



Composed at Randy's (Diner Days)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: How do I tell the guy I like that I'm not homeless, just a dumbass?

Wren:

Help! I accidentally got kidnapped by a hot rock star who thinks he's doing the right thing by housing and feeding me. He thinks I'm homeless because my absent manager is the one who remembers petty details like my home address, and my broken phone is the one who knows the numbers of anyone who can prove I am who I say I am. What do I do?

Bael:

Help! My impulse control issues made me kidnap an adorable homeless guy who's too proud to accept my help. He keeps trying to get away, but I'm pretty sure he'll starve to death if I let him go. He's tiny, so I don't think he'll take up too much space on the tour bus. I just need to convince him to stay. What do I do?

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Chapter 1

Wren

This is literally the dumbest thing I have ever done.

Why did I think I could be left alone during a major deadline?

Why did I tell my agent, my handler, and my closest friend that I would be fine without them because another one of them would be around to take care of me?

Go back and read the first line again. I am a total fucking dumbass.

Smooth brain. No thoughts. Not a single smarty wrinkle to be found.

Sigh.

Everyone keeps going on about how genius my work is and how my mind operates on an entirely different level. What they don't realize is that said level is the very bottom of the sub-basement.

All of my fancy, inspired ideas?

Yeah, those aren't mine.

No, no, I'm not stealing them or anything. They come from me, but they also don't. I don't think about what I'm doing when I'm painting or creating a piece. Something

makes my brain go ding! and I have to do something about it.

Honestly, I don't think about anything at all.

That's why I have every art medium under the sun in my studio. That way, when I go to start on a new piece, I can just open the gates to Artland and let whatever is in there do its thing.

Then I let go.

All sense of self vanishes, and when I come back to myself, I either have a finished piece, or I'm lying face down on the floor in a puddle of drool because I passed out from exhaustion.

Or at least that's what used to happen before my bestie Marty found out how bad my lack of self-care was.

Once he did, he forced me to accept one of the dozens of agents beating down my door to represent me.

I'd been putting it off, because how is a person supposed to choose the right agent when they can't remember to eat regularly or pay their bills on time?

Fortunately, Marty did it for me, and I crafted a statue in his honor. No, seriously. I totally did. Some people are joking when they say that, but I really did. You know that new statue downtown? I slapped Marty's face on it and then inscribed Marty Rocks! right under the armpit where a casual viewer wouldn't see it.

I made sure Marty saw it, though. I could tell he liked it by the way he hugged me until I nearly passed out.

I'm a bit on the small side compared to Marty, so getting the stuffing hugged out of me isn't much of a challenge for him.

So anyway, after Marty found my agent, Shelly, I started getting regular gigs, and I went from financially secure to holy shit rich. It was pretty nice.

It wasn't until Shelly found out how I lived that she got me a handler. I mean, Marty had told her I needed help and explained my situation, but Shelly had thought it meant I needed a housekeeper to come and check on me once a week and an accountant to pay my bills for me.

When I went MIA on her for a week and my housekeeper found me unconscious on my balcony, Shelly flipped out and got me someone to manage my entire life for me.

Enter Kai. He's awesome. Ever since Shelly hired him, I haven't passed out from hunger or sleep deprivation a single time.

It's been great, and I love him with all my heart.

Not that way. Kai is straight, and I'm... well, I don't know exactly what I am. I haven't had a lot of time to explore all of that since I transitioned, but I definitely enjoy riding a dick.

It's been a whole-ass journey for me. The gender thing, I mean.

Marty was great about all of it when I started realizing that my outsides didn't meet my insides, but then Marty is about as queer as they come.

Marty raised me after my parents died, by the way. He didn't have to, but I was eleven, he was eighteen, and we'd permabonded at the fancy art school I'd been attending since I was five.

I know our ages are a bit extreme for us to be best friends, but for us, it just works.

So Marty was my legal guardian when I hit puberty and had the whole Oh god what is happening to me??? Make it stop!!! thing start up.

He made sure I had access to puberty blockers as soon as possible so I didn't have to worry about getting major changes I'd need to have reversed, which is totally sweet in my opinion. Blockers don't always work that way for trans folks, but I was one of the lucky ones. Bottom surgery was enough of an ordeal without needing to add top surgery into the mix too. I only required minor intervention in that area.

Anyway, let's fast forward to right now. I'm twenty years old, a wildly successful artist, trans, and dumb as a bag of rocks.

But I have Marty, Shelly, and Kai to help me out with that last part, so life is pretty great.

Except for today, I guess.

When Shelly informed me that she'd be out of town for a month to shepherd a baby artist through the challenges of spontaneous fame and fortune, I'd been all, "Don't worry! I have Marty and Kai to help me while you're gone!"

Unfortunately, my smooth brain completely forgot about that when Kai told me he needed to go home to Japan for a while because his dad had gotten sick and he needed to be there for him and his mom.

I told him, "No sweat! I've got Shelly and Marty! Go take care of your family, my dude."

Aaaaand when Marty had some bigass gay event thing going on in Brazil, I'd

forgotten all about Kai's and Shelly's situations and told Marty to go have a blast.

Hell, I didn't even have a housekeeper anymore because Kai made sure he and I kept my place clean. He didn't believe in housekeepers, so he made me do housework with him. He also made me shower (alone, you perverts), do grocery shopping with him, and water my plants.

He was nice and didn't make me deal with my own paperwork and bills. He saw that it seriously put a dent in my ability to create art, so he made sure my accountant continued to take care of most of it. Kai took care of the rest.

Kai was super worried about leaving me when he went back to Japan, but he trusted Shelly and Marty, and he was so worried about his dad dying that he forgot to check in with them before he left.

He nearly left burn marks on the carpet as he went.

You'd think that kind of energy would make an impression on a guy, and that I'd remember it, but I was on a deadline, and as I said before, when I'm in Artland, I'm gone.

Sometimes I'm not sure anyone understands exactly how gone I am when that happens.

When I finally surfaced today, two weeks had gone by since everyone had skedaddled, I was out of food, horribly sleep-deprived, and my phone was in a pitcher of water.

Why?

No clue. I think from now on you should just chalk all the weird stuff up to smooth

brain syndrome, okay?

So here I am, stumbling down an unfamiliar street in search of food because my stomach is trying to eat its way to my spine.

I can't call for takeout because my phone is dead as a doornail, and who has a landline these days? Not me, that's for sure.

My feet are wobbly, and my eyes have this permanently sparkly and gray at the edges thing going on, but if I can just get some food in me, I'll be okay.

Then I can sleep, and I won't have to worry about Shelly, Marty, and Kai blowing three separate gaskets when they come back and realize I spent weeks completely unsupervised.

Hell, they might even be impressed. Kai might even let me out of his sight for more than ten minutes without calling to check up on me every three. He'll probably leave the tracker on my phone, though, but that's just common sense when it comes to me.

Hey, look! There's a funky neon light on a store front up ahead. Maybe they have food. I wonder if they know it's really blurry and wiggly. Maybe I'll warn them about it when I get some food in me.

Man, I'm tired.

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Chapter 2

Bael

There's a sticker of Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson smiling up at me from the backward-facing seat of the limo. It wasn't there yesterday, and I try not to think about it too hard.

I fail.

It's just... Mel and Shay had both promised that the limo was off-limits, and I?—

"Dude, I honestly have no idea how someone like you manages to look like this." Travis, the drummer of our band Baelfire (Yes, it was named after me. No, I didn't pick it.) interrupts my train of thought and gestures vaguely at the entirety of my body lounging in the back of our limo. He's referring to the black leather harness crisscrossing my black fishnet-covered chest, the artfully smudged eyeliner, and the oh-so-casually messy strawberry-blond hair cascading over half of my face.

It took my stylist Trina a solid hour of vicious poking to get it that way, thank you. She'd also tried to convince me to let my makeup artist cover my freckles, but I noped my way right out of that. Freckles are hot, and I love mine.

"Someone like me?" I ask around a mouthful of the delicious Hello Kitty-shaped sandwich I'd ordered at our favorite diner, Randy's.

"Soft and goofy." Travis tries to jab my food to emphasize his point, and I snatch it

safely out of reach.

“I can like cute, soft things and not want to be one,” I say sagely before I get back to demolishing Hello Kitty’s torso. I pause eating when I remember I haven’t addressed the other half of Travis’s statement yet and say, “And I’m not goofy. You’re goofy.” I wad my sandwich wrapper into a ball and flick it directly at Travis’s face.

Travis smacks it out of the air and says, “The only part of you that fits this gig is that you’re a vindictive bastard.”

Vindictive?

I bet he’s talking about that time last week when I’d physically tossed out a techie openly ogling Mel’s ass while making rude gestures.

Or maybe he means the time I kicked a racist troll in the chest and accidentally knocked him down a flight of stairs.

Boy, did I get in trouble for that one.

I refused to apologize, though and chose to eat the legal fees and publicity storm it caused.

Next time, I’ll make sure there are no stairs before I kick.

If I remember.

I get in trouble a lot, by the way. I can’t help it.

No, seriously, my impulse control is complete garbage on a good day, and when I see someone doing something fucked up, it’s nonexistent. To date, I have yet to hold in

the desire to show bullies and assholes the real-time consequences of their actions.

But if I don't, who will? My fans back me every time and do some fairly outrageous things to show their support anytime I get in trouble. The shit-ton of money I have doesn't hurt either.

I have real power in this world, and like some smart old dying guy said that one time, "A bunch of power is great..." No, that's not it. Maybe it's "If you can beat people up and get away with it, it's a big responsibility..." Goddammit, that's not right either.

I'll google it and tell you later. I think you can get the gist though.

Anyway, I reason that a cracked eye socket or a handful of missing teeth is a great way to let my personal philosophy really sink into a person who's in need of a solid mental rearranging.

I don't respond to Travis's bitchy comment other than to make a sort of cheers motion with Hello Kitty's adorable head. Then I finish her off because she's fucking delicious and needs to be inside me.

"Yeah, never mind. You can keep your goth card. No normie eats like that."

"What can I say? I like pussy." I give Travis a not-so-innocent smile.

"You like dick, too, so do me a favor and never eat a banana around me, okay?"

"No worries there, bananas are gross. Like, they've got those strings. Seriously, who likes eating strings? And you can't get rid of them because there's always a sneaky one hiding in there somewhere. It's like they're trying to get eaten. And don't even get me started on the bananus, man. I can't even with that shit?—"

Travis interrupts me before I have a chance to explain why eating banana ass is completely different from eating regular ass. “What the fuck is a bananus?”

“The ass end of the banana. duh. No one wants to eat that.”

“Okay, okay, spare me the details! I'm sorry I asked. Jesus, Bael, I swear, if your fans knew what you were really like, we'd be out of business in a week.”

I'm pretty sure that if I was allowed to be as weird as I truly am, our fans would go apeshit. I think being yourself resonates with people, and it goes a long way, but nobody listens to what I think.

I suppose that happens to people who accidentally glue their own balls to the floor. Yes, that really happened to me. No, I don't want to talk about it.

Ball gluing aside, I think I'm a pretty great person. My fans tell me this constantly.

I humor Travis because I'm a nice guy and ignore his comment. “You should really get one of these sandwiches. They're fucking amazing.”

I'd seen the way he'd been eyeing Miss Kitty. He wants one, I just know it. But Travis isn't as comfortable with his masculinity as I am, so he's going to need some time before he takes the plunge.

“No way. If you think I'm eating that shit, you're insane.” Travis's eyes linger on the wrapper I threw at him. “I bet it tastes like perfume anyway.”

“Whatever, man. Have fun starving.” You can stick a horse in water, but you can't, umm, you can't... dammit. I don't know how that saying goes, okay? I just know that I can't make Travis's stupid ass eat something if he doesn't want to.

Travis swears, then flings open the door of our limo and storms across the street. Then he flips me off and stomps inside Randy's diner like a cute little brat. Travis likes to think he's this macho guy when really, he's just a bottom who needs a spanking.

It ain't gonna be me. That's not my style at all.

What is my style, you ask? I'm still working on it. All I know is that Travis doesn't do it for me.

I laugh as I watch Travis's little performance through the open door of the limo. Yes, he left the door wide open. Dude really needs that spanking, right?

I immediately forget all about Travis because my attention jumps and lands on a little guy stumbling towards Randy's. He really doesn't look good.

I consider going over to him to ask if he needs help. Maybe I can call someone he knows to come and get him. Like, he really looks like he needs help.

Some people call me pushy. I call me helpful. There are a ton of people out there who need help but don't ask for it. That's where I come in.

The little guy stops stumbling and starts falling onto his face. That's when I stop considering helping him and realize I'm already running across the street. That's probably the only reason why I manage to catch him before he plants his face into a puddle. That would have been a shitty way to wake up. Nobody wants a face full of mysterious city street water.

He's distressingly light, and it takes zero effort to scoop him into my arms. I juggle him a little so I can tap his face to try and wake him up.

His eyes flutter open for a second, giving me a chance to see a set of pretty brown eyes, but they close again and he goes completely limp, causing a sweep of blond hair to cover his face.

When I tap his face again, there's no reaction. Not even a flinch.

Poor little guy. Something bad must have happened to him to make him drop like that. I take in the rest of his body to see if he's injured and notice his ragged, wrinkled clothes and lack of shoes. His clothes are streaked with something black and I realize his face is too. I think it's dirt or something.

You know what? I think he might be homeless. He looks half-starved, so I bet he passed out from lack of food.

I should take him to a doctor.

Wait.

You're not supposed to take random strangers to the hospital. I remember what it was like being poor before my band became insanely famous. You only go to the doctor if it's the end of the world.

What if this guy has no money?

A brilliant idea occurs to me. The band has our own private doctor, so I can take this little guy to her. I'm so fucking smart it shocks me sometimes.

I'm already carrying him to the limo because it's such an excellent idea that I know I don't need to stop and think about it. Travis can find his own way back to the hotel.

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Chapter 3

Wren

I wake up confused and dizzy. What the hell happened?

The ceiling I'm staring at is completely unfamiliar and the room smells weird and sterile. I can hear hushed voices outside the room, and they don't sound remotely familiar.

Shit. I think I'm in a hospital.

This is seriously no bueno.

I mean, I live in a really liberal area, but it's still nerve-wracking to go to a hospital as a trans guy without someone else there to hold my hand. Doctors can be a bit weird about things like trans folk.

I need to call Kai. No, wait. Kai is gone. So is Marty. Oh gods, so is Shelly. What do I do?

Can I call my publicist? No, I don't know how to get in contact with her. Hell, I don't even know her name. Dammit, me. Why do I have to be like this?

The door opens, and the voices get less muffled.

“I'm sorry, Bael, but you need to wait outside. Patient-doctor confidentiality,

remember?”

“I just want to see if he's okay. Then I'll leave.”

“He'll be fine. Now fuck off before I slam the door in your face.” The voice sounds more amused than threatening, and I'm oddly comforted by this.

A tall woman with light brown skin enters the room and asks, “Hi, honey. How are you feeling?” Her eyes are warm and reassuring.

“Honey?” I ask. Doctors don't usually call patients honey.

“Shit, I'm sorry, we tend to be informal here. I'd call you by your name if I knew what it was, but Bael didn't know, so here we are.”

“My name is Wren. Can you tell me where I am, please?” Yes, I said please. A little bit of politeness goes a long way, especially when you're in a strange and unfamiliar environment.

“We're in my private practice, and I promise you're perfectly safe here. No, don't sit up, and don't move until I take out your IV.”

“My what?” I turn my head and see I'm attached to a tube coming out of a clear bag filled with fluid. I shiver a little because, ew, needles.

“First things first, Wren. Can you tell me your pronouns? Mine are she/her.”

That answers a question I hadn't even gotten a chance to ask myself—whether or not she'd noticed I was trans while I was unconscious. She seems pretty cool about it, and I can physically feel the tension leave my body.

Phew. I am so glad nice people found my dumb, unconscious ass instead of mean ones.

Go me!

“He/him. Thanks for asking.” I give Doctor Nice Lady my sunniest smile. “Are you the one who found me?”

“No, that was Bael. He?—”

The door opens again and in walks a big, scary dude in leather who looks like he can and will eat three of me for breakfast if he wants to. “Did I hear my name?” His voice is like smooth, dark amber honey, and, oh my god, he has freckles scattered across the bridge of his nose.

Absolutely delicious.

I get all tingly in the pants region immediately. It could be the voice, or maybe the piercings. Or the dog collar. Or the way he needed to stoop slightly to get through the door frame... It could be a lot of things. I want to climb him and get my tingles all over him.

“Get out, Bael.” Doctor Nice Lady shouts.

“But you said my name!”

“Doctor-patient confidentiality, Bael! Look it up!”

“But I’m the one who found him.” The big, scary man starts pouting and transforms into a big, adorable man.

Oh, my...

Doctor Nice Lady grabs Bael by one arm, turns him around, and shoves him back out the door. She slams it behind him and shouts through the door, “Get your ass down the hallway, Bael, and stop listening, or so help me god, I’ll tell Trina to dye your hair neon orange!”

She turns around and her expression transforms from irritated to kind in a flash. “Sorry about that, Wren. Bael means well, but he’s not great at thinking before he acts.”

“He’s the one who brought me here?” I ask. My fingers pull at my sleeve anxiously. “Does he know about?—”

Doctor Nice Lady holds up one finger in a wait-a-second gesture, walks over to the door, and kicks it hard. On the other side, I hear, “Ow! Fuck! What the hell, Gwen?”

“I’m texting Trina right now, you asshole!”

“Shit. I’m going, I’m going.” The sound of exaggerated footsteps echoes down the hall, and Bael’s voice is far away when he calls out, “Don’t call Trina!”

There’s a vacuum left in the wake of Bael’s departure, and I’m left feeling like part of me went with him.

It’s probably the tingly part if I’m being honest with you.

“So...” I say, adding an awkward little cough, because I’m totally at sea here, folks.

I mean, what the fuck am I even supposed to be doing right now? This is what I have Kai for. If he was here right now, he’d have Doctor Nice Lady’s credentials up on his

phone, have Marty on his way back from Brazil, and have Shelly shifting the date for my next opening to adjust for any downtime I might hypothetically need. He'd also be yelling at me in a firm but kind way about how I got into this shape in the first place. He'd also make a Google Doc with ways to prevent it from happening again and share it with Marty and Shelly.

He'd do it all at the same time and probably manage to get me a smoothie on top of that. Like, one of those gross green ones that no one likes but everyone pretends to. It's the worst form of punishment Kai has been able to come up with for me, and let me tell you, it is effective as fuck. I nearly gag just thinking about it.

Doctor Nice Lady smiles at me encouragingly, almost like she knows that I'm all but useless without my Kai and wants to give me time to get my shit together. I decide to try my best to reward her for her patience.

"Your name isn't Doctor Nice Lady," I state firmly and wait for her incredulous laugh to pass before plowing boldly forward. People always have that sort of, oh, isn't he just fucking adorable reaction around me, and I've learned to make room for it in conversations. "So you should tell me what to call you."

"You can just call me Gwen. Everyone here does."

"Wonderful. Thank you, Gwen. What questions should I be asking you right now?"

Kai taught me this trick. When you don't know what the hell is going on, this is the best place to start. It makes you sound smart and thoughtful and makes the person you're talking to have a good opinion of you. Unfortunately for me, it's the biggest bullet in my gun of life hacks. If I can't figure out what to do with what the person gives me, it becomes immediately evident, and I get downgraded to practically a child status.

I hate that status. I'm already a shorty and am subjected to more than my fair share of head pats. I've kind of gotten used to it, though.

So I'm delighted when Gwen goes into a nice, long monologue with the list of questions she'd ask if she were me, and then answers them as she goes. This is what I learn:

1. I passed out on the street from exhaustion, dehydration, and malnutrition. (I'll be honest with you; I'm secretly impressed that I managed to achieve the full trifecta.)
2. Bael found me, snatched me up, carted me off, and presented me to Gwen like a half-dead, stray animal.
3. I'm not in horrible shape, though, and should be fine in a few days if I take care of myself.
4. Gwen wasn't a huge fan of treating me without my consent because it's highly illegal, and she fought tooth and nail to send me to a hospital.
5. Bael refused and strong-armed her into it by saying he'd just take me somewhere else if she didn't treat me, and did she really want it on her conscience if something bad happened to me?
6. Gwen definitely knows I'm trans, doesn't give a shit, and is really only hoping I don't sue the pants off her. She's okay with me suing Bael, though, because he's a well-meaning dumbass who deserves it. Her words, not mine.

I decide to address the last issue because Gwen is super nice and doesn't deserve to be left worrying if her good deed is going to fuck up her life.

"I'm not going to rat you out. I'm glad you helped me, Gwen, because going to a

hospital isn't an option for me right now." Without Kai or Marty advocating for me, I'd be lost in a sea of paperwork and explaining myself over and over again.

"Wonderful! I love being able to eat every day, and having a job helps me achieve this goal." Gwen does something with the IV bag hanging above me, but I don't look because I want my stomach to stay right-side-in, thank you. When she's satisfied with what she sees, she freezes and looks down at me. "I'm sorry. That was insensitive of me to say."

Uhhh... what?

My mind has to chew on that for nearly a minute before I realize she's trying to be cool about the shitty shape I've gotten myself into and not draw too much attention to how stupid a person would have to be in order to get where I am now.

"Oh, well... you know..." I trail off because I want to tell her it's okay that she's noticed my challenges, but she's being so nice about everything that I want to be nice back and not make her call me stupid directly to my face. I don't know how to follow that up, so I jump to the next hot topic. "Are you the only one who knows I'm trans?"

Gwen's face softens, going from anxious to reassuring. "Bael is the only other person who knows you're here, and I didn't tell him. I may be his friend, but you're my patient, and you're the only person who gets to decide who knows your personal information."

Aw! Gwen really deserves to be called Doctor Nice Lady. This shit may seem like common sense, but sometimes you just need to check.

"So he doesn't know?"

"I have no idea if he does or not, but Bael is about as safe as they come. If he does

know, he'd rather die than out someone without their permission."

I nod as I realize that I used up a ton of luck today by getting found by the right person.

There's a soft knock on the door, and I hear Bael say, "Gwen, can I please come in now? I just want to make sure he's okay."

Gwen gives me a funny look. "It's up to Wren."

"His name is Wren?" This is said with all the enthusiasm of a golden retriever puppy being presented with his first ball. "Can I come in, Wren? I promise not to be weird."

"No way!" I yell at the door. "You can only come in if you promise to be as weird as possible."

The door slams open so hard that it bounces back and nearly hits Bael in the face as he enters. "Oops! Sorry, I get excited sometimes." He hurries over to my cot and kneels down. "Are you feeling okay?"

Huh. Actually, I haven't really stopped to ask myself that question. I've been so caught up in the novelty of waking up in a strange place that I haven't checked in with my body.

Wow. I feel like shit. My head is spinning, the world is soft and fuzzy, and my stomach is killing me.

"I've been better," I answer.

Bael turns to Gwen, "You were supposed to fix him."

“I’d be further along with that if someone didn’t keep barging in here and interrupting me.”

Bael shoots to his feet. “Who’s doing that? I’ll make sure they don’t get back in.” He glances back and forth between me and Gwen, waiting for one of us to illuminate him.

“I don’t know. I just woke up,” I admit. “Gwen told me you’re the only person who knows I’m here, so whoever keeps barging in and interrupting Gwen must be really unobservant. Or maybe she stood directly in front of me the entire time so they couldn’t see me? If so, I wish I’d been awake to see it, because that sounds tricky as hell.”

You know that funny look Gwen had on her face earlier? It’s back, but, like, with an added flavor of something I can’t quite put my finger on.

“That does sound tricky. I’d like to see it too,” Bael agreed.

“Right? I’ve seen it done on TV, but in real life, I’ve always wondered if it was really possible. How did you do it, Gwen?”

“Maybe she had to take a course for it as part of getting her medical license.” Bael strokes his chin thoughtfully.

“That makes sense. I imagine doctors have to know all kinds of special tricks to keep their patients safe.”

Gwen’s funny look has gotten so funny that I’m mildly concerned she’s going to need her own doctor soon, and I’m not quite done with her yet. But maybe if they call a doctor for Gwen, that doctor can also help me while they’re here.

“Are you two... Wait, are you pranking me right now, Bael? You two have actually met before, and this is just a really bad joke, right?”

Constipation. I think that the extra flavor in Gwen’s expression is constipation. I hope for her sake she’s able to take care of that issue once I’m off her hands.

“Why would I joke about something like this, Gwen? You should have seen him when he fell! You nearly scared the life out of me, Wren.”

“Sorry,” I say as I reach up to rub my dizzy head. “I didn’t mean to. And if this is a joke, I missed the punchline.”

“I refuse to believe there are two people like you out there,” Gwen mutters.

“There are plenty of hot, awesome people in the world, Gwen. You’re just too cynical.” Bael gives Gwen the sweetest smile.

I nod emphatically until my head swims, because not only is Bael right, he also just said I’m hot and awesome, and I need to make sure that gets acknowledged.

Gwen just sort of sighs a please just let me get some rest sigh and then moves on from the conversation. It was getting late when I crashed, and the windows are dark now. It’s probably well past her bedtime. “Wren, is there someone I can call for you?”

My mind whirrs and clicks as I try to get it to cough up a phone number for her to call, but it comes up null program. “Sorry. I can’t think of anyone you can call right now.” I wish I’d memorized at least one number in my contact tree. Even an intern at Shelly’s office would be better than no one.

How fucking embarrassing. I know I’m being cagey with my words, but come on.

How eager would you be to admit to perfect strangers that you don't know a single piece of contact information that could help you reach your loved ones?

Until this exact moment, I've always thought Kai was being overly strict with how he manages me, but now I realize he's been coddling the shit out of me.

If I were him, I wouldn't let me out of the house without a bodyguard.

"You need someone to keep an eye on you for a few days until you feel better, Wren. Are you sure there isn't anyone you can contact?" Gwen's face is scrunched up in concern.

It doesn't matter how many times I ask it; my brain keeps coming up with a big fat goose egg. "I'm sorry, but there really isn't. Everyone is gone."

Both Bael and Gwen look really sad right now, and I'm right there with them. I miss all three members of the Wren support crew, and I can't wait to see them again. Bael and Gwen are probably able to pick that up from me.

I don't want them to be sad, though, so I smile and say, "But don't worry! I'm really good at being on my own." Big lie. "I can totally recover from this by myself. No problem." Huge fucking lie. "I don't need anyone to take care of me, I promise." Great big, huge motherfucking lie. "I'm basically good to leave now if you need me to go." That's the Titanic of lies right there, and if they take me up on it, I will crash, burn, and sink without leaving survivors. I don't think I could even walk five steps right now without keeling over, let alone find my way home without my phone.

If there is a god, they're probably watching this show through their fingers in horror right now.

"I'm sorry, Wren, but I'm going to have to insist," Gwen says firmly. "I've already

violated half of my professional morals by treating you this evening. I can't treat you here long term because this is a private practice, and I can't let you leave here alone either. We need to find a solution that will allow me to continue sleeping at night."

Oh thank JesusBuddhaFrankChristMacGee. If she'd said yes, I would probably die moments after leaving.

When I tell you Kai would be pissed...

I'd be lucky I was dead, otherwise, he'd make me do something horrible like help him with my taxes.

He did that once.

I never forgot to put my shoes away again.

Shudder.

"He can hang out with me for a few days."

Gwen and I both turn to gape at Bael.

"He's not a stray kitten, Bael. You can't stick him in a box with a towel and a bowl of food."

Actually, he probably could if the towel was clean, the box was big, and the food was pizza. I'm pretty small. I'm also really sleepy right now, so any flat surface not covered in bees will do. Also, spending a day or so getting to know Bael doesn't sound like the worst thing that could happen. It's certainly better than pretending I'm well long enough to leave here and then pass out cold in an alley as soon as I'm out of sight.

“I’m fine with Bael taking care of me if Bael is,” I announce.

Gwen looks at me like I’ve gone insane. “Seriously? You’re willing to put yourself in the hands of a total stranger? What if he turns out to be a serial murderer?”

“Hey!”

”He doesn’t look like a serial murderer.” I point at Bael in his leather harness, eyebrow piercing, leather dog collar, and towering physique. Nope. No red flags there that I can see.

“No one looks like a serial murderer, Wren.”

“I’m not a serial murderer!” Bael cries indignantly, and I notice his mouth is a beautiful cherry red. I’m not mentioning this to you for any particular reason. I just feel like it’s information you might want to know.

“See? He says he’s not.”

“How are you still alive right now, Wren? Maybe I should just take you home with me,” Gwen says in concern.

“I thought you liked me, Gwen.” Bael looks and sounds like a kicked golden retriever puppy. “Do you really think I kill people for fun?”

“Of course not, Bael. You’re a fucking angel, but Wren doesn’t know that.”

“Well, I do now. Consider me informed.” My eyelids are getting pretty heavy now, and the dizziness is starting to take over. I’d really like to stop being an adult now. I yawn hard enough to suck in a low-flying bird. Fortunately, we’re inside, so it’s a nonissue.

“Ugh. Fine!” Gwen throws up her hands. “I’ll let you take him, Bael, but if you ask me what I’m talking about when I check in with you tomorrow, I’ll make you wish you were never born.”

Bael’s eyes go wide. “I would never!”

“You’d better not.” Gwen gives him a death glare. Then she shuts it off and gives me all of her attention. Her hand is warm and gentle as she runs her fingers through my hair. “You must be tired, honey. You still need to finish your IV before I let you go, so you can sleep if you need to.”

Things fade in and out for a bit as my eyes lose the fight to stay open, and I hear Gwen say, “Bael, I’m texting a list of instructions to your manager. At the very least, I can trust that Harvey can keep this poor boy alive.”

“I’m not going to let him die. He’s not a fish.”

That’s the last thing I hear before I fall asleep.

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Chapter 4

Bael

The little guy is out cold again, and I look at Gwen in alarm. “Is he okay? What did I do? Did I do something to him?”

Christ on a crutch, maybe he is like a fish. I’ve accidentally killed the shit out of so many fish. Poor little guys...

“Calm down. You didn’t do anything to him. He’s just exhausted and fell asleep again. This is good for him.” Gwen does doctor things around Wren while I work on not freaking out.

His name is Wren! Isn’t that just the cutest name ever? That Hello Kitty sandwich I ate earlier has nothing on this guy. He’s adorable from top to bottom.

No, I didn’t feel him up when I was carrying him. First of all, I was way too freaked out at the time to think of anything other than finding someone I trust to fix him. Second, gross, okay? Just... no.

I’d kick a whole slew of assholes down a flight of stairs if they even thought about touching Wren like that while he was sleeping. I’d do it for anyone, but the idea of it being Wren gets my dumbass hero complex ramping up an extra notch or three.

So no, I didn’t feel him up while he was unconscious. But if I did happen to notice how warm, small, and perfect he felt in my arms, it was an unavoidable, if enjoyable,

side effect.

“How long until you’re done with him? I’ll call and make arrangements to have him moved.”

“I’ll be done soon, but you can’t move him while he’s asleep.”

“Of course I can. Wren said I could.”

“I was in the room the entire time, Bael. He definitely didn’t say that.”

“He said he wanted to go with me so I could take care of him. That was his consent for me to take him and keep him safe.”

“Bael, that is not what happened just now.”

“I’m pretty sure it was. We were both in the same room, right?” People tease me about being unobservant, but really, I think everyone else just fails to grasp the essence of most situations.

“This isn’t like you, Bael. I mean, yes, you’re dangerously impulsive, but you don’t usually get attached to people so quickly.”

“Come on, Gwen. I’m nice to everyone.”

“Nice isn’t the same as attached. I’m not surprised you helped this kid, but I’ve never seen you stick around for the aftermath of one of your good deeds. Are you sure you’re up for this? I can find someone else to take him in for a few days.”

Alarm shoots through me. “No! I’ve got this. If you’re really worried, you can check in with Harvey like you said.”

Gwen is crazy if she thinks I'm going to ditch the mysterious bundle of adorable human that just got dropped in my lap.

I mean, where did he come from? How did he become homeless? He seems like such a sweet little guy. How could the world throw him away like that? And will he let me fix everything for him, so he won't ever be hungry again?

I start texting the band group chat furiously so I can rally the troops to my side before Gwen can talk herself out of letting me take Wren.

Bael

I have a sick friend who needs to crash with us in the suite for a few days. Can some of you double up so he'll have somewhere to sleep?

Mel

Your friend is totally welcome! But my room might be full. I found some new friends this evening, and who knows what will happen?

Travis

A. Mel, stop bragging. Everyone knows you'll have company. You do every night you go out, you slut. B. Someone better make room because Bael NEVER invites a friend over. It can't be me though because my drum kit and my spare drum kit are taking up most of my room and half of my bed.

Mel

I can't help it if I'm popular.

Shay

My mom is staying with me tonight, so I'm out.

Travis

You invited your mommy? Is she going to tuck you in?

Mel

She'd better not clutch her pearls over my guests while she's here.

Shay

My mom isn't going to give a shit.

Travis

She's an accountant. She'll probably run screaming at the door of the suite.

Shay

Dude.

I just...

How long have we been friends? Do you really not know what being an 'accountant' means?

Mel

You never told me your mom was an accountant, Shay! *heart eyes*

Bael

I NEED YOU TO FOCUS HERE, PEOPLE.

Travis

Jesus, Bael, you don't need to shout. Why don't you sleep in the common area on a couch and let your friend sleep in your room?

Mel

Or you could share, Bael. Is he that kind of friend?

Bael: ...

Mel

Ohmygosh.

Travis

OMG.

Shay

Dude.

Harvey

Please stop adding me to your chat groups.

Mel

Harvey, my love, light of our lives, and the reason our world goes 'round, you're here because you made us add you, remember?

Shay

You said it would cut down on collateral damage if you knew what we were up to.

Harvey

And I regret every minute of it. Bael, I got Gwen's text. I'll assign you an extra assistant to help with Wren. You don't need to keep him in your suite. He can share a room with the new assistant.

Bael

NO.

I stuff my phone in my pocket so I don't have to argue with Harvey. He's not shoving Wren in some tiny broom closet with a stranger. Not when I promised Wren I'd take care of him. I'll just stick him in my bed for now and figure everything out later.

I message my driver and tell him to bring the car to the front of the building.

"Okay. I'm ready to take him," I tell Gwen. "Does he have anything I need to bring with me?"

"Harvey is sending someone over now to get him, and I'll give them a list of

instructions. You can go home.”

“Nope,” I say and then scoop Wren into my arms.

It’s okay. I made sure he’s free of the IV stuff, folks. Don’t stress.

I carry him out to the street and climb into the limo with him in my arms. Having a driver to open doors for you is mad handy, by the way.

I hug Wren to my chest as we head to the hotel. Once again, I’m not feeling him up. I’m just a little antsy because everyone seems to be eager to snatch him away from me. I can take care of him, okay? Everyone needs to chill.

He doesn’t stir at all. Even when I picked him up to carry him, it was like moving a ragdoll. A warm, soft, floppy ragdoll.

How did he make it so long on his own like this? What if someone else had found him and hurt him?

What if someone has already hurt him?

I clutch him tight at that thought and he makes a sleepy eep of protest.

“Sorry, little buddy,” I say, but I realize he’s still fast asleep. He’s really out of it.

I’m good at sleeping too, but if someone squished me like that in my sleep, I would be up and swinging before my eyes opened. It was a helpful defense mechanism when I was younger, and the fact that Wren doesn’t even have that level of self-preservation chills me to the bone.

I have to convince him to stay with me until I can fix everything for him.

Hopefully, he won't fight me on that. He said I could take care of him, after all. He won't be fully cared for until I know he's in a safe and stable situation, so that means I'm supposed to be in charge until then, right? I think we can all agree on that.

Wren continues to sleep all the way to my hotel, past security to my private elevator, and down the hallway to the door of my suite where I smile at the final set of security guards.

I know it sounds like overkill, but fans can be incredibly persistent and resourceful. I've woken up to too many strangers in my bed that I didn't invite there. It wasn't until Harvey installed the second set of guards that it stopped happening. Everyone in the band is on board with it—even Mel, who will fuck anything that moves.

"Hey, Brent. Hey, James." I try to wave at the guards posted at the door, but I'm hampered by Wren, so I wiggle a few fingers at them. "Can you get the door?"

"They're usually conscious when you guys bring 'em in, but you do you, boss," James says with a deadpan expression. I honestly can't tell when he's joking. Or if he even jokes.

All of Harvey's security guards come off a bit lacking in the personality and morals department, but deep down, I know they're decent people. When they throw people out for trying to sneak in, they always say excuse me first.

I snort and say, "Come on guys, who do you take me for?"

James doesn't respond. Instead, he faces forward while Brent opens the door for me and Wren.

Just as Brent is closing the door behind us, he tells me, "We saw nothing."

He's probably joking.

Right?

Well, even if it wasn't a joke and he is willing to cover up a kidnapping for me, at least I'm not the kind of person to take him up on it.

Everyone says I'm a total sweetheart.

They also say other stuff, but I like to focus on the positive things in life.

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Chapter 5

Wren

The next time I come to, I'm in an equally unfamiliar but much comfier place. I'm bundled up in soft, fluffy blankets and surrounded by half a dozen pillows. The whole bed smells amazing too.

Like, really amazing. It's a lot like how I imagine Henry Cavill smells...

Oh shit, I'm about to pop wood over a bed, and we haven't even been introduced.

I bolt upright and have to struggle, because wow these blankets are really wrapped around me tight. There also seems to be a stuffed cat or seven that I have to battle as I go.

As I work my way free, I hear, "Hey, buddy. It's okay. You're safe here."

My sleep-fuzzy brain manages to inform me that I recognize the voice from last night. But even if I didn't recognize him, I'd be instantly calmed just by how kind and reassuring Bael's voice is.

Once I pop free of my cocoon, I can see Bael sitting on the floor next to the massive, king-sized bed I'm in. The curtains are closed, but it's light outside, so I can see that I'm in a fancy-ass bedroom. It has two couches, what appears to be a walk-in closet, and through a half-opened door, I spot a palatial bathroom.

I lean over the bed and see a single pillow. “Were you sleeping on the floor?”

“I wasn’t going to crawl in with you. That would be a pretty scary thing for you to wake up to,” Bael says sheepishly.

“Yes... scary.” Horny would have been a better term. If I’d woken up in bed next to Bael, I probably would have humped him without realizing it.

I’m pretty hair-trigger in the mornings. Testosterone is a magical thing, but one of the side effects is that it makes me hornier than an entire flock of rabbits.

In fact, at the moment, the combo of Bael’s voice, the smell of his bed, and his gorgeous fucking face has me fighting not to wiggle to find more friction.

“Don't get me wrong,” I say. “I appreciate your gallantry, but you could have stuck me on one of your couches. I wouldn't have minded.”

I'm not a fancy guy. I've been known to sleep on a hardwood floor for hours without moving an inch. I consider that a selling point, but Kai thinks differently and is quite vocal about it.

“I'm not shitty enough to stick you on a couch when you're not feeling well.”

“Okay, but I'm super gross right now, and you probably don't want me dirtying up your bed. Wait, unless you gave me a bath while I was asleep. You didn't do that, did you?”

I give myself a quick sniff check, and wow, I’m stinky. Yeah, another gift of testosterone is that you get super stinky real easy.

Bael gives me an offended look. “Dude. If I'm not creepy enough to share a bed with

you, I am definitely not creepy enough to bathe you while you're sleeping. If you thought I was that fucked up, you shouldn't have told Gwen that you'd let me take care of you. You had options, you know.” Then his face goes all weird and he starts to backpedal. “I mean... I’m not trying to belittle you. I'm sure in your circumstances it seems like you don't have a lot of options, but I promise you that you do.”

“My circumstances?” I'm not exactly quick on the uptake, but I feel like there's some crucial information I'm missing here.

Bael looks like he's gearing himself up to say something, but a horrible grinding noise outside the bedroom tears our attention away from the conversation. He shoots to his feet, and I fight my way through pillows and stuffies to escape the bed.

My efforts are for nothing, because Bael shoves me back down and throws an entire blanket over my head.

“Stay here,” he orders, and then he's gone.

That was weird, right? It's not just me?

So here I am confused, kinda horny, very hungry, and not even remotely considering staying here.

I fight my way free of the blanket once again, navigate the forest of pillows and stuffies, and finally escape the bed. I'm woozy and I'm not loving it, but I need to know what's happening.

I'm a curious critter and staying put isn't my style. Kai hates this about me too. You really have to feel sorry for Kai being stuck with me when so much about me drives him nuts. On paper, it sounds like I'm probably the bane of his existence, but I promise you he's a really kind person and one of the only reasons why I'm still alive.

I miss Kai. I really hope his dad is okay.

But to be honest, Kai isn't my first priority right now. I need to know what the hell that noise is and maybe see if I can find a way to get Bael to let me sniff him.

Just once so I can get it out of my system.

I'd like to take a shower first though, just in case the sniffing goes really, really well.

I wobble my way across the floor, through the door, and stumble out into a short hallway. I follow the sounds of, "What the fuck are you doing?" and "For the love of god, make it stop!" and "How did you break the kitchen making soup?"

The first voice is Bael's, but the other two are strangers' voices. Then I hear, "Someone go get Harvey!" Followed immediately by, "Don't you dare get Harvey!" Neither voice is Bael's.

I'm completely winded by the time I make it to the kitchen, so I have to lean against the door frame as I take in the scene in front of me.

"Calm down everyone, it's just Elvis." A tall, androgynous person shouts to be heard but waves their hand airily in the direction of the godawful noise coming from the vent over the stove.

"Who's Elvis?" I ask, but no one pays attention to me.

"It's not Elvis. Also, Elvis isn't real. And why would you name our ghost Elvis in the first place?" This is Bael. He's holding a chair and looks a lot like he's trying to find something to hit with it, as if one could battle an annoying noise.

It's pretty cute.

“Don't listen to him, Elvis. You're perfect and we love you,” the androgynous person says.

“No, we don't. Shut up and go away, Elvis.” This comes from a little waifish guy in the corner covering his ears. I think he'd be shooting the noise the finger if he had his hands free.

I shit you not, the sound gets louder.

“Bael, get Travis out of here before he makes everything worse.”

“On it,” Bael says and drops the chair. Then he scoops the little guy off the floor, and when he turns towards the door and sees me, without missing a beat, he scoops me up, tucks me under his other arm, and carries both of us out the door.

Behind us, I hear the androgynous person cooing to their Elvis ghost, saying, “Don't worry about them, baby. They're all too stupid to know how great you are.”

The sound gets a lot quieter after that.

This place is awesome, and I never want to leave.

“Where are we going?” I ask the waifish guy I'm face-to-face with because we are both under Bael's arms in twin football holds.

“Somewhere we can't get in the way of Mel sweet-talking Elvis out of destroying our kitchen for a second time,” Waif-boy says.

“Third time,” Bael corrects.

“Why don't you believe in Elvis?” I ask Bael.

“Because he’s not real.”

“I think his millions of adoring fans beg to differ,” Waif-boy says and then flails wildly when Bael tosses him onto a huge, white, faux-fur couch. “Hey!”

I expect similar treatment, but instead of giving me the ole heave-ho, Bael sits on the opposite matching couch and arranges me neatly beside him.

“You didn’t stay put,” Bael says to me with betrayed puppy eyes.

They are fucking brutal, and I consider offering him a new car in compensation. I don’t, though, because I’m pretty sure he doesn’t need anyone to get him a new car.

Did I mention how nice this place is? Either Bael is loaded, or he lives with someone who is.

“No. I’m not very good at that.” I would say sorry, but I’m not, and there’s no point starting our friendship on a foundation of lies.

Bael makes a little hmmph sound and ruffles my hair.

“If you don’t believe in Elvis, why did you drag us out of there?” Waif boy doesn’t give Bael a chance to respond before pulling out a bag of M&Ms and chucking it at me. “I’m Travis. Eat something before you die on my couch and make Bael sad.”

It was such a non-sequitur that my dumb ass would have let the package hit me in the face, but Bael reaches out a hand and plucks it out of the air. He gives Travis a wtf man? gesture, and says, “I dragged you out of there because I didn’t want you to add to the chaos, and don’t throw things at Wren.”

“I wasn’t planning on dying on your couch,” I say as I accept the M&Ms from Bael.

“The floor then,” Travis is tearing into another pack of M&Ms with his teeth, so it comes out a little muffled. “You look like you’re moments from joining Elvis in the kitchen, and this place only has room for one ghost, so eat.”

The noise from the kitchen stops, but I can still hear quiet murmuring.

“Is... is that guy flirting with your kitchen?”

“No, she’s just flirting with Elvis.” Travis is actively eating now and it’s kind of gross to watch him talk with his mouth full.

“Oops! Thank you for correcting me.” Trans folk make mistakes about this stuff too, y’all. You just breathe and move on.

“Nah,” Travis waves his hand casually like he’s waving away a mystery fart in the room. “Mel accepts any and all pronouns. When she’s sweet-talking Elvis?—”

“Who isn’t real,” Bael cuts in.

“Who is definitely real,” Travis says through gritted teeth and starts over. “When she’s sweet-talking Elvis, she’s more femme to me, so that’s what I’m going with right now.”

Bael grins. “Personally, I just call Mel a slut. It’s a nice gender-neutral term.”

“It is, isn’t it?” Mel glides into the room with an aura of complete fabulosity.

In my experience, non-binary folk tend to fall into two categories: complete, feral cave goblins, or ethereal creatures touched by the divine. Mel is definitely in the second category. But, like, if everyone wanted to fuck them.

Mel lands next to me and gives me a look that says they've clocked me as trans, and I blink up at them. Most folks don't anymore, but trans folk can usually tell. I wonder how Mel will play this.

"M&Ms aren't food, Travis," Mel announces and snatches my candy right out of my hand. "What do you want, honey? I'll DoorDash it. Elvis wants to be alone with his feelings for a bit, or else I'd cook you something."

"You don't need to feed me—" I begin, but everyone talks over me.

"Randy's has great soup. Let's order from there since Elvis wouldn't let me make any."

"We were just at Randy's, Travis. Why didn't you get soup then?"

"That was six fucking hours ago, Bael. Keep up."

"Oh yeah, right. I can order you a sandwich, Wren. They've got some really cute ones."

"Wren doesn't want a Hello Kitty sandwich?—"

"Who wouldn't want a Hello Kitty sandwich?" Bael looks like Travis smacked him in the face, but then he switches gears and says, "We always order from Randy's though. Maybe Wren would like something different."

I've never eaten at Randy's a single time in my life or met these people, but it's sweet of Bael to worry.

"Is Randy's making anything other than breakfast right now?" I ask.

I'm assuming it's morning. The light outside looks soft, and the sun is either in the process of coming up or going down. This is me being optimistic about not having slept through an entire day cycle.

Bael gives me a sunny smile, all warm and excited like a golden retriever. "Randy's will make anything for us. Our sleep schedule is flipped backward, and everyone there is super cool about that. Hazards of the job, you know?"

"I fucked Randy once," Mel says, which has nothing to do with food, but I'm here for it.

"No one has fucked Randy, Mel. Not even you," A new guy says as he enters the room. "No one even knows who Randy is." At first glance, he's nothing special. Brownish hair, brownish eyes, tallish but not remarkably so. You know the type. I mean, with Bael and Mel in the room outshining everything with their presence, I should be forgiven for thinking this guy is ordinary. But on a closer look, I can see he has something about him, some inner presence that makes him a contender for second-most dazzling person in the room. Plus, he has these big-ass hands that you know could finger-bang you straight into the sun.

Yes, I'm always this thirsty. It's the testosterone, remember? I am nothing but a helpless bystander in a hormone stampede and should really be fucked out of my misery.

I discreetly peek at Bael's hands, and the new guy's hands become dead to me. Bael's hands are big too, but instead of having a lanky frame like the new guy, he has a matching body to go with his huge hands. I ogle Bael's hands, enjoying how strong they appear. They're just the right side of veiny, and my eyes follow said veins up his forearms where they disappear under the soft, cream-colored sleeves he has rolled up at the elbow.

“Where are your fishnets?” I whisper to Bael while the new guy argues with Mel about someone named Randy. I’m not following their conversation, but I think they might be fighting over him or something.

Bael gives me a sunny smile, and I realize I have his complete attention. It’s like the chaotic conversation around us isn’t even happening. I see myself reflected in his warm, brown eyes, and somehow, I know without a doubt that I have one hundred percent of his focus.

It’s intoxicating.

“I changed clothes while you were asleep,” he says. Something about that makes Bael’s eyes go wide in alarm, and he starts speaking rapidly. “I was in a different room, though, I promise. But I didn’t leave you alone in a strange room. I kept the door open.” Bael’s expression grows more alarmed, and his cheeks are pink now. “Not that I was peeping on you while you were asleep when I was naked! I would never?—”

“Bael, I’m going to rescue you from yourself now, and I expect to be promoted to first best friend status for it,” Mel says, which is pretty impressive. I wasn’t paying attention to what they were saying with the new guy, so the fact that they were paying attention to me and Bael speaks to a level of multitasking I can’t claim ownership of. Mel goes up to the new guy, twines their arm with his, and says, “Shay, darling. Please introduce us to the ravishing woman standing in the doorway over there.”

Shay, the new guy, scowls. “Just because you didn’t get to fuck Randy doesn’t mean I’ll let you fuck my mom.”

The woman in the doorway laughs and enters the room. “Sweetheart, I think I love your friends already. Also, it’s amusing to think you have any say over my sex life.” She pushes her son out of the way and holds out a hand to Mel. When Mel takes it,

she lifts their hand to her lips and kisses it. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. Please, call me Laura.”

Mel’s face flushes, and it makes me think they aren’t usually on the receiving end of aggressive flirting, but they hold their own by coming back with, “I have a bottle of something ridiculously expensive in my room we can share if you’d like to get to know me better.”

“You can share it out here with all of us,” Shay says firmly.

If he was using that voice on me, I’d probably be all like, “Okie-dokie, sir! Whatever you say.” Because I’m not a leader. I’m not really a follower either, though. More like a meanderer. I sort of drift through life bumping against the boundaries my people have set up for me. If someone uses a nice, firm voice on me to enforce those boundaries, something in my tummy goes all fizzy and funny, and I am pretty much ready to do whatever they say.

Neither Mel nor Laura are followers because they ignore Shay completely.

“I have a private balcony with a gorgeous view of the city,” Mel says, taking Laura lightly by the elbow and gesturing down a hallway.

Shay stands there frozen as the two walk away, and he doesn’t snap out of it until Travis says, “Looks like your room is free now, Shay. You and Bael can bunk together, and Wren can stay in Bael’s room.”

Shay throws Travis a withering glare before tearing down the hallway after Mel and Laura.

“Anyway, I wasn’t peeping on you in your sleep,” Bael says anxiously and takes my hand. Then he drops my hand like it burned him.

I'm getting a ton of mixed signals here, right? It's not just me?

Maybe it's because I need a shower...

There's a loud smack from Travis's side of the room, and I see him with a hand on his forehead. "Buddy." Travis seems to lose words for a bit there, and I think maybe he's tired. Being a night owl takes a toll on a person, especially when you keep seeing the sun come up from the wrong side of the day. When Travis removes his hand, he shakes his head and says, "If even Mel can't wingman you, you're fucked. You two sort yourselves out. I'm going to bed."

Travis heaves himself off the couch, stretches his arms over his head, and yawns. For a little dude, he's pretty jacked, so the yawn is a visually informative one. He also has a teeny, tiny happy trail.

Everyone in this place is a solid fucking ten. Where am I? Queer Heaven?

I mean, I'm just assuming it's a queer-friendly space given what Gwen told me earlier and Mel's sheer existence. And maybe everyone here isn't queer, but even so, the eye candy alone is on the same level as the cast of *The Mummy* for causing a sexuality identity crisis.

Hell, I bet even Elvis the ghost is hot, but I'm not leaving Bael's side in order to find out.

Because, folks? As much as you've been getting my running commentary on the hot-ass people I've met tonight, none of them hold a candle to Bael. He's not even on the scale. He's got his own scale and no one else is allowed anywhere near it. Mel is pretty spectacular, but there's just something about Bael that makes him seem more real than anyone I've ever met.

I notice these people because I'm alive and horny, but I already know who the prize is here.

But—and here's the cold, harsh truth part—I'm pretty sure Bael is way out of my league. It's okay, though. I'm used to that. I'm a weird little dude. I'm an over-sheltered, under-socialized house cat, and I know without a doubt that I don't belong here.

I'm stupid, but I'm not that stupid.

So I content myself with watching Travis strut his eye-candy self past us and sneakily bask in Bael's hard, warm body next to me. I don't need to do anything about my horny thoughts. I'm just lucky to be here.

“Soooo... food? Gwen told me to give you stuff that's easy on your stomach, so maybe not a sandwich.” Bael's inner glow dims a little. “I'm sorry for forgetting and letting Travis give you candy earlier. I'll get better at this, I promise.”

“Better at what?”

“Taking care of you.”

Oh dear. My face burns as I realize I basically threw myself at a stranger and gave him no choice but to be my replacement Kai. It doesn't matter how beautiful he is, he doesn't deserve having the Wren Show shoved on him without warning.

“You don't actually have to take care of me,” I say quickly. “I can go home now.”

“Home?” The level of doubt Bael's expression shows makes me think he has low confidence in my ability to survive on my own.

I think about my chances of making it home without collapsing from hunger and ask, “Do you mind if I grab something to eat here first?” Even if I do manage to make it home, I’ll be back to square one—in my condo alone without food.

“Hmm...” Bael’s forehead is pinched in concern. “You should definitely stay and eat, but you don't look very steady right now. Why don't you take a nap after eating, and we'll figure out what to do next?”

This sounds like a fabulous idea to me, so I shamelessly agree and say, “This is a genius plan.”

A little bit more time in Bael's presence is something I can't pass up, and getting to sleep in that bed again? Yeah, that's what we're going to be doing today. I'll try to hunt down my shame later after I don't feel so shaky.

I tell Bael that I don't really care what we eat, and that he should order since it seems like he's familiar with this Randy's place. While we wait for the food, Bael info dumps what seems to be his entire life story on me. I'm telling you, this is the sweetest guy in the world.

He’s the same age as me, but unlike me, he didn't have the best life starting out. According to him, he was trailer park trash. I don't really know what that is, so I have to ask.

“It means I lived in a busted old RV surrounded by fifty other trailers and campers in various stages of falling apart. All the kids in the neighborhood ran wild and free like a pack of wolves. In hindsight, it was pretty fun.”

Then he tells me stories involving makeshift pirate forts in the woods and stealing fruit from a local orchard. He assures me that the owner was a total asshole and had it coming.

Bael's sad smile makes me think that it was a lot less fun than he was making it out to be. I get the impression that he was stealing fruit because he was hungry and not because he was a bratty child.

I don't tell him anything personal about myself because other than losing my parents, my childhood was idyllic. My family had plenty of money, we lived in a nice house in a nice neighborhood, and my parents made sure I made friends with 'all the right people.' After they died, I had Marty and then Shelly and Kai to look after me. It seems like a shitty thing to talk about after learning about Bael's past, so I say nothing about my childhood.

When he asks me questions about my life, I get flustered and go quiet. Then Bael gives me the softest smile and changes the subject. I don't really know what to do with that, but Bael is happy to carry the lion's share of the conversation, and listening to him talk is fascinating, so it isn't like the conversation is struggling.

We also have a startling amount of things in common. We both love retro video games, vintage eighties toys, and cheesy old B movies. I lose track of how much time we spend falling down that rabbit hole together, but the experience is magical. No one else I know is as into this stuff as deeply as I am, and I'm pretty sure I could do this with Bael forever.

When the food arrives, we're chatting away like old friends. I know this sounds crazy, but it feels like I've known him forever.

That's probably why after we finish eating, I allow him to shuffle me back into his room to take a shower before I go back to sleep.

"I don't think you should be alone in there in case you pass out again," Bael says. His face goes bright red and he hurries to add. "I'm not trying to creep on you, I swear."

I don't tell him that I'd be okay with it if he wants to creep on me a little bit. Instead, I say, "I promise I'll be fine. I feel much better after eating."

"At least leave the door open so I'll hear you if something's wrong. I may be new at this caretaking thing, but I'm pretty sure letting you drown in the shower is a huge no-no."

So that's what we do. And if you think I was horny before, let me tell you that it's nothing compared to being naked in Bael's bathroom knowing he's listening to me with nothing between us but some mist.

By the time I finish and I'm wrapped in the massive, fluffy robe Bael has in his bathroom, I'm shaky again, and I realize he was right when he suggested I stay and sleep some more.

When I leave the bathroom, Bael is right there with hover hands, looking like he wants to snatch me up off the ground and carry me to the bed.

That might be my imagination, though.

He does, however, stick me in his bed with at least a dozen cat stuffies. He's got me tucked in so tight I can barely move. He hovers a bit more before finally saying, "Okay, I'll let you get some rest now," and then he moves away from the bed.

Now, you'd think that after such a wild night, I wouldn't be able to sleep, but with a full belly and the weight of half a toy store's worth of stuffies on me, I was out like a light. The last thing I saw was Bael stretching out on the couch closest to the bed.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:43 pm

Chapter 6

Bael

“Dude, you gotta get up. Don’t make me get Harvey in here.”

My eyes fly open at the name Harvey. One of my hands lashes out and covers Travis’s mouth while the other grabs him by the shoulder to pull him close.

“Don’t you dare send Harvey in here. He might scare Wren,” I hiss.

I scramble off the couch and drag Travis with me out of my room. I take a quick peek at Wren to make sure he wasn’t disturbed by Travis’s invasion and heave a sigh of relief when I see nothing but a tuft of blond hair poking up from the blanket cocoon on my bed.

When I turn back to Travis, he looks breathless and ruffled, and I realize I’d just scooped him up and carried him away.

Again.

I have a bad habit of doing that. I tend to act first and think later, and when I see that something needs to happen, I just make it happen and deal with the fallout afterward.

But carrying people without their permission is on the don’t fucking do it list, and I signed the list just like everyone else in the band did.

“Sorry,” I tell Travis, trying my best to actually look sorry.

I’m not, though. I really didn’t want Travis to wake Wren up, and negotiating his departure would probably have done it. The next time I get a chance, I’ll sneak an ‘except in case of emergencies’ onto the list. It won’t be hard. It’s hanging in the kitchen, so unless Elvis our fake ghost rats me out, no one will ever know.

“What does Harvey want?” I ask, keeping my voice down. I motion Travis away from my door and head toward the common area. Travis is excitable, and I need to get him away from my room.

See? I’m doing a great job at being a caretaker, yes? I just know I’m going to get even better as time goes on. Maybe I should get a book to read on the subject. I’ll google it later.

I like to google things, in case you hadn’t noticed. Learning is important. And I’m pretty sure there’s an old saying that goes something like, ‘Education is not the Preparation H of life, but it will teach you how to apply it.’

Yeah. I don’t understand that one at all. Do you? I’m sure it means something incredibly profound, though.

Travis bites his lips anxiously and says, “We’ve got an interview in less than two hours, Bael. Harvey is freaking out because we all forgot.” He starts pulling on my arm like he thinks that if I start hurrying now, it’ll spare us all from Harvey’s wrath. It won’t. Once Harvey decides to be miffed about something, he stays that way until he thinks we’ve all learned our lesson.

Instead of letting Travis drag me, I keep going at my own pace. “Did Harvey put it in the group chat? We wouldn’t have forgotten if he’d done that.”

“God, don’t tell him that. Then he’ll start spamming us, and we’ll have to make a secret chat to get away from him.”

When we get to the common room, I see Harvey standing there glaring down at Shay and Mel, who are both sprawled out on the same couch, tangled together in an exhausted mess.

Harvey looks exactly like you’d imagine the manager would for a band that just went double platinum for the third time in a row. Tall, trim, always wears an expensive suit that never seems to wrinkle no matter how long he’s been in it, wears expensive designer glasses, and looks like he’s covered up at least ten felonies during his career.

Harvey shoots me a withering glare as soon as I enter the room, and Travis hides behind me.

“Bael, just because you got a new pet doesn’t mean you can forget your responsibilities. And dragging the rest of the band down with you?—”

I storm up to Harvey and get right in his face, looming over him, barely restraining the urge to grab him by his collar and yank him up on his toes. “He’s not a pet,” I growl. “He’s a person.”

Harvey’s eyes go wide and his cool-as-ice demeanor shatters. “I’m sorry, Bael. That was... inappropriate of me. It won’t happen again.”

“Good.”

The alarm fades from his face like it was never there, and he goes right back to being irritated. Honestly, the fact that he slowed his roll at all tells me that I probably scared the shit out of him.

He deserved it, by the way, and I have no regrets.

Harvey continues like nothing happened. “The four of you were supposed to be in make-up chairs already. What happened to the assistant I sent to help you with Wren? I told her to make sure you all got to the studio on time.”

Travis, Shay, and I all try our best not to look at Mel because bros don’t rat other sibs out, but the slut is shameless and says, “She’s tired, so I gave her the day off.”

Ok, I didn’t know for sure that Mel banged our new assistant, but come on. Harvey vets the hell out of everyone he lets near us, and if one of his assistants fucks up, it’s probably because of Mel’s dick.

Harvey closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose. He also holds out a hand with one finger pointing up in the universal sign for just give me a second to get my shit together.

He takes a deep breath, opens his eyes, and says calmly, “Just get in the fucking car.” His smile could have come out of a Jaws movie, so we all race for the door. Shay is half draped over Mel’s back because he’s not a morning person.

Halfway to the door, I skid to a halt. Travis slams into my back, but he does this cool acrobatic thing where he manages to roll around me and keep going. It’s probably due to the rigorous dance training we all get.

So Travis manages to escape while I’m busy being awesome. “I can’t leave Wren alone,” I inform Harvey. “He might get scared.”

Harvey puts a hand on my back and makes a shooin motion to me with his other hand. And because he knows that I won’t be moved until I want to move, he doesn’t bother trying to force me. “I’ll have the door guards look out for him. Get in the car.”

“But—“

“And I’ll kick Allie out of Mel’s bed since she’s supposed to be helping keep an eye on your friend.”

“Be nice about it. I think Shay’s mom is in there too,” I interrupt helpfully.

Harvey doesn’t even blink at that one. He’s been dealing with us for a while now, so he’s used to our shit. “I’ll make sure not to wake her if she is. I’ll get your new assistant up and let her know that Wren is to be in perfect condition, both physically and emotionally, upon your return or else she’s out of a job.”

I allow the pressure of Harvey’s hand on my back to propel me toward the door. “You’re still going to let her work with us after banging Mel? That’s not like you.”

Harvey snorts. “Of course not, but I can find her a job going through fan mail or something.”

“As long as Wren is okay, right?” I don’t want someone working for us if they aren’t nice to Wren. That would make me a shitty caretaker.

“Sure. Whatever you want, just get in the car.”

When we reach the door, Harvey tells Brent to escort me down and orders him to make sure everyone is in the limo and on our way before coming back up here. I glance in the direction of my room for a moment before finally letting myself be herded away.

I hope Wren will be okay. What if he wakes up without me there? What if he leaves?

Brent has already hustled me into the limo and we’re on the road by the time I have

this thought, so unless I fling open the door and bail out, it's too late to do anything about it.

I can't even bribe the driver because he's terrified of Harvey. I don't blame him really. Our manager can put the fear of god into a lifelong atheist.

“Hey man, you're really worried about Wren, aren't you?” Travis says, poking me in the shoulder. “You're never this quiet.”

Mel is facing me, and the slut kicks my foot. “Allie will take good care of him, I promise. She's really nice.”

“Forgive me if I have doubts about the person you fucked just so you could get a few more hours of sleep,” I grumble.

“Hey, we all got those few more hours of sleep, so you should be thanking me. Shay knows what I'm talking about.” Mel elbows Shay who slumps over into the slut's lap.

“If he was awake, Shay would probably be kicking you right now for fucking his mom,” I grumble.

“Fine, Mr. Grouchy. But I'll have you know Shay fucked my mom first, so I was well within my rights.”

Bandmates, right? The chaos is real. Don't be confused, we love each other like siblings, but that means we also fight like siblings. It never lasts long though. Inevitably, we are all drawn back together by our mutual love of making music. My bandmates are my ride-or-dies, and I'd help bury a body for any of them.

Shay lets out an incredibly loud snore that shocks him awake. He jerks upright and says, “I'm awake. I was paying attention.” When he realizes it's just us in the limo

with him, he relaxes and asks, “What did I miss?”

Travis laughs. “What do you remember?”

Shay is notorious for sleepwalking his way through the first hour or so after being awake, so it's a valid question.

“I remember Mel sleeping with my mom, and me going on an eBay shopping spree to drive those mental images out of my mind.”

“Did you get me anything?” Mel asks shamelessly.

“You just wait and see what I got you,” Shay says and there's a hint of threat in his voice.

If I wasn't so grouchy about being forced awake and dragged away from Wren, I would be grilling Shay about his finds. His eBay sprees are always epic. One time he spent ten thousand dollars on vintage Transformers from the 80s. All of them were in mint condition and still in the package. We spent a week gleefully unboxing them all and playing with them before donating them to a local children's hospital.

Some collectors would call this sacrilege, but Shay thinks that leaving a toy in a box for eternity instead of playing with it like it was intended is a crime against humanity.

I think playing with Transformers is cool, and I'm gonna fucking play with them every chance I get.

I wonder if Wren likes to play with toys, or if he thinks he's too old for them now. From the conversation we had about how cool old toys were earlier, I have a feeling he might be like me in that aspect. Only one way to find out. I kept a few Transformers for myself, so when I get home, maybe he'll want to play with them

with me.

They're way cooler than the Transformers you can buy now because the laws governing children's toys were a lot less strict in the 80s. That means that there are tons of little parts on the old ones that can break off and you can choke on if you're not careful. I learned my lesson on that one. This probably means that maybe we shouldn't have donated them to a children's hospital, but sick kids deserve to have fun too, okay?

When we get to the studio, we're rushed straight to makeup and wardrobe. Trina grabs me, shoves me into a chair, and starts fighting my hair into submission. It's a wild tangle because I had such a weird night and took a nap on a tiny couch, but Trina is amazing, and she manages to make my hair look cool like she always does.

She does swear a whole lot though.

My guys cover for me during the interview because I'm a million miles away. Instead of being the lovable goth puppy our fans adore, I keep staring off into space. I can't stop worrying about Wren waking up alone.

I answer when I'm asked questions, but I'm not paying attention to what I say, so I have no idea what's going on. I'm probably going to hear all about this later from Harvey, but I can't seem to get myself to snap out of my daze.

I stay in my spaced-out state until I realize everyone in the room is staring at me. The host, my bandmates, and all the people in the audience.

"Are you serious, Bael? You have a special someone?" The host, a thirty-something DJ who was wildly popular about a decade ago, is standing over his desk like he's about to climb on top of it from excitement.

What the hell did I just say?

“Um...” I have no clue how to respond, so I just give up and leave my um hanging there like a gravity-defying brick.

“After three years of touring and being in the limelight, not once have you ever admitted to dating someone or being interested in anyone. This person must be really special,” DJ Whatshisface says like he's just discovered the cure to cancer. I'm still not convinced he's not about to climb over the table.

Some people get waaaay too excited about rock stars sometimes.

I throw Mel a panicked look, and the slut jumps into action.

“What Bael means is that he's met a really good friend recently. They hit it off right away and he's hanging out in new friendship bliss.”

DJ Whatshisface wilts visibly and sits back down in his chair. “Bael, you nearly gave all of us a heart attack. The number of fans out there who are in love with you would revolt if they found out you were dating someone.”

I’ve never understood this. Mel, Travis, and Shay are all banging their way across the world, but it's my sex life everyone is curious about.

I have one, obviously, but they’re single encounters and relatively few and far between. Harvey makes my partners sign NDAs for their sake as well as mine. My fans go bonkers anytime they think there's a chance I'm seeing someone.

I never am though. I'm just so busy, and I’m not interested in a conga line of meaningless hookups like the rest of the band is. It's just so difficult to date when everyone knows who you are, you know? Yes, it sounds cliché, but it's also true. I

want love, and I'm not willing to settle for someone who only wants me because I'm famous.

Maybe that's why I'm so taken with Wren. I seriously doubt he has any idea who I am. The way he reacted to me when we met made me feel like he was meeting a random stranger. I imagine living on the streets like he does means he doesn't have a lot of time to catch up on pop culture.

We get through the rest of the interview relatively unscathed, but when we get back to the green room Harvey is giving me the stink-eye with his arms crossed and his foot tap, tap, tapping away.

“What?” I ask, avoiding eye contact.

“You know what,” Harvey says in a long-suffering voice. I notice he's using the very best one in his arsenal.

“I have no idea what you mean,”

“You can't keep him, Bael. As you said before, he's not a pet. We can take care of him until he's well, and we can even make sure he has a good start on life, but he can't follow us on the tour. If your fans even suspect that the two of you are dating, they'll eat him alive. It would be cruel to make someone like him face that.”

I don't believe that bullshit for a second. Sure, my fans are overly invested in my personal life, but for the most part, they're all kind people. Call me naïve, but I believe that if I finally find someone I love, they'll support me and not murder them.

I'm not saying I love Wren. We just fucking met for god's sake. All I know is that I can't stop thinking about him.

I shrug at Harvey in response, and he sighs at me. He uses the best one of those in his arsenal too, but I refuse to relent. This is my life after all. Not his.

I don't know where this is going with Wren, but I'm going to ride it until the wheels fall off.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:43 pm

Chapter 7

Wren

When I wake up, the sun is blinding me through a crack between the curtains. It may be October, but, man, when the sun wants to shine in New England, it goes all out.

I fight my way free of Bael's bed for the third time today, and I gotta tell you, if I'm going to be struggling in this bed, I don't want it to be due to stuffies and bedding. Once I'm free, I look around, but there's not a single Bael to be seen.

Huh. I wonder where he went?

Since he's not here, I poke around his bedroom because I didn't really get to see much of it earlier. I make my way over to one of the little couches and notice the pillows on it are all squished, and there's a blanket on the floor in front of it.

The idea of Bael scrunching his huge body down enough to sleep on such a tiny couch makes me laugh.

I wish I'd seen that.

Along one wall is a huge entertainment system with the largest number of video games I've ever seen in my life. On another is a spectacular collection of toys and figurines.

This guy knows how to live. It's never even occurred to me to do something like this.

I make a mental note to discuss with Kai the logistics of having something like it in my condo as soon as possible.

I could play with his video games and toys right now, but I'd rather go find Bael. Maybe we could play with them together. I should probably leave after that, though, because I don't want to wear out my welcome. Also, any day now, one of my people will come looking for me, and they'll freak out if they don't find me.

After poking around in Bael's closet (He has an amazing assortment of clothes, and if they weren't too big for me, I would try everything on.), I finally leave his room.

Why did I poke around in his closet? Because I can't find where the dirty clothes I wore last night went, so all I have to wear is a robe so big it drags on the floor behind me, and I had to wrap the belt around me three times in order to keep it from dragging on the floor too.

I take a deep breath and steel my spine before going out into the hallway. I tell myself that these people won't care what I'm wearing because none of them seem like the judgmental kind, and if they are, they should have left me some fucking clothes to wear.

Once I get to the common room, I don't see Bael or the guys I met last night. Instead, I see Laura and a woman I've never met before having coffee and laughing together. I pull the robe around me tightly and join them.

"Good morning, sweetheart. Did you sleep well?" Laura asks. I forgive her for infantilizing me because she doesn't know me, and I probably look like a child in this massive robe. Generally, I don't mind my loved ones treating me like a little cutie pie because I am and should be treated as such. Strangers though? They gotta earn that right.

I nod mutely and realize doing that probably made me look even more like a child.

Goddammit.

“I heard you weren't feeling well, so you should let us take care of you until the boys are back. Are you hungry?”

“I could eat,” I say, realizing that my stomach is growling like crazy. “I don't want oatmeal.” I had enough of that this morning, thank you.

“Noted,” Laura laughs. It's lovely, musical, and takes away all my reservations.

“Hello, new person,” I say shyly to the lady sitting beside Laura.

The woman stands and says, “I'm Allie, and you must be Wren.” She holds out her hand for me to shake, and I take it awkwardly.

“That's me.” Jesus, I'm an awkward person. I really need my Kai. I don't realize how truly bad I am at socializing until he's gone.

“Let me go fix you something to eat in the kitchen,” Allie says. “I'll be right back.”

“Watch out for Elvis,” I call to her back as she heads towards the kitchen.

She waves her hand in acknowledgement and then she's gone.

“So how do you know my son?” Laura asks. “I didn't get a chance to talk to you before I got caught up with Mel.”

“I don't know him actually. Bael brought me here while I was sleeping. Do you know where I am right now?” I'm used to being fuzzy on the details of my daily life, but

this is information I probably need.

Laura looks at me incredulously. “Oh, honey. Please tell me they didn't kidnap you.”

“Of course they didn't.” I'm probably not lying here. I did tell Bael that he could take care of me, after all. “I was very sleepy last night.”

Laura nods like what I said explains everything. Bael did tell me everyone has a wonky sleep schedule, so maybe everyone's sleepy all the time and they're all just weird here.

This place sounds perfect actually. I hate to have to leave, but after I eat, I'm really going to need to get out of here. If Bael isn't here, there's no reason for me to stay.

This thought makes me super sad, but there's nothing I can do about it. It's just common sense. Overstaying my welcome is the last thing I want to do to such nice people.

That doesn't stop me from snarfing down everything in sight when Allie returns with a great big honking tray covered in a delicious assortment of healthy food.

I'm not a huge fan of that last part, though. Healthy food is very meh for me, but at least Allie made sure it was all the yummy kind.

Laura and Allie are both charming breakfast/ lunch companions. Laura tells me stories about her clients and her Onlyfans platform. She sounds like the coolest mom ever, and I hope Shay knows how lucky he is. Even if I'm pretty sure Laura banged Mel last night.

It's gotta be weird to have your roommate hook up with your mom. But I don't have a mom, so I'll take anything I can get, and Laura sounds like the cream of the crop

when it comes to moms.

Once the food is done, I offer to help carry everything to the kitchen and help wash the dishes. Sure, I'm a little nervous about Elvis, but he didn't bother Allie, so I'll probably be safe, right?

“Thank you, hun, but I can't let you do that,” Allie says and takes all the food away to the kitchen.

“Does Allie live here?” I ask Laura.

“No, she just arrived this morning. Only Shay, Mel, Bael, and Travis live here. This is their base of operation. Even though they hop around a lot, they always come back here. Eventually, they decided to take up permanent residence in this hotel because they like it so much.”

Laura's answer sparked so many questions in me that I don't know where to start, so I address the last part first. “Hop around?”

Laura leans back and studies me. “What do you know about the boys?”

“Literally nothing.”

“Oookay then.” It's way suspicious, but Laura's been nothing but nice, so I let it pass. Laura keeps going though, saying, “The boys finished most of their, um... business here in Boston last night, so they'll be moving on to Connecticut soon.”

“Business?” The questions just keep rolling in, and I'm fighting to keep up.

“You really have no idea, do you? You're not just playing dumb.”

“I just showed up last night.” Do I sound defensive? I’m pretty sure I do, but wow, I hate when people call me dumb. I can use it when I talk about myself, but other people should keep it as an inside thought, don’t you think?

I don’t call her on it. My fingers do start getting twitchy though.

Whenever I’m uncomfortable or feeling wiggly inside, it always makes me want to draw. It’s a coping mechanism I developed when my parents died. When the inside stuff gets too big, I put it on a page and it becomes way more manageable.

It’s not something that usually sends me to Artland because it’s a conscious choice, but it’s enough of a danger that I know better than to ask for paper and pencil. I’m in a strange environment with a stranger. Kai made me promise to hell and back again that I wouldn’t draw unless I was somewhere safe.

“You belong to Bael, right?” Laura asks, and it’s such a non-sequitur that I forget all about my twitchy fingers.

“I don’t belong to anyone.” Belonging to Bael sounds nice though, and my stomach wiggles from admitting I don’t. I don’t want to draw anymore. I just want to run away. “Actually, I need to leave now, but it was really nice meeting you.” I get up from the couch and search for the exit.

“Wait!” Allie calls from the kitchen and races into the common room. “Before you leave, I need you to sign something.”

“Sign something?”

For the first time since meeting Bael, alarm bells go off in my head. Why do I need to sign something before I leave?

Allie shoves about a million papers in my face. “It's a standard NDA. All hookups are required to sign one.”

What the ever-loving fuck?

“We-we didn’t hook up. Bael just let me crash in his room for the night.” Does Bael do this sort of thing often? He doesn’t seem like the type of person to ditch a person after fucking them. And if he is, it’s pretty mean of him not to bang me before ditching me.

Great. Now I'm sad.

My face must be showing that, because Laura jumps up and gives me a hug. “Sweetheart, don't let a one-night-stand get to you. You're too good for him, and if he's bailing on someone like you, he's not worth being sad over.”

“I absolutely second that, Wren,” Allie says, but then she sticks the papers in my face again, completely ruining the sentiment. “Once you sign these, I can get you a ride anywhere you need to go. You’ll never have to see him again.”

I dodge the papers Allie is thrusting in my face. Kai told me never to sign anything if he isn't there, and I gotta tell you, I hope to god Kai never even finds out I was here.

If he does, he’ll never buy my favorite breakfast cereal ever again. In fact, I'm willing to bet on him going directly to the company and every grocery store in town and terrorizing them into making sure I'm never able to buy them myself either.

Kai is a wholeass experience.

I'm pretty sure it takes someone that extra in order to keep me alive, though. Plus he’s better at playing Cards Against Humanity than any other person on the planet,

including Marty, who has the darkest sense of humor of anyone I've ever met. Every time Kai joins the game, he makes me laugh until I'm ready to throw up.

I keep going on about Kai, don't I?

Don't get me wrong. I'm not in love with Kai, I don't want to have his babies (EW!), and I'm not pining over him or anything. But if you see somebody every single day of your life and they're deeply invested in keeping you alive and happy, you're going to become a huge fan of them. Unless they're an asshole, but Kai isn't. I may bitch and complain about his tyrannical ways constantly, but I absofuckinglutely adore him.

Just not in a dirty way.

Okay, moving on.

Allie and I play a vigorous game of I'm not touching that NDA so please get it out of my face for a bit before Laura finally intervenes.

"If you were going to make him sign those, you really should have done it before he came into the penthouse." Laura is trying not to laugh at how Allie has me pinned face-down on the couch while I windmill my little arms and legs as hard as I can in an attempt to get her off me.

"I'm sorry, kid, but I have to do my job." Allie only relents when Laura grabs her by the arm and pulls her off me. At least Allie has the decency to look embarrassed.

"Your job sucks," I say as I pull together my last shreds of dignity and the lapels on my robe. Yes, I'm nearly naked at this point. Yes, I forgot I was only in a robe when I was about to leave this place a minute ago. And yes, you can shut your cake hole about it.

If the robe wasn't as big as it is, I would have shown these two ladies far more than I ever planned to share with them. Fortunately for me, they only got the dollar peep show and not the full Monty. Small though it may be, I paid good money for my downtown amusement park, and someone had better at least buy me a nice dinner before they see it.

Once I get myself put back together, I'm ready to magnanimously forgive Allie for mussing up my person, but when she tries to stick the papers in my face again, I leap off the couch and shout, "You're a lot less nice than I thought you were!" Then I race back to Bael's room.

I lock the door and ignore the knocking that happens two seconds later by putting on a set of headphones from Bael's entertainment system and playing the shit out of Undertale for a while.

Out of pure spite, I overwrite the game he's in the middle of. If he wanted me to be a good guest, he shouldn't have had his person rough me up.

Thirty minutes into the game, I get a fantastic idea. I drop the controller, run over to the door, and put my ear to it. When I don't hear anything, I drop to the floor and peek under the crack. I see no feet, which probably means the coast is clear, so I hop up and tear ass to Bael's closet. I dig through it until I find something that could remotely stay on my body for an extended period of time. I end up putting on a slinky fishnet shirt with a silky underlayer, and I slap on a belt.

Now I have a fancy new dress!

A very manly one, thank you very much.

Armed with my new dress and no shoes—why the hell are Bael's feet so big? Fuck it, I don't need shoes—I take stock of my body and see that I've gained a lot more

energy after getting a good rest and putting two solid meals in me. I should be able to do this.

I burst out of Bael's room, putting on as much speed as I can, and I race for where I think the door is. I'm in luck because I see a big, fancy, gilded double door just as I hear Allie shout "Wait!" behind me.

Sucks to be you, Allie. I'm outta here.

Or so I thought, but when I get the doors open, I slam face first into not one, but two meat walls. Outside the doors are two men who could have easily been extras in the Men in Black franchise.

I let out a little urk! as I'm hoisted into the air by Meat Wall #1. He only uses one hand to do it, by the way, and I'm terribly insulted by this. He could have at least pretended to need two hands.

I lash out at Meat Wall #1, kicking my feet with everything I have in me. When Meat Wall #2 grabs my feet, I go feral and dig my teeth into Meat Wall #1's hand.

He lets out a very satisfying scream, so I bite harder. Maybe next time he'll know better than the fuck with a tiny person.

I know the meat walls are miles ahead of me in the ass-kicking department, but I decide that if I'm going down, I'm leaving permanent scars in my wake.

I can see Allie's arm through a crack between the meat walls. And I hear her shout, "Oh my god, stop!" but I am not fucking stopping. It's personal now.

"If I let him go now, I might not be able to have kids later," Meat Wall #2 says in a strangled tone. Yes, I nailed him directly in the man berries with a well-placed kick,

and yes, I'm very proud of myself.

“I am so getting fired,” Allie sounds close to tears, which means if I try really hard, I can get Meat Wall #1 in a sensitive spot, and then I'll have made all three of them cry. They might take me down, but at least I'll make them all deeply regret it.

I'm okay with not making Laura cry. She seems actually nice, not fake nice like Allie.

Just as I am about to achieve my goal, a thundering, “What the fuck is going on here???” booms through the hallway and interrupts my stride. This allows the meat walls to get a firm grip on me and I'm left hanging in their hold.

That's when my tiny store of energy drops me in a ditch, and I feel my whole body start to shiver.

Fuck me and my life.

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Chapter 8

Bael

I can barely believe what I'm seeing when I step out of the elevator into the hallway leading to our suite.

Poor, tiny little Wren is wrestling with Brent and James, both of who are easily twice his size. I see red and storm towards the clusterfuck happening in front of my home.

“We stopped him before he escaped. No harm done.” Brent informs me like it’s something I’d ordered him to do.

“Give him to me.” When they hesitate, I bark, “Now!” I don't care how it sounds because I'm not worried about hurting anyone's feelings at the moment, so my order makes both guards pale and shove Wren at me like he burned them.

Wren is a floppy little rag doll in my arms, and it makes me want to kill everyone within reach. Not Wren, obviously. Him I want to tuck away in my room so no one can ever see him or hurt him again.

“Get her out of my sight,” I hiss at Harvey, jerking my chin toward the woman I know must be our new assistant. No one else would be in our suite, so who else could she be? “And call Gwen. Tell her it’s an emergency.”

I storm toward my room, calling over my shoulder, “Mel, you’re a terrible judge of character.”

I slam my door behind me and hurry to put Wren on my bed. “I’m sorry, Wren. I’m so, so sorry. I didn’t tell them to do that to you.” I’m burying him in blankets and shoving cat after stuffed cat at him, like they can fix what happened. I give him all my favorite cats.

He can keep them forever as long as he's okay.

I’m so goddamned stupid. Why did I let Harvey convince me to leave Wren alone here? What if Brent and James broke him?

“Please be okay. It’ll never happen again, I promise.”

Wren opens his eyes, and his voice is soft and shaky when he says, “Allie wanted me to sign something. She wouldn’t let me leave unless I did. I didn’t want to sign it, so I ran.”

I rest my forehead on the bed and kick myself internally. Stupid fucking Harvey and his stupid fucking NDAs.

“You don’t have to sign anything, I promise. No one is gonna grab you like that again. Not ever.”

I reach out and stroke his hair, smoothing it down from where it was ruffled during the struggle. “I’m sorry. I can’t seem to stop touching you. I’ll stop.” I know I won’t be able to stop for long, but I’m really, really going to try because he was just roughly manhandled by two big guys, and I can’t imagine him being comfortable being casually touched by another.

When I pull my hand away, Wren grabs my wrist and pulls it back to rest on his head and says, “No, I like it. Don’t stop.”

“Thank god,” I say and immediately go back to petting him. “Your hair is just so soft and fluffy. I can’t help myself.”

Wren’s eyes drift shut slowly as I stroke his hair, and he’s doing that thing baby animals do when they don’t realize they’re falling asleep. His eyes close and then they pop back open again, then they drift shut again, and it’s longer between sleepy blinks, and his eyes don’t open as wide after each blink. I know he’ll be asleep any second now, so I keep playing with his hair.

“You’re safe, Wren. I won’t let anything happen to you. It’s safe to fall asleep, I promise.”

He gives a soft sigh, and his eyes stay closed after his last sleepy blink.

Wren is a gift. The universe dropped a fucking gift into my lap, and I’ll be damned if I squander it.

Once I’m sure Wren is fully asleep, I move away from him as slowly as possible. I ease my weight off the bed ounce-by-ounce because I’m afraid that if he wakes up, he might pull a goldfish on me and die. Or at least become incredibly ill.

It takes me at least five minutes to get myself completely free of the bed and then another five minutes to tiptoe over to my door, step out into the hallway, and close it behind me.

Harvey is standing there just like I expected him to be. His discomfort is seeping through his generally impassive expression.

Good. He should be uncomfortable right now.

I glare at him and ask, “Is Gwen here yet?”

“She’s on her way and should be here in less than ten minutes.”

“Good. When Gwen gets here, everyone in the penthouse and I are going to have a talk . It’s going to be the scary kind, and you should all be feeling anxious while you wait.”

“Bael—”

“No. You sit in the common room with everyone else and feel anxious too. Everyone had better be there when I’m done here. Now go.”

Harvey visibly ages in front of me, and he no longer appears to be the strict, unflappable guy who’s been pushing me and the guys through the ranks of stardom to superstardom whether we want to go or not.

After today, I have a feeling I’ll never see him the same way again.

I watch Harvey walk away until I’m certain he won’t turn around to argue with me, and then I sneak back into my room. I don’t go back to my bed because I don’t want to make Gwen wait the ten minutes it would take for me to let her in once she gets here. Instead, I lean against my door and google how to help homeless people get back on their feet again.

I quickly realize that most of it won’t apply to my situation because none of it says anything about putting the person in your bed, being unable to stop petting their hair, or what to do if your bodyguards accidentally assault them when you’re not around.

Being responsible is a lot harder than I thought it would be.

I’m tempted to go on Instagram and ask my fans for advice, but I remember at the last second that discussing my personal life on social media is at the top of Harvey’s list

of Things not to do if we don't want Harvey to die before he turns fifty .

Hey, I may be pissed off at Harvey, but I don't want him to die.

So I put my phone back into my pocket and vibe out to the ever present song living in my head. I've always got at least one in there begging for my attention, and this one is well on its way to being born. No lyrics yet—that's more Mel's thing than mine, but the music is already loud and proud. As I watch Wren sleep, it only gets louder and prouder.

What is it about this guy? He somehow calms and stimulates me all at the same time.

Whatever it is, I love it.

There's a soft tap on the door behind me.

"It's me, Bael," Gwen's voice is barely audible even though I'm standing right there. She's such a thoughtful doctor.

I opened the door as quietly as possible and squeeze my body through a small crack like I'm trying to keep an animal from getting in. I frown when I realize my subconscious is probably trying to keep the world from getting in to hurt Wren.

"Harvey told me what happened," Gwen says and puts a calming hand on my arm. "It wasn't your fault. From what everyone tells me, you've done an amazing job so far. Please don't beat yourself up over this."

My eyebrows go up in surprise.

Gwen snorts and says, "What's with the face? I'm not that mean, am I?"

I shake my head quickly so she doesn't yell at me. "No, of course not."

I know that, deep down, Gwen is a kind person. It's just that she generally shows her kindness through threats and yelling. This might be the first time she's ever been gentle with me.

Admittedly, this is the first time I've needed her to help me with a problem I didn't cause.

At least, I think I didn't cause this one.

"That's what I thought." Gwen sniffs haughtily.

Yeah, maybe I can stand up to Harvey, but Gwen is a whole different ball of wax.

"He's asleep right now, so be quiet when you go in, and we should wake him up gently so you don't scare him."

"I'll do my best. No, you don't need to be a part of the examination, Bael." Gwen puts a restraining hand on my chest when I try to follow her into my room. "Allow me some semblance of professionalism here."

I swear to you that the sound I make isn't a whimper, but for some reason, Gwen still pats me on the shoulder like I'm a puppy. She probably would have patted my head if she could reach that high.

I let her close the door in my face, and I wait outside my bedroom for longer than I'm proud of before I remember the talk I'm supposed to be giving everyone. I pause because I'm torn between making sure I can be there for Wren the second he needs me and tearing a new asshole into everyone who needs it.

I finally decide on getting the asshole tearing out of the way.

Yeah, I didn't like how that sounded either. Let's just move on.

When I get to the common room, everyone is there. Mel, Travis, and Shay are sharing a single couch, all three looking mildly uncomfortable, and I nod in approval because it means they're following my instructions.

Harvey is in the leather wingback chair. His face says he has everything under control, but his body language makes him seem like he's about to jump to his feet at the next loud noise.

Brent and James are standing behind Harvey, and I can't tell whether they're trying to make a show of protecting him from me, or if they're using Harvey as a human shield between me and them.

Eh, either way, everyone here is getting a new asshole.

Okay, I'll stop with the asshole metaphor.

Probably.

No promises.

I spot Allie quivering by the door, and I notice Mel is looking anywhere but at her. Solidarity between sibs is strong in our group, even when we have conflict. This is why I know we're going to make it as a band instead of falling apart due to infighting like a lot of other bands do.

“Why are you still here?” I ask Allie, and I note with grim satisfaction that she tries to melt into the wall behind her.

“I told her to stay until you told her she could go,” Harvey replies.

Huh. That actually makes sense, and I'm glad Harvey thought of it. How else would I find out what happened if I don't get every side of the story?

I nod my approval at Harvey and note that the tension in his body cuts in half.

Jesus, it's not like I'm going to fire him or anything. Harvey can be a bit intense, but he's still one of us. However, Harvey fucked up big time with this one, and he needs to know that it better not happen again.

Laura enters the room, and she glides over to the couch where the band sits. “I wasn't sure if you wanted me to be here, but you said you wanted everyone and that includes me.”

She waits until I say, “You can stay,” before sitting on the arm of the couch next to Mel. She take's Mel's hand in hers, and I can see Shay giving them both some serious stink-eye.

“Tell me what happened,” I fold my arms in front of me, and everyone but Allie starts talking at once.

Shay immediately starts bitching about Mel fucking his mom. Travis is thoroughly confused because he was still in the elevator when I rescued Wren, so he keeps saying “I don't think I'm supposed to be here.” Everyone else's words become a din of incomprehensible noise, and I shout, “Quiet!” Then I get angry because they made me shout, and I don't want Wren to hear and get scared.

“Allie, you go first,” I say to be petty because she was the only one not talking, and because it was her job to make sure Wren was safe.

“I did everything Harvey told me to do!” Allie blurted.

“I don't remember Harvey telling you to sit on the poor boy, jam a pen into his hand, and try to force him to sign that contract.” Laura nudged a loose pile of papers that had fallen under the coffee table.

Allie shot Laura what could only be described as a how could you betray me after we fucked? look. Laura shrugged and gave her an innocent smile.

“I definitely didn't tell her to do that, Bael,” Harvey said, voice dripping with disdain. “Don't make this worse for yourself, Allie.”

If Allie could fuse herself with the wall behind her, I'm pretty sure she would.

“But you did tell her to make Wren sign an NDA.” It's not a question because I know he did. It was such a Harvey move that it didn't need to be asked.

“It's standard procedure for the entire band. No one is exempt from this rule, and the only reason why Wren didn't sign one before he came into the penthouse was because he was asleep at the time.”

“That's only for hookups. Wren isn't a hookup.”

“I didn't have to sign anything,” Laura said merrily.

“That's because you're the mother of one of the band members,” Harvey says, and I can tell he's trying to be polite to her but failing miserably.

“You just said no one is exempt from this rule,” Travis reminds him.

I can see Harvey regretting every second of the last twenty-four hours of his life, and

if this wasn't so important, I'd be laughing my ass off right now.

And if I wasn't so pissed off, I'd be more than happy to sit back and watch Harvey attempt to pull himself out of the hole he'd just dug.

Honestly, it's his fault for not realizing something like this was bound to happen eventually.

I don't have to worry about one of my guys fucking my mom because I don't even know who she is. I suppose it's possible that one of them already has, but that's not a rabbit hole I need to dive down.

Hopefully, wherever she is, she's happy.

Everyone continues to bicker about who fucked who and who should sign what, and since I'm still mad as hell, I bulldoze over it, and repeat, "Wren isn't a hookup." Everyone shuts the fuck up because I was loud about it, and I continue. "Wren is a guest. He's my guest, and he can stay here as long as he wants to, and he doesn't need to sign anything in order to do it. Are we clear?"

I stare Harvey down until his no-nonsense aura wilts.

"Good," I say, and then I move on to the bodyguards. "Who told you to grab Wren like that?"

There's a lot of hemming and hawing between Brent and James considering how lethal they both appear, but maybe I'm bringing my A-game today because they both look like children who are about to have Christmas canceled on them.

After a fascinating nonverbal conversation where they make a ton of meaningful eye contact, they reach a consensus and point at Allie.

“You two are such assholes,” Allie snarls.

Hey, that asshole wasn't mine this time. Assholes pop up left and right whether I want them to or not, but currently, it's the bad kind and not the good kind.

Pity.

“Are we lying?” Brent asks. “Because I seem to remember a certain someone who insisted that we not let anyone leave other than her if she didn't give us the go ahead.”

“Ha! Your mom is going to have to sign one too, Shay!” Travis laughs so hard that he tips over and rolls right off the couch.

“I'm not signing shit, sweetie.” Laura blows a kiss to Harvey, and I swear he ages even more. I'd say he's gained an entire decade since we got back.

“You're not making my mom sign an NDA just because she fucked Mel.”

“Seriously. You didn't make my mom sign one when she fucked Shay.” Mel is just goddamned shameless, and I love the slut.

Mel and Shay make eye contact, and for a second there, I think they might be about to scrap, but then they both laugh and give each other a high five. Travis's head almost becomes a casualty because he tries to climb back up onto the couch just as they do it.

It's a narrow miss though, and I'm glad for it because I don't want Gwen to get dragged away from Wren just because Travis got a concussion due to terrible timing.

“I'm still not sure why I'm here,” Travis says grouchy. He crawls over Shay's lap and nudges him closer to Mel, probably to stay out of the potential concussion zone.

I nod in approval. I told you my band was solid. It's the admin side I'm concerned with.

“As for you two,” I tell the guards, “neither of you are allowed to touch Wren ever again. If he wants to leave, he can leave.”

Oh shit. What if Wren wants to leave? How will I get him to stay if he really wants to go? I might need to revisit this issue with Brent and James later. There must be a polite, non-scary way to keep somebody from leaving the penthouse, right? I'll google it.

“Bael?” Gwen enters the room and comes up to me. “Wren asked me to have you come back in. He's sleepy, but he'll be okay.”

“I gotta go. Feel free to argue amongst yourselves. And Harvey? Get her the fuck out of here.” I point at Allie and jerk my thumb towards the front door.

I'm out of the common area and down the hall to my room without another word. Wren wants to see me, and I want to make a good impression.

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Chapter 9

Wren

“ I ’m fine!” I laugh and hold out my hands to ward off yet another stuffed cat. How many of these does Bael have?

After a quick check up and the all clear from Gwen, I was finally able to convince her to let Bael back in.

He's visibly relieved when Gwen reassures him I didn't have a major setback, and that I just shouldn't be exerting too much energy for the next day or two unless I want to take forever to fully recover.

This information puts at least half a dozen of my fantasies out of the running, but I keep that to myself. Moderate amounts of activity though... No. Nothing is going to happen, so I can keep those fantasies where they belong. Fantasy Wren is perfectly fine, after all, and can do whatever he wants.

Even though Gwen assures Bael several times that I won't explode if someone sneezes near me or a light breeze hits me the wrong way, he's still adorably anxious. I think he might be afraid that I'll die if he doesn't do everything in his power to make me happy. Gwen finally washes her hands of us when she realizes that none of assurances are affecting Bael's actions. She gives me a “Good luck.” accompanied with a grimace and leaves me to my fate.

“This is a nice change from how Kai treats me,” I comment after I accept a fifth

stuffie. “He likes to boss me around and make me do things I don't want to do.”

Bael pauses his cat piling activities. “Who's Kai?”

Uhhhh... How do I spin this? I refuse to admit that I have a babysitter because I'm complete garbage at taking care of myself.

“He's a guy... that I live with sometimes.”

“Not all the time?”

“No. I only live with him when I really need to. He's gone right now or else I probably wouldn't have gotten so hungry.” It's already more than I can bear admitting, and I know it makes me sound unbearably useless, so I stop talking.

Bael doesn't need my life story. He had to live through actual poverty. What does he think now that I've admitted to being too pathetic to remember to eat?

He's frowning, but before I'm able to really work up to a nice, healthy freak out, he says, “He didn't do a good job taking care of you when you needed it.”

I jump to defend Kai because he's the fucking best. “It's not his fault. His dad is sick right now, and I told him to go.”

“So, what? It's okay for you to suffer just because someone else is suffering?”

“I'm pretty sure Kai's dad was suffering more than me. Besides, I really should be able to take care of myself, so it's my own fault for ending up like this.”

My stomach growls and I look down at it in surprise. Considering how much I'd eaten earlier I should be set for a while. It must be because it was all healthy food.

That stuff never lasts me for long.

“Let’s go get something to eat,” Bael announces, and he scoops me off the bed. It’s so sudden that at least three cat stuffies come with us as we leave his room.

We’re in the main area, trailing cats behind us, and Bael announces, “We’re going to Randy’s.”

He doesn’t stop the entire time. He just keeps carrying me until we’re out the door. I stick my tongue out at the meat walls as we sail past them. Neither of them will look me in the eye, and I know it’s because I put the fear of god into them. Any and all survivors of a Wren attack know better than to try again. Unless they’re Allie, but she tickles and that’s not fighting fair.

I’m not sure why I’m so good at scaring people off. I don’t think of myself as a particularly strong person, but no one ever bothers me twice. Kai has no answers for me anytime I bring it up. Likely he has no idea either.

It’s not until we reach the elevator and the entire band plus Harvey and Laura are jammed in with us that I realize I’m completely shoeless.

“Wait!” I cry, and then point to my feet, kicking them wildly. “I don’t know what kind of place Randy’s is, but I doubt they’ll let people in without shoes.”

Bael gets this funny look on his face, and I’m starting to recognize it as his oh shit I fucked up again face.

“Harvey.” Bael gives an imperious snap of his fingers and says nothing else, as if he expects Harvey to know exactly what he wants without explaining it.

I guess he does, though, because Harvey says, “On it,” and then dives into his phone.

“What happened to your shoes in the first place?” Travis asks. Then he yelps, because for some mysterious reason Shay slaps the shit out of the back of his head.

“I forgot to put them on.” I become the human embodiment of the sweat drop emoji and consider burying my face in Bael’s chest, but we don’t know each other that well, so I hold it in and face the shame head on.

“It’s okay, Wren. No one cares whether you have shoes or not. I’ve got you covered.” Bael gives me a little squeeze, and my cheeks pink right up. It’s too bad that we’re not in the chest-burying stage of our friendship yet because I’m losing the battle with facing all of these emotions without my sketchbook.

Bael is super nice and carries me all the way to their limo. It’s nothing special as limos go. I don’t own one or anything, but I’m used to museums and galleries sending them for me every time Shelly makes me attend a thing. They always have my favorite snacks in them and some pretty cool video games. This one doesn’t even have a PlayStation, so, you know. Meh.

It’s around this time that I start wondering what the hell Bael and his merry band of fabulous misfits do for a living. They certainly aren’t hurting for cash, and Laura was suspiciously ambiguous when talking about it earlier.

They probably don’t kill people for a living, right? I should probably ask just to make sure.

“So, just out of curiosity, how many people die after meeting you all?” Yep, that’s me, I’m a let’s rip that Band-Aid off kind of guy. Except when I’m not. It’s all or nothing with me, really. When I have to ask awkward questions, I have to go at it at a run, otherwise those questions might never get asked.

I’m still sitting in Bael’s lap because we’re all packed in here like sardines, so it’s

really obvious when he goes completely still.

Shit. What if they really are killers, and I just hurt their feelings? I practically trip over my tongue to try and fix it, saying, “I’m not job-shaming, I promise! I’m sure some people really have it coming, and I bet a lot of perfectly nice people have to kill the occasional person for their job. I mean, no job is great all the time, right? I know mine has some downsides.”

The inside of the limo is quieter than my sex life right now, but I’m pretty sure I can’t fuck this problem away.

“Um... You all... dress really well for the mafia?” I know I’m reaching at this point, but no one else is talking, So what else am I supposed to do? At least I’m saying nice stuff about them, so if I hurt their feelings earlier, they’ll know that I wasn’t trying to be mean.

“You think we’re part of the mafia?” Travis is sitting cross-legged in the seat across from me and Bael. His elbows are on his knees, and both fists are propping up his chin. He seems utterly captivated.

I think this means the conversation is going well.

“...yes?” I notice that Harvey seems to be looking green around the gills, so maybe the conversation isn’t going that well. “It’s okay if you are. Sometimes organized crime gets a really bad rap, but I think a lot of people know that. Like, I read an article once about a mob boss who has an entire chain of soup kitchens in his city and how he does more for the homeless population than the government does.”

The limo gets a lot more active than my sex life after I say that.

Mel, Travis, and Shay all burst into laughter. Like, howling, falling over each other,

tears streaming down their face kind of laughter.

Harvey speak/yells over the cacophony. Did you know that was possible? Because up until now I didn't know somebody could manage to be loud and calm all at the same time. It's an impressive skill set.

Anyway, Harvey's got that ability in spades because it's very clear when he says, "I can assure you we are not part of the mafia."

Bael is suspiciously quiet, but his fingers are tapping out a rhythm on my hip, so I know he's got something going on inside his head.

"You're not... you guys aren't part of a cult, are you?" If they are, it's probably a really cool one considering their lifestyle, but I know for a fact that neither Kai, Marty, nor Shelly will allow me to be part of a cult no matter how cool it is.

I eyeball the door handle and try to judge how fast the limo is going. We're not going that fast. If I bail out right now, I bet I'll be okay.

I think Bael notices what I'm doing because his hands grasp my hips firmly. I guess I'm not going anywhere for a little while.

"How the hell are you still alive right now, Wren?" I'm not sure how Travis managed to say that considering that he's laughing so hard I'm concerned he's going to swallow his tongue.

"Bless your little heart," Laura says to me, and she reaches out like she wants to pat me on the head. At the last minute, Bael's hand intercepts hers.

"You need consent before touching someone," Bael says in a growly voice that does amazing things to my nervous system. He wraps his arms around me tightly and tucks

my head under his chin.

“It's okay,” I reassure him. “I've gotten used to the fact that everyone seems to want to pet me. I guess that just happens to people who are travel sized.”

Bael hmphs and squeezes me a little tighter.

Shay snorts. “Bael’s hypocrisy aside, I would like to expand on Travis's comment just now. Wren, did you really think the best time to ask a large group of people if they're murderers was to wait until you were trapped in their limo with them?” He says this slowly, like he's trying to spell something out to a 5-year-old.

Hmm... He does have a point.

I tap my chin thoughtfully—as much as a person can when someone huge is wrapped around them like a boa constrictor—and finally land on saying, “I think you would have already killed me if you were going to, so I'm probably fine.”

The limo stops, and everyone stares at me until the door opens next to me and Bael.

“Are we getting out now?” I ask, because no one seems to be moving, and I really am starting to get incredibly hungry.

Bael motions towards the person who opened the door, and the guy hands me a pair of sassy ankle boots and cute little ankle socks. I put them on, and they look absolutely perfect paired with the makeshift dress I'm wearing.

“No accessories?” I ask cheekily, but when Bael says, “Harvey,” in that Lord of the Manor voice from earlier, I rush to say, “I'm kidding! I don't need accessories, just food.”

It doesn't escape my notice that Harvey still vanishes into his phone anyway.

Bael gets out of the limo with me in tow. He tries to princess-carry me, but I kick my feet until he puts me down. He keeps a steady hand on my back as I take my own weight, and my legs do a little wobble. Seriously, it was the tiniest wobble ever, but Bael still notices and says, “Nope,” and scoops me back up.

“Consent really is a wonderful thing, isn't it?” Travis says randomly.

“I fully agree, my friend. One never can be too careful about body rules when it comes to strangers.” Mel says as they extend a hand to Laura to help her out of the limo.

“I think so too,” I agree. “You've all been incredibly accommodating in that. Other than Allie and the meat walls, that is. You should talk to them about it.”

“Meat walls?” Shay gives a little laugh.

“They've been, ah... spoken to,” Harvey assures me.

“No one will ever touch you without your permission again, Wren. I promise.” Bael's vice is as solemn as the grave.

“Thank you,” I say, and snuggle into Bael as covertly as possible while he carries me into the cutest little diner I have ever seen.

Actually, it looks kind of familiar. At least the outside of it does. “I recognize these neon lights. This is where I passed out, isn't it?”

Travis opens the door for Bael and waves us inside. “Yep! If you'd made it inside, you would have found a good meal whether you could pay for it or not. The people

here are always ready to help a queer person—or any person, really—in crisis.” He points at a board on the wall covered in receipts. “These are all meals that people have already paid for. If someone needs food but can't afford it, they can just grab one of these and bring it to the counter.”

“That would have been handy,” I murmur. I’d totally forgotten my wallet right along with my shoes, so a policy like that would be perfect for dumbasses as well as poor people. I’ll come here with Kai in the future and buy enough meals to last the folks on this side of Boston until Christmas.

I order the thought to dig into my brain as far as it can go so I’ll remember to actually do it.

Once that's done, I take in my surroundings.

Fuck, this place is cool. It’s like queer Elvis stormed in here and exploded, splattering the walls with retro fabulousness.

Marty would absolutely love this place. I have to tell him about it as soon as he gets back because there's no way he wouldn't have dragged me here a million times if he knew about it.

Mel and Laura commandeer a huge corner booth, and Bael steers us toward it, but then the weirdest thing happens before we make it there.

A lovely human marches right up to us and stops a respectable distance away. “Excuse me,” they say. “I’m Avery, and that’s Myles over there pretending like he’s not as excited as I am right now. Would it be rude of me to ask you to sign my...” The lovely human goes still and then pats themselves down. They have no pockets on their dress, so I’m not sure what they’re looking for.

“Here, you can use mine.” Harvey reaches into his suit jacket and pulls out a marker, handing it to Avery. I see he has more than one in there. Does Harvey have a lot of coloring related emergencies in his life?

“Thanks! I still don't have something for you to sign though. Um, can you sign my dress?” Avery holds the marker out to Bael hopefully.

“No one ever asks me to sign their dress. Why does Bael always get the hot ones?” Travis grouches, but I can tell he's just doing it to be sassy.

A fascinating change comes over Bael. His soft, puppy dog edges fade away and morph into something more aloof and wolf like. “Nice to meet you, Avery. Where do you want me to sign your dress?” Bael's voice is a low, yummy rumble, and I'm struck once again by how sinful he sounds.

He makes like he's going to take the marker, but then he realizes his arms are full with my illustrious person, and he goes full-on confused puppy dog again.

“You can put me down,” I say. “I'll be fine.” I may be happy in Bael's arms, but right now I'm mystified by what's going on, and I need to know what will happen next.

Bael frowns a little before setting me on my feet next to Travis. He doesn't let go of me until I'm standing steadily on my own. He tells Travis, “Don't let him fall,” and turns back to Avery.

“Oh my. Your voice really sounds that way. I mean, okay! Can you sign under my shoulder strap?”

Bael gives Avery what can only be described as a professionally sexy smile and signs the dress with a flourish.

“Thank you so much! Myles! I told you he’d be nice!” Avery gives us all a brilliant smile and turns to go.

“What the...? What was that?” I watch Avery’s back as they hurry over to the table where the pretending-to-be-incurious young man is. When Avery reaches the table, their hand reaches out and connects with the young man’s before they even sit down, and they snuggle into his side. They huddle together and speak in excited whispers.

“That was one of our fans.” Bael’s face is sheepish and his body relaxes in some indefinable way. His voice is still hot, but it doesn’t have that cutting edge to it anymore. This is probably a good thing, because if he talks like that all the time, I will probably die from constant nosebleeds.

“I didn’t know cults have fans.” Though if it’s a cult of Bael’s voice, I can see the appeal.

“We’re not a cult!” Travis snaps.

“Whoops. Sorry. I didn’t know the mafia had fans.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. We’re none of those things. We’re a band.” Travis stomps away to the table Mel and Laura grabbed for us. Shay is sitting with them comfortably like he’d completely let go of the whole bro, you fucked my mom thing. Good for him.

“An extremely famous one, so keep your voices down,” Harvey says, focused on his phone and typing away. He manages to follow Travis to the booth and sit down next to him without looking up a single time.

Bael ushers me to scoot in next to Mel on the other side and sits next to me.

“A band named after Bael, if you want to be specific. We’re called Baelfire.” Mel’s

voice is a sexy purr directed right at me, and I give them a look. Mel can be as hot as they want, but they've already bagged a mom and an assistant today. Mel doesn't need to add me to their list of conquests.

Everyone at the table looks at me expectantly. That's when I finally connect the dots.

"Holy shit, you're a band? Thank fuck! That's way better than the glitter mafia. I ran out of nice things to say about people who kill people for a living ten minutes ago, and since my phone is dead, I can't google for help to find more."

Shay laughs. "Jesus, Bael, he's like your mini-me."

Mel slams the table with both hands in excitement. "Oh my god, Wren, I love you so much right now. I vote to rename the band Glitter Mafia immediately."

"No," Harvey says absently without looking up from his phone. I get the feeling he's used to vetoing a lot of ideas from this group. I wonder what it takes to faze him?

"Yes, please, please, yes," Bael says, which is a bit of a surprise considering that the band is named after him. When I quirk an eyebrow at him, he sighs. "It's enough that I was given a stupid name. The rest of the world doesn't need to keep reminding me of it."

"Are you kidding me? Your full name is Baelfire? That's the coolest name ever! When's your birthday? Please tell me it's nine months after the summer solstice."

"You know what my name means?"

I'm about to tell him that I did a crazy amount of research on Midsummer for an art piece I did, but considering what the piece sold for, it's going to come off sounding like bragging, and this conversation isn't about me. It's about making sure Bael knows

exactly how cool he is, including his name.

For about five seconds, I pondered over choosing Baelfire as my new name when I transitioned due to my Midsummer research. I ultimately decided I wasn't grand enough to pull it off. I think Wren suits me perfectly, and I don't give a flying shit how many other trans people have chosen this name. I love it.

“My birthday is February second,” Bael says, face flushed.

He's shy? Oh, kitten lords, be still my heart. “Wait, there are only seven months between midsummer and Candlemas. The math isn't mathing enough for you to be a solstice-made baby unless you were a preemie.”

Bael gives me a sheepish shrug. He's miles from the cool, confident man he was while signing a fan's dress. I may actually die from how adorable this man is.

“No way. You were a preemie?” I gesture to his hulking frame. “No fucking way.”

“Bael really ate his Wheaties, didn't he?” Shay reaches across the table and punches Bael in the shoulder affectionately.

I whistle and say, “You certainly did.” Then I remember that Bael all but admitted to me earlier that when he was growing up, he didn't always have enough food, and my enthusiasm for the conversation vanishes.

I place a tentative hand on Bael's forearm. “I love your name, Bael. It tells a story, and I can see why you all named the band after you. I think you should keep it.”

“We were always going to keep it,” Harvey states absently. Dude is, like, the most level-headed cat-herder I have ever met. He and Kai should get together one day and compare notes.

A lemon-yellow server comes up to our table. No, seriously, they're a vibrant yellow from hair to shoes. I have mixed feelings about their aesthetic, but they appear happy with themselves, so I'm going to be happy for them.

"Hi, I'm Zo!" they announce to me specifically, treating the rest of our group like air, and then they're off to the races telling me about every single thing that's happened to them in the past week.

During a fascinating tale about a three-legged race with three eight-year-olds in one sack (why a sack???) that devolves into what happened to Zo at the grocery store when a group of grannies started a food fight at the salad bar, I managed to squeeze in my order. I ask for a lot of things because I plan to feed most of it to Bael. That preemie story hit me hard in the feels, ya'll.

Bael also orders an ungodly amount of food, and I'm starting to think maybe we need a bigger table.

"Are you sure you should be eating so much heavy food right now?" Bael whispers to me when Zo whisks themselves away with our orders in hand.

"Ummm..." Well shit. I don't want Bael to think I'm insane when he finds out I ordered extra food for him even though he's a grown ass adult who can feed himself now. Not everyone is as bad as I am, after all. "Gwen said I needed to eat more, so I'm just following her orders. Can you finish anything I don't eat? My eyes might be bigger than my stomach."

Bael nodded vigorously. "You can order more right now if you want. Anything you want, you can have. You can have all the food."

Everyone at the table starts offering me food too. Then they start offering other things like clothes and phones. Someone even offers to get me a plant. That last one was

Bael. Harvey is the one who offers me a phone.

That's weird, right? I'm pretty sure this is beyond the norm for social interactions between strangers. It's pretty sweet though, and who am I to judge? I'm weirdness incarnate.

When our food arrives, the conversation dies a swift but delicious death, though I'm pretty sure I really will be getting that plant at some point soon. It can go hang out with all the other plants Kai makes me water, so it will probably survive. Plus, it will remind me of Bael, so I don't mind adding another member to my plant family.

Now the whole booth is filled with copious amounts of snarfing noises as we all completely destroy our lunch. Can it be called lunch when the sun is setting? Meh, whatever.

I slow down with the eating way before everyone else does, but people keep sticking things on my plate anyway, and I'm starting to be concerned that maybe they all want to see if they can make me throw up. If so, this is a great way to do it.

"No, seriously, I don't need any more food." I cover my plate with both hands to protect my poor stomach. "Give it to Bael. He has more room in him than I could ever hope to."

I reach out and pat his rock-hard abs without thinking, and when I realize what I've done, my entire body grows hot with embarrassment.

And maybe some lust. Just that one touch was nothing shy of a religious experience, and as soon as I get home I'm going to do my best to recreate it on the largest canvas I can find.

Or maybe a sculpture would be a better medium to use. There's no way to capture his

yumminess without resorting to three-dimensional techniques.

Where was I?

Speaking of home, I really need to get back to mine before my people find out I'm gone and send out a search party.

“Thank you for the meal, everyone, but I really need to get going.” I make to stand up, but when I give Bael a nudge, he doesn't move.

I nudge him again, only this time I put my weight into it, and I get the same result. It's like trying to move a boulder.

“You don't have to leave.” Bael looks at me with those puppy eyes. “You can stay with us as long as you want.”

I want to say yes. I really do. Hell, he could ask me to do anything right now and I'd want to do it, but I really need to get back to my people.

“I'm sorry, but I need to go back now.” I give Bael's magnificent bicep a poke, and he takes my hand.

“I know how hard it is to accept help, but you don't need to do things alone. Everyone needs help sometimes,” Bael's eyes are soulful as they stare into mine.

“I could use some help getting home,” I admit. “Can you give me a ride?”

Bael exchanges glances with all of his friends. “Why don't we go back to the hotel just for tonight? We can work on setting you up tomorrow.”

Setting me up? What the hell does that mean?

That's when a silver daddy comes up to the table. "Do you need help, kid? These guys are nice enough, but pushy," He has a yummy accent that gives me French-Canadian vibes. There's a cacophony of cries from the band denying his words, and he says, "Pipe down, I'm not talking to any of you. Kid, if you want to leave, you can. No one here is going to stop you." Then Silver Daddy gives Bael a meaningful look. "Right?"

When Bael ignores him, Silver Daddy gives his leg an extremely vigorous poke. Okay, it was a kick. A hot ass old man just kicked the shit out of a gentle giant for me, just to make sure I'm okay.

Are these happy tears stinging my eyes? How are there so many decent people in this one small diner? Is this what Marty means when he tells me the whole world isn't as bad as I think it is, and it's worth getting out more and giving everyone a chance?

I'm definitely coming back to this dinner.

"Thank you, Silver Daddy, but I'm fine."

The man gives me a startled laugh. "The name's Archie, and I'm glad you're fine. Just make sure and let me or anyone else in this diner know if that changes. And you boys take this kid home right now if he wants you to. Got it?"

"You heard the man," Harvey says, finally looking up from his phone. "We're leaving early tomorrow, and you're all going to need some rest, so stop fucking around."

I'm not really sure what that means, but I've got a lot of stuff on my mental plate, so I let it pass by without comment.

Bael gives a sulky affirmative and finally lets me push him out of the booth.

“I’ll settle up here,” Harvey tells us once he's ushered us into the limo. “You lot go straight back to the hotel as soon as you drop Wren off at home.”

“For god’s sake Harvey, he doesn’t have a home!” Travis shouts.

We all turn to gape at Travis.

Shay shoves him in the shoulder. “You can't just say it like that, dumbass.”

“Have some fucking manners, dude,” Mel sighs.

“Sweetie... no. Just. No.” Laura sounds so disappointed I'm tempted to apologize to her, and I don't even know what's happening right now.

“It’s okay even if you don’t have one, Wren. No one is looking down on you.” Bael is hovering over me and twisting his fingers together. “Do you want me to hit Travis for you? He's small, but I think I can do it without hurting him too much.”

“Hey!” Travis cries in indignation.

This is when all the pieces fall together for me. Don't look at me like that. I haven’t been anything but honest with you about my smooth brain issues. I have keepers and everything, remember?

No wonder everyone has been so nice to me and trying to jam food into me. They think I'm homeless.

Well, shit.

“I’m not homeless,” I say, looking down at my feet in embarrassment. What the actual fuck? I’m so far from homeless that it isn’t funny. I have rooms in my condo I

don't even know the purpose of, but Kai still makes us dust them anyway.

The sheer ridiculousness of the misunderstanding has my tongue completely tied.

But for some reason, no one here looks like they believe me.

“My name is Wren Dobrev. I'm an artist. You can look me up!” I don't blame them for not knowing who I am, because I had no clue who they were until about an hour ago.

“Rin Dobrev? Okay, let me check.” Harvey does stuff to his phone for a few minutes, and eventually, he looks up frowning, and says, “There's no artist by that name.”

“What?” My mind whirls as I try to figure out what the hell is going on. I couldn't have said it wrong, could I? I mean, smooth brain or no, even I'm not dumb enough to forget my own name.

“There's a Wrensong, but?—”

“That's me!” Or maybe I am dumb enough to forget my own name. I don't use the name Marty gave me for my public persona because I think it's pretentious, so it's a forgivable mistake, okay?

Bael gives me a kind smile. “There's no shame in being poor. I've been in your place before, I promise. I know what it's like to not know where your next meal will come from. You don't need to pretend.”

“I'm... I'm...” I sputter a bit before I'm able to continue. “I'm not pretending! Why would I?”

“I don't know. Some people get embarrassed about being homeless.”

“I can prove I'm not. Just take me home, and you'll see.” When they see my fancy apartment, they'll have no reason not to believe me.

Harvey washes his hands of all of us then by saying. “You all sort this out yourselves. I have something I need to take care of. Just make sure you all get at least a couple of hours of sleep or you're going to be hating life later. It was nice to meet you, Wren. Good luck with...” he waves at me vaguely and then closes the limo door on us.

Harvey raps his knuckles on the top of the limo, and we take off into the night.

It takes me a few minutes to remember my address. Okay, I don't actually manage to remember my address, but I am able to tell them the name of my apartment building, and that's enough for them to get me home. When we arrive outside, I say, “See? I have a home! You can even come and see it if you want.”

Bael gives me an uncertain nod. “Okay, Wren. Let's go see it.”

So here's where everything goes South.

When we get to the door, the doorman won't let us in.

“No really,” I say to the trim, imposing little man before me. “I live on the top floor! I have for a few years now.”

“I've worked here for two years, and I've never seen you.”

“That's...” Impossible? No, it's not impossible, because I'm such a weirdo that I only ever use my private elevator that goes right to the garage. Once this is all sorted out, I am going to stop being that weird little shut-in even if it kills me, because this is ridiculous.

I try everything I can think of to get past the door man, and nothing works. There's no one in my apartment to vouch for me, I don't know anybody's number for him to call, and no one here recognizes me because I'm a freaking hermit.

I'm beyond annoyed, but at least it's good to know that the man is excellent at his job. I doubt anyone who doesn't belong here will ever get in. My apartment is so safe that it's even being protected from me. I'm sure I'll laugh about this someday in the future.

Far, far in the future.

But today I'm standing here in front of a group of really nice but extremely confused hot people, and I'm more embarrassed than I've been in my entire life.

Finally, Bael says, "Come home with us Wren. We'll get this sorted out for you. I promise."

What else can I do? Sleep on the streets just to save face? Now that would be doing the opposite of taking it easy, and there is no way I will be able to face any of my keepers if I'm a starving, exhausted mess when they finally find me.

I heave the biggest sigh my little body has in it and say, "Fine. But that really is my apartment building."

No one responds to that, but no one gives me a sad, pitying look either, which I appreciate. These are just really nice people, and I'm lucky they found me.

It's really hard being stupid sometimes.

Chapter 10

Bael

What do I do now?

Wren seems so certain about not being homeless that it's hard not to believe him. But the shape he was in when I found him couldn't have come from a day or two of neglect. Even I'm smart enough to figure that out.

I don't know how a person with enough money to live in such an expensive apartment complex could get so neglected, but I do know how it feels to be homeless and how hard it can be to admit you need help.

Wren really doesn't seem like a liar though. Maybe the apartment belongs to Kai? Wren had mentioned something about living with him.

"How long has Kai been gone?" I ask Wren. We're playing video games in my room because I don't know what else to do. Wren is really good at gaming, and I'm loving every minute of it. It would be a lot more fun though if I wasn't so worried about him.

"About two weeks."

"Two weeks! How did you survive on your own for two weeks? It's getting cold outside!"

"It hasn't been that bad. Kai left the heat on at a decent level. At least I think he did. I

don't remember getting cold."

"So Kai didn't kick you out to fend for yourself while he was gone?"

Wren snorts, "Please. Kai would never. I wouldn't survive that long on my own. If he came back and found me dead, he'd be so pissed he'd probably dig me up and make me do laundry or something."

This Kai guy is really starting to get on my nerves. He sounds incredibly proprietary for someone who ditched Wren for weeks and let him get into such trouble.

"You don't have to stay with Kai anymore. We'll take care of you."

Wren turns his attention from the screen to look at me. "It's okay. Other than the past few weeks, everything has been great. Besides, you're part of a band. You can't be dragging me around with you everywhere you go."

"I can, though." I can pretty much do anything I want. Just because I've never taken advantage of that doesn't mean I won't, and my brain just gave me the best idea ever. "We can get a second tour bus just for me and you."

See? Best. Idea. Ever.

The controller falls out of Wren's hands. "Just for us?" His voice shakes a little and he looks down shyly.

The blush spreading across his face gives me the courage to do what I've been wanting to do since he first woke up in the clinic. I lift his chin until his eyes flick up to meet my gaze, and slowly, oh so painfully slowly, I inch down to meet his lips with mine. His mouth is soft and sweet, and his gasp of surprise makes my heart flutter.

“I really like you, Wren,” I say when I pull away. I don’t want to pressure him, but he should know how I feel.

“I...” Wren takes a deep breath and glares fiercely down at his hands like he’s steeling himself for something big. “I’m trans. I’m really proud of it, too, but I just didn’t think it was necessary to tell you until now.” His eyes flick to mine before darting back down again. “And I’ll tell you how I feel about you once you tell me how you feel about that.”

“I’m cis,” I say. “And I like hearts, not parts.” Because I’m a little too eager, I rush to add, “I’m really into your parts, though. Whatever they might be. I mean, no pressure. You don’t have to ever show them to me if you don’t want to. I just like being around you—oof!” I don’t get to say anymore because Wren throws his tiny body at me.

“I really, really like you too, Bael. So fucking much.” Wren says, and then his sweet little mouth is on mine. The TV screen is flashing an aggressive game over message because we both got the shit killed out of our characters when we stopped paying attention to the game.

Would you be able to pay attention to a stupid game if you had a wiggly, willing Wren in your lap?

I think the fuck not.

I’m not able to let Wren control the kiss for long. He’s just too tempting. My hand goes to the back of his neck, and I grip it firmly so he can’t get away. Sorry, baby, you started this game, and now I get to finish it. My other hand goes to the small of his back and I pull him in until his spine makes a perfect curve and his stomach is pressed tightly against me.

I fuck his mouth with mine, making promises of what I plan on doing to him as soon

as he gives the okay. Wren's hands are gripping my hair, and he writhes against me, making the cutest little gasping noises.

Oh yeah, it's time for the consent talk so I can rip off the little shirt he stole from me and turned into a dress. I can get him a new one if he wants. We gotta do the talking thing now before I forget that I'm a good guy.

It takes more than a little willpower to get myself to stop, and even more than that when I have to convince myself to pull away from Wren. His eyes are large and confused when I finally manage it.

I'm not great with talking when I'm in a hurry, so I blurt out, "So you'll leave Kai and come and live with me?"

"What?" Wren scrambles backward and nearly falls off my lap. I manage to catch him at the last second, and now I have one hand on each tiny, perfect hip. It's lovely until Wren sours the experience by saying, "I can't leave, Kai. He'd kill me!"

"He'd what?" The world goes red and hazy around the edges, and suddenly I'm on my feet. I'm not horny anymore. I'm enraged. "No, he fucking will not."

I realize Wren is dangling from the football hold I now have him in.

"Shelly would be super pissed off too, and don't even get me started on Marty. He'd kill me twice." Wren barely seems to notice that I'm carrying him.

It's almost like he's used to being toted around. Does Kai carry Wren around? And who are Marty and Shelly?

I have an irrational urge to carry Wren to my bathroom and lock the door behind us to put another layer of protection between Wren and all the people who have suddenly

popped up that I didn't know about.

What if Wren was telling the truth earlier and he has a decent life waiting for him?
What if Wren doesn't need me at all?

No. If Wren is scared of the people in his life, they aren't good people. They don't deserve to have him.

"What are you doing?" Wren asks, finally cluing into the fact that I'm wandering restlessly around the room while carrying him like a bug-out bag.

"I'm not going to let anyone kill you, Wren," I say firmly. "I have plenty of security, so no one is getting in here who could hurt you."

"I didn't mean literally, Bael. None of my people would physically hurt me; they're just incredibly protective of me."

"Not from where I'm standing." Being protective means caring, and letting someone you are supposed to protect collapse from neglect isn't caring.

"What happened to me was an accident and entirely my fault, I promise. Kai usually takes great care of me."

What the hell is up with this Kai guy? I don't know him, and I already hate him.

"Kai is an idiot. You should dump him and date me instead."

And move in with me, and let me fuck you, and let me take care of you forever.
That's an inside thought and no one's business but mine.

"Instead?" Wren laughs. "Put me down, please."

I don't.

"No, seriously put me down." He flails and wiggles to make sure I know he means business.

I scowl and go back to the couch where we'd been doing wonderful things until everything went straight to shit mere moments ago. I sit back down and hold him in my lap when he tries to leave.

Eventually he stops trying to get away and says, "Okay... compromise. Compromise is good. I can work with this." Then he relaxes and sits on my lap facing me with his legs criss cross-applesauce.

I'm not kidding. He really is small enough to do that, and I hold extra still so he'll keep doing it.

"Hmph," I say sullenly because compromise is all well and good unless he's about to tell me that he's in love with Kai and wants to date both of us. I'm not sharing. Kai can go and find himself a new Wren. This one is mine now.

Finders keepers.

Wren puts his little hands on my cheeks and makes me look at him. "I'm not dating Kai. He's bossy and makes me put away my socks. That's like, the opposite of hot."

And that isn't enough of a reason not to want to date a person if you like them, so I say, "Why do you live with him then?"

Wren taps his index fingers together and looks away. "Well..." I wait patiently, aging months instead of minutes before he finally whispers, "Because I can't take care of myself."

I take his anxious fingers and kiss them gently. “I can take care of you, Wren. I really, really can. I want to do it. Please let me take care of you.”

I just need him to give me a chance. I’ll give him a place to live, let him buy anything he wants, and feed him until he gets fat. I’m already making a mental list of things to talk to Harvey about, like finding ways to let Wren take college courses while we’re on tour—if he wants something like that. Hell, if he wants to join the band and play the tambourine, I’m willing to make it happen.

It might need to be a broken one, though, because our sound isn't going to mix well with a tambourine.

“You don’t need to go that far, Bael. I mean, you barely even know me.” Wren’s eyes are soft and luminous, and I start to lose track of the conversation.

“I’ll go anywhere you want me to go,” I say stupidly, and then Wren is kissing me again.

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Chapter 11

Wren

I 'm pretty sure that there are still a lot of loose ends that Bael and I haven't tied off yet, but having such a sweet, sexy man all but beg me to let him take care of me puts my brain in the back seat and my dick in the front seat. Since it's too short to see over the steering wheel, our conversational journey has come to an end.

Like our first kiss, Bael takes charge as soon as my lips touch his. He seems to really like moving me around however he wants. Just one of his hands is big enough to cradle the back of my head, and I melt into the delicious sensation of giving up control, letting him consume me.

Bael is safe, and he radiates it from every fiber of his being. I've never met someone who felt so right. Kai? Kai who? Why would I even consider him when I have access to all of this?

My fingers creep under Bael's shirt, and he laughs in a growly, pleased sort of way. I pause and ask, "Am I going too fast?" I'm pretty sure he and I are both going fast enough, but I still have to check.

"Do what feels right to you. I'll keep up."

So yeah, Bael's shirt fucks right off and then so does mine. Bael stops in his tracks when he sees my tattoo.

Puberty blockers helped a lot, but I still needed a little work done to get the flat chest I wanted, which meant I ended up with two tiny scars. Some people don't mind their chest scars, some do. I'm one of the ones who do, so I created an art piece for my chest.

I wanted more than a cover-up piece, though. I wanted something that was an extension of who I was. It's a simple but powerful asymmetrical piece of a plain little bird morphing into a phoenix taking flight. It hurt like a bitch to get and I cried the whole time, but from the look on Bael's face, it was definitely worth it.

"Can I?" He holds a respectful hand over my chest. There's a tension to it like he's really holding himself back.

I give him a reward kiss before saying, "Yes, please!"

He traces the little wren with a look of wonder, but then he gets sidetracked by my nipples. Then I get sidetracked because, thank the gods, I started out with tiny ta-tas and didn't need major nerve-killing surgery there.

Fuck, Bael knows what he's doing with his hands.

He lovingly maps out my face with his mouth, and I'm gone. I'm just completely fucking gone on this man.

I'm wrapped around him, wallowing in the pleasure of his skin against mine, and I never want to leave.

"Where am I allowed to touch, sweetheart?" Bael kisses the words against the hollow of my throat.

"Anywhere you want," I breathe. Taking T has made me into a horny little thing and

I'm not shy or body conscious. A good upbringing will do that for a boy.

Bael's hand drifts lower and slips inside my pants. "What do you call this?" He strokes one of my favorite sweet spots.

"Th-that's my cocklet." I clutch one of his massive biceps tightly and bury my face in his chest.

He explores further and discovers just how slippery he's made me. "And this?" he asks as he slides a finger inside me. Slowly. So fucking slowly I shiver.

"My... ah... my front hole," I gasp.

"What about here?" He strokes my asshole in tandem with my front hole and tears of pleasure threaten to spill down my cheeks. "Call it anything you want."

"Can I fuck it?"

It takes everything in me to only nod and not tell him he can fuck any hole I have as long as he gets to it immediately. I don't, though, because some people take that shit literally, and I have a couple of holes no one has any business being inside of. I may be kinky, but my mouth, front hole, and asshole are the only holes I allow access to.

Because I really want to get down to business, I eventually force myself to say, "Please... just fuck me. Front or back. Just fuck my holes."

Bael groans into my neck, and it sounds a bit like he just said, "Thank you, god," But I can't be sure because Bael is getting first-hand knowledge of how wet my front hole has gotten.

My undies are completely soaked by the time Bael starts working them down my

legs. One last kick from me and they fly off my ankle and sail across the room. Now I can get down to soaking through Bael's pants so we can get those off him too.

I rub the bulge of Bael's cock with my hand, and he swears under his breath, but it's the good kind of swearing, so I get bolder and try to free it for closer inspection.

Bael's hands take mine and trap them. "Easy, baby. I'm not done learning about you yet. I'd like to take my time if you don't mind." He whispers that into my ear in a growly sort of way, and my tiny cocklet twitches in interest.

Yep, I'm small, folks. I have a tiny tadger. An eenie weenie dick. Technically, the term for results after meta-surgery is micro-penis, which I think is a bit mean to the folks who have size issues.

I'm not one of those.

I could have paid to have phalloplasty and gotten something massive if I'd wanted to, but personally, I think it's pretty neat to have the two-and-a-half slender inches I'm packing. It doesn't get in the way, I don't have to deal with sweaty balls because I opted out of having them, and I got to keep my front hole, which is quite a lot of fun to have.

Go Team Tiny!

Bael seems to be a fan of Team Tiny as well. He keeps both of my wrists trapped in one of his, and he slicks his fingers using my front hole before stroking my cocklet. His eyes are on my face as he checks my reaction.

"Please keep doing that," I say. "Jesus Larry Christ, please keep going." I buck into his hand and make a mewling sound of disappointment when he pulls away. I don't get a chance to get upset because he releases my hands and flips me around on his lap

until my back is pressed against his chest. He holds me in place with a hand on my chest and he uses his other to start deconstructing my sanity.

His hands are huge, right? So he manages to use his thumb and index finger to jerk off my cocklet and slide his other three fingers into my front hole.

Oh god, his rhythm is amazing. My entire world has narrowed down to his magical hand and his hot breath on my neck, and before I know it, I'm coming like there's no tomorrow. I ride his hand as he works me through my orgasm and my cocklet spurts a few milky drops on his fingers.

While I'm busy being thoroughly boneless and spent, Bael rubs his fingers together and makes a curious sound followed by an excited, "You can do that?" He brings his fingers to his mouth and licks them.

Fuck, that's hot.

I nod shakily. My poor, smooth little brain is trying to catch up after getting scrambled, so an anatomy lesson is going to be a challenge for it.

Maybe just a quick one.

"It varies depending on the person, but I could do this before surgery, so I can do it after too. Stuff just got rerouted." I love my results, and sometimes I want to high-five my surgeon for their excellent skills.

"That's the coolest thing ever."

"Right?" I love my body, and I'm absolutely delighted that Bael seems to as well.

"Can you come with my mouth on you? Because I want to try that."

“I have no idea,” I say. “No one has ever sucked me off.”

Bael kisses the side of my head. “We’re trying it.” He stands and scoops me into a princess carry. “But first I’m going to fuck you.”

He strides over to the bed and tosses me onto the mountain of pillows, giving me a cheeky smile.

I’m still wobbly from the intense orgasm and the events of the past few days, so instead of moving the pillows out of the way, I say, “If you want to fuck me here, you’ll have to fish me out before I sink.” Because I’m sure as hell not fighting my way free from the bedding again today.

Bael snorts. “Condoms first, then I’ll save you.”

“I might be lost before you get back.” I’m losing ground fast and slowly falling between two of the larger pillows.

He roots around in a drawer and tosses me a sock. “Wave this and I’ll find you.”

I laugh because he could have found condoms in the time it took for him to find that sock.

He is so perfect for me. Just like my slowly vanishing body succumbing to the inevitability of the pillow pile, my heart is being completely consumed by Bael.

Artland blazes to life in my mind, and a perfect representation of this emotion unfolds. The desperate need to get it out floods through me, and for the first time in my entire life, I bat it away like an irritating fly.

Sex now. Art later.

Huh. Apparently, my need to get railed by Bael surrounded by an entire harem's worth of pillows supersedes my need to get the pictures out of my head.

It's nice to learn new things about myself.

I've gone completely under by the time Bael returns to dig me out. The largest pillow comes away from my face to reveal the handsome features of the man who put me in this predicament in the first place.

"There you are." Bael sweeps most of the pillows off the bed with an easy sweep of his arm, then he presents a bag that he empties out onto the bed. "Everything here is new and clean. If you see anything you want to use, let me know."

There are the obvious things like condoms and lube, but there are also butt plugs of various sizes and a bullet vibe. It's like he's Sex Santa or something.

I toss a condom to Bael and say, "This one, obviously, and you'll need lube if you want my ass. The front is self-lubricating." I give Bael a dirty smile.

He pushes me on my back and slips two fingers inside my front hole. "You are so fucking wet, baby."

He says some other stuff, but Bael has magic fingers, and they're all I can pay attention to. He's holding me down and finger fucking me while all I can do is make little whining noises.

"Beautiful." He pulls his hand away and licks his fingers.

I watch through heavy lidded eyes as Bael strips. He has a crow tattoo that wraps around one hip, and it's a perfect compliment to mine. I give silent thanks to his artist for not ruining the gorgeous display of freckles scattered across his torso. If they'd

covered them up, I would have needed to murder someone. His body is a work of art, and when someone like me says that, you can treat it as gospel.

I play with my cocklet, giving it slow, lazy tugs, and Bael's eyes go dark. I see the switch happen inside him again. He goes from playful puppy to something feral, and it sends heavenly shivers through my system. I am so ready to be fucked by this man.

"Put on the condom and get inside me." I'm aiming for playful, but I think it comes off sounding more like pleading.

Bael puts the condom on like a pro and grabs my legs, jerking them apart and hitching one of them over his arms, but he stops just shy of entering my front hole. He teases me with the tip of his dick and says, "Say please."

"Please," I whisper, and Bael slides right in, inch by inch. He could have slammed right in, and I would have thanked him for it, but I'm tiny and he really, really isn't. Later Me would have had regrets.

He bottoms out even though he still has dick to spare, and I find myself apologizing for being too small. "Sorry! It might be more fun for you in the back."

"It's fun for me because it's you," Bael says in a gravelly tone, and he starts pounding into me, silencing my brain right along with my ridiculous apology.

Holy Jesus Kittens, I know I just came a few minutes ago, but his big-ass dick is about to get me there again. I know that any attention my cocklet gets right now will do the job, so I grab Bael's arms to keep myself from touching it.

I want this to last.

And boy does it. Bael seems like a sweet, fluffy guy, but he fucks like a porn star.

A considerate one, too. He watches me intently, noticing every tiny gasp of pleasure, and he fucks me harder to turn them into wails.

“God, you’re so perfect. So small. So mine.”

He grinds past my sweet spot, and I come with a cry. Bael follows close behind me, and he crushes my body against his as he comes. I swear I can feel him growling. It rumbles through my body and I sigh dreamily. Is this what love feels like?

Bael is half collapsed on me and panting, and I give him a lazy kiss. “Good boy.” Bael is a very, very good boy. “You should get a treat for this.”

“If you can come up with a better treat than that, I’ll probably die,” he laughs.

He gets off me and disposes of the condom before getting back in bed and curling around me.

“I want to do that again about eight thousand more times,” he murmurs into my hair.

“I think I can manage that,” I say sleepily. “But tomorrow, okay?” I yawn and my eyelids close on their own. I know, I know, falling asleep right after sex is cliché, but I came twice, okay? And I had a busy day. A boy needs rest after that.

I drift off to sleep to the sensation of gentle kisses pressed into my hair.

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Chapter 12

Bael

I wake up to a warm, snuggly little body octopused around me tightly. It's so wonderful, so perfect, and so right that I octopus Wren back even harder.

Love. I'm in love. This is what love feels like; I just know it. I want him, I need him, and he needs me too. He's cute and funny and silly. He likes the same video games I do, and I know he doesn't give a shit about whether I'm famous or not. I just need to convince him to stay.

At this point, I don't know if he's homeless or not. It seems like he has at least a little bit of support, but I'm not impressed with it at all. I just need to find a way to convince Wren that my crew and I will be way better at taking care of him and that he should stay with us.

I decide to find out what fucking a snuggly, sleepy little Wren is like, but then the clock on my nightstand catches my eye.

Well, shit. We have to be on the tour bus and on our way to Connecticut in two hours. There's no way Harvey will let us be late today after what happened last time, and I don't want him busting in while I'm balls-deep in my new boyfriend.

Oh please, oh please, dear god, please let Wren think we're boyfriends now.

Instead of fucking Wren awake, I choose to kiss him awake instead. I start with his

hair and move down to his forehead. I kiss my way down his nose and across his cheek. From the giggle I hear, I achieve my goal, but I'm not ready to stop yet, so I nuzzle into his ear. I whisper, "Good morning," and I continue down his neck.

Oops. I'm getting carried away, aren't I? If you heard the sweet encouraging sounds Wren is making right now, you'd be getting carried away too. Well, you would be if cute, tiny little blond guys are your thing. They certainly are mine now.

All my other types have been washed away in the wake of the Wren experience.

If I were to lose him forever, I can already foresee an endless line of small, blond one-night stands that never manage to satisfy me. I hate this line of thought. It's stupid, and I'm not following it anymore. I'm definitely keeping Wren, and I'll use every trick in the book to make sure it happens.

"I'm sorry sweetheart, but we have to get up and get out of here." I plant a huge sloppy kiss on Wren's cheek.

His eyes finally blink open, and he gives me a grumpy little pout. "I don't have anything I need to be doing." A massive yawn showcases his little pink tongue.

I'm about to say, "My mistake, there are no plans. Let's fuck." But then I remember how much I don't want Harvey to bust in here, so instead I say, "Let's get showered and have breakfast."

I squeeze Wren and sit up, taking him with me. When I get out of bed, I drag Wren along, ignoring his sleepy protests, and carry him all the way into the bathroom and stick him in the shower.

We have a little too much fun soaping each other up, and I get the best blowjob of my life out of the deal. Who knew such a small mouth could do such big things?

I don't know. Maybe Wren isn't the blowjob king of the universe, but he certainly seems that way to me.

After sucking me off, he allows me to soap up his cocklet and ass. I have to nip out of the shower for a minute because he said unless he's absolutely gagging for it, he usually needs a bullet vibe to have an orgasm. I skid back into the shower with the bullet vibe that had gotten lost in the bed. The whole bed is soaked now, but I couldn't give a shit about that.

I've forgotten all about the danger of Harvey by the time I have Wren screaming my name and coming into my hand. For the record, he's a fucking vision.

Unfortunately, Harvey didn't forget about me.

I still have my fingers inside Wren's ass when Harvey starts pounding on the bathroom door hard enough to make me wonder for a second if we're having an earthquake.

"Stop fucking and get your ass out here right now, Bael."

I ease my fingers out of Wren and give him an apology kiss before yelling, "Wren needs clothes!"

"I'll have some for him in five minutes. Now get dressed and ready to go."

I can hear him as he storms away and slams my door. Harvey can be a real bitch sometimes, but then again so can Travis, and I love them both anyway.

We get out of the shower, and I pull him out to the bedroom where it isn't so steamy. I want to see every inch of him for as long as I can.

I'm in the middle of toweling Wren off when I say, "We're boyfriends now." When Wren doesn't respond immediately, panic shoots through me and I add, "Right?"

"You want to be my boyfriend?" Wren's shy smile eclipses my entire world, and I nod vigorously. "I'd like that very much. Yes, please."

I let out a loud whoop, grab him by the waist, and swing him around in the air. It's a good thing I moved us to the bedroom, because I would have bruised the hell out of both of us with this move. Then I kiss the ever-loving shit out of him.

My Wren. Mine. All mine.

"You're gonna love the tour bus. It has everything. According to Mel, it's even going to have Elvis, because that slut is planning on moving the kitchen fan and hanging it on the wall. Not that I believe in Elvis or anything."

Wren is mid-laugh when he stops dead in his tracks. "I can't go on the tour bus with you. I need to get back to Kai and everyone else before they freak out."

For a second, everything inside me freezes, and I can see my entire world crash down around me, but then I remember who I am. I'm Bael, and I can move mountains.

No, he's not getting away.

Hell. Fucking. No.

"You definitely can get on the tour bus. Everyone likes you here, and if you're really worried about your people, you can find them later. A few days won't matter, will it?" They'd all already fucked the pooch in my opinion. If they were so concerned about Wren, they would have found him by now.

Wren looks pained when he says, “I’m sorry, but I really can’t.”

“I can give you a better life than they can, Wren. I know it. Just let me prove it to you.” I’m practically begging right now, and I’m willing to get on my knees if that’s what it takes. “You don’t even know how to get in touch with them right now. Just come with us for a little while. We’re returning to Boston in a few days, and then we’re taking several weeks off.”

“I have responsibilities...”

The door to my room slams open and Harvey shouts, “I don’t care if you’re naked; your time is up.” He throws a bag on one of the couches and taps his foot impatiently.

I shield Wren with my body instinctively, so Harvey doesn’t get an eyeful.

“I’m coming, I’m coming. Don’t get your panties in a bunch.” I shrug on a robe, hustle Wren into the bathroom, slam the door, and fetch the bag. As I suspected, it’s full of clothes, so I go back to the bathroom, open the door a crack, shove the bag at Wren, and say, “These are for you. Come out when you’re dressed. I’ll be back in a minute.” Then I give his little nose a peck before shutting the door in his face.

I leave with Harvey, but before he’s able to tear into me, I say, “One sec,” and jog up to Brent and James.

Harvey’s squawk of indignation has me smiling once I reach them.

“Hey guys, I need you to do me a favor.”

They trade glances, and James asks, “Do you want us to get rid of the kid?”

What the fuck???

“No! Of course not! Why are the two of you like this?” I wave the subject away because I don't have a lot of time. “It is about Wren, though. Things are weird and confusing right now since we're leaving, and I don't think he really understands what's going on, so I want you to keep an eye on him. Don't let him leave without talking to me, but don't hurt him. In fact, don't touch him, either.” I give them both a glare and add, “And definitely don't be mean to him or scare him in any way.”

“Don't hurt him ? I'm more worried about us than him. He's a menace. My doctor told me I'm going to have a scar.” Brent holds out a bandaged hand for me to inspect.

I nod and smile. Good for Wren. “Yes. Absolutely do not hurt him at all costs, and everything will be fine.” I reach out and pat James on the arm. “Good talk,” I say and then jog back to Harvey.

This is going to work.

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Chapter 13

Wren

“ S o there I was, stark naked with about three hundred fans just around the corner because they heard a rumor that I take smoke breaks in stairwells right before concerts. Anyway, I?—”

I like Mel. I really do, and their stories are fascinating, but not half as fascinating as the scenarios my brain is cooking up for the next time Bael and I go to poundtown.

I'm also maybe, kinda, sorta, a little concerned about how everyone seems convinced I'm going on the tour bus with them. I've told them all multiple times each that I can't go and that I have something I have to do. I'm pretty sure they all still think I'm homeless and that I'm just trying to not be a burden—which is really funny if you actually know me. I literally pay people to let me be a burden to them.

I really can't go with the band right now though. I don't remember which day it is, but I know for a fact that sometime soon there's a huge gallery exhibit I have to go to the opening for because it's for my art.

Not only would I be a shitty person for not showing up, but just imagining the nightmare disappointment extravaganza I'd be subjected to for vanishing and skipping the opening makes me want to yak.

We're at Randy's again, and the food I'm eating is fantastic, so I really want to keep it inside me. Since I didn't get sick from stuffing my face here yesterday, I plan on

doing it again today.

I eyeball Brent and James standing over in the corner, and I give them a look . With how protective Bael seems to be, I don't put it past him to set his goons on me if I just try and make a break for it. Not that I think they'd hurt me or anything. But I do think they'd stand in front of me long enough for Bael to puppy eye me into getting on the bus.

It would take almost no effort on his side to convince me to stay with him. With the way he's been feeling up my leg this entire meal, I'm finding it hard to put my Grand Plan into action.

I don't want to leave Bael or the band. Not for good, anyway. Especially since the whole we're boyfriends conversation Bael and I just had. But I'm sick of trying to convince everyone that I'm not what they think I am.

They're all so kind and understanding and change the subject as quickly as possible anytime I try and bring it up. I don't think they're being assholes about it, either. No, I think they all genuinely believe that they're helping me and just trying to spare my dignity or something.

This really sucks, because if I really was homeless, I couldn't imagine a better group to have fallen in with.

But I have responsibilities, and I'm terrible at advocating for myself, so I'm gonna have to go with my Grand Plan.

And look at that, the main part of the plan just went into the back of the restaurant.

Damn it. Now I have to actually do it.

“I have to go to the bathroom, sweetie,” I whisper into Bael’s ear. “I’ll be right back.”

He gives me a sad little frown and moves his hand from my leg reluctantly. “I can go with you if you want.”

I promise myself that I will contact him as soon as I’m able, and that this is not goodbye forever, just goodbye for an hour or two. Once everything is cleared up, Bael and I can sail off into the sunset together, leaving a trail of video games and condoms in our wake.

This gives me the courage to laugh and say, “I think I’ll be okay on my own for five minutes.”

He stands up and lets me scoot out of the booth, and I give him a kiss on the cheek. I want to give him a long, lingering goodbye kiss, but it's impossible to give somebody one of those without them getting suspicious. So instead, I grab his butt to tide me over until I see him again.

I skip off happily to the bathroom area and freeze when I realize it's just doors to single-person gender-neutral bathrooms. I mean, hooray for accessibility, but am I just going to have to stand out here like a creep until my target shows up?

That is exactly what I have to do, and I don't even have a phone to hide behind to ease the awkwardness. Perfect.

At least I'm not standing where the band can see me. I sure hope Archie isn't one of those people who spends five hours in the bathroom.

It feels like nine years, but it's probably only about a minute and a half before Archie is done. As soon as he leaves the bathroom, I grab him by a red plaid flannel sleeve, put my finger over my lips, and drag him through the back exit.

Archie is exactly as cool as I thought he would be, because he doesn't say a thing until the door closes behind us and we're alone in the alley. There's a sticker of Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson right beside the door for some reason, but I don't get a chance to ponder its existence because Archie jumps right to the point.

"So you did need help?"

I nod violently.

"Don't worry, kid, I got you. I'll get you out of here first, and then we'll call the cops."

"No!" I shout, and then realize I'm being all covert and stuff, so I change to whisper-shouting. "Don't call the cops! They haven't done anything wrong. I'm just terrible at explaining myself, and they don't understand. I need you to help me figure out a way to contact my people so I can go home. They think I'm homeless and I'm really, really not."

"Aw, kid..." Archie rubs the back of his neck and gives me a oh, you're one of those smooth brained people, aren't you? look, and I feel my face go hot. "What do you need me to do?"

As I sort it all out in my mind, I realize there were a lot of things I could have done differently at the beginning of this adventure if I'd been more clear-headed, but I wasn't, and I've reached the point with the band that this is really the best way to get what I need. Otherwise, I'm going to let Bael puppy eye me right onto that tour bus, and then gods know how long it'll be before I get back home.

I know that sounds crazy and pathetic, but he's so kind and so freaking sweet. Also, that dick of his is pure magic. Saying no to any of that is far beyond anything I'm capable of.

“I need you to find a way to contact my agent,” I say finally. Archie is super chill to be giving me space to work out what I want to do, and I appreciate that in a person. It’s a basic necessity in dealing with me. “But can we get out of here first?”

Archie gives me a wry smile, nods toward a fire-engine red motorcycle, and says, “Hop on.”

A very thrilling fifteen minutes later and we are at a posh little coffee shop.

I am a shaky, wobbly little thing, and I cling to Archie as I get off his bike. That was insanely fun, and I want my own bike now, but if Kai values his life, he will never allow me to buy one. Marty would just straight up fucking kill him.

And then probably me too for tricking Kai into letting me get one in the first place.

But I digress. Archie lets me hang on to him until I get my footing and then does me the favor of pretending like I wasn’t treating him, a perfect stranger, like my personal servant.

“We don’t have to do this here if you don’t want to,” I say. “I don’t have the money to treat you to coffee right now, so we can do this at your place if it’s easier.”

Archie sighs like one of my old art history teachers used to sigh when he realized I’d accidentally destroyed yet another of my textbooks by drawing all over the pages instead of taking notes.

So that’s probably not a good sign.

“Please tell me you don’t try to follow every stranger you meet home.”

“Oh no, I’m not that bad. It’s only you and Bael so far.”

I get another sigh before Archie tells me, “Let’s just go inside. You sit down, and I’ll get us something.”

The café is shiny and modern, and you’d think it wouldn’t suit Archie’s Canadian lumberjack vibe, but you’d be wrong. When he comes back with our food and sits down, he fits right in with the decor like he owns the place.

He’s a classy, French Canadian, silver daddy lumberjack. Dude must be fending off tits and ass everywhere he goes.

I spend at least five minutes convincing Archie that I’m not a sixteen-year-old runaway, and that I’m actually a grown-ass man who he could have gotten coffee for instead of the milk he bought me to go with my banana bread.

After I’ve explained the entire situation to him, he makes one phone call, yells at two people, and suddenly I’m on the phone with Shelly.

I am pretty sure people from two streets away can see the heart eyes I’m shooting at this giant lumberjack man. The heart eyes only last two seconds into my conversation with Shelly because she’s suddenly screaming in my ear, and I nearly yeet Archie’s phone across the café.

Archie intercepts my hand mid-yeet and takes his phone back. “Take it easy on him. He’s had a rough couple of weeks, and the folks he trusted to keep him safe really let him down. He doesn’t need one of them yelling at him right now.”

Aaaand the heart eyes are back.

“Don’t look at me like that, kid. I’m nobody’s hero.” Archie hands me the phone again.

Shelly's voice is far less ear-piercing this time, so I'm able to understand her when she says, "Wren, honey, where have you been? Everyone in the agency has been freaking out. Marty hopped on a plane as soon as Kai realized you were missing."

"Kai's back?" There's a mixture of joy and trepidation in my voice as I ask.

On the one hand, Kai is going to fix everything for me perfectly because he always does, and that's exactly what I need right now. On the other hand, that'll be a massive waste of his time because I'm pretty sure as soon as he's fixed all my problems, he's going to murder me and then perfectly hide my body.

"He got home early yesterday morning and went straight to your place to check on you. I'm pretty sure he lost a year off his life when he realized you were missing." Shelly sounds pretty shaken up herself, so she's probably not just talking about Kai for that last part.

My heart goes all warm and gooey because it's nice to have people who will miss you and worry about you. But... "Ummm, Shelly... do you think you could be the one to call Kai? I'm pretty sure if he yells at me right now, I will cry."

I'm not just saying that to get out of being in trouble. I'm full-on emotionally fragile right now. I hate the fact that Bael and the band have surely realized I ditched them by now. Everyone's feelings are going to be hurt, and I absolutely cannot stand that thought.

Oh, for fucks sake. I should have left them a note.

Ahhhh! Why do I have to be so stupid???

Now Bael is going to be mad at me, he's going to dump me, and he's never going to want to talk to me again. He might even throw fruit at me when I try to see him.

What have I done?

I should have gone for that goodbye-forever kiss after all.

They don't make a pill for stupid, but they really should, so people like me can have a boyfriend for more than a day.

“Are you okay, Wren? Did your agent make you cry?” Archie is holding out a tissue for me, and I touch my face. My cheeks are covered in tears.

“No... it wasn't her.” I take the tissue and rub at my face. I'm going to need about nine more of these because these tears aren't stopping.

“Wren, love, Kai is on his way to you now. He'll be there in a few minutes. I promise you that we'll get this all sorted out and make sure nothing like this ever happens again.”

I sniff and nod at the phone and hang up, forgetting that she can't see me. I hand the phone back to Archie and tell him, “Thank you for helping. You don't need to stay anymore.”

“The hell I don't.” Archie takes my hand in his large, work-roughened one and squeezes before stuffing more tissues into it. “I'm not letting you out of my sight until I know you're safe.”

That didn't help with the tears at all. “You don't even know me. Why are you being so nice?”

“You're a kid in need. My Abigail would have my head if I stood by and did nothing.”

I sniff and cry into tissue after tissue while Archie regales me with tales of his efforts to restore an ancient dirigible. It sounds freaking amazing, and I decide then and there that Archie is going to be my best friend forever (other than Marty, obviously) because once it's built, I need to ride that thing like I need air.

Halfway through the conversation, he switches to discussing mundane details of his life, and I realize I'm not entirely certain whether Abigail is his wife, his child, or his dog.

It's comments like, "Abigail was trapped under the deck for an hour before I could coax her out," and "She hates it when I wear tan, so I'm not allowed to buy anything that color." And "Her art isn't half bad, considering," that muddy the waters for me.

When I ask him to clarify, he snorts and says, "You're funny, kid."

Then the door to the coffee shop slams open, and the bell on the door flies off and bounces off of an unoccupied table.

"Wren!" Kai shouts as he scans the room with a wild look in his eyes.

I wave to him from my table, hold up my banana bread, and point to it. Why? Because I'm an awkward person, that's why.

"Oh god, baby, I was so worried." Kai races across the café as soon as he sees me and puts me in a stranglehold. I hug him back as strongly as my tiny body can manage.

"Kai, I missed you!" I cry into his suit. I'm probably going to need more tissues soon.

Kai pulls back and begins to check me over from head to toe, "We should get you to a doctor to check you and make sure you're okay."

I know how this looks, and I need to stress yet another time that Kai and I are not like that. I may have forgotten to mention that Kai can't have children. He lost a wife due to this issue, and I'm pretty sure he thinks of me as either a little brother or the child he could never have. This is why he's so protective of me and overly handsy.

And because of how well he takes care of me and how kind he is, I love him like family too—even if he's pushy, gruff, and won't let me watch free porn on the internet. He makes me buy it from reputable sources!

What a monster.

“Okay?” I laugh nervously. “Why would you think I'm not okay? Look, I still have all my arms and everything else!” I do a little twirl to show off my fancy, still-attached appendages.

“You look like you've lost at least five pounds, Wren. That's not my definition of okay.” Kai starts running his hands over my scalp to check for lumps.

“I don't have a concussion!” I shout as I slap his hands away.

Kai steps back with good grace, and I give him a playful shove while laughing. Kai babying the shit out of me is familiar territory, and it makes me feel like I've finally come home even though I'm miles from my condo.

“You seem like you're in good hands here,” Archie says with a soft smile. “I'll leave you two to it.” He gets up and offers his hand to me. I take it and give it an awkward shake.

“I want to hang out with you again,” I blurt.

Archie gives me a little salute and says, “You can find me at Randy's most days.”

Kai takes his hand and shakes it too, only he does it with style and class. “Thank you. Shelly told me what you did for Wren. I promise you'll be well-rewarded for it.”

“Nah,” Archie says and turns to leave just like that. I watch him through the window as he hops on his motorcycle and drives away.

“Please don't tell me you rode on that thing.”

“Okay, I won't tell you that.”

Kai shoots me a fake glare and ruffles my hair. “Let's get you to a doctor and then back home.”

“I don't need a doctor. I already saw one.”

“Well, you're going to get to see another one. Lucky you.”

“Fiiiiine,” I concede grumpily. It won't be the worst thing to ever happen to me, and I can tell he needs me to let him mother hen me extra hard for his own sanity. “But I need you to do something for me when you get a minute.”

“Anything, Wren. I'm just glad you're okay.”

I curl into his side and let him lead me out of the café.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:43 pm

Chapter 14

Bael

“ I think I'll be okay on my own for five minutes.”

This sentence haunts my every waking second as we make our way to Connecticut.

Not that I was sleeping or anything. It just sounds more dramatic if I say it that way, and since I'm feeling incredibly upset right now, you need to feel it with me.

Why did Wren leave? Was it something I did? Was it something I didn't do? I really should have offered to give him all of my cats...

I didn't fire Brent or James because telling them to keep an eye on Wren had been a stupid idea in the first place. I'm the one who was supposed to be taking care of him, so making sure he didn't slip out is all on me.

What if he's cold? He didn't have a jacket. “Goddammit, Harvey,” I shout toward the back of the bus. “Why didn't you make sure Wren got a jacket when you brought him clothes?”

“Harvey's not here buddy, remember? You made a deal with him that you'd only get on the bus if he stayed behind to find Wren.” Mel rubs my shoulders, probably in an attempt to be soothing.

I am not soothed.

“He'd better fucking find Wren,” I growl. “I'm not above hopping off this bus and catching a ride back to Boston.”

Everyone knows I mean this because I don't make empty threats.

Why should I? Making threats is boring and pointless. Action is what gets you what you need.

“I'm sure Wren is okay, Bael,” Travis says as he pokes at the not-Elvis fan hanging on the wall. He jumps backward post-poke, but when it does nothing otherworldly, he adds, “He made it this long on his own, didn't he?”

“He obviously didn't, Travis. Don't poke the bear.” Shay pulls Travis away and gives me a rough deal, buddy shrug.

Laura isn't here because she promised to stay at the hotel in case Wren comes back, and he'd probably be happier if someone he knows is there.

I don't end up catching a cab as soon as I get off the bus because Harvey is giving me regular updates on his progress. Which is zero, but I know Harvey. If there's something out there to be found, he'll find it. I have full confidence in his ability to hunt down Wren and remotely supervise tonight's gig.

So I obediently allow Trina to turn me into a goth wet dream, but I don't bother checking the results before stepping on stage because my mind isn't in Hartford, Connecticut. Instead, I do what I do best: Something stupid and impulsive.

I gaze soulfully out into the crowd. I'm sad, I'm mad, I'm scared, and I'm not ashamed to hide it. I'm not doing any of this grin-and-bear-it bullshit.

“Thank you for coming today,” I say. “It means everything to me and the rest of the

band because I know this shit is expensive and sometimes getting out of the house is hard. Thank you for supporting us by doing the hard thing. Every single one of us knows we wouldn't be here if it wasn't for you.”

The crowd goes completely berserk, cheering and waving banners and glow sticks. Our fans are just the best, aren't they?

“Leaving my home was really hard for me today,” I continue, and the crowd goes dead silent. I don't tend to get personal on stage, so everyone is probably a little confused right now. If Harvey's prone to having a stroke, this will be what does it. Hang in there Harvey. “I just met someone amazing. He's the coolest guy—cute, funny, and weird in all the right ways.”

There's a loud crash behind me and I turn to see that Travis has fallen off of his stool, narrowly missing taking out his drum kit. Travis is a topsy-turvy guy when he's stressed out, have you noticed?

There's a smattering of laughter from the crowd but mostly everyone seems entranced by whatever the hell I'm doing right now. I wait a second to make sure Travis is okay before I continue. He's fine. Travis is small but he's a resilient little bugger.

Thank god he didn't fuck up the drum kit or we'd be here an extra hour setting it back up again.

“Sorry about that, Travis,” I give him a little wave. “I'll try to give you a warning the next time I decide to do my soul searching in public.”

Travis gives me the finger, and everyone laughs. When the crowd calms down, I say, “I think I scared him away though. I'm not sure how I did it, but I'm going to find out as soon as I can, and I'm going to fix it. That's what we do right? We're human and

we fuck up, but what keeps us from being shitty people is that we admit our fuckups and try and do better.”

I pause and stare across the crowd. I wish Wren was here. I wish I could say this to him. I wish I could find out why he left.

“As soon as this concert is over, I'm going to find him and tell him how I feel, and you're all going to be super nice to him about it, okay? No internet bullying. I'm pretty sure I don't need to say this to you guys, but I've seen some scary things happen to other musicians' and artists' lovers, so I need to be proactive about this. I love my guy, and I will kick the shit out of anyone who makes him cry.”

It's good to be upfront about this, especially since it's Harvey's main reason why I can't take Wren on tour with us. All I need to do now is find Wren and convince him to come.

I wait patiently for the crowd's reaction. Currently, it's nothing but crickets out there.

I accept that I might have just turned away most of my fans, and maybe I've killed my career, but I don't care. I'm not here for the fame, and I already have the fortune. I do what I do because I love doing it, and if being honest makes my fans hate me, then I will keep doing my thing anyway.

It's just now occurring to me that I'm not the only member of this band. Well, shit. I should have thought this out more. They'll probably be okay if they kick me out, right?

I turn to give my guys an apology, and I'm just in time to see the full-speed group tackle hug coming my way.

The crowd erupts. The stage shakes from the force of the cheers and stamping feet,

and it makes it impossible for me to keep my footing while Mel, Travis, and Shay throw themselves at me. We all go down in a pile of flailing limbs.

I try to free myself, but my bandmates are all really strong, so if they want to cling to you, they're staying.

I can tell that the crowd was a huge fan of my little speech because once the din dies down a little, I can pick out things like, “We love you, Bael!” “Marry me and we can have a three-way!” “I would die for your boyfriend; he sounds adorable!” and my favorite, which was, “Go get your man!”

When the crowd is finally quiet, Mel says, “We stand behind Bael, obviously. And he's right, you're all really fantastic fans, so we're going to count on you to shut down the trolls online when you find them.”

“What he said,” Travis says with all the black cat energy he can muster.

Shay just snorts and says, “If we're done with the feelings portion of the evening, can we get back to what we're here for?”

I gather them all into a bear hug and squeeze until I know they probably all need air. Then I haul us all to our feet when I stand up. I know, I'm very strong, and as you can see, it comes in handy sometimes.

“Let's do this thing,” I yell, and the stadium goes bananas once more. Is anyone else like me who doesn't know how to spell the word banana? I just type ba and keep adding na over and over again until it looks right or I give up.

No?

Just me?

Whatever. Anyway, the next two hours are insane. I have more energy than I've ever had on stage before and that's saying something. I think it's safe to say that we killed the ever-loving shit out of this concert.

Mel is our guitarist and backup vocals, but tonight the slut gets to do lead on our cover of "Shout" by Tears for Fears. Mel has been slaving over getting the vocals right for months now and absolutely slayed.

I've never been prouder.

Even Shay shows more than the too-cool-for-words facade he crafted to use for stage performances. I swear to you that he actually smiled. Twice . Also, his keyboard work is usually outstanding, but tonight he really went all out.

And me? I sing my fucking heart and soul into every second because I'm imagining Wren being here with me, listening to me perform. I make every single goddamned note my bitch.

At the end where we usually do several encores after the first one, the crowd starts chanting, "Go get your man!" until I give a final bow and run off the stage.

It was fucking epic.

The next part is tricky.

I don't have to worry about takedown because the tech crew has that locked down. However, the bus isn't remotely ready to go because the guys had all of their personal stuff unloaded already, and it would be shitty to take off with it and leave them stranded here. Also, even though the bus definitely isn't haunted by Elvis's old kitchen fan, I'm still not taking any chances and riding in that thing alone.

My phone is ringing, but I see that it's Harvey, and I'm not interested in having him brutally destroy my eardrums, so I hit ignore and stuff my phone back into my pocket. Then I realize he may have info about Wren, so I skid to a stop, whip it back out, and text him.

Bael

Is this about Wren?

Harvey

No, but we need to talk about what you just?—

I stop reading, stuff my phone back into my pocket, and start running once more.

I'm going fast when I make it to the dressing room, so my entrance is on the dramatic side, and it makes Trina shout, “Jesus Christ on a pogo stick, Bael!” when I slam the door open.

“I need your car,” I say, bouncing up and down on my heels impatiently.

“I'm sure you do, lover boy. I caught your speech, and if my heart wasn't made of coal, I would have had an emotion. If you try a little harder next time, I might care. Sadly, you fell short, so no dice.”

Normally this is one of the things I love about Trina. She isn't moved by fame or fortune. She has her own set of priorities and can't be moved unless she wants to be. This means that the fact that she likes me is beyond precious. Unfortunately, it also means I can't bully her into letting me borrow her car.

“Name your price, Trina. I don't care what you want. If I can give it to you, it's

yours.”

Trina knows she has me over a barrel, and I don't have time to play games. She knows I can't hire a car myself or take any kind of public transportation. The few times I've tried, it's been such a disaster that Harvey actually threatened to quit if I did it again. He really meant it too.

I like Harvey and I don't want him to quit. Besides, if he quits, he won't be able to help me find Wren.

“Get me a date with Harvey.”

Wow.

Like... holy shit, wow.

I don't have the time to unpack that right now. I swear to you, until this exact second, I thought Trina was a lesbian. You learn something new every day, I guess.

“Done.” I don't know how I'm going to do it, but I don't go back on my word, so I know eventually I'll make it happen.

“And I'm driving. I also get to pick the music, you're riding in the back, and don't even think about talking to me. I'm off the clock as soon as my butt hits the driver's seat.” Trina pokes me in the chest so hard I flinch and finishes with, “You are damn lucky I was planning on going back to Boston tonight in the first place.”

Trina is prickly as hell, but she wouldn't have said yes at all if she didn't like me, so I don't get my feelings hurt.

“Deal.”

I'm on pins and needles the entire time Trina finishes packing up. I'm smart and only suggest to her once that she should let a techie do it for her. Her glares are like razors to the soul and just one of them is enough to shut up the devil himself.

I obediently allow her to make me her packhorse and carry all of her stuff to the car. Thank god, she only made me bring the important stuff, otherwise there would have been no room for me or her in the car. But she's protective about her brushes, combs, and other tools, so those had to come with us.

It's closer to early morning than it is to late evening when we're packed and ready to go, but I don't complain because we're still leaving earlier than I could have managed alone. I really, really want to though. I swear she took her time just to be mean.

"You better be as quiet as a mouse back there," Trina says as she buckles herself in.

I mime zipping my mouth shut, and we're finally on our way to Boston.

So you know that song I've been working on? The one that really took off as soon as I met Wren? It's louder now. So much louder.

It's kind of angry now, too.

I'm mad. I think I'm also hurt. I spent most of the time until now scared and worried, but Wren agreed to be my boyfriend and then ditched me immediately after. Why didn't he say something before he left?

What if I don't find him before he makes himself sick and collapses again?

I have my headphones on and open my music notation app. I haven't written any of my new song down yet. Until now it's all been in my head, but it's so loud that if I don't get it out, it'll come out on its own, and then Trina will kick me out of her car,

and I'll have to walk to Boston.

I space out and let the music do its thing. All the beautiful parts of the past few days, the scary ones, the sexy ones—every bit of it goes into this song. It's not like my normal stuff. Most of my songs are high energy with an edge of anger because writing is how I get out all of my feelings about my bullshit childhood.

There's a reason why I'm in a goth band, after all.

This song is more delicate. More vulnerable.

I'm just so fucking in love with Wren, you guys.

And right now, it hurts . It hurts so much that if I wasn't pouring this into the song, I'd be howling at the moon.

I need to find Wren and ask him what happened. Ask him what I did to make him think he couldn't tell me what he needed.

The sun is up and over the horizon when we make it back to Boston. My song is finished, and my eyelids are drooping.

I've ignored every text from Harvey that didn't involve Wren. I've done it so much that I'm worried he might die from irritation, so I finally relent. I'm going to see him in a few minutes anyway, so I might as well bleed some of the anger off him before we meet face-to-face.

Bael

What's up?

Harvey

Where are you?

Bael

With Trina. I'm almost home. How bad is the fire?

Harvey

Your sales went through the roof and are still climbing.

This is Harvey's way of saying you made us all a shit ton of money, so keep doing what you're doing . I stop worrying about him being mad and get back to worrying about Wren.

Bael

Where is Wren?

Harvey

I haven't found him yet.

Bael: HARVEY, I SWEAR TO GOD.

Harvey

Calm down, Bael. I have a lead. What do you know about a man named Kai?

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:43 pm

Chapter 15

Wren

Marty slams into me the moment I get into the door of my apartment. I'm off my feet and in the air, inflicted with a rib-crushing, feet-dangling bear hug. "Dude, what happened? I nearly shit a brick when Kai called me and told me he couldn't find you."

"I'm okay!" I laugh into Marty's chest, and I expect him to put me down after I hug him back, but after a solid minute, I'm still hanging in his grip.

Another beat and I'm still there. And another... and another. Still hugging. Yep. Stilllll hugging.

I wince as one of the rhinestones on his denim jacket starts to become one with my face.

This is no longer a co-hug. This is swiftly becoming a hug prison, and I kick my feet in protest. I'm about to complain loudly when I realize the heartbeat I can feel against my cheek is racing like mad.

Damn, Marty wasn't kidding about that brick.

"I'm okay, I promise! A really nice doctor named Gwen checked me out twice and said I'm going to be fine. Then Kai dragged me to another doctor who said the same thing, only they were kind of a jerk about it." They probably didn't like how Kai bullied them into seeing me right away, so I'm not holding a grudge.

When Marty finally puts me down, my gaze becomes magically glued to the floor. I can't look anyone in the eye because I feel so stupid. Shelly is there too, and she gives me a much more respectful hug before she starts bustling around my apartment, going through my cabinets and refrigerator and calling out to Kai a list of things for him to buy.

It's a long time before I'm able to look up.

I square my jaw and I just fucking do it, shouting, "I'm sorry!" Everyone in the room stops and stares at me. "I'm sorry I'm so stupid and that you all have to put up with me. Please don't be mad at me even though I know I deserve it."

"Wren..." Kai says. He puts his list away, comes up to me, and goes down on one knee so he doesn't loom over me. "We're not mad, and you're not stupid. The only people we're mad at are ourselves."

"It kinda feels like you're all three seconds from murdering me, or telling me to go fuck myself."

"Aw, buddy." Marty rubs one of his biceps sheepishly and pulls up a chair to sit next to us. "Every single person here knows exactly how lucky we are to have you in our lives. You're a gift, Wren. You light up everything around you, and all three of us love you to pieces."

"Do you think I would work for someone if I didn't want to? It's not like I need the money," Kai says.

This isn't news to me. Kai's car alone is worth a year of rent in my fancy-ass apartment building. Hell, his apartment might be nicer than mine.

"What did you used to do for a living, Kai? You always laugh at me when I ask."

Kai glances at Marty who gives him the thumb to the throat neck-slicing gesture.

“It's porn, isn't it? I'm old enough to know about porn, Marty. You don't have to hide it from me. Kai, I promise I'll still love you even if everyone on the internet has seen your dick. What was your stage name? I promise not to look it up.”

You better fucking believe I'm breaking that promise immediately if he tells me. No, I'm still not hot for Kai, but don't tell me you wouldn't go straight to Google if a close friend told you they used to do porn.

Kai laughs and shakes his head, and Marty buries his face in his hands.

“I'll tell you when you're older,” Marty says into his hands. “Maybe when you're fifty.”

Marty always says this, and he always eventually caves. I am excellent at badgering people. I do wonder what Marty has over Kai that he could keep him from telling me. Kai isn't known for listening to anyone if he doesn't want to.

“And you're not going to tell me?” I ask Kai.

He shrugs in a what can I do sort of way, and I know that's all I'm going to get out of him. My excellent skills aside, Kai cannot be badgered.

“Soooo... just to make sure we're all on the same page, the three of you aren't about to make a mass exodus from my life because you're sick of dealing with my smooth brain issues, right?”

“God no.” Shelly has Kai's list in her hand now, and she stops writing in it to give me the full force of her mama bear executive energy. “Wren, even if I didn't love you like my own child, you make me millions of dollars a year. You're stuck with me,

babe.”

Marty takes my hand. “Buddy, you have the most brilliant mind I’ve ever seen. They only let genius-level artists into our school, and you blew all of us out of the water. Why do you think our teachers let you get away with everything you did? Because they knew that a mind like yours wasn’t built to follow the same path most people do. They don’t make tests for people like you because they don’t know how to quantify the way you think.”

I’ve heard this kind of talk before, but it’s never made much of an impact on me. I know smart when I see it, and it’s definitely not face down in a puddle of drool on a regular basis. It can also do taxes. I’m pretty sure that’s a basic requirement for smartness.

“We all know who and what you are, Wren,” Kai says and takes my hand from Marty like it’s the group talking stick and he wants a turn now. “I’m grateful every day that I get to be someone you rely on. The art you create changes lives, and I’m honored to be part of your process. I’m not angry at you at all. It was my job to keep you safe, and I failed at it.”

“We all did,” Shelly pipes in. “All three of us should have slowed down long enough to check in with each other, and I promise you we won’t ever forget that again.”

“Never,” Kai says. “In fact, I have several ideas about that to go over with you, Shelly, after the opening tomorrow.”

“I’ll tell my assistant to make a hole in my schedule for you,” she says.

Kai gets up and goes back to the kitchen area to finish helping Shelly with the list, leaving me with Marty.

I feel like a bomb went off in my heart. Never have I felt so loved in my life, and it makes my chest ache. It also makes me think of Bael, and my heart lurches.

How am I going to fix this?

“Kai!” I cry out. “Did you do the thing I asked you to do?”

“Not yet. My priority is you first, but I promise I’ll contact your friends as soon as I can.”

“I really need you to do it right now. It’s urgent. Like super-duper urgent.”

“And I really need you to rest right now.”

“I’m not tired yet.”

“Aren’t you?” Kai gives me a pointed look and I realize I’d just said that mid-yawn.

The excitement and exhaustion of the past few days catch up to me, and suddenly I’m yawning hard enough to expel my soul.

“As soon as you’re asleep, I’ll take care of everything, Wren,” Kai promises.

“Come on, man, let’s get you into bed.” Marty hauls me to my feet and starts to usher me to my room. It’s a lot cleaner than I left it. Actually, the entire apartment is cleaner than I left it. I bet Kai panic-cleaned the entire place while he was trying to find me.

It’s a very him thing to do.

I’m out and dead to the world the moment my head touches my pillow. My dreams are filled with fishnets, strawberry blonde hair, freckles, and Bael’s majestic crow

tattoo.

When I wake up, I know I've been asleep for a long time because I feel amazing. Gwen was right. All I needed was enough rest and food, and now I'm as good as new.

I catapult myself out of my bed, race into my living room and see that Kai and Marty are still there, but Shelly is long gone. They're both wearing different clothes than before, and Kai looks fresh out of the shower, hair slicked back and still damp.

Wow. I slept a really long time.

Kai is making bacon and eggs, and Marty is being his weird-ass self by watching TV while sitting upside down on my comfiest chair, head hanging over the edge of the seat, legs flopped over the backrest. The kimono he's wearing is falling down, but he's wearing leggings so I'm not seeing the full Marty show, thank god.

"Bacon!" I cry happily as I race towards the kitchen and slam into Kai. I hang onto his waist until he gives me the sweet, sweet breakfast goods. Once I get my loot, he's dead to me, and I scurry away to snarf down some of the best bacon in the world.

"Hey, have you two ever been to Randy's?" I ask around a mouthful of bacon dipped in maple syrup. "The food there is pretty good, and it's as gay as the day is long."

Marty perks his head up and twists his body like a stretchy yoga cat until he's sitting up and looking at me. "You have my interest."

"This place is so very you, Marty. It's the kind of place where if Elvis was gay and still alive, that's where you'd find him hiding out from fame and fortune." In fact, I'll bet that's exactly who Randy is. No fucking wonder Shay and Mel keep arguing about who Randy is. If he is Elvis, I doubt Mel has had sex with him. Dude has got to be ancient at this point. His dick would probably fall right off at the first thrust.

Marty's up and out of the chair in a single, fluid motion. "Tell me everything." I knew he'd be into that diner.

Did I mention that Marty moonlights as an exotic dancer? My bestie is jacked and bendy as hell. By day, he teaches art at our old school, and for funsies, he gets his slut on for a ridiculous amount of money.

I love him so much.

I regale him and Kai with the CliffsNotes version of my adventure, and they are both equal parts amused and alarmed until I end it with, "They're all wonderful people and I'm afraid that none of them will ever speak to me again because I ditched them."

Marty gives me a hug and says, "Don't worry, man. Kai and I have your back. If you have a hard time finding your words, we'll help you out."

"I think you did an amazing job taking care of yourself, Wren," Kai says. When I snort, he adds, "I'm not talking about when you were at the apartment alone. You did a shit job at that, but none of us expect you to be good at long-term self-care. That's what you have us for. I'm talking about how well you did for yourself alone and with strangers. You allowed them to take care of you when you needed it, and you left the situation when you realized it wasn't working out for you."

"But it could work out for me. With you guys still in the mix, I mean." I need to make that perfectly clear. "Bael and his band are wonderful people. I can't wait for you to meet them. Speaking of which, were you able to contact Harvey, Kai?"

"I was, actually. In fact?—"

Marty cuts off Kai mid-sentence and grabs my arm. "Your guy's name is Bael? Are you kidding me? Are you trying to say that you spent the past few days hanging out

with Baelfire?”

I nod. “Have you heard of them before?”

“Have I heard of them? Have you been living under a rock? Never mind; forget I said that. Of course you have. Wren, Baelfire is one of the hottest bands out there right now. Everyone wants a piece of them, and you're saying that you're dating the lead singer?”

“Kinda? I mean, I might not be anymore now that I've ditched him. He's probably pretty pissed at me right now, which is why I need Kai to find him so that I can talk to him.”

“Harvey and I had a nice long talk,” Kai says, finally managing to break back into the conversation. “Bael definitely knows how to find you now.”

Wow. That makes me far more nervous than I thought it would. But it's good. Bael can find me and I can find him. I only hope to God we can work this out.

“I'd like to circle back around to how Wren managed to bag the notoriously single and sexiest man in the music industry right now. You're introducing me to him ASAP unless you don't want me to sneak you candy for Halloween when Kai isn't looking.”

“You wouldn't!” I hiss. Then I remember Kai is standing right there, and I backpedal like my life depends on it. “Not that I would eat it without you knowing about it, Kai, because you're wonderful and always make sure I get plenty of candy during every holiday.” I do the uwu girl hand motion where you tap your index fingers together and try to look cute and innocent.

Kai gives us both a serial killer stare but doesn't say anything.

I laugh nervously and change the subject. “So what should I do now? Should I call him? Or do you think I should wait for him to call me?” I've never done the relationship thing, so I'm definitely going to need someone to shepherd me through this.

“If I were you, I would call him,” Marty says. “You're the one who left, so it's your job to make contact.”

Kai nodded. “I agree, but don't do it right now. We need to be at the gallery soon, and no matter which way this conversation goes, I don't think you'll be in any shape to attend the opening if you talk to Bael beforehand.”

Part of me is relieved that I'll have more time to plan what I should say, but a larger part of me wants to be with Bael immediately because I know I hurt his feelings and I want to make it better as soon as possible.

Those kind puppy eyes... He's such a soft man and doesn't deserve anything bad to happen to him ever. Only good things. I'll make it up to him somehow. I don't know how, but I'll do it.

“Buddy, slow down the thought train you jumped on,” Marty says, slinging an arm around my shoulders. “I can see by your face that your brain gremlins are taking over and making you feel bad. Don't forget that you're not the only one who fucked up here. Bael and his friends should have listened to you more, otherwise you wouldn't have felt the need to sneak out in the first place. I know you. You wouldn't hurt a fly unless you believed you didn't have any other options, so don't beat yourself up.”

I nod even though I don't believe him. But if Marty says it's the brain gremlins being mean to me, he's probably right. Even if I don't believe him, I believe in him, and it's enough to tell those gremlins to shut the hell up, or at least get in the back seat of my brain where they won't get in the way so much.

“Good,” Marty says. “Now that we have that settled, let's go find something for you to wear. You're the star of the show tonight, and right now I look ten times better than you do, and we can't have that. Right, Kai?” Kai gives Marty a serious nod and Marty stands up and gives a little spin.

As he spins, the tie on his kimono flies free, and I see a skin-tight crop top with a familiar name emblazoned across the front. I grab Marty's arm, and instead of arresting his movement, he drags me along for the ride. He stops as soon as he realizes what happened and catches me by the shoulders before I get flung across the room.

“You're wearing a Baelfire T-shirt,” I say accusingly.

“Duh, they're my favorite band. You'd better hook me up with Mel by the way. You owe me for that time when you—oof!”

I tackle Marty and bounce right off of him. “Grab him, Kai!” I shout, and Kai dutifully holds Marty down for me as I strip his kimono and crop top off him.

“Mine!” I wave the crop top in the air triumphantly and race into my bedroom. I trust Kai to keep Marty from following me long enough to hide the shirt so Marty won't find it and steal it back while I'm taking a shower.

If Kai doesn't want someone to go somewhere, they don't go.

I spend my shower wildly vacillating between excitement and fear.

I try to hold on to the excitement as much as possible, but it's hard not to worry. Being with Bael felt so right, and I can't imagine how horrible it would feel if he never wanted to speak to me again.

I can't let that happen. I just can't.

I'm pretty sure I love him. Somehow, I went and fell in love with someone I've only known for a handful of days.

And then I ditched him!

Oh, god. What do I do?

Hopefully, Kai and Marty can help me not fuck it up the next time I see Bael.

If I ever get to see him again...

Goddammit.

Tonight's going to be a long night.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:43 pm

Chapter 16

Bael

So I guess Wren really is who he said he was, and I was very, very wrong. All of my mad got washed away after a five-minute conversation with Harvey.

He made me wait three hours for that conversation, by the way, and I'm still kind of salty about it. Harvey claimed he needed the time to get in contact with Kai and straighten everything out, but I think it was revenge for the bomb I dropped at the concert. Even if I made us a lot of money and it worked out okay in the end, Harvey still hates surprises.

I do a ton of googling after that, only I have the right name this time. Wren is spelled like the bird, not Rin like Harvey had searched for. It occurs to me then that if I'd bothered putting in even a little bit of effort into believing Wren, I would have figured it all out ages ago.

Hindsight, right?

Hey, you know that saying about the old dead guy? It turns out he was a comic book character and not a real person. Google knows everything, I'm telling you. Dead Guy's advice is still pretty solid. I can't remember his exact words, but it boils down to 'having power means you gotta do good things with it or else you're a dick.'

Boy, was I being a dick. Did you know that you can do that even if you're not trying to? Sometimes you can do it even when you're specifically trying to do good things.

I have some serious apologizing to do, and I hope Wren can forgive me. I don't blame him for running away like he did. I would have too if I had nothing but borrowed clothes and people who treated me like a helpless liar. Trust me, I'm kicking myself as I speak because it sounds even worse spelling it out like that.

I do wish he'd left me some kind of message though. I've been worried sick.

Life is hard sometimes, you know? You think you've got stuff figured out, and then something comes along and kicks your feet right out from under you. I keep going, though, because I know I can figure stuff out problem by problem if I just keep trying.

I'm in the car, scrolling through the image search I just did for Wrensong, and wow. Wren is so goddamn talented. His art is displayed all over the world, and some of his work is worth enough to make even someone with pockets as deep as mine wince.

I'm in the middle of it all when I get a text.

Harvey

Where are you?

Bael

Just out getting some air.

Harvey

You didn't take any guards.

Bael

Nope.

Harvey

I know it's difficult to wait, but Kai assured me that Wren will be available to see you tomorrow.

Bael

I know.

Harvey

Do you at least have the limo with you? Having your driver for security is better than nothing.

Bael

Yep. Don't worry, I'll be careful. Talk to you soon.

I put my phone away and put it on silent. The limo stops, and I open the door before the driver gets a chance.

I look over at my bandmates. I started a super secret group chat, told them all what happened, and they all tore ass to get up here from Hartford, pronto. Harvey thinks they're all still on the bus, slow-poking their way home at a Harvey-sanctioned speed, when in reality, they paid the driver a stupid amount of money to drive like there are no traffic laws. I didn't ask them to do it. They insisted on being here to support me.

"Are you coming with me?" I ask my guys when I'm out of the limo.

“Are you kidding? I wouldn't miss this for the world,” Mel says, eyes sparkling with excitement.

“Get your ass out of my face, Mel,” Travis swears as he tries to get out of the limo, but he fails because Mel has some seriously curvy hips and can block the entire doorway if the slut wants to, and right now Mel seems to want it badly. Probably specifically to annoy Travis. Annoying Travis is a crap-ton of fun, by the way, and Mel is a master at it.

“A little bit of manners goes a long way, my friend,” Mel says haughtily.

Travis finally gives up and says, “Please,” in a small voice. Mel gets the rest of the way out of the limo and allows Travis and Shay to climb out too.

“Swanky,” Shay says, tugging at one of his sleeves to even it out.

I don't think he's self-conscious about the fancy-ass place we've arrived at. We visit a ton of glamorous and grand venues and hotels, so this is old hat for us. He just wants to look his best because he's as much of a slut as Mel is.

“Do you have your stickers, or do you need some?” Mel asks Shay.

Shay gives a please, who do you think I am laugh and shakes his head. He pulls out a small plastic bag and waves it at Mel. They fist-bump each other and head toward the stairs leading up to the art gallery.

Travis and I linger behind them, and he asks, “Are you sure you want to do this right now?”

“I can't wait anymore,” I answer, and I hurry to catch up with Mel and Shay.

There's a fancy-looking bouncer at the door, but he doesn't stop us. The guy takes one look at us, and says, "Holy shit, do you know who you are?"

I'm pretty sure I said it before, but it bears repeating. Some people get super weird about rock stars. I don't blame them though. If I'd met one before I got famous, I likely would have been a lot weirder.

So we breeze through the doors after signing the guy's shirt.

I make to peel away from my entourage, and Travis says, "Do you want to do this alone, or do you want us with you? You know we've got your back, man. Plus, we need to apologize to Wren too."

I shake my head. "I get first dibs, and Wren doesn't need you three looming over us while we talk."

"Fine, but we're still going to loom in the corner and watch. This is a family issue, after all." Mel smiles, but it's not the usual one that's overblown for dramatic effect. This is a genuine one from the heart. Mel really likes Wren.

I think my whole band does. They're probably here just as much to keep me from fucking everything up as they are to give me support.

I move around the cavernous area of the main event space, bypassing realistic sculptures and stunning, abstract art displayed on floor-to-ceiling canvases until I see what I'm looking for: a massive crowd surrounding a tiny man. I motion to my band that I've found my target, and I'm off.

I rely on my size and height to allow me to plow through the crowd until I reach my destination. Wren looks small and vulnerable, and he's clinging to the arms of two taller men who act like a shield between him and the world. I'm bigger than them, but

both the man in a shiny kimono and the Asian man with serial killer eyes look like they're ready to lay down their lives for Wren.

This slows me down enough to make my way respectfully through the crowd rather than like a runaway freight train.

When I make it to the front of the crowd, I stop dead in front of Wren.

“Hi.”

Hi? That's my opening line? I write record-breaking singles, and this is when my ability to express myself fails me?

It seems to do the trick because Wren turns beet red and says, “Oh! Um. Hi there!”

Kimono Guy looks torn between verbally tearing me a new one and jumping up and down like a schoolgirl. I guess he's a fan.

The serial killer's eyes go dead, and I swear he opens up a portal to hell in those things. He doesn't like me at all. I guess he's not a fan.

I rally and pull myself and my words together. “Wren, I know you have a thing going on right now, but can we go somewhere to talk? When you're not busy, I mean.” I didn't come here to crash his event, so I'm willing to wait to talk until he has time for me. I wasn't willing to wait until his fans went away to see him, though, because I needed to see with my own eyes that Wren is safe.

I had no choice (sorry Harvey!). Otherwise, I would have waited to hunt him down until after his event.

I never would have made it until tomorrow though. I fucked up, I know it, and I can't

wait a second longer than necessary before apologizing and trying to fix my mistake.

“I can go now,” Wren says, and there’s an immediate uproar around us of complaint. He squeezes his serial killer’s arm and looks up at him with those crystal-clear eyes of his. “Please, Kai?”

Kai’s hell portal eyes go soft, and he nods and jerks his chin toward the back of the crowd. He makes eye contact with me and narrows his eyes. A chill goes down my spine, but Wren is worth standing up to this guy.

“I won’t let anything happen to him,” I promise.

“You’d better not.” The hell portal flares and there isn’t a doubt in my mind that this man has killed people without remorse in the past and wants me to know it.

As bodyguards for Wren go, Kai seems almost perfect. If it wasn’t for him ditching Wren and nearly letting him starve, I’d probably like him. But as things stand, I don’t think he’s that great no matter how formidable he appears.

He’s letting me know with every bit of his tense, ready-to-fight body language that I need to prove myself to him. I narrow my eyes right back at him and have to bite back a growl. He needs to fucking prove himself to me too, and I make sure he knows it.

Something about that makes his hell portal close, but the tension in his frame doesn’t lessen one bit.

I give him a smile, showing all of my teeth, before turning my attention back to Wren, who seems not to have noticed any of the by-play. He grabs one of my sleeves, and I allow myself to be pulled between Kai and Kimono Guy.

Kai doesn't stop us, but he rolls his eyes before moving to intercept the people who try to follow us. Kimono Guy doesn't try to stop us either, but he gives me a cool, assessing look before turning to help Kai manage the crowd.

So, a Baelfire fan, but loyal to Wren. Good for him. Maybe if he can keep from letting Wren starve for an entire year, I might not hate him either.

Wren darts between two curtains, holding tight to me, so I get smacked in the face by the heavy, velvet material because he doesn't take up enough space to make a hole large enough for me to fit through.

I'm not annoyed at all. I'm delighted by his size, his energy, and his easy acceptance of whatever life gives him. I'm overwhelmingly obsessed with Wren and everything he does. He can drag me through a million curtains at top speed, and I'll still be laughing by the end.

We reach our destination—a corner filled with scaffolding and surrounded by the random odds and ends that tend to get tucked out of sight during events like this so no one fancy can see them.

God forbid that happen.

“I think I'm underdressed for your event.” I gesture to my ripped jeans and leather jacket. “No, hold on.” I pop out my pinky finger tipped with chipped, black nail polish like we're ladies having high tea. “This should fix things.”

Wren gifts me with the best laugh, husky and free of any self-consciousness.

He wouldn't be laughing right now if he was planning on hating me forever, right?

He pulls one side of his fashionable sports coat away to reveal the loose crop top he's

wearing underneath. “I stole it from Marty. Shelly made me wear the coat to make me fit in, but maybe I should stick mine out too, just in case.” Wren pokes my pinky with his.

I’m not really registering his words anymore. Wren is wearing my merch. He has my name emblazoned across his chest like he’s my property.

Oh shit.

I try to shift subtly to allow my incoming hard-on a chance to not make itself known to the world.

“That looks...” I cough because my mouth has gone dry. “It looks good on you. Really, really, really good.” That might have been one too many reallys . I bite my lip to keep any more words from escaping, like, “I bet it will look amazing on you as a gag while I fuck you over the scaffolding.”

But we haven’t even talked yet, and we need to.

I take his hand in mine. “Wren, I?—”

“I’m sorry!” Wren shouts. “I’m sorry I ran away. I should have left a note, but I didn’t think of it until I was long gone, and then it would have been super weird to pop back in, shove a note in your hand, and then run away again, you know?” Wren’s eyes are pleading with me to understand. “I had to go.”

I kiss his small hand and smooth away the worry lines between his eyebrows with my thumb.

“You don’t need to apologize, Wren. Really. This is my fuck up, not yours. I should’ve listened to you instead of trying to fix all your problems. I just wanted you

to be happy and safe, and I failed miserably.”

Wren’s eyes go wibbly and soft. “You didn’t fail. I’m so grateful you’re the one who found me when I needed help, but I promise that you don’t need to fix all my problems. I have a wonderful support team. I know it may not seem that way, but this is the first time something like this has happened since Kai joined my team, and it’s partially my fault for being so forgetful.”

“Self-care is a real problem for you, isn’t it?” I put a hand on his hip, stroking an exposed hipbone with my thumb. He’s so thin that it makes my heart hurt.

Wren’s eyes look everywhere but at me when he whispers, “Yeah...”

I tilt his chin to get him to look at me. “It’s okay. There are lots of things I can’t do either, but everyone worth being around still loves me anyway.”

“I hope I’m someone worth being around.”

“If it were up to me, you’d always be around.”

Wren’s answering smile makes me breathless, but it falls away almost immediately. “I really should have left that note.”

“I wish you had, but I’m not mad. I mean, I was until I realized what happened, but after that, I just felt like an idiot. I’m so sorry I didn’t listen to you.”

“I’m not mad either. I don’t think I ever was. Mostly I just felt stupid and helpless, and... super into you.” Wren flicks his gaze up to me.

Those eyes hit me like a punch, and I have to take a moment to recover before saying, “Does that mean you’re still my boyfriend?”

Wren steps into my space. “Oh my god, yes, please .”

“Thank god,” I whisper, leaning down slowly, wanting to give him a chance to object before I kiss him. Wren goes up on his toes and meets me, wrapping his arms around my neck, and I take that as all systems go.

We’ve got more to say, I’m sure, but being Wren’s boyfriend means I have time to say everything I need to.

I grab Wren’s waist and lift, and he wraps his legs around me like we’d choreographed it. The scaffolding is too rickety to put Wren on, so I hold him up with my hands, squeezing his sweet, perfect little ass while I get reacquainted with his mouth.

When I come up for air, I say, “One day is too long to go without kissing you.”

Wren pulls me back in, humming in agreement.

I take us toward the wall behind us, planning to see how far Wren will let me go considering we only have a curtain between us and his adoring fans, when I spot a familiar sticker on it.

Oh, for fuck’s sake.

How the hell were Shay or Mel able to work so fast? There’s no way either of them could have found someone, seduced them, and fucked them in the time it took for me and Wren to get here.

I squint and look closer. “Thank god, it’s one of the ones from last week.”

“Huh?” Wren’s hazy eyes and body language are saying, why the fuck did you stop

kissing me?

“I can’t do this here,” I say. I absolutely do not want to fuck Wren somewhere Mel or Shay scored during their little contest.

“Oh.” Wren’s eyes clear a little, and suddenly he looks mortified. “I’m so sorry! I got carried away.”

“No! Please get carried away any time you want, it’s just...” I unhitch Wren’s legs from around me and set him on his feet. “Mel and Shay are both massive fans of semipublic sex, right?”

Wren nods like he’s known them for years and is well aware of their quirks. But seriously, you only need to know those two for five minutes before realizing they are DTF any day, all day long. The only people they haven’t done or tried to do is each other, and I swear to you the day they realize that will be the day before they get married and live happily ever after.

“Anyway, they have this thing, sort of like a contest, where they try and find the most random or interesting place to hook up with someone. Any time one of them manages it, they slap a sticker of The Rock in the place they did it.”

“I can definitely see them doing that, but why The Rock?”

“Shay had a magazine on him the first time it happened, and he tore off the cover and stuck it to the wall with a piece of gum. After that, they both just ran with it.”

“Classy.” Wren gets a kittenish smile on his face and looks up at me. We both stick out our pinky fingers and tap them together.

Holy fucking wow, I am so in love with Wren.

“Even though this is one of last week's stickers, I still don't want to rely on someone having done a deep clean here since then, do you?” I ask. I mean, I will absolutely bang Wren here and now if he wants me to, but it's not my first choice. Or my second. Or my tenth.

Wren throws his hands up, palms out. “I’m all set, thanks. I feel confident in our ability to find somewhere that your friends haven't banged.”

“Thank you.” I was hoping he’d feel that way. Can you imagine if Mel and Shay found out we’d banged here? Then they’ll claim I took part in their contest, and they’ll never let it go.

“You know what? We should get our own stickers! How do you feel about ducks? I have a ton of duck stickers for some reason, and autocorrect seems to think it’s the same as the word fuck, so we could slap up a duck every time we?—”

I slam my mouth down on his because forget what I just said. This is the best goddamned idea ever. “I love you. I so fucking love you,” I say against his mouth and then go back to kissing Wren breathless.

Wren starts smacking my chest to get me to move back way too soon for my liking, but I stop anyway. “We’re still not fucking here. And I’m pretty sure I fell in love with you first, so it’s not fair for you to say it first.”

“Really?” This is impossible, but I still want to hear Wren say it. “When did you know?”

“It started when you burst through the door at Gwen’s clinic, but I think you really clenched it when you said you wanted me to go home with you so you could take care of me.”

“You’re easy,” I laugh. “But also totally wrong. I fell when you collapsed in my arms.”

“You’re definitely easier. I do that sort of thing all the time!”

Uh... no. He’s not doing that anymore.

“Don’t look at me like that. I was joking! I haven’t done something like that in ages before this week. Kai is really good to me. I promise.”

Kai is going to be a massive pain in my ass, I can just feel it.

“If you live with me, you won’t need Kai.”

“I’m not going anywhere without Kai. He’s family.” Wren sets his jaw and his eyes flash dangerously.

Goddammit.

“Fine, but he doesn’t get to carry you anywhere, and you aren’t allowed to collapse on him.”

“Fine, but you don’t get to let your groupies fondle you.”

That’s no hardship because I never let them do it in the first place. “Deal,” I say and hold out my hand to Wren.

Just as he shakes it, Kai’s voice filters through the curtains. “Either fuck or leave. This is getting boring, and I’m hungry.”

“Did you know he was there?”

Wren shrugs. “I assumed.”

“Well, At least I know you won't have a problem with how codependent the band is.”

“I think my people and I will fit right in.” Wren kisses my cheek, grabs my hand, and tugs me toward the break in the curtains. “Now come on, let's go show Marty and Kai how awesome Randy's is.”

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Chapter 17

Wren

“A re you sure Bael is the one you want?” Travis asks me as he eyeballs my new boyfriend dubiously.

Bael is trying to get the door to Randy’s open and failing miserably. I’m not sure what the problem is. He’s using every ounce of his considerable bulk to try and push the damn thing open, but it’s just not budging.

“Obviously. Why wouldn’t I? He’s perfect for me. Hold on a second, I’m gonna go help him.”

I leave Travis and what I think was the beginning of his well-meaning shovel talk to go help Bael. There’s no way that door will hold up against both of us.

“Here,” I say. “Let me get under your arm. If I use both of my hands to push and you stand behind me and push too, we’ll get this thing open.”

“Good idea.”

Unfortunately, it doesn’t matter how hard we push; this damn door isn’t going anywhere. Everyone else seems content to let us handle the problem though, so we keep at it.

“Are you filming this, Marty?” Mel asks my dearest friend in the entire world.

“I owe it to their future children.”

“I’m not sure I want kids, Marty,” I say as I step back from the door and examine it to see if there’s something blocking it, but I don’t see anything.

“Me either,” Bael agrees. I give his shoulder a little kiss.

“My future children then,” Marty says and keeps on filming.

“They really are perfect for each other, aren’t they?” Travis asks in awe.

“Yep!” I scan the door with a critical eye. There has to be something we’re missing here.

There was nothing. Absofuckinglutely nothing to stop this door from opening. What the hell?

“Fuck you, door,” I snarl. “You’re not beating us!” I get in a karate pose I’ve seen in a movie because I’m about ready to kick this bitch in. Bael might have more success in that area though. I’ve got the will, but he has the mass.

“No, Kai, don’t help them. They’ve clearly got this.”

“Thank you, Shay. We’ll have this door open in just a second,” Bael calls over his shoulder. “Are they open? Check the sign.”

Okay, that makes a small amount of sense, so I back down from my murder pose and think for a minute before saying, “I think this is a twenty-four-hour diner. Plus, there’s a big neon light right there that says open. Hold on, let me check the website.” I pull out the new phone Kai shoved into my hands the second he got a chance. This one has a waterproof case. I doubt that it’s Wren proof though.

Smooth brain is a powerful adversary against phones.

As Bael and I check out the website, we hear the door chime and see Archie standing in the half-open doorway.

“Thought you two might need some help.” He pushes the door open all the way and comes outside, letting it close behind him.

“No, don't let it close!” I cry, but it's too late. Damn it, now we're never going to get in, because you just know it auto-locks from the inside. That's how this sort of thing always goes. Trust me.

“Don't worry,” Archie says. “I've got the magic touch.” He pulls on the handle and ushers us inside with a flourish. “Après vous.”

“So it wasn't locked after all?” I say to Bael as I walk inside.

“Apparently not. Damn, Archie, you do have the magic touch. I gave it everything I had.” Bael shakes his head in amazement.

“It was nothing,” Archie gives us a wink. “I see the two of you worked things out?”

“We did! Thank you so much for your help. How's Abigail?” I ask because I'm nice and not because I'm angling to find out if she's a person or a dog. Or perhaps a sentient sock puppet.

“She's great. I need to take her to the yarn store soon.”

That was completely unhelpful. A sock puppet could need yarn just as much as a human could.

I try again as we make our way to the same booth we used last time, waving at Zo as we go. “It is starting to get cold. Does she want to make a scarf or something?”

Archie laughs and slaps me on the back, knocking me into Bael. “You’re hilarious, kid. Abigail can’t knit. Alright, I’ll leave you to your dinner. I’m glad everything worked out.” He waves goodbye and goes to sit at the counter in front of an absolutely majestic stack of pancakes.

Bael has an arm around me after Archie shoved me into him, and he frowns at the man's back.

“Hey, do you have any idea whether or not Abigail is a human or a dog?” I whisper.

Bael blinks before turning his attention back to me. “I don't think anyone knows the answer to that question. She could be a teddy bear for all I know.”

I slide into the long, U-shaped booth, and Bael gets in after me and says, “Scoot over so everyone can get in.” He scoots me over as Mel sits down. Then he keeps scooting me until Laura, Travis, Shay, Marty, and Harvey get in as well. I’ve made the entire circuit of the table when I bump into Kai sitting at the end of the other side of the U.

Kai is smart like that. You'll never catch him scooting halfway around the world when he can take 3 steps to solve the problem.

I notice Kai and Bael making eye contact over me, and when Kai doesn't say anything, I pat his arm in encouragement. He's tolerating Bael very nicely, and I'm proud of him.

Kai isn’t huge on people in general, and when it comes to the people around me, he's extra particular about who he tolerates. Major daddy bear issues, right?

I think he and Bael are going to get along great.

Eventually.

I think he's going to get along even better with Harvey, though. In fact, if Kai wasn't straight, he and Harvey would probably get married and then take over the world.

As it is, the two of them haven't stopped making plans together since they met this evening. They're calling it preemptive damage control, but I know bro-bonding when I see it.

When our food arrives, Bael and I start eating off each other's plates shamelessly, and Mel drifts away, sandwich in hand to go talk to some punk-looking folks at a table who, according to Zo, became famous recently. Mel claims to want to network with fellow musicians, but we all know Mel is looking to see if anyone there is DTF.

Laura has taken up saying things in Travis's ear that make him blush, Marty is flirting with Shay, and Kai and Harvey have moved to a smaller table to bro-bond. They're comparing schedules, I think, but they could be planning a war. All I know is that they each have a phone and a tablet out and have their heads together and keep shout-whispering at each other.

I'm biting into half of Hello Kitty's head when Bael nudges me.

"I want you to listen to something." Bael's cheeks are flushed and he's looking at the table instead of me. He puts an AirPods in my hand. "My brain wrote this for you."

I put the AirPods in my ear, and Bael puts the second one in his. He does something to his phone and music fills my ears. There are no vocals, but the music is so captivating that I don't miss the lack.

“You write music?” I touch the AirPods and press it closer into my ear so I don’t miss a single note.

Bael nods. “I write most of the music for the band.”

“It’s beautiful,” I whisper.

Bael’s hand is resting next to me, and his pinky twines with mine. “You’re beautiful.”

I close my eyes and lean against him while I listen. It’s like being wrapped inside him, equal parts sweet, silly, and feral. “I see why you’re famous. Tell your brain thank you. It makes amazing things.”

“It says you’re very welcome.” Bael’s face gets closer to mine, and I tilt my head up.

“Oh my god, you two. Get a room.” Travis is beet red and looking anywhere but us.

“The alley out back is surprisingly comfortable,” Mel says, and my mind flashes to The Rock sticker I saw when I was back there with Archie. “No alleys,” Bael says, wrinkling his nose in distaste.

I hop up from the booth and drag Bael with me, pulling him toward the bathrooms.

“Wow, look at Wren go!” Mel cheers as they make their way back to our booth. I guess they struck out? Wow.

“Get it, Wren!” Marty joins in because he’s about as sex-positive as they come.

“We’re not going to fuck. I just want to talk to my man without an audience for five minutes.” I announce.

“Bael, if you're back in five minutes, I'm going to be highly disappointed in you, man,” Shay calls and shares a high-five with Mel over the table.

Bael gives them both the finger and lets me drag him away.

Kai gives the entire room a withering glare before going back to his conversation with Harvey.

When we get out of sight, Bael asks, “We're not really going to fuck in the alley, are we?” His face shows an odd mix of horror and reluctant curiosity. If I say yes right now, I have a feeling he'll take me up on it.

“No, that's gross. I really did just want to talk to you.” I say loudly so our friends will hear me. I knock on the bathroom door, and when it swings open under my touch, I pull Bael inside and lock the door.

It's a simple, clean space with one wall covered in chalkboard paint and a small bucket of colored chalk on a small shelf. There's an eclectic mix of images, scribbles, random quotes, and other silly things scrawled on it. I'd be delighted by it if I didn't have more pressing matters to attend to.

Bael is absolutely adorable standing there looking at me confused but still trusting. My mind goes soft at the edges like it does when it's cataloging an emotion or a moment to turn into an art piece later. I wonder what it'll come up with?

“You wrote me music,” I state.

“I did.”

“I lied to you about only wanting to talk. You should fuck me now. People who write me beautiful music deserve treats.”

Bael surges forward and pulls me into a kiss. “Only me,” he growls against my mouth.

“Only you,” I gasp, rutting against his leg.

“I’m going to write you so much fucking music.” He cups my face in his hands and deepens the kiss. The music is gone, abandoned on the table with Bael’s phone and AirPods, but I swear I can still hear it. The melody continues and grows, wrapping around us until I’m dizzy.

Bael is hard against my stomach, and I press into him before pulling away to unzip his pants. When I get his cock out, I swear my brain is writing its own song.

A painting might be better, though. I’d be able to do it better justice. Maybe my next showing will be a XXX collection. I’m going to need huge canvases for every piece.

I’m on my knees, kneeling on my fancy jacket and doing my best to show him my appreciation for the lovely song, swallowing him down inch by glorious inch, as his eyes burn into mine as he watches me.

I own him right now, and I know it. Bael is mine, and I can do anything I want to him. Having this much power over such a strong man is heady.

I’m sure you’re wondering if his freckles extend to his dick, but I’m not sharing. Those hypothetical freckles are mine too.

All I can say is that if he did have them, I’d kiss every single one any time I got the opportunity.

I’m lost in the moment, mind hazy and caught up in the memory of a beautiful melody and the sensation of having Bael’s cock in my mouth.

A hand in my hair pulls me away, and I make a sad, confused little mewling sound.

Oh right, I wanted him to fuck me. “Oops! I think I got carried away. You can fuck me now if you want to—oh shit, I don’t have condoms, do you?”

“No, but?—”

“I could go ask one of the guys outside. I'm sure one of them would have some.” I get to my feet and move for the door.

“Wait.” Bael grabs my arm and presses me against the chalk art wall. “I want to do something else. Will you let me suck you off?” His eyes are soft and pleading.

He didn't need to bust out the puppy eyes for that request, because there's no way I'd ever turn that down, but they are still devastating.

I have my pants undone and halfway to the floor before I'm done saying “Hell fucking yes!”

Bael's mouth quirks and he falls to his knees. His hands bracket my hips and he strokes the skin on either side of my cocklet with his thumbs. He buries his face into the soft hair surrounding my cocklet and breaths in. “Fuck, you smell amazing,” he whispers like he's at church and trying to be reverent.

All hail Wren and his mighty, tiny cocklet. Thank you, I will be taking my bows at the end of the show.

Bael's mouth on me is hesitant at first, but he gains confidence quickly, and he fucking deserves it. Sucking a meta cock is different than sucking a cis cock because I only get a little hard, so he has to make adjustments for that, but he figures it out quickly.

My head is thrown back and I'm a gibbering mess in no time as he licks and sucks me. I can't believe how much I've been missing out. Oral is fucking fantastic, did you know?

Bael has me pinned by the hips against the wall with both hands, and I scrabble at the wall behind me as I marvel at his ability to alternate between sucking my cocklet and licking my front hole without letting up.

When he pauses for breath, he looks up at me with a filthy smile. His bright red lips are wet and swollen, and his pupils are blown out, making his eyes impossibly dark.

When he asks, "Can you come from this?" I nearly do just from the sound of his rough, gravelly voice.

I nod wildly and press the back of his head to encourage him to keep going. He makes a playful little snarling sound and nips at my fingers before giving me another sinful smile and getting back to work.

He releases one of my hips and starts fingering my front hole while he sucks my cocklet. When he finds my G-spot and does a little flourish with his tongue, I see stars and come my fucking brains out.

He continues to suck gently as I thrust against his face, allowing me to control the pressure so I don't get over-sensitized. He stops completely when I give his shoulder a little push. I allow my head to fall back against the wall and focus on not allowing my jelly legs to collapse underneath me.

It takes longer than I'm proud of before I realize Bael still hasn't gotten to come. I look down and say, "I'm sorry, let me—" only to see Bael grinning up at me happily while on his knees with a hand on his softening cock. He's made a complete mess of my fancy jacket.

“So I guess we both really enjoyed that,” I say, crouching down to give him a messy kiss. I can taste myself on him, and it gives me a little zing of pleasure.

“We’re doing that again, ASAP,” Bael says in agreement.

I stand and pull my pants back on. Once I have myself together, I go to pull him up, but he gives my arm a tug and causes me to fall into him. He covers me in wet kisses before hauling us both off the floor.

Bael stops dead in his tracks and nearly causes me to fall over. “Oh for fucks sake.” He glares at the wall above the sink.

“What?” There’s nothing wrong with the wall that I can see.

“We were too late.” Bael jabs at the wall, drawing my attention to the stern visage of The Rock glaring down at us.

I blink at The Rock. The Rock keeps glaring at me.

“You know what this means, right?” I ask.

Bael quirks an eyebrow at me in question.

“We’ve got to fuck in their bathroom now.”

“Oh no,” Bael says, holding up his hands as if to ward off my excellent idea. “Then they’ll both try to fuck in ours. It’ll be a never-ending war.”

“It’s a good thing I’m in this for the long haul then.”

Bael gives me a heart-stopping grin. “I guess it is.”

“Let’s get started on our new quest first thing tomorrow, okay?” I say, giving him a little peck on the cheek.

“Your wish is my command.” Bael grabs me by the waist and dips me into one of those cinematic hero kisses, and I don’t swoon. Really, I don’t.

(I totally do.)

Post swoon, I give my jacket a mournful poke with my toe. “I hate this jacket, but I’m really sad that I have to throw it away now. It would be a nice souvenir for the first time somebody sucked my soul out of my cocklet.”

“Why can’t you keep it?”

“Because carrying it inside out and balled up under my arm for the rest of the evening is going to cause so many questions. It’s better to just let it go gently into the night.”

I give it a grand send-off by chucking it into the trash, and when I turn around, I catch Bael suppressing a laugh, and he goes to inspect the art wall like he’d been doing it the entire time. When I see the wall, I think I know what he found so amusing.

Half of the art is smeared away, and there is a distinct impression of my ass where it used to be.

I smirk. “Well, I don’t have any duck stickers on me yet, but this gives me a good chance to improvise.” I wipe my ass print away, take a stick of blue chalk, and use our initials to form a cute little drawing of a duck.

“Dammit. If I’d brought my phone I could have taken a picture,” Bael laments.

“You have the OG artist in your pocket. I can make as many ducks as you want.” I go

on my toes to kiss him, and he forgets all about his phone. We both check each other over to make sure we're put back together before we return to the table. Bael gives my back a lingering glance on the way to the table, and I assume he's checking out my ass.

I turn to give Bael another kiss, and the entire table erupts into cheers and applause.

What the...?

Kai swears and gets up. He glares at everyone until they shut up and then he brushes off my back. When he finishes, I see that his hands are covered in chalk. Oh, for fucks sake.

"Nice job, Bael. That was way longer than five minutes. Up top!" Mel holds up a hand and Bael slaps it. They both look at me expectantly until I give Mel a hesitant high five too.

Yeah... I think my little family is going to fit right in with this codependent mess of misfits.

ELVIS

“Kai, what are you doing?” The little guy, Wren, tries to look over his bodyguard’s shoulder to see what he’s up to, but his height isn’t up to the task. Kai tilts his phone to accommodate him.

My band is all crammed into our bus along with their entourage, and it feels like old times.

“Why are you calling the manager for my condo?” Wren’s forehead scrunches up adorably. Bael, my lead singer, tugs him closer to his side, pulling him away from Kai. I don’t blame him. The kid is a snack.

What? Can’t an old guy learn new words? There were plenty of snackish people in my day, but we didn’t have the proper terminology for them. Now we do. It’s called evolving, and I love every new discovery.

“I need to fix something,” Kai says. When Wren tries to get closer, Kai stops him with a hand to the face. Bael removes the hand from Wren’s face and calls Kai an asshole.

My afterlife has become so much more fascinating since Wren arrived. It wasn’t exactly boring before. I mean, I latched onto Baelfire for a reason. The band has so much energy and life, and they truly love each other. They’re a family in the very best sense of the word, and I’m glad I stumbled across them.

They needed someone like Wren, though. Bael was sad when no one else was around.

I don't think his family knew. I don't think Bael knew, so how could they?

But I'd seen him spend countless nights quietly sighing while playing the same videogame over and over again. My boy was lonely. Not anymore. You should have seen his face when he brought Wren home. He was smitten on day one.

Watching Bael play video games with Wren was the happiest I've ever seen him. There were other things they did later that made him even happier, but I'm a discrete ghost.

I don't watch and tell.

I enjoy watching now as Kai verbally reams the manager of Wren's condo for hiring such an idiot for their doorman. It serves the guy right. Poor Wren was so humiliated that I nearly did something to help him out. I didn't because it would have used up so much of my energy that I would have had to hibernate inside that stupid fan for at least a week. That's the last thing I wanted because then I would have missed all the fun.

"Get him on the phone. Now." Kai's voice sends chills down my incorporeal spine as he orders the manager to do his bidding. It's a matter of seconds before the dumbass doorman is on the other end.

Watching Kai verbally destroy the man is a thing of pure beauty. Harvey is getting heart eyes throughout the entire conversation. He may be about to propose marriage, though I don't know how that would work. Two straight boys falling in love?

That's a disaster in the making if I ever saw one. Especially if Trina hears about it. Bael will have one hell of a time making good on his promise to get her that date.

Get me some popcorn, folks. I'm here for it.

There's nothing but incoherent sobbing on the other end of the phone by the time Kai is done, and Bael has to hold Wren back from trying to take the phone from Kai.

"He deserves it, Wren. If he'd looked into your claim even a little, he would have found out you weren't lying." Bael says as he holds Wren in his arms. "Don't they have a picture of you in their system?"

"They do," Marty says. "Burn him to ashes, Kai."

So the doorman gets fired and traumatized. Everyone but Wren agrees that he had it coming, and then they all spend several minutes convincing Wren.

They don't succeed, but at least Wren knows he is loved, and that's what matters.

"Can someone trade seats with me?" Travis asks as he eyeballs my fan nervously. He's jammed into the corner right next to it.

"Elvis isn't real, Travis. Relax," Bael says. I love Bael, but the kid isn't the sharpest pumpkin in the patch. I've literally handed him a towel after a concert before and he passed it off as an exhaustion-induced hallucination.

"You're going to hurt Elvis's feelings if you keep that up," Mel, my favorite human, says. Mel is gorgeous and I would fuck him in a heartbeat... if I had a heartbeat.

"If you don't believe in Elvis, then you sit next to him, Bael." Travis is cringing away from my fan and half out of his seat. It won't take much to have him out of it completely, but I bide my time. Travis is so much fun to play with.

"I'll trade places with you, Travis," Wren says. "I'd love to get to know you better, Elvis, and I'd be delighted to sit with you."

He's officially my second favorite human now.

“No deal,” Bael says, and the greedy bastard hugs his new boyfriend tightly to keep him from leaving. “Travis and our fake ghost will just have to make nice.”

“He’s not fake,” Mel says, and Shay nods, backing up his sib. “Stop saying that or I’ll steal Wren from you.”

Bael shoots Mel a glare so malevolent that my special slut goes pale and shuts up.

I rattle my fan to show my displeasure. A little jealousy is all well and good, but no one messes with Mel.

“Did you see that?!” Travis squeaks, and he huddles as far from my fan as he can get.

“See what?” Wren asks excitedly.

“The fan moved.”

“Sure it did, buddy,” Bael says, rolling his eyes.

I wait until everyone else but Travis is looking away and I rattle my fan again.

“No seriously! It totally did it again!”

So maybe I’m a bit of a bully, but if you were an old, dead rock star, you’d take your fun where you can find it too.

Travis spends the rest of the evening giving my fan the stink-eye, Bael and Wren cuddle and make everyone on the bus feel single, Kai and Harvey plot out the next ten years of everyone’s lives, and Shay, Laura, and Mel bond in the strange way that only two best friends and the mother who fucked one of them can bond.

This is my family. Didn't I pick a good one?