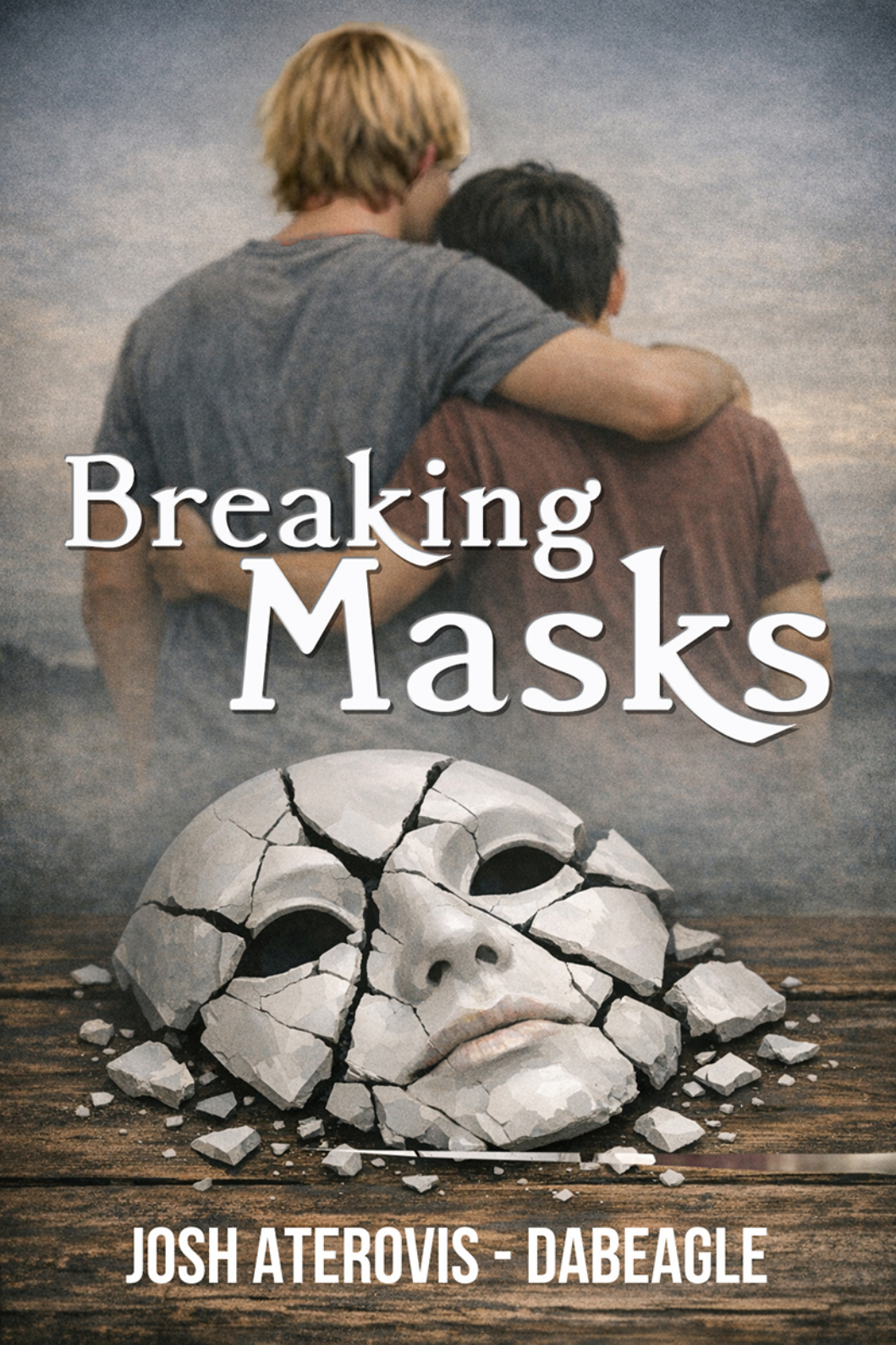


A photograph of two young men from behind, embracing. The man on the left has blonde hair and is wearing a grey t-shirt. The man on the right has dark hair and is wearing a maroon t-shirt. They are standing against a soft, cloudy sky. The title 'Breaking Masks' is overlaid in a large, white, serif font.

Breaking Masks



JOSH ATEROVIS - DABEAGLE

Breaking Masks

Josh Aterovis and Dabeagle

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This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Cover Design: Josh Aterovis

Content Notes

Breaking Masks contains story elements that include addiction/substance use and recovery; references to past substance abuse; underage drinking; grief and loss; family conflict and abandonment; homophobia; bullying; anxiety and emotional distress; sexual content and discussions of sex; nudity; LGBTQ+ themes; recovery meetings.

Chapter 1 - Jake

I looked around the room and tried to force down the panic rising in my throat like bile.

What have I done?

What was I thinking?

Why did I ever think this was a good idea?

Pushing my hands through my hair, I started pacing in circles around the pile of sealed cardboard boxes in the center of my bedroom floor.

What if this was a huge mistake?

Everything I owned was in those few boxes. Okay, maybe not everything, but everything important anyway. Four boxes that contained almost my entire wardrobe, shoes for every conceivable occasion, a couple of framed photos, a comforter and sheets purchased just for my dorm room, a pillow, towels and wash clothes that I'd painstakingly labeled using a permanent marker, and the game system I'd purchased with the money I'd earned from working part-time at an art supply store.

That's it? Four boxes? My whole life fits in four boxes?

We were planning to pick up stuff like laundry detergent, shampoos, soap, and such once we were there, and I still had to pack up my phone charger and stuff in my backpack in the morning, but it seemed impossible that I was heading off to college with just four fucking boxes.

I'm not ready for this.

My life was just finally getting back to some semblance of normality — whatever that meant — and I was about to uproot myself and move halfway across the country.

Okay, so it wasn't really halfway, just 350 miles...but that was still really far away from everyone I knew and trusted — from my aunt, from my best friend, from my therapist, from the safety net I'd spent the last year carefully building.

Moving is a terrible idea.

What was I thinking?

Oh right, I was on drugs at the time.

All I'd been thinking when I picked Van Rensselaer University in Albany, New York was that it was far away from Judy and what had then felt like her stifling, suffocating concern.

Now, the day before moving hundreds of miles away, all I could think was that I'd be lost without her.

I didn't know anybody there. I didn't know the city. I'd be adrift and alone.

I can't do this on my own.

I can't go.

My stress level was going through the roof.

Get a grip, Jake. Calm down.

I tried to slow my breathing, but I was too far gone.

I needed to talk to somebody.

My laptop was already packed up, my aunt was out getting groceries for my going away dinner, and my cell phone was dead and charging.

I need to smoke a bowl.

I stopped in my tracks, which was good since I was probably wearing a groove into the carpet from my pacing.

The thought had come out of nowhere, a sucker punch from the past. I hadn't smoked in over a year. I was supposed to be clean. I *was* clean. The cravings were supposed to be done.

To be fair, this was less of a craving and more of a trauma response, but knowing that didn't make me want the weed any less.

Either way, once the idea was in my head, it refused to just go away. It stretched out, made itself comfortable, put its feet up on my self-control and asked what I planned to do about it.

I could practically feel the first hit already — the burn in my lungs, the earthy taste, the slow unwinding that always came afterward. The way the tension in my shoulders would loosen first, then my chest, then my brain. Thoughts that currently felt enormous and life-ruining would suddenly shrink down to manageable size, dulled around the edges until nothing seemed quite so sharp anymore. For a few blissful hours, everything would soften. The noise in my head would quiet down to a low hum instead of a screaming siren, and I wouldn't have to *feel* quite so much.

For me, that was the seductive part of drugs — not even the high itself, really, but the promise of silence.

I was technically supposed to call someone if I started thinking like that — a friend, my therapist, my sponsor. Not that I'd ever called the sponsor I'd been assigned at the last NA meeting I'd attended. Or even spoken to him beyond exchanging polite hellos, for that matter.

I glanced over at my phone. It was probably charged enough to make a call. The problem was the only person I wanted to call was my old dealer.

I dropped heavily onto the edge of my bed and buried my face in my hands. This was just proof that I wasn't ready to leave. If *moving* stressed me out this badly, what would happen when finals rolled around? Or roommate drama? Or literally anything else? How would I ever survive college?

A little weed would calm me right down, I reasoned.

Just weed.

Not the other stuff. Never the other stuff — not again.

And weed wasn't even addictive. Everyone said so. Hell, it was legal now. Did it even count as "using"?

Okay, not legal for me specifically since I was still underage, but that was a technicality.

Suddenly, a memory wriggled its way to the surface. My head snapped up, and I searched the shelves of my bookcase. There it was: a small wooden box with a carved lid — a simple keepsake box on the outside, Pandora's junk drawer on the inside.

I stood and walked across the room, reaching out with trembling hands to lift the box. It was heavier than it looked.

I quickly flipped it over and slid open the false bottom. I'd long since spent the money I used to stash in the hidden cavity, and the photos had been thrown away, along with almost everything else from that period of my life. I'd purged it all, anything *he'd* purchased for me — every piece of clothing, every electronic device, every token or ticket. They were simply reminders of a time I desperately wanted to forget.

But one thing remained: a small plastic bag with the sad little remnants of an old life.

I picked it up. It wasn't much, but enough.

I tossed it onto my desk, slid the false bottom back into place, and returned the box to its shelf like nothing had happened.

Now what?

The baggie glared at me. I glared back. It had lived in the box for months because I "forgot" to throw it out during my big cleanse. Maybe I'd been saving it for this exact moment, like a time capsule of bad decisions.

I'd thrown away my bowl, my bong, and my lighters, and I didn't have any rolling papers, which meant I'd have to improvise.

I dug through my desk and pulled out a sheet of tracing paper. Before my brain could stage an intervention, I tore off a corner, dumped the

weed in a shaky line, rolled it up, licked the edge, and sealed it. It looked like something crafted in the world's worst prison arts program, but it would smoke.

All I needed now was a lighter.

And living with my aunt meant I lived in the incense capital of the East Coast.

I slid my makeshift joint into my pocket and cracked open my bedroom door. I didn't hear her anywhere, but that didn't mean much. She moved like a barefoot cryptid.

I tiptoed into the kitchen. The catch-all drawer would have a lighter. It always did. I was halfway there when the back door flew open and my aunt bustled in, arms full of grocery bags.

Judy Cassara was one of a kind. She was a straight-shooter with a wicked sense of humor that tended toward sarcasm and a seemingly endless supply of patience, which was good because I'd required a lot of it over the last three years.

She was my mom's sister, and she was the only family I had left after—

No.

Don't open that door. Keep it locked tight.

Especially when I was already spiraling...

There was a slight family resemblance in that we were both blond-haired and blue-eyed and coped with life by embracing biting sarcasm, but the similarities pretty much ended there.

I was just shy of six feet tall while Judy barely came up to my shoulder, though what she lacked in height she more than made up for in sheer force of personality.

She was an optimist, always looking for the silver lining. I tended toward nihilism and existential dread.

She embraced life with a level of enthusiasm that was, frankly, occasionally alarming, treating every day like the universe was a magical scavenger hunt designed specifically for her amusement. I always felt I was waiting for the next disaster, the next storm, the next blow.

I saw a rainy day and thought, great, seasonal depression with atmosphere. Judy saw a "cleansing spiritual reset" and immediately wanted to collect it so she could make "moon water," whatever that was.

She believed in ghosts, herbal remedies, tarot cards, tea reading, and visions of the future. I believed in therapy, antidepressants, and locking my bedroom door.

And somehow, against all logic, we worked.

Or, at least, we'd figured out how to coexist reasonably well.

It hadn't always been so simple, though. I'd moved in with her three years ago when everything in my life had changed overnight. We'd had a bit of a rocky start, but things had improved after I quit using and started going back to therapy following a near-fatal overdose.

Funny how that works.

Still, she'd supported me through all of it. Mostly through snark, supernatural intuition, and leaving pamphlets about healthy coping skills in the bathroom.

She stopped when she saw me and gave me a funny look. "Are you okay?"

I nodded nervously.

Would she know about the joint in my pocket?

This was more than just typical teen paranoia. My aunt was an actual psychic, so she claimed anyway, and I couldn't prove anything to the contrary. She certainly had an eerie way of predicting the future that was unnervingly accurate...if sometimes vague.

The good news for me was she wasn't a mind reader.

At least as far as I knew.

Her eyes narrowed, making me second-guess myself. "Are you up to something?"

"What? No." I aimed for offended. Landed squarely on suspicious. "I was just getting ready to go for a walk. You know, say goodbye to the neighborhood."

Okay, that sounded lame even to me. I tried not to cringe.

Judy arched an eyebrow. "Awesome. Be sure to say bye to the pothole that almost took out my right front tire, will you?"

I laughed just a little too loudly, cut it off just a little too quickly. Was it just me or did she overemphasize the first syllable of *pothole*?

I waited until Judy had her back turned to me as she set the bags on the counter, then threw myself toward the back door. I had to get out of there, and fast.

My hand was on the knob when Judy called out again, "Oh! Jake?"

My stomach tried to exit my body through the back door. "Yeah?"

"Are you all packed?"

Relief bloomed. "Yeah. All that's left is my toiletries."

"Good. Are you excited?"

"Something like that," I mumbled.

Judy turned and smiled at me. "It's normal to be nervous, you know. I was a wreck before I went off to college, but hey, it turned out to be one of the best things that ever happened to me. You'll be fine."

"Yeah, thanks."

"Really, Jake. You're stronger than you think. You'll make new friends, learn new things, maybe even meet a cute boy." She gave me a wink, and I tried to muster up a convincing smile. "And if you don't like it, you can always transfer to somewhere closer."

"I know."

Then she dropped the bomb. "And you can do it all without that joint in your pocket."

My jaw dropped.

There was no point denying it. "How do you *do* that?"

She grinned as she turned to open the catch-all drawer, pulled out a small disposable lighter, and tossed it to me.

I didn't move to catch it, and it bounced off my chest, clattering to the floor.

"If you're going to smoke, you'll need that," she said, turning back to the groceries. "Unless you were just going to rub some sticks together in the backyard."

"But...you just said—"

"I said you didn't need it. I didn't say I was going to stop you. You're not a child anymore."

"I don't understand..."

"You're leaving tomorrow. I won't be there to babysit you. You have to make your own choices. Besides, when have you ever listened to me anyway?"

"I..."

"I'm kidding, Jake." She bent down, picked up the lighter, and put it in my hand. "Not about the marijuana. That's still your call."

She turned back to the groceries and started putting them away while I stood gaping at her.

"Is this some sort of guilt trip reverse psychology Jedi mind trick?"

"Nope." She glanced back over her shoulder as she put away a carton of oat milk. "You're over a year sober. It's your life. It's your call. I'll just ask you this: is a temporary high really worth throwing all that away?"

"It's just weed," I argued weakly. "It's not even addictive."

She gave me a look so sharp it could cut granite. "Jake...you've been to rehab. You've sat in meetings. Hell, you OD'd, for fuck's sake. And

you're going to stand there in my kitchen and tell me you're somehow immune because marijuana isn't addictive?"

"It's not the same. Weed wasn't the problem before."

"It wasn't the *main* problem," she corrected. "You don't slip because of the hardest drug you ever took. You slip because of the easiest one. The one you convince yourself doesn't count."

I swallowed.

"You can convince yourself of anything," she added. "You're very bright. Very creative. Very...charismatic." She paused. "Honestly, you'd make an excellent cult leader."

"Gee, thanks."

She shrugged again. "You know I'm right."

I hated that she was.

"Look," she said gently, "I'm not your warden. I'm not going to burn it. I'm not going to forbid you. You decide where your line is. Not me."

I nodded silently, slipped outside, and let the door shut behind me.

Even after years together, she could still surprise the hell out of me. We were never going to be a normal mother-and-son duo — her parenting style was 'chaotic wisecracking oracle' — but I loved her anyway.

I'd miss her.

Meanwhile, the joint burned a hole in my pocket.

Judy may have laid a world-class guilt trip on me, but I still wanted to smoke the damn thing.

She'd know, of course. Judy always knew. I just didn't care. Not at that moment.

I just needed a place where no one would look at me too closely while I made a questionable life choice. The park seemed like the best bet. Middle of the day, not too many people.

Sure enough, only a few joggers thumped along the river path, earbuds in, minds on other things. Hardly any kids. Good. There would be no innocent bystanders to witness my relapse in progress.

I wandered into a fairly deserted area and sat down on top of a picnic table. I waited for a very large lady walking an equally enormous mutt to huff and puff her way by — reminded briefly of the saying that people looked like their pets.

I waited until they disappeared around a bend, and then it was my turn to puff.

I slid out the joint and lighter. My fingers were shaking just enough to be annoying. The joint went between my lips, the lighter hovered at the tip, and I flicked.

Nothing.

I tried again. Still nothing. Not even a spark — like the universe was judging me.

Or trying to save me from myself.

Deep breath. Third time's the charm.

Flame.

As the fire caught, I cupped my hand around it, protecting it. And that was when Judy's voice cut through my head.

"Is a temporary high really worth throwing all that away?"

I swallowed hard.

I'd worked so damn hard for my sobriety. Meetings. Hours of therapy. The kind of self-control no one believed I had — least of all me. Granted, the last year hadn't been that stressful. Finals were easy enough. Getting into Van Rensselaer was stressful but in a good way.

But moving to New York? That was real pressure. Real life. Real unknowns.

Was I really going to fold that fast?

The twisted end of the joint flared orange as it finally caught, the paper crackling softly, yanking me back to the now. I cupped my hand around the flame, shielding it from the breeze.

And one hundred pounds of uncontrolled enthusiasm launched itself directly into my chest. One second, I was having an existential crisis on a picnic table. The next, I was horizontal.

A massive blur of shaggy brown fur slammed into me hard enough to knock the air out of my lungs. I stifled a yelp, lips clamping down on the joint as my back hit the tabletop with a painful thunk, limbs everywhere, mine and...not mine. Some furrier than others.

The lighter flew out of my hand in a graceful arc and vanished into the grass.

"Oh, you have got to be kidding me—"

A giant tongue immediately dragged across my entire face.

I gagged violently, jerking my head to the side just in time to avoid a second slobbery assault. The dog panted happily, hot breath wafting over me, smelling like he'd been snacking on straight-up fecal delicacies, tail whipping back and forth like a deadly weapon.

"Down! DOWN!" I wheezed, trying to shove him off me.

The dog interpreted this as encouragement.

His front paws planted squarely on my chest while he wriggled with delight, nearly crushing my ribcage beneath what felt like the weight of a compact SUV. I caught a glimpse of his huge paws and briefly wondered if it was secretly a bear.

“Jesus Christ, what are you eating? Small villagers?”

The mutt barked excitedly directly into my face, spraying me with warm dog spit. I recoiled in horror.

Then I made the mistake of glancing down.

The joint was still clenched between my lips.

The dog noticed too.

His eyes locked onto it with sudden laser focus.

“Oh no,” I whispered.

With terrifying speed, he lunged.

There was a soft snap as he neatly plucked the joint from my mouth like a magician performing a card trick.

“Hey!”

I grabbed uselessly at empty air while the dog jerked backward triumphantly, tail wagging so hard his entire rear half vibrated. For one awful second, we stared at each other — me in betrayed disbelief, him with the smug confidence of a creature who had just outsmarted another human.

Then he chomped down.

“No! No no no—!”

Thirty dollars’ worth of primo cannabis disappeared between giant canine teeth.

The dog chewed enthusiastically, swallowed, and immediately tried to lick my face again.

“You big, hairy...monster!” I shouted, shoving at his massive head. “That was *medicinal*!”

Somewhere in the distance, a woman gasped, “Oh my goodness!”

The dog’s owner finally came huffing around the bend in the path. She was red-faced and breathless, her enormous floral muumuu fluttering dramatically behind her as she hurried toward us.

“Tank! Tank! Leave that poor boy alone!”

Poor boy was correct.

Tank, apparently deciding his work here was done, planted himself more firmly on top of me and resumed panting directly into my face with enormous doggy satisfaction.

“I am so sorry!” the woman puffed as she reached us. “He got away from me! He just took off and made a bee-line right for you!”

“Clearly,” I croaked from beneath the beast.

“Oh Lord, are you okay? He didn’t bite you, did he?”

“No, but he robbed me.”

She blinked. “What?”

“Nothing.”

Tank chose that moment to attempt another full-face lick. I twisted away so abruptly my head smacked against the picnic table again.

Stars exploded behind my eyes.

The woman finally got hold of Tank’s collar and hauled backward with a grunt. The dog resisted with all the stubborn determination of a furry bulldozer.

“Tank! Heel!”

Tank absolutely did not heel.

It took both of us and what felt like several acts of God to finally pry him off me. I sat up slowly, hair sticking out in damp spikes, hoodie covered in muddy pawprints and saliva.

The woman looked mortified.

“I’m terribly sorry,” she repeated. “He’s usually so well-behaved. He really must have taken a liking to you.”

I stared at the dog.

The dog stared back.

“Yeah,” I muttered. “I gathered that.”

She finally managed to drag him away down the trail, apologizing the entire time.

Halfway down the path, the dog suddenly stopped, looked back at me, and sneezed. His owner tugged on his leash, and Tank pranced off behind her happily, tongue lolling out of his mouth.

I stared after them in stunned silence. Tank was about to have the most enlightened walk of his life.

If the universe wanted to stop me from relapsing, that was certainly one way to do it.

I flopped back on the table, staring up at the pale stretch of sky above me, listening to my pulse thud in my ears. Clouds drifted lazily overhead, slow and unconcerned, while my brain spiraled in twelve different directions at once.

Nothing in my life felt simple anymore. So much had changed in just a few short years.

I let myself think about it for the first time all day — really think about it. I cracked the door open just enough for the memories to slip through.

First, my entire family was gone, brutally murdered by my own brother. And he'd nearly finished me off. I was only alive because my friend Killian arrived just in time. He'd had to put a few bullets in my brother to stop him, but it was an effective — if violent — solution.

Then Judy had swept me off to California in the hope that a change of scenery could somehow glue my shattered life back together. Instead, I found drugs. Or maybe they found me. Either way, we became very close, very fast. The kind of toxic friendship that feels wonderful right up until it destroys your life.

So Judy dragged us back to Maryland, determined to save me from myself.

Didn't work.

I just found new dealers. New ways to disappear. New ways to stop feeling.

One of those new “friends” turned out to be a whole lot more dangerous than the burnout party kids back on the West Coast. I overdosed. Nearly died. Nearly got arrested for a murder I didn't commit.

And honestly? Without Killian, I probably would have.

As a private investigator, he'd managed to prove I was innocent. As my friend, he'd somehow convinced me that my life was still worth salvaging afterward. He'd sat with me through panic attacks and withdrawal and shame spirals. He'd talked me down when my own brain became unbearable to live inside.

He'd saved my life more than once.

I wasn't sure there was any way to ever repay someone for that.

Suddenly, lying there alone in the park, smelling like drying dog slobber and bad decisions, with the remains of my aborted relapse somewhere in an overgrown mutt's digestive system, the reality of leaving hit me all over again.

I was really going, really leaving them behind.

And God, I was going to miss Killian most of all.

I squeezed my eyes shut, hoping to stave off the tears building up.

Maybe Judy was right. Maybe I was still just one spark away from burning everything down again.

Suddenly, a shadow fell across my face.

"Hey, Judy said I might find you here."

I opened my eyes to find Killian standing over me, concern clouding his expression. I sat up and tried to give him a big smile.

"Hey. I hate how she can do that."

He eased himself onto the picnic table beside me, like he wasn't sure I wouldn't bolt. "I think it was just a lucky guess this time. You okay?"

I nodded. "I was just thinking about you, actually."

"Oh yeah?" His eyes searched my face. "You sure you're okay?"

I frowned. "Did Judy tell you about the joint?"

"Um...maybe?"

"Did she call you?"

He grinned sheepishly. "Don't be mad. She was worried she'd made the wrong call not coming down harder on you."

I rolled my eyes. "So she sent you after me again." I sighed. "I'm not mad. In fact, it's kind of sweet that you both care so much. That's actually one of the reasons I'm so freaked out about leaving."

He leaned in to give me a hug, which I accepted gratefully — until he took a not-so-subtle sniff of my shirt.

I pushed him back. "I didn't smoke, Sherlock. Quit investigating me."

He laughed. "Sorry. Force of habit." Then he became serious. "So why didn't you?"

"Well, I was having second thoughts, but it wasn't because I'm morally upright or bursting with inner strength or something."

"So what happened?"

"A dog ate it."

Killian blinked. "A dog...ate..."

I chuckled at the look on his face. "I swear. Giant mutt. Out of nowhere. Tackled me. Ate the joint."

"You're serious."

"As serious as climate change."

Killian shook his head. "That's...just wild enough to be true. But in my defense, I did find you red-eyed, lying on a picnic table, staring into the void."

I snorted. "Because I have to be high to do that?"

He shrugged. "Hey, somebody must be looking out for you." He glanced around, as if expecting a guardian angel lurking behind a tree.

I slung an arm around his shoulders. "Several someones, actually. I don't know what I'll do without you guys."

"You'll be fine."

"Will I?"

Killian studied my face. "Is that what all this was about?"

I drew my arm back. "What do you mean?"

"You're scared you'll fall off the wagon."

I shrugged. "I mean...I almost just did."

"But only because you were sabotaging yourself. Again."

"And who's to say I won't do it again?"

"Only you can say that."

I looked away.

"Hey, you've made it an entire year. I'm not saying it'll be easy but you can do it. You just have to believe in yourself."

I nodded, still not making eye contact.

"Do you miss it?"

I shrugged. "Sometimes."

"Really?" There was honest surprise in his voice.

I kept my gaze fixed somewhere near the horizon. If I looked at him, I might lose my nerve.

"I don't miss what my life was like then. I was out of control and almost died. But sometimes I miss...not feeling." I gave him a little half smile. "Emotions are hard."

He gave me a bigger smile back. "Of course they are. If emotions were easy, we wouldn't have art, or songs, or poetry—"

"Okay, okay. Beauty comes from pain, I get it. But this is my life we're talking about. I don't want to start using again just to make art."

"That's not what I meant. But yeah — I don't want you to start using again either. What about your therapist?"

"I'll keep seeing her virtually. Every other week."

"You can always bump it back up to every week if you feel like you need it. And you're gonna find a support group up there, right?"

I shrugged. I hadn't clicked with any group yet. Twelve-step wasn't my thing — hard to believe in a higher power when life had spent years punching you in the face. I'd bounced around groups without ever sticking long enough to find a sponsor I clicked with.

My therapist had kept me afloat so far. But being far from everyone I trusted? Maybe I needed more than "afloat."

"You know, this is all easy for you to say," I muttered. "You've never dealt with anything like this. You don't even smoke."

"Uh...I've hardly lived in an ivory tower, Jake. Maybe I don't smoke but—"

"I know. You shot and killed somebody. I was there."

His eyes widened, hurt flickering across his face. I winced, knowing I'd gone too far.

"Sorry. Too soon?"

"Jake..." He sighed. "Look, no, I don't understand addiction from the inside. But I *am* trying to help. So stop deflecting. This isn't about me."

"I know. Sorry." I blew out a breath. "It's just... I won't know anyone there. I'll be alone."

"Oh, come on. Not for long. You're charming, funny, smart, and drop dead gorgeous. People will line up to be your friend."

I shook my head. "Maybe I'll start a cult."

"Huh?"

"Nothing. Just something Judy said earlier. Even if you're right and there is a waiting list to be my friend, I won't know them. You know how hard it is for me to trust people. What if I push them all away?"

"Then don't do that."

I gave him a look.

He held up his hands. "I know, easier said than done. But if you know you do that, at least you can catch yourself. Try something different. You can't fix everything overnight, but you can try."

"And what if I meet people and then they find out about my past and don't want to be my friend?"

His voice softened. "Anyone who can't handle that you survived something hard doesn't deserve to be in your life now that you're building something better. People who matter stay. People who don't—" He flicked his fingers. "—gone. And good riddance. They were shitty to begin with. Pick better people. You don't owe anyone a sanitized version of yourself."

"They still won't be you guys."

"We're not going anywhere, you know. I'll only be a phone call away. Same for Judy. You're not replacing us — you're adding to the list."

"Maybe."

"Definitely. And while you're at it, maybe it's time for you to start dating again."

I snorted. "Right. Let's add another stressful situation to my life right now. Just what I need."

"I'm serious. You have to get back out there eventually. You can't stay a monk for the rest of your life."

"You make it sound so easy. It's not like I'm just going to meet someone and fall head over heels in love at first sight. This isn't some meet-cute romcom."

"Never say never." He nudged me. "Besides, you're looking at this all wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"This is your shot at a clean slate. So much bad stuff happened here. So much baggage. Up there? You get to start fresh."

I blinked.

A fresh start.

The words settled into me slowly, and for the first time since I'd gotten my acceptance letter, something inside me loosened.

A fresh start.

Not an escape. Not running away.

A beginning.

All I'd been able to think about was everything I was leaving behind. Judy. Killian. Familiar streets. Familiar routines. The handful of people who knew exactly how broken I was and loved me anyway.

But maybe I'd been looking at the whole thing backward.

Albany didn't know me.

Van Rensselaer University didn't know me.

To everyone there, I wouldn't be Jake Sheridan: local disaster, recovering addict, trauma magnet, guy who almost died twice before graduation.

I'd just be Jake. Some random freshman with a nice tan and decent hair.

The thought hit me so hard I actually sat up a little straighter.

No one there would look at me with pity. No one would lower their voice when they talked about my family. No one would know the headlines. No one would know about Fenton Black or the overdose or rehab or the fact that sometimes I still woke up sweating from dreams I couldn't fully remember.

I could choose what parts of myself to share.

I could choose which parts to hide.

The idea felt...light.

Terrifying, still. But lighter.

I looked over at Killian. "You know what's weird?"

"What?"

"I think this is the first time I've realized I'm allowed to become a different person."

His expression shifted immediately. "Jake..."

"No, not fake different," I said quickly. "I don't mean pretending none of that stuff happened. I just..." I struggled for the words. "Maybe I can be something new. Something different. Maybe...someone who isn't always living under the shadow of all the horrible things that have happened to them."

Killian nodded slowly.

"Maybe I can leave all that here and just be...Jake." I laughed softly, almost embarrassed by how hopeful I sounded.

"There you go," he said quietly.

I rubbed a hand over my face, staring back up at the drifting clouds. "God, that sounds disgustingly optimistic."

"Ew," Killian agreed solemnly. "You should probably stop before Judy senses positive emotional growth and starts burning sage around you."

I laughed, but for the first time all day, when I imagined getting in the car tomorrow and driving away from Maryland, I didn't feel panic. I felt something close to hope.

"A fresh start. Maybe you're right..."

Killian grinned. "Of course I'm right. When am I ever wrong?"

I shot him a look out of the corner of my eye, and he cracked up.

"Don't start making a list. You'll be okay. Trust me."

I squinted. "You *know* that, or is this just a psychic hunch?"

He wagged his fingers dramatically. "It came to me in a vision from the Great Beyond."

I rolled my eyes. "You and Judy..."

"Should I consult my crystal ball?"

"How about a tarot reading?"

"Tea leaves?"

"You should totally do my chart."

"Or freshly spilled intestines—"

"Ew!"

We collapsed back onto the table, laughing. God, I was going to miss this.

"Oh hey," Killian said suddenly. "I was supposed to invite you and Judy over for dinner, sort of a last-minute going away party. Except, you know, not a party."

"Tonight?"

"Yeah."

"I think Judy was planning something, but I'm sure she would be thrilled at the prospect of someone else making dinner."

Cooking was not Judy's forte. She wasn't a total disaster, but it wasn't something she enjoyed either.

Then a thought hit me. Hard. Adam loved big dinner parties. Like...*loved*.

"Who all will be there?" I asked, narrowing my eyes. "I don't want a big thing."

"Just me, Adam, Steve, Kane, Tad. You and Judy. Maybe Novak."

I groaned. "So an intimate dinner with your dads, your brother, the foster kid from hell, and your boss. Sure. Very low-key."

He elbowed me. "Oh stop. Tad's gotten better. And inviting Novak makes sense — he's practically your stepdad."

"Ew. Never say that again."

Shane Novak was a nice guy, but we weren't exactly buddy-buddy. He gave ex-cop energy. Stiff. Polite. Awkward around me. But he treated Judy well, which was all that mattered.

"So?" Killian prompted.

I forced a smile. "It sounds nice. Thanks."

It sounded like mild torture, but they cared. And that mattered.

"Great." Killian looped his arm through mine. "Let's go ask Judy."

Chapter 2 - Kody

The tour boat slowly churned through the water toward the thundering cascade of Niagara Falls. The flow came from such a massive height, it generated a huge amount of spray — not to mention noise — as it crashed into the river below.

My little brother Charlie leaned precariously over the railing next to me, so far, his feet actually dangled above the deck. “I wonder how close we’ll get.”

I grinned at his excitement. “Close enough to get soaked.” The flimsy ponchos they were handing out as we boarded didn’t look like they’d be much protection either.

Charlie wiggled a little farther onto the rail, and I suddenly had a mental image of him slipping over the side. Dad would have a coronary, Charlie would drown, and there was the tiniest chance I’d miss them both. I grabbed the back of his shirt.

“Don’t lean so far over. You might fall.”

“Okay, *Dad*.” Charlie rolled his eyes, but he did drop back down to the deck.

“Speaking of, where are the old folks?” I couldn’t believe they weren’t out here with us telling Charlie to get his butt back in the boat.

“Inside.” Charlie gestured toward the enclosed center of the boat. “Dad is still bitching about the cost of the tickets. You know what Brandon said?” He grinned widely. I shook my head, and Charlie launched into his best imitation of Brandon. “This is what you do on vacation. Suck it up, buttercup!”

I chuckled and shook my head.

We technically weren’t on vacation, but we all knew it was as close as we were going to get that year. Driving practically across the country to bring me to college had been Dad’s idea. We were one big happy, gay family. Me, my dad, my adopted brother, Charlie, and Dad’s fiancé, Brandon.

Charlie had a bit of a troubled past. He was a gay kid who’d been placed in the foster system after running away from addict parents. That was partly why Dad had chosen him. He said gay kids in foster care situations were underserved and often fell through the cracks. Charlie had come a long way in the last few years, though.

All the adoption stuff happened before Dad met Brandon. I was a little nervous at first, since not too many guys would jump at the chance to

have an instant family complete with two teenage boys, but Brandon turned out to be pretty cool.

Every year since they'd started dating, we'd taken a family vacation, and every year Dad bitched about how expensive they were. Some traditions are meant to be kept.

In the distance, a carbon copy of our little water craft was headed back towards the dock with another group of tourists. Some of the sightseers were standing on the deck, hands cupped to their mouths, calling something out to us, but their message was lost to the steadily increasing roar of the falls.

“Wonder what they're saying.”

“What?” Charlie yelled.

I raised my voice. “I wonder what they're saying!”

“What?”

I leaned in closer to Charlie, but as I opened my mouth to yell, he turned and screamed, “I wonder what they're saying!”

I closed my mouth and glared at him while he gave me his patented smirk.

Only a few minutes later, our boat started a long, looping turn, allowing us to view the falls from what they deemed a safe distance. Sure enough, water vapor drenched those of us on the observation deck, but the falls still seemed a very long way off.

Charlie was pretty disappointed, and I had to admit, I was too. We'd expected to get closer to the actual base of the falls, but the boat turned back so soon, I was sure you'd get closer being on the walkway above the rushing water.

As our boat began to make its way back towards port, Charlie and I commiserated. When we passed another tour boat headed out to the falls with a fresh batch of tourists, Charlie and I joined a group of people on the railing, calling out to them, “Suckers!”

They couldn't hear us, but I had a good idea what the other boat's passengers had been yelling.

After the disappointing tour, neither Charlie nor I were in the mood to pile back into the car, but we were on a tight schedule. As we crammed damply into the backseat, which was also packed to the roof with my stuff, Charlie asked, “How much longer until Albany?”

Dad thought for a moment. “Oh, I guess about five hours.”

Charlie and I groaned in unison.

“That long?” I whined.

“Hey, shove it,” Charlie grumbled. “At least once we get there that’s as far as you’re going. Some of us have to get back in this tuna can and drive all the way back home.”

Home. Where I wasn’t going.

We were on our way to Van Rensselaer University to drop me off for my freshman year. I was attending Dad’s alma mater, a fact he was extremely proud of. He’d talked about the school for ages, having graduated sometime in the Stone Age, and he thought it would be great for me to follow in his footsteps and get my education at the same place he had.

At first, I hadn’t been so sure about going to school so far away, but the last thing in the world I wanted to do was let Dad down.

“It’ll be good for you,” he said. “You’ll be independent,” he said. “It’ll be such a great experience, all new things for you.” In the end, he’d won me over. I was moving away from home — and him — for the first time in five years, on my own in a new city with all sorts of opportunities. It sounded great. In theory.

I’d been through enough change in my life that the idea of college didn’t really freak me out, but I knew I would miss these guys. I didn’t want to think about that, though, so instead I leaned against my rolled-up comforter and went to sleep. Classic avoidance works every time.

We pulled into a motel that evening just short of Albany. Dad had remembered a barbecue place he wanted to go for dinner that was actually still there.

Monday morning, we had breakfast and then rolled into Albany, and, as if he’d been waiting for the chance, Dad started his lamentations about how much Albany had changed since he went to college there.

“When did that theater close down?” he grouched. “I used to skip class and go there for the cheap matinees.”

“Way to set an example,” Brandon said, and I laughed.

“Well, it’s closed now, so he can’t do it, can he?” Dad pointed out. “What? A McDonald’s? Really? That used to be the best little pancake house.”

“Time marches on, Dad,” Charlie spoke up. “Entire civilizations have risen and fallen since you were in school.”

Brandon and I cracked up, but Dad was not amused. He shot Charlie a dirty look in the rear-view mirror, but before he could come up with a retort, Brandon pointed out some prominent buildings in the distance. “Is that VRU?”

Dad broke into a grin. “That’s it. There she is, Kody — Van Rensselaer University. The finest higher education money can buy.”

Charlie snorted. "Yale, Oxford, Harvard, and about a hundred other schools might disagree."

"It's a good school," I said defensively.

"It's a great school," Dad said. "You're going to love it, Goose."

"Maybe you'll even get laid. Get it? Goose? Laid?"

"Charlie..." Dad said warningly.

Charlie leaned back, but the self-satisfied smirk on his face was not comforting. I suspected he had something up his sleeve.

Before I could worry too much about it, we pulled onto the campus, and I got my first good look at my new home. The imposing stone buildings exuded an air of dignity, and I found myself getting excited.

I was at college. I was now a college student. I felt so grown up.

A young, goofy-looking guy in a campus security uniform waved us over as we drove through the gate.

He bent down to the driver's side window with a toothy smile.

"Welcome to Van Rensselaer University. Are you an arriving freshman?"

Dad laughed his big, booming laugh, which meant he was about to tell a joke he thought was hilarious, but probably wasn't. "I'm not, but my son in the backseat is!"

The security officer chuckled as if this were the first time he'd heard that one today, which I hoped for his sake it was, then handed us a campus map and gave us some quick directions.

As we pulled away, Charlie snorted. "What a job that guy has."

"What's wrong with it?" Brandon asked. "It's an honest living."

Charlie grinned. "That's the point. There's nothing wrong with it. I'd love to get paid to stare at hot college guys all day."

Brandon suppressed a smile as Dad shot another warning glance at my horny younger brother.

"Hey, I'm a hot college guy now," I pointed out.

Charlie scrunched his nose up. "Ew. No, you're my brother. Gross."

After a few minutes of wandering, we located my dorm: Hudson Hall.

"Huh. This is new," Dad said, staring up at the obviously modern structure. The designers had used stone in an attempt to make it fit into the campus, but the huge plate-glass windows and exposed steel stood out amongst the much older buildings.

"It's an attractive addition," Brandon said.

Dad shrugged. "It's okay. I like the old stuff better."

"Of course you do," Charlie mumbled under his breath.

“It's probably much nicer to live in,” Brandon continued. “It's much larger than the old dorms, and modern means better amenities and more space.”

“Yeah, but since when do freshmen get the shiny new building?” Dad pondered, scratching his chin.

Brandon ignored him and patted me on the shoulder. “Maybe you won't have to share tight quarters with your roommate.”

Speaking of roommates, I wasn't excited about having a roommate. I was used to having my own space, but Dad insisted it was all part of the experience.

Under normal circumstances I would have gotten to know my roommate by chatting on Zoom or Face Time ahead of move-in, but due to some paperwork mix-up, the college hadn't assigned me one. I'd only found out what dorm to report to a couple of days before we left. I was starting off with almost no information and a whole bunch of worrying.

Charlie glanced over at me, and I knew exactly what he was thinking before he even opened his mouth.

“Maybe he'll be hot,” he said with a lascivious grin.

I rolled my eyes. I was still hoping I wouldn't get a roommate at all, and if I did, I wasn't sure I wanted a hot one — especially not a hot, straight one. That would just be too much distraction. I was there to learn, not hook up.

Although, if I did meet someone, I guess that wouldn't be the worst thing in the world.

Jesus, I sounded like my dad.

Stepping into the lobby of the dorm was almost like entering a modern office building: all thick glass panels and shiny polished steel. There were two tables set up with four stations divided by last names and people sitting behind each ready to direct you to your new room. We lined up behind the 'K-R' sign.

Charlie grabbed my arm. “Oh wow, look at him,” he whispered.

I glanced in the direction Charlie was very obviously staring and easily spotted the current object of his libido standing in front of us in line. My little brother had good taste, I'd give him that much. The guy was about five foot ten with tanned skin and light brown hair that was streaked with highlights from the summer sun. He was wearing running shorts and a tight tee shirt and looked as if he'd just completed a marathon.

“He's so hot.” Charlie barely bothered to keep his voice down. “I just want to lick that sweat beading on his skin....”

“Shut up. You'll embarrass me,” I muttered.

Charlie was not to be deterred, however, as he continued to practically drool over the object of his loins. Thankfully, the guy was too engaged in conversation with the hipster chick seated behind the table to pay us any attention.

Finally, the hot guy walked off, and we stepped up to the table.

"Name?" the girl asked.

She had short, severe bangs, and wore a pair of aqua, cat-eye glasses right out of the 1950s. Her bright-red lipstick appeared to have been put on while driving her car into a tree, and the rest of her makeup wasn't so much applied as it appeared she'd plopped her face in a makeup palette and just rolled from side to side until everything was covered. Her eyebrows were penciled-in crookedly, giving her an arched, permanently surprised expression.

I tried not to stare. Or laugh. I was going to hell.

"Kody Kingsley," I managed.

She flipped through some files and pulled one out. "Oh, your roommate was just here." She looked around, but not spotting him, shrugged and gave up. "Whatever, you'll see him in a few minutes. Do you have identification?"

After I proved I was me, she handed over a key card and a manila envelope stuffed with paperwork.

"The dorm is brand new. You're the first year to be living in it, so take care of it. The list of dorm rules and all the information you'll need to get settled in is in the envelope there. As a freshman, you wouldn't usually be in this building, but we had a...housing shortage. So congrats. You got a free upgrade. Oh, and I'm Payton, the head RA here at Hudson Hall. Welcome to VRU."

She smiled, but the effect was rather unsettling. She reminded me of a sinister clown, and I suddenly understood why people suffered from coulrophobia.

"Wow, lucky you," my dad said, his tone appreciative but also something else I couldn't figure out. "But I wonder what caused a housing shortage?"

"I just looked it up," Brandon said, looking at his phone. "I found an article that says they had to unexpectedly close one of the older dorm buildings. Some kind of catastrophic plumbing failure."

"Too much Taco Bell?" Charlie chimed in.

"Does that mean I'll be rooming with someone older?" I asked.

“Yeah,” Charlie said as soon as the elevator doors closed. “And I bet it's that hot guy who was right in front of us! Did you hear what your cosmetically-challenged RA said?”

I was very glad he waited until we were on the elevator.

“We don't know who she meant,” I replied nervously. “She just said he was there before us. That doesn't mean it has to be the guy who was *right* in front of us.”

“I know it's him! And he's so hot!”

“Yes, Charlie. He was hot. Now shut up about it.”

The guy *was* extremely good looking, and that just made me anxious. We stopped on the third floor and found my door, 3M.

I hesitated. Charlie fidgeted impatiently. “Well?”

Dad laid a hand on his shoulder. “It's a big moment.” That's exactly what I was thinking.

Charlie giggled. “Yeah, that hot guy might be in there changing. Hurry up and open it!”

I sighed and opened the door and got my first look at my new home. The walls were a bright white; the smell of fresh paint lingered in the air as a testament to how recently they'd finished. We stepped into a compact common area with a small, built-in table, two molded-plastic dining chairs, and a counter running along the far wall under the window. There was space for a small seating area, but that was about it.

Doors on either side of the room opened into very small bedrooms, and a small-but-functional shared bathroom separated them.

I had to admit, I was expecting worse.

“Wow, these are a lot better than when I was here.” Dad said.

“They used to be all one room with a shared bathroom down the hall, but it looks like you'll have a little privacy.”

Just then my roommate appeared from the right-hand door. “The old dorms are still one room. These new ones are way better,” he said. “Welcome. I'm Nick Pederson, your charming roommate.”

Charlie was right. My roommate *was* the hot guy from the lobby. And he'd taken his shirt off.

Fuck.

His chest was chiseled, with defined pecs and perky pink nipples, and he had a hint of a six-pack. He clearly worked out, and he probably played sports.

Just what I needed.

Charlie almost broke his neck as he jumped forward and stuck his hand out. “Hi, I'm Charlie.”

Nick shook Charlie's hand and grinned. "You look a little young for college. You one of those geniuses that can do my calculus homework for me?"

"He's in high school," Dad said sourly.

Charlie gave Nick a sly smile. "I am a genius, though. Ask me what I can do."

Nick cocked an eyebrow but wisely chose to ignore my brother as he turned his attention to me. "You must be my roomie, then?"

I nodded and shook his hand with a tight smile. "I'm Kody. These are my dads." I waved toward Dad and Brandon. "And you already met my brother, Charlie."

Dad and Brandon exchanged pleasantries with Nick, then Dad went to check out my new bedroom.

I stood awkwardly, not sure what to say to the gorgeous, shirtless jock, who was chatting easily with Brandon about Albany, since it was his second year at VRU.

"Can you believe it? They redid the whole works and kept the old mattress?" Dad bitched as he emerged from the bedroom. "You need a good night's sleep. We'll go get your own mattress."

"Oh yeah? Mind if I look at yours to see if it's less stained than mine?" Nick laughed.

Charlie laughed too and sidled closer to Nick, who continued to ignore him.

The next hour was a caravan of boxes and bags as we brought my stuff up. Then, while Dad and Brandon caught their breath, I busied myself hanging clothes and filling the small dresser with my junk.

Charlie sat in the common area chatting up Nick, who seemed to be amused with my little brother, which I supposed was better than annoyed. Not that I would have blamed him if he'd been annoyed. Charlie was talking his head off and flirting outrageously.

When Nick went to shower, Charlie babbled unrelentingly about him, positively mooning over him until he reappeared in little more than a towel and a smile.

Not that I didn't enjoy the view, but Charlie was acting like a dog in heat. I would have only been marginally surprised if he began backing his butt into Nick's crotch.

Luckily, Dad provided the perfect distraction. "Let's go get that mattress. And maybe a mini fridge."

"A microwave would be more useful, don't you think?" I asked him.

“Nick already has a microwave. If you have a small fridge then you can use his microwave and he can use your fridge.” Dad explained. “Assuming Nick is okay with that.”

Nick nodded. “That would be awesome.”

Dad looked around the room again. “And maybe we can find a used couch. You guys could use some comfy seating.”

That afternoon, we hit a big box store for the fridge and mattress, and Brandon found a Habitat for Humanity used store for a dorm-sized couch. After setting everything up in the room, Dad insisted on taking us out to dinner. He even invited Nick, much to Charlie's delight, but Nick crushed his dreams by politely declining.

Dad and Brandon each gave me a present for college: Dad a new laptop and Brandon a new cell phone. The laptop came with a few odds and ends, like a thumb-drive, a cordless mouse, and a flexible keyboard that I could take anywhere.

“That's not fair!” Charlie groaned. “You get a new laptop and a cell phone, *and* you don't have to eat Brandon's cooking anymore!”

“What's wrong with my cooking?” Brandon retorted.

I tuned them out and examined the specs on the laptop while Charlie teased Brandon. It was nothing new. The boy teased everyone — it was his love language.

While I was distracted, Charlie snatched my new phone and began to program it without missing a beat in his back and forth with Brandon.

After dinner, Charlie and I were standing by the car waiting for Dad and Brandon, one paying the bill and the other hitting the bathroom. They were going to drop me off at school before heading to their hotel.

“You know, this is weird.” Charlie said.

“What is?”

“It feels...wrong to leave you here, for you to be so far away.”

I let that hang in the air for a minute. The whole situation was surreal. My family was still here with me, almost as if we were still on vacation, but the whole purpose of the trip was to leave me there. Granted, I was there to study. It wasn't like I was being abandoned.

Odder still was Charlie admitting to a genuine feeling not associated with roasting someone.

I smiled and bumped my shoulder against his. “I know what you mean. I'll be alone out here. Who's going to start conversations with cute guys for me if you aren't here?”

He gave me a sober look. “Kody, the guys already want to talk to you. You just haven't realized it yet.”

“That was almost—”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. Just let it go. But that guy in your room? Hang on to him. In fact, you'd better be banging him by the end of the week.”

I burst out laughing, and Charlie joined me. I didn't know how he did it, just talking to people so fearlessly, but no one walked away not liking Charlie.

I was dropped off in front of the dorm and told to be ready by nine in the morning for one last family breakfast. I made my solitary way to my room and let myself in with some trepidation.

What if Nick was...with someone? Did we have to work out a code? A sock on the door knob?

I entered the room and found him sprawled on the new (to us) couch watching a video on his laptop.

He paused and turned to greet me. “Hey, Kody. How was your night?”

“Um, good, thanks. Just dinner with the fam, you know?”

I stood at the door, unsure of myself.

“So listen...” Nick leaned, stretching his lean body. “I'm going to go out on a limb and say you're okay with the whole gay thing?”

I came into the room and warily sat down in one of the chairs, curious to see where he was going with that line of questioning. “Yeah. You could say that.”

I knew the subject would have to be dealt with at some point no matter who my roommate was, so it seemed as good a time as any.

Nick grinned. “I figured with the gay dads, horny brother, and all.”

I flinched. “Yeah, sorry about Charlie...”

“No, no, it's cool. That's not why I brought it up. It's just good that you're not a homophobic tool. In fact, it's actually really good, 'cause my roomie last year was a total asswipe about it.”

“Wait. What? Does that mean you're...?”

“Yep.” Nick leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “Guilty as charged. Ground rules, though. I'm not after you, okay?”

“Uh...” I replied.

“Not that you're not, you know, cute or whatever, but I find it's best to let the straight guys know I'm not gonna try to jump you in the shower or stare at you in your underwear.”

I laughed. “I'm not straight though.”

“Thank God, 'cause I might look at you in your underwear. You're still safe in the shower, though. And what's up with your brother? I mean, he's totally adorable — do you guys have good genes or what? — but he's a little young for me.” He laughed, and I joined him. “Seriously, though, no fooling around between us. Roommates are off limits. It's too messy, and I'm not ready for a divorce.”

I smiled so big my cheeks hurt. I liked Nick already, though I didn't bother to correct him about Charlie and I sharing genes. That story was too long to get into on our first day.

“Deal,” I said. “I should tell you, though, Charlie will be heartbroken.”

“That we're not messing around?”

“That too, but more that he's too young for you.”

“Hmm, somehow I don't think Charlie will be waiting around for me.”

We chatted for a bit more, then I went into my bedroom, which was really more of a stretched cubicle — not that I was complaining. I appreciated the privacy.

I peeled off my shirt and jeans and tossed them in the hamper by the door, pulled on sleeping shorts, and grabbed my bathroom kit to go brush my teeth and wash my face in our shared bathroom.

Once I returned to the common area, I opened the laptop box and started setting it up. At some point, I noticed Nick watching me.

“What?” I asked.

“Oh, nothing.” He grinned. “I just want to be clear that there's room for fantasies in our arrangement...and maybe fringe benefits.”

He turned and went to his room, leaving me baffled and a bit flustered.

The next morning, Dad, Brandon, and Charlie picked me up, and we all went out for a huge breakfast. Everyone made a concerted effort to keep things light, but I could see the tension in Dad's face.

Afterward, back at school, we said our goodbyes. It was mostly tearless, until Dad started getting a little misty. I don't think I'd ever seen Dad tear up before, and neither had Brandon, who quickly dragged a complaining Charlie off to the car to give us some privacy.

Dad swiped at his eyes and smiled sheepishly. “I never expected to send a son off to school. I never even expected to have a son, let alone two. Or thought I'd be standing here again, except this time it's because I'm leaving someone behind who...”

He swallowed a few times before dropping a hand on my shoulder. “Kody. I’m so proud of you, and not just as my son, but also as a person in your own right. I love you. Study hard, don’t do anything stupid, and call home often.”

“Jeez, Dad. You sound like you’ll never see me again. I’ll be back home in a few months,” I pointed out. “Not like I can miss your wedding.”

Instead of replying, he crushed me to him in a bear hug, then headed toward the car in a weird rushing walk — almost like he had the runs.

As he started the car, the rear passenger door burst open, and Charlie tumbled out with a small gym bag in his hand.

He grinned. “I have a going-away gift too.”

He hugged me tightly and left me standing with the bag. I heard my dad asking what the hell Charlie’d been up to before he closed the door.

Then they were gone.

I didn’t open Charlie’s parting gift until I was back in my room, and, boy, was I glad I waited. The gym bag, it turned out, was loaded with condoms and lube. I wondered how on earth he’d gotten so much, but realized he’d probably purloined most of it from the free handouts provided by the school nurse. He must have been stockpiling for months.

Well, not the lube. He’d thoughtfully bought the warming massage kind.

I chuckled and zipped it up. It was a shame it would all go to waste. I was never going to meet a guy, and even if I did, I was too shy to talk to him.

Sometimes, I wished I could be more like Charlie.

I tossed the bag in the corner and promptly forgot all about it.

“Hey, how about we get some lunch at the Commons, and I’ll show you around campus?” Nick asked a few hours later.

I looked up from my screen. “Sounds good. I have my meal app downloaded, I think.”

I frowned and hunted on my new phone for a minute, forgetting what the icon looked like. I don’t even know what most of the apps on my phone did.

Wait. What was that bright yellow icon on my home screen? Grindr?

Charlie. He must have installed it when he was setting up my phone.

“If you didn’t, the dorm guards downstairs will have a code for you to activate it.”

“Dorm guards?” I asked, distractedly.

“The RAs. Last year they punished me with three lunkheaded straight boys in a row for roommates, and not one of them was even slightly attractive. I can forgive a lot if you’re visually pleasing, but those guys? I’d rather hump a goat.”

I burst out laughing, and Nick just smirked.

“So you said you were here last year. Does that mean you’re a sophomore?” I asked as we walked to the elevator and down the stairs.

“Yep. You’re rooming with a soph. Lucky you. I can show you the ropes.”

“How come you’re stuck sharing a room with a freshman?”

“It’s not just me. Algonquin Hall had some kind of massive sewer back up. Poop everywhere. They have to tear out walls and stuff, and it won’t be finished this year, so they’re stuffing kids anywhere they can, even mixing upper and lower classmen. It’s a real shitty situation.”

I groaned at his terrible joke while thinking that Charlie’s guess hadn’t been that far from the mark after all.

Downstairs I met Lindsay, an RA who was much easier to deal with than Payton the Clown. She gave me a QR code to download the app and a temporary PIN to activate my account.

I thanked her and headed out into the bright afternoon with Nick, absently setting the thing up so I could eat.

“Hey.” I stopped as a new thought occurred to me. “If you’re a sophomore, why are you here during freshman move-in week?”

“Sports. They call it freshman move-in week to make you guys feel special, but all the fall teams are here, too. Soccer — my sport — field hockey, cross country. The football meatheads are running around too. And the RAs, obviously.”

So I was right — he was a jock. But at least he was friendly. And gay. And not too hard on the eyes. It could have been worse.

He suddenly threw an arm around my shoulders and started me moving again. “Damn! I wish I had an ex on campus who could see me now.”

“Why?”

“So I could see the bitch get all jealous thinking I’ve moved on with a lil cutie like you!”

“Hey, I can’t pretend to date you. I won’t get dates then.” I didn’t miss the cutie remark, but I did choose to ignore it. He was just being nice.

“Oh, please. Don't you know rule number one is you instantly become hotter if a guy thinks he can't have you? Hell, I'm going to use you to get some real action this year.”

“Glad to help, I guess.”

Nick escorted me to the cafeteria, and we scanned a code with our app, which was monitored by a lady with a pink hair net and more muscles than both of us put together.

Nick caught me doing a double take on the lunch lady, and he whispered to me, “She was a professional wrestler in Germany before becoming a lunch lady.”

I stared at him in awe. “Really?”

“Nah, but I love starting juicy rumors.”

I was seized by a giggling fit, and Nick just beamed at me. “I'm really going to like you if you keep laughing at my jokes.”

After a filling but unmemorable lunch, Nick showed me to the library, which had a multimedia lounge — complete with free movies a few nights a week — and the student union. He warned me that none of the food or beverages served in the student union should be trusted. He claimed the lunch lady brought them with her from the gulag she worked in.

“Gulags were Russian,” I said, laughing at him. “Didn't you say she was German?”

“Well, aren't you a stickler for detail. How about coffee? Are you a coffee drinker?”

“Definitely. My dad's own a coffee shop back home. Charlie and I work there.”

“Charlie hit on many customers? Wait. Dumb question — of course he does.”

“He's pretty shameless,” I agreed.

“Well, there's no decent coffee anywhere on campus. You'd be better off mainlining caffeine directly into your veins. Gotta go off campus for anything that tastes good.”

“Where do you go?”

“Follow me.”

Nick led me off campus, heading down a tree-shaded street lined with store fronts.

“Okay, so...” he started, dropping into full-on tour guide mode. “To your left, we'll soon come upon The Morning Rush, otherwise known as java Nirvana. Luckily, it's not far. About a block farther down, there's a cool used record, tapes, and CD store called Disc or Dat. They have a decent

selection, if you're into that, and they also have some old movies on DVD and collectibles.”

“Can you even play those anymore?”

“I have a DVD player that I bought on Amazon for that very reason. They're pretty cheap. Plus I don't trust corporations so I like having physical media. Anyway, here we are.”

He stopped in front of a shop with a neon sign hanging over the door that read “The Morning Rush” along with a coffee cup on a saucer. He pushed the door open with a flourish, and we stepped into a well-appointed little coffee shop with dark wood paneling, a vintage black-and-white tiled floor, old-fashioned booths along one wall, and small round tables filling the rest of the space. Fifties-style pendant lights cast a welcoming, cozy glow.

The aroma filling the place was pure, authentic, bean-lover coffee shop — not burnt corporate slop, but real fresh-ground coffee.

I stopped and inhaled for a moment, the scent giving me a tiny touch of homesickness.

“Wow, I guess you do like your coffee,” Nick said.

A petite blond lady wiping the counter glanced up and smiled.

“Hey, Nick. Welcome back. Who's your friend?”

Before he could respond, a full-figured woman with chestnut brown curls came bustling out of the back room holding a sign I couldn't quite read in one hand.

“Marla!” she bellowed. “Where's the tape? Oh!” The dark-haired woman stopped in her tracks as she noticed us. “I didn't hear you come in. What can we get for you guys?”

“Hey, Max!” Nick replied, stepping up to the counter. “Medium espresso with the steamed milk and mint leaf please.” He pulled out his wallet, glancing back at me. “And whatever he's having. First one's on me.”

“For here or to go?” she asked.

Nick glanced at me, and I shrugged.

“For here,” he replied.

“I got it,” Marla said as she started pushing buttons and pulling levers on a giant silver machine that made our espresso machine back home look tiny in comparison.

Max turned to me. “And what about you, cutie pie?”

“Oh, um, can I please have a medium hazelnut coffee light with honey?” I ordered while trying not to blush. “Do you guys have honey?”

“Whoa. Of course we have honey.” She turned towards the blond. “Right, Marla? We have honey?”

Marla shook her head. "I think we ran out."

"Maybe I used it all on Mike," Max guffawed then suddenly seemed to remember she had customers. "No honey. I'll put it on the shopping list. Just for you, *honey*." She winked.

"Um, thanks," I said with a self-conscious smile.

"In the meantime, here's Nick's cup of love," Marla said, sliding a cup and saucer across the counter. "Will vanilla syrup do this time?" she asked me.

I nodded.

"Who told you to try honey in your coffee anyway?" Max asked.

"A customer in my dad's coffee shop always ordered it that way. I was usually the one making it for him, so I decided to make one for myself one day." I shrugged. "I liked it."

"Hang on. You have experience in a coffee shop?"

"Four years."

"As what, exactly?"

"More or less a barista."

What was with the third degree? I just wanted coffee.

"Freshman?"

"Yes," I replied slowly.

"No part time job yet?"

"Huh?"

She slapped the sign in her hand on the counter, and I glanced down. 'Now Hiring!'

"You looking for a job?" she asked.

"I mean, I hadn't thought about it really..." I said slowly, my mind racing.

"Fill out an app, and your coffee is free," she said.

"Free coffee?" Nick said brightly. "Hell, I'll fill out the application for you. Where are they?"

"Hey!" I squawked.

I hadn't decided if I even wanted a job. Although, I could make coffee in my sleep, so it's not like it would be that hard. And the extra spending money would be nice.

She reached under the counter and slid an application across the polished marble surface. She looked around, then said, "Hang on. Let me get you a pen."

"Nick, Nick, Nick," Marla clucked. "Signing your new boyfriend up so you can get free coffee? For shame!"

She laughed while waving a finger at him.

“*What?*” I nearly shrieked.

“He’s not my boyfriend,” Nick said with a grin. “New roomie. He is cute though, isn’t he?”

“Adorable!”

“I’m right here, people.” My face was *so* warm.

Max returned and slapped a pen down on top of the application.

“Make sure he fills that out so I can forget this sign,” she said to Nick, then snatched said sign off the counter. “I hate doing interviews.”

“Can I just take it with me?” I asked, thinking that I still wanted to think it over before applying.

“As long as you bring it back. The sooner the better.”

With that, she vanished through the open doorway she’d come from originally.

Marla handed me my order with a smile and a twinkle in her eye.

“Welcome to the Morning Rush.”

I woke up far too early the next morning, and then I was too nervous about orientation to fall back asleep, even though it didn’t start until ten. I tossed and turned for a while, then scrolled on my phone for a little longer before finally giving in to my insistent bladder.

I opened my bedroom door to find Nick standing shirtless by the counter, zapping something that smelled like bad B.O. in the microwave.

“Hey,” he greeted me with a yawn as he scratched his junk.

“What *is* that?” I asked, trying not to let my eyes linger on his crotch. “It stinks.”

“Um. I forget. Something leftover. I think it’s edible.” He paused and sniffed. “Maybe. It should be fine, right? Unless you want to go grab coffee and breakfast,” he added hopefully.

“I have orientation,” I called as I headed into the bathroom.

“That’s not until later. Besides, I can save you the trouble.”

I stopped and popped back out of the bathroom. “What do you mean? Don’t they take attendance or something?”

“You’d think, but no.”

“But the email said—”

“Trust me, you don’t need to go.” The microwave dinged, and he opened the door. “Oh, it was burning. No wonder it smelled bad.”

I covered my nose with my hand. “I don’t think that was the only issue.”

I frowned at his plate of what looked like charred vomit. “Go shower, and then we’ll grab coffee. And afterward, I’ll show you the school

bookstore. Didn't you say you needed some books for English or something?"

"But orientation..."

"Jesus, what are you? A boy scout? It's like eight a.m. Be fast and you'll still have plenty of time to get to orientation if you really want to go."

I ducked back in, closing the door behind me, peed, then took a quick shower. By the time I pulled on some clothes, Nick was already dressed and waiting impatiently by the door.

"So why did you say I didn't need to go to orientation?" I asked as we walked.

"Because it's a waste of time. They tell you to respect the neighborhood, then they just basically read aloud all the school information and history that's on the website. I mean, literally, they print it out and read it. You wouldn't miss anything, and they'd never know you were missing."

I processed that for a moment, then said, "I think I'd still rather just go and get it over with."

He rolled his eyes. "Suit yourself, boy scout."

"I'm not a boy scout. I just don't want to miss anything."

Nick just smirked like he didn't believe me. Before I could insist, we arrived at The Morning Rush. Nick opened the door, and I entered, greedily inhaling the fresh ground scent that hung in the air. The shop was moderately busy so we joined the queue.

Max appeared while we waited and eyed me suspiciously.

"Why don't I see a completed application?" she demanded.

"Oh! I forgot about that."

She pursed her lips and reached under the counter.

"Luckily, I'm prepared," she said as she slapped a fresh application on the surface. "Have a seat and fill it out. You can't leave until it's finished."

"After we get coffee," Nick interjected.

"As long as I get a completed app before you leave," she called as she retreated to the back room.

"Hey guys," Marla greeted us. "Now, Nick, if you think you get free coffee just because you came in with Kody again, you're wrong, mister. You're gonna have to start showing some skin for that to work!"

"Haven't you heard it's wrong to objectify men, Marla?" he pouted.

"No, it's not," Max yelled from the back room. "Men have been objectifying women for ages. Turnabout is fair play. Now start stripping!"

“Oh, now I feel bad. Really, I do,” Marla pooched out her lower lip, and she and Nick burst into laughter while I wondered if this was some sort of established routine with them.

Marla took our orders — to-go this time — and started whipping them up quite efficiently while I worked on filling out the paperwork. Our drinks were ready by the time I finished the first page, which gave me something to sip on while I finished up.

I turned in the application, and we said goodbye before heading out, cups in hand.

Just before we reached the door, Max stuck her head out of the doorway to holler, “Wait.”

She held out a thick stack of paper.

“What’s that?” I asked suspiciously.

“More paperwork. W-9, tax forms, direct deposit. The usual.”

“Huh?”

“You’re hired. You start tomorrow.”

“You didn’t even look at the application,” I argued.

“I don’t need to. I know good people when I see ‘em. That was just a formality.” She shook the sheaf of paper. “Bring these in with you in the morning. Six sharp.”

“Tomorrow?” I asked, my head spinning as I accepted the papers.

Max pointed at me. “Tomorrow.”

Nick placed a hand on my lower back and ushered me out the door.

“Uh, that was fast,” I said as the door closed behind us.

“That’s Max. Once she decides she likes you, it’s all over.”

“And she likes me?”

“So it would seem.”

“They seem to like you too. Did you work there last year or something?”

“Nah, I just went there pretty much every day. Max owns the place, and Marla’s been there practically forever. They like to get to know their regulars. They’re quite the dynamic duo, a little wild sometimes, maybe, but good people.”

“And it’s just the two of them? Are they a couple?”

He snorted. “No, they’re both tragically hetero, as far as I know. And they usually have a couple of other employees, but I didn’t get to know them as well. One was this weird guy named Mike. He wasn’t very talkative. And there was a girl for a while. I forget her name. She was only there for a couple of months. Tisha? Trish? Doesn’t matter. And then there was another guy. He had an old-fashioned name. Harry? Louis?”

“Liam?” I guessed, but Nick just looked at me blankly. “You know...One Direction?”

“Are you into boy bands?” he asked, sounding slightly worried. “Because if so, we might have to make some rules about music in our shared space...”

“No, it was a joke...” I sputtered. “Never mind.”

He grinned. “Gotcha.”

Back on campus, we joined the people on the busy quad. Various canopies were set up for clubs, teams and various college services. I figured most of the services had their own offices somewhere, but none of the new people like me would know where any of the admin buildings were.

I saw a sign with a rainbow on it, the calling card for someplace I’d be welcome.

“They have a GSA here?”

“Yeah. They call it the Rainbow Roost. Everything here is related to roosters.” Nick rolled his eyes. “They do some community work and do some social gatherings. It’s kind of a mixed bag; some people are there to hook up and others are just looking for community. You get the people who are just feeling their way out of the closet, trying to figure out if they’re safe at school to be themselves now, and you have the people that have been out and are looking for more. You get out of it what you put into it.”

“Did you go last year?”

“I did. I liked it. There were some people I was friendly with. I had a few coffee dates, and I like the social side of meeting people in a setting where your sexuality isn’t the exception. With that out of the way, you can focus more on other things where you might find common ground.”

As he talked, we’d walked up to the booth, and we each scanned a QR code that brought us to a schedule of events for the semester, their regular meetings, and an open invite to a mixer they were having in a few weeks.

I saved the page so I could think about going. I’d probably be more comfortable if Nick went too, but maybe I could check it out on my own.

My phone buzzed while it was still in my hand. It was Charlie calling.

“I’m gonna take this real quick, just in case something is wrong,” I told Nick. Then, I answered with, “It’s been, like, a day. Miss me that much already?”

“I miss not being stuck in Bumfuck, Indiana,” he replied.

“Indiana? What do you mean stuck?”

“Car broke down. Left the hotel this morning and drove a couple of hours before the engine started making this sound like a hellmouth had opened under the hood and all the demons of hell were escaping. Dad pulled over to take a look, but then it wouldn't restart.”

“Oh my God. Is everybody okay?”

He ignored my question. “We had to get towed to some podunk mechanic in the middle of nowhere. All the guys here look like extras from *The Hills Have Eyes*.”

“Charlie...”

“Although, the younger one could probably still get it. He has a nice body. I can overlook the crossed eyes. I think. I swear I'm either about to get murdered or get lucky; I don't know which.”

“Charlie! Is everyone okay?”

“Oh yeah, we're fine. But repairs are going to be a lot. Brandon says Dad's wallet is having a myocardial infarction, whatever that is.”

“It's a heart attack, Charlie.”

“Why didn't he just say that then?”

“Because...never mind. Where is Dad?”

“He's inside talking to the head mechanic. I'm pretty sure he's wearing somebody else's skin, though.”

“Dad?”

“No, the mechanic. Oh, he's waving for me to come inside. Fuck. He's going to sell me to this guy in exchange for the car parts, isn't he?”

“You're not worth that much,” I said.

“Hey! I'm, like, at least worth a brand-new Maserati.”

“Maybe a used Honda.”

“Damn. Not even a new Honda? Anyway, I'd better go before he really does have a stroke. His face is very red. That can't be good. Bye, Kode.”

“Bye, Charlie. Tell everybody I love them, and get home safe.” I tried to rush that last part in but I was pretty sure he'd already hung up before I was finished.

“Everything okay?” Nick asked.

“Yeah, just Charlie being dramatic as usual. I hope.”

We walked to the campus bookstore, which turned out to be the best idea ever, because we saw the most beautiful guy in the world there. Absolutely no exaggeration. He had to be the hottest man I'd ever seen. Tousled, shaggy blond hair. Bright blue eyes. Long, toned legs, broad shoulders, narrow waist, and a physique that suggested the sort of athleticism I sorely lacked. He was the shade of tan that you only get from

being outdoors doing outdoorsy things, with sun-kissed, rosy red cheeks. He looked like he'd just walked off a photo shoot for a surfing website.

And he was coming right at me.

A finger swiped under my lower lip, startling me. I frowned at Nick.

"Sorry, you were drooling." He glanced at the blond as he passed us. "But I think it's entirely justified in this case. Jesus wept, would you look at that ass?"

"Okay, Charlie," I muttered. I was looking hard at that ass, though.

Then the guy paused and turned back, almost as if he'd heard us. As he turned, the Golden Boy wore a slight frown on his face, his brow furrowed with frustration. He was clearly looking for something, and I had a crazy thought that I should try and help him. Not that I knew where anything was in this place.

"Think that's the look he gets when he finishes? You know how your face scrunches up?"

I shoved Nick, who laughed at me.

The Golden Boy must have reached his limit with the crowded store, however, because he spun and stalked out of the bookstore without making a purchase.

I stared after him like a starving man watching someone walk off with the last sandwich.

"You have good taste, I'll give you that," Nick said, breaking me out of my trance. "Give me ten minutes with him and I'll redefine the term bedspread."

"Jesus, Nick."

"Admit it, if he asked you out, you couldn't say yes fast enough."

"I don't have to worry about it — a guy who looks like that would never ask me out."

"You make it sound like you're chopped or something. You're a good-looking guy, yourself."

I ignored him again. "Come on, I have to get those books."

"Did you pre-order them?"

"Pre... No, why?"

"Oh, well, I'm guessing that blond wet dream didn't either and that's why he left empty handed...after making that adorable little 'O' face."

"You know what? You and Charlie deserve each other."

After verifying Nick's assumption that the books were unavailable but due any day now, we headed back out. By that point, it was just about time for orientation, so we parted ways, Nick headed back to our room and

me on a mission to locate the lecture hall where orientation was supposed to take place.

It didn't take me long to realize I had no clue where the lecture hall was, and I was never going to find it just wandering around like a lost puppy. Luckily, I spotted the main administration building ahead. I mounted the steps up to the main door, but just as I reached for the handle, the door flew open. I stepped back as a fellow student rushed out, head down and without a spare glance in my direction.

It was the Golden Boy from the bookstore.

Twice in one day? Maybe it was a sign...

He disappeared around the corner, and I realized that I was standing outside staring after him, holding the door open like the world's dumbest doorman. I tried to stroll in as if nothing had happened, but my heart was pounding, and my palms were sweating just a bit.

I proceeded unsteadily to the table set up for assisting with directions for new students and inquired about the location of the freshman orientation.

After crossing campus to the lecture hall, which turned out to be an amphitheater-style auditorium, I looked around in vain for a seat. I had no idea you'd need to show up early to get a seat to an orientation. I gave up and leaned up against a break in the humanity lining the wall while I studied the room, which looked hopelessly dated. Shiny, mustard-colored drapes hung over the tall windows, open to allow the summer light to drench the room and fall like a spotlight on the hot guy in the next to last row.

Holy shit!

It was the Golden Boy again. He was a freshman too? I supposed it would be too much to ask that he be a Journalism major as well.

Maybe he'd need a private tutor. I could just see us lying next to each other on our stomachs across a bed, the lights dim, an ignored book open between us as we got lost in each other's eyes. His fingers would brush my hand...

I pulled the brakes on that fantasy and shook my head. I needed a hobby — any hobby, as long as it didn't involve obsessing over unavailable hotties.

I realized a balding man in a charcoal suit and maroon tie had started speaking at some point, though I'd been so lost in my daydream that I'd missed it entirely. He was droning on about random crap concerning the school's relationship with the community.

Oh my God, just shoot me.

Nick was right, this was painfully boring...but I could never tell *him* that.

Every time I tried to focus on the speaker, my gaze returned to the blond boy, sunlight hitting his straight hair at the crown of his head, forming a silly little halo that shimmered every time he shifted in his chair — from boredom, no doubt. The speaker could have put a group of insomniacs to sleep.

The Golden Boy shifted in his chair again and tilted his head to scratch just under his chin. The motion revealed the tanned skin on his shoulders and neck as he dug just under the collar for whatever was irritating him — besides the speaker, of course.

“So, if I could have your attention here real quick,” the speaker broke into my thoughts, “we are going to identify you all by major by a show of hands. Accounting?”

I paid attention as he moved through the majors, raising my hand at Journalism and watching in amusement as people made a sudden berth around those that raised their hands in response to Mortuary Science.

As General Studies were announced, the Golden Boy raised his arm — a toned, tanned arm. An arm I could easily picture draped casually across my shoulder. Or around my waist. Or maybe pinning me to the—

Okay, this was definitely unhealthy, as Dad would say. If I let my imagination keep running, we'd be married with three kids, a mortgage, a second car, and divorced before we even left the lecture hall.

The bald guy wrapped up, and we were finally dismissed. I pushed off the wall, having absorbed only that my guy had perfect skin and that he was in General Studies. I sincerely hoped Baldy hadn't said anything important.

I was quickly pulled into the rush of people trying to escape and swept outside, which was just as well, since left to my own devices, I probably would have just stood there openly staring at the guy while people poured around me like water breaking on the pylons of a bridge.

Dad would laugh if he could see me. I did that sort of thing way too much.

Well, not this time, Mister Golden Boy! I'm not falling for your charms!

Famous last words...

Chapter 3 - Jake

"Where do we go first?" Judy looked around the intimidatingly large campus.

I shrugged. "Um...I'm not sure. The dorms?"

"Didn't they send you some instructions?"

Feeling like the world's dumbest freshman, I pulled up the email I'd received a few weeks earlier and scanned it quickly.

"Yeah. It says I'm supposed to go to my dorm building and check in with the RA to get my room assignment."

"And classes start when?"

"Next Monday."

"What are you supposed to do for an entire week until then?"

"Get settled in? Meet people? Go to orientation? Learn your way around campus? Get rid of your parents?"

"You'll miss me when I'm gone. When is orientation?"

"They have a few scheduled. I'll probably go tomorrow just to get it out of the way."

She nodded approvingly. "What dorm are you in again?"

I checked my phone again even though I already knew the answer. "Mohawk."

All the older dorms were named after local Indigenous tribes.

"Which is where?"

I shrugged again. "You know as much as I do."

"Didn't you go on a tour when we came up to visit the campus?"

"Yes, but so did you. I don't remember much about it, though. It was like two years ago, and I was high. What's your excuse?"

Judy snorted. "I'm old. That's my excuse. Come on, there's a map."

We consulted the map, found the 'You Are Here' marker, located Mohawk Hall, and then Judy began navigating across the campus following signs. I just followed her, letting my mind wander.

I had to admit it was an impressive campus. Most of the buildings were at least partially built from stone, something we didn't see much where I came from. Neat brick pathways connected all the buildings, and everything was landscaped beautifully.

As lovely as the campus was, my mind kept drifting to my roommate. I'd never shared a room with anyone before, and I wasn't looking forward to starting. Especially with the guy I'd been assigned.

The email the university had sent me also included the name and contact info for my roommate: Foster Williamson. I'd FaceTimed him, and we'd talked for a total of five minutes, long enough for me to realize we were hopelessly mismatched.

He was a jock. The only sport I enjoyed was surfing.

He spent four of the five minutes we talked telling me about his girlfriend and her apparently very generous breasts, and how he was probably dumping her before leaving for college so he could "play the field." I was gay and single.

He was rich. Judy was going out on a limb to send me to college.

He liked to party. Well...we were bound to have something in common sooner or later. The difference, of course, was that I quit all that when I got sober, which meant college parties were probably not the best option for me.

I wasn't planning on outing myself to him right away. It was hard to judge how homophobic he may or may not be from our brief conversation, so I figured it was wiser to get to know him a bit first. I thought it was pretty safe to say he was straight as an arrow judging by the way he went on and on about his girlfriend and how much she liked sex.

I didn't tell Judy any of that. When she'd asked how our chat went, I'd just given her a noncommittal "okay."

Back on campus, Judy stopped suddenly, and I almost ran into her.

"Well, here you are," she announced. "Home sweet home."

I looked up at the huge stone building that looked as if it had been there since the college was founded over a hundred years ago...and probably had. It resembled Dracula's castle more than a home.

"Cozy."

Judy ignored my sarcasm. "I guess we should wait to get your stuff until we see where your room is. It's quite a schlep from the car."

I glanced around and saw some people had driven right up to the dorm on small brick roads. I pointed them out to Judy. She approved, then set off toward the dorm with a purposeful stride, with me trudging along behind her.

The small lobby area just inside the door was furnished with a slightly beat-up desk on the right and an institutional style chair and couch in a small conversational area off to the left. A TV was mounted in the corner, but it was turned off at the moment.

Behind the desk sat a rail-thin girl with shockingly red hair and a face-full of freckles. She was talking to a much shorter, slightly plump blonde girl about having her mattress replaced — apparently the blonde

thought hers looked a little unhealthy — so we stood by patiently until they were finished.

When the blonde girl was satisfied that cleaner bedding was on its way, the redhead turned her attention to us.

"Hi, I'm Erin, the head RA for Mohawk. Are you a freshman?"

I thought that was a silly question considering only freshmen were moving in that day. Instead of saying that, however, I just nodded my head.

"What's your name?"

"Jake...er, Jacob Sheridan."

"Hi Jake," she said brightly, flashing me a glimpse of her pearly whites. "You have some ID on you?"

I produced my driver's license, and she scanned down a pad, tapped the screen, then rummaged through a stack of large manila envelopes, selecting one from the pile bearing my name printed in bold font.

"You're on the fourth floor." She handed me the envelope. "Your roommate has already moved in. Pre-season practice and training."

I knew Foster was a jock, but I couldn't remember for the life of me what sport he played. Clearly, the answer was a fall sport. That should have probably narrowed it down, but I had zero interest in all things sportsball related, so I had no clue.

I was snapped out of my thoughts as the RA stood up to reveal that, in addition to being thin, she was also tall — very tall. I was only an inch away from six feet, and she towered over me.

"The elevators are over that way," she said with a barely concealed smile.

Judy and I followed her onto the elevator. "Your key and the dorm house rules are in the envelope, and, for the record, no, I don't play basketball, and yes, my hair is naturally this color." She broke into a grin.

I couldn't help laughing. "I wasn't going to ask."

"Yeah, but I could read it in your eyes," she said teasingly. "I wish I had a dollar for every time I've been asked one or both of those questions. I wouldn't need student loans, that's for sure. So where are you from?"

"Maryland."

Her eyebrows shot up. Even they were red. "You're a long way from home."

"Yeah, I know."

Don't remind me.

She smiled sympathetically. "I think you'll like it here. Any questions?"

I shook my head. "Not right now, but I'm sure I'll have some later."

"Then you know where to find me. I'm here all week. Try the veal."

She waved cheerily, and Judy and I got on the elevator and pushed the button for the fourth floor.

"The veal?" I asked as soon as the doors closed.

Judy laughed. "It's a reference to the Borscht Belt circuit."

"The who what where?"

"The old stand-up comedy circuit at places like the Catskills. When comedians used to perform for several nights in a row in restaurants at resorts, they'd end their sets with, 'I'm here all week. Try the veal.' It was a way to remind people to tell their friends about the hilarious comedy they just saw and push the more expensive menu items."

"I don't get it."

"It's just a joke."

"I don't even eat veal. It's cruel."

"That's not— You know, what? Forget it."

The doors opened, and we exited into a long hallway. We found my room number on a door adorned with two paper stars bearing the names Jacob and Foster.

Judy tapped the star with my name, "You should cross that out and write Jake under it unless you want everybody calling you Jacob."

I shrugged. "No big deal either way."

Fresh start, right? Maybe Jacob would be less of a fuckup than Jake. I dumped the key into my palm, unlocked the door, and pushed it open, but didn't go in.

"What are you waiting for?" Judy pushed past me and sailed into the room.

I followed her in, then froze in my tracks, staring around with growing horror. The room looked less like a bedroom and more like a low-security prison cell. Cold white cinder-block walls, a single narrow window sunk so deep into the wall it might as well have been an arrow slit, two twin beds with clunky metal frames, a pair of mismatched dressers, and two desks that had definitely seen better decades.

Welcome to higher education, I thought grimly.

One bed — the one on the right — was "made," if by "made" you meant there were rumpled sheets vaguely covering the mattress and a blanket dangling half off the foot. A high-end laptop gleamed on one of the desks, while a grubby sweatshirt had been tossed over the other like it had died there. Apparently, my new roommate believed in manifest destiny and both desks were his.

The top of the right-hand dresser was a shrine to filth, buried under a landslide of dirty laundry. I squinted, horrified. Was that...was that a jockstrap? Fantastic. Nothing says home sweet home like a stranger's dingy crotch gear on display.

As if to taunt me further, a dorm-sized fridge was shoved under the desk nearest the unmade bed, humming faintly. Guess who wouldn't be sharing that, either.

I kicked the leg of the unmade bed and frowned.

"Perfect. Just what I always wanted — fifty square feet of cinder-block chic, accessorized with other people's dirty underwear."

"What were you expecting?" Judy said dryly. "The Ritz?"

"Let's just bring my stuff in."

We rode the elevator back down in silence.

"Are the accommodations to your liking, sir?" Erin called with a cheeky grin as we stepped out into the lobby.

"I think I'd like a refund," I said, and she laughed, a loud braying sound not unlike a donkey.

Sure, she could laugh. She probably had a cell all to herself, being an RA.

It took several trips to load all the stuff I'd brought into the room. Besides my clothes, which took several boxes on their own, I also had a small TV, my laptop, and my game console.

Judy insisted on helping me make the bed before she left, but once that was done, the inevitable teary goodbye couldn't be avoided any longer. Judy had decided not to get a hotel room for the night, so she was getting right back on the road. It would make for a long day, but she said there was no point drawing things out and spending the extra money.

To her credit, she didn't make too big of a production out of things. There was a big, lingering hug and a few tears on her part, but it could have been worse.

It wasn't until after I'd walked her to the car and stood watching as she drove away, that a sinking feeling hit me in my stomach. I rushed back to my room, where I indulged in a few tears of my own as I put my clothes away.

I knew it was ridiculous, but I couldn't help feeling a little abandoned. I had plenty of experience feeling alone, but some things you just never get used to.

Thankfully, I'd stopped sniveling by the time my door flew open with a bang, scaring the bejeezus out of me. I spun around to find an

enormous Neanderthal filling the doorway, blinking at me in mild confusion.

He was a mountain of a man — easily six foot seven or eight, with at least three hundred pounds of bulk packed onto his frame. His face was the kind only an ogre mother could love: square jaw, heavy brow, dull brown eyes, and thick lips, ever so slightly smashed in, as if he'd run into a brick wall...and the wall had won.

A curtain of greasy hair cascaded down the back of his neck in what could charitably be described as a mullet. He wore a football jersey and athletic shorts that strained against thighs the size of tree trunks. I had no doubt he could bench press me one-handed without breaking a sweat.

“You’re not Foster,” he grunted.

I shook my head wordlessly, confirming his keen observation. I was not, in fact, Foster.

The Neanderthal gave the room a once-over, as if my elusive roommate might be crouching behind the desk or hiding under the bed. Satisfied we were truly Foster-free, he gave me a polite nod, then backed out and shut the door behind him.

“Fee-fi-fo-fum,” I muttered as I clicked the lock into place, making a mental note to keep it that way from now on. I wasn’t sure if random giants made a habit of bursting into our room, but if so, I didn’t intend to make it easier for them.

About half an hour later, I heard a key turn in the lock. The door swung open, and there was my missing roommate — followed closely by the Neanderthal from before. Side by side, they looked like two branches of the same evolutionary tree.

I’d seen Foster on my phone screen, but in person, he was somehow even less appealing. His head was round like a beach ball, yet his face took up a surprisingly small amount of real estate on it. Dark hair was buzzed close to the scalp, and small, pale-blue, piggy eyes sat a touch too close together above a pug nose and thin, unsmiling lips.

At least he was fit. Broad-shouldered and well-built, he had a defined chest outlined by a tight t-shirt and muscular legs that extended from cut-off gray sweatpants, a light dusting of dark hair tracing their contours. All of it screamed gym time — but no amount of lifting could make that face less...unfortunate.

He looked me up and down like I was some kind of biology project.

“Are you Jake?”

“Yeah. Foster?” I forced my voice steady, though I felt my stomach doing somersaults.

“That’s me,” he confirmed. Then, hooking a thumb over his shoulder, he added, “That’s Slug.”

The Neanderthal grinned at me, and a chill ran straight down my spine.

Nope, I decided. From now on, he was the Neanderthal, and I would never, ever speak the name “Slug” aloud.

“I hope you don’t mind that I took this side of the room,” Foster said. “Come on in, Slug.”

Foster stepped into the room, the Neanderthal trailing behind him like some massive, trained Sasquatch.

“Ah, no. This side is fine,” I said quickly.

Honestly, I didn’t really see any difference — both sides of the room were equally dismal — but it seemed impolite to say so.

Foster dropped onto his bed with the casual confidence of someone who owned the place. The Neanderthal stayed standing, looming over us like a redwood tree, silently measuring.

Foster’s eyes flicked to my belongings. “Oh, cool — you play?” he asked, pointing to my game console.

“Yeah,” I said, resisting the urge to add, “*Why else would I have it hooked up to my TV?*”

Be nice, I reminded myself. No reason to make an enemy on day one. We’d be living in this tiny space together for the foreseeable future.

“What games do you play?” he asked.

I rattled off a few of my favorites, almost all story-driven RPGs, the kinds of games that made me disappear for hours.

Foster frowned. “Oh. I only like shooters and sports games.”

That tracked.

“Cool,” I said, feeling decisively uncool. The words hung awkwardly in the room, but I didn’t know what else to say. After a beat, I added, “Well...I think I’m going to walk around campus, check things out.”

The initial meet-and-greet had gone better than I’d feared, and there was no point pressing my luck.

There was no argument from Foster and Company, so I waved and slipped out, exhaling a long, quiet sigh in the hallway.

“That could have gone worse,” I muttered under my breath.

I considered taking the elevator, but thought better of it. Other students were probably moving in and needed it more than I did. I took the stairs instead, bounding two at a time, letting the tension in my legs and

chest release. By the time I jumped the last few steps and landed with a satisfying thud at the bottom, I felt a little lighter — and a little more ready to face whatever this first day had in store.

I thought to ask Erin the RA where I could find a good coffee shop, but she was busy welcoming an androgynous Asian student, and I didn't want to interrupt. I just gave her a little wave as I passed on my way out the door.

I wandered around campus for a while, trying to remember where things were from my whirlwind tour a couple of years back. Needless to say, it was all a little hazy. I managed to find the Commons, the campus dining hall — more by accident than design — and once inside, just followed the smell of food to the actual cafeteria.

I asked the guy at the door if there was a café or something on campus and he gave me directions to the campus bookstore. It was in the student union, which was naturally on the far side of campus.

After getting only slightly lost following his directions, I found the bookstore and café, which had been given the sickly-sweet name Cool Beanz. Note the "z", as if spelling it like that would lend it some sort of street cred.

I noticed a small corporate logo discreetly tucked into the corner of the window and almost walked away, but my caffeine withdrawal pulled me in. I'd given up a lot of addictions but a guy needs at least one vice.

"Give me the strongest thing you've got," I said, feeling like a gunslinger entering a saloon in a cheesy old Western.

The pimply-faced person of indistinguishable gender, multicolored hair, and many piercings behind the counter flashed me a grin and turned to the espresso machine. I waited impatiently, shifting from one foot to the other, while they filled my order.

I paid for my drink and walked to a table inhaling the scent. It smelled a little burned, but it would do. I sat down and just cradled the elixir of the gods between my palms, content for the moment just to breathe in the aroma.

"A fellow java aficionado, I see," a voice said from the next table.

I glanced up to find a very pretty dark-haired girl smiling at me over the rim of her coffee cup. She had one of those perfectly heart-shaped faces you'd expect to see in a commercial for skin cream, all framed by glossy waves of hair. Her hazel eyes were sharp and assessing, like she was already filing me into a mental category, and her smile suggested she might actually approve of where I landed. She had the kind of curvaceous figure

straight boys write terrible poetry about. I could acknowledge the aesthetic, even if it wasn't doing anything for me personally.

I smiled back. "More like a caffeine junkie."

She laughed. "You got me there too. I was about to warn you about the brew here, but if all you're interested in is the caffeine buzz you should be fine."

"Warn me?"

"They're not known for their high-quality beans here."

I took a cautious sip and couldn't keep my face from contorting in distaste. The bitter flavor sat on my tongue and mocked me.

"Wow. You weren't kidding."

"What do you expect from corporate coffee? They burn the shit of the beans and have the nerve to call it a dark roast."

I eyed her cup. "Why do you come here if you know they're so bad?"

She lifted her cup as if to toast me. "Chai. They can pull that one off pretty well."

"Where do you have to go to get a decent cup of coffee around here?"

"The Morning Rush is the only place nearby that's not Starbucks, Dunkin', or some other corporate slop. It's over on Central Avenue."

"I, uh, don't know where that is. I'm new here."

"Maybe I can show you sometime," she said with a little smile, tucking a stray tendril of hair behind her ear and leaning towards me.

"Where are you from?"

I knew she was flirting, but she seemed harmless, and talking to her was better than brooding alone, so I decided to play along.

"I'm from Maryland, and I'd love it if you could show me around sometime. The sooner the better. I don't know how long I can survive on this swill."

"Maryland, huh? A southern boy, then. That explains the accent."

"I don't have an accent!"

"Sure you do. My name's Rebecca, by the way, Becca for short."

"Jake. Jacob for long."

She crinkled her nose at me. "Cute."

"What? Me or my name?" I was flirting outrageously, but it was fun.

"Both."

"Well, thankee, ma'am," I said, putting on an exaggerated drawl. "So are you a freshman?"

"Sure am. I wouldn't be here otherwise, would I?"

"You could be an RA or an athlete."

"Good point."

"You seem to know the area pretty well for someone who just got here."

"I didn't just get here. I've lived in Albany all my life."

"Oh. But you're living on campus?"

"My parents wanted me to have the full college experience." She rolled her eyes and put air quotes around 'full college experience.' "You're a long way from home."

"It seemed like a good idea at the time."

"But not now?"

"It's looking better all the time."

She smiled, and glanced at her smart watch. "Oh hey, I have to go. There's some big get-to-know-each-other event at my dorm that I sort of can't miss." She stood and held out her hand. "Phone."

"What?"

"Hand me your phone."

"Why?"

"So we can exchange numbers. Damn. All looks, no brains, huh?" She winked.

"Oh. Uh, right."

I didn't really want her to have my cell number, but I was feeling cornered. I couldn't say no without being insulting. It was my own fault, of course. Me and my stupid flirty nature.

I pulled out my phone, unlocked it, and handed it over. She tapped away at the screen for what felt like a very long time before handing it back.

"I added my number then texted myself so I'd have yours too. I'll be in touch. We'll get coffee. Good coffee."

She swept out of the café in a cloud of sweet perfume.

I'd just got a girl's phone number. And I think I agreed to a date. On my first day on campus. Talk about a fresh start.

I glanced down at the cooling cup of brown sludge in my hand and my stomach immediately began launching a revolt.

"Don't worry," I told it. "I won't force that on you."

I stood up and dumped the cup into the trash can on my way out.

I returned to my room to find that Foster and the Neanderthal had wandered off again. I can't say I was too disappointed.

Just out of curiosity, I opened the mini fridge and found it packed with alcohol. Beer, vodka, rum...they practically had a fully stocked bar in

there. Granted, it was all cheap, bottom-shelf shit, but still. I briefly wondered how on earth they had managed to buy it all since I knew Foster was underage, but then I remembered Slug and realized that no one would ever have the nerve to card him.

For the scantest second, the alcohol seemed to call to me. It had been almost a year since I'd had any alcohol at all. I quickly put a cap on my temptation and shut the door.

Walk away.

Then I wondered how long he'd be able to hide that from the RAs, then decided it wasn't my problem...unless he made it my problem.

I went to my desk and pulled out my phone. I opened my music app and put on some Noah Kahan. I found his melancholic songs and sweet voice soothing, and I needed to be soothed. I could still see the bottles of booze wedged into the fridge. I resonated deeply with a lot of the recurring themes of his lyrics — addiction, recovery, mental health, fractured relationships, complex feelings about home. I often felt like he was singing some of my deepest, darkest thoughts.

Don't think about the booze!

I managed to distract myself with the music long enough to drift off to sleep, still fully clothed and on top of my blankets.

Then next thing I knew, I was waking up the next morning, feeling utterly grungy and badly in need of a shower. I must have been more worn out from the travel and stress than I'd thought. I hadn't even woken up when Foster came back to the room.

The proof that he had indeed returned was evidenced by the lightly snoring lump under the blankets on his bed.

I glanced over at the clock and sat up with a jolt.

"Shit!"

It was already nine-thirty. I was supposed to be at orientation in half an hour.

I leaped out of bed and blindly grabbed some clothes from my drawers before starting for the shower. I paused in the doorway and debated if I should wake Foster, but decided he was a big boy and could worry about making it to orientation on his own.

Maybe he'd already had orientation with his sportsball team. What did he play again? I still didn't actually care enough to remember.

I felt a little more human when I got out of the shower. I pulled on my jeans and finger-combed my wet hair. That would have to do for now. I ran a hand over my cheeks. I needed a shave, but I didn't have time. I'd have to go for the scruffy look. I yanked my T-shirt over my head and took off.

I was halfway across campus before it occurred to me that I had absolutely no idea where I was going. Classic. I skidded to a halt and glanced around, trying to look less lost than I felt.

Luckily, I was near the administration building. If anyone knew where I was supposed to be, it would be the people who made a career out of telling clueless students where to go.

I jogged up the stone steps and yanked open the heavy wooden doors, slipping into a lobby that was cool, echoey, and about as welcoming as a mausoleum. Nothing said congratulations on your new adventure like the vibe of a crypt.

At the table for new students, I asked for directions. The guy rattled off instructions to the lecture hall, managing to sound both efficient and bored at the same time, and I set off again.

By some miracle, I made it to the auditorium just in time. Unfortunately, so had everyone else. The room looked like it was holding the entire freshman class, crammed into a space clearly meant for far fewer. Were they seriously planning to run this orientation multiple times? How many of us were there? Or maybe, like me, everyone had decided to rip the bandage off and get this thing over with.

I took in my surroundings while waiting for the “show” to begin. If the admin building had been austere, this room was full-on tacky. I was pretty sure it hadn’t been redecorated since disco died. The floor was covered in avocado-green tile, and the windows were dressed in gold drapes so shiny they could’ve doubled as Vegas show costumes.

I snagged one of the few open seats and immediately regretted it. Whoever designed the chairs clearly hated human spines. I shifted, squirmed, and finally accepted that comfort wasn’t an option. I was just about to give up my seat to one of the poor schmucks standing in the back — let *them* suffer—when a balding man in a dark gray suit and maroon tie shuffled to the front.

He looked like every bureaucrat I’d ever imagined: pasty complexion, slight paunch, and the kind of nervous energy that suggested public speaking wasn’t his jam. He cleared his throat, adjusted his tie like it might strangle him, and began droning on about campus life and how proud we should feel as the newest members of the VRU “family.”

Family. Sure. Nothing like a few hundred strangers and a guy who looked allergic to sunshine to make me feel right at home.

I stifled a yawn while scratching my chin, wishing I’d had time to shave that morning. Stubble is so itchy.

I tried to refocus on Bald Guy. He was talking about maintaining a good working relationship with the surrounding community. Translation: don't party too loudly and bother the neighbors.

I'd pretty much completely spaced out when several people near me raised their hands. I almost raised mine too, but realized just in time that we were indicating our majors. I hadn't declared mine yet since I still had no clue what I wanted to do. I was taking general studies until I could make up my mind. Hopefully, that would be sometime before my senior year.

I raised my hand at the appropriate time, then promptly zoned out again.

Finally, we were dismissed, and I joined the throng of kids moving towards the room's only exit.

What a waste of a perfectly good hour, I thought to myself.

I went back to my room only to find Foster and the Neanderthal in residence. Apparently, orientation hadn't made their to-do list. They were hunched over Foster's laptop, slack-jawed, eyes glazed, drooling over something that clearly wasn't academic.

As I came around behind them, I realized the "something" was Pornhub. Front and center on the screen was a woman with surgically inflated proportions, legs open in a pose straight out of *Anatomy for Dummies*, her hand working overtime between them while she made a face that screamed 'kill me now' more than ecstasy. Her eyes were vacant, her expression faker than Foster's slightly unfocused "I swear I'm sober" smile.

I looked away fast, but it was too late. I'd already seen way more than I ever wanted, the images burned into my retinas.

Each of them clutched a can of Natural Light, and it wasn't even noon yet. My optimism for the semester plummeted.

"Hey, Jake," Foster said, hitting pause to acknowledge me.

Points for friendliness, I guess.

"Hi, Foster."

"Want one?" He lifted his beer like a peace offering.

"No, thanks," I said, keeping it polite. The whole *in recovery* thing was a conversation for another time.

"You gonna hang out for a while?"

"Uh, no, I...um, have to..." My brain scrambled frantically for an excuse before inspiration hit. "...go get my textbooks."

Foster frowned, like I'd just confessed to knitting tea cozies in my free time. "You didn't just pirate those?"

"Uh...no?"

He shrugged, already bored with me, and turned back to the screen. He hit play, and the chorus of high-pitched moans so fake they could've been overdubbed by cartoon chipmunks resumed.

Dismissed. I had a feeling he'd already forgotten I was even in the room.

I slipped out, wondering if I'd ever be able to relax without their collective brainpower sucking the oxygen out of the room. Their combined IQ would probably be roughly equal to that of a below-average sea cucumber.

The "textbook" excuse had been pure improv — I already had the e-versions downloaded — but I *did* need a couple of assigned novels for my English class. So it wasn't a complete lie. One of them was written by the professor himself, which struck me as a neat little racket to pad his royalties. I decided to buy it used out of principle.

I found my way back to the building that housed the bookstore and Cool Beanz. The bookstore was surprisingly large. Besides books, they also sold a wide variety of school merch — clothing, water bottles, hats, backpacks, tote bags, even baby clothes, pet clothes, and shower curtains — everything emblazoned with the school logo and mascot, the Van Rensselaer Red Roosters. Who bought this stuff?

When I'd first heard what the mascot was here, I thought it was pretty lame. After seeing the T-shirts they didn't advertise on the website, however, I'd changed my mind. I spotted a shirt featuring a large cartoon of the red rooster with the caption, "How big is your...?"

I snorted.

They had shirts for all the sports. For crew, there was a cartoon of the rooster rowing and the caption reads, "Stroke..." For swimming, it was a dripping rooster and "Wet..." My favorite, however, was for the equestrian team. A rooster on horseback: "Riding..." I wanted to buy one even though I've never been on a horse.

I reluctantly tore myself away from the shirts and found the textbook and assigned reading section, but quickly realized I should have preordered my books. It seemed like everything I needed was already sold out. Or maybe I just didn't know what the hell I was doing. I couldn't believe every single book was gone.

I looked around but the only people who seemed to be working were behind the counter and were busy with other customers. The place was crowded with freshmen, most of them with parents who must have stayed until after orientation. I decided to come back later in the afternoon when, hopefully, it wouldn't be quite as hectic, and made a hasty exit.

I wandered aimlessly around campus for a while, familiarizing myself with the layout until my growling stomach reminded me that it was lunch time. I hadn't eaten breakfast and, come to think of it, I'd skipped dinner the night before too. No wonder I was so hungry.

I went to the Commons and grabbed a tray, then wandered around checking out the various offerings. The food didn't look too bad, but I ended up with a couple of slices of cheese pizza and a cup of coffee.

I sat at a table by myself and took a wary sip of the coffee. I almost spit it back out. If anything, it was worse than the jet fuel they served at Cool Beanz. It tasted like dirty dish water. I pushed it aside and decided I might have to switch to soda.

A few minutes later, I was surprised when someone sat down next to me.

"Hi, Jake," Becca said brightly. "Do you mind if I join you for lunch?"

"Not at all." I glanced down at her lunch, which consisted of a small cup of fruit salad and a bottle of spring water. "You call that lunch?"

She giggled and motioned to a tall, model-thin blonde with prominent cheekbones and an outfit straight from the pages of a fashion magazine. "That's my friend Adrienne. You don't mind if she sits with us, do you?"

What could I do except nod?

I watched in fascination as the blonde made her way across the room towards us. I was afraid she'd throw a hip out before she got to the table. She looked like she was strutting down a runway.

As she sat down across from me, Becca made introductions. I noticed that Adrienne's lunch was a tiny plate of lettuce with a small mound of cottage cheese in the center.

How had I ended up at the anorexic table?

We made small talk while everyone ate — or while I ate and they poked at their fruit and lettuce and pretended to eat. I learned that Becca and Adrienne had gone to high school together and were both majoring in elementary education. For the life of me, I couldn't picture Adrienne in a classroom full of five-year-olds.

After we'd finished our lunches, Adrienne and Becca announced that they were off to get manicures.

"Why don't I call you later and maybe I can show you how to find The Morning Rush?" Becca suggested before they left.

I agreed just to be polite and watched the two of them sashay their way towards the door. I could always beg off later.

"I need to make some guy friends...and soon," I muttered to myself. "Preferably proud members of the alphabet mafia."

The university had an LGBTQ club, but meetings wouldn't start for another week or so. I couldn't remember the name, but I knew it tied into the rooster mascot somehow. Rainbow Roosters, maybe?

Despite Becca's overtures, I was feeling very lonely. I had no illusions about her interest in me. She thought I was hot and wanted a trophy boyfriend. Once I came out to her, she seemed like the type that would drop me so fast you'd think I was a steaming hot dog turd.

Or worse...she'd want to be my bestie.

With a shudder, I gathered up the girls' trash, which they'd considerably left sitting on the table, and threw it away with mine.

The next question was: how to spend the rest of my day? I decided to go check out some of the planned activities Baldy had talked about at orientation.

I managed to waste a few more hours playing mindless games with my fellow freshmen — most of which involved more physical activity than I would have preferred — before I couldn't take anymore. I hadn't met anyone I wanted to become friends with and I was getting sweaty. I'm of the opinion that there's only one time when it's okay to be sweaty, and running around the lawn chasing a Frisbee like a trained golden retriever wasn't it. Hint: it takes place in the bedroom.

I decided to head back to my room and risk another encounter with Foster and his sidekick.

I opened the door hesitantly, but was immediately relieved to find it vacant. Two empty beer cans sat on Foster's desk, a testament to their former occupancy. I swept them into the trash can — no point leaving them out in plain sight — and flopped on to my bed.

I was staring at my ceiling when my phone buzzed in my pocket. I dug it out, and a pang of homesickness washed over me when I saw Killian's name.

I opened his text: *How's it going?*

I told him all about VRU, trying to make it sound as if things were going better than they were. He especially loved the story of my pending date with Becca. We chatted back and forth for a bit before he had to go.

After that, I wasted another couple of hours playing video games. Eventually, my growling stomach reminded me that it was dinnertime, so I returned to the Commons cafeteria. I ate alone, and wasn't all that bothered by the fact.

When I got back to the room, Foster was there — alone for a change.

"Hey Jake," he greeted me. "Want a beer? I was just getting ready to get one."

"Um, no thanks."

"Want something harder? I've got Smirnoff, Bacardi, Jack..."

"No, I'm fine," I said quickly, cutting him off. "Actually, I don't drink."

He blinked stupidly at me, as if I'd just told him I was an alien from Uranus. "You don't drink?"

"Nope."

"At all?"

"Nothing."

"Are you, like, religious or something?"

I laughed. "No, it's not like that."

"So...you don't mind if I drink?"

"As long as you don't get us in trouble for having it in the room, I guess I don't care."

"But why don't you drink?"

Foster was as tenacious as a pit bull, and about as bright. There would be no picking up on subtle social cues with this one. I was going to have to be very blunt.

"I'm a recovering addict."

He blinked at me again. "But you're just a kid."

"There's an age limit on addiction?" I made an effort to keep my tone light. It wasn't his fault he was a moron.

"I guess not." He pondered that for a minute. "Wow, I guess that's pretty cool that you stopped then. Are you sure it won't bother you to have it in here?"

Maybe he wasn't so bad after all. I smiled at him and tried not to remember the way the alcohol had called to me the night before.

"Nah, but thanks for asking."

"Sure. Uh, I guess let me know if it gets to you or whatever. We could probably stash it in Slug's room if we have to."

"Thanks," I repeated, then grabbed a novel off my desk and settled back onto the bed. It was one I'd read before, but it was worth a second read and anything was better than conversing with Foster.

I was just starting the fourth chapter when my cell phone buzzed again, sending me about a foot into the air. I dug it out of my pocket, expecting it to be Killian again, but it was Becca calling.

I suppressed a sigh and answered.

"Hey Jakey, it's Becca," she chirped, and I tried not to grind my teeth at the unwelcome nickname. "You still up for coffee, or is it too late?"

I started to make an excuse, but then I realized that maybe it would be nice to get out of my room, plus she said she knew a good coffee place and I desperately needed one of those.

"I'm always up for coffee, and it's never too late."

"Great! Meet me in front of the admin building in like ten minutes."

"Okay. See you there."

I hung up and jumped off the bed.

"You got a hot date?" Foster asked with a grin.

"Something like that," I said as I peeled off my shirt and pulled on a fresh one.

"What's she look like?"

I paused. "Pretty."

"Come on. You can do better than that. Blonde or brunette?"

"Dark hair."

"Tall or short?"

"Average, I guess."

"Big tits?"

I tried not to make a face. "I didn't notice."

Foster stared at me incredulously. "How could you not notice? Is she, like, flat or something?"

I quickly pulled on my shoes. I needed to end this conversation, the sooner the better.

"She's, you know, normal. I gotta go. Don't want her to wait for me."

Foster looked confused. "Who cares if she waits?"

I just waved and made my escape.

Sure enough, Becca was already there when I got to the admin building. She linked her arm around mine as soon as I was close enough and dragged me away. She kept up a constant stream of chatter as we walked, most of which I blocked out in the interest of my mental health.

Luckily, the coffee shop was only a few blocks off campus. It was a rather plain storefront from the outside: large plate-glass windows were set flush with the brick wall and a neon sign hanging over the door in the shape of a coffee cup on a saucer declared it to be The Morning Rush. Someone had made an effort to spruce it up a bit by adding striped awnings, but it was kind of like putting lipstick on a pig.

We pushed open the door, and the rejuvenating scent of java hooked itself into my nostrils, reeling me in like the catch-of-the-day. I almost forgot about Becca as I made a beeline for the counter.

A petite middle-aged blonde was taking orders. Her name tag read "Marla."

"I'll have one of everything," I gushed.

"That's my kind of customer," someone yelled from a semi-open door behind the counter.

Marla grinned. "Is this your first time here?"

"Yeah, I'm starting at VRU."

"You should try the double cappuccino with whipped cream," she suggested with a welcoming smile.

Before I could say a word, Becca sidled up to the counter and eyed Marla disdainfully, placing her hand possessively on my arm.

"We'll have two espressos, but thanks for the recommendation," she said condescendingly.

I flinched away from her touch, but she just dug her fingers in tighter.

Marla's eyes narrowed, but she simply turned and prepared the drinks for us without comment. She handed us the cups, and Becca stood there staring at me expectantly.

I realized she was waiting for me to get the tab, so I stifled a sigh and pulled out my wallet to pay for our drinks. Then she led me to a corner table closest to the front window.

"You didn't have to be so rude to her," I said, as we sat. "She was just being nice."

"She obviously saw us come in together and she still threw herself at you," she said. "She wasn't even subtle about it."

Like you are, I thought.

"She didn't throw herself at me. She made a recommendation. Besides, it's not like we're dating."

"True," she said with a little smirk. The word "yet" hung in the air as if she'd spoken it aloud.

She batted her eyes and leaned forward, resting one elbow on the table and stretching her shirt tight across her breasts.

That ain't gonna work on me, sister.

I took a sip from the cup in my hand and almost groaned in delight. She'd been right about this place, at least. The espresso was perfect. I closed my eyes and savored the flavor.

"You really take your coffee seriously," Becca said, interrupting my moment.

She sounded a little peeved, probably because the espresso had taken her place as the center of my attention. She was merrily tap-dancing on my last nerve.

I took a deep breath, prepared to let her have it, but, just then, the caffeine hit my system, and I immediately felt more forgiving. I decided to give her another chance. After all, some girls are protective of their prey — and that was clearly how she saw me at this point. I'd have to quickly disabuse her of that notion...right after I finished my coffee.

"Hey, I gave up drugs and alcohol. This is my last bad habit. Give a guy a break, huh?"

Her expression changed instantly. Not dramatically. Just...too fast.

The teasing edge disappeared from her face like somebody had flipped a switch, replaced by something sharper and more alert. Her fingers tightened briefly around her cup before she forced them to relax again.

"You do drugs?" she asked.

Did.

Not do.

That tiny correction registered in my brain immediately because recovering addicts always clocked language like that.

"Did," I corrected. "Past tense. I'm sober now."

"How long?" she asked quietly.

There was something weirdly specific about the question. Not casual curiosity. The kind of tone people used when they actually understood what they were asking.

"A little over a year."

Her eyes flicked down toward her own drink before coming back to me. "That's...hard."

Not impressive, or brave. Hard. Again, that felt oddly precise.

I shifted uncomfortably. This was bringing up bad memories, and I really didn't want to get into my history with her. Or with anybody who wasn't my therapist, honestly. "I'd rather not talk about it, if that's okay."

"Oh. Yeah. Of course." She nodded a little too quickly. "Sorry. I didn't mean to pry."

For the first time since I'd met her, she looked genuinely unsettled. She reached automatically toward the table like she was looking for something that wasn't there before catching herself and curling her hand back around her cup instead.

"That's okay," I said.

"I just think it's really good," she said after a second, quieter now. "Getting sober, I mean. Most people don't realize how hard it is to..." She trailed off. "Anyway...good for you."

There was a tiny pause there. The kind that happens when somebody almost says too much.

Interesting. I studied her for a second over the rim of my coffee. Suddenly the hyper energy, the territorial attitude, even the intensity made a little more sense. She had the restless vibe of someone who worked very hard at keeping herself together.

And maybe didn't always succeed.

I decided not to poke at it.

Mostly because I knew exactly how much I hated being poked at myself.

"Uh, thanks," I said lightly. "But we're still talking about it."

She laughed, though it sounded relieved more than amused. "Right. Sorry." Then she straightened in her chair and pointed at me with forced brightness. "Okay. So what should we talk about?"

I decided to give her a topic she'd have no trouble with. "Why don't you tell me all about yourself?"

I spaced out while she went on at length, enjoying my coffee and making the occasional grunt to indicate I was paying attention. Eventually, she wound down, just about the same time I finished my espresso.

It was well after dark when we left the coffee shop. As we made our way back towards campus down the still busy sidewalk, streetlamps providing little pools of amber light, I thought about how romantic this walk would be with the right person.

Unfortunately, Becca was not the right person, and she chose that moment to remind me of that fact.

"This was a really nice first date," she said suddenly. "Thanks for going with me."

I'd almost forgotten it was supposed to be a date. I decided it was time to release the proverbial pussy from the pouch.

"I had a nice time too, but I don't think we should count it as a date."

She frowned. "Why not? Don't you like me?"

"I mean, sure. It's just that...I'm not looking for a girlfriend."

She spun around to face me and stopped walking. "Why not?"

Great, now she sounded hurt.

"I don't think we'd be very compatible." It's very hard to enunciate when you're speaking through clenched teeth.

"Why not?"

"I just don't."

"But why not?"

"Because I'm gay!"

She blinked at me. For a few seconds, I thought she was going to freak out.

"You're, like...*fruity*?"

I sighed. "Yeah."

"For real?"

"Why would I lie?"

She wrinkled her nose. "Because you don't want to date me?"

"I don't want to date you because you're not a guy."

"That's all?"

I nodded, and she rolled her eyes dramatically. "Why didn't you just say so in the first place?"

"I was..." I paused. She had a point. "I was waiting for the right moment?"

"Well, thanks a lot for wasting my time."

"I thought we were just hanging out, making new friends."

That wasn't entirely truthful, but it was close enough to count, at least as far as I was concerned.

"I have plenty of friends. I was hoping for something a little more...intimate."

"Ah, well, sorry to disappoint. At least you got some free coffee out of it. No hard feelings?"

"Whatever. It's fine. There are plenty of other guys at this dumb school."

I smiled. "That's the spirit."

We'd arrived back at the campus by then.

"So...see you around?" I said, although I had a feeling Becca was done with me, and I was more than okay with that.

I stepped in to hug her, but she deftly sidestepped my awkward attempt.

"Yeah, sure," she said curtly. "See you."

I was relieved when she set off briskly in the opposite direction from where I was heading. It would have been unbearably awkward if we'd had to walk in the same direction after that.

"Hey man," Foster said when I let myself back into our room. "I didn't expect you back tonight, if you know what I mean. Strike out?"

I considered that for a moment. "No, not at all. I found a really good coffee shop."

He looked confused at that, but just shook his head and went back to his computer.

I changed for bed and crawled under the covers where I read myself to sleep.

Chapter 4 - Kody

In some ways my first week away at college was a lot like being at home. Classes hadn't started yet, so I mostly just worked at my newly acquired job and goofed off with Nick. I'd spent enough time in a coffee shop that picking up things at The Morning Rush wasn't that difficult.

Max said the first week would be training, but in reality, that had lasted all of a shift and a half, and mostly consisted of learning where to find things. While twice the size of the one I was used to back home, the espresso machine worked exactly the same, and a coffee pot is a coffee pot, you know? I can't say I was a fan of working open, which Max had declared was my permanent shift until I was told otherwise, but honestly, it worked out, since I didn't have many morning classes.

The downside was the fact that morning shifts meant you were meeting most people *before* they had their daily caffeine fix. Every morning, the bureaucratic shit-heads who worked up at the Alfred E. Smith State Office Building showed up in droves, all of them wearing weirdly identical uniforms of lame, ill-fitting suits and conservative twill skirts and complaining loudly. I suspected they hated their lives and processed that by bitching at whoever was behind the counter.

The thing is, no one is nice in the morning unless they're on medication or are mentally ill — like so-called “morning people” — so why in God's name did I pick a place to work where I'd not only have to be relatively cheerful at the crack of dawn, but maintain that mask while serving a seemingly endless supply of grumpy people? I was clearly a glutton for punishment.

Still, we quickly fell into a rhythm. Max and I had hit it off right away and had already established a joking, teasing relationship. In a way, she reminded me of several of the girls I'd been sort-of friends with back home. They'd treated me more or less like a kid brother, given I was on the short side, and Max wasn't much different. She certainly wasn't the kind of manager to stand on formality.

As for my coworkers, I liked Marla quite a bit and tolerated the only other employee, Mike. He was thick and pale, with limp mousy brown hair and a perpetually bored expression. He had the personality of a moldy dish towel, but Max seemed fond of him for some unknown reason that I'm sure had nothing to do with the large, swinging appendage easily visible in the gray sweatpants he favored. Mike, for his part, seemed oblivious to

Max's blatant — and often inappropriate — flirting, which was probably for the best, considering we didn't have an HR department.

By nine o'clock on Thursday, I was starting to really feel like part of the team. The morning rush was just about over, which meant things would slow down until shortly before noon. A few people would set up camp at a table and work on their tablets or laptops, but things were about to get pretty quiet.

Marla was waiting on a straggler while Mike and I cleaned up behind the counter when Max came bustling through the door.

"Oh my God. I am so tired," she moaned.

In just a few short days, I had learned that Max was always tired, whether it was first thing in the morning or the middle of her day off.

"Morning, sunshine," Marla greeted her with a wink in my direction.

"Did you make any hot chocolate?" Max asked as she slumped dramatically across the counter, ignoring the customer at the register, who eyed her nervously.

"Yes, Max," Marla replied, and I snorted. The fact that the manager of a coffee shop didn't drink coffee was still endlessly funny to me.

"Don't start with me, Short Round," she grumbled as she moved behind the counter. "It's too early."

"It's almost time for me to get off," I reminded her. I worked six to ten most mornings, five days a week. It was only twenty hours, but I figured that was about all I'd be able to handle once classes started.

"No shit, Sherlock. Why do you think I'm here at this time of day? Oh, did you make me a copy of your schedule?" She turned from me to accept a cup of hot chocolate from Marla. "Thanks."

"Right here." I pulled the folded paper from my back pocket and handed it to her.

"Good. You'd have been in so much trouble if you forgot." She grinned and walked away to the small office in the back.

Mike and I finished wiping down tables and refilling depleted supplies while Marla waited on a few more mid-morning customers. At ten, I hung up my little red apron, tucked my shirt in, and waved to the rest of the crew before heading back to campus.

I'd been told that New York was humid in September, but there was a nice breeze going, and it actually wasn't too bad. I strolled up Central Avenue, past a couple of bars that were closed and a couple of shops just opening up. Traffic was heavy, and city buses groaned by. The sidewalks

were filled with people bustling to and fro, since we were so close to the state government buildings.

All in all, I liked Albany so far. I felt like I was settling in nicely.

Nick was playing a video game on his laptop using the TV as a monitor when I got back to our room.

“Oh, hey!” he greeted me. “I keep meaning to ask you — do you game?”

“Oh, um, yeah,” I replied, purposefully downplaying my enthusiasm for video games of any kind. “You could say that.”

I practically needed a twelve-step program, but that would have required admitting I had a problem, which I staunchly denied. I was partial to arcade games, but I wasn't a snob about it. I also loved a good adventure game, an RPG, or an MMORPG. Basically, if I could lose myself in a fantasy world, hunt for relics, or kill some aliens, I was in.

“Cool. Let me show you this game I've been playing recently.”

I was about to sit down next to him on the couch when my phone buzzed.

Charlie. A smile crossed my face. I missed the little asshole.

“Hello?” I answered.

“Please tell me you've made it with your roommate by now,” he jumped right in without preamble. “It's been almost an entire week. How big is his dick? Is he good in bed?”

Maybe I didn't miss him that much after all.

“Hey, Nick,” I said out loud. “Charlie wants to know how big your dick is and if you're good in bed.”

“Tell him he's too young and innocent to know,” Nick said with a laugh.

“Yeah, right. So no sexy times?” my brother clarified.

“No, Charlie. No sexy times.”

Nick chortled.

“Sounds like you made a friend, though,” Charlie continued, undeterred. Nothing kept him down for long, a trait I admired.

“Speaking of good in bed, tell him about that smoking hot guy we saw,” Nick suggested loud enough for Charlie to hear.

“What happened to him being too innocent for thoughts like that?” I retorted.

“What hot guy?” Charlie demanded. “What's he look like? Did you get a picture?”

“No, Charlie, I didn't take a picture of a complete stranger like a creep.”

“Oh, we should have. That would have been a keeper,” Nick inserted. “You could bounce quarters off his ass.”

Charlie burst out laughing in my ear. “I heard that. Tell Nick to add me on Snap. I have to go. Dad is yelling for me to hurry up so we can go get school supplies, assuming they didn't spend all their money on your college presents. Tell me about this hot guy later. See ya, brah.”

I hung up and turned my attention to Nick. “Don't encourage him. He's bad enough as it is.”

“He cracks me up.”

“That's because he's not your brother. Anyway, so what's this game?”

The game turned out to be a new open-world fantasy game, complete with dense lore and an irresistible mystery. He started to show me all the details of the gameplay, and within minutes I had broken out my laptop and signed up to play.

Soon, we were questing side by side. I could totally see the game eating up all my free time if I wasn't careful...and most of my not free time as well.

We played until dinner and barely made it to the Commons before they stopped serving.

When we got back to the dorm, Nick wanted to play some more, but I begged off to watch TV in my room. The little nineteen-inch TV was the one thing I wished I'd upgraded while Dad was here. I'd tried to leave it at home, but Charlie had packed it in the car at the last minute, probably so he could get a newer, bigger screen for himself, the little turd.

After about an hour, I got a craving for a coffee. I asked Nick if he wanted to go, but he couldn't tear himself away from the game. Instead, he gave me a couple of bucks to bring him back one too, since he was planning on staying up late playing.

As I approached the coffee shop, I stopped in my tracks. There, framed perfectly in the big front window was the Golden Boy. The warm lighting in the store made him look positively cinematic. My heart skipped a beat, and for a moment I imagined myself pulling a Charlie and going in, walking right up to him, and introducing myself.

“Hi, I'm Kody,” I'd say, “and you're the most beautiful guy I've ever seen.”

And he'd laugh in a charmingly self-deprecating way and say, “No, I think you already have that title.”

Which would just be silly, but very sweet.

And then he'd ask if I wanted to sit with him, which, of course, I did. And he'd insist on getting my coffee because he's not just a pretty face — he's also a gallant gentleman, naturally.

My runaway fantasy was cut short when I suddenly realized that he was with someone. A girl. A very pretty, very busty girl. Who was busy throwing herself at him.

I sighed internally.

Of course he was with a girl. She was probably his girlfriend...or one of them anyway. He was so hot he probably had one on every floor of every dorm. She'd be screaming his name later, I was sure, the lucky bitch.

A familiar bitterness welled up in me. Another crush on a straight boy. Way to go, Kody. When would I ever learn? I'd almost forgotten about him during the week, focusing on work and settling in, but some small part of me had remained fixated on the gorgeous Golden Boy.

Correction, the gorgeous *straight* Golden Boy.

My craving was gone. Instead, I felt a little queasy. I would have bailed, but Nick had given me money. I entered the shop quietly, though I didn't have to worry about being seen. The girl was coming on strong, talking nonstop while waving her hands about theatrically, though the Golden Boy seemed focused on his coffee.

Probably playing hard to get. I bet he got offers for girls to ride his dick all the time.

I was happy to see Mike behind the counter. I could count on him to be practically nonverbal. I got Nick's coffee and got out before I felt any worse.

I thought about the Golden Boy as I walked back. Why did I keep running into him? What kind of cruel game was the universe playing? I felt like a starving dog teased with a bone I'd never get. A big, throbbing bone...

A bone that was going to be buried deep in that stupid bimbo. Ugh, I hated my brain. I didn't need that mental image.

I hoped he wouldn't start coming in for coffee. I hadn't seen him in the mornings so far, but it would just be the most exquisite torture if he suddenly started hanging around all the time.

Oh God. What if we had to interact? What if I was forced to have a conversation with him? What if his fingers brushed across my palm? What if we made good use of that giant bag of lube Charlie had given me and we made sweet, sweet love right on the counter?

I quickly pushed those thoughts from my mind. It was growing increasingly hard to walk. I picked up my pace. I needed a distraction, and I needed it fast.

Back in our suite, I handed Nick his coffee, though he was so engrossed he didn't even look up when he mumbled a thanks, then grabbed my laptop and plopped down next to him.

"I thought you didn't feel like playing anymore tonight," he said, glancing over.

"Changed my mind."

"Cool. Let's quest, bitch."

I tried to focus on the game, but my thoughts kept drifting back to the Golden Boy. I hated it when I got like that. My temporary obsessions never worked out.

I had a whole laundry list of past infatuations. There was Sam, who was gorgeous...and totally unavailable, since he was so far up Ian's ass you could see his nose coming out from between Ian's lips. Then there was Joseph, who'd had so much baggage I'm sure Samsonite was jealous. Andy followed, a little blond-haired angel with the devil's own way of telling me he wasn't interested.

The list went on, but it only got more depressing. I only dredged it up in order to remind myself that it's okay to look, would be wonderful to touch, but...I had bad luck in matters of the heart. My latest crush was probably on his third or fourth girl since we'd arrived at college.

After my third time almost getting killed because I wasn't paying attention, I called it a night and went to bed. By that point, Nick was ready for me to go. It was clear my mind wasn't in the game.

I lay in bed for a long time staring at the ceiling, wondering what was wrong with me that I couldn't seem to find a guy who thought I was worth his time.

I must have drifted off at some point, because the next thing I knew, my alarm was going off. It was five o'clock, time for work.

I dragged myself out of bed, feeling like I'd barely slept, and took a quick shower just so I'd be something approaching functional, then headed to The Morning Rush.

I got there a little early and had to wait for Marla to open the shop. While I waited, I stared through the window at the table where I'd seen the Golden Boy the night before. Of course, he'd been with that bimbo, but in my mind, I was only seeing him, alone, hands cupping his drink, looking hotter than anything in that mug could ever be.

Of course, my mind wasn't really good at happy endings, so then I conjured up an image of the bimbo on her knees under the table. Which is why she wasn't sitting across from him. And why he was sitting so still while she finished him off.

My daydream — nightmare? — ended as Marla approached. I hoped I didn't have an obvious boner.

"Hey there, cutie patootie," she greeted me. "Hope you're ready for the onslaught. It's just the two of us this morning."

She unlocked the door, and we set about getting the shop set up.

We were as busy as ever, but I was constantly distracted. I kept getting orders wrong because I couldn't stop picturing that girl on her knees between his tan thighs.

You need to quit, the little voice in my head taunted me. *You know this shit never works out. But do you listen? No. You'll just be disappointed again.*

I hate that little voice. If it had a neck I'd strangle it.

"Hey, you okay?" Marla asked as I started to remake yet another drink. I'd added whole milk instead of oat like the customer had ordered. "You don't usually make this many goofs."

"Sorry," I said sincerely. "I'm just not all here this morning. You can tell Max to take these out of my pay."

"Oh shut up, you little martyr. It's just a few drinks. We all have off days."

I mustered up a weak smile for her and finished the drink, handing it over. I forced myself to focus and got through the rest of the rush without any more screw ups.

"If I have to deal with one more jackass customer, I'll scream," Marla snarled a while later. "I need a fucking break."

Our previous customer had complained the coffee was too hot, and when Marla cheerfully put an ice cube in it to make it more palatable, the customer bitched that she was watering down the coffee.

"Then take one. I'll cover. Besides, Max should be here soon."

Marla laughed. "Like you'll get any work out of her majesty before noon. But I'll take you up on that offer. Hopefully, it won't get busy while I'm gone. Just holler if it does."

I merely nodded at her and took her place at the register so she could step out back to pollute her lungs. Marla was a smoker, and she favored the most expensive brand on the market.

"You know, if you'd smoke the cheaper stuff, you could take the difference and save for an iron lung," I teased her.

She flipped me off before stepping out the back door.

Unfortunately, as soon as she was gone, we did, in fact, get very busy. But I left her alone. She'd earned a break.

I filled what seemed like an endless line of orders for coffee, bagels, and muffins, suffering an equally endless barrage of complaints, mostly about how I was moving too slow for their liking, even though I was obviously alone behind the counter. Some of the complaints were more creative, though. One didn't like the amount of cream cheese I'd slathered on his bagel, another said his muffin had too many chocolate chips — as if I'd personally baked them — and yet another strongly felt that there was too much milk in his latte.

Jesus, talk about spoiled brats.

Max showed up about nine-thirty just as things were slowing down, but disappeared into her office with a wave, muttering something about needing to work out next week's schedule.

As soon as my last customer left, I made and delivered a hot chocolate to her, which she accepted gratefully.

"I think I'm going to have to hire someone else," she said, taking a sip and leaving a hot chocolate mustache on her upper lip.

My heart stopped. "You're firing me?" I asked.

She looked at me like I'd lost my mind. "No, dumbass. Why would I do that? You're the best hire I've made since Marla. I just need more help in the evenings. Mike's availability is shit."

"So...fire him?" It wasn't like he did much.

"And get rid of the eye candy? No way."

We clearly had different definitions of eye candy. At best, he was a piece of gum stuck to the bottom of your shoe. But who was I to yuck someone else's yum?

"I have this application, but listen to this," she continued, waving around a sheet of paper. "This lady comes in to fill this out, and she tells me she wants to be honest. She says she was arrested for assault, but only because the guy was more hurt than she was, and that she's all straightened out now, because she's a Jehovah's Witness. She wants to know if that will affect her ability to get a job, and I had to look her in the face and say, 'No, of course it won't!'"

She shrieked with laughter.

"Besides, I don't work well with women." She thought for a moment before adding, "Marla doesn't count."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because I'm not really a woman," Marla said dryly as she came in through the door to the back alley.

"No, I mean, why don't you work well with women?"

"Because she's threatened by them," Marla said. "She thinks they're gonna run off with her boy toys. I'm safe because I'm an old married lady."

Max waved her away. "I'm not threatened. I just like to stack the odds in my favor. And I have good reason to worry. Remember Trisha?"

"What happened with Trisha?" I asked.

"She hooked up with Mike," Marla said with a wicked little grin.

"The harlot!" Max crowed. "Don't you two need to get back to work? Leave me alone so I can figure out this damn schedule."

We started out of the room, but the Max called me back. "Hey, today is Marla's birthday, so I want to take her to lunch. Could you work a little later today so we can keep the shop open?"

I didn't have anything else to do so I agreed.

"Thanks, baby doll."

I rejoined Marla out front. "Why didn't you tell me it's your birthday?" I asked.

"Honey, when you get my age, you don't want to be reminded. It's just another day."

At noon, Max took Marla a few doors down to the Chinese place for lunch, despite Marla's protests that she didn't want to make a big deal about her birthday.

Left alone in the shop, I swept up and took care of a few odds and ends before pulling a coffee, light and sweet, for myself. I used a to-go cup so I wouldn't dirty up another mug. I needed to load the dishwasher, but that could wait. I wanted to take a break while we were slow. I took the chair in the manager's office, making sure I could keep the counter in sight.

My butt had barely touched the chair when the bell on the door rang. I'd barely even had a sip. So much for my break.

I sighed and rushed out to the counter, intending to put my coffee on the counter next to the cash register.

I say intending, because it never made it.

The Golden Boy was approaching, dark blue eyes unfocused as they adjusted from the glare of the bright afternoon to the relatively dim lighting of the store.

I dropped my coffee, cussing under my breath as I jumped back in an attempt to avoid the coffee that fountained out of the top. That little

plastic lid is never quite enough to stand up to the tidal wave of coffee if you drop the cup.

“Excuse me,” I said quickly.

I grabbed the mop from the small closet door that was just inside the manager's office. After mopping up my mess, I returned to the counter all flustered.

Of course, I'd make a fool of myself just as I had to face my cheerleader-screwing champion. Of all the coffee joints in all the towns in all the world, he walks into mine. Clearly, the universe had beef with me.

“So, ah, do I place my order with you?” he asked with a small smile.

Oh jeez, look at that, he has such cute dimples.

His voice was nice too — a little raspy, very sexy.

Why do I care? He's straight!

Oh shit, he's talking to me.

“Um, yeah,” I responded after what must have been a delay of about, oh, a millennium.

He ordered a double cappuccino with whipped cream, telling me it had been recommended to him. I didn't think I could bear to see him with a whipped cream moustache.

I tried to move efficiently behind the counter, but I had turned into a bumbling klutz in mere seconds. First, I dropped the mug, but, thankfully, it landed on the rubber mat and didn't break. Then I aimed three times — *three freaking times* — for the button to dispense the espresso before finally hitting the mark.

Straight boys shouldn't be allowed to be that hot. It just wasn't fair. Even knowing he had probably bopped that bimbo last night didn't change the thrill I took from his presence.

I approached the whipped cream gun with trepidation, afraid that it would explode when I got near it, coating me with cream to complete my descent into degradation.

I managed the task without incident, however, and moved carefully back to the counter where he stood with an amused expression on his face. I bet he thinks most people are idiots because they act like that around him. Or maybe it was just me.

“Um, you okay?” he asked.

“Yeah, um, sure, everything's Jake,” I said while I withdrew my hands from the cup before they could do any more damage.

“Cute,” he said as he tapped his phone.

Did he mean me? I felt my face heating up even more — which a few moments earlier I would have sworn was biologically impossible.

He took his drink and sat at a corner table, sipping quietly while observing the street. He looked sad, and suddenly, I felt sorry for him. I knew I should just leave him alone, but I screwed up my courage and walked around the counter towards his table...then retreated back behind the counter.

Coffee first, then I could act like I was taking a break. Be cool and nonchalant. I made myself another cup, since my last one ended up all over the floor, added honey and cream, and headed toward his table again.

As I got closer, I noticed he had a faraway expression on his face, and I was loath to interrupt his silence. At least that's what I told myself as I chickened out and headed back to the counter.

I tried to forget he was there. I hid in the manager's office praying the bell didn't ring, because if I had to go out there and attempt to be graceful, I just knew it would end in someone's death. Probably my own. I could just see the headline: *LOCAL STUDENT DIES IN TRAGIC ESPRESSO ACCIDENT.*

Of course, the bell did ring. I peeked out to see Max and Marla back from lunch.

"Kody with a 'K', you can go. We're back," Max called out as she walked in the front door.

She'd started calling me that after I corrected her for misspelling my nametag. I refused to wear the one that spelled my name with a "C," and she refused to make a new one, so I went without.

I didn't want to walk past *him* again. I'd probably fall on my ass. I could hang out and talk, but they'd know something was wrong. Not because I don't ever stay to chat, but because I knew I must have looked like a moron right about then. Matter of fact, I felt like that was tattooed on my forehead.

"Kody, go on! Get out of here!" Max said with a giggle as she walked behind the counter.

Marla merely smiled as I reluctantly took off my apron.

"Sure you don't need anything else done?" I asked.

"I'm married, and you aren't her type," Marla quipped.

Max slapped Marla's arm, and they laughed while I looked at them both as if they were insane.

"I'll take a little piece of that guy out there though," Max said in a low voice.

She was talking about the Golden Boy! For a moment, jealousy swelled in my chest, but then I sagged as I realized that Max had a better chance with him than I did.

“We still need someone, Max. Tell him to fill out an application,” Marla said.

“That would be way too obvious,” Max scoffed. “Kody, go give him an application.”

“What?” I gaped at her.

“Give him an application. You know, for a job?” Max said slowly, as if I were an idiot.

“Why me?” I should have just taken my chances and left when she'd said it the first time.

Max laughed and handed me an application before retreating into her office. I cautiously slipped out from behind the counter and walked towards the guy who had fascinated me ever since the first time I'd seen him. He was still looking off into some faraway place with that air of melancholy about him that suddenly made him less of an object and more of a person.

I sighed, sucker that I am, and approached him.

“Did it live up to the recommendation?” I asked.

“Sorry?” he asked, as if my words had pulled him from a daze.

I pointed to his mug. “Your coffee. Is it okay?”

“Oh, yeah, it's great. Much better than the place on campus. Bitter, bitter stuff over there.” He gave a small shiver for emphasis.

“Okay, good. Well, uh, see you,” I said as I moved to the door.

“Kody!” Max hissed pointing frantically towards the application form in my hand.

I sighed. I'd hoped to get away without giving it to him, but resistance was futile. Max always got what she wanted. I mouthed to her that she owed me and walked back to his table.

“Um, they're hiring here, if you're interested,” I mumbled, wishing the floor would open up and swallow me whole.

“Excuse me?” he asked, looking confused.

I felt my face flush and heard Max and Marla laughing in the back. “Yeah, um. Job.”

Brilliant. Just brilliant.

His lips twitched as he fought a smile. “Job, huh? Thanks, but I'm not really looking right now. I start classes on Monday and need to focus on my studies.”

“Oh, uh, yeah. Me too.”

I started backing away, the application still in my hand.

"Sorry to bother you. My, uh, boss made me," I explained lamely.

The smile he'd been fighting finally won, and it was like the sun breaking through the clouds. Damn, even his teeth were perfect behind his perfect red lips.

"You're not bothering me," he said. "See you around."

I squeaked an unintelligible response and practically bolted out the door, hoping to God and all that was holy that I'd never see him again.

I skipped the elevator and climbed the stairs two at a time, entered our rooms, closed the door, and leaned my back against it.

Jesus, it just wasn't fair! The guy was *straight*, and I still acted like I was some star-struck stan. I should have asked for his autograph.

I pulled off my tee shirt with the college logo on it and threw it through the open door to my bedroom in frustration. Sometimes, I could just kick my own ass. I couldn't believe I was such a screwup in front of him, and I was even more annoyed that it bothered me so much.

I opened the mini fridge to look around for something to microwave, then decided against it. I was full of nervous energy, yet somehow also depressed at the same time.

Of my limited coping options, I decided to do what I did best — whine to Dad. With a glance at the clock, I called the store landline.

"Hey, Dad," I said when he answered.

"Kody! How're things going?" he asked brightly when he heard my voice.

I sighed heavily.

"Uh oh, what's his name?"

He knew me so well.

"I don't even know."

"Goose, why do you do this to yourself?"

"I don't know!" I paced around the room restlessly. "He's just so cute, and I did just like you said. I told myself no. I really did."

"So what part of no didn't you make clear to yourself?"

"It's not that. I walked away. I swear." I flopped onto my couch for emphasis. It didn't translate well.

"So what happened?"

"I can't escape him. He's everywhere I go. The bookstore. Orientation. The coffee shop. And I turn into a total idiot around him."

Dad sighed. "Kody, please tell me you didn't burn down the coffee shop or something?"

"No!" I replied, mentally sticking my tongue out at him, and then doing it to the phone since he couldn't see me.

"Well, what's going on?" he asked warily.

"Nothing is going on. End of story."

"If that was the end of the story, you wouldn't be calling me. Spill."

"Well...I saw him last night when I went down to go get a cup of coffee...and he was with a girl."

"Aw, Goose...you sure can pick 'em. Look, if he's a straight boy, don't think it'll be like some internet story where you turn him gay just for you, okay? Do yourself a favor and just forget about him."

"I wish I could. He showed up at work today, and I had to serve him. Then Max tried to make me give him an application. That's just what I need. What if he starts working with me?"

"Did he seem interested in the job?"

"Well, no..."

"Then I doubt that'll happen, so stop worrying about it. And if it does, just stay focused and do your job."

"That's the problem. I can't seem to focus when he's around. I just act like a total nerd around him. I drop stuff and say stupid things."

"So, typical Kody behavior then."

"Dad!"

"Just take him off your list. He's like people on TV: pretty to look at and that's it. You can't live your life hoping some straight boy is going to notice you."

His voice was soothing, a balm for my frazzled nerves.

I sighed. "I know. I guess I just needed to hear you say it."

We chatted for a while longer, mostly about my new job at the coffee shop and how things were going with Nick. By the time I got off the phone, I'd almost forgotten about the Golden Boy.

Almost.

Chapter 5 - Jake

After my morning coffee, I returned to my room, but Foster was still sound asleep. The sheets had twisted around his body while he slept and he was exposed from the waist up.

It could have been worse, I thought to myself. He's not my type, but at least he has a nice body. Still a shame about that face, though.

I decided I didn't want to hang around the room, mostly because I was tired of reading and I didn't want to play video games in case it woke Foster up and I was forced to converse with him again. I opted to wander around the campus.

The juvenile university-planned activities were not on my agenda, but as soon as I stepped outside, I was set upon by Erin. She was trailed by a jaw-droppingly hot guy.

I barely spared a glance for Erin, except to see she was wearing a pair of skimpy gray jogging shorts and a hot pink tank top. Freckles covered every exposed inch of skin...and probably the skin that wasn't exposed. I didn't waste my imagination envisioning it. I was much too busy picturing the hunk without his clothes.

He was beautiful. About my height, maybe slightly taller, which meant he was still dwarfed by Erin. He was broad shouldered and muscular, but not in a beefy way. He was toned and slender, the broadness of his shoulders narrowing to a small waist and long, shapely legs.

He had the face of a model, all chiseled angles, golden skin, and warm dark eyes that made me want to melt on the spot.

His hair was a masterpiece of carefully disarranged chestnut curls with gorgeous golden highlights that I would stake my reputation as a gay boy were not the product of a salon, but real, natural highlights resulting from hours spent playing soccer in the sun.

I could just picture him, running around with his shirt off, chest glistening with a fine sheen of sweat, patting the other players on their pert little butts...

I shook my head to clear it of my little fantasy and realized Erin had been talking the whole time. I caught the last few words, which was enough to figure out that she was inviting me to play some sort of game with them.

"...so we just need one more player from our building and we'll have a team," she was saying with a highly amused expression on her so-homely-it's-cute face. "What do you say?"

I didn't really want to play any more stupid games, but if it meant I got to spend more time with this walking god I'd do just about anything.

"Yeah, uh, sure," I said, still not knowing exactly what I was agreeing to.

"Great! It'll be fun. By the way, Jake, this is Carlos. Carlos, this is Jake. He's a resident in Mohawk."

Carlos held out a hand which I managed to shake without moaning out loud.

"Let's go! The scavenger hunt is about to begin," Erin said as she jogged away.

At least now I knew what it was we were doing. A scavenger hunt didn't sound so bad, especially if Carlos was on my team.

Carlos followed Erin, and I trotted along behind him, enjoying the view of his nicely shaped bottom bouncing under the silky material of his soccer shorts. I was so mesmerized by his buns that I almost ran into him when he came to a stop. I looked up to see we had joined a group of four other kids. We moved to form a circle.

"Okay, guys, this is our team and we're gonna kick ass!" Erin enthused. "Quick introduction. We all live in the same building so we need to get to know each other and learn how to work as a team." I was beginning to see the point in this little exercise.

She had us go around the circle and introduce ourselves along with our pronouns. There was Chloe, she/her, the chubby blonde with the dirty mattress from my first day. Then there was Alex, he/him, a long-haired hemp hippie sporting a tie-dyed T-shirt and sparse facial hair, smelling faintly of weed. Mira, she/they, was a gorgeous black girl with natural hair and an athletic body. Toshi, the androgynous Asian I'd spotted in the lobby, unsurprisingly used they/them pronouns. They were a pretty little thing with shoulder length hair, a delicate, heart-shaped face, and full, pouty lips shining with pink lip gloss. Carlos (he/him) and I rounded out the team.

Erin quickly outlined the rules, finishing up just as a whistle blew, signaling the start of the game. We spent the next hour running around the campus as if our very lives depended on the recovery of a napkin signed by the cafeteria lady with the pink hairnet. It didn't take me long to realize that, besides forging bonds between my fellow Mohawk residents, the game was designed to familiarize the freshies with the campus.

I'd already taken it upon myself to do that on my own, making the game even more pointless than it already was, but I played along happily since it turned out Carlos was the touchy-feely type. I was a little disappointed to see he was equally demonstrative with everyone, but it

didn't really lessen the excitement I felt when it was me he grabbed me in a victory hug as we found another object from the list.

Despite our best efforts, we came in second. Since there was no discernable prize, I wasn't all that disappointed. Unlike Carlos, who, it seemed, was the competitive type. He was absolutely crushed by our first-loser status...and I wanted to be at the front of the line to console him. I was about to offer my services when Erin made an announcement.

"We're having our very first official Mohawk activity night this evening at eight in front of the building," she told us. "It's a pizza party, and I hope you'll all be there. Be sure to tell everyone you see."

"Are you going?" I turned to Carlos and asked.

"I don't have a choice," he said, almost blinding me with a flash of his sparkling white teeth.

Good oral hygiene is always a plus, I thought.

His next words snuffed out any budding hope that I might have a chance with this Adonis. "After all, my girlfriend is throwing the party."

"Oh. You and Erin..."

"Yep," he said, blissfully unaware of my dashed dreams.

Just then, Erin broke away from the conversation she'd been having with Sir Alex of Cannabis and approached us. "So, will you be there tonight, Jake?"

"No, I don't think so," I said flatly.

She looked genuinely disappointed. "Well, if you change your mind, feel free to come on down. The price is right. You can't beat free pizza."

"Thanks." I started back towards the dorm.

You ass, I chided myself. *How are you going to make friends if all you do is mope in your room with Foster and the Neanderthal?*

I had a point.

Besides, Erin and Carlos seemed like cool people even if they were hopelessly straight.

I turned back. "Hey Erin, I changed my mind. I'll see you tonight."

She lit up like a Christmas tree and waved in acknowledgment.

Feeling much better about my situation, I changed direction and went to get lunch at the Commons. I helped myself to a plate of some sort of stir fry and picked an empty table.

Becca and Adrienne walked by, and, for a second, I thought they were going to sit with me again. Thankfully, Becca settled for a little wave and kept going, much to my relief.

A few seconds later, Foster and Slug dropped into seats at my table.

"Dude, the food here rocks," Foster said while Slug nodded in contented agreement.

They both began to shovel huge gulps of meat and pasta into their mouths — complete with disgusting slurping sounds — and I immediately lost my appetite.

"Yeah, uh, I was just finishing," I said weakly.

"You gonna eat that?" Slug asked, pointing at my unfinished stir fry.

"Help yourself." I slid the plate toward him as I stood. "See you back in the room."

I spent the rest of the afternoon hiding in my room out of fear I'd be dragged into another team building game if I ventured outside.

At eight, I went down for the pizza party and was surprised to find I actually enjoyed myself. A good number of people showed up for the party. Erin had slipped flyers under everyone's door, and apparently teenagers responded positively to free pizza. Who knew?

I spent most of the time hanging out with Erin, who, it turned out, had a wicked sense of humor. We hit it off famously.

I really liked Carlos too, although I kept a little distance between the two of us. I still didn't trust myself to be too close to him without humping his leg or something.

I also got to know Toshi a little more. I was fairly sure they were queer, judging by how they shamelessly — and literally — threw themselves at any guy who moved within arm's reach, including me. They'd clutch your arm and press themselves against your side, while giggling and blushing adorably. Disentangling yourself was a little like fighting off an aggressively flirtatious octopus, but they were so darn cute you couldn't be mad about it.

There was a time when I would have had him in my bed before he had the chance to think twice. That was the old me, though. I was trying to put my slutty ways behind me. Not that there was anything wrong with enjoying sex, but like many things in my life, it had almost become an addiction for me. I craved the validation I received from the guys who wanted me. I thought it filled some yawning void inside me, but in reality, it just left me feeling even more hollow.

I was determined that the next guy I fell into bed with would be someone I'd gone on a real, honest-to-god date with, at the very least. These days I was yearning for connection more than just cock.

Not that I had anything against cock. I was definitely yearning for that too. Especially if it was attached to someone who just happened to look like the beautiful yet tragically heterosexual Carlos.

The party began to dissolve into smaller gatherings as the evening wore on. Some left to watch a movie in their room, while others broke off to play games or chat in more intimate settings. We weren't the only party on or off campus that night, and some moved on to other pastures. It was dwindling down to just me, Erin, Carlos, Toshi, and a few other stragglers when I excused myself to go up to my room.

"Can I talk to you for a second?" Erin asked as I stood up.

"Sure."

She walked away from the remaining group, and I followed her.

Once we were out of hearing range, she turned and faced me.

"Okay, this is probably none of my business, but are you gay?"

I was caught off-guard for a second. Not that I had any problem with people knowing I'm gay. I'd been out since I was sixteen, and I certainly didn't intend on retreating into the closet ever again.

"Yeah, I am."

"Hey, don't get me wrong," she said quickly. "I'm perfectly cool with it. I was just wondering." She broke into a broad grin. "I figured you were from the look on your face when you saw Carlos for the first time."

I grinned. No point denying it. I'd been caught red-handed. "Yeah, sorry...but in my defense, he's a yummy piece of eye candy."

"Hell yeah, he is. But he's also a lot smarter than most people give him credit for. They look at him and think that anything that pretty couldn't possibly be blessed with a brain too, but he's here on an academic scholarship."

I loved her fierce defense.

"Well, brains or brawn, you don't have to worry about me trying to steal him away. Maybe once upon a time I would have pulled something like that, but not anymore."

She laughed. "That's not why I asked. It's just good to know these things as your RA. That way I can watch out for potential problems."

I frowned. "Do you expect any?"

"Problems? No, not really. VRU is a pretty liberal campus, but that doesn't mean there aren't a few rotten assholes in every barrel. I just like to be prepared. In other words, don't worry. I've got your back."

I had a sudden impulse to give her a hug, so I did. "Thanks."
She grinned at me again. "Keep that up and it's Carlos who'll be jealous."

I snorted. "Tell him not to worry. You're completely safe with me."
She wriggled her eyebrows. "Yes, but are you safe with me?"
We linked arms and walked back to the group giggling like school girls.

Carlos raised an eyebrow, but took our sudden bonding in stride. I guess when you look like he does you aren't too worried about someone stealing your girl.

I said my goodnights once again and went up to my room.

I opened the door to find the Neanderthal laying across my bed, arms folded behind his head and staring up at the ceiling. Foster was not in the room.

"Uh, hi..." I took a deep breath and forced myself to say it:
"...Slug."

He rolled his big dark eyes in my direction — managing to look remarkably like a St. Bernard — and gave me a crooked smile. "Hi Jason."

"It's Jake."

He looked at me blankly.

"My name is Jake, not Jason," I explained slowly.

"Oh. Sorry. Hi Jake."

"Where's Foster?"

"Dunno."

"So, uh, how did you get in the room?"

"Foster gave me a key."

"He did, did he?"

I was going to have to have a talk with Foster about that. At the moment, however, I was more concerned about the fact that the Missing Link had given no indication that he was planning to remove his person from my bed any time soon.

"Yeah, um, did you know that's my bed?" I asked as politely as I could.

"Oh, did you want to get here?"

The idea seemed to catch him by surprise.

"Please?"

It felt odd to request the use of my own bed, but it seemed the saner course of action when dealing with someone named Slug, especially when he was closer to the size of Jabba the Hutt.

He laboriously worked himself to a sitting position, and with a few false tries, managed to get to his feet, where he stood swaying like a sapling in a stiff wind. It became all too apparent that Slug was drunk off his ass.

With an inward groan, I shut the door and steered Slug towards Foster's bed. I'd let him deal with his friend whenever he dragged himself in for the night.

Slug stood next to Foster's bed and stared at it without comprehension. Either this guy was dumber than I'd given him credit for or he was a lot farther gone than he looked.

I gave him a little push in the direction of the bed and watched in horrified fascination as he slowly took a nose-dive onto the bed, looking amazingly like a toppling Sequoia.

He bounced once upon hitting the mattress — testing its weight endurance to the limit, no doubt — and proceeded to pass out.

I was tempted to applaud the performance, but instead, I just turned and changed into a pair of boxers and a plain t-shirt. I was worn out and it wasn't even that late. One bad thing about being an early riser is that you get tired earlier too. When I was in full party mode it didn't really faze me — I'd just collapse every so often and sleep it off for a few days — but it had been a long time since I'd been in full party mode.

I was just about to drift off when Slug started snoring. No, snoring doesn't quite capture the unearthly noises that were emitting from his body. It started off sounding like a sty full of pigs fighting over the last choice bit of slop. It wasn't long before he'd worked up a full head of steam, however, and the noise was more like a 747 landing in the room with me while sucking a whole herd of terrified cows into its engines — maybe with bagpipes thrown in for good measure.

At first, I thought I'd wait it out. If it started suddenly, it stood to reason it might stop just as suddenly. Twenty minutes later, that theory wasn't holding water, and I was seriously considering holding a pillow over his big meaty head until the cacophony ended.

After a couple of hours of unending torture, I was near tears when Foster finally came back, fumbling in the dark and cursing under his breath.

"You might as well turn the light on," I told him, causing him to yip in surprise. "I'm awake and I don't think anything short of a nuclear blast would wake your drunken friend right now."

The light came on to reveal Foster staring fuzzily at his bed and its occupant. "Whatsh he doin' here?"

Great. Now I had two intoxicated idiots on my hands.

"Don't ask me. You gave him the key."

"Ish he makin' all that noise?"

"Apparently."

"Where'm I s'posed to sleep?"

"Oh, for God's sake!" I exclaimed. I leapt out of bed and grabbed my key. "Take my bed, but I swear, if you piss in it, I'll kill you."

"Where're you goin'?"

"Somewhere I can get some sleep."

I stormed out of the room and down the hall to the elevator. I took it to the first floor where an RA I hadn't met yet was on duty.

"Do you know what room Erin is in?" I asked the guy.

He raised an eyebrow but gave me her room number without arguing, and I quickly sought it out. I knocked softly on her door. When she didn't answer, I tried again, louder.

I was just about to give up when a very sleepy looking Carlos opened the door in just his boxers. I felt my jaw drop.

"Jake?" he asked with a great deal of confusion. "What time is it?"

"I, uh, I actually don't know. I just...I was going to ask Erin if I could sleep here, but I'll, uh, I'll go somewhere else..."

I knew my face had to be beet red. He looked even better without his shirt than I'd imagined. His pecs were defined, his brown nipples pert, and a tantalizing happy trail led down the valley created by his perfect six-pack to vanish into the promised land. The asshole even had the nerve to have a V-line, or as I preferred to think of them...cum gutters.

If I stood here another second, I'd be boned up.

I began my retreat, but Carlos called after me.

"Why can't you stay in your room?"

"It's, uh...occupied."

As annoyed as I was with Foster and Slug, I didn't want to get them in trouble. At least not until after I tried talking to them.

"So where are you going?"

I shrugged. "I don't know."

"Then come on."

"No, really, it's okay..." I was imagining myself snuggling between Erin and the nearly naked Adonis, and all my blood was rushing south.

"Come on. You can have the futon. It's not very comfortable but it's better than nothing."

I wasn't sure about that, but there was no way to turn him down without being rude — not to mention obvious. I trudged back to him, feeling like I was going to my own execution.

I stepped into Erin's room and my first thought was that it was a lot homier than mine — and bigger. A carpet covered the floor, a metal-framed futon faced a TV, and a papasan chair sat off to one side to create a conversation area. Beyond that, her desk had been situated in such a way to separate the sitting area from her bed. Framed posters and photographs adorned the walls.

Erin sat up in bed and stared at me as if trying to figure out why I was standing in her room at something o'clock in the morning.

"He got evicted from his room," Carlos said simply.

She nodded sleepily and dropped back down.

"Pull up some futon," Carlos offered.

He helped me convert it into bed mode and offered me a pillow, which I didn't accept since they only had two and both were already in use. I dropped to the lumpy mattress and squeezed my eyes closed.

A few seconds later, the light turned off, and I heard Carlos climbing back into bed with Erin. My eyes immediately popped open. Sleeping in the same room as that walking Michelangelo sculpture was going to be worse torture than staying in my room with Foster and Slug.

I don't know how long I laid there awake, staring at the wall and desperately trying to pretend that Carlos wasn't sleeping practically nude mere feet from me. I finally drifted off to sleep in the wee hours of the morning.

Unfortunately, my inner clock doesn't really give a damn what time I fall asleep. It woke me bright and early Saturday morning. I sat up and rubbed my aching eyes. I was in desperate need of my caffeine fix.

I got up and put the futon back in its sofa form, being as quiet as possible to avoid waking Carlos and Erin, then I let myself out of her room and took the elevator back up to mine.

I opened my door to be greeted by the symphony from hell that was still emanating from Slug. He didn't look as though he'd moved since I'd dumped him onto Foster's bed.

Foster, meanwhile, had somehow managed to pass out amidst the unbelievable racket and was still sleeping peacefully in my bed. He'd slobbered on my pillow. I was not happy.

I slammed the door but neither of them even flinched.

With a low growl, I yanked some clothes out of my dresser and exited the room, slamming my door again on the way out. It made me feel better even if it didn't really accomplish anything.

I showered, dressed, and shaved, then returned to the room. Neither of the two amoeba brains had so much as rolled over. I wanted to

leap on Foster's back and beat him with my fists until he woke up, but I restrained myself with some effort and decided to go get some coffee before I hurt someone — namely myself.

I glanced at my phone on my way out. It was almost nine, about the same time I'd gone to The Morning Rush the day before. I wondered if that cute klutzy kid would be working again this morning.

What was his name? That loud woman had said it. Ah yes, Kody with a K.

The coffee shop was pretty much the same as I'd found it the day before — practically deserted.

Kody was behind the counter again but he was distracted by the shop's sole customer, a crotchety looking geezer with more hair coming out of his ears than on top of his shiny head. The guy was complaining that the coffee was too hot, a complaint I found to be absurd. If you want cold coffee, then order an iced coffee.

While they negotiated, I took the opportunity to really observe the barista. He was absolutely adorable, but in a quieter way that some people might overlook at first glance. Not the kind of beauty that demanded attention the second someone walked into a room, but the kind that snuck up on you until suddenly you couldn't stop looking.

He was small, probably six inches shorter than me if I had to guess, with dark brown hair cut short on the sides and left longer on top. It was neatly parted this morning, making him somehow look even younger and more put together at the same time. His skin had a warm ruddy undertone that hinted at Spanish or Italian heritage, and the contrast made his pale gray eyes stand out even more.

And God, those eyes.

They were the sort of soft silvery-gray that almost didn't look real, framed by dark lashes that most girls would probably kill for. Combined with his sharp cheekbones and delicate mouth, they gave him this strangely pretty, almost fragile appearance that pulled at something in my chest before I could stop it.

He looked like the kind of person the world could bruise too easily.

Not that he couldn't handle himself. He was handling the situation with the grumpy senior citizen very professionally. He remained calm, cool, and patient with the old fart. I was impressed. He didn't seem like the same person at all. He acted like this happened all the time, which it probably did.

They finally seemed to reach some sort of satisfactory compromise, and the old man shuffled off.

I approached the counter, and Kody looked my way. His eyes widened for a second, but then he pasted a professional smile across his face and the momentary look of panic was gone. I almost thought I might have imagined it.

"Hi," he said cheerfully. "You're getting to be a regular here."

"What can I say? I like the company," I said with a big smile. "All by yourself today?"

Nope, I hadn't imagined the panicked look. It was back again.

He laughed nervously and twisted his hands into his apron. "Uh, just for now. Marla will be back soon and Max is coming in...um, whenever. So, uh, what can I get you?"

He was a bundle of nerves. Somehow, it only made him cuter. Was he always like that? If so, how did he function?

"Well, I've had the espresso and the double cappuccino with whipped cream," I said. "What would you suggest I try now? It can be anything as long as it has lots of caffeine. I didn't get much sleep last night."

"I, uh...we have some really good specialty blends," he stammered, his face flushing.

"What's your favorite?" I asked, placing my elbows on the counter and leaning in towards him.

I was flirting just to watch him squirm at this point. I couldn't decide if he was uncomfortable because he was gay or because he was straight, but either way it was too much fun to pass up.

"Hazelnut, heavy on the cream, and a touch of honey," he responded without hesitation. "My, uh, personal favorite."

"Sounds perfect," I purred, but to be fair, it really did sound good. "I'll have that. Maybe just a little lighter on the cream."

He rang me up and went to work preparing my drink. He handed me the ceramic mug emblazoned with their logo: a coffee mug on wheels with speed lines coming from it.

I raised it to my nose and took a long, deep sniff. It smelled heavenly. Then I took a small sip.

From the corner of my eye, I noticed that Kody was watching me closely for my reaction.

I made an exaggerated disgusted face and exclaimed, "That's horrible! How can you drink this stuff?"

He looked shocked for a moment, before his expression turned to horror. "I'm so sorry! You don't have to drink it. Do you want something else? It'll be on the house."

I laughed. "Kody, calm down. I was just kidding. It's really good."

He jerked when I said his name as if someone had goosed him. He took a deep breath and released it slowly. "So you *do* like it?"

"Yeah, I really do."

His face lit up with a smile that completely transformed him from cutie to hottie in under a second. I felt my breath catch in my throat, and all I could think about was making him smile like that again.

"Can I get you anything else?" he asked, and I realized that I was standing at the counter staring at him.

My brain was screaming at me to ask him out, but instead, I smiled and said, "No thanks. This is good."

I turned away and walked to what I now thought of as my table.

I don't even know if he's gay, I reasoned with myself in a vain attempt to justify my cowardice.

What was wrong with me? I'd never hesitated to ask a cute guy out before, even if I knew for a fact he was straight. 'You never know' had always been my motto.

If I was honest with myself, though, I knew exactly why I hadn't said anything. I hadn't seriously dated anyone since getting out of rehab. There had been a few dates here and there, but every single one of those guys had pursued me first, and I'd made damn sure none of them got too close. No one ever made it past the second date.

Why?

Because I was scared.

Not of them, exactly. Of what came after. The inevitable moment where someone starts looking at you like they might actually stay, and suddenly all the locked doors in your head start rattling.

If I let someone close, eventually I'd have to tell them about my past. And I was terrified of seeing someone's face change when they realized who I used to be.

Addiction was only part of it.

Honestly, the drugs and drinking almost felt easier to explain than everything underneath them. Those at least had names. Rehab. Sobriety. Recovery. People understood those words. They fit into neat little narratives where you hit rock bottom and then bravely claw your way back.

The rest of it was uglier.

The abuse. The murders. The spiral. The shame. The ways I'd let people use me because I didn't know how to believe I deserved anything better. The constant fear that if someone saw all of me — not just the pretty

parts or the funny parts or the flirtatious parts — they'd realize I was too damaged to love properly.

So I kept things shallow. Safe. A couple dates. Some flirting. Maybe kissing if I felt brave enough. Then I'd find a reason to pull away before the other person could decide to leave first.

It was easier that way. Lonelier, but easier.

All that introspection reminded me that I still needed to find a support group. My next therapist appointment was still a week away, and I was feeling a little squirrely. I knew it was the stress of moving and being away at school, but I felt like my emotions were all over the place. I could have probably texted my therapist and she would fit me in sooner, but that felt like admitting defeat, and I wasn't that bad yet.

I risked a look in the direction of the counter and found that Kody was still watching me. Our eyes locked for a second before we both looked away — him pretending to clean behind the counter, me suddenly finding something infinitely captivating out the window.

This is ridiculous. He obviously likes you so stop being an idiot. It doesn't mean you have to tell him anything. It's only one date.

I stood up with sudden resolve and marched to the counter. Unfortunately, my timing was garbage. Kody glanced up just as he was wiping down the espresso machine. He jumped, yanking his hand back, and in the process snagged the dish cloth on the hot water handle. A jet of scalding liquid hissed out, spraying his arm and all down his front.

He yelped, leaping forward to shut it off, then bit down hard on his lower lip, standing stiff and wet...and obviously very much in pain.

My stomach dropped. "Oh my God, are you okay? I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to—"

"You didn't," he ground out between clenched teeth.

"Let me help."

"No, it's fine. I've got it."

Naturally, I ignored him and slipped behind the counter anyway. He was gripping the rag so tightly it looked like he was trying to strangle it.

"Did you get burned?" I asked, reaching for his arm.

He jerked away instinctively.

"Hey, it's okay. I just want to see if you're hurt."

This time, he let me take his wrist. His forearm was flushed red but not blistered — bad, but not emergency-room bad.

"Does it hurt?" I asked.

"What?"

"Your arm. Does it hurt?"

“Not anymore...”

“Did it splash anywhere else?”

“Um...my leg?”

I glanced down at his bare calves below his shorts and crouched for a closer look. His eyes went wide as he stared down at me kneeling in front of him.

“Which one?” I asked.

“Which one what?”

“Which leg got the boiling water treatment?”

“Oh. Right. I mean — right as in my left. It was my left leg.”

I ran my fingers gently along his calf. His skin was warm, smooth, sun-browned — like someone who actually did things outdoors.

He shivered, and I jerked my hand away. “Sorry! I didn’t mean—”
“You didn’t—”

His leg looked fine, better than his arm anyway, but I still lingered.

“My official medical opinion,” I said, glancing up at him, “is that you’ll live. No permanent damage, unless you count emotional trauma.”

“Thanks,” he murmured, breathless.

I tore my eyes away and glanced around. “That’s the good news. The bad news is, uh, the floor looks like Lake Michigan. Do you have paper towels?”

He crouched beside me and grabbed another cloth from under the counter, handing it over without meeting my eyes. I took it, mopping at the puddle like a good Samaritan-slash-idiot who’d just made things ten times worse.

“You don’t have to do this,” he said softly.

I glanced over, caught his eye. “I know. I want to.”

He looked away, shoulders tense. “You really shouldn’t be behind the counter.”

“I feel like it’s my fault. I startled you.”

“Nah. I’m just a space cadet.”

But he didn’t push me out, just started blotting the floor with the dish rag still clutched in his hand.

We worked side by side in silence for a few moments, then he asked, “How’d you know my name?”

“That lady called you by name when she came in yesterday.”

“Oh.” Something in his voice shifted. Was that disappointment?
“That’s Max. She’s the manager.”

“My name’s Jake,” I offered.

His eyes flicked up to mine. “Really?”

Why would I lie about that? I didn't say that out loud, though, instead saying, "Yeah. Jake Sheridan."

A crooked smile spread across his face, and my heart stuttered in my chest.

"Hi, Jake Sheridan."

I grinned back at him. "Hi, Kody with a K."

Just ask him, my inner voice hissed. I took a deep breath and tried to summon my courage.

"So, uh, would you like to—" I was interrupted by the bell that signaled the front door opening.

Kody shot to his feet so quickly you would have thought a jolt of electricity had zapped him in the ass.

"What were you doing on the floor?" the woman I now knew as Max asked.

Kody opened and closed his mouth a few times, but nothing came out. I stood up too, and her face became a comical mask of confusion. She looked back and forth between Kody and me as her expression took on a knowing look.

"Or maybe I should ask what you were doing on the floor with this hunk. Pretty sure he never turned in an application and I know for a fact I'd remember hiring him."

Before I could explain, Kody bolted through the office door, leaving me standing there looking guilty as hell.

Max's face was growing redder by the second.

It looked like I was going to have to talk my way out of this one — and judging by the color of Max's face, I'd better talk fast.

Chapter 6 - Kody

I couldn't believe I was actually talking to the Golden Boy. And I finally knew his name.

Jake.

Jake Sheridan.

I couldn't stop saying his name in my head. It was the perfect name for the guy of my dreams. And he was so kind, helping me clean up my mess. It was partially his fault, anyway, for being so damn hot. It wasn't fair to us mere mortals.

All those thoughts were flooding through my head as we mopped up the puddle of water.

His voice suddenly cut through my inner commentary. "So, uh, would you like to—" he began.

Wait. Was I crazy, or was he about to ask me out? My heart literally flipped, then my stomach copied it.

But the question was left unfinished as the bell rang, announcing a customer.

I bolted to my feet, only to come face-to-face with Max.

She stopped in her tracks. "What were you doing on the floor?"

Oh my God! I was behind the counter with a customer — who happened to be the hottest guy I had ever seen — and my manager walked in. I was so cooked. She was going to write me up and fire me. I knew it.

I felt something pop in my temple and wondered if that was what an aneurysm felt like.

Just then Jake stood up next to me, and Max's eyes bulged, darting back and forth between him and me.

"Or maybe I should ask what you were doing on the floor with this USDA Prime cut of beef," she said, pointing an accusing finger at Jake. "Pretty sure he never turned in an application, and I know for a fact I'd remember hiring him."

I responded by doing the mature thing — I ran. Leaving Jake to face Max alone, I darted through the office, out the back door of the shop, and into the alley, where I could hyperventilate in private.

Shit!

I leaned against the wall as embarrassment flooded my system, followed immediately by guilt and recrimination. Those were feelings I was very familiar with. We were on a first name basis. I also had more than a passing familiarity with awkwardness and bad timing. And since I'd run away instead of taking accountability, maybe immaturity was mixed in, too.

I'd practically just started this job, and I had customers behind the counter.

Dumb. Dumb. Dumb.

And we were on the floor, which made it look even worse to anyone walking in. Because of course, you had to wonder what two people were doing on the floor. Were zippers being hurriedly pulled back up when the bell rang?

What was I thinking?

I hadn't been thinking. It had all happened so fast. I'd been overwhelmed by everything that is Jake Sheridan.

I slid down the wall into a crouch, the rough brick scratching against my skin even through my shirt.

What was I supposed to tell Max? She was going to fire me. Where was I going to get another job, especially with my limited skills? I didn't really *need* the job, but how embarrassing was it to be fired? What would my father say? Charlie would tell me I'm an idiot...and he'd be right.

Shit! Shit! Shit!

Worse, if the Golden Boy — Jake, I reminded myself — *had* been about to ask me out, he'd probably change his mind now that he'd seen me act like a complete coward. I'd blown any chance I had with him by running away. I'd only just gotten his name, and now I'd blown that up like I'd dropped a bomb on it.

Way to go, loser.

My inner monologue was a dark spiral of self-flagellation. I was debating if I should just toss my apron on the ground and start walking home or stay and wait to be fired like a man when the back door opened and Max stepped out.

She stopped when she saw me. "Are you crying?" Shit, had I started to cry at some point?

"No."

"Dude, why are you crying?"

"Cause you're going to fire me. Because I had Jake behind the counter. Because it probably looked worse than it was when you walked in."

I wiped at my eyes, just to try and get myself under control.

"Kody, breathe. Where am I going to find someone with your experience? I mean, yeah, you can't have someone behind the counter, even if he is a fucking hottie with a bangin' body." She smiled, and I felt my face heating up. "But let's call this a learning experience and move on, okay?"

"You're not going to fire me?"

“Not unless you really want me to. I don't fire people I like. Besides, you're adorable — like a real person, only smaller.”

I laughed a little, sniffing back the congestion that always comes with tears...and maybe a panic attack.

I slowly stood up. As the adrenaline faded, I was starting to feel silly.

“Damn, that guy, though... Whew!” She fanned her face with one hand. “If I was over my ex, I'd go after him in a heartbeat. Oh my God!”

“Yeah, he is hot.”

My head snapped up as I realized I had just outed myself. I wasn't sure if she'd caught it or not.

She sighed. “Fuck! Marla wins. She said you were gay, but I thought you were straight.” She laughed, while I just blinked in disbelief.

Was she serious? Had they really placed a bet on whether or not I was gay? Was I that obvious? Either way, that had to be the easiest coming out in history — aside from the whole getting splashed with scalding hot water part. And the debilitating humiliation. And ruining my one and only chance with the Golden Boy.

But truthfully, who knows what he would have said? Maybe he was just going to ask if I'd like to suggest anything else he'd like to try? Some other caffeinated concoction. He was *straight*, and I'd just talked myself into thinking he was interested in average-at-best me.

“So is that hot piece of ass gay too?” Max asked.

I sighed. “No such luck. He was in here with some big-boobed bimbo the other night. I don't have a chance in hell.”

“Ah, well. You can't win 'em all, kiddo, and besides, you have to leave us straight girls a few lookers. It's not fair that we're always stuck with the shmucks and shmoes. Hey, what's wrong with your arm?”

I realized I was cradling my arm against my body.

“I, uh, burned myself on the espresso machine like a noob. To be fair, it was kind of that guy's fault. I mean, it was my fault. He didn't do anything wrong. I just turn into an idiot whenever he's around.”

Max gave me a sympathetic smile. “Yeah, I do the same thing when my ex is around. Come on, let's go inside. I think I have some burn spray in the first-aid kit.”

“Is he gone yet? I don't want to see him.”

She sighed again and poked her head in the door. “Hey, Mar. Is cutie-patootie gone yet?”

Apparently, Marla had returned from her errand while I was having my breakdown.

“Yeah,” Marla called from inside. “It’s safe to come out now.”

Max snorted. “Perfect choice of words.” I followed her back in, and she handed Marla a ten-dollar bill. “You win.”

I blushed again as Marla stared at the money in her hand for a moment before understanding flooded her expression and her face lit up.

“Oh, poor Kody!” She chuckled as she patted me on the back. “Did Max force it out of you?”

“No, it was a slip of the tongue.”

She fought a grin and lost. “That’s what he said.”

She and Max laughed heartily while my cheeks reached the approximate temperature of the surface of the sun.

“Come on, that was funny, Kody. Admit it,” she said. “I promise we’re all cool. Nobody here cares who you like. And look on the bright side...now we can look at cute guys together.”

I finally cracked a smile and started to relax.

“Oh man, remember Scott, Mar?” Max pulled out her phone and started scrolling through her photos, the first-aid kit already forgotten. “You would have loved him, Kody. He worked here last year. Or was it the year before? Anyway, I think I still have a picture of him on here somewhere. Wait till you see him. Gayner than RuPaul on Halloween, but he had such a sweet ass...”

This was going to take some getting used to. I hadn’t really ever thought about coming out at work or anyplace. I was kind of happy in my little cocoon with Nick, just doing my thing and getting used to life away from home.

Obviously, I’d have admitted to being gay if Jake had asked me out — which he hadn’t, because he’s straight and probably headed back after that disaster this afternoon to bang that girl until her tits gave her black eyes.

Wow. That was a visual I didn’t need. And her chest hadn’t been *that* big. But maybe he’s energetic?

“Kody? Did you want to just stay here, or will you risk going back out into the world?”

I glanced around, realizing I’d slipped off into the idea of Jake having sex — again — while standing behind the counter.

“Oh, sorry. Yeah, I should get going. Uh. Thanks for not firing me.”

“Just don’t invite hot guys behind the counter without me being here. That’s all I ask.”

I walked home after work with my earpods in, listening to the classic rock channel to remind me of home and my dad. I always left the room when he played it at home, but it was kind of nice at the moment. It grounded me and matched my mood. I reflected that familiarity was probably why I'd been so focused on getting this job. It reminded me of home and my dad's shop, a little.

His music wasn't really bad. I listened to a lot of things, but it was fun to rage bait him a little. One time, this song came on the radio — I think it was *Sweet Dreams* by the Eurythmics — and I started to sing along with it. He got this pleased expression and said he was surprised I knew the song. I told him they played oldies over the speakers at school in the morning for homeroom.

He got all pissy, and I laughed and laughed.

I was doing my best to put Jake out of my head, as nice as he'd been. I just couldn't understand beautiful people. Don't they know what kind of effect they have on us mere mortals? It would be so much easier if he had been an asshole — all wrapped up in himself, not even realizing I existed. But no, he has to be nice and considerate and give me a stupid little burst of false hope.

Of course, being nice to someone doesn't mean that you're interested in them. In fact, I was nice to a great many customers every day, and I wouldn't mind a couple of them getting hit by city buses.

Jake hadn't been just nice, though. Nice would have been showing some concern and then, once he'd realized my skin wasn't sloughing off from hot liquid, heading off on his merry way. Instead, he'd actually stayed to help set things right, and I didn't care how many cheerleaders he was cracking — not true, I definitely cared — he was more than just polite.

He'd been kind and considerate. And of course, in true Kody fashion, I'd interpreted that as having a deeper interest in me.

But really...what was he going to ask?

I headed up the stairs to my dorm, opened the door, and headed directly for my room, pulling my shirt over my head and tossing it into the hamper as I went. Dad always said I must be warm-blooded, because I'm not a big fan of shirts. If I'm going to be comfortable at home, I generally lose them as soon as I can. I know some people are like that with pants, which don't bother me as much, though I'd probably sit around in my underwear all the time if I could.

I took a quick shower to get all of the coffee smells and the stink of embarrassment off of me and then got myself into a pair of joggers and a VRU tee shirt. My father had nearly cleaned the campus store out of official

school gear, he was so happy to have me there. I smiled, thinking about how proud he was.

Because I didn't meet my dad until I was older, I'd always been plagued by worries that he wouldn't like me or that I had to behave to keep his affection. He'd never given me a reason to think any of that — in fact, just the opposite. But it was just the sort of thought spiral I got into with so many things...especially romance.

I think when someone comes into your life late, some part of you is always waiting for them to realize they made a mistake.

Dad loved me effortlessly. He'd never once made me feel like a burden or like a mistake. Once of the first thing he'd done after I moved in was get a family portrait taken, just me and him. And then another one when Charlie came along. And another when Brandon moved in. He bragged about me like I'd personally cured several diseases. Rationally, I knew he loved me. But irrationally? Irrationally, there was still this tiny feral part of my brain sitting in the corner clutching its knees and going, 'Yeah, but what if one day he changes his mind?'

What if I become too much trouble? What if I was too needy? What if I was too weird? Too gay? Too emotional?

Too disappointing...

I worried about that more than I'd ever admit out loud.

So I compensated by trying to be easy to love, easy to keep around, to forgive...to tolerate. I tried to be agreeable. Helpful. Funny when I could manage it. Low maintenance. The kind of person who said sorry too much and took up as little space as possible emotionally, just in case affection had an invisible expiration date I couldn't see.

And the stupid thing was, Dad had never treated me like that. Not once. If anything, he loved me harder the older I got, like he was trying to make up for lost time. But brains are assholes sometimes. They take old fears and keep replaying them long after they stop making sense.

Especially mine. Sometimes, my mind is my worst enemy.

It was probably why crushes hit me like natural disasters instead of normal attraction. Other people got little butterflies. I got full psychological collapse.

The moment someone was kind to me in a way that felt specific — not polite, not generic, but intentional — my brain latched on like a barnacle.

One sweet smile and some eye contact, and I was drafting wedding invitations.

Not literally. Usually.

But it became way too big inside me way too fast. Every interaction started carrying emotional weight. A look lingered too long, and I'd replay it for three days. Somebody remembered my coffee order, and suddenly I was wondering if we were soulmates.

It was embarrassing. Worse, I always seemed to fall hardest for people who were never really available to me in the first place. Straight boys. Older guys. Guys who were kind but clearly not interested. It was like my brain preferred crushes that were doomed from the start, because then I could ache dramatically without ever risking anything real.

For example, there was TJ from back home. He worked in a local restaurant and was so nice looking and generated this aura around him that just made him seem effortlessly chill. I always saw him at work in his uniform of well-fitting black pants and a white button up shirt. I'd thought the waiter's uniform looked so elegant on him. I'd had such a crush on him and dreamed about the ultimate thing — holding his hand.

I'm pretty sure TJ saw right through me. He'd treated me much the way Nick had treated Charlie. Kind, but somewhat amused with my awkward affections. It embarrassed me to even think about it now.

Andy had been the worst, though. I was sure I was in love with Andy, so in love that I completely missed the fact that he was in love with someone else, a guy named Jay. Andy had worked with a local band, kind of as a manager for them, and I'd helped get them a gig at Dad's shop.

Andy'd meant well, but they'd kind of announced how much the band appreciated me, even if Andy didn't feel that way for me. It was humiliating, and I was sure my heart had broken into tiny pieces. I never really recovered myself after that. Andy, Jay, and the rest of the band never gave me crap about it or anything, but I'd carried it around like I'd been marked. Branded as a dumbass.

To make things even worse, the band had played a song named after me — or a song that shared my name, more accurately. In my mind, it was a mocking thing, which, in retrospect, probably wasn't really the case. None of them ever treated me badly...aside from that one act of colossal indiscretion.

Real was terrifying.

Real meant they could actually reject me instead of me just assuming they eventually would.

And when I did get attached, it happened frighteningly fast. Like my heart skipped all the normal getting-to-know-you stages and went straight to emotional dependency. I didn't know how people casually liked someone. My feelings always arrived like they were kicking down a door.

Which was exactly why the whole Jake situation was so dangerous.

Because I already knew myself well enough to recognize the signs. The obsessive thoughts. The constant replaying of conversations. The stupid hope. The emotional investment wildly outpacing reality.

I was already halfway gone over a guy who'd helped me clean up spilled water and maybe almost asked me something before getting interrupted.

That was not healthy behavior.

And yet...the worst part was that I knew if Jake actually did like me back, I'd probably become even more insane about it.

Because underneath all the yearning and fantasizing and hopeless crushes was the same ugly fear I always carried: That eventually people would realize loving me was more work than it was worth.

Shaking myself from my stupid, sad past, I went back out to the common space with my laptop in hand. This was my last weekend before classes started, and I fully intended to spend it doing as little as possible. Gaming didn't count.

Nick and I actually spent most of the weekend doing completely stereotypical guy things: we ordered pizza, played video games, and drank soda. We gamed until the wee hours of the morning and slept late just to do it all again.

Nick reasoned we wouldn't be able to do that much once classes started, so we teamed up on as much as we could online. I binge-watched some TV shows when he wasn't there just so I wouldn't get ahead of him too far; it was fun to accomplish things as a team.

All in all, I felt pretty relaxed by the time classes started on Monday morning.

At my request, Max had scheduled me pretty lightly for my first week of classes. I wanted to get a feel for my workload before jumping in with both feet, but after talking to my professors and taking a look at the syllabi for my classes, I felt pretty confident I could juggle school and The Morning Rush.

Max was very relieved. Dad approved. Charlie asked when I was going to get laid.

I spotted Jake the Golden Boy a few times throughout the week, but I was equal parts relieved and disappointed to learn we didn't have any classes together. Each time I saw him, I'd duck into a doorway or behind a tree to avoid any potentially awkward conversations. With my lighter work schedule, I'd managed to avoid him at the shop as well.

Project Get-Over-the-Straight-Boy was well underway.

Reasonably speaking, I was pretty sure he wasn't looking for me and there weren't any conversations to be had, awkward or otherwise.

The trouble is my brain isn't always reasonable. I kept imagining him coming into the shop and asking me why I was such a weirdo for running out and leaving him to face Max alone...especially since he'd been helping me. It was a fair question.

In my head, I'd tell him because he was so damn cute and that me burning myself had been his fault and—

Damn it! I didn't need to do this to myself!

But I couldn't help wondering if he'd even noticed my absence. Which was dumb, because why would a crazy hot straight boy care if the little weirdo at the coffee shop was working or not?

One day I tried distracting myself by sitting on one of the benches in the quad and just observing people. I figured there had to be other attractive people, and maybe looking at some of them would give my mind something to do other than obsess over Jake.

What I learned from that was that my tastes run toward Jake. It wasn't that I saw a bunch of weirdos — I mean, I did — but rather that so many just looked so...*less than* when compared to Jake.

I guess the problem was that my mind wasn't done with the whole Jake thing. I had yet to fully come to terms with him being straight.

Okay, two problems.

The second was that I noticed someone's appearance first. It's not shallow, necessarily. It's just marketing...the packaging gets your attention so you'll take the time to see if you like what's inside.

And Jake had some excellent packaging. Like...award winning.

And I was sold. But I wasn't his target audience.

I'd just finished my last class of the week on Friday afternoon when I decided a shopping trip was in order. I'd discovered a few things I needed over the last few days...like underwear.

Charlie had thought it was funny to take most of mine out of my suitcases before I left. Dad had promised to send them, but he was notorious for forgetting packages. Sometimes that extended to things he'd ordered. We'd get a box, and Dad would actually say 'What did I order'? I'd been rinsing out the couple pairs I'd worn as we'd crossed the country, but that was getting old fast.

I checked my phone for my bus fare app — Dad insisted that public transit was better than ride-shares — as I walked back to my room to

grab my wallet. I ran into Nick in the lobby, his arms loaded with several grocery bags. Apparently, I wasn't the only one who had shopping on his mind.

"Need a hand?" I asked.

"If you start clapping, I'll beat you senseless with a bag of Cheetos," he said with a laugh, then gratefully handed me a few of the bags.

"No clapping. Got it," I replied with a grin.

He used his newly freed hand to push the button for the elevator, and we got on.

As soon as the door closed, Nick turned to me. "Hey, bro, this guy on the team is having a party later tonight. Why don't you go with me?"

"Um, I don't know..." I wasn't sure I was ready for my first college party. They always looked kind of wild in the movies.

"Aw, come on. It'll be a good way to meet people. And I promise it won't be too crazy."

Was I that easy to read? I must have looked as nervous as I felt.

"What else are you gonna do? Sit around the room by yourself?"

He wasn't wrong. That was exactly what I'd planned to do.

"And I'll be there, so you'll know at least one person." Nick must have noticed the hesitation on my face, because he doubled down. "Hey," he said, bumping my shoulder with his, "just come. You do know that nobody will be grading you on your party performance, right?"

"That sounds fake," I replied immediately.

He laughed. "I'm serious. You don't have to walk in there like some TikTok thirst trap."

"I don't even know how people act at parties," I admitted. "What if I just stand in the corner looking like someone brought their little cousin?"

"You won't."

"How do you know?"

"Because you're cute and funny and weird in an entertaining way," he said casually, like that was an objective fact. "People like you."

I looked away, pretending to inspect the groceries instead of dealing with the tiny emotional crisis those three words caused.

People like you.

That always felt suspiciously temporary to me. Like maybe people liked me in small doses until I became too awkward or too clingy or too much of whatever invisible thing I always worried I was too much of.

Nick either didn't notice me freaking out or politely chose not to acknowledge it.

“And honestly,” he continued, “college parties are mostly just loud music and people pretending they’re cooler than they are. You’ll fit right in.”

“I don’t know if that’s reassuring.”

“It should be. Half the guys there are gonna spend the night flexing near a speaker and yelling over Pitbull songs.”

I snorted.

“And besides,” he added, pointing at me, “you already survived a public emotional collapse at the coffee shop this week. This is gonna be way easier.”

“Oh my God,” I groaned. “Can we retire that storyline?”

“Absolutely not.”

I had a feeling he wouldn’t give up until I gave in, so I decided to surrender with dignity. “Okay, I’ll go.”

“Great! It’s gonna be lit. Meet me back here around nine, and we can head over together.”

“Yeah, uh, thanks,” I stammered as the elevator opened.

I dropped the bags on the counter, grabbed my wallet, and headed out before I could be roped into any more social gatherings.

Well, that was interesting! A party? With a bunch of other college guys?

Maybe Nick was right and I’d meet some people. Then I could finally forget about the Golden Boy. Knowing me, I could find another unavailable guy to crush on and eventually be embarrassed over.

I set off for the bus stop with my mood buoyed considerably. Capital District Transportation Authority, or CDTA, ran the bus system, and I guess it was fairly decent. The seats sucked on most of them, like most city buses, but they ran more or less on time.

One of the first things I’d done upon arriving at school was find out where the closest mall was and the easiest route to get there. While a lot of malls had closed over the years, Crossgates Mall, a huge shrine built to pay homage to the gods of capitalism, still seemed to be going strong. It boasted about a hundred and fifty retail stores, including a Human Claw Machine, whatever the hell that was. The website boasted one point six million square feet of retail nirvana.

Yeah, I liked to shop.

Online shopping was fun for some stuff; I liked window shopping in general. But when it came to clothes, I mostly wanted to go try them on, so I didn’t have to think about sending things back and waiting for replacements to be shipped.

The ride took about twenty minutes, and I spent it looking at the mixed styles of the storefronts and churches, until the bus took a left at a split in the road, and the mix turned residential.

I got off in front of the north entrance. The two-level mall had all sorts of shops to explore, and I blissfully browsed for a while before heading into a discount department store.

On my way to the socks and underwear section at the back of the store, I strolled through the aisles, looking at the jeans and the name brand shirts that were defective for reasons I usually couldn't discern.

I perused the underwear selection, checking out all the prices before making a final decision. I like to shop, but I don't like to blow money. I also wasn't going to just buy the cheapest brand. For instance, I never buy Fruit of the Loom because of that FTL they put on them. It looks tacky, like a house brand cheap garment, or something made in a sweat shop. Not to mention they fit poorly. Let's just say things never stayed where I put them.

I froze when I spotted a brand of underwear called Jake & Co. Was this some kind of cosmic joke? Everywhere I went there was a Jake, even down to underwear! It was too much, but I could take a hint.

I laughed to myself as I pawed through them to find two packages in my size. I figured that would be the only way Jake was getting in my pants.

Undies in hand, I walked to the counter feeling incredibly pathetic, as if the clerk would somehow know my reason for buying that brand and call me for it over the intercom.

"Attention, shoppers. Kody Kingsley just brought two packages of Jake & Co. boxer briefs to the counter because he has a ridiculously hopeless crush on someone named Jake. Can we have someone from security over here?"

Of course, that didn't happen, and a few minutes later I walked out with my shameful purchase safely hidden in a bag.

And that was when the overthinking kicked in. Had buying underwear with Jake's name on them crossed the line into obsessive stalker territory? Was I setting myself up to be the subject of a Netflix documentary?

I could see it now... Jake comes in for coffee one morning. In my usual imbecilic state that I slip into whenever he's around, I drop a mug, and when I bend over to pick it up, he sees the waistband of my underwear. Naturally, he'd say something, like, "Hey, is my name on your underwear, you creepy little psycho?" And then I'd have two choices: Either bludgeon

him to death with a coffee pot or drop out of school and enter the witness protection program. There were no other options.

Maybe I should just take them back, get a refund, and buy some other brand. No! That wasn't going to happen. Those babies were going home with me no matter what.

I'd lost my zest for shopping, though, so I headed home with my new underwear, wondering what was wrong with me.

As I got off the bus, my phone buzzed with a text. It was Nick reminding me about the party. I told him I was on my way back and to cool his jets.

Who says that? was his reply.

Me, I sent back.

As soon as I got in the room, Nick started bugging me to hurry up and get ready.

"What's your hurry?" I asked as I headed for my room to change. "You have a hot date or something?"

"No, but I don't want all the hot guys to pair up before I get there."

I paused. "Is it that kind of party?"

"Kody, I'm kidding. I promised my buddy I'd help him set up the rage cage table. I've got the cups." He pointed to a bag of red solo cups sitting on the floor by the door. I'd walked right past them.

"Rage cage?"

"It's a drinking game. Sort of like beer pong. You know beer pong?"

"I know *of* beer pong. As in, I know it's a thing that exists."

"Never mind. I'll teach you."

I wasn't sure I wanted to play, but I'd cross that bridge when we got there. In the meantime, I had a slightly bigger concern. Concerns.

"Uh, wait. First...will there be guys there? I mean...single guys?"

"Oh, I'm sure there will be. No idea of the mix though. Like, I contain multitudes, you know?"

I stared at him. "What does that mean?"

"Well, I'm an athlete, but I also like drag performers and sexy outfits. So even though a guy on the team is throwing the party and you might think it's all straight people, I'll be there, and you'll be there. We might be the only two on our team, but I can't be sure."

I scrunched my lips together.

"Do you want to dress up a bit? We can certainly get you some attention."

My eyes went wide. "Uh. No. I don't think I'm really looking."

“Still thinking about that blond stack of sexiness we saw?”

I felt hot. “Uh. Trying not to.”

“Well, that’s not easy.” He paused and looked at me. “Wait. Did you meet him?”

I sighed. “Yeah.”

“Whoa. Wait. Are you pregnant? No alcohol for you tonight!”

I couldn’t help but to laugh. “No. He came in for coffee, and I acted like a moron, because that’s what I do.”

“Some guys like it when we give their ego a boost like that.”

I shook my head. “Nah. He’s straight anyway. Saw him with some girl down at the shop the other night.”

“Maybe it was his sister?”

“Weird family if so; she was showing her brother a lot of cleavage.”

“Oh. Well, lots of cute guys. Let’s get you all tarted up for a night out.”

“I don’t think I want to draw any attention. I need to...let this obsession out of my head.”

I changed quickly, thinking briefly about trying out one of the new pairs of underwear, but decided to save them for a special occasion. Like, after a shower.

I combed my hair, adding a little dry wax to get it to flip up in the front, and then followed Nick out the door.

We were off to my first college party.

Chapter 7 - Jake

"I can explain everything, just don't fire Kody," I said, holding out my hands in the universal sign for *Please don't kill me*.

Max burst into laughter, and I belatedly realized that her reddening face had only been a sign of impending mirth, not anger.

My face flushed, and I stood awkwardly while she laughed herself out. Before she could pull herself together, the door opened again and the blonde woman — Marla? — entered. She took stock of Max's tear-stained face and me standing behind the counter and just shook her head.

"What did I miss?" she asked. "Did we hire the cutie-patootie?"

"It's not what it looks like..." I felt like an idiot. "Please don't fire Kody," I insisted again. "It wasn't his fault..."

"Nobody is getting fired, least of all Kody," Max said, wiping her tears. "But maybe you can start by explaining why you were behind the counter — on the floor, no less — with him."

Marla's eyebrows jumped up.

"Well, um, I startled Kody, and he jumped, and his dish rag caught on a handle and sprayed hot water all over the place, and I didn't know if he'd burned himself so I came back to check, and then I was helping him clean up the mess—"

"Take a breath, kid," she said, cutting me off. "Aren't you just a good little Samaritan?" She approached and peered over the counter, confirming the existence of a puddle. "Well, that was mighty sweet of you, but we'll take care of it now. So unless you want to tie on an apron, I suggest you get out from behind my counter."

I quickly and gratefully made my escape as Marla and Max slipped past me.

"I'll take care of this. You go check on Kody," Marla said to Max.

Max left through the back door and Marla turned her thoughtful gaze on me. I had a feeling she wasn't going to let me off as easily as Max had, so I grabbed my coffee and nodded in her direction as I practically ran for the door.

That was real smooth, Jake, I thought as I walked back to campus.

I'd never botched a pick-up quite that badly before, and I'd had some real doozies. Like the time I was aggressively flirting with a guy only for him to finally tell me that we'd already hooked up.

Or the time I thought a sexy tattooed bartender was checking me out all night, so I dramatically slid my number across the counter on a

napkin...only to have the other bartender grab the napkin, crumple it up, and throw it in the trash. It turned out she was his wife.

And arguably the worst one: I asked this guy who was always shopping at the art supply store for his Snap only for him to say, "No thanks. I knew your brother." Talk about a boner killer. No pun intended.

Those had been awkward, but this was different. I'd always shaken off my other failures, but this one deeply disappointed me. It wasn't just that it was embarrassing — I'd have to see Kody and Company again if I wanted to keep getting coffee there. And it wasn't just that he was adorable — although, that smile! I'd been shot down by hotter guys and walked away without a second thought.

So what was different?

He fascinated me.

No, it was more than that. I felt inexplicably drawn to him for reasons I didn't understand. He wasn't remotely anything like my usual type...and maybe that's what I liked about him. Maybe it was his innocence. There was a certain flustered naiveté about him that I found very charming.

What am I thinking? I don't even know if he's gay!

Things had been going well though, at least before Max and Marla had returned. I was pretty sure I was getting positive signals from him.

I sighed.

Or maybe he was just too nice to tell me I was being a weirdo creeper.

It was possible I'd never know after that debacle. I wouldn't blame him if he ran the next time he saw me coming. What had I been thinking going behind the counter like that? I could have gotten him fired.

Even if he is gay, he probably won't be interested in you if he finds out about your past, a nasty little voice whispered inside my head.

Maybe that was what made it different. My attraction to Kody was about something other than just his looks. I wanted more than a one-night stand, and that terrified me. I didn't know if I was ready to be honest with someone about the things I'd done. I could always keep it a secret, but if things developed, I'd have to tell him eventually, and then it would only be worse then because I would have hidden it from him.

I sighed again.

This line of thinking was going nowhere fast. All I had was speculation and suppositions. I pushed Kody from my mind and tried to redirect my thoughts.

As I passed the student union, I remembered that I still needed to buy those assigned books for English, so I decided to try again. Maybe

they'd restocked or something. If nothing else, it would be a welcome distraction from my thoughts of Kody. If they didn't have them this time, I didn't know what I would do.

Luckily, the bookstore wasn't as busy as it had been earlier. I pulled the list up on my phone and started looking up call numbers. Sure enough, they had restocked at least some of the books, and it didn't take me long to find two out of the three titles.

I took the ones I'd managed to find up to the cash register and asked about the final book. The guy behind the counter said they didn't have any more copies, and probably wouldn't for another week.

I made my way back to my room, but as I went to unlock the door, I dropped my keys.

"Jesus Christ," I muttered, bending to pick them up — only to somehow slam my forehead directly into the door in the process.

Pain exploded behind my eyes.

I leaned against the door with a groan, waiting for the throbbing to subside, when, to my surprise, the door suddenly swung inward.

Off balance, I stumbled straight into the room, my books flying from my arms as I pinwheeled forward and crashed into what felt less like a person and more like a load-bearing wall.

Or, more specifically — because apparently the universe hated me personally — Slug.

Of course it was Slug.

He caught me in a bone-crushing hug and looked down at me as if I'd somehow lost my mind.

"Don't you have a room?" I snapped as I struggled to disentangle myself from the giant.

"Yeah, but my roommate doesn't like me," he said matter-of-factly.

"I can't imagine why not." My voice was soaked in sarcasm but the Neanderthal didn't seem to notice.

"I don't know either. I'm always polite."

I stifled a roar of frustration as I turned away to pick up my books. I dropped them on my desk, then decided to get it over with.

"Where is Foster?" I asked, even though I knew it was an exercise in futility.

He shrugged, sending ripples across his chest. "Dunno."

"Why am I not surprised?"

He sat on Foster's bed and stared dumbly at me. I fought the urge to scream at the big doofus, reminding myself that he couldn't help being the dimmest bulb on the Christmas tree. Besides, I knew what was really

bothering me was the fact that I'd screwed things up with Kody. There was no point taking that out on Slug.

I flopped backwards onto my bed with a sigh.

"Are you okay?" Slug asked.

"It's a long story," I said, waving my hand dismissively.

"I have time."

"Thanks, but...I don't really feel like talking about it."

"Oh. Okay."

Was it my imagination or did he sound a little disappointed? I took pity on him and decided to attempt a conversation.

"So you're friends with Foster?"

"Yeah."

This might be more difficult than I'd first thought. "How do you know each other?"

"We went to the same high school."

"Where was that?"

"Canton."

"Is that in New York?"

"Yeah."

"I've never heard of it."

"It's upstate."

I squinted. "I'm not from here. What does that mean? Aren't we technically upstate here?"

"It's...more upstate."

"So north of here?"

"Yeah. Near Canada."

I was getting worn out from the effort of extracting information. I decided to take a breather and let the silence settle between us. I jumped a little when he suddenly started talking.

"We've been friends since, like, kindergarten. We're both really good at sports. Foster plays water polo. I play football. Foster used to play football too before he got into water polo. We used to be best friends, but when he started playing water polo, he didn't talk to me as much. When he found out I was going here too, he suddenly wanted to be my friend again."

He paused, and I thought his infodump was finished. It was obvious to me that Foster was using Slug, probably for the access to booze, assuming my theory was correct. I was trying to think of something to say while also trying very hard not to picture Foster in nothing but a Speedo and those weird little bathing cap things when Slug started up again.

"Everybody always thinks I'm really stupid, and maybe I'm not the smartest guy, but I'm not as dumb as people think either. Foster thinks I'm dumb, but he's not any smarter than me. I got better grades than he did. Sometimes I don't think he really even likes me all that much. I think he's just my friend because I'm the only person he knows here."

I stared at Slug with a new respect. As he'd admitted, he might not be the brightest guy but he was obviously smarter than he looked to have figured all that out on his own.

"What's your real name?" I asked.

"Huh?"

"Your name isn't really Slug, is it?"

He shook his head. "It's Brayden."

I blinked. He didn't look like a Brayden.

"I hate Slug," he added sadly.

"Then why does Foster call you that?"

"Everybody back home called me that. When I was seven, somebody dared me to eat a slug."

"And you did?"

He nodded.

"Ah."

I suddenly found myself actually liking the big lug...at least a little. I felt bad for him. There was a certain sadness about him that made me wonder what was going on inside that big empty head of his.

Or perhaps it wasn't as empty as I'd thought.

"Well, Brayden," I said, reaching for my book. "I think I'm going to read for a little while."

When I said his name, he got a big goofy grin on his face. "Sure, Jamie. Don't let me bother you."

"It's, uh, Jake," I reminded him, and he nodded cheerfully. He'd probably forgotten already.

I shrugged and started reading.

I looked up a while later, surprised to see Brayden still sitting there grinning happily. Maybe there wasn't too much going on inside his head after all.

I sat my book down a couple of hours later and looked over at Brayden. He was still sitting on Foster's bed. He'd turned on the TV after asking if it would bother me, and ever since, he'd been contentedly watching Cartoon Network.

"I'm going to lunch," I said.

He looked up. "Can I come?"

I had a sudden sinking feeling that he'd latched onto me. Would he start following me around like a big dopey puppy? The thought was rather chilling, but I couldn't very well tell him he couldn't eat lunch.

"Uh, yeah, sure."

He plodded along after me as we walked to the cafeteria. I got a cold-cut sub while he filled several plates with enough food to feed a small third world country. I suddenly understood how he maintained his size. We ate in companionable silence, and then he followed me back to my room.

The rest of the weekend was basically just more of the same. I read and messed around online or played games while Brayden watched TV, chuckling occasionally over the antics of whatever animated character he happened to be watching at the time.

Foster barely made an appearance, which was fine with me, but Brayden was in our room more than my actual roommate. I finally asked Brayden about it, and he informed me that Foster's absence was due to "team stuff." He didn't elaborate, and I didn't ask him to.

He did finally reappear Sunday night, which was probably a good thing considering classes started the next day.

The first week of classes went about as well as I could've expected. A few of them were obviously going to be easy enough to sleepwalk through, while others looked significantly more brutal than I'd anticipated when I signed up for them.

Most of my professors seemed pretty cool, though. Passionate without being insufferable, which felt like the ideal balance.

While the jury was still on my Philosophy professor, I really only took an instant dislike to one, who I could already tell was going to be one of those types who were really full of themselves and never tired of hearing their own voice. By the end of the first lecture, I was already exhausted by his nonstop barrage of humblebrags.

Friday afternoon, I was working on a paper that had already been assigned while Brayden watched videos on his phone when Foster burst into the room wearing a shit-eating grin.

"Dude, I've had the best fuckin' day!" he bellowed.

I wasn't sure if he was talking to me or Brayden and decided not to comment on the off-chance he wasn't talking to me.

Apparently, he didn't need the encouragement anyway, since he continued without hesitation. "I met some dope guys," he said. "They all play soccer, but we had some...business, and they invited me to this super

chill party tonight to celebrate the first week of school. You guys *have* to come. They said it's going to be, like, the party of the century."

"Of the *entire* century?" I asked.

If he heard me, he gave no indication. "Everybody is going to be there." He paused dramatically before delivering his *coup de grâce*. "And it's off campus at this guy's apartment."

"He must have a big apartment if everybody is going to be there."

"Anyway, he told me to bring some friends and you guys are like the only people I know."

"Wow, what an invitation. I've never felt so special."

"So you guys are coming, right?"

I stared at him and wondered if anything ever sank into that thick skull of his.

"Are you going?" Brayden asked me.

"No, I think I'll pass on this one."

I could think of at least several dozen other things I'd prefer to do besides attend a college jock party, up to and including a root canal. Besides, there would no doubt be lots of drinking and, more likely than not, drugs. I really didn't need to put myself in that position.

"Oh, come on. You have to go!" Foster suddenly looked like an overgrown, petulant two-year-old. "I can't show up alone."

"Why do I have to go? You guys can go without me."

"I don't wanna go either," Brayden said.

Foster stared at him in utter disbelief. "Dude, you love parties!"

He shrugged. "I don't wanna go."

Faced with the idea of spending another entire day *and* night alone in my room with Brayden gave me a new perspective on the party. I would just avoid the alcohol and drugs.

"Okay, I'll go," I said quickly, hoping I wouldn't regret it later.

"Me too," Brayden said immediately.

Foster gave him a funny look, but seemed satisfied that we were both going to the party with him.

"Great! It starts around nine. Meet me here by, like, ten. I don't want to be the first ones there."

With that, he spun around and was gone as quickly as he'd appeared, slamming the door behind him.

Soon after that, I went to dinner, Brayden once again trailing after me like a silent golem. Erin and Carlos were there when we arrived and they waved me over to their table. The three of us kept up a constant stream of chatter as we ate, while Brayden silently inhaled his food.

After he finished eating, Brayden surprised me by announcing that he was going back to his room to change and lumbered off.

I welcomed the respite.

"So what's up with your gigantic friend?" Erin asked after he'd left.

"Brayden? He's my roommate's friend from high school, but apparently he's basically a stray cat and, unfortunately, I fed him."

Erin giggled. "Well, you'll never have to worry about getting mugged with him following you around."

Carlos laughed. "At least he's quiet. You know who he reminds me of? The guy Andre the Giant played in *The Princess Bride*."

"Fezzik!" Erin squealed.

Carlos howled. "Anybody want a peanut?"

"You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means," Erin yelled back.

My head was swiveling back and forth between them like I was following a particularly heated match at Wimbledon.

"Have fun storming the castle!" Carlos screeched.

Both of them were almost crying from laughing so hard.

"Hey, so um, what's happening here?" I asked, mildly concerned.

Carlos and Erin abruptly stopped laughing and stared at me with twin expressions of shock.

"You've never seen *The Princess Bride*," Erin asked.

"Nope," I admitted.

"Inconceivable!" Carlos crowed.

"You're kidding, right," Erin said, sounding as if I'd just announced that I'd never bathed before.

"Uh, no. Is it a movie?"

"It's not *just* a movie. It's one of the best comedies ever made. You have to come back to my room and watch it right now."

I laughed and shrugged. "Why not? I have a few hours to kill before I have to get ready for this stupid party my idiot roommate talked me into attending."

"Where is it being held?" Erin asked as we stood up to throw our trash away.

"I don't even know. Off campus somewhere."

She made a face. "Be careful. Some of those off-campus parties get pretty wild."

Just what I needed. Maybe there was still time to bail. I'd worry about that later.

We walked back to Erin's room while Carlos and Erin threw lines from the movie back and forth. I wouldn't need to see it after they finished quoting the entire script.

Once we were in her room, Erin found it on streaming and started the movie. They settled onto the futon while I took the chair. The movie turned out to be surprisingly good, and I could definitely see the resemblance between Brayden and the lovable but intellectually challenged Fezzik.

After the movie ended, we sat around and just talked for a while. Erin and Carlos were quickly becoming my closest friends here. I'd even found it was possible to sit in Carlos' presence without drooling.

Around nine-thirty, I excused myself to change for the party. I wasn't exactly thrilled about going, but if I had to attend, I'd at least look my best.

I somehow wasn't surprised to find Brayden in my room when I opened the door. He'd changed into a pair of nice jeans and a button-down shirt. I had to admit it was an improvement over his usual uniform of athletic shorts and sleeveless T-shirts.

I took a few minutes to pick out an outfit of my own, finally settling on nice jeans and a sexy, form-fitting, short-sleeved knit polo shirt that matched my blue eyes almost perfectly.

I debated going into the bathroom to change, but decided that was just silly. Still, I felt weird getting undressed in front of Brayden, so I changed as quickly as possible, feeling as if he was watching me. He probably didn't even notice. SpongeBob was on, and that seemed to have captured his full attention.

Once dressed, I ran my fingers through my hair and sprayed on some of my favorite cologne.

"You look nice," Brayden said suddenly, startling me.

"Uh, thanks," I said, feeling distinctly uncomfortable.

If Brayden turned out to be gay and developed a crush on me, I was moving home. Screw college.

We didn't have to wait long before Foster showed up again. "You guys ready?" he asked.

"As I'll ever be," I answered with a heavy sigh.

I had a sinking feeling about this party.

He frowned. "You could sound a little more excited."

"Let's just go. You do know where we're going, right?"

"I have directions."

Somehow, I wasn't reassured.

As we were leaving, I thought I caught a whiff of alcohol on his breath but wasn't positive.

Surely, he hadn't been pre-gaming, had he?

Then again, knowing him, that's exactly what he'd been doing, probably with his teammates. It seemed as if now that he'd fallen in with them, Brayden was, at best, an afterthought for him.

Which meant I was Brayden's babysitter by default.

Oh joy.

We followed Foster downstairs, and he set off in the direction of The Morning Rush. As we passed the coffee house, I glanced in, but Kody wasn't in sight. Max was working with a sulky-looking guy I hadn't seen before.

We walked for several more minutes, taking a few turns that almost felt random. I was beginning to suspect Foster was lost when we arrived at a slightly rundown apartment building with a sign in the window that read "College Rentals."

"I think this is it," Foster said, pushing open the front door.

We followed him in as he started up a flight of steps taking two at a time. When the door closed behind us, we were suddenly thrown into pitch-black darkness. I came to a sudden halt and Brayden slammed into me full force from behind, knocking me down with a clatter and a yelp.

"What the fuck?" Foster exclaimed.

"I think Brayden just broke my leg," I groaned.

"Why is it so dark?" Brayden asked.

"Who the fuck is Brayden?" Foster asked in confusion.

"I'm Brayden," Brayden responded. "Did I really break your leg?"

"No, it's not broken. You just knocked me down." I pulled myself to my feet using the wall for support.

"His name is Slug!" Foster bleated in the darkness.

"I don't like Slug. My name is Brayden."

"Since when?"

"My mom named me that when I was born."

"Could someone just open the damn door?" I yelled just as a light appeared at the top of the stairs and music flooded into the stairwell.

"I thought I heard voices," a guy said from the second floor.

He was backlit so I couldn't make out his face clearly, but he looked to be about average height and was well-built from what I could see.

"I'm assuming you're here for the party," he continued. "Sorry about the light being out. My bro said the landlord hasn't replaced it yet. Come on up. Be careful."

We made it to the second-floor landing without further incident, and I got my first real look at our host for the evening. He was quite good looking, around my height, with light brown hair, green eyes, and a square jaw.

"Nick Pederson," he said with a megawatt grin as he held out his hand, and we all shook it in turn, introducing ourselves as we went.

His handshake was as firm as his jaw. I thought I saw something in his eyes as his hand lingered in mine just a little too long, then caught myself.

Chill, you horny fucker, I chided myself.

I was beginning to think everybody I met was gay. First Toshi, then Kody, and now this random guy. I'd even wondered briefly about Brayden. Was I that desperate for some queer companionship or was this college just full of fairies?

"Is this your place?" Foster asked as we entered.

"Nah, I live on campus. This joint is my teammate's. He's around here somewhere, I was just closer to the door. Come on, I'll give you the grand tour."

He escorted us into the apartment which was surprisingly large and already pretty much filled to capacity. Most of the guys looked like meatheads, and the girls were, let's just say, of a type. That type being large breasted and empty eyed.

As I'd suspected, there was plenty of alcohol flowing, although at that point, everyone was still more or less sober. Music was playing, but it was at background volume and didn't really interfere with the conversations that were going on all around the room.

"Drinks are in the kitchen, bathroom's at the end of the hall, bedrooms are off limits...unless you're personally invited." He winked. "Can I get you a drink?"

"Just point me towards the hard stuff," Foster said, his eyes already scanning the room like a predator seeking prey.

"I'll just have a beer, thanks," Brayden said politely.

Nick pointed Foster in the direction of the kitchen, then grabbed a bottled beer out of a nearby cooler and handed it to Brayden. Then he turned to me. "What can I get you?"

"Do you have Coke?"

"As in cocaine?"

"No, like the soda."

"Oh sure. Rum and Coke?"

"Hold the rum."

"Just a Coke?"

"Please?"

"No problem." He ducked into the kitchen area and returned quickly with a glass of Coke. I took a cautious sip just to be safe.

"I didn't spike it," he said with a smile.

I smiled back. "Sorry. I didn't mean to imply you did. It's just that I don't drink."

"At all?" he asked with surprise.

"Not anymore."

"Oh, okay. Got it. That's cool."

We chatted for a few minutes before the sound of shattering glass came from the kitchen. Nick flinched and gave me an apologetic grimace.

"I guess you'd better go check on that," I said.

He grimaced. "Yeah. First party foul of the night. I'll catch you later." He headed off in the direction of the crash.

Considering it wasn't even his place, he sure seemed to be running the show. Did anyone even live there?

I decided to make a circuit of the room. As I went, I looked for familiar faces but didn't see any. To be fair, the only people I'd met were other freshmen in my building, and what were the chances any of them would end up here partying with all these jocks?

As I went, Brayden followed a few feet behind me. When I stopped, he stopped. When I moved, he moved. It would have been comical if I wasn't so annoyed. I couldn't be mean to him, though. It would feel too much like kicking a particularly dim puppy.

I finished my lap around the living room and started down the hall. The party had spilled into the front bedroom, where a group of people were watching something on the TV. I assumed they'd all been personally invited. They definitely looked stoned as fuck, staring glassy-eyed at the screen with blank expressions.

I hadn't been invited, but I stayed and watched for a while before eventually losing interest in the dumb comedy and wandering on again, Brayden always nearby.

I had a mildly interesting conversation with a guy who liked to surf as much as I did, but when his girlfriend arrived, he quickly lost interest in me and started pawing at her chest.

Eventually, I ended up back in the living room, leaning against the wall. Parties just weren't as much fun if you couldn't drink — especially when you didn't know anyone.

I gave the room another once over hoping someone I knew had arrived while I'd been in the back, but all I came up with was Foster, who was busy hitting on a brunette chick who looked extremely disinterested. He already looked hammered.

No wonder, I thought as I watched him drain the glass of amber liquid in his hand. He was knocking back the hard stuff straight-up.

Brayden was standing a few feet away from me with his arms crossed over his chest while scanning the crowd. Every few seconds, he'd glance over to make sure I was still nearby. I was beginning to feel like I had my own personal bodyguard. If anyone there was actually interested in me, they'd probably be too intimidated to approach.

Just then, I was proven wrong as someone tapped me on the shoulder. I turned to find a painfully thin girl with stringy blonde hair.

"You look really familiar," she said.

Her voice was steady but her eyes were slightly unfocused. It was a look I'd seen many times before. She'd been into something besides alcohol tonight.

"Are you from around here?" she asked.

"Uh, no. I'm from out of state."

As I said that, I realized that she did actually look vaguely familiar. My brain raced, trying to figure out where I might know her from. It would be just my luck if she was someone from my past.

"Really? Me too. I swear I've seen you before. Have you ever been to California?"

I took a closer look at her.

Shit.

I'd lived in California for a year with Judy. I'd been quite the party boy while there. I didn't know where I'd met this girl before, but I was sure I didn't want her to remember. Not here. I'd done a lot of things I wasn't proud of then.

"Nope. You must have me confused with someone else."

I quickly moved away, Brayden trailing a few steps behind. Movement caught my attention out of the corner of my eye, and I turned to see some drunk rando dancing by himself on the other side of the room.

No, not just a rando, I realized. It was Kody.

He turned in my direction, his eyes squeezed shut as he danced. His cheeks were rosy, his lips turned up in a smile, his body moving without any inhibitions. He was clearly inebriated, but his movements were graceful, even sensual.

I took advantage of the moment, taking him in without worrying about him catching me staring.

He was even beautiful drunk.

He was dressed very differently than he did for work. A pair of tight jeans hugged his perky little butt, which was revealed every time he raised his arms over his head, lifting the patterned button-up shirt he wore over a plain, white V-neck tee that was maybe a size too small — not that I was complaining. His denim-clad butt wasn't all that was revealed with that particular dance move. It also showed off a tantalizing glimpse of his smooth stomach.

I couldn't tear my eyes off him, but other people were starting to notice him too. The blonde chick from California had even started dancing with him. Or at least in his general vicinity.

"Hey! Look at the little fag dance!" someone yelled.

Unfortunately, I was fairly sure I knew that voice. I searched out the heckler and, sure enough, it was Foster. It figured he'd be a homophobe. He was definitely shitfaced.

Kody stopped dancing and stood swaying slightly while he sought out the voice. He stared defiantly at Foster.

"Go on, fag. Dance till you puke," Foster taunted, and several dudebros laughed with him.

I didn't like the look in Kody's eyes. I pushed away from the wall where I'd been leaning and started across the room in his direction.

Before I'd taken more than a couple steps, Nick caught Foster's arm and said something to him quietly. Foster shook him off angrily and gave him a slight push.

Suddenly, Kody launched himself into Foster's chest. Kody was much smaller, but he caught Foster by surprise, and Foster was beyond trashed. They went down with a crash, Kody pummeling Foster's face before they hit the floor.

I had to give it to him, he was a tough little moron. He couldn't keep that up forever though, and Foster would cream him the first chance he got.

I tried to move faster through the crowd, but Nick was closer. He grabbed Kody and started pulling him off of Foster.

Foster took the opportunity to throw a sucker punch.

One shot and little Kody was out like a light.

I felt a growl in my throat, but suddenly, the crowd parted before me as Brayden cut through them like a bulldozer. He reached Foster and lifted him off the floor as if he was nothing more than a rag doll.

"That was mean," he snarled.

"Are you sticking up for fags now, *Slug*?" Foster spat the name like an insult.

I saw Brayden's hand clench into a fist, and quickly stepped in close to lay a hand on his arm.

"He's drunk, Brayden," I said quietly. "Why don't you take him back to our room before he causes more trouble?"

I felt the tension drain out of him. I seriously believe those might have been Foster's last words if I hadn't been there.

"What about the kid?" he asked.

I looked over at Kody, his head cradled in Nick's lap, and felt a sharp stab of jealousy...and something else.

Protectiveness?

I wasn't sure, but I definitely felt an overwhelming desire to take care of this virtual stranger.

But was Nick his boyfriend?

"I'll check on him," I said quietly.

"Okay, Jake," Brayden agreed.

I took a moment to appreciate that he'd finally gotten my name right as he physically dragged a loudly protesting Foster out the door before turning my attention to Kody and Nick.

I knelt down next to them.

"Hey, Kody," I said softly. "You okay?"

He tried to focus on me, but his eyes refused to cooperate. "Jake?"

"Yeah."

"There're two of you."

"It's okay. Just relax."

"I take it you two know each other?" Nick asked.

"Yeah, we've met."

"I'm his roommate. I had no idea he was such a wild man."

I felt a rush of relief. They were just roommates. Then I frowned. That didn't mean they weren't also dating.

I realized Nick was watching me, waiting for a response. "I, uh, don't get the impression that he usually is. Wild, I mean."

"Hey, I'm in the room, you guys," Kody slurred. "Don't talk about me like I'm not here."

"Sorry, Kody. Hey, Nick, Foster is my roommate so I feel a little responsible to clean up his mess. Why don't I take care of getting Kody here back to his room so you can get back to the party?"

"Are you sure? Kody's my roommate. I also feel a little responsible for him."

"Yeah, but parties aren't much fun when you're sober. I was thinking about leaving anyway. No need for all of us to go."

He shrugged. "Sounds like a plan. Is that okay with you, Kody?"

"Hm? Yeah, whatever Jakie says."

"Jacie?" Nick asked with a raised eyebrow.

I stared back, wide-eyed. I was as confused as he was.

Thankfully, Nick dropped it, but a little smirk played around the corners of his mouth.

Between the two of us, we managed to get Kody more or less to his feet. He was leaning heavily against me, but I can't say I minded it all that much.

Do not take advantage of this situation, I told myself sternly.

We moved slowly towards the door, the other partiers considerably moving out of the way as we progressed. Someone kindly got the door for us, and I maneuvered him into the hallway.

"Sorry about all this," I said, as Nick joined us in the hall.

"It's not your fault," he said. "You're probably the only sober one involved. If you hadn't stepped in, I think we would have had a dead body on our hands. That big guy looked like he could do some damage. It was nice meeting you, though. Hey, maybe we can get together some other time under better circumstances."

He gave me a dazzling smile, and I definitely knew he was flirting this time. I hesitated, and he noticed. His eyes flicked to Kody, who had his arms wrapped around my neck and his head on my shoulder.

"Unless..." he started, then stopped.

I gave him a questioning look.

"Unless there's something going on with you and Kody."

At the sound of his name, Kody nuzzled his face further into my neck.

"Uh...n-nothing is going on," I stammered unconvincingly.

He broke into a grin. "Uh huh. You sure you can handle him?"

I took a deep, calming breath. "Yeah. Taken care of."

"Okay then. Be safe. I'm sure I'll see you around."

His words felt strangely loaded, but all I said was, "Thanks."

He shut the door, leaving Kody and me alone in the dark hall. I'd forgotten about the situation with the lighting...or lack thereof.

"Okay, Kody," I said to the dead weight at my side. "Let's get you to bed."

He giggled. "Are you hitting on me?"

I couldn't help but laugh too. "You wish."

"Mmm," was his ambiguous reply.

It suddenly occurred to me that we were a ways from campus and I didn't even know what dorm he lived in. Not to mention, I had to somehow get both of us down the flight of stairs in near total darkness. Maybe I should have let Nick help after all.

The spark of jealousy flared up again, but I tamped it back down. At least I knew that Kody and Nick weren't an item since he'd basically asked me out. If I wasn't so smitten with the boy in my arms, I wouldn't have hesitated. Old me would have had him naked before he'd finished the sentence.

But that was the old me.

New me was still standing in the dark at the top of the stairs with a very cute but barely conscious boy in my arms.

"Hey, Kody," I said. "Think you can help me get down these stairs?"

He didn't respond.

"Kody with a K," I tried again.

Still nothing.

"Kode-ster."

Nada.

With a sigh, I shifted as much of his weight onto me as possible and started a very slow descent, half-dragging Kody while making my way down the pitch-black stairs — mostly by feel — while grim visions of the two of us tumbling to our deaths danced through my head. Some unfortunate party-goer would find our twisted bodies in a heap at the foot of the stairs, our necks broken, arms still wrapped tightly around each other for eternity.

Needless to say, I was extremely happy when my feet finally found solid ground instead of another step.

I stood there for a minute catching my breath, then hauled him outside. We may have survived the stairway to hell, but Kody was still dead weight. I decided I was too exhausted to drag his limp ass all the way back to campus, so I called a Lyft.

I shook him awake when we arrived.

"Kody, what dorm are you in?"

He mumbled a response, but I couldn't make it out.

"Kody," I practically shouted in his face. "What's your dorm?"

"Hudson," he said clearly.

I frowned. I didn't know where that was. I thought all the dorms were named after local tribes. Hudson was a river, wasn't it? Maybe I'd misunderstood him.

"Where's Hudson?" I asked.

He raised his head, looked around with that weird momentary lucidity drunk people can sometimes muster, then pointed in the opposite direction from my own dorm.

"That way," he said, then promptly plopped his head back on my shoulder, eyes closed once more.

I started us in the general direction he'd pointed, hoping I'd run into someone I could ask on the way.

I didn't. The campus had a weirdly deserted feel to it. I guess everyone was off at some party.

We rounded a corner, and suddenly an enormous, brand-new building loomed in front of us, Hudson Hall spelled out in huge, stainless-steel letters across its side. I stopped in my tracks. It looked like a luxury hotel compared to the dump I was in.

"This is your dorm?" I asked incredulously.

Kody raised his head again and struggled to focus. "Yesh."

I sighed. "Okay, let's get you home, Drunkie McDrunkerson. Where's your key?"

"Pocket."

He made no move to get it, so with another sigh, I fumbled my hand into his pocket.

He giggled again and squirmed against me, which caused a blood flow directly to my crotch.

"You're making this hard," I mumbled, and added under my breath, "Pun intended."

I couldn't find a key, but I did find what felt like a thick credit card. I slid my hand out of his pants and looked down at a keycard.

"Of course you'd have a fancy keycard for this fancy palace," I muttered, and we started forward again, Kody stumbling along beside me.

I suddenly stopped again as I realized I couldn't just waltz into Kody's dorm with him obviously drunk off his ass. He was a freshman. He might get expelled. Or...whatever they did with drunk freshman at college. I wasn't really sure, but I vaguely remembered Baldy droning on about some sort of dire punishment if we were caught drinking.

Did it still count if the drinking was off campus?

I guess that didn't make Kody any older. Underage was still underage no matter where you consumed the alcohol.

So what was I going to do?
Just then, I spotted someone I recognized.
"Toshi," I hissed.
They looked around, startled.
"Over here."
They spotted me and approached us apprehensively.
"Is your friend okay?" they asked when they got a better look at

Kody.

"Eh. He had a little too much to drink. Do you think you could maybe help me get him back to his room without his RA seeing him?"

A terrified look crossed Toshi's face. "How would we do that?"

"I, uh...I don't know. Could you maybe create some sort of distraction until I get him onto the elevator?"

They blinked owlshly at me. "Distraction? Like what?"

"I don't know, Toshi. Just think of something." They looked like they were going to refuse, so I sweetened the deal. "Please. I'll owe you big time."

They thought that over, then nodded somberly.

The three of us made our way to the entrance, where I used Kody's card to unlock the door. Toshi, now fully committed, slipped inside and strode across the lobby with purpose.

The RA at the front desk, a heavy-set girl who looked like she'd used Marge Simpson's makeup shotgun from that one episode of *The Simpsons*, glanced up as Toshi approached. She looked like was about to say something when Toshi froze in their tracks and began to violently convulse.

"Oh no!" they said loudly in a high-pitched voice. "I'm having a seizure." They then proceeded to collapse onto the floor where they continued to writhe in a comically exaggerated manner.

Their performance wasn't going to win an Oscar, but it was enough to convince the RA. She leaped up from her chair, sending it careening into the wall, and rushed around to kneel next to Toshi, her hands fluttering nervously above their body.

I was so caught up in the drama that I almost forgot to make our move, but I snapped to attention just in time. I hustled Kody across the lobby and stabbed at the elevator call button. Luckily, there was one already on the ground floor, because the doors opened almost immediately, for which I was very grateful.

I half-shoved, half-dragged Kody onto the elevator and watched the doors closed before releasing a breath I hadn't even realized I was

holding. It was only then that I realized I didn't know what floor Kody was on.

I shook him awake(ish) again and got his floor number. Once there, I propped him against the door and unlocked it using the key card while holding him up with one arm.

He stumbled backwards as the door swung open.

I caught him and pulled his body against mine as I struggled to keep my own balance. His arms went around my neck, his face only inches away. His eyes were wide open all of a sudden, and he stared at me with alarming clarity.

I felt my face flush as I sincerely hoped he was too drunk to remember any of this in the morning.

"Bedroom?" I croaked.

He pointed vaguely toward a closed door across what appeared to be a shared space with a small table with a couple of chairs, a small IKEA couch in front of a TV, and a counter that ran along one wall. Even that was bigger than my entire room...that I now knew I shared with a homophobic cretin.

I kicked the door closed and waltzed us toward what I hoped was Kody's room.

"Come on, we're almost there," I grunted.

We reached the door, which I managed to open, then reached inside and found the light switch.

Sure enough, there was an unmade bed — a full, I noted bitterly, thinking about my narrow twin bed. The impression of Kody's body could still be seen in its sheets.

I shuffled him towards the mattress until we reached its side.

"Okay, into bed," I said.

"Okay," he agreed with a giggle and fell back, pulling me with him onto his bed.

"Kody, I should go," I said, my voice uneven and my breath ragged.

"No. Stay," he whispered.

Chapter 8 - Kody

Someone had finally turned the music down. It had been almost deafening when we'd arrived, even though the party hadn't even officially started yet.

I say officially, because the party was clearly already well underway for the hosts who lived in the apartment, including Nick's teammate Ethan. My man was absolutely zooted and completely useless.

At least I understood why Nick had been asked to be the cohost when he didn't even live there. He was obviously the responsible team member.

Nick was visibly annoyed, which made me feel bad for him. I helped out where I could, while Nick kept apologizing, and I assured him that it wasn't a big deal. Rinse and repeat.

We'd been among the first to arrive — at least besides those who had been invited to pregame — but by the time we'd set up the drinking game whose name I'd already forgotten and cleaned the kitchen, a few people had started trickling in. After that, the place had slowly filled up until people were scattered around the large living room milling about in clusters, talking, drinking, and laughing.

Nick then tried to teach me the drinking game, which involved a lot of fast-paced bouncing ping pong balls into cups and smacking other people's cups and drinking lukewarm beer, but I never quite got the hang of it. I just drank whatever people shoved into my hands. It was nasty, like drinking someone's morning breath saliva, but I didn't know what else to do.

Eventually, I'd begged off, but that just left me wandering around awkwardly on my own. I felt out of place, not sure how I should conduct myself at what appeared to be a very straight jock gathering. I was feeling a little conspicuous in my sartorial choices. Aside from Nick, it seemed like everyone else was wearing jerseys and baggy jeans.

Nick suddenly appeared by my side. "Come on, Kody, let's get you a drink!" he said as he took me by the hand and pulled me through the crowd.

"I've been drinking," I protested.

"I mean a real drink, not sips of stale beer."

"I thought you were still playing rage bait."

"Rage cage," he corrected. "And I was, but it was getting old, and you look like you need to loosen up a little."

Maybe I did need to loosen up. I certainly wasn't enjoying myself.

We paused when Nick hit a traffic jam at the kitchen door, so I took the opportunity to take in the view, which wasn't much considering the colossal guy blocking most of my line of sight. He was like a pillar of solid flesh. He turned in profile, and I saw a low, heavy forehead that resembled a bulwark, complete with unibrow. His muscles rippled as he stretched his gargantuan body. Then again, everyone is huge at my height.

The man-mountain shifted, and I almost gasped.

There was Jake, turned three quarters away from me and holding a glass of something dark. His chest was outlined in a tight-fitting, dark blue polo that reminded me of a clear evening sky. He began to turn in my direction, but Nick started moving again at that point, and I was tugged away into the kitchen.

"Screwdriver?" Nick asked as we reached the counter.

"I'm not all that mechanical," I replied.

He smiled and mouthed 'smart ass' at me before pouring a drink that looked like it was mostly orange juice with a generous splash of something clear. He handed it to me with a flourish, and I sipped it carefully.

"Hey! This isn't bad!"

"Would I steer you wrong?"

I began to drink it a bit more quickly while Nick pointed out a few teammates and told me a little about them — small talk really. I tuned most of it out. I didn't really care.

Just then, yet another one of his teammates appeared and dragged him away for one more game of caged rage or whatever they called it. How many teammates did he have, anyway?

I glanced down and realized that my drink was almost empty...and it tasted like a second.

What had he put in it?

"Hey, how do you make a screwdriver?" I asked a girl who was pouring a healthy amount of dark rum into a cup of Coke. She looked like she knew how to make a drink.

She gave me a look like I was stupid. "It's just vodka and orange juice."

That didn't sound hard. In fact, it sounded almost healthy.

I grabbed the carton of OJ and poured some into my cup, then added a splash of vodka. I thought about it, and added a few more glugs.

I was on my third — or was it my fourth? — drink, when Nick rejoined me.

“Have you even left the kitchen?” he asked, then noticed the half-full drink in my hand. “Jesus. Are you still working on that drink I made you?”

I shrugged. I didn't want to admit how many drinks I'd had.

“If you don't like it, just say so. Here, I'll make you something even better. It's called a Long Island Iced Tea.”

I watched him start pouring a bunch of liquors into a cup, then finish it off with a splash of Coke. Not a drop of iced tea to be found, but I was in no shape to complain.

He handed it to me, and I took a healthy slurp. Boy, was that good too!

Nick snorted. “Attaboy! Double fisting. Now you're officially a college student.”

I thought that had become official when I'd gotten my acceptance letter, but I just nodded happily and giggled. Double fisting sounded dirty.

At some point, I realized that Nick was gone again and felt a little confused. I wondered if I'd bored him or something.

“People come and go so quickly around here,” I mumbled.

“What?” some guy yelled in my face. His breath smelled like pizza.

Mmm. I wanted pizza. Was there pizza here?

I turned, and my vision swam. Some guy who looked like someone had used a filter to put a tiny face on a big head was laughing in front of me. His mouth looked impossibly large, as if it could swallow planetary systems or something.

I began to giggle again, which made me lose my balance somewhat. I placed a hand on the counter to steady myself.

I spotted Jake through a break in the sea of people. He was leaning against the wall in the living room, looking extremely bored. I decided to be social and go say hello to him. We hadn't talked since that tragic day in the coffee shop, but I was feeling bold, filled with liquid courage. I'd already completely humiliated myself in front of him. What was the worst that could happen?

I giggled to myself and released my death grip on the counter. I took a few unsteady steps toward the door, which somehow suddenly seemed much too far away.

Wait... This might be more difficult than I thought.

I wobbled a bit more, then stopped altogether. I grabbed the door frame while I waited for the room to stop spinning.

Wow, those drinks hit me fast. Who would have thought? It was only four drinks. Or was it six? Who's counting?

I looked up and watched Jake from across the room, his arms crossed over his chest. That hulking figure from earlier stood a couple feet from him. I suddenly got the image of this guy on a leash moving in a precise two-foot radius around Jake like the world's largest puppy.

I began to giggle again and inhaled deeply as I tried to catch my breath, but Jake slowly straightened up as some blonde girl stopped to talk to him. The Hulk hovered just at the edge of his invisible leash.

The girl was looking intently at Jake and speaking to him.

I hated that. I hated her.

Seeing him at the party almost felt like some divine plan peeking through for a moment. Then there's some girl to ruin it all and remind me that he's straight.

God! I came here to forget him!

The stereo volume bumped up a couple of notches, and a familiar song came on. Bump, bump, bump, then some words...

Oh! It was one of my favorite songs!

Okay, I can get into this!

I pushed into the room and began to dance a bit on my own, just swaying in place at first. I'm not much of a dancer, usually opting to watch others instead. But for some reason, I was feeling freer than I'd ever felt before.

I kind of lost track of time — eyes closed, just letting the music flow through me — until mocking laughter broke through my little bubble. I ignored it, since it couldn't possibly be about me. I was just minding my own business, doing my thang. I just kept dancing, mumbling the lyrics to myself, or as much as I remembered of them anyway. I'm sure they were almost all wrong, but who cares?

I spun on my own, oblivious to my surroundings. I was fluid, twirling, feeling the air as it flowed across my skin. The song shifted into the bridge, a much quieter part, but I danced all the more.

"Lookit the little fag dance!" a voice rang out loud enough to be heard over the music.

I opened my eyes. The first thing I noticed was that the blonde chick who'd been talking to Jake was now dancing with me. Well, in my general area anyway. Maybe we'd start a dance party. That seemed cool.

Then I remembered the voice who'd called me a fag. That was less cool.

I followed the eyes of everyone in the room, which led me right to Emperor Tiny Face. We made eye contact, and he grinned at me drunkenly, a mean glint in his gaze.

Even as sloshed as I was, I knew a bully when I saw one. I hated bullies.

Dad had always said it was best to ignore a bully.

“Go on fag. Dance till you puke,” he taunted.

Dad also said that if you couldn't ignore a bully, then you had to stand up for yourself. And I felt an overwhelming need to hit something.

People were laughing, which only fueled my anger.

It occurred to me later that they could have been laughing at the Emperor for showing what a narrow-minded moron he really was, but in the moment, it felt as though they were all laughing at me.

And it was all *his* fault. Maybe I needed to teach him a lesson.

I took a few steps in his direction when Nick magically appeared at his side and grabbed his arm. My roomie seemed to be trying to talk to him, but the Emperor was having none of it. He shook Nick off, then shoved him hard.

I saw my moment of opportunity while he was distracted by Nick...and I took it.

As a small guy, you don't really get the chance to administer a beat down too often, so I was strangely exhilarated. Sure, he was more than twice my size, but I was drunk, and he didn't look so tall anymore. In fact, I was sure he'd shrunk since I began to drink.

All of that went through my brain as I charged across the room. He didn't notice me until I was almost on him, and by then it was too late. I was in attack mode. I launched myself, landing on him like a small child leaping into his father's arms.

Except I was the daddy.

My surprise attack was enough to knock him off balance, and we hit the ground hard. Fortunately, he cushioned my fall.

I came up swinging, aiming for the target of his tiny face with both fists.

I dropped five or six good shots on him while he struggled to free his arms. I knew I needed to stay close or I was dead meat. My fists felt as if they were moving with Matrix-like speed, so I was quite surprised when I began moving away from ol' Jack.

Someone had grabbed me from behind and was pulling me away.

No! I wasn't finished!

I struggled to pull away. The last thing I saw was a big, meaty fist coming straight at me.

I dreamed of Jake.

I knew it was a dream because the blonde girl he was probably banging was nowhere to be seen. He was standing over me, telling someone he would take me home. I tore my eyes away from Jake's gorgeous face to see that he was talking to Nick. Was in his lap? Why was I in Nick's lap?

They were talking about me, as if I wasn't right there. Rude.

The next thing I knew, I was somehow on my feet leaning on Jake, feeling his firm body under my grip.

I was *definitely* dreaming.

Oh well, no need to waste the opportunity. I latched my hands around his neck and laid my head on his chest. I know, I know...it should have been his shoulder, but I'm short. This was a technically correct dream, apparently. It still felt nice. So nice.

Somehow, we teleported to the hallway, where Nick was flirting with Jake. I think I bared my teeth at him, but I wasn't sure. I'd kill him later. After a nap. I couldn't keep my eyes open...

The next thing I knew, we were back on campus, and Jake was asking me where my dorm was. This dream was really getting good. If only I could hold on to it.

I told him, I think, then time jumped again, and we were standing in front of my building. He wanted my key. I giggled. All he had to do was ask.

At some point, I think I asked if he was flirting with me, but I don't remember what he said.

He reached into my pocket, and it felt so *real*.

I squirmed under his touch, grinding my crotch against him. It was amazing how real it felt, from the firmness of his body to the smoothness of his skin. Even the clean, fresh smell where my nose met his neck was perfect.

I had a mad urge to lick him.

And then we were in my room. He asked me where my bedroom was. I pointed, not wanting to relinquish my hold on him. The dream had to be followed to its logical conclusion.

Maybe it would be a wet dream.

We lurched into the bedroom, where he flipped the light on and then told me to get into bed. I happily complied, dragging him down with me.

He looked in my eyes and seemed to be breathing heavily. Maybe it was from supporting me during this dream, but maybe it was from wanting me. I decided it was from desire. It was my dream, after all.

“Kody, I should go,” he said.

“No,” I said, trying my best to pout in an appealingly cute manner. “Stay.”

I looked up at him, my dream already fading as exhaustion claimed me. I looked into his beautiful blue eyes. They were clear and bright, so blue they could have been cut from the sky itself.

I wanted to say sweet things. I wanted to sing to him. I wanted to kiss him.

I think maybe I tried, but the dream got fuzzy from there. I must have fallen into a deeper sleep, because if I kissed him, I would have desperately wanted to remember that...

When I woke up, the sun was streaming through my window. My mouth felt like it was full of cotton, and my head felt like there were seventy-six trombones playing inside.

Oh, God. I would never be able to watch *The Music Man* again.

I rolled out of bed and instantly regretted it. Could you die from a hangover? If so, I welcomed death's sweet release.

My stomach lurched, and I stumbled from my room to the bathroom to pray to the porcelain god in the time-honored tradition of college students everywhere.

I had to admit, I felt better after emptying the contents of my stomach. It was mostly liquid, which reminded me that I'd skipped dinner the night before, which probably hadn't helped with my level of inebriation.

After showering, I felt almost human again.

Back in my room to dress, the clock reported it was now twelve-thirty-six. I dressed in sweats and a tee shirt with the VRU Red Rooster on the front. He was doing something obnoxious. All the shirts had something suggestive on them, which was funny sometimes, but not at the moment.

My stomach rolled over, and I couldn't decipher if I was nauseated or hungry. Both? Was that a thing?

I needed coffee...and maybe a small scone.

I decided to see if Nick wanted to go with me, the least I could do after making a scene at his friend's party. I knocked on his bedroom door but got no answer. I could hear his white noise machine running, and that was only on when he was sleeping, so I knew he had to be in there.

I knocked again, but harder, which finally elicited a muffled response that sounded like an annoyed, "What?"

The door opened, and I stood there trying not to laugh. Nick was sporting some very aggressive bedhead. His green eyes were somewhat bleary, and it was obvious I'd woken him up.

"Um, morning. Or, uh, afternoon, I guess. Just wanted to see if you wanted to go with me to get coffee?" I asked while carefully schooling my features to neutrality. "My treat."

"Coffee? Sounds good," he grunted, reminding me of a cartoon caveman. "Shower first."

I sat down on our couch to wait, sipping water and hoping like hell my head would calm down after I got a small amount of food in me.

Nick emerged from the bathroom in a cloud of steam wearing nothing but a towel and a blank stare. He went into his bedroom and returned a few minutes later, looking much better and dressed in the same relaxed fashion as me.

"So, uh, how was the party after I left?" I asked.

"You mean after you were dragged out nearly unconscious?" He chuckled a little while my cheeks warmed up. "Things definitely calmed down after your little brawl." He shook his head. "I never would have pictured it, but I think if I hadn't pulled you off of him, you might have inflicted some serious damage."

My cheeks were growing steadily hotter. "Oh God. I am so sorry. I'm so embarrassed. I usually don't drink," I replied.

He smirked. "Yeah, your friend *Jakie* thought that might be the case."

"Jakie?" I repeated, aghast.

"That's what you called him."

"What? I didn't really say that, did I?"

His grin grew wider. "Yep, you sure did...right before you tried to crawl into his skin."

Why did this all seem vaguely familiar?

"I didn't... He didn't hear me, did he?"

"Well, I gotta be honest with you, Kode. I think he might have, since he was trying to get you up off the floor at the time, and you were latched around his neck like he was the last life ring on the Titanic."

I squeaked.

"If it helps any, he didn't seem to mind. I think he just figured you were drunk, you know? I mean, he still took you back to our dorm."

I gaped at him in growing horror. Oh my God! Jake had been in my dorm? In my bedroom? Had I left my deranged underwear purchases where he could see them?

Then a scarier thought occurred to me. Had I really pulled him into bed with me? Did I really try to kiss him? What was a dream and what was real?

“Kody, you all right? You don't look so good.”

“I... Oh my God.”

I rushed into the bathroom where I proceeded to puke some more. I cleaned myself up, rinsed my mouth with mouthwash, and stared at myself in the mirror while contemplating my crimes.

All I could think was how uncomfortable that nice straight boy must have felt to have me, this raging homo, drunkenly pawing at him while making unwelcome passes.

Was that assault? Was I a sexual predator? I covered my face with my hands.

Nick appeared in the doorway. “Hey, Kody, chill. It's not that big a deal.”

“Yes it is,” I said from behind my fingers.

“Seriously, he seems like a nice guy. He even said he felt responsible, because the guy you jumped was his roommate.”

“Fucking hell,” I moaned. “Now I know he hates me.”

“He definitely doesn't hate you. I didn't get the impression they're all that close. I mean, he took you home, right?”

“He was just being nice,” I whined. “I'm a charity case. A pathetic drunk loser who attacked his friend unprovoked.”

“Oh, you were definitely provoked. Besides, I think he might be into you.”

I dropped my hands and stared at him, aghast. “Emperor Tiny Face is into me?”

“Emperor...? No, dummy. Jake.”

I started shaking my head, which was a mistake, since it was still pounding like an entire drumline.

“No way he's into me.”

“Don't be so sure. I mean, not just anyone will look out for someone they hardly know, you know?”

“No, I don't know.” I paused, remembering my dream, then looked at him with a squint. “Wait... Did you hit on Jake last night when we were leaving?”

"Maaaybe," Nick admitted with a grin. "Can you blame me? He's hot, *and* he seems like good people. Do you know how rare that is? And it didn't seem like you guys had known each other for too long. It would be different if you guys were dating, then I wouldn't flirt...too much...except in fun." He smiled at me, and I couldn't fault his logic. "Why? Do you like him? Should I back off?"

"What? No! Yes? Why? Is it obvious?"

He chuckled. "No, no, not at all. You know, aside from calling him Jakie. And the way you nuzzled into his throat like you were a vampire out for blood. Oh, and also, when I flirted with him, I'm pretty sure you growled." He ticked off the reasons on his fingers.

Okay, so he had me. And I wanted to die.

"So, is Jake your boy?" he asked.

"I wish, but after last night... Wait a second! He can't like me. He's straight!" I exclaimed.

"Oh no, friend of mine. I'm pretty sure he is at least a little bent."

"But I saw him on a date with a girl. And then there was another girl last night..."

He shrugged. "Bi erasure is so real. Anyway, can we go get coffee now?"

"Yeah, sure, whatever," I said absently, my focus still firmly on Jake. "But how can you be so sure?"

"About Jake? He didn't seem to mind you being all snuggly. And he was pretty protective of you. Plus, he was flirting back a little. He even blushed. He knew the score. You have to watch people, Kody."

"I *have* been watching him!" I blurted, then realizing how that sounded as Nick laughed. I clarified, "I mean, I seem to run into him everywhere. He's really...noticeable."

"He should put that on his dating profile. 'Considered to be very noticeable.'"

"He really flirted with you?" I asked, as the tiny spark of hope Nick had ignited fizzled out. There was no way I could compete with a hot jock like Nick. They would look great together. Even I knew that.

"Don't worry, kiddo. He only had eyes for you. Trust me." He threw his arm around me and steered me toward the door.

But I didn't trust him. Or I didn't believe him anyway. There was no way someone like Jake was into me. I'd been down that road too many times to let myself believe a fantasy again. I'd just get hurt again.

I didn't talk much as we crossed the quad and made our way to The Morning Rush. I trailed a few feet behind him, and thankfully, Nick left me to my swirling thoughts.

Finally, he must have grown tired of my pouting. He slowed down and waited for me to catch up.

"Relax, Kody. Whether he's gay or bi or whatever, I think he's into you. If not, no harm, no foul. He's just a nice guy who made sure you got home safely after having a little too much to drink at a party."

"Oh God," I moaned. I was so focused on whether or not I'd made a pass at Jake that I'd almost forgotten about starting a fight at the party. "I made such a fool of myself..."

"You're hardly the first guy to get drunk at a party."

Yeah, but did those other guys try to kiss their knight in shining armor?

We arrived at the shop just in time to keep me from spiraling any farther. Mike was working, and he looked bored out of his skull.

"Jesus, I'm glad to see someone!" he said. "This place is so fucking dead on the weekends."

We ordered, and while he made our drinks Mike kept up a steady stream of small talk. He was unusually chatty. I blamed the boredom. He was alone since, as he'd said, weekends were slower, and he clearly welcomed the company.

Not that he was any more interesting than usual. I definitely didn't see the attraction Max had to him, except that he was uninterested in her. I got the impression that she was into impossible relationships — that way she couldn't really get hurt.

Wait. Was I into that, too? Is that why I was obsessed with yet another straight guy? Or, according to Nick, a *bi* guy.

We got our drinks, which were on the house, and grabbed a table, each lost in our own thoughts.

"So what are you going to do?" Nick asked after a while.

"About Jake, you mean?"

"No, the crisis in the Middle East! Of course I mean Jake!" He laughed.

"I'd rather solve the crisis, thanks."

He gave me an impatient look.

"I don't know. I mean, let's assume that he is bi, at least. I don't even know if he's into me."

Nick rolled his eyes. "Kody, I'm not blind. He's into you."

"Not after last night. And that's another thing. I am *so* embarrassed about the way I acted. I don't fight! Look at me! Kindergartners see me and think, 'Yeah I can take him.' On top of that...I am pretty sure I was a...romantic drunk."

"What do you mean? You made a pass at him?"

"I...don't remember. I think...I think I pulled him into bed and tried to kiss him."

His lips twitched. "You loose woman! You tried to kiss him?"

"Nick, I'm serious."

"And?"

"And what?"

"Did you suck his tonsils out? What do you mean 'what'?"

"I...I don't know. It all gets blurry after that. I think I passed out."

"You can't remember if you kissed a hot guy or not? That's it — sodas for you from now on!" Nick laughed, and I flipped him the bird.

"Nick..." I said warningly.

"Fine. Even if you did, have you seen him? You'd hardly be the first guy who threw himself at him. And who's to say he wasn't into it?"

"Right, because who isn't into sloppy drunk twink slobbering all over you?"

"Hey, a lot of guys are definitely into that. For the sake of the argument, let's say that he is interested. What then?" He clearly wasn't going to let it go.

"That is so beyond unlikely. Besides, how am I supposed to look at him after acting like that? He'll never want to see me again!"

"You're making a lot of assumptions. For what it's worth, even if it was as bad as you seem to think, from the looks he was giving you I think it's safe to say he might be willing to forgive you."

"What kind of looks?" I asked in spite of myself.

"Protective. Like he was staking a claim."

"I don't know." I looked down at my cup. I desperately wanted to believe him, but something inside just wouldn't allow me to. I think it's called life experience.

I liked Nick. I wanted to trust him. Even though I tended to place my trust in the wrong people when it came to matters of the heart, I was an okay judge of character if you left romance out. I decided to open up and explain how hopeless it was.

"I have a...history when it comes to relationships," I started.

"Don't we all?"

I shook my head. “No, I mean...the guys I pick are always unavailable or not interested. My romantic history is a train wreck.”

“Welcome to being a gay guy. Besides, the law of averages says you are going to find the right guy eventually, Kode.”

“Sure,” I said. “But Nick, last night was so cringe. I got smashed, picked a fight, had to be carried home, and then after all that, I’m pretty sure I tried to kiss him. No, ‘Hi! I’m interested in you. Would you like to go for coffee?’” I shook my head. “This is *way* beyond cringe. This is negative aura, Nick.”

“Hey, don’t crash out, okay? And don’t give up.”

Easy for him to say. He probably had his pick of guys.

We finished our drinks and walked back towards our dorm in relative silence while I mulled over the sordid events of the previous night. I didn’t care what Nick said — I still felt foolish.

When we reached the dorm, I realized I didn’t have my dorm keycard. I spent a panicked few moments searching my pockets and wallet, but it was nowhere to be found.

“What if I lost it while I was drunk?” I wailed.

“Relax,” Nick said. “You obviously had it last night to get in the building. It’s probably just in your room or something. I’ve got you.”

Nick let us into the lobby but stopped to talk to someone from his team who was walking through.

I headed upstairs, figuring I’d look for my card...and drink some more water. Anything to edge toward feeling more human.

I realized when I got to our door that I still couldn’t get into our room and had to wait like a moron until Nick finished his conversation and caught up.

“Sorry,” he apologized as he tapped his card and opened the door.

As the door swung open, a folded piece of paper slid across the floor.

Curious, I picked it up and, as I did, my keycard fell out. I grabbed the card and shoved it in my pocket, then I unfolded the piece of paper.

It was a note, scribbled on the back of a receipt, handwritten in tiny, neat print.

Kody,

I just stopped by to see how you were feeling this morning. Also, I accidentally took your keycard back home with me. Here it is. Sorry!

Jake

Jake cared enough to check on me.

“What’s that?” Nick asked, but I ignored him, floating toward my room.

I opened my door and pulled off my shirt, tossing it across the room. I sat on the edge of the bed to re-read the note.

He came to see if I was okay.

Then again, maybe he wanted to make sure I hadn’t choked to death on my own vomit just to cover his ass. Let’s be serious here, things never worked out for me. I was the one who was always left alone. I never got the guy.

I stared at the note until the letters began to blur. I started to crumple it, only to stop and sigh in frustration.

He cared enough to make sure I wasn’t dead. Take the W.

I put the note in my pocket, not sure exactly why. Maybe as a solid reminder that there might be more to this than I thought, that maybe — just maybe — Nick was right.

No, I reminded myself. Don’t read too much into it. He’s just a nice guy. Who likes girls. With big boobs.

Just then, Nick appeared in my doorway.

“What’s up?” he asked, standing over me.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you’re sitting there, half naked — thank you, by the way — looking like you hurt your brain thinking too hard.”

I rolled my eyes at him. “I *am* thinking too hard.”

Nick’s phone chimed, and he ignored it.

I’d heard the sound before, though, and it gave me an idea. “I think I need to find a guy or something.”

“Or something?”

I nodded, feeling more confident. “Yeah.” I pulled my leg up as I looked at Nick. “I obviously can’t realistically think there is anything there with Jake.”

“Do you just ignore everything I say?”

I widened my eyes and blew out a breath. “I try my best. Look, I have had an all-time greatest hits of me being me ever since I first ran into him. I can’t form a coherent sentence when he’s around, which everyone knows is really attractive. I saw him at the bookstore and froze in place like a scared possum. When I’m not playing dead, I turn into a colossal klutz whenever I see him. One time, I dropped my coffee. Another time, I almost scalded myself to death on the espresso machine. Then when he tried to help me, I ran off like a total idiot.”

“Uh...”

“Oh, it gets better!” I said, giving him my biggest, brightest fake smile, mentally giving myself permission to leave out the underwear purchase. Nobody ever needed to know about that.

“Kody...”

“Let me cook. I'm just getting started. Because then you drag me to a party where I get white-girl wasted, mostly because I don't drink much but also because I weigh a whopping one hundred and twenty pounds fully clothed with my shoes on.”

“So this is somehow my fault now?”

“You did make me drinks.”

“Two. I made you two drinks.”

“I'm little!” I yelled, gesturing at my body.

“Touché,” he conceded.

“Granted, I made a few more while I was left unattended. But that's beside the point.”

“Uh, no, I think that's an important point...”

“Anyway! While I'm basically incapacitated, I make a mortifyingly clumsy pass at him and, I think, I'm pretty sure, I practically felt him up. Not to mention I tried to shove my tongue in his mouth. So let's be honest, Nick, okay?”

“Um...”

“That's not an attractive look. Can we agree on that?”

“Well, I mean...situationally, it could be hot,” he hedged.

I sighed. “No. It's not. And you know it. I'm beyond humiliated, okay? I am deeply ashamed. I look like a colossal fuck up.”

“You *sound* like someone with a crush who's overthinking everything they do when they are around their crush,” Nick said.

I turned my gaze from him and picked at the knee of my joggers. “I just don't think I've done anything that would make him believe I'm anything other than a child who is definitely not ready for a relationship or anything remotely approaching one. If he was ever even interested in the first place. Which he wasn't. Because he's into chicks.”

He opened his mouth to argue again, but I rushed to cut him off. “And maybe, possibly, but probably not, into some guys who are not me.”

Nick flopped down next to me and his phone went off again. Once more he ignored it, letting out a sigh of his own.

“Look, I guess I can see why you feel like you do. Not everyone would take it as a compliment that someone turns into a complete simp when they're around.”

“Asshole.”

“Just stating facts here.” I could hear the smile in his voice.

“Then you see my point?”

“I...concede it's a point of view. But the fact is you don't really know anything about Jake other than he's fucking hot.”

I decided not to mention the note Jake had left. The purpose behind it was open to interpretation. And for some reason I wanted to keep it to myself. I didn't want Nick analyzing it and trying to frame it as some grand romantic gesture. It was just a note scrawled on a receipt.

A note from Jake. My Jake. The Golden Boy.

“Okay, well that's true,” I conceded.

“The thing is, there are plenty of hot guys. Hot is...common.” His phone went off again. “Like this guy pinging me on Grindr right now. He's hot, but I know who he is, and who he is isn't hot. He's a major douche.”

“So...can't you block him or something?”

“I could. I have before. But he just makes a new profile. Besides, I like letting him waste his time trying to get me to hook up.”

I grinned at him. “You're evil.”

“Situationally,” he agreed. “Have you ever used Grindr?”

“Not really. Charlie downloaded it on my phone when he set it up for me. A joke, mostly.”

“Well, you could try it out. That's one way to meet guys. The thing is, you won't know any more about those guys than you do Jake.”

“I'll know they're gay since they're on a gay dating app.”

“Eh.”

“Well, I haven't done anything humiliating in front of any of them. Yet.”

Nick bit his lip for a second then nodded. “Okay. Let's set up a profile.”

We spent the next fifteen minutes setting up my account.

Nick made me pose for a couple of photos, but he wouldn't let me put my shirt back on.

“Trust me,” he said. “You'll get a lot more attention this way.”

“Yeah, but is it the kind of attention I want?”

Nick sat my phone down. “What *do* you want?”

“Uh, a guy?”

“Okay, but what are you looking for? I'm not just asking philosophically. It's a question on your profile. What are you looking for? Hookups? Dates? Friends? Chat? Attention isn't an option. Neither is humiliation. I know that's your kink, but there are other apps for that...”

“Very funny. I don't want a hookup. I guess maybe dates? Friends are fine. I could use a better one than you.”

“Good luck with that,” he said, picking my phone back up. “I'm the best friend you'll ever have. Unlock your phone. We're almost done. We just need to figure out what your profile should say. How about 'Simp seeking dom top?'”

I crossed my eyes, wrinkled my nose, and stuck out my tongue.

“Should have gotten a photo of that,” Nick commented breezily.

“Then you'd really bring them running.”

“Can't we just say I'm new here and trying to meet people?”

“Sure, if you want to be boring.”

“Truth in advertising?”

“Kody, you are anything but boring.”

He typed away on my screen for a few minutes, then handed my phone back to me.

“What do you think?”

I looked down at the screen to see my smiling face looking back at me. I had to give it to Nick, it wasn't a bad photo. My smile was a little cheesy, but then again, so was I.

I was apparently zero feet away from myself. Under that, the headline said “New to Town.” Then there were my stats and a profile that read, “Just moved to town for college. Looking for nice guys to show me the sights. Dates and friends welcome.”

I shrugged. “I guess that's fine.” I let out a nervous sigh, suddenly having second thoughts. “Maybe no one will notice me.”

“Oh, they'll notice,” Nick said with a laugh. “You're fresh meat, and you're a cute little twink.”

I flushed, but secretly enjoyed the compliment.

The Grindr notification sound chirped, and I instinctively glanced at Nick's phone.

“Oh no,” he said. “That was all you. Someone messaged you already. Come on, let's see what you have here.” Nick leaned in closer to me as I brought up the message. “You into older guys?”

The guy in the photo looked older than my dad.

“I...don't think so?”

The phone dinged again.

“Well. He likes you.” Nick grinned at me.

I shook my head. “What do I say? I don't want to be a jerk.”

"Part of putting yourself out there like this is rejection. You don't have to be interested, but if you talk to them, they might think you are. Just keep that in mind."

"So what? I just ignore them?"

"Sometimes that works. Sometimes they don't get the hint and you have to block them. Or you can be like me and mess with them."

The phone dinged a third time and I frowned. "Is this for real?"

"What's he saying?"

"He's saying...he'll do things like get me beer and weed if I come over. Is he..."

"Yep. I get those sometimes. It's all about the tradeoff for some guys. That does remind me though, watch out for the druggies. Weed is one thing, but some guys are doing stuff like molly. Or worse. I try to avoid them. Seen too many crash outs. And if someone says they like to party with the T capitalized, avoid at all costs."

"Why? What's that mean?"

"It means they're into Tina."

I stared at him blankly. "Like...Tina Belcher?"

"No, you sweet angel child. Like crystal meth."

"Oh." I glanced back down at the phone. "I don't want to trade this guy for anything. I don't want to trade with anyone."

The phone dinged again.

"Oh, new message. This guy wants feet pics. You into that?"

"Pictures of my feet? I don't think so."

"What about Jake's feet?"

"I...don't think I'm into feet."

"Good to know," Nick said. "You kind of have to get an idea about what you're into."

My phone dinged a few more times. I read another message asking if I was a top or bottom, another asking if I could host. A third asked if I could come to them as they had an ankle monitor.

"Half of these guys don't even have face pictures," I complained.

"Welcome to Grindr, home of the headless torsos."

"But how am I supposed to know if I want to meet them if I don't even know what they look like?"

"Gee, Kody...shallow much?"

I glared at him, and he laughed.

"Some of them will send a face pic if you ask. Be wary of anyone who won't. Either way, they're probably just DL. That means down low."

"I know what that means. I'm not that innocent."

“Whatever, Britney Spears. Also, watch out for the AI bots. There are a lot of them these days.”

“How can you tell if someone is a bot?”

“You can't really. At least not at first. After a while, it becomes obvious. They usually try to get you to switch to another app, like Telegram or WhatsApp.”

“What do they get out of it?”

He shrugged. “Scams and extortion.”

“This is...a lot.” I closed the app and looked at Nick. “I think I'm just going to go read for a while.”

He raised an eyebrow as my phone chirped again. I turned the volume off.

“It is a steep learning curve,” he admitted. “But if you have any questions, just let me know. I'll be your Grindr Guru. You'll get the hang of it.”

“I'm not even sure I want to.”

“Too much too soon?”

I stood and started for my room. “Something like that.”

Truthfully, all the attention was flattering, but it was also overwhelming. And none of them were Jake.

As crazy as it sounds, Nick had given me a little spark of hope with his insistence that Jake was into me. How was I supposed to find a faceless profile interesting when Jake was *right there*?

I threw myself across my bed and grabbed a book. I tried to focus my attention on the story, but every once in a while, I picked up my phone to see I had a couple more notifications from Grindr. I ignored them. Maybe I'd check them later.

Or maybe not.

Around dinner time, Nick talked me into going to the Commons with him, then we watched some TV together until I decided to call it a night. I was tired from my antics the night before and my churning thoughts from the day.

As exhausted as I was, though, sleep was slow to come. My brain just wanted to focus on replaying all my embarrassing moments from the night before in agonizing slow motion. The harder I tried to ignore them, the more insistent they were.

Then my thoughts turned to my botched attempt at seducing Jake, but instead of my cringey failure, I wondered what it would have been like if he'd kissed me back. How far would we have gone?

As my mind drifted, I realized I was turning myself on, and quickly tried to distract myself, but I couldn't help wondering if my fantasies could ever be a reality.

Time would tell, as my father said.

In the meantime, my brother had left me an entire gym bag filled with lube. Might as well put it to use. Maybe it would help me sleep.

Chapter 9 - Jake

I looked into Kody's silver-gray eyes and fought for breath. My heart felt like it was trying to pound its way out of my chest. Had he just asked me to stay?

At that moment, I wanted to do that more than anything. It felt so right just lying there in his arms, but I reminded myself that he was drunk. He didn't know what he was saying. I'd been in his position enough time to understand that this wasn't the same as consent.

Before I could react, he leaned forward in a clumsy attempt to kiss me.

For one brief second of pure, startled perfection, his lips brushed against mine, then he dropped back onto the bed.

He was out cold.

I just laid there next to him for a few minutes, watching him sleep while my brain processed everything that had just happened. Any lingering doubts I'd had about his sexuality had been neatly cleared up with that clumsy attempt at a kiss. I've learned from experience — I don't care how drunk you are, you don't kiss a guy unless you want to.

How you feel about it when you sober up is another issue altogether.

I knew I should leave, but I just couldn't stop looking at him. He was so beautiful. I wanted to touch him so badly, just run my fingers across the soft skin of his cheek. I wanted to kiss his eminently kissable lips. I reached out tentatively, just to brush his hair from his forehead...

I could fall for him, I realized with a lurch.

I jumped up from the bed. This couldn't be happening. I barely knew him. He's basically a stranger. I couldn't fall for him. I backed out of the bedroom, quietly pulling the door closed behind me, then just stood there for a minute.

What am I doing? I can't fall for this kid. We're so different. He's so innocent and pure. And I'm...not.

I made my way out of their dorm, taking a side exit to avoid the lobby. I could only hope Toshi had made a full recovery and things hadn't spiraled too far out of control. One thing was for certain, they sure knew how to create a distraction.

As I walked slowly back to my building, I couldn't stop thinking about Kody. It occurred to me that he'd been taking up an inordinate amount of my thoughts lately. What was I going to do about him? I was clearly

drawn to him, but was pursuing him worth the risk of rejection? I knew I'd have to be honest with him about my past, and I didn't know if I could stand to see his face filled with disgust for me.

Maybe it would just be easier to avoid him altogether.

But that would hurt in a different way.

My thoughts careened wildly around and around in my head, but I'd come to no conclusions by the time I reached my own, much shabbier dorm.

I could hear Foster as soon as I stepped off the elevator on my floor. I paused and listened outside the door. From the sound of things, he was still very drunk and very unhappy.

I took a deep breath and opened the door. Brayden and Foster both turned to face me as I stepped in. Foster's posture was aggressive, but Brayden didn't seem intimidated. Then again, I guess when you're the size of two grizzly bears in a trench coat, not much threatens you.

Foster immediately launched a verbal attack. "What the fuck were you doing?" he snarled at me. "I can't believe you two stuck up for that little fag."

I wasn't in the mood to put up with his mouth. "Give me a break, Foster," I shot back. "You're twice his size."

"Hey, the fag started it! He jumped me."

"No, you started it when you opened your big mouth."

Brayden was watching our exchange with an impassive expression, his big head swiveling back and forth like a lawn sprinkler on speed.

"What are you trying to say?" Foster demanded.

"I'm trying to say you acted like an ignorant bully."

"The fag deserved—"

"*Stop* saying that word."

"What word? Fag? Why? Are you some kind of *fag* lover?"

"Shut up, Foster. We're not having this conversation. You're an idiot when you're sober and you're even worse when you're drunk."

An ugly look passed across his face, and I was suddenly very glad Brayden was in the room.

"Maybe you're a fag yourself," Foster sneered.

I ignored him and started getting ready for bed, but Foster wasn't finished yet.

"Is that it? My roommate's a fag?"

I felt him come up behind me and stiffened. Brayden moved closer as Foster grabbed my arm and spun me around, shoving me against my desk.

"Are you a fag, Jake?"

"Foster, stop," Brayden rumbled.

Personally, I would have stopped just from the tone of his voice, but Foster was too far gone.

"Are you?"

Something inside me snapped. I looked him right in the eye and said, "Yes."

Foster's fist drew back so fast I didn't have time to do more than flinch, but the blow never landed.

Brayden moved to intervene with a speed I'd never suspected he possessed. His knuckles connected solidly with Foster's face, actually sending him flying a short distance through the air before he hit the floor with a heavy thud. He didn't move.

I stared down at him for a few seconds before glancing over at Brayden. He was looking at Foster with a sad expression on his face.

"I didn't want to hit him," he said.

"I know, but I'm sure glad you did."

He looked over at me. "Foster always gets mean when he gets drunk."

I couldn't argue with that so I just nodded.

"Is he...dead?" I asked after a few seconds of us both just staring at his inert form.

"Nah. I didn't hit him that hard."

I thought Foster might beg to differ — if he ever regained consciousness — but dropped it.

Brayden picked Foster up and laid him on his bed.

"I don't think I should sleep in here tonight, just in case he wakes up and is still mad," I said.

"I can stay," the big lug offered.

"Where would you sleep? Nah, I think it's best if I clear out."

He nodded. "Where will you go?"

"I can probably stay on Erin's futon again." He blinked at me without comprehension. "I can stay with a friend." He nodded again.

I pulled out some clothes from my dresser and stuffed them into my backpack. I didn't want to have to face Foster in the morning...or ever again, for that matter.

"Are you?" Brayden asked suddenly.

I stopped what I was doing and looked over at him. He was studying me closely, as if trying to figure something out.

"Am I what?"

"What Foster said?"

"A fag?"

"I didn't want to use that word after you yelled at Foster for saying it."

"You want to know if I'm gay?"

He nodded.

I eyed his huge frame and thought about the damage he could do to me if he didn't like my answer. So far, he'd been a gentle giant when it came to his interaction with me, but I'd just watched him knock a big guy like Foster halfway across the room with a single punch. What could he do to me?

"Does it matter?"

He shrugged. "Not really. I don't care who you like. You're nice. That's what matters."

"I'm...nice?"

Being nice felt like a foreign concept. I'd spent two years of my life being a selfish prick. Sure, I had my reasons, but I'd been so caught up in my misery and addictions that I'd only cared about myself. I was only "nice" in order to get what I wanted, which was usually sex and/or drugs. I'd spent the last year or so in therapy, trying to make amends and be a better person, but I hadn't thought of myself as nice in a long time, if ever, really.

"You're nice to me," he said, as if it was just that simple.

I felt a pang of guilt at his words. I really hadn't been very nice to him. The fact that he thought I had been spoke volumes about the kind of treatment he must be used to. I decided I at least owed him the truth.

"Yeah, I'm gay."

He smiled as if I'd confirmed something he'd suspected. "I thought so. You're sweet on that little guy, aren't you?"

I felt a flush creeping up my cheeks. "Kody?"

"Is he the one Foster punched at the party?"

"Yeah."

"That's the one. You like him, don'tcha?"

"Yeah, I do," I said and laughed as the surrealistic quality of this conversation struck me. The first person I tell about my crush is an enormous straight simpleton.

Brayden's smile grew. "Does he like you?"

I shrugged. "I don't know."

"You should ask."

"It's not quite that easy, Brayden."

"Why not?"

"It's not the same for guys like me as it is for you. You can just walk up to a girl that you like and ask her out. I can get beat up or even killed if I ask the wrong person."

Brayden thought about it a second then slowly bobbed his head once. "Maybe if the guy is someone like Foster, but Kody couldn't beat up a third grader."

I laughed. "He took Foster down."

"Only cuz he was drunk and didn't expect the little guy to jump him."

I looked over at Foster. The area around his eye where Brayden had hit him was swelling slightly and already starting to turn dark. He was going to have quite a shiner when he woke up.

"I should probably go before he comes to," I said with a sigh. "I don't look forward to sharing a room with him in the future."

"You'll have to be careful now," Brayden said. "I'll watch out for you when I'm around."

I grinned. Just earlier that night I'd thought Brayden felt like my bodyguard, and now he really was.

Brayden frowned. "That little guy will need to watch out more than you, though."

"You think Foster will mess with him?"

"He's gonna be mad. He made him look bad in front of all those people."

I hadn't even thought about that. Great. Just what I needed — something else to worry about.

"I'll watch out for him, too," he said.

I smiled at Brayden. He really wasn't such a bad guy. I picked up my backpack and slung it over my shoulder.

"So yeah, I guess I'll go see if I can stay with Erin."

"Okay. Do you care if I stay here tonight? I'll keep an eye on Foster."

"That's not a bad idea. You can just take my bed."

"Take it where?"

I laughed, then realized he wasn't making a joke. "Um, you can sleep in my bed."

"Oh. Okay. Thanks."

I smiled at Brayden again. "No, thank you."

"For what?"

"For being a friend."

He looked surprised. "We're friends?"

"Hell yeah. You saved my ass tonight."

A huge grin spread across his face. "Cool."

"G'night, Brayden."

"Night, Jake."

I slipped out of the room and went to see if Erin's futon was available.

"Hey," she said when she opened the door. "What's up? Everything okay?"

I wasn't sure how much to say. There were so many people involved beyond just Foster — Kody, Brayden, Nick, whoever was hosting the party. I didn't want to get a bunch of people in trouble one week into the semester.

Besides, even if I wanted to change rooms, where would I go? I'd heard the rumors about a housing shortage on campus. I wanted to at least try to talk to Foster when he was sober before taking the nuclear option.

I decided to dodge the question, for the moment anyway.

"Still adjusting to the new roommate situation. You know how it is. Think I could crash on your futon again?"

She gave me a look that clearly said she wasn't buying what I was selling, but was willing to let it go...for the moment, at least.

"Of course," she said. "It'll be like a slumber party!" She grabbed my arm and dragged me into her room.

We stayed up for a while, just talking and getting to know each other better. At some point, I felt comfortable enough to tell her about the situation with Foster and what had happened at the party and back in our dorm room.

She immediately went into professional RA mode.

"Jake, that's pretty serious. You need to file a report with campus safety."

I was startled. "What? No! I can handle it."

"No, that's a serious infraction. Foster should face disciplinary action for the homophobic remarks alone, let alone the threats of violence."

"But I don't want to get Kody or Brayden in trouble."

"Why would they get in trouble? Just leave them out of it."

"You really think Foster won't throw them under the bus at the first possible opportunity? Kody was drunk and jumped Foster, and Brayden punched the douche nozzle and knocked him out cold."

Erin shook her head. "Kody was acting in self-defense, and Brayden was protecting you. I think the administration would be lenient on them."

"But you don't know for sure. I can't risk ruining Kody's life. What if he got expelled for drinking and starting a fight?"

She eyed me carefully. "You like him, don't you?"

"Who?" I squeaked, my voice breaking in a way it hadn't since I was an early teen.

She grinned. "Kody, duh. You have a crush. Does he like you too?"

I shrugged and looked away but she wasn't giving up that easily.

"Uh uh. Spill the tea."

"Are you even allowed to say that?"

"Jake..."

"Fine. He, uh, he might have tried to kiss me when I took him back to his room."

Erin squealed with delight.

"Don't get too excited," I said quickly. "He was drunk. When he's sober, he can barely string two words together around me. Nothing is going to happen."

"Oh come on! How can you say that? You have to ask him out!"

"It's not that simple."

"Why not?"

"I'd really rather not talk about it," I said.

To her credit, she smoothly changed the subject, but I could see the wheels were turning. We talked a while longer, but, eventually, we both grew too tired to keep our eyes open and fell asleep.

I was a little disoriented when I awoke the next morning. I sat up and remembered where I was, but Erin was nowhere to be seen. I found my phone and checked the time. It was after ten! That was sleeping late for me. I got up and found a note from Erin on my backpack.

Gone out for breakfast with Carlos. Help yourself to the shower.

See you later,

Erin

I took her up on her offer and jumped in the shower. She still wasn't back by the time I got dressed, so I left her a quick note thanking her for letting me stay, then went to get some coffee.

I was secretly hoping to see Kody, but coffee was a good excuse.

I pushed open the door and was disappointed to see no sign of my crush. Max and the dark-haired guy I'd seen last night were working behind the counter. Max grinned as soon as she saw me.

"Well, if it isn't the Good Samaritan. Helped any old ladies across the street today?"

Max was a joker. I knew her type and I knew just how to play up to them.

"No. Why? Did you need to cross the street?" I quipped with a wink.

Max threw her head back and let out a guffaw. "Oh yeah," she said, wiping her eyes dramatically. "I definitely like you, kid."

"Call me Jake."

"There're a lot of things I'd like to call you, but none I can say in front of Mike here." She leaned over the counter and added in a stage whisper, "Virgin ears..."

I glanced over at Mike who looked quite bored with the whole exchange. He wasn't exactly Mr. Personality.

"So what can I get you?" Max asked.

"A double shot of espresso, please."

"Coming right up."

She made my drink and I handed her a ten. As she was getting my change, she looked up slyly.

"So, have you given any thought to applying for a job here? We're still hiring."

I accepted my change and receipt while I pretended to think about her question. "I'll let you know when I get that desperate."

She stuck her tongue out at me, and I was surprised to see she had a tongue stud. "I'll be sure to let Kody know you dropped in to see him," she added with a smirk.

I must have looked startled because she started chortling again with the satisfied expression of one who has taken a shot in the dark and hit the bull's-eye.

I let her have the last word and left with my coffee. It seemed I may have underestimated Max.

Was I really that transparent? If it was so obvious that Brayden could see it, I guess I was.

I walked back to campus and decided to risk going back to my room. I listened at the door but didn't hear anything inside. I went in to find the room unoccupied. I think it was the first time in days I'd opened my door without finding Brayden inside. It felt strangely empty without his calm presence.

I was playing video games when the door flew open and Foster walked in. I jumped to my feet and eyed him warily. He was sporting

a huge black eye that was almost completely swollen shut, but a range of emotions flickered across the rest of his face, finally settling on sheepish.

"Hey, Jake," he said softly.

"Foster."

"Look, I owe you a huge apology for last night. I was way out of line. I have a really bad temper when I'm drunk."

I didn't know quite how to take this. What had happened last night was more than just a bad temper.

"I, uh...it's nice of you to apologize but it still doesn't excuse what happened."

"Yeah. You're right. It's just that I've never known any gay people before."

I raised an eyebrow. "So that makes it okay?"

"No, that's not what I'm trying to say. It's just that... Okay, listen. When I get drunk, I get kind of...what's the word? Belli...belligerent?"

"Belligerent?"

"Yeah, that. My dad always said I get a big mouth. I didn't really mean to start a fight with that little...uh, punk. It wasn't really anything against him, you know? I just run my mouth. I didn't expect him to just jump me like that."

"You just expected him to take it?"

He shrugged and had the grace to look a little ashamed.

"So what happened when I got back to the room? You tried to attack me too."

He shifted his weight uncomfortably. "I'm real sorry about that, Jake. I guess I was just mad and taking it out on you."

"I don't think this rooming arrangement is going to work."

"Huh? Why? I said I'm sorry."

"How do I know you won't decide to take it out on me again? Besides, you clearly showed that you're homophobic last night. I wouldn't think you'd want a *fag* for a roommate."

He flinched at my use of the f-slur.

"I promise I won't take it out on you again. That was really stupid. And as far as sharing a room with...with you, like I said, I've never known any gay people before. You seem like a good guy, though. You haven't, like, hit on me or anything."

"Trust me, I won't."

"So yeah, I don't care if you stay."

"Well, gee whiz, Foster. I really appreciate you generously letting me stay in my own room and all, but that still doesn't guarantee me that the next time you get drunk, I won't end up as your punching bag."

"I said I promise—"

"Foster, I used to drink. I know how long promises last when you're smashed. As long as you plan to continue to get drunk, you can't promise me a damn thing."

"I'm not gonna stop drinking. I mean, that's great that you did and all, but I don't have a problem."

"You don't think that making homophobic comments, starting fights, and almost punching your roommate is a problem?"

"Hey, I told you I didn't start that fight!"

"Foster, talking to you is like talking to a brick wall."

"Why are you being such a prick? I said I was sorry, didn't I?"

"Apologizing isn't always enough. It's a start, but it has to be followed up by action or it's just empty words."

"What do you mean?"

"If you say you're sorry, then turn around and do the same thing over again, what's the point? How many times will you say you're sorry? And how many times am I supposed to accept your apology? Take it from somebody who's been the one apologizing."

"You're not even giving me a chance. So far, I've only asked you to accept my apology once because I've only screwed up once."

Okay, the dummy has a point.

"Yeah, okay," I conceded. "I'll give you another chance. But if you screw up again, I'm out of here *and* I'll report you to campus police. I doubt they'll be very tolerant."

He blanched. "My dad will kill me if I get in trouble."

"Then maybe you shouldn't be such an asshole."

I tried to go back to my game, but I was too distracted after our confrontation. Adrenaline was coursing through my body and I needed to get out of the room. I decided to take a walk.

"I'll be back later," I said as I let myself out.

I started off walking aimlessly, but soon found myself standing in front of Kody's dorm.

I really should check on him, I told myself. But how would I get into his building without his keycard?

His keycard!

It was still in my pocket of the pants I'd worn the night before. In all the confusion, I'd forgotten to give it back. I rushed back to my room,

which Foster had thankfully abandoned, retrieved the card, and then jogged back to Kody's dorm.

I let myself in by the same side door I'd exited from the night before and made my way up to Kody and Nick's floor. I knocked on their door, but didn't get an answer. I tried again with the same result, and started to get a little worried. Kody hadn't been in great shape last night. Maybe I shouldn't have left.

I felt in my pocket for something to write a note on. I found my receipt from The Morning Rush and a pen and jotted down a quick note letting him know I'd stopped by to check on him and return his keycard, then shoved both under the door and left.

Mission semi accomplished, I found myself at loose ends. I wasn't ready to return to my room, but I had no idea what to do with myself. I was wandering aimlessly around campus when I felt my phone buzzing in my pocket.

It was a text from Erin: *Impromptu movie party in my room.*

What's the movie? I sent back, even though I'd already started walking in the direction of our building.

We'll decide when you get here. Group consensus.

Fair enough.

I was halfway there when I felt a hand clamp on my shoulder. I yelped and ducked out from their grip, spinning around to find Brayden giving me a concerned look.

"Did I scare you?" he asked.

"Yeah, Brayden, you did. Warn a guy next time."

He nodded. "I will." Then he just stood there.

"Did you, uh, need something or...?"

"Oh. I was bored, but then I saw you and thought I'd say hi."

I waved. "Hi."

He looked at me as if I'd lost my mind.

"Anything else?" I asked, starting to edge away slowly. No sudden moves.

"What are you up to?"

"On my way to watch a movie with Erin and some friends." She hadn't specified who else was there, but group consensus implied more than just her and me.

"What movie?"

"I don't know yet. We're going to decide when I get there."

"Sounds fun. Guess I'll see you around."

He looked so sad and pathetic that I felt bad for him.

"Want to join us?" I asked, against my better judgement.

His face lit up. "Yeah. I'd like that."

"Then come on, Big Guy. Let's go watch a movie."

I hoped there was room for Goliath. Erin's room was bigger than mine, but still not that large, especially if she already had a bunch of people over.

A few minutes later, Erin answered my knock with a big, toothy grin. Her eyes widened as she looked past me to the wall of flesh behind me, though, to her credit, her smile never wavered.

"Hey," I said, trying not to laugh. "I brought Brayden. Hope that's okay."

"Of course," she said without hesitation. "The more the merrier. Come on in."

She stepped back to reveal Carlos, Toshi, Mira, the gorgeous Black girl who was on my team for the orientation game day, as well as a girl I hadn't met before on one end of the couch.

"Okay...let's see. Everyone, this is Jake and Brayden." She said, once more in full RA mode. "And this is Carlos, Toshi, Mira, and Alys," Erin said, indicating each person in turn, ending with the girl I didn't know.

Alys was all sharp angles and shy energy, hiding behind a curtain of dark hair. She glanced up to reveal dark brown eyes lined heavily with black, winged eyeliner and a pierced nose. She gave a little wave then quickly looked away. She wore a graphic tee layered under a cropped, loose-knit sweater, and a pleated skirt over a pair of leggings and heavy combat boots. Her nails were short but painted, if chipped. She had broad shoulders that she pulled in on herself, as if she was self-conscious.

Introductions out of the way, we moved to negotiating our seating arrangements. Mira took the end of the couch opposite Alys, and Toshi was small enough to slot in between them. Erin squeezed into the papasan chair with Carlos, half on his lap, leaving the floor for Brayden and I, though Erin did provide a couple of cushions.

Once we were settled, Erin started surfing the streaming platforms looking for something we could all agree on. Twenty minutes later, we still hadn't made a decision.

"Oh hey," Toshi said suddenly. "This one has a rainbow collection. Let's watch a queer movie."

"Would everybody be okay with that?" Erin asked.

Mira shrugged. "I'm down."

"Me too," I said.

Carlos also agreed, and Brayden and Alys just shrugged.

I'd never heard of most of the movies in the collection: *But I'm A Cheerleader*, *The Birdcage*, *To Wong Foo, Priscilla Queen of the Desert*. I'd heard of *Brokeback Mountain*, but that was about it.

"Why are they all so old?" Mira asked.

"They do look dated," Carlos said.

"This one stars Troye Sivan," Erin offered.

"Pass," Mira commented drily.

"If they're not old, they sound depressing as hell," Toshi complained.

"Wait, what's that?" I interrupted. "Go back. There. What's that one?"

"*Beautiful Thing*? Never heard of it," Erin said.

"Me either," I said. "But the cover image caught my eye." It was an image of two young guys embracing.

"It came out in 1996," Carlos pointed out.

"I wasn't even born yet!" Toshi said.

"None of us were," Mira added.

"It sounds good, though," Erin said diplomatically.

"It's fine, just play it," Mira said. "Otherwise, we're going to just keep scrolling for the rest of the night."

"Everybody okay with this one?" Erin asked.

"Is there going to be, like, a lot of...sex in this?" Brayden asked nervously.

"It says it's rated R for sexuality, language and drug use. Is that a problem?"

"Uh no. Just curious."

"Relax, Big Guy," I said. "It's not like we're watching *Heated Rivalry*."

"So we're good?" Erin clarified, and everyone agreed. "Great! Let's go!"

She hit play and the movie started. It turned out to be pretty good. Parts of it felt a little dated, especially the fashion, but the central love story felt pretty timeless.

When it ended, I could have sworn I saw Brayden swiping away a tear. I definitely heard sniffing coming from Toshi's direction.

"That was really sweet," Erin said as the credits started to roll.

"It was, but I hate that it was made thirty years ago and the homophobia is still so relevant," Mira said.

"It almost feels like we've regressed in some ways," I said.

"Try being trans," Alys said softly, the first words I'd heard her speak since we arrived.

"Oh baby girl, I can't even imagine. It's hard enough being a black lesbian," Mira said.

"Or Asian and nonbinary," Toshi added.

I twisted around to face the couch. "Yeah, compared to you three, I guess I have it pretty easy as a white cis gay guy."

"These days, no queer person has it easy," Mira responded immediately. "We're all under attack by these damn fascists."

"It's scary," Toshi agreed. "Especially as an immigrant. I mean, we moved here when I was a little kid, and we're all here legally, but that doesn't even seem to matter anymore. My parents have been really scared since...since everything started getting bad. They've even talked about moving back to Japan."

"I know what you mean," Carlos said. "My tio, my uncle, was abducted by ICE agents. He's a fourth generation American, and they still beat him and locked him up for over a week. It took us three days to even find where they were holding him, or if he was even alive."

"That's awful," Toshi breathed.

"Yeah, and to add insult to injury, we're Mexicanos, indigenous people. We were here first! Well, not here in New York, but you know what I mean. They don't care about any of that, only that we're brown."

Erin wrapped her arms around him and laid her head on his shoulder.

"How would you feel about moving to Japan?" I asked Toshi. "I think I'd be happy to get out of here."

They shrugged. "I don't really remember living there so the U.S. is my home. My parents were really big on assimilating into American culture so I wasn't even raised culturally Japanese, for the most part. Plus, Japan doesn't have any anti-discrimination laws for LGBTQ people. They don't even have marriage for same-sex couples. Things are pretty terrible here right now, but I feel fairly safe in New York. That's why I only applied to colleges in the northeast. At least there are laws and protections in place. I just need to survive the next few years."

"But what if we don't?" Alys said, her voice barely audible. "If they ignore the laws and nobody holds them accountable, what good are those laws? Things will only keep escalating. They came for me first, for the trans community. And they came for immigrants, but only the brown ones, of course. But they'll come for all of you eventually." She glanced up. "Even

you, Erin. They're trying to strip women's rights, too. You say you feel safe here, but I don't feel safe anywhere anymore."

"Well damn, this party turned dark," Mira said after a few minutes of silence. "No lies detected though. We're here to learn, but how are we supposed to do that when we're literally afraid for our lives? And why are we even getting an education? Like, what kind of a world will we even be graduating into in four years? It all seems so pointless."

Erin straightened up. "I get it. I really do, but we can't think like that. Times are hard, but we have to believe that it will get better."

"Just believing it will get better isn't enough," Alys said, her voice surprisingly firm. "We have to work to make it better."

"But what can we do?" Toshi asked. "We're just kids."

"Kids have made a difference over and over throughout history," she replied. "Student movements were a crucial part of the civil rights movement and the anti-war protests."

"Not everybody is an activist..." Toshi's voice was small.

"Nobody says you have to be out on the front lines. There are plenty of other ways to help. We're all eighteen, right? You have to vote. Write letters. Make calls. Make your voice heard. The time for silence passed a long time ago. Silence is complicity."

"Obviously, this is something weighing on everyone," Erin said. "We all need safe places to relax and vent and share our fears. I may not be gay, but I am an ally."

"Speak, Valentina," Toshi threw in, but nobody laughed. The vibes were too heavy.

Erin smiled, though, acknowledging the attempt at lightening the mood, and continued, "My room is always safe, but for a lot of you guys, I can also recommend the Rainbow Roost."

"That's the school GSA, right?" Toshi asked. "I stopped by their booth during orientation week."

"Yeah. They could be another place for support. I think meetings start soon. You can look online or I can get you the info if you are interested."

"What's a GSA?" Brayden asked. He'd been so quiet, I'd almost forgotten he was there.

"Gay/straight alliance," Erin explained.

"It's sort of like a club for people in the alphabet mafia," Mira explained.

"Do you have to be gay to go?" Brayden asked.

"No," Erin stepped back in. "That's why they call it a gay/straight alliance and not just a gay club. I'm straight and I go sometimes."

"How'd you get involved?" I asked.

She paused, and Carlos' arms tightened around her waist. She drew in a deep breath. "My...my best friend came out to me as trans in high school. We went to a pretty conservative Catholic school, so it wasn't easy. I tried to be her support, but her family was really transphobic. They were so hateful. She...she killed herself two weeks before graduation."

We all sat in stunned silence. No one seemed to know what to say.

"I'm sorry," I finally managed, regretting my question even though I'd had no way of knowing. Erin came across so bubbly and carefree, but I was once again reminded that you never know what people are dealing with under the surface.

She shook her head. "No need to apologize. It's important to remember her. Her name was Sadie, even if that's not the name on her tombstone. She'll always be a part of me. She made me an activist. Last year, I was the vice president of the Rainbow Roost. I'm really involved in community awareness stuff and fighting for LGBTQ rights. The meetings aren't all political though. We have a lot of fun. We watch movies, play games, go on trips, have special guests, plan events. Seriously, you should all come."

"I'm in," Mira said right away.

Toshi nodded. "Me too."

"I'll think about it," Alys mumbled.

"I'll try to make it sometime," I said vaguely.

I'd had mixed experiences with the GSA at my old high school. Killian's brother Kane was the president for a while, even though he was straight. It was a good group, but it had felt a little cliquish at times. Or maybe I just wasn't much of a joiner. Still, I should probably give the one here a try before writing it off completely, especially if Erin vouched for it.

The group broke up not long after. It was hard to come back from the dark turn our conversation had taken. We were all feeling a bit somber, and, besides, as Erin reminded us, we all had classes the next day.

It was past dinner time by then, as my stomach reminded me, so I headed for the dining hall, Brayden on my heels like the world's largest duckling.

After we ate, I figured Brayden would go back to his room, but I should have known better. He followed me up to mine, which we found empty, much to my relief. I still wasn't in the mood to deal with Foster.

The next question was what to do with my newly acquired oversized shadow.

"Do you play video games?" I asked.

He nodded.

"What kinds of games do you like?"

"Do you have Madden?"

"Uh, no."

"Mario Cart?"

"Yeah, I have that."

We settled down and played for a while, got bored, and switched to an animated TV show. After four or five episodes, I was getting tired and started dropping hints. My hints landed on deaf ears, however, and I realized I was going to have to be a lot less subtle.

I got up and started getting ready for bed, while commenting, "Man, I'm getting tired!"

"Oh," he said, looking surprised. He checked his phone. "I guess it is getting late. I should let you get to bed, Jake."

"Yeah, we should both get to bed, huh?"

He stood up and just stood there, looking unsure. "Um, thanks for inviting me to watch the movie with your friends. It was good. And I learned a lot."

"From the movie or our conversation after?" I asked, teasing ever so gently.

"Both," he said seriously. "Anyway, g'night, Jake."

"Good night, Brayden. Rest well and dream of large women."

He blinked at me for a moment, then nodded and left.

I set the alarm on my phone and crawled into bed, where I fell asleep quickly.

I woke up when Foster stumbled in a few hours later, but thankfully he went right to bed, and I was able to fall back asleep with no problem.

I awoke the next morning before my alarm went off, so I turned it off before going to take my shower. Once I was dressed, I grabbed the books I needed for the morning, and set out for coffee.

On the way, Brayden fell into step next to me. I hadn't even heard him approaching. For a big guy, he could move silently when he wanted to.

"Morning, Brayden," I greeted him.

He gave me a big smile and nodded.

"The strong, silent type this morning, huh?" I joked.

He nodded again.

"Works for me. You like coffee?"

He shook his head no.

"Hot chocolate?"

Another nod.

"So noted."

A few minutes later, we arrived at The Morning Rush. I glanced in the window before going in and saw Kody wiping down the tables. By the time I opened the door, all I saw was his tail end disappearing into the back room, leaving the coffee shop completely abandoned.

What the hell was going on?

I couldn't help feeling disappointed. Maybe I should just find another coffee shop. No need to torture both of us if he was avoiding me.

I approached the counter, and cleared my throat. "Um... Hello?"

Marla swept in from the back room.

"Morning, handsome," she said breezily, then noticed Brayden.

"And you too, tall, strong, and gorgeous."

Brayden looked around as if she must be talking to someone else.

Marla caught my eye and gave me a look I couldn't interpret.

"What can I do for you this morning?" she asked.

I ordered my coffee for me and a hot chocolate for Brayden, and Marla started preparing our drinks.

While we waited, I studied Brayden. For someone who rarely seemed to have anything going on behind his eyes, he appeared to be deep in thought. Or maybe he just wasn't awake yet.

A few minutes later, Marla slid our to-go cups across the counter.

"There ya go," she said with a toothy smile.

Brayden and I both pulled out our wallets at the same time.

"No, this one's on me," I said quickly. "Least I can do after all you've done."

"You don't owe me nuthin, Jake," he argued.

"Then let me buy my friend a hot chocolate."

His face lit up, and he quietly sipped his drink.

I paid, then we made our way to my table.

"You okay, Big Guy?" I asked after we were seated.

Brayden shrugged. "Yeah. I didn't know if we'd still be friends today."

"Why wouldn't we be?"

"I thought maybe you were just being nice yesterday because I hit Foster for you."

I managed not to laugh. "No, that's not the only reason we're friends."

"Oh. Okay. Cool." He smiled as if I'd just cleared up a lifelong mystery for him.

If only all my relationships were as simple as this one, I thought as I scanned the room for Kody. I was hoping he would reappear before we had to leave, but I was destined to be disappointed.

Eventually, our drinks were gone, and it was obvious that Kody wasn't going to return as long as I was there. For all I knew, he'd ducked out the back door. Either way, I couldn't sit around waiting all day.

"I guess we should get to class," I said with a sigh.

Brayden nodded, and we headed back to campus.

My first class was English Lit. The professor was a short, wiry man with energy to spare. He bounced around the front of the room, guaranteeing that he would keep things lively, if nothing else. He asked if we'd been able to get all our required reading books on his list, and I told him the bookstore was out of one of the titles, the one he wrote.

"As much as I appreciate the royalties," he said with an ironic grin, "may I remind you that the library exists and is free to use. All you need is your student ID. I encourage all of you to check it out, literally and metaphorically."

The class chuckled as my face blazed. I hadn't even thought about the library.

I headed there immediately after class, hoping I hadn't made too much of a bad impression on a professor I already liked.

I found his book on the shelf and checked it out. I was actually looking forward to reading it, and I'd never been much of a reader.

By the time I left the library, it was just about noon, so I headed for the Commons. The lunch special was chicken strips and fries, so I helped myself and looked for a table. I spotted Brayden eating alone off to one side and decided to join him.

He looked up and smiled as I approached. "Hey, Jake," he greeted me.

"Hey, Brayden."

We ate in silence for a few minutes before Brayden suddenly grunted. "Hey, isn't that your boy?"

I looked up in time to see Kody dropping his tray off at a trash can and practically running from the cafeteria.

"What was that about?" I mused aloud.

Brayden shrugged. "I dunno. He saw us and took off."

I sighed. So that was how it was going to be. He was definitely avoiding me.

"I guess he's embarrassed about the other night."

Brayden frowned. "Why should he be embarrassed? He got a couple good shots in before Foster clobbered him. As little as he is, he shouldn't be embarrassed that he went down with one punch."

"There's more to it than that, but I really can't go into it."

He gave me a grin. "Oh. Gay stuff."

I laughed. "Yeah, gay stuff."

"Like in the movie."

"Yeah. Except life isn't like a movie. You don't always get happy endings."

He sat thoughtfully for a moment, just chewing, then said, "But you deserve a happy ending, Jake."

His unexpected kindness caught me off guard, making it hard to swallow around the sudden lump in my throat.

"Uh, thanks, buddy. Wish I believed that half as much as you do."

He looked like he was about to argue with me, but I'd lost my appetite for lunch and that particular conversational thread.

"Hey," I said quickly. "I'm getting full. You want the rest of my chicken?"

My distraction worked, and Brayden gratefully inhaled the rest of my lunch. He finished eating then left for his next class.

I sat at the table for a few more minutes wondering what to do about Kody. He'd given me the perfect excuse not to pursue him. I could walk away now and no one could ever blame me.

And I would never have to tell him about my past.

Presented with this out, however, I found I didn't want it. Brayden words still rang in my mind. Maybe I did deserve a happy ending. And why couldn't it be with Kody?

With a sudden, surprising clarity, I realized I wanted to be with Kody. I wanted to hold him in my arms and feel his lips against mine again, but a real kiss. My breath quickened just thinking about it.

The idea of telling him about my past still terrified me, but I knew that I couldn't just let him walk away. I was going to pursue him. If he wanted to tell me to get lost, that's what he'd have to do, but he'd have to tell me to my face.

Decision made, I left for my next class with a bounce in my step and a smile on my face.

The chase was on.

Chapter 10 - Kody

Basic English must be one of the most boring subjects known to man.

I can speak and write English pretty well, but I can't diagram a sentence to save my life. I was so bored with the droning that I spent most of my class time thinking about the disastrous night of the party and the aftermath.

Had I kissed Jake? I truly wished I could remember. If I had, it would probably be the only time I'd get the chance.

He was loaded with rizz. No one who looked that good had thoughts about circling back to the drunk boy who picked fights. Not a good look. Even if he was bi, if Nick could be believed on that score, I hadn't given him a reason to come back to me.

After a double session of ignoring English and receiving my homework assignment, I had an hour break for lunch. I headed over to the Commons and fumbled through using the meal app at the entry. I walked through slowly while I checked out my options.

I settled on a cheeseburger with some fries, and a coke to round it all out. I started into the dining room...and immediately spun around — sending french fries flying — and ducked behind a large round pillar, pressing my back against it like I was starring in the world's worst spy caper.

Jake was eating with the not-so-incredible hulk from the party. What was he, his personal bodyguard? It seemed like they were always together these days. Maybe *they* were dating. Maybe Jake was into rough trade.

I snorted. Even I didn't believe that.

Had Jake seen me? He'd probably seen me. Whether or not Jake had seen me, I suddenly realized other people definitely could, and I was getting some strange looks.

Okay, be casual. You're just waiting for a friend.

I tried to relax, craning my neck like I was looking for someone. Then I felt stupid as it occurred to me that I'd trapped myself behind the column. I couldn't stay there forever. Eventually he and the Mountain would finish and leave, and I was right by the main exit.

Retreat was in order.

Moving as quickly as possible, I set my tray down on top of the garbage can, grabbed my cheeseburger — the most portable item — and darted for the door.

I chanced a look over my shoulder once, hoping and praying to all the gay gods that I hadn't been spotted as I made my escape. The last thing I wanted was for him to see me running away — again.

I felt like I was living inside of a recurring nightmare where I just kept making the same stupid choices. See Jake, do something stupid, run from him, and repeat. I should randomize some of it, maybe trip in front of a group of people while running away or something just to change it up.

I ate on a bench outside and waited until it was time to head to Western Civilization, my next class. As I was sitting there, the SS Mountain of Flesh cruised into view.

I instinctively looked for Jake and was a little surprised when I didn't see him anywhere. I was under the impression that the giant needed to be within a few feet of Jake at all times. Maybe if you're that pretty you just need some protection? Or maybe he was the kid of somebody famous and that really was his bodyguard. Maybe he was really a European prince.

Perfectly reasonable. You know, with the complete lack of accent and all. Then again, if you're royalty you probably can afford speech lessons. Actors change their accent for parts all the time. Why couldn't a sexy prince like Jake be one of them? And maybe we'd fall in love and get married and rule his tiny little country together, just me and Prince Jake of the Imaginary Tiny European Nation.

Prince Jake wouldn't wear one of those ridiculous jewel-covered uniforms with medals for accomplishments like Existing While Royal. No, he'd be relaxed royalty. Modern royalty. The kind who did charity work and got photographed rescuing sea turtles or something. He'd wear loose linen shirts unbuttoned too low and stupid expensive sunglasses while tabloids called him "The People's Prince" because he surfed and occasionally carried children during natural disasters.

And somehow, against all odds, he'd fallen in love with me — Kody Kingsley: patron saint of panic attacks and saying the wrong thing at maximum volume.

In my fantasy, he'd see through all of that instantly. Fantasy Jake thought my awkwardness was charming. He'd grin when I rambled. He'd pull me closer when I got anxious. He'd kiss the top of my head while I spiraled about embarrassing myself at some royal dinner because I accidentally called a duchess "bro."

"It's okay," he'd whisper in my ear. "They love you."

Impossible sentence.

Still, my brain kept going. We'd escape from royal obligations and disappear to some private beach nobody else knew about. He'd stretch out beside me in the sand, golden in the sunset, all long limbs and impossible beauty, and somehow, he'd still be looking at me like I was the miracle there instead of him.

That was the real fantasy, the idea that someone that beautiful and kind could know me fully and still pull me closer instead of pushing me away.

I let out a groan and dragged both hands down my face. Jesus Christ, I'm an idiot. I needed therapy. Or electroshock treatment. Maybe both.

The jolly pale giant was heading my way, looking down at the front of the notebook clutched in his meaty paw. I imagined he had a list of instructions written on the front: *Inhale. Exhale. Repeat.*

I sat quietly, schooling my face to neutrality, pretending to read so I didn't get stomped in public.

As he passed by, he literally blocked out the sun. Well, at least he was good for shade.

After a moment, I realized that I was still in his shadow. I looked up from my book to find he was staring down at me with what could almost be called a thoughtful expression on his blocky face.

"You hit Foster at the party the other night," he said.

Oh shit! He was friends with the guy I went after!

"I, uh, really don't remember," I said quietly.

He shrugged. "He deserved it."

Atlas Shrugged, I thought crazily.

"I don't usually fight." I said meekly. He continued to look at me in silence until I grew uncomfortable with his gaze. "Is...is there something I can do for you?"

"Nope."

"Um, okay." I tried to look away, but felt as though a spotlight were on me.

"You're Jake's friend?" he asked.

I looked up at him sharply. "Not really. He buys coffee at the place where I work." Why would he ask about that?

"Jake's a good guy. He's nice."

"Um, why are you telling me this?" I asked, trying not to be nervous. It wasn't easy. He was intimidating just standing there, and I certainly didn't want to piss him off.

“I don't know. Jake's my friend, and he helped you the other night, so I guess he's yours too.”

I glanced at my watch. “Wow, look at the time. I'm going to be late to class. I'd better go.” I stood up and nodded to the big guy. “It was, uh, nice talking to you.”

“You too, Kody. See ya.”

I rushed off to class even though I was in no danger of actually being late. I just couldn't take any more of that bizarre conversation with Jake's weird friend. I arrived in the room first — even before the professor — and took a seat near the back so I could observe everyone else.

Something weird was happening, and I really didn't know what it was. The only real clue was that it seemed to involve Jake. Everywhere I went, there he was...and the campus wasn't even that small. Everywhere I looked, something reminded me of him. I'd think I heard someone say his name and turn to look for him. Or I'd see some random blond guy from behind and briefly think it was him.

It all seemed too much to be a coincidence, but maybe it was just one of those things where you start noticing something in particular — a number, a color, a brand or something — and then you see it everywhere. It didn't mean anything except your brain was looking for patterns.

But I have a masochistic streak, so my mind kept going back to that day in the coffee shop. I couldn't help but wonder what he had been about to ask? I looked out the window and got lost in the question that hadn't been asked. What if he'd wanted to ask me out?

More likely, he'd been about to ask what the fuck was wrong with me. In that case, he got all his answers at that party.

I'm not sure I'd ever run into someone who had seen me be so unmitigatedly stupid so many times. There really was no excuse for me to have run like a coward in front of Max and then follow it up with getting sloppy drunk and starting a fight.

So why had he taken me back to my dorm? That was the part my brain kept snagging on, like a loose thread I couldn't stop pulling. No one is that nice, right?

Okay, objectively, maybe some people were. Somewhere. Probably in inspirational videos or those little stories people reposted online about humanity being beautiful.

But not most people.

People didn't voluntarily choose inconvenience unless they wanted something out of it. That was just basic human behavior, wasn't it? If

somebody went out of their way for you, there was usually a reason. Attention. Gratitude. Control. Favors later. Ego. Something.

So what did Jake get out of helping me?

I tried to replay the night in fragments. Me drunk off my ass. Me apparently starting fights. Me maybe trying to kiss him like an idiot. None of that exactly screamed worth the effort. And yet he'd still made sure I got home safely.

Jake barely knew me. I was basically just the awkward coffee guy who kept humiliating himself in increasingly creative ways. By all rights, I should have been forgettable. A funny story to tell his friends. Instead, he'd taken care of me.

Why? It genuinely didn't compute.

Pretty people especially weren't supposed to be nice. That sounded terrible and shallow, but life experience had taught me that people who looked like Jake existed in a different social ecosystem than the rest of us. They didn't need to develop patience or kindness or empathy, because the world just handed them things with a smile. When you're beautiful, life is a piece of cake served on a silver platter. Which usually meant that the beautiful people were spoiled as hell.

Not always in obvious ways, necessarily. Sometimes it was subtle. They were used to people laughing at their jokes harder, forgiving them faster, wanting their attention badly enough to overlook behavior the rest of us would get crucified for. Doors opened for them — literally and metaphorically. Teachers liked them more. Employers trusted them more. Random strangers wanted to help them. Even when they were awkward or rude, people bent themselves into pretzels pretending it was charming.

After a while, wouldn't that kind of thing warp you a little?

I'd seen it happen online constantly. Gorgeous people posting videos where they were objectively being assholes, and the comments would still be full of people thirsting over them like having nice cheekbones somehow trumped bad behavior. Pretty privilege was real, and I think if you grow up with the whole world constantly reinforcing that you're special, eventually you start believing ordinary rules don't apply to you anymore.

That was why nice beautiful people felt suspicious to me. Because there had to be a catch, right?

Maybe they liked being adored. Maybe they collected people the way some people collected compliments. Maybe kindness was just another way to keep everyone orbiting around them.

But Jake didn't feel like that.

That was the problem. He didn't flirt with every breathing organism in a five-mile radius. He didn't seem attention hungry or aware of himself in that exhausting way really attractive people sometimes were. He just...helped people. Listened to them. Smiled at them like they mattered.

Like I mattered.

And honestly? That was way more dangerous than if he'd just been a cocky asshole.

If he'd been arrogant, I could've dismissed him. If he'd been an asshole, I could've turned the crush into annoyance and moved on with my life. But every interaction just made him seem more genuine, and my brain did not know what to do with genuine kindness that wasn't asking something from me.

Maybe he just pitied me. Honestly, that explanation made the most sense.

Maybe I'd looked so pathetic that basic human decency kicked in and he couldn't leave me alone, drunk and miserable at a party. Maybe he was just one of those naturally helpful people who rescued stray animals and held doors open and helped old ladies cross the street.

Still, though...most people would have dumped me in a chair somewhere and called it a day. Jake took me home.

The more I thought about it, the stranger it seemed. How did he even get me there? Was I talking the whole time? Oh God, was I crying? Had I thrown up on him? Did he have to drag me up the stairs? Had I clung to him?

I hated not remembering.

But underneath the embarrassment and panic was something even more unsettling. A tiny, traitorous part of me kept circling back to the possibility that maybe he'd helped me because he wanted to. Not out of obligation or pity, but just because he cared.

And somehow that scared me more than all the other possibilities combined.

I was pulled from my thoughts by the sound of the seat next to me creaking, and I glanced over to see the hulk settling into it. Oh no! We have the same class, and he's sitting next to me! I think he likes me.

He waved with a big goofy grin. "Hey, we're in the same class."

"So we are," I said with a forced smile that probably looked like more of a grimace.

I was distracted as the class began. Our professor was a man who truly loved his subject, and I found myself drawn into the class quite easily.

He assigned reading and chapter questions due back for Wednesday's class, which I noted, and we were dismissed.

The giant caught up with me as we were filing out of the room. "You work in a coffee place?"

I sighed. "Yeah." Oh god, please tell me he isn't a caffeine freak.

"Working tonight?" he asked.

"No," I said with some relief. "Two days off."

"Oh, enjoy them," he said with a smile, showing large square teeth that looked made for crushing gravel.

I smiled weakly back as he ambled out the door. I headed to my last class of the day, Basic Algebra. All I can say is math will always suck, and I was still mad that I had to take this class, since I hated it so much in high school.

I decided not to risk the Commons for dinner, in case Jake was eating there again. Instead, I headed off campus to get some take out from a Chinese place.

I let myself into my dorm, near total darkness enveloping me as soon as the door closed behind me. Why was it so damn dark? All of a sudden, a light switched on, and I saw Nick sitting on the couch, a blanket over our window.

"You talk to Jake today?" Nick asked from his perch.

"No," I replied. "What's up with the—"

"Chicken. I don't want to hear lonely incel music coming from your side of the wall," he laughed. "Did you bring me some dinner too?" he asked. "Where's mine?"

I grinned. "I left it down the street, about a block up. Chinese place."

"That smells good. I'm going to go get some." He ducked back into his room as I took over his seat on the couch. I put my food on the TV table and pulled my shirt off, tossing it toward my room. I sat on the couch with my food, picked up my Western Civ book, and began to study while I ate.

Nick just *had* to whistle at me before he left. He was a goof, but it was nice to get checked out, I guess. He was back quickly and settled in next to me with his computer. We largely ate in silence, each occupied with our work. The food didn't last long, and we eventually both felt like we'd put in enough time being good students and switched to gaming.

As we played, my phone rang. I answered without thinking and immediately heard, "Hello, this is Monica calling from the loan department. We wanted to let you know that you've been approved—"

I hung up. Assholes. I need to check and see if it's a spam call before picking up.

The phone rang again. This time, I checked the Caller ID before answering. I didn't recognize the number, so I sent it to voicemail.

When the phone rang for the third time, I was ready to scream. Luckily, I saw my dad's name on the screen, so I knew it was either him or Charlie. All our phones were under Dad's name.

"Hello?"

"Run out of underwear yet?" It was Charlie.

"If you left them in my bag to start with, I wouldn't have had to go out to get more yesterday."

"And what would be the fun in that? Sorry you had to buy more, though. Dad still has the box sitting on his desk to send you."

"Gee, thanks, Charlie."

He giggled. "Hey, I needed space for all those condoms and lube!"

"You had an entire separate bag for those."

"Details. So are you still hung up on the straight guy?"

"Why do I like you again?"

He laughed again. "So you are."

"Well, I... Yeah, I am." I decided not to mention the possibly bi part.

"That sucks, Kody. Why are you still hanging on? Usually, you get over these things pretty fast, once you find out what the deal is."

"Okay, it's like this. See, this guy is so cute, and he's so freaking nice to me. He even helped me the other night after I had too much to drink." And he might be bi.

"You were drinking?" he asked in a stage whisper. Obviously, my father was somewhere in the vicinity.

"Yeah, and I paid for it the next day."

"Did you get a hangover?" he asked with curiosity.

"Yeah, a bad one. Threw up and everything, just like Dad said I would."

He snorted. "What does that have to do with this guy?"

"Well, I might have had the right to remain silent, but I didn't have the ability."

"Oh my God! What did you say?"

"I don't really remember, but I punctuated whatever I said by trying to kiss him."

"Holy shit! Can this get any worse?"

“Yeah, I’m afraid so. He has this huge guy who is like a stunt double for Arnold Schwarzenegger who always seems to be around. Well, he came to talk to me today.”

“Why is that bad?”

“Let’s just say I was nervous in his presence.”

“Well, he could have other qualities that make him cool,” Charlie suggested through his giggles.

“Yeah, he probably bites the heads off live chickens — very cosmopolitan.”

“And he’s friends with the straight guy?”

“Jake. His name is Jake, and yes, he does seem to be his friend.” And he might be bi.

“Well, unless Jake has really bad taste in people, then this guy is probably okay, right? I mean, I’d be more worried about his judgment if he liked you.”

Charlie cracked himself up, an unending stream of guffaws and snorts, until I told him goodbye and hung up on him. Little brothers are possibly the most annoying pests on the face of the earth.

The phone rang again, and I snatched it up in annoyance. “Charlie, why don’t you wait until I get home to make fun of me, you asshole?”

Silence greeted me and I growled in frustration as I stared at the phone. Huh. Not Charlie’s number. Not one I knew, either. The phone said the call was from Maryland, so probably another spam call.

Nick was just looking at me, both our screens displaying our dead characters.

“Uh...what’s up?”

“I’m sick of spam calls, and I’m tired of studying, and I’ve died six times to that boss. You want to go to a movie or something?”

He gave me a smirk. “Um, sure. Do you want to put some clothes on first, or were you planning to go like that?”

I looked down to see I was still shirtless. “Oh, uh, yeah.” I started back towards my room.

Nick chuckled. “Not that I’m complaining. You know, if you showed up on Jake’s doorstep like that, you’d get his feelings sorted out really quick.”

I stopped long enough to fix him with a glare. “Maybe I should just stay in and turn off the phone.”

“Hurry up. Let’s go get your mind off Jake.”

Over the next two days, I repeatedly ran into the Hulk — or, as I learned in class, Brayden. He was like Visa: everywhere I wanted to be. He became a constant shadow in the few basic classes I had with him. He seemed to be quite comfortable dwarfing me, though I often wondered what his purpose was exactly.

Eventually, I discovered at least one reason he was hanging around me. One afternoon not long after the party, I saw Jackhammer Face looking at me from a bench, glaring, with one eye all purple and black going to green.

Wow! Did I do that?

I barely had a mark on me. I tried to remember the guy's name. Brayden had mentioned it the first time he talked to me, but it wouldn't come to me. He glared until Brayden glowered at him and then he suddenly found something fascinating elsewhere. Interesting.

“So, are you my bodyguard now?” I asked Brayden.

“He's mean. You're not,” he said, as if that explained the universe in general.

Maybe it did. I accepted it with a shrug. It was the best reason I could think of. I was starting to think that Brayden wasn't so bad after all. Watching over someone he didn't know just because actually seemed sort of noble in a way.

“So. Brayden. Uh, how are you liking college?” Oh, I am the rizzler.

“It's been different than high school.”

“More freedom?”

He frowned a little, and I started to wonder if I'd broken him.

“The classes are a little harder. And there are more people than there were in my high school. I didn't really have any friends there, though.”

Something about the way he said it hit me weirdly hard. There wasn't any self-pity in it or a dramatic pause waiting for sympathy. It was just a statement of fact, delivered in that deep rumbling voice like he was telling me the weather.

I suddenly felt kind of bad for assuming Brayden just bulldozed through life on sheer size alone.

“People can be assholes in high school,” I said quietly.

He shrugged one massive shoulder. “Mostly they were nervous around me.”

Honestly? Fair. The guy looked like he could accidentally kill someone by hugging too enthusiastically.

Still, there was something unexpectedly gentle about him. Underneath the size and the intimidation factor and the whole Lurch from the Addams Family aesthetic, Brayden seemed almost painfully earnest. Like someone who genuinely didn't know how to connect with people but wanted to.

Which, unfortunately, made him a lot more difficult to dislike.

"That sucks, though," I added. "Maybe you'll make friends here at college."

His eyes flicked toward me then, and he smiled, completely transforming his face. Suddenly he didn't look intimidating at all. Just...happy that somebody had said something nice to him.

And, horrifyingly, I realized I understood that feeling way too well. Wait, did he think I meant we could be friends?

I guess it was better than being his enemy, but I wasn't sure what we had in common besides Jake. I didn't want to be rude, though, and say anything to hurt his feelings. On the other hand, I also didn't really want to dig any deeper into his lonely school days.

Thinking back to the fight and Brayden kind of defending me, I wondered if Jake had set that up, but I didn't have the nerve to ask. How do you even bring something like that up without sounding like an idiot?

Speaking of Jake, I'd been ducking him all week, including one day when I had nothing more between me and him than Brayden, who was waving and calling to Jake from across the quad. I could hide behind Brayden as easily as a mouse stepping behind an Escalade. I knew in a galactic sense that what I'd done was too small for history to care about, but every time I saw Jake, I was both attracted and embarrassed all over again. It was really confusing.

Thursday morning found me waiting in front of the Morning Rush bright and early, unhappy at being awake. An Economics assignment had kept me up half the night, basically because the text was so dry it practically self-combusted near any form of light. I leaned against the side of the building wishing I had some coffee in my hand already while I tried to keep my eyes open.

"You look bright-eyed this morning," Marla commented as she approached the front door, keys in hand.

"Economics."

She gave me a knowing nod and unlocked the door. "We've had a lot of kids from the school work here. Some good, some bad, but one universal constant was that Economics was no one's favorite."

"Was there a favorite?"

“Usually art classes. We’ve had a few very artistic types, and they could really go on about their art form, and they did the best chalk art, but they were less helpful at slinging coffee.”

We set about getting the store ready to open and making ourselves that all important first cup of the day.

Shortly after opening, I was pleased to see Nick come in to get his morning coffee, our first customer of the day.

“Mornin', Kody,” he mumbled.

I smiled at him. He was cute when he was sleepy.

“Morning, Nick. How are you?” I replied in as chipper a voice as I could manage.

He eyed me evilly and ordered his coffee. I took pity on him and gave him an extra-large instead of a large. He lingered a bit, and since we were slow, I took a few minutes to talk to him. This business was all about rush and recover, and we hadn’t had that first rush yet.

“You look more tired than usual. Didn’t you sleep last night?”

“I kept waking up for some reason.” He shook his head. “I go through that sometimes. Just have a couple days in a row where I don’t sleep well, then I crash for one really good night’s sleep and I’m fixed again.”

“You have a full day of classes?”

“Unfortunately. Sophomore year seems to be a step up from freshman year. I remember one professor telling us on the first day of freshman year to look around at how many people were there and then to take another look at the end of the semester.”

“Do a lot of people just drop out?”

“Big chunk. Some classes, like half. Most of them at least a third.”

He shook his head. “High school was a joke compared to this. I mean, I like to learn, so maybe I don’t mind the challenge as much as some people. They think you just show up and they give you a diploma. I’m like, Bitch, this isn’t high school.”

“I know what you mean. My dad had me in advanced classes in high school, but there was this kid who was bragging that the administration had him turning in ‘assignments’ that were nothing more than what he’d had for lunch that week. They gave him credit just to graduate him!”

“Then they get here and are like, uh, uh, uh...” We both broke into laughter, and he thanked me for the extra coffee and headed out.

My first class wasn’t until eleven on Thursdays, so Marla and I would be working together for the entire morning rush, which hit shortly after Nick stumbled out. It sounds a little counterintuitive, but I like the

rush. Not only does it feel like time is moving faster, but it also feels like something got done. The sounds from the machines, the slap of the seal on the fridge doors as we withdrew or replaced ingredients that needed to be kept cool, orders being called — it was like a little symphony.

As things fell off a little after nine, Marla ducked out back for a cancer stick while I wiped down the counters and started a wash cycle for the porcelain cups for people that stayed to drink. I saw Brayden's shadow before he actually made an appearance. When I saw that Jake traveled with him, I practically sprinted to the back door before he could see me.

I popped outside to find a surprised Marla.

“What?” she asked.

“Jake just walked in.” I gave her pleading eyes.

“Is he the cutie-patootie who was behind the counter with you?”

I nodded.

“You are too funny,” she said.

She went inside to deal with our new customers while I put my head between my knees and tried not to be sick.

I was thankful that Max wasn't the one working with me. I figured I was pushing my luck with her. That was about all I was grateful for at the moment, though. The stress of avoiding Jake was getting just a bit ridiculous.

Maybe I should just stop worrying about him. It's not like he knows I'm interested in him anyway.

Except for that whole might-have-tried-to-kiss-him thing.

What I really needed to do was find a way to get my mind off him. Sometimes, I managed for brief moments with school work or video games, but it was like my brain was some kind of evil clown that was always waiting to bring up Jake the second I let my guard down.

He was just so perfectly my type. Not that I was locked in on one single type, but he pushed a lot of my buttons really hard. It didn't help that he was as nice as anyone I'd ever met. He had to know how pretty he was, and when you're that pretty and you know it, usually your ego develops to match — or exceed — how pretty you are.

I saw it all the time on the socials. I thirst-followed plenty of guys just because they took their shirts off or worked out in tight shorts. The thing is, if you followed someone when they just did relatable stuff — talking in their car about some trouble they were having, some issue they saw in the news or heard about from a friend or family member — then you got to see a person, even if it was a curated version. Or, at least, it felt like it.

But that wasn't enough for some people, especially if the creator was attractive. Some people feel like just seeing someone online gives them some sort of ownership. It creates a sense of entitlement, as if posting a video or photo is enough of a reason to expect — or even demand — way more than what's being offered.

I don't post many pictures online as it is, but I've even had one or two instances where someone started asking for feet pics or if I'd send them my underwear or open an OnlyFans account.

The most common of these was usually one word: X?

My point being these relatable creators would get some people complimenting them on their looks, and they'd start to transition from their normal content to making something where they were still talking, maybe, but now their shirt was off. Then, gradually, there would be more and more pool shots or tanning pictures or GRWM vids where they start off in their underwear, until eventually they were just one big thirst trap.

And it all started because of the attention, people telling them how good looking they were, and once people buy into that, they think it translates to success in life. It no longer matters if you're smart or strong — good looks equal power and money.

And sometimes it does. Sex sells, and online culture trained people to commodify themselves. If you went viral or built up enough followers, you could get people to pay for nudes...and other content.

But what then? How many times can you show your junk on the internet and get paid for it? How long could it last? There's always another pretty face connected to a set of abs waiting to take your place. Everybody was always looking for the next big thing, the flavor of the month.

That's what made Jake kind of rare. He *was* objectively pretty. He looked like he'd stepped out of a surfing poster, for Christ's sake. He had great hair, gorgeous eyes, he was tall-ish, great tan — he was literally the Golden Boy.

And yet he didn't act like that made him special. He didn't come across like he was full of himself. He never seemed performative. You can tell a lot about people by how they treat someone behind a counter, and Jake had passed that with flying colors every single time.

I let my shoulders relax as I returned to the private beach with Prince Jake, where he would hold me while the sun set. We inhaled the salt air as the warm water lapped at our feet. The dying light bounced from the ripples in the water, a million little golden points of light.

And God, the way fantasy Jake touched me.

Not sexually, even. Not really.

Just...constantly, like he couldn't help himself. A hand at the small of my back. My head against his shoulder. His strong arms wrapped around me. Fingers laced through mine as we walked along the shore, sand scrunching under our feet. The shadow of a palm tree covering us.

Wait! I wasn't imagining that shadow...

Chapter 11 - Jake

I sat at my desk that night writing a paper for Philosophy. I was undecided about this class. Our first few assignments had seemed a little daffy. For this paper, the professor, a frumpy middle-aged woman with thinning hair and a lazy eye, had given us three lines that sounded like the beginning of a bad joke:

"Waiter, there's a fly in my soup!"

"I don't believe there is, sir."

"I'm sorry, but I know there is."

Our assignment was to explain what the diner means when he says, *"I know there is"* and then explain the difference between belief and knowledge. It was about as exciting as it sounded.

I had already typed and deleted the same sentence six times.

Knowledge requires certainty while belief merely requires conviction.

Delete.

One can believe something without empirical proof, whereas knowledge implies justification.

Delete.

I believed Kody liked me, but I didn't know if he liked me.

Okay, that one at least felt honest, even if Professor Whittaker would probably accuse me of missing the point entirely.

I groaned and leaned back in my chair, rubbing my eyes. Philosophy was just anxiety dressed up in academic language. A bunch of dead guys sitting around inventing increasingly complicated ways to ask, *But how do you really know anything, man?*

I'd gotten a huge cup of coffee from the cafeteria at dinner which I'd been nursing ever since. It tasted vile, like someone had filtered hot water through a gym sock and called it French Roast, and somehow got worse as it cooled, but the caffeine was the only thing keeping me from slipping into a coma.

I tried focusing again.

"I know there is."

How did anybody know anything? People believed the earth was flat once. People believed cigarettes were healthy. I believed Kody was avoiding me because he was embarrassed, but for all I knew he could've secretly hated me and been plotting to fake his own death just to get away from me.

Maybe that was the real point of Philosophy: making everyone progressively less certain until society collapsed.

I typed another sentence: *Knowledge differs from belief because knowledge requires evidence.*

Then, because my brain had apparently become terminally infected with Kody, I immediately thought:

Evidence: *the way he smiled at me at the party.*

Counterpoint: *He smiles at everybody, idiot.*

I sighed dramatically and let my forehead thunk softly against the desk. Somewhere out there, ancient Greek philosophers were probably shaking their heads at me.

Socrates drank poison for wisdom.

I was drinking cafeteria coffee and developing heart palpitations over a twink barista.

Honestly, same general energy.

When I heard a key in the lock, I welcomed the distraction even if it meant dealing with Foster. I was relieved to see Brayden poke his head around the corner. He smiled when he saw me.

"I was hoping you'd be here," he said. "Are you busy?"

"I'm working on a Philosophy paper, but I could use a break.

What's up?"

He came into the room and dropped onto Foster's bed. "Kody has the next two days off."

"Um...okay. How exactly do you know that?"

"He told me."

"He...told you? Did he just walk up to you and volunteer that information?"

"I asked him."

"You asked him? Why?"

"I was trying to find out for you."

"For me? But... You... I..." I sputtered. I paused and took a deep breath. "You didn't tell him that, did you?"

He shook his head, looking a little insulted. "'Course not."

I sighed with relief. "So what does knowing his work schedule do for me anyway?"

He looked at me as if I was missing the obvious. It must have been a treat for him to be on that side of the look for a change.

"He won't be at the coffee shop so you'll have to look for him at home."

"How do you know I want to look for him?" I asked, perhaps a tad defensively.

He rolled his eyes. "Why are you pretending you don't like him?"

"It's complicated."

"And I'm too dumb to understand?"

"I didn't say that!"

"But it's what you mean."

"No, it isn't. Okay, I'll try to explain, but I don't really understand it completely myself. I've never had any problem finding dates, but Kody is different. I really like him. He's sweet and innocent."

"So?"

"And I'm not."

"Not what?"

"Sweet and innocent."

"You're really nice. You're nice to me and you helped Kody when Foster punched him."

"That's not the same thing. Look, Brayden, I did some really horrible stuff before I came here — stuff that I don't necessarily want people to know about, especially Kody."

"Then don't tell him."

"That's just it. I don't want to lie to him either."

"It's not lying if you don't say anything about it."

"It's lying by omission."

He frowned. "Maybe you're right. Maybe I can't understand this."

I sighed. "I'd be lying simply by not telling the truth. I don't want to start a relationship with someone based on a lie."

"So tell him the truth."

"What if he can't stand the truth and decides he doesn't want to see me any more?"

He shrugged. "What if he doesn't care? Maybe he'll just like you for who you are now, and not what you did before."

I blinked. Was that wisdom flowing from the tongue of my massive friend?

"I think you should call him," he said.

"I don't have his number."

He frowned. "Can you get it?"

"I wouldn't know how."

"I'll get it for you."

"No! That's okay, Brayden. Besides, what would I say if I did call him?"

He shrugged again. "You could ask him out or something."

"I guess I could just say I'm checking in to see how he is. I haven't seen him since the party."

Brayden brightened up. "That's a good idea."

"But how do I get his number?"

"I dunno. You could ask someone."

"But who?" I thought for a moment and a possibility occurred to me. "Hang on, I have an idea. I'll be right back."

I ran down to the first floor. Erin was on duty tonight so that meant she'd be in the lobby sitting at her shabby little desk, probably watching TV. Sure enough, that's where I found her.

"I need a favor," I said.

"Yes, you can have my kidney," she said without looking away from the TV.

"Great. I appreciate it. Now, do you think you can get a phone number for me?"

She glanced over at me. "Would this be the phone number of a certain coffee shop clerk?"

I grinned. "Got it on the first guess."

"What dorm is he in?"

"Hudson."

She whistled. "And he's a freshie? How'd he land the fancy digs? I thought they were just for juniors and seniors."

I shrugged. "Beats me. But I think his roommate is a sophomore so maybe they were just strays."

She nodded. "Yeah, that's possible. I heard there was a room shortage this year because they accepted too many incoming students and then had some housing emergency. I think they actually had to offer some sort of housing incentive to get some seniors to move off-campus."

"But can you get me his number?"

"Probably." She spun her chair to face the laptop on the desk. "What's his name?"

"Kody...Shit! I don't know his last name!"

Erin rolled her eyes. "He's the love of your life and you don't even know his name?"

"I never said he's the love of my life!"

"Dude. You never stop talking about him."

"Wait, wait...I have another idea. Look up Nick Pederson. That's his roommate."

"You know his roommate's full name but not his? What kind of stalker are you?"

"He introduced himself to me with his full name! Kody didn't!"

She shook her head, but tapped away at the keyboard, then rattled off a number.

"Gah! Wait! I wasn't ready."

I pulled out my phone and she repeated the number slower.

"Thanks, Erin," I gushed. "I owe you one."

She waved a hand dismissively. "Just name your first born after me."

"What if it's a boy?"

"The name sounds the same whether it's with two A's or an E."

I paused and did the math. "Oh yeah. Good point."

She winked at me and did double finger guns. "Now go get your man, Romeo."

I paused, but decided it wasn't worth arguing about her mixed metaphors...or the fact that Romeo didn't exactly get a happy ending. I just waved and headed back to my room.

"Did you get it?" Brayden asked.

"Not exactly, but hang on."

I shot a quick text to the number Erin had given me: *Hey, Nick. This is Jake. From the party.*

Hey, Jake from the Party. What are you wearing?

What?

It was a joke. Like the commercial. Never mind. What's up?

It occurred to me that I couldn't very well just ask for Kody's phone number without being painfully obvious. I'd better at least try to make an attempt at conversation.

Not much. How about you? I sent back, feeling as lame as it sounded.

Not much here, either. Just finishing up some school work.

Bummer. I know what you mean. I'm swamped already and we've barely started the semester.

He sent a laughing emoji as a response. Was that enough small talk? Better not risk it.

So how'd the party go after I left? I texted.

Well, it was certainly less entertaining without Foster and Kody there.

The perfect opportunity!

Speaking of Kody, I was just wondering if you have his number. I paused before sending and wondered if that was too thirsty. Better soften the ask. I quickly added, *I wanted to check in on him since I haven't seen him since the party.*

He sent back, *Oh really?* with an upside-down smiley face.

I frowned. What was that supposed to mean? Was he not going to give it to me? How did I even respond to that?

Brayden noticed my frown. "What's wrong?"

Before I could respond to him — or spiral into a full-blown panic attack — Nick sent a contact card: *Kody Kingsley*, followed by a phone number.

Kingsley. The name fit him, though I thought of him as more of a prince. A really cute prince.

Thanks, Nick. I sent back.

No prob. And here I thought you were going to ask me out.

I stared at my screen in horror before he sent another laughing emoji, and I breathed a sigh of relief. I sent one back to show I was in on the joke, then turned my attention to Brayden who was watching me intently.

"Got it," I announced.

Brayden's face split into a triumphant grin, like he'd personally completed a dangerous diplomatic mission instead of helping me obtain the phone number of a cute barista from the coffee shop.

Then his expression slowly shifted into confusion when I just stood there staring at my phone like a deer caught in headlights.

"You gonna call him?" he asked after a few moments.

"I..." I swallowed. "Yeah. I will. Eventually."

Brayden frowned. "Why not now?"

"Because now is immediate and terrifying."

He blinked at me.

I pushed back from my desk and started pacing the room, phone clutched in one sweaty hand. "Okay, think. Think. What do I even say?"

"Hello?" Brayden suggested.

I pointed at him. "See? This is why I keep you around. Brilliant insight."

He grinned proudly, apparently missing the sarcasm entirely.

I took another lap around the room.

Maybe I should text instead. Texting was safer. Texting allowed for editing. Revisions. Deleting entire emotional catastrophes before another human being witnessed them.

Calling was dangerous. Calling meant tone of voice. Awkward silences. Breathing.

What if he answered and immediately sounded disappointed it was me?

What if he answered but brushed me off?

What if he avoided my call and didn't answer at all?

I stopped pacing long enough to groan into my hands.

"This is stupid," I muttered. "Why am I acting like I'm preparing for war? It's just a phone call."

"Maybe because you really like him," Brayden said simply.

I narrowed my eyes. "When did you become emotionally insightful?"

He shrugged. "Cartoons."

"...what?"

"A lot of cartoons are about feelings."

I stared at him for a second, then sighed and resumed pacing.

"Okay. Okay. Maybe I just keep it casual." I cleared my throat.

"Hey Kody, it's Jake. Just wanted to see how you're doing after the party."

Brayden nodded approvingly. "That's good."

"Right? Friendly. Concerned. Normal."

"You should also tell him he has nice hair."

I stopped mid-step. "What?"

"People like compliments."

"I cannot open with '*Sorry you got punched unconscious, by the way your hair looks fantastic.*'"

"Why not?"

"Because I'm trying to date him, not skin him and wear him as a suit."

Brayden considered that. "That's creepy, Jake. Definitely don't say that."

I sighed and leaned against my desk.

Maybe I was overthinking it.

No, scratch that. I was absolutely overthinking it.

My thumb hovered over Kody's number.

"What if he thinks it's weird that I tracked down his phone number?" I asked.

Brayden shrugged. "You did track down his phone number."

"You're not helping."

"You asked me to help."

"I made a terrible mistake."

He thought for a second. "You could pretend you have an emergency."

I stared at him in horror. "Brayden, that is psychotic."

"Not, like, a huge emergency," he clarified. "Like...you could say you needed help opening a pickle jar."

I laughed despite myself. "Yes, because when I think 'jar-opening assistance,' I immediately think of the shy barista who weighs a hundred and twenty pounds soaking wet."

"He could surprise you."

I shook my head, still laughing a little as some of the tension eased out of my chest.

Brayden pointed at my phone. "Just call him, Jake. You're making yourself crazy."

He wasn't wrong.

I took a deep breath, sat back down at my desk before my legs gave out entirely, and stared at the number one last time.

Then, before I could lose my nerve, I hit call.

It only rang once before he answered.

"Charlie! Why don't you wait until I get home to make fun of me, you asshole?" he screamed into the phone.

I jerked the receiver away from my ear. Apparently, I'd caught him at a bad time. I was trying to think of something to say when the line disconnected.

I stared at my phone for a second. *What the fuck was that?*

"Why didn't you say anything?" Brayden asked.

"I think it was a bad time."

"You should call back later."

"Maybe I will," I said, but doubting I would. Or I could text. Maybe that would have been smarter, after all.

I wondered who Charlie was. Could he be a boyfriend? Maybe they were having a fight. I shook my head. There was no point speculating.

"I guess I'll get back to work on that paper," I told Brayden.

He nodded. "Okay, Jake. I'll leave you alone. Good night."

He ruffled my hair, making me feel like I was five again, then let himself out. I turned back to my paper. What was the difference between knowing and believing?

I believed I was falling for Kody, but I didn't know if he even liked me.

The next few days were spent settling into my new routine, figuring out my classes, and trying to catch up to Kody. The kid really should consider signing up for the CIA. He would make a great spy with his uncanny ability to give me the slip.

I even tried knocking on his door a few more times, but either I never caught him home or he just didn't answer the door. Since he had a few days off, I couldn't even corner him at work — not until Thursday anyway.

First thing Thursday morning, I headed down to The Morning Rush for my daily caffeine fix. I ran into Brayden as I came out of my dorm so I invited him to accompany me. He agreed.

As we entered the coffee shop, I saw the now familiar view of Kody's backside slipping out the door.

"This is getting ridiculous."

"What is?" Brayden asked.

"He's avoiding me. Every time he sees me, he takes off running. Maybe it's time I just face the fact that he doesn't want anything to do with me."

"He's embarrassed," someone said.

I looked up to find Marla coming through the door.

"Huh?" I responded wittily.

"Kody. He's embarrassed about the other night. That's why he's avoiding you."

"Oh." I was surprised that Kody had confided in her, and even more surprised that she would tell me.

"Look," she said, leaning across the counter on one elbow. "I've been watching you two and it's starting to drive me crazy. I've seen the way you look at him. It's obvious to everybody but Kody that you're crazy about him. I think this whole cat and mouse game is starting to get to him, so why don't you just go out there and talk to him?"

"I... Are you sure?"

Marla rolled her eyes and grinned. "Yes. Go on out the back door. You've been behind the counter before and Max isn't around to catch you this time."

Suddenly, I wasn't so sure I wanted to do this. If I confronted him, something would have to happen between us. Either he'd reject me flat out, or we'd take a step towards each other. If it was the latter, then I'd have to make a decision about what to tell him about my past.

When I didn't move right away, Brayden gave me a not-so-gentle push towards the counter, sending me stumbling forward a few steps.

I glared back at him, and he responded with a huge gap-toothed grin.

He'd gotten me started though, and, now that I was moving, I was able to keep going.

I slid past Marla, who gave me an encouraging smile and a friendly pat on the back, and went through the door. It opened into a small, cluttered office area that smelled faintly of coffee grounds, printer toner, and chocolate syrup. Boxes were stacked against one wall beside shelves crammed with extra cups and supplies. Beyond that was another door leading out into the alley.

I hesitated with my hand on the knob.

This was it.

Either I was about to get rejected, or my life was about to become significantly more complicated.

Possibly both.

I pushed the door open.

The alley behind The Morning Rush was narrow and cluttered with dented trash cans, milk crates, and the lingering scent of espresso and rain-damp brick. A chilly breeze curled through the space, carrying the distant noise of traffic and student chatter from the street beyond.

Kody was sitting on the ground beside the building with his knees drawn tightly to his chest and his arms wrapped around them. His forehead rested against his sleeves like he was trying to disappear into himself.

For a second, I just stood there looking at him.

God, he was cute.

Not in the polished, perfectly curated way some guys were. Kody looked soft around the edges, real and nervous and innocent. His dark hair was falling into his eyes, his oversized hoodie sleeves swallowed his hands, and despite everything, despite the avoidance and awkwardness and confusion, every protective instinct in me immediately flared to life.

"Kody?"

His head snapped up so fast I thought he might've gotten whiplash.

His eyes widened in horror.

Then pure panic crossed his face and he scrambled upright so quickly he nearly tripped over himself.

For one awful second, I genuinely thought he was going to run again.

"Kody, wait!" I said quickly, holding up my hands like I was approaching a frightened animal. "I just want to talk. Please stop avoiding me."

He froze, though every inch of his body still looked coiled for escape. His shoulders were tense, his cheeks already turning pink.

"How'd you get back here?" he asked suspiciously.

"Marla told me to come talk to you."

His eyes narrowed immediately toward the back door like he was mentally plotting her murder.

"Traitor," he muttered under his breath.

I smiled despite myself. "She also said you've been hiding from me because you're embarrassed."

"Oh, for God's sake," he groaned, dragging both hands over his face. "I tell her one thing and suddenly she's the town crier."

I laughed softly. "Actually, I'm glad she told me. I was starting to think you hated me."

His head jerked back toward me so fast it was almost comical. "What? No!"

"Well, you've been disappearing every time I show up."

"I wasn't disappearing," he said weakly.

"Kody, you literally ran out the back door thirty seconds ago."

"...strategically relocated."

I snorted.

He crossed his arms tightly over his chest and looked away. "I just... I didn't know what to say to you after the party."

"Why?"

He gave me an incredulous look. "Seriously?"

"Seriously."

He stared at me for a moment like he couldn't decide if I was being deliberately obtuse.

"I got drunk," he said finally. "Like...really drunk. I made an ass out of myself. I started a fight with that gorilla even though he outweighed me by at least fifty pounds. I got knocked unconscious. And then..." His face turned violently red. "...then I basically threw myself at you like a horny sorority girl at a kegger. You must think I'm a fucking disaster."

I had to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from smiling too hard because honestly? That description was adorably accurate, minus the disaster part. Or maybe that part too, but an endearing disaster.

"Kody," I said gently, "you don't have to be embarrassed."

He gave a hollow laugh. "Easy for you to say. You were the cool, composed one."

Oh, if only he knew.

I leaned back against the brick wall across from him and folded my arms loosely. "Trust me, I have embarrassed myself far worse than that."

He eyed me skeptically. "I genuinely cannot picture it."

"That just means my rebranding campaign has been successful."

Despite himself, a tiny smile tugged at the corner of his mouth.

"Admit it, you've never done anything embarrassing in your life. You're the Golden Boy."

"You don't know me very well, Kody," I said softly. "There's a reason I don't drink or do drugs anymore. Well, many reasons, actually. I've done a lot of stupid things in my life, things I deeply regret now — things that make what you did look like nothing."

He had a curious expression on his face now. "Like what?"

I gulped. I'd set myself up for that. I searched for a fairly innocuous anecdote. "Okay, um, one time back in my wilder days, I hit on this older guy at a club. He shot me down, and a few days later, on the first day of school, I found out he was one of my teachers."

Kody's mouth dropped open, then a giggle escaped. "Liar."

"Nope." I was encouraged, so I tried another one. "Another time, I was at a house party — didn't even know the people who lived there — and managed to lock myself in the bathroom. I was so fucked up they had to take the doorknob off to get me out."

He laughed out loud. "You're making this up to make me feel better!"

I was on a roll with my stupid human tricks, so I gave him one more. "Once I was so drunk, I climbed up on top of a coffee table and did a striptease. Someone stole all my clothes and I had to wear a blanket home."

Kody was leaning against the wall laughing by now. "Okay, you win. No wonder you stopped drinking."

I smiled, but my thoughts turned dark all of a sudden as I thought about the real reason I'd gone into rehab — which had nothing to do with alcohol. Waking up after an almost fatal overdose with a gun in your hand and a dead body on the bed is enough to scare anybody sober.

Kody noticed the change in my expression. "What?"

I shook my head and pasted the smile back on. "See? You have nothing to be embarrassed about. Everybody does stupid things when they're drunk. It's practically the whole point of alcohol."

"Okay, but not everybody tries to kiss the guy they have a crush on while they're concussed."

I blinked.

He blinked.

His eyes widened in absolute horror as the words replayed in his own head.

"Oh my God," he whispered. "Fuck, did I say that out loud?"

His entire body seemed to implode inward.

"Oh my God," he repeated, voice muffled now that he'd buried his face in his hands. "Kill me. Actually, kill me right now. Push me into traffic. Throw me into the river. I can never come back to work. I'll have to change my name."

A laugh escaped me before I could stop it.

Kody peeked through his fingers, scandalized. "You're laughing at me."

"A little."

"Wow. Cruel."

"I'm sorry," I said, still grinning helplessly. "It's just...you're kind of adorable when you're freaking out."

His face somehow turned even redder.

I pushed off the wall and stepped a little closer.

"Kody."

He looked up cautiously.

"I don't think you're a disaster."

He swallowed hard.

"And for the record," I added softly, "I kind of liked the kiss."

For a second, he just stared at me.

The alley suddenly felt very small and very quiet.

"You did?" he asked, almost inaudibly.

I nodded.

Hope and disbelief flickered across his face, warring for supremacy.

And, so help me, I wanted to kiss him again right there between the dumpsters and the dead rat, but for real this time.

That thought snapped me back to reality, and I suddenly felt self-conscious and awkward.

I glanced down at my watch. "I'd, uh, better hurry up and get my coffee if I'm going to get to class on time."

Kody nodded and indicated the door. "After you."

We were the center of attention as we came back into the coffee shop, with Brayden and Marla both watching us with curious expressions.

"Everything okay?" Marla asked.

"Yes, Ms. Busybody, everything is okay," Kody replied with an affectionate grin.

Marla grinned back. "Good. Now get back to work. If you think I'm going to pick up your slack all day, then you've got another think coming." She turned to me. "And you'd better get your cute butt out from behind the counter before Max decides to pop in. It might be her day off, but she can't stay away from this place."

I quickly scuttled out from behind the counter and placed my order. Kody fixed it for me and handed it over with a smile. I smiled back and congratulated myself on breaking the ice between us — with Marla's help and a little push from Brayden, of course.

"So, did you ask him out?" Brayden asked as we left the shop.

I spun around to make sure the door was shut and Kody hadn't heard. It was, but he was watching us from behind the counter. He gave a little wave, and I waved back.

"No, I didn't ask him out."

"Why not?"

"It wasn't the right time. I just cleared the air between us so he'll stop avoiding me."

"You mean you were scared."

I shrugged. "That too."

I only had two morning classes on Friday, so I used the afternoon to catch up on some assignments. You can only stay in your room for so long, though. I got fidgety by mid-afternoon and gave up trying to finish the boring Philosophy paper.

I went down to see what Erin was doing and ran into Brayden in the hall.

"Hey, Jake," he said. "I was just looking for you."

"Oh yeah? What's up, big guy?"

"Not much. I have a class soon but I wanted to ask you something."

"Ask away."

"So there's this block party thing at the park tonight. Some band is playing. Uh, someone told me about it and I, um, thought maybe we could go. Like, you and me. It sounds like fun, don'tcha think. Wanna go?"

I fluttered my eyelashes at him. "Why Brayden, are you asking me on a date?"

"I...huh? No!" He looked very flustered. "I'm not... I don't... I'm not...gay. I just—"

"It's okay, Brayden," I interrupted with a laugh. "I was just teasing you. What time?" Not that it mattered. It wasn't like I had plans.

He told me the details and we arranged to meet up later and walk over together.

He left to go to his last class, and I continued on my quest to find Erin. After checking her room to no avail, I stumbled across her and Carlos playing Frisbee on the lawn in front of our building.

I joined in for a while, but when I started to sweat, I quickly bowed out. I invited them to go to the block party, but Erin begged off saying she had to write a paper and Carlos wanted to keep her company.

I sat in the shade watching them play a while longer, then left to shower and get ready. My room was blissfully empty. I showered, then pulled out a pair of jeans and a sky blue, v-neck t-shirt to set off my eyes.

I snorted as it occurred to me that I was getting dressed up to go out with Brayden. "Always look your best" was a creed I lived by. You never knew who you'd run into.

Once I was ready, I added a few more paragraphs to my Philosophy paper until Brayden knocked on the door and let himself in.

"You look nice," he said.

I still wasn't used to receiving compliments on my appearance from the behemoth.

"Um, thanks Brayden. You, uh...look good too."

Actually, he did look good. He was wearing a polo shirt that stretched tight across his massive chest showing off his considerable muscles, and a pair of khakis.

"Maybe you'll meet someone at the concert," I added.

He grinned. "Ya think?"

"Never know. Stranger things have happened. You could meet a nice Viking girl or an Amazonian warrior."

His brow furrowed with confusion. "Huh?"

I patted him on the arm. "Never mind. Should we head for the park?"

"Okay."

Since I didn't have the slightest clue where the park was, I let Brayden lead. He seemed to know his way around pretty well. The walk there didn't take too long, and I could hear music before it actually came into sight.

When I got my first real glimpse of the park, I was honestly shocked by the size of the crowd. The place was packed — way more people than I would've expected for something I hadn't even known existed until Brayden mentioned it earlier.

The park had transformed into a sprawling little festival. Strings of lights had been hung between trees near the vendor tents, glowing softly as dusk settled in. Food trucks lined the edge of the walking paths, sending waves of smells drifting through the air — fried dough, grilled onions, barbecue, kettle corn, coffee. The skunky smell of cheap weed was strong enough that I could smell it over everything else.

Most of the crowd looked college-aged, clusters of students sprawled across the grass in hoodies, flannels, crop tops, and ripped jeans, but there were plenty of people from the surrounding neighborhoods too. Young couples with toddlers dancing barefoot in the grass. Older locals sitting in camping chairs like they attended every community event within a fifty-mile radius. A group of middle-aged women already halfway through several bottles of wine and shrieking with laughter loud enough to be heard over the speakers playing pre-show music.

The energy felt warm and loose and alive in a way I hadn't realized I'd missed.

People had claimed little territories for themselves with blankets and folding chairs spread across the lawn. Coolers sat open beside them. Some groups had full picnic spreads going like they were preparing for a military campaign instead of a concert. Others wandered around socializing, drinks in hand, stopping every few feet because apparently every single person here knew someone else.

Closer to the stage, the atmosphere changed. The blankets disappeared, replaced by tightly packed bodies standing shoulder-to-shoulder near the barricades. Excitement buzzed through the crowd in waves, everyone half-talking, half-looking toward the stage like they were afraid they'd miss something.

The stage itself sat at the bottom of the hill beneath the massive dark outline of the park trees, washed in colored lights that swept lazily over the equipment. Guitars rested on stands. A drum kit gleamed under the spotlights. Every now and then, a tech wandered out to adjust something, which triggered cheers from people prematurely losing their minds.

"The band hasn't gone on yet," Brayden informed me, as if the empty stage and lack of live music hadn't tipped me off already.

"Oh, thank God," I deadpanned. "I thought we missed the invisible opening act."

He snorted.

"Want to get closer?" I asked.

His face lit up immediately and he nodded.

We started wading into the crowd together, slipping sideways through clusters of people, muttering apologies whenever we accidentally bumped someone. The closer we got to the stage, the louder everything became — canned music blasting through the speakers, laughter, overlapping conversations, the constant restless roar of hundreds of people all waiting for something to start.

Brayden grabbed the sleeve of my hoodie so we wouldn't get separated, and I let him tug me forward through the masses while the bass from the sound system vibrated faintly beneath my feet like the whole park had a heartbeat.

Brayden seemed distracted, scanning the crowd as if he was looking for someone. After he almost ran over a third person of short stature, I caught his arm and dragged him to a stop.

"Are you expecting someone?" I asked him.

"Huh? Um...no."

I raised an eyebrow. Brayden was a lousy liar. "Do you have something up your sleeve?"

He looked at me blankly, and I decided I was giving him way too much credit. He turned towards the stage and laughed suddenly.

"Look, Jake. You're famous!"

I followed his pointing finger to see two roadies stretching a banner across the back of the stage. Written on it in three-foot tall red letters was *Jake and The High Voltage*.

"Huh. Funny. Must be the name of the band."

A dark-haired girl standing nearby overheard us and spun around. "You don't know Jake and The High Voltage?" she asked in a disbelieving tone.

"Uh, no, sorry. My friend just heard a band is playing so we decided to check it out."

"Oh my God! They're so good! They had a few radio hits a few years ago, but they mostly do the college circuit these days. Jake Holloway is *so* dreamy."

"Cool," I said, hoping our interaction was over.

It wasn't.

"He's the lead singer. He has this sexy, raspy voice. Ugh. He makes me squirt."

That was enough.

"Okay, cool. Thanks. Let's go, Brayden."

Brayden didn't need to be told twice. He pushed his way toward the stage with renewed vigor, leaving me to endure the disgruntled frowns

of the people he bumped out of his way as I scrambled along in his wake. I no longer cared as long as he carried us away from that weirdo groupie chick.

We found a spot to his liking just as the band members took the stage. The band was made up of four dark-haired guys and a skinny guy with shaggy, dirty blond hair who took the lead mic while the other guys settled in with their instruments. I assumed the blond was the titular Jake.

"Hey everybody!" Jake yelled.

He received a tepid response from the crowd.

"Come on! You can do better than that! Make us feel welcome!"

The crowd responded a little more enthusiastically. "We're Jake and The High Voltage and we're gonna have fun tonight, right?"

The crowd cheered.

"Right?"

The cheering grew a little louder.

"Come on! Let me hear you! Right?"

A roar rose from the crowd, and he finally seemed appeased.

"Midnight Detour!" he screamed and the crowd roared again as they broke into a fast-paced beat and he began to sing. The groupie had been right about one thing. The lead singer did have a pleasingly raspy voice.

"Hey, they're pretty good!" I said with a little surprise.

I don't know what I was expecting, but it wasn't this. When that song ended, they launched into a much more mellow song.

"That song was a big hit for us a couple years ago," he said as it ended. "It's called '*Hard-Wired Heart*'. Let's rock out a little now."

They followed that with a couple faster numbers, then eased into a slow song.

"Let's slow things down a bit," the lead singer rasped into the mic. "This one is called '*Fragile Hands*.' It's a new one that'll be on our next album."

He started singing, his voice suddenly so soft that the crowd quieted. The song was well-written but it was the chorus that really got me. The words made me think of Kody so strongly I felt tears well up in my eyes.

*'Cause I'm scared you'll see the cracks in me
When the lights are low and nothing's left to hide
If I let you in, will you still believe
That this trembling heart is worth the risk tonight?
I want to fall, but I'm afraid you'll land in fragile hands*

The lyrics soaked into me like rain falling onto cracked desert earth, sinking deep before I could defend myself against them. Every word seemed to slip past my ribs and settle somewhere dangerously tender inside my chest. It felt less like listening to a song and more like overhearing my own thoughts sung back to me by a stranger with a guitar and a gravel-edged voice.

If I let you in, will you still believe

That this trembling heart is worth the risk tonight?

Jesus.

I could have written those words myself. Hell, I had written some version of them a thousand times in my head over the last few weeks.

Suddenly, more than anything, I wished Kody was there beside me. Close enough that our shoulders touched in the crowd. Close enough that I could glance over and catch that shy little smile of his in the flashing stage lights.

I imagined leaning toward him during the chorus, him laughing softly when I inevitably made some sarcastic comment to cover up how much the song was wrecking me emotionally. Maybe he'd try to hold my hand. Maybe I'd sling an arm around his shoulders and he'd melt into me like he belonged there.

That last thought made my chest physically ache.

And that scared me a little.

Because somewhere between one disastrous party and one increasingly pathetic game of coffee-shop hide-and-seek, Kody had stopped being just a crush and became something more like an addiction. Making him smile gave me the same rush drugs used to.

But addiction and I had a sordid history...and nothing good ever came of it.

Did that mean I needed to give him up?

Or maybe I'd just cut back, ween myself off. No need to quit him cold turkey.

Even I knew I was kidding myself. I was too taken by this sweet, charming barista boy. He was one addition I didn't want to kick.

Chapter 12 - Kody

Friday afternoon held the promise of freedom in the air, and every ass wiggled in its seat as we waited for the last lecture to end.

Okay, maybe *I* was the only one wiggling, but just looking outside would make anyone want to be out of school. Economics had to be the most boring class on the face of the earth. Picking out socks excited me more. Why did I need math for a journalism degree anyway?

Finally, the warden, er, professor dismissed us. Naturally we were saddled with more reading from that ponderous tome they jokingly called a textbook. I headed out at a pretty quick clip.

Nick broke from a crowd of people in the quad and flagged me down.

"Kody! What are you doing tonight?" he asked as he closed the distance.

I shrugged. "Avoiding my Economics book, mostly."

"There's a free concert in the park, and some of us are going. Wanna join?"

I looked over at his group of friends, many in soccer jerseys, and thought about how my last chat with a certain tiny-faced meathead jock had gone.

"You know, I think I'll pass."

"Kody, you've gotta go. Please."

"Why?"

"Okay, see the guy with the black hair and killer grin? No, the one on the left?"

"What about him?"

"His name is Derek, and he is totally hot!"

Nick made a moony expression in Derek's general direction.

"What does that have to do with me?"

"Duh. I need you to be my wingman. You know, in case he turns out to be a dick."

"What exactly does a wingman do?" I asked uncomfortably.

"You've never done duty before?"

"Uh, no."

"Noob. It's easy. If I give you the signal, you go into a fake epileptic seizure or something." He burst out laughing at my expression. "Kidding! You just remind me we have someplace to be, and it gives me an out. And maybe distract his friends if they try to cockblock."

“Um...”

Nick gave me his best puppy dog eyes. “Please, Kody? If you don't go, I'll go tell Jake you like him.”

“That is so not fair! In fact, it's blackmail.”

He laughed. “You're forcing my hand, here, Kody.”

“Would you really tell him?”

“Come on. No way. What kind of shitty friend do you think I am? Well, I mean, I guess I would if you asked me to.”

“Right. That's not going to happen.” I sighed. “I just wish I knew if he liked me back.”

“So find out.”

“How?”

“Research.”

“Huh?”

“Do some research. Talk to his friends. Isn't that big guy always hanging around? See what you can get out of him. Maybe it'll finally get you off your shy ass and get you to take a chance.”

“You're funny. Not.”

“Seriously, man. Do something, or quit moping about it.”

Just then Brayden came lumbering up, as if to prove Nick's point.

“Hi, Kody,” he said with an eager grin.

“Hi, Brayden. Do you know Nick?”

Brayden waved in Nick's direction.

“Hey,” Nick said. “I don't think we were formally introduced, but you were with the drunken loudmouth at the party last week, right?”

“Sorta, but he's usually not *that* bad. Only when he drinks. Or if he's mad. But especially when he drinks.”

“Gotcha. No more for your buddy then. Anyway, Kody, be ready tonight around eight, okay?”

I hadn't officially agreed to go, but Nick knew he'd worn me down. I sighed. “Yeah, sure. Eight.”

“Great! It's a date. See you then.” Nick flashed me a grin and started backing away. “See ya later. Gotta go get pretty for my man. Well...prettier.” He winked and took off.

He was gay, perfectly nice, attractive, and sane. Mostly, anyway. Why wasn't I attracted to him the way I was Jake?

Brayden gave me a disapproving look. “You're going on a date with Nick?”

I rolled my eyes. “Not a chance. He’s my roommate. Talk about a bad idea,” I said as if I hadn’t just been mentally bemoaning the fact that I wasn’t more attracted to him mere moments ago.

“But he said—”

“It’s just a saying. We’re going to the park. Apparently, there’s a free concert or something, and there’s this guy he likes...” I realized I was overexplaining. “Anyway, we’re just going as friends. Do you...want to join us?”

Brayden’s face lit up, and I felt very good about myself. Then his expression suddenly turned contemplative...or perhaps he just had gas. I kind of liked him, but I really wasn’t sure how smart he was. Then again, he got into college, and we even shared some classes, so maybe he was just socially awkward. If someone told me that he was on the spectrum, I wouldn’t have been surprised in the least.

“Maybe I’ll meet you there. Would it be okay if Jake comes too?” he asked.

Oh no, how did I always get myself into these situations? Stupid, stupid, stupid!

I should have seen that coming. All I needed was to act like a freaking goofball around Jake in front of hundreds of potential witnesses.

“Uh, well, I guess I’d have to ask Nick if it was okay,” I responded weakly.

Brayden looked at me with what might be considered a thoughtful expression. It was kind of interesting to see him working something out in his mind. I imagined his thought processes required much the same effort as moving boulders.

“Why don’t you like Jake?”

I took an involuntary step back. “Is that what he thinks?”

“I dunno what he thinks. But you get...different when I talk about him.”

“Well,” I said as I shifted from foot to foot, “it’s not that I don’t like him. I just get...weird around him.”

Jesus, I was talking out my feelings with a Neolithic relationship counselor.

“I don’t understand.”

I stared at him and tried to decide how deep I wanted to go with someone who wasn’t all that deep to start with. But Nick had suggested trying to get some information from Jake’s friends, and Brayden qualified, I guessed.

“Well. Like at the party? Remember. Drunk. Fighting.”

“Yeah, but he took you home.”

The statement could be interpreted in a sexy way, but the reality was quite the opposite.

“Well, he carried me back because I was blackout drunk,” I pointed out.

He appeared to consider that. “But your friend Nick said he’d take you, and Jake was all like, ‘No, I’ll do it.’”

Huh. Nick never mentioned that.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing, I was just thinking, but I do have a question for you. Do you know how Jake feels about me?”

Brayden’s eyes widened. “Oh...I don’t know if I should talk about that.”

“I mean, I’m not asking *how* he feels about me, necessarily. I was only asking if you *know* how he feels about me. You know, a simple yes or no question.”

His face scrunched up, and I realized I’d only confused him more.

“Never mind—”

“He’s sweet on you,” he blurted out suddenly, and my stomach did a full Olympic-level gymnastics routine.

“He...is?”

He nodded, then looked guilty. “But don’t tell him I told you that, okay?”

I couldn’t have stopped the grin that was spreading across my face if I’d tried. “Don’t worry. I won’t tell a soul. Hey, I’m going to go home and get changed, but maybe I’ll see you there. And bring Jake.”

“What about Nick? You said you needed to ask him first.”

“Fuck Nick. He’ll be fine. Just bring Jake. It’ll be our little secret.”

Brayden’s face broke open into a big smile, making him suddenly look less terrifying and more like a giant sweet kid.

“Okay,” he agreed. “Our secret.”

As I walked away, I wondered how much Brayden the Immovable Object really knew and how much was just his own interpretation. Did Jake actually confide in his sidekick? Brayden seemed more and more like a faithful dog — maybe not the brightest dog, but loyal none-the-less — but that didn’t mean Jake talked to him about who he liked.

More importantly, who was Brayden loyal to? A week ago, I would have said Jake, but I couldn’t seem to avoid him lately. And he’d just spilled the beans that Jake was “sweet” on me. Was he up to something? Or was that giving him too much credit?

Back in our dorm, I pulled my T-shirt off and dropped it on top of the overflowing hamper as I entered my room. I would need to do laundry in the near future. I took a quick shower so I'd be presentable just in case I did run into Jake, then pulled on a fresh pair of my illicit Jake & Co. underwear.

I put some music on my phone and flopped down on the couch. I knew I'd have to get dressed soon, but it felt nice to just relax for a few minutes. I stretched, enjoying the feel of my mostly bare skin on the couch. The song ended, and a slow song came on. I wasn't really paying attention, the idea of Brayden dragging Jake to the concert was taking up all my brainspace.

Suddenly, Nick's bedroom door flew open and he barged into our shared pace. "Oh no, you— Oops!" He stopped in his tracks when he saw me in nothing but my skivvies.

I launched up from the couch and scuttled to my bedroom to the sounds of his laughter, feeling completely mortified. It hadn't even occurred to me that Nick might have beat me back to our rooms.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he gasped, although apparently not sorry enough to stop laughing.

I glared at my closed bedroom door. "Don't you knock?" I yelled.

"Why would I knock on my own door?" he called back.

He had a point, but I was still embarrassed. I pulled on some shorts and grabbed a tee shirt, my shoes, and a pair of socks before going back into the living room to find a grinning Nick.

"I really am sorry, Kody. I heard that damn song, and I just knew you were out here moping over Jake. You know the rule. No moping if you don't have the *cojones* to go after him!" He emphasized his statement by pantomiming carrying objects roughly the size of bowling balls near his crotch.

"Whether or not I go after Jake is no one's business but my own. Besides, he could go after me too, you know."

"Hey, don't get your panties in a twist — although, speaking of panties, I have to admit those undies hugged you in all the right places. Dat booty..."

Nick licked his upper lip, and I threw my balled-up socks at him, though I was blushing and enjoyed the compliment.

"You know," he continued, "if we're going to live together, we should probably just accept the fact that we're occasionally going to see each other in, ahem, compromising positions and just get over it. We're both guys, right? And clearly, you're some kind of nudist at heart."

"I'm not a nudist!"

"And I'm not complaining. Just saying." He frowned as I searched for the armhole in my shirt. "You're not wearing that, are you?"

I frowned down at my outfit. "What's wrong with what I'm wearing?"

He looked at me critically. "What if Jake is there?"

"So what if he is?" I didn't want to admit that I'd just conspired to ensure Jake would be there.

He shook his head and headed for my bedroom. "Come with me, my young Padawan. Learn from the Master."

"Where are you going?"

"Kody, can I be honest here?" Nick asked while looking me over from head to toe, then continued without waiting for my reply. "You dress like a college kid."

"I *am* a college kid. So are you."

"Sure, but what I mean is you have a really nice body. In fact, after seeing you in your skivvies, I'm deeply jealous of that bubble butt. You should dress to show off your best assets, yet you hide that work of art under baggy pants and shorts."

"That's just how I dress," I said defensively.

"Okay, but what if tonight you dressed to take his breath, huh? Let's just try to blow his mind."

"How am I supposed to do that?"

"Let's look in your closet and see what we have to work with, okay?"

Nick rifled through my hanging clothes while I stared at him.

"Nick, we don't even know if Jake is going to be there." Except I'd just arranged it with his guard dog. "Or if he even likes me for that matter," I quickly added. Although said guard dog had also indicated that he did, in fact, like me.

"Of course he likes you. Why else would he ask me for your number?"

"He *what*?"

Nick appeared to be in deep thought for a few seconds, then handed me a light gray button-up shirt. "Let's see how this looks on you."

I ignored the shirt. "Nick, Jake asked you for my phone number?"

"Isn't that what I said?"

"When?"

"I don't know. Yesterday, maybe? Or the day before? No, I think it was Monday." He shook the shirt. "Just try this on."

"He didn't call me, though."

"Will you put on the damn shirt?"

I took the clothing from his outstretched hand and pulled it on. I turned to face him once I had it buttoned.

"Okay, lose the shorts."

I stood looking at him.

"I've already seen you in your panties, remember?"

I didn't budge.

"Okay, fine. I'll look for pants while you take 'em off, jeez!" He grinned as he tore his eyes away from my waist and began going through my closet again. "Ruin a guy's fun," he grumbled with good humor.

Guy was seriously good for my ego.

I took off the shorts, then cleared my throat. "Pants aren't in the closet."

"What?" he asked, popping his head out of the closet.

I blushed as his eyes dropped to my bulge.

"Pants are in the dresser, second drawer."

"Huh? Oh, right."

He crossed the room and opened the dresser, rooting around for a proper choice. He straightened up with a pair of black jeans I'd had since I was a freshman in high school.

"Maybe these?" he mused.

I frowned. "Those are old. I haven't worn them in years."

"Great, then maybe they'll fit properly." He squinted at me. "But we'll need to iron that shirt. Take it off."

I was fairly certain the shirt didn't need ironing and Nick was just trying to get me stripped down again, but I sighed and complied.

"Great," he said, snatching the shirt while keeping a firm grip on the jeans. "You stay here. I'll iron. I don't need any distractions, or I'll burn your shirt." He leered in my direction as he left.

It felt good that Nick was paying me this attention, but why did Jake get my phone number? More importantly, why hadn't he called? Why did he want my number if he wasn't going to use it?

I was pacing back and forth fretting when my pants flew through the doorway and landed on my head, followed by my shirt.

"Cover yourself, you pervert!" Nick laughed.

I pulled on the jeans and shirt, then checked myself in the mirror. I had to admit, it wasn't a bad look. The gray shirt matched my eyes. I turned to the side and was admiring what Nick had described as my bubble butt when he appeared in the doorway and whistled.

“Damn, Kody!” he said admiringly, and I blushed again. “If Derek turns out to be a dick, I’m jumping you tonight!”

Nick tossed me the socks I’d thrown at him earlier, and, as I slipped them on, I thought back. The phone had rung several times on Monday, a bunch of scammers and then Charlie called... Oh, my *God!* Could I have yelled at Jake on the phone after Charlie pissed me off? There was that Maryland number. Where was Jake from?

Wait a minute. “Why did Jake ask *you* for my number?”

“I don’t know. He didn’t say.”

I sighed. “So do I really look okay?”

Nick gave me a critical eye. “I don’t know. Turn around.”

I complied, feeling silly. Once I had completed my turn, he looked at me as though thinking deeply. His eyes met mine, and he waved his hand in a circular manner.

“Do that again.”

Once Nick had dressed me, he disappeared into the bathroom to shower, leaving me alone with my thoughts. I quickly worked myself into a fretting frenzy. I needed a distraction.

After pacing around the room for a few minutes, I finally decided to take a walk.

I wandered aimlessly around campus for a while. I was completely oblivious to my surroundings but was snapped out of my dark thoughts when a Frisbee smacked me in the side of the head.

I was still blinking the stars away when an extremely tall red-haired, freckled-faced girl ran up to me.

“Oh my God! I’m so sorry,” she said, looking completely horrified. “Are you okay?”

I gave her a smile. “Yeah, I’m fine. I have a pretty hard head. I may have broken your Frisbee, though.”

She laughed. “It’s okay. It was free. Are you sure you’re not hurt?”

“I’m fine. I promise I won’t press charges if there’s brain damage. No one would notice the difference anyway.”

She laughed again, a loud braying sound. “You’re too funny. Well, I’m really sorry I hit you, but it was nice to meet you. I’m Erin.”

I stuck out my hand. “Hi, Erin. I’m Kody.”

She cocked her head to one side as she shook my hand. “You wouldn’t be Kody with a K, would you?”

“Uh...maybe...”

“Coffee shop Kody?”

“I do work at a coffee shop and spell my name with a K,” I said nervously. How did this chick know me?

“Oh my God!” she squealed. “You’re just as cute as he said!” She clamped her hands over her mouth as if she’d said something she shouldn’t have.

I narrowed my eyes. “Who said?”

She started backing away. “Never mind. It was great meeting you, Kody. I should go...somewhere...now.”

“Wait. Who said I was cute? How did you know my name?”

She sighed dramatically. “Okay. But when we tell this story in the future, let’s say you beat it out of me with my own Frisbee.”

“Tell what story?”

“I’m friends with Jake.”

I frowned in confusion. “Jake?” She couldn’t mean *my* Jake, could she?

“Yeah, you know, Jake Sheridan? Tall, impossibly cute, blond hair, big blue eyes, looks like your stereotypical surfer dude?”

She *was* talking about my Jake!

I felt my face get hot, and I’m sure I looked like a spanked lobster. Then all the color drained from my face as the full impact of what she’d said sunk in.

Jake thought I was cute. Jake thought I was cute enough to tell his friends about me. This was confirmation that Brayden wasn’t just full of shit.

“Look,” she said nervously, “don’t tell him we had this conversation, okay? He’d *kill* me.”

I blinked at her and tried to gather my wits. This was the perfect opportunity to take Nick’s advice and pump one of Jake’s friends for more information. Think, Kody, think.

“Um...okay,” I said carefully. “I won’t tell him. But can I ask you something?”

She immediately grinned. “Why, Mr. Kody. Are you blackmailing me?”

I laughed nervously. “No. Well. Not exactly.”

“Mhmm.”

I rubbed the back of my neck, trying to act casual despite the fact that my pulse currently sounded like a heavy metal drum solo.

“I just wanted to know if he’s from Maryland.”

That seemed to catch her off guard. She blinked. “Uh...yeah, I think so?”

Well. Fuck. That basically confirmed I’d screamed into the phone and hung up on him the other night. Fantastic.

Between that and my drunken almost-kiss disaster, I’d probably annihilated whatever microscopic chance I’d had with him in the first place. Unless...

I hesitated, chewing on my lower lip while Erin watched me with increasingly obvious amusement.

“Okay, wait,” I said. “Can I ask, like, one more thing?”

She folded her arms dramatically. “This interview is becoming very investigative journalism coded.”

“I’m serious!”

“So am I. Ask.”

I lowered my voice instinctively, even though nobody nearby was paying attention to us. “Does he talk about me?”

The grin that spread across her face was immediate and dangerous. “Oh my God,” she said. “You’re *gone* gone.”

My entire face heated up. “Please answer the question before I pass away.”

She laughed. “Yes. He talks about you.”

“Like...good things?” I asked weakly.

“Kody.”

“I just need clarification!”

“Yes,” she said, still laughing. “Good things. Very good things, actually.”

I stared at her. Jake talked about me. To other people. Voluntarily.

I suddenly understood why Victorian women fainted onto couches.

“Okay,” I said, trying and failing to sound normal. “One more.”

“You said that already.”

“I know, but this one’s important.”

She gestured grandly. “Proceed.”

I swallowed. “When he’s around me...” I started slowly, “...is he actually flirting, or is he just naturally *Like That?*”

Erin laughed so abruptly and loudly that a couple nearby turned to look at us.

“Oh, wow,” she said. “No, trust me. He’s flirting.”

My brain stopped functioning. Like, fully. Smoke coming out of the ears. Windows shutting down. Error messages everywhere.

Because that meant I hadn't imagined the staring, the smiling, the teasing, the weird tension every time we were near each other. It had all been real.

And suddenly every interaction I'd had with Jake replayed itself in my head with horrifying new context.

"Oh my God," I whispered.

Erin looked delighted by my ongoing psychological collapse. Then, apparently deciding she'd interfered in the lives of others enough for one day, she pointed a warning finger at me.

"But you did not hear any of this from me," she said. "Seriously. If he finds out I said anything, my vengeance will be swift and brutal. I'll...hack into the system and change all your grades to zeroes. I'll do it, mister. Don't fuck with me."

She winked and started backing away before she could commit any additional crimes against confidentiality.

"It was nice finally meeting you, Kody with a K," she said with a wink. "Hope to see you around more."

I barely remembered to say goodbye.

Jake liked me. Jake Sheridan. The Golden Boy. Human male model. Destroyer of my peace. Owner of the nicest arms I'd ever seen in person. Liked me.

I just stood there for a second with this huge stupid grin spreading across my face, while my entire nervous system short-circuited.

It was confirmed. Jake liked me. He was gay, and he liked me.

I somehow found my way back to our dorm and took the stairs two at a time to burst into our room. I heard Nick banging his dresser drawers. I poked my head into his room while he was looking at his clothes. It barely even registered that he was only wearing boxers.

"Jake likes me! Jake Sheridan likes me!"

As I danced out of the room, I heard laughter from him. I twirled around the living room with a grin plastered to my face then dropped blissfully onto the couch. Maybe this time I had a chance.

Nick came out of his room, buttoning a red shirt, still not wearing pants. I leaped off the couch and threw my arms around him in a bear hug anyway.

"Jake likes me!"

He laughed. "Yeah, I gathered that when you said it a minute ago. I think you're the last person on earth to figure that out."

I let him go and stepped back with a huge smile. "No, you don't understand. He likes *me*!"

“Yeah, yeah. I've been telling you that for days now. What made it finally sink in?”

“I took a walk while you showered, and I saw Brayden and remembered what you said about pumping his friends for information, so I did. He admitted that Jake liked me, but then I wasn't sure if he actually knew what he was talking about — I mean...have you met him? But then I ran into this girl. Well, actually she ran into me. Or her Frisbee did. Anyway, when we introduced ourselves, she already knew who I was, because she's friends with Jake, and he talks about me. He thinks I'm cute. And he likes me. She confirmed everything. Holy crap! Nick, I might actually have a chance with him.”

“That's fire, Kode!”

He gave me a high five, then went to finish getting dressed while I stood in the middle of the room in a haze of elation. Cloud nine had nothing on me at that moment.

Now I desperately hoped Jake *would* be at the concert. That single thought ruled my mind. I checked my reflection in the mirror, wondering if Nick had picked out the right outfit, then gave up, because I was hopeless when it came to fashion.

I sat down, looked at my watch, and then stood back up. My nervous energy wouldn't allow me to rest.

Nick appeared in a pair of jeans, and we stared at each other for a moment.

“These are all wrong, aren't they?” he said, before spinning on his heel and heading back into his room. At least I wasn't the only one who was nervous.

“Want me to come in there and watch you change *your* pants?” I yelled after him.

Jesus, I never say things like that!

I heard him snort, but he didn't accept my offer. Thank goodness.

A few minutes later, he reemerged. He'd changed his entire outfit while he was in there. He was now wearing a green shirt to accentuate his eyes and cream cargo pants. The shirt was tight enough to show off his chest, and the pants were just snug enough to show off his — how had he put it? — assets.

“So? How do I look?” he asked as he turned for me.

I placed my hand on my chin, appearing to be in thought. “I dunno. Do that again?”

“Jackass! Let's go.”

Washington Park was in downtown Albany, just a few blocks from Lark Street. Nick explained that Lark was significant because it was the gay section of the city. Each year they held the Larkfest, which was like a block party with rides and food.

Tonight's event in the park was part of a series of free concerts put on by the city each year, mostly in the summer months. This was to be the final one of the season.

Continuing his tour guide act, Nick explained that Washington Park was the home of the Park Playhouse, an outdoor theater that provided free shows throughout the summer months. The playhouse was done for the year, but the park was still green, and the weather — in the mid-sixties — couldn't have been more accommodating.

We strolled up Central Avenue, past The Morning Rush, Disc and Dat, and various other businesses. We chatted idly as people swarmed around us, rushing to catch their buses home or to their cars. Posters dotted the lamp posts along the way, advertising everything from drag shows to live music.

"I've never been to a drag show," I commented after pausing to look at one of the colorful fliers.

"They're fun," Nick said. "But you couldn't get into that one without a fake ID. That bar is really strict. Rainbow Roost usually hosts a couple of drag shows on campus each year, though."

I filed that away as we reached the intersection of Lark and Central. A huge banner stretched across the street advertising the free concert series.

We crossed the street and walked up Central a couple more blocks before turning left onto Henry Johnson Boulevard. The park stretched out before us. The stage loomed in the distance as we headed towards the east side of the park.

"Derek said we could meet by the middle of the park on the east side. I guess his apartment is just off the park."

Nick scanned the crowd for his date, unconsciously wiping the palms of his hands on his pants as he did so. It was kind of funny to see Nick so nervous. He was normally so confident and outgoing.

"Nick!" Derek waved to us, and Nick smiled widely in reply.

I had to admit Derek was pretty darn attractive. He was tall, with wide shoulders, a trim waist, and dark, curly hair. Couldn't hold a candle to Jake, of course, but all in all, he wasn't bad.

Derek was there with several of his soccer buddies, and I quickly faded to the edges of the group, introduced and forgotten.

Derek turned out to be quite the gentleman, and his friends were welcoming but respectful of Derek's space, and it soon became apparent that Nick wouldn't need me to do anything drastic. I figured that meant I was released from my wingman responsibilities and decided to look around.

The astute observer might think I was just looking for Jake. Well, that would be completely true.

I wandered into the crowd, stopping to get a soda from a vendor and paying ten bucks for my beverage. No wonder the concert was free. They were making all their money from concessions.

I turned toward the stage, expensive soda in hand, as I heard someone on the mic. As I did, I spotted the banner for tonight's band: *Jake & The High Voltage*. I laughed at the irony. I couldn't escape him if I tried. If I was looking for a sign, you couldn't get one more to the point than that.

The lead singer was attempting to get the crowd warmed up before launching into their first set. They rocked out a nice sound — strong lyrics and a driving beat.

As I watched from a distance, I suddenly spotted Brayden in the masses. He was easy to find, since he stood almost a foot taller than anyone else in the crowd. I chuckled at his stiff dance moves. I'd seen better dancing at a retirement home.

His head swiveled mechanically, as if he was looking for something...or someone, and I imagined small ball bearings and a grease fitting at the nape of his neck to keep it all in working order.

I figured wherever Brayden was, Jake couldn't be far away, so I headed toward him as the band broke into a slow lament. I was small enough to dart around and through the crowd like a little mouse.

As I broke through into an opening in the crowd, I saw Jake. He was in profile to me, the setting sun in the west creating a corona around him, and a warm feeling filled my chest.

Even if nothing happened between us, at least I knew he liked me. Of course, I wanted something to happen, and I wasn't going to wait around for him to make the first move. I'd waited long enough.

I smiled, happy with the knowledge that for once in my life I had a chance. It wasn't just some idiot fantasy. This beautiful guy was interested in goofy, awkward me.

I steeled my nerves and started toward him while the band launched into a sweet ballad. The lyrics sank in and my breath caught in my throat.

*I traced your name in condensation on my window in the fall
And I swear I heard a promise echo softly down the hall*

*But I've learned that every echo's just a memory in disguise
So I keep my distance, scared of what you'll see behind my eyes
I stopped in my tracks as they eased into the chorus.
'Cause I'm scared you'll see the cracks in me
When the lights are low and nothing's left to hide
If I let you in, will you still believe
That this trembling heart is worth the risk tonight?
I want to fall, but I'm afraid you'll land in fragile hands*

I shook my head as if casting off a spell and started moving again.
As I closed the distance, I reached out and touched his arm. His skin was smooth and warm — just as I had imagined it would be...but somehow even more so.

He turned to face me, his incredibly blue eyes shimmering with unshed tears. He looked so lost, I felt as if my heart would break.

Our eyes locked, and time stopped. The song continued, but I barely noticed. It was as if the entire world melted away and it was just the two of us standing there.

“Hi,” I said softly.

He blinked. “Hi.”

“You okay?”

“Yeah, um, better now.” He broke into a smile.

“Good.” I smiled back.

“Definitely.”

I stared into his eyes, mesmerized by his presence. My mind was screaming to ask him out, but what if I was wrong? What if he says no?

I realized he was just as tongue-tied.

What if he says yes? I took a deep breath. “So, um, would you like to...um, get something to eat...with me?”

I looked up at him while my stomach went berserk. This was more than butterflies — more like birds. Large birds. Or pterodactyls.

Jake's smile was brighter than the sunset. “That's, um, I mean... Yeah. That sounds great.”

I grinned like an idiot while my heart soared.

He said yes! Jake said yes!

Chapter 13 - Jake

"Hi," Kody said.

"Hi," I responded wittily.

He'd caught me off guard. I hadn't expected to see him, and there he was with his hand still on my arm. His touch was surprisingly warm and tingly, as if energy was flowing from his body into mine. I stared down at his hand, unable to believe that he was actually touching me.

"You okay?" he asked.

I snapped out of it and grinned. "Yeah, um, better now."

"That's good." He smiled back at me, and I forgot we were standing in the middle of a crowd of people. For a moment, we were alone.

"Definitely," I agreed.

He shifted nervously. "So, um, would you like to...um, get something to eat...with me?"

He was so cute. I felt like my mouth was full of cotton, and I was stumbling over every word. "That, um, I mean..." Deep breath. "Yeah. That sounds great."

He looked surprised that I'd agreed, then broke into a grin. "Oh. Okay. Awesome. So, uh...where should we go?"

I shrugged. "I don't really know anywhere except The Morning Rush."

Kody made a face. "Ew. No, definitely not there."

"We can just wander until we see something we like."

He nodded. "Sounds like a plan."

We'd started walking away before I remembered Brayden. I turned back to find him trailing along behind us with a proud smile on his face. Great, just what I needed for my first date with Kody, a three-hundred-and-fifty-pound chaperone.

Before I could decide what to do about Brayden, I heard someone calling my name and turned to see an arm waving above the crowd. I followed the arm down to find Erin, Carlos at her side, grinning in our direction.

I stifled a sigh and pasted a friendly smile on my face. Why was this happening now? I just wanted to be alone with Kody.

As Erin and Carlos pushed through the mob towards us, I noticed Toshi following in their wake.

Great. The more the merrier.

“Hey!” Erin shouted to be heard over the music and crowd as she approached. “I was hoping we’d run into you.”

“I thought you had a paper to write.”

“I do, but then I decided it would be more fun to come—” She broke off as she noticed Kody. “Oh! Hey, Kody. Sorry about earlier.”

I felt my eyes grow wide. Kody and Erin had met already?

I looked to Kody, who was blushing furiously. I turned back to Erin. She hadn’t missed my expression and was now trying her best to look innocent. She didn’t fool anyone.

“Okay, what happened?” I asked.

“Nothing,” Kody and Erin chorused.

Erin shrugged. “Well, I mean, I clocked Kody in the head earlier with a Frisbee, so we met then.”

I gave them my best skeptical look. I was sure there was more to that story, based on how guilty they both looked, but I let it slide — for the moment. I’d be sure to bring it back up later.

“Isn’t this band great?” Carlos asked in an attempt to change the subject.

“They really are,” Toshi agreed. “And they have the same name as you, Jake! How cool!”

Just then the band went into another slow number.

“Oh! I want to slow dance!” Toshi cooed. “Carlos, dance with me!”

Carlos blinked in surprise.

“Hey, watch it, buster. Carlos is mine,” Erin teased.

“I promise to bring him back unmolested,” Toshi replied with a serious face.

Erin pretended to think about it for a second. “I guess it’s okay then. Go ahead.”

“Hey! Don’t I get a say in this?” Carlos protested, but he was grinning.

“No!” Toshi and Erin said together as Toshi began to drag Carlos off towards the area where everyone was dancing.

Erin watched them go with a wickedly amused gleam in her eye.

“You’re enjoying that way too much,” I said.

She laughed and turned to eye the rest of us. “Well, I’m not going to just stand here like a wallflower. Come on, Brayden, we’re going to go dance.”

“Uh, me?” Brayden asked, his voice filled with something akin to fear. “I don’t know how to dance.”

"Don't worry. I'll teach you," Erin said as she grabbed his arm and started pulling him away.

Erin looked back at me with a meaningful glance, then flicked her eyes in Kody's direction. Brayden looked back in panic.

Once they were gone, I turned to Kody, who was looking at me with an anxious expression. I wasn't sure if he was nervous that I'd ask him to dance, scared that I wouldn't, or a mixture of both. The opportunity was too good to pass up, however.

"So, can I have this dance?" I asked as I held my hand out to him.

He looked down at it like it was a snake about to bite him. The panic was clear on his face.

Crap! I'd moved too fast. With Kody I felt a bit like someone trying to coax a wild animal to eat from his hand. I had to avoid making any sudden moves, or I might spook him.

"Never—" I started to say, but he cut me off.

"Okay."

He took my hand and started towards the dance area, towing me along in shock. I barely had time to register that he was holding my hand before we'd reached the edge of the dancing couples.

He turned to look at me, his face clearly saying, "What now?"

I gave him a reassuring smile and stepped closer to him, sliding my arms gently around his waist. I heard him suck in a sharp breath.

I knew how he felt. My heart was hammering, and I could barely remember how to dance.

He slowly lifted his arms and placed them around my neck. His face was flushed, and his expression was somewhere between bliss and utter terror. Who knew that was such a fine line?

We began to move in time to the music, awkwardly at first, but gradually finding the rhythm of the music and one another's body.

I couldn't tell you if people were watching us or not. All I could think about was the way it felt to be in Kody's arms again. It was better than I remembered.

For starters, he wasn't drunk this time. He knew exactly what he was doing.

His eyes were locked on mine, and what I saw there filled me with a strange jumble of hope and fear — hope that I might have the possibility of something real and deep with Kody and fear that he would reject me if he knew the truth.

Kody leaned into me and rested his head against my shoulder. I closed my eyes, shut off the part of my brain that was trying to freak out, and just enjoyed having his body touch mine.

"I've never danced with a guy before," he said.

"I have...but never like this," I said.

The song ended too soon, and the band jumped into another fast song. I reluctantly released my hold on Kody, and he stepped away. I thought he looked a little disappointed as well, but maybe I was only seeing what I wanted to see.

More than ever, I just wanted to be alone with Kody. I had to get rid of Erin and the gang — but how? Then I remembered where we were going when we ran into them in the first place.

Erin, Carlos, Toshi, and Brayden made their way over to us. I don't know who looked more pleased with themselves, Brayden or Erin. Had they conspired to bring us together? If so, I'd have to be sure to thank them later.

"Hey, guys," I said. "Kody and I were just about to go find somewhere to eat before we ran into you."

"Good!" Toshi said. "I'm starving, and Carlos was just saying how hungry he is in between whispering sweet nothings into my ear."

"Ha! You wish!" Carlos laughed. "Oh, and Erin, let's just say they did not return me unmolested. This one has wandering hands!"

"I didn't hear you complaining," Toshi shot back, and we all laughed again.

"There's a great diner near here," Erin said. "It's on the south side of the park, across from the Lake House. We can walk there from here. You guys will love it."

I wanted to say that what I'd really love is some alone time with Kody, but that idea had obviously been steamrolled by our well-meaning friends.

Just then Nick walked up with a tall, dark, and handsome guy by his side. The party just kept growing.

"Hey, Jake! Hey, Kody!" he said. "What's up?"

"We were just getting ready to go get something to eat," Kody said.

"Cool! Mind if we tag along?"

"The more the merrier," Erin said, echoing my sarcastic thought from earlier. "Since these guys seem to have forgotten their manners, hi, I'm Erin, and this is my boyfriend, Carlos. The one with the drool running down their chin is Toshi, and the strong, silent type in the back is Brayden. I take it you already know Jake and Kody."

"Hi, Erin! I'm Nick, and this is Derek. I'm Kody's roommate, and I met Jake at a party last weekend. Actually, I met Brayden then too."

"Kody punched Foster," Brayden added helpfully.

Kody blushed furiously, but all Erin said was, "Wish I could've seen that."

"It was quite a sight," Nick replied with a chuckle.

"How about you give us all the gory details at the restaurants?" she suggested.

"How 'bout we don't?" Kody said quickly.

"Oh, come on, it was pretty impressive," Nick kidded. "You should be proud."

"Yeah, sure. It was my proudest moment."

"Can we argue about this while we walk?" Toshi asked. "My stomach is about to eat itself, I'm so hungry."

The group started to move, and Erin naturally took the lead. She was a born leader and seemed to feel most comfortable when she was in charge. Everyone argued good-naturedly, joking and trading mock-insults as we walked. It would have been fun if I wasn't dying to be alone with Kody.

I was trying not to pout, but it was a losing battle. Kody finally makes a move, and the moment gets ruined. The old saying "two's company but three's a crowd" was so true — and if three was a crowd, what does that make eight?

My sulking was interrupted by the sudden appearance of Erin at my side. While I pouted, I had slowly moved to the back of the group. I was surprised that she'd give up her lead-dog position to come to the back of the pack.

"So what's eating you?" she asked softly.

"Nothing," I said unconvincingly.

"Uh huh, and I'm Mrs. Claus. Ho! Ho! Ho!"

"I think it's Mr. Claus who says that."

"Come on, Jake. What's wrong? Are you mad at me for telling Kody you liked him?"

I stopped walking. "You what?"

"Oh. Right. I may have let that slip when I saw him earlier."

Well, that explained where he'd suddenly gotten the nerve to approach me. Since it had worked out, I couldn't very well be too mad at her, but I wasn't going to tell her that. No sense letting her off the hook that easily.

I frowned. "You owe me big time. I can't believe you told him that!"

She looked pained. "I'm sorry, Jake. He asked, and I didn't want to lie. And hey, it seems to have worked out for the best, right?"

I couldn't keep up the charade for long. "Yeah. It did. Just...in the future, do you think you could maybe keep your trap shut when it comes to my personal business?"

She nodded guiltily. "Yeah. You're right. Just because it worked out this time doesn't excuse the fact that I betrayed your confidence."

"Well, I mean...I wouldn't necessarily go that far."

She grinned. "Good. Neither would I. I was just trying to say the right thing. Besides, I like playing matchmaker."

I rolled my eyes.

"So is that why you're back here pouting?"

"I'm not pouting. And no, I didn't know about that until you just admitted it, remember?"

"Right. Then what's up?"

"I guess..."

"Spit it out already!"

"I guess I'd just like to be alone with Kody."

"Oh. Oh! And we're cramping your style. Duh!" She slapped her forehead. "Sometimes I can be so dense. I'm so sorry, Jake!"

"It's okay. It's just...you know, I really don't know how to do this."

"Do what?"

"Date someone normal. I've never been in a real relationship. I've never done the whole dating thing. Not seriously anyway, and not with anyone my own age. I mean, I've been with a lot of guys, but never anyone like Kody. I'm so afraid I'm going to do something wrong and hurt him or scare him away."

"Trust me, sweetie, I don't think you could scare him away if you tried. You should have seen the look on his face when you guys were dancing back there. He looked like he'd died and gone to heaven."

"Really?" I asked hopefully.

"Really."

I sighed. "Okay, but you don't know the whole story..."

"Then why don't you tell me?"

The funny thing was I wanted to. I wanted to tell her the whole sordid story. Something told me she wouldn't pull away. Maybe she wouldn't understand — how could she? — but she'd at least try to. But it wasn't the right time.

"Hey, what are you two doing back there?" Carlos yelled back suddenly.

“Maybe I’ll tell you some other time,” I said quietly to Erin, then yelled back to Carlos, “We’re talking about how fine your ass is!”

A series of cat-calls from the assorted gay guys present took the attention off of me and Erin as we rejoined the group. I caught Kody giving me a thoughtful look, and I’m sure he suspected we’d been talking about him. I gave him what I hoped was a reassuring smile and was rewarded with another adorable blush.

We arrived at the restaurant and managed to get seated together. Being so near the campus, they were probably used to herds of rowdy students arriving en masse.

I did manage to situate myself so I was at least sitting next to Kody. As I slid into the round booth, he leaned in close to me and whispered, “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, why?” I asked innocently.

“You just looked like you were upset back there.”

“Everything’s great. I’m here with you, aren’t I?”

He blushed again, and I laughed.

It was almost becoming a game — Make Kody Blush. Of course, it seemed to be a game I could win quite easily, but that didn’t make it any less fun.

We ordered our food and sat around shooting the bull while we waited. As I watched Kody gradually relax and open up, I realized that maybe it wasn’t such a bad thing to have everyone else along after all. It took some of the pressure off of the two of us, and he definitely seemed more comfortable with Nick there.

I felt a twinge of envy, but that was silly. Nick was with Derek. He and Kody were just roommates. No matter how many times I told myself that, though, the jealousy was still there.

Man, I had it bad.

I hadn’t felt like this about a guy since I was sixteen. It made me feel like a dumb kid again — which was weird, but not entirely a bad thing. That was the last time I’d felt even close to innocent. My whole life was ripped to shreds about that time, and I was still trying to piece it together three years later.

“Jake?” Kody asked.

I blinked and realized he’d been talking to me while I was lost in my thoughts. “Sorry,” I said with a rather shaky smile. “I guess I zoned out there for a minute.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?” His voice was filled with so much concern I almost fell apart right there.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” I didn’t even convince myself. I could see my strained face reflected in his worry-filled eyes.

“Jake—” he started.

“I’ll be right back,” I said suddenly as I stood up. I had to cut him off before he said another word. If I hadn’t, I would have started crying. What the fuck was happening to me?

Toshi had to get up to allow me to slide out, but once I was free, I rushed to the bathroom and tried to pull myself together.

I was splashing water on my face when Brayden came through the door.

“Jake?”

“Hey, Brayden,” I mumbled through the rough paper towel I was using to dry my face.

“Are you sick?”

“No, I’m okay.” I was getting very tired of saying that, especially when I so obviously wasn’t okay.

“Then why’d you run out like that?”

“I just needed to get away for a minute.”

“Did Kody say something to make you upset?”

“No! I just...I started thinking about something that happened a long time ago, and it...I guess it still upsets me. I’m ready to go back out now. Let’s go.”

He clapped a giant hand on my shoulder, stopping me in my tracks.

“Jake, if you need to talk, I’m here. I may not be the best at putting words together, but I’m real good at listening.”

And just like that, I was fighting back tears again. Why was everybody being so damn nice?

I cleared my throat, and managed, “Thanks, Big Guy. I appreciate that.”

We walked back to the table, where everyone was carefully trying to pretend like nothing had happened. Only Kody was acting any differently. He had pulled back into himself and was sitting quietly with a haunted look on his face.

I slid back into my seat and turned to him. “I’m sorry,” I said softly, so only he could hear.

“Was it something I said?”

“No! I promise. It’s just...I’ll explain later, okay?”

He nodded, but his cheery mood from earlier was gone. I felt like a colossal jerk for ruining the night for him. He remained quiet while we ate. I tried to pull him into the conversation again, but he’d withdrawn completely.

I was feeling like a complete and total ass when Erin kicked me under the table. She rolled her eyes toward Kody, gave me an intense look, then waggled her eyebrows.

Was I supposed to know what that meant? Was there a facial expression interpretation class I should be taking?

My confusion must have been easier to read than her cryptic message, because she shook her head and gave me a cheery — if slightly demented — smile.

“Hey,” she said brightly. “Have you guys ever been down to the Corning Preserve after dark?”

“Yeah,” Carlos said, receiving a dirty look from his girlfriend for his effort.

“I don't even know what it is,” I said, hoping I was following her lead. I still wasn't sure what was happening.

“It's this cool park in the middle of the city, right on the river.”

“That would be the Hudson River?” I asked.

“Right. Want to go?”

Was I supposed to say yes or no? Was she trying to get all of us to this preserve place or was I supposed to say no and they'd go, leaving Kody and I alone. I liked the idea of that last scenario the best, and since we'd been talking earlier about how I wanted to be alone with Kody, I decided to choose Door Number Two.

“Not really...” I started, but a sharp glance from Erin quickly let me know I'd chosen the wrong door. “...er...I mean, sure.”

“Great! There's a bus that stops there. We can go as soon as we pay up.”

“I think Derek and I are gonna duck out, if you don't mind,” Nick said, staring deep into Derek's eyes.

I had a feeling I knew where they would end up before the night was over. I waited for Erin to argue with him, but she just smiled and nodded. I guess they weren't essential for her plan.

“I think I'm gonna skip out too,” Kody said softly, and I spun around with dismay.

“Come on, Kody,” Erin said. “It'll be fun.”

“No, thanks,” he said.

“Please?” I whispered.

His eyes met mine and he stared into them, as if trying to read my intentions. I gave him my best puppy dog look, and I could see him giving in.

“Okay.”

I gave him a big smile. I didn't know what Erin's plan was, but as long as Kody was along for the ride, it couldn't be all that bad.

After we settled the bill, we said goodbye to Nick and Derek and then caught the bus toward the Corning Preserve. Kody was quiet the whole way there.

When we arrived, I looked around with a little disappointment. It wasn't what I had expected at all. When I'd heard the word "preserve", I'd pictured some sort of wooded area teeming with wildlife. The Corning Preserve was a narrow strip of trees, bordered by the river on one side, and the highway on the other. Don't get me wrong. It was a pretty little park as far as that type of thing goes, just not what I'd imagined.

"So why are we here again?" Toshi asked as we walked down the footpath towards the river.

"I just thought it would be nice," Erin said defensively.

"It is nice," Carlos placated, as he slid his arm around her waist. "You know what would be even nicer? If we walked down to see the Slater."

"Who's that?" I asked.

"Not who. What," Erin said, rolling her eyes.

"She's a decommissioned World War II Navy destroyer," Carlos enthused. "The city keeps her moored near here. They offer tours and stuff."

"She? Her? Why do boats and cars always have to be women?" Erin said in mock-testiness. "Besides, not everyone wants to see some big boat. Right, Jake?"

"Huh? Uh, right."

I was being honest; I couldn't care less about a boat right then. I couldn't take my eyes off Kody. He looked so beautiful in the moonlight, standing at the railing overlooking the Hudson River. From the look of things, he wasn't paying any attention to the conversation.

"But if you want to see it, we'll walk down there," Erin continued. "Come on, Brayden and Toshi. You can walk with us."

"I'll stay here," Toshi said.

"No, walk with us," Erin insisted.

"I don't really want—" Toshi started.

"Yes. You. Do," Erin informed them firmly, as Brayden caught Toshi's arm and started tugging them along in the direction Carlos was heading.

I turned to find Kody still leaning against the rail. I wondered if he even knew the others had left. He seemed to be in his own little world.

I walked up and stood next to him. "Hey, you okay?"

He looked up and gave me a little smile. "Yeah. I'm good."

"You've been really quiet since the restaurant."

He shrugged and looked back out over the water. "I'm sorry if I said or did something wrong."

"You didn't, Kody. Honest."

"Then what happened? One minute we're talking and everything is fine, then you get this funny look on your face, and the next thing I know you're running away from me."

"It's...complicated. It wasn't you I was running from." I wasn't ready to go into details, but his disappointed expression made me realize I had to tell him something. "Okay." I took a deep breath. "Kody, there's a lot you don't know about me."

He rolled his eyes. "Duh. There's a lot you don't know about me too. We hardly know each other at all. Really, all I know is that you're a caffeine junkie. And that I like you."

My heart skipped a beat at that last part, but I couldn't get distracted. "No, I mean there's a *lot* you don't know about me. I have a pretty...unpleasant past. I guess you could say I come with a lot of baggage. When we were sitting in the restaurant, I was actually thinking about how much I like you too."

His eyes grew round. "Really?"

"Yeah." It was my turn to blush for a change.

He grinned ear to ear, but his smile slowly slid into a frown. "But that doesn't explain why you ran away like that."

"Well, that's where my past comes in." It was my turn to face the river to avoid eye contact. "I haven't liked somebody this much for a long time — since I was a kid, really. Some really bad things happened to me then, and as one of my many therapists put it once, I disassociated my emotions, so I wouldn't get hurt like that again. I also picked up some pretty unhealthy coping habits to try to drown out the pain. I haven't really let myself feel things for a long time, so this is all very new to me. Feeling that way about you made me remember the last time I felt like that, which made me think about the bad things that happened around the same time."

"What...what bad things?" Kody asked tentatively.

I tried to suppress a shudder but failed. "I'd rather not talk about it," I whispered. Then added, "Not yet."

Kody nodded.

I cleared my throat. "I do want to get to know you better, though," I told him as I faced him once more. "I really do like you."

He smiled. "What do you want to know? I'm pretty much an open book."

I was relieved that he was so willing to let the subject drop and move on. "Everything!" I said with a grin. "Start at the beginning."

He giggled. "Well, I grew up at a truck stop." I laughed. "No, I really did. My grandfather raised me after my mom died when I was little. He owned this truck stop out in the middle of nowhere. I didn't know my dad back then, didn't meet him until I was eleven. That was when my grandpa discovered I was gay. He sat me down and said he wasn't sure how to raise a gay kid. He felt like his generation had too many preconceived notions about 'queers,' and he just didn't know how to do right by me.

"So he got in touch with my father, who, it turned out, was also gay. I guess Grandpa knew that but just hadn't told me. Dad didn't even know I existed until Grandpa called him. My mom never told him. He didn't even hesitate, though. He's pretty great. Came and got me, moved me to California to live with him. Not that long afterward he adopted my little brother, and we just made more room. My brother and I developed a close relationship, even though there were days when I liked the dog a whole lot more than him. Since then...I guess Dad's done a pretty good job at the whole parenting thing, even though it couldn't have been easy going from a single guy to a father of two practically overnight, you know?"

I stared at him open-mouthed. Kody watched me, nervously awaiting my reaction. His story was almost as incredible as mine.

"Wow," was all I could manage. "So, uh, how'd you end up here?"

"My dad went to VRU, so he really wanted me to come here too," he explained. "It's really far from home, and I miss Dad and his fiancé Brandon, even Charlie, but I guess it's good for me."

He was starting to babble, so I thought I'd better say something before he started telling me what kind of underwear he wore.

"Charlie." I latched on to the name.

Kody blinked at me. "What about him?"

"When I tried calling you the other day, you called me Charlie, and yelled something before hanging up. I wondered who Charlie was. So he's your little brother?"

Kody flushed a fetching shade of scarlet. "Yeah, um, he's my brother. I'm, uh, really sorry about that. Charlie had been teasing me..." He trailed off with a sudden look of horror.

"Teasing you about what?" I couldn't resist asking, although I thought I had an idea from his expression.

"N-nothing."

“Come on, tell me.”

“He was, uh, teasing me about you.”

It was too dark to tell, but I was sure he was blushing again. I could almost feel the heat emanating from him.

I grinned. “Oh really?”

He stuck out his tongue at me. “Yes, really. And don't try to pretend that you weren't talking about me. Erin knew who I was as soon as I told her my name. She even called me Kody with a K.”

It was my turn to blush. “Yeah, well...”

Kody grinned at me, and I looked into his eyes. I saw something there that brought me to a decision. I wasn't ready to tell him all the details, but I wanted him to know what he was getting into.

Without thinking, I reached out and took his hand.

“Let go for a walk,” I said softly.

He fell into step beside me as we began to walk along the river. He kept looking down at our hands as if trying to reassure himself that it was really happening. I knew how he felt.

I took a deep breath.

“When I was sixteen, this guy transferred to my high school. His name was Seth, and he was openly gay. It was a pretty big deal at the time, since there were no out gay kids at my school then. We didn't have any classes together, so I didn't really have any interaction with him, but I watched him from a distance. He seemed so proud of who he was, even though he pretty much had no friends. I wanted to be that open, but I was scared. I already knew I was gay, but I hadn't told anyone. I was from a really strict religious family, and coming out had never even occurred to me.”

As I told the story, I almost felt as if I were talking about someone else. I'd only talked about my past with my therapists, so it felt strange to be telling it to Kody.

“I was just working up enough nerve to talk to Seth when he was murdered.”

Kody gasped, but I ignored it. I had to keep going, or I'd lose my nerve.

“This other guy from our school, Killian, was stabbed at the same time. It was all anyone talked about for weeks. Then Killian started dating my sister, or at least that's what I thought at the time.”

Kody gave me a curious look. “What do you mean?”

“Hang on, I'll get there. So anyway, I had a huge crush on Killian. He was really cute. I guess I was kind of flirty — well, okay, I was a huge

flirt. It turned out Killian was gay too. He was just dating my sister as a cover, because he was secretly investigating Seth's murder, and I guess he was scared to come out after, you know, getting stabbed and all."

"I don't blame him!"

"Right. So I was crushing on him really hard, and for a while I thought maybe I had a chance with him. He was sending a lot of mixed signals, but in the end, he decided that he liked another guy more, and they started dating. So I guess you could say I got my heart broken."

Kody squeezed my hand, and I squeezed back.

"That happens to everybody, though," I continued. "It's like, a rite of passage, right? Killian and I are even friends now. It wouldn't have been a big deal, except for what happened next. Another student was killed at a Halloween party at my house. The police investigated, but nothing seemed to happen. Then a few weeks later all hell broke loose."

I paused in my narrative while I tried to figure out how to tell the next part. Kody misunderstood my hesitation and spoke up. "Jake, you don't have to tell me this if you don't want to. I don't want you to feel pressured."

I shook my head. "No. I want to tell you. It was my brother."

Kody looked at with a mix of confusion and horror. "Your brother was killed?"

"No. Well...yes, but... I mean...my older brother was the murderer."

I was surprised at how calm I sounded, almost clinical. "I found out when he tried to kill me. He...he killed my whole family. Saved me for last."

"Oh my God... Jake..."

I rushed on. "I would be dead except for Killian. He shot my brother and saved my life."

"Oh...Jake...I..."

I was on a roll now and couldn't stop, the words just kept tumbling from my tongue. "My entire family was gone, just like that. All of them. Dead. In just one night. I was... I don't even know how to describe how I felt. Devastated doesn't really cover it. My entire world was shattered."

"How did... What...what happened?"

"My aunt took me in. She moved me across the country to Southern California. She thought it would be best to get me away from where everything had happened."

"I can't imagine what that must have been like."

"It gets worse. Things were really rough out in California. I was hurt, scared, angry...I started using."

"Using?"

"Drugs, mostly, but alcohol, sex...you name it, I tried it."

"I...wow..." Kody abruptly stopped walking, and his hand went limp in mine. I turned to face him and saw the stunned look on his face.

It suddenly struck me how this all must sound to him. He was so innocent, so pure. What must be going through his mind? It didn't take my psychic aunt to figure it out.

"I know," I said, my voice tight with bitterness. "You're probably disgusted. I don't do any of that anymore, but...I've seen and done some horrible things. I don't even know why I thought this would work. I...I'm sorry..."

I dropped his hand, turned, and started walking away.

I'd only taken a few steps when I felt his hand slide around my wrist. I stopped and turned back around but refused to look him in the eye. I didn't want to see emptiness and pain where moments before there'd been such warmth.

"Look at me," he demanded in a gentle voice.

I slowly lifted my gaze to meet his. There was pain in his eyes, but not like what I had expected. There was empathy for my pain, and it was softened by compassion.

"I'm not disgusted. I'm...shocked. I....I don't know what I would have done if I was in your place. I don't even know if I could have survived it. What happened to you is horrible. But...I'm glad you told me. I can't imagine how hard it must be for you to talk about it. It means a lot that you'd trust me that much. I...I like you, Jake. A lot. I want to really know you. I want to keep seeing you."

His fingers slipped from my wrist to intertwine with mine. The sincerity in his eyes told me that he meant every word.

A sense of relief washed over me that made me want to whoop with joy...or burst into tears, but I somehow restrained myself. I couldn't restrain the grin that spread across my face.

"You really mean it?" I asked.

"Yep."

"I'd like to keep seeing you too."

I wanted to kiss him so bad, but my instincts told me it was too soon. I settled for a quick hug instead.

"We should probably get back to the others," I said, even though what I really wanted was more time alone with him.

We walked back towards the bus stop in a comfortable silence, still hand-in-hand. The others were waiting for us when we got back. Erin took in our hand-holding and gave me a wink. Judging by her smug expression,

she was quite pleased with the success of her plan. I was sure I'd hear all about it as soon as we were alone.

The camaraderie from earlier was back in full-force on the bus ride back to campus. Once there, we all said goodnight and went our separate ways, with me insisting on walking Kody back to his dorm. Kody and I strolled as slowly as possible in order to drag out our time together.

At his door, I once again found myself fighting to keep from giving him a good-night kiss. A slight hesitation on Kody's part is all that kept me from going for it.

Our first real kiss would wait, and it would be all the sweeter for it. I had a hunch he was worth waiting for.

Chapter 14 - Kody

I walked into my room and darted over to the window overlooking the quad. Jake was down there looking up at the building, even though I was too high for him to really see, especially at night.

I smiled as he turned and started walking back to his dorm. I watched him as long as I could, his slender frame passing through the spotlights of the walkway lamps. His hair sparkled in the soft glow and still glimmered a bit when he left its glare.

I sighed as he disappeared from view.

I should have asked him to stay. How can I possibly sleep tonight knowing he's out there?

I grinned to myself and walked back towards my hamper, unbuttoning my shirt as I went. Jake and I had a few things in common, like our unconventional families. I knew there was something he was still holding back, but I could wait. He'd told me more than he had to already, enough to show he wants something to happen and to be vulnerable.

I tried to imagine what it would be like if your brother murdered your entire family and tried to kill you as well, but even my imagination wasn't up for that task. Still, what he'd told me was bad enough, which made me wonder what could be so bad that he didn't want to talk about it if he'd been willing to share the rest.

That thought started a little gnawing of nerves in the back of my mind, but I relished the fact that I had a golden opportunity for something real. I grabbed a soda from the mini fridge and went back to the window to stare at the spot where Jake had been only moments before.

After a while I put the unfinished soda back in the fridge and decided I should at least try to get some sleep. I had to work in the morning.

I took one more glance out the window, hoping to see him coming back the way they always do in the movies. You know the scenes, where they stand under the window and toss pebbles to get someone's attention. Then they say sweet things and maybe run off together.

Finally, I gave up and went to bed.

I was awakened in the wee hours of the morning by a loud crash followed by some low cursing. I leaped out of bed and started for my bedroom door before I remembered I was only wearing underwear, so I stopped long enough to pull on some gym shorts.

I opened my door to find a half-naked Nick helping a fully-clothed Derek to his feet. They both froze, staring at me wide-eyed, like two teens caught sneaking back into the house by the parents.

“Uh...everything okay?” I asked.

“Sorry,” Derek said. “I was leaving and tripped over somebody's shoes. Guess I should have turned the lights on, huh?”

“Those are Kody's,” Nick said. “He may look tiny, but his feet are not. And you know what they say about guys with big feet...”

“They have big shoes,” I said, dryly. “Sorry about that. I just kick them off when I come through the door.”

“All good,” Derek said, rubbing his elbow. “Sorry to wake you up.”

I retreated to my room and shut the door to give them privacy to say goodnight — or was it good morning? I checked the time on my phone and saw I still had a couple more hours to sleep before I had to get up for work.

I couldn't help giggling to myself as I crawled back in bed, thinking about the looks on their faces when I'd opened the door. I wondered what exactly they'd been up to in Nick's room. Not that it was any of my business.

Then again, Nick would have made it his business if Jake had stayed over in my room.

I wished again that I'd asked Jake to stay. Not because I wanted to do anything in particular — I just wanted to spend more time with him. Maybe all snuggled up.

I fell back to sleep imagining Jake holding me.

The next week was pretty chill. I was falling into a rhythm of classes and work. The highlight of each day was when Jake walked through the door of The Morning Rush. He'd figured out the best time to arrive so we weren't so busy that I couldn't take a break and sit with him for a bit. Luckily, Max and Marla were almost as invested in my relationship as I was, so they didn't mind...too much. Max had her limits.

We'd established enough of a routine that I knew what to make him as soon as I saw him through the window. Sometimes, when we weren't too slammed, I even had it waiting for him before he showed up. I loved greeting him with his cup and watching him wake up as he sipped the coffee that I'd made for him.

As he perked up, we'd get to talk for a while, getting to know each other better, until Max would loudly clear her throat, my sign to get back to

work. I kept waiting for him to ask me out again, but by the end of the week he still hadn't brought it up, and I was running out of patience. A boy can only take so much edging, you know?

Max and I opened Saturday morning, and Mike wandered in a few minutes after we arrived. I got our machines turned on and warming up while Mike set up clean mugs and to-go cups for easy reach.

Max sipped her hot chocolate and stared at Mike's ass whenever he wasn't looking.

I hoped I wasn't that bad with Jake. Who was I kidding? I was probably worse. I couldn't help myself. I stared at everything. His eyes. His arms. His chest. That bulge. And definitely that finely sculpted ass.

Luckily, some people began to wander in before I could get too lost in my dirty thoughts about Jake, and soon we were balls-to-the-wall busy. 'Assholes and elbows' my dad used to say when there were so many people it was positively chaotic.

Jake showed up just after the initial rush. He clearly hadn't taken the time to check himself in the mirror, and he looked all rumpled and cute. I started making his coffee before he was even fully inside.

Max bumped me and told me to take my break, so I met him on the other side of the counter.

"You look like you need this." I was unable to hide my smirk as one of his eyebrows jumped up.

"You trying to tell me I look a little rough this morning?" he mumbled.

"I think you look kinda cute, all wrinkled and rumpled and half awake."

He huffed, and I smiled at him as we made our way to his table. The tide of people had slacked off, and I felt comfortable taking a short break. Besides, Max would make it clear if she needed me back to work. It wasn't like she was shy.

After we'd sat down, he placed his hands on the sides of the cup, inhaled the scent, and looked as if it was the best thing that had ever entered his nostrils.

A scene flashed in my head, years into the future, taking pleasure in making his coffee in the morning, breakfast in bed for his birthday or our anniversary, seeing that exact expression over and over as we grew old together. I didn't think I would ever get tired of seeing that look on his face.

"What?"

I realized Jake had opened his eyes and seen me staring at him while I was lost in all my silly, domestic thoughts.

"Nothing. How's your coffee?"

"Perfect. Just what I needed."

He took a sip and smiled at me.

"So what are you doing today?" I asked.

"Laundry. I'm almost out of clothes."

That would be a tragedy, I thought, smiling to myself.

"What about you?"

"Laundry, too. I may have to pry Nick out of his room too." I winked at Jake. "Derek left sometime early this morning."

"How do you know?"

"I heard him fall last night."

He laughed. "You what?"

"I heard this crash, and it woke me up, so I poked my head out into the living area, and there was Nick rushing to help Derek. I guess too much sex makes you unsteady on your feet." I sniggered at the remembered sight of Derek and Nick.

A wicked grin lit his face. "Are you speaking from experience?"

"I'm not that kind of boy," I said flippantly, but I knew my cheeks were showing my embarrassment.

"What kind of boy are you?" He wagged his eyebrows suggestively.

I guess the coffee had hit the part of his brain that picked on me. I was surprised to find I liked it.

"The kind that doesn't kiss on the first date."

"How many dates do we have to go on before that happens?"

"Well, I haven't even been asked out on the first one yet." I looked up at the ceiling, feigning being cool and collected while my heart pounded in my chest. I was amazed he couldn't hear it.

Jake laughed. "What? That cozy, intimate dinner for eight wasn't enough?"

"Nope." I giggled. "Dinner for two would qualify though."

"Kody with a K, will you go to dinner with me?"

I grinned. "I thought you'd never ask."

"Well, the only problem is I don't have a place for us to go, and I don't really know any restaurants, but wherever you want to go is fine with me."

"Well, I know this great little dorm room with a pretty decent cook," I said.

I couldn't believe I was being so forward. I'm sure my cheeks were crimson, but damn it, I wanted to see him again.

“Are you offering to cook for me after making me ask you out?”

Jake teased.

“No,” I replied as I stood up to go back to work, “I’m not offering anything. I’m telling you dinner is at seven. Be there if you’re hungry. Break time is over. See you later.”

“What’s on the menu?” he called as I walked away.

“You’ll find out where you get there.”

I don’t know where all that sass came from, but I was pretty proud of myself. My father would die if he saw how I was acting, but Jake was coming to dinner at my place later that night, and that was all that mattered.

The only thing left to do was figure out what I was going to cook.

And how to make it. And where to make it. And how to get rid of

Nick.

“So let me get this straight, you were flirting with him, and it got out of control, and now you don’t know what to make him for dinner?”

“Your words, not mine,” I said while loading the washing machine.

I just knew asking Nick for help would come at a price, but his ribbing had already worn thin.

“Wow. I mean, I’ve done some dumb things to get in a guy’s pants before, but I always had a plan.”

I shot him a deadly glare as I fed quarters into the slot and started the machine on its first cycle.

“I’m not trying to get in his pants.”

“Why not? Jake is pretty damn fine if you ask me. If you’re not interested, maybe I should shoot my shot.”

“Back off or I will murderize you. Besides, you’ve got Derek.”

“We just met! We’re not married.”

“Well unlike you, I want more than a one-night stand.”

“Down, boy. I was just saying he’s hot. I guess I don’t understand why you aren’t interested in what he’s packing.”

“It’s not that I’m not interested. It’s just—” I sighed and dropped into one of the molded plastic chairs. “I want something real for my...for my first time. There. I said it. Are you happy now? I am a virgin. A fucking sexual loser.”

“Whoa, chill, Kody. I’m sorry. I didn’t know. I just assumed someone as cute as you had some experience, that’s all. I didn’t mean anything.”

I looked down at my hands twined in my lap, feeling embarrassed.

“I just... I don't want to mess this up. I mean, I don't know if it'll work out or not, but Jake likes me, and I like him, and I want something more than just sex. I really want something...romantic...” I trailed off into a whisper.

“Kody, that's cool, man. There is nothing wrong with that. Listen, let me tell you something about me. I've been in love before, so I know how they can twist you up in knots.” He smiled at me.

I looked up at him and waited in silence for him to continue.

He took a deep breath and leaned back in his chair before starting. “He was awesome, funny, and smart, and he really loved me. He still does, and I love him too, but he loved someone else more than me, so I had to let him go. I went through a phase after he and I broke up, after I came here freshman year. I gave a new meaning to the term bed-spread!”

My eyes must have been wide, because he laughed at my expression before continuing.

“I gotta tell you, I know what you mean about wanting something more. I really like Derek. He didn't even mean to stay over, which is why he was leaving when we woke you up. We sat up all night just talking until we accidentally fell asleep. I mean, we may have also made out a little — okay a lot — but no bodily fluids changed addresses. The strange thing was that I woke up and felt good about that. So I guess what I am trying to say is I respect what you're feeling with Jake and what you want to try and build, but if you want a recipe, you came to the wrong guy. I can screw up instant mac and cheese.”

I chuckled and tried to relax. I always felt embarrassed about my lack of sexual experience. For most guys, being a virgin is not something you're proud of unless you're one of those abstinence-only religious fanatics.

“Seriously, Kody, I think it's cool that you want your first time to be with the right guy. I hope Jake is the one. Just remember, it's not the end of the world either way. Losing your virginity can be special, or it can be weird and awkward. Both are equally valid. There's no shame in being inexperienced, just like there's no extra value in being 'pure'...whatever that means. Just relax, and whatever happens, happens.”

I hadn't expected him to be so cool about it, and I chewed on that for a minute. I really wanted to make the right choice. I wanted to follow my heart and not just my dick. I wanted mind, body, and soul...as well as head.

I felt a flash of guilt at that last thought, but there it was. I *did* want to have sex. I wasn't asexual or anything, but after having so many romantic misadventures, I was determined to do it right this time.

Still, for all my thinking, I was pleased Nick backed me up. A little moral support never hurt anyone.

After my last load of laundry was done, I headed back to our room to put my stuff away and make an embarrassing phone call. I dragged out putting the socks away and folding my underwear. I don't know anyone else who folds their underwear. Charlie basically rolls his into a ball and squeezes them in a drawer. I hung my shirts and folded my pants and put them away before calling Dad at work.

"Thank you for calling the Java Script. How can I help you?"

"Hi, Dad. It's Kody."

"Hey, buddy! How's everything in the great northeast?"

"Going pretty well. Classes are okay, except Economics, which is so boring I can't even tell you."

"Yeah, I hated Econ too. Pretty dull stuff. You'll have to buckle down to pass that one."

"Yeah, I know. So, uh, how are the wedding plans coming along?"

Yes, I was procrastinating. Sue me.

"Eh, don't ask," Dad grunted.

"That bad?"

"Everything is so damn expensive, just because it's for a wedding. They jack the prices way up. At this point, if it wasn't for Brandon, I'd just suggest we go to the courthouse and have a private ceremony. You know how he has a vision, though..."

I laughed. Brandon had dreamed of a big wedding for years. It wasn't Dad's style, but he would have done anything for Brandon.

I figured I'd stalled enough. "So...actually, I'm calling for a reason. I need a little help."

"You mean you weren't just calling to check on the wedding plans?"

"Well, that too, but ..."

"I'm just giving you a hard time, Goose. What's up?"

I felt my cheeks reddening already, but I was committed now and plunged ahead. "I have a date tonight, and I need to know how to cook something impressive but not too hard."

"Oh wow! A date, goose? That's great. Wait. *You're* cooking dinner?"

"Yeah, I am."

“With what? The microwave?”

I frowned. “Well. I could probably ask Max or Marla if I could cook at their place.”

“Who are they?” he prompted.

“Oh, uh, the manager and assistant at the coffee shop.”

“And they'd just let you cook at their house?”

“Most likely. They're more invested in my love life than they probably should be.”

“I see. And who is this guy?”

With some trepidation I said, “It's Jake, the one I told you about the first week of school.”

“The straight boy? Oh, Kody, you can't be serious!”

“It's not what you think. It turns out he's gay, and he's interested. In me. As in he actually likes me. We met up at this free concert last night, and we walked in the park together and talked, and he's really nice, and he even held my hand.”

I felt like a small child, almost afraid my father would forbid this guy to come over to my dorm three thousand miles away.

“Well, you're on your own now, Kody. I can't tell you what to do,” he sighed. “But I do feel like I need to say...something. Not good, not bad, but still important.”

Feeling unsure, yet also anxious he was going to pour cold water on this, I waited.

I could picture him running a hand through his hair as he spoke. “Look, sweetheart...no one is coming to save you.”

I was confused. Of all the things I'd expected him to say, that wasn't on the list. “What do you mean?”

“I mean...when you've been alone for a long time — or when finding someone feels impossible, which happens to a lot of gay kids growing up — it's easy to build this fantasy in your head that the right guy is going to fix everything. Like if somebody finally wants you, really wants you, suddenly all the loneliness and insecurity and hurt will disappear.”

“I don't...?”

“I know, I'm not saying this very well. Look, when you finally meet someone who makes you feel seen, or chosen, it hits hard. Especially if they're your type, saying the right things, giving you attention you've been starving for. You start thinking, ‘This is it. This is the person who's going to make everything better.’

“But no relationship can carry that kind of weight, Kody. A guy can love you, support you, make your life better even, but he can't

magically heal every lonely part of you. And if you expect him to, eventually you'll either crush yourself trying to hold onto him, or crush him by making him responsible for your happiness."

"So, what are you saying? That I shouldn't date Jake?"

"No. That's not what I'm saying at all. I'm just saying the right relationship doesn't erase your problems. It just gives you somebody to face life with. That's a very different thing."

"So I should date Jake...but not...not have any big expectations?"

He sighed. "Goose, listen. Jake may be *the* guy. Or he might just be the guy for right now. Expectations are fine, but for a moment, while you're thinking of how wonderful he is and whatever you have imagined to fill in the blanks in your head about him, ask if he's worthy of *you*. Remember that you have value and bring things to the table, too. That said, for what it's worth...I hope it works out this time."

"I hope so too. He's been really sweet so far, and we have some stuff in common."

"Like what?"

"Well, we're both gay!" I laughed but Dad didn't, so I continued. "We're both from single parent houses, 'cept I'm almost positive his aunt is a little more feminine than you."

"Laugh it up. I won't be a single parent much longer. What else?"

"Jeez, I dunno." I racked my brain for more examples to appease him. "Neither of us is into drinking or the party scene really. We like the same music, sort of. The band at the park played a really good song. We even danced to it. Oh...I wonder if that would be, like, our song?"

"Focus, Goose. So...did he kiss you yet?"

"Dad! No!"

"Good. Means he didn't do anything else either."

I wondered if Dad was a little uncomfortable with me and Jake, but then I realized that of course he was. He wouldn't be there for me if something went wrong like he'd always been in the past. You know, for all of my previous disastrous attempts at dating.

"Dad! That is so not funny," I grumbled at him.

"Well, I guess you're trying to get to his heart through his stomach, huh?"

"No, I'm trying to get a date, since I told him I don't kiss on the first date."

He chuckled. "So we are trying for a first kiss?"

“Yes, Dad, we are. I want him to kiss me, and then I want him to take me to the bed and kiss me some more, and then I want him to find the bottle of lube and the condoms Charlie left as a going away present, and—”

“Kody!”

“Well, you made it sound so dirty!”

“I did not. I was just curious. You jump so wholeheartedly into these things. I just don't want him to take advantage of you. I can't stop it from happening though, so I hope you are right about this boy.”

“I am, but I need a recipe. I told him I'd cook dinner tonight.”

“And you have how much longer to cook this meal?”

“He's coming over at seven.”

I heard him clicking his tongue. “Do you know what he likes? Does he have any allergies?”

“Uh.”

Dad chuckled. “Okay. I'll text you a couple of links to some simple recipes. You find out if anything would kill him before you decide what to make.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“Oh...and what's this about Charlie leaving you a bag of condoms and lube?”

Oops. I hadn't meant to let that slip. Charlie was going to kill me. Assuming Dad didn't kill him first.

After hanging up, Dad sent me a few options, and I texted Jake to ask what foods he liked and if he had any allergies. I couldn't help but grin as he started to pick on me again.

First, he told me fresh seafood was his favorite, given he was an Eastern Shore boy. I had to move him onto things that might fit the list Dad had sent me...and my budget.

Then Jake told me he was allergic to being hungry, and I told him there would be no dinner if he didn't get more helpful.

As he continued to be the world's most adorable troll, I headed down to the coffee shop to see if Marla or Max would let me use their kitchen before I made any purchases.

The shop was nearly empty. Marla was behind the counter, but she was speaking toward the doorway behind her, so Max was probably in the closet that served as her office. Marla turned toward me as I approached the counter.

“Kody with a K!” she said with a big smile. “What are you doing here? Coffee run for your new boy toy?”

“Uh, not quite. It is Jake related though,” I said. “I need a kitchen.”

Her expression turned curious as she waited for me to continue.

“So I asked Jake to come over for dinner. I said I'd cook, but my dorm room isn't exactly set up to prepare food.”

Max appeared in the doorway. “You know there's a McDonald's just down the street, right?” She smiled and poked her tongue — stud and all — out at me as she grinned.

“I'm not feeding him Rotten Ronnie's,” I scoffed.

Max grinned and looked at Marla then back to me. “And what are you feeding him? Tube steak? Baby—”

“Oh my God! Where's Mike? You need someone else to harass!” I said, laughing but feeling a little awkward.

“I'm kidding.” She paused. “Kinda. Anyway. Why don't you just get some ramen? You have a microwave, right?”

I raised an eyebrow at her.

Marla laughed at me and leaned forward. “Poor Kody. Ignore her. She's bitter and lonely.”

“I'm not bitter!”

Marla rested her chin on her hand and smiled. “I like romance. What do you need?”

I smiled back at her. “I have to go to the store, but I think I'm going to make enchiladas. I'll clean up after!”

“Wait, I like enchiladas,” Max said. “You can cook at my house.”

Marla looked at her. “You don't like Mexican food!”

“It's not Mexican! He just said it was enchilad...an Enchiladan... Stop laughing!” she demanded while laughing herself.

Marla looked back at me. “Max doesn't cook. I think her oven is filled with take-out menus.”

“I can *cook*,” Max replied, flicking her tongue out once more. “Ask Mike.”

I stared at her for a second as she laughed again, then chose to ignore my boss. I looked back to Marla. “So you'd be okay with it? I need to go to the store to get stuff, and he's coming over at seven.”

“I'm done in...thirty minutes. You run to the store and meet me back here.”

Once in Marla's kitchen I got to work. I'd cut a corner by getting a couple of rotisserie chickens to pull apart for the ‘shredded chicken’ part of the recipe, so I quickly pulled it off the bones and filled a bowl with the meat. Then I started chopping onions.

OH, MY GOD. I thought the crying thing was a joke!

“So, can I help with anything?” Marla asked. “My husband Rich is glued to the TV, so I can lend a hand.”

“Oh! No, thank you. This kitchen is a huge help already,” I said with a grin. “All I really need is help finding stuff.”

She sat down at the small, two-seat table against the wall. “So. Jake must be pretty special if you’re going through all the trouble of cooking, huh?”

I leaned back from the onions, hoping distance would help as my eyes watered. “I really hope so. We talked yesterday, and...it was so chill. I mean, once we got past all the people we’d been hanging out with, you know?” I wiped my eyes with the backs of my hands and looked at her. “We were out with a group of friends, and they were trying to help us along, I guess. Eventually you have to just talk to someone alone, though. Right?”

Marla tipped her head toward the doorway. “My husband thinks talking is overrated.” She grinned at me. “I agree with you, though. I’m glad things are going well. I think it’s more common in younger people, but there’s a whole section of the population who are really immature about relationships.”

I blinked a few times then dumped the onions into a bowl before washing my hands and grabbing a poblano pepper to dice. “What do you mean?”

“Just that...some people only care about the hook up. The pretty face.”

Her husband appeared in the doorway. Rich was tall and heavy with a gray beard and a few darker hairs fighting for their lives on top of his head. “Did you just say pretty face and hook up? I’m right here, you just let me know, honey!”

Marla laughed. “Oh, get out of here. You see what I mean, Kody? He only hears the words he wants to hear.”

“There were other words?” he asked with a smile. He looked at me. “She starts conversations in the weirdest way. Like the other day she starts off with ‘Are you even listening to me?’ I mean, who says that?”

“Oh my God! Do you have a reason to be here?” she asked, swatting at him.

“Seemed like food was getting started. Figured I’d see what was for dinner. Did you finally hire a houseboy? How are you paying for that?”

“I sold your motorcycle!”

He mock-gasped loudly, and I laughed at them.

“Come on, get out. Kody’s cooking for his boyfriend, not for you.”

"I dunno. Are you a good cook? If you feed me, I can be a good boyfriend. I have a job and a house, see?" he joked.

"Oh, I don't think he wants you, even as a side piece!" Marla teased. "He's got his eye on someone who looks like a surfing model."

"I like surf models."

"Not the same ones Kody does," she said drily.

"Oh. Well. We can share. I'm not greedy."

"Out!" She made a shooing motion.

He turned to me, held his hand up to his ear like he was holding an old-school phone handset, and mouthed 'call me,' then left.

I resumed chopping the rest of the chilies and commented to Marla how I liked her relationship.

"Well, that's kind of what I meant," she said. "People who have value to you outside of the bedroom are always going to be better than ones who only matter between the sheets."

I blushed, hoping I'd find out all those answers eventually.

"Well, I like Jake a lot, but I admit, he's hard not to notice."

She made a noise of agreement.

"But when we actually talked...it felt real. You know how really hot people can be kind of stuck up sometimes?"

"Yes, it's a problem I struggle with daily." She cackled at her own joke. "But yeah, I get what you're saying. If you get told that often enough, you start to believe your own press."

"Right. But he's not like that. I felt like we made a real connection, so I want to show him that I'm willing to put in the effort to really get to know him." I moved the chilies into a bowl and started on the tomatoes. "I want him to know that I'm interested in more than just his looks and that I'm not a low-effort kind of guy, but also...that I want someone who's going to make an effort, too."

As I said the words aloud, I kind of surprised myself. Maybe what Dad had said hit home with me somewhere.

"I'm glad to hear it," Marla said. Her chair scraped as she stood and joined me at the counter. "Relationships are hard. You have to ask for things, communicate what you need. Here, let me grate the cheese."

"Oh, are you sure? I really appreciate you loaning me your kitchen."

"Of course! Then I can say I helped this little relationship get started."

Marla was nice enough to drop me off so I didn't have to try and wrestle the steaming hot pan home on the bus. I also had a plastic bag hanging from my wrist with two actual plates with real metal utensils.

It was awkward, and I was still a little dazed with how reckless my offer had been. I made a big deal about not getting fast food, to show him I was serious and willing to do some work, yet I'd thought ahead so little I forgot all I had were paper plates and bio-degradable utensils?

I made it into our dorm safely, though I had to put the pan on the floor to swipe my card at the door, then got the pan settled on the counter without leaving a trail of juices on the floor.

Or so I thought.

I glanced down and sighed. A little sauce had leaked from a corner, leaving a dark stain on my pants. I'd have to change.

"Damn, something smells good! What is that?" Nick asked, emerging from his room.

"I made enchiladas."

"Yum! Gimme!"

"No, not for you."

"For just one piece of that, I'll clean your tonsils, Kody!"

Nick made a mock attempt to kiss me, but I just laughed and pushed him away.

"No, this is for Jake. Make your own dinner."

"But I can't cook, Martha Stewart!" He flopped onto our couch.

"Smelling this is torture. I'm pretty sure it violates several international treaties."

"If there are any leftovers, you can have some."

"Oh, I see. I get your sloppy seconds."

"And you'll be grateful for them." I paused and took a deep breath.

"I am so nervous. In Home Ec, I once made these muffins that smelled amazing...until you actually tried to eat one. I accidentally used salt instead of sugar. They tasted like a big, fluffy salt lick."

Nick howled with laughter.

The story was true, but what I didn't tell him was that after I knew how bad they were, I left them on my math teacher's desk. I'd hated that bastard.

"So are you meeting Jake somewhere?"

I paused and looked at Nick. "Um, yeah... Here? Seven?"

"Ohh. And I am supposed to...?"

I looked at him for a minute. "I'll give you one enchilada. To go. Please?" I wasn't above bribery.

He took a deep, dramatic breath. “Deal.”

I decided I needed a quick shower with all the cooking and lugging things around — not to mention having run to the store, literally, to get back in time to meet Marla.

Nick was cool enough to straighten up the common area while I showered, then asked if he should pick my clothes out again.

I stuck my tongue out at him and firmly closed the bedroom door.

After showering, however, I really did wonder if I shouldn't have had Nick pick something for me. With his advice to show off my assets in mind, however, I settled on a fitted black button up and jeans that were somewhat snug in the back.

I also pulled on a pair of my Jake & Co underwear for good luck. I figured I was safe, since if we weren't kissing, the chances of him seeing my undies were pretty low.

I pulled on some socks and headed back into the common area. I unpacked the white tablecloth Marla had loaned me and draped it over our rickety folding table. She'd said the cloth was an old one she didn't use much anymore, so it didn't matter if it got stained.

I noticed a frayed edge along one side, so I made sure to place that toward the side where I would sit, then continued to set the table with paper towels for napkins, silverware, and plates.

It didn't look half bad.

“Shit. I wish I had some candles. Do you think he'll notice that I don't?”

Nick smiled. “Calm down, Susie Homemaker. I'd be surprised if he notices anything after he sees you. You picked that out all by yourself? I guess you are learning from the master after all.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere. Take your bribe and go. Jake will be here soon, and I need to finish things up here.”

“Okay, good luck.” He paused and pushed his finger into my cheek. “Jake's a lucky guy, and don't you forget it.”

I flushed as he left. I'd really hit the roommate jackpot with him.

I tried to settle my nerves by cleaning, but Nick had been thorough enough that all I could do was move my shoes from in front of the couch to my closet. No need to trip anyone else.

One of the few items of decor we'd picked up since my dad left was this tacky old lamp that was red glass fading to white with gold leaves glued to it. It was interesting, because it had two bulbs, one on the top where the main source of light was, and one on the inside of it where you could have a nightlight type of glow.

I set the lamp on its dim setting and eyed the room critically. I had to admit it looked better draped in shadows, less like a thrift shop and more as if things actually went together.

I checked the food again. And then once more for good measure.

I was so nervous. Why was I so nervous?

We'd talked already. I knew he liked me. There was no reason to be acting like a ninny.

I placed the food on the table and started uncovering it, then realized it was going to cool down faster if I did that. I couldn't serve a cold dinner to Jake, but what was I supposed to do with it in the meantime?

Shit.

Why was this so complicated? I really shouldn't have to go through all this to get one kiss from the guy who already told me he liked me. I should just lay one on him as he came through the door and get it over with. Maybe then my nerves would settle down.

I covered the food again, then glanced at the clock. It was five after seven. What if he didn't show? Oh my god, that would be a disaster!

Jake wouldn't do that, would he?

Maybe I'd been too forward. Maybe he didn't like guys to be aggressive. I was consumed by a paralyzing fear that Jake would stand me up. I had a nasty image of giving the whole pan of enchiladas to Nick.

Just as my paranoia was about to blossom into full-fledged panic, there was a knock at the door.

My heart flew into my throat. I wished one last time that I had some candles then dashed to the door, pausing to run my hands down to smooth my shirt. I grabbed the handle and took a deep breath. If it was Nick on the other side of the door, he was leaving in a body bag.

I threw open the door, and there was Jake, wearing a dark blue button up shirt with the top few buttons undone and black jeans. Between his outfit and his shaggy hair, he looked like a pop star. I could almost see him on stage, his adoring fans screaming.

Me. I was his adoring fan. And I wanted to scream.

"Kody? Hello?" He waved his hand in front of my face, and I snapped out of my fantasy world.

"Hi, Jake, sorry, you just...you look...really nice."

I swallowed all the other terms that came to mind in case they were too forward. I'm almost certain 'edible' would be considered too forward, and really, who wants to be compared to a pot gummy?

"Thanks. You look pretty damn nice yourself." He smiled and stepped into our room. I noted a small curl at the edge of his mouth as he

took in the room. "Sorry I'm a little late. I had to convince the RA on duty to let me in. They're pretty strict here."

"Oh, uh...yeah. Maybe I should have let them know I was expecting you. Who was it? Why didn't they just call me?"

"Some girl named Lindsay, and she tried. No answer."

"Oh!" I realized I'd left my phone in my room when I showered and changed. Oops.

Jake seemed unfazed, though. He was busy looking around. "The place looks different than the last time I was here. You really know how to set the mood."

I almost said it was to cover the mismatched furniture, but I then realized that having a romantic atmosphere was better for getting my first kiss. Besides, I didn't really want to dwell too long on the last time he was here. Time to change the subject.

"Glad you like it. Dinner is ready, if you are." I ushered him toward our little table and pulled out a chair for him.

He grinned at me and sat down in the proffered chair. I uncovered the food with as much flourish as one can manage with aluminum foil, crumpling it up in a ball. I tossed the ball at the trash can, and of course, it bounced off and rolled back toward me.

Without thinking, I bent over to get it.

"Mmm, Kody, looks good. I mean, smells good!"

I realized I was bent over in front of him, and straightened up so fast I got a little lightheaded.

He seemed quite amused by something, a little smirk on his face. I wasn't sure if it was because of all my preparations, my nervous energy, or what, but whatever it was, he could find it amusing all he wanted, as long as he was also pleased. And hopefully at least a little impressed.

I served him two of the enchiladas with a side of Mexican rice. He still had that slight smirk on his face. I was shooting for something more than amusement. I hoped he was taking our dinner as seriously as I was.

Or was I taking it too seriously?

He murmured his thanks as I took my seat across from him and put some food on my plate — but not too much. I didn't want him to think I was a pig.

Was I overthinking it? Maybe. Probably. Okay, definitely.

"So...dig in," I said with a smile.

He grinned at me and forked a piece, popping it in his mouth. I waited for his response, praying it was good, and also praying he wouldn't

repeat the horrible routine he'd pulled when I suggested he try my favorite coffee.

He must have taken pity on me.

"Hey, this is good!"

I smiled in relief, finally able to eat a bit myself.

"You don't have to sound so surprised," I said after I swallowed.

He laughed. "I just didn't know you could cook! I'm impressed."

"I called my dad this afternoon for a recipe," I admitted. "I realized after I got home, I didn't know what to make for you."

"But you made it yourself?"

"Yeah. Well, Marla grated the cheese..."

"Marla? Never mind, it's delicious. And now I know you can cook. Take out would have been fine with me. This is way more than I expected."

I just smiled and watched him eat, extremely pleased with myself that I'd managed to make a good impression.

More than he'd expected.

He wasn't mine yet, I knew that, but I also knew that he was mine to lose. I just needed to keep showing him I had some value, and then I would maybe have a chance to keep him — maybe for a long time.

"What are you smiling about?" he asked.

"I was thinking about you...in ten years." I grinned at him as his jaw dropped open a bit. It was over the top, but it was worth it to catch him by surprise.

"Ten years, huh? What did I look like?" Jake grinned, rising to the bait.

"Handsome...and well fed."

He pretended to pout. "Are you telling me I got fat?"

"No, you get plenty of regular exercise."

I flashed an appraising look at him as his eyes sparkled with the mischief of our playful banter. Dad would kill me if he could hear me. In fact, I was beginning to embarrass myself. Better change the subject again.

"So is life at college everything you thought it would be?"

"It's starting to look better," he said, giving me a meaningful look, "but it didn't start out that way. I wanted a fresh start, a new place and all, and I got that, but I was a little lonely at first. Then this chick Becca tried to pick me up the first few days I was here. She turned out to be a real piece of work. She was really persistent, and eventually I had to turn her down, but she showed me where The Morning Rush is, so in a way I guess she served a purpose."

“Oh, was that the girl I saw you with there?” I asked without thinking.

Jake's eyes narrowed. “When did you see me with her? She only took me there once, and I don't remember seeing you.”

I began to squirm in my seat. “Do I have to answer that?” I asked sheepishly.

“Well, no...” Jake toyed with his food. “...but I think you should.”

I just had to open my big mouth. He was about to find out I'd been watching him for a long time. He'd probably think I'd stalked him if I told him how often I saw him and just stopped in my tracks. Oh well. Better to be honest, I guess, than try to hide things from him.

“Okay. I was walking down to the shop, and you two were up front by the window. She was flirting, tight shirt, no bra.”

Jake simply raised an eyebrow. I knew I was cherry red.

“I had no idea,” he said quietly. I couldn't bring myself to look at him. “I can't believe you remember that. Was that the first time you saw me?”

I looked up at him, not sure what he was getting at.

“Uh, not exactly. I saw you a few times. Around campus.” He gave me a quizzical look, and I sighed. Might as well finish filling in the blanks. “I think the first time was at the bookstore. Then you came running out the door from the admin building this one time just as I was opening the door. You almost ran over me.”

Jake appeared to be deep in thought, and I started to forget I was supposed to be embarrassed.

“I saw you at orientation too. You were sitting in the back row. I was standing right behind you.”

Jake laughed. “Were you stalking me?”

“No! I swear...”

“I'm just kidding.” He smiled gently, almost...fondly? “I first remember you behind the counter at Morning Rush, but I kind of remember almost mowing someone down on my way to orientation. That was you?”

I merely nodded in response, feeling dumb for having said anything.

“I think...” Jake appeared to be in thought again, and then smiled. “I think I really noticed you the day I tried your favorite way of making coffee. You have a beautiful smile.”

Now I *knew* I was as bright as a red beacon, but I also had a very, very large smile on my face.

Jake chuckled. “See? There ya go. That's the smile.”

“Eat. Your food is getting cold,” I replied, still smiling at him, unused to compliments. I wasn’t sure how to take it, how to respond in a way that a normal person would.

He laughed. “Yes, Mother.”

We finished our meal over comfortable conversation, Jake telling me about surfing, and me picturing him on his surfboard...in his wetsuit. We discovered I liked sports a lot more than he did, but we both liked video games. He told me more about his friend, Killian, and how they met. I could tell their bond was deep. He smiled the whole time he talked about Killian.

I could feel the pain Jake still felt when he spoke of Killian as his first love, and I admit I was the tiniest bit jealous, but Jake was pretty firm about there being no future outside their close friendship. I was suddenly ashamed of myself and thankful for Killian. He was Jake's most loyal friend and confidante, and I had a feeling if someone didn't measure up in Killian's view as an appropriate match for Jake...well, I just hoped I'd make the cut.

Jake asked for more details about my family, and I filled him in on Dad, Brandon, and Charlie. I told him how Charlie had been bugging me about whether I was going to ask Jake out or not, and he just smiled.

I wondered if he'd had a similar conversation with Killian. My curiosity was killing me. Who did he confide in? Then I realized that Brayden seemed to know an awful lot. What did that mean? Where did Brayden fit into all this anyway?

“So is Brayden your closest friend here?”

Jake chuckled before replying. “Sort of? Brayden's just always there these days, so I talk to him a lot. Sometimes it's almost like talking to myself. He's a good guy, though. I guess you could say Erin is my closest friend here.” He went quiet for a few seconds. “I wish I could talk to Killian more, but he's really busy. He's a private eye, and he's on a big case right now.”

“A private eye? How old is he?”

“Nineteen, same age as me.”

I noted that Jake was a year older than me, but just filed that fact away. “And he's a PI?” I asked instead.

He shrugged. “Killian is the type who knows exactly what he wants to do. And that type is Type A.”

I chuckled. “Well, I guess him being so busy must be tough on you then.”

“That's the great thing about us — we don't have to see each other all the time to know the other cares. We can go a long time without talking,

but when we see each other it's like no time has passed at all. You'd like Killian, I think."

"I hope I get to meet him some day, especially if he's so important to you."

"You know what's funny? I think he'd say the same thing about you."

I was feeling pretty damn good right then, and I don't think anyone could blame me. I had this gorgeous guy in my room, I didn't burn dinner, and we were getting to know each other.

But the best part was...I really liked him. I liked spending time with him, not just staring at him and wondering what he looked like under his clothes. He could make me laugh, he was easy to talk to, and, as a bonus, we seemed to have some real chemistry.

I noticed his glass was empty. "More Coke?"

"Please."

I jumped up to get his drink and felt a tug near my waist. I realized too late it was because the tablecloth was stuck to my belt buckle, caught by the same frayed edge I'd so carefully positioned on my side so he wouldn't see it.

As the tablecloth slid off in what felt like slow motion, I spun around and reached for the main dish but it toppled past my grasping fingers, followed quickly by damn near everything on the table.

So there we were, Jake at the table, fork in hand and a shocked expression on his face, and what was left of our meal on the floor at my feet. I stared sadly down at the mess. All my hard work splattered on the brand-new vinyl.

"I hope you didn't want seconds," I said weakly, fighting the urge to burst into tears.

Jake snorted, then started laughing.

At first, I failed to see the humor in the situation, but his laughter was infectious, and, after a few seconds, I had to chuckle. Then the utter ridiculousness of the situation really hit me and I cracked up too. I had to lean on the counter for support.

After we'd laughed ourselves out, Jake slipped from his chair and started scooping food back into the pan with his bare hands. I quickly knelt next to him to help.

"You know," Jake said as he picked up a stray piece of chicken that had bounced under the table, "this seems familiar."

"Yeah, the two of us cleaning up my messes."

"I almost asked you out that day."

I stopped and stared at him. "You did?"
"Yeah, when we were behind the counter, right before Max walked in."

Our eyes locked over the mess. For once, I held his gaze without becoming embarrassed. We must have made a silly tableau, food everywhere on the floor and us staring into each other's eyes.

He smiled at me and began to lean forward hesitantly.

It was about to happen!

He was getting closer, his face less than a foot from mine. I leaned in slightly, my lips parted.

Suddenly, he lurched forward. He crashed into me, and the next thing I knew, I was looking up into his face, only inches from mine, lying on my back with him on top of me.

He looked as surprised as I felt.

"I slipped on the sauce," he said sheepishly.

I started to giggle. He quickly joined in, and we were laughing loudly again, lying in the remains of dinner. He looked down into my face, and the laughter slowly faded away.

He leaned in slowly, pressing his lips against mine. They were soft and warm.

I kept my eyes open and my gaze on him. I wanted to remember every detail.

He began to pull away, a cloud of self-doubt in his eyes. I slid one arm behind him and placed my other hand on his neck.

I gently pulled him back in for another kiss. The feel of his warm, smooth skin registered in my mind as his hair brushed across my face, tickling my cheeks.

The second kiss was less hesitant, firmer, with more purpose.

It was everything I'd hoped it would be.

I knew I'd never forget my first kiss.

Chapter 15 – Jake

My first kiss with Kody wasn't quite the way I'd imagined it, but it was better than anything I could have ever dreamed.

Sure, we were lying in a splattered mess of chicken, sauce, rice, and vegetables in the middle of his dorm room, but none of that mattered. The only thing that counted was his lips against mine, the feel of my body pressed against his, the way his arms felt wrapped tightly around me.

I didn't want the moment to end, but, of course, like all good things, it had to eventually.

I gently broke the kiss and pushed myself up on my elbows so I could look into his beautiful face again. His eyes were shining, his lips wet, his cheeks rosy — he was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

And then he spoke: “The sauce is soaking through my underwear.”

I snorted and started laughing again.

“No, seriously. It's kind of warm and...well, wet. It feels really gross. Sorry to spoil the moment.”

“You couldn't spoil that if you tried,” I said, then kissed him lightly on the nose and used the table to pull myself up off of him. Once on my feet, I extended my hand to pull him up.

We were both a royal mess. I had food on the knees of my favorite black jeans and down the sleeves of both arms. Kody was even worse. When he turned around, I saw he was coated from the center of his back to just below his pert little bum.

He twisted around to get a look at the mess and grimaced. I had to bite my lip to keep from laughing again.

He sighed heavily. “Great.” He looked back down at the floor as his face crumpled. “Oh God, I'm so sorry. Everything is ruined—”

“No,” I said quickly, cutting him off. “Nothing is ruined. We had a delicious dinner — well, most of it anyway — and an amazing conversation. Then we made a memory we'll have forever, not to mention a really great story to tell at parties. *Plus*, I found out that you're a great kisser.” He blushed scarlet and ducked his head to hide a pleased smile. “And the night is far from over.”

He looked up with a surprised expression.

“But we're a mess...”

“So we change,” I said with a shrug, then added playfully. “Come on, I'll help you.” I grabbed his shirt tail and tugged it up.

He yelped and spun away, but I chased him around the table, almost slipping on the sauce again. I grabbed him around the waist from behind and swung him around. His shirt bunched up under his arms, and I couldn't resist sliding a hand over his flat tummy. His underwear was sticking out above the waist of his jeans in that way that I find ever so sexy.

Then I did a double-take.

I set him down and spun him around to face me, my arms still tight around his waist.

"Is it my imagination, or is my name on your underwear?" I asked with a teasing grin.

Kody's mouth and eyes flew open in abject horror. "I...it's...they..." he sputtered.

I squeezed him even tighter, pulling him against me, and leaned in to whisper into his ear. "It's okay. I'm wearing Kody boxers."

He blinked. "Really?"

I laughed. "No, but I think it's sexy as hell that my name is on yours."

He flushed red again and tickled my sides so that I let go of him with a yelp.

"This sauce is getting cold now, and it's even grosser," Kody said with as much dignity as he could muster. "I have to change." He paused. "And maybe shower. What are you going to do?"

I started to answer flippantly with "Watch," but realized that might be pushing things a bit too far. While Kody certainly seemed to catch on quickly when it came to this whole flirting business, I had to keep reminding myself that he was really innocent and inexperienced. How inexperienced I wasn't sure, but it was obvious that this was all new to him. He was so adorably awkward and so very earnest.

"Maybe I should raid Nick's closet to see if he has something I can wear," I suggested. "He's a little more muscular than me, but his clothes will fit me better than yours. Do you think he'll mind?"

Kody rolled his eyes. "Mind? No. I think he'll love the idea that you were naked in his bedroom."

I raised an eyebrow. "I'll be sure to leave my underwear on then. I'll explain everything to him when I see him."

"Ugh," Kody groaned. "I'll never hear the end of this from him. Can you tell him we had an earthquake and he just missed it?"

I laughed. "I'll make sure he doesn't give you a hard time."

Kody shook his head but turned towards his bedroom without a word. I wanted to follow him, but I made myself turn around.

I opened Nick's bedroom door and stepped into his room, feeling a little like I was trespassing. I guess technically I was. It's not like I had his permission to go through his closet and wear his clothes. I had a feeling he'd be okay with it, though, considering it would salvage my first date with Kody.

Then I remembered I had his number and I could actually get his permission.

I pulled out my phone, found my last conversation with him, and sent off a quick text, giving him as few details as possible.

Hey, Nick...I need a favor and it's a weird one. I got food all over my clothes and I don't want to have to run across campus to change and ruin my date with Kody. Could I possibly borrow some clothes from you? I promise I'll wash them before I return them.

I saw the little dots pulse almost immediately after I hit send, indicating that he'd already read the message and was replying.

Dude...how did you get food all over your clothes? Is Little Kody THAT kinky?

Very funny. Long story.

I got nothing but time.

Well, I don't. The sauce is getting cold and it feels nasty. Can I please borrow some clothes?

Yeah, help yourself.

Then, a few seconds later: *There's a red pullover in the closet that shrank in the dryer. It's too small for me now, so if it fits, keep it. Jeans and sweatpants are on the shelf at the top of the closet.*

Thanks! I sent back.

No problem. But you owe me the whole story.

Sure, man. What you want. I appreciate it.

I opened his closet and found the shirt and jeans where he said they'd be. I quickly stripped out of my dirty clothes, used the clean parts to wipe off as much sauce as I could manage, then pulled on Nick's clothes.

The shirt fit perfectly, surprisingly enough, but the jeans were a different story. He definitely wore a larger waist size than I did by a couple of sizes.

I dug through his sweatpants and finally found a very worn pair, the gray fabric so thin in the crotch you could almost see through it. They were so small they must have last fit him when he was in middle school. They were really a little small on me too, but less ridiculous than the larger jeans that made it look like I was wearing my dad's pants.

Besides, the snugness sort of emphasized my bulge, and that seemed like a bonus. As long as I didn't pop a boner. There would be no hiding that in these.

I checked myself out in the mirror on the back of his door and decided it would have to do. I didn't look bad, exactly, just more like I was heading to the gym, not how I wanted to look for my first date with Kody. Plus, Nick used a different fabric softener than I did. The clothes just *smelled* like they belonged to somebody else. But they were dry and clean, and for that I was grateful.

I opened the door to find Kody on his knees on the floor cleaning up the mess. He'd changed into another pair of jeans; his polo shirt was a smoky blue-gray that reflected the color of his eyes perfectly.

He looked up as I approached and gave me a crooked grin.

"How about if you stay where you are?" he quipped. "I think we'd all be safer that way...and besides, I can look at you better from here."

I smiled and did a little pirouette. "Like what you see?"

"Oh yeah. Don't tell him I said this, but Nick's clothes look better on you than they do on him."

I laughed. "I don't think I'll be able to resist telling him that, actually. He already wants the whole story."

He stopped what he was doing and looked up at me again. "What do you mean?"

"I texted him to ask permission before I stole his clothes."

He blinked. "Oh. That was thoughtful. But he's never going to let me hear the end of it."

"I'll just tell him I knocked something over and it spilled in my lap."

"But that's not what happened..."

"I know that, and you know that, but Nick doesn't need to know that."

"You don't have to do that."

"I know, but this way he won't ride you about it."

I edged closer to where he was kneeling.

"Jake..."

"Kody, it's not a big deal. I feel stupid just standing here watching you clean up. Isn't there something I can do?"

"I'm almost done. Hold the trash bag so I can throw all this crap in there. Just don't get too close. I don't want you to slip again."

"I'm a little more prepared now."

I picked up the trash bag and held it open while Kody tossed in the food and the paper towels he'd used to clean up.

"So much for dinner," he said with a sigh.

"It was really good, Kody. I can't believe you cooked it yourself. I can't wait to see what's for dessert."

His face registered dismay. "I forgot dessert!"

I tried not to laugh at his pitiful expression. "It's okay. In fact, that's perfect."

"Perfect? How can it be perfect? I forgot dessert! Everybody knows that's like the most important part of dinner. God! What else can I mess up?"

"This is my chance to thank you for dinner. Now I get to take you out for dessert. Where should we go?"

"I don't know."

He was still visibly upset, so I squatted down next to him.

"Kody, we could have had Big Macs and apple pies from Mickey Dee's, and this night would have still been perfect. I don't care if dinner ended up on the floor or that you forgot dessert. So what if things didn't go exactly as you planned? We got to spend time together, and that's what matters. Right?"

A smile slowly spread across his face, transforming him into one of Raphael's angels.

"Right. You're right."

I couldn't resist any longer. I bounced to my feet, pulling him up with me. I drew him into me as I slid my arms around his waist. Kody's arms snaked around my neck, and we met halfway.

The kiss was amazing. It lasted several minutes, and I thought my knees would buckle. There was no doubt about it: the kid was a quick study.

We reluctantly broke apart, both of us panting. I wondered if Kody could feel my erection pressing against him. I just hoped he wouldn't look down until I went down.

"Or we could just skip dessert and stay here," I said in a husky voice.

Kody pretended to pout. "I wanted ice cream." I raised an eyebrow, and he grinned. "But I think I can live without it."

He stepped back, sliding his hands down my arms and slipping them into my hands. He pulled me toward his room and uttered the time-worn — but never unwelcome — words, "Let's get more comfortable."

I was ready to do whatever he said — anything to taste his lips again. We fell onto his bed, and our bodies slid together like two pieces of a puzzle, a perfect fit.

For a few moments, I just lightly traced the outlines of his face with my fingertips. He was so beautiful, so pure...and he wanted me. The idea blew my mind, made me deliriously happy and unspeakably terrified at the same time. Would he still want me if I told him the rest of my story? He'd surprised me over and over so far, but how much was too much?

He must have seen the uncertainty in my eyes, because he gently reached up and touched my cheek.

"Don't be scared," he said in a barely audible voice. "I won't hurt you."

My breath caught in my throat. I couldn't look away from his eyes. I was lost in their smoky depths. The spell was suddenly broken when something began to vibrate aggressively against my leg.

"Either you're so excited you're about to blow, or someone is calling," I said with a grin.

Kody looked absolutely mortified.

"I'm not answering it," he said through clenched teeth.

"Why not?"

"Because I just know it's either my dad or my brother."

"How do you know?"

"Nobody else calls me. Plus, they have the worst timing, and they're nosy."

I laughed.

The phone finally stopped buzzing, and Kody gave me a smug smile. He opened his mouth to say something just as it started up again.

"Arg!"

"You better get it," I said, rolling off of him. "It could be an emergency."

"Emergency, my ass," he grumbled as he sat up and pulled the offending object from his pocket and stabbed at the screen. "Hello?" he snapped.

If I'd been on the other end of the phone when he answered in that tone of voice I would have promptly apologized and hung up. Whoever it was had a stronger constitution than I, however.

Kody listened for a few seconds then rolled his eyes. "Dinner was fine, Dad. Thanks ever so much for calling to check." Pause. "Yes, it was delicious." Pause. "I'll tell you later." Pause. "Yes, he's still here." Pause.

"No, you can't talk to him. That's not funny!" Pause. "Dad! I have to go. I'll call you later. No, wait. Tomorrow. I'll call you tomorrow."

He ended the call and turned to face me, red-faced and tight-lipped. "Sorry about that."

"Don't be," I said. "That's parents for you."

I held my arms out to him, and he came towards me with a small smile. I pulled him back down onto the bed, and he snuggled into me.

"I can't believe he called. It's like he doesn't trust me or something."

"Maybe it's me he doesn't trust," I said with a snicker.

"It's not like I'm some dumb little kid."

"Well, you are kind of little."

He playfully punched me in the arm.

"Hey, watch it with that thing. I've seen your fists of fury in action." That got a giggle out of him. "But seriously, it's cool. So your dad called to check up on you. That just shows how much he loves you. I mean, you're the oldest right?"

"Yeah," he admitted slowly, as if he knew where I was going and didn't like it. He wasn't ready to give up on his pout just yet.

"So, this is the first time your dad has gone through all this. It can't be easy having you leave and move across the country. I'm sure he misses you, and he probably feels like he's missing out on important things in your life."

He sighed. "I guess you're right."

"Of course I am. You'll quickly learn that I'm always right." He rolled his eyes. "Hey! Don't roll your eyes at me, mister!" I started tickling him and soon had him squirming and laughing hysterically.

"Okay! Okay, you win! I give up."

I stopped tickling him and sat back, watching him gasp out a few residual giggles.

He sat up. "How about dessert now? I'm hungry."

"You should be. You didn't eat much before you tossed it all on the floor."

He stuck out his tongue at me.

"Don't stick that thing out unless you plan on using it," I said with a wink.

"Oh, I plan on using it."

"Oh, really?"

"Oh, yeah." He slowly started to lean in towards me, lowering his eyelids and licking his lips seductively.

My heart started racing as I leaned in towards him, eager to pick up where we'd left off earlier.

Just before our lips met, he suddenly licked the tip of my nose and jumped up. "Come on! Let's get ice cream."

Kody and I found a little ice cream shop tucked between a laundromat and a bookstore just off campus, its neon OPEN sign buzzing faintly in the front window.

Inside, the place smelled like sugar cones, chocolate syrup, and waffle batter. A few students occupied the tiny tables scattered around the room, but most people seemed to be coming and going with paper cups and cones in hand.

Kody paused just inside the door, looking around uncertainly. His cheeks were still faintly pink from our make-out session back in his dorm, and every time I looked at him, I had to resist the urge to drag him into another kiss.

"Pick a table," I told him. "I'll get us something."

"You don't have to pay."

"I know. I want to."

He hesitated, then smiled softly. "Okay."

I watched him weave between the tables toward a booth near the back of the shop. Even something as simple as that fascinated me — the slight bounce in his step, the way he tucked his hands into his pockets when he felt shy, the fact that he kept glancing back at me like he couldn't quite believe I was actually there with him.

By the time I reached the counter, I'd already decided there was no universe in which I was getting two separate desserts.

"One large chocolate fudge sundae," I told the girl behind the register. "Extra whipped cream."

"And two spoons?"

I grinned. "Definitely two spoons."

When I carried the sundae over, Kody's eyes widened slightly.

"Did you leave any for anyone else?"

"You said you wanted ice cream."

"Yeah, but not all of it."

I laughed. "Just say thank you and eat it."

"Thank you and eat it."

The sundae was ridiculous — three scoops of ice cream drowning in hot fudge and caramel with whipped cream piled high and chocolate

shavings scattered over the top. Two cherries perched on top like decorative punctuation marks.

Kody stared at it reverently. "This is beautiful."

"Please don't make out with the ice cream before me," I said.

"No promises."

He picked up one of the spoons and carefully scooped a bite from the edge like he was trying not to damage a priceless sculpture. I, meanwhile, went straight for the middle.

His eyes widened. "You monster."

"What?"

"You destroyed the structural integrity."

"It's ice cream, Kody, not architecture."

"You have no respect for craftsmanship."

I laughed and stole a bite off his spoon while he was lecturing me. His mouth fell open in outrage.

"Hey!"

"Should've defended your territory better."

He narrowed his eyes at me, then deliberately scooped up one of the cherries before I could stop him and popped it into his mouth.

I gasped dramatically. "You little thief."

He looked unbearably pleased with himself as he chewed. "Finders keepers."

"That was my cherry."

"You still have one."

"That's not the point."

"It kind of is."

"So let me get this straight...are you asking me to take your cherry?"

His face flushed as red as the cherry, and I stared at him, at the tiny streak of whipped cream near the corner of his mouth and the teasing sparkle in his smoky gray eyes, and something inside me softened so completely it almost hurt.

Because this was ridiculous. We were sitting in a tiny ice cream shop sharing a sundae like a couple out of a cheesy romantic comedy. The table wobbled every time one of us leaned on it. Some indie song buzzed softly through blown-out speakers overhead. A little kid near the counter was crying because he dropped his cone.

And I was happier than I could ever remember being. That realization hit me so suddenly it almost knocked the breath out of me.

I thought about all the glittering parties Fenton used to drag me to — the massive ballrooms filled with chandeliers and string quartets and people dripping diamonds and fake smiles, the champagne flowing like water, the designer suits, and marble floors polished so brightly they reflected the lights overhead.

Back then I'd thought that was what happiness looked like. Luxury. Excess. Being wanted by important people. But those nights had always felt cold underneath all the glitter. I'd spent most of them high out of my mind or trying to become someone decorative enough to survive them.

And now?

Now I was sitting across from a nervous college freshman in a cramped little ice cream parlor while he defended the honor of a chocolate sundae like it was a moral issue. And I'd never felt more alive.

Kody tilted his head. "What?"

I realized I'd been staring at him. "Nothing," I said softly. "Just admiring the view."

That earned me a shy grin before he ducked his head and scooped another bite of ice cream.

I watched him for another moment, warmth spreading through my chest so fiercely it almost scared me. Because this — this stupid little moment — mattered more to me than rooms full of wealthy socialites ever had. More than expensive gifts. More than designer clothes.

Kody looked back up and caught me smiling again. "You're staring again," he murmured.

"Can you blame me?"

He rolled his eyes, but he was smiling so hard he could barely pretend to be annoyed. Then, before I could react, he leaned across the table and dabbed a blob of whipped cream onto the tip of my nose.

I blinked in surprise. Kody immediately burst into helpless laughter.

"You asshole," I said, laughing too.

"You deserved it."

"For what?"

"For being smug."

"I am not smug."

"You absolutely are."

I scooped up a dangerous amount of whipped cream with my spoon. His eyes widened immediately.

"Jake," he warned.

I grinned.

“Kody.”

He scrambled backward in the booth just as I leaned forward, both of us laughing hard enough that people started glancing over at us.

And for once in my life, I didn't care who was watching.

After that we went back to his room and made out some more for a while.

It was heavenly.

I would have stayed the night if he'd asked, but I sensed he wasn't quite ready for that yet. Truth be told, neither was I. I just didn't want to leave him. But eventually I knew I'd better go before things went farther. I didn't want him to regret anything about our evening when he thought back about it later. And I'd done a fairly decent job of staying out of my head for one night. No need to push it.

So I reluctantly pulled away and told him I needed to head back. The excuse was that I had a paper I needed to work on, but also, things were getting hot and heavy and I wasn't sure we'd be able to put the brakes on if things went much further. I wasn't sure either of us was ready for that.

We made it as far as the door, where the goodnight kiss got a little out of hand; it was another five minutes before I actually left.

I used the walk back to my room to cool down and think about what had happened between us. We'd certainly gotten the first kiss out of the way. Not to mention numbers two through ninety-nine. Even when we weren't kissing, though, we'd had a real connection. We could talk to each other about real things, but we could tease each other too.

I knew I'd have to tell him my whole story at some point — just...not yet. He knew enough for now. I just wanted to bask in the glow for a while.

I unlocked my door and started into my room. I was stopped in my tracks by the sound of grunting and a bed squeaking. I stifled a moan and hastily backed out of the room.

Just what I needed to walk in and see: Foster screwing some chick, white ass in the air. I shuddered, desperately trying to clear the image from my mind.

I decided to go down and see what Erin was up to.

I knocked on her door and waited. I could hear sounds of movement from inside, but there was no answer. I sighed and walked away. She was probably busy with Carlos. Or getting busy.

Everybody was getting some but me.

Well, it was probably a safe bet that Brayden was alone, but I didn't even know what dorm he was in. He was always in mine.

I decided to head down to the campus lounge. I'd read about it in the orientation packet and had been meaning to check it out.

Tucked into the lower level of the student union, I found a dimly lit hangout space. The vibe was somewhere between a café and a small music club. Someone had come up with the bright idea of naming it The Coop. The sign by the door showed a proud rooster standing guard in front of his henhouse, but thankfully they'd drawn the line at decorating.

String lights and wall sconces cast a soft glow. The walls were painted in rich, warm tones and covered with student art that, according to the placard by the door, rotated every semester. There was a low hum of music — someone's curated playlists, if I had to guess — but there was a stage at one end of the room that indicated that there were perhaps sometimes live performances or open mics.

Plush armchairs and low couches were clustered into conversation circles, and high-backed booths lined the walls for more private chats. Floor cushions and rugs make it easy to sprawl casually with friends.

A board game shelf occupied one corner, and a chalkboard wall was filled with doodles, announcements, and inside jokes.

A café counter served coffee, tea, mocktails, and inexpensive snacks like nachos, samosas, and locally baked pastries.

According to the student guidebook, after hours it became more of a late-night spot, making it the go-to place after rehearsals or study sessions or just to meet up with friends.

It was certainly packed on a Saturday night, full of old friends catching each other up on their summer vacations.

I heard a donkey bray of a laugh and turned to see a flash of bright red hair.

What was Erin doing there?

I made my way across the room to stand at her elbow. She was talking animatedly to a dark-haired girl I'd never seen before. It took Erin a few seconds to notice me, and when she did, she let out an ear-piercing squeal.

“Jake! I'm so glad to see you! I've been dying to hear about your date. I tried staking out your room, but your charming roommate came back with some skank, and they looked like they might be there for a while, so I gave up and came here.”

“Yeah, well, I walked in on them while they were, uh, engaged in adult activities. I made a speedy exit. Actually, I went to your room, and I

could have sworn I heard someone moving around in there. I figured you and Carlos were, uh, busy as well.”

She laughed. “I wish. Carlos is in my room alright, and he's busy, but not with me. Busy puking his guts up is more like it.” I made a face. “Yeah, tell me about it. I stayed for a while and tried to be the supportive maternal type, but let's face it, that's not me. Finally, I told him to stay as long as he needed to but I just couldn't hang around anymore listening to him ralph and wiping his forehead. I'm no Nurse Nightingale.”

“Yeah, can't say I'd want you for my nurse.”

She laughed, then seemed to remember the girl she'd been talking to, who was still standing there patiently following our exchange.

“Oh, Jake, this is Chrissy. She's an RA in Cayuga. Chrissy, this is my friend Jake.”

We exchanged pleasantries, and then Chrissy said she needed to go.

“I hope I didn't chase her off,” I said after she'd left.

Erin rolled her eyes. “If you did, I should thank you. She's so god-awful boring. I mean, get a personality already.”

“You have enough personality for the both of you.”

“True. So...tell me everything. What was the date like? What was he wearing? What did he cook for you? Was it any good? I love a man who can cook. Did you guys do it?”

“Slow down! I can only answer one question at a time. Kody was wearing jeans and a shirt.”

She shook my arm. “Oh come on, you gotta give me more than that.”

I laughed. “Okay. He was wearing these jeans that just hugged him everywhere and this sexy tight black button-up shirt, but the best part was his underwear had my name on them.”

“*What?*”

“Yeah, it's some brand, Jake and Company or something like that. It was wild.”

“And just how did you discover that fact?” she asked, wagging her eyebrows suggestively.

“Not the way you're thinking. See, while we were eating—”

“Oh! What did he cook?”

“Enchiladas with Mexican rice and a sauce. It was really good. Anyway, as I was saying, while we were eating, he stood up to get me something to drink, and somehow, the tablecloth snagged on his belt — or it

was tucked into his pants, I don't know. Either way, he yanked the whole thing off the table, and all the food hit the floor.”

“Oh no!”

“Oh yes. I thought he was going to start crying right there. I felt so bad for him. It was kind of funny, though. I couldn't help laughing. So anyway, we're trying to clean it up, and I somehow slipped and fell on top of him. We were both covered in food, so we had to change. I saw his underwear then, but just the band.”

“You changed together, but you only saw the band of his underwear?”

“We didn't change together. I changed in Nick's bedroom.”

“How disappointing. Other than that little mishap, how was it?”

“Amazing. Erin, he's so incredible. When I got there — it was so cute — he had the lights all turned down low and mood lighting on. It was obvious he'd worked so hard, and he was so nervous. But then we got talking, and he relaxed. It was just so...wow.”

Erin giggled. “It sounds like somebody has got it bad.”

“Heh. I really do.”

“So, did you guys, you know, do it?”

“No, actually, we didn't.”

“Oh God, please tell me you at least kissed him.”

“We did do that.”

“Whew. You were about to shatter all my stereotypes about guys in general, and gay guys in particular. I mean, I can only handle so much virtuousness. Is he a good kisser?”

“The best.”

“Aww. How cute. Hyperbole. And after only your second date.”

“Shut up. Technically, this was our first date. The chaperoned one doesn't count. But...in all seriousness...I really like him, Erin. And that scares the shit out of me.”

“Okay, that's the second time you've said something like that. Why are you so scared? You're sweet, smart, funny, and God knows you're cute as hell. What do you have to be scared of?”

“My past.”

“Right. So you were like a government assassin? You chopped the heads off babies? You kill and eat your mates? What could be so bad?”

I was filled with indecision. I wanted to tell her, but at the same time, I was afraid of her reaction too. But maybe it was time to tell someone, like a practice round or a test run before I told Kody. I had to start trusting more people, and if not Erin, then who?

I took a deep breath and decided to take the plunge.

"I used to do drugs and drink...a lot."

Erin gasped and clutched her chest in mock horror. "Oh no! My delicate sensibilities! I don't know if I can ever speak to you again."

I almost smiled, but the rest of what I had to say weighed too heavily. "That's...not all." My eyes darted around the room, suddenly aware of every nearby ear. "Do you think we could go somewhere a little less...public?"

She smacked her forehead. "Of course. Duh! You're a moron, Erin." She grabbed my arm before I could protest and tugged me across the room toward an empty corner booth. She shoved me into the round banquette, then slid in right beside me.

"Better?" she asked, lowering her voice.

"Yeah. This is fine."

I dropped my gaze to my hands, twisting them together in my lap. If I was going to do this, there was no way I could look her in the face.

"While I was addicted to drugs, I got involved with a man. An older man. He was very rich, very powerful...and a drug dealer. Drug lord, really. He was basically a mobster. He gave me drugs in exchange for..." My throat closed, but I forced the words out. "...for me."

Erin's voice softened instantly. "Oh, Jake. I'm so sorry. I didn't know..."

I shook my head. "It gets worse. Not only was I pretty much a whore, but I was a whore to someone who was a very bad man. He hurt people. A lot of people. He was a murderer — and I don't mean in the 'drugs kill' sense. I mean he actually killed people. Or had them killed. Same difference. And then it caught up with him. He was murdered while I was at his house."

She gasped.

The memory burned, but I pressed on. "I don't really remember anything, since I was busy overdosing at the time. Someone found me unconscious, with a gun in my hand and a dead body in the room. Naturally, I was suspect number one."

Her eyes couldn't have gotten any bigger if I'd just confessed to being an alien sent to eat her brain.

"Oh, my God!" she breathed.

"I'd probably be rotting in a cell right now if it weren't for my best friend. He's a private investigator — he found the real killer and proved that I was framed. I owe him my life...more than once, actually. He's also the person who convinced me to go into rehab." I let out a bitter laugh. "So

yeah. That's me in a nutshell, minus all the sordid details. I was a whore and a druggie."

Erin's expression hardened into something fierce, like she was daring me to argue. "But you *overcame* all that! Jake, you should be proud of who you are, not ashamed of who you were. I mean, you don't do drugs anymore, right?"

"No," I said quickly. "I don't even drink. I've been sober for about a year now."

"See?" She thumped her hand against the table for emphasis. "You're a survivor. A fighter. You beat demons that kill most people before they ever get the chance to fight back."

I blinked hard, but the tears still stung my eyes. I wasn't used to hearing it framed that way — not as something I needed to overcome, but as something I'd survived.

I stared down at my hands. They were still in my lap, fingers knotted together so tightly my knuckles had gone pale. I realized, distantly, that I had been waiting for them to start shaking again.

They hadn't. That felt wrong. Like my body had missed the cue.

"I...I guess I never thought about it like that," I said, because the silence was starting to feel like something I needed to fill. "You, uh, took that pretty well. People usually...react more."

"More how?"

"I don't know," I said. "Just...more. They usually look at me like I'm not the same person after."

Erin's eyebrows lifted slightly. "Are you *not* the same person?"

I opened my mouth. Then closed it again.

Because the honest answer was complicated in a way I didn't want to unpack in public, in front of her or anyone. I wasn't the same person I had been. I wasn't the same person that I pretended to be either. And somewhere in between those two things was the version of me that actually got up every day and tried my best to function like a normal person.

"I don't know," I said finally.

Erin nodded like that was acceptable, like uncertainty wasn't some sort of moral failing.

Then she leaned forward again, elbows on the table. "Okay. So here's what I'm hearing. You did a bunch of really messed-up stuff. You survived it. You got out. You got clean. You're here."

I shifted uncomfortably. "When you say it like that, it sounds—"

"Like what it is?" she cut in.

That shut me up. Because, yeah. That was the problem. She was making it sound...simple. I didn't trust simple things. Simple things were usually false promises that hid sharp edges.

Erin continued, unfazed by my silence. "And now you're acting like you should be disqualified from, what, being liked? Being kissed? Being—" she waved a hand vaguely, "—whatever this Kody thing is?"

My ears went hot at his name.

"I didn't say I was disqualified," I muttered.

"You didn't have to."

I stared at her. She stared back.

I hated how steady she was. How she didn't look away. How she didn't soften her words or wrap them in politeness or pretend she didn't see what I was doing. That annoyed me more than anything. Because part of me had been prepared for this to break something open and spill out into chaos. For me to feel worse. Or worse in a way that at least made sense.

Instead, I just felt...exposed.

"I'm not trying to be dramatic," I said quietly.

Erin snorted. "You're not. You're trying to protect yourself."

I looked down, suddenly fascinated by a scratch on the table's surface. "It's just easier if people don't know. Then I don't have to... I don't know. See it in their face."

"What, disappointment?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said immediately. Then, after a pause, "Or fear. Or like they're waiting for me to turn into *that* again."

The words tumbled out before I could polish them into something less honest.

Erin's expression softened. "Jake," she said, quieter now, "do you hear yourself right now?"

I blew out a short, humorless breath. "Constantly. Unfortunately."

"You're talking like you're on probation for the rest of your life."

I didn't answer that. Because that was exactly what it felt like.

A beat passed, then Erin reached across the table and nudged my hand with her finger. "Hey, you shouldn't rewrite the entire story of your life based on your worst chapter," she said.

I looked down at where she was touching me, and my chest tightened in a way that had nothing to do with panic and everything to do with not knowing where to put the feelings she was stirring up.

"I don't know how to not do that," I admitted.

“Then start by letting someone else read the book without you narrating it for them.” She raised one ginger eyebrow. “I think you should trust Kody enough to tell him the truth.”

“But...”

“But what?”

“But he’s so pure. So innocent.”

She pulled back, her face a comical mask of indignation. “And I’m not?”

I managed a weak smile. “Well, I didn’t want to say anything, but...”

She shoved me, playful but firm. “Jerk. You should trust him, Jake. You can’t keep something like that hidden. It’s part of who you are. If he really likes you as much as it sounds like he does, he won’t care about your past. He’ll care about the person sitting in front of him now. Keeping it bottled up will only poison things later.”

“I know you’re right,” I admitted, voice cracking. “I’m just...so scared.”

Her expression grew gentle again. “Tell him.”

“I will,” I said after a pause, meaning it but already feeling the dread coil in my stomach. “When the time is right.”

She smiled, squeezing my hand. “Thank you for trusting me with the truth.”

For the first time in a long time, I felt a strange lightness in my chest. It wasn’t freedom exactly — more like a window had cracked open in a room I hadn’t realized was suffocating me.

We sat in silence for a beat, just the hum of the Coop around us. Then Erin’s lips curved into a mischievous grin. “Now, if you really want to shock me, you’ll tell me you secretly breed Chinese Crested dogs in your basement as a hobby.”

I laughed, startled and grateful. “Sorry to disappoint. We don’t even have a dog back home. I do love to surf though.”

She reeled back dramatically, her eyes wide in exaggerated surprise.

“You? Surf? Surely not! That’s like the least surprising thing you could have possibly told me. You look like a walking surf board commercial.”

I shook my head, smiling despite myself.

But underneath the banter Erin’s words kept echoing: *Tell him. Trust him.*

I knew I would...eventually. I just wanted to enjoy being someone who hadn't been a drug-addled whore for a little longer, at least in Kody's eyes. Was that really so bad?

Chapter 16 - Kody

Morning sunlight streamed through the curtains and across my face. Specifically, over my eyes, and the eyelids weren't doing a great job of blocking the light and letting me sleep. I groaned. I needed thicker curtains.

An insistent rapping came from the living room, and I pulled my pillow over my head, but the sound grew louder until I finally rolled out of bed and stomped out to find the source of my irritation. Someone was knocking on my bedroom door.

Where was Nick?

I headed to my door, but then had a thought. What if it was Jake? What if Nick had let him in? I couldn't open the door with bedhead!

I splashed a little water from an open bottle on my nightstand over my hands to quickly dampen my hair, running a comb through it while the knocking grew more intense.

Then I breathed into my cupped hands to test my breath. Vile. Ignoring the pounding at my door, I squirted some toothpaste on my brush, took a few swipes, and then rinsed and spit into the trash can. I couldn't give him dragon breath for his first kiss of the day.

I headed for the door, realized I was clad only in boxer-briefs, and decided to go with it. Maybe I could make his jaw drop again.

I opened the door to find a smiling Nick, with two cups of coffee.

"Jesus. I didn't think you'd ever—" he started, then stopped and whistled. "Damn! I'm bringing you coffee more often!"

"Christ, Nick. I thought you were Jake!" I said, turning away from him as I felt the hot flush of embarrassment spread across my face like a wildfire. I grabbed a pair of pants. "Why didn't you just let yourself in?"

"Oh, so I have permission to just barge into your bedroom whenever I want? What if you're having a goon sesh? Respanning the troops? Choking the chicken? Spanking the monkey?"

I emerged from the bedroom in a pair of jeans and the polo from the night before. "Okay, I get it," I said tightly. "You don't have to be so gross."

"Hey, we're all guys here."

"Some of us are more mature than others."

"Or what if you're having a sleepover with Jake? You know, bumping uglies? Getting freaky? Throwing it back?"

"Enough! Permission revoked. And I'll be sure to lock the door now if I need privacy."

Nick smirked as he handed me a coffee cup. "You're grumpy in the morning," he said with a certain amount of smug satisfaction as he sat on the couch.

"I didn't get much sleep last night," I mumbled while I sipped my coffee.

Nick's eyebrows shot up, and I mentally scolded myself for my choice in words.

"Wow. Jake moves fast. You guys knocking boots already?"

"Nick, you can be so sweet. Why do you *choose* to be a crass asshole?" I glared at him over my coffee cup.

"Would that be a crasshole?" he quipped. I glared. "Oh, well, I'm sorry. I just thought—"

"That's not what happened. Jake is a perfect gentleman."

I sipped my coffee while Nick waited, properly chastised.

I knew now he would wait until I spoke, if nothing else because he didn't want to piss me off even more. I took a few sips and savored the hot liquid before meeting Nick's gaze.

"The suspense is killing me," he said before sipping his coffee.

"Why? You've been kissed before. What's the big deal?"

"Because, dude, it's your first time. It's the kiss all others will be judged by and be found lacking. It's total magic."

"It was magic," I admitted. "I mean, I've imagined kissing plenty of other guys — Jake among them, of course — but I really wasn't prepared for...that." I furrowed my brow. "I don't think anything really could have prepared me."

"Yeah?"

I nodded. "Nick, he was so gentle and sweet. I was so worried I wouldn't do it right." I took a deep breath. "I think I'm falling for him."

"Whoa, slow down there, cowboy. You haven't known him all that long." Nick's face was set in a slight frown.

"I just feel so...wonderful when I'm around him. He makes colors seem brighter and jokes funnier and, yes, I know what a simp I sound like."

"Hey, you said it, I didn't. But you're not wrong. So what exactly happened last night? Jake was being extra cagey when he texted me. How did he end up with food all over his clothes? Did you guys have a food fight?"

I knew Jake had a whole cover story planned, but I decided to tell him the whole story. Predictably, he laughed his ass off, but I had enough distance from the disaster that I was able to see the humor and join in. Besides, everything had ended up okay in the end.

“So, that's how he ended up in my clothes.”

“Yes, and there is nothing on this earth sexier than Jacob Sheridan, even in your old shirt and sweatpants.”

“Jeez. I guess red is his color.”

“Anyway, after all that, I couldn't sleep last night.” I got up and went to the window looking down on the sparse foot traffic below. “How could I? Not after he was here, not after he has become this...beautiful thing in my life. I just sat in this window and watched the street in case he changed his mind and came back. I don't know if I am ready for everything, but I know when it happens...no magic could ever match it.”

“That was...almost poetry.”

I looked at Nick. “See! That's what he does to me. My God, I'm so sappy. Do you have any idea how hard it was to let him leave? I wanted him to stay, I really did, but I was...scared. I'm afraid I'll disappoint him somehow.”

“I think you'd have to work really hard to disappoint Jake.”

“But what about...”

“What about what?”

“I mean... I don't know what to do...you know...in bed.”

He rolled his eyes. “It's not rocket science, Kody. You've seen porn, right?”

I nodded hesitantly.

“Well, it's nothing like that.” He snorted at my expression. “I'm kidding. You get the gist. Trust me, instinct will take over, and you'll know what to do. You should probably look up some articles about how to prepare for your first time, though. That will make it easier and more enjoyable for you. Or do you want me to draw you a diagram?” He grinned. “Part A inserts into Part B...”

“Oh God.” I covered my ears. It was time to change the subject, but I had nobody to blame but myself. “What've you got planned today?”

“I was thinking of inviting Derek to dinner. You should stay away though, since you and Jake seem to think of dinner as fashion rather than food.”

“Remind me again why I like you?”

Nick just smiled and sipped his coffee.

I put it off as long as I reasonably could. In a way I was kind of surprised Dad hadn't called back yet. Maybe he was just taking his own advice and letting me tell him when I was ready. I didn't think he'd said anything to Charlie or he'd have been texting me already. I was a tiny bit

torn about telling Charlie, because me having a date shouldn't be a big deal, especially at my age.

The fact is, though, while I wanted to share this happiness with them, I also didn't want any of the 'about time' kind of comments that I was imagining. Charlie was such a charmer. Flirting and dating all seemed to be so simple for him, so natural. I felt like he could seduce a straight guy. He and I were just very different people, with different comfort levels and different ways of dealing with rejection. He just let it slide off his back. I stewed on it for months. Nothing seemed to faze him.

I figured I could only put it off for so long, though, so I finally gave up and called home.

Dad was terrible with his cell phone, forever leaving it in our apartment above the shop, so I wasn't surprised when he wasn't the one answering it.

"Hello?" Brandon answered.

"Hi! Can I speak to the lady of the house?" I asked in my best telemarketer voice.

"Sure, hold on."

There were some sounds in the background, footsteps, some shuffling, and then my dad picked up.

"Hello?"

I laughed. "That's great, Dad. I asked Brandon for the lady of the house, and he got you instead of Charlie."

"Oh yeah? He'll get his — or rather he won't be getting any!" Dad yelled the last part for Brandon to hear. I giggled. "Okay brat, tell me all about your date with Mr. Wonderful, since you couldn't be bothered last night."

"First, his name is Jake, and that's not to imply he's not wonderful, 'cause he is."

"Okay, well, does Jake have a last name?"

"Yeah, actually. It's Sheridan. Jake Sheridan."

"Tell me more about him. What's he look like?"

"Well, he's taller than me..."

Dad snorted. "Isn't everyone?"

"You want to hear this or not?"

"Okay, okay. I'm sorry. Go on, please."

I made him wait a second or two before I started again. "He's really tan, because he's from Maryland and he's a surfer."

"They surf in Maryland?"

"We have an ocean on this side of the country too, you know."

“Yeah, but...never mind. Continue.”

I stifled a sigh. “He has these gorgeous blue eyes that change their shade depending on the lighting, but, somehow, they always look like the sky...sometimes dark like midnight, sometimes bright like the clearest day ever. His hair is dark blond with some lighter streaks where the sun bleached it a little. It's not too long, but kind of shaggy. It does this really cute thing where it falls over his eyes sometimes—”

“Okay! I get the picture. He's a beauty. How was dinner?”

“Um, it all tasted good. I followed the cooking instructions just fine. Marla let me use her kitchen.”

“So what happened? Did he like it?”

“Yeah! He thought it was really good.”

Dad remained silent for a few moments, and I imagined I could hear the wheels turning in his head.

“There is something here you aren't saying. I just know it.”

“Well, no, not really.”

“Kody...”

“Okay, fine. I dumped dinner on the kitchen floor.”

He sputtered. “How did you manage that?”

I sighed deeply. This would be told at family gatherings for the rest of my life, I was sure. I quickly told him the whole, messy story as succinctly as possible. I was getting good at telling the story by that point, adding little embellishments to heighten the drama...and the humor.

“Oh, Kody...I'm sorry. It sounded like it was going really well up to then.”

I was somewhat mollified that he had stopped laughing and turned serious.

“It kind of worked out,” I said with a smile.

“How's that?”

“Well, I was cleaning it up, and he came over to help and slipped in the sauce and sort of...fell on me.”

“Fell...on you?”

“Yeah, like, whole body kind of thing. We were laughing, and then...he kissed me.”

“Right there on the floor?”

“Uh huh.”

“Lying in the mess?”

“Yep. Right there.”

“And?”

“It was beautiful. In fact, I'd say it was perfect.”

“Sounds like a scene from a movie. Very romantic. He'd better be good to you, 'cause if not, I'll get on a plane and—” He started to gear up, but I jumped in to defend Jake.

“Dad, Jake isn't like that. He's really sensitive and...well, sometimes I feel like I'm the one with the strength, you know?”

“You have a ton of strength. I just want you to be happy.”

“I am. He's made me so, so happy.”

“I'm glad. Charlie was really worried things wouldn't work out, but if you dumped dinner on the floor, ruined his clothes, and things still turned out okay, I'd say he's a keeper.”

“Yeah, he really is.” I was glad Nick had run off for soccer practice, because I was sure I was grinning like an idiot.

“So, did you stay in your ruined clothes all night?” Dad asked lightly.

My senses, however, were on high alert. He was fishing for something, and, if I wasn't careful, he'd give me a ton of shit.

“No, we changed...” I said slowly.

“Where?” he asked in a leading tone.

Feeling evil and wanting to troll him for being nosy, I replied, “Right in the common room, so we could help each other.”

“There's no need to get snotty.”

I sighed. “Dad, I got kissed, not laid.”

“Okay, fine, blame your dad for caring.”

“Yeah, my dear *old* dad!” I giggled.

“That's right, laugh it up! But you and your brother have *caused* me to age! Every grey hair is because of you two!”

I grinned. “That's just because we love you.”

“I'll try to remember that, if my Alzheimer's isn't too bad. Who are you again?”

“Dad!”

“Love you, boy. Call Charlie's cell. He's running upstairs as we speak, probably so I can't hear him being wildly inappropriate.”

After I hung up, I didn't even get the chance to call my brother before my phone rang.

“What did he do to you on the floor?” he asked excitedly.

“Get your mind out of the gutter.” I said with a laugh. “It was just a kiss.”

“Just a kiss?” he crowed. “Kody, that's huge. I'm so happy for you!”

I smiled to myself at his enthusiasm.

“Aww, man,” he continued. “That’s awesome! Was it worth all that stress and worrying?”

“Totally. He’s so sweet. He doesn’t mind that I turn into a klutz around him. You should see him in red. He looks good in every color, but red makes him so, so sexy!”

“If he can take you being klutzy, man, you are all set. Grab onto him and never let go.”

“I have absolutely no intention of letting him go anywhere.”

“What’s this about dropping dinner on the floor?”

I rolled my eyes and retold the story once more, which ended not in the expected giggles, but in a heartfelt sigh.

“Kody, that is just about the most romantic thing ever. Things like that never happen for real. He sounds really special.”

“Yeah, I know. I’ve been trying to tell you guys that since school started.”

“Does he live on campus?”

“Yeah, he’s a freshman too.”

“Same dorm?”

“No, he’s in Mohawk. It’s all the way across campus. His friend Erin is one of the RAs there. She’s pretty cool too.”

“Fire. What’s his Insta?”

“I...don’t know.”

“Bruh. You have his snap though, right?”

“Um...”

He laughed. “Have you stalked your crush *at all*?”

“Not unless accidentally running into him on campus over and over but never speaking to him counts.”

Of course, inside I was thinking how dumb I was. Who knows what I could learn about Jake from his accounts? Maybe he even posted the occasional thirst trap.

“That absolutely does not count unless it was intentional,” Charlie said, sounding very disapproving. “Lucky for you, I’m a professional. What’s his last name?”

“Sheridan.” I reached for my laptop and pulled up a search page.

“Okay. I see a few.” He made a humming noise as my own search results popped up. “Too old, unless your Jake is a professor.” Another pause. “Is he a professor? Are you the teacher’s pet?”

“You’re such an asshole, Charlie,” I said with a laugh. “I already told you he’s a student.”

“Okay. Narrow down what he looks like?”

“Blond. Blue eyes that can be lighter or darker depending on the lighting.” I thought for a moment, picturing Jake. “He’s tall, white, but he’s pretty tan.”

“Someone’s been staring at him a lot,” Charlie said distractedly. “Oh. Oh, I think I found him.”

“Send me the link.”

“If this is him, he is *so* hot. So hot. Bro is *majestic*.”

“What’s the link!” I growled.

“I sent it already! I completely see why you’d get lost in those eyes.”

I opened the link...and it was to a midget porn site.

“Charlie! You’re such a shit!”

He laughed. “Okay, okay. I’ll send it in Insta so you can see on your computer.”

I clicked on his notification...and there he was. “Oh.”

“Well?”

Doing my very best to sound natural, I said. “No. It’s not him. I mean...damn, though, right?”

“What? No, this... Hang on! Bro, it all lines up! Same name, he goes to Van Rensselaer, he looks just like you described. Quit playin’.”

I laughed. “Okay, okay. It’s him. Got you back. Your brother has good taste, aye?”

“Suspiciously good,” he said. “So wait, you kissed this guy? Fuck, bro. I wish he had more photos, though. Oh! Look at that one on the beach!”

“I haven’t found that yet. Wait a second!”

For the next little while Charlie and I commented on Jake’s pictures. I got a look at a lady who I figured was his aunt and a cute blond twink who I thought might be his friend Killian. Unfortunately, he hadn’t tagged him, so I couldn’t be sure.

As I looked at what he’d shared, I came to the same conclusion Charlie had voiced earlier. “Huh. There aren’t that many pictures,” I said. “Maybe he’s not really a selfie kind of guy?”

“If I looked like that, I’d never stop taking pictures of myself. And I’d never wear clothes.”

Thinking about what Jake had told me of his past, I thought maybe he’d not documented those things or had removed them if he had. I didn’t feel like getting into all that with my brother, though.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I mean, at least he’s not like a total narcissist, posting tons of fit pics or GRWM vids. Even the one beach photo wasn’t *intentionally* thirsty.”

"There was intent," Charlie said dryly, then snorted in laughter.

"Well, I'm gonna get going, Charlie. Thanks for the detective work. I love you, man."

"Just doing my part. Love you too."

I avoided work all day. I knew Max and Marla would be itching to hear about every detail, but for now I just wanted to see Jake. I could have texted him, but I decided to surprise him instead.

I crossed the campus and approached Mohawk dormitory with a spring in my step and a smile curling my mouth as I thought of seeing Jake.

I opened the door to see a short, squat girl with black hair sitting on the corner of the on-duty desk. She was talking to Brayden, who was looking...shy? What was he up to?

"Hi, Brayden." I waved to him as I walked towards the elevator.

"Hi, Kody," he said distractedly, his full attention on the girl in front of him.

"Excuse me, are you a resident here?" the girl questioned.

"He's okay, Jen. That's Kody. He's Jake's boyfriend."

I started at Brayden's introduction.

"We're not—" I was about to deny that status, but Jen cut me off.

"Oh, you mean the Jake Erin's always talking about? I haven't met him yet, I don't think."

She turned to me and smiled. I tried to smile back, but I felt weird. Jake and I hadn't even talked about being boyfriends yet. What if he just wanted to be friends? But now that the idea was in my head, that was all I could think about. I wanted to be Jake's boyfriend more than anything.

"You're cool with gay people?" Jen asked Brayden.

"Um, yeah. Jake's a good guy. He's my friend. He likes Kody, so he's my friend too."

He made things sound so simple. By Brayden's logic, I wanted to be Jake's boyfriend, so I should be his boyfriend. Seemed sound enough to me.

"Points in your favor, Brayden," Jen purred.

She was practically batting her eyes. Was she actually into him? Was he into her? Would the elevator ever arrive?

"Yeah?" Brayden said with a goofy grin.

The doors finally slid open as she leaned in towards him and ran a hand up his arm with some comment about his muscles. From the looks of things, Brayden had made another friend. Thankfully, the doors closed before they could get any more physical.

From the way her feet didn't even come close to touching the floor, I figured she had to be pretty short — probably shorter than me — which made me imagine their height difference had to be similar to a Chihuahua and a Tibetan Mastiff. At least she was at the perfect BJ height. Wouldn't even have to bend over.

The elevator creaked and groaned to the third floor, making me very thankful that I'd ended up in my shiny new building, where everything still worked. When the doors finally wheezed open, I couldn't get out of there fast enough. Next time I was taking the stairs.

I found Jake's room. Two stars on the door. One read 'Jacob', which had been crossed out with “Jake” written under it in a different handwriting, and the other said 'Foster'.

I froze, hand mid-air as I was about to knock.

Foster? As in the guy I'd punched at the party? In my state of extreme mortification, I'd completely forgotten he was Jake's roommate.

I imagined him opening the door, taking one look at me, and promptly cleaning my clock. Or maybe he'd drag me into the room and shove a smelly old sock in my mouth so he could work me over in private. Or maybe he'd just break me in half like a Twix bar.

I almost walked away, but I'd come that far to see Jake, so I figured I might as well risk it. Maybe Emperor Tiny Face wouldn't be there. I gathered my courage and knocked.

While I waited, my little burst of bravery evaporated, and I almost ran off, but before I could, the door swung open to reveal Jackhammer Face. He was wearing boxers and a tight muscle tee — which showed that he was indeed a strapping, if ugly, specimen — and he didn't look pleased.

All thoughts of Jake left my head, replaced by thoughts of my imminent death.

“What?” he barked.

Okay. So he didn't seem to recognize me.

“Um, is Jake here?” My heart beat violently, and thoughts of flight filled my head.

His eyes narrowed. “Why? You his *boyfriend* or something?”

The word 'boyfriend' hung in the air — not quite soiled, but not quite clean either.

Before I could come up with a response, I heard Jake's voice behind me. “Back off, Foster.”

I turned to see Jake walking down the hall towards us, fresh from a shower judging by the damp hair, shower sandals...and the towel wrapped around his waist. Droplets of water beaded on his smooth, tan skin...so

much skin. His chest was lightly defined. His stomach, while not your typical fantasy six pack, was flat and thoroughly inviting, sending my mind off in a million naughty flights of fancy. A small line of hair marched rigidly down from his belly button only to disappear under the towel.

There were definitely muscles there, but a bodybuilder he wasn't. More like a swimmer's build. My brain felt like it was short circuiting. All I could think about was pressing myself against his warm skin.

"Kody?" Jake waved a hand in front of me, breaking into my thoughts.

"You're... Yeah... Hi... Good morning... I mean..." I stammered, blushing to my roots but unable to tear my eyes from their feast.

I forced my gaze up to his face to find an amused smirk and resisted once more the urge to throw myself at him.

"Jesus," Foster muttered as he turned away from the door.

"Hi," Jake said, and booped me on the nose. "Come on in. Just let me get some clothes on."

He slipped past me, and I drank in the view of his back, broad shoulders tapering down into a trim waist, and...well, let's just say that I wasn't the only one with a bubble butt. He had a really nice ass.

I followed speechlessly.

"You guys aren't going to make out or anything, are you?" Foster grumbled as I shut the door and leaned against it.

"After the eyeful I got last night, we could do a lot more than make out and still not be anywhere near as gross as you and your quote unquote 'friend' were," Jake snapped.

Obviously, there was a story there.

Foster wisely dropped the subject. He simply rolled his ugly frame back into bed and pulled the covers up over his head.

I tried not to watch Jake as he pulled on underwear and jeans under the towel. Instead, I took the opportunity to look around the room.

Foster's side had empty beer cans and dirty clothes thrown everywhere and no books in sight. His computer was on, as if he'd been using it when I knocked, with a screen saver of sexy anime girls with improbably large breasts bursting from barely-there outfits.

In contrast, Jake's side was fairly neat, with a few books, framed photos, and knickknacks on the shelf above his desk. A laptop sat open on the desk, with a beach scene as the desktop background.

I moved closer to the shelf for a better look at one of the photos. It was another picture of Jake with his arm thrown around the shoulders of the

same blond guy I'd seen on his Instagram, further solidifying my guess that he was probably Killian.

My mind kept wandering back to Jake, however, completely entranced by the physical side of him that I had never seen — but hoped to see more. What would it feel like to touch his skin? Would it be as soft and smooth as it looked?

In the reflection of the glass, I saw him pulling on a pair of jeans under his towel, so I figured it was safe to turn around.

He tugged on a black pullover, and I watched with disappointment as the skin of his upper body disappeared from view. Jake favored me with a smile before digging for socks in a drawer. I felt silly, standing and watching him dress, but then I could also see myself years from now doing the same thing and enjoying it just as much.

I am *so* weird.

We stepped into the hallway a few minutes later, Jake regrettably dressed, and my heartbeat returned to normal — or as close to normal as I ever got with Jake around.

"I'm so glad you came over," he said as we walked to the elevator. "I really slept in today. I never sleep this late."

"I couldn't sleep last night either." I avoided his gaze.

He probably thought I sat up with a hardon all night, considering the way I kept staring at him this morning.

"Well, I got back here and got an eyeful of Foster pounding his girlfriend." Jake shivered to accentuate the horror of the situation.

Wow. He walked in on that and lived to tell the tale?

"So what did you do?" I asked.

"I went down to the Coop, the club on campus, and ran into Erin. We talked about you, of course." He smiled at me, and my heart skipped a beat.

The elevator reached the lobby, where Brayden was still trying to talk to Jen. I felt sorry for the big lug. He looked lost. I think Jen was starting to discover that he wasn't much of a conversationalist.

As bad as I felt, I wanted time with Jake and willed him to keep moving for the door. I guess he wasn't psychic, because he called out a hello to Brayden.

"Aren't you going to introduce me to your friend, Brayden?"

"Oh, hey, Jake. Yeah, this is Jen. Jen, this is my friend Jake, the gay guy."

I winced inside as Brayden made introductions.

Jen looked over at me. "Looks like you found him," she said, tipping her head in Jake's direction. "I can see why you were looking." She winked.

Everyone thought Jake was cute. I just hoped he kept thinking I was.

I nodded at her, took Jake by the hand, and tugged him toward the door. We managed to escape before Brayden could invite himself along. I may have been mistaken, but I thought Jen cast a wistful look after us as we left.

"Kody, what's your rush?" Jake asked playfully.

"Ulterior motives, of course. I want you all to myself."

"Okay, well, you got it, mister." He grinned at me. "What do you want to do?"

Ask if I'm your boyfriend, I thought to myself. Unfortunately, like the lion, I lacked the courage.

"We could go to the mall? Take the bus?"

"Sounds good. You know which bus to take?"

"Yep," I replied confidently.

"Well, sounds like you've got it planned out. How about some coffee first?"

"Sure, there's a Dunkin' up the street."

"My world does not run on Dunkin'. Why not just go to The Morning Rush?"

"Well...if it's what you want."

I knew my coworkers would tease me, and I wanted to enjoy my time with Jake without that, but if it was what he wanted, then we'd do it.

"Is there a reason you don't...want me there?"

"No. Why?"

"Kody, you are the world's worst liar."

"It's not you. They'll make fun of me, tease me 'cause we're...together. They'll ask me if we're boyfriends and stuff. That's all." Well, that and I didn't know what to tell them if they did ask.

"So? Let them tease. Who cares? In fact, just make them uncomfortable. Start telling them how great the sex is and how you've never had such mind-blowing orgasms."

"Jake!" I gasped. "I can't say that. First of all, we haven't had sex...yet. But more importantly, you don't know Max. She'd just want more details."

He laughed. "Don't think I missed that 'yet.' But you could always just tell them to mind their own business."

“They don't give up. They'll still want to know if we're boyfriends...” I tried again, hoping he'd pick up on the hint this time.

He glanced at me, his expression turning thoughtful. “They'll want to know? Or does Kody want to know?”

I felt my face grow hot and knew I had to be turning the color of boiled lobster.

Before I could find my words, he stopped walking and turned to face me. “Hey, I like you. I *really* like you. Like, a lot. I hope you know that after last night. And I hope we'll be boyfriends. Someday. But this is only like our third time hanging out. I...I really don't want to fuck this up. I want to do this right, and that means not rushing things, okay?”

I tried not to look disappointed as I nodded, my gaze locked on my shoes. He slid a finger under my chin and raised my eyes to his.

“Hey, I'm serious, Kody. I want this to work. I want *us* to work. So let's take our time and get to know each other before we slap a label on it. We don't need that kind of pressure. Not this early.”

“Do you, like, want to see other people?” I asked, my voice small.

He snorted. “No way. I've found the only guy I'm interested in. How about this? We agree to see each other exclusively for now and see where that goes. Does that sound okay?”

I wasn't sure what the difference was, but I could accept that compromise for now, as long as I didn't have to share Jake Sheridan with anybody else. I wanted him all to myself.

“Yeah, I can live with that,” I said finally.

“I don't want you to just live with it. I want you to be okay with it. I'm just...not ready for that yet. I'm sorry.”

“Ah crap. You don't have to be sorry. I'm being a baby. I should apologize.”

“You're not being a baby, and you don't have to apologize for how you feel or for asking for what you want. I think we'll get there, Kody, honestly. I'm not planning on going anywhere. We have time.”

I smiled and slipped my hand into his. “Okay.”

“Okay, you're good or okay, you're giving in so I'll stop talking?”

I laughed. “I'm good. I promise.”

“Great. Now that we've got that settled, can I get my coffee now?”

“Okay, but if they make fun of me, you'll pay for it.” I took his hand and dragged him forward.

We entered the shop and found the place deserted — no customers, no workers. It was like a ghost town.

“Hello?” I called.

I walked in a little farther and peeked into the manager's office. The chair was empty. I walked to the back door and poked my head out. There was no one in sight.

“Where is everyone?” Jake asked, and I shrugged my shoulders.

Having no one in the store was freaky and somewhat disturbing. I was just about to step behind the counter and start making our coffee when the storage room door flew open and Max stepped out, flushed and breathing heavily. She brushed her hair from her face, and I figured she was rearranging stock.

Max moved towards the counter, looking uncharacteristically flustered. “Thought I heard somebody come in. What can I get you two lovebirds?”

“Jake and I just stopped by for some coffee,” I said, nodding towards the aforementioned Jake.

“Sure thing! What are you having?”

I gave her our orders, and she went about making them, acting as if nothing had happened. Her lack of insinuating and inappropriate comments was sounding an alarm. Something weird was going on.

“Are you here alone?” I asked, growing more suspicious. Max never scheduled herself to be alone in the coffee shop. She didn't like working that hard.

“Marla is off,” Max said breezily. “Her and Rich went to some big flea market. I told 'em they could get fleas easily enough around here, but nobody listens to me.”

“No Mike either?”

She set our to-go cups down so hard that a little coffee squirted out of the tops. Before she could answer, the storage room door swung open, and Mike poked his head out.

“Hey, Max, are you, like, coming back?” he asked.

I burst out laughing, and Max pushed our cups across the counter.

“Just take these and go! You can't talk about this! Do NOT tell Marla. Go!” she hissed, but as I looked at her face, all I could see was the tongue stud popping in and out on her tongue, and I laughed all the more while she glared at me.

“Are you gonna finish this?” Mike called out as we were leaving. Jake and I stood outside laughing for several minutes.

Mike wasn't attractive, at least not to me, and I didn't like thinking about what straight people do in their bedrooms — or in the storage room in this case — but that was just too much.

I couldn't wait to tell Marla.

We finally got control of ourselves just in time for the bus to arrive.

We sipped our coffee and made small talk as we trundled toward the mall. We were sitting towards the back, side by side, with his hand covering mine. The bus wasn't very crowded, so there was no real worry about anyone giving us a hard time, and the affection brought a special closeness to the ride.

The bus route ran past the state capitol building, which was architecturally amazing, and I actually turned my head to admire it for a minute. It looked like a European castle.

I allowed myself to daydream about living in a big castle with Jake. He was my prince, after all. Or was he the king and I the prince? I certainly wasn't a princess.

I was picturing him wearing a pair of tight breeches and nothing else while astride a big white horse when he snorted next to me, snapping me out of my fantasy.

"What?" I asked, hoping he hadn't been reading my mind when just earlier I'd been wishing he was psychic.

He shook his head. "Max and Mike. I mean...get a room already!"

I laughed with him. "Yeah. I wonder how long that's been going on. It's kind of sketch, though, right? She's always making suggestive comments to him and stuff. I mean, a manager saying stuff to an employee like that felt a little off, but Mike never seemed to care. Like it was all some kind of joke I wasn't really in on. I never thought anything would actually happen!"

Jake glanced out the window for a moment, then looked back at me. "Do you think she...manipulated him into it?"

I thought for a moment. "No. I think Mike is just the kind of guy to take what's available. I never got the impression he cared all that much. Or even noticed most of the time. He just seemed oblivious. Maybe she made him an offer he couldn't refuse..."

"I mean, she does have that tongue stud," Jake said with a little shiver. "But enough about them. What else can we talk about?"

"Um, tell me more about you."

"Aren't you bored of me yet?"

I bumped him with my shoulder. "Never."

He slid his arm around me and pulled me closer. "Then what do you want to know?"

"Tell me about where you grew up. Or your aunt. Or your friend, Killian. Is he the one in the photo with you in your room?"

“Yeah, that's him.”

Jake proceeded to regale me with stories about his hometown, his aunt Judy — who he claimed was psychic, but I couldn't tell if he was pulling my leg or not — and Killian. He told me more about Killian's detective work and some of his bigger cases, including one about a kid who chopped up his abusive father with an axe.

Killian sounded like quite the guy. I was beginning to wonder how I could possibly measure up to him.

“So, you and Killian were never a couple?” I asked, even though Jake had already said they never dated. I just needed to be reassured.

“No. Almost, maybe, once, but like I told you before, he started dating someone else. When I first moved back to Maryland, I kind of half-hoped we might end up together, but I wasn't in a good place, like, mentally, so I'm kind of glad that didn't happen. I don't think it would have ended well, you know?”

“Yeah,” I agreed, more to keep him talking than because I really understood what he meant.

“Killian was the first guy I ever kissed, the first guy I ever made out with, my first real crush. He was a lot of firsts for me.”

“Do you still have feelings for him?”

“I guess on some level. I mean, part of me will always love him. He's my best friend.” Jake chuckled. “Don't you still love your first?”

I squirmed a bit in my seat. “Well, um, yeah, you could say that.”

“Well, come on. I just told you all these details about mine. Spill.”

He poked me in the ribs and I squirmed some more.

“Cut it out, bruh!”

“Kody, come on. Who was your first love? What was his name?”

“His name?” I looked down at my hands.

“Yeah, was he a good kisser? How do I stack up?”

“Well...” I fidgeted.

“What?” Jake was waiting for me to grade his kissing versus my first.

God, I felt like such a loser.

“Last night was my first kiss.” I blurted out. I couldn't bring myself to look up into those sunny-day, sky-blue eyes. “I'm a total virgin. Okay?”

He squeezed me tighter.

“Sorry I pressed the issue like that, but it's okay.” When I didn't say anything for a few beats, he continued. “On the bright side, I guess no matter what happens between us, you'll always remember me, huh?”

His words were quiet, gentle, like he knew he'd spooked me.

"I... I don't want to even think about that," I managed, though I couldn't bring myself to look at him.

I couldn't yet voice my concern that I wouldn't be enough to hold onto him. The last thing he'd want is some clingy drama queen.

"I'm really honored though, that you chose me to be your first," he said as he rubbed my arm with a light, comforting rhythm.

"Why? You've probably kissed a lot of guys."

Jake grew quiet and his hand stilled. I finally looked up, and his eyes were unfocused. Suddenly his gaze snapped back to me.

"Yeah, I've kissed a lot of guys. I—" He hesitated, but his hand started moving again. "I felt a lot for Killian when we kissed. Your first is like that." He sighed.

"I'm not Killian."

"I know that. I'm not trying to compare you. Kissing you is nothing like kissing him. His kiss was special because it was the first one. Yours was special because of how...how I feel about you. It wasn't like any kiss I've had before. It was like...kissing someone for the first time all over again."

I felt all warm and fuzzy inside, but I decided we needed a little levity. This was getting entirely too serious, even though my heart swelled at his statement.

"Want to hear something funny?"

He smiled and nodded.

"Right before you brought up Max and Mike again, I was thinking about how much the capitol building looked like a castle, and I was picturing us as, like, two princes living in a castle..."

Jake's eyes lit up. "Like a fairy tale."

"Emphasis on the fairies," I said, and he laughed. "My mind sort of wandered, and I was picturing you on a horse...but like...half naked and all oiled up..." I stopped, my mouth suddenly dry. Why had I told him that?

He tried to hold it back, but the laughter burst out of him, and I joined him, giggling mindlessly at my silly imagination.

"I know, silly, right?" I said when we stopped laughing.

"What? That you were picturing me in the classic Putin pose?"

"Ew! No! Don't drag him into this..."

"Admit it, you have the hots for Poots."

"Gross. No way. You're way hotter than he is."

"Are you sure you wouldn't leave me for him if he rode up on his horse right now?"

"Ugh. Positive. You're gonna make me hurl if you don't stop."

"Okay, so I guess he's not your hall pass guy."

“My what?”

“You’ve never heard of that before? It’s like the one person, usually like a celebrity, that your partner gives you permission to sleep with if the chance ever arose. Putin can be yours.”

“No thanks. I’ll pass on the hall pass. Wait. Who would be yours? Who’s your celebrity crush?”

“I don’t have one.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Not even, like, Ross Lynch?”

“Nope.”

“Timothée Chalamet?”

“Definitely not.”

“Sam Nivola?”

“Nuh uh.”

“Jacob Elordi?”

“No, but I’m really getting a glimpse into your spank bank.”

“No! Okay, no celebrities then. Maybe you’re secretly lusting after your roommate.”

Jake almost choked. “Foster?” He pulled his arm from around me and pretended to pout.

I snickered. “Yeah, I mean, he’s right there. You’ve seen him naked and doing the dirty. Probably gave you ideas.”

“No, it turned me off of sex forever. I hope you’re okay with dating a monk.”

“Oh, so now we’re dating? Now that you’re trying to convince me you don’t have the hots for your roomie?”

“They say every accusation is a confession. Maybe you have a crush on Nick.”

“Ha,” I scoffed. “I only have the hots for one guy, and he’s sitting next to me.”

Jake raised one eyebrow in acknowledgment of my bold statement but only said, “Well, you must think I have pretty terrible taste if you think I’d ever be interested in Foster.”

“No, actually I think you’re hot enough to get pretty much anyone you want.”

“Hmm...” Jake rolled his eyes to the roof of the bus, pretending to think it over. “Definitely not. And I don’t think he could make a decent cup of coffee anyway.”

I threw my arms up dramatically. “The truth comes out! You only want me for my coffee.”

“Am I that transparent?” Jake asked in a stage whisper.

“As glass.”

“For the record, there's only one person I'm interested in getting, and thankfully, I've already got him.”

I smiled and took his hand, leaning my head against his shoulder.

“So...the mall, huh?”

“Oh. Yeah. I know malls aren't really, like, a thing to do, but it's one of the few places I know how to get to off campus. I thought maybe we could use the time walking around to think about other places to go?”

Jake smiled at me. “Kody. I'm with you, so it's good.” He paused. “As long as it's not a dispensary. Or a liquor store. Or a whorehouse. Or a—”

“A whorehouse? How do you even find one of those?” I asked, feeling a bit on edge hearing him listing off his former vices. He'd stressed that he was sober now, but did he still think about that stuff, or was it a thing of the past, like his feelings for Killian? Or was any of that ever really in the past?

“Well, *I* don't know. But if you knew, I don't think you should take me there.”

I stared at him as the corner of his mouth curled up in amusement, and I rolled my eyes at him. “Okay. No whorehouses.”

“Good,” he said seriously. “Think of what your dad would say.”

I laughed. “My dad? What would your aunt say?”

He snorted. “She'd say, 'Do you have enough cash to cover a tip?'” We burst out laughing, and he waved a hand. “I'm kidding, I'm kidding.”

We fell into a comfortable silence while the bus stopped and started, slowly making its way past car lots, restaurants, and shopping plazas, under overpasses and over underpasses. Squeezing his hand lightly, I realized I'd never been happier to be riding a bus.

Shopping with Jake was so much fun I didn't want it to end. We went from store to store and tried on all sorts of clothes. We even tried on suits, and we looked good, if I do say so myself. Jake was made for fine clothes. They just accentuated his natural physique.

We passed a dog groomer; there was signage that indicated it had been a pet store once, but New York had banned selling dogs like that. I told Jake about the beagle we had at home. He asked more about my family, and we sat down to have an Orange Julius while I filled him in on Charlie and the many loves he'd had. I probably sounded like a pathetic loser describing how Charlie was such a charmer.

"You know, that stuff doesn't really matter," Jake said, as if he could read my mind.

"What stuff?"

"Losing your virginity. It's all a social construct, and besides, everyone is different. Everyone develops in their own way and in their own time."

"I know, I know. I've had the lecture. It's just... I've just wanted to have all those experiences, you know? Feel all the things. But I've always made bad choices. My self-esteem has taken a beating to the point that I was pretty much afraid to take any risks."

Jake grinned. "So what made you go after me? Do I look easy?"

"No!" I stuck my tongue out at him. "You're just too fucking cute for words, asshole."

"Well, you're the cutest coffee boy I've ever seen."

"Stop."

"What? I can't tell my date he's cute, but he can tell me I am?"

"Jake, *everyone* thinks you're cute — guys, girls, straights, gays, stray animals. Jesus, I think I saw a Honda get boned up in the parking lot!"

"Puh-lease! You are so damn cute, and I know I'm not the only one that thinks so. Besides, maybe the Honda liked you."

"No, it definitely wanted you."

"Nope, I'll bet it was you."

"I don't think so, Surfer Boy."

"Well I do, Coffee Boy."

I looked into his eyes, his smiling face, and just smiled back, completely content. We walked the mall some more, stopping to play glow-in-the-dark mini golf and video games. It would have been completely cliché to play the games to win tickets for a prize, so I was kind of glad we didn't do that.

We were on our way out when I spotted a photo booth, the kind that takes the pictures and texts a link to your phone. I grabbed his arm and pulled him towards the machine.

"You really want to do this? Isn't it kind of corny?"

"No, it's retro. Come on, quit trying to be so masc. I want some pictures of us together to remember this day."

"Can't you just write about it in your journal?" Jake continued as I fished in my pocket for my wallet.

"Dear diary, today I went to the mall with the dreamiest guy in all of Albany..."

Jake laughed, but gave in.

We climbed into the booth, and it started to talk to us, corny stuff mostly, but we mugged for the camera. We had to approve each shot on a screen before it took the next one, four in all. In the last one, Jake kissed me.

We were having so much fun that I tapped my card one more time and we did it again.

On the way home we decided to get some food and stopped for takeout at the Chinese place I'd gone to a few nights before. While we waited for our order, we chatted idly, with small touches clearly showing affection to anyone who wasn't blind.

After finding something to drink and getting settled on the couch back in my dorm, we put on a movie and relaxed with our food.

A funny thing happened though, something I hadn't expected, because it was so domestic. Once the food was gone and we were leaning back on the couch, his arm slipped over my shoulders. I leaned into him, curling my legs up onto the couch and lying against his chest. Our bodies were touching, and he stroked my arm lightly while we watched the movie.

The whole thing seemed so completely natural that it never occurred to me until much later that it was a comfortably intimate act that I could willingly repeat for the rest of my life.

I was dozing happily, the crappy movie long forgotten in my utter hedonistic enjoyment of Jake's warmth, when he stretched under me.

"I guess I better get back to the dorm," he said, reluctance clear in his voice. "I have a class first thing in the morning."

"Can't...you stay?" I asked slowly.

"Oh..." Jake looked slightly uncomfortable.

I suddenly felt silly and sat up. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to put you on the spot."

He grabbed my shoulder and gave me a quick kiss before drawing away to look me in the eye. "You didn't. It's just...that whole rushing thing we talked about earlier...you know? I want your first time...our first time to be special."

"I wasn't asking for you to stay for sex." I couldn't keep the disappointment from my voice.

"Kody, listen to me, please?"

I glanced up and found I couldn't look away from him. His gaze was intense.

"I've made a lot of mistakes. You don't know everything there is to know, and I just— Look, I want you. God knows I do. But I also like that

we have so much more than sex in common. I like the way things are going. I don't want to mess anything up. I'm afraid of making a mistake."

"I want you too," I whispered. "But I just want you to stay with me. We spent all day together without having sex, can't we sleep and do that too?"

He smiled. "I dunno. You're a lot to resist."

"I felt so comfortable here on the couch with you. I guess I'm being dumb."

He took a deep breath. "No, you're not. I'm just not sure I trust myself to be in bed with you and keep my hands to myself. Stuff happens when two guys who are attracted to each other are in bed together, even if that's not the original intent. Okay?"

"Okay." I hoped I was masking my disappointment better.

I walked him to the door, where we lingered in a kiss. Well, we lingered in several kisses, truth be told, and then I was closing the door behind him.

I sighed deeply and leaned my head against the door, heart racing and my breathing shallow.

I knew realistically that waiting a little while was the right thing to do. I was still scared of doing something wrong in the bedroom, something so stupid I'd never live it down. Jake was the first boy I'd ever kissed, though, and at that moment I knew I wanted him to be my first in other things too.

Chapter 17 – Jake

The next week was a blur of activity. Classes were kicking my butt, but I made sure to carve out time for Kody. I'd see him in the morning for our daily coffee ritual, of course, but we also hung out almost every night, sometimes just grabbing dinner at the Commons — occasionally joined by Nick or Brayden — or sometimes watching TV or going for a walk.

We went to the New York State Museum on Sunday. I wasn't usually much of a museum guy, but it was fun wandering through it with Kody, making fun of some things, and even learning a few things. We grabbed dinner on the way back, then reluctantly parted ways, since we both had assignments we needed to finish.

We'd both stayed up late finishing papers. To be fair, they probably would have gone faster if we weren't texting each other the entire time. I didn't get to bed until almost three in the morning.

I awoke a few hours later to the sound of my phone vibrating loudly on the bedside table. I felt around blindly until I finally found the offending object, then pulled it under my blankets. I fumbled with it for a few seconds before I managed to answer, my voice froggy from sleep.

“Hullo?”

“Jake?”

“Judy?”

“Did I wake you up?”

“Um, yeah, actually. What time is it?”

“Six-thirty?”

“A.M.?” I bolted upright. “What's wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong...per se.”

Most conversations with Judy tend to be a little confusing. It's not that she's scatterbrained. Her mind just works a little differently than most people. The fact that it was six-thirty in the morning and I was still half asleep did not help.

I frowned. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“I don't know. You've been on my mind a lot the last few days, and it's been mostly positive feelings and thoughts, but then, this morning, I woke up and knew something had changed.”

“Something bad?”

“No...at least, not necessarily. Although...it could be. I sense a fulcrum.”

I sighed. It was too early for this. “And what does that mean?”

“A pivot point.”

“I know what a fulcrum is, but how does it relate to our current conversation?”

“I think you've reached a pivotal moment. Something has happened, a catalyst for change, and you know how those can go either way.”

“Right, of course,” I mumbled, rubbing my face. “Well, everything is hunky dory over here, so...”

“School's going well?”

I laughed. “Yes, school is going great. I'm doing well in all my classes, even the unbelievably boring Philosophy.”

“Are you getting along with your roommate?”

I glanced over at Foster, who was snoring away in his bed, undisturbed by our conversation.

“Well, I wouldn't say we're friends or anything, but we're tolerating each other.”

“Are you making friends?”

“Yes, Auntie Judy.”

“I'm sorry, Jake. You know I worry, and then this feeling...”

I sighed again and gave in. “I've met some really nice people. In fact, everyone here is really nice. I think you met one of my new friends the day you dropped me off. The tall RA with red hair who checked me in? Her name is Erin. She's really great. And several other people as well.”

“Anyone in particular?”

I rolled my eyes even though she couldn't see me. “Yeah. Erin's boyfriend, Carlos, someone named Toshi, another guy named Nick, this giant named Brayden. Do you want me to name everyone I've met since I got here?”

“You know that's not what I'm asking.”

“I know what you're asking.”

“And you're avoiding my question.”

“I have a right to my privacy!”

“So there *is* someone special!”

There was no point trying to dodge her. She was as tenacious as a bulldog, and her psychic abilities didn't hurt.

“Yes, there is someone special,” I said, giving in.

“Well? Are you going to tell me about him?”

“Well, it's all kind of new yet, so I don't want to jinx it...”

“Jake...” she said warningly.

I laughed. "Fine. His name is Kody, and he's totally unlike anyone I've ever met before. He's so sweet and...innocent. It's almost like he's been sheltered from the real world or something, but at the same time, he's been through a lot." Once I opened the floodgates, it was like I couldn't stop gushing. "We actually have a lot in common. He's really smart. And he's so cute! He has dark brown hair and these amazing silver-gray eyes. And he's so little..."

"Slow down!" She chuckled. "I don't need his measurements, but good to know you're not a size queen."

"Judy!" I gasped in horror. "How do you even know that term?"

"I had a life, you know, once upon a time. Anyway, how'd you meet him?"

"Apparently, I ran into him the first day on campus, but I don't really remember that. The first time I remember seeing him was at this great coffee shop off campus."

"You and your coffee..."

"Yeah. Anyway, he works there. I thought he was really cute, but I didn't know if he was gay, so we didn't really talk for a while aside from small talk at the café. Then one night we were both at the same party."

"It wasn't a wild party, was it?"

"Judy, honestly, I'm doing great. I didn't touch any illegal substances."

"But other people were drinking?"

"I'm sure they were all over twenty-one."

"Right, and I'm the Tooth Fairy. Have you found a support group up there yet?"

"No. I haven't had time to look."

"Jake, it's been weeks..."

"I promise I'll find one soon. Now, can I continue my story?"

She sighed. "Fine. What happened at this not-wild party where everyone but you was of legal age to drink?"

"Well..." I paused, trying to decide how to spin the story, but I was too far into the tale. Better to just lay it all out and be honest. "So Kody may have had a little too much to drink—"

"Is Kody over twenty-one?"

"Are you going to let me finish or not?"

"Well, you just said—"

"No, he's not over twenty-one, but it was the first time he'd ever really drank at all, so he got drunk fast. Plus, he's so small."

"You make him sound like a Munchkin."

“He represents the Lollipop Guild. *Anyway...*so he drank too much, and Foster, my roommate, started picking on him, calling him a fag and stuff—”

“Your roommate is homophobic?” I could practically hear her hackles rising.

“Don't worry, I took care of it. Everything worked out. Don't go full Mama Bear on me. So, Foster was calling him names, and Kody, full of liquid courage, jumped him. Foster is huge, like at least two of Kody, and one punch pretty much laid the poor kid out cold.”

“It *was* a wild party!”

“That was the only wild part.”

“That's enough! So what happened? Did the police come?”

“No, nothing like that. Brayden, the giant I mentioned, took Foster back to our room, and I helped Kody back to his. After that, Kody was really embarrassed by how he'd acted at the party, so he avoided me for a while before I finally cornered him at the café and we cleared the air. Then a couple of weekends ago, we both ended up at this concert in the park.”

“Was there drinking there?”

“It was a public concert. I don't know if there was drinking or not. I didn't monitor the whole crowd. No one I was with was drinking. Can I continue now?”

“I worry. So sue me. Go on.”

“We ran into each other at the park, although I think maybe Brayden and Erin had a hand in that, and we ended up hanging out. We even danced together. And the whole gang went out for food after, which, you know, wasn't ideal but we made the best of it. Then he cooked dinner for me. We've been hanging out a lot.”

“Wow. It sounds like it's going well so far. So when do I get to meet him?”

“Right after the wedding.”

“Jacob Sheridan!”

“We just started hanging out! Do you think I can give him a little while before I introduce him to my family?”

“I guess I'll allow it.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“Do you have a good feeling about him, Jake?”

“Yeah, I really do. I haven't felt like this about someone in a long time.” I paused. “I think...I think I could fall for him very easily.”

“Then he must be something special.”

“He is. I even told him a little about my past, and he still likes me. Not everything, though. I'm not quite ready for all that yet.”

“Just don't get hurt, baby.”

“Hey, I'm growing up. You can't protect me forever.”

She gave a short, bitter laugh. “It's not like I've done a very good job of protecting you in the past.”

I felt a sharp stab in the heart.

“Nothing that happened was your fault. You took me in when I had no one else, and you've done the best you could for me. I made my decisions for myself.”

“I know. We've been through all the therapy. In my head, I know all that. Sometimes, though...I just feel like if I'd only paid more attention, acted sooner...”

“I'm okay now. That's all that matters.”

“Okay now...” she repeated in a soft voice, then fell silent.

“Judy?”

“Are you sure everything is okay?”

“Yes. Everything is fine, I promise.”

“If something was wrong, you'd tell me, right?”

“Of course.”

“Good. Then I'll let you go. Find a support group. Call me if you need me.”

“I will. I love you.”

“I love you too, Jake.”

I hung up the phone and smiled down at it affectionately. Judy might be a little kooky, but I was damn lucky to have her. I couldn't believe I'd already told her about Kody. We'd only been on a couple of dates. Sure, I hoped there'd be more. A lot more. Maybe we'd even be boyfriends...

I snapped myself out of my fantasy. Daydreams were all well and good, but I was getting ahead of myself. I glanced at the time on my phone and stifled a groan. It was so early. My first class wasn't until nine, but I was wide awake.

What was I going to do with myself for the next two hours?

Then I spotted a notification at the top of my screen. Instagram? Who would be messaging me there? I barely used it anymore. Probably spam.

I almost ignored it, but then decided to click on it just to be sure. It was a message from someone named charliexxx. The image bubble was too small to make out any detail. We didn't follow each other, so I had to accept

or reject the message before I could see it. I was almost certain it was a pornbot, but I reluctantly tapped “accept.”

A message popped up, along with a full display name: Charlie Kingsley.

Hey, this is Charlie, Kody's brother. I was just stalking you, you know, making sure you're good enough for him, and figured I'd say hi instead of being a creeper.

I snorted. Kody had mentioned his brother could be a lot, but he seemed harmless enough. And funny.

I sent a quick message back: *Hi there! Kody has told me a lot about you. Hope I meet your approval.*

All this talk about Kody made me wonder if he was awake at that ungodly hour. Although, if he was, he was probably at work. What time did The Morning Rush even open? I checked Google and was pleased to see it was, in fact, open.

Coffee sounded really good.

Seeing Kody sounded even better.

Plan in place, I dragged myself out of bed, grabbed my shower stuff, and headed for the bathroom to get ready. Feeling slightly more alert after a quick shower, I threw on some clothes, grabbed my phone and backpack, and set out.

I was barely out of the building before my phone started buzzing again.

My first thought was that it was Judy calling back with another one of her vague predictions of doom, but when I pulled my phone out of my pocket, I saw it was a video call request from charliexxx.

Why was Kody's little brother trying to video chat with me?

I debated for a few seconds, then accepted the call. My screen filled with an image of an impish looking teen boy with sandy brown hair and big brown eyes that seemed to sparkle with mischief before he'd said his first words. It looked like he was in a dark room of some sort.

“Hello?” I said.

“Hey! Hi! I'm Charlie! But I guess you figured that out already. I saw you had responded so I figured we could say hi face to face, like real people.”

“Cool, but, uh, isn't it a little early? It's barely seven.”

“Sorry, I had to call before school. And before Dad wakes up. Besides, I was kind of hoping I'd catch you before you got out of bed, maybe shirtless...” He grinned lasciviously.

I raised an eyebrow. "Stalking is bad enough but now you're trying to perv on me too?"

His grin widened. "Guilty as charged, but hey, can you blame me?"

He shifted and I thought I saw clothes dangling above his head.

"Are you in a closet?"

He looked confused. "No, I'm out."

"No, I mean, are you physically hiding in a closet?"

"Oh. Yeah. Like I said, Dad's still asleep. And I want him to stay that way."

"Got it." Charlie was turning out to be a handful after all. I couldn't say I hadn't been warned. "So, aside from hoping to see my bare clavicles, to what do I owe the pleasure of this early morning call?"

"Ooh, clavicles! Are you like...pre-med?"

"Charlie..."

"Okay! Sheesh. Just curious. Anyway, you know, I had to check you out, make sure you're worthy of my brother."

He sounded so serious as he said that last part that I almost laughed, but I fought down the urge. "I thought that was why you were stalking my Instagram in the first place."

"Well, maybe if you had more photos..."

"Sorry, I don't use Insta much these days."

"It's okay. I mean, it's totally lame, so I don't blame you. But it does make stalking harder."

"You don't trust Kody to take care of himself?"

"Let's just say he hasn't had the greatest luck with guys in the past."

"Yeah, he mentioned that."

"He's been hurt pretty bad, and I'd just hate to see him get hurt again."

"I think that's great that you look out for your brother like that. And I can see why you'd be so protective. I've never met anyone like him. He's pretty special."

Charlie giggled. "He said the same thing about you."

"Really?"

"Uh huh."

"So what else did he say about me?"

Another giggle. "Sorry, but there's no way I'm telling you that. Kody would kill me."

I laughed. "Can't blame a guy for trying."

"Right. So, what's going on with you and Kody?"

“What do you mean?”

“What are your intentions toward my brother?”

I stifled another laugh. I couldn't help picturing this cute kid as a stern, mustachioed father grilling his daughter's prospective suitor.

“Well, you know, it's early days yet. I want to keep getting to know him, see where things go. But I definitely have intentions...”

He frowned, as if that wasn't the answer he wanted. “Do you like him?”

“I wouldn't be on my way to see him at the buttcrack of dawn if I didn't like him.”

He snickered, then asked, “Do you love him?”

I stopped walking again, choosing my words carefully. “I think...I think it's a little early to be talking about love, but...I think it's safe to say I could easily see myself falling pretty hard for your brother.”

“That's exactly what I was hoping you'd say.” His grin returned.

“Does that mean I passed?”

“I think so.”

“Glad to hear it. I'd hate to see what you'd do if I didn't.”

“It would be ugly.” He grew serious again. “And it still will be if you hurt him.”

“Look, Charlie...I can't promise I won't hurt Kody. I wish I could, but nobody can make a promise like that. People who care about each other can still hurt each other. All I can do is promise you that hurting Kody is the last thing in the world I'd ever want to do, and I'm not taking this lightly.”

He was quiet for a moment, then nodded and said, “Yeah. I guess that's fair. Hey, I should go before Dad catches me and wants to know who I'm talking to this early. If he does, then he'll demand to talk to you too, and then you'd have two interrogators instead of one. I'm sure you'd appreciate waiting awhile before you meet the parental unit. We'll put off that torture as long as possible.”

“I hope he's not that bad.”

“He's not. He's a really great dad. But knowing him, he'll be planning your wedding before you get to your first month's anniversary.”

I laughed. “Sounds like my aunt. They should meet. Now, I really do have to go. I hope you don't get in trouble with your dad.”

“I won't...as long as he doesn't find out. Hint, hint.”

I laughed again. “He won't hear it from me.”

“We're all good then?”

“We're good. So...yeah. Feel free to call or text me anytime.”

“Thanks. Maybe Kody didn't choose a total loser for once.”

We said our goodbyes, and I disconnected the call, but his final words echoed in my head. I knew we were getting closer to me needing to be totally honest with Kody. I couldn't hide that part of my life forever. I only hoped Kody wouldn't think I was a total loser when he learned the truth about my past.

I shook off those dark thoughts, and focused on Charlie instead. He seemed like a cool kid brother. Kody was really lucky.

Ever since my brother and my twin sister died, I'd been an only child. Then again, even before Todd snapped, we'd never been close. And while I did miss Gilly, we'd largely lived separate lives. People talked all the time about twin bonds, but I'd never felt that with her. Granted, my family was pretty fucked up in a multitude of ways, so our sibling dynamics were undoubtedly affected.

I'd spent hours upon hours in therapy since the murders, with multiple therapists in two different states. I'd finally found someone I bonded with and felt comfortable opening up to, and we'd made a lot of progress in the relatively short amount of time I'd been sober, but there was still a lot of territory to cover. A lifetime of abuse that culminated in your brother savagely killing your entire family while also trying to kill you and your friend, followed by almost two years of self-medicating with drugs and alcohol to numb the pain, which led to a near overdose and suspicion of murdering your middle-aged lover and supplier who also just happened to be an international mob boss...well, it left you with a lot to unpack.

What was I thinking?

I wasn't ready for a relationship, especially with someone as wonderful as Kody. Maybe I'd never be ready. Maybe I was permanently fucked up. Could anyone blame me if I was? There was no question in my mind that I'd be dead by now if it weren't for Killian and Judy.

Thinking about Judy made me remember her phone call and her reason for calling. What did she call it? A fulcrum? She's said it was a turning point and things could go either way, by which I assumed she meant either good or bad.

What if Kody was the fulcrum? What if things went wrong there, and everything fell apart? I was being so cautious, trying to keep us moving slow, even though I felt a connection with him like I'd never felt before. I barely knew him, but I already knew I'd be devastated if I fucked things up and lost him.

I suddenly looked up and found myself standing in front of The Morning Rush. I'd been walking while my dark thoughts swirled; I must have been operating on auto-pilot, because my feet had still led me toward

caffeine. But my mood had soured considerably, and I was no longer sure I was up for facing Kody.

I could see him inside, wiping up the counter and looking as cute as ever, and my heart ached. He was too good for me. I was damaged goods. He deserved better.

I was just about to walk away when he looked up and spotted me. His entire face lit up. He waved me in, and I couldn't very well leave without being a jerk. I forced a smile and opened the door.

"Hey!" he greeted me through a grin that spread from ear to ear. "You're here early."

"My aunt called before the sun was even up, and I couldn't fall back asleep. I figured a nice cup of joe was in order."

"And seeing a certain miniature barista was just a bonus, eh?" Max said, appearing in the office door.

"Don't start, Max," Kody said with an eye roll as he started making me my usual order without even asking.

Max shrugged, winked at me, and retreated once more into her inner sanctum.

Kody glanced over at me. "Is everything okay?"

I froze. Could he sense my doubts? Was everyone around me a mind reader? "What? Why do you ask?"

"You said your aunt called early this morning."

"Oh. Right. Yeah, everything is fine. She just gets these... I dunno... premonitions sometimes."

Kody's eyebrows jumped up. "I know you said she's a psychic, but she can see the future?"

"She prefers to say she's gifted, but yeah, sometimes."

He frowned. "So, like, was it something bad?"

"It was vague and useless, like most of her foreboding feelings. In her own words, it could go either way."

He didn't look comforted, so I rushed on, "But I'm sure it's nothing." Time to change the subject. "I, uh, told her about you."

He lit up again. "Oh really? And what did you tell her?"

"What a nosy little brat you are." His eyes widened, and I laughed. "No, I told her you're really sweet and wonderful. And then I got another interesting phone call."

He blushed adorably but tried to act normal as he slid my coffee cup across the counter on a matching saucer. "Two phone calls before seven in the morning? You must have angered the gods."

"I've often thought that, but the second call wasn't so bad, really. It was your brother."

He blinked in surprise. "Charlie?"

"Unless you have another brother you haven't told me about."

"That little fucker! I'm going to kill him—"

"Hey, I promised I wouldn't get him in trouble."

"Oh, he's in trouble all right. I'll wring his scrawny little neck myself. I told him to leave you alone. How'd he even get your number?"

"He actually video chatted me on IG. He was stalking my account and decided not to be a creeper — actually his handle made me think it was a porn site or something at first." I laughed. "It's actually a pretty impressive bit of detective work, if you think about it. Maybe he should work for Killian..."

"It's not funny," Kody insisted. "I told him to drop it."

"Look, I wouldn't have brought it up if I'd known it would upset you. It ended up fine. We had a good conversation. It's obvious he cares about you a lot. You're lucky to have a brother who loves you enough to go to those lengths."

He visibly relaxed. "Yeah. You're right. And I do love the little ass wipe, even when he drives me absolutely bonkers."

I laughed. "He does seem like a handful."

"That's putting it mildly."

Just then, the bell by the door rang. I turned to see a very sleepy looking Nick wander in.

"Look what the cat dragged in," Kody said with a grin.

"Late night of studying?" I asked.

"Late night canoodling, more like it," Kody said quickly. "He didn't come back to our room last night."

Nick drew himself up straight. "I'll have you know I do not 'canoodle.' Canoodling is for losers. I fuck like a man."

Kody's face screwed up. "Ew. TMI."

Nick grinned wickedly. "You started it. Now, give me some caffeine before I hop over the counter and help myself. Espresso, please."

Kody stuck his tongue out at him and went to work.

"Things must be going well between you and Derek," I commented, feeling more than a little jealous. Why couldn't my relationship with Kody be that easy?

Nick rolled his eyes. "They're going fine, but don't listen to that little brat. We just fell asleep watching a movie."

"Uh huh, sure," Kody said. "And that's the second time this morning someone has called me a brat."

"If the shoe fits..." Max called.

"Nobody asked you, Max," Kody shot back.

I shook my head. "There is entirely too much going on for this early in the morning," I mumbled.

Kody handed Nick his espresso in the appropriate *tazzina* cup. Nick tossed it back like an office worker on a Friday night tossing back tequila shots.

"How do you drink it like that when it's that hot?" I asked in awe.

"A lifetime of suppressing all of my feelings," he said with a wink.

"I feel better already."

"It's barely had time to hit your stomach," I replied.

"And yet, I feel a poop coming on already."

"You're so gross," Kody said.

"Hey, we're all guys here. Right, Max?"

"I too fuck like a man," her disembodied voice proclaimed.

"See?" Nick grinned and slid his demitasse across the counter.

"Bartender, hit me again. I'll be right back."

He sauntered off toward the bathroom.

"See what I have to put up with?" Kody said.

"Would you rather have Foster?" I asked. "We can always switch."

His face paled. "Never mind. Nick is the best roommate ever."

"I heard that," Nick yelled from behind the closed door.

"You heard nothing," Kody called back. "And be sure you wash your hands this time."

"This time?" I asked with some alarm.

Kody laughed. "I'm just kidding." Then he grew serious. "I hope."

Kody went about making him a second espresso, while I just enjoyed watching him work. A few minutes later, Nick emerged.

"Man, I feel ten pounds lighter," he said.

"You don't look it," Kody shot back.

Nick chose to ignore him. "I had some time to think while I was in there, and Derek and I were talking about hitting The Aviary Friday night. You guys should come. It can be a double date."

"What's The Aviary?" Kody and I asked in unison, then giggled.

"And you say I'm gross," Nick said. "The Aviary is a gay club."

"Uh, in case you forgot, we're not twenty-one," Kody said. "Maybe Jake has a fake ID, but I don't."

“Not anymore,” I said, trying to sound unbothered, while inside I was feeling anything but. I hadn't been clubbing since I'd sobered up. The idea intimidated me a little.

“They kind of cater to the college crowd,” Nick explained. “They have under-twenty-one nights every Friday. Come on, it'll be fun!”

I opened my phone and looked them up, clicking on their IG account. Their logo was a pair of vertical feathered wings positioned back-to-back to create a vaguely phallic shape, with the tagline “Where Albany Takes Flight” in place of a bio.

I saw a post proclaiming “FRIDAY FLIGHT — 18+ NIGHT AT THE AVIARY” and tapped it.

The smaller text read:

No fake IDs. No watered-down vibes.

18+ to enter

21+ wristbands for bar access

- Rotating guest DJs
- LED dance floor + glow fog drop at midnight
- \$5 mocktail specials all night
- Student ID = discounted cover

Doors at 9. Dance floor ignites at 10.

Get there early and spread your wings.

Nick had gone before and was extolling its virtues when I glanced up to see a look of excitement on Kody's face.

“I've never been to a club,” he was saying. “It sounds kind of fun.” He turned to me. “What do you think? Can we go?”

I was still a little nervous, but from the description it looked like it would be easy enough to avoid alcohol. You needed a wristband to access the bar, and they were advertising mocktails. Still, if my experiences had taught me anything, it's that there would be plenty of other substances on offer at a club, and the lack of a wristband wouldn't stop anybody who was determined enough. I couldn't stand disappointing Kody, though.

I shrugged. “Sure. Let's check it out.”

Kody's face lit up, and he bounced a little. He was so damn cute when he was happy, and it was so easy to make him happy.

Standing there at the counter, coffee in my system, it was hard to imagine that I'd been thinking about ending things with him just minutes before. I could blame it on low blood sugar, but I knew the truth went a lot

deeper into my issues with self-worth. I didn't feel worthy of Kody. My next therapy session was later that afternoon, and I definitely needed it.

I suddenly realized everyone had stopped talking and looked up to see both Nick and Kody staring at me expectantly.

"Uh, sorry, unlike Sir Shits-a-lot over here, the coffee hasn't fully hit yet for me. What did I miss?"

Nick threw his head back and laughed, then recovered enough to choke out. "I asked if ten worked for you. Don't want to be the first ones there."

"Oh yeah, that's cool."

"Great! See you losers on Friday."

With that, he breezed out, holding the door open for another customer on his way.

I made eye contact with Kody, who merely rolled his eyes again.

"Well, I'd better stop distracting you and let you get back to work," I said as the customer approached the counter.

"Aw, do you have to go?" he said, giving me those damn puppy dog eyes.

"Yes, he does," called Max.

I winked. "The voice of God has spoken. I'll see you later."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

He turned his attention to the new customer, and I used the distraction to make my exit.

The screen froze for a second, then unfroze as my therapist, Dr. Mira Patel, adjusted her glasses and leaned a little closer to her webcam.

"Jake," she said gently, "I want to pause on something you just said."

I dragged my fingers through my hair and stared at my own face in the tiny square at the corner of the screen. I always forgot how haunted I looked during therapy until Zoom forced me to confront it.

"You said you don't feel worthy of Kody because of your past," she continued. "That he's...what was the word you used?"

"Untouched," I muttered. "Like he hasn't messed everything up yet."

Dr. Patel's eyebrow lifted slightly. "And you believe you have."

I looked away from the screen. "I mean, objectively? Yes. Drugs. Overdose. Mobster sugar daddy. Almost arrested for murder. It's not exactly meet-the-parents material."

She didn't flinch. She never did. Her calm unflappability was one of the things I liked most about her. She was the perfect antithesis to the chaotic demon monkey circus that was my ever-present inner monologue.

"And yet," she said calmly, "you've also been sober for over a year. You've repaired relationships. You moved across state lines to start over. Those are also objective facts."

"That doesn't erase my past."

"No," she agreed. "It doesn't erase it. It integrates it."

I frowned. "Integrates?"

"It becomes part of your story without being the whole of it."

I shifted in my desk chair. My dorm room was quiet for once — Foster was at the gym or terrorizing smaller freshmen or whatever it was he did for fun. His mini fridge hummed beside me like it was trying to eavesdrop.

"It's just..." I rubbed the back of my neck. "Kody's good. He's kind. He works at a coffee shop. He probably volunteers reading to blind puppies or something. His kid brother looks out for him. He calls his dad. It's all so...wholesome."

"You don't call your aunt?" she shot back.

"She mostly calls me."

"Still."

"That's different."

"How?"

"She's...psychic."

Dr. Patel blinked once. "Right."

I sighed. "You know what I mean."

"I do," she said softly. "But I'm going to challenge the narrative that you are somehow morally contaminated and he is morally pristine."

I winced. "When you say it like that—"

"It sounds dramatic?"

"Yeah."

"Addiction tends to breed dramatic internal narratives," she replied. "Especially shame-based ones."

I leaned back and crossed my arms. "It's not just that. He's never seen me at my worst."

"And you're afraid if he does...?"

"He'll realize I'm not worth the trouble."

There. It was out.

Dr. Patel let the silence sit for a moment. She was very good at silence. It made me itchy.

“Jake,” she said finally, “you are currently living in a dorm room with a refrigerator full of beer, correct?”

I glanced at the mini fridge like it might sprout legs and defend itself. “Among other things. Yes.”

“And that alcohol belongs to...?”

“My roommate.”

“So you are sleeping ten feet away from alcohol every night.”

“Unfortunately.”

“You attended a college party a few weekends ago.”

I grimaced. “Word travels.”

“You told me about it in our last session,” she reminded me.

“There was drinking.”

“Lots.”

“And you did not drink.”

I picked at a thread on my sleeve. “No.”

“You have access. You have proximity. You have stress. And yet you have not given in.”

“That doesn’t mean I won’t.”

“It does mean you haven’t.” I looked up at her. “You’re asking others to trust a version of you that you don’t seem to trust yourself,” she continued. “But the evidence suggests he’s doing quite well, that you’re stronger than you believe.”

I swallowed. “It doesn’t feel like I’m strong,” I admitted. “It feels like I’m constantly one bad day away from screwing everything up.”

“That’s anxiety,” she said. “Not prophecy.”

I let out a shaky breath.

“And now,” she went on, “you’re considering going to a club. A sober person going to a dance club where alcohol is present.”

“Which sounds like a terrible idea when you phrase it like that.”

“It sounds like exposure,” she corrected. “Not recklessness.”

I frowned. “Exposure?”

“You avoiding every environment where alcohol exists is not the goal of sobriety. The goal is building a life where you can tolerate those environments without needing to escape them chemically.”

I stared at the screen.

“What do you imagine will happen at the club?” she asked.

“I’ll feel awkward. Out of place. Everyone will be drinking. I’ll be hyper-aware of it. And then I’ll think, one drink would make this easier.”

“And then?”

“And then maybe it’s two. Or three. Or maybe I decide weed doesn’t count.” My jaw tightened. “And then I’m back at zero.”

She nodded slowly. “So your fear isn’t the club. It’s the slope.”

“Yeah.”

“That’s a very common cognitive distortion in early sobriety,” she said. “Catastrophizing. You skip all the middle steps and jump straight to ruin.”

I gave her a look. “It’s not exactly an unfounded fear.”

“No. But it is an unproven outcome.”

I leaned forward, elbows on my knees. “What if I go and I hate it? What if I feel like I don’t belong there — or with Kody?”

“Then you gather data,” she said simply.

“Data.”

“Yes. ‘I went. I was uncomfortable. I survived. I remained sober.’ That is data.” She paused. “And if you enjoy yourself?”

“That would also be data,” I admitted.

She smiled faintly. “Jake, you are not unworthy because you have a past. You are not fragile because you have cravings. And you are not doomed because you feel anxious.”

I stared at my own reflection again. My eyes didn’t look as haunted as they did earlier. That had to count for something.

“What if he finds out everything?” I asked quietly. “All of it.”

“Then he gets to decide if he wants to be with a man who has survived extraordinary things and done the work to change.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

“Then he is not your person.”

That was my biggest fear, of course, summed up succinctly in a neat little package.

She leaned back in her chair. “You keep talking about worthiness like it’s something you have to earn retroactively. Worth isn’t a prize for perfect behavior. It’s inherent.”

I let that sink in. I wished I could believe it.

“So,” she said gently, “if you choose to go to the club, what safeguards can you put in place?”

I thought for a moment. “Maybe have an exit strategy in case I need to leave early.”

“Good.”

“Text Killian before and after.”

“Excellent.”

“Keep a soda or mocktail in my hand so people don't offer me a drink.”

She nodded approvingly. “And if you feel overwhelmed?”

“I leave.”

“Exactly.”

The simplicity of it made the knot in my chest loosen a little.

“You’ve already demonstrated resilience in far more tempting situations,” she reminded me. “A dorm fridge full of beer. A college party. Daily stressors. You’re still here. Still sober.”

I glanced again at the humming fridge.

Still here. Still sober.

“Maybe I’m not as weak as I think,” I said quietly.

Dr. Patel smiled. “That sounds like new data.”

Chapter 18 - Kody

My breath plumed out in front of me in the cold Tuesday morning air, and I stamped my feet on the sidewalk to keep my blood flowing. God, it was cold! No one ever told me it got this cold here. It was only October! What would happen when winter actually arrived? Marla's car pulled into the small lot, and a moment later she turned the corner, smoking the last of her pre-work carcinogens.

"Did you know about Max and Mike?" she demanded before I could even say good morning.

I blinked. I guess the word was out.

"What about them?" I asked cautiously, just in case we were talking about something besides the storage room incident.

"I went on a smoke break last night and came back in to find them tonsil deep in each other's throats."

I shuddered at the image as she unlocked the door. I figured I might as well tell her about what Jake and I had walked in on the week before. By the time I finished, she was bent double laughing, gripping the counter.

"Oh God! I think I peed a little," she hooted, wiping tears from her eyes. "Classic Max."

"So how long do you think it'll last?" I asked. I started the coffee pots, figuring we could both use some caffeine.

"Knowing her, I give it another week, two at the most. Then she'll get bored."

"What happens when she gets bored? Will she fire Mike?"

Marla shrugged her coat off. "Nah. Not unless he causes a stink or makes things weird. She can always just schedule him for when she's not around. Wouldn't be the first time."

"Maybe she should stop messing around with her employees," I suggested.

"Now there's a thought!"

Marla put her coat away, and I followed suit once the pots were happily gurgling to themselves.

"So how are things with you and Mr. Cutie Patootie?" she asked. I sighed happily. "Things are absolute fire."

"Oh ho!" Marla turned with a hand on her hip and a smile on her lips. "Dish the dirt. Is he a good kisser?"

I tried to be demure. "Well, he'll need some more practice before he's perfect at it. But I intend to give him all the practice he wants!" I laughed.

"Oh, that's so cute! Did you guys spend the weekend together?"

"Pretty much. We went to a museum on Sunday."

"You kids today, so wild and out of control."

"We don't have to do anything wild. I just like being with him."

"Sounds like someone is falling hard," she said as she filled the cash register with daily funds.

I shrugged. "Way past that. He owns me, even if he doesn't know it yet."

She just laughed again, but as I finished getting the store ready and poured us both cups of coffee, I realized that I wasn't lying or even exaggerating. If I'd thought I was scared before, I was absolutely terrified by that realization.

Jake owned me, or at least a part of me. My heart.

The fear was the risk, I figured. But as I considered it, the reward was...Jake. I got Jake. And that wasn't quite so scary. Jake was good. I felt certain of that, and he hadn't given me any reason to think otherwise. I knew he had a past, and I knew he was worried about telling me about it. In fact, he'd pretty much come out and said that. So maybe I just needed to just chill a little. Take it slow, the way Jake said, and let us grow together.

My shift ended, and it was time for me to get to class, but Jake hadn't been in for his morning coffee yet. I made Marla promise to take good care of him and headed off.

On the way, I acquired an escort roughly the size of Manhattan.

"Morning, Brayden."

"Hi, Kody."

"How are things going with you and..." I paused to remember her name. "...Jen?" I turned to look at him.

"Oh, good! I don't have to talk much. She seems to like me okay. I was thinking maybe we could all go out sometime or something."

"Hmm, did you run that idea by Jake yet?"

"No. He wasn't awake when I stopped by his room. Foster was still asleep too, but he had a class at eight, so I guess he missed it."

"Does he do that a lot?" I asked.

I was secretly thinking that if Foster flunked out, I was applying to switch dorm rooms. I already had one picked out!

"Yeah, I guess so. People think I'm dumb, but he's stupid."

"It's been said ignorance can be educated, drunkenness sobered, but stupid..." I tried to clasp Brayden's shoulder and settled for his upper arm. "...stupid is forever."

Brayden rumbled a chuckle in reply. "So how are things going with Jake?"

"Pretty good, I think. I just gotta quit being dumb about him." I grimaced.

"Well, this good friend of mine said that dumb can be made smarter and stupid— Wait, drunks— No, wait..."

I just shook my head.

We arrived at class, took our seats, and were quickly swept away in facts and pages of notes. I would have been more swept away except that Brayden's laptop was dead, so he asked if I had my charger. Of course, my charger wasn't compatible with his laptop, and we were looking at the online textbook. Next thing you know, we were like the world's goofiest Siamese twins as we looked on at the same screen.

"How do you forget everything you need for a class?" I hissed at him.

"I grabbed her laptop this morning by mistake."

"You grabbed...who... What?"

"I went to Jen's last night and stayed the night—" Brayden started, and I cut him off.

"I don't want to know."

"But—"

"I don't want to know!" I insisted.

"But we just—"

"No!"

"So is it okay if we share a screen this morning?"

"As long as you don't share anything else about last night, sure!"

"But it was fun."

"Brayden..." My voice took on a tone of warning.

"What?" he asked innocently.

"I. Don't. Want. To. Know," I said through gritted teeth.

"Okay."

"Good."

"I don't know why you are so uptight about sex, Kody," he whispered.

Would this class never end?

"Brayden, do you picture Jake and I having sex?"

"What? No! I'm not gay!"

“Well, I am, and I don't want to picture you and Jen making the two backed beast!” I whispered fiercely.

“Doing what?”

“Screwing, fucking, doing the horizontal mambo!” I rolled my eyes and wondered what I had done, exactly, to deserve this.

“Oh!” Brayden said in a tone that revealed this had never occurred to him. “Sorry, Kody.”

“That's okay, as long as we understand each other.”

“We do.”

“Good.”

But it was too late. My brain was already picturing what their mating rituals might look like. The best it came up with resembled a polar bear humping a guinea pig. That image almost sent me into an uncontrolled fit of giggles. I barely managed to keep it together and got a little lightheaded for my efforts.

I tried to focus on the professor as he droned on, but it wasn't easy to do, especially with Brayden sitting right next to me trying to read the same bits I was. I imagined I could feel heat radiating off him, and I actually started to feel the tiniest bit claustrophobic.

Just then Brayden leaned in and whispered into my ear, “Well, since you brought it up, are you guys fucking?”

I slammed my laptop shut and grabbed my bag, taking only enough time to growl in frustration and shoot Brayden as dirty a look as I could muster.

Was nothing sacred?

I walked briskly across campus trying get rid of the image of Brayden and Jen without any clothes on. Why, oh why, did he do that to me? At least he didn't get more descriptive, like leather or something.

Argh! Damn my vivid imagination! The mental image of Brayden in leather chaps was enough to make me never want to have a single sexual thought again. And I'd done that to myself!

I stalked into the library, contemplating being a virgin for life and not liking the thought very much. The fact that Jake seemed to pull away whenever we got within sight of the bedroom door wasn't helping either. He'd had sex before, I was sure of it. One doesn't go through life looking the way Jake Sheridan does and not get some play. Besides, he'd mentioned sex in vague terms here and there.

So why didn't he want to have sex with me?

I picked a table near the windows and sat down with my books, figuring I'd read the chapter we were studying in class before Brayden had told me all about—

Damn! I'd done it again! I'd thought I felt sorry for Jake walking in on Foster fornicating, but this was torture. I wondered if Brayden would ever bang Jake's roomie?

Ugh! I smacked my head on the table top repeatedly to drive the image out. I am too twisted for my own good.

Clearly, I was sexually frustrated. And who could blame me? I was dating someone who was actual sex on legs, and all we'd done was make out. A lot. Leaving me with a wet spot in my undies and blue balls. I was getting sick and tired of having to take matters into my own hand...literally.

I put my notebook on the table and grabbed a pen before opening my laptop. Being so prepared, I promptly looked out the window to daydream about Jake. He could be so sweet, and I still couldn't believe he was interested in me, but what gave with the sex thing? Was he just really bad at it?

Yeah, right.

Okay, I had to be realistic. He had no freaking scars on his body. Well, his upper body. I hadn't really seen much of him below the waist. Didn't some guys cut their legs? He'd been through a lot. Maybe that was it — he had scars on his legs or something, and he was embarrassed. What else could it possibly be?

Then it hit me.

I was so stupid! It wasn't Jake at all. It was me.

How could I be so dumb? Suddenly it was all crystal clear. I was probably too inexperienced. Too much of a little kid. Why would he want to be with somebody who had no idea what they were doing? He was just waiting to let me down easy, because he was such a nice guy.

I felt like dog crap, but I knew that I would continue to see Jake right up to the moment he told me to go away until I had some sexual experience or grew two inches. Either way I was screwed.

I sat brooding, my mood matching the weather. It couldn't decide if it wanted to be gloomy or bright, so it was doing both. Clouds would roll in and darken everything, and then the sun would break through and paint the earth with light. I waxed and waned like that too, wondering if I was right about Jake wanting to let me down easy, and feeling a dread in the back of my mind that I'd stumbled across the truth.

I let out a slow breath and told myself I was overreacting. Again.

Firstly, Jake seemed as nervous as I was, which was kind of incredible. More importantly, no matter how improbable I found it, Jake seemed to find me attractive. He certainly wasn't faking those boners I'd felt throbbing against my leg during our marathon make-out sessions.

In my experience, what a person finds attractive is subjective. While Jake ticked boxes for me — so many boxes — there was the smallest chance others wouldn't see him like that.

If I accepted that as fact, then the reverse had to be true too. Even though guys up until now hadn't seemed to think I was worth pursuing, Jake had pursued me. Granted, I'd made most of the first moves in our relationship, but he hadn't rejected me. And he'd definitely instigated our first kiss.

More importantly Jake wasn't frigid or anything. He was just taking longer than my hormones wanted. Still.

I needed to talk to somebody, but who? I liked Nick, and he'd been a good friend, but he didn't have the history Charlie and I did. Plus, my brother — my *little* brother — had more dating experience than I did. I was thinking about texting him, but then I realized I'd be opening myself up to his merciless trolling if I voiced my worries about Jake not moving faster.

And I'd deserve it. After all, what more proof did I need that Jake liked me? What would be enough?

There were plenty of stories about people who got what they wanted from someone — getting in their pants — and just moving on. Jake wasn't doing that. Was it possible he didn't want that with me?

Maybe.

There was that old joke about washing machines being better than virgins because washing machines don't follow you around after you dump a load in them. I mean...I guess he could be thinking like that.

I didn't really have a reason to think any of this stuff other than me being my psycho self.

I also had to admit that Jake had said he'd done a lot of things in his past, had some bad experiences. Maybe it was less about me and my virginity than it was about Jake and the stuff he'd gone through? That didn't feel completely right, so maybe a mix of things?

I pulled out my phone and made my way to Jake's Instagram page. I scrolled through the few images until I found the one I wanted — him on the beach.

The sun was shining, and Jake was standing in the water up to his ankles, his feet indistinct under the water. The shorts were too long for my taste, but they hung low on his hips.

He had one hand out as if raising it, but there was no way to tell why. To wave? To keep his balance? To tell someone not to take the picture? He had a smile on his face, teeth showing, so whatever it was, it hadn't been a bad thing.

I pressed the heart icon to like the picture, then grew curious at the comments section, so I touched the icon for that.

The comments were pretty old, at least a few years. Most were fire icons or random compliments like 'king!' and stuff. But then I spotted a recent comment...from Charliexxx: *Brother-In-Law material?*

I have never tapped out a text so fast: *Why are you commenting on Jake's pictures!?!?*

I waited, not calling him, because he was still in school, so he couldn't answer anyway. After a maddening minute the little dots started to wave indicating he was typing.

Uh. Hot guy so I left a comment? No?

NO.

Well, it's weird to follow him and not comment, right? Isn't that the rules?

Bruh! I'm trying to date this guy!

Are.

What?

Are dating.

I bit my lip. We're not boyfriends.

In name only. You've been seeing each other for weeks. He's not like the rest. He's got intentions, the right ones.

I stared at my screen. Wtf are you talking about?

I mean he's got the right attitude. Plus, bro, imagine the three of us lined up? I mean people will be in AWE of how fire we are.

I shook my head and smiled in spite of myself. I haven't even followed him on there yet. You think you can let me make the first move with him instead of you?

I'm your wing-bro. Total support. Like a bra, but maler.

JFC.

I guess he was right in a way, though. I'd seen Jake's profile the same time Charlie had. Why hadn't I sent a friend request? Was I afraid it would make me a try-hard? Or was I just building things up in my head again?

I decided that since I'd seen Jake's pictures, mine should at least be available to him. If he wanted. Before I could spin out thinking about it, I sent him a friend request and followed his account.

I wanted to put a comment on his picture, but everything I thought of just seemed like I'd be glazing him. I was enough of a simp when he was around — no need to do it online as well.

With a bit of enlargement, the beach picture made a nice wallpaper on my phone.

The rest of the week passed quickly with what was fast becoming my daily routine:

Work and coffee with Jake in the mornings.

Class during the day.

Dinners with Jake or Nick in the evening.

School work.

Daydream about my future with Jake.

Sleep.

Literal dreams about Jake.

Repeat.

As the weekend loomed ever closer, I grew more and more excited about going to The Aviary with Nick and Derek. And Jake, of course.

Speaking of Jake, he seemed a little tepid about our plans whenever I brought them up, but I chalked it up to him being a little jaded about clubs. After all, he'd been before. It was my first time.

Because my brain is completely normal, I started thinking of us back in my room after the dance. His shirt coming off, the way his skin would feel under my hands. The way his lips would feel in places besides my lips.

Of course, I couldn't just have a normal sex fantasy. No, I got lost in logistics. How flexible was he? How flexible was I? What if it hurt? It had to hurt, right? I'd felt him hard against my leg. There was no way that wouldn't hurt, preparation be damned. I was more than a little nervous that he might split me in half.

That thought also brought up other boner-killing ideas, like who would be doing what? Are you supposed to talk about that first? I'd been assuming that I'd be the bottom, but what if he wasn't a top? How did his relationship with a much older man work? Was he the bottom then? I hoped he was at least vers, because the idea of me being the top was just comical. What if he was a side? Would I still technically be a virgin if he didn't blow my back out?

BJs seemed more like foreplay than the main event...but was that right? Maybe my perceptions were warped thanks to all the porn and stories

I'd read online. Like, I knew it wasn't really their first time in those videos — not with the way they bounced on it — but still. It looked fun!

How do you even begin to have those conversations?

Putting aside my sex concerns, the one thing that was worrying me about going to the club was that I knew he'd look amazing, and I was going to have to figure out how to look good next to him. It was our first time really going out as a couple — if that's even what we were. I didn't want him to be embarrassed to be seen with me!

After my last class on Friday, I practically sprinted back to my room to get ready. I had hours, but I wanted my first clubbing experience to be perfect.

When I opened the door, I was greeted with music coming out of Nick's room. His bedroom door was open, so I poked my head in, to find him lying in bed and staring at his phone.

"What's up?"

He looked up and shook his head. "Chillin'. I was going to walk out for a minute. This little store down the street has all this retro junk in it, but they also carry these little candies I like." He paused. "Well, actually I have a minor addiction. And I need a fix."

"Don't we need to get ready?"

He chuckled. "Nah. We have a few hours since we're not pre-gaming. We're not, right?"

I raised an eyebrow. "Pass. If Jake takes me home again, I want to remember it!"

He laughed with me, then pocketed his phone and jumped out of bed. "Come on. Let's get a bag of gummy dicks."

"A...what?" I laughed, falling in behind him.

"They sell these sexually explicit gummies, among other things," he explained as we headed out of the building. "Not edibles, if that's what you're thinking. Just penis-shaped candy. I bought them as a joke one time, but they're so good."

He led me into a shop called Disc and Dat. I vaguely recalled Nick pointing it out when he gave me the grand tour in my first week when we ended up at The Morning Rush. I hadn't been in yet.

I quickly realized I'd been missing out. The place was a riot of disjointed shelving, racks of DVD and CD cases, old gaming systems attached to small screens, and a glass case that doubled as a counter on one end with a wall of shelves filled to overflowing behind it. It was half thrift store, half video store, and one hundred percent dangerous.

Behind the counter was an older guy, middle-aged, maybe, with a few days' worth of stubble on his face, thinning grayish hair, and a worn, stretched-out tee shirt in pastel colors with the words "Miami Vice" emblazoned across the chest.

I wasn't sure if "Miami Vice" was an aspirational goal, a band, a movie, a TV show, or something else entirely.

There was a customer at the counter, but as we drew closer, I began to think this was someone the clerk knew...or was tolerating.

"So she says if I'm so sure the kid isn't mine, then we'll need a paternity test," the customer was saying. He had long, stringy hair and dark circles under his eyes and was dressed in a too-tight hoodie and joggers that were pilling. He gave off a greasy aura.

"You think she cheated?" the clerk asked.

"Alls I know is the kid has red hair. Do I look like a goddamn ginger to you? My wife tried to tell me that genes for red hair are re...re...regurgitated..."

"Recessive," the clerk corrected.

"Whatever. I'm not buying that shit. Here's what I want to know. How come it's always the guy that needs to take a paternity test. Huh? Answer me that!" He drove his finger into the glass as though he'd made an obvious point.

"Hang back," Nick said in a low voice. "This sounds like free entertainment."

The clerk tilted his head at the greasy one. "Are you serious, dude?"

"Completely! Think about it!" the guy said, now tapping his temple. "Why can't she just take it. It makes so much sense! I mean they're already in the hospital surrounded by everything they need to prove paternity."

Nick covered his mouth to muffle a snort of amusement as he grabbed me by the arm and dragged me into the stacks of DVDs.

"Dude. I'm trying to figure out if you're serious or just an idiot," the clerk said.

"No, no. Think about it! It's always the guy that has to prove it. That's not fair! It's some sexist shit, is what it is!"

"Whatever's wrong with you, I bet it's hard to pronounce."

"Are you not hearing me? Men get screwed all the time and have to take these paternity tests!"

“Because *paternity* means they are trying to figure out who the father is. Otherwise, it would be a *maternity* test,” the clerk said, his voice flat.

“That's just words, though. You see my point, right?”

“I don't think so.”

“Listen. Listen.” Greasy sighed. “Why doesn't she have to prove it's her kid?”

There was a moment of silence, then, “Because a whole room full of people saw it slide out of her cooch?”

“But what if it wasn't hers?” Greasy demanded.

“What do you think she did? Shoved a kid up there, ran into the hospital, and squeezed it out before he suffocated?”

“Nah, no, not that. She showers.”

“What the... What does that have to do with anything?”

“They wouldn't suffocate, she's clean.”

“I'm not talking about her *smell*! I mean a kid would suffocate inside of her. You know, a kid that was already born — to stick with your dumbass idea — somehow gets crammed back up inside her and now she's going to squirt out some baby that isn't hers? What are we talking about here?”

“What are *you* talking about? Who would do that? That's nuts,” Greasy asked.

Meanwhile, Nick and I were leaning against each other, desperately trying to hold in our giggles and mostly failing.

“You know what? You're a sick perv for thinking like that,” Greasy said indignantly, then spun on his heel and left.

Nick and I *lost* it before the door even closed behind him. We slowly made our way to the counter where the clerk was shaking his head.

“Takes all kinds, huh?” he said to us.

“Was he serious?” Nick asked and started to laugh again. “How did you even get into that conversation?”

“Fuck if I know. I don't even know why I still talk to him. I hope to Christ that kid isn't his, though. He should definitely not be passing on any genes.” He shook his head. “You here for more gummies?”

“Yep! My friend here needs some, too. My treat.”

Nick showed me to the candy display, and sure enough, there was a row of bags filled with candies shaped like penises, complete with balls, hanging across the top. They came in various flavors, and an assorted rainbow bag. In the interest of being fully inclusive, the row beneath that was all vaginas.

“You didn't mention the pussies,” I said.

“The what now?” Nick asked.

I pointed at the coochie candy, and he leaned in closer.

“Huh,” he said, surprised. “Look at that. I always thought they were flowers.”

“Okay, Georgia O'Keefe,” I snarked.

Nick gave me an impressed look. “Look at you, just out here spotting vaginas in the wild. Don't tell me you watch straight porn.”

“Ew. No. I'm strictly dickly.”

“Well, speaking of dicks, pick your poison. I'm buying. But I'll warn you, they're addictive.”

I chose the green apple ones and started to giggle again looking at them. They really were little cocks n' balls.

Nick selected his and, candy in hand, we started to browse the rest of the store. A radio was on, playing oldies music that my dad liked — the current song sounded vaguely familiar, and I absently started to mouth the words as we looked around.

“Can you imagine when this stuff was the absolute shit to own?” Nick asked. “No cell phones. Computers were barely a thing. Hey, are you singing?”

“What? No.”

“Yes, you were. What is this song?” he asked, tilting his head to listen. “It's pretty good.”

“I dunno.”

“Liar. Now I really want to know.”

“Why would I lie? I don't know the name. It's just some song my dad listens to.”

“Useless,” he muttered as he pulled out his phone.

I shook my head and started scanning the movies, wondering if they had any gay movies in stock. Did they even make them back then?

I wandered down the aisle, continuing to whisper the song to myself. *‘No, only in my dreams. As real as they may seem, it was only in my dreams.’*

I paused, coming upon a hand-drawn sign on thin cardboard with a few lines that might have been a rainbow, but there was no color - just black marker. I ran my finger along the spines, reading titles I wasn't familiar with, for the most part. Ah, *Love, Simon!* I knew that one.

“Okay, Shazam says it's 'Only in My Dreams' by Debbie Gibson, so I'm guessing you're singing about Jake under your breath. Your *dream*

boy.” Nick fluttered his eyes, laughing at his own lame joke as I rolled my eyes.

“Have you seen any of these gay movies?” I pointed to the section.

He glanced at the shelf. “Some of them. I bet they have a DVD player here for sale. We could do a movie night sometime.”

I liked the idea, but we didn’t really have the time to pick stuff out right then. Nick paid for our X-rated candy, and we wandered toward campus, stopping for burritos for dinner on the way.

“A bottom should never eat Mexican before sex,” Nick intoned as if he was imparting an important life lesson.

“Why not?” I asked, though I wasn’t sure I wanted to know the answer.

Nick gave me a look. “Nobody wants to get painted.”

“Painted?”

Nick’s brows jumped up. “You don’t know what painted means?”

I shook my head no.

He glanced around at the other people waiting for their food.

“Google it,” he said with a devious grin.

I wasn’t sure I wanted to do that, but our conversation did bring me back to the thoughts I’d had earlier about Jake and what our first time might be like.

Swallowing some of my pride — okay all of it — I cleared my throat. “Uh, you mind if I ask a dumb question?”

“Not at all. You do that better than anyone I know,” he said, grinning.

“Fucker.”

“I know. Tell me, what’s the question?”

“What’s...” I hesitated. “Like, what is the line where you’re not a...you know...anymore?”

“A what?”

I made a face. “You know...”

“I promise I do not know. What are you talking about?”

I lowered my voice even more. “A virgin.” I knew my face had to be burning. “How do you know when you’ve lost your virginity? Like what counts as sex?”

“Ah. Well, fuck. I mean, that’s one way. But it really depends on who you ask.” He scratched his head. “Last year, in my human sexuality class, we talked about this president who made this big proclamation about how he didn’t have sex with this woman at the White House, when in fact she’d been swallowing his johnson. Though not his cummies, I guess, since

they ended up all over her dress. Anyway, some people tried to argue that oral didn't count as sex, but come on. Her dress."

I frowned. "I think I've heard my dad talk about that before. Hillary's husband, right?"

"Yeah. But my point is, it's not like there are official rules about what qualifies or anything. Some people talk about emotional cheating or think fantasies are cheating. Some people think if you think about sex, it's already a sin. Personally? Sex equals sex act. Hand job, blow job, rim job—"

"How many jobs are there?"

Ha paused and tilted his head. "I think that's all? Wait. I guess you could have a foot job. Right?"

I stared. "No. I mean, someone else could, but not me. I wouldn't even know how."

"I think—"

"Moving on."

He chuckled. "Yeah. So anyway, no rules that I know of. Why? You thinking about moving things forward with Jake?"

I laughed nervously and turned away. "All the time. I'm just...not sure what that might end up meaning. I'm not... I don't know. I...I don't know what...position...he likes."

"Ah. Sorry, I can't help you there." He shook his head. "You really only have two options there. Not for positions. Lots of variations on that front. But I think you mean you're not sure if he's a batter or a catcher."

I nodded, my face feeling like it would burst into flame at any second.

"Well, you can either ask or wait and find out."

"You just ask?" I was aghast.

"Dude, that's like the first question you get asked on Grindr. Most guys skip the Q&A and just put it right in their bio. It's not like a closely guarded secret."

"What are you?" I asked before I could stop myself.

"I'm vers, with a slight preference for taking it like a champ."

I blinked.

"What about you? Do you have any idea of what you think you'd like?"

My eyes grew wide. I deeply regretted opening that door.

I started shaking my head. "I, uh, haven't figured that out yet."

That was a lie, but he didn't need to know that.

“Right. Hence all the questions. Look, the only way to know is to try things and figure out what you like.” He shrugged. “Some guys are total bottoms, some guys are always tops, and some are versatile. And there are sides, meaning they don't like penetrative sex. Oh, and there's also asexuals.”

“I know all that,” I interrupted before he could go into a full lecture on gay male sexual habits.

“Hey, you were the one asking.”

They called our order number just then, so Nick grabbed our bag.

“Come on,” he said with a grin. “Let’s go get you tarterd up for your boy. I want him to get so worked up when he sees you, that you're guaranteed to lose that V-card tonight.”

I followed him out, thinking that maybe blushing was just going to be my thing for now on.

I should have never started a conversation about sex with Nick of all people, let alone in public. I was never going to hear the end of it. I just hoped he wouldn't humiliate me in front of Jake.

I did that well enough on my own.

Chapter 19 – Jake

Friday arrived almost too soon. Even after my session with Dr. Patel, I'd been low-key dreading our clubbing adventure while trying not to let Kody see my anxiety.

I stood in the middle of my room, wearing nothing but black boxer briefs and existential dread. It had been a while since I'd last gone out, and the clothes I'd chosen to bring to school weren't exactly high fashion. Then again, we were in Albany, not LA or NYC. Then again *again*, the gays were the gays, no matter what city you were in.

The only opinion that really mattered, though, was Kody's, I reminded myself, then promptly chose to ignore myself as a fresh wave of panic washed over me.

"Okay," I said softly, "this isn't the Met Gala. It's a college dance club."

From the other side of the room, Foster snorted without looking up from his phone. "Who're you talking to?"

"Myself. Because I have standards."

Brayden was sprawled on my bed eating something neon orange out of a crinkling bag. "You going on a date or something?" he asked, crumbs cascading down his chest like toxic snowfall.

"Yes. I told you. Kody and I are going on a double date with Nick and Derek to some club. And don't get crumbs in my bed."

"Oh yeah. I won't." Another handful went into his maw, crumbs flying everywhere.

I chose to ignore it. That was a problem for Future Jake. Current Jake had enough on his hands.

Option one: Black jeans, fitted dark tee, boots. Clean. Simple. Invisible. This was the safe option. Boring, but solid.

Option two: Tighter, form-fitting black jeans and a sheer charcoal button-down, sleeves rolled, top two buttons open. I don't know how it had ended up packed in my college clothes, but it was the edgiest thing I had with me. I probably hadn't realized it was sheer when I grabbed it and threw it in a box. This outfit implied that I was trying...but not too hard. It was provocative without being indecent.

Option three: Dark-wash jeans so tight you could see my religion and this soft, skin-tight, pale blue mesh shirt that made my eyes look unfairly bright. This was the fit of reckless optimism. It was probably too

much for anything besides a wild Pride party in WeHo. I definitely wasn't sure why I'd even packed the shirt. I hadn't worn it since my Cali days.

I pulled the mesh shirt out and held it up in front of me, studying my reflection in the mirror on the back of the closet door.

It looked ridiculously small against my chest, like it belonged to a child. Since I got to school I hadn't been keeping up with the gym enough to wear it confidently. Plus, it would look like I was trying way too hard. Maybe it would work if I was trying to pull, but I was going with Kody, and he was the only guy I was interested in.

I tossed it onto the bed next to Brayden.

"Are you nervous?" Brayden asked, his mouth full, spraying bits of half-chewed snacks everywhere.

"No," I lied.

The sheer charcoal one next.

I hesitated. You could see my nipples. It wasn't obscene, just...suggestive. But maybe a tad too sexy.

"You sure look nervous," Foster contributed.

I threw him a dirty look that he didn't see since his eyes were back on his screen. "I'm not. I'm just deciding between 'casually hot' and 'trying too hard.'"

"Same thing," he shot back with a snort.

Brayden squinted at me. "Wear something tight."

I stared back. "I will absolutely not be taking fashion advice from someone whose entire aesthetic is 'concussed linebacker.'"

Brayden blinked. "I'm a lineman, not a linebacker."

"I don't even know what those are," I deadpanned as I returned the charcoal shirt to the closet. "But the point is, you don't have to look like one off the field. You could step up your game, Bray, especially if you want to keep Jen. Girls like it if you look like you care about your appearance."

He stared at me with an expression that implied I'd just imparted a nugget of wisdom that he'd never before considered.

I turned back to the mirror and stared at my reflection. I did look nervous. I decided I'd return to the shirt after I chose my pants. The black jeans would do.

I stripped off my boxers, forgetting for a moment that I had an audience.

Brayden choked behind me, reminding me he was still there, and I yanked on the black jeans so fast I almost castrated myself.

"Sorry for the free peep show," I said, my face burning hot.

Brayden cleared his throat. "It's cool," he wheezed. "We're all guys here. Not like I'm not in locker rooms all the time. Wangs everywhere. Just didn't expect you to be—"

"Brayden..."

"—so big," he plowed on.

"Jesus," I muttered. "Yeah, okay, Brayden. I'm going to try very hard to forget you said that."

"I mean, it's not like you've got anything to be ashamed of."

"Let's never mention this again."

"I'm just sayin'..."

"Brayden. Never. Speak. Of. It. Again." I paused for dramatic effect, then added, "Ever."

He shrugged, sending ripples across his massive chest, displacing more crumbs. "Okay."

"Glad I missed it," Foster commented from his side of the room.

I ignored him and turned to the side to appreciate — purely clinically, of course — how the jeans fit. Not painted-on, but tailored enough to suggest I had a nice ass. Which I did. Thank you, genetics. At least they'd given me something besides a predisposition for mental illness and a big...ego.

I pulled on the black tee and stared at myself.

I looked emo.

Off came the shirt.

I put the charcoal shirt back on. Maybe it wasn't that bad. It skimmed my torso just enough, the fabric catching the light faintly, hinting at skin beneath without giving too much away. Just the merest suggestion of nips, and, as a wise woman once said, the nipples are the eyes of the face.

Or something like that.

I rolled the sleeves to my mid-forearm and left the top two buttons undone. Maybe I didn't look like the guy who'd nearly destroyed his life. Or a cautionary tale. I just looked...like a college kid going to a club.

"How do I look?" I asked.

"You look fine," Foster said dismissively.

"Fine? I was shooting for slightly better than fine."

"You look like you know you're hot but you're pretending you don't."

I narrowed my eyes. "That was almost nice."

"Don't get used to it."

"I think you look sexy," Brayden added helpfully.

"Thanks, Bray. If only you played for my team."

He stopped chewing. "I play for the school."

"Yeah, I know. I just meant...never mind."

I turned back to the mirror. Was this too much for a sober guy going to a dance club?

I heard Dr. Patel's voice in my head: *Gather data.*

I'd survived the dorm fridge from hell. I'd survived an off-campus party. I could survive a dance floor.

My gaze drifted to the small silver necklace hanging from the lamp on my desk. Judy had given it to me when I hit my one-year sober mark. A simple chain. No charm. Just something to ground me. I picked it up and fastened it around my neck. It felt right. A reminder.

My phone buzzed. It was Kody. *Where are you?* 📞

My stomach flipped.

Just getting dressed. On my way soon.

Three dots appeared almost instantly.

Cool. Nick says it's gonna be packed. He says Friday Flight energy is unhinged.

Unhinged. Great.

I slipped on my black leather boots, ran a hand through my hair, then stopped and actually styled it. Texturizing cream. Quick tousle. Effortless-but-not.

I took one last look in the mirror. "You're not unworthy," I muttered under my breath.

Brayden pointed at me accusingly. "If you're hyping yourself up, that means you're nervous."

"I'm not nervous."

"You're vibrating," Foster said.

I glanced down. My leg was bouncing.

"I'm fine," I insisted. "Just...excited."

Column A, Column B.

I grabbed my keys, wallet, and phone, then announced, "Alright, I'm out."

As I reached the door, Foster called out, "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

I paused, hand on the knob. "Unless you're doing guys now, I don't think I have any other options."

Brayden's laugh followed me into the hall, my heart pounding. It wasn't dread, exactly. But it also wasn't not dread.

Here goes nothing.

I felt the vibrations from the thrumming bass through the soles of my feet before the sound of the driving music even hit us. There was already a line that stretched halfway down the block when we turned the final corner.

The Aviary was tucked into a quaint residential area just off Lark Street. The club was housed in two old rowhouses that had been joined together but retained their facades. I wondered how the other homeowners felt about their new noisy neighbor. Maybe they were all college kids who didn't care.

Above the entrance hung a sleek matte-black sign with the winged logo standing proudly above the club's name. LEDs hidden under the awning bathed the façade in shifting hues — deep violet, electric blue, hot magenta — washing over the wannabe partiers and making them look almost cinematic.

A velvet-rope line curved along the sidewalk, keeping the blend of freshmen in platform sneakers, upperclassmen in mesh tops, drag queens in six-inch heels, and straight girls who “just loved the vibe” in check until the bouncers called them forward in little cliques.

Security checked IDs under a ring light, then assigned them either wristbands or large black X's on the backs of their hands, depending on their age.

“I knew we should have left earlier,” Nick grouched. “Look at the line. We'll be standing out here forever.”

“It's a nice night and you've got great company,” Derek said soothingly, linking his arm with Nick's. “Plus, you look hot af. Let these poor schmucks driving by get a little look. What's your hurry?”

Nick gave Derek a one-thousand-watt smile. “Oh, flattery will get you *anywhere*. But right now, I've got my cha cha heels on, and I'm ready to dance.”

Derek, Kody, and I laughed.

“The dance floor isn't going anywhere,” I commented. I was fine with the wait. The sidewalk seemed safer than whatever awaited us inside.

Kody snuggled into my side, and I wrapped my arms around him.

“Are you cold?” I asked him.

Derek was right, it was a nice night, a clear sky and the temps hovering in the mid-fifties, but Kody was little. Maybe he was chilly.

“Nope. Just wanted to be closer to you,” he replied, smiling up at me. I squeezed him tighter.

We'd been standing in the queue for maybe ten minutes — while moving two feet at the most — when I felt eyes burning into the back of my

skull. I turned to scan the line that had already formed behind us and spotted a familiar face near the back of the line.

Becca. She didn't look happy to see me. What was her problem? We'd left things on good terms, or so I'd thought. The intensity of her glare made me think she may have felt otherwise.

Kody noticed my distraction and followed my gaze.

"Hey, isn't that the girl I thought you were dating?" he asked.

"Sure is."

"Why is she looking at us like that?"

"No clue."

"Maybe she just can't stand seeing two hot guys being happy," Kody said smugly and tipped his head back, lips pursed for a kiss.

I obliged.

"Get a room," Nick snarked.

"I have one," Kody shot back, "but I have the worst roommate ever, so it smells like feet and desperation."

Nick pretended to be offended while Derek and I laughed.

The line crept slowly forward until eventually we were the next to enter. Our IDs were checked and hands marked, and we were swept through the door. The moment you stepped inside, the bass rattled your ribcage.

The entry corridor was narrow and dark, forcing you forward — like you were being funneled into something bigger. The black walls were painted with faint metallic feathers that only revealed themselves when the light hit just right. Then the space opened up.

The main floor was two levels: the dance floor and the mezzanine.

Front and center — and slightly sunken — was a wide LED floor that shifted color with the beat. All I could think was that the sunken floor had to be a major tripping hazard when people got drunk. Or otherwise altered. I wondered how many people face planted each night.

Overhead a massive circular lighting rig glowed like a halo. Moving spotlights sliced through fog in slow arcs, catching glitter, sweat, and the occasional disco-ball reflection.

The DJ booth was elevated at the far end, framed by stylized polished-steel "wings" that stretched up the wall behind it. When the bass dropped, strobes flashed along the feathers.

The dance floor was chaos in the best way — college kids jumping in packs, arms raised, screaming lyrics like they were in a music video.

The signs pointing to the second level were simply labeled "The Loft."

"Drinks first or dancing?" Nick yelled over the music.

“Dancing,” Kody said at the same time as Derek replied, “Drinks.”

“Let’s split up,” I suggested pointlessly as Kody took matters into his own hands, dragging me away toward the dance floor.

Nick grinned and waved as he and Derek started making their way toward the bar that ran along the right-hand side of the room. It was a long, glossy black affair with underlighting that shifted from icy blue to purple to hot pink. The twenty-one-plus crowd were adorned with neon wristbands that glowed under UV lights, making them easy to spot.

The bartenders all looked like models or actors from the latest hit teen show — in other words, impossibly beautiful and easily in their late twenties. Most of the guys were shirtless, and even some of the women were only wearing sports bras, their sweaty skin glistening under the lights.

Kody tugged me onto the dance floor, where he let go of my wrist. I stopped moving as the fog curled around my boots and the LED floor flickered beneath us like it was alive. For a split second I just stood there, blinking, like I’d walked into the wrong classroom on the first day of school.

Kody, however, was already moving. Not in a try-hard way, just easy. Shoulders loose, hips catching the beat, his dark hair glinting under the lights. He looked over at me and grinned like it was the most natural thing in the world. For someone who had never been dancing, he certainly knew how to move.

“You okay?” he shouted, leaning close.

“Yeah,” I yelled back.

Lie. I’d been to clubs before. I’d danced before. I’d just never done it sober.

The awareness was what got me. Every sound was sharp, every body brushing past felt amplified. Someone nearby splashed their drink on my arm, and the pungent smell of tequila hit me for half a second before disappearing into the miasma of sweat and cologne and fog machine.

My inner voice kicked in next: “You look stiff. You don’t know what you’re doing. Everyone else seems effortless. You should’ve had one drink. Just to take the edge—”

No. I shut that down hard.

Kody tilted his head. “You’re thinking too loud.”

“I am not.”

“Then dance, you goober.”

I snorted a laugh despite myself.

He stepped closer and took my hands. His palms were warm. Grounding. His eyes were filled with sincerity and concern.

“It’s just dancing,” he said. Just dancing. Okay.

He started moving again, pulling me with him. Nothing complicated. Just rhythm. I tried to follow. At first it felt mechanical, like I was operating my own limbs from a control panel somewhere above my head.

Then the DJ switched tracks to the current big pop hit. The artist was openly queer, and the song was stupidly catchy. The crowd exploded, people scream-singing the opening lines.

Kody threw his hands up. “Oh my God, I love this song!”

I couldn’t help smiling. Of course he did. And something in me loosened.

I laughed — actually laughed — and stopped monitoring every movement. I let my shoulders drop, let my hips move without pre-approval from my anxiety. The music crawled into my bloodstream, and for the first time since we got there, I wasn’t scanning the room for exits or counting drinks in strangers’ hands.

I was just there. With Kody. Letting the music flow around and through me.

Kody’s grin widened when he saw me relax. We drifted closer, not grinding, not performing — just dancing in the same orbit. We’d done this before at the concert. No big deal. But this felt different. The air was charged, thick with pheromones of hundreds of horny teens.

Our knees bumped. My hand slid briefly to his waist to steady him when someone crashed into him from behind. It felt good.

We danced for a while before a sudden roar went up to my left. I glanced over and immediately regretted it. Nick was shirtless. Of course he was. Derek had also lost his sweatshirt somewhere, leaving him in only a mesh tank that might as well have been theoretical. They were wrapped around each other like the dance floor was their ex and this was revenge.

“Oh my God,” Kody muttered.

Nick dramatically rolled his hips in sync with Derek in a way that was...ambitious. Meanwhile, Derek’s hands were everywhere. There was zero daylight between them.

It was basically live porn. A circle started forming. Phones came out.

Nick caught my eye mid...whatever that move was and grinned like he was proud of himself. Which he absolutely was.

Kody’s eyes were round as he watched, and he’d almost stopped moving.

“You’re staring,” I said.

"I'm observing," he replied, almost too softly for me to hear. "For science."

Derek hooked a leg around Nick's hip, and the crowd lost its mind. Kody made a strangled noise. "They're one bass drop away from being banned."

I laughed. "You're not exactly looking away."

"I made eye contact during a hip thrust," he said, scandalized. "I need a minute."

He grabbed my wrist and yanked me toward the stairs before Nick and Derek could escalate further.

"Where are we going?" I yelled over the music.

"Somewhere I can't see my roommate trying to get his date pregnant."

We climbed up to the Loft, a mezzanine that wrapped around one side of the club. Velvet couches in jewel tones were arranged in semi-private clusters. It was darker up there, more intimate. A perfect vantage point to watch the crowd below...if that's what you wanted to do.

It seemed like most people were trying to spot their next hookup. Or drunk texting their ex. Or making out dramatically, as if their very lives depended on swapping as much saliva as humanly possible. Some were just pretending they were too cool to dance...before inevitably going down there anyway.

We spotted an empty couch and collapsed side by side. For a second, I just sat there, heart pounding from adrenaline. From dancing. From being there without numbing myself first.

"You good?" Kody asked, nudging my shoulder.

I checked in. Any cravings? No. Any itch under my skin? No. Just sweat and endorphins.

"Yeah," I said. "I'm good." For once, it was easy to be honest.

"You looked like you were having fun."

"I was."

Below us, the bass dropped again, and the crowd screamed.

"I'm not used to doing this sober," I admitted.

Kody's expression softened, not pitying — just sympathetic. "So this is a new experience for both of us."

I smiled and leaned in for a quick kiss. No OTT displays for us, unlike the lesbian couple with multi-colored hair going at it across from us. I was worried their piercings might lock together, but I was trying hard not to stare in fascination.

"I'm glad I'm here with you," I said.

The lights flickered over him, catching in his eyes. He looked hopeful, a little flushed, a little breathless. A smile spread across his face, warm and genuine, just like him. "Me too. Ready for round two?"

"Already? I've barely caught my breath. I'm out of practice."

He giggled. "Okay, old man. We can wait a little longer, I guess."

"Old man?"

"You're like an entire year older than me. Ancient."

I shook my head as he glanced toward the railing. "You just like this song, don't you?" I teased.

He gave me his best innocent look. "Maybe..."

I fought a grin and lost. "Okay, we can head back down right after I pee. I think I saw a bathroom up here, and it's probably less crowded than the one downstairs. Be right back."

"I'll miss you!" he called as I walked away.

"Gross," I heard one of the lesbians say.

I pushed through the bathroom door, grateful for the relative quiet. The music was a little muffled, but only barely.

Two guys were at the sink.

At first, I barely registered them. My bladder was calling insistently. One of them was bent slightly over the marble counter, the other standing too close behind him. Then I saw the small plastic bag. The neat white line. The rolled-up bill.

My stomach dropped.

They looked up like startled deer, watching me in the ring-light-framed mirror — perfect for bathroom selfies — giving me a quick assessment. Was I a threat? A narc? Competition?

Apparently, I didn't read as any of those things, since they relaxed.

"You good?" one of them asked casually, like we were discussing the weather.

"Yeah," I replied automatically, moving toward a stall.

Before I could close the door, the other guy smirked. "Want a bump?"

His tone was friendly, inclusive...but also knowing, as if he'd seen something flash in my eyes.

For half a second, maybe less, my brain sparked. It would be easy. No one would know. You're already here. The thoughts slid in smooth and familiar, like muscle memory.

And then memories rose just as fast.

The memory of waking up in a hospital bed. Judy's face when she thought she'd lost me. Killian sitting in that hard plastic chair looking like he hadn't slept in days, which he probably hadn't.

Suddenly a wave of nausea washed over me, and cold sweat prickled at my temples.

"No," I said, sharper than I meant to. "I'm good."

The first guy shrugged like it was no skin off his back and leaned down again. The second gave me a once-over, that knowing smirk still firmly in place, then turned away.

I quickly closed the stall door and locked myself in.

My hands were shaking. Not badly. Just enough that I noticed.

I stared at the door for a second, heart thudding, the offer still echoing in my head. It wasn't dramatic. It wasn't some after-school special moment. Just casual. Easy. Like he was offering me a stick of gum.

That's what made it so dangerous.

I peed, because that was technically the mission. The toilet flushed automatically while I was still standing there, lost in my head.

With a sigh, I emerged. The guy at the sink was sniffing now, eyes glassy but pleased with himself.

I decided I didn't need to wash my hands, just this once, and headed straight for the door, purposefully avoiding eye contact on my way out.

The hallway air felt cooler when I stepped back into it, even though it probably wasn't. I took a deep breath as I leaned against the wall for a second.

I didn't want it. Not really. But the fact that some tiny part of me did — even for a split second — rattled me more than I expected.

Downstairs, the music swelled and the crowd cheered like nothing in the world could possibly go wrong.

Kody was waiting for me. I pushed off the wall and headed back to where I'd left him.

As I approached, I thought for a moment that Kody had left without me. There were now three people sitting on the couch instead of one. My stomach dropped instantly.

One of them was Becca.

The other was blonde. The blonde turned her head slightly, and recognition crashed into me. Oh, fuck. It was the girl from the party, the one who thought she'd recognized me from California.

This time something must have triggered my brain — the moment in the bathroom, the flashing lights, I don't know — because a blurry

memory surfaced: a crowded club in West Hollywood, music so loud your hearing would be muffled when you left, someone passing a tray of little white lines around like hors d'oeuvres. Her laughing loudly, gripping the arm of an acquaintance, while I leaned against the wall pretending I wasn't already too high. A friend of a friend. Or maybe a hookup's friend. One of those orbiting faces from that period of my life where everyone blurred together under club lights and chemicals.

And now she was sitting with Becca. Talking to Kody. Every muscle in my body locked up. My brain immediately did what it always did best: catastrophize at light speed.

Did she remember where she knew me from? Had she said something? Did Becca know?

Were they telling Kody right now about the clubs, the drugs, the version of me I was trying so fucking hard to leave buried in the past?

Or maybe she'd told Becca, and Becca had researched me, found out about the overdose, the murder suspicion, everything.

The blood drained from my face so fast I actually felt dizzy.

Kody was more or less facing me, so he looked up first. He wore a slight frown, but his face lit up when he saw me. His reaction caused Becca to notice me next.

The blond girl followed Becca's gaze and blinked. I watched the exact second recognition sparked in her eyes. Oh, no. There it was. That tiny widening of the eyes. She did remember.

"Well," Becca said slowly, lips curling into something halfway between amusement and intoxication, "speak of the devil."

My pulse started hammering.

The blond girl squinted at me through glassy eyes. Definitely high. Coke, maybe Molly, maybe both. Her pupils were huge. Both of them looked high. That made them extra dangerous.

"Wait..." she said, pointing vaguely in my direction. "Oh, my God. You again. I knew I knew you. LA, right?"

Kody's eyes flicked immediately to me.

I could practically hear my heartbeat over the bass downstairs.

The blond girl snapped her fingers suddenly. "The Abbey. You were there with—"

"Okay," I cut in sharply. Too sharply. All three of them blinked at me. I realized instantly how aggressive I'd sounded, but panic was already clawing up my throat.

Becca leaned back against the couch cushions, studying me with narrowed eyes. "Whoa. Defensive much?"

“Kody,” I said, ignoring her completely, “can I talk to you for a second?”

Concern immediately replaced curiosity on his face as he stood up.

The blond girl frowned. “Did I say something wrong?”

“Nope,” I said quickly. Too quickly. “We’re good.”

But I wasn’t good. Not even a little. Because suddenly it felt like the whole club was tilting sideways beneath me. Seeing them together — Becca with her possessive nasty streak and this girl carrying ghosts from California — felt like the universe kicking open a door I’d been desperately trying to hold shut.

I could practically smell that old life on them beneath the perfume and alcohol. Sweat. Powder. Smoke machines. Chemical comedowns at four in the morning. Conversations that felt profound because everyone was high enough to mistake self-destruction for intimacy.

For one horrifying second, I was back there. Back to being the version of myself that could disappear for days. The version that scared Judy. The version that almost died.

And Kody was standing right beside me now, warm and real and trusting, while my past sat ten feet away looking at me like it recognized an old drinking buddy. Or worse. Like it recognized itself.

“Kody,” I repeated quietly, more urgently this time.

He immediately took my hand and pulled me away.

“Hey,” he said softly once we were a few feet from the couch.

“What’s wrong?”

I looked back over my shoulder. The blond girl was still staring after me, confused.

Panic surged harder. “What did they say to you?”

Kody blinked. “What?”

“What did they tell you?” I demanded.

His forehead creased instantly. “Jake—”

“Did they say they knew me? Did they tell you anything about California?”

Now he looked genuinely startled. “Whoa, hey. Slow down.”

But I couldn’t. My thoughts were spiraling too fast. Of course this would happen. Of course, my past would show up before I was ready to talk about it. I knew I should’ve told him sooner. I knew it. Now some random girl from LA was going to casually destroy everything because I waited too long like an idiot—

“Jake.” Kody grabbed both my wrists gently. The contact grounded me just enough to stop the free fall.

His expression softened immediately when he got a better look at me. “Oh, my God,” he said quietly. “You’re freaking out.”

I swallowed hard. “I know her,” I admitted, voice tight. “Or—not really. But from before. From California.”

Kody waited patiently. Neither pushing nor judging. Just listening. “I thought maybe...” My throat tightened. “I thought maybe she told you something.”

Realization dawned slowly across his face. “Oh.” He squeezed my wrists gently.

“Jake, they weren't telling me anything. They were mostly asking questions,” he continued. “About us. How we met. How long we’ve been together. Stuff like that. Nosy, intrusive maybe, but that was all. And it was mostly Becca.”

I blinked. “That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

I glanced back toward the couch again. Becca was now talking animatedly while the blond girl nodded along, both of them clearly distracted by something else entirely. Neither looked remotely interested in destroying my life.

Embarrassment crashed into the space where panic had been. “Oh.”

Kody’s mouth twitched slightly. “You thought they were exposing you, like some reality show twist.”

“I— maybe.”

“Think you maybe overreacted a little?”

I smiled sheepishly, feeling almost giddy with relief. “Just a little.”

“Babe, you looked ready to flee the country.”

I dragged a hand down my face. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize.” His voice softened. “You got scared.”

That simple understanding nearly undid me. Because he wasn’t mocking me. He wasn’t annoyed. He wasn’t demanding explanations before I was ready. He was just...concerned.

My chest tightened painfully.

“I’m gonna tell you everything,” I said quietly. “Soon. I promise.”

Kody studied my face for a moment, then nodded once. “I know.”

No pressure. No ultimatum. Just trust. Which somehow felt a thousand times scarier than anger would’ve.

“But there’s no rush. You already told me you were addicted to drugs back in California. And speaking of drugs, they both reeked of booze,

and their eyes looked funny. Becca was even slurring her words a little. Was I that bad when I got wasted at that party?"

"Nooo," I lied.

He narrowed his eyes as if he wasn't buying it, but then giggled.

"Anyway, forget those two skanks. Let's go dance."

I spared one last glance at Becca and Blondie as Kody pulled me away.

We returned downstairs, where I was grateful to find Nick and Derek's floor show had wrapped up. They were dancing normally, more or less, though still glued together so tightly you couldn't have slid a sheet of paper between them.

We joined them, taking a spot nearby but not too close, and started moving again. Kody glanced at them, looked back at me, then shrugged and moved in closer, pressing against me as he reached up and wrapped his arms around my neck.

I slid my hands around his waist, letting them rest just above his perfect little bubble butt.

He looked up at me with absolute adoration in his eyes. His gaze was open and honest and filled with trust. No expectations. No calculations. No waiting for me to screw up. No one had ever looked at me like that before, and it terrified me. I was terrified I didn't deserve it, couldn't earn it. More terrified of losing it.

Would he still look at me that way if he knew everything? Not the sanitized version. Not the "I had a rough time" summary. The ugly specifics — the selfishness, the recklessness, the hurt.

The music shifted into something slower and heavier, and Kody rested his forehead briefly against my chest. It felt so right. I couldn't lose him.

Dr. Patel's voice threaded through my thoughts: *If he doesn't want to be with you after he knows the truth, then he isn't your person.*

I understood the logic. I got it. I did. But wanting someone to be your person isn't rational. It's hopeful and reckless and humiliating.

I wanted him to be my person. Not because he made me feel absolved, or because he made me forget who I'd been, but because when he looked at me, I didn't feel like a project, or a cautionary tale, or a bomb with a delayed fuse.

His blind faith in me made me want to be the man he thought he saw, but I knew I wasn't. Not yet anyway.

I knew I needed to tell him the whole truth, and soon. We couldn't move forward honestly until I did. I didn't know how he'd take it, but for

the first time the possibility didn't feel like a ticking clock. It felt like something I could walk toward instead of something chasing me.

Kody leaned back, his eyes searching my face. "You okay?" he asked.

"I'm with you, aren't I? Of course I'm okay."

He smiled, his eyes dancing, then he reached up on his tiptoes to kiss me. I tightened my arms around him, and the little peck quickly turned into something a lot more serious.

Nick and Derek weren't the only ones who could put on a show.

As the kiss lingered on, I thought that maybe being the man he saw wasn't about erasing who I'd been. Maybe it was about choosing, over and over, who I was becoming.

Chapter 20 - Kody

As I got ready for work Saturday morning, I couldn't have been in much of a better mood. The only thing that could have possibly made me any happier would've been waking up next to Jake.

I replayed much of the night before in my head as I walked up Central Avenue in the chilly morning air. The cold temps had returned with a vengeance. I disapproved, but even that couldn't spoil my good mood.

Dancing was fun, but it was even more fun with Jake. I'd never really danced before unless you counted flailing around alone in my room with earbuds in, and I did not count that. Or that slow dance with Jake at the concert, but clubbing was a whole different beast. I'd just let the music carry me and moved however felt right. Maybe I looked cool. Maybe I looked like a confused possum having an epileptic seizure. Either way, Jake kept smiling at me like I was the hottest thing on the dance floor, and that made it really easy to stop overthinking and just have fun.

One thing I'd never gotten to do was dance with someone in high school. There were no carefully posed prom pictures of me and my date—

Damn it! I'd forgotten to take one of me and Jake the night before!

Still, even that wasn't going to ruin my mood. Jake had looked so fire. I half thought people were probably wondering what he was doing there with me. But a funny thing happened...Jake was there for me. He didn't even look at another guy.

I mean, except for when Nick and Derek put on their live porn show, but I think most of downtown Albany noticed that. I don't even think Jake said anything to anyone besides me. That girl Becca didn't count. It was an amazing feeling, to not just want his attention but to actually have it. That he was just focused on being with me was...everything.

Thinking about Becca and her friend made me replay our weird conversation while Jake was in the bathroom. I hadn't been completely honest with him, but only because he was upset enough, and I didn't want it to become a bigger thing than it already was. She *had* asked how we'd met and how long we'd been seeing each other. That much was true. But she'd also asked some really inappropriate personal questions. Like, had we fucked yet? And how big was Jake's cock?

Hell, I didn't even know how big it was!

I'd been just about ready to tell her to fuck off when Jake had returned, saving me the trouble of what would have probably been a messy scene. I could just see myself tossing her over the railing.

But I brushed the bitch off and refocused on how much fun I'd had dancing pressed against Jake's body. It was almost like having sex with our clothes on. Or at least, how I imagined having sex would be, our bodies in perfect sync, moving against each other, sweaty, hot...

"Why are you so happy? Did you get laid last night?" Max asked, snapping me from my thoughts.

I'd been moving on autopilot and hadn't even fully registered that I'd arrived at the coffee shop.

"What? Uh, no!" I laughed at her, hoping I wasn't noticeably hard. "We went dancing last night—"

"In the sheets? Horizontal mambo?"

"No!" I laughed some more. "We went to The Aviary, over on Lark Street. It was stupid fun."

"Aww. I used to like dancing, too," Marla said. "But Rich always drank too much and stomped on my feet."

"Too much sweating for me," Max replied.

The conversation was sidetracked by a rush of customers. I worked quickly to fill orders, practically whistling to myself.

As I worked, I let my mind wander back to when we'd first arrived at the club, and frowned for a moment. When I'd pulled him onto the dance floor, Jake hesitated, and I thought about that for a minute. He seemed like he'd settled in okay, and he'd certainly looked like he was having fun — but there was a moment before all that when there was something else.

What was that about? I wasn't able to come up with anything, but the feeling I'd missed something important nagged at me.

Once the rush was over, Max asked if I knew how to break down and clean one of the commercial espresso machines. It was the same brand as the one we had in my dad's shop, though a different model. She decided that was close enough, and I was soon elbow deep in the gleaming caffeine machine.

It turned out to be so similar that my mind started to wander again as I worked from muscle memory. I figured if I couldn't see what was bugging me about Jake's misgivings — if that was even what it was — then maybe if I thought about other things, my mind would connect the dots in the background. I was worried both that he was uncomfortable and also that I was being neurotic and seeing something that hadn't been there.

Maybe he'd seen someone he knew? He was from Maryland, so that seemed kind of unlikely. There was Becca. He definitely wasn't thrilled when he saw her in line or talking to me. She'd also tried — and failed — to

pick him up, but I couldn't really blame her for that. Just meant she had good taste.

And there was the girl from California, but that hesitation I'd seen on the dance floor happened before he ever saw her, so that couldn't be it. Although he had certainly freaked out about her later. As much as I'd played it down in the moment, seeing him like that had gotten to me. It made me wonder exactly what he wasn't telling me. Had he killed somebody, maybe while drunk or high?

No, that was too dramatic. This wasn't a soap opera.

But it was clearly a time in his life that still haunted him, and I hated that. I wanted to wave a magic wand and make it all better. But I knew that wasn't realistic and I just had to wait until he trusted me enough to open up to me fully.

Whatever it was, at least it hadn't ruined our night.

I thought about us dancing and the show Nick and Derek had put on. I had to admit it was hot, even if it was Nick.

Idly, I wondered if Jake had been feeling any pressure after that display. We got in some pretty serious kissing as well; we just didn't strip on the dance floor. We did have some pretty intense making out, though, and his hands were definitely roaming. Nothing too far — no grabbing bits or pieces — but it wasn't nothing either.

In fact, there had definitely been *something*. A pretty significant something too.

I glanced at Marla, who was running the counter, and then went back to work. I always felt like people could see into my skull when I started having thoughts like that. But there was definitely a reaction from Jake. I mean, being fair, me too.

"Kody, can you reach that while you're up there? No, that."

I handed Marla one of our promotional coffee cups. As I did, I noticed Becca standing in line, looking like an extra for *The Walking Dead*. It seemed like I couldn't get away from her.

I felt a flash of longing, since Jake hadn't come in for coffee this morning. He'd told me that he and Brayden were grabbing breakfast and heading to the library, because he'd promised Brayden to help him with some of his assignments. It was so like Jake to help other people.

I sighed happily, but then I remembered that Brayden wasn't the only one with stuff due. I needed to get a couple of things knocked out as well, but I was hoping to see Jake at some point before the day was over.

As I started to reassemble the machine, my thoughts returned to Becca. She hadn't looked good last night, and while I'd not really been

looking too hard at her when I'd seen her with Jake that time, she hadn't stood out in a negative way then. She'd looked like a healthy, normal straight girl trying to get herself a little vitamin D.

Last night, though, she'd looked out of it, her eyes glassy. When she'd spoken, it had been slow, like she had to focus to get the words out or they felt strange in her mouth.

"So." Marla smiled at me as she leaned against the counter. "I know you've already said Jake is a good kisser, but can he dance?"

I smiled back at her. "It wasn't his first dance, I'll just say that."

"One time, Max and I went to this place that was briefly open on warehouse row," Marla told me.

"No!" Max called out from her office.

Marla ignored her. "We had gotten drinks and were just kind of looking around, taking things in, when this guy came up to Max and held his hand out to ask her to dance."

Max appeared in the doorway. "He pulled me off balance! It was like trying to dance with a climbing monkey!"

Marla laughed as she kept going. "I was sitting at the bar watching, and, all of a sudden, Max falls—"

"It was his fault!"

"—ass over heels, and the next thing you know, we're headed for the emergency room, because she'd sprained her ankle *so* badly."

"And that's why dancing is stupid," Max said smiling and shaking her head at Marla.

Marla looked at me. "Any fireworks on your dance floor?"

I told them about Nick and Derek, and that led to Max talking about how she'd discovered an old series called *Queer as Folk*.

"I can't stop binge watching it!" she said. "They always go to this huge gay club, and all the hot guys are dancing with their shirts off. I bet it was just like the one you went to."

"I've always been comfortable in gay bars, because I feel safer," Marla commented. "There are some gay men that don't like that, given it's a space for them and all, and I can see their point. At the same time, it's a public place, and there are some men who are very welcoming as well."

"Hey, remember Gabby? She would only go out to gay bars after her drink got drugged at a straight club." Max shivered for emphasis, then smiled and posed dramatically. "She said the gays were her people."

We had another knot of people come in, and I spotted Jake as he came in the door with Brayden trailing behind him. I hadn't expected to see him, so I knew I had to be cheeing.

I caught his attention and pointed at a table, so he'd sit and I could bring him a drink. After helping Marla get the new orders taken care of, I got Jake's coffee ready for him and slipped from behind the counter.

"Good morning," I smiled at Jake.

"Hey, good morning to you," he said with a smile, his eyes a little droopy, as if he'd rather be asleep. He accepted the cup, took a sip and hummed his approval before setting it down and pulling me to him. He gave me a light kiss, and we hugged for a moment. It was all relationship goals as far as I was concerned.

As Jake picked his cup up for another sip, I turned to Brayden. "Can I get you anything, Bray?"

"The kiss is off the table though," Jake said quickly.

Brayden frowned. "No kisses please. I need something to wake up my brain, but I've never liked coffee."

"He likes hot chocolate," Jake said. "Make it a double."

"Coming right up!" I ran behind the counter, made up Brayden's drink, and headed back over to them.

"Be careful. It's hot," I told him as I handed it over.

Brayden nodded and contentedly cupped his hands around the mug.

Jake sipped his coffee, holding an arm out for me to slide up next to him. I leaned into him a bit and put my arm around his waist, soaking in the feeling of his body against mine.

"Have you already been to the library or are you going now?" I asked.

"On our way," Jake said. "I needed to sleep in a little after last night. Someone kept me out late."

"Who?" Brayden asked with so much sincerity it felt like a crime to laugh.

"This one here," Jake said to Brayden, shaking me a bit, then turned his full attention to me. "What are you doing today?"

I sighed. "After I get done here, I have to start on a research paper. The prof wants us to dig into local history and write about something. It's kind of open ended, and I guess it's sort of interesting? It's kind of neat to know more about where I live right now, I guess."

Jake hummed, and Brayden nodded.

"But I was hoping to maybe watch a movie later with you? Or something with you?"

"I like how you think," Jake said with an affectionate smile.

"How was the club?" Brayden asked.

I filled him in, teasing him that he would have liked Nick and Derek's display. He just looked at me with a confused expression and asked me why he'd like that.

Eventually they headed out, but Jake was more awake and gave me a proper kiss before leaving.

After my shift, I headed back to my dorm. The wind had picked up, and I held my arms close as I hurried across campus. I never thought of myself as one of those people who are perpetually chilly, but Jake had been out in just a hoodie this morning and seemed okay, and there I was acting like it was cold enough for penguins outside.

Opening the door to our room, I heard music coming from Nick's open bedroom door. I called out to him and headed for my own bedroom to get changed and get my stuff. Once I was more comfortable, I settled in on the futon just as Nick emerged from his room, also looking like he wasn't going anywhere anytime soon. He was barefoot, wearing gray sweatpants and a plain white tee.

"I thought you might stay at Derek's," I said, setting my laptop on the small table, fully ready to procrastinate starting this project as long as possible.

"There were a bunch of people at his place, and I wasn't feeling it," Nick replied as he settled into the corner of the futon. "Sometimes I like crowds, and sometimes I just want to chill, you know?"

"I understand the chill part, not so much the crowds."

"Where's Jake?"

"At the library with Brayden to work on a project." I paused as I thought. "I didn't think of it, but he probably can't focus in his room if his stupid roommate is there."

"Yeah, that guy." Nick shook his head. "Couldn't supervise a hand job. I wonder how he got into college at all."

"My dad is always talking about 'the dumbing down of America' and how the schools teach to tests instead of teaching critical thinking." It was a conversation I'd never quite understood, but seeing Foster brought Dad's arguments into focus. "I mean, I get it a bit more now. He always pushed me into advanced classes, so I never really saw what he meant. He said advanced classes today are more like the classes he took in high school versus the crap regular courses."

"So I'm guessing he didn't come here to work because all he'd do is work on you?"

I shrugged. "He claims I'm a distraction. Pfft." I grinned at him.

He chuckled. "I'm going to go shower, then I'm meeting this girl for some help with a class."

"A tutor?"

"Student tutor, but yeah. Prof can't explain anything to save his life. I'm not letting a bad teacher stand in the way of learning what I need to."

He got up and headed to the bathroom.

I opened my laptop and started running different search strings to find history about the Albany area. The thing is, like most areas that had been populated for a long time, there was a lot of history to choose from. There was First Nations history, colonization history, revolutionary war history — just a bunch of stuff to consider.

As I scrolled and changed the wording of my search, I stumbled across a picture of a big rail yard in downtown Albany. I then fell into a rabbit hole of articles about how Albany had once been one of the biggest rail hubs in the U.S. and easily found two of the historic buildings that had belonged to the New York Central system and Delaware & Hudson rail lines. There was also a newer station across the river that had passenger rail service.

That had me wondering about taking the train down to New York City with Jake. I'd never been there. Maybe we could... I mean that might be a little bit far, but kind of a weekend away together. A romantic getaway.

I closed my eyes and tilted my head back, imagining I was leaning my head against his shoulder while we watched the scenery go by. It all sounded so exciting. The biggest city in the country. Broadway shows. The top of the Empire State Building. A hotel room just for us. Maybe a bubble bath... It was all a fantasy, so I didn't have to worry about how two college kids could afford all that.

Nick emerged from the bathroom, derailing my train of thought, but I was going to keep that in my mind. I wondered if Jake liked trains or if he'd ever been to NYC? Maybe if he hadn't, it could be a first for both of us. A core memory.

I sat up and refocused on my project, making some notes about the locations of the old Union Station and the D&H building, along with statistics and such about the size and scope of the rolling stock that used to roll through this area to flesh out my report.

After a while, Nick returned from his tutoring session. I'd been so caught up in my daydreams and research that I hadn't realized how much time had gone by.

"You hungry?" he asked.

I was definitely hungry. "I could eat."
 "Want to head to the Commons for lunch?"
 "Sure. I could use a break."
 On the way, we talked about our night out at the club.
 "You and Derek certainly put on a show," I said.
 He laughed. "Yeah, we may have gotten just a teensy bit carried away."
 "You think?"
 "It was fun!"
 "You two were practically fucking."
 "Admit it — you liked watching."
 "No! I mean...maybe. Just a little." I giggled self-consciously.
 He grinned. "Well, we liked being watched," he admitted. "I mean, it was mostly just performative nonsense, but it was also kind of sexy to have an audience, if I'm being honest."
 I gave him a skeptical look. "Really?"
 "Oh, yeah. It definitely egged us on, all the cheering and screaming and stuff. Maybe I'm more of a voyeur than I thought."
 "Isn't that somebody who likes to watch?" I asked.
 "Right. You'd be the voyeur. But what does that make me?"
 "An asshole."
 He snorted. "Maybe, but that's not the word..."
 "Exhibitionist?"
 "That's it! A time-honored tradition. Those who like to watch and those who like to be watched."
 "I'm not sure I liked watching."
 "You sure seemed to be doing enough of it. But maybe you're more of an exhibitionist too. You and Jake put on a little show of your own."
 I shook my head. "Yeah, but that had nothing to do with being watched. As far as I was concerned, we were all alone in the world."
 "Fair enough."
 "I don't think I'm a voyeur or an exhibitionist."
 "I think we all have a little bit of both in us, to be honest."
 "How so?"
 "Well, you admitted you were watching us, and you like porn, right?"
 I felt my cheeks heat up, but nodded.
 "Well, most content creators just followed the idea of voyeurs and exhibitionists to its logical conclusion and set up a business model."
 I could see his point, so I nodded.

"In that scenario, you're the voyeur. You like watching. But it's also nice to be admired, right? When you let me dress you up so you don't look like a first grader at recess, people look at you...and you like it."

"I don't look like a first grader! And I only like it when Jake looks at me."

"Liar. You like the attention."

I sighed. He was right, and I hated it.

Thankfully, we arrived at the Commons just then and split up to grab food, and by the time we sat down Nick had moved on to other topics of conversation.

Afterward, he headed off to soccer practice, and I started walking back to our room to work on my project some more.

My intention was to map out a timeline for the history of rail lines in the Albany area and maybe see about locating some of the still existing structures to take pictures to enhance my project, a now and then sort of deal.

All of that was pushed aside when I got a video call from Charlie.

"Hey. Everything okay?" I asked.

He frowned. "Yeah, why? I can't call my brother?"

I laughed. "You call me things all the time, just usually in text."

He tilted his head. "Facts. What are you doing?"

"Just heading back to my room. I have to work on a project."

"Where's Jake?"

"In the library working on a project with Brayden. They stopped by for coffee this morning before they headed over. I don't know how Jake goes around in just a hoodie. It's freaking cold!"

"Just a hoodie? No pants?"

I raised an eyebrow at him, and he laughed at me. "Well, it's a nice picture, I guess," I admitted, "but I'm pretty sure that's not why you called."

"Oh?"

"We...don't really call unless something is up. We text ninety-five percent of the time. So what's wrong?"

He pursed his lips. "You know we both had crappy ways of getting to our dads."

He was right. Mine had been lonely, of course, being raised by my grandpa and not knowing my dad was out there. Charlie's background was a lot more tragic. He knew his parents and wished he hadn't. He ran away, and adopting him had been a very stressful legal matter. He'd been through some stuff, and I hated thinking about it. It made me so angry and yet so sad that I felt drained.

“Yeah,” I replied with caution. “Did something come up? Are you okay?”

“Oh, yeah, I’m good. Sometimes stuff creeps up, but my therapist is actually straight fire. You know.”

“Yeah, I know you’ve said.” I paused. “So...what are we talking about?”

“It’s kind of complicated, but you know how I get things going in my head? Dad says I’m chasing my tail?” I nod at him and he continues. “I’ve been doing that a lot lately. So in therapy we worked part of it out, basically it’s that you’re not here.”

“Oh. I—”

“That’s not all, so don’t...” He took a deep breath. “Let me finish. So you know how I get kind of protective of you and how much you hate that.”

It wasn’t a question, and I felt a twist of resentment in my stomach. I was happy that we were close and that I was important to him, but I was the older brother. I was supposed to watch out for him. He says I have a constipated view of how our relationship works.

“The thing is, the reason for that is because I know what a bad family looks and feels like. I know what it’s like to not eat for days or have no one to even talk to at home, to not know where your parents are, to be scared where I should feel safe, for the people who are supposed to take care of you to be like zombies. Like it or not, you earned my protection, because I love my brother.”

My resentment shifted to guilt in a flash.

“So in therapy, I kind of realized I’m low-key obsessed about this thing with Jake, because I’m not there with you. I know I’ve been luckier with numbers when it comes to dating, and that bugs you. It’s not a good or bad thing, just we’re different people. I guess I just wanted that story where we could hang out together with our boyfriends, eventually introduce them to Dad and Brandon, take family vacations with our kids or dogs or whatever. But you’re going through this alone, and I’m not there. What if things go bad, and I’m on the other side of the country?”

I wasn’t really sure what to say to that. By that point, I was back in the dorm so I sat down on the futon.

“But you kind of are, Charlie. We talk. We were online looking Jake up. I mean you *called* him.”

“That’s different, though.” He fell quiet for a moment. “My parents used to say things whenever they got the idea to clean up their act, which was usually when they were in trouble of some kind. It was weird, because

they'd always talk about themselves in the third person. 'Mommy's doing what she needs to' or 'Daddy's getting straightened out.' Stuff like that. Addicts can be really convincing, even though my parents mostly weren't — at least not to me. Sometimes they were to the cops or the social workers, especially to CPS, but the longer you were around them, the more you could see the gaslighting and the lies."

"I mean...that's shitty, and I feel bad for that situation. I know we've talked about your bio units, and I think I hate them more than you do, but...what are we talking about here?"

He glanced down for a moment and then back to me, his gaze intense. "I spent some time running down what's out in the world on Jake, since we now know which one of the Jake Sheridans he is."

"Okay..."

"I found some stuff. Stuff that's... I'm..."

I frowned, wondering what could make Charlie act like this, but then I realized that talking about his parents being addicts and he'd mentioned Jake — maybe he'd found some kind of arrest or probation report? Jake had said he'd had a past with alcohol and drugs, so maybe that was it? I knew he hadn't told me everything. I thought about the blonde girl from the club. Maybe it was something to do with her.

"Just say it, whatever it is," I said when the silence drew out too long. "We'll figure it out from there."

He nodded. "Yeah. Well, has Jake ever said anything about his past? Like...a past with drugs?"

I nodded, keeping eye contact with Charlie. "Yes. He didn't go into a ton of details, but he...well, I guess it's probably out there to find, even though I didn't look anything up, but it started with his whole family being killed by his own brother."

Charlie visibly swallowed. "Yeah. I read that."

"Jake said his aunt took him in and tried to take him from the situation, but that didn't help. You know, I think both of our therapists talked about this to us, right? Wherever you go, there you are?" He rolled his eyes, and a tiny smile cracked his lips. "Well, when he got to California, he...he got into that stuff to cope, I guess. He's been sober for about a year."

Charlie let out a breath. "Wow. Okay. I mean, I'm so glad this isn't news to you."

I shook my head and leaned back. "Not going to lie, it breaks my heart, just like every time you talk about your bio units. Thinking about Jake in so much pain, it hurts. There's just so much bad shit out there." I sighed. "Maybe I should go read that stuff, though. I want to be able to support Jake

if or when it creeps back up on him. Our past never really goes away, right?”

Charlie shook his head. “No, it doesn’t. There’s one more thing, though.” He took another deep breath. “He was involved with this guy named Fenton Black for a while. He was some kind of mafia-like guy, bad news — drugs, prostitution, the works. They found him dead in his bed...and Jake was found unconscious...holding the gun. The cops thought Jake killed him.”

My jaw dropped. “What!”

He nodded. “Some private detective guy figured out Jake was innocent—”

“Was his name Killian?”

Charlie’s eyes went a bit wide. “Uh, yeah. Killian Kendall.”

“That’s Jake’s best friend. Huh. Jake said he’d saved his life, but I’d assumed that was about his brother. I guess it could be both.”

I thought about that, turning all that over in my head. It was really hard to see Jake as the person in the story Charlie was telling me about, even knowing most of the information already.

Jake had given me a general idea, though, so I didn’t feel like I’d been lied to. If anything, it made me feel more protective toward him. Here was this guy who could probably skate by on his looks his whole life, but he wanted to do better, to be better.

And he wanted me.

Not only that, he was more than his looks. He was smart. He was funny. I liked the way he teased me. He was gentle and kind. You just had to look at how respectful he was with me and how he insisted we take our time, or how sweet he was about that dinner I cooked. Hell, he’d even tolerated Charlie calling him like a freak.

He was also probably scared.

All of these bad things in his life and what if...what if he’s worried that I might be a good thing? Maybe he’s afraid that I’d be scared away by all the things in his past that he can’t undo, because what’s done is done?

“You freeze up?” Charlie asked, breaking my train of thought.

“Huh? Oh, yeah. I mean, thank you for looking him up. I feel okay, actually. Jake told me some of this, so it’s not a complete surprise, which actually makes me feel better about it.”

“Yeah, me too. I mean, I don’t know when exactly you bare your whole soul in a relationship, but I think it’s a good thing that he isn’t hiding things that hurt from you. Plus, I really didn’t get that vibe from him when I talked to him, and I think I can spot that shit.”

I nodded. “It also makes me think. We went dancing last night, and when we first got to the club, I thought he looked like he was low-key freaking out — just for a few seconds, and then it was gone. I’ve been wondering if I was just imagining something that wasn’t really there, and to be honest, I kind of forgot about his past. But to be fair, it’s not like he’s... I guess he’s not throwing up red flags, you know?”

“That would make sense,” he agreed cautiously.

“Yeah, but now I just feel insensitive. Jesus. I’m such a fuck up. There are drugs at clubs, Kody. And alcohol. We even ran into some girls he knew, and they were definitely on something. Maybe he was... Shit. I practically begged him to go there. Damn!”

“Whoa, whoa. First, he’s a big boy. He’s got to decide if he can stay sober and have a plan.”

I frowned. “How would you know?”

“Because the social workers would ask my parents about their plans for sobriety all the time.”

“Oh. Right. But still, I feel bad that I pressured him.”

“Okay, fair. But he has to be in charge of his sobriety, so it’s up to him to draw lines for himself, right?”

“Yes, but! I have to be more aware and talk to him about things like that instead of just seeing what I want. I have to be considerate of him, too. He has a past — a rough one. It’s part of him, and I have to remember that.”

Charlie let out a chuckle. “Sounds like Jake is in good hands, anyway. So you went dancing? What happened?”

I filled Charlie in on the club, and he asked me if there was any video of Nick and Derek. I told him more about the Becca girl and her weird questions. As I recounted our night, I couldn’t help but replay my interactions with Jake, and except for him being a bit uncomfortable at first and the tense interaction with Becca and her friend, he’d been my Jake all night.

After we hung up, I felt the need to understand Jake’s past more. I didn’t know if he’d tried to Google me, not that there was anything to find, but it seemed like fair game. It was public, after all.

What Charlie had told me was sad, but reading it for myself was really disturbing. Some of the articles were deliberately sensationalized. Some tried to paint Jake like this...I don’t know what to even call it...some out of control gay druggie hustler.

There were pictures too — one of Fenton Black, the man Jake was accused of killing. He wasn’t at all what I’d been expecting. He was

surprisingly handsome in the photo, almost debonair, with dark hair graying at the temples and blindingly white teeth. Maybe I was just imagining it because I knew what he was, but I also thought I could see a sense of cunning in his dark eyes.

There were pictures of Jake too, one that looked like a yearbook photo, and another from the time of the Fenton Black mess, his hands cuffed behind his back. He was barely recognizable in that one. He looked so thin and scared. I could see the dark circles under his eyes and how *worn* he'd been. It made my heart ache for him.

More than anything, that made me want to see Jake, to know he was okay, and reassure myself that he was the healthy, sober guy I knew. I also wanted to apologize for putting him in that awkward position at the club, to promise to be more considerate.

I texted him to ask if he was still at the library and if he wanted to go to the dining hall for dinner with me.

As I waited, my fingers moved of their own accord, and I scrolled down to click on another of the articles. The headline was 'Killian Kendall Cracks Case that Confounded Cops.' The page loaded to reveal a large photo of Killian, under which was the caption, 'Local teen private eye does it again.'

I'd seen a photo of him before in Jake's room, but I hadn't wanted to linger on it. This time, I could look as long as I wanted.

The picture looked candid, like maybe it was taken by a photojournalist and not like a professional headshot, but he was looking directly into the camera, his expression serious. He had wavy blond hair in a stylish cut, and attractive, even features. He looked young, but there was also something mature in his eyes, like he'd seen things most people shouldn't. He was definitely cute, but a little too twinkish for my taste. Definitely not as hot as my Jake.

But Jake had fallen for him once, even if he assured me they were just friends now.

I looked at the picture for a long time, trying to see if there was any pattern to Jake's tastes, but I didn't think Killian and I looked alike at all, so it didn't seem like Jake had a type. Young and blond, middle-aged mobster...and me. Goofy, awkward me.

The old *Sesame Street* song about 'one of these things just doesn't belong here' played in my mind.

I had no idea what Jake looked for in a person or what he was attracted to. But to be fair, judging by his history, maybe he wasn't sure, either.

My phone buzzed. It was Jake telling me he was back at his dorm and would meet me in the lobby of mine to walk over to the Commons in five.

I hopped up and got myself ready to leave, then practically took the entire staircase at a leap — okay maybe half the staircase. I'm only five-foot-five.

I waited for him inside, so I could delay going out into the cold, watching through the glass for him to appear. As I did, my mind continued to churn, a knot twisting in my stomach every time I thought of Jake's tragic history. I wanted him to know he was safe with me, that I loved him no matter what.

Oh. Loved?

I rubbed my hand over my jaw as I thought about how easily that word had come to mind. My therapist had said everyone was deserving of love, but sometimes people had to learn that. I'd often wondered early on with my dad. We didn't have history at that point, so how could I know if I really loved him or if he actually loved me? Maybe he'd just taken me out of a sense of duty, you know?

Eventually, I learned to trust our relationship, but insecurity is an insidious bitch, crawling deep into your brain and infecting every relationship and interaction. Sometimes, I was still afraid that if I did something stupid enough, screwed up badly enough, that he might send me back to Grandpa.

If I applied that lesson to Jake, if I considered that he might also feel insecure — even though he mostly projected confidence — that might explain some of his behavior. I'd seen his hesitation, the way he held back. Sometimes, it almost felt like there was a wall between us.

In my head, I'd always assumed the problem was me, my inexperience coupled with my tendency to overthink, but maybe Jake was nervous too. Maybe he was more insecure than he let on.

I spotted him walking up the path, and I darted from the building. He smiled as he saw me rushing to him, and I followed my gut, pulling him down into a kiss, holding his neck, and feeling who he was in that moment — right then — happy that he was okay.

"Damn!" he said, grinning as we separated. "Miss me much?"

"All day," I admitted happily as I linked my arm through his and shoved my hands in my pockets. "Let's go! It's cold."

"I don't know. We could warm things up out here?" he teased. Just to be a shit he was making me pull him along.

“The kiss will keep me warm until we get to the dining hall,” I told him, tugging him by the arm.

“What about me though? I have needs,” he teased.

I pulled my hands free and slipped them into his pockets, latching onto his hands, because one, they were warm, and two, I needed him to understand exactly how freezing I was.

“Oh my God! Your hands are like ice!” He tried to back away, and I awkwardly followed him.

“I told you!” We were both laughing. “Is this meeting your needs?”

It suddenly struck me that I was happy — genuinely, truly happy — in that moment. The emotion swelled inside of me until I was so overwhelmed by the moment that I released his hands and wrapped my arms around him, pulling him close, and burying my face against his chest.

Before I could stop myself, the words left my mouth.

“God, I love you.”

Chapter 21 - Jake

I was almost to Kody's building when I saw him burst out of the door and run to me like I was a soldier returning from war after months on the front line.

He reached me and immediately, without any hesitation, grabbed my head and pulled me into a whopper of a kiss.

"Damn!" I said when he finally came up for air. "Miss me much?"

"All day," he said with an impish grin, linking his arm through mine. "Let's go! It's cold."

As someone who grew up on the east coast, I knew it wasn't all that cold yet, but I had to remind myself that Kody was a west-coast boy. He'd have to toughen up if he was going to survive a New York winter.

Then again, it left lots of opportunities for cuddling. And for teasing.

"I don't know," I said slowly, holding back just a little so he had to pull me along by the arm. "We could warm things up out here?"

He rolled his eyes dramatically. "The kiss will keep me warm until we get to the dining hall."

"What about me, though? I have needs."

Before I knew what he was doing, Kody pulled his hands from his pockets and shoved them into mine, grabbing my hands with an arctic little death grip. I tried to retreat, but he twined his frigid fingers with my warm ones, both of us laughing like crazy.

"Oh my God!" I protested. "Your hands are like ice!"

"I told you!" he said, almost unintelligible through all the giggling. "Is this meeting your needs?"

He held on tight, still giggling adorably.

Then, suddenly, something shifted in his expression. He almost looked distressed, or overwhelmed. Before I could ask what was wrong, he let go and stepped in close, wrapping his arms around my waist, and nuzzling his face against my chest.

I was caught off guard for a second, but then I returned the gesture, holding him tightly.

It...felt nice. Dangerously nice.

"God, I love you," he mumbled under his breath, almost to himself.

Just like that. Casual. Offhand. Tossed into the air like it was nothing. Like the words wouldn't detonate inside my chest.

I froze up. Not visibly, at least I hoped not. But inside me, everything seized. My heartbeat stumbled so hard it actually hurt, one brutal thud against my ribs before it started racing to catch up.

I don't think Kody noticed at first. He just pulled back from the hug with that soft little smile still lingering on his lips, grabbed my hand, and started tugging me toward the dining hall again, like he hadn't just altered the chemical composition of my bloodstream.

I realized I should say something. Anything.

"Mm," I managed. Which...was not a word, not even close to a word. Just a sound that could mean literally anything from agreement to mild indigestion.

Kody paused and looked back at me, tilting his head to look up at me, his brows knit together.

"You okay?"

"Yeah," I said too quickly. "Why wouldn't I be okay?"

Because someone impossibly sweet just handed you his heart, and your first instinct was to run.

His eyes searched my face carefully now, and guilt punched straight through me. I could practically see the moment uncertainty started creeping in around the edges of his expression. God. He thought he'd done something wrong.

Meanwhile I was internally unraveling because he'd done something right, something I suddenly wanted so badly it terrified me.

I let him pull me forward again, but my thoughts kept spiraling.

I love you.

The words replayed in my head, but slower this time. Clearer.

Not flirtatious. Not teasing. Not manipulative.

Real. Easy. And that was the terrifying part.

I'd heard those words before. Plenty of times. Usually right before someone wanted something.

A hand slipping into my back pocket while a drunk guy in a club murmured, "I love you, baby," after knowing me for forty-five minutes.

A slurred "Love you, man" passed between people too high to stand upright.

Fenton smiling lazily from silk sheets, wineglass dangling from elegant fingers while he told me I was 'special,' 'beautiful,' 'his favorite.' The closest he'd ever come to love was ownership wrapped in expensive packaging.

My family had practically made weaponized affection an art form. My father wrapped cruelty in Bible verses and called it love, acting like

every bruise, every cutting word, every punishment was for my own good, because he was “trying to save me.”

My mother perfected the quieter version of it — standing by, looking away, smoothing everything over with soft voices and excuses while letting it all happen, loving me just enough to make me feel guilty for resenting her.

My sister Gilly treated affection like a bargaining chip, turning warmth on and off depending on what she wanted from people, always keeping everyone emotionally off-balance so she could stay in control of the room.

And Todd...Jesus Christ. My brother Todd called his obsession protection. He'd kill for the people he loved, and somehow that was supposed to make you feel safe instead of terrified. In the end, he'd simply killed everyone when love warped into hate.

I'd learned the line between the two — between love and hate — was much, *much* finer than most people cared to consider.

In my family, love was never gentle. It was possessive, manipulative, suffocating. Love meant somebody wanted ownership over you. It meant they could hurt you and still expect gratitude and loyalty afterward. So when Kody said it softly against my chest like it was something pure and uncomplicated, some terrified part of me honestly didn't know how to survive it.

Love had always come tangled up with conditions, danger...survival. It was currency. It was leverage. It was seduction or control.

But Kody...

Kody had said it as easily as breathing. No agenda. No performance. No calculation. Just truth slipping out accidentally because he felt too much to keep it contained.

And somehow that scared me more than all the lies ever had. Because I believed him.

That was the problem. I believed him completely.

He tightened his fingers around mine as we walked, absentmindedly rubbing his thumb over my knuckles, and the simple affection nearly broke me. He fit against me so naturally it was frightening. Holding him had already started to feel instinctive, like my body recognized him before my brain did. When he'd buried his face against my chest a moment ago, my first impulse hadn't been panic. It had been home.

That realization made my stomach twist.

Nobody should feel like home to me. Not after everything.

And yet, Kody did.

His freezing hands shoved into my warm ones, his bright laughter bursting out of him uncontrollably, that ridiculous way he clung to my arm like he couldn't physically stand close enough. He loved openly. Earnestly. Without strategy.

And I didn't know what to do with something that pure. Because the more natural it felt to hold him, the more unnatural it felt that someone like him could possibly love someone like me.

A voice deep in my head — old, ugly, familiar — immediately started listing reasons why he shouldn't.

If he knew everything, he wouldn't be looking at you like that.

If he knew how low you sank. How many strangers. How many nights. How many times you sold pieces of yourself just to stay numb long enough to survive.

If he knew about the overdose. The body. The gun.

If he knew how badly broken you actually are—

I love you.

Did I love him? The question should have been simple, but it felt enormous...even dangerous.

I love you.

I thought about him constantly. I looked for him everywhere without meaning to. My day genuinely felt worse when I didn't see him, better the instant I did.

I love you.

I knew the exact shape of his smile before he laughed.

I love you.

I knew the way his voice softened when he got embarrassed.

I love you.

I knew he scrunched his nose when he was concentrating and chewed on his lower lip when he was nervous.

And somehow all of that mattered to me more than it should have after such a short time.

I wanted to protect him, I wanted to make him laugh. I wanted to kiss him until neither of us could breathe. I wanted—

My chest tightened painfully.

Maybe that was love, or the beginning of it anyway. Which should have felt wonderful. But it didn't. It felt like standing barefoot at the edge of a sea-slick cliff in the dark.

What if it wasn't love at all? What if he was just the first person who'd made me feel seen in a long time? Could I trust these feelings? Should I trust these feelings?

My chest tightened. What if I said it back and I didn't mean it the same way he did? What if I was just...chasing the feeling of being wanted?

What if he *did* mean it? What if he knew exactly what he was saying?

My stomach dropped, because if Kody really loved me — truly loved me — then eventually he was going to want all of me. Not the curated version. Not the charming college boy with the tragic-but-vague past. Not the funny stories and carefully edited confessions.

The real version.

And once he saw that version, I didn't know if he'd still be holding my hand like it was the easiest thing in the world.

That was the part I couldn't survive. Not losing him, exactly. Losing this look on his face.

The softness. The trust. The certainty.

Nobody had ever looked at me like I was something good before, and I had absolutely no idea how to believe I deserved it.

Kody stopped walking so suddenly I literally plowed into him, almost knocking him over. I grabbed him by the shoulders to steady him, and he gave me a lopsided grin that didn't quite reach his eyes. Those looked wary, like he suspected he'd messed up, and I felt another pang of guilt.

It wasn't fair to him that I was fucked up, that three simple words could freak me out so thoroughly. Maybe he was better off—

"You're quiet," he said, studying my face.

"I'm fine," I said, forcing a smile that must not have been very convincing, judging by the fact that his frown only deepened.

He dropped my hand. "Did I do something?"

"No," I said, too fast again as guilt exploded from a pang to a twisting sense of nausea that filled every corner of my body. "No, you didn't do anything."

He stood there watching me. I could tell he didn't believe me, that he was blaming himself. Which somehow made everything worse.

"I...I'm just not feeling well. I have a bit of a headache," I said.

I wasn't even lying. I just didn't mention that the headache had materialized approximately five minutes ago when he'd dropped the L-word and a vein had burst in my temple. Was I having an aneurysm? Was that even what an aneurysm was?

He frowned. "You should have told me. I wouldn't have dragged you out to dinner. I could have even brought you some food."

"Plot twist," I said weakly.

He didn't laugh.

"I...guess I just wanted to see you," I tried.

Again...not a lie.

He didn't look convinced, but he gave in. "Okay," he said slowly. "Are you sure you're alright to go to dinner?"

"I'll be fine." I sounded as unsure as I felt.

He sidled up next to me again, slipping under my arm and pressing himself against me, like proximity might fix whatever was wrong.

It didn't. If anything, it made it worse. Because I was suddenly acutely aware of him. Of how easily he fit into my side. Of how quickly he attached. Of how ready he seemed to be for something I wasn't sure I was equipped to give.

He pressed his face into my shoulder, gripping my arm like I might run off at any second. And honestly, maybe I would have?

I recognized that he was probably feeling insecure, and who could blame him? But the result was that he was clingier than usual. And I hated that a small, awful part of me registered it as too much.

Not because of him.

Because of me. Because I didn't know if I deserved it, didn't know if I could live up to it. Because if he knew everything, he might not be holding me like that at all.

My chest felt tight. Like there wasn't enough air, even though we were still outside. I was just about to explode from the tension building up inside me when we reached the dining hall.

He held the door open for me, and as I stepped inside, the warmth of the room, the sound of all those college kids yelling over each other, and the smells of the food washed over me in a staggering wave, making my stomach flip.

"I don't think I can't do this," I said suddenly.

Kody scanned my face. "Do...what?" he asked cautiously.

"Dinner. I'm sorry. I just...feel really sick all of a sudden."

Concern replaced everything else instantly. "Do you want me to get you water? Or—"

"No, it's okay," I cut in gently, already backing toward the door. "I think I just need to go back to my room and sleep it off."

The words felt like a cop-out even as I said them.

His face fell, just a little. He tried to hide it, but I saw.

“Oh. Okay.”

Guilt twisted sharp in my gut. I thought I might throw up. I needed to get out of there.

“I’m sorry,” I added backing away. “I didn’t realize how crappy I felt until just now.”

“It’s fine,” he said. “I mean, it’s not fine, but — you know. It’s okay.”

“Sorry,” I repeated.

“I can walk you back—” he started.

“You don’t have to.”

“I know. I want to.”

I knew he meant well, but I needed time alone, space to think.

“No, you’re already here,” I said firmly. “You should just eat. I’ll be okay.”

He looked crestfallen but nodded. “Text me if you feel worse?”

“I will.”

Another pause.

His eyes flicked up to mine, searching for something.

Reassurance? Confirmation? I wasn’t sure, and I didn’t know how to give him what he needed.

He gave me a small smile, leaned in like he might hug me, but then seemed to think better of it. He settled for a quick squeeze of my hand instead.

“Feel better,” he said.

“Yeah. Thanks.”

I left, shoving my hands in my pockets, head down, mind spinning.

I love you.

The words echoed again, softer this time. Heavier.

Did I love him? Maybe. Something close to it, or at least I was heading there fast.

Which should have felt good. Instead, it felt like standing at the edge of something I wasn’t even sure I could survive.

If I was going to let myself fall into that, he had to know. And that meant I had to tell him.

And I had no idea what would happen after that.

When I got back to my room, I was extremely grateful to find it empty. The last thing I wanted to do right then was deal with Foster. Or even Brayden, for that matter. It felt like a storm was raging inside my head.

I wanted a joint. No. I wanted something stronger. Maybe some benzos. Hell, I would have settled for a stiff drink. That thought made me remember Foster's fridge full of booze.

No one would have to know. It would just help me take the edge off. That's all.

I walked over to Foster's fridge and squatted in front of it, staring at the dented door like it was going to make the decision for me.

Beer. Cheap vodka. Whiskey. Whatever disgusting fruit-flavored thing he and his hookups drank out of red plastic Solo cups.

It was all right there. One pull. One numb little burn down my throat. One blessed hour where my brain would finally shut the fuck up.

The hum of the refrigerator filled the room.

I wrapped my arms around my knees and leaned forward slightly, forehead almost touching the door.

Jesus Christ. I hadn't wanted a drink so badly in months. Sure, I'd had passing thoughts. Moments. Triggers. The guys doing coke at the club. Smelling weed at parties. The joint the dog ate.

But this? This felt sharp. Immediate. Predatory.

And the worst part — the really horrifying part — was finally realizing what had triggered it.

It wasn't fear, or grief, or loneliness. It was love. Or the possibility of it, anyway.

My stomach twisted hard.

I love you.

Kody loved me.

The thought hit differently now that I was alone with it. Out there with him, I'd barely been able to process it through the panic. But now it echoed through the silence of the room with nowhere to hide from it.

God, I love you so much.

Those were his exact words.

...so much.

I dragged a hand over my face hard enough to hurt.

The thing that really made me sick — the thing I could barely admit to myself — was realizing that I had felt more emotionally stable when I thought this thing between us was temporary, when I assumed that eventually he'd find out who I really was and leave.

That made sense to me. That fit the rules. People wanted me until they knew me. They loved the version of me they invented in their heads, but eventually they saw the rot underneath.

I understood rejection. I could prepare for rejection. Build walls around it. Survive it.

But Kody looked at me like I was worth loving. Right now. Not someday. Not after redemption. Not after I became somebody easier or less fucked up. Now.

And it destabilized the hell out of me. Because hope was dangerous. Hope made you careless. Hope made you believe things.

I squeezed my eyes shut.

That was the real reason I wanted a drink. Not because I wanted to party. Not because I missed being high.

I wanted out. Out of my own skin. Out of the unbearable vulnerability of being loved by someone good.

I'd spent so long preparing myself for abandonment that I genuinely didn't know how to survive affection. And Jesus Christ, wasn't that pathetic?

I laughed once under my breath, sharp and humorless.

A year sober, and apparently the thing most likely to break me wasn't trauma or violence or grief. It was a sweet boy with cold hands and honest eyes telling me he loved me like it was the easiest thing in the world.

My throat tightened suddenly.

I didn't know how to reconcile his softness with the person I knew myself to be.

The refrigerator hummed steadily in front of me.

One drink, my brain whispered. Just enough to quiet down.

I stared at the handle.

Then I thought about Kody's face if he ever found out. He would be deeply disappointed. He'd be hurt. Concerned. But not judgment, though, in some ways, that might be easier to deal with. But the idea of hurting him made something inside me recoil violently.

"Fuck," I whispered.

I stayed there another minute anyway, crouched in front of the fridge like an idiot, fighting with myself in absolute silence, until I finally stood up so abruptly my knees cracked.

My heart was still racing. But the moment had passed. Barely.

Maybe I should call Dr. Patel. She said I could if I ever needed to.

But it was late. After work hours. I'd probably be interrupting dinner.

If I was being honest with myself, I knew those were all just excuses. The real reason was that I knew what she'd say: "But you didn't give in, and that's what matters."

On the surface, I knew she was right. She'd explained — over and over — that those urges weren't failings on my part. They were all part of recovery. It was how my brain was used to coping with stress, well-worn neural pathways, blah, blah, blah. I'd heard it all before, repeatedly, and yet the temptation still shook me every time.

More than all that, though, the biggest reason was that I knew she'd ask me if I'd found a support group yet. And the answer was still no.

I wasn't sure why I kept putting it off. Except maybe part of me did know.

I'd chosen this school on purpose — a clean break, a chance to start over.

Because the truth was, there was already a gulf between me and most of these kids, and it felt like an unbridgeable one.

They hadn't watched their entire family get murdered. They hadn't been tied to a bed by their own brother while he calmly described all the unspeakable things he was going to do to them before he killed them. They hadn't taken whatever a stranger offered — smoked it, swallowed it, snorted it — just to blur a face they couldn't unsee, a touch they couldn't scrub off their skin. They didn't know what it was like for the smell of blood to linger in your nose for years, phantom and inescapable.

They hadn't looked up at a man old enough to be their father while he used them and spat on them, telling them exactly what they were worth — nothing.

They hadn't woken up in a hospital bed, black charcoal ringing their lips, to find out they were a suspect in a murder.

That kind of history doesn't exactly scream freshman-year experience.

And yet, somehow, I'd found people who liked me anyway.

Maybe they didn't know everything — they definitely didn't know everything — but they knew enough. Enough to walk away, if they wanted to. But they hadn't. They'd stayed.

So the idea of walking into an NA meeting — or AA, or whatever acronym fit the day — felt like stepping backward instead of forward. Like volunteering to redraw that line between me and everyone else in thick, permanent ink.

What if someone saw me going in? What if someone I knew was already there? Just like that, I wouldn't be Jake the college student anymore. I'd be Jake the addict. Again.

I wasn't sure I could bear that.

If I couldn't call Dr. Patel, I knew I needed to talk to someone. I pulled my phone out and dialed Killian.

He picked up on the second ring. "Hey, Jakie!"

The nickname felt like a lifeline. It was familiar...safe.

"Hey...uh, do you have a minute?"

There was a beat, then, "Of course." He was all business now. He must have heard something in my voice. "Is something wrong?"

"Yes. No. I mean...I don't know." I ran my hand through my hair. "I just — I need to talk to somebody."

"I'm here. Talk to me."

I took a breath. "Kody told me he loves me."

Killian was quiet while he processed. He was very good at that.

"...and?" he prompted when I didn't immediately continue.

"And I freaked out."

"Okay," he said slowly. "Let's rewind. Who is Kody?"

I blinked. "Wait. You don't know about Kody?"

"Apparently not."

Had I really told Judy about Kody and not my bestie?

"Wow. I'm a terrible friend."

"You are," he agreed easily. "I feel betrayed. Now start talking."

Despite everything, I laughed. "He's a guy here."

"Well, duh. Unless you went straight, which would really be burying the lede, I figured he was a guy."

I ignored him. "He goes to VRU. We're...sort of seeing each other."

"Jake," he said, and I could hear the grin in his voice, "that's awesome. I'm happy for you."

"Yeah, well...hold that thought. Because he dropped the L-word tonight."

"Right, you started with that." A pause. "How long have you been seeing each other?"

"Officially? Like...three or four weeks, I guess."

"And unofficially?"

"We've been orbiting each other since we arrived for orientation. He works at the coffee shop I go to. And we kept running into each other on campus. We just started talking. And then our friends kind of set us up, and things developed from there. So it's not completely out of nowhere, but still—"

"Still fast," Killian finished.

"Yes. Thank you."

"Okay. So. Any red flags?"

"No!" I said quickly. "That's the problem. He's...great. He's sweet, and kind of innocent, and—"

"Innocent how?"

"He was a total virgin when we met. Not even a kiss."

"When you met, huh? Is...that really relevant?"

"You know what I mean," I said, rolling my eyes even though he couldn't see it. "I've been his first for a lot of things."

"Whoa! Okay, that's definitely too much information."

"No! We haven't...done anything," I explained quickly. "I mean, we've kissed, but that's it. I was his first kiss. That's all I meant. And I'm the first guy he's dated."

Killian let out a low whistle. "Yeah, that's a lot of new feelings hitting him at once."

"Exactly."

"So maybe he just...said it. Because he's feeling everything for the first time and doesn't have a filter yet."

"Yeah," I said. "I thought of that."

"Did he expect you to say it back?"

"I don't think so. He didn't act like it. Honestly, he kind of pretended he didn't say it at all."

"Then it probably slipped," Killian said simply.

"Yeah."

A pause.

"Then why are you spiraling?" he asked gently.

I exhaled, long and slow. "Because I really like him."

"Okay. That's allowed."

"No, I mean...I really like him." I swallowed. "Like, I could see myself...falling in love with him."

There was a shift in Killian's tone. "Jake," he said softly, "that's not a bad thing."

"Isn't it?" I laughed weakly. "Because I haven't told him everything."

"So?"

"So it's not just, like, a fun fact. It's a whole...situation."

"And you think he won't be able to handle it."

"I'm afraid he won't want to handle it."

Killian didn't answer right away.

"You know you're going to have to tell him eventually, right?" he said finally. "If this keeps going."

"I know."

“Because otherwise you’re building something on half-truths. And that doesn’t hold up when things get real.”

“I know,” I repeated, quieter this time. “That’s what scares me. Things have been...good here. Better than I expected. I don’t want to blow that up.”

“Hey.” His voice sharpened slightly. “You’re not blowing anything up by being honest about your life.”

“It feels like it.”

“Yeah, well, feelings aren’t always reliable narrators.”

I huffed. “Says the guy who literally solves crimes based on vibes.”

“They’re educated vibes,” he corrected. “And right now your vibe is fear, not fact.”

I leaned back against the wall, closing my eyes. “It’s not just that.”

“What else?”

I hesitated. “When he said it, I just...freaked out. I couldn’t get out of my head. We were supposed to get dinner together, and I bailed. Made up some excuse and went back to my room and basically had a breakdown.”

“Okay.”

“I almost drank,” I admitted.

There was a brief pause.

“Okay,” Killian said again, slower this time.

“But that counts,” I rushed on. “It counts that I almost did.”

“No,” he said firmly. “It doesn’t count. Not the way you think it does.”

“It does to me.”

“Jake. You were triggered. You had a moment. And you didn’t drink.” His voice was steady, grounding. “That’s what matters.”

I didn’t respond.

“You didn’t give in,” he continued. “You made a different choice. You were strong in a moment of weakness. That’s the whole point of recovery.”

“It didn’t feel strong,” I muttered.

“It rarely does in the moment. But you called me. That’s also part of it, you know. Not doing this alone.”

I swallowed. “Yeah.”

“Which brings me to something you’re probably not going to love hearing.”

“That’s never a good start.”

“You need more support than just me and Judy,” he said.

I tensed immediately. "I have a therapist."

"You talk to her every other week."

"I can increase it if I need to."

"Okay, and what about the rest of the time?" Killian countered.

"Jake, you're in a new place, under a lot of stress, starting a new relationship, dealing with triggers — you can't white-knuckle your way through that."

"I'm not white-knuckling—"

"You just told me that you almost drank today."

I flinched.

"Okay," he softened. "That came out harsher than I meant. But you see my point."

I did. I just didn't like it. "I don't want to go to meetings," I said quietly.

"Why?"

"Because then I'm...that again." I struggled to put it into words.

"Jake the addict. Not just Jake."

"You are Jake," Killian said simply. "All of it. The good parts and the messy parts."

"Yeah, but here? I get to just be normal."

"Normal people struggle. Normal people need help."

"It doesn't feel normal."

"I know." A beat. "But isolating yourself definitely isn't going to make it better."

I rubbed my forehead. "What if someone sees me going in?"

"And what if they do?"

"They'll know."

"They'll know you're taking care of yourself," he said. "Which is actually a pretty attractive quality, in case you were wondering."

"That's not how it works in my head."

"I gathered."

I was quiet for a long moment.

"I haven't really connected with the whole twelve-step thing," I admitted. "The higher power stuff, it just doesn't...work for me."

"Why not?"

"Because...if there is a higher power, then it must be some sort of sick, twisted, sadistic monster to allow the sorts of horrible things I've experienced in my life. I...I don't want any part of that. I don't believe in God. I don't believe that some imaginary deity can restore me or forgive me or that I have to have some sort of relationship with it in order to be sober. If

anything, if there is a God, he owes me an apology. He needs to ask for my forgiveness.”

“I can understand why you would feel that way. And honestly, I agree with you.”

“You do?”

“Yes. I’ve seen too much, too many horrible things, to believe there’s some kindly, all-loving man in the sky. I think it’s bullshit used to control people. But AA isn’t your only option, right? There are other groups. Peer support, campus resources. Find what works for you.”

“I don’t even know where to start.”

“Start small,” he said. “Google up. Go once. You don’t have to commit your soul. Just...don’t do this alone.”

I exhaled slowly. “Okay,” I said, though it came out more like a question than a commitment.

“I’m serious, Jake,” he added. “You’ve come too far to try to carry all of this by yourself.”

“I know.”

“And for the record?” His tone lightened just a little. “A guy liking you enough to accidentally tell you he loves you is not a crisis.”

I snorted. “Feels like one.”

“That’s because you’re you.”

“Rude.”

“Accurate.”

I smiled despite myself.

“Just take it one thing at a time,” he said. “You don’t have to decide everything tonight. Not about Kody. Not about a support group. Not about your entire past. Just breathe. Stay sober. But maybe look for a support group.”

I sighed. I knew he was right. The fucker usually was, infuriatingly enough.

“Thanks, Kill,” I said.

“Always.”

We hung up, and I stared at my phone for a long moment. Then, reluctantly, I opened my browser.

Chapter 22 - Kody

I'd blown it.

How could I have been such a baby? Everyone knows you never say 'I love you' first. Now he thinks I'm some needy little bitch, and who could blame him? I mean, a handful of dates and I'm tossing out love like it's not a big deal? Like I was talking about iced coffee?

I watched Jake for a minute as he walked away, and I felt so...not worth the effort.

"Watch out, bro," a guy said, nudging past me.

"Sorry." I got out of the way.

Despite being unhappy, I *was* also hungry. Plus, the last thing I wanted to do was leave and look like a bigger baby than I already did if Jake saw me. He'd think I was following him, stalking and being creepy. Clingy.

Fuck.

I got in line and picked out some food. I didn't see anyone I really knew, which was fine, because I wasn't in the mood to be social anymore anyway, so I just picked an empty spot and ate without tasting.

Okay genius, why did you say that? Do you even know what you're talking about? I turned that over in my head and was a little surprised by the answer.

I knew what crushes felt like — and I'd definitely had one on Jake — but somewhere along the way it had changed into something deeper, steadier. I loved his gentle teasing, and I'd started looking for openings to fire back, just so he couldn't score all the points. Trading jabs with him had become its own kind of flirtation, a game I never got tired of playing.

And then there were the little things — the parts of him I'd somehow become quietly attached to. Like the sleepy, slightly vacant look he wore in the morning before caffeine brought him fully online. The way his face softened after the first sip of the coffee *I* made him. It made me weirdly happy knowing I could give him even that small piece of comfort, help start his day off just that much better.

But more than that, being with Jake felt easy in a way almost nothing else in my life ever had. I had started to feel like I didn't have to edit myself around him or hold back parts of who I was. I could be awkward, goofy, clingy, anxious — fully me — and somehow, he never made me feel like that was too much. If anything, he seemed to like me

because of those things, not in spite of them. It was almost as if he found my oddities endearing.

Somewhere between coffee runs, late-night texts, stolen kisses, and long conversations that never seemed long enough, we'd started building something real, something that felt important.

There was an *us*.

I realized that my conversation with Charlie had made me realize how much I'd grown to care about Jake. I *hated* to think about someone hurting him, making him feel bad, only seeing the outside or his past. While I was a big fan of his outside, he'd proven that his beauty went much farther than just skin deep. If he was a bad person, someone only out for himself, he could have gotten sex from me on any number of occasions and dumped me just like that. I would have given it up to him, drunk or fully sober.

Instead, he'd shown me nothing but respect. He hadn't taken advantage of me, even when I threw myself at him. He'd shown a lot of grace over my cooking disaster, turning the evening around before I could fold in on myself. He made time for me, showed interest in who I was and how I got to be the deranged mess I know I am. Jake cared about me.

And I'd put all of that at risk by just blurting out, 'I love you.'
Damn it!

It had just...slipped out. I'd hoped it was too low for him to hear, but I could tell by his reaction that he'd heard loud and clear. He probably felt pressured, or like I was immature for saying that so quickly.

But what are the damn rules? Is there an internationally standardized amount of time you're supposed to wait before telling someone how you feel? Do people just know that sort of thing? Where do you learn it?

One thing was for sure: it was out there now. There were no take-backsies. I couldn't rewind time and change the past.

So what happens next? That question ran in circles in my mind as I ate my meal, not tasting a single bite, and headed back to my dorm room.

I heard music through Nick's door, and that gave me an idea. I needed to talk to someone, and my roommate seemed like the best option.

I couldn't ask Charlie about love. I was pretty sure he'd never settled into that. Sure, he'd dated a lot more than me, but he was like a butterfly, never settling for long. Plus, Charlie would give me more crap than I needed at the moment.

Dad wasn't even a consideration. Sure, he and Brandon were in love, but I knew he'd freak out and start lecturing me like I was a dumb kid. I needed advice, not someone telling me I'd fucked up. I already knew that.

Nick, however, had some experience, and he was closer to my age. He'd get it. I remembered he'd mentioned that he'd been in love before during one of our chats. At the very least, he was definitely more experienced than me. Best of all, he was there.

But before I started that conversation, I needed to get my thoughts in order. I kicked off my shoes and changed for staying in.

I paced around my room for a while before gathering enough nerve to knock on Nick's door.

"Yo," he called.

I opened the door.

"Hey! I'm naked!" he yelled from his bed.

I jumped, but I could see that he was dressed just like I was, in sweats and a tee. He laughed at my reaction.

"Hah," I replied, not really in the mood for his goofiness at the moment.

He took an earbud out and set it in the case with its mate. "What's up?"

"Just chillin'." I leaned back against the door. "Where's Derek?"

"Uh." He looked at his phone. "I don't know. Unlike you and Jake, we're not attached at the hip. Or should I say the lip? We're supposed to hang tomorrow. I have some work I'm behind on, and I wanted to knock some of it out tonight."

"Huh. I kind of thought you'd just stay up all night and hang out with him instead."

"Oh, my friend, I've done that before, and it doesn't end with your old pal Nick getting a good grade. I want a future, and education is going to get me there, so...guys come second." He paused. "Preferably on my chest."

"Gross." I tilted my head. "But that's...unexpected. You guys seem so close. You know, with all the public fucking..." I smiled at him.

He rolled his eyes. "Okay, it wasn't *that* bad." He stretched and sat up.

"You know what I mean."

"Okay, yeah, we're close enough, I guess. He's hot, he has a personality, and we're pretty good together so far. Maybe he's a little territorial, but I feel good about it."

"Territorial how?"

"He doesn't like that I can be a little flirty."

"A little?"

He laughed. "Okay, I'm a big ol' flirt. But it's just harmless fun. He just hasn't figured that out yet. But he will."

I watched him. "Do you think it's love?"

His eyes grew wide, and he blew out a breath. "I don't know. I mean...not yet? I guess it depends on how you define love. I care about him, but I don't know if I'd say I *love* him. I don't think he loves me either."

"So how do you know?"

"Damn, Kode. This is deep shit. I...guess it's different for everyone. I'm not, like, an expert. I'm only nineteen."

"But you know more than I do. You said you'd been in love before. How did you know? And how do you know when somebody loves you?"

He rubbed his face. "Um...I just...felt it." He frowned and shook his head. "Don't say it. I know that's not helpful."

He stared up at the ceiling, searching for words. "There are so many different ways to show love. It's not always some big, romantic gesture. People who have been married for a while show love by doing the dishes or paying the bills or doing the laundry or vacuuming — things that might seem mundane from the outside but show that you care. You're maintaining the life that you've built together, you know? And then there's the little things you do to make that life better. Making them breakfast or taking them out somewhere they really enjoy. Maybe sometimes giving them the space to read a book or something in peace?"

Making them coffee in the morning?

"Yeah, but...it's different if you say it, right?" I pressed. "Like, out loud?"

"Oh, well, yeah. I mean, I guess I was talking about ways to show love or affection. Do I love Derek? I could, maybe? It's early days yet, though, you know? I think love develops over time. Attraction? That can be instant. Lust? Woo, boy. On sight. But love? You have to really know somebody before you can truly love them. At least that's what I think. Again, not an expert."

"Okay, then how do you know if it's really love or if it's just...lust? Or attraction?"

"I think you just know. But maybe that comes with experience? You have to have felt all of them, and then you can tell the difference."

I nodded to show I was listening, even if I didn't fully get everything he was saying. "And when is it okay to tell someone you love them?"

His eyes narrowed, and he stared at me as I tried not to squirm. "Shit," he finally said. "Which of you said it?"

I sighed. "You have to ask?"

He snorted and smiled. “Look, you both are so into each other it’s kind of relationship goals, really. You have this chill, wholesome thing going on, so...could I see Jake dropping the L-word on you? Not before you did, no. You’d definitely yap first.”

I wrinkled my nose. “But...do you think that’s a...mistake? Like too soon?”

He ran a hand through his hair. “It...depends? I mean, on the one hand, a person should know how you feel, but on the other, some people might feel pressured to say it back, especially if they’re not ready. Everybody moves through this stuff at their own pace. It depends on what they’ve experienced, how cautious they are, so many things. If he was thinking that this was just some...fling or something, he might not take it well.”

I didn’t get the impression that Jake thought of us as a fling, but he definitely hadn’t taken it well.

“Is there... I mean, are you supposed to wait for, like...a certain amount of time to pass? Like a month? Three?”

He shook his head. “It’s different for everybody. There’s no formula. And it’s always a risk to say it first. How did you tell him?”

I pressed my lips together. “We were meeting up to go to dinner. We were just talking, playing around, kind of being silly. I was cold, wanted to go faster; he was dragging things out to mess with me. I put my hands in his coat pockets, and he was bitching that my hands were cold.”

I looked away from Nick’s face. “It felt so... I dunno. I was just so happy, and...I guess that was it. I just felt so happy. I felt like I was going to explode from happiness. So I hugged him and said ‘I love you.’ But it was like...into his chest.” I looked down and then to him. “I didn’t think I’d said it loud enough for him to hear, but then he got weird.”

“Weird how?”

“When we got to the Commons, he said he had a headache and he felt sick and wanted to sleep it off. It was like he couldn’t get away fast enough.”

Nick made an “O” with his lips and blew out a breath. “Whew. Okay. Well. I think maybe it might have made him take a step back, kind of assess things. Jake seems like a good guy, from what I’ve seen. And I’ve dated enough bad ones — and probably *been* the bad guy more than once — to learn how to spot sketchy shit. Jake seems genuine. In some ways, he almost seems like you’re his first.”

I frowned. “Me? His first? Not even close.”

“What I mean is...if you use the apps to hook up, sometimes you end up feeling like you'll never make any real connections. They're sort of dehumanizing, I guess. But that's by design. They're not really trying to find your perfect match. They use the algorithm to create instant gratification, dopamine bursts to keep you coming back. So a guy gets on there and ends up on this circle jerk of a system where love or end-game happiness isn't usually the result, and after a while you don't really know what that even looks like anymore.”

He shrugged. “Then there's you guys. Right place, right time. I mean, your chemistry can be seen from the fucking international space station. All of a sudden, a guy who's maybe had his fair share of action starts to feel more than hookup energy...and he might not know what to do with that yet.”

I frowned and stared at a spot on the wall. Could it be that Jake had never had a relationship where he'd felt like he was in love? I knew his exterior attracted attention, but that wasn't enough to keep someone around — or it wasn't enough for Jake to want to keep someone around.

But whatever Jake and I had, it was based on more than just looks, so maybe Nick was onto something? Maybe he and I were building something real, even if I got ahead of the cart. Or whatever the saying was.

“What are you thinking?”

I looked back to Nick. “I was just trying to see if what you're saying makes sense to me. You've been in love, right?”

He nodded. “Yep. First love. Nothing's ever hit quite as hard.”

“But you're not in love with Derek?” I asked skeptically.

“Your honor, the prosecution is badgering the witness,” he said with a chuckle. “Like I said, no, I don't love him. At least, not yet. But feelings change over time. Like my first? Still love him. It's just...more brotherly these days. We'll always be close, but part of loving him was knowing I had to give him up, because he was in love with someone else. I didn't own him.”

My eyes went wide. “He cheated?”

He shook his head. “No. They were separated by a lot of miles and had broken up. And then they got back together. Sometimes, when it's real, those feelings don't just go away. But you can't force someone to be in love with you.” He sighed, then smiled at me. “I do have a suggestion, though.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“Maybe you shouldn't hang all your hopes on one person.”

“What do you mean? Like...date other people?”

“No, that’s not it. Just...it’s a lot of pressure to put on somebody to be your entire world.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You need some other friends.”

“I...I have you.”

“Yeah, you do. And I don’t intend to go anywhere. I have mad respect for our friendship. I already feel like we’re going to be tight for a long, long time. But I’m not all-knowing or anything, and maybe it would be a good idea for you to get to know more people in our community.”

I could practically see the air quotes. I tilted my head. “Why did you say community like that?”

He shrugged. “Because people are gonna people. Not everyone is like me or Jake or you. There will be people worth talking to, getting to know. Understanding more people’s path, people who share our sexuality, is always a good thing. Some of them might even be worth being friends with. But it’s always better to have a wider base of friends and family, my bro.”

I chewed on that for a moment, my mind skipping from idea to idea from our conversation, all while still feeling upset about Jake.

“So you mean going to one of those GSA meetings or something?” I finally said.

“That’s a good start. They meet on Tuesdays. How about we go this week?”

I thought again for a moment. “I’ll check my schedule.” I turned to go and stopped. “You know I... Thanks, Nick.” I glanced at him. “You’re right. This feels like real friends, and I know I’m a little too trusting, but...”

“No mushy, bro. It’s all good.”

I nodded and headed back into the shared space. I grabbed my laptop and sat down, staring at the screen as it booted up.

A streak of defiance bubbled up, as I thought to myself, *I’m allowed to love Jake. I should be allowed to tell him. It doesn’t mean he’s got to say it back.*

On the heels of that I had to admit, though, that Jake was allowed to feel at his pace, too, as much as I’d rather he’d tell me he loved me, too. I wondered what that moment might feel like when — *if* — it came, but then quickly pushed that thought away.

I picked up my phone and checked my calendar. I was free Tuesday night. Then I flipped to my text messages and reread the exchange I’d had with Jake about meeting up for dinner.

I quickly tapped out: *I hope you feel better.*

After a moment’s hesitation, I added a red heart and hit send.

Fuck it. I'm allowed.

Then I called out to Nick that Tuesday was good for me before trying to focus on my school work.

Monday was a mess.

Jake did text me back that he felt better after sleeping and thanked me for checking on him, but there were no emojis — heart or otherwise.

In my mind, that was a mixed bag, but it was okay for now.

He did come into the Morning Rush, but he was earlier than usual, and we were swamped. I barely had time to rush his coffee out to him. At least he gave me a hug and allowed a quick kiss on the cheek, so it was mostly all right. Part of me couldn't help but wonder if he'd timed his visit on purpose, though.

To be fair, he did stay to drink his coffee, so maybe that was to provide time in case I got a break, but we were balls-to-the-wall, and I didn't get to talk to him.

Which was probably better anyway, because, as much sense as Nick had made, I still felt like I owed Jake an apology. Maybe that would have just made things worse — let sleeping dogs lie and all that — but I felt bad that I'd put him in such an awkward position. I mean, I could see a logical path to a scenario where I could have kept that to myself...for now anyway.

Of course, I'd blurted it out in a moment of happiness, so maybe I just wasn't made for discretion.

After work I struggled off and on to pay attention in class, but my thoughts bounced back and forth between feeling justified and beating myself up. Mostly, though, I was feeling like I'd fucked things up. After all, Jake was pretty. Maybe he'd just liked the attention, and I'd just gone and made things too serious. That didn't entirely square with my experience of him, though, so I spent a decent part of my day feeling like I was being pulled in two directions.

I tried not to text Jake too much; the word 'clingy' kept flashing in my head like a warning. I settled for sending him a meme, and he sent back a laughing emoji.

I did ask what he was doing that night, and he let me know he had plans, but he didn't say what. I figured it would be *clingy* if I pushed him for details, so I left it. But I *so* didn't want to.

Resigned to brooding, I got dressed down to try and do some work before dinner, even though my heart and brain weren't in it.

I set my laptop up in our common area and settled on the futon. Instead of working, though, I found myself wondering what Jake was doing that he wouldn't just say what it was. My imagination was a terrible thing sometimes. I'd come up with a lot of things that mostly kept circling back to some variation of Jake having met someone else.

I couldn't even blame him if he did.

A needy little twink who says he loves you after a few dates is a red flag you could see from the moon. I'd probably scared him off, and there was no way Jake would stay single for long. In fact, he could be one of those headless torsos on Grindr right now. Or maybe he didn't even bother with being headless with a face like that.

That thought reminded me that I still had Grindr on my phone. I hadn't checked it since the day Nick and I set up my account, but once the idea of Jake being on there looking for my replacement infected my brain, I couldn't shake it.

I grabbed my phone and opened the app. I quickly scanned the grid of faces, chests, and blank profiles. At first glance, no Jake. Then I started tapping blank profiles to see if the description sounded like him.

After the third profile, it suddenly hit me that this was probably not the healthiest way to handle the situation. In fact, it was almost certainly the very definition of clingy. If I was trying to beat the rap of being a psycho twink, stalking a dating app looking for the guy you just blurted out "I love you" to maybe wasn't the move.

My phone chimed with the Grindr notification, and I sighed.

What was I even doing? What would I have done if I'd found him? Confronted him? Messaged him? Given up all hope and hurled myself from the roof of Hudson Hall?

I closed the app without bothering to check the message I'd received and set my phone down. Then I picked it back up, went to my app manager and deleted Grindr completely.

Just then, Nick wandered out of his room and looked around. I hadn't even realized he was home. He gave me a funny look.

"What?"

"Did I hear Grindr?"

"Um...yeah," I admitted. "I just deleted it."

He gave me a curious look. "Are you okay? You look like you're about to crash out." He paused. "What's going on?"

I scratched at the back of my neck. "I just feel stupid."

He chuckled. "Yeah? Welcome to being gay. I mean, probably applies to just being human too, but definitely gay. What's going on? Jake again?"

I looked away from him. "Yeah. We've barely talked since...you know. I asked what he was doing tonight, and he just said he was busy. But didn't say what he was doing. And after yesterday..."

"You think he's avoiding you?"

"Maybe. But it's mostly just not knowing..."

He flopped down on the futon with me. "Yeah. It lets your imagination run wild, right?"

I nodded and tried to hold in a sigh. "I mean, he'd have no trouble just going out and finding someone less clingy. He could open Grindr and—"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Let's back that truck up a second. First, while I agree that Jake's hot and all and he could get with someone—"

"Nick! Not helping!"

"Lemme finish!" he said with a laugh. "You have the same thing going. I know you don't think of yourself that way, but just like there are guys who will pant over Jake, there are plenty to drool over you. You don't give yourself nearly enough credit. You could find somebody else just as fast."

"But I don't want somebody else!"

"Then trust that Jake feels the same."

"But..."

"You have to give Jake at least a little time to work through this in his head."

I stood up and stalked a few feet away before turning to Nick. "Why is it such a big deal? I was just *happy*. I said I *loved* him. It's not like it's this horrible...awful...thing."

He rubbed his cheek. "I get it, but like it or not, the L-word is a big deal. Some people toss it around like they do 'friend.' Everyone they meet is a friend, whether they actually have a relationship or not, and they do that because they don't know what it really means. He could be thinking about what love means to him and how you saying it impacts him."

I ran a hand through my hair. "So why wouldn't he just say study group or orgy or whatever. Why be so vague?"

He shrugged. "Did you ask him?"

Sullenly I replied, "No. I didn't want to seem clingy after blurting that out."

He sighed. "Look. I agree with you that Jake is being a cryptic little bitch, but you need to work out some of this negative energy, so come on. Let's go to the gym."

I stared at him. "What? Why?"

"We're gay." He stood and headed into his bedroom.

"What does that have to do with anything?" I called out.

He appeared in his doorway with a shirt in his hand. "The gym is like therapy for gay men."

I frowned. "No, therapy is like therapy."

"Listen, you burn off some energy, stay in shape, and you have dance music in your ears to help keep you from brooding over your dumb hot boyfriend."

I crossed my arms. "He's not dumb." I thought for a second, then added, "Or my boyfriend."

He smirked. "You're so cute when you pout."

"He's not!"

"Semantics. Come on, get changed."

I sighed as he headed back into his room.

Well...maybe the gym would be better than what I was doing? Granted, the bar was so low you could step over it. Almost anything was better than spiraling about things you can't control.

With a growl, I went into my room and pulled on joggers and a tee shirt. I carried my kicks out to the shared space and sat down to re-tie them so they wouldn't come off on the Stairmaster, leading to some kind of embarrassingly horrible death.

"You can't wear that."

I looked up to find that Nick had changed into a tank with low-cut arm holes that showed off his shoulders, his sides, and one perky nipple. He'd paired that with the tiniest pair of running shorts I'd ever seen — like real running shorts with the split up the side. They were almost obscene.

"What are you talking about? I'm sure as hell not wearing *that*."

"Hey, I look good. You look like a hetero in those joggers. And what is that baggy-ass shirt?"

"So what? I'm supposed to wear..." I gestured at his exposed legs. "I'll freeze."

"You'll get warm while we run to the gym. You clearly need a crash course in how to gay gym."

I narrowed my eyes. "I'm not wearing shorts. It's too damn cold."

He rolled his eyes. "Kody. Let me explain this in simple terms for you. For gay men, the gym has multiple functions. To work out, sure, but

even more importantly, it's to show off. Your primary objective is to make other guys thirsty.”

I stared at him.

“I know, I know. They always say you should focus on yourself, but everyone looks at everyone else in those mirrors.”

I rubbed the side of my face and wondered if I was getting a headache. “Why do I care?”

He sat down beside me. “Because it’s a dopamine rush. Getting checked out is like an affirmation. It doesn’t mean anything besides someone noticed you, and you, my friend, need noticing.” He shook his head. “You go around all the time talking about how hot Jake is, like he’s doing you a damn favor for noticing you. Not only is he not like that, you shouldn’t ever be with someone who is. Besides, it wouldn’t hurt you to get some reinforcement that isn’t from a guy on Grindr asking you to be his ‘good boy.’”

I shifted uncomfortably. “Well, I—”

“Kody, and I say this as a friend, you’re a good-looking guy. I’ve seen you in your panties, remember? You look like a runner. You have great legs, so let ’em breathe a little. I have a tank you can wear — I save it for going out, but I think it’s really too small for me. I’m sure you have some shorts that make you feel sexy. Go put them on, and, you know, just...let some of your own hotness out.”

I stared at him. “I. Uh...”

I don’t think anyone had ever really told me I was hot. Cute maybe. I mean, Jake liked me, so I guess... I mean, what could it hurt?

“Whattaya say? Let me gym you up, bruh. Let’s go sweat out some of this angsty shit, huh?”

You know, sometimes you just have to go along with whatever dumb thing your friend is doing to try and cheer you up.

“Okay. Okay! Let’s do this gym thing.”

He clapped his hands together. “Yes! Okay, go find shorts, and I’ll get that tank, and we will go beast mode.”

I doubted I was capable of beast mode, but I didn’t want to disappoint Nick, so I kept that opinion to myself while I went to change into shorts.

Five minutes later, I was *freezing*.

“I can’t believe I’m doing this. Are you trying to kill me?”

“Feel the burn, baby!” Nick called back from about ten strides ahead of me.

I growled and tried to keep pace, not really able to talk to him.

Nick was familiar with the campus gym, being a jock. The meathead at the front desk even greeted him by his last name. “Yo, Pederson!” Such a weird jock thing, calling people by their last name.

I tried not to roll my eyes. They had their own little culture, and I was an interloper, a tourist at best. It wasn't nice to make fun of the locals.

Nick led me through some warm-up stretches, followed by all kinds of things that made me sweaty and sore. Instead of what I'd pictured, which was going off to do our own thing, Nick was acting like my personal trainer. He'd show me how to do something, then have me copy him.

I was surprised by how fast an hour went by. I wouldn't say I'd enjoyed it, but I had to admit I had been distracted.

We went into the lockers to get to the bathrooms, and Nick stopped us in front of the floor-to-ceiling mirrors.

“Aye,” he said, flexing his bicep. “I like post-workout selfies. Veins be poppin’.”

“You look like a ball of sweat,” I said with a laugh.

He pulled his phone out and then pulled his shirt off, flexing his biceps again and taking a picture. He made a few taps on the screen as I admired his chest.

“That'll hold Derek over until later,” he said, grabbing his shirt and slipping his phone back into his pocket. “Come on, First Time. Let's take one for ole Jakers. Give him something to think about.”

“What? No.” I laughed nervously.

“Kode. You love the boy. So show him who you are. How hot you are. Remind him that you could get another him in a minute. Love is a big word, but no self-respecting gay can ignore a thirst trap.”

I chewed the inside of my lip. “But...don't you think it'd look desperate?”

He raised an eyebrow. “No. It's a statement. You're here. Where is he?”

“That's a question, not a statement.”

“Just do it.”

I moved from chewing my lip to chewing my cheek and looked at the mirror. Looking back was a short guy, proportionally built. Dark brown hair, eyes that looked kind of silvery-grey in the weird locker room light. My shoulders still held a ghost of my darker summer tan from swimming and forced yard labor.

I couldn't see what Nick saw, but maybe he was right. It couldn't hurt to show Jake what he was missing. Besides, it's just a gym selfie, right? Not like I was pulling my shorts off.

Nick pulled up a little at the bottom of my shirt. “Come on. Make him thirsty.”

I glanced at Nick and then decided not to think and just do.

I yanked off the tank and pulled my phone out. I assessed myself for a moment. I had some definition — pecs, even if they weren’t an athlete’s. No six pack, but my stomach was flat. Was I too thin?

Maybe this was a bad idea.

“Damn. Let’s go, super twink.”

I couldn’t help grinning at Nick and his silliness. Still smiling, I tried flexing my biceps and took a picture. I looked at my screen and cringed. “Jesus. Do I even have arm muscles?”

“Yes, you do,” Nick said firmly. “Here.” He took my phone and held it up to take a picture. I looked back at him feeling self-conscious.

“Come on. We’re sending your boyfriend something so he can drool. I’ll just zoom in on your nips for him—”

I laughed and reached for the phone, but he jumped back out of reach. “Nick!”

“There.” He tapped my screen.

“There what?”

“I took a picture.”

“I wasn’t ready!”

“I know.”

“Let me see.”

“No.” He was still tapping away.

“Nick...” I whined.

“Sent. If he doesn’t like what he sees, he’s just dumb. Or should clean his screen.”

Nick returned my phone, and I immediately pulled up the picture he’d sent. I was smiling, starting to reach toward the camera. The muscles in my chest looked like they’d tightened up a little. Nothing scandalous, but it wasn’t the sexy pic I’d envisioned in my head. It could have been worse. At least they weren’t close ups of my nipples like Nick had threatened.

I tapped out a quick message to Jake: *Sorry! Nick took me to the gym and grabbed my phone. Why do people take gym selfies? I’m sweaty and gross!*

“Okay. Ready to run back?” Nick asked, emerging from a bathroom stall.

My eyes went wide. “Oh shit. Are you seri—” I sighed. “Of course. It’s how we got here.”

I typed to Jake again before pulling the thin tank on: *Now I have to run back in this cold. WTF?*

Now...if only he'd answer.

Chapter 23 – Jake

I was still processing Kody's bombshell the next day.

His declaration of love was the first thing on my mind when I woke up, sitting there like an unopened email I was afraid to click. I didn't want to punish him while I sorted out my own mess, but I also knew I needed some space to think. So I split the difference — I answered his texts, kept things light, and stuck to my routine, including my usual stop at The Morning Rush before class.

The coffee shop was slammed when I got there, the line snaking halfway to the door. Kody caught my eye once from behind the counter and took a moment to run my coffee out to me, but there wasn't time for much more than that. Which, honestly, was a relief.

I wasn't avoiding him, not exactly, but I also wasn't ready to have any kind of real conversation about what had happened. Or what hadn't happened.

Knowing Kody, the silence was probably eating at him.

And the worst part was, it was eating at me too.

I kept catching myself reaching for my phone between classes, wanting to text him something stupid and normal just to feel connected to him again. A meme. A video. A selfie. Anything that would let me pretend I wasn't quietly freaking out over the fact that the idea of someone loving me felt so...terrifying.

Then again, maybe I was projecting. Maybe he was fine. Maybe he didn't even realize what he'd said, or how it had affected me.

Either way, I had enough on my mind without replaying the L-word incident on a loop. I'd found a support group holding an introductory meeting that evening, and I'd decided to go. I wasn't expecting miracles, but it sounded different enough from the others I'd tried that I was willing to give it a shot.

Classes, unfortunately, required a level of focus I did not possess.

I made it to my first lecture on time, slid into a seat, opened my notebook with every intention of being a responsible, academically-inclined human being...and then proceeded to write "I love you" in the margin without realizing it.

I stared at it for a solid ten seconds, then aggressively scribbled over it like I was censoring my own brain.

The professor was talking — about something important, probably — but the words just kind of washed over me. Every so often, a phrase

would stick, but none of it fully landed. My notes ended up being a chaotic mix of half-sentences and unrelated thoughts, most of which somehow circled back to Kody.

My second class wasn't much better. I caught myself checking my phone more than once, even though I knew there wouldn't be anything new. He'd texted me a meme. I'd responded with a laughing emoji. Riveting stuff. Totally normal. Definitely not the communication pattern of two people quietly avoiding a conversation that probably needed to happen.

A little later he asked what I was up to that evening, clearly a hint that he wanted to hang out. I could have just said I was going to a support group or something, but I felt like that might invite more questions than I was feeling open to, so I kept things vague and just said I had plans.

By the time I made it to my afternoon class, I gave up pretending I was retaining anything and focused instead on just being there and not spiraling.

Which, given recent events, felt like a reasonable bar.

As the day dragged on, my thoughts kept circling the same questions — Did he mean it? Did I feel the same way? How much did he really know about me? How much did he need to know? — until they all blurred together into a low, constant hum.

By the time my last class ended, I felt wrung out, like I'd run a mental marathon without actually going anywhere.

Which, I supposed, made it the perfect night to try something new.

I hovered outside the door longer than I'd like to admit.

It was just a classroom. Fluorescent lights. A printed sign taped crookedly to the door that read "**SMART Recovery – Intro Meeting**" in bold, slightly smudged ink.

My hand hesitated on the handle as I tried to psych myself up.

I found them online. They didn't sound like the other meetings I'd tried. No higher power, no folding myself into something I don't believe in just to make it work. This was supposed to be practical and science-based, providing tools and strategies and actual coping mechanisms. That's what they said on the website, anyway. It almost sounded too good to be true.

I exhaled, pushed the door open, and stepped inside.

There were maybe a dozen people scattered around a loose circle of chairs. Some looked like they'd been there before — comfortable, chatting quietly. Others had that same tight, uncertain posture I recognized in myself. New. Maybe a little scared.

A woman at the front smiled warmly. "Hey, welcome. First time?"

“Uh, yeah,” I said, immediately clocking how loud my voice sounded in the room.

“Great. Grab a seat anywhere. We’re just about to get started.”

I nodded and scanned for the least conspicuous option — and froze.

Becca.

She was sitting hunched slightly forward, hands clasped between her knees. Her hair was pulled back, messy, like she hadn’t bothered with it. There was no makeup. None of her usual sharp, biting confidence. She just looked...tired.

For a split second our eyes almost met, then she looked away so fast it was like I wasn’t there at all. The message was clear and, frankly, welcomed.

I almost turned around and walked out, but I remembered Killian's words. Besides, I was already there, and she’d already seen me. And she was there too.

I swallowed and forced my feet to move, taking a seat on the opposite side of the circle. My heart was beating a little too fast.

The woman who'd greeted me turned out to be the facilitator. She was in her mid-forties, well put together, with a calm voice, the kind of person who could probably talk down a hostage situation.

She welcomed everyone and started explaining the basics of SMART Recovery, which stood for Self-Management and Recovery Training. Focus on thoughts, behaviors, patterns, she said. No labels if you don’t want them. No one-size-fits-all.

I found myself...listening. Actually listening.

It made sense. More than the others ever did.

She talked about urges like waves. About not fighting them head-on but learning how to ride them out. About examining the thoughts that lead to behavior instead of just trying to suppress the behavior itself.

It was...practical, grounded, and hopeful in a way that didn’t feel like a sales pitch.

Then we got to the sharing part.

“Only if you’re comfortable,” the facilitator stressed. “You can pass. But if you want to check in — how your week’s been, what brought you here — that’s what this space is for.”

A few people went, talking about small things, big things, slips, wins. The room stayed steady through all of it — no judgment, no over-the-top reactions. Just...listening.

Then Becca shifted in her seat. I didn't look at her directly, but I felt it as the room subtly re-focused their attention.

"Um," she started, voice quieter than I'd ever heard it. "I, uh... I'm here because I messed up this week."

No one reacted. No gasps. No tension. Just attention.

"I thought I could go to a club with some friends," she continued. "Just...have a drink. Be normal about it." A small, humorless laugh. "Turns out I cannot, in fact, be normal about it."

A few soft chuckles. Not at her. With her.

"I ended up taking molly," she said, more bluntly now. "Which was...not the plan. At all." She shrugged, but it was tight. Defensive. "So. I guess I'm here because I need to...reset. Get my bearings again."

There was a pause. Then the facilitator nodded. "Thank you for sharing that."

Someone across the circle added, "Yeah, that happens. You think you've got it under control until you don't."

Another voice: "The fact that you came back says a lot."

"Seriously," someone else said. "That's the win."

Becca nodded once, eyes still down, but her shoulders loosened just a fraction.

I sat there, absorbing it. No shame spiral. No condemnation. No "start over from zero" energy.

Just...okay, that happened. Now what?

When it was my turn, I almost passed. Then I heard Killian's voice in my head — *don't do this alone* — and cleared my throat.

"Uh. I'm Jake. This is my first meeting." My voice felt too loud again, but I kept going. "Here, I mean. I, um...almost drank this week."

The words hung there.

"I didn't," I added quickly. "But I thought about it. A lot. And it freaked me out more than I expected."

A few nods. Understanding. Not alarm.

"I've tried AA and NA but just didn't connect with the whole higher power thing, but then I found about...this online. So I figured I should probably...give it a shot."

"Glad you did," the facilitator said simply, and she moved on to the next person.

After the meeting wrapped, people lingered in small clusters. I was halfway to the door — mission accomplished, social battery depleted — when a voice stopped me.

"Hey, there. Jake, was it?"

I turned.

An older Black man was walking toward me. He looked to be in his late fifties, maybe early sixties, tall, solid build, salt-and-pepper beard, dark eyes that missed nothing. I couldn't remember his name, but from his floral-patterned shirt, tight faded jeans, and polished black boots, I guessed he might be gay, and I braced myself to get hit on.

"I'm Gus," he said, offering his hand.

"Jake."

"First time, huh?"

"Was it that obvious?"

He smiled. "Only because I've been that guy."

I relaxed a little, shaking his hand. Maybe he wasn't just going to flirt.

"You did good," he said.

"I talked for, like, thirty seconds."

"Yeah," Gus said. "And you showed up. That's the hard part."

I managed a small smile. "Yeah. It kind of was."

He nodded. "SMART's a good place to start...or start over. Gives you tools instead of just telling you you're powerless or you have an incurable disease."

"That's, uh, what I'm hoping."

"You in school?"

"Yeah. Freshman at VRU."

"Big transition," he said knowingly. "New place, new people. That's prime trigger territory."

"Yeah," I admitted. "I'm starting to figure that out."

Gus glanced around the room, where the facilitator was cleaning up. We were the last people in the room. "Let's go. Don't want to hold Keyara up." The facilitator looked up and started to protest, but Gus waved her off. "Don't argue. I know you have a wife to get home to. I'll walk Jake out."

He followed me into the now deserted hall, where he said, "Look, I can see you're feeling overwhelmed, but you don't have to have it all figured out right now. You just need enough awareness to catch yourself before things go sideways."

"I almost didn't," I said quietly.

"But you did," he counters. "That counts."

I nodded. "So everybody keeps telling me."

"Sometimes — not often mind you — but sometimes, everybody is right." He folded his arms, and leaned back against the wall. "So what did you think?"

"Of the meeting?" I clarified.

"Yep."

I shrugged. "It was okay. Kind of a lot."

He nodded as if I'd said something deep. "I remember that feeling. First time I walked into a recovery meeting, I thought I'd accidentally joined a cult."

"Honestly?" I glanced back at the closed door. "I know what you mean, but this one didn't feel like that."

"No," he agreed. "It doesn't."

There was something in the way he said it that made me look at him more closely.

"You've been doing this a while?" I asked.

Gus smiled again, but darker, more sardonic. "Long enough."

He shifted his weight, like he was deciding how much to say. Then, apparently, he made up his mind.

"Longer than you've been alive. I came up in New York," he says. "Eighties. Downtown."

I blinked. "Like...the city?"

He chuckled. "Yeah. That New York. Before everything got cleaned up and packaged for tourists."

I'd seen *Paris Is Burning*. I could almost picture it — gritty, loud, neon and shadows.

"It was a wild time," he continued. "Clubs that didn't close. Music that felt like it was being invented in real time. You could be whoever you wanted to be for a night. For a lot of us...that was the first time we got to exist out loud."

There was a softness there, memories he didn't hate.

"And the drugs were just...part of it?" I guessed.

"Not even part of it," he says. "They were everywhere. You didn't have to look for them. They found you." He shakes his head slightly. "Started with coke. Nose candy. Harmless, right? Just a little boost to keep the party going."

"And then?" I asked quietly.

"And then it wasn't just for the party anymore." His voice stayed even, but something underneath it tightened. "Then it was for getting through the morning. The afternoon. The parts of the day that didn't come with a soundtrack."

I nodded, because I understood that part more than I wanted to admit.

"I tried everything," he went on. "Every program, every method. I'd get clean for a few months, sometimes a year if I was lucky. Then something would happen — or nothing would happen — and that little voice in the back of my head would start telling me I needed it again."

"Yeah," I murmured. "I know that voice."

"Everybody in that room knows that voice," he said. "That's why we're here."

He paused, appraising me again.

"My partner," Gus continued, more quietly now. "His name was Lionel."

The name landed heavy, even before he said anything else.

"We met in '87," he said. "He was...steady. Where I was chaos, he was calm. Where I was always chasing the next high, he was...enough. Just as he was." He took a deep breath. "Then he got sick. Back when people didn't even want to say the word out loud yet." A beat. "AIDS."

The hallway felt smaller, tighter, like the walls were closing in.

"I tried to get clean for him," Gus said. "And I did, for a while. Long enough to be there. But after..." He exhaled slowly. "After he was gone, I didn't see the point anymore."

I swallowed, feeling pressure building behind my eyes.

"So I went back out," he finished simply. "Hard."

I didn't need to ask how bad it got. I could tell the answer was very bad.

"What changed?" I asked instead.

Gus glanced toward the meeting room door, then back at me.

"I got tired," he said, rubbing his forehead.

"Tired?"

"Tired of starting over. Tired of hating myself every time I slipped. Tired of feeling like I was either unstoppable or a complete failure with nothing in between."

I knew that feeling as well.

"The other programs..." He shrugged. "They work for a lot of people. I'm not knocking them. But for me, it always felt like I was trying to fit into something that didn't quite fit me."

"The higher power stuff?" I offered.

"Partly. But, also, the idea that one mistake wiped out everything you'd built." He shook his head. "That didn't sit right with me. Life's messier than that."

I thought of Becca, of the way the room held her without letting her drown in her slip up.

“So what made this different?” I asked.

Gus’s expression shifted, warmer again, certain.

“This gave me tools,” he said. “Not just rules. It taught me how to actually look at my thinking. To catch the patterns before they turned into actions.” He tapped his temple lightly. “Up here. That’s where it starts.”

I nodded slowly.

“And when I messed up — and I did — it didn’t turn into ‘Well, I’ve already failed, might as well keep going.’ It was, ‘Okay, what happened? What do I do differently next time?’ No shame spiral. No reset to zero. Just adjustment. It made it possible to keep going. Even when I wasn’t perfect.”

Silence settled between us, but it wasn’t uncomfortable.

“You miss him?” I asked before I could stop myself.

Gus smiled again, softer this time. “Every day. But I wouldn’t trade a single moment we had together, even with all the pain, even as short-lived as it was. His love made me a better man. It gave me the strength I needed to love myself.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, but my thoughts immediately went to Kody. I thought about what Gus had said about his partner Lionel, how he’d been a calming presence in his life, an anchor. Kody was fast becoming that for me as well. He made the noise in my head quieter sometimes — not all the way gone, but softer, more manageable.

When I let my guard down, he made me feel safe...and that’s what scared me most. Feeling safe felt unsafe.

I just nodded, desperately trying to hold back the tears that were still pressing against the back of my eyes, not trusting my voice.

He noticed. “You got somebody like that?”

I shrugged and swallowed hard. “Maybe,” I managed.

“Maybe?”

“I... We haven’t been seeing each other for that long. But he does make me want to be better, stronger. For him.”

He nodded. “That’s what I’m talking about.”

“I’m scared though.”

“What are you scared of?”

“I haven’t told him...everything. About my past. He knows I’m sober, but he doesn’t know how bad things were.”

“Does he need to know all the details?”

I rubbed my eyes. “I don't know. I feel like I'm keeping things from him.”

“Well, that's no way to start a relationship, I'll grant you that. But listen, are you open to a little unsolicited advice from an old man who's been there?”

I nodded.

“You don't owe anybody every detail of your story. If he knows you're sober, then maybe that's all he needs to know right now. If you decide you want to tell him more later down the road, then that's up to you. For now, if you care about him, that's enough. But here's the important part: don't let your fear get in the way of a good thing.”

I stared up at the ceiling, blinking hard and willing myself to hold it together.

He pushed off the wall, straightening. “One more thing, and then I'll leave you be. Being here, that's a big step. You said you want to be better for him, stronger. Accepting help isn't a weakness. It's strength. You don't have to decide right now if this is your thing, but you showed up. And that matters more than you think.”

I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding. “Yeah,” I said. “I think I'm starting to get that.”

“Good.” He gave me a small, approving nod. “Then you're already on the right track. Hope to see you next week.”

He started down the hall, but I called after him. “If you don't mind me asking, why do you come to intro meetings if you've been in the program so long?”

He winked. “To talk to folks like you. Sometimes, we all need a little encouragement. A little hope. Don't you think?”

I nodded, and he turned again, took a few steps, then paused. “And for what it's worth?” he added over his shoulder. “Hope's a muscle. You don't have to feel it all the time. You just have to keep using it.” Then he was gone.

I stood there for a moment, letting our conversation settle.

Hope's a muscle. Not a miracle. Not something you either have or you don't. Something you build. Something you choose.

I glanced back at the closed door of the meeting room one last time, then headed for the exit, feeling...lighter. Not fixed. Not magically better. But like maybe I'd finally found a foothold.

My phone vibrated just as I was about to reach the door. I pulled it from my pocket and checked the notifications. Kody was texting. A low-

battery warning popped up, but I dismissed it and I tapped his message as I pushed open the exit door...and nearly ran into Becca.

She was leaning against the wall like she'd been waiting, arms crossed, guard back up, but not as sharp as usual. I stopped and slid the phone back in my pocket.

A beat passed.

"Hey," I said carefully.

"Hey."

The silence stretched, then, quickly, like she wanted to get it over with, she said, "You're not gonna, like, tell anyone about this, right?"

I blinked. "What? No. Of course not."

She studied my face, searching for something.

"I would never do that," I added, more firmly. "It's not my story to tell. Besides, I'm here too, right?"

Something in her expression shifted. Not quite relief, but close.

"Okay," she said. Another pause.

"But if you ever need to talk," I offered, before I could overthink it, "I'm...around. You have my number."

She gave me a small, almost-smile. "Yeah. Sure. You too."

Which was not a yes. But not a no.

"Thanks," she added, softer.

Then she pushed off the wall and walked off down the sidewalk without looking back.

I watched her go for a second, then turned the other way.

I was waiting at the bus stop when I remembered Kody's text. I pulled out my phone and opened the message — then nearly fumbled the damn thing onto the sidewalk.

Kody's face filled the screen, smiling, flushed, and wide-eyed, framed by a shocking amount of bare skin. My brain barely had time to register the image before panic and hormones simultaneously short-circuited my nervous system. I caught the impression of smooth skin, exposed shoulders, maybe the curve of a hip or chest — too much of him all at once and nowhere near enough time to actually process it. Was he naked? It definitely looked like he was naked.

Then my phone screen went black. Dead. Completely dead.

I stared at my reflection in the dark screen for a full second.

"You have got to be fucking kidding me."

By the time I got back to my room — which was, thankfully, empty again — and charged my phone enough to boot it up, it was getting

late. I sat next to the charger, bouncing my knee impatiently, dying to check out the photo Kody had sent me. I'd only caught a glimpse before my battery died.

Was he sending me a nude? That seemed really out of character for Kody, but then again, how well did I really know him? We'd only been seeing each other for a couple of weeks. Maybe he sent nudes all the time. Somehow, I didn't think so, though.

When my phone finally had enough juice to start, I immediately opened my text messages and tapped on Kody's name.

The photo loaded once more, and my breath caught in my throat. The first thing I noticed was how beautiful he was. His skin was smooth and ever so slightly sun-kissed, his nipples small, perfect, and the color of a strawberry Starburst. The slightest hint of a treasure trail led from his belly button to the elastic waistband of a pair of gym shorts at the very bottom of the photo.

So he wasn't naked. That answered that question. I was strangely relieved.

I looked at the photo again with fresh eyes. I'd been pretty focused on his body the first time. It looked like he was laughing as he was reaching for the camera. Had he set it up for a selfie or was someone taking the photo for him? If someone was taking the photo, who was it and why was Kody shirtless? And...sweaty?

I checked the background and realized it was taken in a locker room.

Kody went to the gym?

A lightbulb went off in my head. Nick definitely went to the gym, and Nick was Kody's roommate. He probably got to see Kody shirtless all the time. Had he seen him naked? After all, both Foster and Brayden had seen me in all my glory, unfortunately.

I pushed that thought away and tamped down the little tendrils of jealousy that were snaking through my mind. Kody didn't seem like the cheating type, and Nick seemed cool. Besides, Nick was seeing Derek. If I was going to make any sort of relationship work with Kody, I couldn't get jealous of his best friend here at school.

Just then, my phone vibrated as text notifications lit up at the top of my screen. A bunch were coming in now that my phone had reconnected.

I backed out of the full-screen photo and saw a few of them were from Kody. He must have sent them after my phone died.

Sorry! Nick took me to the gym and grabbed my phone. Why do people take gym selfies? I'm sweaty and gross!

And then: *Now I have to run back in this cold. WTF?*

So I was right. It was Nick.

I had to disagree with Kody, though. I opened the photo again and just stared at it. He was anything but gross.

I suddenly snapped out of it and realized that Kody probably thought I was ignoring his texts.

I searched for an appropriate reaction gif and settled on an old cartoon of a wolf in a tuxedo with his eyes bulging out, tongue rolling out of his mouth, howling, and pounding on a table with the caption "Awooga!" Perhaps a bit subtle, but it summed up my feelings nicely.

It was late, but even if he was already asleep, he'd see it in the morning.

I took one last look at the picture, downloaded it, briefly considered making it his contact image before deciding that was maybe a bit much, then checked my other text messages.

One was from Judy, asking if I'd found a support group yet. I'd answer that in the morning.

The other message was from Killian: *Just checking in. You good?*

I smiled. Typical Killian.

I typed back: *Yeah. Feeling much better today.*

I was thinking about pulling up Kody's picture again when a FaceTime request lit up my phone. It was Killian. At least he was still awake.

I accepted, and Killian's face filled my screen.

"You're up late," I said.

He rolled his eyes. "It's like eleven. What are you, eighty?"

I laughed. "I just got back to my room. It feels later."

"Were you out with Kody?" he asked, fishing for dirt.

"No. Actually, I took your advice and found a support group. I think it might be a good fit for me."

He looked surprised but pleased. "Oh yeah? You feel like talking about it?"

I shrugged. "Sure. I mean, I only attended an intro meeting so, you know, not much to report, but it's not like a twelve-step program. It's called SMART Recovery, and it's more science-based. I think I resonate with it more. I had a nice conversation with this older gay guy who's been in the program for a while now. He had nothing but good things to say about it."

"That's encouraging. So that's one thing down. How are things with Kody? Have you guys talked yet?"

"No..." I said slowly.

“Are you avoiding him?”

“Not exactly. I mean, I saw him for a few seconds this morning, but he was busy at work and couldn't really talk, and then I had classes, and then I went to that meeting...”

Killian gave me a look that clearly said he wasn't buying what I was selling.

I sighed. “I'm really not avoiding him. I just... I needed some time. I'll talk to him tomorrow.”

“And say what?”

“I don't know, Killian,” I said with no small amount of exasperation. “What am I supposed to do? Declare my undying love? Get down on one knee and propose?”

He raised one eyebrow. “Hey, chill. I don't think those are your only two options. Last time we talked, you told me you thought you could fall in love with him. That sounds like some pretty serious feelings. Don't you think you owe him *something*? Not some grand declaration of love,” he rushed on, “but some indication that he's not alone, at the very least?”

I was really getting tired of him always being right.

But deep down, I knew he was. I did owe Kody something. I'd already left him hanging too long. I wasn't ready to tell him I loved him — hell, I wasn't even sure if I did — but we needed to talk.

I just wasn't sure what to say.

It didn't help that the little voice inside my head was still whispering that maybe I wasn't capable of love. Or even if I did love him, what if I couldn't love him safely? What if my love only ruined him?

And of course, the underlying fear remained — that once he saw the truth, he would run away screaming, leaving me alone just as I began to remember what it was like to not feel so alone.

“Hey, did I break your brain?” Killian finally nudged when the silence stretched too thin.

I forced a laugh. “If only you were as good at navigating your own love life as you are at telling me what to do about mine,” I said with a wicked little grin.

“Ouch!” he said with a good-natured smile. “I must be hitting a sore spot if you're going on the attack.”

“Oh, that wasn't an attack. If you want an attack...”

He laughed. “Nah, I'm good. But I do think you should talk to Kody.”

“Okay, okay, I will. Sheesh. And while we're on the subject, have you been on any dates lately?”

"This isn't about me."

"But what if it was about you?"

"It's not. I'm taking a hiatus from dating, remember?"

"And just how long is that going to be? The clock is ticking. You're not getting any younger."

"I'm the same age as you, and we're not even twenty yet. Besides, if you're that concerned about time passing, then you'd better hurry and make things right with Kody."

My diversionary tactics had failed, which wasn't really all that surprising, considering it was Killian. He was a bulldog when he was focused on something.

"I said I'll talk to him tomorrow."

He narrowed his eyes. "You'd better."

"Or what? You'll drive up here and make me?"

As soon as the words left my mouth, a strange pang of homesickness hit me. I found myself missing Killian and wishing we were closer. Sure, he was on my screen and we were talking, but it wasn't the same as hanging out. I even missed Judy.

Killian must have sensed the shift in my mood, even from afar, because his expression immediately softened.

"I will if you need me to."

I was already shaking my head. "No. I'm fine. Really. And I promise I'll talk to Kody tomorrow. Thanks for looking out for me."

He shrugged it off. "That's what friends do. And I'm still making up for lost time."

Killian had an unhealthy habit of blaming himself for not being there for me when I was at the peak of my self-destructive behavior. I'd told him over and over that I had isolated myself and that he'd more than made up for any perceived shortcomings by saving my life more than once, but he still brought it up from time to time.

"You don't have to make up for anything. You know I love you."

His eyes lit up. "See how easy that was to say?"

"It's different, and you know it."

He grinned. "Yeah, I know. Just giving you a hard time."

"I think you've done that enough for one night. Plus I have classes in the morning and need to get to sleep."

"Oh yeah. So do I. Good point. Good night, Jake. I love you too."

"Night, Killian."

I hung up and started getting ready for bed. I knew Killian was right. I did need to talk to Kody. I couldn't leave him hanging forever. I just wasn't sure what to say.

Oh, well, I thought as I crawled under the sheets, I'll figure it out tomorrow.

Chapter 24 - Kody

I fell asleep early Monday night, early for me anyway.

I tried to stay awake, hoping Jake would reply in *some* way to the picture, even if he just wanted to know why I was shirtless and with Nick; at least the jealousy would tell me something. But after all the circles I'd run mentally, not to mention Nick taking me to the gym — plus running to and from in the freezing cold — I just couldn't keep my eyes open.

The first thing I did when I opened my eyes Tuesday morning was check my phone. I was pleased to see Jake had replied overnight.

I felt a silly smile break across my face when I saw his response — a gif with a wolf-like cartoon with his eyes popping out and a caption that said “awoooga!”

Heat flushed my cheeks as I grinned to myself. I didn't know what you said to that as a response, but I was happy enough that he'd liked it not to risk anything more at the moment.

I didn't have to work, so I thought about asking Jake to meet for coffee. He hadn't been very chatty the previous day, though, and he'd given me that cryptic response the night before, so I second guessed myself. I was back to not wanting to seem clingy. I got coffee without him and didn't run into him there.

The day went much as it had the day before, with me being way too in my own head.

By the time I got back to the room, with still no word from Jake, I was feeling something achingly familiar. I'd had too many romantic misfires, been let down — gently and otherwise — far too many times, not to recognize the sensation spreading through my chest, the one that told me something was ending. I had a sinking feeling that I was about to be ghosted again.

The signs were all there: him not initiating contact, the slow replies, not seeing each other for days. We hadn't gone more than twelve hours without seeing each other in weeks, and now we were going on forty-eight hours. Two whole days.

It wasn't like I hadn't been through this before. And I'd survived, obviously. But this felt different. I'd fallen for Jake, thought we were building something real, so it hurt more this time. Worse than any of the others.

Even with all that, though, I wasn't crying. I was overwhelmingly sad and missed Jake so much I could practically put my arms around the

misery, but the release of a good cry just wouldn't come. How can you mourn something that technically hasn't ended yet?

I didn't trust myself to text Jake with how I was feeling, so I just did what I always did and pushed all those uncertain emotions down deep and did my best to pretend that the most meaningful relationship I'd ever had wasn't slipping through my fingers like sand and the more I tried to grasp it, to salvage it, the faster it slid away.

As dinner time approached, I didn't have much appetite, but I knew I needed to get dinner anyway. I'd barely had anything all day. Maybe I could eat my feelings? The distraction would be welcome.

I was just getting ready to leave when Nick burst in.

"Oh, good! Let's go eat. Are you hungry? Then we can head over to the meeting."

"The meeting?" I asked dumbly.

"Rainbow Roost? GSA?" He dropped his arms dramatically.

"Kode. You promised."

I frowned. "I don't think I did."

"Come, come, come, come," he chanted, tossing his bag on the futon and grabbing my arm. "Let's goooo!"

I snorted and smiled a little. "You're so dumb."

"And hot — don't forget hot," he said with a grin. "I'll also accept himbo."

I gave in, as we both knew I would before he even started. Any resistance on my part was merely a charade.

We made our way to the Commons and sat down to eat. Nick was talking about some of the people he'd met at past meetings, but I wasn't convinced any of them were real.

"Really. We call him Philip the Prolapse."

"No, you don't. That's nasty."

"He got the name 'cause—"

"Stop!" I laughed.

"Well, it's more of a title really. But Chlamydia Kyle is for real."

I giggled, made worse by trying to hold it in. I had to give it to him, he knew how to cheer me up. I wasn't sure how I would have gotten through any of it without him — my friend. A real friend.

After dinner, we headed to the student center. We got to the meeting room early, but there were a few other people already there. Two girls were chatting on a bench, and a small group of guys were talking. I followed Nick to a spot near the back wall where there was a lonely cookie platter on a folding table.

Nick grabbed a peanut butter cookie and handed it to me.

"Don't eat it," he advised.

"Why?"

"It's for protection."

"From what?"

"The Prolapse is allergic to nuts. If he comes for you, throw the cookie at him and run."

I snorted. "Gee, thanks."

"Hey, what are friends for?"

"Yo."

Nick and I both turned from our conversation to the speaker, a burly guy with a cocky stance, a douchy face, and a douchier haircut.

"Philip?" Nick asked.

I let out a nervous giggle.

The guy looked confused for a moment. "Uh, no. Patrick," he said.

"Nice. Pat rhymes better than Phil," Nick said, looking at me with a devilish gleam in his eyes.

"It's Patrick," Patrick insisted. "And I wasn't talking to you."

He turned away from Nick and focused on me. His tongue ran across his upper teeth in a way he probably thought was sexy but just made me cringe.

"Hey there," he said. "I don't think we've met."

"Uh, no. We definitely haven't." I almost added that I was okay with that, barely managing to bite off the words.

Play nice, I told myself. You're here to make friends.

Not that I wanted to be friends with Pat the Prolapse.

"You're pretty cute," he was saying. "Where you from?"

I felt a little warm. "Uh. Out west."

"Oh. Like Buffalo?"

He leaned in, putting a hand on the wall next to my head, encroaching on my personal space and seemingly trying to cut Nick off from me. I was definitely getting an uncomfortable vibe from him.

"Yeah, sure. Buffalo," I agreed.

To be fair, Buffalo was west of Albany. We'd passed it while driving from Niagara Falls.

His eyes roamed up and down my body. "Damn, Buffalo. You feel like getting a coffee or something? We can chill."

I took a half step back. "Uh. Cookie?" I held it out to him.

He stared at the cookie in confusion.

Nick slipped past Patrick and put his arm around my shoulders.
“Hey. Mine.”

Patrick's eyes narrowed. “I just heard you say you were friends.”

“With benefits,” Nick shot back with a suggestive eyebrow wiggle.
“Oh hey, did that hemorrhoid ever clear up, or did you have to get surgery?”

“I... You... What?” Patrick sputtered.

This was absurd. I removed Nick's arm. “Thanks, but I've got this,” I told him, then turned to Patrick. “No,” I said firmly, like I was talking to a naughty dog.

Patrick raised an eyebrow. “No? What's that supposed to mean?”

“It means I'm not interested.”

“Oh, come on. You don't know what you're missing...” He glanced behind him, and I followed his gaze. His buddies were watching, seemingly amused. He turned back to me. “Let's—”

“I'm going to stop you there,” I cut him off. I was annoyed. I didn't even want to be there, and I definitely wasn't in the mood to deal with this cocky amoeba-brain, who couldn't hold a candle to my Golden Boy. “I'm sure this has worked for you before...”

“Hey now—”

“...but I have someone. And it's not him,” I added, jerking a thumb in Nick's direction. “My guy is funny, complicated, and so fucking hot it makes my brain melt. I'm pretty sure I know exactly what I'm missing, and it's a tiny dick and a smaller brain, so...nah. I'm good.”

My insides quivered as the big guy's jaw worked. “Damn bitchy little twinks,” he finally managed. “Why don't you—”

I turned. “Nick, I think I'm leaving.”

“No. No, no, no. You promised.” He shooed Patrick away with his hands. “Go away now. You heard the man. He's not interested. Go on. Get.”

Patrick looked like he was about to argue some more, but just then, someone from across the room hollered, “Okay, everybody find a seat. We're about to get started.”

Patrick frowned and glanced around before shrugging and heading back toward his group of friends. They were laughing at him as he got closer.

“Hey, looks like you fended off one of the fuckboys,” a new voice commented. “Nice.”

I turned to the new speaker, a tall, thin guy with shaggy hair, some eyeliner, a nose ring, and tattoos circling his forearm. He was attractive in an alt sort of way.

“Uh, I guess?” I replied, hoping I wasn't going to have to blow off another jerk.

Nick grabbed my shoulder and shook me. “You guess? Bruh. You torched him! He'll be on fire for *days* after that. You should have thrown the cookie at him. Just because.”

“He's right,” Tattoo Boy said. “I mean, about roasting him. Not sure about the cookie part.”

I shrugged, trying to act nonchalant, even though I was actually feeling pretty proud of myself.

“So was all that true?” Tattoos asked. “Are you seeing someone, or were you just trying to get rid of him?”

I nodded, then realized that didn't exactly answer his question. “Both.”

He sighed exaggeratedly. “Figures. The hot ones are always taken.”

“Hey, I'm right here,” Nick said.

“You're taken too,” I reminded him, trying to ignore the fact that a stranger had just called me hot.

He grinned. “I know. Just can't let you have all the attention.”

Before I could think of a comeback, the meeting started. The room had filled up while I was distracted by Pat the Prolapse. It was a fairly diverse group. I felt like the entire alphabet was covered. There were probably about twenty or so people sitting in chairs, on couches, and on the floor. A few of us were still standing by the wall.

There were two people who were obviously running the show. The guy who'd called for our attention looked like he was born to be an accountant. He was Black, slim, with heavy, dark-framed glasses, and a sharp part carved into his close-cropped hair. He wore Chinos and, I swear to God, an actual cardigan over an Oxford button up. He had a deep voice that didn't match his slender frame.

He welcomed everyone to the Rainbow Roost, then the girl sitting next to him took over. She was his polar opposite in that she was large, but her voice was high and tiny. She had wavy, shoulder-length hair that was sort of a faded pink and purple with a generous portion of dark roots, like she was well overdue for a dye job.

“It's nice to see some new faces!” she chirped. “I hope y'all helped yourself to cookies and we can get started! Let's go around and introduce ourselves. I'll start. I'm Mazie, they/them, and I'm the VP of our little coalition.”

We went around the room, with everyone providing their name and pronouns, until it came back to the guy who'd kicked things off, who turned out to be the club president: Andre, he/they.

Mazie took over again. "First, just a reminder that we've partnered with the Aviary — yay! — to do a costume contest slash fundraiser on Halloween!"

Idly, I wondered what Jake would look like in one of those hot gladiator outfits. I know some people get all bent out of shape about sexy costumes, but really, could he ever be unsexy? No.

"That's only a couple weeks away, so don't forget. And be sure to tell all your friends. We're hoping for a big turnout. We'll send out more deets, so if you're not on the mailing list, be sure to let Sara know before you leave. I can tell you that there will be a costume contest with some really great prizes donated by local businesses. Cover is only five doll hairs with a valid VRU ID, and the entry fee for the costume contest is just three dollah!"

Her repeated attempted use of slang was starting to give me second hand embarrassment.

"If you're looking for a kiki before that, though," she continued, "since October is LGBTQ History Month, we'll be hosting a drag show in the Weir Black Box Theater in the Student Union next week. We spent a lot of money to get Plasma as our headliner, so you better support."

There was a little cheer at that, but I didn't know who — or what — Plasma was. A person? A band? A vampire? I glanced at Nick.

"She was on Drag Race," he whispered in my ear.

"In addition," Andre the accountant stepped back in, "we'll be having a legislative day at the beginning of November before the legislature goes into recess. Some of the items that are potentially coming up for debate are the proposed ban on 'reparative therapy' and a challenge to the library system in which books they may stock — and yes, queer books are one of the biggest targets, though there are several by black, brown, and female authors, as well as important subjects such as human trafficking, that some groups are trying to have removed or banned. There is a list of titles on the petition, which you can find on our website, along with ways you can help advocate for our rights to our lawmakers."

There was some discussion about books and the bans that were being debated in political circles. There were actually a couple of people in the room who argued that they understood why some things should be restricted, and I found that really disheartening. I'd never get how people in an oppressed community like ours could just bend over for things like that.

I was happy to see them get debated into the ground by people who clearly understood the importance of fighting censorship at every level. As one girl argued, I think her name was Mira, "Once you open that can of worms, what's next? Where do you draw the line?"

The rest of the meeting was comparatively uneventful, mostly planning the legislative day, which I didn't know enough about New York State politics to really contribute to, but there were some things I thought I might want to get involved in.

The costume party sounded fun, but I didn't think I'd bring it up to Jake. It was at the Aviary, and I didn't want to make him any more uncomfortable than I already had. The drag show definitely caught my attention, though. I remembered what Nick had said about them being really fun. Maybe I'd mention that to Jake instead.

After the meeting portion ended and the social portion began, a few people came over to say hi, since I was the new guy. Luckily, the fuckboys had moved on to greener pastures and left us alone.

"Hi, remember me?" an adorable little Asian asked with a wave.

It took a second to place them, but then I remembered that they'd been with Erin and Carlos at the concert. In my defense, I'd been very distracted that night. I racked my brain for their name, and finally it came to me.

"Oh, yeah. Hi, Toshi."

Toshi was very pretty, if fairly androgenous, with long hair, just a hint of makeup on their perfect, clear skin, and a heart-shaped face. We were almost the exact same height, so it was nice to look somebody right in the eye for a change.

"And I'm Mira," the girl who'd argued so fiercely against censorship introduced herself. "I don't think we've met."

She was stunningly beautiful. So much so that I was almost intimidated. She towered over me and Toshi, although a few of those inches were courtesy of the chunky heels on her black boots. She wore a pair of baggy, low-slung jeans and a cropped yellow sweater that showed off a strip of her stomach. Her hair was a cloud of dark curls that framed her face, which could have easily been on the cover of *Vogue*. Her makeup was artfully applied, enhancing her dark, almond-shaped eyes and full lips.

"And I'm Nick," my roommate chimed in.

"You I have met," Mira said to Nick. "But I don't have a dick, so I don't expect you to remember." She winked to show she was kidding...mostly.

Nick put his hands over his heart and staggered back a few steps.
“Ouch! I'm not one of the fuckboys, I swear.”

Toshi giggled. “It's good to see you here.”

“Are you guys dating?” Mira asked, her eyes darted between me and Nick.

“No!” I said firmly, as Nick said, “He wishes.”

I rolled my eyes. “We're roommates,” I explained.

Toshi turned their full attention to Nick, placing a hand on his arm.

“So does that mean you're single?”

“It's complicated,” Nick said.

“No it's not,” I corrected. “He's seeing someone.”

“We're not exclusive!” Nick protested.

Toshi yanked their hand back like Nick's skin was on fire.

“Sounds like it's too complicated,” Toshi said.

Mira chuckled. “Don't mind them. They're just desperate for a boyfriend.”

Toshi gasped in faux indignation. “I am *not* desperate! Just...eager.”

We all laughed.

“So what did you think of the meeting?” Mira asked.

“It was interesting,” I replied. “Some of the events coming up sound cool.”

“Oh yeah! You should definitely come to the drag show.” Mira insisted.

I nodded. “It sounds fun. I'll talk to my...” I wasn't sure what to call Jake, so I finished lamely with, “...person I'm seeing.”

Toshi grinned. “And maybe your person you're seeing is also interested in the costume contest.”

Mira swatted them, but I just laughed and said, “I'm not so sure about that one.”

“It could be fun,” Nick said. “What if we did, like, a group thing? You and Jake, me and Derek...”

“How is Jake anyway? Why isn't he with you?” Toshi asked me.

“He's...fine.”

“Jake?” Mira asked, then turned to Toshi. “The Jake we know? From Mohawk?”

Toshi bobbed their head. “That's how I met Kody.”

She turned back to me. “So you're dating Jake?”

Dating seemed like a strong word for whatever we were doing, but I nodded.

“Lucky you,” Toshi gushed. “He’s dreamy.”

“Yeah, he is,” I agreed, although internally all I could think was “*Back off, sister.*”

We chatted for a bit longer, then said our good nights and went our separate ways. I still wasn’t one-hundred percent sold on the meetings, but I’d met a few people, avoided the fuckboys, and actually felt okay by the time we left.

Of course, afterward I went right back to thinking about what I’d said to the fuckboy and the realization that came with it: I was spoken for.

Maybe Jake wasn’t sure about me, but I was sure about him. Until I heard him say we were over, I was taken as far as I was concerned. Ghosting me wasn’t going to be an option.

And the thing was...I hadn’t even realized how deeply that feeling had settled in until the words came out of my mouth.

I have someone.

Not *I’m talking to someone*. Not *It’s complicated*. Not *There’s this guy*.

I have someone.

He was mine. And I was his. At least as far as I was concerned.

Somewhere along the line, without even noticing, I’d stopped looking at other people as possibilities. Not consciously, anyway. I could still recognize when somebody was hot — obviously, I wasn’t blind — but every comparison ended the same way. They weren’t Jake. They didn’t laugh like him or look at me like him or make me feel like somebody worth listening to.

That amoeba-brained fuckboy hadn’t stood a chance, even if he had been my type. The cute alt boy didn’t either. The second he’d tried flirting with me, my brain had immediately gone, *Okay, but he’s not Jake, though*.

Which was honestly kind of embarrassing. Because we weren’t boyfriends. We hadn’t defined anything. Jake was still clearly working through...whatever was going on in his head the past couple of days.

And yet emotionally? I was gone. Fully launched off the diving board. No floaties. No lifeguard. Just me plummeting into the deep end at terminal velocity.

Maybe that should’ve terrified me more than it did. Or maybe it did terrify me, because underneath all the warm, dizzy feelings was the quieter fear curling around my ribs: if Jake walked away, he wouldn’t just be another failed crush. He’d take something real with him.

That was the dangerous part. Jake had stopped feeling hypothetical to me.

He felt woven into my life already, into my routines and thoughts and future plans in ways that were probably unhealthy, considering we'd only known each other for a few weeks. Every funny thing that happened made me want to text him. Every room I walked into, some part of me looked for him automatically. I'd started mentally saving stories for him before they even finished happening.

And, apparently, I was now publicly claiming him in front of strangers.

Jesus Christ.

No wonder I was losing my mind over two days of weird texting. Maybe I *was* a psycho twink.

Back in my room, I settled in and scrolled through my messages. I looked at the gif Jake had sent me the night before. I wondered if it was the obvious meaning, that he liked what he saw, or if it was something more along the lines of 'Holy shit, this delulu twink is really needy for my attention.'

I hated my brain.

On the other hand, I had to remember that he hadn't said we were over; maybe I should just stick with that angle for now.

I gave in and texted him: *I missed you today.*

I watched my phone for a minute, then let it go dark. I closed my eyes and tried to think positively. He'd liked what he'd seen in that image and maybe, considering he'd wanted to go slow, he was avoiding me because it was so sexy he thought he'd lose control.

Yeah. Sure. That was it.

My phone vibrated, and I scrambled to check it, dropping my phone on my face in the process.

It was Charlie. He wanted to know if I had kept any of the essays I'd written for Mrs. Franklin's English class, which led to a back-and-forth about plagiarism. He didn't think it counted if it was family.

Then Jake texted back: *Aww.*

I frowned. I was hoping for a little more than that.

Then Charlie asked how Jake was. I was thinking '*single*' was about to be my response, but Jake texted again.

I missed you too. Long day. Everything's okay. I promise. I'll explain later.

Well. That was something different entirely. I told Charlie that Jake was as hot as ever and that I had to go. He kept texting, but I'd switched back over to Jake and tapped out: *Okay. Just wanted to make sure you were okay* ❤️

Charlie kept texting, but I ignored him, staring at my screen, willing Jake to respond. Charlie tried to FaceTime, but I stabbed at the decline button.

Jake still hadn't replied.

Maybe the heart was too much.

I sighed. It was late. I knew I should get to sleep...but I really just wanted to talk to Jake more. At least he'd said he'd missed me too. And if he did ever reply, it would still be there in the morning. I put my phone on the dock to charge and rolled over.

I woke up at some point and couldn't go back to sleep. I hadn't really seen Jake in days, and texting was leaving me going back and forth between extremes. One minute I was determined to keep him, and the next I was convinced he was letting me go. More than anything I just wanted to look him in those blue eyes and understand just where the fuck we stood.

I rolled onto my back and stared up into the dark, lit only by the small amount of light that managed to filter through my light-blocking blinds.

I did the thing they say to never do when you wake up in the middle of the night: I grabbed my phone off the charger.

4:07 — fantastic.

I checked my messages, even though I already knew there wouldn't be anything new. Jake's last text still sat there on the screen.

I missed you too. Long day. Everything's okay, I promise. I'll explain later.

I read it again. Then again.

Everything's okay.

That sounded reassuring, right? Except if everything was okay, why had things felt so weird between us?

I hated that my brain immediately wanted to dissect every word like it was evidence in a murder trial. Maybe *later* meant later today. Maybe it meant he was trying to let me down gently. Maybe he was overwhelmed. Maybe he regretted everything. Maybe—

I groaned and dropped the phone onto my chest.

This was insane.

A couple of months ago, I hadn't even known Jake existed, and now my emotional stability apparently hinged on whether or not he used enough punctuation in a text message.

I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to force myself to relax, but my thoughts just kept moving anyway.

I replayed every interaction we'd had over the last few days, searching for the exact moment things had shifted. Had I said too much? Been too intense? Too clingy? Maybe telling him I loved him had freaked him out more than he let on. God, maybe sending the gym picture had made me look desperate on top of everything else.

The worst part was that I could feel myself doing it — spiraling, attaching meaning to every tiny thing — and I still couldn't stop.

That was always the problem with me. Once I cared about someone, I cared too hard.

It happened fast and deep and all at once, like my brain skipped the normal stages and went straight to *this person matters more than oxygen*. Forget if they were dating someone else or straight or oblivious to my existence. That didn't matter when I was deep into it. Then every shift in tone or moment of distance felt catastrophic. Like standing on a frozen lake listening to cracks spread beneath your feet.

And Jake...Jake mattered. More than I wanted him to.

I rolled over and shoved my face into my pillow with a muffled groan.

"Get it together," I whispered to myself.

Because rationally, I knew two weird days didn't automatically mean abandonment. People got busy. People got overwhelmed. Jake had his own stuff going on that had absolutely nothing to do with me.

But another part of me — the uglier, smaller part — kept whispering that this was how it always started. I was cute, but not in an attractive way. More like the way some people think small dogs are cute.

I would miss something, sometimes something really big — like their lack of interest.

I was fun in small doses. Cute for a while. Endearing until I became Too Much. Too emotional. Too attached. Too eager. Too...me.

And the really pathetic thing? Even now, even feeling half sick over the possibility of losing him, I knew if Jake pulled away and said he just wanted to be friends, I'd probably agree to it immediately. Because having some version of him would still feel better than having nothing.

In some ways, it was kind of like feeling nauseous. I hated to throw up, but at least once you do, it's over one way or another. And

sometimes you felt better. After several days in limbo, I just wanted Jake to tell me how he felt. Even if it hurt. At least then I could stop imagining a hundred different endings every time my phone buzzed.

I checked the clock again. 4:31. Fuck this.

Finally, I just got up to start getting ready for work.

It wasn't until I hit the lobby of my building that I saw all the goddamn snow. When did a blizzard hit? And why hadn't I heard anything about it? That seemed like the kind of thing someone would have mentioned if they were calling for a big snow storm in the middle of October.

I pulled up my built-in weather app — only people over sixty download one of those intentionally — and saw they were running a headline about a rare October snowstorm. The last time they'd seen snow this early was back in 1987. I'd have to ask my dad if he'd been here at school for that one.

The app said we'd gotten six inches, and I almost wished that Jake were there so I could make a dick joke.

My face fell a bit as I put the phone away. A joke like that might make him uncomfortable, given how we were taking things slow.

I sighed heavily, zipped my coat up, and plunged into the tundra.

I was surprised that it wasn't really that bad. There wasn't any real wind, which would have made things much more miserable. The maintenance staff were busy clearing paths, and the snow looked really pretty in the early morning light, the piles of white powder glittering like a holiday card.

I bet Jake—

Shit! I couldn't think about anything without circling back to *him*.

I stuffed my hands deep into my pockets and forced myself to set a steady pace to the shop and not think about Jake making snow angels in his underwear. *That* warmed me up, at least.

As I walked, I noticed the stores on the other side of the street had no lights on. The power must have gone out in some areas.

I was slightly disappointed to find the lights on at The Morning Rush when I got there. I let myself in and stomped my shoes off by the door.

"Oh, you made it!" Marla emerged from Max's office, smiling. "I thought I might be alone today."

"I didn't know we were getting a blizzard."

"No one did. I think it even surprised the meteorologists. Nobody was calling for all this."

I moved past her to hang up my coat. "I saw some of the stores had no power, and I was wondering if we'd be closed."

"Yeah, the power grid changes on the other side of the street, so sometimes we lose power and they don't or the other way around. Today, I guess it's their turn."

"Lucky us," I commented dryly. "Think anyone will come in?"

"It's Albany, kiddo. Six inches is nothing. It'll be a strange day, though. We'll either be business as usual or completely dead. Lots of people will call out or go in late, depending on how well the roads are cleared. Hopefully the plow drivers were prepared. I bet it was an all-nighter for a lot of them."

We chatted as we set up the store, mostly her filling me in on how things changed when the snow started to fly each year. We had to mop by the door, and she sent me out to salt the sidewalk. A plow driver had cleared the small parking lot overnight and used a snowblower on the walk, but we'd have to maintain it throughout the day.

All of that kept me focused and moving, and soon a few customers started trickling in. Before long it was business as usual, and we were slammed with orders.

Max bustled in almost an hour after opening, complaining that the snowplow had buried her car when it went by in the middle of the night.

We rotated between helping customers and cleaning up the entrance to prevent people from slipping on the puddles left by melting snow. My mind was filled with orders and people commenting on the weather, as if we hadn't noticed. Sometimes, small talk is really just not needed. Unfortunately, it's a requirement in a social job like ours.

Still, I was getting sick of the idiots who thought saying things like, "So much for global warming, am I right?" was the height of comedy. As if disruptions of weather patterns weren't clear evidence of climate change. Morons.

My mood was steadily souring, but all that changed when Jake walked through the door. As soon as I saw him, my heart began to race. I knew it was time to clear the air. I couldn't stand one more day of this uncertainty.

He looked as tired as I felt, and I wondered if he'd been thinking about me as much as I'd been thinking about him. I pointed him to an open table and made two cups of coffee for us, letting Max and Marla know I was going to take a break.

“Kody, I’m your boss,” Max said. “Don’t you think you should *ask* me if you can go sit down with your thirst trap boyfriend instead of informing me?”

I sighed. “Unlike you, I was here to open the shop. Plus, it’s slowed down. I think you can handle things for fifteen minutes. And besides, you get to look at Jake for free. What more do you really want? Wait, don’t answer that!”

I scooted from behind the counter before she could say something inappropriate.

Jake looked up with heavy eyes as I approached with his coffee. “Thank you,” he said, his tone both tired and grateful. He took a small sip, then a bigger one before letting out a sigh that seemed to come from deep within him.

What was going on with him?

“You look like you needed that coffee even more than usual this morning,” I said. I wanted to add he looked like he also needed a hug...and maybe some kisses, but I decided to hang onto that for the moment.

He sipped again and hummed as he did. Setting the cup down he nodded. “More than I have in a while.” He smiled, but he still looked exhausted.

I slipped my fingers between one of his hands and his cup — probably a dangerous move with a caffeine fiend — and watched his face.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Nothing is wrong. I just still haven’t recovered from yesterday.”

“What happened?”

“Let me get some more coffee in me, and then I’ll spill the tea,” he promised.

“Tea, coffee...it’s almost like we’re in a coffee shop.”

He flashed me a tired smile, but just took a long sip. I just sat and stared while he drank. Finally, he asked, “What?”

I shook my head, trying to silence all the things flying around in my skull. “I just feel like I haven’t seen you for days. Now drink your coffee, babe.”

The corner of his mouth twitched upward, and he took another drink. “It has been too long,” he admitted. “Looks like Nick kept you busy though.” He waggled his eyebrows.

Was he jealous?

“Yeah. He was just tired of me whining about not hanging out with you.”

His cheeks turned a little red. “Is that a fact?”

“Definite fact.”

He let out a tired chuckle. “Well, we should fix that. What are you doing tonight? We need to talk.”

Chapter 25 - Jake

I awoke with a start Tuesday morning.

It was still dark out, the room washed in that eerie blue-gray light that comes just before dawn, and for one disoriented second, I had no idea what had ripped me out of sleep — until I realized there was a giant looming beside my bed, softly backlit by the window like some kind of Sasquatch apparition.

I nearly launched myself through the wall. Then I recognized him and let out a shaky breath.

“Jesus *fucking* Christ, Bray,” I hissed, clutching my chest. “You scared the hell out of me.”

“Sorry,” he said quietly, still standing there like a redwood had sprouted next to my bed overnight.

I squinted at him. “What time is it?”

“I don’t know what time it is.”

That was not especially helpful.

“What are you doing in here?”

“My stomach hurts.”

I blinked up at him. Was he serious?

I sat up, rubbing sleep from my eyes, half convinced I was dreaming. Across the room, Foster was still dead to the world, snoring loud enough to register on the Richter scale. I grabbed my phone off the charger. 5:02 a.m.

I looked back at Brayden. “So...you woke me up at five in the godforsaken morning to tell me you have a tummy ache? Have you tried taking a shit?”

“I’ve got the squirts,” he said miserably. “And I puked.”

I sighed. I’d opened that door. No one to blame but myself. Is this what parents of toddlers felt like?

“Okay, then you probably ate something bad. Food poisoning. Stomach bug. Whatever. Go lie down.”

“I can’t sleep.” His voice caught with pain. “My stomach hurts too much. It started sharp around my belly button, but now it’s lower. And it keeps getting worse. It really hurts, Jake.”

That got my attention. As my brain slowly booted up, I could hear genuine fear under the pain. I couldn’t just brush him off if something was actually wrong.

“Where exactly?”

He pointed shakily to his lower right abdomen. I grabbed my phone and Googled his symptoms.

The first result: Appendicitis. Well. That seemed bad.

“Does it hurt when you press on it?”

He pushed lightly and immediately sucked in a breath. “Yeah. A lot.”

I winced sympathetically. “Sounds like appendicitis, Big Guy.”

He frowned. “What’s that?”

“It’s when your appendix gets infected.”

“My what?”

“Your appendix. It’s an organ. It...honestly, I’m a little fuzzy on what it does. Apparently not enough to matter, because doctors yank it out all the time.”

His eyes widened. “They take it *out*?”

“Usually, yeah.”

His whole face crumpled. “I don’t wanna.”

“You have to. If it bursts, the infection can spread, and then you could die.”

He looked suddenly very small for someone built like a linebacker.

“Will they give me medicine?”

“Yeah. Antibiotics. Pain meds. Stuff to help. But it’ll probably still need surgery.”

“Surgery?” His voice went up an octave. “No. Nope. Hard pass.”

“Bray, this isn’t a restaurant. You don’t get to send it back.”

“But—”

He suddenly doubled over, clutching his stomach with a strangled groan.

I scrambled backward until my spine hit the headboard, fully convinced he was about to ralph all over me and my bed.

“Okay,” I said quickly, “hospital. Definitely hospital. Like, now.”

He looked up at me, eyes wet and frightened.

“I’m scared, Jake. I hate hospitals.” His voice dropped softer. “Will you go with me?”

And just like that, he stopped being a giant football player and became a scared kid.

My chest tightened. “Yeah,” I said. “I’ll go with you.” I hated hospitals too, but what could I do?

The second I said it, reality crashed in. I had no car. No clue how emergency rooms worked. No idea whether they’d even let me tag along.

I needed an adultier adult. Luckily, I knew one.

"Hang on," I said, sliding out of bed and yanking on the first clothes I could find. "I'm getting Erin. Stay here."

"Thanks, Jake," he said quietly.

I rushed down to Erin's room and pounded hard on her door. She yanked it open a few seconds later, her hair mashed flat on one side and sticking up in every direction on the other. She was wearing a matched pajama set and a startled look.

She relaxed a little when she saw it was me. "Roommate trouble again?" she asked.

"Not this time. It's Brayden. I think he has appendicitis, and I don't know what to do."

"Shit," she muttered. "Why do you think it's appendicitis?"

I gave her the rundown of his symptoms, and she nodded. "Yeah, you might be right. We'll probably have to call the EMTs. Hold on, let me get dressed."

She closed the door, and I fidgeted nervously until she emerged wearing jeans and a sweater.

"Okay, where is he?"

"In my room."

"Why...? You know what? Never mind. Let's go."

We went back up and found Brayden clutching his stomach, sitting on the edge of my bed.

"Hey there, Brayden," Erin said casually, as if she was just running into him at the Commons. "Not feeling so great?"

"It hurts," he moaned pitifully.

Erin pressed the back of her hand to his forehead. "Yikes. You definitely have a fever. We should get you to the ER to have you checked."

"Jake said he'd go with me," he said quickly.

She gave me a questioning look, and I nodded with a shrug.

"Okay, well, I'm going to call an ambulance. Is that okay?"

"I guess."

Erin pulled out her cell and dialed nine-one-one. She was on the phone for a few minutes, describing his symptoms, occasionally asking him a question, then thanked them and hung up.

"They're on their way," she reported. "Are you okay to walk?"

He nodded.

"Then let's head downstairs to wait for them. They know which dorm to come to. Jake, can you help him down?"

"Yeah, sure."

“Thanks. I need to make some calls to let campus security and Student Affairs know what's going on, so I'll be down in a minute.”

Brayden stood and wobbled a little on his feet, wincing in pain again.

“Come on, Big Guy. I've got you.” I slid an arm around his waist, which felt like hugging a tree, and he leaned against me, his hand on my far shoulder. His weight made me almost topple over, but I braced myself, and we began to move. I'm sure we looked ridiculous.

Erin was already dialing the phone as she followed us out. Just before she closed the door, I noticed that Foster had somehow managed to sleep through the entire ordeal.

Brayden and I took the elevator down to the lobby, while Erin stayed behind. I was grateful that she rejoined us before the ambulance arrived, since I wasn't sure what the protocols were for that sort of thing. Brayden was eighteen and conscious, so I assumed he could make his own medical decisions, so that was something at least, but did somebody from the college need to be there?

We saw the flashing red and white lights reflecting off the nearby dorm windows before the ambulance rolled into view.

It pulled right up to the entrance, brakes hissing softly, and two broad-shouldered EMTs climbed out of the front cab. One sported a thick mustache that belonged in a seventies cop show. The other was clean-shaven, but otherwise they looked weirdly alike — same sturdy build, same square jaws, same calm, practiced competence.

Erin had taken Brayden's other side, and together we guided him outside.

Mustache gave Brayden a reassuring smile. “You must be our VIP this morning.”

Brayden grimaced. “My stomach hurts.”

“We're gonna take good care of you,” Mustache promised.

The clean-shaven EMT — his name tag read MARTINEZ — opened a large red medical bag while Mustache crouched in front of Brayden.

“Can you tell me where the pain is?”

Brayden pointed weakly to his lower right side.

“When did it start?”

“A few hours ago.”

“Nausea? Vomiting?”

“Yes.”

“Diarrhea?”

Brayden nodded miserably.

“Fever?”

Erin jumped in. “He’s definitely running hot.”

Martinez stepped forward with a thermometer scanner and blood pressure cuff, moving with quick efficiency, while Mustache gently pressed Brayden’s abdomen.

The second he hit the lower right quadrant, Brayden yelped.

Both EMTs exchanged a look.

“That’s rebound tenderness,” Martinez said.

“Classic presentation,” Mustache agreed. He looked up at Brayden. “Could be appendicitis, bud. We need to get you checked out.”

Brayden looked panic-stricken.

“Am I gonna die?”

Mustache chuckled softly. “Not on my watch.”

They helped him onto a wheeled stretcher — no easy feat, considering Brayden was approximately the size of a vending machine — and strapped him in.

His big hand immediately shot out and grabbed my wrist.

“Jake—” His voice cracked on my name.

I squeezed his hand. “Hey. You’re okay. They know what they’re doing.”

“You said you’d come with me.”

I looked at the EMTs. Martinez gave me an apologetic smile.

“Sorry, man. Only medical personnel in the rig unless there’s a parent or legal guardian, and even then it depends on circumstances.”

My stomach sank, but Brayden looked devastated. Before I could say anything, Erin stepped in. “I’ll drive Jake,” she said firmly. “We’ll be right behind you.”

Brayden looked at me.

“I promise,” I said. “I’m coming.”

He loosened his grip.

“Which hospital are you taking him to?” Erin asked, and I was once again glad she was there, since I wouldn’t have even thought to ask that.

“St. Peters,” Martinez said, then the EMTs loaded him into the ambulance and shut the doors. A second later, sirens chirped to life — not full blast, but urgent enough — and the ambulance pulled away into the early dawn.

I stood there in the cold morning air, suddenly wide awake and full of adrenaline. Erin touched my arm. "Come on," she said gently. "I've got my car."

I blinked at her. "You're actually taking me?"

She gave me a dry look. "Jake, it's five-thirty in the morning. I'm already awake, fully dressed, and invested in Giant Baby's fate. Of course, I'm taking you."

Despite everything, I laughed weakly. "I figured you were just saying that so he'd go with them."

"No, dummy. Come on. Let's go."

We hurried toward the parking lot, chasing flashing lights into the waking city.

We rode in silence at first, Erin focused on the road, both hands tight on the wheel as the dark campus streets gave way to early-morning emptiness. The heater blew hot air on full blast, filling the car with dry warmth that made me suddenly aware of how cold I'd been standing outside waiting for the ambulance to leave.

A few minutes passed before Erin cleared her throat. "So..." she began carefully, eyes still fixed on the road ahead, "while I was in your room, I, uh, noticed an empty bottle of vodka in the trash."

I turned sharply toward her. "It's not mine," I said a little too quickly.

She glanced at me, then back at the road. "Yeah, I figured. Or at least I hoped not, considering you trusted me enough to tell me about being sober."

My shoulders loosened slightly.

"So... Foster's?"

"Yeah," I admitted, guilt prickling at the back of my neck. He wasn't exactly my friend, but lately we'd been inching toward something resembling mutual tolerance, at approximately continental drift speed, and ratting him out felt lousy.

Erin gave a small nod. "Is there more?"

I hesitated. That was apparently answer enough.

"Jake," she said gently but firmly, "I have to report what I saw, because now I know about it. If another RA spots it later and people know I've already been in your room, it looks like I ignored a violation. That could come back on me. They're going to inspect the room, and if there's more alcohol, they'll find it. You're better off just being honest with me."

I rubbed a hand over my face. "There's...a lot more."

"How much is 'a lot'?"

“He’s basically running a speakeasy out of our dorm fridge.”

That got a laugh out of her.

Then she looked over, realized I wasn’t joking, and blinked.

“Wait...you’re serious?”

“He has enough booze in there to open a small neighborhood bar. Beer, vodka, rum. I think there’s tequila. Maybe whiskey? Honestly, I stopped cataloging it for my own sanity.”

She shook her head slowly. “That’s wild. Where the hell is he getting it?”

“No clue,” I said. “I don’t ask questions. It was there when I moved in, and, somehow, it’s always fully stocked.”

I kept my suspicion about Brayden to myself. He had enough on his plate without me dragging him into Foster’s bad decisions.

Erin was quiet for a moment, processing. “Okay,” she said finally. “Thanks for telling me.”

“What’s going to happen to him?”

She shrugged slightly. “Depends. Since it’s a first offense, probably a written warning, residential probation, maybe mandatory alcohol education. They love making students write reflective essays about poor life choices.” Her lips quirked to one side. “If there’s as much alcohol as you say, they might strongly encourage counseling, but that part would be voluntary.”

I thought of Foster’s confession about his dad, about how terrified he was of disappointing him. “Will they tell his parents?”

Erin winced. “Oh, absolutely. He’s underage. That’s standard protocol.”

I leaned back in my seat, feeling conflicted. Part of me felt bad. But another part thought: *Maybe this is exactly the wake-up call he needs.* Then a fresh panic hit me. “Wait! Am I in trouble?”

Erin shook her head immediately. “No. I’ll write it up as though you reported it after discovering it. That puts you under the Good Samaritan policy.”

I stared at her. “Oh, God. If Foster finds out, he’ll kill me.”

“He won’t find out,” she said firmly. “I’ll make sure your name never enters the conversation.”

“You can do that?”

“I’m an RA, Jake. My true power is paperwork and plausible deniability.”

Despite everything, I snorted. Then I sighed and rested my forehead briefly against the cool window.

What a spectacular train wreck of a morning.

Brayden was in an ambulance headed for emergency surgery, Foster was about to get busted for operating a minibar out of our dorm room, and somewhere in the middle of all that chaos was me, still somehow trying to keep my own life from flying off the rails.

And the sun wasn't even up yet.

A few minutes later, we pulled into the hospital parking garage. Erin parked and killed the engine.

"I need to call campus security before we go in," she said, already pulling out her phone. "Go ahead. Find out where they took Brayden. I'll meet you inside."

"You sure?"

She gave me a look. "Jake, I'm invested now. Go."

I nodded, climbed out, and hurried toward the elevator. I took it to the ground floor, and followed the signs to the emergency room, the sterile smell of the hospital somehow already reaching me before I even made it through the doors, stopping me cold.

I'd spent more than my fair share of time in hospitals — a couple of surfing injuries here and there, my brother trying to kill me, getting almost burned to death in a fire, overdosing...the usual.

As a result, hospitals came with baggage. The too-bright fluorescent lights. The distant beeping of monitors. The squeak of rubber soles on polished floors. It all stirred up memories I generally worked very hard not to think about.

But I wasn't there for me, so I shoved all of that down, closed my eyes, and centered myself, then entered.

The emergency room was utter chaos. Almost every chair in the waiting area was full, and people lined the walls besides — some coughing violently into tissues, some hunched over clutching their stomachs, others sitting unnaturally still with that pinched, gray look people got when they were in real pain. Somewhere off to my left, a child was crying. Across the room, an older man was hacking up a lung like he was auditioning for a tuberculosis documentary.

Apparently, half the city had decided to get sick at once.

I made my way to the admissions desk, where a frazzled-looking nurse sat behind a computer, typing furiously while juggling two ringing phones and what looked like her last shred of patience.

She glanced up at me with an expression that very clearly said, *If you're here to ask where the bathroom is, I will end you.*

Instead, in a clipped professional tone, she asked, “Can I help you?”

“Uh, yeah. My friend just came in by ambulance. Brayden. I wanted to check on him.”

Her fingers hovered over the keyboard.

“Last name?”

I opened my mouth...and immediately froze.

Oh, no. I had no idea what Brayden’s last name was.

I knew he was enormous. I knew he was weirdly sweet. I knew he could probably bench press a Honda Civic. I knew he liked football and called diarrhea “the squirts.”

But his last name? Nothing.

My face warmed. “Uh...”

The nurse stared at me. “His last name?”

“I...don’t know.”

Her expression somehow flattened further. “You don’t know your friend’s last name.”

“He’s more of a college friend?” I offered weakly. “Dorm acquaintance? Giant golden retriever in human form?”

She blinked at me.

I winced. “That probably didn’t help.”

“No,” she agreed. She rubbed her temple. “Look, there was a full moon last night. We’re in the middle of a flu outbreak, we’re completely slammed, and I do not have time to manually search every Brayden admitted tonight. I need a full name or date of birth.”

“I don’t know that either.”

Her stare suggested she was reassessing whether I counted as sentient life.

Mercifully, Erin appeared at my side just then.

“Hi,” she said smoothly, stepping forward with all the confidence of someone used to getting things done. “I’m Erin McLuhan, Resident Advisor at Van Rensselaer University. One of our students was brought in by ambulance this morning — Brayden Johnson, eighteen, probable appendicitis. I’m acting as campus representative until we can make contact with his family.”

That changed everything. The nurse straightened and immediately started typing. Apparently, ‘campus representative’ were the magic words. After a moment, she nodded at the screen. “He’s been admitted.”

“Is he okay?” I asked quickly.

The nurse's professional mask slid firmly back into place. "I'm sorry, but due to privacy laws, that's all I can tell you unless you're immediate family or listed as an emergency contact."

Of course.

"Can we wait here?" Erin asked.

The nurse nodded distractedly, already turning to answer one of the ringing phones. "Yes, but I can't promise anyone will come update you."

"That's fine," Erin said.

She gently steered me away from the desk before I could say anything else dumb.

We found two empty chairs wedged between a sneezing teenager wrapped in a blanket and an elderly woman muttering angrily to herself. I sank into mine and stared at the closed doors leading back to treatment. Erin sat beside me.

Now there was nothing to do but wait.

We sat there for about an hour, talking about everything and nothing. Mostly nothing.

Erin had a gift for easy conversation. We bounced from campus gossip to awful professors to whether squirrels were secretly plotting against humanity. Erin felt strongly that they were.

It was strangely comforting, sitting there in the middle of everything, pretending, for little stretches at a time, that we weren't in a packed emergency room waiting to hear whether our giant slow-witted friend needed emergency surgery.

Then Erin's phone buzzed. She glanced at the screen and immediately stood.

"I need to take this. It's campus security."

She answered as she headed toward the exit, already slipping into RA mode.

While she was gone, the elderly woman beside us got called back, her chair almost instantly snatched up by a grimacing middle-aged guy cradling one arm like it might fall off if he moved it wrong. The sneezy kid on my other side, meanwhile, was still there — still sniffing, coughing, and launching microscopic death particles into the air around him like some sort of plague sprinkler.

I pulled my hoodie collar up over my nose. If I survived this morning only to die of influenza like I was on the Oregon Trail, I was going to be very annoyed.

Erin's empty chair became prime real estate almost immediately. I had to defend it like it was beachfront property, explaining to no fewer than three people that someone was sitting there. Or would be sitting there. Hopefully.

By the time I was seriously considering going to look for her, Erin finally came back through the doors, her expression grim. My stomach dropped.

"What's up?" I asked, sitting forward.

She exhaled hard and dropped into her chair. "Well...your roommate is in a heap of trouble."

That got my attention. "What happened? I thought you said he'd just get a warning."

"That was before they searched the room." She rubbed her forehead. "They found the booze, obviously, but they also found drugs in his backpack."

I stared at her. "Drugs?"

She nodded. "Weed. And a lot of it. Enough to imply he was likely selling. When campus security confronted him, he took a swing at one of the officers."

"He *what*?" I practically shouted, earning a dirty look from the nurse's station.

Erin winced. "Well, more accurately, he *tried* to hit one of them. I don't think he actually connected, but still — not exactly a winning strategy."

"What the hell was he thinking?"

"I'm not sure he was thinking at all," she said dryly. "From what they told me, he was belligerent, making threats, screaming at people...basically speed-running every bad decision available. They suspect he was still intoxicated — or high — or both. It's unclear."

I sank back in my chair. "Damn."

"Yeah."

For a second, we just sat there absorbing it. I knew about the alcohol, of course, but the drugs were honestly a surprise. I would have thought I'd have recognized the signs, and I definitely would have recognized the smell. Which implied to me, at least, that he didn't use it, just sold it. That, or he was a lot more careful about where and when he used it, which seemed out of character for him.

Finally, I asked, "So what happens now?"

Erin gave a helpless little shrug. "No idea. That's way above my pay grade. The Dean of Students will get involved. Residential Life too. My

guess? He's done in campus housing. Probably kicked off the water polo team. Possibly suspended. Maybe expelled, depending on what they found and how hard he actually swung."

I shook my head slowly. "Wow."

"Yeah," Erin said softly. "Wow."

For all Foster's flaws — and there were enough to write a dissertation — he'd still somehow seemed like one of those people who always landed on his feet. The kind of lucky, entitled asshole who failed upward.

Maybe his luck had run out.

Erin checked her phone again and grimaced. "I have to head back. They need a formal statement from me."

"Oh." I nodded. "Okay."

"But I'll check in once things settle down," she said quickly. "And if you need a ride before then, call me."

"I can just grab a Lyft—"

She gave me a look. "Jake. Call me. I'll come get you."

There was no point arguing. I smiled faintly. "Thanks, Erin."

She stood and gave my shoulder a squeeze. "I got you. Hang in there." Then she was gone.

Left alone, I looked back toward the double doors leading deeper into the ER.

I still hadn't seen Brayden. Hadn't gotten an update. Hadn't even confirmed he was okay beyond the fact that he was admitted. And now Erin was gone too.

I sat there listening to coughing, crying, ringing phones, and the endless hum of fluorescent lights, and started to wonder whether staying made any sense at all. But then I pictured Brayden waking up scared and confused in a strange hospital room — and asking where Jake was. So I stayed.

While I waited, my thoughts kept drifting back to Brayden. Somewhere along the way, he'd attached himself to me like an oversized puppy who'd decided, for reasons known only to him, that I was his person. At first I'd found it annoying. Then baffling. Then weirdly endearing. If I was being honest, I'd grown pretty fond of the big lug too.

I thought of him almost like a little brother — which was objectively ridiculous, considering he stood more than half a foot taller than me, outweighed me by at least a hundred pounds, and looked like he could uproot a tree with his bare hands if properly motivated. Still, there was

something undeniably childlike about Brayden beneath all that muscle, an openness, a sweetness, a need to be liked that made him oddly vulnerable.

For all his size and strength, there was a softness to him that most people probably never noticed. They saw football pads, a square jaw, and enough bulk to block out the sun and assumed *meathead jock*. They didn't see the lonely kid underneath, the one who'd stumbled into my room at five in the morning because, deep down, he'd wanted someone safe.

Someone who wouldn't leave.

I knew what it was like to feel alone in the world — to believe, deep down, that the people who were supposed to love you either couldn't or wouldn't. To feel like damaged goods. Like a burden. Like somehow, fundamentally, you were too much or not enough.

Maybe that was why Brayden got under my skin sometimes. Not because we were alike on the surface — we couldn't have been more different — but because somewhere underneath all the obvious differences, I recognized something in him.

Hurt knew hurt.

Whatever the reason, I knew one thing for certain: Brayden wasn't a burden. He was my friend.

About twenty minutes later, a tall, very attractive black man in blue scrubs pushed through the double doors and scanned the waiting room.

"Is there a Jake here?" he called. "From Van Rensselaer University?"

I shot to my feet so fast I nearly fell over. "That's me."

He gave me a warm, tired smile — the kind worn by someone halfway through a very long shift — and motioned for me to come with him. "Follow me."

I hurried after him through the double doors and into the maze of curtained bays, bustling nurses, rolling carts, and antiseptic smells that always made my stomach knot. As we walked, he glanced over at me. "Your friend hasn't stopped asking for you since he got here."

That surprised me more than it probably should have. "Really?"

He chuckled softly. "Repeatedly. Loudly. Between complaints about his stomach and asking whether he was going to die, he kept saying, 'Did Jake come? Is Jake here? Where's Jake?'"

Despite everything, I smiled. The big goof.

"We finally got him stabilized," the nurse continued, "so you can sit with him for a bit until they take him up to prep for surgery."

My smile faded. "So he really does need surgery?"

He nodded. "Oh, yeah. Acute appendicitis. He also told us you were the one who convinced him to come, so good job." He gave me an approving look. "Your instincts were right, bringing him in when you did. Hopefully we caught it before it ruptured, though we won't know for certain until they get in there."

He stopped in front of one of the curtained bays and turned to me. "Just so you know, he's got fluids running, and we gave him something pretty strong for the pain, so..." he smiled knowingly, "he may be a little loopy."

"Loopy how?"

The nurse grinned. "A few minutes ago he asked if appendixes grow back like starfish arms."

I snorted. "Yeah, that sounds like Brayden."

He pulled back the curtain, and in a sing-song voice said, "You've got a visitor!"

Inside, Brayden lay sprawled across a hospital bed that looked far too small for him, propped slightly upright on a pillow. He was wearing one of those flimsy patterned hospital gowns that looked ridiculous on everybody but somehow looked especially absurd stretched across his massive frame. An IV line snaked into one huge arm, taped in place against his skin.

His shaggy hair was flattened in strange directions, his face pale and shiny with sweat, but he looked more relaxed than he had earlier — less like a wounded bear, more like a heavily sedated golden retriever.

His big brown eyes rolled toward me, then widened with sleepy recognition. "Jake!" he slurred, sounding absurdly happy to see me. "You came."

"Of course I did, Big Guy. I wasn't going to leave you here alone."

The nurse gave me a quick nod as he stepped back toward the curtain. "Call out if you need anything," he said. "I've got a few dozen other people trying to die on me today." With that he disappeared, drawing the curtain closed behind him.

Brayden watched him go, then looked back at me, his big face suddenly crumpling with emotion. "I thought you didn't come," he said softly, sadness thick in his drug-slurred voice. "I was scared."

My chest tightened. I moved closer to the bed and rested a hand gently on his forearm. "I'm here," I said. "And they're taking good care of you. How're those drugs treating you?"

His brow furrowed. "I don't do drugs."

I snorted. "Wish I could say the same for your buddy Foster," I muttered under my breath.

"What?" he asked blearily.

"Nothing," I smiled. "I asked if the pain meds are helping."

He nodded, then immediately winced like even that small motion had been a mistake. "Yeah," he mumbled. "But I feel weird now. Floaty. Like my head's full of marshmallows."

"Yeah, they warned me you might be a little loopy."

He stared at me for a long moment with glassy, over-serious eyes, like he was contemplating some profound cosmic truth. Then, in a solemn voice, he declared: "Jake...you're my only friend."

"Hey," I said gently, "that's not true. What about your teammates?"

He was already slowly shaking his head. "They're not friends. We just play football together."

"What about Foster?"

His face pinched. "He's a jerk."

I stifled a laugh. Couldn't argue with that.

"Well, there's Erin. And Kody."

He shook his head again. "They're your friends." He frowned thoughtfully. "Well...Kody's not your friend. He's your boyfriend."

"We're not—" I stopped myself and sighed. This was not the time for semantic debate. "Sure," I said. "Whatever you say." I patted his arm and tried steering him somewhere safer. "Has anyone gotten hold of your parents?"

His expression immediately darkened. "I dunno," he muttered. "Hope not."

That caught me off guard. "What? Why?"

He leaned his head back against the pillow and stared blankly at the ceiling tiles. "They don't like me."

"Bray..."

"They don't," he insisted, sudden emotion thickening his voice. "I'm just...a disappointment."

My instinct was to argue — to immediately tell him he was wrong — but I caught myself. I didn't know his family. Didn't know what home looked like for him.

He squeezed his eyes shut. "I got two brothers and a sister. They're all smart. Normal. They get good grades. They say the right things. They make Mom and Dad proud." His voice cracked. "I just embarrass them."

"Oh, Bray..." My throat tightened. "I'm sorry. They...they don't know what they're missing."

A tear leaked from the corner of his eye and slid slowly down his temple. "They're not missing anything," he whispered. "I'm just a big, dumb, football idiot."

"No." My voice came out sharper than I intended. "You're not."

His heavy-lidded eyes drifted toward me.

"You're kind," I said firmly. "You're loyal. You look out for people. You'd throw yourself in front of a truck for someone you care about without even thinking twice. And probably stop it. That makes you better than the vast majority of people walking around out there."

He stared at me. Then, very quietly, he said, "My mom says I'm a waste of space."

My whole body went cold, then hot as fury flooded in.

"Well," I said flatly, "she's wrong. And she sounds like a bitch."

His eyes flew open wide. "Jake!"

"What?" I said, unapologetic. "That's a horrible thing to say to your kid."

He blinked at me in dazed disbelief, then his face softened. "One time..." he murmured, voice drifting sleepy and sad, "freshman year... I got tackled real hard in a game. Broke my arm. Got a concussion." He swallowed. "My parents weren't there. They never came to games. Ambulance took me to the hospital. My dad came to the hospital long enough to sign off on the paperwork for them to fix my busted arm and to yell at me for being a fuck up, making him leave his important meeting." His mouth twisted bitterly. "Then he left, and I was alone until Mom finally picked me. She yelled at me all the way home 'cause she had plans that I'd ruined." He closed his eyes. "That's why I hate hospitals."

My vision blurred. Jesus. No wonder this giant, wounded puppy had shown up at five in the morning looking for comfort. He hadn't wanted a ride. He'd wanted someone not to leave him.

I swallowed hard around the lump in my throat. "Well," I said quietly, "I'm here. And I'm not going anywhere. You're not alone this time."

His eyes stayed closed, but one massive hand groped weakly at the side of the bed, searching. I immediately put my hand in his. He squeezed...hard.

My knees nearly buckled. "Easy there, Big Guy," I said through clenched teeth. "I'm attached to that hand. I might need it later."

His grip loosened instantly, though he didn't let go. "Sorry," he mumbled thickly. "Sleepy."

"Then get some rest. I'll be here when you wake up."

A minute later, his breathing deepened into soft, rumbling snores, his giant hand finally slipping from mine. I flexed my fingers, trying to restore circulation.

Whatever they'd given him was apparently excellent. A tiny, traitorous part of me was jealous.

I found a chair in the corner, dragged it close enough that he'd see me if he woke up, and sat down to wait.

Eventually the cute nurse returned, accompanied by several broad-shouldered orderlies and a rolling gurney, to whisk Brayden away to surgery.

Brayden looked equal parts terrified and deeply offended by the indignity of being wheeled anywhere. "Don't let them steal my kidneys," he mumbled groggily as they maneuvered him out of the bay.

"I'll keep an eye on your kidneys," I promised solemnly.

He nodded, apparently satisfied, and let them roll him away.

Thankfully, once he was gone, they allowed me to wait in a small surgical waiting room instead of banishing me back to the plague pit that was the emergency room. For that alone, I was profoundly grateful.

A little while later, Erin texted to say she was wrapping things up on campus and could come back if I needed her. I told her to stay put. There was no reason for both of us to miss classes, and there wasn't much she could do at the hospital besides sit with me while we waited. Sweet, yes. Necessary, no.

That reminded me that I probably needed to let people know where I was, so I emailed my professors to let them know what was going on. Eventually my stomach started gnawing at itself, so I wandered off in search of the cafeteria.

Hospital food was exactly as depressing as advertised. I ate a subpar hamburger that tasted vaguely of cardboard and regret, along with a side of lukewarm fries that somehow managed to be both soggy and stale at the same time—a culinary achievement, really. Still, it was food, and food was fuel.

The coffee on the other hand — the less said, the better.

When I got back, Cute Nurse found me before I'd even fully reclaimed my seat. His shift was clearly ending — his scrub top was untucked, exhaustion written across his face — but he'd made a point of seeking me out. Trailing behind him was a young freckled nurse who couldn't have been much older than me, her auburn hair pulled back in a practical ponytail.

“Your buddy’s out of surgery,” he said, and my whole body unclenched. “Everything went well. They got the appendix out before it ruptured.”

“Oh, thank God.”

“He’s in recovery now. Since it was laparoscopic, they’ll probably discharge him later today — maybe tonight, depending on how he handles recovery.”

He gestured toward the younger nurse.

“I’m heading out, but I filled Jessa in. She knows the situation, and she’ll come get you when he’s ready for visitors.”

I hesitated, then said, “Thank you.” He gave me a polite nod, but I shook my head. “No, I mean really. Thank you. You didn’t have to keep checking on me, or let me see him earlier, or make arrangements so I could stay close. You’ve been...really kind. I appreciate it.”

For a second, he looked genuinely caught off guard. Then his tired face softened. “It’s those little moments that get us through shifts like this,” he said quietly. “Take care of yourself. And take care of your friend.”

“I will.”

He gave me one last smile and headed off, leaving Jessa behind.

She offered me a reassuring smile of her own. “I’ll come find you when Sleeping Beauty wakes up.”

Despite everything, I laughed. “Thanks.”

The rest of the day crawled by. Mostly, it consisted of me sitting in uncomfortable chairs half-watching some awful twenty-four-hour news channel and trying not to think too much. A weather segment droned on in the background about temperatures plunging overnight, with rain coming in and a slim chance of snow flurries.

At the time, that ranked somewhere below ‘paper cut’ on my list of concerns.

Brayden woke briefly, but anesthesia had apparently declared war on his stomach, so I wasn’t allowed back until the nausea passed. When they finally let me in, he was pale, glassy-eyed, and drifting in and out of sleep. Mostly he dozed. Every so often, he’d crack open his eyes, look around in confusion until he spotted me, then visibly relax and drift back under. Like a giant baby checking to make sure his parent hadn’t left the room.

Each time, my heart squeezed a little.

At one point, Kody texted me: *Hey. I missed you today.* I immediately felt bad. I should have told him what was happening hours ago, but the day had become one crisis after another, and he’d honestly slipped

my mind. Not because I didn't care. My brain had just been consumed by hospitals, surgery, roommate drama, and Brayden.

Still, trying to explain all of that over text felt impossible. I sent back *Aww*.

Even though I couldn't even think how to text out my day and how tired I was, I figured *Aww* probably wasn't enough. So I added: *I missed you too. Long day. Everything's okay. I promise. I'll explain later.*

Three dots appeared immediately.

Then: *Okay. Just wanted to make sure you were okay* ❤️

That little heart hit me right in the chest. I stared at it for a long moment, but before I could formulate a response, Brayden woke up. I slid the phone into my pocket to focus on my overgrown child.

We chatted for a bit, mostly about nothing. The highlight was when I asked him how things were going with Jen, and his face clouded over like a stormy day.

"I think I need to break up with her," he said.

"Why's that?" I asked.

"She just wants sex all the time. Like, every time I see her."

I blinked. I wasn't expecting to hear that. "Oh, um..." How did I even respond to that? "Some guys might think that was a good thing..." I ventured.

His eyes closed, and I thought he'd drifted off again, but then he said, "Yeah. I guess I did too, at first. But then it was just like...she could never get enough of me."

I was starting to regret initiating the conversation, but at the same time, it was like witnessing a car crash. I couldn't look away. Or in this case, I couldn't stop asking questions.

"So she was insatiable, huh?"

He opened one eye and rolled it in my direction. "I don't know that word."

I chuckled. "Just means she couldn't get enough."

He closed his eye again. "That's what I said."

Couldn't argue with him there. "Yeah. I was just...agreeing, I guess."

"How many times in a day is too many?" he asked after a few seconds.

"How many times...? Oh. Um...I don't know, Bray. I guess that's a pretty individual call."

"It gets sore after a while, but when I tell her that, she just says I need to man up and take care of her needs. She says I'm the only man who

can truly please her. That makes me feel special, ya know, but she wears me out. And I need to focus on my classes.”

We'd definitely crossed over into TMI territory, but I figured it was mostly the drugs talking.

“That's...admirable,” I managed.

Mercifully, he drifted off for a bit after that, and I was spared further details of his overactive sex life.

Brayden wasn't released until nearly eleven that night. Erin came to pick us up, saint that she was. Brayden shuffled out of the hospital moving like a man fifty years older, hunched protectively over his abdomen and walking with tiny careful steps.

His biggest complaint wasn't pain. It was football.

“I'm gonna lose my starting spot,” he grumbled from the back seat.

“You almost died,” Erin pointed out.

“But Coach is gonna be pissed.”

“Your priorities are insane,” I mumbled.

By the time we got him settled back into his room in Cayuga Hall — with approximately one million promises that we'd check on him first thing in the morning — it was well past midnight.

When I finally dragged myself back to my room and opened the door, I stopped cold.

Foster's side was bare. Completely stripped clean. Bed empty. Desk cleared. Clothes gone. And, most importantly, the offending mini fridge had vanished. It was like he'd been erased.

Had I known they were moving that fast, it probably would've made more sense to bring Brayden back to my room, where I could keep an eye on him.

But I was far too exhausted to do anything except kick off my shoes, fall face-first into bed, and disappear into dreamless sleep.

The next morning, my alarm yanked me awake. For one blissful second, I forgot everything. Then reality filtered back in.

No Brayden looming over my bed at dawn. No Foster snoring. No smell of stale beer lingering in the room.

I sat up and stared at Foster's empty half of the room.

I definitely needed an update from Erin. We hadn't talked about any of it in front of Brayden last night. Which reminded me that I needed to check on Bray.

Then another thought hit me. Kody. I owed him an apology. And an explanation.

I only hoped he could wait until tonight for both. I had no idea what I'd missed out on the day before, but I had a feeling that it would be far too easy to fall behind in my school work if I wasn't careful. I needed to make sure I made it to all of my classes.

My next thought was immediate and urgent: *Coffee*.

The weak brown sadness they served at the hospital had not remotely satisfied my caffeine dependency.

Then I noticed the strange brightness coming through the window — not sunlight exactly, but that weird glowing quality the world gets when snow is reflecting light back at everything. I got up and crossed to the window.

Everything outside was blanketed in white. Snow coated rooftops, trees, benches — every surface transformed overnight into a winter postcard.

I rubbed my eyes. “You have got to be kidding me.”

That walk to The Morning Rush was going to be brutal. At least the walkways looked cleared.

I took a quick shower, got dressed in approximately seventeen layers, and headed out into the cold.

Kody lit up when I stepped inside the warm interior of my favorite coffee shop. He pointed at our usual table, and I veered off in that direction.

A moment later, he slid in across from me, passing me a steaming mug of much-needed elixir.

“Thank you,” I practically moaned in appreciation.

He let me take a few sips before speaking again. “You look like you needed that coffee even more than usual this morning.”

I gave him what I hoped was a reassuring smile. “More than I have in a while.”

I must not have pulled it off because he looked concerned. He reached over and slid a finger into my hand.

“What's wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing is wrong. I just still haven't recovered from yesterday.”

“What happened?”

“Let me get some more coffee in me, and then I'll spill the tea.”

“Tea, coffee...it's almost like we're in a coffee shop.”

I smiled again at his valiant attempt at humor, but I needed more caffeine. I wished someone could just hook me up to an IV like Brayden had...except mine would be filled with coffee.

I snapped out my fantasy to notice Kody staring at me intently. “What?” I asked.

“I just feel like I haven’t seen you in days. Now drink your coffee, babe.”

“It has been too long,” I agreed, then I remembered the gym photo he'd sent. “Looks like Nick kept you busy, though.” I added.

He giggled and blushed a little. “Yeah. He was just tired of me whining about not hanging out with you.”

“Is that a fact?”

“Definite fact.”

“Well, we should fix that. What are you doing tonight? We need to talk.”

Chapter 26 - Kody

“Well, we should fix that. What are you doing tonight? We need to talk.”

Alarms went off in my head, I literally felt my blood pressure go up, and I’m fairly certain sweat popped out all over me as my body felt hot all of a sudden.

“Ow,” he said, still chuckling and pulling his hand back.

I realized I’d been digging my nail into his hand. Nothing good ever followed the phrase, “We need to talk.” Was he breaking up with me? Were we even dating in the first place?

I took a deep breath. It really was now or never — fight for him or let him throw me back like a fish that was too small to keep.

“You can’t do that.”

He paused. “Do what?”

My voice lost its power, dropping down to a whisper. “You can’t make me wait like that.” I cleared my throat and took his hand again. “I’m sorry. I...I know you heard me the other day, and I’m...I’m not sorry. It’s how I feel, and maybe I’m not supposed to yet, but I was *so* happy to see you and—”

“Hey...”

“—and I know I put all kinds of pressure on you, and for that I *am* sorry. You don’t have to say it back! But I don’t think I’ve really done anything *that* wrong, and things seemed to be going so well, and I—”

“Hang on, wait a second,” he said, putting his cup down and wrapping my hand in his.

“Please don’t break up with me.”

Shit.

So much for fighting for him. I’d gone directly to abject groveling.

Way to go, Kody. Smooth...real smooth.

He shook his head. “I shouldn’t have said it like that. That was dumb. I’m tired, and the caffeine hasn’t fully hit my veins yet.” He took a breath. “What I meant was I just thought we could catch up because... Yeah, okay, I wasn’t ready when you said it.”

“I’m sorry.” I hated how broken I sounded.

“Don’t be,” he said firmly. “Like I said, I wasn’t ready, but that’s not on you. I... It means a lot to me. You really can’t...” He cleared his throat. “Look, I was hoping to be a lot more eloquent about this, but

obviously I stepped in it, and, no, of course I don't want you to be spinning all day thinking I'm going to break up with you."

I swallowed and waited.

"Kode, you have a right to feel however you feel. And, honestly, it's nice to know that you, uh, feel like that about me. Really, it is. But my experience with that word — and the people who've said it to me in the past — isn't so great. You could say I have a really complicated relationship with the concept of love, right? There's a lot of stuff I haven't gone into with you because, well, it's hard to talk about. It's dark. And it's not the kind of stuff I want to just throw out there when I'm getting to know somebody I like. Somebody I like a lot. So yeah, I got...a little overwhelmed."

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I didn't mean for that to happen."

He laughed a little. "Of course you didn't. But...I guess I'm a mess. I needed some space to process." He swallowed. "I'm still processing. But I do know that I care about you a lot and I want to keep growing what we have. I'm just... I'm not ready to say it back."

I wiped my eyes. "Okay. That's okay. You deserve your feelings too. I don't want you to say it back just because I said it. I want you to mean it if you say it."

He leaned in a bit. "I'm getting there. Be patient with me."

That was it. Relief flooded through me. I very awkwardly stood and leaned over the table to grab him in a hug. Thankfully, he held me back tightly.

"You're not a mess," I mumbled into his shoulder.

He chuckled. "I kind of am."

My thoughts tumbled with the emotions of the situation but were also swirling with the things Charlie and I had found about Jake's past. How unmoored I'd felt when I thought I'd lost Jake, how I wondered if he felt any of the same nerves that so consumed me when I thought of him. The fear of being not enough, of things ending before they really got started, strangled before it could grow strong enough to survive the inevitable messes that go along with human existence.

"No, not a mess," I said firmly. "You're complicated, and I love you."

He twitched when I said that but didn't let me go. Of course, leaning over a table like we were wasn't something the lower back tends to let you do for long periods, so I did eventually let him go. We sat back down, and I took his hand again.

"Drink your coffee," I said softly. "I promise to let you enjoy it in peace."

He shook his head, a smirk twitching around the corner of his lips. "Never a dull moment with you, Kody with a K." Then he picked up his cup and took a long slurp, his eyes never leaving mine over the rim.

For a few quiet minutes, it was just us and our drinks and the aftermath of messy feelings, but good feelings, at least.

After Jake left for class, I finished my shift and went to my own classes. I was so relieved. I was still a little tired from not sleeping, but I was able to pay much better attention in class.

The due date for my project on the local railroads that had dominated the area was getting closer, and I still wanted to go take some pictures of the buildings as part of that. Of course, now I'd have to wear snow shoes or something.

By the time my classes for the day were over, I was thinking about a nap. Back in my room, I curled up and texted Jake to try and arrange to hang out. That morning had been necessary, but I was still short on my Jake time for the week. Plus, I wasn't sure we'd said everything that needed to be said yet. We couldn't really get all that deep in the middle of the coffee shop with Max and Marla as an audience.

I saw a message notification from Charlie.

So I found one of your essays. Don't worry! I didn't copy it. I just ran it through AI to make it sound more like my writing style.

I sometimes wondered how it was possible that he was his bio-father's fastest swimmer.

I quickly typed back: *What style? Moron? Why are you being so lazy about your paper?*

Shaking my head, I checked my calendar. I'd have time over the weekend to go around downtown to find those buildings, but that made me think of the weather, so I checked the forecast and was shocked to see that it would be in the mid-fifties over the weekend. After some frost giant just blew his load all over the city.

Charlie started texting me back that he was using AI to improve my paper because the quality was so bad and he wanted a better grade. I told him he was destroying the environment for a B. We argued back and forth for a while, and I only stopped when Jake texted back that we should meet up for dinner and then hang afterward. He asked if I'd come to his room to get him when I was ready, since he was working on a paper.

The door to our dorm room opened, and Nick burst in, shouting, "Honey! I'm home!"

"Is that a warning that you're not alone?"

He laughed. “No. That’s later.” He appeared in my doorway. “Derek is taking me to a city council meeting.”

“That’s...a weird date.”

“We’re both taking a government class, and it’s one of the assignments, so we figured we could go together. What about you?”

“I don’t want to go to a city council meeting.”

He rolled his eyes. “I mean what are you doing tonight?”

“Oh. I’m meeting Jake for dinner at the Commons, then we’re going to hang.”

He pumped a fist. “It was the post-workout thirst trap, wasn’t it? Hang a sock on the door as a warning, okay?”

I laughed at him. “That won’t be happening. We talked a little this morning, though, and things are okay.”

He nodded. “That’s good to hear. I really don’t know how you guys keep your pants on together, though.”

I didn’t want to say too much, but I also knew Nick had become someone I could trust with important things and probably deserved something from me when he said things like that. “Some things haven’t been great for Jake. So it’s not that I don’t want to, but it’s more...”

He raised a hand. “Say less. I know people that have gone through SA. Not sure if that’s it, but I respect the line.”

I nodded. “Thanks.”

“Just one question. Did he say it back?”

I smiled at him. “No. But it’s all good. I don’t want him to say it just to say it. And he’s good with me and my messy feelings even if it caught him off-guard at first.”

“Much respect to Jake. Okay, time to get changed. See you guys at the Commons? I want to eat before being bored by elected officials.”

I nodded, and he bounced off to his room.

I checked my phone but there was only a response from Charlie telling me that I was uptight and needed to get laid.

I rolled my eyes and pulled on my shoes and coat to start walking over to get Jake. As I made my way down the path, rock salt crunching under my shoes, I thought about what Charlie and Nick both had brought up — sex with Jake.

God knows I was ready. If it was up to me, I would have already lost my V-card. I didn’t exactly know what I was missing, and that was part of my issue. People made it seem like it was the most unbelievable thing, and I wanted to know, but I also wanted it to be something I didn’t regret. I

followed so many queer creators who said some version of hooking up is the gay way of shaking hands, which...had *not* been my experience.

I was mostly okay with that. Mostly.

Like, I understood and respected where Jake was coming from, but I was still human. I still got horny, especially around him. But the idea of my first time being with Jake, whom I loved and who I knew cared about me, was romantic. So I could wait. For now.

I had to admit I was still a little concerned about making an idiot of myself in bed, but I rationalized that Jake would be as considerate as he'd been in the rest of our relationship. There was at least half a chance Jake would be the top, so just to be safe I'd followed Nick's advice and looked up how to be ready for your first time. The information was helpful, if a little overwhelming, and I'd been...doing what I could to prepare for when the time came.

Overshadowing all of that was what I knew of his past. I don't think it had occurred to him that so much information was available online with just the slightest amount of digging. Or, realistically, he must be aware, but he certainly didn't know that I knew as much as I did.

When he'd said some of his past was dark and that he struggled with the concept of love, I'd almost blurted out what I knew. I'd managed to bite my tongue, though. It was important for him to tell me in his own time. But that made me think about that Fenton Black guy, the mobster who'd used Jake. Had he told Jake he loved him while abusing him?

The thought simultaneously infuriated me and broke my heart.

Erin was in the lobby of Jake's dorm, so I stopped to chat with her for a moment before skipping the elevator and climbing the stairs to his floor. I knocked on his door and waited, smiling to myself in anticipation of seeing him again. My smile grew wider as Jake opened the door.

"Thank God you're here," he said, grabbing his coat and stepping into the hallway. "I regret taking this philosophy class so much."

"Do you want to grab some joggers to relax later?" I suggested, trying my best to be subtle, while also trying to check out the way Jake was filling out his jeans.

He paused with his hand on the doorknob. "Huh?"

I dropped my voice. "You said something about hanging out after dinner. I figured we could go back to my room. Nick will be out with Derek, and we can have the futon to ourselves."

He smiled. "Good idea! Comfort for later. Let me grab my backpack."

He ducked back in, and I stayed in the hall while he threw a few things in his bag. He rejoined me, backpack slung over his shoulder, and closed the door behind him, and we headed down the hallway. Once we were out of the building, he resumed talking about the assignment in his class and how it wasn't turning out to be what he'd expected.

"You have all these great thinkers that you hear about all your life — Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, Descartes, Locke, Kant — and then, you read about them, and they just spend so much time talking in circles. And then we talk in circles about them talking in circles. And then we have to write papers about all the circles. It's so goddamn boring."

"I Kant believe they're making you do that," I said, attempting to lighten the mood.

He snorted and bumped my shoulder. Win.

We got to the Commons and grabbed trays of food. I spotted Nick and juted my chin toward him so Jake would see. Derek was already there when we joined them, and the conversation switched from Jake's hated philosophy class to the government class Derek and Nick were taking and the meeting they were going to.

As we were wrapping up dinner, Nick got excited for a moment. "Jake! I was telling Derek that when Kody and I were at the Rainbow Roost meeting last night they announced a costume contest at the Aviary on Halloween. We should come up with a group theme!"

"Chill," Derek said. "Not everyone wants to dress as sexy Minions."

"Liar." Nick laughed as they gathered their trash. "Think about it," he called over his shoulder.

Jake turned to me and raised an eyebrow. "What do you think?"

"About what? Slutty minions? Derek's right. I don't want to dress up like a slutty minion."

He laughed. "I meant the Halloween thing. Do you want to go?"

"We don't have to—" I started, but Jake shook his head.

"That's not what I asked."

"We can talk about it later," I said evasively. I didn't want him to feel pressured to go just because I wanted to go.

He gave me a suspicious look but let it go. "Anyway, now that we're alone, I have to fill you in on all the drama from yesterday."

"Drama?" I asked, sitting up straight.

"So much drama. So first thing in the morning, like five o'fucking clock in the morning to be exact, I wake up to find Brayden standing over my bed like a demented toddler talking about having a stomach ache."

“Wait...what? Like...gas pains?”

“That was my first thought, actually. I think I asked him if he’d tried to take a dump.”

I made a face but couldn’t help but laugh.

“But to be fair, it turned out he had appendicitis.”

My laughter dried up instantly. “Oh, no!”

“Oh, yes, and I didn’t know what to do, so I ran and got Erin, and she called an ambulance. Then we went to the hospital, because it turns out he was really scared to go alone. He was telling me about his parents, and they sound like real douches. It made me so mad. So I sat in waiting rooms all day basically while he had surgery.”

“Is he okay?”

“Yeah, or he will be. The surgery is pretty low key, so they released him. Erin and I are keeping an eye on him. But... In the process of all that, eagle-eyed Erin spotted an empty handle of vodka in the trash can and cornered me about it, so I had to tell her all about Foster’s liquor stash, which she then had to report. Campus security did a search of his room and found a bunch of contraband stuff — including drugs, question mark. I guess — he got physical, and... Well, I don’t know what happened after that. I haven’t gotten an update from Erin yet, but he was gone when I got back late last night.”

“Holy shit!”

“Right?”

“So you’re all alone in your room now?”

“I guess so. Unless they let him come back. But all his stuff was cleared out.”

“That’s fucking crazy.”

“I know. It was a very weird day. I did have a good conversation with Bray, though. I think I understand him a little more now.”

“Was that about his parents? You mentioned they were douches. What’s that about?”

Jake shrugged and his expression clouded. “Yeah, that was part of it. He told me about something that happened to him when he was younger, where his parents kind of abandoned him at the hospital. He was scared, and his dad just yelled at him for getting hurt and inconveniencing him. Neglectful, emotional abuse...”

“Jesus.”

Jake nodded and cleared his throat. “He was pretty freaked out yesterday and...I don’t know. He stopped being...how do I say this without

sounding like an asshole? He just seemed way more real to me. He was just a scared kid, not this..."

"The immovable object part of 'irresistible force meets immovable object?'"

Jake smiled. "Yeah. Kind of like that, I guess. Sometimes you can forget there's a person in there."

I nodded. "That's good, at least."

"Yeah. He was pretty drugged up at the time, so I don't know if he'll remember it or not, but I will. That's all that matters." He laughed as he started gathering our trash.

We turned in our trays and headed back out into the cold. I was thinking about everything he'd told me, processing it all. Then my mind shifted back to that Halloween party and how I'd decided not to tell Jake about it.

As much as I wanted an honest relationship with him, it seemed like our talk that morning had been incomplete. Jake was complicated, and I needed some guidelines to help me be successful with him. Nick and Charlie had done their part, but eventually I had to actually communicate directly with Jake.

Once in the room, we separated to change, like two guys who weren't a couple and definitely weren't boyfriends. I hoped that would change soon.

Of course, as I took my pants off, all I could think about was Jake also without his pants on just one room over.

Being horny is normal, I reminded myself as I tucked my semi into my sweatpants.

Back in the common room I put my laptop on the small desk in case we wanted to watch a movie later, but first I wanted a few peaceful moments with him.

"You're so lucky with this setup." Jake sat on the futon. "Foster was almost always in the room, so there was no privacy; either that or Brayden is there. I like the lug, but it gets a little crowded."

I joined him on the futon, and he raised an arm so I could slide in and put my head on his shoulder and wrap my arm around him, resting my fingers on his ribs. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, soaking in the feeling of Jake beside me.

"That was a deep breath. You okay?"

"I'm not sure I could be better." I shifted a bit closer. "I didn't sleep well last night, and I've been thinking about just getting some Jake time in."

"I didn't know I had a time named after me."

"Just a minute." I didn't follow up with more words, I just snuggled against his chest and squeezed him a bit closer, like I wanted us to just melt together. He got the message and turned into me a bit, pulling a leg up and letting his hand stroke up and down my back, occasionally running up to the back of my neck.

I stayed like that longer than I'd planned, and, in fact, started to feel like I'd fall asleep on him if I didn't move. As good as that sounded, we had things that needed to be said.

I sat up a bit, pushing my forehead into his neck, then tilting to kiss his neck lightly before leaning back a bit.

"Better?" he asked.

I took in his face and smiled. "Heaven."

His cheeks gained a little color, but before this could head in really interesting ways, I had to get a few things out in the open between us.

"I don't feel like we finished our talk this morning."

He tensed a little bit before nodding his head slowly. "Uh. I'm not completely sure..."

"I don't need you to explain anything, not yet. I just want to make sure I say a couple of things. Okay?"

He frowned. "Okay."

"Jake," I said fondly. "Nothing bad. You already know how I feel. I just want to communicate better."

His expression relaxed. "Oh. Yeah, of course. What's on your mind?"

"First thing...I don't need to know."

He looked confused. "About?"

"The things that hurt you before." I paused. "You've told me there was a lot of stuff. The first night you opened up to me, you said drugs, alcohol, sex."

He swallowed and nodded slowly.

"This morning you said there was dark stuff in your past and how complicated a word like love is for you. I need you to know that you don't owe me details of things that hurt you." I stared at him, willing him to take my words to heart. "The only thing I'm really going to ask you about your past is how it affects us now."

He nodded. "That's...fair."

"I don't know who you were back then, but I feel certain enough that I know who you are now, and I like that guy. A lot. Having said that, I do have a couple of questions."

Jake swallowed again and nervously rubbed the side of his nose. "Okay. What questions?"

I looked at him steadily for a moment. "I know I kind of begged you to go dancing last week. I didn't think much about that until we got there and it looked like you were uncomfortable."

"I—"

"Hang on, babe," I said and paused just to make sure he wasn't going to rush forward and tell me something he didn't have to. After a moment he nodded, and I continued. "You don't have to tell me what made you feel like that. I just want to know...are dances and clubs something we should avoid? Because I wasn't going to mention that Halloween party, but my well-meaning, big-mouthed buddy Nick brought it up."

Jake frowned lightly and pursed his lips for a second. "I'm not fragile. I mean..." He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "Yes, I was uncomfortable at first, for, like, a minute or two. I've had a lot of club experiences, and a lot of those thoughts hit me then — drugs and dealers would be there. There would be ways to get alcohol and...sometimes it's hard to resist. Being an...an addict is always a thing, you know? It doesn't just go away."

"So we do something besides club nights then," I said firmly.

Jake shook his head. "No. I get you're being supportive, and I appreciate that more than you realize, but no. I have to be in control of the situations I put myself into. I had a plan for when we went out, so I knew what to do if I got into a bad place."

"I want to be part of your plan. To keep you safe."

He chuckled. "You are. Don't worry."

"But I do. So...what are the rules about stuff like clubs?"

"Well, not rules—"

"I mean, I need to know what we should be doing. I don't want to pressure you—"

Jake actually laughed at me. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry." He pulled me by the back of my neck and gave me a strong kiss. "Look, Kody...*you* are pressure. The best kind. Going out is something that's normal. Yes, I may need to be mentally prepared, but I want to experience stuff like that with you. I never went to a club and stayed sober and present with the person I came with. That was fucking amazing, not going to lie. I wouldn't have risked it and gotten that if it weren't for you."

I looked at him skeptically. "I'm not sure about that. It sounds nice. How about you go back to the kiss and we can try again?"

He laughed again and gave me another good kiss. “Kody. I think the answer is, if you want to do something, you bring it up, and if I can’t—”

“Then you can’t. And I’m good with it.”

He shook his head. “No. You have a right to expect me to do—”

“Nothing.” I shook my head. “Nothing that’s going to put you in a bad spot.”

He swallowed, an indulgent look on his face. “I mean you have a right to expect experiences from me, too. I’m going to try, and last time it went okay. Better than that — I had a great time with you. It may not always be like that, but I want to try for you.”

Okay, that made me feel good. He wants to try to challenge himself for me. That shouldn’t feel so good. Should it?

“Okay. I’ll bring things up, but I’m cool with you saying it’s not a good thing for you. Okay?”

He scratched behind his ear. “We’ll go with that for now.”

“And if things change, then I need to know so we can handle it. Right?”

He closed his eyes, a little smile on his face, and he rubbed his forehead for a moment before looking at me. “Yes, Babe.”

“Okay. Second thing.” I hesitated and heat flushed through my body. “One of the things you mentioned was...sex. We talked about going slow, and I’m not saying we change that — that’s not my question.”

I watched his expression, trying to gauge what he might be thinking or if I was stressing him. When he didn’t throw me off the futon, I continued

“This morning, when I was reading that we got six inches overnight, I was thinking about making a dick joke—”

“As you do.”

“Well, that’s the thing, though. Should I avoid stuff like that with you? Is that—”

“No,” Jake said firmly, then took a breath. “What I said about that...look...”

“You don’t have—”

He held a hand over my mouth and gave me a stern, yet indulgent look. “I kind of do.”

He waited a beat, and then I licked his fingers, because things felt tense, and I wanted to lighten things up.

“Agh! Perv!” he said, pulling his hand back and laughing as he wiped his hand on his thigh.

“Yum!” I giggled.

Sure, it was probably wrong, especially with what I'd just asked, but I have so little self-control sometimes. And it was fun. So there.

He grabbed my face with both hands. "Listen, okay?"

I nodded, and he let his hands fall down to my shoulders.

"My thing with, uh, sex isn't about jokes or stuff like that. Yeah, I have some stuff to work through, but my point about that was...sex is part of a lot of healthy relationships, and I've...never been in one of those."

I put a hand over one of his. "No pressure, babe."

He shook his head and smiled, kind of sadly. "Yeah, there is. I want to. You're so...I mean that picture you sent me, you know? Talk about yum!"

I widened my eyes and then laughed. "No! That was so gross! I never send things like that! It was completely Nick's fault."

"So it's Nick's fault you looked so sexy?" Jake teased.

I did an actual face-palm. Jake laughed.

"I don't know why that embarrasses you. You should own how hot you are."

"Now you sound like Nick," I groaned. "And I was sweaty and gross after working out, which I really don't even do."

Jake laughed at me and pulled me closer. "Then why did you do it?"

"Nick claims it's gay therapy."

He hummed at me. "Well, in my expert opinion, you weren't gross. You were fuckin' hot."

I cuddled into him to hide my face. "Yeah? Well. I guess I'm some people's type. This guy at the GSA hit on me."

"Wait, what?"

"Yeah. A real douche. Nick named him Pat the Prolapse."

Jake laughed, and I giggled, finally feeling calm enough to back off him a bit.

"So wait, this guy hit on you, and Nick called him that...and then what?"

I shrugged and gave him an embarrassed smile. "I told him no."

He raised an eyebrow and waited.

I shrugged again. "I told him I had someone that was funny, complicated, and so hot he makes my brain melt. And I may have implied he had a small dick. Or maybe more than implied."

Jake's face ranged through a few shades of pink as he struggled to decide what part of that to follow up on. "Brain melt, huh?" he said, settling on something. "Is that a fact?"

I nodded. "Yeah. Brain. Melted."

He snorted and shook his head. "I don't know. You make my brain melt too."

"Do not."

"Yeah, you do. I liked you all sweaty and half-naked..."

I blushed, but I loved everything he was saying. "Well, I like your beach picture. It's my phone background."

"Your what now?"

Unashamed, I pulled my phone out and woke it. "Ignore the text from Charlie — he's trying to plagiarize me."

I turned the screen to him, showing the picture from his Instagram.

He flushed a little again. "Wow. That was a while ago."

"I like it."

He smiled, scrunching his lips together as he gave me the phone back. "So that means I can put your thirst trap on my lock screen?"

"Jake, no!" I scrambled to hold his hand down as he reached for his phone.

"Fair's fair!" he giggled as I fought to keep him from getting to his phone.

We rolled on the futon, laughing, pushing and wrestling a bit until he leaned forward and kind of pinned me down.

"Hmm. Kiss you or put that picture on my lock screen now? What to do, what to do?"

"Jake." I whined.

"Kiss, then lock screen," he said firmly and then landed one of his better kisses.

Oh man, great kiss. Him lying on me, just all that contact — I was bricked immediately.

He finished the kiss with a lingering flurry of tiny kisses and then sat up. I struggled to sit but didn't miss him adjusting himself, how flushed and sexy he looked, or how his chest moved as he tried to master his breathing.

"Lock screen," he said as if to himself. I just shook my head and watched him as he put me on display on his phone. "So much better."

"Weirdo."

He shifted to look at me side-eye. "Says the boy with my half-naked picture on his phone."

"But you're not all sweaty!" I whined and crawled back over to nestle into him.

He wrapped an arm around me and kissed the top of my head. Clearing his throat, he said, "I just want to go back for a minute, because it's important." He paused. "It's important to me that you understand."

I just nodded, my head rubbing against his chest.

"I appreciate that you're so willing to be considerate of me and my damage. Maybe complicated isn't the worst way to describe me. Like I said...I know sex is a part of most healthy relationships, and I want that with you. I want that a lot. But sometimes what I want can be overwhelming, because it's not...like, it's not all by itself. Lots of things bring up my mistakes and bad memories, and I struggle with that."

"I can wait," I said quietly.

"But...I'm not sure you should have to."

I leaned back to look at him. "It's my decision, too. I'm good with waiting. I want...all of that with you. But I want it to be when we're both ready." I bit my lip. "So...that picture? You *really* like it?"

His lips slowly curved into a smile. "It's fire."

I curled back into him, took another deep breath. It was kind of amazing he had my picture on his lock screen. A picture of me he thought was sexy.

"You could have picked another picture, you know."

"Well, tough to beat this," he teased. "But where would I find these other pictures?"

"On IG. I sent you a friend request a while ago."

"You did? I don't really use IG. Let me see what we have here."

His tone was still gently teasing, but I was a little excited to show him my life before meeting him. I sat up and looked down at his screen as he brought up the app and then accepted my friend request. I walked him through photo dumps of family vacations, Charlie and I doing various things, and some of the friends we'd had back home.

"This guy's kind of cute. You didn't try to date him?"

I glanced at the image. "Yep, I did. His name is Andy, and he had a boyfriend; I just didn't know it."

"Ouch."

"That was kind of my history, until now at least."

He hummed a response. "You don't use this app that much either. More than I do, but not a ton."

"Nah. I've never really been into taking pictures of myself. I guess it's mostly just friends and my family."

"A lot of Charlie," he noted.

"Charlie loves nothing more than to look at pictures of himself."

He chuckled, then grew quiet as he looked at the pictures of my life. I felt pretty good about it, being able to share things he'd not been in my life for.

Of course, me being me, I started thinking about all the things we could do to make memories. Memories that would need photographic evidence. The trips we could take, like camping — no idea why, I hate sleeping on the ground — or maybe to see the ocean, since he was an 'Eastern Shore boy.' Amusement parks, concerts, cabins in the woods...although maybe the best thing would be just being home together.

He shook me gently. "Where did you go?"

I looked up at him and raised an eyebrow. "It'll embarrass you if I tell you."

"Embarrass me or you?"

I shrugged. "Both?"

He looked back at me, and I wondered if he was running some kind of calculus in his head about if he dared to find out what was going on in my head.

"Okay," he said finally. "Let's hear it."

"I was thinking about us doing things like this." I pointed at his phone. "Trips. Maybe we could take the train into New York City. See a Broadway show. Or go camping, or go to the beach. Just...making memories. Together."

He nodded with a smile. "That all sounds pretty good. Have you ever been to the ocean?"

I shook my head. "We went up to Lake Tahoe once, but not to swim. There's a lake near town that's part of a state park, and there's a beach there. I think Dad said they trucked the sand in to make the beach."

"Hm. I'd like to get you on the beach. The ocean can be really peaceful and relaxing as all hell."

"Sounds good to me."

"Plus, you'd look really hot in a speedo."

I gave him a playful shove. "I'm not wearing a speedo!" Then I pictured him in one and reconsidered. "Unless you wear one too."

He tapped his screen. "Huh. A notification...new comment? Who— Oh, that was Charlie."

I looked at his screen. "Where? What did that little shit say?"

Jake chuckled as I read Charlie's comment: *Brother-in-law material?*

"Just making predictions, I guess," he said, clearly amused.

I blew out a breath. “Yeah. I guess you got Charlie’s seal of approval.”

“Better than him hating me,” Jake said with a laugh.

He lifted the phone, but I was off thinking about what that might look like one day. A proposal. The chaos of invitations and catering. Maybe, since he liked the ocean, we could have a small ceremony on the beach?

He bumped his head into mine, and I started.

“Look at the screen, silly, and smile.”

Oh! A picture together. I grinned at the phone, enjoying Jake’s smile with his arm around my shoulders. Our first picture together!

“Now, I have to warn you. Once I post this, Killian can find you. I don’t think he’ll be as direct as Charlie was with me, but if you feel like you’re being followed...”

“Wait. You said he was a good private investigator. Wouldn’t he be able to cover his tracks so I *didn’t* know I was being followed?”

“Well. He might tell my aunt there’s new evidence that you actually exist. And, of course, I have to set you as my collaborator, so...Charlie will be all over that. Does your dad follow your account?”

His tone was like he thought he was teasing me, winding me up somehow. He had it backward though. Like I’d ever be embarrassed to be seen with him!

“Post it. I dare ya.”

He raised an eyebrow, then looked at his phone and posted the pic — our first together. No title, but I think it sent a clear message.

I put some music on through my phone, and we just hung out. I asked if he wanted to live near the ocean after graduation, if he liked flying — which I wanted to know, since he’d have to fly to meet my family one day. We talked about foreign cities to travel to, bands to see. It was like we were talking about our future without actually saying that.

By the time he left for his dorm, my brain was dancing with possibilities.

Before he left, I did my best to pack a few days of not seeing him into some serious kissing. His lips were definitely puffy as he headed out the door — and fuck, that was another sexy look on him!

I was off Thursday and overslept, which meant I was running behind, so I didn’t make it in for coffee before my first class, and there wasn’t time between the first and second.

Jake trolled me by sending a selfie of him enjoying his coffee. He could be such a shit when he wanted to be.

After my second class, I texted to see if he wanted to meet for lunch.

I have a headache that just won't quit, he texted back. Feeling a little off, a bit of a sore throat starting. I'm headed back to my room to lie down. Let's aim for dinner instead?

I replied: *Yeah, sounds good. Feel better! Let me know if you need anything.*

I just hoped he wasn't getting sick. Quite a few people were missing from my classes, and one of the professors mentioned that the flu was making the rounds.

After classes, I went back to my room to drop off my bag. I debated heading downtown for pictures for my report on the railroads, which was due the following Monday.

Instead, I texted Jake, asking him how he was feeling.

Worse, he replied. I'm definitely coming down with something. Not surprised after sitting in that damn plague pit of an emergency room. I hope I didn't give it to you last night.

It would be worth it if you did, I sent back. Are you going to want dinner?

No. I feel like crap. I don't want food.

Got it. Do you need anything?

The shit sent me back my shirtless selfie! I was trying to come up with a clever response when my phone buzzed with an incoming call from my dad.

"Hey kid. Did you lose my number? I pay your phone bill, you know, and you can use it for more than porn."

Feeling a little guilty, since I hadn't called him in a minute, I sat down on the futon to talk.

"Hi, Dad. No, I didn't forget your number. It's just been super busy, and yes, I know that's not a great reason."

He chuckled. "I figured. I just had a free minute, and I haven't been able to give you a hard time in a little bit, so, you know, phone call, guilt you into talking to your old dad for a few minutes."

I chuckled back at him.

"So. Tell me what's taking up all of my oldest's time? School, I hope."

"Yeah, that's been ramping up. I was going to go get some pictures of two of the old railroad buildings downtown for a project. Did you know Albany used to be one of the biggest rail hubs in the U.S.?"

"I don't think I did, actually."

I filled him in on my project and added in things from other classes that I was working on. The rail project was the biggest one by far, and Dad asked me a lot of questions, trying to picture where the buildings were.

“Oh! Yeah, I remember that one actually! It was so ornate!” He seemed excited that he recalled the old Delaware and Hudson Railroad building and knew what I was talking about. “So, what else is taking your time?”

“Well, between work and school, most of my free time is with Nick or Jake.”

“Nick is the roommate, right?”

“Yeah. He’s been great. He dragged me to the gym the other night, and we went to a GSA meeting this week. They have some cool events coming up. Oh, and we went dancing last Saturday at this place that does 18 and over nights.”

“That’s definitely a busy schedule. Don’t get too buff from all that gym time.” He paused. “And how are things with Jake?”

I couldn’t help but smile. “So good! We hang out whenever we can. We spent all night together dancing, but we haven’t seen a lot of each other this week between school stuff. And he started getting sick this morning. He’s so sweet, though.”

“That’s good to hear.” He cleared his throat. “Charlie showed me a picture. You two look really good together.”

“That was last night. We were hanging out, and I showed him my pictures, and he took a selfie of us. I like the picture, actually.”

“You say he got sick?”

“Yeah. He took a friend to the ER a couple days ago, and he thinks he may have caught something there.”

“The ER?” He sounded parentally concerned.

“Yeah. Our friend Brayden ended up having appendicitis. Jake was in the waiting room for a while, I guess, while Bray was having surgery.”

“Oh. That’s... well, he sounds like a good friend.”

“Yeah. Brayden is kind of Jake’s shadow.”

“Is he gay?”

“Oh, no.” I laughed, thinking of what Brayden hitting on Jake could look like. “I think he and Jake just get along. He’s a nice guy.”

“Well, Jake needs to drink plenty of fluids. Get him some water and soup. Or Gatorade, Pedialyte, something like that.”

“If he’s still not feeling well tomorrow, I will.”

I asked how the wedding was coming along, and he bitched about caterers and photographers for a few minutes. We talked for a little bit more,

and then he said to sit tight because Charlie was going to call. When he did, I declined the call just to mess with him.

He called back, and we traded insults before he started asking about the picture. Jake sure was right that it was going to get noticed. I wondered if Killian or his aunt had seen it yet.

"I'm going to tell everyone here that he's your fiancé and you're getting married before Dad and Brandon. You know, show 'em how well you're doing at college."

"Do that, and I'll castrate you while you sleep," I warned, but he just cackled.

"Speaking of fiancés," he said, "Brandon is such a bridezilla! I feel like he and Dad are going to get a divorce before they even get married!"

"Really? What's going on?"

"Brandon keeps adding more people he wants to invite, but Dad keeps saying the invitations already went out and every person he adds is more money for food. And yesterday, Brandon decided he wants to ride in on a horse."

I almost choked. "A horse?"

"Yeah. Dad vetoed that real quick."

I laughed. "Can you imagine? Brandon riding down the aisle on a horse and it takes a huge dump?"

We cackled together for a minute. "I think Brandon is just rage-baiting Dad now."

"I'm sure it'll all work out."

"Sure, you're not here listening to them argue about every little detail."

"Charlie, they love each other. That's all that matters. Weddings are just stressful. Or so I've heard."

It occurred to me that maybe Charlie was actually a little concerned, given his family history, so I spent a little more time reassuring him that Dad and Brandon were fine, but made a mental note to text Dad and warn him to maybe tone down the theatrics, around Charlie at least.

By the time I got off the phone, it was getting close to dinner time, so I decided to put off my trip downtown and get some food after I texted Dad. He appreciated my tip and thanked me for looking after my little bro.

When I stepped outside, I narrowed my eyes at the weather. There were still mounds of snow, which was supposed to clear up over the weekend as the temperature climbed back up, but at the moment, there was a light rain, and it was cold enough that it was freezing in spots. I slipped twice on the way to the dining hall, and got soaked on my way back.

Since I'd gotten lucky with the first one, I sent Jake a quick selfie of me looking freshly drowned. Sniffing, I went to get changed to stay in and work on my unfinished project.

Afterward, I checked my phone, but Jake hadn't responded. He was probably sleeping off whatever bug had hit him. I hoped it was just a headache, but it was sounding more and more like the flu.

I worked steadily for the next few hours, only stopping to talk to Nick a bit when he came in. I told him Jake was sick, and he made the sign of the cross and said to stay away from him.

I rolled my eyes. "I'm not sick, he is."

"Yeah, but you touch tongues."

I laughed. "Oh, shut up."

"Eh, well, at least it's good timing, patient zero. Derek invited me to go with him and a bunch of our teammates to this off-season rental up at Lake George. I wasn't sure I wanted to go, but it's suddenly sounding like a lot more fun than avoiding germs with you."

I stared at him. "I've seen your room. Shit is growing in there. I hear you talking to it."

"Oh, that's a big fat lie!" He laughed.

He went to take a shower, and I kind of forgot about him as I went back to my report.

I checked my phone before going to bed, but no reply from Jake. I sent him a good night text and dropped off to sleep.

Friday morning, Jake said he felt worse, but he apologized for not responding the day before. Apparently, his charger had somehow become unplugged, and his phone died. I offered to bring him some coffee, but he said he thought that was probably a bad idea, since he hadn't been able to keep anything down all night.

I made a note to pick him up something with electrolytes.

I had to work Friday morning, so I was sufficiently caffeinated to be alert for all my classes. Outside, the rain had turned to sleet — a mix of rain and snow that was somehow worse than either of its components. Essentially, the world was turning into a slushie.

I checked on Jake again around noon, but didn't get a reply. I hoped that meant he was resting, but I was pretty sure he hadn't eaten since breakfast the day before, and he said he spent all night throwing up. He had to be getting hungry.

I grabbed some lunch for myself and then got a little soup in a cup to go. They didn't have chicken noodle, which would have been my choice

for sick people, so vegetable would have to do. Besides, everyone needs more vegetables.

I texted him again to let him know I was swinging by, figuring I'd have enough time to check on him and get to my last class. By the time I got to his building, though, he still hadn't replied, and I hoped I wouldn't be disturbing his sleep when I got there.

I was relieved to see Erin was at the desk when I reached the lobby. That would make things easier.

"Hey, Kody!" She greeted me with a toothy grin.

"Hey, Erin. Just dropping off some soup for Jake." I held up the cup of soup as proof.

She grimaced. "Sure you don't need some PPE? A face mask? Some gloves? Maybe a full hazmat suit?"

"Is he that sick?"

"If it's anything like what Carlos had a few weeks ago, it's rough. It was shooting out both ends. I had to take a break." She paused. "You know, I think maybe I'm not cut out to be a mom. Anyway, good luck!"

"Uh, thanks?"

I ran up the stairs to his floor and down the hall to his room. I noticed that the star with Foster's name was gone, replaced by a sheet of ruled notebook paper on which someone had drawn an ornate red cross over which the words "Lord, have mercy upon us" were printed.

I hesitated a moment, then knocked.

A few moments later, I heard someone inside the room croak, "Enter at your own risk," followed by a coughing fit.

It didn't really sound like Jake, but who else would be in there?

I tested the door knob and, to my surprise, it opened.

The room was oppressively warm, and it smelled bad, like stale sweat and something else I couldn't identify and didn't want to. I knew Foster was gone, but it was still odd seeing his side of the room stripped bare.

Jake frowned. "Kody?" His voice was hoarse and raspy, deeper than usual. "Babe, what are you—"

He broke off, twisting to cough into his arm. I drew closer, and as he looked up, I could tell he was miserable. His skin was flushed, and there were sweat stains on his dark tee shirt. His eyes were watery, his nose was red and raw, and a pile of paper towels and napkins were piled next to his bed, presumably filled with snot and contagion.

"I brought you some soup. Have you eaten since yesterday morning?"

He gave me a weak smile. "That's so sweet. Thank you. No. I haven't been able to keep anything down. I think the worst of that might be over, but my abs feel like I did about a million crunches."

"If you're feeling a little better, then you should definitely try to eat. Have you been drinking anything at least?"

He looked guilty. "Not since I finished that soda." He pointed to an empty Baja Blast bottle on the floor.

I frowned. "And when was that?"

"Sometime last night. I dunno." He started to say something else, but another coughing fit racked his body.

With a sigh, I set the cup of soup on his dresser and picked up his backpack, which only had his laptop in it, then I opened his drawers to grab a couple changes of clothes.

Jake coughed a bit more and groaned, then noticed my packing. "What are you doing?"

I set his bag on the foot of his bed and picked up his phone and charger, squatting to pull the plug from the wall.

"Kody, what the fuck?" Jake grouched.

I stood and looked down at him, probably the first time in our relationship I could do so. "I'm taking you back to my room so I can keep an eye on you," I told him firmly. I would accept no argument.

"I don't want to go anywhere, Kode. I feel like total shit."

"I know. But you're not taking care of yourself. I'll put you in my bed and sleep on the futon so you can— Stop shaking your head, Jacob."

He widened his eyes at me. "Did you just...?"

I gave him my sternest look. "You're sick and miserable and all alone. Let me take care of you."

He let out a raspy chuckle. "It's just the flu or something. I just need—"

"To get up and let me take care of you."

His fingers picked at the blanket for a moment and his eyes filled up. "I'll just get you sick. I know you're trying to be nice—"

"Oh, shut up." I zipped his bag up. "Where's your toothbrush and stuff?"

"Did anyone ever tell you you're bossy?" That was punctuated with a cough.

I sat on the side of his bed and took one of his hands. "Jake. Let me do this for you."

He cleared his throat a couple of times. "Okay. My toiletries bag is on a shelf in the closet."

I nodded and went to his closet. “So when did you become religious?” I asked as I rummaged through his closet.

I spotted the bag, grabbed it, and turned to find Jake was climbing from the bed.

Speaking of religion, I was definitely going to hell. I am a terrible, awful, shallow person, and I am going to burn in a fiery lake or whatever Christians believe. Jake, my Golden Boy, the guy I love, was so sick — coughing, congested, probably dehydrated, and miserable — but I’m not sure any jury would have convicted me for the thoughts that ran through my mind as I took in the sight before me: he was only wearing underwear and a short-sleeve tee shirt that hid nothing.

I had two thoughts that were so close they may have been one, single horny thought.

The first was that I was right that the swim trunks he’d been wearing in that beach picture were way too long, because *damn*. It was also impossible to miss that bulge, the outline of his equipment sparking a visceral response deep in my belly.

But, of course, I immediately felt guilty as all fuck for checking out my sick... Boyfriend? Person I was not-so-casually seeing? Situationship? Whatever our status was, I felt bad. He was miserable, and all I wanted to do was push him back down on the bed and get some fluids of my own...

“What do you mean religious?” Jake asked, snapping me out of my shame spiral.

“Oh, uh, the cross on your door?”

“What cross?” he asked, and for a moment, I almost forgot what we were talking about. My mind was still filled with images of his crotch.

“Oh, um, on your door.”

“Huh?”

I opened his door and yanked off the sign, then showed it to him, trying — and mostly failing — my hardest (no pun intended) to keep my eyes above his waist.

He blinked at it. “Isn’t that the sign they put on doors during the Great Plague?” he asked.

“I wouldn’t know.”

He shrugged. “Probably Erin’s idea of a joke. I asked her to check on Brayden, since I was sick. She popped in for a minute, but—” Another coughing fit interrupted him.

The coughing sent his package jiggling, and my eyes dropped again. This time, he noticed.

“Third drawer...joggers...” Jake gasped, waving his hand at the dresser.

“Huh? Oh. Right.” I was glad I had enough self-awareness to not say the first thing that came to mind, which was “*It would be a shame to cover that up.*”

I am *such* a terrible person.

I grabbed the joggers and handed them to him, then I forced myself to turn and look for his coat instead of watching him like a pervert as he covered his lower half.

He sniffed. “I think I stink.”

“Uh, maybe. I’ll grab your towel. You can shower at my dorm.”

We moved slowly, but I got Jake across the quad and to my room. I was his pack mule, carrying his bag and still transporting his traveling cup of soup. He was sniffing and coughing the whole way.

And complaining — so much complaining.

Once we reached my room, I told him a shower would help him feel better, especially clearing up some congestion.

“I don’t feel like a shower,” he whined. “I’m so tired. Why is your dorm so far from mine?”

“Babe, it will help,” I told him.

“So bossy,” he grumbled.

“Want me to get in with you? Do you feel like you could fall in the shower?”

He gave me a very unamused look. “I’m not eighty.” He took his toiletries and towel and headed back into the hallway. “Uh. Where’s the shower?”

I pointed at our private bathroom. “Over there, grandpa.”

He shot me a dirty look. “We don’t all get to lodge at The Four Seasons,” he snarked, then headed off to get clean.

I took his stuff into my room and started setting things up for him. I put his clean clothes on top of the dresser along with his laptop in case he wanted to watch something or felt good enough to check in on his classes or anything. As I did, I tried to resist the feeling that I was setting him up as if he were moving in and letting my mind wander along that domestic line of thinking.

I pulled his charger out, plugged it in, and set it up on the nightstand so he could reach it if he wanted. I also left the cup of soup and a plastic spoon on the nightstand.

I heard a vibration and pulled my phone from my pocket, even though I didn't feel it shaking. Nope. Feeling silly, I figured it was Jake's phone so I fished it out of his bag.

I honestly, to the last breath I take, will never know how I accidentally answered Jake's phone. Even worse, it wasn't just a spam call. No, the screen said 'Judy'.

"Jake? Can you hear me?"

Shit, shit, shit.

"Uh, no, sorry. Jake went to shower. I didn't mean to answer his phone." I winced, realizing *exactly* how that sounded.

"And you are?" she asked.

"Um. Kody."

"Uh huh. Is that Kody with a 'K'?"

Oh God, she knew who I was.

"Uh, yep. That's... That's me. Kody with a...K."

I sounded like a damn moron, but I was in full panic mode. She was probably thinking Jake and I had just hooked up and he was cleaning up afterward. I was desperate to change that narrative as quickly as possible.

"Uh, Jake has the flu or something. I mean, I'm not a doctor, so what do I know, but the flu is going around, so... He, um...he thinks he may have gotten it when he took Brayden to the hospital. But he wasn't drinking fluids. Or eating. Or taking care of himself, so I kind of dragged him to my room where I can keep an eye on him, make sure he's hydrated, feed him..." I realized I was babbling and petered out.

There was a pause. "I see. You don't have a roommate?"

"I do. But I'm in this newer dorm, and it's like a suite with a three-room setup where there's a single bedroom for each of us and a shared common space so you can get some privacy."

"Privacy. That's always nice, isn't it?"

I felt so hot. She was still thinking we'd just hooked up.

"I mean, yeah? I get along with my roommate really well, but it's also nice to be able to close the door if you're changing or sleeping. Jake's roommate is—" I realized I should probably let Jake break the news about Foster. "—um, not that great."

"I'm guessing he's less miserable with you?"

I actually laughed. "Actually, he's calling me bossy and giving me dirty looks."

I thought I heard her try to suppress a laugh. "He's always been a terrible patient. Well... I'll try calling him later. I had a feeling something was... Anyway, I'll call him later."

“Okay.”

“Take care of him, okay?”

“I will.”

I hung up and immediately started to debate whether I should tell him I answered his phone by accident. Then I thought about how Jake had said she had some kind of psychic gift. She’d changed what she had been about to say, but I wondered if she’d had some kind of feeling about Jake that had prompted her to call?

I set his phone on the wireless charger, and turned just in time to see Jake appear in the doorway wearing nothing but a towel, fresh from the shower. He was obviously chilly. Goosebumps covered his skin and his nipples were so hard they—

Damn it!

All thoughts of Judy and the phone call and any feelings she may have had went out the window as I was once more confronted with the reason I’d booked a one-way ticket to hell.

“Come on. I set your clothes on the dresser,” I told him.

He sniffled and nodded, stepping into the bedroom as I slid past him. My arm brushed his, and I felt a shiver go down my spine. I sat down on the futon where I couldn’t be tempted to look in on him as he dressed.

I am such a pervert.

I felt guiltier as he had another coughing fit, sniffed hard, and muttered, “Jesus Christ, this sucks.”

He appeared in the doorway in joggers and a tee shirt, crossing his arms across his chest. “I’m probably going to get you sick. I should go back to my room.” But he didn’t sound like his heart was in it.

“Sorry. You’re not in charge this time, Babe,” I told him.

He ran his hand over his face. “I should check on Bray.”

“Isn’t Erin doing that?”

“She’s on duty.”

“Right, I just saw her, duh. I’ll do it.”

He looked at me, nose red, and looking as miserable as he probably felt. I got up and took him by his biceps and steered him into the bedroom. He didn’t fight me as I got him into bed and pulled the covers up.

“I’ll check on Bray, see if he needs anything. Why don’t you try and get some rest?”

He nodded, then decided to talk instead. “I hate being sick. I know I caught it from that stupid kid next to me in the emergency room. He kept sneezing and coughing and spewing his germs everywhere. Didn’t cover his mouth once.” He sniffled and suppressed a few small coughs.

Unable to be that close for that long and not touch him, I sat down on the edge of the bed, reached over, and combed his hair back with my fingers. I repeated the motion, and he closed his eyes.

“Feels nice.”

Like I needed encouragement. I kept going, glad to have the connection with him.

“I feel like this is familiar in some way,” he said quietly, voice raspy. “Like maybe someone did this when I was little and sick. I don’t know. I can’t think right now.”

“Well, don’t then. Just rest.”

We stayed like that for several minutes, until his mouth fell open slightly and he let out a tiny, congested snore. I stood up and tiptoed out of the room.

Hopefully, he’d find the soup and eat it when he woke up, but I figured he’d need fluids like Dad had suggested, plus some medicine. I started adding to my list for a grocery store run.

I texted Brayden to see if he needed anything. Might as well do it all in one trip.

Taking care of them both had somehow become my whole day. And weirdly enough, I was okay with that.

Chapter 27 - Jake

I woke up tired.

Or maybe I wasn't awake at all. The ceiling above me wasn't a ceiling. It was too far away, stretching like it belonged in a cathedral instead of my dorm room. Or maybe it was my dorm room and everything was just wrong — tilted, breathing, pulsing faintly like it has a heartbeat that doesn't belong to me.

My skin was too hot. Then too cold. Then both at once.

Somewhere far away, something ticked in a steady rhythm, like a metronome for a life I wasn't sure I was still part of.

I tried to sit up, but the bed didn't agree. Hands burst through the mattress to grip my shoulders, wrists, and ankles, clutching at my chest, my legs, my hair, holding me down firmly. I tried to fight but I was too weak.

Suddenly, the hands released me, and I shot up...and then I wasn't in my dorm anymore. I was in the kitchen of my childhood home. Except the walls were black and dripping. And the floor was ash. And my brother Todd was standing there, smiling like nothing was wrong. Like he hadn't murdered our entire family and tried to kill me as well.

“Hey,” he said casually, as if we were late for dinner and not something else. Something worse. “You ready?”

I tried to answer, but my mouth was full of smoke. Not cigarette smoke. Smoke from a house fire. Toxic, hot, and harsh. Burning my throat. Searing my lungs.

Behind him, the hallway opened like a throat.

And I saw her. My twin sister Gilly. Lying on her back. Pale eyes staring blindly at the ceiling. Still. Too still. Wrong in the way only stillness like that can be wrong.

“No,” I said, but it came out broken and thin.

Todd tilted his head. “You always say that.”

Her head jerked, then rolled toward me, dead eyes staring accusingly. She opened her mouth, but no sound came out, only a swarm of black flies, their wings creating a buzzing that kept growing louder until it was deafening. The walls flickered.

I wasn’t in the house anymore. I was outside on the lawn. The sky was orange, like it was on fire.

The buzzing from the flies morphed into the roar of a thundering blaze, unseen but unmistakable.

Killian was there, too—current Killian, then sixteen-year-old Killian, then somehow both at once. He held something in his hand. A gun. Or a flashlight. Or maybe it was only the shape of something that changed depending on how I looked at it.

“Don’t,” I told him.

He looked at me like I wasn’t the one bleeding.

“I already did,” he said.

And then Todd was there again. Closer. Too close. A gaping hole in his forehead. Saying things I couldn’t hear over the ringing in my ears. But I knew what he was saying. Filthy things. Things no one should ever hear their brother say.

There was a sound like glass breaking. Or bone. Or both.

Someone grabbed my arm, and I thought it was Killian pulling me away from the fire — but when I turned, it was Fenton instead. His face was wrong. Like someone tried to erase him and didn’t finish. He had a hole in his forehead too, to match Todd’s.

“Who’s my good boy?” he asked gently, almost kindly.

“No—” I started.

But he interrupted me by disappearing. Just gone, like he was never there.

The roar of the fire grew louder.

Then I was in a burning club. Then a hallway. Then it was a hospital room with too-bright lights and too-clean floors.

I was in a hospital bed. My hands cuffed to the side rails. The metal digging into my skin. Hot. The cuffs were glowing red, burning into my flesh. Someone was shouting my name.

“Jake!”

I thought it was Killian again. Or maybe Judy. Or Brayden. Or Erin. Or maybe nobody.

The voices overlapped until they stopped meaning anything at all.

A hand pressed against my forehead. Too warm. Too real.

“You’re burning up,” someone said.

I tried to tell them I knew. I tried to tell them I’d been burning for years.

But Todd’s voice came out instead. Mocking. Then laughing. Then crying. Then both at once.

I was back in the fire.

Or the fire was back in me?

There was a moment where everything went still. Even the ever-present sound of the raging fire stopped.

And in the silence, I saw them all together. Todd. Gilly. My mother. My father. Fenton. Killian, holding a gun he didn’t want. Men without faces. Men with too many faces. All of them standing in a circle, like they were waiting for me to join them.

“Say it,” Todd said.

I knew what he wanted me to say. But I couldn't.

So, instead, I woke up.

Or I thought I did.

The ceiling was normal again. Mostly. The shadows writhed in the corners in an unsettling way.

Did they always do that?

My body was drenched in sweat, sheets tangled around my legs like they were trying to hold me down.

My throat hurt. My chest hurt more.

There was someone sitting in the corner. I felt them before I saw them, their face hidden in the shadows. Somehow, their presence was comforting. I didn't know why.

Then a voice, soft and close. "You're okay," it said.

And for a second — just a second — I believed it.

Then the figure rose and their face came into focus. A demon's face, twisted and evil. Todd's face. Fenton's face. My father's face. Something else entirely. Constantly shifting, morphing, bulging, collapsing in on itself, then reforming and starting the horrific cycle all over again.

The creature reached behind it and dragged a figure forward.

Kody.

He hung limply from the abomination's hand. He looked so scared.

Why was he there? He shouldn't be there.

The monster suddenly brandished a cartoonishly large knife, but there was nothing funny about it. The blade glinted, looking deadly sharp.

It brought the knife closer to Kody, Kody's eyes silently pleading with me to do something. Anything.

But I was paralyzed. I tried to scream, but it came out as the tiniest whimper: "Don't!"

I couldn't lose Kody. He was the best thing that had ever happened to me.

Chapter 28 - Kody

While I waited for Brayden to reply, I puttered around the room, straightening up a bit. I stopped when I heard noises coming from the bedroom, more like mumbling versus coughing. I quietly opened the door and peeked in.

Jake was on his back, his legs twisted in the sheets, his head twitching back and forth on the pillow, his face red and sweat glistening on his brow.

“No.” he murmured. “No...d-don’t”

I frowned, wondering if he had bad dreams often. Considering his past, I guess that wouldn't be surprising. Or maybe it was caused by his fever. Either way, I wasn't going to just leave him trapped in a nightmare, so I went and sat down on the side of the bed.

I pressed my hand to his clammy forehead and almost yelped, he was so hot.

“You’re burning up,” I said, but his body only twitched in response. “Jake?”

Nothing.

“Jake?” I called a little louder.

Still nothing.

I shook his shoulder a little.

“Jake? Wake up, Babe.”

He jerked violently away, his eyes snapping open before he launched into a body-racking cough. For a moment his gaze darted around uncertainly, then he focused on me, and he visibly relaxed.

“Kody? Where... Ugh.” He rolled to one side and sneezed hard several times. He grunted again, blew his nose, then looked up at me with watery eyes. “What’s going on?”

“You sounded like you were having a bad dream.”

“Oh.” He closed his eyes for a moment and sighed before looking at me again. “Yeah. Was I loud?”

I shook my head. “Not at all.” He studied my face as if he didn't fully believe me. “No lie. It sounded like you were talking to someone, which I thought was weird since I'd just left you a few minutes ago and you were clearly asleep. So I just checked on you.”

He swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing. “Could you... What was I saying?”

“Just sounded like ‘no’ and ‘don’t.’”

He closed his eyes again and inhaled deeply, mucus bubbling as he did. “Sorry about that.”

“About a bad dream? How dare you have something out of your control happen!”

A smile ghosted across his lips and then was gone. “I...sometimes have nightmares. Not as much lately, but sometimes... You know. Old hurts.”

“I’m sorry, Babe.” I took his hand and squeezed it gently, and he returned the gesture.

“I’m fun, huh?” he said, opening his eyes. “A grouchy bitch when I’m sick, *and* I have nightmares.”

“Well, personally I’m glad to find out you have *some* flaws. It’s hard to have a perfect partner. It’s a lot to live up to.”

He snorted and a genuine smile crossed his lips. “You’re something else.”

“I am!” I agreed cheerfully.

“You know, Kode,” he continued after a thoughtful pause, “I have a long way to go. With—”

He put his fist in front of his mouth to clear his throat, which turned into another coughing fit.

When that passed, he cleared his throat and tried again. “I have a long way to go with recovery and I have...stuff like this. Nightmares. Fears. Bad things that I’ll be dealing with for a long, long time. My therapist calls it PTSD. I call it really fucking annoying.”

I watched him, waiting to see if he wanted to say more. When it seemed like he wasn’t going to continue, I asked, “Will you let me help?”

He swallowed and stifled another cough before turning to look at me. “It’s a lot.”

“You’re worth it,” I said with a confidence that some might think I didn’t have a right to, but after all my dating mistakes in the past, I was catching on that the reason this felt different was because it was real. Not just a surface attraction, but a deeper commitment to someone that had been hurt — hurt in big ways that my own experiences couldn’t really account for.

My phone buzzed with a reply from Bray asking if I could bring him some cookies and frozen burritos as he didn’t want to walk to the Commons.

“Who’s that?” Jake asked, sounding a little jealous.

“My sidepiece wants some cookies and burritos.”

He frowned. "Who? Whose ass do I need to kick?" His faux-macho routine was ruined by another coughing spree.

"Down, boy. You're in no shape to kick anyone's ass. It's just Brayden. I was checking on him before I run to the store for some supplies."

"Oh. What supplies?"

"Don't worry about it. Just go back to sleep. I'll be back before you know it."

"If it's for me—"

"I just said it was for Brayden. You're the one who asked me to take care of him."

He relaxed. "Okay," he conceded. "But will you do the hair thing before you go?"

"On one condition," I said.

He narrowed his eyes. "What's that?"

"No more nightmares while I'm gone."

He tried to muster up a smile, but didn't quite get there. "No promises, but I'll try."

"That's all you can do," I said, and started running my fingers through his hair.

I waited until he drifted back off before getting up and slipping from the room as quietly as I could.

I pulled on my coat and headed down to the lobby, texting Brayden on the way to let him know I was on it. I ran into Nick coming in as I was going out.

"Hey. How's Jake?" he asked.

"Oh, um, sick."

He gave me a suspicious look. "I know. That's why I asked. Are you on your way to his room?"

"No... I may have put him in my room."

He frowned. "Why'd you do that?"

"So I can take care of him."

He shook his head. "Man, you are down bad. Now, I'm doubly glad I won't be around for the weekend. Just be sure to wipe the entire place down with bleach before I get back."

"Back? Oh, right. Your romantic getaway with Derek."

"We'll see about the romance. Hard to be romantic with like ten other teammates around. Oh, and don't let Jake wander around and infect the rest of our space," he continued. "You don't want your dear friend Nick to get sick, right? Right?"

I rolled my eyes. “Yes. I’m going to the store now, and I’ll get some disinfecting wipes. Just be quiet, okay? I just got him to sleep.”

He rolled his eyes. “You make him sound like an infant.”

“Nick, I’m serious.”

“Fine. I’m just grabbing my bag and rolling out anyway,” he promised. “But you’d better take care of me like this when I inevitably catch his cooties. I expect a sexy nurse outfit.”

I shook my head. “You wish. Have a good time with Derek. I won’t miss you.”

“Yes, you will.”

I let him have the last word and left.

The closest grocery store was a local chain in a bad spot. The temperature had gone up a little, so the snow had turned into an icy cold rain instead. I shoved my hands deep into my pockets, kept my head down, and hustled the twelve blocks to the store.

I grabbed a cart and started getting stuff for Brayden, then loaded up on chicken noodle soup for Jake. Then I wondered if that was smart since I had no idea if he even liked that, so I picked up a couple other types just in case. Maybe many types. So many kinds of soup - who knew?

Then I got even more neurotic and picked up some crackers to go with it, a gallon of water, several bottles of Gatorade, some orange juice, and a box of herbal tea. Then I wondered if he’d like his tea sweetened, and my head was filled with my dad’s lectures on the evils of processed sugar, so I got a bottle of honey. I knew he liked that in his coffee, so why not tea?

The real trouble started when I reached the cough-and-cold aisle.

I stopped in front of a wall of brightly colored boxes and bottles promising relief — multi-symptom, maximum strength, nighttime, severe cold and flu — and immediately started overthinking everything.

Was buying Jake cold medicine actually a bad idea? Didn’t people abuse that stuff?

I remembered this kid from high school — scrawny, perpetually glassy-eyed, always smelling faintly like grape — who used to brag that it was the perfect loophole. No one questioned you buying medicine when you looked sick. No one counted how often you took it. As long as you spread it out and played it smart, nobody realized you were getting high.

At the time, I’d thought he was an idiot.

Standing there with Jake in mind, I still thought he was an idiot, but maybe he’d served a purpose by setting off the alarm bells in my head.

They didn’t have a pharmacy in the store, so I did a search on my phone.

I found a list of over-the-counter stuff that was safe for people in recovery. Recovery apparently meant I had to shop for medicine like I was defusing a bomb. I needed to avoid anything marked PM or DM, anything that contained Benadryl, and definitely no Nyquil.

Cough drops, throat lozenges, Mucinex, pain relievers like Advil, Tylenol, and Aspirin, and mentholated VapoRub were all safe, so I threw one of each in my cart, then grabbed a box of tissues, the kind with lotion. I went back and forth before picking up a steamer that had menthol in it as well, trying not to think about what all of this would cost.

Before leaving the aisle, I also grabbed a bottle of vitamin C and some zinc. Might as well give my immune system a boost.

Good thing I hadn't really spent any of my money from work.

My next issue that I didn't clock until I'd already checked out was that I had to carry all this shit back. No way was I doing that in the rain and cold, so I splurged for a ride share.

I still had to carry everything to two separate dorms when I got back. My arms and shoulders were burning by the time I got to Brayden's room. He was in Cayuga, a dorm I'd never even been to before. He'd always just been in Jake's room.

The RA on duty was a dark-haired girl named Chrissy. I explained what I was doing, and she let me up after calling Brayden to confirm that I wasn't some crazed serial killer who wandered around carrying several grocery bags in the rain.

I knocked on his door and heard shuffling inside. The door opened to reveal Brayden, somehow looking thinner from his ordeal.

"Oh, hi, Kody. That's a lot of cookies and burritos," he said, looking down at my bags.

"Jake is sick, so I got some stuff for him, too." I entered his room and stopped in my tracks. It was worse than anything I think I could have imagined. There was stuff *everywhere* — clothes, blankets, trash, papers — covering the floor and most of the flat surfaces. Things were hanging off the back of both chairs, and there was a lingering odor of BO, feet, and pot in the room.

"Uh. Not sure where you want these," I said, setting down the bags and digging through them to find his stuff.

"I'll put them here," he said, moving a hoodie to reveal a microwave that had a small fridge and freezer underneath.

"You hid your appliances under a hoodie? Jesus, Bray, you need a cleaning person in here."

Oops. I hadn't meant to say that out loud.

“Yeah. It was okay before my hospital trip, but I haven’t picked up since I got back. It hurts to move much. Especially to bend over.”

It was funny how he'd phrased that, like it had been a school field trip to get his appendix removed. Also, it only took two days for it to look like...that?

I handed him his items, and he moved gingerly, placing the frozen burritos in the freezer — wedging them, really — and then gently sitting down with his package of cookies.

Technically, I'd finished my task, but I hesitated to leave. I felt bad leaving him in this filth.

“So, uh, where's your roommate?”

“Dunno.”

“Can't he clean?”

“No.”

“Got it.” I didn't get it.

“He's pretty messy. And mean,” he continued when I just stood there. “I don't think he likes me.”

That caused a little pang of sympathy that I tried to tamp down...unsuccessfully.

I should leave, I told myself.

“Are all these clothes dirty?” I asked aloud.

He looked at me blankly, and I made a sweeping gesture encompassing the entirety of his room.

“Oh. Yeah. I need to do laundry.”

I was *not* doing his laundry. But I could straighten up a little.

“Do you have a hamper?”

He looked around and then back to me. “Yeah.”

I stared at him for a moment. “Where is it, Bray?”

“Oh. Uh. In the closet.”

I chose the closet on the same side of the room as the bed he was sitting on.

“Oh, my roommate doesn’t like people in his closet.”

I paused and looked at him. “This isn’t your closet?”

He shook his head and munched on a cookie.

“Kind of weird that your bed and your closet are on opposite sides,” I said as I stepped over to the other closet.

“It’s not.”

I looked at him again, then at the empty bed. “I thought... Are you sitting on your roommate’s bed?”

He nodded. "I don't want crumbs in mine. Jake gets mad if I get crumbs on his bed. And it feels weird if you get crumbs in your eye or something when you sleep."

I scratched the back of my head and decided that it wasn't the time.

I pulled out his hamper and started cramming things into it, only stopping when he said something wasn't his. I tossed his roommate's things on the foot of the bed Brayden was sitting on.

After picking up the clothes — some of which were strangely stiff, I tried not to think about why — I threw several greasy paper plates in an already overflowing trash can I found under a desk, collected an armload of empty aluminum cans that I shoved into a grocery bag I emptied, and stacked the scattered papers. They could sort them out later. It wasn't perfect but it looked...less like a biohazard.

"Thanks, Kody. You're really nice. I can see why Jake likes you so much."

"Uh, thanks. I'm, uh... I'm going to head back to my room. Do you need anything else before I go?"

"Actually, could you refill my water bottle? I have to go down to the bathroom, and it hurts to get up and down."

After taking care of that, I escaped before something else came up. I wanted to help, but Jake was waiting for me. Well, hopefully he was sleeping, but he needed the meds I'd bought. I was a little worried about that fever.

I hauled my remaining — very heavy — bags across campus to my building. Why had I bought so many cans of soup? I wouldn't need to go to the gym with Nick if I kept this up.

Once back, I unpacked the soup and Gatorade and stacked them next to the microwave. It looked like I was opening a bodega.

I heard some movement from my bedroom, and Jake called out, "Kody?"

I opened the door to find him sitting up. He looked at me, confusion on his face. "Where'd you go? I woke up, and you were gone."

"I went to the store to get stuff for you and Brayden. I told you before I left. Don't you remember?"

He screwed up his face adorably. "No...?"

"Well, I did. I dropped off Brayden's stuff for him, and holy shit...his room. Have you ever been? I've never seen such a mess."

He shook his head. "No. How is he feeling?"

"Sore. But just as clueless as ever. When I left, he was intentionally eating cookies on his roommate's bed so he wouldn't get crumbs in his."

He snorted. "Yeah, he does that."

"Did you eat the soup I left you?"

He shook his head. "Soup?"

I pointed to the cup on the bedside table. "I'm sure it's cold by now. I can warm it up. Or I got some other soup if you don't like chicken noodle. Are you hungry?"

"Uh. Not really."

"Well, you need to eat. I think. Is it feed a cold and starve a fever or feed a fever and starve a cold?"

He shrugged, looking a little lost.

"Either way, you need to eat so your body can heal. I also got you water, Gatorade, juice, and I can make hot tea, too. You have to push fluids. Are you sure you don't want some soup? Oh, and I got you some medicine, too." I figured if I kept bugging him about soup, maybe he'd give in.

"Oh. Uh, Kody... I can't... I mean, thank you but..."

"They're all safe to take. I checked. Mucinex for your cough. Advil, Aspirin, or Tylenol for your fever and headaches."

"I don't have a fever..."

"You're still sweating like a popsicle in July, so I'm pretty sure you do. Shit! I should have gotten a thermometer. I can go back."

"No, no..." he protested weakly.

"I mean, I guess I'll just give you some pain meds and see what happens. Do you prefer Advil, Tylenol, or Aspirin? I got all three because I didn't know what you took. I also got some medicated chest rub and this steamer mist thing that's got menthol in it to help with your congestion. And tissues with lotion. Your poor nose is chapped. And cough drops, and lozenges for sore throats." Thinking of the website I'd used for reference, I repeated one of their lines. "And it's all safe for people in recovery."

He looked at me for a moment, then his eyes started to fill up. He swiped at them as I rushed to his side.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

He nodded his head. "Yeah. Yeah, I...just... I feel like shit. And you're being so sweet. I guess I'm maybe a little emotional."

"I know. It's okay. How about some soup? And I'll bring some Gatorade and...all of the pain relievers?"

He let out a ragged sigh. "Okay. But just Tylenol."

"What flavor Gatorade do you want? I got blue, orange, red, and purple."

"Which blue?"

"Um...Glacier something?"

“That one.”

I hopped up, feeling strangely energized, grabbed his cup of soup, and went out to the common room. I put his soup into the microwave, set it going, then brought the remaining bags into the bedroom. I lined up all the meds on the nightstand and added the bottle of Gatorade.

“Jeez, Kode,” Jake said, eyeing the assortment of products. “Did you leave anything for anyone else? How much did all this cost?”

“Don't worry your pretty little head about it. I've got it. I'm just going to go fill the mister in the bathroom, okay?”

He nodded tiredly, and I zipped around, filling the steamer, getting the little machine set up and blowing hot, moist air, and bringing him the soup when the microwave beeped.

I sat at the end of the bed while he sat up to eat, sniffing and suppressing coughs periodically.

“So Bray's room is a wreck?” he prompted.

“Oh, Babe. His room is everything every parent has ever complained about with their kid's room. My dad used to say shit like ‘It looks like a bomb went off in here’, but his room...holy shit. You literally couldn't see the floor.”

Jake chuckled which transformed into a coughing fit. He was smiling though. “I'm not surprised he's a slob.”

“To be fair, I think it's partly because he's so sore from his surgery. But you know what he asked for while he's recovering? Cookies and frozen burritos!”

He shook his head while I opened the bottle of Gatorade. When he'd finished the soup, I shook out two Tylenol and two Mucinex tablets and placed them in his palm, then handed him the bottle.

“Take those.”

“Yes, Nurse Kody,” he muttered.

“You're such a cranky patient,” I told him, swiping my fingers along his too-warm cheek.

“Ah, yeah. Sorry. I'm terrible when I don't feel good. Judy always says all men are babies when they're sick.” He tossed back the pills with a swig of Gatorade.

“Not all men,” I said, and was pleased when my dumb joke got a little chuckle...even if it almost immediately turned into a cough. “But it's okay. You're allowed to be a little grouchy when you're sick. It's a law or something.”

“Not to you. Not when you're doing all this, taking care of me.”

“S'okay,” I said, waving him off.

I threw out the paper bowl and picked up the tub of VapoRub to read the instructions.

"It says for back, throat, and chest. Want me to put it on your back for you?"

"Actually, would you put it all on? I don't like the greasy feeling on my hands and don't feel like getting back up to wash my hands."

"Sure!"

Oh, did I say that too fast? Because there I was, buying another ticket to hell — all I was thinking about was getting my hands on my poor, sick...boy...friend.

Fuck.

"It's not fair you can be so sick and still be so hot," I grumbled.

The corner of his mouth pulled up in amusement. "It's just because I have a fever."

"Hah."

He pulled his shirt off and swung his legs off the bed. I climbed on behind him, dipped my fingers into the jar, and dabbed the rub onto his back.

He hissed and pulled away. "Cold!"

"Sorry."

I rubbed the viscous goo between my hands to warm it a bit, then began running them over his strong back, starting at his shoulders and working my way down. He definitely had a fever. He was hot to the touch.

The menthol really opened up my sinuses, and my eyes were watering from the wafting vapor, but, *damn*, it felt so good to touch his bare skin.

I finished his back and moved around him as I scooped more ointment onto my fingers, rubbing my hands together again, then running them down his throat. He tilted his head back to accommodate me, but our eyes stayed locked. It all felt very...intimate.

I worked my way down over his clavicles to his pecs, being careful to avoid his nipples. The medicated rub probably wouldn't feel good on sensitive skin like those hard, hard nubs.

I had a mental image of me leaning in and biting one of them, and I yanked my hands back like I'd been burned.

"There," I said, a little breathless.

"Thank you." His voice was raspy, and oddly sexy.

"Anyti— Uh, I mean, sure."

"Someone liked that." He said with a little smirk as he reached for his shirt and pulled it on.

I knew I must have been blushing hard, but I refused to look down to see if I'd popped wood. I knew I had. I could feel it. I just didn't know how obvious it was.

"Guilty," I said with a nervous giggle. "It's probably the sixth or seventh reason why I'm going to hell."

"Only seven? I need to work harder..."

I stood up, not wanting to get into any more emotionally charged discussions, especially while he was sick and couldn't do anything about...my condition.

"I'm going to go wash my hands," I announced. "Get some rest."

He lay back down, and I went to the bathroom.

After I washed my hands, I checked in on him again. His eyes were open.

"Kode."

"Yeah?"

"Would you...?" he brushed his fingers through his hair.

"Oh. Yeah, of course."

"Feels silly to ask." His voice was scratchy, but soft. "But it feels good."

"That's all that matters then."

He scooped over, and I sat beside him, combing my fingers through his hair, feeling pleased that I could bring him comfort. To be fair, I was enjoying it as much as he was. There must be something clinically wrong with me that I craved physical contact with him so much.

Eventually he looked like he was sleeping, so I stood up and stretched. My stomach growled so loud I was afraid it would wake Jake up, and I realized I'd missed dinner. Maybe I should eat some soup myself. And maybe push some of my own fluids. Not...like that. Though maybe that too. But if I caught whatever Jake had, maybe I could move it out of my system faster if I was well hydrated.

Jake let out a muffled cough in his sleep, and I froze, but he didn't move otherwise.

I figured I might as well get comfortable before eating. I took my pants off and hung them from a hook on my closet door, then reached for the gray joggers I always threw on top of my dresser. They were worn and soft and comfy; my staying in pants.

As I started to step into them, I heard a low whistle from behind me and spun around, hopping on one foot, the other tangled in the leg hole, only to see Jake with his eyes open, gaze fixed on me.

"Guess I'm going to hell, too," he said, flashing a little smile.

Heart pounding, I pulled on the joggers. "I thought you were asleep."

"Drifting a little. I can breathe a bit. I think the meds are helping."

I padded over and kissed his temple. "Good. Go to sleep, Babe."

His eyes were already falling closed, and I doubted he'd remember this little...whatever. What a stupid way for us to see each other in our underwear for the first time.

I shut the bedroom door and made myself some vegetable soup, then ate it standing at the counter while thinking about the day.

I wondered what Jake's aunt was thinking after our strange conversation. As far as I knew, she was his only adult anchor — Killian didn't count, since he was our age — but I didn't know her well enough to even begin to guess how she'd interpret the situation. My only frame of reference was my dad and what he would have thought if Jake had answered my phone. He would definitely jump to the conclusion that Jake and I were hooking up.

Maybe women thought differently, though. I hadn't had a lot of them in my life, so I wasn't sure.

After eating, I poured myself a cup of juice and sat down with my laptop to work on my railroad project — then remembered that I was supposed to work in the morning.

I wasn't sure about leaving Jake. Not that he was an invalid, but what if the fever didn't drop and he needed to go to the emergency room or something? There was literally no one to take care of him if I didn't. No, that's not true. He also had Erin and Carlos and his other friends there in the dorm.

I *could* reach out to Erin and ask her to make sure Jake was looked after while I was at work...but I really wanted to take care of him myself. A protective feeling had filled me, and I wanted to be there for him, even through the flu.

For better or for worse, in sickness and in health...and all that jazz.

I went back and forth a bit in my head before finally ringing Max to call out for the next morning.

"What? Really, Kody? Calling out in advance? Are you planning to party and get drunk tonight or something?"

I rolled my eyes. "No. Jake's sick. Flu, I think." I realized that may not be a compelling reason for *me* to call out and quickly added, "And I may be coming down with it too."

I mean, it wasn't a lie. The chances are I'd catch whatever it was, right?

“Are you sure it's not the bubonic plague? I heard that's going around.”

“Max.”

She laughed. “It's fine, we have plenty of coverage. We won't even get mad if you come in and get coffee when you call out because—” she raised her voice, “—you're going to go get hammered with your hot boyfriend and be worn out from all that drunken sex.”

I pulled the phone away and stared at it, but I could still hear Marla laughing and telling Max to leave me alone.

“Okay, well...I'll see you later then,” I said.

“Hope you guys feel better! Bye!”

With that settled, I went back to my report. I barely had the document open when my dad texted to ask how Jake was, and I got distracted going back and forth with him.

Then Charlie sent me an AI-generated image of “me” turned to the side, back arched in a way that would have required me removing my spine, wearing a red cross nurse's hat and skimpy white bikini briefs that barely held things in. He asked if that's how I was attending to Jake.

My body had never looked that chiseled and never would. And my package wasn't that prominent either. The booty, however...that was fairly accurate.

I went back and forth with him for a few minutes, and then Brayden texted me to ask if I'd come to refill his water again.

I stared at my phone. Was he serious?

Shit.

I reminded myself that he *did* just have surgery.

I groaned and said I'd be there in a minute. I didn't bother to change, just made sure Jake was asleep and ran across to Bray's building. At least the rain had stopped.

Back in my room, I worked on my paper for a few hours. I figured I may not be able to take my own pictures after all, so I spent some time hunting down images I could use for free. Eventually, I felt pretty good with what I had and set it aside.

After a bathroom break, I picked up my phone and decided to check Jake's post of the two of us, just to see if anyone had commented.

There were a few comments, most from people I knew back home who must have gotten the post on their feed when Jake tagged me. I was a little surprised that Andy had replied, given how embarrassingly that had gone. There were a few fire emojis, a random ‘Kings!’ comment, and ‘about time’ sort of messages.

And then there was my brother: *Back off, bitches! That's MY future brother-in-law!*

I covered my face with my hand, shook my head, and laughed a little.

There weren't many from Jake's friends, not surprising since he'd said he wasn't active on the socials. There were a few hearts, one asking if we would be interested in some Eiffel Tower action — ew — and one from an account I thought might be Killian simply saying: *Call me!*

I tapped on Killian's profile, but it was private. I thought about following him, but decided we should probably meet first. I didn't want to be weird.

I wondered for a moment if Killian and I would like each other, and I remembered that not that long ago I'd been hoping I'd measure up in Killian's eyes, because Jake probably would want his best friend's seal of approval before he dated someone. Somewhere along the line, my thinking had shifted from needing his approval to hoping we'd get along.

I spent a while doomscrolling, bouncing from app to app, and was absolutely floored when Bray texted me again asking for more water.

Was he a fucking data center? How much water did he need?

I grumbled to myself as I pulled on shoes and coat, wishing I had a milk jug I could just fill and leave with him. The wind had picked up outside, and my teeth were chattering by the time I got to his dorm.

I got back to my room and decided I was too tired to keep playing waterboy to Bray. I opened his contact and muted his notifications. I'd turn them back on in the morning, but for tonight, Bray would just have to get his own drink. After all, he had to go down to the bathroom sometimes anyway, right? What was he going to do, text me at three in the morning to come fill his water bottle?

Actually, he probably would.

I settled back onto the futon, feeling the exhaustion settle in my body. It had been a long day. I dimmed the reading lamp, stretched out, and, using my arm for a pillow, drifted into a fitful sleep. The futon just wasn't very comfortable.

I woke up at some point and checked my phone, thinking I'd only been asleep for like five minutes, and was surprised to see it was after two in the morning. Even though it hadn't felt like it, I must have slept longer than I'd thought.

I wondered if Jake needed another dose of Tylenol. The Mucinex and mist humidifier thing were supposed to last twelve hours, so I wasn't

too concerned about them, but the Tylenol was every four. He might even need me to reapply the medicated rub, and that would be a damn shame.

I didn't want to wake him though. He needed his rest.

Just then, my bedroom door opened and Jake shuffled out. Maybe I'd heard him getting up and that was what woke me.

"Are you okay?" I asked, sitting up.

He jumped. "Yeah. Gotta pee," he mumbled.

He went into the bathroom, and I tried not to picture him standing in there...holding his...

The faucet turned on as he washed his hands, and a few moments later, he emerged, looking around like he'd never seen the place before.

"That's a lot of soup," he said, sounding a little groggy. "Did you buy out the store?"

"I wasn't sure what kind you liked."

"I'm kind of hungry, I think."

"That's probably a good sign. I'll make you some. What kind do you want?" I stood up and started for the counter with Jake padding after me.

"I'm not crippled," he whined. "I can warm up soup."

I turned and hugged him. "I know. Make your soup. I'll sit with you."

I held him for a minute, and he squeezed me back. I took that as a sign to let go. I was feeling a little grouchy myself from my poor sleep and him being grumpy. I sat down on the futon and yawned loudly.

Jake fiddled with the can and dumped the soup into a bowl, then started the microwave. While the microwave whirled, he sat next to me.

"It's probably time for more Tylenol. I'll grab that for you."

He laid a hand on my arm before I could get up.

"I've got it. You don't have to wait on me hand and foot."

I rolled my eyes. "I know, but I want to. You get the soup. I'll get your meds."

He accepted my compromise with a nod and got up to get his soup, while I went to get his aspirin and, you know what? I got the VapoRub too, because I wanted to.

After I got Jake back to bed, I managed to fall back asleep on the futon. I woke up feeling sore, like I'd been sleeping on a sidewalk. A glance at my phone said it was just past eight.

I made a quick trip to the bathroom, then checked on Jake. He was on his back, mouth open, snoring softly. He still sounded a little phlegmy, but he appeared comfortable to me.

I pulled some stuff from my drawers and headed back to the bathroom to take a shower. Unlike Jake, I have no physique to show off so, after drying, I put on a tee shirt and underwear before wrapping the towel around my waist. I was surprised to find Jake sitting on the futon as I emerged in a cloud of steam.

He looked up, made a disappointed face, and said, "Aww, boo!"

I raised an eyebrow. "Boo? For what?"

"I figured you'd come out in just a towel, but you put a shirt on!"

My face instantly felt like the temperature had gone up ten degrees, but I cracked a smile. "Stop!"

It was nice that he wanted to see me as much as I wanted to see him, so, feeling bold, I dropped the towel as I headed into the bedroom. True, I was wearing underwear, and he'd only have seen me for a split second, but my heart was racing like I'd just streaked through the middle of campus. I felt very daring.

"Hey!" he called out, laughed and then broke into some coughs. "Slow down!"

"You're sick!" I called out, laughing a little to myself as I pulled on joggers and ran my fingers through my damp hair. "Can't give you too much excitement."

"I'm feeling better now!" he replied, then coughed some more.

I came back into the room and shook my head. "Doesn't sound like it."

The microwave beeped, and I realized he must have woken up hungry. I took his soup out and brought it to the little table.

"I *am* feeling better though."

"That's good. You want some coffee? I was going to go get a cup."

"Um, yeah, actually."

"Okay. Eat your soup, get a shower, and I'll go get us coffee."

"I can—"

"You can shut the fuck up, eat your soup, and take a shower."

He narrowed his eyes. "Bossy."

"You like it," I teased.

He gave me the evil eye as I pulled on my shoes and headed out.

I laughed to myself in the hallway. Who was this person sassing Jake so much? I was acting like he'd said he loved me and we were boyfriends or something!

Semantics. He may not want to call it that, but we were dating, titles be damned.

I texted Erin to let her know she was on Brayden duty today since I needed to focus on Jake and taking care of both of them was too much. Plus, if I did get sick or was carrying the germs with me, it was the last thing Bray needed. Then I was off.

The shop was busy, but not slammed. Mike was at the counter, so I got our coffees and headed back to the room. Jake had changed, though he was still shirtless, and his hair was damp, so I figured he'd already showered and gave him shit for not waiting to give me a show. If he can troll me, I can give it back!

He got the last laugh by holding up the jar of VapoRub.

We watched something on a streaming service for a while, then he started to nod, so I got him to go back to bed. He insisted he felt better and could go back to his dorm, and I demanded to know if he really wanted to lose his live-in nurse.

"Okay, okay. I just feel bad that I've taken your bed."

Shame this is what it took to get you into it, I thought.

That evening I was sitting on the futon trying to read a sample article for my speech-writing class when Jake wandered in from a nap. He sniffed loudly and then lay on his back next to me, knees bent to fit, and plopped his head in my lap.

"Well, hello," I said, smiling down at him, and set my laptop aside.

He closed his eyes and hummed a response.

"How are you feeling?"

"Better."

His voice still sounded a bit scratchy, but it looked like his fever had finally broken.

He opened his eyes and focused on me. "Holy shit, Kode. Now I *really* feel bad. This thing is *terrible* to lie on!"

"In my defense, I didn't know that until I tried to sleep on it." I laughed at his expression. "But it was the right call. You do look like you're feeling better after some decent rest."

Since he was literally in my lap, I started to run my fingers through his hair again.

He made a happy noise. It was funny...I felt like I was in a game and I'd just unlocked a new relationship achievement.

He asked what I'd been doing, and I told him about the assignment I was working on and how I was surprised that, having read a short speech

in class once already, I wasn't that intimidated about the idea of public speaking.

He turned his head and coughed a few times, then lay back again and looked up at me. "Do you remember once when we were having coffee and you were looking all moony, I asked what that smile was for, and you said you were thinking about us in ten years?"

I chuckled, still stroking his hair. "I wouldn't say moony, but yeah."

"I would. Do you do that a lot? Daydream about the future?"

"All the time."

"Did you ever picture being my nurse?"

I laughed. "No, actually."

He closed his eyes. "Tell me one of your daydreams."

Well, that was a loaded ask. "This reality right here isn't bad."

He opened his eyes and swung his knees in and out. "Come on. When you think about the future, what's in your head?"

I tilted my head and looked down at him.

God, that face.

"I think about a lot of things. Kind of random. It all includes you now, of course."

He smiled. "Like what?"

What was he after?

"Well. I think about taking you home to meet my family. After you mentioned it, I was thinking about us at the ocean." I smirked. "You in a Speedo."

His eyes went wide. "We're back to the Speedo?"

I nodded. "Those board shorts in that picture are way too long."

"But a Speedo, babe?"

I chuckled. "Fine, maybe some short, fitted trunks."

He chuckled and then turned to cough again. "What happens after that?"

Figuring it doesn't get more embarrassing than telling him I wanted to see him nearly naked on the beach, I didn't mind so much telling him other things.

"Oh. Well, marriage of course."

"Of course."

"I figure we could have a ceremony on the beach, since you love it so much."

"What about what you want?"

"I'd be marrying you, dummy."

He laughed again. "Okay. Then what?"

"Honeymoon in Venice."

"Italy?"

I rolled my eyes. "No, Venice Beach. Yes, Italy."

"You're so sassy lately."

"I know," I said with a sigh.

"So...why Venice?"

I stopped stroking his hair for a moment and moved my hand to gently brush his eyelids so he'd close them. Then I ran my fingers up his forehead and back into his hair. My forearm was actually starting to get a little tired, but my fingers were still registering nothing but bliss.

"My grandpa had this collection of books, like encyclopedias for kids. We lived in a rural area and didn't have WIFI or cable and stuff like that, so I used to love reading them, learning all these interesting facts. It was just like going down a Wikipedia rabbit hole."

He nodded, but stayed quiet otherwise, eyes closed.

"I read the entry about Venice maybe a hundred times. No streets, just the canals. They have water buses instead of the ones we're used to. The architecture, the one island they have that's famous for glass blowing. I don't know...it all sounded so magical." I grinned and I looked down on him. "We could spend a day on the beach there; it's called the Lido."

He opened his eyes and smiled. "Trunks though. We're compromising, right?"

"I dunno. Still imagining you in a Speedo..." I teased.

Given what I'd seen when I'd dragged him from his room, I was starting to regret this line of conversation. Things were getting hard, and if he turned toward me, his forehead would be pressed against my boner...and it really wasn't helping to think about that.

"Oh, no. We made a deal, remember? If I have to wear one, so do you."

"Ack. Trunks it is."

"What about me, though? What if I want you to wear them?"

"I will. Under the trunks!"

"Evil." He sighed and let out a couple of short coughs. "I wish I could kiss you. But I think I'd need to go brush my teeth first at least." He sniffled.

"We'll make up for it another day. I promise."

He closed his eyes. "Have I...said anything else in my sleep?"

"Nope. No other nightmares I know of."

He nodded.

“Do you want to talk about them?”

He was quiet for a moment, and I wasn't sure he'd answer. Then he spoke. “I used to have a lot more. The dreams are always the same, messy mix of different people and events.”

“What do you mean?”

He opened his eyes and fixed his gaze to me. “Just like, people who never met each other are in the room with me, or people in places they never were. It's like a melted puzzle where nothing makes sense, but it's all bad stuff. Things I did to myself, things people did to me. It all runs together into this big, scary mess.”

“Well. You should call me in your dream. I'll fight 'em off.”

He chuckled and turned his face toward my stomach and...

Jesus Fucking Christ, Jake, don't nod or my dick will poke your eye out.

“Not really how dreams work, at least not my nightmares. I'm scared of what my dreams would do to you.”

I was a terrible person. He's telling me these deep, dark things, but I couldn't think about anything other than how close his face is to my hard dick right now. It was taking every ounce of my will-power to keep it from throbbing against his nose. It was tough to even be empathetic with how inappropriately turned on I was.

“I have to go to the bathroom, Babe.” I willed myself not to shift with his head in my lap.

“Argh. You're taking my pillow.”

“Unless you're into watersports— and we'd have to have a real talk then — yes, your pillow is moving.”

“I'm up!” he said as he sat up with a chuckle, which morphed into some dry coughing.

I shut myself in the bathroom before adjusting myself. It took a couple of minutes of thinking about non-Jake things for it to go down, but eventually I was able to go back out.

I managed to keep him for the weekend. He dozed here and there, but was definitely better on Sunday, if still congested and coughing a little.

“Thank you for taking such good care of me,” he said, giving me a solid hug. “I'll pay you back for the soup and stuff.”

I squeezed him. “I'm paid in full.”

“No, Babe. Come on. You spent all of that and stayed in all weekend with my cranky ass. Let me do something to pay you back if you won't take the money.”

I hummed for a moment, enjoying having my face pressed to his chest. "I know. Let's see if we can find a Chinese buffet!" I leaned back and looked at him. "I like those. So many different foods." I paused and narrowed my eyes. "Unless you're the kind that eats mac and cheese at the Chinese buffet. You're not, are you?"

He scratched the back of his head and tried to look innocent. "Uh, what? No. Not me."

"Jake!" I gasped, and he laughed.

"Just kidding. That sounds good."

No kisses when he left. He was still coughing and stuff and, love him though I did, I didn't want him to cough while our mouths were locked together. Besides, my throat was starting to feel a little scratchy and the sniffles were starting to kick in by that point.

I immediately took some more vitamin C and a zinc lozenge, washing it down with more fluids, but I had a feeling I'd be down the next day with whatever Jake had.

Chapter 29 - Jake

As I walked back to my dorm, I thought about how lucky I was to have found Kody.

I'd somehow stumbled across a genuinely good person — one of those rare people who was sweet without being naïve, kind without keeping score, caring in a way that felt effortless and instinctive. He'd spent the last few days taking care of my miserable, feverish, cranky ass without a single complaint — making me soup and dosing my medicine, combing gentle fingers through my hair when I felt like death warmed over.

No one had taken care of me like that in a very long time. And he'd been running errands for Brayden the entire time as well.

His care and kindness were the keys that opened a door inside me that I'd closed and locked long ago.

It wasn't just gratitude. It wasn't just affection. It was something bigger and messier — something warm and aching and a little terrifying. Being cared for made me feel strangely exposed, like Kody had placed his hand over a wound I'd spent years pretending had scarred over, only to discover it was still tender underneath.

Something had shifted between us over the last week. I could feel it.

Kody was changing...or maybe growing was the better word. He seemed more confident, more certain of himself, more willing to take the lead instead of hanging back and waiting for me to set the pace. There was a quiet steadiness to him lately, a subtle strength that hadn't been there before — or maybe it had always been there, buried under nerves and self-doubt. And he was certainly bolder, flirting openly and sharing his hopes and dreams about us and where we might end up.

And if I was being honest, I liked it. I liked it a lot. Maybe too much.

Because the stronger and surer of himself Kody became, the more it forced me to look at myself, at the mask I wore to hide my scars.

Was I falling in love with him? Or had I already fallen and just been too scared to call it what it was? Either way, I was in over my head.

I needed an outside perspective — someone objective, someone smart, someone who knew me well enough to call me on my bullshit.

When I got back to my dorm, I texted Killian to see if he was free, then started straightening my side of the room while I waited for him to respond.

As I cleaned, I thought about Foster, wondering what had happened with him and if I'd get a new roommate. I texted Erin to see if she knew any more.

Oh hey! Look who's alive! Feeling better? she texted back.

Getting there. Kody took good care of me. What happened with Foster? Was he expelled?

I don't think so. He got in trouble, but I heard his dad pulled him out. He probably wouldn't have been expelled for a first offense. Another RA told me that his dad showed up with a U-Haul within hours.

I almost feel sorry for him, I typed.

Erin sent back a clown emoji. For Foster or his dad? I don't feel sorry for Foster if he was dealing on campus. He dug his own grave. But I do feel sorry for anybody who has to deal with Foster.

Where was he getting the drugs? I had no clue and you'd think I'd notice something like that.

I don't know but I did hear that he was selling to the sports teams...so that's not going well for them either. I assume he had connections here in Albany.

Did the police get involved?

No, it was just weed, but still, underage and all.

Our conversation was interrupted by an incoming FaceTime call from Killian. I accepted it and flopped onto my bed. I'd barely done anything in my room, but I was still feeling shaky and exhausted from my illness. The walk across campus had worn me out more than I wanted to admit.

"Hey, what's up?" he asked. "You look a little pale. Everything okay?"

"Yeah, I'm still recovering from a particularly fun bout of the flu."

"Ew," he said, wrinkling his nose. "Glad you're on screen and not breathing your germs on me."

I laughed, which started me coughing. "Don't make me laugh," I wheezed. "Besides, I'm over the worst of it. I don't think I'm contagious anymore."

"You don't sound like you're over the worst of it."

"It's just a cough. Trust me, I'm feeling much better. Not back to normal—"

"When have you ever been normal?"

"Fuck you."

"No, thanks, I'm good."

“Anyway...” I said, attempting to steer the conversation back on track. “I need some advice. Or, I dunno, maybe just a sounding board.”

“What’s going on?”

“Well...you know how I’ve been seeing Kody, right?”

“Yeah. I saw your pic with him. He’s so cute.”

“Right, well, he’s also...absolutely amazing.”

“You say that like it’s a problem.”

“Only in the sense that I keep having these feelings of...I don’t know...inadequacy? Or like...maybe he’s too good for me?”

“Okay, well, stop that.”

I laughed softly and shook my head. “I wish it were that simple. He...took care of me when I was sick — and I don’t mean he just checked in on me or dropped off soup, though he did that too. I mean he physically hauled my feverish ass across campus and insisted I take his bed, then slept on the futon so he could play nurse. He kept me stocked with carefully researched cold medicine, made sure I stayed hydrated — seriously, so many fluids — called out of work, and somehow turned caring for me into a full-time job.”

I paused, smiling despite myself.

“And the thing that gets me is...he actually looked up which medicines were safe for someone in recovery. He thought about that. It mattered to him enough to do the research. He probably spent a ridiculous amount of money on medicine, not to mention enough canned soup to survive a small apocalypse, and never once acted like it was a burden. He’s just...incredible. Sweet in this completely genuine way. Thoughtful. Caring. The kind of person who notices what you need before you even realize you need it yourself. I’ve never known anyone like him.”

Killian gave me an exasperated look. “I still don’t see what the problem is.”

“I mean...I guess there isn’t a problem, exactly. Not with Kody anyway. If there’s a problem, it’s me. I think I’m falling in love with him...and that terrifies me.”

“Jake, you’ve got to let go of this feeling that you’re not worthy of this kind of love. Because you are. And if you ask me, I don’t think you’re falling in love with him.”

“Huh?”

“I think you’re already in love with him. The way you talk about him, the look on your face. Boy, you’re head over fucking heels, and you’re way past the point of plausible deniability. Accept it. Then get off your perky ass and do something about it. Don’t fuck it up.”

"Yeah, thanks for that pep talk, RuPaul. But... I... You're right. I am in love with him."

"So tell *him* that, not me."

"But..."

"But nothing. What are you so scared of exactly?"

"What if... What if it doesn't work out?"

"And what if it does? Every relationship is a risk, but only you can decide if the risk is worth the reward. You have to put yourself out there unless you want to spend the rest of your life alone."

"I know."

"Do you? If you ask me — and you did — Kody is a keeper. Guys like that, they don't come around every day. You know he loves you, because he's not only told you so, he's clearly shown it through his actions. Are you willing to lose that just because you're afraid it might not last? Or is this still about your past?"

"No... I mean, not really. I guess everything is about my past in the sense that I have all this baggage—"

"And it's not even cute baggage."

"Hey, I didn't choose it. But what I was trying to say was that I guess I've kind of come to terms with my past in regards to Kody. Did I tell you I went to a support group?"

"Yeah. The science-based one."

"Right. Well, I had a good talk with someone there who helped put things into perspective, how I don't have to share every nitty-gritty detail about my past, and then Kody kind of reinforced that with some things he said, about how my past doesn't matter to him, only who I am now."

"Okay, you really have to marry him."

"Hey...slow down. We're not even officially boyfriends yet."

Killian shook his head. "Jake, please, put this poor boy out of his misery, and make him your boyfriend, at the very least."

I sighed. "Yeah. I think it's time. I just needed someone to give me that final push."

"Consider yourself pushed."

"Thanks."

"You'd do the same for me."

"And I will. You still on your dating hiatus?"

"Yes, and for the foreseeable future. But that's different. I'm taking some me time."

"How much you time do you need?"

"I'll know when I get there. Don't worry about it."

“Oh, so you get to meddle in my love life, but I can't worry about yours?”

“The difference is you asked for my advice. Anyway, are you coming home for Thanksgiving?”

“Shit. I forgot that was coming up. I guess I need to talk to Judy.”

“You should bring Kody...”

“Oh. Um...I'm not sure.”

“Come on! I want to meet him.”

“He might already have plans.”

“You won't know unless you ask. Adam is expecting you and Judy again this year, and you know how he always cooks for an army. One more mouth to feed wouldn't matter. In fact, he'd be thrilled. He's the walking embodiment of 'the more, the merrier.'”

I laughed. It was true. Adam — Killian's dad in every way that mattered, paperwork be damned — treated feeding people as both an art form and a sacred duty. The man didn't cook meals so much as stage edible events. Holidays at his house were legendary: sprawling spreads that could have fed a small nation, every surface groaning under platters, casseroles, and desserts.

Adam never believed in keeping the guest list small either. Their house was a revolving door for what he lovingly called chosen family — a wonderfully mismatched collection of strays, misfits, loners, and loved ones who'd somehow found their way into his orbit and gotten adopted whether they meant to or not.

Judy and I had long since been folded into that chaotic, affectionate tribe, and if you showed up at Adam's table hungry, you left stuffed and feeling like you belonged somewhere.

I gave in. “Okay, okay, I'll ask him.”

It was still a month away, so I had plenty of time.

Killian narrowed his eyes. “You'd better. And don't put it off for weeks hoping he'll make plans.”

I laughed. He knew me too well. “Fine. I'll talk to him soon.”

“And ask him to be your boyfriend.”

I rolled my eyes. “Sir, yes, sir. Anything else?”

“Yeah, call Judy and discuss your Thanksgiving plans.”

“Jeez. Another bossy bottom. Just what I needed.”

Killian's eyes lit up. “Wait! So Kody is a bottom?”

“Oh my God, Kill. We haven't had that conversation yet.”

“But you said another...”

“It was just a...a figure of speech.”

"But if you had to guess?"

I shook my head. "Goodbye, Killian."

"No wait! Spill the tea."

"Hanging up now."

"No—"

I ended the call and laughed. I knew that would drive him crazy. Killian had the most insatiable curiosity of anyone I had ever met.

I took a moment to digest our conversation, then called Judy, as promised.

"The fulcrum has tipped," she said in lieu of a greeting. "I knew you'd call. Is everything okay?"

"Hi, Judy. I'm good thanks, just getting over the flu. And how are you?"

"Oh, so it was the flu, then? Did you see a doctor?"

"No, I didn't get an official diagnosis, but I checked all the boxes."

"Why didn't you call me?"

"Well you see, I was puking my guts up, then I was a little loopy from my fever, then Kody kidnapped me and made me stay with him so he could take care of me. Somewhere in there, I guess I just forgot."

"Mmm..." she hummed. "So Kody took care of you, huh?"

"Yes, he did."

"That seems very...coupley."

"Well, we're a couple, so..."

"Jake! That's new!"

"I mean, nothing official just yet, but—"

"Then make it official!"

"I'm working on it! That's not why I called."

"Why did you call?"

"Thanksgiving is coming up—"

"Oh, right. Adam invited us over."

"I just talked to Killian. He said they were expecting us. But how am I getting home?"

"Good question. I guess I could come get you. Or there's the train. Do you have a preference?"

"Isn't the train expensive?"

"With the cost of gas these days, it's probably about the same either way, especially when you add in a hotel room for me. I can't drive up there and back in the same day. Well, I could, I suppose, but I don't want to."

I laughed. "That's fair. Want me to look into the train? What station should I go to?"

"No, I'll take care of it, but I think Wilmington is probably the closest." She paused. "Will it be just you?"

I grinned. "You sound like Killian. He made me promise to ask Kody if he had plans."

"I approve," she said. "And I'm happy to get his ticket too, if he can come."

"I'll let you know in the next day or two."

"Good. Do that. And just for the record, any of your friends are welcome here at any time. I'm...I'm glad you've built a good support group up there. Speaking of support groups..."

"Yes, I found one, and I've attended. I liked it. I'll be going back."

She laughed, and I could hear the relief in her laughter. "Okay. Well then, anything else before I let you go?"

"No, that was it."

"Thanks for calling, sweetie. I love you."

"I love you, too."

We ended the call, and I lay there thinking about love. It was so easy to say to Judy, so why was it so damn hard to say to Kody? I mean, I knew it was a different kind of love, but still...

To distract myself, I decided to check on Brayden. I had class work to catch up on, but I was enjoying just lying on the bed with my phone and wasn't in a hurry to start on it.

Bray answered, sounding surprised. "Hi, Jake. I thought you were sick."

"I was, but I'm getting better. I just wanted to check on you. How are you feeling?"

"Less sore today."

"Does that mean you're getting your own water now?"

"Yeah."

"Atta boy."

"Kody stopped answering my texts."

I laughed. "Good for him for establishing clear boundaries."

"Is he mad at me?"

"No, I think he was just being run ragged trying to take care of both of us. Sorry, buddy, guess he chose me over you."

"Well, you're his boyfriend, so I guess that makes sense."

"We're not—" I started, but Brayden was still talking.

"I tried texting Foster, but he told me he left school."

"Oh yeah. That is a thing that happened." I glanced over at his empty bed.

"I won't really miss him."

I snorted. "Yeah, I guess I won't either, really."

"So you don't have a roomie now?"

"Nope."

"Can I be your roommate?"

I almost dropped my phone. "What?"

"My roommate is really mean. I don't think he likes me. I want to move out, but the housing office told me there were no available rooms. But now there is."

"I mean, I can't make that decision..." I hemmed.

"Maybe I can ask again and tell them your room is available."

"Kody mentioned that your room was pretty messy. If you lived with me, I'd need you to be neater."

"I can be neat. I'm not usually that messy. I was just in a lot of pain and didn't feel like tidying up, you know? But Kody cleaned up for me. It was sweet of him."

"Yeah, well, Kody is very sweet. Oh, hey, what are your Thanksgiving plans?" Since I'd just been talking about it with Killian and Judy, the subject was on the front of my mind. Paired with what Bray had shared with me in the hospital about his family, I was curious how he was handling it.

"I don't have any. I kind of forgot. Maybe I'll just stay here. I don't want to go home."

"Can you even stay here?"

"Dunno."

"Me either, but I know at some schools all the students have to leave campus during holidays."

"Oh. Then I guess I'll go home then." He sounded so dejected.

"Um, sorry for bringing it up..."

"Nah. It's okay. Thanks for calling, Jake. You're a good friend."

We hung up, but I couldn't stop thinking about how sad he'd sounded about the prospect of going home. I mean, he'd have to go home eventually. Winter break wasn't that far away, then spring break, and then the school year would be over before we blinked.

I pushed all that from my mind and moved to my desk, where I checked my class assignments on my student portal to see what I'd missed. I'd emailed all my professors to let them know I was sick, but they still expected me to complete all my course work on time. I had a paper that I'd started on that was due the next day, so I focused on banging that out.

After a couple of hours my stomach growled, reminding me that it was past lunch time.

I shot Kody a text to see how he was feeling. He'd been sniffing a little when I left.

I think I'm the latest victim of this epidemic, he sent back with a sad face emoji.

Nooooo! I sent back. *I'm so sorry. I knew I'd get you sick.*

Don't be sorry. I knew what I was doing. I wanted to take care of you.

And you did a great job. Now it's my turn to take care of you.

You don't have to.

Remember what you said to me? I want to.

But what if I get you sick again?

I already had it. You can't catch it twice.

I actually didn't know if you could or not. I didn't even know for sure what I'd had. But I was determined to return the favor.

In fact, I texted, maybe you should just move into Foster's old bed until you feel better.

You know, maybe that's not such a bad idea. Nick is going to freak out when he gets back. Who knew he was such a germaphobe?

Then it's decided. Pack a bag, and I'll come get you.

I'm fine to walk over. It hasn't hit me fully yet.

You sure?

Yep. See you soon.

I smiled at my phone, then remembered that I was hungry. I shot Kody a text telling him to take his time, because I was running to get some food that wasn't soup. He sent back a laughing emoji, and I headed for the Commons.

I grabbed a sandwich to go, along with a few sodas — a couple of Dr. Peppers for me and a ginger ale for Kody, just in case — then headed back to my room.

I felt like I'd run a marathon by the time I got back. I couldn't wait to sit down.

Kody was waiting for me in the lobby when I returned, sitting on one of the grubby couches surrounded by grocery bags, his backpack at his feet.

One of the RAs I didn't know that well was sitting at the desk, looking bored out of their skull.

"Hey, you made it," I said to Kody. "Sorry you had to wait." I turned to the RA. "He's with me."

The RA gave me an apathetic thumbs up, and I scooped up some of Kody's bags, then hit the button for the elevator.

"Do we have to take that rickety thing?" Kody groaned.

"Yes. I don't have my strength back yet. No way I'm taking the stairs."

Kody gave me a sheepish look. "Sorry. Of course."

The doors opened, and we squeezed in.

"It looks like you're moving in permanently," I said after the doors closed.

"I wish," he mumbled under his breath. Then, louder, "It's all that soup and medicine. Figured I might as well bring it."

"Smart. But you can take the good stuff, you know."

We arrived at our floor and started down the hall.

"Wouldn't that be bad, though? To have that stuff around you?"

"Nah. It's not a temptation. Even at my lowest I wasn't drinking cough syrup."

"Oh. Well...I didn't get anything like that anyway."

"I can go pick you up some Nyquil later."

I opened the door, and we loaded everything in. Kody had even thought to bring sheets for Foster's bed, which was good since I didn't have a spare set and hadn't actually thought of that. I did have an extra blanket, at least.

We made up his bed, then snuggled and watched a movie on my laptop while I ate my sandwich.

After lunch, we set up Kody's laptop so he could game while I did some more school work.

By that evening, he was looking significantly worse. I ran out to the closest pharmacy to get him some real cough syrup and some Nyquil, and by the time I got back, he informed me that the vomiting had begun.

He'd been running down the hall each time a new wave of nausea hit, but I noticed that Foster had left behind his plastic trash can, so I dumped its contents into mine and told Kody to just use that.

"But I don't want you to see me barfing my soul out," he argued.

"Kode, it's okay. What if you don't make it down the hall one of these times? That would be even worse. Besides, didn't you say you were picturing us in the future, married and all? We're going to see each other puke at some point, right? Might as well get it out of the way."

He smiled weakly at that but agreed.

It was a rough night for both of us. He threw up several more times before that phase finally passed, and I flushed the mess and rinsed out the

trash can each time. By morning, the coughing, sneezing, and snorting had fully kicked in.

I didn't want to leave him, but I had class.

"I'll be fine," he insisted, somewhat unconvincingly. He sounded so stuffy. "You've missed enough classes already."

"But what about—"

"I'm fine. The worst is over. I'll probably just sleep."

"But what if you get hungry?"

"I have all that soup, remember?"

"Yeah, but I don't have a microwave."

"Oh. Right."

"I'll check on you between classes and warm some up in the lounge."

He nodded and closed his eyes. I kissed his forehead, which was warm.

"I think the fever has arrived," I said.

"The gang's all here," he muttered.

I gave him a dose of Nyquil, and hoped that would help bring his temperature down. If nothing else, it would help him sleep until I got back.

I had trouble focusing in class — mostly because I knew Kody was sick in my room, but also because my brain still felt a little fuzzy from my illness.

I rushed back after class, only to find him sound asleep. I warmed him up some soup, woke him up to eat it, then rushed off to my next class.

The weather had shifted again, with temperatures climbing into the upper fifties, melting the last of the early snow. I figured we'd get a lot more in the months ahead, but for now I welcomed the warmth and sun.

After my last class of the day I returned to the room to find Kody sleeping again. He didn't even stir as I entered.

Then I noticed the Nyquil bottle next to the bed. It was much lower than it was when I left; it looked like at least a couple more doses were gone. Had he taken all of that? Maybe he spilled it.

I shook him awake, but his eyes were unfocused, and he still seemed very out of it.

"Hey, Kode, how are you feeling, boo?" I asked.

He looked blearily up at me and gave me a goofy smile. "I'm fine. Thanksh for ashking." He was slurring a bit.

His eyes started drifting shut again so I gave him another little shake. "Kody, did you take more Nyquil after I left?"

He blinked at me.

“Kody...”

“I... I fink I took shome more. Maybe. I wash feeling like shhhh...”
He paused. “Like sh...like shit.”

“I think you took a bit too much.”

“I’m fine, thanksh for ashking,” he murmured.

I grabbed the bottle and read the label to see if I needed to call poison control. The directions said to take thirty milliliters every four hours and to not exceed one-hundred-and-twenty in a twenty-four-hour period. The bottle was small, only two-hundred-thirty-six milliliters, and he’d taken about a third of the bottle, maybe. In, like, six hours. He was below the daily maximum, but it was still too much in too short a time. I didn’t think it was fatal or anything, but he was probably drunk off his cute little ass.

Again.

Just to be safe, I asked Google if you could overdose on Nyquil — and immediately regretted it. The warnings were terrifying. Kidney failure? But it wasn’t like he drank the entire bottle. He’d maybe taken one too many doses. Probably.

I added “Reddit” to my search, and found a bunch of threads with people asking similar questions. The general consensus was he’d probably be fine and to let him sleep it off. He’d just be very drowsy and confused. And fairly high, especially considering his weight.

Out of an abundance of caution, however, I stowed the bottle well out of reach, and decided to make him drink some water.

I ran down the hall to the bathroom to fill a glass, and when I opened the door to the room, I stopped in my tracks.

Kody was sitting up in bed, eyes wide.

“Where did you go?” he asked, perfectly clearly. He sounded confused and maybe a little offended that I’d left him alone, even though he’d been dead to the world, and I’d only been gone for less than a minute.

“I, uh, went to get you some water.” I handed him the glass. “Drink it.”

He stared at the glass in his hand with a disgusted expression, as if I’d handed him a dead squirrel or a still warm bag of dog poo.

“I’m not thirsty,” he proclaimed.

“Okay, well, you took a lot of Nyquil, so unless you want to take a trip to the emergency room to get your stomach pumped, I suggest you drink the water. And as someone who has had his stomach pumped, I promise you don’t want to do that.”

He stared at the water for a few more seconds, then raised the glass to his lips and gulped the entire thing down in one go.

“Note to self, do not enter a chugging contest with Kody,” I said. He sat staring at the empty glass until I gently took it from his hand.

“Want some more?” I asked,

“I didn't even want that,” he said.

To be fair, he wasn't wrong. I set the glass aside and perched on the edge of the bed. I pressed a hand against his forehead, but he didn't feel nearly as hot as he had earlier, perhaps not surprising considering the amount of acetaminophen that was currently coursing through his veins.

Kody was staring at me, wide-eyed, oddly focused yet checked out at the same time.

“What's up?” I asked.

His eyes drifted up to the ceiling, darting around, though I had no idea what he was seeing up there, then slowly came back down to focus on me.

“Is it gonna hurt when you fuck me?” he asked, and I almost fell off the bed.

“What?” I yelped.

“It's, like...pretty big.”

“How would you know?” I asked teasingly, trying to keep it light, but inside my heart was thumping against my ribs from the unexpected question.

“I was... I was perving on you when you got out of bed the other day. I'm such a sicko. But man...that thang was thangin'. I mean, I haven't *seen* it seen it, but I've felt it. Against my leg. When we were making out. Not, like, with my hand. But I want to. Feel it. With my hand. And my mouth. And my—”

“Whoa! Whoa!” I said, my voice at least an entire octave higher than normal. I stood up. “Slow down there, cowboy...”

Now that he mentioned it, I did recall him eying me when I stood up, before he tossed me some pants. Not that I was trying to be sexy or anything. I'd felt like dog shit at the time, and that was the last thing on my mind, but hey, if he'd enjoyed the view, good for him.

“I've been pre...preparing myself.” He swayed a little. “But I'm scared it'll hurt.”

“Oh, Kode...” I brushed his hair back from his forehead. “Try not to worry about it, okay?”

“But will it hurt?”

I did not want to have this conversation. I mean, someday I hoped it would come up, because I sure wanted what came after, but not while he was hopped up on Nyquil.

He grabbed my wrist. "Will it?" he pressed.

"We'll, uh...take it slow. Okay? We can stop if it hurts."

"No. I don't want to stop. I want you to fuck me. I want to be yours." His voice dropped lower, and he added. "I'm already yours."

"I guess that answers Killian's question," I said under my breath.

"Oh, I'm sorry," he said, suddenly loud again. "I'm being rude. Did you want to be the bottom?"

I could not believe this was happening. Was I being punked? I looked around for hidden cameras. This look into Kody's subconscious was ninety percent terrifying and ten percent a turn on. With maybe a dose of ego boost mixed in.

"I can be a good boyfriend. I can top, too. If you want my dick in you..." He was still going. God, why was he still going?

"Kode, it's okay. We can figure this stuff out later."

"No. It's important. What if we're not comp...comp..." He paused and concentrated really hard. "...compatible?"

"Trust me, we're compatible."

"I mean...I could top. I want to. I mean, have you seen Jake's ass? I'd like to see Jake's ass."

"Okay! Want to watch a movie?" My strategy was to deflect and distract. There was just no way to have this conversation with stoned Kody. His directness was making me feel awkwardly aroused, and that was a recipe for disaster.

"I'd like to stick my tongue in Jake's ass."

"Jesus Christ."

He was talking mostly to himself now, as if he'd forgotten I was in the room...not that *that* was any better, really.

"Or maybe I want him to eat my ass."

"Kody...I beg of you..."

He sighed dramatically. "I bet he's good with his tongue."

I ignored that. My only priority was how to run Kody's batteries down so he'd *stop talking about sex*.

"I've jerked off so many times thinking about Jake."

This just wasn't fair!

Kody's expression turned thoughtful. "Do you think Jake loves me?"

Great. Now I felt like shit.

“God, I love him so. Fucking, Much.”

Part of me wanted to tell him that I loved him too, but I knew it would be a grave injustice to tell him for the first time when he almost certainly wouldn't remember it.

Then again...

I sat down on the edge of the bed again and took his hand. He stared down at our hands as if he'd never seen hands before.

“Kody, I love you too, and I want to be your boyfriend. I know you won't remember any of this later, and somehow that makes this all easier to say. And maybe if I've said it once, it'll be easier the second time, you know, when you can remember it. You're the sexiest, most incredible person I have ever met, and I can't imagine my life without you. I hope I get the privilege of being your husband someday. And, for the record, I do want to fuck you. And eat your sweet ass. And you can do whatever you want to me. Well, not *whatever*, but you know, within reason. Like, no watersports. Or poop stuff. Or blood...”

I realized I was rambling, and stopped. Kody was just staring at me, glassy-eyed, as a snot bubble slowly expanded until it popped.

This was not how I'd pictured telling him I loved him for the first time, but I did feel better.

I gently placed the palm of my hand on his chest and pushed him down until he was flat on his back again. His eyes focused on me, and I felt he was actually seeing me for the first time since I'd re-entered the room.

“Are you gonna fuck me now?” he asked in a tiny voice.

“No, baby, not right now. Get some sleep.”

And just like that, his eyes glazed over again.

“Don't touch me. Only Jake gets...to...touch...”

His eyes fluttered, then closed, and within seconds he was lightly snoring.

The next few days were a blur of caring for Kody, classes, and school work. As I predicted, Kody gave no indication he remembered my confession while he was high as a kite on Nyquil. On the one hand, I was a little relieved. I wanted to make the moment special, romantic, maybe with a little less talk of ass eating.

On the other hand, that meant I had to do it all over again at some point, and that was causing me no small amount of anxiety. Because I wanted it to be special and romantic. And, most importantly, memorable for Kody.

The rational part of my brain understood that he'd find it memorable if it was in the middle of the adult diaper aisle in Walmart. The irrational part of my brain insisted I had to stage the perfect cinematic scene.

Meanwhile, Kody seemed to kick the bug much quicker than I had. He insisted it was because of all the fluids he'd been pushing, along with the vitamin C and zinc. And maybe it was. Either way, he reluctantly returned to class — and his own room — Wednesday morning and was back to work on Thursday.

I had to admit, it was nice to get back to our normal routine...but I also kind of missed being around him all the time. I thought that was a pretty good sign, that we'd basically spent an entire week together, pretty much twenty-four-seven, and not gotten tired of each other.

Friday night, Kody texted me about a drag show on campus sponsored by the Rainbow Roost. He and Nick were going, and he wanted me to go with them. I'd seen a few drag shows here and there when I was out in Cali, and I'd always had a good time, so we agreed to meet up outside the Student Union a little before seven.

By the time I got to the theater, there was already a line snaking down the hallway. I scanned the crowd looking for Kody or Nick...and stopped dead.

I'd spotted Kody...and he looked amazing.

He wore tight black jeans and a cropped burgundy sweater that showed just enough skin at his waist to make me briefly forget how language worked. He'd done something different with his hair, too — it was loosely styled, soft and messy in a way that somehow looked accidental and incredibly deliberate at the same time. Had he suddenly acquired a personal stylist?

Meanwhile, I was wearing jeans and a dark gray henley under a red and black flannel shirt like somebody's emotionally conflicted lumberjack cousin.

Suddenly Nick stepped in front of me, blocking my view of Kody. He was wearing a smirk so self-satisfied that I wanted to smack it off his face. I should have known he was involved.

"Breathe, Sheridan. You look like you're about to mount your boyfriend in public."

Kody immediately turned pink. "He's not—"

"You are," Nick cut in cheerfully. "And also, gross. Save it for your dorm."

I elbowed him. He laughed and bounced ahead of us to stake our place in line, all swagger and restless energy.

I stepped in close to Kody. "You, uh, look great," I said.

"Thanks. Nick dressed me. I feel silly."

"You don't look silly."

He tipped his head back, and I swooped in for a quick kiss. He slipped his hand into mine, and we joined Nick in the queue.

Inside, the theater had been transformed. Strings of lights crisscrossed the black ceiling. A temporary runway cut through the center of the room, lined with rows of folding chairs packed tightly together. A disco ball spun lazy flecks of light across the walls, and dance remixes of pop music thumped through the speakers, while students buzzed with excitement, already half-lubricated by whatever they'd smuggled in hidden in water bottles.

As we searched for seats, I heard a familiar voice.

"Well, well, well...if it isn't the cutest damn couple on campus."

We turned to find Mira waving us over.

She was seated with Toshi, Erin, and Carlos in the front row closest to the runway. They all stood for hugs as we approached. Toshi looked effortlessly cool in a dark turtleneck with a silver chain and wide-legged flowy shimmery silver pants that almost looked like a skirt. Their fingernails sported a matching silver. Mira was wearing electric blue eyeliner sharp enough to cut glass and a matching bodycon mini-dress. Erin had somehow managed sexy librarian chic, with her hair pulled up in a messy bun, a white blouse, complete with a pussy bow, and a tartan kilt. Carlos, as always, looked like he belonged on the cover of a cologne ad — all broad shoulders, dimples, pants that looked painted on, and a fitted gray sweater that made the room's gay population lose focus.

Nick immediately abandoned us to claim the empty chair beside Carlos.

Traitor. Not that he'd get anywhere.

Kody and I squeezed in next to Nick, Kody's thigh pressed warmly against mine. I tried not to think about it...and failed spectacularly. He wasn't even doing anything, and I was hyper aware of our legs pressed together.

The lights dropped, and the crowd erupted, then a spotlight hit center stage, and out strutted the host. She was magnificent. She wore a towering platinum wig with a rhinestone gown slit scandalously high and her waist cinched to impossible proportions. She had breasts like weaponized beach balls, and her makeup was flawless.

She held out her arms grandly.

"Hellooooo, Van Rensselaer University! I am your hostess with the mostest, the queen of your dreams, your auntie in sequins — Fanny Pack!"

Thunderous applause. Fanny preened.

"Oh, I can already tell this crowd is horny, confused, and underprepared for what's about to happen — which is exactly how I like my college boys."

Wild cheering.

"Yes, boys...you can call me mother. Let's go..."

Her opening number was a blistering lip sync to "Call Me Mother," complete with backup dancers, a wig reveal, and enough dramatic hair flips to register on the Richter scale.

She was followed by four local queens.

Miss Cherry Bomb, a petite Latina queen in a candy-red latex catsuit, exploded onto the stage with acrobatic flips set to a dance remix of "Fat, Juicy and Wet," then proceeded to duck walk, dip, and dance her way up and down the runway until I was exhausted on her behalf. At one point, she pulled a whipped cream can seemingly from nowhere and sprayed it directly into the screaming audience's mouths. Toshi was the one of the lucky recipients, and I really wished I'd had my phone out to record the aftermath, white cream dripping down their chin.

The next queen, Diva Divine, statuesque and regal in a shimmering silver gown, slowed things down with a breathtaking torch-song performance of "Only Love Can Hurt Like This" by Paloma Faith, somehow making lip syncing feel emotionally devastating. Half the audience looked like they were going through a divorce by the end of her act.

Then came Anna Lingus, a punk drag gremlin in shredded neon fishnets and combat boots, who crowd-surfed during a riotous performance of "Bad Reputation."

Finally, a gorgeous Black queen simply named Chardonnay performed MEEK's "Fabulous" dressed head to toe in a flesh-toned body suit covered in rhinestones. She was, without question, fabulous as advertised.

By intermission my throat hurt from screaming.

"Are you having fun?" I asked Kody.

"Are you kidding? This is amazing!"

We all chatted about our favorite moments from the first act until Fanny Pack returned to the stage. She'd had a costume change and was now wearing a very short, pale pink sequined minidress, knee-high white go-go

boots, a hot pink feather boa that must have left many naked flamingos shivering somewhere, and an enormous pink wig that probably had its own zip code.

“Welcome back, bitches. Are you ready for the second half of this goddamn shit show?”

The crowd roared, as Kody slipped his hand into mine and leaned against my shoulder.

Fanny stalked down the runway. “Let’s get a look at this audience. God, some of you look like you’re still breast feeding. Should I get my tit out?” She stopped in front of Carlos. “Well, hello there, tall, dark, and handsome.” She dropped her voice down low to add, “I got something else you can suck.”

Carlos laughed good naturedly as Erin threw an arm across his chest and yelled, “Back off! He’s mine!”

“Calm down, Raggedy Ann. You can keep him. I don’t do straight boys...assuming anyone that pretty is actually straight.” She mimed holding a phone to her ear and mouthed, “Call me,” to Carlos as she moved along.

Next, she stopped directly in front of me and Kody. Oh no.

“Oh my sweet glittered Christ,” she said into the mic. “Look at these two.”

A spotlight found us instantly. Kody made a tiny horrified squeak.

Fanny crouched dramatically, knees far apart to reveal a pair of hot pink panties with a pair of lips on the crotch and the words “kiss me.”

“Babies,” she declared. “Literal cherub-faced homosexual babies.”

The room laughed. Kody turned crimson.

She pointed a jeweled nail at him. “This one? Disney prince energy. I bet woodland creatures help him get dressed.”

Huge laugh.

Then she pointed at me. “And this one looks like the prince who’s emotionally unavailable but secretly writes poetry about moonlight and yearning.”

The laughter got louder.

I grinned, but Fanny wasn’t done. “And together? You put the fairy in fairy tale. Honey, you two are so offensively adorable I want to put you in a basket and leave you on a rich lesbian’s doorstep.”

The audience roared.

She leaned closer, squinting. “How long y’all been together?”

Kody looked at me helplessly. I answered. “Not that long.”

She gasped theatrically. “Fresh love!” She clutched her chest. “Oh, that explains the way Twink Prince Charming here keeps looking at you like you invented sunlight.”

Kody covered his face. Fanny gently tugged his hands down. “No shame, baby. Look at your man however you want. If I had him, I’d be climbing him like a jungle gym.”

Even I laughed at that.

Then she put a hand over her heart. “But seriously — hold onto each other. In this ugly world, finding somebody who looks at you like that? That’s holy.”

The room softened, but then she snapped right back. “Now kiss so I can judge it!”

The chant started instantly.

“KISS! KISS! KISS!”

Kody looked mortified.

I looked at him. He was red-faced, smiling, eyes bright, embarrassed but clearly having fun...and so unbearably sweet. And in that moment, I wanted to kiss him more than I’d ever wanted to before. Not because a drag queen had told us to, but because my heart felt like it was going to explode out of my chest if I didn’t.

I leaned in.

It was just a quick kiss — nothing dramatic — but the crowd reacted like we’d given them Broadway.

Fanny screamed, “They’re in LOVE-love. Disgusting. I support it completely.” She swept away to thunderous applause.

Kody buried his burning face against my shoulder. I wrapped an arm around him and kissed the top of his head. “You okay?”

His muffled voice came back: “No. I died. I’m dead now.”

Nick leaned over. “Worth it,” he said.

Then the lights dropped again.

When Plasma finally took the stage — polished, funny, dazzlingly theatrical, performing a razor-sharp comedy set followed by a glamorous old-school showstopper that somehow mixed Broadway vocals, camp, and absolute diva energy — I understood why everybody had been buzzing about her all week.

Still...

As incredible as the show was, I kept finding my attention drifting back to the boy tucked against my side and the dangerous, wonderful certainty that Fanny Pack wasn’t wrong.

I was definitely in love.

Chapter 30 - Kody

"I think you should sign all your emails with 'Twink Prince Charming.'" Nick grinned at me.

"Oh my God, stop," I whined at him, but it was funny.

"Nah. A drag queen practically knighted you. Oh! Sir Twink Prince Charming, official title! You should get business cards made with that on them!"

I laughed at him as we both collapsed onto the futon after the show. The futon gave a warning not to do that again by way of a sharp crack that made us both look at each other before we burst into more laughter.

"My outfit choice for you paid off, too," Nick said smugly.

"Yeah, well, that's not really me."

"Maybe it should be. Did you see Jake wiping the drool off his chin? Did you see the way he looked at you showing just a little skin? He's home right now polishing his knob."

I reddened and shook my head.

"Beating the bishop? Flogging his dong? Choking the chicken?"

"Okay, okay!" I laughed at him. "You were right! He was definitely looking."

"And drooling."

I tilted my head side to side. "Maybe a little."

"Shit, I'd be bragging if I got that kind of response." Nick shifted. "Thanks for letting me dress you up as a distraction though. Seriously."

"Least I could do." I shifted to look at him. "I'm still kind of in shock that you and Derek broke up. You're always so confident, and I thought you guys were solid."

When I'd returned to my own room earlier that week, I'd found a very depressed Nick, which is a disturbing enough concept in theory. Seeing it in person was just upsetting. Apparently, while they were at the cabin, Nick had walked in on Derek and one of his teammates having sex. Nick had packed up and left immediately. I felt bad that I wasn't there to support him, but in my defense, I had been dealing with the flu.

Nick let out a small sigh. "Yeah. Apparently not so much."

"What do you think...happened?"

He tilted his head and then adjusted so he was facing me as well. "Hard to say. There are so many different pieces that go into a good relationship. I mean, for some people appearance isn't even near the top of the list. Take Jake — he's pretty, but that's not really my type. You're cute,

but also not really my type. Now, after getting to know you guys...still not my type.”

I laughed with him.

“It’s like...attraction doesn’t equal compatibility, right? Over time you can feel that out and see if it works. I was attracted to Derek physically, but I guess we just weren’t compatible. I’m disappointed things didn’t work out — mad at how it ended, really.”

“Yeah, I...wondered about that.”

“How so?”

“Well, just that...he cheated. I get that, no question. But...you act like you’re single sometimes.”

He hummed for a moment. “See, this is part of the whole thing, though. To me, a little flirting is just like banter. Nearly meaningless. Makes someone feel good to be noticed. But I get what you’re saying. It may seem like I’m not invested in my own relationship to someone that doesn’t know me.” He pressed his lips together. “And love you though I do, I know you don’t really know me.”

“I do,” I said immediately. “I mean, the important things. I’d trust you alone with Jake.”

He raised an eyebrow, and his lips quivered for just a moment. “Well. Maybe you do know me more than I thought. Because...I never crossed the line. You understand? I can smile and be chatty and even a bit of a cock tease, but that’s just me still figuring out who I am.”

I thought for a moment. “If Jake did that, I’d be super pissed.”

“And see, that’s why you and I wouldn’t work. Because my argument would be ‘You should be secure enough with us,’ and you’d say I shouldn’t do stuff that I know will upset you.” He shrugged. “And the thing is, we’d both be right. There’s always compromises.”

“Still. I can’t believe he did that. With you in the house, too. That was like a big ‘Fuck you,’ and you don’t deserve that.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t think I deserved it either, but...then he started yelling that I was doing other guys because I’m a flirt, and it was this big, messy...thing.” He tapped the back of my hand with his fingertips. “But I have you to distract me. You let me whine and dress you up to mess with your boyfriend’s libido...assuming he has one.”

“He’s not my boyfriend.” I decided to leave the libido thing alone.

Nick sighed. “When, Kody?” He held up a hand to my open mouth. “Look, I get it. One of your very best qualities is, you’re so considerate. And I like Jake. I do. You guys have this great energy about you in so many ways. But when does what you want matter too, Kody?”

I tangled my fingers together. “We’ve talked about it. I mean we did before. I just got through the whole ‘I love you’ thing with him, and then we were both sick.”

“I think he loves you back. I just wish he’d say so or fucking do something.”

I scratched the back of my head. It felt like betrayal to agree with him, no matter how much it was true.

“I mean, look. First you see him and walk around with both your heads in the clouds. One head dreams of marriage and romance and the other of being buried in that ass.”

I laughed.

“Right? Of course, right. So then you get drunk, make your feelings known, and that’s somehow not a huge waving red flag for old Jakers.”

“You make it sound so bad!”

“And then! Then, my friend, you run in mortification and even look at hook-up apps. Did you ever call that poor retiree back?”

“There was no— You’re just making shit up now!”

“Wait, wait!” He held up a finger. “Then Jake chases you down — which he didn’t have to do — and tells you he’s interested in your weird little ass.”

“My ass is weird?”

Ignoring me, Nick continued. “So back then Jake drove the bus. Everything was about how Jake might see things, how Jake was too good for you, and, oh my god, I wanted to puke.”

I rolled my eyes, but there was no stopping him.

“But then you guys keep circling each other like there was a drain between you and you were dirty douche water—”

“Oh, come on!”

“And finally you drop the old love bomb on him and then take care of each other like an old married couple. Jesus, you guys take forever! And here we are, you’re still not even boyfriends? What’s it going to take?”

It suddenly wasn’t funny anymore. “He’s just... He’s not there yet.”

“That’s exactly why you have to let me pick out more of your clothes. I mean, in all seriousness, what the fuck else does he need? Who else will treat him like the golden boy that you do? All that and he can’t go with boyfriends? I mean really...what the fuck, Kode?”

I swallowed and rubbed a moving itch from my ear to my neck. “He’s complicated.”

“And you’re not? I mean, fuck me, but if this doesn’t matter to you then I’ll shut the fuck up about it.”

I sighed. “It’s not that it doesn’t matter. It does. I want to be his boyfriend. I want him to tell people we are official. I want him to have that confidence, the way I already do. I mean, once I knew this could be a real thing, I’ve done everything I can think of. I *cooked* for him to show it wasn’t just a...a...I don’t know, not like we were having ramen or something. That I was willing to do the work.”

“And you have. I mean, look, I don’t think I’d have gone as far as you did for Derek if he’d gotten sick. But that’s partly just who you are. And credit to Jake, he did the same for you. That’s kind of it, though, right? The guy clearly loves you. Even the drag queen could see it.”

I snorted, smiling at him. “What does any of that have to do with you picking out my clothes?”

Nick crossed his arms. “Look. What I see is, Jake was all for this thing when he started with you, but now you’re stepping up and he’s not in control anymore, you’re kind of trying to bump him along.”

I frowned.

“Like the love bomb you dropped. Someone else can debate the when and whatever, but once he had a minute to absorb that you actually meant it, he was okay with it. He moved forward a bit on this whole relationship thing. Not far enough, if you ask me, but you didn’t. Not about that anyway.”

I flushed.

“But showing a little skin? Getting Golden Boy to inflate his golden rod from looking at you?”

I *almost* blurted out something about how Jake’s dick wasn’t shaped like a gold rod, but I managed not to. Just barely. Nick didn’t need encouragement.

“And you really think making him horny is the play?”

“I think he needs to know what he’s risking by not claiming you as his own. Making him thirsty? That’s just fun.”

I snorted. “Seems manipulative.”

“You make it sound so...Republican. Look, I get crop tops and revealing things aren’t you, or at least not something you’re comfortable with on the regular. I don’t dress that way every day either, though I support those who do. My point is that I think the more Jake looks at you and wants what he sees, the closer you get to what you want.”

I sighed. “It’s more complicated than that. I get what you’re saying, and I have no issues with making him thirsty. It almost seems like

payback, in a way. But his past is a real issue for him. He's been up front about it, so it's not like I found out too late or anything. He's not misleading me." I hesitated. "Besides...I told you there's...stuff for him. I'm not sure this kind of pressure is the right thing for us."

"Ah. Don't listen to me," Nick grumbled. "I just struck out — again — and I want you to get Jake. I mean, I really do. There's something so romantic about how you guys are edging closer, but at some point it's also like...fuck already."

I laughed out loud. "Yeah, that's the plan. At some point."

"Well, I'm glad to know at least you do want to fuck him. That's something."

"Yeah. I want to do a lot of things with him. But—"

"Have you even seen him— Well, not naked, but anything?"

I felt hot all over.

"Oh! You've been holding out! Tell me."

I laughed nervously. "I am an evil person, and I'm going to hell."

"I'll sit next to you on the bus. Come on! Be kind to your bro."

I rolled my eyes. "I saw him in his underwear when I brought him here."

"He...crossed campus in his underwear?"

"No!" I laughed again. "In his room. He was just wearing underwear when I got there."

"And? Did you like what you saw?"

I blew air between my clenched teeth. "So fucking hot."

"That's what I'm talking about."

"I just... I wish I could make his hurt go away. I do want to tell people he's mine, and I want him to tell people I'm his. I do. But you know how feelings are. You're still mad and hurt. He's still hurt. I have to help him get past the hurt before I can have him for real."

"See? You feel this relationship deep in your boner."

"You're such a shit."

He laughed. "Come on, Kody. You guys give me hope for my own romantic story one day. I need to find someone that gets me. Someone who gives me the kind of grace you give Jake. I know the boy needs some room to grow— Oh, is he a grower?"

I tried to look innocent and not think about that bulge in Jake's underwear.

"Oh. He's got something in there you like! But like I said, it's great that you're so good with him, but he can't keep you hanging like that forever. It's cruel."

I sighed. He wasn't wrong.

The Halloween dance at the Aviary was coming up, and I was struggling to think of a costume. I'd never been very creative with that stuff — some fake blood and plastic teeth, and I was good to go.

Nick was on a mission, though.

His costume was going to be an actual fairy — wings, tights, a wand...the works. He said the wand would be green, and I'd have to help him with glitter, but something about the way he said 'wand' made me suspicious.

On the other hand, he was determined that my costume would get Jake so hot he combusted. I wasn't so sure about that.

"Kody. Don't you want him to want you? I mean..."

"Well, yeah! He does!"

"How do you know?"

Thinking of Jake pressing his hardness into me during our make-out sessions, I looked right at Nick. "Trust me, I just do."

He rolled his eyes. "Okay. But you agree I can pick out your costume?"

"I never agreed—"

"Kody. I walked in on them." He shook his head. "Derek's ass in the air, getting ready for a down stroke. It was deeply scarring. I need a distraction..."

"That's emotional manipulation."

"Is it working?"

I sighed. "Okay."

"Yes! You're *such* a good friend. Okay. So I love horror movies."

"No shit. You've been watching them every night this month, even before you wanted to kill Derek."

"It's fun because when the teenagers have sex and cheat on each other, they die. It's, like, the number one rule."

It was my turn to roll my eyes.

"But it's given me inspiration. I'm going to dress you like Johnny Depp."

I paused in thought. "I'm going to be a pirate? Does Jake have a weird kink about pirates I don't know about?" I teased.

"Well, he definitely wants your booty." He laughed at me. "I have no idea what Jake's fetishes are, but no, not a pirate. You know the *Nightmare on Elm Street* movies, right?"

“The guy with the melted face? Yeah. I mean, I never actually watched one. Eddie or something, right?”

“Freddy. Freddy Kreuger.”

“Right, him. Wait...Johnny Depp was Freddy Kreuger?”

“No! I have so much to teach you!”

He pulled out his phone and his fingers flew across the screen. After a moment, he turned the screen toward me.

“That’s Johnny Depp in the first movie. I’m going to dress you like that!”

If that was Johnny Depp, he looked incredibly young. How old was that movie? He was cute, but the crop top and sweatpants were...a little snug around the bits and bobs — and quite possibly marked the beginning of the whole sweatpants season trend.

Still, they were revealing enough that they were already making me feel like I’d be walking around naked, practically. Maybe Nick didn’t mind showing off for the entire queer population of Albany, but I would have preferred only Jake and my doctor knew if I was cut or uncut.

“Uh. I don’t know. Won’t it be cold out?”

“Your nips will stand proudly, begging to be suckled!” he proclaimed.

“Uh, my nips don’t speak, and I don’t want to freeze.”

“Come on, Kody...” he whined.

“Argh! Can I at least wear a coat to get there or something?”

“A hoe never gets cold.” Nick leaned forward and lowered his voice. “Look, this isn’t just for me. Not only will we make your boyfriend — Shut it! — thirsty, he’ll pop a hard-on so hard that it won’t go down for days, forget Viagra. But I promise, I am also working on his costume.”

I looked at him doubtfully. “Jake’s going to wear something you’re telling him to?”

“He understands you want to see some skin, too.”

I frowned. “He said that?”

“Well, not in so many words, but... I want you two horny for each other! Is that so bad?” He affected an accent. “Computah! Make these guys super gay and horny!”

“We are! I am! For Christ’s sake, seeing him fully clothed is like torture sometimes, and you want make it *worse*?”

“Yes! So much worse!” He did his best impression of a villain laugh, and I couldn’t help but laugh with him.

School had shifted into another gear, and I didn't think much about the costume for the next couple of days. I deliberately didn't bring the dance up with Jake, at least partly because I wanted to leave room for him to say he wasn't comfortable with that scene. We could always just stay home or do something else.

But there was another part of me that was dying to know if Nick had really talked Jake into some kind of sexy costume. As if I didn't jerk off over him enough as it was.

Jake was also affected by the increased intensity in school work, so we didn't see each other much in the run up to the dance. We did text, and I was happy we still had that connection. No matter how busy we were, we still made sure to have dinner together each night. I liked the routine of it, meeting up each night to sit down together and talk about our day or whatever else.

I talked to Dad and Charlie here and there. Charlie was as obnoxious as always, asking me about my relationship until I was ready to scream. Nick wanted Jake and me to be official — and boning — Charlie wanted us married, and Dad started asking if I was bringing anyone home for winter break. Real subtle.

Adding into that mix, I got a completely unexpected message from Andy on IG.

Andy had been...not my first crush, I guess, but the first one that hit me as hard as it did, the first in a long string of embarrassing situations that still kept me awake sometimes at night, replaying each humiliating moment like the world's worst home movie. It was the first step in a long march of dumb things I'd done that filled me with regret.

Andy had been all I could see at the time. Well, not the way he looked at the boy he was in love with — I'd been blind to that. Until I wasn't. Until I was forced to see the truth.

Afterward, I'd always felt awkward around him. He never did anything to add to it, which was a small blessing, I guess. We hadn't really interacted a great deal, but he knew who I was, and our paths crossed only occasionally. So I was beyond surprised when I saw I had a message from him.

Hey, so, surprise! I saw your picture with your boyfriend! Congrats! I know we had a bad moment and things got weird, but it never seemed like the right time to reach out to you. I always hoped you'd find the right guy. In fact, I was sure you would. It was a mystery to me why you hadn't been scooped up already. You're such a good person, but I knew it wasn't my place to say something like that to you, as much as I wanted to.

But you look so happy, and I can see the love between you guys. For whatever it's worth, I just wanted to say how happy I am that you finally got someone who sees you for who you are.

I read it several times, not really able to absorb it all in one reading.

Andy had been my first real heartbreak. I'd spent years beating myself up over him...without learning a single thing. I'd only seen what I wanted to see, a mistake I was doomed to repeat.

Until Jake.

But I'd never known Andy had been...what? Fond of me?

I wasn't sure how to feel about his message. I guess he'd felt like we couldn't be friends, not with how awkward I'd been. And maybe he was right. I'd probably have taken it the wrong way, misread the friendship for something more. Or maybe he just didn't think he had a right to say something kind after how devastated I'd been.

But why reach out now? Because I was safely in a different state across the country and seeing someone else? Or maybe it wasn't any deeper than what he'd said - he'd never thought it was his place, but he was happy I looked happy.

I guess it was nice of him. And maybe that was all it needed to be. Maybe it was better not to read too much into it.

What was I supposed to even say to that? Or should I say anything?

I settled on a thumbs up and left it alone. Awkward to the end.

The evening of the dance, Nick burst from his room clutching a bag of items that contained my costume, which he'd ordered online, because he claimed he didn't trust me with such an important purchase.

"Now. Before we get started, I have a big favor to ask you."

Why did that worry me?

"What's that?"

"So...I was going to go to Derek's for Thanksgiving, but obviously that's not a thing now. You haven't said anything about flying home for break..."

I shook my head. "No, not until the semester is over. Flights are expensive."

"Well, with the campus being closed until Sunday afternoon-"

"Wait, what?"

"Yeah. You didn't know?"

I frowned. "Are you serious?" If I couldn't stay here, that meant Jake couldn't. Could I go where he was going? The idea flooded my brain with ideas.

"Okay. So...I have some relatives in New Jersey — my mom's sister and her husband. My aunt is cool, my uncle is a douche, and my cousins are a bag of mixed nuts. Anyway, Aunt Liz has been reaching out asking me to come for Thanksgiving to 'be with family.' She even said I could bring a plus one. Now she's called my parents, and they're making me feel bad, since I no longer have other plans. Thanks a lot, Dickhead Derek."

"Can't you just say no?" I asked doubtfully.

"The guilt in this family is nearly religious in its strength, so no." He looked at me seriously. "Kody. I need a friend, someone to be a buffer if my uncle is a jerk or my cousins get too annoying. Come with me for Thanksgiving."

"You make it sound so tempting," I said, hoping I'd inserted enough sarcasm into my words to make my position clear.

"I mean, it'll be fun if you go. We can make it fun. And my aunt is a good cook, at least, so the food will be good."

"I don't know what Jake is doing..." I hedged. I could feel the time with Jake slipping through my fingers.

"Please, Kode? You owe me!"

"Owe you? Didn't I already do you a favor by letting you dress me up like a doll tonight?"

"That was different. That was distracting me from my heartbreak. Besides, speaking of tonight, just wait until you see how I dressed Jake. You'll be so grateful you'll be begging to repay me in some way, so really, I'm helping *you* out. You're gonna be so horny for him."

I laughed. "Nick, I can't get any hornier for Jake than I already am!"

"I think you're wrong, and I'll prove that tonight. But seriously, I need someone to keep me sane. Please?"

I groaned. Why did I even bother arguing with Nick? He always won in the end. Besides, who knew what Jake was doing? For all I know he was going to Brayden's for the holiday; we really hadn't discussed it.

"Please, Kody? Don't make me beg...more than I already am..."

I threw up my hands in defeat. "Okay, I'll go."

He grabbed my face. "Thank you, Sir Twink Prince Charming."

I jerked out of his grip. "Weirdo."

"Now. Time for Operation Give Jake a Permaboner. You're going to need some directions with this costume."

I frowned. "It was a cutoff shirt and sweatpants. What directions could I possibly need?"

"See? This is why you need me." He looked at me expectantly.

"Just tell me what it is." He was so exasperating sometimes.

"You have to go commando."

My eyes felt like they'd pop out of my head. "What? No. No way. Absolutely not."

He hopped up and down. "You *have* to. The full effect requires some schwing-a-schwing,-a-schwing! Some jiggle. Some VPL."

I crossed my arms. "No. I'm not doing that."

He gave me a pleading look.

"No."

He held his hands in prayer.

I laughed. "No!"

"But Jake will—"

"No, Nick!" I said firmly and louder than I intended. With a sigh, I said, "Look. I'm not totally comfortable even with the cutoff shirt. Somehow, it feels more uncomfortable than going shirtless — but yes, I know, Jake will like it, and I want that. But listen, I thought you got this? I *can't* push this sex stuff right in his face. It's not just me being uncomfortable. I think it might make him uncomfortable, too. I can't do that to him. Trust me, it's a real thing."

He sighed. "I'm sorry. I won't even suggest we tape a dildo in your pants just for the dick print."

He sounded so dejected I couldn't help but to laugh. "No one would believe it anyway."

"Eh. Maybe they would? Give Jake some competition."

I shook my head and flatly said, "He has no competition."

"Okay, well, go put this on then. I'll need your help with mine when you're done."

I accepted the bag and went into my room with it. It felt a little heavy and I wondered exactly what was inside. After all, the picture he'd shown me was just the sweatpants and the cutoff football jersey.

I set the bag on my bed and pulled the items out and was mildly surprised at how complete it was. I laid out the shirt and sweatpants, then pulled out the white socks and there were even some white kicks at the bottom that looked used.

I was not putting my feet in those things.

I went to set the bag aside and felt something shift in the bag. Looking again I saw something crumpled at the bottom. I pulled it out.

“Motherfucker.”

I was not wearing a jock strap. I had a nasty vision of Nick pantsing me and leaving my bare ass hanging out for the club to see. In fact, I think he knew I’d say no to commando and that was just a feint. If he pantsed me, I’d be wearing actual underwear.

But then I stopped and thought about Jake perving on me when he was sick. He’d seen me in my underwear. Would he like me in a jockstrap?

I held the thing up and critically examined it. It had a wide band at the waist so it would probably be up over the top of the sweatpants.

Nope. No. Wasn’t doing it.

If Jake wanted to see me in that, it’d be a private show.

I stripped down, then pulled on the socks and sweatpants. I frowned at the thin material and snug fit as I looked in the mirror.

I looked up a photo again to compare. The color match was pretty good, but they did not look like the comfy sweats old Johnny had worn. They were almost more like tights than sweat pants. Had he bought me a kid’s size? I imagined you could see my dick print even through my underwear, but that was probably more me being paranoid than actual indecency. There was definitely a bulge, however.

I sighed and peeled off my tee shirt, tossing it on my bed to use to sleep in later, and pulled on the crop top. I had to resist the urge to pull down on the bottom hem because it wasn’t going to cover those last four inches or so no matter how hard I tugged.

I was going to fucking freeze, but according to Nick’s logic that just meant I wasn’t a hoe.

Why did I listen to Nick?

“Kode! Come check my wings. Are they straight?”

“Nothing about you is straight,” I called back as I headed into the shared space.

Nick had on white dance tights with subtle threads of green and gold running through the fabric to give it a slight shimmer. He was shirtless, with wings strapped to his back with elastic running over his shoulders and under his arms.

“I still have to put on my makeup, but I wanted to check the wings first.”

“Uh. Yeah, they look right to me. I mean once you move to put makeup on they might shift.”

“Ugh, you’re right. Sorry! I think I’m nervous.”

“You are? Why?”

He pressed his lips together. "I was supposed to go with Derek. We were meeting friends." He paused. "'Friends.' Mostly his, but I'm sure I'll lose them all in the divorce; it just had to be someone on the team too, you know? I just don't want to *look* like I lost something, you know?"

I nodded. "But you did."

He puffed his cheek out.

"What you lost was a cheating slut who probably would have given you something and then the Rainbow Roost gays would call you, like ChlamydiNicholas."

"Kody. No."

"Nicky the Gonorrhea Fairy?"

"None of that rhymes! It has to; it's a rule! Or alliteration at the very least."

"Still. His loss."

He sighed. "I love you, Kode. Now let me go put my makeup on."

Nick was freezing but refused to admit it. His chest sparkled with the roll-on glitter he'd had me help apply, emphasizing his nipples, which were sticking about four inches off his chest. They might be nipcicles by the time we got to the dance floor.

Then there was the 'wand'. It was a glow-in-the-dark, acid green dildo — the rubbery kind that sort of flopped around with the slightest movement. It was flopping a lot since we were speed walking to The Aviary.

He planned to give out fairy blessings with it.

"I'm disappointed, Kody."

"Oh?" I was too cold to care.

"No jockstrap?"

I barked a laugh. "No jockstrap."

"Jake would have loved it. Just a strap over each cheek?"

"He'll have to request a private viewing then."

We were meeting Jake there, along with Bray and possibly a few other people.

We got to the queue, and I was deeply thankful that the line was actually moving. The costumes ranged from little effort, like what I'd normally do, to the amazing. I saw two drag queens, one Zorro, a zombie that was so realistic it really looked like their nose was falling off, and this crazy hot guy in a skimpy roman soldier—

Wait.

Wait a damn minute.

Jake strolled up, shoulders hunched. He wore a quasi-toga with an olive leaf wreath in his hair. The toga didn't come down all that far — maybe as far as swim trunks would, definitely not as far down as his offensive board shorts. He had on some of those gladiator sandals with the crisscross straps running up his calves, and one of his shoulders was exposed, along with half his chest...and one perky nipple.

Hello, Mr. Nipple.

“Hi, Kody.”

I blinked and looked past Jake, just now noticing Brayden. Bray had worn his football jersey.

“Oh, um, hey, Bray. Let me guess... You're an evil clown?”

“No,” he said with a frown. “I'm a football player.”

“Ah, a real stretch.”

“Are you a football player too?”

“Oh, no...um... I'm Johnny Depp? From *Nightmare on Elm Street*?”

“And I'm his fairy godfather,” Nick said, deepening his voice comically. “Bless you, bless you.” He tapped Bray and Jake on their shoulders with his floppy green dildo.

I turned back to Jake and opened my mouth to speak, but he beat me to it.

“You... Wow. Kody, you look...” He bit his lip, and...

Holy fuck. I didn't know he had that in his arsenal.

“You look amazing,” I said quickly. “That's, uh, also wow. Very...wow.”

I was staring. I knew I was staring, but the nipple was staring back. I was sure of it.

“Told you,” Nick said into my ear, but I ignored him. Gladiator Jake was taking up every bit of my attention, and possibly several years off my life expectancy.

“Let's get inside,” Jake said, reaching for my hand and brushing his fingers across my stomach on the way.

Oh, no. Those sweats weren't going to hide *anything*.

Fucking Nick.

Thankfully, the line moved quickly, and we were inside where it was warmer in no time.

Nick popped up in front of us, holding his dildo wand aloft. “I, the fairest of the fairies, bless you with a wicked, sexy good night!”

He tapped each of our shoulders, then moved on, looking for new victims.

“Your friend...” Jake looked at me with a crooked smile.

“He’s yours too.”

The DJ started speaking to the crowd over the loudspeakers, smothering the hum of the crowd.

“Welcome to The Aviary’s Rainbow Roost Halloween Bash! The contest for the bustiest — I mean *best* costumes begins at midnight! Tonight’s theme is Halloween through the ages, and I’ll be playing plenty of songs to make you sweat. Hope you used waterproof makeup!”

He dropped a beat, and Jake took me by the hand and pulled me toward the dance floor. That was a big change from the last time we were there, and I was glad he was in the right frame of mind to dance and have fun. I reminded myself that I needed to do the same. Be aware of Jake, but not so worried that neither of us had fun.

The music thumped, and I lit up as I recognized what the DJ was playing. “I love this song!”

I started moving and Jake joined in, close but not touching.

I couldn’t help singing along to the lyrics. “Don’t you want me like I want you, baby? Don’t you need me like I need you now...”

Jake was miming the words as well — or maybe he was singing too. I couldn’t tell. The music was too loud. But it felt so good to just move.

I couldn’t take my eyes off my dance partner. He looked so damn fine. I imagined everyone was looking at us — mostly him — wondering how I’d gotten so lucky. But just the idea that he was singing *those* lyrics to me made my heart beat faster.

We danced hard through three or four fast-paced songs, and then the beat shifted to something oddly familiar. It took me a minute to clock what it was. I leaned into Jake, and he leaned forward so I could speak into his ear. “My dad plays this! I know this one!”

He nodded, smiling. *My God, that face.*

I threw my arms up, and the air rushing around my middle felt good in the stifling heat of the room. It might have been cold outside, but inside, on the packed dance floor with all those bodies moving, it felt more like a sauna.

I swung my hips and sang to the remix, looking at Jake and trying to give him a sultry look. “I think we’re alone now; there doesn’t seem to be anyone around; the beating of our hearts is the only sound...”

He grinned, and I imagined he was thinking about the lyrics. Or maybe he was just happy at my happiness. I moved forward, wiggling my hips and resting my wrists on his shoulders as we danced.

The skin of his shoulder was like a grounding point, not from an electrical feeling, but I was hyper aware of my bare skin touching his bare skin and that *something* was passing between us.

I was even more aware when his hands landed on my waist in response. I actually stumbled a bit. He wiggled his eyebrows a little, and I wet my lips, and we danced on.

When that song ended, I pulled him off the dance floor to get some water and find our friends. I got us a couple of bottles of water at the bar, sliding between a guy in pajamas with a fake tablet strapped to his wrist — an iPad kid costume — and a heavy, barrel shaped woman in a flowing red gown. I had no idea what she was meant to be.

“Have you seen Bray?” I hollered to Jake.

He took a swig of water, glanced around, then jerked his head to follow him.

Bray was standing by a high table with a few other people. As we drew closer, I realized it was Erin, Carlos, Toshi, and Mira. I barely recognized Erin in a long, black wig.

Erin and Carlos had gone for a couple's costume, Morticia and Gomez Addams, while Toshi was rocking a David Bowie-inspired glam rock look, and Mira was a sexy cat burglar in a skintight black outfit, eye mask, gloves, and a metric ton of confidence.

Mira and Erin were deep in a discussion, while Carlos and Toshi had their heads bent close in a conversation of their own. Bray seemed content to just stand there, taking it in.

We walked over, and I jumped as Jake slid his hand down to rest on my exposed skin, his fingers curling around my side. I leaned into him and drank my water, trying not to think about boning up.

Did he have *any* idea what he did to me? It wasn't fair. If it weren't for his past, I'd try something to make him as horny as he made me.

Erin waved a hand in front of my face, and I started. “What? Sorry.”

She laughed. “I was saying hi; you guys looked great!”

I glanced up at Jake and smiled before looking back at her. “Thanks! This is amazing! I love the DJ.”

The music shifted again and “The Monster Mash” came on. Nick appeared, holding his arms out like a zombie, green dildo flapping as he danced in front of us. We all took up silly monster poses — even Bray got in on it — and danced, just laughing and enjoying the campy song.

After it ended, Nick got closer to Jake and me and leaned in to be heard. “So...you guys approve of my costumes now?”

Jake pulled me in by my waist again, his hand hot on my skin, making my stomach flip.

“You did good, Nick!”

Nick looked at me.

I shrugged. “Jake’s always hot.”

Jake dug his fingers into my side, and I twisted, laughing, but he pulled me back into him, wrapping both arms around my waist.

“C’mere, you.”

And then we were kissing. The feel of his skin under my hand, his hands on me, his lips on mine, his tongue sliding between my lips, the pounding beat of the music...it was all one big, glorious *rush*.

This must be what it feels like to be high, I thought.

But I also felt completely connected, present, in the moment, and clear-eyed, so maybe it was better than being high.

Jake slid a hand up my shirt to the middle of my back, and I let my hand trail across his shoulder to his neck, keeping him in place.

Then I did the bad thing.

I blame Nick, I really do.

I didn’t *really* think about it. I just did it. I let my hand trail down from his neck, forward over his clavicle, dragged my fingers down the exposed side of his chest, and rubbed my thumb right over his nipple.

I intended to finish with my hand on his exposed side, like he’d done with me, but he jumped. He stepped back a half step, and when I looked at his face, I could see I’d gone too far.

He masked it quickly, pulling me back to his side, but inside I was cursing myself.

Fuck.

I was lost in my head as the party went on around us. The music flowed, conversations continued, but I wanted nothing more than to rewind and not let my hormones take over. The part that made me feel the guiltiest wasn’t that I’d pushed Jake too far. It was that I could still feel his nipple, the soft skin just surrounding it and then the firm nub, and I could just...

Damn it.

Jake was moving, pulling me by the hand, and I trailed behind him, looking at the exposed skin on his shoulder and then letting my eyes drop to his legs.

Hell. I’m going to hell. And Nick will *definitely* be next to me on the bus, and I’ll beat him with his acid green dildo.

Jake got to the stairs, and we climbed. I was staring at him, because the toga wasn't *that* long. I could see just a hint of the white boxer briefs he'd worn under it.

I was going to cum in my pants before the night was over.

I shook myself out of that train of thought when we got upstairs. The space was familiar from the last time, same couches and small tables. Jake passed them all, tugging me along until we hit the end where the bathrooms were. There was a small alcove near the bathrooms, maybe where a cigarette machine or something would have gone once upon a time, and Jake backed me into the small space.

He leaned forward, moving his lips to my ear. "I'm going to kiss you now."

He pulled back, and I looked up at him, and...maybe I hadn't fucked up.

"Is that okay?" he asked.

I couldn't breathe, so the best I could manage was an enthusiastic nod.

He stepped forward, putting one knee between mine, pushing my legs far enough apart so he could press his thigh against my groin.

Oh. He was happy to see me.

Briefly, I once more considered the possibility that I'd cum hands free, but then his mouth was on mine, and all thoughts were gone. It was like a new level had been unlocked. His kissing was uninhibited, almost wild. Needy.

I reached behind him, my hand pulling on the hot skin of his back. One of his hands was on my ribs, higher than he'd gone before. I wondered if he'd go higher. His other hand grabbed my butt cheek, and I would have squeaked if my mouth wasn't otherwise occupied.

I wondered if—

There was a crash. I mean a bang and then a crash? It was the kind of sudden, sharp sound that startled everyone, cutting across the music like a scar. We broke apart, and the crowd fell silent as the music thumped on.

Into that void, a feral screech could be heard, like an injured animal, followed by an anguished voice, "God damn it, you fucking cheating bastard!"

My eyes went wide, and Jake and I looked at each other.

"No. No, no, no." I shook my head. "Don't be—"

We rushed to the railing overlooking the dance floor. Sure enough, over where we'd been, Bray was pushing Nick away from Derek, one hand

holding each of them. Nick was waving his dildo wand threateningly, the silicone appendage flopping wildly with every move.

“Shit.”

Jake looked at me and grimaced. He leaned in and said, “I guess we’d better go get him.”

“But...I want you...”

He swallowed visibly. “Me too.”

“Maybe Brayden has this one...” I suggested hopefully, then glanced back down to see security pushing through the crowd toward our friends. I sighed. “I guess we should go.”

Jake took my hand, and we headed down the walkway to the stairs. By the time we got there, the two huge security guards were roughly steering Derek and Nick toward the exit. We followed them out, and the sweat we’d worked up from dancing — and making out — seemed to flash freeze on my skin.

“You, go that way! You, the other direction. Don’t make us call the cops!” the security guy barked at Derek and Nick.

“We got this one,” Jake said, pulling at Nick’s arm.

“Little *bitch!*” Nick called out.

“Whore!” Derek shot back.

I grabbed Nick by the other arm, and together, Jake and I turned him around and steered him back toward the school. He bitched for a block or so, but the cold air quickly cooled his temper.

Then he wiped at his eyes, and I realized he’d started to cry. I wanted to be mad at him. Jake was *finally* making a move. Who knew what would have happened. We’d both been in the moment, and maybe...well, I don’t know. It was a public place, so probably not what I’d really wanted, but it was something, that was for sure.

When we reached our building, Nick apologized, tossed his dildo in a trash can, and went inside.

I looked at Jake and pursed my lips. “This is all his fault.”

He raised an eyebrow. “That Derek cheated?”

“No. This.” I flicked a finger between us. “These costumes. This was intentional. And you look so...fucking...”

I bit my lower lip and felt more than a little satisfaction at the look that flashed in Jake’s eyes.

“Don’t do that,” he whispered, his voice husky.

I wanted to be coy and push things farther, but I knew I had a friend inside who needed me. And I knew Jake understood.

I dropped my forehead against his shoulder. The bare one, because I deserved something. "I should go take care of Nick," I said softly.

"Yeah," he agreed, wrapping his arms around me.

Neither of us made a move to leave.

Eventually the cold got to us, though, and we broke apart. He gave me a lingering kiss goodnight, and I headed inside.

Sometimes it really sucks to do the right thing.

I was up for a bit with Nick, but I finally got him settled after a hundred apologies and semi-rants about Derek. I should have realized he wasn't as over things as he tried to put on. He and Derek had seemed pretty solid...right up until they weren't.

I realized at some point that I needed to distract him from the whole Derek thing. Since I was already committed to Thanksgiving with him, I figured that would be a safe topic.

One day, I will learn to ignore that part of me that thinks I'm right.

"So. Uh, Aunt Liz, was it? You said she's a good cook?"

Nick looked at me and sighed, his eyes still red from his emotional outburst.

"Liz is my mom's sister. She and my mom are close, but we only see that side of the family once in a while. There's a lot of physical distance, but also my uncle... He's always been kind of weird? Not bad exactly, but weird. Ex military, into conspiracy theories and shit. He wasn't political until...you know. The orange one."

Shit.

"You and I...I guess, we've never talked politics, so I don't know where you land with any of that stuff. Maybe I shouldn't assume..."

"As far away from the Cantaloupe Caligula as you can be."

Nick smiled weakly. "My bro." He held out his fist, and I bumped it.

"So your uncle is a douche?"

"Major Douche. Address him by his rank."

I sighed. "What about your cousins?"

"Last time I saw them it was kind of a mix. My oldest cousin is Kenny, and he's always been Daddy's little man. His sister Kelly was always arguing with them over casual misogyny and stuff. There's a gap before Gary, Misty, and Carson. Gary's like...seventeen, now? I don't think he really connected with his parents. He was showing me pictures of dirt bikes and engines last time we were together. Misty is Daddy's little princess. I don't think she has a brain. Carson's like thirteen or fourteen. I

don't know him that well, but his mom told my mom that he's really into music, movies, and reading."

"So...your uncle and oldest cousin. Will they start shit on a holiday? I mean wouldn't your aunt get pissed?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. My mom might have an idea; maybe that's why she's pushing me so hard to go."

I scratched my head. "I don't understand the obsession with blood family. I'd never have Charlie or Brandon in my life if I was so locked in on that."

"Yeah. I think my mom and my aunt have always been close, but it's less about that, really. It's just another thing to throw at me to get me to go."

"Yeah but...why is it important? I could understand if your mom was making the trip." I stiffened. "Wait, is the rest of your family coming? Do I have a lot more names to learn?"

He chuckled. "Nah. With the price of gas my parents would have to take out a second mortgage to fly out."

I frowned. It didn't really make sense, at least not to me.

"So. Before I ruined everything, how was it going with Jake?"

I swallowed and tried to choose my words. "I think there's a chance we'd have crossed a big line tonight."

Nick's face fell. "Aw, God damn it. I'm so sorry, Kode."

I waved a hand. "No. I mean...yeah, I was mad at first, but we were in public. How far can you really go?"

"Pfft. In a dark corner? Pretty damn far." He shifted toward me. "You think Jake...I know you said there's stuff, big stuff for him. Did he..."

"He grabbed my ass." Wow. Had *not* meant to blurt that.

He raised an eyebrow. "And did we...like that?"

I rubbed a sudden itch on my face. "Yes. Yes, we did."

Nick smiled. "Promise me something?"

"That depends."

"Name your first kid after me?"

I barked out a laugh and pushed at him with my foot. "Shut up."

"I'm assuming I'll at least get an invite to the wedding, but I figure naming rights are still up for grabs, you know?"

At least he was getting back to normal. Giving me shit was his status quo.

Afterward, I lay awake, thinking of Jake and what might have happened. Would he have regretted whatever it was? Did he already? Should I have put the brakes on?

Did I even have the mind to stop in the middle of getting what I thought I wanted?

Difficult as it was, I didn't message Jake about any of it. In fact, I figured my best course was to act like it hadn't happened, so as not to put pressure on him.

But he'd said I *was* pressure. The good kind, but still.

In its own torturous way, school helped by dragging me away from my thoughts of Jake — the course load only grew more ferocious as we started into November. We each had a flurry of projects due, but there was also just a lot of work. Some bigger assignments were due before the holiday, and at least two asshole professors had scheduled theirs to be due shortly after the holiday in what I was sure was an attempt to force people to work through the short break.

Nick started moving on — or at least was less openly bitter about his breakup — but reminded me frequently that Thanksgiving was coming and he'd need me. He must have been really stressed about it to think I needed daily reminders.

When I updated Dad on the campus closing for the holiday and my plans to go with Nick to his family's, I was surprised how chill he was about it. He only asked that I let him know when I was leaving and arriving, so he'd know I was safe.

It was almost like he was trusting me, treating me more like an adult. It felt weird. Good, but weird.

My dad was bugging me about if I wanted a plane ticket for Jake to come as my plus-one for the wedding. He also said he was welcome for all or part of winter break, but he needed to know soon because, he wanted to buy the plane tickets as my Christmas present.

I promised I'd ask, but I wondered how that would even work. We don't really have a spare bedroom, and if Jake were with me, there's no way I could just *sleep* next to him.

Even beyond that, though, I felt like asking Jake to accompany me to my dad's wedding was a big deal. I mean...a really big deal. As always, my mind ran to how Jake would feel about the pressure of meeting my family *and* going to a wedding. It could push him in bad directions. I didn't want to stress him out. But I *did* like the idea of him being with me for the big important stuff as well as the everyday little things.

How would I even introduce him? My friend from college? I'd rather drink Drano. Would we still not have a label?

I could only imagine how gorgeous he would be in a suit, though...and I did. I pictured one of those slim cut styles from the Mad Men era that hugged his frame, with a blue kerchief poking from his breast pocket to match his eyes.

And what about the dancing? If it's a wedding, there has to be dancing. Would he dance with me in front of my family?

I wanted to bring it up with Jake. I even had a plan to be subtle about it, but we seemed to be struggling to find alone time. Brayden was always in Jake's room and was seemingly immune to hints that we'd like some privacy. Nick was always at my place, and I didn't want to rub my relationship in his face when he was still getting over Dickhead Derek.

I couldn't talk to Nick, because he was still navigating whatever stages of grief people go through after someone cheats — he seemed to be somewhere between wanting Derek's dick to fall off and acceptance. Plus, he was way too invested in his conviction that if Jake and I just had sex, all our problems would be solved.

Feeling as though I just had to get out of my head, I FaceTimed Charlie on Sunday evening.

"Oh, big brother calls from college. He remembers I exist," Charlie said flatly then grinned. "Must be that hot boyfriend keeping him busy."

"I do actually have school work, you know." I tried to ignore the sting of the casual 'boyfriend' statement.

"Rumors. Everyone knows college is for parties and hookups."

"Sure. I mean as long as you don't want to graduate and just want to supervise the self-checkout lanes."

"Bruh. Are you seriously trying to tell me Jake takes up none of your time?"

"That's not what I said."

"Aha!"

"No! No 'aha'!"

"Come on! Give me something!"

I sighed. "I was actually calling you about Jake. I need a fresh perspective."

"Uh oh. Okay. Well, I was actually going to do the same with you so...trade?"

I frowned. "Trade? What's going on with you?"

He sighed. "Frankie."

Not again. "Really, Charlie? Why did you get with him again?"

“You know... He’s cute. He does that puppy dog thing. And if he leaves his Bible at home, we get on pretty well.”

“His dad’s a deacon. Frankie leads a prayer circle on the front lawn of the school in the morning and on test days.”

“Well, to be fair, most of us pray on test days anyway.”

I rubbed my forehead. “What’s going on with you two?”

“Just...after we broke up last time — again — he reached out and asked to talk. I was single so...we talked. And we kissed. And we decided to try again.”

I cleared my throat. “And did you talk about any of the things that broke you guys up the last, what, six times?”

“Four.”

“So much better.”

“Don’t be a prick.”

I bit my tongue and took a breath. “Sorry. It’s just...he’s not going to change.”

“That’s the thing though, right? There has to be something going on if he keeps coming back to me.”

“Yeah. He’s gay and filled with self-hate because of his sky daddy.”

He was quiet for a moment. “Okay, you know what? I’m going to circle back to my issues, because you’re being an asshole right now, and I guess you need to get some shit off your chest.”

I let out a heavy sigh. “I’m sorry.”

“Are ya?”

“Yes,” I said firmly. “I’m on your side. I am. But it’s a long shot, Charlie. A really long one. It’s not like you guys just met. He knows you way too well for a churchy boy who can’t admit he’s not straight.”

“Kode.” His tone was edged with warning.

I paused and counted to five in my head. “It’s just that religion... It’s not something you can argue with him about, or even talk about, because it’s not, like, rational. Like, if he was insisting the sky was green, you could show him proof it’s blue, you know? But you’re not fighting facts. You’re fighting belief...faith. And I...I just worry that he’s going to keep you bouncing back and forth without ever giving you what you deserve.”

“He—”

“Not *that*. I mean a real relationship.”

He went quiet again, then, “I’m not sure what you *thought* I was going to say there, but we haven’t gone all that far, Kode. I’m a flirt, a frequent dater maybe, but I’m not a slut.”

I ran my fingers into my hair. “I’m sorry. I’m not trying to say that you are. I just don’t think it’s fair to you.”

I heard something rustle. “Yeah. You kind of sound like Dad when you say that, but...you’re not wrong.” Another pause. “He told me he’s struggling with his faith, or what he’s been taught versus how he feels. He told me that he gets told his feelings aren’t real, that it’s just the devil tempting him, and...I kind of told him his feelings are more real than the devil.”

“And how did that go?”

He sighed. “He cried, Kode. He cried, and I felt like the world’s biggest asshole. You know how I feel about crying.”

“Yeah. I’m in the same boat. Nick did that to me a few weeks ago when I wanted to kill him.”

“Nick? What’s up with Nick?”

I told him about Derek cheating on Nick, and how Nick was struggling to get over the betrayal. Then I described how he’d dressed Jake and me for Halloween, set a situation rolling, and then crashed it all down by acting like a Real Housewife of Albany and getting kicked out of the club.

“Wow. I mean...I’d be salty too. But honestly, he’s probably lucky he cried, because you’re mean when you’re mad.”

I blew out a breath, but said nothing.

“So. Are things okay with you and Nick?”

“Oh, yeah. I love him. He’s probably the second-best thing to happen to me out here.”

“Cool. ’Cause if he’s still single for winter break, I was hoping you could bring him to me for Christmas.”

I snorted. “You’re too young for him — his words, not mine — but I’ll be sure to tell him what you’re asking Santa for this year. It’ll give him a good laugh at least.”

“Hardy-har-har. Since we’re yucking it about our lousy love lives, how’s the first best thing about being there?”

That triggered a big sigh.

“Oh. Okay,” he said in response. “I guess that means he hasn’t asked you to marry him yet? Or was the diamond too small?”

I chuckled. “No. I’m... I’m just frustrated.”

“Like sexually?”

“That too. But I meant that I’m in a weird place, because I know a bunch of stuff about him — the stuff we talked about — and he doesn’t know that I know what I know. I think he was about to tell me one day, but I told him he didn’t need to, at least not until he was ready. I don’t want him to bring up something painful just because he thinks he should tell me.”

“Yeah, totally. Good call.”

“But...I don’t know. Maybe I’m being a little bitch about this.”

“I’m the expert about you being a little bitch, so let me decide.”

“Eat shit and live.”

“There’s my brother!”

I rolled my eyes. “Look. I’m just... I told him I loved him. Like...weeks ago.”

“Oh wow. Bold move, bro. How’d that go?”

“It...worked out okay in the end. But it was kind of tense for a few days.”

“Okay... Tense how? And why?”

“He’s into me. I feel confident he cares, that he likes me for me, that I’m his type...whatever that means. He’s interested. We seem to work really well.”

“Okay, so I’m guessing this is where you tell me the problem?”

I sighed, glanced at my bedroom door in sudden paranoia to confirm it was closed, then looked away and out my window.

“He still hasn’t put a label on us.”

“Uh, what?”

“And we still haven’t... I mean that’s not as important, but...he hasn’t said it back yet. He said he was getting there.”

Deadpan, Charlie repeated, “Getting there.”

“Yeah.”

“Fuck.”

“And I’m frustrated.”

“Well, yeah. Who wouldn’t be?”

“I guess I just don’t know what to do. I’m trying to be patient and give him time. I know he needs time, more than lots of others maybe. But Jesus...I’m so pent up I feel like I could explode.”

“You have options, right?”

I swallowed. “What option are you thinking of?”

“Well, first is nuclear. You break it off.”

My stomach felt like it was collapsing in on itself.

"I mean, in a way, this is like what you were saying to me about Frankie, right? I'm stuck in a loop waiting for him to get his head out of his ass, and I can either be there for him or break it off, right?"

I shook my head. "I don't want to do that. I mean, I don't want to break it off."

"I'm not saying you do, bro. I'm just giving possible options."

I nodded, "Sure. Options."

"So option two is you go online and buy a Fleshlight and spend time thinking about Jake while working out your frustrations. Hey! Remember when we saw how you could make a mold of your boner? You should ask Jake to make one so you have something to look forward to!"

I laughed. "You're such an asshole, Charlie."

"And the last option, I guess, is kind of...I don't know, out there?"

"Out there how?"

"I mean it's weird, even for me but...you could talk to him?"

I snorted. "I told him I love him. We both know we want this, but...he's holding back, and I don't understand why. I mean, I get that he has this fucked up past, but what am I supposed to say? How come you don't love me yet? What else do I have to do to prove we should be boyfriends?" I stopped. "Jesus, I sound like a psycho twink super bitch."

"Well. Maybe not *super*, but, yeah. Delivery is key."

I thought for a moment. "I've been thinking that maybe I could bring it up more like a...a check in. See how he's feeling?"

"Sure. Or just feel him up and tell him he feels fine to you."

I let out a gut laugh. "Yeah, okay. Maybe not that. Although, I thought we were gonna fuck in the middle of the club at that dance. Stupid Nick."

"Stupid, beautiful, sexy Nick. So, now that I've solved all your problems, let's circle back to Frankie. Final thoughts?"

I sighed. "How do you feel about him, Charlie? I mean, you date a lot. Is he special somehow?"

"I don't know. I think so?" He scratched his chin thoughtfully.

"You know how some guys are just on the outside looking in, like a kid at a candy store window. They stay on the edge, wondering if they can cross the line between being hetero and being gay. Maybe they don't want the label of queer or anything else that isn't hetero, but they see me and think...safe option. I can use him to figure things out."

"Are you the candy in this metaphor?"

"I mean I'm a safe option. Non-threatening. They can experiment with me then walk away when they get what they need. And that's all I am to them, some empty calories."

Thinking of the one boy he'd dated for two months once, I asked, "What about Brent?"

"Okay, yeah, he was real. At first, anyway. But then we discovered we couldn't stand each other once the sex glasses came off."

"Sex glasses?"

"Yeah. Where you look at them and just think about sex. You know, like when you saw that pic of Jake on the beach. Sex on the beach."

I growled at him.

"Anyway. What do you think?"

I sighed. "I guess our options are similar, right? Either you break it off, talk to him, or wait it out to see if your hunch pays off."

"Yeah. Kind of what I was thinking. I don't know. I think I want to wait and see. I mean, I have my own Fleshlight while this plays out, right?"

"Jesus Christ, do *not* tell Dad I got you that."

"On one condition...bring me a Nick for the holidays!"

"Bye, Charlie."

It snowed again on Monday. Not like the slop-fest we got in that freak event a few weeks before. Was it only a few weeks? Time, how does it work?

This was just a constant flurry of tiny flakes that swirled on the sidewalk as I trudged to work.

Max was opening with me, and we worked silently to get things fired up for the day. Max was rarely there for the opening shift, because she did not morning well.

People started coming in as soon as we unlocked the door, and it was just a hair over being steady for a long while. The line was no less than five people deep for the longest time, and Max and I were slinging java like the pros we were.

By the time things slowed down, I'd shifted from paying attention to customers to looking for Jake.

"So," Max said with a knowing tone. "Just how much of a cutie discount has Jake gotten so far this semester?"

I tried to look very innocent. "What's a cutie discount?"

A slight smile curled her lips. "You do know we sell coffee for a living, right?"

“Well...since I get free coffee, and since Jake takes his coffee the same way, I just let him finish mine before I drink from the cup.”

She stared at me for a moment. “That almost made sense. So what you’re saying is he’s gotten a 100% cutie discount from the moment...when? Since you laid eyes on him?”

“He paid! At first. And to be fair, he *is* really cute.”

“What about the big guy?”

“Less cute,” I admitted.

“And Nick? Never mind. I love Nick. He can have the cutie discount.”

“I’m never telling him that. His ego is healthy enough. He pays full price.”

She laughed, then nodded toward the door. “Oh, and here’s your discount now.”

I turned to see Jake approaching, so I turned and started fixing his coffee for him.

“I hope he’s at least giving you more than just the tip — I mean a good tip.” Max giggled at her own joke, which was good, because I didn’t.

I sat down with Jake, watching for the hundredth time how his face changed as he accepted his coffee and took the first few sips. It was subtle and yet remarkable...unless of course it was all in my head. But I was convinced I could see an initial reaction in his expression the moment the aroma of the brew hit him, setting off something in his brain.

Indulgently, I thought it might be partly because this was as close to a morning routine as we’d managed, me sitting with him as he woke up.

God, please, if you exist, I want this for my life. Or, you know, Dog. Whoever grants these sorts of prayers.

“Where are you?”

I shifted from my thoughts to Jake’s face. He looked amused, knowing he’d caught me daydreaming again.

I put my hand in his. “You should know, since you’re with me.”

He smiled and sipped again. “So...I’ve been meaning to ask you something...”

This was it. It was happening. At long last.

My heart went up to double, no triple the normal beat. He was going to make us official. He was going to tell me he was finally there, that he wanted us to be boyfriends, and how he’d dance with me at my dad’s wedding. He was going to—

“So I was thinking if you hadn’t made plans for Thanksgiving you might like to come home with me.”

My stomach muscles tensed, and I actually felt some of my morning coffee cresting at the back of my throat.

“What?”

“Yeah. My friend Killian? His dads — have I mentioned that his dads are gay? — anyway, Adam and Steve always cook a huge feast, and you're invited...” He petered out, noticing the look on my face.

“Are you serious?” I asked through clenched teeth.

He frowned lightly. “Are you— You...don't look happy. I mean, it's fine if you don't want to. I know it's a lot...”

Everything tumbled through my brain like demented dominoes as he babbled on. I think my heart actually started skipping every other beat.

He *wasn't* making us official. He *wasn't* going to be introducing us as boyfriends. He *wasn't* going to dance with me at my dad's wedding. He *wasn't*—

“Kody? Babe, what's going on?”

More dominoes. I had already promised to go with Nick. Which meant I couldn't go with Jake anyway. Which meant no being introduced to his family as his friend from college, at least.

Silver fucking linings.

“God *damn* it!”

He frowned for real. “What's wrong?”

Disappointment crashed into me so hard I felt a little light headed.

His hand squeezed mine. “Kode?”

I took a few deep, shuddering breaths until my heart slowed down. “I can't.”

“What?” He sounded so disappointed. “Why not?”

I swallowed. *I will not cry like a crazy, twink super bitch.*

“Because Nick asked me to go with him. Difficult family situation. I already said yes.” I paused. “I didn't... I'm sorry.”

He sighed. “Yeah, me too. Family sitch, huh? So no chance of changing plans?”

My lower lip trembled.

“Oh, hey, come on Babe...”

I pressed my lips together, unsuccessfully willing them to stop their shit.

“I can't.” I took a breath, then one more. “I promised him I would go, and he's really stressed out about it.”

“Oh. Well, I guess maybe next time then.” He sounded so dejected, nearly as much as I felt.

A group of college kids came into the shop.

“Cutie discount time is up!” Max called out.

Jake looked at me. “What is she going on about now?”

I smiled at him and sniffed. “Because of how much free coffee I give you because you’re so damn cute.”

“Oh shit. Are you in trouble? I can pay...”

I shook my head as I stood up. “No. See you for dinner?”

“Yeah. Yeah of course, babe. See you tonight.”

I went through the motions of calmly serving the gaggle of customers, but inside I was anything but calm. My hopes had soared, only to come crashing down. You'd think I'd be used to that by now, but did you really ever get used to it? Maybe I just needed to stop hoping, stop expecting good things to happen to me.

Part of me knew that wasn't fair, though. It was a big step for Jake to ask me to meet his family. Maybe a major step toward us becoming boyfriends. Maybe even to him saying the L-word.

And I'd ruined it all. I guess, technically, Nick had ruined it. Or his weird MAGA uncle. But it was definitely ruined.

Next time. Ha. When would that be? Next year?

“Kody!” Max snapped her fingers in front of my face, and I realized I'd gotten lost in my head and had been standing there with a full coffee cup for who knows how long.

Embarrassed, I handed it to the customer and shoved all those tumultuous thoughts and feelings as far down inside as I could. I would deal with them later.

Or not.

For the moment, though, it was time to focus on work. Before Max fired me.

Chapter 31 – Jake

I was equal parts disappointed and relieved that Kody couldn't go home with me for Thanksgiving. Okay, maybe I was a *little* more relieved. After all, there were a lot of expectations about meeting each other's families for the first time.

Not to mention that Killian would definitely put on his PI hat and ask Kody a million questions. And Judy would probably be weird and go full psychic and tell us exactly when we were going to break up and why.

Those were all just excuses, though, and I knew it. He'd have to meet them all eventually, assuming we kept seeing each other, but I didn't really mind putting it off for a little longer.

The truth was I was scared. It felt like I was on a runaway train that was careening wildly towards a cliff or something. Sure, that cliff was just a relationship status, but that felt like a Really Big Deal.

I did wonder what was going on with Kody, though. He'd looked disappointed far beyond what I would have expected. Maybe meeting my friends and family meant more to him than I thought. He did really value that sort of thing — like, spending quality time together, doing coupley things...labels.

I sighed to myself. If he could just hang on until Christmas, I had this idea of writing him a letter asking him to be my boyfriend and wrapping it in a little box that would be inside a bigger box that would be inside a bigger box, and so on. A Russian nesting doll of Official Boyfriend Status.

But maybe it was a mistake to wait that long.

I knew Kody was probably itching to be official. I was his first real relationship, and I'd been dragging my feet. Not because of him. He was great. Almost too great.

I'd finally admitted — to myself, at least — that I was in love with him, and theoretically I was ready to be official, but even asking him to come home with me for Thanksgiving had taken everything I had in me. If Judy hadn't been texting me nonstop about needing a final headcount for Thanksgiving, I probably wouldn't have even asked that.

Not that Adam actually needed a headcount. I knew that was just an excuse for her to pressure me. And I loved her for it. Somebody needed to kick me in the ass.

Since I was already thinking of Judy, I sent her a quick text to let her know Kody couldn't make it.

My phone buzzed within minutes. I assumed it would be Judy, but when I pulled it back out of my pocket, I saw it was Killian calling.

“Judy just texted me,” Killian said as soon as I answered.

“Word travels fast,” I replied.

“How did you fumble this one?” he asked, accusingly.

“I didn’t!” I insisted. “He’d already made other plans before I asked, and he’s too sweet to back out of them.”

He actually harrumphed at that, something I didn’t know people did outside the pages of a book.

“And I’m sure that had nothing to do with the fact that you waited so long to ask him.”

“No! Well...maybe. But I think he’s had these plans for a while, so maybe not.”

“Have you at least told him how you feel and made things official?”

“No...” I hedged.

“What? Jake! What’s the hold up?”

“I want it to be special. I’m waiting for the right moment.”

“Any moment will be special if you make it special.”

“You know what I mean. I was thinking about doing it at Christmas—”

“Christmas is two months away!”

“Yes, but I was thinking about doing this, like, box within a box thing. Maybe buying him a ring. Not like an engagement ring, just a token of...of my feelings for him...”

“Fucking hell, you can’t even say the words to me. Say it. Love. Love, love, love. I love Kody. Say it!”

I laughed. “I can say love. And technically, I have said it to him. It’s just that he’d overdosed on NyQuil at the time and was so high he was picking out curtains on the moon.”

“Wait, what?”

“It was when we both had the flu back-to-back.”

“Well, if he doesn’t remember it, then it doesn’t count.”

“I like to think of it as a test run.”

“Still doesn’t count.”

“I’ll tell him...when the time is right.”

“Jake Sheridan, so help me God...”

“Killian, let me do it my way.”

“Not like I have a choice, do I?”

“And don’t meddle.”

"I don't know what you're talking about. I never meddle."

"Uh huh. You're practically the sixth member of the Scooby gang."

"Seventh, if you count Scrappy."

"Nobody counts Scrappy."

"So has *anything* happened since we talked last, or have you just been paralyzed by indecision?"

"A lot has happened. We went to a drag show and a Halloween dance party that was a fundraiser for the GSA here."

"Gay. Did you have fun at least?"

"The drag show was really fun. The host picked on Kody and me a little, but it was pretty funny. The dance party started out great but went sideways when Kody's roommate, Nick, got in a lover's quarrel and got kicked out."

"What?"

"Well, I guess it was more of a former lover's quarrel. His ex cheated on him, and that was the first time he'd seen him since the breakup. Bad timing, though..."

"Is there ever a good time for that sort of thing?"

"I guess not, but it was especially bad for me and Kody. We were...having a moment at the time, but it got cut short when we had to be there for Nick and get him home."

"A moment? What kind of moment?"

"A...pretty heated moment."

"Like *Heated Rivalry* heated or like angry heated?"

"Definitely more hockey than hate."

"Ohh...tell me more."

"There's not that much to tell. We were making out in a corner, kind of hot and heavy, and then the fireworks started. And no, that's not a euphemism."

"Oh...well, that's a bit of let-down."

"For us too."

He laughed. "What did you guys dress up as?"

"Nick orchestrated the whole thing. Kody was Johnny Depp's character in *Nightmare on Elm Street*—"

"I don't know what that means."

"He was in, like, a crop-top football jersey and very form-fitting sweatpants. He looked edible."

"Okay. You'll have to send me pics."

"Damn it! We forgot to take pics!"

“How do you forget to take pictures on Halloween? I’m revoking your gay card.”

“There was so much going on!”

“Whatever. What were you?”

“I was a gladiator. Sort of. If they were super slutty.”

“I mean, weren’t they, though?”

“I guess. I just wish Nick could have held it together and not made a scene.”

“Or what? You would have fucked in the club? You would have finally asked him to be official? You would have said you love him?”

“Maybe. I mean, it’s easier to say those things in an emotionally charged state, right?”

“If by emotionally charged you mean painfully hard and insanely horny...”

I laughed again. “Yeah, that’s exactly what I mean.”

He sighed so heavily I imagined I could feel his breath in my ear.

“Seriously, Jake, you have got to stop dragging your feet. Am I going to have to stage an intervention? Do I need to drive up there and force you to tell him how you feel?”

“No. I’ll tell him. You stay out of it. Remember how much you hate it when people meddle in your love life?”

He sighed again, but more resigned this time. “Yes. You’re right. It’s just so frustrating being on this side of things for a change...”

“It’s my relationship. I’ll handle it my way. And I’m getting there.”

“Slowly.”

“Baby steps are still steps.”

“Okay, now you sound like my therapist.”

“Goodbye, Killian.”

“Tell him.”

“Bye.”

I hung up and shook my head affectionately. I loved my well-meaning friend, and deep down I knew he was right. Kody was getting restless. I could sense it. But I still wanted the moment to be special. I just had to watch for the right time.

Or at least come up with a plan that didn’t involve waiting two months.

Later that week I was on my way to The Morning Rush, head down and deep in thought, when I felt myself being pulled into the orbit of an unexpected planet.

I glanced up to see Brayden at my side. It had been a few days since I'd seen him, so it was a welcome surprise.

"Hey, buddy," I said. "How's it going?"

He shrugged. "Okay, I guess. The coach says I can get back on the field next week. I'm tired of sitting on the bench."

"That's great, Bray."

He nodded.

"Did you ever decide what you're doing for Thanksgiving?"

He heaved a sigh so big I could have sworn I saw a few trees bend from the breeze.

"No. My parents decided to go on a cruise, so I guess I'll just go home and sit in an empty house."

"Where are your siblings?"

"They're going on the cruise too."

"But...you're not?"

"No. They said I was still recovering from my surgery, so I needed to rest and heal."

I felt my temper rising. That was such a blatantly fake excuse that all I wanted to do was throat punch each and every member of his shitty family.

"Well, why don't you come back to Maryland with me?" I asked before my brain could catch up to my mouth.

I immediately regretted it. I liked the big guy. In fact, I'd even come to think of him as a good friend. That didn't mean I wanted to spend my holidays with him.

At the same time, Judy had said my friends were welcome any time, and Killian had made it clear that Adam wouldn't care if there were more guests at the table. Although, to be fair, they hadn't met Brayden or seen the massive amounts of food he could pack away in a single sitting.

Maybe I should buy an extra turkey, just to be safe.

I suddenly realized he was no longer walking next to me and turned around to see he'd stopped. He stood a few feet away, just blinking at me.

"Really?" he asked, sounding so much like a hopeful little kid that I felt bad for second guessing my spontaneous invitation.

"Sure," I said, keeping my voice hearty. "You can meet my aunt and my friend Killian."

He frowned. "Are you sure it's okay if I just show up?"

"Oh yeah. No problem. Killian's dad, Adam, basically treats Thanksgiving like a competitive sport. The more people at the table, the

happier he gets. I'm pretty sure he'd adopt random motorists off the interstate if he thought they looked hungry."

I made a mental note to warn everyone, starting with Judy.

"Okay. If you're really sure."

"I'm sure."

"Cool. Thank you, Jake." He started walking again, and I waited until he reached me to fall into step next to him again.

"I'm taking the train down, so we'll need to see about getting you a ticket on the same one."

He nodded again. "I know how to book a train ticket. If you send me the booking stuff, I can get it."

I was a little surprised but tried not to show it. "Are you sure? They're not really cheap..."

"That's okay. My parents gave me a credit card that I can use on anything I want as long as I don't bother them."

"Must be nice."

His face dropped a little. "It's okay. I'd rather they cared about me, though."

I bumped my shoulder against his — well, against his elbow anyway. "Who needs them? You've got me now."

That brought a smile to his face.

"Yeah. You're the best, Jake."

"Nah, I just try to look out for my friends."

We reached the coffee shop just then, and I was pleased to see I'd timed things just right so that the titular morning rush was over. Brayden and I were the only customers.

Kody and Marla were behind the counter, and Kody practically jumped over the counter to throw himself into my arms.

"Christ almighty," Marla grumbled, though a smile betrayed her true feelings. "You'd think you two hadn't seen each other in weeks instead of hours. Just wait until the honeymoon period wears off."

"It'll never happen," Kody said, then stretched up on his tiptoes for a kiss.

Marla turned to Brayden. "How do you stand being around them?"

Brayden shrugged. "I like 'em. They're sweet."

Marla laughed. "Yeah, I guess they are that. Too sweet, though. They make my teeth ache. What can I getcha, big boy?"

"A hot chocolate, please."

"Coming right up."

Kody released me to go make my coffee, since he knew just how I liked it. He wouldn't let anyone else make it if he was around.

Once we had our drinks, Kody took a break and sat with us at our usual table.

"I'm going home with Jake for Thanksgiving," Brayden announced almost as soon as our butts hit the seats.

Kody's eyes grew wide, and he turned to me as if for confirmation.

"His, uh, parents are going off on a cruise, taking his siblings with them, but said Bray needed to stay home because he's still recovering from his surgery," I explained. "Alone."

Understanding flooded his face, but he still looked very jealous. I could practically read his mind: *"Oh, so Brayden gets to go home with him, but I can't."*

I reached across the table and took his hand, hoping he'd feel what I couldn't exactly say in front of Brayden.

His pout softened, but only a little.

"There will be other holidays," was all I said.

He nodded and managed a small smile. "I know."

"And if anything changes..."

He sighed. "I can't do that to Nick. I promised."

"I know, but if it does..."

"Trust me, you'll be the first to know."

"Well, at any rate, maybe we can do something special before we leave."

Kody perked up like a dog that just heard the can opener. "Like what?"

"I don't know. Maybe we need to have our own little Thanksgiving dinner."

He gave me a skeptical look. "Right, because the last time I tried cooking for you ended so well."

"Hey, as I recall, it ended very well...with our first kiss."

He smiled. "True. But where would we cook it? I'm pretty sure Marla won't let me use her kitchen again."

"Eh, mi casa es su casa," she said from behind the counter. She wasn't even pretending not to eavesdrop, and good for her. We weren't exactly trying to be quiet.

"Nah, but thank you," Kody said to her. "Once was enough."

"Rich scared you off, didn't he?" she asked.

Kody giggled. "No, I liked him."

"That makes one of us, then."

“Oh, stop. You know you love him.”

“You said like, not love. Two different things.”

“Anyway,” I interrupted before they could take their vaudeville show on the road. “Maybe we could just go to a nice restaurant then. That’s something we haven’t done yet.”

“Yeah, that sounds fun,” Kody said, trying to sound enthusiastic but not quite getting there.

I needed to cheer him up, and that would require something bigger than dinner at a nice restaurant.

“Or…” I said slowly as a plan started to come together in my head. I’d remembered one of his daydreams he’d shared with me. “Since we can’t be together for Turkey Day, what if we go on a little getaway, just the two of us?”

His interest was piqued. “Where?”

“Maybe a weekend in New York City? We could get a hotel, maybe see a show—”

He cut me off with a strangled little happy sound that was somehow both adorable and vaguely alarming, then launched himself across the table at me hard enough to slosh coffee over the rim of my cup.

Marla stopped pretending to wipe the same spot on the counter and looked over.

“Jesus. Get a room.”

“We’re sitting in one,” Kody shot back without looking away from me, his arms tight around my neck.

Marla stared at him. Then at me. Then at Brayden.

“Well,” she deadpanned, “I officially hate all three of you for making me witness this much wholesome nonsense before noon.”

Brayden sipped his hot chocolate thoughtfully, a little whipped cream clinging to his upper lip like a mustache. “I think it’s nice,” he said.

Marla pointed at him. “Stop encouraging them.”

Brayden looked genuinely confused. “Why?”

That made all of us laugh.

“When?” Kody asked, finally letting go and settling back into his seat.

“Maybe we delay going home for a few days when winter break starts? We can celebrate surviving finals week.”

“Assuming we survive,” he said, but his eyes were sparkling, and I could tell he was already planning the trip in his mind.

I was planning a few things of my own. That would be the perfect time to pop the question. I was already picturing candles and red roses...

And the best part was, winter break was only a couple of weeks after Thanksgiving break, so it would technically be before Christmas. Maybe Killian would stop breathing down my neck if I had a solid plan in place.

For a moment, sitting there with my tiny unofficial boyfriend and my giant adopted stray of a friend, warm coffee in my hands, something clicked inside me.

This was what I wanted.

For so long, I'd moved through life like a loose balloon, cut free and drifting wherever grief, fear, addiction or loneliness carried me. Always bracing for the next disaster. Always waiting for something good to be ripped away. And maybe that could still happen. Life had taught me that much. But lately I was building something stronger than fear.

Maybe the fresh start Killian had talked about wasn't about becoming someone new. Maybe it was about finally becoming the person I was supposed to be all along.

Kody squeezed my hand, and I squeezed back.

The day before Thanksgiving, Brayden and I took a Lyft across the river to the Rensselaer Amtrak station bright and early, when train fares were cheaper. Well, dark and early, since we had to be there before the sun cracked the horizon.

Brayden had successfully booked his ticket on the same train with an ease that still mildly offended me. For a guy who sometimes seemed confused by automatic doors, he'd navigated the Amtrak app like a seasoned business traveler. Meanwhile, I'd spent twenty minutes the night before triple-checking my reservation, because I was convinced I would somehow accidentally board a freight train to Nebraska.

Brayden was very chill about the whole thing.

I was weirdly excited. Part of it was that it was my first real train trip. Part of it was the novelty of heading home for Thanksgiving with a friend in tow. And part of it — if I was being honest — was that I needed a little distance from school, from stress, from the complicated hurricane of feelings Kody had stirred up in me.

Kody and I had said our goodbyes the night before. You would have thought I was shipping off to war. He'd clung to me like a koala with abandonment issues, arms wrapped around my middle, face pressed dramatically into my chest while he mumbled things like, "Four whole days is basically forever," and "What if you meet someone hotter in Maryland?"

"As if the Eastern Shore has hotter people than you," I'd teased.

“You don’t know that,” he’d said gravely. “They could be hiding them. Besides, you’re from there, so, clearly, they exist.”

He’d managed — barely — not to cry, but only after extracting a solemn oath that I would FaceTime him every night, text him when I got on the train, text him if I changed seats, text him when I arrived, and text him “just because.” I was pretty sure if technology allowed it, he would have injected a tracking chip in me.

Not that I entirely minded.

At the station, Brayden stood beside me holding a duffel bag the size of a studio apartment while I stared up at the departure board like a kid at Disneyland.

“This is cool,” I admitted.

Brayden nodded. “Yeah.”

“You don’t seem impressed.”

He shrugged. “I rode trains a lot when I was little.”

That surprised me. “Family trips?”

He made a rumbling sound. “No. My parents used to put me on one by myself and send me to my grandparents’ farm in Ohio every summer so I was out of their hair.”

My heart did that painful little squeeze it kept doing whenever Brayden casually revealed another heartbreaking detail from his childhood.

“That’s...grim.”

He brightened slightly. “The farm was awesome, though. My grandpa let me help deliver a calf once.”

“That is...somehow both so pure and absolutely disgusting.”

“It was slimy.”

“Please stop.”

He grinned.

We boarded a few minutes later and found our seats — two facing forward with little fold-down trays on the seat backs in front of us. I took the window seat, and Brayden took the aisle in the mistaken belief that he’d have more leg room.

When he sat down, however, he immediately looked like he’d been designed specifically for torture by public transportation. His knees jammed against the seat in front of him at a violent angle, his shoulders spilled over both armrests, and his head nearly brushed the luggage rack.

“You look like a hostage folded into a suitcase,” I said.

“I’m uncomfortable.”

“You look uncomfortable.”

It was a five-hour trip by train, and I did not envy him.

An elderly woman in a flamboyant purple hat with an enormous pheasant feather sticking and carrying a soft-sided pet carrier boarded at the last second. She took the seats across the aisle from us and promptly opened the carrier, producing a tiny white dog wearing a sweater that read “BITE ME” in rhinestones.

The dog locked eyes with Brayden and growled.

Brayden looked stricken. “I don’t think he likes me.”

The woman sniffed, settling the dog in her lap. “Mr. Biscuits senses weakness.”

“I’m not weak,” Brayden said, sounding wounded.

Mr. Biscuits bared one tiny needle-like fang.

Brayden slowly leaned closer to me, which wasn’t ideal since, considering his bulk, I was already smooshed against the window.

I struggled to get my hand into my pocket to retrieve my phone so I could text Kody, but Brayden’s tree-trunk leg was pressed so tightly against me I could barely manage.

“I’m not trying to feel you up,” I said to Bray. “Just trying to get my phone.”

He was too preoccupied with the dog to respond.

I shot Kody a quick message saying we were safely on the train and setting off, then slid my phone under my thigh. I wasn’t about to try to squeeze my hand between my leg and Bray’s ever again.

Eventually the old lady and Mr. Biscuits dozed off, and Bray relaxed, though he kept a wary eye on his new nemesis.

At Penn Station in NYC, a wiry man in tie-dye boarded carrying what appeared to be a ferret in a sling strapped to his chest.

Not a baby....a ferret. The ferret wore a little knitted cap.

The man sat behind us and immediately began having a full conversation with it.

“No, Marmalade, gratitude first. Then snacks.”

I turned slowly toward Brayden.

He whispered, “I like him.”

Naturally, things got weirder.

We’d barely left the city when the train lurched hard enough that a teenage girl’s pumpkin spice latte launched out of her hand and flew through the air in glorious slow motion, splattering across the chest of a sharply dressed businessman asleep two rows up. He woke with a scream that sounded suspiciously British.

Mr. Biscuits started barking.

Marmalade the ferret escaped his sling and made a break down the aisle.

A toddler began clapping wildly, like this was the best entertainment of his young life.

And Brayden — sweet, giant Brayden — stood up instinctively, caught the fleeing ferret one-handed like he was intercepting a football, and gently handed it back to its owner.

The whole car applauded.

The tie-dye man clutched Marmalade to his chest and gave Brayden a grateful look. “You have a beautiful aura, mountain man.”

Brayden sat back down, pink-cheeked.

“I caught him,” he said to me.

“You did, buddy.”

Mr. Biscuits, apparently impressed by this feat of bravado, climbed down from his snoring owner’s lap, crossed the aisle, and jumped onto Brayden’s massive thigh, where he curled into a tiny ball and fell asleep.

Brayden looked at me in amazement. “He likes me now.”

“Congrats,” I said. “You’ve been accepted by a demon hamster in a sweater.”

Brayden smiled that sweet, uncomplicated smile that made him look about six years old inside that giant body.

For the next several hours we rode through New York and New Jersey, surrounded by chaos, oddballs, and holiday travelers — and somehow it felt strangely perfect.

By the time Wilmington finally came into view, I was exhausted, mildly sticky from secondhand latte splash, and holding an elderly dog I hadn’t boarded with. And the dog kept farting. At least I thought it was the dog. I couldn’t rule out Brayden.

I texted Judy: *Arriving soon. Bringing one giant football player, one tiny gassy dog, and possibly a ferret. Hope that’s okay.*

Her response came immediately: *Perfect. Adam made three pies and enough food to feed a militia. Also, Shane is here with me. See you soon.*

Shane Novak was Judy’s...romantic partner. He was too old to be her boyfriend, but they’d been dating for a few years. He was a retired cop who had opened a private investigations agency, and he was Killian’s boss. Or partner, I guess, since Killian had gotten a big promotion the year before.

Shane was a nice guy, but we’d always been kind of awkward around each other. Which was probably mostly my fault. I’d been a bit of an asshole when they first started dating. In my defense, I was on drugs at the

time, and law enforcement types made me uncomfortable. That is admittedly a terrible defense.

When the train pulled into the station, we gathered our bags and fell into the queue of people exiting. Once on the platform, I strained to find Judy and Shane, but it was the day before a major holiday, and the place was packed.

“Do you see a short blond lady and a tall guy with gray hair anywhere?” I asked Brayden, hoping his superior vantage point would benefit us.

“Uh...there are a lot of blond ladies and gray-haired old men,” he reported.

Just then, I spotted Judy through a gap in the crowd and started toward her, trusting Brayden to keep up.

He didn’t.

When I reached a beaming Judy and we finished hugging, I turned around to find he wasn’t behind me. How do you lose someone his size?

Then I saw him, being swept along with a crowd of nuns in full habits, his head swiveling and his face a mask of panic.

“Bray!” I shouted. “Over here.”

He managed to disentangle himself from the swarm of sisters and quickly made his way to us.

“Judy, this is my friend Brayden. Brayden, this is Judy.”

Brayden shook Judy’s hand, then turned to me with an accusing look on his face. “You left me,” he bleated.

“I thought you’d follow me.”

“Those ladies in the funny dresses confused me.”

“They were nuns.”

“None what?”

“Never mind.”

Judy had been watching us with an amused expression. “It’s nice to meet you, Brayden.” Then to me, “Are you sure Kody isn’t with you?”

She leaned to one side and peeked behind Brayden, as if Kody might be hiding behind him like a shy toddler. To be fair, he wasn’t that much taller than a toddler, and he could have definitely hidden behind Bray.

“No, I told you, he had plans already.”

“I know, but... Well, never mind.”

“What?”

“I just... I thought maybe plans had changed and he’d be with you after all.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Another one of your crazy visions?”

She laughed and swatted at me playfully. "They're not crazy!"

"They're also not very accurate, apparently."

"Sometimes they're not. The future is malleable. But I was hoping to meet him. He sounded so cute on the phone."

"Hold up. On the phone? When did you talk to Kody?"

"When you were sick. Didn't I tell you? I had a feeling that something was wrong, so I called to check in on you, and he accidentally answered. He said he was taking care of you. And that you were a cranky patient, but I already knew that. He seems very sweet."

I frowned. "No, you didn't tell me, and he never mentioned it either."

She waved her hand dismissively. "It wasn't a big deal. We couldn't have talked for more than thirty seconds. He seemed flustered."

"Kody always seems flustered," Brayden observed. "It's kinda his thing."

I laughed, because he wasn't wrong.

"Anyway," Judy said briskly. "Is that all you brought? Two bags? I figured you'd have laundry to do..."

"I do laundry at school. We packed light. We're only here for three nights."

"In that case, are you boys ready for a three-hour car ride or do you need to stretch your legs a bit first?"

"Where's Shane?" I asked.

"He went to get the car. He's pulling it around to the drop-off zone out front."

I turned to Brayden, but he just shrugged.

"Let's just get on the road," I said, deciding for both of us. "The sooner we start, the sooner we'll get home."

Bray and I hefted our bags and followed Judy outside to look for Shane.

He'd parked at the curb and was leaning against the car checking his phone. He glanced up as we approached, and his eyebrows jumped when he saw Brayden.

He straightened up and held out a hand. "You must be Kody," he said. "Nice to meet you."

Brayden looked more confused than ever as Judy and I burst into laughter.

"I'm not Kody," he said, shaking Shane's hand anyway.

"This is my friend, Brayden," I managed between belly laughs and gasping for air.

"I told you Jake said Kody couldn't make it," Judy said.

He shook his head. "Too many names of people I haven't met to keep straight. Wasn't there an Erin too? And a Foster? And maybe a Nicky?"

"Yeah, they're all friends at school," I said. "Except for Foster. He was my roommate, but he...dropped out. And it's Nick, not Nicky."

"Dropped out? Already?"

"It's a long story."

"Well, you can tell us in the car," Judy said. "Let's go, so we can get home in time for dinner."

As soon as we were on the road, Shane driving and Brayden and I stuffed into the backseat, Bray promptly fell asleep. We weren't even out of Wilmington before he started snoring.

"Is he okay?" Judy asked as she twisted around in her seat to look at him.

"He always sounds like that," I said.

"I think he needs a CPAP machine," Shane noted dryly.

I laughed.

"So tell us all about Kody," Judy prompted.

"Oh! I need to text him to let him know we're off the train," I said, reaching for my phone.

Except it wasn't in my pants pocket. I checked my other pocket. Then my coat pockets.

Where was my phone?

"Shit!" I hissed.

"What's wrong?" Judy asked.

"I think I lost my phone on the train."

"Jake!" she exclaimed.

"It's not like I lost it on purpose!"

"What's the train's final destination?" Shane asked.

"I don't know! I think the next stop was Baltimore, but I'm pretty sure it was continuing on from there. I didn't pay attention to how far it goes, only where we needed to get off."

"Well, it'll be hundreds of miles away before we could even hope to catch up to it, and that's assuming someone turns it in and doesn't steal it."

"But I can't live without my phone!"

"You kids these days..." Judy started.

"But Kody—"

"You'll both survive."

“But—”

“Calm down. We have insurance,” Judy said. “We’ll just get a new one when we get home.”

“You might get a better deal if you wait for Black Friday,” Shane pointed out.

“I can’t wait until Friday!” I exclaimed. “Kody will kill me if he can’t FaceTime me tonight.”

Shane’s eyes met mine in the mirror. “Are you sure you two aren’t married?”

“He’s not even officially my boyfriend yet,” I groaned.

“Well, we can’t do anything about your phone now, so you might as well fill us in,” Judy pointed out. “Tell me more about your unofficial boyfriend.”

I huffed, but she was right. There wasn’t anything I could do about it, at least until Brayden woke up. He had Kody’s number, so I could call Kode using his phone at least.

I eyed the phone-shaped bulge in his pocket, briefly considering just reaching in and getting it, but I caught myself before I did anything rash. I could still feel his thigh against my hand from our tight quarters on the train. Besides, even if I successfully managed to get it out without waking him, I didn’t know his unlock code.

Unless he had it set to face recognition. Would that even work if his mouth was hanging open like that?

I shook my head. No. Kody could wait a little longer.

I spent the rest of the car ride catching Judy and Shane up on the first few months of college, including all about Kody, while Brayden sawed logs. He didn’t wake up until we pulled into the driveway of the little bungalow Judy had purchased when we moved back to Maryland.

The first thing I did before we were even out of the car was ask Brayden if I could borrow his phone.

“Sure, Jake,” he said, handing it over without any hesitation. “But why can’t you just use yours?”

“I lost it on the train.”

His eyes grew wide. “Oh, no!”

“Oh, yes. I want to let Kody know we made it here okay. Can you unlock your phone?”

He blinked. “Just hit the button on the side.”

I did, and it woke up.

“You don’t have any sort of security on your phone, Bray?”

“Nah.”

"You really should."

"I ain't got nothing to hide."

"That's not the point. You know what? Never mind. You do you."

I opened his messaging app and shot off a quick text to Kody letting him know we arrived safely and explaining that I'd lost my phone and that he could call or text Bray until I replaced mine.

I handed it back. "Let me know if Kody calls or texts, okay?"

"Sure, Jake."

We got our bags and followed Judy and Shane inside. I showed Brayden to the guest room, then continued to my bedroom.

I just stood in the doorway for a second, taking it all in. It felt weird to be back there after three months at school, like I was seeing the room through new eyes. In some ways, I guess I was. I was a different person than the guy who was having a full-blown panic attack over going off to college.

Brayden came up behind me. "Is that your room?" he asked.

"Yeah," I stepped inside and dropped my bag.

He followed me in and looked around.

"I, uh, redecorated not that long ago," I said, feeling a little self-conscious about how devoid of personality my room was after my purge.

"It's nice," Bray said. It wasn't, really, but it was kind of him to say so.

"So, what do you want to do tonight?" I asked.

He shrugged. "What is there to do here?" His brows drew together. "Where are we again?"

I laughed. "We're in Salisbury, Maryland, and honestly, there's not a whole lot to do here. We're not that far from Ocean City, though. That's, like, a beach resort. Granted, it's November, so it's mostly shut down for the winter, but there's still a boardwalk. And the beach."

"A beach? Like the ocean?"

"Yep. The Atlantic Ocean."

"I've never seen the ocean. Can we do that?"

"Sure. It'll be cold, though. You can't, like, go in or anything." I felt like I had to say it.

He nodded. "I just want to see it."

"Okay, but I need a phone before we go."

We found Judy in the kitchen.

"All settled in?" she asked.

“Yeah, but I was hoping we could maybe go get my new phone, and then Bray wants to see the ocean so I'm taking him to Ocean City, if that's okay.”

“That's fine, but dinner first. You two must be hungry.”

“Yes, I am,” Brayden confirmed.

I was too, but I was more concerned about replacing my phone. I was overruled, however, so we piled back into Judy's car and headed to a nearby casual restaurant. Shane had already taken off, so it was just the three of us, which was a little surreal, listening to Judy chat with Brayden. Judy insisted on paying for us, which was very sweet.

Afterward, we drove to the cell provider's store where Judy had our account, but when we arrived, the lights were off and a handwritten sign on the door informed us that they had closed at six for the holiday.

“I'm sorry, Jake,” Judy said. “Maybe we should have come here first.”

I sighed. “It's not your fault. I guess it'll have to wait for Friday after all.”

We swung back by the house, where Bray and I switched to my car.

“Any word from Kody?” I asked once we were on our way.

Brayden checked his phone. “Nope.”

“Weird.”

I was starting to get a little worried. If he was texting and calling my phone, he would be freaking out that I wasn't responding, but why wouldn't he respond to Bray?

“Maybe try calling him?” I suggested.

He hit dial and held the phone to his ear. After a bit, he hung up.

“It rang and rang and then went to voicemail,” he reported.

I frowned. “I hope everything is okay.”

Bray patted me on the shoulder. “I bet he's just having so much fun with Nick's family that he's not checking his phone.”

“Yeah, sure. You're right. I'm sure everything is fine.”

We drove to Ocean City, where I planned to park in the inlet parking lot. I'd forgotten that the Winterfest of Lights had already started, though, and the lot was filled with holiday light displays. I diverted to a nearby municipal lot, and we walked the short distance to the boardwalk.

Brayden was absolutely enchanted. He insisted that we walk by the light display, which was quite crowded, before heading down to the beach. He just stood and stared at the waves for so long that I started getting cold.

He refused to leave until he'd stuck his hand into the water, which also resulted in him getting his shoes wet, but he seemed unaffected.

I kept thinking how romantic this would be if Kody were with me instead of Brayden. He would have loved this. And I would have loved watching him love it. Because I loved him.

The more I said it to myself, the easier it became.

The next step was telling him.

I had a plan, and it was a good plan, but I was starting to question the wisdom of waiting that long. Maybe I could do it in stages. Tell him I love him now and make us official in New York. Or vice versa. Which made more sense?

"Okay, I'm ready to go," Brayden said, interrupting my thoughts.

We drove back to the house and watched a movie on TV with Judy before heading to bed. I borrowed Bray's phone again before we went to our rooms, but still no answer from Kody.

I was starting to get really worried.

It took me a while to fall asleep, a combination of being back in my old room and concern for Kody. What if something had happened to them on the drive? I mean, considering that Nick was driving, anything was possible. I'd have no way of even knowing without a phone.

The next morning, I tried again with the same result. Judy took us out to breakfast, since she wasn't much of a cook, then we came back to watch the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade and the National Dog Show.

"When are we heading to Adam's house?" I asked after they crowned the winner, an adorably goofy Old English Sheepdog who was whimsically named Briarpatch Lord Paddington, or Paddy for short.

"Not until six, so we've got some time, but it's not at the beach house this year. They've moved fully into the B&B now. Finally finished the top floor renovation."

Adam and Steve owned and operated a bed and breakfast they'd named "Amalie's House." It was located out in the middle of nowhere, a huge, antebellum Italianate mansion on a beautifully landscaped, riverfront property. The house had come with a ghost or two, but Killian had somehow laid them to rest.

But Brayden didn't need to know that. I made a mental note to tell him ghost stories in the car.

"Oh, Killian hadn't mentioned that," I said. "What about the guests?"

"They're closed to the public for Thanksgiving."

"Got it. Who all is going to be there?"

“The usual crowd, as far as I know.”

That would be quite a guest list. Just Killian's family alone was five people, six if his mother drove down from Pennsylvania, which she almost definitely would. There was Adam, Steve, Killian, Killian's younger brother, Kane, who was eighteen and in college in Southern Maryland, and his foster brother, Tad, who was sixteen and in high school, plus his mom, Meg.

Then there were Adam and Steve's friends Bryant and Calvin, a gay couple who always seemed to be around for the holidays, and Ilana and Lysander with their daughter Melody, who had to be around two, I figured. Sometimes Nila, Lysander's daughter from his first marriage, came with her partner Heather, but not every year; they alternated holidays between Nila's mother and Heather's family as well.

With Judy, Shane, me, and Brayden, if everyone showed up, there'd be at least seventeen people present. And that wasn't counting any new strays Adam and/or Killian might have adopted recently.

I shook my head. “Where are they putting everyone?”

“They have that entire ballroom. Adam said they were setting up tables in there.”

“Sounds like a lot of work.”

She laughed. “Yes. I offered to help, but you know Adam. Not that Steve is any better. They insisted they had it covered. Wouldn't even let me bring a dish.”

We had a light lunch, then I broke out my old game system, and Brayden and I played some games that felt charmingly retro for a while. When we got bored with that, we watched another movie.

Around five-thirty, Shane met us at our house, and we all loaded into his old boat of a car — a Buick he affectionately called Bessie that was older than I was — and headed out to the B&B. It may have been a bit of a clunker, but the back seat was huge, so I wasn't complaining.

On the way, I regaled Brayden with stories about Amalie, the ghost of the scorned woman who'd once haunted the mansion. Judy chimed in now and then from the passenger seat, since she'd actually witnessed some of the encounters herself, lending credibility to my admittedly embellished retelling.

Hey, ghost stories are *supposed* to be melodramatic. Besides, I was missing my phone, and I had to entertain myself somehow.

By the time we turned into the circular drive and parked beside a small fleet of other cars, Brayden looked ready to bolt. He climbed out slowly, eyes darting toward the enormous house looming above us.

He craned his neck as we crossed the drive. The mansion rose three stories into the gloomy, November sky, all dark windows and elaborate gothic excess. A wraparound porch encircled the first floor, its railings crowded with intricate carved woodwork. Above it all sat a narrow cupola perched on the flat roof like a watchtower. The whole place looked perfectly designed for ghosts, murders, and mayhem.

A chilly breeze rattled the dead leaves along the walkway.

Brayden stopped walking. "If, uh, the ghost lady tries to possess somebody, is there, like...a polite way to decline?" he asked, his voice filled with concern.

This was going to be fun.

Chapter 32 - Kody

“I didn’t know you had a car.”

“Well, I don’t really need it, but I wanted it.” Nick patted the dashboard. “I wasn’t allowed to have it on campus as a freshman, but this year? Yeah, I drove all the way from home.”

“Yeah. My dads drove me and my brother out here to bring me, remember?”

“Right. Shit, they drove all the way back right after? Jesus.”

“More like Jesus take the wheel.”

Our stuff was packed into the trunk, and he’d gotten a Styrofoam cooler at a convenience store and stuffed it with junk for our ride. We’d just filled the tank with liquid platinum — going by the price on the pump — and were navigating toward the highway.

“I know I’ve said it, but thank you. I know it had to be hard not going with Jake. I feel like shit about that.”

I sighed, trying not to be a little whiner about it...again. “What you should be sorry about is that you had this car and you still made me run in the damn cold to the gym. What the fuck, Nick?”

“Hey, you can’t just drive around campus. Plus, it pays off more to run. I saw Jake trying to put his eyes back in his head after he saw you in that costume.”

I snorted.

“But really, Kode... I appreciate it more than you know.”

I rubbed the side of my head. “I know, Nick. If it were literally anyone else, I wouldn’t be here.”

He looked a little down at that, and I kicked myself. *Try to be a little more positive for him will you, asshole?*

“How would you feel about being Charlie’s date to my dad’s wedding?”

“I’m sorry. What the fuck now?”

I laughed. “Charlie. I told him you were single, and he’s requested you be delivered for Christmas.”

He snorted and then laughed. “Your brother is *bold*. Good for the ego, though.”

I figured as long as I was trying to lift the mood, I may as well feed Nick’s Golden Retriever energy a bit more.

“Max said she loves you and you can have the cutie discount whenever you want.”

“Uh... Max looks like she pinches my ass with her eyes, and I’m only going when you’re there, okay?”

“Nah. Mike’s her type. You’re just like the neighbor’s cute dog or something.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“Hey, it’s free coffee.”

“I’m not just a piece of meat you know. Stop laughing!”

We passed some road signs announcing the last exit before a toll, and then we were merging into holiday traffic headed south on the New York State Thruway. The posted speed limit seemed like it was more of a suggestion than anything. It didn’t help that Nick seemed to think his little car was trying out for the Formula One circuit.

“So...” he said. It was only one word, but it sounded loaded.

“So...what?”

“Let’s talk.”

“Or we can just enjoy the drive.”

“Come on, Kody. We need to talk.”

“About what?”

He rolled his eyes. “Well, there’s always the weather.”

“Nick...” There was a warning note in my voice. I just wasn’t in the mood.

“It’s a long drive. We can talk about my family or Jake, or I can make sure that if we hit a guardrail we go out in a blaze of glory. What do you think?”

“I think slow the fuck down.”

He slid into the right lane, and the car shook as a truck roared past us.

“So look, I’m confused...” he said.

“There are so many options with just those few words.”

He gave me some side eye. “You’re still mad at me.”

I shook my head and looked out the window. “I was never mad at you.”

“After we left the club?”

I turned back. “That was not mad. That was sexually frustrated rage.”

“Ah, right.”

“I’m not mad at you. I promise.”

“Well...what then? I mean, we have hours to go, and the radio’s broken.”

I frowned and reached for the volume. The music blared for a moment before I turned it back down. "Huh. Would you listen to that?"

"Okay, fine. You don't trust me."

"Oh, fuck you. I'm not mad at you. I'm just disappointed. I know I'm being dumb."

"I don't think it's dumb. I just—"

"If you say that Jake and I should fuck our problems away, I will open this door and throw myself out."

"I'm just saying...it couldn't hurt."

You haven't seen that package, I thought. I rubbed my brow and reconsidered the option to go out in a ball of fire on the side of the road.

"I'm kidding. Honestly, most of the time when I think about you two and sex, I focus on the logistics of it all."

"The what?"

"How would it even work? I know they say we're all the same height in bed, but..."

I snorted and looked away so he couldn't see my smile. "You're such a jerk."

"I'm just saying, you're not happy. I'm here, we're trapped together because you're doing me a solid. So let me return the favor."

"It's stupid. I'm stupid."

"Well, that really hasn't been my experience."

I sighed. "It's just that Jake and I still aren't official. No label. The sex thing is kind of secondary. He still hasn't said anything about his feelings besides saying he cares about me...and I'm frustrated. I know you know this."

Nick was quiet for a moment. I wondered if he thought I was as pathetic as I felt. Before he could render judgment, I charged forward.

"I talked to Charlie, and it kind of came down to three options: wait and see, talk to him, or break things off."

"Whoa. Charlie needs to not say shit like that."

"He was just talking about options, not making suggestions."

"Yeah, but he's not here. He can't see what's happening."

I frowned. "Meaning?"

"Kode! You guys are *genuine*. Look, I know you said Jake has some stuff he's carrying around, and I'm with you that he's got to nut up and be a partner if you guys are gonna work out, but from the outside looking in? From seeing you guys in public? Naw. I'd bet cash money you guys are the real thing."

I looked out the window. "Did you think that about Derek?" I closed my eyes. "I'm sorry, that wasn't fair."

"No, it's fair. And I'd say no. Derek and I...we were like a lot of relationships I've had and seen others have. We liked each other's outsides. Maybe there was more, but it turned out to be surface level. Because, bro, if he'd talked to me about how insecure he felt about me flirting, things might have been different."

"You think so?"

"Yeah. I don't know if it would have changed the outcome, but it might not have ended as badly as it did. I'm not completely an ass about other people's feelings. Maybe we'd have worked through it. Instead, he decided I was cheating and wanted to hurt me. So he did. Or maybe he was always the cheater and just used that excuse to shift the blame. I don't know. Does it even matter?"

I looked at him. "Jake would never."

"And see? I agree."

"I don't understand why he'd invite me home without settling anything else though. I keep picturing him introducing me to his family as his friend from college."

"Nah. I don't buy that. I don't know what he was thinking, but I don't think he'd do that. So...Is that enough Jake? Want to talk about my family now?"

I laughed. "Yeah. Come on. Remind me who I'm meeting."

"Well, I don't know if they've invited significant others or anything, so I can only confirm the familial players in this little tragedy. There's Aunt Liz. She's super nice. She not only invited me but suggested a plus one. No idea why."

"Did she know you were dating?"

"She might have assumed. I never told my parents about Dickhead."

"Hmm. Okay."

"Then there's Uncle Major Douche. Now, he never actually made it to Major except in the douche category, as far as I know."

"Actual ex-military, though, right?"

"Yeah. He's said he'd have stayed in for life, he liked it that much, but his fat ass got drummed out for keeping his snout in the trough too long."

I thought for a moment. "How does someone nice like your aunt end up with that?"

He sighed. "Pregnant. But wait, there's more."

“Your cousins?”

“Uh uh. More stupidity. So my oldest cousin, he’s somewhere in his twenties. Kenny? His middle name is Kelly.”

“Isn’t the sister named Kelly?”

“Yep. Want to guess her middle name?”

I stared at him. “They didn’t.”

“Kenworth.”

I jerked back and frowned. “Kenworth?”

“It’s Kenny’s given name. My uncle was a diesel mechanic in the military, and he worked on the Kenworth trucks they had.”

“Oh, well, thank goodness. I thought he’d name them after his favorite beer.”

“That’s the dog, Bud.”

“Are you serious?”

“About Kenworth, yes.”

I shook my head. “Okay. You said Kenny is just as bad as his dad?”

“Eh. He’s more like a sidekick, you know? Uncle makes a racist joke, and Kenny laughs.”

I shook my head.

“Kelly is different. She’s smart, always stood up to Uncle Douche. He’d say something, Kenny would laugh on cue, and she’d tear into both of them.”

“He doesn’t, like, hit her or anything for talking back?”

He shook his head. “Aunt Liz won’t allow it. He can yap all he wants, but in some ways Aunt Liz has his nuts in a jar.”

“Huh. Well, I guess I like Kelly.”

“Yeah. She’s good people.”

“Then there’s the younger ones, right?”

“Yeah. Gary’s a senior in high school, I’m pretty sure. Whatever mechanical skills Uncle Douche has got passed to Gary in spades. He doesn’t seem to clock the outside world that much. Everything is RPMs and fuel to air ratios.”

“Got it. Avoid Gary at all costs.”

“Oh, no. He’s not like that. If you get him going he’ll get excited, but he won’t trap you in some endless conversation you’re not participating in.”

“Okay. Then I guess I could like Gary, too.”

“Misty is like..fifteen or sixteen? I forget. My aunt and uncle must have fucked like rabbits. Runs in the family.”

“Yeah? You stick your furry tail up in the air and wait for it?”

“Not a furry, bro. Fairy. Get it right. I shave my ass.”

“Do you really?”

“No. Guys like my furry butt.”

I laughed at him. “Okay so, Misty...”

“Yeah. Total airhead. It’s like all the brains went to Gary, and there was just enough left over for Misty to be able to breathe on her own.”

“Uh. Wow.”

“It’s bad. She told me about a family trip they took to Montreal because of some event or other that I can’t remember; but she seriously said it was like visiting a different country.”

I burst into laughter. “Okay. Still, she sounds harmless...as long as she’s not reproducing.”

“I don’t know. She could wander into a voting booth one day.”

I shook my head. “And one more?”

“Yeah. I think he’s actually the reason my mom and aunt were pushing for me to go.”

“Oh?”

“I got the scoop from my mom last night. I was kind of annoyed that I’d kind of twisted your arm to go and how you weren’t going to your boyfriend’s because of it.”

I winced.

“So now of course she thinks you’re a saint and wants me to thank you personally. And she wants you to come visit. Naturally, I told her you worship me and that getting to spend time with me was all the thanks you needed.”

“Oh my fucking God.”

He laughed, and I rolled my eyes.

“Seriously, though. We’re both western state boys. Could do a road trip.”

I glanced at him. “Charlie does want you to come.”

“Come visit, right? Don’t answer that.”

I snorted. “He just likes to flirt. He’s got something going on with a church boy that seems destined for heartbreak.”

“Ah. Sucks.”

“So, your mom?” I prompted.

“Oh, right. So anyway, Aunt Liz thinks Carson plays for our team, so she asked me to bring a fake boyfriend and model a good relationship in front of him.”

I whipped my head so fast I actually heard my neck pop.

Nick looked at me innocently. “Just some light cuddles. And maybe some hand holding. A few kisses. I promise I won’t use my tongue. Too much.”

I shook my head and started to laugh. “Oh my *God*, why am I friends with you?”

“I’m attractive, funny, and I have your back.”

“One for three isn’t bad.” I cleared my throat. “Back to Carson. What do you think? I mean, was that for real?”

He nodded. “Yeah. Aunt Liz is worried about him, especially with his dad being such a phobe, and she wants him to see someone gay and normal.”

“Okay, well, we might be gay, but we’re definitely not normal.”

“We’re textbook normal gays. I’ve been cheated on, you’re lost in a guy who can’t communicate to save his dick...sounds about average to me.”

I texted Jake: *If I grab the wheel and drive us into a bridge abutment, I want you to know Nick was the problem.*

I waited to see if he’d reply, but no.

The traffic grew heavier as we got closer to New York City. I saw a silver train snaking its way along the river on the opposite side from us, and even though I knew they’d left early that morning, I imagined that Jake and Brayden were on board, looking out the window, maybe seeing cars on the distant highway and wondering if I was there...

I wished I could just stop thinking about him all the damn time.

I looked out the other side at the trees whipping by and the occasional road sign. Would I be any less of a basket case if he told me he wanted us to be official? Or would I just be waiting for him to take the next step and never be satisfied?

We pulled into the rest area at Ramapo to stretch and get coffee. It was chain stuff, so mostly sugar and calories, but junk was okay once in a while. Nick topped off the tank and asked if I wanted to take a turn driving.

“You want me to drive your car?”

“I could use a break.”

I shrugged. “Okay.”

“Oh, damn. He’s so *fine*.”

I glanced at Nick and followed his gaze. The guy was nice looking, no question. Coiffed hair that looked expensive and a face that only came with a strict skin care regimen. His legs were long in thin flannel pajama pants that accented his butt nicely. He was following a group of friends into the rest area, his hands stuffed into the pockets of a puffy jacket.

“That’s some intense staring, there, Nick. Down boy.”

“Please. He did his hair because he wanted to be noticed.”

“What about the pajama pants and crocs?”

“Obviously relaxing on his way to being delivered to me as a prize for my selflessness in helping my family over this holiday weekend. I’m sure he’s got a change of clothes.”

“Yeah. I’m sure that’s it. How did I not see it before?”

“I have a gift.”

He got settled in the passenger seat as I slid behind the wheel and started feeling around for seat controls. I thought it was a little cruel how much snickering he did as I adjusted the seat and mirrors.

“Laugh it up. Good luck fixing all this when you get back into this seat,” I grumbled.

He grinned. “You’re adorable.”

“I will drive us through the wall of that rest area.”

“Is it because you can’t reach the brake pedal— Hey! Don’t hit! Violence is not the answer!”

I pulled back onto the thruway, merging with the worsening traffic as the sun slowly sank to our right.

“Wait, are we going into New York City? I can’t drive there!”

“No, we’re going to turn off here pretty soon. But wouldn’t that be fun? We could hit the gay clubs.”

“No. My first time in the Big Apple will be with Jake.”

A huge sign welcomed us to New Jersey, but the GPS said we still had three hours to go.

“I don’t like the look of that red line,” I said, staring at the GPS in dismay.

“Rush hour the night before a holiday. What did you expect?”

“Wait! Is that why you wanted me to drive?”

“Kode, I’m not a total tool. I drove for two hours. Why are you so suspicious of me?”

I laughed as I glanced over at him. “Because you’re you! I have almost three months of experience living with your sneaky ass!”

I had to slow down to get off the highway and onto a super busy state route. I was white-knuckle merging when a phone call came in through the car.

“Hi, Mom,” Nick answered.

“Hi, Baby! Are you on the road?”

“Yeah. We left a few hours ago. We just hit Northern New Jersey.”

“Don’t roll down the window — you might pass out!” She laughed. “Did your friend come with you?.”

“Say hi, Kody.”

“Hi, Kody.”

“Oh, he’s a jokester like you!” She laughed again. “Well, Kody, I want you to know how grateful I am that you’re taking this trip with Nick. He’s mentioned before what a great friend you’ve turned out to be. After his roommate last year, we almost didn’t want him to go back.”

“Okay, Mom, no glazing Kody.”

“He’s given up a lot! Kody, I hope you’ll come visit. Nick said you live in California?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, you’re welcome any time. I’m so grateful Nick’s not making this trip alone and that he has such a good friend with him.”

I was probably cherry red, but glancing at Nick, he was no better.

“Well, Nick’s been a real experience, so I don’t mind helping him.”

“An experience?”

“Mom!”

Sensing a rare chance to really embarrass Nick, I jumped in with both feet.

“Oh yeah, your son’s great, Mrs. Pederson. He’s been with me every step of freshman year. He’s taught me how to be gay at the gym, how to use a hook-up app, how much skin to show when we go dancing, and my brother really wants to see him again.”

“Oh yeah? Why’s that?” she asked, amusement in her voice.

Nick interrupted, diving for the phone. “Oh no, looks like we’re coming up on a tunnel, Mom! Love you! Bye!” He hung up and squinted at me. “I underestimated you.”

“Still think your mom will want me to visit?”

He laughed. “Yes! Because she could tell you were screwing with me! She’s all for that shit!”

Traffic remained heavy as the sun set and I had to turn on the headlights. When we stopped again, we had driven just over another two hours but hadn’t covered as many miles as the first leg of the trip.

We went into a dingy rest stop and used the bathroom. Nick got into a fight with a vending machine, and I went to wait for him outside. I sat down on a bench and checked my phone.

I hadn’t heard from Jake since he’d messaged to say they were on the train. It was kind of annoying, mostly because I was worried that he might be annoyed, since I wanted him to stay in touch on his trip.

Maybe he doesn't miss me like I miss him?

Even I knew that was dramatic as all hell.

Chill, gay boy.

I texted him and let him know we'd stopped for a break and that I hadn't, in fact, driven into a bridge abutment. I waited, but there was no reply, no three little dots waving to tell me he was typing.

I glanced over my shoulder but couldn't see Nick anywhere.

Checking my phone again, I thought about what time Jake got on the train. They'd left pretty early. Would he be home yet? He'd mentioned where they were getting picked up at the train station, but I hadn't retained the name of the city, having no frame of reference.

Wilmot? Winchester?

I brought up maps and started fussing around with the train stations in Maryland. I kept it closer to the coast, Jake being an Eastern Shore Boy and all, and spotted a place called Wilmington. That sounded vaguely right, but it wasn't in Maryland. After checking Amtrak's schedule, I still had no idea where he'd be.

What I did know was he should have replied or something by now.

Aside from when he was sick or that time his phone died, Jake was usually pretty good about replying. I didn't feel like I was being too unreasonable this time. But because I'm me, I checked to see if any trains had derailed. That would be a no.

"Okay, that was ridiculous."

I glanced up, and Nick had two bottles of soda.

"Thirsty?"

"One was stuck. I had to figure out which thing to buy above it to get it to hit what I wanted down into the chute." He glanced at one. "Want a Diet Shasta Orange?"

"Pass."

He shrugged and sat down. "Texting with Jake? Saw you on your phone."

Feeling a little embarrassed, I said, "No. I mean, I texted, but he's not answering. I was just looking up what his schedule might be. He never said when he'd get home. He's probably just sleeping on the train." I sighed. "I saw we passed an exit for Philadelphia. How much farther?"

"It's usually around four hours, but this traffic has been a bitch."

"It's starting to thin out."

"Yeah. We have to turn soon and head for the coast. They live outside Atlantic City." He stood up. "Why don't you give Jake a quick call,

and we'll get back on the road? You'll feel better if you can say hi, Sir Twink Prince Charming." He grinned.

"Go."

He sauntered off, drinking his soda. I noticed he'd left the other one behind on the bench, but I turned back to my phone.

Maybe Nick was right. I just wanted to hear Jake's voice. I hit the button to call him and listened for it to ring, but it went directly to voicemail: "Hey, this is Jake! Don't be weird and leave a message, just text me!"

After the beep, I started talking despite his warning. "Hey, Babe. I just... We stopped, and I thought I'd see how your trip was going. Love you and send me a text or something, 'kay? Bye."

I hung up and looked at the phone for a moment, wondering if he'd just been fumbling his phone from his pocket and would call me back. After a moment — and one big, cold blast of winter air — I got up and headed back to the car.

I took way too much satisfaction watching Nick try to get his seat and mirrors back the way he'd had them.

It took another hour and a half to get to his aunt and uncle's place. It was a modest rancher, brightly lit. A big extended cab truck with severely rusted rear wheel arches sat in the driveway alongside a smaller, newer-model hatchback.

"Huh. Not many cars," I commented. I'd expected more from Nick's description.

"Kenny has an apartment. Not sure where Kelly is, though; I think she still lives at home. That's my aunt's car and Uncle Douche's truck." He leaned forward, squinting. "Don't see Gary's car, either. Could be in the garage, I guess."

We climbed out and stretched, feeling good just being upright. After grabbing our bags from the trunk, we made our way to the front door. We were still a few steps away when the door swung open to reveal a plump woman with large glasses and frizzy brown hair dressed in a sweatshirt and yoga pants.

"Nicky! Aww, you made it!" She held her arms wide, and he stepped into them, giving her a hug. Then she turned to me. "Oh, and you must be Kody! Don't be shy! Come here, sweetheart!"

I've never entirely understood the urge to hug strangers, but she was pretty good at it.

"So nice to meet you."

"Thank you for inviting me."

“Oh of course! I wish Nicky’s boyfriend would have come last year. I keep telling him it’s okay!”

I looked at Nick, and he shrugged.

“Uh, we’re not dating.”

“Oh, I know, honey. I just meant his friends are always welcome. Come in, come in. Kick your shoes off on the mat. Misty! Carson! Nicky’s here!”

I leaned in. “Hey, Nicky.”

He pointed a finger at me. “No. Bad, Kody.”

Finally, I had something to get under his skin with.

We left our shoes by the door and padded behind his Aunt through a doorway leading into a living room area. A man was seated in a recliner with the TV on, but he didn’t look up. It was kind of uncomfortable. We passed through the room with zero acknowledgment, stopping at an intersection with a hallway and an opening into the kitchen area.

“I saved you guys plates. I hope you’re hungry. Misty! Carson, come say hello! Don’t be rude!”

A girl appeared in one of the doors down the hallway. She was really pretty, but looked unenthused by our presence.

“Hi, Nicky,” she said listlessly, then drifted back into her room.

“Charmer that one,” Aunt Liz said. “Nicky, put your things in the spare, then come to the kitchen. I want to hear all about college and this adorable thing here.” She beamed at me, and I took an involuntary step backward, afraid she might pinch my cheek or something. It was just so odd how overwhelmingly nice she was.

Shit. Do I make Jake feel this uncomfortable with my feelings spilling out all over the place?

“C’mon, Kode. Let’s dump our stuff, body slam Carson, and get some food.”

I followed him down the hall, and we dumped our bags and coats on a full-size bed.

I paused. “Hey. Are we both sleeping in here?”

“Yeah. Sorry. I’ll wear mittens if you want.” He grinned.

I rolled my eyes and followed him out the door.

He tapped on the door across the hall, then entered. A skinny teen boy with dark curly hair turned slowly in a desk chair, attention drawn by the door opening. He had large, expressive eyes and features he hadn’t quite grown into yet. He was wearing baggy jeans, an over-sized hoodie over a tee, and large, over-the-ear headphones.

His eyes brightened when he saw Nick, then his gaze shifted to me and lingered with curiosity.

He pulled off the headphones. "Oh, hey, Nicky. I didn't realize you were here."

"Carson," Nick said formally. "Carito. My favorite cousin. Meet my boy toy, Kody."

I waved. "We're just friends. Don't ask me why."

Carson smiled faintly, his eyes darting between me and his cousin while Nick planted himself on the corner of Carson's bed. I glanced around the room, feeling awkward.

There was a stack of milk crates filled with vinyl records, an electronic keyboard sitting on a metal stand, an acoustic guitar leaning in a corner, and an old component stereo like the one Dad used in the shop. He refused to switch to streaming, claiming he didn't want to rent his music.

"You should have seen the Halloween dance we went to," Nick said and pulled his phone out. "Just look at all this freakiness, will you?"

Carson leaned forward to look at Nick's phone, and I frowned. "Where did you get pictures?" I asked as I tried to see.

I didn't recall Nick having his phone out at the time. Where would he have put it? He hadn't been wearing a shirt, and his tights left no room for phones, not one you wouldn't notice anyway.

"Like my wand?" Nick asked with a smirk.

Carson's grin spread, and he snickered. "Is that a dick?"

"Finest silicone money can buy," Nick confirmed. "Or at least the finest they had at Disc or Dat. Look, do you recognize who they are supposed to be?"

"Uh, that looks like some Greek or Roman dude. And is that..." Carson's eyes flicked up to me.

"Nick, you complete shit." I leaned forward, and yep, there we were, Jake and I, side by side in the club. "When were you going to tell me you had pictures from that night?"

"When I was done selling them," he said with an insolent grin.

"Uh. You looked good," Carson said. "Who are you?"

I raised an eyebrow. "See, Nick? Not everybody is a horror geek like you."

"I've failed you, Carito. How do you not know *Nightmare on Elm Street*?"

He shrugged. "I don't really like scary movies."

Before Nick could work up a full head of steam, Aunt Liz bellowed. "Nicky! Come eat!"

“Yeah, Nicky,” I mimicked.

Carson smiled again, and Nick rolled his eyes. “He thinks that bothers me.”

“Oh, Nicky, you’re so fine, you’re so fine you blow my mind. Hey, Nicky!”

“Not bothering me!”

I laughed. “It totally does.”

Nick just sighed. “See Carito? Go to college, meet your best friend, and bring him to your favorite cousin’s house, only for him to repay you with disrespect.”

“Whose house?” boomed a deep voice from the hallway behind me.

I jumped and turned to find a bear of a man filling the door. He sported a long beard that looked almost wild, and his buzzed hair looked weird in contrast to the rat’s nest on his face. His facial features were indistinct with the lighting behind him being much brighter than in the bedroom, but I was pretty sure it was the guy in the recliner when we entered. I guess he’d decided to stop ignoring us.

“You don’t even say hello? Fuckin’ rude.”

“Oh, Uncle Mitch! Aunt Liz said you’d taken your hemorrhoid meds and were probably sleeping.”

Carson choked back a laugh.

“Hah, funny boy. Who’s this?” He jerked a thumb at me.

“This is Kody, my roommate at school. Kody, this is Uncle Mitch.”

“Hi. Nice to meet you,” I said, fibbing to be polite.

“Glad to have you.” He looked at Nick. “You, I’m not so sure about.”

He turned and headed down the hallway.

Nick stage whispered. “See Kode? Doesn’t he remind you of a sweet old drifter who might murder you and leave you under a bridge for rats to eat?”

Carson slapped a hand over his mouth, but the giggles slipped from between his fingers.

“Nicky! Damn it, come here and eat!”

“Did you eat yet?” Nick asked Carson.

“Yeah. But I’ll come out and get a drink. Are you just here for tomorrow, Nicky?”

“Yeah.” He leaned in and stage-whispered, “Unless we can spring you out of this maximum-security prison.”

Carson laughed aloud as we headed for the kitchen.

We sat at a counter in the kitchen area, and Aunt Liz put plates of baked ziti in front of us, urging us to eat. Carson leaned against the fridge, sipping from a Snapple bottle and listening as his mother peppered Nick with questions about school, the drive down, and his family.

"So how'd you boys meet?" she asked, then smacked her forehead. "Wait, you said roomies, right?"

Nick threw an arm around my shoulders and pulled me close. I made an awkward squawking noise just from surprise.

"I saw him on the shelf and thought I needed an elf like that just for me. He's adorable, isn't he?"

"Let go, loser," I grumbled.

"You must be used to him by now, huh, Kody?" Aunt Liz asked.

"Yeah. Sort of like how you get used to being nauseous."

She laughed loudly. "Well, I'm glad you could make it. I think—"

I never got to hear what she thought, because just then, a female voice called out, "Nicky!"

A door closed, followed by the sound of feet coming down the hall before a heavy girl ran into the room. She looked like a younger version of her mother but with smaller glasses. She rushed to Nick and threw her arms around his neck.

"Hey girl!" He hugged her back.

I was pleasantly surprised so far. All of these people had been really nice, aside from the uncle when we'd arrived, but even he'd been kind of nice to me. Okay, and maybe not the other girl, Misty, I assumed — but that could just be generic teenage apathy. My dad said Charlie and I were loaded with it.

Then the new girl turned to me. "Oh my God, Nicky! You're right! He's so tiny!"

"I— What?" I glared at Nick, and she laughed.

"I'm so sorry. He told me to say that. Hi, I'm Kelly."

"Hi. Nice to meet you. Sorry about being related to him." I jerked my thumb at Nick.

"Aww, he's not so bad once you get past the smell."

"Ah! Can you feel the love, Carito?" Nick asked Carson, who was just watching with a grin. "Where's Gary?"

"He's staying at his friend's house," Aunt Liz said. "They're wiring a new radio in some old car."

Kelly added, "The radio's worth more than the car."

Uncle Mitch walked into the kitchen, and I got a better look at him with some light. It wasn't an improvement.

Where I thought his hair had been buzzed, it was actually just super thin on top and very short on the sides. There was no real telling where his nose hair ended and his beard began. He was wearing a tank top with a Harley Davidson logo on it, putting meaty, flabby arms on full display. He had on baggy sweat pants and grey socks; it was hard to tell if they were meant to be that color or just dingy.

"Here you are, getting along with the women," he said, smiling as though he were funny.

"I don't get it." Nick looked back at him with faux wide-eyed innocence.

His uncle opened the fridge. "You boys get on better with the women than other men, dontcha?"

"Dad, don't be an asshole," Kelly snapped. "We have a guest. Go watch something gross on cable. Isn't Fox News on?"

"It's your fault she talks like this," he said to his wife. "Should have popped her as a kid."

He left with a can of beer, and Carson slid from the room, disappearing like a shadow.

"I swear he gets worse every day," Kelly said as she pulled a chair over from the dining room table behind us. "So. Are you Nicky's new boyfriend or not?"

"Uh, not."

"I told you we weren't dating," Nick said.

"Yeah, but you lie," she replied with a laugh.

"Oh. So she *does* know you," I snarked.

His aunt rested her elbows on the counter. "So tell me, Kody, how can you resist my Nicky, huh?"

"Oh that's easy," Nick said and whipped his phone out. "Look at his boyfriend. Look how, as a drag queen said not that long ago, he looks at his boyfriend like he invented sunshine."

"Oh my gosh, look at them!" his aunt cooed.

Kelly was up in a flash to see as well.

"Those costumes are amazing!"

"Right? I picked them out."

I poked Nick in the ribs. "Where did you get those pictures from? I don't have any!" I asked again, since he'd ignored me the first time.

"I have contacts! Why, you want a picture of you and your boyfriend?"

"I'm not dating either of them, and I want one!" Kelly said laughing.

“Aww. Kody, you guys look so adorable together,” his aunt said.
I must have been blushing so hard.

She started asking me questions about Jake, which Nick answered for me, entertaining them with embellished stories about our life at school and how crazy in love Jake and I were.

I asked where the bathroom was and excused myself, thinking that Nick seemed just fine without me. I checked my phone in the bathroom to see if Jake had replied to me yet. He had not.

Frowning, I tried to call him again, but just like last time, it went straight to voicemail.

I pocketed my phone and wandered back toward the kitchen. I sat with them for a little bit longer, but I started having to hide yawns. Finally, even Nick noticed and said we were both kind of tired.

We excused ourselves to get changed for bed. It was funny... Nick was objectively good looking, but I didn't have the urge to check him out like I did with Jake. He was more like Charlie. Nick just kept talking the entire time, and it was weird how it wasn't weird at all.

We brushed then returned to the room, and he hit the lights.

“Uh. I can't see. I need to plug my phone in.”

“Jake must be so disappointed you can't feel your way in the dark.”

“Shut it.”

The bedside lamp on his side flipped on, and I fumbled to plug in my charger and check my phone one more time. Still nothing from Jake.

“Did Jake text?”

“Uh. No.”

“Hm. That's weird.”

I sighed. “Yeah, that's what I thought.”

I climbed under the covers, and Nick flipped out the light.

“Do you have his mom's number?”

Shit. Nick knew nothing about Jake's past. “Uh, no.”

“Well. Dad? Probably not. Does he have any brothers or sisters?”

I closed my eyes and took a breath. “Nick, I have to ask you a favor. A big, very personal favor.”

“Uh. Okay. I mean, I'd love to make a joke here, but you sound serious.”

“Whatever you do, please never Google Jake's name.”

He was quiet for a moment. “Kode. Do you have any idea how creepy that sounds?”

I took a deep breath. "He lives with an aunt, because his whole family is dead. It's awful. I don't want you to see Jake through that lens, though. Not unless he wants to tell you. I found out...but he doesn't know I know."

Silence ballooned in the room.

"Okay. Yeah... I guess I don't need to know. I mean, I was just thinking maybe we could search up his address or something. Maybe find some other people we could contact. Just to make sure he's okay."

"Yeah."

"Kody...I mean..." He rolled in the dark. "This sounds really bad. Is Jake in trouble? Are you?"

I shook my head. "No. It's over, except for what Jake has to live with."

"Did he... He didn't hurt anyone. Right? I know he doesn't drink..."

"No. Nothing like that. I promise."

He shifted again, and I thought he was lying back down. "Okay then. I don't need to know."

"You really are the best friend I could have asked for."

"Yeah. I'm pretty great, right?" he chuckled.

I thought about Nick trying to find Jake's family and what he'd find instead. I didn't know Judy's last name, so that was out of the question anyway.

Wait. I did know how to reach someone, or to try to anyway. I sat up and grabbed my phone.

"What is it?"

"His friend Killian. Maybe I can friend him on IG and ask to check on Jake."

"Is Killian cute?"

I brought up the picture Jake had posted of us and scrolled to the comments. There. @factsbeforephantoms said *Call me!* I clicked on the profile link and it opened to Killian's page, complete with his full name and a profile picture.

Nick slid closer and looked over my shoulder. "Um. I need to meet him."

"Well. I need to make friends with him. Had to happen sometime, but this wasn't how I pictured it. But this might be the best way to make sure Jake is okay."

"He's probably fine. You didn't hear anything about train wrecks, did you?"

"No," I said absently. "I checked."

I debated for a moment. Nick was right. Jake was probably fine. Maybe his phone died. Maybe he was just wiped out and fell asleep. Maybe he got kidnapped by surfer pirates and they were carrying him off into slavery in deepest, darkest Delaware.

“Friend request sent.”

I set my phone on the table, and Nick turned the light back off. I can’t truthfully say I was that worried about Jake. He’s a year older than I am and perfectly competent. There had been no reported derailments, so I was really more disappointed — yet again — than anything.

Given that, I was actually starting to wonder about the wisdom of reaching out to his best friend. Did that send a bad signal? Was it putting out needy or clingy vibes?

“So. What did you think of my extended *familia*?”

Thank goodness for Nick, once more rescuing me from my spiraling thoughts.

“They mostly seemed nice. Your aunt is really friendly.”

“Right? It’s almost like a tidal wave of if ‘means well’ was a person, right? I hope she didn’t drown you.”

“Uh. No. It was a surprise, because my friend didn’t warn me, but it was good.”

“What about my Carito?”

“Why do you call him that?”

“Oh, one year he said he was taking Spanish as his language requirement, and I’d done the same. Carito means car, or little car, and it’s kind of funny because he’s not mechanical at all. Plus, you know, Carson, Carito. Just a pet name. He likes it, makes him feel special.”

“Does it, though?”

“Hey, how did this become about me?”

I giggled. “Isn’t it always? And how did you get those pictures, by the way?”

“Oh, Rainbow Roost sent out a link. I think they had a photographer there or something, probably a student. I can send you the link.”

“And you were just going to keep this to yourself?”

“Honestly, it didn’t occur to me that you didn’t have the link.”

“Oh. Well, yeah, send me the link please.”

“Then we can both drool over your boyfriend.”

“You can’t see it, but I’m rolling my eyes at you.”

“I could hear them. So what did you think of Carson?”

"He was fine, I guess. Quiet. I saw he bailed after his dad said that stereotypical crap."

"Yeah. I think it bothers him, but he hasn't figured out how to stand up to his dad yet."

"Kelly has no trouble."

"Yeah." He was quiet for a moment. "I'm a little worried about Carson, though."

"Why? He seemed okay."

"It's just got to be tough with *that* as your dad. He acts like he's this regular old guy, but then he just blurts out the shittiest things. If you grow up around that, it has to affect you, right?"

"Yeah. You're right. I mean, he didn't say much, but he didn't seem *unhappy*. He was smiling at all the banter in the kitchen."

"Well, after Mom gave me the heads up, I really wanted him to meet you."

"Me? What for?"

"To show him he can be whoever he is." I heard him rustle, and I could just make out a shadow lying on its side next to me. His voice sounded a little closer. "I'm the jester, right? I keep things light, try to put out positive vibes, but I'm also way different than anyone here, anyone he has close access to. He's not like that, though. Like, I'm all for the drag queens and the slutty outfits, but I also recognize there's people like you who aren't as comfortable with all that. People who are quieter, but just as valid. He needs to know, if he *is* gay, that he doesn't have to be like me. That there are different ways of being gay, and that he can be the one that fits him. Does that make sense?"

"That's... Well, that's sweet, Nick. Uh. I hope he got all that from us being here."

"Me too." He flopped back. "But since I don't get to see him much, I think I'm going to talk to him tomorrow. Just to let him know I'm here for him, you know?"

"Sure. What will you say, though? Hey, your mom told my mom you might be thinking about dick?"

He snorted with laughter. "Well, no. Maybe I'll just ask him if he thinks you're cute and go from there?"

"No. That's kind of cruel—"

My phone buzzed, erasing all other thoughts. Maybe Jake was getting back to me.

I picked up the phone and woke the screen.

"Is it Jake?"

“No. Killian accepted my friend request.” I opened the app to clear the notification and was a little surprised the phone started to vibrate. I was getting an incoming video call request through IG.

It was Killian, but I thought maybe Jake was with him so I answered.

“Can you turn on the light?” I asked, which Nick did as Killian’s face filled the screen.

Killian looked exactly like the photos I’d seen, aside from the fact that his dark blond hair was messy, and it looked like he was shirtless. His eyes were much bluer than I’d expected — though not as blue as Jake’s — and they were filled with curiosity. At the moment, they were busy taking me in. They widened slightly as he probably spotted the pillow behind my head.

“Oh. Hi. Sorry. I got your request and thought you were up. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“You didn’t. Nick was babbling, so I’m very awake.”

“I wasn’t babbling.” Nick leaned to look at the screen. “Oh. Hello there. I’m Nick.”

Killian smiled knowingly. “Oh, I’ve heard all about you.”

“Lies and slander, I’m sure,” Nick replied.

“Anyway, I’m Kody. But you know that. I’m sorry to have bugged you, actually. I just haven’t heard from Jake all day, and he’s not answering his phone, so I got...mildly concerned.”

“Uh, as far as I know he was getting picked up by Judy and Novak at the train station with someone who wasn’t you.”

Feeling dumb, I said, “Oh, yeah. Jesus, how could I forget Brayden was going with him?”

“We were all disappointed you couldn’t make it down, but I’m really glad you reached out. Jake talks about you all the time, Kody this and Kody that. I’ve been dying to meet you.”

“And me?” Nick inserted. “I like to meet people. Especially attractive people.”

“Shush, Nick. Grownups are talking,” I gave him a stern look and went back to the screen. “Excuse my friend.”

“He’s excused. I know he’s impulsive. Jake’s told me all about your adventures. Isn’t Nick the one who just got kicked out of a club?”

Nick slumped back and crossed his arms over his chest as he pretended to pout.

“That’s him. Jake’s talked about you, too. Sounds like you’ve been through a lot together.”

“Oh yeah, for sure. And that's putting it mildly. But he's worth it, even if he is a pain in the ass sometimes.”

I chuckled. “Completely.”

“Hey, I'm worth—”

“Nick! Down!”

Killian grinned. “He's exactly as described. Props to Jake for painting a vividly accurate portrait.”

I laughed at Nick's stricken expression.

“He's a really good friend, though.”

“Well, I wouldn't have reached out before Jake introduced us, but now that you have, all bets are off the table.” Killian smiled widely.

I laughed. “I was so disappointed when I realized I couldn't come down.”

“Okay, so just out of curiosity, *when* did Jake invite you?”

“Um.” I glanced at Nick as I thought. “A couple of weeks ago, I guess.”

“Uh huh. And when did you make plans with Nick?”

“He...asked me on Halloween. Why?”

He pursed his lips and shook his head. “Because I'm going to slap Jake in the back of the head.”

“Hey. Violence is not the answer,” Nick said. “Had to explain that to Kody after he got in a fist fight at a party after too much...” He mimed drinking from a bottle.

“Hey!” I protested.

“I have a feeling Kody was justified,” Killian said, his lips curling in amusement.

“Completely.” I nodded and gave Nick a mock dirty look.

“So. You're the kind of guy who doesn't change their plans when your boyfriend invites you for a weekend. Very independent.”

I shifted a little, feeling slightly judged.

“Well, Nick had said his extended family was a challenge and he needed a friend with him. It wasn't just casual, like, sorry, I have to water my plants...”

“Ah.” Killian looked vaguely pleased. “So you're a loyal friend.”

Nick leaned in again. “He really is. And it's all true. My mom was pushing for me to come down, because my aunt thinks her youngest might be gay. His dad is a bit of a MAGA nutjob, so she wanted me to, like, be a good influence or something, and I wanted Kody to go with me. Kind of reinforcement, so he knows he's not alone. If he is, you know...”

“Huh. That's...a damn good reason.”

"Yeah." I couldn't help the dejection creeping into my voice. "I was so disappointed, though."

"Where are you guys now?"

"Just outside of Atlantic City."

"Huh. I wonder..." He seemed to be fiddling with his phone.

I glanced at Nick then back to Killian. "Wonder what?"

"It's just that you're not *that* far away. Under four hours by car, according to my phone. And you do have an open invitation..."

I got excited for a second, but then immediately felt disappointed again. "Yeah, but the situation here is the same. And we drove in Nick's car."

Nick raised a finger to me. "But..."

I glanced at Nick.

"What if we...kidnapped Carito so you could rendezvous with your boyfriend?"

I kind of forgot about Killian for a moment.

"Well. How would that work? What are we going to do, go steal Carson out of his bed in the middle of the night and sneak out? They'll call the police."

"I didn't mean literally right now. I can talk to Aunt Liz in the morning."

"And she's just going to let two dumb college kids take her youngest to go stay with complete strangers?"

He shrugged. "She trusts me."

"That was her first mistake. Besides, I was invited, but you were not, no offense. And no one even knows Carson exists. We can't just show up with three extra people on Thanksgiving."

"Um, hi. Still here," Killian interrupted. "I can say with confidence that there is plenty of food and rooms for all three of you, if you wanted."

"Uh. You can do that?"

"Sure. We have an open-door policy on Thanksgiving. Besides, Steve and Adam make enough food to solve world hunger by themselves." He held up a hand and smiled. "Deadly serious. They just keep making things. There are literal tables — plural — set up to host everyone. Plus, they run a bed and breakfast that's closed for the holiday so they could focus on our extended family. All but one of our rooms are empty."

"I don't know if we could afford—"

"It would be on the house for Jake's boyfriend. And his friends. And if you need more reasons, I can think of several people who would love to meet the guy we've heard so much about in person."

I tried to process all that. “Uh, he talks about me that much?”

He tilted his head and his expression moved to something warm.

“Yes. It’s really nice to see him at this point. Which isn’t to say that there aren’t times when I still want to slap some sense into him, but still...progress is progress. You’ve been good for him. Really good.”

I blinked rapidly, trying to ward off the sudden rush of emotion building behind my eyes. I glanced at Nick.

“Uh. I don’t want to just say yes? I mean...we’re here for your family.”

“I—” he leaned into the frame to look at Killian. “Didn’t I suggest going down? Do you see what I’m dealing with here? Complete lack of respect. Um, and hey...strong shoulders. Do you lift a little?”

I pushed him back to his side. “Will you stop? He’s Jake’s best friend!”

“Then we can all be related!”

“Will you stop? You’re like a Golden Retriever that can’t stop wagging its tail.”

“Or humping the guest’s leg?” Killian asked.

I turned and looked at him. “Yes! Thank you! You understand!”

“So...what do you think? Should I double check on those rooms I can already guarantee are available?”

I looked back at his face. I liked his face. It was open and, as naive as I am, I felt like he was trustworthy. Honest. He was also Jake’s best friend, and that went a long, long way for me.

“I’d like to. But...can I ask? Like, why? We haven’t even been in the same room or talked for more than ten minutes, and you’re just going to go through all this trouble?”

He smiled, a full smile that made his eyes flash. “It’s been a long time since I’ve seen Jake happy. I like that you bring that out in him. I also think it would be the nicest prank I could ever pull to surprise him with you.”

My eyes went wide. “You wouldn’t tell him?”

He grinned. “Best Thanksgiving ever.”

I glanced back at Nick for a moment and bit my lip. Turning back to Killian, I said, “Can I let you know tomorrow? We still have some moving parts here. If Nick can’t get his cousin to go with us, I think we’d have to stay.”

Killian made a little two-fingered salute of respect. “Yeah, that sounds like a great plan. Reach out as soon as you know something, and I’ll send you the address.”

I shook my head and smiled. "Thank you, Killian. I'm so glad you called. I hope I get to thank you in person tomorrow."

"Oh! Before you go, Jake said you guys went to a Halloween dance? That there were no pictures?"

"Uh, partially true, yes. So we didn't take pictures, but Nick had a line on some, and Jake and I were definitely in them."

Killian tilted his head. "Why would you not take costume pictures yourselves? What kind of gay are you?"

I sighed. "Because once I saw Jake in his costume, I forgot cameras existed."

Killian laughed. "Can I get the link to the pictures?"

"I'd be happy to text that to you. Your number is?" Nick said, leaning in.

"Kody, would you forward me the link once Nick sends it to you?" Killian was grinning widely.

"Man, I am getting shot down like never before!" Nick groaned.

"Well. You'll make a better impression in person, I'm sure," I said to him.

"Wait." Nick leaned in again. "Killian, are you single?"

Killian didn't move. For a full ten seconds it looked like the call had frozen, but I spotted his hand move as the call disconnected.

"Oh, come on!" Nick whined. "He's so goddamned cute!"

"He is," I confirmed. "Maybe just tone it down a little? Jake has obviously filled him in."

"Poisoned the well, more like. Ugh! Okay, I'm going to see if Carito's still up. See how he feels about a consensual kidnapping."

My phone buzzed as he climbed from the bed. I glanced down at the screen displaying a notification from Killian.

Yes, I'm single. I'm not looking to date right now. And I'm really, really glad you reached out.

I woke early, having not slept well at all. Between the strange bed, sleeping next to someone, and the excitement of Killian's invitation, I was restless.

A little after six, I got up and used the bathroom and was thinking I'd have to just lie in bed until people woke up, but then Aunt Liz appeared at the end of the hallway in a big fluffy robe. She broke into a big smile when saw me and waved me toward her.

"Good morning," I said quietly.

“Good morning, sunshine. Did you get any sleep? Or were you two boys up half the night like teenagers at a sleepover?”

I trailed her into the kitchen.

“No, I think he went to keep Carson awake, actually.”

“Nicky’s always liked Carson. I mean he gets on with all of them, except Kenny. But Carson’s always been his favorite.” She pulled cups down from the cupboard and pointed me to the seat I’d been in the night before. “I’m not a *barista* like you, but would you like some caffeine?”

I smiled at her. “Yes, please.”

She poured and set out some flavored creamer, milk, and sugar so I could doctor my coffee. I wondered if Jake was going to be able to get his coffee the way he liked it this morning.

“So. Kenny will be here later. Kelly will be back with her boyfriend — he’s so nice. Misty has a boy who’s supposed to come over for pie later.”

She sipped her coffee and bustled around, setting the oven to preheat and pulling things from the fridge as she did.

“You enjoy having a full house?”

“Oh, it’s nice sometimes, sure.” She grinned. “Lot of work, though. Misty is supposed to help me, but she’s slow moving in the morning. Gary should be home in a few hours, but he and Carson are no good in the kitchen.” She paused. “They get that from their father.”

I snorted, and she grinned again.

Misty wandered in looking tired, but fully dressed, if a little rumpled. She was just one of those people who always looked good. Jake was like that...but maybe I was biased.

“You want coffee or juice, sweetheart?”

“Coffee.” Misty’s voice sounded like rocks tumbling together.

“Well, get a cup and sit down. I’m just warming the oven.” Liz stopped and looked at me, hands on her hips. “Are you a cook?”

“I can follow directions.”

“You’re ahead of half the population then!” She laughed. “So Nicky was chatty last night. He was telling us all about your boyfriend. He sounds like a great guy.”

I nodded, a smile popping up on my face. “He’s...kind of the best thing ever.”

“Aww. I’m so glad. Maybe we’ll get to meet him sometime. Nick said so many nice things about you, too. I’d imagine it’s a real trip living with him full time.”

“It’s been an adventure for sure. But Nick’s great, really. I couldn’t ask for a better roommate...or friend. He’s always there for me, and we’ve had a lot of fun together, too.”

“He’s always been so sweet.”

“Such a waste,” Misty said.

I glanced at her. She noticed and turned toward me slightly.

“What do you mean?” her mother asked, starting to chop things like a chef in a knife commercial.

“Him being gay. He’s really nice. And good looking. Lots of girls would be happy to date a guy like that. It’s a waste when there’s so many crappy guys out there that he’s...choosing that.”

“It’s not a choice,” I said quietly.

“And she knows that,” Liz said firmly. “I don’t even know why you’d say that. When did you choose to like that boyfriend of yours?”

“He’s not my boyfriend,” she said quickly. “He wants to be, but he hasn’t earned it yet.”

I was not interested in this. I tuned out while Liz and her daughter chatted. Unfortunately, I was saturated with Misty’s vapidty just by proximity.

After a second cup of mediocre coffee, I went to wake Nick. Why should I suffer alone?

Once in the room, though, I decided to relax and look at my phone instead. Since Killian and I had made contact and he’d accepted my request, I decided to check out his pictures. I scrolled through photos that rarely included Killian himself, and paused to look at a striking building.

It was an elegant three-story house with a wrap-around porch and decorative woodwork above and below the roof line. Shutters outfitted each window, with wooden ornamentation above each one. A small square room sat high atop it with more decorative wood lattice.

There were multiple views in the post, so I scrolled through them. It was one of those rare buildings that just captures the imagination. I wondered where it was and if I could spend a weekend with Jake there. We could venture out during the day to shops and have whatever local adventures could be found and then come back to that magical building for our evenings.

I could bring him his morning coffee on that wraparound porch, and we could sit and watch the world come awake together in our pajamas.

Eventually Nick stirred on his own, bringing me out of my daydream. Noises could be heard in the house, indicating others were waking up as well.

I went to shower while Nick went to the kitchen for coffee. After I was clean and dressed, Nick popped back in.

“So. Carito is up for the jailbreak.”

“Oh?” My heart picked up. “What did you tell him?”

“Well, I wanted to be subtle, you know?”

“Oh, Jesus. Did you just say a bunch of gay boys would be there and wouldn’t he like to come look?”

“I can be subtle!”

I just laughed at him, and he grinned back.

“I said nothing about anything gay. Except that we were thinking of going to surprise your boyfriend and hang in Maryland after dinner today. I didn’t even have to ask — he just said he wished he could come with us.”

“Oh. Well, I mean that’s good, right?”

“We were halfway home at that point. We were up talking for a while, and he edged up to coming out to me, but kind of hung back a bit. I get it. It’s hard saying it for the first time. I didn’t want to push, but I think this could be a really important moment for him.”

“So are you going to talk to your aunt?”

“Already did. That’s why I was gone for so long. Had to wait for Misty to fuck off.”

“Yeah, she was something this morning. She thinks you’re a waste.”

“Takes one to know one.”

I shook my head. “She was talking about you being gay and what a shame it was since you’re such a nice guy. I guess it was sort of a backhanded compliment, in a way, but she didn’t mean it that way.”

“Oh, so that started way before I got there then? ‘Cause she started that shit up again, but I shut it down with a quickness.” He snapped his fingers. “Like that. Fuck her. The important thing is, Aunt Liz gave us the okay to kidnap him. She just wants an address and stuff.” He grinned. “She thinks I’m responsible.”

I stared for a moment. “She didn’t actually say that, did she?”

“Not in so many words...”

We went back and forth for a few minutes, then he went to shower.

I had no desire to hang out with his family on my own, so I stayed in the room. I considered texting Brayden just to kind of follow up from last night but decided it would be more fun to surprise them both.

Then again...maybe that wasn’t such a good idea. Would Jake think I was creepy just showing up like that? That’s kind of like the partner who

shows up unexpectedly when someone thinks they have free time to themselves. Maybe he'd actually feel like I wasn't giving him any space?

As I thought more, it occurred to me that Killian had seemed to interrogate me last night about when Jake had asked me and when I'd made the plans with Nick. What did that mean?

Nick returned and got dressed. "People will start getting here soon. Did you reach out to Killian? You can have him text me the address."

I shook my head. "I think you'd get farther with him if you toned it down."

"Huh. So you think there's a chance?"

I laughed. "I don't know. I have no idea what Killian looks for in a person. He did say he wasn't really looking right now though."

"That's when great things find you, when you're not looking."

"Okay, but that still wouldn't include you."

"Ouch," he said, clutching his chest. "Right through the heart. How about some gentle encouragement?"

"I *did* say you might have a better chance if you toned it down. Maybe he won't take you seriously if you come on so strong?"

"Right. Right. I should...be smooth. Let the rizz come out on its own."

I chuckled. "I'll message Killian now and let him know the plan is a go."

Still have room for three for dinner and a room?

I was starting to get excited and yet very nervous that I was making a big mistake surprising Jake. Did he even like surprises? Maybe with his past he liked it more if he could plan and count on things? He was taking some very deliberate steps with our relationship...maybe I was pushing too hard.

But I was committed now, since Nick had already planned things with Carson and Liz. After meeting his dad and sister, I could see why Carson might want a temporary escape.

Then again, it also meant I'd be worrying that Jake wouldn't take it well if I just showed up. What if he'd needed some time for himself? Or if spending time with his family, which he hadn't seen for a few months, was something he'd wanted to be able to do without any complications from the emotional shitstorm that is me?

Killian replied: *Your rooms are ready and your seats are reserved!*

Not being able to help myself, I replied, *Is this a good idea? Does Jake like surprises?*

This is a PERFECT idea. He will be thrilled.

Thrilled? I bit my lip. *Are you sure? I'm second-guessing this. Well stop that. It'll be a happy surprise. Trust me.*

Well, as his best friend, Killian should know.

Killian texted the address, and I told him I'd let him know when we got on the road.

The next little while was mostly boring. Liz was cooking, and Misty was helping. Gary got home, and he was like Misty in appearance, except he seemed to be actively working against it. He had on dirty boots, grease-stained work pants, a solid dark blue tee shirt that looked like it was chosen solely to hide grime better. He had a thin, scraggly mustache and a few chin hairs that reminded me more of dirt than hair. He would have been cute if he'd put in a little effort.

He was nice enough, though — polite, and more personable than his sister. Eventually Carson wandered out. He'd put on a dress shirt and khakis, but there was no hiding how gangly he was. My dad claimed there was an age where most kids were all arms and legs, and Carson was squarely in that stage of development.

Kenny arrived and parked himself in the living room with his father, drinking beer at ten thirty in the morning. Kelly got there about an hour later with three pies and a thin guy named Doyle who was carrying a refrigerated bag containing ice cream. I couldn't figure out if Doyle was his first name or last; he sported a patchy beard paired with a bit of a mullet.

The house got louder with each new addition, and Nick and I were perched at the kitchen counter listening to all the chatter. Kelly's boyfriend, Doyle, said about as much as Carson did, so I didn't really get a read on him, but Liz and Kelly more than made up for it, filling the room with chatter while Doyle sat at the table and Carson lurked behind Nick and me. Misty was helping her mother all morning, but she blessedly didn't say much once Kelly showed up.

When we finally sat down to eat at noon, things started off okay. There was a prayer of thanks; I played the polite guest and just lowered my head and stayed quiet.

As the food started to get passed around and plates were filled, it actually seemed to be going pretty well. I was thinking that maybe Nick and his mom really didn't have much to be worried about.

But then things changed.

"So, will you guys head down just after we eat? It's like three or four hours, right?" Liz asked.

"Yeah. Kody can't be separated from Jake for more than twenty-four hours or he shuts down."

I shot him a look, and he grinned at me.

"Where you driving to?" Mitch asked.

"Maryland." I noticed Nick kept his reply short, no mention of Jake like he'd done with his aunt.

"They're having all kinds of trouble down there. I heard ICE rounded up about three thousand illegals in a bunch of Home Depot parking lots. Should really help the job prospects down there."

I looked at Nick, and he shook his head subtly.

"Oh yeah? I wonder if anyone wants those jobs?" Kelly asked.

"They take jobs and don't pay taxes and even vote. Why do you think they have Democrats in office down there? They infest the cities and soak up benefits, 'cause they don't want to work."

"Wait." Doyle leaned forward and looked at Mitch. "They're taking jobs, but they don't want to work?"

"Well, it's a mix, you know."

"They promoted a black guy at work. Total DEI," Kenny said.

"Were you up for the job?" Nick asked.

"Nah. Different department."

"So because he's black he's DEI?"

"Yeah."

"What's the job?"

"It's an engineer job. They have to design the roads and stuff before we lay the asphalt."

"Oh. So you mean he had to go to school to be an engineer? Pass classes? Get certifications?"

"Yeah. I guess. I don't know, I'm not an engineer." Kenny snorted out laughter, like it wasn't readily apparent that he wasn't smart enough to be an engineer.

"So...a qualified guy gets the job and you think, because he's black, that it has to be a DEI hire?" Doyle asked.

"It's how those people get jobs," Mitch said.

"Do you even hear yourself?" Liz asked and shook her head. "It's like you stuff crap in your brains overnight."

"Oh, here we go," Mitch said and gave his eldest a knowing look.

"So you guys are going to see his boyfriend?" Kenny asked.

"Yep." Nick's tone was clipped.

"So." Kenny looked at me, glanced at his dad, and smiled before looking back. "Are you the guy or the girl in the relationship?"

There were a few protests overlapping with Kenny's satisfied smirk and his father grinning at him, almost appearing to show pride.

When it calmed down, I looked down at Kenny. “So Kenny, when you pay for a date, are you on top or do you just lie there and take it?”

My nerves were raw wires, but my temper mixed with his clumsy attempt to humiliate me had pushed me into territory only my brother would recognize. I was glad we already had an escape plan. True, I was banking on Killian being right that Jake would be happy with me as a surprise, but I could deal with that later.

“What?” Kenny asked while snickers raced around the table. Even Mitch was grinning at his son.

“I mean if you’re so interested in my love life — which seems pretty gay, just saying — I just figured you wouldn’t mind telling everyone about yours...or the lack thereof.”

Nick leaned in and whispered, “I never knew you could be so mean. Nice job, and I hope I never piss you off.”

“I don’t have to pay for nothin’.”

“Right. You probably offer refunds. My point is, if you’re asking about sex positions in my relationship, it seems like you have questions about if you’re doing it right.”

Mitch shook his head. “He’s not gay. No problem with the gays, but my kids can’t be.”

“And why’s that, Mitchell?” Liz demanded.

“It would ruin my bloodline. That’s why.”

I glanced at Carson. I felt so bad for him. He’d nearly folded in on himself, all sharp angles with his thin frame.

I hadn’t thought it possible, but I grew even more angry. How can people be so goddamn stupid and mean? How can they can be so confidently wrong and do lifelong damage while also being smug as fuck about it?

“Well, Uncle Mitch, I think it’s too late,” I said.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Carson’s head snap up.

Mitch looked at me. “Oh? How’s that?”

“Your bloodline seems to be male pattern baldness, obesity, pre-diabetes with a side of incel for your oldest. I hear that’s genetic.”

He smiled, but not kindly. “You’re at my table.”

“And you’re a rude host.”

“You don’t have to stay.” He leaned back and spread his arms wide.

“Mitchell!” Liz snapped.

“What the hell, Liz? I’m not going to be insulted at my own table.”

“Oh, but you and fucking Kenny can insult our guest?” Kelly snarled. “Pathetic.”

Voices erupted around the table, my heart was hammering, and I figured I’d made a mess for Nick, but I didn’t care.

Carson was looking at me with an odd expression, and Nick was whispering in my ear, but I couldn’t understand him. Voices were getting louder, and the whole thing was starting to get overwhelming.

“Nicky, go get on the road. Go get your stuff, honey,” Liz said to him. She patted my shoulder and nodded at Carson.

“Where’s he think he’s going?” Mitch demanded, pointing at Carson. “Sit your ass down and eat.”

Carson wavered, but Liz pushed his shoulder toward the hallway as Nick and I stood to clear our plates.

“He’s going with Nicky for the weekend.”

“The hell he is!”

“I said he could, so you can just sit *your* ass down and eat!”

“This is my house!”

“And I paid for it!”

“Don’t start that again! You know I’m in constant pain!”

“No, you’re a constant pain in everyone’s ass! You sit there being rude, but you sure can’t take it when someone dishes it back. And you! I didn’t raise my son to be a bigot!”

We headed down the hallway to grab our bags. I was glad we’d packed up before dinner. Carson was in his room putting a few things into a bag.

“Shake a leg, Carito. We’ll slip past the old dragon while he’s locked in combat.”

Carson zipped his duffel and headed toward us. From the dining room, Liz and Mitch were still going at it. Kelly could be heard telling Kenny to shut up and snapping at her father. I thought I heard Doyle, too, which was kind of impressive to me. Points to him, whether that’s his first or last name.

“I’ll call later to apologize for not saying goodbye,” Nick said as we hit the front door.

We slipped into our shoes and stepped into the cool afternoon, and were surprised to find Gary standing out by the cars.

“Gare? What’s up, *compadre*?” Nick’s car flashed its lights as it unlocked and the trunk lid popped up.

Gary’s hands were buried in his pockets, and he was hunched as if it were much colder than it was. He’d cleaned up well in khakis and a polo.

He'd even shaved his chin. It was quite the change from my first impression of him.

"I just don't like being in there when they argue," he said. "It's like firing up two engines without exhaust on them, you know?"

"I wouldn't mind putting a muffler on your dad." Nick tossed his bag in the trunk and took Carson's from him to do the same.

"Why are you taking Carson?"

"Well, see...I'm his fairy godcousin, and his one wish was to be a real boy. Uh, I don't know where I was going with that."

I put my bag in the trunk and turned to face the cousins.

Gary looked at his little brother. "You know I'm in your corner, right?"

Carson shifted on his feet. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Gary glanced from me to Nick, then back to Carson. "Well, just remember that when you figure it out."

Carson just climbed into the backseat without replying.

"Respect, Gary." Nick held out his fist.

Gary snorted. "I don't know where that fist has been."

"What did I do to deserve this?" Nick asked, acting wounded.

"When you coming back?"

"Uh, Sunday. Long drive Sunday. I mean I'll be asleep, 'cause Kody will do all the driving."

"Will not," I said as I climbed into the passenger seat.

Gary nodded. "Okay. Well, don't break down or anything, I guess."

"Hey. Carito will be okay with us. How about you?"

Gary shrugged. "I graduate in five months. I stay out of the house as much as I can. Once I have my own place, Carson can stay with me when he needs to. Or Kelly. The only one Dad's bullshit doesn't affect is Misty, but I think it's because she doesn't fire on all cylinders, you know?"

"Actually, no."

Gary snorted. "So gay."

"Hey, there are gay mechanics!"

"Why, just because you heard the term lube job?"

Nick paused and looked at me and then back to Gary. "Yes."

Gary cracked a smile and gave us a small wave and turned, opened the garage door, and disappeared inside. He was lost to view, but I had the feeling he wasn't headed back to the table.

Nick started the car up and turned to look at me. "So. Killian didn't text me."

"I'm shocked."

"Kody. He's *so* cute."

"Yes, he is."

"Kody..." he whined.

"I can't make him like you, Nick."

"What kind of fairy are you? I mean, you just torched the bearded dragon in there!" He started to laugh as he backed us out of the driveway and headed into town.

Carson snickered from the backseat. "It's true. You roasted my dad."

I looked back at Carson. "He deserved it, but...I am sorry. I didn't mean to ruin Thanksgiving. My brother says I can be vicious when I'm mad, but I always figured it was just because I was usually mad at him."

"You didn't ruin anything. My dad and Kenny ruined it, just like they ruin everything. You were straight fire. Usually, my sister is the only one who stands up to him. He pissed off Mom today too, though."

"Your mom is going to kill him one day," Nick told him.

"Eh, I'd settle for a divorce."

We stopped to gas up, and I entered the address Killian had given me into the GPS and texted him that we were getting on the road.

"Should get there in plenty of time for second dinner," I said.

"Who is going to be there?" Carson asked.

"Well, first and most importantly, the center of Kody's universe: his boyfriend, Jake."

"He's not my boyfriend," I protested, just for the sake of accuracy. He wasn't, even if everyone kept referring to him as that.

Nick ignored me. "Then there's Jake's bestie, this stunningly gorgeous twink named Killian that I'm going to hide in my luggage."

"No kidnapping," I said in warning. Then I had a truly evil, delicious, wonderful idea. "Besides, Nick, you don't even know if Killian's gay."

Nick looked at me, and his jaw dropped slightly.

"W...wai— Whoa! Hang on a damn minute! There is no way that sweet little thing likes cooch. No, no way!"

I turned to look at Carson. "This is what we call 'please-be-gaydar'."

"You're screwing with me! Why would he have let me say all those things if he wasn't gay? Huh?"

"The same reason we all let you say anything? Like first, what in the world will stop you?"

He kept swapping his gaze from the road to me and back, his neck twisting sharply each time.

“That’s my future pocket husband you’re fucking with me about. Kody, this is cruel. Why are you fucking with me?”

I twisted in my seat to look at Carson again, who was looking at us like he wasn’t really sure what to think.

“See, Carson, this is what happens when you assume things about people. Nicky here assumed Jake’s best friend was gay. Now doesn’t he look silly?”

“Kody!”

Carson looked like he was fighting back a grin.

“Now he’s going to show up, and Killian will avoid him, because what straight guy wants a gay panting after him?”

“Kody. Kody, remember, I’m your friend.”

“Anyway, Carson, you’ll meet Brayden, another of Jake’s friends.” I paused. “Huh. I wonder what Bray and Killian could possibly have in common?”

“That they’re Jake’s friends, that’s what!” Nick growled. He glanced in the rearview. “You’ll like Bray, Carito.”

“Yeah. Brayden’s nice, but he’s a literal lineman for the school football team.”

“Is he— I mean...is everyone there going to...be gay?”

I shook my head. “Bray’s straight. But Killian’s dads are gay.”

“His...dads?”

“Yep. And so are mine. Well, my dad and his fiancé are both gay. I hope. They’re getting married soon, and it would sure be a shock if Brandon turned out to be straight.”

“Oh...wow. Um...is that all?”

“I don’t know who else will be there besides Jake’s aunt and her boyfriend.” I paused, then added, perhaps unnecessarily, “They’re straight.” I turned to look at him. “Are you okay with all this?”

“Oh, yeah! I was just wondering. Nicky’s the only person I really know that’s gay. Well, and now you.”

“You’ll definitely get to add to that list today...”

“And Killian is on it,” Nick said firmly.

“You’re so thirsty,” I teased.

“He’s exactly what I’d want. He’s gorgeous. He’s smart. You heard him talking. I like smart.”

“But do ya, Nicky?”

“Why are you doing this to me?” he asked and started to laugh.
“Let me have this, Kode. You have Jake, I get his bestie. Win win.”

“We’ll see, I guess.”

“When did you get so mean? I’m driving you to the love of your life!”

I laughed a little. “True. Still, you don’t have to wag quite so hard at him.”

He narrowed his eyes and pressed his lips together. “Do your dads know how mean you can be to your best friends?”

“They’ve heard me with my brother, so yeah.”

“So wait— Killian *is* gay?” Carson asked.

I nodded, looking at Nick. “He was Jake’s first love, in fact.”

“Now you’re just making this awkward!”

“Speaking of my dads, I should let them know we’ve had a change of plans.” My dad picked up after several rings.

“Kody! Happy Thanksgiving, kiddo. How’s your day going?”

I put my phone on speaker. “Happy Thanksgiving, Dad. As to how ours is going, well, Nick wasn’t kidding about his extended family being interesting.”

“Meaning?”

“His uncle is a MAGAt.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. Why would Nick take you there?”

Thinking of Carson I said, “Rescue mission. Anyway, we’re on the road again and headed to see Jake for the rest of the holiday.”

“Oh? He went home, didn’t he?”

“Yeah. We’re headed to Maryland.”

“Maryland? Nobody goes there.”

I raised an eyebrow and looked at Nick. “Uh, well, Jake and Brayden did.”

“But Maryland?”

“Well, Jake’s there!” I said with a laugh.

“There’s good things there!” Nick chimed in. “Like Killian?”

“Who’s Killian?” Dad asked.

“Jake’s best friend.”

“Well. Are you going to talk to Jake about the wedding?”

“This weekend, I promise.” Feeling devilish I continued. “Would you mind if Nick came too? Charlie asked for him to be delivered as his plus one.”

“Hey!” Nick protested.

“Nick is welcome, though Charlie may make him regret it.” Dad sighed. “He’s seeing that churchy boy again.”

“Yeah, he mentioned.”

“He invited him for pie this afternoon.”

“Oh. Uh. That’s...unexpected.”

We chatted for a few more minutes, then hung up.

“Uh. Is your whole family gay?” Carson asked as soon as I was off the phone.

“Yep. Charlie is adopted, but if I could pick out a brother, it’d be him.”

“What about me?” Nick asked.

I frowned. “With what you and Charlie have going on? Not into the incest look, Nicky.”

“There’s nothing— Stop. You have an evil streak, you know that?”

We made good time with the traffic being very light and the fact that Nick claimed cops didn’t hand out tickets on holidays unless you were drunk or had an accident.

Carson was more talkative away from his family, and we talked a lot about music. He had instruments and was trying to teach himself to play some things, but he was struggling. He knew he liked music, but he wasn’t sure yet if he could make it himself.

He asked how I’d met Jake, and Nick took over. I had to keep interrupting him as he tried to embellish the story. Then, as revenge, I told Carson how Nick had gotten tossed out of a club, and that led into many more fun conversations.

We arrived at the bed and breakfast just after five, having only stopped for a single bathroom break. A relief carved wooden sign surrounded by late fall ornamental cabbages and pansies was planted by the road, naming the B&B “Amalie’s House.”

We pulled into an already crowded circular drive and parked next to a car with Pennsylvania tags. Apparently, we weren’t the only out-of-town visitors.

I climbed out and just stood staring at the house. It was the one from Killian’s photos that had captured my imagination. The woodwork was even more intricate in person, and the colors of the house, the shutters, the trim made it all seem like it belonged in a fairy tale.

I texted Killian that we’d arrived, and we grabbed our bags and climbed the wide brick steps to the porch while I marveled at the feel of the place.

“Do we knock?” I asked.

"It's a business. I think we can just go in," Nick said.

"Yeah, but they're not open today, remember?"

Before we could come to an agreement, the ornate, heavy door swung open to reveal a Victorian wonderland of carved wood, colorful carpets, elegant lighting...and a stocky guy about my age with reddish-brown hair and sparkling green eyes.

"Jesus," Nick breathed. "Are they all gorgeous here?"

"Hey! I'm Kane. Killian is up to his elbows in mashed potatoes right now, so I'm the official greeting party. Which one of you is Kody?"

I raised my hand, and did a quick round of introductions, then he invited us in.

I felt like I was stepping back in time. Hardwood floors glowed, mellow light filled the space, and a carved staircase with an ornate balustrade provided access to the floor above.

We could hear footsteps approaching down the hall, and Killian appeared in the lobby, dressed formally in a shirt and tie with a sweater over the top, slacks, and dress shoes.

"You made it!"

"Hi!" I smiled and was pleasantly surprised that he gave me a quick hug.

"Thanks, Kane. I've got it from here if you can take over my kitchen duties." Kane headed toward the back of the house, and Killian turned back to us. "You're just in time. You can come pick out your rooms. Wait till you see them! Once you're settled, you can come down and meet Adam and Steve and my mom. You've already met Kane, my brother. And Tad's around somewhere. He's probably hiding upstairs. The others will start to arrive soon."

I wasn't sure if Tad was a human, a cat, or a dog, but I really only had one person on my mind. "Jake's not here yet?"

"Nope. He's coming with Judy and Novak. They should get here closer to six. Novak is a stickler for being on time."

"Oh, okay. Is Novak the same person as Shane?"

"Oh yeah, one and the same. He's my boss, so it feels weird calling him by his first name. Anyway, come on..." He started for the stairs.

"Wait, no hug for me?" Nick pouted.

"I've heard you have wandering hands," Killian teased.

"I do not! Carson, don't listen to him. Damn. Jake has really built me up, huh?"

Killian winked at Carson, then waved for us to follow him. "Come on. Let's get you guys in rooms so you can chill after your drive."

We trailed behind him up the stairs, and I once more had the feeling of being in the past, in an age where staff were the norm for the upper class, and we'd just arrived home.

As we climbed, Killian said, "There are five rooms, but my mom is staying in one and the other isn't clean. We just had a couple leave this morning. Adam and Steve chose all the decorations and antiques for each room, so they're a little fussy, maybe, but really beautiful. They're all special in their own way, so see which one you like best."

Cresting the top of the stairs, Killian opened a door with a brass number 1 on it and gestured us into the first room. It was decorated entirely in shades of blue with white accents. Very soothing. Rich, heavy, blue velvet curtains hung at the window over sheer white drapes. A large, comfy-looking chair with carved wooden arms and legs had been upholstered in the same blue velvet.

A tall mahogany dresser stood against one wall with an oil lamp and a silver-framed mirror on its top. Framed watercolors hung on the wall, and a beautiful hand-painted glass shade covered the overhead light bulb. The bed had a mahogany frame with carved spindle-posts and a mattress that came up almost as high as my waist.

"I dunno, Kode. You'd need a step-ladder to get into bed." Nick paused. "Or maybe Jake will just lift you up."

"Short jokes?" Killian sniffed. "Strike one."

"Wait. Wait! I get two more, right? I'll be good!"

Killian turned to me. "Want to see what's behind door number two or do you like this one?"

I looked around, taken with the space but curious about the others. Jake's blue eyes would be just one more blue in here, but they didn't need competition, I decided.

"This is beautiful, but I'd love to see the others."

"Come on."

Killian led us next door to room two, complete with a brass 2 on the door. "They call the first room the Blue Room, as you might have guessed. This one is the Woodland Room."

The Woodland Room felt cool, quiet, and deeply secluded, like stepping into the heart of an old forest just after rain. Rich shades of emerald, moss, and deep pine green dominated the space, accented by dark wood and touches of bronze that gave the room an earthy elegance. Heavy forest-green velvet curtains framed the windows, their folds so thick they muffled both light and sound from outside. Beneath them hung gauzy cream sheers embroidered with twisting ivy vines.

The centerpiece of the room was a magnificent antique bed, the dark walnut headboard delicately carved with leaves, acorns, and winding branches. At the foot of the bed sat a tufted leather bench worn buttery-soft with age.

Near the corner fireplace stood a high-backed wing chair upholstered in green damask fabric, paired with a small round table stacked with old books whose cracked spines looked as though they'd been read beside fireplaces for generations. A massive oak armoire occupied one wall, its doors painted with woodland scenes — deer among trees, curling ferns, little hidden foxes worked into the details.

The walls held richly framed landscape oils — misty forests, moonlit beaches, and winding streams. Brass sconces cast warm amber pools of light across the room, while the overhead fixture was covered by stained glass in deep green and amber tones that scattered leaf-shaped shadows across the ceiling. The whole room smelled faintly of cedarwood and old paper, and standing inside it gave the strange impression that if you listened carefully enough, you might hear wind moving through distant trees.

I put my bag on the leather bench at the foot of the bed, thinking it might be an easy way in since the bed was just as high as the one in the blue room. I was in love with this space, but felt it would be a disservice to not see the last one.

"I'm calling dibs here," I declared, "but I want to see the other one."

"Follow me."

"Right behind you," Nick said. "And the view is spectacular."

Killian didn't even turn. "Strike two."

"Oh, come on! I meant the room..."

The third room, Killian told us, was called the Rose Room. It was actually a little farther down the hall behind door number four, but it was just as stunning as the other two in its own right, if maybe a bit too feminine for my taste.

It looked as though someone had taken the inside of a jewelry box and turned it into a bedroom. Everything was done in shades of blush, dusty rose, and cream. Heavy rose-colored brocade curtains framed the tall window, tied back with braided silk cords, while sheer lace panels softened the pale November light filtering through the glass.

An antique canopy bed made of dark cherry wood stood in the center of the room, its tall carved posts twined with climbing roses and trailing vines. Gauzy pink fabric draped from the canopy overhead, giving

the whole bed a dreamy, storybook quality. The quilt was layered in soft pinks and ivory with embroidered roses stitched along the edges.

Near the fireplace sat a curved Victorian fainting couch upholstered in pale rose velvet, paired with a delicate marble-topped side table that held a porcelain lamp with a fringed shade. Across from it stood a tall wardrobe with ornate brass handles polished to a warm glow. A vanity with a tri-fold mirror occupied the opposite wall, its surface cluttered with little decorative touches — a silver-backed hairbrush set, cut-glass perfume bottles, and a ceramic dish shaped like a flower.

The walls were decorated with framed botanical prints and crackled oil paintings of gardens in bloom. Even the overhead light had been softened beneath a hand-painted glass shade covered in tiny pink roses and curling green leaves, casting the room in a gentle rosy glow.

“What do you think?” Killian asked.

“I think I’d like to die here,” I said truthfully. “This place is so amazing. Are you sure your dads are okay just putting us up here? I mean, I know you said it was fine, but this seems like a five star hotel or something.”

“They offered before I could even finish asking. Adam and Steve are really generous, so don’t worry.”

Nick snorted. “He’s always worried.”

Killian turned and leveled a flat look at him.

“That wasn’t a crack! Kode, tell him.”

I stared at Nick.

“Kode, come on, bro!”

I looked at Killian. “All of the rooms are fantastic, but I’m in love with the Woodland Room.”

“There really are no bad choices,” Killian said, then turned to Nick and Carson, who’d just been following us around with wide eyes. “How about you guys?”

Nick turned to his cousin. “You pick, Carito. This is really your holiday.”

Carson looked around the room, fingers touching the velvet of the couch, then glanced quickly at Nick before dropping his gaze to the floral-patterned rug. “Can we stay in this room? Is it...um, is it too girly?”

“No. If you like it, it’s perfect, Carito.”

Killian glanced at me and got a truly devilish smirk. Then he caught Nick’s eye and said, “That’s one point.”

Nick lit up. “Wait, that’s good, right?”

“Why don’t you guys get settled? Kody?” He touched my elbow, and I followed him from the room.

“Awarding him points now? You know that will only encourage him, right?”

He laughed. “He seems like a nice guy, but he’s fun to mess with. Too easy, really.”

“You’ve definitely got him all worked up,” I agreed with a laugh of my own. “But he really is a great guy, and his bark is worse than his bite. He’s still getting over a bad breakup, so don’t be too hard on him.”

“So am I supposed to encourage him or not?” he asked as he led me back into the Woodland Room and let the door drift close to being closed.

“Oh no, definitely tease him all you want, but...just be gentle.”

“Got it. I’ll let you get settled, but I just want to say again how thrilled I am to meet you. And it’s really great what you guys are doing for Carson.”

“I’m really glad to meet you, too. Although I was also a little...apprehensive, maybe? I mean, after how important Jake said you were to him...no pressure, right?” I laughed nervously. “I certainly didn’t expect you to be so welcoming and generous, though.”

He scratched his chin, looking thoughtful for a moment, then nodded slightly. “Jake is a wonderful person. I’ve seen him through a lot of things, though I wish I’d been able to help more. After all this time, though, what I want more than anything for him is to find peace and happiness. He deserves it.”

I nodded. “Yeah. He’s been through a lot.”

Killian tilted his head and his eyes grew sharp. “You say that like you know something.”

I swallowed. “You don’t miss much, do you?” I sat down on the bench, and Killian drifted over to the chair and perched on the edge of the seat, waiting me out.

“Last night when you were asking about when Jake asked me to come down and when I’d agreed to go with Nick, I had a slight feeling of being interrogated.”

His features softened. “Sorry about that. Comes with the job, I’m afraid. Can’t seem to turn it off. My mind...it’s always working. I’m very curious; in fact, I’m sure Jake will tell you that.”

“So...what were you trying to find out with those questions?”

“Timing, mostly.”

This time I stayed silent to wait him out. The corners of his mouth moved up just a bit in amusement.

"It doesn't really matter, especially now that you're here, but I'd hoped Jake would have asked you a little sooner." He grinned a little. "He was encouraged to invite you."

His expression shifted and he slipped back into investigative mode. "So...tell me what you know about Jake," he prompted.

I nodded slowly. "You're right. I do know some things about Jake's past."

He tilted his chin up a bit. "Did he tell you?"

I shook my head slowly.

I imagined that Killian was studying me, assessing my worthiness and maybe wondering if he'd been too quick to extend his hand in this little escapade. He was Jake's best friend, after all, and I was sure he'd look out for his best interest first.

"Then how did you find out?"

"My brother can be a little protective sometimes. He did his own research and came to me with what he found."

"Which was?"

"Okay, well, Jake told me that his brother killed his family and almost killed you and him, but you shot and killed his brother." He flinched ever so slightly, but I noticed. "Then he said he got into drugs and stuff to, I guess, escape all that. What he didn't tell me was about Fenton Black and that whole...incident."

"Have you mentioned to Jake what you know?"

I laced my fingers together. "No."

His eyes moved, small lasers mapping my features and looking for cracks.

"Why not?"

I shook my head. "Because it doesn't matter. I mean, it does. I know it's a part of him, but it would be cruel to ask him to relive it or confess it or whatever. For what? Why would I need to know unless he needed me to know?"

He narrowed his eyes. "So you'll just ignore it?"

Irritation flared inside me, but I tried to control it. I had a feeling I was being tested.

"He's been sober for a year. He's worked hard. He and I are...we're a thing. We may not have a title yet, but it's real, and I'm not going to risk taking whatever peace he may have for no good reason. I don't want him to

feel that hurt again, I don't want him to have nightmares, and I'm not going to do anything to make that worse for him. So no, I don't plan to tell him."

He tilted his head and regarded me. "You do love him."

I raised my chin. "Yeah. I do."

A smile spread across his face. "I can't wait to see his face when he gets here. Come on, let me introduce you around. Everyone wants to meet you."

Chapter 33 - Jake

We hadn't even reached the porch steps when Killian burst through the front door.

"Happy Thanksgiving!" he said, throwing his arms open wide.

"Uh, thanks. You too," I said as he grabbed me and pulled me into a hug.

Was it just me or was he acting strangely?

He hugged Judy and waved at Shane, then turned to Brayden, tipping his head back to see his face. Killian was only a little taller than Kody, so Bray was almost a full foot taller.

"And you must be Brayden! Glad you could join us."

Brayden nodded and shook his hand. "Thanks for letting me come."

"Anytime," Killian said. "Why don't you guys go on in, drop off your coats, grab a drink? Jake, can I talk to you for a second?"

What was he up to?

I crossed my arms and waited until everyone was inside. I studied him with suspicion as the door drifted shut with a heavy 'chonk' sound. Killian's features were lit up from the inside, and more than ever I was sure he was up to something.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Nothing! I mean...I just wanted to catch up. How was the trip down? You took the train right?"

I shook my head. "You're being weird."

"I am not! Why didn't you call or text when you got down here?"

"I lost my phone on the train."

His eyebrows jumped. "Ah, that explains it."

"Killian—"

"Come on," he said suddenly. "Let's go in. It's cold out here."

He opened the door, and with a sigh I started inside.

"Oh...I have a surprise for you," he said as I stepped over the threshold.

I paused mid-step. "A surprise? What surprise? You know I don't like—"

"It's me," a little voice said, and Kody stepped out of the shadows under the stairs.

My mouth dropped open as my entire world narrowed to the boy I loved, standing there looking nervous as hell.

“Wha...what?” I stammered, my brain trying valiantly to catch up.

“Surprise?” Kody added.

I glanced around and realized that we had an audience. Judy, Shane, and Brayden stood off to one side, Judy's hands clutched against her chest, and Nick, of all people, stood on the stairs next to a timid-looking kid I'd never seen before.

I realized everyone was waiting for me to react, which somehow released me from my paralyzed shock. Without thinking, I crossed the foyer in two big steps and grabbed Kody in a bear hug, lifting him off his feet and planting a huge kiss on him, spectators be damned.

He had a big smile on his face when I finally set him down.

“You're not mad at me?” he asked.

“Mad at you? No! I'm so glad you're here.” I glanced up at Nick again, who was grinning so hard I could see his molars. “What happened?” I looked over to Judy and Brayden. “Were you guys in on this?”

Judy held out her hands. “No! I had no idea. I'm just as surprised as you are.”

Brayden shook his head. “Me either. I mean....me too.” He frowned. “I didn't know nothing.”

I turned to Killian. “You were definitely involved.”

“Guilty!” he agreed gleefully.

Kody grabbed my hands. “It just sort of happened,” he said. “I'll explain later. It's a long story. Let's just say I may have worn out my welcome at Nick's aunt and uncle's.”

That certainly sounded interesting. Sweet little Kody wearing out his welcome anywhere? I couldn't picture it. I looked at Nick again, but he just shrugged. The kid beside him was watching me with big eyes and looked slightly stunned.

Following my eyes, Kody spoke up again, “Oh, Jake, this is Nick's cousin Carson. We kidnapped him.”

Carson smiled shyly and gave me a little wave.

“Hi, Carson,” I said. “Should I be concerned? Are the police looking for you?”

“We have his mom's permission,” Nick said quickly.

“But not Dad's,” Carson chimed in softly.

“Okay, well, I can't wait to hear the entire story, but maybe we should all come inside and get out of the lobby.”

Killian laughed. “Yes! I can take coats. Judy, can you show everybody to the library? I think that's where we're gathering until dinner is ready.”

I shrugged out of my coat and handed it over to Killian, then slid my arm around Kody. I was surprised at how excited I was that he was there. I hadn't fully realized how much I'd missed him, how much I wanted to be sharing this with him, until he was standing there in front of me.

To think I'd actually thought it would be nice to get a break from all the emotions he riled up in me, and now I was just filled to the brim with pleasure to see him.

We made our way to the library, where several bottles of wine, Italian soda, and sparkling water awaited, along with a few familiar faces. Bryant and Calvin were sitting on the brown leather love seat, but stood as we entered, and Killian's mom, Meg, was apparently playing hostess.

Bryant was in his late forties, roughly my height, with dark hair and fit, with bulging biceps that strained at the arms of his short-sleeved button-up shirt and thighs that tested the limits of his Chino's seams, tanned skin, and crow's feet radiating out from the corners of his eyes like sunbursts, a testament to his love of the outdoors and his perpetual smile. His partner, Calvin, was younger, closer to thirty, with bleached blond hair, blue eyes, and pale skin. They were a striking couple and had been together for years.

Meg greeted me with a hug. She was petite, about the same height as Kody, with blonde hair that fell in soft waves just past her shoulders, and the same sharp blue eyes as Killian.

"Look at you!" she said, stepping back with a big grin. "You look great! What would you like to drink?"

I chose the sparkling water, and Kody did too, trying out an Italian accent on the brand name - Pellegrino. Brayden picked the blood orange soda, and Carson looked at him with curiosity and chose the same, while Nick asked Killian what he'd like. What was going on there? Meg went about pouring wine for all the new arrivals who wanted some alcoholic cheer.

Everyone else had already been introduced, so we all found places to perch, Kody and I taking the window seat so we could catch each other up on our adventures. He insisted I go first, but stopped me when I got to the part about losing my phone on the train.

"You lost your *phone*?" he asked, aghast at the very thought.

"Yes, but I've been texting and calling you from Brayden's phone nonstop."

He frowned. "I didn't get anything." He pulled out his phone and opened his messaging app. "Oh. What? There are a bunch of notifications. But I didn't get them, I swear!"

He tapped on Bray's contact card and gasped.

"Oh! Oh, no! I muted him when you guys were sick, and I guess I forgot to turn his notifications back on. I'm so sorry!"

I chuckled. "Apologize to Brayden, not me. How did you end up here, anyway?"

He quickly filled me in, though I suspected I was getting the abridged version.

"See!" I said when he wrapped up. "If I hadn't lost my phone and you hadn't blocked Brayden, then you would have never talked to Killian and been invited to dinner."

Brayden overheard me and looked over with an injured expression from where he'd been talking to Nick. "You blocked me, Kody?"

"I didn't block you! I just...muted you. Temporarily! You remember when Jake and I got sick back-to-back?"

Brayden nodded dutifully.

"Well, I was really exhausted, and you were asking me for water and stuff, and I needed to sleep, so I muted your notifications. Then I forgot to turn them back on. I'm sorry. Really."

Bray shrugged. "It's okay. I forgive you."

"Thanks, Bray. I feel so guilty."

"You were sick."

He said it with such finality that I realized for him it was as simple as that. No hard feelings — he knew Kody wasn't avoiding him out of spite or anything like that. In some ways I envied his view of the world.

I was about to ask for more details about what had gone down with Nick's family, since he'd glossed over that part, when we were interrupted by more arrivals.

It was Ilana Constantino, her husband, Lysander, and their daughter, Melody. Ilana was a lawyer, and she'd helped me out a few times in the past, walking Judy through the adoption process when my family was killed and later making sure I had legal representation when I was accused of killing Fenton, so I had a soft spot for her and her family.

Ilana was strikingly beautiful, late thirties, with long curly brown hair, dark almond-shaped eyes, and an impeccable fashion style. She was wearing a dark-red sheath dress under a long black knit duster.

Lysander, also a lawyer, was her equal — a tall, distinguished Black man around fifty with close-cropped hair graying at the temples and a well-groomed pencil mustache. He was wearing a dark red V-neck sweater over a crisp white shirt and dark slacks.

Lysander carried their daughter, two-year-old Melody, who fit right in with a red velvet dress, white tights, and tiny little Mary-Jane shoes, a matching red bow in her dark curls. They made for a beautiful family.

After another round of introductions, Kane appeared in the doorway.

"Kane!" Melody squealed and wiggled out of her father's arm to run to him.

Kane scooped her up and twirled her around while she giggled.

"Dad said to tell you dinner would be ready in five minutes," he reported, then vanished, taking Melody with him.

"She adores him," Ilana commented.

Just then Tad wandered in. I was wondering if he would make an appearance. The room was starting to feel a little stuffy with so many people crammed into it.

Tad was sixteen, slim, with copper ringlets that framed a face that was almost too pretty. He was Killian's foster brother, a runaway he'd met during a case and convinced Adam and Steve to take in. He'd had a rough life and came across as very defensive, holding people at arm's length. We'd become somewhat friendly during my senior year, but we weren't close.

"Just in time for dinner," Meg said, beaming at him.

He smiled back and ducked his head. Meg was one of the few people who seemed to be able to consistently crack through his shell.

After a bit more small talk, Kane appeared again, this time with Melody on his shoulders, to announce that dinner was ready. We made our way across the hall to the ballroom, a huge formal room that ran the entire length of the house. They'd set up several tables down the center, complete with white tablecloths, fine china settings, and handwritten place cards.

Adam and Steve stood at one end of the room, looking a little frazzled but absolutely thrilled.

"Hello, and welcome!" Adam said. "Happy Thanksgiving!"

"Happy Thanksgiving!" we all echoed back

"Oh God, here comes the speech," Kane moaned, and everyone laughed.

Steve wrapped an arm around Adam's waist. They were such a handsome couple, both decently fit, just a little over six feet tall, and in their mid-forties. Kane got his auburn hair from Adam, though his green eyes must have come from his mother, since Adam's were a pale blue. Steve was slightly taller, with brown hair and eyes and a full mustache.

Adam laughed. "No speech! Okay, maybe just a little one."

Kane groaned.

“Alright, alright. I promise to keep it brief. But before we eat enough carbohydrates to medically qualify as hibernating bears, Steve and I just wanted to say how happy we are to have all of you here tonight.”

He glanced around.

“Every year this seems to get bigger,” he continued. “More chairs, more place settings, more noise, more arguments over pie. And somehow Steve still keeps agreeing to let me host.”

Steve chuckled. “I never agreed. I surrendered.”

That earned a laugh.

“But seriously,” Adam said, his voice softening, “it means a lot to us seeing some new faces around the table this year. Or tables. We’ve always believed family isn’t just about who you’re related to. Sometimes the family you choose saves your life. Sometimes they show up when nobody else does. And sometimes they show up to surprise the one they love.”

Kody ducked his head, pressing it against my shoulder, as everyone turned to look at him. He’d yet to release my hand.

“I know the holidays can be complicated for a lot of people,” Adam went on. “Not everybody has a place where they feel fully loved, fully accepted, fully safe. So if you’re here tonight, that means you belong here. No exceptions.”

Kody’s hand tightened in mine, and I glanced down to see him watching Nick’s cousin. Carson was watching Adam intently, a range of emotions playing across his features like a movie. There was definitely a story there.

Adam lifted his glass slightly, drawing my attention back to him. “To old friends, new friends, and chosen family. We’re really glad you’re here.”

“And to whoever brought the extra wine,” Steve added. “You’re the real hero.”

Dinner was amazing, as always. Adam really should have considered opening a restaurant instead of a B&B. The appetizers alone could have fed a small village. There was baked brie en croute topped with cranberry compote and candied pecans; crostini with whipped goat cheese, fig preserves, and prosciutto; little puff pastry mushrooms filled with herbed cream cheese; and a massive charcuterie board overflowing with imported cheeses, smoked meats, honeycomb, spiced nuts, dried fruits, olives, and slices of crusty artisan bread Adam had apparently driven forty minutes to acquire because “the bakery near us simply doesn’t understand sourdough.”

The main table looked almost absurdly extravagant. The turkey had been dry-brined for two days and roasted with herb butter beneath the skin until it emerged lacquered golden brown and smelling of sage and garlic. Beside it sat a spiral-cut ham glazed with bourbon, brown sugar, and cloves. There was also a crown roast of pork, because Adam firmly believed one large entrée was “visually underwhelming.”

The side dishes bordered on architecture. Truffle mashed potatoes sat in a massive copper bowl beside sweet potato gratin layered with Gruyere and thyme. Green beans had somehow been elevated with garlic confit and toasted almonds. There was maple-roasted delicata squash, wild mushroom stuffing studded with chestnuts, creamy mac and cheese with a crispy parmesan crust, honey-glazed rainbow carrots, roasted Brussels sprouts with pancetta, cranberry-orange relish, homemade dinner rolls brushed with rosemary butter, and a silky turkey gravy Steve had apparently been babysitting like a newborn child all afternoon.

Adam had also made a vegan lentil-and-walnut Wellington because Calvin was vegetarian and “everybody deserves drama at Thanksgiving.”

Dessert occupied an entire separate table like a bakery display window. There were pumpkin pies topped with fresh whipped cream, pecan pies so rich they practically glistened, apple tarts dusted with cinnamon sugar, miniature cheesecakes with cranberry swirls, dark chocolate bourbon cake, pear galettes, and an absurd tower of delicate French macarons in autumn colors.

Meanwhile, Steve wandered through the chaos periodically refilling wine glasses and muttering things like, “Please eat more stuffing. We’re going to have enough leftovers to survive a nuclear winter.”

Everything tasted as good as it looked. I ate until I thought I was going to explode, and then had another slice of pie.

When we’d all consumed as much as we could without Adam and Steve force-feeding us — though the unspoken threat felt ever present — Adam stood again and tapped a spoon against his water glass.

“Our regulars know what’s coming, but for our first-timers, we have a little Thanksgiving tradition here. After we’re stuffed fatter than the turkey and before we all head off in little groups, we go around and each person says one thing they’re thankful for.” He held up a finger. “That’s one thing.”

He shot a pointed look at Bryant, who tried to look offended but ended up just grinning, then continued, “If you really just can’t keep it to one thing, the judges will decide each request on a case-by-case basis. It’s me. I’m the judge. Everyone got that?”

A chorus of agreement accompanied by nods was his answer.

“Great. I’ll start. I’m thankful to have Kody, Nick, Carson, and Brayden with us this year. I hope it’s not the last time we see you. You’re all always welcome here.”

He turned to Steve, who took a big swig of his wine before setting his glass down. “Last Thanksgiving was at the beach house, and I remember saying that we were going to need a bigger room if the guest list kept growing, so I’m thankful that we have this space that accommodates all of us with room to grow.”

“Hear, hear,” Adam said.

Melody had crawled up into Kane’s lap after she ate. He stopped bouncing her on his knee long enough to say, “I’m thankful I’m surviving my first semester of college. So far anyway.”

Everyone chuckled.

“I’m thankful that I finally got to meet Kody,” Killian said, and I glanced at Kody to see him blushing.

“What am I, chopped liver?” Nick said.

Killian grinned. “And Brayden and Carson.”

“Hey!” Nick protested.

“Wait your turn,” Adam said with mock sternness.

Tad was next. “I’m thankful to meet new people, too,” he said, his eyes never leaving Nick’s face.

I’d noticed he’d been paying an awful lot of attention to Nick, and I wondered if I should warn my friend that Tad could be a little...predatory...at times, but then I decided that Nick was a big boy and could take care of himself. Besides, it might be funny to see him on the receiving end of some aggressive flirting for a change.

Suddenly, I realized that everyone was looking at me expectantly. “Oh, is it my turn already?” I asked, my mind racing.

Why hadn’t I been thinking of something so I’d be ready?

“Um...” I looked over at Kody, who was watching me with a contented little smile on his face. Love filled his eyes, and all at once I was overwhelmed by his blind faith in me.

No.

It wasn’t blind. He saw me. He truly saw me, flaws and all...and loved me anyway. He’d been nothing but patient with me while I figured things out. He was the kindest person I’d ever met, incredibly gentle when I needed him to be and unyielding and stubborn when he needed to be.

Sitting there watching the candlelight play across his beautiful face, I was filled with so many emotions, all of them competing for

dominance — happiness that he was there next to me, fear that I'd never be the man he believed I was, hope for our future, anger at myself for taking so long to see what was right in front of me — but above it all soared love like I'd never felt before. It was so strong it was almost too much. My throat closed up, and I felt my eyes welling up.

“Jake?” Kody asked, sounding concerned.

I blinked rapidly and cleared my throat. I was going to say something lame about being thankful for having Kody there with me, but when I opened my mouth, what came instead was, “I love you so fucking much.”

Kody's eyes grew wider than I'd ever seen them as a deep hush fell over the room, even little Melody had gone quiet.

“What?” Kody whispered.

“I love you,” I repeated, marveling at how natural the words felt coming out of my mouth. “I don't know why it took me so long to tell you, but I promise I'll never stop telling you. I love you, Kody Kingsley. I love you, and I want you to be my boyfriend. Will you be my boyfriend?”

Kody made a little whimpering noise, then threw himself at me with such force that he almost flipped my chair over with both of us in it.

“Yes,” he said, his voice thick with emotion, his arms squeezing my neck so hard I couldn't breathe. “Yes, you big dummy. I was already yours. I love you too.”

I felt a warm wetness on my cheek and realized he was crying. I gently pried him off of me and wiped away the tears streaming down his face with my thumbs, then cupped his face in my hands.

“I love you,” I said again. Now that I'd broken the dam, it was like I couldn't say it enough.

He sniffled and giggled a little. “I know.”

We sat staring into each other's eyes, having an entire conversation without saying a word.

“Jesus,” Nick said into the silence, and the fact that we were sitting in a crowded room surrounded by people hit me like a Mack truck.

“Oh,” I said, looking around. Half the room had tears in their eyes, and the rest didn't look far off. “Um...sorry? Uh...”

“Don't you dare apologize,” Judy said quickly. “I feel beyond privileged to have witnessed that moment.”

“Judy is right,” Adam said. “And I think that might be enough for this year's tradition.”

“I didn't mean—” I started, but Nick cut me off.

“Nobody wants to follow that,” he said.

"I'm thankful that Jake is my friend," Brayden announced loudly.
"Right back atcha, buddy," I said, not taking my eyes off Kody.
As everyone started talking, I leaned in and kissed him tenderly, hoping he could feel every bit of the love that I felt for him.
"Hi, boyfriend," I said softly.
"Hi, boyfriend," he answered, his eyes filling up again.

"So that's how we kidnapped Carson and ended up here," Kody said, wrapping up his recap of his journey from school to New Jersey to Maryland.

"Yeah, I see why you guys wanted to get him out of there, especially if he is gay. His dad sounds like hot garbage. I still can't believe you said all that to him though. Between that and you jumping Foster that time, remind me to stay on your good side."

He giggled. "If there's one thing I can't stand, it's a bully," he said.

We were walking by ourselves along the creek that ran through Adam and Steve's property, bundled up against the chill, hand in hand.

I pulled him to a stop and swung him around to face me.

"Hey, I just want to apologize again for taking so long to get here."

He was shaking his head. "It was worth the wait, babe. Besides, it took you as long as it needed to take. I admit I was starting to get maybe just the teeniest, tiniest bit impatient, but I also understand that you've been through a lot and it just took you a little longer to get there."

I pulled him into a hug, rubbing his back. "How did I get so lucky?"

"I'd argue that I'm the lucky one," he said, his voice slightly muffled by my chest.

"Oh my God! Kody, you have to hear this story!" Nick called from across the back lawn. "Come here!"

"Did you have to bring him?" I asked, pressing a kiss against the crown of his head.

Kody laughed. "I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for him."

"I know," I said with an exaggerated sigh. "And I love him, I do — not nearly as much as you — but sometimes..."

I reluctantly released Kody, and he stretched up on his tiptoes for a quick kiss...that turned into a much longer kiss.

"Kody!" Nick yelled, and we broke apart.

"Think of it this way," Kody said with a grin. "It's great practice for when we have kids."

"Hey! I never agreed to kids..."

"Oh, we're having kids," Kody said as he started across the grass toward the bonfire where Nick, Brayden, Carson, Kane, Tad, and Killian were trading stories.

"How many are we talking?" I asked as I followed.

"At least five or six," he called over his shoulder.

"Then you'd better get pregnant soon," I shot back.

He turned but kept walking backward. "I'm ready to start trying when you are," he taunted with a wicked grin.

I felt a jump in my pants but just smiled back. I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt so happy. Maybe I never had.

We joined the other teens, and Nick made Killian retell Amalie's story.

I already knew the story, and everyone else had already lived through it or heard it already, so I turned to Carson sitting next to me. "How was your second Thanksgiving dinner of the day?" I asked.

He shrugged, eyes on the fire. "This was a lot fancier than what we had at home. I didn't really get to eat much earlier before Dad had to run his big mouth, though. Then the next thing I knew, Nicky was bringing me here."

I nodded. "Yeah, that was cool of him."

He hunched his shoulders. "Yeah." We fell silent for a moment, then he said, "That was, um, really sweet, what you said to Kody after dinner. Kody is cool. He's been really nice to me."

I grinned. "I didn't intend for it to be so public, but thanks. And yeah, Kody is the best."

"You really love him?"

"More than I have ever loved anyone or anything."

He stared into the flames. "I hope somebody loves me like that someday."

I looked at him, shoulders up, arms wrapped tightly around his middle. I wasn't sure how old he was but he looked so young and vulnerable in that moment.

"Someone will," I said, trying to put every ounce of confidence in me into those two words.

He shook his head. "You don't know that."

"Yeah, I do," I countered.

He peeked at me out of the corner of his eye. "How do you know?"

"I'm psychic."

He snorted.

“Okay, maybe my aunt is, but I'm not. But I am speaking from experience. I was your age not that long ago, and I remember how stuff like that felt so far off, so impossible, but it's really not.” I glanced at Kody. “Love can come out of nowhere when you least expect it.”

“Not for me.”

“What makes you say that?”

His eyes darted around the circle, and it occurred to me that he was nervous about talking in front of everyone.

“Want to go for a walk?” I asked.

His head spun sharply in my direction.

“There's something I want to show you.”

There really wasn't, but it was an excuse to get away from the group. I had a feeling he needed to talk, and he wasn't going to open up there.

He shrugged. “What about Kody?”

Killian was still going strong telling the tale of the Haunting of Amalie's House, and Kody was hanging on every word. I leaned over and whispered in his ear, “Be right back.”

He nodded without taking his eyes off Killian. I wasn't sure he'd even heard me, but I'd done my due diligence. I stood, and strolled away from the bonfire toward the little copse of trees that stood off to one side.

For a moment, Carson just watched me go, but then he jumped up and rushed after me.

“So what do you want to show me?” he asked when we were a little ways away from the others.

“I thought you might like to see Amalie's grave.”

He stopped for a second, while I kept walking, then had to rush to catch up.

“Wait. She's real?”

“Oh, yeah. They really did find her skeleton bricked up behind a wall in the basement. They moved her out here with her baby. And her husband, I guess, though since he was the one who killed her, she was probably less thrilled about that.”

“Jesus fucking Christ,” he muttered under his breath, and I tried not to laugh. The kid seemed so tightly wound that his cursing seemed almost comical.

We entered the tree line and followed the little crushed stone path Adam had laid as it meandered its way back to the small cemetery: just three headstones, one smaller than the others, all watched over by an enormous marble statue of an angel, her head bowed, arms out in

supplication, wings arched behind her. She almost looked like she was glowing in the moonlight.

"Are you fucking serious right now?" Carson asked, looking like he might bolt at any second.

I did laugh that time. "It's fine. I promise. Killian laid her to rest. Besides, even when she was actively haunting, it was in the house, not out here."

I sat on the stone garden bench and patted the seat next to me. He stared at me like I'd grown a second head.

"Come on," I cajoled. "I know you want to talk."

He shifted his weight, his expression going from freaked out to wary.

"What do you mean?"

"Back at the fire pit it seemed like you wanted to talk but couldn't with all those people around."

"Talk about what?"

"You tell me."

He stood there for a minute waging an internal war. I gave him space and let the silence stretch out, a trick I'd picked up from Dr. Patel.

Just when I thought he was never going to speak, he started talking, his words tumbling over each other in his rush to get them out. "I'm never going to find love because I can't come out. Nobody knows. You're the first person I've ever told. My dad would..." He paused and took a deep, shuddering breath. "God, he'd lose his shit. I mean it. He might even kill me. And if he didn't, Kenny would. He says all the time that no kid of his could ever be gay. That's what he was saying when Kody called him fat and bald. Oh man, I'm going to be in so much trouble when I get home. He must be so mad."

"Hey, slow down," I said. "It's going to be okay."

"No, it isn't. He told me not to go with Nicky, and I went. I disobeyed him."

He was working himself into a full meltdown.

I stood and walked over to him, "Carson, take a breath. In through the nose, out through the mouth. Good. Take another one. Come on, do it with me. There you go. Good job."

I took him by the shoulders and steered him to the bench, then pressed down until he sat. I sat down next to him.

"Does your dad hit you?" I asked.

He shook his head no. "He just yells a lot. And punishes me."

“Okay, good. Well, not good, but it's better than hitting. My dad...” I paused. I hadn't talked about this with many people besides my therapist. “My dad was really strict, very religious. But he was also abusive. Mentally, emotionally, physically...the trifecta. He hit me some, but he really took it out on my brother.” I stopped again as old memories floated to the surface like corpses in a lake.

“I'm sorry,” Carson said in a small voice. “Is...is your brother okay?”

“No,” I said. “He's dead. My whole family is dead.”

“Fuck. I'm so sorry.”

“No, don't be. For the most part, the world is probably better off without them. Most of them anyway. It's just me and Judy now, and she's the best.”

“And Kody. You have Kody, too.”

I smiled. “Yes, and Kody. And a bunch of great friends, like Killian and Brayden, and some people back at school. Chosen family. That's what Adam was talking about at dinner. Sometimes, our blood relations suck, right? And when we're young, we're kind of stuck with them, but eventually you won't be living at home anymore, and you'll get to open your wings and fly.”

He was shaking his head again. “But my dad—”

“Your dad is a homophobic bully. You can't live your life for other people, Carson, especially not tiny little people like him. I'm not saying to come out waving a rainbow flag right now, at least not to him — you have to stay safe — but there are some people you could talk to who would support you even now.”

“Like you and Kody and Nicky?”

“Us, yeah, but also maybe your mom? Or your sister?”

He frowned. “Kelly?”

“They're both supportive of Nick, right?”

“That's different.”

“I mean, sure, he's not their son or brother, but he's still family. From what Kody was telling me, I feel pretty sure they'd have your back. But no pressure. Coming out is a big deal, and you have to do it on your terms. But hey, you just came out to me, so that's something.”

His eyes widened. “I did, didn't I?”

“Yep. Unless you were just trying to tell me you're a werewolf and I'm in imminent danger out here until the moon...”

He snickered. "Nah, I'm not that hairy yet. Although if I got any genes from my dad, eventually all the hair on my head will migrate south to my back and shoulders."

I laughed. The kid had a sense of humor after all.

He tipped his head back to look at the moon and grinned. "I'm gay," he said, like he was trying the words on for size, then laughed out loud. "I'm gay!" he repeated a little louder. Then he closed his eyes and let loose with a howl to rival the best Hollywood werewolf.

A commotion came from the fire pit area as his howl faded away.

"What the fuck is happening in there?" I heard Nick yell.

Carson and I cracked up, and were very soon joined by the others.

"What was that?" Killian asked. "Or should I say who was that?"

I pointed at Carson, "That was all Teen Wolf, here."

Nick looked surprised. "Carson?"

Carson grinned. "I'm gay," he announced.

Nick blinked, then jumped forward to hug his cousin. "Aw, I'm so proud of you, Carito."

"Congrats," Kody said, and everyone else chimed in words of support.

I stood, and Kody leaned against me. I wrapped my arms around him, and we watched a beaming Carson enjoy his moment, until a huge yawn almost split Kody's cute face in half.

"You tired?" I asked.

He nodded. "I didn't sleep well last night. I was sharing a bed with Nick, and he was all over me."

I jerked back, but Kody just giggled. "I'm kidding. He was a perfect gentleman. I just couldn't sleep. Strange place, I guess. And I was worried about you."

I pulled him close again. "I'm sorry, Kode."

"It wasn't your fault. It's just catching up to me."

"Maybe you should get to bed."

"Mmm," he hummed noncommittally. "I don't want you to go." He paused, then looked up at me. "Maybe you could stay?"

"I..." I started to say I couldn't, but why not? We were boyfriends. Boyfriends spent the night together.

I mean, technically, we had spent the night together. In the same room anyway, when we were sick. But this would be different. I remembered Kody's taunt earlier about getting him pregnant and felt a flutter in my stomach. Very, very different.

"Yeah, if it's okay with Adam and Steve, I'll stay."

Kody burrowed into my side, his eyes sparkling.

Of course, it was perfectly fine with everyone. In fact, by the time we got back up to the house, Judy and Shane had already left, essentially making the decision for me. Killian or someone would have driven me home if I'd asked, but it was a moot point, because I did not want to go anywhere. I was right where I wanted to be.

We all stayed up a bit longer, shooting the shit and having late night snacks. It reminded me of middle school sleepovers, except nobody was drawing dicks on anyone's foreheads...yet. Brayden had nodded off, sprawled across the big leather couch, but so far no one had gone off to find a Sharpie.

Eventually, Kody and I peeled off and headed upstairs to surprisingly little fanfare, aside from one smartass comment from Nick about watching.

Killian had simply said, "Strike three, and you're out," and Nick was practically groveling at his feet. I'd have to ask Kody about that...later. I had other things on my mind right then.

The nerves were starting to kick in as we climbed the stairs. I noticed Kody had gone quiet too, and I wondered if he was having second thoughts.

I had a complicated history with sex, but I'd had a lot of it — just never with someone I truly loved. So in some ways, this would be a first for both of us. Still, he had a lot more on the line.

Once we'd both used the bathroom and brushed our teeth, we stood in the center of the room staring at each other awkwardly.

"We don't have to do anything if you don't—"

"Jake Sheridan, if you finish that sentence, I will punch you in the mouth," Kody growled. "I've been waiting for this for months. Now get naked."

We both burst into laughter. It was just what we needed to break the ice.

I stepped closer and stroked his cheek. "I love you, Kody with a K," I said softly.

He swooned. "I will never get tired of hearing you say that."

"I love you," I said again, sliding a hand around his waist. "I love you." I pulled him closer. "I love you," I mumbled against his lips.

And then we were kissing like it was the last time we'd ever be allowed to kiss.

Kody's hands slid up into my hair while mine settled at his waist, pulling him tight against me. Every nerve ending in my body lit up at the

contact. He made this soft sound into my mouth — half sigh, half relieved laugh — and it nearly destroyed what little self-control I had left.

We stumbled together toward the bed in a tangle of limbs and nervous energy, still kissing between bursts of laughter whenever one of us bumped into furniture.

“Elegant,” I murmured as my knee hit the mattress.

“We’re very graceful,” Kody agreed breathlessly.

“Like gazelles.”

“Sexy gazelles.”

I grinned against his mouth and pushed him gently backward onto the bed.

For a second, I just looked down at him.

It was ridiculous how cute he was. Absolutely weaponized. His hair was adorably messy already, his cheeks pink, his lips swollen from kissing. He looked up at me with so much trust and affection that my chest physically hurt.

“You’re staring again,” he whispered.

“Can you blame me?”

He smiled shyly and reached for me. I went willingly, stretching out beside him as he curled instantly against my side like that was where he belonged.

God. That feeling again. Belonging.

I kissed him slower this time, savoring it. My hand slipped beneath the hem of his shirt, fingertips brushing warm skin. He shivered beneath my touch.

“Cold?” I teased softly.

“No,” he breathed. “Definitely not cold.”

I laughed and kissed along his jaw while my hand explored carefully, giving him plenty of time to stop me if he wanted to.

He never did. If anything, he kept moving closer.

His fingers fumbled briefly with the hem of my shirt before he pulled back just enough to tug it over my head. He stared at me afterward with wide eyes.

“What?” I asked, suddenly self-conscious.

“Nothing,” he said quickly. “You’re just...really unfair-looking.”

I snorted. “Unfair-looking?”

“You know what I mean.” His face reddened. “Like somebody designed you in a lab specifically to make my dick hard.”

“That’s the sweetest thing anyone’s ever said to me.”

“It wasn’t supposed to be sweet.”

“It absolutely was.”

He groaned and hid his face against my shoulder while I laughed softly and wrapped my arms around him.

After a moment, he lifted his head again, expression gentler this time. “Can I?” he asked quietly, fingers brushing my side.

I nodded.

His touch was tentative at first, almost reverent, like he was afraid of doing something wrong. But gradually he relaxed beneath my hands and kisses, growing bolder, more confident.

The room filled with uneven breathing and whispered reassurances.

No pressure. No performance. Nothing ugly or transactional.

Just us.

At some point his shirt disappeared as well, discarded somewhere onto the floor without ceremony. Skin against skin sent a fresh wave of heat through me, and Kody made another one of those helpless little sounds that went straight to my bloodstream.

“You okay?” I whispered.

“Mhmm.” He nodded quickly. “Very okay.”

I brushed my nose against his. “You can tell me if you want to slow down.”

“You are literally the only person in this room trying to slow things down.”

I snorted, then his expression softened again.

“Jake,” he said quietly, fingers tracing my shoulder. “I want you. Like...all the way.”

The sincerity in his voice almost sent me over the edge.

I kissed him gently before answering. “I know.”

He searched my face immediately, worried he’d said the wrong thing. “But?”

“No but.” I stroked his hair back from his forehead. “I want that too. I just think...maybe we wait a little longer for that part.”

His face flushed even more, but he nodded. “Because I’m inexperienced?”

“No.” I tilted his chin up so he’d look at me. “Because this matters to me. Because you matter to me.”

Something vulnerable flickered across his face.

“I don’t want our first time to happen because we got carried away,” I admitted softly. “I want it to happen because we’re both ready and

sure and not nervous and laughing because somebody elbowed the headboard.”

“That still might happen.”

“Fair.”

He smiled a little. Then he surprised me by kissing me first this time — slow and warm and full of affection.

“Okay,” he whispered against my mouth. “We wait.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah.” His hand slid into mine. “Honestly...this already feels kind of perfect.”

And somehow that simple sentence made me feel more loved than anything else possibly could have.

“But can we still get naked?” he asked.

I threw my head back and laughed. “Yes. I would like that. I'd like that a lot.”

So we did. And Kody naked was everything I'd imagined and more. Judging by the reverent look on his face, it was fair to assume he felt the same way about me.

Then we spent the next hour tangled together beneath the blankets, exploring carefully, kissing lazily, licking, nibbling, sucking, learning each other piece by piece. Every touch felt meaningful in a way sex had almost never felt to me before.

And when we finished, it was the most powerful orgasm I'd ever experienced. I thought my entire body was going to turn inside out. I laid there after, our mess cooling between us, and I felt completely depleted, legs shaking, chest heaving. I couldn't have stood up if the ghost of Amalie herself had strolled in right then.

Kody kept smiling like he couldn't help himself.

At one point, after we'd cleaned up and crawled back into bed, doing our best to avoid the wet spots, he tucked himself against my chest and mumbled softly, “I'm definitely never gonna forget tonight.”

I laughed softly and pressed a kiss into his hair.

“Good,” I whispered. “Because neither am I. I love you so much, Kody.”

“I love you too.”

Then I drifted to sleep, our limbs tangled together...and it was perfect.

Chapter 34 - Kody

After we'd cleaned up, I could have pulled pajamas on, at least bottoms or something, but the new feeling of so much of our bodies being in contact was too much to resist.

Jake had made a move to put his underwear back on, but I asked him if he'd be okay sleeping without them.

For a moment I wondered if that might be too much, considering we weren't in the moment anymore. Instead, he smiled, just a tiny one, and the tips of his cheeks flushed a bit as he climbed under the covers with me. I rested my cheek on his chest and molded myself to him, idly tracing patterns on his skin.

He rested his hand on my back and stroked my skin for a bit, but his breathing slowly evened out. I stopped moving my hand so I wouldn't wake him and just soaked in the physical sensations, but I couldn't fall asleep.

I'm not a virgin anymore. I have a boyfriend. I have something real. Something I can build on. Someone I love who loves me back.

In the quiet of the room, I replayed his declaration in front of his world — his family, both blood and chosen — people who were meaningful to him. Knowing my feelings for him were returned just as strongly was almost more than I could handle. I'd grabbed him and hadn't been able to stop the tears — all the waiting, all the hoping, all the patience paying off in a single moment, a dream come true.

And now this...lying together as we were was also a big fucking deal. The trust he was showing to go with his love. The fact that there were still things he had that haunted him, but he trusted me enough to be vulnerable.

"You've made me so happy," I whispered.

In the morning, I woke up in a cocoon of warmth. The blankets were heavy, but Jake and I were tangled together. I'd never slept like that before, lying on someone, but Jake had rolled a bit toward me in the night and wrapped his arms around me. Instead of his chest, my head was on his biceps, and one of his legs was thrown over me. For my part, one of my legs had slipped between his, so the fact we hadn't put anything on was wonderfully obvious.

The only thing ruining it was my piss boner.

I kissed his chest a few times and gave in to licking one of his nipples. That got him to stir a bit.

“Babe,” he said sleepily. “What are you up to?”

“I have to go to the bathroom, but I’m tangled up with you. Which if I didn’t need the bathroom would be the most perfect thing ever.”

He hummed happily. After a little nuzzling, I told him I’d go make him coffee and to come down to the porch.

“Why there? Outside?”

“I had a daydream.”

“Did I have clothes on in this daydream?”

“Yes, but now I have so many dreams to picture you naked in...”

He snorted and smiled, eyes still closed. “Okay, babe.”

I slowly slid out from his grip and off the bed with a small thump, given there was a bit of a drop. I pulled my bag open and fished around for some joggers to slip into. Behind me came a small whistle.

“I’m still goin’ to hell.”

I turned and stood still for a moment. “Make it worth it, babe.”
Who am I?

“Kody,” he whined. “I can’t leave the room like this. Either come back to bed, or you have to put some clothes on.”

I laughed to myself as I pulled the joggers on and then a tee. If I didn’t have to pee so bad, I would have been all over him.

I slipped into the hallway and down to the bathroom, then made my way down to the kitchen. It took me a minute to find the kitchen, since I didn’t get that part of the tour.

“Good morning.”

I jumped, not expecting to find someone in the kitchen this early. It was Adam’s partner, Steve. “Oh, hi. Good morning. You startled me. I didn’t think anyone would be up.”

“Yeah. Curse of an early riser. I’m used to getting up to put out the continental breakfast for our guests. Did you sleep well?”

“Best sleep of my life,” I said honestly. “That room — the Woodland Room — is the most amazing space I’ve ever seen. I’d live in that room full time for the rest of my life!”

“Thank you.” He smiled. “We worked hard on all of them. So. Quite a show for Jake yesterday. It’s really nice to see him doing so well.”

“He’s amazing,” I agreed. “I don’t mean to be rude, so please excuse me, but I was going to make some coffee for him.”

He nodded. “I think Judy said something about you being a barista?”

“Well, I don’t know if I’d go that far, but I do know my way around good coffee equipment.”

“Well, let me show you what you have to work with.”

He pointed toward a gleaming machine, and my mouth dropped open. “Uh. That’s a professional machine.”

“Do you think you can manage to make Jake some coffee with it?”

Grinning, I said, “I think I’m about to make my boyfriend very happy.”

“I get the impression you do that a lot.”

He helped with the things I needed, even providing a jar of local honey, and as I worked the machine, I continued the conversation.

“When we pulled up and I saw that porch, my first thought was Jake and I sitting out there with our morning coffee. Probably cold, but I’m going to take advantage.”

“Oh, there’s a solarium on the back of the house. We do breakfast for guests there in the warmer months as it has a nice view of the grounds. It’ll still be cool, but not as bad as the front porch.”

“Perfect!” I happily made Jake’s coffee, then started to make one for myself. As I did, he asked questions about what I was doing, saying he was curious how a ‘professional’ did it.

When I finished, he said, “Well. Why don’t you take that out to the porch, and I’ll knock on your guy’s door on my way back upstairs? I’ll send Jake down.”

I turned and looked at him. “Thank you. I... For all of this. Thank you.”

He smiled but said nothing as he left the room.

I carried the cups out through the hallway and navigated to the glassed-in sunroom. A couple of small table and chair sets dotted the space, and I picked one where we could look out onto the new day — our first as an official couple.

My mind, always a strong candidate to wander, drifted back again to Jake saying he loved me for the first time and making us official. My heart and brain swelled with love for him and how happy he’d made me by sharing his heart.

I knew this B&B would always be a special place for us. I could see us coming back here for anniversaries year after year.

“Babe?”

“Back here!”

He shuffled into view, wearing the pants and shirt from the day before, though the shirt was untucked, and his zipper was open.

“Come drink your coffee, baby.”

“Oh, that smells good. Judy’s coffee machine is shit. I’m spoiled with you making mine every morning.”

He sat and inhaled the steam from the cup before sipping.

I stayed quiet, engaging in my ritual of watching his face change as his body absorbed the caffeine and he slowly became less fuzzy in the head.

The cups were smaller than the ones at the shop, so when he drained it in no time, I snagged it and popped back in to refill it.

Setting the cup back down, I resumed my place, watching my boyfriend wake up.

“Thank you. I’m so spoiled. How did you sleep?” he asked.

“Like it was the best night ever.”

He smiled. “Me too. But it was a bit warm in there, huh?”

I studied his face for a moment, trying to keep this in my head — our first official morning. “I love you.”

He smiled gently. “I love you, too.”

“Thank you for all this. For last night. For doing things the way you needed to. For being so gentle with me. For being you.”

“Okay, starting to feel a little embarrassed here,” he said with a chuckle. “You know it was all for you. Well...for us. But it wouldn’t have happened without you.”

I smiled at him. “And Killian. I like him.”

He chuckled. “He played his part. Now don’t you go conspiring with him anymore.”

“Not committing to that at all.” I laughed as he rolled his eyes. “Babe. Are you awake now?”

He looked at me as he sipped. “What’s up? It’d be suspicious if we went back to the room already, but...”

“Oh. That’s... You still have coffee left. We can talk about that after.”

He chuckled, and I reached out to cover his hand with mine.

“Are you okay this morning? After last night?”

He tilted his head. “Yeah, I am. It... For a moment, I was maybe a little concerned about...how I’d feel... What I might... But I think the pace, the love... You. You made it okay. I feel safe with you. I know I’m loved.” He paused and shook his head. “I don’t think I could have done that with anyone but you.”

I nodded, satisfied he wasn’t dealing with any lingering doubts or ghosts from his past, at least as far as our first intimate evening anyway.

“Well, I’m not sure I mentioned that my dads are getting married, finally.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I thought they already were.”

“Nope. Something always comes up that derails things. Venue. Work stuff. Money gets tight. Life. But they’re finally going to tie the knot in January, during winter break. They planned it so I’d be home.”

“That’s exciting, huh?”

“Yeah. So...my dad has offered me a great Christmas present.”

“Holy subject change, Batman.”

“Not really.” I leaned in. “It’s all connected. The present is two roundtrip plane tickets back to California. I think, since I’ve met your family, you should meet mine. Plus, I can’t wait to see what you look like in a suit. And I want to dance with you at the wedding.” I paused as his eyes grew wider. “Plus, just think how hot it will be to get you out of your suit afterward...”

He shook his head, but with an affectionate smile. “Is this how it’ll be with you, Kode? Always chasing daydreams?”

“My biggest dream came true, so...I figure I should keep aiming for them.”

He chuckled. “Well, if that’s your way of inviting me, I’d love to go with you.”

He drained the cup and looked down at it for a moment.

“Cups are smaller than you’re used to. You want another?”

“Not yet.” He tilted his head and smiled just a little. “You know, I’ve learned a lot about you over the last few months. But one of the most important things is that if I want the truth out of you, alcohol is the way to go.”

I rolled my eyes and smiled at him. “Is this about my drunken attempt to kiss you?”

“Partially.” He grinned devilishly. “But sex really seems to be on your mind when you’re high.”

I crossed my arms and stared at him.

“Like...when you got sick and were all stoned on NyQuil.”

I raised an eyebrow. “I don’t remember being *stoned*.”

“I know. But that’s how I got my first view about how sex was going to go with you.”

I snorted. “Uh huh.”

He raised his voice and put his hand to his chest. “I jerk off over Jake so much.”

I shook my head. “I didn’t say that.”

“Have you seen Jake’s ass? I want to put my tongue in it.”
That felt a little closer to home. “Uh huh. I would *never* have said that.”

“I want Jake to eat my ass.”

I laughed and pushed him. “Shut up! I wouldn’t say that!”

“That thang was *thangin’!*”

“I don’t even know what that means!”

He laughed at me, eyes going wide. “But you did!”

“Did not!” I giggled at him.

“Why would I say it then, huh?”

“Because the caffeine has hit the part of your brain that likes to troll me, that’s why.”

He pushed his coffee cup with this finger. “I’m telling you. You said *a lot* when you had all that NyQuil”

“Well, you’re a flirt, even when you’re sick.”

“Oh, no, the VapoRub was all your fault!”

We went back and forth giving each other a hard time. I didn’t remember any of this NyQuil crap he was talking about, so I was nearly certain he was just saying it to wind me up.

But there was no denying how much my confidence had swelled. In some ways, now it almost felt like us being together was a foregone conclusion when it had been anything but. I think the feeling of certainty had been creeping up — with some definite drops — since he’d gotten sick. I felt like I’d planted a flag and just had to wait for him to realize it was for him, if he wanted it.

Apparently, he did.

I had no nagging doubts left. Jake was mine and I was his.

Adam and Steve cooked a big Southern family-style breakfast with bacon, leftover ham fried in bacon grease, biscuits, sausage gravy, and eggs cooked to order. I felt like I’d start to gain weight if we stayed here much longer. I’d have to hit the gym with Nick again at this rate.

After breakfast everyone got cleaned up, and we gathered in the library. We went over the Halloween pictures with everyone, and Nick declared victory when Killian gave him his number to text the link to.

There was no romantic future there, not one I could see, considering the distance, but I did see a friendship developing. Killian seemed to enjoy teasing Nick, and Nick seemed to enjoy being teased, at least by Killian.

On the other hand, Tad seemed to be very attached to Nick, who appeared to be as amused by him as he had been with Charlie. I didn't have the heart to tell Tad, who I hadn't really spoken to, that he was too young for Nick. I wasn't sure it would have mattered anyway.

We spent a lazy morning exploring the B&B and venturing for a walk on the grounds when it warmed up a little.

We divided a little after lunch, with Judy swinging by to pick up Jake so they could get him a new phone. I tagged along, partly to be with Jake but also to get to know his aunt a little bit, given how important she was to him.

"So, Kody, I'm curious."

Jake groaned from the backseat, and I looked at his aunt. "About?"

"The first time Jake mentioned you to me, there was something about a party?"

I sighed. "Oh. Yeah. That. Not my finest work, but you have to understand, it was all Nick's fault."

She chuckled. "I got the impression he's in the middle of a lot of things."

"He is. But don't get the wrong impression — he's great. I can honestly say nothing would have turned out like it did without him."

"Please never tell him that!" Jake said, laughing.

"What am I? An idiot?" I replied, smiling at him.

"This sounds like a good story?" his aunt prompted.

"I guess it kind of is. So Jake and I had been almost making contact at school for a few weeks. I'd see him places...he almost ran me over once."

"Not like with a car! You make it sound so bad!"

"I'd seen him out with this girl who I thought was his girlfriend. I didn't know Jake had noticed me, too. He was a customer at the coffee shop I work at."

"You got a job while you're at school?" I thought I saw her glance in the rearview mirror.

"Yes, but it's not because I'm incredibly responsible. It just kind of happened, mostly because I worked at my dad's coffee shop. Working with those machines was something familiar with all this change. Does that make sense?"

"Oh, yes. You grounded yourself."

"Right. So there I was, crushing on Jake, and I saw him with this girl, and all my little daydreams went up in smoke."

"A bit of a dreamer are you?"

“A bit?” Jake laughed. “He dreamed all this into reality.”

“A manifester...” Judy mused.

I wasn't exactly sure what that meant, but something about her tone made me blush. I charged forward. “Anyway, here's where it's Nick's fault. So I was all bummed about Jake being straight.”

“Wow, did you misread that!” Judy said with a laugh.

“I know! I don't have gaydar. I have 'please-be-gaydar', and it's overactive, so I never trust it. Anyway, Nick convinced me to go to this party. I should probably say I don't drink. I've tried it a couple times, and I just don't like the taste. So I tried this thing Nick gave me, thinking I'd be polite. It was called a Screwdriver. Have you heard of it?”

Judy smiled indulgently. “A time or two.”

“Well, I'd never heard of it, so I thought maybe it was kind of like a mocktail. When I actually tasted it, I couldn't taste any alcohol, so I ended up having a couple of them without realizing what I was doing.”

“Mixed drinks can sneak up on you,” Judy said with a nod.

“Then I got offered a Long Island Iced Tea. I'd never heard of that either.”

“That's a lot for someone of your weight.”

“Especially since I don't drink. So Jake's old roommate Foster started being a jerk, and I had beer muscles and poor judgment, and...I may have started a fight. Well, maybe Foster started it. And finished it. Jake took me back to my dorm.”

“That's, uh, where I got my first clue Kody was into me. I'd actually wanted to ask him out, but couldn't get a read on him. Then he tried to kiss me before he passed out.”

“Aren't I romantic?” I asked with an embarrassed laugh.

“Isn't it funny how all it takes is one moment of chance to start a relationship?” Judy asked.

“Actually, it took a lot more than that.”

“Meaning?”

I shrugged. “My dad wanting me to go to his alma mater. Jake going to an out-of-state school. Me working in a coffee shop with actually good coffee. Jake and his caffeine...preferences.”

“Nice phrasing,” Jake said with a roll of his eyes.

“Brayden adopting Jake. Or maybe Jake adopted Brayden. Then me getting Nick for a roomie. He made a lot of things possible. Like, things could have been very awkward between us, but he came right out and said he'd had a bad experience before and he didn't want us to ever cross any romantic lines, even though he thought I was cute.”

“Everyone thinks you’re cute,” Jake stated flatly.

“But he was there for me every step of this process, backing me up, and...he likes dressing me up to get Jake’s attention, too.”

“He’s the worst best friend I’ve ever had,” Jake confirmed.

“But really, all those things had to fall into place — the time, place, support. Tons of stuff to get to this place. And that’s not even considering that I was so embarrassed after the party that I was avoiding Jake, and he kind of had to hunt me down.”

“I was wondering when I’d hear about Jake participating in this little affair.”

“He spent most of his time being pretty.”

“Okay, I think it’s time to separate you two.”

We pulled into the parking lot, and while Jake and his aunt worked on getting a phone, I looked out of the plate glass windows to the street beyond. I wondered what it would have been like to grow up with Jake here, how he might have been different if we’d been together sooner.

But then maybe all of those things had to happen to create our moment? Maybe, if I’d known him back then, we’d either have never gotten together, or I’d have just been one of the blur of faces in his life.

In the distance a plane climbed into the sky. I imagined being on a plane like that with Jake, flying across the vast ocean to our Venetian destination. We could sit out on the Lido and watch the *Vaporetti* go by. Or maybe have lunch at a cafe overlooking the Grand Canal, the breeze off the Mediterranean tousling his hair like a god giving a favorite son affection. Maybe a rental where I could make his coffee and we could sit on a terrace overlooking the sea. What could an adventure like that bring us?

“See? He dreams all the time.”

I turned, blushing as Jake grinned at me, then looked down as his phone shook.

“Looks like all my missed messages and calls are coming from the cloud backup. Some happy thanksgivings from Erin and Carlos. One from Toshi? I didn’t think they had my number.” He scrolled for a second, then laughed and said, “So if you drove into a bridge abutment it would have been Nick’s fault?”

“Just wait until *you’re* stuck in the car with him for hours.”

We made the drive to Jake’s house next, so he could get his bags and a change of clothes along with Bray’s things. He decided to take a quick shower while we were there, so I sat in the kitchen with Judy.

“Jake was so worried you’d kill him if he didn’t FaceTime you yesterday,” she said with a chuckle.

I grinned. “We have a routine, even when we’re really busy. We usually see each other for coffee in the morning and at the meal hall at night for dinner.”

“That’s so nice. The routine and something to look forward to.” She shook her head with a little smile. “Him and his coffee. I guess your shop must be inexpensive. He hasn’t asked for any money at all, which I was surprised about. I mean I figured he’d need *something*.”

I tried to look innocent. “Oh. He gets a cutie discount at my shop.” She raised an eyebrow.

“I give him free coffee.” With a bright smile, I said, “It’s how I’m keeping him close. If we broke up, they’d charge him full price.”

She burst out laughing. “Well, he did complain about my coffee pot yesterday morning. I think he muttered something about how you’d never let him drink that.”

“True. But to be fair, everyone where I work was so invested in us getting together, I don’t think they charge him even if I’m not there.”

“Isn’t that something? It’s got to feel good.”

I let out an embarrassed laugh. “Most of the time. The owner is a little inappropriate sometimes, and it can be kind of embarrassing. Marla lent me her kitchen so I could cook for our first official date.”

“Oh? I didn’t know that.”

“Yeah. It was...a mess.” I shook my head and smiled at the memory. “I ended up knocking the food onto the floor partway through.”

“Oh no!”

I snorted and laughed a little. “It worked out. Jake helped me clean up, and we went out for ice cream, and except for me being a complete disaster, it went all right.”

“That’s very sweet of your coworker to help you that way and that they support your relationship.”

I grinned. “They were invested. But I like knowing they spoil him when I’m not there to do it myself.”

“Well, the problem with spoiling is that they get used to it. So now you can never have less than an expensive coffee machine or Jake will complain.” She grinned at me. “I’d been thinking so strongly you’d be joining us for Thanksgiving that I was surprised you weren’t on the train.”

I walked her through the adventure that was Nick’s extended family and how Killian had conspired with me to make this happen.

“It really is amazing how many moving parts it took. Killian being involved comes as no surprise. He has a nose for being in the center of things.”

“I like him. I’m told I’m too trusting, but he felt really genuine to me.”

“So what’s next for you?”

Deeper in the house the shower stopped. I blew out a breath.

“Finals. Nick seems smitten with Killian, so I’d imagine he’s going to be a pain for a little while. Of course, after all that there’s Jake and the wedding.”

“Declarations of love aside, isn’t that a bit fast?”

I laughed. “Oops, sorry. My dads are getting married finally. Jake’s been invited. My Christmas present is his plane ticket.”

“Oh, I hadn’t heard. When did that come up?”

“This morning over coffee. I guess he hasn’t had a chance to talk to you about it yet.”

“Sounds like an adventure.”

“I hope so.”

A door opened and another closed down the hallway.

“So is Brayden your friend as well?”

“Yeah. He’s really attached himself to Jake, but we’re friends.”

“But Nick is more your friend?”

I hummed and tilted my head from side to side. “Sort of? I mean he’s my roommate, but we’re pretty close friends besides. Actually, he’s been a big surprise in a lot of ways. He’s almost become like a big brother at times. Then other times he’s like my child. But he’s really been pushing in the background for Jake and I to get together.”

“Sounds like a group effort. How does it feel to have that kind of support?”

“With Nick? Honestly, exhausting sometimes!”

She smiled. “He does seem like a handful. Chaotic good, I think he’d be called.”

After a few minutes, Judy told me which door was to Jake’s room, so I wandered down the hall. I saw the bathroom door ajar, the mirror still steamy, then reached his door. I tapped on it, and he called out to come in.

“I just have to grab my stuff,” Jake said as he sat down to pull on socks. “Bray’s stuff is in the spare room. We should grab that too.”

I looked around his room and thought again about what life might have been like had we met sooner. I walked slowly, taking in his personal space. The walls were an inoffensive shade of beige that was fairly common but that I kind of associated with puke, but there were no pictures or posters hanging. There was a large freestanding bookcase with a carved box sitting out but not much else. A small desk and chair tucked in a corner with tracing paper left out. With a shudder, I decided I didn’t like it.

Jake slipped his arms around me from behind. "What are you dreaming about now?"

I laid my hands over his. "How much I don't like your room."
"What? Why?"

I turned to face him. "Because it's not really you. It's just...where you went through the first stages of recovery. It's where you had nightmares. This room... It feels like you were alone. I don't like that."

"If you mention anything about auras or feelings, I will never let you talk to Judy again," he said warningly. "But...you're not wrong." He pulled me closer. "This room is nicer with you in it."

I held him and tried to push all those thoughts away, closing my eyes and breathing him in.

"You know," he said, "the last time I was really in this room was the day I headed up to college. I was *so* stressed. I was convinced I was making a huge mistake and that I couldn't handle leaving my support network so many hours away."

He let me go and walked slowly to his bookshelf and picked up the carved box.

"Pills are easy to hide. They're small. When I made the big push for sobriety, I purged everything. Ground things up, dumped them in the trash. Even though they'd nearly ended me, I still felt them calling me as I took them out to the curb."

I stayed quiet. This felt more like a memory that didn't sting so much anymore than him getting into things that still pained him.

"That last day I was freaking out, and I thought...if I just had a joint. A couple of quick hits and I could relax enough to get through the move." He was quiet for a moment, then turned toward me with the box in his hand. "This little box has a hidden compartment." He demonstrated, though the little hollow was empty. "I'd conveniently forgotten a little bit of weed in here. I actually tried to smoke it."

"What stopped you?"

He looked up at me and cracked a smile. "This huge dog in the park ate it right off my lips. I shit you not, it was almost like the cosmos reached out and said no to me."

"Well. I guess the cosmos knew you didn't need it."

"Maybe." He put the box back. "Well. I guess we'll have to make this room up a little better for the next time you come to visit." He grinned. "After all, you won't be sleeping on the couch."

Judy dropped us back off at the B&B, but after stowing Jake's stuff in my room and leaving Bray's in front of the Blue Room where he'd slept the night before, there was no sign of anyone. So Jake and I elected to cuddle on a sofa in the library, where a nice, cozy fire crackled in the fireplace.

"I really am sorry it took me so long to get here," Jake said after a few minutes of companionable silence.

He was running his finger tips lightly up and down my arm, sending delicious little shivers through my body and my mind into orbit, but his serious tone brought me back to earth.

"Like I said last night, it was worth the wait. You don't have to keep apologizing."

He sighed. "I know, but..."

"No buts. You can't keep beating yourself up about it. Everything turned out okay. Better than okay. I've never been happier."

"I know, but that's just it. I could have been making you this happy all along."

"If it makes any difference to you, I'd do it all again even knowing how long it would take."

He gave me a tight smile. "I just wish I could have figured things out faster, taken a chance sooner."

"It's better you didn't. Maybe everything would have fallen apart if we'd rushed into things before you were ready," I said.

He stopped and considered that. "Huh. Yeah. Maybe you're right."

I nodded and snuggled into him. "Yes, I usually am. The sooner you accept that the better it will be for both of us."

He laughed and squeezed me tight.

"What..." I started to ask what had held him back for so long, but then stopped when I realized that I'd just said it didn't matter and dredging it back up maybe wasn't the best move.

"What what?" he asked.

"Never mind."

"No, just ask. We need to be honest with each other from now on."

"Oh, you mean like your lies about me and NyQuil?"

"It's all true!" he protested with a laugh. "Now tell me."

"It's not... Yeah. Maybe you're right. I was just wondering what it was that was holding you back. But you don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

He sat up a little, but didn't pull away. "No, that's a fair question. The simple answer is fear. I was scared."

“Of...me?”

“No, of me. That I couldn't live up to your expectations. That I was so fucked up that I didn't know how to love or be loved. That I would mess everything up and hurt you.”

I kissed his jaw, right below his ear. “Well, I hope you've laid those fears to rest because, to me, you're perfect just the way you are.”

He shook his head. “But see...that's kind of what I mean. I'm not perfect. Nobody is, but definitely not me. And when you say things like that, even though I know you don't mean it in that way, it sets off all these alarms in my head, because I feel like you're putting me on a pedestal and...I can't possibly live up to that.”

I sat up and turned to face him. “Jake, I'm sorry. I never meant to make you feel like I was putting you on a pedestal. What I mean is that I know you're not perfect, but I love you for who you are, not some idealized version of you that I've invented in my head. Maybe it was a little of that at first, but as we've gotten to know each other over the last few months, I've come to love *you* — the real you, scars and all.”

He blinked away tears, and cupped my cheek, running a thumb over my lips.

“God, how'd I get so lucky?” He paused and took a deep breath. “But there are things you still don't know about me, Kode. And it's high time I told you. I should have told you a long time ago—”

I reached up and caught his hand in mine. “I already know.”

He stopped. “What?”

Softly but firmly, I said, “I already know.”

“What do you mean?”

“About...about your brother. And Fenton Black.”

He sucked in a little breath at the mention of Black's name.

He shook his head again. “How...?”

“Charlie. He's...protective. He claimed I wasn't a very good stalker and went hunting for more of your socials and stuff. He did some searches for you and found the news stories. He told me. We went through the news articles and stuff together.”

“When?”

I shrugged. “I don't know. A month ago? Maybe longer?”

He pulled back. “You've known that long, and you didn't say anything?”

I reached for him again, and he allowed me to take his hands in mine.

“What was I going to say? I told you the truth when I said I didn't need to know the details of what happened. Even news stories only go so far, and I don't need to bring all those old memories up, especially knowing that you're still wrestling with them. I know enough, and it doesn't change how I feel. Knowing where you've come from just helped me to understand why you needed this to go at a pace you could handle. If anything, it helped give me the patience I needed to give you the time you needed. All of that...it made you the man you are, and I love that man so, so much.”

He squeezed his eyes shut for a few moments, and when he opened them, they were glistening with unshed tears.

“You are so amazing.” He paused. “But...what about Charlie?”

“What about him?”

“What did he think of...all that stuff.”

“He just cared that I didn't get surprised or hurt by it. And, I mean, it did hurt, but just in the sense that I ache for what you went through. I told him you'd been up front and I knew you'd been through things. So Charlie is still telling people you're his future brother-in-law.”

He rolled his eyes. “Maybe he's psychic too.”

“He's just a psycho.” We chuckled. “You know, you really had me fooled at first. You come across as so confident. No one would ever guess that you're carrying all that...shit...around with you all the time, scared of what others will think.”

“It's all just a mask,” he said, smiling ruefully.

I tipped my head to one side. “We all have masks, though, right?”

He leaned back against the sofa cushions, still holding my hand, the late November sunlight softening the sadness in his expression.

“Yeah,” he said quietly. “Some people wear the professional mask. Some wear the funny mask. Some wear the tough-guy mask so nobody notices they're terrified all the time.” He glanced down at our joined hands. “Some people spend so long pretending they're okay that they forget what okay even feels like.”

I thought about Charlie with his endless charm and boisterous enthusiasm that hid how lonely he could get sometimes. About Brayden looking so big and untouchable when he was secretly desperate for approval. About Nick pretending everything in life was one big joke so nobody would realize how deeply he actually felt things. About Carson feigning indifference and apathy when he so desperately wanted to be seen and accepted.

What was my mask?

The good son, trying so hard to be someone my father would take pride in.

The good student.

The good employee.

The good house guest.

The good boyfriend.

I wanted people to like me. I wanted to please them. Because, maybe, if they liked me enough, they wouldn't reject me.

Jake laughed softly, drawing me back from my thoughts. "I had the bad-boy mask down to an art form," he said. "Sexy disaster boy. Very mysterious. Very damaged. Great hair." He gestured vaguely at himself.

"You do have great hair."

"Thank you. The secret is salt water and trauma."

I snorted loudly enough that he grinned. Then his smile faded into something gentler. "But underneath all that," he admitted, "I was just scared all the time. Scared people would leave if they really knew me. Scared they'd stay and regret it."

I squeezed his hand tighter. "I think everybody's scared of that."

"Yeah." He looked over at me, eyes reflecting the flickering firelight. "Difference is, some people eventually find someone who makes taking the mask off feel safe."

My chest tightened painfully in the best possible way.

I leaned over and kissed him softly.

When I pulled back, I rested my forehead against his and smiled a little.

"Then maybe," I whispered, "it's time we both started breaking masks."

Killian joined us at some point, and we enjoyed talking to each other about how we'd surprised Jake with my visit, Jake playfully bemoaning our alliance.

"You realize giving Nick your number was a tactical error, right?" I asked him.

Killian laughed lightly. "It's all in good fun."

"Yeah, I don't know about that," Jake said slowly. "He's already talking about driving down here on weekends."

Killian's expression shifted to surprise, then settled on confusion. "I haven't suggested anything like that."

“He’s been asking me for advice on you. I’ve tried to discourage him gently, but he’s on the rebound and, as he put it, you’re cute and smart and funny.”

Killian frowned. “I just thought he was full of shit.”

I laughed. “He’s very much that too, but I think he does have a little crush on you.”

Killian leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “Okay, well, thanks for the heads up. I’ll try to tone down the teasing. Like I said, I’m not looking for anything right now. I need some time to myself.”

Jake nodded. “Heard. But...if you decide you’re ready for a nice long distance, low stakes relationship, you could do worse than Nick. He’s a really great guy.”

Killian was shaking his head before Jake was even half-finished. “No, nothing against Nick, who I’m sure is lovely, but I’m really not interested in dating, and especially not long distance. If I wanted to date someone in New York, I’d still be with Micah. So you can stop your meddling.”

Jake held up his hands in surrender. “I’m not meddling! I know how you feel about that. Just felt I owed it to Nick to throw that out there.”

“Consider it thrown.”

Nick and Carson soon appeared, and we ended up playing board games. I can’t remember if anyone actually won.

Carson was a new person, talking to us about his room and how much he liked it. It was like watching a sapling spawn its first flowers of the spring.

Brayden wandered in looking quite rumpled, saying he’d fallen asleep after lunch. He kept eying me and Jake and grinning like a proud father. I remembered how he’d intervened in an attempt to bring me and Jake together at the concert and figured he’d been playing the long game and this moment was probably almost as rewarding for him as it was for me.

I texted Dad to let him know that Jake had agreed to be my plus one so he could get the plane tickets, and within minutes, Charlie FaceTimed me.

“Does that mean you’re finally official?” he asked as soon as I accepted his call.

I turned the screen to show Jake who had his arm around my neck.

“I don’t know. Jake?”

“Hi, Charlie,” Jake said with a grin. “Yes, we’re official.”

Charlie let out a whoop, and I promised to fill him in on all the details later. Then I walked around introducing everyone to my brother over the phone. He made several requests for people's Snap accounts, and once more made sure Nick knew he was also invited to the wedding.

That Friday and Saturday were surreal. It felt like living in a bubble of a new family that somehow felt as if we'd always been together. We drifted together and apart, roaming the house and grounds yet always ending up back together to share more stories and just be together. It was like everyone knew this was fleeting and special.

Every night was pure bliss. Jake and I continued exploring each other, growing more confident with this new facet of our relationship. I relished every moment I had with him, but was especially enjoying the new experiences with our clothes off.

There's something to be said for dreaming, but now I had new things to dream about and a new reality to shape.

But eventually that part of the dream had to end for new ones to begin, and so Sunday morning we were up early. I made coffee for everyone, which was a big step toward breaking the spell, as I didn't have Jake and our morning routine to myself.

After breakfast, we got situated in Nick's car. We'd decided that we'd all drive back together, since Nick had the car and Judy could get credit for Jake's unused ticket. Brayden seemed completely unconcerned about his return ticket. Possibly because he hadn't purchased one, but that was just a guess on my part.

As a bonus, the road trip would extend our little holiday adventure just a little longer.

Brayden had to sit up front, because there just was no room in the back for him and anyone else. I wouldn't have minded sitting on Jake's lap, but Nick claimed it was unsafe and he'd get a ticket, blah, blah, blah. So with Brayden up front with Nick, and Carson, Jake, and I in the back — me in the middle — we started our return trip.

Nick was very dramatic about leaving Killian behind. He kept calling him 'the one that got away.'

"He's taking a break from dating," Jake reminded him.

"I know, but what if he's ready and I'm not there, huh? Timing is everything."

"Nick, you barely know him. He's great and all, don't get me wrong, but you spent a few hours with him."

"Some of us don't need months to know our feelings, Jake."

"Shots fired!" I said with a laugh.

“Well, with that attitude, I’m going to tell Killian everything about you.”

“Jake! You’re supposed to be my wingman...”

“Nah. That’s Kody’s job. Killian has been my bestie for a long time. Saved my life. I have to protect him from ferocious flirty fairies.”

“Saved your life?” Carson asked.

I patted his knee. “Long story, another time.”

“You know,” Jake drawled as he gave me a wink. “If you’re really looking to meet someone, I know someone else who is recently single.”

Where was he going with this?

“Who?” Nick asked cautiously.

“Brayden here.”

Brayden, who had been innocently minding his own business up till then, twisted his body around in his seat so fast that the car actually rocked. He gave Jake an incredulous look, but Jake wasn’t finished.

“He’s kind, loyal, sweet, and I hear he’s amazing in bed. Satisfies like no other.”

Brayden’s mouth opened and closed like a fish, but before he could gather his wits to form a reply, Nick jumped in.

“You know, maybe you’re right. Maybe I should keep it closer to home. Whaddaya say, Big Guy? Should we give it a go?”

Brayden looked like he was about to have a heart attack. “Um, thanks, Nick. I guess you’re cute and all, but I’m not into guys.”

“Ouch,” Nick cried. “Shot down again.”

“You never know until you try, Bray,” Jake said.

I swatted my boyfriend as I took pity on Bray. Their little game had gone on long enough.

“They’re just teasing you, Brayden,” I said.

Bray broke into a big grin. “Yeah, I figured. But I’m outnumbered in this car. Besides, if I was gonna try a guy for the first time, I think I’d go for Toshi. No offense, Nick.”

Nick’s eyes opened wide, but he reached over and patted Bray on the arm. “None taken, my large friend. None taken.”

Nick and Jake kept up their silly banter, entertaining us for many miles. Eventually, a few of us fell asleep and didn’t wake up until we arrived at Nick’s aunt and uncle’s.

We dropped Carson off at home, and I was genuinely touched and saddened by how he hugged us each in turn. We were exchanging our numbers and socials when the front door opened and Liz and Gary came out.

"Hey there!" Liz greeted us. "There are more of you than when you left. Did you pick up some strays?" She spotted Jake and her smile grew even larger. "Oh! I recognize you. I've heard a lot about you."

Jake blushed, and Nick did a quick round of introductions for Jake and Brayden.

Liz turned her full energy on Brayden, and it was really something to see him respond to her. It was kind of the way a dog reacts when he's told he's a good boy, rolling over and exposing his belly for rubs.

"So, uh, what happened after we left?" Nick asked once Liz was done gassing Bray up.

Gary snorted softly. "More of the same."

Liz rolled her eyes. "Oh, hush."

Carson glanced at the house. "Is Dad still here?"

Liz nodded. "Yes, but don't you worry about him. I put him in his place, which for the foreseeable future is the basement."

Carson studied her. "Are you getting a divorce?" he asked.

Liz seemed to be caught off guard by his blunt question, and I actually felt a little sorry for her, being put on the spot like that in front of all of us.

"I... Well, I suppose it's not off the table. Is that... Is that what you would like?"

Carson shrugged. "I..I guess I don't really feel safe around him and Kenny."

Liz's expression hardened, and she nodded once. "I understand." A lot was said with those two words. "I swear to you that nothing will ever happen to you in my home," she said, and the tone of her voice left no doubt that she meant it. "And I will do whatever I need to do to protect you."

"Me too," Gary said quickly.

Liz pulled Carson into a hug, and I figured they'd have a lot to talk about later.

Carson pulled away, his face red. "So, uh, can I go visit Nick and Kody and Jake some time?" he asked.

Liz's eyes darted to us. "Oh, I don't know. I'm sure these college boys don't want a kid cramping their style..."

"We'd love to have him," Nick rushed to say. "Any time. Right, Kody?" I nodded my agreement. "He can even bunk on the futon in our shared space, since we have a suite."

"Uh, you know, I think I'll get an air mattress to go on that futon, because it's brutal to sleep on," I said. "Speaking from experience."

“Totally,” Jake agreed. “Good idea. It’s like the world’s lumpiest morgue slab. And the train runs right through town.”

“Plus, there are some great museums in Albany,” I threw in for good measure.

Liz smiled. “Okay, I can see Carson’s family has grown this weekend. We’ll see what we can figure out.”

“Worst case scenario, we’re only a few hours away,” Nick said as he gave Carson a friendly shove. “Which means, don’t hesitate to call us if you need us, Carito.”

“Yeah, remember what we talked about,” Jake added, and I made a note to ask him about that once we were back in the car.

Even with plans in place and a support system as strong as we could make it, I still didn’t feel great about leaving Carson behind, knowing his dad was still in the house.

After a final round of hugs, we piled back into the car, with a little more elbow room in the backseat this time around.

Nick and Brayden swapped driving duties at some point, and it was kind of comical to see Brayden squished behind the wheel of Nick’s little car. It wasn’t even really that small, but it wasn’t nearly big enough for someone of Brayden’s stature.

For my part, I soaked in as much of Jake as I could, knowing with every passing mile that we were getting closer to going to our separate rooms. Soon, we’d be back in our routines, getting back into school for the home stretch of our first semester.

At least I’d be back to work, where I could watch Jake wake up to his coffee.

I wondered how being official would change things. There would definitely be more sleepovers. Which raised the question of where those would take place.

“Hey,” I asked. “Do you think your room will stay empty?”

Jake glanced at Bray, who seemed to be asleep — though since he didn’t sound like thirty-seven chainsaws it was hard to tell — then leaned over to whisper in my ear. “Bray’s trying to move in with me. I think he’s already gone to the housing office.”

I narrowed my eyes and looked up at him. “I guess that works out. He practically lives there anyway.”

“Yeah, but there goes our privacy.”

“Not really...I have a private space.”

A smile spread across his face. “Yes. Yes, you do.”

“I heard that,” Nick said from the front seat. “Just remember, the walls are thin, and I don't want to hear *anything* else.”

We all laughed loudly, waking up Brayden, who blinked and asked, “What's so funny?”

It took a day or two to readjust to being at school. I spent the first few nights in Jake's room, since for now at least, he still had it to himself, and there was no Nick to eavesdrop on us. Brayden was even getting better at giving us privacy — he even started texting before he barged in. We call that character growth.

We had dinner with Erin and Carlos the first night back, catching them up on the developments over Thanksgiving break. Erin was giddy with excitement, and Carlos kept congratulating us like we'd won a Nobel Peace Prize or something. It was very sweet to know we had so much support.

Max and Marla were equally happy for us, though Marla had to pay Max ten bucks for another bet. Apparently, Max had bet her that Jake would finally ask me over the holiday weekend. Marla thought he'd wait for Christmas. Jake told them that, technically, that was his original plan, before he'd pivoted to a romantic weekend in NYC.

Once I knew that was on the table, I insisted we stick with that plan, and Dad was kind enough to adjust our plane tickets so we could have a couple of days in the Big Apple before flying back. I was already making plans to see the big tree and go ice skating at Rockefeller Center, kiss at the top of the Empire State Building, and take the ferry out to the Statue of Liberty. We were going full tourist, baby. If we had time, maybe we'd squeeze in a last-minute show, too, which was the only way we could afford to see a Broadway production.

But what I was most looking forward to was the wedding. Dad told me he'd arranged for tux fittings for Jake and I the day after we landed. I couldn't wait to see Jake in a tux, although I was a little worried I would spontaneously jizz at the sight.

We did end up going all the way, though Jake really took his time to make sure I was ready before we did. I learned that I did, in fact, really enjoy getting my ass ate...and returning the favor.

When we finally got there, Jake was as gentle as ever, pausing often to make sure I was okay. Despite what he'd done to prepare me, it did hurt at first — after all, Jake was a lot to take. I wouldn't have stopped him for anything — pain or no pain — but we took our time, and more importantly, I was determined and ready. Jake was as considerate and loving as I'd known he would be.

He insisted I be on top for our first time. He held still, letting me be in control, until I couldn't sink any farther onto him. We locked eyes when I bottomed out, his expression almost dazed. His body shuddered as he whispered my name.

I leaned in and kissed him, stealing my name from his lips.

He slowly pushed me back until I was upright and the pressure and discomfort shifted, blossoming into a flare of pleasure that lit up my insides and ran up my spine. With every throb, ecstasy rolled through my entire body. Even my fingertips were tingling.

He stared up at me like he almost couldn't believe this was happening. I could see the awe and love in his eyes, along with a healthy dose of lust. I was getting very good at reading his expressions and was still amazed that he could feel all of that...for me.

"You're so...so beautiful," he gasped. "And you're mine. You're really mine."

I shifted and gasped, a ripple of pleasure running through me.

"Of course I'm yours. And you're—"

"Yours. I'm all yours. All of me."

Then there were fewer words as we found our rhythm. Pleasure took over, and it was one of the most magical moments of my life. I couldn't imagine giving my virginity to anyone but Jake.

He even promised that we could switch...later down the line. He was still working on some issues with that due to his past, and I assured him I understood and it was okay. I knew I'd dream of the day it would be reality that he'd feel okay with me having him like that. I'd already proven I could be patient, and he was worth waiting for.

Not that Jake seemed to fully believe that yet.

I made a point to check in with him often, holding him to our new vow to be truthful with each other. I wasn't sure how each stage of our intimacy would affect him or when something from his past might rear its ugly head. So far things had gone well, but I wasn't taking that for granted, not for a second.

Sometimes I'd catch him looking at me when he thought I wasn't paying attention, like he was still trying to figure out how this had happened, how we'd happened. Like maybe if he stared long enough, the universe would reveal the clerical error that had somehow landed him a boyfriend who looked at him like he hung the moon.

Joke was on him, honestly, because I still felt the exact same way about him.

Finals descended on campus shortly after Thanksgiving break like some sort of academic apocalypse. Suddenly, everyone looked exhausted and smelled vaguely of coffee and panic. The library stayed packed twenty-four hours a day, The Morning Rush developed a line long enough to qualify for its own zip code.

Jake threw himself into preparing with frightening intensity, though I noticed he was also taking better care of himself than he had earlier in the semester. He kept going to SMART meetings. He still met virtually with Dr. Patel. He actually slept occasionally instead of surviving entirely on caffeine and repressed trauma.

More growth.

I was proud of him. So unbelievably proud.

One evening during finals week I stopped by his room to find him asleep at his desk, his cheek smushed against an open textbook while Brayden sat on the other bed quizzing himself with the flashcards Jake had made for him, wearing reading glasses he absolutely did not need. He insisted they made him look smarter, but I kept telling him they just made him look like Smart Hulk.

I stood there in the doorway for a solid thirty seconds just looking at them.

My boyfriend and his emotional support linebacker. Or was it a lineman? I still wasn't sure what the difference was.

Either way, they were kind of adorable.

Brayden noticed me first and immediately held a finger to his lips.

"He finally crashed," he whispered. "He was up till like three last night."

I smiled softly and crossed the room. Jake looked exhausted even in sleep, sweaty hair sticking to his forehead.

The heater in his room was on overdrive, something the maintenance crew insisted couldn't be fixed without cutting off their heat entirely. The joys of an old building.

Carefully, I brushed his hair back.

His eyes cracked open almost immediately.

"Kody?" he mumbled sleepily.

"Hey, baby."

The soft smile that spread across his face at seeing me nearly melted me into a puddle right there on the dorm floor.

"Missed you," he murmured.

"You saw me six hours ago."

"Terrible. Agonizing."

I laughed quietly while Brayden giggled in the background.

"You guys are so cute," he informed us.

Jake blinked blearily in his direction. "Why are you still here?"

"Studying."

"With upside down flashcards?"

Brayden looked down.

"Huh," he said after a pause. "That explains a lot, actually."

Jake snorted tiredly and reached for my hand.

And just like that, looking at him there — exhausted and healing and trying so hard every single day — I had one of those strange moments where life suddenly felt very real.

Not perfect or magically fixed, but real. Good real.

The kind you almost don't trust at first, because you've spent so long waiting for everything to fall apart.

But it didn't. Not that night. Or the nights after.

Winter settled over campus fully by the time finals ended, coating everything in glittering snow and icy wind that turned the walk to class into an extreme sport. Christmas lights appeared in dorm windows. Over by the administration building someone dressed the statue of whichever Stephen Van Rensselaer had founded the school in a Santa hat. Marla started putting gingerbread syrup in everything, whether people asked for it or not.

And through all of it, Jake and I just kept...choosing each other over and over again.

One evening a few days before we were set to leave for New York City, we found ourselves walking across campus after dinner, bundled against the cold. Snow crunched beneath our boots, while our breath fogged the air around us.

Jake reached over and slipped his hand into mine. It still gave me butterflies every time.

"You know," he said after a moment, "this place turned out very differently than I expected."

"How so?"

"When I got here, I thought college was going to be about reinventing myself." He glanced over at me, snowflakes catching in his hair. "But I think maybe it's actually been about figuring out who I already was."

Emotion swelled suddenly in my chest.

"Who are you then?" I asked softly.

He smiled — small and genuine and beautiful.

"Someone worth loving, I think."

I stopped walking abruptly.

“What?” he asked, startled.

“You can’t just say devastatingly romantic things without warning me first.”

His laugh echoed across the snowy quad, warm against the cold night air.

Then he pulled me close, pushed my scarf out of the way, and kissed me right there beneath the glowing campus lights, while snow drifted lazily around us. And for the first time in a very long time, neither of us was hiding behind a mask anymore.

We were just two boys in love.

And somehow, against all odds, that was enough.

About the Authors

Josh Aterovis is the award-winning author of multiple LGBTQ+ novels blending mystery, romance, suspense, and the supernatural, including seven novels and multiple short stories in the acclaimed Killian Kendall Mysteries series. His work explores themes of identity, chosen family, grief, healing, and queer resilience, often centering flawed but deeply human characters navigating extraordinary circumstances. Known for emotionally grounded storytelling and vivid atmosphere, Josh's books have earned a devoted readership among fans of queer fiction and genre-bending narratives.

In addition to his work as a novelist, Josh is an immersive theater creator and producer with Submersive Productions in Baltimore, Maryland, where he develops original, site-specific experiences that blur the line between audience and performer. His storytelling across both page and stage is driven by a passion for creating meaningful, transformative experiences that invite audiences to connect, reflect, and imagine new possibilities.

Learn more at joshaterovis.com or submersive.org.

Dabeagle is a longtime writer of gay fiction whose work has been reaching readers online since 2001. A prolific independent author, Dabeagle has created dozens of stories and interconnected series, including the fictional world of Sanitaria Springs, where characters recur across multiple stories and their lives continue to intersect and evolve. His work ranges from intimate coming-of-age stories and contemporary romance to drama, mystery, science fiction, and fantasy.

Dabeagle began writing and sharing his work online through the early internet fiction community and eventually established his own website, Welcome to the Doghouse, which has served both as a home for his fiction and as a gathering place for other writers.

Outside of writing, Dabeagle is a husband and adoptive father, a devoted beagle owner, and an enthusiast of vintage Telechron clocks.