



Heart of the Race

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Varro Dacien spends his life riding toward the next adventure. Brian Christie, his best friend and touchstone, the one person who's always truly seen him, plays sidekick on these madcap adventures and subsequent trips to the hospital until he can't take it anymore. While Brian can see Varro, Varro has never caught on that he's breaking his best friend's heart.

Without Varro, Brian builds himself a life that's all about just getting by, doing his best to ignore the hole in his heart and his life. Without Brian to balance him, Varro pushes harder and takes more risks to reach that ultimate high. His job racing high-octane bikes on suicide-level courses makes it easy to get that rush... until it's no longer enough and Varro realizes it's not the race, but who's waiting at the finish line that truly matters. Now he just has to convince Brian to be there.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:33 am

ONE

I told Aidric Barnes the same thing in person as I had on the phone. “No.”

“Come on, mate,” he muttered, trying to push my front door open from his side while I held it closed from mine.

“I’m not your mate, and I’m not going.”

“But he’s runnin’ it with or without you.”

“It’s not a problem, then. Everything’s fine.”

“‘Tis not fine, Brian.”

“Go. Away.”

He groaned loudly. “Brian.”

“No,” I said firmly. “Get off my porch, Aid.”

“You’d have him race without you, then?”

“I don’t want him to race at all, but it’s hardly my concern anymore.”

“Brian—”

“No.”

“He almost died the last time.”

“Yes, I know. I was there, if you recall.”

“Not then! Since you’ve been gone!”

But the time I’d seen it had been enough to haunt my dreams. I didn’t need to hear about his most recent brush with death. I used to see him fall over and over every time I closed my eyes. Now that I finally didn’t, I wasn’t about to start again.

We had all been there when the rear wheel of his bike suddenly slid out from under him. Because he was moving so fast, easily two hundred miles an hour, the motorcycle had simply flipped over with him still on it. It was called a high side—but I just called it a horror, because that’s what it looked like.

He’d broken four ribs, punctured his left lung, and fractured his collarbone, as well as his left arm. Pins had been needed to hold bones in place, and the worst part was he had just gotten through physical therapy as a result of a previous crash, and now he was going to have to do it all over again.

It made sense; it did. Racing was the love of his life, and he wasn’t going to stop for anyone or anything. The rush of adrenaline, the howl of the bike engine on the road, the way the world whooshed by him—it was all he needed. The rest of us were just window dressing in his hunt for the next fuel-injected thrill ride. I wouldn’t be that anymore. I couldn’t.

“He canna win if you’re not there,” Aidric informed me as he kept trying to push his way in. The more upset he got, the thicker his brogue became.

“Winning should not be your goal.” I grunted as I continued to hold the door mostly closed. “Aim lower. Keep him breathing.”

“Open the door!”

“Okay! Let go and I will.”

He stopped pushing—and the minute he did, I slammed it shut, locked it, and clicked the deadbolt into place.

“Brian!” He sounded both hurt and offended.

“Go away, Aid,” I ordered. “I’m not coming, and you don’t need me, anyway. Really, truly, only you and the guys are required. Think about how long I’ve been gone.”

“You’re wrong, mate. You’re the only one who really matters. It doesn’t mean anythin’ if you don’t see it.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, and I really was. I so wished it were different. I wished he were different.

“Open the door!”

“Oh for fuck’s sake, Aid,” I replied belligerently, annoyed now that he was persisting. He knew it wasn’t good for me, going back, but he was still pushing. That was really crappy of him. “Get off my porch!”

He banged the door hard with his fist, but I heard him retreat, and then the car started out on the street.

He was wrong. I knew Varro better than that. The only thing Varro Dacien needed

was the rush of being on his bike and the blurring speed.

We'd been friends since the fourth grade. I was on the sixth of what I didn't know at the time would be the last of my foster homes. The Rossers lived next door to Varro and his family, and I looked over one day—a week after moving in—and from my second-floor bedroom window, I saw him on the roof of his house. I would come to find out that the other boy with him was his brother, Nico. But really, neither of them was the real attraction at first glance. It was the go-cart he was sitting in, and the ramp it was pointed at.

When you're nine, the thing you say when you open the window is not the same thing you'd say when you're thirty-two. Now I would have yelled at him to get the hell down before he killed himself. Then, as I watched him put on a bike helmet and fasten the chin strap, I leaned out onto the sill and asked if I could have a turn.

His gaze took me in.

I waved.

“Yeah, come on!” he called back. “You can go next!”

Since I was alone in the house, there was no one to check with. I was downstairs, out the back, and knocking on the door of the three-story Georgian Colonial next door moments later. The woman who answered was, to me, stunning. Her long black hair, big and warm dark-brown eyes, her smile, and the smells emanating from the kitchen—I was in love at first sight.

“And who are you?” she wanted to know.

“Brian,” I answered. “Brian Christie. I live next door.”

“And what can I do for you, Mr. Christie who lives next door?”

“He said I could go after him.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Who said you could go after him?”

“The boy on the roof.”

She gasped and grabbed my hand, yanked me into her house and—even though I didn’t know it yet—into her life, and both of us made it up to the slanted roof just in time to see the go-cart whip by. It hit the edge of the ramp, flipped over—there had been no way to get it flush against the wood shingles—and propelled the boy through the air and into the maple tree next to the house. The cart didn’t have the same luck. It hurtled to the ground, thirty feet below, and smashed into a hundred pieces.

The boy, her son, Varro Dacien, broke his right arm—I could tell from how it was backwards—was scratched and bruised, and had his left wrist run through by a branch, but was thankfully rendered unconscious on impact with how hard he hit the oak. The sound that came out of his mom, the high-pitched horrified scream—I had no idea anyone actually made sounds like that outside of the movies—scared me and nearly made me cry at the same time.

“I’m going inside to call 911. You watch him,” she ordered.

“Mom, I’m here,” the brother said to her retreating back.

But she wasn’t speaking to him.

“I knew I was gonna be in trouble too,” he grumbled, turning to look at me. “I guess you have to watch Varro now.”

I wasn't looking at him. My gaze stayed on the boy in the tree, who was waking up.
"Hi," I said, waving to him.

His eyelids fluttered, and then he startled.

"Don't move," I instructed, smiling and getting as close to the edge of the roof as I could. "You don't wanna fall."

He groaned when he saw his wrist.

"Does your arm hurt?"

"Kinda."

"What about your other arm with the tree coming out of it?"

His gaze met mine. "Nuh-uh."

"That's good." I nodded.

He looked around and groaned. "Man, she's gonna murder me."

I was pretty certain of that fact myself. "Your mom is calling an ambulance, or firemen, maybe."

He swiveled his head back to me. "You think maybe they'll hafta cut down the tree?" he posed sadly, like that was the worst thing he could think of.

"Or they get you with a helicopter," I offered brightly.

"You think?"

I shrugged. “I dunno. Have you been stuck like this before?”

“Yeah, but not this high.”

“It was awesome,” I assured him.

His smile was blinding, and that fast, I was addicted to seeing it on his face.

Firemen brought a ladder with one of those baskets at the end that they stood in, and one of the men held Varro still while the other used a small jigsaw to cut the branch instead of pulling him off it. Paramedics wrapped the hand and the piece of the tree up together. Both Varro and I were disappointed that there was no helicopter.

We all followed the ambulance to the hospital. Me too, since I was alone in the house. It turned out that Varro and his older brother, Nico, were big believers in speed. Even as we rode to the hospital in the minivan, Nico was considering modifications to the ramp. Meanwhile, Mrs. Dacien sounded like she was having a heart attack.

From the passenger seat, I reached over and put my hand on her thigh, patted it gently, and told her everything would be all right. Once we were there, she took my hand in hers, rolled it palm up, kissed it, and pressed it to her cheek.

She then parked where I wasn't sure we were supposed to and marched through the emergency room doors after the paramedics. The fact that the nurses there greeted her by name, the looks on their faces sympathetic and not judgmental, clued me in that her boys, or maybe just Varro, were frequent visitors.

What was nice was that she had taken hold of my hand on the walk in and did not let go.

Five hours later, she, Nico, and I were home. Mr. Dacien—Ancel, Varro's dad—was at the hospital with him, in Varro's room keeping vigil over his son, crooning soft words in lilting French. I hugged Mrs. Dacien good-bye, waved to Nico, and headed back to my house, still dark even though it was after seven at night.

I never made it out of their yard. Mrs. Dacien came after me, took hold of my hand like she had all day, and pulled me back inside with her. She was on the phone to Child Protective Services minutes later. I never went back to the empty house next door.

People came—a social worker, a policeman—and my things, which fit in my one duffel, were moved into the Daciens' guest room. There was no fanfare, just Mrs. Dacien with her flashing eyes and crossed arms. Everyone scurried around her, intimidated by the woman talking about neglect and nonsupervision, my weight for my age, and the holes in my clothes. Who was supposed to be checking on me? What in the world was going on? Her voice rose with righteous indignation and judgment, and because no one had ever been mad for me, only at me, it was a revelation. It turned out her lawyer was a great deal scarier than anyone working for the State of California, so what normally would have taken months happened very quickly. Mrs. Dacien was not a patient woman, a trait she had passed on to both sons.

I saw the Rossers after that, but only in passing. They were nice people, both in their mid-sixties, and if they missed the money I brought in, they never acted like it. They still waved when I walked by their house for another two years before we moved, the Daciens and I, from Dublin, California, back to Great Neck, on Long Island, in New York, where the family was from originally. Mr. Dacien was a DOD contractor and had been working at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory but moved to the Brookhaven National Laboratory. I had no idea what he did there. I didn't ask, and he didn't tell me. All I knew was that when they moved, I went as well.

New York was a big change for me, but I fell in love with it very quickly. First with

Long Island, and then with Manhattan, where we moved a year later. Central Park, the Met, the neighborhoods, the food, ice-skating in the winter, and the subway. I told Mrs. Dacien it was exciting.

“No.” She shook her head. “The real adventure is the three of you.”

Just getting me and Nico and Varro to all our various activities took up a good portion of her day. At least one of us always had a game or a meet. Nico played football, basketball, and baseball; Varro played lacrosse and ran track, and played soccer with me. I played hockey, which neither Varro nor Nico liked, as well as tennis. I also swam, which I loved the most. How she kept all our schedules together and kept us fed, I had no idea. It was a full-time job she always said she was thrilled to do. She loved her boys—me included—and was thrilled her family, as well as her husband’s, treated me the same as her birth sons.

I loved my new family. I had never known my own. My mother had turned me over to foster care when I was an infant, and there was no father listed on my birth certificate.

Supposedly blond-haired, green-eyed little boys were in demand, but no one ever wanted me, so I got passed around the system until the day I saw Varro on the roof.

It turned out I had fallen in love at first sight.

When Varro came home from the hospital and saw me in the room across the hall, he was more than happy to have another brother to plot escapades with. When he found in me a willingness to follow, blindly, wherever he led, I quickly took Nico’s spot as his preferred partner in crime.

The bond just strengthened the older we got. It was always me and him, inseparable, and while Nico had at first been upset about being replaced, when he discovered girls,

we were forgotten anyway.

I didn't get Nico's fascination with every girl he saw. I had no interest in them, and by the time I hit high school, I understood why. Women were not alluring. They were nice, I liked them, they made for incredible friends, but not to kiss or do anything else with. Men were a whole different story. The posters in my room were not on the walls because I loved the teams they played for, but instead for the various stages of undress. Removal of sports equipment was a convenient excuse for them to all be half naked. Of course, David Beckham was on the ceiling above my bed in all his tattooed glory, and when Varro was there, splayed out, he never missed a chance to remark on how weird it was.

"That would creep me out, waking up and seeing that poster every morning."

By seventeen, it took everything in me not to say I wished it was him I could wake up to instead. More than anything, I wanted to sleep with my best friend, have him in my bed, between my sheets.

I dreamed about him being the one who did things to me I read about and saw pictures of on the Internet. Every cell in my body screamed for him, yearned for him. Having him in my room, close to me, stretched out beside me, was maddening, but worse was the realization that, just as Nico did, Varro loved girls. And they loved him back.

I finally got it through my head that my life was not a movie. My best friend would never one day just turn, grab me, and kiss me breathless, no matter how much I hoped. It was a painful realization, but owning it made me feel better, and soon after, I started putting distance between us.

When I came out, the Daciens were fine with it, supportive and accepting, giving me the same safe-sex lectures Varro and Nico got, especially since I was going away to

college and they wouldn't see me every day. Mrs. Dacien was worried as much about me not eating as she was about me not using a condom. I promised to be vigilant about both.

Leaving for school was easier than I thought it would be—with the one exception of Varro. Being apart after nine years of constant togetherness was painful.

It turned out the whole sharing-a-brain-with-someone thing was not something you could just turn off and on. I was in Chicago, getting my business degree, but Varro was calling, texting, and emailing because he was excited to give me the news.

“Motorcycles?”

“Yeah.” It sounded like he was vibrating, he was that happy.

“You’re kidding?”

“No,” he snapped. “Why would I be kidding?”

“Why are you mad?”

He was always pissed off lately. The happy-go-lucky guy I'd known for years and years had disappeared once we weren't living together anymore.

“I just don't need one more person telling me it's stupid.”

“So now I'm just another person.”

“No.”

“That's what you just said.”

“Fuck you, Brian!” he yelled, and then he was gone.

I was stubborn and didn’t call back, so the next communication I got was an email directing me to join the SuperbikeSteel website so I could watch videos and basically stay on top of all the news related to racing on the international stage. My foster brother, first crush, first love, had decided he was going to race motorcycles for a living.

I called Nico, absolutely frantic.

“Don’t get me started.” He was trying not to hyperventilate himself.

A trust Varro’s grandfather had set up for him that he received when he turned twenty-one made his dream happen. We were all worried—the whole family—and when I checked in with Varro, finally got him on the phone, I asked him.

“Why not a car?”

“Too constrictive.” He yawned and made a noise like he was stretching, which I could imagine him doing. All the long muscles moving under his smooth skin...

“Brian?”

“Sorry.” I coughed. “But, uhm, motorcycles are dangerous, V.”

“Oh c’mon,” he husked. “Riding a motorcycle at two hundred miles an hour—it doesn’t get any better than that.”

I understood, of course. Speed had always been Varro’s greatest love.

And so it went. Nico and I were the boring ones: he was going to be a doctor; I was

learning about finance and marketing. Varro called me from places like Monaco at all hours of the night and day, always drunk, always with noise in the background. Circumspect Varro was a thing of the past.

After I graduated with my bachelor's in business administration, I went to work for a real estate developer while going to school for my MBA at night. It felt good; I was on track toward my goal of security. Varro didn't get that. He wanted me to go on the road with him.

It became a weekly thing. He'd call from clubs, parties, places I didn't want to know about, and beg me to come to wherever he was and stay with him.

"Are you doing body shots off a model?"

"Yeah. How'd you know?"

I'd groan and tell him I was hanging up.

"Just come stay with me."

Always he entreated me to just get on a plane. And I understood: he didn't know what had happened. It wasn't his fault I fell in love with him. He wanted his best pal back, his adopted brother. I was the one carrying the torch and interfering with our lifelong friendship. But we were also simply growing up.

"We weren't going to live together forever."

"Why not?"

I was incredulous. "Because we're grown men."

“Yeah, so?”

“So you’re gonna want a family someday—so will I.”

He scoffed. “You’re my family, Brian.”

“I’m a member of your family, yeah, but?—”

“No. You’re it.”

He didn’t understand.

“Come see me. Come watch me race.”

I felt like crap about it, but being around him, having him manhandle me, hug me, kiss me in the whole touchy-feely way he had, was agony. My body heated when I was near him; my skin ached to touch and be touched in return.

I was hungry to taste him, and it was a consuming, unrequited desire. The only way I knew how to deal with it was to impose distance.

I went home for Christmas only when I knew he couldn’t make it. Mrs. Dacien always had the same lament, that someday, before she died, she would like all her boys home together. Little did she know that I checked the Internet and the company blog, stayed on top of his status on Instagram and YouTube to make sure I knew where he was at all times. There were no surprises. I became the master of last-minute changes.

“So you’re not coming now?” he would snarl into the phone from his parents’ home.

“No, I gotta work,” I reported, and really, it wasn’t a lie. I covered the office all the

days before and after the holidays so people with families could have the time off. “I have a real job, you know?”

“Racing is?—”

“A real thing, I know.”

“You’re such a dick sometimes.”

“Well, then, lucky for you, you don’t have to see me.”

He hung up, and it hurt, like a knife in my gut, but it saved me the pain of seeing him and not having him. I was also sparing him the humiliation of being grossed out by my advances. I was keeping us both safe from a shitload of grief.

What I didn’t anticipate was that the better he got at his sport, the more dangerous it became. You had to keep taking bigger chances, the bikes got more powerful, and the competition grew so much more fierce.

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TWO

The Isle of Man TT was a race I never saw coming. It was not part of the races Varro normally rode in, not part of the MotoGP, the motorcycle racing world championship circuit he competed in. Normally there were barricades and fencing between him and the bystanders, and he was used to a track. Everything about the Grand Prix events he normally rode in was similar. But there, on the small island, the race was run on almost forty miles of public roads, roads used by regular people on a day-to-day basis. You could study the route but nothing else. Everything was so tight; you could scrape a house, a tree, take a wrong turn and be in the middle of a pub or in someone's front yard. At any time, a rider could hit an uneven patch of road, and another rider was right there, closer than normal, and the result was a collision with walls, hedges, or gardens. For Varro it had been a simple matter of taking a turn just a little too tight.

The bike couldn't hold the angle, and down he went.

The call for me to get there came from Nico. Varro was unresponsive; the doctors weren't sure when he would wake up. I arrived a day later.

Varro's staff was there. I met them all: his assistant, Georgia Penny; his chief mechanic, Aidric Barnes; his publicist; some of his friends; the current socialite he was dating; and his manager, Kyle Tokunaga. Mr. and Mrs. Dacien were there as well, and Nico and his wife, Fiona.

Everyone looked scared. I wasn't. I was pissed.

They were quiet. I yelled.

“What the hell?” I barked at Varro.

Nico was shocked. “Brian, what are you?—”

“Oh!” The doctor on the other side of Varro’s bed, beside the monitor, was startled not by my outburst but something else.

“What?” Nico asked worriedly.

Apparently the monitor had made a very promising sound.

“That was... unprecedented,” he answered Nico before he glanced at me.

I squinted.

The doctor’s eyes got big, and Nico, being an attending physician at his own hospital where he worked, looked at the same monitor and knew what it meant too. He turned and kissed me on the cheek.

“Yell at him some more, Bri. All of us talking to him didn’t do a damn thing, but apparently your anger just woke the asshole up.”

“Nico!” Mrs. Dacien scolded.

But he hushed her as I leaned down next to Varro’s ear and whispered something I thought would get his attention:

“If you don’t open your eyes right now, I’m telling your folks that you screwed a crapload of girls on their bed.”

The monitor whistled and whined.

“And,” I husked, “I’ll tell your mom that her mother’s quilt, dear Grandma Esther’s quilt, was on the bed under you when you deflowered all the cheerleaders in the eleventh grade.”

The growl surprised everyone.

“Open your eyes, dickhead.”

A collective hush followed everyone’s gasps when Varro’s gorgeous brown eyes, fringed in long, thick, feathery black lashes, fluttered open.

Mrs. Dacien broke down. “Varro,” she said on a sob.

“You wouldn’t dare,” he whispered.

I arched an eyebrow for him, which I hoped conveyed the assurance of yes, of course I would.

“Fucker,” he muttered.

A whole second round-robin of startled chirping filled the room.

“Don’t do this again,” I said, turning to go, just needing to be out of the room for a little bit, shocked that my brave face had stayed on, overwhelmed that he was both awake and lucid.

“Wait,” he rasped, and I heard all the effort that took.

“I’ll be back when it’s quiet,” I promised over my shoulder. I walked out as I glanced

back and saw everyone surging around him, and waited down the hall for Mr. and Mrs. Dacien to come out of the room and greet me.

I felt like crap because they were both so thankful. If they knew what I really wanted, needed, was dying to claim and could barely breathe around... they would be sick. I was a fake, a phony, masquerading as their son when I yearned to be a son-in-law instead. Only Nico's vigilance kept me from bolting. He sat with me in the hall.

"There's a race through the Atlas Mountains in Morocco," he said absently.

I had no idea why he was telling me that.

"That's where he's going next."

"He's brilliant."

"That's what I said," he scoffed, sipping the coffee he'd gotten out of an ancient machine.

We were quiet for a bit.

"They want you to call them Mom and Dad, but you never do."

I turned from staring at the wall to meet his gaze.

"You're not blind. You know why I can't."

"Because if you do, if they really are your parents...." He sighed. "Then you'll really be his brother."

I didn't even have to agree. We both knew it was true even though neither of us ever

gave the secret voice.

“But if you were with him, wouldn’t they be your folks anyway?”

“That would be different.”

“I guess. But he misses the hell out of you, he tells me all the time. It’s not fair the way you punish him for your weakness.”

“I know,” I retorted irritably and went back to staring at the cracks in the wall.

Later, Mrs. Dacien, the only mother I had ever known, stood with me.

“You love your job so much?”

It was an odd conversation to start. “I’m moving up,” I explained. “That’s good, right?”

“Yes,” she agreed, her eyes clouded. “That’s good.”

There was obviously something on her mind. “What?”

“The time when anyone else could take your place,” she said, “that’s long past. Even Ancel and I... our words carry little meaning.”

“What are you?—”

“Varro. We’re talking about Varro.”

“Yeah, but what about him? I don’t?—”

“Only you, Brian, not us,” she stated.

“Wait, you’re saying you don’t think he cares what you and Mr. Dacien think about the racing? That’s not true. He?—”

“Not just about the racing. About anything.”

“No—”

“Stop.” She held up a hand. “I’m not a fool. There’s only one person he believes and listens to and heeds.”

“Heeds .” I snorted out a laugh.

“It’s true,” she insisted. “You’re the one he saw in the window and invited into his life. You’re the one who never said stop, only go. He’s used to looking over his shoulder and seeing you there, and now you’re not.”

“He has his life and I have mine.”

“No.”

I shook my head. “I can’t be his shadow for the rest of my life.”

“That’s not what he needs.”

“Then what are you saying?”

“Only for a little while, one season only.”

“But I’m working and going to school and?—”

“You can work for him, and school can be done on the Internet, Brian.”

And of course his sponsor would pay me, and yes, I could do my coursework online, but why should I have to?

Why did I always have to follow him?

“It’s not fair of you to ask me for anything.”

“Isn’t it?”

Shit. The guilt card.

“Brian?”

My gaze locked on hers. “You don’t know what you’re really asking.”

“I do. But understand this, for him, for you, for Nico—it would be the same request. It’s not you for Varro, or because I saved you, now you have to save him.”

“Are you sure?”

Her eyes blazed in that way that I knew, from years of shared space, that she was furious. “If the roles were reversed, and Varro needed you—this would be the same conversation.”

“Yes, but that could never happen, right? He’s the one who’s scary, not me. Not Nico.”

She nodded. “This is true, so we will never be able to test this.”

I was going to say something, anything, to wriggle free.

“But,” she said softly, but somehow thunderously at the same time. Her voice blew right through me, “that doesn’t mean that you can use that to say no.”

Everything froze. I could feel my lungs constrict. “You don’t get it.”

“I do.” She nodded. “And I don’t care what sacrifices you need to make right now because, again, I would ask the same of Varro, or Nico, if the roles were reversed.”

Would she? Or was she asking me because I wasn’t hers, and she loved Varro more? She would use me to make sure he stayed in one piece.

“He loves you best, Brian, that can’t be changed. And because of that, this is all on you.”

It wasn’t fair.

“Please, Brian,” she entreated, squeezing my hands.

I wanted to ask: Do you care if by some miracle your son falls in love with me? Do you care if it physically pains me to be near him and not be his? Am I so expendable? And more... it was like returning to my childhood.

I was again a foster kid whose life was constantly unsettled, who was displaced over and over, and whose whole world had been one giant upheaval. I craved stability, and I wouldn’t get it. More than anything I wanted a home, and that dream too would have to wait. All in ruins because of this, because of what Varro needed.

“Brian,” Nico said at my ear, suddenly there.

I couldn't tear my eyes from Mrs. Dacien's dark-brown ones, the ones she had passed on to her son.

"Brian."

The first time my name was spoken, it was Nico. I'd been conditioned to ignore him by years of close quarters.

But the second time, it was Mr. Dacien, and she commanded too much respect for me to not give him my full attention. I met his gaze.

"He's asking for you."

I was furious because they all expected me to do the right thing. I was just supposed to go in there and give up my life because Varro needed me? How was that fair?

"Brian?"

Mrs. Dacien squeezed my forearm gently before she put her hand to my cheek. I covered it briefly with my own and then made my way down the hall. Moving at a clip, I passed the socialite and the crew and the assorted entourage until I was standing again in the doorway of his room.

"Come here," he said tiredly.

I stayed where I was. "Are you going to get better?"

"Of course—" He winced, shuddering with pain. "—I always do."

"Nico says you're off to Morocco next."

“The next race is in two months. It’s gonna be a rough one.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah,” he explained. “Lots of bad turns, and there’s a huge gorge that—” He sucked in a breath. “Come push this button for me. I need more drugs.”

I remained still. “You can get it.”

“Yes,” he hissed. “I can. But I don’t fuckin’ want to! I want you to do it. I want you to come here and give a damn that I almost?—”

“Shut up,” I mumbled, letting my head thunk back against the doorframe. “You know I care. Don’t be so dramatic.”

“Please come here.”

I levered myself off the wall and crossed the room, stood over him and looked down at his bruised and swollen face, at his eyes, both with blood in them, the subconjunctival hemorrhaging which Nico had explained to me, looking and sounding worse than it was.

“I missed you.”

What was I supposed to say?

“Just hug me already.” His voice broke.

I felt horrible. He just needed comfort, and I was keeping that from him because of what was going on in my head, in my heart.

“Brian?”

His voice was so full of heart-tugging need it took everything in me to stay where I was.

“Hey, which one of the women out there is your girlfriend? I can go get?—”

“No. I only want you here.”

He was saying everything I wanted to hear, in completely the wrong context.

“Could you hold my hand?” It was a request, and the trembling made him clench his jaw.

“You need to be more careful.”

“Come watch me—” His voice hitched with the roll of pain through his body that made him twitch. “—then you can make sure.”

“Give yourself some more drugs before you stress your body.”

“You do it.”

The button was in his hand. “Just press it already.”

“You.” He insisted like a child.

“Don’t be an idiot, you could go into shock.”

“Promise to come with me. I know you’re not afraid,” he whispered.

And he was right, I wasn't. I couldn't explain it. Getting busted up with fractured bones had happened to him so many times in the past, I was used to it. But having him die never entered my realm of possibility. I'd never worried about that.

"If you're there, I'll be okay," he said as tears started to well in his eyes.

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Varro," I huffed, grabbing the button that pushed the meds and then pressing it quickly.

He was so hurt, just broken, but still he managed to take my hand before I pulled it back, and slid his fingers between mine.

"Let go," I ordered lamely, since it was the last thing I really wanted.

"Why do you hate me now? What did I do?"

"You didn't do anything," I said softly. "I promise."

"Then how come we don't talk like we used to?" He tensed in pain. "And how come I never see you?"

"People grow up, V."

He whimpered in the back of his throat. "Just come with me so I can feel like me and not somebody else."

"I'm not this important."

He tried for a grin but winced instead. "Isn't that for me to say?"

"You're being ridiculous."

“I don’t think so,” he said, staring up at me with wounded, blood-filled eyes. “You know, you used to pet me when you thought I was passed out and wouldn’t notice.”

I had no secrets from this man.

“I liked that, and I liked listening to you breathe.”

God.

He was quiet for a minute, and I saw how hard he was fighting sleep. “Close your eyes.”

“You have to give me your word first that when I open them, you’ll still be here.”

“I could just lie.”

He almost laughed, but the attempt must have felt like someone punched him in the gut and stole all his air. “You—” He gasped. “—never lie to anyone, least of all me.”

I was done at age nine, him at ten, the day we met. The minute our eyes locked—that very first time—the bargain had been struck.

Look at me!

I see you!

Without my eyes on him, whatever he was doing wasn’t real. I got that because I was the same exact way. It was just that watching him was a full-time job and my life only happened in spurts.

“Bri?”

“I’ll come for a while. I don’t know how long.”

“Okay.” He exhaled, obviously relieved. “So you’re not mad anymore?”

“I was never mad.”

His relief over that fact made my heart drop.

“I’ll pay you to babysit me.”

“Yes, you will,” I guaranteed drolly.

He nodded, lifting his right arm. The left one was too mangled to move, broken in five places, with pins holding it together. “Bend down.”

I leaned over, and he put his right arm around my neck, buried his face in the hollow of my throat, and held me tight as he inhaled.

“You’re gonna like watching me race.”

“I really doubt it,” I muttered. But when he turned his head and touched his lips to the spot on my jaw right under my ear, I forgot what else I was going to say.

“I don’t.” He sighed deeply, so obviously content. “Promise to stay with me.”

And I would, until it hurt too much.

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THREE

The breadth of what I had to learn staggered me. The places we went in the off-season before the official start of the MotoGP calendar left me dizzy. Those races were not, strictly speaking, legal. Our trip to the Atlas Mountains was terrifying, and learning from Aidric that the race wasn't sanctioned by anyone confused me. But apparently the money was good because of the threat of imminent peril.

Varro was looking for a wild-card spot before the racing season began, and if he got it, more cash would be needed to maintain the bikes and pay a larger staff.

The year before, after his injury, Varro lost his premier-class status when he failed to collect enough points to keep it. So even though he was riding a Honda RC213V—a 1000cc bike—over the Stelvio Pass in the eastern Alps in Italy (where we were right after Christmas), he would not be riding it once the official racing season started unless he could win the wild-card spot. Currently he was in the Moto2 class, which meant he was racing a 600cc bike.

"I'm lost," I admitted to Aidric as I stood with him two weeks later on the Guoliang Tunnel Road in China.

"There is MotoGP and Moto2 and Moto3."

"I got that part."

"Well, Varro needs the FIM/Dorna to nominate him as the one wild-card entry for the MotoGP class at each Grand Prix."

“Who?”

“FIM is the Fédération Internationale de Motocyclisme.”

“And Dorna?”

“Dorna Sports is the company which administrates MotoGP.”

“Okay.”

He waited.

“So it could be a different guy each time, right?”

“That they nominate at the Grand Prix?” he checked, and I nodded. “Aye.”

“But if Varro wins, it stands to reason that they would pick him again and again?”

“Yes.”

“And his backup plan is to run in the Moto2.”

“Don’t say it like Moto2 is not?—”

“Yeah, okay.” I was trying to wrap my brain around everything. “Now explain about the bikes.”

“Well, like I said, Varro used to ride for Quad Ducati, so he had a bike made by the manufacturer. But since he lost his sponsorship, now we’re runnin’ a satellite bike, which means that the bike itself is still basically factory, but Honda doesn’t sponsor us.”

“And what about those guys with the CRT bikes?”

“That’s a team that claims special status because they race bikes that are modified.”

“And your bike isn’t?”

“It’s more than one bike, mate.”

Of course it was. “How come he doesn’t ride a Ducati anymore?”

“When Varro had his accident in Jerez, and then again in Mugello last year, he just couldn’t keep coming back in time to race.”

“Which was why he was doing the Isle of Man TT when he got hurt again,” I summarized.

Quick nod from him to confirm.

“But the places where he—” I couldn’t bring myself to say “crashed,” it wasn’t enough of a word. “Won’t we go back to all those this year?”

“Aye, my lad.”

I had to absorb that. “Sorry, go on.”

“Well, once he was released from the team, they took the bikes back. I talked him into getting a Honda. Everyone runs better on a certain kind of bike. Sometimes it’s as simple as the shape of the fairing, but for Varro—he seems to do better on the esses on the Honda.”

He was talking about turns. On the switchback ones, the hairpin ones, the esses,

Varro, for whatever reason, maneuvered better on the Honda. Everyone swore by a different kind of bike, and as far as I could tell, every rider could make a case for why his was the best. I just wanted Varro to stay vertical—or at an angle—without losing his balance. How he could even hold the curves, slanted as he was when he took them, like he could have turned his head and touched the pavement with his nose, was a feat of balance I could not imagine. The physics of it was lost on me, but science had nothing to do with him believing. I was there, so he could have flown if he needed to.

Every day, Varro stared into my eyes as he got on the bike. I looked at the helmet and the red and black racing leathers and thought, How can that be all? Shouldn't there be more padding? Armor, maybe? But that was all there was, because otherwise how was he going to hunch over the bike and fly down the course?

I didn't say anything; it wasn't my place. The words be careful never passed my lips. I just prayed them over and over in my head.

Each of the Grand Prix events lasted three days, and during that time, we lived in a motorhome. We had two—one for the crew, one for the rest of us—and quarters were tight. We parked in an area called the paddock, and really, by the time we were in Qatar for the first race, I was certain I was going to need tranquilizers.

I had no idea how everyone kept themselves sane amid the constant bustle, the lights, the noise, the crowds of people, and the rules. Just what you had to know was daunting. Where to sit, where to stand, the riders had to line up on the grid according to their qualifying time, all the races had points, and... It was mind-blowing.

“Why are you worrying?” Varro teased the night before the race, pulling me into the tiny room we shared at the back of the motorhome. The room held two stacked beds that could be pushed up flat against the wall, a closet, and a flat-screen on the wall. “They named me the wild card. I’m in, that’s what we all wanted.”

His desire, not mine.

“All you have to do is watch me ride really fast out there tomorrow. I need the best time. That’s all there is to it.”

But I found that watching was not the exciting experience I thought it would be. It was simply terrifying.

And it wasn’t that I didn’t like danger. I was as much of an adrenaline junkie as the next guy, and having him race legally on tracks was so much better than when he had been riding roads that could only loosely be called that, at altitudes between one and a half and three miles above sea level. But it was terrifying because of the speed. He could be gone in an instant.

But nobody, including him, read that on my face.

“Oh, mate.” Aidric grinned at me over a drink in Jerez almost a month later. “You’re lucky, you are.”

I squinted at him.

“He looks at you and he thinks he can fly.”

“Is that a compliment?”

“‘Tis. If I hadn’t seen the man shag three and four girls a night before you joined us, I’d wonder about you two.”

But there was nothing more between me and Varro than there had been our entire lives. And when I looked up and saw Varro emerging from the back of the club we were in, I was reminded yet again that the man was a whore.

“Oh shit,” I heard a girl say at the table next to us. “I want that.”

Varro was making his way through the crowd to reach me and Aidric.

Jesus.

Head held high, a loose-hipped, fluid stride combined with the wicked curl of his lip—he made people stop and stare. His frame was powerful and strong; his clothes clung to his long muscular legs, broad shoulders, and wide chest.

The thick, glossy black hair he had inherited from his mother was pulled back from his face in a queue, and the rest hung to his shoulders in a silky fall. Even the stubble, of which I was normally not a fan, was sexy on him.

When he reached us, I could smell the smoke and perfume clinging to him. My stomach rolled. “Gettin’ laid?” I inquired snidely.

“Yes, sir.” He grinned big.

“How many is that tonight, mate?” Aidric teased.

“. Or, I mean, does it count in a bathroom stall?” he queried his head mechanic, his hooded brown eyes looking liquid in the light.

“It does,” I informed him petulantly.

His grin was evil. “Of course it does, baby.”

I growled. He grabbed me, and though I was still five ten to his six two, the man was much more muscular than me, and he easily pulled me off my chair and into the forced embrace.

“Hug me back,” he demanded, soft and husky in my ear.

But he reeked of perfume and cigarettes and cum, and he was trying to show me again, for the billionth time in my life, that we were brothers. Friends. And in that second, I had the weirdest moment of absolute shining clarity.

It was funny, but it was like something actually clicked in my brain. I shoved him off me, and he looked wounded for a moment before I grinned wide.

“What’s this? You’re not actually going to lighten up, are you? Wouldn’t want you to break something in your face,” Varro sniped.

Epiphanies came at the weirdest times, in the oddest places.

What a bastard I must have been for him to say something like that. There I was, thinking I was hiding everything, when my thirst for him, my hunger, consumed every second. I was making him miserable too; I had to be.

The things I wanted—him with me, not drinking, not fucking the paddock girls or any of the other thousand women milling around—were not possible. I had to let it go.

He was straight, no matter what foolish dreams my heart had conjured up, and I was supposed to be his best friend. I had completely lost sight of that.

It was time to make the best of it.

“Brian?” He sounded worried. “You all right?”

I took his face in my hands, realized who he was, what he was, and finally—after a lifetime—let him go.

“Baby?” And even the nickname would not stop the severing, not this time.

I took a step back and exhaled a decade of craving.

“What’s going on?”

“I’ll stay until the end of this season,” I informed him. “But then I’m going back to the States, picking a city, and buying my own place.”

“What kind of place?”

“Not sure yet.” I grinned. “But I think I can be a good boss, ya know?”

“Bri—”

“Go get your kink on, V,” I replied, sitting back down beside Aidric. “We’re gonna get drunk while you get laid.”

“Are we now.” Aidric laughed, his hand on my shoulder like it never was, companionably. “You think you can outdrink a Scot?”

“Hell yeah.” I waggled my eyebrows.

Varro was at a loss.

“Just go,” I said cheerfully. “Don’t worry about it.”

He was suspicious. “Just like that?”

I nodded. “You can only carry a torch for so long before you finally have to drop it.”

“I don’t— What? What does that mean?”

“Everything’s gonna be good,” I promised. “I swear, baby.”

He visibly jolted.

“What? Only you get to say that?”

“I—”

“Off you go.” I dismissed him, turning to Aidric. “Get me a pint, will you, mate?”

Aidric’s grin was huge and crooked. “I like you this way, Mr. Christie.”

Everyone did.

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FOUR

The season ended in Valencia in November. I informed Varro I would stay until Thanksgiving, and if he was going home to New York to see his folks, I would fly there with him.

But he was going to Paris for Thanksgiving—there was a new girl—and then he was going to some chateau in the Alps for the holidays. I promised to convey all his love to his family, hugged and kissed him and everyone else, and took the first flight out. I could breathe once the plane left the ground.

We were friends, but even though I had made it clear in my head that I no longer had any feelings for him, my heart didn't know that. I could do it, just be his buddy, but it took a lot out of me. It was nice to not have to look at him anymore.

The best part was that I'd figured out what I really wanted: to open a shelter for kids. Not the kind where they just came to sleep or stay when they were on their way from one foster family to another, but the kind where they could learn some skills for life, sort of like Job Corps. But if they were artistically inclined, I would have ways to help with that, as well.

Basically, Chameleon—which is what I named my business—helped you fit in wherever it was you decided you wanted to be. You wanted to learn how to fix cars? I had an apprenticeship for that. If you wanted to go to college, we had programs to get school figured out and help you with financial aid and all the scary parts of preparing to get a two-year or four-year degree. Whatever you needed, we could provide. And once you registered with Chameleon, if you stumbled—drugs, alcohol,

pregnancy—we would be there for that too.

I was stunned to find out how many programs out there wanted to partner with me, how many schools, private businesses, and rehab facilities. We had wonderful donors with charitable dollars to spend and write off on their taxes.

People I met when I slumped around the world with Varro remembered me, people who had money to burn that I was more than willing to take off their hands. Things ramped up so fast, for the first six months I had no time to think or worry. I had big plans, and what I thought would take time instead moved at light speed.

Mr. and Mrs. Dacien didn't understand why I chose Long Beach, California. But it was a mix of a smaller city cussing on an enormous one, which was perfect for me.

When I had visited a friend there during college, I had fallen in love. Before, I had always worried about Varro, about where he wanted to be, but I had come to realize he was a nomad, living out of his trailer because that was his life. It wasn't mine.

I loved my little house close to downtown, a block from a really great Japanese restaurant. My business was close to 1st and Pine, close to the Transit Mall, which made it easy for the kids to get there on the train. I walked every day from my place, and on the very few nights when I actually got out at a decent hour, the friends I made—from going on art walks, being involved in community activities, and attending gallery openings—and acquaintances from the chamber of commerce would show up to meet me. I was building my life; things were good. I even started dating my real estate agent.

So of course, right at that one-year mark, when I was on track and together, was when Aidric Barnes showed up on a Saturday. It all made perfect sense.

“Uhm, Bri, do you know this guy?”

Graham Easley, the very handsome, very kind, very understanding new man in my life, was not looking at me but instead behind me at whoever hovered there.

Turning in my chair, I looked up at the scowling Scot who had been on my porch earlier in the day, trying to leverage himself into my home. “Oh, for crissakes, Aid, what the hell?”

“I’m needing to speak with ya.”

I shook my head.

“Would you like to sit down?” Graham offered. And of course he would offer. Aidric Barnes was a mountain of hard muscle with the face right out of a romance novel. The man was stunning. Much like Varro, everyone looked at him.

“He doesn’t want to sit down,” I said firmly.

“I would love to sit, thank you,” Aidric said in that overly solicitous way he had when he was being a real ass.

Six people sat at the table, not counting me or Graham or now Aidric. They all leaned forward, riveted by the rugged-looking Scotsman suddenly in our midst.

I waited.

“He needs you to come back.”

I leaned my chin on my palm and stared at him.

“He does,” Aidric insisted.

“Who are we talking about?” Graham wanted to know.

“My foster brother.”

“Oh, the motorcycle racer?”

I nodded.

“Motorcycle racer,” Aidric scoffed. “Is that what you’re callin’ him, then?”

“Try and not be a total wiseass right now.”

“That canna be helped.”

“What does he need?” I questioned Aidric. “‘Cause you guys did a whole season last year without me. You actually just finished it, like, last month. Aren’t you off? This is December. You should be home with your wife on the farm in—where is it again?”

“Netherbrae.”

“That’s it,” I said wistfully. “It sounds lovely. You should be there.”

“Don’t tell me where I should be, wee man.”

“And where is your liege? On Lake Como with—what was her name? I got a call when you guys were in?”

“You didn’t call him at all last year.”

“I did, I tried. It’s hard, though, with the change in time zones and... but we emailed.”

“He got hurt.”

The simple statement slammed into me like a fist in the gut.

“Brian?”

“It must not have been very bad,” I quipped, trying not to let anyone see how much the words had affected me. “No one called.”

“It was verra bad.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know. Now tell me why I didn’t.”

“We were forbidden.”

“And why’s that?”

He cleared his throat. “Shall everyone be hearing, then?”

I exhaled sharply. “Why don’t we do this... come see me tomorrow and we’ll go to breakfast and talk.”

He nodded. “Varro doesn’t know I’m here.”

“Okay.”

“He’s plannin’ to run the Isle of Man TT again next year.”

“That’s in May, right?”

“Aye.”

“But he’ll do the MotoGP again.”

He was silent.

“Aid?”

He shrugged.

“Listen,” I said softly. “I know he got hurt really bad in the TT last time, but he’s a better racer now, and?—”

“No.”

“No?”

He shook his head, and I finally got it. “What’s wrong with him? Is he sick?”

His dark reddish-brown brows pinched together, and he shook his head slightly.

“Okay, not sick. Then what?”

But whatever it was, he didn’t want to say.

“Come over tomorrow whenever you get up,” I directed. “I’ll be there.”

He rose and left without a word.

“So tell us all about your boyhood friend,” Graham prodded after Aidric left.

I played videos from YouTube on my phone for him and everyone else at the table instead. They could see him, but the last thing I wanted to do was talk about Varro.

On the walk back to my place, Graham bumped me with his shoulder.

“What?”

“You never mentioned that your pal, the guy you always make sound like a giant pain in the ass, is drop-dead gorgeous.”

I looked at him. “What?”

“And you made the racing sound so benign, so small-time. You neglected to say that he participates in a huge international competition where the bikes cost more than my house.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It does matter, because this guy Vaughn?—”

“Varro,” I corrected.

“Varro,” he repeated, “is the kind of cool I can’t compete with.”

“Graham—”

“Those videos, Brian, the wail of the bikes and the—people are standing there watching these guys just for a glimpse of?—”

“It’s not a big deal.”

“It is. And the videos from that Isle of Man race are insane! And he rides in that and he risks his life just to participate in a dangerous sport and?—”

“Why do you care?”

“Because your buddy, the one you say you don’t care about, well, he looks like a pirate or something, and he’s beautiful, and he does this amazingly sexy thing for a living, and he’s rich and?”

“Not rich,” I corrected.

“Okay, not rich.” He chuckled.

“It really doesn’t?”

“What he does is really scary, and he’s larger than life. How am I supposed to compete with that?”

“You don’t compete,” I scoffed. “There’s no competing. He’s my friend and not even my best one anymore, because he doesn’t know anything that’s going on with me. He doesn’t know about my business or my plans or my life or....” I trailed off, thinking. “He’s just gone. He’s got his life, I have mine. That’s it.”

“Yeah, but?”

“No, Graham,” I promised with a sigh. “There’s nothing.”

“There’s something.” He stepped closer, lifted his hand under my chin to tilt my head back.

“We’ll always be friends; we grew up together. If it wasn’t for Varro and his family, I would have gone from foster home to foster home, bouncing around the system, and who knows what would have happened to me. I owe them a lot.”

“Yes,” he said, his eyes on my mouth.

“It’s what I was thinking of when I started Chameleon, the debt I owed and that I should give back. The whole pay-it-forward thing, right?”

“Sure.”

“But really, me and Varro, we’re not close anymore. We’ve barely spoken since I left a year ago. Our lives are so drastically different. I mean, like, polar opposites. It’s crazy that we could even know each other, really.”

“You’re rambling.”

I was talking too much about something that was supposedly no longer the most important part of my life.

“Brian.”

But so many things had changed in a twelve-month period, and Varro had no idea. “I just don’t want you to think that he’d ever be anyone?—”

“Okay.”

“I probably won’t ever see Varro Dacien again.”

He nodded.

“It’s true, you know, even though you’re looking at me very dubiously.”

He appraised me. “You wanted him.”

“Of course I wanted him, he was my first love.”

“But?”

“But he couldn’t love me back, and you can’t be an idiot forever.”

“No,” he agreed before he sighed. “You can’t.”

“What?”

“It’s lucky that you two never got together.”

“Why’s that?” I teased, beaming as he bent toward me.

“Because he’s stunning and so are you. Not fair to the rest of us mere mortals.”

But I knew what I looked like, and even though blond hair and green eyes were appealing on other men, I had never been able to stop traffic, myself. I was more of the plain brown-wrapper variety, nothing like Varro, who turned heads wherever he went. I had often wondered when I was growing up what it was like for him to be that beautiful, what it was like to see the world through Varro’s eyes. It was nice to finally be in a place where it didn’t matter.

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FIVE

I waited around the next morning, but by the time noon rolled around, I was wishing I had taken Graham up on his offer to spend the night with him instead of going home. But I had promised Aidric I would be there, so I was going to be a stand-up guy; it was kind of annoying to get blown off when I could have gotten blown the night before.

As I was heading out to meet Graham for a late lunch, Varro's number appeared on my caller ID.

"Hey." I smiled into the phone. "This is weird timing."

He cleared his throat. "Bri."

I waited, but there was only silence, and because of that, I stopped on the cobblestone path between my little pale-blue California bungalow and the street. Varro was never quiet. He was big and loud and vibrant and... that was missing. "V?"

"Did you talk to Aidric?"

"What?"

"Just—did you?"

"Varro?"

“Brian!”

“No, I mean, we talked, but he was going to— Where are you?”

No answer.

But because I knew him so well, so thoroughly, I understood. “What did you do? Come chasing after Aidric?”

“No.”

“Yes, you did. Where is he?”

He coughed softly. “He went back to his farm this morning.”

“Because you what? Threatened him?”

“What?” His voice went up way too high.

Uh-huh. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” Varro lied, and because I knew him, I could tell.

“Where are you?”

“I’m at the airport.”

I absorbed that. “If you were leaving, why didn’t you just go?”

He was silent again.

“V?”

“I just thought it was a shame to come all the way from Malta and not say hello.”

“I would think so,” I huffed. “God, you’re an ass.”

“Me?” he flared. “What about you?”

“I haven’t done anything!” I was incredulous.

“No, you haven’t,” he agreed snidely. “Nothing at all.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Christ, no one wound me up as fast as Varro! I was so calm and serene ninety percent of the time. Only with him did I turn into a crazy person.

“You left me.”

How he could fill three little words with so much hurt and surprise and anger all at the same time, I had no idea. “I always said I was going to find a place and settle down, and you—it was a year ago, asshole.”

“I know precisely how long ago it was.”

“You were fine with it.”

“I thought you were coming back when the new season started.”

“Why?”

“I just did.”

“You just did?” What the hell kind of logic was that? “That’s ridiculous.”

“But you showed me, huh?”

“It’s been a year!” I retorted. “We talked on the— How can you be mad now when you weren’t mad then? That makes zero sense.”

“I was always mad.”

“You were always mad? That’s crap. How come you never said anything?”

“What was there to say?”

“What’s there to say now?”

Silence.

“Varro?”

“There’s nothing to say,” he said quietly. “So I guess I’ll?—”

“Don’t you dare hang up the phone,” I snarled, absolutely furious with him.

“Why? You just said?—”

“You have been a shitty friend,” I swore, passing judgment.

“Me? If one of us has been a total prick, believe me, baby, it’s you.”

“Don’t call me ‘baby,’” I stated petulantly, feeling the anger surging up from my gut.

“And you don’t even know what I’ve done!”

“You mean with your business, with Chameleon, that you never asked me to help you with? Is that what you’re talking about?”

“Help me?” I was livid, his words just fanning the flames.

“Yes, Brian, that’s what you do when you have a best friend. You call them and announce the big events in your life! You ask them to invest time and money, to help with funds to get the place off the ground! You ask them to come and be with you so you don’t go insane, because just seeing them grounds you and makes it so you can breathe.”

He lost me at the last part, and my brain shorted out. Instantly baffled, shocked out of my anger. “What?”

“Oh fuck off. Don’t play dumb. You know better, and you didn’t tell me on purpose.”

It was true. I’d been busy, yes, but I’d also made the conscious choice not to contact him. But that wasn’t the part I was confused about. “I knew better?” I repeated his words.

“Of course you did,” he sounded hurt and snide at the same time.

“You would have come to help me?”

“I would do anything for you!”

“Anything?”

“Do you doubt that?”

I did and didn’t.

“Brian?”

“That’s not fair,” I said, because there were things he wouldn’t, couldn’t, abide.

“It’s the truth and you fuckin’ know it!”

I had to think.

“When you were there—when I had you and the racing...” He sounded so wistful.

“God, Brian.”

“I hate it when you say shit like that,” I exploded. “Don’t treat me like I’m this great fucking love of yours when you know that’s all I ever wanted!”

Silence.

And after a long moment, it dawned on me what I had let pour from my soul and finally escape my lips.

Dear God.

I needed to pull the words back, but it was done and they were out there and there was no turning back time. I was standing naked in public, and there wasn’t anything I could do about it.

“What?” Varro was nonplused. I’d definitely surprised him.

Oh God. “Just?—”

“You love me?”

“Of course!” I seized on the chance to fix it. “You, Nico, your?—”

“No. That’s crap, Brian. That’s not what you meant.”

And it wasn’t.

“If it’s true?—”

“If?” I ground out. “There’s no if .”

He made a noise like he wasn’t sure. “Well, again, if that’s true, you sure have a shitty way of showing it.”

It took me a second because it was hard to listen and hope your head didn’t explode at the same time. “ What ?”

“You love me, but we’re apart. How does that make sense? Are you sure you know what you’re talking about?”

I hung up, because how dare he!

The year I spent on the road, I was great to him. I made sure everybody in his whole goddamn entourage loved me. I could not have been any nicer, any kinder, or any more helpful. I got messages and emails when I left, the whole we miss you and it’s not the same without you crap. I had made the trailer my home for the time I spent there, had filled it with things I knew he would want from heavy mugs to blankets to plants. How was I not the best friend ever?

My phone vibrated to let me know I had a text message.

It said simply, Who did you do that for?

The fact he knew me well enough to text not only a question, but the counterpoint to what I was thinking, was beyond maddening.

I growled as I hit the button to call him back.

“Everything I did, I did for you!”

“Bullshit! You did it for you!” he roared.

“What?” I was stunned. “Have you lost your fucking mind?”

“You did it so there’d be a big-ass fuckin’ hole in my world when you left.”

“Varro.”

“You wanted to make sure I saw it, make sure I felt it.”

“ Varro .”

“That I couldn’t miss it.”

“You—” I began.

“And guess what, Brian? I already knew it would be just fuckin’ like that!”

“God, I hate you!”

“Whenever you’re not with me, I feel it.” The way his voice cracked deflated all my anger. “And you don’t hate me one bit, and that’s the problem.”

There was a long silence where neither of us said a word.

“So you don’t just love me, you’re in love with me?” Varro sounded so out of it. Not quite lost, but it was a close thing.

I was suddenly freezing, pacing up and down on the cobblestone walk. I must have looked like a lunatic to anyone walking by my house.

“Brian?”

“Can’t you just?—”

“That’s what you said.” He was making sure. “That’s what you meant.”

“Can’t we just leave it alone? You don’t want?—”

“You have no idea what I want or don’t want, because you just decided for me and then left me all alone.”

“Varro, I left so you wouldn’t have to deal with me wanting you anymore, and that’s the bottom line. You know it and I know it.”

“And whoever said you couldn’t have that?”

“Have that . Have you . That’s what we’re talking about. Make no mistake, we’re talking about me having you,” I confessed, and I could hear the scratchy desperation in my voice. I was so scared and suddenly, ridiculously, so hopeful at the exact same time.

“I know.”

“I—”

“No, Brian,” he said gruffly. “You don’t get to keep making decisions. We’re done with that.”

“What does that mean?”

Several beats of time went by, of silence.

“I missed you when you left.”

“I missed you too,” I said automatically, since it was the truth and it sounded like he was going to let us get back to normal.

“No, you’re not hearing me. I didn’t miss you like I used to. It was different.”

My knees wobbled, and I had to sit down. It was lucky my front porch steps were there.

“I think about you all the time, Brian,” he murmured, and I could hear the pain in his voice.

I didn’t trust mine to come out as anything but a strangled gasp.

“But then I got scared, because, holy shit, right? I mean, you’re it . You’re my best friend and my conscience, you know all my secrets, and you still love me. What if I fuck it up and then you’re really gone? What am I supposed to do then?”

He sounded so lost. “Please wait at the airport,” I rasped. “I’ll come get you.”

“What?”

“You’re at LAX, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Then wait. I’m coming now.”

“No.” He sounded certain, and my heart seized.

“Don’t leave,” I begged. “Don’t race away from me.”

“What’re you?—”

“Please.”

“Brian, I have no intention of leaving you.”

He didn’t? “You’re not?”

“No. I don’t think we’re made to be apart.”

Always, my whole life, the man had been able to devastate me with his words.

“Do you love me?” I held my breath waiting for his answer.

“Yes.”

I plunged ahead. “Not like a brother.”

“No, not like that.”

I was back to being able to push air through my lungs.

“Like you want to be with me and sleep with me.”

“Yes.”

“Varro,” I whispered, because my voice had bottomed out on me.

“I love you. I’ve always loved you. I just didn’t know I did.”

And my life, just then, at that second, finally started. I stood up, walked down the steps, and then halfway down the path, lifting my face to the sun.

“Brian?”

“You do?” I asked shakily, a new emotion rolling through me. Hope.

“I do. I’m sorry. Turns out I’m kinda clueless. Forgive me.”

“Varro—”

“And then I was scared, ’cause, like I said, what if I lost you and then that was it?” His voice sounded like his throat was full of broken glass. “Can’t come back from that. Nothing would ever be the same.”

I missed things sometimes, and the fact he was really hurt had flown right over my head. “I left to punish you,” I confessed.

“I know.”

“And it worked.”

“Yes, it did.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re all I have. You’re the only one who knows me,” Varro admitted.

“You have your family. They love you.”

“But you get me. You know how my mind works. You see all of me.”

“And now you know why.”

He muttered something.

“What was that?” I pinned him down.

“I said yeah, I know why.”

“Do you?”

“Again, I’m not fuckin’ stupid.”

The whimper was involuntary. “Please, just?—”

“Shut up. I’ll be right there. Just wait for me, all right? Don’t take off again.”

“I’m home—where the hell am I gonna go?”

“Maybe somewhere with that guy,” he grumbled.

“What guy?”

“You don’t know your own guy?”

“I don’t have a guy.”

“I think you do.”

I was at a loss, and then it hit me. What it would have looked like if he saw it from the outside looking in. “How do you know about Graham?”

“Oh, so suddenly you remember his name?”

“I always—how do you know who he is?”

“I saw you with him last night.”

“You did?”

“Yeah.”

“And you didn’t come see me. You didn’t come and talk to me.”

“No.”

“Why the fuck not?” I flared angrily, shocked that he would stay away from me. He was never allowed to be in close proximity to me and not be seen, heard, touched.

“You were kissing him, and I— I’ve never seen you kiss anyone before.”

“Okay.”

“It was weird.”

“Weird, gross?” I fished.

“No.”

“Weird how?”

“Weird how pissed I was at you.”

“Pissed at me?”

“Yeah.”

“Why the fuck would you be pissed at me?”

“Because you were kissing him!” He sounded disgusted.

“Are you even listening to yourself?”

“Yes, I’m— Why would it matter?”

“You know why.”

I said what I hoped he was thinking. “Because I don’t kiss other men, I don’t fuck other men. I only do that with you.”

“That’s right.”

It felt like the ground fell out from under me, and my body, which had been cold out in the December air, flushed with heat.

Oh, please, God, let me be awake.

“I’ve never been possessive or jealous or?—”

“But you are now.”

“Yes.”

I had to push; I couldn't help it. “Because?”

“Because you belong to me, Brian, make no mistake. You always have.”

He was right and we both knew it. There was no argument to be made.

“It has to be all or nothing,” I insisted.

“Oh, I know.” He was placating me.

“What does that mean?” And now I was annoyed.

“It means that's how you are, Bri. Don't you think I know that?”

His voice, the way it broke, like his heart was aching, made me catch my breath. I wanted to see him almost desperately. “Were you really leaving?”

“I have no idea what I'm doing. I'm winging it.”

The sultry rumble made my stomach flutter.

“Did you come chasing after Aidric?”

“Yeah. I didn't want him to be the first one to talk to you. I wanted it to be me.”

“But?”

“But he doesn't want me to race anymore without you, and so he came to talk you into coming back. I mean, I get it. Everyone's always liked me better when you're

there. You make me nice and cautious and vigilant about my safety.”

“Is that right?”

“Screw you.”

“And you’re saying, everybody likes you that way?”

“I could do without you being so pleased with yourself.”

“Me?” I went for surprise, unsure if it was coming off. “Whatever do you mean?”

“You’re a good influence on me,” he snapped irritably. “That’s the general consensus.”

“Who knew,” I husked.

After a frustrated huff of air, he muttered, “I did.”

I chuckled. “Is that right?”

He grunted.

It felt so good to talk to him, so normal. “I missed you so bad.”

“I know you did.”

The man was insufferable. “You could say you missed me too.”

“But you know that, so why do I have to say it?”

“Varro—”

“Just wait for me. I’ll be right there,” he grumbled and hung up.

I stood there for a moment staring at my phone before turning and walking back up to the house. I sat down on the top step and realized I was trembling.

It was weird to be terrified and flooded with happiness at the same time. Head down between my knees, I worked to calm myself, trying not to hyperventilate.

Part of me was angry. How dare he pop back into my life again and pull the rug out from under me? I deserved my place, my home, my life. I wouldn’t be homeless again. I couldn’t be. It would break me.

The other half, the half that had spent a lifetime in love with my best friend, was in heaven.

I had to think.

I breathed in the smell of the ocean and coming rain. I focused on the sounds of people rushing by on the sidewalk and the wind kicking around the leaves on my front lawn. All the normal helped me slowly pull back all the pieces of my heart that had exploded like shrapnel. When I felt the stillness settle in me, I called Graham to give him my apologies.

“Okay, no lunch,” he said, chuckling. “So, dinner, then?”

“I don’t think so,” I replied honestly. “Varro is actually in town and?—”

“Wait.”

“What?”

“You’re saying the guy you said last night that you weren’t sure if you’d ever see again, ever, he’s suddenly in town?” he asked and sounded just a bit snide. “Do I have that right?”

“You do.” I laughed because, really, and always, Varro’s timing was for shit.

“That’s very interesting.”

“How do you mean?”

“I mean I’m getting conflicting messages here, Brian.”

“In what way?”

“Are you kidding? What is this guy to you?”

“Exactly what I told you. He used to be my best friend, and really, he still is.”

“How do things just change overnight?”

“They just do with Varro,” I groaned and then added, “He’s the worst.” But even I could hear how fondly the words came out.

“It sounds like that’s all right with you.”

“It was for a long time and then it wasn’t.”

“And now?”

“Now I don’t know,” I confessed because my life was in free fall at the moment. No telling where I was going to land.

“So everything you said last night was a lie.”

“No,” I explained. “It was all true then. I thought he was gone. Today he’s not, he’s here, and everything’s different.”

“So he never actually said that he was out of your life.”

“No, he didn’t.”

“And now what? He says jump and you say how high?”

“It’s not like that. I wanna see him.”

“You want to?”

“Of course. Always.”

He must have been mulling that over, because there was a momentary lull. “And you and I have what?”

“You lost me.”

“What do we have, Brian? What is this that we’re doing?”

“We’re spending time together. Dating.”

“It’s a little more than that.”

“But it’s not serious,” I made clear, because being less than honest served no one.

“It’s not?”

“It just started.”

“Brian.” His voice dropped. “I really like you.”

“And I like you too, or we wouldn’t be dating.”

“The way you are, the way you see the world the way it could be and not just the way it is, is a really amazing gift.”

That was nice. “I appreciate that, Graham.”

“It just sounds like this Varro guy is bad news. Like he brings you down.”

“No, he doesn’t,” I said softly, and even I could hear the adoration in my voice. “He’s been there my whole life.”

“Until now.”

“Yeah.”

He cleared his throat. “You missed him.”

“I did.”

“Brian,” he sighed. “I need you to let me come over there.”

“Just to have you leave when he gets here? That makes no sense.”

“You’re not hearing me.”

All the men in my life had gone insane. “Can I just call you tonight?”

“No,” he said after a moment. “I’ll call you next week, all right? See if you’re still in the same place to start something with me.”

That was fair. I had no idea what I was or wasn’t going to be like even in another thirty minutes let alone a week from now. Varro was coming to see me. What would my life look like after he showed up?

“I want to be with you, Brian, but if you’re not ready to take that step... what am I supposed to do?”

“I understand.”

“No, Brian, that’s not what I want. I don’t want you to understand and be nice and let me walk out of your life. I want you to fight. I mean, do you ever do that? Do you ever yell and make demands and hold someone else accountable? Christ, do you ever get mad? Do you ever get excited or frantic or?—”

“You’ve seen me be all those things. Of course I?—”

“No,” he said firmly. “I’ve barely seen any emotion from you at all. At first I thought it was cool that you were so unflappable, but now I see it for what it really is.”

“And what’s that?”

“You just don’t care.”

“You’re wrong,” I said flatly.

“No. I mean, you explained about the foster homes before?—”

“Wait, now?—”

“And maybe that’s what you did. Maybe that’s how you handled it. You just shut down and turned off and insulated yourself from?—”

“I’m gonna hang up now, Graham, before I say something I shouldn’t.”

“Even in bed you’re so sedate, so calm, so... I don’t normally have to ask a lover if the sex was good—I can usually tell.”

He was judging me, and I hated it. “Bye, Graham.”

“Wait. Just?—”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t exciting enough for you.”

“Whatever. If that’s what you heard, that’s what you heard. But you can’t go through your life with everything being fine, Brian. I’ve never met anyone as calm as you. You’re not truly passionate about anything.”

“Then why even pursue a relationship with me?”

“Because like I said, the world through your eyes is a wondrous place full of possibility and hope, and of course, there’s the challenge to see if I could actually bring some life and heat out of you. I feel like if you just let yourself love and be loved in return, then?—”

“Thanks, Graham, I appreciate the advice. Why don’t you call me next week, and we’ll have lunch or something.”

“Brian?”

“Okay?”

“Yeah. I’ll try and remember to do that,” he said and hung up.

I swallowed down the quick ache and then braced my hands behind me. Stretching my legs out in front of me on the three steps, I sat there and waited for Varro Dacien to show up.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:33 am

SIX

The cab stopped in front of my house, and when he got out, my whole body suffused with warmth as I stared at the man.

And just like that, it was official.

Even if we spent the rest of our lives on opposite ends of the earth, I still had no business dragging any poor, innocent man into the devastation that was the remains of my heart. I had given it to Varro when I was too young to know better, and there it would stay. Nothing to be done about it. Graham was right. I needed to be loved, but there was only one person I wanted that from, and I was looking at him.

“Hey,” Varro called over to me as he walked up to the white picket fence, opened the gate, and then closed it behind him, his eyes never leaving mine the whole time.

“Isn’t my house awesome?” I threw out just to be saying something.

“I like that you have a yard.” He smiled, stopping to look around. Even close to downtown, the homes, because the neighborhood was old, had decent-sized front yards. So where I was, on the porch, sat a good fifty feet back from the sidewalk and under the wide overhang from the roof. We didn’t get a lot of traffic on my street, which was nice. “Did you put the cobblestones in, or were they here when you moved in?”

“I did it.”

“Nice. You did a good job.”

“Well, the contractor did, right?”

“Sure.”

It was weird. It felt odd, stiff, static—we were having the most polite conversation ever. All at once I realized I had to return us to normalcy.

“So what the hell is going on with you and your head mechanic?” I volleyed playfully.

His smile was instant, firing his eyes, and I could tell he was thankful we were talking like we always did.

“What brought him all the way here to me?” I added.

“He doesn’t know I got a job offer yet,” he answered, closing in, garment bag in one hand, huge Louis Vuitton duffel in the other. “And he was worried about me racing again without you there.”

“I see. And when do you plan to tell him what’s really going on?”

“Any second now,” he said as he sat down close to me on the top step, putting his two articles of luggage on the step below him.

We were silent, just the two of us sitting together.

“Okay, I’ll bite,” I said, rolling my head sideways to look at him. “Why didn’t you just tell him about it as soon as you got it?”

“Because for one, it means the job, if he wants it, will be a lot different than the one he has now. He wouldn’t work for me anymore. He’d work for my new employer.”

“And for two?”

“When I first mentioned it to him, he thought it was too dangerous.”

I snorted out a laugh. “You got a job offer scarier than what you do now?”

“Potentially,” he hedged.

“Jesus, doing what? Riding your bike through a mine field?”

“Test driving.”

“So, close, then?”

He laughed softly.

“When did this happen?” I asked.

“Last month. We all heard that this guy, Archer Del Toro, was gonna build a new bike.”

“Okay.”

“But it’s a joke, right, nothing serious. Word on the circuit is that he’s a playboy. Fast bikes, faster women, you get the idea.”

“Sure.”

“Thing is, though,” he said as he leaned all the way back against the concrete, hands clasped behind his head, long, hard muscled body stretched out beside me, “everything changes when we see Klaus Stein walking around the paddock with him, talking to guys and then checking the pit.”

“Who’s Klaus whoever?”

“He’s the bike designer behind innovations in?—”

“No.” I stopped him. “Don’t dazzle me with examples of stuff I have no clue about. He’s a bike builder from Germany with a name like Klaus, right?”

“Yeah.” He grinned up at me.

“Like, one of the top in the world?”

“Uh-huh, he’s totally respected by MSMA.”

I didn’t care what that stood for. What was important was what the conversation was building to. “And so what does this have to do with you?”

“Well, since I can’t be racing all over the world anymore because I’ve got plans for us, I made sure I was there, in Del Toro’s face, the next time I saw him.”

“Plans?”

“Yeah,” he said, rolling his head to his bent elbow as he reached for me.

I took his hand and relished the strength and warmth, the electric tingles running through my body from just a simple touch.

“I told my manager before we parted ways that I don’t want to ride competitively anymore,” he explained, his voice gruff.

My stomach fluttered. “Why not?”

“I need a job with more of a set schedule, so you’ll know when I’ll be home so you can plan your life with me in it.”

I nearly swallowed my tongue. “You tell me you love me on the phone, and now you just expect to move in?”

His gaze was on our fingers lacing together. “Yeah.” He wasn’t really listening to me. The hooded eyes, the trace of a smile; it was our skin together that had him so entranced.

I didn’t even want to move; I was so afraid I would startle the exotic creature and he would run away. I exhaled as the world slowed and everything fell away except the two of us.

“You look tired.”

He didn’t say I was wrong.

“You’re not sleeping.”

“I haven’t slept since you left,” he replied, sliding his hand up to my wrist.

I mirrored the action, having to slide closer to him, pressing my hip into his side and twisting my upper body so I could look down at him. He had beautiful forearms, strong, with roped veins I found very sexy.

“So... tell me about the guy,” he ventured.

“That was subtle.” I chuckled.

“Brian.”

I looked down into his face. “Nothing to tell.”

“What does that mean?” His gaze lifted to meet mine.

“It means that he wanted me to pick between him and you.”

He nodded. “And you told him to go fuck himself.”

“It’s done.” I left it at that. “He also said that I’m basically dead inside.”

Sitting up quickly, he turned to face me. “You? Dead inside? He’s obviously never seen you bounce in your chair over three scoops of rocky road.”

His eyes were so dark, so warm, and having him close sent twinges of sizzling heat through me.

“You don’t think that, do you?” I checked.

“No,” he promised, leaning close. “You fight with me at the drop of a hat. Dead is not the adjective I’d use.”

My eyes filled fast.

“No,” he soothed, putting a hand on my cheek, stroking gently before smoothing his thumb over my bottom lip.

“V?”

“Does it have to be a whole thing?” he inquired, never moving his fingers from my face.

I was fairly certain he was speaking Mandarin or ancient Greek, some language I didn’t understand at all.

“I mean...” His eyebrows pinched over his nose even as he traced his thumb along my jaw. “Can it just be I’m fuckin’ sorry for being blind all the way back to high school when I screwed all the girls instead of jumping you in your bed in the middle of the night?”

“I don’t begrudge you the girls, or the women when you were older,” I allowed. “All those experiences and relationships make you who you are. I get that.”

“I didn’t know, Brian. I didn’t know I loved my best friend. I was too stupid to figure it out. It only made sense after you left.”

The when didn’t matter to me, just the truth he knew now .

“Am I gay if I only want to sleep with you but not any other guys?” he asked.

“You like to sleep with women too,” I reminded him. “So no, you’re not gay, you’re bi, since you’re saying you like me along with women.”

“There won’t be anyone else anymore.”

“I like the sound of that.”

“Okay,” he said after a second, sliding his hand to the back of my neck. “But does it

have to be a thing?”

“I have no idea what that means.”

He didn’t answer, instead simply eased me forward, leaned in to meet me, and sealed his lips over mine.

I had kissed him a thousand times: on the cheek, shoulder, even brushed his mouth accidentally once with firm purpose. But never had I opened for him and allowed him to know the yearning, the famine for his touch that lived in me.

The press of his tongue, the taste of it, made the ache deepen and burn. I seized on the wanting, on the desire, and claimed what I’d always hoped would someday be mine. It didn’t matter if he pulled away or shoved me off or even hit me. All that mattered was the precious moments I had to drink in his attention—his breath, his kiss—and that I would finally know what it felt like to have everything I ever wanted.

I could live a lifetime in just a few heartbeats of time.

But he didn’t pull away, and the first voracious, starving kiss became another, and another. He cupped my face in one hand and tangled the other in my hair as he held me close and didn’t let go until we both had to have air. Our lips parted just enough and then fused once more, harder, rougher, deeper, tongues sliding together as I was devoured.

I met him eagerly, forcefully, made him feel my ravaging hunger so he’d know, so there could be no mistake. I was demanding, dominating him like I never did, my hands in his long thick hair, tugging at his clothes, crawling over him, pushing him back and pressing him down.

My reward for being brave, for not letting the moment pass, was his surrender. I had

him flat on his back under me; I mauled his mouth, licking, biting, sucking. I slid my hands under his sweater onto his hot skin as I slowly rocked my ass over the hard bulge in his jeans. The undulating motion as I kissed him brought a moan from deep in his chest. A sweeter sound I had never heard. When he shoved me back, the first thing I noticed was his dark, wet eyes, the blown pupils hotter than I could have ever imagined.

“For fuck’s sake, Brian,” he complained, interrupting my thought. “Why didn’t you just take me?”

“It wasn’t my place to take, it was yours to choose. And what did you mean, does it have to be a thing? What’re you talking about?”

He made a noise in the back of his throat. “I mean, do we have to talk about it for ten years before we go to bed?”

The way he stared up into my eyes, I seriously could have stayed right there, straddling his hips, for the rest of my life. God, I loved him.

“Bri?”

I shook my head just a little so I wouldn’t cry. “What’re you talking about? I don’t have to talk about every little thing.”

It was a whopper of a lie.

“I hope you don’t turn to stone right here, as big a lie as that is.”

I bent over and kissed him again, because he was letting me and I wanted to do it, just in case I was having the best, most realistic, most vivid dream ever.

He smiled when I pulled back and licked his lips.

“So.” He cleared his throat, settling his hands on my thighs, clenching and unclenching his grip as he gazed up at me. “Is this place everything you hoped?”

“What do you mean?” I sat back to look down at him.

“It was time that you had what you always wanted and needed. Your whole life couldn’t just be about me.”

It took me a moment. “You stayed away on purpose.”

“Yeah.” He nodded and reached up to knot his hand in my sweater and draw me back down to him.

“Why?” I put my hands down on each side of his head. “Why would you do that?”

“Because I knew if we talked, I’d ask you to come back on the road with me.”

“So?”

“So, if you didn’t, I’d be crushed, and if you did... were you supposed to give up on all your dreams for me?”

“Oh,” I whispered, getting it suddenly, the reason for the silence between us. “That’s why you didn’t visit or call or... you were thinking about me.”

“I do that on occasion,” he said huskily, moving his hands to my hips. “Think about you.”

“Varro.”

“In fact,” he said as he pulled me down so our foreheads touched, “I think about you all the time.”

He did? “You do?”

“I do. I was coming to tell you.” He tilted my head back and pressed his hot mouth to my throat, kissing and sucking. My whimper came out deep and low as my eyes fluttered closed. “And I was going to go alone back to the Isle of Man because the job offer is contingent on one more successful run of?—”

“I hate that race.” I shivered, only partly from his closeness.

“And I love it.” He chuckled, kissing my nose and then my closed eyes. “But I need you there with me, because it’s dangerous, and now I have something to lose, and that kind of scares me to death.”

Lulled by the heat rolling off him, his warm hands on my skin, the rumble of his deep voice, it took a few seconds for his words to register. I jerked back, and he groaned as my weight pressed down on his hard, swollen erection.

“Please, Brian.”

“Varro.”

“Last time, I promise. We’ll go, and then we’ll come back and live together in your sweet little house. I’ll still have to drive, but I’ll come home.”

My mouth was open, but no words were coming out.

“We can get a dog.”

“Varro.”

“I know you need a home, baby. I do. I’m gonna be that, I swear.”

I was going to pass out. “You don’t want me. You just want a babysitter.”

“No,” he growled as he sat up, grabbed hold of my ass, and yanked me onto his lap.

I gasped as he caught my bottom lip between his teeth and bit down gently, then harder, sucking it into his hot mouth.

My bucking against him could not be helped; the coursing sensations annihilated me. I had waited my whole life to be where I was right now, clutched tight, his hands digging into my flesh.

When he leaned back, I caught his look, the sweetness in it.

“We need to talk,” I managed to get out.

“After,” he whispered. “Can you get up now and take me inside and show me your bed?”

“It doesn’t have to be that,” I said, because I wanted him to be sure.

“What do you mean?”

God, what was I even saying?

“Come here,” he said warmly, hands on my face as he drew me forward. He smiled against my lips. “Do you want me?”

“That’s the stupidest question ever.”

The laugh lines around his eyes crinkled, and I saw the curl of his beautiful mouth, the full lower lip, the thinner upper one.

“You kiss everybody the way you just kissed me?” he wanted to know.

“Another stupid question.”

“Okay,” he said, and just then I got that he was nervous too.

I stood up slowly, not wanting to spook him, and picked up his duffel. “Follow me.”

“Have been all my life.”

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SEVEN

My house was cozy and I loved it: the warmth in the soft browns and creams, uncluttered but not sparse. I could tell he liked it when he closed the door behind him and inhaled deeply.

“Feels like home in here.”

He could have said nothing better. “Lemme show you?—”

“Where’s your room?”

I walked him from the living room, which was the center of the house, past the guest bathroom, by the guest bedroom, and five steps down what was not even a hallway. I pointed out my office and finally got to my bedroom with the tiny bathroom attached.

“So where is your job?”

He put his duffel and garment bag on the overstuffed wingback chair next to the window. I sat in it sometimes and watched the rain.

“It’ll be all over the world. I’ll travel a lot. Lots of courses, lots of conditions, but all of them closed. I’d be the only guy on whatever road I was on. They’d make certain.”

“And this builder is going to make a bike to rival Honda and Yamaha, Ducati or Kawasaki? That’s their plan?”

“Yeah.”

“Where is the company based out of?”

“Spain.”

I nodded. “I see.”

“Corsica Elemental.”

“Okay.”

“They named the bike the Arrow.”

“So the Arrow by Corsica Elemental.” I considered the sound of the name. “I like it.”

“Me too.” He took a step forward. “It was like the answer to everything. Who knew one good thing would so quickly lead to another? Everything’s falling into place.”

“Why do they need you to run the TT?”

“Just to make sure I’m the guy they want.”

“Fearless.”

“Yes.”

“And you’ll have the ability to what, invest?”

“Take payment in stock options, yeah.”

“If the company goes public, that could be a lot of money.”

“And money’s good and helpful and you need it to retire on, but—” He moved again, closing the distance between us. “I’m thirty-one, you’re thirty-two. We have time to figure that out too.”

“Jesus, Varro,” I said after a moment, when I realized he was staring into my eyes.

“Jesus, Varro, what?” he asked, taking the final step, reaching me, lifting his hands to my face and tilting it back so there was no looking away.

“You were running away from me.”

“I thought you were happy. I didn’t want to mess that up.”

“I am happy.”

“You’re pleased with the stability because you need that, but you’re not happy.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I know you.” His smile lifted the edge of his lip. “And you need me with you for you to be all-the-way happy.”

Some would call him cocky. “You think?”

“Course,” he groused, the scowl adorable. “You’re in love with me.”

Yes, I was. “And you’re okay being bi?”

“I’ll get to be with you, right?”

I couldn't answer; I was barely pulling air into my lungs.

"Bri?"

"Yes."

"Okay, then. I'll be whatever as long as I can be that."

"Giving up women, you're sure?"

"It's not about giving up, it's about getting."

God. "You know there's still prejudice and?—"

"You know me," he interrupted. "When have I ever cared what anyone thought of me, besides you?"

"Never."

He shrugged. "So I'm going to start now?"

"You're not worried or scared? What about your new boss?"

"I explained that when I saw them at the TT, I'd have my partner with me."

The man was always so sure of things. "That's what you said?"

"Yeah. I mean, if Del Toro was a homophobic asshole, I had to know, right?"

"And what did he say?"

“He said he was looking forward to meeting you.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” He yawned suddenly, turned away from me, and walked around the bed to sit down. I watched as he pulled off his motorcycle boots. “It’s funny, ya know, you always worry what other people think, but really, why would you care what anyone else thinks but me?”

“So you’re the focus of my world, is that it?”

He turned to meet my gaze over his shoulder. “Aren’t I?”

“God, you’re so vain.”

Quick shrug of his shoulders. “Why vain?”

“You’re not everything. I have a life now.”

The quizzical arch of his eyebrow told me he wasn’t convinced.

“I do .”

“You fight so hard, Brian.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your life is fine, but it’s not great. How can it be great without me?”

I wanted to crow at him that he was so very full of himself, but it was the absolute, raw, soul-baring truth. I had missed him like crazy. My heart ached for him every

single day.

“You always think there has to be some grand gesture, but really, there doesn’t even have to be words. Just knowing something should be all the truth you need.”

I felt completely exposed, as though my heart was on the outside of my chest, right there on display.

He stretched out on my bed, crossed his sock-clad feet, and grinned at me. “So are we sealing the deal or not?”

“What?”

“Am I getting laid?”

I crossed my arms. “That’s so romantic, how can I resist?”

“I dunno, how can you?” He wagged his eyebrows at me, and that combined with the rakish grin on his kiss-swollen lips and the dark wet eyes... who was I kidding? I tried to stifle the low moan, but it was out before I could.

“Yeah, you want me,” he growled, folding one of my pillows in half and shoving it under his head. “Come kiss me some more, ’cause that was hot.”

I could have played hard to get, but he looked so incredibly good on my bed, and I wanted all of him. I toed off my shoes and crawled onto the bed and over him to settle above his waist.

He chuckled as he lifted his hand to my face, and I realized every fantasy I’d ever had was not how things were going to happen between Varro and me. The whole torrid, hungry, desperate scene, the holding down and manhandling—that was not us.

Because he knew me. He really, truly, deeply knew me, and so it would be us , a joining, and it would change my life.

“I should have known just from your eyes,” he sighed.

“What do you mean?”

“They’re so gorgeous all the time,” he whispered, tracing his fingertips over my eyebrows, my cheekbones, and finally my bottom lip. “But when you look at me, they shine.”

“Green eyes do it for you, do they?” I asked, shivering under his hands, my own finding his chest, holding tight as I moved against him like I had earlier, pressing my ass along the length of his erection outlined through the denim. He was so hard.

“Only yours, Brian. Everything about you is perfect because it’s you and you’re mine.”

“I’ve always been yours, Varro.”

His breath shook, coming out in puffs as it hitched and caught before I bent and ground my mouth down over his.

He rolled me fast to my back, and his arms went under and around me as my own coiled around his neck. I sucked on his tongue as it invaded my mouth, wanting more, whimpering and whining, writhing with the need to be closer.

“Brian,” he groaned against my lips, “get—what we... I think I know all we need, but I don’t wanna be wrong.”

“Hey.”

His eyes, clouded with passion, stared down at me.

“Tell me if we need a condom.”

“Uhm, no.” He shook his head, and it was adorable. “I don’t have sex without one. I—never have, Bri, I swear.”

“Me neither,” I said, pointing toward my nightstand. “Get in there and grab my lube and I’ll tell you how to make me ready.”

His brows furrowed above his long, straight nose. “You? Won’t I be the one taking your cock up my ass?”

Just the visual flooded me with heat, blood pooling in my groin. “No.” I swallowed hard. “If you want, down the road, we can... I can... but I like to bottom, and I want you inside me pretty much more than I want air right now.”

His eyes narrowed. “I was hoping, but I didn’t want to assume. I never want to be a selfish prick, okay?”

I laughed softly. “No, we wouldn’t want that. Get the lube.”

He moved, and I took that opportunity to yank and tug my clothes off as fast as I could, needing to be naked. When I looked up, I nearly swallowed my tongue. Varro was pulling his cashmere crewneck sweater up over his head, and the number of marks on the man’s chest and abdomen stunned me: some deep gouges, crisscrossed thin ones, and still others thick and raised and puffy.

“Ugly, huh?” he said, straightening to his full height so I could look my fill.

His gorgeous olive skin was highlighted by the scars. Each was noticeable, each

could be traced and licked and— “No,” I said sincerely, sliding closer across the top of my comforter. “You’re beautiful, you know that. Now let me see the rest of you.”

He was fast, out of his jeans and socks in seconds, standing in front of me with smoldering eyes. I had not seen Varro naked in years, but his cock had been a constant in many a dream. It was huge, long and thick and cut, with a wide vein running along the side.

“Please,” I begged.

He moved to the foot of the bed and took hold of my legs. I shuddered at the feel of his hard, callused hands on the backs of my thighs. “Wait,” he grouched suddenly, glaring at me. “That was sarcasm, wasn’t it?”

“What?” I gasped as he ran his hands up to my ankles.

“I actually have been a selfish prick. You were being funny.”

It took a second for my head to clear. “Ohmygod, can you focus ?”

He started laughing, and then I was, and it was nice. It was a relief, and I was good and happy until he bent forward at the same time he put my ankles on each shoulder. Once he stilled, I heard him open the cap on the lube.

“Varro,” I groaned as he slid his finger around the outside of my hole.

“You’re so pretty, Brian—your skin and your body—I’m sorry I never told you before.”

“Now is perfect,” I panted.

“Does that feel good?” he asked, the look in his eyes pure evil.

“Yes.”

“I want that,” he said as he rubbed in circles before adding a second finger. “I want that sound in your voice.”

“What—” I gasped. “—sound?”

“Like you’re gonna die if you don’t have me,” he answered, his own voice deep and low.

I bowed up off the bed, reaching, grasping for some part of him, whatever I could reach.

He dipped his fingers inside of me at the same time he captured my hard, throbbing cock in his fist, milking it as precum slowly leaked from the slit.

“Varro!”

“You’re gonna be ready for me,” he growled, and the sound, primitive and possessive, chilled and then warmed me, the intervals seconds apart.

“I’m ready now!” I swore.

“Not yet,” he ground out, curling his body forward so that my feet slid over his shoulders to his back.

I lifted, offering, opening myself to him as he bent and touched his tongue to the crown of my weeping shaft.

“You’re gonna make me come!” I cried softly. “I don’t—I can’t... I want to know what it is to be loved by you.”

“Brian.” He uttered my name, and I heard the catch and the hunger.

“No.” I shivered hard, not caring that he was a blur as hot tears filled my eyes. “I’ve spent so long holding words in, being quiet, not telling you what I wanted and felt and had to have. No more!”

I heaved out a breath, and he let me go, hand gone from my dick, fingers sliding free of my fluttering hole.

“No!”

“Yes,” he yelled and covered me with his long hard body, mouth slanting down over mine, claiming me before I flew apart.

He ravaged my mouth and I writhed under him, legs around the backs of his thighs even as I felt his hand moving between us, capturing his own dick, guiding it to me.

“Please,” I panted against his throat. “Forgive me for being a coward.”

“Forgive me for being blind,” he murmured, lips moving on my skin.

“You’re right; we’re never supposed to be apart.”

“No, we’re not,” he decreed, and I felt the press of the enormous flared head slide between my ass cheeks. “Never again.”

“Varro!”

“I can’t— Brian!”

He couldn’t wait. He had to have me.

“Yours,” I promised.

He lifted off me and thrust forward, all his weight behind the hammering movement.

I roared his name.

“Yes?” he gasped.

“Yes!”

And that was all.

He knew me. I knew him. No more words needed.

My hands scrambled over smooth, sweaty skin as he bent me in half, tops of my thighs to my chest now before he pounded down into me, then leaned back, in and out, over and over, the motion powerful, each thrust deeper than the last, until he was buried to his balls in my ass.

“Can you feel me?”

I could probably taste him.

“You’re so tight and hot,” he rasped.

The feel of him, pushing, stretching, filling me, overwhelmed me. “Varro,” I cried.

“Jesus, why didn’t you tell me?” he ground out.

“We should have been doing this for years,” I half yelled, the sizzling in the base of my spine starting to lick its way higher, setting fire to nerve endings, tightening my balls, and causing my muscles to clench around the long, hard, thick length of him.

He pulled out, and I would have screamed, but he moved me too fast, grabbed me, flipped me over onto my stomach, and shoved me facedown into the bed, ass in the air.

“Say you want me, Brian.”

“Oh yes.” I surrendered as he breached me and slid home.

One hand held my thigh tight in a bruising grasp, and the other was pressed, palm open, to the small of my back, holding me as he thrust.

When he suddenly stilled, pressed his chest to my back, wrapped a strong, lube-slicked hand around my cock and squeezed tight, I moaned out his name.

“Show me,” he ordered, face pressed into the back of my neck.

The angle, the push, the stretch, his skin plastered to mine was all there was. I came, spurting onto the comforter beneath me, with his name, the chanting of it, sounding like a prayer.

“Brian,” he barked gruffly.

My muscles tightened around him like a vise, clamping down, and he came deep inside of me. His climax made him clutch at me, his arms curling underneath mine, almost like we were wrestling and he was holding me down.

We didn't move. There was only him emptying, me being filled, and him holding me as aftershocks rippled through us.

When he finally eased slowly from my stretched and slippery channel, I felt the warm trickling of fluid down the insides of my thighs.

"Don't move," he said tenderly, pushing my sweat-dampened hair back from my face and kissing my forehead before he bolted into the bathroom.

I stayed where I was, and he came back to drop a hand towel over the mess I'd made on the bed and then used a warm washcloth to wipe me down. He had never, ever, been so gentle with me.

"I'm not gonna break," I said shyly, unable to look at him.

"I know," he said hoarsely before he was gone again.

I straightened up, feeling the twinge in my ass from the pounding I had just taken, loving the fact Varro had done it, used me, taken pleasure from me. The act could never be undone, never forgotten, even if he walked back into the room and announced it was all a big mistake.

He had been mine. It was all the truth I would ever need.

I was pushing the comforter down to the end of the bed when I heard him behind me. There was not even enough time to turn before I was on my back under him.

"What're you— Oh," I uttered as I took in the gleaming-eyed man above me. "Hi."

"You just gave yourself to me like no one ever has."

“Because I trust you,” I murmured as he flopped down close by.

Strong arms wrapped around me, and he draped a thigh over my hip so I was enfolded, pressed tight to his heart.

He kissed my eyes closed, and the bridge of my nose, my cheeks, my jaw, and finally my mouth, running his tongue along the seam of my lips to get me to open them.

What started languid and sweet became rough and bruising so fast. I was breathless, digging my hands into his back as he parted my thighs.

“I’ll be so gentle.” He whispered the promise.

I was still stretched and slick with lube and cum, and he slid in easily before rolling to his back, bringing me with him, impaling me on his shaft. I let my head fall back as I lifted up only to slide back down, loving the feel of him moving inside of me.

“I love you, Brian.”

I leaned forward to meet his dark gaze and whisper the words he needed to hear and I needed to say. “I love you, Varro, so much.”

“Swear it,” he said and held out his pinky with his right hand as he fisted my cock with his left.

“What’re we?” My voice dropped off. “Ten?”

“I am. You’re nine. Now swear.”

I hooked his pinky with mine as he pushed up from under me.

“Jesus, Varro, you feel so good.”

“So do you.” His voice sounded like sandpaper as he reached up and hooked a hand behind my neck, drawing me down to him. “Come here.”

I closed my eyes when he kissed me.

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EIGHT

The walk in the summer night soothed me after a long day at work, and I realized how happy I was that it was Friday. I loved the gentle ocean breeze and the smells of people grilling mixing in the night air. It was good to be on my way home and even better knowing Varro was there, back after three weeks in Burma on some stretch of road that was, apparently, as Aidric assured me, a right bourach . Varro translated mess for me and promised to come home in one piece. I was appreciative, because I worried.

An onslaught of concern about everything had filled me.

Varro's parents, Nico, Archer Del Toro, Varro's team... all of it, everyone. I made myself sick contemplating the worst.

Varro was right: if worrying were an Olympic event, I could easily medal.

It turned out the family, though surprised, did not have a problem. They knew me, loved me, and when I could finally say Mom and Dad to Mr. and Mrs. Dacien and mean it, their happiness was unexpected. It turned out they wanted to keep me even if I was sleeping with their son. Varro being mine was greeted with the same acceptance I had received a decade earlier, along with a pat on my shoulder from his mother. She knew. Of course she knew. Mothers knew. Nico was simply glad everything was settled. He had missed having both his brothers in the picture. I had been overwhelmed, and Varro had squeezed me tight until I looked, he said, like me again.

The Isle of Man TT was run without incident. And while he didn't win, Varro wasn't last, either. Mr. Del Toro saw what he needed to, Varro as a more than capable expert. The new motorcycle designer ended up hiring Varro's whole team, not just Aidric, absorbing them into his organization in various capacities.

I didn't make the trip back to the British Isles with Varro; he didn't need me to. He actually liked the idea of me at home, waiting, better. The man with the nomadic soul turned out to be as much in love with the idea of permanency as I was.

"Brian!"

Turning, jolted from thinking about the past six months, I found myself facing a smiling Mr. Sandoval, my next-door neighbor.

"Hello, sir," I greeted him hesitantly.

He was pleased with me, which was a change. The smile told me so. "Varro is home," he said, making the love of my life's name sound even more dashing than usual, the roll of the R very sexy-sounding. "He cut back the bougainvillea so it's not shading my pool anymore."

"Oh, good," I said with a smile. "I promise you I was going to call someone next week."

"I know, you're a good neighbor, Brian. And now that Varro's here, you're even better."

I threw up my hands because he was right. Who knew that the man who'd been on the road forever would enjoy having a home to work on. Slowly, the grounds had been transformed so that now it was an oasis. Landscaping was another of Varro's gifts, and he'd so enjoyed discovering that about himself.

As I watched my neighbor go, loving that a man who originally had no time for me now glanced back and waved, I was thankful, again, that everyone on our street loved Varro. It turned out the community I wanted had been achieved when he moved in. He was, as always, irresistible to practically everyone.

When I reached my front gate and opened it, I took a minute to look at my home. The lights blazed, the windows facing the street and front door were open, and a glass pitcher of sangria with two empty glasses sat on the porch railing. Our German shepherd wagged her tail as she came trotting up the path to greet me, and my beautiful man lay asleep in the hammock on the porch. I petted Archer, named after Varro's boss, so christened because Varro found that funny on so many levels, and she trailed after me to the steps.

Varro's T-shirt was old and faded, the threadbare jeans were worse and both simply... perfect. Lying there sleeping, he was the picture of ease, barefoot, his thick black hair tousled on the pillow, one hand behind his head and the other, his left, resting over his heart. I noticed, as I always did, his ring.

I had adamantly maintained that a wedding wasn't necessary, but because he knew me, he understood that I was lying. I needed the vows, his promise to stand by me forever, the bedrock foundation something I could, and would, build my life on. It was a beautiful celebration, and with it came a wedding ring. He had commissioned two huge, thick, heavy pieces of platinum that could not be missed. Varro Dacien was married now, and the band proclaimed that.

Not that the ring was the only change; the biggest one was in Varro himself. He was content, grounded, and the wild, dangerous daredevil, though still there, was now layered in a desire to be home, on his porch, in the hammock, waiting for me to come home from work.

I crossed to him quietly, smiling when I heard the Nick Drake album I had bought him on our first anniversary playing softly in the background. Gently, I ran my

knuckles under the arch of his foot to wake him.

His eyes fluttered open a little, and I was gifted with the glow of warm brown and the curl of his lip when he realized it was me. The smile never failed to make my heart skip a beat. He didn't give that one away; it was only for me, had only ever been mine, and would belong only to me for the rest of my life.

“Welcome home, baby,” he rumbled, lifting his arms for me.

It was a magic word, home , and he chuckled when he saw my happy shiver.

“Come kiss me.”

As I sank down over him, I thought how strange it was to imagine a time when I didn't believe in happily ever afters.

Varro had given me mine.