



# Paper Butterflies

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**Category:** Romance, Adult

**Description:** Neil Summers is a preacher's son. Religious, pure, off-limits. Especially for Olivia—who only wants to defile and corrupt him.

On the first day back to school after summer break, seventeen-year-old Olivia Davis finds herself gawking at Neil—yes, gawking. Ugh. Wholesome, kind, and holy Neil; the son of a preacher, Neil. But she can't put her finger on what it is, exactly, that's different about him. Broader shoulders, suddenly more chiseled features, and a new haircut, sure, but it's something else. Maybe it's the way he now carries himself, full of calm and confidence. Maybe it's the memories they share of being childhood best friends. Or maybe... it's the look in his eyes that screams he might not be so wholesome after all.

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## Chapter 1

### GQ-Cub Scout

It was one summer. One. And somehow, Neil Summers had gone from Cub Scout to looking like he could've just stepped off a GQ shoot. If GQ was now featuring conservative, buttoned-up shirt, khaki wearing wholesome boys.

I couldn't stop staring at him. Though I did hide it from behind the veil of my long, dark hair. No way was I going to let someone catch me gawking at him. Me, gawking at Neil Summers.

What a joke.

But there it was. Because I was actually gawking at him, wasn't I?

It was just that something about him had definitely changed. And no, I wasn't talking about the way he now filled in those khaki pants and that short-sleeved shirt, though that definitely, definitely helped. It was something else. Something I couldn't put my finger on, and something that still had my eyes glued to him from across campus.

Was it his hair? It did look longer, cut and styled in a way I hadn't seen on him before. Or maybe it was his smile. Less timid and more... confident? Sure of himself? Absolutely.

Still, that wasn't it.

I sighed and redirected my attention to my group of friends huddled around me, sure I'd gotten away with my past few minutes of slipped judgment until my eyes landed on Sydney's. Her lips were curled in that evil, smirking way of hers.

I one-upped her smirk with one of my own and raised an eyebrow, challenging her to say something. Sydney was my best friend. The kind of friend that drove me nuts, and I wanted to slap constantly, but I still couldn't help but love.

She quickly backed down, hands thrown up in the air as if she was brushing it off and didn't care, but I noted the curiosity in her eyes when they strayed back to Neil without her realizing it.

Something simmered inside me at that second look of hers. Something I shoved back down and refused to acknowledge.

This was Neil we were talking about. Neil. A place where proprietary feelings did not belong.

And besides, he wasn't my type. Not even close.

I liked the dark, withdrawn, artsy emo boys who bled their feelings into art or music or whatever their jam was. The eyeliner-wearing, unstable, split-personality, asshole types who also happened to sometimes cry in bed after hooking up with you.

I wasn't even sure Neil owned a single black piece of clothing.

And if I remembered correctly, he actually used to be a Cub Scout. Like, legit, selling multi-flavored popcorn in front of the local grocery store with his mother, kind of Cub Scout.

And then there was the whole Jesus thing, of course.

So, no. He was not my type. Not at all. But looking at him now, he was definitely doing things for me. His features had sharpened out, his arms looked thicker, and his entire appearance as a whole just seemed so... effortless. These were not regular descriptors I would've used to describe him, but there they were, lounging across the square from me, taunting and confusing and out of place.

He threw his head back, laughing at something one of his friends had just said as he thrust his face into the sun, and what in the ever-loving hell was happening to my heart?

It didn't make sense. I'd known Neil for thirteen years and not once had a sexual thought about him. But right now? I felt the need to break something. To break him. I was ashamed to admit that, even to myself, because here was the thing about Neil:

He was a preacher's son.

A good, wholesome, happy, law-abiding kind of citizen. And I, on the other hand, could've been described as the complete opposite. I didn't follow a single rule if I could help it, I didn't believe in God, and my mother would've been thrown out of church the second she walked in it... if she didn't disintegrate into a pile of steaming ash first.

Not that I didn't love the woman, or her crazy.

But Neil and me? We were polar opposites.

He was right side up, and I was upside down, and I didn't want to live with two feet on the ground. I was happy in my chaos, and he was the straightest arrow I'd ever seen.

But it hadn't always been that way, had it?

No. It hadn't. Because at one point in time, we had actually been pretty close. (Shocker, I know. But I was full of surprises.)

“Shut up, Neil, or I'll make you marry me,” an eight-year-old Olivia—me—said.

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“You can’t make me marry you, Olive,” he snapped back, sticking his tongue out at me before laughing.

“We’ll see about that.” I crossed my arms, trying—with everything I had in me—not to show him how angry I felt, but I was failing miserably. The frown on my face and the tight balls of my fists gave me away.

“Olive. Don’t be mad. You’re my best friend; I’ll think about it, okay?”

“I don’t have to think about it,” I said tightly, and he smiled—gentle and resigned. One of many smiles I would’ve stolen and pocketed back then if I could’ve.

We were inseparable for a while, really. Having connected over our infatuation with books and movies and telling our own stories, spinning far-out tales of dragons and shape-shifting animals and other awesome things.

(These days my mother called it my skill for lying, but what did she know?)

So, one day, Neil and I had been connected at the hip, and the next, we weren’t. It was that simple. It wasn’t this long, drawn-out thing. Just two kids finding new interests and new best friends and moving on with their lives. That’s how it had felt to me, anyway.

It wasn’t until much later that I recognized the way his mom used to look at me. Like just the thought of her son being friends with me made her want to clutch her crucifix a little tighter.

I didn't know if that had anything to do with it. If it did, or if it didn't, either way, Neil had never been outwardly rude to me or anything. He'd just been obviously avoiding ever going out of his way to say a word to me.

But the same could've been said about me, I guess. And I wasn't going to lie, I hadn't given him much thought since.

Until today, of course. It was like the image of him, this new, distorted version of him, had permanently affixed itself to my brain and I wouldn't be able to peel it off until I solved this mystery.

So far, all I had was an accumulation of small changes that equaled a different and embarrassingly hotter Neil.

But that couldn't have really been it, right? Broader shoulders, suddenly more chiseled features, and a different haircut didn't make someone all that different, did it?

I didn't think so. It had to be something else.

And then it hit me. His eyes. And I mean, literally, he was looking right at me. But now that I was looking at them from across the square, it also hit me that they were what was different. They felt different. Like maybe he'd experienced things over the summer that had changed him somehow—

—holy hell, had he lost his virginity?

No. No way. But maybe... I tilted my head and gave him a closer inspection. My eyes trailed from his head to his toes and back up again.

Wouldn't that be an interesting turn of events? Neil, not a virgin.

Huh.

Something told me I was wrong, though. Even though I hadn't known him for over a decade now, I didn't see him breaking that vow. I knew enough to know that church was important to him, and his father was a preacher, for Christ's sake.

So, no, I didn't really think that was it either.

I shook my head and brushed away my thoughts, forcing myself to look away from him. But I could still feel his eyes on me. I ignored the magnetic pull for about three seconds before looking back over at him again. (Magnetic pull? Yep, I was losing it. Clearly.)

Sydney cleared her throat and pulled me right out of the hole I was spiraling down. Away from the dark eyes that had penetrated mine with as much curiosity as I'd been unintentionally throwing his way. If blushing were a thing I'd do, I probably would've been doing it right about now. But it was not a thing I did. Not at all. Especially not when it involved churchgoing boys like Neil.

Sydney's smirk was fixed firmly back in place. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you were crushing on choirboy over there," she said.

I rolled my eyes, groaning. "Shut up. I'm just trying to figure out what's different about him."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know." I shrugged. "Doesn't he look different to you?"

She glanced over at him, giving him another look over. "Yeah, definitely," she said, and the way she'd said it made me want to physically tear her eyes out of her face,



but her next words were a bucket of cold water being poured over my head. “He got hotter. So what? He’s still Neil.”

“...Yeah,” I agreed after a few stuttering seconds of thought. She was right, mostly. He was still Neil. Religious, and pure, and off-limits. Especially to someone like me. Someone who looked at him and only wanted to defile and corrupt him.

“But...?” she hedged, pulling a piece of my hair into her hand and twirling it around her finger.

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“What?” I met her eyes. They were about four shades darker than mine, but brown was brown, I guess.

“There’s a ‘but’ here, I can feel it,” she said, and I looked back over at Neil. The reality of me staring at him seemed to be left far in his rearview mirror, probably not even a blip on his radar, as he continued laughing with his friends—who had now been joined by some of the guys on the swim team. The swim team he happened to be a member of.

I made a mental note to make it to the next meet. If things were looking different on the outside of his clothing, then things were definitely happening underneath them that I needed to see.

I moved swiftly past that thought, pretending it never happened. “But nothing,” I said, brushing it off with a shrug of my shoulders. “Nothing at all.”

If Sydney saw past my bravado, she didn’t say anything.

Because again, this was Neil we were talking about. Neil—who wore button-ups as a regular part of his high school attire.

Who did that?

No one did, that’s who. Just Neil and only Neil.

I should’ve been repulsed by it, and in normal circumstances I probably would’ve been, but instead, I found myself wanting to run my fingers along each of those

buttons, all the way to the very top, and listen to them fall and clink against the floor as I ripped his shirt apart.

What was wrong with me?

“I think I want inside his pants,” I finally admitted out loud, and Sydney choked on her grape soda.

When she finally got her shit together, she said, “I’m sorry, girl, but I don’t think he’d let you near him with a ten-foot pole.”

I laughed. “Yeah... I bet I couldn’t even get close enough to kiss him, let alone get inside his pants.”

“I bet you could.” The rise in her voice and the lift of her right eyebrow were challenge enough.

I looked over at Neil again.

His eyes caught mine immediately, and my stomach did an unfamiliar flip.

Screw it. I smiled—more of a smirk, really—and threw my hand up in a small wave for him to see. It was official. I’d lost my mind. But I couldn’t stop obsessing over Neil Summers. So I turned to Sydney and said, “You’re on,” and shook her hand to solidify my stupidity.

Why did I take her bet? I didn’t know. Sometimes smart people did stupid things. Especially when said debatably smart person found herself, for whatever inexplicable reason, really wanting to kiss an attractive, virtuous, Bible-loving Neil Summers.

Chapter 2

## Holy Water

Turned out that Neil and I had a few classes together. Actually, after lunch was over our first day back, I quickly found out that we had the entire rest of the day together. Three classes in total—math, science, and lastly, ASB.

I hadn't made my move yet, or any moves yet, really, except that I had managed to snag a seat next to him in ASB.

It had been three days. Three long and embarrassingly futile days that I couldn't find it in me to speak much of any words to him at all. Except for:

Me: "Hi."

Him: "Hey." Soft side-smile that absolutely did not make my insides squish.

Me: "How've you been?" I really hope you don't remember the time I professed my love to you when we were seven years old.

Him: "Pretty good. And you?" Smirk. I definitely remember.

Inner Olivia: Shut down. Walk away. Abort mission.

It was... disconcerting, to say the least. Perplexing. This was not like me. Not at all. I was not an introvert, I was not afraid of confrontation, and I sure as hell was not intimidated by boys.

It was guilt, I told myself. I never should have taken that bet. It was stupid. And I had no shame in backing down and telling Sydney as much. Yeah, that had to be it. As soon as I admitted it to myself, I felt better. Lighter. More myself.

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And then Neil walked into class, taking his seat next to me.

My heart was doing things. Strange things. Like beating faster and then halting altogether. Like the evil in me recognized the holy in him, and it got excited, but it was also backing away in smoothly masked horror.

Or terror. Whatever.

I shut down like I had for the past three days. And then I mentally bitch-slapped myself for it and turned toward him.

“Hey,” I said. Calm, casual, nothing weird about it.

“Hey.” He smiled, hesitant, curious. Nothing weird about it. Or about my physical reaction to it.

Sweaty palms. An uncomfortable awareness settling in my chest, spurring my heart on up and out of its hiding place. It was something I couldn’t help, apparently, so I was going to have to get used to it—this slightly accelerated heartbeat thing. I didn’t think I could get used to it, though. It was too alarming.

So, it was something I was going to ignore then.

Awesome. Sounded great to me.

Words. Use them, Olivia! I cursed at myself as Neil slid his backpack over his chair and settled his elbows down onto the desk in front of him, fingers folded beneath his

chin.

“So, the poster thing... you want to partner up for it?” I asked him.

He looked me over, eyes trailing over my face before meeting mine. He was waiting for the punchline, I could tell. But I stood my ground. Because that, I could do.

Besides, I was dead serious, and he would know it in about five... four... three... two... one...

“Sure.” He cleared his throat, nodding as if he was reassuring himself. “Sounds good.”

“Perfect,” I said, smiling as I looked up at the board and to our teacher as she began detailing plans for homecoming.

Point one for Olivia, House Slytherin.

We worked on our posters for the last half of class. He’d rolled up the long sleeves of his—gasp, shocker!—checkered, button-up shirt to his elbows, and I absolutely was not watching his forearm muscles tense and shift around beneath his skin as he dipped his brush into red paint, and then stroked the words “Homecoming Election” onto the white poster paper sprawled out in front of us.

Nope. Not I.

I switched out his brush for a new one, ignored the lingering tingle on my hand from where our fingers had touched, and walked over to the sink to rinse out the brush I’d traded him for.

Red paint mixed with water and swirled around and around the basin. Red, to pink, to

clear.

Maybe something was different with me. My gut inclination was to scoff at myself, and I did, but it hit me about halfway through that something felt different. We hadn't talked much, beyond the simple back and forth of what our posters would look like and what they would say, but my eyes had been drawn to him. In more than mere curiosity. My focus, my attention, no matter how many times I'd mentally slapped myself for it, didn't stray from him for very long.

I looked over my shoulder at him now. If someone tossed me into a confessional and forced me to divulge my sins, I'd probably admit that Neil wasn't at all what I assumed he'd be. He didn't shove religion down my throat the second we were paired together like I expected him to, and he didn't seem to judge me, either—not nearly as much as I was clearly judging him. There was no judgment on his end at all, really. Not when I cursed at my paintbrush, not when I gave up on one of the posters I'd been working on, crumpled it up and threw it in the trash can, and not when I caught him eyeing the small tattoo on the inside of my arm.

I didn't see a single shred of judgment in his eyes when he looked at me; he just smiled—a lot. Like it was a familiar thing to do.

Why I expected him to randomly quote Bible verses and fling holy water at me, I didn't know. But there it was. The thought had been lingering at the forefront of my mind when we first sat down to make our posters, and it had forced me to smother a smile because I was so sure I was right. But of course, I'd been wrong. I added that mystery to the growing list of All New Things Neil Summers.

But... what if I hadn't been wrong? Not all the way?

I set the paintbrush down onto the counter and walked back over to Neil. “Do you carry holy water in your pocket?” I asked, and he outright laughed. Epic opening

words if you asked me.

“Seriously?” he responded.

I stayed silent, shrugging.

His eyebrows rose up into his hairline. “Oh. Okay. You are serious.” He seemed a little disappointed by that, but hey, I was who I was. And I really wanted to know. To know that I hadn’t entirely lost my mind, or to know that the world as I thought I knew it wasn’t starting to slip off its axis, I wasn’t sure. That last one, I wasn’t going to admit to myself, though.

And besides, I couldn’t take the question back now, even if it made me feel like a little bit of an asshole.



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“No, Olivia, I don’t carry holy water in my pocket.” He turned back to the poster in front of him, shoulders notably tense. My attention had already latched on to something else, though.

My name.

It was the first time he’d said it in over ten years, and the way the four syllables had rolled off his tongue sent a shiver down my spine.

I shook it off.

The feeling, my confusion.

“I’m sorry. That was a rude question,” I said, the betraying words falling from my mouth before I knew what to do with them. But I think...

I think I meant them.

I looked up at the ceiling, waiting for it to open up and swallow me whole. Because surely, the end of the world was about to happen. The apocalypse, Armageddon, doomsday, Y3K a few centuries early, the Hunger Games, something.

I was in a state of shock, really. My mouth was hanging half open. My thoughts stunted and crashed together. My lungs forgot how to breathe. Because...Olivia Davis did not apologize. For anything.

What was wrong with me?

And why had I found myself asking that question far too many times these past few days?

Neil's soft laughter pulled me from impact, from the collision of thoughts in my mind. "They're just two little words, Liv. They aren't going to kill you," he said. Somehow knowing my thoughts, my feelings.

It made me feel more seen than I was prepared to be.

I swallowed past a rush of new thoughts. Ones that terrified me. "Yeah, well..." I said, and I left the words hanging, reaching to pick up and put away all of our supplies before the bell rang.

He did the same, closing lids on paint cans and collecting pencils and unused brushes while I moved our posters over to the counter by the windows.

When the bell rang, all my traitorous brain could think about was one thing. One stupid, small, inconsequential, interesting thing. A single word.

Liv.

From one pair of lips.

Nobody called me that besides my mother. It was different when Neil said it, though. Laced in humor, a mischievous and knowing gleam brightening his eyes.

Like I'd said, interesting. Because maybe Neil wasn't what he seemed to be at all. Not even close.

One point for Neil, who was still definitely, definitely a Hufflepuff.

Or was he?

By the time I got home, I'd completely lost track of points and had given up altogether. I'd thrown in the towel somewhere around dock three points for stupid questions, and two more for making an ass out of yourself, Olivia.

Either way, it was clear to me that Neil had somehow gained the upper hand, and that was just... weird, and wrong, and didn't make any sense whatsoever.

"Mom!" I called out, even though I knew I'd only be answered by silence. She was never home. Like, ever.

I threw my things onto the kitchen counter and pulled open the fridge, which (to no surprise to me) was mostly empty. I called in an order for pizza, recited my mother's credit card number from memory, and then dialed Sydney.

"What's up, Olli?" she greeted. Olivia, Olls, Olli, Ol, Liv, Livvy... Olive. Some of the many names I went by, apparently.

"You want to come over? I just ordered some pizza," I asked.

"Do I ever not want to come over?" she scoffed.

I jumped up onto the edge of my kitchen counter, toeing off my shoes. "Then get your ass over here."

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“Mom says I have to finish my homework first, and then I can come.” We both laughed at that. Good luck, Cynthia, I thought, because no way was that actually happening. “I’ll be there in ten,” Sydney threw out quickly before hanging up, and I laughed again.

I reached over and lifted a Post-it note off the fridge.

Be home Monday.

-Mom.

Today was Thursday.

Again, not surprised.

“So, nothing, huh?” Sydney asked through her bite of cheese pizza.

“Nope.” I shrugged it off. I was trying to figure out how to tell her that this whole thing was stupid, and I was over it. “But this whole thing is stupid, and I’m over it.” Simple enough. Direct. That was me.

She laughed. “You’re giving up already?! Olli doesn’t quit!”

“Sure she does. All the time. Especially when she doesn’t want to do something.”

“This is true.” She sighed. “So, you’re saying you really don’t want to kiss him?”

“Not even a little bit,” I said, but it was a lie. Sort of. I wanted to kiss him—because he was hot, and his lips looked nice and soft, and I was sure it would end up being a pretty fun thing to do. But at the same time... I didn’t want to, either. Because it was starting to feel messy. And don’t get me wrong, I was drawn to chaos—yes—but not when it felt like that chaos was happening inside my own head. That kind wasn’t as easy to control.

And the fact that I felt this way because of Neil? I wasn’t even going to go there, hence the need to abort mission.

“But it was going to be so much fun to watch,” Sydney whined. “Are you sure?”

I thought it over for her benefit. Thought of Neil. His arms, his face, his eyes, his lips. My heart sped up in my chest.

Was I sure?

I shook my head. “Absolutely not.”

## Chapter 3

### Intermission

I took that Friday off from school.

Was there a family emergency, did my car break down, was I sick? Nope. Not at all.

But when your mom “worked” out of town ninety-nine percent of the time, you were bound to take a few days off here and there just because you felt like it.

And Friday, I felt like it.

And yes, I know, “worked” out of town was awfully cryptic, and I was not a cryptic person, so here was the deal:

My mother was a professional escort.

See? Full of surprises.

But an even bigger surprise, maybe? Was that I didn’t hate her or judge her for it. Not even a little bit. It just was what it was. She was my mother, and she was crazy—yes—and what she did for a living was... far from typical for a widowed mother living in the suburbs of Texas, but... some of us had to do what we had to do to get by.

It was just that for my mother, “getting by” meant keeping up with the lifestyle of her deceased third husband while trying to find a new and even richer one.

Considering where she’d come from, though, I didn’t blame her. Childhood hunger, trauma, and neglect—they either lit a fire in you that propelled you forward, or they became the weight that dragged you under; I respected her for fighting for the former.

Were there better ways to go about it? Sure. But again, I didn’t blame her. If there were sleazy, filthy-rich men out there who wanted to blow their money on paying for “time” and “dates” with a woman they didn’t know, that was on them. Someone was going to get that money, so it might as well have been my mother.

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And full disclosure, when I looked around at my house, at the nice clothes on my back and the brand-new car parked in the driveway that belonged to me, I was, at the very least, grateful for it.

That isn't to say there wasn't a downside to it, though. Like not having a mother, for one. Not really. She was gone so often it didn't count for much of anything, but even when she was here, she was more like a friend to me, or an older sister. No discussion was off the table for us. She'd tell me every dirty detail of her most recent conquests and craziest escapades, and then she'd take me shopping, buy me the fanciest dinner in town, fill my pockets with cash, and be off again.

So it's only obvious to say it was lonely sometimes, too.

And I worried about her. A lot. Probably more than she ever worried about me. Because somehow, she'd gotten lucky enough to have a daughter that lived by a set of her own rules, but who cared enough about her future to play inside the lines that mattered.

Because for some of us, we looked at our parents and thought, I want to grow up to be just like them. But for the rest of us, we looked at our parents and demanded of ourselves to be anything but.

Obviously, I fell into the second group.

Don't get me wrong, I loved my mother. She was fun, and fearless, and unapologetic. But she was lonely, too, I think. In a different way. The down to your soul kind of way.

She hid it well, though. So well, in fact, that I never really saw it. It was just a feeling I got sometimes—that she was hiding things, even from herself. So many things that she couldn't possibly recognize what most of them were anymore, all hidden behind shopping bags, expensive cars, and a loud personality.

It was why I was the way that I was. Open. Honest. (When I wanted to be.) Not many shits given. I liked to grab life by the balls and whisper in its ear the things I wanted—expected, really—and watch them unfold.

On the flip side, I also recognized that she was the reason I tended to hold other things in. Why I could sometimes be reserved, too; why I held a skewed view of love and vulnerability.

I'd grown up pretty young, and I was forced to see life and the world for what it was early on, too, through the eyes of my mother. I wasn't mad at her for it, because the world could be an ugly place, and now I was better equipped for it.

But somewhere along the way my view mashed with hers, settled into my own, and looked something like this: The world worked in your favor if you held what you wanted in view and refused to look any other way. Love, true love, was nearly impossible to come by, and it would ruin you in the process, so why even bother? And life... life was short. So we might as well be true to ourselves and our desires and get on with it.

(It wasn't the prettiest of belief systems, I knew, but it worked for me.)

To round it all out with a more positive twist, though, my mother was also the reason I became obsessed with movies. I loved them—the good, the bad, the ugly, the scary, old and new, I loved them all. My first and most frequent babysitter.

Anything to do with movies, and I was there. One-hundred percent. Which is how I



ended up with a job at the movie theater—where I was now, currently wasting away my seven-hour shift. Free tickets, popcorn, and screening movies the night before they came out, and I was pretty much living the dream. Sort of. Like, the dream, minus angry customers, the sweeping up of other people's messes, and cleaning the never-ending grease pit of the popcorn machine. But all that aside: the dream.

Something I hadn't told a soul? I wanted to be a screenwriter someday; I planned to be a screenwriter someday. The problem was, I didn't know shit about screenwriting. But that's what college was for, right? I'd figure it out then.

"Incoming."

"Huh?" I responded, having completely lost sense of all reality. I was pulled out of my head and found Jax's face in my periphery. I turned toward him. "What?"

"I said 'incoming.'" He smiled. "Evening rush."

I looked up at the lobby as it started to fill with people. "Damn."

He laughed. "Quit daydreaming and make some popcorn."

"No." I threw him a nice hand gesture and did what he asked despite my refusal since, technically, he was my supervisor. But he also happened to be one of my closest friends. Who also... happened to be Neil's older cousin. Barely. Through marriage, or something like that. But that was a story for another time.

Opening the kernel drawer, I grabbed the scooper, filled it up, topped it with a spoonful of popcorn salt, and tossed it into the popper, closing the lid and pressing the button on the oil dispenser. And done.

I took my place in front of my register and witnessed the next two hours fly by. That

was the fun in working at the movie theater. When a rush came through, two hours felt like two minutes. You just got swept up in the storm and came out on the other side in a land of soda-sticky countertops, trash-filled bins, and popcorn everywhere. But, outside of the rush, two minutes also felt like two hours. So it evened itself back out somehow.

We got to work on cleaning up our concession stand disaster.

“Here’s what I don’t understand,” Jax said, sweeping up a mound of popcorn as I started wiping down counters. “The customer who comes in here and goes, ‘Yeah, I’ll take a large popcorn, butter on the bottom, butter in the middle, extra butter on top, nachos, ice cream, three of every candy in this case, and a Diet Coke, please.’” He scoffed. “Diet? Diet? What is the point?! Just go with the regular Coke, man. You already jogged three miles into junk food town, just take the last step, dude. It’s like driving to an amusement park, buying your tickets, and then standing outside the gates and watching the rides like, ‘nah, I’m cool right here.’”

“Some people just like Diet Coke, Jax,” I deadpanned. I didn’t let him see that I was biting back my laughter.

“No, they don’t.” He shook his head, eyes wide. “Nobody likes Diet Coke. Unless they’re Satan’s spawn and enjoy a bit of light suffering.”

I laughed outright this time. “You’ve lost it.”

“Officially,” Hailey threw in. Yet another employee who was working in concessions tonight. (She was alright.)

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“I like Diet Coke,” Kyle offered, twisting and tying a trash bag closed, rounding out tonight’s crew.

“Of course you do.” Jax rolled his eyes, and it went completely over Kyle’s head.

“It’s good.” He shrugged, walking past me.

I tugged him back by the arm. “You want to clean out the popcorn machine, and I’ll do the dishes and mopping tonight?” I asked him. We were the only two here until closing, besides Jax who would be busy counting out drawers and inventory, so I smiled extra wide for added sway. I think Kyle would’ve given in either way, though, because full honesty, I was pretty sure he was into me. Or... I knew he was into me, I just refused to acknowledge it. Except for in these cases, when I completely took advantage of it, but that was beside the point.

“Sure,” he answered, and I wanted to hug him, but I didn’t. For obvious reasons.

I could’ve been into him too, though, I guess. Could’ve being the operative word. He was my type, almost down to a T, but he was... Kyle. Take last week for example:

His fingers were steepled beneath his chin, his gaze lost in a world of thought as his eyes held the view of the arcade games in the lobby.

“You want to come grab a burger with us after work? Jax is coming. Josh and Molly, too. Brian... basically everyone,” I told him. We were done for the night, just waiting for Jax to finish up his counts.

“Sure.” He took a deep breath and sighed, all melancholy and shit. “You ever think about the stars?” he asked.

“What?”

“The stars. I mean, are they really these big, burning balls of gas, or do you think they could be something else?”

It would’ve made more sense if he was looking out the window or something, but he was just staring at flashing lights and blinking game screens.

“Like a collection of wishes,” he continued anyway, running his hand through his greasy, mussed-up hair. “Filled with so much burning hope, that they’re forced to shine that brightly...”

Um, yeah. No. Perhaps I should be reevaluating my type, I thought to myself then, and I was thinking it to myself now. Perhaps someone more...opposite of Kyle.

“Hey, Liv. Can I get a refill, please?” The tone and lilt of his voice filled my mind before his words did. Not Kyle’s. Neil’s.

What was he doing here? I’d managed to not think about him at all today (total lie), and now here he was. Standing in front of me with an empty cup in his hand.

Right. Refill. Mind, shut up. Heart, slow down.

“Sure,” I said, unintentionally stretching the word out a few extra vowels so it sounded more like a:uuuuurrrre.

I took the cup from him. “What would you like?”

“Half Coca-Cola, half Sprite.” Okay, gross. “I can see you judging me, Olivia,” he commented right away, and it made me laugh.

I filled up his cup with his concoction and handed it back to him. Securing the top on it, he took a sip.

Something like, “Hmmm,” came from his closed lips, and it forced me to bite down on mine.

My heart wasn’t listening at all; it just kept pounding away, clouding my thoughts.

“Perfect, thank you,” he said, and one moment his cup was in his hands, and the next it was in mine. I took a drink from his straw.

It still tasted like Coke—mostly. That nice, kick you in your face boldness I loved, but with... just a hint of lime somehow.

“Huh. Not bad,” I said and slid his cup back to him. I knew nothing about boundaries, obviously.

He picked it up with a subtle smirk, a hint of pink on his cheeks, and a severity to his eyes that didn’t at all match the Neil I knew. The Neil I thought I knew, anyway. He was quickly becoming a total fallacy in my mind. A complete contradiction to who I’d assumed he was for the past ten years.

“Well. Enjoy your movie. I’ll see you Monday,” I rushed out, turning around and walking straight into the back room behind the concession stand.

“What in the fucking H-E-double-hockey-sticks was that?” Jax asked, looking at me with wide eyes.

“What’s the point of spelling out ‘hell’ if you’re going to throw a ‘fuck’ in there first?” I responded.

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“What?” He brushed it aside. “Nope. Back to you. What was that?”

“What was what?”

He looked at me like I was as stupid as I was acting. “Back there, with my cousin?”

“You’re going off the deep end again. I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

He shifted his body forward a little, eyes carefully roving over my face.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Just taking this in. You. Lying. Right to my face.”

I scoffed. “I lie all the time, I’m just too good at it for anyone to tell.”

“You do not. Not to me, anyway.”

“Oh, yeah? How about last Thursday? I wasn’t sick; I just didn’t want to come in to work.”

His jaw dropped, humor lighting his eyes. “You didn’t.”

“I did.” I smirked.

“You are so lucky we’re friends. But you pull that shit again, and I’m writing you up.”

I shrugged. “Fair.” I helped him stack candy boxes back onto the shelves in the snack shack. (Our name for the small, caged room that held all the candy we sold up front.)

He locked up behind us when we were finished. “Seriously, though. I didn’t realize I haven’t seen you crush on someone until now.”

“What? Of course I have.” I laughed it off.

“No, that was different. You were totally out of your element.”

“Was I?” Yeah, that’s exactly what I was when it came to Neil, wasn’t I? It still made no sense to me whatsoever. “He makes me nervous,” I blurted out intentionally. I needed to get it off my chest, and Jax was as good as anyone to tell. He wouldn’t out me, even if Neil was his step-cousin by marriage, through something, skipped a generation, or whatever.

“Oh, wow... okay.” He was taken aback, but he was also trying not to laugh, and I was about to punch him for it. “Interesting. You know, most people would say Neil couldn’t spook a kitten, though.”

“Yeah, well... it doesn’t make any sense to me either.” But there it was. Something about Neil made my insides uneasy, but excited, or anxious, at the same time, I think.

“Mmhmmm.” He studied me with amusement. “I don’t even know what to say right now.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I shoved him off. “Hailey’s still waiting for you to close out her drawer.”

“Oh, shit. I completely forgot.” He backed out of the doorway, pointing at me. “This conversation isn’t over.”



“Yes, it is!” I sung and turned to the sink full of dishes waiting for me. Ugh. Still beat the popcorn machine, though. Thank you, Kyle!

Sometimes being a heartless bitch really paid off.

## Chapter 4

### Pin Me

“You got the tape?” Neil asked as we were heading out of class the next week.

I held up my arm to show him the seven rolls now decorating my sleeve. We were in charge of hanging up posters, both ours and the ones from earlier ASB periods, too. He had them slung over a small cart and started pulling it.

“Where to?” he asked.

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I looked around the hallway we were standing in. “I guess we should start in the square.”

He nodded and headed in that direction.

Neil was wearing shorts today, and a regular tee. Some black Vans. It was completely throwing me off. It was stupid, for something that minute to make me feel like I was seeing him through yet another lens, but...

He looked good in casual. Or different. I didn't know.

I helped him carry the cart down two flights of stairs into the square, avoiding his gaze. I could feel his eyes on me, though. Two laser beams searing straight through me. Could he see right through me as well? Could he see that something in me, was attracted to something about him, even though I still had no clue what it was, and I was confused as hell about it?

No. No way. I was way too good at putting up a front.

But if that was the case, then why did it feel like all of that was stripped away when Neil was standing in front of me?

Maybe it was because we'd known each other as kids, before too much life intervened and forced us to need fronts at all. He'd already seen me, and known me, on some level, before any of that existed.

That had to be it. It made sense.

But that was a long time ago.

“Should we start here?” Neil’s voice untangled the knotted thoughts in my brain until they disintegrated into nothing.

“Huh?” I asked.

“This wall here...” He gestured to the wall beside us, the one that stood center in the square, sitting between the two doorways of the library. “We can put the biggest one here.”

“Yeah, that’s smart.” Everyone would see it there no matter where their classes were. I held up one side while he held the other, and we placed it against the wall. Holding my arm full of tape out to him, he reached over and pulled a piece, leaning down to tear it off with his teeth.

Yeah, not going there. Or the million-and-one other devious places my mind had just gone.

After securing down the poster, we moved down the way, attaching a few more to the walls that closed in the square. I definitely wasn’t at a loss for words as I inconspicuously watched him—his arms lifting, flexing, tearing pieces of tape from my arm. Nope. Not me.

I cleared my throat, looking away. “So, what movie did you see on Friday?” I asked him.

“Oh, uh...” He finished smoothing out a poster against yet another wall before sliding his hands into his pockets. “Demon Daze.”

“Nice.” I nodded my head in approval. “What did you think of it?”

“It was alright.” He shrugged. “I think they missed a few opportunities for something gorier, but I liked it enough.”

“Mmhmm.” I bit back a smile. Everyone else I’d talked to about it had hated it.

“Did you see it?” he asked.

“I did.”

“And what did you think?”

“I think they skimmed on the gore, for sure, but the concept was pretty cool. I liked it.”

“I agree,” he stated confidently, curling his hands over the edge of the cart. I stood there and stared at him, distinguishing four different shades of brown that melded together in his eyes. Mocha near the iris, caramel and honey in the center, and nearly onyx at the rim that edged them.

He blinked away and started pulling the cart down the last hill of the square and toward the gym, landing me right on my metaphorical ass of reality.

Mocha and honey? What in the actual fuck, Olivia?

Call me mortified. Because I was. Mortified. At my own traitorous thoughts.

I shook my head, banished them away, and followed him.

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We put two more posters up, one on the side window where the lunch lines were and the other on the main door to the gym.

“Are you still as into movies now as you used to be?” he asked, and I told myself I didn’t care that he remembered.

I nodded. “Definitely.” I liked the process of making movies more than anything. From the conception of an idea to it being realized on screen, it fascinated me. “And you?”

“A bit, yeah. I’ve been watching a lot of older ones lately, fifties and sixties stuff.”

You do not think that’s cool. You do not think that’s cool. It’s not interesting at all.

“You know” —he laughed— “back when guys used to pin a girl before asking her to homecoming.” He slid his hand over the stack of homecoming posters.

I swallowed. Right. Pinning. The tradition of having your girl wear your pin as a sign of commitment, or whatever. Not the type of pinning I was picturing Neil doing to someone—me—right now.

The thought of it was far more enticing than I wanted to admit. Oh, screw it. I’d already admitted it to myself. A few times.

“Like in college, right?” I said. “Isn’t that basically what the promise ring of today is?”

He shrugged, his eyebrows pulling together into an almost unnoticeable frown. “I don’t know, I feel like it was different. More intentional, right? And innocent. I kind of like the idea of it.”

I rolled my eyes. Of course he did. “Of course you do.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

I brushed off his offense. I hadn’t meant any, anyway. “It’s just... if you told me you’d been transported here from the 1950s by time machine as a kid, I’d be inclined to believe you.”

He laughed. “Thank you, I think?”

“It’s a compliment.” I think.

“You sure about that?” He laughed again.

I thought it over for his benefit. Good manners, respectful stare, light conversation, easy smile. Yeah, I could get down with that. On a friendly level, anyway.

“I mean, with your collared button-downs, pressed pants, and perfect reputation... you definitely fit the bill.” I shrugged. “But you also seem like a pretty decent guy. Old school.” Innocent, prudish, the kind of guy who’d pin a girl and go steady with her and have a swinging good time while never once trying to get past first base.

I kept those thoughts to myself, obviously.

He looked down at his clothes and back up at me, lifting his eyebrows.

“Well, except for today, of course,” I said. Today, I could see the hair that lined his

calves and shins. I could see the muscles in them. Swimmer's muscles. Ahem. I looked him in the eyes. "What is it, laundry day? Or did you lose a bet?"

His lips curved up into a smirky half-smile. He didn't say anything as he looked over my face, searching for God knows what, but he was looking for something.

Whatever he found made his smile stretch wider. His eyes shined with amusement.

It took everything in me not to shift around on my feet.

"And which do you like better?" he asked, smirk still fixed firmly in place.

And, oh...okay. So apparently, he could see right through me. Like my façade and walls weren't even there.

Apparently, they were just a goddamn mirage of flimsy thin glass pretending to block out Neil's awareness, but instead had parted like the Red Sea behind my back and welcomed him right the fuck in.

Wonderful.

My mom's car was in the driveway when I pulled up after school. The smell of food hit my senses as soon as I walked through the front door into the house. (Lots of food.)

Entering the kitchen, it was evident that my mom had ordered one of everything from every restaurant within a three-mile radius, and the table was all done up, too. Fancy china, silverware, shimmering tablecloth, rhinestone runner, floral centerpiece, the whole nine yards. My suspicion immediately rose.

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Because I knew better.

“Mother?” I dragged out the word and laced it with the suspicion I was feeling.

She came clacking down the staircase, a tiny woman on two tiny heels. I mean, if you considered five-five tiny. I was five-seven in comparison, inheriting an extra two inches from a father I’d never met.

“Oh, baby! I missed you,” she cooed and ran her fingers through my hair.

I smacked them away. “What is this all about?”

“What?”

“Don’t ‘what’ me.” I rolled my eyes.

“Okay, well...” She pulled me into the next room. “I met a man!” She threw her hands out at her sides, about one twitch away from sporting full-on spirit fingers.

“Uh-huh,” I deadpanned. “And?” She met a dozen new men a month, so...

She held her left hand out to me. “I’m engaged!”

I took in the enormous rock. “Okay...” God, my mom was exhausting. “And you met this guy in Vegas, just this weekend?”

“No, of course not. We’ve been dating for a while now.”



This was news to me.

“But it’s perfect,” she continued. “You’ll be eighteen next month, so you’ll totally be fine on your own.”

“Because you’re moving?” I frowned. Not much surprised me when it came to this woman, but this was new. A whole new level of I don’t know how to parent properly was being reached, and it was something to see. This was a prime example of how the desire for love (or pretending not to want anything to do with it while searching for it in all the wrong places) could make you insane.

My mother, people.

“No, no, no. I told him I’ll be flying back every weekend to check on you, and you know what he said?”

I didn’t answer her. I was about two seconds away from slapping some sense into her.

“Take my private jet!” she squealed. I scoffed, shaking my head, and she burst out into laughter. “Haha! Your face right now!” She clapped her hands together and threw her head back in another deep laugh. “I really had you, didn’t I?”

“Oh my god, you’re the worst,” I groaned. This was her idea of a joke. Again, people—my mother. I’d just about hit my limit. I threw my backpack onto the floor and started up the stairs. “Enjoy your dinner, psycho.”

“But don’t you want to know who our actual dinner guest is?” she sang.

“Nope. Not at all. Not even a little bit. Have fun!” I threw the last two words out sarcastically, and that’s when he stepped out from the hallway and halted at the top of the staircase with a huge grin. Still in uniform. Tall brown boots, camo get-up and all.

“Holy shit!” I shrieked. My brother was back from bootcamp. I raced up the stairs and tackled him into the wall. When his arms slid around me, I felt like I could finally breathe again.

“Missed you, kiddo.”

“Not more than I missed you,” I exhaled the words into his chest. I wasn’t going to let him go. Not ever. I looked up at him. “What the hell are you doing here?”

His smile grew wider. “Came home for a visit before I head to SOI.” School of Infantry, I was pretty sure. His explanation of it all had been a blur.

“How long do I have you?” I asked.

“Two days.”

“Two days?” I deflated. “That’s crap. I thought you got longer than that?”

His arms tightened around me before he tried to let me go, but I wasn’t having it. I may have had a crazy-pants for a mother and father I didn’t know, but my brother... he was everything. Everything those two hadn’t been for me and more. I squeezed him harder, and he chuckled. “I know, but I’ve been off a couple days now already—I had some things to take care of. And then some of the guys and I are headed to Vegas for a few days before we head back.”

“Not cool.”

“Aw, come on, kiddo. We have two whole days. Ditch school, and I’ll make it worth it.”

“Deal.” I finally let him go and stepped back a foot.

“But first, we get through this dinner,” he said under his breath, low enough that psycho-pants, now bouncing in place on the balls of her feet at the bottom of the stairs, couldn’t hear him. I snorted, and he laughed.

“If you say so,” I responded, turning around on my heel and heading back downstairs.

“So, Vegas, I hear? When were you going to tell this to your dear young mother, Jason? You know I can slip you a few cards if you want. My ladies will show you guys a good time.”

“That is the last thing I want,” my brother growled.

“God, Mom,” I cut in. “Some boundaries are not meant to be crossed.” I shot her a glaring look that she simply shrugged off. What was with her today?

“I’m just saying.”

“Well, stop.”

“What is with you today?” She kidnapped my thoughts and turned them around on

me.

I sighed, but it turned into a groan. “Well,” I started. Besides the obvious, a lot. I knew telling her what was up with me was a questionable life choice, all things considered, but who else was I going to get answers from? When it came to dating, my mother was an expert. Literally. “I think I’m crushing on Neil, and it’s screwing with my head,” I told her.

“Ahh, boy trouble. You’ve come to the right place.” Her eyes lit up, and I laughed, and just like that, we slipped into an energy far less irritating.

“Hold up. What?” Jason cut through my laughter, staring me down.

“Neil, as in Neil Summers,” I offered.

He visibly relaxed. “Still. I don’t care if he’s the preacher’s son, I’ll beat him to a pulp if he touches you.”

I laughed. “I doubt you have anything to worry about there.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” my mother interjected, and Jason and I both narrowed our eyes at her. I already knew something insane was about to come out of her mouth. However crazy, it wouldn’t surprise me.

“You know I slept with his father in high school,” she said, and no. I was wrong. There was literally no level higher of shocking words she could’ve just said.

“What?!” I smacked my hands down on the table, holding back my laughter. “You’re serious?”

“Yep. I fell for him pretty hard—for a week.” She snickered.

“And?” Jason and I both echoed, wholly invested in wherever the hell this story was going.

“Oh, it was short-lived.” She waved it off with a hand and reached for her fork. “We dated a little, things got heated, I finally convinced him to go all the way, and then he broke up with me the next day.”

“Brutal,” I commented.

“He’d seen the light.” She shrugged. “He felt like what we’d done was horrible and wrong, and then he went on to graduate high school and go straight into priesthood training, or whatever it’s called.”

My brother laughed, and I laughed even harder.

“Holy shit, Mom. You scared him straight,” I said. As soon as I could breathe again, anyway.

“I did.” She smiled, not embarrassed in the slightest. “So, you see, you two? Take note.” She pointed at us both with her fork and finished with, “I’ve done good things for this world, too.”

And then we all broke out into laughter.

As soon as our laughter died down and we dug into our dinners, silence washing over the table, I felt a strange uneasiness creep over me. What my mother had just described was startlingly familiar, I realized, and I didn’t need her answers for what I was feeling anymore.

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Dirty. I felt dirty. In a way I wasn't familiar with.

I guess I was going to be calling off the bet after all. But I decided to take it one step further than that.

I was going to tell Neil about it, too, and level out the playing field. Because, bet or not, I still planned on kissing him, and I didn't want that hanging over my head when I did.

### Chapter 5

#### Always Faithful

"Why are you even wearing your get-up anyway? Shouldn't you be in 'civilian' clothes?" I said, throwing up some air quotes.

"For effect." Jason laughed. "Thought you might want to see me in my new gear. I hoped to maybe get a few tears out of you, too, but I see you're still hardened to the core." He nudged me.

I stared at him pointedly, still waiting for the more truthful version of that answer.

"And... I might've needed the women in the neighborhood to know a man in uniform was in town," he added, and I laughed. That was more like it.

"If you're so hard-up, take Mom's card," I joked.

His features curled up in disgust. A disgust directed at our mother and not me, of course. “No thanks.” His revulsion echoed in his words. “Linda, man. She’s really something, isn’t she?”

“No joke, I think she’s gotten worse since you left.”

“That’s really saying something.” He kicked his foot up onto the edge of the firepit in our backyard, leaning back in his chair, and finished the rest of his beer in one deep swig.

“I think she can taste her freedom and her wings have already spread for takeoff,” I said. Not that she didn’t clearly already have her freedom. She always had. Being a mother came second, since always. How she’d gotten away with it my entire life was only a testament to how determined she was to live her best life and live it for herself.

Selfish, I know. Absolutely. It was one of the many downsides to having Linda for a mother, but... she also gave me Jason, and he made up for everything she wasn’t and could never be.

I would’ve taken that over anything, and I did.

Was that too much pressure for a guy like him? Twenty and starting out his life on his own, having always taken care of his sister—cooking my meals, walking me to school, and tucking me in most nights when he’d just been a kid himself? I didn’t know. He never made it seem that way, though—like I was a burden, or a chore, or an annoying little sister.

I was certain that all the best parts of me were made up of the very best parts of him because of it.

And if that was the case, then our mother’s crazy—her chaos and self-centeredness

and inability to settle—must’ve equaled my other half. I didn’t mind it too much.

“So, eighteen!” Jason cut through my thoughts. “You tiny little grownup. How’re you feeling about entering into adulthood?”

“Um... probably how I’ve been feeling for the last thirteen weeks,” I deadpanned.

“Touché.” He clinked his empty bottle against my chair, and it made a ringing noise that stretched out and faded off into nothing.

“I really missed you,” I said.

“I know, kiddo. I’ve missed you too. You know I don’t feel good about leaving you.” His eyebrows drew down, a crease forming between them.

“You should,” I assured him. “I’m glad you’re doing you.” He’d already put off doing his own thing for two years because of me; I didn’t want him putting his life on hold any longer than that. I could easily take care of myself. “And doing something good and honorable at that. I’m proud of you,” I added. I might have given him a truckload of shit about it before he left, but the truth was, I respected him and all that he was sacrificing. I didn’t think there was anything more honorable than willingly putting yourself at risk for the safety of a country and people you didn’t even know.

His eyes widened teasingly. “Are you telling me all I had to do was leave for a few weeks to get you to pay me a compliment?” he joked. “You’ve changed since I left, haven’t you? What is this life?” He looked around him in a mocking way, being a pain in my ass.

“Shut up.” I laughed. “You know I love you. It’s just my responsibility as your younger sister to make sure your head doesn’t get too big. It’s big enough as it is. In fact, I think you should see someone about that.” I held my hands up around my head,



showing him the approximate size of his watermelon-shaped ego.

He smacked my hands down with a smile. “I can’t help it that I’m good-looking. It’s in the genes. Thank you, Linda!” he shouted up at our back windows. “Best thing she ever gave me,” he said in a regular voice again, sarcasm lacing his words.

“You’re welcome!” she screamed back a handful of seconds later. I snorted. Leave it to our mother to never miss a compliment.

The next two days raced by. I would’ve shoved a crowbar into the passing hours if I could’ve, sending time sizzling into the ether and halting it altogether. But obviously, I wasn’t living in a movie and the real world didn’t work like that.

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Ugh. How annoying real life could be. It's why I loved movies so much, after all.

We'd stayed up late that first night. Jason told me all about his experience in the Marines so far, bootcamp and training and all that. Honestly, it sounded like a nightmare to me, but he detailed it all with a proud smile. Like charging into a room full of tear gas made him a better man and spending two-plus days marching forty miles on eight hours combined sleep and only two MRE meals to sustain him gave him a new sense of purpose. (They didn't call it the Crucible for nothing.)

I believed him, though. I could see the differences in him. They were good differences—the light in his eyes, and the determined set of his shoulders. His smile was more relaxed, too.

I was glad for it.

And then he drilled into me about college, and I assured him I was going to be applying soon, but that wasn't good enough for him. He made me apply to two right then and there, and then we headed off to bed at three in the morning.

The next day, we went to see—shocker—a movie. I forced him to watch *Demon Daze* with me again, and he hated it just like everyone else I knew had hated it. Except Neil, of course.

Freaking Neil.

After that, he took me with him to a party at one of his friend's houses. Which was a first. Never had I been allowed to tag along with him to one of his parties. (That's not

to say I hadn't ever gone to one, becausehello, not a rule follower here.It was just that my brother didn'tknowabout it.)

This party, though. It was full of bad boys. Older, bad boys. My kind of boys. A familiar giddiness crept through me, but it was quickly sliced into pieces and obliterated by my evil brother.

"Don't even think about it,"he'd said,and then he proceeded to beat off any interested parties with his proverbial bat, giving out a tongue lashing that marked me off-limits and underage to anyone listening.

So annoying.

It's not like I wanted to hook up with them or anything. I was just interested in a tiny little distraction from my growing obsession withyou know who.

Was it really such a bad thing? (The obsession part, not the distraction.)Yes, andno, was the conclusion I'd come to. No, because attraction was natural, and just because it was homed in on one holy boy, in particular, didn't make it weird. Okay, it did, a little bit, but that was beside the point. And yes, because...

It was a point I'd already made a hundred times, at least inside my own head, but he was practically an angel, and in comparison, I was the goddamn devil. He was too good for me.

Did I even stand a chance?

A chance in hell, maybe. Which is probably why I had no qualms about just coming out with what I wanted. He'd blush and choke on his spit a little and then turn me down, citing at least three commandments he'd be breaking for just thinking about it. And then? We'd move on.I'dbe able to move on. From this ridiculous, embarrassing,

consuming need to make a move on Neil.

It occupied far more space in my mind than was healthy.

And yes, I got it, teenagers were hormonal creatures and sex and attraction was on our minds almost always. But we at least had the decency and smarts to fantasize within our realms of possibility, right?

Okay, maybe not. But this was different. This was complete opposites, and not ever going to happen, and weird and uncomfortable, and obviously a terrible idea. Not totally unheard of, the whole opposites attract thing, but kind of insane. Just like the idea of Neil and me ever actually being a thing.

Then why did the picture it painted in my head feel like a good idea? A very good idea. Neil and I, hands touching, lips kissing, horizontal, vertical—whatever. It made my palms sweat just thinking about it.

Anyway. I swallowed.

This morning Jason and I had gone out mudding in his truck and he had me hanging on to the “Oh, shit” bar for two hours straight. My heart was just finding its familiar rhythm as we pulled into the parking lot at Inkcafé, my favorite half-coffee shop, half-bookstore.

Jason’s rumbling truck shuddered to a halt. He looked over at me and pressed his lips together, amused. “You used to live for this stuff. What happened to you this summer?”

“I still do,” I grumbled. “I think you being in the Marines has made you ballsier, though, you jerk-face.”

He laughed.

“Seriously. I mean it. We could’ve died back there, and then I’d have gone straight to hell far sooner than I ever planned on going.”

He rolled his eyes and pulled his door open. “Come on, crazy.”

I opened my door and hopped down onto the asphalt, neglecting to tell Jason that, technically, a lot could happen to change a person in one summer. So much that you wouldn’t even recognize them anymore when they once felt familiar to you.

I wasn’t thinking about anyone in particular. Not myself, and definitely not Neil. And that, right there, was a great testament to how well I could lie to myself.

Jason pulled me into his side as we walked into Inkcafé, and the intoxicating smell of coffee hit my nose. I swear, just breathing the air of it into my lungs gave my energy a little kick.

“Mmmmm, caffeine,” I hummed.

Jason shook his head. “You’re far too young to be so hooked on coffee, Olls.”

“Never,” was my quick reply as we stepped up in line, and remember when I claimed that I couldn’t halt time? That it wasn’t possible in the very real and tangible world I lived in? I was wrong. Because there was no other explanation for what I felt when I looked up and saw Neil standing on the opposite side of the counter, ready and waiting to take our order.

It wasn’t just time that stopped; everything stopped. Sounds, movements, my heart, my breaths, gravity. I looked down at my Converse-covered feet, stuck firmly to the ground. So, I was wrong about the gravity part, I guess. But what about everything else?

I willed a breath past my lips and into my lungs, which spurred my heart back on into a steady beat. Dishes clinking and low murmurs filled my ears and movement registered in my periphery. I took another breath.

“What can I get for you guys?” Neil said with a smile, oblivious to what had just briefly shaken my world. I added a lonely, supportive tally to themaybe I can stop timecolumn in my brain.

“Eyes here right, buddy,” my brother said.

Neil just smiled. “Jason, right?”

He grumbled some kind of noise of affirmation in response.

Right. “I’ll take a medium iced caramel macchiato, extra caramel drizzle, and a balsamic avocado toast. No tomato, please,” I interjected. Yes, these two things didn’t go together, like, at all, but they were my favorite and I refused to choose one over the other.

Neil’s hand moved over the screen in front of him. I spotted black nail polish on his other hand, on his left thumb. The hand that was curled around the edge of the counter while his other pushed in my order. I just stared at it, feeling like I didn’t know Neil at all. I get that it was only a few strokes of paint on a single fingernail, but...why was it there? It was stupid how much I wanted to know the answer to that question. How much I wanted to know him, well enough that I would know the answer without having to ask.

I blinked myself out of my stupor and cleared my throat, gesturing for Jason to give his order already. He gave me a knowing look before rambling off a bunch of things I didn’t hear.

“So you like him, like him,” he said as soon as we sat down at my favorite table outside. The one with swings for chairs.

I pushed myself backward and forward, ignoring his comment. The look on his face said it all, though. I was out of my mind. Setting my sights on Neil freaking Summers was an idiot move.

But I couldn’t help the way I felt when I looked at him. I was great at lying to myself, but my body was a traitorous instigator. I could tell myself all the things I wanted to, but there was no way I could ignore my pounding heart, or my convoluted thoughts, or the way my breath caught every other time he looked at me.

Jason kicked my foot beneath the table. “Truthfully, if there’s any guy I’d want you interested in, it would be someone like him. But do you think it’s a smart move? You know who his parents are.”

I looked up at him. I appreciated how easily he could switch into parental figure mode; I appreciated it more that he wanted to take on that role sometimes. “Doesn’t mean he’s like that,” I settled on, surprising even myself with the truth of those words, but I finished with, “It’s not like that, though. It’s just an attraction thing, and we both know that’s not going anywhere. No matter how much I’d like it to,” I muttered the last part under my breath, and Jason’s face scrunched up in genuine revulsion.

“Nope. No.” He shook his head. “Did not need to hear that. In fact, maybe I should just go ahead and hook you two up myself to ensure you stay a virgin until you’re thirty.” He started to stand up, but I tackled him down from across the table.

Of course, Neil chose that moment to deliver our food and drinks. Jason feigned having to use the restroom—or maybe he actually had to; I didn’t know. Either way, he quickly left the table. Leaving me staring up at Neil who was wearing the subtle hint of a smile.

“That’s cool that your brother’s back in town,” he said, and all my thoughts gravitated back toward Jason leaving. My energy deflated.

“Yeah. Until tonight, anyway,” I responded.

Neil’s face drew in. With concern, I think. Or sympathy.

I shrugged it off. “I didn’t know you worked here.”

His shoulders relaxed, followed slowly by his expression. I watched each of his features settle into place on his face, and when they did, it felt like I was looking at



him for the first time.

“Yeah, I just started a couple weeks ago, actually,” he said, but I was still stuck on his face. Something had just happened. I wasn’t sure what it was, but I—I didn’t know. I smiled at him, in a very un-fucking-like-Olivia kind of way—real and dug up from some dark pit that was connected to actual feelings.

He smiled back, glancing down at his feet, and for that brief second, he seemed... nervous? Interesting. “I saw you in here last week when I came in for my shift, but you’d already ordered, and your face was stuck in a book, so I didn’t want to bother you.” His words didn’t sound nervous, though. They were delivered with confidence, maybe even a bit of playfulness layered within them.

It was at that exact juncture in time that I realized I wanted to get to know Neil Summers. Really know him. Who he was now. His likes and dislikes. His beliefs and goals and the kind of things that made him laugh.

I wanted to crawl inside his world for just a little while and see if there were any colors in it that didn’t exist inside of mine.

“No. Nope. Not happening.” I shook my head as I squeezed my brother harder. “You can’t go.”

“I have to.” He chuckled. “But you can write me now, remember? And I’ll make sure to write you back. I’ll even call you when I can, okay?”

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“Okay,” I grumbled. I was not a crier, so if I didn’t cry the first time he left, I sure as hell wasn’t going to embarrass myself and do it now.

“Cheer up.” He nudged my chin. “I’ll see you again soon.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I stepped back a foot. “Go be a hero now. Oorah and all that shit.”

He laughed. “Oorah, kiddo. Or better yet, semper fidelis.”

“What?” I deadpanned.

“Semper fidelis. It means ‘Always Faithful.’ That’s you and me. Semper-fi.”

The corner of my mouth hitched up. “I kind of like that. Even if it makes you sound like a huge dork.”

He pulled me in for one last hug with a chuckle, and then I held my hand up in a wave as I watched him walk away, vanishing through the terminal doors.

## Chapter 6

### Butterflies

I was in an awful mood. The worst mood. Think PMS, stacked on top of a shitty day, stacked on top of waking up with a vacant space in my house and my heart, kind of worst mood.

I didn't have patience for anyone the day after Jason left. Hence the reason Sydney officially wasn't talking to me today. Like I gave two shits. She'd asked what was wrong with me about one time too many, so I gave her a piece of my mind, telling her to shut up and mind her own damn business. She did so, gladly—her word, not mine.

I knew I was going to have to apologize to her later. But she'd forgive me like she always did. And vice versa. Our relationship was an annoying one, yes, but I wouldn't have had it any other way. Sydney was the Holmes to my Watson and the Bonnie to my Clyde. In other words, we made no damn sense, but we were ride or die.

But back to my world-class shitty day: I had three classes left for the day before I could get the hell out of here, go home, change into my uniform, and start my first official day of projectionist training at the theater. It was the only thing that gave me even a hint of excitement that day. It felt like I'd been waiting forever for the title, and now that my birthday was only a few weeks away, my managers felt comfortable enough letting me work the closing shift that ended at midnight.

I'd already shadowed Gabe, the head-projectionist, all over the projection room out of mere curiosity, so I pretty much knew all there was to know. So really, my training period was just a formality.

But the best part? Our theater still ran film reels when the rest of the world had upgraded to digital. It was a dying practice, I knew, but our theater still did it, and I was obsessed.

We had to physically splice together 35mm film and run it through the machines with our hands, press and flip a few switches to start the projector and wait for it to fully run before opening the douser and letting the lamplight through. The clicks and hum of the mechanics, film traveling through each piece—I loved it.

So, no matter how shitty my current mood, I was looking forward to it. That, and

when all the screens were running, I got to sit around and watch the movies. Like, it was in my job description. Getting paid to watch movies and make sure they were running properly. How was that real life? I didn't know, and I didn't care. It was my life, and that's all that mattered.

I walked from lunch to fourth period, a permanent scowl on my face despite any of this. I didn't know when I was going to see Jason again. Or when I'd even hear from him. I understood and respected what he was doing—yes—but it didn't mean I liked it. In fact, I hated it. Full honesty, it was terrifying.

Worrying about him ate me up sometimes, but I guess it was about time our roles had reversed. He'd spent enough of our childhood worrying about me.

He's fine. He'll be fine, I told myself repeatedly, right up until I bumped into the back of Neil and my bag of chips went flying across the floor, spilling everywhere. Great. Awesome. I sighed a dramatic sigh and cursed the world with a few colorful expletives.

"Dammit," I growled. Sometimes I wished it was still appropriate to throw yourself on the floor and kick and scream when life wasn't going your way. Apparently, that kind of life tactic was only cool for three-year-olds. Whatever.

I rolled my eyes at the universe, picking up my wasted lunch of Flamin' Hot Cheetos.

"Here, let me help you," Neil offered, taking the bag from my hands.

"It's okay, I got it," I said in vain. He was already halfway through picking them up for me, and I wasn't really doing anything but standing here watching him. "Thanks," I added when he was all done, and then I turned and started heading into class.

"Liv?" His voice sliced into my awareness. Maybe even through my irritation. (Who

was I kidding? Neil's words were like a knife cutting through warm butter.)

"Yeah?" I turned back around and faced him.

When I did, when his eyes met mine, my throat closed up the smallest, almost imperceptible bit.

Just looking at him seemed to set me off balance.

But there was a contrast of light and dark in his eyes that was suddenly fascinating, and the subtle curve of his lips as they lifted into a smile... I could hardly remember what had been bothering me all day.

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Time was doing that sort of pause and halt thing again, too, and there was this odd feeling in my stomach, like...

Butterflies.

No, literally. Neil was holding up two paper butterflies. But there it was—butterflies in both the literal and figurative sense.

“Some of the girls from church taught me how to make these at lunch today, and...” He cleared his throat. “They made me think of you. You used to love butterflies... when we were seven... and...” He trailed off, looking a little unsettled and definitely unsure. Probably because of the intense stare I was currently searing him with.

It made sense—the small outline of a butterfly I had tattooed on the inside of my arm that I’d caught him staring at a handful of times. I did like butterflies, though I wasn’t sure why. Just another calming thing to look at, I guess—kind of like Neil, really. But my mind had tangled itself up in a mess of thoughts, one screaming out louder than the others: Why the hell was he giving me these?

He stretched his arm forward, attempting to hand me the paper butterflies. One black and one gray, like he knew the color of my soul or something.

I stood there, staring at his outstretched hand, mouth slightly agape.

Neil did not give butterflies. Real or imagined, goddammit. What the hell was going on with me?

His smile hitched higher, his hand reaching closer.

And I had the startling thought that what I was feeling for him went beyond attraction.

I think... I think I actually like him, I thought to myself. Liked him, liked him, just like Jason had called.

Ugh. Gag me and choke me in my sleep. Things were slipping way too fast into somewhere way too uncharted and unfamiliar, but the worst part? I didn't think Neil had the slightest clue.

And I still had to tell him about the bet, but right now seemed like an increasingly stupid time to do so. I knew what I'd said, about wanting to slip inside his world, and take a nap in it, or whatever. But I'd been in a vulnerable place, okay? I hadn't seen my brother in weeks. And he had just left me—again. Neil's face had felt like a ray of sunshine on a dark and shitty day.

But right now, I needed to pretend like that hadn't also been true about ten seconds ago. I needed to get my shit together and end this ridiculous charade. I needed to tip the balancing scale back in my favor.

I smacked the butterflies up and out of his hand, pretended to gag, and walked the hell away—screw Neil and his stupid butterflies—before turning right back around with a sigh, snatching them up from the ground, and walking the hell away from him for a second time.

I might have mumbled a sorry and a thank you while I was at it, but I couldn't be sure. I was too busy screaming at myself, so loud it could've burst my eardrums if it hadn't only occurred inside the bubble of my own reality—inside my own head.

I would've thought Neil took offense to my rudeness if it weren't for his soft and amused laughter that scraped along the last of my sanity. Laughter that tattooed itself right into my brain.

I was well aware that I probably looked like a complete psycho. I knew I felt like one at the moment. But I was who I was, and I wasn't going to apologize for it. And Neil certainly didn't seem to mind, his smile still fixed firmly in place as he sat down at his desk across the room from me.

I felt my own lips twitching, fighting the pull of a smile.

The two paper butterflies sitting on my desk sobered me right back up. I spun the black one around in circles with the tip of my finger. Two perfectly folded pieces of paper; two small butterflies. I kind of loved them.

Except—they didn't feel like butterflies anymore. Not really. No, they looked more like two death moths if you asked me. A bad omen; a warning that if I allowed my feelings to crawl any deeper it could very well be the death of me.

Dramatic much?

Nope.

Never.

I made it through the rest of my day. Without any further dramatics, thank you very much. Just the sure and steady success of ignoring Neil's attention through three classes and five hours of threading film through fifteen projectors.

It was ten p.m. and the last movies had been started for the night. I just had to wait for them to end, shut down all the machines and sound towers, and then I could head



home.

I made my way downstairs since all there was left to do was wait.

Jax was in the back room, restocking the snack shack. I pulled one of the soda nozzles out of a bucket of warm soapy water and rinsed it off in the sink, reattaching it to the Coke. I filled my cup up halfway and then moved the nozzle to the Sprite, filling it the rest of the way.

I was twisting my lid back on when Jax slid into my periphery. “Interesting choice of soda flavors there, my friend,” he said.

“Whatever could you possibly mean?” I blinked at him dramatically, pressing a hand to my chest like the smartass I was, my tone backing up the sentiment.

He smirked. “Really?”

“Shut up,” I quipped, regular old Olivia again, and he chuckled. He went to make another comment, but I shut him down with, “You done for the night?”

“Just about.”

“Want to hang out with me for an hour?”

“Sure.” He shrugged.

“Cool. Fifteen is empty. Meet me there.”

“You got it,” he said, heading off to finish out whatever it was he had left to do.

I threw the soda nozzle back into the soapy bucket of water and walked through the theater, checking in on each screen before landing on theater fifteen. I sat down in the back row, leaning my head back on the seat and closing my eyes.

“How could you?” the actress on the screen cried. “I trusted you. I trusted you, and now you’ve ruined everything.”

“You don’t understand,” her male counterpart interjected. “It’s not what you think.”

“It doesn’t look that way.”

“What do you want me to say, baby?”

I snorted.

“Don’t call me that.”

“Baby...” he pleaded.

“I said don’t call me that!”

“Wow, a bit dramatic, don’t you think?” Jax said as he slid into the seat next to me. He handed me a box of sour gummies.

“You’re the best.” I pulled them open and dug around for all the greens, handing over the box when a mound of them were sitting in my palm.

He shook his head, pointing at my small mountain of gummies. “I’ll never understand this. If you’re going to have a favorite flavor, why is it going to belime?” he practically spit the word out in disgust, but I saw him biting back a smile.

“Mind your own business. These are my life choices, not yours.”

He laughed. “Speaking of life choices... what’s going on with you and my cousin?”

I scoffed. “Subtle subject change.”

“Had to dive in there somehow,” he offered with a shrug. “So, what’s the scoop?”

“‘The scoop’? There is no scoop.”

“Ah! And she lies again! So I guess Neil’s sudden interest in all things Olivia is a figment of my imagination?”

I turned toward him, obviously eager, but whatever. “What do you mean?” He laughed again, and I bumped him with my shoulder. “What do you mean?” I repeated. If he didn’t spit it out, I was going to punch him.

“I can see the need for physical violence in your eyes right now, and I’m going to need you to simmer down. I’ll explain right now.”

“Please do,” I said sweetly, my sarcasm betraying my impatience. He could probably see it on my face anyway, because apparently, I wasn’t all that good at hiding emotions where Neil was concerned.

He shrugged. “It’s not a big deal, but he’s been asking about you lately.”

Sure. Not a big deal. I could get down with that. I just needed my heart to catch up with that assessment. “Like what?” I asked.

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“If we’re friends, if we hang out, what we do, what you’re like now.”

“Oh.”Wow.Okay. Those were some mildly personal questions for someone merely making conversation, weren’t they?

Why hadn’t he just asked methese questions? There was plenty of opportunity to, that was for sure. But I hadn’t asked him any questions myself either, had I? Nope. I hadn’t.

I kept brushing away the same nagging thought before finally allowing it to take root:Was Neil actually interested in me, too?

Nope. No way. There was no way. That was as impossible as impossible could come, because just like I’d had my list of assumptions about him, hehadto have his about me. And I knew they spelled out all the things he didn’t want in a girl.

But hadn’t I thought the same thing about him, too? Wasn’t I still trying to convince myself that was the case? That he was the exact opposite of everything I thought I liked in a guy?

It was like the universe was mocking me. She’d taken my list of desired attributes, thrown them in a blender, ran them through a strainer, and handed me the leftover pieces, saying,“You figure out what to do with them now.”

I didn’tknowwhat to do with them! That was the point.What the hell was I supposed to do with any of this? Especially now that I knew Neil had been asking about me.

I kind of wanted to ask Jax about him now, too. Instead, I settled on, “He makes me nervous.”

Jax smiled. A soft and easy smile I didn’t see too often. “So you’ve said. How so?”

“I don’t know.” I shook my head back and forth a few times. “I just... I’m usually pretty straightforward, right?”

He snorted. “You could say that.”

“And clear about what I want,” I continued on right past his comment. “But for whatever reason, when Neil looks at me, my mind feels like a traffic jam on the I-35—slow moving and chaotic—and my thoughts are all the jerks honking behind me as if there’s anywhere I can go...”

He hid his laughter behind his hand, and this time, I did punch him. (Softly. I wasn’t a total a-hole.) “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to laugh,” he said. “But disrupted Olivia is pretty damn cute. Continue on.”

I huffed out a breath. “I made this stupid bet with Sydney—that I could get Neil to kiss me. But now I kind of actually want him to kiss me, but for it to, like, mean something?” I laughed at myself. “Ugh, I don’t know; I’m all over the place. It feels stupid coming out of my mouth, but I think I like him.

“That couldn’t go anywhere, though, right?” If anyone would know the answer to that, Jax would.

This whole scenario was only proving to be yet another excellent example of how wanting another person could make you slightly crazy.

“Why couldn’t it?” he asked.

I looked down at my shirt as if it held all the answers he needed. “I’m Olivia. That’s why. And his parents...”

He laughed. “Maybe you should try to get to know him; he might surprise you.”

I let his words settle, and they burrowed into me. I did want to get to know Neil. I’d already admitted that to myself. I still wasn’t sure what to do with it, though, or how to go about it.

“So, what about this bet thing?” Jax interjected.

“It’s nothing.” I shook my head. “And it’s stupid. I’m going to tell him about it.”

His eyebrows rose. “I’m not saying you shouldn’t, because you probably should, but that’s an interesting foot to start on.”

I shrugged. It was what it was.

“You know...” he hedged. “We actually got pretty close this summer—Neil and me. Did you know that?”

I shifted in my seat, turning to face him as I pulled my legs beneath me. “I didn’t,” I said, more than surprised. He hadn’t mentioned this—like, at all. Not even before it was blatantly obvious I was crushing on his cousin.

I guess I understood his hesitancy, though. Their families had quite a bit of history. Bits and pieces he’d told me here and there—but basically, a gay step-cousin and a religious family sometimes didn’t mesh all that well, as many might know. Theirs had been one of those families, unfortunately. And it hadn’t been pretty.

Until recently, maybe? “Who reached out to who?” I asked Jax.

“Neil.” He gave me a pointed stare, and I read it loud and clear. Obviously, Neil had changed this summer. More than I even knew.



I nodded. “What did you guys do?”

“Regular things.” He shrugged. “We went out to eat, went skateboarding a lot, swimming at my house.”

I shoved into him with a shoulder. “You didn’t invite me to come swimming, you jerk.”

His eyes widened mockingly. “Oh, I don’t know, probably because you own a pool the size of a small ocean, so what do you want to come swimming at my house for? Besides, you didn’t invite me to your place either this summer.”

“Yes, I did!” I shouted with a laugh. “But you were always busy with work or whatever else.” I guess I now knew that whatever else equated Neil freaking Summers. I felt lied to. “Traitor.”

“It was nice,” he said over me, and I immediately took it back. Jax deserved a nice summer with Neil. I just had a million questions about what that summer had looked like. What things did they talk about? Did they hash out their history or skim over it? Were Neil’s parents in on this reunion, or had Neil made this decision on his own? Did it have anything to do with why he seemed different this year? My list of questions was quickly compiling, but I didn’t know where to start.

I didn’t have to. “He apologized,” Jax dove in for me. “Not that he had much to do with any of it. But he said he felt bad for the way his parents have treated me, and that it was time he started making his own judgments about people, based on their character and not who they do or don’t love.”

Okay. Wow.

Something was happening inside my chest that I refused to acknowledge—feelings coiling around thoughts, but I willed them away.

I curled my hand over Jax's arm and gave it a squeeze, meeting his eyes. Eyes that looked a lot like Neil's even though they weren't technically related. "That's really cool, Jax. I'm glad for you." It felt like we were in the middle of the most intense conversation we'd ever held—probably because it was. We both had a way about laughing off the serious, but this was different. This was pretty huge.

"And the rest of the family?" I asked.

He shrugged. "It's getting better."

"That's good."

"Yeah," he said, letting out a sigh as he relaxed into his seat, repeating, "Yeah."

My eyes lingered on his profile. He had a long, slightly upturned nose, soft cheeks, and eyelashes any chick would kill for. His features were nothing like Neil's sharper and more chiseled ones, but he was attractive in his own way. Attractive enough that I'd hit on him two minutes after we first met. We decided friendship was the best alternative, considering first, we were both amazingly awesome, and second, we had the exact same taste in boys.

It was a few months into our friendship before I figured out that him and Neil were family. They'd come into the theater one evening, and Jax ducked down behind the counter so fast he almost took me down with him. Details were sprinkled in after that.

Jax's mother was married to Neil's father's brother. (Say that tongue twister out

loud.)

Jax's family was religious, too, but they kind of followed their own path—one of more faith and less judgment.

And once upon a time, Neil's parents hadn't treated Jax all too well when they found out he was gay.

Call me judgmental, but it hadn't surprised me. Not at all. Not because they were religious, but because of who they were as people. It aligned with the sneers I remember being directed my way at seven years old.

"So, I'm having a Halloween party." Jax averted my attention entirely, coming out of left field. "Want to come?"

"Do I want to come?" I scoffed. I could've strangled him. "Of course I want to come. It's Halloween," I said. It was the only reason I needed. I mean, besides the obvious fact that Jax was my friend and you could find me at any party I was invited to. Even some I wasn't invited to, really. But... Halloween!

Movies were my favorite thing in this world—yes—but Halloween was an awfully close second. Like, two lovers attached mid-bang, kind of close second. Followed by caffeine and hot Cheetos, in that order.

Because... what wasn't there to love about Halloween? Ghosts, goblins, vampires—all the monsters—all the best thriller and horror movies, dressing up, eating ungodly amounts of candy without being judged for it. (Not that it stopped me any other time of year, but that was beside the point.)

All the black things. And fall—sure, we only got a cool breeze and brightly colored leaves for about two weeks out of the year, but I was here for it. It was the best time

of year.

Anyone who disagreed could fight me.

## Chapter 7

### Confessional

“I’m just going to come out with it,” I said a few days later.

Neil looked up at me from his notebook, and his eyes caught mine—like a mouse in a trap.

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Seriously, it felt like the air had been punched out of me. I was on the verge of suffocating.(Again with the dramatics.)

I forced a breath into my lungs and huffed it back out, plopping down backward into the desk in front of him. His lips tilted slightly—an almost smirk, or smile, I didn't know. Whatever.

“I made a bet with Sydney; you know Sydney, right?” I came right on out with it like I said I would. It was now or never, because secrets only came around to bite you in the ass in the end, and I didn't need anything else working against me. You know, on top of the list of a thousand other reasons for why Neil and I were a stupid idea.

He nodded in response, his features shifting from amused to curious, and it was weird how time slowed down just enough for me to watch it happen.

“So, anyway,” I continued with a sigh. “I made a bet with her on the first day of school that I could get you to kiss me—stupid, right? But I felt like I should tell you that and clear the air. My air, anyway.”

A smile. That was definitely a smile on his lips now. It reached his eyes. “Good to know,” he said, and that was it.

Good to know.Good to know.“Good to know?” I repeated for the third time, only this time out loud. This secret had been plaguing me like the goddamn... well, plague, and all he had to say was good to know?

And that smile?

Clearly, I didn't know Neil anymore. Not at all.

A-N-D? Sydney spelled out in American Sign Language. We'd only gotten through the alphabet and Hello, my name is... in our first period ASL class, but once we knew more, we planned on carrying on secret conversations wherever we went. You know, add another layer to our unbreakably awesome friendship.

G-O-O-D-T-O-K-N-O-W, I signed back at the pace of a sloth, and she broke out in laughter. Her head tilted back with a loud cackle. Our group of friends looked over at us, but I just rolled my eyes, and they shrugged and went about their business.

"Oh my god," she said as she caught her breath. "Fucking priceless. I like him."

I gave her a piercing stare.

"For you, psycho," she added. "I like him for you." And I shook off my proprietary feelings. "So, now what?" she asked.

"I have no clue," I answered.

She smirked. "We'll think of something."

I walked into fourth period, ignoring the sear of Neil's eyes cauterizing into my skin as I sat down.

I'd divulged my secret to him just one short period ago—in his class, not mine. And not one we shared, by the way. How I knew where his first, second, and third periods were was no one's business but mine. It just made the apparent need to get it off my chest as soon as possible that much more annoying. But whatever; now he knew.

Sure, I'd thrown the ball in his court, but at some point, I was going to steal it back.

Just as soon as I could figure out how.

Our teacher started rambling on about something, but my mind wandered its way back to lunch. To Sydney and me, spelling out every curse word we could think of in sign language. By the end of lunch, we'd been getting pretty damn creative, finding at least one inspired word for every letter of the alphabet.

I snorted—out loud, in class—and our teacher paused to give me a pointed look before continuing on with his lesson. Something about the limit of function  $y$ , but I wasn't listening. I was still biting back my smile, smothering the urge to keep laughing. Freaking Sydney.

The rest of the day dragged on. Neil's eyes trailed me the entire way through, but I made it a point to ignore them. I was stealing my power back one way or another, figured I'd start there.

But now, sitting in my car in the mostly empty high school parking lot, I was in the middle of a self-imposed conundrum. Weighing my options on my metaphorical balancing scale: To go home, or not to go home. To do my homework at Inkcafé—like I almost always did—or to not do my homework at Inkcafé.

My mother was out of town again for work. "Work." And going back to an empty house just didn't feel like the kind of thing I was in the mood for today. But Neil would probably be at Inkcafé—also working.

But also, I wasn't going to let him, and this bizarre attraction and his confusing allure and his excitingly contradictory behavior, bulldoze me out of my favorite place.

Nope. No way. Screw that notion right up it's pretty little—you know what, never mind.

I tossed my backpack onto the chair next to me and pulled my things out of it one by one: notebook, math book, pencil, calculator. Hot Cheetos. And got to work.

No Neil. Not yet, anyway.

Good.

I took a long and full breath. I refused to acknowledge that it was the first I'd taken all day, free and unshackled by the weight of Neil's awareness.



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One deep swig of my salted caramel mocha ice-blended coffee, and I almost felt like myself again. I finished my math homework in record time and moved on to English, then science, and lastly, history.

After that nightmare was over, I took out my second notebook and flipped it open. I read over my notes on screenwriting before opening up Final Draft on my laptop, a program my mother had recently bought me without her knowledge. (Funny, she did that a lot. Could she really blame me, though, when she didn't pay enough attention to care what I did or didn't do with her credit card? Nope. Not at all.)

So, technically, I didn't know shit about screenwriting—yes—but as it turned out, the stories in my notebooks weren't so far off from a typical screenplay. My goal by the end of the year? To flip a few of my favorites into some fully thought-out, genuine screenplays.

And then? I didn't know. It just seemed like a fun thing to do, and a step in the right direction.

“What are you working on?” Neil's words were a vise around my heart, strangling my heartbeats and scaring the absolute shit out of me.

“Jesus,” I breathed. I knew I'd come off slightly irritated, but Christ. Warn a bitch with a clearing of the throat first or something.

Neil winced as I looked up at him. Whether it was because of my obvious irritation—I won't lie, I was more irritated with myself than anything—or if it was because I'd just spit out the word Jesus like it was a filthy curse word, I wasn't sure. It

was entirely lost on me.

I sort of felt bad, though, so I backpedaled a step or three. “My bad. I didn’t expect you to be here tonight.”

“Oh, yeah.” He slid his hands into his front pockets, which left me no other option than to steal a glance at the space between them.

Okay. Wow. I dragged my eyes back up to his.

“I come in later on Mondays. After Bible study,” he explained, and I was clearly going straight to hell. Not that I hadn’t already known that, but lusting after Neil’s crotch as he talked about Bible study had to be a new level of sin I was currently waltzing myself into.

But...

Spoiler alert: there was a pretty impressive bulge happening between his legs right now. And my eyes had somehow become a foreign entity from my brain, traveling down for another look despite my inner dialogue screaming at them not to. They took a mini-vacation there... before I shut that shit down and closed my eyes.

Being attracted to Neil was proving to be all shades of messed up.

My thoughts started colliding together again as I sat there. The seemingly familiar traffic jam that kept happening in his presence, leaving my thoughts in splintered fragments.

I didn’t know what to do with them.

What I did know, though—in that moment of record-scratching clarity—was that I

was over it. So over it. This was not me. Not even close. I didn't falter in the face of a challenge, I didn't lose sight of what I wanted, ever, and I never gave up.

Okay, that last one was a lie. But I sure as hell did not cower. Not to anyone. Who was this bullshit version of Olivia masquerading around as me?

"So what is it that you're working on?" Neil asked again. He sat down across from me with a warm smile, and I decided right then and there to throw everything else out the proverbial window.

Just like that.

Because this. This was where I was hitting the reset button. On everything I thought I knew about love, and attraction, and lust, and relationships. On everything that lured me into idiotic bad boys and repelled me from the good ones like Neil. On everything I thought I knew about who Neil Summers was.

I didn't see the harm in finding some of these things out for myself. And at the moment, he felt like a safe place to look.

A very safe place.

I blew out a breath and freed myself from the shackles of my own doubts and preconceived notions. I didn't care if it was insane.

It certainly didn't feel insane as I slid my notebook toward him and he picked it up in his hands, eyes skimming over my latest story. It felt harmless. Easy. Right.

I finished my coffee and hot Cheetos before he was done, and while patience was not my best virtue, I familiarized myself with it as Neil kept reading, eyes now carefully moving over my words. I noticed them brighten and darken, his mouth twitching at

the corners few times, too, but I couldn't decide what any of it meant.

And then he finished—finally—and looked over at me, slowly closing and sliding my notebook across the table and back over to me with an amused smile twisting his lips.

“Well?” I asked. I'd run out of patience, clearly. But my heart was beating way too fast in anticipation of his thoughts.

You don't care what he thinks. You don't care what he thinks, I lied to myself again and again.

“I think that only you, Liv, could make vampire nuns seem appealing. It's really funny, though,” he said, and that was not a relieved breath I'd just taken. Nope. Not at all. “What are you going to do with it?”

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I tilted my head slowly to one side and then the other as if I was thinking it over, but I already knew what I wanted to do with it. “Finish writing it and turn it into a screenplay,” I admitted.

His eyes lit up. “Really?”

“Really.”

“That’s awesome, Liv. You know—I’m actually working on one myself,” he said. And here I was, thinking there was nothing else he could say that would make me like him even more. “A screenplay, I mean,” he clarified.

“I knew what you meant,” I said with a playfulness to my tone. “That’s pretty cool, Neil,” I added, mashing my lips down on a smile as I glanced over his features. Dark eyes, sharp jaw, full lips, a nose that was just slightly askew, balancing out the ridiculous perfection of everything else taking up residence on his face.

My thoughts were racing again, but I had a grip on what most of them were this time:

Neil is hot.

Like, actually, reallyfreaking hot.

And he’s smiling at me.

And my heart is still racing.

And I think I might definitely like him.

I like every single thing that's come out of his mouth so far.

I really do want to get to know him again, be his friend again, maybe. Maybe something more.

I think I could get him to kiss me.

I smirked, amused by my own thoughts.

"Would you be interested in swapping scripts when we're done?" he asked. "We could read them over Thanksgiving or Christmas break, give each other some helpful feedback." His words were confident, but there was something about his appearance that betrayed a level of vulnerability I couldn't read in his eyes—his Adam's apple slowly climbing up and dipping back down his throat, the quick bounce of his knee beneath the table.

I'd been so busy feeling off balance in his presence that I hadn't noticed an unbalance on his end, too. Now that I had dialed myself back a few notches, I could see it. I could practically feel his heart beating from across the table.

Neil was definitely nervous.

My smirk stretched higher at the thought, and I felt the upper hand shift back over to me; I could eat him alive if I wanted to.

It wouldn't have been the first time I'd had such a thought before Neil casually waltzed into my confident awareness and pushed me right back off balance again. Apparently, this time was no different.

“Just think about it and let me know.” He smiled. “There’s something else I’ve been wanting to tell you all day, though. Since we’re clearing air today and all.” His smile shifted from innocent to amused, and I had to remind myself to take a breath.(No, literally.)“So... the first day of school?” he continued.

“Uh-huh,” was the only word I could find to urge him on.

“I might’ve said something to the guys about wanting to kiss you, too,” he said. “And... I might’ve had a bit of an internal bet going on as well.”

I blinked and blinked again. Swallowed. Allowed air to pass through my lungs in an automatic fashion.What?

He stood up and pushed his chair in with an amused smirk still curving his lips. “See you later, Liv.” And he walked away.

I wasn’t able to piece my thoughts together fast enough, and now he was gone. What the hell would I have said to that anyway?

I took one deep breath in and released one confused, stunned puff of air back out.

The first official thing I learned about good boys like Neil? Was that sometimes they said things a bad boy would say, but it turns out to be way fucking hotter. Because you’re looking directly into the eyes of a total enigma. An aching hot, virtuous enigma with the morals to prove it.

## Chapter 8

### Rumor Has It

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I rushed into the kitchen, slid across our tiled floor, and bumped my shoulder into the corner of the wall as I picked up the phone.

“Hello?” I said, out of breath. Shit, that hurt. I rubbed at the ache pounding in my arm. “Hello?” I repeated for a second time.

“Hey, Olls!”

“Jason?” My heart had already been racing from flying down the stairs and into the kitchen, but it kicked into overdrive when I heard my brother’s voice on the other end of the line.

“Yeah, it’s me,” he replied. I slid down onto the floor, an involuntary breath spilling out of me.

It was weird how the sound of someone’s voice could make the world feel right again. Maybe it made me codependent; I didn’t know. But Jason’s voice immediately set me back on solid ground. “How are you doing, kiddo?” he asked.

“Who cares about me? I’m fine. How are you? How’s infantry training?”

“It hasn’t started yet.” He chuckled softly. “We only just got here. And I care, for the record.”

“Oh, right. Right.” I flicked some lint off of my PJ’s. “It feels like you’ve been gone forever already, for the record.”



His sigh drifted across the line. “I know. I’m glad I got to see you, though. And I’m glad I caught you now. I’ll be pretty busy the next few weeks, but write me, yeah?”

“I already said I would.”

“Just want to make sure, smartass.”

I scoffed through a smile. “It’s your fault; you made me this way.”

“Touché. So... where’s Linda today?”

I rolled my eyes, shrugging. It was a waste of effort because he couldn’t actually see it. “Who knows. I haven’t seen her this morning, but she didn’t leave a note anywhere, so she has to be around here somewhere.”

His grunt rumbled off the phone and into my fingers. “You’re okay, though?” he asked after a beat.

“I’m fine. Totally fine,” I assured him. I’d been fine for the last fourteen weeks; I knew I’d be fine for the next thirty-six more. (That’s how many weeks were left until I graduated and got myself the hell up out of here.)

“Promise?”

“I promise,” I assured him again.

“Alright.” He sighed. “I wish I didn’t have to, but I gotta go now.”

“Okay.” I clutched the phone tighter. “You better write me back, though,” I threw out. My fingertips were on the verge of cramping from my grip on the phone, so I released my grasp.

“I will,” he said.

“Promise?” I tossed back at him.

“Promise.” There was a quiet laughter in his breath, followed by the click of the phone and a dead tone ringing out into my ears.

I hung up, blindly reaching above me to put the phone back on its receiver.

“Who was that?” Linda sang as she bounced into the room—the gym. That’s where she’d been. As if her skintight workout gear and glistening flesh weren’t clue enough, she threw in a whispered, “Eight miles!” for good measure, eyes wide and fingers spread out around her mouth as if this were some great accomplishment I should care about.

“Solicitor,” I lied, answering her previous question.

“Hmm,” she noted absentmindedly. Her back was already turned to me as she scanned over the refrigerator. “I don’t know why we still have that thing, anyway. Who has landlines anymore? No one, really. I should call and cancel it. It’s not like we don’t always have our cell phones on us—gosh, I’m hungry, and there’s next to nothing in this refrigerator. Should we go shopping? Let’s go shopping.”

One of my mother’s greatest talents? Having full-on conversations with herself without looking like a total psycho. Joke was on her, though, because she actually was, at least, half-psycho. There was no official paperwork to back up my analysis, but I had enough first-hand experience to prove otherwise.

I was still sitting on the floor as I looked over at her. “School.” I pointed down at the top of my head. “Minor, remember?”

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She scoffed. “Oh, you’re no fun. Have a great day at school.” Her eyes went all bug-eyed to emphasize her point. “Guess I’ll go out and housewife on my own, then,” she complained.

There were far too many smartass remarks on the tip of my tongue I could’ve said to her, but I wasn’t in the mood for any of them.

Sydney slumped into the passenger seat of my car (a two-month-old Jeep Wrangler, for the record—black grille, black rims, tinted windows, fully murdered-out. My mother’s idea of a consolation prize for Jason leaving. Not that I didn’t love it. In fact, I kind of felt like it matched the aesthetic of my soul, so I was obsessed with it. But I wasn’t telling Linda that.) and slammed the door shut behind her, clicking in her seat belt in an overly dramatic fashion before sinking down into the seat with a low growl.

“I see someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed this morning,” I commented, pulling out of her driveway.

“Don’t even get me started,” she snapped, and I already wanted to slap her. It wasn’t even seven-thirty in the morning yet.

“Do... you want to talk about it?” I asked, stretching out the question because I wasn’t sure I actually wanted to ask, but the words slipped out anyway; I guess that meant I really loved her.

“Andreas broke up with me!” she shouted. “I hate him. He’s such a pig.”

Oh. “Yikes.” I threw her a sympathetic look.

Sydney and Andreas had been together for a few months now, which was practically forever in high school. Marriage and babies, kind of forever—in Sydney’s eyes. Never mind the fact that she complained about him constantly and almost always had her eye on the next best thing. No, those were just technicalities, of course.

“Well, what happened?” I asked.

She threw her arms up in the air. “Hell if I know. Suddenly, seventeen is too young to be with the same person for the rest of our lives. And maybe he wants to apply to colleges out of state, and maybe he wants to be sure about us and not feel like he’s settling, but where the hell did all this come from, you know? He said he loved me.”

She continued on and on, and I was just there to listen. I really did feel bad for her, though, because she did seem sad, but I knew there was nothing I could say that would make her feel better. She just needed to vent. So, I drove us to school and listened. Sometimes we just needed to be listened to, to be heard.

“I’m sorry, that sucks. Hesucks,” is what I settled on at the end of her long rant.

“Damn right he does! His loss,” she scoffed, throwing her hair up into a messy bun. “I’m going to have myself a new boyfriend by the end of this week. That’ll show his ass,” she added, and I laughed in response. “Maybe Neil,” she snickered, and my laughter died a quick and brutal death on my lips. “Joking! God, you should see the look on your face right now. You know, I’ve already suspected you’re capable of murder, but I’m sure of it now. I know who I’m calling when I need help burying a body.”

I managed a chuckle even though I wanted to slap her all over again. Just a little. You know, in a friendly way. “I don’t know about that,” I answered her, thinking it over.

“Well... maybe.” I shrugged, and she fell into a fit of laughter.

“I knew I could count on you. So, where are things with choirboy anyway?”

“I don’t know why you keep calling him that. He’s not actually in choir, you know.”

“He sure dresses like he could be,” she muttered under her breath.

I guess she had a point. “Anyway,” I said. “I don’t know where things are. I told him about the bet, and then he told me, last night, that he had a similar bet of his own going on.”

She stopped dead in her tracks. “Say what?”

“He said he had a bet going on with himself that he could kiss me, too, or something. That he wanted to, I think. Something like that.” I stopped in front of her, turning around to face her.

“And then?!”

“And then I sat there like an idiot while he walked away, because that was the last thing I expected to come out of his mouth.” Now I was the one throwing my arms out into the air like a crazy person.

“Are you insane?!” She tilted her head. “Well, scratch that. Of course you’re insane... but what do you mean, you didn’t say anything? That right there was your opening.”

“No shit,” I quipped.

She tugged me by the arm, and I followed, walking through the parking lot and into

school. “Well, it’s not like the door’s closed. Sounds to me like he flung that baby wide open for you, and now I’m going to have to shove you through it.”

“Shut up. I’ll walk through the damn door myself.” How I’d found myself in this ridiculous conversation, talking about metaphorical doors and shit, was lost on me.

“You know, the more I hear about Neil, the more I like him,” she interjected. “We need to dig deeper and come up with a solid plan. I’ve already been thinking about it... but Neil isn’t our typical dude, you know?”

“Yeah. I’m getting that,” I deadpanned. I was learning that sobering truth more and more every time I was around him. I think that’s what made me like him more, though. To be totally honest, Neil was a challenge, and I was always up for a challenge.

This one was just waymore confusing than all the other ones I’d fearlessly faced.

But also?

Way more fun, too.

“Can I talk to you for a minute, Liv?” The breath of Neil’s words sent a shiver down my spine. Or maybe it was the quiet, rough sound of his voice in my ear.

Either way, I was smoothing unseen goose bumps away from my arms when I turned on my heel to face him. “That’s two times, in less than two days, that you’ve scared the crap out of me, Neil,” I said.

“Sorry.” He chuckled. I wanted to yank the chuckle from his throat and throw it somewhere where it didn’t make me feel all...tinglyinside. “But can I steal you for a minute?” he asked.

“Sure.” And again with the drawn-out word that made me feel like a total idiot:Suuuurrreeee.

He stepped a few feet away from my circle of friends. Sydney’s eyes were about the approximate size of two golf balls, gawking at me from over Neil’s shoulder.

I stifled a smirk and redirected my attention back to Neil. “So, what’s up?” I asked.

He slid his hands into his front pockets, all casual and calm. And I showed superhuman strength by not stealing another glance of that general area. (You know the one.)

Instead, in my effort to avoid said area, I pinned my eyes to his, holding his steady gaze.

I couldn't tell you if time stood still for a few minutes, or if losing myself in Neil's confident awareness was a slow and deliberate thing, but we both stood there for a small eternity without saying anything—just simply staring at each other.

I would've been ashamed to admit that I got lost there for a while. Forgot who I was, maybe. What he was even doing standing there.

When we warped back into the present moment, his lips tugged up in a soft smile, and mine followed suit.

It was one of those real smiles again—one I could feel pulling at something deep and buried within me; I didn't want to acknowledge what that was, exactly.

Neil cleared his throat, grasping the back of his neck with one hand before sliding it back into his front pocket.

I still held his gaze, curiosity taking over my thoughts.

“Rumor has it I make you nervous, Liv,” he said, finally breaking the silence. “But you don't seem all that nervous to me right now.”

It was true. I wasn't nervous. Until he said that, of course. Now I could feel my nerves fluttering in my stomach, breeding like butterflies. But they quickly made way for the anxious energy flooding through me—an extreme, bodily harm inflicting, irritation.

Not with Neil, but with Jax.

You better believe the first second I saw him, I was going to kick him somewhere



soft and vulnerable.

“What?” I deflected, going into defensive mode. “You don’t make me nervous. You’re Neil.” I huffed, shrugging, clearly lying my ass off, because in truth, he did make me nervous. Sometimes. Most of the time. (Who was keeping track, really?)

A frown line formed between his brows, and the urge to reach out and run my finger over it was overwhelming, eclipsing my irritation just like that. I clenched my hand into a fist at my side in case I dared to actually do it.

“And what is that supposed to mean, exactly?” he responded, humor beginning to light his eyes.

I scoffed. “I don’t know. That you’re not a threat?”

“Are you asking or telling?” He smirked. And... okay, for a brief second there, I did get flustered. Because... that smirk. It felt foreign on a face like Neil’s, yet entirely right somehow. So right.

I threw an imaginary lasso around my thoughts and violently yanked them back in. “Telling,” I answered confidently.

He nodded, a smirk still tilting his lips in a far too attractive way. “A little elaboration?”

I huffed out a breath, settling on, “You’re safe. I can crush on you, and you’re not going to, like, devour me or anything. You know?” I didn’t think even I knew if that was actually the case, but it had felt right when I said it. For a split second there.

Until he stepped closer, getting all up in my personal space. “No.” He shook his head. “I’m not sure I know what you’re talking about...” His eyes narrowed. “So... you

like me, huh?”

“Who said anything about that?” I replied. Usually, I was an expert liar; when it came to Neil, I guess all of that went out the window.

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He slid his hands out of his pockets and curled them around his backpack straps, lifting his brows in a knowing way. He was turning out to be far more confident than I ever would've pegged him for.

"So, you don't? Like me, then? Okay." He shrugged and turned to walk away.

Dammit.Dammit.I waged a war inside my head for all of three seconds. "Wait!" I shouted.

He turned around—again, way too confident for his own good.

"Maybe I do like you," I admitted.Shit.What the hell was I doing?

His smile hitched higher. "Maybe I like you too, Liv."

I nodded, silent. An uncomfortable warmth was filling the cold spaces in my chest, and I think it had something to do with Neil and the way he was looking at me, but I couldn't be sure.

"Maybe you should take me out on a date, then," I decided to say. My mouth was clearly running the show here.

He laughed, a breathy laugh that was mostly just filled with air. "Maybe I will," he finished, smiling as he turned to walk away—for the second time in as many days while leaving me totally reeling.

I shook my head as he disappeared around the corner of the building. Shrugged my

shoulders. Scoffed at no one but myself.

Freaking Neil.

I bit down on a traitorous smile and shook my head again.

Neil Summers: he was a plot twist of epic proportions.

For the record, I went into work later that day, walked straight up to Jax, and punched him square in the arm. In that nice, meaty spot right between his shoulder and elbow that gave him the perfect dead arm.

“Hey! What the hell was that for?” he screeched, all feigned shock and flabbergast. What a joke.

“You told Neil?!” I screamed at him—I mean, as much as a scream can be executed through clenched teeth, anyway.

“Ohhhhh.” Awareness dawned on him. “Yeah, about that.” He rubbed at his arm with a wince. Good. “I thought that maybe you could use a little nudge. I was just trying to help my girl out.”

“By giving him more power?”

“More power? What is he, a Mighty Morphin Power Ranger?” he joked. As if this were the time for jokes. My fingers twitched with the urge to punch him again. “Is the power held in a vial or in the essence of his being, you think?”

“Be serious, big mouth. That was confidential information, ass-wipe.”

He held his hands out in a half shrug. “Well... he asked you out, didn't he?”

“No. He didn’t. I mean, not technically. Wait... how do you even know about that?”

He smirked.

“You’re such a dick!”

He grabbed my wrists and set them back down at my sides. I hadn’t even noticed they were hanging out in front of my face, ready to duke it out like Rocky freaking Balboa. “Chill out, Olivia. If it makes you feel better, Neil is as stupid over you as you are for him... In fact, I think he might’ve giggled when I told him he made you nervous.”

“Shut up. No, he didn’t.” Neil wasn’t a giggler. Not even close.

He laughed. “I’ll never tell.”

“Oh, I’m sure you won’t, loose lips,” I threw out, sarcasm coating every curve of those words. That was the last time I was telling him anything. Like, ever. “I’m actually mad at you, you know. Total violation of our friendship code.”

“Aww, come on. He’s my cousin. And I told him with only good intentions; that has to count for something.”

“Yeah, we’ll see.”

### Chapter 9

#### Close Encounters

When Monday rolled around, I wasn't thinking about much of anything except for Neil actually asking me out.

Was he ever going to?

Honestly, I had no clue. My gut told me he would, but so far, his actions hadn't backed up his words.

It had already been a few torture-filled days of unintentional side-eyes, shared smiles, and definitely not waiting on bated breath for him to just. Ask. Me. Out. Already. And then the weekend had come and gone, and here we were.

I didn't think he'd say it just to take it back, though, so there was that. And truthfully, I was kind of enjoying it. I was used to getting what I wanted when I wanted it, so it was refreshing—this unfamiliar build-up of anticipation. It was either going to make conquering Neil that much more exciting, or it was going to continue to strangle me until I couldn't breathe anymore. I wasn't sure which one was going to win out just yet.

What it would look like when we did actually date was lost on me. I knew with every bone in my body that sex wasn't on Neil's agenda, and I knew even more than that that love wasn't on mine.

But I was getting way ahead of myself. Way ahead. For the time being, I was having fun just getting to know him again. Because in between all my held breaths and waiting for him to ask me out, we'd gotten lost in a lot of little conversations—that I, of course, had gotten us into trouble for on more than one occasion.

Oops—said with every layer of sarcasm I could muster.

What I'd learned so far? Church was still very important to Neil. No shocker there, really. He went every Sunday, Monday, and Wednesday. Which was crazy. He'd read the Bible front to back, twice, and he was going on a mission this summer, just after graduation. The mission part sounded alright: helping build houses where people really needed them. But the rest I couldn't relate to. Not even close.

We also talked about movies, and writing (which we fully connected on, of course), and colleges, too. We talked about what he liked to do for fun: Outdoorsy stuff—riding dirt bikes and hiking, skateboarding, and swimming. And what I liked to do for fun: Not much of anything but partying with Sydney and Netflix and chilling, translated to: 'watching movies and hanging out with my friends,' for Neil's benefit.

He was all calm and casual, totally confident, but also shy at times, too. I was just me. Olivia. Blunt, honest, and real. He seemed to like it, though, and I knew I was slowly becoming more drawn to who he was as a person, too—outside of all my preconceived notions.

It was all fun, fine, and dandy, but I was still waiting on my date. Neil had already admitted to wanting to kiss me, and at this point, it was nearly killing me with all the close proximation, soft conversations, and the smiles of his I was quietly collecting. Not to mention the amount of solid eye contact we'd been logging.

I think we actually had almost kissed once or twice. Maybe. I didn't know, but I

did know that he sure as hell looked at me like he wanted to a whole lot. (A whole lot.)

Differences and compatibility, virtues and corruption aside, I had a suspecting feeling that kissing Neil would be more than enough for the both of us. He could secretly take it to his grave, and I could store the memory of it as fuel for my future fantasies. Not that I hadn't already had a perfectly good time coming up with some material on my own.

Ahem. Moving on.

I kind of couldn't wait to see him this morning. The temperature was currently around a level of freezing, so Sydney and I were huddled up inside the same sweater, stretching it far beyond repair, but Mikey (one of our friends), didn't seem to care. It was his sweater, and full honesty, with the way he kept looking over at us, I think he was going to be storing this image in his mind for some future use of his own. If you know what I mean.

Gross.

When I turned my face to the opposite side of the square for the umpteenth time this morning, I caught Neil walking up along the edge of it. Look over here. Look over here. Don't look over here. I couldn't decide which one would be worse.

He looked over here. His head lifted, and his eyes caught mine, and a smile immediately took over his face.

It took all of two seconds to decide that fighting against the pull of my own smile was stupid and pointless, so I smiled back, throwing up a quick wave.

You know, as if I'd actually held any sway in the matter. Because... spoiler alert:



Neil was still giving me butterflies. And what did butterflies do, I was quickly learning? They threw all rational thought out the window. Most of it, anyway. Proven easily by the fact that I was allowing Neil to take the lead in all of this. And was actually, mostly, okay with it.

Though his time was running out, I could feel it. He had practically no time left at all before I went ahead and lost control and mauled him. I wanted to corrupt him in the worst way. The worst way. On some level, I knew it was dangerous thinking, but it also felt oh, oh so very right. If only I could get him on board...

But that was a long shot, right?

I settled down next to him in ASB. I hadn't even looked over at him yet, and yet somehow, somehow, the whole of my right side of my body felt warmer than my left.

Body heat, of course, would make sense. That was the rational, logical answer. Somehow, I knew it was something else. I could feel that it was something else.

Butterflies, stacked on top of awareness, stacked on top of attraction, finished off with a level of pent-up frustration was turning out to be a deadly combination. I felt it churning in my stomach. It wanted to combust—explode.

I turned only my head to face him, my chin propped up in my hands. He was already looking at me. "You're never going to ask me out, are you?" I asked, apparently done with the waiting game.

He puffed out an amused laugh, his dessert-colored eyes going liquid. I was losing my mind, wasn't I? "I'm thinking about it," he said. "But I'm starting to think you're more trouble than I can handle."

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He was dead-on with that assessment, but I wasn't going to deter him by agreeing. "I don't know about that. Besides, you're turning out to be way more trouble than I ever would've pegged you for."

His cheeks went a little pink, but he shrugged it off. "Not everyone is what they seem, Liv."

I gave him a pointed stare, and his mouth hitched up the smallest bit. "Point taken," he said, but our conversation was cut short as our teacher dove into plans for the next few football games—now that homecoming was out of the way.

The entire time she was talking, I felt Neil's presence beside me like a warm hand drifting up and down my side. The phantom passes left goose bumps on my skin.

It didn't make any sense.

My face fell into my hands, and I heard him quietly chuckling next to me.

I kind of wanted to strangle him. Or, you know, somehow find my way into his lap and grind myself up against him.

Sydney. Sydney was the best damn friend in the whole damn world. The room was spinning and there were three of her, so lucky me.

I wasn't big on drinking. Like, at all. I liked to be in more control than that, but since as of recently I had no control over most of anything, I thought why the hell not, and here I was.

Some hot guy in too-tight pants and pretty eyeliner was in the middle of a conversation with himself because I wasn't listening to anything he was saying. Something about being in a band. Weren't they all? I mentally rolled my eyes. Or maybe I actually had rolled my eyes. Who knew?

I stood up and left him talking to the empty space in front of him. My head swam, and it took a few seconds to steady myself.

Where did Sydney go?

I searched the kitchen, and then the backyard. Nothing. I made my way down the hallway. "Sydneyyyyugghh," I wailed. I was ready to go. More than ready. About five seconds from finding a place to drop into and pass out, but even in my haze, I knew that was a stupid idea, so, "SYDNEY!!" I shouted.

A door down the way opened and slammed shut, a disheveled Sydney left in its wake. She was fixing her hair as she huffed out a breath, glaring down at me where I'd slid to the floor. "You so owe me. That guy in there?" She pointed at the door she'd just escaped from. "He is so hot, and I sort of want to murder you right now."

I didn't feel bad. I was always D.D. and left when Sydney was ready. Tonight, it was my turn, because apparently, I couldn't handle these growing feelings for Neil. Especially when there was no outlet for releasing them. This was the attempted outlet—Sydney's idea, not mine. And since we were both obviously under twenty-one, it was Sydney who ran out of the liquor store with a twelve-pack of beer in her hands, and I who squealed us out of the parking lot in Wednesday like our asses were on fire. (Wednesday was my pretty black Jeep's name, of course.)

But I digress, because this "outlet" wasn't helping at all. If anything, I only wanted Neil more.

“I think I just should just call him,” I told Sydney as we made our way across some stranger’s driveway.

“What? Who?” she huffed out, all frustrated. She’d lost her patience for me, and that was rich, coming from her.

“Neil.” I pulled my phone out and unlocked it.

“Oh, no you don’t.” She yanked the phone out of my grasp.

I shrugged. “I don’t have his phone number anyway... But I could just DM him on Insta.” I went to steal my phone back, but she was far less inebriated than me. Whatever.

“Jeez. Desperate much?” she commented.

“Um, yeah, have you not been listening? I think thiswanthas spiraled into need.”

She scoffed. “Ew.”

“I know!” I shouted, throwing my hands up. “It’s disgusting.”

Sydney burst out in laughter, and I followed suit.

“Get your ass in the Jeep,” she said, and it was the last thing I remembered.

Working while hungover was the worst kind of penance for drinking when I knew I shouldn’t have. I hated every part of drinking, but I especially hated the way it made me feel afterward.

I barely passed for human the next day. Or... at least it felt that way.

“Here, boo.” Jax slid me another bottle of cold water. All was forgiven—mostly—because he’d picked me up for work today and brought with him some water, Advil, and a big,fat, heavenly burrito.

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I'd slept straight through school, though. Oh well. Except for the nagging thought that maybe Neil would've asked me out today.

There was always tomorrow. And the next day, and the next day, and the day after that, if how long I'd already been waiting had anything to say about it, though.

Ugh. I should've been embarrassed about this whole situation, but it was whatever.

I dragged myself through my shift until it was almost over. I was just counting my inventory beneath my drawer, and then I could get the hell out of here when Jax was ready. Though I was feeling mostly better, for the record. Almost fully human again.

I stacked my candy into pretty little piles in a plastic crate as I counted them, standing to bring them back to Jax when I was done.

When I straightened, crate in my hands, there was a small butterfly perched on my cash register. A paper butterfly. It was black and gray and lime green, the three colors marbled together. It was folded differently from the other two currently sitting on my dresser at home. I liked the sharper points it was sporting for wings.

I dragged my eyes away from it and up to Neil who was standing in front of me, just on the other side of the counter.

"You look really pretty today, Liv," he said quickly, as if he couldn't help but say it. I would've assumed he was joking if he hadn't looked so serious about it. I didn't have the energy to analyze his words or the seemingly genuine expression behind them, so I accepted the compliment even though he sounded nuts. My hair was tangled up into

some sort of a nest, and my face was completely bare. Popcorn grease stained my red shirt.

“Thank you,” I responded, because that was the polite thing to do. Never mind what my heart was doing.

He smiled—a slow and deliberate smile. “You have to open this one,” he said, gesturing down at the butterfly.

I narrowed my eyes at him, before sliding my crate onto the counter and picking up the butterfly, carefully taking it apart by the wings and smoothing out the paper square onto the counter. Written in the center: Be my date to Jax’s Halloween party? Circle one: Yes or No.

I laughed. Once upon a time, I’d written him a note a lot like this one—way back in first grade. Apparently, he remembered this, too.

I slipped my pen out of my back pocket and circled yes not once, or twice, but three times for good measure.

He pumped his fist into the air in a joking manner—totally corny, but also way too fucking cute and charming—before leaning halfway across the counter. His chin was resting on the tips of his fingers, and he was close, really close, since I’d already been leaning there myself.

His eyes latched on to mine as he smiled, but he didn’t say anything. It felt like he was sizing me up, reading every single thought that was running through my mind and storing them somewhere in his.

I swallowed. I was used to my accelerated heartbeats at this point, and the way they tended to migrate through my body, but something else was happening that was

entirely different. There was an almost unbearable tightness in my chest. An invisible hand penetrating my ribcage and twisting its wrist around just enough to pull everything inside me taut.

What the hell was that?

“I’m glad you said yes.” Neil broke through the silence and straight through my thoughts.

“Me too,” I replied right away. That was the problem with having no filter. Not that it mattered. My walls weren’t there where Neil was concerned, anyway; we both knew there was no other answer I wanted to give him.

## Chapter 10

### Eighteen Candles

Neil’s birthday came four days after mine. October 23rd, and October 27th, respectively. As kids, we thought this was the coolest thing on the planet. As a freshly inducted adult (my birthday was today, thank you very much), I was only thinking that not only was I intent on breaking Neil six ways from Sunday, but also that I was technically going to be robbing the cradle if I got my way. And by got my way, I meant have my way with him, of course.

Which... wasn’t even a possibility, really. I knew Neil well enough to know that that was not going to happen. No way would he let things get that far—if anywhere. But that’s where my thoughts were when I rolled out of bed that morning, for the first time as an official adult, go me!

I didn’t feel all that different, though. I halfway expected to feel the release of invisible shackles fall from my wrists and ankles at midnight, or at least feel more



certain about who I was as a person and the things I wanted for my future, but that wasn't the case. I felt the same as I had the day before, and all the days before that. Like a kid who still had no clue what the hell she wanted to do with her life.

Cool.

I dragged myself into my bathroom, brushed my teeth, and got dressed. I loathed myself for this, but... I was taking extra time picking out my outfit today. Not because it was my birthday, or because I was eighteen, or because I actually cared about what I wore. The god-honest truth? I was wasting time questioning my clothing choices because of Neil. Yep, Neil.

Ugh. Gag.

How lame was that?

Between the butterflies, and the heart racing, and the doubting every thought I had when I was near him, and now this? I was starting to feel like such a girl. Not that there was anything wrong with being a girl, of course. Females were the superior gender, obviously. No question about that. It's just that I was usually pretty immune to the more emotional, affected, googly-eyed, and daydreaming side some of us sometimes sported.

So, this was entirely new to me—looking in the mirror and wondering what someone else would think about the view—or... caring what someone else would think about the view. Someone other than myself, of course.

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I didn't know what Neil's type was, because I'd never seen him date anyone before, but he was obviously into me. But also...why?

No. Nope. Wasn't going there.

I settled on an old, washed-out band tee, black tights, and a plaid, high-waisted skirt, finished off with my shiny black Dr. Martens.

With my dark hair hanging straight down to my waist and my light brown eyes staring back at me, all I saw was someone primed and ready to demolish a person. Mentally, physically, emotionally. I was a wrecking ball of a human, and I had my sights set on Neil.

I think a couple other parts of me had latched themselves on to him, too, though. Like my brain, and that annoying thing currently pumping life into me, hiding behind my ribcage like a coward.

I headed downstairs—where I walked into a kitchen containing far too much noise and visual stimulation for six-thirty in the morning.

“Whoa.” I threw my hands up as a shield, blocking my eyes from the fireworks display happening at our kitchen table. I peeked around my fingers. Okay, fireworks display was a tad exaggerated. A tad. But there were sparklers. Literally, sparklers, attached to a giant cake, and it was throwing out gold and silver sparks all over the table and floor.

“Happy Birthday, baby!” my mother shouted. She was insane. For more reasons than

one. But even though she was hardly ever home, she never missed a birthday—ever. It was one of a good handful of reasons why I really did love her. Despite everything else she could be, she didn't miss those.

“Thank you.” The sentiment was squished and muffled as she pulled me into her chest with a firm hug. She was strong for such a tiny human. I gently pushed her away.

“You're welcome, baby. Here. Open.” She shoved a small but heavy gift bag into my arms.

I plucked the tissue paper out of it, tilting it closer and peeking inside. It was a Polaroid camera. Which... was pretty awesome, really, but I was immediately suspicious. Linda didn't do anything small or understated, a.k.a. normal, like, ever.

“I like it,” I said, attempting to hide my skepticism as I flipped through the different packs of film that came with it, but—ah, there it was. I pulled my hand out of the bag, and an airplane ticket sleeve came along with it.

Linda squealed and giggled, her head positioned over my shoulder and next to mine before she spun me around to face her. “You're going to Europe this summer!” She threw her hands up into the air. “You can go backpacking, find yourself. And use this for pictures!”

Oh. Wow.

Okay.

I didn't know what to say. Or think. This might've been the nicest thing she'd ever done for me. Because I knew I'd mentioned wanting to do this someday, and that meant that... she'd actually listened to me.

Which was new. Talking to Linda felt like talking to a wall most times, so, I might've felt the smallest—almost inconsiderable—bit emotional, before:

“Or you could just find a hot, rich Italian man to knock you up and marry you, and never come back. I'd forgive you,” she added.

“Gee, thanks,” I deadpanned, rolling my eyes. My feelings on the matter went right out the window. This, right here, was how I'd been conditioned to feel like emotions were stupid and pointless.

“So, what are you up to today?” she asked, changing the subject.

I shrugged, setting the gift bag down onto the table and tossing everything else back inside it. The pyrotechnic show had ended somewhere between “you're going to Europe” and “find a hot Italian man to knock you up.”

“School. Swimming with Sydney. I don't know,” I answered. I kind of just wanted to get the hell out of here. I wasn't in the mood for my mother today—and everything that came along with her being her. Not that I wasn't stoked about her gift, because I really was.

“Alright, have fun. Be safe. I'm heading out for the next few days, so you'll have the place to yourself. Love you.” She kissed me on the cheek and disappeared.

I wished, for just a brief second, that Jason were home. He would've made today awesome.

I told myself it didn't bother me, though. None of it did. Not really.

I was holding another paper butterfly in the palm of my hand. One I knew I'd be adding to my collection later.

It was becoming a thing, wasn't it?

Neil, and me, and these butterflies.

I kind of loved it.

I tried not to smile as Neil watched me, carefully gauging my reaction, but I failed miserably. (I'd hardly been trying, anyway.)

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This one was blue—midnight blue—and in a thin, silver marker he’d drawn stars and a moon and a “Happy Birthday, Liv” on it.

It was pretty damn sweet, which made me a little uncomfortable, or just out of my element, maybe, but I ignored the unsettling feeling because I really did like it more than anything. I might’ve also liked the fact that it was Neil making me feel these things—you know, if I was willing to admit that kind of thing to myself.

“Thank you,” I said, quieter than I had intended.

My heart was betraying me again, beating faster. Like it was trying to beat itself right up out of my chest to get to Neil and wrap itself around him—or something equally as ridiculous.

I pulled my focus back to the butterfly. It shouldn’t have made any sense, but somehow it did—how Neil’s tiny little butterfly was making me feel more than the gift of an entire summer in Europe had. The gesture was just so simple, and thoughtful, and sweet, and it felt like he just...saw me. Like he was looking right at me, and I was letting him see me—past all my imaginary walls and right at who I was.

Something about the whole scenario seemed to please him. My betraying smile, maybe, or my silent but obvious acceptance that there weren’t as many walls between us as I might’ve wanted there to be.

The slow and satisfied tilt of his lips is what gave him away. His eyes did, too, though. They turned the butterflies in my stomach into something else altogether.

I stepped toward him and went in for a hug, wrapping my arms around his solid torso without even thinking about it. Until it fully hit me that we were now pressed together. His front, to my front, from our chests to our toes. And...okay.

Okay.

I definitely should've prepared myself better for what the front of me being pushed up against the front of Neil would feel like. It wasn't like any other time I'd been pushed up against a boy, I can tell you that.

My heart went crazy. Like, lost its damn mind.

Because he was bigger than I'd imagined. Firmer. Warmer.

But...

But...the best part about hugging Neil? Was that I could feel his heart this way, too, and it was as out of control as mine was.

There was something inherently satisfying about that.

And that was before I wrapped my arms farther around him and squished us closer. It was only a brief second that lasted an eternity in my mind before I released him. (I didn't want to come off as too desperate, after all.)

He cleared his throat. Not just once, but again for a second time, and I bit down on a satisfied smile.

"You're welcome," he said. He wanted to say something else, I could tell, but he shook his head and banished whatever it was away, settling instead on, "So, for the party next weekend... do you... I mean, we're supposed to dress up, and I wasn't

sure if you wanted to dress up together, or...?” He was gripping the back of his neck, looking equal parts confident and nervous. I didn’t know how that worked out in his favor, but it did somehow.

My gaze settled on his, and we stared at each other for more than a few breaths without saying much of anything. Not anything at all, really. And he seemed to grow more nervous as the seconds ticked by.

“If you don’t want to, that’s cool. I just thought I’d ask,” he threw out, and my eyes wandered over the features of his face.

Neil—slightly nervous—was really cute. I wished I could read his mind, to know if his thoughts were as convoluted as mine sometimes were. But the more unsure he seemed, the more something softened and melted inside me. “Okay.” I put him out of his misery. “I’m down. Did you have something in mind?”

“Um. Well.” He slid his hands into his pockets with a shrug, brushing away his previous uneasiness. “I was thinking that since we’re both into films... that we might pick a movie couple to dress up as.”

“A couple,” I responded, unintentionally amused.

His cheeks went red, way red, before settling back into his regular complexion. I wanted to kiss him. Badly. Especially when he bit down on his bottom lip with a shy smile, waiting on my reply.

“Yeah, let’s do a couple,” I gave in. I might’ve been smothering a smile of my own, but I couldn’t be sure. I was too busy expending all my energy on holding myself back from kissing him like I wanted to. Or at least telling him that’s what I wanted to do—straight-up maul his face.



I cleared my throat.

“Okay, cool,” he responded. “That’s really as far as I got, though. There’s so many to choose from.”

“Yeah, for sure.” My mind was already wandering, imagining Neil dressed up as a dozen different characters. It was enough to temporarily quell the desire to feel his mouth on mine.

Bonnie and Clyde—cliché.

Danny and Sandy—yes—if only for seeing Neil in tight pants and slicked-back hair. (I’d definitely be circling back around to that one.)

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Hans and Leia—classic.

Romeo and Juliet sat at the top of my list, though. The Baz Luhrmann, Craig Pearce version, of course. Because: Claire and Leo. Ugh. Obsessed. The whole concept was crazy, and I loved it.

Edward and Kim. Forrest and Jenny. Joel and Clementine, Ferris and Sloan, Janet and Brad, Vincent and Mia, Lupin and Tonks. They were all epic movie couples, and there were about a hundred more I could easily think of.

Neil was right, there were far too many options. No way in hell would I ever be able to choose one, so I gave him some of my suggestions and left the rest up to him.

Eighteen, in a nutshell, was weird. I was technically a fully grown adult even though I didn't feel any different. There wasn't much I could do now that I hadn't been able to do before. (I already had my freedom, thanks to Jason being gone and my mom hardly ever being around.) The only thing I could think of was being able to rent a hotel room, but for what?

Still, I was probably going to circle back around to that one, too, just because I could.

So, eighteen was just a formality, really. Another number. And kind of boring if I was being honest. Except for the fireworks show in my kitchen this morning and Neil's butterflies—literal and metaphorical ones included.

I should've thrown a party or something. That's what any logical, sane eighteen-year-old would've done in my situation, but planning for one, and cleaning up after it,

sounded like far too much work to me. I preferred crashing parties, not throwing them.

As a result, on my eighteenth birthday (after school was over for the day), it was just me and Syd hanging out in my backyard, swimming. Well, she was swimming. I was lying down, my head hanging upside down over the edge of a pool lounge.

She popped up at the side of the pool where I was and kissed me. I wiped my lips with my middle finger, intentionally flipping her off, and she barked out a laugh.

“You want to order some pizza and go watch a horror movie?” she asked.

“Sure.” I shrugged while still upside down, and we spent the rest of the night doing just that.

Eighteen. It was pretty boring, but it was also kind of perfect.

On the flip side of four days, on Neil’s birthday—okay, don’t laugh—I gave him an origami butterfly, too. I watched, like, a dozen YouTube videos before I could figure it out and murdered at least fifteen of them before I got it right, but when I handed it to him that morning, it was totally worth it.

Like, after the smile he gave me, and the way he pulled me in for a hug that time? I was headed for my death bed.

Jesus save me.

## Chapter 11

All Hallows’ Eve

HALLOWEEN! Finally.

I threw on my black wings and headed outside where Neil was waiting for me, idling at the curb. I easily could've driven myself, but this opportunity was far too enticing to pass up.

I wanted to get inside his truck, get inside his world, get inside his head. This was a great place to start—if not for the fact that I was literally about to get inside his truck.

Pausing in front of his passenger door, I spun around on the balls of my feet. Black dress, black wings, black hair, black boots. Neil chose Romeo and Juliet, but the dead version. Not a fake blood, makeup gash on the side of my face, kind of dead. But a pale-toned, dark hollows around the eyes and cheekbones version I thought looked really cool. So instead of the white dress and angel wings Juliet sported at the Capulet's party, I went with black.

I opened the door to his truck and slid in. I had to maneuver the seat belt around my wings, but it worked out in my favor; I didn't feel like taking them off and having to put them back on again—the epitome of laziness, really.

Neil's eyes were already on mine when I looked up at him. I gave him a head-to-toe scan, starting at the top with his perfectly styled hair and traveling down to his dark shoes before climbing back up again.

“You look good in armor, Neil,” I said. He did look good. Whether it was the costume, or the combed back hair, or the way he was looking at me, I wasn't sure—probably a combination of all three that had my heart doing a familiar dance inside my chest.

“And you look good as an angel of death,” he said, pulling away from my house with a smile.

I did look like an angel of death, and I did look good, in my opinion, but I wasn't sure if he meant that as a compliment or not. Coming from Neil, I thought it had to be. But was it? Clearly, I was thinking way too hard about it.

"You look really pretty, if I wasn't clear." He laughed softly, putting me out of my misery, proving again that he could somehow read my mind. Or, you know, plainly see everything written across my face like I wasn't bothering to try and hide it. Walls? What were those? "You look like Halloween all wrapped up in a person," he added—and, okay, that one was definitely a compliment. No matter how he meant it, I was taking it as one. But back to the part about me being pretty. (One point to Neil for smoothness.)

What about me did he think was pretty? I wanted to ask the question badly, probably more than I would've liked to admit, but that would've given too much away. I turned my attention to him instead. His armor was dead-on. Chain mail shirt, spaulders covering his arms from shoulders to wrists. He did a good job with his makeup, too. The hollows of his features were contoured with a dark gray perfectly. And his hair. (Ugh. His hair.) It was definitely the best part of the whole ensemble. It was combed back, but not neat and tidy like I would've expected. There was a carelessness about it that I was into. Super into.

"Thanks, Neil," I replied with a subtle breath. "You look pretty dapper yourself." Yep, dapper. That is the word I chose to go with. What a moron. Neil made me stupid—officially. But whatever. Dapper suited him. I was going with dapper, and I was owning it. "Anyway," I continued on. "What time do you have to be home tonight?"

“Midnight. You?”

I leaned forward and picked up his phone. There was no lock on it. What kind of psycho didn't have a passcode set on their phone? (Probably a trusting one, like Neil, who wasn't actually a psycho. Not even close.) I went into his music app and changed the station to the Neighbourhood, because: Jesse Rutherford. It was already in his playlist, so I gave him another solid point for that. (And obviously, I still needed to learn a few things about boundaries, but he didn't seem to mind.)

I set his phone back down and leaned back in my seat with a shrug. “No curfew.”

“Ah.” He nodded. “The benefits of being eighteen?”

I shook my head. “The benefit of lackadaisical parenting. So... is this, like, your first date? Ever?” I asked.

He huffed out a laugh. “No. I've dated before.”

I shifted in my seat, resting my elbow on his center console and my chin in my hand as I looked up at him with mockingly wide eyes. “Really? Tell me more.”

He shrugged, an amused smile lighting up his face, and his armor made a funny chinking noise in response that made me laugh. “I mean, I haven't dated much, but I've dated,” he answered.

That's all he was going to give me? Nope. That wasn't going to fly. I was getting more out of him whether he wanted to give it to me or not. “And did any of these

dates result in a girlfriend?” I asked. I was reaching and he could tell, but I didn’t care. I didn’t have any interest in being his girlfriend, but I was curious.

He shook his head. “Nah, I don’t really do the girlfriend thing,” he responded. And... interesting. I didn’t do the boyfriend thing, either. But funny how when someone tells you that you can’t have something, you only want it more. Or want it at all when it wasn’t even on your radar before. I wasn’t talking about me.

Okay, yes, I was definitely talking about me. I didn’t actually want that, though. Right? His lips, sure, but his commitment? No; no way.

Maybe?

I settled on not ruling it out, but that would sure as hell be interesting. Neil and me—boyfriend and girlfriend.

Okay, yeah. I liked the sound of it, and the picture it painted in my head even more. And on that note, I needed to get the hell up out of this truck and get some air.

We arrived at the party, and Jax threw his arms around us in a giant three-way hug as soon as we walked through the front doors. I hugged him back, and Neil did, too. I watched them both—their easy smiles and familiar conversation. There was an effortlessness about them together I hadn’t expected even though Jax had already explained their new dynamic to me.

I fought the pull of a genuine smile. Jax really did deserve that. And Neil... well, we already knew what I thought about Neil.

Speaking of Neil. He led me farther into the house. And when I say led, I mean he grabbed my hand like it wasn’t a thing and pulled me along after him. Feelings hadn’t really been at the forefront until this point. I’d kept my cool—mostly—during the

ride over here. But now, there were a kaleidoscope of them attacking my senses.

Everything around me suddenly felt brighter, louder, and bigger. His fingers folded over mine sent quiet shockwaves through my body; my thoughts went running around, screaming in panic.

Oh, how dramatic! I mentally bitch-slapped myself.

It was his hand on my hand, for Christ's sake.

I shook my head, brushed the thoughts away, and followed him into the kitchen, where he grabbed a beer from the fridge.

“Would you like one?” he asked.

I shook my head again. If he was drinking, I definitely wasn't. But also, Neil was holding a beer in his hand like he was about to consume it, and my brain couldn't compute. It sure wasn't very holy-like.

“Isn't that, like, illegal?” I eyed the beer in his hand. I meant it in a religious sense, but it hadn't come out that way.

He laughed. “Well, yeah, but—”

“And breaking like, at least three commandments?” I interrupted. Oh, much better, Olivia, thanks for clarifying.

He laughed again, louder this time. “Do you even know what the commandments are, Liv?”

“Of course I do.” I scoffed.



He looked at me expectantly.

Oh,I was always up for a challenge. “Well, there’s the murder one—” I started, “—don’t want to do that. No stealing, no cheating. Don’t covet thy neighbor’s...something.”

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He smirked; and looked really fucking cute doing it. Especially in his knightly get-up.

I continued ticking them off on my fingers as we stood in the middle of an increasingly crowded living room. “Um... oh! My favorite one, of course—thou shall not honor any god but me, because I am a very jealous god,” I mocked.

He cleared his throat, obviously wanting to comment on that, but he surprised me by not saying anything and gesturing for me to continue.

“Thou shall not... be an asshole.” I gave up. I didn’t know any of the other ones, and Neil’s growing amusement was making me all fluttery inside. “Do you even follow the ten commandments? You’re not Catholic.”

“I do.” He smiled. “A slightly different version of them, but yeah, we do.”

Jax bounded into us. “Thanks, man!” He took the beer from Neil’s hand, and that made so much more sense. Hand to Neil’s God, I felt the earth settle back onto its axis.

“No worries,” Neil said. “Sorry I got held up.”

Jax gave him a knowing, mischievous look even though I was standing right there between them, so I elbowed him in the ribs. His fingers dug into me as payback, and I let out an unintentional squeal as I shoved him away. I hated being tickled. It was pure torture—one-hundred percent. Literally, getting punched in the face would pain me less. Ugh. Such a violation, and Jax knew better.

Neil was suppressing a smile, but he curled his arm around me, and all was forgiven. It might've been worth it.

I said might've.

Jax winked at me as Neil led me back into the kitchen, and I flipped him off, fighting to hold back my smile.

"You want a Coke?" Neil asked, oblivious to the scene playing out behind him.

"Sure," I answered.

He poured himself a Coke, sans Sprite, and I asked for the same. Then we found ourselves on the back porch, sitting on the steps that led down to Jax's pool.

"I spent most of the summer here," Neil offered.

"Yeah, Jax told me." I took a sip of my drink, fully appreciating the burning tingles it left in its wake. It only proved that it was essentially poison, but I didn't care.

His eyebrows rose with understanding. He was probably wondering how much Jax had told me. "You guys are pretty close?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'd say so. He's like a brother to me—and I say brother, because I want to punch him in the face half the time."

He chuckled. "He can be a lot, but he's a solid guy."

"This is true." I nodded, spinning my cup around in my hand.

"So... back to our earlier conversation," he hedged.

I looked up at him, noting that his brown eyes looked lighter in the warm glow of Jax's pool lights. A few more thoughts barreled into that one. Something about the fullness of his lips, and the way his hands were folded together, and how I liked how strong they looked.

This first date of ours was kind of...weird. I felt so many things when I looked at him, but I also feel inexplicably comfortable with him tonight, too. Like we were just two friends hanging out and getting to know each other better. (Well, two friends, one of which I knew for certain wanted to do wicked things to the other, but I wasn't going to name any names or anything.)

I was actually enjoying myself, though, and his company.

"Have you been on a lot of dates?" he asked, and it was apparent he was referring to our earlier, earlier conversation. It would be a lie to say I wasn't interested in revisiting it, too.

I shook my head. "No. Not really, actually." I usually met guys at parties, skipped over the whole dating thing, and went straight into making out and heavy petting. I wasn't mad about it; things were less complicated that way. "Don't look so surprised!" I shouted with amusement when I noticed his bewildered expression.

He laughed. "No, it's not what you're thinking. I'm just surprised you're not asked out every other day is all."

Was that my cheeks flooding with warmth? Yep, sure was. I was blushing. I ducked my head, throwing my hands over my face as I shook my head. "Thanks, Neil." The words were muffled by my palms. I took a breath and glanced back over at him. He was smiling, clearly entertained by my ridiculous show.

"Lucky me, then, huh?" he said. It was more of a statement than a question, and I

refused to let myself blush again even though that comment was pretty damn worthy of a blush.

“Definitely,” I quipped instead. “So, if you don’t really date, and you don’t do the girlfriend thing, what is this?” I gestured between us with my cup in my hand. Way to be forward. But that was me—usually.

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He laughed through a slightly startled breath. “Is it terrible to say that I don’t know?”

“No.” I shook my head. I didn’t know what the hell we were doing either.

He seemed to like that answer. “I know that I’m attracted to you, though, and you make me laugh, and I find myself wanting to know you better.” He shrugged, leaving it at that.

I smiled. “Same.” He’d taken the mess of thoughts where we were concerned and laid them out so plainly. “Can I ask you something?”

“Yeah, sure. Of course.” He shifted so we were facing each other full-on from across the brick stairway.

I looked him dead in the eyes. “Is there even the slightest chance I’ll get you to kiss me tonight?” I asked.

He barked out a laugh. “I don’t know, Liv. Do you want me to kiss you?” It started out as a joke, but the tone of his voice and the set of his features felt pretty serious by the end of his question.

Like it was no one’s fucking business, did I want him to kiss me. I had half a mind to answer his question just like that, but I decided not to give myself away just yet. “Maybe,” I told him instead, smirking.

“Good to know,” he said. Again with the good to know.

My smirk shifted into a devious smile. “Do you kiss a lot of girls, Neil?”

He suppressed his own grin, capturing it between his teeth, and simply shrugged. So, it looked like he wasn’t going to kiss and tell. I could respect that.

I, on the other hand, wasn’t as virtuous. “Well, I have,” I said. “Kissed girls, I mean. Plenty of them.”

He spit out his drink and it went spraying everywhere. There was literally a raincloud of Coca-Cola and Neil’s saliva sprinkling down on me as if I were sitting in front of a mister, and I think I was totally okay with that.

I threw my head back in a deep laugh, and it was echoed by his.

“So... are you. Um. Bisexual?” he asked, after our laughter had settled down. I carefully watched him, gauging how he felt about the question, but I didn’t find any judgment in his eyes, though his cheeks were kind of red. I mentally tallied another point in his favor.

“I don’t think so.” I shrugged. “I like it, but not as much as I like kissing boys. And I definitely can’t imagine going much further than a kiss with a girl. Why? Would you stop talking to me if I was?” I didn’t know why I asked the question; it was kind of a dick move, really.

“No,” he answered right away.

“Good,” I said, smothering another smile. My cheeks were starting to hurt from doing it so much.

The thought sobered me a bit. Freaking Neil. I shook my head. “So, as far as holidays go,” I purposefully changed the subject, “where does Halloween rank on your list of

favorites?”

Halloween was obviously my favorite, but I would've put money on the fact that Neil's favorite holiday was something like... Christmas... or something equally as holy.

“I'd put it at the top. Halloween is my favorite holiday, too,” he said knowingly.

“Really?” I asked, surprise lacing my words. “Doesn't that go against religion? Devil and demons and all that?”

He chuckled. “Religion is whatever you interpret it to be, Liv.”

And, well, there were a whole lot of layers to that comment, now weren't there? Perhaps it was time to stop being so freaking judgmental. I let the thought settle, and then buried it away.

“Interesting,” I mused. There were so many questions I wanted to ask him, but our first date didn't really seem like the time or place for them. So I dropped the subject altogether.

He glanced down at me, releasing a quiet sigh, and it was clear he was drawing the same lines on the matter.

The moment passed, and a slow smile began to curl his lips. It had me biting down on my cheek and looking away. All the fuzzy, warm feelings he gave me with just a look were ridiculous. Flooding my senses, surrounding them with Neil, Neil, Neil, my heartbeat chasing after them in a chaotic rhythm.

It didn't keep my attention from being pulled right back to him, though. And the shy curve of his smile, the glimmer of light in his eyes, and the way he was leaning



toward me, his body tilted forward until there was only foot of space left between us, had me thinking he might've been feeling these things as well.

But who was I to say?

Until he shifted even closer, of course, pushing himself toward me and obliterating the space between us between one blink and the next. He was right there, too fast for my thoughts to catch up. And too fast for my breaths; they were coming and going in short flashes—in and out far too quick.

He definitely noticed.

He set his cup down between the spindles of the railing behind me, his eyes lowering down to my chest as his mouth opened with a soft inhale.

And...who was this guy?Calm and respectful on the exterior, but totally confident and overwhelming on the inside?

Or was it the other way around?

There were too many wires crossed in my brain to be sure, but he wasdefinitelyabout to kiss me—way sooner than I ever actually expected him to—when Sydney crashed into our bubble with, “Olivia!” she shouted my name in four separate syllables, and the look on her face said this was absolutely payback for my interrupting her make-out session the other week.

I wanted to strangle her.

But Neil coughed and looked down at the ground, and I was sufficiently distracted. His cheeks had gone red.Way red.I would’ve been pissed at Sydney if I didn’t enjoy the sight of it so much. I might’ve also needed the space to catch my breath, anyway.But who needed air to survive, really?

“Pictures!” She cheesed with a line of perfectly straight teeth.

Neil eased himself up from the ground and offered me his hand. Mine was embarrassingly sweaty, so I quickly wiped it on my dress before letting him pull me

to my feet.

Sydney took a picture just then. I didn't actually see her do it, but I heard the click of the camera and caught the flash of it on the side of my face. I watched her pull the film out from the top of the camera, and she stood there shaking it while eyeing us with a full-on, troublemaking smirk.

I scowled at her in return.

"Okay, okay," she said, throwing her hands up into the air. "Just one more, and I'll leave you two be. But first, we take a selfie."

She skipped down the steps and held the camera up above us. I stuck my tongue out and closed my eyes to avoid the flash, squishing her face into mine—half aggression over interrupting an almost, maybe kiss, half because I still loved her anyway.

"Okay, your turn." She pulled away, holding her hand out for Neil to shake. "I'm Sydney, by the way."

"I know." He smiled, slipping his hand into hers. "Neil."

"Nice hands," she commented, and I wanted to smack her all over again.

"Okay, scoot together," she ordered, quickly manhandling us enough that I had to brace myself with a hand on Neil's chest as she shoved us closer.

I didn't let myself look up at him; I couldn't hold myself liable for what might happen if I did.

"Okay, now do something cute. Something all... intense vibes and Romeo and Juliet-y," Sydney directed.

What?

Neil was the one who took the initiative, pulling my hand off his chest and stepping half a foot away, before bending down to kiss it—just like the scene in the movie.

It felt far more real than just a recreated scene, though, when his full lips grazed my knuckles.

My heart certainly couldn't tell the difference, pounding away.

His mouth was still on my hand when he glanced up at me, and I wasn't sure what kind of awestruck look I was giving him as Sydney took the picture, but I knew it felt a whole lot like want, and greed, and infatuation. They were tangled up in a knotted ball of need sitting heavy in my gut.

And my chest. A combination of both.

A mixture of shouts and splashes tore me out of my reverie, and I looked behind us to find a bunch of people crashing into the pool. The music in the backyard kicked up as I turned to Neil, and I knew exactly what would cool down these burning feelings: A nice dip in the pool.

A mischievous smirk twisted my lips; Sydney was already snickering, understanding my mind completely.

“Don't even think about it.” Neil caught on, but it was too late. I pushed my hands up against his chest and shoved him in.

At the very last second, he wrapped his arms around me and took me down with him—right on top of him.

We crashed into the water, sinking beneath the surface, the sounds of the party drowning out completely. My fingers were clutched on to him, and his arms were still wrapped tightly around me, making me feel all kinds of things. Things that only amplified in the washed-out quiet.

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His chain-mesh shirt was cold and hard beneath my fingers as I met his stare through the water, and I swear time actually slowed down. Suddenly creeping past us in slow motion. Neil blinked, and air bubbles spilled from his lips, and his fingers slipped down my arms, and he smiled.

A sobering, clarifying kind of moment before—

We let go at the same time and pushed our way to the surface, gasping for air. The sounds of the party roared back into my awareness; the mute button suddenly being turned off.

My wings weighed what felt like a hundred pounds as I found my footing and a place to stand.

Neil did the same, following suit until he was standing right in front of me. He was dripping wet. I almost laughed, but he looked really good all soaked up and drenching wet. Too good.

“I can’t believe you did that,” he said with a smile.

I cocked my eyebrow.

“Okay, I can believe you did that.” He laughed.

People in the middle of the pool were getting all rowdy, so I drifted back into a small corner, tugging Neil along with me.

My dress was stuck to my body like a second skin, and I caught his eyes glued to it before he glanced back up at me, swallowing thickly. My breaths screeched to a halt somewhere between my lungs and my mouth.

Because the fire I saw burning in his gaze?

That was not the way someone wholesome looked at someone they were simply interested in. It was the way someone looked at you when they wanted to demolish you. Obliterate you.

My brain was having a hard time computing:

Neil. Wholesome. Good.

Neil. Surprising. A little bad?

I found my lost breath, sucking it into my lungs as he lowered his mouth to mine, and every single one of those thoughts disintegrated and blew away in the wind when he kissed me.

I thought I knew all there was to know about how much a kiss could make you feel, but I knew nothing.

Nothing at all.

My senses went haywire, exploding with tastes, and sounds, and feelings completely foreign to me.

Neil's lips were soft. And slow. And they felt like they were carefully learning all of the curves of mine. But somehow, beneath all of that, his mouth was equally as devastating—mindful and dominating in equal measure.

It was yet another fallacy. Another contradiction to who I'd assumed he was, peeling back another layer of expectation and throwing it out the proverbial window with everything else.

Neil was pure, and honest, and kind—all the good things this world had to offer, and yet his kiss...

His kiss felt like absolute sin.

It was so much dirtier than I ever could've imagined. The way he kissed my mouth like he was making love to it; the way his fingers curled around my neck as he slid his tongue over mine.

It was a shocker. A jolt to my system.

There was no way he hadn't done this before, but I didn't actually care about that at the moment. Because every ounce of me had flooded with a warm, clawing need. And I was already a fairly greedy person, I'd say, but I familiarized myself with a brand-new level of it as Neil kissed me.

Because no kiss had ever felt this way. Not even close. I could easily admit that. So no way in hell was I about to let it end anytime soon—if ever.

I curled my fingers into his hair and yanked him closer.

I pushed myself into him so hard it bordered on painful, but he pushed back just as hard, shocking me all over again.

The pain and shock coiled itself together with something else and left me with a suffocating ache I wasn't familiar with; I had the terrifying thought that I could drown in it if I wasn't careful.



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And that was before he slowly grazed his teeth along my bottom lip and pulled it into his mouth.

I drew in an involuntary breath as he slipped his tongue back over mine, invading every piece of me—his hands in my hair, his tongue in my mouth, his chest flush with mine, a low growl rumbling out of his mouth and into every part of me.

I wanted to scream. Because bottling up the way it made me feel had me sure I was about to explode.

It was just so... perfect, and unexpected, and so wholly unlike what I ever thought kissing Neil would be like.

I didn't know if it was him or me or a combination of both that had us pushed farther back into the corner of the pool, but there we were—my back pushed up against the wall, one leg lifted in his hand and curled over his hip thanks to his quick and intentional movements.

He was good at this. Way too good. Ruin every kiss I had before this one and every kiss I would have after it, kind of good.

Like I'd said: Obliterating.

But also, I was fairly certain I'd managed to climb inside his head, and inside his world, for just a little while, and he was giving me a private glimpse of his Utopia. I felt myself start to relax into it just before reality violently shoved me back out. Cheering and shouts hollered out around us, Jax's and Sydney's louder than any of

them, and Neil pulled away from me.

I was dazed.

I didn't give a shit who, or what, or why; I needed his mouth on mine again.

He chuckled, looking slightly embarrassed but mostly smug, and gave me a quick peck on the lips—again, like he knew the thoughts that traveled through my brain somehow—before lifting me up out of the water and tossing me over his shoulder, plunging me back into the pool. It did a fine job in sobering me back up. Mostly.

Sydney crashed into the pool after me, giggling loud. “Holy hell,” she whispered in my ear. “That kiss was—”

“I know,” I cut in. “I know.” I was there, half participant after all.

“Hot damn! I need to find me my own church boy,” she said, and I wasn't sure why, but I took offense to it. I didn't say anything, because again, I didn't know why I took offense to it, I just did. It picked at something unknown.

My wings were still weighing me down, and so were my boots, so I tore them off and chucked them over the side of the pool, feeling both physically and mentally lighter.

I watched as Neil did the same from the opposite end. He took off his shoulder armor first, followed by the chain-mesh shirt and his regular black tee along with it. I was instantly drooling. No, literally, I was drooling. Shit. I wiped my saliva from my chin, and it mixed in with the pool water. No one would've been able to tell. Right?

But since when did he have muscles like that?

I had no clue, but there they were, big and thick and defined and out for everyone to

see.

He caught me gawking, and I rolled my eyes—at myself, mostly, and his lips curved up into a shy, knowing smile in response.

After dumping his armor over the edge of the pool, he swam back over to me, gliding effortlessly through the water, and I'd somehow almost forgotten that he was a swimmer. Aswimmer,swimmer—breaststrokes, flip turn, swim meets and all, kind of swimmer.

He looked graceful and at home in the water.

When he popped up above the surface, standing right in front of me, I grabbed his wet face dripping with water and shadowed paint, pulled him into me, and slid my lips over his without letting him think twice about it, or giving him the chance to back away.

I didn't mind the taste of chlorine. Not like this.

We spent the rest of the night doing a lot more of that. It was the best Halloween first date in the history of fucking ever.

## Chapter 12

### Friends with Benefits

“You told me you loved me in first grade.”

“Did not.”

“Did too.”

“Oh, so we’re going to act like we’re in first gradenow?” I quipped. I took a bite of my pizza with a hot Cheeto perched on top. Apparently, we’d taken to hanging out at lunch now—after our first date. I wasn’t mad about it.

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“No.” He laughed. “But my point is, if I got you to love me once, I think I could do it again.”

“Nope. Not gonna happen. Besides, we’d have to get past the whole ‘I don’t really do the girlfriend thing’ first, which really isn’t going to happen, because I don’t do the boyfriend thing either.” I threw him a smartass, twisted smile like the smartass I was, neglecting to tell him that he had actually made me question it—the whole boyfriend thing.

“Yeah, we’ll see.” He smirked.

It was a joke; we were joking. But it still felt like we were dancing around on a dangerous line. A line I was definitely going to be steering clear of from here on out.

“But back to the point... I never actually said that,” I lied. I totally had said that, and the memory of it sat in my mind, clear as day.

“Do you love me, Neil?” I asked.

His eyes widened, unsure. “Like I love my mom and dad?”

I shook my head, a little frown settling on my small features. “Like you love a best friend... or a girlfriend.”

“A girlfriend?!” His eyes went even wider, perfectly round like the handballs I played with at recess. “You’re my best friend, so I like you a lot like a best friend.”

“But do you love me?”

His cheeks went pink. “I don’t know.”

I thought that he must have loved me, but he was just too afraid to say it. What a chicken.

“Well, I love you, Neil.” I huffed. “Because you’re my best friend.”

Full honesty, Neil actually was the first (and only) boy I ever loved. Even if it was on a purely innocent and childlike level. It made me uncomfortable now, just thinking about it. As if him getting through to my heart once before meant he could do it again.

Ha, not happening. I looked down at my phone.

“Agree to disagree—” Neil started.

“It’s 12:12,” I cut him off, crossing my fingers, closing my eyes, and holding my breath, throwing my wish out into the universe. I never held tight to one wish like I imagined most people did; instead, I always made it a point to wish for something new.

This time?

Do not let me fall for Neil Summers. Do not let me fall for Neil Summers.

Call me dramatic, but it felt necessary. Extremely necessary. Especially when I opened my eyes and found his gaze on the side of my face, a soft smile curving his lips that made my heart do a little flip inside my chest.

I said a little.

Friends. Friends is what we now were. Friends who had gone on one pretty awesome date and had kissed a lot but did not, under any circumstances, fall in lo—

Ugh, I couldn't even think it.

But that's all we could be—all I wanted to be—for too many reasons, anyway.

Friends.

It was back to being my turn as Designated Driver, and at the moment, in my current position as D.D., the drunk-o's were hungry so at a fast-food joint, we were.

Sydney turned up the music in the Jeep, Mikey and Sal were trying to order at the same time through the same window, while Grant was chanting "chicken nuggets" from the very back, in between making out with whoever that girl was that he was making out with. I wasn't actually sure where she'd even come from. (Sal and Grant were also part of our core-friend group, and as an unwritten rule, I hadn't hooked-up with either of them—for the record—Mikey included.)

I turned the volume down and yelled at everyone to shut the hell up. "Sorry about that," I said to the girl manning the drive-through. I attempted to sound a least a little more patient than I was feeling, which wasn't too hard, because I wasn't all that irritated. Not really. "We'll just take, like, one hundred chicken nuggets, four large fries, and four Cokes."

"Ooh! Let's eat over there!" Sydney pointed at the park across the street when we pulled out of the parking lot, the smell of fried food filling up the cab of Wednesday along with Grant's weed. Overly excited agreements echoed around the Jeep, and only drunk, would they think it was such a great idea! to eat in the cold, dark park, but

whatever. I was down.

I jerked to a quick stop in a parking spot and watched everyone jolt forward in their seats with the movement and cracked up. Ah, the benefits of being sober when in charge of a bunch of drunks. It was all in good fun, though; they were laughing, too.



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Grant and his mystery girl opted to stay in the back of Wednesday with a box of chicken nuggets and ranch. Gross. Mikey ran up the slide and sat down at the top, Sal joining him on the bottom end, and Sydney and I walked over to the water fountain at the corner of the park to devour our chicken nuggets.

Sweet and sour, spicy mustard, and BBQ sauce was the only way to eat them—dunked in all three. Try to tell me I was wrong.

“Oh my god, I have to pee so bad,” Sydney whined a handful of minutes later.

“Well, yeah. You hogged the whole freaking soda,” I said, shaking the ice around in our now empty cup. I sucked the straw in vain anyway, but all I was getting was hints of flat, Coke-flavored water.

“Seriously, I’m going to pee my pants!” she squealed.

“Then go pee!” I laughed.

“Where?!”

Okay, she had a point. The bathrooms were on the opposite side of the park, and they were probably closed. So it was that, or I’d have to walk a drunk Sydney back across the street. I groaned. “Just go over there.” I pointed at the side of the fountain.

She jumped up and pulled her pants down without a further remark, sitting down over the edge of the fountain instead, almost dunking her ass in the water as she did it.

She burst out in laughter, and I followed suit.

“Hurry up!” I said. “Someone’s going to see you if they drive by.”

“I can’t!” She laughed harder. “I’m feeling pee-shy.”

“I thought you had to pee ‘so bad!” I mocked her while cracking up. “Shut up and go!”

“You’re gonna have to go with me. I can’t do this alone.” She shook her head.

“Oh, you are so annoying,” I whined. Sydney was about as stubborn as I was, so I knew she’d hold out no matter how drunk she was, and I clearly didn’t have the luxury of time to hold my own ground here.

I groaned my relent and yanked down my pants, plopping down over the side of the fountain with her, and let go.

It was even less glamorous than it sounded, but neither of us really cared. We cracked the hell up the entire time.

Memories, people. These were memories we were making.

Neil and I started hanging out a lot—a lot, a lot. Or dating. I didn’t know what to call it, really.

Friends... with benefits, I guess?

Ha! Never would I have pegged Neil for a “Friends with Benefits” kind of guy—no, it wasn’t even in my realm of possibility—yet here we were.

F.W.B. is exactly what we were, technically, even though those benefits didn't stray very far from kissing—kissing mouths, and cheeks, and chins, and necks. We graduated to that last one yesterday, after school in his truck, and it was pretty fun. More than fun. His lips sliding across my throat—sucking, licking, biting—the scratch of his Adam's apple against my mouth: Yum.

Though today, I was hanging out at Inkcafé while he was working, so we weren't making out at all. Lame.

I suspected that those moments were stuck in a space-time continuum, existing in an alternate reality and not the one I was currently occupying, because the contrast between Halloween and our few make-out sessions, and this, felt impossible. Like two different worlds altogether.

Two different Neils, and two different Olivias.

Huh. That sparked an interesting story idea, and I jotted it down in my notebook.

Neil carried over a flatbread pizza and two iced caramel macchiatos, setting one of the drinks down in front of me.

"I'm on break," he said, and slid the pizza closer to me. "Want some?"

"Sure. Thanks." I took a bite of pizza and a sip of my drink and settled back into my chair. "What house are you, Neil?"

He looked up, his brows furrowed in question for a brief second before clarity dawned, answering, "Slytherin."

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Ha! I knew it. “I knew it.” I smirked. “Wait, what? Did you say Slytherin?” He smirked right back, and my mouth actually fell open. Neil. Slytherin.

Okay, yeah, I could totally see that now. But wow. “Okay. Color me shocked. Moving on. What house do you think I am?”

He chuckled, folding his hands beneath his chin, elbows on the table. “If you’re not Slytherin, then I don’t know anything about life, Liv,” he joked.

“That’s right,” I said cockily, nodding in approval as I flashed him one of my rare, genuine smiles. It was one that clearly conveyed my growing fondness for him, whether I wanted him to see it or not.

I was going to have to keep that in check, wasn’t I?

“Do you want to go to the movies this weekend?” he intruded my thoughts, and I scoffed in response.

“Of course I do,” I answered. Not just because it would be with Neil, though that was definitely a plus, but because I was up for watching movies any day of the week, really. “When?”

“Do you work Friday night?”

“I do.”

“Saturday?”

I shook my head.

“Saturday then.”

“Saturday then,” I echoed, smiling again and ducking my head so he couldn’t see it this time. He watched the whole thing play out, though, an identical smile curving his lips.

They were dangerous, these kinds of smiles.

We went to the movies (twice) that weekend, grabbed dinner (once), and were hanging out during (most of) our lunches now.

It was easy with Neil, almost so easy that it didn’t seem real.

I was used to the rush of thoughts and panic of time, intentionally filling the spaces in my life with noise, but the more I hung out with Neil, the more I was forced to take notice of the way he was content in just being still sometimes.

He was relaxed, confident, and easy-going.

I’d once said I wanted to peek inside his world, and now that I was, now that he’d given me the permission to, all I saw was calm.

Calm skies, calm breeze, calm waters.

It was the complete opposite of what existed inside of mine: Fires burning, empty spaces filled with nothing, traffic jams of thought, spinning in circles of laughter with Sydney, loud music and parties drowning out sound, writing, working, and questions. So many questions I didn’t have the answers to.

Who am I? Who do I want to be? What do I want my future to look like? What am I going to do after graduation?

What are Neil and I even doing?

There were a thousand more questions behind that, hence the mental traffic jam.

I wanted to slip completely out of mine and into his, for just a little while. To lie back in his silent waters and watch the sky slowly changing colors, the sun quietly creeping beyond the horizon.

I thought I might be able to find some of my answers there, because I'd already found a little bit of peace in his calm.

I'd already found some silence in his quiet.

Full honesty, it was terrifying.

Chapter 13

Crazy, I Know

## Page 44

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 9:41 am*

I was staring at Neil from across our classroom—gawking, ogling, watching, drooling, whatever you wanted to call it. I was supposed to be dividing up flyers for an upcoming football game, but instead, I was stuck in my seat, motionless. Like a moron.

I was pretty sure I hadn't even blinked in a solid sixty seconds, at least. But I couldn't stop staring at him.

He was currently stacking chairs at the corner of the room with the only other guy in our ASB class, Bryce, and his arms were flexing and releasing with the weight of the chairs. It's what my eyes were glued to at the moment, for the moment.

He was wearing another short-sleeved button-up, which honestly, at this point, I saw for exactly what it was: the Clark Kent façade to the secret interior of who Neil actually was.

In a short word: it was hot. Especially when I felt like I was probably one of only a few who actually knew this about him—that there was something beyond his appearance, demeanor, and beliefs that was night and day from all that.

Don't get me wrong, he was still Neil. Wholesome and seemingly pure, but he was something more, too. He wasn't all khaki pants, kind smiles, and a Bible tucked into the front pocket of his backpack.

No. Not at all.

It should've been obvious to me that people were not always what they seemed, but I

guess I was pretty good at judging a book by its cover. Clearly. I wasn't proud of that. Especially when it came to Neil. Because he was turning out to be a lot more of the kinds of things I didn't know I liked. Things I hadn't realized I was attracted to.

Like his laughter—loud and unrestrained at times, but quiet and thoughtful in others. His words—spoken with intention and purpose because nothing that came out of his mouth felt wasted; it was always backed with some kind of reason.

And his humor. He was funny, and straightforward, and fun. And we happened to have a lot in common—as far as our interests went.

He was currently smiling at something Bryce had just said, and I saw it from clear across the room, and there was that, too. The way his eyes crinkled at the corners when his lips turned up, and the way he held his hand to his chest like he was physically holding the rest of his amusement in.

I'd never noticed these kinds of things in anyone else before. Probably because I hadn't cared to. These were only things you noticed when you were looking at someone—really looking at someone.

And apparently, right now, and as of recently, I was really looking at Neil, and I couldn't stop myself from doing it. I kind of just wanted to walk across the classroom, take his hand, and drag him somewhere private to engage in some mildly inappropriate behavior. (Or appropriate behavior, depending on one's outlook.)

I cleared my throat and forced my eyes away from him, down to the stack of flyers in front of me and got to work separating and clipping them together by classroom.

I guess there was something to be said about delayed gratification and taking things slow. And something even more to be said about thoroughly enjoying what you could get, because the rest wasn't going to happen anyway. The fact that Neil was waiting



for marriage was beside the point, because:

I was still a virgin, too.

(Full. Of. Surprises. That was me.)

Crazy, I know. But simply put, I hadn't ever wanted to give it up. It didn't seem worth all the drama that could come along with it. Unexpected teenage pregnancy, no thanks. Emotional attachment, even bigger no thanks. (And let's not pretend that Linda viewing sex as a means to prosperity didn't play into it as well. She'd warned me off of these deeper connection kinds of things for as long as I could remember.) How Neil was making me contemplate these things was even crazier in my book, because I think I totally would've been willing to sleep with him if he was down for it.

Thankfully, he wasn't.

And I knew because I'd asked.

I wasn't embarrassed about it, because it wasn't like I was literally asking him to sleep with me or anything. I just wanted to know what his stance on the matter was, and he readily told me, so there it was.

I kind of wanted to slap myself for admitting this, but kissing Neil was enough for me anyway. (I'd totally called it, hadn't I?)

His hand threading through mine sparked more feelings than any other place a hand had ever touched me, and kissing him constantly set fire to an inferno I didn't know existed in me, so I was already fighting the urge to run as far away in the opposite direction as I could while simultaneously wanting to jump him.

Yeah, I was confused as hell.

I was slipping into that same territory that was way too uncharted and unfamiliar. I knew nothing about real relationships, not really, thanks to Linda and my own built-up fears, so I didn't even know if what we were doing was the standard, par for the course as far as relationships went, or not. I usually bailed after the hooking-up part. And I sure as hell never had to work this hard to get to that point as I did with Neil.

I respected him for that. It made a safe place feel even safer, because if he wasn't willing to go that deep, then things between us could only go so far.

No matter what my insides did when I was near him, and no matter what thoughts tried to crash into my awareness the more time I spent with him, Neil and I—whatever we were—it was safe.

This thing between us was safe.

(I didn't actually believe that, though. No. Not really.)

“Hey, kiddo. Happy Birthday! I'm bummed I didn't catch you, but since you didn't answer, I'm assuming you're at school, which makes me hella proud—Oh! That reminds me, you still have three schools to apply to,” my brother switched into parental figure mode with ease, “I expect you to have those apps turned in by winter break. You got it, kiddo?”

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“Anyway. Eighteen! Man, I can’t believe my little sister is an adult. You’ll always belittle sisterto me, though. I love you, kiddo. Hope your birthday is awesome. Talk to you soon.”Click.

I listened to my brother’s voicemail for the fifteenth time since my birthday. I’d missed his call while I was at school and was pretty bummed about it, too. I still hadn’t been able to catch him. We were playing one epic game of phone tag.

I’d already applied to one of the three schools he’d mentioned, but I still had to finish the other two, though I wasn’t sure I wanted to go to any of them. I wasn’t sure about college in general. I wasn’t sure about anything, really.

Maybe I’d just go ahead and follow my mother into a career of professional escorting.

Joking.

I put these contemplations on hold and quickly got dressed for work, heading out the door ten minutes later than I probably should’ve.

Oops.

Kidding. I didn’t actually care.

The actor’s mouth was moving on screen, but I could only hear a muffled version of what he was saying through the projector window since it was closed. I folded my arms and stared at the screen anyway, eyes narrowed, trying to lip-read the

character's dialogue.

Something about blankets or blank checks, or blagetagetah for all I knew.

I heard the projection room door open and close at the far side of the room and stepped away from the window. Jax was casually making his way toward me, passing half of the projectors on his way.

"What's up, girl?" he greeted when he reached me.

"Not much," I responded. "Just waiting for these last three movies to finish up, so I can shut them down and get out of here. What are you still doing here?"

He leaned against a sound tower and slid his hands into his pockets with a shrug. "Just waiting on my date to pick me up."

That immediately got my interest. My brows rose of their own volition. "Date?" I stepped closer to him, nudging him in the ribs with my elbow. "Date with who?"

"Just some guy I met at church this weekend," he said, all feigned detachment.

"Get. Out." I laughed, and then he broke character and followed suit.

"I know. Guess that's where all the good boys are these days," he commented with a wink.

"No shit." I smirked.

"What's up with you and Neil anyway?" he asked the question I already suspected was coming.

Now it was my turn to shrug. I threw my shoulders up uncaringly and let them fall. “Hell if I know,” I told him honestly.

“Well, I know for a fact that I saw one deceased Romeo and Juliet kissing a whole lot the night of my party, so I’d saysomethingis going on.”

“Obviously,” I quipped. “But I think we’re just... having fun.” I shrugged again. I didn’t know what Neil and I were doing, and I was over trying to analyze it. I was having fun with him; that’s all it had to be. Right?

“Hmm.” Jax looked at me thoughtfully, and I turned my attention elsewhere. Back to the movie playing on screen. There were particles of dust floating through the beam of light between the projector and the screen, and they were a lot more fascinating than the look Jax was still giving me. I couldn’t actually see it, but I could feel it—his eyes tattooing a pattern on the side of my face.

One of the last three projectors running released the end of its film with an audible snap, and a sigh of the projector shutting down echoed after it.

Saved by duty.

“I have to go get that,” I said.

His eyebrows rose as he smirked. “Oh, I’m coming with you,” he tossed in, and I rolled my eyes, which only made him laugh. “Relax, I just want to ask you something.”

“Oh, yeah? What’s that?” I asked. I walked over two theaters and began wiping things down and shutting switches off.

He followed right on my heels. “I was wondering if maybe you and Neil would want

to double date with me and Pax.”

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I paused my cleaning, turning slowly on the heel of my foot. “Pax?” I asked. “As in Jax and Pax?”

“Shut up.”

I burst out laughing, though it was more like a long, escaped snort that barreled into laughter. The sound of it traveled down the projection room and drifted off into the ether.

“I said shut up,” Jax reiterated, but he was laughing, too. Or visibly holding back his laughter at least, but he was failing miserably.

“Okay, Jax and Pax. Where should we go on our date? The tracks? Or maybe the grocery store for some flax?” I was being a jerk, but it was amusing—to myself, anyway. “Ooh! I know. Maybe we could go do our tax-es,” I flopped.

He scoffed. “Lame.”

I shrugged it off. “Seriously, though. That does sound fun. We can leave Neil at home, though.”

Jax’s eyebrows rose up. “Oh, it’s like that, huh?”

I shook my head, feeling a stupid blush creep up my neck. “No, it’s not like that at all...” I huffed out a breath. “It’s just that I think I’m starting to really like him—like, not just on the surface like him—and I don’t want to like him that much,” I admitted. To him, to myself.

He snorted.

“Right?” I whined.

“Too right.”

“Ugh,” the groan crawled from my lips as I threw my head back dramatically.

It clearly amused him. “Relax. Neil’s a good kid.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I waved him off. Good people could still hurt other people. Good people could still burrow their way into someone’s heart and then decide to leave and leave a vacant space along with it.

I wasn’t talking about me. Or my heart, for that matter. I was simply stating facts. (Liar, liar, pants on fire.)

“So, you think tonight’s going to go that well, huh?” I steered the topic back to him.

“Oh, definitely,” he answered right away.

It made me smile. “Good. Then I’m in. But you’re asking Neil.” I pointed at him.

“Already did.” He looked like the cat that ate the damn canary.

I straightened up, walking toward him and miming like I was going to choke him out but kissed him on the cheek instead. “Solid work.”

He chuckled.

“So, where are we going?”



His lips turned up in a mischievous grin. “Oh, you’ll see,” he said, and I let my head fall backward again, shaking it at the ceiling with another low groan.

Why were all of my friends total pain in the asses?

Oh, that’s right. Because all the best ones were.

“What are you watching?” I whispered. I didn’t actually need to whisper, because I had the whole house to myself tonight, but Neil was whispering so I was whispering too, I guess.

“Nothing,” he answered. “Just browsing, but there’s nothing good on.”

“Hmm.”

“Want to pick something together?” he asked, his tone slipping down another octave, into something even more quiet and relaxed as I imagined him sinking down in his bed and getting comfortable. A soft rustle of fabric scratched against his phone, his quiet breath following as I answered with aye and we clicked through movie options.

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“Should we watch something dirty?” I asked.

His low laughter sent goose bumps up my arms. I stretched my blanket tighter around me, rubbing them away. “I’ll pass,” he answered. “How about something gory?”

“Eh. Also pass.” I wasn’t about to tell him that sometimes—sometimes—I was too much of a chicken to watch the gorier shit when I was home alone. Big empty house and all. Unless I could turn this around in my favor. “Unless... you want to come over and watch it with me?”

“At eleven p.m.? My mom would kill me.”

“It was worth a shot.”

He chuckled. “You’re trouble.”

“With a capital T. You should probably steer clear of me.”

“Nah,” he responded. “I’ll take my chances; I like you too much.”

And yeah, his words sent my heart aflutter.

So lame, I know. I mentally rolled my eyes at myself while the rest of me was a total traitor and sparked like little excited fireworks inside my body, my mouth the biggest perpetrator of them all when it said, “I like you, too, Neil. I like you a lot.

## Playing with Fire

We were laying in the back of Neil's truck in my driveway, looking up at the slowly darkening sky. I felt the warmth of his body next to me even though we weren't touching. We weren't speaking, either, for that matter. Like I'd mentioned before, Neil had a way about quieting the outside world and using it to his advantage, and he seemed to really be thinking something over at the moment.

A shooting star streaked across the sky. I pointed up at it and broke the silence. "Shooting star."

"Did you make a wish?"

I closed my eyes, throwing one out to the universe. I swallowed. I was keeping that one to myself.

I puffed out a breath and relaxed back into the silence. Or tried to relax, anyway. Because here was the thing about Neil's silence: It was a part of who he was, yes. But after hanging out with him for the past few weeks, he was definitely being quieter than usual. And he hadn't tried to kiss me today, either, or yesterday, or the day before that, for the record. You know, if I was keeping track.

Full disclosure, it might've been my wandering hands that scared him away. I hadn't been meaning to try and slip my hand down his pants, it just happened. On accident. The kind of accident that was totally on purpose but shouldn't count because there was no thought behind it, just action. Yeah. That sounded stupid, even to me.

Ugh.

Neil was going to break things off with me, I could tell. But it was okay. The scarier part is that I found myself more worried about losing his friendship than anything.

I guess I kind of liked being friends with Neil. Or more than liked being friends with Neil.

“Have you thought any more about what college you want to go to?” he asked out of nowhere. And it was for reasons like that.

We talked about the real things that mattered, and he cared about things like that, and I found myself caring about them, too, when he was around.

I lifted my shoulders and shook my head. “Not really. I mean, I’ve thought about it, but honestly, I’m not sure I even want to go to college,” I admitted—for the first time out loud.

“Yeah, me neither.”

I immediately turned my head and looked sideways at him. “Really?”

My eyes were wide and glued to the profile of his face, so I could see him thinking his response over. He played with his bottom lip between his teeth as he looked up at the sky, before settling on, “Yeah. I think so. I don’t want to disappoint my parents, but... I’m not sure college is for me.”

“Wow. I would not have expected that from you.”

His head shifted, and his eyes were on mine. “Why?”

Why? Why? “I don’t know. You’re smart; you seem like you have a good head on your shoulders. I guess I just assume college is what you’d want.”

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He blinked a few slow times, still worrying his lip between his teeth. I tried not to stare at his mouth as he let out a quiet breath, but my eyes were glued there whether I liked it or not. (Okay, yeah, I liked it. Obviously.) “I just want to help people,” he said. “I want to leave this world knowing I helped make it a better place, and I’m not sure I need college to do that. I can do it now, at church. And...” he cleared his throat. “I’ve always wanted to be a firefighter.”

“Really?” I asked for a second time, but I hadn’t expected that either for some reason.

“Yeah, really.” His smile was shy, but his eyes were lit up. The moment seemed to stand still for a few stuttering seconds. “I’ve never actually told anyone that before.” And a few seconds more.

Neil was confiding in me. That’s what was happening. Okay.

If Neil could confide in me, I could confide in him, too. Right? “I think that’s really cool. Thank you for trusting me enough to tell me that.” The light in his eyes spread across the rest of his features, and I had to force myself to take in a full breath. My heartbeat accelerated and pounded right through that breath. I cleared my throat, continuing on anyway, “As far as college goes... think I want to go to school, maybe, but like, an art school. Or maybe just work and write and be out on my own for a little while. I don’t know. I’m sure it sounds crazy, but I do know that I want to give screenwriting a shot. I want to know I at least tried.”

“I don’t think that’s crazy,” he instantly responded.

“No?”

He shook his head. “I think you’re really talented, and you should go for it. It’s always worth pursuing your dreams, right?”

My lips fought against the pull of a smile, but the smile won out. “Yeah. Thanks, Neil. And for the record, I think you shouldn’t care what anyone thinks about what you want to do, either—including your parents. If you want to be a firefighter, then you should go be a firefighter.”

One thing I knew for sure: He’d look good as hell doing it. Uniform, muscles, fire burning in the reflection of his gaze. Yeah.

I was going to keep that bit to myself, though.

We found ourselves holding each other’s stare, and I swallowed past my heartbeat that had settled in my throat, all while attempting to hold back my mischievous smirk at the thought of him in a fireman’s uniform, but I was failing miserably.

“What?” he asked on a soft chuckle.

I said the first thing I thought of, besides the obvious. “You want to be a hero.” It was kind of cute that he wanted to be a hero. Admirable, too.

He shook his head. “No, not at all. I just want to do something that matters. And fires are sort of fascinating to me.”

“Okay, Clark Kent.”

“What?” His features went all amused.

“Nothing.” I looked back up at the sky. Another shooting star streaked over us. What kind of luck was that?

I made another wish: Don't let me scare Neil off. Not yet. I promise to keep my hands out of his pants from this point forward if he doesn't walk away. Honest. (Liar.)

Ahem.

Neil shifted beside me to get more comfortable, and now his elbow was touching my elbow, and his leg was touching my leg, and I sucked in a quick breath. It was like the universe had turned around and decided to immediately test me.

Try not to put your hands down Neil's pants now, she was clearly taunting.

I didn't. My fingers didn't even twitch. So there, Uni. How do you like me now?

Neil shifted again, settling his arms beneath his head. I caught sight of his bicep and dragged my gaze away.

Where the hell was Linda, anyway? Not that I minded hanging out with Neil in the back of his truck, but it was getting increasingly warm back here, next to him. Because of muscles and warm skin and close proximities and all that. I could practically feel the rise and fall of his chest we were so close.

Headlights darted up the driveway, followed by the sound of my mother's car. Oh, thank you, sweet baby Jesus—the gods—the universe. Whoever was up there and in charge.

We were waiting on Linda because I'd forgotten my keys in the house this morning—since Neil had picked me up and driven me to school today. (I know. I know. Things were escalating in some areas, while deescalating in others, and I didn't get it either. I'd thought that maybe he wanted to break things off on our way home, but that hadn't happened, and now here we were.) Thankfully, Linda was home today and could let me in. I just hadn't realized she was going to take her sweet time getting

here, though I should have known.

I sat up in the bed of Neil's truck as she pushed her car door shut with her elbow, at least a dozen shopping bags decorating her arms.

"Hey, baby! Got you some stuff, too. Oh, hi there," she greeted Neil when he sat up beside me.

We both shuffled our way out of the truck, plopping down onto the driveway. I ignored the fact that she was only half-dressed today; I was used to it. But I tallied a huge point in Neil's favor when I noted him doing the same.



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“Oh, Neil. Neil Summers. I’d recognize you anywhere; you still look exactly the same,” she said.

“Hi, ma’am,” he responded politely, and I snorted. I couldn’t help it. Ma’am and Linda were like two perfect antonyms—what the light was to the dark, what romance was to horror.

She shook me. “A man with manners. I like it. Teach this one your ways.” She nodded her head toward me.

I rolled my eyes and looked up at the now dark sky with a sigh.

“This is what I’m talking about,” she said. “Always with the rolling of her eyes. But...this is interesting.” she fingered the space between me and Neil, quickly switching the subject. “I’ve heard so much about you lately, and now here you are.”

Freaking Linda. I should’ve sent Neil on his way and waited for her myself, because who knew what was going to come out of her mouth next.

I was not going to look at Neil and see his reaction, and I was not going to blush. I was not. I shifted from my left foot to my right, folding my arms across my chest as I gave her a searing, intentional stare.

A glare. Whatever.

“Oh, okay. I’m going, I’m going,” she huffed.

“Let me help you with those first,” Neil offered. He stepped forward, and she slid an armful of bags into his hands, and then we followed her up the driveway and into the house, unloading all her crap in the foyer.

She thanked him, and he bid her goodnight, and I quickly pulled the door closed behind me.

Ugh.

Neil was smirking when I looked at him. Smirking.

It did things to me. Weird things. Things that were starting to feel all too normal in Neil’s presence.

“Careful,” I warned, but his smirk only stretched higher.

“Why?” he asked, stepping toward me.

“Because that smirk really wants to be kissed right now,” I told him. Straightforward. Dropping all pretenses. Because, screw it. I kind of missed Neil’s lips on mine. Or felt the absence of them like a tangible void, but who was keeping track?

He bit down on his mashed lips, and my heart pounded in perfect rhythm with the chanting in my head:

Kiss. Me. Kiss. Me. Kiss. Me.

He read the expression on my face clearly and released a breath. We waited a beat, and a beat more, just staring at each other.

What is he thinking, what is he going to do, does he want to kiss me too, is he as

terrified of this thing between us as I am?shouted the mental traffic jam.

He licked his lips, and my eyes were drawn lower. To those full lips that had me biting down on mine. But I was still waiting on him to cave first.Hopinghe would cave first because I was about two seconds from losing it.

When he cleared his throat, my gaze swung back to his.

He definitely wanted to kiss me, too. I could see it written all over his face. In the almost unnoticeable tension between his brows, the heat in his eyes, and the way his Adam's apple slowly slid up and down his throat.

My lips curled into a soft smirk.

And thenfinally,he broke. He shook his head, clearly losing some internal battle before closing the distance between us and lifting my chin in his fingers and lowering his mouth to mine.

It sure as hell didn't get old—kissing Neil. And at this point, I felt pretty depraved of it, so I leaned into him with a less than quiet sigh as his mouth moved over mine.

His chest vibrated against mine with his chuckle.

I wasn't embarrassed about it, though. Especially not when he pulled my bottom lip between his teeth and into his mouth and let it slowly slide out from between them, following the movement with his tongue.

I fisted his shirt and pulled him into me just as he was backing me into the door, his tongue slipping into my mouth and finding mine.

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They curled together and twisted my brain into a knotted mess. My thoughts, my heart, my insides—they were all a wreck when Neil kissed me.

Lips, and tongues, and my fists in his shirt, and his hands on my waist, and our chests pushed together, and I was pretty sure I was slowly dying, but I met him beat for beat, breath by breath.

The temptation to push him for so much more was a very tangible thing, living and breathing inside my chest.

Begging for release.

It was like playing with fire, kissing Neil.

But I kind of liked playing with fire.

“Well, well, well!” my mother sang as I closed the door behind me.

My chest was still rising and falling faster than the average breather. Because Neil.

But damn.

“Shut up,” I barely managed, but it only made her laugh. I fell into a breathless laughter of my own.

“That was surprising,” she commented.

“Yeah,” I huffed. “Tell me about it.”

I strode up the stairs but stopped halfway up when she cleared her throat. Looking over my shoulder at her, I watched her features settle through her lingering smile.

“You know I won’t tell you not to have your fun. But remember what I taught you. Attachment only leads to disappointment,” she said, and I groaned in response.

Like I needed her reminder.

## Chapter 15

### Double Entendre

“Higher! Higher!” Sydney screamed through her laughter.

I pumped my legs harder, attempting to surpass her height on the swings, but it was all in vain. Girl was freakishly good at getting it up, hard and fast.

(That’s what he said.)

“You suck!” she sang as she launched herself out of the swing and landed in the sand. Why we were hanging out at the park, in the kid’s playground—both of us eighteen years old, mind you—was only because of the skate park nestled in the middle of it. (Not that it deterred us from hitting it up any other time.) A.k.a.: Boys. Skater boys, to be exact. Sydney’s perfectly brewed cup of tea. Scratch that. Perfectly brewed cup of coffee.

I flew out of my own swing and dropped into the sand next to her—a lot less gracefully. Her eyes went wide as she turned to me. Cute boy, five o’clock, she signed. He wasn’t close enough to hear us, but she’d signed it anyway. I shrugged. At least

we were doing our homework and practicing. I checked out the general vicinity of the five o'clock area.

Oh. Yeah. Definitely cute.

Make your move,I signed.

I will.

When? This year?

Shut up.

I laughed, pulling on her sleeve and tugging her toward the skate park. When we got there, I signed:Go. Now.

She rolled her eyes, giving my expert eye roll a full-on run for its money, though she did actually seem nervous for some reason.

That was new.

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She glanced between him and me and back again, her eyes darting back and forth a ridiculous amount of times.

“Oh youreallythink he’s cute,” I commented, and a blush crawled up her cheeks—andokay, that was it. I spun her around to face me. “Okay, what the hell is wrong with you?”

Silence.

I tapped her forehead. “Are you broken? Did the cute boy break your brain?” I mocked.

She flushed and looked down at the ground, and something solid settled its weight in my stomach. “Okay, seriously. What the hell?” I asked. This wasn’t like her. Not at all. Not even close.Embarrassedwasn’t really a part of our vocabulary. Things just were. Most of the time. Okay, all of the time, excluding the ones that included Neil.

Sydney was tugging me in a mildly aggressive way in the opposite direction. She was definitely in a hurry to get away from the obscenely cute skater boy.

“What is up with you?” I practically balked.

She tugged on my sweater even harder. “I just realized that I might’ve, maybe, already hooked-up with him before,” she confessed through some very clenched teeth and a bright, fake smile.

I scoffed. “Okay...”And?“And?”

“And?” she huffed. “And... there might’ve been some specific anatomy in some oral places before someone started shouting through the halls that it was time to go.”

Oh. Oh, shit. “Oh, shit.” I barked out a laugh. I tried not to, but I couldn’t hold it in. But also... “Damn. I really do owe you.” Interrupting a kiss was definitely not equivalent to...that. “Oops.”

“Oops?!” She threw her hands in the air. “You are so lucky I love you.”

I stifled my grin, but another snort of laughter burst past it. Sydney groaned in response but fell into a fit of laughter, too.

“What can I do to make it up to you?” I asked when I finally got my shit together, but I’d already thought of something. “Just let me go get his number for you.” Simple enough.

“No way.” She shook her head. “Not after the way things went down. I don’t think you understand what kind of compromising position I was barely in when I had to high tail it out of there.”

I mashed my lips down on my laughter. I was such an asshole. But we could absolutely add embarrassed to our vocabulary now. Because that was definitely, definitely embarrassing. Mortifying. Beyond that, maybe? For sure.

“I’m sorry?” I offered, giving her the most innocent stare I could muster, which wasn’t saying very much. But it turned into a genuine grimace.

She folded her arms over her chest with a resigned puff of air. “Fine. Go get his number for me.”

I perked up. “Done.”



“Today was weird,” I told Jax absentmindedly, “and it’s only halfway over.”

“What’s that?” He turned from the popcorn machine.

“Nothing.”

He shrugged and went back to scooping out popcorn before it burned, and then swiveled back around. “Don’t forget it’s double date day tomorrow.”

“How could I forget?” I responded sarcastically. “You’ve only mentioned it about, oh...” I looked down at my imaginary watch. “Fifteen times since we first spoke about it?” I smirked.

He nudged me with his shoulder as he walked past me. “Shut up. I’m excited.”

“Me, too,” I told him truthfully, following behind.

“Good.” That mischievous smile of his was back again; I didn’t trust it.

“Are you planning on telling me where we’re going at some point in the near future, though?” I asked.

“Nope!” he threw out before disappearing into the back of the concession stand.

Joke was on him, because I was going to get it out of him one way or another—physical violence or otherwise.

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Or...maybe not.Maybe I'd just get it out of Neil.

He walked up to my cash register and set his palms down on the counter, eyes darting around the concession stand suspiciously, before leaning forward and stealing a kiss.

It was... unexpected. To say the least.

I didn't even have a second to respond by the time the whole thing was over. If it weren't for the lingering suggestion of his lips on mine, I wouldn't even be sure it happened.

When I settled my gaze on his with a soft smile, he was looking at me with a secretive smile of his own. It was the kind of smile that spurred a whole bunch of butterflies to life.

Because yes, there were still butterflies.

Ugh.

No, I took it back. I liked the butterflies. They were just new, and they'd taken some getting used to, but I liked them.

Who evenwasI?

Neil was still staring at me as his smile stretched wider.

"What?" I asked. The words felt a little self-conscious, if self-conscious was a thing I

did. Which it was not.

“Are you blushing?” His fingers skimmed over my cheek, his smile still anchored in place.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “No,” I lied.

“Okay,” he offered, clearly amused.

I wanted to lean over the counter and kiss him again, if only to know what the curve of that smile would feel like against my mouth. I had half a mind to do it, but I shook off the urge. “Anyway. What can I get for you?” I feigned nonchalance.

Even though I now mostly worked upstairs in the projection room, I’d gotten stuck in concessions for two shifts this week.

Oh well. Sucks to suck.

“Nothing,” Neil quipped. “Just wanted to see you.” His brown eyes liquified, melting into mine. Mocha, and caramel, and honey, and I wasn’t even embarrassed about thinking it this time.

I was changing my mind about the suffocating butterflies, though. They were currently stealing the oxygen from my lungs, and it was kind of annoying.

Lies.

It was Neil, obviously. Neil was stealing my oxygen.

How he managed to take me by surprise time and time again was lost on me. But full honesty, I loved it.

“Okay, then.” I smiled against my will, giving in to all the mushy, gushy (slightly terrifying) feelings I felt when I looked at him.

“Okay, then.” He smiled again, too. More of a smirk, really.

With a quick look around, I pushed forward and managed to steal it from his lips that time.

“Paintball? Seriously?!” I shouted as we pulled up to an outdoor paintball course. “Hell yeah!” I’d always wanted to try paintballing. It wouldn’t hurt that much, right? No way.

Neil chuckled in his seat next to me, his hand curving over my knee. I wasn’t even going to go there—the multitude of things it made me feel.

“Paintball!” Jax confirmed.

“Oh, you’re thebest! I’m going to kick your ass so hard.” I unbuckled and hopped out of Jax’s car, practically bouncing in place on the balls of my feet. I saw it from an outside vantage point for a second there, mentally bitch-slapped myself for it, and fell back down onto my heels. I was getting way too comfortable around Neil.

Or he was getting way too good at washing out all the asshole in me and replacing it with... I didn’t know. Something opposite of asshole. Something giddy and smiley and gag-worthy.

I smiled in amusement.

Dammit. See?

We went into the main office, paid our fees, and suited up. I felt like a badass in my camo coverall, mask, and AK-47. (Joking. It's what I named my paintball gun—AK. Much to my own amusement.)

“Okay, so it's us four, and those four, against those eight.” Jax gestured between us and another group standing closer to the course entrance.

“We can totally take them,” I said. I totally meant it. I didn't know where my pretentious, swaggering display of courage came from since I'd never actually played paintball before, but it was there.

Neil slid his fingers through mine, and my attention snagged on his laughter. The low rumble that fell from his lips, the vibration of it traveling from his chest, down into his fingertips, and straight into mine.

I took an unsteady breath as my throat closed up tight, the vibration turning itself into a warmth that was spilling into every dark piece of me. My heart hammered; my thoughts scattered and lost their damn mind.

It was...new. Like all of the things I'd felt in his presence before, only... turned way the hell up. It shook the metaphorical ground I stood on. Because I'd thought all these feelings were returned on, before.

I was wrong. So stupidly wrong.

How was that even possible?

What is this?

What did it mean?

Nothing. It means nothing. I shrugged it off. It meant that I liked Neil, but I already knew that. The rest of my thoughts could shut up and go jump off a bridge.

He tugged on my hand, pulling me behind him into the course and directly out of my mind. Which was... good. I didn't want to be dwelling inside there anyway. My thoughts tended to have a mind of their own and spiral into things that didn't make any sense, but totally convinced me should make sense, as evidenced, and it was crazy-making.

"You ready?" Neil breathed in my ear. He didn't actually, literally breathe the words into my ear, but it felt that way, sending a line of goose bumps down my arms.

"Oh, I'm more than ready," I replied. I wanted to paintball the shit out of someone. My excitement about it eclipsed anything else for the moment, clouding things better left ignored.

A quick glance at Pax, and I saw that he looked nervous. I bit back my smirk. He was sweet—too sweet. Too sweet for paintball, and definitely too sweet for Jax. It was certainly interesting, those two. But maybe that's what Jax needed. A little light to balance out the dark.

I tucked that thought away for later.

The ref sounded a horn, and it was on.

I ducked behind an inflatable, heart already racing faster. Neil caught my attention and gestured to my right. I didn't even think about it before charging out and shooting in that direction like a madman before throwing myself into a crouch behind another inflatable. Had I managed to shoot someone? Who knew?

But this was freaking awesome. Adrenaline was coursing through me, making me giggly. Me, giggly. I guess hell had frozen over and Satan was ice-skating to work this morning.

Neil shot out into the open, gun pressed against the front of his shoulder as he aimed and popped out a few intentional shots.

"Hit, hit." The single word came from two different voices across the field. "Out, out; out, out," they echoed.

Okay, hot. Neil had totally annihilated them. Like an assassin straight out of an action film. Again...hot.

He skidded onto the ground next to me, smiling. I couldn't actually see it, but his eyes were crinkled, lit with the laughter that was hiding behind his mask.

"You can't just go shooting blindly," he said through a chuckle.

"Why not?" I took offense to his statement. Mock offense, anyway. "I didn't get hit."

He laughed again. "That time. Come on, follow me." He nodded for me to follow behind him, but screw that.

I darted through the next few inflatables, paintballs whizzing past me. I actually felt

one fly right by my ear. But still, I didn't get hit.Ha.

Movement sounded just ahead. Feet ground to a halt on the opposite of me, directly through the inflatable. Throwing my gun up above me, I quickly peeked up, shot, and nailed a guy right in the chest.



Hell yeah!

He grumbled a bitter, “Hit, out.” Sore loser.

I crouched back down and attempted to catch my breath. While I did that, I watched Neil dart from inflatable to inflatable, taking down not one, or two, but three guys. What a showoff.

A stupidly hot, not at all cocky about it, showoff.

Ugh. How annoying.

He slid into place next to me. At this point, I could easily say he was following me through the course. I smirked beneath my mask even though he couldn’t see it.

“Hey there, crazy girl,” he said. The crazy girl had come out more like an affectionate pet name, and I was too busy lingering on that when I felt a sharp pelt to the shoulder. Ow.

Scratch that. It only hurt for, like, a second.

And then I heard Jax laughing from behind me. “Sorry; I’m so sorry.” He threw his hands up. The hit had come from his direction and not the direction of our opposing team. Son of a—

I pointed my gun right into his mask-covered face. He paled, eyes going serious through the strip of clear plastic. “Don’t even think about it,” he said.

I burst out laughing, lowering my gun. “You really think I would do that to you?”

“Um, yeah.” He rolled his eyes.

“Then what the hell would possess you bring me here?” I smirked. Again, he couldn’t see it—no one could—but it was there.

“You know, I was thinking that same exact thing about two seconds ago—”

“Guys,” Neil interrupted. “You’re gonna get us—”

Too late. We got nailed, three sitting ducks in a row. Pow, pow, pow. Neil down, Jax down, Olivia down. Just like that.

“Dammit!” I whined, and it made Neil chuckle.

“Relax. You did good.” He curled his arm over my shoulders. “Kicked some serious ass out there.”

I spun around in his hold just as we exited the course. “Did you just say ‘ass?’” My lips stretched up in amusement.

“No.” He stifled his smirk.

“You totally did,” I said on a wave of laughter.

His eyebrow rose in challenge. “And if I did?”

I met his challenge, folding my arms and raising my brows at him in return. And if he did? “Nothing,” I answered, relenting with a smile. “I just really liked the way it sounded coming out of your mouth.”

Something like choked laughter fell from his lips, and I laughed up at the open sky.

## Chapter 16

### Marking of Territory

“You ready?” Linda sang all excitedly as I slouched down in the passenger seat of her Audi.

“Yeah.” I yawned. I’d stayed up way too late watching thriller movies with Neil last night. (On the phone, not in person.) One movie had rolled into two, and two rolled into three, and before we knew it, it was three a.m. I wasn’t mad about it.

His sleepy “Night, Liv,” still tickled the edges of my brain the way it had right before we hung up and fell asleep. Like one of those head scratchers with the claws that slipped over your scalp and sent goose bumps down your neck and spine. It gave the same effect as Neil’s low, gravelly, sleep-filled tone.

I swallowed.

Anyway.

My mother peeled out of our driveway, pulling me away from those thoughts as we headed to Sydney's. We were picking her up and going shopping. Or, "Shopping!" as it more accurately sounded when Linda said it.

"You look like hell," she commented now.

"Gee, thanks."

"Oh, come on." She waved it off. "It's nothing a good facial won't fix. Or Botox. You ready to try Botox yet?" she said with a ridiculous smile.

I rolled my eyes. "Um, yeah. Not today, but thanks," I said in my best sarcastic tone.

She snickered. "You know I'm only kidding."

I rolled my eyes again, and then shut them altogether, passing out until we got to Sydney's. Her door thudding shut behind me is what woke me. I stretched my arms up above me with another yawn before turning in my seat.

"Hey, girl." I smirked.

"Hey." She smirked back.

Three words, two smirks, and it told me all I needed to know. Things went good with Skater Boy last night. More than good.

“What are you two smiling about?” Linda asked.

“Boys,” Sydney and I answered at the same time.

“Oooh, tell me more,” she purred in response, making me laugh, and Sydney was more than happy to oblige.

Syd threw her head back in laughter at something my mom had just said, and it made me snort out a laugh, too, even though I hadn’t actually heard a word of their conversation.

I’d been dazed out, thinking of something else entirely.

Or someone else. Maybe. I wasn’t telling.

But back to the laughter that was in front of me—Sydney loved my mom. Like, loved her. (I did, too—honest. You know, when she wasn’t being all...Linda. Like today, for example. All these shopping bags crowding the space next to her? They were for Jason. A care-slash-birthday package we were sending him this weekend. It was a whole bunch of his favorite things—some of which I hadn’t even remembered he liked until she’d mentioned them. So, she was good people, too. When she wanted to be.) And my mom liked Sydney just as much. Full honesty, I suspected that either one of them would’ve totally traded me out for the other if given the chance. Again, I wasn’t mad about it. They were made for each other, these two. The kind of people you wanted to love and strangle all at the same time. (I sure knew how to pick ‘em.)

“So, what’s next?” Linda said, settling back into the booth across from me and Sydney with a long and contented sigh, about eight empty plates lying abandoned on the table between us.

It was clear we could put back some food, but who was judging? Not I.

“What about a movie?” I suggested since it was the first thing that popped into my head—like, always.

“That sounds fun,” she replied, and I immediately narrowed my eyes at her, throwing her a suspicious glance. “That sounds fun?” Who was she today? “I mean, you go on and on and on and on about these movies,” she added. “So let’s go see one.” She shrugged.

Okay, yeah, that was more like the Linda I knew and loved. (And sometimes, almost always, wanted to strangle, of course.)

With pen to notebook, I fought with what to write for, like, way too long before just giving up and deciding to go ahead and word-vomit onto the paper.

Jason,

Dude. I know you’re busy and all, doing real-life, adult things now, but... **CALL YOUR BABY SISTER ONCE IN A WHILE!**

I miss you.

There, I said it.

Anyway. You said you wanted to know what was going on with me in these things, so...

I started writing a few screenplays. I’ve always wanted to write screenplays, and I don’t know why I’ve never told you that before now. But... I do. You know I love movies, obviously. (Who doesn’t know?) So, I want to write one, start to finish,

and... I don't know. It's just fun.

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Let's see... school is as boring as ever, so no news there. YAWN.

But speaking of school, since you nagged, and nagged, and NAGGED me about it, I finished applying to the last three colleges on our list. You're welcome.

(Thank you.)

Oh! I'm officially a projectionist now! I don't know how the hell I forgot to tell you that one first. I love it. Like, freaking love it. When you get home, I'm giving you a tour of the projection room. I think you'll think it's pretty awesome, too.

Hmm. What else...

Oh.

Neil. He kissed me.

Just kidding. Pretend you didn't see that. But we have been hanging out a lot. I like him. Also a lot. Which is weird. Except that it doesn't feel weird most of the time... which IS weird. Ugh.

I don't even know what I'm saying.

But yeah. I think I'm digging myself a hole here when it comes to him, one I'm starting to feel like I won't be able to crawl out of if I dig too much deeper, but still, I can't stop myself from doing it.



I think Mom totally messed with my head when it comes to relationships, and I'm really starting to see it now...

Why the hell is it so much easier to divulge my sins to you in a letter?

Who knows. But since I obviously won't be sending you this letter, I might as well tell you that...

I'm not sure I want to go to college. I mean, I might want to. But... I'm not sure. I just can't see myself sitting in a classroom for another four years. Voluntarily. I hate school. But maybe it'll be different when I'm there because I want to be, for something I want to be doing?

I don't know.

Neil told me he doesn't want to go to college at all, which was shocking—for more than a few reasons. But he also told me that his parents have “expectations” of him, and he doesn't want to let them down, so he might go anyway.

I don't like that for him. Not at all.

And OUR parents clearly don't have any expectations of us, so why does the decision feel just as hard? To go, or not to go.

Did you always know you wanted to join the Marines? I assume not, because you never said anything about it, but what do I know? Well, only enough to know that you wouldn't have left to be a soldier on a whim, so... there's that.

Oh yeah, that reminds me... Mom gave me an all-expenses-paid trip to Europe for my birthday. I'm taking off for the summer, and I'm pretty freaking excited about it. And who knows, maybe I'll find some clarity there. Or maybe not. But who cares?

It's Europe. EUROPE!

Anyway, Happy 21st Birthday, big brother. I hope it's a good one.

Love you, Olivia

I folded up the letter, sealed it without allowing myself to think twice about it, and made my way downstairs two steps at a time, tossing it into Jason's birthday-slash-care package.

I sat quietly next to Neil in ASB the next day, taking notes as our teacher droned on and on about plans for after Thanksgiving break. Winter formal, holiday choir performance, championship football game. Blah, blah, blah.

Neil chuckled beside me, and I peered up at him with a fake glare, followed by a genuine smile.

He just smirked, giving my notes an intentional glance—because, okay, I hadn't actually been taking notes. Just drawing circles and lines and flowers with skulls for faces at the corner of the page.

I flipped my notebook closed, giving Neil my full attention instead. He pretended not to feel my eyes marking the side of his face, but I knew he could feel them because of the slight, amused twitch of his lips happening at the corner of his mouth.

I almost reached over to run my finger along it—like, actually trace the lines of his mouth with my finger in front of the entire class—causing me to clench my hand into a fist on my desk. Because that was against the rules, right? Obviously. For more reasons than one.

Though it was pretty clear that Neil and I were friends now (anyone could see that), I

didn't think anyone besides Sydney knew that wasn't actually the full extent of it. Not anyone at school, anyway.

And now that that thought had settled in my brain, I had the startling urge to claim him. Like, claim him, claim him. Like a goddamn alpha-female, I suddenly wanted to piss in a circle around him and mark my territory for everyone to see: See? Mine.

Ugh, gag!

What the hell was wrong with me?

(Well, a lot of things, but that was beside the point.)

His fingers skimmed across the desk, barely touching mine and settling next to them, and it shut all of those asinine thoughts right the hell up.

I took a long breath, welcoming the air of clarity, before peeking over my shoulder to see if anyone had noticed Neil's hand up against mine.

I definitely caught a few curious glances. But I returned my attention to Neil. And when I looked up at him, he was smiling. Just the subtle hint of a smile, but it was enough to spark something to life inside me.

Pride, or embarrassment, or possessiveness, I wasn't sure.

Probably a combination of all three.

I made a face at him, sticking my tongue out sideways (because obviously running in the opposite direction of these ridiculous feelings was the way to go here), and he held back his laughter, which of course in turn had me holding back my own laughter.

I didn't care who was or wasn't watching us then.

Our muffled laughter turned into a silent conversation of smiles and smirks and the shifting of our facial features that kept making it hard not to laugh.

Though his eyes, all lit up like they now were, had me suddenly swallowing thickly. It hit the metaphorical brakes on everything else. A loudscreeeechbounced off the walls in my mind.

I looked around the classroom, and more of our classmates were definitely paying attention now, but still, I didn't really care. I looked at Neil's hand and slowly slid my fingers through his, fully holding on to his hand now—much to some's obvious surprise. Including Neil's.

A quiet gasp and low murmuring sounded from the back corner of the room, but my attention was all on him.

I trailed my eyes over his face, watching as his lips slowly curved upward and as his eyes started to crinkle at the corners.

No way had he ever smiled at someone else like he was smiling at me now. He hadn't even smiled atmelike this before. All secretive and knowing and smug like that.

It was the kind of smile that was made for movie screens. A melt your insides, leave its mark on you kind of smile. A smile I wouldn't forget anytime soon, if ever.

I heard more whispering at the table next to us, catching their attention on us, too, as I glanced over at them.

They were all wide eyes and sparkling curiosity. And I got it, I did. Neil and I were polar opposites and probably didn't make any sense whatsoever to anyone looking in from the outside. Him, in his gray dress pants and white button-up, and me, all ripped pants and black on black on black. But that's probably why—as Neil's hand tightened

around mine in acceptance—I felt totally smug, too. Not just because of his hand in mine, but because they didn’t know Neil like I did. And they didn’t know me like he did, either.

Not even close.

## Chapter 17

### Holy Bible

Walking into Neil’s house for the first time since I was seven years old was an unexpected experience—unusual, disconcerting. It was like being transported back in time, because everything was exactly how I remembered it—the seven crosses decorating his living room walls, the painting of what I assumed was God’s hands propped above his fireplace, and the little sign hanging outside his front door that read: “Anchored by Jesus.”

Though it felt like another world altogether. Like a scene from a movie I’d watched, so it seemed familiar even though it wasn’t. Not really.

“I’ll be right back,” Neil threw out over his shoulder and disappeared down the hall, leaving me alone in his living room with my thoughts.

I looked around the quiet, seemingly familiar space and immediately felt like I didn’t belong. I felt watched—judged. By the seven crosses, or God’s hands, or the Virgin Mary in the corner of the room looking down on me all condescending like.

Or maybe, definitely, I was just projecting. I should’ve gone with my gut and invited Neil to do homework at my house instead, but... I was curious. And obviously curiosity got the best of me when it came to Neil. Also, he said his parents wouldn’t be home until later this evening, so...

Here we were.

At Neil's house—inNeil's house.

I set my backpack down on the carpet but picked it right back up again, slinging it back over my shoulder. I didn't feel right standing in this room, because if Neil's mom knew I was in her house I was sure she'd have a straight-up conniption, and that's what my uncomfortable feelings boiled down to, I guess.

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If she walked in that door and saw me standing here, she'd probably huff and puff at Neil while nearly blowing a gasket, staring straight through me like I wasn't even there. Because full honesty—it had always felt like she was looking right through me. Even if I didn't recognize it for what it was until I was older.

A weird, uncomfortable, I don't belong here vibe trickled through me, and I decided to stop waiting on Neil. I led myself down the hall and searched for him, peeking in the cracks of each door down his hallway. (No boundaries, that was me. Who was even surprised anymore? But I wasn't standing alone in that room, feeling like I wanted to scratch through my skin, one second longer.)

I found him rifling through a desk. His bedroom was still the same one it had been when we were kids—two doors down and one more to the left.

I pushed his door open with a soft creak announcing my presence, and he glanced up, slightly startled to see me. His brows rose up toward his hairline, making two fascinating little creases across his forehead. Whether his surprise was because he hadn't expected me to follow him down here, or just because I was walking into his room uninvited in general, was lost on me.

“Can we just do our work in here?” I asked. “I promise to behave,” I added with a forced smirk, trying to cover up the fact that I hadn't felt comfortable in his house until I stepped inside his room.

But this was definitely more like the Neil I knew. It was a lot like I remembered, but I noted a few subtle differences, too. The sky-blue color that used to cover his walls was now a darker, ashier shade of blue. The shelves that used to hold buckets of race



cars and model cars now held a record player, a row of vinyl records, some totally nerdy but admittedly cool Marvel action figures, and a bunch of his swimming trophies.

I still needed to get to one of his swim meets, stat. I mentally cursed at myself for lagging on that end.

Oh—and no more race car bed. I stifled a laugh, looking back at Neil with an eyebrow raised in question.

He still hadn't answered me, and I was waiting on him to say something though he was clearly still busy thinking it over. Or... maybe he was deciding how he felt about me standing in the middle of his bedroom like this. If his deepening frown line had anything to say about it, I'd say I was probably right.

Huh.Interesting.

His eyes were glued to mine, completely locked in, and his cheeks were flushed, a bit pink. I would've put money on the fact that his heart was racing. If only I had the guts to actually reach over and check.

I wasn't going to lie, though. My heart was beating faster, too.

I didn't know which way this was going to go—which way he was going to go. I raised my eyebrow higher, a genuine smirk following in its wake this time, and he gave in with a quiet puff of air—not quite a sigh. “Sure,” he relented, and I relaxed into his safe space. I think he could sense my relief, and it made him feel a little better about his decision, the soft tinge of pink fading from his cheeks.

I let my backpack fall to the ground and plopped myself down next to it in the middle of his room.

I could've sat on the edge of his bed, since it was closer to where he was now lowering himself into his desk chair, watching me from the corner of his eyes, but it seemed like more than I could handle right now. Sitting on Neil's bed would be far more dangerous than playing with fire; it would be like submerging myself in the whole damn inferno. So, obviously, that was a no-go.

And I didn't want to push him any further than I already had.

He sighed again, an actual sigh this time, forfeiting yet another internal battle when it came to me (he seemed to be doing that a lot lately), and lowered himself to the floor, too.

But I caught the hint of his smile as he pulled his things from his backpack. And then we got to work. An English paper and math homework for me, and the same math homework plus ten chapters of "The Picture of Dorian Grey" to read for Neil.

I wasn't actually sure why we were doing our homework together, except that Neil had asked me to, and it was the only reason I needed. I wasn't going to turn him down. (Pathetic, I know, but it was what it was; I liked spending time with Neil.)

I mentally rolled my eyes at myself, and then actually got to work on my assignments.

I was finished with calculus and halfway through writing my paper when I felt Neil's attention on me, his eyes skating around in my periphery. My hand stilled, halting pen on paper in the middle of a word, before dragging the end of my pen off the page as I looked up at him.

He was peering over his book at me. All cute and intense and making my insides shaky.

"What?" I asked, eyes narrowed on him, while absolutely not smiling. Nope. Not I. I

smothered that son-of-a-bitch down like it was asking for it.

“Nothing,” he answered with a shrug, his cheeks curving upward, hinting at a smirk, or a smile, that was hiding behind his book.

I leaned forward and slapped the book out of his hands, and it fell down into his lap. It only made him chuckle. He picked it back up, carefully folded the corner of the page he was on, and set it back down next to him.

And then his eyes were on mine again.

He was being all mysterious and quiet, not saying a word. His lips were perfectly still as he watched me, and I made a mental note of how it made me feel.(Anxious.)It was probably the first time I’d ever felt intimidated under someone’s gaze.

“What?” I asked again, attempting to brush away the feeling.

He got up, still not saying anything, and walked over to me, sitting down right next to me. I shifted to face him full-on.

“You’re distracting, Liv,” he finally said with a smirk, his brown eyes seemingly sinking into mine.

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“What? No, I’m not.” I scrunched up my face. “Believe me, if I was trying to distract you, you’d know it,” I added—all smug, fully ignoring the way his eyes had gone liquid. Mostly ignoring. Oh, screw it, it was pretty hard to ignore. Because sometimes, when Neil looked at me, his eyes definitely dissolved into something liquid. Melty, and fluid, and it felt like I could dive right into them.

Dive into his eyes, Olivia? Who even are you? I didn’t really know anymore, did I? Neil was changing me, making my hard parts all soft.

I wasn’t even sure I liked that part of what was happening between us. Whatever that was.

“You know... I’m not even supposed to have girls in here,” he continued, yanking me right back out of those thoughts. “Let alone kiss them.” His eyes were on my mouth now, and those parts I was talking about? They went even softer. Practically oozing out all over the floor for him to see.

“Okay,” I said. “That was—what?” Wires crossed in my brain. It’s not like I hadn’t expected him to kiss me at some point today; it was just how suddenly intense he seemed about it. “Don’t... kiss me then?” I said. I didn’t know what the hell I was thinking, let alone saying. The words just traveled out of my mouth without thought, apparently.

Don’t kiss me?

Yeah, no. “Or, you know. Do. Kiss me. You already broke one rule, so you might as well break another,” I added.

Was it just me or had that totally come out all breathy?

Who knew, but Neil hadn't acknowledged it, so I wasn't going to acknowledge it either. Instead, he licked his lips, biting down on his bottom one, and I watched the whole damn thing like it was the best movie I'd seen in a while. It was like he was purposely putting on a show or something.

His pain in my ass smirk and the twinkle of amusement in his eyes confirmed it. And, well, ha.

Screw it. I wrapped my hands around his head and pushed his face into mine, and I was met with a satisfying, startled groan that I felt on my lips. Opening my mouth to his, his tongue slipped inside, and side note—I didn't think anything was more fun than kissing Neil.

His hands in my hair and his moans in my throat.

His mouth molded to mine, tongue exploring.

Every kiss with Neil felt like a first kiss, and what was more fun than that?

I let our kiss settle my thoughts and sweep them away.

My back hit the floor, my folder fell out of my lap, and my homework made a crinkling noise under the weight of my arm, but all I really cared about at that moment was the weight of Neil's body settling over me.

Shocker. I repeat: Shocker!

We were heading straight into unexplored territory, and I wanted to stop us before we went too far and got lost and couldn't find our way back out, but it was too late to

retreat now.

Nope, that ship had sailed.

Neil kissed me deeper until I sunk into the floor, the weight of his body pressing into me harder. And I could feel how into it he was, which was another shock to my system.

My senses went haywire. Exploding and scattering throughout my body until I couldn't tell what was what anymore. Because this was not a part of Neil I had to come to know in our recent time together, even if it was something I thought about pretty frequently. (Way too frequently.) But it was by far, by far, the furthest he had ever dared to take things.

His body pressed into mine, letting me feel things. Feel him.

But his hands skimmed perfectly around all the important areas on my body like the gentleman he was. Which was discouraging—or, more accurately, one of the most frustrating things I had ever felt in my damn life.

But his mouth was enough.

This is enough. His mouth is enough. I told myself the lie again and again as his hands skated up my thighs but skipped over the good part between them and went up to my stomach instead. As they curled around my ribcage, took a flight over my bra, and landed on my neck, traveling around my face and through my hair.

As he repeated this path once, and twice, and again.

It was on the next pass, his hand skimming up my ribs, when he accidentally grazed a bit of side-boob. I was wearing one of those strappy, crisscrossed bandeau bras, and

this was the second time his hand had found its way under my shirt, so it was kind of inevitable. But when it happened, when his fingers touched the bare swell of skin beneath my shirt, he groaned so low, and so clearly grounded in lust, that I nearly came in my pants. It didn't help that he was pressed up against me in all the right places. Hard parts against soft.

I wanted to yank him into me and chase the building feeling. But at the same time, I didn't want to scare him off, either. Because this was too much, right?

Yeah. It was definitely too much.

A whiny, frustrated growl climbed up the back of my throat and spilled into his mouth, and before I had a second more to think about it, he pushed himself off me and up onto his knees, his chest heaving with heavy breaths.

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I just watched him, licking my lips where his had been as I tried and failed to catch my own breaths.

“I’m gonna.” He pointed outside his door, pausing between words to make room for his breaths. “Go. Cool down. Get a glass of water. Or something,” he groaned, wiping a hand down his face. “Do you want one?” If I thought his eyes were liquid before, they were molten now.

Time slowed down as I watched them settle back into something more tangible, into something a little more guilt-ridden, and shy. And awakened, or excited, maybe, too. Nervous. Definitely turned on.

My lips curled up in amusement as it fully hit me that Neil was as flustered as all get out. It was really something to see—the flush on his cheeks, the crease between his brows, and the heat in his gaze. But it only made me want to pull him back on top of me all over again, which is why he really did need to get the hell up out of this room—if we wanted to keep that unspoken promise to each other that said we wouldn’t take things too far.

“Yeah, I’ll take some water. Thanks,” I said, all shaky and missing the air I still couldn’t seem to find.

He noticed and smothered his own amusement, before nodding once, standing up, and vanishing through his doorway.

I sat up with a sigh and pushed up to my feet, sitting down on the edge of his bed. Toeing off my shoes, I laid down on it and closed my eyes.



This thing with Neil...

It was...

I didn't really know. But it scared me. Excited me. Had my heart feeling like it was going to pound right out of my chest to get to him. A lot of the same feelings I saw in his eyes before he walked out of this room, and I didn't have the first clue what to do with any of it.

If I was being honest, I think I was just waiting for him to call this out for what it was—something that had gone further than either of us intended—and end it.

I didn't like the way the thought of that made me feel. A leaded weight settled in my stomach, and I puffed out a breath, shaking my head to drive out the thought.

When I opened my eyes again, I came face to face with Neil's Bible. I pulled myself up and leaned against his headboard, running my finger over it where it sat on his nightstand.

It felt personal, touching his Bible like this. But I still couldn't help myself from doing it. It was worn and obviously run-through, the corners curled back, and the edges fanned out a bit. I picked it up and opened it, curious, glancing up at the door and listening for footsteps to make sure he wasn't on his way back yet.

I looked back down at the book and started flipping through it, fanning the pages.

What did he find comforting about them?

What kind of questions did they answer for him?

Full honesty, I didn't understand it (religion), like I didn't understand a lot of things.

There was this intense, blind faith in it I couldn't connect to.

How someone could go their entire life believing with one-hundred percent certainty what could never be proved, was completely lost on me.

I had too many questions, too many doubts, and way too many alternate possibilities floating around in my brain. Magic, alien life, a twin world in a twin galaxy full of twin humans in this world, or that maybe, this life was just a giant science experiment created by some unknown being in a real, actual existence we had no clue about.

The big hand in the sky, promising salvation? It could be anything, in my mind.

But on the flip side, I also wasn't ruling the possibility of "God" out. (I know, I know. Surprise. I didn't believe in God, but I also didn't believe it couldn't be the answer, either.) I respected it as a possibility. But that was the thing. The possibilities were endless.

The universe, energy, reincarnation, God, science, aliens—I didn't know what the answer was, but no one did. And until we knew, without a doubt, with a fact sheet to back it up, how we got here and why, it should all remain a possibility. Right?

That was my confused, convoluted logic on the matter, anyway.

And that's when Neil decided to walk back into his room, his Bible still sitting in my lap, cradled by my hands.

"Hey, what are you—"

I slapped it closed, mortified. "Nothing!" I said, way too quickly. I had slapped the Bible shut so quick and so fast, the echo of it took a full trip around the room, ensuring no one could've missed it. Neil certainly hadn't. I watched his lips curl into

an amused but unsure smirk, and my cheeks were on fire.

True story, I didn't think I'd ever been more embarrassed in my life. And I'd once had my pants pulled down in the middle of the playground in fifth grade, so that was saying a lot. Sure, it didn't make sense; I hadn't been doing anything wrong, or anything worthy of embarrassment even. But tell that to my cheeks, and my heart, and that sinking feeling in my stomach.

"What's going on in here?" The question was drawn out, conveying his confusion, or curiosity—I wasn't sure which.

"Nothing, I just." I swallowed. "Got curious, I guess." I rolled my eyes at my own ridiculousness, setting his Bible back down onto his nightstand.

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He sat down on the edge of his bed in front of me, and I caught that subtle smirk of his trying to break through on his lips. He was amused. Obviously. Because I was insane.

“It’s just a Bible, Liv,” he said quietly.

Sure, just a Bible. A little book filled with pages that had been a catalyst towards. But yeah, just a Bible. I believed it when Neil said it, though. Believed he meant it, anyway.

“And it’s just faith,” he added.

“Faith,” I echoed, looking into his eyes. It didn’t make sense that so many different shades of brown could fit themselves into one pair of eyes, yet there they were, looking right at me like they knew me.

A kaleidoscope of warmth and depth and understanding.

But faith. I cleared my throat. I guess this was more of an appropriate time and place than any...

“And where does your faith come from, Neil? Because you truly believe in it, or because you were raised to?” I wasn’t asking to be an asshole. I genuinely wanted to know.

He didn’t take offense to it, thankfully. He just shrugged, thinking it over. “I don’t think I can really answer that, but regardless of how I was raised, I like having

something to believe in. A hope that what we're doing here goes beyond the surface of humanity."

I nodded. It seemed simple enough.

"Life is too complex and intricate to be an accident," he added.

I mulled it over, tossing it back and forth between logical and crazy, before settling on, "Isn't it kind of cocky then, to believe that one being is responsible for it all?"

He shrugged again. "Maybe, maybe not. It's just what I believe."

I could respect that. "I can respect that."

He smiled, curling his hand over my knee. "And what do you believe?" he asked with a gentle squeeze.

I skated my fingers down my leg until they landed on his, lacing through them. "That anything is possible," I answered. And when I looked into his eyes, I felt the truth of those words on more than one level. In an alternate reality; in answer to another question altogether. It punched through so many of my layers that I felt like he was looking right at me. Right into the very core of who I was.

I shifted forward and kissed him. Silencing the questions and the fears those thoughts bubbled up to the surface. He leaned into me, deepening the kiss, and it got heated even faster than our last kiss did, making him quickly break away.

And then we were right back to where we'd started.

"I think we need to get out of my room," he said through a flustered chuckle.

“Okay,” I breathed, my soft smile shifting into a smirk. “Need another cooldown?”

“Something like that.” He cleared his throat, adjusting his shorts.

And okay. Not looking; definitely not looking.

I took a quick peek and snapped my wide eyes back up to his. Not looking again. My mouth was held open in a little “o.”

He laughed, wiping his hand down his face for the second time today in amusement. Or frustration. A combination of both that had his cheeks flushed and eyes lit.

“Let’s go swimming,” I suggested. “I think we could both use a cooldown—” I glanced at his lap again. Oops. “—now.”

He sighed. “Unless you have a bathing suit on underneath your clothes, I do not think that’s a good idea.”

I nudged his shoulder with mine as I slid off his bed, ignoring his adorable, gravelly emphasis on the word not. Okay, attempting to ignore. “I have a bathing suit in my backpack,” I said.

His eyebrows rose. “Do you always carry around a spare bathing suit?”

“You never know when an opportunity is going to present itself, Neil.” I stared at him pointedly. “Case in point.”

“Fair enough.” He laughed. “Then let’s go swimming.”

### Chapter 18

#### Sinner Sinner Chicken Dinner

I was hanging out on one of Neil's pool loungers in my bathing suit, probably (definitely) lying in the best position possible to show him what I was working with. Which, I know, was ridiculous, but let's not act like it was the first time a person had done such a thing in front of someone they were into.

He came out of his house, pulled his slider door shut behind him, and walked toward the lounge next to me. When I caught his gaze, his eyes were already trailing their way down my stomach. He had two folded-up towels in his hands, and his grip on them visibly tightened as he reached me.

He tossed one down by my feet with a thick swallow and placed the second one firmly against his front, held there by one of his hands as he looked everywhere else but at me.

I narrowed my eyes at him, my brows pushing toward each other in confusion. Full honesty, it took me far too long to put it all together, but as soon as I did, I burst out laughing. The sound drifted up into the sky before disappearing into the clouds. "Holy shit, Neil. You're killing me!"

He bit his lip and stifled a groan, before tossing his towel over me, walking over to the edge of the water, and plunging himself into his pool. All without saying one word to me, which only made me laugh even harder.

I was still laughing, my cheeks totally flushed, when I followed in after him. The cool water against my skin—warmed by the late fall afternoon—was just... perfect. One of those unexplainable moments that ripped you right out of time and space and felt like every other good summer memory you could think of.

I broke the surface, wiping my hands over my face, and found Neil gliding through the water, from the deep end to the shallow end and back again while hardly taking a breath.

I sat on the steps and watched him.

He really was at home in the water—as fluid as the liquid itself.

I didn't know how much time passed as my eyes trailed his movement, back and forth across his pool too many times to count. I guess he really needed that cooldown. I smothered another smirk.

When he was finished and sufficiently out of breath, he took a seat next to me on the steps.

“You're like a torpedo in the water,” was the first thing out of my mouth, for whatever stupid reason. “Do you have a nickname?” I continued. “You definitely need a nickname.” Obviously, I had a way with words and compliments. Obviously.

He smiled. “A nickname for Neil? What, like, Nnn?”

“No, not Nnn.” I laughed. “But something.” I shrugged. “Like, Torpedo. Or N-dog, or Neilstopher, or something.”

“‘N-dog’?” He smirked.



“I kind of like N-Rocket,” I said right through his comment, amusing myself.

He cleared his throat. “The guys on the team do have a nickname for me,” he said with a noticeable blush creeping over his cheeks. And now I really wanted to know what that nickname was—almost as desperately as if it were my last breath on earth.

Dramatic much? The answer to that, of course, was never.

“And that is?” I asked him. Half amusement, half suffocated desperation.

He took the space of a breath before saying, “They call me ‘Eagle,’ for my wingspan... on the butterfly stroke.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, thoughts screeching to a halt. “Why does that sound so dirty? And why do I like it so much?”

He barked out a laugh, his cheeks going even more red, and my heart sped up in my chest. I wanted to kiss him, but we were out here because of all the kissing, so I didn’t think it was allowed. Which, of course, only made me want to kiss him more.

“Okay, but what about your everyday, run-of-the-mill nickname?” I asked, diverting my own attention back to the subject at hand.

He shook his head, shrugging. “I think I’ll stick with Neil.”

“Yeah, I think that’s for the best,” I quickly agreed, and he chuckled all over again. “Neil really does suit you, though.” I thought it over. “In a... Neil kind of way.”

He smiled, almost as if it had happened in slow motion. One corner of his mouth tilted upward, and the rest followed suit in a leisurely little wave. “And what does that mean?” he asked quietly, his brown eyes brightening the more he looked at me.

I shrugged, saying what immediately came to mind. “It’s a solid name. Classic. Steady, strong, sure. Attractive, but like, in a nerdy but hot kind of way. You know? And confident. And real. Like you.” I nearly choked on a few of those words because they’d come out of nowhere. They barreled right past the less honest ones, surprising me even more than they clearly surprised him.

He turned toward me, eyebrows drawn together, forming a crease between them that I wanted to run my finger over. “That’s how you see me?” he asked, the words tight with...something. Something that made my insides stall and then jump back to life in overtime.

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Mayday. Mayday! My internal sirens blared. Warning me of what, I wasn't sure. But my heart pounded away, terrified. Or excited. I honestly couldn't tell the difference between the two anymore.

I took a full breath and released it, barely calming my nerves. "Yeah, Neil. That's how I see you," I confessed. It felt like I was divulging every last one of my sins. Breaking down more facades; letting him see too much of me. If I hadn't already scared him off, I was surely going to now.

But... he surprised me. Like he always did.

He parted the water in front of him with his hands, closing the distance between us, and then his mouth was on mine. My back pressed against the shallow edge of the wall, Neil completely surrounding me. His chest, and his lips, and his hands, and his arms, caging me in.

Minutes that lasted a small slice of eternity passed, his lips slower and more cautious, careful. Protecting himself, or me, or the both of us, it felt like. But from what?

When his mouth slid away from mine with one last lingering kiss, the question drifted away. He was taking these slow, shallow breaths, his eyes glued to my mouth. I watched his gaze leave my lips and travel over my collarbone, landing on my shoulder. He inched closer, his mouth meeting the colored bruise that was there from our paintball date.

Then he kissed the other one, a few inches over, where my shoulder met the base of my neck, before rising up and settling his forehead against mine. I sucked in a

weighted breath, closing my eyes.

“You make me want things I know I should be waiting for,” he said, so quiet I almost hadn’t heard him over the cicadas buzzing around his yard. “Things I want to wait for,” he corrected.

I let his words resonate somewhere past my mutual want for him. Past my selfishness and the urge to corrupt the good in him. “I’m sorry,” I offered.

He shook his head. “It’s not your fault.”

It sort of was my fault, though. Wasn’t it? I urged him on every chance I got. But I couldn’t help it. I wanted to round the bases with him—absolutely even more than he did.

“I think my parents will be home soon,” he changed the subject, redirecting the traffic in my brain entirely.

I let his words penetrate and settle. “Do you want me to leave?” I asked. Was this it? Was this where he finally told me this was too much for him? That we’d taken things way further than we were supposed to?

“No.” He shook his head again, and I visibly sagged in relief as embarrassing as that was.

But... I thought he was probably wrong. “I probably should—leave. Before your parents get home.”

He nodded. “Okay,” he said quietly, and my stomach dipped, but then he reached out with a smile and tickled me, and I screamed at the top of my lungs, and that is when his parents decided to announce that they already were home.

Mortified. That was me. “Oh, god,” I think I breathed.

Neil cleared his throat. “Hi, Mom.” He seemed nervous but not really all that nervous, if that made any sense whatsoever.

I forced myself to turn around. “Hello,” I said with the best smile I could muster.

She gave me a tight-lipped smile in return, turning her attention back to Neil. “We brought dinner.”

“Okay,” he responded. “Mom? You remember Olivia?”

The surprise on her face was quickly smoothed over by something slightly more welcoming. “Oh, yes, of course. Why don’t you join us for dinner, Olivia?”

My mouth forgot how to move for a few stuttering seconds. Me. Stay here. For dinner. With Neil’s family.

Umm...

“Please?” Neil whispered, and the desperation in his tone further softened something inside me. Something that kept melting and conforming itself around all thoughts and feelings where Neil was concerned.

“Okay, yeah. Thank you,” I gave his mom my answer, and I was awarded with his smile.

I guess I was having a proper dinner with Neil’s family. With the preacher.

Somebody, somewhere, was surely turning over in their grave.

Forks scraped against plates and my water glass made a softclunkas it hit the dinner table, but other than that, the room was so quiet I could actually hear Neil chewing next to me.

Awkward, uncomfortable, stuffy, tense—the energy in the room could've easily been described as any of the above. And that was before the conversation started...flowing, for lack of a better word. Water crowding around a beaver's dam and slipping its way through any available crevice in an interrupted flow, was more like it.

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Neil was all Yes, Sirs and No, Sirs, and it wasn't the Neil I knew at all. I guess this is what he'd been talking about, when he said he didn't want to let his parents down or disappoint them. Prayers at dinner, board straight in his chair, and laughing at jokes that weren't funny. He wasn't sharing any part of him that made him Neil. (The Neil I knew, anyway. The parts of him I liked the most.)

All while ignoring the awkward fact that his parents had barely acknowledged my presence.

Neil's mom: "So, let's see now, how long has it been?"

Neil: "Ten years." He smiled. I smiled. She just let out a little "Hmm," and that was it as far as I was concerned, I guess.

It wasn't like his parents were being overly rude to me or anything. It was just obvious I wasn't welcome—a black stain on their white table linen despite their kind smiles.

They talked about school, and church, and it was more Neil who included me in these conversations than anything.

And then at some point, his dad turned his attention to me. "Have you got any plans for college?" he asked.

I internally cringed before brushing it off. Might as well test the waters with people who didn't care about my future. But more than that, I was testing the waters for Neil. "I'm undecided. Not sure college is for me," I answered.

His mom swiftly dove in with, “Oh, you should reconsider. Our Neil has already applied to all of our favorite colleges, and I just know he’ll be accepted into our top choices. We can’t wait to...” She went on and on, laying out his future plans all while he stayed silent.

I knew without having to look at him that these were their plans and not his, and I suddenly felt bad for him and a whole lot better about my own situation. My mother may have stretched the definition of that very word to its fullest extent, but I never felt like I couldn’t be myself around her. Like I couldn’t say my piece or tell her how I was feeling. I just chosenot to most of the time.

“I have been thinking about the fire academy, though,” Neil said, shocking everyone at the table, but no one more than me.

I turned and looked at him, my mouth hanging half open before it curled into a smile.Go, Neil!

But his parents shut it down so fast I felt his head spin.

“That’s ridiculous,” his father said.

“Absurd. A noble profession, but you can do so much better than that,” his mom said with a scoff.

What?

“I disagree,” I cut in; I couldn’t help myself. I looked at Neil. “I think you should do whatever makes you happy.”

His mom huffed, or maybe it was another scoff. I wasn’t sure. “Of course he should, which is why we have a plan that we’re going to follow through on. Despite any



sudden detours and distractions,” she finished under her breath.

It went against everything I was, every honest and outspoken thing I stood for, to sit here and keep my mouth shut. Words and curses wanted to pour from my lips. But I did it for Neil—sitting in this tense and uncomfortable scenario while saying nothing more. And that’s how I knew I really cared about him.

The thought sobered me, and the words fell away.

I cared about Neil.

I cared about him.

Like, actual feelings connected to who he was as a human, living in some dark place in my heart, cared about him. Shit.

I reached next to me and slid my hand over his, because honestly, it was the only thing I knew would shut up all my fears.

His mom eyed me, a perfectly masked façade of pleasant indifference on her face. “Bless your heart.” She turned to Neil. “A word, privately?”

Bless your heart. What she really meant was fuck you. In whatever godly, appropriate variation of words that was meant to be. She might as well have held her middle finger up to my face.

I cleared my throat, pulling my hand out of Neil’s and twisting the napkin in my lap like I was trying to murder it. I wanted to close my eyes and teleport the hell out of here. Staying for dinner was clearly a stupid move on my part. But I couldn’t help it. I could never help myself where Neil was concerned, could I?

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly, shaking his head. “I’ll be right back.” He got up, trailing his mother out of the room.

I looked to his father. “Mr. Summers. Thank you for dinner, but I think I should probably head home now. It’s getting late.” It was a shit excuse, but he took it.

He nodded. “Have a good night.” He smiled tightly.

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I dropped my napkin onto the table next to my plate and stood from my chair, making my way outside. I'd get my backpack from Neil tomorrow.

But of course, as I walked through the living room, I could hear Neil and his mom bickering down the hall—if a one-sided argument was still considered bickering. Curiosity ran the show yet again, forcing me to stop my forward momentum.

I wasn't going to rehash the dirty details, but I heard more than my fair share of what his mom had to say. All the ways I was wrong for him. All the ways he was too good for me.

It stung more than I thought it would, crept itself into the place Neil had burrowed his way into and squeezed at it painfully.

I didn't care what people thought of me—usually. (No, they could take their opinions and shove them right up their judgmental asses.) But the thing was... the things his mom was saying to him, about how he deserved someone better...

I wasn't so sure I disagreed.

I cleared my throat, resettling my thoughts.

Heading outside, I patted myself down for my keys and realized they were still inside—inside my backpack, of course. I sighed dramatically, rolling my eyes at myself, and sat down on Wednesday's bumper.

It was only a few minutes later that Neil strode outside, my backpack in hand. I

watched his feet step into my periphery.

“Hey,” he said, quiet, his hands curling around my elbows, pulling me up and into his space instead of just handing me my backpack.

I slid my index fingers into his belt loops, thudding my forehead against his chest. My next breath was constricted and hard to take. I ignored all the whys of it.

“I’m sorry,” he said, but I shook my head, still looking down at the ground.

“You don’t have anything to be sorry for,” I said. “If anything, I’m sorry if I made things worse,” I confessed.

“They’ll get over it.” He forced a laugh, and I took the bait, tugging him closer. He hugged me against him, planting a kiss on my temple. “You’re not mad?” he asked.

“No.” I laughed through a breath at the irony. “Are you?”

“Nah.”

I smiled against him, fully against my will. He made me do things like that, lightened all my moods, and I had the startling thought that I wanted to keep him.

Keep him, keep him.

But I didn’t know what the hell I was doing or where I was going after high school, let alone anything beyond that. College, LA, an art school, a summer trip in Europe that I might not ever want to leave.

Where did Neil fit into all of that, really?

And where did I fit into his plans?

I didn't even know why the hell I was asking myself those questions.

## Chapter 19

### Dumpster Fire

Full honesty, I was spooked. Feelings, relationships, dating—they weren't supposed to go this smoothly, right? I mean, mild dinner disaster aside, things between Neil and I had been sailing along way too effortlessly. Slipping right past unfamiliar territory and straight into a place I didn't recognize at all.

It wasn't my perception of what relationships were supposed to be. Where was the crying, or the desperation, or the games I'd seen Linda play with men a thousand times? Where was the give and take away, the boredom, and the things that reared up and made me not like him anymore at?

Relationships were ugly, full of drama and heartache. Weren't they? They consumed you and turned you into someone you didn't recognize anymore. Didn't they?

And "Love" was never the endgame. Right?

That was my assumption, based on the experiences of the people around me. Based on what I'd always seen right in front of my face—Linda and her numerous escapades; the man who shared DNA with Jason and I and had broken Linda's heart irreparably once upon a time, essentially making her the way she was; all the heartless things she'd told me that built the foundation of all these assumptions in the first place. Sydney—hell, even Jason. Relationships were pretty much a joke to him, too. He jumped from one girl to the next like his pants were on fire—Linda obviously screwing with his ability to commit, too.

So, Happily Ever Afters? They belonged on movie screens, not in real life. In real life, relationships were messy and ugly and not worth the time at all.

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But Neil and I, whatever we were, it was night and day from all that—from all my preconceived notions. I liked him, and he liked me, and things beyond that were just...easy.

I could be myself around him—bad attitude, sarcastic remarks, and blunt honesty included—and it only seemed to amuse him. I could tell him things I never felt like telling anyone else, and he wanted to hear those things. Always listening intently and nodding along; always having something to say in response that made sense to me.

Somehow, between noticing that Neil had changed over the summer and deciding I was really, really into it, and dinner last night, I had handed him a trust I didn't offer many.

The most absurd part is that I couldn't even pinpoint when it had happened. Was it when he handed me that first paper butterfly? Or when I looked at him at Inkcafé and truly saw him for the first time? Or was it when he kissed me like he knew exactly what to do with me and it flipped my whole perception of him completely upside down?

I had no clue.

But all of that, stacked on top of the realization that had dawned on me during dinner at Neil's like a violent smack to the face, and the questions I'd asked myself at the end of it all, left me slightly terrified of how far I'd let him in.

Because surely this was the part when things went downhill, right?

I didn't know.

I didn't know anything.

Those thoughts stuck with me all day. All week. Nagging incessantly and poking at my vulnerabilities.

Did it stop me from hanging out with Neil? No.

But did it terrify me? Absolutely.

We were in Neil's truck now, idling in my driveway, and for probably the first time in my entire eighteen-year existence, I didn't have much to say. I hadn't said much all day, in fact. All week.

Full disclosure, I was being a bit of an asshole. When I wasn't avoiding Neil, I was full of snappy replies and one-sided arguments. I could see it myself doing it—I was watching myself from the outside, wanting to slap myself for it—but I couldn't help it. I kept lashing out.

So when Neil asked, "Are you sure everything's okay?" for about the hundredth time since dinner with his family, I wasn't all that surprised.

I pasted on a smile that made my insides crawl. "Yeah. It's all good. I'm fine," I said, turning to open his door—a dirty, filthy liar, I was. I didn't know what was going on with me, but I needed to get out of here before I did something stupid.

He curled his hand around my forearm. "Can you wait a sec?" he asked softly. I should've been grating on his last nerve, but apparently, he had the patience of a freaking saint. Because really, he only seemed concerned. Which made me feel like even more of an asshole.



I let out a breath. Turned in my seat. I didn't even know why I'd let him drive me today, or all week for that matter. I needed space. A break. Time to reset my feelings and put myself in check.

But Neil pulled me closer until I was sitting in the middle seat next to him, and my heart let out an involuntary sigh. My knee was digging into his thigh, my other foot on the ground between his. He'd somehow tangled me up in him in the span of three seconds, but my mind had already been there for a while now.

He opened his mouth to say something, but I shut him up with a kiss. It was a lot easier than dealing with my convoluted feelings that had gotten out of control.

I released a relieved breath against his lips and let everything else drift away.

It wasn't hard. Not really. Not when he kissed me like this. Like it was the only thing that mattered—like our differences and futures and fears weren't a thing slowly wedging us apart.

I twisted my fingers in his shirt, closing that distance. Physically, mentally, emotionally. Zipping it up in pretty little luggage and throwing it into the proverbial closet for later.

His tongue stroked mine deep, and I moaned into his mouth, his fingers tightening around my thighs in response. He lifted my leg up and over his lap until I was straddling him.

I didn't give myself the space to question it. I kissed him harder, hands skating up his abs as I ground myself into him, wringing a soft groan from his mouth that traveled into my chest. But instead of filling it up with the warmth I expected it to, it only left obvious all the empty spaces lingering in there, wanting more—more than this—on more levels than I was willing to acknowledge. It was frustrating as hell.

Tightening my grip, I dug my fingers into Neil's shoulders. I pulled his bottom lip between my teeth. Yanked him closer to me by the neck of his shirt. And still, it wasn't enough.

Screw it. I reached for his belt, quickly unbuckling it and tossing it out of my way, my fingers tugging on the button of his pants. I pulled it free and zipped him halfway down before he stopped me, his hand on mine, holding it tightly.

He was panting when he broke our kiss. Literal heaves of his chest pushing against mine with all the pent-up urges he was holding himself back from. He was a lot better at depriving himself than I was. Clearly. (In my defense, I'd had, like, zero practice with that until Neil came along.) But I was over it.

Tension coiled itself around me, tightening my limbs until my muscles were as taut as my feelings, stretched way too thin.

I'd known Neil wouldn't let things go far, but for once, I just wanted to make him feel as out of control as he made me feel. He was always so calm and collected where we were concerned, and it had never been more infuriating.

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I wrangled my breaths as I watched him give a quick and frustrated shake of his head. “Liv,” he said my name like it was a curse word, a plea.

“What?” I snapped, officially losing it. I was defeated. Resentful. Still frustrated with him—and with myself. I pushed my way out of his lap, landing hard in the passenger seat.

“I don’t know,” he admitted after a moment of thought, defeated, too. His shoulders sagged, and his energy visibly deflated.

“You don’t want this,” I threw out—a statement and not a question. Bringing to light what we both had to have been thinking. Though I was sure it came off as not wanting to push things too far again, instead of this as in us—Neil and I, as a thing.

“Shit...no.” He shook his head. He seemed as frustrated as I was, but as tangled up as my thoughts currently were, I still couldn’t help but be momentarily amused by his use of the word shit. He was so genuine in the way he said it, that familiar frown line forming between his brows. But my amusement was there and gone in a flash.

I curled my hand into a fist at my side, mentally pushing back the rushing swell of...everything.

“I don’t know what to say,” he continued with a sigh. “What you want me to say. I mean, you know this isn’t an issue because I don’t... because I don’t want to, right?”

“Not helping, Neil.” I sagged against my seat, biting back a handful of arguments before settling on, “And that isn’t an answer.”

He sighed again, running his hand down and back up his face and through his hair, turning to lean back against his door to give me his full attention. The kaleidoscope of browns in his eyes had gone dark and intense, making it harder to breathe.

“This is an issue because I know once I do,” he started, “I won’t be able to stop.” His hand was on his chest now, pushing back against something unknown. I thought I might’ve been feeling that something, too. “I know that once I do,” he continued, “the way I feel about you won’t just be about how much I like you. It’ll shift everything into more, Liv, and I can’t. I can’t offer you that.”

I was ashamed to admit it, but I was stunned stupid. To say his words shocked me would’ve been a massive understatement. It was a truckload of shit dumped on my lap, and it was more than I could handle at the moment. I was spiraling; I’d already been spiraling.

“I have my mission, and college, and my parents...” He trailed off, or maybe it was my mind that had trailed off in an attempt at self-preservation.

Because I realized, right then, in that mortifying fucking space of time, that what Neil was basically saying... was that he liked me, but not enough to carry it anywhere. That he liked me, but he didn’t want to like me more than he already did. That even though my feelings had grown, despite my efforts to smother and suffocate them into the ground, his obviously hadn’t if he could say something like that to me. To admit that—after I’d been sitting in his lap, grinding against his hard-on with his tongue deep in my mouth.

It was a slap to the face like I’d never in my life felt before.

I immediately dropped all pretenses, all the bullshit and self-preservation instincts, and put him on the spot, asking him point-blank, “If you can’t do more, then what the hell is this?” I gestured between us, fully intending to start a fight. I was ready to go

to war for myself, irrational or not. “For all intents and purposes, you are essentially my fucking boyfriend, Neil. You get that, right?”

He scoffed. Actually. Fucking. Scoffed. And it pissed me off more than I could mentally comprehend. I didn’t care if his scoff was accompanied by his smile or his obvious intent to lighten the situation. Because the next words out of his mouth? They threw a match directly into the flame of my burning anger. “We don’t do the boyfriend-girlfriend thing, Liv. Remember?”

I laughed out loud. A short, sardonic, mocking laugh. “Screw you, Neil.”

His mouth fell open, his features scrunched together in confusion. His eyes were alight with worry. “You know I didn’t mean it like that.”

And... ha.Ha!

Good, bad, virtuous or not, all boys, apparently, were stupid.

“No,” I spat. “I don’t think I do.”

He groaned—growled, grunted; I was too pissed off to be sure—both hands digging through his hair this time. “I know what you’re doing, Liv,” he said, a forced calm to his tone. I wanted to strangle him and straddle him all at the same time. “You’re trying to push me away; you’ve been doing it all week.” His demeanor softened. “Is that really what you want? You want me to walk away? Because you’re doing a hell of a job trying to make sure that happens.”

My thoughts flipped upside down, and my emotions followed suit. The anger that filled my chest fell heavily in my stomach, shifting into something else entirely. Into something I didn’t recognize. Something dark and tainted and twisted up in too many feelings.

It felt a lot like something that was tied directly to my—no. Just. No.

“Maybe I do,” I said quietly, the whisper barely making its way across his truck. It was a half-assed attempt at meaning what I was saying. I straightened my back and cleared my throat. “Maybe I’m over this, too,” I said, louder this time. “You can’t give me what I want, and I sure as hell don’t fit into your pretty little plans. Your perfect life of church, and virtue, and saving yourself for marriage. It’s a joke, Neil.”

His eyes were so intense then that I was forced to look away. I already hated myself for saying that.

“Sometimes I feel like you’re the only one who truly sees me, Olivia. Beyond everything else.” He sighed. “And then other times, like right now...” He ran his hand through his hair in my periphery, his voice rough and tangled up in his own feelings. His hair was a mess at this point. “I feel like you’re blinded by your perception of me. Like you don’t see me at all.” He fell quiet. If I didn’t know better, I would’ve said he was pissed, but I could see what was written in the pained lines of his features—he was more disheartened than anything.

I didn’t want to admit it, but I was too.

The truth was, we were both avoiding the inevitable. I knew that from go, but I’d ignored it anyway. We couldn’t be more than this right here, but for whatever reason, it wasn’t enough anymore.

Still, I wanted to take it all back, tell him I was sorry, kiss and make up, but I knew we’d only circle right back around to this moment again eventually. A merry-go-round of misery, and I was going to get the hell off before I made myself sick.

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The silence twisted between us, pulling me in a hundred different directions.

He looked at me with a disappointment in his eyes, his lips caught between his teeth and his pulse hammering in the hollow of his throat. My heart raged at me. Yelling, and screaming, and hollering for me to fix this. No way in hell was I going to listen to a single thing it had to say right now.

The tension and frustration stretching between us pulled even harder than the silence, yanking me right back into his lap before I knew what the hell I was doing. But he didn't stop me. If anything, he only aggravated the situation further, curling his hands around my face and pushing my mouth into his. His fingers held the back of my head, held my face to his, as his mouth fully worked mine over, not leaving a single piece of me untouched.

It was a last kiss, kind of kiss. A goodbye, kind of kiss. A this-won't-happen-again kind of kiss. I refused to acknowledge that I kind of wanted to cry.

I drew my attention back to his mouth instead.

His lips were bruising—rough and punishing, and angry. He bit down on my bottom lip, invading my mouth with his tongue and his anger.

My throat constricted, and I squeezed my eyes shut, wrapping my hands around his arms and digging my fingers into his biceps.

But still, he kissed me into oblivion, oblivious, refusing to let go.

I tore into his shirt, ripping the two halves apart. His buttons made soft clinking noises as they hit the floor of his truck, and somewhere in the back of my mind, I remembered wanting to hear that sound someday. But not like this. Not clouded in hurt and anger and confusion.

Our mouths slid together, teeth grazing lips as I tried to let these thoughts go. For the moment, or for however long this last kiss of ours would last until it ended. It twisted my emotions up further, knowing I would never feel this again.

My hands coasted down his abs, writing every line to memory, along with the taste and feel of his mouth, his fingers pressing into me, sliding up my thighs and around to my lower back, pulling me into him.

I could feel him beneath me, hard and straining against his jeans. A soft cry spilled from my mouth, but instead of deterring him it only pushed him further. His tongue penetrated deeper, his hands becoming impatient. They tightened in my shirt, and then pulled it over my head, breaking our kiss.

Our gazes collided, chests moving as quickly as our breaths that filled the space between us.

Where did we go from here? What happened now—

My thoughts came to an abrupt halt as his hand came up and slipped my bra strap down my shoulder, his finger continuing down my arm until he picked my hand up in his. His lips met the center of my palm in a soft kiss, his eyes still glued to mine. I swallowed. I could see his inner turmoil. His inner fight on whether or not to continue pushing things further. Confusion and hesitation mixed in with a handful of other painful things.

I didn't know what I wanted from him, exactly, but I knew it wasn't this. This felt



messy, and wrong, and selfish. This felt ugly.

I slid off his lap and threw my shirt back on. “I can’t do this, Neil,” I said as I grabbed my backpack and opened the door. “This thing between us, whatever it is or isn’t” —I looked him in the eyes, already begging myself to take the words back before they spilled out of my mouth— “it’s over.”

I told myself I was doing us both a favor.

“I’m done, Neil. I’m just... I’m done.” But the truth was, I did it because I was afraid. Because I was terrified—of the things he made me feel, of the things he made me want that I knew he wouldn’t give me. Things I knew would end up in a dumpster fire anyway.

Because Neil was too good for me.

And I was a coward.

## Chapter 20

### Purgatory

Self-fulfilling prophecy, anyone?

Neil and I had officially become messy—all thanks to me. I’d screwed everything up royally—like, on an epic level—and I didn’t think there was any coming back from it.

But I missed him. Already, I missed him.

And I hated myself for it. For pushing him away, for being weak and letting my fears

take over, for letting Linda inside my head and completely skewing my way of thinking. For letting the dark recesses of my mind filter out and spill into my heart. (For letting Neil in there in the first place.)

Because yeah, I was admitting it.

It fucking hurt.

I shoved my face into my pillow and screamed. At myself. And my stupidity. And that aching, hollow pit in my stomach. I wanted to beat these feelings into a pulp and bury them six feet underground. But apparently, these things didn't work like that.

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Instead, they crept around in my periphery, slapping me with a good dose of feel-like-shit whenever they felt like it, convincing me I deserved the way I felt heavy with regret.

Too heavy to get out of bed—my thoughts, my feelings, every ounce of my body. So, I rolled over, pulled my blanket around me extra tight and settled into a feeling that felt a lot like sadness.

I didn't make it to school the next two days; rumor had it, Neil didn't either.

And before I knew it, a few more days had passed before I stepped foot on school grounds again. Oh well. I was here for today—for a project that was due in English class—and midterms next week, and nothing else. Sydney said Neil hadn't been to school all week either, but I was trying not to think about it. Trying not to think about the fact that he'd never missed a day of school in his life, and now that he had, it was all my fault. Of course it would be my fault. It made me feel even guiltier than I was already feeling.

Especially when he still didn't show.

I sat there stupidly, staring blankly at his bare desks through three periods. Three periods that felt like an eternity without him sitting there, stealing all of my attention. The empty spaces nagged at me, skipping around in circles with my guilt, pointing and laughing at my misery. An emotion-filled knife stabbing at my insides, letting in even more messy feelings I didn't think I could handle.

But it was even worse when he did show up on Monday.

Because he might as well have not been there. He didn't talk to me—didn't even look at me—and he moved seats in ASB, gutting me further. Though I really couldn't say I blamed him. Even I didn't want to be sitting with myself at the moment, or any of these goddamnfeelings.

It sucked, though—fuckingsucked—missing someone when they were standing right in front of you, sitting right across the room from you. There, but not there. Entirely unapproachable. Hating everything they made you feel, while somehow wanting to slip inside their arms and hear them tell you everything was going to be okay all at the same time.

It clutched at every messed-up feeling and twisted them into a tangled knot, shoving them down my throat until I felt like I was choking on them.

Our eyes met only once in the next few days, and he looked as miserable as I felt in that split-second frame of time.

It shouldn't have made me feel better, but it did somehow.

“Whoa, what's got you down?” Linda asked, oblivious to the past however many days she'd been here that I'd been walking around like someone had run over my puppy.

“Nothing.” I swirled my soggy cereal around in my bowl. She was the last person I was going to confide in about this. I didn't need herI-told-you-so pouring salt on my open wound.

“I haven't seen Neil around lately,” she stated the obvious anyway.

I huffed in response—more of a growl, really.

“Hmm,” she commented. “It’s only for the best, you know. Relationships don’t last—better you find that out now. Men suck.” She shrugged. “That’s why finding the richest and hottest ones and milking them dry while you can is the best move. Then you move on to the next poor soul. Lucky for you, you’re young and hot, so you shouldn’t have a problem working your way up the ladder.”

I scoffed, thoroughly over her shit.

Still, I didn’t have anything to say to her. She had everything completely backward, upside down, and inside out. I’d known that, on some level. I just hadn’t realized until recently how truly messed up it was.

“Relationships, commitment, marriage, they’re for one of two kinds of people, baby,” she went on, ignoring my cues to just drop it. “People like me—and you and Jason, because I taught you better—who know that it’s about a transaction, something one or both parties can benefit from, and then there are the suckers who actually think love is forever.”

My mother, people. No wonder my view on these things had been so thoroughly fucked up.

And here was the thing: Linda had loved my dad once upon a time—actually, genuinely loved him—and then he went and cheated on her and left her and Jason and I, shattering her so bad that her view on love skewed entirely, bordering on completely messed up.

Okay, no. She’d skipped over that line a long time ago.

The things she was saying were only some of countless other ridiculous Linda-isms she’d spewed over the years.

All while obviously (at least it seemed obvious to me), still secretly, and desperately, searching for a love of her own.

It was a toxic mess of skewed views, shoving twisted ideas down my throat, and blatant hypocrisy that left a nasty taste in my mouth.

And I was just...over it.

I pushed my bowl forward until it dropped into the sink with a loudthunkand left the kitchen.

When I got back up to my room—door slammed shut, black curtains pulled closed, bed a mess—I called Sydney. If anyone would get it, she would. On some level, anyway.

“It’s his loss, honestly,” she said in solidarity a few minutes later. I bit at my nails, nodding in agreement even though she couldn’t see it. I wanted to believe it. The problem was, I didn’tfeelit. “You want to go to a party tonight?” she asked. “Find a new distraction?” There was a hint of excitement and a whole plan unfolding in that tone of hers.

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I perked up. (Just the slightest, almost unnoticeable bit... don't judge me.) "Sure. Okay." I could practically see her lips curling up into a mischievous smirk it was so vivid in my mind. "You're smiling, aren't you?"

"Damn right I am."

I wasn't, for the record—finding a distraction. We'd gotten to the party, and my eyes had landed on the first hot guy I'd caught staring my way with any level of interest, and my stomach had immediately turned over on itself just thinking about it.

So, no. No distraction.

Unless you counted Sydney. Who was currently making out with Skater Boy in a mildly lewd, yet kind of hot grope-fest on the couch in Kyle's living room. (Yes, that Kyle. From work. The ponderer of deep things while gazing into the vast sea of arcade games.) But I didn't—count it. Because watching Sydney and her guy maul each other only made me miss Neil more.

Ugh. I swallowed a too big bite of pizza, smothering the thought. I was legit considering pouring some vodka—whiskey, rum, tequila, take your pick—straight down my throat, but I wasn't in the mood for feeling worse than I already did.

As soon as I saw Jax walk into the party, I felt like I could breathe again. At least a little more than my lungs had been allowing these past few days.

"Come here, girl," he said as soon as he saw me, and I was seriously a sad sack if he could spot my mess with one glance. His entire demeanor oozed with empathy,

though, and I kind of loved him for that. I needed someone to feel sorry for me; it felt good to have my misery validated.

And obviously, Neil had already talked to him because he didn't ask me what was wrong. He just held me, like it was all I needed, and it kind of was right then.

I puffed out a breath into his arms, wondering how that conversation had gone down. How much Neil had told him. If he regretted his part in it. If he realized that his parents had probably screwed him up almost as much as mine had me.

No way in hell was I going to ask, though.

"I'm fine... I'm fine," I lied when Jax eventually pulled away.

He did a full scan of my features. "Your lies are getting easier to spot, you know."

"That's because I'm not trying," I sulked.

He smirked, a sympathetic smirk if that was even possible. "Seriously, though." He stepped closer again, curling his hands over my shoulders. "You good?"

I forced a smile. "I will be." Was it a lie? It felt like it.

It was the last Friday before winter break, and Neil and I still hadn't said a word to each other. It had been—what? Five, six, seven days? I wasn't sure anymore. It felt like forever.

At this point, all my weighted feelings were slowly being shoved aside by anger. It was an easier emotion to deal with, I guess. A simmering in my blood and in my chest, fueling itself by the thought that I had probably done the right thing in the end if he could go this long without talking to me. Or trying to work it out. Or whatever.



I followed him out of sixth period like a stalker, pulling him back by the hand. I was over the waiting game. I wasn't heading into a three-week break without knowing where the hell we stood. "You can't ignore me forever."

He looked at me with a softness in his eyes that threatened to break me. No, screw that.

"I'm sorry, okay?" I huffed. "I pushed you away when I shouldn't have, and I already feel like an asshole for it, so you don't have to make me feel worse about it." It was barely an apology. But how else did I make him understand how I was feeling? I regretted it, clearly. He had to know I did. Right? "I'm sorry," I said again. The emphasis I put on those words made me feel weak, but I meant them. It was a true, borderline desperate apology, and I didn't care how it made me look. My anger had melted itself into something else in the thirty seconds I'd been standing in front of him, and I just...missed him.

"I miss you," I forced out, gnawing at my cheek to force back the stupid sudden urge to cry. I did not cry. Especially not over boys. I was losing my mind. Except that the truth of those words—I miss you—resonated deep, somewhere dark and tainted by fear. Deeper than I wanted to comprehend. But Neil was, really, the closest connection I'd ever had with someone. He was the only person who saw the parts of me I kept hidden from everyone else.

And that meant something to me.

Did he get that?

"I'm sorry," I repeated when he still hadn't said anything. I didn't know what my intention was. To try and fix things, or to just make sure he understood, or to what...I didn't know. "I don't want you to hate me," I whispered, my traitorous voice breaking on the last two words. But there it was. I didn't want him to hate me even

though I deserved his anger.

It was my own fault, I knew. I'd pushed him away because I found myself wanting more, even though I knew more hadn't been an option for either of us. We wanted different things, had different plans for our futures, and we were too different from each other to actually last.

But something had changed for me. A switch had flipped in my brain and wanting more of Neil didn't seem like such a ridiculous thing anymore. Terrifying—yes. Ridiculous, not so much.

But I knew he wouldn't have given me more even if I'd asked for it. So, I went ahead and sabotaged it before it inevitably crashed and burned, essentially making it crash and burn.

And I loathed myself for it.

I wanted to press rewind, go back to that day, to that stretch of time in his truck, and make a hundred different choices.

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But then, on the other hand, I also found myself thinking: Screw that. Because he had totally led me on, too. You didn't look at someone the way he looked at me, or kiss me the way he kissed me, or stay up until three in the morning watching movies together and whispering sleepy goodnight over the phone and essentially dating without the official label, and then take the out the way he did. So, he was a coward, too.

It's why my anger kept battling with misery, why I kept swaying between blaming myself and blaming Neil. Hence the messy.

A sigh fell from his lips, like he knew the direction of my thoughts, his shoulders falling. "I'm sorry, too, Liv. I am. I'm not angry with you." He shook his head. "I'm angry with myself—for a lot of things, but mostly for letting things go that far between us; I knew better. And for some of the things I said to you, too. I'm just trying to sort it all out."

I blew out a defeated breath.

How had things gone so sideways? It didn't make all that much sense anymore. How things could feel so right but turn out so wrong.

Neil cleared his throat, and my eyes were drawn back up to his. He caught my gaze, holding it hostage. I couldn't look away; I was locked there, staring at eyes I could feel pulling away from me even though they looked as pained about it as I felt.

We could figure this out, I thought, and I really thought we could. If we both wanted it badly enough.

“I won’t ever push you like that again. I swear. I know it’s not what you want, and I can respect that. I can,” I begged him to believe me.

He looked at me with sympathy in his eyes, and it made my stomach turn. “The problem isn’t that I don’t want it, Liv. It’s that I do,” he said quietly. “I want things with you I know I shouldn’t, and it scares the hell out of me.”

“Then lets—”

“The temptation is too much. I need some space. A break.”

My words were cut off with a harsh breath, the wind knocking right out of me.

Space.

Right.

Like the last handful of days that had stretched out into an eternity hadn’t been torture enough.

He needed more space.

My bottom lip was a fucking traitor. It quivered, and I wanted to scream at it for doing so, for letting Neil in on how upset I was. Instead, I bit down on it until it hurt. “Okay,” I managed. “I understand.”

A break. From me. That was a first. Usually I was the one calling a break on someone—or ghosting them altogether.

Anger filtered back into my bloodstream, unbidden.

It was for the best, though. I knew that. I thought I knew that.

But my mind roared at me, and my heart raged with emotion. I hated emotions, and this was proving to be every reason why. I'd been so good at avoiding them until now. Until Neil.

I pressed the heel of my palms into my eyes, forcing back the unfamiliar sting.

When I looked back up at him, he took a deep breath. He opened his mouth to say something, but I walked the hell away. I was not going to cry. I did not cry over boys. Ever.

I sure as hell wasn't going to make a liar of myself now.

Spoiler alert: Jason called as soon as I walked through my front doors, and I burst into tears immediately. Before I even managed to say hello.

"Hey, hey," he said softly, all caring and big brother like and parental figure mode, making everything worse.

Crying was not a character trait of mine, yet here I was. Crying like a goddamn baby. Ugh. I was pissed at myself for it. Like, literally, I kind of wanted to beat my own ass for it, but I couldn't stop.

"What's going on?" he asked. "You're scaring me."

I couldn't tell him. It didn't matter. He wouldn't get it.

"Is this about that Neil kid?" he guessed, and I bawled even harder, choking out another cry. What was wrong with me?!

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“Ugh!” I groaned into the phone, making Jason chuckle.

“I’m sorry. It’s not funny. I just never thought I’d see you shed a tear, let alone cry over a boy. He must really be something, huh?”

I scoffed. Thought it over. “Yeah, I guess so,” I grumbled.

“What happened?” he asked.

Despite my better judgment, I told him. Everything. From the very beginning until the very stupid (on both our parts) end.

How much I liked him. Cared about him. What a decent friend he was. How different we were, but how much it felt like we made sense anyway.

Jason patiently listened to my entire rant, shocking me when he quietly offered up some advice. “If he cares about you as much as you care about him,” he started, “all you have to do is apologize—which, I know, I know, is nearly physically impossible for you to do, but if you can manage to dig up your heart in that dark pit of your soul, then...”

I burst out in laughter through my tears. Jason knew me better than anyone, and that totally did sound like me. But I’d changed in the last few weeks.

“I did,” I said. “Apologize.”

“Holy shit,” he cut in with a shocked whisper that made me crack a smile.

“But he still said he needed a break,” I finished.

“Huh.” He thought it over. “Something tells me this break won’t last long, but even if it does... what’s meant for you will eventually come back to you when you let it go. Or however the saying goes. If he doesn’t see what he’s missing, he doesn’t deserve you anyway.”

Okay—wow. “But if he does come back? Then what?” I voiced my deeper fear. Allowing it out into the open. Because I needed to know.

“Then, if you two care about each other as much as I think you do, you’ll make it work. It doesn’t have to be that complicated, kiddo.”

That seemed simple enough. I had to deconstruct a few boxes in my mind and build a new one to place that thought in, but it was one I wanted to keep.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“And you won’t make fun of me?”

He chuckled. “I won’t make fun of you.”

“Do you believe in love?” It felt like one of the most vulnerable things I’d ever asked in my life.

His breath halted, the line going silent before he blew out a long breath. “Yeah,” he said carefully. “I do.”

“So, Mom didn’t screw with your head like she did mine?”

“No. She did. For a while. But Linda... she’s full of shit, Olls. She wouldn’t know love if it smacked her upside the face. She acts like it’s this godawful thing when the truth is, she’s just fucking scared. Dad broke her heart, so she put it back together and hardened it into a hunk of ice. And then she spewed a bunch of bullshit our way.

“I think, in her own twisted way, she’s just trying to protect us. But it doesn’t make her right, kiddo. It makes her sad.”

I nodded silently, taking his words to heart. Because I was sure they were right, coming from him. I just needed to find a way to let go of these ingrained notions for good.

## Chapter 21

### Winter Break

I was giving Neil the space he said he needed. No phone calls, no texts, and definitely not seeing him in person. Which wasn’t hard since it was winter break. But still, I missed him. A stupid, ridiculous amount.

The number of times I wanted to hop inside of Wednesday and drive down to Inkcafé—or worse, his house, and really show his mom how crazy I could be—was also ridiculous. At one point, I’d actually thrown my keys out of my bedroom window so I wouldn’t be tempted.

It took me half an hour to find them when I decided I needed some Taco Bell five minutes later.



*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 9:42 am*

But here was the thing: Neil had become my best friend. (Yep, I said it. My best friend. No way was I telling Sydney that, because she'd kill me, but there it was.)

He was my go-to text, my go-to phone call, and the person I found myself wanting to hang out with more than anyone else—you know, before everything went sideways. Did that make me a totally patheticchicks over dickstraitor? Probably. But I got what I deserved in the end, because it was ripped out from under me, by my own two hands, and I was left with a severe case of emotional whiplash. I was carrying around the mess of feelings in my arms, wearing them on my sleeves, struggling to bury them back deep down where they belonged.

What I was seeing these last few weeks? Again and again? Was that I was even more screwed up than I'd thought possible. I was so afraid offeelingsomething for someone that I'd run from Neil like such a coward. In the end, more damage had been done than I'd realized. There was an aversion to these things—relationships, feelings, love—living somewhere in the shadows of my bones, and it was obvious to me who had planted them there. Seeding and watering them my entire life. My mother.

It was embarrassing. And hard to come to terms with—that there was something about me I needed to fix, wires that needed to be rerouted in my brain. I didn't even know how to go about doing that.

But I wanted to try. For Neil, I wanted to try.

If heeven wanted to fix what was broken between us in the first place. I wasn't forgetting that he brushed me off, scoffing like the idea of us actually being together was absolutely ridiculous. Throwing theno girlfriend, no boyfriendthing in my face. It

was a dick move, honestly.

But I was hoping he regretted it as much as I did.

And the not knowing of it all, of where we stood now, was slowly killing me. Even though I tried to convince myself it wasn't.

I guess I wasn't so good at lying to myself anymore. The flood gates were open, and my feelings were screaming in my face, refusing to be ignored.

It was a mess.

I was a mess.

A week had passed. It was Christmas Eve, and I was all alone. Linda was off in Vegas, doing her thing. Herthing.

As if I wanted to spend Christmas with her anyway. Though, in her defense, she had asked me first—if I was okay with her taking off. Considering the perma-scowl I'd been wearing all break, adon't fucking approach mevibe like I was born with it (well, I think I actually was, literally, born with it, but that was beside the point), she practically ran out of the house when I told her I didn't care.

I was lounging in bed now, twiddling my thumbs. I might've been all Netflix-ed out. (Gasp! Said no oneever. Something was definitely wrong with me. Obviously.) I flipped my phone around between my fingers, closer to breaking and texting Neil than I'd been all break.

I unlocked my screen. Pressed on the green message app. Scrolled down and tapped Neil's name. Which was still input as "Mr. Wingspan" in my phone. I cracked a smirk, and then rolled over and groaned into my arm, purposely tossing my phone to the end

of the bed, and then kicking it off with my foot for good measure.

It clunked onto the floor with a satisfying thud and smack.

I was not breaking and texting him first.

I was not.

Screw that.

After a sufficient enough amount of time and feeling like I could trust myself again, I got up and grabbed the remote and turned Netflix back on instead.

Whatever.

I settled on a nice holiday classic. Silent Night, Bloody Night.

How was that for a Christmas mood?

A message pinged.

I rolled over and stretched out, before growling and pulling the blanket back over my eyes. Too early. The sun wasn't even up yet.

But the message reminder chimed again.

I reached out, picked up my phone, and pulled it into my dark cocoon. It was a message from Neil. At three a.m.

I perked up. (Mentally. It was still too early for the physical part.)

He'd sent me a message. He broke first, and he sent me a message—his screenplay, actually, upon closer inspection. I sat up and looked over the text feed again, rubbing the sleep from my eyes. There was definitely nothing there but the manuscript. Not since our messages from a few weeks ago.

Still, it felt like a peace offering.

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My heart was certainly screaming the same sentiment, pounding so hard I could feel the echo of it in my entire body. In my hands, and in my ears, and in my throat, tangling itself up with too many other things I'd been trying but failing to get a handle on.

I opened up my email on my phone, finding the one I'd sent to myself to back up my own manuscript, and forwarded it to Neil without letting myself think twice about it.

Another message pinged through. Again, from Neil.

It shouldn't have been possible, but my heart pounded even harder.

Merry Christmas, Liv, it said.

I watched the bubble with three little dots appear and disappear, and then appear and disappear again. But he didn't send anything else over. I deflated a little. Let out a frustrated huff.

This was something, though, right?

Right. I guess I would take what I could get—for now.

Merry Christmas to you too, Neil. I sent him back, and then I dove into his screenplay at three in the morning.

Neil, this screenplay is awesome. I didn't care if I was reaching out first this time, I had to say it—text it, whatever. Because his screenplay was pretty epic.

(Actually, I was obsessed with it, but I wasn't telling him that.)

It was this fantasy, with this badass heroine—and it was funny, and interesting, and action-packed, and sexy, without even trying, really.

My cheeks filled with warmth just thinking about it.

And yeah. No. Not going there.

But he'd somehow managed to pack an insane amount of punch in what was set to be an hour and forty-five-minute film.

(That was the best part of movies, really. And why I preferred them over TV shows. Condensing a storyline into a smaller time frame; fitting in the beginning, end, and everything in between without missing a beat. It was more of a challenge. It forced a level of care and intent when deciding on the scenes you went with, and the dialogue you chose, that was different, I felt. Driving the story forward without it feeling rushed. It gave you roughly an hour and a half to convince people to fall in love with or completely hate your story—yeah, I could talk about this all day.)

Neil's heroine was my favorite part of his story. She came right out of the gate already knowing how powerful she was, and she was kicking ass and taking names before anyone came along to help her—with more of her deeper-rooted demons than anything.

And her love interest? Ugh. He was what male leads were made of. And again, I felt myself blushing. I. At least it was over fictional characters this time.

Haha. Thank you, Neil replied. You really think so?

A whole bunch of thoughts raced through my mind at his reply. The usual mess of

things—buried beneath the past few weeks and the way things had gone sideways between us.

Is this where we started? Small talk through text until we made our way to the bigger stuff?

It was becoming glaringly apparent that I needed someone in my life who actually knew something about these things.

But I didn't know... as convoluted as everything was, this didn't feel wrong. Nothing with Neil felt wrong. Except for where we had messed everything up.

Really, I responded. I wasn't going to tell you this, but... I'm kind of obsessed with it.

Yeah?

Yeah.

Thanks. That means a lot, he sent. Especially coming from you. I'm almost finished with yours, too. I don't think I've stopped laughing the entire time.

I cracked a smile, my heart making its presence known. Especially coming from you—what did he mean by that? I wasn't going to ask. Thanks, Neil, I messaged instead.

Okay, I'm finished, he replied a handful of hours later. Wow, another message bubble popped up. You really have to do something with this, Liv. I mean it.

Warmth filled some of the empty spaces that had been nagging at me. Spaces I didn't want to admit Neil had carved out, spilling his sunlight into them until he took it back.

I swallowed.

Thank you.

My fingers tapped against my screen, thinking over my text sitting in its metaphorical holding cell—whether I should send it or not. I hovered over the send key for one... two... three seconds.

Screw it.

Can we talk?I sent him the message.

The three little dots on his end blinked for what felt like forever. He had to know I didn't mean just surface talk. I wanted answers. I wanted to put back together what was broken, even though the thought of it was terrifying. That, or have him tell me it was over for good. No more thinking on it, no more sitting in limbo.

It would suck—of course it would suck—if he decided on the latter, but I was tired of sitting around like an idiot, not knowing how he felt. All the while, my heart was screaming at me things I didn't want to hear, and I was barely succeeding at shoving them back into the dark corners where they belonged.

Yeah, of course,his message pinged through.Right now?

My heart started racing, beating so fast it felt like my chest was vibrating. Now?No, not now,I chickened out.I'd rather talk in person, you know? Tomorrow, maybe?



Yeah, okay. We can talk tomorrow. I had a whole two seconds to let his confirmation sink in, before, Actually, shoot. I'm sorry... I promised my mom I would help her with something tomorrow. Would Friday be okay?

Yeah, Friday is good. I spent too long debating on what else I should say—if anything. So long that it would be obvious I was cradling my phone like a crazy person and thinking way too hard about it.

So, about these deviant nuns... Neil opened the conversation back up, and I grinned like an idiot.

I wasn't even mad at myself for it.

I didn't know what to say to him. How to start the conversation. I'd been thinking about it almost constantly since yesterday, and I already knew I wouldn't be able to stop until I saw him tomorrow.

What our conversation was going to look like, how it was going to turn out, was completely lost on me. I knew what I hoped for, despite my better judgment, but I had no clue what to expect.

But at the very least... I didn't want it to feel weird between us. I didn't want him to hate or resent me, I didn't want him to regret everything that happened between us before that stupid night in his truck, and I didn't want to look at him and feel like I couldn't tell him something, or laugh with him, or...

I didn't know.

I just wanted to feel like we were okay, whatever that meant.

These nagging thoughts were playing on a loop in my mind, exhausting me. I

should've just taken him up on his offer to talk last night—over the phone. Instead of torturing myself for the next forty-eight hours with the ridiculous amount of what-ifs floating around in my brain.

I legit thought I might combust from the nerves alone.

What if he was done? Done, done?

I didn't think that was the case, though. Not after how much we'd been texting since yesterday. Surface stuff, sure. But if he was talking to me, it was because he wanted to be talking to me, right?

I was going with yes.

I wondered if he was as nervous about tomorrow as I was, or if he was even nervous at all. It made me feel better to assume he was, so I was going with a yes on that, too.

And I really needed to stop thinking about it so damn hard.

I grabbed my keys and my bag and made my way downstairs, heading straight through the front door, down the driveway, and into Wednesday, plopping into my seat. Driving to Inkcafé was probably a terrible idea, but if Neil was there, and I could see his face, maybe tomorrow wouldn't feel like such a big, looming storm cloud hanging over my head. And if he wasn't, well, then I could work on editing my screenplay.

But... spoiler alert: He wasn't there.

I curled myself into a seat at the back of the room, over a small table, and got to work. Apparently, my vampire nuns needed to be a tad more likable, hanging a little less precariously over the edge of totally unrelatable. Just a little.

I could do that—make them likable. Right? Totally. (Ha, I was going to try, anyway.)

It was about halfway through my script when I swear, I felt the air in the coffee shop shift. I didn't care how dramatic it sounded in my head, that's exactly what it felt like. Like Neil opened the front doors and let all the oxygen out.

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The bell attached to the door chimed, and I watched him stride inside from across the room, a smile pulling at one corner of his mouth.

My heart immediately dove into a chaotic rhythm, somehow climbing its way up my throat and threatening to strangle me at the same time—no, literally strangle me. To death.

Because he wasn't alone.

No. He was with someone.

A girl, for the record.

Neil was here, at Inkcafé... with some girl, and it looked like they were—my stomach flipped over on itself, acid rising up my throat. I couldn't even think it, but the thought (and the actual, physical image of it) slapped me across the face anyway.

Neil was here on a date.

## Chapter 22

W.T.F.

What the fuck? What the fuck? "What the fuck?" I said under my breath for the third time. To no one but myself. But—what the fuck?

My heart was racing, my throat definitely closing in on itself. The mortifying sting

behind my eyes was threatening to embarrass me in front of everyone at Inkcafé. But somehow, Neil still hadn't seen me. He pointed to a table by the front windows, throwing the girl an easy smile, and I shrank back, sinking down in my seat and hiding behind my book. (When really, all I wanted to do was chuck it across the room and make the noise inside Inkcafé feel as loud as the chaos going on inside my head right now.)

Neil. Here. With some girl.

My brain was having a hard time computing. Trying to make sense of the picture before me.

They sat down together at the table Neil had pointed at and exchanged a few more nauseating smiles. My grasp on the book tightened, my fingers aching from the grip.

My first thoughts about her? Wholesome—pretty.

She was wearing a lacy, knee-length dress and boots, her long, blond hair was curled and pulled back, and she was twisting a silver cross that hung from her necklace between her fingers.

My stomach roiled. Because my next thought was that she looked exactly like the kind of girl Neil should be with. The kind of girl his parents would approve of in a heartbeat.

I kind of wanted to throw up.

But should was the imperative word here, right? I looked down at myself—baggy sweater, ripped jeans, and chipped nail polish.

Neil was clearly attracted to these things, too, right?

What the hell was he doing?

Besides the obvious fact that he was on a date, of course.

I promised my mom I would help her with something tomorrow. Isn't that what his text had said? What a joke. What a freaking joke.

My emotions were going off the rails, filling every crevice inside me with feelings I didn't want to be feeling.

I swallowed down the mess of them.

I had to figure out how the hell to get out of here without him seeing me. Because that would just be mortifying on too many levels. But of course, of course, he chose that moment to somehow sense my presence and look in my direction.

His face immediately fell when he saw me, and my heart dropped back down into the pit of my stomach.

He looked...embarrassed. Guilty. Ashamed.

Because of me or because of her, I had no clue. Maybe it was a little bit of both, because he was clearly on a date with some girl while his ex (not so much an ex, I guess) was sitting across the room from him, and I could see the regret written all over his face.

His Adam's apple bobbed in his throat as he half-heartedly listened to her, and I wanted to claw at my eyes to rid myself of the image of them sitting there together.

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*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 9:42 am*

His eyes darted from the table to her, to the floor, and back to me too many times to count. Please don't come over here, please don't be mad, I swore they were saying.

The first, I wasn't giving another thought to, but the second? The second, it was too late for.

He was out—on a date. Instead of talking to me, instead of trying to work things out, instead of meeting up with me today and not pushing what I thought was an important conversation to tomorrow.

And I felt so, so fucking stupid.

Mortified. Pissed. Anger simmered in my blood, pumping out of a heart that felt like it was slowly splintering open and—no. Nope. Screw that.

I dragged my eyes away from him and slapped my book shut, tossing everything into my backpack with a forced level of calm, hands shaking even though I cursed at them not to. Book. Notebook. Pencil. Pens. Phone. Keys. Trash. It felt like a fucking eternity.

I zipped my bag up, threw it over my shoulder, and walked through the coffee shop—that I was never, in my goddamn life, going to step foot back inside of again. Screw Inkcafé, screw the girl with the pretty little cardigan, and screw Neil.

I was done. Tapping out. Over it.

And I got it, I did. That that was the kind of girl he wanted, or thought he needed, or

that wouldn't disappoint his parents, or whatever, but I still wanted to scream at him in the middle of Inkcafé and tell him that he was just as much of a coward as I was.

My throat constricted, closing up tight, and...shit. I threw my hand against my chest, shoving back against my traitorous heart.

Making a straight shot for the door, I heard Neil utter a quick, "Can you give me a minute?" as I passed by his table and shoved my way outside.

"Liv," he called.

No. Nope. Not happening.

"Liv, please," he pleaded.

I wasn't going to—I swear, I wasn't going to—but I turned on the heel of my foot anyway, despite every self-preservation instinct screaming at me not to.

I looked down at the ground, counted backward from twenty. But still, I felt like I was going to cry, and I hated myself for it.

"It's not what it looks like," he rushed out.

My gaze met his, and my stomach twisted and flipped over on itself just from looking at him, intensifying at the pity in his eyes.

I tightened my fists, nails biting into my palms. "You know what." I huffed through the urge to cry. "It doesn't matter. It's none of my business. Obviously."

"It is your business," he said, his forehead creased with what looked like worry. But there was no way he was actually worried about me or what I thought when he was



here with someone else.

“No, it’s not,” I gritted the words, my voice barely a thing. “Not anymore. You’ve made that pretty clear.”

“Liv...” He trailed off with a harsh breath, running his hand through his hair. It settled on the back of his neck and tightened around it. “It’s not like that,” he implored, but his words weren’t landing where they were supposed to. Somewhere that would stop making me feel so shitty. “I wouldn’t lie to you. She’s new to town—new to church—” he gestured through the window, pointing out the girl I was absolutely not going to look at again. “And my parents told her I’d show her around. That’s all this is. I swear.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I repeated, the words coming out before I could stop them. They were a lie. It did matter, but I hated that it did.

“It does,” he said. “The fact that I feel the need to explain myself to you right now is pretty telling of where my feelings lie. I don’t want to be here.” His brows furrowed. “I don’t want anyone else.”

I swallowed, my gaze crashing into his.

His eyes searched mine, and mine searched his right back, desperately looking for something. Anything that would make me stop feeling like this. Eyes burning, stomach heavy, throat thick with hurt and words I refused to say. Words that terrified me.

Especially when I was convinced he didn’t feel the same way.

I could see that he was still confused, still unsure about everything.

I ignored the stupid thing twisting inside my ribcage, wanting to murder it. Attempting to separate my thoughts, the feeling-obscured ones from the logical ones, I settled on, “But you don’t want me either, right?” I said, lacking the actual anger I’d intended behind the words, because I just felt... defeated.

He took a step closer. “I shouldn’t—”

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I huffed out a breath and spun around on the ball of my foot, turning my back on him. Did he even think before he said things? I growled—whined. A sound that was both but neither of them at all.

“—but I do,” he finished.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I pressed the heel of my palms into them and let out a frustrated growl. “Then where does that leave us, Neil?”

“I don’t know,” he said, and his words sounded as broken as I felt. “I don’t know,” he repeated for a second time, his fingers wrapping around my elbow and slowly shifting me back around to face him. “But I miss you.”

I could see in his eyes how serious he was, how much he meant what he said. But it didn’t matter. Like a switch being flicked in my brain, my emotions sprinted from one end of the spectrum to the other, rolling from a disrupting, painful ache to a simmering anger.

Just like that.

I pulled out of his grasp, my jaw clenching tight. “No.” I shook my head. “You don’t get to say that when you don’t know what the hell you want!” My voice cracked, and I wanted to scream; I wanted to scream until it scratched my throat raw. And the resulting look of bewilderment on his face, that little crease of confusion between his brows, only made me angrier.

Didn’t he get it?

I was the one who stepped closer this time. “I gave you your space, your break. And while I don’t think I’ve stopped thinking about you for one goddamn second, here you are. On a date!” I yelled the last sentence through my teeth, my eyes still burning. I was pretty sure the girl inside the coffee shop was gawking at us through the window now, but full honesty, I didn’t give two flying fucks. I threw my hands up in the air. “Do you have any idea how much that sucks?” I raged on.

He took a deep breath, releasing it on a sigh. “I told you, Liv, it’s not—”

“I don’t care! That’s what it feels like.” I shoved my hand against my chest, swallowing back against everything.

I felt crazy. My insides going batshit. Hurt being washed out by anger, being washed out by hurt, being washed out by anger, like a freaking riptide. My heart was beating so fast I was sure it was going to stop dead in my chest, and my thoughts were running around in a hundred different directions. And my emotions... the hurt and anger, stacked on top of frustration, stacked on top of what felt like was breaking inside me and a kaleidoscope of too many other disconcerting things, was too much.

I had the sobering thought that Linda was right, and feelings ruined everything.

It wasn’t worth this. Wasn’t worth feeling this confused and crushed and just... awful.

No, I just wanted to get the hell out of here. I turned and stepped off the curb, but Neil’s hand tightened around my arm.

“Wait,” he said. “Please don’t leave like this. I want to talk about this.”

“There’s nothing to talk about.”

“Olivia,” he pleaded. “Please. I don’t want you to walk away thinking I don’t care,

because I do.”

I turned back around in his hold, my gaze meeting his. And in that quick second, I wanted to break. His fingers grasping on to me, his eyes pleading with mine, it felt like I was breaking. “Well, you have a pretty shitty way of showing it,” I said quietly.

I watched him visibly deflate. “It’s not so easy for me, you know... with my parents, and my faith,” he responded, equally as quiet. “I know what I want, but my mind screams something else, and my parents—”

I scoffed. “Grow a pair, Neil. You think this is easy for me? You think my mom hasn’t screwed up my way of thinking, too? It’s probably the entire reason I pushed you away to begin with.” I took in an unsteady breath and blew it out. “But it didn’t take me long to realize that I don’t have to be the person she’s tried to make me be. I don’t have to share her twisted point of view just because she wants me to.”

I pointed at the window. “That’s who you think you should be—who your parents want you to be. But I see who you are. Who you really are.” The thickness in my throat, the tightening in my chest, the wave of pressure behind my eyelids... I swallowed them all back with far too much effort. “I just wish you did, too. Because you can be really fucking cool when you’re not so concerned with all of that.

“I like that Neil. God and Bible included.” It was more honest than I wanted to be, but it was what it was.

I liked the Neil who watched horror movies with me until three in the morning and still woke up in time for church on Sundays. The guy who read the Bible front to back but still believed his cousin should be able to love who he wanted to love and not be condemned for it. The one who laughed at my crude jokes and smirked in that way too attractive way when he was amused and who liked me for who I was—curse words and dark personality and smartass included.

The Neil that kissed me the way he kissed me but still held tight to his morals, too.

That was the Neil I fell in love with.

And sure, the realization hit me like a physical blow, but it wasn't the first time I'd thought the words, or even felt them. I could easily acknowledge that. It was the first time I was admitting it to myself, though—looking at him now, all these feelings twisted up inside me.

I was definitely, one-hundred percent in love with Neil Summers.

It shouldn't have hurt as much as it did, finally giving it space to breathe in my mind; it didn't make sense to feel broken when you admitted something like that to yourself for the first time.

But here I was.

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My heart was so heavy its beats were weighing me down, gravitating toward the concrete beneath my boots.

I sat down on the curb outside of Inkcafé and let my head fall into my hands. I didn't know what the hell I was doing. Walking away, telling him to fuck off, yelling at him some more... any of those options were probably better than what I was currently doing—allowing him to truly see how hurt I was. How much this non-existent, existent thing between us actually mattered to me.

He sat down beside me, his fingers cautiously sliding through mine, and I hated that it took me longer than it should've to pull my hand away.

“Tell me what you're thinking,” he said.

I took a breath, and a few more. “I'm thinking that...” I'm thinking that I love you, but... “I'm honestly not sure you give a shit at all.”

He puffed out a breath, his brows drawn together. “Is that really what you think? That this doesn't matter to me—that you don't matter to me?” He immediately pulled me into him, wrapping his arms around me tightly. I didn't fight it this time even though he held me like he was sure I was going to. “It does—it does. I care about you. So much.”

I felt like I could cry. Pressed up against him like this, his arms caging me in, his words penetrating deeper than I wanted them to. My tears made their presence known, stinging at the back of my eyes, but I shoved them away yet again.

“I’m sorry I hurt you,” he said, squeezing me tighter. “I don’t want to lose you just because we want different things, but I don’t know how to fix it.”

I took in a breath, my face slipping into that space between Neil’s chest and shoulder. I’d slap myself for it later, but... he smelled like warmth—like coffee, and the outdoors, and sunshine. And I kind of wanted to stay there forever.

So I pushed myself out of his hold. “I don’t know either,” I finally replied, shaking my head. I settled my chin down onto my knees and tugged at the laces on my boots, trying and failing to brush away the way he made me feel. “We never actually discussed what we wanted, though,” I pointed out the obvious.

He ran his hand through his hair. “No, you’re right. I guess we didn’t.”

I puffed out a breath, watching it cloud in the air.

“I want to have that conversation, though. As soon as I can...” he added before trailing off, folding his hands together. “...I just have some things I need to figure out and work through first...”

“I don’t want to screw this up again.”

I swallowed and nodded my head slowly. I knew what his words sounded like, but I was too scared to let what they meant penetrate too deep.

It was exactly what it sounded like, though, and it forced my heart to stall before speeding into a faster rhythm.

If he was willing to try again, if he wanted to try again, then I guess this really did mean something to him, too.



“I’ve really missed you,” he said, backing up his previous statement. “And I know this is asking too much, but I’m hoping that, at the very least, we can still be friends. For now. While I figure my own stuff out.”

“Your friend,” I immediately choked out the words. His friend. I laughed, short and unamused.

I loved him, and he wanted to be friends.

For now, I reminded myself. That, and of what he’d said before. I could deal with it, I guess. Maybe. No, I didn’t know.

“I don’t know, Neil. I’m not sure I can look at you and pretend like I don’t... like I don’t...” I shook my head, mentally shoving the rest of the words down, because I was terrified of actually saying them to him.

I blew out a breath. “I guess I’ll think about it.”

“Okay,” he quickly responded.

“Okay?” I turned to face him full-on.

He nodded. “Just... don’t give up on me yet. Yeah?”

I mentally rolled my eyes at myself, at the way everything softened inside me at the tone of his voice and the honesty and vulnerability in his words. At the way they were reflected in his eyes, too.

Only Neil could make me so weak.

Because I swear my heart also slowed back down and met the rhythm of his. My eyes

drowned in the depth of his fluid gaze. And there was really only one answer I found myself wanting to give him.

“Yeah, okay,” I said. Because I was in love with him. What other choice did I have?

### Chapter 23

#### Just Friends

Friends. I could do that, right?

Totally.

Yeah. Keep lying to yourself.

The fact that my heart sped up in my chest when Neil sat down next to me in ASB for the first time in weeks was beside the point.

“Do you have an extra pencil?” he asked, all calm and casual. I looked up at him, swallowing thickly. It was the first test of what was sure to be many. Could I do this? Did he think I could? Did I?

No, not really. But I was willing to try.

I cleared my throat, dug into my backpack, and handed him a pencil, ignoring my heart and my breaths and the insane amount of thoughts that filtered in when his hand touched mine.

I didn’t say it was going to be easy.

I puffed out a breath, focusing on our teacher. Trying to focus on our teacher, anyway. She was writing dates up on the whiteboard—upcoming baseball games and other

after-school activities. Neil was writing them down in his notebook, and I should've been doing the same, but instead, I was shoving away all smart decision-making abilities and trading them in for staring at him.

Like a wanderer lost in the desert, Neil was the mirage of cold water taunting me in the distance.

His lips, his jawline, his throat, his arms, his hands.

Places I now knew like the back of my own hand. Because I'd felt those places—on me—or tasted them with my mouth, and oh my god! I wanted to strangle my own thoughts.

Especially when I had the thought that looking into his eyes felt like looking into his soul.

Because that was a bullshit thought to be having when you were trying to be friends with someone. Just friends.

On a temporary basis.

Until what?

Until he pulls his head out of his ass and decides...what?

"I don't want to screw this up again." Again. Which implied...

I knew what it implied, but my mind was a mess. And surprise! I was back here again, with Neil making chaos of everything going on inside my brain. It was...ugh. I didn't know.

He smiled, oblivious, and I forced one back though I had no idea what it actually looked like from his point of view. At the very least, I hoped it masked everything else going on inside my head.

How much I missed him. Loved him. (Even though there was no way in hell I was telling him that.) The way my eyes drank him in and tattooed my craziest fantasies starring him at the forefront of my mind—ones that weren't even all that sexual, goddammit.

I bit down on the inside of my cheek and felt a flush creep up my neck. Forcing my eyes away from Neil with far too much effort, I cleared my throat. Friends. Friends. I was going to be repeating it like a freaking prayer for the foreseeable future, wasn't I?

If we had any chance of actually being friends, though, these thoughts were going to have to shut themselves up. And then bury themselves and die. And ignore all hope of Neil coming along to exhume them.

I gave myself a mental shakedown and took a much-needed breath, focusing on the task at hand.

Which was what, I didn't know.

Officially, I was a mess. (And ignoring the tiny little fact that I'd already been one for a while, obviously.) But how did you not tell someone with every look that you loved them?

I was sure Neil could see it written all over my face, flashing over my forehead in neon red letters. It had only been a few torturous days (five, actually, because yes, I was counting), and the secret was already threatening to swallow me whole.

So, I was avoiding him.

Sort of.

I figured I could bide my time while he sorted his stuff out and not have it so... all up in my face. Not have him so all up in my face. Because the ache of wanting him to be ready, to tell me what he'd figured out and try again, was killing me slowly. Without the weighted fact that I loved him being stacked on top of it.

"You know..." Sydney cut into my thoughts, and the tone of her voice, paired with the mischievous curve of her brows, told me she was up to something I didn't want any part of.

"But do I? Want to know?" I quipped.

Leaning over, she bumped into my shoulder with hers. "Shut up. You want to hear everything I have to say. That's why we're best friends."

"Um, that's debatable," I said, and she shoved into me even harder, forcing my façade to crack, and I snorted out a laugh. "Okay, okay. What's up?"

"We never got to put my plan into action."

"What pla—" Oh. That plan. "Neil and I are just friends, Syd."

She gave me a pointed stare, like it was the stupidest thing I'd ever said. And yeah, okay, it was the stupidest thing I'd ever said.

"That's why you've been mooning over him all day," she deadpanned, and that shut

me up for half a second.

I straightened my spine, glaring at her. “Mooning?”

“Just calling it like I see it.” She popped a Cheeto into her mouth. “Anyway... if you did—hypothetically—want to win him back, we could totally put some of my earlier ideas into play.”

I scoffed. “I’m not carrying around a Bible to look more wholesome, Syd.”

“But—”

“Or wearing a cross. Or showing him my boobs. Or getting baptized, or ignoring him, or trying to date his best friend—”

“But they’re great ideas!” she shrieked.

“No!” I yelled through my laughter. “They’re horrible ideas, hence the reason I never used any of them.” Not to mention the fact that I was leaving the ball in his court. Neil could shoot his shot when he was ready. My plan was to simply keep moving forward. (Easier said than done.)

“And look where that got you,” she snarked.

And...ha.Yeah. I didn’t need an ASL class to know how to tell her to fuck off in sign language. I threw my middle finger up in her face.

She was lucky I didn’t strangle her.

“Let me make it up to you!” she shouted across some rando’s house party later that night.

“Nope. No thanks,” I ducked out the back doors and made my way through the backyard to the fire pit. Dropping into an empty chair, I kicked my feet up onto the bricks that surrounded the fire.

A few seconds later, Sydney plopped into the seat next to me. “Just hear me out, okay?”

I let out a whiny groan. How she’d convinced me to come out with her tonight was lost on me. (Kidding. I knew exactly how she’d gotten me here—she’d nagged and nagged and nagged until I finally gave in.)

Whatever.

It was better than sitting at home, diving down a rabbit-hole of Netflix documentaries.

Or was it?

I thumped my head back against the lawn chair and rolled it against the material until I was facing her. “What do you want, Syd?”

She perked up. “Distraction—” I opened my mouth to interrupt her, but she held a finger up in the space between us. “Not that kind of distraction,” she continued. “Me.”

I raised my brows at her meaningfully, a smirk tilting my lips.



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“Not that kind of distraction, either. Jeez!” She rolled her eyes with a laugh. “Truth or dare, anything goes.”

“Really,” I met her challenge.

“What, I’m not scared. You scared?”

I scoffed. As if. “You’re on.”

“On for what?” Skater Boy asked from behind Sydney’s chair, hauling her out of it and into his arms, and what a freaking traitor Sydney was!

“Baby!” she squealed, and I kind of wanted to throat punch her. Three-wheeling wasn’t exactly my idea of a good time, especially not when the whole point here was to pull me out of this ridiculous, black-heart-splintered-open funk I was in.

She threw me a please don’t kill me pout from over his shoulder, and I pretended to think it over, figuring the jail time wasn’t worth it anyway, and settled on acknowledging that I was being a bit selfish. I shrugged with a half-hearted smile, keeping my black cloud from raining on her parade. (Her lovesick, traitor parade.)

Full honesty, I was happy for her. It just kind of sucked, you know? In that selfish, I don’t want what I’m missing to be shoved down my throat right now sort of way.

I pushed away the feeling, buried it somewhere, and smiled. An actual one this time. “Truth or dare,” I answered Skater Boy’s lingering question. “That’s what’s on.”

“Ah, sweet!” He fell into Sydney’s chair, pulling her down with him. “Can I play?”

“Yes.” “No.” Sydney and I both answered at the same time. Me, with the former. Her, with the latter.

“You can definitely play,” I plowed right through whatever she was about to say next. The least they could do was provide me with some entertainment on this three-wheeled bus.

It was like she didn’t trust me or something.

I mean, rightfully so, buttha!Screw that.

“Cool!” he said, oblivious, and I laughed under my breath as Sydney shook her head, visibly biting back a handful of curse words even though she was holding back a smile, too.

The party quickly grew around us, but we stayed on our own planet, truths and dares flying between us like it wasn’t a thing.

“Okay, Skater Boy.” I zeroed in on him when he picked truth—again,lame. “What’s your real name?”

He choked out a laugh.

Joke was on him, though, because I was pretty sure Sydney didn’t know his name either, hence the reason the name Skater Boy had stuck in the first place.

When her eyes widened, my suspicion was confirmed, and I barked out a laugh as he answered, “Damien.”

“Damien.” I nodded, pulling myself together. “That’s a good name. We should probably start using it, huh Syd?”

Her look was slightly murderous, and I laughed even harder.

“I like Skater Boy. It’s cute.” She shrugged.

“Yeah, me too,” I relented. “Skater Boy Damien—oh, hey.” I turned to face him again. “Sorry about that whole cock-blocking thing, by the way.” (Re: faces in vulnerable places before I started wailing that I wanted to leave the party, or however Sydney had explained it. I didn’t really remember.)

His head fell back in laughter. “No worries, it’s all good.”

Sydney’s glare went from murderous to serial-killer mode before she tucked it away. A smirk slipped into its place. One that said there was about to be some payback headed my way.

“Olivia,” she said my name in its four separate syllables, her tone way too sweet. “Truth or dare?”

“Is that how this works? Isn’t it Damien’s turn now?” I quipped.

“Whatever,” she growled. There were at least a dozen other threatening words on the tip of her tongue, but she couldn’t say any of them without giving herself away.

We held each other’s stare, and then we both cracked the hell up. Because that’s just what we did. Our friendship was full of passive-aggressive, pain in the ass, genuine love and I wouldn’t have had it any other way.

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The increasingly crowded party threw a bucket of cold water over our truth or dare game, though. I didn't mind it so much. Not when the couple screaming at each other in the corner of the yard and a group of cute, drunk guys thinking it was a good idea to walk through fire were providing more than enough entertainment.

I looked down at my phone and unlocked the screen, pulling up my texts with Neil, and proceeded to stare at them pathetically. Or the lack of them over the last few days, to be more accurate. Aside from a few good morning and good night texts we'd exchanged.

"I dare you to tell him you love him," Sydney whispered as she bumped her shoulder into mine.

"I do not—"

She threw her hand up. "Nice try, but I can see right through you."

My mouth—that was still hanging half open in mid-sentence—fell closed. I guess she had a point. Neon red sign, anyone? It was definitely flashing across my forehead. Didn't change the fact that her suggestion was insane.

"I'm still not doing that, though," I said. No way in hell.

She shrugged, not all that invested in pushing the matter further. "A drink then?" she asked.

"Sure." I shrugged right back.

She got up and made her way through the crowd of bodies, disappearing into the house in search of some drinks.

I glanced back down at my phone. Staring at it for one... two... three... far too many seconds.

I love you,I eventually typed out the words, curious how they felt. They were terrifying. Also kind of liberating.

My heart was beating like a caged drum, echoing through my limbs, daring me to pushsend.Three small words, eight tiny letters, and somehow, they held so much weight. A weight that was clawing at my insides.

I had half a mind to do it. Hitsendand get it over with and let that weight settle onto Neil's shoulders instead.

I swallowed, actually contemplating it even though it was crazy but settling onno way in hell. Because again, it was crazy.

That, and... when it came down to it, I was too scared.

Chicken-shit.

Sydney slammed into me with a loud cackle, and my finger slid over the screen in what literally felt like slow motion. Panic seized my chest as I looked down at my message, now surrounded in a bubble of blue.

“Shit.Shit, shit, shit!” The single word from my mouth got increasingly louder.

“What?” Sydney looked down at my phone in confusion and then gasped. “Oh, shit,” she breathed. “Wait. Wait!” she was saying, but I was too busy diving head-first into

a panic attack. My hands were shaking, and so were my breaths, and my vision was currently going sideways.

What the hell did I just do?!

“Look. Look!” she shouted, prying my phone from my death-grip and holding it in my face. “Your. It autocorrected to your. Look.”

My eyes focused in on the text.

I love your

No period, no declaration. Holy shit, maybe there was a God.

I snatched my phone out of her hands and quickly added: screenplay. I still can’t stop thinking about it.

“That was... dramatic,” Sydney said with a roll of her eyes. “I mean, would it really have been so bad if you’d actually sent it?” She moved behind me and pulled my head back into her stomach, running her fingers through my scalp.

I let out a sigh. “I don’t know. Probably.”

“Spoiler alert” —she stole two of my favorite words— “I’m pretty damn sure he feels the same way, Olli.”

I shook my head. “I don’t know. He asked me to be friends, Syd. What if he changes his mind and wants it to stay that way? I don’t really want to be fucked around again.”

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She handed me a freshly opened can of Coke and sat down in the chair next to me. “Just dicked down,” she deadpanned, nodding seriously, and the Coke that had barely hit my tongue sprayed straight out of my mouth and into her face.

“Oh my god, I can’t with you today!” she screeched, wiping a sweater-covered hand over her features. “Get it together,” she snapped—both her words and her fingers. “Jesus.”

I was laughing so hard I couldn’t catch my breath, and she followed suit. Because honestly, this is what best friends were made for—laughing with you through the things that had the potential to break you.

“It’s pretty crazy, though—you, in love.” She nudged my leg with her foot.

“Apocalyptic, right?” I huffed out a breath.

Her mouth twisted up on one side as she nodded.

If everything wasn’t so up in the air, I didn’t think it would’ve been so bad—loving Neil. It didn’t feel half bad as it was. Not after some time of having no other option than to let it sink in.

Even if I ended up walking away without it, blazing in scorching flames of failure behind me, I was kind of glad to have ticked this first off with someone like Neil.

Sweet, genuine, mostly pure.

Even if he was capable of making his own stupid mistakes, too.

My heart twisted inside my chest at the thought just as my phone vibrated in my hands.

Lol. What are you doing right now? Neil finally messaged me back.

At a lame party with Syd, I typed out slowly. I was still trying to calm my heart and reel in the panic from what I'd almost told him, sitting right here in our message box as a glaring reminder.

Lame? Really? he replied. That sucks. I only just got here.

My head snapped up, eyes immediately searching the backyard for him. I scanned every head at the party at least three times with no luck, until I found him stepping through the slider after my fourth scan, a smirk twisting his lips.

My heart went crazy. Literally, inexplicably, crazy at the sight of him. "Holy fuck," I whispered under my breath, too many feelings flooding me at once, that four-lettered word taking up majority occupancy.

I wanted to bolt. I wanted to stand up and walk across this party and (in my craziest fantasy) watch him fall at my feet.

Dark jeans, black beanie, a plaid button-up beneath a tan jacket, and shoes of the same color covered him from head to toe—all perfectly fitted to his body. All of it making the breath in my lungs disappear entirely. All of him.

It was overwhelming, all the things I felt for him then.

No way could I pretend to be his friend right now. My heart had dug itself out if the



dark pit it was living in and stupidly declared itself his, and I didn't know how the hell to hide it from him anymore. Especially not when I was taken off-guard like this, him waltzing through the party, looking like that, after the confession that had almost gone down but was still perched right at the tip of my tongue as I openly gawked at him.

It was the last possible scenario I'd imagined for tonight—Neil, randomly showing up to this party. Looking casual, and confident, and comfortable, and good enough to—

I cleared my throat, swallowing the consuming thought down.

His eyes glittered the closer he got to me, his smirk shifting into a perfect, soft smile, and it stole my trapped breaths and held them hostage. My heart unlatched its cage, waltzed on out, and handed itself right over to him.

Because it was definitely his now, whether he wanted it or not.

I felt it beating in perfect synchrony to the letters of his name.

“Hey, Liv.” He bit down on his bottom lip, and I looked down at my lap. Took the space of a breath to collect myself before looking back up at him.

“Hey.” I smiled.

I was used to the usual chaos he created inside my brain; it was the silence that was disconcerting.

No fires, no mental traffic jams, no chaos.

It was just Neil and me and a party that had somehow disappeared all around us.

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I stood up and found my breaths. I didn't know if I should hug him or not—if I could, I guess. He slid his hands into his jacket pockets, slightly nervous, subconsciously making the decision for the both of us. If it was any consolation, he looked like he wanted to hug me as much as I wanted to hug him, even if it wasn't going to happen.

“So...” he started. “Lame party, huh?”

I shrugged. “Yeah, I guess. Same old, same old.”

He nodded. Took a breath. Pinched his brows together for a moment before saying, “You want to get out of here?”

My heart swelled, and my breaths stalled. And then I ducked my head to hide my smile. “Yeah, I'd like that, Neil.”

### Chapter 24

#### Admission

We pulled away from the party in Neil's truck, soft music drifting from his speakers—an acoustic version of Prey.

The lyrics felt like a dare, a soundtrack to the movie that was our relationship, sitting on the precipice of hope and vulnerability.

But Neil was quiet. Too quiet. It made me fidget in my seat—tugging at the sleeves of my sweater, tapping my fingers against my thighs, and mashing my lips together

before I couldn't stand the silence a second longer.

"Where are we going?" I asked, tilting my head to the side to face him. The combination of night and streetlights painted his features in a mesmerizing shade of red I couldn't tear my eyes from, fascinating on a level it shouldn't have been fascinating on.

A quiet, "Hmm?" came from his lips as he turned down another street, and my gaze slid over his face—his motley brown eyes, his nose, the curve of his jawline, the pout of his lips. I clenched my hands against the ache to reach out and touch him.

My heartbeat raced, swimming out of my chest and through my limbs. I love you. I love you; I love you; I love you; I love you; it was screaming. I cleared my throat and looked out the window, drawing a butterfly in the dew with my finger.

I had to navigate my way around those words, around the chanting of them in my head before I was able to wring out the ones I needed. "Where are we headed?" I managed again. Without looking at him this time—for all of a few seconds before my eyes were drawn to him again.

"Oh... well..." He laughed under his breath. "I guess I didn't really think that far ahead." His cheeks went a little pink as he looked down at his dash. "I need to get some gas, though, and then..." He shrugged. "Maybe we just drive and see where it takes us?" His tone had risen by the end of his question—as if maybe, just maybe, he was as unsettled and uncertain as I was.

The assumption made me feel at least a little bit better.

"Okay." I nodded, feeling a smile tugging at the corners of my mouth. I smothered it with the back of my hand.

A few minutes later, he pulled into a gas station, throwing me his own tentative smile before shutting the door and leaving me in silence.

I wasn't going to pretend I didn't watch him the whole time he walked through the lot and disappeared into the store. Even from the back, he was attractive enough to leave my heart aching, my throat constricting.

The truth was, I didn't care where the hell we were going. I was content right here—with him. Uncertainty and hidden confessions aside, I felt almost at peace.

I sucked in a breath and released it, sinking into my seat. Neil's truck smelled just like him. Like warmth, and softness, and something entirely too comforting. I let myself relax into it, my gaze trailing him as he strode back to the truck, a small black bag in hand.

He opened the door and hesitated a second before reaching over and setting it down on my lap, swallowing down whatever words were on the tip of his tongue, and then the door closed again and he was off to pump gas.

Curious(okay, way more than curious),I opened up the bag without waiting on him. Coke, Sprite, Flamin' Hot Cheetos, and a whole bunch of my favorite candy sat inside it.

My throat constricted even more, a twisted little knot making a home in there. I cleared my throat, attempting to loosen it, but I conceded the battle because it wasn't interested in going anywhere.

The bag of hot Cheetos made a loud crinkling noise against the quiet as I pulled them out and set them in my lap, followed by the bottle of Coke. I put the rest on the middle seat, cursing at my heart to slow the hell down.

It was completely ridiculous to feel this much over a bag of snacks, but I couldn't help it. I never could when it came to Neil. But it was also just really damn sweet, and—

The driver's side door swung open on that thought, Neil plopping into his seat with a quiet breath.

His head pivoted toward me. "Where to?" Brown eyes melted into mine, somehow erasing the chaos going on inside me.

It had never been so hard to hold myself back from doing what I wanted, but something told me crawling over his middle seat and straddling him wasn't the best idea—considering what had happened the last time we did that in here.

So, anoon that one.

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I blew out a breath. “Anywhere? Nowhere? I don’t really care, Neil. I’m just happy to be here with you.” I lifted my shoulders, going with honesty. I was overflowing with it at the moment, and I was sure he could see it anyway.

He nodded with a slow swallow. “Yeah, me too,” he said. His voice was thick and laced with emotion—something that dug deep, but felt light and hopeful at the same time. And then he cleared his throat, breaking the moment into pieces until they fell away.

His lips hinted at a smile as his engine revved to life, and then we were off.

We drove around—aimlessly, quietly, heart silently battering against my ribcage.

I knew we’d eventually get to the conversation I was anxious to have, but every second slid by like molasses. Which, I guess I was kind of grateful for; I didn’t want to fast forward to later, when I’d have to leave Neil’s quiet space of solitude.

So, I could wait it out and wait for him to bring it up, purposely stretching out the time we’d have together. It didn’t feel like an avoidance. Just a quiet creep toward the inevitable.

Even if holding back my emotions felt like caging a wild animal.

We shared all the snacks in silence, driving from one side of town to the other and back again.

I couldn’t help but start to doubt everything, even if Neil had been nothing but soft

smiles and kind eyes. Maybe the conversation I was hoping for wasn't coming at all. Maybe it was an entirely different conversation he was bracing for. Maybe your morals are so screwed up that he can't see himself getting back together after all. Maybe he—

The thought was obliterated, splintering into tiny fragments. Dust left in the wake of Neil's hand slipping over mine. His fingers lacing through my fingers.

My heart sped up in my chest.

Neil was holding my hand. Duh. But Neil was holding my hand. I glanced up at him. His eyes were full of raw vulnerability, silently asking if this was okay. But of course it was okay.

It was more than fucking okay.

I smiled, squeezing his hand tighter in reply, feeling a million things settle into place between us. A million things I couldn't name except for how right they felt.

"Can we talk about the things we want now?" he asked quietly, not waiting for a response before he barreled into his next question. "What do you want?" His features were pinched together adorably.

I could've been a smartass, I could've made him sweat it out, I could've done a hundred things but be completely truthful with him. But what would be the point? "I just want to be with you, Neil," I admitted. "Whatever that means."

A slow smile crept up his cheeks. "Yeah?"

"I think it's pretty obvious." I glanced down at our hands, at our entire situation and history fluttering in memories behind my eyelids. I loved him. What more was there to

say? (Besides the obvious.)

“I want to be with you, too,” he replied, and tiny, brand-new butterflies stirred to life in my stomach. I breathed out a laugh. I could kiss him; I wanted to kiss him. “You were right, you know?” He sliced straight through my thoughts, dragging my attention back to his serious expression. “About my parents and their expectations of me. I know I can’t live up to them and be happy.”

I swallowed. He hadn’t taken his eyes off me, and I couldn’t tell you if we were stopped in the middle of a busy street or on the side of the road or where we were at, at all.

“I’d rather have the happy,” he said quietly.

I nodded, smiling. Brushing away the stinging pressure pushing at the back of my eyelids. I was proud of him. In a selfish way, and in a not so selfish way, too.

Good on him for figuring it out now, and not five or ten or twenty years down the road into his adulthood. I knew it couldn’t have been easy for him.

“I’m glad you feel that way. You deserve to be happy,” I told him. I shifted in my seat and glanced out the window. Turned out, we were parked along the curb just down the street from my house.

“You make me happy,” he responded, and my heart skipped a beat. “I like who I am when I’m with you.” And another.

“I like who you are when you’re with me, too, Neil,” I said quietly.

He chuckled, directing an amused stare my way. I wanted to trail my lips from one end of his smile to the other. But I smirked softly in response instead. “I like who I am



when I'm with you, too—for the record," I said.

"I know." He threw a smirk right back at me. Him and that I know. I rolled my eyes playfully. I secretly loved it, almost as much as I loved him.

The reminder sobered me a bit, hanging over me like a raincloud threatening to spill all my secrets. It was terrifying, laying your heart out for someone else to take. "So now what?" I asked.

He pulled my hand to his chest. Right where his heart was. I didn't think he had done it intentionally, but I felt it thudding fast beneath our hands, confessing secrets of his own.

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“Now I tell you that my faith is still important to me... and waiting to have sex until marriage is, too.” My stomach dipped at the look he gave me, at the heat in his gaze. Like maybe sex was off the table, but there were some other things that weren’t. Maybe. His soft kiss against my wrist solidified my theory. “I’m still going on my mission, but when I get back, I’m going to move into my own apartment and apply for the fire academy,” he added, and I smiled. I was so down for a Neil in uniform.

He smoothed a hand over the top of his steering wheel, gripping it once before letting it fall back into his lap. Releasing a deep breath, he said, “I won’t live my life guided by anyone’s expectations but my own, and I have you to thank in part for that, but you should know that I’m still figuring out what some of those expectations are.

“I want to figure them out with you, though. I just pray that you’re okay with that.”

I swallowed. Smiled. “Why wouldn’t I be okay with that?”

“I don’t know.” He shook his head, laughing on a breath. “I guess I just wanted to put it all out there.”

I nodded. I could respect that. I could respect everything he was saying. I honestly could. Navigating slow steps with Neil was a hell of a lot better than not taking any steps with him at all. And it was this, this exchange of honesty and vulnerability, more than anything else, that had been missing before. The willingness to admit our feelings and our desires and our plans and just be together.

“Since we’re putting it all out there,” I said. “I should probably tell you that I’m not

perfect—obviously.”I shrugged my shoulders, mouth twisted to the side in a wry smile. “But I don’t care to be.”

My fingers got tangled up in the bottom of my shirt as I pulled at the material. How much did I tell him? How much did I say?All of it?

“I’m not sure if I believe in a god, Neil, and I know I’ll more than likely keep pushing your boundaries even if it’s not intentional. I can be rude, and mouthy, and a pain in the ass, and you don’t even want to know what my mother actually does for a living, but I’ll tell you, because this is me. All of me. My future is a rainbow of ridiculous possibilities, but they all center around you—and how much I love movies and writing screenplays. And that is all I know.

“I’m kind of a mess.” I huffed out a laugh. “But I’m figuring it out, and I want to figure it out with you, too.”

He shook his head. “I don’t want perfect. I just want you.”

I couldn’t tell you when our seat belts had come off, but Neil was across his cab and I was sliding into his arms and into his warmth, and I swear to God—the deity, the universe, whatever—there wasn’t anything that felt as good as being wrapped up in Neil again.

And then I was a liar, because his lips slid over mine, and his hands curled around my face, and this was the best feeling in the world.

I felt like I could finally breathe.

Sunshine and warmth surrounding me, Neil’s soft lips devouring me. His tongue, and his teeth, and his hands, and holy shit...

He pulled away slowly, resting his forehead against mine. His breaths drifted across my lips.

They tasted like candy, and the thought made me smile.

“Hey, Neil?” I whispered softly.

“Yeah, Liv?” he breathed. His hands were still wrapped around my face, his thumbs painting a pattern over my cheeks.

“I think I should probably also tell you that I love you,” I finally confessed.

His eyes pinched closed, fingers tightening in my hair as a relieved breath rushed out of him. When he opened his eyes, his gaze melted into mine, and there were too many emotions floating between us to name. “I love you, too, Liv. God, do I love you.” And his lips slammed back down on mine.

Right—my heart screamed for the second time tonight, flooding my bloodstream with the sentiment. “Say it again.”

He chuckled. “I love you, Liv.”

I pulled him closer, tasting the words on his tongue.

We said them again and again, over and over between kisses. Soft and achingly slow ones that stretched out into eternity. Turning into an entirely different kind of conversation altogether—one of hands and mouths and sounds that led me directly into an inferno.

I swear, Neil growled something about burning in the fire right along with me.

I snuck inside my house at two am. Snuck was a technical word, though, because Linda wouldn't have cared.

But I immediately froze when I saw her sitting at the island in the kitchen, crying her eyes out.

No, bawling.

Every tired muscle in my body seized up, my bones locking in place, my heart climbing up into my throat and constricting my airways. Linda did not cry—ever. I hadn't seen her cry once in my entire life, so if she was crying, something was definitely, seriously wrong. But I couldn't for the life of me dig up the words to ask her what the hell was going on.

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“It’s Jason,” she hiccupped of her own volition, and the world beneath my feet completely shattered.

No.No, no, no.

You would think it would be chaotic when your world combusts.Noise, and pain, and chaos.But it was the exact opposite. Everything went still and quiet. The kind of silence that signals the aftermath of a deadly explosion, knocking everything off-kilter. Color bled from my world, and I fell into a dark hole with no visible way out; I was suffocating on the realization that something had happened to Jason.

“What?”I whispered from the darkness, the most terrified, broken word I’d ever spoken in my life. Tears shoved their way to the surface, and there was no blinking or pushing or forcing them back. “Mom!”I cried. “What are you saying?!” She hadn’t said anything since rocking the foundation I’d always stood on. There was no way she was saying what I thought she was saying. She couldn’t be saying what I thought she was saying.

“Yeah, sorry.” She scoffed. “It’s just your brother—he’s getting married.Married.Did I not teach you two anything?” She sniffled, and anger immediately spilled through my veins, flooding my system with a litany of curse words I wanted to hurl at her. They got tangled up with the fear and terror of the past most infinitely long thirty seconds of my life.

“What?”I spat.

“He’s getting married! To some harlot he hardly knows.”

I took a breath. And another. And about fifteen more before striding closer. My hands were clenched into two tight fists. I never would've actually laid a hand on my mother, but I had also never wanted to slap her more in all the years I'd been alive.

"Jason? He's fine. Is that what you're saying?" The last words broke on my lips. Reality was shaky, fogged by the alternatives I'd imagined when she uttered Jason's name—like he had just fucking died. I could've killed her. I honestly could've killed her.

"What? Yes, he's fine. I guess. If you consider making the biggest mistake of his life fine." She was so oblivious it made my blood boil.

"Mom!" I screamed. "You scared the shit out of me! Do you not get how that sounded? I thought something happened to him—I thought—" I broke and started crying. Full-on crying.

Jason was my foundation. My brother, my parental figure, my friend, my mentor, my pain in the ass, my everything.

And Linda—god, Linda.

"I'm sorry, baby," she said, her features pinched together in concern. "But this is just—"

"Get over yourself!" I shouted. "So, he's getting married. So what! Big fucking deal! That means he's happy, Mom! God! I can't believe you. I could kill you right now!"

She was saying something, but I was done with listening. She waved a letter in the air, a letter I realized was mine. I snatched it out of her hands and stormed outside, attempting to calm myself.

Though I wasn't sure there was any use in trying.

Linda was officially insane. Off her rocker, take a gallon of meds, and commit herself, kind of insane.

It took at least a thousand breaths before I felt even remotely calm. My heart was still pounding, anger still floating around in my system, just waiting to be ignited.

I'd been rocked from one end of the emotional spectrum to the other today, and I was...exhausted.

And then it hit me. Jason. Married. I rerouted my attention and burst out in hysterical, delirious laughter. I guess it would've come as a huge shock if it hadn't been drowned out by Linda's insanity. Now, I was just relieved.

He was going to have a field day with what had just gone down.

I laid down on the driveway, tears drying in tracks down my cheeks. I didn't bother to wipe them away.

The letter crinkled in my palm, and I smoothed it out on my lap before holding it up above my face.

Hey, kiddo.

I'm going to make this short and sweet, since I'd kind of just like to get to the point. I tried calling earlier today, but no one answered, and I didn't want to run the risk of Linda finding out before you. (You'd chew my ass the fuck out.) And I won't be able to call until next Sunday, so a letter it is.

I'm just going to come forward with it: I'm getting married.



I know. I KNOW.

But our last conversation got me thinking, and there's this girl. Man, this girl. She's my one, Olls. The one that makes all of Linda's bullshit just that... bullshit.

We met the first day of training—and don't be mad, but she's the reason it took me a few days outside of training to get back home to you. I would've told you about her then, but I wasn't sure of what I was feeling. It was new, and to be honest, I was in a bit of denial.

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I learned pretty quick to get my shit together if I wanted to keep her, though. And now here I am.

She's going to be stationed across the country from me for a while, and I didn't want to let her go. So I tied her to me forever.

Dick move, maybe, but I love her. And she loves me enough to marry me, so I guess I'm not looking too rough.

I can't wait for you to meet her, kiddo.

Miss you and talk to you soon.

XO,

Jason

I cracked a smile. Don't get me wrong, I was going to give him a world of shit for this just because I could, but my happiness for him outweighed all the craziness of the last half-hour.

Jason.Married.

It was pretty freaking awesome. I couldn't wait to talk to him, to see him and hug the crap out of him and meet this girl who'd flipped his world upside down. Kind of like Neil had wrecked mine.

In the best way possible.

I shoved off the ground and made my way into the house and up the stairs, throwing myself down onto my bed in a heap of exhaustion.

From the exchange of I love you for the first time in my life, to Linda's majorly screwed-up display of insanity, to Jason getting married, it was one hell of a day.

Emotional whiplash was a phrase that easily came to mind.

The thought didn't linger in there for long, though, as I drifted off to sleep.

(With a smile on my face, for the record.)

## Chapter 25

### Paper Butterflies

Sydney shoved the bathroom stall door open a few days later with a loud bang. "Not pregnant. Thank you, Jesus!" Her words bounced off the walls in an echo.

I tilted my head to the side. "I'm not sure Jesus has much to do with your sex life, but whatever." I shrugged. "Thank you, Jesus!" I held my hands up toward the ceiling and then smacked her upside the head with my right one. "Condoms from now on, idiot."

She looked at me with rounded eyes, her hair askew. A piece was stuck across her face, and it had me biting back a snort of laughter. "Okay." She nodded. "I guess I deserved that. But if you try me like that again, I will beat your ass. Got it?"

I scoffed. "I'd like to see you try."

She fainted toward me, but I didn't so much as flinch. After a short, awkward standoff (on her end), I cocked a brow at her, my lips curving up into a smirk.

"Ugh, you're so annoying!" She spun around on the balls of her feet and headed to the sink to wash her hands, chucking the pregnancy test in the trash on her way.

"But you love me." I squeezed her from behind, my arms wrapped around her torso. "And yay for not being pregnant...dumbass."

"We should celebrate." She ran right over my comment.

"I am not celebrating your inability to take birth control correctly," I deadpanned.

"Fine, whatever." She rolled her eyes. "But I have something I want to show you. Come on." She dragged me out of the bathroom by the sleeve of my shirt.

Campus was completely empty as we made our way down the stairs and into the square. When she didn't lead us out to the parking lot like I'd expected, I narrowed my eyes in suspicion.

"What did you want to show me, exactly?" I asked.

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“You’ll see.” She waggled her eyebrows, and I groaned. Who knew what was up her sleeve? The possibilities ranged from mundane to ridiculous to obnoxious with this one.

Neil. It was Neil who was up her sleeve.

A half-naked, dripping wet and pushing himself out of the water, Neil.

It was pure stupidity that I hadn’t made it to one of his swim meets yet. (In my defense, I’d been too caught up in ignoring my feelings at the beginning of all this, and then there was the whole truck fiasco, and then the misery that followed, and then the making up, of course.) But here I was now, all thanks to Syd.

Reasons why I loved her, people. Reasons. Why. I. Loved. Her.

“Oh my god.” I stumbled over the bleacher, righted myself, and sat down, huffing out a dramatic breath.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” she whispered with wide eyes. I mean, I was sure they would’ve been wide had I actually been looking at her. They sounded wide. Or something.

Whatever.

Neil was currently taking place on his mark. He raised his hands above his head, the muscles in his back contracting, and a horn blared just before he dove into the water. I turned to Sydney. “I can’t—I’m just—I think—Fuck—What?” Swim shorts were

way tighter than I'd expected them to be. That was for sure.

Her head fell back in laughter. "Oh my god," she said between cackles. She took my chin in her hand and looked me over. "I think hot, half-naked Neil broke you."

"Yeah, definitely," I said, dead serious, and it only made her laugh harder.

To say the next two hours of Neil's swim meet were eventful would be a massive understatement. I had a front row seat to every reason why he had a six-pack and muscled, toned arms and legs. In a short word: he put in work. Swimming was a lot more strenuous than I would've thought—you know, when you were in a competition to kick everyone else's asses. Because that's exactly what Neil was doing. He was the fastest on his team. Which made me ridiculously giddy for whatever reason.

Me, giddy.

Only Neil. I smirked as he blew through the water for his last race, annihilating his opponents.

"Hell yeah!" I screamed, much to Syd's amusement. She cackled beside me, obnoxiously loud. But she had just been chanting Neil's name like a crazy person five seconds ago, so we were equally matched in ridiculousness.

Neil won the race, or match, or heat, or whatever it was called, and I jumped up with Sydney; we made an embarrassment of ourselves. It wasn't like we gave a shit, though.

"Eagle!" one of his teammates shouted, clapping him on the back when he strode out of the pool for the fourth time today. (I wasn't going to lie, it was my favorite part. Muscles tensing—all dripping wet—and those swim shorts. Had I mentioned that they were tight? Like, tight, tight? Ahem.)

The rowdiness of his teammates pulled me out of tunnel vision mode. They were all hyped, all smiles and laughter. I would be too if I'd demolished the competition like they had.

I watched Neil as he responded with the same excited energy, his eyes lit with pride and satisfaction.

When he eventually turned and scanned the crowd, his gaze quickly finding mine, the butterflies in my stomach went crazy. His smirk, the amusement in his eyes, his Adam's apple sliding up and down his throat, all those ripples on that damn stomach of his...

I swallowed, all virtuous thoughts fleeing my brain. (If I was being honest, there weren't that many lingering in there to begin with.) I pulled my shit together just in time to realize he was headed our way. Long, careful strides closing the distance between us.

"I didn't expect to see you here, not that I'm complaining," he said as he stopped in front of us.

"You can thank Sydney for that," I responded. "I know I will be." I cleared my throat to cover up my snort of laughter. "So, that was, um... strangely enticing."

Neil threw his head back in a deep laugh.

I wanted to kiss the column of his throat, lick it in front of everyone here—both things I was sure he would like but wouldn't be cool with in front of an audience. What was wrong with me?

Nothing, nothing at all.

“I thought you were showing off, bro,” one of his teammates said, stepping up beside him. “But now I know why.” His gaze met mine. “Nice to finally meet you, Olivia.”

“We have English together, Matt,” I deadpanned. He sat right in front of me, and we’d been paired up more than a few times on random assignments.

He laughed. “You’re officially Eagle’s girl now, though, right? It’s different.”

I raised my brows and directed my gaze at Neil. A tinge of pink rose up his cheeks before quickly fading away. He shrugged, not saying a word, obviously leaving the answer in my hands.



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Are you my girl?he was silently asking—that perfect in-between, not quite a smile, not quite a smirk thing twisting his lips. He was too attractive for his own good sometimes.

I gave the butterflies in my stomach a slow and painful death by not taking another breath, figuring out my course of action.

Of course I was his girl, but was I going to admit it in front of Sydney and Matt? And the other four teammates of Neil's that now crowded up behind him?

Sure, why not.I shrugged.

I was never one to back down from a challenge. And who was I to tell a half-naked Neil he didn't own me right now?

I stepped forward, pushed up onto my toes, and planted a kiss on his mouth for everyone to see. (Chlorine, and Neil.A strange yet always satisfying combo.)

Hoots and cheering broke out around us.No, literally.Like a goddamn cheesy ass nineties film, his friends were hollering Neil's praises—Sydney included.

I wasn't all that mad about it.

Yep, people. Mine.I kissed him again, claiming him right back.

When we separated, we were both smiling.

Yeah, I could get used to this, I thought as he leaned down, his lips brushing the shell of my ear. “Can we hang out tonight? Watch a movie or something?” he asked.

Um, duh. “Yeah, for sure.” I played it cool.

“Sweet.” He stepped away with a smile. “I’ll see you in a bit, then; I have to go get changed now.” He directed his attention to Sydney. “Thanks for dragging her here.” He nodded toward me, and I rolled my eyes. There would be no dragging about it next time. I wasn’t telling him that, though. Or Sydney.

He planted a kiss on my cheek, and I watched him walk away.

Matt spun around on the heels of his feet and directed a shout at Sydney from halfway across the natatorium. “Maybe next time you could scream my name instead?!”

I snorted in laughter as he threw her a wink that probably had her panties melting. Her fingers tightened around mine in confirmation. Yep. Nuts, this one.

I loved the shit out of her.

“Beautiful, intense, strong, breathtaking,” I read the four words out loud, one on each wing of the paper butterfly I held in my hand.

A blush worked its way up my neck and through my cheeks.

We were sitting on the tailgate of Neil’s truck in my driveway, and he was wrapped around me from behind. I was shrouded in Neil. Legs hugging my legs, arms around my waist, chin resting on my shoulder. At least he couldn’t see me blushing this way.

He cleared his throat, pulling his arms around me tighter. “Remember when you

when you said all those things in my pool, about my name and the way you see me?” he asked. The breath of his words breezed over my neck, sending a slow trail of goose bumps up my spine and down my arms.

I shook my head. “Nope. Not at all. You were half-naked, Neil. That’s all I remember,” I lied.

His fingers pressed into my sides, threatening torture.

I tensed up. “Don’t you dare,” I whispered through my teeth, and he chuckled, his fingers digging in a millimeter farther. “Shit, yes, I remember. I remember!” I relented—much to his amusement.

He laughed into my neck, forcing a shiver through me.

“Well, this is how I see you,” he said. Sweeping my hair over the front of my shoulder, he placed kisses down the back of my neck between each word he spoke. “Beautiful.” Kiss. “Intense.” Kiss. “Strong.” Kiss. “Breathtaking.”

Every single one of my reactions to him turned up a notch—the blushing, the goose bumps, my heartbeats, my breaths. I turned around in his hold, meeting his dessert-colored gaze. Uh-huh, yeah. This was really it, wasn’t it?

“You really love me, don’t you? Like, actually love me. How?” I asked, stunned. Because that was how he saw me? I could’ve easily argued that he was missing a few adjectives. Brash, stubborn, mouthy, rude just to name a few.

He chuckled. “What do you mean how? I just do.” He shrugged. “I don’t think we choose these things.”

“So you’re saying you wouldn’t choose me?” I immediately responded in challenge,

like the total pain in the ass I was.

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“No, I would,” he said, wholly serious. That little frown line of his made an appearance between his brows. “I would choose you, Liv. Without a doubt, I would choose you.”

I swallowed past the small knot that had formed in my throat, refusing to admit that my eyes were glassy.

I was not crying over Neil’s confession. I was not.

(Okay, maybe I was. A little.)

His hands slid over my cheeks, cradling my face. “I love you,” he said, and pressed a soft kiss against my lips. “You make me happy, and you challenge me, and you make me feel...alive. You—”

I shut him up with a kiss. If he kept going, I was going to embarrass myself and full-on cry like a total mush. As it was, my heart already felt like it had swelled up to at least three times its size, overflowing with all the reasons why I loved him, too.

I moved my mouth against his with a need so deep it bordered on physically painful, tongue stroking his tongue, hands pulling at his hair. It could’ve gone on for seconds or minutes or days, but I couldn’t have told a soul which one it was.

I slid down off the edge of his tailgate, breaking our kiss and tugging him along with me by his shirtsleeve with a smirk twisting my lips. I led him up my driveway, through my front doors, and up the stairs—it wasn’t what it sounded like. I wasn’t dragging him into a den of sin with me.

We'd already had the sex talk—again. It had gone something like:

Me: Why? Because it's a sin?

Him: A chuckle. I mean, that's part of it. But it's mostly about committing ourselves to each other before God. I want us to belong to each other, in every way, before we take that step.

Think about how much better it'll feel, too, when we do.

Me: A thick swallow. Screaming at the roof of his truck—to whatever god existed beyond it—that I guess I could wait to share with him the sacred place that was my vagina.

Him: Kissing me to shut me the hell up, his lips turned up in laughter against mine.

And that was the end of that conversation.

As I led him up my stairs now, he tossed me a curious look. Eyes glittering in question, lips curved in amusement. I pulled him into my room and shut the door behind us, causing his eyes to widen even more in curiosity.

I walked over to my dresser and plucked a bright green origami butterfly off of it, grabbing a purple pen on my way back to Neil. I dropped them both in his hands.

He pulled the butterfly apart, chuckling at the words inside.

Will you be my boyfriend? Circle one: Yes or No.

He tossed them both to the ground, hefting me over his shoulder instead, and threw me onto the bed, climbing over me.

The warm brown strands of his hair fell over his face as he smiled down at me, and then he leaned down and kissed me. “Yeah, I guess I can break my rule for you.”

I laughed, yanking him back in and kissing him harder. “Good.”

“Good?”

“Yeah. Otherwise, I’d have to tie you up and keep you in my closet. And what a sad existence that would be. For you.” I mock pouted.

He threw his head back in a deep laugh. “It’s definitely your devious side that does it for me, Liv.”

## Chapter 26

### Saint and Sinner

A calming buzz filled the room a few weeks later, humming in a sinful symphony. Tattoo guns marking strangers’ skin for life.

Neil seemed more nervous than I was. Which wasn’t saying much because I wasn’t actually all that nervous. It was written all over the features of his face, though. His pinched brows, the thin line his lips were making, the intense look in his eyes.

“Are you nervous about the pain, or the sin?” I asked him, a smirk tilting my lips.

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He jolted out of wherever his mind was at, his grip on my hand loosening. “I’m not nervous,” he said.

“Really,” I deadpanned, and his cheeks went a little pink.

“Okay, a little. But it’s not what you’re thinking.” He shook his head. “Really.”

“Uh-huh. So you’re not wondering if I’ll be going to hell for this?”

He laughed. “No, Liv. Hell wouldn’t take you even if you wanted to go. You’re pure, you just don’t know it yet.”

“Me? Pure?” I burst out in laughter, cracking up at the ceiling. “That has to be the most backward thing anyone has ever said to me, Neil,” I said. As soon as I could catch my breath again, anyway.

“We’ve already established that we’re not all that different, you and me,” he countered. His eyes were bright with amusement, with a comfortability and ease that had formed between us.

And yeah, I guess he was right. “Yeah, okay,” I relented. “But I still think assuming I’m not going to hell is pushing it.”

He smirked. “I’ll drag you out of there myself if I have to.”

“Okay, deal.” I laughed. I could totally see him doing it. Somehow defying the laws of his afterlife and dragging my sorry ass out of hell behind his glowing, angelic



form.

“You ready?” Mike—the tattoo artist—said, peeking over the low wall that separated the waiting room from the rest of the shop.

“Yep,” I said, and I tugged Neil along with me.

Mike fixed the stencil to my arm, made sure the placement was to my liking, and got to it, dragging the needle of the gun over my skin.

Neil tensed, and it made me smother another laugh. “What is with you?” I asked him.

“I don’t know.” He let out a breath. “I guess I don’t like the idea of someone hurting you.”

Oh.

Wow.Okay.

Hand to Neil’s God, my heart melted inside my chest and spilled out all over the place. Totally giving me away. Shining in my eyes, and tilting my lips into a smile, and tightening my fingers around his.

I never would’ve guessed that these kinds of moments existed. Where just looking at someone could remind you how much you loved them all over again. A laugh, a smile, a few words from their mouth. The way he was looking at me in the middle of the buzzing tattoo shop—worried and slightly nervous, but with a hint of fascination, too.

I felt myself loving each piece of him.

I could hardly remember any of the reasons I'd tried so hard not to anymore. He'd taken all my preconceived notions and beaten them to a pulp. Took everything Linda had ever said about love and exposed them for the bunch of sad lies that they were.

And I couldn't think of a single reason why it was supposed to be so scary anymore, either.

Sure, I'd hardened my heart and made a half-assed attempt at avoiding it, but in the end, there was no deciding if I did or didn't fall for Neil.

It was more like: Oh, shit. There's a cliff, and I want to see what's over the edge of it, but I'm speeding way too fast, and... yep, we'll be skidding off the ledge now.

Love was a blindfolded push into a canyon. With a faulty parachute. And maybe you'd survive it, or maybe you wouldn't.

But Neil was worth the risk.

Somehow, I knew he was a safe place to land, and it made everything else okay.

I clutched his hand tighter, dragging it up to my mouth and scraping my teeth over his finger in a soft bite. He smiled, a small chuckle hidden beneath his breath, and his cheeks went pink again as he eyed Mike beside us—who was still inking the small and simple outline of a film reel on the inside of my arm, right above the butterfly.

My lips twisted into a cocky smirk, and Neil shook his head in response, the pink fading from his cheeks slowly. And it hit me all over again how much I loved him.

(Yeah, I was calling it. I was a lovesick idiot. There, I said it. I wasn't mad about it.)

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Mike finished up my tattoo and wiped down the area with a paper towel. I squealed a tiny bit—a tiny bit—over the perfect little film reel before he wrapped it up, and then Neil and I were on our way. (After I paid my tab and tip, of course.)

We walked out of the tattoo shop wrapped around each other, laughing about...something. Honestly, I couldn't even remember what it was we were talking about. The tone and lilt of his voice and the vibrato of his laughter caught my attention more than anything.

He spun around in the middle of the parking lot and walked backward with my hand still in his.

“Hey...” His steps slowed, and I pushed up on my toes and planted a kiss on his mouth. (I couldn't help it; I'd kind of needed his mouth on mine since we'd walked into the tattoo shop earlier.) The rest of his words were smothered against my lips, and then disappeared completely. His tongue drifted over the seam of my mouth, and I opened for him, letting him in.

We kissed in the parking lot like no one else on this planet existed. If they did, they could fuck off and wait—

We got honked at, of course.

And then Neil was blushing all over again.

He cleared his throat, pulled us out of the way, and asked out of what felt like nowhere, “Will you go to church with me tomorrow?”

My stomach did a weird little flip. I couldn't tell if it was a good flip, or a bad flip, or what. But it was a contrast from the butterflies that had been fluttering around in there a second ago.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," my mouth and brain settled on, bypassing my thoughts entirely.

"Why?" He chuckled, his brows furrowed together.

I looked down at my clothes as if they were all the answer he needed. I was basically dressed like a modern-day witch, sin freshly inked onto my arm for added emphasis. "I might burn the second I walk in there?" I tried.

His head fell back in laughter. "God, I love you." He sighed. "But just come. Once. For me. Trust me when I say it won't be anything like what you're expecting."

But I didn't really know what to expect.

And what the hell did one even wear to church, anyway?

Was it the kind of church where girls couldn't wear pants? "Am I allowed to wear pants?" I asked, and his lips twisted in amusement.

"You can wear whatever you're comfortable wearing, Liv," he said.

"Okay. Well..." I trailed off, tossing the idea around in my head. It's not that I was opposed to it, I'd just never had any interest in going before.

In being judged.

Possibly burned at the stake.

Only Neil would actually make me consider it.

“I mean, I guess—sure, I’ll go with you.” I shrugged. Best case scenario, he was right, and it wouldn’t be all that bad. Worst case scenario, my presence would cause some holy water to go flying. Either way kind of sounded like a good time to me.

“You will?” he asked, his voice rising with his obvious surprise at how easy I’d relented.

I rolled my eyes. “Yes, Neil, I’ll go.”

I wasn’t even going to pretend like his answering smile didn’t light me up inside like the fourth of July.

I was dying inside. Slowly. From being jumpy and uncomfortable and way out of my element. I tugged at my shirt, twisted my hands in front of me, slipped them into my back pockets.

Yes, I was nervous. Obviously. But I didn’t know why. Not really. Well, maybe it had something to do with the fact that I knew how important church was to Neil, and if I somehow screwed this up...

I didn’t know, maybe—

He slipped an arm around me, his whisper close to my ear when he said, “Relax, babe. I really think you’re going to like it.”

I wanted to scoff at him, but my mind snagged on a single word.

Babe.

My thoughts did a complete one-eighty.

“What?” He narrowed his eyes with a soft smile.

I shook my head, biting back my own grin. He did not want to know the sudden thoughts I was having about him as we were about to step foot inside his place of worship. All because of that one new word: Babe. (He was definitely, definitely dragging me out of hell someday.)

His fingers slipped through mine as he led me through the front doors, and a self-consciousness I wasn't familiar with forced me to look down at my outfit again—black skirt, black tights, black boots, white shirt tucked in. It was the best I had to offer.

They could take me or leave me, I guess.

We walked past a mostly full auditorium that smelled like unscented candles and dried rain, though there were still people mingling around in the halls. He smiled at some of them and waved to a few others before leading me around the corner and down another hallway. Away from the room that clearly held service.

“Where are we going?”

“You'll see.” He smiled, and there was something about his tone that immediately made me suspicious.

I narrowed my eyes in response. “What are you up to?”

“Nothing.” He bit down on his bottom lip, attempting to hide his growing smile.

My suspicion rose even further. And then we landed at a windowed room full of screaming kids and bright colors painted all over the place. He opened the double doors and tugged me inside, noise engulfing us.

Kids were loud.

“This is where we’ll be today,” he threw over his shoulder.

I moved closer to him as we walked through the chaos, whispering into his ear. “You’re totally hiding me in here, aren’t you,” I joked.

He jerked to a stop mid-step, and I bumped into the back of him. That little crease between his brows was back again. “I would never—”

“I was just kidding,” I interrupted him. “I know you wouldn’t.” I mean, he’d brought me here in the first place and didn’t even flinch at my outfit. So, I was one-hundred percent kidding. Even if my insecurities were screaming that maybe he should be hiding me.

The crease between his brows smoothed out. “Good.” He smiled, his hand tightening around mine before letting go. “This is where I spend all of my Sunday mornings,” he added, and his smile shifted into something a little shier.

Full honesty, I wanted to kiss him in front of fifty screaming kids.

I cleared my throat and looked over the room. “Where do we even—what do we do?” My eyes widened.

He laughed. “Keep them happy and entertained. Stop them from eating markers or base diving off the bookshelf. Basically, we keep them from trying to kill themselves every five seconds.”

My mouth fell open, and he laughed even harder.

“You’ll do fine.” He smirked playfully. There were three other daycare aides that he introduced me to, and then he kind of just... left me to it.

Basically, he threw me into shark-infested waters without a life raft. Thanks, Neil.

I looked over the sea of children, finding one in the corner of the room that looked somewhat harmless. Making my way over to him, I sat down in a tiny plastic seat that was way too small for me.

“Hi there,” I said. The kid was currently coloring at the table between us all by himself. “Mind if I join you?”

He glanced up at me, sizing me up. Without saying a word, he slid a coloring book toward me. I took the in with the miniature mafioso and flipped through the pages of the coloring book, landing on a page of butterflies. We colored in silence, me and the cute little wordlesscapo.

Well, we colored in silence, while being drowned out by the sounds of screaming and crying and excited peals of laughter all over the room. There was a high level of chaos surrounding us that I was trying my best to stay invisible from.

It worked. For a while.

“Excuse me,” a small, high-pitched voice said, its tiny owner tugging at my skirt.



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I looked down at her—dark, braided hair with colorful beads clinking together at the ends. Innocent little brownish-green eyes. “Yes?” I answered her.

“Will you play grocery shopping with me?” she asked, her ‘r’ rounding out into a ‘w’, and it was probably the cutest thing I’d ever heard, making it impossible to tell her no.

The next hour flew by faster than I would’ve thought possible. Running the cash register at Toddlers-R-Us was no joke. Kids were crazy.

I stood up and stretched my arms above me, searching the room for Neil and finding him sitting at a small table across the room. Making my way over to him, I paused when I realized a little girl in a pink, frilly dress was painting his nails, and I heard him laughing softly.

“This color is soooo pretty!” the little girl said.

He chuckled. “I like it, Lily.”

My heart skipped a beat. And then a few more.

I remembered that day at Inkcafé, with Jason, when I’d seen that black nail polish on his thumb. This was where it had come from, I was sure of it.

It was blue this time, though. And he sat there, listening patiently, as the girl droned on and on about something that sounded awfully important to her tiny little four-year-old self.

Having kids someday had never been on my radar before. The thought of it scared the shit out of me now—I didn't want to do to some innocent kid what Linda had done to Jason and me.

But watching Neil with that little girl... my heart warmed. And my ribcage felt just like that—a cage, trapping all the warmth inside me as I watched them.

Maybe I could do that someday. Have kids of my own.

You know, someday in the far, far, far future.

The next handful of days, weeks, and months passed by with warp speed. They all just kind of bled together and flowed past us, a ridiculous montage of being attached at the hip and disgustingly in love.

Gag, I know.

But I secretly loved it.

We went to prom together, totally screwing with the way of things and going dressed up as Elizabeth and Darcy, because why the hell not? I mean, for reference, our prom was themed "Hollywood."

Probably not the way they meant it, but whatever.

I'd like to say we got a hotel room and I totally had my way with him, but that wasn't the case. We were rounding the bases, though. Slowly.

I wasn't mad about it. All the firsts with Neil felt like home runs anyway. And we were just... enjoying our time together. Getting to know each other deeper in other ways. And it was enough for the both of us.

Graduation was just a week away, and then after that, we were leaving for the summer.

Him, on mission. Me, to Europe.

We were sticking to our own plans—yes—but when we got back, we were making a bunch of new ones together, too.

And god, I couldn't wait.

Because Neil.

He was sort of perfect, wasn't he?

I eyed him from across the cab of his truck, watching his lips wrap around the straw of his Coke and Sprite concoction, eyeballing his neck as his Adam's apple slid up and down his throat. Popping a hot Cheeto into my mouth, I lifted my brows at him, bringing all my corrupted thoughts to light without saying a word.

His cheeks broke out into a blush, but his fingers slipped through mine, bringing them up to his mouth. He kissed my hand and held it against his chest as his blush slowly faded away.

And I swallowed thickly.

Yeah, he was pretty damn perfect.

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Neil.MyNeil.

Neil freaking Summers.

He was a surprise, that was for sure.

He never cursed, or skipped class, or had ever even had a drop of alcohol. He went to church every Sunday (and Monday and Wednesday), was saving himself for marriage, had never stolen a thing in his life, and was the most genuinely good person I knew.

And his father was a preacher, for Christ's sake. While my parental unit was... well, pretty much the exact opposite of that.

In comparison, Neil was an angel, and I was the goddamn devil, but somehow, we balanced each other out.

Saint and sinner, angel and devil.

A little light to wash out the dark; a little dark to make the light burn brighter.

But we'd already established that I wasn't as evil as I thought I was, and Neil wasn't as wholesome, either.

Whatever we were, though, our halves bled together perfectly.

Epilogue

The End

“Did you know that the life cycle of a butterfly is lived in four different stages?” I asked Neil.

He giggled. “Yeah, Olive. You told me that yesterday.”

“But isn’t it so cool?!” I fell back on the grass field at recess, where Neil and I always played pretend and drew dragons and other cool things. “But they totally change, and change again, and change again! Into something brand new. They start all over, and then they fly away, way more beautiful than when they started as just a tiny little egg.”

He laughed again. “That is really cool.”

“I don’t think you think it’s cool.” I pouted.

“I do, Olive. I do.”

Neil turned to me with a lollipop held in his smiling mouth.

He’d been back from his summer mission for a week now, and I’d just gotten home from my backpacking trip in Europe yesterday (sans any hot Italian guys, FYI), and I think I was more in love with him now than I was when we left.

His lollipop was pulled from said mouth with a little pop.

Leave it to Neil to turn something as innocent as enjoying a sucker into something that felt like genuine foreplay. His wholesomeness clashed with his deviant side a little too effortlessly these days, and I almost couldn’t tell the difference anymore.

Neil was sin topped with a halo, walking backward down the sidewalk from my house to his truck—warm eyes crinkled at the corners because of his growing smile. Slipping his hand into his pocket, he pulled out four tiny paper butterflies and halted his steps.

“What are those?” I kept walking until I was right up in his space.

The lollipop went back in his mouth, and I gently tugged it from his lips and put it in mine. Strawberry. And Neil. Yum.

He laughed through his breath, holding the butterflies up closer between us. “These,” he said, pressing his forehead against mine, “are for you.”

I looked up into his eyes with a smirk. “Well, I kind of figured that much. But what for?”

“There are four.” He took a slow, weighted breath and released it. “One for each stage of a butterfly’s life,” he said, stepping away and pulling his sucker with him.

“Thief.” I narrowed my eyes at him.

He continued straight through his smirk. “Four, for a completed metamorphosis and a brand-new beginning, more beautiful than the start.”

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And okay. Holy shit, but I actually got choked up. “That is really freaking sweet, Neil,” I said, and he pulled me back into him, lollipop thrown in the bush or something. I didn’t know, actually, because I was sidetracked at the moment. But Neil wasn’t a litterer, so he must’ve folded it back in the wrapper and put it in his pocket somehow.

But anyway—a new beginning, absolutely.

As it turned out, neither one of us really wanted to leave Texas. So, I was going to start at a community college this fall while working at the theater and messing with my screenplays, and Neil was officially starting training at the fire academy next month. (Apparently, Texas had one of the top fire academies in the country—yay for Neil, and yay for me.) But loaded up in the back of Neil’s truck? Were the contents of my entire bedroom and closet. Yep, we were moving out. (Not together. Not yet, anyway. I was still working on getting him to commit that sin with me sometime in the near future.

Sydney was moving out with me, and Jax with Neil. Into two apartments in the same complex, so it was close enough, I guess.)

“You have to open them.” Neil brought my attention back to the butterflies sitting in his palm. He stepped closer, and his breath breezed over my face. It smelled like strawberries. And it tasted like strawberries when I put my mouth on his. He let out a little moan, and greed curled itself around my limbs. My fingers got tangled in his shirt as I dragged him into me and deepened our kiss.

He moved his lips over mine, our tongues sliding together, and I nipped him with my

teeth as he pulled himself away.

He spilled the four tiny butterflies into my hand. All pastel colored—blue, purple, pink, and green.

“The blue one first,” he said quietly. When I met his gaze, I could tell he was nervous. His heartbeat was pulsing at the base of his throat.

Interesting.

I unfolded the blue one and read it out loud. “Will.”

“Now the green,” he said, even quieter.

“You.” Now my heart was racing, sending a jittery feeling through my whole body.

“Purple... and then the pink,” he finished.

I opened the third one. “Marry,” I said, though I’m not sure the word actually came out of my mouth. I crumpled the fourth one up in my hand. “Are you insane?!” I shrieked. My eyes were wide and slightly terrified; I was stunned stupid.

“Open the butterfly, Liv.”

“No.”

“Open it.” He laughed.

“Absolutely not.” I threw it into the bush, where Neil’s lollipop may or may not have been hiding. I was still going with not.



“Liv!” He chuckled. Thank god he was amused because I was not opening up that butterfly. Neil was officially nuts. Moving out together but not together was one thing. But marriage?

No freaking way.

Not anytime soon, anyway. If I was being truthful, the idea didn’t terrify me nearly as much as it used to, but we were eighteen!

He tugged me in close, hands clasped around my lower back, and full honesty... the look on his face sort of melted me—amusement, mixed in with adoration, and what was definitely love.

I slid my hands up his chest, unsure of whether I should yank him in and kiss his insanity away, or if I should shove him away from me. Because he was crazy. Possibly even gave Linda a run for her money. But I guess I kind of liked that sort of thing.

I pulled his shirt in my grip and pushed my mouth into his.

I put a lot into our kiss—how much I loved him and wanted to keep him, and the way he surprised me again and again and how much I was seriously here for it.

When he broke our kiss and stepped back a foot, he said, “It doesn’t have to be today, or next week, or even next year. I just want you to know how serious I am about this—about us. I’m yours, forever. And you’re mine, too.”

I mean, when he said it like that...

He fished around in the bush and found the butterfly, handing it to me and daring me to open it with one look. A severity to his gaze, but an amusement in his smirk.

“Okay.” I rolled my eyes. But there was a ridiculous smile attached to my face... because Neil.Sigh.I really did love him if I was seriously considering opening this butterfly.

It didn't mean I wasn't still slightly terrified, though.

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Whatever.

I pulled the small wings apart, and a ring fell out.

A thin, silver band with a tiny silver butterfly on it. And written on the inside of the last paper butterfly was:

Me.

...Someday.

Will. You. Marry. Me... Someday.

I barked out a laugh and smacked him in the chest. It was a promise ring. Not a freaking engagement ring.

My heart settled back into a regular rhythm.

“So, will you marry me? Someday?” He smirked.

I tugged him back in and kissed him again, growling my answer into his lips. “Yeah, maybe.”

The end.