

Strange Bedfellows
by myheartisinohio | KH

Chapter One

"I don't... I don't *need* to be here. Really. I don't."

I have said this at least a hundred times, and I will say it a hundred more. I will say it however many times it takes to convince Mom to stop unpacking my clothes into the dresser and Dad to stop setting up my computer on one of the ancient mahogany desks. Clearly, they are both unimpressed.

"I think your credibility is somewhat ruined by the fact that you were nearly arrested on Friday. Again," Mom says.

"I was not *nearly arrested*. I just... okay, you know that whole thing was Kyle's idea, right? We don't even *own* any fireworks," I say, which is at least enough to get Dad to untangle himself from the computer wires to squint at me in disbelief.

"We don't own any fireworks because you almost blew up the pool house with them in May," he says. I pause, trying to come up with something to say that does not involve pointing out that the colors had actually been pretty cool before the fire department came to put everything out.

"This is a valid point," I say carefully, "but putting that particular issue aside, it still wasn't my fault. I mean, it's not like we were going to hurt anyone, anyway. And it's not like we actually *did* get arrested."

"*Because you ran away from the police!*" Dad bursts out. Mom shoots him a warning look, and he rolls his eyes and disappears back under the desk. Mom reaches out to smooth my hair, and I flinch away. She should know by now that I can't stand that. God, it's her fault I'm one step away from a Jewfro, anyway. She sighs.

"Listen to me, honey. It's no longer negotiable. Your behavior has been getting worse and worse each year, and it has gotten to the point where you are actually breaking laws now. Between the incident last week, the fire in May, and the... well, *whatever* it was that you were trying to accomplish by breaking into your school and filling the auditorium with live ducks in April, I *still* haven't figured that one out yet. But given all of those things, we cannot change our minds now. We can't keep you in public school if that means you'll continue to be friends with the same people and do the same things. I don't want my only son to end up as a criminal," she says.

"So go have a second one so you guys can leave me alone," I suggest. "And actually, the thing with the ducks was definitely not me, but if it had been, it would have been meant as a like, a 'Happy Spring, you guys!' type of present to the school." She silences me with A Look. Mom is the *master* of Looks. Dad finally finishes with the computer and stands up, brushing dust off his sleeves and glancing around the room. My half is done being set up, so the only part missing now is the tearful goodbye scene. Yeah. Any minute now.

"Well, say hi to Ohio for me," I say flatly. Mom smooths my hair down before I can stop her and kisses the top of my head.

"Good luck, honey. Make lots of friends. Do your homework. Call at least once a week. *Behave yourself.*"

We all pointedly ignore the emphasis on the last stipulation. She and Dad both hug me, and I let my arms dangle limply at my sides, trying not to let either of them notice the way my spine goes rigid when they touch me. After a few more half-hearted goodbyes, they finally trudge out of the room and down the hall towards the stairs. I stomp the moving boxes flat and jam them in the one closet, clear everything off my desk and start rearranging it in a way I actually like. I am in the middle of dumping the mug of pens into one of the drawers when the door bangs open. I jump, then freeze. The hottest guy ever in the history of

the world is hauling a huge suitcase over the threshold and heaving it up onto the other bed. He has soft brown hair that is elegantly rumpled in a way that hints at expensive haircuts, and his skin is tanned to almost the same shade as his gorgeous honey-colored eyes. He must be at least six feet tall, maybe six two, and his entire body seems to be made of nothing but long, smooth muscle, clearly visible under a snug white polo shirt and dark blue jeans. No way can this be my roommate. No way can this be a freshman.

“Hello there, pleased to make your acquaintance. I’m James Goldwyn, and I assume you’re Garen?” he says. He has a honey-sweet Southern drawl and a dazzling white toothpaste-commercial sort of smile. God. I can’t speak. At all. Probably ever again. I nod. “Well, Garen, in honor of our first day as roommates, we’re going to play a little game called ‘find a place to hide Jamie’s contraband before his momma makes it to the room.’”

He unzips the giant suitcase and digs out another suitcase of approximately half the size. He moves it to the floor, and there’s a soft tinkle of what is unmistakably bottles clinking together. He glances at me, clearly trying to gauge my reaction. This is better than I could’ve hoped for. A drop-dead gorgeous roommate who introduces himself by basically showing me that he’s as much of a screw-up as I am.

“James, honey, is this your room?” calls a voice from outside the door, and James jumps. I grab the handle of the suitcase and thrust it under my bed, kicking it back so it thumps against the wall. I hope he packed it well enough to stop the bottles from breaking. A dark-haired woman with lily-white skin enters the room, twisting to crook a finger at someone behind her. A moment later, two men in movers’ uniforms enter with two boxes each. Who the fuck hires movers for four boxes?

“Oh, I see you’ve met your new roommate. How lovely!” Mrs. Goldwyn announces as her eyes light on me. I step forward with my hand outstretched.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Goldwyn. My name’s Garen Anderson,” I say. James’ eyes snap to my face, which isn’t altogether surprising. I’ve heard enough recordings of myself and seen enough girls practically swoon to know that in the past two years, my speaking voice has become not that different from my singing voice; smooth, warm, and ridiculously, inappropriately sexual. Usually, however, guys my age are not the ones looking at me with that intrigued, heavy-lidded stare. Usually, guys my age do not let their tongues dart out to wet their lips before catching their lower lip between their teeth for the briefest second. Fuck.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, too, Garen. I’m sure you and my son will be fast friends. James here is just the nicest boy you’ll ever meet,” Mrs. Goldwyn continues.

“Yeah, I’m a real Georgia peach,” James murmurs. I wonder if his mom notices the half-octave drop in his voice. Oh my god. Is it even legal to put me in a bedroom with this guy for a year? How is it possible that the only two fags at Patton ended up being roommates? This is not good, this is very not good.

“Well, honey, I’ve got to get going. The plane back to Savannah leaves at four, and I’d hate to miss it,” Mrs. Goldwyn says. She pecks James on the cheek and gives him a very light hug before whisking out of the room with the movers trailing after her. An even colder goodbye than the one from my parents.

“Thank you for hiding my bag,” James says, heading across the room to shut the door. Shit, shit, shit. “I wasn’t sure if she’d leave like she did, or stay and make me unpack in front of her. Can’t be too careful, now, can we?”

If we were really being careful, that door would be open right now. Just in case.

“No problem,” I say softly, tugging the suitcase out from under my bed and handing it back to him. He places it very gingerly on the floor near the closet and begins to set up the rest of his belongings. I try to act like I’m more interested in my student handbook than in staring at him, but I still somehow end up watching him over the top of the book as he unloads his clothes into his dresser. Now that everything he

brought is spread out across the room, it feels a lot less like just my dorm. This is due, in large part, to the fact that the whole room smells like him now. Summer and fresh-cut grass and soap and something just warm and heady enough to make my eyes drift halfway shut, just like his were before.

“So, Garen,” he says, adding the tiniest bit of inflection to my name, “are you from New York?”

“No. Cleveland, Ohio. And y-your mom said Savannah, right? That’s where you’re from?” I say. He nods and begins tossing the rest of his clothes into the dresser at random.

“Yep. My family owns what used to be one of the biggest plantations in all of Georgia. It’s still big, of course, just not really much of a plantation anymore. We don’t grow anything, and we don’t have any servants except for the stable hands.” He pauses, then adds, “Well, we don’t have *many* servants except for the stable hands.”

“You have *servants*?” I say, staring at him in disbelief. He must understand my tone more than I mean him to, because his eyes narrow just the slightest bit.

“We have three housekeepers, four cooks, two gardeners, and about seven stable hands. All of them are paid very well, and in case you’re concerned that the slave trade is still alive and well in the deep South, all of them are white, too, except for two of the stable hands, who are Cuban,” he says. I shake my head quickly.

“I didn’t mean-”

“I know what you meant,” he interrupts. “Contrary to popular belief, a Southern accent doesn’t make a person stupid.”

I sink back onto my bed, trying to find some method of melting into the mattress. I cannot believe how fast everything is happening. I can’t believe I went from feeling alone and pathetic, to having the hottest, and probably gayest roommate ever, to making said roommate think I think he’s a dumb-as-a-post racist hick from East Bumfuck, Alabama. I haven’t even been at this fucking school for an hour yet.

James, however, seems incapable of holding a grudge. By the time he has finished unpacking his clothes, his blinding smile is back in place and he is crossing over onto my side of the room to pick his way through my possessions.

“Quite the music collection,” he says as he flips open the second of my four CD carriers. I nod. “Do you play anything?”

“Guitar,” I say. He glances at me, as though waiting for proof, so I open the door of our shared closet and pull out my guitar case. I unlatch it and very carefully remove the guitar. James whistles softly, but one glance at his face tells me he has no idea what he’s whistling at. I bite back a smile.

“It’s a Vintage Hot Rod ‘57 Fender Stratocaster,” I say, doing my best to keep my voice neutral, as though I assume he knew this. His hand twitches towards it.

“May I?” he asks. I nod, and he takes the guitar from me very gingerly. His eyes dart up and down the body, appraising it, but his hands... god. His right hand is flat under the body, supporting most of it, but his left hand is touching the neck - *caressing* the neck - like he wants to make my guitar come. Oh my god. A beautiful boy is practically giving my guitar a hand job. I am about five seconds away from getting wood right now.

“Looks pretty pricy. How expensive was it?” he asks. His fist curls loosely around the neck and he lines his fingers up on the frets like he’s about to play, even though his other hand is nowhere near the strings. His thumb shifts to the back of the neck, rubbing small circles onto it. Holy shit.

"How expensive was it?" he repeats, a bit more loudly. I snap my eyes back to his, away from *those hands*.

"About twenty-seven hundred," I say hoarsely. I can't decide which is more humiliating; the fact that I can feel my face getting redder by the second, or the fact that this conversation has actually made me hard. I take the guitar from him and return it to the case, latching and locking it before I duck down to store it under my bed. Because my options are pretty much limited to staying down here or standing up and running the risk of him seeing the bulge at the front of my jeans, I stay on the floor, trying to look casual.

"You know, the floor can't be too comfortable. You're allowed to sit on your bed," James says, and then after a beat, "or mine, if you prefer."

Holy fucking fuck. No, no, no, I cannot hook up with my roommate on my first day here. God, that would just be begging for a year of awkwardness. I am misreading the signals. Yes, that's it exactly. He's just a strange, overly affectionate, mind-bogglingly *hot* person, and there's no shame in that. Like I'd even know what to do if he *did* want to hook up, anyway. Like I'd be able to come up with anything better than "Hurr I've never kissed anyone before and am pretty much only hypothetically gay at this point, we sex please, hurr."

"I'm um... I'm good down here, actually," I say. James inhales deeply and lets it out slowly.

"Ten minutes and you're already killing me, Mr. Anderson," he says. I frown.

"What?" I say, but he shakes his head and backs towards the door.

"I think I'm going to go explore the school. I've never even visited, you know. Pain in the ass to fly up just for a tour, so coming here was just a shot in the dark. Hopefully not a disappointing one," he says. "I'll be back sometime later. Before dinner, though. Probably. If not, I'll save you a seat in the dining hall?"

"Yeah," I say quickly, desperate not to fuck everything up any more than I already have, "that would be great."

"It was a pleasure," he says, ducking out of the room and letting the door shut with a click. Yes, it was a pleasure. Far too much of one, actually.

Once I've managed to calm myself down, I sit down at my desk and boot up my computer. The internet here is way slower than it was back home, but I'm pretty sure that's due to the hundreds of other guys all trying to sign on at once. It takes ten minutes just to bring up the internet, and once I do, I'm prompted by the school homepage. All first-year and transfer students must log in using their name and student ID number (located on their student ID cards) to set up personalized email account and access internet.

That'd be useful, if I had an ID card.

I sigh and shut down the computer again. The hallway is as crowded as a city sidewalk, and I only make it about five steps towards the stairs before someone places a hand against the small of my back and gives me a deliberate shove. I twist to glare at the person behind me, who is a few inches taller than me and possibly a few years older. It's hard to tell in the crush, but it looks like he has some of his equally large friends with him.

"Hurry up, freshman, some of us have places to go," he orders. I roll my eyes and turn back around. I make it another three steps before he shoves me again. "Come on! I know it's hard to haul ass on those skinny little legs of yours, but you're in our way."

Shove me again, asshole. Please shove me again. I may be new to military school, I may be new to high school in general, but I know that this kind of incident is what will define my freshman year. The second I feel his fingers brush my shirt again, I spin around and grab him by the collar of his shirt, yanking his face

down so it's an inch away from mine.

"Don't fucking touch me," I growl. Perplexed, he reaches for my hands, but I take advantage of his surprise to shove him up against the wall, pinning my forearm to his throat. "What's your name?"

"Gerard," he chokes out. I may not be as tall or built as he is – or, for that matter, as big as half the guys here seem to be – but I have a lot going for me right now; the element of surprise, the intimidation of violence, and a very impressive pair of dark green eyes that are set in a hard glare.

"Hi, Gerard. I'm Garen. It's nice to meet you," I say. I grab one of his hands with my free one and give it a hard shake. "Now, I want you to listen to me really closely. Are you listening, Gerard?"

"Yeah," Gerard hisses. I can tell he's getting angry now, preparing for his comeback. Time to make a real impression. I lean a little closer to him.

"There are three kinds of guys who get sent to military school. The first kind is the legacy kid, who's from a whole family of ex-military people. He's the kind of guy who talks a lot of shit because his daddy never loved him and he knows he's destined for a life of getting fucked in the ass by Marines, so he tries to prove he's a real man by beating up freshmen. I'm guessing this is you."

Gerard grits his teeth and shifts again under my arm, but I jerk it forward sharply, choking him again.

"I'm not finished, so you might want to stay still. The second kind is the complete loser who goes to military school because he's hoping the people there will be even lamer than he is. That's the kind of guy who actually listens when the Dorm Advisor says it's lights out, who tattles to the librarian when people are talking during study hall, and who pisses himself just a little bit the first day of marksmanship classes."

I pause, suddenly hearing my dad's voice in my head. *Garen, from now on, I want you to stop before you do anything. I want you to ask yourself, 'Is this the kind of image I want to make for myself?' Think seriously about that, Son.* It's his favorite lecture, one I get at least once a week. The problem, though, is that he never took the time to point out that usually the image I want to make for myself isn't the one I should be making. Like now, for example, as I cock my head to the side, smile just *slightly*, and present myself with the image of the psychotic badass of the freshman class.

"The third kind is the guy who was court-ordered here after a month-long arson investigation, has a police record as long as his arm, and is wholly unafraid of beating the shit out of you if you ever push him again. I'm pretty sure you can figure out which of these three kinds I am."

I don't need to give him a chance to respond. I step back, brush off my hands, and flash him my brightest smile. He just stares at me, clearly trying to figure out if he should hit me or save his neck. I lace my fingers together behind my head and head for the stairs, doing my best to appear nonchalant, as though I don't notice that the crowd in the hall parts like the Red Sea to let me through.

The line in the dorm lobby for student ID cards is long enough that I have to head right back to my room after I get my card to change for dinner. The laminated, phonebook-sized student handbook that was sitting on my bed when I arrived dictates that I wear "School Dress" clothes; dress pants and either a polo shirt, or a button-down shirt and tie. What is this, a motherfucking tea party? I get dressed anyway, in khakis, a long-sleeved blue Oxford, and a dark blue tie. My shoe choices are pretty much limited to decrepit black Converse or the standard-issue black combat boots I was instructed to buy from the uniform store before coming to school. I lace up the boots, which are uncomfortable and heavy as fuck, tuck my ID and room keys into my pocket, and follow the surge of people headed for the dining hall. Tables are assigned at meals, which means that I, Garen Anderson of three fifteen, am seated between James Goldwyn, also of three fifteen, and Andrew Donahue, of three thirteen.

"Hey, Roomie," James asks once everyone has been seated and the Headmaster has finished welcoming

us all to Patton. "Someone in the Student Center told me that a freshman named Gavin Andrews beat the ass of some junior for looking at him wrong. That wouldn't happen to have been you, would it?"

I laugh. "Whoever told you that got the story about as wrong as they got my name. I didn't beat anybody's ass, and it wasn't for looking at me wrong. Some guy was shoving me in the hall, and I got annoyed."

"So you beat his ass," James finishes.

"I told you, I didn't beat his ass. I just shoved him against a wall and told him not to fuck with me," I say. I glance up just in time to see James quirk an eyebrow in such a way that makes my cheeks flush.

"Sounds hot," he murmurs so the other people at our table can't hear. No, no, no. He's my *roommate*. I twist to address Andrew Donahue of three thirteen, but he is facing his roommate, Colin Kovac.

"I think I'm going to try to test out of that class," Andrew says. "I took it in middle school, and I'm pretty sure I'd enjoy Personal Finance more."

"Why, who teaches that?" Colin asks.

"Some guy named Mendelssohn," Andrew says, shrugging and spooning mashed potatoes onto his plate. Colin snorts.

"Not surprising that the guy teaching the class all about money would be a total Jew," he says. He just had to say that, didn't he?

"Hey, asshole," I say sharply, leaning around Andrew to address Colin, who jumps. "I'm Jewish."

"Sorry, man. I didn't mean anything by it. You know I was just joking," he says quickly.

"I hope so. Maybe you should take Personal Finance with the 'total Jew' so you can learn how to save enough money to buy yourself a fucking brain,"

"Oh, that's not fair, Garen," James says, brushing his fingers across the back of my hand. "It's pretty obvious that his parents spent all their money on the lobotomy. He can't be expected to afford both."

A few guys at the table laugh, just a little awkwardly, and the tension I didn't intend to create is lifted. I scoop a lump of potatoes onto my plate when Andrew hands me the spoon, but I try not to move or talk too much for the rest of the meal.

It's not even that my family is Orthodox. My dad and all of his relatives are Catholic. While my mother demanded a bris when I was an infant, helped me study Hebrew for my bar mitzvah last year, and was amusingly outraged every December when my elementary school filled the choir's Holiday Concert with dozens of songs about Christmas and none about Hanukkah, she is still what she calls a "social Jew." She lets me eat bacon. She only really drags me to synagogue on the holy days. She watches "How the Grinch Stole Christmas" every time it's on television.

Every time I ask why she bothers to say she's Jewish if it's not all about the religion, she takes my hand and brings me upstairs to her and Dad's room. She has me sit cross-legged on the floor while she unlocks the tiny mahogany jewelry box she keeps on her bureau, and then she very carefully hands me a long gold chain with a Star of David hanging from it.

"This was your grandfather's, Garen," she says. "His entire family was imprisoned in a concentration camp when he was seventeen years old, and only he survived. His mother and father both worked until they died. His sisters, who were twins, were used for medical experiments. When Dachau was liberated in 1945, your grandfather moved to America, where he bought this. He gave it to me, and one day, I will give it to you. This is why we cannot forget that we are Jewish, Garen. Because your grandfather was

imprisoned and forced into slavery and nearly murdered for what he was, and we will not ever be ashamed of what we are.”

I slip a finger beneath my shirt collar and hook it around the chain, which hangs heavy and unfamiliar around my neck. One day of finally owning the necklace that has been promised to me since I was born is not long enough to make the way it bumps against my chest when I move feel natural.

“Do you want these?” Andrew asks, gesturing with the bowl of green beans. I shake my head.

“No, thanks. I’m not really hungry,” I say. James reaches across me to take the bowl, and shovels a heaping scoop on my plate.

“Don’t be an idiot. We have training first thing in the morning, and if you don’t keep a healthy diet up, you’ll fall behind. And I don’t want to have the worst cadet in school as my roommate,” he says. I roll my eyes, but start eating anyway.

After dinner, we are all herded into our dorm lobbies to receive our schedules and textbooks. James was right about having training first thing in the morning. From five to seven thirty, I’m to report to the quad for training and drills. Seven thirty to eight is down time, presumably to shower, get dressed for classes, and collect my books and homework. Breakfast is served in the dining hall from eight until nine, and from then on, it’s all classes. I have Algebra I until ten o’clock, World History until eleven, and Biology until noon. Lunch is from noon to one, followed by an hour of Freshman English, and an hour of French II. From three o’clock until five o’clock, I am to report for my Leadership Education Program, or L.E.P. According to the blurb underneath the course title, this is where I’m supposed to learn map-reading, first aid, weapons safety, instruction methods, military history, and marksmanship. After L.E.P, I return to my dorm or the library for two mandatory study hours, and then attend dinner from seven o’clock to eight. Lights out by ten thirty on weekdays, one o’clock on weekends.

Holy shit. This isn’t Patton Military Academy; this is Hell. This is a very methodical, very structured Hell, with dress codes, over-scheduling, and basic training every morning.

I head back to the room, but James disappears again, presumably to do more exploring. I use my student ID number to set up my user account, and check my email. There’s only one message in my inbox, which is from Kyle.

Hit me up when you get a chance. I’m bored as shit, and I want to know how your first day at PMS goes. Did you manage to smuggle your cell phone into the school, or did they confiscate it? Let me know. Ky.

I click ‘reply’ and pause with my fingers just above the keys, trying to figure out the best way to explain everything that has and has not changed today.

Hey, Ky. PMA (not PMS, you jackass) is pretty lame. I’m already fucking up, I guess. Some upperclassman was trying to mess with me in the hall, so I told him off. It went well. My neighbor was a douche at dinner, made a Jew joke. Told him off, too. My roommate is this Southern guy named James. Hot as fuck, and he might be into me, too. Not sure what I should do about it, considering he’s my roommate. He brought a lot of booze with him, which should be fun. The school doesn’t allow cell phones for students, but they didn’t search any bags. My mom did, though. She took the phone and charger, and anything even remotely explosive or flammable. Sorry I didn’t write earlier; they spent forever going over our schedule tomorrow. I’ve got to get up early, so I’m going to bed now. Peace, man. Garen. P.S. In case you didn’t catch that part in the middle, I’m gay. I think you knew this already, but if not... surprise!

I try not to think too much as I click ‘send.’ After all, if he reacts badly, I can recover. He may be my best friend since fifth grade, but I’m at a new school now. If his response is anything involving the word “faggot,” I can adjust. I can find a new best friend.

By the time James returns to the room, the lights are off and I am curled up under my blankets in a pair of

sweatpants and a t-shirt. James clicks on a desk lamp and collapses into his chair. He sits there for a moment, completely still, then strips off his necktie and undoes the top button of his shirt, exposing a few inches of smooth, tanned skin. I swallow, even though my mouth is suddenly dry. James tugs open one of the drawers of his desk and takes out a pen and a few sheets of blank paper. He arches his back until it cracks, then bows his head over the paper and begins to write.

It's like watching an old black and white film from the thirties. The glow of the lamp illuminates his face just enough for me to make out his expression of concentration, and he leans his chair back onto the hind legs more than once, balancing precariously and looking like the complete picture of schoolboy elegance. After almost half an hour, his hand returns to the drawer and withdraws an envelope. He folds the letter into it, seals it, and stands. I squeeze my eyes shut, refusing to be the type of creepy son of a bitch who'd watch while he undresses. I don't relax until I hear the click of the lamp and the rustle of bed sheets. He exhales slowly, and within ten minutes, his breathing has evened with deep sleep.

I don't even know I'm asleep until suddenly I am awake again and there are hands on me, pinning me down. I act instinctively, kicking out before my legs are pinned down, too.

"James!" I yell. "James, wake up! What the fuck is—"

My blanket is yanked up over my head, and the beating starts. I have no idea what I am being hit with, but sharp, painful blows are landing all over my body, from what feels like every side. I struggle to free myself from the blanket, but it is pinned at the corners.

"Garen?" James says loudly, sounding slightly panicked, and I see light bloom in the room through the blanket.

"Shut the fuck up and get back in bed, or you'll get the same thing!" someone snarls. The blows seem to be coming less frequently now, so I take advantage of the lull to hull myself off the bed. I am expecting to become tangled in the blanket and hit the floor, but there are so many people surrounding me that I crash right into a warm, solid body. I manage to claw my way out of the blanket, and blink around. My room is full of guys, at least ten, maybe more. The body I have crashed into belongs to – of course – Gerard. He grabs a fistful of my hair and drags me to my feet.

"See what happens when you shoot your mouth off? Welcome to Patton, faggot," he says, and he shoves me back until my head hits the wall with a loud crack. I stumble and have to grab the edge of my nightstand to steady myself, but once the world stops spinning, I step forward once more, right up in Gerard's face.

"So that's how it is? You need to get a dozen guys to help you beat me up while I'm *asleep*. How fucking pathetic is that?" I demand. He reaches for my hair once more, but I place both hands squarely on his chest and shove him backwards.

I do not immediately register that he's swinging something at my head. I only really see it right before it connects with my face, and in that second, I am too preoccupied with trying to figure out why the hell this sock looks so heavy to worry about ducking or shielding myself. The sock, and whatever rock solid object is buried in the toe of it, slams against my temple, and I finally buckle to my knees. I don't bother getting up. In fact, I actually just drop sideways, sprawling out across the floor; even I know when I've lost a fight. I hear the guys bolting from the room, and then James is on his knees next to me.

"Garen? Garen, can you hear me?" he whispers. I nod, rolling onto my back and reaching up to touch my head. My skin is swollen and painful, and my hand comes away wet. I close my eyes.

"Dude, I'm kind of bleeding, aren't I?" I say.

"Fuck yeah, you are. Do you want me to take you to the infirmary? I haven't the faintest idea where it is, but I'm sure I could find it," he says. I shake my head – bad idea – and grab his arm.

"No, it's fine. I don't have a concussion or anything. I can tell, because the pain's not inside my head. It's just, you know, all over it. Fuck, man. Do you have any bandages or something?" I ask. He jumps to his feet.

"No, but I saw a first aid kit down in the front lobby. I can sneak down and get it. I'll be back in a minute. Two minutes, tops. Do you want me to get you into bed first?" he asks.

Even with incoming bruises all over my body and blood all over my face, I still manage to flush. Yes, *please*.

"Yeah, sure," I say. He slips an arm around my waist and helps me clamber to my feet. I pause to steady myself before flopping back on the bed. James lifts my dangling feet off the floor and tucks them back under my blankets.

"I'll be right back. I swear. Don't you move," he says, and he darts from the room. True to his word, he's back within two minutes, a large white case tucked under his arm. He shuts and locks the door behind himself. "From now on, I'm thinking we should bolt that before bed."

"No shit," I say, laughing softly. "Thought you had."

"Forgot," he says simply. He dumps the first aid kit out onto his bed and sifts through the contents, finally selecting a gauze pad and a tube of antibacterial ointment. "Now, I'm not exactly used to playing Florence Nightingale. So, if you end up with gangrene or something, you're not allowed to get mad at me.

"Just be a good roommate and dress my wounds," I say. He uncaps the ointment, but instead of applying it to my skin or the gauze, he ducks into my personal space, his lips mere inches away from mine.

"I saw how much of a beating you just got. If you want me to dress all your wounds, maybe you should start by undressing," he murmurs. I'm too dazed to be embarrassed, but not too dazed to note that I'm getting increasingly turned on the longer he stays this close to me.

"Are you trying to make me uncomfortable when you say shit like that?" I ask. He grins, nearly blinding me with his teeth in the dim room.

"Maybe. Does it work?" he asks. I shrug.

"To a degree. But if you want maximum effect, maybe you should put in a room change request so you can try hitting on someone who doesn't like guys," I say. I let my eyelids drop shut once more, just in case he decides to hit me. I have no idea why he's doing this. I have no idea what's coming. When nothing painful happens, I open my eyes again. If anything, he is closer; when he speaks next, I can feel his lips just barely brushing mine.

"Maybe I should. But what's the fun in flirting with you if there's not a chance that something's gonna come of it?" he whispers. I don't have a chance to respond before he leans away, dabs some ointment on my cheek, and wipes the streaks of blood away with the gauze. I can only watch in mild confusion as he packs up the first aid kit, kicks it under his desk, and climbs back into his bed, flicking the light off on his way. "Night, Garen. See you in the morning."

I roll to face the wall, restless and unsatisfied.

Chapter Two

Training the next morning is probably one of the top five worst experiences of my life so far. Squads are assigned by grade and dormitory, so I follow James to a corner of the quad designated for all the freshmen of Whitman Hall. A few people do a double-take when they see the dark purple bruise that engulfs half my face, but a lot don't really seem surprised, which surprises *me*. Everyone else looks as tired as I feel, save a few people who started slamming energy drinks or coffee as soon as they woke up.

"They'll be regretting that later," James says, grimacing as Glen Mason, one of our neighbors from across the hall, takes a giant swig of Red Bull. "It's just going to make them all sick."

"Yeah?" I say. He doesn't seem to be fazed by the fact that five hours ago, he was almost kissing me in my bed.

"Yeah. Here, want one?" he asks, stooping to his knees to dig through the small gym bag he brought down with him. He eventually extracts two bottles of water, one of which he hands to me.

"Thanks," I say, unscrewing the top and taking a sip. He nods his acknowledgement. A whistle is blown from a few feet away, and I jump.

"Alright, Cadets! I want two lines in front of me. Stand next to your roommate, in order of your room numbers. I want you alphabetical, too. Whoever's name comes first should be standing on the left!" bellows a man with the whistle and a slightly splotchy face. I step to James' other side, and fall into place behind Glen.

"I'm Sergeant Smith, and I'm going to be leading you in your morning training for your entire first year here at Patton. You are to address me only as 'sir,' and when I give an order, I want it followed! Are we clear?"

"Sir, yes, sir!" we all chorus back, like every lame Army movie I've seen in the past fourteen years.

Sergeant Smith leads us in twenty minutes of stretching, ten minutes of push-ups – which I've always been world-shakingly suckish at – twenty minutes of crunches, and another ten minutes of stretching. Then, to my utter horror, he makes us run. For the next hour and a half, we run. When we can't run anymore, we jog. When we can't jog anymore, we walk. When we can't walk anymore, we try to sit, and he screams in our faces until we start running again. By the time we finally return to the quad, I am dizzy and nauseated and slightly suicidal.

At least ten other guys collapse onto the grass at the same time I do, but Sergeant Smith doesn't seem to see any of them. He storms over to me and crouches down to yell, blanketing me with droplets of spit.

"Cadet, what are you doing on the ground?" he hollers. "Get on your feet! Get up!"

"Sir, I just need a minute to catch my breath, sir," I gasp out. He grabs the front of my sweat-soaked t-shirt and hoists me a few inches off the ground.

"When I say on your feet, I want you on your feet!" he yells, and he drops me back down. I cover my face with my hands, trying to wipe off the mixture of sweat and spittle.

"Sir, suck my dick, sir!" I say. There's a very brief, very stunned silence, and for a moment, I think Sergeant Smith's head is going to actually explode.

"You've got thirty seconds to be in the headmaster's office, boy," he says finally, taking a small radio from his pocket and flicking it on. "I'm going to count to that number, and then I'm going to call into the office. If you're not there, not only will I have the headmaster call your parents and have you put on probation, I will make sure you're doing community service every day for the rest of the semester. And trust me, if that

happens, this will be your last semester here. You've got half a minute. I suggest you run."

The headmaster's office is in the main administrative building, which is halfway across campus. It's about five minutes away, if you walk. I scramble to my feet and head for the building at a dead sprint, cursing under my breath. I try to keep track of the seconds, but my head is spinning, and it's making everything a lot harder to focus on. How long has it been? Fifteen seconds? Twenty? A hundred and twelve? I can't tell. I have to skirt around a group of sophomores, and shove my way through a group of other freshman on their way back to their dorms from training.

"Watch it!" one says angrily. I'm too winded to speak, so I just bow my head and run even faster, run until my muscles burn and my legs feel like they're going to bleed. I burst into the administrative building, and the secretary at the desk glares at me.

"Do you have an appointment, young man?" she asks.

"Did Sergeant Smith just call in here?" I demand. She frowns and shakes her head no. I collapse onto the tile, gasping for air. I did it. I made it. No community service for me, *not today*. Before I can really start to celebrate in my head, a radio on the secretary's desk crackles to life.

"Lisa, this is George. Did a freshman student by the name of Anderson just arrive at the building?"

The secretary – Lisa, I guess – peers down at me, and I nod, waving my shaking hand at her.

"Uh, yes, George, he did. Would you like me to send him in to the headmaster?" she asks. I can hear the sadism in Smith's voice when he replies.

"No, thank you. But I'd like you to tell him that he has thirty seconds to get back here, or he'll be acting as a waiter during every meal for the rest of the semester, regardless of whether or not it's his squad's turn."

"Shit, shit, shit," I moan, clawing my way up the side of the front desk and stumbling back out the door. The good thing about this trip is that by now, my legs are already numb. I move a bit more awkwardly, but I can run faster because it doesn't hurt as much. I'm starting to see splotches of darkness in front of my eyes by the time I make it back to the section of the quad where Smith is waiting with my squad. I skid to a stop in front of him, but I don't fall down this time. I straighten up and clamp my mouth shut, praying I'm not about to vomit on his shoes. Sergeant Smith is grinning at me, but not in a pleasant way.

"Congratulations, Cadet. You just made it all the way across the campus and back in one minute. Obviously, you *are* capable of running. In the future, I expect you to refrain from being a whiny little bitch. Are we clear?" he demands. I swallow until my mouth is dry, and focus all of my energy on not throwing up.

"Sir, yes, sir," I say finally.

"Good. Dismissed!" he bellows, and he stalks off across the quad.

I black out.

I must only be out of it for a second, because when I come to, half the people in my squad still haven't noticed. I'm not on the ground, though, which is surprising. I blink back the splotches of darkness still swimming around me and realize that someone is behind me, supporting my weight. He has his arms hooked under mine and his hands splayed across my chest to steady me.

"I think I'd like to die now, please," I say, reaching for the ground.

"Not gonna happen, sorry," says the person behind me. James. Of course. "We need to get you back up to the dorm. And you need to shower and get ready for classes."

“No,” I say emphatically. “I do not believe that is happening today, not even one little bit.”

He laughs and tugs me back towards Whitman Hall. “Come on.”

I let him guide-slash-carry me back to our room, and once there, I collapse on my bed.

“Come on,” James repeats. “Get up, go take a shower. You smell worse than the stables back home on a hundred degree day.”

“I really think you should just let me kill myself. It would feel a lot better,” I say, but he doesn’t seem to be budging. I sigh and get up to gather my clothes and shower supplies. The school handbook once more forces me to wear School Dress clothes when I am going to meals or class, so I dig out another pair of khakis and a dark blue polo shirt. I shove them in my duffel bag to bring down to the communal bathroom. The shower area of the bathroom is a long row of stalls on one wall, and a long row of hooks on the other. These hooks, it turns out, are assigned. I sling my bag across the one labeled “G. Anderson, freshman, 315,” stuff my dirty clothes into the bag, and disappear into one of the stalls. The water is boiling hot, which feels amazing. I lean against the wall for a moment, letting the water run down my aching muscles, and try to stay very still. If I don’t move, I don’t feel that much pain. I scrub down and wash my hair, trying to prolong the process so I don’t have to leave the comfort of the warm spray. Eventually, James grabs the curtain of my stall and gives it a sharp rustle.

“Hurry up! We’re going to miss breakfast!” he says. I sigh and turn off the faucet. Wrapping a towel around my waist, I throw back the curtain, and James inhales sharply.

“What?” I demand, but he just stares at my chest. I look down and freeze. My whole body, already red from the heat of the water, is covered in bruises from my beating last night. Disturbed, I dry off and dress quickly. We’re halfway to the dining hall before James speaks again.

“I asked Kevin if he heard what happened last night. You know, Kevin Newark? He’s uh, our neighbor, in three seventeen. He heard it through the wall, so I explained everything,” he says.

“Oh?” is all I can really think to say. I’m not really sure what else he expects from me.

“He said it’s called a blanket party. It’s, you know, a thing. It happens a lot, in private schools, especially military ones. A bunch of people put bars of soap in socks, cover you with a blanket, and beat you with the socks—”

“I was there, James, I get it,” I interrupt. He shrugs.

“Kevin said it’s a hazing thing. Probably because of all that shit you were talking to that junior, Gerard,” he says. I snort.

“This year’s probably going to suck for you, you know. Classes haven’t even started yet and I’ve already been beaten with soap and threatened with community service by the drill sergeant. You’ll probably get shit by association,” I say. “Sorry.”

James knocks his hip into mine, right over a bruise he probably didn’t realize existed. I bite back a grimace.

“Lucky me. I like bad boys,” he says, grinning, and he jogs ahead of me – how can he still be alive enough to move any faster than a *crawl*? – to the dining hall.

Everyone at breakfast wants to talk about my confrontation with the sergeant. A few people even come over from other tables to ask questions; word must travel fast around here. I don’t want to be the kind of guy who admits it sucked and confesses that I deserved to be punished for mouthing off – which is kind of

true – but I don't want to be the kind of asshole who complains about how unfair it was, either. I settle for a happy medium; I smile and laugh when people bring it up, and say I'm surprised I got let off so easily. What a great story, maybe I should up my game. Ha. Ha. Ha.

Word seems to spread just as fast among the instructors as it does among the students. By the time seats have been assigned in math class, my teacher, Mr. Ryan, has already given me half a dozen apprehensive looks. In World History, Mrs. Wilcox gives me a pointed look when she tells us that she "just doesn't hold for such nonsense" when it comes to acting out in class. When I walk into Biology, Mr. Steinangle points in my face and hisses, "I've heard about you, Anderson. And believe me, if you put one toe out of line, I'll send you right to the headmaster. This is a place for learning. Not tomfoolery."

"Tomfoolery?" I echo, blinking. His eyes narrow, and I take my seat quickly.

I skip lunch. Andrew tries to convince me not to, saying that if any of the administrators notice, I'll get in even more trouble, maybe even have to actually do all the things Sergeant Smith threatened me with. I shrug off his warnings.

"Want some company back in the room?" James asks casually. I try to ignore the suggestive undertone to his offer. I must be imagining it. He's just fucking with me. He's just *joking* with me.

"No, thanks. You go eat," I tell him. He shrugs, and I return to the room.

Once I'm there, I can't really figure out what to do with myself. I only have one homework assignment so far; a sheet of math problems for Algebra I. I do the problems on my bed, using my book as a desk, and then move to my actual desk to turn on my computer and check my email. I log on, and immediately wish I hadn't. There's a reply from Kyle.

G. How the hell could you not tell me something like that until you move away? That's fuck up, man, that's really fucked up. That's a big deal, and you kept it from me, which makes you a complete asshole. We've been best friends for years, and it really sucks that you email me from your new school and you're like, "Oh, I'm gay now and never bothered to tell you, my roommate's so hot, I want him so bad." You promised you wouldn't become a completely different person just because you were going to some fancy-ass boarding school, but you lied. You should've told me this shit when you first figured it out, because friends aren't supposed to keep stuff from each other. It pisses me off that you apparently think this is something you had to hide from me, like I'm some homophobic bigot who'd hate you or something. I cannot stress this enough: I DON'T CARE THAT YOU LIKE GUYS. I CARE THAT YOU'VE BEEN LYING TO ME. It's not like this was even a lie of omission. You have outright told me before that you're into chicks and stuff. That's a dick move, and I can't lie, that really bothers me. Any other big secrets you've been keeping? Because now's the time to say them. Kyle.

I shift back in my seat, staring at the computer screen. This is ridiculous. This is so *not* about him, and he's doing everything in his power to make it so. Still, I don't want to fuck things up with him even more than they already are, so I simply reply, I'm sorry I lied to you. It was stupid, and I wish I could take it back. I understand if you're mad. Please write back to me when you're ready. I don't want to lose my best friend over this. G.

I stand and retrieve my guitar from the closet. It feels familiar and solid in my hand, like it's the only thing in the world that can ground me right now. I only have time to play a few chords before I have to join the crowd I can hear out in the hall, but it's enough.

When I make it to my last regular class of the day, I'm fully expecting my teacher to make a snide comment to me. After all, my English teacher didn't hesitate to tell me she'd already heard I was a disrespectful troublemaker. Why should this class be any different?

My French teacher, however, doesn't even blink as she calls my name – first, of course – and directs me to a seat in the front corner of the room. Once the entire class is seated, she tosses her seating chart

onto her desk and sits down in her black leather desk chair.

“*Bonjour*, gentlemen of French Level Two. My name is Madame Delonpre, but you may all feel free to call me simply Madame. This is my fourth year teaching at Patton, and I’m thrilled to be back once more. I have been teaching French for twelve years now, and am also fluent in Spanish and German, with a basic understanding of Mandarin Chinese. Please accept now that this is a difficult course. I assign homework every night, I expect you all to do the reading that I require, and I do not give out easy A’s. I also will not tolerate any of the typical *posturing* that seems so prevalent at military boarding schools. If I’m not mistaken, there is already some degree of hazing among the freshmen. Is this true?”

Finally, she looks directly at me. Everyone does. The bruise on the side of my face feels warm. I remain silent and still. When no one answers her, Madame continues.

“I find this type of behavior completely unnecessary. That being said, I will also not tolerate anyone acting out in my class. If you’re here only to fulfill a language requirement, I’d suggest you transfer to Senor Rivera’s Introductory Spanish class. Quite the fiesta, I’m told, with little focus on complete comprehension of the language.” The distaste in her voice is almost tangible. “Now, because you have all tested out of Introductory French, I’d like each of you to stand up in turn and introduce yourself to the class. Tell us your name, where you’re from, what you like to do. That kind of thing. Let’s start alphabetically.”

Of course.

I stand and, staring at the floor, say, “*Je m’appelle Garen Anderson. Je suis originaire de l’Ohio. J’aime jouer de la guitare. Je suis un pyromane, mais mon thérapeute dit que je fais des progress.*”

Madame laughs, but no one else does. “Bonne, Garen. Your accent is very good, and it’s clear you have a grasp of the language. However, I think your classmates may have lost you at the end. Care to translate?”

“My name is Garen Anderson. I’m from Ohio. I like to play the guitar. I’m a pyromaniac, but my therapist says I’m making progress,” I say. I’ve never actually seen a therapist in my life, but several people chuckle, which makes it worth the additional blow to my reputation. Furthermore, Madame nods approvingly at me as I sit back down, which makes her just about the only person here – other than James, and sometimes Andrew – who doesn’t seem to think I should be on the next bus back to Ohio.

M.L.E.P. is painfully dull. The instructor happens to be my best friend in the world, Sergeant Smith, who, upon seeing me, barks, “If you have any more smart remarks to make, Anderson, feel free to say them. I’d be happy to make you run more laps around campus.”

His threat is, quite literally, the only thing remotely interesting about the entire class. He spends two hours telling us about everything we’re going to be studying, and for the first time in the history of the world, shooting a gun sounds boring. Actually, I might appreciate it right now, if the muzzle of the gun was in my mouth.

When five o’clock finally comes, James and I both bolt for the door. We race back to Whitman and into our room, where James flops down on his bed, and I return to the closet for my guitar. I glance at James, somewhat hoping he’s going to clear out and head to the library or something, but he simply sits up in bed and props himself up against the pillows.

“Play something for me,” he says. I can’t bring myself to actually look him in the eyes anymore.

“Alright. What do you want to hear?” I ask. I can just barely see him shrug through my peripheral vision.

“Anything. Whatever you want to play,” he says. I strum out half of “Row, Row, Row Your Boat,” but he whips a pillow at my face. “I meant something serious.”

“Row, Row, Row Your Boat” turns into a funeral march. This time, James himself comes at me. He grabs the front of my shirt and drags me to his bed, pushing me flat on my back and climbing into my lap, knees anchored on either side of my hips.

“Come on,” he says, his voice a little huskier than before. “Play something for me, my little minstrel.”

“If this is you trying to seduce me, you’re doing it completely wrong,” I say. Lie. Lie, lie, lie. Biggest lie ever. Luckily, the guitar I’m still clutching is enough to shield the quickly hardening *lie* in my pants.

“Who said I was trying to seduce you?” James says, doing his best to appear shocked and outraged.

“Actions speak louder than words,” is all I can think to say.

“I have no idea what you’re referring to. I’m not doing anything, I’m just sitting here. You know, tackling you, having a big outpouring of masculinity,” he says.

“Well, could you try to refrain from pouring out your masculinity on me? This is a new shirt,” I say. He leans closer, curving over my guitar in a way that would look incredibly awkward on me. For him, it’s probably one of the sexiest, most graceful moves I’ve ever seen.

“You know, it only counts as a seductive action if it’s working,” he says.

Here’s the thing: if I kiss him right now, like he’s practically begging for, I am officially fucking up my entire freshman year at Patton. There will always be an awkward understand between us, a horrible, unspoken “Hey, remember that first day of school when we made out on your bed?” It will ruin any friendship we might otherwise have, and it will cement the fact that I am a Big Ridiculous Faggot. All capitalized, written in big, sparkly, rainbow letters. I can’t do this. Not now. Not yet.

“Can you get off me?” I ask hoarsely. “Please?”

James doesn’t move at first, as though he’s trying to assess how serious I am. When I don’t say anything, he rocks back onto his heels.

“Sure, Roomie,” he says, and he hops off. I sit up and clear my throat. He flops down at his desk, and I retreat to my bed. Neither of us speaks much for the rest of Study Hour, but James doesn’t seem terribly upset with me when we make our way down to dinner. I still try to avoid his eyes as we sit down. By ten after seven, the squad serving today’s meals is still lingering by the kitchen. I nudge Andrew’s elbow with mine.

“Is there a particular reason we’re here if we’re not allowed to actually eat?” I ask. He shrugs.

“Maybe this is their version of more training. Starve us until we crack,” he says. However, just as he finishes speaking, Headmaster Samuels stands at the staff table and raises his hands for silence.

“Before we begin tonight’s dinner, there is something I wish to discuss with all of the students here,” he says. “Every year, the end of the first week at school leads to a lot of parties in the dorms. Now, I do not mind if students socialize. It’s a reasonable, encouraged part of life here at Patton. If you wish to play music, purchase snacks from the Student Market for you and your friends, or play games, you may. I believe today was a very successful first day—”

“For some of us,” I mutter, and James snorts.

“—and I think that some celebration is called for. However, I must remind you all of a few key rules. Tomorrow night is Friday, which means weekend curfew is in effect. All students must be in their dorm rooms – rooms, not just dorm buildings – with the lights turned out by one in the morning. No girls from any of the coed or all-female schools in the area are permitted to attend any of the parties. With the

exception of faculty, administration, and emergency crews, no females are allowed into the dormitories under any circumstances. I should also remind you all that this school has a zero-tolerance policy for any alcohol, tobacco, or drug use. If you are found with any of these substances you will be expelled. If you have any further questions about what is or is not allowed, please see me after the meal.” He beckons to the squad at the kitchen doors, and they hurry to serve.

“In conclusion, there’s no point to having a party at all,” James announces. There’s a murmur of agreement through most of our table, but directly across from me, Glen Mason, from room three fourteen, shakes his head.

“I think it’s a fair policy. If I wanted to go to a bunch of drunken parties, I’d be in some lame public school with the poor kids and the whores,” he says. His roommate, Steve Woods, frowns.

“Uh, I’ve gone to public school my whole life. This is my first year out of it,” he says. Glen shrugs, looking unapologetic.

“Still. I’d rather be in here and sober, than at a public school and wasted,” he says.

“That makes one of us,” James announces, “because if I got my way – and I usually do – I’d be in here, wasted, and ideally, getting some ass.”

There’s another rumble of agreement, except for Andrew, who is suddenly looking wary.

“Can’t get any of that, though. Not here,” he says.

“Any of what?”

“Ass.”

James shrugs and leans back in his chair, locking his fingers together behind his head. “Sure you can.”

“What, you know some secret passageway to sneak girls in that the rest of us don’t? You seem like a total legacy kid. Your dad tell you something?” Mike Hamilton, three sixteen, asks. James laughs. Oh, no. Oh, no, he is not about to tell them all what he really means

“My dad’s never been to New York in his life. Took him a year to warm up to the idea of me going to a school full of Yankees. And anyway, I wasn’t talking about sneaking girls in. We’d get caught, and there’s no point. Not when there are hundreds of hot guys here already. Just as good. Actually, if I’m completely honest about personal experience, guys are kind of better.”

He just came out to a table full of military school students, and I could barely make that confession to my best friend for years. I am simultaneously stunned and envious.

“That’s disgusting,” Glen says after a pause that stretches on for hours. James shrugs.

“I don’t happen to think so, obviously. But it’s your loss, considering you get to spend the next four years with the company of your right hand, and I get to spend them actually getting some,” he says.

“Wait, you’re not joking? You’re actually a—” Thankfully, Mike stops short of actually letting the word ‘faggot’ out, but he doesn’t seem capable of just saying ‘gay.’ After a moment, he struggles to clear his throat, and finishes, “ho-mo-sex-u-al?” Just like that, each syllable its own awkward sentence.

“No, not completely,” James says. “I’ve been known to partake in some relations with the opposite sex. I just happen to prefer gentlemen.”

Please don’t let them look at me, I pray. Please, let them just drop it, so I can finish my dinner and go

bury myself under my blankets and pretend not to exist.

“But doesn’t this bother you?” Mike says, gesturing to me with his butter knife.

Fuck.

“No,” I say with a shrug. Yes, but only because it’s like bringing a six-pack to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. It’s not fair to tease.

“Seriously?” Glen says, frowning. “If it were me—”

“Luckily, there’s only one of you. And Garen really doesn’t mind,” James says. If his tone left any doubt in their minds as to what he’s implying, that doubt is erased when he reaches up and cards his fingers through the hair at the nape of my neck.

I shiver.

Smirking slightly, James lets his hand fall, and everyone except for me finishes their dinner.

Chapter Three

I don't speak to James for the rest of the night. I don't speak to him after the alarm clock goes off in the morning, or on the way to the showers. I don't speak to him at PT, at any of the meals on Friday, or during World History, Freshman English, or LEP, all of which we have together. I don't speak to him because I *can't* speak to him.

How could he out me to everyone in our squad like that? What's wrong with him?

I take refuge in the library after dinner to avoid him, but there's only so much devotion I can give to my schoolwork. It's the second day of school, and my second consecutive day of actually completing all of my homework. This just might be a new record for me. I jam everything back into my backpack and trudge up to my dorm alone. When I open the door, however, I can barely force my way inside because of how many people are there.

"What the hell's going on?" I say. James barely glances up from the magazine he's reading.

"Pre-gaming," he says. Almost every guy in our squad is crowded around the infamous suitcase of bottles that I stuffed under my bed on the first day. "We're just getting ready to head down to the party. There's going to be one in the common room. Care to join?"

"Join the party or join the drinking?" I ask.

"They're pretty much the same thing," Andrew says, grinning at me. Fuck, he's cute. I take the bottle of Patron he is holding out and watch, slightly dazed, as he pours a small pile of salt onto the space on the back of his hand between his index finger and thumb.

"What, no limes?" I say.

"Limes aren't really necessary. Salt cuts the bite just fine. Plus, it's too hard to get limes on campus," James says.

"Could always use lemons," Kevin Newark suggests.

"You're not supposed to use lemons! It's gotta be limes!" comes an obnoxious slur from the other side of the group. I lean around the guys to blink at Mike, who is curled up on James' bed and completely *gone*.

"How much did you have?" I ask.

"Like, three shots. He's a fucking lightweight. Come on. Lick it," Andrew says. It takes me a minute to realize he's holding his salted hand in front of my face. Obediently, I lick the salt from his skin and slam the shot. The rest of the guys seem to be waiting for me to cringe, but I'm more used to tequila and a better actor than they all seem to know. I pause, then nod slightly.

"Smoother than Cuervo," I say.

"No shit," James replies. "I'm filthy fucking rich, what'd you expect?"

"Moonshine in a Mason jar, and a rant about how the South will rise again."

He gives me what must appear to be a manly shove, but only I seem to notice the way his hand curls around my shirt, tugging me back towards him after I've stumbled back a step. We all do some more shots, and I am nursing a pleasant buzz by the time we finally make it down to the party.

What's happening in the common room is incredibly lame, especially compared to shots in the dorm room. There's music, there's food, there's a bunch of cool people, but fuck. The parties in *Ohio* were

better than this. Part of the problem is the complete inability to acknowledge the fact that I am drunk, but really, the problem is that alcohol and boredom are not a good combination, especially for me; I slump down on the couch between Kevin and Mike, and we roll our eyes and heckle our way through whatever stupid action movie is playing on the television. The lead actor is in his late forties, at least, so I don't even have smooth muscles and glistening sweat to distract me from the plot – or lack thereof.

The movie is the only thing in the room that's even moderately entertaining, and when it's over, my choices are to either force my way through a conversation with someone, or return to the room. There is absolutely nothing in the world that's harder than trying to pretend you're not drunk when you really are, and I'm starting to sober up, anyway. I bid the guys goodnight, declare the party a waste of time, and retreat, stumbling and irritated, to my room.

The door is locked. Of course. Fishing the key out of my pocket is no problem, but actually getting it into the lock is another story entirely. It takes a good three minutes, and when I finally get the door open, I almost have to duck out again.

When James finally notices me out of the corner of his eye, he leans away from Andrew and raises his hand in a careless wave.

"Hey, Garen," he says, the perfect picture of nonchalance. Andrew throws himself off the bed immediately, straightening his clothes and covering his kiss-swollen lips like that makes any difference.

"What the fucking shit is happening?" I groan. I am still too drunk for this shit.

"I should go," Andrew says hoarsely, but James laughs.

"Don't worry about it, Andy. Garen can join," he says. Andrew shakes his head, looking more disturbed by the minute.

"N-No, that's okay, I... I don't know what I was thinking, alright? I'm straight, honestly. I don't even like guys. I-I'm just really fuckin' wasted, and I think I should go," he says. He can barely meet my eyes long enough to add, "Bye," before ducking out of the door I left open.

"What the fuck," I moan again, burying my face in my hands.

"Good Lord, Garen. It's not that big of a deal. We were just kissing," James says irritably. "Come here, and I'll *prove* it doesn't mean anything."

But it does mean something. At least, it does to me, and I seem to be the only one who feels that way.

Shaking my head as much as I can without making myself fall over, I stumble to my bed and bury myself under the blankets.

"Come on," James says, but his voice is softer now. "I'm sorry you walked in on us, but it's only awkward if you let it be."

"Then I guess I'm letting it be," I say. I hear the twang of bedsprings as he stands, and then his hand is on my shoulder, shaking me lightly.

"Don't get all mad at me, honey. You've been mad at me all day, and you only just forgave me a few hours ago. Don't go getting mad for no reason," he says. I shrug away from his shoulder.

"Don't call me 'honey.' And don't fucking touch me."

After too long of a minute, he turns off the lights and retreats to his bed. We both lie there for hours, knowing the other is still awake but not daring to say a word.

By the time I wake up, head pounding, and stagger to the common room just before noon on Saturday, everyone knows about James and Andrew. Andrew, apparently, is incapable of lying while drunk, and when Colin questioned his disappearance after the party, he couldn't help but reveal everything that had happened. His involvement, everyone seems to be reasoning, was excusable; he was wasted and James convinced him to do it, and once I came into the room, he snapped out of it. However, when James makes his way to the common room, the air is full of whispers and coughs that sound suspiciously similar to "faggot" and "whore."

The problem with this scenario is that James is not the type of guy who gives a shit what people call him. He doesn't even seem to hear it as he heads towards me and asks, "Want to go for a walk?"

I don't. Going for a walk with him is pretty much the last thing I want to do. But people will talk either way, and I'd rather be outside pretending it's not happening than in here listening to it all.

"Sure," I say. He waits while I pack up my guitar, and we head out to the quad. Apparently, that's enough to cure his desire to go for a walk. He sprawls out on the grass, and after a moment, I sit down next to him and take my guitar back out of its case.

"You still owe me a song."

I glance at James, who is squinting up at me, his hand raised to shield his eyes from the sunlight.

"I don't owe you shit," I say before I can stop myself. Neither of us speaks for a while, and eventually I sigh. "What do you want to hear?"

"Well, an explanation might be nice," he says. I can't help myself; I start to strum "I Want You To Want Me." He doesn't seem to recognize the music, and after a minute, I stop playing.

"An explanation for what, exactly?" I ask.

"Why you're being a cock. It's not like I did anything wrong. I made out with a cute guy, and I think I was damn considerate about it. I locked the door and everything," he protests.

"I know. The problem is..."

The problem is you weren't making out with me. The problem is that you gave me the green light, and then you hooked up with some other guy. And it doesn't matter that I said no. It doesn't matter that you pushed me away. I still wish it had been me.

But I can't say any of that. Instead, I shrug it off and start to play random chords.

"I guess there isn't really a problem. It just seemed inconsiderate to be hooking up in our room on the third night at school," I say. James sits up and drapes one of his long, muscled arms across my shoulders in a single, fluid motion.

"So, let's come up with a system," he says. "If you're in the room and you're with someone, lock the door. If I knock, just say anything, and I'll go away. If you're alone or don't mind if I come in, just leave the door unlocked. Sound fair?"

"I guess so, yeah," I say.

"Great," he replies, and he brushes my hair back to plant a kiss on my temple. "I'll see you later, okay?"

I nod, and he jumps to his feet. A few steps away, he stops, and turns back to face me. I glance up. "What?"

“Just so you know, Cheap Trick is kind of overrated,” he says. Fuck. Of course he’d recognize the song. He doesn’t look disturbed, though. Just a little wryly amused. I laugh sheepishly.

“Yeah. I guess so,” I say. That’s the end of it. I avoid the room, especially if the door is locked, and James and I don’t talk about it. Actually, James and I don’t talk about much of anything; he’s usually too busy making new *friends*.

“Can you get that?” James asks, gesturing towards our door with his Italian notebook. I toss my algebra textbook onto the floor and roll off my bed. Another tentative knock.

“Coming,” I say loudly, and then, under my breath, “Calm the fuck down.”

The guy standing in the doorway when I open the door is unfamiliar, and too tall to be a freshman. He blinks at me, not speaking, and slowly looks me up and down. What the fuck?

“Can I help you?” I say. His eyes snap back up to mine.

“Are you James Gold?” he asks.

“Uh, no. James Goldwyn is over there,” I say, stepping to the side and pointing to James. He twists around in his desk chair.

“Yeah?” he says. The guy in the door steps forward uncertainly.

“My name’s Mac,” he says. “I was told I could find you here. You know, in this room.”

“And so you have,” James says slowly. “Is that all?”

Mac turns to me and nods expectantly towards the door. I raise my eyebrows, and he raises his right back. Fuck that. I sprawl back across my bed.

“I heard...” Mac trails off, making a half-hearted gesture, like he expects James to understand everything from two pointless words. James just stares at him. “I heard you’re this complete whore, okay? And I heard that you’ll do pretty much anything with anybody.”

I am on my feet immediately, clenching my fist around the first thing it touches on my nightstand – my French-English dictionary – and stepping forward with it. James raises his hand and shoots me a warning look, and I freeze. Mac looks startled, like he hadn’t expected any negative reaction to calling somebody ‘a complete whore.’ What a fucking idiot.

“I’m not a whore,” James says with unnerving calmness. “Whores get paid for their services.”

“I could pay you,” Mac says immediately. I tighten my grip on the French-English dictionary and grit my teeth. God, he’s asking for it. James, however, stands very slowly and takes a step forward. He pauses, head cocked to the side, and then closes the distance between him and Mac. He reaches up, winding one long arm around Mac’s neck, and pulls him forward so they’re nearly nose to nose.

“You couldn’t afford me. Now, get out of my room.”

Mac staggers back a step, squinting at James as though he can’t figure out if he’s serious or not. I clear my throat, and they both glance at me. Seeing the book still clenched in my hands, Mac seems to decide better of his situation.

“Fine. If I’d known you were such an asshole, I wouldn’t have bothered. I can get it somewhere else. And I can probably get better. I figured it’d just be easier to go after someone who I already know puts out,” he

says. Without waiting for a retort, he stalks out, slamming the door behind himself.

“Well,” James says. “That was fucking *interesting*, that was.”

Mac is the first guy to come calling, but he’s not the last. Not by a long shot. Guys don’t show up every day, but more often than not, I knock on the locked door to hear James call out, “Hey, Garen. Mind coming back a bit later?” James says some of the guys he’s with are gay or bisexual, and have been praying to find someone like him at Patton. He also says a lot of them are straight, but have been convinced by James’ honey-sweet voice that they might want to try a walk on the gay side. Still, most of them don’t seem to know or care what they are; James is gorgeous by anyone’s standards, and skin is skin, no matter what gender it belongs to. Consequently, James has a lot of suitors, and I spend as much time out of the room as possible. After the mandatory study hours every evening before dinner, I finish my homework in the library, which – as my parents express their delight over in various emails – brings my grades higher than they’ve ever been. After dinner, James has usually finished entertaining whatever guests he has, and I’m allowed back in the room without disrupting anything.

Following dinner on the first day of my third week, I try the room doorknob, as always, and find it unlocked. The door swings open, and I find James lying shirtless in bed with a guy I vaguely recognize as a sophomore leaning over him. The sophomore doesn’t seem to notice me, but James does. He keeps his dark eyes on mine as the sophomore licks and bites at his neck, and eventually, he raises a hand and crooks a finger at me, inviting me in. I shake my head and mouth, *Fuck no*. He grins – a gorgeous, wicked grin – and mouths back, *I want you in my bed*. I back out of the room and shut the door with a click.

After that, I am desperate to find even more ways to avoid the dorm. With my assignments all done and my grades about as high as they can be, I find myself retreating to the gym every single day.

The gym is the newest addition to the campus, courtesy of a generous donation that everyone says came in a few years ago to guarantee the donor’s son had a place in that year’s incoming class. All of the equipment – the treadmills, the ellipticals, the bench presses – is state of the art and polished to perfection. The back wall of the room, the one the treadmills face, is made entirely of one long mirror; presumably, this is so we can all check out the guys running next to us and not be accused of being queer. There is a full-sized refrigerator as well, fully stocked each day with bottles of imported water, and a large rack of fluffy white towels near the door to the pool, which is located in the room just next door.

I throw myself into working out with a vigor I would’ve previously thought impossible. I have never been a terribly active person, nor have I ever had the desire to change that. However, if my options are to either run a few miles each day or sit at my desk and try to pretend that I don’t realize my roommate is swallowing some junior’s cum a few feet away, I’m willing to make some changes in life.

The first benefit I notice from my new gym obsession is that my daily physical training comes much easier. I don’t collapse after running anymore, and I slowly build up my upper body strength until I’m able to do the designated number of push-ups every day. Sergeant Smith, who still makes it no secret that he hates me from the deepest part of his soul, is even forced to grudgingly accept that I’m becoming the best in my squad.

The next – and much more pleasing – benefit is that I’m finally starting to fill out. I have never been fat, but I’m not particularly scrawny, either. Because of this, when my muscles finally start toning up, I don’t end up with the lean, smooth look that James seems to have effortlessly. My muscles are thicker, harder, and more noticeable. The sleeves of my shirts are tighter, and I can actually manage to look pretty fucking impressive if I flex in just the right way. It takes a while, but my abs start to harden, and I slowly but surely make my way towards something resembling a six-pack.

I’m not self-conscious about my body. I never have been, and probably never will be. It has never been something I’ve worried about, or even noticed. However, the changes in my physique seem to be of

interest to quite a few of James' bright and shiny new friends. Whenever I happen to be coming back to the room as one of James' conquests leaves, I can practically feel the fire in his gaze. Sometimes, a guy will grab my wrist and look at me with some kind of question or offer in his eyes, but every time it happens, I shake the hand off and duck into my room. The last thing I need right now is to be indulging in James' sloppy seconds.

As September ends, and October comes and goes, James loses even more of his inhibitions. A week after Halloween, we are both in the room for once; he is sitting at his desk, as he usually is, and I'm lying in bed with my iPod, blocking out the scratching of his pencil with Something Corporate cranked high, but with one earbud dangling out. We both look up at the sound of the knock on the door, and I immediately stand up. I don't have any homework to do, and the gym's closed by now, but I can always just sit in the common room and listen to my music. James knows to get me when he's done. This time, however, he bolts towards me, gripping my hips and pushing me gently back towards my bed.

"You don't have to leave. That's Danny. He's a junior I met in the library, and trust me, he won't care. You can stay," he says. I blink at him and pluck the other earbud out of my ear, dropping back down onto my bed.

"Isn't that going to be incredibly awkward, though?" I say. Yes. The very, very obvious answer is yes. James, however, shakes his head.

"No, no. It'll be fine. Stay," he says, and then he steps a little closer, stooping so his face is nearer to mine, his fingers laced together at the back of my neck. "I want you to stay."

No. This is too much, too creepy. But even as I think it, I find myself slowly lying back down and crawling back beneath the blankets. James keeps his eyes locked on mine as he walks backwards to the door and opens it, turning around only once Danny, a black boy with an innocent face, is fully visible in the doorway.

"Hi," James says brightly, hooking an arm around Danny's waist and tugging him into the room. I close my eyes and roll onto my side, tucking an arm under my head as a pillow.

"Oh, shit. I didn't realize your roommate was still in," I hear Danny murmur. James laughs very softly.

"He's a deep sleeper. You don't need to worry about it," he whispers. That seems to be all the encouragement that Danny needs, because I hear the flick of the lightswitch, the click of the door lock. When I open my eyes again, they are stumbling back towards James' bed, illuminated by the glow of the streetlamps lighting the path outside our dorm. James wastes no time in stripping off his shirt, and Danny fumbles for the buttons of his own while James ducks to press his mouth to his throat.

I don't know how long I watch them. It must be a while, because my body is cramping up from being so still and the playlist on my iPod comes to an end. James sneaks looks at me periodically, whenever Danny's head drops back or his eyes flutter shut. Eventually, James flicks open the button of Danny's jeans and slips his hand inside, and I squeeze my eyes shut. It's too much to watch this. There is a line, and watching this would be completely crossing that. I can't, I can't, I can't.

Danny lets out a tiny groan, and my eyes snap open again. James is jerking him off, hard and fast, and while Danny's eyes are rolled back in his head, James' are locked on mine. It's too much, and I'm painfully hard. And he knows. He has to know, because his eyes flicker downwards, and he mouths, *Touch yourself*. It's not an order; it's more like a prediction, a statement of what he knows I'm going to do. Unwilling to disappoint, I slip a hand under the sheets and open my jeans, grateful that Danny can't seem to hear the scratch of the zipper over his own heavy breathing. I pause, just to make sure I'm not going to get caught, then tug my jeans and boxers down over my hips and wrap my hand around my cock.

Having James watch while I jerk myself off is probably the sexiest thing I have ever experienced. Part of

me feels a little bit guilty, a little bit sick, knowing that Danny has no idea I'm watching, but for the most part, I'm just too turned on by the way James is watching me with his lip between his teeth and his eyes halfway shut, like he's getting off on this, too. I can't keep my eyes open anymore, so I try to focus on listening, just in case Danny happens to glance over. He doesn't. He is too busy coming all over James' hand with a sharp grunt and more heavy breathing. When I sneak my last glance, James doesn't seem to give a shit about his cum-covered hand, his sated bed partner, anything except watching me. His lips are parted now, and his tongue darts out just once to wet his lips. I squeeze my eyes shut and come. Even though I'm trying not to move, trying not to make any noise at all, it's still one of the most intense orgasms I've ever had in my life. I wipe my hand on my sheets and lie there, boneless and shaking, as James sits up and reaches for his shirt.

"It's almost curfew. You should probably head back to your room," he says.

"What about you?" Danny asks, brushing his fingers across James' shoulder. James shrugs him off.

"I have a lot of homework left, actually. Rain check?" he suggests. I try not to breathe as they kiss goodbye at the door, and then as the door shuts once more. I look over at James, who is watching me with predatory eyes.

"Well, that was interesting," he says softly.

"Shut up," I say, and his eyes darken further.

"So it's like that again?" he says. "You're so deeply in denial that you can even convince yourself *that* didn't happen?"

"I'm not in denial," I snap. "Look, I know I'm gay, alright? I've known for ages. But I can't do anything with you. It'd be too weird, especially since you've always got guys parading in and out of here. Do you even realize how awkward it would be for the rest of the year?"

James steps forward and threads his fingers through my hair. "It doesn't have to be."

"James, stop it," I say flatly, shoving his hand away. He sighs in frustration, and stalks across the room to his bed. I bury my head under my pillows and beg for morning.