



Harboring Secrets (The Anchor #3)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Brodie Taggart travelled around the world, and all he has to show for it is a broken heart.

After meeting Liam in Greece and falling headfirst into a whirlwind affair, Brodie is left alone and bereft after Liam receives a mysterious phone call and breaks things off. In love with a man who doesn't want him anymore, Brodie does the only thing he can think of—he goes home.

Liam Lawson is grieving... and furious. When the parents of his deceased wife call him home to take part in their latest publicity stunt, Liam is sent reeling. Sick of dealing with his former in-laws and living in a cloud of mourning, Liam does the only thing he can think off, the only thing that makes sense—he decides to find Brodie, the stranger who's stolen his heart.

Brodie has wasted no time settling back in at home. After years of traveling, he's ready to get his own place and put down some roots. At one time, he'd imagined building a life with Liam, but now he's looking to the future alone. Before he has a chance to get comfortable with that, Liam shows up on his doorstep, begging forgiveness. Liam's been harboring secrets and he's ready to spill them all, but only if Brodie is willing to listen. Because Liam might have lost the first love of his life, but hes not going to let go of the second without a fight.

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Chapter 1

Brodie

Even after the sun set, the scent of white-hot sand lingered. Liam and I had spent the afternoon as true tourists, going through the markets, looking at all the stalls and the things people had for sale.

Liam teased me for buying nothing but a postcard. But back in our hotel room, he'd nibbled at my ear while I sat at the desk and scribbled out a message to myself.

Dear Brodie,

Today was one of the greatest days of your life

xoxo

Somewhere, back home, there was a stack of postcards. One for every day that I'd been gone. I tried to get them from the place I was sending them from, and I was usually successful, but whenever I got to a new country, I bought a bunch of generic ones from the airport.

"That's a bit cryptic, isn't it?" Liam asked, kissing his way down my neck.

"I'll know what I meant." I closed my eyes. I'd know that I meant today was the day I realized how much I loved Liam. I'd know that I meant today I looked at a man and saw my future. I couldn't picture where we'd end up, or what that future would look

like, but he was there.

Liam cupped my cheek and turned my head so he could kiss me. Our noses bumped against each other and Liam smiled at me. His lips brushed over mine gently. He kept his eyes open and I thought—not for the first time—how stormy his green-gray eyes looked.

All day I'd tried to tell him that I loved him, but I could never get the words out. It had hit me that morning when I woke before him. I'd come inside from watching the sunrise, something I tried to do as often as I could, and he was still sleeping. Bathed in the glow of the barely risen sun, he looked peaceful in a way that he never quite managed when he was awake.

Liam was only a few years older than me, but we couldn't have been raised any differently. He was born into wealth and privilege, though he wasn't arrogant about it. And me, well, I'd grown up broke, surrounded by people who worked their asses off to try and get by. Until Shane won the lottery, we'd been drowning.

I still felt that way sometimes, but it had nothing to do with money.

And then it hit me that I hadn't felt that way since I met Liam. I'd wanted to wake him and tell him that I loved him. To tell him all the sappy, lovesick thoughts that turned my brain into syrup around him.

But his eyes had begun fluttering and he reached for me in the bed, one arm groping blindly, his face scrunching when he found nothing but emptiness. His eyelids opened then, and he saw me standing there. His face lit up when he smiled and I loved him even more for that.

I'd tried all day to find the perfect moment to tell him what I discovered that morning, but no moment was perfect enough. Or private enough. I wasn't about to

declare my love for the first time in the middle of a market while Liam haggled over prices. Lunch might have been a good opportunity, but I'd been shy, struck silent by the weight of my own feelings, by how heavy the words felt in broad daylight.

The sun was down now and we were alone.

"Liam," I whispered against his lips. "Liam, I—"

His phone, which almost never made a sound, rang.

"I have to get that." Liam pulled away and dug his phone out of his pocket. He stepped back and brought the phone to his ear.

"Yes?" He said instead of hello. He never answered the phone with a hello. It was always yes. Always what do you want from me? What can I do for you this time? What do you need from me? All those questions and more wrapped in a single three-letter word. Yes.

I wasn't sure what Liam's life was like back home, but he never looked particularly happy to hear from anyone there.

Liam huffed out a sigh and looked at his watch. "Now? Are there even any flights—no, of course. Yeah. No, I didn't forget." Liam ended the call and tossed his phone down on the desk with a clatter. He rubbed his hands down his face and looked at me, abruptly distant like he'd already left.

"I'm needed at home," he said.

Home, which I knew was Boston. I'd never been to Boston before, but I could see myself there as a tourist. There were probably all kinds of historical sites to see.

“I’ll go with you.” I was about to stand when I caught the barely perceptible shake of Liam’s head.

It was the loudest refusal I’d ever heard. A fucking earthquake. The ground fractured beneath me and threatened to swallow me whole.

“That won’t be necessary.”

I watched the man I loved transform from Liam, the carefree, starry-eyed stranger I’d fallen in love with, into William Everett Lawson, son of Robert Lawson of Lawson Pharmaceuticals. William Lawson was colder than my Liam.

“Of course it’s not necessary, but I’d still like to go with you.”

“That isn’t possible, I’m afraid.”

My heart slammed against my ribs, against the walls of my throat. It wanted me to tell him everything as if it would make a difference.

“Liam—why don’t you want me to come?”

His eyes flashed with an emotion I couldn’t name. Anger? Pain? Something lurked in the depths and I wanted more than anything to draw it out of him. Liam set his jaw and turned his back on me. Grabbing his suitcase, he flung it on the bed. It was still half-packed like mine was.

We’d met a month ago and had spent every day since then together. We’d been to four different countries. We’d watched sunrises and sunsets and shared laughter and drinks and each other.

“When are you coming back?”

Liam shook his head. “I’m not. I’m needed at home.”

“I—”

Liam turned on me before I could get another word out. “You knew this was temporary, Brodie.” His eyes were as cold as his voice. Liam was shutting down right in front of me. Not shutting down. Shutting me out.

“Don’t.” I shook my head. I used to love it when he said my name, but now it sounded like a weapon. Desperation clawed at me, tearing my insides apart. My body moved toward his of its own volition. The words tumbled out of my mouth without my permission. It was like an out-of-body experience. I watched myself with embarrassment and horror as I did the thing I swore I’d never do.

I begged.

“Liam, please. Let me go with you.”

“Brodie.”

“I won’t get in your way. I’ll do the tourist thing in Boston. Just—whatever’s going on, let me face it with you.” The words came out before I could stop them. I wanted to snatch them back even before Liam registered them. “I love you.”

No. Not like this. I hadn’t wanted to tell him like this.

He stared at me. A few minutes ago, I remembered how this morning he’d looked like sunshine. Like a future I wanted. Now Liam’s eyes were cold. His face hard and his jaw clenched. He took a breath and straightened to his full height, putting on all the airs of the rich and powerful man he’d been groomed to be.

“I’m sorry.”

He didn’t elaborate for what. Was he sorry I loved him? That I was stupid enough to believe that we had something great?

“We can meet up when you’re done,” I proposed.

My brain had heard his words, but my heart refused to believe them. It wasn’t until he gently shook his head that I broke.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Liam’s words were careful, but still cruel.

He wouldn’t say why we shouldn’t meet again. He turned away and went back to packing. I watched him for a minute, wondering how this tall brick of ice was the same man I’d fallen in love with. Maybe he wasn’t. Maybe I didn’t know him at all. I wanted to believe I knew the things about him that mattered, but maybe none of it did. Because I didn’t matter, that much was clear.

My phone was on the desk behind me and I turned to get it. The postcard stared at me, mocking me. I’d never send that one. There’d be a gap in the journey where today’s missive should’ve been. It would stick out like a missing tooth, but anything was better than having to read those stupid, hopeful words.

The postcard was in my hands before I knew what I was doing. I tore it down the center and tossed it in the trash.

“I’ll be back for my things later. The room is yours.” I grabbed my phone and my wallet off the desk and pushed past Liam, who didn’t even look at me as I left. Why would he?

In my head, he chased me down the street. Followed me to the water’s edge. Dropped

to his knees and sank his face into my skin, pressed his mouth against my hipbone and begged my forgiveness the way I'd begged him. He'd have had it too. But he never came. No one called my name. No one looked for me. No one found me there.

Night fell, dark and moonless. I contemplated sleeping on the beach, in the sand, against the waves, because I was dramatic. And heartbroken. Almost numb. But only almost. Because if I were really numb, I'd have let the ocean take me. But I still had people waiting for me back home. They were the only thing that made me get to my feet and brush the sand off my ass.

Home. Shane had made some noise about wanting me to come for a visit. And Kieran had been on my ass for months to come home. He was even more insistent now that he'd fallen in love. Shane had too. And I had yet to meet either of their men. Home was the last place I wanted to be until I walked into my hotel room and found Liam gone.

I knew he wouldn't be there, but I hadn't known what called him back to Boston. I guess I didn't matter enough to him to be told the reason he was abandoning me. Cutting me off without a backward glance. Telling me he was sorry that I loved him. I was sorry too.

Sorrier than I'd ever been.

I packed my things like he'd done and checked out of the hotel. The woman at the front desk looked sad when I went to give her my credit card.

"It's been taken care of, Mister Taggart."

"Can you just... please?" I put my card on the desk and slid it across to her. "Please put it on my card."

She met my gaze and gave me a little shake of her head. She explained that it wasn't possible. That was fine. I vowed then that I'd take nothing more from him. Not his time or his energy. Not his money. No one was sorrier than I was that I loved him.

I went straight to the airport from the hotel. There were still things that I'd wanted to see and do, but they'd lost their appeal. I found myself empty, all my previous enthusiasm gone like Liam had taken it with him. Maybe I'd feel better when it wasn't so fresh. Maybe I'd feel worse.

I sat in the airport for hours. I didn't eat, but I made myself drink water and I watched the planes take off. I imagined each of them to be the one that Liam got on. Every takeoff was another goodbye, but I couldn't stop watching them until finally it was my turn and I was the one taking off. The one leaving. I wondered if he'd watched the city disappear and said his own goodbye to me.

I pulled the shade down over the window and leaned back, wishing I was already home.

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Chapter 2

Liam

“You look like shit.” Carol’s heels clicked across my kitchen floor, sharp sounds punctuating her displeasure. With me? With life in general? Who knew? I loved Carol, but my older sister was always unhappy with one thing or another. Unless you were one of her cats.

“Missed you too.” I took the last sip of my coffee and put the empty cup in the sink.

“I didn’t say I missed you. I said you look terrible. I thought people who came back from vacations were supposed to look more well-rested or something.”

There hadn’t been a lot of rest after I met Brodie. There’d been adventures. Clubs when it was safe. Hotel rooms when it wasn’t. We’d been tourists together. Friends. Lovers. And now we weren’t anything.

“I assume you’re here to collect me.” I snatched my jacket off the back of the stool I’d draped it over and slid into it. The tie around my neck felt like a noose.

“They think you won’t come.”

“I shouldn’t. Piper would have hated this, you know.”

Carol’s ruby lips flattened into a harsh line. “It’s not really for her, though, is it? It’s for her family. For all the people they’ll help by doing this. That part, Piper wouldn’t

have hated.” Carol’s eyes flashed to my left hand, the one where my wedding band used to sit.

“Let’s just get this over with.” I stormed past her. “I’m changing my locks, by the way.”

I’d met Piper in college on a storybook-perfect autumn afternoon. We had no classes together. We weren’t even in the same year, Piper being a year ahead of me. She was a TA for an art history professor. She was a vivacious person, one of those magnetic people you couldn’t look away from.

The cancer had taken her fast. She fought as hard as she could, but some battles weren’t meant to be won, she told me. She’d have hated having her name on a building, but Carol was right. She wouldn’t have hated the rest of it.

A black Escalade waited at the curb and I pulled the back door open, ushering Carol inside before sliding in next to her.

“I hate this for you, you know,” Carol said after a few minutes of awkward silence. “I tried to reason with them and asked them not to call you home.”

I smoothed my tie because I couldn’t smooth all the rough edges inside me. “It’s fine. I should be here.”

“You were finally moving on.” Carol glanced at my naked ring finger. “I don’t want you to go backward.”

She had no way of knowing that would never happen now. Behind me was Piper and our short marriage and the forevers we’d never have. A box of memories left behind. A wedding picture on my dresser, face down.

For a brief glorious moment, I'd found something special. Something important. Someone who shone as bright as Piper had shone. That's what had drawn me to Brodie to begin with.

I wished I could say we met in some romantic way or that I hadn't been an absolute ass to him. But the way we met was so quintessentially Brodie that the memory warmed me now.

The rain was unexpected that day. The forecast had been woefully wrong and no one expected the microburst. I had managed to duck into the lobby of a hotel just as the rain started. A few others followed me inside to take refuge from the sudden downpour.

And ten minutes later, a man came charging inside, laughing his fool head off. He burst through the doors, bringing rain and wind and laughter with him. He'd raked his hands through his hair like his soaking fingers would do anything to the drenched strands other than spray the water on me.

"Why don't you just shake off like a dog?" I told him, annoyed that he'd sprinkled my shirt with the tiniest bit of water.

Then he looked at me and smiled, and my heart stopped. My pulse quickened. He was gorgeous. Even looking like a drowned rat. Maybe especially since he was soaking wet, head to toe. Because he didn't let it upset him. He almost seemed to enjoy it.

One of the employees rushed over to him carrying a towel.

"Thanks." Brodie took the towel and dried his hair. He turned his gaze to me, probably because I was gawking at him. I'd learn that Brodie had a million different smiles and he showed me another. "Sorry I disturbed you."

“You looked like you had quite a good time.”

“It’s not the first rainstorm I’ve been caught in, but it’s definitely the most impressive.”

“You make a habit of getting caught in the rain?”

“Not a habit, really. I just don’t try to avoid it as hard as other people do.” He dried his hand off on the towel and stuck it out for me to shake. “Brodie Taggart.”

“Liam Lawson.”

Brodie’s lips quirked. “It’s good to meet you, Liam.”

Carol’s voice brought me back to the present. Away from Brodie. Again.

I hated how I’d left things with him. Hated how much about myself I hadn’t shared. Maybe he’d have understood why I’d left things the way I did. Maybe if I’d have been honest, I wouldn’t have had to leave things like that at all. What I did was cold and Brodie didn’t deserve it. But in those moments I’d been stricken with panic. My two worlds—two lives, old and new—came crashing together and I’d smashed Brodie’s heart on the rocks of my ruined life.

Had I told him, he’d have understood. I knew that. But I’d been lost in a daydream. Lost in the idea that I could move forward with my life. And then my past dragged me out of the clouds so swiftly that I did the unforgivable. I hurt Brodie.

“For what it’s worth, I am glad to see you’re moving on.” Carol glanced at my left hand again.

“Not everyone will share your sentiment.”

The Escalade pulled up outside the hospital I'd purposely avoided since Piper's death. There was a shiny new cancer ward now. It looked like it had a thousand windows. Like it was more glass than brick. Piper would have liked it.

Carol fell into step next to me; even with her heels she was still a few inches shorter than me. "Don't let them bully you, Liam."

"They're not bullies. They're grieving."

"They use it as a weapon. It's why you're here, isn't it, instead of on your much-needed vacation."

I grit my teeth and didn't answer her. I was here because they'd called and Piper's mom had been in tears. Her mom was frequently in tears. It was her dad that put the final nail in the coffin, though. Sure would mean a lot to us, son, to have the family back together.

My own parents were never really the affectionate kind, but Piper's were. What my parents lacked in warmth, Piper's had it in spades and they gave it freely and willingly. Though I never felt quite like I fit in, they were good people and they doted on Piper.

"It's the least I can do," I told Carol, using a tone I hoped she'd interpret as a plea for her to drop the subject.

"You still haven't told me how your vacation was."

"Because I just got back. Besides, there's nothing to tell. I went and looked at old shit and got sand in my ass crack. Thrilling stuff."

Carol's eyes cut to mine when we stepped into the building. She didn't believe a

word I'd just said, but she had always been able to see through my bullshit. Even if no one else could. I wanted to tell her about Brodie, but she didn't even know about my attraction to men. I wasn't out. Even in the smallest way. Hell, until Brodie I hadn't realized I could be so drawn in by a man that I could look in his eyes and see the universe. See the future. See the man I wanted to be looking back at me.

"This way," Carol said, stepping off the elevator. I followed her purposeful steps down the hallway and into a new section of hospital that hadn't been there before. A section that Piper's parents had bought. The hospital had already had a good oncology ward, but now it had the best. And Piper's name and face were on the wall. A larger-than-life portrait of her had me stopping in my tracks.

Carol put her hand on my arm. "Shit, I forgot to warn you about that. Her mom insisted."

"It's fine." It wasn't. Because I looked at the picture of Piper and I realized that I hadn't looked at her picture in months. I'd avoided seeing her face for so long that it felt like I was seeing her again for the first time. But it was different this time. There was a sad sort of ache down inside me. We could have had a good life.

A good life. Guilt threatened to make my knees buckle, but I steeled myself against the sudden onslaught of emotion. I'd had years with Piper and a mere month with Brodie, but I was free with Brodie in a way I hadn't managed to be since Piper. Before Piper died, I'd been close with her family, but their grief had changed them. It had changed all of us and now I found it hard to warm up to her parents. She idolized them, even when her mother tried meddling and sticking her nose where it didn't belong. Piper would smile and try to reassure me that her mother was only trying to do what she thought was right. Her father, John, was an okay guy, but too willing to go along with Marsha's whims.

I wanted to talk to her now. To tell her about Brodie. Piper was so much more than

my wife. She was my greatest and closest friend and I found that to be the thing I missed the most. I'd loved her with every fiber of my being. Every molecule that made up my body had loved her and everything about her.

"Liam," Carol whispered. "Are you okay?"

I bit back a laugh. It was a stupid question. I wasn't. But not for the reason she was thinking. Sure, I missed Piper. But I'd grieved her. I was still grieving her. But I ached for Brodie. I hated the look on his face when I ran from ghosts he couldn't see and didn't know existed.

We hadn't talked about Piper, but even without sharing that part of myself, I felt like Brodie knew me better than anyone. Better than Carol. Better than Piper had known me.

Our parents were old when they had Carol, and older still when they had me. In a lot of ways, Carol was more like a parent to me than a sister. We didn't quite have a brother-sister relationship, but it wasn't like parent and child either. She was a best friend who could pull rank. Piper's parents still had expectations of me. The grieving widower. The distraught son-in-law.

"Liam."

John's voice had me turning around. Piper looked like her mother, but she had her father's eyes. She'd had his perception too. "Good to see you, son. It's been too long." John took my hand, though I didn't remember offering it, and pulled me into a hug. The embrace was brief and it left me shaky, unsteady. "You look well," he said to me.

"You're a bad liar, John." I managed to force a smile for him, but truthfully I felt like shit. I didn't want to be here and not because I missed Piper. I did. I would never be

done missing her. But leaving Brodie had torn out a part of me. I'd sat in the back of a cab on the way to the airport, looking for him. Telling myself that if I happened to see him, I'd stop the car and go to him. That it was a sign I shouldn't leave.

I didn't believe in signs.

But I believed that leaving Brodie was the biggest mistake of my life.

"Is there anything we can do for you?" John asked me.

The postcard in the inside pocket of my jacket tethered me to someone I never should have walked away from.

"Can we talk after?" I didn't know what I wanted to say, what I'd be ready to admit. Not that I found someone else. Or that he was a man. Or that I'd rather be with him anywhere than spend one more minute with Piper's ghost.

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Chapter 3

Brodie

Home hadn't changed; it was me that was different. I took an Uber past Mom's house and I thought of getting out and going up to the front door and knocking... and the chaos that the next few hours would be. I loved my mom, but I didn't have the energy to pretend that I wasn't still gutted.

I needed sleep. I'd traveled through so many time zones I wasn't even sure what year it was anymore. Airports made shitty places to try and sleep. The benches weren't designed for comfort, that was for sure. The floor was almost better. When I could, I upgraded to first class, but even that didn't help. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw Liam. Memories replayed in my head torturing me with what I'd lost.

If I'd ever even had it. Clearly Liam hadn't been half as invested in me as I was in him. Maybe if I'd told him before he got the mysterious phone call, he might have believed that I loved him and that I wasn't trying to manipulate him. That memory was the worst. The way I'd poured my guts out to him and he'd apologized to me. Humiliation stung, but it was almost better than the bereft feeling that had choked me when I left that room and he hadn't followed.

When I started travelling, I gave up my apartment and my car. I put my things in storage and took with me only the essentials, so I had nowhere currently to call my own. The Uber stopped outside of Kieran's and I climbed out, dragging my suitcase and my busted-up heart to his front door. The lights were off and his car wasn't here, but lucky for me I had a key.

Kieran had insisted on giving me one before I left and I was glad for it now. I let myself in and parked my suitcase by the couch. I wasn't sure how long I'd be staying. Mom would probably want me to spend time with her, and I didn't hate the sound of that. But when I was more rested and able to hold my shit together. Not now when I was so worn out that a strong wind could knock me over. When my whole body felt fragile like rice paper.

I made a quick trip to the bathroom to empty my bladder and wash my face. I wouldn't miss smelling like airplanes and airports. I would miss smelling like Liam. Fuck.

I flicked the bathroom light off and went to the living room. I was too exhausted to deal with my shit and needed about six weeks of sleep. Could I hibernate until it didn't hurt anymore? I could certainly try.

Kieran's couch was ridiculously comfortable. I stretched out and covered up using the blanket he kept draped over the back. He always kept a blanket in the living room. It was good for movies and make-out sessions, and for wayward siblings with broken hearts and probably the worst jet lag known to man.

Sleep hit me like a sledgehammer. There was no way of knowing how long I'd been out when suddenly I was being shaken. Kieran's voice, deep and familiar, and kind of pissed, filtered into my brain and woke me.

"Who the fuck?" Kieran asked. I pulled the blanket off my face and squinted at the light. "Brodie?" Kieran looked shocked and not unhappy to see me now that he knew it was me who'd broken into his house and crashed on his couch.

"Is that any way to greet your little brother?" I tossed the blanket off and sat up. About three point two seconds passed before Kieran yanked me up to my feet and crushed me in a bear hug.

“Holy shit. Does Mom know you’re here? Don’t answer that. It was a stupid question. Does anyone know you’re here?”

“I came straight from the airport. Several airports.” I caught sight of Kieran’s boyfriend, Clay. Kieran frequently called to check on me and ask how my travels were going. Usually at least once a conversation he’d ask me when I was coming home. Then he started seeing Clay and his question changed to when was I going to come home and meet his boyfriend.

“You must be Clay.” I pried myself out of Kieran’s arms and offered a hand. “I’ve heard all about you.” I gave him what I hoped was my best welcome-to-the-family smile.

“Whatever you heard, he lies.”

“Oh, so you’re not the best thing that’s ever happened to him? Shame.”

Clay’s face turned bright red and he glanced at Kieran, who shot me a look of exasperation. I’d only been home for five minutes—that had to be a new record.

“The guest room is yours if you want it,” Kieran told me. “Before Mom kidnaps you and drowns you in cookies.”

“There are worse fates.”

Unexpectedly, Kieran grabbed me again and gave me another hug. I stood there awkwardly for a long few seconds before I let out a sigh and hugged him back.

“I’ll order food for everyone.” Clay said. “Any preference, Brodie?”

“Hot and not served at thirty thousand feet.”

“Order from Rosa’s. Get a number two, four, eight, extra garlic bites, and anything you think looks good. The menu is in the drawer at the end there.” Kieran held tight to me while he gave Clay directions.

Eventually, after one more tight squeeze, Kieran let go of me.

“What was that for?” I asked him. My body felt heavy and not entirely steady so I let myself drop back down to the couch. Sleep was still something I needed more of, but the nap had taken the edge off and now that I knew food was coming, my stomach growled, practically eating itself in anticipation.

“You looked like you needed it.” Kieran sat in the recliner and when Clay approached, a little nervous, Kieran pulled him down into his lap. Arrows shot me in the heart. It was hard to see them so in love when I’d flown halfway around the world to try and escape my own heartbreak.

“How long are you in town for?” Kieran asked. It was a reasonable question. I hadn’t spent a lot of time here. Usually I flew in for a week or so, let everyone dote on me, and then I took off again on my next adventure. But I was tired and sad and sick of airports.

“I don’t know yet, but for a while, I think.” I leaned back and shut my eyes for a second. At least I thought it had only been a second, but the sound of the front door shutting and the sudden smell of food had me opening my eyes.

“Holy shit.” I dragged my hand down my face and looked at the spread of food that Kieran unpacked on the coffee table.

“I’m giving you tonight and all day tomorrow to hide here, but the day after tomorrow you’re going to see Mom. And Shane before he kicks both our asses.”

“How generous of you.” I leaned forward and flipped open the first container. A gloriously cheesy sight greeted me. “Oh fuck, the five cheese mac. I missed this.” I grabbed a fork and dug in. I scooted over to make room for Kieran, who let Clay take the recliner. I’d have offered to take the solo seat if it didn’t feel so nice to have my brother sitting next to me.

“Catch me up. What’s been going on?”

Kieran slid the box of garlic bread over and I grabbed a piece.

“Nothing new since our last email a few days ago.”

My chewing slowed as I remembered the last email I sent him. I’d been so happy, determined that I might never come home. Shane kept shoveling money at me to keep me out in the world and I’d had Liam. There wasn’t a reason to come home.

I wasn’t happy about the situation that brought me here, but there was something bittersweet about coming home. I’d missed my family, even if they were pains in my ass.

“You’re really not going to tell them that I’m home until the day after tomorrow?”

Kieran leaned over and bumped my shoulder with his. “You’ll be grumpy and sleepy. I figure the least I can do is give you a day to figure out which way is up.”

“I’ll get the spare room freshened up for you.” Clay stood and offered me a smile.

“Oh, that’s not necessary. I know where everything is. I can do it. Don’t go to any trouble for me.”

“It’s no trouble.”

“Really—”

“Brodie, he’s trying to give us five minutes alone so I can interrogate you before I make you shower and go to bed,” Kieran cut me off.

Letting out a sigh, I dunked my garlic bread in my mac and cheese. “Fine, interrogate away.” I looked up at my brother’s boyfriend. “Thank you, Clay. That’s very thoughtful of you.”

He looked kind of unsure of himself as he slinked out of the room, or maybe it was me he was unsure of.

“Is he okay? I didn’t ruin any of your plans, did I?”

“He’s fine.” Kieran leaned in and lowered his voice to a whisper. “He really wants you to like him.”

“You said such nice things about him, eventually. I feel like I already know him. It’ll be easy to like him. Will he like me? I sort of crashed into his life unannounced.”

“Don’t worry about that. I think the two of you will get along just fine. Now,” Kieran took a breath and shifted his position so that he was turned more toward me. “Tell me what happened. Not even a week ago you were having the time of your life. You sounded happy.”

“I was and then I wasn’t, and I just wanted to come home.” Home to people who wouldn’t leave. To people who had to stick around because this was home for them. People who wanted me around. I kept in near constant contact with Mom and Kieran, and more sporadically Shane. Shane never quite got the hang of making the transition from big brother to a friend I happened to be related to and his need to have an opinion on everything made it hard for the two of us to connect.

Kieran was quiet for a minute. From the corner of my eye, I watched him push his dinner around with his fork, giving the impression that he was eating. “I’m sorry you were hurt.”

“Ugh. Am I that transparent?” I both loved and hated that Kieran knew me so well. There was a certain comfort in knowing there was a person who could look at me and understand that I was hurting. Even if he didn’t know specifically why, he knew what to say and do to make me feel better in the moment.

“I know what a heartbroken Brodie looks like, remember?”

“Ew, don’t remind me.” I bumped Kieran’s knee with mine and gave him the best smile I could muster. “I’ll be okay. I think I’m going to stick around home for a while this time. I think I’d like an actual routine again.”

Honestly, I had no idea what I was going to do. Even when I was with Liam, it had all been this daydream perfect bubble of overinflated happiness that we’d lived in. It wasn’t real life and the fear that nothing we shared had been real cut me to my core.

Suddenly without an appetite, I put my container down on the coffee table. “I’m going to shower the airport off me and then sleep until the day after tomorrow, if that’s okay.”

“I’m glad you’re home, Brodie. Even if the reason sucks, it’s good to see you.”

“You too.”

I towed my suitcase to the bedroom and dug out a pair of sleep pants. In the bathroom, I stood staring in the mirror for a few minutes before I snapped out of my stupor and started the water. My brain wouldn’t shut up about Liam.

The next few days were going to be filled with a series of depressing firsts and I hated them more because I hadn't known things were ending. But that was the way of it. One day you had something and the next day you didn't, and there wasn't a thing you could do about it besides go to bed and wake up, and do that again and again until you got used to not having that thing anymore.

This was my first shower without Liam and when I got into bed, it would be the first time I'd slept in a bed without him since the day we met. At least I had exhaustion and jet lag on my side to drag me under into a dreamless sleep.

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Chapter 4

Liam

I'd managed to make it almost all the way through the whole event without being left alone with John and Marsha. It was hard to think of them as my in-laws when Piper wasn't here to tether us together. I missed the people they were before her death. Before, they weren't fond of me, but after they were more brittle. Abrasive. And I had less of a reason to want to deal with them. I missed the person I used to be before her death too.

Most of all, I missed the person I was when I was with Brodie. And wasn't that the most unfortunate, uncouth thing to realize at the grand opening of a cancer wing in honor of your dead wife? Her absence would always be a hollow spot in my heart, a hole that would never be filled. A light that would never again shine.

But Brodie was still here. Not here, but on the planet. It was shit of me to stand here and cut ribbons and talk about how brave Piper was, how hard she fought, how much this wing would have meant to her and all the good it would do for people who weren't Piper.

"Can we talk to you about something after this?" Marsha put her hand on my arm, her manicured French tips digging into my arm through the fabric of my suit. "It's important."

"Marsha, I'm not sure today is the right time." John put his arm around his wife and tugged her away from me. He pressed a kiss to her temple and shot me a sympathetic

look. “Plus, we haven’t decided if that’s what we really want to do.”

“But, John,” Marsha started. Grief had torn Marsha apart at the seams and remade her without an instruction manual to follow. The result was someone who looked like Marsha, but frail. She was a carefully stacked house of cards and I didn’t want to be the one to kick that first card out from under her. But I already knew that whatever she wanted, my answer was no.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Marsha. I plan to leave after this and go straight to the airport.” A lie, but they didn’t know that.

“I only need two minutes.” Marsha pressed on, despite John’s whispered warning that now was not the time or the place. I was definitely team John. “Piper had those eggs frozen and...”

“No.” Horror slashed through me. “Absolutely not.”

Piper had desperately wanted a baby, and I’d desperately wanted Piper to be happy. But after trying the old-fashioned way and nothing worked, we’d opted to try medical intervention. Piper had just had her eggs harvested to prepare them for in vitro when she got sick. When it became clear she wasn’t going to make it, I asked her what she wanted done with the eggs.

“I can’t bear the thought of someone raising my baby, Liam. Living my life. I can’t.”

Even now her words rang in my head, shaking the way they had when she’d spoken them. Barely a whisper because she was so weak at that point. “Once I’m gone, I want them gone too.”

“We could do it now,” I’d offered, sick to my stomach from the whole conversation.

“No, Liam. Where there’s life, there’s hope.” Piper closed her eyes and that was the last we talked about it. Now, as her husband, her eggs were legally mine, as per the arrangements we’d made with the clinic and the lawyers. I should have taken care of this a long time ago, but I’d been sick with grief, nearly mad with it, and the idea of getting rid of the last little bit of her I had left hadn’t been something I was ready to grapple with.

“There, Marsha, he said no. We need to move on from this now.” John shot me a look of relief as he ushered his crumbling wife out of the room.

I needed to vomit. And then to get blindingly drunk.

Carol came swishing over to me when she spotted how John and Marsha left.

“What was that about?”

I shook my head, unwilling to spill the secrets of the grieving. I hoped that one day Marsha would be okay, but I wasn’t going to let any amount of guilt or sympathy goad me into doing something like that.

“Have I been here a socially acceptable amount of time? I would very much like to leave and get totally hammered.”

Carol’s lips twitched into a smile. “That sounds like the best idea you’ve had since you got home. Let me do the talking on our way out, and I’ll have us on our way back home to get wasted by the pool in our pajamas in less than ten minutes.”

Carol was an expert schmoozer. Her time as head of the family company had turned her into a professional escape artist. Whereas I would have gotten sucked into twelve different conversations on the way out, Carol navigated each obstacle with tact and grace and in six minutes we were in an elevator heading down to the main floor.

The familiar black Escalade pulled up and Carol climbed in first, leaving me to follow her. The silence of the car was jarring. Closing my eyes, I leaned back and pulled at my tie until the knot came loose.

“What did Marsha want?” Carol asked, determined to ferret out the truth, so I let her have it.

“I didn’t let her ask, but she wants access to Piper’s frozen eggs.” My eyes popped open and I cut Carol a careful look. “Don’t criticize her; she’s hasn’t handled this well.”

Carol’s lips flattened into a hard line. “What are you going to do with them?”

“Piper wanted them destroyed.” Even if she hadn’t, that felt like the best move, even if I hadn’t been ready to pull the trigger right away. I didn’t know if Piper’s cancer was something that could follow someone else genetically, but I’d watched what it did to her and I couldn’t bear to let that happen to someone else and their family. Even in a future that was so far removed it was impossible to picture.

John and Marsha would shit, but it wasn’t up to them to decide what to do.

“I’d forgotten about her eggs.” Carol was quiet and morose. She’d adored Piper.

“To be honest, so had I.” I let out a sigh. “All she ever wanted was a family.”

I let out an exhausted breath and cursed past me for not dealing with this sooner.

Carol patted my arm as she sighed along with me. “God, this day has been fucking awful. How are you holding up?”

“I’m fine.” I wasn’t, but not for the reason she was thinking. All day I’d been

thinking of nothing but Brodie and how he could have come with me if I'd been out. If I'd have figured out how to ever tell the people around me that I was bisexual. The only person who knew now had a cancer wing named after her. Piper had embraced my bisexuality to the extent that she'd point out men she thought were cute to me.

It turns out that we had wildly different taste in men.

"The problem is," I'd told her when she'd found it especially hysterical that we were never attracted to the same kind of men. "I'm your type, but I'm not my type."

She'd taken my secret to her grave.

My condo came into view and I knew Carol wanted to follow me upstairs and fuss over me, but the idea of that made my skin crawl.

The vehicle came to a stop at the curb outside my building. "I think I'd like to be alone, Carol."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"I'm fine. Stop worrying about me."

She looked me over and gave me a slight nod. "Fine, but you'll check in with me tomorrow morning."

I bit back the sassy yes, Mom that was on the tip of my tongue. "Thanks for coming with me today. I couldn't have faced all of that alone."

"Whatever you need, little brother. You know that. Now get out of my car. Even if we're not getting trashed, I still very much want my pajamas and my couch."

“So glamorous,” I teased as I climbed out of her car.

“Comfort is better than glamor. Call me in the morning.”

“I’ll text you.” I closed the door before she could argue with that and headed into my building. My building never used to have a doorman, but the owner had recently hired a golden retriever of a man who was sunshine personified. He greeted me with his usual sunny demeanor and welcomed me home.

I felt bad for giving him the cold shoulder. He was a nice guy, but I wasn’t in the mood for any more social interaction. My apartment was the kind of place I called home without feeling it was home. I’d moved after Piper died and most of the time I didn’t regret the decision, but sometimes it would have been nice to have ghosts to come home to.

I emptied my pockets into the porcelain dish on the side table near the door. Piper had gotten me in the habit of leaving my things by the door so they were easy to find. Not that I lost them or anything. Piper was particular about things sometimes.

Heading to my room to change, I stripped my jacket off and neatly hung the suit so it could be sent for dry cleaning. Once I was out of my suit, I slipped on a pair of lounge pants and went to the kitchen. I poured myself a gin and tonic and stared at nothing.

All day my brain had fluctuated between thinking of Piper and missing Brodie. I despised myself for what I’d done to him. I hated how I’d left things. On a lie. Unfinished. Broken. I’d hurt him because I was too cowardly to keep him. The call from Marsha had unnerved me, as calls from her often did. On the phone, Piper and Marsha sounded almost identical. It never failed to disarm me. And she’d been crying. Marsha frequently cried when I saw her or spoke to her.

If I hadn't promised to be there long before I knew what I was promising, I might have pulled the grieving widower card and stayed away. That was a lie too. Today was the last thing I'd ever have to do for Piper and a small part of me was glad I hadn't let her down.

I poured a second drink and drank this one slower than the first and meandered back to my bedroom. Sitting on the edge of my bed, I put my drink on the nightstand and carefully picked up the two pieces of torn postcard.

Brodie's travel journal had been postcards. One per day that he'd mail back to his brother's house. He'd been on the road for a while, months. Traveling alone, soaking in the sights. It was strange to think that we met halfway around the world, but had we not, we never would have met at all.

I turned the pieces of the post card over and lined them up. All I had left of Brodie were the pictures in my phone that I scrolled through every night and this torn postcard. I seldom read what he wrote on his missives, but sometimes Brodie would whip one out wherever we happened to be and he'd scrawl his thoughts in the moment on the back. He was never shy about sharing them with me, but I never asked to see them. I should have asked.

I should have done a lot of things. When I met Brodie, I had no way of knowing how important he would become. How necessary his presence would feel. But wasn't that the way of things? People never knew what they had until they didn't have it anymore. Absence makes the heart grow fonder, after all. It was a saying for a reason.

But that's not all absence did. It highlighted your mistakes. It showed you all the places you fell short. It filled your downtime with daydreams of what you might do differently if you were given another chance. And how you'd cope if you weren't.

I'd do a lot of things differently if I were given another chance. I'd ask about the

postcards. I'd show him that he was important to me. On vacation halfway around the world, Brodie had fallen in love with a version of me that I wasn't proud of. I'd cared about Brodie, but had never told him.

At first, I thought the two of us were just some kind of fling, but when we quickly became inseparable, it was clear to me that Brodie was more than just some guy I'd met on vacation. And yet I'd taken a sledgehammer to us anyway. Influenced by guilt and grief, I'd ruined the first good thing to happen to me since Piper died. The pain in his eyes when I let him walk away haunted me at night. During the day. During any moment that I wasn't completely occupied doing something else.

I traced my finger over the gentle slope of Brodie's handwriting. He had stunning penmanship. When I could no longer stand to read the words, I studied the soft loops, the curves, the little happy face he drew. It was so entirely Brodie that my chest tightened just looking at it.

We'd had a great day. Shopping. Wandering the markets like boyfriends. Because that's what we'd been like on vacation. A lot of the time we kept our PDA to a minimum, but it was always a relief when we got to a place where we could be ourselves. That's when Brodie really sparkled.

My eyes flickered to the address label stuck to the back of the postcard. Not for the first time, I imagined going there and camping out until Brodie showed up so I could throw myself at his feet and beg his forgiveness.

What was stopping me?

The answer hit me like a brick in the face. Nothing was stopping me from going to him. Not my job or my sister or anything else. The only thing stopping me from getting up and going to him was the fear that he'd reject me.

But what if he didn't?

I started packing.

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Chapter 5

Brodie

My one-day grace period went by entirely too fast. I still felt like roadkill, but I pasted on a smile and let Kieran smuggle me over to Mom's house. I wasn't shocked to see Shane's truck when we pulled in the driveway.

"Are you sure I have to tell them I'm home?" I complained from the back seat of Kieran's new car.

Kieran met my gaze in the rearview mirror. "Yes, Brodie. You have to tell your family, the one that loves you, that you're back in town. You can return to being a jet-lagged zombie when we get home. I'll even let you pick the movie tonight."

"How generous of you." I was looking forward to seeing everyone, but I wasn't excited about everyone seeing me. I didn't have it in me to pretend that I was fine. Exhaustion clung to me like a second skin. I had no energy left in me to be fake-happy.

Mom's house was home. My true north. Even now, when I'd never stayed in this particular house. It was home because she was there. I heard her in the kitchen, probably baking like she always was. Shane's voice carried through the house. I couldn't tell what they were talking about, but I took my shoes off by the door and tucked myself behind Kieran and Clay as they meandered into the kitchen.

For a brief moment, I was able to observe Mom and Shane before they saw me.

Mom, of course, had flour on her apron and Shane was talking with his hands. I recognized Archer from pictures and he was the first one to spot me. He kept his mouth shut as I squeezed past Kieran and went to stand next to Mom. Unable to resist, I reached into the bowl of cookie dough she was stirring. I grabbed a little from the bowl and popped it into my mouth.

“How many times have I told you—” Mom turned and when she caught sight of me, her words died. The confusion and the shock only lasted for a second before joy took over. Suddenly I was enveloped in her arms. She’d been shorter than me since I hit a growth spurt at fourteen, but that never stopped her hugs from making me feel protected and safe.

“You’re home! When did you get in? How long are you here for? Let me get a look at you.” Mom held on to me like she was afraid I’d vanish if she let go.

“I’m here for a while this time.” I wasn’t ready to tell anyone yet that I’d already been looking at rentals in town. I wasn’t sure about anything anymore. Maybe I’d been lost for a long time, but never realized it until I learned how wrong I was about Liam. I thought for sure that he loved me. His stupid apology made my ears ring even now. Thinking of him often made my brain go blank, like a phone line with no one on the other end. Just dial tone or dead air.

The next few minutes were a whirlwind of hugs and smacks on the back. Then things were achingly normal. Shane put the leaf in the kitchen table to make room for everyone and Mom plated up a bunch of cookies. Suspiciously my favorite cookies were present.

I grabbed one of the snickerdoodles and bit into it. “Did you know I was coming?”

Mom shook her head. “I always have a batch of your favorites on hand. Just in case.”

Well, shit. “I think I got dust in my eye,” I said, blinking away the sudden tingly burn that came right before the tears.

Mom leveled a look at Kieran. “And how long have you been harboring this fugitive?”

Kieran stirred his coffee, a smirk tugging at his lips. “I plead the fifth.”

“I got in the night before last. All I did yesterday was stare at the wall and try to get my body to catch up to the right time zone.”

“Where did you leave from?” Archer asked. It was an innocent enough question, but I found myself unable to answer it. I’d left from a hotel room where a man I thought I was in love with dismissed me with an ease that made my stomach clench even now, days later and thousands of miles away.

“Nowhere special.” I shoved the rest of the cookie in my mouth to avoid having to elaborate. Everyone around me shared a few nervous glances. Shit. I guess I wasn’t playing it as cool as I thought.

Mom put a batch of cookies in the oven then washed her hands. “I’m sure Brodie will have all kinds of stories for us once he’s gotten a little more rest.” She threw me a lifeline.

After that, no one was interested in asking more questions. Well, they were interested, but they weren’t about to now that Mom had subtly laid the law down to leave me alone.

“Tell me what you’ve all been up to while I was gone.” My gaze slid from Shane to Archer. “I’ve only gotten the highlights from Kieran.”

Kieran and I kept in touch a lot more than Shane and I did. And I sent Mom a lot of pictures and I'd tell her a little about where I was and what I planned to do. I'd always been closer to Kieran than I was to Shane, though. There was no reason for it, no hidden trauma or old grudge. The simple fact was that I'd always felt that Kieran understood what I was trying to say.

The next couple hours were spent sitting around Mom's kitchen table. In some ways it felt like I never left. The inside jokes were unchanged, as was the way Shane acted like he was king of everything. Whenever he looked at me, I could feel his concern.

But as much as things were the same, they were also different. Before, Shane would have buckled by now and asked me ten thousand questions that I wasn't ready to answer. He'd do it out of love, as he did everything, but it would still feel oppressive and intrusive.

Archer was good for him, and therefore for me. He ran interference so beautifully it was almost like Shane didn't know what was happening. But whenever he focused on me too intensely, Archer would touch him or talk to him and steer his attention away from me.

I'd heard about the whole thing between Archer and Clay, where they'd been best friends until Clay fucked up and stole the money from their business. Archer had been left with no choice but to close up shop and move in with his brother, Cyrus, the cook at Shane's bar.

The whole series of events is what led Archer to Shane. I don't know that I could hold onto a grudge when the result was finding something I wouldn't have had otherwise. Archer kept his body turned more toward Shane and less toward Clay, who sat across the table sneaking glances at Archer like a kid with a crush. Or a guy who wanted his friend back.

Shane and Kieran, if they noticed the little body language back and forth between their boyfriends, chose to ignore it. Shane and Kieran were happy to take over the conversation for me, talking about Shane's next philanthropic venture and Kieran being the voice of reason. Shane might spend like his money grew on trees, but Kieran did a pretty good job of reining him in.

Being home was weird. It was pleasant, and I'd missed my family like crazy, but my broken heart put a damper on the reunion. I didn't have it in me to smile as much or to be as excited about regaling them with tales of my adventures. I couldn't talk about the last month. Even thinking about it turned my throat to shattered glass. My heart to dust. I never knew it was possible to feel a broken heart in every molecule of my body, but I swear even my hair fucking hurt.

Shane's eagle eyes kept sliding over to me. His big brother intuition had to be going insane. Here I was, home without warning. I probably looked like my dog died. I didn't have a dog. Maybe I should get one.

"How long are you home for?" Mom asked again, hope ever present in her expression even though she tried to hide it from me.

"I might get a dog." The idea had taken root in my head and I couldn't shake it now. It would tie me down to one place, but maybe I didn't hate the sound of that. I rolled it around my head. The truth was that running home had been easy after shit went down with Liam. I could have gone anywhere in the world. Thrown myself to the wolves in Ibiza and used other bodies to forget about his. But I came home.

Living out of suitcases had been fun at first. I had loved only having a couple bags of belongings. I'd put everything in storage or sold it before I left and it felt like freedom at first, but it had long ago lost its luster.

"A dog?" Mom's brow furrowed. A ripple of confusion went around the table.

“Yeah. A dog.” The more I thought about it, the more I liked the idea. There were plenty of things to see and do that didn’t involve leaving the country. Plus, a dog would love me the way I loved it. It wouldn’t be sorry that I’d been stupid enough to get attached.

“First, I guess I need to find an apartment or a house or something. Maybe a townhouse. Something with a yard for Rover, but nothing extravagant because yard work is evil. And I guess I’ll need a job.” I stopped talking suddenly. It was like my body had been snatched and taken over. I’d only meant to say that I was going to get a dog, but the jet lag was still trying to murder me.

Shane was the first one to latch on to what I said.

“I can get you the number for my real estate agent. You probably don’t want to work for me, but there’s always a job for you at The Anchor if you want one. Just talk to Vivian. She’s the manager there now. Is all your stuff still in storage? How big of a place will you want?”

I watched in horror as Shane pulled out his phone and started tapping away on it.

“I—” No words would come out of my mouth. I should be used to Hurricane Shane, blowing in to take everything over, but I’d forgotten what it was like. I’d been away for too long and I’d lost the defenses I used to have.

Then something miraculous happened. Archer took the phone from Shane and put it face down on the table. “Shane, stop. Brodie’s a big boy. I’m sure he can handle his shit. Right, Brodie?”

I wasn’t half as confident as Archer was, but I nodded anyway. I managed something close to a smile.

“I think I like you, Archer.”

Shane pouted, but stayed quiet and Archer patted him on the arm, snuggling closer to him, probably to soothe his bruised feelings.

Shane’s gaze slid over to me. “What kind of dog? Do you need help looking?”

“I don’t know yet, Shane. But when I go dog shopping, I promise to bring you, okay?”

Shane beamed at me, then reached over and ruffled my hair. “I missed you.”

I already regretted promising to bring him dog shopping.

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Chapter 6

Liam

The minute I turned my phone on, it went insane with text messages from my sister. The missed calls numbered in the double digits and I knew what waited for me in my voicemail.

Instead of reading through any of that or listening to the voicemail, I called her back.

“Where are you?” she demanded.

“Not in town.” I smirked when I heard her suck in a breath.

“Are you continuing your vacation?”

“Not as such, no.” The second leg of my journey had brought me to a small airport in upstate New York. The idea of Ubering around all over Hell’s half-acre didn’t appeal to me, so I’d arranged to rent a car. A man in black jeans and a red blazer met me at arrivals. My name was neatly scrawled on the front of a sheet of paper.

“Where are you?” Carol asked again. “I can always turn on the friend finder app, Liam.”

“I can’t be there, Carol. I won’t deal with them anymore.”

It was all too much. I’d be fine, but then John and Marsha would come around and

their grief would swallow me up like quicksand. Their sadness was oppressive. It made it impossible to breathe around them. And their latest idea had horrified me to the point where I was positive I didn't want anything to do with them.

On my way to the airport to come here, I'd called my lawyer, Oren, and left a message instructing him about Piper's eggs and what I wanted done with them. Piper was their child, but she'd been my wife. Not only did she not want someone else raising her baby, but she especially wouldn't want to have her eggs used to make a Piper 2.0. I wasn't a therapist, but I highly doubted what Marsha wanted to do was a healthy way to cope.

"I can't do it, Carol." My voice was thick and the words struggled to make it out. I fell into step next to my quiet escort and followed him out of the airport. Autumn was starting to roll in. The air had that crisp snap to it when the wind brushed my cheeks and some of the trees had just started to turn in preparation to shed their leaves.

"At least tell me where you are and how long you're going to be gone."

"I'm in New York. State, not city. I'm safe and shall remain so. Do I need to send you proof of life?"

"I wouldn't hate it," she grumbled.

"Carol, I love you, but we both know my position at the company is redundant. Give my position to my assistant. She does most of the work anyway. Offer her a hefty raise and give her time to adjust and I think you'll be happy with the change."

"Are you coming back, Liam?"

The driver took my suitcase and stowed it in the trunk while I slid into the back seat. My stomach clawed at my insides and I tried to remember the last time I had a real

meal. Had it been dinner with Brodie? That was a lifetime ago.

“The short answer is I don’t know. The longer answer is I don’t know and I don’t really want to talk about it anymore. Don’t tell John and Marsha where I am. If they need me for anything, they can talk to my lawyers.”

“Liam.” Carol was using her mom-voice. Her concern wrapped around me like a soft, warm blanket. “Are you sure?”

“I know they were family, but I can’t... they make it impossible to move on.”

“As long as you’re sure you’re not doing something you regret.”

I choked on a laugh. “I already have regrets.” Brodie’s broken heart had been written all over his face and I’d hated myself every moment since then. I hated myself now because, despite my determination to see him again, I still couldn’t tell my sister that I was bisexual.

“I have to go, Carol. But we’ll talk soon, okay?” I ended the call before she could argue. Before I could blurt out that I was in New York to chase a man.

My secret bisexuality was a silly hang-up to have and I knew it. But my circle was small. I had a few friends from university, but I’d drifted away from a lot of people after Piper died. People didn’t know how to be around the grief-stricken. And I didn’t know how to be around people.

Brodie was easy to be around from that very first rain-soaked meeting. He’d dragged me out of the hotel lobby into the sun afterward. The light glinted off the fresh puddles, blinding us both.

“Breathe deep,” Brodie told me.

I still wasn't sure why I'd followed him out there. Or why I'd listened to him tell me to breathe deep. Maybe it was how free he looked. How alive.

"Smell that?" he asked.

"It smells like wet."

Brodie bumped his shoulder against mine. "The scent doesn't change much no matter where you go. Petrichor smells like petrichor. Sometimes it's earthier. Wetter. Sometimes it's drier. But it's the same no matter where I go."

"Have you been many places?"

Brodie shrugged. "I've been to a few. What about you? Is this your first time in Greece?"

"Yes." It was the simplest version of the truth. It was a place Piper had wanted to see, but hadn't made it. An unchecked item on a bucket list.

"Where to?" the driver asked me.

Reaching into the breast pocket of my jacket, I pulled out a postcard. Torn in half. Taped together. I gave him the address of a hotel near the address on the postcard. I wanted to scrub the scent of travel and despair off my skin before I saw Brodie again. Though, maybe showing up looking like roadkill would work to my advantage.

The town Brodie lived in was cute. It was a bit too large to be called a small town, but it definitely lacked the big city vibe. Flower pots hung from street light posts. Petunias draped down in billowing curtains of color. The fire hydrants in the city were painted to look like people. I wasn't sure I understood why, but it was endearing.

“Where’s a good place to eat around here?” I asked the driver.

“For casual, you can’t go wrong with Bennett’s. If you want a drink with your food, you’ll want to go to The Anchor. For fancy food, Ulysses is a nice little Greek place just off the main drag. Or there’s a steak house by city hall that’s just opened. It has good reviews, but I haven’t eaten there yet.”

My brain had been fuzzy for days so I put all his recommendations in my notes app. The car came to a stop outside a hotel that wasn’t anything special, but this wasn’t the type of town to have anything flashy. Clean was good enough for me, and the reviews had been promising.

The driver fetched my bag from the truck. “I’ll valet the car and leave the keys at the desk for you, sir.”

I pulled my wallet out and tugged a couple bills out and handed them to the driver whose name I didn’t care to learn. “Thank you.”

“When you’re done with the car, you can call us for pick-up. If you’ll be heading out via the airport, you can always arrange for us to drive you there. Until then, she’s all yours. If you have any issues, you can call, or text. The numbers are in the glove box if you need them. Enjoy your stay.”

My room was on the top floor of the hotel. The fact that it was the third story made me rethink my assessment that this wasn’t a small town. I tossed my suitcase on the bed and stripped out of my clothes.

I had no plan, but I had to win Brodie back. I had to at least explain to him all the things I hadn’t been able to before.

We’d been men escaping our lives in sandy beaches and sparkling tourist traps. We’d

gotten to know one another, but I felt like there was so much more we could have shared. So much more we could have learned about one another.

I knew he had two brothers, but I didn't know their names. He knew I had a sister and that I came from money. I knew he didn't. There were a million little things that I knew and even more that I didn't. But I knew Brodie. I knew his touch. I knew how his breath sounded in my ear. How he scrunched his face every morning before he opened his eyes.

But I didn't even know if he was here in this city. If he wasn't, then I'd wait. I'd wait for as long as it took to make things right. I'd camp outside his house if I had to.

After showering and changing into a pair of jeans and a long-sleeved waffle knit shirt, I went downstairs to the attached restaurant. I'd explore more of the city later. Right now I needed food and directions.

I ordered scrambled eggs and toast with a side of bacon. The coffee was strong enough to dissolve a spoon, not to mention how the lining of my stomach would fare, so I ordered an orange juice instead. By the time I finished breakfast, I had directions to the nearest florist, and to a pharmacy to get antacids.

Note to self: Don't eat in the attached restaurant.

It also could have been my nerves that made my stomach churn and clench. The pharmacy was my first stop and after that I waited another thirty minutes for the florist to open. I had little experience in buying apology flowers, but I wanted something more unique than roses. Roses were nice, but they were thoughtless. They were generic.

Different flowers were supposed to mean different things, but I wanted something that reminded me of Brodie. Something that gave me the same kind of feeling as

when I looked at him.

Brodie was sunshine. He was life and art. He was joy.

I bought every yellow tulip they had in stock. I didn't know if they said the right thing in flower language, but in my head they said that I was sorry for being an idiot. I was sorry for letting him go without offering him an explanation. There were a thousand things I regretted about the way we'd left things. All I could hope for was a chance to explain.

I parked on the street outside a blue bungalow. It was a cute little house with white shutters. Very domestic looking. The yard was well taken care of, even if it lacked curb appeal. Crunching another antacid, I steeled myself with a few deep breaths before stepping out, bouquet carefully tucked into the crook of my arm. The postcard he'd left behind was in my back pocket, but I had no intention of returning that. It was the one piece of Brodie I had left. Maybe one day, if he forgave me, I'd give it back to him. Maybe.

After a final bolstering breath, I raised my fist and knocked.

This was it.

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Chapter 7

Brodie

The morning of the next day rolled around and brought with it a little less jet lag. I still wasn't sure what day of the week it was, but at least my body recognized morning when the sun rose.

It was nearly ten when I crawled out of the guest room. My body weighed ten tons, but I managed to drag my carcass to the kitchen. I stood, dressed in boxers and a ratty old t-shirt that I'd stolen from Shane years ago, while I waited for my coffee to brew when there was a knock at the door.

I was up earlier than Kieran and Clay, who didn't have to work that day. Barely awake, I combed my fingers through my hair to smooth it down so I wouldn't resemble an electrocuted hedgehog and I shuffled my way to the front door.

"Hang on. I'm coming," I croaked out, not loud enough for anyone outside to hear me, but mostly for my own benefit. I didn't want the knocking to wake anyone.

Another knock.

Persistent fucking solicitors. I wondered what they were trying to sell me. It was a toss-up between religion or vacuums. Both sucked. I managed not to laugh at my own brilliant joke and pulled the door open.

Clearly my brain hadn't woken up all the way because it saw Liam fucking Lawson

standing on Kieran's front step, holding more tulips than I'd ever seen in my life. He looked like shit. Like, he looked good because Liam was hot. Tall, with dark hair and sharp cheekbones, eyes that usually sparkled. The corners crinkled when he smiled and though he was barely thirty, he had a smattering of grey at his temples starting.

"Brodie."

Liam's voice cut through my brain fog. The mirage on my doorstep was a living, breathing man. My body jerked back as if I'd been in a car crash as all my senses came to life at once, computing the fact that Liam was here.

"What are you doing here?" My first instinct had been to recoil from him, but now I fought not to shove those stupid yellow tulips aside and climb into his arms. I'd cried in airport bathrooms for him. I sniffled over the ocean. My body hurt like I'd put it through a meat grinder. All to escape him. Not him. The pain he'd caused. The agony I'd put myself through.

Liam didn't seem to have an answer to my question. He stared at me over an ocean of bright yellow until things got awkward. When I took a step back and reached for the door, Liam finally found his voice again.

"I came to talk to you." He even sounded like hell. His voice was thin and raspy and weighed down with a million things he probably should have said before he let me walk out of that hotel room.

"I have a phone, Liam." Not that I'd looked at it since I landed. I'd turned it off when I realized there would be no frantic apology text. No series of phone calls begging to be accepted.

"Would you have answered?" He didn't wait for me to tell him that no, I fucking would not have. We both knew that. Instead he took a step forward and held the

obscene bouquet out to me. “These are for you.”

I almost took them, but the absurdity of it had me stepping back.

“You shouldn’t be here.” I wanted to brick myself off from him and his stupid face and the dumb way I felt about him. I hated that I didn’t hate him. That even now I wanted to give in and let him pour his heart out.

But I wasn’t an idiot.

Okay, I was an idiot, but fool me once and all that.

“Give me ten minutes. Brodie, please.”

My hand flailed in empty air until it found the doorknob. Without another word, I closed the door. I stared down at my hand and had to make myself let go before I did something ridiculous like open the door again. I stormed into the kitchen as the coffee maker sputtered and finished brewing my coffee.

The house was eerily quiet now. The clock on the wall counted the passing seconds with an aggressive tick ... tick ... tick. I made myself get my coffee. Adding two sugars, no milk, I sat at the table and stared into nothing. I thought of all the things I had to do soon. A place to live. A job. A dog. I still wanted the dog. I refused to unpack the reasons why.

I tried not to think of Liam, but I never made it more than half a minute before he was invading my brain.

When my coffee was finished, I was sure that Liam would be long gone. Tiptoeing to the living room, I pulled the curtain back and peeked outside. A shiny black sedan sat on the curb and a familiar shape inhabited a spot on the front step.

“Fucking Christ.”

I stomped over to the door and yanked it open. Liam jumped up like his ass was on fire and thrust the flowers at me again, leaving me with little choice but to take them.

“Ten minutes. Please, Brodie. Hear me out,” Liam begged.

“Are you seriously still here?”

“I’m not going anywhere until you talk to me.”

Again, I closed the door. I took the flowers to the kitchen in time for Kieran to wake up and stumble out of his room. He rubbed at his eyes as he stared at me, massive bouquet of tulips in my arms.

“Tulips?”

“Apology flowers.”

Kieran acknowledged my explanation with a grunt and opened a couple cupboards and slid things around until he produced a vase that looked big enough to handle the bouquet.

He thunked it down on the counter and grabbed a cup of coffee. After adding enough milk and sugar to turn himself into a fucking marshmallow, he eyed the flowers as I carefully unwrapped them from their floral paper.

“Do I need to kill him?”

“Who are we killing?” Clay emerged dressed in Kieran’s clothes. Kieran pulled him into his lap and pressed a kiss to his cheek.

Jealousy burned through me hot and bright like an explosion.

“It’s a long story.” I scoffed at the tulips. They were pretty and I wanted to hate them for it, but I didn’t have it in me.

Kieran kicked a chair out from under the table. “Sit.”

Rolling my eyes, I dropped into the seat with my arms folded over my chest like a petulant child waiting to be scolded.

“Spill.”

“There’s nothing to tell.”

Kieran arched an eyebrow at me. “Is this the reason you came home out of the blue?”

“Ugh... fine. The abridged version is I fell for someone I clearly shouldn’t have and it ended badly, and he tracked me down because he wants to explain or whatever. He says he’s not leaving until I talk to him. He was still loitering on your front step last I saw him. It’s like you didn’t even read the postcards I sent here.”

“I read the ones with my name on them.”

I rolled my eyes. “Figures that you’d be all respectful and shit and not invade my privacy.”

Clay got up and rushed to the front window. He was back a minute later, trying not to grin at me. “He’s still here.”

“Something funny?” I asked him. I liked Clay; he was good for Kieran. If anyone deserved to be happy, it was him.

“It’s not funny.” Clay tried to smooth his expression, but failed. The remnants of a smile remained on the corners of his mouth. “But it’s so fucking romantic.”

“It’s stalking,” Kieran growled.

“It’s sweet.” Clay pressed on. “He tracked you down and bought you every tulip in town. Just for a chance to talk to you. Are you going to talk to him?”

“No,” Kieran said.

“I don’t know.” I glared at Kieran. “I appreciate your support, but you’re not allowed to murder people. And I’ll talk to who I want. When I want.” I stood and headed to my room. “If I want.”

Putting some distance, even a few measly feet between myself and Liam helped me think more clearly. Getting away from Kieran’s open disapproval also released some of the pressure that squeezed my lungs. For the first time since I woke up, I sucked in a deep breath.

I wasn’t going to let Liam’s presence put a damper on my day. I sat in Kieran’s living room and scrolled local real estate listings. The front curtains remained closed, blocking my view of Liam, but I knew he was still there. Even without looking. It was like I could feel him.

Kieran grumbled and belly-ached about Liam being there until I told him that if he really wanted, he could ask Liam to leave. There must have been something in my voice that slipped out, some little nugget of vulnerability that he picked up on because Kieran didn’t go near the front door and he stopped mentioning murder and body disposal techniques. The support was nice, if a bit morbid.

I didn’t want Liam dead. Or hurt. Or even sad. I hated that he was out there hurting.

But he'd hurt me first and I still didn't know why. The answers were right there on the outside of the house. On my brother's doorstep.

I'd stayed in my room most of the day, but somewhere around dinner time when I was convinced Liam would be gone, I ventured out of my room.

Clay glanced at me, then at the front door.

"He still here?" Hope fluttered because it was stupid and foolish and didn't know any better. Hope was a child who still believed in Santa and thought you'd get whatever you wanted if you asked nice enough.

Clay nodded. "He's been out there all day. I don't think he's even left to use the bathroom."

Fuck. I was an asshole.

"Brodie." Clay's voice got my attention. Not because he used my name, but because of how unsure he sounded suddenly. "I know we don't know each other very well, but you seem to really want to go out there. And... I've been in his spot before."

"You don't even know what he did." I crossed my arms over my chest, more to protect myself than because I was mad.

"Did he go into business with his best friend, then steal all their money and gamble it away because he has shit coping mechanisms and relied too heavy on short-term dopamine rushes to get through complicated emotions?"

I blinked at Clay and he let out a tight laugh.

"I've done lots of therapy," he supplied.

The sound of a car door slamming had me rushing to the window. The black sedan was still parked on the side of the street, but a car pulled into the driveway and a driver got out carrying an insulated pizza bag.

“Did you order pizza?” I asked Clay.

“No. Kieran said he was going to order something later. He’s just on the phone with Shane about one of Shane’s new harebrained ideas.”

I watched the driver give Liam a pizza and a drink. Liam gave him a tip and then the pizza guy was gone and Liam was sitting on the front step.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I opened the front door and went outside. I was still in boxers and a ratty shirt, but I didn’t care. I plopped myself down on the other end of the step and reached into the pizza box.

“You have until I’m done with this slice to tell me what you came here to tell me.” I bit the tip off the hot triangle and arched my eyebrow at him.

Liam put his slice of pizza down and brushed his fingers off on his pants. “I was an idiot.”

“You’re off to a good start,” I told him after I swallowed my first bite. The pizza had lit my appetite up like a firework. “You’re going to have to talk fast because I’m starving.”

As if to prove my point, my stomach growled.

Liam smiled fondly and pushed the pizza closer. “Have as much as you want.”

“Time’s wasting.” I took another bite and waited for my answers. Once I had them, I

was going to go inside and do my best to forget about Liam Lawson.

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Chapter 8

Liam

“First I’ll explain and then I’ll give you my apology.” I rushed the words out. Wiping the pizza grease off of my fingers onto my pants, I grabbed my phone out of my pocket. “I didn’t want to leave, but an obligation pulled me away and I dealt with it poorly.”

I opened the news article about the cancer ward’s dedication and handed Brodie my phone.

He was careful not to touch me when he took it. Just as he’d been careful not to touch me when he took the flowers. Both little acts gave me a sliver of hope that we could somehow get past this. I didn’t know if he’d forgive me, but I had to try.

“Piper Lawson Cancer...” Brodie’s voice trailed away as he finished reading the headline. I knew what the article read. It detailed her short fight and the people she left behind. Her parents had funded the cancer wing in her memory and her surviving husband had cut the ribbon to officially open it. The article detailed things about her that anyone with moderate internet skills could learn. Her job, her friends, the names of the professors she studied under. It made her sound hollow and not like a person at all, but a list of accomplishments and aspirations unfulfilled.

“Piper and I met in college. We married. We had plans and then she was gone. It was quick, like the world’s worst roller coaster. I’d put her behind me. Not all the way, of course, but enough that I could think of getting on with life.”

Brodie handed me my phone back and stuffed another bite of pizza in his face.

“My sister Carol practically raised me. Our parents are gone. When I met Piper’s parents, they became like a surrogate family. They’re generally very lovely people, but grief has changed them. It’s... her mother isn’t coping well. She makes me feel incredibly guilty whenever we speak because it’s like she’s upset that I’m not actively mourning Piper anymore. My peace disturbs her. She was the phone call I got.”

Brodie swallowed his bite and stared at me thoughtfully. Sympathy shone in his eyes. “I’m sorry about your wife.”

“I’m sorry that I never told you about her. At first it wasn’t important. We were just two guys who were having fun. And then we kept having fun and I felt alive again for the first time since she got sick. I didn’t want to say or do anything to change that. It was intoxicating. Being with you, Brodie, isn’t something I will ever regret. But I need you to know that if you have any questions about her, I’ll answer them. No one asks about her anymore.”

Brodie nodded and I hated that I didn’t know what that meant. Before I screwed things up for us, Brodie had been an open book to me. But now there were walls where windows used to be. I was tangled up inside trying to make this right. And the only way to do that was to continue giving him the truth.

When Brodie said nothing, I decided to keep talking. I sucked in a deep breath.

“Time for confession number two. My sister doesn’t know I’m bisexual. No one does. Piper knew, but her parents didn’t. Why would they?”

“So I’m the dirty little secret.” Brodie’s lip curled in disgust.

“No.” I reached for him, but stopped myself, unsure if my touch would be welcome yet. I pulled my hand back and folded it together with my other one, neatly placing them in my lap. “You’re not a dirty secret. You were a wonderful surprise. You were a burst of sunshine in a rainstorm. I didn’t want to take you with me because I didn’t know how to tell you everything that I’d been keeping from you. I’d gotten so caught up in our time together. I just kept telling myself that I could tell you later. And then it was too late.”

Brodie’s sneer faded, but he looked away from me and stared out into the distance. His half-finished slice of pizza sat in his lap. I watched him pick it up and take another bite.

“I should have been honest with you. I should have opened up to you. I was so fucking stupid, Brodie. I’ve hated myself every moment of every day since I got off the phone in that hotel room.”

He turned his head and looked at me. “How did you find me? I know you’re rich, but are you track a person to their brother’s house kind of rich? Do you have a spy on staff? A private investigator in your back pocket?”

I leaned so I could access the post card in my back pocket. I was almost afraid to show him in case he wanted it back. I pulled it out, careful not to inflict more damage. I’d thought about laminating it, but then there’d be a barrier between the paper he’d touched and the ink he’d used and my skin. It was sentimental garbage, but it was all I had.

Clearing the lump out of my throat with a cough, I spoke. Nerves made my voice tremble. “You left this in the room.” I let out a breath. “Shit, Brodie. I fucked up so bad. I don’t know how to fix it. But I want to. I need to. You mean more to me than any other person on this planet.”

I loved him. More than I thought possible. But I didn't want to say those words in these circumstances. I'd hate for them to sound like an attempt at manipulation, like I was only saying them because I thought they would get me something.

Brodie didn't reach for the postcard. He stared at it like it was scum, like it was an omen of evil. I tucked it away again out of sight. He still hadn't said much to me. A minute passed when Brodie looked down at his slice of pizza. He took a few smaller bites, like he was still going to stick to his guns and leave when he was done, but maybe he wasn't in a hurry anymore.

"I feel like I don't know you," he said without looking at me.

"We could get to know each other." Nervous sweat made the back of my shirt stick to me. "I don't want to go back to how things were before I met you."

"I don't even know what that means, Liam."

Say my name again.

"My old life is a shell I was ready to move away from. I took a leave of absence to go on vacation, partly at Carol's insistence. She's older than I am and she runs the family company. I'm a figurehead whose assistant was more qualified for my position than I was. But nepotism opens doors and I used to care about what people thought. I find that I care less now what people think of me. I do, however, care deeply what you think of me."

"Liam, I don't know." Brodie bit his lip and looked away. He only had the crust left and he broke a piece off.

"I hurt you. I know that. I kept things from you and when faced with an opportunity to explain to you, I let Marsha and her overwhelming grief guilt me into treating you

like shit.”

“If I haven’t said it already, I’m sorry about your wife.” Brodie managed to be gracious and kind even when he had every reason not to be.

“Thank you.”

“You miss her.” On the surface, it wasn’t a question, but the subtext was there.

“I do. But not the way I used to. I will always miss her, but the loss of her no longer keeps me in bed. I’m functioning again. Ready to live and breathe and move on. I’ve been ready for a while I think. But meeting you was a turning point for me.”

Brodie scoffed. “Yeah, I’m a ray of sunshine in a rainstorm or whatever.”

“Don’t you remember the day we met? You stormed into the lobby soaking wet, laughing from being caught in that downpour. You practically drenched me. I looked at you and all I saw was sunshine.”

He pushed himself to his feet. “I’m going inside now. Like I said I would, but I want to say one thing before I go.”

I looked up at him and watched as he held out his hand. His fingers were closed and he held his fist out to me. I held my hand out palm up and Brodie dropped a small handful of olives into my palm. I’d been so focused on what he was saying that I hadn’t noticed him pick them off.

“Next time, don’t get olives. It ruins the flavor.”

Brodie turned and went into the house. The sound of the deadbolt slamming into place was jarring but it didn’t matter suddenly that Brodie was inside and I was out

here. I had a handful of olives and the hope of a next time.

I dropped the olives into the pizza box and closed it. My knees protested the sudden change in elevation, but I wanted to show Brodie that I was a man of my word. My ass was numb and I must have looked awkward as hell as I made my way to my car.

The driver's seat was infinitely more comfortable than the front step of Brodie's house. His brother's house. Whatever. Didn't matter. All that mattered was that Brodie had listened. He'd heard what I had to say and he hadn't told me to fuck off. That felt like a win.

But the line he'd given me before he disappeared into the house lifted my spirits.

Back at the hotel, I parked my ass on the bed and stretched out. I ate my pizza and sent Brodie a text message, giving him the name of the hotel I was going to be staying at. I thought my room number might be too forward or presumptuous so I left that off. I wanted him to know that I wasn't going anywhere.

He didn't answer. Not that I expected him to, but at least he read the text. Modern technology was a blessing sometimes.

I'd gotten through to him today. Even a little chink in his armor was progress. I wasn't delusional enough to think that it would be easy going. I'd hurt him more than I ever wanted to. I hadn't meant to at all, but Marsha had that effect on me. I missed the way she was when Piper was alive. Her marriage wasn't my business, but I think John missed her too.

Marsha had a habit of making her grief my business. When we'd first lost Piper, I'd tried to be there for John and Marsha as much as possible. But it quickly became clear that the more I gave, the more Marsha took. Stepping back was hard initially. They'd been family to me, but being around them was like trying to save a drowning

person. The more they flailed, the more they dragged me under with them. I had to let go if I was going to make it.

Being around Brodie had made me believe that I had a future still. If he ended up not wanting to be in it, that would be excruciating, but I'd survive it. Brodie had breathed air into my lungs again and resuscitated me.

Come hell or high water, I was going to win him back.

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Chapter 9

Brodie

I wasn't sure that I did the right thing by giving Liam a shred of hope to cling to, but I knew what it was to live without any. The fact that he'd spent the entire day sitting on Kieran's front steps softened me toward him.

He'd had a wife. It was obvious to me that he'd cared about her. He cared about her still. Fondness was etched into his features when he talked about her. It was hard to stay mad at him when it was clear that his actions had made him just as miserable as they'd made me.

Was I going to forgive him? Probably. But not yet. Not until I was certain that my heart would be safe if I gave it back to him.

"So that's the guy, huh?" Kieran sat on the couch, one of his arms thrown around Clay, tucked in next to him.

"Yeah. That's the guy."

"Is he gone for good?"

It was cute when Kieran tried to get all protective and big brothery with me. We were more like friends than brothers. It wasn't often he pulled the same overprotective thing Shane did. When Shane did it, I could get prickly. But for some reason, when Kieran acted like that, it made me feel safe and happy. I'd never admit that to him,

though. Or Shane. Shane would be mortally wounded. Some things were best left unconfessed.

“He’s gone for now. I think he’s sticking around for a while.” Until I decide what I want. Until I either send him away for good... or keep him. Seeing as how I wasn’t ready to do either, he’d likely linger until I made up my mind. Today was proof that Liam wasn’t going to give up so easily.

“If he messes—” Kieran’s voice cut off when Clay’s hand clamped over his mouth.

“Stop. It’s cute and romantic and harmless. He sat on the step all day, which yeah, that’s a bit stalkery, but he was polite and quiet. And I think if Brodie had asked him to leave, he’d have done so.”

Clay yanked his hand away from Kieran’s mouth with a grimace. “Did you just lick me?”

“All is fair in love and war. You’re supposed to be on my side.” Kieran teased, pulling Clay closer, seemingly unbothered by Clay taking Liam’s side.

Clay rolled his eyes. “Yes, because I’m totally going to be the one to say no one deserves a second chance.”

I pushed myself away from the door even though my body screamed at me to go back outside and chase Liam down. The pull was hard to ignore. There’d always been a magnetic attraction between him and me. Right from that start. The cloudburst I’d escaped from had nothing on the windstorm of attraction that spun my insides when I saw Liam for the first time.

He looked expensive. Well-trimmed hair. Perfect teeth. A watch that cost more than most people’s mortgage payments. Probably more than some people’s cars. I wasn’t

well versed in how much luxury items cost, but I knew quality when I saw it and his watch was definitely not some kind of cheap Walmart special.

His gaze was sharp as glass and when our eyes met, it was like lightning struck. And that feeling never went away. Every time I looked at him, there was this abundant feeling of right and perfect and mine that made it hard to breathe around him. Impossible to think. So I hadn't. I'd thrown myself into some kind of whirlwind love affair.

I had no way of knowing he'd been running from a ghost.

"What are we ordering tonight" I asked Kieran. He'd always preferred to leave the cooking to other people.

"Chinese okay? Or do you want burgers and fries. I could get Shane to deliver."

"I could kill a burger. Get me a mushroom burger with mozza. And I want gravy with my fries. I'm going to shower."

Kieran gave me the thumbs up and I went to my room to gather a set of fresh clothes. Liam had looked amazing. Even as miserable as he was, he still made my mouth water. And I'd gone out and talked to him still in a pair of boxers and a threadbare shirt that was two sizes too large. At least I'd tamed my porcupine hair. The picture of him in the suit at the grand opening of that cancer ward haunted me.

It was Liam, but it wasn't.

It was Liam, but haunted and sad. Drawn and gaunt. Liam in body, but not in spirit. It helped to see that he'd clearly not ran off for a fun reason. But he'd still run off. He'd still let me leave. The bruises from that emotional battering hadn't started to fade yet.

The hot water from the shower revitalized me like it washed away a layer of my sadness. Or maybe I'd shed it like a snake skin. Meeting my eyes in the mirror after was easier than it had been in days. At first I'd been so red-eyed that I hated looking at them. After that, I didn't look because of how hollowed out I felt. I feared looking in the mirror and seeing nothing at all staring back at me. Like my body would be visible, but there'd be nothing left inside me. No light in my eyes.

Dramatic? Me? Never.

By the time I was out of the shower and dressed in a more respectable pair of lounge pants and a shirt of a proper size, dinner had arrived, and with it Shane and Archer. Everyone was spread out in the living room, already picking at their food. I wasn't sure what they were talking about, but it wasn't me so I sent up a silent thank you and took the footstool and the only unopened takeout container and sat down.

I dug into my meal, my appetite whet by that slice of pizza outside. I was halfway through the burger in three bites when my brain finally tuned into their conversation. Shane was telling Kieran he needed a tattoo. Kieran was disagreeing. Archer and Clay were exchanging glances, but staying out of the brother's little spat.

"You're so bossy." I said, looking directly at Shane.

Shane threw a fry at me. It hit my chest, bounced off, and landed on the floor. I wasn't going to employ use of the five second rule so I left it there.

"I'm sorry. I take it back," I said. "You're a bossy toddler."

"Are you sticking around town or are you already sick of us?" Shane asked. He always had to know what people were doing. What their plans were. How he could help. It was as endearing as it was frustrating.

“Yeah, I think I’ll stick around.”

Shane nodded. “If you need help with anything, let me know, okay?”

Archer glanced at Shane and sent him a soft smile like he was proud of him for acting like a normal person. Although it made me feel like Shane was a pod person. Like he was the same on the outside, but filled with an imposter.

“Who are you and what did you do to my brother? The Shane Taggart I know would never miss an opportunity to insert himself into someone else’s business.”

He tried to throw another fry, but Archer snatched it out of his hand and popped it in his mouth before Shane could launch it.

“My boss says I have to behave.” Shane tilted his head toward Archer, who grinned at me while he munched on the fry he stole from Shane.

“I want Brodie to like me, and the best way for that to happen is if I make Shane act like a civilized person and not an ogre.” Archer gave me a winsome smile.

It was clear there was still tension between Clay and Archer, who barely looked at one another, but if they were meant to be friends, I’m sure they’d find a way to patch things up. It wasn’t lost on me that, arguably, Archer had been far more wronged by Clay than I had been by Liam, and Archer was able to sit in the same room as Clay now.

“I’m not an ogre,” Shane protested.

“If the swamp fits.” Archer answered with a shrug.

“Those are fighting words.”

“Please save your weird foreplay for later, when you’re alone.” I cracked the lid off my container of gravy and dumped it on my fries.

“So, little traveler, tell us about one of your adventures.” Shane reached over and dunked one of his fries in my gravy.

“What do you want to hear?”

All the memories that came to mind were ones that Liam was tangled up in. My brain was convinced that I had no memories prior to meeting Liam. That he was the reset button or something.

“I don’t know. You’ve been all over the planet. I figured you’d have something to say.”

“Wait here.” I stood and went to my room. Well, not my room, but my room until I found a place to live. On the top of the dresser was a box of postcards that I’d sent here for myself. Kieran had not only kept them safe for me, but he’d stacked them in the box in the order they were received. After a quick flip through the most recent ones to pull out any that mentioned Liam, even though some were still en route, I took the box out to the living room.

“Wipe your greasy paws off before you touch them.” I set the box down in the center of the coffee table.

“What’s that?” Archer asked. Shane was already wiping his hands with a napkin.

“I sent myself a postcard every day that I was gone. I tried to get as many from the places I was as I could, but there’s some generic ones in there too.”

Shane dug out the first postcard. “Beautiful British Columbia. I forgot you started

your world tour in Canada. How was it?”

“Friendly and maple syrup-scented.”

Shane rolled his eyes. “So glad you’re back.”

The next hour or so was spent with Shane and Kieran taking turns asking me about the postcards. Some of the days were more memorable than others. There were a couple of mentions of storms and rain and other bad weather. That sort of weather would always make me think of Liam now and how we’d met.

I knew it was supposed to rain, but rain never bothered me. I wasn’t anticipating a microburst to dump on me the way it had. It rained so hard that day it was like an entire lake had been upended overtop of me.

The rain was warm, luckily, and not icy needles. But it came down with a force that made my skin sting. Ducking into the hotel lobby had been a matter of self-preservation. It was the luckiest rainstorm I’d ever been caught in.

At least I used to think so.

I wasn’t sure if I should forgive him. I wanted to. But I’d also wanted to dive into his arms and kiss him stupid. Clearly my judgement couldn’t be trusted right now. It did please me, however, that he was staying in town. Just knowing where exactly in the world he was made going to sleep that night a lot easier.

Chapter 10

Liam

It was a small victory for sure, but not only did it give me hope, but it felt like step one in the win-Brodie-back mission was accomplished and I could move on to phase two. As soon as I figured out what that was.

My social circle was woefully small now. I'd let most of my friendships suffer when Piper had gotten sick. Of course she'd been my priority. But even after she was gone, I hadn't let people near me. Their comfort was sandpaper on my skin and I couldn't stand it. Their sympathy choked me.

One thing I could always count on from my old friend, Oren, was that he was the least sympathetic person on the planet. He'd never treated me any different, no matter the stage of Piper's illness.

That didn't mean I didn't avoid him sometimes. In fact, I hadn't called him in a while, but that wasn't unusual for us. We didn't have the kind of friendship that needed constant nurturing. We were solid like bedrock.

He answered on the third ring, sounding vaguely amused to hear from me.

"Well, well, well. Liam Lawson. I thought I'd be hearing from you soon."

Oren was also my lawyer. Something I hadn't needed until Piper passed. With the way John and Marsha were acting, I wasn't willing to deal with them anymore.

“This isn’t a business call.”

“I’m still billing you for it.” Oren could be hard for other people to read, but I knew he was joking because I’d heard him threaten it only a million times before.

“That’s fine, but I want your relationship guru rates, not the lawyer ones.”

Oren sucked in a breath. “That’s going to cost you extra, Lawson. Relationships are messy. I prefer law. There are clear rules and guidelines.”

“And a thousand loopholes for you to exploit.”

“Exactly. So tell me about the unfortunate woman who has landed herself in your sights. How did you two kids meet? More importantly, how bad did you fuck up?”

Whereas the thought of telling Carol that I’d fallen for a man, because I was bisexual and always had been, gave me hives. Telling Oren was as easy as telling him the sky was blue.

“The lucky lady is a man, Oren. And I fucked up pretty bad. I think he understands now that I explained and apologized, but I need to win him back.”

Oren didn’t miss a beat. He didn’t obsess about my sexuality. “What did you do? In order to establish a plan, I have to know the crime you committed.”

I flopped down on the bed in my hotel room. After putting Oren on speaker phone, I told the whole tale of how we met and how I’d fucked up. Oren might act like he knew shit about relationships, but he’d been with the same man since he was in law school. It was also why I was comfortable coming out to him the way I had. I could have done it years ago, but being with Piper made me feel like there was no point in talking about my sexuality. I was in a relationship that made me look straight,

regardless of who I really was.

I wanted to say that I didn't care how people perceived me, but the lie would never hold up under scrutiny. Clearly I did care, or I'd have called Carol for advice.

"He ate with me and he heard me out, and he said next time don't get olives on the pizza. That's good, right? That means he wants there to be a next time."

"That does sound promising. So what's your next step?"

I let out a tired laugh. "I was hoping you could tell me. I've never had to grovel like this before."

"And you think the groveling will be different somehow because you're trying to win back a man?"

Oren didn't need me to answer that. I doubted he wanted me to admit that I'd never consciously thought that way, but it didn't make it untrue.

"I think you're off to a good start. Show him that you're not going anywhere. Find out what's important to him and show him that it's important to you too. Remember that your actions are going to mean more than anything you can say to him. That's how you'll win him back. And next time you have to leave, take him with you. At least make the offer. Beg him if you have to. He might say no, but at least he'll know you want him with you."

"Okay, I understand what you're saying." I wiped my hand over my face. Exhaustion pulled at me, threatening to take me under. I hadn't slept well since leaving Brodie, and sitting and doing nothing all day on his brother's front step had been surprisingly taxing. "But how do I do all that?"

“That’s up to you to figure out. Anything you do will mean more if you do it with him in mind. You could search for a hundred ways to say you’re sorry, but the actions that mean the most will be the ones you take with him in mind.”

“Glad I’m not paying you for this, Oren. Honestly, you’re kind of shit at this.”

“That’s why I’m a lawyer and not a love doctor.”

“How’s the husband?” A change of subject was necessary to my sanity. I needed to think of something or someone other than Brodie for five minutes.

“Darling, as always.”

“Still doing the firefighter thing?”

“Ugh, don’t remind me. Don’t get me wrong, the whole firefighter thing really does it for me, but I get hives whenever I hear a siren. And when he’s on a call I eat antacids like the fire is in my stomach. But he loves his job, so what can I do?”

“I’ve always envied people like him.”

“Firefighters?” Oren asked, sounding confused.

“No, people who like what they do for a living.”

“Well, if you’re starting a new life in a new town, why can’t you find something you love to do? This Brodie guy can’t be the only thing you exist for. Take this time and this opportunity you’ve created for yourself and find what you love to do. You have the luxury of time and money on your side, Liam. Why not use it?”

“That’s actually helpful, Oren. You might just earn your paycheck yet.”

“As if you ever pay me.”

“I pay you when it counts. Speaking of which, have you to contacted the lab? I want any and all viable eggs destroyed.” Saying the words made it real and for a moment I paused, taking one shaky breath after another as I felt out my own reaction to this. Was I sure? Maybe at one time I’d wanted that life, but I felt like a lifetime had passed between then and now. The Liam I was before wasn’t the same one that existed now.

“I’ve been your lawyer for a long time and your friend for longer. I want to ask you if you’re positive you want those eggs destroyed.”

“It was what Piper and I wanted. I hadn’t done it before now because, well, I think I forgot about them. Or maybe I wanted to forget about them. Maybe I was holding on to her in some way. I was overwhelmed for a long time and some things got pushed out of my mind. But the idea of Marsha using them to try and replace Piper somehow ... I’m not willing to let them do that. I don’t think John is sold on the idea, but he lost his daughter and might feel that he’s losing his wife. I think he’ll go along with anything he thinks will make Marsha happy.”

“I’ll get in touch with the lab right away. It’ll probably be a couple days before the process goes through, so there’s a small window if you change your mind. It’s not over until it’s over.”

I took a long, deep breath and then let it out. “I won’t change my mind. It’s over.”

Acknowledging it out loud sent a tremor through me, like the last vestiges of grief sloughing off my bones. Tears pooled in my eyes, not because I was sad, but because I wasn’t. I was at peace with the loss of Piper in a way I hadn’t been before. Some of it was due to Brodie and the way he’d shifted my entire cosmos. And part of it was just time and tears and a promise I’d made to live my best life.

“You okay, Lawson?” Oren asked, his voice low, like he wanted to be gentle with his words and his intentions.

If he’d asked me that a few months ago, I’d have answered by rote. I’m okay. I’m fine. I’m doing well, thanks for asking. I’d have meant it on a surface level. Now the answer was more genuine. I was okay. I was fine. I really was doing well. Except for the whole missing Brodie thing, but I was working on that.

“I’m better than I’ve been in a long time,” I told him.

“Think about what I said. Find something for you. This guy can’t be the only thing you center remaking your life on. Figure out where you want to be and what you want to do, and what will make you happy. And I think doing that, along with some groveling, should win you your boy back.”

“You’re a good friend, Oren.”

“Shhh. Don’t say that. They might be listening and I don’t want the secret to get out. I’m a shark, Liam. An evil, awful, scum-sucking lawyer. I’m a big bad wolf.”

“You’re a golden retriever.”

“No, that’s my husband. I’m at the very least a mastiff. Big and intimidating, will eat your face off if you cross him, but mostly just wants to lay around on the couch.”

“Nah, you’re a husky. Too much energy and too many opinions about everything. You can’t be bored or you invent your own mental stimulation and that’s not always to the benefit of others.”

“Listen, Lawson, I don’t have to take this slander.” Oren laughed when he chastised me, but he didn’t argue with my assessment.

“It’s not slander if it’s true.”

“Why do I like you again?”

Hearing the humor in Oren’s voice hollowed my chest out with a spoon. It had been entirely too long since I’d made a point to connect with my friends.

I cleared my throat around a sudden swell of emotion. “I’ve always believed it was because you thought I was cute.”

Oren barked out a laugh. “Oh, honey, you’re barking up the wrong tree. But speaking of trees, were you ever going to tell me that you were bisexual?”

“It didn’t seem important before now. I was with Piper and she was it for me. She knew, but she’s the only one I ever told. Carol doesn’t know.”

“Well, thank you for telling me. Are there any other secrets you’ve been keeping from me?”

“Nope. Brodie was the only one.”

“Okay, good. Keep it that way. I don’t like not knowing things. It makes my ass itch.”

“You should see a doctor about that. It might be contagious.”

“Glad to see your sense of humor has returned. Now if you don’t mind, I have to run. I have a couple of calls to make and it’s my turn to pick up dinner on the way home. But don’t forget what I said.”

“What did you say?” I teased.

“I take it back. I am no longer pleased that you found your sense of humor. You should’ve found a better one instead. Seriously, Liam, I’m happy for you. I hope you and your guy can work it out, but if not, you need to have something to build a life on.”

“When I’m more settled and when things with Brodie are either happening or dead in the water, I’m coming for a visit.”

“Damn right you are. If you and Brodie patch things up, maybe the four of us can go on one of those gloriously indecent gay cruises. I know Will would shit kittens if I booked one. He says he doesn’t want to go, but in that way that makes me know he really does. It’s the same face he gives me when I ask if he wants a bowl of chocolate ice cream and he says he shouldn’t, and I bring him one anyway because I know he really means that he wants one but doesn’t feel like he’s allowed to have one.” Oren’s sudden laugh gave me a jump scare. “Okay, I talk too much. It’s official.”

“You just love your husband and I think that’s sweet. Now get off the phone with me and get your shit done so you can get him dinner. And chocolate ice cream. And, Oren?”

“Yeah?”

“You better not bill me for this conversation.” It was my way of saying thank you, I love and appreciate you.

“Watch me.” Oren ended the call with his way of saying I know you do, who wouldn’t appreciate me. I’m awesome.

Where would I be without friends like Oren? I asked myself that as I drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 11

Brodie

Though I didn't expect him to be out front when I walked out the door the next morning, my eyes searched for him anyway. Because I was lovesick and stupid. Last night he'd been a temptation, just not enough to get past my hurt feelings. I had to admit, though, the deceased wife thing kind of made sense.

When I met Liam, it wasn't like he was actively sad. There were no tears or frowns, or faraway gazes. But he seemed lost and empty. Like he'd given it all to something and had nothing left. He gave the impression of a man whose light had gone out.

The pleasure of watching that light come back to him was addicting. Every laugh I coaxed out of him warmed my chest. Day by day, little by little, I watched Liam come alive. I loved knowing I was the one who'd done that for him. I was convinced that I could do anything.

And then Liam got that stupid phone call and all the lights in him shut off. He closed himself up like Fort Knox and pushed me away. It had felt like jumping off a cliff and getting smashed against the rocks. But he'd come after me. That counted for something.

Last night, despite my better judgement, I'd googled him and his late wife. I knew Liam came from money, but his wife had come from even more money. They were the kind of rich people who were so rich you'd never guess how rich they were. The uber wealthy could be a lot more stealth about their money.

All the money in the world hadn't saved his wife from an aggressive cancer. She was a beautiful woman. She had that classic look about her, like a woman who came straight from a red carpet event.

The Uber I'd hired pulled up to the curb and I got in. "Bennett's, please," I told the driver of the Honda Civic as I buckled my seatbelt. I laid my laptop bag across my legs and the car started moving.

"You got it," my driver, Toni, said. Toni was a girl, probably no more than twenty, whose car smelled of vanilla body spray and bubble gum.

I spent the ride over looking out the window of the car, secretly hoping to see a sleek black sedan chase us down. Alas, there was not, and I arrived at Bennett's a few minutes later. I gave Toni a nice tip, despite the fact that the scent of vanilla and bubble gum was burned into my brain.

Bennett's was a family diner run by Ethan Bennett. My brother Shane was friends with Ethan and I'd heard all about Ethan's fiancé, Mickey. He was a bartender at Shane's bar, The Anchor.

Because I'd woken up late, again, the morning rush was over and I found a table easily enough. I slid into the booth and took my laptop out of my bag. Unless I wanted to live in Kieran's spare room forever and subject myself to an eternity wearing noise canceling headphones, I needed my own place.

Ethan came over and greeted me with a bright smile. A coffee pot in one hand and a clean cup in the other. "The prodigal son returns. Shane said you were back. How was... where were you again?"

"I was everywhere, and it was amazing. But I think home is nice too. I could murder a stack of Taylor's waffles. I'll take some bacon on the side, extra crispy. And I'd

love a coffee.”

“Coming right up.” Ethan put the cup down and poured me a coffee. His gaze slid to my laptop. “If you need a place to plug in, there’s an outlet under the table. I also offer free WiFi now.”

“Really? That’s great, thank you.”

“No problem. If you need anything, just shout. I’ll be back soon with your order. Welcome home.” Ethan gave me a friendly clap on the shoulder, then went to put my order in.

I added a couple of sugars to my coffee and took a tentative sip. Restaurant coffee was always a gamble. For such a seemingly simple beverage, there were a million ways to fuck it up. Thankfully, Ethan avoided all of them and I took a second, larger sip before sliding my laptop out of the bag and getting set up.

Rentals were scarce, as it turned out, but if I wanted to buy something, there was a complex of townhouses that were freshly built and ready to go. Several units were still available to purchase.

Back when Shane first won the money, we’d gone a few rounds about it. It was his money. He had no right to spend so much on me or other people. It was his. And then he’d reminded me that yes, it was his, and he could spend it how he saw fit. And he saw fit to take care of the people who were important to him. Even annoying little brothers.

He’d funded my travel and I’d tried not to think of where the money came from at first. But after a while, it became easier. Every time I talked to Shane and he’d ask about where I’d been and what I saw, he did so with an enthusiasm that rivaled a kid on Christmas morning.

But could I ask him to buy me a house? He probably would because it meant I'd be staying. I'd be putting down roots. Not that I didn't already have roots here. My family was here and I had no good reason to be anywhere else.

There had been a brief period of madness after the first sum of money Shane dropped in my account when cold sweat climbed my back and pushed me down into a spiral of doom. I'd genuinely worried about how I was going to pay him back. Shane had looked at me like I'd grown a second head.

He'd been incredulous, but kind. He reassured me that he had more money than he could reasonably spend on himself. My scalp tingled with the memory of the noogie he'd given me. I'd always hated that and Shane knew it. But at that moment, I'd secretly liked it. It felt like a promise that everything was okay.

By the time my breakfast arrived, I'd sent Shane a text asking him how many noogies it would cost me to ask for a townhouse. I had no interest in staying in another hotel for a while, and I desperately wanted to get out of Kieran's place. He and Clay acted like moony-eyed newlyweds. Not only did I not want to hear my brother and his boyfriend, my broken heart needed a breather from their love-filled happiness fest.

Ethan brought me a stack of fluffy waffles with all the fixings. I set my computer aside and drowned them in maple syrup before digging in. I devoured the waffles and then snacked on the bacon while I checked out other listings.

A townhouse appealed to me because I'd still have a yard if I got a dog, an idea that I hadn't totally dismissed yet. But I wouldn't have much of one and it would be easy to maintain.

Shane, as predicted, texted back as soon as he woke up and told me to get whatever I wanted and that it wouldn't cost me any noogies. I chose not to believe the second half of that while I made arrangements to go look at one of the empty units later that

day.

Going back to Kieran's held no appeal and I could track Liam down at his hotel, but I wasn't sure I was ready for that either. That left me sitting at a table at Bennett's, drinking coffee and plunking away at my secret side project.

Did I know the first thing about writing a book? Absolutely not, but there was only one way to learn how to do something and that was by doing it. I didn't have a theme to bind all my stories together, and maybe I needed one, but I wanted to write about my travels. About the places I'd been and the things I'd done. For what purpose, I hadn't decided. Maybe just for my family to read. I'd have to edit out the time I spent in Ibiza and any other X-rated shenanigans, but it wasn't that kind of book anyway.

The townhouses were a short jaunt from the diner so when it was time to meet the agent, I left money on the table, including a hefty tip, and I walked the few blocks to the complex.

The row of townhomes was on a quiet street lined with trees. I never could tell one tree from another, but the leaves had just started to turn at the tops of the trees. When fall was in full swing, the whole street was going to look stunning.

The building looked to be a few stories tall with a faux brick facade and lots of freshly planted landscaping. I wondered if the paint had even dried in the units yet.

An agent waited for me at the door of unit seven. I wasn't superstitious, but the idea of owning lucky number seven tickled me. The agent was a man about my age and was almost alarmingly tall. The sleeves of his button-down were rolled up and I wondered if it was because they didn't make shirts with arms long enough to fit him properly.

"You must be Mister Taggart."

My face scrunched involuntarily at the greeting. “Brodie is fine, please.”

“Brodie, then. I’m Neil Chambers.”

Neil turned and stepped into the house. “This complex is a new build. You’ll have a monthly fee for upkeep of the exterior of the building and services like trash and snow removal. The unit has been outfitted with all energy efficient windows, and appliances.”

Like most modern places, everything was decorated in white and gray. That wasn’t anything a few coats of paint couldn’t fix.

“I’ll give you space to wander around and have a look, but it’s a three bedroom, two and half bath with a flex space.” Neil rambled on for another minute or so about some of the other amenities before letting me loose to explore and get a feel for the place.

It was nice. Clean. Modern. Everything was white, or gray, or black, though. And what would I need with three bedrooms and two and a half bathrooms? I’d never wanted to start a family. My brothers had their own places. I didn’t even have a dog yet.

The idea of rattling around in a place this big all alone didn’t appeal to me and it wasn’t long before I went downstairs and joined Neil in the kitchen. I almost felt bad for him. He looked at me with such hope in his eyes.

“It’s nice, right? Plenty of room, sleek design. Move in ready.”

“Oh, it gorgeous. It’s just not for me.”

Neil’s smile didn’t fade and it made me wonder if he was part robot.

“It’s too big and too... modern, I guess. I think something smaller with a bit of character would be more to my liking.” Swear to God I saw Neil’s ears perk like a puppy when he heard the word smaller.

“How small would you be willing to go?”

“Honestly, it’s just me. I don’t need a lot of room. One bedroom. One bathroom, some living space. I’ve lived in hotel rooms for a while now. The idea of rattling around in a two thousand square foot townhouse is a bit daunting.”

“I have a place I think you might like. The location isn’t bad, but a lot of people have passed on it because it’s small and though I say that decor can be changed, the paint colors have put many people off. I can pull up the listing if you want to see it.”

“Is it available for a viewing?”

“Now?”

“Yeah. I have time if you do.”

Neil smiled so bright the International Space Station probably saw the glare.
“Definitely. I’ll text you the address.”

“Uh, I actually walked here.”

“Then I’ll take you there myself. Come on.”

I followed Neil outside and waited for him to lock up. “You seem very excited to show me this place.”

“I probably shouldn’t tell you this, but the owner of this property won’t move on

price. They want a very specific number. That, plus the unique appearance and the different aesthetic, it's been a challenge to sell. There's a friendly competition at the office to see who will be the lucky agent to finally sell it." Neil fiddled with his phone and a moment later mine buzzed with a notification. "I sent you the listing so you can have a look on the way over if you want. Unless you want to be surprised."

I left my phone in my pocket. "Surprise me."

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Chapter 12

Liam

I ignored calls from my sister. She had every right to be worried about me, but I wasn't in the mood to deal with angsty Carol. Oren had called me after getting in touch with the lab a final time. I still wasn't sure how to feel about losing that last little bit of Piper, but honoring her wishes was the right thing to do.

My turbulent thoughts about it had me wandering town like a zombie for a couple of days. I wanted to see Brodie again, but he hadn't reached out. I needed to do something before I went insane.

On the evening of the third day, I showed up at the doorstep of Brodie's brother again. This time with a pizza without olives, a cooler with drinks, and a couple of blankets.

The tips of my ears heated and I fought the urge to rock on the balls of my feet as I waited for someone to answer the door.

I heard a thud, and a faint commotion from the other side of the door and then Brodie shot out of the house and yanked the door shut behind him.

"Sorry about that." He made no move to explain and I didn't ask. We were both the youngest in our families and I imagined the commotion had something to do with his brother.

“Don’t worry about it,” I told him. “I, um... brought dinner. Pizza again, but no olives this time.”

Brodie looked at me and then at the pizza box and the blankets. Before I could parse what he was thinking, a flick of movement caught my attention.

“I think we have an audience.”

Brodie whirled around to see the curtain fall back into place. He turned back to me and raked his fingers through his hair.

“I can go if you’re not comfortable with me being here.”

“No, you’re fine. It’s those idiots inside I can’t stand.” Brodie looked up at me. “Do you think we could go somewhere?”

“I’d like that.” I stepped off the porch and waited for him to fall into step next to me. He surprised me by taking the blankets and the cooler from me so I could unlock the car. Once they were stowed in the back seat, Brodie climbed in the front and I passed him the pizza.

I took a deep breath as I rounded the car and climbed in the driver’s seat.

“Anywhere in particular you want to go? If you don’t want pizza, I could take you somewhere.”

“Pizza’s fine. I’ll give you directions.” Brodie put his seatbelt on. “Just get me away from Kieran and his boyfriend.”

I put the car in gear and followed Brodie’s directions out of the neighborhood. “Kieran is your brother, right?”

“Yeah. He and Shane are both older than me. And Clay is Kieran’s boyfriend. Kieran thinks you’re bad news, but Clay is totally team Liam. He’s apparently a sucker for a second chance.” Brodie huffed out a breath. “Long story.”

My chest puffed a little at the fact that someone in Brodie’s circle was team Liam. Brodie cut me a glance and a smile tugged at his lips. An ache erupted in my chest at the sight of it. I’d missed his smiles and the way they lit up my universe.

“Don’t let it go to your head, Liam.”

The grin that broke out couldn’t be stopped if I’d tried. And I didn’t want to stop it. I’d spent so long being sad and I didn’t want to be that anymore. I’d grieved and mourned. And I’d moved on. For the living, there was life after death. There had to be.

“Too late. I have a fan club. I think I like Kieran’s boyfriend already.” I waited at a stop sign for Brodie’s instructions.

“Take a left,” he told me. “Can I eat in here?”

“Go ahead.”

Brodie popped the box open and took a slice out. “Is this your car? It’s nice.”

“It’s mine until I return it. I’ve rented it from a car service. It could have come with a driver if I wanted, but I like driving.”

“I hate it,” Brodie said after swallowing. “I know how, and I’m decent at it. I just prefer to be a passenger. I guess now that I’m staying, I’ll have to get a car again. I sold my rust bucket when I started to travel. There was no point in paying storage fees on it or having it sit in my brother’s driveway collecting dust.”

“Or you could keep me around and I’ll be your personal driver.” I shot Brodie a look to let him know that despite the light tone of my voice, I wasn’t joking.

“You would, wouldn’t you?”

“There’s not a lot I wouldn’t do for you, Brodie. I know I’ve done a shit job of convincing you of that, but maybe one day you’ll believe me.”

From my peripheral, I was aware of his gaze on me, but I drove as though I were oblivious to it. Unaffected. As though my heart didn’t beat faster whenever he looked at me. As if oxygen didn’t get thinner and my head didn’t swim whenever he was near.

“Take a right,” Brodie said before going back to his pizza.

We turned onto a street that was lined with trees. In a few weeks, when the leaves had turned fully, it was going to be a gorgeous sight.

“Pull in there.” He pointed to the driveway of a startling yellow house. I wasn’t sure what the style was called, but one side of the house was remarkably taller than the other, giving the flat roof quite a slant. The paved driveway led to a detached garage that was done in the same style as the house.

Brodie unbuckled his seatbelt and climbed out of the car, leaving me no choice but to follow him. He stood in front of my car and I followed him as he slowly walked toward the house.

“What do you think?” Brodie asked.

“Of the house? It’s very yellow.”

Another megawatt smile flashed my way. “Yeah, I know. It’s great, right?”

In my head, tires squealed as my brain came to a stop. “Wait. Is this yours?”

“The paperwork wrapped up a couple hours ago.” Brodie pulled a set of keys out of his pocket and gave them a jingle. “Want to see?”

“Yeah, I do.”

He went to the front door and slid the key in. “I realize that not everyone can close on a house in a few days, but when you’re paying up front and bypassing all the loans and shit, it gets a bit easier.”

“I wouldn’t know. I inherited my condo.”

Brodie unlocked the door and stepped inside. He toed his sneakers off by the door and I followed suit.

The inside was as bright as the outside. The kitchen was on the shorter side of the house, but it was open to the living room that had a twenty-five foot ceiling and a wall of windows. The interior was painted in sunset colors. Oranges and pinks and little splashes of yellow.

“It suits you,” I told him. “From that first moment I met you, it was like looking at the sun.”

“The owner wouldn’t budge on the price and he wouldn’t let the agent paint the house in neutral colors. This house was his artistic vision and even though he was selling it, he wanted to at least believe it would remain unchanged.”

“It’s like living in a sunset. I can see why you love it.”

Brodie looked at me, his expression soft around the eyes. He licked his lips and stuffed his hands in his pockets like he wanted to keep them away from me.

“I figured I should bring you here, you know, so you stalk the proper house.”

“Is it stalking if you invited me to do it?”

He lifted a shoulder in a shrug. “I don’t know. Is it stalking if I say you can come knock on the door?”

“I don’t think that qualifies as stalking.” The distance between us made me long to close it. I wanted to kiss him in his sunshine house. I wanted to strip him bare and watch the light bounce off his skin as he bathed in the sunlight from the wall of windows.

Brodie let out a shaky breath. “I’m not ready to give you the grand tour, Liam.”

The closed bedroom door sat at the other end of the room. Maybe one day I’d earn the right to be invited in there, but until then, I wouldn’t give up trying.

“I can get the pizza if you want to have a picnic in your living room with me,” I said. “And maybe next time I could come pick you up and take you out somewhere. I’m not ready to give up on us.”

Brodie paused, and then he licked his lips and gave me a tight nod. “I’d like that. The picnic, I mean. And maybe the date.”

I reached for him and brushed a strand of hair off his forehead. The gesture felt almost too forward after days and days of not touching him, but I couldn’t resist. “I’ll be right back.”

The walk to my car and back gave me time to get my dick under control. I grabbed a blanket and the cooler from the back and the pizza from the front and carried everything into the living room. Brodie took the pizza from me and I set the blanket out in the middle of the empty room.

I took one side of the blanket and he took the other, sticking the pizza in the middle as though it were a chaperone. From the cooler, I grabbed a couple drinks, just pop tonight.

“I figured we’d work our way up to wine dates,” I told him as I passed him an orange soda, his favorite.

“You’re really going to date me?” Brodie cracked the can open and it echoed in the empty space like a gunshot. A laugh bubbled out of him and he took a sip. “That was louder than I expected.”

“Of course I’m going to date you. I fucked up, and you deserve better. The way we met was magical, and our time together was something I’ll cherish, no matter what. But out there wasn’t the real world. I want to know the real world Brodie and I want you to know me that way too.”

He nudged the pizza box closer to me, prompting me to take a slice.

“I’d like that. I’d also like it if you used my phone number. You can text me and stuff, you know. You don’t have to just pop up every few days like the world’s slowest whack-a-mole.”

“Okay. I’ll text you.”

We sat in silence for a few minutes, both enraptured by the way the light moved through the room. Whoever painted the inside of the house was a magician. The

colors and the light blended together and created this soft, glowing atmosphere.

“I think you have the most romantic living room I’ve ever seen. The realtor should have shown this house at sunset only.”

“Well, it was my luck that they didn’t. This was the second place I looked at. The first was this massive, modern monstrosity. Everything was very in style. Very white and gray. I hated it. Besides, what do I need with two and a half bathrooms?”

My own apartment was much larger than I needed, but it wasn’t something I’d thought about. Having money meant having space. An abundance of it. Houses were status and my parents had loved status. And their parents before them and so on for generations.

My apartment was one of their properties. Not that they’d ever lived in it. I doubt they ever saw the inside. They likely bought it to say they had a unit in the building because everyone wanted to live there. They’d rattle off lines about how it was a good investment, of course.

“Maybe there’s a place for sale nearby. We can be neighbors,” I said, only half joking.

“If you want the number of my agent, I’m sure he’d be glad to land another sale.”

“I’ll text you for it later. I’d love to not sleep in a hotel for a while.”

“God, I know. I can’t wait to get my shit out of storage. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I had an amazing time. A once-in-a-lifetime kind of adventure, but I’m looking forward to having my own space again. The lack of room service is the only downside.”

“There’s always Door Dash. Or you can call me.” I took a slice of pizza. My excitement finally curbed enough for my appetite to make an appearance.

“My very own delivery driver?” Brodie laughed. “You’d do that too, wouldn’t you?”

“There’s not a lot I wouldn’t do for you,” I repeated. Maybe it was a bit too honest, but not being honest with him had got us in this position in the first place.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he said, his voice rough and deep. Then he turned his attention back to his house and the way it seemed to glow as the sun crawled down the sky to tuck itself into bed. He watched the sunset and I watched him, and I was certain I had the better view.

Chapter 13

Brodie

The good thing about having two brothers with boyfriends was that it took only a single afternoon to get all my stuff out of storage and piled into my new place. Archer and Clay, both artists, were impressed by the inside and I promised they could come back one night when I was settled in and watch the sunset.

I think Shane was preparing to let Archer redecorate the inside of his house, which was now their house. Liam had offered his help, but I'd declined. He'd made good on my instructions to text me and had sent me sporadic texts all day long. While I'd spent the morning grocery shopping and stocking my pantry, Liam had been exploring the area. He sent pictures of himself at Bennett's asking if I'd eaten there before, as if I'd never heard of it. There had been mention of a breakfast date in our future.

My brothers gave me a look whenever my phone buzzed, but so far they'd kept their opinions to themselves. They were probably afraid that I'd pack up and move to Morocco and they'd never see me again. They weren't far off the truth.

Shane and Archer had to take off because Archer had a tattoo appointment to keep and Shane liked to hang out at his bar whenever Archer was upstairs working. Kieran and Clay stuck around and helped me put my bedframe together.

"Are you sure you don't want help with anything else?" Kieran asked, staring at my ocean of boxes.

“I’ve got it. I promise.” I had to stop myself from physically shoving Kieran out the door.

Clay, who had turned out to quickly become a friend to me in a genuine way, and not just an I’m dating your brother and need you to like me sort of way. Clay was funny and kind. He could also be reserved and he’d been open about the trouble he’d caused in his life. Not that I cared about that. If Kieran liked him, that was enough for me. He was a good judge of character.

“If you need anything,” Kieran said.

“He won’t.” Clay tugged Kieran toward the door. “He’ll be fine, Kieran. He was all over the world and came back in one piece. I think he can handle living by himself.”

“I like him,” I said to Kieran.

“You would,” Kieran replied, pretending to scowl at me as he wrapped an arm around Clay and tugged him close. He dropped a kiss on Clay’s cheek, then finally relented and stuffed his feet into his shoes. “We’ll get out of your hair. But don’t be a stranger.”

I walked them out and shut the door behind them. The silence descended on me like a favorite blanket and I exhaled hard and fast, relieved to finally be alone. Properly alone. No one lingering in a hallway outside my hotel room door. No staff milling about asking if I needed anything.

After a day of shuffling my items from one location to another and buying half the grocery store, exhaustion clung to my bones. I had no energy left to unpack or cook. Hell, I was going to be hard-pressed to make my bed to sleep in it tonight. I’d probably curl up on the mattress and fling a blanket over me and not move for twelve to fifteen hours.

Ordering dinner was something I could do. While I waited for my delivery, I had a quick shower. Months of travel meant that I always had a toiletry bag ready to go, but I had to admit that it was going to be a nice change to use a proper sized shampoo bottle. When I remembered to buy one. Making a mental note to put that on my online order, I scrubbed the day's sweat from my skin before drying off and sliding into a pair of soft jersey knit bottoms and a shirt I was pretty sure wasn't mine.

After towel drying my hair, I slipped out of the bathroom in time to hear the doorbell. The windows of my new house were plentiful, but the ones at the front had come with window coverings. There were none in the rest of the house to allow the light to saturate every surface.

I'd paid for my dinner online so I didn't bother to grab my wallet off the counter. As the bell rang again, I pulled the door open and was met with a sunburst of flowers. Yellows and pinks. Reds. Oranges. Daisies instead of tulips.

Liam's smiling face appeared from behind the enormous bouquet, vase included this time.

"I thought you were my dinner," I said to him as I took the flowers and stepped aside, inviting him in.

"I wouldn't mind that." Liam's eyes twinkled and I'd be lying if I said I didn't miss his touch. Sometimes when I was alone, I imagined his hands on me. Gentle fingers drawing patterns on my back in the sunshine. Unforgiving hands on my hips as he slammed into me from behind. The taste of salt on his skin as he gagged me with his fingers to keep me quiet.

Jesus, I had to get a grip.

Honestly, I wouldn't mind that either. But I wasn't sure if I was ready to go from

broken-hearted to jumping straight back into bed with him. Placing the flowers on the kitchen island I gave myself a second to take a breath and calm my raging libido.

“I miss you, Liam. Sometimes I can’t even breathe because your absence hurts so much.” I turned to face him, shocked that he hadn’t moved from where he stood. Didn’t he feel the cord between us? The thread that pulled us together tightened in my chest. I wanted to go to him, but I stopped myself.

His eyes held a look of devastation I’d only seen when I looked in the mirror. An ocean of grief and regret swam to the surface to greet me.

Liam exhaled and took a tentative step toward me. His hand fluttered, lifting as though he wanted to reach for me, but didn’t know if he dared.

“I miss you too. And I know I don’t deserve a second chance, but I want one. I know I messed up. What we had deserved more honesty than I gave you. You deserved better, and I want to be better. I was stupid. I have no excuse for what I did. I’ll be sorry for the rest of my life for the pain I caused you.”

He took another step toward me—our connection demanded it. The thread, like a rubber band, stretched to its limit, now retracting. I was powerless under its pull. And with no more than a foot of space between us, I had to ask myself if this was what I wanted.

Did I truly want to forgive Liam? Could I live without him if I didn’t?

“Brodie,” Liam breathed my name with such tender affection it made my knees weak. His hands, previously uncertain but suddenly sure, reached for me. His palm was warm and soft against my cheek and he pulled me close to him, his other hand on my hip as if to steady me.

I looked up at him, that little bit of height he had on me making me feel suddenly small and fragile. I wanted him to shield me, but he was the reason I trembled.

He said my name again and then he was kissing me. His lips, pillowy soft on mine, seeking entry. Hesitant, as though I'd refuse him. Hopeful that I wouldn't. He held me as if I were necessary, and something about that embrace healed some of the broken pieces inside me. My lips parted for him, and only then did I stop trembling. The storm in me quieted with the flick of his tongue on the seam of my lips. I parted for him, welcoming him as my arms rose and I wrapped them around his shoulders, his neck. Drawing him into me, I came to life again in his arms.

My fingers tangled in his hair. I whimpered into his mouth. My body had gone from zero to six hundred on the horny scale, but my dick was going to be disappointed. We weren't going to have any fun with Liam, not tonight.

That didn't stop us from kissing like it was our last. Liam's hand sank into my hair. He cradled the back of my head and slid his other arm around my waist, dragging me closer as he deepened the kiss.

Liam tasted like peppermint with a hint of coffee underneath. The combination was sweet and a little bitter. Perfect, like the way I fit against him. It had always been easy for me to get lost in Liam, in his kisses and in his arms. I swear we lost entire days of our lives just kissing.

After we met abroad, there had been no separating us. I followed him on the next leg of his journey, both tired of the place I'd been and unwilling to say goodbye to him so soon. He changed his bookings and we shared a room. Meals. Music. Night swims in the ocean and sometimes the hotel pools. Magic surrounded us.

A glimmer of it flickered in me and I found myself smiling against Liam's mouth.

“Hi,” I said, breathless and a little lightheaded.

“Hi,” Liam repeated back to me. I’d always loved looking him in the eyes. They were a dark shade of blue, the kind that looked like an endless hole in a tropical ocean. The kind of blue that went for miles down deep, leagues under the surface. The kind that held worlds inside them.

Another kiss ghosted against my lips, but Liam made no move to deepen it. We were both affected by it. I could feel his rigid cock pressed against me, matching mine. A large part of me wanted to beg him to lay me down on the floor and fuck me through it. To christen every room in my tiny house and make it all smell like us.

The more sensible part of me knew we’d done plenty of that already. What we hadn’t done was live in the real world together. We’d met in a bubble and while it was wonderful while it lasted, it had been agony when that bubble burst.

My doorbell rang again and Liam looked at me with a furrowed brow. “Expecting someone?”

“Just my dinner.” I untangled myself from him and pulled my shirt down over my crotch to hide the bulge in my pants. I opened the door and thanked the driver for my delivery. I’d tipped well on the app so I didn’t feel bad that I didn’t have any cash on me.

I carried my dinner inside and set it on the island next to the sunset bouquet Liam brought. I traced my fingers over the petals of a pink daisy. The bloom heads were huge, easily the size of my palm.

“The florist must love you by now. These are beautiful.” I turned to him. “But you don’t need to shower me with gifts to make an excuse to come see me.”

“Then how about I shower you with gifts because you deserve them? Because they make you smile, and I like making you smile.”

Heat crept up my cheeks. Why? I had no idea. Sometimes I couldn't help the giddy schoolkid-with-a-crush feeling that swelled up in me.

“I should go.” Liam pulled his keys from his pocket. “I don't want to wait to see you again. Can I take you to breakfast in the morning?”

No one had ever taken me on a breakfast date before. Not on purpose. I'd been to breakfast with men I'd spent the night with, but that wasn't the same as sleeping apart and someone deciding that they couldn't wait a full twenty-four hours before they saw you again.

“I'd like that.”

Liam gave me a soft, satisfied smile. He stepped into my space again, this time catching me under the chin with a couple fingers and tilting my head up so it was the perfect kissing angle.

The kiss was soft and quick, far too quick for my body's liking. It screamed at me to go to him when he stepped away.

“I'll see you in the morning.” Liam turned away, taking my breath with him when he walked to the door. He turned at the last minute and shot me a smile. “And, Brodie, you can keep the shirt.”

My hand went to my chest and I rubbed the space over my heart.

Liam winked at me and then he was gone, leaving me alone in my kitchen wearing a shirt I hadn't remembered stealing.

Chapter 14

Liam

Fully cognizant of the fact that I couldn't be idle for the rest of my life, I'd put a call into Oren last night and we'd spent a couple hours spit balling ideas. So far, all of them sucked. I was determined to make a life here, not just for Brodie, but for myself.

The few days I'd spent in my apartment had shown me that my old life no longer fit me. It had been like wearing clothes that used to fit, and they still technically did, but they sat wrong and the seams itched.

My position at the family company wasn't an important one. I had mostly schmoozed with people and convinced them to spend their money so we didn't have to spend our own. I wanted something better for myself now. Something that didn't make me feel like my soul was leaking out of my ears.

Piper had told me time and time again that I didn't have to work there, but I'd convinced myself that she was wrong. My family had a company and I was supposed to work there. My parents had been gone a long time, but some of my clearest memories were of Father, sitting in his chair, his long legs outstretched and crossed at the ankles. He puffed on cigars that drove my mother crazy, but not enough to forbid him from smoking them. And in those memories, he told me over and over how one day I was going to work at his company, just like Carol.

My dreams had been their dreams. They'd never been my own and that's why walking away from it all was a lot easier than I thought it should have been at first.

Guilt tugged at me now and then as I thought of leaving Carol all alone, but then I remembered that she was a far better business person than I. Smarter, more passionate, and far more capable than I'd ever been. I think my parents' dreams were her dreams.

The only thing I knew for certain that I wanted was a life here, with Brodie in it. But Oren was right. I had to find something for myself in all this change. Something that wasn't Brodie. But I didn't know what. Yet.

That was a problem for after breakfast.

I'd no sooner pulled into Brodie's driveway when he stepped out of the house. As much as I'd liked seeing him in one of my shirts, he looked even better this morning. A brown leather coat was pulled on over a crisp white shirt. Dark skinny jeans cupped his legs and disappeared into a pair of brown boots. And when he looked at me, color slashed across his cheeks.

He slid into the passenger seat and buckled his seatbelt.

"Where did you want to eat?" I asked instead of leaning across the seat and kissing him. The kiss from the night before had played on a loop in my brain all night long.

"Bennett's is fine. They have good food."

"I ate there the other day. Nice place."

Brodie raised an eyebrow at me.

"What?" I checked for traffic and backed out of his driveway, keenly aware of the way he was still looking at me.

“I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised at the compliment. We did eat at some pretty sketchy places.”

“Just because I can afford Michelin star restaurants doesn’t mean I limit myself. Besides, Ethan Bennett is a perfectly nice man.”

“Ooh, schmoozing with the locals are you?” Brodie seemed impressed and I didn’t miss the way his smile grew.

“Well, I hope to one day be counted among them.” My admission stunned him into silence, though it shouldn’t have. I thought I’d been clear in my intentions to start a life here with him. Hopefully with him.

“You’re serious,” Brodie said carefully, as though I might take it back.

“I’ve been all over the world. I’ve been to glittering cities and I’ve been to places that look untouched by man. I’ve lived in mansions and penthouses and none of it means anything to me. I want to be here.” I turned my head so I could look Brodie in the eyes. “With you.”

I shifted my attention back to the road and the rest of the drive was silent. I let Brodie sit and absorb my declaration. Whether he believed me or not, trusted me or not, wanted me or not, I wanted a life that felt real. What I’d had before was a shell. It was as solid as a shadow.

Bennett’s came into view and I turned into the parking lot. It looked pretty busy, but that didn’t deter either of us. Would he have let me, I’d have opened the door for him, but Brodie didn’t wait. He climbed out at the same moment I did and we walked into Bennett’s together. I held the door for him and followed him to an empty table.

A lovely woman named Josie took our order and poured our coffee for us. I watched

Brodie spoon in two sugars. He looked at his coffee like it was the most fascinating thing in the world.

“My brothers think I’m insane for giving you another chance.”

“And what do you think?” A deep breath helped keep my composure. I wanted his brothers to like me, but I wasn’t certain that I needed their approval. Brodie seemed to be comfortable doing what he wanted, with or without family approval.

“I think that I have no idea what I’m doing. When Shane won the money, I was flipping burgers, writing bucket lists on napkins. I volunteered with some aid organizations that allowed me to travel and then suddenly, Shane was rich and I was travelling around with no worry about anything but where I wanted to go next. I knew one day I’d have to stop. I’d have to stand still and figure out what comes next.”

“What comes next?” I asked him. Brodie’s brow was furrowed and he glanced up at me. Torment pooled in his eyes and I wanted to hold him until it faded from his expression.

“I have no idea.”

Unbidden, a smile flashed across my face before I could stop it.

“Why are you grinning at me like that?” he asked, almost sounding insulted.

“Because I have no idea what the hell I’m doing either. I got the degree my parents wanted me to get. I took a job in the company like they wanted. And they weren’t even here to see any of it. I quit my job. I’m selling my condo. The only plan I had for my future was taking you to breakfast.”

Some of Brodie’s unease melted away. The beginnings of a smile pulled at the

corners of his mouth. “I’m glad I’m not the only one who doesn’t have everything figured out.”

“I don’t even know what I want for breakfast.”

Brodie reached across the table and put his hand on mine. Warmth spread through my body, radiating out from that single point of contact. It was hope and comfort. Proof that I wasn’t alone in how lost I felt sometimes. And even if he didn’t feel the same way, he wasn’t going to let me face the uncertainty by myself.

“You should get pancakes and bacon and I’ll get sausage and eggs.”

I knew what he was really after with his breakfast suggestion.

“You just want my bacon, don’t you?” Flashbacks of previous breakfasts came to me. Us curled together. Me getting the room service tray and going back to bed with it. Feeding him by hand. It was magical. But this was the real world, not a vacation bubble and I found myself just as content to sit across from him and watch him smile triumphantly when he realized he was going to get his way.

“Taylor makes amazing bacon,” Brodie said.

I ordered the pancakes with extra bacon. Brodie ordered his sausages and eggs with whole wheat toast.

“Tell me about your sister,” he said, poking at his eggs when they arrived. He’d ordered them sunny side up and he stabbed a sausage into the center of one, dipping the sausage into the yolk.

“Carol? She’s older than me by about ten years. I was an accident. I was a teenager when we lost our parents and Carol had already been working toward the COO

position of Dad's company. Once they were gone, she was the major shareholder. She worked under the former COO until she was ready to take over as CEO. She's always been very business focused."

"Is she married? Do you have any nieces or nephews?"

"She's single and unless you count her small army of cats, no."

"Do you have pictures of her cats?" Brodie had finished his sausage in the time it took me to have a bite of pancake. He stole a slice of bacon off my plate and dunked it in the egg yolk.

I pulled my phone out and scrolled to the cat album I kept. "The black ones are Mimsy and Pip. The fluffy orange one is Gremlin and the smaller orange ones are Tom and Apple. Then the little tabby one is Miles and the gray one is Mushroom."

Brodie scrolled through a million of the pictures, turning my phone to me every once in a while so we could both laugh at them. Eventually he returned my phone and we finished our breakfast. I'd managed to eat two slices of bacon and one of the sausages that mysteriously appeared on my plate.

"Did you have any plans for after breakfast?" I took the last sip of my now ice cold coffee. Josie had been around to offer refills, but I'd passed.

"Well, someone I know is new to town and I thought he might want me to show him around. Give him the guided tour. Show him where my brother's bar is so maybe if he takes me out for drinks, he knows where not to take me." Brodie bit his lip like he did when he was unsure or nervous.

It was my turn to reach for him. I took his hand in mine and slid our palms together. Gently, I twined my fingers in with his. "I'd like that very much."

“Liam.” Brodie exhaled, his voice trembling. “What are we doing?”

I met his gaze and did everything I could to pour all my honesty and earnestness into my voice.

“I’d like to think that we’re starting over. That we’re going to date and get to know each other in ways we couldn’t when we were living in our little bubble. I’d like to think that what we’re doing is serious. Is that what you want? I know I hurt you, but no matter where I’ve been, wherever you are is where I want to be.” I took a breath and squeezed his hand gently. “What do you want?”

My heart stilled. Breath froze in my lungs. Limbo was agony, millions of needles in every nerve.

“I want more of this,” Brodie answered, sending light and color into my world and air into my lungs. “More dates. More talking. More getting to know you.”

“Getting to know each other.” I squeezed his hand and when he squeezed back it was like he was holding my heart.

Chapter 15

Brodie

Our conversation at breakfast had left me feeling light as a feather. Some of that dreamy, floaty, head-over-heels feeling returned. It would be easy to exist in a bubble here too. Shane and Kieran were both busy with their own boyfriends and Mom had never been the type to interfere in our private lives. But bubbles always burst.

I didn't want a bubble. I wanted a life. And to get it, I had to trust that Liam wasn't going to hurt me again. Wanting was easy. It was the trusting that was harder.

After breakfast, we drove around town for a while. I showed him where The Anchor was and explained that there was a tattoo shop above it now, even though I'd never been in it.

"Did you ever think of getting a tattoo?" Liam asked me.

"Not really, to be honest. I like how they look on other people, but I don't think they'd suit me. What about you?"

Liam shook his head. "Never really thought about it. When I was thirteen, back before my parents died, I wanted my eyebrow pierced." Liam glanced my way and grinned. "That request did not go over well."

"I once asked Mom for a motorbike and she nearly shit a kitten. I'd watched some daredevil jump a bunch of busses and, to a nine year-old, it was the coolest thing I

ever saw.” The memory brought a smile to my face. “We never did have a lot of money, so a motorbike wasn’t going to happen. But she went white as a ghost and bribed me with my favorite cookies if I never asked that question again.”

“Was it hard? Being gone for so long? I bet you missed her.”

“I did. But we talked on Skype sometimes and I emailed a lot.”

“No postcards?”

“Turn left up here.” I pointed at the next street I wanted Liam to take. “Nah, the postcards were for me. I don’t know why I started it. I mean, sometimes I’d send Mom a postcard, or one to Shane or Kieran, but mostly I sent them to myself. I guess I wanted to remember.”

“What are you going to do with all of them?”

“Well, see, I hadn’t thought that far ahead.”

Liam took the left like I’d asked and soon we were on the outskirts of town. The houses started to spread out more. Tall pines stood vigil on either side of the highway.

“In the winter, when we get a big dump of snow, I like to come this way and see the branches all weighed down with it. It’s even better if the sky has cleared so it’s blue and the snow is sparkling.” The weather had turned a little colder now as winter approached, or I’d have rolled the window down to feel the air on my skin. When I was a kid I thought I could catch the wind. But that’s because kids were innocent and foolish.

After driving for about twenty minutes, signs appeared advertising for a service

station slash thrift store slash restaurant.

“Pull in there,” I told Liam.

He was obedient without question, even though I could see the what the fuck expression on his face. It was probably the scrap metal scarecrow that had him wondering where the fuck I’d taken him.

“There’s a local artist who does those.” I motioned to the sculpture. “He teaches shop at the high school, but in his free time, he does that.” I’d always envied people who had a talent. I’d never been particularly good at anything. I could draw a mean stickman if I put my mind to it.

“He’s very skilled.”

Liam and I got out of the car and wandered over for a closer look.

“I’d never be able to look at a pile of scrap and say ah, yes, there’s a scarecrow in here, and just”—Liam gestured wildly at the scarecrow—“make this appear.”

“It makes my head spin.”

Liam moved around the sculpture to examine it from all angles, but I stayed put. I’d seen it before and it no longer held the same level of awe that it had when it first appeared. He came to stand next to me, so close that our arms brushed against each other.

“Come on,” I said, breaking away. “Inside.”

I set off without waiting to see if he would follow. He would. He’d followed me halfway around the world already.

The restaurant was deserted except for a few older men who seemed to always be sitting at the same table drinking coffee and chatting away. I gave them a friendly wave and skirted past them and into the other section of the building. The one that was stuffed full of treasures.

Metal signs advertising everything from soda brands to ones that told stupid jokes. Touch lamps with glass panels decorated with images of wildlife. Salt shaker sets. Every kind of knickknack you could think of. And buried in the back corner, an old style pinball machine.

“Does that thing still work?” Liam asked me.

“You bet your ass it does.” I reached into my pocket and fished out a quarter. “When you stepped into the bathroom at Bennett’s, I got Ethan to get me some quarters.”

I flipped one in the air and caught it. “Want to play?”

Liam held his hand out and I dropped the coin into it. I showed him where the coin slot was and where the buttons were for the flippers.

“Your first quarter doesn’t count.” I told him when his first ball went straight past his flippers and into the gutter. “But after that, it’s on.”

Liam glanced over at me. “Why do I get the feeling that you’ve done this before?”

“Because I have. I used to beg Mom to bring me out here. When she did, she’d sit and have a coffee and I’d sink quarters into this machine until she made me leave.”

Liam, as it turned out, was horrible at pinball. Originally, I’d planned to let him get a few quarters under his belt, then challenge him to a friendly competition, but that was never going to happen.

After a couple of dollars sank into the machine, Liam stepped away with a laugh.

“I think you should give me a tutorial. Show me how it’s done.”

“Prepare to be amazed.”

I sank my quarter into the machine, pulled the rod that slammed into the ball to shoot it into play, and then I was transported back in time as my hands flew to the trigger buttons on each side of the machine.

The ball ricocheted off the bumpers, bounced off the sides, and I slammed it back up into play with the left flipper. The table had certain targets you could hit to rack up a higher score and there was a trick to hitting them all. I’d spent hours learning just how hard to hit the ball and what spot it had to be on the flipper to shoot up and get the trickiest target.

When my luck finally ran out and my play was over, I turned to Liam. I hadn’t realized I’d been smiling until Liam slanted his mouth over mine, catching me off-guard in the best kind of way.

I laughed against his mouth, a short burst of joy before melting into his kiss. Not too much, we were in public after all. And though there wasn’t really anyone around, I didn’t want to get too carried away.

That was the problem with Liam and me. One touch was never enough. It led to two. Led to holding hands or kissing. I could kiss Liam for days. Years. Eternities. I’d already fallen for him, but every moment we spent together, every little thing he did to show me how much I meant to him, only made me fall harder.

Liam’s hands dug into my waist, fingers like iron vises. He gripped me like he planned to never let me go. If only he hadn’t in the first place.

The thought was an unwelcome bucket of water. I pulled away, a little breathless. Disoriented. Sometimes I felt like I'd stepped out of reality and hadn't found my way back.

Liam's thumb traced my lower lip.

"Show me something else," he said.

"Okay."

He ducked into the service station slash convenience store and bought a couple bottles of overpriced apple juice. Instead of giving him directions, I plunked an address into the GPS.

He held my hand while he drove, which was a new experience for us. When we'd met, we went everywhere via transit or taxi. There was something far more intimate about sharing a car this way. If I let myself, I could get used to it. I could get used to a lot of things.

Kisses after pinball. Stealing bacon off his plate. The way his thumb stroked over my skin almost absentmindedly as he drove. Not sleeping alone. Fuck, I missed that. The way his body sought mine out in the night. I loved waking up with his arms around me, his lips brushing the back of my neck.

Was I ready to invite him to stay over? I wanted to be ready for that. For everything we'd had and had lost. Maybe not lost, but temporarily misplaced. I wanted it back. But only if I knew for certain that I'd get to keep it.

And that was the rub. There were no certainties in life. There was just chance and trust.

The car came to a stop in a familiar-to-me location. Liam looked around with a furrowed brow. I could understand his confusion. The place I'd taken him was a run-down house in a grungy neighborhood. More than a few houses on the street sported an overgrown lawn spotted with junk. Peeling paint. Boarded up windows. It wasn't the nicest place.

"I grew up in that house," I told him. To his benefit, he kept his expression neutral. More interested in me and what I had to say than looking at the house that would probably be better off demolished.

"It's a two bedroom. I wasn't really planned, but..." I shrugged. "There was a room that was supposed to be a storage room that was turned into my bedroom. It was barely big enough for a bed, and there were shelves built above the one side of it. I was terrified to sleep on that end of the bed. I thought the shelves would fall on my head and all my books and stuff would tumble down on me and kill me."

Liam didn't let go of my hand. "Did you want to get out and take a closer look?" he asked me. "Does anyone live here now?"

I shook my head. "Mom lived here up until Shane won the lottery. He bought her a nice house across town. She runs a shelter for abused women. She still owns the house, but she hasn't decided what she wants to do with it yet."

"Sometimes, it's hard to let go of things, even if they serve no purpose for us anymore."

"Did you want to see inside? I have a set of keys."

"Only if you want to show me."

Relief rushed out of my lungs in one huge breath. "Not especially. I think I'd like to

go home.” A smile tugged at my lips. “Home. It’s weird to have one of those again. But weird in good way.”

Liam looked at me, long and meaningful. He held my gaze and lifted our joined hands. Brushing a kiss against my knuckles, he said, “Yeah, it is good.”

I knew what he meant by the way he looked at me when he spoke. The earnestness in his voice and the intensity of his gaze made my heart race. Me. I was his home.

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Chapter 16

Liam

The disparity in our upbringing had never been so obvious. I'd had love, but I'd also had financial security. Money came with a lot of privilege. I'd never had a closet as small as the room Brodie described as being his for his formative years, barely large enough for a single bed. I had a hard time wrapping my head around it.

None of my hardships had anything to do with money.

"How did you lose your parents?" Brodie traced the lines in the palm of my hand with the tips of his fingers

We'd gone back to his place, which was still a sea of boxes and unorganized furniture. I offered to help him unpack, but he'd laughed at me and tugged me down onto his couch.

"Mom to a heart attack. She'd been unwell for a while, but kept brushing it off as indigestion. Dad was older than her by about fifteen years, and he just kind of faded away after she died. Within a few months, he was gone too."

"Shit. That sucks."

"It did, but I came out the other end okay. Eventually." I loved the way Brodie kept wanting to touch me. Breakfast had kicked down one of the walls between us and every moment we spent together after it drew us closer together. "What about your

dad?”

“Gone. Died. I don’t even remember him. He did some bad shit that put my family in a tough spot for a long time. So it’s probably good that I don’t remember him.”

“That sucks.” I echoed Brodie’s words back at him.

Brodie dragged his fingertips across my wrist, then up higher, tracing the veins that showed through my pale skin. “I don’t want to talk about that anymore.” His hands trembled against my skin. A sign that he was as nervous as I was.

We hadn’t been together since the morning of the day I got that stupid phone call. And while it wasn’t that long in the grand scheme of things, a lot had happened between us in that time.

“What do you want, Brodie?” I had to know in words, not assumptions. I’d give him anything he wanted, but nothing he didn’t tell me he was ready for.

Brodie rolled his eyes and shuffled closer, pressing our knees together. “Isn’t it obvious?”

He was a beautiful temptation. Light brown hair that was the perfect length to always be in his face, to always need me to push it off his face. He looked at me with his hooded eyes and his teeth pressed into his bottom lip.

“I don’t want to make a single mistake with you. Not again.”

Brodie moved slowly, telegraphing every motion as he rose to his feet. He put his hands on my shoulders, then sat in my lap, one leg on either side of me, straddling me. Caging me in.

“Not kissing me right now would be a mistake, Liam.”

I wondered if Brodie could feel the way my heart slammed against my ribs. Did he feel the way I shook when I put my hands on his thighs and slid them toward his hips? Did he know how terrified I was of fucking this up again? He’d given me a second chance, but it also felt like a last chance. One more shot to get it right. And if I fucked up, it would all go away. His smile. His voice. The way he looked at me—like he was looking at me now.

“Liam.” He leaned in, bumping his nose against mine. Warm breath washed over my face. “What’s a girl gotta do to get a kiss around here?”

I kissed the trace of a smile off his face. Our mouths came together. I moved first, but he moved faster. He grabbed my face and rose up on his knees, making him taller than me for a change. The angle pressed me backward, so I leaned against the back of the couch, letting it take my weight. I wound my arms around Brodie and kissed him like I hadn’t kissed him for a thousand years.

Our hours apart had been weeks. Eons. A desert of loneliness and regret vanished as Brodie licked his way into my mouth. His hands slid into my hair and he held me like he wanted to punish me for leaving. For not explaining better why I had to go. For being stupid and almost ruining everything.

Kissing Brodie never got old. It never would. He kissed deeply. Passionately. With his whole body.

He lowered himself down and plastered his body to mine. Hips swiveled, grinding our cocks together. God. There weren’t words for how badly I’d missed him. Needed him. I’d been so fucking stupid and I still hated myself for it. I’d never forgive myself for hurting him.

All I could do now was try to make it up to him.

We kissed for an eternity. Until my lungs screamed for air and my face ached from it, and only then did I let him pull away. But he didn't go far. He grabbed the hem of my shirt and rucked it up, urging me to raise my arms so he could tear it off over my head.

Once my shirt was gone, I wrapped my arms around him and lifted him up in one swift motion. I flipped him onto his back and pinned him between me and the couch.

A laugh tore out of him and it was like music. And suddenly everything was okay. He wrapped his arms around me and gazed at me with those liquid brown eyes, like melted chocolate.

He didn't have to ask before I kissed him, but it was just a taste this time. I wanted to ravish him. To spoil him. Lick every inch of his body until he squirmed and begged and sobbed with need for me.

I shoved his shirt up his body then tugged it over his head. His arms I left tangled in the fabric as sort of a makeshift bondage. Laughter peeled out of him as he wriggled his arms.

"Do you think this will seriously hold me?" His eyes danced with humor and another brick of regret fell away.

"I think you'll like what happens if it does." Tenderly, I dragged my hands down his bare torso, softly catching his nipples with the pads of my fingers as I went. He hissed in a breath and stopped wriggling. Well, his arms did. His hips thrust, seeking friction I wasn't yet providing.

Holding his gaze, I leaned over him and took his nipple in my mouth. In a lot of

ways, we were starting over. But in some, we were picking up where we left off. I knew Brodie's body already, but explored as though it was my first time with him. I toyed with his nipples. Sucking and licking. Nibbling made him yelp and laugh and get too squirmy, so I shelved that for another time. I kissed my way up to his armpit. Underneath his deodorant, he smelled like himself. It was an achingly familiar scent, all skin and salt and musk and man. I wanted to bury my face there and breathe him in until every cell in my body smelled of him.

My mouth caressed the curve of his neck. The delicate hollow of his throat. I kissed the pulse points on his neck, then mapped my way slowly down the center of his chest. Brodie was a panting mess by the time I got to his belly button. My fingers were clumsy from excitement and arousal, but I managed to get his pants open and free his cock.

Brodie let out a sigh of relief as if he doubted for a moment that I was going to put him out of his misery. Our gazes met and I found myself smiling up at him and the way he was still tangled in his shirt. Vulnerability flashed in his eyes, a glimmer of fear, hesitation. Uncertainty.

I tore my stare away from his and kissed the spot under his belly button that always made him shiver. Then lower. I dragged kisses down his treasure trail.

"Liam, you're killing me." Brodie's voice was thick and full of anguish.

I looked up again and flashed him a smile, then finally I gave in to what we both wanted. I took him in hand. His dick was perfect. I'd always thought so. Wonderfully average in both length and girth, with a stunning curve when he was fully erect. He kept his pubes trimmed down to a nice manageable length without getting rid of them completely. Brodie was a work of art.

I licked a bead of precum off the tip of his dick. Brodie's cock twitched in my hand.

When I took him in my mouth, teasing the head of his cock with my tongue, he made the most delicious sounds. He'd always been vocal and my dick liked a vocal lover. He whimpered my name and I knew I'd tortured him enough. For now.

I took him deeper, down to the base of his cock, a skill I'd only recently acquired. My gag reflex threatened to make me choke and I shed a few tears keeping it at bay. I swallowed around his cock and Brodie cried out, writhing with pleasure. I wanted him to come apart in my mouth.

Releasing his cock from my mouth earned me a surprised gasp from him, but then I was up and untangling his hands from the shirt I hadn't removed earlier. Yanking it off his wrists, I tossed it aside and crushed our mouths together, letting him taste himself.

"Take what you need." I kissed the corner of his mouth, his cheek, then I wriggled back down. My tongue followed the thick vein that ran up the underside of his cock and I took him into my mouth again.

This time Brodie buried his hands in my hair. A knot in my chest loosened when he anchored himself to me that way. I wanted him to claim me. As if he read my thoughts, Brodie pushed my head down, making me take all of him. I did gag that time. There was something about him taking the lead that made me lose all ability to control myself.

Tears sprang to my eyes and I didn't know if they were from choking on his dick or from the sudden relief that wrapped around me like a warm blanket. I thought I'd lost him. I was sure he'd never forgive me. And yet here I was and it felt right. It felt like home.

Brodie let me ease back and take a breath, and when he pushed my head down a second time, he was gentler, like the first time was an overabundance of frustration

coming to a head.

I tried to make it as good for him as I could, sucking and teasing the head of his cock with my tongue when I could. Brodie whimpered and moaned and sometimes he'd talk, letting little bits of encouragement slip out.

Then suddenly he was pulling me off him and gathering me into his arms. He brought me to his mouth and kissed me deeply, licking his way past my teeth. He kissed me like he was trying to steal all my secrets. I had none, but he was welcome to try.

Hands scrabbled at my waist.

"Off. Clothes off," Brodie commanded, his lips still pressed against mine when he spoke.

I stood and undid my jeans, shoving them and my underwear off at once, making sure the socks went with them. Brodie watched me with heat in his gaze. He'd had more experience than I did when we met. He was aware of this from the beginning and he was always gentle with me when we tried things I hadn't done before. I'd topped and bottomed, but now more than anything I wanted Brodie to make me his. I needed him inside me with a desperation I'd never felt before.

He looked me up and down, raking his gaze over every inch of my skin. Slowly, he got to his feet and undressed the rest of the way. We stood like that for a minute, bare to each other in every way two men could be. Standing so close the heat of his body radiated out and seeped into my skin. I leaned into it like a moth to a flame. My fingers brushed over his cheek. Asking him what he wanted was on the tip of my tongue, but then we were kissing again. Slower, like we knew now we had time.

Plastering his body against mine, his hands roamed my back, mapped the length of my spine. My breathing changed when his fingers trailed down the crease of my ass,

then dipped inside. He spread me open and I realized I'd stopped kissing and had already been reduced to a panting, needy ball of want.

“Make me yours, Brodie. Please.” My voice didn't sound like mine. It was shaky and desperate and ruined.

He kissed me again, soft and sweet. I was already his. I'd been his from that first moment I saw him rain soaked and laughing, full of joy and life. But I needed to feel him inside me so bad I trembled, my whole body shaking.

Brodie let go of my ass to cup my cheek. His thumb smoothed along my cheekbone and he gave me a sweet smile. “Let's take this to the bedroom.” He tangled his hand in mine and led me through the sea of boxes that stood between us and his bedroom.

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Chapter 17

Brodie

My house was a disaster and it felt like a metaphor for my life. I kicked a box away from the side of the bed then turned and gathered Liam close. Leaning in, I breathed deep, dragging my nose up the side of his neck. My tongue poked out and I licked a trail up to the tender spot underneath his ear. He shivered against me. His hands rested on my hips and his fingers curled, digging into my flesh.

He chased my mouth until he caught it and that felt symbolic too. After all, he'd found my home and chased me down. Shown up and waited for me to give him the time of day. All the while my heart was jumping for joy, it was my brain that told me not to trust him.

Right now my brain was blessedly quiet. Liam's mouth on mine, his tongue sliding against mine, breath mingling, heartbeats syncing, it was everything I imagined being in love would feel like. Like being without him was being without a limb. That breathing was easier when he was around.

I was aware from the start that I'd been Liam's only lover who was also a man. He'd known he was bisexual, but knowing of your attraction and feeling safe enough to act on it were two different things.

"Are you sure?" I asked Liam as he broke the kiss and got into bed. He and I had more than our share of sex. In beds and dark alleys and club bathrooms. But seeing him in my home, in my bed, had my cock aching, throbbing, desperate to sink into

him and lay claim. It made me feral.

Vulnerability shone in Liam's eyes. He was naked before me, and not just in the physical sense. It was like he was letting me see inside him, like he'd stripped all his walls down for me.

"I need you, Brodie."

I loved the way he said my name like it was the best word he knew. Like it was magic. And maybe it was. Maybe it was my Achilles heel, because I grabbed the lube from the nightstand and then I was kneeling on the bed between his legs.

I loved Liam before and I'd lost him. I wouldn't survive losing him again, but I'd already let him in. The damage was done. I was Liam's—body, soul, and heart. Stupid tender heart that squeezed every time Liam looked at me like I was his answer.

After we met and it became clear to us that we didn't want to see other people, we'd ditched condoms. Reaching for one now would feel like a step backward, but I asked anyway.

"Do you want me to go bare?"

His eyes were dark pools of lust. "More than anything."

He reached for me, fingers sinking into my sides, anchoring him to me. "More than oxygen," he said.

I kissed him then, softly, on the corner of the mouth. Liam opened to me like a bloom in spring. He wound his arms around me and pulled me close. I indulged him, letting him kiss me again and again. Our bodies lined up and his cock was hot and hard against mine. Even if he changed his mind and didn't want to take things further, this

was enough. It was more than enough. Just having him here with me made everything okay.

But Liam became unsettled. His kisses were as frantic as his hands, which couldn't decide where they wanted to be, so they were everywhere. And then he said my name again. The magic word.

"Brodie," he said in his wrecked voice, thick with desire and too many emotions to untangle.

I reached for the lube and applied a generous amount to my fingers. Liam spread his legs wider for me. His lower lip was pinned with his teeth and his body practically shook with nerves and anticipation. We'd done this before, but not often. Liam was new to it and I didn't mind bottoming for him. And sometimes we had sex with no penetration at all. That was good too, but Liam wanted this and I wanted to give it to him.

"Breathe, baby." Gently, I massaged the soft skin between his cheeks. I teased his hole until it was lube-slick and relaxed enough for me to ease a finger inside. The groan Liam let out made my dick twitch.

Removing the digit earned me a disgruntled look, but I added more lube and went in again. This time it was easier. Still tight, but the lube helped me slide that finger in and out, loosening him.

Liam stared at me like he couldn't believe I was here. Like I might disappear if he looked away. I felt the same about him. I leaned forward and stole a kiss. It was messy and perfect. While my tongue distracted him, I added a second finger. He gasped at the intrusion, but his gasp turned into a moan so loud and long I was thankful we were somewhere private with no other guests lingering in the hallways. No maids coming in because we forgot to hang the Do Not Disturb sign.

Smiling down at him, I crooked my fingers and pressed against that little bundle of nerves that I knew would light up his universe. Liam's eyes slammed shut, then flew open. His hands gripped me, pulled at me, cupped my face.

"Please, Brodie. I need you. I—" Liam's words snapped off when I pulled my fingers from his ass.

He lay trembling, silently waiting as I added lube to my cock, slicking it so I wouldn't hurt him. I spread some more between his cheeks for good measure. The last thing I ever wanted to do was hurt him. It was part of the reason I forgave him. He hurt me, yes. But his hurt also wounded me. His regret was still etched into his eyes, like it had been carved into his soul.

I lined my cock up with his hole. Grabbing his dick with my other hand, I stroked it nice and slow, distracting him from the fact that I was about to breach him. Liam still reached for me. His hands stroked up my thighs. His fingers flexed, pressed into my flesh when I pushed forward, sliding the head of my cock into him at a glacial pace. I didn't top often and the grip his ass had on me always took me by surprise.

Sucking in a deep breath and vowing not to blow the minute I was all the way in, I pushed deeper. A shaky breath rattled into Liam's lungs and his body opened for me, welcoming me home.

Missionary got a bad rep from people, but I loved it. Sure, other things were great too, but I sank into Liam, buried myself to the root, and then slanted our mouths together. His arms wrapped around me, caging me against him. Heels bit into my ass and I started to move at his insistence.

He was tight and slick and so fucking perfect wrapped around me. His ass was impossibly tight, but yielded little by little for me. When our kiss broke and Liam tipped his head back, exposing his throat to me, I sat up. Sliding a hand down his leg

to his knee, I lifted it and folded it to his chest. Using it as leverage, I pulled back so just the head of my cock remained inside him.

Then I slid home all at once. Crying out, he fisted the bedding. He tugged at the sheets. His back arched off the bed and pleas for more fell from his lips. Holding on to his leg, pressing it to his chest, I thrust into him again. And again. And again. And Liam's chest turned red with arousal. The tips of his ears too. The side of his throat. It was like I was changing him, if only temporarily.

Indulging myself, I reached down and toyed with his nipple, flicking and tugging at it as I continued to fuck him.

Liam looked like a man on the edge, ruined hair, wild eyes, pink cheeks. "Can we... can we... the other way?" Liam asked somewhat shy for a man who had my dick up his ass.

"The other way?"

"On my stomach." His gaze darted away.

"You want to roll over so I can take you that way?" I asked, already pulling out so he could flip over.

Liam rose up, kissing me first, tangling our tongues together in that heady, needy way that sent my spiraling headfirst into desperation. Then he was rolling over, spreading himself out before me, all long lines and exposed flesh. He turned his head and glanced back at me.

Reaching for him, I dragged my hands down his back. On his left shoulder he had two small, dark moles and I leaned down, pressing my lips to them as I'd done before. As I did frequently.

Liam folded his legs, raising his ass in the air for me. An invitation and a plea all in one. Lining up, I smoothed my hand down his back and rested it on the globe of his ass as I slid back inside him.

A keening sound tore out of Liam and he immediately started rocking back, fucking himself on my cock. I let him take over, let him use me as a fuck toy while I grabbed his ass, stroked his back, felt every curve and contour of his skin.

My hands slid up his sides, then down his arms. I lay over him, plastering myself to his back, my hips jerking as I fucked myself deeper into him. His hands found mine and our fingers twined together. He clutched me tight, almost to the point of discomfort.

The back of his neck was damp with sweat and I kissed it off him. Need and want and excitement pooled hot in the pit of my stomach. Everything in me drew tight, coiled like a spring. Liam was a wreck. Nothing that came out of his mouth was coherent, just a stream of sounds that I wanted to record, preserve, play on repeat forever.

“I’m so fucking close.” I told him. I could have told him that I loved him, that this moment was everything to me. That even when my heart had been smashed and shattered, I never hated him for a single second. I loved him too much. But the words wouldn’t come. I scraped my teeth against his shoulder, not quite biting, but letting him know I could. Wanted to, even.

“Come in me, Brodie. Brodie, please.” Liam untangled one of our hands and I reached around, beating him to it, wrapping my hand around his cock before he could touch what was mine.

I jerked him, relishing the way he bucked and jerked underneath me. Every wanton noise and shaky breath was a balm to my soul and soon he was coming in hot ropes that shot out of him, pooling somewhere beneath him. Running down my fingers and

in all the spaces between. Closing my eyes, I kissed the nape of his neck, and then I was coming. Every bit of pleasure that had built up in me released all at once. My hips took on a mind of their own and I rode him hard, still jerking him, still touching and kissing him wherever I could reach until I was breathless and boneless.

Eventually I stilled, but didn't pull out. I stayed where I was, lying on his back like a blanket, kissing the nape of his neck still, tasting the salt and satisfaction on his skin. Sunlight stretched in through the windows, casting everything in a serene kind of glow that matched how I felt on the inside. I found myself saying the words I wished I'd have heard from him when everything imploded.

“I want you to stay.”

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Chapter 18

Liam

Of course I stayed. I couldn't have made myself leave if I wanted to. I'd asked if he meant for the night, or longer, and all Brodie said was yes.

The day still had plenty of hours in it, but Brodie and I stayed in bed. We curled up in each other's arms and we talked.

He told me more about his family and I told him about Piper. He seemed curious about her. It had been such a long time since anyone asked me about her that I'd forgotten how nice it was to share her with someone. He didn't seem jealous of her, just quiet and a bit sad, I thought.

As the sun moved through the sky, the light in the room changed. His bedroom was painted in the same soft sunset glow way that lit up when the sun hit it. It was like living in a cloud.

"I think I love your house," I told him. My body had recovered and was ready to go again, but I ignored my baser urges in favor of just being near Brodie. I could see myself here, morning after morning.

Brodie was lying half on top of me, his arm flung over my chest, his legs tangled in mine. The soft strands of his hair tickled my chin. He'd covered us up earlier, but the blankets had slid down to his waist. As tempting as it was to start something, I brushed the hair off his face and kissed his forehead.

“It’s almost dinner time. And as much as I love staying like this with you, we need food.”

He rolled off of me and onto his back. He turned his head and looked at me. “I suppose I could cook us something. Be warned, though, it’s been forever since I made anything. It might not be edible.”

“Then I’ll cook.” I kicked the covers out of my way and climbed out of bed. I quickly dressed again, earning me a small scowl from Brodie. “You, my darling exhibitionist, have a house of windows.”

“There’s a privacy fence. And the neighbors don’t have windows on that side of their house.” Brodie raked his gaze over me. “And you were naked earlier.”

I went around to his side of the bed and swooped down, stealing a kiss. “Yes, I was. But I wasn’t cooking. There are many things that are more fun naked; cooking is not one of them.”

Brodie stretched out like a starfish and heaved a sigh. “I suppose that’s fair.”

“Come on. I’ll cook and you can unpack and keep me company.”

I left the room and went to Brodie’s kitchen. I spent a few minutes going through his cupboards and his fridge to see what I had to work with. Brodie had a shocking lack of kitchen items. He had one pot and one frying pan. He had a few wooden spoons and a couple of horrifically dull kitchen knives.

Brodie came padding out of the bedroom, tugging a shirt down. He stopped and looked at me. “Problem?”

“Brodie, darling, is the rest of your kitchen still packed? The pots and pans? The

knives?”

He rubbed at the back of his neck. “I told you I wasn’t good in the kitchen.”

“You didn’t say you weren’t good. You said it had been awhile since you made anything.” I closed the drawer and put my hands on the counter. “What was the last thing you cooked?”

Brodie grinned at me, broad and amused like he was about to let me in on the world’s best joke. “Probably ramen.”

“Tomorrow, I’m taking you shopping and we’re going to outfit your kitchen properly.” Before he could argue with me, I added, “Consider it a housewarming gift.”

He bit his lip and thought about it for a second. “I guess that would be nice of you.” He reached for the flowers that I’d brought. The colorful daisies were stunning in his kitchen. He traced his fingers along one of the bloom heads. “It’s a housewarming gift, though, right? It’s not like guilt or something?” Brodie caught my gaze. His brows were pinched and he looked troubled.

“Do I still need to feel guilty?” My voice was barely above a whisper. “I will grovel for a thousand years if that’s what it takes, but I assumed earlier that we were moving past that.” I took a deep breath. “Was I wrong?”

He shook his head. “You weren’t wrong. I don’t want every moment we spend together to be tainted by that. I’ve forgiven you, Liam, but forgetting is harder.”

I rounded the island and Brodie practically fell into my arms. He held me around my waist and buried his face in my shoulder. Kissing his hair, smoothing my hands down his back, I let him have a moment to collect himself.

“I can’t change what I did, but I can promise to not do it again. I won’t ever leave you behind again.” There were more things I wanted to say, but my words were trapped behind my teeth. Brodie was my whole heart and I needed to tell him that. But a punch of melancholy hit me in the sternum. The last person I’d loved was Piper, and she’d been taken from me. I wasn’t superstitious enough to think that I had some kind of Practical Magic curse, but a sudden torrent of what-ifs hit me.

What if I lose him too? What if I tell him how I feel and he gets sick? What if I am cursed? What if he’s struck by lightning and I never told him how I feel?

That last question stopped me dead. I couldn’t breathe through the fear that skittered down my spine. I pulled back so I could look at him and words came tumbling out like a dam had burst.

“I shouldn’t have let you leave. I should have chased you down. There are a million ways I could have handled things and I chose the worst possible one. And I won’t make excuses for it. I will never stop being sorry, Brodie.”

His cheek was warm in the palm of my hand. I wondered if he could feel the way I trembled or see my heart cracking open as I poured every bit of affection I felt for him into my words. “You’ve forgiven me, and I can’t tell you how badly I want to deserve that. I’m not sure I do, but I am sure about how I feel about you.”

“Liam—”

I put my hand over his mouth and saw the crinkle of amusement in his eyes. I felt the smile on my skin.

“Brodie, I love you. I love you so much it terrifies me. I think I’ve loved you from that first day. From the moment I saw you laughing, drenched head to toe, towel drying your hair in the lobby of a hotel.” I pulled my hand away from his mouth.

“Everything I do from here on out is because I love you. Because I should have told you a long time ago. Because I want to be a man who deserves you.”

“You love me?” Brodie’s voice was thin and it quivered a little.

“More than life.” I cocked a smile at him. “I stalked you and followed you halfway around the world, didn’t I?”

“The tulips were a bit much.” Brodie gravitated toward me, the gap between us grew even smaller.

“They weren’t nearly enough. I can’t change that I hurt you, but I can swear that I will never leave you behind again. I won’t ever let you walk away from me, Brodie.”

“Red flag,” Brodie said, brushing a kiss against my lips. “But lucky for you, I love you, red flags and all.”

Our gazes held and I could almost see our love for each other float between us like dust motes in a sunbeam.

“I know I just confessed my love, but I’m about to disappoint you and I hope you can forgive me.” Before Brodie’s happy expression could fall too far, I smiled at him. “Your kitchen is too ill-equipped for me to make us anything suitable for dinner.”

Brodie rolled his eyes. “Lucky for me, my boyfriend is taking me shopping tomorrow.”

“He sounds like a generous man.”

Brodie shrugged. “He’ll do.” After a beat, he caught my mouth with his. The kiss was soft at first, not tentative or shy, but tender. With gentle ease, he licked his way inside

my mouth. Everything about the kiss was soft. The way he held me around the waist and the way his tongue danced with mine. It wasn't greedy or insistent, but it was still powerful. My knees turned to jelly and I threatened to crumple down to a heap at Brodie's feet. It would be a suitable place to be to worship him, I thought.

We kissed until we were both wound up and wired from it. Our cocks were impossibly hard, but we didn't do more than press up against each other and bask in the proximity.

Brodie was the first to pull away. "I'll order something for dinner and you can cook for me tomorrow." Brodie went in search of his phone and, once he found it, he placed a call for pizza and two kinds of wings. When he hung up, he put his phone on the counter and looked at me.

"What?"

"When I said I wanted you to stay... I think you should check out of your hotel and stay here. With me." His expression was equal parts hope and fear and I hated that he looked at me with even an ounce of trepidation.

"I'd like that."

The fear melted out of Brodie's expression, replaced by warmth and joy.

"I'd like that a lot." I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I don't know what my future looks like right now, but I know I want you in it."

Brodie crossed the space between us and looped his arms around me. Lips brushed against mine and I felt the smile on them.

"That's enough for me."

Chapter 19

Brodie

My brothers descended on my house like a plague. It wasn't unexpected, but it was unannounced. Lucky for everyone, Liam and I had been on our best behavior all morning. Well, after the morning sex, and the shower sex, and the frantic frot when we walked in the door after shopping. It was almost a blessing that my brothers appeared on my doorstep, their boyfriends in tow. My dick needed a break.

Liam was in the kitchen when they arrived. After our shopping trip, he insisted on reorganizing my kitchen to his liking. His gaze flicked up to the sudden influx of guests and I saw his shoulders lift and his spine straighten.

"We thought we'd come with a housewarming gift." Shane held up a couple cases of beer. "Didn't know you had company." His gaze slid over to Liam.

"That's Liam," I told them. "Liam, this is Shane and his boyfriend Archer." I gestured at Kieran next. "And that's Kieran and Clay. Everyone, this is Liam. Yes, he's my boyfriend. No, you may not interrogate him, threaten him, or otherwise act like irritating brothers toward him."

Kieran reached out and ruffled my hair. Shane scowled. Liam came over and slid an arm around me and tugged me into his side. He pressed a kiss to my cheek in front of everyone.

Archer tugged a case of beer out of Shane's grasp and elbowed him. Reluctantly,

Shane extended a hand toward Liam, who took it graciously.

“Good to meet you,” Liam said. “I have to admit that I almost feel like I know you already. Brodie talked about his family a lot.”

Shane glanced at me, looking surprised and pleased. “Only good things, I hope?”

I shot him a mischievous grin. “I’ll never tell.”

“Are you all unpacked?” Kieran asked. He’d taken the other case of beer from Shane and sat on the couch, pulling Clay into his lap.

“There’s a stack of boxes in my bedroom that I have to get through, but mostly, yeah. Liam and I tackled that this morning.” Unpacking had happened after morning sex but before shower sex. My face heated at the memories. It wouldn’t be long before Liam had me on every surface in the small house.

Tugging Liam with me to the couch, I took up space on the other end. Liam sat on the floor in front of me. He draped an arm over my lap, like he was claiming me as Kieran passed him a beer.

“So how long are you in town for?” Kieran asked.

My leg shot out and I kicked Kieran. He was unaffected by my assault, only pausing to look at me with a raised eyebrow to mock my attempt to inflict damage.

“I’m not interrogating him. It’s a question.”

Liam cracked his beer open and took a sip. He offered it to me and I waved him off.

“You don’t have to answer their questions, Liam.”

He leaned against me, pressing his side against my leg. My hands found their way into his hair and I ran my fingers through the short strands.

“I’m in town for as long as Brodie wants me to be.”

Liam was never leaving because I definitely didn’t want him to go. I liked having that little nugget of knowledge.

“What do you do for a living?” Shane asked. His big brother instincts had kicked in. He was standing at the kitchen island. Archer had taken up residence on one of the stools and had his arms looped around Shane’s shoulders.

“Right now? Nothing. I quit my job.”

I saw Shane’s expression darken. “You quit your job? And moved here? Whatever money you think you can get from Brodie, you’re wrong.”

I hated Shane for being presumptuous and judgmental, but loved him for being protective. Even if he was going about it the wrong way.

Liam squeezed my leg as though he wanted to reassure me that he didn’t take any offense to Shane’s ridiculous assumptions.

“My parents owned a pharmaceutical company. My sister runs it now. I never had an interest in it, but family obligation had me in college for a degree in business and then I got a job at the family company, mostly so I could make my dead parents proud of me. Even without my income, I have more money than I can spend. And if that ran out, I have a sister I could mooch off. Maybe she should come here and interrogate Brodie about his intentions with me.”

Liam looked up at me and grinned. “What are your intentions with me?”

My intentions with him were definitely not something I could discuss in front of my brothers and their boyfriends. In lieu of listing all the X-rated things I intended to do to him the moment we were alone, I drew him into a kiss that tasted like beer. There was no doubt that the interrogation was going to continue with or without my permission, but knowing Liam gave as good as he got settled something in me. I'd been afraid that they were going to scare him away. I no longer worried about that.

Liam had chased me halfway around the planet to sit on Kieran's step for an entire day just so I'd give him five minutes of my time. He wasn't about to let something like Shane's bristly personality bother him.

When the kiss ended, I took Liam's beer from him and stole a sip before returning it to his grasp. I loved the way our fingers brushed when we passed the can back and forth. The thrill it sent through me made me feel like a high school kid who accidentally touched their crush. Happiness rose in me like bubbles

"Any further questions?" I scowled at Shane.

Shane shrugged, his drink hovering near his mouth as he paused to answer. "I'll let you know."

I took it for the truce it was meant to be and I changed the subject. I didn't mind them coming over unannounced and it was nice to see them, but part of me felt guilty because I just wanted them to go away so I could be alone with Liam.

Kieran was the first to comment on the stack of kitchenware that was still spread across the counter. "Did you learn to cook on your travels?" He motioned to the mess in the kitchen.

We'd torn everything out of the packages and given most of it a quick rinse in the sink with soapy water. I'd never been so content doing chores before, but with Liam

it didn't feel like work. The domesticity of it hit me in the sternum and made it hard to breathe. I'd floated so high on my own happiness that the air got thin.

"Hell, no. I'm still hopeless. But Liam can cook, only he thought my kitchen equipment was pathetic. It was. So he bought us new stuff." I tried to pass it off as casual, and not the life-altering event that it was, but I wasn't sure of my success.

Liam glanced up at me and I realized that I'd said us, not me. I might have bought the house... well, Shane might have bought the house, but it was ours. I already thought of it like that. Our spatula, in our kitchen, in our house. I'd asked him to stay and he'd agreed. He checked out of the hotel and unpacked his bag, stowing the empty suitcase in my walk-in closet. His meager stack of clothes took up too little space. I wanted him to get the rest of his things so they'd be mixed up with mine. In my head, it wasn't my house, it was ours.

He narrowed his eyes, looking at me with a quizzical expression. Unwilling to get into it in front of my brothers, I shook my head. My fingers raked through his hair again like they had a mind of their own. There was something about Liam that made me want to be in constant contact with him. I was comfortable with him, even after everything that happened between us, and that more than anything gave me hope for our future.

I wasn't used to kissing people in front of my brothers, but it was quick and chaste, more sweet than heat, and Liam smiled against my mouth before I pulled away.

"Oh gross," Shane said. I looked over at him to see a huge smile on his face. "The two of you are sick."

Archer was wrapped around Shane, arms encircling his shoulders, legs around Shane's. Clay was in Kieran's lap, quiet and observant, but seemingly content. When I'd left, we'd all been single and I didn't think any of us minded being that way, but

this was nice too. Better in a lot of ways.

Liam's phone rang and part of me still bristled at the sound.

"Sorry." He dug his phone out of his pocket and glanced down at the screen. "It's Oren." He looked at me. "My best friend. He's also my lawyer."

"You should get it. Take it in the bedroom if you need privacy."

Liam didn't move, but swiped at the screen and pressed the phone to his ear. "Oren, what's up? Yeah, I have a couple minutes."

He glanced at me and mouthed an apology. He handed me his beer before getting to his feet. "Let me just step into the other room."

When Liam was gone, I had four sets of eyes trained on me. I took a sip of the beer Liam passed off to me and shrugged a shoulder. "Before you ask me, I have no idea."

A small lie, but they didn't need to know Liam's entire history.

His absence made my skin crawl. Not because I couldn't be without him—I wasn't that codependent—but because of the look on his face when he excused himself.

"If the four of you are sticking around, be useful and order some dinner. I'm going to see what's up. I'll be right back."

I slipped past everyone and into my bedroom before anyone could get a single question out. Liam was already off the phone. It was lying on the bed and he stood in front of the windows, his arms crossed over his chest with his jaw clenched.

"What happened?"

“Piper’s parents want to sue me.”

“For what?” I barked, probably too loud. I lowered my voice and closed the distance between us.

“It’s not official yet, but their lawyers were in touch with Oren. About the eggs. They’d wanted to sue me for access to them, but I’d had them destroyed before they could get anything filed. It’s what Piper wanted. Oren wanted to warn me that they were going to be unhappy about it. As if that was news.”

I looped my arm around Liam’s waist and leaned my head against his shoulder. “Did you two want kids?”

“Piper did, more than anything. And sometimes that made me want them too. I’d have done anything to make her happy. Which means that it’s probably a good thing it never happened. It’s not what I want anymore. Maybe it never was. Sometimes I still don’t know if it was that I wanted them, or that I wanted them with her. Or for her. If that even makes sense.”

Relief washed over me. I’d never wanted kids either. Kids were fine. Occasionally cute, sometimes sticky, often loud. I’d leave populating the world up to other people.

“I’m sorry.”

Liam exhaled and turned to me, gathering me close. “You have nothing to be sorry for.” Trouble still brewed in his eyes, but he teased his lips against mine. “Let’s go back out there.”

“Are you sure you’re up for company? I can tell them to leave.”

“I’m sure. I want to get to know your people.”

“I’m not sure Shane qualifies as a person.” I laughed and dragged Liam back toward the living room. Worry for Liam and that phone call still nagged at me, but I pushed it to the back of my mind and focused on enjoying the moment.

Chapter 20

Liam

Brodie and I had gone back to living in a bubble, we'd just changed locations. Part of me didn't mind, but another part of me recognized that in order to have a life together, we had to build one. And we couldn't do that by existing only in each other's orbits and having copious amounts of sex.

We'd spent the past few days getting the rest of his things unpacked and I'd called to make arrangements to have my clothes express shipped here. They arrived last night and Brodie helped hang my clothes in his closet. If he thought I didn't notice the way he smiled the whole time, he was mistaken.

I kissed the nape of Brodie's neck. "Wake up, sleepyhead. I want to take you to breakfast."

Brodie grumbled, but nestled in closer. The warmth of his body made me almost too hot to be comfortable, so I kicked the covers off despite his weak protests.

"What if I get cold?" Brodie rasped, still half asleep. I trailed my hand down his chest, flicking a nipple gently before sliding it lower. He let out a disgruntled sound when I avoided his cock.

"You're a tease," Brodie protested and wiggled his ass against my cock. "Lucky for me, I have the same playbook as you."

I dragged my teeth over his skin in the promise of a bite. He sucked in a breath and let it out with a moan. God, I loved working him up like this. All loose and sleepy and warm, he felt malleable, like putty in my hands.

I'd woken up with a cock so hard I could pound nails like I did every morning I woke up next to Brodie. His ass pressed against my dick again and it was my turn to groan when he slowly ground his ass against me. I grabbed his hip and pulled him against me, trapping him there the best I could, but that didn't stop him from writhing.

"You're trouble," I whispered against his skin.

"You started it."

I twisted away and grabbed the lube off the nightstand.

"How do you feel? Are you sore?"

"Not if you're nice. I don't think I could take what we did last night, but I still need you."

I planted kisses against his neck, peppered his skin with love as if I could heal him with my touch.

"We don't have to. There are other ways I can make you happy."

"I want you to," Brodie whispered like it was a secret that he wanted me. That I wanted him back twice as much.

I handed the lube to Brodie and held out my open hand. He squirted a generous amount into my hand.

“Thank you, love. I’ll be careful with you, but you have to tell me if it’s too much.”

Brodie’s whole body went limp at the first brush of my fingers against his hole. As good as he was on top, he was even better on the bottom. It was his favored position, but he didn’t mind switching it up once in a while.

Despite having fucked him right before bed, he was tight as a drum again. Tracing the soft skin of his rim, I slicked him up, softening him with my touch before I dared to slide a finger inside him.

Brodie moaned and his body relaxed even further, welcoming me inside him.

“Don’t make me wait.” His voice was already choked with pleasure. The tips of his ears had turned pink. It made me wish I could see the look on his face. I loved the soft expressions he made when we were together, the way he looked at me like I was the only thing he saw in the whole universe.

Gently, I withdrew my finger from his ass and motioned for him to give me more lube.

He obliged, but grumbled at me about it. “It’s messy.”

“That’s what showers and laundry are for.” I kissed his shoulder as I slicked my cock. “I won’t hurt you.”

Entering him was an exercise in restraint. No matter how badly I wanted to line up and slam into him, unleashing all my desperation for him, I held myself in check. Brodie panted and pressed against me, like he also couldn’t get close enough to me.

“Liam.”

He said my name and nothing more like I was the only thing he needed. I wrapped my arm around him and held him tight. Brodie bent his leg to offer me a better angle and I used it to my advantage, slowly sinking deeper and deeper until we were as close as two people could get.

Brodie turned his head and we shared an awkward, messy, amazing kiss before Brodie broke away. His hand found mine, threaded our fingers together, and held our joined hands tight to his chest.

“How are you so perfect?” I squeezed my eyes shut and rested my head against his. We rocked together, slowly building toward an end that promised to be explosive.

“I’m not,” Brodie answered with a breathless laugh.

“You are.” I rocked into him deeper, driving a groan out of him. “Touch yourself.”

I was perilously close to finishing, but needed him to get there first.

“Want to stay like this forever,” Brodie said, not making a single move to do as he was asked.

I untangled our hands and reached for him myself. Taking him in hand, I stroked him the way he liked it, firm with a bit of a twist. He took a moment to squirt some lube onto his dick for me, then he reached behind and tried to urge me closer, faster, harder.

My pace didn’t change. I made a loose fist around his cock and let my slow pace drive his cock through it. It only took half a dozen strokes for Brodie to lose his mind.

“Liam, please,” he whined, his hips moving back and forth like they weren’t sure which direction the real pleasure lay.

There was no sweeter sound than my name on his lips. I rewarded him by tightening my grip on his cock and stroking him hard and fast. Thrusting forward, I buried my cock inside him and without pulling back drove forward again. Brodie let out a strangled gasp and then came, coating the sheets before even more cum leaked down and slicked my fingers.

My release hit me, unfurling all at once, driving my body forward faster as I gasped and moaned. I pressed my mouth against the nape of Brodie's neck and tasted the salt of his skin as I jerked inside him.

Afterward, when my dick was done twitching and he'd gone still and boneless, we both lay there panting. Spent. Sated. It almost felt like a dream, how perfect everything felt in the afterglow. It had always been that way with him. The world could crash down around us and we'd still be wrapped up in each other, floating on our happiness.

Brodie's stomach growling broke the silence and then the sound of his laughter, light and bright, quickly followed. He wriggled away from me, hissing slightly when my cock slid out of his ass. He turned over and threw his arm around me. Pulling me into a kiss, he ignored the way his stomach growled again, but I laughed against his mouth.

"Brodie, we need to feed you."

"Food is overrated."

My hand skimmed down his back. I understood how he felt. I didn't want to be away from him for even a moment. If I could, I would stay in bed with him.

"Food is fuel. No food, no sex." I kissed the tip of his nose then rolled out of bed.

"I'll start the shower."

Once I was under the spray, Brodie joined me. His bottom lip was stuck out in an adorable pout. Drawing him close to me, I wrapped my arms around him. I'd never get enough of him. There wasn't a moment that went by when I didn't want to be near him.

"Someone's sleepy." I massaged my fingers through his hair. He purred like a satisfied feline and nodded.

"Someone thinks I need to get up and eat. I say that someone is mean."

"I'm taking you for pancakes."

"You're addicted."

It was true. We'd been to Bennett's together the other morning and already I wanted to go again. I predicted a lot of business going their way.

"That's only part of the reason. We need to leave the house, love. We can't just hole up here and have sex forever."

He tilted his head back and looked at me. Rivulets of water ran down his cheek and the tip of his nose. "Says who?"

"Says me. Says you. I don't have a job, and I'm not entirely sure what I want to do, but I need to do something."

Brodie tipped his head back and soaked his hair thoroughly before adding shampoo. "I thought rich people just played cards at the country club all day. Doesn't your money make money?"

"I could, in theory, do that. But I want to be a man worth having. And you deserve

someone who uses his time wisely. I want to be someone you can be proud to be with.” I hadn’t known those feelings were there until I unearthed them and I stood blinking at him while my heart caught up with my brain.

In my head, I had a specific image of the kind of man I wanted to be for him. I didn’t want to be just a body taking up space in his universe. I’d done that before at my old position at the family company. Carol, to her benefit, had tried to get me to branch out and explore life. To see what I wanted to do, but I’d been content where I was. It was familiar even if I never quite felt like I fit.

“I am proud to be with you.” Brodie’s assurance was a balm to my soul and it wasn’t that I didn’t believe him, but I wasn’t proud of myself.

“I know you are, but I need to find a purpose. Something outside of loving you. You mean everything to me, but if we’re going to make it, we need—I need—direction. I need a plan. A purpose.”

“We can figure it out together.” He kissed the corner of my mouth when he was finished rinsing his hair. “I’ll eventually have to get a job or something. I can’t mooch off my brother forever.”

“No, but you do have a wealthy boyfriend.”

He poked me in the ribs. “I could. But I won’t. You’re not the only one who has felt adrift lately. I’m just glad you’re here to help me figure all this shit out.”

“There’s nowhere else I’d rather be.” Resting my hands on Brodie’s hips, I pulled him against me. “I’m crazy about you. I couldn’t breathe without you. Couldn’t think of anything else but you. Letting you go was the single most stupid thing I’ve ever done.”

“Don’t say you’re sorry. You’ve already apologized.”

A smile-ghosted across my lips. “I wasn’t going to. I was going to tell you that I love you.”

Brodie’s smile was sunlight. “You already told me.”

“I’ll tell you every day. Every hour.”

“I could live with that.”

I wasn’t sure who kissed who, but it was soft and sweet with none of the urgency behind it that tended to simmer below the surface waiting to explode. The kiss was gentle, patient, like we didn’t need to hurry it up because we had all the time in the world.

I pulled away and cupped Brodie’s cheek before kissing him again, but briefly. “Come on, love. Let’s get pancakes.”

“One-track mind.” Brodie rolled his eyes, but he couldn’t get the smile off his face.

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Chapter 21

Brodie

Despite my best efforts to distract Liam and keep him home, and naked, and mine, he dragged me out of the house for breakfast. It was one of those crisp autumn mornings where the sky was clear and the air had a bite to it. I found myself smiling at the beauty of it. This was a postcard moment. Something that I'd have written about so I could hold on to the memory.

I was still thinking about postcards when we sat down at a booth. The thing I loved most about Bennett's was that it really felt like a family place. Ethan and his youngest son, Taylor, worked here, but his other boys were here frequently.

Ethan came over with coffee and to get our orders. I took the opportunity to ask the question that had popped into my head the minute I walked in.

"Hey, Ethan. Who is sitting in your booth?" Ethan glanced over and his eyes went all soft.

"That's Mickey. And the guy with the computer is Nash. He's one of Taylor's boyfriends."

"Ah, the famous Mickey. Shane told me about him. I think I saw Nash here the other day."

Ethan nodded. "He uses this place as his office away from home. WiFi. Coffee. Food.

It's a good thing he's got going. What can I get you two?"

"Pancakes, please. Two stacks."

"Extra bacon," Liam added, shooting me a grin. He knew perfectly well I was going to steal it from him. My heart did a little kick-flip because he knew me. We might not know everything about each other, but not only was I unsure if that was possible, I also didn't think it was necessary.

People didn't have to know every detail about another person to love them. I didn't need his life history to know that he made me feel like I was made of sunlight when he looked at me. I knew the important things. I also loved that we still had things to discover.

I stirred a couple spoons of sugar into my coffee and took a sip. I hummed in appreciation. "Restaurant coffee is always such a risk," I said.

"Oh?" Liam arched an eyebrow at me. "Are you going to elaborate?"

I stretched my legs out and bumped my feet against his under the table. "Coffee is a personal thing. Everyone likes it different and no two restaurants make it the same. Okay, maybe that's an exaggeration, but it's easy to fuck up. Too bitter. Too strong. Too weak. Too old. Too cold. Ethan makes it just right. Strong, without stripping the lining out of your stomach, and it's always fresh."

"What else do you have opinions on?"

"Everything." I took a sip of my coffee. "But it's your turn to share with me."

Liam's brow furrowed the way it did when he was thinking about something. "I'm not sure where to start."

He looked genuinely troubled by this so I reached for him and took his hand in mine.

“It was just a silly game, love. Don’t worry about it.”

Liam looked at me and sadness flashed in his eyes. “I’m not sure anyone ever cared much about my opinions before. My parents told me where to be and what to do and I did it. And then Carol took over when they died. And Piper cared, but we were together so briefly that everything was quickly consumed by her illness.”

I cleared my throat around a ball of melancholy. I might not have had much growing up, but I had people who cared about me and what I wanted. My brothers might be pains in the ass, but the first thing Shane did when he won that money was share it with the family. Debts were paid; houses were bought. He made sure we did fun things too. Things we never would have done otherwise.

“What’s the best kind of cookie? And the worst.” I asked him.

Liam looked at me and the sadness melted out of his expression.

“The worst is easy. Any cookie that looks like chocolate chip, but actually has raisins. That’s a crime and offenders should be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.”

“Okay, now what’s the best?”

“I don’t know what they’re called. But Piper’s mom makes these lemon ones. They’re small and round and kind of crackly on top. They look like little drops of sunshine. They’re sweet without overdoing it and they’re soft like clouds.”

“I’ll see if Mom knows what kind of cookies those are. She probably does.”

“You said she bakes a lot.”

“I want you to meet her. I’m due for another visit soon and I’ll bring you with me.” What I didn’t tell him was that I was pretty sure Mom knew every cookie recipe in existence and that a batch of his favorites would likely be waiting for him.

Our food arrived and we both ate like a couple of starving dogs. With better manners, of course. But only barely. When I finished my food, I leaned back and let out a breath.

“Holy shit, I needed that.”

Liam flicked a look at me that screamed I told you so .

“So, when are we going to see her?” Liam stacked our plates neatly and put them at the end of the table.

“I’ll call her later and work out a good time. She runs a shelter so sometimes she has other things going on. Do I get to meet your sister?”

Liam’s face paled and I watched several emotions flit across his features. Fear. Regret. Hope. Sadness. It made me sorry I asked.

“She still doesn’t know about us,” I whispered. I knew everyone came out in their own time, and I knew Liam loved me. I felt it every time he looked at me, touched me, spoke my name.

“I’ll tell her soon. I promise. I just... I wanted to enjoy this a bit longer first.” Liam held my hand tighter. “I want to tell her, but I don’t know how. I’ve never felt about anyone the way I feel about you and that scares me, because if for some reason it goes badly and she tells me to choose, I’m choosing you. Now and always.”

“What if it goes good?”

Liam scoffed. “Nothing goes good for me, Brodie. Except maybe you.”

I didn’t know what to do with that information and the matter-of-fact way he delivered it. Part of me loved that he would choose me, but the bigger part of me hated that he feared he might have to. Family was supposed to love you no matter what, and I hated that it simply wasn’t true for a lot of people.

“Sometimes you break my heart,” I told him. Liam smiled wanly and smoothed his thumb over the back of my hand.

“I’ll tell her. I promise. As soon as I figure out how. We might have to go for a short trip to see her in person.”

“Yeah? You’d take me to meet her?”

Liam nodded. “I think she’d like that. And you can meet my best friend, Oren, and his husband.”

“Were you ever interested in Oren?” I let my question trail off. It wouldn’t have been unheard of for two male best friends to have fooled around with each other. I can’t say I was a fan of the idea, and I had the sneaking suspicion that if my assumption proved true, I’d hate Oren without having met him.

“God, no. Besides, like me, Oren didn’t discover men until he met the one he fell in love with.”

“Fucking swoon.” I put my hand to my chest and rubbed at the swell of emotion that formed. Equal parts relief that he’d never had any man but me, and a bit of smugness that out of all the men in the world, I was the one to make him look twice.

His eyes darkened and he leaned in. “You’re the only one for me. I know it must hurt

you that I haven't told Carol about us yet—"

"You'll get there in your own time," I cut in. I didn't want him to feel bad that he hadn't come out yet. Yes, I wanted him to. More than anything, but those kinds of things couldn't and shouldn't be rushed. "You need to come out for you, not for me."

"How did you come out?"

"I don't know that I was ever in, to be honest. I think I was eight or nine when I announced to my family that I was going to marry Parker O'Donnell. My sexuality didn't come as a huge surprise after that. I'm one of the lucky ones. My mom never bought into that shtick about tolerance. She says that tolerance is lip service. Acceptance is what matters. That, and love."

"She sounds great."

"She's the best. Everyone thinks so."

"How do you usually do the whole introduction thing? Should we invite her over? I can cook something, or would it be better to meet her on her own territory?"

I rubbed at the back of my neck with the hand that wasn't entwined with Liam's. "I've never brought anyone home before. You're the first."

Liam looked like the cat that ate the canary. "I like being your first."

I did too, but I also wanted him to be my last. My forever.

"I'll call her later and set something up. Maybe we could all meet at Shane's bar for dinner and drinks. They probably think I've dropped off the face of the earth again."

“We’ve been preoccupied.”

We had. But I needed that preoccupation. After being apart from him, thinking that he was lost to me forever, I’d needed to bask in his attention. To bathe in his scent and seek his touch at every possible moment.

But I also knew that it was time to come up for air. He was right to say that we needed to build a foundation for a life. Sex was great, and I loved living in a bubble with him, but bubbles tended to burst.

“I think I want to write a book,” I blurted out, changing the subject before I popped a boner in the diner.

“What kind?”

“Something about my travels, maybe. Or maybe something inspired by them.”

“What about your postcards? Maybe you could do something with them.”

“I’ll figure something out. What about you? Have you figured out what you’re going to do yet?”

Liam let out a tight, nervous laugh. “Other than being with you, I haven’t been able to decide. I’m sure the right opportunity or idea will present itself before long.”

“Promise me that when you do find something that interests you, that you’ll do it, no matter what your sister might think. Or what I might think. Or anyone else. I don’t want you to be a spectator in your own life.”

Liam lifted my hand and held my gaze while brushing a kiss across my knuckles. My heart flip-flopped in my chest.

“I promise.”

“I’m going to hold you to that. Come on.” I got to my feet and fished a couple of bills out of my wallet to cover breakfast and a tip.

“Where are we going?” Liam added a bill to my stack and I rolled my eyes at him.

“We’re going to figure our shit out together.” I took his hand and dragged him out of the diner and back into the sunlight.

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Chapter 22

Liam

Brodie was better at the whole figuring out his shit thing than I was. He bought a new laptop and planned to spend the morning at Bennett's drinking coffee and writing. While he worked, I was going to... I had no idea. And that was the crux of the problem. The very thing I'd worried about.

"Are you sure you don't want to come in?" Brodie asked as I pulled into the parking lot to drop him off.

"I'm sure. You've got your shit to work on, and I've got mine. I'll be a phone call away when you're ready to go." I stopped the car in front of the diner and put it into park so I could lean across the seat and steal a kiss. I kept it brief because kissing Brodie was my favorite thing and it was all too easy to fall into more with him.

"As long as you're sure." Brodie paused, reaching for the door handle, his other hand clutching his laptop bag.

"Yes, love, I'm positive that I don't want us to turn into codependent nightmares for each other. Go to work."

"What will you do?"

"I think I'm going to call Carol. I haven't talked to her since I left." I had to come out to her, sooner rather than later. The idea of coming out to her made my stomach turn

to ice.

“Well, I’ll see you in a couple hours. Have a nice chat.” Brodie stole another kiss then got out of the car. I waited until he was in the diner before pulling away.

Truthfully, I had no fucking idea what I wanted to do and part of me hoped that Carol or Oren would tell me what to do. Brodie was sweet and insisted that I figure things out on my own. He didn’t want to influence my decisions or my ideas. I think he was worried about me doing what would make him happy, and not what would make me happy. And he was probably right to worry about that.

I drove back home, well, to Brodie’s house. I’d had my phone off since last night when we were trying to watch a movie and Oren kept texting me. I was wrapped up in Brodie and hadn’t wanted to come up for air so I turned it off. Oren was going to shit a kitten, but he’d forgive me.

I powered my phone up and it went nuts as it loaded in all the missed calls and messages. It was hard not to panic when it took an eternity to stop. Oren and Carol had been the most frequent callers so I called Oren back first. He answered on the first ring.

“It lives. Jesus fuck, Liam.”

“Where’s the fire?” I put him on speaker and leaned against the counter, bracing myself with both hands.

“Have you been under a rock? What do you mean, where’s the fire? You and your boyfriend hit the society pages, my friend. Which we will circle back to later, by the way. So not only have people been calling me to try and get in touch with you, but your in-laws have called several times.”

“My in-laws. Wait... what?”

“Have you not looked at any of my messages?” Oren groaned in disgust. “Liam, you’ve been outed. They have pictures of you and your boyfriend holding hands and kissing. Eating breakfast at some little diner. He hand fed you bacon. That’s pretty gay, dude.”

“Bisexual. Actually,” I corrected him. I’d expected the word to be harder to say, but it came tumbling out and my shoulders rolled back, suddenly lighter for having said it out loud. “I’m bisexual. And so what if he’s my boyfriend? Aren’t I allowed to be happy?”

“According to me and the sensible half of the internet, yes. Your sister wants you to call her, by the way. Expect some flak for being unreachable.”

“Why does the internet even care that I have a boyfriend? I’m a nobody.”

“You’re rich and you were just in the headlines for opening the memorial wing for your deceased wife. Some little reporter was tipped off that there might be an interesting follow-up story. It turns out that your sexuality is of great interest to people who make money off of headlines and clickable links. It’s also of great interest to your in-laws.”

“What on earth could they possibly want?”

“Well, it’s not like they can get money from you, so they probably want blood. Speaking of blood, call your sister.”

Calling Carol was the last thing I wanted to do, but I knew I had to get it over with eventually.

“Fine, I’ll call her right now.”

“Thank you. And, Liam, I’m happy for you. You’ll have to bring him around for a visit.”

“I’ll do that. Say hi to your fireman for me.” I ended the call and barely managed to take a breath before my phone rang with a call from Carol.

“Hello, Carol. It’s nice to hear from you. What can I do for you?”

“What can you—Liam Anthony Lawson. You’re gay? Since when?”

Carol sounded worried, but not angry. I could work with that. The lack of anger made my knees weak and I leaned more weight on the counter.

“Bisexual actually. Since always. But if you want specifics, since you were dating Matthew Hart. Sorry, I know he was kind of a meathead, but he was hot as shit.”

“Matthew was your bisexual awakening?” Carol sounded incredulous. “You were eleven.”

“Listen, he was hot, okay. Those broad shoulders. That narrow waist. His ass. Did you see his ass?”

“And suddenly I’m very sorry I asked.” Carol’s laughter soothed the little boy in me who thought she’d hate him for this. “Did you secretly lust after all my boyfriends?”

“Hardly.” I rolled my eyes. “Only the hot ones.”

Carol was quiet for a long moment and I let her have it. Now that the band aid had been torn off, the relief I felt made my head swim. I never realized how tightly I’d

held myself until I let go. For the first time in years, I felt like I could breathe.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I was going to. I wanted to tell you about him, but I didn’t know how.”

“Can you tell me about him now?”

“What do you want to know?”

“Does he treat you well?” Carol asked, her voice wavered from emotion and I wished that I’d told her in person so I could’ve seen her face.

“He’s amazing. Smart, friendly, sweet.” He worries about me making choices just to please him. He wants me to find a purpose on my own, something just for me. He supports me in ways no one ever had. Or maybe in ways that I wouldn’t let anyone else. But instead of saying all that, I said, “Yes, he treats me well.”

“Good. He better.” Carol cleared her throat. “Tell me about Brodie. What does he do? How did you meet? Where did you meet? Can I meet him? Send me a picture.”

“Oren said there were pictures.”

“Yeah, those don’t count. I want one you took.”

I sent her a picture of him standing at the shore, his pants rolled up to his knees and his shoes dangling from his fingers. We hadn’t planned to go near the water that day, but we’d taken a bit of a detour on our explorations and all the walking had made Brodie’s feet hot. We went down to the water so he could cool off. I’d snapped a couple pictures of him without him noticing me, but the one I sent to Carol was of him looking back at me. He had a bright smile, one I liked to think of as mine. I could

almost hear him calling to me to come join him.

“He’s no Matthew,” Carol said, “but he’ll do. When do I get to meet him?”

“Soon, I promise.”

“I can’t get away right now, but surely the two of you can make the trip.”

“I’ll have to run it by him, but yes, I want you two to meet.”

“Good. Okay, I have a meeting in fifteen that I have to prep for, so as much as I would like to keep interrogating you, I have to go. But you’re going to call me more often, and you’re going to come for a visit. Okay, Liam?”

“I’ll call more often. And as for coming for a visit, I’ll see what I can do.”

“I suppose that’s fine. Love you, little brother.” Carol ended the call. Before I could even see the headlines, Brodie was calling me.

“There are photographers following me,” Brodie whispered.

“Fuck. Where are you?”

“I’m in the back at Bennett’s. Ethan is letting me hide in his office. Do you know what’s going on?”

“What’s going on is that apparently my sexuality is big news on a few websites. Someone wanted to do a follow-up on me after the hospital ceremony where I opened Piper’s wing. Apparently, a bisexual well-off widower is big news today.”

“I didn’t realize you were a big deal.” Brodie laughed, but his heart wasn’t in it.

“I didn’t either, to be honest. Oren said Marsha is behind it.” Those weren’t his words, but they’d been heavily implied by his comment about them being out for blood. “Stay where you are. I’m coming to get you. I love you.”

“I love you too.” Brodie hung up the phone.

I needed a deep breath to steady myself before stepping outside. A car parked across the road looked suspicious and the zoom lens of a camera confirmed my suspicions. In that moment, I’d never hated Marsha more. My grief had been a wretched thing, but it wasn’t the same insurmountable monster that had eaten John and Marsha alive. I’d tried my best to be there for them both, but I had to accept the fact there was nothing I could do for them that would help anymore.

Marsha had always been meddling and overbearing, and Piper had been sweet and good-natured and had gone along with a lot of it because it was mostly harmless stuff, Piper had said. But Piper was gone. I no longer had to play nice, and for the first time since I lost her, I didn’t feel guilty for the animosity I felt toward her grieving parents.

“First thing’s first.” I climbed behind the wheel of my car and drove to the diner. Instead of going in the front, I pulled up around back and got out, shooting a text to Brodie telling him where I was.

A second later, the back door opened and I was greeted by a younger version of the man who served us pancakes. He had his hair tucked up under a bandana, but his eyes sparkled with a glittery sort of eyeshadow. An earring dangled from one ear, catching the light.

“He’s in Dad’s office.” He steered me in the right direction and I found Brodie sitting on a couch in an office that was smaller than the walk-in closet in my condo.

He shot to his feet and I pulled him into my arms.

“I’m sorry.” I buried my face in his hair and took a deep breath.

“Why are you sorry? I’m sorry. You were outed, Liam. Like, super publicly. Are you okay?”

“Am I— wait. You’re upset because I was outed? I don’t care about that. I care that your privacy was invaded.”

Brodie snorted. “I don’t care about that. I have no skeletons in my closet. A few internet articles won’t hurt me. I’m just pissed that you were outed like this. It’s not okay.”

He looked at me, his eyes swimming with sadness and anger, and fear too. But when I kept looking, all those different things just looked like love to me. “It’s not okay,” he repeated, almost pleading with me to agree with him.

“It’s not. You’re right. And I’ll deal with it.”

“We will deal with it together.” Brodie tilted his chin back, sticking his nose in the air the way he did when he was ready to fight to get his own way.

“Together,” I agreed.

Chapter 23

Brodie

Never before did I hate people I'd never met, but Liam's in-laws had definitely crossed a line. I understood that the weight of grief could make people do things they wouldn't normally do, but grief didn't absolve them of accountability.

"What are you going to do?" I asked Liam. We were still holed up in Ethan's office at the diner. It was a less than ideal hideout, but it would do for the now.

"I'm going to call John and see what the hell they want. I've been dodging their calls." Guilt flashed across Liam's face.

I reached for him. Cradled his face in my hands. His eyes fluttered shut and he took a breath. He wound his arms around my waist and relaxed into me.

"Look at me."

His eyes opened and I met his tortured gaze. "You have nothing to feel guilty about. You've done nothing wrong."

"Logically, I know that." He leaned in and stole a kiss. "Emotionally, however ... I always felt like I could do more to help them move past it."

"That's not on you. And I'm not sure there's such a thing as moving past something like that. I think that some things stay with us no matter what we do. But we have to

choose how we carry it.”

“I don’t want to talk to them here.” Liam glanced around. He looked like a cornered animal, trembling with fear and adrenaline.

“Give me your keys.” I held out my hand. Confused, Liam fished into his pocket and pulled them out.

“I thought you didn’t drive.”

“I can. I just don’t like to. But you need a few minutes to get yourself together, and that’s not going to happen here.” I tugged Liam out of the office and through the kitchen. Ethan met us with a concerned expression.

“All good?” he asked.

“Yeah, thanks for letting me hide back there. I’ll tell Shane he owes you a drink. I’m going to get us out of here. Mind if we slip out the back?”

“Go ahead. I hope your day gets better,” Ethan told us as I steered Liam out the back door. He climbed into the passenger seat and I got behind the wheel.

After doing up my seatbelt, I put the key in the ignition and grinned at him. “It’s like riding a bike.”

It was not like riding a bike, but we made it to Mom’s in one piece.

“Where are we?” Liam asked as we got out of the car and headed for the front door.

“You’ll see.” I rang the bell and a minute later the front door swung open. Mom, as always, was covered in flour, her hair piled on top of her head in a messy bun.

“Brodie, what a nice surprise.” Her gaze slid over to Liam and her smile brightened. “And you brought your boyfriend. Come in, come in. I’ll get the coffee on.”

Liam’s hand tightened on mine as I pulled him inside. I shut the door behind us and, after taking our shoes off, we met Mom in the kitchen. She buzzed around the room like a happy little bumblebee, making coffee and plating cookies for us.

“What brings you boys by? Not that I mind. I just wasn’t expecting you for a few more days.” She set the cookies on the table, then stuck her hand out toward Liam. “I’m Patricia, but you can call me Pat, Patty, or Mom.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. Brodie has told me all about you. You’re a remarkable woman.”

“Lies.” She rolled her eyes and took a seat at the table across from Liam. “So, you’re the one Brodie met on his travels. He’s told me precious little about you, but that was always his way. He likes to keep things close to his chest.” Mom pushed the plate of cookies closer to Liam. “Snickerdoodles, oatmeal chocolate chip, and lemon drops. Help yourself.”

Liam took a lemon drop and Mom caught my eye, sending me a look of triumph. I’d told her about the lemon bars he’d found and how he ate nearly the whole box himself.

The pleased sound that Liam made would have had me climbing into his lap were we not at my mother’s kitchen table.

“It’s quiet around here,” I said to Mom as Liam reached for another cookie.

“I’ve just got the one girl, and she has classes today. She’s going to finish up her courses and then transfer her credits and go live with her aunt while she finishes up.”

Mom was good about sharing about her girls. She'd never say why they were there or who they were running from, but she often bragged up their accomplishments. Some of them were only there long enough to make arrangements to get even farther away, but Mom had helped more than a few put their lives back together.

"Brodie told me about all the women you help. It's pretty amazing."

"I do what I can. My sister had a bad marriage and I do for these girls what I wish I could have done for her." Mom nudged the plate of cookies closer to Liam. "Help yourself, dear."

"That must have been hard." Liam's voice was tight. "To watch her go through that."

Mom stood and busied herself getting coffee mugs and cream and sugar. She set them on the table and Liam picked at another cookie, breaking it in half first before taking a bite.

When the coffee had been poured, she sat back down. "Are you boys staying for lunch? I should get the other boys over and we can take advantage of how warm it is today and fire up the barbeque."

I glanced at Liam and raised my eyebrow in a silent question. Liam shrugged back, but he looked more relaxed, even if the worry and the anger were still etched into his expression. John and Marsha's reckoning was coming, even if I had to deliver it myself.

"We'll stay, Mom." Under the table, I put my hand on Liam's thigh and gave it a gentle squeeze. Liam put his hand over mine and squeezed back, and more of the angst melted out of his expression.

"Great. I'll get Shane to swing by the store on his way over. Do you have any

allergies or special diets, Liam?”

“No, uh, no allergies. Or special diets.”

“He’ll eat anything, Mom. The street vendors around our hotel in Kalamata knew him by name. Mister Liam , they’d say. Mister Liam, come here and try this . Every time we stepped out of the hotel, or went back to it, they were always happy to see him.” Liam squeezed my hand.

His phone buzzed in his pocket. A subtle vibration followed by several more in quick succession. He fished it out of his pocket and glared at the screen. “It’s John.”

“His late wife’s family have been hard to deal with,” I summed up for Mom, whose curious gaze wasn’t missed.

“If you need privacy, there’s an office just off the kitchen. Brodie can show you the way.”

I stood and tugged Liam to his feet. His phone had stopped vibrating, but it was only a matter of time before John tried again.

“We won’t be long.”

“Take your time. I’m going to wrangle the boys and then get a start on lunch.”

I shepherded Liam into the office and shut the door. “Did he leave a message?”

I pulled out a chair for Liam and motioned for him to sit.

“I haven’t wanted to look at my voicemail. I don’t know why that still exists. I should get rid of it. I don’t think there’s a thing on this planet that I like less than checking

my voicemail.”

“Spoken like a true millennial.” My quip earned me a smirk from Liam, even though his heart wasn’t in it.

“I wish people would text me and then I know what they want and can get back to them when it’s convenient.”

“Did you want me to call John? Because I will.” I sat on the desk and Liam wheeled over to sit between my legs. He looked up at me, uncertainty in his eyes.

“You’d do that?”

“There’s not much I wouldn’t do for you. I wouldn’t eat asparagus for you, or avocado. And I draw the line at jumping out of things or off of things. But if it’s not one of those things, then yes, I would do anything for you.”

“Remind me to read your terms and conditions later.”

“Smart ass.”

Liam’s chest swelled when he took a deep breath and I watched him deflate when he breathed out. “I feel like the bad guy. Ever since she got sick. I’ve been so helpless. I couldn’t do anything to help her. And when she was gone, it was worse because I thought maybe I could make it easier for them.”

“That was never your job.”

“I didn’t want to just abandon them.” Liam’s hands shook and I took his phone from him. I opened up the recent callers and hit the top button, then put it on speaker.

“I’m not letting you do this alone.” Liam nodded and we waited three long rings before the call was answered.

“Liam, finally. I’ve been trying to reach you.”

“I’m not alone, John. I’m here with Brodie, my boyfriend. You’re on speaker.” Liam’s face had lost all color and he looked like he wanted to be sick. It was the same expression he’d worn that night when everything went to shit between us.

My stomach tightened and a chill crawled up my spine. Then Liam reached for me and grabbed my leg. His fingers curled around the back of my calf and he clung to me like I was a lifeline. I loved to hear him claim me as his boyfriend, but I hated that it had happened under these circumstances.

“Liam—listen, son—”

“No, John. Not son. Not anymore. Please. I just—I have done everything I could for the two of you. I did everything you asked of me. Except that one thing. You never should have asked me to do that, John. I also never should have delayed destroying them for so long, but I did the right thing, John. It’s what we wanted.”

The longer Liam talked, the stronger his voice sounded. He’d started off tired and unsure, but it was like he was pulling strength from my presence.

“And leave my boyfriend alone. He has nothing to do with any of this. I’m disappointed in you and Marsha. I loved Piper, but I can’t keep acting like she just died. She’s been gone for a couple of years. I want to move on.” Liam looked up at me. “I have moved on.”

“Liam—I’m sorry. Marsha and I ...” John’s breath shook through the phone. His voice returned sounding choked with emotion. “I left her. This morning. I’m at my

brother's house for the time being."

"You left her?" Liam's fingers dug into my flesh.

"She's not the same. I lost Piper too, but I also lost Marsha. I called her nephew, he's the one with the gossip rag that's been hounding you. I might have fudged the truth a bit, but I led him to believe that there'd be lawsuits if he kept harassing you. He wasn't aware of how bad Marsha is. Her sister and I are trying to get her into a therapist."

Liam scoffed. "That's two years too late, John."

"I know. I'm sorry. Looking back, we asked a lot of you and you were always so good about it. And we repaid you by hounding you. I didn't know she'd orchestrated a news story until it hit. None of this is okay, but I want to make it right."

"How did she know about Brodie? I hadn't come out to anyone yet. Carol didn't even know."

John took a deep breath. "When you were so quick to shut her down after the ribbon cutting, she was distraught. And then she tried to get an injunction filed to stop the eggs from being destroyed. She wanted to sue you. Only, by the time she got calmed down enough to get a hold of her lawyers, you'd taken care of that. She wanted to confront you, but you'd left. So she confessed to hiring someone to find out where you were. And you can guess what happened after that." John sounded weary.

"You were like parents to me." Liam's voice cracked and his fingers dug further into my flesh.

I wanted to crawl inside him and take his pain away. I would've given anything to be able to do that for him. To shoulder some of the burden.

“I know. We didn’t handle anything well and I can’t undo the damage that’s been done.”

Liam cleared his throat. “I’m selling my condo. There’s a box or two of Piper’s things. Just some random stuff I haven’t been able to part with. I’m due to fly back soon and take care of some business and I’ll ship her things to you. And after that, I think it’s best if we don’t speak.”

“That’s kind of you. And for what it’s worth, I’m sorry.”

Liam ended the call and rested his forehead on my knee. My heart battered against my ribs as I played Liam’s words in my head. He was going back. Logically, I knew he’d have things to take care of, but I thought he’d have talked about it with me and made plans. I wasn’t currently tied down to any sort of schedule. Going with him would be easy, but he hadn’t asked. It hurt more than I’d admit. I couldn’t help but wonder if he planned to take me with him at all or if I was going to be left behind again.

Chapter 24

Liam

Brodie's family swooped in and proved to be an excellent distraction from whatever was suddenly plaguing him. A rainstorm rolling in dampened Patricia's enthusiasm for sitting outside, but her kitchen was big enough to accommodate everyone. Especially since Clay had seemed to take up permanent residence on Kieran's lap.

Brodie had told me about what happened between Archer and Clay, so it wasn't a huge shock when Archer and Clay's interactions seemed stilted and awkward. Everyone seemed to ignore it, preferring to let the men sort it out themselves. I had a feeling that they'd be friends again before long. Maybe not best friends, but some relationships couldn't be put back together the same way once they were destroyed.

Patricia, however, was in her element. The more people she had to dote on, the more she lit up. She practically glowed, buzzing around her kitchen getting lunch for seven sorted out like it was nothing out of the ordinary.

My own mother hadn't been half as happy around her children. At least not with me. She and Carol had been closer, but my memories of the two of them together were shaky at best. It had been a long time since I thought about it, but even before Mom and Dad passed away, Carol had been a sort of parent to me. The difference in our ages was far more profound when we were younger. Ten years now was a drop in the bucket.

I pulled my phone out and shot off a quick text to let her know that I'd be coming for

a visit soon. As I tucked my phone away, I caught Brodie's gaze. His eyes were dark and troubled, and I could almost see the storm brewing behind them.

Leaning close, I lowered my voice. "You okay?"

He'd seemed distracted for the past little while, but I figured it was the events of the morning that were keeping his attention.

"I'm fine." He gave my leg a squeeze, but turned to Clay. "How's the app coming?"

Clay let out a sigh. "It's not. At least not yet. I'm still solidifying the idea and working on art for it, though. But it's going to be a long time before it's up and running. If ever."

"What app?" I asked out of equal parts curiosity and politeness. This was the first I'd heard of an app. Mind you, Brodie and I had spent most of our time talking about our own futures. Our focus had been singular and I was glad now for this reprieve. It was good to not be so isolated.

Clayton fidgeted with a coaster as he talked. "I want it to be sort of like an art therapy app, but free. I have a lot of ideas for it, but I don't know how to build an app, and I'd like to connect with actual art therapists to help me make it something beneficial for people. But there's like a million things I don't know how to do, so mostly I've just been drawing and messing around making vision boards."

"It's all he does when he's not working." Kieran took the coaster from Clay and tangled their hands together, keeping him from fidgeting. Grounding him.

Up until now, I hadn't thought I'd done much of anything of use at the family company. I didn't really want to be there, but it had been expected. Business degree. Family company. Married with two point four kids. My whole life had been mapped

out for me once upon a time, and I'd willingly gone along with it. But Piper's death blew everything up. In some ways, I felt like I'd been given a second chance.

Especially now when it occurred to me that I did have some skills that I could put to use.

"Back when I worked at the family company, part of my job was bringing different parts of the company into the twenty-first century. I may not have built any apps myself, but I spearheaded the projects. If you'd like some help, I could talk to my sister and see if she could loan us a couple of people."

It felt good to be able to offer a potential solution to Clay's problem. Clay shot me a beaming smile, making me feel like I'd won the lottery. Or at the very least, the approval of Patricia and Kieran, whose stares I was aware of. But I kept my focus on Clay.

"I would say that you don't have to," Clay's hands shook. "And you don't, but I'd be a liar if I said I wasn't excited about getting someone to help me who knows what they're doing. My therapist says I need to accept help more often, and I think she'll be impressed when I tell her about this." Clay's excitement made him look like a golden retriever, all happy, bouncy excitement and nowhere for it to go.

"I'll talk to Carol about it." Even if I had to hire someone myself, I was going to get Clay help with his app. More than anything, I wanted to be someone Brodie could be proud to be with. I still didn't know what I wanted to do with the rest of my life, but helping Clay with his app seemed like a good place to start.

I motioned for Clay's phone. "I'd like to give you my information so you can send me your plans for the app. Send me everything you have so far." Clay handed me his phone and I put in my email and my phone number. "I'll reach out to my friend Oren, he's a lawyer, to get some legal protection in place for you. Not that I intend to steal

your app, but I want you to trust me.”

“If you want me to trust you, why would you get me a lawyer?”

“Because trust is earned.” I knew that better than ever because I wondered if I’d earned any of Brodie’s trust back. Something was clearly bothering him, but he obviously didn’t want to discuss it surrounded by his family. Not that I blamed him. I blamed myself for being such a mess of a man when we met that I’d let myself hurt him.

The conversation moved on around Clay and me. He was content to spout off all his ideas to me while Shane and Kieran held one conversation, and Brodie and Archer another. The chatter made me feel like I was part of something, like I belonged instead of being a casual observer.

Movement caught my eye and I saw Patricia pointing an iPhone at us. She shot me a smile. “I couldn’t resist getting a few pictures. All my boys and their boys under one roof for the first time. It deserved to be immortalized.”

“You should be in the picture too,” I told her.

“Yeah, Mom.” Shane got to his feet and took the phone from her. “Take my chair. I’ll get a tripod from the office and set a timer.”

Patricia took his seat and fussed with her hair, smoothing down a couple flyaways. Her apron had handprints made of flour on it, bright white against the red fabric. Her smile had etched joy into her face over the years. Surrounded by her people, she looked like the happiest person on the planet. The difference between her and my parents was night and day. I had few memories of my parents laughing. They weren’t cold, they were just ... unhappy. Deeply so.

Shane got the camera set up and started the timer. He slid into the frame and stood behind his mom. One of his hands came to rest on her shoulder and she reached up, putting her hand over his. I moved closer to Brodie and put my arm around him.

“Everyone look at the camera and say cheese,” Patricia said.

The sound of all of us together, slightly out of sync, was horrendous, but yet still the best sound I’d heard in a long time. It sounded like belonging.

After the timer went off and we were all blinded with the flash, Shane checked the picture. He showed it to Patricia, who signed off on it with a happy smile, and we were all free to go back to what we were doing.

“Can you send me that?” Brodie asked Shane. It only took a few seconds before it arrived on Brodie’s phone. He forwarded it to me and I opened it to have a look. Brodie had been increasingly quiet as time dragged on. I wanted to get him alone and make him talk to me, but for the foreseeable future, we were going to be surrounded by his family.

A funny feeling tugged at my chest when I saw the picture. It had been years since I’d been part of a family portrait. Piper and I hadn’t gotten around to it, her not being one to love having her photo taken. I had a few candid shots of her and some wedding photos, of course. And before her, I’d been a little kid, still knee-high, in a suit and tie with my hair slicked back. I still thought I looked like a miserable little vampire child, all pale and scowling.

I’d almost expected to look like an outsider, this being my first time meeting Brodie’s mom. But with my arm around him, and the stress from earlier temporarily forgotten, I didn’t look out of place at all. In fact, I sort of looked like I belonged somewhere. I hadn’t expected to find that feeling again, but now that I had, I knew I’d do anything to hold on to it.

Chapter 25

Brodie

We didn't manage to leave Mom's until nearly dinner time. She tried to convince us all to stick around and I might have if Shane and Kieran hadn't bowed out. I promised Mom to bring Liam around more often, and myself too, and then we were alone in Liam's car.

"How long are you going to drive a rental? That's got to be costing you a small fortune."

"I should buy something when I get back. Will you help me look?"

There was that talk again of him going, but at least he was talking about coming back. It did little to settle my stomach. I'd picked at my lunch, unable to eat very much. The thought of Liam leaving me made me want to crawl into a hole. I wanted to ask him about it, but my throat closed every time I thought about putting myself out there like that.

Suddenly I was back in that hotel room, cutting my heart out of my chest and handing it to him, but he didn't catch it. I'd left that room hollowed out. Empty except for despair. Having Liam back felt like a dream, but I was terrified if I asked about his plans that they wouldn't include me.

Fear was never rational and it had my heart running like a scared rabbit ever since that stupid call to John back in Mom's office. How long had he planned on going

back home? The thought that he might have his travel plans arranged and I had no idea made bile rise in the back of my throat, hot and stinging like acid.

Liam pulled into the driveway at our house—was it our house?—and suddenly I couldn't make myself move.

“Brodie?”

The concern in his voice was obvious and I hated that he couldn't read my mind. That I was seriously going to have to open my mouth and make the words come out. Once again I was in the position of being the one begging and I hated it. I hated that I was going to and that I wanted it to work this time.

But I wasn't going to do any of it in my fucking driveway.

“Let's go inside.” I unbuckled and got out of the car. The autumn evening air was fresh and carried with it a familiar scent that had me stopping in my tracks to breathe it in again. “Smells like snow.”

“It's not in the forecast.”

“Trust me.” I fished my keys out of my pocket and unlocked the front door. Home felt like a foreign planet all of the sudden, but it wasn't the house that was different. It was me. It was the knowledge that if Liam walked away again, I'd let him. I had no desire to be John and Marsha, desperately clinging to the shreds of their former life.

I needed to be busy, but there was no mess to clean. No laundry to fuss with. Liam set my laptop bag down on the counter.

“You left it in the car.” He turned to me and tucked his hands into his pockets. He was uneasy and it made my fear spike. “Brodie, what's wrong?”

“I’m fine. It was a long day.”

Liam narrowed his gaze at me, like he also wished he could read my thoughts. Earlier I’d wished for it, but now I was glad he couldn’t. I didn’t want him to know how pathetic I felt at the idea of him planning a life without me. He had things back home to take care of. I knew that. But the idea of him going and leaving me behind, of maybe not coming back, made what little lunch I ate lurched in my stomach.

“Brodie.” Liam took his hands out of his pockets and crossed the distance between us. Before I could think of pulling away, he was there, tugging me into his arms. “Talk to me, love.”

My body wasn’t mine. I told it to run, but it wasn’t listening. Instead, it did the opposite. It leaned into him. My arms slid around his waist and I gripped handfuls of his shirt like I could keep him if he tried to bolt. Liam nuzzled my hair, his voice barely a whisper.

“Brodie, please.”

My eyes scrunched closed and I tried to get my heart rate under control. It slammed against my ribs like it was trying to break free and climb inside Liam for safekeeping. He couldn’t leave if he had my actual heart.

“You’re coming back, right?” In my head a million different scenarios had played out all day long. Liam and I had met and fallen in love on a whim. Maybe it was the thing I’d gone looking for when I told Shane I wanted to travel. Because once I found him, seeing the world didn’t matter at all if he wasn’t with me.

“What do you mean am I coming back?” Liam sounded genuinely confused as though he hadn’t spent half the day planning to leave. Anger erupted like a volcano and I managed to put some distance between us, even if I still clung to him like I was

drowning and he was the only one who could save me. There was at least air and light between our bodies now.

“What do you mean, what do I mean? You talked to John and were all ‘I’m planning to come back to deal with things and I’ll send you Piper’s stuff.’ And then you said you’d buy something to drive when you got back.”

Liam took a breath and then his hands were cradling my face. My eyes closed. I couldn’t stand to see him see me like this. I wanted to disappear.

“Where do you get the idea that I wouldn’t take you with me? Where I go, you go.” Lips ghosted against mine, soft like an apology. “You’re coming with me.”

Relief nearly took me off my feet, but I steadied myself by gripping on to Liam even tighter. “I am?” I opened my eyes and looked into his, trying to search for deception and finding none. “But you never—you said you had to go back. You didn’t mention me.”

Liam combed his fingers into my hair. “There is no me without you.”

He sounded so earnest, so sincere that tears pricked at my eyes and I blinked them away.

“That’s quite the line,” I said, breathless with relief.

“It’s the truth. Until I found you, I was a ghost. I was a round peg in a square hole, wondering if I was going to feel out of place for the rest of my days. And then you came into my life like a sunbeam.”

“A rain cloud would be more accurate.” A smile tugged its way onto my face without my permission, but I didn’t fight it.

“I wasn’t trying make you feel excluded. I’ve been on my own for a while now, and referring to our plans as my plans is a habit I’m going to need to break. For the first time in my life, I feel like I fit somewhere.”

“What about when you were with Piper? You clearly loved her. Didn’t you feel like that with her?”

“Being with Piper came with a lot of expectations. Be the socialite her parents wanted. Start the family they wanted. Do the job my sister gave me. Fill all these shoes that other people picked out. I loved Piper and I don’t want to sound like I didn’t, but I feel like myself with you. I feel like I can finally get to know myself.” Liam kissed me again. His lips lingered on mine, like he was trying to get my body to understand the truth of his words. When he paused, the world stood still.

“Brodie.” He breathed my name like it was the answer to all his questions. “I will never stop being sorry for letting you walk away. I will never stop loving you. Putting you first. Needing you.” His grip on me tightened, pulling my hair a little, making my scalp sing.

“I need you to ask me, Liam. I need to hear it.” I worried he might not understand what I meant, but then his lips brushed against mine.

“Come with me? Please? I want you to come meet my sister, and Oren. I want to show you my condo before I sell it. I want you to see that I’m leaving behind an empty shell of a life. I need you with me. Say you’ll come.”

Playing hard to get had never been my style, but especially now that I’d heard the words I’d imagined hearing, my heart couldn’t have stood to pretend that I didn’t want to go with him. Not even for a second.

I’d follow him anywhere.

“When do we leave?”

“We can go right after.”

“After what?”

Liam grinned at me and before I knew what was happening, he'd bent over and hoisted me up onto his shoulder in a fireman carry.

“What are you doing?” I asked, half laughing. The sudden change of position had completely disoriented me, but I still managed to pinch Liam's ass in retaliation. Plus, it was right there, all hot and tempting.

Liam yelped and made me regret my actions by smacking my ass. I cried out, even though the pain quickly faded. It had shocked me more than anything. Liam carried me into the bedroom and flipped me over, dropping me on the mattress. I looked up at him and watched his chest heave from exertion and emotion. Slowly, he stripped off his shirt. I watched, frozen, struck dumb by the heat in his gaze.

Unable to look away, I watched him pop the button of his pants open and pull his fly down. Then he kneeled on the bed and crawled toward me, blanketing me, caging me in underneath him.

“Where I go, you go.” Liam repeated, his voice practically a growl. “I let you go once. Never again.”

“Swear it.” I wrapped my arms around him, splayed my hands on his back, and pulled him closer. I let him slot himself between my legs. The way my cock was suddenly hard and horribly trapped in my jeans made me wish he had stripped me bare. It felt cruel to leave so many layers between us.

“Cross my heart.” Liam kissed me. Softly; he licked his way into my mouth and took my breath away. I could feel his love in the way he kissed me. The way it felt like every atom in his body was reaching for me, wanting to touch me and be inside me. Part of me.

Our kiss evolved from gentle to ferocious passion. Teeth clacked. Liam’s fingers found my hair and tugged. I gasped at the spark of sensation that lit my scalp up like a firework. My body arched into his, seeking more. Begging. Wanting. We’d barely started and already I was a wreck of lust, leaking in my underwear and moaning into his mouth.

Liam broke the kiss and tugged my shirt up. I raised my arms so he could get it off me and sighed in relief when he tossed it aside.

“Hey,” he whispered, glancing out the window. “You were right.”

I turned my head to see what he was talking about. A dark gray cloud had rolled in and big fat snowflakes drifted down. My fingers twitched, wanting a pen. If I had a postcard, I’d write, Today it snowed. And it was perfect.

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Chapter 26

Liam

I hadn't bothered turning the light on when I carried Brodie into the room, and when the dark cloud rolled in, it brought snow with it. Brodie looked at it through his wall of windows, his eyes softening at the sight.

With his head turned, he gave me access to his throat. I swooped in and kissed his jaw, then down lower, over his pulse. My eyes shut and I drank in every raspy breath he took. Not removing our pants was a glaring oversight, but I wanted to drag this out and it would be over all too soon if I got naked.

Brodie was meant to be cherished. He was a gift from the universe and my throat closed when I thought of how I'd nearly squandered it. If I had to, I would spend the rest of my life making it up to him.

Brodie's head turned and he captured my mouth in a searing kiss. We were all tongue and breath and want. His hands slid down my sides, carving trails of heat on my skin. Then he was shoving my pants down exposing my ass. His touch grew more hesitant the closer he got to my crease.

"It's okay," I told him, breathing heavily, rocking my erection against his.

"Can we flip tonight?"

I pulled back and smiled down at him, hoping how feral he made me showed in my

grin. “You want to have your cake and eat it too? That can be arranged.”

Our next kiss was softer, slower. He let me lead it. Every little sound he made had my cock twitching. I wasn’t sure which way I wanted it first, but I knew I wanted my mouth on him.

His throat was flushed and hot under my mouth. I kissed my way down his body, stopping at his clavicles to trace them with my tongue. Brodie writhed and gasped underneath me. Every so often his fingers ran through my hair and I trembled at the loving touch.

Sex with Brodie had always been explosive. Fun. Equal parts tender and exciting. But tonight there was an extra layer in there underneath the surface, a deep, unrelenting affection blooming. Everything I felt for him poured into every kiss. Every touch. I flayed myself open and gave my all to him, and when our eyes met, I knew he was going through something similarly profound.

I kissed lower, earning a laugh when I got too near his ticklish belly button.

“Sorry, I forgot,” I lied, but he didn’t call me out on it. His fingers merely raked through my hair again, scratching my scalp in a way that drove me wild. I wanted him to scratch me all over, mark me as his. But all in due time. Right now I wanted—needed—to get my mouth on him.

I popped the button of his jeans and he braced himself on his elbows, lifting his hips, allowing me to tug his pants down to mid-thigh, taking his tight briefs with them. His cock sprang free and slapped against his stomach. I looked up at him and grinned.

“Someone’s eager.”

Brodie huffed out a laugh and flopped down. “Someone has been teasing me.”

Leaning in, I skimmed my nose up along the crease where his thigh joined his body. “I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I said, letting my breath ghost over his flesh.

Brodie laughed again, but it choked off when I flicked my tongue against the head of his cock. I did it again, just to watch his cock twitch, seeking out the warmth of my mouth.

“Remember, turnabout is fair play,” Brodie warned as if I would mind being teased and tormented by him.

“Don’t make promises you don’t intend to keep.”

Whatever response he might have given disappeared when I licked a trail up the underside of his cock, my tongue sliding along the thick vein that ran from root to tip. He hissed a breath when I took the head into my mouth and swirled my tongue around it. My palms skated up his body toward his nipples. Each bud was hard under my touch and I toyed with them, loving the way he writhed against the sensation.

Slowly, I took him in my mouth. Farther. Deeper. I played with him, taking him almost all the way in before backing off. Panting and moaning, Brodie pulled at my hair and more than once he gripped my scalp. I loved the slight bite of not-quite-pain. The discomfort made everything seem urgent and sharply edged.

I wanted him first. First and last and always. My brain spun with promises I wanted to make him. Things I wanted to give him. I was being overloaded with dreams and desires, but the most insistent of them had me releasing his cock. I tore his pants the rest of the way off of him and tossed them aside. I slid my hands under his thighs and rolled him up, lifting his ass off the bed.

“Wha—” Brodie’s word stopped when I dove between his cheeks and licked him

from hole to balls and back again. “Holy fucking shit,” rushed out of his mouth like it was all one word.

He tasted like musk and skin. Like salt and soap and mine. Brodie reached for his cock and gave it a couple of tugs before releasing it.

“Motherfucker, that feels amazing.” Brodie reached down and, without being asked, spread his cheeks for me.

I took the hint and buried my face deeper. I pinned his legs in place with my arms and fucked his hole with my tongue, loosening him, stretching and softening him. The sounds he made were outrageous.

He thrashed when I added a finger to the mix. I teased him open slowly, kissing and licking and gently stretching with my tongue and my finger working together. I wasn’t sure how long I was going to last once I was inside him.

Brodie was keening, moaning, practically sobbing by the time I pulled back. My face was wet with my own saliva and I wiped it with my hand, then wiped my hand on the bed. I wriggled the rest of the way out of my pants, cursing myself for not getting fully naked to begin with. But the short breather gave my dick half a minute to calm down, so maybe I’d last more than three pumps.

While I fought to get my pants off my ankles, Brodie made a grab for the lube. He squirted a generous amount on his fingers. Our gazes held while he plunged two fingers deep into his ass. They sawed in and out of him and when he tried to pull them all the way out, I reached down and put my hand over his, pressing his fingers in harder and deeper.

“Li—fuck. You’re so mean.” Brodie’s face was almost as red as his angry-looking cock. Desperation poured off him in waves. “Please.”

I moved closer, lining my cock up with my other hand. I released him from my grip and his fingers slid out of his ass, replaced immediately with my cock. Tilting his head back, a moan tore out of him, bouncing off the glass wall and back at us, a feedback loop of pleasure.

Brodie was hot and tight. My fingers bit into his flesh. I rolled him up, pressing his knees closer to his chest, raising his ass so I could get a better angle. I held my breath when I started moving. Fuck. His ass felt incredible wrapped around my cock. I couldn't get enough of him. The angle was awkward, but I leaned down and slammed my mouth over his. Teeth clacked and breaths shuddered as my hips started to jerk, fucking him deeper with every thrust.

Hands tugged at my hair, then pushed at my shoulders. I eased back, slowing my pace.

"Did I hurt you?" I searched his face for any sign of distress and found only bliss looking back at me.

"I was going to come."

"Too soon."

"Let me fuck you." Brodie tugged me back down into a kiss. His tongue flicked into my mouth, dancing with mine. Our breaths mingled and when I was thoroughly ruined, light-headed enough to float up to the ceiling, Brodie pulled away.

"How do you want me?"

"Ride me. I want you to fuck yourself on my cock. I want you to use me to make yourself come. I want to watch you."

God. His words drove me insane. The suggestion made my dick twitch. I pulled out of him and took a moment to lube his cock. When I straddled him a moment later, his eyes went wide.

“What are you doing?” Brodie asked as I reached back and lined him up with my hole.

“I want to feel you. All of you. For days and days and days and when I can’t feel you anymore, I want to do this again.” I took a breath and pressed down, letting his cock push upward and breach my hole. That first inch brought with it a terrible burn that made me hiss and bite my lip.

Brodie reached for my cock and gave it a stroke. He toyed with the head, the slit, the bead of precum that leaked out even as the bite of discomfort made my dick slightly softer.

The next inch was better. I’d done a good job of lubing Brodie’s dick and it helped to ease the way. But each inch felt better than the last. The burn that started out as almost unbearable had softened into a warmth that spread through my body. By the time I had all of Brodie inside me, my breath was coming out in reedy pants.

Bracing myself on his chest with both hands, I let my head drop forward and I took a long, slow inhale. Brodie’s hand slid up my thighs and he gripped my ass. Pulling me forward, he rocked up into me, pressing in even deeper.

My cock throbbed with need. My balls had a pulse of their own. My whole body felt like it wanted to come. I rocked back and forth, using my arms to hold myself up when all I wanted do was collapse into his arms and let him fuck me until I cried. I was so fucking close and I rode the ragged edge for longer than I thought possible. My orgasm seemed to build and build and build with no sign of actually erupting.

I swiveled my hips in a circular motion, groaning at the way it made his cock feel like it was the only thing left inside my body. It was everywhere. He was everywhere. God, I was so fucking close.

Brodie groaned and my cock leaked, dripping precum on his stomach. His hands tightened on my ass and then I was rocking faster, harder, chasing a sensation that I couldn't catch alone.

"Brodie, please." I heard my broken voice beg him. He reached for me, tugged me down into a kiss. One hand held my hair in a tight grip, the other wrapped around me and dug into my flesh. Then Brodie bent his legs and placed his feet flat on the mattress and fucked up into me hard and fast.

I clung to him, buried my face in the crook of his neck and tasted his skin while he ravaged my body. His hands were everywhere. Holding me. Touching me. Soothing me, spreading me open. My hands dug into the bedding and I clutched fistfuls of it. And then everything exploded. My release hit me like a lightning bolt. Everything flashed hot and white. After a moment, I became aware that the desperate keening sound was coming from me, but I couldn't silence myself if my life depended on it.

The skin where our bodies touched grew sticky with my release then Brodie's arms tightened around me and his pace increased. His breathing was harsh in my ear and I twisted my head away from the sensation that was too much for my body. Brodie saw the opportunity to kiss me and slanted our mouths together.

We came down from our high that way. Sticky and trembling and unable to stop kissing to come up for air. When we finally did manage to stop, he was still half hard and inside me, but his cum had started to leak out of my hole. Brodie reached back and I felt fingers brush over the tender place where our bodies joined.

He kissed the corner of my mouth and said nothing as I eased forward, letting his

cock slip out of my ass. I collapsed next to him. I flung an arm over his chest and tangled one of my legs with his. We were sticky and sweaty, and we'd suffer later if we let our mess dry on our skin, but neither of us was in a hurry to move.

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Chapter 27

Brodie

We were still naked and twined together in what was clearly our bed. Liam liked the left side and I'd taken the right, as we'd done when we traveled together. Even though he'd made it abundantly clear that he had no intention of leaving me behind, part of me still wanted to cling to him like a barnacle.

Liam traced feather-light circles on my back, completely unaware of my continued turmoil. I'd acted like an idiot and my embarrassment made it hard to think straight.

"Should we get curtains?" Liam asked as though I wasn't having an existential crisis.

"Curtains?" I asked stupidly.

"Window coverings. We have a lot of windows."

I looked at the wall of windows. It had been one of my favorite things about the house. That and the color scheme that made me feel like I was living in a sunset. The back yard was protected by a privacy fence.

"No one can see us," was my answer.

"I saw one designer take someone's vacation photos and turn them into slides and they fashioned them together with silver rings and made a curtain out of that."

“That sounds like a lot of work. Besides, I took lousy pictures.”

A laugh rumbled out of Liam. “I know. I swear you did it on purpose.”

“Well, sometimes, yeah. Like, I’m sure that the other two thousand people who all hiked up the same trail to look at the same view all took very lovely pictures. But I wanted one that suited my experience and when I got to the top of Mount Zas, I felt half dead. Hence the selfie of me stretched out in the dirt. I did manage to get a shot or two before hiking back down.” I nestled closer to Liam. We needed a shower and a change of sheets, but that could wait. I wanted to bask in this closeness a little while longer.

“I never worried if the pictures I took turned out good. Besides, I had my postcard collection accumulating back home.”

“Can I see it?”

I wriggled around until I was able to prop myself up on an elbow and look him in the eye. “You want to see?”

“I’ve always been curious about them. I want to know where you’ve been.”

The postcards were in a box in the walk-in closet with the word postcards scrawled across it in Kieran’s tidy printing. I retrieved it from its place on the shelf and sat down next to Liam. He looped an arm around me and waited for me to open the box.

“It was in plain sight the whole time. You could have looked at them whenever.”

Lips brushed against my temple. “It’s not the same as being invited.”

Kieran had put the postcards in an old shoe box arranged by date. With no regard to

his careful organization, I took the lid off and upended the box, spilling them onto our laps.

Liam grabbed one and smirked at it, then at me. “This looks familiar. I didn’t know you were a fan of Game of Thrones .”

“Maybe I went to Croatia for other reasons.” Arguing was pointless when I couldn’t wipe the smug look off my face. “Okay, so I went specifically because it was filmed there. But I also went to other famous locations, like the Chateau D’If from The Count of Monte Cristo. It’s a real prison, but Edmund Dantes wasn’t a real prisoner, of course. But they have a cell you can go visit that they say is his cell.” I glanced at Liam and gave him a smile. I felt suddenly foolish about my bout of excitement so I paused to explain. “I was one of those kids that other kids picked on in school. For whatever reason, people didn’t like me. Having two older brothers helped stop the more physical stuff, but it didn’t stop the taunts.”

“I’m sorry. That sounds rough.”

I loved that I could tell how sincere Liam was. That these weren’t just platitudes that he felt like he had to say.

“I’d see these places on TV and in movies and I’d imagine going to see them. I started keeping a list. It was always a pipedream. There was no way I’d be able to see any of them, but it was a nice dream to have. And then Shane won the lottery. A multi-million dollar windfall. After he collected and talked to Kieran about how not to go dead broke in a couple years’ time, he told me to get my passport sorted.”

“Did you get to see everything on you list?”

I scoffed. “No, but only because the more I saw the longer my list got. But after a bit, the thrill of always being on the go had started to wear off. I’d come home for a little

while to see the family, but then Shane would be all excited about another place he could send me and I'd be gone again."

"He cares about you."

I put the postcard down and sifted through the others. "Shane cares about everyone. It's his greatest strength, and also his Achilles' heel. It's why he keeps Kieran in on all his money plans. Shane dreams up the ideas and Kieran tells him if it's financially responsible or not."

I envied their closeness, but I had no way of fitting into that dynamic with them. I had neither the money sense or the philanthropic knee-jerk response to things that Shane had. Shane was a lot like Mom. They saw problems and immediately thought of how they could help solve them.

"Green Gables?" Liam said, breaking my concentration.

"It's from a famous Canadian book series. Anne of Green Gables . It's on Prince Edward Island. I'd never read the books, but I was looking for places to visit that had been in television series or movies. It's one of the places I'd like to go back and see again. Not everything warrants a second visit, but I loved it there."

"Are there other places you want to revisit?"

The place I wanted to return to the most was out of reach. Though I could travel the world, I couldn't travel through time, or I'd go back to that night when everything went wrong. I'd do it over again and get a better ending.

"I don't know. I'd have to think about it," I said instead of admitting my childish fantasy. "You can read them, you know. They're not top secret or anything." I noticed that Liam wasn't reading any of the things I'd written on the back.

“Where was your favorite place?”

I settled in against him as he carefully picked up each postcard and looked at them one by one. “I feel stupid saying that home ended up being my favorite place. I’ve seen the sunset in countless different countries and on a few different continents. But home is my favorite place to be now. But if I had to pick somewhere that wasn’t here, I’d probably pick Scotland. It’s so green and rainy. It’s a whole vibe and I love it. Where’s your favorite place?”

Liam picked up a postcard I’d sent from the Maldives. “I haven’t been many places. I was always chasing the next goal post. High school. University. Marriage, etcetera.”

“I never understood why people did that.”

“Did what?” Liam asked. He’d gone through a good portion of the postcards by now and was still flipping them over to read the back.

“Have kids and then pigeonhole them into the kind of life that the parents think they should lead.”

“There are worse fates. My parents weren’t responsible for all my decisions. I wanted to make them proud. I thought maybe they’d notice me more if I did things I thought they wanted of me.” Liam paused and flipped over a postcard. “Today I met a gorgeous man.”

“That’s the day I met you.” He’d notice eventually that most of my musings after we met were about him. About places we visited together and things we did. Sometimes it was just a little line he said that I wanted to remember.

I sat up and started going through the remaining postcards. Ones that weren’t about him went into the box and the others I made into a small stack.

“Maybe someday I’ll put all of them in order, but these are enough for now.” I tucked the rest of them away and settled back in against Liam. His arm came around me and he sat, silently waiting for what I would say next.

“Okay, so you saw the day we met.” I flipped the next postcard over and looked at the date and read the caption out loud. “If one more cabana boy flirts with Liam, I’m going to scream.”

He let out a roaring laugh. “I didn’t know you were the jealous type. Besides, they weren’t flirting with me.”

“I’m not jealous. But you didn’t see the way they looked at you.”

“That’s because all my attention was on you.” Liam plucked the postcard out of my grasp and dropped it into the box. “What’s next?”

I turned over the next card, a picture of a sun setting over the water from Kalamata. “The sunset was spectacular, so I heard. I only had eyes for Liam.”

Heat rushed to my cheeks and I tried to tuck the card into the box with the others, but he plucked it out of my grasp and looked at it, furthering my embarrassment.

“That’s sweet.”

“I sound like a love-sick teenager.” I handed the rest of the cards to Liam, unsure if I wanted to stay there while he continued to scan through them.

“If it makes you feel better, I felt like a love-sick teenager. I couldn’t breathe without thinking about you. I wanted to chain you to my side, but that’s probably frowned on in a lot of places.”

“Sounds kinky.” I took a breath and rolled out of bed. “Shower with me?” The afterglow had officially faded and I wanted to get clean, and maybe dirty again.

Liam put all the postcards back in the box and set it aside to follow me. The bathtub was big enough for both of us, but I preferred to shower most of the time. I started the water and after making sure it was set at a good temperature, I stepped into the spray.

Less than a minute later, Liam was in the shower with me. He stood behind me and pressed his chest against my back. His arms wrapped around me and he buried his face in the curve of my neck. His lips grazed over my skin.

“When do we leave?” I decided to ask about it now while I facing away from him. I still felt foolish about my mini-meltdown.

“Whenever you’re ready,” Liam told me. “I don’t want to rush you, and there’s nothing there that needs my attention that urgently.”

“We should go soon. Get it over with. Plus, you’ve met my family; it’s only fair that I get to meet yours.” I tried to sound nonchalant about it, but Carol sounded like a force of nature and I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t slightly intimidated with the prospect of meeting the most important person in Liam’s life. And then there was his best friend, Oren. The sooner I met everyone, the less time I’d have to conjure up doomed scenarios in my head.

“We should go tomorrow. Or the next day. But soon.”

Liam kissed my shoulder. “You don’t have to be nervous; they’ll adore you.”

“I’m going to be nervous anyway.”

“Then I’ll book flights when we’re done in here.” Liam’s hand snaked down my

body. I leaned against him and closed my eyes.

“And when might that be?”

Liam chuckled in my ear and kissed water drops off my skin.

“Eventually.”

Chapter 28

Liam

After a short flight, Brodie and I piled into the back of a hired car. Our bags were stowed in the trunk for us and I tugged him into my side as we headed into the city.

“I’ve never been to Boston before.” Brodie’s gaze was transfixed out the window as he soaked in all the sights. “We should go on a road trip. Start on the east coast and work our way across to the states.”

“Still getting bit by that travel bug?” I took Brodie’s hand in mine and lifted it. His gaze slid over to mine when I kissed the back of his hand.

“Kieran used to talk about going on road trips. We’d plan where he wanted to go and what he’d stop to see along the way. I think he and Clay should go on one. I think they went on a short one, but he believes we’ll all fall apart if he’s not around to supervise us.”

“Or maybe his dreams changed. That happens too.” I gave Brodie a lingering look. “It happened to me.”

He rolled his eyes, but he pressed himself against my side. “Where are we going first?”

“We’re stopping by my condo to drop off our bags and then we’re meeting Carol at the office.”

“And you’re sure she won’t hate me.” Brodie clutched my hand. “I’ve never met someone’s family before.”

“It’ll be fine. She’ll love you. Besides, if I can handle yours, you can handle mine.”

My comment earned me a laugh. “I’m going to tell them you said that,” he teased.

“I think your mom would agree with me. I had to get the approval of your mom, your two brothers, and their boyfriends. Plus the diner guy, Ethan? If he didn’t approve of me, I’d probably get lousy coffee and burned toast.”

“You exaggerate.” Brodie grinned at me. “Taylor’s the one who makes the food. Ethan might give you old coffee, but he wouldn’t mess with your food or he’d have to face Taylor’s wrath.”

The chatter about his hometown eased some of Brodie’s nerves and by the time we arrived at my condo, he was in full tourist mode again. I loved watching him see new things especially, it turned out, things that weren’t new to me. Watching him see my condo for the first time gave me a way to see the man I used to be through his eyes.

From the outside, the building wasn’t anything special. It was a white building, only eleven stories high. Hardly the tallest building, or the most expensive, but Brodie still gazed up at it with his mouth open.

“You live here?” His voice was full of wonder.

“Lived... and sort of. I wouldn’t call it living, Brodie.”

His gaze cut over to me and I watched him take stock of me next. As though he could see every vulnerability I was still trying to keep tucked away. My breath came in shaky, but I managed to keep the bits of myself from falling apart.

“Come on. I’ll give you the tour.” The ground floor had a gym and a sauna that I’d seldom used, but I gave Brodie a quick tour anyway before we took the elevator up to the eighth floor.

Taking my keys out of my pocket, I unlocked my door. Even with my keys, I still felt like an intruder. Like I was walking into someone else’s house. Someone else’s life. I let him go in first so I could watch him take it all in. The white hallway stretched out in front of us. The decor was all modern. Lots of shiny finishes and clean lines. Sterile. Uncomfortable. I’d never noticed it before, but being away from it had given me a new perspective.

“The primary bedroom is up on the left. Spare on the right. Also on the right is the bathroom, and then another bedroom that I used for my home office.”

Brodie poked his head into the spare room. A rather unremarkable space with more shiny finishes and decor that I didn’t pick.

“In my defense, it came furnished.”

“You have nothing to defend.” Brodie reached for me and took my hand. “We are not our things, Liam. We are not our houses. Things aren’t who we are. I used to have nothing, that doesn’t mean that I was nothing.”

His words were a punch to the gut. I gathered him into my arms and buried my face in the curve of his neck. Our bags had been abandoned by the front door and I had the urge to take them and run away from this place.

“I don’t want to stay here,” I confessed.

“Then we won’t.” Brodie’s arms tightened around me like he knew I needed to be held together. “We’ll take the tour, you’ll get Piper’s things and whatever else you

need. Whatever you can't take, we'll arrange to have shipped, and then we can leave.

"You need to see the view at least." I tugged myself out of Brodie's arms and led him through to the main living area. The dining room and living room took up the entire front of the condo. It was nothing but windows. From one end to the other, and out of them a view of the water.

A round table with stark white chairs sat on the far left across from the kitchen. The living room, that had always looked more like a posh waiting room to me, took up the rest of the space. A television hung above the fireplace. Built-in shelves flanked the fireplace and held the few personal touches I'd brought in with me.

"The view is amazing." Brodie went straight to the windows, as I suspected he would.

"I prefer the view back home."

"Our bedroom looks at a fence."

"Yes, but it's a nice fence. And most of the time, I'm looking at you anyway."

He turned and flashed me a megawatt smile. "Flattery will get you everywhere."

The brightness of his expression dimmed a little and a furrow appeared in his brow. "I can't believe you lived here."

"I told you outside, I existed here. I had to sell the house Piper and I lived in. I couldn't go in there without thinking about her. Living here was supposed to be temporary. I took what I wanted out of the house and moved in here. I was supposed to start over, but I was stuck."

I went to the couch and sat down. Brodie followed, piling himself into my lap. I held on to him like he was a life preserver. The extent my life had changed since I'd left for vacation was mind-boggling.

"I don't know if you know what it's like, but what I was here... wasn't alive. I was breathing and walking and talking, but I was dead inside. Carol had to force me to go on vacation. I didn't even want to do that, but I think she knew that I needed something to change. I'm still sad about Piper. I'll always miss her, but I'd passed the point where my grief was like walking through chest-deep mud. But I didn't know how to move on."

"That sounds hard."

"The first week I was away, I stayed in my hotel room. I hadn't wanted to go anywhere, but Carol had practically shoved me out the door."

"And this is why meeting her makes me nervous. I can't imagine anyone making you do anything."

"She'll love you," I told him, believing it with my whole heart. I loved him and therefore Carol would love him.

"I'll believe it when it happens." Brodie wound his arms around me and rested his head on my shoulder. The sound of his steady, deep breaths soothed me.

"You're the best thing that ever happened to me. I don't know where I'd be without you."

He laughed. "Probably on a beach being oblivious while cabana boys flirt with you."

"I'm never going to live that down, even though you're the jealous one."

He kissed my neck, his lips grazing that soft spot below my ear. Goosebumps erupted and I shivered.

“Do we have time?” he asked, sliding closer to me so that his erection pressed against mine.

I glanced up at the clock, an ugly gold thing with no real numbers on it. Fucking minimalist garbage. “We’re supposed to meet her in an hour, I think.”

“Then we have plenty of time if I don’t make a mess.” Brodie slipped to the floor and shoved the coffee table out of the way with a grunt.

“That thing is heavier than it looks.” He laughed and situated himself between my legs. He put his hands on my knees and slid them up toward my crotch. Looking up at me, his expression was soft but determined. It was like he knew this place had no good memories for me, and he wanted to give me at least one.

I let him open the fly of my pants and free my cock. He took me in hand and leaned in with his pretty pink tongue poking out. Then suddenly he stopped and stared up at me.

“Do you have toothpaste here? I can’t meet your sister with dick breath.”

“Mention my sister again and you won’t have to worry about dick breath because it’s going to shrivel up and crawl inside me.”

Brodie flashed me a sassy expression. “Sorry, but also not sorry.”

Then his mouth was on me, warm and soft and perfect. His lips shielded me from his teeth as he took me in, inch by inch. A groan escaped me and I tipped my head back. My fingers found their way into Brodie’s hair. I let the silky strand slide through my

fingers as he bobbed up and down.

I wasn't sure if he was trying to kill me, but my balls tightened so fast that it made my head spin.

"Slow down, love," I said on a laugh. "Or this will all be over far too soon."

Brodie pulled back and released my cock. He shot me a mischievous grin. "Who says that wasn't my evil plan?" he said, but when he returned to my dick, he took things slower. Lavishing my cock with attention. His tongue caressed the head, toyed with the slit, the ridge, and then eventually swallowed me whole. Sinking down slowly, taking me down to the root, he swallowed around my cock, his throat squeezing it perfectly.

He gagged and pulled away for a breath of air, and then was back again, sinking down, sucking me deep. I didn't stand a chance.

"Brodie... I'm gonna—"

He sank down lower and redoubled his efforts. I looked down and watched his cheeks hollow. His gaze flicked up and caught mine and it was over for me. I came in his mouth, down his throat. I cried out, my voice sounding too loud in the otherwise silent space.

While I waited for my body to recover from being obliterated, Brodie tucked me back into my pants and wrestled with my zipper. Then he leaned his head against my knee and I ran my fingers through his hair.

The world seemed softer now. Less harsh. More inviting. Or maybe it was just the afterglow that had me feeling that way. I looked down at Brodie and he stared up at me at the same time like we were joined by an invisible string.

“You go freshen up and I’ll dig the boxes out of the closet for John.”

“I’ll help you pack a bag when I’m done.” Brodie pushed himself to his feet, pausing to kiss me.

“Mmmm, dick breath. My favorite.” I captured him and kissed him again, cutting off his burst of laughter. Though I wanted to take him to bed and strip him naked, I didn’t want to spend another unnecessary minute in this place. There was nothing here for me.

Chapter 29

Brodie

I did not, in fact, have dick breath when I met Carol, nor did I have sex hair. But I did have a case of nerves that wouldn't settle. We were supposed to meet her for dinner and I'd half expected to walk into some place with a strict dress code. Of course I'd be thrown out. It would be embarrassing and Carol would hate me.

Instead, I found myself being led into a restaurant with a patio on the sidewalk and a chalkboard sign outside with the special of the day scrawled across it in hot pink chalk. My eyes drifted up to the sign and I found myself smiling.

"Pierre's Poutine." I cut my gaze over to Liam, who smirked at me. "Are you serious?"

"This place is legendary around here. Of course they have the proper traditional poutine. But, don't tell the Canadians, they also have versions that are more than just gravy, fries, and cheese curd."

"What happens if you tell the Canadians?"

"Every time a Canadian finds out that you bastardized their poutine, another Canada Goose is born."

The banter helped settle my nerves and I crashed into Liam when he stopped suddenly. I hadn't even noticed that he was leading me to a table where a single

woman sat nursing a beer.

She'd been dressed in a suit, but her jacket was hanging off the back of her chair and the sleeves of her blouse were rolled up past her elbows.

"Little brother." Carol got to her feet and wrapped Liam in an embrace. The top of her head came up to just under Liam's chin, but the hug looked intense, like she was cracking ribs. She pulled away and gave Liam one final glance before her gaze swung over to me.

"Carol Lawson. You must be Brodie." She extended her hand and I shook it, trying to recall everything I'd ever been told about how to give a good handshake. I should have practiced. Or at least rehearsed what I was going to say.

"That's me." The heat of a thousand volcanos flooded my cheeks. "I mean, it's a pleasure to meet you."

Carol's smile softened and after she released my hand, she took her seat again. Liam and I sat on the same side of the table. On any other occasion, it might have felt reassuring, but tonight it felt like I was on trial. Or at an interview.

"I hope you're okay with my restaurant choice," Carol said. "The last few times I've been out to eat have been for business and this kind of place isn't suitable for business dinners."

"Well, I don't know the first thing about business dinners. I'd be happy anywhere. It's all a write-off anyway." Brodie said.

"Which is why they go to the places that cost the big bucks," Liam said.

A server arrived and took our drink orders and promised to return with menus.

“Anyway, enough about that. How long are you two in the city for?” Carol took a sip of her drink. I think she was already aware of Liam’s plans, but wanted to hear it from him when she could look him in the eyes. “Are you going to show Brodie around?”

“If he would like that,” Liam hedged.

The Liam here was different from my Liam. I’d gotten a flash of him on our way in, but Boston Liam was subdued. It was like the melancholy met him on the tarmac and had clung to his bones ever since. There were clearly too many ghosts here for him.

“While I’m here, I wanted to discuss using a few members of the tech development team for a project.”

“Oh?” Carol leaned forward, suddenly all business. “Tell me about this project of yours.”

Our drinks arrived and Liam took a sip of his. I stared at mine and wondered if I should abstain or if I should slam the entire thing to take the edge off.

“It’s not technically my project, but the person the idea belongs to doesn’t have the resources I do and I said I’d help if I could.”

“Well, color me curious. What do you need them for? They’re all yours, of course, but I want to hear what captured your attention.”

I listened and poured over the menu while Liam outlined Clay’s project. They’d clearly been in touch since the initial conversation because the idea was a lot more fleshed out now.

It turned out that I loved hearing Liam in his element. I don’t think even he was

aware of how much he came to life when he was in a situation that put his knowledge to use. He often came off as insecure about his own education and abilities. It might not have been a passion of his when he was in school, and he might still feel as though he let other people dictate his decisions, but helping Clay with the app had really brightened something inside of him.

I think Carol saw it too. As Liam chatted about it while we ordered, the longer he went on, the more she relaxed.

By the time our food arrived, Liam had secured her blessing along with her permission. And then her focus shifted.

I was just shoving a bite of pulled pork poutine—sorry, Canada—into my mouth when her eyes landed on me.

“And what do you do?” Her question came from genuine curiosity, but I still felt like an asshole, having nothing meaningful to respond with. Instead of trying to sound impressive, I went with being brutally honest.

“I mooch off my lottery-winning brother. I traveled a lot, which is how I met your brother. Before the lottery, I worked for minimum wage at a grocery store. I didn’t go to college because I watched my other brother, Kieran, drown in student loan debt. And I never knew what I’d do there anyway. It was too much money to just wing it, you know?”

“I respect that. It’s a big commitment, even if you don’t have to worry about the money.” Carol sounded far more accepting than I’d expected and I realized that maybe I’d judged her without knowing her. I’d decided that she’d automatically look down on me because I came from a different background than her and her brother. But she’d been nothing but kind. From the restaurant choice, to her losing her suit jacket to appear to be more casual. And then the way she seemed to honestly

understand why someone with no money might not want to spend even more money they didn't have.

"But right now, I'll admit to being a bit directionless. Liam and I are both trying to figure out what's next for us."

The corners of Carol's eyes crinkled when she smiled. "You'll figure it out."

"I thought of writing a book," I said, suddenly feeling brave and a little foolish. "I saw all these famous places that were in movies and from books, and it always made me think, like, I could do that. But it's not practical, I think."

Carol lifted her beer to her mouth and took a sip. "Fuck practical. You love my brother. My brother loves you. My brother is loaded. Your brother is loaded. Why do you need to be practical? Will your brother let you starve? Likely not."

You could have knocked me over with a feather. I sat in stunned silence as her words washed over me. Liam nudged me with his elbow.

"Your food is going to get cold," he said.

I glanced at him and found a warm kind of humor in his eyes. He'd needed to come home and see his sister. As much as I wanted her approval, he'd needed it. And I think he'd always had it, but now he believed in it.

Being back here was painful for him, but I think it was starting to heal something in him. And I think he realized it too. That didn't mean we were going to stick around for longer than planned. We had flights out the next morning and I had half a mind to see if there were any earlier ones.

We'd packed another bag for him before leaving for dinner. It contained a few

personal items he didn't want to send with the movers and more clothes. The boxes with Piper's things in them, the ones he was willing to part with anyway, had been addressed and taped shut and were sitting on the counter back at his condo. He'd arrange for someone to ship them to John.

I'd asked Liam if he wanted any of his furniture and he'd laughed at me. More at himself now that I thought about it. He hadn't picked anything in that place. Not a drop of decor or a single finish. He'd arranged to buy the furnishings from the company who'd staged the condo for showings.

It made me realize just how much he must have come to life since I met him. And why he was certain his sister would love me. Liam was different with me. Happier. Lighter. More sure of himself and his place in the world. I wasn't sure if I was the cause. I think he'd been ready and we met at just the right time. I think the universe put us together for a reason.

I'd never put much stock in things like fate before. Life did what it was going to do and, for the most part, I'd always felt like I was just along for the ride. Even now that I'd found Liam, I still sometimes felt directionless, but at least with Liam I had someone to travel with. Even if our travels took us back to a one bedroom home the color of sunsets.

"Are you going to see John and Marsha while you're here?" Carol asked carefully, stuffing a bite of food in her mouth afterward.

"No." Liam's voice was clipped and harsh. Not loud, but firm. "John left Marsha. He's living with his brother at the moment. He's trying to get Marsha into a therapist, but so far she's been resistant. Her sister is with her right now. And honestly, after the scene at the hospital, I don't want anything to do with them. I'd always thought that maybe I could help them, but they have to find their own way through." Liam picked up his glass and drained his drink in a couple of large swallows.

Now more than ever, I wanted to leave Boston behind. It was the place Liam lost everything, including himself, and I didn't see him ever finding peace here, let alone happiness.

With a skill that was effortless, Carol steered the conversation away from John and Marsha without further comment. More than anyone else, she had to be aware of the toll they had taken on him over the years. Hell, I knew and I'd known him for a fraction of his life. A blink, really.

When it was time to leave, Carol paid the bill and we trickled out onto the sidewalk together. Our hired car was still parked nearby and Liam shot a message to the driver letting him know to come get us.

Instead of shaking my hand, Carol hugged me. Her short frame was as strong as it had appeared when she'd squeezed the stuffing out of Liam.

"It was great meeting you," she said as she pulled away. Liam was next to get hugged.

"Take the plane home," Carol said to him. "It's fueled up and waiting for you both at the hangar."

"You have a plane?" I gaped at them.

Carol grinned. "It's not Air Force One or anything, but it'll get you home faster than commercial."

"Come see us," Liam told her. "Anytime you want. As often as you want."

She brushed imaginary lint off Liam's shoulder. "As if I need your permission, but thank you. When you're both more settled, I'll take some vacation time. I promise."

Our car pulled up to the curb and Carol dove in for another quick hug from Liam before pulling away. “Get going, you two. Take care of each other.”

Liam opened the back door for me and I climbed inside with him right behind me. He watched Carol through the window as we pulled away, and I watched Liam until he could no longer see her. Then he turned to me and let out a breath. A year’s worth of tension bled out of him in a single sigh.

“I can’t wait to get home,” he said.

“Did I ever tell you how happy I am that you kept that postcard and used it to follow me home?”

Liam put his arm around me and pulled me into his side.

“I’d follow you anywhere.”

Chapter 30

Liam

Boston had gifted me with Carol's blessing and an emotional hangover that turned my brain into mush. Brodie and I arrived home in the wee hours of the morning and we'd climbed into bed. Too tired to do much more than trade a few lazy kisses, we fell asleep.

When I woke, Brodie was gone, his side of the bed was cold, and the sun was high in the sky. He hadn't gone far, though. Music filtered its way into the bedroom. Warmth crawled into me and eased my mind. It was clingy to admit, but I hated waking up alone.

Now that I knew Brodie was nearby, staying in bed seemed like a reasonable option, but once my bladder forced me to get up, I figured I might as well go see if he had coffee on. Once I was in the bathroom, the idea of a hot shower called to me. I wanted to scrub Boston off my skin as though soap and water would take the last vestiges of my old life and its baggage down the drain with it.

The water was too hot at first, so I turned the temperature down. I wasn't sure how long I was under the spray after that when the door opened and Brodie walked into the room. He'd only dressed in a pair of loose cotton pants and he shoved those off his hips and let them pool on the floor so he could join me.

I pushed the shower door open for him and he slid into the stall. Immediately his arms were around me and mine around him. His mouth brushed against mine and I

gave into the urge to kiss him.

It was a kiss of comfort. Of hello and good morning and I'm happy to see you, and when it was over I felt lighter. Like weight had been taken off my shoulders. A smile tugged at my lips and the one Brodie returned had to be ten times bigger and brighter.

"There you are," he said, somewhat reverently.

I had nothing to say to that. I hadn't gone anywhere without him. He'd come with me. But maybe that was the reason he was looking at me with tender affection. Brodie had witnessed the shell my life had been and the zombie I'd been inside it.

I returned the kiss, cradling his face in my hands. My thumbs brushed water off his cheeks and I deepened the kiss. Brodie moaned and his arms came around me. I backed Brodie up into the wall and he let out a startled oomph , and then a laugh.

"Fuck," I said, pulling away so I could see the laughter in his eyes. "I love you so much."

If I had one wish left to make, it would be for me to never take for granted the way Brodie's eyes lit up when I said I loved him. I went to my knees in front of him, dragging my hands down his wet body. Brodie shoved a hand into his hair and pushed it off his face.

I kissed his belly button, laughing when he squirmed away. Sex with Brodie was always fun. He brought light and life into my world. Love didn't keep score, but I still owed him everything. I never wanted to be without him.

Brodie's fingers brushed my hair off my face. I hadn't gotten it cut in a while and it was longer than it had been in years.

“I should get it cut,” I said, kissing my way lower, down to the prize that waited for me.

“Don’t do it on my account. I like it.” Brodie stroked his fingers through my hair again. I could’ve stayed there forever and let him pet me, but the tile was already starting to be a bitch on my knees.

Instead of going straight for his cock, as tempting as it was, all hard and standing straight up now, I nuzzled the base of it, then moved lower, exploring the sensitive sac with my tongue. Brodie spread his legs to give me more room. If I were given eternity with him, I’d spend it on my knees, worshipping him like this.

But we didn’t have eternity. We had one life and I was ready to live it. I caressed his body with my hands, travelling up his torso to feel the planes of his chest, the ripples of his ribs, the softness of his middle. The perfection that was Brodie Taggart. Maybe not perfect, but perfect for me.

My cock throbbed, hard and angry, forgotten. But I ignored it in favor of enjoying Brodie’s. I glanced up at him as I wrapped my hand around the base of his cock. My tongue swirled around the head and when I took it into my mouth, it brought with it the flavor of salt and skin. The taste of Brodie.

Both of his hands sank into my hair and he cradled my skull like I was something precious. I hollowed my cheeks and sucked, taking half of him in before retreating. The curse Brodie let slip went straight to my balls. I loved hearing him come apart. I relished knowing I had this effect on him, that I could so quickly reduce him to curse words that sounded a lot like endearments.

I put both my hands on him, his waist at first. His narrow hips jerked slightly when I increased my pace, taking him faster and deeper. Brodie had been my first, but he was also going to be my last. I loved knowing that his was the only male body who

would know mine intimately. Parts of me had been untouched for him and it felt like a gift I could give him.

Sliding my hands around, I gripped his ass and took him as deep as I could. I gagged as his cock hit the back of my throat. Brodie's sounds mingled with the sound of the shower and it was music to me.

"Shit, Liam. Not like this. Want you with me." It took a moment for his words to register, and then he was helping me to my feet and we were kissing again. All tongues and lust. His arms wrapped around me, tugging me into his space. He was still pressed against the wall, but then he stepped forward and turned us around so I was the one pressed against the tile.

Brodie kissed me like it was our last, like it was the only kiss we'd ever get, so he had to make it good. And then his hips started to move and he thrust against me. I loved everything we did, but I always loved it a little more when Brodie took control. I liked knowing that he'd do things to make us both feel good, and nothing I did would be wrong. I couldn't make mistakes if I wasn't the one in the lead.

Water was shit for lube, but lucky for me, I'd landed myself a Boy Scout who'd stocked the shower for occasions like this. He paused long enough to lube his hand before taking both our cocks into his fist, making a tight channel around them.

Our kiss was messy now. All tongue and breath and clacking teeth until Brodie gave up on it. His free hand wrapped around the back of my neck and he held me in place, gazing into my eyes like he could read the fine print on my soul.

I couldn't breathe through the lust that surged in me. My body was wound tight, every muscle screamed for release but forgot how to let go. And then Brodie's intense gaze softened, his pouty lips parted and the little furrow in his brow appeared.

“Liam—Liam, fuck.” Whatever else Brodie might have been trying to say was lost to us both as his orgasm slammed into him. His body jerked against mine, his hand flew faster. If I looked down, I’d see him stroking us both. I’d be able to watch his release pour out of him and coat his fingers, my cock, before it was washed away. But I couldn’t look away from his face.

It wasn’t his hand or his orgasm that dragged me over the edge finally. It was the way his body collapsed into my arms and his mouth finding mine that did it. I came so hard I saw stars. I saw my life flash before my eyes, my future. And it was nothing but Brodie.

When I was done, wrung out and boneless, he gently washed us both. I felt more alive than I’d felt when I’d first crawled out of bed and instead of collapsing right back into it like I’d half-intended to earlier, I put on a pair of joggers and a shirt and followed Brodie, who was dressed similarly now, into the kitchen.

“I thought I heard music.” I made a beeline for the coffee pot and poured myself a cup. “Coffee?”

“I had plenty, thanks,” Brodie said. “I was doing a bit of tidying up and had my phone docked so I could listen to music. I hope I didn’t disturb you.”

The coffee wasn’t exactly fresh, but it was good enough to take the last edge of sleep off. I leaned against the counter and took a second sip. “You didn’t. I liked knowing you were still around, even if I didn’t get to wake up next to you.”

Brodie’s expression melted and a smile tugged at his mouth. “Awww, did you miss me?”

“Like a limb.” I was about to take another sip of my coffee when my gaze slid through the room and landed on something familiar. “What?”

Slowly, I made my way to the living room. Brodie had unpacked a few of the things I'd brought with us and there, hanging on the wall next to pictures of his brothers, was one of Piper and me.

I turned to him, my heart in my throat. "What's this?"

Brodie slid his arms around me and pressed his chest against my back. "She's not the only one who made it out of the suitcase. I can't believe you slept through me hanging all these." Brodie pointed to another familiar picture. "I assume that's Oren?"

"Yeah." The word came out strangled. I cleared my throat and blinked at the wall, taking it all in. Mingled in among pictures of him and his family were pictures of my family. Carol and me. Oren and his hot firefighter husband. Piper and me on our wedding day. And there at the center, a picture of Brodie and me. Sometimes we'd stop to take pictures for other travelers and then they'd offer to do the same for us. We looked wind burned and tired, but so very in love.

"I was head over heels for you even then." The picture had been taken somewhere around the two-week mark of our meeting. "I can't believe you did all this."

"Your condo broke my heart, Liam. You deserve a home. I want you to feel like you belong here. I want it to feel like we both live here."

"I belong wherever you are. That's home for me." I turned my head to look over my shoulder at Brodie. "I love you. Thank you. For everything. For the pictures and the support and the second chance, even though sometimes I worry that I'm not worth it."

His hand closed over my mouth. "Hush. Stop bad-mouthing my boyfriend. His opinion of himself is skewed. He no longer gets to determine what he's worth. That's my job. And I think he's everything."

I licked the palm of Brodie's hand and all he did was narrow his gaze at me.

“Do you really think that's going to work? We just came all over each other in the shower. I'm not afraid of a little saliva.”

He did, however, peel his hand away and wipe it on my pant leg instead of his.

I turned and brushed my lips against his. “Thank you,” I said again. I'd never stop saying it. I'd never stop meaning it.

Chapter 31

Brodie

“We’re going to be late,” I heard Liam call from the patio.

“I was just making sure he went to the bathroom first.” Fall had given way to winter and then spring, and as summer approached, Liam and I were still together. We still lived in the sunset house and we’d recently added to our family. Shady was a small, wriggly mutt of some sort. A terrier mix, by the look of him. Liam, with the help of Shane, got him for me a month ago for my birthday and it was love at first sight.

“There’s grass where we’re going,” Liam said, still patient as ever.

“Okay, fine. Come here, Shady.”

He bounded over to me and flopped down on my feet, belly up, still wriggling. I bent down and clipped the leash to his collar and whistled for him to follow.

Liam waited for us at the patio door and stole a kiss from me as I passed him.

“Do we have everything?” I asked him one more time on the way to the car. I still only drove when absolutely necessary. Liam spoiled me.

“The suitcase and garment bags are in the back.”

The drive out to the lake took three hours and I glanced nervously at the time. “Are

we going to be late? We should have stayed over last night.”

“We have plenty of time. I might have fudged about when it starts.”

“You’re a bad man.” I buckled in and let Shady get comfortable on my lap and keeping him away from Liam as he drove. Though every once in a while, Liam would reach over and scratch him behind the ears.

Ever since the trip to Boston, Liam had come alive in ways I’d never imagined. Every day that went by he said he felt more like himself. The app he’d been developing with Clay had sparked his drive and Liam had thrown his money and expertise into other similar endeavors. Some of the apps he’d funded were already up and running. Some earned him a tidy profit, others were passion projects not expected to earn anything.

I was still trying to find my way. Writing a book had seemed like a great idea at the beginning, but six months in I wasn’t sure I’d written anything worth reading. And I wasn’t sure I wanted to continue to pursue it with the idea of it becoming my purpose in life.

Saying any of that out loud felt a lot like giving up, and I wasn’t ready to throw in the towel just yet. But I was almost certain I didn’t want to do anything with my life that required me to need a home office.

Liam worked wherever he wanted. Sometimes he lounged on the couch and fired off emails on his phone. Other times he went down to Bennett’s and sat next to Nash, a local writer who was dating the cook at the diner. He and Liam had struck up a nice friendship. The two of us had gone for drinks with the three of them—Taylor and Nash were two parts of a triad—something we hadn’t done for a while.

Liam and Nash weren’t Liam-and-Oren-level close, but it was nice to see him make friends and put down roots.

We stopped once to let Shady mark his territory and Liam tried to look impatient, but I just gave him a look and reminded him that I'd been trying to get him to go before we left.

It didn't matter if we were late. It wasn't like they could start the ceremony without us.

Maybe one day it would be the two of us getting married, but for now I was happy to be one of the few guests in attendance at Kieran and Clay's wedding. Kieran had popped the question over Christmas, a swoony romantic gesture that had earned him big points with Clay, who'd sobbed into Kieran's arms in a way that might have been concerning if he hadn't been repeating yes over and over again through his torrent of tears. I thought maybe Shane and Archer would make things official, but they seemed happy with their status quo.

Kieran and Clay spent the next few months taking short road trips. Partly because Kieran had always wanted to go on road trips, and partly to scout the perfect wedding venue.

It was only going to be family. Mom had driven up the night before. Her house was currently under the watchful eye of Josie, a waitress at Bennett's who'd at one time stayed with my mother.

The place Kieran and Clay had chosen was situated at the end of a long and winding road, flanked by tall trees. Liam drove carefully, navigating the switchbacks with ease.

Then the trees ended and the view opened up, revealing a sprawling log structure on the edge of a lake.

I let out a low whistle. "This place has been three hours from me for years. I can't believe I've never been here." There was definitely something to be said for staying

close to home. But if we had, Liam and I never would have met.

We were the last to arrive, and we might have been in hot water had it not been for the fact that we brought Shady with us. He'd quickly become everyone's favorite family member, and he knew it. He milked the attention for all it was worth. Kieran grabbed our garment bags out of the back, leaving me to get the suitcase.

Archer was the first to my side and he plucked the leash out of my grip. "I'll take the little guy for a walk while you two get settled."

Liam slid his arm around me and brushed a kiss against my cheek.

"I think he just stole our dog." I watched them go, Archer's voice fading as he chatted away to Shady.

"He'll give him back. Don't worry."

"They could get their own dog, you know," I groused as Liam steered me toward the entrance of the building.

"Sharing is caring." Liam grinned as my scowl deepened. "If you're a good boy, maybe I'll reward you when we get up to the room."

That shut me up. I loved Shady with my whole heart, but sex with a dog in the house could be a challenge. If we locked him out of the bedroom, he whined. If we let him in the bedroom, he tried to be on the bed to be near us.

Liam and I still managed—somehow—to have almost as much sex as usual, but my dick was suddenly eager for a few minutes alone with Liam. No whining dog. No set of eyeballs staring at us as though he was judging our technique.

By the time we got to our room on the second floor, I was vibrating. Liam hung our

bags in the closet and I dropped the suitcase on the floor. Then I was on him, pinning him to the wall, tearing at his clothes.

Liam laughed against my mouth, and then kissed me back. He raised his arms and let me tug his shirt off over his head.

“How much time do we have?” I asked.

“The rest of our lives.” Liam flicked my pants open and shoved his hand inside, curling his fingers around my cock.

“You smooth bastard.” My words tumbled out on a groan. We stumbled deeper into the room. I hadn’t expected to go straight to the room and fuck Liam’s brains out, and I found myself woefully unprepared. The lube was packed in the suitcase and I doubted we had time for a proper fuck at any rate.

Liam solved the dilemma by scooping me up and dropping me onto the bed. He yanked my pants down to my knees. The predatory look he gave me sent shivers through my body. I wriggled my underwear down as he shoved his pants off.

Sitting up, I stole a kiss. Truthfully, I’d have been content to do nothing but kiss him. Forever and ever, but my body wanted more than his mouth on mine. Liam pulled away, then with all the grace he could muster, he moved around so that we were both lying on our sides, face to cock.

Sixty-nine was always a challenge for me in that I’d always found it hard not to blow my load in under two minutes. There was something extra erotic about becoming a complete circle. His cock in my mouth, his mouth on my cock. No room for words or breath or anything else. The world was obliterated as he sucked me down without preamble.

He pulled back right away, laughing at the way I cursed and twitched. The only truly

bad thing about sixty-nining was that we couldn't kiss while we sucked each other off.

The rest of it, however, was amazing. I loved the feel of Liam on my tongue. The way his scent invaded my senses when I was between his legs. Mostly, I loved how easily we were lost in each other and how he made me feel like the only person left in the universe.

Liam teased me with his tongue, toying with the head of my cock in a way that he knew drove me crazy. I tried to focus on what my mouth was doing, but Liam had taken over, his hips thrusting, pressing his cock in deeper, a fraction at a time.

He buried my cock down his throat, taking me to the root. Whatever sound I'd tried to make was muffled by his cock. Liam reached for me, his fingers brushing through my hair and when he took a handful and gave a gentle tug, it was all over for me.

I didn't have time to warn him, but Liam knew what he was doing and he was prepared when I shot my load down his throat. I desperately wanted air, but more than that, I wanted Liam to come too. Liam's hand tightened in my hair and I relaxed, letting him use my mouth. It wasn't a porn-star-face-fuck; Liam was never rough with me like that. It wasn't our style.

Liam always fucked me like he was astonished that he got to touch me at all. Even now when my mouth was but a sex toy, every touch was reverent. I felt his love in the way he never went too deep or too hard. In how he stroked my scalp and pulled my hair and said my name. Over and over again like it held all the answers he'd ever need.

"I'm close," Liam rasped and I went from passive bystander, willing cock-sleeve, to active participant, sucking him deeper, using my tongue to tease him and torment him until he came with a shout, flooding my mouth. I managed to swallow and I kept sucking and teasing him, licking him clean until he shivered and pulled away.

“We have to stop. And get cleaned up,” he said, but neither of us moved a muscle. I closed my eyes and pressed my forehead against his leg.

“I have no bones.”

Liam traced a finger down my half-hard cock. “You have at least one.”

“Doesn’t count.”

“Mmm, I don’t know about that. I think it counts.” Liam kissed the tip of my dick, then rolled away and got out of bed, the fucking tease.

I flopped onto my back and stared at him. “Do we have to get dressed?”

“Come on. Lunch, then a nice afternoon break, then a wedding and dinner. Dancing. Drinks.”

“They can FaceTime us in,” I groused, but I was already rolling over and climbing out of bed. When I got to my feet, Liam pulled me into his arms and kissed me, dick breath and all. One day, maybe it would be our turn. But I was content to go with the flow. So long as I had Liam, nothing else mattered.