



Distance Between Him (New York Book Boyfriends Duet #1)

Author: Jack Harper

Category: LGBT+

Description: On the road to the past.

By each other's side since they were eighteen, Grayson Welles must cope with the sudden loss of his longtime partner, Julian. Raised in the bible belt of Louisiana, Grayson knew he'd be admonished for falling in love with Julian Torres, whose family moved to the rural town of Felton from Puerto Rico. Accustomed to being each other's companion, the pair made the only decision that seemed right, pursuing their dreams and surrounding themselves with fellow members of the growing gay community after running off to New York City post-graduation.

Thirty-plus years later, Grayson is now tasked with telling Julian's family about his death and planning a funeral that will force Grayson to confront his own family given they operate the only funeral home in town. While packing to head home, Grayson discovers a suitcase of Julian's penned journals. Finding comfort in the entries, Grayson is reminded of the birth of his relationship with Julian and many of the moments between then and present day.

Upon facing both of their families, Grayson comes to terms with a new set of realizations which threaten his prior notions of what it means to love and be a family. A lifetime of true love couldn't be remembered any greater.

****Trigger warning:** this book includes themes such as extreme grief, suicide, alcoholism, smoking, excessive language, and abuse. Please use discretion before reading if you feel you may be sensitive to these topics.**

Total Pages (Source): 34

GRAYSON

There are too many goddamn people in this grocery store. It's practically bedtime. Most people would assume a store wouldn't be as busy this time of night, but I guess I'm wrong. It surely shouldn't surprise me, provided this is the city that never sleeps. I dart my eyes down to my phone screen so I can see what's next on my shopping list. Not that I need a reminder, since the only important thing in my basket is a liter of Glenlivet. But it seems the palm of my hand must have touched enough buttons that the camera has been opened unintentionally. It activated the front-facing lens, leaving me to study the reflection staring back at me. Those puffy red eyes with dark circles hanging below them, as if I'm trying on a raccoon look for Halloween. If only that were the case. If only.

It's five of ten and it's been twenty-nine hours since I found him lying face down on the bathroom floor, inches away from the toilet. Not a wind of breath exiting his nostrils. At least he didn't have to smell the soiled maroon boxers around his waist. His eyes were plastered open as if he'd been spooked just seconds before he left this world. My world. Fuck. I can't even imagine what it must feel like in our final minutes. But after losing my lover of over thirty years, I wished I'd have gone with him.

Julian Torres was my entire life. We did everything together. If the universe wouldn't have stolen him from me, he'd be by my side right now. Even though I detest large crowds, having his presence would make this grocery stop one-hundred percent more bearable. And now I'm supposed to just keep chugging along like Thomas the fucking tank engine. No thanks, I don't even like trains—they're too noisy.

I wander up the snack aisle. Surely, I'll need a bag of Doritos to soak up this hooch. As I approach the chip selection, I pass by a colleague of mine from the office. Kraig Winslow, the purely conceited piece of shit he is, keeps walking ahead while looking at his smartwatch as if purposely trying to avoid making eye contact with me. It's okay, I don't need his pity. And I don't prefer to look into people's eyes. Except for Julian's. Just the thought of his honey-brown irises locked in one position for the rest of eternity. Fuck me. I best hurry back to my hotel room before I have an absolute meltdown in this fucking market.

Other than a quart of creamer for my coffee in the morning, nothing else in this God forsaken place is of importance right now. As much as I know I need sleep, every time I've tried shutting my eyes, I couldn't shake his voice in my head.

“Amo te—Saccharo Ferre.”

In Latin, it means ‘ I love you—Sugar Bear.’ Though now defunct in modern day society, his mother taught her kids Latin as a special way they could communicate between each other.

Once I retrieve my creamer, I head up to the front of the store to pay for my few items. As I get closer to the only open checkout aisle, I see Kraig standing last in line. He's typing away on his phone, but he doesn't see me this time. Begrudgingly, I claim my place in line while fumbling for the wallet in my small messenger bag. I know it must seem silly. A gay man at fifty carrying around everything but the kitchen sink in what is lack for a better word—a man purse. But I'd love it if someone else knew what it felt like to have the need to be prepared for a momentary crisis between a disintegrating brain and the man whom they've loved their entire life.

A year and some change ago, Julian was diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer's Disease. ‘Familial Alzheimer's’ is how Dr. Nash put it, as a result of a rare genetic

marker. After the first several months of his diagnosis, we ran the gamut of memory aids. Drugs for this and that, seemingly none of it working all too well. But something was better than nothing.

The dryness in my mouth causes an annoying tickle at the back of my throat, forcing me to let out a cough. Kraig's head twists back to see me standing here beside my items on the belt. I can only imagine what must be running through his mind as he gives me a once-over in an unnerving manner. Much like Mr. Fitzherbert in "Bridget Jones's Diary"—save for the fact he's definitely not checking me out sexually. And thank fuck for that! I'm quite sure the whole office is abuzz with gossip about why I wasn't there today. Though I adore my assistant and good friend, Phoebe, she can be too much of a yenta.

Kraig advances to the next place in line and finishes his transaction. I don't quite know how to tell him goodbye in this awkward scenario. To be truthful, it's always awkward around him. Dead husband or not. I muster the courage to form a smile and wave him off to be cordial, but I'm almost certain it looks more like a grimace. Though, it should go without saying, it's not my responsibility to offer any words in my current version of Hell. He paces away from the checkout lane with his sack of purchases dangling from his fingers, not letting down my assumptions.

"I'm pretty sure half-and-half curdles in alcohol," the cashier tries joking.

I attempt my best smile one more time, probably failing miserably.

"Meh—it's for tomorrow's coffee," I shrug because I'm in no mood for small talk. If I ever have in the first place.

Melinda finishes scanning my booze, using a tool attached to the shelf under her register to remove the anti-theft device from the bottle. She grits her teeth while getting the tab to budge.

“I don’t know why they have to put these on so gosh darn tight,” she drones.

After I inspect the total displaying inches from Melinda’s head, I insert my credit card into the machine before the signature box pops up. Once I return my wallet to the messenger bag, I scoop the plastic bag with my creamer and Doritos in one hand. The other wields a slender paper bag concealing my liquor in between the fold of my arm and chest.

“Have a good night—Sweetie,” she yells out while I step towards the exit.

Some great fucking night this will be. At least it might help submerge the world from my consciousness, if for only a few hours.

Leaving the market, I shuffle down Stanton Street to Chrystie, where I booked a hotel room. Try as I might, it’s impossible to sleep at home right now. Not with constant reminders of the horror from Tuesday night haunting every corner of my mind. Especially with an empty void on the right side of our bed. Fuck. My bed.

Streetlights shine brightly upon the sidewalks, while the hiss of nighttime traffic and blaring car horns drown out the sound of a brood of young adults—probably on the second stop of their bar crawl. I remember being that young. Mine and Julian’s hand in each other’s after leaving a bar—filled to the brim with mixed alcohols. There we’d roam, staggering through the city without a care in the whole goddamn world. Back when life was simpler, at least in a figurative context.

Approaching the hotel entrance, my right hand thrashes around my bag for the room key. A fidget spinner falls to the ground while rustling around the sides of it, ultimately before my hand detects the correct shape and size of the proxy card. I hunch forward to pick up the spinner when the plastic bag slips through my fingers, causing the creamer to crush my chips. Oh, come on!

My hotel room is ample sized, perfectly accommodating me for the next couple of nights while I get my shit together. Or while Phoebe helps me rustle up what sanity I have left. Earlier today, I'd assigned her the duty of digging through the deep recesses of the internet. Specifically locating a contact method for someone within Julian's immediate family.

It's been over thirty years since either of us have talked with anyone in our families down in Felton. We ran away from home after realizing that the slew of bible toting bigots in small town Louisiana wouldn't suit either of us. The week following our high school graduation, it was New York or bust. And we haven't been back since. If I may be completely frank, decades of no contact with any of our relatives is perhaps one of the best things we'd ever done in our lives. Second to the night of our marriage—or rather our civil union ceremony.

But like the saying goes, all good things must come to an end. And fuck me if I don't fear dredging up the past just to confront his family, informing them that my lover left this world on a cruel summer Tuesday night in June.

Hours after returning to the hotel, I find myself stumbling from the bed to the pisser, much like a pregnant woman with a fetus pressing into her bladder. Sauntering to the bathroom sink, I gawk at the pathetic man standing in front of the mirror. The tears parade down my tired visage causing me to lurch forward, pressing the palms of my hands into my forehead. I contemplate how the last couple of hours have allowed me to feel numb to the world. My head shakes away these feelings of despair, convincing myself that I need to refocus on something positive. Yet there's a darker presence taking form, ushering my soul to the Earth-shattering ledge of reality.

I splash water into my throbbing eyes before patting my face dry with a towel hanging next to the sink. If I'm starting to feel again, a few more swigs of the bottle must be overdue. The glass vessel of courage resting on my hotel nightstand. Another show on Nick at Night starts playing on my way back to the bed. Twangy opening

bars of the Roseanne theme song flounder within my chest. This is one of many things which Julian and I'd watched together a thousand times over.

Because I don't need yet another reminder of what I've lost, I quickly switch the channel to a station airing a pre-recorded golf game. At this moment, if it's a choice between pouring out an extra bayou of sorrow, or a couple hours of monotony, I'll decide on sports. Another few ounces of scotch glide down my gullet before I return the bottle to its bedside throne. Followed by a heavy swipe of my palm on the pillow, sending Dorito crumbs to the well vacuumed carpet. Though, as I lay my head down, I doubt I'll catch even five minutes of sleep.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:33 pm

GRAYSON

A harsh morning light peeks through my hotel window, summoning me alive for the day. Despite heavy curtains, the wide sliver of sunshine is quite blinding. As I wipe away the exhaustion, I reach for my phone. It's holding strong on a twenty-two percent charge. It's paramount that I remember to grab my charging cable when I stop by the apartment today. Surely, taking a few steps inside won't be as haunting of an experience during daylight hours. As opposed to anytime after sundown, dusk swallowing the Big Apple like the universe has my aching heart.

There's a voicemail demanding my attention, in addition to an unread text message. It's not so surprising that I didn't answer Phoebe's call an hour ago, since I usually keep my phone on vibrate only. If there's another thing that I can't stand in this world, it's weird noises. And ringtones rank high on the list of audible disturbances. Plus, if the remainder of my Glenlivet is any indication, I may have achieved REM sleep for at least a little while.

"Hey Gray, I found a few people who could potentially be whom you're looking for. Will you call me back when you have a chance? I'm hoping you didn't answer because you finally got some sleep. Talk with you later."

Since I'll be stopping by the office today to sign a zoning contract, I'll just speak with her then. The text message is from a good friend of ours, Rick Abernathy. It's one of several condolence messages I've received since yesterday. Judging by the rate of how fast word spreads in our thriving gay community, I'll see a dozen more of these by the end of the day. If there's one thing that can be counted on in our humble circle of chums, it's an abundance of support. When one soldier is down on the field,

twenty others sprint to the rescue.

The intensity of my bladder begs me for a good emptying, so I waste no time hurrying to the bathroom to take care of business. As I pass the large mirror, my unkempt violet oxford reminds me that I need to grab a couple more outfit changes. And my deodorant as well, based on the smell seeping through my pores which reek of a brewery. These are yet more things to slip my mind before leaving the apartment Wednesday morning. As for a shower, it'll just need to wait until later.

Moving around combined with the lingering odor of my poison laced sweat, causes me to retch inconceivably. At least I'm already in the bathroom. A split-second later, I lurch toward the toilet as vomit propels Linda Blair style into its bowl. My head bobs with one heave after another, causing every blood vessel in and around my eyes to throb even worse—now from my oxygen starved brain. I flush before wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. If the booze-soaked stench wasn't displeasing enough, the bitter taste of bile certainly pushes the envelope. And once my waist returns to a ninety-degree angle, I can finally take that fucking piss.

Flushing the toilet for a second time, I make a mental note of the growing list of things which I need to grab. Phone cord, fresh clothes, deodorant. Meds, too. Well, no. While fleeting, the realization Julian is gone still hasn't sunk into my thick skull. When making mental notes of things to grab prior to now, his medication was usually the most vital thing I found myself constantly needing to remember. My head shakes with a hue of contention, wondering when this bitter pill will finally settle in my stomach. That Julian's taken another trip out of town, only this time he's never coming back.

Out in the room, I raise the messenger bag over my shoulder before collecting my phone. With a few steps down the hallway, I set out for the elevator and allow the door to swing shut behind me. Once I reach the parking garage down below, I rack my brain amidst the backdrop of a thundering headache. Now where the fuck did I

park my BMW? Searching up one lane off to the far left leaves little to be discovered. Only at this moment do I get a visual reminder of a large round cement column in the center of the lot.

I toss my bag over the center console, letting it fall freely in my passenger seat. Behind the wheel, my door slams shut while powering on the ignition button. This wretched sun isn't doing my hangover any favors as I cruise down 3rd Avenue, leaving me to feel around the visor for my sunglasses. Traffic is horrendous as it usually is in the heart of the city. With my office building on 49th Street practically two miles away, it should take only five minutes. Yet this morning, my attention to detail clocks the commute at twenty-four. I pull into the nearby parking garage, then trek through a crosswalk for the main entrance.

Bells from the elevator ding once it reaches the seventeenth floor, sending me to a quick pace out from the doors before they slide shut. As I tread through a maze of cubicles leading to my office, I can hear a cacophony of multiple phone lines ringing throughout the main workspace. I tap my fingers against the strap of my bag, counting each repetition so I can focus on something else. This keeps my shit intact, mollified from every ear-splitting noise.

I'm one of five partners at Spellman & Associates, the tenth leading architectural firm in the nation. On a typical day, I enjoy my job. There's a team of eager junior architects who work under me. And though I sometimes doubt my managerial abilities, I've only lost one person in the last eleven years. Everyone else seems satisfied with their jobs. I push the glass door ahead of me while spotting Phoebe behind her desk, nursing a Starbucks latte in her grasp. Probably a Venti Caramel Macchiato, since she's just as much a creature of habit as I am.

"Gray, I was just about to call you!" She exclaims. "But I'm kinda glad to see you instead."

I shake my head, contending with a bedeviling throb around both temples. Despite the large tinted window behind me, its main use seems highly ineffective. So, these shades remain on for now. Likely a prudent idea anyhow, as I'd hate for my dingy eyes to fuel more gossip around the water cooler.

"What did you find?" I ask.

Phoebe scoots her office chair, allowing room for me to stand beside, studying the dual computer screens. "I found one Sophia Torres in Felton, and three others in surrounding areas."

I click my tongue. "Felton is kinda like jury duty," I admit, scratching at the bristles already surfacing on my chin. "Apart from a few determined schmucks, you just can't escape it, so the listing in town should be Jules' mom," I add. "Does it give an address?" I ask curiously, yet I can assume his parents never moved.

Phoebe points to a listing on the screen. "An address on Tamarack Street?"

"Yep, that's the one," I nod. "Can you text me the number, so I have it?"

The tone on her face screams of worry. "Did you get any sleep, Sweetheart?"

My fellow partners, Kraig Winslow included, don't allow their assistants or subordinates to call them cute little terms of endearment. But unlike the rest of those entitled dipshits, I don't have an inflated ego. Nor does my ass house a giant stick. So, I welcome anything which doesn't sound like an insult.

I sluggishly shrug my shoulders. "I guess a little bit," I reply indecisively. "Maybe an hour—two tops."

Phoebe shakes her head with discontent. "I'm just so sorry you're going through this,

Gray,” she replies. “I can only guess how you must be feeling right now,” she adds, her finger sliding the rim of her Starbucks cup. “Julian was a real gemstone of a man.”

My palm can’t stop fussing with the headache currently assaulting me. “Aside from the shooting pains in my forehead— well —pretty fuckin’ awful.”

Phoebe frowns. “I have some Midol in my purse,” she offers, rifling through her top desk drawer.

“Nah—I have some ibuprofen in my bag,” I reject the offer with a wave, though Julian’s previous pharmacy expertise would deem Midol just as effective. “I really don’t have anything to wash it down.”

“Here,” she replies, passing me her latte. “I’m not scared of your germs.”

My shoulders shrug without hesitation, reaching out to grab her cup. Meanwhile, I retrieve the bottle of Motrin from my bag. “Thanks, Pheeb.”

A quick sip allows me to test the temperature. Indeed, I was right. She’s drinking a Caramel Macchiato. I take another small gulp to wash down the tablets, then set the beverage back on her desk. My phone vibrates from Phoebe’s text, including Sophia Torres’ updated phone number. On the short walk to my office door, I look through the adjoining glass partition exposing Kraig’s ugly fucking mug. He’s on a conference call. But when he raises his head to witness my vacant stare, he immediately averts his attention elsewhere.

At my desk, there’s a kraft paper envelope with my name written in cursive on the front. Beside it are my stacking trays with sorted file folders for prospective projects not yet scanned into our database. Inside the top folder is the form I need to sign—a zoning contract for a future build in the pre-planning stages. A quick signature

affords me precisely enough time to open the envelope someone has thoughtfully left for me. It's a sympathy card from Angela in legal. While this is very early in the tropical storm of my life, it brings me comfort to know people in this office care so much. I can't fathom where I'll be once the tropical storm has been upgraded to a full-fledged hurricane.

I return to Phoebe's desk with the folder in hand. "Can you scan this with other documents for the Hillcrest Development project and assign them a folder in the cloud?" I ask, placing the manilla contents in the top tier of her inbox.

She nods. "Sure thing, I'll get to it in just a few minutes."

Hobbling towards the glass door which leads to rowdy chaos, I hear Phoebe adding more sentiments.

"If you need anything, just call me," she says. "Even if it isn't work related—you're like my brother from a different mother."

An awkward smile warms my face, yet genuinely moved by her generosity. She's not wrong. We've been friends longer than she's been on the payroll. "Thanks Pheebs, I'll keep you in mind."

I'd already decided yesterday that I was going to take some time off for a proper bereavement. I'm waiting on a call from the New York County Coroner, who said he'd be calling any time before Saturday. That timeline nears an end tomorrow. And when I do get that call, I'll be forced to make all the necessary arrangements. Two weeks, to me, seems most fair.

While empty, the apartment doesn't feel too eerie. The worst of it—and I'd avoid it like the plague if it meant not needing my toothbrush and deodorant—is going to be the bathroom. The door is shut on purpose, because I closed it when I came home

from the hospital just after midnight on Wednesday. As a matter of fact, I'd rather stop at the drug store to purchase new toiletries if it means I won't need to go in there now. A former therapist, Elizabeth, instilled a new motto in me years ago. "Avoidance equals disaster," she always says. Well, this is one disaster I full fucking well choose to stomach in the future.

I shuffle into the guest bedroom to retrieve my luggage from the spare closet. As I round the foot of the bed, my attention takes notice of the shutter style closet doors. There's an open gap where the panels part ways. One of them is pushed out by a couple of inches. I slide it over, revealing one of Julian's vintage suitcases has seemingly fallen from the shelf up above. The weight seems much heavier than I remember, as I hoist it above my head. Instead, I lug it over to the guest bed, intent on investigating the contents.

Opening the lid leaves me in a world of surprise. Several leather-bound journals are piled inside. Some with months and years. A few others with locations— Felton, New York City, and Boston. I had no idea until just now that *meus amor*— my love in Latin—kept journals. Not that this should be surprising in the least, as he's an author of twenty New York Times bestsellers. With four additional books from early on in his career. Fuck. I mean, he was . As much as I want to curl up in the fetal position on this bed, weeping to every handwritten word he's ever penned, I'd rather not fall into such a grief trap. Being in this apartment by myself is starting to give me the willies as it is. A snuffle joins me as I close the suitcase shut, then reach back into the closet for mine from the shelf.

In the master bedroom, I've piled four days of outfit changes inside. They're stacked neatly for being as grief stricken as I am. I saunter over to my nightstand on the left side, unplugging my phone charger from behind, quickly tossing it on a clothes pile. After a short sneeze—likely from the dust on the lid of my suitcase—I circle the zipper around the edges to secure its contents. Out in the hall, some type of instinct persuades me to bring his luggage full of journals with me to the car.

A hot minute allows me to choose whether I want to lose my shit or not. My gut says I might find some comfort having pieces of Julian with me. What could possibly be better than reading his inner thoughts from when his mind was as bright as his spirit?

At the drugstore, I find myself in the quandary of deciding between deodorant brands—Arm & Hammer or Degree. They're seemingly out of stock in the variety I've used for the last six years, the shelf laid bare just as my aching heart. It pisses me off to no end when a store doesn't keep my regularly purchased brands. Especially since I've been shopping here since 2012 when we moved to Washington Heights.

Being forced to use a new brand makes my skin crawl. Ughhh. I should've just opened that goddamn door. After a few minutes of fighting my staunch disapproval for change, I finally decide on the Degree deodorant. Now onto the opposing aisle to select a toothbrush and toothpaste. So long as my Pronamel is in stock, I'll be slightly happier. Well, that might not be entirely true.

The cashier up front is ringing a gentleman's items in front of me at a snail's pace. But I'm not necessarily in a huge rush. Over the last few days, I'm beginning to realize when a person encounters a major loss, they don't hold much emphasis on the concept of time. At least so far, being grief stricken has taken so much from me, that I couldn't hurry anywhere if I tried.

While waiting in line, the vibrant colors of cigarette pack varieties catch my eye. And with it, a sudden urge to taste nicotine hits my brain like lightning. Despite having abstained from tobacco twenty years ago, I can taste it as I'm being escorted to yesteryear.

Trisha scowls as she waves me up to the counter, shooting a disgruntled smirk when the items fall from my arms. She grunts ravenously, scanning each item as if she's having a bad day. Me too, Trish. Me too. No sooner does she scan the two bottles of cold Coke, when I point to the wall of temptation behind her.

“And I’ll take a pack of the Camel Turkish Gold please,” I request, fumbling a lighter from a hook inches away from my shoulder.

“Do you have your ID?” She asks with a hint of indignation.

Are you kidding me? Do these wrinkles on my forehead make me look like I’ve swallowed the fountain of fuckin’ youth?

As much as I desire clapping back with my haughty thoughts, I flip open my wallet to reveal my driver’s license. My jaws clench tightly while I try to fish the goddamn thing from its slip. There’s no good reason they should make them more difficult to remove than sliding inside. Passing the identification doesn’t go without flashing a pseudo smile. I’m pretending to not be fazed by her tone, but I’m certain I appear rather bitter.

Once she returns the proof that I attended school with Jesus Christ, I insert my credit card into the terminal to pay. Seconds whizz by as we wait on a spinning wheel, followed by a mechanical beep like it hasn’t recognized my card. Yet another element making this interaction even more unnerving.

Trisha huffs. “You put it in too soon.”

I roll my eyes, inserting it for another try. Finally, I see the words approved. I drop my wallet back into the messenger bag, then grab the plastic bag and my receipt.

My hotel door has me wedging halfway through, juggling both suitcases, the bag from the drugstore, and a paper McDonald’s takeout sack cinched between my teeth. The weight of Julian’s old-style suitcase slams into my right knee, causing me to trip. A flash of light blinds me as I heave forward, accompanied by a ripping sound from the paper sack. Meanwhile, dozens of french fries sprinkle over the carpet. God damn it!

I'm not terribly hungry, but I figured I'd try eating something anyway to settle the pit in my stomach. At least my double cheeseburger is wrapped in paper. I unload the suitcases to a chair in the corner of the room, before returning to the scene of the crime. All the while feeling my soul rip to shreds because the fries are now inedible.

Only two bites of the burger finds my gut satiated. So, I toss it in the trash can with the most anticipated portion of my meal. My phone screen flashes a low battery warning for the third time today, forcing me to waste no time plugging it into an outlet next to the bed. Thoughts of Julian's journals flourish in my mind. Since I'm due for some quiet time, it's a no brainer that I should pull one from his luggage. Written in black Sharpie across the sheen of brown leather, is the singular word which threatens to haunt my memory— Felton.

It takes me all of a few moments finding a comfortable position among the freshly made bed. The maid must have cleaned while I was out. Then I'm caught off-guard as my vision zeros-in on the nightstand where I discover she's taken my remaining Glenlivet. Seriously? What the actual fuck?

Annoyed, my eyes roll straight back as I lean against the headboard. The journal slowly makes its way up to my nostrils. While somewhat dilapidated, the pages seem to have withstood the tests of time. They're still crisp, but fetid. An exhale escapes my lungs as my mind resets, traveling back in time to recall where I was when Julian penned this entry.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:33 pm

JULIAN

January 15, 1990

My family just moved into our house in The United States. Louisiana isn't as warm in the winter as Puerto Rico. Today was my first day in a traditional American school. They call it 'high school' here, which is weird because I'm not used to calling it that. Back home, we call our final grades 'upper secondary school,' and we don't have as many options to choose our own classes. But here, I was given some say. Since I'm eighteen, they placed me in the twelfth grade because I tested well in most subjects, besides History. Which I can understand because I wouldn't know too much about the primary United States.

Other kids look at me differently, like I don't belong here. And I kinda don't. Except for one boy. He makes me feel seen and he's very nice to look at. I have two classes with him, History and Chemistry. I sat behind him during third period History. He didn't speak to me, but I felt like he wanted to. Although I was still nervous from being in a brand-new school, I wasn't in the mood to chat with anyone right off the bat.

But during lunch, I was browsing the school library. Then when I turned around the corner from a shelf, the same boy bumped into me, and my textbooks fell to the ground. I went to pick them up, but he beat me to it. He looked me in the eye with a huge smile as I looked back. So sweet and innocent, how could he not be friendly? He looked like how a teenage version of a cherub might. The image of pure innocence. It just warmed my whole body.

“Hi, I’m Grayson,” he said, waving his hand through his short, black hair.

I took a minute to respond. His willingness to speak to me as if I wasn’t the alien everyone else thinks I am, was startling. I almost didn’t know what to say, or if I did, I might’ve stuttered my words making me sound like a complete idiot.

I waved at him shyly. “I’m Julian.”

It didn’t sound as bad as I first thought.

“Where are you from, Julian?” He asked.

I leaned up against the side of a shelf. “My family just moved here from Puerto Rico.”

His lips formed a small circle. “Oh, that’s pretty far.”

“My papá moved my family here because he’s working on an oil rig off the coast of Mississippi,” I said.

He seemed shocked. “Oh wow, I hear that can be a real dangerous job.”

I shrugged. “He says it’s going to bring in better money than he made back home.”

“Well it was nice to meet you, Julian—I gotta go catch my next class since lunch is almost over,” he said. He started walking away when I realized he still had my Language Arts and Chemistry textbooks still in his arms.

“Wait,” I waved at him. “You have my books.”

Grayson chuckled with an embarrassed sort of grin. “Oh, I guess I do.”

Later in the afternoon, I walked to my Chemistry class where I spotted Grayson walking by a bathroom in a corner of the hallway. His welcoming smile made my heart beat so fast, I was convinced it would just suddenly stop working. I've never felt this way about a boy before. And while I don't feel the same way around girls, I'm sure what I'm feeling isn't normal. I wonder if I am the freak the other kids take me for.

In class, Grayson sat at the long table across from the one I chose. The teacher continued giving directions about the midterm project. He looked in my direction and pointed, saying because I was a transfer student, I could join someone else's group. Without so much as a second, Grayson raised his hand and begged me to join his group. Another kid who I assume is in that group punched him in the ribs and whispered something that sounded like, "we don't want that Mexican working with us."

It's hurtful to assume that just because I'm Latino that I'm from Mexico. In fact, my home couldn't be any farther from Mexico. Grayson told him to shut up before smiling back in my direction.

At the last part of class, Mr. Wilson let the groups get together to discuss the progress on their projects. Grayson brought me up to speed with the other students, which included a girl with big round glasses and brown hair named Megan. A boy with freckles and braces named Chip. And the jerk who I can tell doesn't like me, Kevin. And of course, Grayson. Just writing his name makes me tingle on the inside.

"We're doing our project on the conductivity of copper," Grayson said.

"That sounds interesting," I replied.

Twenty whole minutes of conversation with the group proved to me that Grayson must be very smart. Afterwards, I wondered if he could help me catch up on United

States History, since he seems to be a straight-A student.

This afternoon when I got home, I couldn't stop thinking about him. How he stood up for me and genuinely wanted me to work with them on their project. I can't help but brag about this crush. But I'm sure this journal is the only place I can confess my feelings. Well, I already have some homework to catch up on. Even if my mind will be distracted by the thought of him and his smile. I hope he's planning to be an actor or something, because he looks like a million bucks.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:33 pm

GRAYSON

It's already a quarter past two in the afternoon. Reading Julian's entry about the first day we met leaves my already fragmented heart in a hundred more pieces. A river of emotion rains down my cheek, thinking back on how cruel the other kids at school were to him. All because he was different. Fuck. If they only knew I was just as different, I shudder to think how they would have treated me. But I do remember being protective of him. If anyone was going to step up to the plate and defend his honor, I personally saw to it that person was me.

However, reading the words about his first impressions of me—a future movie star—brings the faintest smile to my forlorn visage. In fact, it might very well be the first time I can feel it genuinely radiating from my soul in weeks. Though the ache is still very present, and I don't know how long it's going to last. Will it get any better at all?

The slightest vibration coming from the bed stand catches me off-guard, assuming it's a text message. As I unlock the main screen, the message from our adoptive brother, Miles, doesn't surprise me in the least.

Hey bud. Alex and I are so heartbroken to learn about Julian. You must be just beside yourself. It should go without saying, if you need anything at all, you can count on us to deliver. Be good to yourself and know there's a whole community of us in your corner.

Miles Langford and Alex Wilkins have been in my life since the first week Julian and I moved to the city. They're also at the forefront of the Rock Hudson community

theater program, which Julian had regularly contributed his knack for writing. Before dementia held his beautiful mind captive, that is. In fact, it was Alex who officiated our civil union ceremony in May of 1998. Thinking back to that day seems like a distant shadow, after all we've been through and faced. But I remember the immense love I felt. A day hasn't gone by without feeling that same love. And it's still just as profound as when we said our vows.

While my phone is within grasp, I should call Sophia. But I'm so drained, my insufficient supply of energy prevents me from following through. Surely the longer I prolong the inevitable, the harder it will be. Yet, I still don't know what words I could possibly muster to convey how incredibly sorry I am—that their only son has departed. Let alone apologize for his absence from their lives the past three decades. God fucking damn it! These tears are going to be the death of me. Just when I thought my ducts had dried like Shakespeare's inkwell, here they are with an encore presentation. It's baffling how grief can make a person's mood shift so excessively.

My parched mouth leaves me feeling thirsty. As much as I want to open one of my Cokes, the gnawing pit in my stomach has returned. With my nerves rising back to the surface, the better choice to shove the fuckers back where they belong seems to be a stiff drink or two. With no thanks to the hotel maid, I've been robbed of my own hooch. Now I'm tasked with traipsing a block down the street to a nearby bar.

I gather Julian's journal from Felton, sticking it inside the side pocket of my bag, before shuffling out to the elevator. Once downstairs, I exit the lobby. After only a few paces away from the revolving door, I can instantly feel the drastic temperature change. It's so fucking muggy outside, I'd have a fair chance at slicing the humidity with a knife. My hand reaches into my shoulder bag to retrieve the pack of Camels and lighter. A quick tap against the base of my palm precedes unwrapping the flimsy cellophane wrapper.

Instinctively, I bow my head as my chin presses into my collarbone. Between pursed

lips, my left hand positions in front of the cigarette, while a subtle flick of the lighter tingles my auditory senses. This is what my body has craved for two decades. With a deep inhale, smoke tickles the back of my throat, just as the sweet, leafy flavor of tobacco teases each taste bud. And after a prolonged exhale, the dense plume of smoke dances across my face, all the while approaching a crosswalk at Chrystie and Stanton.

At only a block away from the hotel, I find myself reaching the end of a short jaunt. I finish the last drags from my smoke before entering. This first cigarette in twenty years has propelled my senses into a fit of fury, as if the addiction has only suffered a short hiatus. No way should I light another. Okay one more for good measure. But the desire in my throat yearns for something smooth and wet. Something which even nineteen more of these bad boys can't mollify.

Tapping the cherry with my two fingers, I send the hot ashes to their demise amidst balmy pavement next to my foot. Instinctively, my foot extinguishes the embers before tossing the filter into a coffee can next to the door, aptly filled with sand.

A bartender greets me upon my entrance. He smiles enthusiastically while I find a seat at the end of the bar. It's dimly lit in here. And most of all, cloaked by whisper level silence.

"You're the first person today, so I don't have any of my fruits sliced yet," he says, seeming rushed. "But what'll you be having today, pal?"

These spur of the moment decisions rattle me to no end, summoning a hesitant shrug. That's why my go-to at Starbucks is usually an Americano, which Phoebe usually fetches for me anyway.

"No worries," I respond. "I'll just take a double Glenlivet 12—neat."

“You got it,” he nods.

As I wait for him to pour my drink, there’s a few moments to transfer Sophia’s number from Phoebe’s text to the keypad screen. Then again, more reluctance endures, preventing me from this simple task. If I lost a kid—regardless of having talked all the time or never—I’d probably hate to find out over the phone. These thoughts come rushing through my mind as I set the device down in front of me. All the while, its keypad screen heckles my conscience. It joins a somber tune in the crux of my plight—delivering me into a dark world of doubt.

Minutes which seemed like hours pass by when the bartender finally returns with my drink. Its wet, oaky flavor sates the thirst in my mouth. I take an extra gulp because—screw it—I’m allowed right now. Surely it won’t turn into a huge problem. And if I’m going to be burying my fucking husband soon, I know damn well I won’t be able to do it dry.

Speaking of burial, this is a moment where I find myself scouring the recesses of my memory. A moment almost four years ago when we spoke to each other on the subject.

Julian nestled his head into my bare chest, partially laid under the warm blankets of our bed. He’d been entombing his fingers into the short hairs on my chest, while a draft of December air blew in from the bedroom window. It was such a welcome treat after working up a sweat from forty minutes of non-stop love making. My left hand stroked his shoulders as we discussed making the hard decisions when our expiration date would arrive.

“Do you wanna be cremated or buried?” He asked.

What a way to spoil a night of sex with such a depressing question. It took me a solid minute to reply, since it’d been the first time that we ever mentioned something so

grim as our end-of-life wishes. Even though the very subject was my family's meal ticket, I've always found it to be too gloomy.

"I don't know," I replied. "I don't really like the idea of being stuck in the ground—left to rot like some leftover apple core."

"Yeah, I can relate," Julian agreed. "But my family is so Catholic," he added, pausing to let out a sigh. "They'd want me buried."

Hearing him comply with what his family expected of him—especially after having absconded from the Hellscape of Felton—made my skin crawl. Determined to soothe him, I gently brushed my fingers through the tresses of his greying mane. "Who gives a damn what they want, *meus amor*?"

"Don't hate me," Julian replied, ostensibly under the impression that I'd object to what he was about to say. "But even though we've removed our families from our lives, I want them to have the opportunity of being present at my funeral," he affirmed with a hard gulp of air.

And after a long sigh, he continued explaining his position on the matter. "I feel as if my soul wouldn't be at total peace if they didn't get the opportunity for some sort of closure."

A contentious grunt escaped my lips as Julian met my prickly gaze. "After what my father did to us, he'd better hope he dies long before I do," I avowed. "That son of a bitch would rather drive a nail through his eyes, before he'd decide to appear at my funeral."

Julian placed his forefinger to my lips. "That's why I wanna go before you, *meus amor*," he professed. "As hard as it would be losing you," he added, pausing briefly to glance up at the ceiling. "Being in the same town as your father might be the

bigger challenge.”

“Oh lover, shhh,” I shushed him quickly. There was no way in Hell that I wanted to give the conversation more weight over my soul. “Don’t make me spoil our fantastic night by fuckin’ crying.”

A rattle of clinking bar glasses provides a sharp jolt back to the present moment. My vision shifts from the group of Edison lights dangling above shelves of liquor bottles, down to the bartender in front of me.

“You all right over there?” He asks, extending an open palm.

I wipe a river of burden escaping the dams of my soul with the back of my hand. Fuck. In public now too?

“Oh yeah,” I reply, surely not very convincingly. “Just fine.”

He nods. “Mmmm hmmm, yeah sure looks like it.”

Most of the time, I take things literally. But this time, I can detect his hint of sarcasm. After letting out a sigh, I raise the drink to my lips for another swig. “I’m gonna need another one of these motherfuckers if you expect the truth out of me.”

“I can do that, my friend,” he obliges, instantly reaching for a clean glass. “But it’s none of my business either way.”

While he pours me another glass of courage, my mind starts to digest Julian’s wishes from our conversation. And with the very notion of returning to Felton, I polish off the remaining booze in my grasp. But if it’s what my lover wanted, I must respect it. I don’t think I’d be able to live with myself if I don’t. Within moments, the bartender slides a refill in my direction. My lips contort amidst a satisfied grunt. Then after

another fresh gulp, feeling the euphoric tingle of intoxication scatter through my body like scarabs in Cairo. I remove Julian's journal from my bag, all the while fanning my flush facade with my free hand. The hooch is full fucking well doing a top-notch job at masking reality.

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JULIAN

February 11, 1990

This has been one of the best weekends I've ever had in my life. School is going better than I expected it to. And well, Grayson has made me one of the happiest boys alive. Not only has he helped me so much in History, but I'm also learning everything there is to know about American culture. It's funny that they think a place like Taco Bell is considered Mexican food. Although Mexican food is still a little different than what we're used to making in Puerto Rico, Grayson seems to really enjoy the place he calls 'fast-food.'

On Friday after school, he drove me there in a truck his mom gave him for his sixteenth birthday. He said it wasn't new, but it was better than taking the bus or walking. When we arrived, the smell of chili powder was so strong, I could've tasted it from a mile down the road. I ordered something called an enchirito and a taco. We didn't have to wait long before our food was already being passed out to us up at the counter. Grayson carried the tray, while I hauled his book bag to a booth next to a window so we could study for our History test next week.

He took a bite from a burrito, as sauce dripped from his chin, and all down his neck.

"You've got some sauce," I said while pointing towards his neck. "Here."

He bowed his head to glance down at his shirt, which just caused a bigger mess above his collar. I took a napkin and reached over the table so I could wipe his neck clean, but stopped before my hand touched his chin. He gave me a weird look, but not a bad

one. If I had to put words in his mouth, I swear they would have said ‘It’s okay, go ahead.’ It seemed the music playing in the restaurant stopped playing in a pure moment of silence. Then I slid the napkin from the base of his mouth all down his neck.

What happened next took me by surprise. He took my hand and appeared to be giving it a sniff as if I had lotion on, but I didn’t. Just regular soap from my shower that morning. A few seconds later, the music seemed to drown the quiet and we returned to chapter fourteen of our textbook about the Bill of Rights. We continued talking about slavery and the Thirteenth Amendment.

After we drank our weight in Pepsi, Grayson convinced me to go with him on a little trip. Since it was still light outside, I knew mamá wouldn’t be worried about me not being home until it was dark. He drove me out past the cemetery with a large field of grass and a long stream.

“I come out here to catch crawfish all the time,” he said. “It’s my quiet place when I just need to get outta my head.”

He took my hand and walked me down a hill which took us to the bank of the stream. In his other hand, he carried a bucket with a screen that closed over the top of it.

“The key to finding them is to search along the bottoms where there are larger rocks,” he said. “And don’t be surprised—they can pinch you just like a lobster—so be careful.”

Although seafood is so popular back home, I don’t really like it as much. So, I’ve never eaten lobster. I prefer to stick with a juicy strip of beef. But the fact I was on the search for something that could pinch me was very intimidating. Grayson got down on his knees and went elbow deep into the creek while I carefully kneeled beside him, too scared to stick my hands in the water.

“Don’t be shy, Julian, it doesn’t hurt too much,” he tried to assure me while turning his head in my direction for a brief glimpse at my fright.

I shook my head. “I don’t know.”

“Here we go!” He shouted with a look of satisfaction.

Grayson pulled out his first crawfish catch, which absolutely looked like a very tiny lobster. He waved it in front of my face before I quickly leapt up to my feet to back away as if it was about to attack me.

“Oh come on,” Grayson laughed. “It’s just a little bitty thing.”

Yeah, a little bitty thing that could kill me. After a second of standing in fear, I found myself running up the hillside while he chased me from behind and taunted me with the small creature. I didn’t imagine I’d spend hours after school being chased by the one boy who I have the biggest crush on. Let alone something so tiny, that if it did pinch me, it may hurt no more than a paper cut. But I can’t complain about spending time with Grayson. If I had a choice, I’d want him around me all the time. There’s just something about the energy he gives off.

Halfway up the hill, I stumbled on a rock and fell amidst the cold patch of dead grass. Grayson put the crawfish in his bucket and lowered to his knees with a huge grin on his face. O Deus meus, if only I knew what he was thinking all the time. In the last month or so of getting acquainted, I can tell he’s selective with his words. But if there’s one thing about me, I can be extroverted around some people. And Grayson is one of them.

He laid on his back next to me while we stared up into the sky at a group of clouds. It wasn’t dark yet, but I could tell it was getting close to dinner time. Grayson broke the silence a few minutes later.

“I’m glad your parents chose to move to Felton,” he said with a near whisper.

Hearing him mutter those words sent my heart back into overdrive. It was the confirmation I’ve been waiting to receive for a month. I felt wanted, and that’s something I don’t feel very often. My mamá loves me. But I can tell there’s something about my parents that makes me cautious. If I told them I’m in love with a boy, I just know they would flip out. They’re Catholic and the word ‘gay’—if that’s what I am—is not welcome in the church.

I felt Grayson’s hand creeping through the patch of grass to touch mine. Almost as if it knew exactly what to do, I welcomed his touch and gripped it tightly.

“I don’t know what I’d do here without you,” I replied. “You’re kinda like my bodyguard.”

He turned his head to look straight at me. I could feel the weight of his stare, so I slid my head on its side also. We gazed at each other for several minutes, while sounds from the babbling creek whooshed past us. His eyes were a lighter shade of freshly brewed coffee. And if they were any sign of what he tasted like, I wanted so bad to lean in and find out.

“O Deus meus,” I said out loud before I slithered over to climb on top of him. I wiped my thumb away from the corners of his left eye and studied his reaction. It was as if he surrendered his every last thought and feeling over to me. The twinkle in his stare was all I needed to know that it was okay to plant my lips against his. But Grayson practically read my mind. With no time wasted, he reached his hand around my neck and pulled my head down closer to his.

The kiss. It lasted for so long. His lips tasted savory, from the Taco Bell earlier that afternoon. It was more than I was expecting, that’s for sure. Being my first time kissing someone besides mamá, I’ve only seen it in movies. But the actors on TV

aren't there in the room with you. And they certainly aren't Grayson Welles.

"I really like you, Julian Torres," he said while he stroked my face which hovered above his.

I swallowed whatever liquid had built up inside my mouth. "I like you too, Grayson Welles."

We laid there for what seemed like forever. His hands traveled up and down my body and I did the same. Feeling another person is a unique experience and I can't describe it in just a few words. It's like you're taking notes of their every feature. The location of every bone and muscle, and the rhythm of their heartbeat. Or how many breaths they let in and out within a minute's time. That was the first moment when my brain convinced me that I'm not a freak. It just felt right.

We knew it was time to go home once the crickets started chirping. And another Americanism concludes, 'we'd better be home before the last streetlight turns on.' The ride back through town stirred a world of thoughts. I wondered what excuse I'd give mamá. I might be eighteen, but I'm still in school and living under their roof. Grayson reached across the long seat and grabbed my hand while he steered the wheel with his left hand.

Since he'd never been to my house before, I gave him directions, telling him to take a right on Tamarack Street from Pine. The thought of my mamá standing out on the porch crossed my mind. I wondered if I should've had him drop me off on the corner, so she wouldn't see me climb down from his hunter-green 1977 Ford F-150. But that thought was too late. Sure enough, she'd been waiting outside with her arms crossed as suspected.

"Wanna hang out tomorrow?" I asked him before I opened my door. I figured he probably would, since our friendship turned a major corner that night.

“I can when I clock out of work,” he replied. “Pick you up just after three, and we’ll go see that movie Megan was talking about.”

I smiled as big as I could while stepping out onto our dirt driveway and gave mamá a kiss on her cheek. She asked me who the boy was, and I told her he’s just a friend from school who is helping me with U.S. History. It seemed like she bought it, but I didn’t give any other details beyond his assistance.

Yesterday afternoon took forever to come. Although I got all my homework done for the weekend, my mind kept constantly drifting off to what Grayson was thinking about while at work. He bags groceries at the supermarket, so I had hoped he didn’t drop too many things while thinking of me and our amazing afternoon on Friday. As soon as three in the afternoon came, the butterflies in my stomach began fluttering around and my body tingled with excitement.

I told mamá I was meeting a group of friends from school at the movie theater. That we were going to see some action film called “Hard to Kill,” when really, it was just going to be Grayson and I seeing a movie all the girls at school were talking about called, “Steel Magnolias.” I asked her if I could have five dollars to pay for my ticket and thankfully, she agreed.

The very minute his truck pulled into our driveway, I grabbed my coat and headed out the door. Grayson smiled while I climbed into the seat. He didn’t even take the time to remove his work apron with the cartoon pig’s head. He looked relieved to be off work. Or maybe it was just his excitement to see me. We talked about his day on the ride to the movie theater, and I told him I’d already finished my homework.

Once downtown, we pulled into the theater. I retrieved the money from my pocket as we approached the box office window. Grayson lowered my arm and insisted on paying. The movie was his idea, he claimed.

Since the movie came out a few months ago, only a few other people were scattered around the theater. I reached over to grab Grayson's hand while the characters sat and gossiped in the beauty salon. With the light of the screen shining down in our faces, I leaned over to Grayson's right shoulder. He twisted his head and reached his arm around my backside. It didn't matter what drama unfolded in the movie, feeling his lips over mine while he stroked my shoulder was all the action I cared about.

He let out a moan and fidgeted in his seat as if he'd gotten a cramp in his leg. But there it was, our second kiss. And it felt even better than our first. His tongue knows its way around a boy's mouth. Which makes me wonder if he's had plenty of practice.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:33 pm

GRAYSON

A medley of light jazz music and moderate chatter greets my attention, closing Julian's journal to return to my present state of fuckery. I've spent too much time here, so I toss a fifty-dollar bill down for the bartender. He didn't pry for information after my near meltdown in front of a stranger. So, the excessive tip is for that reason and the fact he provided good service. But if I don't leave right now, I'm afraid I'll release more waterworks.

Julian was wrong though. I think to myself, recalling our first kiss. I didn't have any practice before him. He was my first kiss. And my last. There's zero doubt I'll ever love another man for as long as I live.

That enchanting afternoon on the hill. My gaze locked into his, studying the shade of Julian's irises—a darker tinge from Jack Daniel's whiskey. His hands trailed the edges of my body as we laid in the grass, our lips sealed into the other. They formed random shapes in short intervals. He and I both only parted briefly to take breaths of the crisp February breeze, while the sun kissed Felton a warm goodbye.

The wretched humidity greets my flushed skin as soon as I step outside to the sidewalk on Chrystie Street. There's no question what my instincts have been reprogrammed to reach for—another cigarette from my messenger bag. My eyes liven, watching a fiery orange cylinder left in the lighter's wake.

Raising my sight, I'm reminded of the strong alcohol smell exuding from every sweat gland of my body. Once I return to my room, a shower will be in order. Especially now that I have fresh clothes—and the time. Perhaps it'll help distract me from

thinking about Julian for the millionth time today.

Back at the hotel, I find myself standing between three walls cloaked with stone tiling. The water beating down into my back hits with precision, easing all the tension built up amongst my neck and shoulders. It's been nearly eighty-three hours since I've bathed last, making me shudder with what everyone's thought of my stink. But if the wells of my soul haven't been reenacting our last trip to Niagara Falls, I've been busy fighting sleep or drowning in the murky waters of an abysmal purgatory. Fuck me, not again.

More weeping ensues as I battle the demons which have since begun razing my torn spirit. Leaning into a tile wall, the fold of my arm comforts my aching head as I remember the last time I showered.

I stood before Julian, sat on the bench of our walk-in shower, streams of water bouncing off our skin from the spout above. With a sponge in hand, I lathered soap across his shoulders, all the while carefully caressing the length of each arm. Piles of suds slid down the front of his torso and sides, before swirling into the drain.

In that moment, I couldn't help but wonder what thoughts slogged through the molasses of his brain. If he'd even been able to think much at all. I can only imagine when someone isn't fully lucid, it must feel like being stuck in the middle of a darkened street without so much as a wink of light to illuminate their path.

Julian stared ahead, aimlessly, between short intervals of glancing up in my direction with the faintest smile. My aspect replied in kind. But I questioned if his smile was out of place or if his faculties were intact, offering a moment of clarity. I summoned his head to the side of my stomach while I lathered soap across his shoulders and backside. And out of habit, I bent forward to plant a kiss on the crown of his head.

"Te amo magis quam ipsa vito—I love you more than life itself," I said, weaving

shampoo into his thick, greyed landscape.

He muttered back. “Tu es toto vito meus—Grayson—You are my entire life.”

For a brief moment, I wondered if he was transitioning back to a lucid state. Or if his response was a consequence of our innate bond. As much as I wanted to whisk him back to the bed and make love before heading into work, I knew it wouldn’t be right to take advantage of his fleeting acuity. Or even if his brain decided to spring back to life, it would be a fucking miracle if it lasted until I could climax. In days past, he’d been able to go a while between lapses. But this goddamn disease always leaves a person guessing.

After rinsing his hair, I allowed the water to jet down on us, rinsing the suds from his skin. Meanwhile, I used the remaining soap already soaked into the sponge to wipe myself down, before washing the shampoo from my own scalp.

My concentration breaks, face planted flat against the cool stone surface. I’m now swept away from what is only a distant memory, left shattered by the realization that I’ll never feel his skin against mine under a hot shower. Let alone at all. Never fucking again. I rinse the remaining shampoo from my mop, then slide a thin bar of hotel soap around my pits with a circular motion. The temperate water gushes down, inundating the drain with suds.

Reaching for a plush towel above the toilet, I remove myself with a dejected sigh. After tying the towel snug around my waist, I wipe a small area clear on the fogged mirror. Although I feel clean on the outside, the cruel echo catching my achy vision leaves much to be desired. There’s so much uncertainty about the gritty dissension and despair beneath my skin. Will it ever subside? All I’m left to hope for is that the shower relaxed me enough so I can get quality rest. Even more crucial now that I’ve decided to burn rubber in the morning.

The concerning fact that I've yet to hear back from the coroner leaves me more than a little perturbed. But I can imagine they're backlogged, this being New York City and all. As I slip into a fresh pair of boxers, the question of how much longer he'll take to call stings my curiosity. Once dressed, I detect a strong desire for another smoke after enjoying two earlier. Within moments, I'm trekking the hallway with a bottle of Coke from the fridge, my pack of Camels, and Julian's journal from Felton.

My feet file out from the elevator which has ascended to the roof level of this hotel. Treading outside, I chide Mother Nature because it's still fucking hot as Hades. I've left my phone back down in the room on its charger, because it hasn't even seen forty percent. That's mostly thanks to me taking it to the bar.

Scanning the surroundings, I make note of a small brood up here. They're engaged in a deep conversation about Ray Liotta's death. There's a small, square table in the corner of the rooftop lounge, adorned with a seemingly comfortable chair beside it. A cavernous yawn is stifled, as I situate myself amongst the cushion. The view from up here isn't awful either, accentuated by another lit cigarette. Smoke billows over the ledge upon a long drag. And once the feeling of nicotine flourishes my bloodstream, I'm at ease enough to reminisce on days past.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:34 pm

JULIAN

March 2, 1990

We had the day off from school today, so Grayson took me out for one amazing excursion. Yesterday at lunch, he told me he had something special planned for us. 'Us.' That sounds nice, doesn't it? And to duck out of whatever my family might have scheduled. To be honest, we never have anything planned because papá is never home. I woke up with a good feeling in my chest, excited for the morning to be over.

Mamá made pan de mallorca as a special weekend treat for my sister Amelia and I, which is one of my favorites. But what I was looking forward to the most was spending the day with my secret boyfriend. My family still doesn't know a thing about him. And I'm not sure I ever want them to.

Grayson said to meet him down at the Piggly Wiggly at eleven. Since I slept in way too late today, I didn't need to wait too long. After finishing a game of Uno with Amelia on the floor of her bedroom, I ran to mine so I could get ready for this secret date. With no clue about what Grayson had planned, I closed my eyes and picked whatever my hands touched in the drawer. They first landed on a blue polo shirt, then in the one below, a pair of khaki shorts. It's only March, but it seemed like a shirt and shorts kind of a day.

I told mamá that I was invited to go fishing with a group of kids from school. She doesn't know I'm one of the least popular kids. Gratias Deo for that. On my walk to meet Grayson, I passed the corner of Stevens Road and Pine when I glanced over at the funeral home down the way. It occurred to me that Grayson never talks about his

family. All I know is they own Harmony Memorial, and that he has an older brother named Jacob.

After a twenty minute walk, I finally spotted Grayson's green truck at the end of the grocery store parking lot. He stood there, leaning into the tailgate of his truck with a huge grin on his beautiful face. My expression matched his once I got closer.

"Are you ready for our adventure, Cutie?" He questioned me, taking my hand in his.

Oh Deus meus. I just love it when he calls me little names like that.

"Yes, I'm all yours," I replied. "Saccharo Ferre."

Grayson chuckled while opening the door for me like a true gentleman. "What's that mean?" He asked with a wrinkled nose.

I smiled as I looked into those cola-colored eyes of his. "It means 'sugar bear' in Latin."

"Oh, that's neat," he said. "Why'd you call me Sugar Bear?"

My window had been rolled down, so I stretched my arm out to grab the placket of his denim shirt. "Because your eyes remind me of a Coke, and it has a lot of sugar," I said with a wink. "And your personality reminds me of a giant teddy bear."

I'm pretty sure that got his engines going, since he blew an air kiss before stepping around the hood of his truck to climb inside. We left the parking lot and drove down the road for what seemed like thirty minutes. But maybe it only felt that long because I was a little nervous not knowing where we were headed. On the seat between us was a red Playmate cooler. And next to it, a silver boombox. Boy was I curious about what was about to go down.

We reached Grayson's planned destination as he parked off the dirt road in front of a group of old hickory trees. Beyond them was a narrow path that wrapped around behind, taking us to a huge lake. He carried the boombox and cooler in each hand. Meanwhile, I followed his lead along the wooden planks of a pier which stretched out over the water. Down from the ledge, was a small blue rowboat. It became clear to me then, that his adventure involved floating around the water.

He climbed down into the boat before reaching his arm up to help me step inside. It wobbled from side to side the moment my left foot landed. And a second time when I lowered the other. He sat on the bench across from me and started rowing us out into the middle of the water. I couldn't help but feel all the anxiety in my stomach melt away. Ripples formed on the water's surface with each dip of the oars. Once we reached about midway, he looked at his watch before leaning over to turn on the radio. That seductive smile returned to his face, while his lips formed the shape of a low hanging crescent moon.

After a moment of him fussing with the radio tuner, he glanced up at me. I heard the radio DJ speaking at the tail end of the current song.

"This next one goes out to Grayson's special friend, who asked us this morning to play this song precisely at this very minute. So, Grayson's friend, enjoy this hit from back in '82 from Sheriff. This is 'When I'm With You' on Felton's number one station—99.2 FM."

My heart melted as soon as the song played. Who knew Grayson had the capacity to be so romantic? He took my left hand and raised it to his lips, just like he did a few months back. Except this time, he planted a kiss on the top of my knuckles. The song specifically spoke about keeping things inside from everyone else, except the one person they love the most. If that was truly the case, then I thought in the moment, I might just be able to learn more about his family. The song ended almost as quickly as it started. But feeling all that I was, my mind was focused on so much more than

the words in the song.

“Pulchellus puer,” I whispered low as the boat floated in the wind’s direction.
“Damnare cor meum et conflandum.”

He smiled again. “And what does that mean, pretty boy?”

“It does actually mean ‘pretty boy,’ but also,” I paused. “You melt my damn heart.”

Grayson’s cheeks turned the slightest shade of red and he winked. “So I finally got one right,” he chuckled. “And I was calling you that, not guessing!”

I grabbed my fast-beating heart and gushed. “O Deus meus!”

Grayson reached down to unlatch the cooler. “You’re so distracting, Julian,” he winced. “I nearly forgot all about our lunch.”

As if lunch was very important. Certainly not as essential as the moment we were sharing. Just being in his presence makes me feel like nothing else in this world matters. I can’t imagine what I’d be feeling right now, if papá chose to move our family somewhere else. Grayson Welles is living proof that destiny is real.

He pulled out pre-made sandwiches, along with individually packaged chips from the deli at the market. I could tell he took great pride in planning every detail and prepared for pretty much every scenario. Except for maybe two things. Mustard smeared around the corners of my mouth as I took my first bite. I reached down for a napkin, but didn’t find any in the cooler.

Grayson raised his palm to his forehead and sighed. “Oh, damn it,” he exclaimed. “I forgot all about napkins.”

“That’s okay,” I replied. “That’s what your tongue is for.”

That devilish grin returned to his face. “I think you might be right.”

I leaned in his direction while he did the same. Our lips touched for the first time today, while we heard a loud crack of thunder from overhead. The fact that it could possibly rain didn’t seem to bother either of us, as I felt his tongue slide around every edge of my mouth. My free hand reached around his neck, while my tongue rubbed against his. Within minutes, we felt prickly drops of rain down the backs of our necks. Meanwhile, hundreds of circular ripples formed along the surface of the water as the storm raged around us.

“Oh fuck!” Grayson said loudly.

I pulled my head away from his with a beaming grin. “Such language from an innocent boy like you.”

“And you’re wearing shorts,” he said, pointing out my obviously poor choice of clothing.

Grayson grinned from cheek to cheek, grasping hold of both oars. He rowed us to the other side of the lake while the rain drenched every square inch of my clothes. I tossed the sandwich overboard because the bread had already gotten soggy. In my mind, I studied Grayson’s great arm strength as he rowed hard and fast.

Once we approached a bank on the other side of the water, we stood and stepped out to shore. Followed by a bright flash of lightning which struck across the quickly darkened sky. He tossed the cooler aside while he handed me the boombox, before he bent down to turn the boat over so it wouldn’t fill with rain.

“Come on, I know of a dry place,” he said before taking my hand and retrieving the

radio from my grasp.

He tugged on my arm while leading the way. Thunder clapped a few more times on our jog up a dirt trail which took us to a wooden shack, but it was padlocked shut.

“It’s locked,” I pointed out at the same time he reached under a large rock.

“Don’t worry, this is my pawpaw’s old shed,” he said while holding up a gold key. “He’s usually too drunk to remember anything,” he added with a shrug. “So he keeps a spare under here.”

Grayson unlocked the latch and led me inside, where we took cover from the unplanned storm. The pattering sound of rain could be heard all over the roof of the shed. I looked around to see a bunch of nets, fishing poles, and other kinds of gear hanging from hooks.

“Sorry there’s no light in here,” he said.

“I’m not scared of the dark when you’re around, Saccharo Ferre,” I assured him.

“I’ll always protect you, Cutie,” he replied. “I promise you that.”

We lowered to the wood floor before I pushed Grayson to his back, climbing on top of him. My mouth locked in with his as the feelings in my body started taking over. I could practically hear my heart telling me to unzip his jeans before unbuttoning my shorts. But my brain signaled otherwise. In the intensity of that moment, I was overcome with such an urge to feel his dick in my hand. So, I reached my hand down to his waist, then started unbuttoning his jeans before he let out a moan.

“Stop a minute,” Grayson said while grabbing my arm.

Because it was pitch black in there, I couldn't tell if he was upset or not. My heart immediately froze while I swallowed the guilt of making him uncomfortable. I thought he liked me. "What's wrong?" I asked.

He whispered quietly. "Dontcha think we should wait a little while before we take the next step?"

Maybe my earlier feelings were a bit premature. But I had to be sure. "Is this your first time?" I asked.

"Well yeah—" his reply staggered, rubbing my arm with his warm palm. "It sorta is."

That made me feel better. He wasn't mad as much as he was probably just unsure of how to go from first base to second. I scratched the side of my head. "Yeah, me too."

"It would be okay but—" Grayson started to reply, then paused. "Here in America, we have a law," he added. "And since you're already eighteen and I'm not yet, if someone found out about it," he continued. "You could get in big trouble."

It never occurred to me that the legal age in America was different from Puerto Rico.

"Oh, I didn't know," I replied. "Okay then." I mumbled. "Back home, it would be okay if you were sixteen," I whispered, just amazed that here it's much stricter. "So how much longer do we gotta wait?"

"I turn eighteen in only a couple more months," he assured me. "But it's not at all that I don't want to right now."

I let out a sigh. "Well, we'll wait then."

As soon as I finished assuring him it was fine that we waited to take things another

step further, I heard the whine of his boombox turning on. I felt Grayson reach his arm out, placing his hand on my shoulder. Meanwhile, the mellow tune of Franki Valli's song "I Can't Take My Eyes Off of You" played through the stillness. I grabbed his wrist and kissed the back of his hand several times, before lowering my head to find his lips from the base of his chin. We continued kissing with so much passion while waiting out the storm.

"Why don't you talk about your family?" I asked, lying in Grayson's protective arms.

He cleared his throat. "They're not that interesting," he assured me with fingers brushing through my hair.

"Yeah but, other than having an older brother and your family business," I replied. "I don't know much else about them."

"Uhhh—" he seemed hesitant to share much else. "My parents can seem nice and all on the outside," he added. "Well, my mom isn't too awful," he admitted, patting my chest. "But my dad's a drunk prick."

"Prick?" I asked, honestly curious having never heard of that term being associated with a person.

Grayson continued speaking after taking a breath. "Yeah, like a real dick," he sighed. "If either of them ever found out about us, I just know they'd make my life miserable," he added with a hard swallow of air. "Mostly because my mom just goes with whatever my dad decides."

I brushed my fingers across what felt like Grayson's cheek. "Same, but you know my parents are Catholic."

"Mine are Baptist," he said. "The fire and brimstone kind."

“How are we gonna stay a secret forever?” I asked, but I honestly think about it all the time.

“We’ll just have to find a way,” he responded before kissing my neck.

It was probably an hour of constant thunder and lightning before the clouds parted, allowing sunshine to return over the lake. We followed the trail back to the boat, when Grayson forced all his strength in an effort to turn the boat back over. He rowed us in the same direction we came, while my thoughts returned to how much I’m falling madly in love with him. More so than even a month or two ago.

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JULIAN

May 5, 1990

It's been a mixed emotions kind of weekend. I'll start off with the good. Yesterday was Grayson's eighteenth birthday. His parents threw him a party. Or at least I should say his mom Martha did. That afternoon when we got out of school, he dropped me off on the corner of Tamarack. He insisted on taking me instead of the bus, so I walked a few houses down to get home. I'd already told mamá I was invited to my friend's birthday party last weekend when we were in town. So, she let me pick out a gift. She thought it was for a girl I liked. Boy, is she so clueless.

Yesterday evening at his party, I sat across from him at a picnic table in their front yard next to Megan O'Connors and Chip White from school. Grayson had a falling out with Kevin Miller, because he doesn't like me. Even though I'm a few months older than he is, Grayson is still so protective. He stopped being friends with Kevin in late January, after we got closer to one another. I thought to myself what he'd think of the gift I brought with me. Due to the nature of it, I left my name off the package. I knew once he opened it, he'd automatically know it was from me, anyway.

Martha forced his dad, Clint, to grill hamburgers and hotdogs. I could figure he may have been drinking all day, because my burger was still raw in the middle. After this weekend, I'm much too afraid of Gray's dad. Thankfully we all enjoyed a piece of cake a few minutes later, so I at least had something to eat that night. Megan's mom dropped by to pick her up, saying there was a family emergency. This was like a sign from above that gave me a quick excuse. Since she didn't bring a gift, if anyone wondered who the unmarked present was from, I decided I'd say it was from her.

Grayson chose to open the gift from Chip first, so he wouldn't show any favor over mine and not rouse suspicion from his parents. Well, Martha anyway. Clint went inside after grilling the meat. Grayson displayed the digital watch Chip gave him with a pose in front of Martha, holding her camera. He quickly sat it aside on the end of the table before picking up my present, a small black box with a thin red ribbon. Immediately upon opening it, he smiled in the usual way that makes my chest pound. Rather than taking it out to show everyone, he put the lid back over the box. Martha piped up wanting to see what it was, as she held up her camera another time.

"Who's it from Grayson?" Martha asked.

Grayson shrugged his shoulders while taking the teddy bear pendant with a black cord out of its box to pose for the picture. "I don't know," he said. "There's not a name on here."

"I'm pretty sure I saw Megan lay that down when she got here," I added into the mix.

He nodded his head. "I think that's who it was," he said with a grin so big that only I knew what it really meant.

Grayson looked at me from across the table as if he were thanking me in some telepathic way. But I knew when I picked it out last week, it was so perfect that he'd appreciate the symbolism. He continued to open the rest of his gifts, showing way less enthusiasm about them than mine.

The humidity started dying down as his party wrapped later in the evening. When I rose to go inside for the bathroom, I heard a whistle coming from the backyard. Grayson caught my attention with a wave, urging me to go talk to him in private. I looked around the front to make sure nobody saw me sneak to the back. My heart pounded, and it only grew stronger as I got closer.

“When everyone leaves here in a few minutes, act like you left without saying goodbye to anyone,” he whispered with a hand at the side of his mouth. “But come around to the backyard from over there—” he said, pointing from the opposite end of the house. “Then sneak into the barn.”

I had a feeling I knew where his mind was headed when I reached for his arm. “But your parents are home.”

Grayson shook his head. “My dad is already pissed drunk and passed out in his chair, and my mom will go to bed once everyone’s gone.”

The sinking feeling in my gut knew it was a bad idea. But the urges exploding inside my chest—and my crotch—wanted to finally experience sex for the first time. Especially with my Sugar Bear. Like the saying goes, ‘the heart wants what the heart wants.’

“Okay,” I replied. “I’ll be there.”

His cousins left with his aunt and uncle a few minutes later, serving as my cue to sneak out back. This only left Chip to leave after I pretended to. I tiptoed behind the house like I was acting in some spy movie, while trying my best to avoid making any noises once I reached the barn door. And to my disappointment, it creaked slightly trying to wedge inside. Much like the fishing shack back in February, it was nearly dark. Well, apart from the subtle glow of a waxing gibbous moon shining in through a small windowpane high above the barn door. As if I wasn’t already nervous, a whinnied sound came from the far corner, scaring me half to death. Grayson never told me he owned a horse.

I stood in the center of the barn for what seemed like thirty minutes. But Grayson promised he’d join me when the coast was clear. And I trusted his judgment. After another few minutes, I heard a scraping sound from the door before witnessing him

shimmy through just like I did. He gently closed it before walking past me to the wall behind us. I heard the strike of a match, and soon after, a glowing flame at the end of a long stick. He lowered the fire between a glass tube, which was connected to a metal pot with a wide wick sticking out from it.

“You prepared ahead of time,” I said in almost a whisper.

“You don’t gotta be quiet, this barn is almost soundproof if everyone’s inside the house,” he assured me.

Grayson’s charming grin returned to his face. “I’ve been waiting for this moment for sixty-three days,” he said. “You’re damn right I prepared ahead of time,” he added while unfolding a blanket. He draped it over a wide stack of hay.

“That’s mildly impressive,” I replied.

He stepped in my direction to take my hand while his lips fell into mine. “Can your ‘Saccharo Ferre’ unwrap his final birthday present now?”

“Ita—quod potest.”

Grayson chuckled. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

I nodded with a big grin. “Yes, smartass.”

He looked into my eyes as his hands touched the top button of my plaid shirt. It was finally going to happen. Sex with Grayson Welles. At that moment, my mind blanked, and I almost didn’t know what to expect or do. I’ve seen it in movies and TV all the time. But my brain seemed to block out the only kind of education I’ve had on intercourse I’ve had access to. I only hoped he knew what he was doing. Within seconds, my shirt fell to the ground while Grayson started on the bottom half. He slid

his fingers from the base of my crotch and up the zipper. I could feel my cock growing. Nobody has touched me like that before, and damn was it intense. He unhooked the button while pulling the jeans down below my knees.

I brushed the back of my fingers against his cheek, before tracing both hands down the sides of his body to his waist. His t-shirt easily slid up over his head before he released his arms from their sleeves. I leaned in to plant a kiss on his lips, then slid my tongue down his chin and neck. I continued until I reached the waist of his black denim shorts. After a quick look up into Grayson's eyes, almost as if I were asking for approval, he winked back.

"Go ahead," he said.

I glanced in the direction of his horse, then back to him.

He shrugged. "Don't worry about Jasper, he's seen my dick a hundred times," he said. "I frequently masturbate out here."

At his instruction, I unzipped the shorts and they slid to the ground around his ankles. I hooked both of my hands under the elastic of his white underwear and pulled them down gently. I've heard in conversation with female friends back home that they suck on their boyfriend's cock, so I assumed gay couples did the same thing. His is a bit smaller than mine, judging by when I play with myself in bed. And he doesn't have extra skin surrounding his either. It smelled kind of sweaty, but the feelings rushing through my body made me worry less about how unpleasant it might be. So, I imagined it was just like a thick candy cane. It tasted like a very salty peppermint stick, but nothing I'd complain about.

Grayson let out a moan as my head moved back and forth a few times before I felt his hands touch my hair.

“Let’s take the sucking a little easy,” he said.

I looked back up into his face as if I’d done something wrong. “Are you okay? Did I do something wrong?”

“No—no—” he said while shaking his head. “Cutie, we’re new at this,” he added. “I think we’re supposed to save our ‘stuff’ until we’re inside each other.”

I replied with a clarifying question. “You mean cum?”

He nodded. “Yeah, that.”

“Boy, you couldn’t tell we’re virgins,” I joked while raising a palm to my forehead.

Grayson kneeled to the ground in front of me. “Do you want to know what it feels like?” He asked with a grin that I swore screamed silently—‘we need to fuck soon because I can’t hold it in much longer.’

I nodded. “O Deus meus, yes I do.”

“Get up,” he said.

As I stood, he pushed me gently back onto the blanket draped over the haystack, while tugging on my underwear. I could feel my cock throbbing with so much excitement. Jasper neighed in the background and blew out a burst of air from his nostrils just to subtly remind us that he was watching from the corner.

There were a few moments of awkward silence when I glanced into Grayson’s seemingly surprised face. Perhaps he was just as bewildered as I was that our dicks don’t look the same.

“Oh my God, you’re bigger than I am,” he said rather nervously.

He wrapped his hand around it while pumping up and down a few times. I looked straight up toward the wooden beams which held the roof of the barn together, while Grayson’s wet mouth surrounded my dick. I felt it slide in and out several times, probably for a good couple of minutes before he stopped. But it felt so fucking good, I didn’t want him to stop.

“Okay cutie,” he said, creeping his body up against mine before leaving another wet kiss on my lips. “You gonna go first or me?”

“I’ll go first, it’s your birthday,” I replied.

Grayson pointed over to the flickering light. “There’s some Vaseline next to that kerosene lamp,” he said as I climbed down from the haystack.

I stepped over to the lamp and popped off the blue lid from a rectangular jar, dipping my two fingers. I’ve never used Vaseline on myself before, just lotion. So, I didn’t know how it would feel. I found the thicker texture surprising as I slid it all around the extra skin of my cock. I returned to Grayson lying on the haystack, and being my first time, figured there is only one place it went. It took a little bit of force and pushing. But once inside, the tightness that surrounded my dick felt fantastic. My head pulled backward as I let out a sigh.

“Oh fuck, Grayson,” I moaned.

Then he did the same. “Unnghhh, that’s fucking incredible.”

Being my first time, it didn’t take too many thrusts for me to feel like I was about to release my cum. In fact, after only a couple of minutes, I moaned again. That time a bit louder than before. Once I pulled out from Grayson’s hole, a pool of my cum

dripped out onto the blanket. A look of approval could be seen on his face, so I must have done everything right.

“That was amazing, Julian,” he said while the sparkle in his eyes twinkled brightly.

At the precise moment we were about to switch places, we heard the creaky barn door swing open. I looked at Grayson. His shocked expression was more like a look of horror. Then I heard the loud thundering scream come from his father’s mouth before glancing over my shoulder.

“WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU TWO DOING IN HERE?!?!”

Grayson immediately leapt to his feet while I stood there covering my crotch as if I were an exposed deer in the headlights that was Clint Welles. Grayson couldn’t get so far as picking up his shorts from the ground before his father shouted again.

“YOU’D BETTER GO THE FUCK TO YOUR ROOM—BOY—GOD DAMN IT—I DIDN’T RAISE NO FAGGOT.”

I could see the look of pure terror in Grayson’s eyes while I scrambled to put on my jeans and reached for my shirt. Through my own fear and embarrassment, I think I heard him say he was sorry before scrambling out the barn door. I couldn’t even slip on my shirt, when I turned around to see Clint walking toward me with eyes so big they could’ve popped right out of his skull. I backed up as far as I could until I felt the itchy wood paneling scrape against my skin.

“AND YOU!” He shouted at me, even though he was only a few inches away.

I swear, in the brief moment of one single blink, I felt the impact of his right fist plow into the side of my face. It was so hard, if it were just half of an inch lower, I’d probably have spit out teeth. I know his father is an alcoholic, but I didn’t imagine he

was that violent. I cried instantly from the pain while he grabbed my throat with the grip of his left hand. Just as soon as he pinned my neck against the wall, he punched me in my stomach almost as hard as the first. My windpipes immediately felt like they were clogged as Clint continued to shout more.

“IF I CATCH YOU ANYWHERE NEAR MY BOY AGAIN, IT WON’T BE MY FIST YOU MEET,” he paused to briefly look over his shoulder before his angry eyes returned to my frightened face. “I’LL FUCKING KILL YOUR SPIC ASS WITH THE BARREL OF MY SMITH & WESSON 10 MM.”

I squirmed around trying to breathe, but it was impossible. His grasp was so tight, no air could come or go. I thought I was going to die right then and there. Luckily, he unclenched his hand, and I broke free with enough time to allow some oxygen to flow.

While not a shout, Clint endlessly scolded me while I hunched over in an attempt to catch my breath. It was still difficult due to the blow to my gut. I could feel my face was already beginning to swell up. Lightly touching it with my fingers caused me to feel the immediate warmth radiating from what is now, a welted bruise.

“I’m gonna do you one favor and save your parents from the embarrassment of having to find out from me that their son is a flaming faggot,” he said. “But so help me God, I promise you’ll be meeting your maker if I see you even so much as look at my boy,” he added. “Does that sink into your little beaner head?”

I was so frightened. All I could do was nod my head. Not a single word could escape my shaky mouth.

“GOOD!” He shouted again while he pointed out toward the barn door. “Now get the hell out of here and dontcha ever come back!”

I darted straight out into the backyard. Painfully, I reached the end of Grayson's dirt driveway before stopping to slide my feet into tennis shoes and put my shirt back on. I was in just as much pain as fear during the whole walk home in the dark. Since Felton doesn't have many streetlights on the outskirts of town, it took me dang near half an hour. I haven't heard from Grayson since he apologized and ran out at his father's behest. If Clint wasn't shy about beating someone else's kid, I fear what he did to his own once I had left.

GRAYSON

A loud alarm blares from my phone, instantly jerking me from a dead slumber. As I rise from the mattress, the curl of my finger digs into my exhaustion before silencing the painstaking melody. This is one of the only instances where anyone will hear sound emitting from my devices. Though my internal clock had been in tip-top shape in my thirties, twenty years later is a different story entirely. But for the first time since Monday night, I've found a decent five or six hours of sleep. I stretch my legs out from the bed while yawning as both feet grace the hotel room floor.

The roaring headache between my temples hasn't budged. Besides crying an entire ocean, it seems the nuisance is all I've had. Despite not consuming any more alcohol after leaving the bar yesterday. If this is going to persist like a fucking influenza, I'd be wise to remember buying more Motrin when I gas up the car in a few minutes. Gas, snacks, Red Bull for sure, Motrin.

Approaching the bathroom sink to brush my teeth, I continue compiling a mental list in my head. My toothbrush sweeps around both jaws as I glance into the mirror, surprising me to no end that there's a pimple rising to the surface of my forehead. Its aesthetic reminds me of Mt. Kilauea, and also the fact I haven't broken out since I was practically sixteen. No doubt this is stress induced.

As I finish brushing, minty goop swirls down the drain before gathering my toiletry items. They crowd each arm while shuffling out to my luggage. Only at this moment, does it occur to me that I've neglected to check on Boo Radley, our Scottish Terrier. Fuck. I mean, I guess he's just mine now. My head shakes with indignation at the simple, yet consequential detail of Julian's absence. It still hasn't clicked yet.

Wednesday, I thought I'd be ambitious enough to work as if nothing happened. So, I had Wendy to take him. I must call to see if she'd keep him a few days longer.

Wendy has been our, I mean my— oh fuck it— our dog walker for the last year and a half. One day, I found her wandering the 14th Street Park with three dogs in tow. While conversing about her affinity for furry lovers, she graciously offered me her services. It took me no time at all to accept her invitation, as this was just after Julian's first major episode. Even thinking about that summer day in 2020 sends a major chill down my spine.

I'd just arrived home from the office at a quarter past six. Trailing from the elevator on the third floor of our apartment building left me curious why the door was locked. After letting myself in, I found it peculiar that I wasn't graced by Boo Radley's lively presence. Usually, he'd be perched impatiently in front of the door at the sound of footsteps or jangling keys from the hallway.

"Meus amor," I called out.

Traipsing around, I jangled my keys to the rhythm of each step. "Boo Bear."

Neither of them responded. I sauntered down the hallway to Julian's writer's nook only to discover a blinking cursor just below the words 'Chapter Seventeen' on a new page in his manuscript. This alarmed me, especially after another shout throughout the apartment with no response. So, I dialed his phone. Perhaps he'd taken Boo Radley down to potty. Generally, I can hear his voice light up whenever I call. But, after three rings, he answered with much less enthusiasm than expected.

"Where are you, my love?" I asked concerningly.

His voice was flat. "I'm not really sure."

“Are you okay, Jules?” I asked, fright cloaked every syllable. “What’s wrong—baby—what’s the matter?” I questioned more, my ceaseless worry turning into an interrogation.

His response lacked the usual confidence I expected from him. “I guess so.”

I shook my head as the panicked state escalated to full-on fear. “What do you mean—you’re not sure?”

He didn’t respond.

“Hang tight where you are, meus amor,” I instructed him. “I’ll come find you.”

With no time to spare, I immediately ended the call to check our family phone locator tool. I knew it would pinpoint his location. To my surprise, the dot on the map disclosed coordinates all the way down in Lenox Hill. On the corner of 2nd Avenue and East 68th Street to be precise. Harried, I left the screen open while jogging down the hallway from our door. My legs rushed down the stairwell without the patience to wait on the elevator. And in a New York minute, I’d found myself pulling out from the parking garage. My sights set on Lower Manhattan.

Once I passed East 77th and 2nd Avenue, I double checked the locator to discover his location approaching Central Park Zoo. When my eyes returned to the road, I had to battle some dumbass with a Pennsylvania license plate—who apparently didn’t realize New Yorkers have people to see and places to be. After heavily laying into the horn, I swerved lanes to cut him off at the first opportunity I could. Within minutes, I swiped my credit card at the parking garage at Madison Avenue. Then sprinted down 61st Street at the cheetah-like speed of my buddy, Miles, straight for Central Park.

My pace faltered on the main trail which veins off into multiple directions, before studying the map on my phone. I followed Julian’s dot along the path, leading me to

the Thomas Moore Statue, where I searched frantically. My right hand rested above both brows, as if it would help me locate him any better. After a minute of scanning the surroundings, I spotted what appeared to be the paisley print of Julian's backside, sitting on a bench. Boo Radley's blue leash intact, with our beloved canine lying in the grass beside him. A sigh of relief fell from my lips as I hurried down the winding path.

"What in the world are you doing all the way down here, meus amor?"

He raised his head with a mystified gaze locking with mine. The innocent smile adorning his visage told me he didn't entirely understand. While it melted my heart, it vexed me just as much. I sat down on the bench next to my lover, concurrently stroking his shoulders and indulging Boo Radley in my lap. The gentle breeze rustled through Julian's evolving brown hair—with flecks of gray throughout—while quacking ducks could be heard from the pond behind us. My frightened soul could finally afford a breath. At least he was all right.

In between pulling on a comfortable outfit, my other straggling items left out of the luggage are returned. At least this is something worthy of lasting the many miles I must trek today. And I know damn well that's not going to be a shirt and tie. After I toss my phone charger into the suitcase, I raise the messenger bag over my shoulder. With a piece of luggage in both hands, I make my way down to the front desk to check out.

At the desk, Jennifer smiles ardently in my direction upon signing their electronic pad confirming my charges. "Thank you so much, Mr. Welles," she says. "I hope you had a very pleasant stay with us."

Hardly pleasant by any stretch of the fucking definition. If she thinks unremittingly bawling until all which is left is a migraine—a fun time—then I've had the time of my life. If only she knew I've just lost my whole reason for breathing, she wouldn't

assume such a trifling belief. But she doesn't. So, I flash the best faux smile I can muster, on the take for my first Oscar nod. Step aside, Brando. There's a new sheriff in town!

"Have a good day," she waves me off as I waddle over to the elevator leading down to a parking garage.

Under a dim light bouncing off rows of windshield, I load the luggage into my trunk. Then fling the messenger bag into my passenger seat, closing the door beside me. Within a few minutes, I'm already zeroing-in on a lane at the gas station on 8th Avenue. I step out to unlock the gas cap before inserting my Mastercard as payment. The strong fumes exacerbate a throbbing sensation in my head as the pump clicks and hisses behind me. All I can seem to do is recount my mental list from earlier, of things to grab for the road. Motrin, snacks, Red Bull.

Seventy painstaking dollars later, I hurry into the gas station for the items on my list. In the snack aisle, I grab a bag of Doritos, two packs of beef jerky, some vanilla Zingers, and a bag of Corn Nuts. In the back of the store are the refrigerated beverages, where I reach in for a sixteen ounce can of Red Bull. Steadying the items in my arms, I totter up to the counter so I can pay. Once the items fall freely before the clerk, I realize I've forgotten about the most important thing to rescue me—ibuprofen. Oh fuck me.

"Hang on just a second," I instruct Josh behind the counter, my forefinger raised between him and I.

Shuffling quickly along the counter, I realize there's a limited selection of over-the-counter pain relievers. Everything's in such a pissant sized bottle with an extortionate price tag. The mere thought of spending more than a product is worth, sends my blood to a fine boil. For the price of only twenty generic ibuprofen, I could buy a whole hundred count bottle of brand name Motrin at CVS.

Don't mistake me for a poor man. While I make an excellent living, I'm ever the cautious spender. Josh is standing at the register tapping his fingers against the counter, waiting for me to make up my goddamn mind. A raucous grunt escapes my throat while I take a consequential moment to decide if my discomfort is worth being robbed blindly. In a split-second, I slide the remedy off its hook. I guess that's how the cookie's gonna fuckin' crumble today.

Josh rings me for my haul of garbage food, all the while my attention focuses beyond his seemingly pointed ears towards a tobacco shelf. Since I chain smoked a good ten—or twelve—on the hotel roof yesterday evening, I figure I might as well purchase a new pack. It'll help pave some relief in my shattered soul as I drive the fourteen-hundred miles to my very own hellscape that is Felton, Louisiana.

"Oh and—a pack of Camel Turkish Gold please," I say, my finger pointing to the shelf.

I don't have another smoking problem. I have a sad and stressful problem. Oh fuck it!

"Just go ahead and make it two," I clarify.

Josh clears his throat before telling me my damage. "52.47 today, Sir."

"Christ, that's almost as much as my gas," I mention, inserting the chip of my card into the terminal by his register. Surely, he must get tired of hearing that all day.

He tears off my receipt, sticking it in the bag with my items before waving a friendly 'goodbye' from his register.

Given I'm already halfway outside, I can't make out exactly what Josh says. Most likely some form of, "have a good day."

I didn't even attempt returning in kind, since I know it won't do any good. I'm not having a good day. And I'm certainly not happy. I honestly don't even know if I'll ever feel that way again. When you've lost everything that matters, life's simple pleasures become of no consequence.

Someone's high beams shine directly through my rear window on Interstate 78, just past Newark. A glint of light bounces directly from the sheen surface of a small teddy bear dangling from a cord, wrapped around my rearview mirror. My very first birthday present from Julian. God damn it. I thought I'd get a few miles under my tires before I fell prey to sorrow again. It might also be the fact that this Ed Sheeran song, "Lego House" doesn't help either.

All things considered, my brain can't help dialing back to the very moment I skittered out of the barn that night of my eighteenth birthday. With one hand on the wheel, I reach over to my bag in the passenger seat to retrieve a cigarette and my lighter. It ignites with a spark, the promise for solace. A long drag soothes my worry much like a drug addict feels with that initial push of heroin striking their bloodstream. Meanwhile, my mind revives the first devastating moment that Julian and I ever experienced together.

At the very suggestion of my father's temper, I hightailed my ass out of the barn. But there was no chance I'd leave my boyfriend behind. My whole *raison d'être* was to protect Julian, despite being ordered to go to my room. At that moment, I recalled a building flaw in the structure of our barn. A small, yet ever so insignificant crack in the wall on the side of the barn. It took me half a moment to hunch over, peeping through.

My jaw dropped to the ground the second my father smacked Julian as if he were a punching bag. It was so hard, I practically heard the joint in his neck cracking upon impact. I'd never seen my father get so drunk to the point he'd hit another person. He'd always been known to lunge objects across a room, yes. But physical assault,

that was a first.

Julian remained frightfully pressed into the wall, motionless, while my father continued punching him in the stomach. He cried out in the most horrific pain as his face quickly grew a deep cocktail of red and blue. I could see the gloss from his tear-struck eyes by the glow of our kerosene lamp flickering from a distance. What took the cake for my broken heart, was being threatened with his life if he ever contacted me again. Emotions all too consuming, I couldn't help but break out in silent tears right along with the poor baby.

After my father sent him running for his life, I stood straight, pushed my shoulders back with an air of vengeance. There's no way I'd signal to Julian that I was standing nearby, nor that I saw the whole fucking thing with my own eyes. No, I remained motionless until he passed the oak tree a few yards from the corner of our house.

Before my father turned around to leave, I sprinted through the backyard. The kitchen door slammed behind me on a quick dash to the staircase. By the time I leapt to the surface of my bed upstairs, I heard the kitchen door slam shut yet again. To follow, were the heavy footfalls as he ascended each step.

Fear welled inside the furrows of my soul while my fight-or-flight response kicked into overdrive. Within a moment, my bedroom door swung open. The look on my father's visage intensified from just moments before in the barn. His eyes took the appearance of a total monster, those seemingly reddened pupils only quantified his rage. Like he was about to beat the living shit out of me. And a second later, my suspicions were confirmed by the swing of his arm into my left temple. As a result of his force, my neck popped and twisted.

He shouted so loudly that I'd just knew my mom probably shot straight out of bed. "YOU SON OF A BITCH GONNA TELL ME YOU'RE A FUCKING QUEER NOW, ARE YA?"

I couldn't respond. The ability to utter a single word froze right with the rhythm of my heart. I also knew that no matter what response I could engineer, it wouldn't be enough to defuse his temper. When he got drunk—which was damn near every day—everyone had better have a shelter-in-place plan. The growls which escaped his throat were disgustingly similar to a wolf defending her pup against an intruder. He bunched the ringed hem of my shirt in his hand, yanking me up off the bed.

“WELL WHAT DO YOU HAVE TO SAY FOR YOURSELF, FAGGOT?”

My mother rushed to the doorframe, covering her mouth with both hands. I knew she didn't have the courage to stand up to the piece of shit, out of fear that he'd send her body flying across the room. She stood there helpless, staring solemnly into my soul with a tacit apology, meanwhile allowing my father to keep tearing into me with fire and fury. I stared back into my own personal mirage of Satan, trying to say one fucking word—anything at all. I knew if I didn't at least respond with one or two words, he might finish beating me into the next Tuesday.

“I—I—” I stammered unintelligibly. No real words or genuine thought could break the ice.

My instincts were spot on. And for a second time, his fist heaved forward with the velocity of a speeding missile. It landed square on my nose, disjointing it. I felt the blood gush down just as quickly as my throat tasted it trickling through my windpipes. Murderous screams ejected from my voice box while a river of agony crashed from my eyes. Aside from breaking my arm in the fifth grade, I'd never been in so much agony.

In that single moment, I glanced over his shoulder to notice my mother shaking her pale forehead with fright. The tears streaming down her face were trivial at best. And in the presence of her abandonment, I knew they wouldn't do a goddamn thing to rescue me from the torment.

“I’M NOT GAY!” I screamed out—blood splattering into the face of the devil—fully cognizant that it was a major lie. But he relented his grasp, sending me backwards onto my bed. “OKAY?!?”

His reddened face eased up while he wiped away the blood and foam protruding from the corner of his mouth like a rabid dog. He turned around in the middle of my room to stomp towards the doorway, yelling at my mother to go back to bed in the process. Before leaving, he twisted his head back around with a death stare, catching me straight in the eye.

“Damn right you’re not,” he snickered. “And you’re never going to see that beaner again, you got it?”

Just remembering the horror which came from that night sends me into a rage. Even though I haven’t spoken to him in thirty-two years, I still think poorly of him. Elizabeth was the first therapist who helped me overcome all the traumas of growing up in a home with alcoholism via E.M.D.R. therapy. But in these moments—when I remember him so vividly—I can’t help but breathe fire.

GRAYSON

My trip has lasted four hours so far, yet I'm finding it difficult to concentrate on any piece of road before me. If I don't find a spot to use a restroom, my bladder will definitely burst. Not only that, but I also feel hungrier today than I have most of the week. As the cliché goes, my hunger doesn't measure up to eating the proverbial horse. But those two bites of burger certainly didn't stretch long. Doritos, Corn Nuts, beef jerky, and the whole lot of junk I've stocked up on, aren't satisfying my need for a substantial meal either.

Also, it occurs to me that I still haven't called Wendy to tell her I've left the city. The town I'm driving through is fields for days. The last sign I passed said the upcoming town of Carlisle is about five miles away. I glance down to my phone to check the signal while keeping a fair eye on the road. Three bars of service should hold up a short phone call.

"Hey Siri, call Wendy Cooper," I say aloud.

The only woman after my own heart finishes announcing the task she's been assigned, leaving me to several trills on the line throughout my car speakers. It rings twice, then a third. Finally, an answer greets the other end.

"Hey Wendy, it's Grayson."

"Oh, hello dear," she replies sweetly. "Is everything all right?"

"Well, they could be better," I reply sarcastically, though it may have sounded bitter.

“Couldn’t they?”

She clears her throat. “Yeah sorry, you’ve been dealt a shit hand right now.”

Despite never playing a round of poker in my life, I can still appreciate the sentiment. Though the mere mention of my heartache summons the darkness all over again. After a morning of watching yellow and white lines pass me by, I thought confronting the horrors of reality would come easier. Is that so unrealistic?

My head wavers, pushing down the urge to cry. “Anyway, I know this might be an imposition,” I reply, gritting my teeth. “But I’m on my way to Louisiana right now,” I add. “And I’m terribly sorry for not asking you first, but would you mind keeping our pride and joy a few extra days?”

I hear a brief, silent pause. “Oh damn it, Grayson,” she replies, leaving me to worry if she’s truly upset. “We’re headed out on that cruise at the end of the week,” she adds. “Are you gonna be back by Thursday?”

My days seem to have been sloshed around inside a blender. I’m not quite sure what day of the week it is. As I’m experiencing, grief has a way of fucking up our ability to store information. And the truth is, I have no fucking clue how long I’ll be stuck in the inner circle of Hell. I’d like very much to slither into Felton, achieve my mission, then make an even stealthier exit. But my conscience is jeering at me—reminding me of the ancient adage— man plans and God laughs.

“You know, Wendy,” I reply, clearing my throat. “I wanna say it’ll only be a couple of days,” I add, while sulking internally over the snail’s pace Pennsylvania driver ahead of me. What is it with people from there?

I continue my thought once I swerve into the left passing lane. “But I honestly don’t know, why don’t I text you my best friend’s number?” I suggest. “He’ll most likely

take Boo off your hands if this takes longer than expected.”

A sound of relief surfaces in her reply. “That’ll work.”

“He and Alex are in Tribeca,” I add.

“Okay then, that sounds good,” she obliges. “Try to be easy with yourself, Will and I are in your corner.”

“Tha—”

Judging by the abrupt hang up, I’m undecided if she was quick to end my call, or if the cell service in Podunkville is just sparse. Text Wendy Miles’ number. My brain finishes its mental reminder while the car finds its way into the right lane, so I can veer off into Exit 51. I turn into a truck stop, seeming like the only gateway into town. My legs quiver relentlessly as if I don’t find a toilet right fuckin’ now, it’ll be monsoon season in my joggers. I step outside, immediately making a beeline for the door. My nearly empty gas tank will just have to wait.

This bathroom is disgusting. I’m not entirely sure that I’m the only living organism in here, but thankfully I can stand to piss without the need to pop a squat. It might be absolutely filthy in here, but my mind is focused on voiding a particularly pissed-off bladder. My face warms over with an abundance of relief. I’d been holding this in since Good Hope.

After a minute or two, I carefully find my way to the sink to wash my hands. Regardless if it seems counterintuitive or not, since I’ll be forced to touch the germ-ridden faucet. If there is ever a suitable time to appreciate those annoying automatic kinds, it would be now. Instinctively, I use my elbow to push on the handle of the paper towel dispenser until a large enough piece rolls out. I tear it off to wipe my hands, dropping it into the trash bin which appears to haven’t been changed even

once in the last year.

Out in the store, I search for an aisle where I might find a cheap bottle of hand sanitizer. If I don't, I'll keep obsessing over these hands caked in microbes until I can wash them in a much cleaner environment. Sure enough, there's a shelf dedicated to a small array of personal hygiene products. Four dollars for one ounce of Purell seems like thievery. But it's far cheaper than treating a MRSA infection. I snag it from the bin before hurrying up to the counter. Only at this moment do I realize I'd been in such a hurry to pee, that I'd left my wallet in an unlocked car.

"I'll be right back," I blurt out, setting the bottle down on top of a glass lottery ticket counter.

I retrieve my messenger bag from the front seat, all the while unfurling a fiver from the pocket of my wallet as I step inside to pay. The clerk seems preoccupied with gossiping about a fellow coworker named Becky, and how she's after her man. A gurgle escapes my throat to subtly garner her attention.

"Oh, sorry about that," she says with a tilted head. "I didn't see you there," she adds, turning around to face the register.

After our brief interaction, I make my way back outside to gas up. As I wait for my tank to fill, a woman thirty paces away is screaming at her children to stop hitting each other, or she's going to leave them stranded in the parking lot. A dog barks from their backseat, reminding me to text Wendy with Miles' number. If I don't act on the thought now, there's no telling when it'll get done.

Once I've attached Miles' contact card in a text to her, I hear a loud thud of the gas pump. Twisting the gas cap, I find myself crawling back behind the wheel, paying attention to the rumble in my stomach. Since there's a Denny's across the street, it'll be as good of a place as any to eat a decent meal. Then I must make hay while the

sun's still shining.

After a short drive across the street, I gather my messenger bag. On my step out of the car, I take a few drags from a freshly lit cigarette. Smoking may be the only thing right now to keep my nerves at bay, but I refuse to do so in the car. A quick fourth puff ensconces my lungs as I scan for an outdoor ashtray by the doors. With no place to dispose of the cherry, I flick it behind me on the way inside. Fuck them if they don't have a place for people to responsibly discard them.

There's a vibe in here giving me major nostalgia. As soon as the hostess shows me to a booth in the back of the dining area, the thought finally occurs to me. It's no wonder why this environment seems so eerily familiar—I've sat here in this exact place three decades ago.

The hostess offers me a warm smile. "Carrie Jo will be over in a minute, but can I get you something to drink?"

"Uhh," I mumble. "A Coke would be good," I say. "Thanks."

While perusing the menu, my mind flutters back to the summer of 1990 when Julian and I ran away to New York.

It was the week after graduation when I found myself holding both of Julian's hands across this table. In between slurps of our strawberry milkshakes, we discussed what we planned to do when we reached the Big Apple.

"I wanna get into the writing program at NYU," Julian spoke with confidence. "If you're gonna do something for yourself, what's it gonna be?"

For a moment, I thought quietly about my own personal aspirations. We were bolting to New York City to join the larger gay friendly community where we could finally

be ourselves. But I hadn't paid much consideration to what I planned on doing with myself once we got there.

"I guess I'd like to study architecture," I replied cheerfully. "I really like how New York has so much history behind all the buildings," I added.

Julian smiled. "I think you'd be great at that," he replied, squeezing my hands with his devilishly charming smile on that equally adorable visage. "You're an excellent planner and you're good at math."

The strength in my fists matched his. "Just as you'd make a terrific writer," I affirmed. "Could you imagine being a future author selling millions of books?"

"You know I've always liked reading," he said. "Just knowing that one person held a book—that I wrote—in their hands," he added, momentarily glancing out the window with a grin. "Would feel amazing—but a million people?" He shrugged, his gaze returning to mine. "That would be a dream come true."

"So," I began. "You get into the writing program, and I'll start planning a skyscraper taller than the World Trade Center," I affirmed, imagining my name on a building sixty years in the future being recorded as a historical landmark.

Julian winked. "Deal."

I rose from the table to join Julian on his side of the booth, while I slid my right arm around his backside. He nuzzled into my ribs while we polished off the rest of our shakes. The crisp air conditioning bit at my ears as we stared out into the night sky. I leaned my head into his shoulder. Thoughts of our future selves rushed through my mind, interrupted by the hum of a passing semi on the interstate every few minutes. We'd just escaped a place with a known history of curses placed on its residents—foretelling that once they lived there—they'd be permanent residents until

death.

A strong perfume smell shakes me out of the fog. Carrie Jo is standing next to the table with her pen and pad, ready to take my order. I'd just spent the last few minutes preoccupied. There's no way I've paid a thought to what I want. Since I must get back out on the road, I order generically based on Denny's well-known fare that's withstood the tests of time.

"Sorry," I say. "I'll take a Grand Slam with crispy bacon, and my eggs over medium."

She scribbles my request on her pad. "I'll put this in right away," she replies with a smile.

A generous guzzle of my ice-cold Coke affords me a minute to guess how much longer I'll be on the road. I'm usually better prepared and organized, so this jaunt down South goes against my anti-whimsical creed. If memory serves me, it took Julian and I two days to drive from the ass crack of Felton to New York.

But this time, it's different. The wrinkles on my face herald my advancing age, and exhaustion has already worn me down after only a single decent cluster of sleep. Assuming I lay my head down for just a night—and only stop to piss or eat—and refuel every two hundred miles or so—three days seem reasonable. Since I have the time while I wait for my food to arrive, I retrieve Julian's journal from my bag to read another entry. I sure could use some comfort from his pen right about now.

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JULIAN

June 9, 1990

It's so early in the morning and I can't sleep because I'm so nervous. Well, and anxious. Grayson and I are about to leave our families and run away to New York City. I'm scared of leaving my mamá and Amelia behind. And papá is never here, so it's not like I ever get to see him anyway. But I'm even more scared to stick around Felton, ever since last month when Clint punched me and threatened to kill me if I ever looked or spoke to Grayson again. He's so violent, I wouldn't put it past him.

At school on the Monday after Grayson's birthday, he slid a note under my history textbook, telling me to meet him out under the bleachers at lunch. That morning lingered like a terrible case of the flu. I wanted so badly to just talk to him and apologize for what happened. I still feel like that night was all my fault. I could have waited to experience sex for the first time. In fact, the voice inside me told me that it was a bad idea. But my urges got the best of me.

It didn't surprise me when I saw his beaten-up face, because I knew Clint was going to punish him severely. His nose looked broken, and I could see him wince in pain every few seconds as his hand tried to rest against the side of his head. I felt lucky enough that I only suffered a bruise and raised welts on my face. My heart broke just knowing he had to go through that, and from his own dad no less.

Lunch finally arrived and I headed out to the football field as he instructed me to. At first, I couldn't see Grayson anywhere. Like I might have been the first one to arrive. Once I reached the base of the stands, I heard a short whistle from the hole in the side

of the bleachers.

He held out his arms while I quickly ran towards him. When I met his embrace, I wrapped my arms around his shoulders. Our lips rested against each other's. We kissed for a minute in the silence, while the wind blew into the side of my battered face. I felt his arms tighten around me while my cheek sensed a wet trail of tears falling between our faces.

"Don't cry Grayson," I told him. "I'm so sorry that happened," I added while my hands held his face out in front of mine.

He sighed. "You're sorry?" He questioned with a puzzled look. "I'm the one that should be apologizing to you."

"Shhh," I whispered. "We can't see each other again?"

Every inch of me wanted to bend over to pick up the largest rock I could find and chuck it out over the chain-link fence behind us. Facing the fact that I was forbidden to see him again hurt like hell.

Grayson huffed. "No!" He yelled. "Fuck him, Julian," he said, looking red in the face. "He doesn't get to tell us what to do."

"But he's your dad, Saccharo Ferre," I replied. "You live in his house."

He shook his head confidently. "Not for much longer, I won't be."

"What does that mean?" I asked with a raised eyebrow.

"I wanna go as far as I can from this fucking place to New York City," he replied. "And I want you to come with me," he added. "I—need—you to come with me."

The first notion of leaving my family didn't settle very well. I love my parents. But then I thought about the consequences I might face, should papá ever find out I was exactly the opposite of his expectations. He would likely force me out of the house because I wasn't living the lifestyle accepted by the Catholic church.

"And what, we just up and move?" I asked curiously.

He nodded his head in agreement. "Exactly," he confirmed. "We'd live our lives on our own terms and leave the disapproval of our families behind."

I reeled him in for another giant hug, while I stared out at the passing cars on Boudin Road. I was hung up on what it would feel like to cut off all communication with the people who brought me into this world. Or from my dear sister who looks up to me.

I gently stroked the back of his head. "Never talk to my family again?"

"Julian, if my parents ever talk to yours after we've left, and you've told your mom where we went—" Grayson paused for a moment. "My dad will find us," he said quickly as began huffing.

He had a good point. And in that moment, I feared seeing Clint Welles' evil eyes even once more. They've haunted me enough this whole last month as it is.

"So, whatcha say, Cutie?" He asked while he continued his embrace. "We graduate here in a few weeks, then make a clean break."

There was no doubt in my mind about following him wherever he went. I wouldn't be able to live with myself being even one town apart, let alone thousands.

"Okay—" I mumbled with a small bit of uncertainty. "I trust you completely," I replied. "Wherever and whenever you go, I'll be there by your side."

“Oh, Julian,” Grayson started crying, but I could tell in a happy way. “I love you so much,” he replied. “I will always take care of you and protect you, even if it’s the last thing I do.”

Hearing those words brought me so much comfort. He’s stood up for me every step of the way since the first day we met. I knew I could expect nothing less of him in the future. Our future was a month away. Yet in that very moment, with his arms wrapped around my waist, I could feel it. I could taste it. I knew I’d feel awful about running away from home, and that part tasted sour. We stood there for several minutes. The lunch bell hadn’t rung yet, so I could tell it hadn’t been a full hour.

Grayson held my hand as we walked the length of the bleachers’ underbelly. Once we reached a group of trees off to the side of the field, we found a shaded area away from the sun. He sat Indian style across from me in a patch of grass. He reached up to the beaten side of my face while letting out a scowl.

“He really did a number on you, didn’t he,” he said as a statement more than a question.

“You’re in worse shape,” I admitted. “Your poor nose, can you even breathe?”

He shrugged with a sparkle in his eye. “Don’t you worry about me,” he insisted. “I can hold my own.”

The thought that he might have retaliated to defend himself crossed my mind immediately after him reassuring me. “O Deus meus, Grayson,” I gasped. “What did you do to him?”

“Nothing,” he assured me with a quick glance through the trees. “But if my mom wasn’t standing in the doorway watching,” he paused for a breath. “I probably would’ve clocked him right back after the first shot.”

Seeing the tough side of Grayson is just as much of an experience as witnessing his soft and tender side. He might display tough skin, but after the past few months of getting closer to him, I know deep inside that shell is a heart so pure and gentle. But then I wondered what kind of a mother would stand idly by. How could she watch one of her kids get abused so violently by anyone—let alone his own father—without breaking it up?

“Your mom saw him hit you and she didn’t do anything to stop him?” I asked.

Grayson shook his head. “No,” he replied. “She’s a coward,” he added with a bit of an upset look. “Does everything he says,” he waved his arms around for emphasis. “She matches his thoughts and opinions, but I also know that if she did, she would’ve gotten hurt in the process.”

We sat there under the shade for the rest of our lunch period holding each other’s hands. Hearing him talk about how he had to learn how to defend himself in any given situation was more confirmation that leaving town is the best decision he could possibly make.

Now a few weeks later, here I am at my desk next to a packed suitcase and a box of my most important belongings. I’m staring at my blue graduation cap sticking out from the top of the box and it’s finally hitting me that this is the ending of a chapter. I’ve written a long note to mamá apologizing for leaving. And I confessed to her why. It’s probably one of the hardest things I have ever had to do in my life so far. But Grayson made a valid point, and I can’t risk Clint finding us—just as much as I’d never be able to breathe without him. If true love is the game of chance everyone says it is, then I’ve won the lottery on my first time playing.

It’s still only about two in the morning and I’m in knots waiting for him to park his truck across the street. Grayson said he would toss a pebble at my bedroom window to let me know he’s here. He told me to be awake and ready to go closer to four, since

it would be easier to make our escape while it's still dark out. All I need to do is stick my letter under a magnet on the fridge. Then I can turn a fresh new page with my very own Sugar Bear. So, my next journal entry will be from the big city.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:34 pm

GRAYSON

Farther down Interstate 81, I find myself falling victim to fatigue. Despite the music coming from my speakers and the wind blowing in through my window. I haven't consumed nearly enough caffeine over this past week, so this doesn't surprise me. The last green sign announcing select dining options which I passed about a minute or two ago, indicated there is a Starbucks coming up on the journey. But I forgot exactly how many miles away. Just as soon as I open my mouth to shout at Siri, my phone rings. While it's a New York 212 area code, I don't exactly recognize the number. I almost hit the button to send it to voicemail when I remember it could be the coroner who I've been expecting.

"Hello?" I answer.

A man's voice responds in a solemn demeanor. "Is this Grayson Welles?"

I nod even though I'm the only one in the car. "Yeah."

"I'm Steve Tallman from the Uptown New York County Coroner's office."

I hesitate to respond while swallowing whatever spit is left in my dry mouth. This is it. In a moment my heart will likely break all over again. Knowing the cause of Julian's death might shed some light into what happened, but I know this insight will summon the darkness to swell from my heart. Though I speak, I'm unsure I'm ready for the news—but fuck it—it's gonna happen one way or the other.

"Ookkkayy."

Steve clears his throat to speak. “Well, I don’t have a bunch of information,” he says. “A full autopsy report might take a couple of months,” he adds, clicking his tongue. “To that end, I wanted to touch base with you on something which triggered my radar.”

Ughhh. This sounds bad.

His news persists. “Our preliminary toxicology report shows a very high level of bupropion—generic Wellbutrin—from your husband’s blood.”

“What do you mean by that?” I ask.

“In fact, this level is three times the lethal amount for that particular medication—” he pauses for a quick breath. “Which tells me that this wasn’t accidental, and combined with the other medication detected in his body, memantine—or generic Namenda, I’m led to believe this caused his heart to arrest.”

Not an accident? Like he was poisoned?

“Not accidental?” I ask.

“We don’t jump to conclusions here,” he replies. “We’re just the guys who do the science-y stuff behind the scenes,” he adds with a beat. “But maybe the word intentional is more applicable.”

Intentional. On purpose. Deliberate. Calculated. Planned. The list of synonyms starts thrashing through my brain. I’m no author like Julian, but I’m a smart enough guy to arrive at a conclusion.

I’m already nervous that my hand slips from the wheel, causing the car to swerve. “Like suicide?” I blurt out into the phone.

Steve's hesitant stammer confirms it, but he speaks anyway. "I'm saying it's more than a possibility."

Fuck. He killed himself? I'm flabbergasted at the mere thought of my lover doing something so unconscionable. There's no way in a million years that Julian Torres—the man who loved life itself—would be the one to end it.

He tries to cut the silence. "Mr. Welles?"

But I can't speak. My words are landlocked. Just the mere thought of Julian deciding to end his life, ushers me beyond the breaking point. I want to cry, but I'm so angry that I want to hit something as well.

"Uh—" I try to speak, but nothing is rolling off my tongue.

Steve continues his spiel. "After researching his medical records—this sort of situation isn't entirely uncommon," he adds. "You know, given his recent circumstances."

"And what else did you have for me?" I ask. "Or was that it?"

Steve clicks his tongue a second time. "That's about all I have right now, I know this isn't going to bring any comfort, but it's my job to present the facts."

"Yeah, okay." I reply with a shallow sigh. "I appreciate it," I add, although I don't appreciate having my complete day ruined all over again.

There's not a single morsel inside my entire fucking body which values this information. I might have been better off not knowing—ever.

"Is there anything I can answer for you while we're on the phone?" He asks.

“No, that’s pretty much enough of a blow to the gut for me today,” I respond.

We end the call quickly, as a tidal wave of emotions crash against the shores of my soul. It saddens me to my whole goddamn core that Julian would commit suicide. Things weren’t bad, at least I don’t think so. He had more lucid days than not. I can’t imagine what he must have been thinking. Whatever led him to believe ending his life was the only solution to whatever problem he was facing, is beyond me. God fucking damn it!

Tears rain down my cheeks at an accelerated speed, much like if someone had fired a round of bullets into the side of this town’s water tower. My eyes blur quickly from the sobbing. And no matter how often I swipe the tears away, the apertures of my spirit gloss over a split-second later. My car swerves on the interstate from left to right, while my shaky hands feel close to going numb. I pull over to the side of the road, and not a moment later, I’m running in the direction of an empty field with outstretched arms. I yowl so loudly that an entire flock of birds ascend the sky in every which way.

“FUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUCCKKKKKK!!!!”

After nearly damaging my vocal cords, I fall to my knees in the dirt, sobbing relentlessly into the palms of my hands. Why? Why couldn’t it have been an accident? Why couldn’t it have been from natural causes? I question my heart, because it seems the demons thronging my chest are the only ones with any real answer. If I was so clueless as to not pick up on his depression getting worse, then maybe I’m the one who deserves to die instead. If I couldn’t protect Julian from being consumed by the darkness, I’ve absofuckinglutely failed as a lover—and as a person.

Even though I’m several paces away from my car, it’s so eerily quiet on the interstate at this time of day, that I can hear it dinging. The alarm only wails because the key fob is still inside the cabin with the door swung wide open. But I choose to ignore my

car's cry for attention. Instead, I choose to endure the filthy dirt mucking my knees while banging both fists into my temples. This hurts so fucking much, I don't even remember which state I've stopped in. Hell, my mind is so erased that I barely remember my own name.

I eventually rise to my feet at the loud blare from a semi-truck passing my car. The noise pierces my eardrums, but everything inside me hurts, what's another dollop of pain? As I slowly stagger back to the car, I'm surprised to find its battery hadn't completely drained. I wipe my eyes free of saltwater, whilst looking at my pathetic aspect in the rearview mirror. Then a flash bounces from the teddy bear pendant dangling just below. Though my throat is dry and raw, I let out a smaller scream, pounding both palms into the steering wheel.

"God damn you, Julian!" I shriek. "How could you do this to me?"

After throwing my second fit within a matter of a half hour, I take a deep breath to gather my shit. I need something to drink and as much as I want to take to the bottle again. But I have enough wits about me to know driving impaired isn't the answer. My hand reaches for the phone to look up the nearest Starbucks. According to Apple Maps, it's right up ahead in Greencastle, Pennsylvania. Perfect—I'm in my favorite fucking state.

It only takes me a couple of minutes before my car rounds a sharp corner into a parking lot. I'm graced by a sign with the most beloved green and white Siren on the planet. My right hand is on the steering wheel, while my left flicks cigarette ashes out of the window. If I can't have a real drink, I'm damn well going to soothe the agony by way of nicotine. If this will keep me from having another breakdown, then fuck my lungs. And fuck the inside of my car for that matter.

The line in the drive-thru is astonishingly empty. This would be unheard of in New York. It takes damn near an hour just waiting in line on the inside. But I figure

walking in is a better choice, since my bladder can appreciate the opportunity to empty. And if there's another thing about Starbucks earning my staunch support, it's their standards in bathroom cleanliness.

A barista standing at the register greets me with a smile. While I'm in no mood to return the sentiment, my lips instinctively form a shape it's used to making. I can only hope it appears to be happy in nature, regardless of the shrouded and crumbling heart firing on its last piston. Since I don't look directly in their eyes, my attention focuses on the name tag, Shy, and a pin attached to the apron. It gives the preferred pronouns of He/Him/They.

"Hi there, what can I get started for you?" He asks.

"Uhhh—" I drone, stalling with a quick glance up at the menu.

I always know what I want to order. But it's only out of a force of habit that I drown in their sea of drink options regardless.

"A Venti Americano with an extra shot."

The fact it sounded more like a demand than a request crosses my mind, even though I didn't mean to sound like the major dick they're likely used to dealing with daily.

"Please." I add.

"Sure, and what's your name?" He asks politely.

"Grayson."

"Perfect, it'll be \$5.74," he concludes.

Since Phoebe always keeps the physical copy of my Starbucks Gold card, I unlock my phone screen to use the barcode from the app. The red laser beeps after a couple of attempts to position it at just the right angle.

“Thanks, Grayson,” he nods. “It’ll be ready in just a couple of minutes.”

While the baristas hustle behind the bar perfecting my beverage, I’ve taken an opportunity to use the facilities. I didn’t necessarily need to go. But the less exposure to dirty restrooms, the better. As I step over to the sink, I can see my eyelids are grey and puffy, taking to the aesthetic of scorched popcorn. And the whites are redder than they are any other shade. My pitiable reflection stares at me while I feel the gnawing in my stomach start intensifying. With each beat of my heart, I swear I can hear the vile laughter of the devil, as my blood sludges through each vein. That son of a bitch, he won this time.

I shake my head before splashing a palm of water against my face. The coolness feels so refreshing, I repeat this a couple times. A paper towel pats across my forehead and cheeks just before I swing the door open. Back out at the counter, steam from my beverage pirouettes up into the air. I reposition my messenger bag before lifting the drink from the counter. I’m almost halfway out the door when Shy hollers out at me.

“Don’t forget your treat,” he says.

I shake my head. “I didn’t order anything else.”

“I know, I just thought you needed a little extra something today,” he insists, holding the paper bag over the counter.

My feet shuffle back to the counter. “Okay, well,” I reply, surprised. “Thanks.”

I slam my door shut while taking a small sip. My tongue burns from the scorching

temperature, but I'm so dead on the inside that it doesn't faze me. The cup almost nestles into the holder, when I see a note written in black Sharpie on the side—followed by a smiley face.

Whatever's going on, it'll get better.

How kind of him to try cheering up a poor slob like me. My brain tells me it worked—if even just a little—while my heart heckles that it was of no consequence. Shy's blueberry muffin inside the bag tastes sweet and satisfies my clusterfuck of nerves. As I pull out from the parking lot, I wonder how much farther I can get before darkness swallows the Eastern states.

The drive down Interstate 81 is boring and uneventful. While the towns I pass by may hold more history than I have time to explore, this trip just keeps taking me down memory lane in more ways than one. If not from Julian's journal entries, it's my own flashbacks to earlier moments in our relationship. A few minutes ago, I declined an incoming call from Miles. I'm still not up to talking with anyone. Especially after my Achilles heel was demonstrably torn this afternoon in a matter of one fucking phone call.

I know he and Alex are just worried about me. If the tables were turned and one of them were in my predicament, I'd be just as concerned. This is what sets them apart from the rest of our group of gays back in the city. They've been paramount in mine and Julian's life. The first thing we did when we arrived in New York thirty-two years ago was respond to an ad in *The Villager*. Alex placed a classified ad looking for another couple to be their roommates.

Meeting them was our destiny. The day after we called them, Miles and Alex found Julian and I to be exactly what they were looking for in roommates. And the rent was more than reasonable also. Their request in return for letting us stay in their NoHo flat was contributing to the weekly groceries. Alex Wilkins comes from a well-to-do

family, full of politicians and finance moguls. They explained to us, “we need the kinship more than we do money.” That being said, I consider us the lucky bastards to have been in the right place at the right time.

Thinking about our chosen brothers seems coincidental, because the song currently playing in the car takes me back to our first party thrown after Julian and I moved into their fifth floor Bond Street condo.

It was two weeks after our introduction to the New York scene, when Julian sprung from the couch in excitement. Once the opening beats to MC Hammer’s “U Can’t Touch This” blared from the living room stereo, my fear of dancing in front of others had become tested. The look on his face was part inebriation, part energy, and the rest lust. Julian backed his ass up into the air to each slide of a synthesized instrument after the chorus. And his zealous aspect propelled beyond my hesitation to jump up and join him. Though I’d never been a huge party person, I couldn’t resist his warm visage. How could a person tell their adorable man ‘No’ after the flash of such puppy dog eyes?

Timidly, I rose to my feet as the strength in his arms helped pull me up the rest of the way. What must have the other ten or twelve people bouncing around to the beat have thought of my incoordination and rigid, trunk-like stem of a body. Had I not consumed three Heineken’s, I might’ve been even stiffer. But I obliged at Miles’ suggestion to let loose and enjoy the party.

“Come on, man,” he coaxed me. “We might as well have some fun now before I get into the police academy next month,” he added. “Once I’m a cop, I can’t very well condone underage drinking, can I?”

Amidst the chaos of other drunk partygoers, I bounced my hips, grinding against Julian’s frontside. The sensation excited my cock as the fabric of my shorts brushed up against his crotch. The intensity exploding within me couldn’t resist pulling his

shoulders into mine and kissing him in front of every other gay in the flat. His lips seemed dryer than usual, but after consuming my first beer at eighteen, I was only learning the effects alcohol has on a person.

We spun our bodies away from each other towards the close of the song, while the next one played with a much slower tempo. I tugged on Julian's arm, pulling him back into my embrace as we clasped our hands together, to sway with the rhythm of "Right Here Waiting" by Richard Marx. While the song seemed to have a sadder context, it evoked so much emotion.

I might have been two brews past my first buzz, but the lyrics swam through my ears while a solitary tear fell from my right eye. We'd already begun a new moment in our lives. I felt blessed to have quickly found a job, in yet another market, yet swankier than Piggly Wiggly. And the warmth radiating from Julian's sweaty body, combined with his pure happiness, lit a fire within me. The only other thing to force my throbbing cock into a fury, escaped his mouth.

"Amo te tam multo—I love you so much," he whispered at the base of my left ear.

It didn't matter that it was in Latin, I picked up on the 'I love' part. Not a moment later, I took his hand, ushering him down the hallway to our bedroom. I kicked the door shut behind me before lifting his t-shirt above his head. Within seconds, I undressed while concurrently working on Julian's belt from out around his waist. I pushed his backside, sending him to the top of the full-sized bed, while locking my lips with his.

We passionately kissed as my thumping dick begged to be slid inside Julian's ass. I backed away from the bed, all the while sliding his underwear down his legs, before I stepped out of mine. A look of pure agony—his urges to be fucked—danced across his flush mien. I licked my hand with as much spit as I could muster, then stroked it around my cock as Julian pumped his.

Wet and ready, I teased his tight hole with the tip of my dick. I swirled it around a few times while he curled his bottom lip. My young lover's eyes closed, seemingly enjoying the sensation. And within another moment, my cock inched deeper into his hole as far as it could go. Julian moaned delightfully while I bucked my hips forward and back. The thrusts inside him seemed to be almost poetical—matching the bumping music coming from out in the living room.

It was at that moment when I realized that it was the first time experiencing my dick plunging within him. His eyes grew big as melons while his mouth cowered intermittently. For no formal training on the matter, I must have been doing something right. After what seemed like a long time of my head pushing back and forth in harmony with my slithery cock, I felt a rush of euphoria stream down my spine. And within a split-second, I pulled my cock away from his hole to give into my climax.

Quick and long lines of cum landed all over Julian's exposed torso. I thought masturbating might have felt good. But having an orgasm with the person I loved was like ice cream on a balmy afternoon. Julian's rapid stroking resulted in his own release, spilling from the tip of his dick. It landed in my face, even mixed in with drops of my own against his stomach. My head hovered above his, about to wrap our fervorous exchange with another kiss. Followed by feeling his tongue stick out to scoop the drip of cum from my chin. As he tasted the warm release, our lips formed another seal. Then I could taste the salty flavor when my tongue slid against his.

In a flash, my vision remains on the stretch of road ahead. According to a green highway sign a minute ago, Hagerstown, Maryland, is the next place that I'll be passing through. I feel depleted of all my energy resources. And that's after I flushed two hundred milligrams of caffeine down my hatch. When I stop, I plan to find a liquor store. Only second to finding a hotel for tonight, because my body is ready to send reality into an ocean of obscurity. The thought has occurred to me though, when I find a cool pillow, I'm digging out Julian's journal labeled New York City . There's

a loud voice screaming deep through the mire of my chest, encouraging me to read its last entry. The last one he'd ever write again.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:34 pm

JULIAN

June 14, 2022

I haven't journaled in a long while. Strangely enough, I've forgotten how much comfort tracking my thoughts brings me. In this current moment, however, I need a bit of consoling—if even from my own words. As of late, my brain has been incredibly foggy. It's reached the point of occurring several days each week. And as a result of my progressing disease, I've just taken almost three whole months of medication, in the hopes it will whisk me away from this pain. And from the fear of my past converting into such a distant memory, that it'll be damn near impossible to retrieve again.

On my good days, the fully lucid ones, they're great. I cherish each one I have been graced with. But the bad one, when my mind is held captive in a sea of grey dust, I'm done with them. I've grown tired of feeling helpless in the moments when I can't even remember how to wash my own hands. But today, my mind has been graced with so much color that I want to take my last ride remembering what it's like to be left with my own devices.

And my Grayson Carey Welles. This man has been obligated to take care of me in ways he shouldn't have ever needed to. In the beginning, I only required help finding where I last put my glasses, or my iPad. Or encouraging me to feel less insignificant when it takes me an hour to wash a small sink of dishes. Without his help, I'd scrub the same plate twelve times. Nowadays, he bathes me when he showers. And in those helpless states of grey, he helps wipe me clean when I've finished on the toilet.

However, today's brilliance hasn't been bereft of struggle. I've been reminded of an argument between him and I from a couple of nights ago. Of which was my last truly good day before now. We'd been watching an old classic film on TV when I noticed I was without his company. As I scanned the room, I heard him back in the hallway on his phone.

"It wouldn't be every single day," he said to the person on the other end. "Just until six or seven at the latest, and if he's having a good day, you wouldn't even need to do anything but play cards—or a round of Scrabble helps exercise his brain when he's lucid."

I wondered who he could have possibly been talking to, but it occurred to me that he'd been on the hunt for some type of home care aid. Just knowing he was looking into a helper gave me a futile sense of how much a burden I've become on him. And I don't want that. I don't want the man I've loved for the past thirty something years to think of me as dead freight. I can only imagine he's dealing with so much already. So, I must take action now. While the sun still shines on Manhattan. If I don't, tomorrow could be the day when I wake up without so much as a fond memory of who I am. Of who we are as a unit.

Once his call came to a close—of which he'd set up an interview for next week—Grayson shuffled back into the living room, reclaiming his spot next to me on the couch. I reached out to squeeze his hand, studying how it seemed less reflexive than usual. This right there confirmed my suspicions. He was growing exhausted taking care of me. Honestly, I couldn't blame him. He's been my hero since we were both eighteen. So, he was bound to tucker out at some point.

"I'm sorry," I said.

Grayson broke his concentration on the television to meet my pitiful gaze, something he only does with Miles, Alex, or myself. "Whatever are you sorry for, meus amor?"

“That I’m not getting any better,” I admitted. “That you’re doing everything for me most days.”

A tear slid down my cheek as I squeezed his hand even tighter. I could detect a struck chord within him, I’d perhaps even triggered a little anger. In that single moment, I honestly couldn’t tell. But for as long as he sat there with the same confounded expression, I knew he was speechless.

“It’s my fault, Saccharo Ferre, not yours,” I clarified, hoping he would say something.

“God damn it, Julian,” he finally replied. “Nothing is your fault?—”

I interrupted him. “No,” I retorted. “It is.”

He leapt to his feet from the couch, forcing Boo Radley to lurch away from his lap. “These things happen.”

“Yeah,” I began. “Maybe they should in forty years from now,” I added while jerking in my seat to find a new position. “But if it’s already happening at fifty-one, it must be from something I did.”

Grayson’s voice bellowed so loudly, I’m sure everyone in Washington Heights could hear his wail. “Just stop talking, Jules!” He paused with an outstretched hand. “Just stop.”

All I’d intended was to explain the guilt imploding within my core. And that our lives headed South way too quickly. If I’d have known my brain would evolve into a carrot, I could have better prepared myself for these excruciating times causing such tension in a relationship which once flourished with perfection. These moments where I’m on the cusp of oblivion.

“Sit down, Grayson,” I pleaded. “Can’t we just talk about this?” I asked, uncertain if he would be receptive to conversing civilly. “I’d rather go to a home than have you feel you need to hire a babysitter.”

“No—Momo,” he bit back. “I don’t wanna have this conversation right now, and I don’t wanna fight,” he added, his incensed emotions pouring from the lids of his usually keen spirit.

I rose to my feet just as quickly as he had done a moment prior. “When would you rather have it?” I asked. “When you’ve had hours to prepare like it’s some deposition?” I added, swinging my arm. “Or when I can’t remember what to say, or God forbid I have my faculties intact to speak at all?”

Grayson shook his head with a palm planted into his riled visage.

My emotions stirred up in the heat of the moment when I persisted. “Fuck this!” I bemoaned with a finger pointed to the floor. “We’re gonna talk about it right fucking now,” I demanded. “While I still can.”

Boo Radley scurried to the bed inside his kennel as if he felt he’d been punished for something he did wrong. I sauntered over to Grayson standing in the corner of our living room before revealing his discontented mug.

“I’ve become a burden on you,” I said, feeling a tingle at the cusp of my eyes.

And then with tears in my eyes, I continued pleading my case. “Put me in a home,” I added. “Have me put down like a sick dog.” I added, pausing to draw in a quick breath. “Anything that takes the responsibility off your shoulders.”

His stare narrowed, piercing my heart. “Have you killed?” He asked in disbelief. “You honestly think not having you here is gonna make my life—” he paused, resting

his hand at his waist with a shaken head. “—Fuckin’ easier?”

“It’s become too much,” I proclaimed. “Wiping my ass, aiming my dick into the toilet?” I emphasized with both hands. “Is that what you signed up for?”

Grayson extended his arms to my shoulders with a glint at the corner of his left eye. “When I committed my life to you, I meant it,” he avowed. “You’re not a burden on me, meus amor.”

I heard the words which fell from his mouth. But I could also feel the weight of all that responsibility sink to his overworked, heavy-laden heart like the Titanic. I felt pure guilt. All I could think about was how unfair it was for him. A home care aid wouldn’t relinquish his care of me entirely. A babysitter would only escalate my opinions of how dehumanized it would make me feel.

After leaning into his strong embrace for minutes, our argument seemed to melt away with each minute passing us by. Then, he bent over to grab the fold of my knees, while tilting my backside into his right arm. I stared into his determined gaze as he carried me down the hallway into our bedroom. I laid on the top of the bed in complete darkness with his lips sealed against mine. They followed Grayson’s lead, even though I haven’t yet forgotten how to kiss.

I enjoyed settling an argument with intimacy. Especially since I was in enough of a lucid state to enjoy the experience. But I wanted my words to be taken seriously. I wondered if my concerns crossed the barrier of Grayson’s obstinate mind. After all, he is a Taurus. His hands traveled the length of my upper body while our tongues slid against each other. My arms wrapped around his shoulders before I tugged his head down to my neck.

“Don’t be mad at me, Saccharo Ferre,” I whispered into his ear.

He licked the length of my neck up to the base of my chin. “I’m not mad at you, and I never could be.”

We held each other for the remainder of the night. Or until the nighttime meds summoned me to hours of slumber. While the recesses of my memory are wiped from yesterday, I remember waking up in Gray’s arms this morning. He whisked me away for a hot shower. I sat on the bench of our walk-in, observing his facial expressions as he wiped the soapy sponge across my body. Then he concluded by cleaning his own self.

So, in the clarity of this day, I can see perfectly well that I’m better off leaving now. While I can do it on my own terms. I know deep down, it’s for the best. Meus saccharo ferre will understand one day, after feeling the initial sting of losing me. And in time, I hope he realizes that I didn’t want to let another day pass by where I worried if it would be the last one which I’d ever remember again. To that end, my Sugar Bear—tu es toto vita meus.

Ambo te ignosce me, amor.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:34 pm

GRAYSON

God damn him. If those are his last words to me, written at the bottom of this last crisp page, then I don't forgive him. How could I possibly begin to excuse him for breaking my heart into a million pieces, that even the loudest street sweeper in Manhattan could suck them up in their entirety? As I sit here at the edge of a queen-sized bed, my crossed hands pressing into my forehead, I can't help but feel the anger towards Julian's decision explode from within. The only burden he's brought my way is his eternal absence.

I spot the time on my phone to realize it's already four past five in the evening. Although I could stand to settle on some dinner, what I want most is the sweet surrender of feeling all which inflicts this pain beneath my skin vanish into the ether. Before I lock the device, there are two unread text messages waiting to be seen.

PHOEBE: Just checking in on you. Did you leave yet? Your inbox doesn't have any emails about a plane ticket, so I'm just wondering.

MILES: A woman named Wendy called earlier. Alex is meeting her tomorrow at 14th Street Park to take Boo Radley off her hands. Would you please let me know that you're okay? We're both just so worried about you.

I can respect everyone's concern. Before I head out to scour the streets for Hagerstown's finest single malt, I thumb a couple of responses to satisfy them both—starting with Phoebe.

I'm not doing stellar. Distraught over the information given to me this afternoon. I'm

driving down to Felton instead of flying. It's gonna take me a few days to mentally prepare myself for facing that hellscape.

After I press send on my reply to her, I thumb over to my conversation with Miles.

Yeah, sorry I didn't warn you to expect her call. I'm also sorry for not being the most responsive these last few days. I'm driving down to Louisiana to tell Julian's parents about his passing, in person. Is it still considered passing away if it's suicide?

My thumb is quick to send the message when my brain questions whether I should have left that last part out or not. Just at the mention of suicide, my cheeks feel the perspiration raining down them from both of my lower eyelids. Fuck, I need something to drink. My head shakes away the self-pity while I step out to the hallway from my hotel room. Once outside, my chin meets my collarbone, while the curve of my palm shields a breeze from extinguishing the blue-orange flame from my lighter.

The plume of smoke wafts past my ears while I approach my black BMW, parked in the corner. Nicotine sets in quickly as I climb down behind the steering wheel. According to Apple Maps, there's a liquor store eight blocks down the road. What should be a two-minute drive through town turns into fifteen, as I must muddle my way around a literal circus. Seeing the elephants tromping along the perimeter of a long fence takes me back to Christmas Eve of 2017, when Julian and I went to see "The Greatest Showman" at the theater.

Julian sat beside me in the front row, cloaked by the darkness in a large auditorium. The ample bucket of popcorn between us couldn't block the connection of our clasped hands over the armrests. In the middle of the film, once the song "Never Enough" began playing, Julian reached for the popcorn to wedge it in the empty seat beside him. He stood, yanking on my arm to join him underneath the movie screen.

When I obliged, unsure if he needed my help with something in the bathroom, I felt

him take my free hand into his. We swayed to the melody of the song in front of everyone in the theater. After years of practice, I'd gotten over my fear of his impassioned public displays of affection. We stepped side to side, then rocked forward and back in each other's arms. We took short periods of stepping away with only one hand locked to the other.

I could see dozens of people's faces by the glow of the illuminated screen, smiling at the two of us living in the moment. A few 'oohs and awes' escaped some mouths each time our foreheads would meet. During the final bars of the song, my lips found Julian's in front of our own personal audience, as if we'd commandeered everyone's attention from the show. Some clapped, while others let out whistles in our favor before we returned to our seats.

"You little attention seeker," I joked into Julian's ear.

I felt the dampness of his lips form a seal against mine yet again, before he whispered back. "Just thank me and admit you enjoyed it too."

My hand flinches at the extreme burn of a finished cigarette between its fingers. I flick the butt out of the window while wallowing in the pain it has left me, having just become a victim of the past once more. It's ironic how seeing something as insignificant as an elephant can remind me of that night back home. But if that's what it'll take to console my every heartache, I'll take a thousand more.

After pulling into a parking spot, I step out to the blacktop in front of Scott's Liquors. My messenger bag wrestles my shoulder as I swing the door open. The weight of this damn thing is starting to drive me nuts. As of late, it's constantly falling down my arm. Judging by the line of customers, I'd wager that there's a huge party about to go down. That, or half the townspeople are alcoholics. Near the end of the line at the precise aisle I need, I'm forced to shimmy between a smelly old guy and a shelf of vodka. My parched determination gives me an extra nudge to stomach his mess, in

order to reach my pot of gold.

Even though I find myself toward the end of the aisle, it takes everything within me to keep from choking on the foul odor, a direct result of the man lacking deodorant. With a pinched nose, I pull a bottle of Balvenie DoubleWood from the shelf. It's apparent they're out of Glenlivet. So long as it affords me an escape from the abysmal reality of my life, I give zero fucks about what gets the job done. After standing in line for twenty minutes, I'm confronted with another decision. Do I gag on this dipshit's body odor while reading the text message which just buzzed in my pocket? Or do I keep pinching my nostrils until he leaves? I choose the latter.

Up at the register, I slide the bottle of hooch towards Randy. He smirks in my direction while I rifle the disaster zone that is my messenger bag. I really ought to clean this out, since I surely don't need Julian's fidget toys or a jar of Vicks VapoRub.

"It'll be \$84.17 today," Randy informs me blankly.

I shake my head. "No, I also need a pack of Camel Turkish Gold please."

"Need?" He questions with a raised eyebrow.

I'm pretty sure I shouldn't have to admonish a liquor store employee for judging his customer base by their choice in vices. And I'm also certain that smoking and drinking rank well within the confines of the law, as opposed to taking my anger out on this piece of shit's arrogance. But I don't reply with anything but a botched grin and the wave of my stainless-steel Mastercard. Randy bags the booze and smokes in a paper sack, while I sign the receipt with a blue ball-point pen. Of course, it keeps skipping ink after each loop of my signature.

Outside, there's a Taco Bell on the other side of the lot. It takes me only a moment to

decide on a burrito supreme or not. Since I haven't had Taco Bell in a few months, I come to a positive resolution. In the drive-thru, I'm stuck behind five cars. It's apparent I'll be waiting until Halley's Comet visits Earth's atmosphere, so another lit smoke finds its way between my lips. When it's my turn, I pull ahead to order. It takes just as long waiting for my food as it did to order. At this point, I should be numb to the world by nine.

I'm sure the temperature inside my hotel room is chilled to a perfect degree. Though, I'm only an eighth of the way into this single malt and I'm sweating puddles through my I love NY t-shirt. The thought of some fresh air sounds enticing. So, I waste no time gathering my phone, smokes, and bottle of courage before staggering out to the elevator. Downstairs in the lobby, I get the sensation of being on a large disco ball. Surely this is only the buzz teasing my equilibrium.

As I teeter out the doors, I fumble along the short path to a raised flower bed with a brick ledge. I set my scotch on the surface while lighting another cigarette. A long drag allows the tobacco flavor to hastily tease my lungs. On my exhale, I turn the bottle up to my nose, forcing another swig down my gullet. In another moment, I find myself around the back end of the hotel. The dark sky has hushed the town, giving me a glance of the moon's reflection above the rippling surface of a large lake.

The allure of its murky water draws me closer as I puff on my smoke. One last drag before I toss it over my shoulders. There's a slight breeze brushing against my clammy skin which feels refreshing. I still have four unread texts, persuading me to unlock the screen. I must fight through each vicious brain cell to remember my passcode, since FaceID isn't wanting to fucking cooperate tonight. It takes me a minute to recall the five digits, but quickly remember 5-8-5-4-2-6, spelling out J-U-L-I-A-N.

My blurred vision makes out that the messages are from Miles, in reply to the shocking revelation I faced earlier.

HE WHAT???

Oh my God, Gray. That had to be horrible for you to find out.

How in the hell did that happen?

Gray? It's been a couple hours with no reply. Are you okay?

The phone almost slips through my fingers as I use my right thumb to type a short reply. But the gyrating earth is throwing me off-balance. I raise my head at the slightest flash of light zooming through my peripheral vision. I think I finished pressing send before pulling my head around to investigate what I just saw.

My front teeth clank against the glass ridge of the liquor bottle before welcoming another gulp. The deep amber liquid sloshes down the pipe when my eyes focus on the shoreline several feet ahead of me. And for a brief second, I could swear I just saw Julian. Another swig later, I rub my eyes with my free hand, my attention set solely on the man's backside.

"Wait!" I scream. "Hold on."

Despite how much I plead for him to stop and turn around, he continues to tread around the lake's shoreline under the irradiating moon.

"I said—hang on—God damn it!"

Once I curse at him, he turns around to reveal his face. It is in fact Julian. Surely, this can't be real. I must be three sheets to the wind. My vision tries refocusing as I wipe at the corners of my eyes once more. Surely, they're playing tricks on me. Through as clear sights as possible, I see him closer than before. It fucking is too Julian. But how?

I fling my hand ahead, as a loud gasp escapes me. “How can you be here?” I question loudly. “You’re dead.”

The figure places his hand above his chest but doesn’t speak. It’s at this point, my brain registers that I’m seeing his ghost, if anything at all.

“Why’d you fucking do it, Jules?” I cry out quickly, tears spewing from my eyes. “I loved you so goddamn much!”

Still no words. The apparition’s gaze continues in my direction. It penetrates my core as if I’m supposed to receive some telepathic message. But all my hearing can detect is the sound of wind blowing into my eardrums. I can’t help but run closer, hoping the distance between him and I can amplify my ability to hear him. After I’ve dashed a few paces, my left foot trips over a rock, face planting my drunk ass into the dirt. Intense pain throbs in my head while my eyes close to a void of obscurity.

GRAYSON

The bright sun accosts me as I rise from a slumber, my forehead pounding to the cadence of my heartbeat—both inside and out. I'm surprised to be waking outside. The last thing I remember, I'd just finished eating a burrito in my hotel room. My head turns, grinding through coarse dirt while I wince in agony. Once I come to, I realize I'm on shore of a lake. My hand instinctively touches the throbbing area above my eyebrow, causing me to flinch even more.

There's blood running down my fingers when I pull my hand away. Judging by the broken liquor bottle only inches away, I must've blacked out while falling over in a drunken stupor. I turn myself over, using my arms to push up from the ground as my stomach growls. That, combined with the pounding headache, is all evidence of tying one on good last night.

Once risen to my feet, I place my hands above my eyes, grimacing again when my fingers touch the injury. I scan around the shoreline to look for my red iPhone, since it's not in my pockets. It's nowhere to be found. Just perfect. My head shakes indignantly at the notion of needing to waste valuable time from my itinerary to go buy a new phone. If there's even an AT&T store in town. As much as I could continue my journey without it, I can't drive halfway across the country all by myself.

The motion of shaking my head pushes my nauseated stomach's desire to ralph beyond its limit. Within a flash, I lean forward while vomit climbs my esophagus. I heave directly into the lake with the force of a campground water spigot, feeling the burn of ethanol as an added bonus. God damn it! I scowl at the sun piercing my ever-

loving soul—or lack thereof. Meanwhile, my tongue rejects the foul taste left behind. That shit does not taste better coming up than it does going down.

Up from shore, I approach what looks like the backend of my hotel. A sign on the rear door reading— Employees Only. Now I must shuffle around to the front. Inside the lobby, I feel inside both pockets for my room keycard. With no luck, I stagger to the front desk for a replacement. While I stand here waiting for a young lady to wrap a phone call, my bladder decides at this most inopportune time to remind me that it needs emptying. Tabitha finishes clacking various keys on her extremely loud keyboard before smiling in my direction.

“Oh Sir, are you okay?” She asks, pointing toward the side of her head. “You have a nasty gash on your forehead.”

“Yeah,” I reply with a wince. “I just fell, I’ll be fine.”

She shakes her head with a grimace, as if she can personally feel my pain.

I tap the counter lightly, leaving a small blood stain on its surface. “I do need help with a replacement keycard as I seemed to have lost mine.”

Tabitha glances at the mess I’ve just left on her front desk before meeting my gaze with an obligatory friendliness. “Certainly,” she states. “Which room are you staying in?”

Fuck if I know. If I can barely remember what happened last night, I damn sure can’t recall my room number.

“You know, I actually can’t remember,” I admit. “Is there a way you can look it up?”

She smiles, but I can tell she’s probably already annoyed. “Sure thing, and what name

is your booking under?”

“Welles—Grayson C. Welles,” I reply. “With my Mastercard ending in 5971.”

“That’s exactly what I was going to ask next,” she replies. “Thank you for confirming that.”

I snicker. “If I’m being honest, this happened to my husband about two years ago,” I say. “I figured you’d ask.”

“You’re in room 212,” she affirms. “If you can hang tight for a minute,” she adds, turning around to step down the counter. “I’ll go activate another.”

Within minutes, Tabitha returns with a fresh new keycard. “This will do ya,” she says, placing it on the counter in front of me.

“Thank you so much,” I reply graciously.

In the elevator, I make a mental list of things I need to do before returning to the interstate. Shower, luggage, new phone, something greasy for breakfast, gas. Once I hear a ding at the second floor, I step out, immediately pacing to the door reading 212. I toss the new keycard on top of the bed which I didn’t even sleep in, while traipsing straight to the toilet. The warm relief of conducting my morning business sends a tingle down my spine prior to washing my hands.

My condescending reflection in the mirror—more like a two-inch gash on my head—demands that I get my shit together. If I don’t, I’ll be headed straight down the rabbit hole of addiction. But as I stare back at the four red streaks inching down my face, a dark voice in my broken heart convinces me that nothing can drown away the noise of this world quite like booze and nicotine. I’m not an addict. It’s just for a little while to deal with all the stress. Once I finish pleading my conscience, I turn around

to prepare for a warm shower.

I flinch at the slightest touch of water raining down into my wound, shuddering at the thought that I might actually require stitches. My booze-soaked skin soaks up a soapy cloth while I decide against washing my hair today. When I step out from the tub, I reach for a clean towel, wrapping it around my waist.

A fresh pair of clothes awaits me in my suitcase back out in the room. I dress quickly so I can check out of here, all the while hoping to hell there's an AT&T store in town. It'd be a miracle if it's already open. And the greasiest breakfast on the planet to soak up this hangover. I hover the weighted messenger bag over my shoulder as I hoist the packed suitcases at my waist. Down in the lobby, Tabitha greets me at the front desk for a second time.

"You really should get that gash looked at, my friend," she says while I slide the keycard back in her direction. "Are you checking out?"

"Yes," I reply, touching my wound only to see blood stained fingers. "Also, do you have an AT&T store in town?"

Tabitha nods. "We have a couple of them, actually," she says, clicking her tongue. "But I don't think either will be open for another half hour or so."

I start to reply just as soon as she opens her trap to speak again.

"Which would give you enough time to stop at the urgent care around the corner."

Tabitha has a point. I don't necessarily want to dawdle here in Hagerstown. But I really should tend to my wound, so it doesn't get infected or anything. I sign my name on the page she slides in my direction before reaching down for my luggage. The messenger bag slides directly off my arm in the process. I let out a growl as I lift

the strap over my shoulder once again.

“I sure hope your day gets better, Mr. Welles,” she says, waving me off.

I turn around to reply. “It’s only uphill from here, right?”

Once I’ve settled behind the steering wheel, I reach over to the passenger seat. My hand fusses inside the messenger bag trying to feel for the rectangular shape of a cigarette pack. While I wait for traffic to pass me by on the street, I yank the bag into my lap to look inside. They’re not here either. I let out a hiss, tossing the bag back over the center console. I’d be willing to bet they’re in the same damn place as my missing phone. In order to kill two birds with a single stone, I decide to gas up before stopping at the urgent care. A smoke certainly outranks the wound above my right eyebrow.

Upon arriving at the Conoco station down the street, my gas tank fills quickly. And once the heavy fumes are done exacerbating my headache, I hurry inside. There’s a boy behind the counter who seems barely old enough to sell tobacco products. He waves in my direction as I approach the counter.

“Can I get two packs of Camel Turkish Gold,” I ask politely, scanning the vicinity for lighters, since mine was nestled inside the last open pack. “And a lighter?”

Trevor nods. “Yeah,” he whistles. “We keep ‘em back here because they were getting stolen so often.”

“Makes sense,” I reply with a shrug.

He hands me my purchases once I slip my wallet back into my bag. Back in the car, I click my seatbelt into place to begin pulling out from the gas station. In the process, I tap a fresh pack of the Camels against my wrist. I rip the plastic wrapping around the

top, letting it fall where it may, while my bottom lip grips hold of a cigarette to pull it out. My mouth wraps around the filter as an orange-yellow flame ignites from my lighter. Finally. I swat the smoke from in front of my face while rolling down the window.

Back down the street, I remain in my parking spot to finish my last few drags of a cigarette before stepping inside the urgent care. The clock on my dashboard says it's almost ten. Surely once I've been seen here, I'll be able to quickly replace my missing phone. The door swings shut behind me once I approach the front desk. There's a receptionist sitting behind the counter flipping through an US Weekly. Once I clear my throat to get her attention, she sets it open-faced down next to her computer, shooting a grimacing stare in the direction of my cut.

"I hope you won the fight," she tries joking, handing me a clipboard of forms to fill out.

I'm in no mood to joke around so I flash my half-cocked smile while reaching for the clipboard. I grab a pen with a plastic flower taped around it, from a glass vase on the counter.

"If you have an insurance card I can photocopy, I'll get you put in the computer while you complete those two forms."

There's a small row of chairs behind me where I take a seat to scribble down my information. After a couple minutes of focus, I return the clipboard to the receptionist as she slides my insurance card back across the counter.

"It should be no time at all, Grayson," she informs me. "We're not that busy this morning."

I nod my head. "Okay, thanks."

The urgent care didn't take a terribly long time. Twelve stitches later, I'm sitting inside a small diner waiting for an order of over medium eggs with greasy bacon and hash browns. With a fresh new iPhone at full price in my hands, I thumb through the screen trying to remember what apps I must redownload once I reach an adequate Wi-Fi connection. To be honest, I don't care about downloading Facebook right now, since I don't need to see the dozens of sympathy posts likely plastered all over my profile.

My waitress, Marsha, rounds the corner of tables down from me with my breakfast in hand. She smiles as she sets it down in front of me.

"Anything else I can get you, Darlin'?"

I shake my head. "No, this should be fine, thank you."

As soon as I return the pepper to its cradle on the table, the sting of an annoying ringtone sends imaginary nails through my ear canals. It's brand new, so I obviously forgot to turn it on silent mode. The screen displays Miles . I answer him since I've been dodging him the last few days.

His worried tone swims through the line. "Gray?"

"Yeah?" I reply.

"I'm so glad you're okay," he says, sounding relieved. "I've been trying to reach you all morning, that reply last night had Alex and I pretty fuckin' worried."

I fight through the sludge of my brain to remember what I could have possibly sent him. Not much of anything from last night surfaces, besides fumbling my way down to the lake. And I remember seeing a reflection of the honey-glazed moon rippling across the water. But that's about it.

“What did I say?” I ask. “To be honest, I couldn’t find my phone this morning.”

I struggle to tell him the real truth. That I woke up outside my hotel with a huge cut across the side of my forehead. Or that I was more shitfaced than the four guys in the blockbuster-hit, “The Hangover.”

A tinge of bewilderment paints Miles’ words when he replies. “Well—I actually have no earthly idea since it was just a cluster of letters that didn’t form any actual words.”

At the mention of a jumbled message, my mind traces back to the moment when I remember seeing a flash of light in the corner of my blurred vision. Then a second later, I recall thrashing my arms around when I swore that I’d seen Julian standing at the edge of the water. That must have been when I dropped my phone. Surely Miles would think I’m crazy just mentioning seeing Julian—or his ghost.

I scratch the side of my scalp, trying to assemble a reasonable excuse. “I probably butt texted you or something.”

“Well, you obviously found your phone,” he replies. “Since you answered just now.”

“Yeah—” I stammer. “I ended up finding it.”

Liar. Since Miles doesn’t need to know the truth, I can only hope that satisfies his concern. I pierce the eggs over my hash browns while holding my phone into my ear with my left shoulder. Seeing the yolk oozing through the cracks of fried potato strings immediately flips the nausea switch in my gut. But I must eat something so I’m well enough for the next leg of driving ahead of me.

Miles seems content with my excuse, given his profession deems him a human lie detector after all. “That’s good,” he says. “I know you probably don’t wanna talk about it—but—” he adds with a pause. “How do you know Julian?—”

He's right. I don't want to talk about it. About the suicide, that is. I know where his words are heading without the need for him to finish another thought.

I interject him. "Killed himself?"

There's a small, awkward pause drowned out by the raspy voice of Macy Gray playing overhead. Some two decades later, radio stations are still playing this song as if it just hit the airwaves.

"Yeah—" Miles responds.

My lungs warrant an immediate gust of wind, in order to keep my eyes from spewing buckets with my response. "The coroner said he had an overdose of Wellbutrin in his blood," I say.

But the deep breath seems thwarting. Just remembering my internal reaction to Steve's news yesterday, makes the nausea in my stomach intensify. And with it, a solitary tear wells up at the base of my eyelid before escaping down my cheek.

"Christ, Grayson!" Miles shouts through the phone. "I'm so sorry," he adds. "I know the word sorry doesn't mean much right now, because it won't bring him back," he pauses. "But beyond that, I'm just fuckin' speechless."

My thumb meets my lower lids to wipe away the stinging tears forming. "Well, I read the last journal entry he ever wrote," I reply behind the veil of my grief. "And he did it because—" more tears escape the levees of my soul. "Because he felt he was a huge burden on me."

Miles lets out a sigh, his opportunity for a reply now depleted.

I yammer on as if he's waiting for me to come back with the punchline. As if the Hell

of my life is now some big fucking joke. “He wrote that he didn’t want another day to come where he’d worry if it would be the very last one that he’d ever remember again.”

Miles excuses himself from the call after another ten minutes of our exchanged words. None of which would improve my situation, nor bring my lover back to me. I finish chewing the last piece of crispy bacon between my fingers before retrieving my credit card to pay Marsha up at the front counter. As I’m graced with the pithy of mid-morning heat outside, I use my mouth to retrieve another cigarette from the pack. I bow my head briefly to light it before unlocking my door from the key fob.

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JULIAN

July 2, 1990

We made it to New York City a few weeks ago. It's been a major culture shock to go from the island of Puerto Rico to Louisiana, and now a much bigger city all in the same year. When we arrived, Grayson found an advertisement in a local paper from a gay couple who were looking for another couple to rent out their spare bedroom. We were lucky to find Alex and Miles when we did, since we arrived with less than half of Grayson's final paycheck from Piggly Wiggly. All these guys want from us is to help with the cost of groceries, because Alex's family is rich. They've been very friendly and I'm not sure what we'd do without them.

People in the big city always seem to be on the go. Nobody stops to take a breath of fresh air. And apart from Alex and Miles, money seems to be the driving factor behind everything in New York City. Grayson quickly found a job once we came here. He's pretty much doing the same as he did in Louisiana, but for a chain of higher-end markets called Dean & DeLuca.

Last week, I got very sick. We don't exactly know what it was, but we assume it was some kind of stomach flu. After spending hours in the bathroom hunched over the toilet, Grayson came home from work with a bag full of supplies to help me feel better. He also spent every remaining dollar to his name, on medications, soup, crackers, and ginger ale. All of that for me, leaving him with nothing to eat for two days until he received his first paycheck. We haven't eaten much of Miles and Alex's food until we have enough to contribute.

I have an interview next week for an internship as an office assistant with Seven Liberties Publishing. They're a major book publisher downtown. It won't pay anything. But since I want to be an author, Grayson wants me to pursue it because it will give me some exposure to the publishing industry. I was going to put in an application at a few restaurants near the apartment but was told implicitly by my incredibly thoughtful boyfriend that he wanted me to do something I was passionate about.

He touched my heart the other day by saying, "until you write your first best-seller, I'll earn the money for both of us."

We went grocery shopping on Friday when he got paid. He even gave me thirty bucks to hold onto if I found something I wanted. So yesterday while Grayson was working, I went for a walk down 5th Avenue where I saw this new journal in a stationery store. He seems to find satisfaction in spoiling me, but I don't want him to ever feel like I'm taking him for granted.

Since moving, we've both already applied to NYU. I'm hoping to get accepted into the writing program, while Grayson's going to step into the world of architecture. There was a full-ride scholarship opportunity with another college in Massachusetts, though he said he didn't think his transcript down in Felton would match what they're looking for. I did help him write the essay for it, but he's doubtful it will go anywhere. The admissions officer at NYU told us both to expect a letter within the coming weeks, to see if we're accepted or not. I'm keeping my fingers crossed that we both get to follow our dreams in this new chapter of our lives.

On the family front, I miss them so much. I'm holding onto the hope that in time my heart will heal. And that theirs will also. But I love this boy so much, I had to follow him here. And thankfully we're so far away from Clint Welles, he'll never find us in New York City.

Yesterday we celebrated our five-month anniversary of being boyfriends, a week early. As soon as he came home from work, he whisked my attention from the land of Narnia, which is what I've been reading since we settled into the apartment. Going down to get my library card was one of the first things I did when we moved here.

"Put your shoes on," he insisted. "We're going on an adventure."

At first, I didn't know what he had planned. I didn't peg him for the type to remember certain milestones in a relationship. I figure I'd be that guy.

"Okay," I said, slipping a piece of paper in my book to mark its place. "Can you clue me in on where you're taking me?"

He shook his head with a big grin. "You'll find out when we get there," he teased.

After I tied my shoes, we stepped out to the street. He led me around the corner to the Bleecker Street subway station, ushering me down the steps after paying our fare. The screeching sound of metal seemed to bother him, since he'd let go of my hand to cover his ears. This wasn't the first time we'd taken the rail, but loud sounds really bother him.

I wondered if there was an alternate route, if subways would be the painful experience for him as they seemed to be. "Is this the only way to get where you're taking me?" I asked, rubbing his back.

He nodded. "It's a lot faster," he said.

We waited for the 6 train to arrive after standing on the platform for what seemed to be an hour. The poor thing ducked forward with covered ears the entire time. Once we boarded the proper rail, it zipped us down to the Brooklyn Bridge – City Hall stop where we stepped off.

“This is part one of our journey,” he said, taking my hand until the daylight of Lower Manhattan blinded us.

We had to walk almost a block away just to use a crosswalk. The only method leading us to the correct side of the road, where a long path stretched all the way across the Brooklyn Bridge. The dozen people made Grayson nervous, so he squeezed my hand tightly most of the trek across—which took a decent hour. And only when we approached the other side, his grip loosened.

“We’re almost there,” he said, retrieving a folded map from his back pocket.

It took me a second to catch my breath. “I guess we’re gonna be getting our exercise by living here,” I joked.

Thirty minutes and a few crosswalks later, we found ourselves at the entrance of Brooklyn Bridge Park. Lawns full of green grass and trees surrounded us with a breathtaking view of Lower Manhattan off in the distance. We found a quiet spot away from most everyone else, yet within proximity of the water. Grayson nudged me to the ground where he straddled my waist. His lips landed into mine as the summer breeze blew through the strands of his black hair.

“This is a stunning view of the city,” I said, stroking my fingers over his left ear.

Those cola-colored eyes of his stared into mine when he smiled back. “Yeah, it’s nice,” he said. “But you take the top prize for most stunning.”

His forehead rested on mine as we cherished the solitude that moment offered us. In that instant, my worries about the future melted away. If I’m with him, I just know things will work out for the best. Those words of his made me feel a tingle in my crotch. Though I knew it was too public of a setting to have sex, my urges overpowered me anyway. And his curious hands feeling me up didn’t make it an easy

feat either.

He broke the silence between us, right along with my pent-up sexual fascination. “Are you really hungry, or is it just me?” Grayson asked.

I shook my head. “I’m glad you said something,” I replied. “I could eat.”

“We’re not dressed to the nines, and I don’t have too much money left anyway,” he admitted. “But there’s a hot dog stand just over there,” he added, pointing a thumb over his shoulder.

“A hot dog would be fine with me, Saccharo Ferre,” I admitted.

We followed the sidewalk leading us to a man at a mobile hot dog cart. It didn’t matter what we ate, I’d have been just as happy with a pack of graham crackers. What mattered to me most was that we were spending time together. Grayson asked the older guy to top our hotdogs in the traditional New York fashion. That meant doused in a spicy brown mustard, sauerkraut, and onions.

Our grassy spot in front of the East River waited for our return, after grabbing our dinner. I bit into my hotdog not knowing what to expect, since I’d never even heard of sauerkraut. For it being my first time ever trying it, I must admit it has an interesting flavor.

Soon after settling the last potato chip in the bag battle with a kiss, the sun fell behind the tall buildings of Manhattan. We sat upright with our hands in each other’s lap, as the wind intensified the closer we got to sundown. Then both of his hands landed on my shoulders. I felt them massaging my muscles before the pressure grew stronger.

“Happy five months, Momo,” he said, rubbing his strong knuckles into my neck.

“Happy five months to you too, Saccharo Ferre,” I replied.

Grayson rose to his feet just as our view of the sunset off in the distance came to a wrap. He reached down to help me up off the lawn before taking my hand. We walked down to a pier, which is a loading zone for a ferry to take us back to Lower Manhattan. He and I didn’t arrive home until after nine. That peaceful evening away was one of the most romantic moments we’ve shared since moving here. It just goes to prove that Grayson knows how to create a tender moment without dropping a stack of money.

GRAYSON

I'm stuck in a bathroom only twenty minutes from Hagerstown. Before leaving town, I'd swung through a Starbucks drive-thru for a quad shot Americano to aid both the aches in and outside my forehead. But my intestines started spasming ferociously once I crossed the Potomac. This isn't a filthy gas station stall, certainly not even close to the one back in Carlisle. And Julian's words about our impromptu trek across the Brooklyn Bridge, have distracted me from having a cow about there not being any paper towels in the dispenser here.

Once outside the bathroom, I trail the back aisle of the convenience store to retrieve a cold Red Bull from the wall of coolers. As if I haven't had enough caffeine already. My phone chirps annoyingly with an incoming text message, reminding me I've still not switched it to silent mode. Once the chilly aluminum nestles in my left palm, I toggle the button on the side of my phone to hush future notifications. Should've been the first goddamn thing I did when turning it on back at the store.

Walter at the front counter zeros in on the stitched wound above the frame of my sunglasses when I step up to pay.

"Looks like you've seen better days," he notes while the loud chime of his register pangs in my ears.

I've worked in grocery stores where there are constant beeps for an entire shift. If I weren't as hungover as I am, perhaps I'd be able to tolerate them. However, I've been short tempered since Monday. And everyone's pointing out my physical flaws, as if I'm not reminded of them by the physical and emotional turmoil. So, I honestly can't

peg if the sounds are quite as aggravating.

“Yeah—I know it’s there,” I bite back. “You can stop gawking now,” I add, inserting my credit card to pay.

Walter shakes his head as if he’s embarrassed for me. “Sorry, it just looks painful is all.”

I scoop the can of Red Bull off the counter to turn around, making a dramatic scraping sound from the can against the counter. I don’t quite reach the doors before hearing Walter shout in my direction at the top of his lungs.

“Don’t forget your card is stuck in the machine!”

Well fuck. My head isn’t where it should be. I roll my eyes all the way back as I return to the counter to retrieve my Mastercard. Forgetting it would’ve been a fiasco.

“Thank you,” I say somewhat graciously.

When I return to the car, I press to start the ignition. While my Black Beauty warms her engines, I reach into my bag for the small bottle of Motrin. A crisp sound from the Red Bull can hisses, giving my headache instant reprieve. Soon, I’ll be re-caffeinated. And the sour taste going down is just as pleasant. It’s no scotch, but it’ll do in a pinch. Damn, listen to me. I do sound like an alcoholic.

I find my way back to the interstate while Siri reads the text messages I received earlier. It’s from Miles.

Since you may need a place to sleep for the night, I told Jeffy you were headed south. He said he wants to save you from another hotel and is opening his guest bedroom to you. Give him a call to let him know where you are.

Oh, and Boo Radley is safe and sound here now. He's already peed on the fake palm planter in the corner. So, he's marked his territory.

Jeffrey fucking Horton. I'd rather endure five consecutive root canals than exist in the same room with that asshat. Well, he's not so much an asshole as he is a haughty, self-absorbed piece of work. We first met him seven years ago at The Lion's Den, a gay nightclub in Gramercy Park. Before he realized my husband was taking forever and a day in the bathroom, he'd hit on me twice after ordering bottle service for our entire brood.

After that night, Julian became enamored by his career as an A&R executive for 970 Records. So much so that it inspired a main character in his best-seller the following year, "Midnight Crescendo." While I've only tolerated the guy, his inspired character was brutally murdered towards the end. So I considered it fair and poetic justice. He relocated to Nashville two years back, leading me to believe I'd never be graced with his ugly fucking mug again. I will still call him, explaining that I don't plan on stopping that far away from I-81.

"Hey Siri," I yell throughout my car, interrupting the song playing on Spotify. "Call Jeffrey Horton."

She robotically replies. "Okay—calling Geoffrey Gordon—mobile."

Ugh. I immediately press the end call button. Since this is a new phone, it's apparent the new Siri doesn't recognize the deep Manhattanite accent I've developed over the years. I clear my throat after taking another large swig of my energy drink.

"Hey Siri, call Jeffrey Horton."

"Calling Geoffrey Gordon—mobile."

I reach down yet again to end the call. Geoff Gordon must think I'm on crack if these are ringing through.

“Gahhh, you fuckin’ piece of shit!” I scream at my phone, all the while trying to not swerve the car uncontrollably.

Out of pure aggravation, I unhook the device from my dash to toss it in the backseat. As it lands, my Spotify starts up a random station based on the previously played song. Ironically—or not since this trip has been full of reminders—this re-recorded version takes me back to the moment the original played after my formal proposal to Julian on his birthday in 1997.

Julian took my hand as we skipped out over the ice at Wollman Rink. Our legs stroked in unison under the glow of many surrounding lights, gleaming down on us as we followed other people’s lead in a large circle. After a few rotations, the manager caught up with me to pass me a small wireless microphone. Before Julian could turn his head around to see, I attached it to the lapel of my black pea coat.

The manager motioned to me from afar that ‘it is a go’ after the current song finished. Just before it wrapped, I tugged on Julian’s arm, leading him to the very center of the rink. He appeared confused as if he didn’t know what I had up my sleeve. But I knew he couldn’t be too surprised because I always had some romantic agenda.

I lowered my body to one knee as the holiday song played its final notes, trying not to slip flat on my ass in the process. The cold surface nipped through my pant leg as I grabbed Julian’s hand. My throat instinctively cleared before I opened my mouth to speak loud enough into the microphone. Surely everyone in the vicinity of Central Park could hear.

“Julian, the past seven years of my life have been filled with more joy than I probably ever deserved,” I stated. “It’s never a disappointment waking up next to your smiling

face,” I added under the lump in my throat, a tear streaming down my left cheek.

I continued. “And I don’t know what I’d do with myself if there ever comes a day when your gentle grin doesn’t greet me when I rise.”

My eyes scanned the crowd to see everyone stopped in their tracks. Speaking in front of a crowd peaked my anxiety. But as nervous as I was, it seemed like the public declaration of my love was being appreciated. I reached into the inner pocket of my coat, pulling out a black velvet box.

“But you were my first love, and I hope you’ll be my only love,” I added, my creaky voice starting to falter.

Julian’s scotch-soaked gaze intoxicated my heart as I stared up into it. The glint from the surrounding lights danced from corner to corner as he started to shed a tear. I lifted the lid of the box to reveal a silver ring with three blue topaz stones set diagonally in the center.

“Julian Tomás Torres, will you let me be your only love as long as we live?”

It took no time at all for an enthusiastic approval to exude from him as he nodded and smiled. His arms helped stabilize me while I rose to both skates, before I leaned in to plant a kiss, full of my love and gratitude for his commitment to be my first and only love. His arms wrapped around my neck while my hands gripped tightly around his shoulders. Our audience clapped and cheered us on while LeAnn Rimes’ “How Do I Live” flowed from the speakers all around the rink.

Rain patters against my windshield, bringing my focus back to the stretch of road ahead of me. I know I still need to call Jeff to tell him I’m not passing through Nashville just to stay one night. Now it will need to wait until I stop, since my phone isn’t within arm’s reach.

This storm hasn't eased up but once or twice over the last couple hundred miles. I made a quick stop to get out and stretch my legs, grab some lunch from Mickey D's, and pee. As much as I'd really enjoy polishing off a soft-serve cone, I was advised rather brusquely that their machine is out of service. I find it coincidental that two separate locations—four states apart—encounter the same issue each time I want a fucking ice cream. Since I'm stopped under a gazebo in the middle of a park behind the McDonald's, now is as good of a time as any to call Jeff. This time, I'm calling him from the contact list myself.

The line rings twice before I hear him answer.

"Grayson Welles," he answers with too much enthusiasm. "It's been a long time my friend."

We're not fucking friends, you dipshit. I clear my throat, obviously not audibly sharing my thoughts. "It's been a while indeed," I reply cordially. "But I'm probably not stopping in Nashville tonight," I add earnestly. "I'm trying to get down to Felton and?—"

He interrupts me. "Nonsense," Jeff grunts. "You can't drive safely on little sleep."

"I'm not terribly tired right now," I reply, taking a small bite from my Quarter Pounder.

It sounds like Jeff smacked the top of his desk on the other end. "Where are you now?"

I finish chewing my bite before responding. "I'm in Salem, Virginia, at the moment."

"So, it's almost three there?" He asks.

“I assume so,” I reply, grabbing my throat in dire need of a drink. “By the time I reach Nashville, it’d basically be time to fall asleep even if I did stop.”

“Just come on in, no matter the time,” he replies somewhat convincingly. “Wouldn’t a little friendly company be better than a lonely hotel room?”

I’m not in the mood for company, let alone be his company for that matter. But if I do decide to stop there, it’ll be late enough where I won’t have to feel obligated to go for some dinner. I’d just arrive, lay my head down, and shut my eyes.

“Fair enough,” I reply. “Okay—fine,” I surrender, all the while my gut is admonishing me for this hasty decision. “I’ll stay there for the night.”

“Perfect,” he clamors. “I’ll call Wallace to instruct that he prepare a room for you.”

I clear my throat after a smooth slurp of my Coke. “Wallace?”

“My butler,” he yatters. “Keeper of the keys,” he adds. “I’m the CEO of a multi-billion-dollar record label, my yard from fence-to-fence would take up a whole city block in New York,” he boasts. “I also have my own private chef and maid.”

I roll my eyes. He hasn’t changed a single bit. If anything, he seems to be more of a pompous dick than when he lived in the Big Apple.

“I see,” I reply with zero enthusiasm.

“I’ll text you the address, so you know how to find me once you reach Music City.”

I toss my fast-food trash back inside the paper sack. “That’s fair, I’ll let you know when I get in so you can expect me.”

“No need my man, just punch 3-8-2-5 on the keypad when you get to the front gate and it’ll open right up,” he instructs me.

“K, fine,” I reply, already regretting my choice. “I’ll see you later tonight then.”

I end the call as soon as I possibly can. The less I talk to him, the better my nerves are. I don’t even know why I agreed to stay with him. But I guess, it really will save me from wasting more money on a hotel. Before I return to the car, I light up another rewarding smoke to enjoy. Combining it with the sound of heavy rain landing over the roof of this gazebo will be a decent therapy session for today. I decide on staying put while reading another entry from Julian’s New York journal.

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JULIAN

August 10, 1990

It's been a rocky week for Grayson and me. In fact, we've now had our very first argument. And the hell of it is, it's not really by any fault of our own. Monday, when I came home from my internship, I spotted three envelopes sitting on the kitchen counter. Two addressed to Grayson and one to me. By first look, I knew immediately they were our college letters. As much as I wanted to open mine, I figured opening them together would be better.

The evening took forever to arrive, but Grayson finally stepped through the front door about a quarter past five. I tiptoed in his direction with a mischievous look on my face as I held the envelopes behind my back. He looked at me like he knew I was up to something, but leaned in to give me a giant kiss, anyway. When our heads parted, I slid the envelopes up above his nose.

"They came, Saccharo Ferre," I said enthusiastically.

We stood in the entryway while ripping open our letters from NYU, not even wasting the time to sit down at the kitchen island. My eyes scanned through the header, down past my name and address. The moment I saw the words 'We graciously welcome you,' my heart burst into excitement. So much that hiding it wouldn't have been possible. However, the minute I glanced over into Gray's face, I noticed his expression didn't match mine.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

He shook his head with a shrug. “I didn’t get in.”

The fire in me quickly diminished. At that moment, I felt so bad for him.

“Well, open the other envelope,” I said, raising his hand which held it.

I watched Grayson tear the envelope from the Northeastern University Architecture program. Anxiety rushed through me while he unfolded the page. And within a split-second, I saw his mouth contort into another frown. Not that I wanted him to receive a rejection from them, I didn’t. But if he hadn’t been welcomed to attend NYU with me, it would mean he’d not be following his dream of being an architect this year. Or he’d be forced to move to Boston.

“Nooooo,” I gasped. “You didn’t get in there either?”

He clicked his tongue. “I did,” he replied depressingly. Someone could have assumed his dog just died with that facial expression. “But?—”

My fear had just become our new reality. We weren’t expecting the essay I helped him write to do much good, because we sent it so close to the deadline. With that inclination, over the past few weeks, we’ve been planning our lives around both of us attending NYU this fall.

I held my hand up to his shoulder, leaning my forehead into his. “But that means we either both don’t get to do what we want—and we wind up in Boston—or?—”

Grayson shook his head intently. “No—Momo!” He exclaimed. “You’re not?—”

I interrupted him. “No, my plans can wait,” I replied.

The fact is, I don’t want to wait. I didn’t run away from my family, never to speak

with them again, just to follow him here and not do anything about my own future. But I love this boy so much, being miles apart for four years could threaten the entire foundation of our relationship. And I don't want that either.

"No they can't wait," he bit back insistently. "We wouldn't be apart every single day," he said, gripping my wrist. "I'd come home every weekend and holiday."

I walked away from him with a bowed head to my chest. "No, we can't do that," I replied.

He stepped up to me from the entryway. "It's only what, four hours away?" he questioned, seeming unsure himself.

I didn't know the exact distance, but even one hour would be too far. In the moment, and still as I write this, I'm torn at the decision ahead of us. I really want to follow my aspiration of being a famous author. But how can I possibly be selfish at the cost of losing the greatness we have between us? Next to mamá, Grayson Carey Welles is the least selfish person I know in this entire world. I insist he take advantage of this scholarship opportunity. If I don't, I'm not sure I could live with myself.

I looked out the full-length kitchen window, five stories above a street with dozens of people who were probably hurrying home from work. There was a man about to enter the crosswalk, carrying a long tube. He'd possibly been an architect himself. Was this a sign? The palm of my hand touched the glass as I felt a gnawing pain radiate from my heart. Within a second, I turned my head to see Grayson approaching me from behind with his arms stretched out. He rested his chin on my left shoulder.

I swiped at the tear falling from my right eye. "I don't know how far of a drive it is—Grayson," I admitted. "But even fifty miles between us would be forty-nine too many if it meant us being apart."

“Or I can wait to go until next year or something,” he said low into my ear.

I turned around to shimmy from his grasp. “No, we’re going to Boston together,” I said over my shoulder as I stepped through the living room towards our bedroom.

“No—Julian,” Grayson replied hotly. “You’re going to NYU this fall, and you’re gonna be the best fuckin’ writer to roam this Earth,” he shouted in my direction.

I shut the door behind me once I crossed the boundary separating our room and the hallway. I could hear his footsteps get closer while more tears spewed from my eyes. I didn’t want to be the one keeping him away from a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Something which would save him thousands of dollars. And I wasn’t going to entertain the thought of distance separating us for even one semester, let alone seven more. I wiped another stream of tears from my eyes. As soon as I heard the metal band of his watch rustling against the doorknob, I yelled back at him.

“Go away!” I hollered over my shoulder. “I need a minute, alright?”

Grayson didn’t bother respecting my privacy, entering the room anyway. He’s nothing if not incredibly stubborn. I turned around quickly, piping up yet again.

“I said?—”

Gray grabbed my neck, yanking me into his arms while he licked around the edges of my mouth. In the heat of the moment, my mind forgot all about Boston. Or NYU. Fuck me if the world didn’t stop turning itself. All that mattered was surrendering every ounce of my passion to him and his yearn for affection. Since Alex and Miles left town before I got home that day, we had the entire apartment to ourselves.

I slid the violet polo shirt over my head, freeing my arms while working on my black Dockers. Grayson tossed his work apron over his shoulder before stripping from a

pinstripe shirt and slacks. We both removed our underwear before he pushed me backwards to our bed. His tongue found its way from my mouth, and down my chest, before stopping at my exposed cock. It had been growing bigger by the second.

The motion of his tongue swirled around the tip of it, causing me to moan while electric-like sensations shot up and down my spine.

“Oh fuck, Grayson,” I muttered. “Don’t stop.”

His head bobbed up and down over my excited dick, while my trimmed nails dug into the back of his neck. I grunted in short intervals as the motion of his mouth picked up the pace, getting more and more intense as each moment passed by. Within a minute, maybe two, he climbed the bed. Grayson straddled me at the waist while positioning my aching cock between his ass cheeks. It slid inside his hole with moderate ease.

“Oh goddamn, Momo,” he shrieked. “Buck faster!”

At his instruction, I thrust my hips faster and harder. This led to a moan escaping my lips every few seconds. His ass felt so good. As if he’d been preparing for it all day at work. He pumped his erect dick with as much force as my own which plunged deeper into his hole. I pulled my head back into the pillows when I felt a rushing euphoria tingling in my groin. My hands squeezed the sides of Grayson’s waist as tight as they possibly could.

After another repetition or two, my cum shot inside him as I let out a loud scream. We hadn’t had sex in a few days, so the major relief felt so amazing. I let out a huge sigh of relief. After he realized the floodgates of my cock had burst open, he dismounted from my waist while a river of white rained from his ass, smearing all over my abdomen. Grayson stroked his dick faster, looking straight into my satisfied gaze. His bottom lip curled between his teeth while a fleck of light sparkled from his deep brown eyes. Within a moment, streams of his cum landed on my stomach, all

the way up to my Adam's apple.

He lurched his upper body toward me so that our bare chests rubbed against each other. His tongue licked the drops of his sweet release from my neck, before hovering above me with his lips locked with mine. I could taste subtle hints of the pineapple we shared that morning for breakfast as the flavor crept its way down my throat. Grayson grinned, running his fingers through my hair.

“We’re staying here in New York,” he said insistently.

I didn’t reply. I couldn’t. He slid his body next to mine and we spooned each other. His arms wrapped around me for what seemed like two hours, while a late summer storm thundered down on the streets of NoHo. I glanced out to the dreary sky as tears glided down my cheeks in the same likeness of the raindrops streaming down our bedroom window. All I could do was gag at the thought of him forcing me to let him make the biggest mistake of his life. There’s no way I’ll accept that solution.

GRAYSON

The reminder of my first argument with Julian has been stinging my conscience for the last few hours. My blurred vision of the road ahead is compromised by everyone's oncoming high beams on Highway 431, just outside of Nashville proper. Combining both factors is the recipe to one clusterfuck of a migraine. Pain throngs deep in my skull from brow to brow as I approach the neighborhood of Belle Meade. And if there's something I can be sure of, more ibuprofen is in my future. Oh, and a very hot shower.

At the instruction of Apple Maps, I turn left onto Page Road. It takes me down a long path where the houses seem to get larger and further apart from each other the more I drive South. According to the robotic voice coming out of my speakers, I'm supposed to be on the lookout for 1-3-5-8 off to the left-hand side. Through squinted eyes, I spot a double wrought iron gate but no numbers. According to my phone, I've arrived. I suppose once I punch in the security code, I'll know if I'm at the right place or not.

"Three-Eight-Two-Five," I say aloud, punching the buttons on a square keypad.

Within a moment, it's open sesame. I accelerate slowly down the winding driveway which takes me straight to Jeff's sizeable mansion. A whistle escapes my lips as I step out to the dirt and gravel. I suppose a big record label executive must truly need to have their clout on constant display. But I put nothing past Jeffrey.

Once I retrieve my suitcase from the trunk, I ascend the steps leading up to his front porch. After a minute or two from ringing the doorbell, I spot a person's silhouette

through beveled glass around his large alder door. It swings open to reveal Jeff's pretentious aspect.

"I didn't figure you'd answer your own door," I admit, trying to be friendly. Yet it probably sounded like a Freudian slip.

"Don't be silly, it's nearly ten o' clock," he responds. "Wallace is long asleep by now, what kind of an ass do you take me for?"

A fuckin' colossal one, Jeffrey!

He waves his arm, motioning me inside while I oblige. My suitcase bangs into my tired knee as I make lug inside the elongated foyer surrounded by walls and arches of dark stone. Jeff gives me a small tour while leading me up a spiral staircase on the far wall. We have a modest Manhattan apartment. Fuck. It's still not clicking in my head. I mean, I have a nice but humble Manhattan flat. But nothing this swish. Once we reach the top step, he points off to the right.

"This would be your guest room for the night," he offers, flipping the light on.

I peek my head inside like a curious dog sniffing around new digs for the first time. The cedar flooring faintly smells of citrus Pine Sol. The bed linens appear crisp, turned down for my desired slumber. It should be a very comfortable rest after my shower. After hoisting my suitcase on top of the bed, I point to the adjoining door across the room.

"This is the guest bathroom?" I ask.

Jeff nods. "It is, and it's stocked with all you'll need tonight."

"Great, I'm gonna take a long hot shower before going to sleep."

“Wouldn’t you rather take a nice dip in my pool and in-ground hot tub instead?”

I shake my head. “Nah, it’s been a lot of driving today,” I reply. “But thanks.”

He holds out a turned-up palm. “Come on,” he replies. “Apart from my wine cellar, it’s the best feature on my whole property.”

I’m really not in the mood to socialize with him. And I’m going against my better judgment just by staying here for the night. If he thinks I want to spend even an hour out in his backyard, catching up on lost time, he’s sorely mistaken. I offload the messenger bag from my shoulder, placing it next to my suitcase before skirting across the room towards the bathroom. All the while shaking my head for a second time.

“I’m not really up to socializing,” I affirm. “I don’t even have my trunks with me.”

Jeffrey persists. “Just a few minutes?” He drones. “I have an extra pair,” he continues, “we’re practically the same size, Gray.”

Ugh. Leave it to him to lack the capacity of taking a hint. No means fucking no, dipshit. I fight the thoughts inside my head while trying to articulate a sentence which won’t sound rude.

I stammer. “Oookay.”

Are you kidding me? Okay? That’s the complete opposite of ‘No!’ Since I’ve just committed to social interaction with someone who drives nails under my skin, now I must follow through.

His ears perk instantly at my acceptance. “That’s the spirit,” he replies cheerfully.

Jeff leaves the doorway as I find myself in the guest bathroom to pee—and probably

punch myself a few times for being a complete fucking pushover. Sometimes the words that escape my mouth in no way resemble my thoughts. It's something I've battled for as long as I've had the ability to talk. But God damn it, I will stand my ground and only stay out there long enough to put my achy muscles at ease.

The lights in this bathroom are brighter than the surgical floor at Mt. Sinai, only exacerbating the throbs behind my eyes. As soon as I flush the toilet, I wash my hands at the sink before heading out to my bag. Motrin has practically been my best friend on this trip. I shake the bottle next to my ear, wagering that there are maybe six remaining at the most. Between my headache and the throbbing wound above my eyebrow, I pour the last of them into my palm. I was right, exactly six. If my career ever took a turn for the worse, I might have a future as a pharmacy technician.

With my palm hovering the bathroom trash can, the empty medication bottle falls inside. I toss the tablets into my mouth, hunching over the sink to slurp some water from the faucet. Pulling away from the mirror, I take a gander at the doleful reflection gracing my exhausted sight. Who knew even a week ago that I'd be in the fifth circle of Hell, preparing to make a return visit to its very epicenter?

Jeff's sockless footsteps slap against the hard floor, just before hearing his voice from out in the room. "Here's some trunks," he says.

I switch off the bathroom lights to shuffle back to the bed. "Alright," I reply.

He points out from the doorframe. "Just head on down the hallway and use the other stairwell when you're changed, and the back door is right at the bottom of the steps."

I shrug. "K."

Jeff leaves so I can change out of my khaki shorts and underwear. The swim trunks fit just fine, but I've always despised the mesh fabric brushing against my junk. I toss

my phone down on the bed. Before the screen locked, I saw there was an unread text. I'll just read it later before I go to sleep. Since I want to get this damn swim—or whatever the hell it is—over with.

There's a series of splashes heard coming in from outside as I descend the stairs. And as I swing the back door, I can see Jeff is already submerged in the pool. Stepping closer, I can also make out that he's taken the liberty of selecting a bottle of wine to compliment this foray.

"So it's gonna be a whole thing I see," I say, gesturing my hands.

Jeff snickers. "After seeing the awful tear on your forehead," he points up in my direction. "I'd say a glass of this 1965 Gruaud Larose is well earned."

"That sounds expensive," I reply.

"Straight from St. Julien Bordeaux in France," he says. "Worth every penny."

Of fucking course! He just had to mention my dead lover's name. The way it slithers through those soulless lips forces a shiver down my spine. I let out a scowl yet try to conceal my rolling eyes while slipping a Five for Fighting band shirt up over my shoulders. Shortly after, I step in the water with my right foot, followed by the other. I toss the shirt aside, allowing it to fall where it may as I immerse the rest of my torso. The pool's coolness shocks my insides, sending each nerve on a race to acclimate to the drastic temperature change.

Jeff passes off a glass of ruby red wine. Then we tip-toe our way through the water towards the in-ground hot tub, which is sectioned off at the side of the pool. Lights shine up through the water giving the wine in my glass more opacity. And just as soon as my body had adjusted to the temperature of the pool water, my muscles feel a warm jolt from the jets shooting from the sides of the hot tub. He positions his

backside into a corner while I do the same in the other.

This heat certainly checks the boxes where finding relief is concerned. I raise the glass to my lips to take a large sip of wine, it tickles my throat on the way down. It tastes slightly of a green vegetable drowned in heavy notes of black licorice. A sigh of relief escapes my nostrils as I place the wine glass on the ledge above my right shoulder.

“It’s nice, right?” Jeff mentions.

I nod my head, letting these tired eyes of mine shut briefly to cherish the peace of this moment. “Not gonna lie, it is better than a hotel room shower.”

He continues to blather on about how he comes out here almost every night to let off steam. And apparently even sealed a one-billion-dollar acquisition deal with Whiskey Back Records in this very spot. Not that I give a good goddamn about his business. But in this minute, I find myself surprised and grateful that Miles recommended this. It’s my first taste of serenity in what seems like forever.

A couple minutes later, I reach up to feel for the stem of my wine glass for another sip. The second swig seems to go down smoother than the first, the flavor emboldening my taste buds. I hear my glass clink against the limestone surface just before feeling a hand creep its way onto my shoulder. Not even a second later, Jeff is muttering into my ear.

“Now you can really relax,” he says.

What had been a good few minutes of solitude is now thwarted by Jeffrey trying to seduce me. My eyes open to see him leaning into my face with pursed lips. Instinctively, my arms swing out in front of me before latching onto his shoulders. I push him away from my chest as a loud disgusted choking sound emits from my

vocal cords.

“What—the—ever loving—fuck—are you doing Jeffrey?”

Jeff stutters insatiably. “I just—” he stammers. “I just thought you deserved to let loose,” he adds. “I was trying to console you.”

“Jesus Christ!” I scream so loud, I’m pretty sure the house a quarter mile down the road hears me. “My husband isn’t even in the ground yet,” I add, hastily raising a leg over the partition which separates the pool from the hot tub.

I twist my head to condemn the bastard on my trek to the steps, attempting to pick up the pace. Which in water, isn’t very damn quick at all.

“And you think now is the appropriate fuckin’ time to make a move on me?” I rebuke the perv, shooting a prickly look in his direction.

“But—”

I shove my palm out behind me. “Just save it!”

I’ve reached the halfway point of the pool when I hear the splashing from his movement behind me. Try as I might, walking any faster isn’t getting me any closer to the fucking steps. Though I make good progress with one foot in front of the other. Jeff tries to spill more word vomit, making some other phony excuse for his behavior. But I’m definitely not buying the load of horseshit he’s selling.

Finally, the steps. Once my foot lands on the bottom step, I ascend quickly out of the water. My feet patter against the stone deck on the trail to pick up my shirt. There’s a small pile of towels on the table under a covered awning near the back door. I wrap one around my waist before stepping inside to head upstairs. There’s not a chance

I'm staying here after Jeff just pulled whatever the fuck that was back there. This spiral staircase is no match for slippery feet, as I've damn near fallen backwards a split-second ago.

At the guest bed, I loosen the towel while poking my head back through the shirt hole. After pulling my shorts back to my waist, I slip my bare feet into the shoes. Because I've always detested laces, they're slip-ons. This is one instance where I can be grateful for such an idiosyncrasy. Fuck putting on a fresh pair of socks. I need to haul my ass out of Jeff's mansion of debauchery pronto. I scoop my phone in one hand, raising the messenger bag over my shoulder. With the suitcase in grasp, I begin my journey down the first set of stairs we used when I first arrived. No sooner do I totter across his rustic area rug when I hear Jeff's voice under one of the arches from the kitchen.

"You don't have to leave," he claims.

I swing the heavy door open with a short glance over my shoulder. "Fuck right off, you piece of shit."

No time is wasted loading the car when I decide on shoving my suitcase through the driver's side door, over the center console. It can stay in the shotgun seat while I drive as far away from here as possible. As I press the button to start the ignition, my hands recoil momentarily from the steering wheel. I must remember how many sips of wine I'd taken. Two gulps hardly cause inebriation, so I should be fine to drive. As I approach his gate at the end of the driveway, I realize he probably has some clicker to open it whenever he leaves. Preventing me from a quick exit, of course. But my quick thinking prevails.

Luckily there's a knee-high wall, stretching several feet away from the gate which I can hop over to punch in the code. Almost as if I were coming in a second time. Fuck me for never wanting a repeat journey down this driveway ever again. Now all I need

is to remember the fucking code. I punch in 3-2-8-5 to no avail. Scratching at my head, I frantically comb through each brain cell in an attempt to recall what I'd literally just punched in not but an hour ago. Thanks to my semi-photographic memory, as if my mind has its own version of YouTube, it finally clicks. My fingers hammer out 3-8-2-5. And in a nanosecond, the gate unfurls in front of me.

GRAYSON

There's no worse feeling than a cigarette filter burning the insides of your fingers. Well, second to losing the love of your life. Or third to almost being taken advantage of when said lover's still in the freezer. Fucking Jeffrey Horton. I flick the fiery hot remnant out the window, all the while shaking my fingers from the slight but searing pain. Yes, I probably look like some spaz right about now. It might be illegal to do that in Tennessee, much as it is at home. But I'll take my chances, since there's not a goddamn thing out here for days.

I've been prisoner to my own thoughts for the last five miles. Just thinking about what a piece of filthy rich trash Jeffrey is. Console me? That's borderline predatory behavior if I didn't know any better. It takes every ounce of energy I have to stifle a fleeting yawn from my yapper. Luckily, I was able to find a gas station on the verge of closing as I hit the outskirts of Nashville. Apart from my serious lack of caffeine, my adrenaline shot into overdrive will keep me alert for at least the next sixty miles. I reach over to the messenger bag to grab yet another smoke and my lighter. If I will be driving most of the night, I might as well do it comfortably.

My arms lean over the steering wheel as I hunch over, lighting the stick of natural stress relief. A plume of smoke wafts toward the windshield upon a large exhale. My left elbow returns to the base of the open window, before planting my head into the palm holding the cigarette. It's become clear now that my smoking habit has permanent plans. Oh fucking well. Twenty years was a good run. As I continue due West, my mind relives a prior memory marking my first smoke-free year.

It was seven in the evening, and I'd just arrived home from a long day at work. My

overworked ass was already on a second Smirnoff Ice, planted firmly in the cushions of our sofa. Our TV clicker within grasp. The episode of Ghost Whisperer I'd TiVo-ed from the previous night was just returning from commercial break.

Julian rounded the corner of the kitchen, which led into our living room. "Get your charming ass dressed, Saccharo Ferre," he barked cheerfully.

I raised an eyebrow in the same motion as the upturned glass bottle. "And why is that?"

He grinned mischievously. "Because we have plans."

"Oh, is that so, huh?" I replied.

It was obvious Julian had torn a page from my own book of tricks and arranged a special night. But when my lover suggested I do something, I wasted no time hopping to it. I stood from the couch as I extended the television remote in front of my stomach to turn off the TV. My mind bidding adieu to David Conrad's beautiful mien in the process.

"Whatever you have planned Momo," I said, turning the bottom of my Smirnoff bottle above my nose. "You're gonna have to drive us."

He leaned in closer to plant a tender kiss on my lips. "I assumed as much, ya fuckin' lush," he joked, slapping my ass cheek as I turned in the direction of our bedroom.

At our open closet in the bedroom, I hollered out to Julian. "How fancy are we talking?" I asked. "Blazer—black tie and top hat?"

I could hear his footsteps clanging against the hardwood floor on the trail through the hallway. He stopped at the door frame and leaned inside with a raised eyebrow.

“Anything that isn’t those pajama bottoms or a bare chest,” he replied.

A grin warmed over my face as I dangled a long, silky red tie from my neck. “This doesn’t make my chest totally bare,” I shot off with a wink.

Julian laughed as he shuffled to emend my snark. “Do I need to dress you like you’re six-years-old, meus amor?”

My thoughts lusted about how fun a moment of role play would be. “Please do,” I replied shamelessly.

Julian retrieved a mint green button-down shirt with a navy-blue tie, then a pair of grey slacks. He placed them on the top of our bed, firing a silly perturbed look. “You’re gonna make me do it aren’t you?”

I grinned widely. “It was your idea, Momo.”

“Tsk tsk,” he clicked his tongue. “As you wish.”

Julian proceeded to remove my flannel pajama bottoms, after sending my arms through the shirt sleeves. Then his fingers nestled under the elastic of my underwear, when he steered his whiskey-stained gaze up in my direction—just as sweet as sin.

“Go ahead,” I said.

“Nah,” he replied, pulling against the elastic to let it slap against my waist like a rubber band. “We have eight-thirty reservations.”

The hint of reservations piqued my curiosity to which restaurant he was taking me to. In fact, I couldn’t imagine what special occasion we were about to celebrate, since we’d already commemorated his latest New York Times best-seller accomplishment

the week prior. Julian tended to the buttons on my shirt, starting below the collar. After stepping into each hole of the pants, I felt his finger slide the zipper up my crotch. My thoughts insisted that the night had better end with my dick in his mouth.

A half-hour later, we found ourselves opposite each other at a square table on the rooftop of Beekman Tower. Strings of lights dangled from one column to the other, much like garland during the holidays. And the perfect volume of music boasted Andrea Bocelli's tenor vocal range. His alluring melody drowned my ears, while my focus danced between Julian's suave brown hairs rustling around in the gentle wind and the majestic views of East River.

"Happy one year of not smoking," he said, hoisting a spoonful of panna cotta in front of my lips.

My tongue granted the dessert access to my tastebuds. Its silky smoothness satiated the yearn for relief in my mouth from an overly salted entrée of lasagna. The fact that he remembered such an accomplishment, when even I'd lost track, meant the absolute world to me. I thought in that tender moment, how very lucky I was to have bumped into his much younger incarnation at the end of a bookshelf at Felton High School.

The whirr of an oncoming semi-truck buzzes past my car heading Southwest, causing my body to jostle in the seat. It's for the best that I pay attention to the road, since this terrain is getting quite rocky. Despite it being a quiet and peaceful improvement over the pandemonium from Jeffrey's place, music will help me stay focused as I forge ahead.

"Hey Siri, play Spotify," I shout.

After a few seconds of even more silence, I realize that Siri is still not properly set up on my new phone. I form a grimace while unclasping my device from its dash clip. It's asking me to grant special permissions for Siri to access my Spotify data. Since I

already have the device in my hand, I just thumb over to the app myself, pressing play on whatever song played last. No matter how familiar I am with a song, I've never been the kind of person to enjoy a song from halfway through. So, I press the left arrows, replaying "New York" by Snow Patrol from the start.

Just before returning my phone to its spot on the dash, I'm reminded of two unread texts from earlier. I briefly study the road ahead to ensure it's safe to read a quick text or two, before opening them. They're both from Phoebe.

Whatever you do, don't check your work email until you get back home.

Also, the Starbucks account is empty, and the company AMEX card keeps declining. I see you've stopped into a few on your trip. So if you need something between now and Tuesday morning, just use the star balance. We only have 731 of them!

My sight returns to the interstate as I find myself wondering why on Earth the Spellman & Associates card would be declining. It's American Express. There isn't any logical explanation, and I'm sure Sue in accounting pays it in full each month. But now I'm curious why Pheebs told me not to check any emails until I'm back home. Much like anyone else in the natural born world, when someone tells me not to do something, it's precisely the first thing I feel compelled to do. Muscle memory tells my thumb to tap on the Mail icon, though I remember this is a new device. And I don't have the technical info to set it up myself.

There's another way to read them but doing so would take too much focus away from driving. A growl in my stomach reminds me that I haven't eaten a damn thing since Salem, Virginia. But at this time of night, I doubt there's even a fast-food chain within a couple hundred miles that's open. I return my phone to the dash before reaching over for another cigarette. It lights quickly so my right hand can return to the steering wheel. It seems tobacco will be the closest thing to food that I'll get tonight.

Another mile down the road, my headlights bounce against a green sign announcing upcoming towns and their distance. Dickson, Tennessee, is just ahead in another eleven miles. Perhaps there will be an all-night gas station where I can grab a snack. Although they've since dried, my feet are itching like crazy after slipping them into shoes without socks. Snacks and socks. The mental list in my head starts as I think of everything I need to do on my next stop. And find a toilet. I seriously must get my prostate checked.

My night hasn't been completely devoid of luck. In fact, I'm at a truck stop on the throne, in one of the cleanest bathrooms since Greencastle, Pennsylvania. And I've just finished sliding a fresh pair of socks over my tootsies. Now with the phone square in the palm of my hand, I thumb across the screen to the web browser. I search Google for Corpmail Web Client to find that the first result is precisely the page I need. Once it loads, I enter my user id—essentially just my first initial and last name followed by the @ symbol and the company's web domain.

Though I can focus on retrieving email this way, the lackadaisical cell service has me squatted here scratching my head while it loads too damn slowly. Finally, the inbox refreshes after a couple of minutes. This is where I'm reminded of what it's like to abandon work emails for longer than a day. There's a whole list of messages in reply to one single email, appearing to have been sent from Roger Spellman. That's Roger Spellman—as in my direct boss who founded the company in 1985. This strikes me as peculiar since he never sends out his own correspondence. It's always from his assistant, Amanda. Before I entertain the replies from my fellow partners, I figure I should read the original message itself. My hunger pains evolve into tiny stabs of dread the moment my thumb taps over the button to open it.

FROM: R. Spellman

SENT: Sunday, June 19, 2022 11:17 AM

TO: Company-All Recipients

To my esteemed staff and partners:

In light of the recent news on ABC7 NY, it is with my deepest regret that I send this to all of you. As a result of our pending Chapter 7 bankruptcy, Spellman & Associates will be ceasing operations effective sometime in January. With immediate reductions in our workforce beginning immediately. After meeting with the board, our company is unable to recover from the damage that's been inflicted upon it. I'm well into my seventies, as you know, so I won't be doing this again. But if there's one piece of advice that I should impart on all you younger folk, I'd urge you to be careful with the people you entrust with proprietary positions.

At your earliest convenience on Monday, please see Angela Moore in our Legal Department to sign a non-disclosure agreement as it is my hope that each of you can refrain from speaking to the press, or anyone. I appreciate your discretion in this matter. Forward all inquiries from news outlets to Stephanie in Public Relations. Please see your immediate supervisors to request a glowing letter of recommendation as none of you are at fault for this decision. If anyone's to blame, I'll shoulder it all by myself.

Respectfully,

Roger A. Spellman

President & C.E.O.

I have no fucking clue how to process this. As fast as the gears in my brain are turning, nothing comes to the surface. But my heart feels the major blow to my chest. I've just lost my one true love. And God damn it, soon I'll be losing my job. This is a place I've dutifully been employed for the past twenty-one years, when I started out

as a BIM Manager in 2001.

My thigh muscles spasm down my legs once I try to stand. I'd been sitting on the toilet for the last ten minutes, so it's no surprise as to why I'm sore. Outside the stalls is a long counter full of sinks, complete with the sensor technology which that wretched truck stop in Carlisle could have benefited from. I nestle the phone in my pocket while washing and drying my hands, before striding out to the store.

The reality of being jobless hits me as I wander these aisles, trying to remember what the ever-loving fuck I'm searching for. I'm finally reminded that I was hungry. That definitively being past tense now. Especially now that my nerves feel like they did on Tuesday night, when the doctor came out to tell me what I'd already known. Oh, for fuck's sake! I should have listened to Phoebe. I don't need this extra worry right now. If ever.

Back out in my car, I'm sitting here behind the steering wheel paralyzed with grief. I can't imagine what Roger meant by being careful who to trust . But I recall he mentioned there was a news segment on ABC7. I waste no time unlocking my phone to pull up their news website in my browser. Once it loads, I type the company name in the search bar to see if it populates anything. One solitary search result displays under a barrage of incredibly annoying internet ads. Though, it's a video.

If I barely had enough signal to load my work emails, I struggle to imagine a video will stream seamlessly. But I tap on it anyway because my curiosity isn't easing up. After a minute of buffering, it plays while I turn the volume as loud as it will go.

“A man has been arrested in Midtown East today on allegations of embezzlement and other illegal activities. Forty-eight-year-old, Kraig Winslow of Queens, was booked into the Manhattan Detention Complex for theft of company funds from Spellman & Associates on East 49th...”

I tenaciously yell at my phone, which has frozen and began re-buffering. “Oh—come on!”

After waiting for a minute longer, the webpage seems to have stopped responding. Now I’m not going to fucking know what happened. And there’s no way I’m calling Phoebe, since it’s almost two in the morning back home. But knowing all this is Kraig’s fault seems to boil my blood—thick like jam. How he could steal so much from the company to result in its bankruptcy—let alone at all—is ludicrous. All my sentiments of the dipshit must have been my gut warning me of his true nature this whole time. And right now, I’m feeling pretty goddamn irate.

A quick glance into the rearview mirror summons the demons dwelling within my chest to speak through my enervated pupils. With these thoughts of pure disdain and anger, comes a deep thirst for something strong to take the edge of this bitch. I climb back out of my Black Beauty, my feet meeting the concrete. There’s no time to waste heading inside to purchase whatever the hell they have which is at least eighty proof.

Back inside, a clerk standing behind the counter nods in my direction as I approach the counter. My head creeps over my right shoulder to study the booze selection behind him.

“If you’re looking for liquor, I can’t sell it to you,” Chris advises me.

My right eyebrow raises just enough that the pain from my gash forces me to grimace. “And why the hell not?” I ask just as rudely as I know it sounds. “I’m obviously old enough, thank you very much.”

He shakes his head. “It’s not your age,” he replies. “It’s the law,” he adds, pointing to his watch. “If it was tomorrow morning after eight, I could.”

Fuck me! Fucking Tennessee. Annoyed and incredibly inconvenienced, I turn around

to storm outside. As soon as the back of my wrist touches the germy push-bar, I hear Chris shouting out to me.

“But a bar can still serve you!”

That certainly catches my attention. I twist my head back around, at the enticing thought of a large gulp of scotch sliding down my pipes.

“And where’s a bar around here?” I ask, now feeling foolish that I treated him poorly before realizing he’s just rescued my night.

Chris points at the window. “Take this road here North a ways, then turn right for another bit and it’s on the left,” he instructs me. “If you see the Burger King, then you’ve gone too far.”

I processed maybe one coherent thing from his instructions. “Okay thanks,” I reply.

No sooner do I plant my ass back in the driver’s seat, when I light another cigarette. I take a hot minute to search Apple Maps for the closest bar from my pin’s location. According to GPS, it seems Chris was right. I take another long drag from my smoke, flicking the ashes out the window. Within another minute, I’m already cruising down State Road 46 on a quest for a satisfying taste of Glenlivet.

JULIAN

December 20, 1990

Gray and I have been in Boston for the last four months. Yes, I finally convinced him that we would move back to New York once he finishes school here. The conditions for me moving with him were that I re-enroll at NYU in about four years. And the other being that I work at least part-time because we both couldn't stay in his dorm at Northeastern University. It was pertinent that I earned the extra income so we could afford our apartment. I found a job in the pharmacy at Fenway Drugs. It's not so bad at all. Besides one male pharmacist, I'm the only other guy there. My coworkers seem noxious, but I keep my nose to myself.

I've since found a terrific social group for young adults, off-campus from N.U. It's called 'Writers on The Cape,' and they've taken a liking to me right away. In fact, I've already absorbed an abundance of tips to refine the style and voice in my writing. Since we all aspire to be famous authors one day, neither of us seem put off by healthy criticism if it helps us hone our craft. We meet twice a week, taking turns on whose place to gather each time.

My boy finally caught a break from selling groceries. Now he's waiting tables at a swanky steakhouse down by Harvard University. Dealing with hungry people has been a challenge for him, but his tips are usually always stellar. Of course, only the wealthier Bostonians can ever afford to eat there. But he gets a discount, so we've dined there one time. That was last night, celebrating my nineteenth birthday. However, the real celebration was on Sunday.

I woke up that morning to perform my usual stretch-out-of-bed exercise. After splashing water into my face in the bathroom, I shuffled out to our tiny, but adequate kitchen to fix coffee. To my surprise, the pot was already brewed and piping hot. Off to the side of the coffeemaker was a single red carnation in a vase, with a notecard propped next to it. As I lifted the card from the counter, a folded dollar bill fell freely to the top of my right foot.

Travel back in time to our first Boston date. You'd better get a hustle on or else you'll be late.

It took me a minute to catch on what sort of fuckery Grayson was up to. But the clue wasn't hard to zero-in on. He was likely waiting for me at the Sweets 'n Things donut shop on the corner of Columbus & Arlington. It closes early on Sunday's, so I figured I'd require the light rail. This explained why he left the dollar. Without wasting another minute, I hurried to the bedroom so I could slap on a fresh pair of pants and a sweater. Before heading out the door, I recovered my keys from the coffee table, then slipped into my jacket.

Around the corner, I stood inside the train stop for what seemed like forever. My arms shivered as I anxiously bobbed my torso to generate some heat. Finally, the rail slithered through, whisking me across town. The romance in this surprise didn't shock me one iota. Grayson's always going above and beyond with his grand gestures. But I wondered why he would want to meet at a donut place on a Sunday morning, instead of just taking me with him.

The short rail escort left me ascending to the sidewalk on Boylston Street. A frigid chill bit at my nose while rounding the corner at Arlington. It only took a matter of maybe four minutes before I finished my trek to the donut shop. All the while, tiny butterfly sensations flourishing my belly. I'm such a sucker for surprises, especially when they're a product of my Sugar Bear's creative imagination.

I arrived at Sweets ‘n Things with plenty of time to spare, only to see an elderly couple sitting at a table next to the large window. Grayson wasn’t anywhere to be seen. I figured he’d surely meant the donut shop, because it was our first date spot the weekend after settling into our new digs. I approached the counter, asking the lady if I’d by chance missed Grayson. She hunched over, retrieving another note card with a second red carnation. She smiled while passing it across the counter.

“Good luck,” she said. “And Happy Birthday, Julian.”

Along a narrow sidewalk are baby bronze ducks a’ flopping. But right around the corner, you’ll find the next clue waterside, so you’d better get to hopping.

At that moment, it occurred to me that Grayson was sending me on a scavenger hunt across Boston. I’d only seen this sort of thing in a movie one time, but never figured I’d ever have someone special enough to execute something similar. Boy was I wrong! And though it took a few minutes, I’d deciphered the precise location of where to go next. Up around the corner from the donut shop is Boston Common Park, where there’s a large fountain named Frog Pond. It’s on the East side of Charles Street, next to a group sculpture of bronze ducklings following their mother along the sidewalk. It had to be what Gray was referring to.

I took a stroll back up to Boylston Street, heading East before settling on the sidewalk at Charles Street. I crossed the paths winding throughout Boston Common to the fountain. While I cut through the park, I scanned around for what appeared to be another red carnation with a white notecard. This produced no results, so I stepped over to a small hut where tickets for the carousel are sold. The boy knew exactly what I’d sought after when I mentioned a carnation and notecard. He turned around at once to reveal my third clue. I graciously accepted it, thanking him for participating in Grayson’s romantic scheme.

I bet you’re wondering what comes after clue number three. So, keep heading East

where they spill all the tea.

That clue couldn't have been any more obvious. How could I forget missing those questions on a test in our third period History class? A mile East of Boston Common is a floating museum he and I visited a couple of months ago. They put on live shows, reenacting events from the Boston Tea Party. My curiosity intensified as I jetted down Dorchester to Congress, leading my curiosity for how many more clues he'd possibly send me on. Especially since I'd been seeking clues for about two hours by that point.

Just about midway, over the Congress Street Bridge, is the entrance to the museum. I stepped off under the guise Gray left my next clue with the girl in a ticket booth. As I approached, she must have immediately known what I'd ask for. Kelsey reached around to grab my fourth clue, yet another red carnation—but also a white paper sack from Sweets 'n Things.

“Happy Birthday, Julian,” she greeted me as I retreated, my nose sunk deep into the sack.

You're probably hungry by now, and that's perfectly fine. Enjoy this apple fritter and juice, while waiting for the Orange Line. Take it to the place where you'd expect to find me most. Your surprise is awaiting, next to Janet's post.

In the sack with the pastry, Grayson included another dollar bill which he'd wrapped in a piece of wax paper. He's nothing if not a major germaphobe. I sank my fangs into the fritter while returning to Kelsey in the booth, asking her where to locate the closest light rail stop. She pointed in the direction I'd just come from, informing me that the South Station hub is just down from Dorchester. With no time to spare, I treaded the path back over the bridge. My feet retraced their previous steps reaching Summer Street. And a half block down to the left was the rail hub.

The apple juice was lukewarm by the time I'd been able to drink it. But it cured my thirst, nonetheless. I disposed of my trash in a bin below a large map of the different routes while locating the Orange Line. Within a couple of minutes, I found myself over a threshold at the third gate. The rail carried me back across town to the West side, my suspicions narrowing on where I'd find Grayson on a Sunday during lunchtime—the university library.

Anticipation and excitement burst from within me by the time I'd walked from the Ruggles stop around a winding path. This had been a sentimental journey across town and back, but I must admit I was happy I'd approached the end of it. I entered the doors of the library with swagger, traipsing down the hallway. I couldn't imagine who Janet was, but figured she was employed by the university in some capacity. After striding through another set of doors, I spotted a lady standing behind a long counter. As she turned around to greet me, I saw her nametag read 'Janet.'

"I believe I'm looking for you," I said excitedly.

"You must be Julian," she replied, placing a book at the top of a pile.

I nodded nervously. "That's me," I said. "I'm supposed to find a surprise here—" I stammered, not entirely certain at that point. "I think anyway?"

Janet reached under the counter to retrieve another notecard. She slid it in my direction with amusement. I smiled as I scooped it off the surface, reading what appeared to be the final mysterious clue.

Sorry Momo, for the white lie. This will be your final clue. Find the book you told me about which made you cry. I promise your surprise won't make you blue.

I didn't require a single minute to remember which book I'd previously told him which made me emotional. Especially since it's the singlemost title which instilled

my aspirations of being a writer. Janet waved her hand, pointing across the room towards the card catalog. Once I approached the cabinet, my forefinger scanned through the labels of each drawer until I reached the corresponding bin to direct my steps in finding “The Great Gatsby” by F. Scott Fitzgerald. I grabbed a small pencil and slip of paper to write down the Dewey code.

There was a shelf off to my left, down a narrow walkway. And after a bit of searching in the American Fiction section, I located the correct shelf. When I turned the corner, I spotted Grayson and was pleasantly surprised to see Miles standing with Alex beside him. Each of them smiled as I practically ran towards my boy with outstretched arms for a big hug.

Grayson whispered low into my ear. “Happy Birthday, Momo.”

I gently nibbled on his right ear lobe while we hugged. “Thank you,” I replied, unashamed to be showing my affection in front of the boys.

Alex and Miles patted my shoulder at the same time. “Happy early Birthday,” Miles added.

Grayson cleared his throat, pulling his head away from mine. “You must not have had much trouble with any of the clues.”

I shook my head. “Fairly easy,” I admitted. “You’re a wordsmith yourself.”

“Speaking of words,” Grayson stated, pointing his finger in the air. “Alex?”

Alex turned around to bend over, picking up a rectangular box wrapped in green paper.

“This is your birthday present,” Grayson advised me. “It’s from the three of us.”

We left the aisle of bookshelves to sit at a round table, where I could unwrap my gift. Once I tore away the wrapping, a brown cardboard box revealed the words Macintosh PowerBook.

“You’re one of twenty-five lucky bastards on the planet to have one of these,” Grayson explains.

“How so?” I asked with a raised eyebrow.

Alex scratched his head before clarifying. “You know my dad is well connected,” he said with an open palm. “He knows a guy in charge of the beta testing for Apple Computers, so he was able to get his hands on one for you.”

It shocked me to no end to find out I was considered lucky by any account. But confused at the same time. “What do I do with it?” I asked.

Grayson piped up—but as soon as he did—we heard a loud hiss from around the corner because he blurted so loud. “You start writing your first book,” he said. “Just because you’re not in the writing program at NYU right now, doesn’t mean you can’t start getting your thoughts and words out.”

My finger found itself planted into the side of my head. “Ohhh,” I replied. “Well, I feel so honored to be one of the very first people to have one of these,” I added. “It must have cost you a fortune though.”

Alex held out his hand. “That’s not important man,” he assured me. “You’re what’s most important to us.”

I leaned over Grayson’s shoulder to kiss him in front of the boys—and anyone else who might have walked by at the time. In the quiet environment of the library, he and I continued pressing our lips together. We held each other for a couple of minutes.

I'm gratified by the lengths these guys went to, ensuring that Miles and Alex visited Boston to celebrate my first birthday since we'd become a unit.

GRAYSON

My second double scotch of the night slides down even smoother than the first. The emotive display on my worn visage leaves me a slight degree of embarrassed to be in a public setting. But remembering Julian's nineteenth birthday is such a happy memory to recall. Alex surely cracked heads to get his hands on that beta model PowerBook a year before its release. As for the three-millionth tear shed in less than a week, I'll get over it soon enough.

Honestly, I'm just thankful I had this pleasant distraction from stressing about my pending career crisis. But now that my fucking brain is dwelling again, this reality will consume me until I'm good and anesthetized from the agonies of my life.

It shouldn't be a surprise that this bar is country themed. Peanut shells are scattered across the entire floor. And the tinny western music is a bit louder than I'd prefer. Not that I don't enjoy music within the genre, because I do. But I wouldn't be caught dead with any western song which landed the airwaves prior to the eighties. Though complaining about the ambiance seems counterintuitive. I suppose I should be grateful there was a bar at all in this town.

The old-fashioned glass meets my lips for another swig just before I realize my driving progress is now stalled by at least a few hours. I'd find another hotel, but the hint of losing my job in seven months somehow makes my penny-pinching conscience strike a bullwhip. I'll just have to hope Dickson has an all-night diner like they did a truck stop.

Kenny sidesteps the edge of the counter, wiping the bar with a rag. "Need a third my

friend?”

As if I need a nanosecond to question my deep thirst. The answer to escape my mouth is a resounding agreement. “Keep ‘em coming,” I shout over the music, waving my extended fingers in a circular motion.

I suppose if I’m well on my way to momentary bliss, it would behoove me to investigate Apple Maps for that twenty-four-hour restaurant. Surely, it’s about time for last call, where I’ll need a place to sober up before I can drive again. And though the dark monster of despair has loomed its way into my shattered heart—turning me into an alcoholic like my father—I’m not without ethical boundaries.

The bottom of this glass turns up to nose level as I slurp every remaining velvety drop. I slam it gently against the bar while Kenny slides a tertiary refill in my direction. Once I enter my passcode, the lock screen of my phone defaults to the first column of apps. The results Apple Maps has populated shows only one option for an all-night restaurant. About a half-mile away is a Mexican fast-food place. But it’s better than a back breaking park bench or lying in the backseat of my car.

I hear a loud whistle from the opposing side of the bar, summoning my immediate attention. Kenny announces last call, just as I suspected it would be. And that everyone needs to place their final drink order before preparing to leave. Since I’ve already given my liver enough to metabolize for a good four hours, I think three doubles will be my limit. I might not be as dull to my senses as I want, but I’m sure my brain’s drowning in enough dopamine to quench its alky desire.

“Close my tab, will ya?” I yell out to Kenny, proudly waving the Mastercard above my head.

Once he’s free, Kenny retrieves the card from my fingers. He turns around to handle his point-of-sale and a moment later, hands me a receipt to sign. I scribble my

signature at the bottom, making sure to fill in a twenty-buck tip. The minute I prepare to leave, the voice of reason chides me for leaving a gratuity exceeding fifty percent. This is yet another sting from my frugal nature with a reminder that I must stop throwing away money. I yank the messenger bag over my shoulder, swiping my phone from the bar in the process.

The only other thing to cure my body's cravings, is a nice long smoke while I saunter down the road to Dos Hombres. My hand scours the bag to feel for a cigarette pack, all the while battling the Earth's noticeable rotation. I'm surely not pissed drunk, but a heavy buzz most definitely. As I slide the lid of my cigarette pack, my lips detect only four remaining smokes. Assuming it only takes me four hours to recover from this bender, I'll have one per hour. I bow my head to light the end before a loud car horn jolts my senses from behind.

I hear a guy shouting from his window. "Get out of the road, asshole!"

His car swerves around me, speeding off in the distance. I'm not tipsy, I'm fuckin' sloshed. I shake my head at the realization of what a fatuous idea it is to be staggering down the road—in the middle of it rather—on my hunt for something greasy and a soft surface to cushion my aching body. Now my equilibrium is even more out of balance. After exhaling a long drag from the cigarette, I continue zigzagging towards a blurry white sign with what I'm assuming is a cartoonish taco.

According to my phone, it's just about three in the morning. I'm stooped over a slender table inside Dos Hombres. So much purple and turquoise drowns the walls, it almost reminds me of a Taco Bell circa 1990. Just like the one Julian and I frequented in Felton. Oh, these damn memories. There's a long tube of incandescent light stretching across the ceiling every foot or so. If this three-day old stale coffee doesn't flush the booze quickly, maybe the sensation of being locked in a fucking tanning booth will.

My finger picks at a basket of soggy nachos I'd ordered when I arrived, while I spot one of the employees sitting down at a table across from mine. He retrieves a thick hardcover book from a blue backpack. He positions it in front of his face, revealing a picture of two men on a bright sandy beach which hogs the entire backside of the cover. It's Julian and me. Both with the happiest goddam smiles we could flash. The front of the book jacket is the cover of Julian's last ever New York Times best-seller, "Broken in the Bayou."

Prior to its printing, Seven Liberties Publishing requested that I send a picture of the two of us together. Since Julian's dementia struck in the middle of his writing process—and it was already under contract—I'd ghostwritten the rest. That and the fact that we'd already spent a large portion of its advance on a two-week trip to Puerto Rico. The plot in its own special way is an emphatic look at the dynamic between two married gay detectives in New Orleans, racing to solve the mystery of a missing autistic boy.

His outline was practically complete long before the first time I found coffee creamer in the microwave. Or his phone in the medicine cabinet. Suffice it to say, it wasn't hard for me to help him finish without his abundance of formal writing experience. When we went to submit the final draft, I wrote a detailed email to his editor which explained our predicament—also making sure to inform her it would likely be the last thing they'd ever publish under his name.

I shield my forehead as I shimmy out from the booth so I can slip outside for a cigarette, scowling at my wound still burning like a bullshit. Outside, a strong breeze blows in my face while I lean up against a coarse stucco wall. As inedible as those nachos were, my stomach regrets throwing them away before escaping the sights of apparently one of Julian's avid fans. Though this reminds me that I have yet another thing to do once I return home—report his passing to his publisher. And while I'd certainly benefit from any of his residuals, I don't feel accepting them on his behalf is entirely fair. Perhaps I can arrange for any future profits to be donated to an

Alzheimer's focused charity.

After exposing my hooch drenched skin to the wind for several minutes, I swing the door open. All the while hoping that employee has finished his break. The last thing I want right now is to be recognized when I'm hardly even famous by proxy. I toss the empty cigarette pack into the waste bin as I walk by it, drawing in deep breath because I'm fresh out of them. Thankfully, the boy has left. Since I have time to spare before it's safe to assume driving, I unlock my phone to type out a text to Phoebe. Judging by the typos in my message, it's evident my vision is still impaired.

I shotuld have followed youre advice. But oh well..... I casn't go back in time and charge things now. also startted wartching the ABVC7 N news segmrnt, but it friize. Gud daamn him! Who does her thuknk he iss?

GRAYSON

My arms flail over the edge of this table after feeling a person's hand pressing into my shoulder. I'm so terribly exhausted that my eyes may need to be forcibly pried open. I raise my head—opening them anyway—to see a Hispanic man staring down. I glower back at him, shielding my eyes with the crook of my arm. The rays of sun peering through the window beside me are seriously too much to bear at whatever the fuck 'o clock in the morning it is.

“Are you okay amigo?” He asks curiously.

“I take it I'm not dead?” I retort, glaring at him from beneath my elbow.

He shakes his head. “No,” he replies. “You look pretty alive to me,” he adds. “But you look like mierdo.”

That tracks. Like the saying goes, “if it looks like shit, and feels like shit, it must be shit.” Even though I have my days mixed up, I could accurately guess how long it's been since I slept in an actual bed. Judging by the time on my phone—displaying seven and two zeros—I'm going to wager around seventy-two hours. I unfold from the table with a scowl, lifting the messenger bag over my shoulder. Among the useless items inside, my sunglasses should take precedence over a bag of Werther's Original candies.

I wave to the restaurant worker as I approach the door to leave. On my trek up the road, the blinding light of day reminds me that I need to buy another bottle of Motrin. There's certainly more traffic at this hour than last night. But since I'm sober, my gait

is much straighter and faster. It takes no time at all to reach my Black Beauty in the bar parking lot. I reach in the bag to retrieve my key fob so I can unlock the door before climbing into the seat.

My parched mouth longs for anything wet. I turn up the cup of gas station coffee from Nashville to discover there's not so much as a drop left. Which is fine, since I'm stopping at that truck stop to buy more smokes and ibuprofen anyway. I toss the empty cup behind me, allowing it to land where it may. I'll surely be giving my car a good detail once I'm back home. Fuck the mess, right?

Back in the bathroom at the truck stop, I stand before the urinal to empty my bladder. Then turn around to the automated sinks. While washing, I splash water up into my face. And when I raise my head, I catch a glimpse of the disheveled son of a bitch staring back at me. It's ironic how little I paid attention to my own reflection before Julian's death. But now it feels like all I've been able to do is look at the facade gaping into my soul. This isn't the Grayson Welles I once knew. And I fear the old me is so far gone, just like my lover, he's down the pan forever.

I pat myself dry with the base of my shirt before dragging my feet out to the store part of the truck stop. No time is wasted filling a tall cup of freshly brewed coffee, certain to taste better than Dos Embres. On the other end of the store is a personal needs shelf, brimming with a variety of products from caffeine tablets and pain relievers to condoms and lubricants. It is a truck stop after all. I shouldn't be shocked that a place such as this lives up to the stereotype. After retrieving a cold Red Bull from the cooler, I approach the front counter to see Chris is still here.

"You're still in town, eh?" He says, tallying my items.

I rub the side of my throbbing temple. "Well I drank a bit after leaving here last," I reply under the veil of a nauseous wave. "I waited to sober up before I hit the road again."

“That’s fair,” he says with a nod.

“And two packs of Camel Turkish Golds please,” I add.

Chris raises his chin to the tobacco shelf hanging from the ceiling. “Sorry, it seems we’re all out of the Turks,” he informs. “I only have regular,” he adds.

I shrug. “Guess it’s time to graduate back to full flavor.”

While he scans the smokes into his register, I insert my card to pay. Chris bags my items as I return my card to the wallet in my messenger bag.

I reply much more cordially than when I left this counter last night, nestling the cup of coffee in my left hand at the same time. “Have a good day.”

“Safe travels, guy,” he responds with a wave.

Well over an hour after leaving Dickson, I find myself passing by the umpteenth sign announcing a cemetery in Tennessee. I’ve never driven past so many burial grounds all in a single day before. People here must not believe in cremation. Speaking of which, I need to try reaching Steve at the New York County Coroner’s office. I’m curious how much longer I need to wait before Julian’s body can be transported down to Felton. Since of course, it was his wish to have a viewing before a cremation. So I must respect some of his family’s Catholic traditions.

No sooner do I formulate a command to Siri when I realize she’s still not likely to recognize my deep accent. My eyes remain focused driving as I unhook the phone from its dash holder. By inputting my passcode, my thumb can hover over to the browser, in search of the coroner’s office phone number. If I wasn’t a crooked-up piece of shit, I wouldn’t have lost my old phone. Thus, his contact would be stored in the call history. Before I can press the dial button, my phone vibrates while the

Bluetooth incoming call tone blares from the car speakers.

“Hello?”

“Hey, where are you now?” Miles asks.

I return my phone to its holder. “Probably about an hour away from Memphis.”

Miles lets out a very audible yawn. I can respect that sentiment so damn much.

“So you’ll be back in Louisiana today then, right?” He asks.

“Accounting for a stop to get lunch and gas,” I reply. “I suppose it’s more than possible.”

“Well, I’m calling because I don’t understand another one of your texts,” he says. “Alex and I are so worried about you.”

I rack my memory to recall what I could’ve sent him. In fact, I don’t remember talking to him since back in Maryland, I think sometime early yesterday.

“I don’t remember texting you anything recently,” I say. “But I do remember Jeffrey fucking Horton trying to make a pass at me in his pool last night.”

Miles gasps. “He WHAT??”

“Yeah, that fool thought I was so down and out needing—” I begin but pause for effect. “—Consoling.”

“You’re kidding me,” he replies.

I shake my head. “Nope, so I high tailed it out of there and ended up?—”

Another awkward pause interrupts the conversation. I’m uncertain how to say what I need to without thinking about the truck stop where I learned of Spellman & Associates’ demise. Or conversely, without confessing that I got a tiny-bit drunk again last night to obscure the detriment.

“Hello?” Miles speaks. “Did the call drop?”

“No I’m here,” I cut back to him. “I just lost my thought, it’s been happening a lot lately.”

Without skipping another beat, Miles hones in on his suspicion. “Have you been drinking a lot lately?”

Fuck. Do I tell him the truth, or do I make up an incredibly absurd lie that will inevitably just expose itself later?

“Uhhh—” I stammer. “Yeah I mean—wouldn’t you if the tables were turned?”

“Perhaps,” he admits. “But you know I’ve been down that fuckin’ road before,” he adds anecdotally. “So I might know my limits by now.”

So he thinks. Until someone is in my shoes, nobody really knows the depths of which their inner demons will sink, to check themselves out of reality if for even a couple of hours.

A small cough escapes my lungs. “Until someone walks in my shoes, they don’t know what this feels like.”

Miles clears his throat. “According to Elisabeth Kubler Ross, the stages of grief don’t

come in the same order for everyone. But?—”

“Well,” I reply. “She can kiss my queer white ass,” I add with indignation. “I’ll grieve how I want to.”

I want to tell him that my company’s about to lose its stature in the architectural world. Undeniably, if it’s been in the news, he already knows and just doesn’t want to add more undue stress. Much like Pheobe. Oh, fuuuuuccckk me! Once my brain lands on her name, it occurs to me that I have texted someone in the early inebriated hours of this morning. And now I’m almost certain that I mistakenly sent it to Miles instead of her.

“Are you sure there isn’t anything Alex or I can do?”

“No, I’m about to call the coroner because I need to arrange for Julian’s body to be flown down to Felton,” I respond. “Just thinking about that brings undue stress, because you know that means I’ll not only be forced to confront Julian’s family—” I add. “It means I gotta contend with my own fucking sperm donor.”

Miles clicks his tongue, I assume sympathetically. “Would you be terribly opposed to Alex and I flying down there for the funeral?”

“That’s not necessary,” I say.

“We’d like to be there to give our respects,” he replies. “I even think the Wilkins jet is available this week.”

I can deal with this all on my own. I’m sure if I’ve made it this far, albeit a few drunken nights and a head wound later, it’s likely I’ll survive making all the arrangements on my lonesome. But far be it from me to prevent our very best friends from paying their respects to my departed Jules. I hear Miles’ muffled voice as if he’s

pulled his phone away from his face to converse with Alex.

A moment later, I hear the microphone reacquaint with his chin. “Okay, if you want to come,” I say. “I’ll let you know when exactly.”

“I’ll go ahead and put in for immediate time off at the station and we’ll pack a bag,” Miles says. “Alex just said we can probably be down there as early as tomorrow.”

“Well alright, I haven’t booked a hotel room yet,” I reply. “So I don’t even know where I’m gonna stay.”

Miles’ voice becomes unintelligible another time whilst my attention remains on Interstate 40. The sign I’m about to pass says Memphis is fifty-five miles away. Just as I see I’m passing through Willis, Miles’ words become intelligible once again. While he starts talking, I light another cigarette.

“We’re looking up hotels right now,” Miles returns to the call. “And given all your circumstances, why don’t you just let us book a suite we can all share?” He insists. “You’d check-in and stay tonight, then it’s already done for our arrival.”

I think I understood all that. What I’m most curious about is the fact he probably already knows about Spellman & Associates. And he’s just not wanting to bring it up because he knows it will agonize me even more. Too late, brother. I’m well past that.

My throat clears from the tickle of smoke. “Sure, I guess that sounds fine,” I agree. “And I’ll cover our meals for as long as we’re down in Satan’s asshole.”

“We’ll see,” Miles replies.

“Well, I gotta call the coroner,” I respond. “I was about to call him when yours came through.”

“That’s fine, I’ll text you with what hotel to check into,” he says. “And try to stay away from the booze tonight?”

I flick the ashes from the end of my smoke as I end the call, while thoughts about abstaining from alcohol tonight rises to the surface. If I’m already dreading the extremely arduous task of meeting Julian’s parents for the first time, it’s going to be twice as hard telling them his presence ceases to exist. I won’t be placing any bets on if I will drink tonight. Quite frankly, I’d have a better chance of winning the lottery.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:34 pm

JULIAN

July 16, 1994

It's been such a whirlwind year, but my Saccharo Ferre and I made it by the skin of our teeth. The last few months were especially vexing for him. Especially since he'd been preparing for his very last set of finals, concluding his education in Boston. While he spent months tugging on his beautiful, lush hair, I did much of the same. I'm sure I've written about this previously, but I was promoted to Lead Technician at Fenway Drugs a year ago. It came with a pay raise of an extra dollar per hour—and fifty percent more stress than what I was accustomed to.

We just returned to New York City a couple of weeks ago. Pretty much right after my replacement was hired at the pharmacy. Gray found some entry-level technical position with a building outfit—an acronym with a few letters which I don't truly know what they stand for. Though, he's happy so far and that's all I could ever ask for.

As assumed, Alex and Miles insisted upon moving us back in with them. Though, they've since relocated to Gramercy Park. Same conditions as before, just need to contribute to groceries. Which is helpful because Gray and I are paying for my education now. After years of not tossing a dime at Northeastern University for his. This fall I'll be attending the NYU writing program. I didn't go back on my promise of re-enrolling, as I have never once given up on my aspirations.

There are already two manuscripts in my moving boxes, but they remain unpublished. This could possibly change within the year, since I'm back in the office at Seven

Liberties Publishing. Only this time, I'm being paid a small wage to help the acquisitions editor weed through submissions from agents. Though it's part-time because I'm taking all the required general ed subjects for my English degree. But my first paycheck didn't go completely without a splurge. Yesterday, I surprised Grayson with a romantic night out to celebrate our reinduction as Yankees. That's what Miles calls us anyway.

Once I arrived home from work, I quickly stripped my clothes. I figured Gray would be home soon after me, so I stepped into a shower to clean off while waiting. I reckoned that he'd show up the minute I stepped in the tub. And sure enough, the front door slammed shut as soon as water started trickling down my backside. I heard him searching the apartment, calling out my name in the usual spots. After a third shout, he found me in the bathroom.

"Is that you Momo?" He asked from the doorway.

To fool around with him, I lowered my voice to a baritone octave. "No, I'm Gary."

It must have sent an extra piston firing in that engine of his. "Gary huh?"

I smiled, knowing full well he'd turn it into a fun little role play. "Yeah, Julian's boyfriend," I said.

"Well—Gary—" he started. "Got any room for Julian's 'other' boyfriend?"

His undressing silhouette could be seen through the shower curtain. He bent over, sliding off his underwear before reaching his hand inside. In another second, his head peeked around the curtain while my hot little Sugar Bear's eyes scanned me from head-to-toe. I tugged on Grayson's arm, urging him over the ledge of the tub before I tilted my head to feel his lips press into mine. His right palm landed on the side of my neck while our tongues dove deep into one another's mouth. Water rained down his

black hair, as my right hand traveled the length of his spine—down to one of his ass cheeks.

We kissed for minutes, only pausing for me to grab the bar of soap so I could lather suds all over his body. Once he was cloaked in soap, Grayson returned the favor. We've showered together plenty, but it seems each time ushers a new possibility.

"You're so filthy," I said, paying special attention to clean the muck around his neck.

He caressed my cheek softly with a dirty thumb. "I was at a construction site today."

I let the shooting strings of water rinse the exfoliation from Grayson's skin, before he pushed my backside into the tile behind me. My head instinctively cocked back the second his hand gripped my cock.

While I'd made dinner reservations, I didn't fight the notion of giving him my load before we left. "We gotta hurry, we have plans," I insisted.

He raised his eyebrow out of curiosity. "Oh yeah?" He muttered. "And where is—" his tone lowered to the octave I spoke earlier. "—Gary," he added for emphasis. "—Taking me?"

"Gage and Tollner on Fulton," I replied with a grin.

Grayson's voice squealed as if in shock. "Brooklyn?" He questioned, his hand starting to stroke my dick with vigor. "That place is expensive—yes?"

I moaned at the touch of his generous hand. "I have a feeling you're about to earn it," I replied audaciously. "Besides, our first New York date was in Brooklyn."

"But 'this is' our first date, Gary," he joked, leaning in to plant another kiss before

lowering to my waist.

Grayson's mouth felt sweeter than sunshine. His tongue circulated the tip of my cock every time he pulled back for some air. We've been so busy from the moment we'd packed to move, up until now. Especially since he'd already had an interview set up with Tusk Innovations before our return. To that end, we've barely had enough time to fit in a decent meal. Let alone sexy times.

The water started growing cold before my dick throbbed insatiably. A moan or two escaped my lips as I smacked my hand into the wall enclosing us. Within a second, I screamed to the cadence of the pure pleasure ejecting from my cock, literally at the speed of sound. Gray didn't pull his head back to waste a single drop of my Latino delight. His gaze met mine with a look of admiration. Fuck! I probably appreciated it the most. I fully intended on responding in kind the minute we came home from dinner.

Later in the evening, we sat down at our table at Gage and Tollner. The cashed paycheck nestled inside my wallet didn't discourage me from dropping the entire stack in one place, since we don't have to start paying NYU for a couple of months. Grayson, however, required an entire pep talk just to order a nice ribeye. Gage and Tollner charges by the ounce, which stung some deeply rooted thriftiness inside my man. It took an act of congress, but he finally agreed on the steak.

"Since you paid for dinner, let me at least cover dessert," Grayson offered.

I'm pretty sure what escaped my mouth sounded like a chortle. "Sorry, Saccharo Ferre, your cock is too savory to be considered a dessert."

I took his left hand as we retreated from the restaurant with very full bellies. There wasn't a chance I had enough room to devour an extra course, but my palate will never deny the thing hidden behind his zipper.

“And what’s for dessert?” I asked anyway.

Grayson pointed up the sidewalk. “There used to be a cheesecake outfit around the corner here,” he informed me. “At least I’d heard about it years ago.”

Uggghhhh. He’d just struck me with my vice. Fucking cheesecake. Though sex was on my agenda—and usually always is—I couldn’t help but salivate at the mention of something my coworkers back in Boston took turns bringing every Friday. We rounded the corner of Smith Street before crossing at the intersection at Livingston. Off to the left was the grand haven of them all—Aunt Mary’s Cheesecakery.

“This is esteemed to be the cheesecake palace in all of New York,” Grayson said, swinging the door open for me.

“Palace huh?” I questioned with my eyes as big as Jupiter.

But the truth is—besides Grayson’s pretty face—it might have been the most magnificent thing I’ve seen in my life. From case to case, dozens upon dozens of Cheesecake varieties spread throughout the shop. Granted, this was Aunt Mary’s modus operandi. So of course, there would be different options to choose from. Yet my eyes grew bigger than my stomach.

“Choose one, Momo,” he insisted. “And we’ll take it somewhere quiet.”

I selected a raspberry amaretto cheesecake before trekking back to his parked truck a few blocks down Fulton. He drove through downtown Brooklyn, stopping in a spot as he took my hand to usher me down a brick path through Prospect Park. We found a bench surrounded by oak trees. There, we took a seat while Gray retrieved a single plastic fork from the plastic bag with our dessert. It was entirely impossible for us to eat the whole damn thing. In fact, I’m eating a leftover piece now as I sit here writing this.

His lips intersected mine with intervals of tasting our dessert, raising his hand to my mouth for each bite. Grayson's quite adept at feeding me like a mother would her infant. The sky turned dim as I marveled at the twinkles of cosmic dust. Scanning the void above us, my eyes wandered aimlessly for the North Star. At that moment, I hoped that mamá would be consumed by the allure of our constellations at precisely the same time. Despite Central Park's lack of substantial lighting, we still found our way back to the truck unimpeded.

The building doorman greeted us upon our return home just past ten. Once we reached our bedroom, Grayson unbuttoned my yellow shirt with white polka dots before practically ripping my khakis to shreds. I held out my finger, while sauntering to the living room for a few candles from a stand behind the couch. Once I returned, I realized his thoughts of setting the mood resembled mine to an exact degree.

A Spanish version of "Stand by Me" graced our ears as I lit the candles, setting them on our nightstand. I turned around at Gray's touch, raising his hands to my neck. His tongue plunged directly into my mouth. It takes very little to set fire to my man's mojo as fiercely as Austin Powers. But we have this shared affinity to Latin and Spanish, both incredibly sexy in their own right. We swayed to the melody in candlelight while our adjoined lips formed every shape imaginable. And in one fell swoop, I nudged him backward to the bed.

He landed atop our goose down comforter with a look of zeal, as I traced my fingers up his thigh. My fervor got lost in his carbonated gaze. Once my hand traced over his bulge, I unzipped his pants. They slid down his legs as he pushed his head back into our pillows—precisely the very moment my tongue touched the tip of his already throbbing cock. It tasted clean from our shower earlier, yet a fresh salt flavor glazed over His Majesty. He moaned while my mouth dipped up and down, my tongue like a homing device slithering around his sweet spots.

Much like me earlier in the shower, it didn't take long for him to climax. When his

nuts released the lever, it was Puerto Rican monsoon season directly into my face. I swiped my fingers across my cheek, inserting them into my mouth to taste the passion to escape his well-endowed cock. Gray's warm torso invited me to brush up against it, as I reached for a washcloth in the top drawer of our nightstand. After a second of fishing around the drawer, he leaned over with his tongue. It smoothed all around my face, lapping up every morsel of his release.

We held each other in the dark with the occasional reflection of a flame dancing across the ceiling. His hand made little circles across my chest hairs—something I've begun accumulating the past couple of years. Meanwhile, the cassette tape finished playing, leaving the two of us to bask in each other's loving presence. Another few minutes later, Grayson tossed an idea way out of left field.

“Let's try having a kid.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:34 pm

GRAYSON

There's a harrowing pit in my stomach. It can't be hunger since I'm eating right now. I've stopped at a pizza restaurant in Winona, Mississippi, for a couple slices of pie and a tall glass of Coke. My gut feels it's more than likely due to the fact that I'm closely approaching Felton, Louisiana. As much as I don't want to face the music, it's headed my way come Hell or high water. Or perhaps just Hell, which paints the landscape quite vividly.

Julian's second New York City journal has distracted me for the last few minutes, but now it's time I revisit my present circumstances, as grueling as they are. But I'm missing out on a large chunk of his Boston entries, which pisses me off to no end. It's my own drunken fault. I'd reached Memphis today when it dawned on me that I left his Boston journal at The Six String Saloon in Dickson. As I review their hours listed by Google, I can clearly understand that they're still closed. But I've made a mental reminder to call this evening and beg the manager to mail it home. I can't lose another piece of him. I just can't. Before locking my screen again, I notice there are two texts from Miles I've yet to read.

The closest decent hotel to Felton with a two-room suite is The Wilhelm in Franklinton. All you need to do is let them scan this barcode and they'll take you upstairs. The Wilkins jet will be wheels up at eight in the morning and we should land at the regional airstrip around eleven local time. Hopefully the rental we've reserved is waiting for us.

We're bringing Boo Radley. He'll be excited to see you.

He's always thinking of others. I have no Earthly idea what I'd do without Miles, or Alex for that matter. It does mean a lot that they're coming to Julian's funeral. And I guess it will be beneficial to have some moral backup in front of my fucking family. Hell hath no fury like a Captain Langford scorned! Another carbonated taste of Coke fizzes the back of my throat before I finish the last bites in front of me. As a New Yorker, I really should enjoy all the parts to a decent pie. But there's something about the hard crusts which I've always found off putting. After wiping my fingers clean, I hammer out a few replies to Miles.

K, Franklinton is just a few minutes from Felton.

Also, I spoke to Steve's office. They're arranging a quick transfer of Julian's body and will be arriving by plane on Wednesday. They just need my father to electronically sign some form. I don't plan on facing him until tomorrow. And I'm not looking forward to it either.

Yes, it will be wonderful to see our Boo Bear. Or fuck, I guess I should just say 'my' Boo Bear now.

Albeit slowly, it's registering in my vicious psyche that Julian's gone. But I find myself still claiming joint ownership of our possessions. A shrilling scream of a young child at a table across the restaurant causes me to jump inches out of this booth. He's crawling around on all fours underneath the table, with bouts of jumping from one chair to another like a monkey. The look on his mother's face seems beyond taxed as she bounces a baby in her left arm. Seeing the widened eyes on her baby takes my mind back to the journey Julian and I took in the fall of 1994.

Alex and his only sibling, Jessica, sat opposite Julian and me at O'Doul's Pub in Yonkers. She'd just returned from the doctor's office, bristling with excitement. Good news for he and I, for sure.

“So, they’re happening,” Jessica said gleefully, sliding a photograph across the table.

I scooped it from the surface as my eyes grew to the size of oranges. “They?”

“Yes Daddies,” she confirmed. “You’re gonna have twins.”

Twins. The thought permeated my brain. I was so elated that Julian and I would be raising one bundle of joy. But two? After an initial shock of the plural noun, tears of joy burst from my lower lids. I turned my head to get a read of Julian’s flummoxed aspect. His eyes were probably bigger than my own, with a lip curved inward.

“Twins—Momo!” I exclaimed, brushing the back of my hand against his cheek.

Julian let out a sigh. “I guess I’d better start persuading my boss to consider my own manuscripts,” he avowed.

At twenty-four, I was already doing financially well for the both of us. It’s what gave me the inkling that we might have been ready for a child in the first place. I knew society didn’t yet have a grasp for affording gays the same rights as straight couples adopting children. That’s when we pursued a surrogate—someone we knew we could trust. Just about three months earlier, at the suggestion of a coworker, Julian and I harmonized our seed into a cup. We supplied Jessica with a turkey baster, leaving it up to the universe to determine whose DNA our baby would possess. In fact, we almost thought it didn’t work. Much to our surprise, it seemed to surpass our hopes by a mile.

A nervous feeling imploded from within. “Maybe we’re gonna need that extra income after all,” I replied, side-arming my Puerto Rican sensation.

Our foreheads rubbed against the other while I caught a glance of Alex beginning to shed a tear at the sight of our public displays of affection. Even though the four of us

had been accustomed to communal admiration.

“The obstetrician has assigned a due date of the first week in May,” Jessica added.

Julian and I gasped excitedly, our joy teeming in unison.

“Your birthday,” he said with the biggest fucking smile I’d ever seen.

While I exclaimed, “my birthday!”

Too many positive sensations combusted within me. At that moment, I felt like the universe was gracing us with two exceptional gifts. It didn’t matter that we’d have to work a little harder to afford it. I made an instant decision, convincing myself that I’d go to the ends of the Earth to make it all work out if that’s what it took.

After a few minutes of gleeful conversation, many mental notes and plans for the future, Julian and I marched outside the pub. We desperately needed whatever fresh oxygen Upstate New York could spare. The autumn air cleansed my lungs as I peeked up at the cirrus clouds skirting across the sky, thanking whomever responsible for giving us more than we’d asked.

I rise from the seat, gathering my small mess to toss in the garbage before I return for the journal and my messenger bag. There’s only about three or so hours of driving left. Then, I’ll find myself within the margins of misery. If it’s even possible to suffer more than I already have. Immediately out the doors, I light another cigarette, taking a deep inhale of nicotine on my schlep to the car. These temperate conditions in the Southern states are so terrible, it feels like a live-action adaptation of “The Divine Comedy” for the big screen.

Watching the single mom from inside the restaurant load a baby carrier into her minivan ushers my memory back to our paternal attempts of raising a family. With

Interstate 55 ahead of me, I have nothing but time to be a slave of yet another traumatic time in our lives.

It was nine on a frosty Sunday morning in January of 1995. I'd been fresh out of a shower while Julian broke his back preparing our breakfast waffles. A black towel adorned my waist as I ran my fingers through my wet hair on the trek out through our living room. The phone rang once I reached the kitchen in our recently moved-into Astoria apartment.

I lifted the phone receiver plugged into the wall adjacent to our refrigerator. "Hello?"

"Gray?" Alex asked, seeming uncertain if he'd dialed the correct number.

"Yeah," I replied.

I could hear the crack in his booming tenor voice. "I don't know how the fuck to say this."

With my back to Julian, I swallowed whatever fluid remained in my mouth, preparing for whatever bitter pill I was about to be dosed with. "Okay?"

"Jessica—" he muttered, pausing briefly. "Jessica left a message on our answering machine this morning."

It was in that moment when my gut felt like a large boulder had painfully sunk from my esophagus down into my stomach. Whenever anyone begins a conversation as he just did, it's never pleasant news.

"Oh my God—Alex," I gasped. "What's wrong?" I asked, although I had my suspicions of what was about to eject from his mouth.

Alex's harried tone confirmed those suspicions without the need for a single fucking word. "Jessica said—she lost the—the babies on Thursday" he stammered. "And now I can't get her to answer my calls."

That was it. The confirmation that my biggest fear had just become our new reality. Julian shuffled from around the counter, wrapping his arms around my torso with an eager tongue at the base of my left ear. I questioned how the hell I would relay the bomb Alex dropped seconds prior. But my brain was so entirely hung up on the words 'lost the babies,' that I was incapable of processing anything beyond that.

"Grayson?" Alex blurted. "Are you still there?"

I tried replying. I truly made an attempt. But much like when my father accosted me with his fists of rage years prior, my heart froze like a giant ice cube. And the ability to form a single word, much less a whole sentence, seemed to be an impossible feat.

"Grayyyy?"

My right hand thumped the switch hook, ending the call. I didn't necessarily mean to be rude, but there was no way I'd be able to reply. It was entirely some instinctive reaction. My head twisted to see the honeyed expression warming Julian's mien evolve to the exact opposite. Like I didn't need to share the awful news to my lover. He just knew something had boarded the Southbound Express by that point.

His freighted gaze crushed the iceberg in my chest, rendering it useless altogether. "What's the matter, Saccharo Ferre?"

I unraveled from his grip to head towards our bedroom so I could change into clothes. All the while trying to contrive an explanation for Julian that our babies weren't coming after all. For whatever reason, my feet stopped in their tracks once I sauntered by the second bedroom we'd already decorated into a nursery.

As I entered the room, the hues of yellow and green inundated the furrows of my tattered existence. We were expecting both a girl and boy, so we didn't conform to the usual pink or blue panache. I traced the edge of one of the cribs with my forefinger. We'd literally just assembled it two nights prior. We kickstarted the weekend in celebration, oblivious to the fact that we'd be in mourning by Sunday.

The phone rang for a second time. I knew full well it was sure to be Alex again. Julian answered, since he was obviously closer, while my body went completely numb. My spine landed against the wall behind me, sliding down the coarse texture on my way to the floor. Both hands crowded my face. I simply wanted to release the ocean of emotions welled up inside. I did. But I had no idea how to grieve over something I'd never been given the chance to hold in the first place.

The clang of our phone receiver returning to its cradle was louder than thunder, followed by Julian trundling down the hallway to find me. My world stopped turning. And for the first time in my life, knowing how to defrag my scattered thoughts became ambiguous.

A timespan of twenty-seven years doesn't steal any of the novelty from my experience with grief. Tears rain down my cheek as I approach a slow-moving car in front of me. I shouldn't have to remind a driver with a Mississippi license plate that it's sixty-five through this stretch of highway. I'm certainly not in that big of a hurry. But it would be nice to check into our hotel before the fucking zombie apocalypse. As soon as the semi in the left lane passes me, I follow suit to speed up, claiming first place over the green station wagon mimicking a tortoise.

I glance at the green sign up ahead informing me that the town I must drive through to get to Franklinton and Felton is merely another hour away. That intel sends another pang to my gut. It's honestly so intense, I might need antacids. And luckily, I keep a few of them in a small, sectioned medication canister inside my messenger bag. Perhaps this is one instance where preparedness has become an advantage rather than

an inconvenience.

Franklinton is just a snake's slither away once I pass McDonald's as I veer to the right. I swing through the Valero station on the way into town. The fuel light has been lit for the past half hour and I usually never let it dip below a quarter of a tank. I unclasp my phone from the dash holder, then climb from behind the wheel. It feels fantastic to stretch my legs. Since it's only three, I'm going to stretch out on the hotel bed for a few minutes before I succumb to the inevitable. Irrevocably changing Sophia and Julio's life will deplete each goddamn morsel of my energy, zapping it into space.

I insert my Mastercard into the pump so I can fill up. While I wait amidst the mechanical hissing and whirring, my focus zeroes in on an address for The Wilhelm. According to Google, it's on the East end of Franklinton. To that end, it seems wise to acquire a few supplies from inside before checking into the hotel. A minute longer of enduring in this God forsaken heat, I can finally return the pump to its cradle, tighten my gas cap, and scurry across the cement towards the store.

Inside, their air conditioning blesses me with relief as I search for a bottle of Tums. Even generic antacids would suffice. I can't possibly be picky when it feels like Oscar the fucking Grouch is performing somersaults deep in my gut. On the far end of the store is a shelf where I find antacids among a selection of other digestive aids. The variety of health and personal care needs inside this small store is impressive.

There's even a sixty-count bottle of Tums for eight bucks. Since it's highly doubtful I'll find a CVS or Walgreens in the sparse parameters of rural Louisiana, I won't bat an eye. So long as they get the job done. And they're smoothie flavored. That must count for something, right?

My phone buzzes as I trot towards the front clerk. It's probably Steve Tallman based on the area code. Anyone else back home who'd be calling on a Monday afternoon

would register from my saved contacts in the cloud. I can't answer inside the gas station because the details are too personal. And I don't prefer to handle serious business around strangers. I never have. He will just have to leave a message.

I slide the antacids across the counter, all the while spotting an array of liquor behind May, standing at her register. The selection teases my dark traveler and its unremitting thirst. My eyes scan the shelf, stepping aside to take in the view of her entire booze shelf. It doesn't appear they have Glenlivet. No Balvenie DoubleWood either.

Brand preferences aside, they do have a handle sized bottle of Glenmorangie with a higher price tag than anticipated. It's either this or suffer, Gray. The veracity of soon losing my job causes me to cringe at such a flippant disregard for pinching pennies. Yet at this stage in my life, hooch is all too important. My budget will just need to chill the fuck out.

May smiles in my direction. "Anything else hon?"

I nod with a pointed finger. "Yes," I reply. "I'll take the handle of Glenmorangie off to the left there," I add. "And two packs of Camels, full flavor please."

"Having a party?" May asks, assumingly trying to keep things friendly.

"No," I retort. "No party, not at all."

Unless she finds pleasure in a pity party. Though I doubt that's crossed her amiable mind.

"Just what you'd call Monday ," I shrug with a sigh.

The Mastercard sails from my grasp, sliding across the counter, landing on the floor

by her feet. I didn't intentionally throw it. Truth is that my hands are quite shaky. The nerves beneath my skin are about to go full throttle once my Black Beauty finds herself galloping beyond the town limit of Felton, Louisiana.

I shake my head in disgust at my clumsiness. "I'm terribly sorry, I didn't mean to throw that at you."

"Oh hon, don't you worry your pretty little head," May responds, swiping my card on her terminal.

I'm sure the grin on my face looks awkward, resembling more of a frown. Her kind words and demeanor are a welcome touch on such an abysmal return to the South. She reminds me that some people down here are still good natured.

May gathers my smokes and Tums, before concealing the liquor with a paper bag. "You look rode hard and put up wet," she says.

My eyebrow shoots to the sky in total confusion. The awkwardness between us adds another reason for me to hurry back to the car. I have absolutely no fucking clue what that's supposed to mean. But, since she's so nice, I can only surmise it's not meant negatively. Once returning my wallet to the messenger bag, I collect my purchase before traipsing towards the exit.

I shout over my shoulder with a nod. "Have a good day."

"I hope it gets better for you," she replies.

The satisfying taste of nicotine affords me a little peace as I slide into a parking spot at The Wilhelm. I remain behind the wheel, finishing the cigarette between my fingers. A haunting string of lyrics to "Hold On" by Chord Overstreet hurls a series of hypothetical blades straight to my heart. And with them brings a devastating visual

image of finding Julian's lifeless shell twisted like a pretzel on the floor by our toilet. God damn it! The palm of my hand scolds my cheek in disgust because I shouldn't be thinking about this. I don't need any more reminders of that nightmare than I already have.

As I step out of the car, I wield the items from the gas station in one arm. And juggle a sack of food from the Sonic drive-thru, including a large Coke in the other. I lift the trunk of my car with an elbow. Surely there's more than enough shit to carry inside. I doubt I can get everything through the sliding doors without dropping something. If the incident at the hotel in New York on Thursday is any reference, I should know better than to bet on a losing battle.

Surely the lobby has a luggage cart I can use. With a hasty shuffle inside, I discover there is one. Back outside, I load my suitcases onto the cart, along with my food and things from the Valero. The trunk slams shut before I find myself pushing the cart ahead with ease. Though, the pavement is bumpy and my ice-cold Coke rattles off the cart. You're absolutely kidding me right now?!?!

Chuck at the front desk checks me into the suite Miles and Alex are footing the bill for. Indeed, all he needed to do was scan the barcode from Miles' text. If this is the easiest thing to happen today, then God damn it, I'll take it. The void in my soul is already aware that my evening will only escalate. So, I'd better bask in this moment of simplicity while I can.

Upstairs, I'm graced with the keen aesthetic of a spacious suite. There are two separate rooms on opposing ends of a large sitting area. I stand in the center of the room, scratching at my scalp while deciding which one to choose. As soon as the bellhop shuts the door behind him, I peek my head into each room. When I discover they each have their own bathroom, I hoist both suitcases at my waist to waddle into the room off to my left. My belongings rest on a bench at the foot of a king-sized bed before returning to retrieve the rest of my shit. At this point, I feel like I'm moving in.

I hover in front of the toilet, aiming my piss into the bowl. The relief washes my visage as I stand at the sink to clean my hands. An unpleasant echo bounces from the mirror, deriding my outlook on how the direction my day is about to take. Muck like hearing the devilish cackle droning from my vanquished heart. My wound still throbs every so often, and my exhausted eyes confirm exactly how I feel. Overdone and dry.

Once my hands are cleaner than Howie Mandel's, I brush them against a towel draped beside me. Out in the room, I retrieve another journal from Julian's suitcase labeled New York City . My fingers thumb to a random page, as I find a comfortable spot among the sea of pillows. The Sonic sack embellishes my lap while I finagle a greasy onion ring. Hopefully I will find some soothing words from my lover's pen before I must confront my detriment, ultimately killing other people's joy like Krampus at Christmastime.

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JULIAN

December 28, 1997

It's been quite a remarkable month. Between work and school this whole year, my journaling time has been sparse. But in this still moment, I must record my thoughts tonight. Just shortly after Thanksgiving, I received a contract for my third book deal. The overwhelming bustle of my life hasn't afforded me much writing time as I've hoped. My first two manuscripts were picked up by our Chief editor at Seven Liberties over the past few years. They were already written, so most of the hard part was already over. But now that I have my first advance, I must work harder to balance new characters with my busy schedule. And of course, Grayson.

This fucking guy. Let me just say, he absolutely stole my breath just over a week ago. It was my birthday, so I figured he'd be up to his usual antics. You know he's never been a slouch in the romance department. But in 1997, I never expected for the grand display to be as well received as it was. Besides a couple of classes, I had the rest of the day off. So, I enjoyed the downtime vegging the entire afternoon. It allowed me to catch up on the last four episodes of ER which we'd taped.

About half-past four, Grayson came sprinting through the door with a bouquet of royal-blue carnations. Most people prefer roses, but I've always been drawn to carnations. With just a little bit of sugar in the water, they last significantly longer compared to other flowers. He leaned over the back of the sofa, planting a generous kiss on my lips.

"I'm surprised you're not dressed yet, meus amor," he said, seeming shocked,

snatching the VCR remote from my grip.

“What kind of plans do you have now, Saccharo Ferre?” I asked in between the random shapes our lips formed against one another.

He interrupted the show, causing the tape to eject from the VCR. “I was watching that, you know?”

“Well,” he retorted behind a veil of passion. “Now you’re mine for the night,” he added, tossing the remote amongst the empty sofa cushions. “Clooney can just wait a hot minute,” he muttered before reeling me at my neck for the conclusion of our long kiss.

He playfully slapped me on the ass, continuing to shoot orders into my ear. “Now get up and get dressed,” he bit back brazenly. “We’ve got a schedule to keep here.”

While I dressed in front of our closet, I thought about what plans he had. The fact it was my birthday occurred to me. And knowing Grayson Welles, nothing is ever half assed with him. So, I retrieved a red oxford, one of his white ties, and a pair of black slacks. After primping for a bit in front of the bathroom mirror, I hauled my Latino ass back into the living room. All the while, Gray caught my gaze as he raised his chin from his watch.

“That took forever and a day,” he joked.

I shuffled towards his seated position on the couch, noticing he’d taken the liberty of putting my flowers in a vase with water. My fingers rustled through his thick, black hair as I leaned over his shoulders. I heard a grunt escape his throat after he took in a whiff of my cologne. It isn’t anything fancy, just a few spritzes of Old Spice Whitewater. But for some reason, it propels his rocket. He ran his hand up my chest, brushing his head up against my belly.

“You’re the one who said we have a schedule to keep, chico loco.”

Gray’s cola saturated irises penetrated my chest. “You’re right, it’s just you’re so irresistible,” he delights with another sniff. “I’m so fuckin’ horny right now, Momo.”

A few minutes later, we found ourselves sitting in the corner of a chic little Italian bistro on East 65th Street. The flame of a pillar candle decorating our table swayed to the movement of wait staff and patrons as they passed by. Since Gray’s back was to the window, I could take in the sight of snowflakes fluttering in a winter wind as they fell to their demise. Grayson seemed to be nervously swirling his Sangiovese in its glass, taking each sip as if he were imprisoned by contemplation.

We caught sight of each other in between a light conversation about the plans I have for my third novel. Grayson held my hand across the table as we fed one another bites of cannoli for dessert. The mascarpone teased my tastebuds, rendering my tongue to yearn for the savory option underneath Gray’s zipper.

He took another sip of wine then rested his glass on the table. “You’ll have a few days to start writing when we’re at the Wilkins family compound for Christmas break in The Hamptons.”

We didn’t need to discuss my recent plotting struggles. “My book can wait a week,” I replied. “I’m most curious about what else you have planned tonight,” I added, my lips forming a huge grin. “Does it require less clothes?” I joked. “Because I could go for that.”

His mien warmed as his cheeks turned a tinge brighter than my shirt. “Just wait, Momo.”

Grayson paid the check shortly after finishing dessert. I held his hand amid the flurries as we sashayed down the block to a parking garage. I almost thought we’d be

heading back home for some sexy time, celebrating my birthday in all the right ways. But my thoughts were a bit premature. Instead, he retrieved our ice skates from his trunk.

“Buckle up, baby,” he winked. “The night’s just getting started.”

We changed into our skates upon arriving at Wollman Rink inside Central Park. Ice skating has been a recent addition to our list of recreational interests. And I’ve become a far better skater since first starting out. We rounded the giant loop a few times before feeling him tug on my arm, pulling me directly towards the center of the rink. I’m sure my face appeared beyond shocked. Since Grayson is always finding new ways to express his love, I placed all my trust in the moment. I might not have had a clue what he was up to, but I quickly deduced it explained his anxiety in the restaurant.

To my surprise, Gray carefully lowered himself to the ice. He took a minute to publicly profess his love in front of God and everyone. Even cried while incredibly heartfelt words fell from his lips, encircling my heart. Gray then paused, scanning our surroundings before he slipped a small black box from the inner pocket of his coat. He raised it at his shoulder level as our eyes locked in on each other. His auburn stare resembled a light java, caffeinating my every desire.

When he opened the box, a silver ring with three bluish gemstones shimmered under the shine of each light beaming down on us. At that moment, I realized he was proposing. Granted, this is 1997 and the United States doesn’t legally recognize a formal gay marriage. But civil unions are becoming more popular by the day. I didn’t waste a moment longer flashing a nod of approval. It might have been a chilling twenty-three degrees out, but Grayson Carey Welles warmed me to a degree where I could’ve removed my camel-colored overcoat and thrown it aside.

Grayson removed my left glove, sliding the ring over my finger as I felt the heat of

the moment permeate deep into the furrows of my soul. Happy tears practically froze like icicles from each eye as I helped him up from the ice. And the kiss. His lips on mine felt like they were glued to mine for an eternity. The funny thing about time, it always seems to pause when we're experiencing a momentous occasion that we're certain to never forget. Crowds of skaters all around the rink cheered and clapped at us for the milestone we reached. I may have even heard a few whistles as soon as the next song played.

Everyone livened up once Grayson and I rejoined the ranks of skaters circling the large sheet of ice. I held his hand with a momentary glance in his direction every couple of minutes. He appeared relieved, as if I'd actually shoot him down. Another minute passed when I spotted Alex and Miles standing near the entrance gate to the rink, waving as we lapped them for the first time. By our second round, Grayson ushered me off the ice to go greet our brothers. Suffice it to say, he'd meticulously planned their presence as well.

"Take your skates off and hand them over to me," Alex said enthusiastically.

"Okay," I obliged.

I reckoned Grayson still had more up his sleeve. So, I did as I was told.

Miles offered while I passed off my skates to Alex. "Happy Birthday, Julian," he said, planting his hand into the crook of my neck with a grin.

Grayson received a tote bag in exchange for his skates. Once I slipped my feet back into regular shoes, he took my hand, leading me down the sidewalk to Grand Army Plaza. Although the snow eased up just before we began skating, the fluffy white flecks graced our walk to the corner of Central Park and 5th Avenue. Approaching the end of the footpath, I noticed a horse-drawn carriage waiting for our arrival.

A gentleman around the same age as we are, smiled in our direction. “Are you the booking for Welles?”

“That’s us,” Grayson replied.

The man nodded, tapping his watch. “You’re right on time,” he responded, pointing towards the step.

Grayson held my hand, pushing me up into the carriage. I nestled into the furthest end while Gray climbed aboard, joining my side. Snow danced from the sky while the Clydesdale started down a specific trail through Central Park. About five minutes into the ride, Grayson reached for the tote bag. He retrieved two champagne flutes, asking me to hold them while diving back in for what I suspected to be the bubbly.

He unraveled the wire before angling it ever so slightly, so the cork would shoot out towards a grassy area of the park. The whole time I held onto hope we wouldn’t get busted, because consuming alcohol in Central Park is unlawful. It’s bad enough that Miles risked his badge to turn a blind eye. A short but satisfying popping sound emanated from the nozzle—the distinct noise marking any prominent celebration. I held the glasses steady so Gray could fill them.

“Dom Pérignon, meus amor?”

“That’s pricey,” I said.

Though incredibly dark, the subtle glow from a nearby park light illuminated the blaze in his squinted stare. “I wouldn’t mark this occasion any other way, Momo.”

He held his glass up in front of us while I did the same.

“To us, our future, and our undying love,” he avowed.

I replied with likeness in Latin. “Ad nos futura nostro, et amor noster immortalis.”

The upturned glass allowed the storm of bubbles to rush down my throat. Its flavor matched that of golden toast and coffee, followed by a creamy vanilla flavor. As soon as I felt a small chill biting my nose, I nuzzled into Gray’s right shoulder. Our lips adjoined for an appreciative kiss, his tongue sliding against mine every few seconds.

My hand, occupied by the champagne, raised to his left shoulder. He transferred his glass to the other hand, so it could shimmy around my backside. But once he did, our heads didn’t part for several minutes. Our night may have been close to ending, but it was only one curtain call of several.

Now about last night. I’d be remiss if I didn’t jot down the details of an interesting experience which I blame Alex fuckin’ Wilkins entirely. His intentions were pure, so I must give him an A for effort. He and Miles took Gray and me to a new nightclub in Gramercy Park called, The Lion’s Den. This was our first time going, since they opened their doors only a month ago. But this was my first time in anything like it altogether. It’s a male strip club for gay men.

Immediately upon entering, the four of us were greeted by a bouncer to check our ID’s. It wasn’t an unusual request as I’m accustomed to proving my age in a business where alcohol is served. What I found instantly peculiar was the fact they had their very own ATM inside the doors.

“Look, Saccharo Ferre,” I said, nudging into Grayson’s arm with a pointed finger. “Where have we seen a business with their very own ATM?” I asked. “That’s convenient.”

He flashed me a mischievous grin which appeared halfway masked by a look of discomfort. “Momo, I think we’re about to find out why in just another minute.”

While Alex insisted on paying everyone's cover charge, Miles dug his palms into both of our necks. "You poor bastards are in for the surprise of your lifetimes tonight," he affirmed sassily.

"Well boys—" Alex stammers. "Let's go get our freak on."

He and Miles ushered us through a hallway complete with a black curtain at the end. We wedged between its opening when Grayson practically made a U-turn for the entrance. The loud music and flashing laser lights struck like lightning throughout the whole building, piercing his eyes and ears like a pointed needle.

Alex spotted Grayson making a beeline for the black curtain. "Where do you think you're going pal?"

Grayson shouted back at the top of his lungs, covering his ears in the process. "It's too fuckin' loud in here," he shouted.

Miles stood by the end of the walkway ahead of us, while Alex shuffled back towards Grayson. "Come on Gray, tonight's all about celebrating you and Jules," he yelled over the music. "Once I get a few shots in ya, you'll be well oiled to where the lights and music will drown away."

My man shrugged with a tinge of hesitation. "Fine," he bit back. "But tonight's on Arthur Wilkins' dime."

"DEAL!" Alex shouted back, offering a handshake to seal the promise that tonight would be funded entirely by his father, a New York senator.

Alex soothed Grayson as they traipsed back down the walkway lined with the same lights used to line footpaths in a movie theater. His uncomfortable appearance made me feel guilty that I hadn't supported his decision to leave. If I'm being honest, I

would've been more comfortable with a bag of jerky and our culos planted firmly in front of George Clooney's irresistible mien. Something of which I still haven't been able to finish catching up on.

After a few minutes, the four of us settled at a round table on a higher platform placed in front of the stage with four shiny poles. Each decorated by an alluring man wearing basically nothing at all. Grayson's inhibitions whisked away to the stratosphere beyond his fifth shot of Wild Turkey. Miles was thoughtful to ask for a liquor sourced from my homeland in the Caribbean, Ron Rico. I'd just finished polishing off my third shot when Alex returned from the restroom.

He and Miles joked about paying for Gray and me to receive a private lap dance. At first, I didn't take Alex seriously. But after Grayson insisted he'd need to get drunker than he already was, Alex officially declared the challenge. Thank God last night was all paid in cash. Because I shudder to think of what spin the media would make of our gay escapade being footed by his father, who's constantly plastered in the news from here to San Diego.

After the cocktail server delivered another round of Wild Turkey, it took no time at all for my man to find him in an elated state. He ignored every reservation chiding him for giving into Alex's naughty mission. By that point, a dancer escorted us to an exclusive area with private booths. One the plus side for my baby, at least the room didn't accost us with a frenzy of lights. And the music was a few decibels quieter as well.

Troy sat us next to each other in a rounded booth with orange velvet upholstery. He appeared much older than me or Gray. Forty tops. I've never been into daddies, because Grayson is my first love. But I'm no stranger to the underwear section at Macy's which drowns in a sea of older, well-endowed men. Judging by their packages pictured on the boxes of course.

In no time, Troy ascended the platform inches away from our inebriated gawking faces, grinding against another pole. His moves were smoother than a hot knife through butter. And the cock between his shapely thighs seemed so rigid and sharp, it might've well been as strong as the jaws of life.

Troy's shapely head glanced down upon us, looking over his shoulder. "Which one of youse guys gets my ass first?" He asked, his sweat dripping from each sweltering brow.

I reached over to Gray's lap, only to discover his inhibitions were sunk further than the Titanic. On the other hand, his dick grew to the size of a fucking flagpole, supplanting that of my own. We've never discussed this type of situation with one another before. Not once have I found a Honcho or Playguy magazine hidden anywhere, and neither would Gray discover any sort of material belonging to me either. Yet in the spirit of celebrating our betrothing milestone, I didn't have any qualms about his excitement. Fuck, we were so embriagado that I'm lucky I remember last night at all.

My intoxication couldn't have been any more obvious when I shouted up at Troy. "He's more than eager to go first," I bellowed, jolting Gray by his shoulders.

Grayson's flushed visage nodded. "Come here, Daddy!" He chortled.

A split-second later, Gray found the toned, smooth ass rounder than a peach, up in his grill. Troy swayed his moneymaker from side to side whilst Gray's bottom lip curved inward with a degree of satisfaction. Boy am I glad Alex lubricated my boy like a printing press. I couldn't have asked for anything greater, than to see his discomfort from the overstimulating atmosphere dissipate. In fact, I needed to reach back over, slapping his hand away. Had I allowed him to grope the dancer, we'd have definitely been in trouble.

“Your can lurkth but not touthch, meurs amor,” I shot over with a raised eyebrow. “We don’t wannar be blarcklithsted on our firtht visit.”

Gray giggled as a prepubescent schoolboy, burrowing his chin in my right shoulder. “Murmo, I lorve you so fruckin’ muthh,” he slurred, all the while Troy grinding his concealed cock against one of his thighs. “I’m gonnar ernstall a pole in our berdsroom.”

In a matter of minutes, Troy switched his sexual focus over to me, maybe slightly sober than Grayson. The squinted eyes as he straddled my knees begged for me to reach up and yank him closer by the skinny gold tie dangling from his neck. In the moment, I realized how hard it may have been for Gray to keep his hands to himself. And fuck me if my Latino cock didn’t swell to the girth of a holiday beef log.

“Yourt soooo hott Trroy!” I shouted, though our chests were less than a foot away from each other.

Troy offered a grin in return. “You’re not so bad yourself, kid.”

I’m sure more than one song played the whole time Troy bounced and thrashed around my overzealous body. But the concept of time ceases to exist when a person is intoxicated to such a fine degree as we were. A single minute can seem to last a century. Or conversely, it can disappear with a flash of light. What I know for sure, is by the time our brood found ourselves standing out on the smoke deck for fresh air, Grayson’s roiled tummy extruded a puddle of yuck all over the cement.

Miles patted Grayson on the back, intermittently rubbing his palm to soothe him. “The dance was that good huh?” He joked with a giddy expression.

“Well,” Alex spoke up. “That saves father a few bucks on cleaning charges at least.”

Once the four of us finished basking in the bitter December cold, we staggered back into the club towards our table. Bobby Cordova, the club owner, greeted everyone and thanked us for spending the night with him and his accommodating staff. Alex unfurled a wad of cash to pay the tab, quickly sending each of our trashed selves out the door. I sit here clutching a bottle of aspirin with a bottle of 7UP beside me. This is one hangover sure to stick with me into eternity.

GRAYSON

Time has not been good to Felton. I can't count on one hand how many abandoned buildings I've passed on my drive through town which were once thriving businesses. It's sad how the four recessions in America since we ran off to the Big Apple have practically turned this place into a ghost town. Even the now thwarted Pizza Hut appears condemned. This stoplight at Chase Street, however, hasn't changed in all the years I've been gone. With not a single fucking car for miles, it will forever be colloquially referred to as the punishment light .

As I turn onto Pine Street, fear wells up inside me like a child waiting for delayed retribution. My stomach is still all knotted, so I turn the bottle of antacids up to my mouth as if I'm shot-gunning a beer. It's here. The single moment I've been dreading for nearly a week. I feel kind of like those military officers who are assigned the task of knocking on a parent's or spouse's door to relay the harrowing news that their loved one's life wasn't spared. Except more often than not, they weren't related to the fallen. In my case, I've never met Sophia and Julio Torres. But I've been the most emotionally invested in Julian for the last thirty-two years.

Another short curve ahead and Tamarack Street is upon me. I crunch a few more antacids before snapping the lid shut, tossing them into the passenger seat. I'm sure by the weekend, they'll all be gone. If I'm telling the truth, I could stand to be gone too. This cruel world is now so far beyond me. From all that I've been dealt in just a single week, I haven't the faintest of what I'm going to do about it all. By my lonesome. I retrieve a cigarette from my bag, lighting it quickly. Several short puffs offer a momentary release to my nerves. Though I know this reprieve is fleeting.

I'm here. The Torres house appears almost the same as it did three decades ago, save for the full yard of grass. As if I need to mention the twists and pains in my stomach one more time, but I let out a wince while stepping out to the street. I flick my cigarette butt over my left shoulder, grabbing at my chest in the process. The rhythm beneath the rib cage is faster than it ever should be, and there's sweat expelling from every single pore on my body.

I ascend to the porch, wiping my brow. In three seconds, I'm going to ring this goddamn doorbell and change these poor peoples' lives again. This time could wreck one or all of them entirely. One. Two. Three... I press the rectangular button adjacent to the doorknob, waiting patiently while counting my rapid breaths. As hard as it is keeping my shit together, I question whether I can ding-dong-ditch like a teenager and dart out of here. But I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I were to cower out.

Before I can even let out another thought of turning around to leave, I hear the front door creak open. On the other side of a mesh screen, I see a woman not too younger than Julian. Those same shapely eyes adorn her face just like his did. It must be Amelia, his sister.

"Can I help you?" She asks.

I can feel my throat is all dry and chalky. Likely from the all the Tums and tar I've shoved down my fat fucking throat the past hour. A quick attempt to reply is defeated by a rush of salted water striding down both of my hot cheeks.

In another breath, I try again. "Are you Amelia?"

She nods, appearing confused. "Yes, I'm Amelia," she acknowledges. "And who are you?"

"My name's Grayson," I reply while removing my sunglasses, cowering at the pain

from rubbing into my wound. “Grayson Welles.”

Amelia points directly at me. “You’re my brother’s husband,” she responds with certitude.

Uhhh okay. How does she know that? I question whether she has the extraordinary gift of being a psychic. There is no way in—actual Hell—that she should know who I am to Julian. Or was, that is.

“I aaamm,” I respond, peeking above her shoulders through the screen door. “Are your parents home?”

Amelia grits her teeth before stepping out onto the porch, shutting the main door behind her in the process. She scans our surroundings, then darts her eyes in the direction of my car. “Where is my brother?”

The cracks in my voice will probably reveal the truth before I even reach the punchline, but I proceed to explain my presence.

“Amelia, I’m incredibly sorry I have to tell you this,” I begin, clearing my desiccated throat.

Before my lips form the next word, I can tell she’s already about to spew tears. Even though the only person I ever hug is Julian, and Miles or Alex on occasion, I throw caution to the wind. My arms extend over her shoulders while weeping uncontrollably.

“Julian died, Amelia,” I add. “On Tuesday night.”

She accepts my hug, wrapping her arms around my torso. I even feel her hand pat against my back like a mother calming her youngest child from some terrible

nightmare. This is my terrible nightmare. Amelia still hasn't said a goddamn thing in response to the mother of all bombs I've just dropped.

"I am terribly sorry," I reiterate with a squeal in my voice. "For everything, actually."

"Shhh, Grayson," she finally responds. "It's not your fault."

I shake my head with contention, breaking away from the hug. "No no no, It is my fault," I confess. "For everything, we should've come down and reunited years ago," I affirm. "But it's just my fa?—"

She interjects me. "Your father—yeah we know all about him."

"You do?" I reply behind a squinted, achy stare. "But how?"

Amelia wipes the tears away from her youthful looking visage. "Julian reached out to us a few years ago."

My head tilts with a look of part shock and the rest absolute bewilderment. "He did?"

She points towards a bench off to the side of the porch where we each take a seat. I'm still curious as to why she hasn't answered my initial question. Where the fuck are Sophia and Julio?

"Julian didn't ever want you to know because of how terrified you are of your own father finding out where you guys were," Amelia admits. "And he made us promise to never talk to your parents."

That's reassuring. Both palms reacquaint with my tired face as she continues conveying how Julian found her online a few years ago. And even visited them twice over the course of that time. All without me ever knowing. It's likely my man snuck

his visits in between a couple of book tours. A small part of me feels hurt that he'd keep it away from me. But the rest of my conscience feels the weight of shame that I kept him away from his own family. Like a fucking prisoner.

Amelia says he worried for several years that their parents would judge him for his sexual attraction to men. That it's why he didn't contact them much sooner than he did. Then over the last eighteen months, his contact with them seemed to diminish altogether.

"So, my mamá's been fighting Alzheimer's for the past couple of years," she informs me. "And my papá has been in a rehab facility for the last month after receiving a double hip replacement."

My ears perk up. "Sophia has Alzheimer's?"

She nods. "Yes," she confirms. "For over two years now."

I scratch the nape of my neck. "Julian was diagnosed with it extremely early," a painful gust of wind falling down the wrong pipe. "About a year and a half ago."

Amelia looks off in the distance. "That would explain why we haven't heard much more from him."

"And she's home now?" I ask.

She nods again, sweeping a strand of hair from her forehead. "Yes, she's inside," she admits solemnly. "She's having one of her off days," she pauses for a quick breath. "So it may be hard for her to comprehend this news," she adds. "And how did my brother—die?"

I can't meet her gaze to confess the truth. Just thinking about telling her how, makes

me relive the moment of seeing his inert body sprawled out across the bathroom floor. That unresponsive stare will truly haunt me until the day I take my own last breath. There's no way I can admit to her that he checked himself out. But fuck it. She's his brother and has a right to know.

My inexorable nerves rise for the umpteenth time today. Suddenly my body craves another fix of nicotine. I point up a forefinger before descending the porch steps, jaunting to the passenger side of my Black Beauty. A small fiery blaze lights the end of my smoke before a few short drags rush down my windpipe. I kick the car door shut with my right foot, quickly returning to the porch. Once I reach the bottom step, I notice Amelia is no longer sitting on the bench. But only a moment passes when she emerges from the front door.

"Do you mind if I smoke up there?" I ask.

Amelia shakes her head. "You can," she replies. "We'll go inside when you're done."

She's absolutely goddamn right. Telling Sophia in an incoherent state will be incredibly difficult. Not to mention I'll be dropping a second bomb on Felton, that this fuckscape may be deemed a disaster zone. If there's anything to be said, at least first telling Amelia made for good practice. She shoots an undetermined look towards this sad sack on the bench beside her. Maybe studying my pathetic cowardice. Watching me abuse tobacco as if smoking hasn't been deemed harmful by the Surgeon General for the last fifty-seven years. Or perhaps she's seen the ugly wound above my right eyebrow and she's taking pity on me.

I inhale a long drag from the cigarette, feeling my anxiety subside even for just a few minutes. Amelia passes me a small white envelope as my head turns to blow the cloud of smoke away from her direction.

"Don't read that here," she instructs me. "Only when you're ready."

I raise my eyebrow all the while folding the envelope to store in my pocket. I'll read this later for sure.

"So," I say, flicking the ashes from my cancer stick over the porch railing. "Julian's disease progressed too quickly," I add, feeling the dreadful truth crawl its way from my windpipe. "His mental acuity seemed to dwindle faster than time itself."

I scratch the itch at my left temple. "It got to the point where he'd only have two or three good days each week," I add, clearing my scratchy throat. "Then I hunted for a decent in-home aid, so I didn't have to rely on our neighbor or come home from work every couple of hours."

Amelia frowns as soon as I hint at her brother being left home alone longer than an hour. At this same moment, I realize I've yet to call Carter to tell him that I need to cancel the interview. His services are obviously no longer required.

I continue admitting the truth she's yearning, but I feel like a steak knife is razing my insides. "Well, he heard my phone call with the kid I'd thought about hiring to help keep him company during the day," I profess. "He felt guilty, leading to an argument about him thinking he'd been a huge burden."

The smooth taste of this tobacco is the only thing keeping the levees of my soul on high alert. I might only be crying internally right now. But once I'm through telling Sophia that her only son is dead, these barricades will be rendered useless. Then, the only thing capable of masking my pain will be the bottle of Glenmorangie waiting for me back at The Wilhelm. For Christ's sake, I haven't even crossed the finish line of explaining my version of events. And it's requiring every bit of self-control to keep choking back an emotive display. I exhale another plume of smoke with a cavernous sigh.

"Amelia," I continue, placing my palm on her knee. "He overdosed on his

antidepressant,” I finally disclose, hearing the devilish cackle that’s walloping from my chest. I shake my head in disgust to silence that son of a bitch. “He wrote in his last journal entry that he didn’t want another day to come, worrying if it would be the very last one that he’d ever be able to remember again,” my vanquished speech now requiring a breath and something to wet my whistle.

Once the cat’s been tossed from the bag, a tear escapes my lower lid anyway. My defeated aspect surely doesn’t compare to Amelia’s. I wished I had a tissue or napkin in my pocket that I could hand her, but the only things in it are my keys and the envelope. Instead, she lifts the top hem of her rose-colored camisole to dab her tears.

“He must have been in a really bad way,” she replies, shaking her head. “It’s the strangest thing,” she adds. “We hadn’t talked to him in about a year, and I was literally going to call him tonight.”

I extend my arm, placing my hand on her shoulder. “Besides some depression which we were treating, nobody knew he had—” another painful pause summons the dark cloud forever hanging over my periphery. “—Thought those things,” I clarify. “Not even me.”

Although I hope those words would be comforting, I have a sinking feeling they don’t. They wouldn’t for me. A part of my soul feels as if I’m to blame for so much. And after discovering that he thought he had to keep his family reunion a secret to spare my hurt feelings—or fear of my fucking father—an even bigger dagger empales my chest. I finish the last drag of my smoke, bending over to rub it against the cement. I’ll hold onto the filter until I can dispose of it in a trash can. I’ll respect their property.

“Well,” I add, blowing a mouthful of hot air whilst realizing it’s time to face the music one more time. “I suppose I better get this over with.”

Amelia rises to her feet. “Yeah, we’ll see how it goes.”

I follow her lead inside the house, closing the squeaky screen door behind me. The noise only occupies one-sixteenth of my brain’s capacity for annoying sounds. Simply put, there are bigger fucking fish to fry. Her house is dimly lit with the shades drawn. Most of any light in the living room is provided by a glow from the television screen which Amelia turns off with a remote. She switches on lamps at both ends of a sofa, pointing for me to sit down. When I do, I meet Sophia’s hollow stare.

“Can I get you something to drink?” Amelia asks.

“I’d appreciate anything cold,” I reply, studying her commiseration. “Thanks.”

My gaze returns to Julian’s mother. Save for a couple of wrinkles, she appears no older than sixty. But I’m sure she’s older, even though I have more wrinkles than her. Next, I take note of her eyes. The same shape as Julian’s and Amelia’s. Her grey hair is curled neatly and although she sits slouched in place, it may just be from aging. She smiles at me, though I cannot return the sentiment. Fuck, I’m so beyond joy at this point.

I reach over, touching her hand which rests comfortably on an arm of the adjacent couch. Her skin is cold to the touch, even though it’s with zero doubt a hundred goddamn degrees in here. Underneath the lamp, my seemingly tear comprised sight locks in on a framed photograph. Certainly a recent picture of Julian and whom I assume to be Julio standing behind Sophia and Amelia. The picture appears to have been taken at some cookout. It touches my heart to see him incredibly happy, and so full of life.

“Hi Sophia,” I begin. “I’m Grayson.”

Sophia reaches her right hand, pointing to the door. “Green truck,” she says. “You’re

that boy.”

God damn it. Absolute chills scatter my spine when she speaks. Someone’s still inside that shell of a person, for her to remember a detail from a lifetime ago.

“Yes—Mrs. Torres,” I confirm, swallowing a wave of nausea. “I’m the boy in the truck.”

Beyond her recognition of who I am, at least who I was , the awkward silence between us is deafening. I could probably hear a pin drop. I have no idea how to start confessing all that I need to. Amelia returns from the kitchen with a cold glass of lemonade. She sets it down on the coffee table in front of me with a coaster. A small snicker exudes my mouth, catching my own self by surprise.

“What’s funny?” Amelia asks.

I shake my head. “Nothing really,” I pause. “It’s just Julian didn’t inherit that quality.”

“What quality is that?” She asks, taking a seat next to her mother.

“Using coasters,” I reply, gesturing my hands. “He’d set a glass or anything on a surface without regard to the effects it’d leave behind,” I reply, reaching down to take a drink.

It’s cold and tart but should quench my thirst. I clear my freshly moistened throat while resting the glass back down on its coaster.

“Mrs. Torres,” I pipe back up. “Julian—your son—” I add with another pause. God damn these tears!

Speaking another word seems impossible as I battle the urge to let out a snuffle. How does a person tell a parent with dementia such grave news in an easier to comprehend way, without it feeling like a thrown punch? “He’s no longer with us,” I confess. “He passed away last week.”

Sophia makes direct eye contact with me. And although it pains me to stare for too long, I resist the impulse to look away. She deserves this moment on her terms God damn it. “Who?” She asks.

Amelia places her hand over her neck as if she’s fighting a frog in her throat. “Mamá, Juliano imperatore ultima septimana abierunt— Julian died last week .”

Sophia’s pupils expand to the size of saucers before clutching her chest. A slight moan of despair escapes her voice box, not formulating any actual words. She reaches over to the framed photograph as she slowly begins weeping. She stares at the picture, allowing her tears to bounce off the glass like raindrops plummeting to a cement sidewalk. Her reaction eats away at my soul, releasing my own floodgates.

I only know what it feels like to be told the children you were bringing into the world didn’t survive the womb. I only know what it feels like to be told your husband is dead and couldn’t be revived, despite waiting an entire epoch in a hospital waiting room while the doctor’s tried to do everything they could. But to be told the son you successfully brought into this world ceases to be a part of it must be devastating. Whether you have all your faculties or not.

“I’m planning a funeral nearby, so you guys can be there,” I assure Amelia.

She hands me a Kleenex before using one on her mother’s face. The attempt is futile as this poor woman is lucid enough to comprehend the situation without issue. I dry my eyes, taking a minute to compose myself, then hunch forward to grab the glass.

After a loud gulp, my lips contort at the tartness. “If you give me your number, I’ll keep you updated as I know more.”

Amelia nods. “I appreciate it, Grayson,” she replies. “I’ll tell my papá because you shouldn’t need to go through this a third time.”

GRAYSON

The twenty-minute drive back to Franklinton has afforded me the time to call Carter, informing him that I don't need to meet. I didn't provide a reason, because doing that would require confronting the reality of Julian's absence one more time. Keeping it vague helped me hold back the river.

And while I'd been thinking of it, I phoned the manager at The Six String Saloon in Tennessee. After describing the leather-bound journal with the word 'Boston,' he immediately knew what I was referring to. Assuring him that I'd send him ten bucks via Apple Pay or something to cover the cost of postage didn't go over very well. The man's so friendly, he insisted upon mailing it without repayment.

Reclaiming my parking spot at The Wilhelm, I reach over the seat for my messenger bag and sack of Taco Bell. I've surely consumed an entire year's worth of greasy calories these past couple of days. Though, getting fat as a rhino doesn't faze me. If smoking has crept back in my life, or likely acquired my father's alcoholism, I might as well eat myself into oblivion. And besides, I need more greasy food to soak up the single malt waiting for me upstairs.

I flash my keycard on the suite door, waiting a split second. For some reason, it's fussy at precisely the moment I need to piss. Yet, my third attempt is successful. Inside, the messenger bag falls from my shoulder into the cushions of a lengthy couch. No time is wasted rushing to my bathroom so I can relieve my bladder.

After the satisfying hiss of a flush, I wash my hands at the sink. All the while studying my feeble echo in the mirror yet again. A haunting reminder of Sophia's

reaction eats me alive for a second time. The first being as I pulled away from their house, studying the destructive path of both explosives claiming casualties all the way to Pine Street.

In the sitting area, I retrieve my open pack of Camels with only two remaining. Grub in the other hand accompanies my shuffle into the room. There's a balcony on the far wall, surely bereft of some magnificent view. But at least I don't have to go all the way downstairs just to trash my lungs with noxious chemicals. Always the budding optimist, Gray, you sorry motherfucker!

There's not a goddamn breeze in the whole state of Louisiana, meanwhile leaning over the railing outside. Smoke wafts from my nostrils in every direction on a long exhale. I'm uncertain what I'd do without the help of nicotine. There may be two or three Klonopin at home. And they would've only lasted a single day at most. After allowing the effects of my cancer stick to dash through my body, I return to bed while claiming the bottle of Glenmorangie.

I fuss with the thick protective wrapping, but the cork slides out with little effort. Not a moment is wasted taking a large gulp. Its crisp honey-apple flavor hurries down the hatch smoothly and easily. My food is surely cold by now, but my grief still has a wrangle on me to the extreme where liquor and tobacco take precedence. The Taco Bell sack rustles as I rifle around feeling the five tacos and two burritos.

It's no surprise Sophia has Alzheimer's, since Julian's neurologist told us the disease has a huge genetic component. But I'm sad because I can only imagine her brain is similar to an amnesiac's. Sure, she wept tonight once Amelia broke the news in her mother tongue. The bigger question is, will she remember he's still gone after the sun has risen in the morning? My memory sprints back in time to when Julian first received his diagnosis.

Julian and I were sitting in front of Dr. Nash's desk for thirty minutes. Although, it

felt more like an eternity. His office staff told us twenty minutes prior, that he would only be just a moment delayed. But it became apparent to me that ‘a moment’ in ‘doctor speak’ must’ve meant an hour. Julian turned his head, revealing a nervous look on that beautiful mien of his.

He knew exactly why we were there. It had only been a month or two since his episode of getting lost while walking Boo Radley. The day he wandered all the way down to Central Park. Even though prior to the neuro appointment, I spotted him putting cottage cheese in his coffee. At the time, I figured it was a brief slip.

“It’s gonna be all right, Momo,” I said, planting my palm over his left knee.

The harried tone warming his face taunted me. “We already know what he’s gonna say,” he replied.

When entering a relationship, nobody prepares you for all the bad you will face. Nobody’s there with a hot cup of tea and a list of signs or things to look out for. You’re not given a handbook on how to deal with the roadblocks and detours life throws your way, which can test the very limits of the bond with your new partner. All you’re equipped with are the primal instincts given to you when you’re born. And it’s your responsibility to know how best to cultivate them the best way you know how.

All I could do was console him with as much positivity as I could. Fuck me if I didn’t know the truth, or the bitter pill we were about to be dosed with. The words which just ruminated through my brain felt more like the opening to an off-screen monologue in Grey’s Anatomy—when Meredith is heard talking about a specific topic highlighting the theme of that episode.

As soon as Julian covered his mouth to shield a dry cough, I heard the door behind us swing open, then slam shut. His heavy footsteps could be heard as he approached his

desk.

“Sorry to keep you both waiting,” Dr. Nash said, clearing his throat.

He sat in his cushioned leather chair, studying Julian as he shuffled around a few papers. “Just like a month ago, I’m going to give you a name and address, and I want you to remember them until I ask you later to recall what I said.”

Julian nodded. “Okay.”

“Jim Goldberg lives at 29 Cornelia Street in Manhattan, 10014.”

I watched Julian silently recite the info to himself with his lips as if he were studying for a pop quiz.

Dr. Nash turned on a computer monitor which swiveled so it could be seen by all three of us. After a couple of clicks and pressed keys from his keyboard, an image appeared of the MRI Julian went in for the week prior.

He pointed to an area of the scan with the tip of his pen. “This region here pinpoints to the hippocampus in your frontotemporal lobe, only mildly shrunk from the size of a healthy brain.”

I understood maybe two words of that statement, but I trusted his medical opinion because he’s the one with the degree.

“And this area here—while faint—indicates where plaque has possibly started to build up,” Dr. Nash advised us while circling around another point on the scan. “Based on the cognitive tests we performed last month—the results of your genetic testing—and this MRI—I’ve arrived at a conclusion.”

I swallowed a large amount of air which may as well have been heard from the moon's surface. Julian's hand crept over to my lap, so I gripped it firmly into mine.

“Julian, it's my firm belief based on the fact that you contain two markers of the APOE e4 gene—and all the other test results—there's a 99.2% likelihood that you're already experiencing the effects of a rare, but possible form of Familial Alzheimer's Disease.”

The entire room grew silent yet again. I could hear muffled speech from out in the main area of his office. Even a bit of laughter. But I wasn't inside Julian's body, so I couldn't know exactly how he processed the information laid before us. His tight grip, however, indicated some level of frustration.

I scratched at my forehead with my left index finger. “So, what does all this mean?”

Dr. Nash's deadpan expression couldn't have been any harder to read. “It means that I'm going to try a starting dose of donepezil, which is generic Aricept,” Dr. Nash responded, targeting his words in Julian's direction. “I'm confident it could be helpful in your case of what I believe to be early-onset, given your young age.”

Julian raised his right hand to emphasize his reply. “And you're sure this isn't just some temporary thing, and it won't go away on its own?” he asked with a tilted head.

Dr. Nash cleared his throat, grabbing a coffee cup adjacent to him. He took a quick drink before responding. “Julian, do you remember the name and address I asked you to remember a few minutes ago?”

Julian nodded his head. “I'm pretty sure.”

“Was it John Goldberg, Joe Goldberg, Jim Goldberg, or Jack Goldberg?”

Julian scratched the side of his head as if he'd honestly already forgotten the name. I was screaming 'Jim' so loudly in my own head, I hoped it would trigger some telepathic message.

"John—I'm pretty sure?" Julian asked, rather than ascertaining.

Dr. Nash rapped his knuckles against the desk. "And did he live on 29 Lotus Street, 29 Cornelia Street, 29 Washington Street, or 29 Chelsea Street?"

Julian lowered his head, fidgeting with his fingers as if it were going to help him recall the correct answer. The answer resounded between each corner of my brain. 'God damn it, Julian—it's Cornelia Street—think Momo—you got this!'

"I feel like I just had it right there," Julian replied, vanquished. "But I don't remember anymore, I'm sorry."

Dr. Nash clicked his tongue. "There's the answer to your question," he replied astutely. "This isn't going away, I'm afraid," he added. "As much as I'd love to say otherwise, I'd be doing you a huge disservice by telling you what you want to hear, rather than what you need to."

Julian and I checked out with the receptionist, ensuring she had his correct insurance card on file. We stepped out into the main hallway of New York Presbyterian as the elevator dinged loudly, ushering a cringey pain through both eardrums. Julian held my hand whilst boarding, pressing the button to whisk us downstairs. We exited the back entrance so I could treat him to a matcha green tea frappuccino—his favorite—across the street at Starbucks.

We stopped at the crosswalk when he turned his head, staring into my gaze as if someone had just run over Boo Radley. "This changes everything, meus amor."

Inside, I knew that was the truth. But I refused to show defeat and chose to respond indignantly. “Stop it—Babe, this doesn’t change a goddamn thing,” I replied, planting a kiss on his lips. “We soldier on.”

My attention returns to the present moment at the behest of this loud fucking television. For some strange reason, broadcast TV is most annoying when I’m not in the comfort of my own home. Suffice it to say, this show requires the volume to be on ninety. But once it breaks for commercial, it requires everything in me to brace for impact. It only proves that if I’m still sensitive to the objects of this world, I must not be numb enough.

Reaching over to the bed stand for my bottle, I realize there are tiny remnants of taco meat on the comforter in front of me. And drops of burrito sauce have left an ugly stain as well. Although the silkiness of scotch pushes away every worry as it slithers down the correct pipe.

The white envelope Amelia gave me is inches away as I sit cross-legged on the bed. Curiosity has consumed me since leaving their house because she never revealed its contents. Once I finish chewing my last bite, I wipe my mouth with a napkin before scooping the envelope in my grasp. It only has one word written on the front. Mamá. I unfurl the paper with several creases, instinctively clearing my throat as if I’m about to read it aloud, even though it’s not my intention.

Mamá,

It breaks my heart to write this. But I’ve left Felton to follow the first person I’ve ever loved outside of our family. I feel that I owe you the truth, even though it’s eaten me up inside trying to find the words to tell you this in person. But I don’t know how you or papá will process what I have to say.

I’m gay. I realized this when we first moved here in January. I never did any of the

things I told you I was doing, because they were all to cover up who I was really spending time with. To protect our safety, I can't tell you his name. But Mamá, I love him with all my heart and soul. And he cares about me just as much. In fact, his father is not a nice person, and he's most of the reason we're leaving town. I would tell you more about who my boyfriend is and where we're going. But I can't, and it's burning a hole inside of me.

I know you and papá probably won't accept my confession right away. You have different beliefs, and that's fine. That's another reason we've set our sights on a place where being gay is more accepted. But in time, even though we will not have spoken to each other again, I hope you'll be able to find it in your heart to realize I was always your little Papito. He just turned out to like boys instead of girls. Please take heart in knowing that he is still giving someone all his love and receives it back in spades. And that should be what matters the most. Or I hope, at least.

No matter where I go, or what I end up doing, I will do it all knowing that you were the first person to show me how to love. And that you were the one who raised me to be a bright and affectionate young man. There might come a day we get to speak again. I don't know what the future holds. If or when that day comes, I'll be grateful. Until then, please remember how much I love you and papá, and Amelia. Whenever you are down and miss me, just walk out at night and look to the North Star. My soul will feel it and I'll likely do the same. That'll be how we connect with each other from here on out.

I am so very proud that I spent my first nineteen years in your love and care. But it's time that I reach out into the world on my own—at my boyfriend's side—taking advantage of all that my future has in store for me.

Semper Juliano Imperio.

The screen on my phone resting before me catches my attention. It's a Google Alert I

have set up to inform me each time the name Julian Torres is published online. It seems word of my lover's death has finally hit the press circuit. After a moment of loading the browser screen, I continue reading the headline.

INTERNATIONAL BEST-SELLING AUTHOR FOUND DEAD IN WASHINGTON HEIGHTS HOME

While brief, the article still penetrates my subjugated spirit. It says that I found Julian on the bathroom floor last Tuesday night and he was later pronounced dead officially at New York Presbyterian. It doesn't mention he was already dead in our home, and that it had to be confirmed by a doctor. But it does list the last two recent titles from his backlist, including "Broken in the Bayou."

The second paragraph points their subscribers to Julian's author website through Seven Liberties Publishing, where they can purchase his books. I'm certain it will generate some extra residuals, but I've finalized my decision of donating all future royalties to an Alzheimer's focused charity.

Another swig from the bottle escorts more Glenmorangie down my throat, when I raise the TV volume a bit once American Pickers returns from commercial. Given my blurred vision, I should be conked out in ten or twelve minutes flat. I've stretched out on the bed with the hooch firmly between my legs, and I'm comfortably propped up against a sea of pillows lining the headboard. For good measure, I reunite the anesthetic with my lips for one last guzzle to be entirely sure I succumb to a decent REM cycle. It's the first time I've slept in a bed since Friday, I think.

GRAYSON

Violent sunrays hound my vision through the windshield, as I'm once again Felton bound for Harmony Memorial. Otherwise known as the family business. I reach up to the visor for my sunglasses, taking inventory of how I feel at this moment. Apart from the usual headache, surely something I'll acclimate to in a few more days, my stomach aches and gurgles. The foul taste of bile teases the back of my throat, ever since I vomited after my shower. No amount of grease seems to have been effective after all.

Facing my sperm donor is the second thing I've been dreading all weekend. Surely Jacob is running things by now, since he'd been away at LSU the year Julian and I made our great escape. Miles texted me as I was retreating from the hotel parking lot. He informed me that he, Alex, and Boo Radley had reached cruising altitude and will be here in a couple of hours. Which is great, if things go way South here in about ten minutes, my calvary's on the way.

Alex might appear soft and tender. But should anyone harass somebody in his inner circle, he can quickly transform into one mean son of a bitch. Kind of to the degree of those wolf shifters people read about in books.

I turn left on Stevens Road, preparing to confront Lucifer's personal assistant. That is if he hasn't keeled over from cirrhosis by now. Wouldn't that be grand! A few brain cells spasm at the simple fact it could be in the cards for me too, if I don't wrestle my own drinking problem. And smoking. But the cigarette in between my left grasp still serves a greater purpose, whether it's painting my lungs with a slow, torturous death or not.

As I advance into the parking area at my folks' funeral home, I lower my shades to note that the building has undergone massive renovations. In fact, the sign above the door now says New Horizons Mortuary.

My legs eagerly stretch as I climb up out of the car. I take my last drag from the cigarette before pitching the butt off to the side, on my trail to the door. The second I swing it open, a loud alarm wails throughout the building which announces a person's presence. My memory suffers a brief shock as I scan the lobby, looking nothing like it did three decades ago. An apple cinnamon aroma fills each nostril while I let the door swing shut behind me.

There's an older woman rounding a corner from a shallow hallway. Judging by the daylight shining through the surrounding windows, it's my mother. She stops in her tracks as if she's seen a ghost. Something not too uncommon in the undertaker industry. I remove the Ray Ban's from my awe-struck face, offering a gentle wave in her direction.

Her expression couldn't scream of surprise any louder. "Grayson?" She mutters.

"Yeah Ma," I nod. "It's me."

We stand as still as the oak trees outside for several minutes, before she breaks her pose to schlep down the hallway in my direction. Her arms expand once she gets closer. This will be the first hug from my mother in over three decades. Yet my inhibitions about human contact shepherds a slight flinch as if her touch is now foreign to my senses. In another moment, I throw caution to the wind and accept her embrace. I couldn't have been more wrong. Her hug feels just as the last one did from 1990. For seventy, her strength is on par.

Ma lets out a groan, brushing the back of her hand down my face. She grimaces as her fingers trace the edges of my stitched-up wound, probably feeling a sympathetic

pain. The kind only a mother can have of their children no matter their age. A set of tears flutter from each glossed eye as she recoils her head from our embrace. Those mushroom brown strands covering it suits her well.

Her hands trail down my arms, as if taking note of my muscles and fully grown physique. “I figured I’d be seeing you,” she admits through a crackly voice.

“How’s that?” I ask.

“Ohhh, New York emailed us with transfer forms,” she replies. “For a body, that had your name in the responsible party field.”

I figured that would be the case. My mouth contorts an uncomfortable shape. She knows I’m gay, but I doubt she knew I ran away with Julian. I can’t imagine the initial shock of seeing my name on paperwork after all this time. We hold hands on a short walk through a large opening, leading us to a family sitting room with two couches opposing each other. Her grip doesn’t ease up until we find a spot next to each other on one of the beige sofas.

“Ma—Julian’s—” I start to explain, pausing as soon as I feel another river of sorrow building within my tear ducts.

I clear my throat to try this again. “He was my husband,” I admit. “He’s the boy from the barn on the night of my eighteenth birthday.”

Fully expecting to see my father, I scan the room before glancing over my shoulder.

“Sweetheart don’t worry about him,” Ma says assuredly, taking hold of my hand for a second time. “The same month you left,” she adds, seething through gritted teeth. “I divorced that son of a bitch.”

Disbelief cleanses my insides as I tilt my head. “Really?”

“I told him I wanted one after he scared off my youngest boy,” she huffs.

“So where is he?” I ask curiously, not that I care to see him.

Ma darts her eyes past my head while responding but pauses. “In town?—”

A baritone voice shouts from behind me. “Well, if it isn’t Gravy Goober!”

This can be the only person on the planet who teases me with such a nickname, my brother Jake.

My head twists around to see Jacob standing taller than I remember, his hand poised at a hip. “Janky Jay?” I reply with a semi-smile before rising from the sofa.

I instinctively extend an arm to offer a handshake, but he attacks me with slender arms spread out for a hug. The squeeze is much tighter than Ma’s. Understandably so, given he’s only two years older than I am.

“We’ve been expecting you,” Jake says, breaking away from the hug.

I wipe my eyes with a wrist. “It’s been three decades,” I announce. “Apart from getting taller, you’ve not changed a bit.”

“Speaking of time,” Jake replies. “We knew you’d come back to us eventually,” he says. “I did a few Google searches on occasion and saw that you were married to a New York Times best-selling author,” he admits. “And then a couple articles about some architectural achievement awards you received.”

The question of why he didn’t reach out swims to the surface of my mind. If our

parents got divorced, then surely it would have been okay after all. And if only I'd known, maybe I would've reunited eons ago. And Julian wouldn't have been robbed of all the precious memories with his family either. But the past doesn't matter anymore. I shake my head at the very thought of all the fucking darkness that has ensconced my life. Jake hurries away to retrieve an iPad from a desk out in the lobby while I sit back down next to Ma.

When he returns, we start discussing the logistics of Julian's transfer. He guides me through the arrangements I should make, determining a funeral on Friday is reasonable since his body has been on ice longer than it needed to. I express Julian's wishes to be cremated, insisting on an open-casket funeral so I can respect his family's religious traditions. Even if it means forking over a couple grand just to be used for two or three hours. After he walks me through a summary of the arrangements, the three of us spark a conversation, catching up on so much lost time.

I spent the better part of three hours catching up with Jake and Ma. Since Miles and Alex planned on dinner with me tonight, I took the liberty of inviting them as well. And not only them, but I also want this to be a family affair. So, I texted Amelia, inviting her and Sophia as well. Amelia professed that Sophia is very fussy today, but said she'd have their neighbor stay over so that she could come meet Ma, Jake, Miles, and Alex.

I'm about to pull into a parking spot at the hotel when a song on Spotify plays at random. Yet another station playing similar artists relevant to the previous tune. It takes my memory back to the evening Julian finished typing the words *The End*—quintessentially for the very last time.

I sat in the living room with Boo Radley on my lap, a cold Heineken in my hand. I'd been streaming the latest episode of *This Is Us* while Julian finished up some work in the spare bedroom which we'd fashioned into a writing cave. Out of nowhere, I heard him shout out towards the living room.

“Meus amor, it’s time!”

What was it time for? I questioned in my mind, pressing pause on Hulu. Boo Radley leapt from my lap as soon as I inched away from the sofa cushions. Once I stepped down the hallway, I saw Julian hunched over his rectangular filing cabinet with two whiskey glasses and a bottle of Macallan 18 in his grasp. The kind we only saved for special occasions. So, the bar had been set high that it was good news.

“It’s finished,” he said, pointing to his computer screen.

The pride I had for his accomplishments expelled from my heart as soon as I zeroed-in on two words displaying ‘The End.’ His book “A Shot in The Dark” was officially completed. We’d had twenty-two of those moments in the past. And that would be the twenty-third time partaking in our tradition of an impromptu dance party celebrating the completion of a manuscript.

He edged towards me with both glasses, shooting a command to the Amazon Echo speaker on his desk.

“Alexa, play my spontaneous dance party playlist.”

After a warm kiss, Julian transferred one of the crystal rocks glasses to my grip. P!nk’s “Raise Your Glass” started blaring from the speaker. We bopped to the beat in between intermittent sips of the fancy scotch, letting it fuel our energy to dance it out for three full songs. I recorded his look of satisfaction within my memory bank. His contentment and accomplishments were the only thing that mattered in our impromptu momentous occasion.

I scan the hotel keycard above the door handle, stepping inside the suite to hear short barks ejecting from a very energetic Boo Radley. He makes a beeline straight towards me from the opposing room. After reaching down to pick him up, I raise my head to

spot Alex shuffling into the sitting area.

He seems quite energetic, almost as if he's trying to mask what he's really feeling. It's a funeral after all, so I suppose it's understandable. "Hey," he greets me, shuffling towards me to give an elbow bump.

A smile combats my fatigue and nausea. Mainly because seeing him and Miles is the best thing to happen to me all week. Even though reuniting with Ma and Jake exceeded my expectations, these jokers have been my chosen brothers longer than my own family has been a part of my life. I guess that's my own fucking fault though, so I guess I need to accept blame when it's warranted.

Miles joins us in the sitting area. "There's the guy we've been waiting to see."

I nod my head, matching his sentiments. "Hey pal," I reply, but I detect a look of worry in those narrowed eyes of his.

My fingers comb Boo Radley's perfectly groomed, snowy fur. "How long have you been waiting around?"

Alex shrugs. "Not long, an hour maybe?" He responds, seeming irritated.

Boo Radley licks at my chin as I jet into my room. I let my messenger bag fall onto the bench at the foot of the bed, noticing my bottle of Glenmorangie is not in the spot that I last left it. Instead, there's a hundred-dollar bill in its place. Are you fucking kidding me? Before I go storming out of the room in a fit of fury about them confiscating the scotch, I force a deep breath with a shaken head. They're my friends. They only care about me. Try as I might convince myself that this isn't a big deal, the demons inflicting havoc deep inside would beg to differ.

Instead of acting on my incensed frustration, I let Boo Radley roam freely while

slipping another cigarette from my bag. And on the balcony, once again fallen prey to the South's temperate conditions. I hastily light my cancer stick, taking in a massive inhale. The smoke tickles every fiber of my lungs as I flick the ashes out over the side of the ledge where I've found a spot to lean into.

Miles can be heard shouting from the other side of the door. "Gray?"

Another rush of nicotine hits my bloodstream while Miles twists the knob, gracing my presence. He rests his arms on the ledge with a loud sigh. We stand for a minute in complete silence, building up quite a sweat. Well, it's not completely hushed. The rambunctious noises coming from a nearby metal fabrication warehouse are razing my eardrums. By the twelfth drip of sweat down my back, Miles interrupts our silent and insignificant moment.

"I know it's really hard right now," he says. "But?—"

Annoyed, flick the smoke before turning my head. "But what?" I bite back. "You think you can just take my property away from me?"

"It's not like tha—" he responds, but I interrupt him.

"It's not like that?" I counter. "Jesus fucking Christ, Miles!" I exclaim, rotating the hand holding my cigarette for emphasis. "I'm not ten goddamn years old," I huff. "I don't need you to parent me."

That outburst immediately punctures my conscience. Perhaps I was a little harsh. But I have a right to be perturbed.

Miles places his hand on my left shoulder. "Come on, I'm the last person who can judge anyone," he admits. "But I know if you keep the liquor up, you're going to turn into your father," his threat isn't entirely off-base. "Alcoholism is genetic, I know

firsthand—remember nine-eleven?”

He has a point. And I’ve tried reminding myself of this fact a couple of times this weekend. Though, my unremitting thirst seems to win every time I try to combat it. I do remember his affliction all too well. Not only booze, but he’d be found eating pills like they were goddamn Mike & Ike’s. I should apologize for speaking rashly.

“Fuckin-a I do,” I say, taking a drag from my smoke. I hold my breath as I deliberate how best to apologize. On my exhale, the plume of smoke waltzes through the air past Miles’ nostrils.

“You’re right,” I add. “I’m sorry for snapping at you.”

His hand rubs deep into my shoulder before those strong hands of his knead on trouble spot between my neck and shoulder. I take in another puff.

“Hey, bud,” he replies softly. “You don’t need to apologize,” he affirms. “What you’re dealing with fucking sucks, and I’m sorry to hear about the firm,” he adds.

“Yeeahhhh,” I say upon another exhale. “I figured you probably knew about that.”

Miles clicks his tongue. “What the fuck happened with that, eh?”

I shrug. “No clue,” I reply, curing an itch at my wounded brow before flicking more ashes over the railing. “I haven’t heard back from Phoebe about it.”

It’s only at this moment when I realize Phoebe doesn’t know that I know. My drunken text message was accidentally sent to Miles instead of her. And that may be a blessing in disguise. I shouldn’t entertain that fuckstorm until I return home. The amber burn from my cigarette distinguishes when I scrape it against the railing. I toss it over, quickly returning a genuine hug to Miles.

We retreat to the sitting area with one of Julian's New York City journals, settling into a comfortable spot with a chilled San Pellegrino. After enduring the heat for that extended period, this is a welcome treat to my parched mouth. Boo Radley jumps up to the sofa next to me as I prepare to read one of the next journal entries aloud to my brood.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:34 pm

JULIAN

May 5, 1998

This will be my first entry as a married man. Well, not so much ‘married’ in the eyes of New York. But our civil union ceremony will be just as much of a wedding in my eyes as any big day for straight couples. Even though Grayson and I have been together for the past eight years, New York finally granted certain provisions to formally recognize our relationship. If even just a little bit.

I’m sitting down to a glass of leftover champagne while Gray and Miles are out gathering last minute travel supplies. Our big day was yesterday. And tomorrow, it’s Hawaii or bust. If I thought the night that he proposed to me had been the best day of my life, yesterday certainly takes the cake. Literally. Arthur and Helen Wilkins insisted on hosting our day at their family compound here in The Hamptons, opening their guesthouse for us to dwell while we’re here. Alex ‘officiated’ our civil union ceremony in front of our chosen family and a large percentage of the gay community in New York City.

We woke yesterday to the sounds of crashing waves and seagulls off in the distance. A definite change from the jackhammers and honking cars we’re used to. Grayson must have roused before I did. Because when I woke, he’d been staring me down like a parent admires their sleeping baby. He raised his arm, tracing the edges of my chin with his knuckles. I caught his intoxicating stare, acknowledging the tender touch with a big smile. We’d known we had a long, busy day ahead of us. But nothing would interrupt such a silent and intimate moment such as that. As a manner of speaking, a calm before the storm.

A lady on the Wilkins payroll delivered us breakfast from a rolling cart, finally prompting an interruption to the exchanges of loving stares and passionate touches. When she left, we fed each other strips of thick cut bacon while sipping from the same glass of orange juice. Perfectly browned toast, oatmeal, and waffles also lined our plates. I doubted I'd be able to eat everything served, then Grayson reminded me that we'd likely not be afforded time to eat until later at dinner. And even then, we wouldn't get to enjoy every bite, with guests taking turns interrupting us with their warm salutations.

The seaside wind flourished brusquely through an open window in the guesthouse, as we changed into basic clothes to oversee vendors and workers setting up for our day. We didn't necessarily need to supervise at all, because Alex hired one of the most well sought-after event planners in New York. But Grayson acted as more of a bridezilla than I ever imagined. He demanded everything to be executed with perfect detail. Down to the number of creases in each tablecloth.

An hour or two passed when everything had arrived and in the process of being set up. Except for the cake. For some reason, when a baker is told eleven, they assume it means one instead. Gray kind of made it a way bigger deal than I considered it to be, but I still love this man with all my being anyway.

By two o' clock, members of our 'wedding party' began showing. Our good friend from The Lion's Den, Rick Abernathy, arrived first. Since Grayson asked Miles to be his best man—and Alex already slotted to officiate—I asked Rick to stand beside me. By three, our guests arrived in small groups. We initially questioned if there were enough parking spaces to accommodate everyone invited. But between all the neighbors offering the street in front of their properties, it went off without a hitch.

Grayson and I didn't follow the tradition of not seeing each other before reciting our vows. When it came time to dress in our formal wear, we dressed each other. However, we adopted the custom of 'something borrowed, something blue, and

something new.’ Since we held our special day on the sandy beaches of Southampton, Alex deemed it appropriate that our theme should be mermen of the sea.

“You’re gonna look stunning in this,” Grayson said, retreating my brand-new tuxedo jacket from the wardrobe rack.

I slipped my arms through the teal sleeves, tugging it over my shoulders. Gray sidestepped me to fix the lapels of my jacket. His bottom lip curved inward while tying my blue-lagoon bowtie with perfection. He twisted me around so I could get a good look in the full-length mirror in front of us.

“Damn, Saccharo Ferre,” I said, followed with a grin. “I don’t feel ashamed admitting this, but I think I’ll look better out there than you will.”

Grayson raised a brow. “In your dreams, meus amor.”

I waved his brand-new periwinkle tuxedo jacket behind him like a bull cape. Once he slid his white sleeved arms through each hole, he pulled it up over his shoulders. My fingers fussed with his aqua bow tie, and for the life of me couldn’t remember how to tie it in reverse.

He clicked his tongue. “Give it here, Momo,” he insisted, finishing the task as if he’d been practicing for months.

My man, he has more than one talent. I wished I were half as capable of doing the things he is. Yet I’m so glad that he loves me for who I am regardless. Back when we first started planning our outfits, Alex insisted we each wear a top hat. He let us each borrow one from the Wilkins dressing room, fulfilling our ‘something borrowed.’

Grayson and I followed a sandy path lined with seashells, several yards away from

the guesthouse. Hand-in-hand, we schlepped towards a custom pergola specifically designed for our day. Enrique Iglesias' "Hero" could be heard playing from two giant speakers on each side of the decorated covering. As we ascended the platform, the song came to a wrap.

Waves roared from the Atlantic Ocean, offering a perfect backdrop against the dozens of guests sitting in carefully placed chairs planted in the sand. I might smile at Grayson a dozen times each day, but yesterday felt entirely different. This was a unique moment that my soul had been blessed to experience for the first time. And the fact that we shared it in front of nearly forty of our closest friends, made it even more inimitable.

Alex persisted through his opening speech before we were afforded the chance to recite the vows we prepared. Gray went first.

"Julian Tomás Torres," he started. "You make my world complete, and I don't know where I'd be if you weren't a part of it," he added, a tear of joy escaping his left eye. "You're quirky—you're tender—you're a whole lot of fun," a smile complimented the glint of light bouncing from his caffeinating stare. "And you encourage me to go beyond my own comfort zones," he paused to clear the lump in his throat. "Loving you is my greatest honor in life, and I'll eternally be your hero."

I cleared my throat, gripping his hand even tighter. "Grayson Carey Welles, meus amor," a short pause preceded a burst of anxiety. "When I moved to that small place in Louisiana, finding a boy was the last thing I ever expected to happen," I admitted, feeling a rush of emotion fold over my gut like the tidal wave off in the distance. "I was most worried about fitting in, but you made both of those happen," I added. "Cor verberat propter te—My heart beats because of you."

A moment later, we pulled each other's ring from the inner pockets of our jackets. Meanwhile, Alex asked me if I promised to take Grayson through life as my wedded

partner, through thick and thin. When I answered generically, “Yes.”

When Alex asked my man, on the other hand, Gray replied true to Yankee fashion. “Oh, I’m in for the long fuckin’ con baby,” he responded, the twinkle in his right eye complimented the usual mischievous grin adorning his youthful mien.

Alex cleared his throat before concluding with the normal spiel. “It’s with great pleasure that I pronounce you man and man,” he avowed, pointing in Gray’s direction. “You lucky bastards may kiss.”

It hadn’t been our first public display of affection and certainly wouldn’t be the last either. Grayson took his right hand, placing it around my back while I clutched to his other. He pushed me backwards when his lips formed a seal against mine. Our crowd clapped cheerfully before we ushered each other down the platform. The Spanish version of our song which just played previously, accompanied our stride down the same shell led pathway.

The rest of our night completed the festivities, full of precious moments and enough laughter to last us into next year. Before dinner made its rounds, caterers passed around my favorite Puerto Rican appetizers—mofongo and pan de mallorca. Everyone seemed to enjoy our entrée options of prime rib, lobster, and roasted chicken breast. And Grayson wins the gold medal for properly guessing that we wouldn’t get so much as four bites the entire evening. Well, at least until we absconded to the guesthouse when our final guests left.

Grayson urged me through the entrance to the guesthouse before yanking the tuxedo jacket straight off my shoulders. It fell to the floor as he removed his. Our lips joined for an impassioned kiss while we stripped off the rest of our clothes. He pressed my fully nude body against the wall of our guest suite with a loud grunt. The built-up perspiration cloaking his chest sparkled under the sheen of a waxing gibbous moon, shining down through the windowpane beside me. He nipped at my bottom lip while

his hands rested on my shoulders.

“I wanna ride you all fuckin’ night, Momo,” he purred. “Your peach pit’s all mine now.”

My vision squinted while I spasmed with arousal from head-to-cock. “I expect nothing more, Saccharo Ferre,” I moaned with delight.

Our tilted heads feverishly swapped tongues before he twisted me around, summoning me to the king-sized bed. He hovered his head over my chest, his smooth tongue circulating my left nipple for a moment. His teeth clenched it gently, welcoming a pleasurable moan to fall from my quivering mouth. Grayson raised his head to catch my aroused stare, flashed an enchanting grin in my direction.

My legs eagerly parted after he yanked me to the edge, his thumping cock finding my hungry hole with hardly any effort required. It plunged deep inside my ass in a fit of fury, feeling way different than any prior instance. If that’s what married sex feels like, then sign me up for a daily subscription to his dick.

“Fuck, meus amor,” I uttered, fiercely pumping my cock to the cadence of him bucking deeper and deeper.

After my head had been pushed back into the sheets for minutes, Grayson wailed loudly. Like Mount Vesuvius would explode without a moment’s notice.

“Christ!” Grayson shrieked, his eyes shooting back in his skull as he recoiled from my ass.

I felt his warm cum sliding from my hole as a warm caramel sauce glazes an ice cream sundae. He didn’t stop to catch his breath for even a second, before lurching forward to swallow my aching dick as far back as it could go. Not but a few minutes

of Grayson's tongue sliding up and down, when the euphoric sensations set my crotch ablaze. My fists bunched up in the comforter as I screamed with ecstasy. In a split-second, cum ejected my cock in short bursts. His chin an instant casualty of my sticky assault.

My relief passed through me as fast as the sweat puddled in the sheets. "Ay Dios fucking mio, babe?—"

Grayson didn't need to say much, I knew he enjoyed it as much as I did. "Right?" He acknowledged, slapping my naked belly.

Naked and drenched in sweat, he tottered over to the foot of the bed where a cater waiter wheeled the remaining wedding cake exclusively for our post-wedding enjoyment. He held a notecard up to the light of the moon, reading it aloud.

"Congrats, boys—keep the night going with another bottle of Dom and of course—more cake—Miles & Alex," he read, tossing it over his shoulder with a shrug. "Don't mind if I do."

I sat up, then scooted closer to him as another cork popped. A loud whomp from a closet door across the room announced its landing site. Gray poured the champagne into two flutes before climbing back to the bed next to me. All in all, we'd each sipped three glasses of bubbly with intervals of taking turns hand feeding each other pieces of the leftover pistachio vanilla cake.

"Well it's done," I affirmed, a carbonated sip traveling down my throat. "Anything you'd have done differently?"

He raised his hand to pinch my chin. "Not a goddamn thing, Momo," he said as I felt the warmth of his breath against my neck.

Slightly buzzed, I lowered to the bed as his chest fell into mine. My fingers rustled his thick hair as my lips formed a satisfied grin. Meanwhile, the back of his hand brushed tenderly down my cheek when we iterated the same sentiments in separate languages.

“Vos auferat spiritum meum,” I affirmed.

“You take my breath away,” he muttered.

As I sit here sipping the last few flattened sips of our leftover Dom, I’m left to think about what the future holds for us now. We’ve just started the next chapter of our lives. Despite the eight years our journey has on us, there’s many more miles of road for us yet to travel. And we’ve even overcome some obstacles along the way. But so long as we have each other, nothing the future pitches our way will be impossible to defeat.

GRAYSON

Everyone is gathered around a cluster of adjoined tables here at Armando's, the fanciest restaurant Franklinton has to offer. In some ways it feels like a long-overdue Thanksgiving reunion. Alex and Miles insist on footing the bill for everyone. And at twenty-five bucks a person, I think I'll let them. Even though Jake only charged me for things at cost, Julian's funeral is running me a pretty penny. But I absolutely wouldn't have it any other way. He deserves to be remembered properly.

Ma sits to the left of me, with Jake on the other side of her. Miles is directly opposite me, with Alex and Amelia lining the rest of his side. Our waitress, Kelly, is here to gather our drink orders.

Without skipping a beat, I blurt my request. "A double Glenlivet 12 with a water back."

But the disappointed look Miles is shooting in my direction chides me to just order a Coke and be happy with it.

I hold up my forefinger to catch Kelly's attention, who's already moved onto Ma. "Actually, scratch that," I say. "Just a Coke for me."

She leaves our table once everyone submitted their requests. Alex initially started to order a bay breeze but felt the impact of Miles' right elbow straight into his ribcage, followed by what I think was whispered, "just order a fuckin' soda, will ya?"

With all the menus obscuring every nose at the table, I scan through the list of

entrées. There are way too many listed. I think perhaps I'll just have Miles order for me, since he knows what I like. And he knows I hate making these decisions. God damn it! This reminds me of every time Julian ordered for me whenever I couldn't decide. But he and I didn't eat out very much after his diagnosis. Or if we did, it had been a place we frequented where I would order the same thing.

"Miles," I ask, my hand covering a dimple. "Just order for me, will ya?"

He nodded. "Too much to choose from?"

"A bit," I reply. "And nothing too spicy."

I know it must seem silly for a fifty-year-old man relying on someone else to order their meal. But I fucking detest too many options. If they only had four or five choices, I'd likely do it for myself. Kelly returned with our beverages a few minutes ago, but my desire for a scotch is boiling at the surface of my flesh. This Coke isn't quenching shit. Perhaps I can sneak away to the other room where I spotted the bar on our way to the table. If I tossed back even just one, it would tide my desire. When everyone has decided on their meal, Kelly returns to the table with a pen and pad in hand. She glances in my direction first when I point at Miles across the table.

"He'll have the carne asada," he instructs with direct eye contact. "And is your chimichurri terribly spicy?"

She shrugs. "It's not for me, and I don't handle spice too well."

Miles nods. "Alrighty, go ahead and put it on there."

Everyone else takes their turn ordering in a counterclockwise fashion then Kelly leaves at once. Ma sparks up a conversation with Miles about how long they have known me. With a chuckle, he begins telling her the story of our lives right from the

very beginning at the apartment in NoHo. Alex left for the restroom a minute or two ago, so this is my opportunity to run off on a secret mission. I pat Ma on her shoulder, raising the messenger bag over my shoulder to excuse myself from the table.

“I’m gonna step outside for a smoke,” I affirm, turning in the opposite direction to tread down the short footpath.

I’m pretty sure I heard Ma gasp and ask Miles if I really smoked. She can have an opinion, but either way, I give zero fucks. I love her, but she’s not the one about to bury their husband. Or cremate him. Whatever. It’s all the same goddamn thing. As my feet approach the lounge, I twist my head around in the same likeness of Mr. Bean up to his usual shenanigans. Better safe than sorry that nobody at the table saw me making a beeline for the bar. I’ll pay for my drink and keep this to my own damn self.

A young boy barely appearing old enough to vote greets me once I advance to the counter. “What can I do ya for?” He asks.

I make note of his nametag, tapping my fingers against the surface, all the while clicking my thirsty tongue. “Double Glenlivet 12—neat,” I command. “Please.”

Jimmy turns his back to me, retrieving the bottle and reaches down below the bar for a clean glass. He may only look as old as the scotch he’s pouring, but he can eyeball a double without the use of a jigger like a real pro. He slides the glass in my direction before taking the Mastercard between my fingers.

“Ya sure ya don’t just wanna put it on your table’s check?”

My ears perk at the notion while I shake my head resolutely. “No no, paying here is just fine,” I assert, pulling the glass to my cracked lips.

The amber ethanol slithers past my throat almost too easily. I should sip it a few times, but the taste is something my sullied essence has craved all damn day. In one large gulp, I gently slam the glass back down. Jimmy lets out an impressive whistle.

“In my four years of being a bartender, I don’t reckon I’ve ever seen anyone just down an entire double of single malt like that,” he admits with admiration, handing me my credit card.

A belch escapes my mouth before I can cover it with a palm and an embarrassed look. “Sorry,” I say. “It’s been the Monday-est Thursday ever.”

Jimmy slides a receipt and pen across the counter. “Today’s only Tuesday, friend.”

I shrug while lifting the pen. “Okay, Tuesday then.”

The ink skips around every time I try to form a loop of the ‘y’ in my name. Why can’t places just use better pens for Christ’s sake? After scribbling some lines on the bottom of the receipt, I can finish signing with ease. I push the pen and autographed paper back towards the boy while turning around to head out for a dessert—I mean a smoke. Why do I suddenly sound like Karen Walker from *Will & Grace*?

For being damn near seven-thirty, the heat and humidity hasn’t let up one iota. In fact, it feels as if it’s only worsened since we entered the restaurant. My back props against the brick wall as I lower my head with a smoke perched between my lips. The lighter flick engulfs an inch high flame when I take a long drag. I can feel the warming effects of alcohol tingle me all over, but this puppy here will make the rest of my evening tolerable for sure. Or at least until the end of supper.

Smoke discharges from my nostrils as I flick the ashes off to my side. Speaking of after dinner, Miles and I decided we’d go shopping at JCPenney. There’s not a chance in Hell I can show up to my lover’s funeral in a band t-shirt and jeans.

I take another few short drags from my smoke while looking for a container to dispose of the butt. Much like Denny's in Pennsylvania, there isn't one. So I scrape the fiery embers against the brick to toss it away from the sidewalk. I must hurry back, or they'll get suspicious of my extended absence. Especially Miles, he's one smart fucking cop. Inside, the pleasures of air conditioning bless my walk to the table. I pinch my shirt, fanning it against my chest to get the air moving underneath to cool down on the last few paces towards the group.

Ma harasses me as I slide the chair out to take a seat. "That must have been one big cigarette, Sweetheart."

I shrug, wiping my nicotine-stained fingers on my shorts. "Meh, I had a couple," I reply.

Liar liar, pants on fucking fire! I shake my head to ignore the admonishment coming from my conscience, all the while noticing that Alex still hasn't returned either. And wondering exactly how long I've been away. Or how many dirty little secrets Miles divulged to my mother in that timeframe. She sticks her nose out with a twisted head, sniffing at me like one of Miles' canines hunting down a kilo of cocaine. Her eyes squint as if she's caught me in my lie. Yet I don't know how.

"So," I blurt, rubbing my palms together. "You'd think two people leaving the table would've made the food come."

No sooner do I position the soda straw between my lips when I hear a loud sigh from behind. "Sorry about that everyone," Alex says, returning to his seat. "I sure lost track of time."

Miles slaps his palm into his husband's lap. "I was just telling Martha about Grayson and Julian's wedding in The Hamptons."

“You should show me pictures of it sometime,” Ma insists, her hand taking grip of my wrist.

What I could use right now are some pictures of us. In fact, I remember archiving all our old photos in the cloud. Since our meals haven’t arrived, I scoop my phone from the front pocket of the messenger bag, unlocking the screen. With a bit of luck, there might be decent enough cell coverage to access them. My lips fashion a grimace while raising the device in the air as if it will receive any better signal. An extra bar could make the difference accessing a folder labeled May 1998.

Several thumbnails of images populate as I set my phone on the table in front of us. I open the first one to get a larger view. It’s a photo of us in our tuxedos as we schlepped the sandy aisle on our way to the stage. Just seeing the smiles on our faces as I continue thumbing through the photos, warrants a reenactment of the emotions I felt that day. And with it, comes a small trail of happy tears.

“Sweetheart don’t get down,” Ma says, taking the corner of her napkin to lap up my emotive display. “This was a happy moment.”

I nod. “I know,” I retort. “That’s why I’m fuckin’ bawling over here.”

Her ears shoot straight out as if I’d said her blouse was uglier than sin. Whoops! Embarrassment lights up my face. She’s not accustomed to the way we talk in New York. In fact, I doubt for a second that she’s ever been to New York at all.

Ma shakes her head with much contention. “I’m not used to such a potty mouth on you,” she replies.

Amelia pipes in from the other end of the table. “It’s okay, Martha,” she says. “I wasn’t used to my brother swearing either.”

Jake sits innocently in his seat as if he's never sworn a day in his life. All my bets are on him swearing his fair share while away at LSU with each of his frat brothers.

I grab Ma's shoulder, tilting my head. "I'm sorry, Ma," I reply with gritted teeth. "It'll take me a little bit to remember the cultural differences between the city and here."

Kelly and one of her fellow servers approach our table with giant trays. She sets an oval cast iron skillet in front of me, with an extra plate of toppings and a tortilla warmer. The sizzle coming from my strips of steak is a satisfying noise, because I know it should taste delicious. Dinner conversation seems to have taken a pause while everyone digs into their food like a hungry army. I slurp more Coke in between bites of my carne asada, gratefully admiring Miles for his excellent job ordering for me. It might be the first thing I've eaten today, but it's the best goddamn Tex-Mex I've ever had.

After dinner, Ma wanted to join us boys at JCPenney here in Franklinton. Since she rode with Jake from Felton, Alex insisted we'd drive her back home when we're done shopping. Little did I know one of the reasons she wanted to tag along, was because she still had something to say to me. It's when she had been interrupted by my brother back at the funeral home. Our group huddles outside the restaurant to wave Amelia off.

Before climbing into her car, Amelia leans in to give me another hug. She says that she'll be seeing me Friday at the church. When her Camry pulls away, I turn around to see Ma standing around the corner against the adjoining wall. She's waving at me to come over, so I excuse myself from the guys who appear ready to leave. I join her while retrieving a smoke from my bag with the universal expression— do you mind?

Ma gives me her tacit approval. Even though we've been apart for three decades, she's still my mother, and I can feel her judging me on the inside. I light the stick,

taking a quick drag. Blowing the smoke away from us, I study her gaze and the tone of her expression. It seems to have made a one-eighty. Uh oh. Here we go!

“Grayson, my son,” she says, resting her hand on my shoulder. “I haven’t had a chance to tell you this in private.”

My head tilts to the other shoulder while actively listening to what she has to say.

Her eyes begin glossing over with a show of emotion welling inside the cusps. “I never once thought ill of you for who you decided to love,” she continues. “Your father is the prick who has the problem.”

The fact that she’s sharing her true feelings after all these years, means the absolute world. There is never a wrong time for a person to be told they’re accepted for who they are. For how they were the second a doctor slapped them on the ass. In fact, I feel the cowardice of my inner demons diminishing at the very thought of another human being instilling their love—rather than misery. And cue the goddamn waterworks yet more.

Ma persists but uses her thumb to wipe away my emotive display of gladness. “In fact, I pretty much knew you were gay since you were knee high to a grasshopper.”

I turn my head off to the side, blowing a cloud of smoke before curing the itch at the base of my nose. “How’s that?”

She grins. “You waddled around the house in my nightgowns and fancy shoes at six or seven,” she pauses, letting a short laugh escape her lips. “That was my first clue.”

Speaking of long forgotten memories—or lack thereof—my mind flashes back to the moment I saw her standing in my doorway. That night watching my father’s hands trying to beat every last ounce of fag from my disappointing existence.

“That night,” I say. “My eighteenth birthday, did you not intervene because he would have hurt you in the process?”

Her affection turns dingey. “Oh honey, I was frozen with terror,” she admits. “I had no idea if I had stepped in between, if it would’ve escalated his anger or not,” she pauses yet again, rustling her fingers through my hair. “But I assure you that I was just as proud of every part of you that night as I am right now,” she adds, a twinkle returning to her stare. “It had nothing to do with my safety, baby, only yours.”

Ma finishes stroking the disheveled locks up and over my ear. The pride in her eyes is admirable, especially after we’ve gone all this time without speaking. Just as the smoke exits my nostrils, so do the fleeting thoughts of guilt. I suppose it’s anybody’s guess where my father is. And I’m not even sure I really want to know. As I let a draft of air down my pipes, stifling a yawn in the process, I can’t help but ask anyways. He is, after all, the sole reason I avoided this place for so long.

“Ma,” I ask, inhaling another short drag from the cigarette.

She returns my serious gaze in kind. “Yes, baby?”

On the exhale, I scratch another itch that’s been pestering the base of my nose with my thumb’s knuckle. “Where is— he?” I ask solemnly.

The pang in my gut couldn’t be any more pronounced. Despite her eye-roll, I’m not feeling too comforted.

Ma lets out a sigh. “He’s around Washington Parish—” she pauses to let out a cough, apparently from my cigarette.

Ugh. I must quit fucking smoking again. I can’t do this to poor Ma.

“You were saying?” I continue the conversation.

She nods. “From what I hear, the bastard stays in his spider hole alone and unsociable—” she exaggerates with a sneer. “Apparently only leaves to replenish his beer and whiskey, or the occasional loaf of bread.”

I should be cringing with the mental image of my father cut off from all of humanity, living a miserable life until the good Lord takes his sorry excuse for flesh. Yet all I can feel is satisfaction. How wonderful it is to hear how he’s finally experiencing the consequences of his behaviors. From how Ma explains it, he’s nothing more than a stain on society now. Tens of thousands of dollars in debt, with untreated cirrhosis, and a filthy shack he calls ‘home.’

Alex shouts from their rental, pointing at his watch. “Come on, we gotta hit the store before they close.”

Ma tilts her head, both eyes gleaming with adoration—and probably joy. “Please stay in town for as long as possible,” she pleads, wrapping her arms around my waist. “I have so much mothering to catch up on.”

My cigarette is only halfway finished, but I take one last puff before tossing it. Ma’s gentle strokes are soothing, as they always were before. I rub her back with my left hand, hearing her express her pride makes me feel like I should stay in town an extra week. Then in another instant, nothing but guilt swallows me whole. Perhaps this is yet another last-stitched tactic, the darkness drowning me, a casualty of impropriety manipulating me into fear and shame. As the adage goes, “hindsight is twenty-twenty.” The only thing that should matter now, is we won’t leave each other’s lives a second time.

GRAYSON

I'm jostled away from a deep slumber by the alarm on my phone. Perhaps for the first time in a week. I hesitate to rise immediately from the bed, but it seems the alarm has woken Boo Radley also. His smooth, moist tongue licks all over my chin and mouth. And his breath could stand to be freshened, though I doubt there's anything in his go-bag to remedy it. I stretch my legs while my arms do much of the same. After a cavernous yawn, the soles of my feet feel the stringent fibers of our hotel carpeting. I slip into a pair of black polyester shorts with the Yankees logo, patting my thigh to signal to Boo Bear that we're heading out for his morning piss.

I need to pee too, but I'm sure my little bastard needs to go. I'd rather wait to relieve myself, saving the carpet's integrity. With my feet slipped into my shoes, I perform my usual morning hobble, making my way into the sitting area where Boo's leash is bound to be somewhere. He follows my lead as I scan the room. Of course, if it were a snake, it would have bitten me. I hook the leash to his collar before we set out for the elevator in the hallway.

Outside, he leads me around the corner to a shaded patch of grass so he can do his deed. It's only been a couple of minutes, and I can already feel beads of sweat building up between the cloth of my shirt and my back. I seriously doubt the barometer changed any through the night, even if our hotel is well air conditioned. If there's one good thing to come from today, it's the fact Julian's funeral is being held inside St. Valentine's Cathedral. Not outside, since he ultimately won't be buried.

Boo Radley and I head back upstairs so I can finally do my morning business. And shower. We reach the door when I realize I've left my keycard in my messenger bag,

which is on the bench at the foot of the bed. Out of pure luck, Alex answers when I knock. They've just woken. Perhaps it was the noise we made before tottering into the hallway.

"Hey guys," he says, waving us inside as if we're guests. "Potty time huh?"

I nod while unclasping the dog leash. "Yeah," I reply, darting straight to my bathroom.

The warmth of relieving my bladder causes my eyes to roll straight back. A minute longer and I probably wouldn't have made it. As I return the shorts to my waist, I think just how lucky I am that I didn't spill my guts into the toilet like I did many other mornings this past ten days. It might just be the only good thing to come from drinking very little. With that thought, I start the shower so it can get warm while I wash my hands at the sink. It may be a thousand fucking degrees outside, but I'll always take a warm shower no matter the weather.

With the aid of very effective water pressure, I spend several minutes cleaning up before reaching out for a fresh towel. At the sink, I grab my toothbrush, quickly scrubbing it around both jaws. I can smell the incredibly fresh scent of bacon wafting in from the sitting area, but there's no chance I'll be hungry until I've said my last goodbye. If anything, I've felt the pit in my stomach return since three or four in the morning. Well, it never really left, rather less intense. But today of all days, I'm sending my Puerto Rican sensation off in style. Eating away at my heart like a worm to the core of an apple in the process.

The shirt I bought—or rather Alex did—hangs from a hook out on the closet door. I retrieve it, my black slacks, and belt, then return to the bathroom mirror. I dress quickly because I must be at the church before everyone else. The only second that I pause is to study my reflection striking a different sentiment now.

No doubt, I still feel an overwhelming sense of sorrow. But my satin paisley shirt in the colors of a peacock and gold tie is very similar to what I wore the night I proposed to Julian. If I'd have chosen to wear black like every other person probably will, I know I'd hear him screaming from the other dimension. Excluding pants, his bright spirit rarely allowed any shade of black to see the light of day.

Slipping the blazer over my shoulder, I gather the messenger bag to step out into the sitting area. Miles and Alex are finishing their breakfast while Boo Radley is between them, chomping at the bit just waiting for Miles to feebly drop his bacon.

"I'll see you guys at the church," I affirm over my shoulder, saluting them at my right temple. Surprisingly, it doesn't hurt anymore.

Both guys respond similarly. "Yeah, we'll be there soon."

In the car, I prop my blazer over the passenger seat before fastening my seatbelt. The half-empty Tums bottle graces my lips as I press the ignition button. Bluetooth finishes connecting immediately before I even finish retreating from my parking spot. I set out East on State Road 10, slipping the shades over my face.

Josh Groban's "Si Volvieras a Mi" plays, sending chills down my spine. It's a very emphatic song in Spanish, telling the story about a lost lover. Miles happened upon it by accident on Tuesday night when me and the guys sat down, scrubbing the deep corners of the web for funeral music.

A smoke rests between my fingers as I continue the twenty or so minutes into Felton. I can't imagine what all today will bring. Besides a fuckton of tears and possibly a couple of emotions I've yet to experience. If that's even possible. But at this moment, I don't feel too awful. It's amazing what reuniting with Ma and Jake has done in providing me some basic comfort from two people I didn't imagine coming from in the first place.

St. Valentine's Cathedral rests just six miles on the opposite side of Felton, in Washington Parish. Contrary to how things are in New York City, it's not atypical for places to be so spread apart in this Hellhole of a state. It's just up ahead on the left, so I take yet another drag from my smoke before rolling down the window long enough to discard the filter. Much like Tennessee, I don't really care if it's illegal here either. Not with the particular mood I'm in.

I pull into the lot at the church, choosing my parking spot. A few more Tums crush between my teeth while retrieving my wallet from the messenger bag. This may be the first time in a while that I've gone inside a place without it. But I don't quite feel like toting it around all damn day. I reach for my blazer and phone before recoiling out to the asphalt.

It's so hot out already that I can see the opaqueness of heat rising from the ground off in the distance. With it brings a twangy whistling sound flourishing around my mind, the likes of which resemble a duel in an old spaghetti western. On my few steps toward the double church doors, I straighten the lapels of my blazer. The fretting sensation in my stomach has reached peak anxiety.

Father Clarence meets me in the narthex where there's already a small wicker basket, filled to the brim with folded programs that Alex designed on his laptop Wednesday. I can feel Julian's presence. Unlike Saturday night when I thought I'd seen his ghost—or perhaps too snookered to know the difference—this feels way too realistic. I know I shouldn't be surprised since the husk of his soul's recent lifetime is barely thirteen yards away in the sanctuary.

Father Clarence waves me inside. "Grayson," he says with an outstretched hand. "Have you slept any better since we met?"

I shrug. "I suppose as much as can be expected."

“The flowers haven’t arrived yet, but they’re expected soon,” he advises. “I don’t suppose you’re ready to go in there?”

“I guess as ready as I’ll ever be,” I reply under the veil of total uncertainty. “Would you mind if I went in alone?”

He shakes his head. “Not at all,” he replies. “I’ll be back at my desk if you need me before the service starts.”

“K,” I respond, waving nervously.

It takes me a few minutes to muster the bravery to walk my white gay ass through this second set of doors. I know what’s waiting for me on the other side. I could chicken out and leave. Gather my belongings, then board the first plane to depart New Orleans the minute I get there. Or I can buck the fuck up and put on that coat of arms I wore any time Julian needed my protection. I’m certainly not going to cower with avoidance. But I also know that badass persona is way beyond reach. I clear my throat, trying to ignore the fear while straightening my shoulders. And my neck cracks as I twist it way past my shoulder.

The sanctuary is just bright enough. Sun peers through walls of stained glass all around as I follow a narrow path leading me straight to the altar. In the center is a rectangular casket crafted with cherrywood. My stomach aches with each step I take. The left lid is already propped open, but I don’t see Julian’s body inside until I ascend the platform. My spine jolts with goosebumps scattering down both arms. Despite my blazer serving as a jacket, a brief chill forays my upper body.

Inevitably, my sight sets on the body lying among satin lined cushions. His hands folded at his chest, but his eyes are shut this time. It doesn’t matter though. A scintillating flash jolts my memory back to when I saw him collapsed on the bathroom floor—death stare and all. He seems to be at peace. Lord only knows the

limits of his inner pain and anguish which led up to this.

My fingers trace the opening of his casket as I feel the weight of every emotion thirty-two goddamn years has brought, pouring from my eyelids. I reach down, caressing his cheek with the back of my hand. The temperature catches me off guard, my hand retreating instinctively. Another river of emotion ensconces both eyelids, hindering any ability to see clearly. No sooner do I attempt wiping away the sad from my eyes, when I hear footsteps climbing the steps behind me.

A young male voice announces their presence as I turn my head to see a person's figure standing beside me. I use the curl of my finger to wipe my eyes clear. He places an arrangement of white roses on the other closed lid. Meanwhile, another guy tosses a standing wreath of roses and lilies combined. It finally registers in this moment, curdling my roiled blood into an absolute fucking frenzy.

"NOOO!" I shout, my arm involuntarily thrashing the roses over the side of the casket.

A look of disbelief washes the young, pitying boy's visage. He flinches, shoving his arms out in front of his chest as if I'm going to start swinging in a fit of fury.

I continue shouting. "IT'S ALL WRONG!" I exclaim, another salted river crashing through the barricades of my soul.

My arms flail up towards the vaulted ceiling as if I'm cursing the heavens. "HE FUCKING HATED ROSES!"

"It's okay, man," he professes. "Honestly—let me call my boss and we'll figure something out—okay?"

No sooner does he stop pleading for mercy when I turn my head back around to spot

Miles and Alex down at the door. They hurry down the aisle in this direction. The boy descends the steps only moments before Miles leaps up to the platform. He places his arms around my shoulders, much like a hug. I shove him away, pressing my palms into my face. I continue sobbing, only stopping to sniffle every couple of seconds. I raise my wrist to wipe away the tears when I feel an instant shift in my mood.

“Why’d he have to do this?” I question, staring directly into Miles’ soul. “He’s lying there in tranquility and I’m over here losing my shit because they got the flowers all wrong,” I add, crying into my palms once more.

“If only I’d have paid closer attention—” I proclaim but pause to take in a deep breath. “I would’ve stopped him—I would’ve been there—I would’ve just fuckin’ been there—I wanna know why he did it,” I continue my tirade, storming away from Miles and Alex. “It’s not fair—it’s not supposed to be like this.”

Miles comes forward with a cautiously extended arm, spontaneously auditioning to be re-cast as Owen Grady. “Gray, buddy,” he begins in a hushed tone. “It’s gonna be okay.”

“IT’S NOT OKAYYYYYY,” I screech. “IT’S NEVER GONNA BE OKAY EVER AGAIN, MILES!!” I add, sidestepping him. My hands return to both sides of my head. “WE COULD’VE HAD MORE TIME!!”

Another mournful emotion assaults the apertures of my spirit once again as I approach the casket. “No—no—no,” I continue moaning, behind the veil of anger. “I need more time,” I add, my voice cracking by this point.

“I’ve absolutely failed as a husband,” I wail. “I need more tiiiiimmmeeee.”

I hover Julian’s body, glowering down at him through foggy eyes. My head rests

inside the crook of my left arm, meanwhile salted streams rain down on the fabric of his cobalt blue suit. What emotional stability I'd found a mere three days ago seems to have vanished altogether. My woeful stance, thrown over Julian's hollow shell, persists for several minutes. All the while wondering for how much longer my life will feel this empty. With another shift in my mood, I suddenly find myself growing entirely jealous of him. I don't have anything left to live for. I should be in a goddamn wooden box next to him.

One hour and four cigarettes later, everyone else begins arriving. I don't know ninety percent of the people who've walked through the doors. Amelia invited the congregation to attend in support of Sophia and Julio. I see her walking down the aisle with Sophia's arm hooked inside hers. Julian's mom may require help keeping her gait, but she's doing impressively for her age and circumstances.

A man in a wheelchair resembling the one I saw in that picture at Julian's house, is being pushed by a young woman. I gather it's Julio and someone from the physical rehab facility. His faculties seem in check, since nothing but a frown adorns his sullied mien. When I take another glance at Sophia, she smiles right along with the pep in her step. Evidently the reality hadn't stuck in her disease ravaged brain. It crushes my spirits to imagine what it must be like for her not realizing she's attending her own son's funeral service.

I approach Amelia, pointing her to the front pew right next to Jake and Ma. There's enough room on the end for Julio's wheelchair and his caretaker to take a seat. My hand reaches out to help Sophia find a comfortable position next to Jake. She smiles up towards my dismal sights, pointing at my gold tie.

Her eyes grow with admiration. "You sure are handsome today dear," she offers.

"Thanks," I reply, primping my right lapel under the guise she might remember who I am.

“Happy Easter, Charlie,” she responds innocuously.

Maybe not! At this point, I’m sure my mug appears awkwardly contorted. She thinks this is an Easter service. I don’t have the mental fortitude to even attempt correcting her. Much less go through the torment of seeing her react to the news, as if it would be the first time that she’d be hearing it. Another tear falls from the cusp of my right eye as I take my place next to Ma. Father Clarence approaches the lectern from around the altar. The microphone picks up the gurgles of him clearing his throat, resounding throughout the whole sanctuary. He begins reciting the opening prayer with everyone’s head bowed, save for poor Sophia.

My hazy mind misses most of Father Clarence’s speech. Not as if I’m purposely ignoring him. It’s difficult to focus with so many strangers in the room. I’m about to give my speech and it’s taking every morsel I have inside me to remain strong. Miles and Alex bargained with him, coming to the agreement that this would be a less traditional Catholic funeral than he’s used to. With some persuading, he agreed to respect our wishes. But with so many people whom I’ve never met, I almost wished I didn’t have to stand and speak at all.

The sanctuary goes radio silent a few minutes later. In fact, I’m pretty sure I can hear the crickets chirping from down the vestibule. When I scan my surroundings, everyone is staring directly at me. Ma nudges my arm.

“Sweetheart, it’s your turn,” she whispers.

Here goes nothing. I begrudgingly rise to my feet, approaching the microphone, fully cognizant that this is not at all like my public proposal in front of a dozen New Yorkers. My hand reaches inside the inner pocket of my blazer to retrieve my speech I’ve prepared ahead of time. Meanwhile, the other covers a dry cough. Yet again regretting all the damn cigarettes and Tums causing me to be parched. I lower my head to focus on the words I’ve written. I begin my speech much like a story, starting

with part of that monologue of thoughts from the day Julian received his diagnosis.

“When entering a relationship, nobody prepares you for all the bad you will face,” I start. “Nobody’s there with a hot cup of tea and a list of signs or things to look out for, and you’re not given a handbook on how to deal with the roadblocks and detours life throws your way—” I add, scowling in Ma’s direction.

She nods as if I’m doing okay thus far, so I continue. “—Which can test the very limits of the bond with your new partner,” I cough again. “All you’re equipped with are the primal instincts given to you when you’re born, and it’s your responsibility to know how best to cultivate them the best way you know how.”

I swipe away the few tears welling at my lids before persisting. “Julian was diagnosed with early-onset Familial Alzheimer’s Disease just over a year ago,” I say, nervously tapping my fingers against the lectern. “Even then, I found no comfort in the shelf full of books on a subject written specifically for the loved ones this nasty disease affects,” I sniffle. “So even in the throes of this major roadblock in our relationship, I was given a guide on how to navigate caring for a spouse with Alzheimer’s,” I add, taking in another shallow breath.

“And yet I defaulted to my instincts to help me grasp hold of the reality we were facing,” I shake my head doubtfully. “If someone were to have told me thirty-two years ago that this would happen, I’m not sure I would’ve chosen to tread this path,” I admit dejectedly. “Would you—knowingly put yourself through the nightmares that you’ve confronted in your own life?” I ask, genuinely expecting to see at least a few heads nod in agreement.

“Twenty-seven years ago, Julian and I were expecting a set of twins,” I admit, this fact stinging from the furrows of my soul. I sniffle while holding back the river. “But that winter we were forced to accept the fact that they’d miscarried, and it ate at our very existence,” I add, fully cognizant that the goddamn waterworks are coming

anyway.

“After we found a way to heal from that grief, we found the deeper parts of ourselves and channeled an even greater love for one another,” I affirm. “Way more than we’d already fostered,” I profess behind my cracking voice. “It made our bond stronger than we’d ever thought possible,” I pause for another breath. “We weren’t given a damn thing to help guide us around that roadblock, no.”

With another pause for breath, my proclamation continues. Meanwhile, random coughs can be heard from all around the church pews.

“We trusted our instincts and they enhanced our relationship in the process,” I say, dabbing my eyes with a sleeve. “And even though life threw this Alzheimer’s diagnosis my way, I found a way to cope in the best ways that I knew how—and it made me learn to develop more patience—more than I already had,” I admit, pointing at Julian’s casket behind me. “My instincts made me a stronger man and made me learn to accept the things I can’t change,” I profess. “Losing a spouse is a lot worse than any diagnosis he could’ve ever been given, and I’m probably not gonna live another day as happy as I was with this man in my world,” I pause again to clear my craggy throat.

“But handbook or no handbook, I’d go through it all again just so I could experience a second lifetime with Julian Tomás Torres and find the joy in moving through another life with those primal instincts leading the way,” my voice faltering by this point. “Alzheimer’s or not, he made me wanna be a better person every single day,” I conclude, an ocean of sorrow crashing against the shoreline of my soul.

I twist my head around towards Julian’s body at total peace. “Tibi gratias ago, meus amor, et tantum desidero,” which translates to, “Thank you, my love, I miss you so much.”

GRAYSON

Somehow, I find myself still standing in front of the first pew. All these strangers keep coming up to me, to extend their condolences. I appreciate their kind words, even if I don't know them from Adam. The service wrapped a half hour ago, and the last group of people are finally exiting now. Ma leans in for an extremely tight hug, finally showing me her full strength this time.

Her fingers comb through the hairs on the back of my head. "You didn't tell me you boys had expected twins," she says in an almost whisper.

"I haven't had much of a chance," I retort. "Thirty years of life events is a lot of ground to cover," I add, patting her back. "It's gonna take me a whole month to tell you everything."

"Well, I'm sorry you went through that," Ma says, pulling away to look me dead in the eyes. "I can't imagine what it feels like to lose children permanently," she adds. "Let alone those who didn't even get a chance to enter the world at all."

Alex interrupts this small, yet significant moment. "Lunch anyone?"

Miles ushered Amelia and her mother back out to the car, while Julio's aid wheels him closer to me. He takes my hand in his, all the while rivers keep raining down both cheeks.

"Thank you for taking such great care of my son," he says. "He told us how much he loved you, but I can see you may have loved him even more."

Seeing a man well into his seventies weeping so ferociously just razes my gut. Judging by the grip of his hand, I can tell his sentiments are genuine.

“And for the record,” he adds. “I accept your relationship with Julian, and I hope that you will consider still being a part of our family.”

I nod agreeably. “Yes I will,” I acknowledge. “You’re still my in-laws.”

Julio shakes his head in disagreement. “None of that in-law mierdo,” he huffs. “You’re family period.”

Julio’s healthcare worker leans in to advise him that he’s overdue for meds and that he probably needs to go to the bathroom before heading in the opposite direction towards Union Parish. I wave him off as she wheels him up the aisle, while the credence of his words fills my heart. I can feel the monsters which have weighted my soul for the past ten days have somehow dwindled. And the pit in my stomach is improving. Of course, I will be a part of their family. It’s what Julian would have wanted. I’ll treat them with just as much love and respect as I did him.

Miles arrived at the decision for us all to meet at a steakhouse in Franklinton. He sent Amelia and Sophia on their way to gather a big table for everyone. Jake and Ma rode in his Expedition, while Miles and Alex are following behind me on the journey away from the church. Away from Julian. The simple reminder stings me slightly—I won’t be seeing his body ever again. I’ve said my goodbyes and that’s all she wrote. I reach a steady enough speed to turn on cruise control while I reach over to my bag to retrieve a cigarette and my lighter.

After surviving Julian’s service, I deserve two or three of these fuckers. But there’s only one left. I lean over the wheel, lighting the last smoke. A long drag allows the nicotine to excite my lungs, while the satisfying tingle affords me a state of total Zen once the smoke dances from my nostrils.

Halfway through Felton, I find myself stuck at Chase Street behind the punishment light. As per usual, it's the one part of town with the lightest traffic. And by that, I mean absofuckinglutely zilch. My head raises, taking note of my shimmering teddy bear pendant dangling from the rearview mirror. Since I've just said my formal goodbye to Julian, it's only appropriate that I unwrap it from the mirror and wear it for the rest of the day. While the stoplight lingers on red, I raise the pendant to my neck, clasping it firmly in the back.

Finally, the light switches green when my foot lays into the gas pedal. No sooner do I reach the middle of the intersection, when I feel the impact of a larger vehicle smashing my driver's side door. My head sways with the movement from left to right. Glass shatters all around me as the airbags expand, and the strong flavor of blood saturates my throat. That fear has returned to my body—if it even left in the first place—impaling from within me as I close my eyes in the hopes that this is all a terrible fucking dream.

Pain throngs my entire skull while I feel the car moving sideways. And when I open my eyes, I'm confronted with the truth. This is not a dream at all. An instant chill comes over me, numbing every muscle and tendon from head-to-toe. And lastly, my vision grows heavy as lead, causing my eyelids to struggle remaining open. In a split-second, my lungs falter with extremely shallow breaths. And all that's left to see is an endless ocean of black.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:34 pm

Grayson shuffles inside a dark building, a loud door slamming shut behind him. As he scans his surroundings, the thought occurs to him that he's inside Felton High School. There's a path lined with lit votive candles along the floor, leading him down the first hallway of his old school. He passes the principal's office on his left, when the candlelit path turns a corner into what was once a room for study hall.

A table sits in the center of the room, several newspapers strewn about the surface. Grayson lifts the top paper, holding it up to read the headline in the glow of the candles.

AUTHOR DIES IN NEW YORK, HUSBAND DEPARTS TEN DAYS LATER

He tosses the paper aside as he fishes around for the next.

DRUNK FELTON MAN CHARGED WITH THE VEHICULAR HOMICIDE OF OWN SON

Grayson stacks the second newspaper on top of the first, with a third already in his grasp, poising it up to the light.

HEIR TO FINANCE MOGUL AND FORMER SENATOR ARTHUR WILKINS TO MAKE BIG SCREEN DIRECTORIAL DEBUT AFTER MOVIE RIGHTS OBTAINED FOR NOVEL: 'BROKEN IN THE BAYOU.' TO BE FILMED LATER THIS YEAR

A fourth paper remains on the table. He reaches down to scrape it across the table, tilting his head to capture the headline.

INTERNATIONAL BEST-SELLING AUTHOR AND HUSBAND TO BE POSTHUMOUSLY HONORED WITH PULITZER PRIZE

He throws the last paper on top of the others before persisting down the winding path of candles, then around a corner hallway leading to the computer lab. Grayson is favored with a projector descended from the ceiling, its ambient light flickering against a white vinyl screen. There's a podium six feet away, housing a small remote. He approaches the stand to press the play button, whereupon the white jittery light smooths out into a moving, grainy color picture.

Grayson's mother hunches over her newborn baby, smiling tenderly. She blows a kiss while reaching her hand down into the bassinet. Within a flash, the screen transitions to a shot of a large, wooded area off in the distance. Grayson's parents bend down, clapping at the milestone of him taking his first steps. The video fast forwards to the moment he received his first bicycle on his fourth birthday. He straddles the seat, peddling off into the sunset.

Grayson remains in the computer lab remembering all the momentous occasions of his lifetime. After the many years of his childhood, the projector whisks his spirit to the first memory of a shy Julian Torres standing at the end of a bookshelf. The boy's brownish-orange irises warming over his timidity. In another instant, the screen transitions to the two of them half naked in a dark shed with streaks of rain treading down a small window. And within a matter of a second, Grayson is reminded of the happy milestone of strutting across a stage in a football field on his High School graduation day.

The projector sputters obnoxiously causing a pause. In another split-second, the screen transitions to him and Julian in his truck, their hands clasped together as the cityscape of New York City comes into view, as they cross over the Hudson. The memories skip ahead to the moment he kisses Julian at Wollman Rink on the night of his proposal, before flashing forward to their naked bodies facing each other in their bedroom with the dancing candle flame nearby. Sunshine and a sandy beach cloak the

screen with a glance at them standing before God's roaring Atlantic Ocean and dozens of people, reciting their vows to one another.

Grayson stands in silence as the projector fades to black. He feels his spirit being persuaded to walk back towards the hallway and continue down the path of votive candles. Each flame pirouettes while he rounds the corner, leading him to a set of double doors at the library. Once he's inside, the flickering trail ushers him straight to the edge of two opposing bookshelves. No more candles can be seen, but he spots Julian appear from the other aisle of shelves. The man's face alight with an impassioned smile.

"Took you long enough," Julian says, outstretching his arms.

Grayson rushes towards his lover without a single moment to spare, even though the concept of time ceases to exist in his newly welcomed dimension.

"Meus amor," Grayson moans with relief, tracing his fingers across Julian's cheek. "It's really you?"

Julian tightens his embrace around Grayson. "It's really me, Saccharo Ferre," he replies, brimming with confidence. "Welcome home."

Their kiss lasts for an indefinite length. Grayson's hand lassoes his man's neck, while Julian's palm drums against Grayson's backside. The Puerto Rican sensation gently pulls away from Grayson's clutch, resting his hand over the architect's heart.

"Follow me, meus amor," Julian whispers, taking Grayson's hand.

They turn around, facing a wall off in the distance. Julian tugs Grayson down the aisle surrounded by shelves of stories and knowledge from a whole lifetime. Meanwhile, a brilliant white light flickers before them. Grayson follows his lover's lead into the blinding chasm. And with his very last step beyond its threshold, the

weight of an entire era melts away as he joins Julian into eternity.

THE FUCKIN' END