







# Choosing You (Gravity Hill #3)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Banks Rossi was the golden boy of the core four, and then his life fell apart.

College is supposed to be where you get a fresh start, a new beginning. It's where you find yourself, and make friendships that last a lifetime, but not for me.

Ever since my mom died two years ago I haven't felt like myself.

Pushing people away, drinking, and experimenting with drugs is the only way I can stand to survive knowing my mom is gone.

That, and stringing along my childhood sweetheart, Henry Forbes.

I know I'm no longer the guy Henry fell in love with, and I can't seem to stop hurting him, but I also can't seem to let him go.

A threat from an old rival family against someone I love sends me over the edge, pushing me to sell my soul to the devil.

Taking away the one thing I was holding onto from my old life.

My friends say I'm reckless, but I call it selfless.

Friendships will be tested.

Loyalties will change.

And we will find out if love can endure.

All because I didn't think choosing you was an option.

**\*\*Choosing You is meant for a mature audience, it is not suitable for younger audiences.\*\***

**Total Pages (Source): 61**

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

“Let’s go!” Toby shouts in excitement. I don’t entirely blame him, we’re going camping in the mountains for the first time on our own. Usually, our dads accompany us on these trips, Creed even comes too. He’s like our uncle, basically. I’ve known him my whole life.

My dad, Luca, was lost when my mama died giving birth to me. So, like the good friend Creed is, he pulled us into his home and allowed us to make space for ourselves. He saved us, even though he’ll never admit it.

“Come on, before Toby gets his panties in a twist,” Talon grumble-shouts from the passenger seat. The oldest out of our friend group—we’re more like brothers, really—Talon and Toby, the twins, joined us around my sixth birthday. Creed brought them in with their dad, Nile, just like he did us.

By then, the room in the house was stretched thin, but we didn’t mind. It was an unorthodox way to grow up, with two fathers who had different parenting styles, but I wouldn’t change it for anything though. I love these people, and the fact that I haven’t been honest with them kills me. I feel like my heart will burst every time it pumps blood through my veins, the longer I hide from them.

“Henry!” Banks shouts from where he’s standing, one foot hiked up into the truck and the other still firmly on the gravel. “You coming, or what?”

I nod, turning back to where Dad is standing with my bag at his feet. Rushing toward him, I wrap my arms around him, and he chuckles and ruffles my curls, “Call me if you boys find yourselves in trouble.”

I look at him, only having to look up slightly since my growth spurt over the summer. “Ha-ha, we’ll be fine for two days, Dad.”

He makes a non-committal noise and bends to pick up my bag, handing it to me. I smile and wave at Nile and Creed, who have walked back up to the house. Diego, Banks's dad, is left on the gravel, sending us off with a hard pat on the truck before he walks over to stand with the others.

“Go on,” Dad nudges me. “Have fun, and be safe.”

“Love you!” I shout over my shoulder before throwing my bag onto the seat and jumping into the back of Toby’s truck.

Toby and Talon hoot and holler out of the windows as Toby drives down the gravel road that leads to the main highway, where he turns left, heading to the mountains we’ve been to every summer for the past six years.

I can’t remember whose idea it was to spend the end of our fall break camping, but as the rolling green hills turn into heavily tree-lined highways, I feel my breathing even out and the tension in my chest easing.

The mountains feel safe, away from expectations and secrets. The drive isn’t terribly long, but still, I close my eyes and enjoy a nap.

“Is someone going to wake the sleeping prince, or what?” Talon asks from somewhere in the truck, and I groan.

“I can hear you,” I say around a yawn, “and y’all wanted to drive, so napping doesn’t make me spoiled, it makes me smarter than you.”

He laughs while I pop the door open and step out onto the barely paved parking lot

that serves as a home base for the trails. Stretching my body to work out the kinks of car sleeping, I catch Banks looking at my exposed stomach where my t-shirt rode up.

Heat rushes to my cheeks, and I quickly turn away.

God, if he only knew.

I've known him my whole life. He's the only one of us who doesn't live at Creed's house, instead living with his father and mother like he should. All our dads work for Creed, so Banks tends to be around a lot.

I've had a crush on him for a while now, ever since I discovered that I like guys. As in, like guys, and not just in an objective 'he's handsome' kind of way, but in the 'I immediately need to find a place to sit down' kind of way. At first, I thought it was simply admiration, and I do admire them far more than I ever have girls. But I figured out the difference pretty quickly when I found myself admiring my best friend way more than I should. And sometimes when he looks at me or talks to me, I think... maybe he might like me too.

Part of me thinks my mind is playing cruel tricks on me, telling me to go for it. When, in reality, if I told him and he didn't feel the same way, could we move past it?

Would he tell Toby and Talon?

My Dad?

Creed?

Everyone I love could shut me out or worse, and I don't think I can handle that. They're all I have, and we have one rule in the house.

No lies.

Omissive lies, like the giant one I've been holding onto, definitely count.

My heart starts pumping at an alarming rate, and I double over on the other side of the truck, away from where my friends have started to walk, to the beginning of the trail.

Breathe, Henry, one in, two hold. One out, two hold.

I repeat the same mantra over again until my chest doesn't feel like I've been buried alive, and my mouth starts to fill again with spit.

Grabbing my bag, I sling it over my shoulder and steel my nerves.

You can do this, Henry. It's just camping with your best friends.

Shutting the passenger door, I jog over to where they're standing. Talon and Toby are identical, save for their hair. It's wild, really, how two people can look the exact same and yet still be polar opposites.

I'm the tallest of the group since my growth spurt hit earlier than them. I imagine that won't be the case for long, Toby's shoulders have started to fill out, making him and Banks the biggest in the group. His sandy brown hair hangs in his sea blue eyes, unlike Talon, whose blond hair is clipped into a mohawk.

Banks's dark copper hair is tied up on top of his head, and a few of the lighter strands have fallen loose against his neck. His gray eyes slide my way as I step up to the group, and I almost forget to breathe.

He's always been so striking, even when he was all angles and bones.

He's almost as tall as me, but this summer, he and Toby spent a lot of time with our fathers in the gym. Where I'm still lanky with noodle arms and legs, Banks has spent his time gaining muscles. It's been a slow process, and being able to see the progress has been amazing—even for Toby.

"Y'all ready?" Toby asks, bouncing back on the heels of his boots.

"Lead the way," Banks says with a smirk. His lips are like the perfect shade of sunset, like when the sky mixes between pink and orange. His freckles have only gotten more pronounced since we've spent so much time outdoors, and I hate myself a little for wishing I knew exactly how many he has.

Toby starts up the path, Talon right beside him, breaking my gaze away from Banks's profile. Banks follows after. Looking back over his shoulder, he shouts, "You just gonna stand there, or what?"

Licking my lips, I shake my head to clear my thoughts and step onto the trail. The walk isn't bad, nor is it long. The hard-packed dirt makes for an easy hike, and the trees, turning shades of orange and red, make it that much more enjoyable.

There's something awfully peaceful, even exhilarating, about being surrounded by trees and light. The sun breaks through the branches, casting the guys in golden colors as we walk, and the air is fresh with the scent of earth since it rained last night.

Small animals scurry away from us as we walk, sifting the leaves that have fallen. Twigs crunch under our boots, and birds sing to each other in the canopy overhead.

It's like magic.

Soon, a clearing opens up. It's patched with grass that's lasted the season and an old fire ring that's been used many times. Charred wood remains in a black and gray



skeleton of what once was brown and living.

The area has a small picnic table over to one side where we sit our bags so we can set up our tents. Talon carried his and Toby's tent while Banks carried the one he and I will be sharing. We unpack the things we need to set up our nylon tents and set about finding the perfect spots.

Talon and Banks bicker, each of them thinking they know what's best. "No, the tent goes here, dumbass."

"It's flatter over here, prick." Banks responds and throws down our tent for the night, effectively choosing the spot. "When you can't sleep tonight because you picked the wrong spot, I don't want to hear your bitching." Talon gripes across the space, starting to unfold the material that will act as their shelter for tonight.

I swallow down my anxiety and help Banks secure the ties into the ground so our tent stays upright while we sleep. However, with the space being so small, I don't think I'll be able to sleep at all, knowing he's so close.

Once our tents are set up, Toby saunters out of the woods with a stack of wood to burn. I was so focused on helping Banks—and internally freaking out over sleeping arrangements—I hadn't realized he'd left.

"I'll set up my bag later," Toby's face splits into a grin. "I wanna crack open the cooler and sit by the fire before the sun goes down."

Talon throws their bags into their tent, so I follow suit, picking up Banks's bag and my own and tossing them into our tent. Looking at the lack of space between them makes my stomach sink a bit. We're far enough away, so I don't think the twins would be able to hear us snore, which means I'll be alone with Banks.

Truly alone with him, without anyone around.

The thought sends panic through my system. I don't think I can do this—a whole night, alone in a tent with my best friend, who I just so happen to be crushing on so hard that I have daydreams about the two of us... together.

God help me.

“You brought a fan?” Banks's voice startles me out of my head. Spinning around, I find him knelt down in our tent, holding my battery-operated fan.

“Why are you going through my bag?” I ask, but it comes out a little accusatory. “Sorry, I just—I thought we weren't doing that until later.”

“You brought a fan?” Talon mocks.

“I like the noise,” I shrug.

Banks turns the dial, and immediately cool air flows from inside the tent. It's noisy but not terrible.

“Damn, Henry,” Banks laughs as he continues to unpack my bag, “a comforter too?”

“Ohhhh, he's glamping!” Toby shouts as he connects flint and steel against the bark of a fallen tree limb he broke apart for a fire.

“Fancy,” Banks says, as all three join in on the laugh.

“I like to be comfortable!” Rolling my eyes I continue, “Is that a crime?”

“Fancy,” Talon chuckles, “I think I like that.”

“No,” I grumble even though I know that’s not going to deter Talon from calling me the ridiculous nickname.

“I like it!” Toby hollers, finally getting the fire to catch. “Ta-da!”

“Well, I don’t,” I mutter, though the three of them continue their ribbing. Despite my attempts to defend myself.

“Come on, Fancy,” Banks says crawling out of the tent. “Let’s make some s’mores, and you can tell us what other ridiculous items you packed.” He drapes his arm over my shoulder and jostles me.

I couldn’t help my smile even if I tried. With Banks’s side pressed against mine... his eyes focused on me... I’m surprised I haven’t melted into the earth with as hot as my skin heats.

He cocks a brow and turns his head to whisper in my ear, “I think I like the nickname.” He pulls back to look me in the eyes and adds, “It suits you.”

Walking away as if he didn’t just make my boxers tighter, he sits along the side of the fire with Toby and Talon digging through the cooler. I’m absurdly hot, my face feels like it’s on fire, and the worst part is he doesn’t even know that he’s doing it.

I might just sleep under the stars tonight. The forecast isn’t calling for rain, and I think I’d have better chances of not embarrassing myself with the threat of bears than inside a tent with him.

It feels unfair to feel like this about him, especially since none of the most important people in my life know that I’m gay. Just saying it in my head is scary enough, but out loud? I’m a coward, plain and simple. I’m not afraid they’ll be upset because I’m gay. No, I’m afraid they’ll be upset that I’ve been lying by omission for... ever.

Shaking off those thoughts, I join my friends. We talk and eat all the junk food we snuck out here with us until we're full enough to puke and the smell of burnt marshmallows fills the air. My stomach riots against what I know is coming, yet I know it has nothing to do with the amount of sugar and grease I put into it tonight.

Toby's the first to leave, rubbing his stomach. "Why did y'all let me eat that much? I'm going to be playing hell in the gym tomorrow."

"Pussy," Talon calls after him. To which his twin flips him the bird and disappears into their tent. The rustling of sleeping bags and other stuff being shifted around is the only sound in the otherwise quiet night. The crickets are out, singing their songs, lightning bugs flare sporadically as the three of us sit in silence.

I close my eyes and lay back onto the blanket I brought out earlier. It gets cold here in the mountains when the sun goes down. Opening my eyes and looking up at the starlit sky, I imagine a perfect world where everyone knows exactly who I am.

It looks a lot like my current life, except Banks steals kisses instead of looks. His hand would brush mine anytime we passed each other, and everyone would be happy for us.

"Well, I guess I'll turn in too," Talon says after he yawns for the third time since his brother went to their tent. "We'll get started on our hike bright and early tomorrow. Night assholes."

"Good night," I whisper into the cool air.

I can hear Banks scoot and see how the fire dances toward him. He's like a magnetic force, everything wants to be near him. The flames dance until they're almost extinguished, leaving the night the only thing between us.

Banks moves closer, the dirt beneath him shifts with his weight, small pebbles roll by my head.

“It’s quiet here,” Banks speaks into the night.

“Not when you’re talking,” I laugh at my own stupid joke, and he joins in. It bursts out of him in a joyful noise. One of the twins must already be asleep now because once our laughing wears thin, we hear one of them snoring.

Tilting my head to glance at Banks, we burst into laughter once again. Even upside down I marvel at his beauty. When our laughter subsides, his gray irises latch onto mine and it’s like I’m suspended in air.

Moonlight highlights his brow, casting him in a glow I didn’t think humans could achieve. Or maybe that’s just my brain’s chemistry making him look angelic. My eyes dart to his lips, where his tongue breaks them apart and wets them before he raises his hand and claps it to the back of his neck in a sigh.

“I think I’m gonna head to bed too, Fancy,” his eyes follow his hand as it meets his lap.

“Okay,” I whisper, looking back up at the stars.

He leans over me, his hair hangs down from where he must have pulled the tie out. “Are you coming?”

My breath stalls in my lungs.

It feels like whatever lies between the two of us isn’t one-sided— my sided —and the way he’s asking has butterflies erupting in my stomach because it feels possible. Like all I have to do is reach out and take it.

I nod, not trusting my voice not to betray just how nervous I am. With a grunt, he gets to his feet while I sit up. He offers me his hand, and I can't look at him as I latch my palm in his and get to my feet.

When he doesn't immediately let go, my knees feel wobbly, and my throat tightens. As I swallow my nerves, I watch in fascination as his eyes track the movement of my throat. I have to tilt my head down to catch his eyes, and when I do, he drops my hand and heads for the tent.

Exhaling, I shake my head and fold up the blanket I brought out. Maybe it is all in my head.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

I almost kissed him.

Henry, my oldest friend.

The way he keeps looking at me is not like how Talon or Toby look at me. No, it's like he sees me, like he can see right into my soul and see what I've only had the guts to tell my parents.

When I told them, mom just nodded, her strawberry blonde hair gently blowing in the wind with a knowing smile, and my dad just looked at his wife with awe.

"You knew." I accused, leaning back in the garden chair and blowing out all of the pent-up air in my lungs.

She lifted one shoulder, and her smile widened. Her gray eyes bright with tears. "A mother always knows."

"And you didn't say anything?"

"Oh, honey," she leaned forward, placing her manicured hand on my knee, "I wanted you to trust us with this on your time."

I didn't know what to say. Honestly, I thought telling them would be hard, that I would have to defend myself and my choice, but they both made me feel loved and cherished as I am.

"Son, your mother and I will always love and support you, no matter what. And the

person who's lucky enough to catch your heart? Well, we'll love them too."

"Well... okay." I eyed the two of them as my father kissed my mother's cheek, and we continued our dinner. It wasn't when I planned to come out. It just felt right, and I was tired of trying to hide it when I had no reason to.

I really like Henry. He's kind, and far more even keel than any of us. I shouldn't even entertain the idea of liking him, he's my best friend. It's just... I'm pretty sure he likes me in the same way I like him, but he hasn't said anything to any of us, and I don't want to assume.

Then again, I haven't said anything about my sexual preferences to any of them either. I don't really see a need to, other than simply wanting them to know me.

All of me.

I should tell Henry.

I know even if he doesn't feel the same way, he wouldn't tell a soul if I asked him not to. It's just who he is.

Rolling out my sleeping bag, I think about how it would have felt, to have our first kiss under the stars. The cold air wrapped around us as the stars shone down.

It would have been epic.

The zipper on the tent opens, and in he steps. When he looks up and spots me, he stops. His warm brown eyes look dark without the sun to bring out the greens and yellows. He looks almost terrified. I take a step toward him, and he steps out of the tent back into the night.



I pause, unsure of what I did to make him flee. I turn back to my sleeping bag, gripped tight in my fist, and look back at the hanging piece of nylon separating us.

“Is everything okay?” I ask from where I’m standing. I know he’ll hear me, but I’m suddenly afraid that he won’t answer.

My chest pulls tight, worry gnawing at my nerves when he opens the flap, steps in, and zips it up behind him without a word. The blanket he sat on outside is folded in his arms as he looks around the limited space and turns toward his bag.

He doesn’t respond as he rolls out his own sleeping bag and covers it with the comforter I ribbed him about, along with the fan that he angles to blow on his head. The whirr of the blades is the only noise other than the sounds of nature outside of the tent.

“Henry?” I ask as he scoots into the bag and zips himself inside, reaching his lanky arms out and pulling the comforter up to his chin. I can tell he’s biting the inside of his cheek by how he purses his lips. “Are you okay?”

I’ve got the lantern on, but it doesn’t have enough light for me to see him fully. I can only see the side of his face. It looks wet, like he might have been crying. His eyes pop open, and I move to sit beside him on top of my sleeping bag.

“What if I– Never mind,” he grumbles miserably. His mouth opens and closes a few more times before he finally spits out, “What if I told you something that I can’t take back?” His voice breaks a little, and my throat dries up.

“Like what?” My heart breaks for my best friend, seeing him agonizing over something he’s worried about telling me. He looks away and snuffles into the comforter, wiping his eyes and nose on the fluffy blue material. I don’t prod. If he’s scared it will only make it worse, so I simply sit there, waiting.

“I—” He inhales a shaky breath, blows it out hard, and then tries again. “I’m gay, Banks.”

His voice sounds so small, something unlike I’ve ever heard. He’s always been quiet and gentle, but he sounds... scared. The way he said my name, like it’s something worth holding on to like it’s precious, makes my ribs shatter apart under my skin as he continues.

“And I’m pretty certain I’ve got my sights set on someone who could never feel the same.” He finishes in a rush.

His confession makes my heart stall in my chest, my stomach feels full of lead and my skin prickles in painful waves. How could anyone not fall in love with Henry Forbes? The idea is laughable, and I’m so caught up in my own head at the ridiculous idea that I don’t notice how upset he’s become in my silence.

“You don’t have to say anything,” he’s sobbing now, trying and failing to whisper to keep himself contained. “Actually, yeah, don’t say anything.”

“Henry—” I start.

“Please, Banks, I can’t take the teasing, at least not right now.”

“But—”

“ Please .”

“Henry, listen to me for a goddamn second!” I hiss between my clenched teeth. My eyes scrunched tightly so I can keep my heartbreak bottled inside. When I open my eyes, his are trained on me, open and vulnerable, and fucking damn it, I want to crush my lips to his. “I was going to say that doesn’t change anything between us. You’re

still my best friend.”

His eyes start to water again, and I get the feeling I said the wrong thing.

“Okay,” that one word comes out more broken than I’ve ever heard, and tears fall from his eyes rapidly, way faster than before.

“Why are you crying? Did you want me to hate you?” I’m confused, heartbroken, and... nervous.

He shakes his head and rolls over onto his side, his shoulders shake with the force of his tears and I can’t just sit by to watch him implode.

I need to fix this...

How do I fucking fix this?

“Henry, please, tell me what you want me to say, I’m sorry if I didn’t–”

“I want you to tell me you like me as much as I like you.”

His words play on repeat in my head for an embarrassingly long time as I simply stare at him with wide eyes.

He couldn’t mean... no.

He doesn’t... me?

Even his laugh is sad when he mutters, “Yeah, you.”

I must have been talking out loud, “Henry...” I didn’t know it was possible to feel so

many emotions at one time. To feel like you're flying one moment then drowning the next.

"Forget it, okay," he murmurs, "I shouldn't--"

"You should," I interrupt, gently placing my hand on his shoulder, "Henry, look at me. Please?"

After what feels like forever, he turns over and sits up, running his hands below his eyes to catch what's left of his tears before looking at me.

"I do like you, Henry," the confession feels good, perfect even. Especially when his eyes widen and his eyebrows disappear behind his dark curls. "Way more than friendship."

His chest rises on a double breath, and I raise my hand to brush a curl out of his eyes, cupping his cheek as I lean in enough that I pray to God he picks up on what I'm about to do and that it's okay.

My eyes drop to his parted lips before slowly moving back up to his eyes in a silent plea, and neither of us is breathing in this moment. He gives me the tiniest of nods, and slowly, I close the distance between us, giving him plenty of time to back out if this isn't what he wants.

When he doesn't move, and our lips meet, my fingers tighten on his cheek, and my pulse skyrockets. His lips are as soft as I imagined, sparks ignite in my stomach, and I swear I can see stars.

I pull back, enough to catch my breath and make sure that he's okay, that he's not internally freaking out and wishing he wouldn't have just done that with me.

“Do that again, please,” he whispers into my mouth, not even opening his eyes.

The request makes my toes curl. So I do, I kiss him again.

This time, he wiggles out of his sleeping bag to wrap his arms around my neck, pulling me closer as our lips tentatively explore. I’ve kissed a few people, but nothing has ever felt like this, not even close.

Our noses brush as we follow the rhythm our bodies make, until we’re both breathless and staring at one another as if we’re truly seeing the other for the first time.

“I haven’t told anyone else that I’m gay, Banks,” Henry blushes, “but I want to.”

“I’ve only told my parents that I’m bisexual,” I admit because it feels like the right moment.

“Do you think we can keep this between us until I tell my Dad?” His eyes dart to his lap as if he’s ashamed that he hasn’t told him.

“I’ll wait however long it takes, Fancy. As long as you keep kissing me like that.” I tell him, and he smiles brighter than I’ve ever seen him smile.

“Deal.”

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

Watching the love of my life dancing around the room, between girls, boys, and anyone else who shows him attention, is not the college experience I was hoping for. Eyeing his big arms pumping in the air or wrapping around another body—a body that isn't mine—makes me want to drink ridiculous amounts of alcohol.

Banks and I, we're... Well, I don't know what the fuck we are, but I know I love him. And I know he loves me too. He just won't admit it to himself, or me.

We both have our fair share of baggage. Both of our mothers are dead. I grew up under the thumb of my father and surrogate uncles, Creed Hemlock and Nile Rossi. I've lived with Creed the longest, and my dad is his negotiator. Most people react better to my dad giving them a visit over Creed. I never had the opportunity to know my mom since she died giving birth to me. Banks, though, lost his mom almost two years ago, and he's taken it pretty hard.

Despite all of our shit, I shouldn't give him such grace. He's an asshole who needs to figure his shit out and stop treating me like I'm expendable, or I might just go find someone else. The only problem is when I think about being with anyone else, it makes me physically ill.

It's my curse.

I can't help loving him. It's toxic and cruel. I'm only punishing myself.

Sometimes I wish my brain would just turn off so I could enjoy sex with no strings, or without feeling guilty. Despite Banks's insistence that he can't be with me, I know it would kill off what's left of his heart if I were with someone else.

Banks disappears into the crowd, and I make my way to the kitchen here on the third floor of Hammonds Hall, trying not to look like this is the last place I want to be.

Pouring myself a large cup of vodka and mixing it with orange juice, I chug it down, gulp after greedy gulp. Guzzling the burning liquid until the cup runs dry, and my head starts to feel fuzzy. I should hate him. I should tell him to fuck off and never speak to him again.

I just... can't.

My dad keeps telling me that until Banks comes to terms with his demons, he'll never have room in his heart for me. I know he's right, and even though the thought makes me want to cry, I won't. Not here, and definitely not when we get back to our dorm where Banks and I share space. So I just shove it down and ignore it.

I should have asked to bunk with Toby. At least then, I'd have peace, somewhat anyway. Banks would be in a separate room, and I wouldn't care about what or who he's doing when he isn't with me.

The problem is, when he is with me, he's everything. He's the rhythm in my feet, the whisper in my ear, the thump in my heart, and the fucking air in my lungs. I can't get away from him, and even though I know I deserve better, the masochist in me doesn't care.

Because he's the man—deep down, under all that pain and anger—that I know and love. When morning comes, though, he's lost to his demons, and I'm just a weight anchoring him to them.

“Are you going to sulk all night?” His voice sends a shiver down my spine, and I spin to find Banks smiling down at me. His dark copper hair is cropped close to his scalp, and his eyes... God, his gray eyes reel me in any time I find them on me.

“I wouldn’t have to if you weren’t slobbering over everyone,” the words escape my fuzzy mind before my mouth can filter them.

“Jealousy doesn’t look good on you, Fancy.” He laughs, and I can tell he’s high. Most likely on something to make him feel less like himself and more like the unattached person he tries to convince himself he is.

I scoff, unwilling to be baited into this game again. He knows it’s no longer jealousy. It’s heartbreak and suffering.

“Don’t call me that, Banks.”

He laughs and wraps his arms around my waist, pinching the extra bit of weight I’ve gained since working for Candy and Fern. “What about Doughboy, then?”

I sigh and push out of his arms, “You’re high, and I don’t want to play your game anymore.”

He follows me, pushing me against the closest wall and caging me in with his thick arms. Leaning down into my space, he licks the column of my neck and hums a soft, “Salty.”

“Banks, stop,” I can’t do this tonight, I shouldn’t be doing it at all.

“I love it when you pretend you don’t want me. It’s like that kinky shit you like to read, what do they call it...” he pauses as if he’s going to come up with the words he’s looking for.

“Consensual non-consent,” I supply, knowing he most likely won’t remember this conversation tomorrow.



“That,” he nibbles on my ear, trailing kisses down my jaw. I turn my face before he can get to my lips. He pulls back just enough so his eyes are trained on mine, “I need you, Henry.”

Tears burn my nose and pool in my lower lashes, “you need something to fuck, Banks, that’s not the same as needing me .”

He moves one arm, placing his long fingers around my jaw to stop my shaking head. “And I know you want me to.”

I have to bite the inside of my cheek to stop myself from letting the tears fall as I stare at him and say, “I love you, Banks.”

His eyes, with pupils blown wide, narrow on me, and he shoves my head to the side. “Fuck you, Henry.”

Watching him walk away feels like my heart is fracturing into pieces. I know in a few hours when he finds his way back to our dorm, he’ll be sweet and put band-aids over those pieces, hoping that will suffice and I’ll forgive him.

And I will, just like I always do.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

He just had to say those three fucking words, ruining my high and pissing me off. I should find someone to suck my dick until it falls off, and I have suspicions that the guy eyeing me from the dance floor would be a willing participant.

But every time I try, I just... can't. If it isn't Henry, my dick doesn't want it. Which is problematic, considering I'm pretty certain he's going to find someone who treats him like the jewel he is, and he'll leave me once they do.

Someone who can love him back without the fear of losing him.

That isn't me. I've told him that since I cut off our relationship when my mother died. I couldn't leave him alone, though, and he's always there, always ready to take the scraps I offer him. Even when I told him I could never love him, or anyone, romantically.

Seeing my dad drag my mother's corpse out of our burning house and crying over her...

Well, that fucked up my brain chemistry.

I was shell-shocked, and I had never seen my father break like he did that day. He loved her, and he lost her. He's never been the same since. I don't want—no, I refuse to ever be in that same situation. So I locked my heart up behind cement and chains so thick even I don't know where that bitch is.

“Hi handsome,” the guy from earlier sways over. His eyes are covered in sparkles, and his lips are coated in paint that pops against the blacklight.

“Not interested,” I retort.

“You sure?” He smiles and runs a finger down my chest. “I’m down for anything.”

“I’m sure you are,” I scoff and pluck his hand from my body as I walk away. I should follow Henry back to the dorms, just in case. He’ll never know, and it will give me an excuse to wander around the campus a little. Toby’s nowhere to be found, even though he asked me not to leave without him. “Fuck it,” I mutter under my breath, he’s got Gemma, I need to make sure Henry gets back safe.

I haven’t had the chance to scope everything out, but Dad already checked the place. Cameras, dorm halls, classrooms—everything was clear. We can never be too careful, what with our fathers and their jobs and now our two additions to the family.

Fern married Creed over the summer, willingly this time, and Cin managed to wrangle Talon into something more resembling a nineteen-year-old, instead of the crotchety old bastard he used to act like.

He still hates everyone, and I don’t think that will change... ever. But Cin keeps him level, almost docile in comparison. The envy I have flows deep within my body, even though I know it’s a choice I could easily change.

Anytime I even think about trying with Henry, I see my house burning from the inside out with my father too close to the flames, wailing over my mother’s corpse, and I freeze. The wiring in my brain changed that day, and I don’t know if it will ever be reversed.

I know I love my dad, Toby, Talon, and Henry, but that’s as much love as I’ve got left to give. I can’t love someone more than me. I saw what that does, and I’m no longer interested. When Henry’s particularly mad and I can’t cope, all I see are the memories of before—before my life was wrecked, and my father became even more

closed off, before my mother was dead.

The dorms are easy enough to slip in and out of unnoticed, so many drunk and rowdy college kids in one place tends to allow that freedom. Spotting Henry's head of curls, I follow at a distance. Campus at night is actually quite pretty, with the buildings shrouded in gray and black, with slivers of the moon highlighting areas.

The sidewalks are lit pathways under the moonlight, even though they have no actual lights that I can see. Henry's footsteps are quiet. He's the shortest out of all of us, even though he had his growth spurt first, and his dad is one of the tallest.

He also isn't built like the rest of us, where he's soft and round; we're all hard edges.

I wish he would hit me. Beat the absolute shit out of me for the way I treat him, but he won't.

That's not who he is.

I've seen him angry, I've even been the target of his wrath, but this is different. Henry's pain is a silent killer, it's a spear driven through your heart with words, and looks, and longing.

His hurt is a palpable thing, and I'm the culprit.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

I know he's following me like I know the organ in my chest will beat whether or not he returns to the old Banks, the one before trauma gripped his life and made him doubt the world.

Even me.

Knowing he's there always gives me hope that one day something will just click and he'll be my Banks again. It's foolish, and I know I shouldn't wish that he would just let it go. But he's shown time and time again that he has no interest in working through what happened, no interest in a life with me.

Pain strikes me again, my chest goes taut with it. My heart beats slow, and I feel like I'm going to be sick.

Stopping my strides to double over and place my hand over the traitorous organ in my chest, I wait for the suffocating feeling to end. It won't, not fully anyway.

"Are you okay?" Banks's footsteps are loud, and his breaths are heavy as he catches up to me. His shadow moves in front of my eyes as he lifts his hand, as if he's going to touch me, but thinks better of it and puts it back down. "Henry?"

"I'm fine," I croak out through tightly clenched teeth. I don't want to cry, God, please.

His knees pop as he bends down so he can get as close to eye level as he can get.

"Fancy..." He trails off. My nickname on his tongue feels like warm syrup drizzled

over ice cream. It sizzles and gives me goosebumps.

“Don’t,” I whisper, hiccuping on a sob that wants to break out of my chest. “Just... don’t, please .”

I can’t help the waver in my voice, the way it cracks and bleeds, as if my chest is spilling everything in it onto the sidewalk between us. He knows how much I love him, and he knows I’ll wait however long it takes for him to realize that we are soulmates.

We can be like Creed and Fern, Talon and Cin. We can have what they have. And I know it will take him as long as he needs to process his mother’s death, but hell, I’ve given him almost two years already.

I’m tired of hurting.

“I’m sorry,” he says. It’s a whisper shared between two broken boys who have no idea how to sever the tie that binds them.

Turning my head, I find him closer than I expect. His lips are just a breath away, and my nose bumps his. I close my eyes, envisioning us like this but in totally different circumstances.

He doesn’t let it last. Instead he says, “We should get back.”

I nod, waiting as he stands and following his movements. We walk side by side, our hands brush, and electricity runs up my arm. His presence alone is intoxicating, and I worry by the time we reach the dorm I’ll be nothing but a willing body.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

Seeing him like this makes me wish I was different. A different man with a different story. Instead, I'm still the cold-hearted motherfucker who toys with the man who loves him. I wish he wouldn't let me, that he wouldn't take the scraps I give him when I'm tired of pushing him away.

He deserves more, a life not hidden behind grief and trauma—someone who is willing to do anything for him.

But I'm terrified and can't be what he needs if I'm too scared to do it right.

Soon enough, my key slides into the lock, and we're trudging in. The pair of us fighting our own internal battles. Glancing at the bed, I grab random shit from one of my drawers and head into the bathroom.

A good shower will help clear my head, and hopefully, Henry will be in bed when I get done, fast asleep, and I can slip into my own bed to find some version of rest.

The water pressure isn't great, but I won't complain because what do I expect in a dormitory with a hundred or so bathrooms? I take my time—too much time if I'm being honest—washing my body and running shampoo through my hair.

Turning the water off, I grab my towel from the rack and dry off. Pulling on the shorts I grabbed in a hurry to get away from Henry's sad eyes, I grimace when I realize I forgot boxers, and now, if he isn't asleep, he'll be able to see my fucking boner.

Not that that's usually a problem, but tonight feels different somehow. Like crossing

a boundary I know will only prolong his sadness.

I decide fuck it and send it. Slung open the bathroom door, my eyes immediately find Henry's form laying turned away from the bathroom on his bed. Taking a deep breath, I walk to my own bed and pull myself up onto the mattress.

Fuck, I can't wait to move into an apartment, these things are awful. I can practically taste the ceiling while I'm sitting up.

Swiping my hand down my face, I lay back, sans cover because it's hot as shit in here, and I can't even entertain the idea of sleeping right now. My arm covers my eyes, if not, I know I'll punish myself by watching Henry sleep.

His bed creaks with movement, and I have to restrain myself from rolling onto my side to check on him. Logically, I know he's fine. Illogically, my brain tells me there's a mass murder beside his bed about to off him with a butcher knife.

So I do the only thing that will allow my mind to settle and peek out from under my arm. He's turned onto his other side now, facing me. The lines of his face are smooth in sleep, I can see his dark lashes fanned across his cheeks from here, hiding the warm brown irises I fall into every time he looks at me. His curls are wild, which makes me smile.

Forcing myself to look away and keep my eyes shut, I hope for sleep.

"Banks," I hear my name, and feel like I'm on a ship, waves crashing against the boat making it rock violently back and forth. I can't see anything, though, like I'm standing in a void.

"Banks."



Henry's voice, fuck, I'm shaking, trembling in my bed, probably causing enough racket to wake the entire dorm. My tongue is like sandpaper. My mouth is so dry I can't push any words out.

I hear him sigh and climb onto the bed. I'm still shaking, not as bad, though. His weight settles in beside me, and he worms his arm under my torso to wrap me up.

"Henry," I croak, swallowing to start again.

"Shhh, it's alright," he says against my neck, "there's no fire."

His words send me back to a time when I thought I'd never sleep again after I lost my mother and almost my father, too. The night that haunts my every waking moment. Maybe if they caught the bastard that killed my mother and tried to kill me and my father, I could move on. Be the person Henry loves.

But after we called in every favor we could think of, the case ran cold, and my father gave up. The person responsible for killing my mother and scarring my father is free and living.

"Take some deep breaths," Henry's steady voice pulls me from those thoughts. I focus on the way his chest rises and falls against my back, how his heart beats slowly in his chest.

I attempt to swallow my tears, "You don't have to do this."

"I know," he sighs.

"I'm fine. You can go back to your bed." I try to put distance between us, so I can cry without Henry worrying. He doesn't respond, instead, he holds me tighter, and the first tear falls. It hits my pillow without a sound, but for some reason, it feels as loud

as a gun firing.

I can't stop them now. Tears run across my nose, down my cheek, and soak into the fabric of my pillow. As silent sobs wrack my body, Henry holds me through it until my eyes are sore and my nose feels like it's never going to be clear again.

His arms retreat, but he doesn't make a move to leave. Instead, he rubs circles on my lower back and lets me stew in my feelings as I calm down from all the tears.

"It's okay to cry, Banks." His voice is quiet, almost as if he didn't mean to say it out loud. His hand runs up my spine to my neck, where he runs his fingertips over my buzzed hair. "I miss your long hair."

"Hair holds trauma," I snap, "and smoke."

He sighs, "I didn't..."

"Just go back to your bed, Henry." I don't want him holding me. It only makes the mornings worse and gives him hope that I can't squash.

His weight shifts, and I hold my breath, praying that he does as he's told and goes over to his bed where his heart can be safe from me.

Instead, his hand wraps around my shoulder, and he shoves me so I'm on my back staring up at him.

"Let me make you feel good, you stubborn jackass," his wide brown eyes are determined, lips pursed in defiance. And before I can protest, his lips are on mine. Cool and... fucking perfect.

He takes charge, tongue delving into my mouth with an urgency as if I could pull

away even if I wanted to. His palm travels over my exposed stomach, fingers dipping into the ridges of my abdomen.

“Henry-” I begin to protest, but his hand plunges into my shorts and he grips my cock just the way I like, and all words leave my brain. “Fuck,” I suck in a breath through our lips.

He tugs up, thumb swiping over the tip of my length, and drags his soft hand back down to the base.

“Henry-”

“Shut up,” he says, pecking my lips and kissing a trail down my neck, to my chest, and stomach, all while driving me insane with his hand wrapped around my dick.

Pulling the waistband of my shorts down, he exposes me, and the sight of his mouth so close to where I need him makes me nearly orgasm on the spot. Paint his hand and my stomach, and watch him while he licks every drop off my muscles.

Humming, Henry slowly licks a trail from my balls to the tip of my cock where he swirls his tongue and blinks up at me.

“Fuuuuuuck,” I whisper on a sharp inhale.

He smirks and swallows my cock, his hot mouth leaks as my length hits the back of his throat, and the sight makes me groan.

He sucks, working his hand up and down in tandem with his mouth. With a loud pop, he lifts his head, “Use my mouth like you’re dying to Banks.”

I hate that he knows exactly what I want and that he’s willing to give it to me. My

head hits the pillow, and I can't help the hiss of air that leaves my mouth.

"Please," he licks around my cock like it's a fucking lollypop in his favorite flavor.

"Fuck it, you want me to make you gag on my cock, Fancy?" I lift my head again to look at him.

"Mmmm," he nods, eyes focused on mine.

"Open your mouth and stick your tongue out," I command, and like the good boy he is, he does as I say. Beautifully his tongue sticks out right above my cock, and I run my hand through his soft curls, guiding him closer to me.

Threading my fingers tightly into his hair, I hold my dick up and guide him down over me. Watching as I disappear inch by inch into his mouth should be illegal, fucking shit, I'm not going to stop unless he asks me to.

And from the look in his eyes, I don't think he'll ask anytime soon.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

His cock is so hard and mine drips in response. I'm going to make a mess of my sweatpants with the way Banks is looking at me, controlling me, owning me just how I like him to.

I watch as his Adam's apple bobs in his throat, and his sharp brows rise in challenge. So I hollow out my cheeks and suck, letting my spit dribble out as he controls me by my hair. His hips bucking up, as I suck.

I'm a mess, and I know he's going to cum soon by the way his teeth dig into his bottom lip, and he groans.

"I'm going to cum down your throat, Fancy, and you're going to swallow every last drop, understand?"

I can't think of anything I want more than to have him coming undone under me. It's a sight to behold, and I can't help my hips from snapping and rubbing my hard erection against his leg.

"Are you going to cum in your pants, humping my leg like a good dog?"

I nod vigorously and unashamed because hell fucking yes, I am. I can feel it building in my spine, my balls tingle, and the way he snaps his hips up to meet the back of my throat makes me roll my eyes in pleasure.

We're both chasing an orgasm, our bodies working in a rhythm the way they only can together.

“I’m-” Banks starts, and I gently scrape my teeth against his length, sending him over the edge. His beautiful cock jerks in my mouth and coats the back of my throat. “Henry,” he moans my name as he holds me over him.

My own orgasm explodes and I paint my sweats with cum. Soaking them in the most delicious way. He removes his hand from my curls as his cock grows soft, spent. We lay there for a moment, neither of us jumping to speak after what just happened.

I know it was foolish of me to start, but the way he cried out in his sleep for me sucked me back in. I’ve known about the night terrors for years, and I thought they were getting better. This one seemed particularly rough. I know even if I ask he won’t talk about it. I’ve tried, our dads have tried, Creed and Fern have tried. He won’t say a word about them.

My post-orgasm bliss immediately sours. I know if I slip out of bed now he’ll let me go without a word, and we won’t acknowledge what just happened between us tomorrow... or ever. I swear every time is the last, and yet I find myself here, in his bed, wanting to make him feel something other than pain at my heart's expense.

“One day, I hope you’ll want me for more than just a distraction,” I whisper as I maneuver off the bed as quietly as possible. He doesn’t move or speak as I walk into the bathroom and shut the door.

My sweatpants are sticking to my skin, and I think a shower might do me good. My own distraction from my heart fracturing into little pieces and decaying in my stomach.

The water turns on with a groan, something I’m slowly finding charming. The building creaks and pops at odd hours, as if it’s alive and breathing. It’s comforting in a way, to know that life goes on even in non-sentient things.

Peeling my sweatpants down my legs, I shake my head at the mess and try to convince myself it was worth it. Tossing my shirt aside, I step into the hot spray and stand there, arms crossed, skin soaking in the water.

This place must have amazing plumbing because the water never turns cold, and I love to take long showers, to the point that the room is fogged with steam and breathing becomes difficult.

Suds run along my body from the loofa I used to scrub off the memories of Banks with me before . Memories that torture me with who he was... before his mother died, before he closed himself off, and before he turned so cold and careless.

Like the time Banks stood outside of my door when I told my dad I was gay.

“Okay,” he cleared his throat, “you’re still Henry , and you’re pretty damn perfect to me.” Hearing my father say those words in his soothing timber brought me to tears. “Did you think I would be upset?”

I shook my head because words were hard, and I felt like I would vomit everything up if I did. Dad opened his arms and stood, waiting for me to come to him. It made me cry harder, the way he hugged me like I was little again, and he would protect me from the world.

“I could never be upset about you being happy,” he said into my hair.

When my dad left, Banks came in and cuddled against me until I fell asleep. We didn’t speak. He just held me in my relieved and happy state. It was everything he could have done.

Washing the shampoo from my curls, I let the water run over my skin until it runs cold, and I no longer have an excuse to be in here anymore. Turning the water off, I

grab the towel I had hung by the door and dry off.

I wasn't exactly expecting to take a shower, so I wrap the towel around my hips, grip the handle, take a deep breath, and walk out. Directly to my dresser to step into a new pair of sweatpants as fast as I can so I won't be naked in front of him. Though I'm pretty sure he's asleep if the soft snores are any indication.

The material of my t-shirt is soft against my freshly washed skin, and I make sure to hang my towel up in the bathroom before climbing back into my bed and rolling over. Shutting my eyes, I let my thoughts drift off and wait for sleep to come.

Light from the morning sun illuminates the middle of our room, highlighting the rug Fern bought for us. Toby and Talon have the same one because Fern didn't want our feet to freeze—her words, not mine.

My alarm dings, and I scramble to turn it off. I don't want to wake Banks. I'm not sure I have it in me to pretend this morning. However, if I work up the courage to ask about the Gator Coffee Co. job, I might be getting up early enough to avoid him almost every day for the foreseeable future.

It's only been one weekend, and I already miss baking, serving hot drinks, and learning people's orders. It's why I ran the cafe at Ravard Prep for so long. Though that was high school, college feels more... serious. Professors here don't give two-shits about who you are or what you bring to the table, they only care if you do your assignments and stay out of their proverbial hair.

So, I can only imagine that Gator Coffee Co. will be the same.

Swiping my clothes from the dresser for today, I head into the bathroom to get ready. My hair is a mess because I stupidly went to bed with it wet. Finger-combing through the unruly curls, I figure throwing them in a bun will save me the most time. Pulling



the dark strands up, I wrap the elastic band around the knot of hair I created.

Fear doesn't give me the luxury of caring what I look like today. Maybe I can find a bathroom somewhere to fix it. Until then, I throw on my clothes and fly out the door, making sure to grab my backpack that I packed last night before we left for the party Toby's new friend invited us to.

Charlie seems nice. She is a Junior here and room advisor. We met her for a few seconds before she was whisked away to deal with whatever party hostesses deal with. Rubbing my temples with my fingers as I walk, I try to wipe the memories from the party away.

We all have to drive home later today for family supper. Something Fern wants us to do at least once a month, if not every Sunday. I don't mind, I'm homesick already.

My feet carry me on a path unconsciously, it's only when I'm pulling open the door to Gator Coffee Co. that I realize I need to swallow my anxiety and talk to someone about a job. It smells like home, comforting with frosting and coffee mingling together.

When I get closer, the guy behind the counter gives me a bright smile, and I respond in kind. It's automatic after doing this for so long.

"Hi," the guy says leaning, against the counter, palms out on the granite. "What can I get ya?"

Eyeing the variety of items on the menu, I decide on an everything bagel sandwich and black coffee. Nothing a sausage egg and cheese bagel can't fix. While he counts my change, I ask, "Are y'all, by chance, hiring?"

He stops, looks at me, and smiles. "Yeah, actually, we are. It's a front-of-house

position, though.”

“That’s perfect,” I nod with a ridiculous grin on my face. I probably shouldn’t look so happy about applying for a job. “Sorry,” I mutter as he hands me my change.

“What for?” he asks, his brows scrunching down over his eyes.

“I just really enjoyed the coffee shop I worked at back in prep school, and my aunt co-owns a bakery here in Gravity Hill. It’s like a little slice of home, and I got a little... over eager.”

Shrugging, I pocket my change and wait for him to hand me an application or tell me the website where I need to apply.

He doesn’t. Instead, he replies with, “When can you start?”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

Henry's gone by the time I crack my eyes open and roll out of bed. I shouldn't be surprised, he's always been an early riser. What he did last night... What we did, it shouldn't have happened.

He knows it and I do too. That doesn't mean I didn't want it. I just hate that afterward, I know I'll pretend it isn't everything I've always wanted and that I'm not hurting Henry even more by letting it happen.

"I really am the world's biggest asshole," I mutter to myself.

My phone vibrates from where I left it on the desk by the door.

Fern: Expecting y'all at six tomorrow! Be good boys!

As if any of us would forget and risk the wrath of our dads over Fern. She's an interesting woman, much like the women our family seems to attract. I admire her, truly. She lost both of her parents to a psychotic serial killer, and yet she still found the strength to love Uncle Creed without pause.

Sometimes, I wish she would tell me her secret about the way she moved past the trauma. Other times, I envy her and Creed, wishing that Henry and I could take their place. Every time I attempt to ask, though, I fuck it up.

So why try when I know I'm just going to end up hurting him anyway?

I decide to stay in, Henry will stay away until he physically can't anymore, and I'd like to get a jump on my classes. We signed up yesterday for our official schedules,

and by the afternoon, we had everything we needed from Gravity Hill University to get started.

I decided on an information technology degree because it's what I've seen my dad do his whole life, among other things. He's always been good with computers, databases, cyber monitoring, and he taught me a lot. Watching him code always makes me feel like I can do anything as long as I have a keyboard within reach.

Doors slam in the hallway as the building slowly comes to life. A knock on mine has me up and out of my desk chair to find out what absolute mess is on the other side of my door.

Flipping the lock, I open the door to find Toby leaning against the frame, looking like hell. His hair is disheveled, his eyes are rimmed in red, and I'm fairly certain he's got vomit on his shirt.

"Aren't you a sight for sore eyes?" My brows lift as I cock my head to the side and wait for him to tell me exactly what's got him looking like death warmed over.

"I saw her," he hiccups as if a whole new wave of tears are approaching.

"You've seen Gemma a million—"

"No," he cuts me off, "not Gemma."

"Then who—" his eyes lock in on mine, and it hits me, "Salem."

The girl that got away.

We all grew up together—me and Henry, Toby and Tal... and Salem—until one day in fifth grade, she disappeared. Teachers murmured, parents gathered. It was a strange

time. Through it all, Toby was left with a permanent hole in his heart.

He nods his head slowly, swallows, and ducks into my room straight to the bathroom, where he upchucks into the toilet.

“Well, come on in, I guess,” I mumble.

After Toby repeatedly emptied his stomach yesterday and I had to play nurse, I deserve all the fucking sugar Fern’s got. She and Candy must have raided the bakery because the island in the kitchen is filled with colorful pastries and other shit I don’t recognize.

“Boys!” Fern hollers as we file into the house. It’s still hard to walk in and hear a woman’s voice that isn’t my mother’s. It’s been almost two years since she died, and still, I can hear her voice in my head clearly.

Fern hugs us all, Henry last, because he squeezes her tight and holds on like she’s a lifeline he can’t part with. And maybe she is, maybe he tells her all the shit I’ve done to keep him at arm’s length.

“I hope y’all are hungry!” She proclaims, leading us into the dining room where our fathers are all waiting.

Dad isn’t much of a hugger anymore after what happened with Mom. He tilts his head my way in recognition when I step in beside him, offering a shoulder check and a muffled, “Love you.”

“You too,” I tell him while watching as Fern steps into Creed’s orbit, and he throws his arm around her. Luca hugs Henry, and Nile drapes one arm around each of the twins. Their mouths are moving, but I can’t piece together what they’re saying.

I don't want to.

Henry looks over his dad's shoulder, his eyes meeting mine, before I quickly look toward the kitchen. As if the memories there will save me, instead of haunt me, as if I can see through to the pantry, to a different time and place.

Where Henry's lips were on mine, and his cock was on my tongue soon after.

When I was happy.

My hand starts to shake, and I have to flex my fingers out to make it stop. I have to think about something else to eliminate the blood flow to my fucking dick before I embarrass myself in front of my entire family, and have to explain that I was not thinking about sucking Henry's dick in the pantry.

Focusing on the spread of food on the table as I take steadying breaths and survey my options. Roasted Turkey stuffed with homemade dressing that I know Fern worked all day on sits front and center on a black platter. The skin is golden brown and looks absolutely mouthwatering.

She made my favorite sweet potato mash. I know it's for me because there's a bowl of marshmallows beside it. She caught me pulling them from my hiding place and throwing a few in a sweet potato one night after Henry and I fucked around. I was starving, and craving something sweet. She only smiled and handed me the cinnamon and honey before walking away.

I had to hide that marshmallow stash from Creed. He has a ravenous sweet tooth, and she and I both know it.

Ears of corn rest on another platter, along with green beans, corn bread, and yeast rolls.

“Damn, Fern, do we really eat this much, or will we be having more guests?” Toby laughs from where Nile has him pinned under his arm.

“Well, I thought Gemma and Cin would be joining, too,” she says with a small pout.

“They decided we needed time to be alone with y’all, family or some shit,” Talon grumbles.

“Well, anyway,” Fern sing-songs, “Manson and Candy will be here soon, and they said not to wait.”

Talon’s the first to sit and start filling his plate. I shake my head and chuckle, following his lead. Not long after, Manson and Candy arrive. Manson leans down to kiss Fern’s cheek, and Candy takes the seat to her right.

“So boys, how's campus?” Creed asks.

I swallow down my food as Toby answers. “Pretty.”

Nile laughs, “Just pretty?”

“Like any other school, just bigger, and louder,” Talon grumbles and takes another bite of roll.

“The beds suck,” I shrug.

“I got a job at Gator Coffee Co.,” Henry smiles, and my eyes fly to his. He didn’t tell me about a job. Not that we spoke much yesterday... but still.

“When did this happen?” I ask at the same time Fern says, “That’s wonderful Henry! They’re going to love you.”

His eyes flit my way before landing solidly back on Fern, who's fucking gushing over his news.

Talon leans over to whisper in my ear, "Looks like I'm not the only territorial asshole."

Fuck. Him.



## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

The happiness I feel at Fern's joy over my job is short-lived when I glance back at Banks. All the excitement and trepidation I had about the job bubbled up and out at the severe look on his face. Talon leans over and whispers something I can't make out, which makes Banks's face twist in disgust? Irritation?

"I'm sorry, what?" I shake away the feeling of wanting to explain myself and focus on Fern and Candy, who's stuffing her face with mashed potatoes.

Fern laughs as Candy hurries to finish her mouthful. "What she said was, don't go getting any ideas about leaving us."

"I could never," I chuckle and roll my eyes, but deep down, I mean every word. I love these two with every fiber of my being. They listen when Dad doesn't understand and never make me feel like I'm being needy or immature. As the thought crosses my mind, my eyes trail back to where Banks is eating spoonfuls of dressing, and like the hawk she is, Fern tracks my gaze.

"She knows," Fern says, elbowing Candy in her side. What I would give to have seen them before Fern's accident. I'll bet they were a handful and then some. Creed and Manson give them hell about things that happened before a psycho killer went on a spree, but none of us understand it.

"I do. I'm just messing with you, Henry," Candy's smile is wide and infectious—as long as I've known her it has been.

After dinner, Fern and Candy pull me into the kitchen to taste test their new scones. Fern has been dying to add this new menu item, but Candy isn't convinced.

“You caved?” I ask her, eyebrows lifted. Drizzling icing over the batch of scones I presume Fern was talking about, I watch her look over at Fern and sigh.

“She’s hard to say no to, even before...” Fern murmurs more to herself than us.

“I understand that,” I mutter.

“And how is that going?” Fern’s head pops up, and the spoon I was holding clatters to the marble.

“I didn’t...” I start when they both fold their arms over their chests and give me the look like they know whatever was about to come out of my mouth was a lie. “It’s not great.”

As if on cue, both of them sigh and share a pitying look.

“The sad part is you don’t even really know him. Not like I do. The only Banks you’ve known is cold, cut-off, and detached. Nothing like who he was before.”

His easy smile. His almost playful demeanor. He was someone everyone wanted to be near because he was kind to everyone and wildly charismatic.

Completely intoxicating.

“We share a dorm, which has very little room,” once I start, it’s like I can’t stop. Everything just flows out of me in waves of pent-up anger and heartache. “...and I can’t help but love him. I can’t stop, even though it crushes my chest when he acts dismissive. Maybe that makes me clingy, and maybe it means I’m codependent on someone who has no problem forgetting I exist. I just—ugh.” I grunt in exasperation and look up to them both, staring at me with sympathetic expressions and knowing eyes.

They stand there and stare, eyes wide, hands dangling by their sides, not saying a word. I don't know when they moved or how much I overshared, but my chest feels lighter. "Sorry...that was a lot."

Candy shakes her head while Fern says, "Don't ever be sorry for expressing your feelings, especially with us."

"It was a lot," Candy swallows and laughs a small, tender laugh that makes me feel weirdly understood. "But never something to apologize for, you must've needed to get that out."

"I can't say I understand. Like you said, we never knew Banks before the fire," Fern says, turning the corner of the island to come wrap her arms around me.

I guess that was part of the word vomit...

"But we're always here to listen." Candy finishes for her, and I can honestly say I don't know what I ever did to deserve these two.

Diego walks through the kitchen, and I try to pull away from Fern's embrace. I don't need him giving me pitying looks. He doesn't say anything as he walks to the fridge, opens the door, and grabs a water bottle before turning around and leaving without a word.

After sampling all of the sugary confections and declaring my favorite, Fern and Candy let me go to spend time with my people. The voices of my friends and our dads are loud, I can only catch bits and pieces of the conversation.

When I turn the corner, my eyes automatically find Banks. It must be the same for him, because the second I enter, his eyes lock with mine. They're playing cards. Each of them have a set in their hands, ready and strategizing their next move.

Dad waves me over, and I take a seat in the chair they must have left for me. He smirks and shows me his cards, he's got a winning hand, but he doesn't talk shit like the rest of the table. He lets them make their moves and waits until it's his turn. Laying down his cards, he smiles and declares his win.

"Bullshit!" Talon shouts, and Toby laughs. Diego's scowl is evident and Nile is snickering. Creed throws his cards down in defeat and leaves the table when Fern waves him over from the doorway. Her features are tight, and her phone is clutched in one hand.

Creed runs his hands down her arms to her hands, where he lifts them and kisses her pale knuckles. I'm not great at lip reading, but it almost looks like she said, "We can't do this to them."

He whispers something in her ear, and her eyes catch mine. She smiles, as she always does, except this time it's not as big, and it's most definitely not full of happiness.

"I think it's time I disappear with my woman," Creed announces and ushers her past us and up the stairs. "Have a good night, gentlemen."

Our dads give each other looks, and Talon, ever the mouthpiece of our group, demands, "Spill it."

My dad looks at Nile, and he clears his throat. "It's business, Fern's worried. Nothing for y'all to be concerned about."

"I call bullshit," Banks says, nodding at Talon, and Diego levels Banks with a stare that clearly means to shut up, but he continues. "She never worries about business because she's never in it. So what is it, really?"

The room is quiet, and I have to swallow and look at my dad to determine if we

should worry or not. His eyes catch mine, and he looks away. Well, that's pretty damning.

"Does it involve Cin?" I ask him and glance at Talon, who's already on his phone, thumbs flying over the keys.

"No," my dad answers curtly. "Like Nile said, it's not for y'all to worry about."

"That's—"

"If you say bullshit one more time, Banks, I'll make you wash every dish in the house." Diego never really gets on Banks, so for him to threaten an actual punishment makes us all pause. "We've told you it doesn't concern you, leave it."

Diego getting up from the table causes the metal chairs to slide across the rug Fern put down when she moved in. My dad and Nile shake their heads and follow after him, with a mumbled goodnight. We exchange looks, and a feeling in my gut tells me that something isn't right.

"It's not Cin," Talon mutters, "she texted a picture of Gemma demolishing a tub of Cool Whip. They're fine."

Toby laughs when Talon flips the screen so he can see it. Banks nods his head with a smirk, and I don't know how to react. Something's going on, and I have a sinking feeling that whatever it is, it's bad. Fern never worries about the Hemlock Empire, and she's been through some awful things, so it takes a lot to get her upset.

Unless whatever it is will impact us directly. She won't admit it—probably because she doesn't want to scare away Talon and Banks—but I know she sees us as her surrogate babies. I love her as the mother figure I never had the chance to know, and the twins adore her. Talon may not show it with words, but he loves Fern.

Banks, well he respects her. It's hard for him to openly love anyone after the accident, so respect is pretty much as close as he gets to affection.

"Y'all wanna play a few rounds?" Toby asks, grabbing the table and folding it away. I was so lost in my thoughts I didn't notice them cleaning the cards and chips up. Talon nods, catching the controller from where Banks grips them, readying the game station.

Our eyes lock. Sometimes, I wish I could see him as nothing but a brother, a best friend. But I can't, and it feels like my heart turns itself inside out, trying to be someone he can love again. I shake my head, breaking our gaze. "Nah, I think I'll turn in."

"Boooooo," Talon quips, and I flip him the finger.

"Night Fancy!" Toby says as I walk by Banks, restraining myself with every fiber of my being not to brush against him like a cat in heat. My fingers twitch and tingle as I walk by. I have to hold my breath so I don't inhale how fucking good he smells.

Like fresh rain in the forest.

When he doesn't move to touch me either, another piece of my heart shrivels up and dies inside my chest.

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I watched him walk away until I couldn't see him anymore. I watched as his eyes misted over, and his shoulders fell in the barest of hints that I've once again killed another part of him.

"Snacks!" Toby shouts, snapping me out of my self-hatred. "We need snacks."

"We just ate like two hours ago," I point out with a chuckle.

"And? That," he gestures wildly around the room, "was weird, and now I'm zombie-hungry."

"You're mindlessly hungry?" Talon raises a brow in his brother's direction as the game whirs on, and the TV chimes the same sound it plays every time we turn the game on.

He grins wickedly, leaning over into his brother's lap, "Exactly."

Talon laughs and shoves him out of his space. He laughs and asks if we want anything. Talon asks for water, and I follow suit. Finding my place on the couch, I settle in with the controller and check my phone.

I don't talk to anyone outside of the people under this roof, so I shouldn't be surprised that I have no notifications. Part of me wishes Henry would send me a text and ask me to come talk or something. But the other part of me knows that if he did, we would be ripping open the same old wounds all over again.

My thoughts always circle back to last night when he crawled into my bed and held

me. I don't know how he knew, but he did, and he wouldn't let me sit in my misery alone like he should have.

"Dude," Talon taps my chest to get my attention, "just fucking kiss him and tell him you love him, it's not that hard. Jesus, you're so melodramatic, which is saying something coming from me."

Anger bubbles up my sternum, and I have to tamp it down. "I'm not taking dating advice from you, asshole."

"It's not dating advice," he grumbles, "it's me giving you a kick in the ass. You treat Henry like a two-cent slut."

"You have no idea what's going on Tal, so take your kick in the ass and give it to someone else."

He snorts, "Ooookay."

"You know what," fear and anger mix in my stomach, and I know I'm lashing out, yet I can't stop it. "Fuck you, Talon."

"You wish, baby," he kisses the air in my direction. I spring off the couch and storm out of the room, nearly running into Toby, who's carrying a bag of chips with his teeth and arms full of water bottles.

"What'd I miss?" I hear Toby whisper as I turn the corner and pause at Henry's closed door. I try to drown out the twins and their voices by putting my ear to the door and listening for him. I guess I like to torture myself with the knowledge that I'm to blame for his tears staining the sheets.

I don't hear anything, so he must be asleep already, or all cried out. I don't know



which one I'd prefer. Thoughts of him laying on his side, crying over the boy I used to be, or asleep dreaming of the man he deserves plague my mind.

Leaning my head against the door, I let out a breath and reverently place my palm against the wood before walking down the hall to my own room and closing myself inside—the four walls that held me together after my world fell apart.

Jax was driving. After practice, we grabbed dinner with the team, hamburgers and milkshakes from Jill's Diner. We were stuffed and helped Jill close down before we left. He dropped me off at the gravel driveway and sped off, howling into the night air.

I shook my head and walked to the front door. Dad was gone a lot for work with Creed, Nile, and Luca, so mom stayed home. As an interior designer, she worked with clients from all over, and she was good, too.

Well loved, really. Her clients loved her so much that she was fully booked for the year and had to turn people away. Having to do it killed her a little, but she never sacrificed her time with me.

"Banks?" I heard her call from somewhere in the house when the door shut. She wasn't wearing shoes, but I could hear the soft pads of her feet hitting the hardwood.

"Yeah, Ma!" I hollered, making my way into the kitchen to unpack my school stuff on the counter. It's where I do most of my assignments and help her with dinner. Except tonight, she's at the stove with a small pan, frying something. "What's for dinner?"

She laughed, "You've already eaten, mister." She said while waving the flat spatula in the air my way.

I joined her laughter and pressed a kiss to her temple before heading back to the bar stool that served as my desk chair. She flipped the bread and turned to face me, “What’s on the homework schedule tonight?”

“Calculus,” I mumbled. I hated math. I didn’t particularly love anything about school other than football. I love football, and I’m pretty good at it, but in order to play, I have to pass my classes, so... homework it is.

“Ugh,” she mirrors my inner sentiment. “Math, what could you ever do with that valuable skill?” I laugh as her voice drips with sarcasm.

“Ha-ha, Ma,” I say with an eye roll.

She walks to the bar across from me and smiles, “It won’t be long, and you’ll be away at some college, playing football, and you can choose whatever you want to study.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.”

“So don’t stress the small stuff,” she hunkers down so she can catch my eyes. “Besides, you’re brilliant. Any college will be lucky to have you.”

“You’re my Mom, you have to believe that.”

She laughs, turning around to grab her sandwich. Once plated, she turns back to face me. “That’s fair, but I know plenty of mothers who don’t have that much faith in their kids.”

“Maybe they just aren’t good mothers,” I quip, “I’m just lucky,”

“And don’t you forget it!” She bites into her grilled cheese, and the sound crunches,

making me hunger for one myself.

“You don’t happen to have more of that, do you?”

“Growing boys!” She exclaims, “They’ll eat me out of house and home! I swear I’m going to have to go to the grocery store just for the four of you this weekend.”

I try my best puppy dog eyes as she rolls hers, waving her hand at me. “Of course I do.”

“You’re the best.”

“So I’ve been told.”

I finish my homework, with a few rewatched lessons, and eat the grilled cheese mom made after she finished hers. She sat with me the entire time, offering help when she could and providing emotional support when I got frustrated.

She yawns and declares, lights out. “Love you, Banksie.”

“Love you, Ma.”

When she hit the stairs, she turned around and snapped her fingers, “Oh, I forgot. Your dad will be home late. Leave the porch light on, will you?”

“Yeah, I got it.”

“Sweet dreams.”

“You too,” I holler after her.

A tear travels down my cheek at the memory of the last time I spoke to my mother. I can almost smell her perfume and hear her voice floating up the stairs... sweet dreams. It's the last thing she said to me, the last words I ever heard my mother speak.

The rage I know all too well swells inside of me, and I let it out on my pillows. Punching and tearing at them to try and dull the ache in my chest. I won't waste another tear, it's been two years, and I still feel like a lost child thinking about my mother's death. I want to scream, to find whoever took her from me and tear them to shreds.

A soft knock on the door jars me from my outburst, and I clear my throat to tell whoever's on the other side to come in. Henry opens the door, poking his head in. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah," I lie.

"It didn't sound like it," he pushes a little further into the room. His eyes search my face, and I wish he would leave. That he wouldn't inch further and further into the room.

"So you thought you'd come console me? Maybe we'd end up tangled together again? Just like old times?"

He sighs a heavy breath, "It's not like that, and you know it."

"No? So you're not here to crawl into my bed again?"

"Don't—" he starts, but I'm not done.

"Don't what, Henry?" I shout, shocking him into silence. Standing, I cross the room

and crowd his space. “Don’t talk about how you came to me . How you begged me to let you suck my cock? How you loved being used so much, you came in your pants?”

“That’s not what happened,” he grits out.

Laughing, I shove him back toward the door, but with the way he’s standing, it slams shut. His back is against the white paint and our chests brush with each harsh breath.

“Really? So why can’t you talk to me? Or look at me?” I growl at him, “Because you wanted it to mean something it didn’t. Just like now, you’re hoping, despite everything I’ve said, that I’ll suddenly change my mind and be the same person I was when we first fucked.”

“We didn’t fuck!” Henry shouts, his eyes stern, looking up at me, “We were together because we loved each other.”

“So maybe you finally do get it. Loved . It’s in the past, get over it,” my heart lurches in my chest, pounding against my chest as if it knows how much of a goddamn liar I am and wants to prove it.

His eyes harden from my harsh words but hope still shines there. “You’re a fucking coward. Being an asshole won’t make me hate you, and hiding from your pain isn’t going to make it better.”

My laughter is forced, “Well, you’d know all about that now, wouldn’t you?”

He licks his lips, tucking them into his mouth before a broken whisper, “Fuck you, Banks.” A lone tear streaks down his cheek, and my heart skips a beat at the pain beneath his hazel eyes. Stepping back, I open the door for him to retreat.

“Run away now, Fancy. It’s what you’re good at,” I spew because that’s what he

does. He runs until he can't run anymore and then circles right back to me.

I can't keep letting him circle back, not anymore.

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The drive back is silent. No one speaks, and Toby keeps locking eyes with Tal from the front seat. If I had to guess, they can feel the tension from the fight I had with Banks, and if Toby's soft eyes and pursed lips are any hint, he definitely wants to say something.

Pulling into the spot Toby's pass allows him to park in, Banks exits faster than if his ass was being chased by hornets. I watch him sling his bag from the truck bed over his shoulder and walk toward the building.

"Do you... you know," Toby runs his hand through his messy hair and sighs, "want to talk about that?"

Shaking my head, I climb out of the truck and pull my own bag from the back. It's mainly stuff I forgot, pictures, and baubles from my room back home. After our fight last night, I went to the kitchen, ripped open every sweet confection Fern and Candy made, and ate them one by one.

My stomach isn't happy with me at the moment, but I don't care. It was the first night in a long time that I passed out and had no dreams, or at least nothing I can remember. Sleeping in my own bed, without his presence in the room, was the reset I needed.

It was stupid to go to his room after he woke me up with his outburst. I should have known better than to try to talk to him, especially when he's feeling violent.

Pushing him when he's vulnerable is always a recipe for disaster.

My phone chimes, and the twins look at me with tilted heads as they exit the truck.

“What?”

“Are you going to answer that?” Talon asks with a bored expression.

I didn’t realize it was ringing. I hardly ever get phone calls. It’s usually texts or social media notifications. Digging the device from my pocket, I pull it out to see the university’s number flashing on my screen. I swallow and swipe the bottom of the screen to answer the call.

“Hello?” I try to be casual, but it comes out sounding choked.

“Hey, I’m looking for Henry?”

The voice on the other line sounds familiar, but I can’t place it. “This is him.”

“Hey, it’s Koda from Gator Coffee Co.”

The guy from the counter. I think I remember seeing his name tag when I asked about the job. “Oh, hey!”

The twins throw each other questioning looks communicating in that telepathic twin way they do, and I wave them on and head off in the direction of our dorm.

“Hey, so I know you said you could start Monday, but I just realized I won’t have anyone here to train you tomorrow. Would you, by chance, have time to come in... now?”

Shrugging to myself, I huff a laugh, “Yeah, that’s okay. Do I need to wear anything in particular?”



“Clothes would be appropriate,” Koda snorts, and I laugh. “Sorry, I think the coffee fumes are getting to me. Just anything plain is fine.”

“It’s okay, I’m used to crummy jokes,” I pause for a moment, worried that I might have misread the conversation until he laughs and sucks in a breath.

“I think you’ll do just fine here, Henry. See you in a bit.”

Quickly making the rest of the walk to my dorm, I unlock the door to our room and throw my bag on the bed, and it hits me that Banks isn’t in the room. His bag is here, but the door to the bathroom is open, and the lights are off.

I don’t allow myself the time to wonder. Instead, I shake my head and walk to the closet. I pick out a pair of dark blue jeans and a short-sleeve green t-shirt. It’s not too cold here yet this time of year, so I don’t bother with a jacket and swap my wallet and keys over to the new pants.

Once my Converse shoes are laced, I walk to the cafe with a small ball of excitement growing in my stomach. This is just the thing I need.

Koda’s smile when I walk in, is warm and he immediately thanks me for being flexible enough to come in on such short notice. “You look like an extra-large, is that right?” He shoves a t-shirt into my hands.

“Uh, yeah,” I grip the t-shirt and hold it open. It’s pretty plain, with Gator Coffee Co. stamped on the front in a perfectly legible font—nothing fancy, just block letters.

“Let’s get you a name tag,” he waves me around the case of goodies and into the kitchen where music belts out of speakers I can’t see.

“Wow,” everything in here looks so much like Fern and Flourished that it’s kind of

alarming. Tables line the middle of the room, where people fold and prep dough for bagels, loaves, and rolls. Ovens rest on one side of the room while mixers stand on the other. Everything is shiny silver, with a dusting of flour on surfaces.

“We just got a huge kitchen revamp,” Koda says, “Horace says the money came from a kid's parent but they wanted to remain anonymous.” Throwing up his hands, he walks backward and shrugs.

“That’s generous,” I say, trailing after him into what I assume is the employee break room.

“Mhmm,” he looks around before pulling out a box that looks well loved. “Here they are!” He pulls out a new name tag without a name and a label maker. “Do you go by Henry, or something else?”

“Henry’s fine,” I say, taking everything in. “Is Horace the owner?”

“What? Oh yeah, he’s owned it forever. Super nice, he stops by every now and again.”

Koda rambles on, and I zone out a little, thinking of Fern and her worried expression this weekend. I wonder if she’s feeling better, or if I should call her.

“...I’ll show you around the front,” he starts walking back the way we came. I have to shake off my thoughts and focus. I don’t want to mess this up.

A few hours later, we’re closing the shop down, and I feel like I’ve gotten a lot of the procedures covered. There’s not much difference here from the Ravard Prep Cafe.

Koda’s nice and talkative. I feel like he crammed his whole life story into one night, which is kind of impressive. I’ve laughed, met new people, and never thought about

Banks once since I walked in the doors.

“Well, how do you feel about working tomorrow with Opal?” Koda says, “I have classes first thing on Monday’s or I would be here.”

“Oh, that’s no big deal, I actually don’t have classes on Monday.”

“Great! Opal’s real sweet, and a fun one to work with. Come in around six-thirty. She should be here by then.”

I nod and hang up the apron he handed me from the hook on the wall behind the counter. “Do you want me to stay and wait while you lock up?” I know he’s a tall guy, and he can probably handle himself if he needs to, but then I’d feel like shit if I left and something happened.

“That’d be nice.”

He smiles and tells me it will only take him a few more minutes to get his stuff. The kitchen staff went home about an hour ago after they shut down the machines, and placed tomorrow’s dough in the chiller.

Popping through the door that separates the front from the kitchen, he smiles and waves around his keys. “Let’s get outta here.”

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

Henry still isn't back when I get to the dorm after my workout and then scouting the football team. Thinking about how proud my mom was when I played made me miss the sport. Maybe I can find a rec team. I doubt the Gators need a freshman on the team who didn't even play their senior year.

Plus, with new classes starting up, I doubt I'll have the time. Mom was right about one thing, though. I can choose the classes I want to take and avoid the ones I hate, like math. I had enough from Ravard Prep that it carried over as college credit.

Showering off, I set my alarm on my phone and jump into bed. Trying as hard as I can not to remember the last thing that happened in this bed with Henry. My cock doesn't want to forget, and the way it swells makes me want to fucking cut it off.

Tugging down my sweats, I free my stupid dick that's already starting to leak, thinking of Henry's hot mouth around it. Gripping the base, I pull hard up and swipe the bead there to gather some lubrication. If I can make it hurt, I can forget.

Roughly, I move my hand up and down, over the head, until my leg bends and my balls feel like they're going to explode. Pulling harder, my brain turns off, and images of Henry with his lips stretched wide over my cock play behind my eyes.

"Fuck!" I shout, pissed that my orgasm feels that much closer since that image popped up. My spine tingles, and I have half a mind to give myself blue balls. To stop and hope my brain won't be thinking about him the next time my dick gets hard.

Who the fuck am I kidding?

Gritting my teeth, I squeeze my cock and tug hard, knowing I can't stop myself from painting my stomach when my legs lock and spine arches up. The orgasm rockets through my body, warm cum splattering my abdomen as I lay there, hand still wrapped around my cock until the air grows cold and my skin pebbles.

Reaching for the tissues on the desk between us, I wipe up my mess, cursing myself the whole time for thinking of Henry and the way his eyes go impossibly dark when he's turned on.

Pulling up my sweats, I hear the lock turn and stash the tissues under my comforter along with my offending dick. He doesn't say anything as he softly moves around the room. I want to look at him, to ask where he's been. I want to watch whatever he's doing, but I won't.

I left his bedside lamp on when I got in bed, fully intending to go to sleep. My side of the room is dark, and my comforter makes it even darker in the corner of the cement cell, so I hope when he looks, all he sees is a sleeping form.

The bathroom door shuts, and I let out a breath, closing my eyes and shifting to get comfortable. With the air thick and electric between us, I'm not sure that's possible. The door swings open, and Henry steps out in a t-shirt and sweatpants. I can't help the way my eyes track his every movement. When he looks up to turn off his light, he catches me watching him.

"I thought you were asleep," he says, getting into his bed and turning off the lamp. I know he wants to say something else, but I have a feeling if he does, we will either fight or fuck. That's what we do, and I promised myself I wouldn't let him circle back, so I flip over without a word and pretend he didn't say anything.

The next morning Henry's gone before I get up, again. Then my memory recalls that he told Fern he got a new job. I remember when he worked at the cafe at Ravard

Prep, he was always up and out the door before any of us.

My alarm goes off again, “Oh shit.” I must have hit snooze because I have ten minutes to get dressed and be in my first class. The only one I’m actually interested in, computer science.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck....”

Throwing on clothes that may or may not match, I’m out the door in less than five minutes. Practically running through campus and thanking God that I circled all my classes on a map the night before last.

The computer lab isn’t what I expected. Rows upon rows of shiny computers lined in perfectly neat order sit on top of black desks with most of the chairs vacant. Scanning the room, my heart pounds. I didn’t circle the wrong lab, did I?

“Well, hello there,” a jovial voice spouts from the corner of the room. Turning to find the voice, I find an older man with salt and pepper hair sitting behind a large desk that’s separated from the rest of the computer desks.

“I hope you’re Professor Ore,” I only realized after it was out that it sounded rude.

He laughs, his whole body shaking, “That I am, and you are?”

Relief sweeps through me, and I move to find a desk. There are only a few computers occupied, so I choose a row that only has one girl with dark hair at the end. “Banks Rossi.”

“Ah, welcome, Mr. Rossi.” He glances at the watch buckled to his wrist, “just in time, it seems.”

I nod, giving him a tight smile. He starts class without any further conversation, giving us a syllabus with all of our assignments due this semester. “You can work through them at your own pace. However, the midterm will be a group project, so I suggest you get to know everyone in the room.”

Collective groans ensue, no one likes a group project. There’s always someone who doesn’t pull their own weight and another—usually me—that does it all because everyone else sucks.

The girl at the end of my row raises her hand, “Will we get to choose our partners?”

Professor Ore chuckles more to himself than her, “No, this will be a project for all of you. Trust me, you’ll need all the help you can get.”

With that ominous hint, everyone looks around with varying looks of concern. Mr. Ore seems like a fun guy, and he doesn’t beat around the bush. Glancing over the list of assignments, I decide to tackle them as soon as possible. I don’t want shit to hit the fan with my family and lose my grade point average.

I still can’t shake the feeling that whatever Fern was worried about will directly affect the four of us. Something in her eyes left me with an oily feeling in my gut.

“Mr. Rossi?” I hear Mr. Ore’s voice through the headphones I’d put in when he told us we could leave or start working on our assignments.

“Yes sir?”

He nods to the clock, “While I appreciate your enthusiasm, you might be late for your next class...”

“Shit,” I wince at the clock, not realizing how much time I’d lost, and quickly

apologize to Mr. Ore.

“No problem. The first week is the hardest. If you need anything, my office is right down the hall.”

“Thanks.”

With all of my stuff shoved into my bag, I head off toward my next class. Since all of my math classes transferred, I have a pretty light schedule this semester, though I still have to have electives to cover the required amount of credits I need, so I chose physical education.

It's got to be the easiest hour of my day. The gym doors have a paper taped up on them stating that the class will be meeting out on the practice field located on the right wing of the school. Finding the locker room is easy since it's near the weight room I worked out in last night.

Quickly changing and stuffing my bag into a locker, I jog out through the doors that lead to the stadium and hang a right. There's a few people milling about, girls stretching, guys tossing around a football. It's a nice day, pretty mild and sunny.

Slowing down to a walk, I attempt to locate the professor so I don't get counted as a no-show. Though I don't really think it matters too much, most PE teachers are laid back and don't give a fuck if you show up or not.

“Rossi?” I hear a voice that feels familiar and pulls me to a different time in my life. His hair is still the same blue-black shaggy mess it's always been, yet he looks older. “Banks Rossi as I live and breathe !”

My lips tip up in a smile that takes me by surprise. The last time I saw Jax, he was clapping me on the shoulder while I cried over my mother's grave.



“Hell, it’s been how long?” He continues while making his way over to where my feet are frozen in the grass.

“Jax,” I croak, emotion clogging my throat. “It’s good to see you.”

“You look even more jacked than before! You’re not doing the roids, are you?” He laughs and wraps me up in his arms. He’s also gotten larger, and his unmistakable larger-than-life presence is still intact.

“Nah, just good ol’ gym time,” and trauma, but I don’t want to advertise that.

“Of course, how does it feel being God’s favorite pretty boy, huh?” He leans back and his eyes soften, his mouth tips down, and he whispers, “Sorry about Mama Fauna. How have you been?”

The mention of her name brings my simmering rage right to the forefront of my mood, and I suddenly wish he wasn’t here, that he had no idea who I was. Apparently, being God’s favorite comes with caveats. What am I supposed to say to that?

I’m fine. I mean, my mom was murdered, and the police are pathetic, but how much do you bench, bro?

“I’ve been alright,” I say instead.

He eyes me but doesn’t push. Turning to wave at the guys he was throwing the football around with, he hollers, “Come here! You’ve gotta meet Rossi!”

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

Arriving at the cafe ten minutes before six-thirty, I fully expected to take a beat to myself and enjoy the crisp morning air. As I round the corner a girl is already here stabbing the key in the lock for the front entrance, murmuring to herself.

“Hi,” I say, throwing up my hands so she won’t pepper spray me or kick me in the face or something. She startles, dropping her bag and placing her hand over her chest. “Fuck, you scared me.”

“I’m sorry, that wasn’t my intention. I’m supposed to open with Opal, today’s my first official day.” The words just won’t stop as she takes deep breaths, and I start to worry that I’ve scared her into a heart attack.

She giggles, “I wasn’t paying attention to my surroundings, a cardinal sin in girl world. I’m Opal, so that means you must be Henry.”

“That’s me,” holding my hand out, she takes it and turns the key in the lock while I pick her bag up from the cement.

“Thank you,” she says after I’ve picked up the stray remnants that fell out and the door to the coffee shop is open. Following her in, we go through the list of opening procedures, and when we’re done, she leans up against the counter and huffs, “I think that’s the fastest I’ve ever opened this place.”

“I’ve worked in coffee shops before. It’s what I’m good at,” I smack my stomach for proof, and it makes her laugh. Lifting her hand to her mouth, she giggles, and I smile back at her.

“Wait, aren’t you part of those new freshmen that Charlie invited to our party?” Her eyes squint, and she tilts her head to the side. “Yes! I remember you with the twins and that other guy who danced with practically everyone that night.”

I nod, licking my bottom lip to keep from remembering what else I did with Banks that night. “Yeah, they’re basically my brothers, except the dancing one, we’re...” I sigh, not really knowing how to define what Banks and I are. “Well, anyway, yes, I was with those guys that night.”

“I’ll say, I swear half the party left after y’all. It was the strangest thing.”

My brows furrow, and I ask, “What do you mean?”

“Well, weren’t y’all with a big group? It’s just I remember there being a lot of people with y’all when you showed up.”

I can’t remember a big group. I remember Gemma and Cin were with us, but that only adds two. She acts like we had an entourage of twenty.

“No, it was just us and Talon’s girlfriend, plus Gemma,” I add in because I’m not sure exactly where she fits.

“And Gemma is...”

“She’s a friend of the family,” that’s the best way I can describe her without slut shaming her and Toby. Technically, it’s true. We all adore her. She’s always around a lot more since Cin and Talon got hurt, and other than being away this summer, she’s like a sisterly addition to our group.

“Mhmm,” she hums as her eyes search my face. “And the handsome red-haired one who dances so well? What’s he like?”

“A selfish dick,” it comes out faster than I can stop it, and my cheeks flush pink. “I mean...”

“No, no. I get it,” she winks, “men can be assholes, especially if they think you’re a sure thing.”

“That’s not...” I stop myself when she gives me a look that says she sees through the bullshit and won’t believe whatever lie I was about to feed her. “Yeah, they can.”

“You’re sweet, though,” she smiles, “I’m sorry he’s not treating you well.”

“Is it that obvious?” I’ve never known a practical stranger to be so honest or intuitive.

“You’ve got dark circles under your eyes, which either means you aren’t sleeping or you’ve been crying. Your shirt’s on backward, so you got dressed in a hurry or in the dark to avoid something or someone. The way you basically shot daggers at me with your eyes when I asked about your handsome friend. Shall I continue?”

Immediately, I look down, willing her to be making a joke about the shirt, but alas, my shirt is indeed backwards. Bringing my arms out of the sleeves, I twist it around so I’m not looking like a total fool on my first day. “Thank you. You know, you could have told me sooner.”

“And ruin my spot on analysis? I think not,” she laughs, and I find myself enjoying Opal and her company. She’s honest, blunt even, but in a way that’s... soft. “I’ve got to open the door, the show waits for no one!”

I didn’t even realize the bakers were here. We’d come in through the front doors, and I hadn’t needed anything from the back at all, plus I’d gotten lost in our conversation and the ease in which we talked.

Students filter into the shop in waves, some I recognize from walking around, others I don't. Everyone seems friendly enough, and by the time Opal asks if I want to take a break, it's almost time for us to switch shifts.

Getting lost in the flow of something I enjoy made today fly. It feels good, knowing that my first day wasn't a complete disaster and that the routine was easy enough to pick back up.

"I think I'll pass, but if you want to go, I think I can handle it for a few minutes."

"You sure?" Her eyes light up, and she starts to untie her apron.

"Absolutely, I'm fine," I assure her. She flips the neck strap over her hair and walks through the kitchen door with her phone in her hand. The rush is pretty much over, and the lunch sandwiches we had are almost gone. The case up front is basically bare, ready for the last few sandwiches to be bought or thrown out.

I wonder if I can take them back to the dorms for the guys. I'm sure they'd enjoy them. Chiming from the bell over the door snaps my attention away from the case, and my heart skips a few beats.

A few jock-looking guys walk through the doors. One I recognize from our old high school, but it's the one behind him that makes my chest clam up and my heart riot against it.

Banks's smile drops when he sees me, but Jax lights up. "Holy shit! Are all of the quads here?" He makes a beeline for the counter, offering his hand to me. "Henry, you've grown."

I'm not certain if he means I've gotten fat or if he genuinely means I've grown up. The last time I saw him was at Fauna's funeral, and that didn't end well.

“It’s good to see you again Jax.” I take his hand and shake it firmly, just like dad taught me. “Been a while.”

“Damn right it has, I can’t believe it, and Banks here is still just a natural at the game. But he won’t give me any details about his last season. How about you kick him in the ass for me, yeah?”

“He didn’t play,” I offer, looking straight at Banks, and his eyes narrow on me.

“What?” Jax chuckles and turns to face him. Banks shrugs, but his eyes don’t leave mine.

“Didn’t have much time after the move,” he dismisses the conversation, his words sounding final.

“Oh,” it’s all Jax says, effectively bringing down the mood.

“How about some coffee?” I offer.

Jax nods and orders a protein coffee for each of the guys, along with Banks. Swiping his card to pay while the group moves over to the side where they pick up their drinks. Banks’s eyes follow me, I can feel them blazing on my back.

If he didn’t want anyone to know, then he should have just answered Jax himself or played last year. Ravard Prep had a really good team, he would have fit right in. Instead, he chose to quit the sport he loved so he could focus on getting high.

Or drunk.

Basically, whatever would dull him enough to forget the pain of losing his mom. I guess pushing everyone he loves away was a full-time job.

After gathering each of their coffees they walk out, but not before Banks turns around and gives me one last look. He stays in a perpetual state of irritation these days, so his pissed expression doesn't bother me... much.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

The fuck is his problem if I took the year off? So what? Not like it mattered, I wasn't planning on becoming a fucking superstar or whatever. Now it's all Jax can talk about. How I could have gone pro, how I can still go pro.

"Jax," my tone is warning. We've separated a little ways from the group, and I can't take his yammering anymore.

"Sorry man, I just... I don't get it," he sighs and hangs his head, shaking his hair. "Wait," he perks up and runs over to the rest of the guys, whom I assume are on the team. They talk and glance my way. When Jax turns around, he's smiling a ridiculous smile and walking over with the rest of them flanking him.

"The guys and I think you'd be a great asset to the team, so—"

"No." It comes out sharper than I meant, but I don't bother apologizing.

"If you're half as good as Jax says you are, we really could use you on the team," one of the bigger guys says from behind Jax.

"Yeah, our starting wide receiver graduated last year, and the one we have now got injured during the last game." Another one says, and they all start in, murmuring their arguments.

Fucking hell.

"I'll come to one practice," I know if I don't, Jax won't shut the fuck up, and I can't go another week with him like this. "One."



Jax hoots and hollers, jumping up and down, slamming his hands down on my shoulders. The rest of them join in, and I start to wonder if they're all freshmen like us or if they've been starting for a while.

The team isn't half bad, with some improvements and switches, they could be really good. I've checked their stats.

"Tonight at six."

Dressing in my workout gear, I side-eye Henry sitting at his desk. His back is facing me, and he refused to speak to me when he came in and I was at my desk on the computer. I didn't want to speak to him either, especially after the last time we talked.

But the silence is weird, and I want to turn him around and scream at him or kiss him. I'm not sure which. I just know I hate silent Henry. It's so much worse than when he yells at me or calls me out on my shit.

Rather than starting a fight with him just to feel something, I leave for the practice field for the second time today, and it's like deja vu. Except this time, I've agreed to join. Though, I'm not sure I'm actually ready to step on a field yet.

Anxiety and fear fight for dominance in my mind, and I have to stop at the entrance to the practice field to steady myself. It's only practice, and if I don't like it, I won't join the team. I repeat that mantra the whole walk up to where the guys are huddled stretching and shooting the shit.

Coach throws shoulder pads my way, then a helmet. "Heard you're looking to join the team."

"Maybe," I shrug. Coach Cardson is a younger guy, probably not much older than my dad. Possibly even younger, with a permanent scowl and sun lines carved into his

forehead.

A guy in the number four jersey calls for all the guys to gather around, and Coach eyes me expectantly. So I throw on the shoulder pads and carry the helmet with me over to the group. Jax tosses a practice jersey my way and shuffles over beside me.

“That’s Patterson, he’s our—”

“QB, I know,” I smirk in his direction, “I’m not so out of touch that I haven’t kept up with y’all’s stats.”

“I knew he was still in there!” Jax pumps one arm in the air and says, “Patterson, this is Rossi. He’s going to be our new wide receiver.”

“I’m not—”

“Welcome, Rossi. Let’s see what you’ve got,” Patterson’s smile is vicious, but I can’t tell if he wants to test me or run me into the ground. The latter ignites a fire that I thought had long since burned out inside of my chest. “I don’t expect you to know our playbook, so just catch the ball, yeah?”

I nod. Challenge accepted.

My heart pumps as anticipation ramps up. The team splits into two with Jax on my side of the line and Patterson lining up with the center. He calls a play, and I analyze the movement of the players, watching for the right opening before taking off at a sprint that makes my chest hurt in a way that’s difficult to understand in its familiarity. I thought I’d lost my passion for the game, but my chest feels lighter somehow as if it only needed to be reminded.

The feel of cleats on my feet again, digging into the soft earth, propelling me faster

and farther than I've dared to try in years. It's almost enough to make me smile. Turning my head over my shoulder I see Patterson launch the ball in my direction. He's overestimated my push, but I bolt, using all of the adrenaline I have to meet the ball before it lands.

With my arms outstretched, my fingers graze the ball before it falls to the ground, incomplete.

Bending over to catch my breath, I unclip the chin guard and pull my helmet off. I can see Jax coming my way out of the corner of my eye. He's worried that one bad attempt will make me leave. That I'll cut my losses and run, but the feeling of being on the field again with guys who love the sport as much as I do, makes me feel more human than I have in years.

Fucking finally.

"Let's go again," I tell him the second he opens his mouth.

Shoving my helmet back on, he pops it with his hand, screaming, "Let's fuckin' go!"

We line up again, and Patterson calls the play. I don't wait this time, I take off, letting muscle memory kick in. It's like my body was craving the push, the drive. This time, when Patterson releases the ball, I'm right where I need to be. The ball practically falls into my arms, and I run it down the field, passing the defense, which tries to take me down before I can reach the end zone.

"Fuck yeah!" I hear Jax scream, along with a few of the guys that I met earlier. They hoot and holler as my feet bring me to the end zone.

Complete.

Turning around, I see a few guys, along with Patterson, talking to Coach, and I suddenly find myself hoping they ask me to stay.

I don't want to leave. Tonight was the most I've felt in a long time that wasn't directly tied to Henry. Using him as a crutch to my grief should have never been an option.

Fern went through this when she lost her parents, both of them taken from her in their own home. Except she found their bodies, and that's a scar that nothing can heal despite Creed wanting to make everything better for her. Fern didn't use him to heal those wounds, but she wasn't afraid of moving forward with her life after.

I can't get the look on her face from dinner the other night out of my mind. Can't shake the way it made my stomach clench in dread. I've seen that look too many times to ignore it. After warring with myself the whole way back to my dorm, through my shower, and while I painstakingly scrolled through streaming networks, I cracked open my computer.

Dad's going to kill me, and if Creed finds out, he might too, but the not knowing is killing me, so I'm damned if I do and damned if I don't.

My fingers fly over the keys, running codes that will allow me to find whatever was on Fern's phone that made her so upset. I avoid her photos, camera, and social media, all of the things that I'll regret looking at. Some things can't be unseen.

Scrolling through her messages with unknown numbers, I lean back, letting out a harsh breath when I can't find anything that would set off her reaction like that. Frustration starts to settle in when something flags my attention. A text that someone thought they buried, and I have a feeling I know exactly who it was.

The phone rings in my ear. Hopefully he's awake, if not, I'll call until he answers.

“Son,” Dad’s voice flows through my speakers. I can hear the clink of ice being dropped into a crystal glass.

“I know about Fern,” I tell him plainly.

He sighs on the other end, and liquid sloshes into the glass. “And what are you planning on doing with this information?”

“I want to make a deal.”

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

The last few weeks have been a blur of school work, cafe, and avoiding Banks. I've done a pretty good job of it, too. Football takes up a lot of his time now, it's like the old Banks is slowly starting to come back. I've seen him laughing with the other guys, and his hair's grown out, showing off the bright copper strands.

I can practically feel the memory of the soft waves combing through my fingers as we laid intertwined in my bed back home.

My heart aches every time I see him laugh or smile at someone, wishing he would look at me like he used to. How I would catch his eyes on me anytime I was baking and see his lips tip up in a smile I'd come to realize was only for me.

Now, we're all in the same car, and Banks hasn't looked at me once. The house looks the same on the outside as it always does, but the inside is decorated with Happy Birthday signs and streamers, like something out of a kid's dream.

"Happy Birthday!" Our dads, Fern, Creed, Candy, and Manson, shout when we walk in. Banks turns red, and Talon and Toby join in on the off-key song sung at every birthday celebration. I enjoy watching him squirm.

The gift in my pocket weighs the denim down and makes my muscles all gooey. I know he'll love it, but I worry about giving it to him. If he knows it's from me... I don't think I can take any more shots to my heart when it comes to him.

"Happy Birthday, kid," Creed says, while Nile brings him in for a hug, "Nineteen years."

“Weird, right?” He mumbles, “How old are you now? Seventy?”

Diego grips his shoulders and holds him out to look at him, “Still young enough to kick your ass.”

Banks laughs and pulls his dad in for a hug. It’s a rare occurrence, something I’ve not seen him do in a long time, with both arms wrapped around his dad’s shoulders. Diego whispers something in his ear, and Banks buries his head between his dad’s shoulder and neck for a minute, nodding before lifting his head and smiling almost hesitantly at Fern.

“Thank you for this,” he says, gesturing to all the decorations and food lining the island. It’s not like last time when Fern made a homemade spread. This time there’s pizza, chicken wings, and enough ranch to drown the horses outside.

A birthday cake—which is probably confetti cake with vanilla icing—sits in the middle of it all. Banks is an easy one to please because he normally doesn’t eat sweets. So when he does, he enjoys the simple flavors. Fern squeals when Cin and Gemma walk in. They took a different car, and part of me wants to ask to ride back with them.

It’ll probably be less awkward that way.

She rushes Cin and asks a ton of questions after she’s satisfied with her squeeze. All three of them talk a mile a minute, and I love it. How Fern genuinely cares about us even though she has no ties to us other than Creed.

“Go ahead, birthday boy,” Creed chuckles. “Make your plate, the old men are starving.”

Everyone laughs, and conversation flows as we clean our plates and watch the game on TV in the living room. Soon, the conversation shifts to Banks and how the team is

doing.

“It’s surprisingly good,” he stoically replies as if the loved ones around us can’t tell he’s in a better mood. He hates celebrating his birthday. Ever since his mother died, he hasn’t wanted to. But today, he’s all smiles and analyzing the players on the screen with his dad.

“The season’s already started, but I’m not surprised you walked on to the team,” Diego’s grumbly voice proclaims, and everyone nods their heads. Banks is an incredible athlete, so it’s nice to see him get back into that part of his life.

“I haven’t played,” Banks mutters to himself, but I hear it. His eyes find mine, and we look away from each other quickly. The gift burns heavier in my pocket. Part of me wants to leave it on his bed down the hall and never speak of it. The other part wants to see him open the gold chain with a football hanging in the center.

“Didn’t the coach offer to let you start in the next game?” Talon grumbles.

Banks cuts his eyes toward his cousin and gives him the finger, “Yes, he did, gossip queen.”

Talon rolls his eyes, “Better they find out now than the day before and scramble to show up because you know they will.”

Banks looks at his dad and nods, “I’m playing next Friday night.”

“Gemma made posters in art, and Cin found a portable heater since it’s started to get cooler in the evenings,” Toby adds into the mix while Diego, Nile, and my dad all talk about coordinating the evening.

After I’ve cleaned my plate, I head to the kitchen where Cin, Gemma, and Fern are



all standing around the dip, mindlessly eating and gabbing. They don't stop either as I pile on more food to my plate. I shouldn't eat this, I've gained a significant amount of weight since last year. With everything going on with Banks, food is my comfort, but I realize I'm about to be stuffed sick.

I just don't care anymore.

Spooning ranch onto my plate for the pizza, I grab another water from the fridge and head back out to the living room. Banks's red hair catches my eye down the hall, and my gut tells me it's now or never.

Putting my plate down on the table, I slink back out and head down the hall to his room. Arguing pulls my attention even further toward his space. I can hear his dad's deep voice and Banks' that's almost just as deep.

"For all of us," Diego says, "You and I both knew it was coming."

"And that's why Fern was upset last time we were here... because it's happening now?" My foot snags the carpet, and I huff out a breath of relief when I catch myself, but the conversation comes to a halt. Diego comes out of the room with a stern look on his face and walks past me to the living room.

Banks follows him out, doesn't even offer me a glance, and heads in the same direction his father went. His features look sharper than before as if he's clenching his jaw. Banks doesn't look at us, and his features don't change.

Pretending to use the bathroom beside his room, I wash my hands and head out, only to find everyone gathered in the living room and Fern on Creed's lap with wide eyes and his arms banded around her.

"What's... going on?" I ask since the once loud room is dead quiet, and everyone is

staring at me.

Fern's face morphs from sadness to anger, and she tries to stand, hitting Creed's chest with everything she's got until he eventually lets her go, and she storms up the stairs.

"Banks?" I ask because everyone's now staring at him, and no one is saying anything. "Will someone please tell me what happened?"

"Banks has agreed to marry a girl from the Irish mob boss's family," Talon grits out. He's pissed, and if his white knuckles around Cin's fingers don't give that away, the way her face falls when our eyes meet does.

"What?" I choke out. I can't believe the words Talon threw out. Banks isn't marrying anyone, especially someone we don't know. He wouldn't do that to me...

"Bridgett's family threatened Fern," Creed rumbles. "Because of the contract between Bridgett's family and me, her father still expects a marriage tie to the Hemlock Empire."

I mean, I understand well enough. Creed was promised to Bridgett years ago, but he fell in love with Fern, and then shit hit the fan with her, and well, Bridgett got caught in the crosshairs. But that shouldn't mean we have to take up that responsibility. We—none of us can.

"And what does that have to do with Banks?" My heart feels like it's lodged itself into my throat, and I have to push the words out.

He can't, no, he wouldn't.

I cross the room to bring us closer, but he doesn't look my way and stays silent. "Please tell me you aren't serious."

His eyes slowly inch up to meet mine and they're completely empty, as if he's on autopilot. "I am."

"What about one of you," I say, gesturing to our fathers, a much more respectable tie to this empire than a nineteen-year-old college freshman. "Why can't you marry her?" I know I sound childish, and the misery in my voice must be apparent because dad gets up and tries to wrap me in his arms.

"No!" I shout at him, backing away with my eyes still locked on Banks.

"She's a child, Henry. It wouldn't be appropriate for any of us to marry her," Nile says.

"And that makes it okay to pawn off on him?" I'm hallucinating. I have to be because our family would never force any of us to do this.

"We aren't forcing anyone," Creed says. I must have said the last part out loud, "He offered."

Pain unlike anything I've ever felt rushes through my body, and I fall to my knees.

"You can't," my voice is broken like my chest and sobs crawl their way up my insides.

"I can, and I did," Banks's cold, detached voice pierces my ears.

"Don't—" I swallow roughly and try again, "don't do this." I plead around my heaving breaths and pinched throat, "Please, Banks." I must have just been stabbed because the way my chest feels like it was cleaved open and my heart ripped out is staggering.

"Henry," Dad's arms wrap under mine, and he tries to haul me up, but I can't. I can't

leave like this, with my heart on the floor in front of Banks's feet yet again. Only this time, I won't recover.

Crawling on my hands and knees, I scramble out of my dad's arms and make my way over to where he's sitting, as if he didn't just implode both of our lives, "Why? I've waited . I've done everything to help you..." The silence in the room is deafening as I hiccup a breath into my lungs.

"I know you love me, Goddammit Banks!" At this point, I just want any kind of reaction from him. Something .

He doesn't say anything, doesn't even spare me a glance as I make an absolute fool out of myself in front of all of the people I love. "Look at me, you motherfucker!" I scream. I don't know when the tears started to fall or when my hands gripped his knees, but here I am—soaking his knees in my tears while he ignores me.

"I'll never forgive you," I whisper, turning to face everyone else. "If you let this happen, I'll never forgive any of you."

"Henry," Dad crouches down. "He volunteered, it's his choice."

"HE LOVES ME!" Turning back to him, I sit up taller so he has nowhere else to look but at me. "Tell them Banks, tell them you made a mistake."

Slowly, he lowers his eyes to mine, and I feel it in my gut.

He's about to shatter what's left of my heart.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

Seeing Henry on his knees with tears streaming down his face makes me want to throw everything away, tell our dads that I fucked up and can't marry this girl.

But I can't.

Creed didn't ask me to do this, but the idea of seeing Fern hurt like my mother was, isn't something I can handle. I'll crumble all over again, and this time it won't only be me. Fern has captured so many hearts in this make-shift family of mine, and a mob war would be bloody.

If I can make all that go away, I'll sacrifice my heart. And I know I'll hate myself far longer than Henry will. So I steel my nerves and utter the worst possible words I can muster.

"I never loved you Henry, and the only mistake I made was letting you into my bed."

Henry falls onto his ass, as if I hit him with everything in me, and I did. I know this will be the only way he'll stop loving me. The only way I can make him move on. Even if the words taste like death on my tongue, and I hate myself for saying them.

Talon shoots out of his seat toward me, hands outstretched. His dad hooks him around the waist and jerks him back.

"Everyone says I'm the asshole, but I'd never do this." He spits at my feet, and my insides roll. I want him to hit me, lay me out so that I can hide inside of my head. "You're a fuc—" But I don't hear the rest, Nile wrestles him out of the room, and Cin drops her head to follow. She won't look at me, and God knows I deserve it.

“Your mother would be ashamed of you,” Henry spits, shaking and vibrating with rage and heartbreak, I can see it written on his face. His words hit me like a tornado filled with bricks and shrapnel. It feels like everyone takes a breath and holds it, waiting for me to explode.

“She would hate you for this!”

His words strike home, but I can’t let them pierce the memory of her. She wouldn’t hate me, she would cry and plead with me not to throw my life away, but she would understand why.

He will too.

Eventually.

As calm as I can, I stand and turn toward my room, stepping over where Henry’s still sitting on the floor clutching his chest. Something hard hits my back, and I spin, facing my family once again. Henry’s standing now, chest puffed up, arms straight by his sides, pointing at the floor but looking at me.

“Wear it, melt it,” he says, voice detached while hot tears stream down his face. “Or better yet, throw it away, you’ve gotten really good at that. It doesn’t matter anymore.” He walks out to the patio where the string lights cast a soft glaze, slamming the glass door on his way out. I don’t even glance down at whatever it is, choosing to turn and walk to my room and close myself in.

My fist hits the tile of the shower, over and over, until my knuckles split and the tile is cracked. I gathered sweats and a t-shirt from my bag and came straight to the bathroom after destroying Henry’s heart.

After obliterating any sliver of a chance Henry and I had.

I try convincing myself that it was worth it, that he'll move on, and I'll try to make my faceless bride happy. I can do that, I don't need Henry to be happy. The lie strikes me in the chest, and tears run down my face along with the shower water.

He'll be okay. He has to be.

I repeat it over and over in my head, willing it to be true. The lock on the door turns, the click is as loud as a gun firing. Toby's face comes close enough to the fogged glass that he reaches over and wipes the inside of the shower, so we're standing face to face.

I can't look at him, saying that in front of them... I used to think Talon was the biggest asshole in our group. But I think that title belongs to me now.

He raises his other hand so just his fingers are visible over the glass, and something dangles from his fingers. It catches and swings back and forth, it's gold with something hanging on the end.

"I don't want it," I repeat and look away. Yet the way Toby stands there and waits as if I'm going to change my mind makes me turn my head. It's a football, with my new number engraved on the back. I don't need to touch it to know that it's real gold and that Henry probably spent a lot of his own money on it, that he earned working at the coffee shop. That he likely painstakingly thought about it for months until it finally hit him.

"I won't tell you what you already know," Toby's usual carefree voice is replaced by a grim one, "but I will tell you that you were wrong. You should have let us decide as a unit like we always do."

"Talon has Cin, you have Gemma or Salem. I can't keep track, and Henry deserves to be loved by someone who can love him back."

“Talon and I can make our own decisions,” he spits. “And as for Henry, you’re an idiot if you think that person isn’t you.” He retracts his hand and leaves the room, pulling the door shut behind him.

My mind works on autopilot, cleaning my body and washing my hair. The itch to shave it again is there. Henry loves my hair, even refused to watch me cut it after mom’s funeral.

Correction, Henry loved my hair.

Ripping the strands, I let the memory of mom’s death wash over me.

The heavy smell of smoke singes my nostrils and has me up and out of bed before I’m fully awake. My hip bumps into the desk my parents got me that I hardly ever use.

“Mom!” I scream around the increasing smoke. When she doesn’t answer, my blood runs cold despite the heat, and I rush to the door. “Mom?!” I scream again, willing her panicked voice to answer me back.

Flames lick the stairs, eating their way up the carpet. Plastering myself to the wall, I get as low as I can and feel my way to my parent’s room. We’re on opposite sides of the house, and I pray with every fiber of my being that she’s okay.

“Mom!!” I holler again, with no answer. Their door is shut, and the knob is hot, using my shirt as a mitt, I turn the knob and push open the door. Checking the bed, I don’t find her. Releasing a breath, I’m hoping that maybe she’s already outside.

Glass explodes somewhere in the house, I can hear the tinkling of glass hitting the tile floor. Crawling to their closet, I check to make sure she’s not hiding in there. When I don’t find her, I move to their bathroom, again she’s nowhere to be seen. So I keep



moving but pause at the stairs. They're completely engulfed now, I have no way through, so I circle back and throw open the window in my parent's room. The bushes below will break my fall, and then maybe I can get in through the side door and check for mom.

"Banks!" I hear my name, but no relief fills me. "Fauna!" Dread sours my stomach at dad's voice calling for both of us. Instead of just me, which means mom is still in the house. I can't leave her, I won't. Bundling their comforter around my body, I beeline through the house, back to my bedroom, where I've snuck out a few times.

There's a tree outside of my window, and the greenhouse is below it. The fire must not have worked its way in there yet because the inside is still dark and green, but a yellow flicker threatens to break its way in.

Putting my foot out over the window's seal, I place it on the thickest part of the limb that I can reach, and repeat it with the other. Dropping the comforter on my floor, I ease the rest of my body out into the night air. It's dark, save for the inferno that's becoming my house.

"Banks!" I hear Dad call again. "Banks! Thank God!" He says, arms stretched wide above him. "Where's your mother?"

"I couldn't get down the stairs!" I yell back, my throat raw from the smoke.

"Can you get down?"

"I'm fine. Go, Dad! Get Mom!" I scream as loud as my throat will allow. He hesitates but circles back around the house and disappears. I hope she's in the greenhouse, maybe she went to sit there to wait on Dad. My feet hit the grass, and I scramble, pulling open the door to the side of the glass structure Mom loves so much.

“Mom?” I yell, seeing the smoke roll in above my head. “Mom! Where are you?” Tears dot my vision, panic clutches my stomach, and I yell until I’ve searched the whole greenhouse and haven’t seen her.

The smoke becomes too thick, and I run outside to the sound of sirens and heavy trucks crunching gravel. Walking around the side of the house, I see the lights, but everything feels fuzzy, and my vision waves in and out.

“Dad...” I feel faint like my body can’t hold itself up anymore.

“We’ve got one over here!” Someone’s lifting my head up, placing a mask over my nose and mouth. Their voices are loud, but I can’t understand what they’re saying. “Fauna!” I hear Dad clear as day, my eyes pop open, but I can’t sit up. Can’t move as I see my father carrying a body out of the house.

Screaming, so much screaming, her name, her nickname. His arms look like they’re on fire, and I want to go to him, but the person whose words I can’t understand is keeping me pinned down.

“You don’t need to see that,” the voice says.

My dad’s howling, beating on his arms, shaking the body he pulled out, and there are people surrounding him now. Trying to look at his arms and take him away from the body.

“Mom?” I think I say out loud, but I can’t be sure because no one answers. My chest feels funny and tight, like I can’t catch my breath. Because my brain knows who that is.

My mother.

My beautiful, kind mama is lying unmoving on the ground with my dad by her side.  
The smell of acrid, sulfur assaults my senses.

My eyes water, my chest seizes, and I think I'm shaking. I can't breathe. Air won't pull into my lungs. Everything starts to swim, and I choke.

"Fauna!" I've never heard my dad's voice so much as waver, so when the crack in his voice happens as he wails, it feels deafening like the whole world stopped and waited for him to take his next breath.

And, I think the world might be waiting for me too.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

I can't stay here.

I can't be here.

The air outside is cold, and since I wasn't planning on being outside, I don't have a jacket. But I'm not going back inside. I don't want to see any of them, not after Banks tore out my heart and stomped it into pieces that I'm not sure will ever glue back together.

Not while my family watched and did nothing.

The barn lights are on, and while I didn't plan on coming down here when I started aimlessly walking the property, I think the calm of the horses will help. Daisy and Rambow are in their stalls when I slide the doors open. Blanket jackets line their backs, and Rambow's brown head pops out of his stall when I pull the doors shut.

He chuffs and returns to munching on the hay in his stall.

"Nice to see you too," I mumble through the tears still falling from my eyes. Daisy nudges my shoulder with her nose, her hot breath tickling my neck, and I imagine she's telling me not to worry about her grumpy son. "Hey Daisy."

Running my hand up and down her nose, she neighs a satisfied sound. Her wet nose meets my cheek, mixing with the wetness already there. "Think you have it in you to heal another broken heart?"

Leaning against her head, I allow my tears to fall freely until they dry up and my face

feels like it's going to crack open from all the pressure in my head.

"How could he do this to us?" It's a whisper, born from a broken heart. Grabbing a brush from the wall I carefully unlock her stall and start brushing her neck where it's not covered by the blanket.

She preens, stretches, and snorts happily as the brush grips the loose hairs of her shed.

My phone rings, Koda's name flashes on the screen once I dig it out from my pocket. I don't want to speak to him. I don't want to speak to anyone—at least not to anyone that can speak back.

Letting his call go to voicemail, I continue brushing Daisy, shoving my phone back in my pocket. It rings again, leaving only a moment's pause between.

"Hello," I answer, just in case it's serious.

"Henry! Hey, I'm so sorry to call this late," Koda's cheery voice belts through my speaker. "Could you open the cafe tomorrow? I know you aren't scheduled to come in until nine, but Cam is sick, and I have class."

"Uhm," looking around, I figure it's not a bad idea. It would be a Sunday, which are slower days. It beats sitting around here avoiding the people who claim to love me.

"Are you okay?" His question brings me out of my thoughts, and I remember I've been crying. I can never hide it.

"Yeah," I croak, "I can open, but could you come get me? I came home with my friends, and we only have one parking pass..."

"Oh! I forget you're a freshman. I'm sure I can get Opal to come get you, is that

okay?”

“Yeah, I’ll text you the address. It’s not far from Gravity Hill University, you don’t think she’ll mind?”

“Nah, Opal’s great. Thank you!” He shouts before ending the call, and as promised, I text him the address. It’s not a long drive—around twenty minutes from campus—so hopefully, Opal won’t mind. She doesn’t seem like the type to pry.

Hiding in the barn for another twenty minutes, scrolling through my phone to kill time, an unknown number pops up and I answer, hoping it’s Opal.

“Hello?”

“Henry! Hey! I’m like ten minutes out, Hannah’s with me. I hope that’s okay.” Her words come out in rapid succession, and I have to pause for a minute to let them sink in.

“Yeah,” I answer after a pause. “Yeah, that’s fine. Let me know when you get here, and I’ll open the gate.”

“Okay!”

I didn’t bring anything, so I don’t have anything to take back. Hiding in the barn until they get here feels like the best option, so when they arrive, I can sneak around the house and meet them in the driveway.

Putting the brush away and petting Rambow, I check the clock and figure it’s close enough. When my feet hit the back patio, my phone pings with a notification from Opal. Perfect timing. Now, I only hope I can get to them before someone in the house notices that I’m slinking around outside.

Hitting the button on my phone to open the gate, I walk around the side of the house and wait by the fountain in the front. Headlights illuminate the statue, and the front door opens. I groan, hoping and praying it's not Dad.

"Kid," Diego's rumble feels like a shot to my already fragile brain. "Where are you going?"

"School," I don't think I've ever used such a disrespectful tone with any of our dads before, but I just don't have the capacity to care.

"He's just doing what he thinks is right."

"Well, it's not."

His eyes dart to the car, and he freezes. It's so subtle I almost miss it. I don't have time to contemplate why, so I walk to the car. Opal clicks the locks, and I open the back door and get in without another word.

I should have said goodbye to Dad and told him that I'm going back to the school so that he doesn't worry. Just as I'm about to get in the backseat, he bursts through the front doors, arms wide and outstretched, palms turned up.

"Henry!" He shouts my name, and my chest constricts into knots, seeing him standing there.

"Does he live in a house full of hot older dudes?" Opal whispers to Hannah in the front, and fresh tears well in my eyes. Those hot older dudes keep each other from crumbling, every day they choose to keep going, and I'm running away like a coward.

"Just go, please." I murmur before I duck my head and close the door.

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

It's been three days, and Henry still hasn't said a word to anyone, and no one knows where he is. The boys and I came back the moment we found out Henry left. Luca was pissed, rightfully so, I shot knives through his son's heart. I heard my dad and his arguing, and while Luca knows logically that this is the easiest solution, he's pissed that Henry's the collateral damage.

My mind isn't where it should be. It should be on football practice, and that's how I find my ass being thrown on the ground by one of the linemen during practice.

"Dude," Jax is there, offering me his hand to pull me up. "Where's your head, man?"

I don't know how to answer him. I certainly can't say that my boyfriend and I broke up because that happened a long time ago. I also can't say that my best friend hates me, even though that is also true. Both of those lead to questions, and Jax is like a dog with a bone. He can't help himself.

"I think I'm getting sick," I lie, ripping off my helmet and heading for the showers before the coach can tell me to stop. It's not like I'll start for this Friday's game now, not with the shitty practice I'm having.

The girl from the party Toby introduced us to with dark raven hair is leaning against the brick of the building. It's moments like these that I wish I could be the old smiling version of myself and give enough of a fuck to remember someone's name.

"Banks, right?" Pushing herself from the wall she comes to block the metal doors to the locker room.



“Yeah,” I huff, attempting to skirt around her.

She moves, sidestepping in my way. “I didn’t know you were spoken for when Pops made the arrangement.”

“What arrangement?” I study her for a second, and my eyes widen with recognition. I remember her from the party right before classes started. She’s... loud, confident, just like one of us, but I look at her again, and it hits me. This must be her , or she’d have no knowledge of any kind of contract, and no reason to talk to me.

“Fuck , you’re Charlotte,” I mumble.

“It’s Charlie and, yeah, fuck.” Crossing her arms her blue eyes seem filled with a simmering rage, something I can relate to.

“Well, I’m not,” I deadpan, hoping the pang of that statement doesn’t show, “Spoken for, I mean.”

“Oh? Tell that to the boy on my best friend's couch who refuses to move unless it’s for food.”

“You know where Henry is?” I step closer and realize I just gave Charlie what she wanted, confirmation.

Shit .

“I figured,” she laughs, “to be clear, I don’t want this marriage any more than you do.”

“Oh yeah, then what do you want? Because your family threatening mine is not a great move on the chessboard.”

She laughs, a throaty horse laugh that makes me wonder if she's hit the smokes one to many times. "I didn't threaten anyone, that would be my father. God love him, but he's determined to gain a foothold in the Hemlock Empire."

"By pimping his daughter out?" The remark is out before I can stop it, and her palm cracks across my cheek.

She steps closer, her hand gripping my bicep, nails digging in. She snarls a low warning that she's not fucking around, "Do not think for one second that I won't rearrange your insides if you so much as hint again that I'm a whore."

My smile surprises both of us. "Not a whore, just the daughter of a man willing to sell her to an empire."

"And what about you, Pretty Boy? Why are you the one they picked for this arrangement, huh?" Her brows perk up her forehead.

"I volunteered," my smile gets wider as her smirk fades and her eyes grow.

"Why?" She steps back, taking her hand with her.

"Because you threatened someone I love," shrugging my shoulders to avoid having to look directly at her, I nod toward the locker room. "Can I shower now?"

"Only if you promise to come have dinner with me tonight," she proposes, "to discuss other... options." Her eyes roam over my body, and not in the usual way I'm used to. As if she's sizing me up, ready to knock-down-drag-out my ass if I so much as deny her this.

"Tonight?" I worry my bottom lip, trying to recall all the shit I need to get done.

“Not like you have anywhere else to be, right?”

Dropping my head, I mumble for her to wait while I get ready and head into the building. Taking the quickest rinse off I can, I dress and meet Charlie in less than ten minutes. She nods and starts toward Gator Coffee Co.

“Wait, not there.” I stop short.

“Henry isn’t working, remember? Couch or food.”

The reminder feels like an anvil on my chest. There was a point in time when I would do anything to make him feel better, to make sure he never got to that point, to that low.

“You’re pouting,” I say, plopping down beside Henry in the greenhouse. The plants, flowers, and earth smell like my mother. It’s one of my favorite places in the house, along with the memories of me and Henry stealing moments away here.

“What if Talon and Toby make fun of us?” He asks, eyes turned toward mine.

“Does their opinion matter?”

“They’re our brothers,” he whispers, “I don’t think I can handle it if they don’t accept it.”

Grabbing his hands, I lean my forehead down to his and breathe, “Look, Talon’s an ass and Toby’s been bisexual literally forever What’s so different about you and me that they wouldn’t accept us?”

He takes a deep breath, pulling in all the oxygen in the room and moves his hand up my wrist, over my shoulder to my neck. “Because we’re part of the core four. If

something happens to us...”

“I can’t promise that we won’t grow apart, or fall in love with other people. Henry, we’re only sixteen.”

“I know that, and I wouldn’t hold you to a promise like that,” his eyes are locked on mine, and I want to kiss him so badly that it hurts to sit here and look at his pretty face. “I just worry—”

“You worry a lot,” I chuckle, “if you don’t want to tell them yet, we don’t have to, but I won’t deny how you make me feel, Fancy. And if I want to hold your hand, I’m damn well going to, no matter who’s watching.”

His eyes slide closed, and he smiles. When his golden-flecked eyes meet mine again, he laughs and places a gentle kiss on my lips. “You’re kind of a pain,” he says.

“I know, but I just want you to be happy.” Lifting one shoulder in a shrug, we both laugh while his hand slips down, and I interlock my fingers with his.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

“ A lright friend,” I hear her before I see her. Cracking my eyes open, I find Opal leaning over the couch of her apartment, hands held at her side. “You have to get up and take a shower. You’re on shift.”

“Koda changed them,” I retort, not budging from the couch.

“I have a date tonight, so you’re on closing duty. Now get up,” she says, ripping the blankets off my body, she crosses her arms and taps her foot.

“It’s cold!” I shout, earning a glare while I try yet again to reach for the blanket clutched in her fist.

“You’re getting up, taking a shower, shaving whatever that wanna-be beard is, and going to work!” Her jaw is set in a hard line, and I might be a little worried that she’s going to try shaving my face without my consent.

“Okay,” I throw up my hands, touch the newly grown hair on my face, and sit up. Damn, it’s longer than I’ve ever let it get. Sitting up makes my head swim and I feel like I’ll either throw up or start spinning. Either would get me out of work, but I know I can’t lay here forever.

“I respect that you don’t want to talk about... whatever it is that happened last weekend with your family, but you’ve got to get moving, or else you’ll waste away on my couch moving from house to house with me like a bad piece of furniture I can’t get rid of.”

“Thanks, Opal,” I mutter. Comparing me to a piece of furniture no one wants reminds

me all over again that the person I love doesn't want me.

She sighs and comes to sit beside me, "I know it's tough moving on, but you have to Henry. You're gorgeous, and the customers eat you up at the cafe! You're a people person, so go people and see how much better you'll feel."

"You think I'm gorgeous?" I try for a smile, but it ends up being more of a grimace.

"Objectively," she winks, and we laugh. Swatting me with her hands she gets me to my feet and giggles, "Small wins."

"Small wins," I agree, walking to the bathroom that's covered in girl stuff. I need to figure out where I'm going to move. I can't stay on Opal's couch forever. It's already been nearly a week, and I need my own soap. The shampoo, however...

One of the girls must have gone by my dorm because my work stuff is laid on the bathroom sink, along with a razor and men's shave gel. Opal wasn't kidding about the beard, but I think with some shaping, it might be something worth trying.

Showered and dressed, Opal offers to drive me but her apartment is right across the street from campus. "Nah, I think I'll walk."

She nods, hmphs, and takes off down the hall wishing me luck over her shoulder. The walk isn't too bad, and I make a mental note to get my coat when I can since it's only going to get colder here.

Koda's clocking in when I make my way to the back. "Hey," he looks down at his phone he took from his apron pocket. "I thought we rearranged your schedule this week?"

"Opal has a date, so she asked me to cover."

“Are you okay?” Koda’s face pinches. His usual brown eyes are darker back here in the lower light.

“I will be,” I answer with the best I’ve got. I’m not okay, and I’m not sure when I ever will be again, but I’m trying. He seems to understand and nods, stepping aside so I can use the machine to clock in.

Doing my usual routine of poking about the kitchen before heading through the door that leads to the front, I memorize what’s back here. It will be whatever’s on the menu. We don’t serve the usual lunch and dinner. It’s mainly sandwiches and sweets, along with your favorite coffee or tea.

The bell over the door chimes, and I hear Koda answer before stepping through to the front of the cafe. The female voice that answers him makes me pause. I remember that voice and the order. Caramel latte with no whip.

“Hey Charlie!” I greet, looking up in time to see she’s not alone. My smile immediately falls.

“Henry! Holy shit, it’s good to see you vertical,” she smiles, and I have to clear my throat to even think about responding. Banks is behind her, eyes locked on mine. It feels like a lifetime before Koda asks Banks if he wants anything.

I watch in shock and horror as he places his hand near the small of her back and leans over her to give Koda his order, after which he pays for the two of them. My mind spirals.

Are they on a date?

Is he fucking her?

Does she know he's engaged?

Does she care? All of my thoughts spin and tumble over one another.

Snapping fingers appear in my vision and I turn my head to find Koda looking at me with eyes as wide as saucers. "Earth to Henry."

Shaking my head and the lump in my throat away, I chuckle, "Sorry, I spaced out there. Did you need me to make that latte?" I ask, picking up a steaming carafe with shaking hands.

Koda eyes me for a moment before something registers. His eyes go soft, and his mouth turns into a line. "You deserve better than him, Henry."

My lungs seize as if they, too, forgot how to work, and I nod once, forcing my feet to move to the machines so I can make Charlie her latte. Banks ordered a bottle of water, and I have half a mind to poke a hole in the bottom, so it slowly leaks out all over his lap.

Koda grabs it before I can follow through, along with their sandwich and bagel, and walks their way. He offers them his usual smile but cuts his gaze at Banks.

I like that he's protective of me.

It makes me smile. It's small, but it's there, and I'll take joy just about anywhere I can get it.



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

At least I know he's alive. Hearing Charlie talk about how he cried for hours on her friend Opal's couch doesn't make me feel any better about my decision to marry Charlie. In fact, it makes me feel worse than when I told Henry I never loved him.

All I want is to walk to the counter and grab his stupid fucking face and kiss him until he's putty, and then... I'd find another way to hurt him all over again, and the fact that my family's safety hinges on this marriage stops me from doing exactly that. But I can't stop myself from staring.

"Yeah, that's what I thought," Charlie's snickering brings me out of my thoughts and back to the present matter at hand. "Taken."

I shake my head and return my gaze to Charlie, "Yeah, by you and your sociopathic family."

She leans across the table, stopping mere inches from my face, and says, "Let's you and I get one thing straight. I am not my family, and I have no intentions of marrying anyone, let alone you."

I scoff, "Okay, so what exactly are we doing here?"

"I'm so glad you asked," leaning back into her seat as the other guy working the cafe with Henry delivers our tray of food. He not so gently puts the tray down while looking at me and huffs before walking away. "Ooookay, that's unusual for Koda," Charlie muses.

"I've made a fan," I grumble, watching him walk up to Henry and lay his hand across

his back.

Consoling him.

I have to grip the sides of my chair to stay in it because if I don't, the results may be catastrophic. I have no right to be angry that someone else is showing Henry affection, but I don't have to fucking like it, either. Ripping my gaze away from them, I focus back on my betrothed .

"I'd say so did Henry," Charlie laughs and unwraps her sandwich. Taking a generous bite, she chews until she's swallowing down the pieces. "Like I said, I have an idea. We pretend to date and make appearances, but you're free to do whatever it is you do, and you don't ever ask me what I'm doing. Once my father realizes he's made a mistake offering me up, he'll want to arrange a meeting with your precious Creed."

I nearly drain my bottle of water while she lays all of that out, seemingly in one breath. "And you're sure your father will just change his mind?"

Her elbows land on the table, and she cradles her head on top of her hands. "Oh, I know he will. Once he sees how dysfunctional your family is, he won't want to do business with you."

My laugh slips out before I can help it, " My dysfunctional family? What about yours? Using an archaic tradition to gain footholds where they aren't needed."

"Again, not going to happen," she shakes her head, still resting on her palms, and adds, "I've seen you two," she points between me and Henry, "orbiting around each other with longing looks and sad eyes. Then there's the hot twin who looked like he saw a ghost at my party, and the other twin looks like he's got a stick up his ass twenty-four-seven. So yeah, I'd say I've seen enough dysfunction."

Her description of Talon makes me chuckle, which I try to hide behind my water, “Don’t let Tal hear you say that.”

The mention of Talon gives me a pang in my chest. He still won't speak to me, and leaves the room any time I come in.

She shrugs as if she’s not worried and continues, “Look, I know this wasn’t in your plans for your freshman year, but by Christmas, I’ll have this engagement broken off and never to be spoken of again. All you have to do is follow my lead, and Pretty Boy?”

Eyes rolling, I raise my eyebrows for her to go on.

“What you do behind closed doors is none of my business, but please keep your dick away from anyone when in plain sight. This won’t work if my father doesn’t believe we are cooperating.”

I growl.

Like my dick would work for anyone except Henry anyway.

I drop Charlie off at her dorm and head back to mine. I need to check on Toby, make sure he’s okay since Salem’s back. I still can’t believe she’s alive, not that I wanted her to be dead.

I’ve never seen two people with such a deeply ingrained connection like I had with Henry other than Toby and Salem.

Of course, at eleven years old, it wasn’t a physical attraction. It was something soul-deep that couldn’t be wrenched out of your body no matter how hard you tried. I would know.

Listening before knocking on the twins' door—one can never be too careful—I figure it's safe when no noises of pleasure flow through the wood. Footsteps sound behind the door, and a groan follows

“Who's it?”

“Me, are you sleeping?” Incredulousness isn't my forte, and it comes out more accusatory.

Toby blinks his eyes a few times after he's thrown open the door, wearing only a pair of boxers and socks. “Yep,” his voice is groggy, his hair's messy, and I debate walking away. Toby could fall asleep standing up if you'd let him, but his eyes clear the moment they connect with mine. “Did you hear from Henry?”

His question short circuits my brain for a moment, seeing him for the first time in three days. Like I haven't gone that long without seeing him before.

“I saw him.”

Toby pulls me into his room with renewed vigor and demands I explain myself. Toby's mood plummets after I tell him about my interaction with Henry at the cafe. Though he's particularly interested in finding out about Charlie being the woman I've agreed to marry in order to keep Fern safe. I didn't tell him about our plan, or rather her plan.

“Charlie?” He questions for the third time.

“Yeah, Charlie.”

“But she's... fun.” He pouts.

“And?” I’m not sure what his deal is.

“Well, I mean, you and Tal look like mafia kids, you know? The don’t fuck with me attitude and all. Charlie doesn’t seem like a mafia princess.”

I’m not sure if he’s complimenting me and Tal, or dismissing Charlie. “News flash. You’re also the son of a mafia dad.”

“No, I know, but... forget it.” He huffs, jumps down from his bed, and shoves his feet into his shoes.

“Where are you going?” I ask, “We’re in the middle of a conversation.”

“I’m going to talk to her,” Toby looks at me as if I should have known. “She doesn’t want to marry you, and despite the shit you pulled the other night, you don’t want to marry her. So, I’m going to talk to her.”

Gripping his wrist, I pull him away from the door. “I’ve already talked to her. This is happening, and it doesn’t matter what we want anymore.”

His eyes scan my face, looking for any crack he can weasel his way into. I believe in Charlie, and I swear to God if she’s right, I’ll do everything in my power to work past my trauma so I can stop putting Henry through hell.

“Fine, but why did you have to do that to Henry?” His voice is only a whisper, and I pull my hand away as if the question burned. “You... broke him.”

“Henry broke his own heart when he believed I had the capacity to love anyone,” I spit the lie out, throwing the words out carelessly.

“We’re done here.” Not giving Toby a chance to respond, I brush past him and leave,

stomping to my door and unlocking it. I should've known better than to check in with him, they all hate me now.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

“I don’t mean to pry,” Koda starts as we lock the front doors after closing.

“Usually that means you’re about to pry,” I remark. The rest of the night went smoothly, with everyone in high spirits for the upcoming game on Friday. Apparently, our football team is better than average, which is good, I guess.

“If you need a place to crash, I have a spare room in my apartment,” he turns away, focusing heavily on the lock. “In case you need to get away.”

“It’s not like that,” I quickly reply, “Banks and I, we’re...” I can’t explain it. We’re soul mates, destined to be together. But he’s stuck in the past and refuses to move forward. I thought giving him all this time would prove that I’m here and that I’ve got him through whatever life throws his way, but he just obliterated that. And after this weekend back at home, it’s clear there’s no chance for us left at all.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I just thought—”

“It’s fine. I’m just gonna crash with Opal and Hannah again tonight. I’ll figure the rest out tomorrow.”

He looks like he wants to say something more but thinks better of it and walks away. He must live in the same apartment building as Opal because he’s heading the same way I am, and as I trail behind him, I feel the need to explain myself.

“I’m not following you.”

He chuckles, “I know, Opal lives on the floor below me.”

After passing out on Opal's couch once again last night, I woke up feeling better than I have in a while. Still broken-hearted, but less wanting to hide from it. I need to make a plan and figure out what I'm going to do.

I know going back to sharing space with Banks is not going to work. No matter how safe or practical it was when we applied for the dorm, things have changed. I need to call my dad, but my phone's dead and has been since that night. I'm almost scared to power it on.

Almost.

It vibrates for at least five minutes. Notifications pop up so rapidly that it's hard to keep up. All of the missed calls, texts, and social media stuff is too much, so I silence it, stuff the block of metal into my jeans, and make myself a cup of coffee.

Opal has a fancy machine, the kind you find in homes that look like the smaller versions that belong in cafes. So it's easy enough to work, and it's delicious.

"Look who's up!" Hannah's cheery voice sings into the quiet apartment. She looks at the blankets I folded and gives me an arched eyebrow. "Is he finally going home?"

Shaking my head, careful not to drop any of the sugary goodness in my cup, "I'm gonna call my dad and go from there."

"So you're done hiding from your family then," she nods her head in slow motion, lips pursed. Opal rounds the corner, dressed in a cute sweater dress and leggings that make her figure stand out.

"I figure I owe my dad an apology," I admit. I should have at least told him I was okay, safe—in a place that isn't jail.



Opal snorts. When her eyes connect with mine, she sighs. “Coming from a foster kid, don’t take too much of what I have to say to heart, but Dads like yours who worry about you, they don’t happen very often. Hell, my phone’s been blowing up with new numbers,” she clicks her tongue. “I’ve been meaning to ask you about that.”

I can’t explain to Opal how they got her number, that would implicate a lot of people and involve a lot of mafia business even I don’t understand. So I nod and sip my coffee, trying to figure out a way to say thank you to these two women who barely knew me before last weekend and let me sleep on their couch for a week anyway.

Deciding that a simple ‘thank you’ will suffice for now, I make them both coffee, and we sit at the makeshift table they have pushed up against their couch.

“Thank you both for letting me stay. I know I’ve not been the best house guest, but I really, really needed this break.”

They both nod, and Opal places her hand on mine. “I understand a broken heart, and you weren’t that bad.” She waves her hand around in front of her face to dispel the negative air. “So, call your dad, and if we need to get a bigger apartment, I guess we wouldn’t mind rooming with you when you have an actual... you know, room.”

“Actually, how much do you know about Koda?” Their heads pop up, and Opal smiles wider than I think I’ve ever seen. Her eyes slide to Hannah’s, and she smirks into her coffee.

“They say the best way to heal heartbreak is to bounce up and down on another man’s dick or whatever.”

Hannah and I burst out laughing, and my coffee almost shoots out of my nose from laughing so hard. “I don’t think that’s what people say, Opsies.”

Her eyes go round, and she squeals, “Oh my God! I don’t think I’ve ever had a nickname before!”

“What?” I ask, genuinely confused because we just went from bouncing on dicks to nicknames.

“You called me Opsies. I’ve never had a nickname.”

“Oh,” I’m not sure what to say, but she’s looking at me like she might cry, and I’ve had enough tears for this week. “It’s just a nickname. If you hate it, I won’t use it.” I’m not sure if I offended her or what, so I put my cup on the table and wait for her to say something.

“Hate it? No! I think it’s really sweet.” She lays her hand on mine and squeezes before returning to her cup and clearing her throat. “But yeah, Koda? He’s suuuper nice.”

“He’s not a murderer or anything like that,” Hannah laughs.

“And I’m pretty sure he’s into you,” Opal waggles her eyebrows, and I throw up my hands.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” I swallow because in no universe am I ready to move on with anyone. “He offered me the empty room in his apartment.”

“Oh!” Opal says, her cheeks flushing, “Sorry, uhm, yeah. He’s cool, usually at the cafe or school. I hardly ever see him.”

I nod, not fully convinced that it’s a good idea to move into a stranger's apartment, but he is right next to campus. Plus, I’m fairly certain he’s graduating next year, and he seems pretty easygoing. Maybe he’ll let me see the room before I make a decision.

“Well, I have class,” Hannah states, standing up from the table and washing out her mug at the sink before gathering her bag and keys. “Love ya!”

“Love you!” Opal hollers back at her before announcing that she also has class and heads back down the hall.

Staring at my empty coffee cup isn’t going to get anything done, so I take a deep breath and head out with the things I managed to get from my room with Banks when he wasn’t there. Palming my phone in my pocket I have to psych myself up to pull it out and dial my dad.

Deciding to wait, I head toward the library. I really need to catch up on the things I missed and I want to get ahead on the assignment list before fall break.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

My head pounds. The sunlight pouring through the window illuminates our room.

His empty bed.

Hurt, shame, and anger swirl in my gut as I replay our talk last night. Fuck him. “Fuck him,” I snarl out in a choked scream. He should have left me alone when I ended things years ago, moved on, and met someone new. We wouldn’t be here today if he had.

Jumping down from my bed, my knuckles connect with his bed frame before I can think better of it. The wood pops but doesn’t splinter, mocking me. Henry’s sturdy, he’s resilient. I’m the one who can’t move on, who holds everything so close to my chest now that it aches with pressure.

I need to move my body, or I’ll simmer in this rage and lash out at the first person who crosses me, feelings be damned.

Shoving my feet into the first pair of sweatpants I can find, I lace up my sneakers and throw on a t-shirt. My gym bag has everything I need, so I sling that over my shoulder and put my headphones on. I don’t want to talk to anyone, and I pray the headphones will be a deterrent.

Keeping my head down and my strides long, I make my way to the weight room I know will be empty on a Thursday morning. There’s no phys ed toward the end of the week, so the football players can use the equipment freely, and our coach can do whatever it is he does.

Walking into the weight room, I spot a Smith machine and decide doing squats until I can't feel my legs is my best option. After filling my water bottle, I locate the proper weights and lift them onto the bar. Once they're secured I set my stance and unlatch the bar, going down into a squat, holding for two, and coming back up. The burn in my quads feels nice, and my music plays absolute bangers to work out to.

After a few sets, I walk over to the closest bench and replace the weights with the ones I used on the Smith machine. I should probably have a spotter, just in case. The thought of death crosses my mind, but I close my eyes, lift the bar, and do it anyway.

Hands grip the bar after I'm a few reps in, reracking it. Running my tongue along my front teeth, I open my eyes and will the motherfucker to go away using only my death glare. Instead, he rips my headphones off.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" Jax is pissed, and I guess if roles were reversed I would be too.

"Working out," I answer as deadpan as I can manage through deep pulls of breath while I sit up.

"Yeah, without a spot? There's no one in here, what if you dropped this on your neck? Huh?" He throws his hands up in the air and they settle back on his hips. "Do you think I want to call Pops Diego and explain to him how his only fucking child died on campus doing something stupid?"

"Don't—" I warn, but he continues.

"You would do that to him? After Mama—"

"Shut your fucking mouth, Jax," I stand up, crowding his space. He has no idea how my dad would feel if something happened to me. He doesn't understand because he's

never been through a loss of that magnitude. He's still got his parents and siblings. Nothing's ever been taken from him.

Not the way it was taken from me.

He shoves me away from him and shakes his head, turning around to leave. That's when I notice some of the other players are with him.

"You know," he stops, turning to face me with his arms crossed. "I would have been there for you, but you disappeared. We could have gotten through it together. You were my best friend."

"You didn't lose everything that night." My voice rises with every word as I add, "I did. You couldn't have helped me."

"I guess we'll never know since you never gave me the chance, but don't you dare say I didn't lose anything that night."

His words punch a hole straight through my chest because he's not talking about my mother.

He's talking about me.

He lost me.

What he doesn't understand is, I lost me too.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

“Hi, Dad,” I say when he answers my call.

“Henry,” he sounds tired, “you’re lucky Diego wouldn’t let me come after you.”

Biting my bottom lip, casting my eyes down, I nod, then realize he can’t see me and respond, “I know, and I’m sorry for not calling you. I should have when I got to Opals. I just... couldn’t be there.”

He sighs, and I can hear the coffee maker dripping, “I’m sorry, son. Banks was wrong to handle the situation like that.”

“That’s an understatement,” I mumble.

“How are you doing now?” His concern makes me smile. He’s more in tune with his feelings than the rest of the dads, but still, it’s like working with a dead fish sometimes.

“I’m functioning. Opal made me get off the couch and go to work yesterday, so I’m... coping.”

There’s a heavy silence on the other line, and I worry that wasn’t the right thing to say, but it was honest, so there’s that.

“I know it doesn’t seem like it since we were all pretty shocked, but all of us here have been worried about you. Fern’s torn up about the whole thing. Baking at all hours, so now the house smells like burnt sugar,” he chuckles, “I love you, Henry. Don’t do that to me again.”

“I love you too,” I promise, making a mental note to call Fern. “I’m heading to the library now, but I have a favor to ask.”

“Ask away,” I can almost hear his swallow of coffee.

“I’d like to move into an apartment with a guy I work with,” I spit the words out, anxiety gripping my throat in a vice. “I haven’t seen the place yet, but if he’s willing to show me the room, would you... Would you come look at it with me?”

Letting out a deep breath, I run my hand through my hair and grip the curls in anticipation. He doesn’t say anything for a while, and I look at my phone to make sure I didn’t lose him when he clears his throat.

“Are you sure that’s what you want? You were the one who wanted the freshman experience, and it’ll take you away from the boys.”

“I’m sure, Dad. I think it’s time I find out who I am without the core four.”

The library is perfectly kept, the librarian is an older man with gold half glasses perched on his nose and a warm smile that I return when I sign in.

“If you need anything, my name’s Ian,” his salt and pepper beard makes him look like an older Santa.

“Thank you,” I smile and head toward a table that looks empty. A great place to work on multiple projects. Spreading my work out into piles, I use my computer in the center, grabbing each stack until my assignments are complete and turned in. Getting all of the assigned materials out of the way helps me focus on midterms coming up next week.

Some professors have already given those midterms, choosing to enjoy an early fall



break. If Dad agrees on the apartment, I'll likely stay. I don't want to go home to a family that chooses business over me.

My mind wanders as I look around the library. The windows show a dusky sky outside, and my stomach takes the opportunity to growl. I was so focused I didn't even think about food.

I've gorged myself sick over the past couple of days, choosing to eat everything in sight instead of talking out my feelings. Talking is hard, eating is not.

I'm starving, so I pack up my stuff and head toward the dining hall. It isn't far from the library, but I'm not sure I can brave another run-in with Banks and his fiancé . Even the word makes me want to crawl out of my skin. Thinking of him touching her or her touching him.

Something in Banks's eyes makes a fire simmer low in my belly, his gray irises practically glow under the star-lit sky. His lips descended upon mine, hungry. His tongue slipping between my lips, ravishing.

His hands travel up my arm and over my shoulder to my neck so I scoot closer. Wanting nothing more than to have no space between us. Lifting to his knees, he deepens his kiss, pulling me impossibly closer than before.

My hands trail down his front to the top of his jeans, where I wait and his breath catches. "You don't—"

"I want to," I cut him off, popping the button open on his jeans. His eyes bounce from where my hands move lower, but my eyes never leave his. We've only gone so far as very heavy making out, but tonight, after he brought me out to our favorite spot with a blanket and a packed cooler full of dinner, I can't help but feel even more connected to him.

Tethered, as if his soul and mine are bound.

Running my hand over his hardening cock, my cheeks flush when he shuts his eyes and leans back. “Fuck, Henry, that’s...”

His words die on his tongue as I pepper his neck with kisses. I love when his voice catches in his throat, when he loses himself in my touch.

It’s a perfectly mild evening. The crickets are singing their songs, and lightning bugs light up the night around us, dancing over the tall grass.

“Can I?” I gesture to his jeans, gripping his hips. He nods and shifts so I can pull the denim off him, leaving him in his boxers and t-shirt. Running my teeth over my lips, I swallow and reach for his boxers next. His hand covers mine, and he lowers his head so our eyes connect.

“We don’t need to..... I mean...”

“Do you not want me to?” I ask, worried that he might not, and I could be royally screwing this up.

“I’d like to first,” Banks shifts us so I’m leaning back, and he’s hovering over me, reaching for the button on my jeans and unzipping them. “Can I?”

He waits, eyes boring into mine, and I have to swallow, or else I fear I might drool. He places a swift kiss to my lips, “If you don’t want me to, I won’t. It’s okay Henry.”

“It’s not—” my thoughts are jumbled, and my tongue feels tied. “I... I want this, please.”

His smile lights up his whole face before he kisses me again, this time more urgent.

His tongue delves between my lips before he moves lower, and I swear if we weren't sitting, I'd faint.

After spilling everything in me, the need to feel him runs hot through my body, and I know I want my first time to be with him. I've known it for a while now, and judging by the look in his eyes, I think he does too.

"I do," he says as if plucking the thought straight from my head.

I nod, not trusting my voice to give away my nerves. Pulling a condom and a small single-use lube packet from the back pocket of my discarded jeans, I hold them between us. My hands shake so much they both fall from my fingers as I whisper, "I don't know what I'm doing."

Embarrassment floods my cheeks, making them turn bright red.

Banks bends down, plucking the foil from the blanket, and says, "Me either."

My eyes widened and flew to his, "You mean?"

"I'm a virgin," he nods with a small, vulnerable smile. The tips of his ears go pink, and I rush in and kiss him. Our lips move in a rhythm that feels entirely its own like our bodies know our hearts are connected.

"We can learn," I whisper into his mouth while our lips take a break.

"Together."

The memory blindsides me.

How we figured out what worked and what didn't. How fucking steady he was when

I got nervous. Tears threaten to fall just as I make it to the dining hall, so I load up my box with everything that looks remotely good, pay, and head to Opal's apartment. It's not ideal, but they've seen worse, and it's not like I have anywhere else to go.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

“ I figured you’d be here,” Charlie’s standing outside of the weight room when I emerge, arms crossed, bag sitting by her feet.

“You have a habit of stalking me?” I bark the question at her.

She laughs, flashing her phone at me, “It’s called a text, ever heard of it?” Jax’s name is at the top of the screen. I should be concerned about that, but one of the rules we both agreed to is not to ask questions.

Eyeing her, I head back toward my dorm. I’ve been hiding in the weight room practically all day, ignoring classes and all the work I’ve put into them. “What do you want?”

“You and I need to discuss tomorrow night,” she falls into step beside me. She’s taller than most women, almost as tall as I am. I’ll bet if she puts on a pair of heels she’ll be taller than me. I don’t bother answering her, she’s going to continue either way. “Opal, Hannah, and I are making shirts, the two girls with your group...”

“Cin and Gemma,” I provide when she goes silent.

“Would they like to join us?”

I snort and stop walking, turning to face Charlie so she understands what I’m about to say. “I highly doubt Talon will even come to the game, much less let Cin wear a t-shirt meant for another guy, sport be damned. And I didn’t ask you to come, nor do I care if you do.”

“Let Cin?” Charlie raises a brow, “Listen, we agreed to make this look legit, Banks. This is what girlfriends do.”

“You’re not my girlfriend.” I remind her.

She grips my lower arm, nails digging into my flesh, she pulls me aside, looking around as if anyone gives two fucks about our conversation.

“I’m not above throwing down with a man. You should know this. So if you fuck this up for me, know that I will cut your dick off and feed it to the hounds, and that’ll just be the appetizer.”

Her threat falls on deaf ears. I don’t care what she thinks she can do, I’ve already done the most damage to myself that I can.

“Banks, I swear to God,” she’s growling now.

“Yeah, torture, pain,” I roll my eyes, “I got it.”

We walk in silence until we’re at Hammonds Hall.

Charlie hands me her phone with a new contact already pulled up, ready to be filled out. At my raised brows, she explains, “It’s for your number, considering we’re getting married, I should probably have that.”

Plugging my number into her phone feels like another strike against me, another betrayal that I won’t be able to make right. But I do it anyway and fire off a text to myself, so this isn’t one-sided.

“We should probably, you know, text. Believable, right?” She doesn’t sound like texting me interests her at all, and I don’t blame her.

“You want me to text you lovey dovey shit?” I raise a brow, and her eyes flash up to mine.

“I don’t think you have it in you, Pretty Boy.” Her laugh carries as she walks up the stairs, leaving me standing there with a scowl on my face.

She stops, turns around, and the flash on her phone goes off. Around a laugh she says, “Now that’s a good look.”

Disappearing behind the doors to her dorm, I rub my eyes with my finger and thumb, she’s going to give me hell. Striding away from the building, I head for my own. I need a shower and possibly an all-nighter to put myself back on track.

Midterms are going to be fun, and then there’s the final group project Mr. Ore has planned. The only thing we know is when and where to be, he won’t provide anything further. I have a feeling it’s going to be a complicated system that we’ll all have to untangle.

My other two classes are online tests that my professors uploaded a week early, so I can take them anytime after all of my assignments are turned in.

The clock on my phone says it’s a little after two in the morning when I’ve submitted the last assignment needed to unlock the exam. I’m not tired, and the exam is only fifty questions, so I type in the code that’s auto-generated specifically for me and begin the test.

After another hour, my mouse hovers over the submit button. If my grades tank, I really won’t be able to play, despite the shitty practice. I can’t remember if the professor told us we would receive our score right away or if it would be given to us. Reading back over my answers, to be sure, I click the submit button and up pops the score.

Ninety-Two.

Fuck yeah! Holy shit, I should tell Henry. The thought stops me in my tracks. He doesn't care, he shouldn't care. But it sure does seem like something a fiancé would share.

Me: Scored a 92, guess I'll get to play tomorrow.

I don't expect her to answer, it's a little past three-thirty in the morning, so I put my stuff away and climb into bed. My phone pings a few minutes after I've settled.

Charlie: Look at you go.

I don't bother responding, but it makes me chuckle. I think Charlie and I could be friends if not for the looming press of marriage hanging over us.



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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

Dad's midnight blue SUV rolls up to the curb, and I rush over to meet him. I haven't felt this lonely in a long time and I didn't realize just how much I missed him. Wrapping me up in his arms, tears fall. This time, they feel a lot like relief, exhaustion, and remorse.

He pulls back, hands gripping my shoulders, "Don't ever do that to me again, do you hear me?"

"I'm sorry," I say, "I know I shouldn't have taken off like that."

He watches my face, then brings me back in for another hug. Instead of asking how I've been, he steers us to the sidewalk, out of traffic. Koda's standing on the steps at the entrance to the building.

Offering his hand to Dad he introduces himself, "Hi sir, I'm Koda. I work with Henry."

"Luca, it's nice to meet you," Dad shakes his hand, then lets go, his eyes not so subtly finding mine.

I swallow and ready myself to tell him it's not like that with Koda. He's a friend. A friend who has an apartment to share and a room for me.

I hope.

"Well, shall we?"

“After you,” Dad says, motioning for me to follow Koda. I remember Opal saying something about never hearing him and how he said Opal lives below him. We hit the elevators, and Koda presses the button for the third floor.

“We have a gym, pool, patio area, and the building does occasional events for tenants,” Koda fills the silence. Since it’s been Dad and I for so long, I forget how silence bothers some people. Dad and I can go hours in each other’s presence and not say a word.

“That’s nice,” Dad offers with a smile.

The elevator dings, signaling our destination on floor three. We follow Koda out and to the right. The walls are painted a deep green here, with two doors painted black, spaced evenly along both sides. The planks of the floor are manufactured to look like hardwood, but with college kids constantly moving in and out year after year, it’s hard to imagine anyone would put real hardwood in here.

Sliding the key into the last door to the left, Koda motions for us to go ahead, and Dad follows as I step inside. It’s not heavily decorated, but it does have a homey feel. The door opens up to the kitchen, where everything you’d need is stationed. Fridge, microwave, oven, and dishwasher, all in stainless steel, are tucked between white cabinets. The countertop is most likely granite, with a coffee station not unlike Opal’s and a knife block that appears well-used.

Everything looks clean, tidy even. There’s a small high-top table with two chairs pushed up against the wall, and the floor is the same wood imitation from the hall.

“The living room is straight through, and your room would be to the left when you walk through. Mine is to the right, they both have attached bathrooms, so no need to share.”

Dad and I walk past the counter that serves as an island into the living room. There's a couch pushed up against what I assume is Koda's bedroom wall and a TV hutch against mine. It's cozy, with a blanket draped over the couch and the view from the windows between the rooms.

Taking a left into the bedroom I'm here to see, I'm surprised by the size. Then again, I thought I would be spending my freshman year in a dorm. Two doors sit on the left side of the room, both painted a hideous shade of purple.

"The room can be painted," Koda starts, "and the closet is on the right, bathroom is the door on the left."

Dad opens the closet door and shrugs. Compared to the mansion, it's not very big, but for my very own, it's more than enough. The bathroom is clean, and all the essentials are here, including a tub, which I fully plan on taking advantage of.

"I think it's perfect," I whisper to Dad.

"I have to get to class," Koda looks at his watch, "you can let the door close on the way out, it's an automatic lock."

"Thank you, Koda," Dad nods.

"I'll let you know what I decide," I promise. He smiles and tells Dad it was nice to meet him before he leaves.

The door shuts behind him, and I hear the lock whirl and slam closed. That's a nice feature, until you lose your key.

Dad sighs, "Are you sure this is what you want, Henry?"

“I can’t hide from him forever, and sharing a room is no longer a healthy option,” I acknowledge. “I refuse to be locked in a room with the boy who broke my heart in front of my family. The family who not only let him do it, but with the exception of Tal, just watched and did nothing.”

“Henry...”

“I know you think it’s some valiant sacrifice, but he didn’t even warn me! Or Toby and Tal. It wasn’t only his sacrifice to make. We’re supposed to be soulmates. Best friends. We tell each other everything... At the very least, I thought he respected our friendship, the four of us, enough to at least have a conversation.”

I watch as the words register, as they worm their way under his skin. “If this is what you need, I’ll agree. But you have to check in at least once a week. Don’t think I don’t know that you’re going to use this place to hide from the family.”

“I need the space, Dad.” It sucks, but it’s true. “From Ban– him ... and the family.” I know the whole situation isn’t ideal, and if I’m going to move on, I need to do it on my own terms.

He nods, dragging his hand down his face, “Do we sign the lease downstairs?”

“Yeah, Koda told the ladies in the office that we might be coming.” I can’t help the smile that takes over my whole face.

“This room needs painting,” Dad laughs, “or is purple your new favorite color?”

We laugh, and I roll my eyes, “I’ll paint it over the break.”

“I can take you to the store after this, get everything you need while we’re there.” The offer makes a dose of fear and giddiness flare in my stomach. Holy shit, I’m going to

move out of the dorm I fought so hard for.

“I think I’ll take you up on that.”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

My first college game and though the stands are full, I can't help my thoughts from leaning toward Henry. He should be here, with my number on his back, screaming so loud for me that his voice would be hoarse tomorrow.

But he's not here, and she is.

My fiancé, the perfect little mob princess.

I hate to admit it, but Charlie's cool. Laid back and seems to be proficient in whatever she puts her mind to. Best of all, she doesn't actually want to marry me.

Getting dressed today made me think of Mom, and how she'll never see me in this jersey, how she'll never watch me play under the bright white stadium lights of a college football field.

Then I pulled out the picture of us I keep hidden in my wallet and placed it in my locker. Her face forever locked in a wide smile with her arm wrapped around my back. It was my first game, the first real high school game I'd played in, and we both fell in love with the sport.

The team and I are stretching on the field, tossing a few balls around, and warming up in the lower temperatures. Glimpses of people filling in the stadium wearing gold, green, and gray make my heart pound behind my ribs. Coach calls us to huddle around, we jog over and take a knee, listening to what he has to say.

Jax passes me without a word, he's still pissed at me from yesterday. I've gotten used to people being disappointed in me, so I don't bother wasting my breath. Talon and I

haven't spoken since his dad pulled him from the room last weekend. What's one more person?

Coach benched me, which I figured would be the case. I wasn't much good at practice, and with the fight I had with Jax yesterday, I just thought the other guys wouldn't want me on the field.

"Rossi!" Coach hollers.

Walking over from where I was standing on the sidelines so I could watch the kick-off, I stand beside him. "Pay attention to Gilmore," he grunts, not bothering to look at me.

Our cornerback catches the ball and takes off. Willard, I think is his last name. He's fast, but the opposing team is large. Their defense is eating up the distance toward him while our team does their best to block.

Coach hollers directions and waves his arms, but I'm caught in the play. Watching them, analyzing how they work together. Jax tackles one of the guys from the other team, clearing the way for Willard to gain a few more yards before he's brought down by defense.

Just like that, we have a first down. The game continues, both sides unrelenting. By the fourth quarter, we're down by seven, and Gilmore—the guy who's playing wide receiver in my absence—looks even more terrified than he did at the start of the game. Coach and I make eye contact and he hangs his head.

That sure can boost a guy's spirit.

He looks back up, running a hand down his face he says, "Think you can manage to get us a touchdown?" Coach asks after a yellow flag flies in the air. I can't hear the

call, but I'd bet it's holding. The other team has been rough all night. I'm surprised no one's thrown down yet, especially Jax.

His words hit me like a freight train, and his eyes bore into mine, looking at me expectantly.

"Yes," I answer, licking my lips and putting my helmet on. He tells me who to replace, but I already know. Gilmore looks worse for wear as I pass him on the field.

In the huddle, Patterson looks at me and frowns.

"I know I'm not everyone's favorite person right now, but let's focus on the game." I offer with a grumble.

"Just catch the ball, Rossi," Jax mutters, and our eyes meet. There's something hard in his stare, and it makes me think maybe I should give him a chance to sort through all this shit.

Rebuild or whatnot. He's been like a dose of nostalgia, tethering me to my old life. I didn't realize how much I missed that part of me.

I nod and listen to Patterson call the play then take my spot on the sixty yard line alongside my team. I should know these guys better than I do now. We're a team sharing one goal, and I only know their names.

I need to change that.

My feet dig into the earth, cleats making dents in the field. Patterson calls the play, and I take off around the offensive line. I'm halfway to the end zone when I glance back, Patterson's already mid-throw.



The ball flies from his hand, and I gauge the distance I need to clear to make it to where it's going to fall. It's not far, and I push my body harder to get there. On the balls decent, I snatch it from the air and cradle it to my chest.

Fuck. Yes.

Picking up speed, I head for the end zone. My chest pumps harder as I see one of the opposing team members in my peripheral vision coming at me. He's a big fucker, but I think I can make it.

His shoulder collides with my side, his arms wrap around my middle, and suddenly, the sky is all I can see. He jumps up and hollers, but the clock still has a minute, and I know I couldn't have gone down too far from the goal. Sitting up, I hear the crowd screaming, their roar deafening, and exactly the adrenaline rush I need to pick myself up and toss the football to the referee.

Jax and the rest of the team rushes me. Patterson is the first to speak, calling out a play and eying me again.

"You think you can get past them again?" His smile is infectious, and the rest of the team looks hopeful.

"I know so," I offer, "Damarcus, block for me?"

"Fuck yeah!" He hollers, earning a round of hoots from the boys.

We line up again, this time on the five-yard line. If we can score and go for the two-point conversion, we'll win, and God, I want that more than I've wanted anything in a really long time.

Again, Patterson calls the play, and immediately two of the offensive linemen dart

my way, but Demarcus and Andre take care of them. Faking right, I dodge into the end zone and throw my hands up, ready to catch the ball from Patterson.

He pitches the ball, and as if it has a magnet that matches my hands, it's between them before I can blink. The crowd goes wild. Whistles, screams, everything feels like it comes alive after the whistle blows.

Jax is there first, jumping up and down, and fuck, it feels just like in high school.

"I knew you were in there," he screams while the others surround me.

"We still need the conversion," I tell him.

He smiles and says, "Patterson has a plan for that."

"Just stay right this time," he says with a clap on my shoulder, "and be ready to take a hit."

I figure the other team will have their eyes on me the second we line up for the conversion. Their whole line shifts, leaving Jax on the other end unguarded. As long as I can keep the heat on me, Jax will be free to catch the winning pass.

The clock runs down as Patterson hollers out the play. Helmets crack, shoulder pads clack and sure enough, all of their eyes are on me. Patterson chucks the ball to Jax who's waiting in the back left corner.

Arms wrap around my middle, and I'm thrown backward before I can see if Jax caught it or not, but judging by the crowd's reaction, I'm going to assume he did. He trots over and offers his hand, pulling me up. The team storms the field and jumps up and down around us.

Once the revelry calms a bit we head back to the locker room where family and friends are waiting. My heart sinks when I don't find Henry. I knew he wouldn't be here—why would he after the shit I said—but damn, feeling so good after so long made me hope he was still just as stubborn as always, and showed up to support me.

“It was good to see you on a field again,” Dad says. “Your mom would be proud.”

His eyes are glassy, and I know mine match. I want to tell him I know, but my throat swells and I nod my head instead. Fern wraps me up in a quick hug while Creed, Nile, and Luca pat my back with father-like slaps of approval.

Luca doesn't look happy, but he's here at least.

Charlie walks up, along with Opal and Hannah. Each of them decked out in apparel to show off their school spirit. Threading her arm through mine, she smiles up at me and says, “Good game, Pretty Boy.”

The contact sets me back, and for a moment, I almost shake her off. Until her eyes flash and her grip tightens.

Believable .

“Romero,” Creed grumbles, stepping just slightly in front of Fern. A deep laugh sounds behind me and it hits me that Creed wasn't speaking to Charlie.

She tugs on my hand where she's subtly interlocked our fingers and whispers, “Play along.”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

I've texted Dad a million times because it's not like I could go to the game. Not with the way I feel and the way I left things with my family. One day, I'll be able to listen to what they have to say, and when that time comes, it will be on my terms.

Banks hasn't played yet, and it's halftime.

Dad and I went shopping this morning for furniture, paint, and basic toiletries I wouldn't dare take from the mansion. Fern's particular, plus she promised to come by after the game, and I want everything to be somewhat together.

Koda's shift was this afternoon after classes. He brought us a late lunch when he came back to the apartment, and we ate at the high-top table in the kitchen. We talked about our classes. I learned that he's graduating with a major in political science and a minor in business.

He has an older sister who's a doctor, she has her own practice in Cardis. I can tell how special their connection is by the way he talks about her. His parents also live in Cardis, which is only about an hour from here.

After we finished eating, Koda offered to help me put together the bookcase, nightstand, and towel rack since Dad had to leave for the game. Sitting on the floor of the living room we got everything put together, only having to redo the nightstand once... stupid drawers.

It was nice being present with someone, learning something new about them. My chest eased a little, the pressure now gone from wanting to make sure I didn't step on his toes. I couldn't decide on a color for my room, so I narrowed it down to two, and

Koda watched as I swatched them.

“The blue might be too babyish?” His voice lifts at the end as if he’s asking my thoughts. Shaking his head, he goes to start again, and I laugh.

“You’re right,” I offer, turning to smile at him. “It is too babyish.”

“I like the gray,” he stands from his seat on the mattress that’s on the floor. I haven’t found a bed frame I like yet, so I’ll have to make do until then.

Coming to stand beside me, we both eye the wall where I’ve put two patches of color. Looking over at him, I double-take, catching him staring at me.

“What?” I rub my face with my hand, “Do I have paint on my face?” Leave it to me to make a mess while painting.

He chuckles and shakes his head, “No, no paint on your face.” My skin heats as his eyes roam my face, he leans closer and whispers, “It’s in your hair.”

A laugh bursts from my throat, and as he lifts his hand and leans forward, I stiffen for a second, thinking he might kiss me. Instead, his fingers brush the strands of hair that I managed to paint blue.

“Well, that’s embarrassing,” I say between breaths.

He looks away and steps back, when he looks back up at me his teeth worry his bottom lip and the same feeling from just a second ago returns. He sways on his feet as if he doesn’t know whether he wants to stay or go.

“Henry I—”

A knock interrupts whatever he's going to say, and I perk up, passing by him so I can answer the door. Pulling it open, I find Fern, Creed, Dad, and Nile standing in the hall. It's almost comical until Fern pulls me into her arms and I spot Diego down the hall.

"You brought him?" I accuse, because seeing him sends me right back to that night and I have to hold my tears back by biting the inside of my cheek.

"Don't worry about him," Fern says, tapping my chin with her finger, "he's not coming in, but we all rode together to the game, so he'll have to wait."

"How am I going to explain his presence to my neighbors, huh?" Raising a brow, I step away from Fern and fold my arms over my chest. No matter how much I don't want to see him, I know it's rude to leave him in the hall, so with a mumbled 'whatever,' I hold the door open for everyone to file in.

The apartment's a good size until it's filled with four mafia dudes and their queen. The kitchen feels tiny as Fern looks around.

"Nice job, kid," Creed nods his head in compliment.

"Thanks, and this is Koda. He's my roommate," the introduction pulls him from the living room, and he shakes everyone's hand from across the bar.

"It's nice to meet you all," he gives them a warm smile, the kind I've seen him give customers before.

"Show me your room, Henry," Fern's excitement ramps up my own, and I show her new home for this semester. Creed, Nile, Diego, and Dad stay in the kitchen, and I hope they don't say anything embarrassing to Koda.

“How are you?” She takes advantage of the alone time by bundling me into her arms. The contact feels motherly, and I soak it in. I can tell by the worry lines on her brow that what Dad said was true. She’s been stressed, and it’s mostly my fault.

“I’m okay,” I say into her shoulder.

Gripping my shoulders, she pushes me away and pointedly stares at me as if she knows I’m not.

I sigh and give her a taste of what I’m feeling. “I haven’t spoken to any of my best friends in almost a week. That’s a record, and my family is okay with the love of my life marrying some girl we don’t even know to further their careers.” I can’t help the bitterness that seeps into my tone near the end, but I suspect Fern was expecting it at least a little.

“Oh honey,” she says, pulling me down to sit on the bed. “That’s not true, at least the family part. Creed has been working on another solution for the Romeros. Seeing you like that... Well, I think it finally clicked for him that Banks is to you, what I am to him. He came to bed that night more upset than I’ve ever seen him.”

Hope soars in my stomach, and I have to tamp it out. Even if he did find another solution, I can’t just forgive the things Banks said... I’m not sure I can even get over them. How does someone move on from being told they were never loved by the most important person in their life?

“As for your best friends, I think Tal has been staying far away from Banks. He called me to check on you when no one knew where you were. He called and called. I swear he’s firmly Team Henry. ”

The image of Talon being the only one to stand up for me that day has been singed into my brain. He can be a real asshole, but once you’re his, he’ll do anything for

you. The voices in the kitchen get louder but taper off quick enough. Good, at least they're talking.

"I'll call him," I promise.

Laying her hands on mine, she squeezes and notices the paint. "Oh, that gray is pretty!"

"I'm going to paint this weekend," I tell her and watch as her face falls.

"You're not coming home with us?"

I knew I'd have to tell her, and I know she'll understand. It won't make the hurt go away, but I hope it will ease it.

"No, I'm going to stay on campus, work some, get my room together, hand in my midterms."

She nods, eyes searching the place over. She sniffles, "I understand, but if you change your mind, promise you'll call? No matter what time it is, one of us will come get you."

"I promise," placing one arm around her shoulder, I squeeze her into my side.

"Well, send me pictures once you're all set up, okay?"

"I will."

We both stand and walk out the door to a silent living room. I stop, looking around to see what I've missed, but only Diego is gone.



“Is everything okay?” Looking at Koda, his mouth is set in a grim line, and my dad’s smile falters. “I’m sorry I’m not coming home this week, but Dad—”

“He’s outside.”

Those two words, uttered in a low tone, make my heart stop. I think my lungs forget how to work and I swallow hard.

“Why?” It’s all I can muster. Why would he come here when he could have easily left from the stadium after the game?

“I told them to wait by the car,” Creed’s stoic voice breaks the silence.

“Them?” I know he means the rest of the core four, plus Gemma and Cin. Fern turns away from me and walks out, Creed follows as he always does, and Nile walks out with them. Leaving Dad, Koda, and me in the room.

“Charlie is with them,” Dad looks like he’d rather be anywhere but here. His face portrays a semblance of control that I don’t have. He must see my confused expression because his voice betrays his neutral expression. “Charlie’s the one he agreed to marry.”

My eyes grow, and my speech wavers. I have to lick my lips a few times and take measured breaths. I wondered when I saw them at the cafe, but...

Is he taking her home?

To our home?

“Fuck this,” I mumble under my breath. Now I’m pissed.

So much for Creed looking for another way out or for Tal being Team Henry. Dad takes a step forward and tries to reach for me, but I've had it. "Just go." I don't have it in me to cry anymore, God, maybe I'm all cried out. All that's left is simmering rage and dread.

Dad reminds me to check in because that was the deal, and all I can do is nod.

He's taking her home .

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

Dad blocked the door when he opened it on his way out of the building. I guess he thinks I'd be stupid enough to bombard my way in to see Henry, but while Charlie and her father wait downstairs, I'm not willing to risk any type of interaction.

Toby pulls his truck in behind Creed and Fern's SUV and Luca's rental truck, and waits. Talon, Cin, and Gemma all jump in.

"You know, you could smile at me," Charlie's hands land on my shoulders as she leans in.

I have to give it to her. She's got the smiling, doting girlfriend act down. Her smile looks genuine, you'd never know she's angry whispering in my ear.

"I could, but I'd hate for you to swoon," I quip back, surprising myself. Maybe the game really did work some magic.

"It'll take more than a smile, Pretty Boy." Rolling her eyes, she motions for her father to come over. Lacing her fingers in mine she nods to a guy with Mr. Romero who hands over her bag. Instincts kick in, and I grab it before she can with the hand that's not currently tangled in hers. He looks at me with a scrutinizing gaze. I want to tell him he can fuck right off with that. This was his idea, not ours.

Instead, I keep my gaze level with his. His Irish accent isn't very strong, but his voice sounds like he's had some damage done to his throat. Charlie definitely didn't get her raven hair from him, nor her looks. Where she's softer, he's all sharp angles and harsh glares. That she gets from him.

“Mr. Rossi, y’treat my daughter like the angel she is, understand?”

I have to stop myself from rolling my eyes, I doubt that would go over well. Instead, I nod and look over at her. Her eyes are locked on one of the guys behind her dad.

“Excuse us,” as gently as I can, I try to pull her with me toward Toby’s truck, but she stays and speaks with her father. When I get to the truck, I notice we’ll have to split. Talon and Cin are in the back while Toby and Gemma are upfront. He’s lifted the console to create room for Gemma.

Pulling on the door, I find it locked and look up. “Unlock the door, Toby.”

He doesn’t move, only rolls down the passenger window and leans around Gemma, who won't even look at me. “What was that about?”

“Just unlock the door and quit being an ass.”

He laughs and looks back at Tal, “Well, I guess it runs in the family, huh, bro?”

Talon doesn’t say anything, just glares through the back glass. Charlie steps around me, up to the window that Toby rolled down, and says, “Hey again, Handsome.”

“Oh shit, it’s you,” he howls in laughter. “Hell, this is gonna be interesting.” Charlie snickers behind me, and my good mood plummets.

Toby hits the button on the door to unlock it, and Charlie throws a smile over her shoulder at me and hops in the front.

“That might not be a good idea, Princess,” Cin says, eyeing Tal beside her. “These two might start a brawl back here if you make them sit together.”

“That might be worth watching,” Charlie observes Talon, and I’m impressed by the action. Most people take one look at him and turn away, deciding it’s best not to interact with him. One look my way, and she sighs, a clear sign she’s not going to win that seat, and hops down. “I can compromise, see?”

Luca comes out of the building, looking like someone pissed in his cereal. If I had to guess, I’d say it has something to do with me.

We ride in silence, thickened by mutual anger and hurt. No one speaks, save for Charlie, who tries to hold conversations with Cin and Gemma but neither of them knows what to say, I guess.

“...and how in the world did all of you get brought into this house? Hmm?”

“Knock it off Charlie,” I warn. She hmphs and sits back in her seat. The thump of her body against the seat has me clenching my teeth. Why did I agree to let her come home with us? I should have told her no. Should have come up with some fucking excuse, but Creed’s stony face made me agree.

She wants to see what she’s getting wrapped up in. Or maybe she’s looking for the thing that will inevitably dissolve our contract. Either way, she won’t be happy.

I’m not sure she can make our family look less appealing. The Hemlock name is enough to send people packing without fuss. I’ve seen grown men go pale over the mere mention of Mack, Creed’s brother. Our reach is wide, and our roots are strong. We treat our people like family, and in return, they treat us the same.

Creed’s always said treating his people like family creates stronger bonds. Though, why he’s adamant that he doesn’t want to rope the Romeros in is something I’ve tried and failed many times to figure out.

Dad's tight-lipped about any business he works in, even though I've been shadowing him to take over once he retires. He makes sure to only show me the things he wants me to see and nothing more. It's not even worth the fight anymore.

When Toby pulls into the garage and I spot my red Audi in the bay, I decide I'm driving her somewhere this weekend, no matter what happens. I miss driving, especially with Henry in the passenger seat singing off-key to every song on my playlist.

"Nice cars," Charlie comments to no one in particular, and no one responds. I'm not sure if they're icing her out because of the situation with her family or if it's because she's metaphorically tethered to me.

"Come on, I'll show you around," I offer, hopping out of the truck and making my way toward the door. Placing my finger on the scanner, I let it do its thing. Once the locks click, I push the door open with my foot.

Bags in hand, I toe off my shoes and kick them into the bin that I've always used. Charlie looks around, eyes cataloging everything as if she's going to be tested later.

"Shoes," I snap, pulling her out of the way as Talon stomps by, leaving Cin to unlace her boots. Toby and Gemma wait for her to be done, then follow her in.

"Tough crowd," Charlie chuckles. "They fuckin' hate me."

"Do you blame them?" I ask, genuinely curious. "Or is this kind of thing normal in your house?"

"Arranged marriages happen all the time in our world," she shrugs as if it's just another day.

“Don’t you have anyone you actually want to be with? Someone you love?” Charlie doesn’t answer, and that’s plenty of confirmation for me. She’s a gorgeous girl with nice thick legs, a smile that draws you in, and a fierceness that’s palpable. Of course she has someone else.

“Charlie can sleep in Henry’s room,” I hear Luca announce from the family room, having gotten here before us. The thought makes me want to vomit, and I just might.

Charlie, in his bed.

No.

I know he wouldn’t mind. He’s ridiculously kind that way, but me?

I. Fucking. Mind.

“She’ll sleep in my room,” I don’t bother watching my tone, I’m done with Luca giving me shit.

“We’re not letting you two sleep in the same room, even if you aren’t physical. She needs privacy,” Dad says, as if I didn’t say anything.

“You don’t get to give his room up, that’s his space. I’ll stay in his room, and she can stay in mine.”

“Henry would prefer Charlie to stay in his room, don’t you think? Considering everything you’ve done to him?” Luca chimes in.

“He lost the option to have a say in this when he stayed on campus,” I’m slightly aware that I’ve raised my voice, however I refuse to let someone else in his bed. “I don’t give a shit what Henry prefers.” They can punish me all they want, but she’s

not stepping one goddamn foot in his room.

“Obviously,” Talon yells through the house.

Something in me snaps, and I take off through the living room and into the kitchen, where the four of them stand in unison around the island.

“Do you have something to say to me, dickwad?”

Toby immediately grips his brother, and Cin steps forward. Her hand connects with my cheek before I have the chance to stop her.

“You’re a real fucking piece of work, Banks Rossi.” Everyone’s eyes have grown two sizes, and Talon smirks. “You destroyed Henry in the most vile way. I’m glad I wasn’t here to witness the shit you pulled, and now you’re attacking your friends? Who the hell are you?”

“Poor Henry,” I mock, “he seems to be doing just fine now, doesn’t he? New apartment. New roommate . New life.”

Her hazel eyes burn with hatred, and her hands land on my chest right before she shoves me so hard I have to take a step back. I’m sick and tired of everyone blaming me for Henry’s distance. They had a choice to back me up or say their piece. It’s not my fault Talon was the only one to speak his mind.

Talon grips Cin’s hand and pulls her back into his body as if he thinks I may retaliate physically. I may be an asshole, but I’d never hurt a woman. Especially not after what she’s been through.

“I didn’t know you could be so heartless, the guy I met last year may have been cold, but he would never do what you did.”



She storms out of Talon's arms and down the hall, where she disappears.

"Care to tack on-to your girlfriend's tantrum, or does she speak for you now?" I snarl at Talon.

"I can't believe this is who you're choosing to be," Toby speaks, shaking his head as if he's disappointed. "I didn't see you speaking up for him then," I throw back at him.

"He didn't need my help, and he was right, your mother would hate you for what you've become."

Contempt, unlike anything I've ever felt, unfurls in my gut. I launch myself over the island to grip his shirt and push him back until his spine meets the fridge, and my fist lands on his jaw. Gemma screams, and the sound of the punch is so loud it reverberates through the room, and all hell breaks loose.

Dad rips my arms off Toby while my uncle looks at his face. Creed blocks the door where Talon's fighting to get through. "You want a fight? Come here, you piece of shit motherfucker. I'll give you a fight."

"If you ever try to speak for my dead mother again, I'll fucking kill you." I seethe at Toby, my voice hoarse as the words break. Nile, Creed, Fern, and Gemma manage to get Toby out of the kitchen. His eyes wide, as if he didn't expect me to hit him.

Everyone here thinks they can speak on behalf of my mother as if any of them even know what she would want. But I know she would want me to make my own choices. She would be sad for me, of course, but she would be proud that I chose to sacrifice myself for the family.

"Calm down," Dad's voice is like ice water. Void of emotion, detached. His eyes move over my shoulder, and I find Charlie leaning up against the far cabinets,

watching everything unfold with a cunning gaze and her arms crossed.

## Page 30

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

K knowing Banks was on the other side of my door set me on edge. I never thought he would come here, not after everything he's said to me, but I wondered.

A part of me hoped.

After grilling Koda about what my dad, Creed, and possibly Diego said to him, he promised me it wasn't much and told me not to worry. He asked if I was hungry and then made us a late dinner that we're eating on the couch, in front of the TV, where he selected some trash reality show that's making us laugh.

After we're done, Koda asks the questions I expected earlier, and I'm not surprised he finally can't hold them in.

"So all those men are related to you somehow?" He asks with a little hesitation.

I chuckle, how in the hell do I make this make sense?

"Creed is like my Uncle. He isn't related to us, but he's been there since before my mother died. He has memories of her that I'll never get tired of hearing."

Koda smiles, "He's the big one with the dark haired woman, Fern. Right?"

I nod, "Fern and Creed have been together for over two years now. They had a rocky start, but I couldn't imagine anyone except her for him. She's been one of the best people in the world to me and the guys. Something we didn't realize we were missing."

“She seems very invested in your happiness,” Koda says.

“She is,” I chuckle, “and Diego—the angry looking one—is Banks’s dad. His brother, Nile, is Toby and Talon’s dad.” I hope I haven’t lost him. It’s a hard subject to tackle when I don’t want to tell a story that’s not mine to tell.

“And you all just, what, live in the same house?”

That’s a hard question to answer, “Yes, but it’s basically a mansion. Creed built it after he married Fern the first time—which is a long, complicated story that isn’t really my business sharing—and they all work together, so it just makes sense to live there.” I hope he doesn’t ask what they do because that’s definitely not something I can tell him. I wouldn’t even know how to begin.

“It sounds complicated, but basically, you have your dad and three uncles?”

“Yeah, exactly.” I laugh. The dynamic sounds so strange, but thinking about it makes me happy. I’m not sure I would be where I am without each of them. After that, Koda doesn’t ask any more questions about the family. Instead, we talk more about him and his interests.

It’s probably one of the best nights I’ve had in a while.

I fall asleep feeling better than I have in weeks, in my own bed, without a six-foot-four, sex on a stick man, brooding three feet from me.

It’s peaceful.

Lonely but necessary.

Painting my room should give me something else to focus on, but it’s so quiet in the

apartment this morning that all I can hear are my racing thoughts. Koda promised me last night that he would help when he got done at the cafe. He's really good company, especially after last night. I wish I could keep my thoughts from cycling through question after question about what he is doing with her . It does me no good to wonder, and it's actually worse because my brain conjures images to go along with everything I ask.

Each one is worse than the last, making me feel sick to my stomach.

Pouring the gray paint into one of the throw away plastic trays is easy enough. Not spilling it when I try to stop pouring, now that's a fun time. Paint drips down onto the plastic liner I'd placed over the carpet. I need to remember to thank Dad for that.

Locating my bluetooth speaker, I crank some music up and start painting. Dipping the roller into the paint, I roll it against the pan to coat the whole thing before pressing it against the wall and losing all track of time.

Singing along to the songs that shuffle through my playlist, I work until everything is rolled, and the only thing left is to trim around the molding and outlets.

Laughter pulls me out of my concert for one, and I turn, feeling my cheeks burn. Koda's standing in the doorway, laughter on his lips and food in his hands. I hadn't realized how much time had passed.

"Keep going, H. Those moves are stage worthy," he says through a smile that crinkles his eyes and makes a dimple pop in his cheek.

"These moves?" I laugh, starting to dance again to the beat of a pop song. Reaching out to him, I pull him into the room and dance harder. Setting down the bag he must have picked up from the cafe, he joins me.

We're spinning and jumping around, belting out lyrics, some of which I have to make up because I can't remember them, and he laughs. Throwing him a paintbrush of his own to sing into, he cracks up and then sings into the bristles loud and decidedly much better than me.

When the song ends, we're both gasping for breath and smiling like fools. He steps closer, eyes roaming my face, and my heart starts beating so fast I feel like I may fall over. He's so close I can see how his eyebrow separates from a small scar, an injury he must have gotten a long time ago.

I can see the way his neck bobs as he swallows, and every time my chest rises, it brushes his. I can't remember when he got that close, but now that he's here, I can't help but stare at him, biting down on my bottom lip. Nerves ignite in my belly as his eyes close, and he leans down to let his lips graze mine.

Our breath mingles, and I freeze.

"If this isn't..."

I move forward, closing the minuscule gap between us, and kiss him. His lips are tentative as if he's worried I'll change my mind. Dropping the paint brush, I place my hand on his neck, my thumb stroking his cheek.

He pulls back, his hand going to where mine rests on the column of his neck. "If you're not ready, I understand. It's only been a week, and I know things are complicated with..."

"My ex," I supply because that's what Banks is. He's my ex -boyfriend, and I think he has to stay that way this time.

"If you're not looking for anything serious, that's okay, but tell me now, please," his

eyes bounce between mine, waiting for an answer. “Because I think you’re worth falling for Henry.”

His words startle me and begin to repair something buried so deep that I didn’t realize had been broken to begin with.

My self-worth.

For the first time since Banks shattered my future and my heart, I feel like it’s possible to live without him.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

I slept like shit. I should have just snuck back into my room and slept on the floor. Instead, I tortured myself with his sugary, warm smell that drives me wild. It's baked into the sheets, the comforter, everything.

His pictures of us, the guys, our dads, everything pisses me off about it, especially the picture of me, Mom, and him that he keeps framed beside his bed. It's a sick reminder that Mama loved me and Henry together. She would get glassy-eyed every time I spoke to her about him with the most satisfied smile on her face like she knew eons before I ever figured my shit out.

"Incoming!" Charlie's way too chipper this morning as she barges in. She's got a mug of something that smells a lot like coffee in one hand, and the other's holding on to the knob. "You look like shit."

"No, Charlie, I'm not naked. Sure, Charlie, please come in," I grumble. It's too damn early for her to be this happy.

"I've seen plenty of dicks before, I'm sure yours is nothing special." She pops out a hip and leans against the door. "What's on the agenda today? An apology tour, perhaps?"

Whipping my head her way, I zero in on her and narrow my eyes. "You're funny."

She shrugs and takes a sip from the mug. "I really am. However I'm not joking."

"I'm not apologizing to anyone," I tell her, running my palm down my face and standing from the bed. Walking over to where she blocks the door, I take the mug and



drink a healthy swallow. “Thanks.”

“Ew,” she takes the almost empty cup and looks into it with a repulsed sneer. “That wasn’t for you.”

Ignoring her, I cross the hall into my room and grab the clothes I’ll need for today before heading to the bathroom. She follows as if that’s going to deter me. Flipping on the hot water, I look over my shoulder to find her perched on the sink.

“Well, go ahead,” she gestures with her hand as if she’s the ringleader of this circus. “I want to know what we’re doing today.”

“If I tell you, will you leave?” I’m annoyed, and it’s not even nine yet.

“I don’t know. I’m enjoying the stompy, woe-is-me journey we’re on currently, so probably not.” Her legs swing, heels clicking the cabinets with every swing.

“Charlie, I slept like shit, and your voice is pissing me off, so please, could you give me twenty minutes to get my shit together?” If that doesn’t work, I’ll just get in the shower with my boxers on and throw them out over the top.

“Well, at least we can be honest. That’s good to know,” she hops down, leaving me confused trying to figure out exactly what she means. “Twenty minutes, Pretty Boy.”

When she leaves, the silence of the bathroom brings reality crashing down like the water pelting the glass of the shower.

I hit Toby.

Called Talon a dickwad, and Cin slapped me.

Not my finest hour.

After I've showered, dried off, shaved, and dressed, I pull open the door to find Charlie standing on the other side.

"I don't think your family likes me too much," she quips, though her tone doesn't change. More matter of fact than upset.

"What gives you that idea?" I mock surprise.

"Again, I didn't know you were taken. I feel like we've had this conversation already. Or did I imagine that?" She snarks.

"I remember, just like I know you remember that I told you I wasn't taken." Heading past her toward the kitchen I go about my normal routine. Coffee and a protein bar from the cabinet, only there aren't any there. Just an empty box.

I'm not asking Toby or Tal where they are, and I doubt Fern's here. None of the dads will know, so it looks like I'll have to stop and get more while we're out.

"Oh, the hot twins took those this morning," she purses her lips as if she's thinking hard about something.

"I'll bet they did," I mumbled under my breath. Childish shit that I thought we'd be past, but hey, at least they didn't fuck with the coffee. Downing the vanilla-rich coffee, I grab my keys and head for the door.

Charlie's on my heels the whole walk through the house to the garage as if I'd fucking leave her here without me. Not a chance. I wouldn't put it past Toby and Tal to corner her and rope her into whatever ridiculous point they're trying to make by starving me out.

Sliding into my Audi, I take in the leather smell. It reminds me of Mama's car since it's the same make and model but red. She loved that car so much.

"Where to?" Charlie's question interrupts my memory, and I exhale.

"I have to go get some things, so I figure I'll show you around Gravity Hill," I tell her, hoping she'll leave it at that. I should have known better. Her questions never stop.

The whole drive into town it's question after question. At one point, I turned up the music so loud I could drown her out, but she still chatted away.

"Do you ever stop talking?" I ask after putting the car in park.

"No, I'm so glad you asked." Rolling her eyes, she turns her body in the seat, "Are you seriously not going to apologize to the people that you refer to as brothers?"

"No."

"Wow," she says, turning and flopping back into the seat. Staring out the passenger side window I watch her reflection in the glass. Her eyes circle as if she has something to say and doesn't know how, or she knows it will set me off.

I didn't used to be this guy with a short fuse. I used to be the guy you relied on for just about anything. Before Mom died, I was happy. I had everything I could have ever wanted, and now, thinking back on my life, it feels like I've got nothing, and maybe I'm to blame for most of it.

"I have two siblings, you know."

Her confession almost knocks me off my feet. "As in two other Romero brats?"

She laughs, “No, two brothers.”

I don’t know why this feels like something deeply personal to her, but something about her demeanor feels... off.

“Our father,” she swallows and turns back to face me. Her expression is hard as if whatever she’s about to say is serious. “If you ever, ever tell anyone what I’m about to say, I will inflict the worst pain you’ve ever imagined on Henry and make you watch. Are we clear?”

My hand shoots to her neck, and I lean in close enough that we share breath. “I’m getting really fucking tired of you and your family’s threats. If you ever so much as look at Henry again, I’ll fucking kill you with my bare hands. I’ll go to war with your family by myself if I have to. Never threaten him again. Do I make myself clear?”

She pulls a knife from somewhere, and the clink of metal sounds right before it’s against my throat. “You first,” she grits out through the little oxygen she has.

“Let’s get one thing straight, I’m not your enemy.” I release her throat, worried that if I hold on, I might actually hurt her. “Threatening my family has gotten your’s black listed. Sure, we have this arrangement for now , but make no mistake, if any of my family hears you make those threats, they won’t hesitate to kill you on sight. Questions be damned.”

“I have protection—” She starts, putting the knife down.

A sarcastic laugh bursts out of me, and I cover my mouth. “You think that means shit in the Hemlock house? If Creed wants you dead, you're dead.”

“I’m sorry,” she relents, “I know I shouldn’t have threatened Henry, but what I’m about to tell you... It can’t go past this car.”

“You could have just said that,” I deadpan.

“You haven’t really shown me a trustworthy side, and to be honest, Banks, I don’t know what type of guy you are.”

Silence descends as her words sink in. Why should I give her any parts of me when all she’s given me is a pain in the ass?

“My dad isn’t really my dad,” she pauses as if trying to gauge my reaction. “My mother had an affair with another man while she was still married.”

“She got pregnant. After my brothers, doctors told her she would have a hard time getting pregnant again. My dad was so proud as if he created this medical miracle on his own.”

“It’s not—” I start, then think better of it.

“Right, well after I was born, clear differences started to appear that he couldn’t ignore. My hair is jet black, my eyes are green, and I’m taller than almost every woman in my family. He ignored it for nearly fifteen years until he started hitting her. I remember my brothers pulling me away as he beat her, hearing her scream for help. He knew about the affair and had suspected it for years, and when he finally had DNA results to confirm it, he killed them both. My mother and my real father.”

I’m not sure what to say. I’m not sure what I can say. Anytime someone tells me how sorry they are for my loss, it makes me so angry I can’t see straight. So instead, I go with, “That must have been rough. No kid should ever go through that.”

She laughs a humorless sound that just doesn’t fit the Charlie I know. “I was fifteen.”

“Christ.”

“What I’m saying is I know what it’s like to lose someone you love. A mother specifically.”

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Charlie's words make me pause. She lost her mother at fifteen and now at... Fuck I don't actually know how old she is.

"How old are you?" I ask tactlessly. She doesn't seem much older than us, but I'm not the best judge of age.

Her brows dip, and she mumbles, "Twenty-one, did you hear anything I said?"

Twenty-one, she's had six years to process the loss of her mother. I've only had two. "Do you remember the way she sounds?"

She nods, her eyes gloss over, and her lips pinch. "For the longest time, I thought if I wasn't sad, I would lose everything I loved about her that I could remember."

Mulling her words over in my brain, she gives me the silence to think, and my lips turn down.

"It wasn't true, Pretty Boy. I remember how she smelled when I had a really bad day and needed a hug. I remember the way she talked me through my first period. The way she held my face and told me that no matter what my body looked like, I was worthy of an epic love story."

I look out the windshield, allowing her words to sink further into my brain. I know she believes what she's telling me. That she's happy but misses her mom. That she can be sad but chooses to remember the better times instead of her death.

"How did you forgive him?"

Her face morphs into a blank stare as if she can see the moment she became a new person—one without a mother or a father.

“I haven’t,” her voice is calm, much calmer than she looks on the outside. “I’m going to repay the favor he gave her when he murdered her.”

“What—” I start to ask.

“We’re not talking about this anymore. I just wanted you to know there’s always a choice, even through tragedy.”

She opens the door and steps out, leaving me in the car, reeling from her words. She plans to kill her dad, which means the bullshit plan she has going is either a cover or a ruse to play the doting daughter.

Deciding to let this drop for now, I get out of the Audi and click the locks. I parked in Manson’s little lot for his patients to use. Since it’s Saturday, I don’t think he’ll mind.

Charlie leans against the car, arms crossed, eyes unfocused.

“I’ll give you today to sort your shit out in your head, but after that, you and I are going to talk about this plan you have before you go and get yourself killed in the process.”

A ghost of a smile brightens her features, and she nods, coming to stand beside me.

“Where to, Pretty Boy?”

I offer my arm, and she takes it with an eye roll, matching my pace, we head up to the bookstore below Manson’s office. It’s a cool place, especially for Manson’s clients, to recharge after an appointment or to wait before their appointment. I know Theo



doesn't mind the business.

He's a slim guy, always wearing a sweater vest, even in the summer.

"Oh, hi," he says as we make our way through the store. Charlie eyes different things but doesn't stop to look further.

"Hi, Theo," I acknowledge him as we head out the door.

Charlie steps out of the door and looks around, taking everything in. I figure I'd show her the few shops we frequent and end at Fern and Flourished. Her eyes fall on the salon, and she looks at me with a questioning brow.

"That's an interesting name for a salon," she comments. "Curl Up and Dye."

Hearing it out loud does make it sound a bit wild, "You should meet the owner, Becca. She's an interesting person."

"Funny you should say that," Charlie smirks. "I could use some pampering."

"If that's what you want to do, I can't promise they have anything available. Becca and her stylist get booked up pretty quick, especially around the holidays."

She shrugs and heads across the street without looking both ways right as a car zips around the corner toward her. Racing after her, I bundle her up in my arms and pull her back just in time for the car to squeal its tires and stop.

They roll down the window, but one look at my stormy expression makes them go slack-jawed and peel away.

"Would you please look both ways before crossing a road next time?" I scoff as she

wiggles out of my arms.

“You could have let me get hit,” she quips with a smirk.

“You— You knew the car was coming...” The audacity in this one, “Testing me to see if I’d what, let you die?”

I’m not so far gone that I’d let anyone die on purpose. Not even my future wife.

Becca fawned over Charlie, chastised me for not coming to see her sooner, and asked about Henry. Overall, it was not the experience I’d hoped for, but I gave her the semi truth, he was enjoying college and decided not to come home this weekend.

Charlie ended up getting blue highlights put into her long black hair and had her eyebrows waxed. I let Becca trim my hair and style it into a more appropriate style since it’s grown out .

Whatever that means.

We stopped in at Thimble, where Charlie tried on the whole fucking store and bought damn near everything she tried on. I had to ask Shelly if she would deliver it all to the house. She

said her wife and son would help and not to worry about it.

Now, we’re walking down the sidewalk in silence while the sun is starting to set. Charlie’s hand is wrapped around mine, but I don’t mind the contact. It’s cold, and her hand is warm, plus, if anyone were to report back to her father, it looks like we’re a couple having fun in a new place.

The lights strung around town light up, and Charlie stops. Tilting her head up, she

looks like a child who's just seen Santa. The flickering yellow bulbs reflect in her green eyes, and her nose turns pink.

"This is beautiful," she says, eyes still transfixed on the lights.

"I guess," I murmur, apologizing to the people on the sidewalk who have to go around us. Pulling her along behind me, we head to Fern and Flourished, where the window display has changed to look festive. Pumpkins, bats, and cartoon ghosts decorate the glass, along with a spiderweb near the door.

"It smells delicious in here," Charlie breathes when I finally get her through the door.

"Why thank you," Candy says by way of greeting. "You must be Charlie."

Charlie looks at me, and I forget that I never mentioned Candy or how she would know her. "Charlie, this is Candy, Fern's best friend and sister-in-law."

"Not in that order," Manson says from behind the counter. I didn't notice him standing there at first. Distracted by the way the smell in here reminds me of Henry and how often I'd find him in the kitchen baking something with Fern and trying new flavors.

"And this is Manson, Fern's brother," I introduce him, and he nods at Charlie.

"Fern's in the back. Did you need her?" Candy asks, hooking a thumb over her shoulder.

"No, I came to let Charlie have a taste of Gravity Hill, and this is our last stop."

I guess Fern hasn't had a chance to tell Candy about last night, but the way Manson is looking at me, Creed definitely told him.

“I thought Manson was the therapist?” Charlie eyes them both, and Candy loops an arm around his side. His arm automatically comes around her shoulders, and he squeezes.

“He is,” Candy laughs, “but we’re short-staffed today, so husband duty has been called in.”

He kisses her temple and says something that makes her giggle while envy surges through my body. I want that... I had that with Henry. And now, I have two friends that hate me, their girlfriends also hate me, my dad’s disappointed, and who knows how Creed feels.

Charlie and Candy are lost to conversation as I stand here fuming over imploding my fucking life. I can’t even blame anyone, I’d hate me too, with all the shit I’ve done.

“Are those gingerbread cookies?” Charlie’s words pull me straight from my thoughts right as the smell hits me.

“Is that Henry’s recipe?” My tone comes out accusatory, and I clear my throat to hopefully disguise the blunder.

Charlie doesn’t miss it though, her smirk is evident.

“It is! Best seller too,” Fern says, coming out of the kitchen with a fresh tray of them despite it only being October. The cookies are so well loved that Fern decided to make it a year-round treat. The bell above the door chimes, and a couple walks in with two small children, both of whom are screaming for cookies.

Henry would love them. He would grab two cookies, get down on a knee to hand them over, and then watch in anticipation of their reaction, silently praying they loved them.

I hate that all I can think about is him when I've spent all day with Charlie.

"Banks," Charlie chuckles, "are you getting anything?"

"Well, that depends on how sorry he is," Fern says, crossing her arms over her chest.

Candy takes the family's order at the end of the counter while Fern and Manson continue giving me their hard stares. Taking a few steps so I'm at the counter beside Charlie, I return their looks.

"Not sorry enough," I scoff, and Charlie elbows me. "Sorry for starting a fight in your house."

Fern's head drops and she shakes it, tendrils of her hair escape the bun on top of her head with the movement. When she looks back up, her face is twisted. "I understand why you did what you did. And I love you so much for what you did to save me," her eyes slide to Charlie and back to me. "But you've got to stop blowing up your relationships with everyone over it."

"I'll just..." Charlie says, pointing toward a table near the window.

"I can't let you get hurt again, Fern," I let her hear the conviction in my voice. She has to know that I would do anything to protect our family, even if it means sacrificing the one person I love more than anything.

She comes around the counter and pulls me to the door that leads to the bathrooms. The hall is quiet, with two doors, one for women and the other for men.

Fern's arms wrap around my body. I'm not sure when I started shaking, but her arms—just for a moment—feel like my mom's. As my throat clogs and my nose burns, I know if I don't remove her, I'll start to cry, but her body against mine is as close to

the memory of Mama that I can get. So I wrap my arms around her and cry into her shoulder.

“I know you miss her,” Fern’s voice is shaky as she rubs my back. “And I know I’m not her, but I love you as if you were my own, Banks. I wish I had the opportunity to meet her. Everyone speaks so highly of her.”

I nod, letting my tears soak her shirt. I shouldn’t be crying on her shoulder. I should be out there with Charlie enjoying a drink and something with sugar on it.

I should be stronger.

“Letting yourself grieve your mother is okay,” she says as if she’s reading my mind. “I miss my parents too.” The reminder of her parents being slain in their home reminds me that I might not be the only one who needs this moment.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

“Never be sorry for being sad, Banks. It makes you human.” Stepping away from me, she looks into my face and gives me a small smile. “But remember that your friends and your family love you, so stop hurting them.”

I give her a small, rather ashamed smile in return and reply, “I’ll try.”

“And when you have the chance, show Henry how fucking stupid you were for sacrificing the love you have for each other.” With that, she walks into the ladies room and leaves me stunned.

When will I have the chance?

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

The break was peaceful, easy .

Now, with the first day of classes back in session after almost two weeks off, I feel like my shoulders are strung with twine, and I can't untangle the knots. Talon came by the coffee shop this morning and asked to catch up. I gave him my apartment number and told him to come by after classes.

Koda and I hadn't discussed the kiss since we were both busy with midterms and then he went home for the break. I think he's worried I'll change my mind. Or that he took advantage of my sadness. Either way, I should probably tell him that neither is the case.

I know I'm not ready for anything serious, and if he's okay with that, then I am too.

"Daydreaming again?" Opal jokes.

"Ha-ha," I mock and get back to cleaning up so the closing shift doesn't have much to catch up on before the rush. When I'm done, Koda comes into the employee locker area and smiles at me.

"Hey," I wave and use the machine to clock out.

"Hey," he laughs and looks away.

"Could we talk when you get home? Nothing bad," I add when his smile falters. "What with midterms and then break, we just haven't had much time to talk about..."

I don't have to remind him of the kiss. His cheeks turn pink, as do the tips of his ears. We texted a bit over the past week, random shit he was doing, and me asking if I could eat some of his stash of cookies if I promised to replace them.

His smile gets wider as he nods, and his hand brushes mine as I walk by to leave. The contact sends a shiver up my arm, the hair there standing on end. It's only been a month since my whole world fell apart, but having all this space and time to myself has been so... unexpectedly amazing. Putting into perspective just how much I used to lean on Banks, Tal, and Toby.

Getting to the apartment, I quickly clean up and take a shower before Talon comes over. Remembering the dough I made last night in the fridge, I set it out and preheat the oven. Getting lost in rolling out the dough so it's the perfect thickness, I don't hear the knock on the door until it turns into pounding.

"Sorry!" I gasp, unlocking the door to find both Talon and Toby. "Oh."

"Toby wanted to come too," Talon grumbles, bypassing me into the kitchen where he makes a sound between approval and hunger. "You're making cookies?"

I laugh while shaking my head. "Lemon cookies."

Toby rubs his stomach and groans, "I could eat a whole dozen."

"Me too," Talon says, eyeing the dough.

"I'm planning on icing them for the cafe, so don't even think about it," I warn, and they both scoff in unison.

Talon kicks off his boots and dive-bombs the couch, making himself comfortable. Toby settles onto one of the new barstools I bought while Talon clicks the TV on and



thumbs through the channels, finally settling on football. It plays in the background, and as I work, no one speaks.

“So,” Toby breaks the silence. “Last week was weird without you home.”

I nod, trying not to think about Banks taking Charlie with him after the game. I want to ask so many things. Like, how long did she stay? Did they sleep in the same room, or did our dads give her my room? Were they touchy-feely? Did they kiss? The thought makes me want to recoil into my mind and never come out.

“Banks punched me,” Toby admits.

That pulls my attention and the tray clatters to the ground, perfectly baked cookies now lying broken on the floor.

“Excuse me?” I blink, looking at him.

Talon stands up and walks over to where I’m standing among the crumbles of lemon sugar cookies. Bending down, he snaps me out of my freeze, and I move the hot sheet to the pot holders I had ready on the counter so no one gets burned.

We throw the cookies in the trash and I lean against the counter. “Tell me what happened.”

They go into the whole event, every detail down to what Cin said, which makes me love her even more. How Fern reacted, and how after that, they didn’t see Banks or Charlie until they had to go back to campus for their own midterms, so they don’t know if Charlie stayed or not. Banks didn’t say a word to them the whole long weekend.

“He’s great at icing people out,” I whisper after Talon grumbles the last part.

“I’m not sure what’s going to pull him from this life crisis he’s having, but whatever it is needs to happen. Fast.” Toby sounds exhausted, lost, and I notice his shoulders slumped.

“Are you okay?” I ask him, leaning down on my elbows at the island so I’m eye to eye with him, finally noticing the slight yellowish-green bruise under his eye.

“Did I tell you I saw her, Salem?”

I look at Talon, whose face is just as shocked as mine must look. “Salem, from elementary school?”

He nods, eyes bouncing between mine and his brother’s.

“Fuck,” Talon lets out, running his hand over his head.

“She won’t speak to me, it’s like she hates my guts. But she disappeared.” His voice gets louder as he says what’s on his chest, and I give him space to let him get it out. “She saw me... it wasn’t a great reunion. I was... indisposed. She barged into the room, looking for Gemma. She found her, and before I could really see her, I winked. God, her face. It was like she saw a ghost, and when it clicked through the sex fog, I tried to go after her.”

“You were fucking?” Talon tries and fails to hide his laughter.

“Tal, don’t be a dick,” that couldn’t have been easy on him, and his brother’s laughter isn’t helping.

“I’m sorry, that’s just...” he trails off, trying to curve the laugh.

“I saw her at the party before school started, but I thought I was hallucinating. Ever

since she barged into Gemma's room, I've tried cornering her to talk, forgetting about her, but nothing works."

"Have you tried her dorm?" I ask, thinking of how Banks showed up here. He didn't show up for me per se, but he was here.

"I don't know which one it is," he sighs. "And every time I see her, she disappears again."

"Well, now that I know she's here, I'll try to talk to her if you want?" I offer, knowing he would do the same for me.

"Did you ask Gemma if she's in the dorm?" Talon says.

Toby shakes his head, "I haven't told Gemma about Salem. Not that I'm worried, I just don't really have the words yet."

I understand that. I feel like I haven't had the words in weeks. Toby's phone rings, and Gemma's name flashes on the screen before he answers. Turning, Talon taps my shoulder with his fist. "You look better if a bit... hairy-er than before."

"At least I can grow a beard, baby face," I laugh. "I'm doing okay."

"How's the roommate?" He nods toward the living room as if Koda's here. My face must give me away because he's like a shark with blood in the water. He steps closer, catching my eyes. "You fucked him?"

"No!" I shout, then think better of it and lower my voice. "We kissed once." The way he's smiling makes me feel awful.

Why is he so excited about the idea of me fucking someone else?

About the possibility of me erasing Banks from my life?

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

Charlie and I learned a lot about each other over the break. She also uploaded her midterms early, so she stayed with me at the house for the past two weeks. Thankfully, Tal and Toby had to go back to school for the first week since their midterms were in class, so I only had to avoid them last week. It wasn't hard, they still love to party, and I...guess I don't anymore.

Spending all that time with her really made me see her differently, and hearing her talk about her late mother with such care made me feel like I could get there, too.

Charlie: Is it weird that I kind of miss you?

Chuckling at the screen, I type out a response.

Me: It's been four days, clingy much?

Charlie: Don't let it go to your head... wanna get lunch?

I haven't had a break since we got back. It might be nice to get out of the dorm and have human interaction. Practice has been a joke, and no one's speaking to me. Other than football, the dining hall, and classes, I haven't left my room.

Me: I guess I could grace you with my presence.

She sends back a thumbs up, and I sit up and stretch at my desk. Since Henry moved out, I haven't been able to move anything, as if the mere memory of his stuff will suffice while I move forward with Charlie, however long that lasts. Nothing I can do about the bed height, but I can manage for the rest of the year. I've already filed the

paperwork to move to an apartment.

Throwing on a coat and shoes, I head out to Gator Coffee Co. She didn't specifically say where to meet her, so I'm assuming. But with the only other thing on campus being the dining hall, I figured she meant the better option of the two.

They've decorated for Halloween, purple lights strung in loops around the checkout counter. Fake spider webs are tucked into corners, plastic pumpkins dot every table. It reminds me that the twins' birthdays are coming up. Tal was born Halloween night around eleven fifty PM, and Toby graced the world with his presence at exactly midnight on November first.

"Can I help—"

My head turns to find Henry standing on the opposite side of the counter, jaw slack, eyes wide. He doesn't finish his question, just shuts his mouth and waits. He looks so fucking good, no bags under his eyes, he grew out his beard, and it makes him look so fucking sexy.

Even with his eyes narrowed and his arms crossed, he's beautiful.

"Hey," it comes out before I can help it. After all this time, all I've got is 'hey'?

"How's the apartment?"

"What can I get you?" He responds almost robotically.

"Henry," I exhale, "can't we at least talk?"

"Talk about what, Banks?" His words are clipped, barely spoken through a tight smile. "We aren't friends, we aren't anything if I remember correctly, so what exactly do we have to talk about?"

The guy from the last time I was here with Charlie walks out from the kitchen door and smiles at Henry. It's a private smile, not something someone was meant to see. A smile that says I've got a crush on you .

"It's your break time," he winks, and Henry blushes. My blood boils, rushes hot through my veins, and I have to clench my fists by my sides to remind myself there's not a goddamn thing I can do about it.

Henry ducks through the door as Koda—I think I remember his name being—runs his hand along Henry's lower back. When he gives me his full attention, I can see his smugness written all over his face.

"Can I get you anything?" His smirk makes me want to rip the skin right off his face. Turn him into a pile of flesh and bone, then bury him sixteen feet underground.

"You beat me here!" I hear her, but I can't take my eyes off him. Fury rots under my skin. If I clench my fists any tighter, I just might split the skin on my knuckles. "Pretty Boy, you alright?"

Sliding my eyes to hers, I nod, unwilling to open my mouth and have something come out that's going to draw attention to the already strenuous scene.

"Get it togo," I insist, turning around and pushing the door so hard it rattles on its hinges. The glass wobbles in the frame, and I almost throw my fist through it, just to see something other than me break.

Charlie rushes out behind me, laying a hand on my back between my shoulder blades.

"Don't touch me," I snarl, leaning over. I think I might throw up.

Her hand moves, but her feet stay rooted in place beside me. Seeing Henry blush at

another guy feels like he socked me in the stomach. I know I made him feel worse, I know I did , and yet I hate the blush that spread across his face... because it wasn't me who put it there. Which means they must've... No, no, Henry wouldn't do that to me. Not even after everything I said to him.

“Let's go to my dorm,” Charlie's harsh whisper sounds in my ear.

I don't nod or acknowledge that I heard her, but I follow her anyway. Shuffling my feet after her, I force myself to keep walking, trying my best not to turn around and storm back into the cafe.

At the dorm, she slips her key into the lock, throws open the door, and all but shoves me inside. Standing inside of her room feels strange, we've always been in my domain when we get together, or a neutral place. Her dorm's bigger than mine, perks of being an advisor, I guess. It's painted a deep red, with her bed shoved in one corner and the nightstand beside it littered with mugs.

She leans back against the door, arms crossed with a stern look on her face. “Go ahead, look all you want. When you're done, you can tell me what the fuck that was back there.”

Pictures are tacked to one wall. I recognize the two men who must be her brothers and the two friends we met at the start of school. So many pictures of her living .

“How did you...” I can't form the question without it coming out accusatory. As if she never had any love for her mother. I lift my hand without realizing it and touch the picture of her and her mother, smiling while taking what looks like a selfie.

“Find happiness?” She sighs, crossing the room to stand in front of me while I look at all of her pictures. Her memories, captured in film. “I got tired of feeling sorry for myself and decided to live when she couldn't.”



“I don’t feel sorry for myself,” I scoff.

Her eyes slid my way, brows raised. “You’re the walking definition of feeling sorry for yourself.”

When I open my mouth to defend myself, she stops me with a hand.

“You’re about to tell me you’re pissed off, not sad. Right?” She waits for me to respond, but I can’t. “Thought so. Being pissed off about your mother’s murder is perfectly acceptable. Blowing up everything in your life that makes you happy so you don’t feel guilty for living without her is not.”

“You don’t know half of the things that have happened since my mother’s death,” I defend, but it sounds flimsy even to my ears.

“So tell me. Tell me all of the things that happened. Self-sabotage? Isolation? Anger? Depression?”

“All of the above.”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

I wanted to talk to him so damn bad. I wanted him to beg for my forgiveness. I wanted a lot of things from Banks when he walked into the cafe. Instead, I fled, like a coward. Hiding in the back of the kitchen eating a fresh plate of gingerbread cookies probably isn't the most efficient way to achieve the resilient life I'm trying to build.

Koda giving me that out helped and hurt me. I wanted to see what Banks was going to say. However, I knew it wouldn't be what I wanted to hear. He's promised to marry Charlie, and that's exactly what he'll do.

He won't go back on that.

No matter how much I love him.

"He's gone," Koda smiles and reaches for a cookie. "These are amazing and are totally going to sell out. How long have you been into baking?"

"I've always been interested," my cheeks heat at the praise. "It wasn't until Fern and Flourished opened that I really found a love for the kitchen."

"Well, thank you, Fern and Flourished. You're gonna have to teach me how to bake before I graduate."

Is he asking me on a date?

Flirting with me again?

Why am I so bad at this?

“Koda,” I shake my head, willing my thoughts to stop so I can tell him what I need to.

“It’s okay,” Koda grips my hand, not currently occupied by a cookie, and looks into my eyes. “You aren’t ready for anything serious. I can respect that, it’s okay.”

A deep breath leaves my body before I can stop it.

“It’s not,” I laugh, I’m fucking this up. “I think in another life, if we’d met at another time, I could build something with you. You’ve got your shit together. You’re kind, and... well, look at you, God. It’s not that I don’t want to try with you, Koda, I’m just all messed up, and you deserve better. I want you but my heart is just...”

“Not ready?” He supplies, and I nod. I’m not ready to jump two feet into another relationship that may break what’s left of my heart. I need to heal that on my own.

“I’m sorry,” I begin.

“Don’t be,” he chuckles, “it’s okay, I understand.”

He doesn’t, not really. No one does.

What I have—no, what I had with Banks was toxic, but it’s the kind of toxic I still want to drown in. I realize that’s not healthy, and I’m trying to work past it. I just wish it was easy to forget everything before that was amazing... Before everything fell apart. Before he started treating me like a dirty fuck, or the easy option. Back when he loved me, out in the open, in front of everyone...

“But if you ever want to mess around, I’d be down. No strings.” Koda winks, “I also don’t mind seeing Red pissed off.” With that, he gets up and walks to the front, where he disappears.

His comment makes me want to burst out in laughter. I doubt the kitchen staff would appreciate that, though. So I chuckle to myself and clock out. I need to talk to my baking basics professor about the final. I passed the midterm with an almost perfect score.

If I can take the final and pass, I wonder if he will let me test out way earlier than planned. It would be weeks in advance—almost six, actually, but that would be one class I could mark off this semester. One less stressful thing to worry over.

By the time night falls, I've submitted almost every assignment needed for the baking basics class. It was the only requirement my professor said had to be met before he would open the exam for me. The clock says it's ten-fifteen. So he probably won't open my exam tonight, but that's fine.

With that bummed thought, I close out the tab on my computer and pause. I never changed my background. Banks's gray eyes stare into mine. He's smiling a cheesy smile that I caught when he thought I wasn't paying attention.

My heart aches with the memory of a happier time, but I can't bring myself to change it. Shutting the computer, I turn off the lamp on my nightstand and turn on the TV. Reality shows always help me take my mind off everything.

## Page 36

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

It's long past the time I should be out of Charlie's dorm and in bed. I need to get into game mode. Tomorrow's game will be a tough one, as we're playing a team that hasn't lost all season. The team and I have watched some game footage, they're a strong team, solid in defense and practically unstoppable in offense.

"I think you should tell Henry that we aren't actually getting married," she says after swallowing down the rest of her pizza that we ordered an hour ago.

"No," I shut it down. "He'll ask questions, and even then, we don't know if this plan of yours, which you still haven't fully explained to me, is going to work."

"It will," her face is set in hard lines. Determination is written all over her features. "It has to."

"Are you going to let me in on the plan, ever?" I ask. It's been bugging me since she told me back home that I almost went to Creed.

"I've got it covered," she stands up from the bed to grab a napkin from the desk.

"I want to help."

She smiles, but it's not a happy one. "I know."

"My family could be useful," I try again. I don't want to walk into anything without being prepared.

"I need to do this on my own," her voice is full of conviction, but I can sense the

apprehension there.

“Charlie,” I’m not going to beg, but after spending the past few weeks together, I’ve grown fond of her. I’d never forgive myself if something happened, and I could have prevented it.

“You don’t need to save me, Pretty Boy,” she says as if she can read my mind.

“I don’t want to save you, I just want to help.” The words surprise me at the truth behind them. I do want to help her. What she’s told me about her father makes me want to kill him too, and from what little I know, I’m surprised someone hasn’t already. “I could ask Creed—”

“You can’t tell your dad or Creed,” she snaps, stepping up to where I’m perched on her desk. Her eyes are hard, focused as if she’s trying to converse with me without using words to show how much she means it.

“If I think you’re in danger, I won’t hesitate,” I tell her honestly. “I won’t have another death on my hands.”

“I know what I’m doing. You just have to trust me, okay?”

I nod, praying that whatever she’s got planned will work and she won’t get herself killed in the process.

“Don’t you need to do some football ritual before tomorrow?”

Laughter bursts out of me, and I almost choke on my water. “Great subject change,” I squint and get up, letting her off the hook. “I should get going, big game tomorrow. You’re wearing my number, right?”

“I’ll be the blushing fiancé cheering the loudest,” she promises. “And, Pretty Boy?”

Pausing at the door, I turn back to look at her.

“You’re a good one,” she smiles a sad smile and continues. “Too good to be mixed up in my problems.”

“What are fake fiancé’s for?” I give her a half smile and walk out.

Whatever she’s planning, I want to be a safety net. She’s burrowed her way under my skin as a friend, someone I could see myself trusting.

My gut tells me to call Creed and tell him what I know. Maybe we can help her. I know he won’t do anything to ruin her plans. He’s too smart for that. They all are.

We won, and the team is going wild. The locker room sounds like a club with the music blasting, guys singing at the tops of their lungs. Patterson hollers that they’re going into town to some western bar that’s open late.

I’ve been meaning to talk to Jax to mend our friendship. If last night with Charlie taught me anything, it’s that I miss him. I miss having him to talk to about football, relationships, and possibly even mama.

Redressed, I wait in the hallway for him to get out. Nerves prickle my skin. I’m not sure how to start the conversation, but I know I need to.

Raised voices catch my attention, pulling me in their direction. There’s yelling, but I can’t understand it. It sounds like someone’s talking too fast, slurring their words so they all come out at once.

“—one job!”

The sound of a slap is unmistakable, and I pick up my pace. Hearing the voice that responds makes my heart drop in my chest.

“I’m s—”

The sound of another strike greets my ears as I round the corner leading to the academic buildings. Two men are in my face before I can get to Charlie. Her cheeks are red, and her eyes are filled with tears and fury.

“Don’t you fucking touch her again,” I growl, I don’t give a damn how important her father thinks he is. If he puts his hands on her one more time, I’ll kill him right here.

“Mind yer business, boy,” he dismisses me with a flick of his wrist. The two men have me by my shoulder, and I shake them off. Sprinting to Charlie’s side, her chin’s held high, yet she still finds a way to look down at me when she turns.

“Last time I checked, Charlie’s my fiancé, so if I tell you not to put your goddamn hands on her, I’d better not see so much as a scratch.”

He laughs, snapping his fingers. The two brutes come to his side, and my body goes rigid with anticipation. My dad’s here, and I know Nile’s around somewhere with Toby. If I needed them, I could tap my phone, and they’d find us.

“Yer treading dangerous waters,” her father starts and coughs. When he finally clears his throat, I hear my dad’s voice. He’s in the hall where the locker room is. When he can’t find me, he’ll come this way.

“I could say the same to you,” I level him with a stare. I won’t be intimidated by a man that hits a woman.

He looks at Charlie, pointing a finger in her direction, and turns around to leave. Dad



exits the hall into the breezeway, where Charlie and I watch her father retreat.

“What’s going on here?” Dad’s voice is deadly calm, he clocked Mr. Romero walking away. I have no doubt that he also noticed the red handprints on Charlie's cheeks.

“Nothing,” Charlie grits out and attempts to storm off. Grabbing her bicep, I hold her in place and nod to Dad. He nods back and walks back into the hall.

“What the fuck is going on, Charlie?” I ask, making my voice as soft as I can. I want her to trust me enough to let me help her.

“You should have stayed out of it,” a tear traces a path down her cheek, and I want to wipe it away. Instead, I pull her into my chest and hold her. She doesn’t need me to push right now.

## Page 37

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

When Talon invited me to a bar, this is not what I had in mind. A western bar with servers dressed in denim, shirtless bartenders, and wood covering every surface. I've been sipping on a damn Jack and Coke that Talon ordered for me for an hour now, and I've seen zero hot cowboys.

I want a refund.

Cin and Talon have been dancing out on the floor, leaving me at the table. They look hilarious, though. Cin's moving and grooving, and the more attention she attracts, the more Talon hovers.

The place gets louder as the football team makes their way in. We watched the game from here, Talon yelling at the monitors and Cin and I chatting about life. She's enjoying her classes but says Gemma's been acting funny.

I need to remember to check on her.

The air shifts as if it's all been sucked out, and I know in my bones he just walked through the doors. He hasn't gone out with the team at all since he started, so why tonight? Torturing myself further, I turn and find him with his arm slung over Charlie's shoulders. She's tucked under his arm, smiling and beautiful.

I want to hate her.

God, I want to hate her.

She pulls him straight to the dance floor, and I feel the burn of alcohol as I throw the

straw on the ground and down the rest of the drink Tal ordered for me. The soda's flat, but the whiskey is smooth, and I drink until every drop is gone.

Taking it to the bar, I ask for another, a double, plus a shot. He refills the glass, and I tip it back, drinking it in only a few swallows, then down the shot and try not to gag. If I'm drunk, I won't care that he's here with her. I shouldn't care anyway. He broke my heart, stomped on it until it could no longer bleed.

"Fuck," I say as the shot glass hits the counter. Talon and Cin either haven't noticed, or they don't want to bring attention to it.

Hoping I won't see.

Turning around, my eyes spot them. Her hands are thrown up in the air while his are latched on to her hips. They sway to the music as he speaks into her ear, and she smiles.

What a happy couple.

The bartender asks if I want another, and I nod, waiting for him to set a fresh drink behind me. When I hear the clink of glass on the bar, I grab the drink and make my way to the edge of the dance floor, where stools dot the railing.

I'm slightly drunk as I stew while watching them. I want to throw my drink at them, shatter the glass, and watch them step on it. Okay, maybe I'm more than slightly drunk.

They exit the dance floor when the song ends, and I quickly lower my head so he won't notice me, but I swivel back around to catch Charlie by the wrist. Her eyes go wide when she sees me, and I smirk.

“Have you fucked him yet?” I ask, barely registering the slur in my speech. A laugh bubbles out of my throat. “Or is he saving himself for marriage? Ooops, too late.”

“Henry,” his voice is near my ear, and I want to claw it away. Flipping my hand around in his general direction, I wave him off, still looking at Charlie.

“You’re drunk, Henry,” she says softly, as if she cares. “Do we need to take him home? Call Koda?” She’s talking over my shoulder to him, and it pisses me off that she thinks he has any damn say in what I do or where I go.

“No.” Banks and I say in unison, and I turn to look straight at him.

His face is a little blurry, but I see the anger there and smile. “Actually, I was just leaving. I have a roommate to fuck senseless.” I watch his face, seeing it the moment it hits him.

The moment it clicks.

“Banks,” Charlie’s turning to face him, saying more words that I don’t care to hear. Because I saw it. I saw the way his teeth clenched, and his jaw ticked. The way his body wanted to crowd me in and demand to know what I meant. He’s pissed because he doesn’t want to imagine me with anyone else.

Yeah, well, too bad.

“Koda’s so much better than you anyway.”

He slams his fist down on the table closest to us. Rattling the glassware and I laugh, great big laughs that make me feel so light.

Talon’s face pops up behind Banks, and he says something. I can see his mouth

moving but I can't hear him through my laughter.

Pushing past them, I find the exit and call Koda. When he answers, he sounds a little groggy, and I have to suppress my laugh.

"Henry?"

"Hiya, you wanna fuck around?" I giggle.

"What?" He asks, "Are you drunk?" I hear a little laugh in his voice and nod. Then remember he can't see me.

"Only a little," I admit. "Will you come get me?"

"Drop your location. I'll be there soon."

I do as he asks, dropping my pin so he can find me. I can finally breathe out here, where the air is cool and not filled with Banks and Charlie.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Banks yells.

I waggle my head, ignoring him. I don't owe him anything.

Not. A. Thing.

"Henry. I'm talking to you," he says, spinning me around and steadying me with his hands.

"Yelling. You're yelling at me," I correct. "And since when do you care about me, huh? You didn't care weeks ago when you tore my heart out of my chest. Haven't cared a day since then. So what, Banks? What exactly do you think I owe you right

now?”

“You’re drunk,” he spits, gripping my chin to tilt my face up to his.

Pushing him off me, I step back into the parking lot between two cars. “And?”

“You hardly ever drink,” he says.

“Are you trying to think through what's happening? Make sense of it?” I push a finger out in his direction. “Well, let me tell you what’s happening. Listen close, Banksie.” Watching him flinch at the nickname only his mother and ever I use is satisfying.

I wobble on my feet and catch myself on the hood of the car to my right. “Koda’s coming to get me, then he’ll be coming for me when we get home. That’s what’s happening, and there’s nothing you can do to stop me.” I hiccup when I finish my rant.

His face is stone, unreadable, just like it was when he chose that bitch over me.

“Now, go back inside and dry hump your fiancé like the good little soldier you are.”

I don’t know how long we stand like that, locked together in some kind of twisted stare off. Long enough that Koda’s voice carries over the thump of music from the bar as he pulls up to the curb.

“Henry,” Banks says, “don’t get in the car.”

“Why shouldn’t I?” I ask, only torturing myself because I know there’s nothing he can say to make me stay here. “Give me a reason.”

When he doesn’t say anything, I nod and give him my back. Walking to Koda’s car, I

open the passenger door and look up, meeting Banks's eyes. He still doesn't say anything, so I slide into the car and shut the door.

Koda drives back to the apartment in silence.

Banks didn't stop me. I don't know why I thought he would. I guess I hoped.

Koda sighs as we make our way into the apartment, and I don't waste any time. Pushing him against the wall, I kiss him before he can say a word. Pressing his palms into my chest, he pushes me away.

"You're drunk, Henry," he says, "I don't want you to regret whatever happens in the morning."

"I'm not drunk enough to regret this," I kiss his neck, leaning in so I can smell him. "And I fully consent to whatever happens tonight."

"Goddammit," he groans before leaning in and kissing me back. His hands roam over my shoulders, down my back, and to my stomach. His hands dig into my flesh, and he moans into my kiss. "I've fantasized about this for weeks. I want you so bad."

Ignoring his words, I run my hands down to the hem of his shirt and lift. Exposing his stomach that's lean, I know he runs every morning, but I wasn't expecting him to be so... fit. Helping me get the material over his head, he takes control of the kiss. Walking me backward until my ass hits the counter.

His hands expertly work the button and zipper on my pants, yanking them down, he follows them, lowering himself until he's on his knees before my cock. I'm so hard that it bounces against my stomach as he frees it from my boxers.

Gripping me, he wastes no time, flattening his tongue and running it up my dick.

Swirling his tongue around the tip, he hums out a groan, and I close my eyes and inhale sharply.

“You’re so sexy, Henry.”

Hearing his voice makes me wish it were someone else’s, that it was Banks on his knees before me. Seeing his gray eyes darken with lust as I fuck his mouth. When I open my eyes and look down, I hesitate, almost pulling away, but Koda holds onto my hips.

“Pretend, Henry. I don’t give a fuck who you see when you close your eyes.” When I relax, he continues working my cock into his mouth, the sounds of his spit gathering and dripping at the corners making me want to cum already. Especially when I close my eyes.

He sucks, slowly dragging out the tingles that run down my spine with every dip of his head. I can feel the ridges of his palette. The way his cheeks hollow when he sucks, everything makes me want to combust, it’s been so long.

Releasing my cock with a pop, he kisses his way up, dragging my shirt over my stomach. With every press of his lips against my soft, fleshy abdomen, I let out a groan. He’s killing me, I’m too horny for this.

His hands run through my curls like Banks did when I swallowed him down. Only it’s Koda’s face in front of mine. His eyes are hooded with desire, and his lips land on mine. Pushing Banks out of my mind, I try to remain present.

He kisses down my neck, sloppy open-mouth kisses that leave cool zings against my flesh. Back on his knees, he worships my cock like it’s the best thing he’s ever had. Bobbing and sucking, his spit gathers and makes it easier for him to run his fist over my length.



Pleasure builds in my spine, and I let my head drop behind my shoulders. “Fuck,” I whimper, “Banks.”

Realization slams into me. I can’t do this, not to Koda, and not to...

Fuck.

Koda doesn’t stop, even though I called him another man's name.

“Stop. I can’t,” placing my hands on Koda’s shoulders, I pull my hips back as far as the counter will let me and nudge him so he stands and I can collect my pants. “I shouldn’t have...”

“What?” Koda asks, brows dipped down. “I don’t mind.”

“I do!” I shout, completely baffled that he would allow someone he’s intimate with to call out someone else's name. “I care! This isn’t fair to you.”

“Henry, I don—” he starts.

“No, please don’t say you don’t care,” I plead. “I need some space. I can walk the block or something.”

Koda stands and watches me pace while I pull at my hair. Searching my pockets for my keys, I feel his hand land on my wrist, pulling my attention.

“You shouldn’t go anywhere. You’re still drunk,” he says, catching my eyes. “I’ll go to Opal’s. I’m sure they’re either going out or are already out.”

I nod, not knowing what to say.

What can I say?

I'm a fucking mess, and I want the man who broke my heart to break my back too? God, I'm a disaster. Koda leaves, and part of me wanted him to slam the door, break something. I don't fucking know, but he didn't. He's too good for me and my problems.

Walking back and forth in the kitchen, I fixate on the last thirty minutes. I shouldn't have brought Koda into this shit show. I should have walked into my bedroom and jerked off to the memory of Banks like a normal broken-hearted idiot.

Pressure builds behind my eyes, a headache. Wonderful. Rummaging through the cabinets for some painkillers, I jump when there's a bang on the door.

"Open the fucking door, Henry!"

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

Banks's voice carries through the heavy door, and I pause, eyes going wide. He didn't... couldn't...

Pulling the door open, my thoughts swirl when I see him standing there, chest heaving, arms raised, and fingers latched onto the frame. He barges in, blowing past me as I gape at him.

"Who the fuck do you think you are?" I bark, shaking my thoughts away. He didn't say anything to stop me, yet here he is, storming into my apartment like I owe him something. "Get the fuck out!"

He stomps back to me, stopping centimeters from my face. "Did you fuck him?"

"That's rich, coming from you," I spit.

One of his hands circles my throat, tipping my head back to look him in the eye. "Did. You. Fuck. Him?"

My smile sparks something behind his nearly unreadable eyes, and he pushes me into the wall, lips crashing down on mine.

God. I've missed him.

This.

How he commands, takes charge, and makes my body melt to his will.

“Did you suck his cock like a good little slut?” He whispers into my mouth, making my cock grow and leak. “Was it as good as mine?” I hate how his words take hold of me, how he knows exactly what to say to make me want to hate fuck him into tomorrow.

“Actually, he sucked me down like I was his favorite fucking candy,” I snarl, uncaring if it hurts him. He’s done plenty worse to me.

“I’m going to make you forget he even exists,” he growls. “Be a good boy, and take off those pants.”

I do as he says.

I shouldn’t, but fuck me. His chest is heaving, eyes dilated, and fuck, I want him to do all kinds of fucked up things to my body.

“That’s right, baby,” he croons as I step out of my pants. “Look how hard you are for me.”

His hand goes to the button on his pants, and I lick my lips, my anticipation running high. He palms himself through the material, and I groan, standing in the kitchen butt-ass naked and waiting for him to touch me.

To do something .

“On your knees, Fancy.”

Immediately dropping to my knees, I watch him step forward. The clink of his jeans being torn open has me gripping my cock. Running my hand up and down to give me some relief.

“I didn’t say you could touch, baby,” kicking my hand away, he tuts. “Open your mouth, and stick out your tongue.”

I do, immediately and without thought. I love this. I crave this, surrendering control.

“Good boy,” he praises, whipping out his cock and laying the tip on my tongue. I groan at the taste of precum. The sight alone is nearly enough to make me lose it. His cock is perfect, saliva pools in the corners of my mouth, and I whimper. “Still so eager to swallow my cock.”

I nod, flicking my eyes up to his. The way he stares down at me, pissed off, forcing himself to wait. He’s so fucking hot.

His control snaps, and his hips with it. Shoving his length all the way into my throat. I gag at the surprise intrusion and spit drips from his cock when he pulls out.

Groaning, he guides himself back into my mouth and rocks his hips forward and back. Hollowing out my cheeks, I roll my tongue around his cock and suck. His hands tangle in my hair, and he holds my head as he pumps in and out of my mouth.

“Hot damn,” he grunts, pulling out and lifting me to my feet. His eyes look around the space, settling on the counter. “Belly down, baby.”

I roll my eyes but comply, bending over and laying flat on my stomach over the cool countertop. Exposing my ass to him, his palm cracks across one cheek, and I cry out, “Fuck!”

My cock drips against the wood cabinets, waiting for him to slap my ass again.

“This is my ass, Henry.” His voice is like silk in my ear as his weight settles on top of me. His hand planted on the counter by my head draws my attention as the other

palms my ass. "Mine."

His fingers nudge the ring of muscles between my cheeks, "Are you going to be a good little slut and suck my fingers?" Turning my head to the other side, I open my mouth, eager to feel him inside of me.

Lubing up his fingers, he presses one into my hole, causing me to hiss. Spit lands in my crack, and I moan out my delight. He works his finger in and out, I can feel his knuckles as they scrape the tight ring of muscle there.

Bucking against his finger, I silently plead for more. He obliges, offering me exactly what I want. Scissoring his fingers inside of my ass, he pulls them out and back in, stretching me as he does.

"Do you want my cock, baby?" His fingers withdraw, and I'm left feeling empty and fucking needy.

"Yes! Please, Banks." I cry out when he shifts away from me, but I turn in time to see him opening a jar of coconut oil he must have swiped from the stove. He lathers his cock in it and then uses the same hand to coat my hole.

Slowly, the tip of his cock rests against my entrance pushing forward in slow movements. When his head breaks through the first ring of muscle, I suck in a sharp breath as he sighs and rocks back on his heels.

"Damn, you're so fucking tight, Henry. Relax for me, and I'll take care of you." He moans, slowly moving forward. In two inches and out one inch until he's fully seated. Filling my ass with his cock until I feel so full I could cry. "Look at you, Fancy. Taking every inch of me and squirming for more."

His words make me want to combust. Instead, I wiggle, trying to make him move.

“You love this, don’t you?” He says, threading his fingers through my hair, lifting my chest off the counter while he withdraws almost his entire length. “My bare cock inside of you, filling you until you scream.” He roughly thrusts back in, making me do just that. I let out a scream with his name as he rutts into me over and over.

I’m incoherent with lust, moaning out unintelligible words. He feels so fucking good, rolling his hips into my ass like I was made for him. As if no time at all has passed between us.

At this angle, my cock is pressed painfully into the cabinets, adding to the pleasure he’s wringing from my body. My spine tingles as his hips begin a punishing rhythm, and his words take on a growl. He fists my hair, pulling me up so my back is pressed firmly to his chest.

“I love the way you moan, baby.” His lips rove up and down my neck, teeth scraping my throat. “And I love the beard, it’s so fucking sexy.”

A small whimper escapes me, and he pulls us back, reaching around to grip my cock in his sure fingers.

“Are you going to cum for me, Fancy?” He matches his pumps with his hips, driving me wild. “Cum all over your pretty pretend house, so you’ll never forget who made you lose yourself.”

A gasp parts my lips as he continues.

“I—I’m... God, Banks.” My orgasm builds.

“Give me what I’ve earned, baby. I want to see you coat this counter while I punish this ass with my cock.” His command sends me over the edge, and I feel him rip the orgasm from me with his name on my lips as I spill everywhere.

He doesn't let up, chasing his own orgasm, "I'm going to fill your ass with my cum, and you're going to feel me drip out of you for hours."

My dick is empty, and my stomach is filled with sparks.

"Tell me you understand, Henry."

"I understand," I whimper, twisting in his grip to meet his lips with mine, and he groans into my mouth as he licks my tongue.

"Fuck," he bites my bottom lip. "Fu-uckkkkkkkk." He spills inside of me, as he promised and we stay there locked together in silence. The only sound is our mutual breathing.

When he steps back, easing his dick out of me, he tucks himself away without a word, leaving the silence to take up space between us.

"Get out," I snip, locating my clothes and coming to my senses. I should have told him no, shouldn't have let my slight drunkenness and hurt heart let him in.

I'm so fucking stupid.

He's engaged, damnit.

To someone else.

Someone who's probably searching for him right now.

"Fucking dammit, Banks, get out!" I scream, hugging my clothes to my chest and hating myself for being so weak.



“H—“

“No!” I warn. “I don’t want to hear anything you have to say right now. God, I wish I could just hate you.”

He hangs his head, neck tingeing red. Turning to walk to the door, he pulls the handle and hesitates a moment before throwing it wide and walking out. I wait until the lock engages before running to my bathroom and emptying my stomach.

He’s going to marry someone else, and I let him fuck me. I let him make me come so hard I saw stars.

Staring up at the ceiling, surrounded by the scent of sex and regret, I hate myself just a little bit.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

Leaving Henry after fucking him stupid should make me feel triumphant. I should feel something other than self-loathing.

But I don't.

In fact, somehow, I actually feel worse. I shouldn't have gone to his apartment. I shouldn't have fucked him.

I shouldn't have broken his heart...

Paying the cab and storming back inside the cowboy bar, I head straight for the booze, ignoring everyone and everything.

The bartender gives me a look like he knows I'm underage but sighs when I pull out a wad of cash and order a bottle of whiskey. He sets a shot glass beside it, but I swipe the bottle and forgo the glass. I'm sipping straight from the tap tonight.

"Slow down," Charlie says, popping out of nowhere. Or maybe she's been here all along, and my brain chose not to acknowledge her. "Where have you been, Banks?"

Ignoring her, I take another long pull from the bottle. The liquid spreads like fire through my chest, but it's something. A feeling that hurts less than watching Henry lose himself in me, only to kick me out right after. To yell and demand that I leave.

"That's enough," she tries taking the bottle, and I smirk down at her. What the hell? If we're pretending I might as well go all in.

Leaning down into her space, I press my lips to hers. The contact doesn't last long before she's jerking away from me and snarling.

"This isn't okay, and that's not happening."

"Everyone already thinks we're fucking," I laugh, "why not enjoy ourselves while we can?"

"Because I'm not as heartless as you think I am, and you're so fucking out of your mind right now that self-sabotage is the only thing that makes sense."

"I don't need you psychoanalyzing me," I slur. I don't need her to have a good time either way. Pushing my way through the tables, I spot Talon and Cin. Their heads are down presumably, so they can hear each other talk.

"Some friends you are," I call, and their heads turn my way. "Letting Henry get drunk and leave with some guy he barely knows."

Talon laughs, actually fucking laughs, as if anything about this is funny. As if my heart isn't actively trying to beat its way out of my chest.

"That's funny," Talon spits, standing so we're eye to eye. "Last I checked, you're fucking the mafia princess, so what if Henry left with another guy."

Doesn't matter who he left with. Henry let me fuck him, not him .

Talon's words hit a nerve, though, and I down practically half the bottle. Cin says something, but Talon scoffs. "He doesn't deserve Henry."

"You're goddamn right, I don't!" I'm vaguely aware that I've started yelling. The edges of my vision are getting cloudy, and my head's starting to swim. When was the

last time I ate something? “Why do you think I did what I did? For fucking fun?”

“I don’t know why you did what you did, Banks. You haven’t spoken a word to any of us. Not before or after you decided to go rogue!” Now he’s yelling, or maybe it’s all the alcohol in my system.

“I made a decision that saved Fern,” anger flares hot in my gut. “But sure, make me the bad guy.”

He laughs again, and it’s really starting to piss me off.

Cin pipes up, “You are the bad guy, Banks. And if seeing Henry with someone else is the only way for you to admit to yourself that he’s it for you, well, I’m not sorry. But you need to think long and hard before you fuck this up for him too. Koda’s a good guy, and Henry deserves happiness. Even if it’s not with you. ”

Her words are spoken softly, but they land exactly where they’re intended. I’d rather get pummeled on the football field a hundred times over than feel this overwhelming grief. The kind that pulls you under a dark sea and tumbles you around, just waiting for you to drown.

They get up without another word and leave, and I’m left standing there with a half-empty bottle of Jack and a hole in my chest.

“I think you’ve had enough,” Charlie grips the bottle in my hand, trying to take it away. Ripping it from her hands, I head off toward the dance floor. Downing large gulps as if all of my problems will be solved at the bottom of the bottle.

She chases after me, arguing with me, trying to get me down off the table I climbed up onto and start dancing on, but I ignore her. I’ve completely lost my sense of awareness to the empty bottle of whiskey in my hand.

I don't feel anything, I have no idea how much time has passed, and it's pretty damn good.

Until strong arms wrap around me and a voice I know but can't place speaks in my ear. "You're done here."

Laughing, I try to dislodge myself from the vise-like grip. "I'm not done. I'm just getting started!"

"No, you're drunk and making a fool out of yourself."

Rolling my eyes, I try shaking him off again, instead, cold air whips me in the face, and it takes my breath away for a moment. I gasp, shaking my head and pulling in a cold breath.

Words are exchanged, but my ears are fuzzy, or maybe they don't work anymore. That would be a blessing, then I'd never have to hear Henry talking about fucking another man.

Never have to listen to him say how much he wishes he could hate me right after we—

"That's the least of your worries, son."

I don't know what he's talking about, I haven't said a word, and he can't read my mind.

"I don't need to read your mind. You're doing a damn good job of spewing your thoughts."

"Dad?" I ask, but he doesn't respond before everything just kind of shuts off.

My head is pounding, and the fucking sunlight in here doesn't help. I don't remember getting back to my dorm. I try to recall what happened last night, the only thing that comes to mind is Henry leaving with Koda.

Vomit works its way up my throat, and I gag, jumping out of bed only to wobble on my feet. I was expecting the floor to be further away.

Fuck.

I'm not in my dorm.

The room around me isn't the tiny space I've come to hate. It's the room I moved into when Mama died. The walls are light gray, my bed sits in the middle of the far wall, and the bathroom is too far away.

Fuck, I'm gonna be sick.

Rushing down the hall, I make it to the toilet just in time to wretch up what feels like my entire stomach. Bile burns my nose, and acid fills my throat as I continue emptying my stomach.

When I feel like I have nothing left to give, I slump against the toilet, my head hitting the wall.

"Here."

My eyes pop open—though I don't recall closing them—to find my dad squatting in front of me. My throat feels raw, saliva pools in my mouth, and I feel like I'm going to wretch again.

With my head hanging over the toilet, I dry heave so hard I start to sweat while Dad

taps my back. When nothing comes up, I sit back down and look at the glass of water he brought me along with two pills and a shot of pink liquid.

“Do I even want to know how bad it got for me to end up here?” I whisper as embarrassment heats my cheeks.

“It wasn’t your finest hour,” he says, shoving the pills into my hand. “Take these and meet me in the living room.” He says as he gets up and walks out.

Oh fuck.

I debate whether or not to make myself throw up some more. If I can, then maybe I won’t have to face whatever it is waiting for me in the living room. Knowing my dad, he won’t care. He looked less pissed off and more resigned.

Washing my face and brushing my teeth, I look at myself in the mirror. Seeing someone I don’t recognize isn’t new. The state of my clothes from last night, with questionable stains, is.

I’ve never been so drunk that I couldn’t remember anything from the night before. Never been so hung over that I’ve almost thrown up in my bed. Even when I tried a few psychedelics after Mama... I never let myself go too far. I always had control, but last night, everything inside of me broke.

Images of Henry’s naked body on his knees before me flash behind my eyes.

What the fuck was that? I shake my head and blink the images away.

Deciding to go ahead and face whatever is waiting for me head-on, I stand up and walk into the living room. Charlie’s head snaps up, her face looking less grim than I remember.

“You look like shit,” she says by way of greeting.

“Feel it, too,” I admit. There’s no point in trying to hide how I’m feeling. Not with my dad seeing me vomit into the toilet and Charlie having to call him. I assume that’s what happened. She doesn’t have his phone number, though, so I’m not sure how we got here.

Creed, Nile, and Luca are all here.

“What is this an intervention?” I scoff, eyeing each one of them. “News flash, I got too drunk once. Big deal.”

More images from last night assault me.

Me at Henry’s new apartment.

Henry bent over in front of me.

Henry moaning my name like he used to before I ruined us...

“It’s not about the drinking,” Dad says, snapping me out of the memories of last night. “Though, that’s a conversation for another time.”

His face is stern, scarred hands clenched by his side. The sight of them makes me want to spiral. With my heart in shambles, I can’t help it.

“Charlie told us her plan,” Dad drops like it’s casual conversation.

Well, that’s not what I expected, so I turn to Charlie and ask, “You haven’t even told me the whole plan, so what exactly did you tell them?” I can’t believe she would tell them anything about her father, how he hit her mother and does the same thing to her.



Getting her to open up has been like pulling teeth, and I'd like to think she's comfortable with me. But them? No.

"Everything," she surprises me by admitting and then ducks her head as if she's ashamed.

"Why?"

"You were so out of it last night, B. Do you even remember what happened?" Her eyes find mine again, this time they're unreadable.

I don't want to admit that most of last night is a black hole in my memory, other than hearing Henry moan my name. That I can hear loud and clear, along with the feeling still in my fingers, as if I ran my hands through his curls for hours and not just a few stolen moments.

The only thing my mind plays on repeat is the fact that Henry let me fuck him and then screamed at me to get out.

My mouth opens, attempting a reply that doesn't sound childish, but ultimately, I close it and shake my head.

"Your silence is telling enough," she murmurs.

"I don't even know where to start," Dad takes a deep breath.

"I do," Creed's deep voice booms. "Start with how you thought you could murder your father and not die in the process."

Suddenly, I can't control my face because my eyes pop wide, and I stare at Charlie.

"You told him that?"

“What was I supposed to do, Banks? You were spewing things about Henry, how he broke you, how much you loved him, all in a public space. You tried to kiss me last night for fuck’s sake!”

I did... What?

Just those few things she’s said make me want to crawl into a hole and never come out, and then there’s the flashes of what I obviously did with Henry last night.

I cheated.

I’m a cheater.

“Jax tried to calm you down,” she continues as if I’m not already internally imploding with the little information I’m computing. “After you downed a whole bottle of whiskey, there was little I could do. You said... God, you said so many things. Dancing on tables, practically impersonating a stripper.”

“I didn’t...” My heart sinks. I never wanted to embarrass her, and if I weaponized her father’s abuse against her, I’ll never forgive myself.

“You didn’t say anything about my dad until after yours came to get you anyway,” she grumbles.

Hanging my head, I collapse on the couch, ready to hear whatever else I fucked up.

“We’ll get to you,” Creed says to me with a stern brow and turns to Charlie. “I want to know how you planned to execute the head of the Irish mob without retaliation, step by step.”

Charlie eyes me, it’s clear she doesn’t trust me. Why should she? I’ve given her little

to no reason to. “I’m sorry, Charlie.”

She stands, comes over to where I’ve folded myself into the couch, and sits down. She doesn’t grab my hand or rub my back. She only nudges my shoulder. “It was bound to come out sometime, Pretty Boy, at least now you can start making amends with Henry.”

Snapping my head so I can see her, I ask, “Your father...”

“Will be dealt with,” Nile says, “for now, we need to know who was helping you and what you had planned.”

“It wasn’t much of a plan, and I already told Diego everything.” She starts sharing her secrets with my family. The only people in the world I trust. When she’s done, Creed leans back in his chair, rubbing his eyes with one hand.

“What’s the goal here, Charlie?” He asks, “What do you want out of this?”

“His death,” she states plainly. Her conviction’s so strong her chin juts out. “For us all.”

Her words strike something in me. Something that feels like I should know what she means.

“You and Banks?” Luca asks.

My mind turns over all of our conversations, anything that would make her believe that I wanted her father dead. She shakes her head, a subtle move that has the hair on my arms rising.

“And Diego.”

Dad's eyes slide to hers, but she doesn't stop staring at Creed, who looks like he's trying to piece something together. After a tense moment of silence, she turns her whole body my way. Silver pools in her lashes, and my gut squeezes. Whatever she's about to say, it might kill me. "My father was the one who killed your mother."

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Her words stop my heart, my brain, my very blood. I can see it the moment it hits the rest of the family. Everyone is waiting with their breath held, waiting for her to say something else.

Not that.

“Charlie,” Creed's tone is even, but his face is a range of fury. “Tell me what you know.”

“I’m sorry, Banks.” She’s still looking at me, but her head drops a few inches. “Bridgett was my cousin. She was obsessed with the idea of becoming one of you. I heard all about you and your unorthodox family. She wouldn’t stop yapping about you all like she knew you. As if she was already a part of your family and hadn’t even met you.”

She pauses, but no one speaks. We all want to hear everything she has to say as she turns towards Creed.

“When we were notified of her death, my uncle was outraged. He wouldn’t listen to anyone, convinced you got her killed on purpose so you wouldn’t have to marry her. After Fern’s accident, you and your brother came and tortured him. For days, we had no way of knowing if he was dead or alive. When my father found out you killed his brother and two dozen of his men that night over another woman, he went blind with rage.”

“I wanted to tell you, Banks.” Her voice breaks as she finishes and finally looks at me. “He planned to have you all murdered.” She says casually, gesturing to every

man in my family who helped raise me. “But he started, and failed, with your family.”

She looks at Dad, his face is a stony mask, but I can see the turmoil in his eyes. The reminder that his wife is gone because of a grown man’s tantrum.

“I wish I knew the specifics so I could tell you everything. He meant for all three of you to die in that fire. He wanted to send a message, but something went wrong. Sometimes, when he overlooks me, he rants about not getting it right.” Breathing deeply, she finishes, looking directly at Creed. “He wanted to take away something you loved, Creed, and he targeted the only family he could easily get to. Then, when he threatened Fern, I knew he wasn’t bluffing. There’s already so much bad blood between our families. I just wanted it to end.”

Everything she’s saying digs further and further into my chest.

“I swear, I didn’t want to hurt any of you. I wanted to find out who you were. What kind of people you are. I know Bridgett was obsessive, but two lone men rumored to take out twenty-four of my father’s best-trained men in one night? Unheard of, and I thought, maybe if I could get close to one of you, I could convince you to help me. I don’t want the Romero name or the headache of running a syndicate.”

“So, the marriage contract. It was fake?” I ask.

“Oh no, the marriage contract is very real to my father.” Her eyes are back on mine, and I can see the apology sitting there. “I’m so, so sorry Banks. I didn’t know you already had someone who loves you, and I didn’t expect to care about you, not like I do now. But I never had plans to go through with what my father wanted. That’s why, after your game...” She trails off and looks away.

Shame. The thought is like a fresh breath of understanding. She’s ashamed of what I

witnessed, the abuse from her father.

“That’s why he hit you,” I finish for her. If Creed and the rest of the dads are going to help her, they need to know everything they’re up against. “Last night, he slapped you because you had no information to give him.”

She nods, and damn her, she’s stronger than I am because not one tear falls.

“He thought over the break I should have had something he could use against you. But your family,” she swallows and drops her head. “The way you all love each other, it’s beautiful. I can’t let him ruin that any more than he already has.”

“When did you know?” I ask, ignoring all the voices around us. I have to know if I fell into her trap or if it was a coincidence.

“That Fauna was your mother?” She asks before her breath quickens and her shoulders shake. “The moment I saw you on campus.”

“The party,” I’m piecing it together now. She saw Toby first, invited him to the party, and when we all came, she could have easily pieced together who was who if she had any identifying information. Which I’m sure she did, considering her father was hell-bent on offing us.

“I swear, I haven’t and won’t ever give him anything that could potentially hurt you or your family.”

“I believe you,” Nile says, and the rest of them grunt their agreement. “You’re safe here, Charlie.”

“But I’ll be needing your phone,” Dad says, holding his hand out expectantly.

Charlie looks down at his hands, and I can see the pity there. To her credit, she doesn't say anything, only hands over her phone and nods.

"I'm sure you two could use some time alone," Dad's eyes stare pointedly in my direction. "Or a nap," he finishes, and I nod, recognizing my dismissal. His sharp gaze tells me that our conversation about my drinking isn't over, but for now, he has something to do, so I'm off the hook.

Charlie stands with me, following me out and into my room. Dad wasn't wrong, a nap sounds fucking wonderful. Since I'm in last night's clothes, I rummage through my closet and pick out sweats and a long-sleeve shirt, then realize that Charlie needs some new clothes and would also probably enjoy a shower.

"Cin may have some clothes in Talon's room, if you want me to go look," I offer, heading in that direction.

"Do you hate me?" Her question tugs at my heart, whispering softly as if she's scared of the answer.

Sighing, I close my door and turn back to look at her, "Honestly, after a nap and a hot meal, I'll probably have to have you explain everything again. But hating you for something you had no part in wouldn't bring my mother back, and I'm positive she would have really liked you. So no, Charlie, I don't hate you."

She nods, sucking in her lips and blowing out a breath.

"Now, I would like to shower," I tell her, looking down my body and back up. I feel gross. "After that, would you like to take a nap?" I ask because I'm exhausted, and I don't think I'm going to be able to function if she wants me to stay awake.

Her tears fall in slow rivulets down her face, but she nods. Instincts tell me to hug



her, but my brain tells me that would only make the tears worse, and I hate seeing her cry.

“I’ll go get something of Cin’s, okay?”

She shakes her head and coughs out a laugh, “I don’t think that would be wise, Cin looks like her and I could spar for hours and she wouldn’t get tired. You may not hate me, but she does.”

“You’re probably right,” I chuckle, running my hand down my neck. I hate to do it, but Henry’s clothes are probably going to be our best option since she won’t fit into mine. “What about Henry’s clothes? Would that be okay?”

I have to swallow down my unease, it’s just a shirt and some sweats. She’s not trying to replace him, but maybe she can help me get him back.

The only thing I know for certain is that I hate myself for leaving Henry alone last night.

I won’t make that mistake again.

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

Talon's face flashes on my phone, and I ignore it for the seventh time today. Koda came home sometime last night after I binged an entire package of cookies and then passed out in my room, crying. I assume he left for the cafe early this morning since he sent me a text telling me he left the Aspirin on the counter and hopes I feel better. Saturdays are busy days, but luckily, I wasn't scheduled. When I woke up groggy and smelling like sex I felt my heart sink.

I told Koda I wasn't drunk enough to regret what happened, and I don't. Until I moaned Banks's name and he acted like it was just another Tuesday, I was into it, but it wasn't fair to him. Then I let Banks in and basically begged him to fuck me right after.

I'm so conflicted.

I try convincing myself that last night didn't mean anything, it was a lapse in judgement.

Nothing more.

It was hot—in the moment—but now it feels... cheap.

Instead of worrying over the what ifs, I plug the tub and fill it with water and bubbles—nothing like a good soak on a lazy Saturday. I might bake something later, especially since Toby and Talon's birthdays are coming up. They love anything sweet.

My phone rings again, and I groan. I don't know why I carried it with me to the tub. I

should have left it on my dresser and forgotten about the damn thing.

“Hello?” I snap, much moodier than I intend.

“Did you fuck him?” Talon’s voice croons through the speakers, and my stomach plummets to the tub floor. Did Banks go back to the bar and brag about fucking me?

“Come on, Fancy! Did you and Koda get down and dirty?”

Relief shoots through my body, and I hate that it does. I shouldn’t lie to my best friend, but I know Tal will have too many things to say about it, and I’m not ready to hear them. I already feel bad enough.

“I’m not having this conversation,” I know he wants me to move on, and believe me, I do too, but it doesn’t work that fast. Plus, remembering how easy it was to sink back into old habits with Banks makes me wish I were stronger.

“So you did, and now you feel like shit.”

More than he’ll know.

I’m not certain that he’s asking me a question. It sounds like one, but the way he said it seems more like a statement and makes me scoff.

“You do!” He accuses, his voice growly and harsh.

“Tal,” sighing heavily into the phone, “I love that you want me to move on and be happy. I’m just not there yet, and that’s fine. I’m okay sitting in the sadness because it means what Banks and I had was genuine.”

Surprising myself with that bit of truth, it registers in my brain, like saying it out loud made it real.

Made it tangible.

“Got it. I’m sorry if I pushed,” he grumbles, clearly not happy about not getting any gossip to spread.

I laugh, and the water sloshes around. “You know I love you for it.”

“Are you in a bath?” He switches topics so fast I almost get whiplash, but then when I think about it, it makes sense. Tal isn’t a happy feelings type of guy, and anytime I tell him I love him he gets squeamish.

“I am.”

“You’re gonna electrocute yourself,” he snips, and we laugh together.

“Bye, Tal.”

He doesn’t bother with saying anything, and dead air soon fills the room as I throw my phone onto the bath mat. Sinking down into the tub, I let my eyes close and breathe. Attempting to clear my thoughts.

I’m going to relax, damnit.

Koda brought dinner home not long after I’d finished soaking and was laying on my bed listening to music. I need to have a conversation with him.

An honest one.

“Koda,” I call his name, walking out of my bedroom. “Can we talk about last night?”

His head swings up, and he smiles. “Of course.”

I'm not sure where or how to start, but I know I need to tell him how I'm feeling. "I'm sorry it ended the way it did."

His smile gets a little sad then, "It's okay. I understand heartbreak, Henry. I'm sorry if I made you feel pressured."

Glancing down at my shoeless feet, I debate on what I'm going to say.

"I don't want to hurt your feelings," I manage, "And I want you to know I don't regret it, but I don't think it should happen again. Honestly, I think you deserve way more than settling for someone who isn't fully in the moment with you. You should be with someone who doesn't imagine you're anyone else. I—I can't be that person. I'm sorry."

His head drops, and his hands grip the counter. "I know. I figured this was coming," he says, still looking down. When he looks up, he seems resigned. "I hope you find whatever it is that makes you happy, Henry, truly."

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

After we found Charlie some of Henry's clothes that fit her, we stood in my room for a few awkward seconds before I sighed and climbed into my bed.

"Come on," I patted the side of the bed, "I won't try to kiss you again."

I feel like an ass, and she looks so resigned to us hating her that it makes me want to hold her.

"Charlie, we don't hate you. Okay?" I whisper softly. I don't want to spook her. "I could use some platonic contact, and I can sense that you do too. So, I'll hold you while we nap, and we can never speak of it again if that's what you want."

She twists her lips to the side and nods. Tentatively, she slips under the covers and gives me her back. Throwing my arm over her waist, I bring her body into mine and slide my other arm under her pillow.

Henry's clothes on her body make me want to squeeze her tighter. Some fucked up way of feeling like I'm holding him instead of her. My heart sinks at the thought. I should be focused on how the hell we're going to get out of this mess, not fantasizing about Henry. My traitorous dick twitches against her ass from my thoughts.

"Dude," she groans and tries scooting out from under my arm.

"You smell like him," I admit. The blush that spreads over my cheeks is enough to make me want to roll over and hide under my own pillow. "I'm sorry."

Her deep sigh tells me she understands. "Don't get any ideas, love puppy."

Busting out in laughter, I shove my head into the pillow and groan. “Don’t worry, I promise to be on my best behavior.”

“Mhmm,” she laughs along with me until our laughter dies out and we’re both snoring softly.

Charlie’s still sleeping beside me, tendrils of her long hair have fallen out of her bun and tickle my face. I don’t want to wake her, so as softly as I can, I untangle myself from her and slide out of bed.

Seeing her lying there has me feeling so many things. I can’t keep them pushed down any longer. Mostly I think I’m realizing that even though I’ve fucked up so many things, I can work to make them right.

I have to try.

Starting with Toby and Talon. Pulling my phone from my nightstand, I silently make my way out of my room, closing the door with a soft click.

Heading toward the living room, I dial Toby’s number because I doubt Talon would pick up my call.

“Hey,” he answers.

“Do you think you could convince Talon and Cin to come home with you today?” I try to keep my voice from wavering. Nerves take flight in my body, and the hair on my arms stands up.

“Maybe, when?”

“Now?” I ask, “I have something I need to say.”

“I think you’ve said enough,” he snaps, and after a moment, he sighs, “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Yes, you did, and I know. I’m going to make it right.” My confidence grows with every word. I’m going to mend my relationship with them, our dads, Jax, and finally Henry.

“Is Henry invited to this apology tour?” Talon asks, pulling me from my thoughts that churn with ideas on how the fuck I’m going to pull this off.

“Uh, no,” surprise laces my voice, but I should have known he was there. “Not yet,” I know it’s not what he wants to hear. “I have a lot to make up for and a lot of self-reflection to do before I make it right with Henry. He deserves a better me if he’s even willing to forgive me at all.” My voice wavers at the very real possibility of him not being able to.

“We’re on our way,” Talon grumbles and hangs up.

Now that I know they’re coming, I search the house for Dad. I’ve got to figure out what the hell I’m going to say.

Checking his office, I find him in front of a desk full of monitors with Charlie’s phone plugged into his drive. He’s going through every bit of information she has on it, so either she doesn’t have anything she doesn’t want anyone to see, or she doesn’t care what he finds. I knock and wait.

“Come in,” he rumbles.

Stepping into the room, I find my uncle, Nile, in the corner working on whatever it is he does.



“I asked the twins to come home,” I tell them both. Dad spins around in his chair, and Nile turns his head.

“What for?” Dad asks.

“I need to apologize. For a lot of things.” I know better than to pussy foot around. “Starting with last night.”

Turning so I’m facing dad fully, I let out a breath, “I’m sorry for drinking myself stupid, it was irresponsible and inexcusable.”

He nods, giving me a small smile. “Great start,” he says, “but I think the biggest problem is why you did it.”

“Henry was at the bar, drunk, and said some things. Then he left with that new roommate of his, and I lost it.” That’s not an excuse, and I know that I’m the one that broke his heart. “I should have stopped him. He was drunk and pissed, spewing words he knew would hurt me. Or I’m assuming he hoped they would anyway.”

“Banks, if you couldn’t handle the thought of Henry with someone else, you shouldn’t have agreed to the contract.” My uncle states. “And you definitely shouldn’t have ripped his heart out in front of everyone.” He adds unhelpfully.

“I know,” hanging my head, I continue, “I thought I could... I thought a lot of things. But if these past weeks have taught me anything, it’s that I can’t live without him. I’ve been so lost in grief over Mom that I became someone even I hate.” I take a deep breath and blow it out, “And I thought I needed to break his heart so he could find someone better. But then he went and did it, and I’ve never felt so... shattered.”

When neither of them speaks, I start to wonder if what I said makes them more disappointed. “I thought I wouldn’t survive when mom died, but this is a kind of

torture all its own. Seeing the man I can't survive without—who I made hate me—falling for someone else. I feel like I can't breathe.”

My consciousness flashes, and the image rocks me to my core of Henry, absolutely devastated before kicking me out of his apartment.

God, I fucking hate myself. I did that to him. And for what ?

“Have you told Henry?” Luca’s voice makes me cringe. I didn’t know he was behind me. I wanted to talk to him separately.

“No,” I turn so I can look him in the eye. “I want to make things right with Toby and Tal first. Cin, too, and because we still have a contract with Romero, I don’t want to give him false hope. I have to work on my shit before I ask Henry to forgive me.” I say honestly, making a mental note to find a therapist after I talk to Toby and Tal.

“That’s commendable.” He nods, crossing his arms over his chest. “But what happens when we have a plan and you no longer have to worry about pretending with Charlie?”

I hadn’t thought that far ahead. But I know what Henry deserves.

“I’m going to grovel my ass off to get him back.”

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The guys and Cin show up right as Charlie wakes up and joins us in the living room. Taking the seat beside me, she places her hand on my knee. Her way of encouragement, I guess.

“I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“Thanks.”

Talon eyes her hand, but she doesn’t move it, and I have to respect her nerve.

“I’m sorry,” I start, and the words aren’t enough. “I’ve been a dick. To all of you for way too long, but mostly these last few weeks.” I look directly at Toby next because he deserves my sincerest apology the most in the present company. “I can’t tell you how sorry I am for hitting you, Toby. If you want a free shot, I’ll give it to you.”

Toby laughs, “Nah, I think you’ve punished yourself enough.”

“The hell he has!” Talon hollers and moves to stand. “If you don’t hit him, I will.”

I nod, standing so I can take the hit like I said I would, but Cin pulls him down, draping her legs over his so he can’t move.

“Let him go, Cin. It won’t make anything I did right, but it will make him feel a little better.”

“Talon’s not the one who needs to feel better,” she says, pointedly staring at him, before turning back to look up at me. “You look like shit, but it’s obvious that you’re

trying. I can sense the sincerity in you that wasn't there a month ago. Welcome back," she adds with a secret shit-stirring smile that only Cin can deliver.

Sitting back down, I look at Charlie, trying to communicate with her that I'm going to tell them the whole truth. She nods as if she understands.

"Our dads already know, but it's time I told all of you as well," I start. "Charlie and I have been faking our relationship."

Three curious stares blanket me in the silence after my confession.

"Explain," Tal barks.

"Her father is..." I'm not even sure where to begin or what I should say. "He's responsible for my Mo—" My voice breaks, and I can't stop the burning in my nose and the sudden tears filling my eyes, but Charlie saves me.

"My father wanted me to marry into your family so he could destroy it from the inside. He killed my mother, and he's also the one who murdered Fauna." Charlie sits up on the edge of the cushion. "And I'm going to kill him for it."

Cin looks at Talon, who wraps his arm around her and pulls her in close. The mention of killing one's father brings back her own memories, I'm sure.

"And our dads, they know this? They're okay with this?" Toby says, leaning forward to put his elbows on his knees.

"They're going to help." I say, "We're all going to help."

After Charlie and I explained everything to Toby and Talon, we all just sat around processing everything. Our dads came in then, along with Fern and Creed.

“Charlie explained her father’s Christmas gala,” Creed begins. “We’re all going.”

Charlie’s eyes go wide. “All of you?”

“I’ve already spoken to your father,” he nods, “he was enthusiastic to extend an invitation.”

“He’ll have you all in one place. Don’t you think that’s a bit... suicidal?”

He laughs, along with our dads.

“If your father is stupid enough to make a move against all of us in a public setting, then he deserves everything he’s got coming.”

Creed’s delivery is matter of fact, he doesn’t sugarcoat it. Even though I know Charlie thinks she has little feelings about it, this man raised her, and it’s going to take a toll on her if she deals the killing blow.

“You don’t understand,” she shakes her head, “he’s not above playing dirty. Poison, a silent leak, anything to get your family off the board.”

“So we prepare,” Dad’s voice is gravelly compared to hers. “We have almost two months to make a plan that doesn’t involve you getting yourself killed.”

Her hand flinches against where it rests beside my leg.

“Okay.” She relents.

Creed, Nile, Luca, and my father all start in on logistics. They figure out the parts everyone will play and we all listen, throwing out ideas, playing devil’s advocate. We need to be prepared for anything.

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Working at Gator Coffee Co. has kept me busy the past month, along with my classes. It's almost comical how much free time I have without Toby, Talon, and even Banks around. They're usually the ones that keep me busy unless I get time with Fern, which is next to impossible while school's in.

Opal and Hannah invite me and Koda to different parties, lunch, and pretty much any social event they're going to. I've said yes to a few lunches but never a party. I haven't seen or spoken to Banks since the night we were together, and it's been a much needed few weeks of space.

I felt bad for missing Toby and Talon's birthday dinner and the after-party on Halloween, but they understood. I wasn't ready to see him. To see them together again. It hurts like it would if Banks were mine and he was cheating, which I know is unfair, given what happened between us that night. It's just how I feel.

Talon's been surprisingly neutral about the Banks situation. He doesn't have a negative word to say, which I've been suspicious of but haven't had the guts to ask what's up. I'm not sure I'm capable of hearing his name out loud, and I don't think I want to hear how he's doing.

Without me.

Dad called last night to remind me of our annual camping trip we all take every Thanksgiving. It's something I haven't given much thought to, but he made it crystal clear that my attendance was mandatory.

I've been mentally preparing to see him since. I've got two more projects to turn in

this week, and now I've got all of the shit with Banks on my brain. Stress and me, we're not friends.

One of my professors said everyone had finished the assigned work so she scheduled the exam early. Problem is she won't allow us an online forum, so I have to go into the lecture hall. I've gained some more weight since all this started, so all I can really wear are sweats. It's not a big deal, but I haven't had time to go anywhere to shop, and it's not like I have much of a social life anyway. At least, not one where it would matter that I only wear sweats or joggers.

Koda's sitting on the couch when I leave my room, watching something on TV and eating popcorn.

"Mrs. Dods rescheduled the exam to today, right?" He raises one brow and smirks.

"Yeah," I reply, but it sounds like a question. I'm confused by his expression, then I wonder if he's taken her class.

"Well, you better get going," he urges, sweeping his arm toward the door.

Shaking my head, I walk to the door and slip on my Crocs. I've got no one to impress, and they're comfortable.

The walk is short, thank God, too, because the winter chill is here. I'm ready for Thanksgiving next week, thinking about seeing my family and all the food we'll prepare makes me homesick.

Heading into campus, I almost wish I had enough time to stop by the cafe for a coffee before this exam, but looking at the time on my phone, it might be pushing it. The brick building where Mrs. Dods's lecture hall is has two stories, and her class is on the bottom floor.

I've only had to be in here once on the first day for introductions, every other class was recorded and uploaded to our server. I've held an average of ninety-nine in this class all semester, and I'm not about to lose that score because I have to come in.

Mrs. Dods sits behind her desk, looking down at something I assume must be a test because there's no one here. Panic sets in, did I forget the time? Have I missed the exam? My GPA is going to tank.

"Mr. Forbes, good to see you." She says, bringing me out of my spiral.

"You as well, Mrs. Dods," I automatically respond. "Did I miss the exam?"

She laughs at my panicked tone, "Actually, you're right on time. And you passed."

"Excuse me?" I ask, not entirely sure I understand what's happening. "I haven't taken the exam yet."

"You just did," her laugh continues at my confused expression. "Thank you for showing up."

"That was the exam? Showing up?"

"You have a ninety-nine in my class. I think it's fair to say you would ace any test I gave you. Now, go enjoy your holiday." She winks and returns to whatever it is she's doing as I stand there stupefied.

When it's clear she's not going to offer me any more of an explanation I head to the coffee shop where Opal's beaming smile greets me as I walk in. Her blonde hair is tied back into a sleek ponytail, and her cheeks are pink.

"Hey, sugar!" She yells as my feet hit the wooden floor of the cafe.



“Hi, Opsies,” I’ve grown accustomed to calling her by her nickname, every time I do, she blushes and smiles brighter.

“What’ll it be today?” She grabs our largest cup and waits for me to tell her what I want. I like to try new things, so I order a peppermint lavender tea this time. I haven’t tried those two together. Maybe it’ll be exactly what I need.

Something calming to take back to the apartment while I log on and finish up a few more assignments.

“Here you go!” Coming around the counter she wraps her arms around my middle, and squeezes me tight. “I’m gonna miss you over the long weekend.”

“I’ll miss you too,” I tell her. She’s been a good friend, and I enjoy her antics. “I’ll see you before Christmas, you know that.”

“I know, but my last two weeks before Christmas break are going to be insane. I’ll barely have time to eat, let alone see my friends.”

She returns to work with a sigh, and I head for the apartment, ready to psych myself up and get this long weekend over with.

The apartment’s nice, but it’s so quiet. I miss the noise of a loud house. Talon bickering with anyone who will entertain him, Fern and I in the kitchen baking new things for Fern and Flourished. I want that back—the noise, the laughs, the everything.

“Back so soon?” Koda laughs when I enter the apartment.

“She gave me full credit just for showing up,” I tell him, still confused about it. His smile gets wider, and it hits me. “You knew that was her ‘exam,’ didn’t you?”

“Confused the hell out of me too,” he nods.

“I thought I was losing my mind!” I whine, playfully knocking his shoulder.

He shrugs and asks about lunch, which I decline so I can relax in the tub for a bit before I have to pack.

Nerves explode in my stomach when Dad pulls up to my apartment. I watch from my window as he gets out of his car and walks into the building. It doesn’t take long for the elevator to ding, signaling his arrival.

Bolting from my door, I catch him right off the elevator. He laughs and wraps his arms around me.

“I missed you,” I murmur into his button-up, then release him so we can walk to the apartment. I left it propped open with my bag so we could get back in without me needing my key. His brows shoot up in surprise.

“I thought I’d have to pack your bag myself,” he chuckles.

“I’m ready,” I nod. Or at least as ready as I can be.

He winks and picks my bag up from the floor, shouldering it so I can grab the other. Koda left earlier when I was in my room packing. He didn’t offer me any parting words, only gave me a look that made me feel like maybe he wasn’t so okay with my choice not to hook up anymore. Shaking off the thought, I make sure the door lock latches behind us and follow after Dad to the elevator.

When we’re in the SUV, he cranks the heat and asks me about school. His features beam when I tell him about my 4.0 grade point average and how much I’m enjoying my classes. He tells me how proud he is. The rest of the ride is silent because I’m

afraid to ask about Banks, even though I want to know if he's brought Charlie to the house for this trip.

I decide not to risk it, one question will lead to more, and I'm not sure he can answer them. We roll through as the gates open, and when Dad parks the SUV, he turns and looks at me.

"Everyone is here," he says, eyes bouncing around my face, trying to get a read on what I'm feeling. "Talon, Cin, Toby, Banks, and Charlie."

I nod, sucking my bottom lip into my teeth, letting it slowly release.

"If you aren't ready, no one would blame you for sneaking in and heading straight to your room," he offers. "But, I'm going to ask you not to."

"Dad," I sigh.

"Henry, we've all missed you. We know what happened with Banks was excruciating. No one expects you to have gotten past that pain, but I think when you hear some of the things that have happened, you'll understand a little more."

He's not pressuring me, but the look on his face is hopeful. I've always been the one with a level head out of our group. I can do this.

The moment I step foot into the mudroom, I have the overwhelming urge to run to my bedroom and hide. Suppressing my nerves, I take a deep breath and walk into the kitchen. Fern looks up and squeals, launching herself across the kitchen to throw her arms around me.

"I'm so glad you're home!" She all but screams in my ear and I laugh. There's nothing quite like the enthusiasm of Fern. "It's been too long!"

“I know,” I reply, returning her hug and squeezing her into my body. Cin waves from where she and Fern had been standing, and I wave back, releasing Fern.

Toby waltzes into the kitchen and slaps my back, bringing me in for a hug. “We didn’t think you’d come.”

“But we’re glad to see you,” Cin chimes in.

“Yeah!” Talon agrees, shoving his brother out of the way so he can hook his arm around my neck. Pulling my head down like he’s going to run his knuckles through my hair.

Pushing him off me, I look up, and my heart stops, my throat runs dry, and my palms sweat. Banks is standing in the doorway, looking like he hasn’t slept.

For weeks.

The room’s deathly quiet. I can’t hear anyone take a breath, or maybe that’s just me because my pulse has sped up so much that I can hear my own heart beating.

“Hey,” he says, and once again, I’m hopeful. Hopeful that he’ll get on his knees and beg for me back. That he’s finally realized that he can’t live without me, just like I can’t live without him. “Can I talk to you alone?”

“You broke my heart in front of them, I’m sure whatever you have to say now can’t top that humiliation.”

Fuck.

I thought I was past it, but I guess at this point, I’m not sure I want to hear anything he has to say, even if it is begging.

“I’m sorry,” he says, cutting off my thoughts.

That’s... Not what I was expecting.

“I’m so fucking sorry I hurt you... in the most vile way.”

I roll my eyes. Was I hoping this exact thing would come out of his mouth? Yes.

Do I believe him for even a second? No.

Fool me once...and all that, so I cross my arms and wait for the rest of his bullshit.

His eyes dart around the room, and he bites his lip, “I’ve been seeing a therapist, and I realize that I have a lot to atone for—”

I scoff, cutting him off.

“I’m trying here, Henry.” He sounds exhausted, looks even worse, and I shouldn’t fucking care. I really, really shouldn’t, but his hair is longer as if he hasn’t shaved it since the last time I helped him. His eyes are bloodshot and rimmed in dark circles.

Taking a step forward, I pound on his chest with my fists, pushing him backward. “For years, I waited, hoping you’d come to terms with who you really are. Who you used to be. I hoped, foolishly, for weeks after your birthday, you’d realize the savior complex you’d developed was all a shield used to cover your grief, but you never did.”

I didn’t think my heart could take this, but I was wrong. I’m not sad and broken from more of his games. I’m fucking livid. Does he think saying sorry will fix everything he put me through? “I wanted you to choose me!” I shout, anger making my voice louder than I think it’s ever been before.

“Choose you?” He scoffs as if it’s the most ridiculous option in the world. “Choosing you was never an option, Henry.”

He says it so softly I almost don’t hear him, and I’m mildly aware that our family is starring, but goddamn him , it’s been too long, and I’ve waited years for him to love me back.

Tears fall down my face as his words truly sink in, and I know that this will be the moment my heart finally hardens, and I’ll forever be lonely. “It’s always been an option. When are you going to be honest with yourself, Banksie?”

His eyes shine with unshed tears, and his jaw is clenched so tight that his lips are smashed into a firm line. Knowing I shouldn’t, I want them pressed against mine even now. I want him to beg for my forgiveness, not simply say he’s sorry.

I want him to choose me over everything and everyone, but it’s clear that he won’t. Turning around, I start toward the door, but his hand envelopes my elbow, and he spins me back around.

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“ You asked me to give you a reason,” my voice is soft, and tears drop when I blink. I take a deep breath because fuck he’s so gorgeous when he’s mad. “Weeks ago, you asked me to give you a reason not to get in the car with your roommate.”

Swallowing down my anxiety and fear, I look him dead in the eye, and with a clear voice, I say, “Choosing you hasn’t ever been an option because it’s always been you , Henry.”

His eyes widen, and God, I can’t believe I let him down for so long. That he let me drag him through my mess and still holds onto hope that I can love him like before, even through his sadness and anger.

“My heart chose yours the instant you whispered into the darkness that you had your sights set on someone who you didn’t think could ever feel the same. The moment you laid out who you are to your three best friends who you thought you would lose. You’re brave, Henry. Tackling all the scary moments in your life and facing them head-on. You’re kind, inquisitive, sexy, and so fucking perfect I can’t replace you. Even if I wanted to.”

“But, Charlie...” He hiccups, and his eyes pool with tears.

“It’s fake, all of it,” I whisper and look around at our family watching, “I’ll tell you everything if you’re willing to listen.”

His eyes look around the room before returning to mine, and my lungs seize, waiting for him to say something.

Anything.

“I’m not saying I want you to forgive me right now. Fuck, I know that will only come with time, and maybe things will never be the way they used to be.” Inhaling a shaky breath, I push on even though our family watching makes this ten times worse. “You’ve been here through all of my bullshit until I broke something so precious in you that you had to leave. To protect you . And even though I know it won’t be easy, I’m going to scale every wall in your heart to earn your trust back and, one day, your love.”

“You said you’re seeing a therapist?” He hiccups, his eyelashes shiny with tears.

I chuckle and let out a deep breath while nodding. “Yeah, a grief counselor.”

His lips quiver, and I want so badly to kiss him, but I know that's not what he needs right now. I need to heal what's broken between us before anything physical can happen again. So I let go of his arm and wait for him to process what I’ve said.

“You and Charlie aren’t... You never—”

He can’t even finish his question, and I shake my head.

“But the contract,” he turns to look at Fern, “and Fern.”

“We’re taking care of that,” Creed says. I don’t remember him following me in here, but there he is, standing with Fern, whose face is smeared with tears.

Henry looks back at me, and I give him a small smile and keep his eyes locked on mine, imploring him to see the sincerity there.

“I promise you, there is nothing but friendship between me and Charlie.”



“I...” he blows out a breath. “I don’t understand.”

This is the moment when I give him every honest truth. He deserves my vulnerability, or at least that’s what my therapist says. “The night you went home with Koda and then kicked me out after we—” I cut myself off because I never told anyone about that night. I’m guessing Henry didn’t tell them either based on the shocked inhales from our spectators, so I continue, “I got so drunk I tried kissing Charlie.”

“It wasn’t pretty,” Charlie says from behind me. “And I turned him down.”

“You... what?”

“I then got blackout drunk, danced on top of the bar, broke countless bottles, and Talon had to call my dad.”

His chest is rising and falling at such a rapid pace I’m worried he might pass out.

“Hen—”

“Let’s let Henry get settled,” Luca says, gently guiding him toward his bedroom.

Maybe this was too much all at once. Watching Luca take Henry to his room, I stand there praying that after he’s had time to think about everything I said, he’ll give me one last chance to be the man he fell in love with.

I’m going to fight for him because I know he’s it for me.

Just like I know I’m it for him.

Henry didn’t come out of his room all night. Charlie and Cin slept in Talon’s room, so I was stuck sharing my bed with the surly asshole. The girls have become pretty

close over the last few weeks. I guess having homicidal fathers is a trauma-bonding topic, who knew?

After the bar fiasco, Manson referred me to a colleague that he graduated with, and we've been doing virtual appointments until I get back on campus since his office isn't far away.

Firing up my computer, I kick Talon out of the room and wait for Dr. Laurier to enter the session. It's our fourth session, and I feel more at ease this time than before.

He's young, like Manson, with short blonde hair, dark eyes, and the kind of personality that makes you feel like you've known him forever.

"Mr. Rossi!" He greets, chipper like always.

"Hi, Mr. Laurier," I smile.

"So, did you see him?" He doesn't waste time, never has, and I appreciate his directness.

"I did," I tell him all of the details about our encounter, replaying it in my head as I do.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

Every year since we were six, we go camping the weekend before Thanksgiving, so all of us are outfitted in gear, and our bags are packed. We waited until lunch to pack up the trucks because Banks wasn't lying when he said he was going to therapy.

When his session ended, he opened his door, and our eyes found each other like magnets. I forgot I had my door open, but I wasn't listening, and I doubt I could hear anything even from outside of his door if I tried. He didn't comment on my open door, only slung a towel over his shoulder and walked to the bathroom.

I packed my bags last night, and I'm hopeful that I didn't forget anything. Especially now as I watch Dad throw the bags into the truck bed along with our tents, portable heaters, and coolers. No one really says anything, and the silence is a bit awkward since there's usually someone talking.

Fern, Cin, and Charlie wait at the door. It's always been us and the dads, plus Creed. They didn't want to break tradition, plus it gives Fern something to do with women. Usually, it's just her and Candy.

Creed and Talon swoop up their women and kiss them goodbye while Charlie waves at Banks. It's small, and when she thinks I'm not looking, she gives him a thumbs up. I guess that little motion gives him a bit of encouragement because he finally speaks.

"How'd you sleep?" He asks after clearing his throat.

"Fine," I shrug. I'm not sure if I want to trust that his intentions are genuine, and I damn sure won't let my guard down yet. He forced me to build this wall, and it's not going to crumble just because he said he was sorry. No matter how much I still want

him.

Creed claps his hands, gathering all of our attention. “Let’s load up!”

We all pile into the two trucks, Nile, Diego, Talon, and Toby all get into the truck in front. Leaving Creed, Dad, Me, and Banks in the one behind. I almost ask if Dad will sit in the back with me, but my gut tells me he won’t. Considering he asked me to hear everyone out, I have a feeling they’re hoping Banks and I will reconnect on this trip.

After everything.

Bringing us back to the place where we had our first kiss. It feels oddly like a setup.

Dad tries holding conversation, but after giving him mumbles instead of answers, he quits trying. The only sounds are the tires turning on the road and the heat flowing from the vents as I look out my window and studiously ignore my seat mate for the entire ride.

It isn’t long before we’re turning into the lot that’s the starting point for our hike. It’s like deja vu, seeing Banks eye me as I heft my pack onto my shoulders. Even the sun’s in the same position, casting the trees in red, gold, and orange.

It’s almost as if the universe is in on whatever plan my family’s concocted.

The trail walk is the same, with Banks in front of me. The only difference being that Dad walks beside me. The rustle of leaves and crunches of sticks under our boots, is like nature’s music, and I soak it in. I’ve missed camping, it’s one of the things that we all used to do so often that now, when we do get to come, it feels even more special.

The clearing we usually use is dusted in fallen leaves, and dead grass crackles under our weight as we all file in. There are subtle changes, like a few fallen logs with grooves carved into them around the fire pit, along with a picnic table off to the side of the flatter areas where our tents go.

Everyone starts setting up their tents, Talon and Toby, Nile and Diego, Creed and Dad, leaving me and Banks to share.

Like old times.

Fuck. Me.

I'm not ready to play into this reality, the one they're all trying desperately to make the same. Banks smiles, and for a moment I feel like the first time we came up here alone with Talon and Toby. The night I confessed to my best friend that I had a crush on him.

The night that changed a lot of things.

Right here in this same place, in the same tent that Banks is setting up beside the same charred fire. Only this time, I'm hoping he'll confess to me whatever's happened since I kicked him out of my apartment.

"Fancy, mind giving me a hand?" His use of my nickname sparks something in my chest that I really don't want to acknowledge.

"Oh? Are we back on a nickname basis?" I probe rudely, but I don't care. My heart may stupidly still beat for this man, but my head isn't ready to forgive him.

His smile dims but doesn't diminish entirely. Sighing, I leave my bag where it's at on the ground and help him set up the tent. It's a lot easier with two people anyway, and

I refuse to sleep without it.

All of our tents are up and anchored. Looking around, everyone's unpacking, sliding things into their tents, or pulling things from the cooler. Banks passes by me, stopping at my bag. He bends down, gripping one strap and slinging it over his shoulder.

"I can—"

"I've got it," he says, walking past me. He ducks into the tent and disappears.

Deciding I'd rather not have him going through my bag, I head into the tent after him. He's got his sleeping bag unrolled, fluffing it up and laying it on his side of the space. The same side as always.

"Did you bring your heater?" He asks, pulling one that looks suspiciously like mine from his bag. "I know you hate being cold."

"Yeeaaaah," I can't help dragging the word out. This Banks can't be real, tentative, open, trying . "What's going on?"

I'm tired of waiting for the punchline. I'm usually the one who takes the brunt of the hit anyway.

"What do you mean?" He looks from me back to the heater. "I didn't know if you had yours, so I—"

"No," I huff, cutting him off. "What is all of this? I heard you when you said you're trying to be better. That you're finding your way and getting help, but this—" I gesture at all of him, "seems... drastic. Not to mention out of character."

His downcast eyes make me want to gobble the words back into my mouth, but my head knows they need to be said.

“I meant it when I said I’m trying to be better, and I’ve been seeing my therapist since the week after that drunken night. That was the night it all fell apart and clicked. The moment I knew if I didn’t get my shit together... I’d truly lose you.”

“How many times have you met with him?” My curiosity gets the best of me, and I’m choosing to ignore the last part of that statement. He could never lose me, but he doesn’t get to know that.

Yet.

“This morning was my third session aside from the initial meeting, so four times total, but I’ve also been talking things out with Dad.” His eyes flick up to mine. “I promise you, I’m doing everything I can to get back to the man you deserve. The man you fell in love with. I want to be worthy of you, Henry.”

The conviction in his voice almost does me in right here. He’s really trying. It doesn’t heal my heart completely, that will take time, and I need to see it consistently before I believe it’s really making a difference. But I see it, the little glimmer of my Banks.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

Exhaling, I leave the tent. I can't go down this road right now, not with our dads here. I want to enjoy our time. I haven't seen them in weeks, and I miss them.

Dad eyes me over the fire, and I give him a smile, which he returns. He stands once the flames catch and the wood crackles.

"Do I need to have Creed sleep in Banks's tent tonight?" His concern is evident in the way his eyes soften, and his smile goes crooked.

"I think I can manage," I tell him. I'm hoping that being close to me might help Banks sleep. I hate myself a little for how much I still want to take care of him, even after everything.

I'm giving myself whiplash.

The night starts to settle, the sky falling to dusk.

"Hey boys," Nile says, "let's get a picture of you together."

"Like we're five and need a reminder that we were all once friends?" Talon grunts.

Nile slaps the back of his head, and Toby throws his arm around his brother's neck. "We'll always be friends. A bond like ours doesn't just end."

Toby's statement couldn't be truer. We are all connected and have been since we were born. That connection doesn't just dissolve, no matter how much we wish it could. Maybe that's why I'm so drawn to Banks, and him to me. Maybe it really has



nothing to do with love and everything to do with our friendship.

“Banks!” Diego barks when he doesn’t move from his seat on one of the logs. His stare is hot on the side of my face as if he can sense what I’m thinking. “Come on.”

He stands, and Toby pulls him into his other side. Leaving me to choose whether to stand beside Banks or Tal.

Tal crosses his arms and grunts, “Get over here, Fancy, let’s get this over with.”

Joining the rest of the core four, I glance at Banks just as I hear the click of Nile’s phone.

Fucking hell.

I shouldn’t have looked at him. Now, it’s forever in color how much I feel for him. We break apart, roasting hot dogs and eating while conversation flows. Football gets brought up next, and I can see how much Banks missed it. The way his whole face changes, and he talks animatedly about the team. He talks about Jax and how he was happy to reconcile with him.

“I’m gonna turn in,” I whisper to Dad, and he nods. My head’s spinning, and my heart wants nothing but to forgive Banks and let bygones and heartaches rest. I need to be alone with my thoughts.

Unpacking my bag, I roll out my sleeping bag, the comforter I always bring, and dig around for my heater. I need the noise and the extra heat it provides. The temperature is supposed to drop below forty and I don’t want to freeze.

The flap to our tent opens, and Banks hunches over to step in. He doesn’t speak, only starts getting ready to sleep himself. My heater, that I swore I packed, is missing.

Eyeing the one he brought, I squint. How did I forget it?

Without a word he hands me his.

“I swear I packed mine.” I whisper.

“It’s okay, I don’t need it. I only brought it for you,” he shrugs with his back turned toward me.

“I want to believe you, Banks.” I need him to know that.

He turns, facing me fully, and nods before going back to unzipping his sleeping bag and sliding into it.

We don’t speak, even when our family's voices die, and the dark settles around us, spooling up the tension. I know he’s awake. I can tell by the way he’s breathing. I wonder if he’s waiting for me to say something, or if he’s trying to give me what he thinks I want.

Peace.

“I saw the way you looked at me when Toby said our bond runs too deep for us to no longer be friends.”

I don’t know what to say, so the quiet remains as Banks shifts. It’s too dark, and the only light now is the heater by our heads that illuminates orange and fades every so often.

“Our bond is different,” he’s looking at me, I can feel it in my bones. “We’re soulmates, Henry, and I’m going to do everything I can to prove you can trust me again. We can love each other all over.”

My heart lurches in my chest. “Until you decide otherwise.”

His heavy sigh fills the silence. “It was incredibly callous of me to throw away what we had, thinking I had no other option. I was—” He stops abruptly as if he’s realizing something and continues again, “I’ve been so careless with your heart, and I swear to God I’ll make it up to you every day if you’ll let me.”

I feel like I’ve just been slapped across the face. This is what I always wanted after he changed. I wished on shooting stars, birthday candles, and fallen eyelashes, begging the universe to bring back the man I loved, and now here he is, and I feel like I can’t breathe.

I can’t be in here, not with him proclaiming things my head tells me he doesn’t mean. With my heart and head at war, I need air, I need to get away from him before I get hurt again by believing.

Dragging my comforter out to the fire, I wrap myself up and stare at the sky. It’s a beautiful night, with stars dotting the sky through the trees—a flash of white darts across the heavens, and my heart soars.

“I want what he feels to be real,” I wish, whispering into the cold air.

“Can’t sleep?” Diego’s gravelly voice startles me and I jump, turning to look at him over my shoulder. I didn’t know he was there, lost in thoughts of Banks.

“Something like that.”

“How are you?” He asks, coming to sit beside me.

“Confused,” I’m not sure I could answer him any other way.

He nods, and we sit in silence. Listening to the bits of nature not currently hibernating.

“I’m sorry for the part I played in Banks’s choice,” he breaks first. “I had hoped he would have had time to talk to you first, but Banks has never been very good with timing.”

We both share a laugh.

“He didn’t even give us a chance,” I suck in a sharp breath. “He crushed me, Diego.”

“I know,” he nods, staring at me. “I didn’t think he could be so cold, but I guess he learned that from me.”

I don’t know what to say to that. Diego’s always been more cut off than the rest of the dads, including Creed. Fauna was the only one who got much of anything out of him, and when she died it only got worse.

“Henry,” he looks away, the only signal that whatever he’s about to say, he had no intention of telling me. “I donated money to Gator Coffee Co.”

“I... don’t understand.” My thoughts go back to when I first started and noticed the new mixers, the nice high-end ones you’d find in a restaurant, and Koda mentioned an anonymous donor.

“I knew Banks would come home because it’s the only place he knows and trusts, and I had a feeling that when he found out what was happening, he would choose to save Fern. He wouldn’t survive losing her, another mother figure. But you... you’re different. When I heard you telling Fern and Candy about how you fell in love with that cafe, I knew I made the right choice donating the money to help them update it. I wanted to make sure you had a safe space to go to because I had a feeling it wouldn’t

be with us.”

“I can’t... I– I don’t,” I can’t get the words out.

“I love you, Henry, and in his own way, Banks does too. He made a mistake, and I’m not saying it wasn’t a huge one. All I ask is that you give him a little grace. I know it’s not fair of me to ask, but my boy deserves to be happy. And if he’s willing to better himself and work for it, I hope you’ll at least give him one last chance.”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

The next morning, I find Henry bundled up beside me. He's scooted closer in his sleep, seeking warmth, most likely. I try not to let my mind hope he was searching for me while he dreamed. His dark lashes are fanned out across his cheeks, and the blankets are pulled up over his nose. His curly hair is a mess, strands stick to his forehead and neck.

I watch him for far too long until I hear the rest of camp moving around and decide to stop being a total creep.

Everyone's awake, minus Tal, who I imagine is dead to the world asleep. Toby's got his pack leaned up against his tent, waiting for Talon to wake up so they can break down their tent.

Dad's by the fire, dousing it so it won't accidentally start a forest fire when we leave. Creed and Luca are packing up their tent, and Nile's eating a granola bar.

"Morning," my uncle says between bites, throwing me a bar for myself. "Fancy still sleeping too?" He laughs, and I nod.

After we've downed our waters and eaten the granola, Toby wakes Talon up, and I head off to wake Henry. We have to cut this trip short so we can get back for the last week of school before finals. I'm not sure how I'm going to explain everything to Henry, but I know he needs the honest, whole truth from me.

For once. Pulling back the flap, I find him sitting up, with his hands buried in his hair. He looks like he's warring with himself, and I want to scoop him up and hold him. Make him feel better, safe, wanted, loved.

Sitting down in front of him, I fold my legs underneath me, causing him to remove his hands from his hair and face me fully.

“I told you I’d tell you everything,” I swallow, waiting for him to give me a sign that he’s ready for this. When he crosses his arms and nods, I continue. “Charlie’s dad killed my mother.”

“He what?” Henry’s outrage makes my heart pound behind my ribs, as if it knows it belongs to him and only him.

“Because of the whole thing nearly three years ago with Fern, that’s where this all started. When Bridgett died, her father hurt Fern. So Creed and Mack hunted and killed him, along with twenty-four of his brother’s highly trained men. I’ll let everyone else explain that because I still have a hard time wrapping my head around it.”

He blinks, slack-jawed and staring at me.

“Charlie’s dad was Bridgett’s uncle. When Creed and Mack killed her uncle and all those men, he wanted revenge. All of us were supposed to die that night. It wasn’t an attack on Mom, specifically. Romero wanted to hurt Creed, and he thought taking away his right-hand man, my dad, would be the easiest way. But he fucked it up. Charlie’s been trying to figure out what went wrong and why he hasn’t tried again. That’s why she wanted the marriage. She needed help and leverage, and he agreed because he thinks she’s on his side. She wants to—” I stop and clear my throat as I try again. “She has a whole plan for her dad. He hits her, Henry. Because he can, and there’s nothing she can do about it.”

His head is shaking now, hands splayed in front of him as if he doesn’t want to hear anymore. But I promised, and if we’re going to pull this off, Henry has to know it all. He’s not going to like it. I know I sure as hell don’t.

“He... hits his own child?” Disbelief mixes with outrage, it’s clear in his tone and the way his face is set as I lay out the whole plan. Growing up with the father figures we did, I can’t imagine how hard it is for Henry to fathom a parent that would intentionally hurt their child.

“It isn’t my story to tell, and I won’t betray Charlie’s trust, but if you get the chance, you should ask her about him.”

“She knows about the plan to kill her father, and she’s still here?”

I nod, “It was her idea. We’ve been keeping tabs on her father, watching him from the inside for weeks.” Something about hearing this news and knowing it was all Charlie’s plan wakes something up in him. He blinks the tears away and straightens his spine.

“What do I need to do?”

Seeing him ready to jump in to save someone—the very same person he thought I chose over him—makes me want to weep. He’s the same Henry I fell in love with.

Only stronger.

Back on campus, I’ve been busy with the team preparing for our last game of the year. I’ve asked Henry to come, and I hope he doesn’t laugh at me when I give him the t-shirt Charlie helped me make for him to wear.

I’ve only met him a few times at the cafe since we’ve been back, our schedules haven’t exactly meshed well. He’s standing at a table delivering sweets and hot drinks that will drive away the cold to a table with four people.

He smiles at them, and the sight makes me want to kiss him, but I won’t. Not until he



tells me he's ready. The wait might kill me, but with the help of my therapist, I'm learning to be more patient and less impulsive. When he looks up and spots me at the door, his smile turns shy, like it has the past couple of days I've stopped by. It's as if what we have is new again, with butterflies and tight chests.

"Hey," he says, excusing himself from the table and walking over to where I'm standing in the middle of the space between the counter and the door.

"Hey," biting the inside of my cheek, I flex my hands around the present. "This is for you if you decide to come to the game."

He eyes the box, then looks back up at me with one hiked brow. Taking the box from my hands, he turns and goes back behind the counter, turning to look over his shoulder as he says, "Do you want me to open it now?"

"If you want to," I shrug, trying not to make it seem like a big deal and failing miserably.

Henry turns back to face me fully and slowly lifts the lid off, pulling the shirt out of the box, he unfolds it and holds it up. My number is painted in gold fabric paint on the green material, along with my last name above it.

Nerves light up my stomach when he doesn't say anything as he stares. It's too soon. I should have known.

This was stupid.

Shit .

Looking back up at me, he holds the shirt over his body and smiles, "It's your number."

I nod, unsure what he's feeling.

“And you want me to wear it?” He attempts to hide his growing smile by looking back down at the shirt.

“Only if you feel comfortable,” I can't help the needy tone from bleeding through my words. “You don't have to come, don't feel pressured, I know—”

“I'll be there,” he chuckles, and my head snaps up to his.

The smile that splits my face almost hurts with the amount of joy I feel pulsing through my veins, knowing my man will be in the crowd, hopefully wearing my number.

There's no better feeling.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

With our first semester of college completed, Henry, Charlie, and I have the Audi packed and are on our way back to the house. All of my professors allowed me to complete my exams online, even the group project for Mr. Ore. Henry only had one, so he and Charlie spent most of the day together at his apartment while they waited on me.

We got back a little after lunch. Toby, Tal, and Cin must have gotten here before us because Toby's truck is already sitting in the garage. After unloading our stuff, we all went our separate ways so we can get ready to go shopping. We have an image to uphold, and this Christmas gala Charlie's father throws every year is black tie only.

With plates at thirty thousand a pop, I can't imagine anything less.

Charlie's given us all the do's and don'ts of the affair, so we all know what to look for and what to avoid. We don't want to stand out, especially if all goes according to plan.

Cin squeals, shocking us all before racing to the front door to hug her mother, who moved back to New York with Mack after an eventful summer. Their reunion is sweet. I know she misses her mom, but I also know she's happy for her, too. I figured, with shit going down, that Mack would be involved.

Mack nods to us all, claps his hands, and mimics washing them. "Who's ready to get all gussied up?"

That makes Talon snort and Toby laugh. Henry's watching Cin and Lori hug with big doe eyes. They join our makeshift circle, and Creed barks out orders. The shop where

he made the ridiculous appointment is in Cardis, so we're rolling an hour away.

The highway's a straight shot, so the drive isn't bad. Henry rode with Toby, Tal, and Cin. I've tried not being a total mood killer about it, but I don't see how I'll be able to make it up to him when he won't let me near him.

When we get there, everyone gets out of their vehicles, and as we approach, a man opens the entrance to the tailor shop.

This place looks fancy as fuck. Custom wardrobe extraordinaire, here we come.

"Come, come," he says, "have a seat, enjoy the champagne." The man—who must be the owner—says to Fern, who gladly takes a glass and hands one to Lori.

The women all head off in a different direction to try on dresses with his assistants while the rest of us sit and wait to be measured before options are brought to us. Henry's leg bounces up and down, and I shift closer to him on the couch. He stops, side-eyeing me.

"Are you—I mean, you seem... nervous?" I don't know why I asked like that.

"I haven't bought clothes in a long time." He states plainly. "I haven't had to try anything on in a while either. I basically live in loungewear and sweats. I... I don't look the way I did the last time we were all here."

Slowly inching my hand closer, I run my pinky over his thigh. When he doesn't immediately scoot away, I take that as a good sign and run my hand over his knee.

"You're perfect the way you are, Henry. Whatever the size is, it doesn't matter. You know that, right?"

He turns to look at me, and it feels like we're the only two in the room. He doesn't say anything, only smiles shyly. Seeing him give me that smile, one he's only ever given to me, makes my mouth tip up in a smile of my own. We stay that way, staring at each other for a few seconds.

"Banks," Dad says, ruining our moment and causing instant rage to boil up inside me. I have to remind myself that we're taking this slow. So it's probably best that it happened. My therapist is constantly saying how I have to focus on my restraint instead of acting on my impulses. "Your turn."

Tapping Henry's leg, I stand and follow the man that opened the door. He measures my entire body, making notes, murmuring to himself. I tell him to be gentle with Henry and to compliment my suit colors to his.

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

You're perfect the way you are, Henry. You know that, right?

Hearing those words about my body and how it's changed—gotten rounder, softer, with stretch marks that line my stomach around my belly button—was exactly what I needed.

Worry had crept into my mind, my very bones, and he doused them with those few words. I know they weren't said to appease me.

He meant them.

I know he did by the way he was itching to touch me and the eye contact he held me with.

Soon enough, he's waltzing out, and the guy from before is calling my name. Banks brushes his hand against mine as we pass, and just that subtle touch of reassurance makes me want to say to hell with this slow stuff and kiss him already.

I won't until he's earned it.

After we're all measured, the tailor has his assistants pick out full tuxedos for us all. Three options each that will be tailored to our measurements and delivered to our door. Creed pays and thanks the man.

"You're free," Creed says, as the girls make their way back into the mens area. I'm surprised they finished that quick. Seeing Opal try on a million things before going to class must not be normal.

Talon says something in Cin's ear, and she smacks his chest, but the blush on her cheeks makes me happy that he didn't say it out loud. Secondhand embarrassment is real in this house.

"Would you want to ride back with me and Charlie?" Banks asks. He's been by my side the entire time, brushing my thigh, hand, anything I allow him to touch.

Looking at Dad, I can tell he's heard the question, and he gives me a slight nod. "Please," Banks's husky voice feels like it's in my ear, but it can't be because he's minding my space, like he said he would.

Against my better judgement, I nod in agreement and head out with them. Swallowing hard, I climb into the back seat, where Charlie looks at me like I've grown another head. We've been talking more, and I can totally see why Banks likes her. She's charming, though I'm still not ready to declare her a friend, I don't think it'll be long before I do.

"Uh, you're in the front seat, Sweetheart," she says, tilting her head in that direction.

"No, you can have it," I tell her through the window. She groans, pulling my door open she puts her hand out and motions for me to come out. "Enough of this chivalry shit. He wants you to sit up front, and he was pouty about it the whole way here, so do me a favor and sit in the front fucking seat."

Surprise jolts through my body. She's bossy. I find it charming because she says it all with a smile.

"Please." She adds, widening her smile, and I laugh. It burst out of me so fast I didn't have time to stop it.

"Yes, ma'am," I say, stepping out of the car and watching her slide into the seat I just

vacated. Banks is sitting in the driver's seat, watching the whole encounter with a grin on his face and eyes alight with mischief.

Pulling the door open, I drop into the passenger seat and buckle in since Banks has a tendency to drive recklessly, especially when he's happy.

"To clear the air," Charlie leans into the space between our seats. "I'm sorry that Banks didn't tell you it was fake long before the bar. I really have no idea why, other than that he's an idiot."

Her mention of the bar makes me want to curl into myself, especially with what happened after. Even knowing their relationship is a facade, it still shouldn't have happened. I'm nobody's secret love affair, and I should have never allowed it.

"I should be apologizing to you, the things I said and—" Hanging my head, I recall the nasty things I said to her and what Banks and I did after he followed me home from the bar...

She laughs, leaning back into her seat. "No need. I would have said worse if I were in your shoes."

Whipping back to look at her, I raise my brows.

"Oh, I can be one nasty bitch when I'm drunk." She winks, and I turn around when I hear Banks chuckle.

"I told you you'd like her," he says, glancing at me.



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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

The days leading up to the gala have been tense, to say the least. Meeting with Dr. Laurier during the last two sessions has helped me with the space Henry asked for after Thanksgiving. He helped me understand that it's not because I deserve it but because it gives us both time to process the trauma and hurt I caused.

Though I haven't been able to keep my hands to myself for the past few days, I can't help it. Being able to even be near Henry is a gift, and although I'm giving him space, I still seek him out in every room.

Charlie spent the majority of her free time after her finals here at the house with us, but now she's got to go home. Her father called, and this time, she couldn't give him an excuse to stay since the gala is happening tomorrow. Romero must be paranoid for him to be so controlling. We're engaged, doing what normal engaged couples do. However, his insistence that she needs to be home before the gala makes me uneasy, but Charlie swears she's going to be okay.

I drove her back to Gravity Hill University, where she packed up her room for the winter break.

"If he hurts you, call me," I tell her while she packs her bags into the car her father sent for her. Talon waits in my car because Creed didn't want me to be alone with Romero, should he actually show up for his daughter.

"I won't, but it means a lot, Pretty Boy." With a hug goodbye, she slips into the car, and they drive off. Wiping my hand down my face, I walk back to my car and drop into the driver's seat.

“He won’t hurt her, Banks. At least not until after the gala.” Tal reminds me.

“I’m more worried she might not even make it till then.”

Henry went with Fern to the bakery before Tal and I left with Charlie. I wanted so badly to kiss him goodbye. Instead, we exchanged heated glances until Fern ushered him out the door.

I drop Tal off at the house and drive straight to Fern and Flourished. I have to see him.

Walking in, I find Candy at the counter talking to a customer, and she flicks her head toward the kitchen. I should have known that’s where he’d be.

Slipping into the kitchen as quietly as I can, I find him with flour covering his apron and a rolling pin in his hands. There’s a huge ball of dough in front of him and a smile on his lips as he talks animatedly to Fern.

She spots me but doesn’t let on. Watching him enjoy doing what he loves is something I could do for hours. Pressing the marble pin into the dough, he flattens it with well-practiced movements.

There is so much dough he has to stretch over it, his hair tied back into a messy bun because of how long it’s gotten. The way a few curls slip out makes me hungry to push them back behind his ear.

He glances my way but continues to roll the dough, then stops what he’s doing to stand and look back as if he’s surprised I’m here.

“What are you doing here?” His voice wavers a little. I caught him off guard.

“Watching you,” I answer, leaning against the door frame and crossing my arms.

“Why?”

“Because you’re sexy as fuck when you’re covered in flour,” I smirk at the color filling his cheeks. He doesn’t respond, just stands there looking at me. Our eyes are locked in a stand-off, and neither one of us budes. I meant every word, and if I knew Fern wouldn’t kill me, I’d drop to my knees right fucking now and worship him.

As if he can sense my dirty thoughts, he licks his lips.

“I’m working,” he swallows and goes back to rolling dough.

“I can see that.”

“You should leave.” He mutters, shaking his head and huffing out a breath.

“I think I’ll stay,” I tease, “I quite like the view.”

He stops and looks up at the ceiling. Fern’s slipped away by now, and the only other people in the kitchen are Harley, who’s been here since the start and ignores everyone for the most part, and Zeke, the new guy.

Fern and Candy seem to like him. He’s older, quiet, and hums to himself while he works.

“Banks,” Henry’s words bring my eyes to his. “What are you doing?”

“I told you, I like watching you work,” I lift one shoulder and purse my lips.

“If you’re just going to stand there, maybe you could help get this shit out of the way

instead,” Harley gripes and points to all of the bulk supplies that must have been delivered this morning. “Be useful, for once.”

“Hello to you too, Harls,” I smile, and she rolls her eyes, shakes her head, and grumbles something about pretty boys with no use.

Walking around the table Henry’s working at, I run my hand along his side as I pass. “I guess it’s your turn to watch me work.”

His sharp inhale is the only indication that I still affect him, but it’s something, and I’m greedy enough to take it. The fifty-pound bags of sugar are no problem to throw over my shoulder since I’m used to it with football training, and I ask Harley where she wants them to go. I can feel Henry’s eyes track my every movement, I just wish I could see his face.

I know he loves my arms and back muscles He’s said it a million times. Making quick work of the sugar, flour, and whatever else they work with, I turn to see Henry in the same position as when I started. The only difference is his reddened cheeks and glossy eyes. He’s thinking dirty things. I can see it.

He coughs when our eyes meet, as if he’s pulling himself out of his own head, and resumes rolling.

Letting out a sigh, I walk back around him, heading for the door. His hand shoots out and grips my wrist. “Here,” he hands me a cookie cutter in a shape I can’t make out. “Help me cut these?”

Looking between him and the silver cookie cutter, I smile and nod.

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Watching his smile grow, I know I made the right choice. He's proven these past two weeks that he's sincerely trying, and I'm starting to really believe him. Instead of hanging out with Tal and Toby, he's here with me doing something that I love.

After camping, he respected my space but still found ways to show me he was thinking of me. Plus, every time he has a session with Dr. Laurier, he sends me text after text about how it went, and how he felt about it—letting me in without me having to pry it out of him.

It's been refreshing, and I'm finding myself softening towards him more and more.

"Press it into the dough and shake it a little," I instruct. Watching him gingerly put the cutter into the dough has me rolling my lips in, so I don't laugh. He presses down and shakes so hard the table rattles.

"Maybe not that hard," I chuckle. He looks at me with a sheepish smile and tries again. "It's more of just a shimmy. Like this," and I show him, this time with me guiding his hand.

He goes to lift the cookie from the dough, and I grab his hand. "Not yet, just wait."

He looks confused, and I smile, nodding for him to go again. He places the silver ring in the sugar cookie dough where I tell him until we've cut as many as we can out of the sheet.

"Now what?" He asks, his silver eyes wide and possibly even excited.

“Now we peel the rest of the dough away.” Lifting one side of the dough, I carefully peel it away from the ones that have been cut. Revealing over a dozen cookies ready to be placed on baking sheets.

Grabbing a spatula from the end of the table, I gently transfer the cookies to a lined baking sheet, filling it up. Banks grabs the other one and takes the filled one from my hands. Once the next one’s filled, I grab it and walk to the oven against the wall.

Banks follows with the other tray, opens the oven, and slides it in, matching my movements.

Closing the oven doors, I set the timer and turn to Banks, who’s smiling as he asks, “New recipe?”

I can’t help but return his smile. “Yeah. It’s a peanut butter sugar cookie base, and I’m going to ice it with a chocolate ganache.”

“I don’t know what that means, but I’ll be your first taste tester.” He smirks, glancing into the oven like a kid who can’t wait for the sugar rush.

“We have to make the icing,” I push him back gently, and he captures my wrists, holding my hands against his chest. We stand there locked in a battle of wills.

I want him to kiss me.

I want to kiss him.

Instead, he lifts my wrist to his mouth and places the gentlest of kisses there.

My phone dings in my apron, breaking the moment between us. Banks drops my hand and watches me pull my phone from my pocket. Koda’s name pops up with a

text, and I bite my lip. I'm not sure if I should read it in front of Banks.

I've only briefly spoken to Koda since I told him I couldn't hook up with him again, and he left without a word. It's been a bit awkward working together, and I try to stay out of his space at the apartment.

Koda: I know I'm not supposed to, but I miss you.

Fear licks my insides. I don't have to look at Banks to know he's read it. But I want to, I want to see how he's going to react. Looking up, I find his face neutral, shocking me beyond measure.

"I'm..."

"It's okay," Banks's voice is tender, confusing me further. "I know what it's like to miss you, Henry. I don't blame him, and I have no right to be upset with you at all."

His tone makes me pause. He doesn't sound angry or get loud, but every second that I stay silent, his eyes dim a little more until he finally asks, "Do you miss him?"

"Not like that," I tell him. "I told him before the break that I couldn't just fuck around and that I wasn't ever going to be the guy for him. Our friendship has been a bit strained, but I'm hoping he can get past it. He's a great guy, and I like hanging out with him."

He nods, running a hand down his face and around his neck, looking away before his eyes come back to meet mine.

"Okay."

He moves to leave, and I debate whether or not to stop him. I can't have him

thinking... fuck, I don't know what he's thinking.

"Tell me what's going on in your head," I latch onto his arm. "Please."

He hangs his head for a moment, and I wonder if the old Banks will come back and walk out instead of talking this through with me.

"I'm thinking that you did what you needed to after I hurt you. Am I happy about it? No, but I can't be mad at you for it either." His incredibly mature response throws me off balance. "Am I okay with him texting you? Not really, but again, I don't get to demand anything from you. That's not how a healthy relationship works."

"So if I texted him right now and asked him to come hang out, you'd be okay with that?" I probe. This version of Banks isn't at all what I'm used to. His jaw flexes, and just the sight makes me want to do a lot of dirty, naked things with him. "I'm kidding."

He lets out a deep breath, "That's not funny, Fancy."

My laughter shakes my stomach, it was so tense in here that Harley and Zeke stopped what they were doing to watch.

"I'm sorry." Grabbing his hand, I thread my fingers through his like I used to, and he lets out a huge breath. "That was bitchy."

He chuckles and rolls his eyes.

"I deserve it and so much more." He is looking directly at me now with such an open expression that it takes me a moment to realize he's still talking. "But I am worried, Henry. I'm worried that you'll never be able to see me for the man that I was before."



He pauses and looks down. “And I don’t blame you for that. I fucked up so massively that I’m just happy you’re willing to talk to me.”

The way he handled that whole conversation has hope soaring through my body. My Banks is still in there, and he’s finally clawing his way back to me.

Back at the mansion, our dads, Creed and Mack, are busy running through everything and making sure everyone they’ve called in is ready for tomorrow. Talon, Toby, and Banks are playing something on the game station. Cin has her earbuds in, pencil in hand, drawing who knows what. She’s taken up drawing, something her therapist recommended.

Banks looks up when I walk in, and I feel it. The soul-deep connection we share. Setting down the plate of cookies we made today, I look up at the screen. It’s one of the games where they have to work together to escape a killer.

I snort, it’s fitting. Since that will be us tomorrow, minus the extra lives bit.

“Wanna join us?” Toby asks, looking between me and the TV.

Looking down at my flour and sugar-dusted clothes, I shake my head. “Nah, I’ll pass this time. I need a shower.”

He shrugs as Banks grabs one of the cookies, and our eyes lock when he takes a bite. “Mmmm,” he hums. “Are these new?”

Toby and Tal perk up, swiping their own cookies, and Banks winks. He knows damn well what they taste like, but he also knows I like to see people’s first reactions when they try anything new I’m working on.

Toby practically swallows his whole and pats his stomach before going in for

another. “Peanut butter cookies with chocolate icing? Best yet, Henry.” He shouts before shoving the other cookie in his mouth.

Tal offers half of the cookie to Cin, and Banks pipes up. “It’s called ganache, you uncivilized neanderthal.”

Tal eyes him and then looks at me before pretending to gag. “Get a room.” Cin smacks his shoulder, one ear bud hanging out of her ears. She takes a small bit and chews. I really want Cin to love them. I still haven’t made one that’s gotten her really excited, and I know red velvet’s her favorite, but I haven’t perfected that recipe yet.

“Wow, Fancy,” Cin’s use of my nickname, now that she knows where it came from, makes me blush. “These are really good.”

“Yeah?” Biting down on my bottom lip, I wait for her eyes to find mine so I can verify she’s not lying to make me feel better. She’s a terrible liar.

“Almost as good as Fern’s red velvet cupcakes.” She laughs, and I hmph. I really hoped these would be the ones to top that damn cupcake.

The plate’s almost gone by the time I finally leave to grab that shower, which makes me smile.

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I wait for as long as I can stand it, before disconnecting from the game and telling the rest of them that I'm going to turn in early. Big day tomorrow and all of that. They see right through it, but considering the circumstances, they don't call me out.

The shower's still running by the time I make my way toward my room. My thoughts run rampant at the thought of Henry being naked. I can't wait to relearn his body after months of going without him.

That thought makes my cock swell, imagining him pliant and pleased. "Ugh," I groan and fall back on my bed. Taking things slow is going to kill me.

The shower turns off, and I sit up, adjusting a pillow over my lap so it won't look completely awful that I've got an uncontrollable hard-on.

He passes by without a glance, straight to his room, where I assume he'll stay. I don't know what I thought would happen. That he'd come in here and throw himself at me?

Not likely.

I don't really have an excuse to be sitting in my room alone, especially if he comes out of his room and looks this way. I could play on my phone or attempt to sleep, but neither of those options interests me.

I want Henry.

In whatever capacity he'll take me.

Standing from the bed, I head toward his door. Leaning in so I can hear him, I lift my knuckles to knock on the door just as it swings open. He's wearing sweats and a long-sleeve shirt that says Bake like you mean it .

"Oh," he says, stepping back.

My brows draw together in question.

"I wasn't expecting it to be you standing outside of my door." He lets out a small laugh.

Again, I have no clue what to say, so we end up staring at each other for what feels like an hour before he shuffles around me and heads toward the kitchen.

Internally cursing myself, I decide, fuck it, I'll just wait in his room. Surely, I'll have something to say by the time he comes back.

Laying down in his bed, my eyes start to get heavy, and I groan at the smell.

Why does he smell so fucking good?

The bed moves under me, and I remember laying down on Henry's bed waiting for him to come back. The thought jolts me awake, finding Henry sliding under the covers.

"You were just going to let me sleep here?" I ask, having to clear the sleep from my voice.

He looks over at me and says, "I figured you needed it." I just stare at him, completely dumbfounded by his compassion.

“You were going to let me sleep in your bed with you because you figured I needed it?” I ask just to clarify.

The way the moonlight cuts through the blinds casts his mouth in shimmering white light. Those lips I’ve dreamt about so many times.

“Are you still having nightmares?” His question throws me off, but it’s fair.

“They’ve... gotten better since I started seeing Dr. Laurier.”

He nods, wiggling down between the sheets and turning on his side, away from me.  
“Goodnight, Banks.”

“Goodnight, Fancy.”

And for the first time in months, I sleep like a fucking baby.

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Charlie texted me earlier, letting me know that everything was set up on their end. She wanted to tell her brothers the plan, and I spent a few phone calls convincing her not to. I know the feeling of wanting to trust your family above anything, but if they told her father what was happening, tonight could get... bloody.

Pocketing my phone into the gray slacks that were delivered earlier this week, I grab the matching tux jacket and push my arms into it. It fits my broad shoulders perfectly, hits right at my wrists, and I position the silver cufflinks dad gave me into the buttonholes.

When I've made sure my hair is combed back and brushed my teeth, I head to the living room, where Talon and Cin are waiting on the couch. She looks stunning in her dark purple dress, that shows off one of her thick legs. Talon's shirt beneath the black jacket matches the purple perfectly.

Lori and Mack are next, both wearing emerald green. Lori's makeup is nothing like her daughters, where Cin has black rimming her eyes, her mother has a touch of mascara. Creed and Fern join us, both outfitted in a blood red that appears festive but looks menacing at the same time.

"You look beautiful, Fern," I tell her when she comes over to hug me.

Throwing her arms around my middle, she hugs me tight and whispers, "Be careful tonight."

I nod, looking up to find Henry.

I forget how to breathe for a solid minute. His dark hair's been slicked back like that spy in the movie where the kids rescue the parents. His curls lay on his neck in spirals that mix with each other, and his beard—that I want to feel against my lips—is trimmed short and looks amazing.

The navy color of his suit compliments mine, as asked, and his hazel eyes appear darker because of it. He looks... Goddamn, I don't even have the words. No one speaks, as if they're waiting for me.

"You look..." my eyes drink him in from his perfectly polished shoes all the way back up to his eyes that are staring back at me. "God, you're perfect."

He blushes, glancing around the room.

Creed claps, bringing all of the attention to him. "Everyone knows their jobs, right?"

We all nod or agree in unison before heading toward the vehicles Creed brought in to take us all to the party.

"How've ya been lass?" Kel asks Cin in his thick Scottish accent as he helps her into the SUV.

"Good to see you, man," Toby says before Tal has the chance to grumble. Kel was our security when we all took a trip to New York for Cin's birthday. He's one of Hemlock's finest, and it looks like Logan's driving the other SUV, which means they've not killed each other yet.

Logan's a man of few words. I'm not even sure I've heard him speak.

Nerves settle in my gut as Henry scoots in beside me. He smells like vanilla and sugar, something entirely him.

“I have to stay with Charlie tonight,” I whisper in his ear. “But I’m going to have a hard time keeping my eyes off of you when you look like this.”

His hand covers mine, and he squeezes.

If the plan goes well, we’ll be okay. Charlie will be holding the reins to her family’s empire, and Henry and I will be free to be together.

He holds my hand the whole way there and doesn’t let go, even when we park and everyone starts to get out.

“Henry?”

He turns to look at me, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallows, and I start to worry that what he’s about to say won’t be good.

“Are you—”

He swoops in, cutting off my words with his lips. His hands grip the sides of my neck as I wrap my arms around his body.

God, when was the last time we kissed, actually fucking kissed? I can’t remember, but the feeling of him melting into my arms, as if he knows this is it. That this is the moment he’s been waiting for since my mother died, and I shut myself off to the world. I put every ounce of love I have into the kiss, praying that this is his way of saying he forgives me.

When we part, I let my head rest on his, “I love you, Henry Forbes.”

He sputters a half laugh, half cry. A broken, ugly sound that falls from his lips. “God, I thought I’d never hear those words again.”



We sit like that, breathing in each other before he says softly, “Be safe, and come back to me.”

It hits me once Henry disappears outside the doors that he didn’t say he loved me back.

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That kiss felt like a promise of so many things. I couldn't say I loved him back, though, not yet. Not until this is settled, and I can say it without fear of someone overhearing. Until I know for certain that he didn't just say it because of the adrenaline.

Everyone else is waiting by the cars because we're all going to enter as a family, and we're all going to leave as a family. The house is enormous, which isn't a shock considering they were a wealthy family before they became incorporated into the mob life.

Garland wraps around all of the columns, and lights twinkle in and out. It's a gorgeous home, with tall ceilings painted in murals of scenes from the bible. They creep me out a little if I'm being honest, and so does the energy that flows inside the house.

There are so many people here already, milling around on the first floor, talking in whispered tones. Tall cocktail tables dot the space with lights illuminating them a soft blue under white tablecloths.

Charlie looks beautiful in a gold sequined dress that flatters her in more ways than one. Any guy would be lucky to have her, just not my guy. Banks breaks away from the family to hug her with one arm and kisses her cheek.

She nods and comes over to the rest of us.

"Welcome to our home," she says, swinging her arm around like a good hostess. When I find her father watching, I understand the show and follow when we

introduce ourselves. I guess Charlie didn't tell him that we all knew each other.

"You must be Henry," Charlie says, holding out her glove covered hand. Taking it, I bring it to my lips and give her knuckles a brush of my lips. When her back is fully to her father, she winks and whispers. "You look so hot. I'm surprised he hasn't tried jumping into your pants."

I try not to laugh, considering her father's stare is firmly on us, and I'm sure he's looking for anything he can to... do whatever it is he does.

"Refreshments will circulate, if you need anything, please don't hesitate to come find me," her voice is different, perky.

Creed nods and breaks off with Fern latched onto his arm. She holds her head high to her credit despite everything this man has done to her family. Mack and Lori take off, along with Talon and Cin. We all pair off with no one going anywhere alone. Toby and I are partners for tonight. Gemma's been back home all break, and Toby's been a little less... Toby.

"I guess it's just us now," I whisper.

He nods, eyes surveying the people. Moving through the crowd I take in the glamor, women are wearing so many jewels I have to blink a few times when they hit the light. I wonder how uncomfortable most of their dresses are. Everyone seems so stiff.

A man wearing all black approaches us with a champagne glass in his hand.

"You must be part of the Hemlock heirs," his voice sounds almost bored, but his blue eyes are lasered in on us.

"Toby Rossi," Toby introduces himself before pointing to me. "Henry Forbes, and

you are?”

The guy chuckles, a dry sound that doesn't fit him. “I'm Charlotte's oldest brother, Roman Romero.”

Charlie's real name is Charlotte? That's a surprise, but also not. I can't see her going by such a regal name Charlie fits her personality, which she must have gotten a double dose of because her brother missed that train.

“I hope you'll find your evening enjoyable,” he nods, eyes locking on someone else among the crowd.

“He was strange, wasn't he?” I ask Toby, only to find him staring at something over my shoulder. Twisting my head around, I look in the same direction and see Salem. She's changed since the last time I saw her, but there's no mistaking her.

“We have a plan—” I start, grabbing his elbow and attempting to pull him back, but he easily evades me and disappears into the crowd. Cursing under my breath I look for anyone else in the family.

But I'm alone.

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We've been here for a total of twenty minutes, and I already want to crawl out of my skin. Charlie's playing her part perfectly, the love-sick fiancé showing off her prize. I've been felt up by at least two older women who looked like they would eat me for my youth if they thought for a second it would work.

I catch Henry walking through the crowd, looking around as if he's searching for someone.

Why the fuck is he alone?

Charlie tugs on my arm, turning us so we're face to face with her father.

"Mr. Rossi," he says, his voice louder than normal. "You two make a wonderful couple, ya?"

"Yes, sir," I agree, playing his game.

"Well," his predatory eyes slide to Charlie, and I wrap her arm tighter around mine. "Dinner's ready, everyone. Please join me in the dining room."

"I can't imagine anyone's dining room is large enough to accommodate all of these people," I whisper in her ear, grateful that she's as tall as I am in her heels.

She laughs, hiding behind her gloved hand. "He cleaned out the hall."

Sure enough, a dining table set for no less than eighty people runs from the stairs all the way to the back of the house, with one chair set on each end. Mr. Romero takes

one head while Charlie's oldest brother, Roman, takes the other.

Charlie warned me that Roman's not very social. He prefers to be alone, but even he couldn't escape this dinner. Her other brother is around here somewhere, but I've only seen pictures of him. Finley's tall and has a bad habit of snorting anything he can get his hands on—Charlie's words, not mine.

Gold platters sit on the table, along with cutlery at every seat. Foliage runs the length of the setting, and literal diamonds refract the candlelight from the chandelier.

"Are you sure about this?" Charlie breathes as I pull her seat out for her.

I don't have time to answer her as the doors burst open, and a woman I'd recognize anywhere waltzes in.

"No."

My uncle Nile's ex-wife just walked in the door, and Romero is smiling from ear to ear. My head swivels to look at Talon, but he and Cin aren't here, and Toby is standing up and staring at the mother who abandoned him fourteen years ago.

Nile doesn't move, along with the rest of the adults in our family.

They must've known she was coming, but why didn't they warn us? Or at least Tal, knowing it would hurt him the most. My fists clench under the table, and Charlie whimpers beside me.

"I'm sorry," I didn't realize I grabbed her leg. But that wince makes me take my eyes off the woman Mr. Romero got out of his chair to greet. "Charlie," I start.

"Don't worry about it," she hisses, "forget it."

“What did he do?” I snarl, ignoring the looks from the guests around us.

When I look around, I find Creed, who nods.

Show time.

“The hell I will!” Charlie shouts, getting to her feet. Mr. Romero turns around so abruptly he teeters. “You promised me, Banks! I trusted you!”

She’s shouting, tears build as she pulls everyone’s eyes our way.

“I hate you!” She looks like she means it, and that should probably scare me.

“Lower your voice, woman.” I hiss, but make sure it’s loud enough to hear.

“If you didn’t want anyone to know, then you should’ve kept your dick in your pants!” She screams.

“Do go on,” I tell her loud enough that everyone can hear. “Tell me how I broke your heart. Better yet, tell your father here. After all, you wouldn’t be forced to marry me if it weren’t for him.”

“You’re making a mockery of me!” She cries and rushes from the room toward her father, who looks outraged. His eyes are narrowed on me, and I smirk, lifting my glass of whiskey. She falls into his body, sobs wracking her, and I wonder how much is real and what’s fake.

“You, boy! In my office, now.” He demands like we knew he would. “Excuse me for just a few moments, everyone, please, sit, drink.” He addresses his guests like a king holding court.

Dad stands from the table, “If you would like to amend the details of our contract, you’re going to have to deal with me.” Everyone stops talking, not a murmur is heard as my dad’s voice booms through the room.

Mr. Romero’s face is red, but he recovers quickly, whispering to his guest to sit and enjoy the first course. She smiles at Dad as he passes, but he ignores her. I wish I could see Nile’s face. My uncle hasn’t seen Delilah since she took off.

I have no doubt Mr. Romero invited her as some kind of jab at our family.

Standing from the table, I straighten my jacket and pretend to be the douchebag Charlie’s little stunt made me appear like.

We follow him through more halls to a set of double doors that are stained dark. The moment we enter, he slaps Charlie across the face.

Hard.

So hard she falls back, hits her head on one of the chairs in his office, and doesn’t get back up.

“Stupid bitch,” he yells. “Couldn’t keep yer mouth shut for one night.”

I try to take a step to check on her and make sure she’s breathing but Dad holds me steady. There are two men standing at our backs while Romero paces, pulling at his salt-and-pepper hair and muttering.

“We have a contract,” he starts.

“The contract doesn’t require the marriage to be faithful,” Dad reminds him, then gestures casually to Charlie’s prone body. “Seems unlikely to me you would care one



way or another how your daughter feels.”

“That brat will learn to keep ‘er mouth shut, just like ‘er mother did,” he eyes her body on the floor where it hasn’t moved.

“That brat was to remain unharmed. That is in the contract,” I rumble. “And I believe I’ve already had to remind you of that once.”

He steps toward me, and I meet him in the middle. He’s a head shorter than me and smells like liquor. I hope the rest of the family has gotten everyone out. Including Delilah, despite the insidious way she looked at Nile.

“You think yer in charge.” He states, and I wait, chest heaving while he decides what he’s going to say next. “Yer but a boy, no better than a teethin’ pup. Go yap on back to yer mother... Oh wait...”

His smile grows, yellowing teeth showing through his thin lips. “Yer mother ain’t kickin’ anymore. I made sure’a that.”

“You bastard!” I shout, lunging for him.

Gunshots pop off somewhere in the house, and all hell breaks loose in the office. Romero pushes me into one of the men who was blocking the door in his haste to run behind his desk like the coward he is. The guard, thrown off balance, topples to the ground. Dad snaps the neck of the guy behind him, pulling a gun and firing a shot straight into the head of the one I knocked over.

Getting to my knees, I crawl to Charlie, placing my fingers on her pulse and praying he didn’t kill her like he did her mother. It’s weak, but it’s there. There’s another pop, and Dad grunts. I whip my head in his direction and see his shoulder bleeding, blood blossoms on the light-colored material of his dress shirt.

In the chaos, Romero decides to grow a pair and has a gun trained on Dad's chest. I move without thinking, shoving Dad out of the way when Romero fires again.

Pain barely registers as I try to sprint toward a fleeing Romero, dead set on making that bastard pay, but my legs won't work, and I stumble to my knees.

"Banks!" Dad yells, but it sounds far away, garbled somehow.

I can hear the panic in his voice. "It's just a scratch," I assure him.

His face creeps into my vision, but it's blurry, and the more I blink, the harder it gets to see him. Black spots crowd my vision, until there's nothing.

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The guests are murmuring. Between Delilah's arrival and the argument with Charlie and Banks, voices hum with gossip. These people love drama, and we just gave them all the fodder they needed. Questions and speculation run rampant through the room. People only hearing bits and pieces of what others are saying.

Toby's eyes are trained on his mother. I can't imagine how he feels, seeing her after close to fifteen years. Roman's sitting at the head of the table, sipping the champagne he had earlier. The chair beside him is empty, I guess for the other brother that I've not seen.

Salad plates are delivered in covered dishes, and the servers don't utter one word. It's all a little strange, and the tension in the room multiplies when ten men dressed in suits, much like Mr. Romero's, enter the hall.

My eyes travel the room, looking for my family when they latch on to smoke creeping out one of the doors closest to Roman. A server bursts through the doors to what I'm assuming is the kitchen, and the smoke pours out, threatening to choke everyone on that side. Creed, Mack, and my father lurch to their feet, along with me and Toby.

I can't see Talon or Cin.

The guests panic, jumping out of their chairs and flooding to the doors, some of the men in suits rush toward the kitchen, and the others help the guests get out. Fern and Lori rush over to me and Toby.

Their eyes are frantic.

“Where did Cin go?” Lori asks, gripping onto Fern’s hand as if it were her lifeline.

“And Tal, where’s Talon?” Fern adds, her voice laced with terror.

“I—I don’t know, I didn’t see them leave,” panic threatens to pull me in with them. A fire wasn’t part of the plan. “Maybe they’re already outside?”

They nod, heading for the doors pulled along with the rest of the sea of guests. Among the chaos, the unmistakable pop of a gun goes off, and people start screaming. Hysteria floods everyone in the room as they run to safety. Some, falling in their haste to exit, even begin crawling over one another to get out. Toby takes off toward where the guests are, screaming for Salem.

Fuck.

That definitely wasn’t part of the plan.

The smoke settles in a haze-like state, making it difficult, but not impossible, to see through. Ripping the napkin from my plate, I cover my nose and mouth, heading toward where I last saw Creed and Mack.

More gunshots ring, but they don’t sound as close. My thoughts wander back to Banks and Diego. I hope their part is going according to plan because if not, we have way too many problems tonight.

My feet snag on something, and I trip. Looking down at whatever it is I stumbled over, I see one of the men who came in shortly after Mr. Romero left. He’s got a bullet in his head, blood oozing out of the wound. Looking away as quickly as possible, I get up and spot Tal exchanging blows with another one of the men.

By this point, I can’t tell who’s side is shooting or where the bullets are coming from.

Everything is chaos, and my chest threatens to cave.

“Henry!” Creed shouts, “On the ground!” I drop without hesitation. The quick flash of a gun sounds in my ears, and the solid thunk of a body falls behind me.

Creed runs over and lifts me from the floor, checking me over before pushing me behind him and firing off another shot. Mack’s on the other side of the table, squaring off with another one of Romero’s men.

There can’t be that many left, not with the blood splatter covering both Creed and Mack and the number of bodies I see littered just a few paces in front of me. I can’t imagine how many more there are in the room. I’m suddenly grateful for the heavy smoke, so thick now we’re choking, coughing, and spitting.

“Banks, where’s Banks?” I gasp.

Creed doesn’t respond, he only pushes me back until we’re at the end of the table. One of the men dressed in black comes in with a heavy-looking gun. Tal jumps to cover Cin, who I didn’t see come in, and Creed throws one of the tables up, kicking it into the guy holding the gun.

Rapid fire opens up into the ceiling, and a whole new fear punches me in the gut. Banks and Diego are up there. With my thoughts so scrambled I can’t remember where exactly the office is, I pray that it’s nowhere near them.

Creed and Mack both run back into the kitchen while bullets thunk into the wood and spray the plaster of the walls. Chunks of drywall fly, as Dad joins us. He’s got a cut on his neck, but otherwise looks okay.

“Get upstairs and find B and Charlie!” Creed orders. I’m suddenly reminded that it’s my job to get them out of the house and to the cars. Kel and Logan will handle the

rest once we're out.

I nod, crawling through the parlor door. Keeping low until I'm sure no one's around, I creep my way up, checking over every surface before standing. The parlor connects to a small hall leading to a hidden stairwell Diego found when researching the house's blueprints.

Taking the steps two at a time, I gently ease the door open, checking to make sure the hallway is empty before rushing out toward the office where I hope Romero took them.

Diego's voice helps pull me in the right direction because I can hear him shouting.

Charlie stumbles out, a hand pressed to her head. When her eyes meet mine, my stomach plummets to my feet at the agony I see there.

"What happened?" I grip her shoulders, looking her over. She's got a cut on her temple, and her cheek is red. Other than that, she seems to be okay.

Her eyes well up, and she slowly shakes her head. "I'm sorry."

"Where's Banks?"

Her voice breaks, and the tears fall. They fall so hard that her breaths become choppy as she hiccups, "I'm so sorry."

No .

Leaving her there, I sprint the rest of the way to the office, finding Banks laying across his father's lap, his shirt soaked with blood, not moving.

No .

Seeing Diego cradling his son's shoulders, his face white as a sheet, has me falling to my knees. They crack with the impact, but I can't feel it.

My hands immediately go to the wound on Banks's stomach, pressing hard to try and stop the bleeding. Tears drip off my nose as I hold as much pressure as I can. I don't know when I started crying, but I can't hold the sobs in now.

"Diego," I scream, trying to get him to snap out of whatever shock he's in. "We have to get him to the cars."

"He- He just jumped," he says, his face wet with tears. "I- I couldn't..."

"I don't care right now. We have to get him out!" My voice doesn't waver as I command him. Charlie comes back in the room, this time with a man I recognize from the dining room. He's wearing a suit just like the rest of Romero's men, but he's older, closer to our dad's age.

"This is Liam," she hiccups. "He's going to help us get them to the cars."

When Liam dips to lift Banks, I snarl, "Don't. Fucking. Touch. Him."

"Henry," Charlie says calmly but efficiently, "You can trust him. I promise." I shift my eyes to her, see the sincerity there and lower my guard.

I nod, only allowing Liam to help Diego while I hoist Banks up. He's not moving, so I start praying to every fucking God I can think of to let him be okay.

He has to be okay because I never said it back.

Liam throws Diego's arm over his shoulders and hauls him to his feet, snapping him out of whatever trauma he was spiraling down, and we make our way out of the office and down the way I came.

Dad and Nile meet us at the bottom of the servant stairs, briefing Diego on the current situation. Creed and Mack are still in the hall, guns firing left and right. Dad's eyes quickly check me over before pulling Banks from my arms.

"No! I have to touch him. I have to know he's breathing." I howl at my father and stumble to keep pace as he heads for the door that connects to the side of the house with Banks.

"God—Please, Dad!"

Charlie grips my hand, slick with Banks's blood, and holds on tight, pulling me alongside her through the door. Kel flies over to us, gun in hand.

"What the hell is going on in there?" He says, eyes latching onto Banks who still hasn't made a sound. Logan opens the back door, and Dad jumps into the backseat of the SUV with Banks, and I follow, pulling his head onto my lap. Diego jumps into the front seat after us. "Get him to the hospital!" I shout, "Now!"

Kel doesn't ask questions. Jumping into the driver seat, he peels off, dirt spraying behind us. I can't look away from Banks's prone form.

"Please, Banksie... don't fucking die."



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

They wouldn't let me through the double doors after they took Banks, and waiting for someone to come through and give me news has me pacing and ripping at my hair. They said he's in surgery, that's the only thing we know.

If he doesn't make it, I don't know that I'll be able to move on.

To move forward.

How could I have not said it back to him when I had the chance?

Everyone met us at the hospital. Creed's been on the phone barking orders. Charlie disappeared for a couple of hours, and when she got here, I noticed she was freshly showered and changed. Liam, the guy who she brought to help us, hasn't left her side, and I'm assuming that he was the one who convinced her to take care of herself. The look of horror on her face makes me think she might have come straight to the hospital otherwise.

"Sit down, Henry," dad whispers.

"I can't!" I gasp, "They won't tell us anything! What if h-he's..." New sobs wrack my body, and I can't finish my thought.

"Don't you dare," Diego says, "don't act like my boy won't fight death itself to come back to us, to you."

Deep down, I know he's right. Banks wouldn't leave me here, not after all the progress he's made. Not after I kissed him. I have to tell him I love him back!

He stands, gripping my shoulder and pulling me aside. “Banks has had a lot to say since starting therapy. And no matter what the topic is, he always brings you up.” He runs his hand through his beard and sighs. “My boy loves you more than words can justify. After he dropped Charlie off yesterday, he came home and declared that you needed everything you two used to make those new cookies and had Harley go pick them up from the culinary store in Cardis. He planned on surprising you after all of this.”

My lips quiver as fresh tears threaten to fall.

“He’s signed up for a culinary class just so he can bake you something. He’s smiling again, letting people get to know him. Did you know I got to see him and Jax act like they used to before Fauna passed? How joyful he looked. Sure, Henry, you’re the reason he’s pushing himself to get help, but he’s choosing to put in the work. I don’t think I’ve seen him this... dedicated to anything, anyone, in a long damn time.”

His words threaten to steal my breath. I knew my Banks was in there. Buried so deep in anguish and grief, but he’s there. Shining through an angry ocean to reach me.

“Thank you for loving him, even when he didn’t think he could love you back.”

I never thought I’d be lost for words. Diego’s gratitude is like a punch to my stomach, a reminder that if Banks doesn’t pull through, he will die without me telling him I loved him back.

The metal doors open, and a man with blood staining his green scrubs comes out and walks towards me and Diego. “Are you the family for Banks Rossi?”

Everyone in the waiting room stands when he asks, including Charlie and Liam.

“Oh, okay then,” the man says. “I’m Dr. Gully, Banks’s surgeon.”

“How is he?” Diego asks.

“He’s stable, lost a lot of blood. The bullet nicked his liver, and we were able to repair most of the damage without removing too much. As far as we can tell, nothing else was damaged, but with injuries like these, we like to keep a close eye for forty-eight hours to watch for sepsis in case a part of the bowel was also compromised.” He sighs and looks around at all of us. “He’s going to need a lot of rest, possibly another transfusion, and he will be staying here in the ICU for a few days at least.”

“Whatever he needs,” Diego says.

“When can I see him?” I ask. I need to see that he’s okay with my own eyes.

“I wouldn’t recommend—”

“Let him back, please.” Diego nods at Dr. Gully, and he sighs but tells me to follow him.

“Thank you,” I whisper to him as we pass.

The walls are a mint green and off-white, it’s an unsettling color with machines dotting the halls, and nurses sit around a circular workstation with monitors showing patient vitals.

Gully doesn’t knock, just walks into a room that’s marked ICU 4.

The lights are low, and machines show his heartbeat, oxygen, and blood pressure. He’s got a tube in his mouth helping him breathe while he’s sedated, and when I see it, I can’t stop the tears from spilling over. He looks pale, so much paler than normal, and I have to remember to breathe through the choked gasps.

I can hear the machine every time his heart beats. Seeing him, laying in that bed... It's too much, but I try to take comfort in the slow and steady beeps from the machine.

My chest wants to cave.

I almost lost him.

He almost died.

He could still die without hearing my voice telling him I love him.

He lays there, unmoving. Staggering closer to his side, I allow my emotions to roll through me. "Don't you dare die," I murmur. "You and I aren't done yet. You promised Banks. You said you'd do everything you could to get back to the man I deserve. The man I fell in love with."

Tears blur my vision, and I pull the only chair up to his bed and grab his hand. Sitting beside him, I hold his hand and cry.

"I forgive you," I whisper into the heavy air. "For everything."

He needs me to be here, present with him, so he can wake up and get better.

Eventually, exhaustion and spent adrenaline win as I hunch over his bed and use his hand as a pillow, letting sleep drag me under.

"Henry," my dad's voice pulls me from sleep, along with his hand running up and down my back.

"They need to take him for a scan," he says while helping me to stand. When I look

over into the hallway, Diego's standing with someone I don't recognize, speaking in hushed tones. He's got a bandage on his shoulder, his tuxedo jacket is gone, along with his button-up. Leaving him in his tank undershirt.

"Can I stay and wait till he comes back?" I ask, wiping my eyes and looking toward Diego. He nods as a team of nurses come to transport him. The tubes connecting him to all the machines shift as they wheel him out.

"I brought you some clothes," Dad hands me a bag, and when I look in it, I find the clothes he mentioned, along with a toothbrush and deodorant.

"How long was I out?" I ask, confused. I don't know where my phone is, and there's no clock in here.

"It's morning," he sighs. "I figured you wouldn't leave, but the nurses said you can use a staff shower and be done by the time he's brought back."

I nod, leaning back on the chair to stretch my back.

"They say he might not wake up for a few more days," Diego says, wiping his face. "It's my fault he's here." He looks like he wants to punch something or, at the very least, rip his hair out. "That shot was meant for me. He pushed me out of the way."

"That sounds like him," I choke out.

Diego nods to Dad and walks out. He doesn't usually show so much emotion, so just that small bit makes me fear that Banks might not ever wake up.

He's going to wake up. My love for him will give him all the strength he needs to pull himself out of this, I'm sure of it.

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:46 am*

B reathing is painful, and I have to try a few times to open my eyes. They feel so heavy. My body hurts, but I'm alive.

Every moment I was unconscious, I felt trapped in my body, unable to crawl my way back to Henry. Helpless to the things he and I never got to experience. I have so many things I want to do with him. So many memories yet to share with him.

Moving hurts, and something weighs my hand down. Turning my head, I catch the sight of curly black hair.

Henry.

He's here.

"Hey," I croak.

His head pops up, but he's blurry. I can't make out his features, but I know it's him from his intoxicating scent alone.

"Banks?" His voice is soft and tentative, as if he's worried he's dreaming.

"I'm here... I think." The use of my voice makes me cough, and fuck me, my throat hurts.

"I love you, Banks Rossi. I love you so goddamn much." He's standing now, pressing his lips to mine so gently it's like a butterfly's wings. Pressing against the tubes still connected to my arms, I firmly seal my lips to his before the pain causes me to fall

back to the pillow. Henry lifts away from me and whispers, “I thought I’d never get the chance to say it again.”

“I’d kick the reaper's ass to come back to you.”

He laughs, resting his forehead against mine. Nurses come in, followed by Luca and Creed. Dad stands from a chair near the window and taps my leg.

“Welcome back.”

After spending over a month in the hospital due to complications , they finally let me go home. Fuckers said it would only be a few days, and every chance I got, I grumbled about it. Everyone is apparently waiting for me at the house. I missed Christmas, but Fern left everything decorated the way it was.

Henry spent every day in the hospital with me until our dads pulled him out. I haven’t seen him for a few days since the hospital told my dad they would be discharging me soon.

Healing from a bullet that tore through my body is a bitch, and what makes it worse is after all the planning, Romero still got away. Dad hits any bump in the road, it jostles me, and I groan. The fucker snickers from the driver’s seat, knowing firsthand how fun healing from wounds like this can be. I only scowl at him.

“I’m glad to see the bullet didn’t ruin your winning attitude,” he laughs, glancing my way before turning back to look at the road.

“If you weren’t aiming for every fucking pothole on the road, I wouldn’t have to scowl at your poor driving, old man.” I lob back at him, and he laughs. Pulling up to the gates, he stops to let them roll open and turns to face me.

Placing his hand on my shoulder, he squeezes and sighs. “I thought... For a while there, I thought that we’d lost you.” He looks out the windshield, wiping his other hand over his face, “I thought I’d lost you, and it’s my fault. I never, ever want you to jump in front of a bullet for me, B, do you hear me?” His dark eyes are locked on mine as he repeats himself. “Never. Again.”

I nod, keeping my eyes on his.

“I’m the one that’s supposed to protect you, not the other way around.” Two tears roll down his face, something I haven’t seen since my mother’s funeral. “I can’t lose you, not in this life.”

“I can’t lose you either, and I’m not sorry. That bullet would have killed you.” I take another gulp of air because what I have to say might shock him. “I am sorry for taking so long to wake up, for making you wait in dread wondering, and for the multiple complications . I know that’s not my fault, it’s just my body’s way of healing. But I know that couldn’t have been easy.”

He nods, removing his hand from my shoulder and slowly driving up the hill toward home.

Everyone’s here, standing on the stairs as if they don’t have anything better to do than congratulate me on not dying.

“They love you too, son, let them.”

With his parting words, the cab of the truck is silent after he steps out and comes over to help me out. The surgeon told me I’d be sore for a while and not to overdo any strenuous activity until my follow-up appointments and physical therapy.

With Dad’s help, I get out of the truck and gain my footing. Looking up, my eyes are



met with Henry's. He's smiling and crying, but our eyes are fixed on each other. I couldn't look away even if I wanted to.

He steps down, his feet crunching in the gravel as he meets me in the middle. His hand cups my face, leaning in, his lips gently brush mine. "Welcome home."

G raduation.

After playing catch up after one hell of a first year, we all made it. In green and gold, wearing caps and gowns. Our dads crowd us all together, snapping pictures and rotating in and out, capturing all of us together.

It's been a wild ride, and at some points I didn't think we'd all be here together.

After Henry takes pictures with Fern, I slide my arms around his waist and bring him into my chest. Planting my lips on his, he smiles. Hoots and hollers sound all around us, but I don't care.

"Come with me," I command more than ask. He nods with a ridiculous smile, making me dive in for one more kiss.

"We'll meet you at the house!" I yell over my shoulder, gripping his hand and pulling him toward the parking lot.

I couldn't have asked for a better spring day. The weather's sunny, and the air is balmy. We throw off the gowns and hop in my Audi.

"Where are we going?" He asks, rolling down his window.

"You'll see," I smirk.

He rolls his eyes and grabs my hand, turning up the radio with the other, and starts to sing along. I love it when he sings. A little off-key, practically yelling and full of joy.

Pulling up to the mansion, he eyes me suspiciously but follows my lead when I exit the car. Walking through the house with our hands locked, he spots the golf cart waiting past the glass doors in the back.

“Banks.” He says, but I ignore him.

“Get in,” I tell him with a wide smile. He does as I ask, hopping into the golf cart. Driving through the fields, passing by Daisy and Rambow, I drive to our spot. The spot where we first made love, the spot where I’ve brought him every year since I got my shit together.

His eyes grow wide at the spread.

I’m so happy Fern got everything out here. The red and white checkered blanket boasts plates of his favorite foods. Champagne rests in a bucket of ice, along with water.

When I park the golf cart, I turn to him, and he grabs my face, kissing me with such force that it makes me laugh.

“I love you,” he says, never missing an opportunity to say it since my stint in the hospital.

Grabbing his hand, I pull him from the cart and walk him to the blanket. He doesn’t let us get settled, instead, he dives into my arms and kisses me until I feel like my lungs only work because of his breath.

His hands roam my body, pushing up the t-shirt I wore beneath the gown to brush his fingers over the scar on my stomach.

Grabbing his chin, I force his eyes to mine, “I love you, Henry Forbes. And I’ll show you every-fucking-day that you let me. Choosing you was inevitable, Fancy.”