelings?" I say flatly. "Is that the word you're looking for? Are you asking if I need to talk about my feelings?"

"Yes," he says, very stiffly. He looked less uncomfortable and bewildered the first time I had my tongue in his ass.

I don't know what my answer is, but I don't get time to give it, anyway. The door bangs open, and there's Charlie, thankfully followed by Javi and Taylor, not Mr. and Mrs. Walczyk. For a very long minute—maybe several—he and I just stare at each other.

"Charlie." The name comes out of my mouth, but I'm not sure I intended to say it. I stand up. "I-I'm sorry, I never meant for you to find out about this, especially like—"

"I don't believe you," Charlie interrupts, and everything else sort of... slows down.

My whole body goes cold at once, like I've stepped outside my house in the middle of January without remembering to grab a coat. All I can do is shiver and stare. Slowly, *stupidly*, I say, "I don't understand."

"It's not that fucking difficult to comprehend, Garen," Charlie snaps, and for the first time since he came into the room, I realize that he is furious with me. "I don't believe you, I don't believe my brother would do something like that. That's not who he is. He's not a fucking rapist. You just said that to piss off my parents, and I get that you hate them, but you shouldn't have said that. You could have lied about anything else, it didn't have to be—"

"I wasn't lying," I say, my voice hitching up half an octave in my panic. "Charlie, I'm sorry if this doesn't fit with the image you want to have of your brother, but it happened."

"No, it didn't."

I've spent the last three and a half years imagining all the worst reactions people might have to finding out about this. My mom might make me press charges and go through a whole trial before the statute of limitations runs out. My dad might shoot Dave, or at least *have* him shot, call up somebody he met in the Corps when he was my age and just have Dave disappear. Travis might realize that I'm irreparably damaged and leave me for good. Everyone might look at me like I'm weak and dirty and worthless.

And somehow, in all this time, it has never occurred to me that someone might not believe me. That someone—someone I consider *a friend*—could look me right in the eyes, hear what happened, and think I'm making it up.

"Why the fuck would I lie about this?" I ask. "I don't—I just told you all about the worst experience of my entire life—the scariest, most painful, most humiliating thing that has ever happened to me—worse than rehab, worse than getting kicked out of my house, worse than any of the times I ended up—any of the times your brother *put* me in the hospital. The worst thing I've ever been through, and you think I'm making it up? Why the fuck would I do that?"

"I don't know! That's just the kind of person you are!" Charlie snaps. "You do—everything you do is for attention, okay? Everybody knows that. All you care about is getting people to look at you, to notice you, a-and you know what else?"

"What," I say flatly. My whole body is shaking harder than ever. "Come on, Charlie, what else?"

"Guys, don't," Taylor says quietly, trying to edge around Charlie to stand between us, but Charlie elbows him right back out of the way.

"He wouldn't have *had* to rape you. You gave it up for him anyway, everybody knows that, everybody knows what a fucking slut you are. When you were still in the dorms, you and James Goldwyn lived in the room right above mine, and I could *hear* you bringing guys back every single night. Everybody knows you're like, the easiest guy in PMA history, everybody knows that you're desperate to get guys to sleep with you. And you know what? You—you fucking *embarrass* yourself chasing after them. There's a no-contact order between you and David—"

"That's to protect *me*, not him!" I say, kind of hysterically, and I can hear Taylor trying feebly to intervene again, but Charlie talks right over him.

"Your own dad had to kick your gross ass out of the house to stop you from crawling into your brother's bed at night—"

"He's not my brother," I try to protest, but it's so hard to get the words out, because I feel like I'm really about to burst into tears, and why is he *saying this*, why can't he just *believe me*? "He was never my brother, that's not fair, and he—"

"And Declan!" Charlie continues. Declan looks around at him, but it immediately becomes clear that Charlie isn't actually talking to him, he's talking about him, he's saying, "I saw the fucking pictures, alright? I saw the texts you left on my phone after his birthday party."

Oh, fuck. I want to bash my head against the wall, I want to punch Charlie in the mouth so he'll shut up, I want to look at Declan, but when I do, his expression hasn't changed at all. It's like he hasn't even heard, but I don't know how he could miss the way Charlie's still hissing, "What happened, Garen? Did he get completely wasted one night and let you suck his dick, and now you're stalking him, too?"

"Wait, *what*?" Taylor says, his eyes so wide I can see the whites all the way around his irises. Apparently, good gossip is more important than keeping the peace, like he's been trying to do for the past ten minutes. Javi grimaces at me, like he *wants* to help, but is pretty damn positive that talking about what he saw this morning in the dorm won't make anyone happier.

Charlie's focus on me doesn't waver. "I saw the texts, I know what's going on, I know that you keep *begging* him to hook up with you again. It's sick, Garen. It's so fucking disgusting, the shit you said in those texts, talking about how all you want is to have him fuck your throat and come in your mouth or whatever, it's fucking disgusting. Was he still just sixteen when you did it? I bet he was, I bet you're the *real* rapist, and you're just—"

"You're done talking," Declan says. His voice is so cold that Charlie actually obeys.

I don't know what to do, or where to look. The others don't seem to know, either. The thing is, Charlie's words are actually true. I said those things, I *did* those things. And Declan *was* sixteen the first time I went down on him. He wasn't even legal, and Charlie's right, I was wrong, I was just like Dave. I feel sick to my stomach; I have to press a closed fist to my mouth to steady myself, because I'm genuinely terrified that I might be about to puke.

But Declan... Declan doesn't look nervous. Or ill. Or anything, other than *pissed*.

"Charles," he says, very slowly, "I am now going to *generously* pretend that my sex life is any of your business, and in return, I expect you to be equally generous in giving me your full, undivided, and totally *silent* attention. Nod your head if that sounds like a reasonable agreement to you."

Charlie's head jerks in one awkward, almost involuntary nod.

Declan takes one step forward, then another, until he's right in front of Charlie's face. I can tell that it's taking a concentrated effort for Charlie not to step back, but he stays right where he's supposed to, which is probably why Declan's voice is barely more than a whisper when he says, "You have no fucking idea what you are talking about. Dave is family, and you want to believe the best in him. I can appreciate that, on some level. But in order to preserve the image of your perfect brother, that means that Garen has to be the bad guy, doesn't it? Garen has to be a liar, and a stalker, and a whore, and a... what else, Charlie? A predator, right? You think he's the one who takes advantage of people?"

Declan actually laughs, taking a slight step back as he does so. When he speaks again, his voice is louder, sharper, more mocking. "Christ, the *hoops* you're jumping through to turn this whole thing around are just unbelievable. You've seen the photographs of what Garen looked like after your brother put him in the hospital! You *know* Dave was arrested for beating him up, you know about the restraining order, you know your brother's in anger management classes now so that G's family doesn't press charges, you know that Garen was only fifteen years old when your grown adult brother started going out with him. You're not an idiot, Charlie, and deep down, you fucking *know* that Dave is a sick fuck who thought it was fun to go *Deliverance* on an underage boy. Sorry, buddy, but that's a fact. Your brother is a rapist, and—"

"Then what the fuck is he?" Charlie snaps, flinging a hand out in my direction. The movement is sudden enough to make me flinch like a battered housewife. "There's just as much of an age difference between you two as there is between him and Dave—"

"You said you were going to be silent," Declan says flatly.

Part of me expects Charlie to hit him, or at least tell him to go fuck himself. After nearly four years of friendship, there's no way that Declan can still scare him into silence with just the tone of his voice. But Charlie's mouth clicks shut again, and Declan appears satisfied.

"Alright. Since you're so eager to talk about what's going on between me and Anderson, we'll fucking talk about it. Assuming that's fine with you," he adds, turning to look at me.

I haven't spoken a single word in maybe ten minutes, and my throat is too dry for me to manage anything now. Instead, I kick off my boots so that I can climb up onto Declan's bed and settle my back right into the corner of the room. His pillow is right next to my thigh, so I shift it onto my lap and pick at a loose thread on the edge of the pillowcase.

Declan still seems to be waiting for some sort of response from me. I shrug. That must count as a yes, because he turns to face Charlie again and says, "Here are the facts of the matter." He raises one finger into the air. "I'm the one who made the first move, not him. He isn't stalking me, or taking advantage of me, or begging me for anything." He raises a second finger. "The age issue bothered him, too, so we didn't fuck until after I had turned seventeen." A third finger. "Out of all the times he and I have hooked up—and trust me, we have reached the point where I've stopped counting—I was drunk *once*. As a general rule, he doesn't like to fool around when I'm fucked up. Consent is kind of a touchy subject with him. I'm sure you can figure out why." A fourth. "He's my friend, and he's supposed to be your friend, too. He admitted the worst thing that happened to him, and you called it bullshit. You insulted him, and you aired out all his other secrets in front of his friends, and you *wonder* why I choose not to tell you assholes anything about me or my family or the shitty things that happened to me when I was growing up." His hand falls back to his side. "Now, there are two options for how we can proceed. Option one: you look Garen in the eyes, you apologize to him, and you fucking mean it. Option two: you get the fuck out of my room, and you don't talk to me until you're prepared to be someone I can stand to be around again."

Charlie's eyes slip from Declan's face to mine, and I have no idea what he's thinking. He knows I'm not lying. He has to know, doesn't he? I don't understand how anyone could ever look Dave in the eyes and not know what kind of person he is. But Dave's his brother, and I'm beginning to think that maybe that means more than I expected it to. He swallows and says, "Is there an option three?"

"I stab you in the neck with a ballpoint pen," Declan says.

Probably against his better judgment, Taylor raises his eyebrows and says to me, "That's a protective boyfriend you've got there."

"They sound more like prison husbands than boyfriends," Javi mutters.

And that right there, that *word* is the part that's too much for me. I squeeze my eyes shut and snap my head back so it thunks loudly against the wall behind me. "He's not my fucking boyfriend, you guys. He's just this straight boy who sometimes gets bored of high-school girls and lets me suck him off in his truck. Can we stop talking about it? Can we stop talking about all of it? Can I just go home, please?"

"Yeah, of course," Taylor reassures me, at the same time that Charlie says, "Not until you admit you lied about my brother," and Declan announces to the room at large, "Garen's sleeping here tonight."

He says it the same way he said *Garen's coming to hookah with us tonight* back in February, when he first decided I was worth talking to. He says it without asking me a question or waiting for my answer. If he's daring someone to object, he isn't disappointed.

"Uh, do I get to weigh in on this?" Javi says. His normally beaming face is contorted into a wince. "Sorry, I'm not—I mean, it's fine that you guys are together, or whatever. It's not my business who you sleep with—"

"Glad we're clear on that," Declan says.

"—but you make it my business when you bring it into the room where I sleep," Javi says. He keeps sneaking sideways glances at me and Taylor, like he's trying to make sure he doesn't cross a line with the resident fags. When neither of us immediately jumps up to attack him, he goes on, "It's nothing against G, I swear. We're still totally cool, but... dude, I don't think we're at the level of 'cool' where I can handle hearing Dec's balls slappin' against G's ass in the middle of the night."

Taylor presses the heels of his hands to his temples, the way little kids do when they get brain freeze. "Oh, Christ. I'm never going to be able to un-think that thought."

Declan's steady gaze is focused on Javi's face. "Vanessa has been sleeping here at least once a week for the last four years. Do you think I like getting woken up at three in the morning because you two can't fuck without moaning that you love each other every eight seconds?"

"That's different," Javi protests. "I hang out with Garen every day. We're in the same squad, we're friends. The only reason you even hang out with Nessa is because she's my girlfriend. Besides, she and I are a couple, and you and Garen aren't. You've never had any of your other girls spend the night—"

"None of my girls ever needed to, and I never wanted them to. This is different. I want him here tonight, so he's staying here. If you have an issue with that, you can sleep on the couch in the common room. I don't care. Right now, I just want all three of you to get out and go bond with your families for the rest of the day. Leave us alone, alright?"

It's technically a request, but it doesn't leave much room for argument. Javi seems to have learned his lesson about what happens when he tries to protest Declan's declarations, because he slinks back out into the hall with Taylor. Charlie shuffles to the door, but lingers there, his eyes periodically flickering back in my direction.

"I don't ask a lot from you, Dec. We've been friends for four years, and I've never once tried to tell you what to do. I don't want to start now. But it's... this is about *family*. The things he's saying are about my family, my brother, and I can't be okay with that. A line has to be drawn at some point, and right now,

Garen's on one side of it, and David's on the other. I've got to stick with my family, and I'm hoping you'll realize that he's—" Charlie gestures to me. He still looks angry, but there's something almost apologetic in his eyes now. I can't tell if the apology's for me or for Declan. "He's not worth it. Okay? He's not—this whole thing right here, it's about *family* versus some *skank* you've been banging. Just remember that, alright?"

"This might have escaped your attention, Charles, but I don't have a family. And if I wanted one, I'd pick one that wasn't trying to close ranks and protect a rapist from social disgrace." Declan tips his head towards the door. "See yourself out." He doesn't flinch when the door slams behind Charlie.

If I was in a room with any of my other friends, I wouldn't be alone on the bed anymore. Jamie would bury me under the blankets and curl up there with me until I felt like I could breathe again. Ben would wrap his skinny little arms around me in that horrible, wonderful, parental way of his. Travis would crawl onto the bed and wrangle me into his lap; he would kiss me and hold me and stay with me all night.

Declan gets his laptop from his desk, sits down on the bed with at least six inches of space between us, and says, "We could watch a movie."

I don't want to watch a movie. I don't want to stay here tonight if Javi's going to get pissed at me for it. I don't want to fuck up Declan and Charlie's friendship. I don't want Charlie to think I'm lying. I don't want the rest of the school to hear about what happened. I don't want to go home alone. I don't want any of this, and I don't know what I want instead.

But it happens anyway. Declan's movie folder is mostly full of straight porn and action movies with more violence than I can stomach right now. I end up pulling up *The Land Before Time II* on Netflix and daring Declan to object. He doesn't. I don't think he's even watching, to be honest; every time I glance over at him, his brow is furrowed and his gaze seems more focused on the keyboard than the screen.

The Great Valley is an absolute clusterfuck of Sharpteeth and lava when Declan suddenly asks, "Was it the same one he has now?" I don't want to pause the movie, but I don't know what he's talking about, so I make a curious sound. "Walczyk's Lexus. Was the one he raped you in the same one that he has now?"

He must be able to feel how rigid I've gone next to him, but he doesn't rush to take the question back. It's surreal to hear anyone say that word and actually be talking about me. *Knowing* about me. I press the space bar, and the movie freezes on a close-up of Littlefoot. "What the hell kind of question is that?"

"Just answer it," he says. "When I visited Charlie over the summer, his brother was driving an SC430—"

"That doesn't mean anything to me, I don't know shit about cars," I interrupt.

"I can tell. Your Ferrari engine has been running loud for the last few weeks. You should change your oil," Declan says. "I could do it for you, if you wanted."

I play the movie and turn up the volume. He pushes my hand out of the way and pauses it again. "It's a black, two-door convertible. It has—"

"Yes. Okay? Yes, that's the same car," I snap. "He had it when I met him, and about a month into our relationship, he took me out for dinner, and afterward, we parked that car somewhere so we could make out in the backseat. I didn't want it to go any further than that, and I sure as hell didn't want to get fucked, but no matter how many times I said no, he wouldn't stop. He just held me down and fucked me, and I cried, and it hurt, and after? After, he told me that he loved me. And I was stupid enough to think he meant it. So, I figured that he just got carried away, or things just got out of control, and it wouldn't be like that the next time."

"Was it?" Declan asks.

I close my eyes and tip my head back against the wall. “No, it was worse after that. Instead of doing it after dates, he’d... we’d get into these fights, I guess. We’d be arguing about something, and he’d shove me around, and maybe he’d hit me a little, and then he’d try to start something. I’d try to get away, but he just... he said sex was how we could fix things between us. Said it was the only thing I was really good for, anyway, the only thing I could offer to make up for what a bad boyfriend I was. So, he’d hit me, and he’d fuck me. Said we were just too *passionate* to do things any other way. Sometimes, he’d take me out and get me really fucked up—I’m talking about like, so wasted that he’d have to carry me to his room. So high, sometimes I didn’t even *feel* it—I didn’t even realize he was fucking me until halfway through. That’s mostly how it was last year, when we got back together for a month.” It’s not funny, but I find myself laughing out, “Christ, I don’t think I was sober for any of it. I’d go to his place and get blackout drunk because I could barely stand to let him touch me otherwise. I wasn’t even conscious sometimes; I’d wake up, or come out of it, or whatever, and he’d be on top of me. In me. I wouldn’t have any idea where I was, and I’d still be kind of fucked up, so I couldn’t get away from him. He’d just hold me down again. Once I’d slept it off, he’d drive me home in, you know. That same fucking car.”

“I don’t understand how you could ever deal with being in it after the first time,” Declan says quietly.

My eyes flutter open, and I let my head roll to the side so I can face him. “I found plenty of ways to deal with it.” I press my thumb to the side of my nose and inhale sharply like I’m doing a bump of coke. Declan doesn’t laugh, but I do. “It doesn’t matter. I wish the stupid thing didn’t even exist anymore, but what am I gonna do about it? Fuck off to New Haven and light it on fire? That would be kind of fucked up. Cathartic as hell to have it burned off the face of the earth, probably, but really fucked up.”

“Okay,” is all Declan comes back with. It isn’t much, but it’s understandable; I wouldn’t know what to say to me, either. I’m just glad he hasn’t kicked me out yet.

The rest of the night passes in the same way. Declan and I watch a bunch of shitty cartoon films—all my choosing—on his laptop. We skip dinner with everyone and their families, order pizza instead and have it delivered to the dorm. By the time Javi returns around eleven o’clock, I’ve changed into my PT sweats and a t-shirt and am curled up under the blankets in Declan’s bed.

It’s an awkward moment as is, but it gets even more uncomfortable when Declan strips down to just his boxers and joins me. The dorm beds are extra-long twins, so it takes some effort to fit two fully grown men into one of them. He’s making a big show of it, too. I can’t tell if he’s covering up his own nerves with bravado, or if he’s just trying to piss off Javi, but he throws his own *I will leave if you try to snuggle with me* rule right out the window and pulls me in close. I end up on my side, curled against him with my head tucked against his collarbone and my hand on his chest. One of his arms is curled protectively around my shoulders, and the other is sort of wrapped around my middle in a half-hug. His fingers are tracing tiny circles over the back of my t-shirt, and his chin is nestled on top of my head.

It’s a position I’ve slept in so many other times with so many other boys. None of them have ever been as rigid and obviously uncomfortable as Declan is right now. All of his muscles are drawn up tight, and the rise and fall of his chest is far too controlled to be entirely natural. I have no idea why he has wrestled us into a pose that’s designed to make us look like a couple; if I’d asked to sleep like this when he stayed at my house over break, he would’ve laughed in my face and walked out. He must *look* a lot more relaxed than he feels, because on his way to the light switch, Javi gives us a bemused, complicated sort of look, like he doesn’t know whether to be sick or be happy for us. He compromises by locking the door, flipping the lights off, and retreating to his bed.

“Just... please don’t have sex with each other while I’m in the room, okay?” he says. “Seriously, please, I don’t wanna hear that shit.”

“If you don’t shut the fuck up about it, I’m going to record the sound of me gagging on his dick and set it as your ringtone,” I warn. Javi wails and shoves his head under his pillow. I tilt my head back to look up at Declan. “I can sleep on the floor, if you want. Or I can drive myself home.”

"No. I need you to stay here, but I need you to be quiet until Javi goes to sleep. Won't be long—he's usually out within five minutes, stays pretty much dead until morning," he whispers back. Something about his tone sets me on edge. He's not even close to sleep, and he seems like he wants to keep it that way. For now, he's only waiting.

Sure enough, only a few minutes go by before Javi's snoring. Well, *roaring*, really, the motherfucker sounds like a goddamn bear. But the second it's clear that he's out, Declan squirms out from under me and rolls sideways so that he can face me.

"I need to go out for a little while," he says, his voice barely more than a breath. "If Javi wakes up while I'm gone, tell him I'm in the bathroom, or I went out for a smoke or something. Okay?"

My stomach lurches.

"What? No, that's not okay," I hiss. "Why did you want me to stay over if you were just going to bail on me in the middle of the night?"

He doesn't exactly cover my mouth, but he does press the pad of his thumb to my lips, a pretty clear request for me to shut up. "Stop it. I'm not bailing on you. There's just something I need to go take care of, and I need you to work with me on this. I need you to be *here*. You understand? If anyone wakes up in the middle of the night, you need to be sleeping here. If anyone asks, we went to bed, and we slept through the night. Okay?"

"Why?" I ask, and I force myself to stop right there, because if I keep talking, I know that it's going to turn into *why won't you stay with me?* And I can't have that fight with another guy. I'm so, so tired of trying to figure out why guys won't stay with me, and I can't have this shit with Declan, too. Instead of waiting for him to reply, I shift back until I'm against the wall, with a few inches between us. "Fine. Whatever, just go do whatever it is you think you have to do."

Declan slips out of bed, and I pretend not to pay attention as he gets dressed quickly and quietly. He sneaks out of the room, and that's it. He's gone. I peek across the room, but Javi is still completely asleep, and I don't feel any less alone.

I readjust so that I can watch the numbers ticking away on the clock on Declan's nightstand. It's twenty after eleven. If I were home, I probably wouldn't even be in bed yet. I'd be down in the living room with Travis and Omelette. The dog would be curled up on the couch with me, and Travis would be doing his homework, asking me a bunch of questions about today. In that sense, I'm glad I'm not there; I want nothing more than to shed my skin and get rid of everything that has happened today.

In the end, the closest I can get is to just let myself fall into a shaky, restless sleep.

I wake up to the sound of the door closing. The glow of the numbers on the clock—two forty-eight—are bright enough for me to see who it is, but I'm still asleep enough to murmur, "Declan?"

He's holding his boots and his jacket instead of wearing them, but that's as far as his concern for keeping quiet goes. He drops everything on his desk chair and strips himself out of his jeans, kicking them towards the nightstand and crawling back into the bed with me. Or, on top of me, I guess; he's kind of crushing me with his weight, but it's worth it for the way he cups my face between his palms and kisses me. His hands are cold and shaking, and he smells sort of weird, like cigarettes and smoke and fuel, like he abandoned me in bed to go hang out at a gas station for three hours.

I nudge him back out of the kiss with every intention of asking where he's been, but before I can get the question out, he whispers, "Luca."

"What?" I whisper back.

He bumps his nose against my jaw so I'll tip my head back and give him access to my neck. He kisses his way down my throat, flicks his tongue over my collarbone, and comes back up to say into my ear, "My middle name is Luca. No idea where the fuck Alicia got it from, or why she liked it so much, but that's it, that's what the 'L' stands for." He rolls us both onto our sides and presses a hand to the small of my back, urging me closer until our bodies are flush against each other. "What other kind of stupid things have you been wondering about? My favorite color is white, and I was thirteen the first time I fucked a girl, and I like to dip my fries in Ranch dressing."

"That's really gross. Both those things, actually. The Ranch dressing and the fact that you have sex with girls," I whisper, then immediately hate myself for saying anything that might break this sudden spell of honesty.

But Declan just laughs, breathless and a little too loud. I hush him, and we both glance over at Javi, but he's still dead asleep. Dec slips his hand up the back of my shirt and goes on, "I had a hamster when I was five, but it died after a month, even though I made sure I fed it every single day. I like Pepsi better than Coke. One time, I got so high I forgot what fingers were called, so I called them my 'upper toes,' and Steven still tries to find a way to make fun of me for it at least twice a semester. The other guys in the squad sometimes call me the 'baby of the group' because I'm the youngest, and it pisses me the fuck off." His free hand returns to my face and guides me in so that his mouth is near my ear again, making his words seem like a secret even though he has been whispering since he returned to the room. "I like you more than anyone else I've ever fucked."

I shiver and bury a hand in his hair to anchor us both in place. I don't want to have to look him in the eyes as I say, "Do you really mean that? Even after what I said today, after what I told you about Charlie's brother?"

Declan tries to pull back to look at me, but I won't let him move. Eventually, he gives in, just buries his face against my neck and says, "Yeah. Mean it."

"Where did you go?" I ask. "You were gone for like, three and a half hours. I don't understand what's going—"

"I have something to show you," he says, squirming in place. "Fucking let go of me, I did something for you, and I want to show you."

I release him, and he leans over the edge of the bed to fish around in the pockets of his discarded jeans. He eventually surfaces with his phone and unlocks the screen, momentarily blinding us both with the brightness of it.

"Jesus, Dec," I whine, trying to hide my face in the pillow, but he shakes my shoulder.

"No, you have to look. I've got to get rid of this as soon as you see it, but first, you have to look."

He's doing everything in his power to shove the phone down my throat, so I finally take it from him and squint at the screen. At first, all I see is just... glow. A bright, orange-white glow. "What am I looking at?" I ask. Declan taps the screen, and the image starts—okay, so apparently it's a video, not a picture. The sound is turned down low, but I can hear a faint rushing noise, pierced with periodic pops and crackles. The glow is shifting all over, flickering and dancing over a mostly black background, just like... flames. My heart stops.

"Dec," I whisper, "Dec, you crazy son of a bitch, is that—"

"The Lexus, yeah. You said you wanted it gone, and now it's gone. You said it would be cathartic to have it burned off the face of the earth," he says. "Is this what you wanted?"

It isn't. I don't know what I wanted, but I don't think this is it. This might be better. I nod, and Declan grins,

kisses me, reaches up to delete the video. I lean out of reach and say, "Wait. Let me... can I watch it again, before you get rid of it? I wanna watch it again."

"As many times as you want," he says.

We restart the video, and I stare, transfixed. It's only thirty seconds of footage, but it's long enough for me to see that he busted out the rear windshield so that he could start the fire in the backseat, right there, right where it happened. The flames eat through the leather of the seats, growing larger and larger, spreading to the rest of the car until I'm sure there's no hope of it being salvaged. The video ends, and I restart it. Declan kisses me. The car burns, and so do I.

Chapter Thirty-One

“The body is not the only target of rape. Violence does not always take a visible form, and not all wounds gush blood.” –Haruki Murakami

224 days sober

I don't know how Declan and I spend the night. I don't know if he stays curled up with me, nibbling at my throat long after I've dozed off watching the video on his phone, or if he wriggles away the second my eyes are closed and sleeps pressed against the wall. When the alarm goes off at quarter to five, he climbs right over me and is out of bed, dressed, and out the door before I've even had time to blink the sleep from my eyes. He doesn't even stop to turn off the alarm.

“Uh,” I say, turning to meet Javi's barely-conscious gaze from across the room. “That was... abrupt.”

Javi shakes his head, though. “Nah. Same thing he does every morning. I mean, usually he makes the bed first, in case we have room inspections later, but usually there isn't somebody *in* the bed.”

It doesn't sound like Javi is trying to suggest that I do the same, but I'm suddenly feeling very aware of the fact that this isn't my room.

“Why does he leave so quickly? PT doesn't start for another fifteen,” I say.

“The ladies in the kitchen think he's *sweet*, so if he gets down there early enough, they like to make him protein shakes before training.”

“Sweet,” I say doubtfully. I mean, / think he's sweet sometimes, but that's because he sets cars on fire for me. I'm pretty sure most people operate off a very different definition of the word.

Javi shrugs. “Most of the staff here would agree. I think Sergeant Smith kind of wants to adopt him. But like, you of all people should know that there's more than one side to Dec.” Javi gestures to my bed—Declan's bed. “And now, apparently there's a gay side, too.”

I slip out from under the covers—Javi flinches at first, like he expects me to have my dick out, ready for some hot Patton man action—and start straightening the covers, fixing them with hospital corners, the way we're taught to do for inspections. On a normal morning, I would already be on my third cup of coffee, so I'm surprised I'm even capable of tying my shoes, much less remembering to add, “He's not gay, you know. He still fucks girls, and as far as I know, he's never even looked at any guy but me. He's still straight, he says.”

Javi, who has finally untangled himself from his sheets, pauses in the middle of

changing his t-shirt and peers out at me through the neck hole. "But he bangs you, right?"

No, he *gets* banged by me. There's a huge part of me that wants to go door-to-door through this entire hall to make sure every single guy in the squad is completely clear on the fact that I absolutely do not bottom, but I'm not exactly sure how cool Declan would be with the idea of me telling people that he's the one who takes it. Instead, I say, "We've been fucking for a while, yeah."

"Well, that doesn't sound like any version of 'straight' *I'm* familiar with, but hey. His dick, his business, I guess," Javi says. He still sounds doubtful, far from his usual obnoxious cheerfulness. It's disconcerting as shit, considering everything that went down yesterday, and I yank the door open to escape to the quad, only to find myself practically nose to nose with Taylor.

"Oh. An ambush. Delightful," I say flatly. "Join us, won't you? We were just having a fun little chat about where exactly Campbell falls on the Kinsey Scale, and as a fellow six, I'm sure you have some insight."

"Yeeeeeah, not exactly why I came by," Taylor says slowly.

"Bi," I echo, turning to raise my eyebrows at Javi. "That's a possibility."

Taylor clears his throat so I'll look back in his direction. "Do you think maybe we could talk for a minute before we head down to PT? I'll be quick, I promise."

I'm pretty sure I stare at him a little longer than either of us is really cool with. He doesn't *look* like he wants to start a fight with me, and he has been a fairly easygoing dude the whole time I've known him, but my hackles are still raised from last night's confrontation with Charlie. I know where I really stand with the guys in the squad—no matter how much they like me now, no matter how much fun they pretend to think I am, Charlie is the one they've been friends with since freshman year, and he's the one they're going to stand by. Right now, I'm not sure I can trust anyone at this school other than Declan and his firestarting hands.

When Taylor doesn't rescind his request, I square my shoulders and say, "Yeah. Guess so."

He gives me a little smile and makes his way out to the common room, where he guides us to a corner that's empty, but still out in the open. It's good—I don't want to be alone with anyone right now, and I'm fucking pathetic for feeling that way, but I can't shake it just yet.

I'm not sure what I'm expecting Taylor to say, but I'm definitely surprised when he starts with, "How are you feeling today?"

I shrug, not wanting to say *shitty*, but not being able to truthfully say *fine*.

Taylor presses on, “You seemed really fucked up yesterday, after what happened with Charlie—”

“Don’t really wanna talk about that, dude,” I interrupt. “Not if you’re just going to call me a lying psycho, too.”

“That’s not what I want to say to you, so if you could just chill for a minute, that’d be awesome,” Taylor says, frowning.

I don’t wanna chill for a minute. I don’t wanna chill for even a *second*. What I *want* is to punch Taylor right in his smug face for daring to cop an attitude with me about this of all things. My jaw is clenched tight, so I know I’m not baring my teeth like an animal, but I can feel my upper lip curling just a little bit, the very beginnings of a snarl.

My face must be enough for Taylor to realize that I could use a more fucking delicate hand right now, because he ducks his head and says, “Sorry. That was obnoxious. It’s just, uh... I’m a little on edge, maybe. Charlie’s not really talking to me either right now, and I think Sam feels like it’s his responsibility, as Charlie’s roommate, to ignore me, too.”

“Why,” I say flatly, “did you accuse Charlie’s brother of rape, too?”

“No, but I did tell him that if he’s trying to start a fight in the group, then I’m going to be on your side,” Taylor says.

If Charlie’s refusal to believe me last night caught me off guard, it’s nothing compared to the disbelief I’m feeling now at Taylor’s seemingly unwavering conviction in whatever I might say. I blink. “You serious?”

“A hundred percent,” he says, hitching his chin. “Look, here’s the thing, Garen. Charlie feels like he has to stand by his brother no matter what, and I get why he feels that way. But the rest of us don’t have the same obligation. We have to make a choice. Some of the guys—Steve, Sam, they don’t really get that. They say that nobody really knows the full story except for you and David, so the rest of us should just stay out of it and not pick sides. Except, I’m not too sure I can do that. See, I’ve got this sister. She’s a couple years older, name’s Lisbeth. When—”

“Your parents named you guys Elizabeth and Taylor?” I have to interrupt. “Like, the old bitch with the diamonds and all the ex-husbands? That’s really fucked up—”

“Lisbeth. Two syllables. No ‘e,’ no ‘a’. And it’s not like you have any room to talk, because last I checked, ‘Garen’ wasn’t exactly cracking the top ten lists of most popular first names. And I’m trying to connect with you here, so shut the fuck up and let me talk.” It takes him a minute to seem entirely sure that I can keep quiet. Once satisfied,

he takes a deep breath and says, "When my sister was a freshman in high school, something happened to her. She was at this party, and a guy she knew—a guy she thought she could trust—attacked her. It wasn't the same as what happened to you. It was one time, and she was able to get out of the room before he could really... and she didn't keep quiet about it, is the thing. She told my mom, and the cops got involved, and everybody at her school knew what happened, but none of that really mattered in the end, because most people she knew didn't believe her. The guy who hurt her was older, popular, a good athlete, and people said that like it *meant something*. Like being a rapist wasn't a big deal, as long as he smiled at the right people when he walked down the halls. The cops said they didn't have enough evidence of wrongdoing to pursue a case against him, and everybody at Lisbeth's school took that to mean that she was making it up, so they were just... they were fucking animals to her. She went through that whole ordeal, and then had to put up with their shit on top of it. Things got so bad, she had to change schools. Guess you know what that's like, though."

My nerves tingle a little at that, like all the blood is draining from my face, or I'm blushing—getting too cold or too hot at once. It feels like being right back in the classroom in Lakewood High where Josslyn Pryce tore into me until I choked out the truth about Dave. I don't want to relive even a second of that afternoon, but I can't really tell Taylor off for reminding me of a day he doesn't even know occurred. Instead, all I get to do is look down at the toes of my sneakers and say, "I'm sorry that happened to your sister."

"I'm sorry that happened to you," Taylor says. "Because it *did* happen, Garen. I know it did. I know that no decent person would ever make up a story like that just for whatever bullshit reasons Charlie's trying to convince himself you have. I also know that no decent person would value keeping the peace over keeping their friend's trust, which is why I think it's stupid for Steve and Sam to say they want to stay out of this. David Walczyk doesn't give a shit what I think, okay? He barely knows me. You, on the other hand, see me every single day. We train together, we eat together, we have classes together. I don't care if David thinks I'm butting into his business; I care if you feel like you can trust me, and I don't think you can do that if you can't be sure that I'm trusting you about this. I believe you, alright? I'm on your side. And I just, uh... I just wanted to make sure you knew that."

He gives a half-assed shrug and wanders backward a couple of steps, like he figures we might as well head down to PT. Conversation over—move on.

I throw a hand out and grab a fistful of his t-shirt, rooting him to the spot. My heart is pounding, and my head is aching, and I just need a minute to process all of this. I'm either relieved or panicking, I'm not really sure which. Maybe both.

I'm relieved that Taylor believes I'm telling the truth about what happened to me, that he realizes I wouldn't lie about something like that, that he wants me to trust him like he apparently trusts me.

And *I'm fucking panicking* because if Taylor believes that this really happened—if this guy who I've only been casual friends with for a couple of months believes me—then it's the truest thing that's left. It's another thing to tack onto the list of shameful secrets I can't seem to stop myself from revealing to these guys, until I'm just *Garen: the guy who got raped*, and *Garen: the guy who got himself beaten*, and *Garen: the alcoholic*, *Garen: the drug addict*, *Garen: the whore*, *Garen: the monumental fuck-up*.

"Are you okay?" Taylor says slowly, and I shake my head violently from side to side, but when I try to say any of the shit that I'm thinking, all that comes out is, "You shouldn't talk about what happened to your sister."

"What?"

"You shouldn't—" I stop, close my eyes, and god, I should probably stop shaking my head before people start thinking I'm having a seizure. I make myself still. "It's not your story to tell. You shouldn't tell people what happened to her, she'd be so fucking pissed at you, she'd be so ashamed—"

"No, she wouldn't," Taylor interrupts me in that same slow, carefully enunciated tone. "She's got nothing to be ashamed of, and she knows that. I mean, it took a lot of therapy, but she knows it now. She's in school for social work, and she's a counselor at a rape crisis center. She'd be okay with me telling her story to anyone who she thought it could help."

I don't fucking need his help. I know he's trying to be a good guy right now, but everything he's saying is just making me feel weaker—like I need people to help take care of me because I can't fucking do it for myself. And I *hate* that, I hate being coddled like this, so I do the only thing I know how to do when things get hard: I laugh it off.

"Thanks, man. I appreciate the sentiment, but I'm, you know... I'm fine. And you don't have to worry about taking my side over Charlie's, 'cause in case you didn't notice last night, Declan is handling the whole 'ruin a four-year friendship over Garen's childhood trauma' thing. Don't need to add your name to the roster, right?" I say. There's a big, stupid smile on my face, and it makes me want to rip my own teeth out.

Taylor frowns back at me. "G, if Charlie's the type of person who's going to end friendships with people so that he can side with a rapist, then I don't—"

"Can you stop—" I'm yelling, oh, shit. I clamp my mouth shut, swallow, and say in the quietest, steadiest voice I can manage, "Can you stop saying that word, okay? I don't use that word. I *hate* that word. I hate talking about this in general, so, it's cool that you believe me and all, but I sort of just want to go to PT and get screamed at by Smith and maybe hit something. Got it?"

"Yeah," Taylor says. He nods, and for some reason, the fact that he's agreeing with me pisses me off, too. "Got it. Let's go."

When we get down to the squad, Charlie, Sam, Steve, and Javi are all clustered together, shooting the shit like usual. Charlie looks more on edge than normal, though, and he keeps glancing over at the door to Whitman. When he spots me and Taylor approaching, his mouth thins out into a line, and he turns his back.

"Ignore him," Taylor says quietly. "Campbell and I are both with you on this, and the other guys will eventually realize they should be, too. Until then, fucking forget Charlie, okay?"

"Yes, boss," I mutter. Taylor gives me a small smile and goes to stand with the rest of the group, on the opposite side from Charlie. It's distance, sure, but it's not really *enough* distance, so I scan the quad until I find the sanctuary I'm looking for.

Declan is standing maybe ten yards away from the others, sucking on the straw of a plastic cup full of some pasty, off-white horribleness. When our eyes meet, he leans down to pick up a second cup, which he holds out to me.

"This looks like someone shot the world's biggest load in a travel cup," I say, popping the lid off so that I can give it a wary sniff. It smells like cashews and fake vanilla. Great. But when I look up, Declan is giving me that carefully blank stare, the one that says *you fucked up, and I'm waiting for you to figure out exactly how you fucked up*. The only thing I can assume is that I've rejected whatever mating ritual he's trying to act out here—providing for the person who spent the night in his bed, proving he can fulfill more than just my periodic need for an arsonist, something else that'd only make sense in Declan's warped worldview.

I snap the lid back into place and take a long sip through the straw, keeping my eyes on Declan's and my cheeks hollowed maybe more than necessary. Once I've sucked down about a fifth of the shake—and Christ, I'd *rather* drink sixteen ounces of jizz than this foul mess—I lower the cup and say, "Thanks for the drink. And for letting me stay over."

"I didn't let you stay over, I asked you to. There's a difference," he says, because '*you're welcome*' is just too difficult for him, I guess.

I take another step closer so that the toes of our sneakers are touching and say in an undertone, "Alright. In that case, thanks for what you did last night."

Declan's breath hitches like I've just said something absolutely filthy. He sways in place, inching ever so slightly forward into my space so that his mouth is near my ear when he says quietly, "We can't talk about this now."

"But what if I want to show you my gratitude?" I murmur, nudging one of my knees between his.

He huffs a faint laugh and kicks at my sneaker. "You can show me whatever you want,

but not now.” His free hand comes up to grip my wrist for the briefest of seconds before dropping back to his side. I’m all too aware of the fact that the other guys in our squad are standing less than fifty feet away. Declan must be, too, because his voice is barely a whisper when he says, “The police in New Haven will investigate what happened, but there’s nothing for them to find. I didn’t leave anything behind—”

“You left a big fuck-off burning vehicle behind, Dec. Can’t they test for an accelerant?”

“Acetone burns hot enough and fast enough that there isn’t much of a residue left. I stopped at a twenty-four-hour CVS halfway between here and New Haven, bought a couple of bottles of nail polish remover. Self checkout, paid in cash, didn’t have to say a word to anyone. I parked in a lot with no cameras, walked a few blocks to David’s building. He doesn’t even lock his fucking car. Do you realize how stupid that is?”

“So stupid,” I breathe, clenching my free hand around the hem of Declan’s t-shirt. Hearing all the details of what he did makes it seem so much more real, and fuck, I feel almost dizzy right now.

Declan must get it, because he crowds even closer so that his chest bumps against mine and his lips brush against my ear. It sounds like he’s talking dirty to me when he goes on, “The car alarm didn’t even go off when I cracked open the back windshield. I poured the bottles out in the backseat, tossed a match, filmed it from across the lot so that no one would see me standing near the car if they came outside. The second the flames got big enough to really get anyone’s attention, I bailed. Tossed the empty bottles in a trash bin outside a Dunkin Donuts halfway back, deleted the video last night after you fell asleep. There’s *nothing*, Anderson, especially considering you and I have each other and Javi as an alibi. But Walczyk and his parents are going to try to sic the police on one or both of us anyway. We need to cool off for a bit, just for a few days. Until the cops have looked into the whole thing and declared it a random act of destruction by some city kids.”

“I don’t want to cool off for a bit,” I say. “I want to take you back up to your room and fuck you into the mattress.”

“Just for a few days,” he repeats. “We just need to be casual about this for a couple of days, and then we can—”

But I don’t get a chance to find out what non-casual thing Declan thinks we can do once the smoke clears, because it’s officially five o’clock, which means we’re late to PT, an announcement that is heralded by the dulcet tones of my lord and master--

“Anderson! Campbell!” Sergeant Smith barks from several feet away, startling us both. “I don’t know what’s going on over there, but I’m positive I don’t like the look of it. Get over here and get in formation.”

“Yes, sir,” Declan says, at the same time that I say, “We’re talking, Sarge, it’s rude to

interrupt.”

I start that day’s PT session with twenty push-ups.

When I pull into the driveway that night after MLEP, Travis and Omelette are just rounding the end of the block. Omelette starts straining at his leash the second he sees me get out of the car, so Travis lets himself be yanked down the street. I drop to my knees to greet the dog, who licks my face a couple of times, then flops down onto my legs, content as all hell to pin me down so I’ll have no choice but to shower him with affection until nightfall. The attention is nice, actually. Declan’s *‘keep it cool’* plan has involved large amounts of fucking ignoring me all day, Charlie spent all of chem class glaring at me. Steve, Sam, and Javi all seem to be doing their best to keep things calm, and Taylor’s encouraging half-smiles are simultaneously sweet and infuriating. I feel too drained to do anything other than pet the stupid dog right now.

After a few seconds, Travis joins us on the asphalt. “You didn’t come home last night. I was worried. I was going to call, but I figured maybe you’d just, um... hooked up. With Declan.”

Agreeing with him would be the easiest lie in the world. All I have to do is nod, and I bet he’ll be quietly annoyed enough to stop asking. But playing like I’m fine has been difficult ever since I got out of Declan’s bed this morning, and it seems next to impossible right now. Instead, I admit, “I stayed in his and Javi’s room last night, but it wasn’t a hookup. Yesterday was kind of a clusterfuck.”

“Parents’ Day didn’t go well?” Travis says, frowning.

I shake my head and bury both hands in Omelette’s silky fur. He beats his tail against the ground and pants sloppily against the knee of my uniform trousers, slobbering right through the fabric. It’s gross, but I’m afraid he’ll wander off if I push him away, so I let him keep doing it.

Travis shifts off his knees and sits down cross-legged. He says, “I thought you said your mom was working yesterday. You told me she asked to come for dinner later this week. I was—” He stops, coughs, looks embarrassed. “I was actually going to try cooking something, instead of just ordering out again. Ben gave me a recipe, something he said was simple enough that even a couple of culinary failures like us could manage it.”

“Yeah,” I say finally. “Mom’s still coming for dinner on Thursday. My parents weren’t the problem; everyone else’s were.”

I expect a prompt, but Travis doesn’t give me one. He just waits for me to get it out in my own time. It takes a minute, but eventually, I continue, “So, uh, Declan’s mom showed up. She seemed to have every intention of glossing right over the part where she dumped him on his deadbeat, heroin-addicted dad when he was seven, then let him get shoved into a series of foster homes for two years until his grandparents found out

where he was and adopted him. Declan is obviously less interested in forgetting all of this. He spent all day stoned out of his mind, ignoring her while I tried to piss her off so she'd leave, but she stuck around until close to dinnertime. After she finally left, the shit sort of hit the fan with Charlie's parents." I swallow the horrible sharpness in my throat. "I should've expected that, though. They've hated me for a while now, I guess."

"How can they hate you? I thought yesterday was the first time you met any of your friends' parents," Travis says.

"Cept for Charlie's parents," I say. Travis won't understand, if I leave it at that. I can tell from the expression on his face that he has no idea where this is going. It takes me another minute before I can make my voice work long enough for me to softly add, "Dave's parents."

Travis goes very still. Too still. Still enough that it makes me want to crawl right out of my skin and into the dirt for having said something awful enough to make him look like that. I hoist Omelette off my lap and onto his feet so that I can stand and lead the way back into the house. Omelette follows me, but I'm not sure Travis does.

Sure enough, it takes about five minutes for him to join me in the living room. I'm curled up in the middle of the couch with the dog. There's space for Travis to join us on my other side, but he remains standing, and I try my hardest not to think that it's because he doesn't want to be close to me right now.

"Dave Walczyk?" he says.

"I'm sorry, do you know of any other Daves who put this look on my face?" I say flatly.

"And Charlie—the Charlie you've been friends with for like, four months now—he's Dave Walczyk's brother? That's... his name is Charlie *Walczyk*?" Travis says. I shrug, but it means the same thing as a nod right now. Travis rakes ten nails deep across his scalp, and when he lets his hands drop a minute later, his blond hair is sticking up in a dozen different directions, and his eyes are somehow blank and wild all at once. "How the fuck could you not tell me that you befriended your abuser's younger brother? That's the kind of thing you're supposed to tell me, Garen. For fuck's sake, that's the kind of thing you're *not supposed to do*."

"I can be friends with whoever I want to be friends with," I snap. "And look, Charlie's not—he isn't like Dave, okay? Or at least, he's—I mean, I thought he wasn't. But he sort of... things went to shit yesterday, I told you."

"What does that even mean?"

"He said some things to me yesterday that—" *I don't believe you, I don't believe my brother would do something like that. That's not who he is. He's not a fucking rapist.* "He, um. We got into a fight, I guess. It was my fault, I tried to call his parents out

for what Dave did, and it, uh—" *He wouldn't have had to rape you. You gave it up for him anyway, everybody knows that, everybody knows what a fucking slut you are.* "Christ. Can I just—"

"Take as much time as you need," Travis says, sinking onto the couch next to me. His posture is still rigid, and I can tell he wants to yell at me right now, but whatever look I have on my face must be deterring him.

I hate that. I topple sideways onto Omelette so I can hide my face in his fur. Om's an idiot who thinks he's getting a hug, so he doesn't try to get away. After a minute of nothing, Travis carefully plants one palm between my shoulder blades, slowly rubbing them like he thinks I might be sick.

I close my eyes. "I told them about the thing."

When I don't clarify, Travis clears his throat and confesses, "I don't really know what that means."

"The thing," I repeat. "What Dave did, but the, um... not the abuse. The other thing, the one we don't talk about."

Travis' hand stops moving. "The thing I asked you about after you got home from that party a couple weeks back? The thing that people at school used to talk about?"

The fucking thing that everybody else in this world seems to know except for you, I want to say. The thing that Jamie knew happened as soon as he saw me that night, the thing I accidentally told Ben and Alex after my relapse, the thing Doc Howard keeps trying to make me talk about, the thing that Stohler saw on my face the day she shaved my head, the thing that Charlie doesn't believe, the thing that all the guys in my squad known now, the thing that Declan committed arson over.

"The rape," I say. The word feels so unbelievably heavy on my tongue, but I can't take it back now. I roll over onto my back. I'm wedged between Omelette and the back of the couch, and my legs are twisted up under me, and Travis is fucking *staring* at me. I stare right back. "I told Charlie and his parents all about how Dave raped me when I was a sophomore—about how the first time he and I ever had sex, the first time I slept with someone who wasn't Jamie, the first time I bottomed, it was Dave holding me down in his car and *making* me take it. And how he kept doing it until I broke up with him three months later, and how I had to be drunk in order to stand being alone with him because I knew he was going to do that to me every chance he got, and how I had to let him fuck me because I was scared of how badly he'd hurt me if I didn't, and how it all happened again for those two weeks he and I were together last spring, and how I'm *completely fucked in the head* now because of it. I told them, but they didn't believe me. They said I'm a liar. So, I guess Charlie and I aren't friends anymore, and it just, um... it sucks."

Instead of saying anything—telling me this is too much, telling me he's done, kicking me

off the couch or out of our house—Travis raises his free hand to his mouth and gnaws on his thumbnail, his eyes roving over my face. He looks like he’s waiting for me to continue, but I can’t think of a single thing I could possibly have to add.

I untangle my legs and stretch them out as much as I can, digging my toes under Travis’ thigh when I run out of room. “So, you could say something. That would be nice, maybe.”

“Yeah, I just—” he starts to say, but the words are kind of garbled because he’s still chewing on his nail. He lets his hand drop to his own knee, then after a brief hesitation, he moves it to mine instead. “Charlie is an asshole. So are his parents. I’m not too surprised about the latter, considering it must take a special kind of awful to raise a son like Dave, but it’s not—”

“Travis, you *heard* me, right?” I interrupt. “Not just the part about Charlie not wanting to be my friend anymore. Everything before that, too, the sex stuff, the—”

Travis shakes his head once sharply and says, “No, don’t say—it wasn’t ‘sex stuff,’ Garen. It was violence. Sexual abuse is still abuse, and the fact that he hurt you *differently* doesn’t mean it was about anything other than hurting you.”

“But why don’t you *care*?” I say.

Travis looks stunned, hurt by that for all of a second before he shakes off his own feelings and says, “Of course I care, G. But if you’re expecting me to say it’s too much for me to handle hearing about, you’re going to be disappointed. I want you to talk to me about this.” He hesitates, then tightens his grip on my knee. “I’ve wanted you to talk to me about this since I first realized what had happened.”

My whole body goes cold so quickly, I shiver. “What, you... you knew?”

He frees his hand from under my back and raises it to rub awkwardly at the back of his neck. “I don’t know if I can really say I *knew*. Nobody told me about it—James won’t talk about what it was like when you were dating Dave at Patton, and Ben won’t tell me anything you’ve said about it since. But I’ve, um... I’ve suspected it since the last night of the school play, when I stayed over and you asked me to be on top. I’m not an idiot, G, I could figure out why you weren’t okay.”

“I wish you’d forget that night,” I mutter.

“Well, I wish it had never happened,” Travis says. “I’m still sorry. I hate that I agreed to do that, I hate that I ever made you feel anything like what you felt when Dave—”

I try to protest, but at first, all that comes out is a hoarse, desperate whine, which sort of makes me feel like I’m going to pass out, or scream, or cry. I press the heels of my hands to my closed eyelids and say, “Jesus. It’s not the same, it’s not even close to the

fucking same. I asked you to top me, I never asked Dave—you and I, we made a mistake. We shouldn't have tried that, I shouldn't have asked you to do it, but you stopped. Dave never stopped. That's what I'm trying to tell you. He broke me, Travis. He ruined me. I'm completely fucked up, I'm a mess, I'm so—"

"You're not." Travis' hand leaves my leg. My eyes are closed, but I can still hear him moving around, feel the couch shift as he slips off to kneel on the floor next to me and coaxes Omelette out of the way. Once the dog slinks off to curl up near the sliding door, Travis curls his hands over my wrists and guides my hands out of the way so that we can make horrible, shameful eye contact. "You aren't broken, and you aren't ruined."

I try to squirm away. Travis gives up on holding my wrists and leans right in, winding his arms tight around my shoulders and pulling me halfway upright, even though my bones have all melted and I can't do much but lean into him.

"You're going to be okay. Fuck Dave Walczyk, and fuck Charlie, and fuck their parents, and fuck every single person who can't see how strong and brave and *good* you are. Because trust me, Garen, I've seen you when you were at your most broken, and it's nothing like the way you are now. You're just—"

Travis pulls halfway out of the hug so that he can look at me, but his eyes only meet mine for a few seconds before they flicker shut and he leans in. It's a kiss, but it doesn't feel like a kiss. It just feels like comfort. When he pulls back, it's only enough for him to rest his forehead against mine. "I know you, G. I know what you've been through, and I know it hurt you, but I also know that you're doing so much better now. And that's what matters, right?"

I don't know if it's true, but I'm willing to pretend it is, if it means I can stop feeling so shitty tonight. I nod and say, "Yeah, you're right, you're right," until Travis smiles.

226 days sober

"So, do you remember all those times I told you how much I hate your mom?"

"Yep."

"And do you remember all those times I called her a homophobe and an anti-Semite and a bitch troll sent from the bowels of hell to unleash chaos and torment upon my life?"

"Yep."

"And do you remember that time I got unbelievably stoned before dinner, told your mom that you cut yourself, threatened to bite her fingers off, then tried to convince everyone

that I had slept with Ben while you and I were together?”

“Yep.”

“Have you decided to get back at me by killing *my* mom?”

“Eat me.”

I take the wooden spoon from Travis’ hand and carefully prod whatever the fuck is in the baking dish on the counter. The mush gives easily under pressure, then sags back into place the second I lift the spoon back out. “Might have to, ‘cause I’m not sure we can eat this.”

“I followed Ben’s instructions *exactly*,” Travis groans, snatching up the printed, sauce-splattered email. He looks wild-eyed and kind of panicked as he rereads the instructions for probably the sixth time since we pulled the dish out of the oven and discovered... this. There’s a smear of sauce on his cheek, and it’s probably the cutest thing I’ve ever seen in my entire life. He jabs at the instructions again and reads aloud, “Preheat oven to four-fifty. Butter the baking dish. Cut the tomatoes and line the dish with them. Blend the crushed tomatoes and the garlic in the food processor, mix that with the pasta, then add the olive oil, oregano, salt, and pepper. Pour mixture into dish in an even layer, cover with remaining tomato slices, drizzle with olive oil, and bake for one hour. See? And I did all that. I bought everything exactly as he said, I got the right tomatoes, I got the right pasta. Why the fuck does it look like this?”

“I have no idea,” I say, pulling my phone out of my pocket. “So, pizza. Think I should get two mediums, or a large?”

For a second, I think Travis is going to grab the phone right out of my hand and smash it on the ground. Instead, he just stomps around me and goes to get his laptop from the living room. “We’re not having fucking pizza. I said I’d cook for your mom, and she’s going to be here in half an hour. Ben got me into this mess, and he’s going to get me out of it.”

But once we’ve managed to coax Ben onto Skype so that we can show him the definitely-not-pasta-alla-formiana in the dish, he doesn’t seem like he has any intention of helping us at all. Mostly he just levels us with a completely silent, unimpressed stare for two solid minutes before he drags Stohler into frame and sends Jamie an invitation to the video chat so that more people can understand the depths of failure taking place in this kitchen.

“I tried,” Travis says miserably.

“I know, th-that’s why it’s so funny,” Stohler gasps out. She’s laughing so hard, there are actual, literal tears streaming down her face, tracking eyeliner everywhere. She turns and buries her face against Ben’s shoulder, giggling out, “Oh god, he tried so hard. He

did his best, and that's all he could do."

Travis has still got the laptop turned around so the webcam is focused on the dish, which means our friends can't see that he looks like someone just shot our dog in front of him. I snatch the laptop out of his hands and tilt it so that they can see my very best bitchface.

"Look, are you going to help, or not? Because in case you were too busy being *assholes* to notice, Travis is kind of panicking, and my mom's going to be here for dinner soon."

"Cut your losses. Order Chinese," Jamie suggests. The top few buttons of his Oxford are undone, and he looks like he's trying not to pout; I'm pretty positive that he expected Ben to be inviting him to the dirty-sexy-fun kind of video chat, and he's trying to pretend he's not disappointed that his dude is fully clothed right now.

"I said I'd cook," Travis says stubbornly.

"It isn't as if Marian has any culinary skills of her own," Jamie points out. "I'm sure she'll understand."

Ben raises his hand and says, "I'm not sure / understand. Seriously, Travis, the instructions I gave you were painfully simple. What the fuck did you do, double the cooking time?"

"No," Travis groans, collapsing at the kitchen table. I sit down next to him and adjust the screen so we're both in view. "I did exactly what it said. I preheated the oven, I lined the dish with the tomatoes, I boiled the pasta, I blended the tomatoes and garlic, I put the mix in the dish, I—"

"You, ah—" Ben actually closes his eyes for a moment, one hand still raised to signal for silence. On the other side of my screen, Jamie is smirking, his gaze focused on the part of his screen where Ben's face must be. I don't fucking get what's so funny, or so unbearable, but after a minute of trying to regain his composure, Ben finally says, "You cooked the pasta, and you mixed it with the sauce. And then you baked it in the oven."

"Yes."

"You cooked the pasta," Ben repeats, "and mixed it with the sauce. And then you took that *fully cooked meal*, and you put it in the oven. And you cooked it again for an hour. And you're still having trouble understanding why your pasta is overcooked."

Stohler has reached the point of muffled sobbing. Jamie looks like the only thing in the world that's keeping him from joining her is a steadfast devotion to his friendship with both Travis and me.

Travis opens his mouth, closes it again, and frowns. He looks down at the instructions, still looking lost. It's sort of embarrassing. I put my arm around his shoulders, half hoping he'll give up, but the contact just seems like enough to make him convinced that he must be right. "But why would a recipe call for that? Why the fuck would anyone bake uncooked pasta? It would just be hard as a rock."

"It cooks in the sauce, Trav," Ben says. He's wincing a little now, like Travis' heartbroken face is getting to him. "Do you have enough of the ingredients to start over? I can stay online with you and talk you through it."

Travis sighs and turns to look at me. "You should call your mom. I think dinner's going to be a little bit late."

"Thanks, babe, I realized that on my own," I say. I wipe the sauce off his cheek with the pad of my thumb, then kiss the spot I've just cleaned. "It's okay. Take as much time as you need."

I sneak outside to take Omelette on a quick walk around the block while I call Mom to tell her that Dinner: Mark One has turned out to be a shitshow. She tells me that she was about to leave the office for our place, but if it's going to be another hour, she'll stop at one of the bakeries on the same block as the firm where she works and pick up something for dessert.

"Thanks," I tell her. "And just, uh... Travis is kind of spazzing out about dinner now, so even if it sucks, can you just tell him it's really good? He and I both suck at cooking, but he's trying."

"Contrary to what you and your father believe, I do have some tact, Garen," Mom says dryly. "I'm sure dinner will be wonderful. Regardless of whether that turns out to be an accurate prediction, I will thank Travis profusely for the delicious meal he has gone through all this trouble to provide. Now go *help him*."

By the time Omelette and I get back to the house, dinner is back in the oven and the video conference has ended. Travis is camped out on the floor in front of the coffee table, working on his homework, and he glances up when I enter. "Dinner will be ready in an hour. And James says everyone should be at his place by eight o'clock tomorrow night. That'll give us time to grab something to eat before you have to be at work."

I climb up onto the couch behind him, and he leans back against my legs. I card my fingers through his hair and say, "Are you sure you guys even *want* to come to the club tomorrow?"

He tips his head back to look at me upside down. "Of course. It's your first night, and we want to support you."

I'm not sure I *want* them to support me. Letting Stohler trick strangers into slipping

dollars in my waistband last week was funny, but the thought of Travis watching me shake my ass around for random club patrons makes me feel a little sick.

"I appreciate that. Really, I do. And I know Ben's coming to the city anyway so that Jamie can shackle him to his bed, or whatever. But Stohler was just here last week for my audition, and you have to be at work early the next morning. If you don't want to go, you can stay home."

"Sounds like *you* don't want me to go," Travis says slowly.

"I do," I say, even though no, I don't. "But you, um... my job is basically to take off all my clothes, trap myself in a cage, dance around, and flirt with gross strangers so they'll stick money in my shorts. Do you really want to see that?"

He tries and fails to hide the beginning of a grimace. When he sees that I've caught the expression, he admits, "Not really. You know I'm not a fan of seeing you with other guys. But this is different. Seeing you wink at a guy in a club so he'll tip you won't be nearly as bad as, like... walking in on you jerking off your boyfriend was that one time."

Our current position isn't great for staring incredulously, so I grab Travis by the shoulders and shove him around so that he's kneeling in front of me, facing me properly. "Dude, are you talking about Declan?" Travis gives me an annoyed look. I shake my head. "Declan's not my *boyfriend*, Travis. We've been hooking up for a few weeks, sure, but it's *casual*. He's still banging half the girls at Ward."

"Yeah, but you're not," Travis says, and I make a face.

"Ew. Obviously. I wouldn't even want to bang *one* girl at Ward, let alone—"

"I mean that you're not having sex with other people," Travis interrupts. "Clearly you care about being exclusive, even if he doesn't. And I get that, because you told me months ago that you're interested in having a relationship with someone who'll be—"

I clamp my hand over Travis' mouth because I can't think of a single other way to shut him up. He's so far off base, I'm not sure I even know what we're talking about anymore. When I try to take my hand away, he inhales deeply, like he's about to launch again, so I clamp back down. He glares at me. I give exactly zero fucks.

"Dec isn't my boyfriend. He fucks other people, and so do I. I told you: it's casual. I don't get why you would think otherwise."

Travis' eyes flash, and I drop my hand, mostly 'cause I'm scared he's about to bite me if I don't let him talk. Even once my hand is out of the way, Travis grabs at it so I can't try to silence him again. "You told me you couldn't do casual. Back in December, when we were still *happytogether*, you told me that you didn't want to date me because I wouldn't be your boyfriend. You said you couldn't have a casual relationship—"

“Because I wouldn’t have been able to have a casual relationship with you when we first moved here!” I burst out. “The entire reason I had to move away from Lakewood was because I was so fucked in the head. I needed to start over. If I’d tried to do that while still pretending that you and I were just friends with benefits, I would’ve lost my mind over you again, and everything would have fallen apart. I wasn’t ready to *benormal* about dating then. Not like I am now.”

The annoyance flickers out of Travis’ eyes in half a second. He sits up a little higher, and suddenly, I feel so much more aware of his hands on mine. “You mean... you can be normal about a casual relationship with Declan? Or with other guys, too?”

“Declan’s the only one who has asked,” I say.

Travis isn’t really blinking anymore; he’s too focused on my face, his gaze darting from my eyes to my mouth and back again. “Alright. But what if someone else asked?” He swallows. “What if I asked?”

The doorbell rings, and I turn to look at it so quickly, my neck cracks. “No,” I say. “No, no, fuck off. *Bye*, Mom, we’re talking.”

“Since when does your mom ring the doorbell?” Travis asks, twisting to look at the door, too.

And I hate not having his attention on me right now, I hate the fact that he already seems to have forgotten what he just said to me. I grab the collar of his t-shirt and yank him back around. He falls halfway into the kiss, and we mostly miss each other’s mouths, and it’s a pretty big disaster, but Travis cups my jaw between his hands and shifts me over a little bit, and then we’re good. We’re really, really fucking good.

The doorbell rings a second time, and before I can stop him, Travis scrambles to his feet and says, “I’ll get it. It’s cool, we’ll just, uh—we’ll talk about this later? After your mom leaves, we’ll talk this out.”

“Tell her to go home,” I suggest. He gives me a dirty look and goes to the door.

Except when the door opens, it isn’t my mom. It’s two dudes in suits. Two fucking pigs in suits, actually, because the thing about being a drug addict is that you get really fucking good at recognizing plain-clothes detectives who are trying to seem casual. Omelette barks and springs up to go greet them. I know he’s a dog and therefore doesn’t really get the concept of cops, but it still feels like a betrayal to see him trying to befriend them. They ignore him anyway.

“Garen Anderson?” says one of the cops, the shorter one with a precisely trimmed goatee.

Travis shakes his head, brow furrowed. “No, I’m his roommate, Travis McCall. He’s, um—” Travis gestures vaguely over his shoulder, then seems to think better of selling me out to total strangers. “Is there something I can help you with?”

“I’m Detective Kirshner, with the New Haven Police Department. This is Detective Hughes. We’re currently investigating an incident that occurred earlier this week, and we’ve been led to believe that Mr. Anderson might be able to offer some insight.” Kirshner takes a step forward. “You don’t mind if we come in, do you?”

My muscles tense up as I prepare to launch myself off the couch and tell them that yeah, I do mind if they come in, but Travis is already shaking his head and shuffling awkwardly to the side. “No, of course not. Garen’s just, um... he’s in the living room.”

Oh, Christ. If I get arrested because of Travis’ need to be accommodating, I’m going to be so unbelievably pissed. I’m not an idiot, I knew this was coming. Of course Dave would tell the cops to come question me about his car, after the scene I caused with his parents on Monday. It was probably fucking Charlie’s idea, his way of getting back at me once he heard what had happened to his brother.

The detectives step into the house, and I can’t stop myself from glancing around the living room to make sure there’s nothing out there that could get me in trouble. The last thing I need is to have a couple of cops see that I’ve got a switchblade or an unregistered pistol, then take me into custody because it was in plain sight. Thankfully, all my sketchy, illegal weapons are secured upstairs in my bedroom, and god knows these cops are never getting up there without a warrant.

“Garen Anderson?” Kirshner repeats when he sees me.

I let my brows pinch together a little in hopefully convincing confusion. “Yes?”

I’m treated to a repeat of the introductions, this time from Hughes. I focus on letting my confused expression melt into something more wary without letting it go all the way to suspiciously caged. I stand and move to the armchair, gesturing towards the couch. “Yeah, I’ll help, if I can. Do you want to sit down?”

They move to the couch, and the knot in my stomach loosens a little. If they actually had anything on me and came here to arrest me, they wouldn’t be chilling on my sofa right now.

Travis is still lingering in the doorway, his hand twitching at his side as he does his best to refrain from gnawing nervously at his thumbnail, as is his habit. “Is there anything I can get either of you?”

“We’re both fine, thanks,” Kirshner says. “We just have a few questions for Garen here. It’s alright if we call you Garen, isn’t it?” I nod. “Excellent. I’m wondering if you could tell us a little bit about your relationship with a man named David Walczyk.”

It isn't hard to let myself go rigid at the name. Talking about Dave isn't suddenly easy, just because I know that these cops are here because he finally got his. Both detectives seem to notice my discomfort, but it's easy to sell my unease as nervousness, especially when I add, "I haven't had a relationship with Dave since he put me in the hospital last spring. If this has anything to do with the restraining order that I have against him, do you mind if we wait a few minutes to talk about this? 'Cause my mom's coming over for dinner tonight, and she'll be here any minute. She's my attorney, and I don't think she'd want me to talk about this without her here."

"Sure, we can wait for her," Kirshner says, bobbing his head. "But I'm curious why you'd assume this is about the no-contact order, if neither of you has violated it."

And it's stupid shit like that that makes me fucking hate cops. What kind of asshole phrases something that way? How shitty does a human being have to be in order to think it's cool to imply that *I'm* the one who might cross the boundaries the restraining order put in place?

Travis must agree, because despite my pretty fuckin' explicit request that this conversation wait until my lawyer gets here, he says sharply, "Dave *has* violated the restraining order. On Valentine's Day, he came to our house while Garen and I were still at school, and he left him this creepy box full of flowers and presents. A mixed CD full of '*I miss you*' songs, a note asking Garen to call him so they could meet up. Ms. Weisman reported it—"

"Don't call my mom '*Ms. Weisman*,' that's weird," I say, but he steamrolls right over me.

"—to the police when it happened. Pelham Village cops came and did a walkthrough of our house to make sure that Walczyk wasn't in here, waiting for G to get home. People from your department had to go to his place in New Haven to warn him that he'd be arrested if he violated the order again. That has to be on record somewhere, so I'm not sure how there's even a question about this. Yes, the restraining order was violated. Two months ago, by Dave Walczyk."

"That is on record, yes," Kirshner says. "I only wondered why Garen would guess that we're here about the restraining order now. If you reported the violation back in February, it would be a bit strange for us to only be asking you about it now. I wondered if he might be referring to a more recent incident that hadn't made its way to the record just yet." He looks at me, eyes cool. "Have you had any contact with him since February?"

"I want to answer your questions, really, I do," I lie, letting my mouth pull into something like a regretful grimace. "But I told you already, I want to wait until my attorney gets here. Otherwise, she'll just want to hear the whole story all over again later, and I try to avoid thinking about Dave as much as possible. The whole point of the restraining order is to keep him away from me, not to make it so I have to keep having conversations

about—”

“She’s here,” Travis interrupts. I look at him, then follow his gaze to the window. Mom’s car is turning into the driveway.

I stand up. “Give me two seconds, I’ll go let her know we’ve got company.”

Travis gives me a blank, frozen look, but I can’t exactly let my mom come sauntering in without any idea that my living room is full of fucking pigs. I give everybody in the room the same bland smile and let myself out the front door. Mom is just getting out of her car with a bakery box.

I lope over to her and say, “Hey, so, there are maybe some cops in my house right now.”

I should probably be offended by the fact that she doesn’t even look surprised. She gives me a brief once-over, and finding me unharmed, she asks in an undertone, “What happened?”

“I didn’t do anything,” I say. It isn’t even a lie, technically.

“What happened?” she repeats.

I glance over my shoulder at the house, but the door is still firmly shut, and none of the windows are open. It’s not like they can hear me. I turn back to Mom and say quickly, quietly, “They’re here about something to do with Dave Walczyk. They haven’t said what it is, and I haven’t done anything, I swear. But they said they’re investigating an incident from earlier this week, and I guess they think I’m involved. I told them I wanted to wait until you got here to answer any questions.”

“Good,” Mom says, squeezing my shoulder, and I offer her a brief smile.

“You taught me well. But uh, we kind of need to go in now, because it looks like Travis didn’t grow up in a house that emphasized the importance of not talking to the cops without a lawyer present. He kinda launched on them a minute ago, and I don’t want him to put his foot any further in his mouth.”

Mom huffs and hands me the bakery box. I peek inside. It’s full of macarons. Part of me wants to shove a handful of them in my mouth, but the rest of me is still feeling kind of sick about Travis being alone with the cops right now. I close the box without taking any, and Mom’s eyes widen.

“You really must be nervous,” she says. Without another word, she strides off towards the house, with me trailing after her. When she comes face to face with the cops, she holds her hand out and gives each of them a firm, very lawyer-ly handshake. “Good evening. I’m Marian Weisman. My son tells me that you’re investigating an incident that

took place sometime earlier this week, but he neglected to say what specifically you're referring to."

"We were just getting to that," Kirshner says. "But if it's all the same to you, we have a few things we'd like to get out of the way, first. Before you arrived, Garen was just about to tell us whether he'd had any contact with Dave Walczyk since the incident in February."

Mom looks over at me, and I blink back. My face is completely blank, but she can see in my eyes that I wasn't about to tell them shit. She looks back at Kirshner. "If David Walczyk had attempted to contact my son again, we would have reported it. Garen's safety is our primary concern. I'm unclear on what Mr. Walczyk could possibly say to the contrary."

"Well, Mr. Walczyk recently found himself on the receiving end of some incredibly threatening property damage. Given that this incident occurred not long after Garen allegedly had a confrontation with members of Mr. Walczyk's immediate family, he suggested that we look into whether or not Garen might know anything about this."

"What confrontation?" Mom says sharply. I can't tell if her tone is directed towards the cop or me, but I'm guessing I'm supposed to be the one to answer.

"Mr. and Mrs. Walczyk were at Patton Military Academy on Monday. They were visiting their other son for Parents' Day," I begin, sinking back into the armchair. I'm keeping my voice even and my shoulders hunched so I look as unassuming as possible, but it's kind of hard for a hundred-and-eighty-pound dude with combat boots and a lip ring to look fragile without seeming like a joke. "At the end of the day, Mrs. Walczyk came up to me and started saying things about how I'd torn their family apart. I said that what Dave did to me wasn't my fault. Mr. Walczyk said it was, said that I'd seduced Dave."

"Had you?" Hughes asks.

"How can you ask him that?" Travis snaps. I want to shake my head and tell him it's fine, I can handle it, but I also sort of want to see him lose it over this. "When they first went out, Walczyk was eighteen and Garen was fifteen. Most fifteen-year-olds can barely manage to seduce their own hand, let alone an adult male. Aside from the obvious issue of *statutory rape*, which you're apparently not too concerned with, that's—"

"Travis, perhaps you should go check on dinner," Mom interrupts. Travis doesn't move. His jaw is clenched so tightly, I can see a muscle twitching in his cheek. Mom raises her eyebrows at him. "Please."

He takes a slow, steadying breath, then walks to the kitchen, Omelette trotting after him. Hughes watches them go, frowning, then says to me, "As you were saying..."

There's a thin, blue Columbia sweatshirt shoved between the cushion and the arm of the chair I'm sitting in now. It's mostly mine, now. I've seen both Jamie and Travis wear it before, but I can't remember which one of them I stole it from. The living room isn't cold, but I pull the sweatshirt on anyway just so that I can pull the sleeves down over my hands and stare at the hems as I speak. "I said some stuff about Dave. About how I was just a kid when I met him, and he'd taken advantage of that. Then I went back to my friends' room in one of the dormitory halls."

"Do you happen to remember what time you left?" Kirshner asks.

"Five o'clock the next morning," I say, glancing up at him. "My, uh... my friend, Declan Campbell. I guess he wanted to make sure I was alright, so he asked me to stay the night there, in the room he and Javi share. We went up to the dorm before dinner, so we had some pizza delivered. Watched a couple movies on his laptop. Slept. Woke up the next morning at about quarter to five, were down in the residential quad by five for the start of physical training. I didn't actually come home until around quarter to six on Tuesday evening."

"And neither you nor your friend left the room during the night?" Hughes says. I shake my head. "And he'd corroborate that, I assume? If we go ask him right now, he'll tell us that he didn't hear you get up once, and there's no way you could've slipped out of the room without him noticing?"

I can only keep the innocent, wounded vibe going for so long before I snap. Instead of sneaking a little glance, I look Hughes dead in the eyes and say, "He has a twin bed. I slept between him and the wall, with his arm around me. Believe me, if I'd gotten out of bed, he would've noticed."

"Ah," Kirshner says awkwardly. "Well, we'll be in touch with your friend shortly, just to confirm. You said his name is Campbell?"

I confirm, spell it, then give them Javi's name, too.

"Assuming this checks out, I don't think we'll have any other questions for you," Kirshner tells me. "Of course, this was all just a matter of routine. Whenever an incident occurs involving someone who has had domestic disputes in the past, we have to look into the possibility that their previous partner was at fault. Standard protocol for everyone's comfort."

"Obviously. I can't tell you how comfortable I am, knowing that Dave Walczyk can hospitalize my son during the spring of one year, then accuse him of committing some sort of crime the next," Mom says flatly. She gestures towards the door. "We were about to have a family dinner. If you don't have any further questions, perhaps you can see yourselves out."

The cops exchange a brief glance, then stand. "Of course," Kirshner says. They move

towards the door, but he pauses in the middle of the entryway and turns towards the kitchen. “If you don’t mind my asking, where were you on Monday night?”

I roll off my chair and stomp out to the entryway. Travis is still hovering in the kitchen, clutching an oven mitt in both hands.

“And is *this* more of your standard protocol, Detective?” Mom says flatly.

“No,” Hughes says coolly. “But it’s clear that Mr... McCall, was it?” Travis nods. “It’s clear that Mr. McCall here bears some ill will towards Mr. Walczyk. Given the obvious anger he expressed earlier, I think it merits some—”

“I’m angry that Dave did what he did, and I’m angry that someone I care about had to suffer because of him,” Travis says. “But I’d never—I know he’d just take it out on Garen, if I did anything to him. It’s what he did last year. He was abusing Garen, and I tried to tell him to get out of G’s life, and he put him in the hospital. It’s—” Travis swallows. “It was my fault that Garen got hurt then, and I’d never, ever do anything that could make Dave come after him again. I was home on Monday night. I was working on a group project with some friends from school, and we were all on Skype together until about two in the morning. You can check my call history, if you really need to. Or I’ll give you my friends’ names so you can talk to them directly.”

“I don’t think that will be necessary,” Kirshner says with a bland smile. “We might be in touch, if we have more questions later on. But for now, you all enjoy the rest of your evening.”

They leave through the front door. Travis, Mom, and I stand in absolute silence, listening for the slam of the car doors, the hum of the engine starting up, the car backing up and speeding off. The moment the car stops being visible through the window above the kitchen sink, Travis strides over to me, reaches into my pocket, and takes out my cell phone.

“You should call him,” he says.

“Call who?” I ask.

“Declan. If those detectives are going to go right over to Patton and confirm your story, you should make sure that he knows what he’s supposed to say.”

I take the phone from Travis, and he turns away from me to go retrieve the pasta alla formiana from the oven. I look over at Mom, who is staring back at me, her mouth drawn tight. “I didn’t lie.”

“Well, you sure as hell didn’t tell the truth,” Travis says. He practically slams the baking dish down on the counter. “If you didn’t know anything about what happened to Dave’s *whatever*, then you would’ve been pissed. You would’ve been completely furious

that those officers had the audacity to question you. Instead, you hunched yourself up into a ball and tried to look innocent, and that's not how you normally react to anything."

"I said I didn't do it. That's not the same thing as saying that I didn't know anything about what happened," I say. "Look, I told those guys the truth. I argued with Charlie and his parents, and then I spent the night in Declan and Javi's room. I don't have to call Dec to get him to cover for me. He knows I was there all night."

Travis finally turns to face me again. His eyes search my face for a long minute, but when that minute ends, I can see his shoulders drop a fraction of an inch. At the very least, he doesn't look like he thinks I'm bullshitting him.

Mom is another story entirely.

"Tell me what really happened, Garen," she says.

It's not like I've got a choice. Travis dishes up plates of pasta for all of us, we sit down at the table together, and I tell them the entire story—at least, a version of it. I say the fight was about the abuse, not the rape, because ever actually telling my own mother that that happened is just not an option. I leave out the part about the video of the fire. I *definitely* leave out the part about Declan kind of getting off on the whole thing. I maybe emphasize the moment where I told Declan I wished Dave's car would burn to ashes, because Travis is looking way, way too calm about this whole thing.

I'm not even remotely surprised when he says, after I've finished speaking, "Okay. Why don't we just tell the cops it was Declan? They'll go after the guy who really did it, and then you'll be fine."

"He's my friend, and he did it to help me. I'm not going to turn him in," I say flatly.

"You don't have to be the one to do it," Travis says.

I cross my arms over my chest. "Are you telling me that *you're* going to turn him in? Because if so, you and I are going to have a problem."

Travis opens his mouth to speak, but Mom cuts across him, "That's not going to happen. As far as I'm concerned, this family is *done* talking to the police about this incident."

"I'm not family," Travis says.

"The hell you aren't," Mom says, and Travis' mouth snaps shut, his dark blue eyes going round in something that seems like surprise. Mom either doesn't notice or chooses to deliberately ignore him. "Nothing that Garen said to those officers was a lie. They never asked him if he knew who did it, or if he had any ideas who else they should investigate. If they find out that he tactfully omitted any details, he'll get in nearly as much trouble as

Declan would.” She sets her fork down and reaches out to touch my shoulder. “They saw the records, and they know what Walczyk did to you. Nobody who knows the truth about him would want you to suffer more because of him. My guess? Those officers didn’t want to have to arrest you. Now that they know David Walczyk’s first choice of a suspect didn’t do anything, they’re going to look elsewhere, presumably at people in the New Haven area.” She drops her hand and looks around at Travis. “I think it would be in Garen’s best interest to allow them to do so.”

“What if someone else gets in trouble for what Declan did?” Travis asks.

“There isn’t any evidence against anyone else,” Mom says. “Things like this happen all the time in big cities. Do you know what happens when they run out of leads? They put it on the back burner and focus on other cases. Dave Walczyk will get a nice, big check from his insurance company, he’ll buy himself a new car, and everyone will move on. And—” She turns to narrow her eyes at me. “I think that you should have a conversation with your new boyfriend about how he plans to handle things like this in the future. This kind of thing cannot happen again. Do you understand me?”

“Declan’s not my boyfriend,” I say.

Mom’s glare is *withering*. “Is that the only part you heard?”

“No,” I say, letting my head tip back so I’m rolling my eyes at the ceiling instead of her. “I just figured it was worth pointing out, considering *everyone* seems to be on my shit about Declan being my boyfriend, even though he’s not. When I get yelled at for things, I prefer for them to be things I’ve actually done.”

“No one is yelling at you, Garen,” she says in a tone that heavily implies that she’d be willing to start. “I’m merely saying that I hope we won’t have any nights like this in the future. I could happily go the rest of my life without having to mediate another conversation between you and the police. If that’s not something that you think your friends can manage, then perhaps you should reevaluate some of your friendships.”

I’m trying so hard to keep my expression neutral, but I doubt I’m succeeding it. I want to *scream*. Why is she acting like what Declan did to Dave’s car was a bad thing? Why is she acting like keeping my nose clean and keeping some random cops out of my living room is more important than the fact that I finally feel like I’ll be able to drive around Connecticut and not flinch every time I see a black convertible? She doesn’t get that I feel safer knowing that the people I care about are willing to get their hands dirty for me. My old drug dealer got shot in the kneecap by Jamie and punched in the mouth by Ben; my abusive ex can’t *breathe* without Travis taking offense and call the cops about it. It doesn’t freak me out that Declan joined the ranks of my overenthusiastic defenders by committing arson. It makes me like him *more*.

Travis looks down at his watch, sighs, and rubs both hands over his face. “I told one of the girls at the shop that I’d cover her opening shift tomorrow if she took my closing one,

so I've got to be up at quarter after four."

"We'll let you get some sleep, then," Mom says. They both stand, but when I do the same, Mom levels me with a look. "Don't even think about it, Garen. You and I aren't done talking."

"But you said—"

"I said that Travis should get some sleep. Contrary to what you've been telling me for the last year and a half, he doesn't actually need your assistance with that." She gives me a dirty look, then moves around the table to hug Travis. "Dinner was excellent. Thank you so much for taking the time to make it."

Travis looks embarrassed, but I don't know if it's because of the compliment, or because of how unused to motherly love he has become. "You're welcome. Thank you for eating it, even though we all knew there was a chance we might get food poisoning."

She laughs, and he turns to leave. My chest seizes up, and I nearly trip over my own feet chasing him to the bottom of the stairs. "Travis, wait. You—" I glance back at the kitchen, then say, a little quieter, "You said we were going to talk. Remember? We were going to talk after dinner. You promised."

"I know. But it's been a long night," he says.

He isn't looking at me, he's looking up the stairs, and I want to die, because I know—I just *know* that he's trying to find a way to tell me that he has already changed his mind about what we had only barely started to discuss before the cops got here. I didn't even get him back, and I'm already losing him again. I'm always fucking losing him.

But then he cups my face between his palms and says quietly, "You have to leave for school at the same time that I have to leave for work. We can sleep tonight, talk in the morning. Trust me, G—I really, really want to have this conversation, and we will. Tomorrow morning."

"Promise?" I say. I don't even care that I sound stupid and needy for saying that, because he nods and leans in to kiss my forehead.

"I promise. I'll see you in the morning."

He turns and heads upstairs. I know I should go back in to get lectured by Mom some more, but I can't move. I stay where I am, watching Travis until he disappears around the corner.

227 days sober

Travis wakes before me the next morning. By the time I get dressed for PT, collect all my school shit, and drag myself downstairs, he's already showered, dressed for work, and drinking coffee in the kitchen.

"Hi," he says. "I poured you a cup."

He looks so much calmer than I feel. I slip into the chair across the table from him and reach for the second coffee mug. I take a quick sip—he actually bothered to pull a couple of espresso shots into it for me—in the hope that if I keep my hands busy, he won't notice that they're twitching slightly. I want *so badly* for this conversation to work in my favor, but it feels like a losing battle; every time I try to get Travis back, something fucks it up. It's not like this time will be any different.

"We both have to leave in about fifteen minutes, so we should probably keep this short, right?" he says.

I nod jerkily. *I changed my mind* will probably actually only take him two seconds to say. I'm guessing the other fourteen minutes and fifty-eight seconds will consist of me crying and begging and making an ass of myself, while Travis avoids my eyes and exchanges embarrassed looks with Omelette.

"The casual thing you and Declan have," he starts, and that's *wonderful*, that's exactly how I was hoping this talk would start, with Travis bringing up my arsonist friend-with-benefits. Why the fuck not. "As much as I really don't want to hear the details of what you guys do together, I was thinking that maybe that could be a good, uh... starting point, or whatever. For us." He looks down at his coffee cup. There's a wry twist to his mouth, like he's fighting a smirk. "I mean, we went from meeting each other to you proposing in a matter of three months. '*Casual*' doesn't exactly come naturally to us. But if you and Declan have been hooking up for almost a month now without feelings getting involved, then that's probably a good model for us."

"Us," I echo, not really sure I'm hearing him right.

Travis sets his coffee cup aside and reaches across the table to carefully take my hands in his. "Yeah. Us."

My heart is pounding so hard that I'm sure Travis must be able to see my chest vibrating with it. There's some twisted, faithless part of me that's convinced he's fucking with me right now, and I want to crawl across the table and kiss him so that I can know for sure if he's bluffing. But that's one of those... impulses I have. One of the batshit crazy ones that I'm supposed to think through until I realize how unhinged I am. I take a deep breath and remain in my seat. Doc Howard would be so proud.

"Okay. What do you want to know?" I say.

"I know you said you two aren't exclusive. But how far do you take that?" Travis asks slowly. His brow is a little bit wrinkled, like the idea of *not* being monogamous is deeply troubling to him. Pretty ironic, considering I can't remember the last time he dated someone and *didn't* cheat on them with me, but whatever. "Like, does he tell you before he hooks up with someone else? Are you supposed to get each other's permission, or something?"

Why, are you fucking anyone else? I want to yell in his face. But, again—batshit crazy. Another deep breath. "No. We both just kind of do whatever we want. On the nights when I'm too busy to hook up with him, I'm pretty sure he just goes and finds some chick who will. I don't really ask." And the thing is? I'm fine with not asking. Dec fucks girls, I get it, I don't care. But the idea of Travis doing the same thing turns my stomach, so I add, as quickly but casually as I can, "That's just Declan, though. I spent part of January hooking up with this guy in my squad, and then I had a threesome with him and his boyfriend at that party I went to at the start of spring break. But other than that, I haven't gotten with anyone since, you know... you."

"I haven't been with anyone since you, *period*," Travis says. I can't tell if it's an accusation or not. He shrugs. "If we're laying everything out like this, I went on a... I don't even know, I guess it was kind of a date? Like, a coffee date thing with this girl from school, right before you and James went down to Georgia. But we both knew it wasn't going anywhere, and I didn't even touch her. I didn't *want* to touch her."

"You shouldn't do anything you don't want to do," I blurt out. "Like, if you don't want to hook up with randoms, I don't want you to *make* yourself do it just because you want to make sure we're not being too monogamous. 'Cause honestly, T, if I'm with you—I mean, both of you, you and Declan—I'm not going to want anyone else. I'd be happy with just you."

Travis doesn't say anything. Usually, when Travis doesn't say anything, that means I've taken the conversation too far. I try to replay the last five seconds in my head, and yeah, maybe I'm blurring the 'casual' line more than I should. I clear my throat and amend, "I'd be fine with just hooking up with you and Dec."

"Good," Travis says, and half a second later, "When you fuck him, do you stay over after?"

I stare, but I can't get a single word out. Even the idea of actually getting into the gritty details of what I do with Declan makes me feel sick. But Travis either doesn't realize this, or doesn't care enough to let it stop him.

"I know you stayed at Patton the other night, but I'm speaking generally. Do you guys spend the night together? Or is it more like a booty call type of situation?"

Hearing Travis use the phrase '*booty call*' is pretty surreal. For a few seconds, I have to focus very hard on trying not to laugh.

“Um... I guess it's more of a booty call. He stayed here once last week, and I stayed there on Monday, but that's it. We only really spend the night together if it's more convenient than separating.”

Travis nods. “Okay. So, we can do that, too.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Spending the night together. If it's not something you do with him, then it would probably be better for us to avoid that, too.” Travis ducks his head and adds in a hushed voice, “Besides, waking up with you has always felt so goddamn intimate. I'm not sure I can stay in a casual frame of mind if we're doing that.”

I'm not sure I can stay casual *at all*. Right now, I want to lead him back upstairs and into his bed; I want to shut out the rest of the world—PT at school, his early morning shift at Starbucks, my first shift at Rush tonight, everything, everyone—and feel some of that intimacy he's convinced we shouldn't have.

I sneak my hands further forward so that I'm gripping his wrists instead of his fingers, and I know it's impossible, but I swear I can feel his tattoo of my initial under my palm.

“There might be nights when it makes sense for us to share a bed, though,” I say quietly. “Like tonight. If we're all out at the club until after four in the morning, and you've got to be at work five hours later, you know Jamie will want us to crash at his place. And it wouldn't make sense for me to take the guest room and you to go sleep on the couch, or whatever.”

Travis smirks at me. “What, you wouldn't offer to let me have the bed? That's not nice.”

“You can absolutely have the bed. You just have to be comfortable with me being in it, too,” I say.

“Think I can manage that for one night. You know, for James' sake,” he says. His fingertips trace over the veins in my wrists, and I have to grit my teeth to try to fight a shiver. But then his brow furrows, and he asks, “Are you in love with him?”

“Who, James?” I say, purposely misunderstanding. “Eh, kind of yes, kind of no. Only as much as I have been since we were fourteen. I'd say it's more of a debilitating codependency than actually being in love with him—”

“I meant Declan,” Travis interrupts. “You say it's casual, and you say you're just friends with benefits, but are you sure you don't have deeper feelings for him than that? You've never like, told him you love him, or any—”

“Of course I haven't,” I interrupt. “God, Trav. The only person I've ever been in love with

is *you*. Declan and I aren't like that, I swear."

A quiet, traitorous part of me can't help but remember the way Declan had hidden his face against my neck when he said *I like you more than anyone else I've ever fucked*. It felt like a confession. And no matter what I'm saying to Travis right now about Dec and me not being like that, it sure as hell felt like we were *like that* on Monday night.

But with Travis holding my hands and offering me another chance, I can't afford to consider that feeling right now. So, I fucking bury it.

"Okay," Travis continues, "I think if we're trying to keep things even, you and I should probably stick to that same standard. You know, keeping the whole 'I love you' thing out of the picture for now. That way, we can be sure—"

"Yeah, that's not an option," I interrupt. "I don't tell Declan I love him because I'd be lying if I did. With you, I'd be lying if I tried to say I *don't* love you. So... fuck that, I love you, deal with it."

Travis scowls. "How is that even remotely casual?"

"Through tone, mostly. And gesture." I give a dismissive wave of my hand and say, "Love you. Love you a lot, gonna keep saying it. Quit your whining."

"I'm not whining," he whines. And yeah, the language policing is annoying as shit, but the sullen twist of his lips right now is pretty adorable.

"Yeah, you are." I tug on his hands. "Come here. Come kiss me with that whining mouth of yours."

"I'm not whining," he repeats, but his tone is distracted now, and he seems more concerned with getting out of his seat and over to me. He drops to his knees on the linoleum and drags my legs out from under the table so that he can nestle between them.

I curl my hands into the collar of his work polo and pull him into a kiss. He makes a gently pleased sound against my lips, then against my tongue when the kiss deepens. My heart is pounding so hard that I'm sure he can feel my pulse beating under his hands when he settles them just below my jaw. I'm so focused on this thought that it takes me a minute to notice that Travis has captured one of my hands and guided it down to his own chest.

"This is why I was trying to argue against us saying that," he says against the corner of my mouth. "God. Can you feel what it does to me, when you tell me you love me?"

And he isn't exaggerating—I can feel his heartbeat stuttering through the thin cotton of his polo shirt, and fuck, it drives me crazy. I shove the hem of his shirt up, up, up to his

collarbone so that I can press my mouth to his skin as I say again, "Love you, Travis."

"F-Fuck, G," he breathes. He pulls out of my grip just long enough to shuck off his shirt, and then he's grabbing for me again. "You don't give a shit if you're late to school, do you?"

"What are you, new? Of course I don't give a shit, dude, I'll take the whole day off, if you want me to," I say, and I press him to the floor.

And the truth is, Travis was *never* as easy as he is right now. I've barely gotten him onto the linoleum before he's winding his legs over mine and digging his heels into the backs of my thighs, arching up against me and murmuring, "C'mere, G."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm here," I babble back at him, and I just can't help myself. I hook his knee over the crook of my elbow and haul it up out of the way so that I can grind my growing hard-on against his ass through all these awful layers of clothes. "God, you're going to be so fucking late to work."

"It's been four months, dude, I promise you this won't take more than ten minutes. Here, let me just—" and he frees up my arm again by tilting his hips up a little bit more and slinging his leg over my shoulder. The hard, thick muscle of his thigh is pinned between our torsos. His knee is by my *face*.

Oh, god. Oh, god, I'm going to die.

"Were you this flexible in December?" I say in what I refuse to admit might be a hysterical voice.

"Not in December, no. But I was back when we first—when I was still doing track. You have to, you know, do a lot of stretching so you don't pull a muscle while you're running. And I lost a lot of flexibility during the semester I was doing stage crew instead of track, but I joined the fitness center at Columbia—"

I shove his face against my neck to smother his words and say, "What is this talking thing you're doing? What is wrong with you? Shut the fuck up. Kiss me, get your dick out, something—"

"Take your shirt off. Please, I want to see you," he all but begs, shoving his hands between our bodies to claw at the hem of my Whitman Squad t-shirt. I lean back on my heels to strip off my shirt, and Travis wriggles away from me to kick his way out of his jeans. He manages it quicker than I would have expected.

And then he's naked on our kitchen floor, and god, he's gorgeous. I pretty much fall onto him, pressing my body against his in every place I can, and kissing my way across his freckled collarbone. He's only maybe fifteen minutes out of the shower, and his skin is so fresh and clean that it doesn't taste like anything, not even the salt of sweat. A

weird little part of me wishes it was later in the day, when he's more like himself. When I can suck his fingers into my mouth and taste coffee grounds under his nails and smudges of ink from the ballpoint pen he uses to take notes in class. Since I can't taste him like I want to, I nudge his head to the side so that I can nose through the damp blond hair behind his ear. I breathe deeply. He smells like coconut shampoo, just like he always has, and it makes my heart ache.

"Calm the fuck down, Edward Cullen," Travis says, squirming against my hold on him. "You're hyperventilating in my ear."

"Shut up. I just *missed* you," I say. My voice almost breaks. It's kind of embarrassing, up until Travis catches up to what I'm feeling and clutches at my back with shaking hands.

"Christ, Garen. You, too. Can you—"

"Yeah," I say, and I crawl down the length of his body to take him into my mouth.

He practically convulses under me and starts babbling, "Oh my god, that's not what I meant, I thought we were only going to trade quick handjobs before we had to leave."

I pull off with the loudest, wettest noise I can managed—Travis whimpers. I wait until he meets my eyes before I lick my lips and say, "Do you want me to stop?"

"No, Jesus, *no*, but I want to touch you, too," he says, stretching a hand towards me. I roll my eyes and clamber off him so that I can lie mostly perpendicular to him, just close enough for him to jerk me off while I blow him. Honestly, I would rather suck his dick than get a handjob. Getting him off gets me off more than letting him get me off does, and god, that doesn't even make sense.

Travis must not think so, either. Instead of reaching for my dick, he grabs my legs and drags me right around so that my torso is snugged up against his. Before I can stop sucking him long enough to make a comment, he twists around and guides my cock into his own mouth.

I almost choke on the head of his dick. This is the first time that Travis and I have ever actually gotten around to sixty-nining, and it feels surreal that it's happening on our kitchen floor at quarter to five in the morning. It feels even *more* surreal that he can give me this, but I still want more from him.

I fling an arm out for my duffel bag, but only manage to reach the zipper of it. My fingers scrabble over the zipper pull for a few too many seconds before I get a good enough grip to drag it closer. There's a tube of lube in the side pocket, and I suck Travis in so deep that my nose touches his balls, because that's the easiest way to distract him from pulling away and getting sulky about the fact that I sometimes need lube and condoms when I'm away at Patton for the day. His moan vibrates through my groin, and I wish I could thread my hands into his hair and tell him how good it feels. Instead, I snap open

the cap on the lube and coat my fingers in the slick, then reach behind him to rub over his hole.

His whole body shudders, and he lets my dick slip out of his mouth. “Want your fingers so badly. But—don’t want you to fuck me, not yet, okay?”

I want to say *why the fuck not?* But I can’t do that without sounding and feeling like a complete ass, so I just kiss the soft skin over his hipbones and murmur, “Are you sure?” Even without looking down, I can feel him nodding.

“Yeah, I’m sure,” he says. “We can do that tonight, before we meet the others for dinner. O-Or tomorrow afternoon. I want to take our time with it, make it good.” He settles his hand in the small of my back and practically breathes the next words over my cock, “It’s going to be so, so good, G.”

When I start to suck him again, he jerks forward into my mouth. The head of his cock hits the back of my throat, and *that’s* nothing I can’t handle, I swallow around it easily enough, but he starts whispering hasty apologies and tries to correct it by moving back, right onto my hand. One of my lubed fingers sinks into his ass, right up to the first knuckle.

It’s too much. In this stupid position, I can’t finger him like I want to, I can’t suck him like I want to. He doesn’t feel like he’s *mine* in the way that I want him to be. I scramble upright and roll him onto his back, even as he protests the loss. I knock his knees apart and fit myself between them so that I can stretch my body out over his, as my hand drops between his legs again and my fingers return to the tight clutch of his hole.

He curls an arm around my neck and drags me as close as we can get, until I can barely move enough to fuck him with my fingers, until I’m just keeping them locked inside of him and snugged up against his prostate while he trembles and grinds our cocks together and kisses me as deeply and desperately as he can.

“Love you,” he gasps into my mouth, and I can’t remember the last time I felt like this.

Travis doesn’t end up letting me take the day off after we’ve both gotten off, but he does make me insanely late to PT. I jog out into the residential quad sometime around quarter-to-six. The rest of the squad is paired off already, one member of each pair knocking out some crunches while his partner supervises his form—apparently today is one of our super-exciting, bullshit calisthenics days. Even with everyone else busy, my arrival isn’t as stealthy as I’d hoped.

“And where the hell have you been, Anderson?” Sergeant Smith demands the second he catches sight of me.

“Sorry I’m late, Sarge,” I say, despite the fact that I’m absolutely *not* sorry.

I head over to where most of my friends seem to be congregated, and without me saying a word, guys start swapping out partners—Taylor shakes Declan’s hands off his sneakers and shifts over, Steven abandons Javi to come spot Taylor instead, Charlie takes one look at me and goes to the other end of the line to form a group of three with some dudes whose names I don’t know, Sam and Javi pair off—until Declan is laid out on the ground, all by his lonesome.

Technically, I’m supposed to kneel in front of him and hold his feet to the ground if he needs the support, but that sounds so *boring*, and I feel unbelievably wired after what has just happened at the house. Instead, I shuffle up close to his shins and wrap my arms around his thighs, resting my chin on his knees.

“Oh, hi there, Campbell. I have a fun little tale to tell. Guess who showed up at my house last—”

“Anderson,” Sergeant Smith snaps again. I don’t let go of Declan’s legs, but I do at least have the sense not to ignore Sarge. I twist around enough to stare blankly up at him, and he glowers back at me. “Why are you so late?”

“Cause I was giving my stepbrother a blowjob on our kitchen floor,” I say.

“What,” Smith says. It doesn’t really sound like a question, considering the lack of inflection.

“I was giving,” I repeat slowly. “My stepbrother. A blowjob. On our kitchen floor.”

Smith doesn’t say anything. Actually, none of the other guys in the squad seem to be saying much of anything, either. A minute passes, and Sarge hasn’t blinked, so I’m not sure he even understands. I release Declan’s knees so I can sit back on my heels and carefully explain, “A blowjob is when you put a guy’s dick in your mouth. If you’re feeling ambitious, you can use it as a segue to some sixty-nining and some assplay. I was, and I did. It took a little longer than expected, hence me being late.” Wait—manners. I add, “Sorry for that, again.”

Sergeant Smith remains silent. I think he might be having an aneurysm; one of his eyes is kind of twitching. It takes me another few seconds to realize, “Oh, the stepbrother part! Yeah. But it’s not in a weird way, I swear. We’re both legal, and our parents are getting divorced, and they know we pound it out sometimes. In fact, that’s kind of *why* they’re getting divorced. Well, also because my dad had a kid with a Jew, and then married an anti-Semite, but I think it’s mostly the whole ‘I dick her son’ thing.”

“What is wrong with you?” Sergeant Smith finally asks me. It feels like it’s maybe a trick question.

I shrug. “A lot of things. I could probably make a list, if you want.”

“Detention,” Smith says. “Detention today. Detention next week. Detention every day until the start of final exams, actually, and you’ll be serving them with the Hampton and Montgomery squads, because I don’t want to have to spend any more time with you than I absolutely have to.”

“Whatever. You’re going to miss me after I graduate,” I scoff. Why not? If I’ve got detention every day for the next two weeks, I might as well make sure I’ve earned it. After Smith has skulked off to bleach the image of me giving a blowjob from his memory, I turn back to Declan, who is propped up on his elbows and staring at me, too. I roll my eyes. “Come on, don’t give me that look. I *know* you know what a blowjob is, I’m not explaining it again.”

“I know what it is,” Declan says. “Wasn’t too aware of the fact that you still gave them to Trevor, though.”

“Are you ever going to call him by his actual name?” I ask.

“No.”

“It’s not even a funny joke.”

“I think it is,” Declan says flatly, and oh god, that voice.

“You’re not jealous, are you?” I blurt out. The look that he gives me in response is so withering, I don’t have to press for an answer. I slump against his legs again and sigh, “Good. That’s—yeah, awesome. ‘Cause he and I, we’re sort of, you know, together now. Well, not *together*. But we’re figuring things out, and we’re... casual.”

“Casual,” Declan repeats after me.

I nod. The only guys close enough to hear are Taylor and Steven, and it’s not like they don’t know that Declan and I are fucking around, but I still lower my voice when I add, “Like you and me.”

“Casual like you and me,” Declan repeats.

I squint at him. “Is there a fucking echo out here? Jesus Christ, Dec. If you’ve got a problem with—”

He sits up, and suddenly we’re almost nose-to-nose. “What was the story you were going to tell me?”

“What?” I say. It’s the most eloquent thing I can manage right now. My nerves still feel raw from everything I’ve done with Travis this morning, and even with my arms around Declan’s legs, I’m not prepared for him to suddenly be so close to me.

"When you first showed up to PT, you said you had a story to tell me. You said someone was at your house. Who?" Declan asks. He drops flat to the grass again, fixes his posture a little, then starts in on his crunches again.

It doesn't escape my notice that I have to talk a little louder to be sure that he can hear me now. And it sure as hell doesn't escape my notice that the other guys can probably hear me, too.

"Oh, right. Some cops showed up at my house last night," I say.

Two pairs down, Javi perks right up and calls over, "Wait, you too?"

I raise my eyebrows at him, even though I know exactly what he's talking about. If anything, I'm just surprised the New Haven detectives bothered to check my story as quickly as they did. Guess they only wanted to make one trip up to New York.

"A couple of detectives showed up at the dorm last night and had the desk attendant grab me and Declan out of our room," Javi continues. There are definitely a few more people listening now. "They wanted to talk to us about you staying in our room on Monday night. The fuck was that about?"

I roll my eyes so hard, my whole head lolls back on my neck. "It was about some *bullshit*, dude. These fucking Connecticut pigs showed up when I was having dinner with my fucking mom, and they start asking me all these questions about like, where I was on Monday night, and if anybody could verify it, and then all this shit about the... you know, the restraining order or whatever."

Javi sneaks a glance over at Charlie. There aren't enough guys in the squad for us to be separated enough to stop Charlie from hearing everything I'm saying. His jaw is clenched tight in rage, and he looks more like his brother than I've ever seen before. I look away.

"I guess something happened to my ex," I say, a little quieter and with my eyes now fixed on Declan's bent knees. "They didn't even tell me what, specifically. Property damage, that's all they said. And apparently, when somebody broke something of his, he automatically assumed that I was getting revenge for all the things he ever broke on me—you know, leg, ribs, fingers, nose, and so on."

I glance around. My friends look like they don't know whether or not to fake a laugh at that. Most of them settle for giving me awkward half-smiles. I look back towards Declan, whose only allowance of expression is to raise his eyebrows ever so slightly, the way he might genuinely express surprise at me being questioned by the police, if he didn't already know what was up.

"Is that why they came to talk to Javi and me?" he asks me. "So they could make sure you didn't actually fuck off to Connecticut and break whatever your ex told them you

broke?”

“Yep,” I say, hitching my shoulder. “They told me it was standard procedure, and honestly, I’m not sure they ever believed it could be me in the first place. I mean, Dave’s the fucking psycho, not me—”

A pair of hands come down hard on my back, shoving me forward so hard that Declan’s knees crash into my ribcage and knock the wind right out of me. Dec grabs my shoulders to brace me, but there’s a second shove from behind before Taylor jumps up and intervenes.

I get myself turned around, but immediately wish I hadn’t. Charlie is still glowering at me, still trying to get close enough to shove me a third time. Taylor has a pretty good grip on him, and Javi’s coming over to help, too; Declan is right behind me, crouched on one knee, every muscle in his animalistic body coiled tight like he’s ready to spring up and attack.

I don’t fucking care. It doesn’t matter that Taylor and Javi have a solid hold on Charlie. It doesn’t matter that Sergeant Smith is storming over and snapping at the whole squad to calm down. It doesn’t matter that Declan’s body is so warm and tense behind me that he seems ready to tear his best friend’s heart out of his chest right here in the middle of the quad.

All that matters is those hazel Walczyk eyes burning into mine while Charlie snarls, “You shut your goddamn mouth about him, okay, Garen? Don’t you ever say my brother’s name again, don’t you fucking talk about him like he’s--*you’re* the crazy one, making up all that shit you said on Monday! Everybody knows you’re a fucking liar, everybody knows you’re just saying it for attention. Everybody knows you’re just hoping you can make up all this shit about getting abused and have Campbell *ride up* on some white horse and save your pathetic ass. Well, good fucking luck with that, man, ‘cause he doesn’t give a *shit* about you, Dec’s just as fucking crazy as you are, you deserve each other, couple of psychotic fucking faggots who can’t—”

“You need to shut the hell up right now,” Taylor warns, his grip on Charlie going tighter, “because you’re starting to piss *me* off, too. And I’m not sure if you’ve noticed this, but I’m a lot bigger than you, and so is Declan, and so is Garen. Between the three of us, you’re—”

“I’m not going to fight him,” I say quickly, like getting the words out as fast as I can will somehow un-say what Taylor has just said. The last fucking thing I need is for Dave to ever think I was ready to fight his brother.

My hands are shaking. All of the contentment and afterglow I’d been feeling at the start of PT is gone now, replaced by fear that curls tight around my bones and makes it almost impossible for me to move. Charlie’s rage is nearly as all-consuming as Dave’s was, and I’m trying not to be terrified of this stupid kid in a pair of glasses, but I’m sure,

I'm so fucking sure that I'm about to get hit. I can't stand the thought of getting hit again.

Charlie isn't yelling at me anymore, but that's only because Sergeant Smitt has taken control of the situation and gotten everyone quiet. All the better to hear his own screaming, I guess. He's *losing it* on Charlie right now, and maybe me, too, but I can't be sure. None of his words are really penetrating my brain, because none of them make a difference. The only thing I care about right now is watching Walczyk's hands—still balled up into fists—and making sure they don't get any closer to me.

There's a sound that might be *Anderson, Anderson*. I don't know. I keep staring at those fists.

"Garen," Sergeant Smitt says, loudly enough that even I can't tune it out. I blink, but keep my eyes on the fists. One of Smitt's big paws comes down, maybe to grab my shoulder, and I--

God fucking damn.

I jerk away from his touch like I'm a bitch in a fucking Lifetime Movie. Smitt freezes. Nobody says anything. Not much they can say, really, after Charlie's big rant about me making up an abusive relationship with his brother, then me doing a battered housewife flinch away from Sarge's hand in front of the entire squad. I squeeze my eyes shut, but it doesn't do anything to get rid of the shame that's creeping down my spine. I should have just taken the whole day off.

"Walczyk: headmaster's office," Smitt finally says. "I'll be going up there with you now. Campbell, you're in charge. Keep everyone running through the rest of the routine, you know how it should be going. Anderson..."

When he trails off, I slowly open my eyes and raise them to his face. His expression is right on the cusp of pity, and it makes me want to burn the entire school down, just so he'll go back to hating me instead.

"Hit the locker room. You're done for the morning."

I'm supposed to say *yes, sir*, but I can't. All I can pull together is a half-assed shrug. I guess that's enough, given the circumstances, because Smitt starts marching Charlie up the path to the administration building. They make it all the way to the doors before I make myself stand up.

"I'll take care of it," Declan tells me in something barely above a breath. I look at him, and he gives me a much more significant look back, leans a little closer and murmurs, "What, you think I'm going to let him talk to you like that? I'll figure something out. For him *and* his rapist brother."

I can still hear the yelling ringing in my ears. I can still see those cold, hazel eyes glaring right at me. I can still feel Charlie's hands on my back. I can still feel Dave's hands on me everywhere else.

"Whatever you decide to do," I say quietly, "make sure it hurts."

Chapter Thirty-Two

“Clothes make the man. Naked people have little or no influence on society.” –Mark Twain

227 days sober

The only good thing about the rest of the school day is that Sergeant Smith gets a call and ends MLEP forty-five minutes early, giving me the chance to slip out of the room with everyone else, instead of sticking around for the first of my endless detentions. I'm home by quarter to five—plenty of time to take a nap that'll get me through dinner with my friends and work at Rush after. Travis seems to have had the same idea. His car is in the driveway when I pull up, but when I come inside, he's nowhere on the main level. I trudge upstairs and let myself into his bedroom.

He's curled up in bed, dead asleep, with Omelette conked out between him and the window. The dog wakes up the second I close the door behind myself, and he barks loudly enough to bring Travis back to consciousness with a jolt.

“Shut up, Om,” I whisper, even though it's too late. He doesn't care what I'm saying, as long as I'm leaning over to pet him.

Travis pulls back the corner of the blankets and grumbles, “C'mere so he'll stop losing his mind.”

I kick off my boots, strip out of my school uniform, and crawl under the blankets. I didn't bother putting on boxers or a t-shirt after my shower this morning, so I'm sort of accidentally naked now, but Travis is too out of it to notice, let alone do anything about it. He's just awake enough to remember his manners, though. “How was school?”

“It sucked really, really badly. I should've just stayed home,” I say, smushing my face against his shoulder.

“What happened?” he asks. He loops his arm around me and starts rubbing his palm in wide circles on my back.

It feels too good for me to say anything that might make him angry enough to stop. I shake my head and say, “Just stupid stuff with my squad. Don't wanna talk about it right now. How was work? And class?”

“Fine. Boring.” He yawns. “Sleep now, though?”

I nod, and he's out again before I even have time to kiss his cheek. It takes me longer to nod off, and by the time I manage it, I feel like I've only been asleep for ten minutes when I wake again to Travis gently shaking my shoulder and saying, “G. You have to get ready for work.”

“Ew. I don't wanna,” I say.

He laughs. "It's your first night having a job. How can you possibly be complaining already?"

"Easy—I'm lazy and immature and self-centered," I yawn, clambering out from under the blankets. Travis startles at my nakedness, then turns quickly away, blushing. I smirk at his back, and I'm sure he's aware of it. He glances back at me just long enough to shoot me a dirty look.

"Do you have anything you want to toss in my backpack? I met James between classes today, and he said that we should stay the night at his place. Stohler's already made plans to claim his couch. It folds out into a bed, and she says she doesn't want to sleep in the guest room, because she—her words— 'doesn't know what kind of perversions Goldwyn gets up to in that bed.'"

"I guess Jamie didn't have the heart to tell her that he probably gets fucked on the couch at least as often as in the guest room."

"Guess not. I, uh..." Travis winces. "I don't think he liked the idea of us driving back home at four in the morning, when we're both exhausted. You know how tense he's been about anybody getting in a car since what happened with his parents."

I duck my head to avoid having to meet Travis' eyes now. "Yeah. He's still on me to sell the Testarossa and get something safer."

"He's not wrong."

"Not about the safety, no. But I like my car, alright?" I say, maybe too defensively. The Ferrari had been a sixteenth birthday present from my dad. Mom had gone ballistic. They'd been divorced for less than a year, and they hadn't yet gotten the hang of the "friendly co-parents" thing they've got going on now. I hadn't given a shit that the car was too expensive, too retro, too much for a sixteen-year-old who hadn't even gotten his license yet to handle. It was gorgeous and red and the first good thing to happen to me since I'd started dating Dave Walczyk five months earlier. I love that car. Jamie is fucked in the head if he thinks I'm trading it in for some boring sedan.

The conversation—I don't want to call it an argument—about the car continues for much longer than I'd like it to. The topic carries us from the bedroom to Travis' car to the underground parking at Jamie's building to the elevator to right outside his door. That's where I finally say, "We're done talking about this for now."

"You're being unreasonable," Travis retorts.

"You're being *loud*," I hiss. "This isn't a conversation I want to have in front of Jamie. He's having a hard enough time handling what happened to his parents without hearing anything that'll make him think he's going to lose me, too."

If Travis has any plans to keep arguing, those plans change the second I get the door open. James Goldwyn, picture of perfect sanity, is lying flat on his back on the floor, head turned sideways so that he can stare somberly under his couch. He looks worse off than he did a week ago, the last time I saw him. His skin is paler, like he hasn't bothered going outside enough to maintain his usual southern tan, and he looks like he might be a bit thinner. His wrists look bony instead of elegant, and there are circles under his eyes that I'd bet anything he has tried to fix with some sort of under-eye cream that costs way more than it should.

"Jamie, love," I say, as casually as I can manage. "What are you doing?"

"Trying to find my cat," he sighs. "She's being a bit of a terror today, running all over the place. Keeps trying to claw the furniture, too. I could've sworn she was out here, but I can't seem to find her."

"Want help?" Travis offers.

Jamie sits up and extends his hands to me. I haul him upright, and he brushes himself off, straightens his shoulders, and says, "No, it's quite alright. She'll turn up soon enough."

As if in direct response to his words, there is the unmistakable sound of fabric being attacked in one of the bedrooms down the hall. Jamie curses and takes a step towards the hall, but Travis jogs off before him, saying over his shoulder, "I'll get her out here and close the bedroom doors. Be back in a minute."

It isn't the most subtle departure in the world, but it gives me some time alone with Jamie, so I can't complain. I loop my arms around his neck and lean in to kiss his cheek, hoping that might soften the blow a little as I say, "James. Babe. Don't, uh... don't take this the wrong way, but you look a little... tired."

His mouth curves into a wan smile. "Is 'tired' a euphemism for 'like shit'?"

"Fuck no," I lie. "You're as gorgeous as ever, and I'd still do you every way I know how. But you just, you know, look like maybe you haven't been sleeping so well."

The silence stretches between us for too long to be anything other than awkward.

"Have you been sleeping at all?" I ask.

"Not much, no. Not since I came back from Georgia. I spoke to my doctor about it, but he was hesitant to recommend anything more than an over-the-counter sleep aid." Jamie's mouth is still drawn into a tight smile. It's so obviously forced, I'm not sure why he even bothers. "It's not... well, it's not really medical, is it? Anyone in my position would have trouble returning to life as they'd lived it before. My doctor told me that he

could refer me to a psychiatrist, if I thought I might benefit from... I'm not sure, exactly. Some sort of anxiety medication. We didn't really discuss it that much."

My palms skate from his shoulders down to his wrists and back up. "I mean, it might be worth a try, though, right?"

Jamie shakes his head. "Not if it's something that a psychiatrist would want me to continue on a more permanent basis. Staying in any form of psychiatric treatment for longer than six months would disqualify me from military service. Giving up my long-term career goals would only make my anxiety worse."

"Yeah, well," I say, shrugging, "Declan's got a shitload of drugs he's trying to get off his hands before he heads to West Point in two months. Bet he'd sell me some klonopin real cheap, if I, you know. Smile pretty, bat my eyelashes a little."

Jamie chuckles. "Yes, I know how absolutely charming you can be. But I'm quite alright. I won't even need to worry about the sleeping trouble for the next few days. Ben is staying here all weekend, and I sleep much better when I've got someone in the bed with me."

When I make another attempt to draw him into a hug, he tries to shrug me off. That's way more bullshit than I am prepared to deal with. I smack his hands down and flatten myself against his front, with one hand balled up around the back of his shirt and the other knotted in his silky hair. The only way he'll be able to get me to stop hugging him is to yank me off.

"If that's true, I'll be here every night. I'll come here straight from MLEP, and I'll stay until I have to leave for PT the next morning," I promise. "If you need somebody here with you, then I'll be in your bed whenever you want me to be."

Jamie's soft laugh tickles the side of my face. "Oh, what I wouldn't have done to hear you say that a few years ago."

"I mean it."

"I know. Let go of me," he says.

Reluctantly, I obey. Fortunately, when I get a good look at his face again, I see that a wry smile has replaced the horrible tightness from before. That's got me feeling so relieved, I can't stop myself from darting back in to give him a quick kiss on the lips. He rolls his eyes and waves me off.

"Sweet merciful Christ, Garen. Are you ever going to let McCutcheon have a boyfriend who you *don't* try to kiss?"

"Dunno. Is he ever gonna date somebody I haven't already slept with?"

"I doubt it. You've slept with quite a few people, sweetheart."

"I know. And you love that about me. Just remember, I called dibs on you when we were fourteen." I make a grab for his crotch, and he swats my hand away, laughing.

From somewhere down the hall, Travis says loudly, "Can I come back out yet?"

"No one told you that you needed to stay away in the first place!" Jamie calls back.

Travis wanders out of the guest room, herding Zooey ahead of him. "I know. But you guys sounded like you were trying to have a serious discussion, right up until the laughing. I thought you'd want privacy."

"Privacy only gave Garen the opportunity to make untoward advances," Jamie says loftily.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I say, tramping off to the kitchen to find myself something to snack on. "I am a gentleman, and my behavior is always exemplary."

Travis shoots me a look that's half amused, half exasperated, but any snide comment he wants to make is cut off by a huge bout of swearing from Jamie as Zooey darts around his legs and launches herself onto the side of the couch, digging her claws into the leather. Jamie drops to his knees and begins his massively unsuccessful attempts to pry her off. It's pretty entertaining, actually. I retrieve a bag of chips—gross, healthy, whole grain *bullshit* chips, but chips nonetheless—from the cupboard and chomp down on a couple of them like I'm eating popcorn at a movie.

Over on the kitchen counter, Jamie's phone pings with a new text. He shifts his attention from detaching Zooey from the couch long enough to say, "Can one of you check that for—God fucking damn it, Zooey, *stop*—check that for me? I assume it's—"

"Ben, yeah," Travis says, scanning the text. "He and Stohler just got off the subway, so they'll be here in a few minutes. He wants to know if they should come in through the garage so you can buzz them up, or if they can go through the lobby."

"Lobby. Stohler hasn't been here before, but Ben has. I'm betting the doorman recognizes him by now," I say. "Also, once you're done telling them that, scroll up a little, I wanna know how many dick pics they've traded this past week."

Travis starts tapping away at the phone and says, "Don't be ridiculous. That's what snapchat is for."

"And Skype," Jamie says. When he looks up this time, he appears to be schooling his beautiful features into an expression that is pleasant, but not overly excited. I guess he

and Ben are still trying to pretend they don't really like each other. "We text a bit during the day, then video chat at night, once he's home from work."

"Cute!" I say with as much exaggerated enthusiasm as I can manage to put into one word.

"Necessary!" Jamie says in the same tone. "If we ever want to actually see each other, that is. We've got plans to alternate weekends between here and Connecticut, but neither of us is even sure how that'll work out. I've already committed to something back home in Savannah next weekend, and then Ben has finals, and then the week after that, *I've* got finals. After he leaves on Sunday morning, I'm not entirely sure we'll be able to have a substantial conversation until halfway through the month of May. But it's-- *why are you so awful?*"

Zooey has scratched her way out of his hands and under the couch, where we can all hear her trying to shred the furniture from below. Jamie drags her back out and says fiercely, "No. Stop it. Just sit here and *stop*."

"She doesn't look like she's going to stop," Travis says doubtfully. Sure enough, the second Jamie releases her, the kitten stretches herself out and digs her nails back into the leather, looking smug as shit. It's pretty adorable, but it's also not my couch.

"She's so terrible sometimes," Jamie sighs. "She's a beautiful little thing, and she was meant to be my mother's, so I'm somewhat obligated to love her. But sweet fucking Christ, she's terrible. And I suspect she's possessed. She stands sometimes."

I slowly lower the chip I was just about to put in my mouth. "She stands? Like... on her back legs, like a person?"

"Yes. It's *horrifying*. She does it every time I try to feed her. She crowds in close to the food bowl so that I can't even reach it to put the Fancy Feast in, so I tap her nose with the edge of the can so that she'll back up. Except she doesn't. She sits back on her haunches, with her front paws hovering in mid-air, and as soon as the food is in the dish, she falls back down and devours it. And now we've progressed to the point where she thinks she's training *me*, because whenever she's hungry, she comes over to me and gets up on her hind legs, as if to say, '*you may feed me now, I'm ready for my meal*.' It's the most bizarre thing I've ever seen in my life, I don't understand why I can't just have a normal cat."

Zooey's little gray head perks up at the sound of the apartment door opening, and the moment Ben and Stohler have stepped inside, the kitten neatly detaches herself from the couch, dodges Jamie's attempt to grab her, and trots over to wind herself leisurely around Ben's ankles.

"I hate you," Jamie says flatly. It's unclear whether he's talking to Zooey or Ben. The latter raises his eyebrows and slowly lowers himself to one knee. Once he's within

reach, Zooey scales the side of his hoodie and settles herself across his shoulders like a living shawl. Jamie repeats, somewhat louder, “I *hate* you.”

“You do not,” Ben says. He drops his bag on one of the dining chairs and wanders over to where Jamie is standing up and brushing imaginary dirt off the knees of his trousers. “Were you trying to—oh—”

That and a somewhat surprised look are all he manages before James tugs him closer by the front of his hoodie and raises a hand as a shield between himself and Zooey so that he can kiss Ben without getting his face clawed open. It’s a lingering kiss, but not exactly pornographic—there isn’t even any tongue. Jamie trails another kiss to Ben’s bearded jaw, then another down to his neck before leaning away. Ben still looks surprised by it all, and I’ve got no idea why. I’ve given guys more passionate kisses than that just for returning from a trip to the fridge during a movie.

“Hello,” Jamie says simply.

Ben McCutcheon, Actual Freak of Nature, ducks his head so that his face is hidden close to Jamie’s chest. “Hi. Um. Were you trying to pet the cat again? Because you know she hates it when you do that.”

“No, I wasn’t trying to pet her, though I should damn well be able to, if I so choose. I was trying to stop her from ruining my furniture,” Jamie says. “She’s being a terror, and I’m four seconds away from making an appointment to have her declawed.”

“Shut up, you’re not having her declawed. Do you even realize how barbaric that practice is? They cut the tips of the toes off, right through the bone so the claws can’t grow back. You scratch me all the time, and you don’t see me chopping off the first joint of your fingers, do you?”

“The main difference being that James doesn’t nut himself when his cat scratches the furniture,” Stohler says. Ben turns to glare at her, but she hip-checks him out of the way so that she can loop an arm around Jamie’s shoulders and press a very quick kiss to his perfectly carved cheekbone. “Hello again, Goldwyn. Nice place you’ve got here.”

“Thank you very much. There’s an open bottle of Rioja in the kitchen, if either of you would like something to drink,” Jamie says. Predictably, Ben burrows deeper into his hoodie and shakes his head in refusal. Even more predictably, Stohler immediately joins me and Travis in the kitchen and begins rooting around in the cabinets until she finds the wineglasses. She pours herself a generous helping of wine and raises the glass in a silent toast to Jamie, who retrieves his own glass from the coffee table and mimics the gesture. “I’m delighted to see you again, without all the screaming, violence, and humiliation involved in last weekend’s encounter.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I wasn’t humiliated at all last weekend. Just you and Ben were,” Stohler says brightly. She hops up onto the counter and directs the toe of her

motorcycle boot into Travis' ribs. "You missed quite the show, baby gay."

Travis is too busy frowning over at Ben to do much more than bat ineffectually at Stohler's boot. "Yeah, I can... see that. Ben, have you been to a doctor for that? Your face is, like... really fucked up. I mean, I saw it on Skype yesterday, but it looks so much worse in person."

"That's such a sweet thing to say, dude. I can't begin to figure out why Ben ever broke up with you," I say, but Travis isn't *wrong*. Ben's face is pretty fucked right now, and I think the only thing that has kept me from pointing it out already is the fact that I've spent the last two weeks watching Declan's bruises slowly fade from the beating he got dealt at his birthday party. I'm used to that sickly fading yellow color, but Ben's not quite at that stage yet. The swelling is all gone, but the skin around his nose and on his left cheek is still a mottled purple, just starting to melt into a nasty greenish color.

Jamie curls a finger under Ben's chin and carefully turns his face from one side to the other. After a moment of inspection, he announces, "Travis is right, you're revolting. Our relationship is over. You may see yourself out."

"Fine, but I'm keeping the cat," Ben warns.

"I hope that's a promise," Jamie replies. His hand is still resting under Ben's jaw, and he only has to move a few inches to lightly trace the pad of his middle finger over the bridge of Ben's nose. "Honestly, though. It doesn't hurt that much anymore, does it?"

Ben shakes his head, but any comment he'd been planning to add is cut off by Stohler, who abandons her half-empty wineglass on the counter and slinks over to pull Ben away. "Well, it probably does when you fucking *poke at it*, Goldwyn, Christ. And don't worry about the bruising. I brought my makeup kit with me, so I'm sure I can get a bit of concealer on there and have him looking nice and pretty for you before we all head out for dinner."

"Is this really necessary?" Ben sighs, even though he's letting himself be towed down the hall to Jamie's bathroom.

"You look like you took a brick to the face, so, yeah, I'd say it's *incredibly* necessary. Besides, don't act like you're a stranger to makeup. You wear more eyeliner to church than I wear to the strip club." She shoves him unceremoniously into the bathroom and locks herself in there with him... and Zooey, who seems to have conked out on Ben's shoulders.

The second they're out of earshot, Travis looks around at us, still seeming distressed. "You guys didn't tell me it was that bad."

Jamie grimaces and comes to the kitchen to slip a coaster under Stohler's wineglass before refilling his own glass. "It was worse last week, believe me."

“He bled so much when Alex first hit him,” I say quietly. “Honestly, I think mine bled less when I broke it, and I ended up having to get a goddamn nosejob to correct mine. Thought we were gonna have to take him to the hospital.”

“The bruising got worse before it got better,” Jamie says. He sets the wine down on the counter and traces the lip of the glass with his forefinger, watching it instead of us. “Nearly had a fucking heart attack when I woke up next to him the morning after. With all the swelling, he was barely recognizable. I made the absolute worst impression possible on his family, showing up to church the next morning with him in that state.”

“Come on. Hillary can’t have held that against you,” I protest.

He hitches his shoulder lightly. “Certainly didn’t help my cause, but she was most likely going to hate me regardless, given what Alexander said about Ben’s sex life. There was a very terse conversation after dinner, once all the little things—the siblings, the children, whatever. Once they’d been sent to another room.”

“About sex?” Travis asks. There’s a hint of a blush rising in his own cheeks, secondhand embarrassment in its most adorable form. “God, I’d rather die than sit through that conversation with Ben’s parents.”

Jamie raises his wine to his mouth again, but not quickly enough to hide the sudden flash of a grin. “I’m sorry to hear that, Travis, because you might be sitting through it sooner than you’d think. From what she said to me on Sunday, Ben’s mother seems to suspect that *you’re* the rebellious sex fiend who coaxed him out of an abstinence pledge whilst y’all were dating. You bad influence, you.”

Travis gapes at him for a moment, then flings an arm out towards me. “Are you kidding me? I mean, I know I was Ben’s first boyfriend, but he was hanging out with Garen before that, and anyone with the slightest hint of common sense should be able to see that Garen is a worse influence than I am.”

“Um, rude,” I huff. “Like, sure, I’m a drug addict and a go-go dancer now, but I wasn’t *then*. Besides, if anyone out of the three of us is going to get shit on for convincing Ben to break his abstinence vow, it might as well be Jamie. He’s a blood relative of the dude who actually took Ben’s virginity.”

The corners of Jamie’s mouth melt out of a smile and right into the deepest, most sullen frown possible. “Thank you for reminding me of that, Garen. When that image suddenly springs into my mind later tonight while I’m actually in bed with Ben, I’ll be sure to come right over to the guest room and smother you with a pillow as a sign of my gratitude.”

Travis goes to respond, but then does a double-take at something over my shoulder and says, “Jesus Christ. Is that what you guys were doing in there?”

“What? Oh, the—no, that happened yesterday,” Ben says, and I turn. Stohler and he have returned to the living room, and Zooey has disappeared from his shoulders, giving him a chance to remove his hoodie and toy awkwardly with... well, what’s *left* of his hair. The sides and back are cropped a hell of a lot shorter than they used to be, damn near shaved, but the top is still long, shoved *up* and *back* into a tousled quiff. Stohler has managed to even out his skin tone with the makeup, muting the dark purple of his bruises and drawing attention away from what remains by lining his eyes with thick, smoky smudges of black.

“You lovely little rockabilly trashmonster,” Jamie announces, and... okay, I guess he’s not too far off. If I was still Ben’s boyfriend, I’d be a little more interested in the fact that Ben’s black skinnies are so tight they look painted on, and his long-sleeved shirt is so thin that I can see the shadows of his rib tattoos through the black fabric, but, I mean, if Jamie wants to get all hard over a haircut instead, that’s his business. He’s got one hand raised, like all he wants in the world is for Ben to come closer so he can bury his fingers in that dark hipster-y mess. “When did *this* happen?”

“Stohler cut it last night, when she was at my apartment,” Ben says, ducking his head. “She said I needed to be better-looking, if I was going to date someone who looks like you.”

“You are absolutely full of it,” Stohler huffs, returning to the dining table to drown herself in her wineglass again. “Baker’s the one who said that, not me.”

“Alex said *what*?” Travis says sharply.

Ben shakes his head—already trying to downplay Stohler’s words so he can cover Alex’s sorry ass, as usual—but Stohler continues over him, “I was cutting Ben’s hair in their bathroom, and Alex had some friends over. He kept making these snide-ass comments to them about how Ben must have realized that he needed to up his game in order to keep James from cheating on him, too, because apparently, Alex is still rejecting the reality where he refused to go out with James and insisted that they be totally non-monogamous fuck buddies. And do you even realize how loudly he had to be talking in order for his voice to carry from the living room to the bathroom? Whatever. It’s utter bullshit. And of course this one—” Stohler gestures towards Ben with her wineglass, “—didn’t say a single fucking word to defend himself. Didn’t even bother to point out that Alex has been sweating him since they went through puberty.”

“Cue the makeover montage, complete with a humiliating motivational speech about how I’m not the same pathetic loser I was in high school, so I should probably stop looking like it,” Ben says dryly.

“It was all a ruse,” Stohler says loftily. “As much as I adored the whole ‘emo lesbian’ look you’ve probably been rocking since you were fourteen years old, you needed to try something new.”

"I liked the old hair," Travis says, frowning. "I mean, this is nice, too, but he had the—" a vague sideways sort of gesture in front of his forehead, which I'm guessing is meant to signify bangs, "—the whole time we were dating, and I always thought it was really cute."

"Yes, well, you wore *cargo shorts* on Wednesday, so you don't exactly get an opinion on personal style, do you?" Jamie says sharply. I can't tell if the sudden attitude is because it annoys him to be reminded that Travis and Ben were a couple last year, or because Jamie just really, really hates cargo shorts. Either way, it's clearly a sore spot of conversation with both of them, 'cause Jamie looks like he needs an Ativan, and Travis looks like it's taking every shred of his concentration to stop himself from rolling his eyes.

Jamie's hand is still extended, has been for several minutes now. Always the martyr, Ben heaves a sigh and shuffles close enough that Jamie can tangle his fingers in his hair. With the two of them, it's sort of a given that hair-touching is going to quickly give way to hair-pulling, which'll probably end in dry-humping, so I turn to Stohler instead and say, "You're pretty good at this whole hair-cutting thing. I thought it was just a one-off, when you buzzed mine off."

She shrugs. "Picked it up a few years ago, actually. I used to cut people's hair in the dorms for some extra cash when I was in college. But since you bring up the buzzcut, I've got to say, we should make a point of trimming it sometime soon. You don't have to buzz it again, but the ends are getting kind of ragged."

I reach up to scratch at the hair that's starting to grow out near my collar. "I know. I'm looking pretty nasty tonight, to be honest. I'll be surprised if I get any tips at all."

"You don't look bad. You *never* look bad," Travis says, shuffling a few steps closer to me.

We're both standing behind the breakfast bar, so I don't think any of our friends can actually see when he reaches over and covers my hand with his. Heat blooms on my skin at that point of contact, then spreads out through the rest of me; it reaches my face and my dick at pretty much the same time. I duck my head, just in case I'm actually blushing, and turn my hand over to squeeze his. "You're biased, dude."

"No, I'm not. You're just stupidly attractive," he says. Even if I'm not blushing, he's managing it enough for both of us. Unable to stop myself, I lean over and press a soft kiss to his cheek.

"Wow, this is all so cute," Stohler says flatly. I look over at her, and she sticks her tongue out at me, then tries to repeat the face at Ben and Jamie, but neither of them are paying her the slightest bit of attention. The hair-pulling is still kind of happening.

Generous, tactful man that I am, I release Travis and say directly to Stohler, "Well, I

think you did a great job on Ben's haircut. And the makeup. He's not me, he could never pull off the whole *Fight Club* aesthetic. You cleaned that right up."

"I did, didn't I? But I think his necklace kind of ruins the overall look," Stohler says, shrugging. "Not the cross as a concept. Religious iconography has been a staple of the club scene since before any of us were even born. But the red and gold—"

"—cuts him off at the neck. And not in a glamorous, Marie Antoinette sort of way," Jamie says.

Ben's eyes are barely open (and will probably stay that way until Jamie gets around to letting go of his hair) but he manages a shrug. "Whatever. It'll have to do for now. Haven't had a chance to get a new chain for it yet."

"You don't have to. I already got you one," Jamie says.

Ben's eyes flutter all the way open. "What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said, idiot. Hang on a moment, it's just in my room."

Jamie disappears down the hall to his bedroom. Ben frowns after him, and my stomach clenches. Anybody who has spent more than five minutes listening to the Ben McCutcheon dating soundtrack knows that every track has got some twenty-word, Fall Out Boy type of title, like "I Sometimes Hate Myself So Much That I'll Be Annoyed at You for Liking Me," or "Every Dick I've Ever Sucked Has Been Attached to a Millionaire, But I'll Kick You in the Testicles if You Try to Buy Me Dinner (Do I Look Like a Whore to You?)". It's fucking exhausting, and I barely even dated the dude. And I sure as hell wasn't dating him while nursing the three-luxury-department-stores-a-week shopping addiction that Jamie's got.

Thankfully, Jamie's at least smart enough to realize that coming back in here with an actual jewelry box will get him dumped. He returns instead with just his wineglass and a fist closed around something small. There's a glint of silver as he gives it a light, underhanded toss; Ben barely catches it. Jamie flashes that supermodel quality smile of his. "Told you I'd take care of it, didn't I?"

"No," Ben says slowly. He's looking down at the tangle of silver in his palm, but he makes no move to straighten it out and put it on. "You said we would get the original chain fixed."

Jamie's smile remains intact, but his brow twitches a little, like he's confused. "It doesn't make much of a difference, does it? One of my good friends from back home has a birthday coming up, and since I was in the jewelry department at Saks getting her gift anyway, I thought I'd see if they had any suitable replacement chains. All the gold ones seemed a bit too heavy to look right with the crucifix you already own, and getting a broken chain fixed seems to be more trouble than it's worth. But they happened to have

that one, so I got it for you.”

Ben says nothing, pokes at the necklace with the tip of one finger. I can feel that Travis is standing rigidly next to me, and over at the table, Stohler has lowered her wineglass. Jamie’s smile has settled into something politely forced. “I thought you would like it.”

“I do like it,” Ben says. His voice is too even, and it comes out sounding like a lie. “It’s nice.”

And it *is* nice, now that the necklace has been neatened out enough that I can get a good look at it. The chain and the outline of the cross are made of silver, and the cross itself is jet black, maybe made of onyx. Ben’s still poking at it. He turns it over. The back of the cross is all silver, with a deep chevron pattern carved into it. It’s pretty and sharp at the same time, not unlike Ben himself.

But right now, Ben’s posture is stilted, and he finally looks back up at Jamie as he says, “But I wish you hadn’t gotten it for me.”

“Why the hell not?” Jamie asks. His tone makes me flinch, but at least he has dropped the awful fake smile.

Ben hitches his chin up, maybe a little defiantly, but he doesn’t answer. It’s taking every ounce of my self control not to blurt out *because Ben’s super fucking poor and can’t afford to buy you shit like this in return*. Stohler looks like she’s struggling with the same thing and taking large gulps of wine to keep herself in check. At my side, Travis still hasn’t moved.

“I don’t understand what the problem is,” Jamie says flatly.

“I’m pretty sure that’s part of the problem,” Travis says.

Jamie shoots him an annoyed glance, then turns his focus back to Ben. “Listen. If this is something that you are actually upset with me for, I would greatly appreciate it if we could go to another room to discuss it without an audience. Because while I do not even remotely understand what the issue is here, I am very much getting the impression that everyone else does, and frankly, that makes me uncomfortable.”

Wordlessly, Ben takes Jamie by the wrist and leads him down the hall. The bedroom door clicks shut behind them, and the rest of us can’t make out their hushed tones, but somehow, that doesn’t make it less awkward.

“If they break up, is the sleepover canceled?” Stohler asks. “Because if I have to catch the last train back to New Haven, I’m going to need to leave the club by, like, at least one thirty.”

“They’re not going to break up,” Travis says, at the same moment that I say, maybe

more strongly than is reasonable, “They’re not allowed to break up.” Travis raises his eyebrows at me. I frown right back and say, “I’m soul-bound to take Jamie’s side any time he breaks up with anyone, but Ben’s one of my best friends. The idea of choosing which one to stay friends with sucked badly enough before they went out. If they break up, it’ll be unbearable.”

“So, what, your friends have to stay together forever because you’re needy?” Stohler scoffs.

“Yeah, and right now, I *need* you to not call me ‘needy.’ I’m not needy. I’m just—” I break off and scowl down at Zooney, who is batting at my bootlaces. I’m *not* needy. Really, I’m not.

I just like to get my way.

The bedroom door opens, and Jamie strides out, presenting us all with a pageant queen kind of smile. “Right then. That’s settled. Shall we head to the restaurant?”

Ben shuffles out of the bedroom, his face a mask of neutrality. He’s wearing the cross necklace, and the silver chain stands out brilliantly against a bite mark I am almost positive wasn’t on his neck before he went into that bedroom. I can’t even *begin* to guess who won the argument.

An hour later, once we’ve finished dinner, I set out for the club by myself, my gym bag slung over my shoulder. The bag has become my brand new Sex Worker Emergency Kit, fully stocked with hair products, skintight shorts, my cashbox, a combination lock, bottled water, and—at Stohler’s urging, and for reasons I don’t want to even begin to contemplate—baby wipes. It’s the shadiest goody bag ever, and I’m kind of relieved when I get up to the dancers’ locker room and can dump it in a locker.

There are a few other dancers getting ready upstairs, but from the first minute I lock eyes with any of them, it is clear that I’m not actually invited to join their conversation. Most of them seem like they’re veteran dancers, and I don’t recognize anyone from last week’s audition. The other dancers aren’t the only thing that’s different from last week; I started off my audition in tight, ripped jeans, but tonight, all the other guys are only wearing shoes and their little shorts. Not wanting to invite any shitty comments, I carefully fold up my jeans, don a pair of blood-red booty shorts, double-knot the laces on my boots, and head downstairs.

I’ve barely cleared the door when I hear someone say, “Hey. Hey, you’re one of the new hires, aren’t you?” I turn and find myself facing Marissa, the cute dancer who talked us all through the rules of the club last weekend. I nod. She holds out her hand and introduces herself.

“Yeah, I remember. Hi. I’m Garen,” I say, then, “Wait, no, I’m not.” She raises her eyebrows. “They renamed me at my audition. So, I guess I’m Cash.” Mostly to cover up

the awkwardness of that slip, I gesture to the rest of the club. “Looks like everything’s ready to get started. Is, uh, is it all the same as it was last week?”

“Sorta,” Marissa says, snapping her gum. “Instead of getting a ten-minute break every hour, you get a fifteen every two. It’s up to you whether you use it to relax, hustle, or mix the two. Usually, I pop up to the locker room for a couple of minutes first—fix my makeup, pee, check Facebook—and then I go downstairs and see if I can find somebody who wants to come to the VIP lounge for a private dance.” I don’t know what my face does in response to that, but it must show my confusion, because Marissa says, “Did nobody tell you about the private dances?”

“Private dances,” I echo. “Like, lap dances? Because I’m not—they told me I was going to be a cage dancer.”

“You aaaaaaare,” Marissa sighs. “You’re in the cage all night, and if that’s where you want to stay, that’s your choice. But most of us like to do private dances in the VIP, ‘cause that’s the easiest way to score some real cash. You charge twenty bucks a pop, and that goes a long way towards payout at the end of the night.”

I press my lips together in a thin, flat line. Stohler had asked me a couple days ago if I knew what the club expected as a payout at the end of every shift, and I’d told her there wasn’t one. There *wasn’t*, not when I did my audition. She had tried to explain something about the differences between being an employee and an independent contractor, but I’d been out in the backyard, playing with Omelette, so I’d barely been paying attention to the phone call at the time. Kind of regretting that now.

“Right,” I say. “And the payout—is that like, a flat rate? Or—”

“Yeah, it’s sixty for the whole night. That’s why most people do the private dances, too. ‘Cause if you do just one during each break, that covers the house fees, and you can keep every dollar you make in tips.” Marissa sticks two fingers in her mouth and pinches her wad of gum, stretches it out a few inches, then sucks it back into her mouth. “You look freaked.”

Of *course* I look freaked. The whole point of getting a job here was to make a lot of quick, easy cash just for being young and having a good body. Now this girl is telling me that I could dance my ass off in a cage for six hours, give out a couple of lap dances to random creeps, and still make less than Travis gets for a minimum-wage Starbucks gig. But now is the time to put my game face on, not the time to complain to a stranger. I fix my mouth into what I hope is a casual smile and say, “Nah, not at all. Just wanna make sure I understand everything before the doors open.”

“Riiiiiiight,” she says, and shows me to my cage.

It’s stationed in a corner, kind of wedged between the end of the bar and a wall of TV screens playing Top 40 music videos. If pressed, I’d be more likely to call it a tower than

a cage. The base is an enormous, upright cylinder—five feet tall and barely three feet across, with a drink ledge attached around the outside, presumably so that the club clientele can have someplace to rest their refreshments while they stare up at the underside of my bulge. Marissa shows me the footholds built into the back so that I can climb up and slip between the bars.

The moment I've been left alone in the cage, I curl my hands around the bars and... test them. Grip them hard, give them a little shake, just to see if there's any give to them. They're perfectly secure, and somehow, that only makes me feel more nervous.

When the club doors open at ten o'clock, I start dancing, and right off the bat, it's awkward as hell. Some of that has to do with the fact that I'm not wearing pants, and some of it comes from the sheer impossibility of trying to be the right kind of sexy for an entire room full of people at once. Everyone who comes near the bar pauses to stare idly up at me while they wait for their drinks. When I smile at them, some offer me a brief, awkward chuckle in return, but most turn right back to their friends. I'm guessing that nobody's drunk enough to throw away their cash on the go-go dancers yet. I'm *hoping* that nobody's drunk enough to throw away their cash on the go-go dancers yet, 'cause if the other dancers are pulling in more money than I am, or if things don't pick up as the night wears on, I'm fucked.

It takes approximately six and a half years for me to catch sight of my friends. I don't know what the fuck took them so long to get here. It was nine thirty when I left them at the restaurant, but by the time I catch sight of Jamie's handsome face towering a head above everybody else, it's almost eleven o'clock, the club is mostly full, and my confidence is waning. My tips amount to a fistful of one dollar bills that have been passed awkwardly through the bars of my cage, and I'm trying to swallow my panic. How the hell am I supposed to make any money when I've got to make about fifty more bucks just to break even? Nobody's even coming over to this corner of the club. Paul, the dancer who helped me out before, was telling the truth last week: the cages are too inconvenient for anyone to bother tipping the dancers in them.

I had these delusions of success. I figured I'd show up, take my clothes off, and dudes would be falling over themselves to load me up with cash. Instead, I'm stuck faking a smile when Jamie cuts a path through the crowds to lead Ben, Stohler, and Travis over to me. "Hey, guys!" I say, hoping my cheerfulness sounds more genuine than it feels. "Check out my cool cage. It's like being in prison, but with slightly less guy-on-guy sexual contact."

"It's great practice for the day that all of your felonies inevitably catch up to you," Ben offers.

I beam at him and say, "I'm smiling at you because I'm at work, but in my head, I'm beating you up."

"That's the spirit," Stohler says. She flashes me a thumbs-up and takes a sip from a

plastic cup. Guess they went to the bar before they came over to see me.

“Travis assures me that it would be condescending to tip you, but Stohler tells me it’s perfectly acceptable,” Jamie announces, winding one skinny arm between the bars of my cage to offer up a few bills. “Besides, I have change from my drink, and you know how I feel about singles.”

Jamie is and has always been convinced that one dollar bills are dirtier than other money because more people have probably handled them. Usually, he tries to avoid carrying anything smaller than a twenty. I’m guessing that he’s giving me a deeply significantly look right now because he’s not stupid enough to discuss this further in front of the boyfriend who has already snarled at him about money once tonight. I kind of want to snarl at him, too; it feels like cheating to get some of my money from my friends. With less than twenty bucks on me and a sixty-dollar payout coming up, though, I can’t afford to be a brat.

Since I’m dancing around in my underwear for cash anyway, I might as well put on a show. I do the most dramatic, lascivious hip swivel that my body is capable of and hitch my side towards him so that Jamie can fold the dollars into my waistband. He is absolutely delighted by the experience, and when he glances down at his lover, Ben tries to roll his eyes to cover up how clearly amused he is. He doesn’t do a great job of it. I turn my grin on Travis, but the moment I meet his eyes, I know that something is off about him. His own smile is fixed awkwardly in place, like he’d give anything to let it melt right into a scowl, but he thinks he should know better.

“What’s up?” I ask him.

“Nothing,” he says immediately, which is normally Travis-speak for *I’m having a mental breakdown*. I reach through the bars to take his hand, and he gives it a quick squeeze, but then withdraws, smiles even more brightly, and says, “I’m going to run to the bathroom. I’ll be right back.”

“Wait, Trav,” I try to say, but he slithers between two people at the edge of the crowd and disappears into the glow of the colored lights. I blink after him, surprised and... not hurt. I don’t want to say that I’m hurt. But it’s something pretty close to that.

Stohler reaches into my cage to touch one of my calves and says easily, “You’re going to have a great night. You look hot enough to have any man in here, and the fact that you don’t want any of them will just make you even hotter to them. Now take their fucking money.”

She takes Ben’s wrist in one hand and Jamie’s hand in the other and tows them away from me. Jamie twists back around to mouth something at me before the crowd swallows him up. I can’t read his lips, but I pretend he’s telling me he loves me. It’s the only thing that makes me feel better about the fact that Travis never comes back to see me.

By the time my first scheduled break rolls around at midnight, I've only earned a handful of other bills, most of which have been singles offered up as change from the bar. I climb down from the cage and stand behind the platform to count them—twenty-three dollars. My heart thumps harder against the inside of my ribcage. I've got four hours left, and I need to earn thirty-seven dollars to keep myself out of the red, or ninety if I want to pay off my house fees and still earn enough to have managed minimum wage each hour of my shift. My only real option is to head out into the crowd and try to find someone I can hustle a private dance or two out of.

One of the strangest things about getting sober is that I tend to recognize people more easily now. I probably should have expected that; it's got to be a lot easier to remember faces when you're not trying to recall blurry double-visions of them from your last bender. There's a group of guys at one of the tables near the video screens, and I'm *sure* I've met them before. It takes a minute—I'm sober now, but I was drunk for about three months straight last year, so I'm still not great at this—but eventually, it hits me that this is the same group of guys who Stohler half-tricked into tipping me so well last week. They had mentioned being regulars, had told me that they take over the VIP lounge on Friday nights, but right now, the only thing I care about is the fact that I distinctly remember walking away from them with almost eighty extra bucks.

I make a bee-line for their table, slips right between the elbows of two of the men, and lean down to grant them my most welcoming grin. "Hey, gentlemen. You all having a good night so far?"

There's a chorus of affirmation, whether genuine or not. One of the men in the group looks around at me and furrows his brow. "You," he says. "You're one of the new boys, aren't you? I feel like I recognize you, but I also feel like you're not normally here."

"Maybe he's done some modeling?" one of the others suggests. There's a clearly audible slant to his voice, and I don't have to be a genius to figure out that 'modeling' is a euphemism for 'porn.' The dig is just enough to switch *Garen* off and *Cash* on.

I let my mouth twist into the sly sort of smile that I know will carve dimples into my cheeks and say in a light, lilting voice, "I haven't, but I'm flattered you think I could." I turn to the first man and let that smile explode into full and blinding wattage. "And you're right, I'm new. This is my first real night here, but you might remember me from my audition last week. My name's Cash."

"Right!" the man says, snapping his fingers a couple of times and then clapping his hand down on my forearm, giving it a tight squeeze like we're just the best of friends. "You're the lovely little thing who set up our bottle service for us. Cash, Cash, I remember you, Cash. I'm Joey, I'm sure you remember *me*. And I'm so glad you got the job!" He pauses, knocks back the rest of his drink, then shifts his hand further up to curl around my elbow. "Of course, I knew you would. We told Jonathan and Mikael how much we *adored* you, and they're always interested in what we have to say. We're—"

“Regulars. I remember,” I say. “I’d say you all must know this club even better than I do. There are a few things I’m still learning about the way this place works, me being new here, and all that.”

Joey raises his eyebrows. “I’m sure I could answer nearly any question you’ve got. I would love to help you out.”

I glance down at the toes of my boots, then up through my lashes. It feels embarrassingly dumb, but I’m hoping it looks coquettish or something. “Earlier, I could have sworn I heard some of the other dancers talking about the VIP lounge. They said that sometimes people like to pay for private dances in there. And I know that you and your boys spend plenty of time in the lounge, so if anyone would know the truth about that, it would be you, wouldn’t it?”

“It would,” Joey says. He drags the second word out into a few playful, sing-song syllables. “The truth is, some of the naughty boys and girls here *do* like to tip a little extra for a private dance in VIP.”

“And the *naughtiest* boys and girls will pay for more than that,” one of the other men in the group says. He stares at me without blinking, his chin tipped slightly downward so that his gaze feels that much more calculated. I wish he would look anywhere else.

I turn my attention back to Joey and lean into the grip he has on my elbow. “Well. If you’re in the mood to be a little bit naughty yourself, I’m on break right now. Maybe we could head back into the lounge, and you could show me how this private dance thing goes.”

One of the other men lets out a shrill giggle. The one whose stare makes bile rise in my throat looks away, scowling at the dance floor like it has personally offended him. Joey smirks, brimming with the confidence of a man who’s much more attractive than him. “That sounds like such fun. Why don’t you lead the way?”

Lead the way so he can stare at my ass while I walk. Great. I grit my teeth on a smile and guide him through the crowd, over to the VIP lounge. The security guard at the door gives me a polite nod, then makes a small gesture towards one of the couches populating the far side of the room. It feels like it might be an instruction, which is kind of awkward; I hadn’t really figured that positions would be assigned in here. I lead Joey over to that couch, and he deposits himself primly on the seat and spreads his arms across the back as if it’s a throne. He smiles expectantly up at me, and I... I dunno, I’m sort of fucked. I’ve given exactly one lapdance before. It was sometime during my junior year, and Jamie and I had commandeered the hammock in the backyard at one of the Ward house parties, and all I really did was straddle his hips and grind against him, vaguely on beat with the music. He kept telling me how sexy it was, but we were both completely shitfaced, and I couldn’t stop laughing, and we ended up flipping the hammock. I doubt that I can charge for the same experience.

Some of the other dancers who are scattered throughout the lounge seem to actually know what they're doing. There's a girl in the far corner who is twisting and winding herself around the butch chick on the couch, without settling too firmly into her lap. It's like she has mastered the art of teasing, keeping her girl focused without giving her enough to really satisfy. When the dancer steps away, the butch chick immediately gives over another bill, and it starts over again. Not everybody is so adept. A couple of people aren't doing much more than swaying around, shoving their tits, crotches, or asses in the face of whoever's paying them.

On the next couch over, one of the other dancers is straddling a man who looks like he might be in his thirties. Calling him a "dancer" is more generous than accurate, because there isn't any dancing involved at all. There's sitting, and there's thrusting, and there's dry-humping, and there is absolutely no dancing whatsoever.

"Come on, baby," Joey coos to me. "Show me what you've got."

In the end, my method is a half-assed combination of dancing in front of him and grinding the air over his lap when he pulls me in closer. If Stohler happens to come in here and see this, I think she'll weep with shame. There isn't anything graceful or cool about the way I'm moving, though I'm guessing it must be sexier than it feels. At one point, I make the mistake of settling too heavily onto Joey's lap, only to jolt back off when I feel his hard-on pressing against me through his jeans. The whole time I'm dancing, I keep sneaking looks over at the girl who can really move. There aren't any speakers in here, so we're only dancing to the dull thump of music coming through the wall. Watching the girl dance is the only way I can judge the amount of time that's gone by. When she steps back from her chick again, I scramble off Joey's lap.

"Thanks for the ride, man. It was a blast," I say. "My best friend's got a show pony who should take lessons from you."

"God, you're just the cutest thing, aren't you?" Joey chuckles. He shifts half his ass off the couch so he can get his wallet out of his back pocket, then passes me a crisp twenty-dollar bill and a couple of ones. He winks up at me. "You come back and find me on your next break, alright?"

"Of course," I say, even as I'm thinking, *fuck no, fuck no, fuck no*. I manage a saunter out of the room, a sprint up the stairs, and a stumble into the employees-only area of the club. Part of me is convinced that, if I don't hide my twenty away in my cashbox, I'll lose it and have to start all over.

The terrible dancer I saw dry-humping a dude in VIP is the only other person in the locker room. He's naked and unconcerned, his old shorts crumpled up on the bench and a fresh pair folded neatly next to them. He's swabbing at his thighs and ass with something that looks like a baby wipe. Our eyes meet for a brief second. He tosses the baby wipe into the trash can and reaches for his clean shorts.

“Dude,” I say. “Did that guy in the VIP fuckin’ nut on you?”

The other dancer’s lip curls back in a sneer. “You’re new, aren’t you?”

So *what?* I want to say. I press my lips together and nod. The other dancer rolls his eyes. “Yeah. I figured as much. Look, you’ll figure it out eventually. You find one or two guys a night to do that, and you can make some real money. That guy downstairs paid me seventy bucks for two songs. I can put up with a little spoooge for that.”

“Really?” I say, unable to stop myself. Two songs, and the every dime of the house fees would be covered. “Is that the kind of thing that—I mean, I heard some of the people on staff here will do more than private dances, if the money’s right. Is that what everyone’s talking about?”

The other dancer hitches a shoulder. “Sure. That, and maybe some other shit. I’ll grind on a guy ’til he finishes for sixty and up. There’s this other customer who comes in once or twice a month, and he likes for me to pull my shorts down so that he can rub his dick right, you know, between the cheeks. I don’t let him put it in, though, not if he’s only gonna pay me eighty bucks for that.”

“Right,” I mutter. The idea of letting a random club patron rub his dick all over my bare ass is almost vomit-worthy.

“And then there’s the easy stuff. Blowjobs and whatever. Plenty of people do that, and they’ve all got their own prices,” the guy continues. He stops in the middle of adjusting his junk in his shorts, turns to look at me, and says, “Of course, *I* don’t do that. Just the grinding. I don’t really have sex with the clientele, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Of course not,” I say quickly. “It’s just, they said during my audition last week that we weren’t allowed to do that kind of thing.”

The other dancer snorts. “Yeah, well, it’d be a little difficult for Jonathan and Mikael to bitch at us for bending over for the club patrons, considering the shit they get up to with most of the staff.” He slams his locker shut, replaces the combination lock, and heads for the stairs, patting me on the shoulder and smirking at me as he goes. “Just you wait and see what you’ve gotta do for them in order to get out of working on a night when they’ve got you scheduled.”

Alone again in the locker room, I find myself anchored in place. My boots feel so heavy on my feet that I don’t think I’d be able to move even if the building started burning down around me. I try to take a few deep, calming breaths, but my lungs will only allow short, harsh shudders.

I threw myself into this job, and I fucking shouldn’t have. Everyone was right to be worried about me, because god, I’m not ready for this. I’m not ready to be touched by

strangers, I'm not ready, I'm not ready.

"Hey, Cash," Marissa says, breezing right by me into the locker room, unclasping her bra as she goes. "You'd better head out. Your break's gotta be almost up, right?"

I clear my throat, suck in another shallow breath, and nod.

Once I'm back in my cage, I stay there for the rest of the night. I don't take my second break, or my third. Stohler, Jamie, Ben, and Travis come by a couple of times throughout the night to try and coax me down for a rest or to sit down with a bottle of water, but I shake them off. I don't want to give anyone else a private dance, but if I'm going to turn down easy money like that, I don't have any choice. I've got to dance for hours, I've got to shake every part of my body that can be shaken, I've got to wink and smile at every single body that passes my cage. The tips come in slowly, but they do come. That's the part I keep clinging to.

My friends come by for the last time at around half past three. Travis beckons me down low, and I drop to my knee so that I can hear him say over the music, "We were all thinking we might head out. Stohler's exhausted, but there's a diner down the block. Do you want us to go there, grab a cup of coffee? We can wait for you and all take a cab back to James's apartment together."

I glance over his head at the others. Ben is tucked comfortably under Jamie's arm, looking a little tired, but not too bad. The shadows under Jamie's eyes are even more prominent under the glow of the flashing lights. Stohler barely manages to stifle a yawn. I look back to Travis. "Don't worry about it. You can all head out. I'll get a cab back as soon as I get out at four."

"Are you sure?" he asks.

"Positive." I thread my whole arm through the bars and drag him towards me. We both have to press our faces to the metal, prison-style, but we manage a brief kiss. "I'll see you in a bit. I love you."

"You, too. Be safe, okay?" he says.

I knock my knuckles against the bars. "These keep people out just as much as they keep me in."

With my lifelines gone, the last half hour of my shift drags by. I hadn't realized how much I was relying on the comfort of their presence until it has disappeared. The second the overhead lights come on, I practically fling myself down from the cage and book it back up to the locker room. Travis will probably want me to shower before I get in bed with him back at the apartment, and honestly, I just want to hurry up and get there. Instead of changing into fresh clothes, I zip myself back into my jeans and jacket and settle onto the floor in front of my locker to count my tips.

There is only one twenty-dollar bill in my stack, earned with the only private dance I could manage. I smooth it out and set it down in the lid of my cashbox, then dig through for some tens, but there aren't any. I dig out the fives—three. I feel like I'm going to puke. Six hours on my feet, pretending to smile at strangers, fake-flirting with dudes I'd never normally give a second glance, four excruciating minutes grinding up on that guy in the lounge... and this is all I have to show for it? There are a few fistfuls of crumpled ones in the box, too. Feeling a little desperate now, I flatten them all out, add them to the stack, and count everything together.

Seventy-six dollars.

What the fuck. What the actual *fuck*.

I count it again, just to be sure, but I was right the first time. Sixteen, after the sixty dollar payout. Two dollars and some-odd cents an hour, really. I press the heels of my hands against my eye sockets until I see bright flashes of white against the inside of my closed lids. I don't know if it's just because I've been awake for going on twenty-four hours now, or if it's because I've had a long, shitty week, or if I'm honestly just this much of a pussy, but I can feel the hot pinch of tears starting to come.

"Fuck," I whisper. "Fuck, fuck, *fuck*."

Sixteen dollars profit. It's nauseating. It's humiliating. It's so, so awful. I wanted this job because it was supposed to be the only thing I'd be successful at, and it turns out that I fucking suck at this, too.

A locker slams in the next row over. I can hear a couple of the other dancers laughing together, and it's enough to remind me that I'm not really in a position to throw a tantrum right now. I shuffle my tips back into one stack and shove them into my cashbox.

The idea of turning over that lone twenty, three fives, and twenty-five painstakingly counted ones makes me want to shoot myself. There's no fucking way I'm going to let anyone see that I have to hand over small bills because I couldn't manage to make any real money. A kid they call Cash can't embarrass himself at the fucking cashout. Glancing around to make sure that no one is paying me any real attention, I sift through my crumpled ones to find my wallet in the bottom of my cashbox and slip out all of the money inside it. Thank god I hit the bank after school yesterday—there are a few twenties there. Enough that I can at least hand over three crisp bills and be done with it. It's not nearly as badass as being able to pay with a fifty and a ten would be, or paying with a hundred and having to ask for change, but it's still respectable. At least I don't have to let anybody know that I was too freaked out to give three dances in VIP, like Marissa said I should.

I'm the first person in line to pay the house fees. It's less of a polite transaction, and more just me shoving the money at the collection chick and hauling ass out of the club.

All I want to do is get back to someplace that feels like home and curl up with anyone who'll let me—I don't care if that means falling asleep wrapped around Travis, or wedging myself right in between Jamie and Ben in Jamie's room. Shit, at this point, I'd be Stohler's little spoon, if she was willing. I just need someone to make me feel like I'm not a piece of garbage.

When I get back to the apartment, Stohler is dead asleep and sprawled out on the couch, which has been unfolded into a comfortable pull-out bed. Jamie is standing near it, flicking absently through channels on the television, and Ben is tucked into one of the other chairs, with Zooey in his lap. I steal the kitten away from him and tickle her belly so she'll kick at me with her tiny paws. "Where's Travis?"

"He said he was going to take a shower and head to bed," Ben says. He glances towards the hall, then beckons me closer. When I'm near enough that Jamie probably can't hear him over the sound of the TV and Stohler's deep breathing, he adds in a murmur, "I think something might be bothering him."

Yeah, I'm pretty sure I figured that out at the club, thanks.

"What happened?" I ask. I don't know why I look to the hall, like I can see through the walls to check on Travis. It's not like it makes me feel better.

Ben shakes his head. "Nothing, that I'm aware of. He's just been... fading over the course of the night, pretty much since we left the restaurant. I asked if he was okay, and he said sure, but the look on his face... can you talk to him when he gets out, before you go to sleep?"

I nod, and Ben gives me a grateful smile before rising to his feet and hooking two fingers over the top of Jamie's belt. "Bed?" he offers.

"Finally," Jamie says, flashing a sharp, white smile. He turns off the TV, drops the remote control next to Stohler, and leans over to press a quick kiss to my cheek. "Congratulations on your first night in the workforce, darling."

"I'm taking the train back to New Haven with Stohler later this morning so I can meet Doc for a therapy session. If you really want to congratulate me, you'll keep the screams of ecstasy to a minimum and let me get some sleep."

"I'll find something to gag him with," Jamie offers, and Ben lets out a startled bark of laughter.

"The fuck you will! I'm not the one who makes all the noise." As if to prove his point, he digs his fingers into Jamie's ribs and earns a loud sound of protest.

Down the hall, the bathroom door opens. I'm expecting Travis to join us in the living room; it's not like we're being quiet enough for him to think we've all gone to bed.

Instead, I hear the guest room door open and close. Even as he's being tugged down the hall towards the master bedroom, Ben twists to shoot me a pointed, somewhat pleading glance over his shoulder. It's the last thing I see from him before Jamie hauls him into the bedroom, cheerfully declares, "Goodnight, Garen, sweetheart," and snaps the door shut behind them.

A shower affords me the chance both to scrub away the sweat and grime of the night, and to give some thought to what I'm going to say to Travis. I'm bone-tired, and all I want to do is sleep, but if he's fucked up about something right now, I need to fix it. That's sort of the whole point of me.

When I let myself into the guest room, Travis is curled up in bed. He almost looks like he's already sleeping, except for the fact that his eyes are half-open. I close the door, shut off the light, and join him under the covers. There's still next to no reaction. I brush his hair off his forehead, and he leans into the touch, but that's all.

"I guess I should start with the most obvious question," I say quietly. "Does this have anything to do with my job?"

His eyes flicker a little further open, but he's unwilling to meet my gaze. Instead, he settles for blinking at my collarbone as he says, "I don't have a problem with your job at all. If I did, I would've brought it up before you actually *got* the job."

"Okay. So, what's wrong?" I ask. He shakes his head. "Is that a *no*, *nothing's wrong*, or a *no*, *you're not telling me*?"

"Both," he says. He is literally the dumbest liar in the entire world. He huffs out a laugh, like he's only just realized how stupid that sounds, and it's cute enough to make me shuffle in close and wrap an arm around him. I don't think that helps. His voice cracks a little when he says, "I don't want to tell you what's wrong. If I do, you'll be so pissed at me. And when you go to your therapy session later today, you'll tell Dr. Howard all about it."

That's the last thing I expect him to say. I blink. "What the hell does Doc have to do with this?"

Travis closes his eyes. "Nothing. I don't know. Can we please go to sleep, G? Please? I don't want to talk about this tonight, I'm too tired."

He *is*, is the thing. His eyes are barely open, and his shallow breathing suggests it's maybe taking too much effort to stay awake right now. The last time I saw him this exhausted was last November, when he went back on his antidepressants and the sudden change in chemicals threw his entire body for a loop.

The realization hits me like a punch to the stomach.

"Travis, baby," I say slowly. "You, uh... your new shrink, the one Doc referred you to. You said he was going to help you gradually wean yourself off of your medication, but did you maybe... you know. Skip ahead? Did you just stop taking them completely?"

Travis's spine goes rigid under my hand. He shakes me off and sits up, says, "I don't want to talk about this anymore tonight."

"So, that's a 'yes'."

"No, it's an *I don't want to talk about this anymore tonight*. God, Garen. Why do you act like you're the only one who's allowed to have shit they don't want to talk about?" he snaps. "I respect your boundaries, and it would be great if you could maybe try to do the same for me."

I sit up, too. "That's a fucking joke, right? Because you absolutely *don't* respect my boundaries when I'm doing something that's stupid as hell. If I decided that I wanted to quit going to therapy, or that I wanted to start drinking again, you'd stop me. You'd stop me because you *love me*. How can you expect me to just, like, hand-wave away the fact that you did something that we both know is so stupid?"

Travis rolls his eyes. "It's not the same, and you know it. The plan has always been for me to get off the medication. Excuse me for doing it faster than you and the magnificent Dr. Howard think I should. Excuse me for wanting to skip ahead to the part where I'm back to being someone you can actually enjoy being with, now that we're involved again."

It's the sort of sentence that I have to play over in my head, trying to break it into separate pieces so that I can understand what he's even talking about. But it doesn't work. A minute of silence rolls over us, and I'm still absolutely clueless.

"I don't—Travis. Travis, what the fuck are you talking about?" I say. "You're already someone I want to be with. That's the whole goddamn point of—you friggin' moron, I love you. I don't—"

"I know that, okay? I know you love me. But you *like* me better when I'm not so heavily medicated. You *like* me better when I'm not so out of it, when we can go to bed and not have to worry about whether or not I'll even be able to get it up. That's probably—" Travis curls in on himself, drawing his knees up so he can plant his elbows on them and tangle his fingers in his hair. "That's probably half the reason you took up with Declan in the first place. He might be an asshole, but at least he can—"

"Shut up," I say fiercely. "Shut up, that is *bullshit*, Travis. There isn't a single thing that I would change about you, whether you're on antidepressants or not. There isn't a single thing that Declan can do for me that you can't." The image of the burning Lexus rises unbidden into my mind, but I shut it out firmly, mercilessly. "I just want you to be okay, Travis. I need for you to be okay. You can't do shit that we both know is just going to

hurt you.”

“Look me in the eyes and tell me you wouldn’t have done the exact same thing,” Travis demands.

“What, tell you I wouldn’t have done something fucking *crazy* because I thought it’d help me be with you? Sorry, dude, but I’m pretty sure we both know I would. That’s half the reason you didn’t want us to get involved in the first—”

“No!” Travis interrupts. “No, I want you to look me in the eyes and swear that you wouldn’t do something crazy if it meant that we could have *that* again.”

He flings out an arm and points right at the wall separating the guest room from Jamie’s bedroom. For a second, I honestly have no idea what he’s talking about. If it meant we could have... what? A tastefully decorated second bedroom? Weird, black-and-white Modern art in a frame that I’m absolutely positive my best friend spent three hours hanging perfectly straight? And then I hear it. The faint thump-and-creak of a headboard being driven into a wall over and over. The soft rumbling of Jamie’s moans, mixed with a quiet slur of speech that I’m pretty sure is Ben begging. Christ.

I bang the heel of my hand against the wall a few times in the desperate hope that they’ll shut up for five minutes so that I can get Travis out of his own head and fix this. To their credit, they try. Sort of. One of them shushes the other, and somebody laughs, and I get maybe twenty seconds of quiet before Jamie apparently just can’t stop himself from crying out.

“His birthday’s in a month and a half, and I swear to god, he’s getting *rocks*,” I hiss. I smack the wall again, but they ignore me this time, and I have no choice but to pretend it’s not happening and turn back to Travis.

The good thing? When I look at him now, he doesn’t seem angry anymore.

The bad thing? He seems like he might be trying not to cry instead. I fling an arm around his shoulders and drag him closer so that both of us have our faces buried in the crook between the other’s neck and shoulder.

“Trav. Travis, god. If *that* was all I wanted, I wouldn’t care who it was with. Sometimes-- *most* of the time, even—sex is just sex, alright? But I want more than that. I love you, Travis, and I want to be with you. You don’t have to do anything different for me to want you. And you sure as shit don’t have to do the kind of idiot things I would do.”

Travis’s quiet breath flutters over my throat. “I just wanted to give you everything.”

“I know. I know,” I murmur.

The thing is, I kind of thought he already had. And I don't know what it means, that he's so sure there's still something missing.