



# Silver Screens and Broken Dreams (Echoes of Us #2)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Hollywoods shimmering facade often masks the hardest truths, a lesson Austin Ridge knows all too well. Navigating the treacherous waters of fame, he wrestles with the shadows of a past romance that threatens to cloud his future.

In this sequel to Footlights and Forever, Austin returns, struggling with unresolved feelings for his ex, Dylan Cooper. As Austin tries to forge a path forward, he finds himself drawn back into the orbit of the man who was forced to move on without him. Each encounter with Dylan is a reminder of what was lost and a test of Austins resolve.

Dylan Cooper, thriving in his role as a creative force behind the camera, faces unexpected challenges when his past collides with his present. With Austin Ridge lurking in his past as well as on the big screen, Dylan must navigate the complex emotions of his past and a new love.

As old feelings resurface in the glare of studio lights, Austin must decide if he can truly let go or if the past is worth a second act. With every moment on set, the lines between past and present blur, pushing Austin to confront the reality of his choices. In a world where the camera never stops rolling, can Austin step out of his own shadow to find a spotlight that truly belongs to him?

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# Page 1

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Austin

Three years later – California

“And that’s a wrap on Season Three!” the director’s voice boomed across the sound stage. Rapturous applause sounded out from all corners of the studio, signalling the end to months and months of gruelling production schedules, intense behind-the-scenes drama that had led to changes in key backstage personnel and even the replacement of an on-screen star. This had also been the longest season yet, with Season Three consisting of twenty-two episodes, compared to the twelve-episode runs of the first two seasons.

Earlier in the season, production had been rocked when a gossip site had published a photo capturing a stolen moment between our illustrious director Yiannis and the lead actress, Christina. It had showed them in what could only be described as an extreme public display of affection – both of them naked in the back seat of his car. It had shocked us all, but none more than our executive producer, Caitlin, who just so happened to be Yiannis' pregnant wife.

The studio and the pair had ‘amicably’ parted ways, releasing both of them from their contracts with FilmFlix a full two years early. It had shaken production to its core, especially since Christina’s character Beth had to be shipped off to parts unknown, and a new love interest for our dear Teddy (playing Eli): Carly, played by a newer actress Juliet, was introduced by Lisa’s character Naomi. Thankfully, my character Mike's storyline had been largely unaffected by the whole thing, so in front of the camera, nothing much had changed for me.

As I revelled in the end to the months of shooting nearly every day, I heard a squeal from behind the camera operator, and Lisa emerged, beaming happily and throwing herself into my arms.

“Mate!” she laughed. “Can you believe it’s finally over?”

“Tell me about it,” I smiled into her neck, “I thought that hellscape was never going to end.”

We spent the next few minutes listening to Carlo’s less-than-inspiring speech about unity and coming together in times of great trials and tribulations, overcoming adversity to create something beautiful and regenerative, where we had come together and scraped together what could be salvaged from the original plotline and hoped to god that the viewers accepted the new characters and losing Christina, who had been a firm fan favourite.

“Can we all please put our hands together for our very own fantabulous four: Teddy, Lisa, Austin and Carly!” Carlo waved his hands towards us like he was Vanna White. After what seemed like a never-ending applause that made my balls disappear inside of me, I sloped off towards my trailer.

Over the course of the three seasons we had filmed, my trailers had improved significantly. I'd started with a tiny box that could hardly be called a trailer, with no air conditioning and several rickety old plastic white fans that were expected to keep me cool, especially during the hellish fortnight I was filming in the Nevada desert with Lisa. My second trailer in Season Two was moderately bigger, but had come with very good air con and a little kitchenette where I would pretend to myself that I might cook every now and again, but had failed every time, preferring to feed myself at the catering trucks scattered around the lot. Now, in my third year, I had a triple-wide trailer that would have been the envy of any actor in a mainstream Hollywood blockbuster. My agent had done me proud, ensuring that on-set perks were a part of

my contract, as well as a healthy percentage of back-end merch in return for a lower per-episode salary.

I was just about to get inside my trailer when a deep baritone sounded from directly behind me. “We get beers later, yes?” I lurched forward, the edge of the door smashing into my forehead, as the shock of a sudden voice from behind me had, as I assumed from the deep chuckle, its desired effect.

“Motherfucker!” I yelped, rubbing my forehead with the back of my hand, turning to see Teddy’s grinning face as he stood at the bottom of the steps to my trailer. “I might be getting a CAT scan later instead.”

“You Americans are delicate, like flower.” He pushed me back into my trailer and sat me down on the couch. As I pressed my hand against the hot skin of my head, I heard him clattering about next to the tall fridge-freezer in the kitchen. “Here, press this.” I looked up and winced, taking the bag of frozen steaks out of his bear paw-like hands and pressing the cool, solid meat against my forehead.

I sat there for a moment, ensuring that I could still do basic functions like counting to ten and listing the presidents. I heard Teddy tinkering around the trailer, picking things off shelves and looking in drawers, inspecting its contents.

“Are you sure you’re not KGB?” I barked out a laugh. “You certainly seem to be spying on me.”

“Yes Austin,” Teddy puffed up his chest, his muscles straining against his tight white t-shirt. “I am spy, the type that does his spying in front of everyone for extra special cover.”

I allowed myself a moment to stare at the man mountain and his bulging biceps, rock hard abs that were very much visible through the thin material of the shirt, and the

broad pecs that were currently giving the material of the shirt a run for its money. He caught my obvious perusal of him and tutted. “Am I man candy now, Austin?”

“I think the saying is eye candy, buddy.” I chuckled at the frown forming on his face.

“You say potato, I say kartofel .” He shrugged. “Are you not still in mourning period over lost love?”

“Mourning?” I shook my head. “I think you are over-estimating how close me and Jason were before we broke up.”

“He was...” Teddy thought carefully. “What I mean to say is... Oh heck, my English is terrible.” He waved me off sheepishly.

“No, it’s fine, and I know what you wanted to say. Jason was a dick.”

This wasn’t the first time, and undoubtedly wouldn’t be the last time, my ex-boyfriend Jason would be referred to as a dick, I’m sure. Jason Grace was a day player on several shows for FilmFlix, the streaming service that produced and aired our show. He would often appear as background characters, and every now and again he would score some lines on one of the many soap operas or telenovelas that featured on the platform. I’d seen him around at several studio functions and had admittedly thought he was quite cute, if a little arrogant.

I admired ambition in a guy, but sheer unfounded arrogance had been known to give me the serious ick factor . Every brain cell had screamed at me to run for the hills when he’d approached me one day on set. They had hired him to play a love interest for Carly’s character in a two-episode arc, only to be dispatched under mysterious circumstances, with all fingers pointing to Teddy’s character, dun dun dunnnn.

“You’re Austin, right?” He’d smiled at me from across the craft services table. I’d

thought it was cute how he was loading his plate up with the carb-iest food available, remembering what it had been like to be a struggling actor and taking whatever opportunities you could get to score a free meal.

“Yeah, and you’re hungry?” I’d nodded towards the two baked potatoes loaded with sour cream and cheese on his plate, and the small mountain of nachos with pico de gallo smothered over the top.

“I’m a growing boy,” he smirked, obviously flexing his muscles under the tight blue short-sleeved polo shirt they’d given him from wardrobe.

“I can see that,” I mumbled, my eyes never straying from the defined muscle stretched underneath his smooth olive skin.

“Really? Well, I can show you a lot more if you want to invite me back to your trailer.” Going from zero to a hundred and eighty in two seconds flat had been a ballsy move. My brain had warred with my cock as to the correct course of action. My brain had screamed at me to put the plate down and move quickly away from both the table and the red-flagged, muscle-laden hunk on the opposite side of it, whilst my cock had whined how it had been so long since I’d had action of any kind.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” I’d chuckled, giving him a salacious wink as I made a move to go back to safety.

“I think it might be the best idea I’ve had all day.” He’d moved around the table quicker than I had time to react. He’d stood mere inches from me, a few inches shorter than my height, so that he had to look up to meet my shocked gaze. “I have my eyes set on you now, sir.” His eyes had raked me up and down. I’d felt his stare burn deep. My breath had hitched as he’d caught his bottom lip between his teeth. “I always get what I want.”

He'd rested a strong hand against my chest. Standing on his tiptoes, he'd brought his mouth to my ear. "Always." And with that he was gone. The director had called an end to lunch, and we'd gotten back to shooting.

It had taken Jason another three tries before I'd finally agreed to meet him for drinks. Jason hadn't been the first guy I'd dated since ending things with Dylan, hell, he wouldn't even have been the tenth. I'd hoped with each time, however, that things would be different. I'd always hoped that I wouldn't compare every one of them to Dylan and how he'd made me feel, and how I knew I'd made him feel. I'd hoped, since Jason had been a lot more forceful, confident and arrogant than the others, that this time it would be finally what I'd needed to move on.

It had only taken two weeks of dating Jason for me to realise that I hadn't broken the trend. Everything had been wrong. His hand hadn't fit in mine like it should. His body had felt wrong curled up next to mine on the sofa while we watched a movie. I hadn't felt my heart skip a beat, and my stomach hadn't dropped like a plummeting rollercoaster when I'd seen him smile. I hadn't wanted to call in sick every day just to spend a day wrapped up around each other in bed. Most of all, his kisses hadn't made me like a fucking rock star.

Only Dylan had made me feel that way, and I'd blown that big time.

I had tried everything I could to make it work anyway. I'd tried to ignore the feelings of wrongness that coursed under my skin when he'd touched me. I'd blocked out the internal moans of protest when his tongue had pushed its way into my mouth and I'd shut out the internal screams accusing myself of cheating as I'd slid inside his body. Our inconvenient but cordial relationship had quickly turned bitter and sour. Especially since I'd told him I had no plans to ever come out as being in a relationship with him. My fans already knew I did like women but preferred men, ever since a gossip rag had done a story about me dancing and kissing a boy at prom. Garrett had phoned me not long after the article broke to let me know that a 'well-

meaning' admin assistant at the high school had supplied the so-called journalist with all the first-hand information he could have dreamed for, enough to out me to the world.

“When are you ever going to get off your ass and claim me, Austin?” Jason had stood at the end of my bed, not a stitch of clothing off after we'd just fucked. My dick had barely deflated when he'd appeared to have reached a breaking point and snapped.

“What do you mean?” I'd looked around the room helplessly. “What the fuck just happened?”

“You asked me if you should call me a taxi .” He'd muttered the word as if it were a curse word that needed to be censored.

“I'm sorry, was that wrong somehow?” I had definitely screwed the pooch here somehow. “Isn't that what we always do after?”

“Exactly! We spend no time together. I never stay the night and god forbid we talk about any actual feelings, otherwise you shut up tighter than a clamshell.”

I couldn't even have argued, because he'd been right. I'd had no desire to be seen with him in public. I hadn't wanted the press capturing us sitting at a fancy restaurant. I hadn't wanted them to take pictures of us walking down Santa Monica hand in hand. And why? Because some twisted part of my brain hadn't wanted Dylan to have to see that. I hadn't wanted him to see me with another man, because the thought of hurting him even for a moment had made me want to curl up and die. Also, yes, I'd been aware how arrogant my own thoughts were, to believe that Dylan would give a fuck what or who I was doing at all.

It hadn't just been Dylan I'd been protecting, though; it had still been the show as well. Whilst people had known I was bisexual by this point, it had been an immutable



fact that the main stars' availability was a major draw for the show. They had dedicated entire marketing campaigns to promoting these young, and as far as the public were concerned, available actors.

"Listen, I don't want to sound like the heartless prick here, but you knew what this was when we first started seeing each other." I'd known I'd sounded heartless, but in that moment I'd felt the need to be as transparent and crystal clear as I could. "My career has, does and will always come first. That means that I will appear available, even when I'm not. If you can't handle that, they maybe we shouldn't be doing any of this." I'd gestured my arms wide.

"Are the press with us in the bedroom?" Jason had muttered, I'd thought more to himself, but there had definitely been a question behind his question.

"I don't know what you mean."

"I think you know what I mean." He'd smiled sadly. "I think you know what I am talking about."

Sure, Jason had had his faults, and there had been many. For example, he had never met a server he didn't hate and try to get fired. He'd been a shameless social climber and name dropper. He would openly use his connections to get him anything he wanted and if that hadn't worked, mine. Aside from all that, he'd been quite honest, too honest to the point of being rude and abrasive, case in point when he'd told Lisa that her British accent must seem like a disability since no one could understand a word she was saying half the time. He'd also asked on more than one occasion for Teddy to speak into an online translator when he was, in fact, already speaking English. So yeah, he hadn't very much been admired by one and all.

"Even when you're with me, you're never really there." His eyes had tracked to the ground.

“Jason, I...”

“No, stop,” he'd held a hand up towards me, “I thought it was just new relationship nerves or a settling-in period, but it's never gonna work if you don't actually want to be settled. And then there's him.”

I had known before he'd said anything that he would bring him up. One evening not long after Jason and I had started dating, he had woken me in the middle of the night and spoken a name which I had made every effort not to mention in front of him or any guy I dated .

“ Who the fuck is Dylan?” He'd shoved my arm, rousing me from what I could only deduce from my pounding boner was a very nice dream. An uneasy, sorrowful ache had sprung up in the center of my chest. A horrible feeling of loss had threatened to overwhelm me.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I'd rubbed across my eyes with the back of my hand, rubbing away the remnants of a deep sleep. I'd pushed down on my insistent boner, trying to soothe away some of the tension.

“You were moaning and calling out for someone called Dylan.”

I'd snapped my head to the side to catch him watching me with his arms folded across his chest, an annoyed expression marring his face. I'd wondered exactly how long I had been doing this and wondered also if this had had anything to do with other people I'd dated not calling me back for a fourth or fifth date. In the time after that night, I'd been woken by an angry Jason four or five times more.

“Listen Jason,” I'd realized that he'd been right about one thing; this was never going to work, “I have thoroughly enjoyed our time together and will treasure the memories we have made.”

“Oh fuck you and your fucking hallmark greeting card brushoffs, Austin.” He'd stepped into his underwear and jeans that he'd hastily discarded a while earlier. “I'm worth so much better than this. I deserve so much more than some fucking second rate wannabe actor who wouldn't know good pussy if it slapped him in the face.”

I'd flinched at the vulgarity but composed my face. Rocking this already turbulent boat was not the smartest of ideas. “No, I completely agree with you. You're just too good for me, Jason.”

He'd left in a taxi not long after, his things from my bathroom and from my clothes drawers, which I was in fact surprised he'd managed to sneak into my house, were tucked up safely in a cream six hundred dollar Hermes washbag. I'd known the price, because it had been mine. I would just have to consider it a parting gift.

## Page 2

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Austin

Now that we had wrapped Season Three and I had nothing booked for the break, I'd planned on going back home for a few weeks. Catch up with some friends, and try to dodge the people from back home who wanted to take a selfie with me, just so that they could say to their friends that they'd grown up with a celebrity. Most of the time I had never met those people before in my life.

I'd been trying to avoid going home for as long as possible. The last time I had, things had not gone so well. The principal of the local high school had called my agent one sunny Friday afternoon during my break after Season Two. They had invited me back to talk to the kids at the high school about pushing yourself to thrive in the big city and never giving up, peddling out the same bullshit across high schools since forever. I'd taken Kyle along with me for moral support and also in the hope that an Abercrombie model might take some of the focus away from me. As an actor, I kind of lived for attention, but when that attention was coming from the people from your hometown, there was a level of cringe factor that could not be overstated.

“Did the studio arrange for all of this?” Kyle gestured around us at the plush seats of the black stretch limo, the fully stocked bar along one side of the car and a flat screen TV on the far wall behind the driver.

“Yeah,” I shrugged, “I guess they want to keep up this image of mega-stardom. I suppose it's an 'if you build it, they will come' technique. If people see us doing megastar shit, then they will assume we are, in fact, megastars and maybe be more inclined to watch our show?”

“No way, does that work?” Kyle grabbed a beer from the silver fridge at the end of the row.

I reached forward, grabbing my drink from a small inlet on the small table in the center of the space. I’d asked the driver-cum-bartender to make me an Old Fashioned, and had been nursing it for the last hour. As the scenes outside the window started becoming familiar, I downed my drink quickly. “Hell if I know, but I’m not gonna turn down all this free shit.” I clinked my glass against his bottle.

“Amen, brother.” He saluted me with the beer bottle in his hand.

A short while later, we pulled into the same school car park where I’d used to park my car only a few years ago. Pulling up inside some luxury vehicle gave me the biggest feeling of imposter syndrome. As if I were still a student, and the moment I stepped outside the car, they were going to see me as the fraud I was, the scared senior who’d danced with the love of his life at the school prom and not an actor on one of the hottest shows in America. My heart raced as I peered up the small set of stairs that led to the front entrance of the school. A small army of students stood there excitedly, waiting for me to exit the car. I saw various heavily decorated poster boards with my name glitter-bombed across them.

“Wow, this is all very extra,” Kyle whistled, his face pressed against the two-way glass.

“Yeah, this is definitely different from when I was here last,” I grimaced. The car pulled up as I watched the principal trot down the stairs towards the car. My driver jumped quickly out of the vehicle and held a hand up against the burly man’s chest, blocking his way. I see the tell-tale redness spreading onto Mr. Babcock’s angular bearded face, which always meant he was moments away from blowing a gasket. I stepped swiftly out of the car, putting my hands on the driver’s shoulder. I nodded towards the now-fuming man in a suit in front of him and gestured back to the car. He

took his hand off the principal's and returned to the car.

“Austin,” Mr. Babcock said, the smile returning to his cheeks, “how lovely to have you back with us.”

“Thank you, Mr. Babcock,” I smiled in return, shaking his hand. “This is a friend of mine, Kyle Richards.”

“Oh yes.” He looked across the bridge of his glasses at Kyle, like he was some kind of exotic specimen. “I think I have seen your picture on some billboards downtown.”

“Yeah, those underwear ads are quite revealing,” Kyle purred, extending his hand towards him.

“Well, erm, yes...” Mr. Babcock spluttered. “They are quite... what I mean to say is, yes.”

“It was such a shame they had to reduce the size of certain things to make it safe for public viewing.” Kyle winked.

“Kyle!” I elbowed him gently in the side.

“Oh, I'm sure Mr. Babcock has heard much worse.” He leaned suggestively towards the principal, his tongue caressing the cock part of his name. I cringed awkwardly as I saw my old teacher's pupils expand, and his breathing pick up.

“I'm sorry about him, sir.” I nodded my head towards the man who would soon become my ex-friend. “Shouldn't take him out in public without a muzzle.”

Seemingly too flustered to speak, the principal gestured for us to follow him and we made our way into the school.

“Do you have to try and ride every cock you see?” I bit out through clenched teeth.

“Austin!” he gasped, his hand pressed to his heart. “Like I’d have to try.” He gave me a salacious wink before striding ahead to follow his new target. I followed behind them begrudgingly.

“So I’m going to take you straight through to the auditorium Austin,” Mr Babcock spoke over his shoulder. “The AV department can get you miked up and take you straight to the stage.”

“Sounds good.” I nodded, picking up the pace.

“I’m just so happy to have our ex-students back with us. This will be really great for the kids to see what they can make of themselves if they just put in the effort like you boys did.” Alarm bells rang in my ears that I was almost sure weren’t coming from the sirens on the walls dotted throughout the high school’s hallways.

“Sorry sir, did you say boys? As in plural?” My heart pounded as I knew, in my heart and head, what he was about to say before he even turned around.

“Yes Austin,” he smiled. “I assumed you knew. This afternoon’s session is about working within TV and film. The speakers are yourself and Dylan Cooper.”

A few minutes later, the excessive knocking continued on the door of the bathroom stall to which I had escaped moments after one name brought my entire world crashing down around me.

“Austin, you can’t stay in there all day,” Kyle sang through the door.

“What’s happening?” Mr. Babcock’s worried voice sounded from the other side of the pale pink wood. Shit, have I come into the girls’ bathroom?

“Oh nothing, just tale as old as time. Boy meets boy, boys move to New York. Boy gets job as a big shot actor and moves to California and dumps other boy. Boy hasn’t seen boy in nearly two years and now has a run-in with him at old high school,” Kyle whispered loudly.

“That's a tale as old as time?”

“Sure it is.” I wanted to punch a hole through the door and strangle Kyle.

“I’m very sorry Austin,” Mr. Babcock called out through the thin wood. “I knew you and Dylan were together in high school. I mean, everyone did after the prom. But I wasn’t aware you had broken up.” The mention of prom gave me a swooping feeling in my stomach. That had been the start of the happiest period in my life. Am I happy now? I was definitely satisfied with my career. I loved my job. But was I happy? I didn’t want to answer or think too hard about that question.

Just a few hundred feet away was the love of my life. The man who could make me smile, make me feel warm, safe. Sexy and amazing, all at the same time. A few hundred feet away was a man whom I'd left, so that I could achieve a dream I'd had ever since I could remember. A few hundred feet away was the only man who could make me feel alive. I had tried to find that feeling again, but had so far been unsuccessful. I needed to get my shit together. By now he obviously knew that I was going to be here as well and he'd chosen to be professional and stay for the kids. I had to do the same.

“It’s fine, Mr. Babcock.” I pulled some tissue paper out of the dispenser and wiped the sweat from my brow. “I just needed a minute, that’s all.”

A moment later, we were passing rows of gray lockers with red doors down the long hallway leading towards the yellow double doors of the auditorium at the end. “Just breathe, okay?” I heard Kyle whisper in my ear.



“I am breathing,” I mumbled indignantly.

“You’re quietly gasping,” he hissed back.

My Babcock pulled open the doors and stood back, holding one of them open for me. I wasn’t able to tell whether the racing heart, sweaty palms and butterflies in my stomach were a good or bad sign. I didn’t have long to figure it out either, as I was pushed quickly through the door. My foot tripped over the thin metal plate at the base of the door separating the rooms. I put my hands out quickly in front of me as the patterned wooden floor came up to meet me.

I heard a chorus of oooh s, as my hands slammed onto the ground. I squeezed my eyes together, hoping that this was all just a bad dream that I would wake up from at any minute. “Wow, that was quite the fall,” Kyle’s voice whispered in my ear, his voice brimming with held back laughter. No such luck. I quickly pushed myself to my knees and climbed to my feet. The auditorium was filled with rows and rows of chairs, each one filled by a student that was currently watching my one man show with bemusement. My gaze jumped from startled face to startled face. I reluctantly drew my gaze up to the stage. There, standing front and center, was Dylan.

I don’t know what I was expecting, really. Did I think he was going to jump off the stage Baby Houseman style and run into my arms, where I could pick him up over my head to a rapturous applause from the student body and faculty? I stopped for a moment to wonder if I’d hit my head after all. A quick sweep of my fingers across my brow and through my hair confirmed I had not sustained a head injury.

Dylan just stood there at the microphone, waiting patiently for me to get my shit together and join him on stage. He didn’t seem flustered or out of breath. Without the luxury of a stethoscope on hand, I couldn’t check, but I was pretty damn sure that his heart wasn’t beating out of his chest like mine was and the way he was holding the microphone, I could tell his palms weren’t sweaty either. So why the hell were mine?

And most important of all, why did he look as if nothing fazed him?

“Everybody put your hands together for FilmFlix star, Austin Ridge!” Dylan exclaimed pleasantly, gesturing towards me. A sea of applause went up around me, the kids at the end of the rows reaching out to shake my hand or pat me on the arm. Nothing could tear my attention away from the man on the stage. I walked confidently towards him, hoping that I could see some crack in his armour. Some piece of him that clearly still yearned for me, the same way I did for him. Either he had become the world’s best actor or he was truly over me.

“Hey Austin.” He smiled at me. He fucking smiled at me as if he were greeting an old friend. I looked at him, mouth agape for a split second, before I looked down to see the hand he had stretched outwards towards me. He wants to shake my fucking hand!

He stood behind a wooden lectern embossed with the school insignia and some motto that I'd never learned when I went here and had no interest in learning now. Not when there were much more interesting bits of information to learn, such as why he wasn't as shaken as I was? A giant zap of electricity hit me as I took his hand in mine. My breath caught in my throat as my heart almost broke free of the confines of my ribcage, sweat collecting at the base of my spine as an urge to take almost overwhelmed me. I moved my gaze up slowly from where our hands connected to his own confused stare.

“Austin, are you okay?”

Fucking twilight zone, gremlin on the wing of the plane, nightmare at 20,000 feet craziness. I turned around to look at the rest of the students in the audience, who were also giving us the same confused stare. What was wrong with everyone? Did no one realise how truly momentous this was? This was the love of my life standing in front of me. I hadn't realised I hadn't been breathing for the last two years until I took his hand in mine, then life rushed back into my veins. Did no one see? Why could no one

see?

“Austin?” he tried again.

“Yes, I’m Austin.” Smooth, Austin. A wide, maniacal grin broke out on my face as I tried desperately to hide the chaos simmering just under my skin.

“Yes, I know you’re Austin.” He smiled. “I’ve completed my bit before you got here. Are you okay to do your speech now?”

“Speech?”

“Yes, you know?” He gestured around the room. “The reason we’re here?”

“Oh speech! Yes, of course.” I was not ready to give a speech. My brain went into standby mode as Dylan approached the lectern and once again introduced me. A more subdued applause broke out as I took his place in front of the microphone. I looked out into the sea of expectant faces and began.

“Uh, hey, everyone,” I began, my voice slightly shaky. “It’s great to be back here at my alma mater , and thank you for having me. So, uh, you all want to know how to make it in the movie industry, huh?”

I scanned the faces in the audience, trying to ignore the pounding in my chest. Suddenly, my eyes locked on Kyle’s smiling face. Mischief danced in his eyes as he tried to hold back laughter.

“Oh, um, I guess I should start with, uh, perseverance,” I continued, trying to regain my composure. “The entertainment industry can be tough, and you have to be, uh, persistent in pursuing your dreams. Even when your dreams try to elude you, keep fighting for them.”

As I spoke, my mind kept wandering back to Dylan. Memories of our time together and our painful breakup flooded my thoughts, making it difficult for me to focus.

“And, uh, oh, networking! Networking is, uh, essential,” I stammered, attempting to avoid looking in Dylan’s direction. “You never know who you might meet or, uh, how they could help you in your career. But it’s important not to have sex with any producers or casting directors!” I heard what sounded like Mr. Babcock choking on his own tongue off to the edge of the stage.

The audience was attentive, hanging on to my every word, but I felt like I was stumbling over my own sentences. I knew I needed to keep going, to offer valuable advice, but my emotions were getting the best of me.

“Also, um, being versatile is, uh, important, heh, versatile.” I actually fucking chuckled at my own gay sex joke before moving swiftly on. “You might start with, uh, smaller roles, but don’t be afraid to, uh, explore different genres and characters.”

The sight of Dylan standing off to the edge of the stage, looking so effortlessly put together, made me feel even more flustered. I found myself fidgeting with the microphone, trying to regain some semblance of control.

“And, uh, of course, it’s crucial to, um, believe in yourself and your abilities,” I said, the nerves evident in my voice. “There will be times when, uh, you face rejection, but you have to, uh, keep going and stay true to your passion.”

In an attempt to wrap up the speech, I quickly summarised, “So, uh, believe in yourself, be persistent, and, uh, seize every opportunity. And, um, don’t let past heartaches, uh, hold you back.”

As I concluded, the audience erupted into applause, seemingly impressed by my generic, bullshit insights. I stepped away from the podium, feeling a mix of relief that

it was over and disappointment in myself for not delivering the speech I had envisioned.

As the students approached me for questions and pictures, I couldn't help but steal glances at Dylan. I could see him packing up his stuff into a brown leather satchel he had over his shoulder. He was shaking hands with the principal.

Fuck, is he about to leave? I politely excused myself from the crowd and made my way quickly across the stage. "Hey Dylan."

He turned his attention from Principal Babcock to me, a smile etched on his features.

"I thought we could catch up. You aren't leaving, are you?"

"Hi, yes sorry, I have to get back to the city." He gestured over his shoulder towards the exit where a man in a dark suit and glasses waved over. And who the fuck is that? "Sorry, my driver is telling me we need to make tracks. I am ten minutes late but I wanted to wait till the end of your speech."

"But you just got here!" I knew I sounded like an insolent child, but he couldn't just leave. Didn't he realise what this meant?

"Actually, I got in two nights ago," he smiled. "I spent some time with my dad and Jessica, whom I no longer want to throw in front of traffic."

"But..." I heard Kyle cough quietly behind me, but I wasn't about to lose any moments I could steal with Dylan.

"Listen Austin, I really have to go." He smiled sadly. "I just wanted to say I am so proud of you. You got everything you ever wanted and I couldn't be happier for you. You figured out what you wanted, and you went for it. I'm so glad I had time to see

you again, to tell you that.”

I heard his driver call his name once more. He leaned across and pressed a small kiss to my cheek. I closed my eyes. His lips were like hot irons branding my skin. I wanted to grab him and never let him go. I wanted to turn my head and take his lips with my own. I wanted him to be mine again. But his kiss was fleeting. By the time I’d opened my eyes, he was halfway across the room. I wanted to call out to him to stop, to wait for me, but my mouth wouldn’t speak the words. With one last turn of his head and a wave he was gone, and my world fell to pieces.

“Are you okay?” Kyle whispered softly, next to me.

“No, I’m really not.”

That was the first and last time I had seen or spoken to Dylan since. I returned to California, resigned to the fact that whatever was next in store for me, I wouldn’t love like that again.

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As we wrapped Season Three of the show, I sat in my Wegner swivel chair and watched as Teddy polished off his second beer in two minutes.

“Let us go to club, yes?” Teddy belched loudly, his eyes opening wide as if he was also surprised how loudly he’d burped. “Dear god.”

“Gross.” I wrinkled my nose.

“But yes, we go out. We find you nice man to make fun with for one night.”

I’m really not in the mood, Teddy,” I sighed, thoughts of Jason and Dylan doing

nothing but to bring down any elation I had from filming the final scenes.

“I am not taking no for answer, my friend.” He reached across and slapped my knee. “I am going to make myself look handsome. You do same and I will meet you at front of studio in twenty minutes.”

Fifteen minutes later, I waited outside the gates of the studio after telling my driver to take the night off and that I’d catch an Uber home. I surveyed the street, watching as people meandered up and down the wide sidewalks. The late afternoon sun beat down on the white stone of the floor, radiating heat upwards and warming my face. I knew I would wait more than the twenty minutes for Teddy from prior experience.

I cast my gaze across the street to Val’s Diner on the other side. Heavy purple wisteria blossoms hung from the trees that lined the opposite side of the street. A group of six young men sat outside around the small tables and chairs that Val and her husband set up outside early every morning. I’d been known to frequent there as soon as their doors opened, to grab one of her legendary pistachio lattes before heading onto the set.

One man at the table caught my eye. I pulled myself up from leaning against the white walls of the studio to get a better look. It can’t be him. Life isn’t that kind.

Pedestrians on the other side of the street passed by Val’s, blocking my view. I got more and more agitated as I worked my way closer. The man threw back his head and laughed, only his slender neck on display. Please let it be him.

Traffic horns blared as I walked blindly into the street, my eyes never breaking from their target. Another man reached over and stroked his fingers delicately across the back of the man’s head. My stomach rolled. Oh, please let it be him.

I stepped up onto the sidewalk and reached the barrier of the café.

“Dylan?”

The man turned round. A stranger’s face greeted me in the awkward silence.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, I thought you were someone else.” I turned quickly and made my way back across the road.

It’s never him.



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:19 am*

Dylan – New York

I waited patiently in line in the queue of the small hole-in-the-wall deli four blocks away from my office. Did other closer delis serve bagels? Yes. Did other delis serve decent coffee? It was New York, so obviously yes. Did those delis have a six-foot-four Henry Cavill lookalike working behind their counters? No, they did not.

“What’s taking them so long?” Natalie’s voice whined in my ear. “I need to get my daily fix of Dylan’s humiliation or my whole morning is shot to shit.”

“What?” I gasped, my hand pressed to my chest. “When have I ever humiliated myself?”

“How about when Superman up there asked if you liked it spread all over, you replied with ' only if they bought me dinner first' ? Or when you asked if you could taste his sausage first before you bought it? Or what about the time you sucked cream off your thumb, looked at him and hummed? Or...”

“Okay!” I yelped. “Maybe I don’t always act my best when it comes to Muscles McGillicutty up there.”

The line moved slowly forward. With each few feet we moved, I was one step closer to those deliciously bulging biceps. I could feel my heart pounding as I watched him smile at a customer as he passed over what looked like a salt beef bagel.

“Oh dear, you must be starving – you’re drooling. Don’t worry dear, the line here moves pretty quickly,” an older lady said with a sympathetic voice.

I wiped away the traitorous stray bead of moisture from the corner of my mouth with the back of my hand.

“The time is eight-fifteen a.m. Humiliation complete. I can now go happily on about my day,” Natalie laughed in my ear.

I liked to kid myself that there were times that I regretted putting Natalie’s name forward for a writer’s position when one of the spots had opened up at the end of Season Two, now being one of them. However, whilst I had found my job fulfilling and rewarding before, there was something about having her there with me that really let me find my voice as a writer. She was a great sounding board and was ruthless in her critiques, and whilst never needlessly cruel, she allowed herself the freedom to tell me if a scene I’d written sucked if she’d thought so. I credited her a lot in my writing, especially in a new project I’d been working on for the past year. Although there was no shortage of cop dramas on TV, I’d been working on one that would have a gay detective as the lead. I knew it would be a hard sell to the network as the initial episodes I’d penned had the lead character out on the dating scene, dealing with homophobia within the NYPD and succeeding in finding love eventually. A lot of prime time shows with gay leads either had the lead as a tragic character who found themselves in the ‘seedy’ underbelly of the queer community or as the comedy relief. My show highlighted committed queer relationships that dealt with all the same trials and tribulations as any other straight TV couple.

Once Season Four had wrapped, only a few weeks had passed before we were going into the pre-production phase of Season Five. It was legit nuts, but the job market and the realities of working in television were such that Natalie and I were now found ourselves as two of the longest-serving writers in the staff pool.

“Next!”

My gaze lifted to meet Mr. Muscles on the other side of the counter. Apparently

while I'd been lost in my thoughts the line had cleared, leaving only a thin countertop between me and him. "Sorry!" I mumbled, my voice strained and flustered.

"It's all good." He winked, he god-damned winked at me. "Seemed like you were lost in your thoughts a bit."

"Not so much lost as pleasantly meandering around in them." I smiled back. What a douchebag answer.

He at least had the good grace about him to laugh at my lame joke. "Well, I'll have to try and keep your attention on me long enough to take your order."

"Not gonna be a problem there." Natalie chuffed out a quick laugh behind me. I repaid her outburst with a quick light elbow to her stomach, expelling the air quickly from her lungs as she struggled to hold in a laugh. "Sorry," she wheezed through clenched teeth.

"Sorry," I mimicked to him, "about her, I mean."

"No, you guys are fine." He smiled, his teeth brilliant white and perfect. Even this man's beautiful teeth made my heart stutter. "So can I get you the usual?"

"You know what I want?" My jaw dropped slightly.

"Yeah, I know what you want." He winked at me again before turning around to busy himself at the Gaggia machine.

"This is the part in the porn where he'd say he could tell you want something hot and creamy," Natalie whispered in my ear.

"This elbow can keep going," I warned her. She chuckled in my ear and backed off.

A minute later he turned back around with a dark purple paper cup and plastic lid. “One half caf, skinny latte, extra hot with a shot of hazelnut syrup. Am I right?”

“You are right.” Holy shit, he remembers my order. I guess he remembers a lot of regular customers’ orders if he makes them enough. I’m not going to let silly details like facts ruin my moment though! I tapped my card against the machine and put a few bucks in the tip jar.

“Thank you, Dylan,” he called as I turned to walk away.

“You know my name.” I turned back to stare, dumbfounded.

“Of course I do.” He bit his bottom lip. “Same time tomorrow?”

“Absolutely.” I left the shop without Natalie, waiting outside with my nose pressed up against the window like a dog at a butcher shop. I smiled as I saw Natalie walking towards the door of the shop, drink in hands with hearts in her eyes.

The bell chimed as she exited the shop. She immediately slapped me on the arm.

“Ouch!” I yelped out, unable to rub the sore spot because of the scalding hot coffee in my non-smacked arm.

“How could you leave without asking that delicious specimen out?” She gawped at me, gesturing towards the window. I followed the direction of her arm, through the window to the now-smiling Muscle Mary behind the counter who gave me the slightest of nods and grinned at me.

“Come on!” I grabbed her arm and hurried her away from the coffee shop. Safely round the corner I turned on her. “I mean, we don’t even know if he likes me.”

“Come on, doofus,” she chuckled. “I mean, I know it’s been a while, but the signals he was giving were quite clear. I’m a lesbian, and the signals were so strong I could feel some of the old stirrings down below.”

“Please don’t talk to me about your down-below.” I covered my mouth and pretended to gag. “Anyway, I told him I’d see him tomorrow.” I shrugged.

“Well, you’d best practice your best moves and lock that shit down tomorrow then.” She linked our arms, pulling me towards the direction of the office. “Come on, we’re gonna be late and will have to face off against The Beast .”

A few minutes later we were hurrying through the lobby of the building, nodding at Cliff, the old security guy, who on more than one occasion had had to let me through the turnstiles as I had a habit of leaving my ID at home. It happened so often that he automatically sighed and reached for the switch whenever I patted my pockets and cursed, vividly picturing my ID hanging on the back of the chair in my kitchen.

We rushed into the lifts. My feet didn’t stop tapping until the elevator doors opened on the fifteenth floor. The black square modular desk that served as the office reception lay just beyond the doors. Behind the desk was Gretal, the keeper of the office diary, merciless protector of the writer’s schedule and the key holder to the copy room. I would liken Gretal to Cerberus in almost every way, except that Cerberus was probably cute when he slept. I imagined Gretal slept upside down, above her desk with one dazzling blue eye constantly open.

“Good afternoon,” Gretal chirped brightly, her perfectly polished talons gleaming red as she drummed them on the desk in front of her.

“Gretal, it’s fifteen minutes before nine a.m.” I checked my watch to make sure I wasn’t going nuts.

“Some of us have been here for an hour already.” She shrugged, looking pointedly between the pair of us.

“Some of us should get a life then,” Natalie muttered, patting me lightly on the back before moving swiftly down the hallway. Greta eyed me like a lynx just before it pounced on its prey. I shrugged slightly and gave Greta a tight smile, nodding down the hallway that Natalie had disappeared down.

“I’m just gonna...” I hooked my thumb over my shoulder.

Greta’s gaze didn’t leave mine as I made my way down the office. I could feel her stare still on me like icy claws dragging down my spine.

I caught up with Natalie just before she entered the viper pit. We had taken to calling the main writers’ room that after our first few months. We’d learned that if you wanted any credit for any of your ideas, you’d best have that shit written down before floating the idea openly in the writers’ room, otherwise another writer would snap that shit up and have their name on it quicker than you could say boo to a goose.

Just as Natalie reached for the door, a voice that chilled my soul sounded from behind us. “Can you two please follow me?” I yelped and jumped away from the ice-cold fingers and sharp talons of Greta, who seemed to have appeared behind me like a ghoul. “You both are wanted upstairs.”

My heart beat slowed as she walked back towards the bank of elevators, her black leather high heels clacking on the marble floor as she went. She gestured over her shoulders vaguely, which I assumed meant we should follow her.

“I would so hit that if she wasn’t the epitome of evil,” Natalie whined in my ear.

“That is gross, even for you,” I winced.

“She’s hot!” Natalie gestured towards Greta’s retreating form. “I mean, you have to appreciate the aesthetic.”

“She probably stole that body from some unsuspecting new actress or model.” I eyed the demon in front of us. “I am almost positive that she had green scaly skin underneath all that Prada.”

Natalie laughed and punched me lightly in the arm. “What do you think they want us for?” she whispered as the elevator dinged and the doors parted.

“I’m guessing it’s something to do with Season Five starting production. Maybe they want to negotiate our contracts for the upcoming season?” I silently hoped and crossed my fingers by my side.

“If we could keep the chatter to a minimum, please?” Greta scolded as she pressed the button to the twenty-first floor.

My heart pounded as the cabin ascends up the building. A growing dread rose in my stomach. I’d been getting some troubling vibes from the show runners and producers when it came time to discuss moving forward with the next season. There had been chatter about giving more credits to the up-and-coming writers in the room, and with good cause, because the new breed were very talented. I hoped that this wasn’t a very nice handshake from the head of the studio before they pushed us out of our jobs.

We rarely got called to the twenty-first floor. If the studio heads wanted to talk to us, they would come down to fifteen and chat with us in the writers’ room. We walked into the reception area of the space, their very own Greta sitting behind a white circular desk – Meave.

“Good morning.” Greta nodded almost in deference to the tall, eagle nosed brunette behind the desk. I guess Meave was an upper level demon to whom Greta must pay

homage. “I have the two writers I was asked to deliver.” She gestured behind herself towards us as if we were some street urchins she was dropping off at the orphanage.

“Oh of course,” Meave sighed without looking up from her French tipped manicured fingernails. “Please go on through to Mr Hughes’ office. He is expecting you.”

I gathered, from her not leaving her chair and waving us towards the large dark oak door to her right, that she had no intention of introducing us.

“Go,” Gretal urged us along, moving us swiftly to the door. I heard a few choice words leave her lips to Meave as we knocked on the heavy oak.

“Come in,” a deep disembodied voice called from the other side. Harold Hughes was a legend in film and television. During his tenure as the head of the studio, he had managed to increase revenue to all the departments under the company’s umbrella, as well as its fledgling streaming platform. Few studios could compete with FilmFlix , but StudioNine , our very own platform, was giving them a run for their money.

Natalie poked me in the side, urging me to open the door. The door groaned on its hinges as it opened, revealing a huge expansive office that must have taken up a good sixty percent of the entire twenty-first floor. The long office extended from the east side of the building to the west, giving an amazing view of the north side of Manhattan, from the Bowery all the way to Harlem. The luxurious plush white carpets looked so soft that I almost wanted to curl up in a ball like a cat on the office floor. The hunter green walls were dotted equally along their length with white square moulding that held posters from Mr. Hughes’ earlier television successes. A glass and dark wood cabinet held various awards, which included two Oscars and a BAFTA amongst them. At the head of the room, backed by the panoramic New York skyline, was a large glass Etienne Dupre desk that I knew from the fall issue of Vogue cost around forty thousand dollars.



“Ah, Mr. Cooper and Ms. Spencer!” Mr. Hughes exclaimed, standing up from behind his desk. His large frame dwarfed the brown leather Giovanni Riocardi chair that would have set him back at least another ten grand. “Right on time.” He gestured towards the two identical chairs to his own that were situated in front of his desk. There were another three unoccupied chairs just off to his left. Thirty thousands dollars’ worth of chair, currently unoccupied.

Natalie and I took our seats, as Mr. Hughes lowered himself down into his own gingerly, groaning all the way. “Don’t get old kids,” he winced as he sat down, “it’s not fun.”

“I’m sure you’re not a day over sixty-five, sir,” Natalie exclaimed, waving her hand in the air.

I winced and kicked Natalie swiftly in the shin. She sucked air through her teeth, resisting the urge to retaliate or sooth the sting on her leg as Mr. Hughes belted out a deep throaty laugh. “You would be right Ms. Spencer, since I’m only fifty-eight.” He reached forward and picked up the phone on his desk. “Meave, can you please call for the department heads please.” He hung up without saying goodbye, leaning forward on the table to rest his elbow on the glass surface in front of him.

“I suppose you are wondering why you are here.” He smiled kindly, reaching into his desk drawer to pull out a box filled with various hard candies, offering it to us. Natalie and I both turned down the gesture. He shrugged, unwrapping a small red candy and popped it in between his teeth.

“Yeah, I guess we are a little confused?” I bit at the skin on the inside of my mouth, my hands wringing on my lap in front of me.

“Well, I won’t keep you in suspense much longer.” He slipped the box of candy back into his desk.

I silently prayed that this would be good news. Maybe the show has been picked up for more seasons and they are just strategising with us. Why they would do that without the head writer, I don't know. Maybe they just want to commend us on a job well done for Season Four, since Natalie and I carried that season. There is no way they can just fire us.

“We have made the decision that you won't be joining the writers' team for Season Five of your show.”

Well, shit.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:19 am*

Dylan

My stomach felt as if it had dropped to the floor. A sudden wave of nausea passed over me, along with a million and one questions I couldn't answer. How could this happen? What am I going to do now? How am I gonna afford to pay my bills? What the hell am I going to tell my dad? Who is going to hire someone mid-season for anything?

"Are you okay, Mr. Cooper?" Harold Hughes asked worriedly from his seat. "Can I get my assistant to get you some water?"

"No, I'll be fine." I waved him off. I looked for the first time to Natalie on my right, who appeared equally worried. I reached across and squeezed her hand, letting her know I'd be okay.

"So as I was saying, we won't be keeping you on the writers' team for Season Five next year due to..." A sharp knock sounded on the door behind us. Harold yelled for whomever it was to enter. One by one, the three department heads walked into the office and took their seats next to Mr. Hughes: John Devereux the CFO, Julia Jacobs the Head of Content and Hillary Turner, the Vice President of Operations.

I barely got to see John in my day-to-day working at the company, but I did know that he'd gotten wild with Reece from the copy room at the Christmas party last year. John was diminutive in stature, his clothes swamping him as he crossed one leg over the other. His jet black hair was slicked to one side, and his piercing green eyes pinned you in place as he took your measure with his stare.

I could feel Natalie tense to my side as Julia coughed, shuffling some papers in her lap. She would have to be blind not to notice, but Natalie had harboured a giant crush on Julia since the day she had breezed into the writers' room and told us we needed to incorporate more influencer-friendly content into our shows if we hoped to get social media buzz. She was extremely good at her job, able to spot televisual trends before a lot of leading figures in the same field.

Hillary was a whole other kettle of fish. If Gretal was below Meave in the demonic hierarchy, then Hillary would be about ten circles of hell deeper than Meave. If it wasn't for the high beehive of hair on top of her head, I knew in my heart I would see her horns.

"How are you both this morning?" Hillary smiled from across the table. Her eyeballs were barely visible between the thin slits of her peering eyelids.

"Fine, thank you." I heard the tremble in Natalie's voice.

"Good, we should get started." She tapped the glass of the table with her polished pointed nails, gesturing towards Harold. Obviously familiar with her style, Harold chuckled and put an affectionate hand on Hillary's, giving it a slight squeeze. Her grin widened as she smiled widely at him, her pale white teeth seeming to glow from within. Part of me wanted to warn him to be careful in case she unhinged her jaw and swallowed him whole.

"Absolutely." Harold clapped his hands, leaning his big frame back in his chair. "So tell me you two, how do you think you have both done this last season?"

Oh god . It felt almost as if they were interviewing us again. I prayed we would not get a 'where do you see yourself in five years' question, because the only answer I would have given half an hour ago was to be still working for the studio, doing what I did best. Writing.

“I think looking at the ratings, I would say we've done amazingly.” I steeled my voice, hoping confidence might sway any decisions not yet made about mine and Natalie’s futures.

“Can you explain that a little more?” I wasn’t expecting Julia to speak at this meeting. She tended to have more of a stoic nature in meetings, watching things from the background with a keen focus. It seemed Natalie was as surprised as I was as she squeaked out a small noise next to me, quickly covering it with a small cough.

“Yeah sure.” I took a deep breath, feeling a ramble coming on. “Well, as you know, the overall ratings for network television are going down. People watch TV on the whole a lot less and the numbers for people who watch live TV are even less still. We have managed, even with the decline in these figures across the board, to maintain an average of about sixteen million viewers with a six point seven rating and ninth ranking overall for the Thursday night slot. No other network has pulled in those figures in the last two quarters.”

I caught a wink from John across the table. The only time he showed any level of happiness is when money was involved. “That’s true Dylan, advertisers still care about who watches TV live and when. We have maintained good links with the biggest commercial agency, Vunderkin, for the past two seasons. The show has pulled in a lot of revenue for the studio.”

I slapped my hands hard onto the arms of my chair, the anxiety and now growing anger bubbling up to the surface. “That’s why I don’t understand why you are letting us go.”

Impressively, the four executives on the other side of the table pulled the same confused expression. Furrowed brows all around. “What do you mean, let you go?” Julia asked quietly.

“Well, isn’t that why we are here? So you can give us the heave-ho out the door?” Natalie said, trepidation clear in her voice.

“Good grief, no!” Harold bellowed, standing quickly from his seat and moving around the desk, resting against the glass table between us. “Dylan, you have produced some excellent work here with the team over the past few years that has not gone unnoticed. All of us here haven't failed to notice all of the extra work you've put into the show. How you attend every taping, how you develop new talent, and are always on hand for the directors and showrunners. Even with young Ms. Spencer here, we have enjoyed watching how you have cultivated her gift. Natalie, you are irreplaceable and your ideas are so unique. You know the trends to aim for before they are even in the public zeitgeist.”

“Well, that’s awesome.” I looked over to Natalie, who shrugged. “Doesn’t really explain why we are here though.”

“We here because of Amore Blue .” That was the working title of my cop drama that had been on ice for several months now. I knew the studio heads had received my pitch and proposal, but other than a 'thank you for the submission', I’d heard nothing.

I felt my pulse pick up. Amore Blue was a passion project, one that I'd thought would stay hidden in a drawer somewhere for me to pick up and thumb through on wine-fuelled nights in the future whilst I lamented on things that could have been. Now here I was, in the office of a head of a major studio, and he was talking about my work. “What about it?”

“Forgive us, but we have had several meetings about your concept amongst ourselves for several weeks now. We have kept it very close to our chest as we didn’t want word to get out to the press that we were looking into diversifying our portfolios to include a police procedural drama. This isn’t something the studio has ever really paid much attention to. The polling says that the time of these shows is very much

over. Late nineties to the early noughties was their heyday." Harold picked at the white linen of his trousers before reaching behind himself into the desk to pick up a lint roller which he ran up and down his thigh. "However, we see something new and exciting with your work, Dylan."

"You do?" I heard a catch in my voice, the wonder in it reminiscent of a six-year-old boy asking if Santa had arrived yet.

"Yes, we do," Julia confirmed. "What we don't want is to just be another company who drags out the rainbows during pride month and then give ourselves a big corporate pat on the back. With how you have written the pilot of the show, we can see the real humanity in your main character, Nico Amore — love the name, by the way." She winked.

"Thanks." I felt my cheeks heat as she regarded me warmly. Her eyes, however, flitted to Natalie every few seconds.

"Yes, we want to show real, true representation as an organization where the main character doesn't become a caricature of a stereotype." Harold stood, giving my shoulder a light squeeze as he returned to his seat. "We don't want the funny gay best friend. We don't want the tragic figure looking for acceptance in the big city. We don't want all the things that we already have. We want his sexuality to be incidental to the show as we move in and about his life and we think your script gives us exactly that."

I looked at Natalie, whose eyebrows were meeting her hairline as she took in the excited faces around her.

"What we are trying to say, kids," Harold smiled, "is that we have just green-lit the first season of Amore Blue , and we want you to be head writer and showrunner, Dylan."

An hour later, Harold shook my hand before moving on to Natalie. My head spun with all the information that they'd piled on us for the last hour, ranging from content, advertising sources, finance, script development, location recce and creating a team. Natalie had been asked to join the meeting, as they'd figured correctly that I would want to poach her for my own team. When the offer had been presented to her, she had whooped, exclaiming, fuck yeah, baby! before profusely apologising to the studio heads.

“So Dylan, I trust we can leave this in your hands for the moment while you assemble your team and get back to us at the same time in two weeks to begin pre-production meetings?” Harold smiled, ushering us towards his office door.

“Yes sir, absolutely. Thank you again,” I stammered. The building excitement was bubbling just underneath the surface of my skin. I struggled to maintain my composure as I thanked and bid farewell to the other studio heads.

Natalie and I made our way from Harold's office towards the bank of elevators, past Meave the Terrible. Not a word passed our lips as we nodded a silent goodbye to her. The elevator arrived. We solemnly entered and turned. Natalie reached forward to press the button to take us back to fifteenth. Just as the door began to close the dam broke.

“Oh my fucking god!” I screamed.

“Holy shit!” Natalie screamed in response, jumping from a standing point into my open arms. We rocked that empty elevator for the whole ten seconds we took to descend to our floor. We stumbled out into the reception area where a less-than-impressed Gretal scowled at us over a steaming cup of what I could only assume was hemlock. Even her pointed poisonous glare wasn't enough to bring down my mood as I broke into peals of laughter.



After an agreement with Natalie to meet later that evening at my place for dinner to discuss the initial steps, during which she had berated me for making her travel to the third world (which to her meant anywhere outside of Manhattan), we went off into separate meetings. Whilst the news seemed to invigorate her to new heights of focus and inspiration, it had completely zapped my brain of anything anyone could call useful. Needing a reprieve and somewhere to vent, I picked up my phone and dialled.

“What did she do now?” Hailey chuckled down the phone a millisecond after answering.

“Who? Natalie?” I barked out a laugh.

“Yeah, normally when you call me in the middle of the day, it’s to tell me what shenanigans she has been up to.” Hailey wasn’t wrong. Natalie, Hailey, and I had become very close since the breakup. I’d taken to referring to it as just that, as even mentioning his name was like a knife to the gut. Hailey would initially make trips to the city once a month until she got a job offer as a financial analyst for a big name accounting firm in the business district. She'd then moved onto the Upper East Side and rented an apartment that I could fit my whole house in, twice over.

“No, it’s not so much about Natalie, but I have something to tell you. Can you meet me at Giordano’s for lunch in about an hour?”

An hour later I pressed my palms to my ears to drown out the shriek. “Are you fucking kidding me?” Hailey yelled, rushing around the table to pull me to my feet. She threw her arms around my waist and crushed me against her. “I’m so fucking happy for you!”

“Hailey, people are looking,” I gasped, short of breath, as she jumped up and down while holding on to me. I looked around at the other diners, offering a small nod of apology, while trying to laugh through a restricted diaphragm.

“Oh who fucking cares!” she scoffed, pulling me back to look at me, her eyes brimming with tears.

“Excuse me, ma’am, but we have other diners,” the young, pretentious server who’d seated us hissed behind Hailey.

“Oh eat a dick, Diego, my friend is going to be famous,” Hailey laughed before giving me one last boa constrictor-like hug and returned to her seat. I winced and offered my second nod of apology to the now-seething young server, who turned promptly on his heel and returned to the kitchen.

“Hailey!” I laughed. “You’re going to get us thrown out.”

“Oh pfft.” She waved me off. “They can’t throw you out. You’re like the king of movies now.”

“I don’t think creating a show gives you special being-a-dick privileges.” I looked around at the other diners again, who appeared to have forgotten we’d ever existed and had resumed going about the humdrum of their lives.

“I can’t believe it babe.” She put a hand over her mouth and sighed. “You are doing exactly what you set out to do all those years ago in school. You are exactly where you said you wanted to be.”

“I know.” I bit my bottom lip. “It’s kind of awesome.”

“Well, all except...” She trailed off.

“What?”

“Well, you know.” She gestured towards me.

“No, what?”

“Well, I guess I always thought when you finally got here, where you are now,” she started, “I always assumed you would have Austin by your side.”

“Hailey...”

“I know, I’m not starting anything. I was just thinking about how sad it is.”

“Do you not think I know that?” I sighed. “Do you not think how every time I watch his show and see Mike , that I’m not reminded about what I’ve lost? But it’s for the best.”

It’s a line I’d repeated to myself like a mantra since the day we’d ended things. I’d told myself it was okay when I turned on TV and watched him on a talk show for the first time with his castmates, and my heart had felt like it’d broken all over again. I’d told myself it was okay when I’d watched him in a scene in bed with a woman, his lips trailing down her body as he’d whispered I love you into her ear, when all I’d really wanted to do was kick the TV off the wall. I’d told myself it was for the best when I’d seen tabloid pictures of him out in a club with Kyle and Kevin. Kevin had been unnaturally close to Austin, his hand planted possessively on his chest, as the headline had questioned who the man in Austin’s life was. And I’d told myself it was okay, when we’d run into each other at our alma mater and Austin had looked almost sick at the sight of me, sweaty and shaking. I’d made sure to quietly text my driver to give me an excuse to get myself the hell out of there.

“I know babe, but a part of me is hopeful, you know.” She smiled sweetly at me and shrugged, taking a sip of her glass of white wine.

“I think that ship has very much sailed Hailey.” I played with the stem of my own glass. “Austin’s moved on.”

“And that is why I think there is still hope.” She rested her hand on mine. “Because you never say that you have moved on.”

“I want to though, Hailey.” I smiled wearily. “Going over all that again will only hurt me more. I want to move on.”

“I know.”

“I have to.”

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:19 am*

“Friendship improves happiness and abates misery, by the doubling of our joy, and diving of our grief,” — Joseph Addison

Austin

“ O kay, I guess there’s nothing else to say.” I pressed the end button on my phone and placed it down on the table next to me, picking up the bottle of now lukewarm beer and taking a big mouthful. I sank down into the cushioned chair and leaned back against the soft pillows. I took a few deep breaths, trying to halt the tide of panic that was welling up within me.

I heard the vibration of my phone several times which I ignored, trying to block out the screaming in my head. I leaned forwards on the edge of the chair and let my head hang between my knees, remembering watching something that had advised doing this when one was feeling overwhelmed.

“Austin, you okay?” I felt the cushion dip as Kyle squeezed into the seat next to me.

I raised my head to look at him, unsure of how to begin. I’d barely begun to process the phone call I’d just received myself without having to explain it coherently to another human. “I don’t know.”

I looked around the large expanse of my back lawn. It had seemed such a good idea to host a party, inviting half of the West Hollywood gay scene. The lawn was littered with half-dressed, and in a few cases, undressed men lounging around the pool. Servers clad only in black thongs, a waist apron and bow tie circled the party, topping up people's cocktails and getting everyone pleasantly drunk.

I stared at a young guy on the other side of the pool. He was barely twenty-one, sipping on what looked like the most elaborate camp cocktail known to man. He was a day player on our show. I'd seen him hovering in the periphery of scenes, reacting to the surrounding shot. There were countless faces like his, all trying to score that next big break in Hollywood. I couldn't take my eyes off him as a middle-aged producer slinked down into the lounge next to him, lowering his sunglasses and peering like a predator looking for fresh meat.

It all became a bit too much all at once. "I need to go inside. I'm sorry to do this, Kyle, but can you tell everyone to go? I just can't." With that, I snatched my phone from the table and marched across the garden. I stomped through the French doors into my kitchen, yelling at everyone to leave my house. Not stopping until I got to my bedroom, I jumped face first onto my bed, pulling a pillow over the top of me, and prayed for silence.

I must have fallen asleep at some point, as some time later, I became aware of a small knock at my bedroom door. I pulled the pillow from the top of my head, my eyes automatically squinting to protect against sunlight, but finding none. Night had fallen. My room was basked in a soft, moonlit glow. I looked, confused, around my room until the soft knocking started again.

"Austin, man, I'm coming in, okay?" The door creaked open, the light from the hallway falling onto the dark hardwood floors of my bedroom. My vision finally focused on Kyle, standing in the doorway, watching me with concern clearly etched on his face. "Your phone hasn't stopped ringing downstairs, man. What's going on?"

It all rushed back to me, almost knocking the wind out of me.

"It's all over, man." I sighed. I reached for my cell phone, which vibrated silently against my thigh.

“What is?”

“The show. They’ve pulled the plug.” I swiped my phone open, seeing the many missed calls from my agent, the rest of the cast and crew and one from the studio head, who likely wanted to pass on his vague apologies, whilst at the same time green lighting another show to take our spot.

“What?” Kyle’s face fell as he walked into my room, perching at the end of my bed. “How could they? The show’s ratings have been out of this world.”

“No, you’re right, Season Three was a hit.” I thought sadly of the extras, writers and crew that would now be scurrying all over Hollywood, on the phone to their agents, desperately trying to secure a new gig. “But with all the furore around Yiannis and Christina’s affair, the decision has been made to start fresh with a new show that doesn’t have of this baggage.”

“Did it really affect their bottom line?” Kyle leaned back against one of the four bedposts, wringing his hands in front of him.

“The rumblings since the end of the season on social media have not been as positive as in previous years. Also, there has been some speculation as to what the rest of us knew. Yiannis’s wife has done the rounds on chat shows, saying how toxic our show was and how much the show ruined her marriage and life.”

“Fuck man,” Kyle sighed, running a hand through his hair, “I’m so sorry.”

“Well, you didn’t fuck our director.”

He barked out a laugh. “Man, I have some standards – few, but some. I wouldn’t touch him with yours.”

Knowing that lying there in the dark, doom and gloom being my only companions aside from Kyle, would get me nowhere, I pushed to my feet and trudged out of the room. I meandered through the house, the traces of a party all over the lower floor of my home. I pulled my phone out and sent a message to my studio assistant, and prayed that his contract had not been cancelled with immediate effect.

Me: Hey can you arrange for the cleaners to come over? My house looks like a bomb went off.

Justin: Sure thing boss. Feeling okay?

Me: Yeah, of course.

Justin: Sorry about the show.

I guessed that the word had spread like wildfire by now. As I was still under contract from the network, it would just be a matter of time before they landed me some other part in some original programming venture or cut a deal with a director who wanted to tout their new project to the studio execs. Whilst seeming quite altruistic, in fact, the studio knew that since we were still within our contract terms, that we could not push for more cash than our previous roles without bringing in some serious revenue first. And as far as I was aware, there were no major studios knocking down my agent's door.

What the hell am I gonna do? I felt my breathing start to pick up, erratic and deep as a whirlwind of emotions flooded my chest and mind. There are a million men just like me out there foaming at the bit for every available part; why would they pick me? I'm just a guy from a failed, cancelled TV show. I'm tainted. I'm finished.

"You are not a failure you big lummo. You are amazing and I know because I only love amazing people and I love you, so you must be." That had been during a



particularly bad time in college. Exams had been kicking my ass and I could see my future slowly slipping away from me. I'd been sitting on the stoop outside the house I'd shared with Kyle. Dylan had stayed over the night before, which had been rare since he'd told me that he was certain that if he spent enough time there, the smugness from the Four Horse-douches of the Apocalypse, as he'd called my flatmates, would rub off on him and before he knew it he would be over-gelling his hair, wearing polo shirts and chinos, and talking about his portfolio. I'd woken up early in a panic and had needed to get some fresh air, or whatever counted as fresh air in New York. He'd wrapped his legs around my waist and straddled me right there on the stoop, rested his forehead against mine and somehow made everything better. He'd had a knack for knowing exactly what to say or do to make things, if not better, bearable.

What would he say to me right now? To cheer me up? To realize that my future was my own to decide? He would tell me to look around at everything that I had, at the resources available to me, and to stop whining and realizing that I was a motherfucking star. He would yell at me, then he would kiss me and I would fall in love with him all over again.

Like it had done a million times before, my heart sank into the pit of my stomach. There was no point in beating myself up anymore for letting the love of my life slip through my fingers; no, scratch that, for kicking him from the fifty-yard line, out of my life for good. This ache in my chest and the longing buzzing underneath my skin were self-inflicted wounds. They were constant reminders of what I had lost.

I couldn't contact him. It wasn't fair of me to just call him up out of the blue and ask him to sweep back in and fix my life. An idea sprung up, fully formed in my head. I can't contact him, but that doesn't mean I can't contact someone else. I reached for my phone and began to dial.

"Oh my god! it's Austin Ridge!" The slightly maniacal voice screeched down the line.

Chuckling, I rolled my eyes and held the phone a few inches from my ear while the screeching went on. Eventually, I heard a soft laugh coming down the line. I placed the phone back to my ear. “Are you done now?”

“Yeah I think so,” Hailey scoffed. “Oh no, wait, here comes another one. Oh my god, Austin Ridge, the TV Star!”

“Hailey!” I whined.

“Fine, okay, I’m done now.” I could hear her smile down the phone. “How are you baby doll?”

“Well, I’m not a TV star anymore.” I spent the next few minutes regaling her with tales of cheating scandals, demographic studies, and the eventual pulling of the show from the streaming network. The heaviness that had been present in my chest since I’d received the call that had sealed the show’s fate earlier in the day finally began to lessen. Somehow, talking to Hailey felt almost like a proxy for Dylan. In the past, Dylan had always scolded Hailey for making fun of me if I’d gotten a bit too sentimental, or if I’d said something which I’d thought made me sound dumb. Dylan would always make me feel better or stop Hailey from making me feel worse. Eventually, Hailey had begun to soften toward me, and the protectiveness she’d felt for Dylan had begun to extend to me too.

“I’m so sorry Austin,” Hailey cooed. “I really wish I was there. I mean I have a couple of things I need to wrap up, but I could catch the red eye and be there first thing in the morning.”

“No don’t be silly. I mean I really appreciate it, but I’ll be okay. Kyle is here.” I shrugged, my voice sounding a bit more defeated than I had meant it to.

“Oh, him,” she grumbled.

“You know I said Kyle and not Hannibal Lecter right?” I barked out a laugh.

“I don’t know, at least you would get some culture before Hannibal ate you, the only thing you’re gonna get from Kyle is a sexually transmitted infection.” I pulled the phone away from my ear to stare incredulously at the handset. While Hailey was blunt and honest, it was the first time I’d heard her be openly cruel about someone.

“Wow,” I put simply.

“I might have some unresolved issues with that man. I am very sorry.” The touch of guilt in her voice satisfied me that it was indeed the Hailey I knew and loved on the line, and not some mean girl from the movies.

“It’s all good.” I’d held my tongue for longer than I thought I could so I was slightly proud of myself as I continued, “So…”

“Oh no, Austin.” Hailey moaned.

“I haven’t said anything yet.” I chewed on my lip, hoping not to get shut down before I’d even started.

“I know that tone very well.”

“How is he?” I got to my feet and began to pace the expansive room, fingering things along cabinet shelves as I went. This is the closest I’d come to an interaction with Dylan or with someone who still regularly spoke to Dylan in a while, and I wanted to savor it like freshly-baked bread.

“I don’t know what to tell you Austin. I don’t want to make your day any worse than it already is.” My feet were rooted to the spot.

“Is he with someone else?” My throat began to burn.

“You know you can’t ask me that question. We had a deal that you could both keep me in your lives, but that I wouldn’t be a go-between for the pair of you.” She had a point. Dylan, being Dylan, had not wanted me to lose any of the friendships I’d forged during our time together, so had pretty much made Hailey remain friends with me. “I hate this, but if you are asking me if he has a boyfriend, then the answer is no.”

Regular air seeped back into my lungs, easing the scorch. “That’s good. I mean, it’s not good that he doesn’t have someone. I mean it’s just... well it’s just good.”

“Was it also good when you were seeing that douchebag Jason, or any of the other twinkies and twunks of L.A. that I regularly see you out and about with?” Being slapped by the hard hand of truth was not my favourite past time.

“That’s not fair Hailey,” I sighed.

“None of this is fair, Austin,” she groaned. “It’s not fair that you left him in the first place. It’s not fair that I had to pick up the broken pieces of my best friend and then watch as my other friend slowly broke into pieces too when he realized what a huge fucking mistake he had made. It’s not fair that I’m stuck in the middle when all I want is for you guys to get back together, but it’s just not that time.”

“I miss him Hailey.” That was my own truth, laid out bare for all to see.

“I know you do baby doll, and I know how much this sucks.”

My soul yearned for him. My arms itched to reach out and grab someone that was no longer within my grasp. My body missed the feeling of his next to mine. My body hated my brain for the things it had stolen from it.

“I need to speak to him, Hailey.” I could already hear the rejection before she spoke. However, a small part of me held on to the absolute certainty that Dylan and I were made for each other, and that the universe wouldn’t stand in the way of something that was so clearly meant to be. Could it?

“Austin, I love you, okay...” Hailey began. My hope began to fade rapidly. Stupid universe.

“Hailey...”

“Let me finish, okay? Things have been difficult for Dylan. Everything didn’t come as easy to him as it did for you. He really had to struggle but recently everything just seems to be falling into place for him. He is finally starting to be happy. While he isn’t dating anyone, I know there is someone he is interested in and I’m not saying that to be mean, but I do think it’s important that you hear it for how it’s intended.”

Dylan's happy .

“I could make him happy,” I whispered.

“You did make him happy Austin...” Silence. “Until you didn’t.”

There wasn’t much more to be said. Did I love Austin enough to stay away and let him be happy? Absolutely. Would it kill me to do so? I think it might. But when you loved someone, you put their needs before your own. Their happiness became your happiness. I needed for him to be happy.

“I understand.”

“Austin, I meant what I said. I really do love you.”

“I love you too Hailey.” My voice was merely a whisper on the line.

“Listen I have to go, but I’m calling you again, this time next week, okay?”

We exchanged pleasantries before hanging up the phone. I looked around at the museum of my life. Awards and pictures that lined cabinets and adorned cupboards around the room. I looked for meaning where there were only masks. Masks for each life that I'd portrayed. Charades of being, that left me feeling empty and alone. I sat amongst the coldness of Hollywood and realized that in the small house in Yonkers, I'd had everything I could ever need. I'd had love.

This place wasn't for me anymore. I could bear to be away from Dylan if it meant his happiness, but I refused to live this half-life of parties and Hollywood nonsense any longer. I dialled my agency's number.

After a few short rings, I was connected to the world's most lackadaisical receptionist. “Hello?” she mumbled down the line.

“Hi, it's Austin Ridge. I need to speak with someone on the team.” It really didn't matter who. The days of the dedicated agent were over. Small teams worked in harmonious synchronicity to bleed as much money out of you as they could, like some succubus/incubus hybrid that lived to fatten you up and ride the coin from you.

“Now?” Her tone was very nearly one of interest.

“Well, that would be nice?” I shook my head and hoped that I wasn't losing brain cells by merely conversing with her.

“Sure thing, Mr. Bridger,” she sighed.

“Ridge.” I bit my tongue.

“Who is?” Her voice took on an edge of annoyance.

“I am.”

“Then who is Mr. Bridger?”

“When you find out, tell him I said hello. But can you please tell the team that AUSTIN RIDGE is on the phone?” I enunciated each word clearly, to try and avoid any further miscommunication.

“I’ll also tell them about Mr Bridger.” Her voice was almost victorious, as if she'd finally solved the riddle she had made for herself.

The line went silent for a few moments before the saccharine sweet voice of Mitzy Barrett drawled out, “Austin darling, how are you? Such beastly news about the show!”

“Yeah thanks, Mitzy, anyway...”

“I mean how could they just cancel the show? It’s such a loss, and must be devastating to you young ones.”

I was beginning to get irritated, but agents and their clients had a Mutually Assured Destruction deal going on with a very reciprocal 'don't bite the hand that feeds you' approach to their communication. “Yeah thanks, Mitzy, that is what I’m calling about.”

“Oh it’s just awful,” she cooed.

“Mitzy!” I took a deep breath, plastered a smile on my face, and continued. “I wanted to find out if there were any projects that you guys could get me on. Outside of

Hollywood. Like way outside.”

The line was silent for a few moments before a smatter of mutterings broke out quietly on the other end. Eventually, after a couple of minutes, she returned. “Way outside of Hollywood, you say? There is a movie that's approached us a few times over the past few weeks, but your schedule was always so busy with the show that we really didn't think there was any point bringing it to you. It's going to be a long shoot. They think about a year.”

“Sounds good.” I smiled.

“How does London sound?”

Could I do it? Could I pack up my whole life and say 'fuck it' and set my sight on foreign shores? There was no Dylan in London. There was no Dylan in L.A. either. I needed to move on and I needed to do something drastic. Before I could change my mind, I spoke.

“London sounds perfect.”



## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:19 am*

“You know you’re in love when you can’t fall asleep because reality is finally better than your dreams.” — Dr. Seuss

Dylan

Three months later

“So, welcome everyone.” I stood at the top of a giant boardroom table, with no fewer than twenty seats on both sides. The dark oak wood was so shiny that I was sure I could see my own panicked reflection in it.

I glanced off to my left at Natalie, who gave me a tiny thumbs up, her face creased with concern. She'd informed me moments before the first table read that she'd had a dream that I'd shit my pants while giving my opening welcome speech. I clenched my buttocks together and glanced around the table. Along with a couple of the producers from the network, the table was filled with a mix of well-known and up-and-coming young actors who had been selected from an exhaustive list to become the stars of Amore Blue .

On the left of the table were three guys who, under any normal circumstances, would have played front and center in any one of my wet dreams. Chase Sterling, Max Stone, and Ryder Hart. Whilst Chase and Max were at this point veteran actors at twenty-eight and twenty-nine respectively, having a very broad IMDB presence already, Ryder was very green and had only appeared in a couple of indie projects that went straight to television, but were only really shown at three in the morning alongside the infomercials.

On the right of the table were Madison Reign and Harper Starling. These two young women had been cast as the younger sisters of our star, Jax Conway. My eyes darted around the room and confirmed that our lead was nowhere to be found. I knew for fact he was supposed to be here, as his agent had contacted our team earlier to tell us we were good to go. There had been some last minute issues with a film contract Jax had in Romania, but they had managed to get him out of it so he would be able to star in our show.

“I see our very own Nico Amore hasn’t arrived yet.” My gaze slid to Natalie who merely rolled her eyes and shrugged. “But no matter, we will move on with introductions. If you could give your name and what your role is on the show and maybe just a little bit of background about your previous work. I’ll start. My name is Dylan Cooper, I am the head writer and the show runner for Amore Blue . I started out writing when I was in...”

“Sorry I’m late,” a deep baritone voice crooned from the door to my left. I geared myself up to snap some cutting remarks about tardiness and respect for our co-workers. That retort was lost in my throat as my eyes fell on possibly the hottest man to ever walk the earth. Of course, I’d seen Jax before in movies and had been able to tell that he was objectively hot as fuck. But nothing had prepared me for the absolute sensory overload that came from being in the same room as him.

“Harumph...” I actually just said that. I quickly cleared my throat and refrained from backhand-slapping Natalie, who was currently laughing into her palm. I glanced once again at the personification of sex on legs, mostly to apologise for my co-worker who was shaking with laughter and to welcome the star of our show to the table. “Arooo...” Okay, so that was closer, but the hello was somewhere between hello and a wolf howl. Come on Dylan, pull it together.

“I’m Jax.” My gaze lifted to meet his. If there was any hope left in my heart that he would be oblivious to his immediate effect on me, it was dashed the moment I caught

the cocky smirk playing at the corner of his lips as he appraised me from head to toe slowly.

What the absolute fuck! How dare he look at me like a piece of meat? I was pretty much his boss. I looked quickly around the room again with misplaced hope in my heart that people were too busy reading script pages or chatting amongst their co-stars, rather than witnessing my loss of verbal function. Madison's and Harper's eyes were like saucers, and their excited stares bounced quickly between me and Jax.

“Yes I know who you are Mr. Conway, thank you for joining us.” Yay for the return of speech. “Would you care to take a seat?” I gestured at an empty seat at the opposite head of the table. The lead tended to sit at the head of the table, as their lines tended to be with all cast members during each episode. So the lead needed to be easily accessible to everyone. The only issue was that he would be in my direct eyeline at all times.

As Jax gracefully took his seat, I couldn't help but steal furtive glances in his direction while attempting to maintain an air of professional nonchalance. My internal monologue shifted gears, running on a reel of disconcertingly vivid observations about the man who had just disrupted the equilibrium of my workday. His tousled dark hair possessed an unruly allure, as if each strand had rebelled against conformity in a silent act of defiance. The chiselled features of his face seemed sculpted with precision, forming a symphony of masculinity that effortlessly captivated the room. But it was those eyes — deep pools of intensity that bore into the soul — that left an indelible mark, promising secrets and stories yet untold. As he settled into his chair, a subtle swagger in his movements hinted at confidence bordering on arrogance, a quality I begrudgingly acknowledged only added to his irresistible mystique. The realisation dawned on me: Jax Conway wasn't just a charismatic actor; he was a force of nature, a magnetic field disrupting the carefully plotted coordinates of my professional world.

“So shall we?” I asked, gesturing around the room for introductions to recommence.

“Oh, let me,” Jax coughed, standing quickly from his seat. “Since I held everyone up, at least I can get us underway.”

“Oh, I don’t...” I began, before being pulled harshly back into my seat.

“Sit your ass down,” Natalie hissed in my ear, “I wanna hear that fine-ass man speak.”

Sighing, I sank back in my seat and tried to look at anywhere but him. When he spoke, the silky smooth voice caressed my ears, drawing my gaze right to him like a sexy heat-seeking missile.

“Well, I’m Jax Conway.” He looked around the room, his charming smile disarming all whom it fell upon. I could feel the sighs and grunts of approval around the room. It made my skin itch, watching everyone’s obvious perusal of him like he was a piece of meat to be savoured. “Well, at least I’m Jax now, my name was taken from me when I joined Hollywood.”

Laughter rose around the room, making my eyes roll into the back of my head. Wasn’t THAT funny .

“I will not start reeling off my credits, firstly because that might take a while. An old man like me who has been around a while tends to rack up credits along the way.” His gaze locked with mine as he sent me a quick wink. My blood sizzled underneath my skin.

“Old man?” Natalie whispered in my ear. “Daddy can spank me anytime.”

“Natalie!” I hissed.

“I will just say I am very happy to have joined this cast on what I think is going to be a very important show. As a bisexual man myself...” My world screeched to a halt.

Jax Conway was bisexual?

Every time I had seen him in the press, he had been curled around some starlet or runway model. Well, fuck me!

Please.

Nuh uh, Dylan! Professionalism time!

“I see some of you are shocked by that. I have never hidden the fact that I ‘ swing both ways ’, but the media focuses on what it wants, and what it wanted from me it turned out was some generic Hollywood leading man type and when the cheques are rolling in, who am I to disillusion the masses?”

I watched as Jax, enthralled the rest of the cast and crew one by one. Of course, he had done his research and could pull compliments out of the air for each one of the crew. I would like to say that I sat there stoically judging him with a narrowed gaze, but in fact, I could not hold back the puppy dog eyes that I along with the rest of the cast, were shooting his way.

“And Dylan Cooper.” My name jolted something inside me, an inner voice screaming at me to pay attention to the gorgeous hairy-forearmed muscle daddy in front of me. “I would just like to say how honored I am to be the lead in what may be your first, but I truly hope won’t be your last show.”

“Oh, well...” I began, my voice spluttering like a moron.

“And what an important show to be a part of, right guys?” A chorus of agreement

sounded out from around the room.

“It’s really a joint...” I gestured behind me to Natalie, whose grin was so wide I feared it might split her face in two.

“Let me just say...” His silky voice drew my attention solely back to him, his dark cool gaze seeming to dig deep into my soul and grab hold. My stare focused on that luscious mouth, the plump lips, and that fucking tongue. “I am very much looking forward to working closely with you.”

“Uhhhhh.” My brain exploded all over the pristine white wall behind me. That was the only explanation I could come up with that explained why I no longer had the capacity for clear speech or meaningful movement. I stared open-mouthed at that Adonis of a man, as his lips tilted into a sly grin and with one final wink from his eye, I melted into a puddle on the floor and pour into the drain never to be heard of again.

“I think what our fearless leader is trying to say,” Natalie piped up, her hand on my shoulder, assuring me I was indeed still a fully-formed human and not a slurry of human goo down a drain somewhere, “is that we too are looking forward to working closely with all of you. ”

Pulling myself back from the brink, I shook myself out of my hot bisexual daddy reverie and returned to the land of the sane. “Uh yes absolutely,” I coughed, clearing my throat. “Anyway, you have all seen the preliminary scripts. I’m going to pass around the scripts for our Week One, Episode One.”

“Production on Amore Blue is officially underway, Scene One!” Natalie shouted across the room. I heard cheers and claps from around the spacious board room, but my eyes locked with Jax Conway’s and I could not pull away. The heat I saw returned in his gaze would surely set me ablaze.

“Let’s get started,” he smirked.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:19 am*

Dylan

Six weeks later

“There’s so much blood,” Myrna cried into the chest of her husband, her tears soaking the white shirt that was stretched across his impressively wide, muscular chest, her arms wrapped tightly around his waist. Her hands were clasped behind his back, stained with the same blood that was pooled on the floor from the chest wound of the woman lying at their feet. Her body was still and pale, without a breath or flicker of an eyelid to indicate that she could be saved.

“You need to tell them what happened, exactly how we discussed it, okay?” Jake whispered into her ear, pressing a kiss to her wild red curls.

“Jake, I don’t think I can do this,” she cried, pulling away from him, wincing as she caught another glimpse of the gruesome sight below.

“You didn’t have a choice, Myrna,” he said sternly, gripping her by her upper arms. “There was no other way; she made sure of that.” He nodded towards the large butcher knife that was resting loosely in the hands of the body.

“They will never believe me.” Her teeth ground together as she looked nervously at the door. The sudden sound of police sirens pierced the air. She pulled away from Jake and tried to make a break for the door. “I have to...”

“Myrna, for god’s sake, no!” he yelled. “You have to do exactly as I said. Tell me you understand me.”



“Jake...”

He shook her for a moment before setting her back in place. “Tell me!” he barked.

“I understand.”

The sound of footsteps running up the wooden stairs of their apartment building had them both turning towards the apartment door. Loud knocks sounded out from the other side.

“It’s the police!” A deep voice barked from beyond the door. “There’s been reports of gunshots from this location.”

Myrna looked at the handgun now in place on the Formica dining table in the kitchen, only a couple of meters away.

“I’m coming to open the door,” Jake shouted, “we are not armed.”

Jake opened the door to reveal two police officers in full uniform, their guns drawn. He backed off and gestured for them to enter.

Breathing deeply, Myrna took a couple of steps backwards, backing into the arm of the sofa. The sharp impact of her body caused the couch to shift and she fell backwards, landing unceremoniously on the floor just in front of the now out-of-place sofa.

“Shit balls,” she laughed, her hands flying to her face to cover her smile. “I’m sorry everyone, my fault.”

“Cut!” Miles Jeffery, the director of Episode One, shouted across the large sound stage. “Reset everyone.”

Jenna, the actress playing Myrna mouthed an apology at Ged, playing Jake. “Sorry Jax,” she laughed next towards the star of the show.

He threw her a subtle wink and waved her off.

“Take five while we get ready, people,” Miles yelled, chatting with the script supervisor as the crew rushed about the set, putting everything back to their starting positions.

“I really like this episode.” I suppressed a shiver as the deep voice burrowed its way into my ear and slunk its way down my spine. The sweet aroma of bergamot and oranges permeated my nostrils, managing to smell both summery and like Christmas at once. I turned my head slightly to see Jax crouching down next to me, his thick forearm resting on the arm of my chair.

“Thanks,” I grinned, “you’re doing great out there, you know.” I gestured towards the set where Jenna and Ged were currently going over their lines standing above a stage blood-soaked extra on the floor, who remained motionless throughout.

“Really?” he bit his bottom lip and looked up at me from under those thick dark eyelashes. “I’m not coming off like a hack or anything?”

“Not at all. I like what you’re doing with the character.” I shifted in my chair to face him. I searched his face for some imperfection. Something I could hold onto when I was convincing myself that he wasn’t one of the most handsome men I’d seen up close in real life. In the first few weeks I’d hoped he would turn out to be a giant douchebag and that he would do all the work for me in that regard. Annoyingly, he was also perfect in that department as well. He was strong, supportive, sweet and funny as all hell. It was very annoying.

“I hope so,” he grinned, and even the damn crooked tooth at the side of his mouth

was too cute for words. He looked so vulnerable. It sparked a need in me to reassure him and soothe away any concerns he might have. “You’re trusting me with something really special here.”

I make a noise and some attempt to wave off whatever compliment he could throw my way. He stopped me in my tracks.

“I really want to make you proud, Dylan.” His big strong hand gripped mine and squeezed it ever so gently. “Also, please stop calling me Jax.”

“That’s your name.” My palms began to sweat.

“No, that’s my professional name. I want to hear my real name in your mouth. Call me Spencer. Please?”

I fought the urge to jump his bones right there and then. I mean, I could suck his dick just once right? That would surely be fine. I mean, people might have to look away, but it would be totally worth it.

“Positions everyone,” Miles called, and the stage bell rang, alerting everyone to the live cameras and sound. Jax — Spencer — gave my hand one last squeeze before returning to his mark.

I watched from the small bank of monitors surrounded by large two-meter-high moveable walls. The video village was my favourite place to be in during tapings. I loved to watch on the monitors with my huge headphones on as my words and scenes came to life on screen. I loved the drama, the different takes, and the small changes the director and producers made to the scenes to make them more impactful. I even loved the bloopers that happened now and again.

Natalie preferred to sit off to the side with the other writers, as they workshopped

changes on the fly if a scene just wasn't working. I watched as the scene unfolded, as the couple spinning their tale to Detective Nico Amore about the spurned lover and her attempt to take out the competition. I watched as Myrna, the protagonist who would turn into an antagonist during this episode, tried to play the innocent victim, spinning her tales to Nico/Jax — Spencer — as he gathered information around the dining room table, the supposed murder weapon sitting between them.

I watched the director as he paced back and forth between the two main cameras, capturing the scene. His eyes watched like a hawk as the actors moved from mark to mark between their lines. Miles had directed two of the six episodes that we'd filmed so far. Only three of them had come back from the editing process and sound department and were currently in the can, waiting for their turn to be screened. I kept up with the raw dailies that were delivered to my inbox every other day and sent my notes along with the directors and the production company execs. I tried to keep my creative control fairly low-key, letting the directors have their moment in the starlight, but, as the showrunner, I had the final say and complete control over what the final product would look like.

In those first few days, I'd had a few sleepless nights worrying if I would be able to translate my vision to the screen. I needn't have worried, I'd realised as I watched Spencer masterfully work within the scene to bring his character and those around him to life. I watched take after take, as the director yelled action and he transformed from the hot-as-sin actor who made me want to throw all my rules out the window and lick him all over, to the world-weary but sexually charged Nico Amore.

Nico reached across the table and took Myrna's hand in his own and squeezed it affectionately. I thought I might be drooling slightly as the camera closed in on their joined hands, but my gaze strayed to those thick hairy forearms, corded with strong muscle, bunching up under the sleeve.

"I have some singles in my purse if you want to tuck them into his waistband?" I

chuckled under my breath and look across to the benches at Natalie as she spoke into the small black walkie-talkie in her hands.

“You know these private channels are anything but private, dick,” I said, pressing down on the intercom button on the device as I unpinned the walkie from my lapel.

“No one is paying attention to us.” She smirked at me. “Everyone in this town is too wrapped up in themselves to pay attention to us writers. It’s like a licence to kill.”

“If you’re planning a murder, I’d like to remain in the dark about your nefarious plans, please.” I wagged a finger in her direction.

“Oh sweetie, you know if I ever kill anyone, you’ll be my first victim.” I flipped her the bird before turning back to the monitors. She went silent for a few moments, only a low crackle audible on the line. “Are you seriously never gonna hit that?” Her face was now mere inches from my own.

“Creeping Jesus!” I yelled loud enough to earn several glares from crew members and some narrowed eyes from one very annoyed director.

“Still rolling!” he shouted. “Quiet on the set!” He stared my way pointedly. I caught a small smirk playing at the corner of Spencer’s mouth. His obvious stares and blatant perusal of me had been the talk of the writer’s room for a couple of weeks now. Each and every time the suggestion that I should do something proactive about it had reared its attractive head, I’d shut it down before it became a whole thing.

“I don’t know how many times I have to say it, Nat.” She pulled up a chair next to me, resting her head on my shoulder as she watched the monitors alongside me. “Not only is he the lead in the show that we created, but I’m also the bloody showrunner. The power imbalance is just something that we can’t ignore.”

“Yeah, I know,” she sighed, “it’s just so unfair. He is so goddamn hot, and he looks at you like you’re a tall glass of water ready to quench his thirst.”

“Please don’t make it any harder than it already is,” I groaned.

“Seriously, if he looked at me the way he looks at you, I’d be hard all the time too.” I frowned, turning towards her. She pointed at her nipples and I nodded my head thoughtfully.

“So yeah, as much as I’d like to conquer Conway Mountain, I think we just need to be professional.”

“Hmmm.” Her eyes studied me like she was solving some great mystery.

“What?”

“I call bullshit.” She smirked, her fingers twirling in the cable of her headphones.

“Explain.” Not knowing what nonsense was going to come out of her mouth this time, I braced for the worst.

“I think that while, yes, it might not be the wisest idea to get involved with an actor on your show, you know as well as I do that as long as you’re open and honest with the studio execs and the relevant people then it’s not exactly against the rules.”

“Well, I mean...” I stammered.

“I think we have a rather large case of the scaredy-cats here.” She clicked the tongue against the inside of her cheek, rolling her eyes at me as she started to turn away. I grabbed her wrists to stop her retreat.

“Hey, what was that supposed to mean?” I tugged gently at her, pulling her back firmly into her seat.

She shook her head, her eyes darting away from me. “It’s nothing. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

I narrowed my eyes at her, her gaze finally settling back on me. She huffed out a sigh of defeat and shrugged. “I think the reason you don’t wanna give that fine-ass man a chance is not because of who you are, but because of who he is.”

“Huh?”

“Do you think maybe it’s possible that you have already made your mind up about him because he’s an actor and you’ve been burned before?”

My jaw slackened as I sat there and tumbled down into my own thoughts. It was true that the power dynamics were not perfect, but as I sat there and sank into myself, I wondered, Is that the real reason I have the instinct to run from Spencer every time he shows interest? Did my experience with Austin sink so deep into me that I’m not talking about that failed relationship and using it as a tool to beat off all other potential relationships?

“Listen, I didn’t wanna bum you out or anything, but maybe have a think about why you really haven’t had any meaningful relationships since then.” Squeezing my knee, she kissed me gently on the head before returning to the other writers.

I cringed as I realized that Natalie might be right. Although I had no immediate plans to jump Spencer’s bones, I could maybe see a point in the future when my resolve to keep him at arm’s length would be much weaker than it is today, if it existed at all.

I pulled my gaze back to the monitors and watched as Nico Amore gathered Myrna

up in his arms and told her everything was going to be okay. For the first time in a long time, I was maybe starting to believe that too. I watched him through the screen and began to believe in possibility once more.



## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:19 am*

“Love is always patient and kind. It is never jealous. Love is never boastful or conceited. It is never rude or selfish. It does not take offence and is not resentful. Love takes no pleasure in other people’s sins, but delights in the truth. It is always ready to excuse, to trust, to hope, and to endure whatever comes.” - 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Austin

Eight months later

This production schedule is killing me, I thought as the director yelled cut and called time for the day. I looked around Sound Stage Six on the premises of Graywood Studios in London, currently made up to look like the interior of a highly technologically advanced surgical theatre. There were laser scalpels, tablets that could scan a person’s body, giving detailed descriptions of internal injury and disease, and needleless syringes that from what I’d been told used high-pressure sonic blasts to propel medications through the layers of skin without the aid of sharps. All of these things were currently lying on the wide props table covered in blood and gore.

I’d been filming this futuristic space-based medical drama for the last fourteen weeks, directly after coming off another project, also filmed in the same studios, where I played a Professor of Music in an indie movie that I’d been told was picking up some good buzz during the run-up to awards season.

I’d moved directly over to this new project where I was currently playing a surgeon who, as it turned out in a surprise twist that surprised absolutely no one, was an

undercover operative for an alien race looking to take over the world. I wandered out of the studio towards the make up trailer to have them remove the forehead and neck prosthetics that apparently made me an alien.

“You have two whole days off,” Ginny the make-up lady grinned at my reflection in the mirror, “what are you going to do with all that time off?”

“I have zero plans,” I beamed back at her. “I plan to go home, take a very long bath, pour myself a glass of wine, get into bed with a nice steamy romance book and fall asleep early.”

“Woah there Diane Lane.” I grimaced and squeezed my eyes shut, already seeing my plans flying out the currently open make-up trailer door. “You aren’t a middle-aged woman and we have no plans to be under any Tuscan sun this evening.”

“Kyle, what the hell are you doing here?” I smiled, lifting my fist to bump his. “Last time I heard you were off to Paris to walk in Karlos’ show.”

“Don’t talk to me about that knobhead,” Kyle growled, leaning forward to pick up a lip-plumping kit from the table in front of me. Ginny smacked his hands away and shooed him backwards.

“Knobhead?” I chuckled. “You have spent far too much time in the UK.” Ginny chuckled, picking up a bottle of adhesive remover from the desk and dabbed it on my face with a cotton wool bud.

“Anyway, Paris was like three weeks ago. I’ve been a few places since then.” Kyle crouched down next to me and primped his hair in the mirror, accepting the fact that he would just be annoying Ginny with his mere existence.

Kyle hadn't been too pleased about my decision to move across the pond to ol’

Blighty. So much so that he said he would just have to rent a place with me in central London, to make sure I did come back home once filming finished. This had been the plan until the studio offered this new movie to me as I was finishing the last project. I barely got a chance to see him as his agent had him flying around the world to walk in whatever fashion house paid the highest.

“So what happened with Karlos?” I prodded gingerly. “The last I heard he was a sartorial genius and you were honoured to be in his presence.”

“Yeah, that was until he came on my face and left my hotel room before I managed to wipe it off.”

Ginny choked on air, leaning over whilst holding my shoulder. “Jaysus,” she croaked, the Irish lilt to her voice still strong as ever, “warn a girl before you choke her.”

“Amen, sister,” Kyle muttered, spraying his face with a setting mist he'd plucked off her table.

“Okay, so you won't be working with Karlos again,” I sighed. I worried about Kyle and his career. He wasn't shy of sleeping with whichever photographer or fashion designer he took a fancy to, no matter what reputation he might pick up along the way.

“I didn't say that,” he shrugged. “He is still a genius. I'll put him on my body, just not in my body.”

“So what's the plan, big man?” I smiled as Ginny got back to work on my forehead.

“Well, I am back for a few weeks now. I have a show coming up for swimwear, so I need to bulk up and then shred for a couple of weeks before the show.” Seemingly pleased with the job he had done on his face, he stood and grabbed a stool from

behind him, sliding it under his butt and taking a seat.

“So nothing but lean meat and fish for you soon, then?” I reached across and squeezed his knee.

“Don’t remind me,” he shuddered. “That’s why I’m here. We need to go out.”

Yeah, my plans were officially off the premises, flown away on a strong breeze and are now somewhere over the Scottish Highlands. “Why do your plans have to involve me?”

“Because you’re my best friend and I need my wingman with me tonight.” I felt a heaviness settle in my gut. It dawned on me that Kyle might have set his sight on yet another rung in his professional career, and I was about to be used as a draw to reel in some unsuspecting victim for him to climb.

“Kyle!” I groaned, resigned to the fact that, no matter my protest, I was about to be roped into one of his impulsive escapades.

“Austin!” he playfully mimicked my whine, a mischievous glint in his eyes.

“I’ve only got a couple of days off from all this.” I gestured to the prosthetics still clinging to my face, attempting to frown beneath the layers of latex and glue. “I just wanted to retreat from the world, take a breather, you know?”

“Well, you can save that for tomorrow while you’re nursing the hangover from tonight,” he declared, clapping his hands together with a sense of finality, as though that settled the matter.

“So, where else have you been?” I asked as Ginny stored the strips of textured latex and silicone in plastic containers.

Kyle's eyes darted around the room, looking anywhere but at me. "Oh, you know, here and there." He picked imaginary fluff from his trousers and threw a fake-ass smile my way. Kyle had never been much of a good liar, which is why I'd never suggested him for any roles or cameos on the shows I'd been a part of. Couldn't act his way out of a wet paper bag.

"Okay... like where?"

"Paris, Italy, Singapore, Morocco and New York." He mumbled 'New York' in such a way that led me to believe there was more of a story there.

"Kyle, what aren't you telling me?" I turned my head to face him, earning me a quick slap on the side of the head from Ginny.

"Keep still, ya big eejit," Ginny scolded. "If these tings rip, you're gonna be sitting in this chair two hours before you're meant to come Monday!"

I mumbled a quick apology to the pissed-off Irish lady and swiftly kicked Kyle in the leg. "Out with it."

Sighing deeply, his shoulders sagged as he began, "Well, I was at a general industry party for a few big advertisers and magazines. You know, the type of party I'm talking about." And I did. Several times a year, some studio head or publishing house would throw a big soirée and invite the who's who of Tinsel Town and the Big Apple. It was a chance for advertisers to catch wind of what new shows, movies and TV shows were coming down the pipeline, and offer sponsorship and brand deals for their products to appear in whatever prime-time piece of real estate they could get their greasy little paws on. Magazine editor-in-chiefs tended to invite the top models of the season or the new kids walking the catwalk to attract advertisers and fashion houses to come along and scout out models for their next big shows. I'd been at enough of these events where I'd fielded several offers from rival production

companies and agents trying to poach me from my current team.

“Okay, so that’s nothing new.” I shrugged. Finishing up, Ginny patted me on my shoulder and gave me some final advice about getting the remaining bits of adhesive from my eyebrows before quickly rolling up her kit and exiting the trailer. “So what was so special about this party to make you so cagey about it?”

“Well, have you heard that Jax Conway is about to star in a new cop drama set in New York?” I had heard some rumblings about a new show that was going to be airing in the fall about a gay cop. It wasn’t the first time that a show had featured a gay character, but several industry insiders were touting this show as something special to watch out for. There had been a scramble amongst the agents, trying to get their clients any part in the first season. The network had approached me about a part in the first season, but my hectic schedule hadn’t allowed it, so I’d had to decline.

“What do you know about the creative team?” He eyed me nervously.

“Nothing at all. The only thing I know about it is what my agent told me, and that was next to nothing.” I collected my phone and a few items from the desk and placed them into my brown leather messenger bag at my feet.

Kyle pulled out his phone and tapped away on the screen for a few seconds before handing it off to me. “Here,” he said simply, gesturing towards the lit-up phone in my hand.

“Exuding allure, intensity, and an edge of peril, Amore Blue has captivated critics with its tagline promise of being ‘Sexy, Sizzling & Seriously Dangerous.’ Set to become the crowning jewel in Howard Hughes’ Thursday night line-up, this up-and-coming police procedural drama is generating quite the buzz. So, what’s the inside scoop on the show that has everyone talking?”

First and foremost, Hollywood heartthrob and all-round action star Jax Conway takes the lead in the role of Nico Amore, setting the stage for a riveting performance. Amore Blue pledges to immerse viewers in the gritty underbelly of the sprawling metropolis that is New York City. From the upper echelons of white-collar crime in towering skyscrapers to the raw realities of street-level gang violence and clandestine drug operations, the series aims to explore every facet of the city's criminal landscape.

Curious about what the inaugural season has in store, we caught up with the mastermind behind Amore Blue , creator and showrunner Dylan Cooper. In an exclusive interview, Cooper provided insight into the thrilling narrative and pulse-pounding scenarios that viewers can anticipate in the show's premiere season. Amore Blue seems poised to deliver an immersive and multifaceted portrayal of New York's criminal underworld, promising an electrifying ride for fans of police procedural dramas."

"Dylan?!" My voice turned unnaturally high-pitched, so much so that it scratched the back of my throat, making me cough and splutter. "What the fuck?" I realized at that moment that because of my stupid shooting schedule, I'd missed out on an opportunity to work one on one with fucking Dylan. A tsunami of loss washed over me, making me sink back into my chair. "Dylan?"

"Yeah, that what's I was going to talk to you about later." Kyle laid a hand on my shoulder. "I ran into him and some of the other cast and crew of his new show."

"You ran into Dylan?" I craned my neck to look at him, strangely jealous that he got to be in the same room as the man I loved, whereas the last time I got to see him, he'd been fleeing a high school.

Kyle nodded. "Yeah, I didn't expect to see him and from the look on his face, he certainly didn't expect to see me." I chuckled, picturing exactly what his face must

have looked like when he came face to face with one of his arch-nemeses.

“Was he... I mean, I don’t know if you guys had a chance to... But did he say.... I mean, maybe I don’t want to know.”

Kyle shook his head sadly. “Austin, I spent around ten minutes chatting with him. He made it quite clear when I showed up that he did not want to discuss anything about your relationship with me.”

My heart sank deeper into the earth. “So, what did you talk about?”

Kyle started to open his mouth to speak when I suddenly realized I couldn’t take it anymore. “No, actually don’t. I just can’t talk about him right now. It’s too hard.” I laid my hand on my chest and felt my heart rate increase. “It’s clear that he wants nothing to do with me, and I have to respect that. I have to get over him, and I’ve spent a long time forcing myself not to look him up or see what he has been up to because it’s just so damn hard.”

“Austin, I’m...” Kyle’s head bowed, as if he couldn’t bear to meet my stare.

“What?”

“Listen, I promise I won’t talk about it any more than this, but I have to say something, for my sake, more than yours.”

Intrigued, I turned to face him.

“I’m sorry.” Confused, I gestured for him to continue. “It was the same thing I said to Dylan when we chatted. I didn’t give him a chance at college. I always thought that having someone you were so connected to was stopping you from having the true college experience and maybe I was right, but it was a worthwhile trade-off. You had



your soulmate and I guess I was jealous. I didn't make it easy for the two of you back then, and neither did my brother."

My hackles rose at the mention of his brother, whom I now considered the catalyst for the beginning of the end of my relationship with Dylan. The break-up had all been my fault, but we'd been fine before that.

"Kyle, listen..."

"No, let me finish." He powered through. "Dylan was and is a good guy. You know, he thanked me before we parted ways at the party. He said he was glad that you had someone who was looking out for you. He said that he didn't like to think of you alone in the world and the fact that you still had me gave him some peace."

"Fuck Kyle." I didn't dare say anything else in case the dam broke and I crumbled into a thousand pieces.

"You made a mistake, Austin, and I'm the one who helped you make it." I hated him for a second in that moment. "If you ever get your chance with him again, you hold on tight and never let him get away."

I didn't think I ever would get my shot with my Dylan again. If wishes came true and he even so much as hinted that I had a shot with him again, I would give up everything and everyone for just one more day with him. For one more Sunday morning cuddle. To be waiting on the sofa for him when he got back home from his shift at the coffee shop, to feel that kiss on my forehead before he hung up his jacket. I would give up all my success and every dime I had made to feel his hand in mine. To feel the warmth of his smiles and the safety and shelter of his love.

"Kyle, I appreciate the sentiment, but I have one request from you right now," I begged.

“Anything buddy,” he smiled.

“Please take me out and get me very, very drunk,” I sighed.

“Now that I can do!”

I slowly came awake the next morning with a pounding in my head akin to that of a jackhammer against my temples. Shocked at the intensity of the pain in my skull, my hands flew to my head, pressing downwards as if to stop my brain from exploding across the room. My stomach rolled and I forcefully pried my eyes open to find myself not in my apartment, but in some strange room that looked like every roadside hotel I’d ever had the unfortunate pleasure of being a guest in. Saving my freak-out about how I got there till after I’d emptied the contents of my stomach in the nearest toilet, I rushed to the en suite bathroom and took care of that particularly urgent task.

Swilling out my mouth and brushing my teeth with a plastic toothbrush in a thin plastic wrapper and the tiniest tube of toothpaste I’ve ever seen, I stumbled back to the bed. I saw my clothes and shoes discarded on the floor, my wallet and keys strewn on the nightstand alongside a paper wrapper with a half-eaten dinner kebab. That explains the violent evacuation of my stomach, I thought as I tossed the remnants of the mystery food into the trash can.

Snatching up my phone, I fell backwards onto the bed. Regretting this sudden movement immediately, I groaned, clutching my stomach and shimmying backwards up the bed until my head rested against the flat off-white pillow. Sliding open my phone, I dialed the last called number, which, as it turns out, I’d dialed four times late last night as well.

“Good morning Princess,” the cheerful voice said at the end of the line.

“How do you sound so awake? I feel like I’ve been forced through a meat grinder.”

Kyle's chuckle only served to irritate me more. "You told me to get you very drunk, and I fulfilled my brief there."

I leaned across and grabbed a bottle of water from the mini-fridge underneath the bedside table. Quickly unscrewing the lid, I poured the sweet hydrating nectar down my throat, swilling away the remnants of toothpaste and last night's mystery meat in pitta bread. "No shit Sherlock," I grumbled, "what the hell was I drinking?"

"Well, after a few lagers, you told me that British beer tasted like warmed-up piss and demanded that I buy a bottle of tequila and then drank most of it," he said, thereby solving the last clue in the mystery of violent heaving into the hotel bathroom. Flashes of last night came rushing back to me. Being in a club, dancing on the floor with a variety of men, drinking far too heavily and Kyle yanking my phone out of my hands for some reason.

"Did you steal my phone at some point?" I glanced at the phone in my hands to make sure I had, in fact, the correct phone.

"Yes, that was kind of necessary to save your dignity, the respect of your best friend and your professional career." He proceeded to, once again, aggravate me by chuckling down the phone as if my brain wasn't currently oozing out of my ears.

"Do I want to know?" I rubbed at my temples with my free hand.

"Well, it all started when you said you were completely over Dylan. You said that if he could get over you so quickly, then you could do the same. Which lasted exactly fifteen seconds, at which point you started to wail and cry in the middle of the club that you loved him and didn't want to get over him. It was at this point that I saw several cameras fly up out of nowhere and press record. Against the vehement insistence that you wanted to 'be with the people', I spoke with a bouncer who escorted us into the VIP area."

“Oh, shit,” I wailed, sitting up and pressing my back hard into the headboard.

“Oh, I’m not done,” he chirped, “it was at this point in the evening when you told me that videoing your love would be the best idea. You were halfway through a TikTok video professing your undying love for your ex-boyfriend when I wrestled the phone out of your hands.”

“Kyle, I’m so sorry,” I moaned, my arm wrapping around my midriff to stop any further violent rumblings.

“Again,” he sang, “I’m not done. I’ve just sent you a news article.”

Panicked, I looked at my phone and clicked on the link he'd just forwarded me. There in all my shameful glory was a picture of me with my shirt undone, sweating profusely and open-mouth kissing Kyle behind a red velvet rope. Whilst the shock of seeing my lips on Kyle’s was somewhat jarring, it wasn't the picture that had the blood draining from my face. No, it was the caption underneath.

“The sounds of broken hearts are on the rise around the world as none other than Austin Ridge steps out with artist boyfriend Kevin Richards, brother of modelling hunk Kyle Richards.”

“Fucking Kevin?” I bellowed down the phone, jumping out of bed and shimmying into my trousers.

“Yeah, that was the other thing,” Kyle sucked air in through his teeth, “I maybe told the paparazzi guy that snapped that photo that I was my brother.”

“Why the hell would you do that?” I shouted angrily at the phone.

“Well, because my agent said it’s not a good look for me to be whoring it around on

page eleven anymore, and you don't have a twin, so I couldn't pretend you were someone else."

Pulling my shirt over my head I sank back down onto the bed. "Man, this is all so fucked." My phone vibrated with a message. I pulled the handset away from my ear and winced as I saw a message from my agent asking for a meeting about my new relationship. "I love you, Kyle, but you have really fucked me over on this one."

"I know, and I'm so sorry. It seemed like such a good idea last night." Another message popped through on my phone. Expecting yet another message from my team asking me to come in straight away, I swiped the phone to unlock it.

Hailey: I mean, it surprised me, to say the least, that you have a boyfriend. But Kevin? Come on, man.

Hailey: Anyway , I just wanted you to know that 'he' has seen the paper and he told me to tell you that he wishes you guys well. He definitely doesn't want any contact with you, so please just honor that, yeah?

Hailey: I love you Austin, but you sure know how to make a bad situation worse. Whilst Dylan might not be happy, he is on the road to being happy.

Hailey: Contact me anytime you want. We will always be friends, but please leave him alone now.

I was officially fucked.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:19 am*

Dylan

One Hour Earlier

“Kevin?” I slammed my coffee down on the small chrome metal bistro table outside the boutique little coffee shop over the road from the studios. I thrust the morning newspaper into Hailey’s hands forcefully. “Fucking Kevin?”

“I mean, let’s not jump to conclusions, babe.” Hailey attempted to smile but ended up grimacing as she took in the clear evidence printed in the morning paper in her hands. “Okay, well, I guess they aren’t exactly conclusions when it’s right there to see.”

We’d been broken up for so long that I was mentally kicking myself for letting this affect me the way it was currently. It was as if my blood had both turned to ice, whilst fire bloomed under my skin, making me want to lash out and tear Kevin’s gorgeous fucking face limb from limb. I yanked the newspaper back from Hailey’s loose grip and stared at the picture once more. There he was, the man who said he would love me forever, with his arms wrapped tightly around Kevin’s back, his tongue forcing its way into that stupid, fucking pretty mouth. His eyes closed and a clear joy was on his face. Well, fuck him.

“I feel so stupid,” I lowered my head into my hands and stared aimlessly at the table, “I knew.”

“What do you mean, sweetie?” I felt her hands rest gently on my bicep.

“I knew there was something there between them.” A sad smile played on my lips.

“That day I saw them at the party. I allowed myself to believe what Austin was saying to me. It can’t have been true, though. Look at them.”

“Oh, Dylan...”

“No, it was my stupid fault for believing him.” I laughed, the sound not even convincing to my own ears. “He left me for a reason. It just turns out there must have been more than one.”

“We don’t know the whole story.” I could see the desperation on her face, trying to find some sort of salve to ease the burn that was currently scorching itself into my brain the more I looked at that damn photo.

“I don’t even want to know.” I shook my head and shrugged.

“Dylan...”

“No Hailey, I’m so tired.” My shoulders felt so heavy, the burden of my heart and all the emotion currently pounding in my brain becoming overwhelming. “I’m so tired of missing him. I’m so tired of judging guys I meet with an unrealistic expectation of a love that turns out never even existed in the first place. I’m so sick and tired of making excuses for him, even to myself, to justify that he screwed me over for the greater good.”

On a roll, I didn’t even stop as she tried to interject, “Hailey, I would have given up the world for that man. I would have sacrificed everything and followed him wherever he wanted to go. The problem is that he didn’t want me. He wanted the life he has, more than the life we could have made together. So yeah, I am so fucking happy for him. He achieved all the success that he dreamed of.”

“You don’t need to be noble with me, hun,” she smiled.

“Do you know something? A part of me always thought that he would come back for me one day when he was ready. I thought he would sow his wild oats or whatever and realize that we had something special because I am so certain that we did. Or I was certain, at least.”

Hailey looked uncomfortable, shifting in her seat.

“What?” I prodded at her leg with my shoe.

“Babe, you know I love you with all my heart, but I also think of him as a friend, too. I have been keeping in touch with him, as you know, but every time I do, he just tells me how much he misses you and how much he still loves you. He knows he fucked up, and he just wants another chance with you.” She looked down at her clasped fingers, trying to avoid my stare.

“It certainly looks it,” I scoffed, once again setting the newspaper between us.

“I don’t know what he was thinking.” She shook her head, plucking up the picture and examining it in great detail. “It makes little sense.”

“Well, when you speak to him next, just let him know I wish him well, but after this, I am sure that I don’t want any further contact with him.” I knew in my heart that this was mostly true. Whilst I was certain I wouldn’t be able to trust myself currently in the same room as him, I knew I wanted to be over him.

I needed to be. My mind plucked an image of Spencer out of thin air.

“Listen, I’m going to use the ladies’ room and then I’m going to get us a couple of mimosas as it feels like that kinda morning,” she smiled, gesturing at the image of my ex kissing my former rival.



I took in a deep breath, hoping the intake of air would somehow cleanse my now-tarnished morning. Being stabbed in the heart would do that to a guy. It was always such a chore to get back to normal when your world had shifted off its axis. When something you always thought to be honest and true turned out to be bullshit. It was almost as if you couldn't believe the world could still turn when your life as you knew it would never be the same. As I watched people pass by the coffee shop, either on their way to work, shopping or simply just taking in the New York morning, I wondered if he had been cheating on me with Kevin all that time. He'd always been so insistent that he couldn't just keep Kevin out of his life because of his relationship with Kyle. If he had truly loved me and valued our relationship, then surely he would have done anything to keep our relationship safe and strong. I bit back a bitter laugh because I already knew the truth. I wasn't important to him. He'd left me for a job.

I watched a young, slim, handsome guy, who couldn't be older than twenty-one, grasp the hand of a much beefier dude with tattoos who looked about thirty, across the table from him. The younger guy picked up a phone from the table and flipped it around to take a selfie of them both. It was not him that drew my eye the most, though, it was the look of pure adoration and love from the older man. His eyes never strayed from his partner's face as the other man slipped his arm around the wide-set shoulders and grinned cheesily at the camera. He turned the phone around to look at the picture and smiled.

"You didn't look at the camera!" the younger guy squealed happily.

"I was looking at the sexiest man I've ever seen," the older man crooned, pressing a kiss to his cheek.

"That's sweet baby, but I was also in the picture, so let's try that again," he laughed.

"Wait! Send me that one," the man sighed.

“Don’t worry babe, the way you’re looking at me in that picture, that one is going into my private collection.”

I stopped watching them as it began to feel rude and intrusive. Also, I was getting way too jealous watching the man’s thick thighs pressing up against his boyfriend’s slender leg, and the way the muscles of his forearms bunched under the skin as he dragged his man close to his side.

Once again, unbidden, thoughts of Spencer assaulted my memory left and right. Spencer had made no qualms about showing his interest in me during the entire run of filming, right from that very first day. It had been small things at first, like when I had asked him to come to watch the scene he had just filmed on the monitors. He had sidled up next to me, leaning across my shoulder, his hand resting on my lower back. He’d breathed across my lips as he nodded along to the notes and suggestions, whispering in my ear about how much he appreciated my input. I’d had to cross my legs to smother down the roaring boner solely his proximity had given me.

Another time he'd brought along Chinese food to my trailer in the lot of the studios. He had said he wanted to discuss the upcoming episode as it dealt with some difficult issues of drug addiction and mental health. We'd spent a good thirty minutes discussing the scenes he was concerned about. The talk had then shifted to his childhood. He had grown up in foster care, his mother had been addicted to drugs and was in and out of jail because of a string of petty offences. He said he didn't remember her much as they'd taken him into care when he was five years old. He had bounced around group homes and various foster placements until he'd aged out of the system. After being scouted by a talent agent one day whilst walking dogs along Santa Monica beach, his life had changed overnight. He'd told me about the work he did with local children's charities and how inner-city children in affluent cities tended to be forgotten because of the public's belief that the city would take care of its own.

“I like how you have written the kids in this scene.” Spencer ran his thumb across the

page, like it was special to him somehow. “These kids are just like the ones I grew up with. They aren’t opportunistic, violent, or grifters, but just kids who have strong attachments with each other. Their own little community.” The episode focused on one of the older teens on trial for the murder of a foster mother. The scene dealt with the cops viewing the teen as a monster, ungrateful and spiteful. Taking out his frustrations with life and the system on the one person who had bothered to look out for him. We’d depicted the teen character as being harsh with the other foster children, telling them to keep their mouths shut or else. Nico Amore had dug a little deeper, to find that the foster mother was part of a child abuse ring and was selling access to the people in her care. One night, as she was trying to drag one girl from her bed, the girl fought back and bashed her over the head with a lamp.

“The ending is poignant as fuck,” Spencer sighed. “The older guy refuses to let her take the blame and confesses.”

“Well, he says in an earlier scene that he thinks she is the smartest one out of all of them, and he thinks she will do great things and help the others to do great things as well.” I watched as Spencer’s smile turned melancholy. His shoulders tightened as he stared down at the words on the page.

“I don’t want to mess with your process, but does the kid have to be arrested at the end of the episode?” he sighed finally. “Every time I read it, it just makes me so sad.”

My heart melted a little as I watched this strong man’s soul bleed for fictional people whom I’d invented. I could make light of the situation and point out that these people didn’t exist, but I could see that this was personal for him and he was trusting me enough to be vulnerable in front of me.

“I understand what you mean.” I reached across and squeezed his firm forearm. “The problem we have is that the girl pulls away from being dragged down the stairs. She runs back to the room and grabs the lamp. She then lashes out and hits the woman on

the back of the head as she is running down the stairs. In real life, this is not a clear-cut case of self-defence.”

“I know,” he shrugged. “It still sucks, but I guess this is what is going to make this show a success. You get us to feel about these people. They aren’t just two-dimensional cameos in an episode.”

“Well, I mean I guess...”

“No, Dylan.” Spencer turned his arm over from where my hand was still resting on his, sliding it down until his hand linked with my own. “You’re really talented and I’m so honored to be a part of what you’ve created.”

The air shifted around us. I felt the energy intensify and crackle as warmth bloomed around my neck, creeping up to my face. My gaze moved from where our hands were connected, up his arms, and chest to his face as he stared into my eyes. My gaze darted down to his mouth, those luscious lips that just begged to be savaged by my own.

“I know you want to keep things professional between us, Dylan,” Spencer breathed. “I’m trying so hard right now to respect your boundaries, but I’m telling you it’s one of the hardest things I’ve had to do.” His hand tightened around my own.

“I’m struggling to remember why I thought professionalism was such a good idea in the first place,” I admitted, struggling to catch my breath. Everything about him overwhelmed me. The spicy citrusy smell of his cologne clung to me even after he has gone. His piercing dark stare, those wide shoulders and tree trunk legs — everything about him made me want to wrap myself around him and tear the clothes from his body.

We had completed a scene two weeks earlier where Nico had walked out of the

shower naked, only to catch his co-star and TV police partner in his kitchen helping himself to leftovers. They had shot the scene on Spencer's naked back. I'd had to watch from the video village as a very naked Spencer had paraded through the set with only a modesty sock separating him from the rest of the cast and crew. I'd had to excuse myself from the set and take care of business in the bathroom, so I was able to stay professional and focus on the rest of the scene.

"Just tell me it's okay," he sighed, "tell me you want me as much as I want you." I felt him tug me towards him. His thighs parted as he manhandled me between his impressive legs. "Tell me, please."

"I want to," I breathed, "I really want to. I'm just not sure."

"I just want to kiss you." His hand sneaked around my waist, squeezing my hip. "I need to know if it's everything I've been dreaming it to be."

It was all too much. Like an elastic band reaching a breaking point before it either snapped or sprung back on itself, I could feel my resolve do both. "Oh, fuck professionalism," I gasped, grabbing him by the back of the neck and pulling him sharply towards me.

"I think I left my purse in here!" Natalie shouted as the trailer door burst open. I pushed my chair back swiftly, away from our embrace. My wheels on the chair slid too quickly, making me tumble backwards out of my chair. My face pressed into the laminate flooring, I stared up to see a bemused Spencer and Natalie peering at me from above.

"You look a million miles away." Hailey's return startled me as she settled back in her seat, sliding a tall champagne glass filled to the brim with orange goodness towards me.

“Just lost in my thoughts,” I shrugged.

“Well, they must have been some nice thoughts,” she smiled, chewing her bottom lip. Laughing at my blank stare, she leaned across the table. “You had the same look on your face as you had that time when we saw Jason Momoa coming out of that changing room at Macy’s.”

“Just thinking,” I laughed.

Sheepishly, she slid her phone across the table towards me. “Okay, don’t hate me, but I did a thing.”

“What the hell did you do?” I snatched up the phone and sighed as I saw Austin’s name at the top of an open message thread. “Hailey!” I groaned loudly.

“Just read it before you kill me.” She sipped her mimosa, eyeing me carefully over the stem of her glass.

I stared down at the phone and read.

Me: I mean, it surprised me, to say the least, that you have a boyfriend. But Kevin? Come on, man.

Me: Anyway , I just wanted you to know that ‘he’ has seen the paper and he told me to tell you that he wishes you guys well. He definitely doesn’t want any contact with you, so please just honor that, yeah?

Me: I love you Austin, but you sure know how to make a bad situation worse. Whilst Dylan might not be happy, he is on the road to being happy.

Me: Contact me anytime you want. We will always be friends, but please leave him

alone now.

“Hailey!” I gasped, looking up from the phone.

She waved me off and pointed back at the screen. “Read on!”

Austin: Please, you have to believe me. It was a huge misunderstanding.

Me: It was very clear Austin.

Austin: I know it looks bad.

Me: It looks how it looks. You’re single. You can hook up with whomever you want.

Austin: I only want Dylan. You know that.

I cursed myself, as for a fleeting moment, I believed him. For a split second, I wanted to press the dial button, forgive him for everything, and run back into his arms. My brain was my friend; my brain remembered everything he promised me. It remembered every time he was in my arms and told me it was just me and him, against the world. Forever. It also remembered him walking away and tearing my heart out as he left. Well , fuck him. I continued reading.

Austin: I promised I wouldn’t say anything, but Kyle has been under a lot of pressure from his management company about his public image and is trying to land a couple of big names. We went out and got very drunk. I was sadly, lonely and upset and somewhere in the back of my mind, I must have wanted some comfort from a friend. So I kissed him.

Me: Kevin?

Austin: No, Kyle. the guy in the picture is Kyle. He told the photographer he was Kevin, so that his management company wouldn't get on his case.

Me: This is all messed up.

Austin: You're telling me, babe.

Me: I'm out with Dylan at the moment. I'll speak to you later yeah?

"So what if it was Kyle?" I shrugged, sliding the phone back across the table towards her. "It doesn't change anything."

"It doesn't?" I caught the sad look flitting across her face before she schooled it into a small smile.

"Hailey, I've wasted so much of my time worrying about him, taking care of him and then crying over him, waiting for him and eventually getting over him." I took a sip of my drink. "I can't go through that all again. No matter what Austin believes, we were never destined to be together. If we were, he wouldn't have left me for a paycheck."



## Page 10

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Dylan

With filming of Season One having wrapped yesterday and off for post-production, there was nothing left for the cast to do but wait for the big premiere on the fall schedule. There was a bittersweet taste to the end of the season finally being finished. On one hand, I was beyond excited to see the finished product, months and months of blood, sweat and tears finally coming to fruition on the small screen. However, I was coming to terms with the fact that I wouldn't see as much Spencer as I was used to.

I wouldn't go as far as saying that I was becoming obsessed with the man, but maybe that feeling wasn't so far off in the future. There was a kind of static that filled my head when I was around Spencer, or about to be around Spencer, or god, even thinking about Spencer. He sucked the air out of the room and scrambled my brain. Normally, I was focused, I was calm and collected. That was until he breezed into the room and then I was a swooning, babbling mess.

The harsh buzzing sound coming from the intercom near the front door of my apartment jolted my thoughts. I pulled myself off the large chocolate brown sectional sofa that took up most of my living space. Whilst the salary for a showrunner and lead writer in the industry was nothing to scoff at, the money that I'd received from the first season of Amore Blue allowed me to get an apartment that was maybe one up from a shoebox studio, in the sense that my apartment now had a bedroom separate from my living space.

I pressed the intercom and buzzed Natalie into the building. I saw her small face beaming at from the video monitor, holding what appeared to be a very large bottle in her hands up by her head. Chuckling, I opened the door ajar and returned to the sofa,

curling my legs underneath me, as I waited on the crazy bundle of energy making her way up the elevator.

“Hope you have your glad rags on, because it’s party time,” she shouted from the hallway a minute later, slamming the door behind her.

“Natalie, the wrap party isn’t for an hour yet.” I yawned, stretching out on the sofa.

“I know,” she lifted the bottle again, “so we are going to pre-game a little before we head out.” She slumped down on my sofa, her black Valentino Garavani open-backed dress rucking up around her.

“That dress is beautiful Natalie,” I laughed. “Are you sure you aren’t going to crease it, slouching like Homer Simpson over there?”

“I feel like it’s cutting me in half,” she tugged at the dress around her midriff, “I mean, why the hell does elegance mean you have to visually inspect my internal organs from the outside?”

“Pain is beauty and all that malarky,” I shrugged, pulling the bottle out of her hands and taking it to the kitchen to uncork. I poured us two glasses of the fizzing golden liquid and took it back to where she was still grumbling about the torturous nature of stiletto shoes and the patriarchy.

“I think it’s less about the patriarchy and more that you don’t want Maeve or Gretal to eviscerate you with their talons for wearing off-the-rack or, god forbid, jeans.”

She shuddered at the names of the demonic Guardians of the Gates, or assistants, if you wanted to use their titles accurately.

A short while later, the buzzer sounded again — the driver of one of the cars the studio had

sent us informing us he would wait for us in the underground parking garage. One of the major perks of working for the studio was that I no longer had to shlep it on the subway, but had use of the studio's Mercedes black town cars for legit studio business. Yes, maybe there had been once or twice I had rolled out of a restaurant late after one, too many glasses of wine with dinner and begged Luca, the driver I knew liked me the most, to give me a hush-hush ride back to my place. It also helped that I brought on his daughter, Nina, to cameo in a few episodes.

I smiled as I pulled open the rear passenger door to find Luca, craning his neck and smiling at me from the driver's seat.

“Mi caro bambini ,” Luca gushed from the front, his bushy beard glowing white against his olive Mediterranean skin amidst the interior lights. “How are my darlings this evening?”

“All the better for seeing you, Luca!” Natalie cooed, leaning across the front to kiss Luca on his cheek before settling back into her seat.

“Look at you both in your tuxedo and pretty dress, all ready for your party!” He smiled at us through the rear-view mirror as he pulled onto the busy New York streets. Natalie chuckled, thumping my leg with the back of her hand. It was nice in so many ways that Luca only saw us as young kids, writing and creating our silly show for our friends to watch, rather than the most highly anticipated crime drama in recent years. It gave us a sense of home and perspective that we tended not to find anywhere else. “You look so grown up and important.”

“Don't let the clothes fool you, Luca,” Natalie leaned across the seat, resting her head on her crossed forearms. “This is just my costume. I'd rather be at home in my pyjamas watching Survivor .”

“You and me both, bambina .” Luca sighed.

A few minutes later, we waved goodbye to Luca and headed into the production offices. The double doors opened into the lobby. Where on a normal day, a pair of beefy security guards would stand post, checking IDs and appointments, today sat the more terrifying couple, Maeve and Greta.

“Ah, Dylan and Natalie,” Maeve’s wide smile reminded me of a viper’s glistening fangs exposed right before it was about to strike, “how lovely to see you both this evening.”

“And might I say,” It would be useless to tell her she might not say, from learned experience, “you both look positively charming this evening. One might even say you are just this side of elegant.” She didn’t elaborate on which side she is referring to, but Natalie’s sharp glare told me which way she believed the so-called compliment fell.

“And look at you two.” Natalie held her arms outstretched towards them both. I nervously glanced at them. Tall glamazons, towering over us with expressions etched into their face akin to what one might have when observing a crapping baby. However mean they were, one could not deny that they were objectively gorgeous. Maeve, with a whole figure-hugging ankle-length black Balenciaga dress, hair up in what I believe was called a loose chignon, and Greta, wearing a strapless red and black Alexander McQueen Orchid dress. “I imagine Fifth Avenue can afford its bills this evening with what’s currently plastered on your bodies.”

“Well, as the old saying goes, if you have it, flaunt it,” Greta chuckled, running her talons across the delicate fabric around her waist.

“Well, if the Sexual Health clinic chatter is anything to go by, then you certainly have something,” Natalie grinned, grabbing me by the arm and pulling me towards the bank of elevators.

“What!” Greta barked as the doors closed behind us.

“You’re going to need to sleep clutching a crucifix this evening,” I scolded as I pressed the button on the wall panel.

“It was worth it,” Natalie beamed, leaning against the wall, “I wish I had the balls... or is that vagina... or flaps? To stick around and watch her face.”

“Hmmm, I think she would have torn your face off.” I leaned across and pinched her cheek lightly. “Which is a shame cause look how pretty you are this evening.”

She batted my hand away, barking out a laugh. “Showtime,” she winked as the elevator dinged and the doors opened.

The wrap party was in full swing by the time Natalie and I arrived. Showing up fashionably late to a party that you were partly responsible for turned out to be a social no-no, considering the glares we'd been receiving from the senior execs at the party. We had thought they might make an appearance, but from the way we had observed them knocking back the champagne and cocktails, they were perhaps bedding in for the night. The party was being held on the eleventh floor. The partition walls had been taken down and stored elsewhere in the building. Instead of the normal admin offices that were here every other day, there was now a wide open space covering the entire floor. Streamers and balloons decorated the panelled ceilings, whilst dotted around the room were advertisement boards and cardboard cut-outs depicting promotional images for the show and life-size versions of Nico Amore that I definitely wasn't thinking about stealing for my own personal use back at my apartment.

“If you turn your bugged-out eyes and drooling mouth away from the cardboard cut-out for just a second, you will see the real-life version is eye fucking you from across the room,” Natalie coughed, pushing me sharply to the side.

I snapped my gaze up and sure enough, there across the room in a gaggle of actors was Nico Amore himself. I felt Spencer drag his gaze from my feet, slowly up the entire length of my body before settling on my face. The heat was unmistakable in his gaze, pinning me in place. Unable to look away, the only thing I could do was to return his smile.

“God, I think one of you just made me pregnant,” Hillary Turner whispered just off to my left.

“What? I mean, I don’t think... What?” I yelped as the Head of Operations grinned slyly at me from across the flute of champagne in her delicate hands.

“Oh come on Dylan,” she laughed, “everyone knows you two are somewhat of an item.”

My world ground to a stop. “What? What do you mean?”

“You and Jax.” She gestured across the room to where said man was regarding us cautiously. “Everyone knows that you two are together. You don’t have to hide it.”

“But we aren’t!” I yelped, suddenly parched. I snatched the glass from her fingers and down it in one. “We aren’t an item!” I repeated.

“But it seems so obvious,” she frowned. “I mean. everyone talks about it. You two are always finding a reason to be in the same place other than on set. You both stare at each other when you think the other isn’t looking. Jax literally sighs whenever you walk into a room. You two just seem so obvious,” she said once more.

“Well, I wish someone would have gosh darn it spoke to me about it.” I spied another server and called them over to refill my glass. “I’ve been nothing but professional and kept things above board.”

“Why?” She cocked her head to one side curiously.

“What do you mean, why?” I rested my hand across my forehead. “I’m the showrunner and the head writer. It’s my show he is working on. Wouldn’t it be an abuse of power for me to have a relationship with an actor on the show?”

She smiled sadly, resting her hand on my forearm and pulling it away from my head. “I want to say this in the nicest way possible. Jax isn’t just an actor on the show, Dylan. He is the star. He makes more than twice what you do. He has been an established actor in this industry for god knows how long, and he could basically buy and sell you a thousand times over. We need him in this show a lot more than he needs to be in it. There is no big power dynamic from your side.” She shrugged. “And who am I to judge? My husband was the sound guy from the very first show I worked on.”

I knew Hillary was married to someone who used to work in the industry a long time ago, but I wasn’t aware that it was a show she had worked on personally.

“All I’m saying is,” she squeezed my arm, “don’t get in the way of your own happiness with some bullshit moral code and rules that don’t exist in this circumstance.” With that, she wandered away, merging with the crowd of executives holding court in the middle of the room.

Was that really what I was doing? Was I standing in the way of my own happiness? And if so, then why? A sinking feeling in my gut told me I already knew the answer. It was Austin. Part of me still clung to some distant hope that I could work through our breakup and maybe work on getting us back on track. But my head told me that wasn’t what was best for me at this point in time. Austin was my past, and I needed to make my own future. I looked through the crowd, trying to catch sight of Spencer again, but he wasn’t where I’d seen him last time. I made a move to work my way through the crowd when the sound of clinking glasses and the music that had been

playing over the speakers was suddenly brought to a halt.

“Ladies and gentlemen, can I just have a few minutes of your time?” The crowd parted to reveal Howard Hughes in a pristinely tailored Marc Jacobs suit, with a glass and dinner knife in his hand, clinking as the sounds of the room dulled to silence.

“Thank you all for coming out tonight. I know it is such a hardship to come here and drink all this free booze and eat all of this Michelin-starred food on offer around the room, so let me thank you first for coming.” A smattering of laughter sounded around the room. “I just wanted to say a few words to thank you all for your hard work and dedication these past months. It’s not lost on me just how much effort, work, blood, sweat and tears go into making a production of this scale. I know some of you have left family and young children at home with your wives, husbands or partners to allow you to come to be a part of our team here and for that, I can’t thank you enough. The buzz surrounding this show has made things especially hard and the public chomping at the bit to get their first taste of Amore Blue . This is all thanks to the tireless work and dedication of our head writers and showrunner, Dylan our mouths were impossibly close. My eyes tracked down to his full mouth as it tilted up into a salacious smile. "...much," he winked.

I looked briefly around the room, the other guests smiling and laughing at Howard's speech in just the right places. They wore masks of eager expectation, just hoping he would look at them and remember their smiling faces. I didn't belong here. I belonged in a writer's room or on set, not here in this sea of excess and fa?ades.

"Let's go." I nodded.

Realising that my absence might not go unnoticed, I caught Natalie's eye across the room. I nodded my head towards Spencer and mouthed that I'd be back. A wide grin spread over her face and she threw me an exaggerated wink. I narrowed my eyes at her and attempted to turn away from the scene she was in the midst of causing. I



started to turn away from her to follow Spencer whom I saw had begun to make his way through the crowds towards a stairwell near the back of the room when her hand came up to her mouth in a closed fist. Her tongue sneaked out of her mouth and lapped at the hole at the top of her fist. With her eyes closed in bootleg ecstasy, she began to pump the fist up and down an imaginary cock in front of her open mouth, her tongue swirling around and around.

So lost was she in satisfying her imaginary lover, I watched in amusement as the gazes of the guests in the room slowly turned towards the frankly adept demonstration of how to suck a cock.

"Um, Natalie?" Howard murmured.

Like a house spider that had caught the notice of the occupants, Natalie froze on the spot, her fist held in front of her gooning mouth as her attention was drawn slowly towards a confused-looking Howard at the center of the room.

"I was just saying to everyone how much of a stabilizing force you have brought to the team," Howard murmured, a deep crease forming on his brow as he glanced quickly around the room.

Always one to think quickly on her feet, she twisted her hand, pointing her fingers towards her mouth and gesturing to a bemused waiter passing around canapés. "Sorry, I'm so hungry," she chuckled, "I've spent so long trying to get into this dress that I can't wait to get out of it."

"Oh of course," Howard let out a shaky laugh. "That's our Natalie, ladies and gentlemen. Always surprising us."

I shook my head, half in disbelief, half in amusement but a hundred percent thankful for the distraction. I turned my attention back to Spencer, who was smirking from his

position near the entry to the stairwell. Even in a room full of Hollywood stars and executives, his presence was an irresistible tangible force, pulling me along with the promise of solitude away from the clamour.

"Glad you could join me," he smiled as I reached him, and he pushed open the stairwell door and gestured for me to go through first.

"Such a gentleman."

He eyed me carefully as I moved within a couple of inches of him, our chests almost touching as I went. "Not all the time," he whispered as I passed. "One minute." He darted back into the room, appearing again a few moments later with a bottle of what looked to be a very expensive champagne and a small plate piled with canapés.

"You're not just a pretty face, are you?" I laughed.

"Baby, just you wait and see," he leaned down and said silkily into my ear.

Dylan

We ascended the stairs until we reached a single metal door. "I thought it might be a bit quieter up here." With already full hands, Spencer turned and pushed down on a metal bar with his butt, giving it a heavy shove, swinging the door open.

The sharp, cold bite of the night air felt like a splash of clarity from the dreamlike state that Spencer always seemed to imbue in me. The city sprawled beneath us, a vast network of lights and shadows, the distant sounds of traffic muffled by our elevated refuge from the rest of the world, and from the chaos of the party below.

"How'd you know to come up here?" I sighed, walking towards the edge of the building.

"This ain't my first industry party here," he said from somewhere behind me, "I always try to find a little home away from home at all of these things. They aren't really my scene."

A large metal barricade separated the edge of the tall building from the long drop below. Grasping onto the metal railing, I leaned my body over the edge. A wave of vertigo hit me as the extent of our elevation was revealed in vivid detail for the first time. I pushed back away from the edge, turning to see a smirk playing on the edge of Spencer's mouth. I realised he must have seen my legs turn to jelly. I narrowed my eyes slightly before stalking toward him.

"Not your scene? But you're Mr. Big-Time Action Star. I thought these parties where all the studio execs, young starlets and handsome young wannabes fawn all over you

would be your idea of heaven?"

Spencer nodded towards a group of plastic chairs set up near what looks like a giant air conditioning unit. He took a seat on the farthest one and set the bottle of champagne and the tray of canapés down at his feet. Pulling his jacket open, he produced two slim champagne flutes from his inside pocket. I chuckled and shook my head as he set them down next to the bottle.

"None of this is real," he sighed, picking up the bottle and smoothly pulling the cork out with the slightest of pops. He poured two glasses of the shimmering gold liquid and passed one across to me. "This is work. This is expected of us and part of my contractual obligations. This isn't who I am really."

"And who are you really?"

He eyed me carefully, assessing me whilst mulling over my question. "I'm kind of hoping you will stick around to find that out," he smiled, biting his bottom lip.

I looked away nervously as my gaze drifted over the cityscape again. The night enveloped everything in its melodic embrace, with only the occasional flare of lights from distant buildings or the sporadic whoosh of cars below to remind us that we were not completely detached from reality.

"Maybe I will," I responded, my voice soft but clear in the warm air. We clinked our glasses gently, a chime that seemed to punctuate the stillness of the night perfectly. Taking a sip of the champagne, I let the crisp, bubbly drink cleanse my palate, the rich flavour reminding me of the extravagance of the event below yet feeling miles away from it all on top of this building with Spencer.

He shifted in his chair, looking up at the stars briefly before meeting my eyes again. "It's funny," he started, setting his glass on the makeshift table beside him, "how these

heights can make you feel so small yet so alive, isn't it?"

I nodded, following his gaze upwards. "It's like being on top of the world, yet invisible to it," I added, feeling the cool metal of the railing against my palms as I leaned back slightly.

He huffed out a small laugh, a sound that seemed to carry with it a hint of relief. "Exactly. It's the perfect escape." He stood, stretching his arms above his head. His shirt pulled free of his black trousers, exposing a strip of tanned but hair-covered flesh just below his belly button. The muscles there were tense and defined. My own chest heated underneath my collar as I attempted to try to stop openly ogling him. He crossed the small space between us to come and stand next to me. His presence was oddly calming, grounding even, against the backdrop of this otherwise surreal evening.

We spent the next few moments in silence, just watching the city breathe below us. The noise of the party below was barely audible from the stairway. The speeches now seemed to have given way to some kind of DJ set, the sound like an echo of a now-distant world.

"So," I broke the silence, turning to face him. His eyes, reflecting the city lights, seemed to hold stories yet to be told. "What's the real Spencer like, then? The one who doesn't have to smile for the cameras or schmooze with producers?"

He shrugged, a smile forming, a genuine curve of his lips appearing that didn't quite reach his eyes. "He's a lot more boring than you'd expect. Stays home a lot. Watching movies with the curtain drawn on a sunny day. Reads a lot of books, hikes, spends far too much time just playing with his dog, and thinks about life too often and what's out there waiting for him."

"That doesn't sound boring to me," I said, my tone even and measured, "it sounds

real."

"Real," he repeated, mulling over the word. "Yeah, I guess that's a good way to put it." He looked back towards the open stairwell, a wistful expression crossing his face. "I think I've had enough real for the minute," he sighed, walking across to fetch his glass. "To a season well done," he toasted, his voice carrying over the slight wind that whipped around the building. The clink of our glasses under the starlit sky felt like a seal on our shared experiences over the last few months and the gruelling work now left behind us. "And to all the time I hope to spend together."

The silence that followed was charged, laden with an unspoken tension that seemed to thicken the air between us. I found myself caught in his gaze, in those deep eyes that seemed to strip away the fa?ade I kept up for everyone else.

"So, any plans during the hiatus?" I ventured, hoping to steer the conversation to safer waters.

He chuckled, a low, resonant sound that seemed to vibrate along the air. "Trying to change the subject, Dylan?" His voice was soft but edged with a playful accusation.

I exhaled, a cloud of vapour mingling with the brisk night air. "I'm not great at... this," I confessed, the admission more difficult than I expected. "Let's just say that my history with actors... it's complicated."

Spencer once again set his glass down, his movements deliberate, closing the small distance between us. "Complicated how?" he prodded gently, encouraging me to open up.

I stared at him for a moment, gauging whether I wanted to open this can of worms with a guy whom, outside of work, I barely knew. I saw nothing but raw open honesty in his stare and decided that yes, I wanted him to know this part of me.

Gathering my thoughts, I stared out at the city, its vastness a mirror to the turmoil inside me. "Austin was my first real love," I started, the name on my lips bringing a pang of old, yet familiar pain. "We started everything together – hopes, dreams, our careers. But as he had the chance to rise in the industry, it became very clear he needed freedom more than he needed me. When he left, it felt like he took parts of me with him. It's taken a lot to piece myself back together, to even consider letting someone in again."

Spencer listened as I told him of my past with Austin, from our time in high school right through to our home outside of New York. His expression was unreadable in the half-light, his nearness both a comfort and a torment. "And you think I'm like him?"

The question hung between us, a challenge laid bare. I met his gaze, seeing the earnestness there, the sincerity that set him apart from the version of Austin that now occupied my memory. "I thought I knew better than to fall for another actor," I said, my voice barely above a whisper. "But then you came along, and I..."

The words trailed off, but Spencer seemed to understand. He reached out, his hand gentle on my cheek, turning my face towards him. The city lights, the distant sounds, the warm air – all faded into the background. His touch was a question, his eyes searching for an answer I wasn't sure I was ready to give.

"Until I came along?" he whispered, his breath warm against my skin.

"Until you came along," I repeated, my defences crumbling under the weight of his gaze, the sincerity in his touch.

He leaned in slowly, giving me a moment to pull back, a chance to stop what was inevitable. But as his lips met mine, all hesitation melted away. The earth seemed to shift on its axis. Everything clicked into place.

A feeling of rightness.

A feeling I hadn't experienced in what felt like forever.

Home.

This was what I wanted.

"It's La Lucerna you are going to, my friend?" the newbie driver called through to me from the front seat.

I lowered my phone and leaned forward towards him. "Yes, it's on East Seventy-Second Street." I raised my voice slightly, to make sure I was audible over the constant honking of horns and the din of the city outside the car.

"We may be running a little late," he hissed through his teeth, "the traffic is so bad. This is why real New Yorkers take the subway."

I sat back in my seat, a little stung at being called out for not being a true New Yorker. Fair enough, I did take advantage of the handy car service the network provided for me, but I didn't think I'd forgotten about my subway and city bus roots. "If you are worried about being caught in traffic, I can get out here and walk." I tried to ease the edge to my voice. "It's only a couple of blocks."

"That would be great if you don't mind." The driver beamed at me through his mirror. "This would normally be Luca's job as you know, but I'm on loan from Meave whilst he is dealing with something personal," he muttered, rolling his eyes.

"I think the personal thing is the flu, right?" I snapped. I honestly hadn't expected him to take me up on my offer to walk the few blocks to the restaurant. It was high noon in the middle of New York City. The whole place was like a boiled kettle. I hoped



that I would not be sweating through my white linen shirt and cream chinos by the time I met my lunch companions.

"Oh you know," the driver shrugged, "there is always an excuse with some drivers."

"Yes, I think a high fever and throwing up is a pretty good excuse," I returned, deadpan. It made sense to me all of a sudden that he would drive someone like Meave. He must need quite a thick skin to cope with all the snide barbs and outright insults she likely threw his way on a daily basis. Being that close to the essence of pure evil obviously rubbed off after a while.

A few minutes later, he pulled the car over to the sidewalk. I exited the car, dragging my bag and bottle of water with me before closing the door. I attempted to turn around to thank the man, but I only saw the rear of the car as he sped away into the heavy city traffic.

"Charming," I muttered to myself. I slid my phone out of my pocket and fired off a quick text to let my lunch companions know that I might be a few minutes late, thanks to Maeve's underling. I scrolled back through my texts as I made my way along the sidewalk, a stab of annoyance in my gut as I still didn't see any messages from Spencer.

It had been four weeks since he kissed me on the rooftop. We had stood there, me in his arms, and his mouth had made love to mine. The city lights had twinkled below, like constellations laid out just for us. He had sighed into my mouth before pulling back; his gaze had rooted me to the spot and set me ablaze. His stare, deep and revealing, had seemed to suspend time itself until we eventually had to descend back into the reality of the glittering industry party below. As we'd parted ways at the bottom of the stairwell that led back into the noise and chaos, Spencer's hand had come out to grip mine.

"Think about us," he said softly, his voice earnest. "I want something real, something serious with you. We have a while until the new season begins production, so take the time to make sure that seeing where this thing between us goes, is something you really want. Because Dylan, once you're mine, I'm not letting you go."

A few minutes later two men in suits opened the doors for me at an exclusive Italian restaurant on the Upper East Side, La Lucerna. A wave of cooled, fragrant air buffeted me as I walked through the gold-trimmed doorway, a heavenly escape from the hell-like heat outside. A beautiful young woman with deep-toned skin who looked to be in her early twenties smiled at me from the hostess desk just inside.

"Are you dining with us today sir?" Her voice was soft and sweet.

"I'm actually supposed to be meeting with some..." I began.

"Hey Sally May!" I grimaced, shooting an apologetic glance towards the hostess before turning my attention towards Natalie who was sitting just a few tables away. The other diners in the restaurant cast a mixture of amused and annoyed glances her way. I bit back a smile as Hillary, who was sitting next to Natalie, hid her face in her hands.

"I apologise for her," I winced at the hostess, "I'll make sure she behaves herself."

The hostess smiled gratefully as I headed towards the table. After a very handsome waiter took my order, I sat pinned by the curious stares of my two colleagues sitting across from me. "What?"

"What do you mean, what?" Natalie chuckled. "Have you heard anything from Jax?" It still threw me a little that everyone else still knew him as Jax, and only those closest to him were able to use his given name.

"Nothing," I sighed, picking up a glass of water from the table and taking a sip.  
"Maybe he's changed his mind about everything after all?"

"Are you okay, sweetie?" Hillary asked, eyeing me with concern.

"Just thinking about the break. And the show," I replied, trying to redirect the conversation to safer waters.

Natalie played with her wine glass, her eyes darting between me and Hillary. She looked as if she was on the verge of saying something, but holding back for some reason. Hillary saw me watching Natalie's confused stare and turned sharply towards her.

"Ouch!" Natalie yelped, reaching down to touch her calf.

Hillary shot her a stern look that screamed 'Keep it professional'.

Seemingly unable to contain herself, Natalie burst out. "Jax's been turning down dates. Like all of them."

"What?" That couldn't be true. Could it?

"Yep, his publicist is furious," Natalie continued. "They really wanted to jump on the viral marketing campaigns and the show's success to boost his profile even more. It's been a huge big thing for them."

"Natalie!" Hillary scolded. "Privacy!"

"Why isn't he doing what his team have asked him to do?" I asked.

Hillary barked out a laugh, a short, almost disbelieving sound. "You really don't

know?"

"I didn't want to say anything," Natalie shrugged, "because despite all the evidence to the contrary, I do sometimes like to mind my own business."

"Natalie!" Hillary barked.

She rolled her eyes at Hillary's dramatics but obliged. "I caught up with Jax for lunch last week. He told me about the issues he has been having with his publicist and all their concerns. He was pretty clear about it – said he's found his person and doesn't need to look any further. He respects whatever decision you make Dylan, but for him you're it. Whether you need a month or a decade to figure things out. He's waiting for you."

My heart skipped. The clarity of Spencer's feelings, laid out so starkly, was both terrifying and exhilarating. "He said that?" I could barely hear my own voice. There was a part of my brain that refused to believe what Natalie was saying. It couldn't be true. Choosing me over his career? We barely knew each other. Of course, he would choose his own career, because that was what people did in situations like this. When it was a choice between me or fame, I was always left in the dust.

"Yes," Hillary interjected, "and we called him an idiot, because who waits around like that? But he's serious Dylan. He's waiting for you. I don't think you should wait for him to call."

The weight of Spencer's declaration settled around me like a cloak. I'd come to discuss crew setups, not revelations about someone else's heart. I couldn't for a moment lie and say I hated it, because here I was, faced with a decision that now seemed inevitable.

The rest of the dinner passed in a blur, with plans made and tasks delegated, but my

mind was elsewhere. As I bid goodbye to Natalie and Hillary, my thoughts were of Spencer, his earnest eyes and our shared moment on the rooftop that now felt like just the beginning.

Maybe, just maybe, it was time to stop thinking about the past. It was time to stop letting my experiences with someone who didn't deserve me cloud my judgement. Spencer had made his choice clear. Now it was time for me to choose.

Austin

In the tranquil early hours of a crisp Ambleside morning, I found myself seated in the less-frequented corner of the breakfast room at The Village Inn. The quaint establishment, known for its old-world charm and nestled in the lush greenery of the Lake District, provided a stark contrast to the bustling streets and vibrant nightlife of London, from which I had only recently escaped. The rustic décor, with its wooden beams and the soft glow of oil lamps and a roaring fire, set a comforting, almost nostalgic scene, as if the place had resisted the march of time.

My thoughts were elsewhere, though, entangled in a web of my own recent career choices and personal upheavals. More of a drama of my own making, or Kyle's making, depending on which way you wanted to look at it. After wrapping up what ended up being a very successful urban drama in London, that had earned me more than a few awards for my performance as a conflicted artist struggling with newfound fame – ironic, I know – I found myself drawn to a script of a new project.

A romance film set against the backdrop of Northern England's rugged scenery, about a man who unexpectedly falls for his boss's son due to a series of mishaps that begin at a local café in a nearby city. The writer of the book on which the script was based also lived locally, and the deal for the script purchase was that any future TV or film productions would take place in the local area. The thought was that the writer wanted any production to be authentic, but I had a feeling it was also to boost local tourism.

As I sat, contemplating the role and how I would develop the character from page to screen, my peace was disrupted by the arrival of breakfast. The waiter, a cheerful and

very handsome man with an easy smile and eyes that sparkled with mischief approached carrying a tray laden with the hearty offerings of a traditional English breakfast.

"Good morning, sir. I hope this will start your day off right." I read the name Mark on a small nametag pinned to the lapel of his green tartan shirt. "Here you go," Mark said as he set the plate down in front of me. His voice held a lilt that was unmistakably local, imbued with a warmth often found in those who lived in these parts, with a hint of something else, as if he didn't grow up here.

"Thank you, Mark," I replied, managing a polite smile as I surveyed the array of eggs, sausage, bacon, fried tomatoes, what looked like fried bread and the unmistakable black disc of blood. "You really do just eat dried blood, out in the open for everyone to see, huh?" I grimaced. The aroma was inviting, yet my appetite was minimal. It had been for a while, and I had dropped the weight and lost the muscle definition to prove it. The producers of the movie had kindly reminded me that there was a health clause in my contract that stated I needed to stay in shape for this movie.

"It's a local delicacy." Mark chuckled, gesturing to the plate.

"I'm sure it is," I smiled, "Rocky Mountain Oysters are a delicacy in places back home, but I doubt you would want to partake in those either."

"Oysters are lush," Mark exclaimed, his hand flying to his chest.

"Well that's just the name, it's actually made from bull testicles."

Mark paled and the sides of his mouth turned down. "I've been known to enjoy a testicle or two in my time, but never of the bovine variety."

I barked out a laugh, absentmindedly pushing the black pudding around my plate with

the tip of my fork.

Mark, obviously noticing my disinterest in the food, clapped me on the shoulder. "Is there anything else I can get you? Perhaps some tea or a fresh pot of coffee?"

I shook my head, my thoughts drifting. "Just coffee, thank you. I've yet to acquire the taste for tea," I confessed, offering a half-hearted attempt at humour.

With a playful gasp, Mark leaned in closer and whispered, "I'll pretend I didn't hear that, sir. Around here, that's almost sacrilegious!" His grin widened, and for a moment, I was distracted from my brooding. I took a moment to take in the man standing in front of me. He was cute as a button, broad-shouldered with a waist that tapered in. His shirt barely concealed some seriously major biceps and his corded trousers were strained against the muscle of his thighs. He wasn't my usual type, but I could spot a hottie when one was standing in front of me offering me a plate full of meat.

Maybe I could have some fun whilst freezing my nuts off on the shores of Lake Windermere. I placed my fork down carefully on the plate in front of me and leaned forward towards Mark, almost conspiratorially. I lowered my voice and gave him my best bedroom eyes when I said, "Maybe you could show me what I'm missing sometime?"

Instead of the emphatic swooning that I was hoping for, Mark regarded me with outright confusion. "I mean sure, I'd be happy to recommend some local favourites. You'd be surprised how many varieties we have. Perhaps I can convert you? Although the tea I offered you is nothing to scoff at," Mark smiled, his demeanour light and friendly.

"Excuse my husband." My head snapped to the side. Another devastatingly handsome man stood off to my left. Imagine if Thor had a baby with Wolverine and you might



get an idea of what this Viking looked like. All power and strength behind an apron and floral shirt. "He is a little naïve about men who hit on him, especially movie stars. You wouldn't be trying to snatch my husband away from me, now would you, Mr. Ridge?" The man's deep chuckle sent shivers up my spine.

"He wasn't..." Mark scoffed, looking quickly between me and the bearded giant. "I don't think... Oh my!" His cheeks bloomed pink as he muttered something unintelligible between oh my 's.

The man laughed, wrapping an arm around Mark and extended his other hand forwards towards me. "I'm Patrick," he smiled warmly, "Mark's husband and the co-owner of the inn here."

"I'm..." I began.

"I know who you are, Mr. Ridge," Patrick smiled, "it's not every day we get a bona fide action star come stay with us."

"I wouldn't know if I would call myself a star." I mean I would, but I wouldn't just go around saying that to people.

"Oh no, you are!" Mark gasped. "We would try and get all the guests to go to bed early every Thursday night for a new episode of your show on FilmFlix."

"Well, I'm very flattered." I played the edge of the napkin in front of me nervously as they looked at me expectantly, like I should be saying something that I wasn't.

"Forgive my husband," Patrick sighed, "but he loves a tabloid and a gossip rag. I'm sure he wants to ask about the affair between the actress and the director."

I looked up to see Mark nodding, a hopeful expression on his face. I chuckled and

gestured to the two seats opposite me. Unable to contain his glee, Mark shoved into the seat in the corner, with his husband taking the seat next to him. For the next fifteen minutes, I regaled them with a slightly censored version of the events that would lead to the downfall of the show and my time in Los Angeles.

"That's just awful!" Mark gasped, "and so bloody juicy."

Patrick laughed and playfully punched him on the arm.

"Hey!" Mark yelped, rubbing at his bicep. "It's not like I'm going to be on the phone to the newspapers or anything."

"Everything has already been covered by the gossip columns back home, so I don't think it would be much in the way of news," I shrugged, pushing the black pudding around my plate with my fork.

"I guess I didn't think how much it would affect everyone else who worked on the show," Mark frowned, his eyebrows quirked thoughtfully. "Was it quite tough, it getting axed?"

"Baby..." Patrick rested his forehead against Mark's bicep and chuckled, "some tact?"

"I don't mind," I smiled. "Yes, it was tougher than I thought. But I think it was a good move for me. If that hadn't happened I think I might still be on the show. Since it ended I've had the chance to travel and work in different lovely locations like this one and meet awesome people like you two."

"Oh, he's so adorable!" Mark rapped his knuckles against the table in front of him, his hand twitching as if he physically needed to stop himself from reaching across the table to pinch my cheeks.

The small brown leather satchel on the chair next to me vibrated obnoxiously as a chime sounded, like a flock of angry pigeons trapped within the material. I winced at the sound, knowing that only heartbreak was currently linked to that infernal racket. I'd grown tired of being blindsided by pictures of Dylan or articles on him cropping up here and there and not being prepared. I'd been caught unawares whilst shooting the sci-fi show one afternoon, finding a picture of him strolling arm-in-arm through Central Park with Natalie. I'd been so bowled over with self-loathing and grief that I'd struggled through the rest of the day's shooting schedule. To stop it from happening again, I'd put a Google alert on my tablet to at least give me the heads up that there was a story or picture spread to be seen.

"You expecting some bad news?" Patrick asked, a cautious look on his face.

"No," I smiled. "Nothing like that, just my regular as clockwork knife in the heart."

I pulled the tablet from my satchel and swiped on the New York Times notification across the middle of the screen.

Page Six: Lights, Camera, Scandal! Dylan Cooper and Jax Conway spark rumours at New York Industry event.

By Tabitha Reynolds, Gossip Columnist for the New York Times

New York City was abuzz last night as the stars descended on what was to be a celebration for the upcoming season of *Amore Blue*, the smash hot police drama starring none other than Jax Conway, movie star and now titan of the small screen. However, none of the stars shone brighter – or ignited more whispers – than upcoming director Dylan Cooper and the ever-charismatic Jax Conway. The pair, who have been collaborating on the much-anticipated next season of *Amore Blue*, seemed inseparable throughout the evening, leading many to speculate about the nature of their relationship.

Eyewitnesses report that Cooper and Conway were often seen laughing together, with Conway whispering into Cooper's ear on more than one occasion. At one point, an onlooker noted that Cooper placed a hand on Conway's lower back as they navigated through the star-studded event.

"It wasn't just friendly, it was intimate," claimed a source who was an attendee at the event and a self-professed expert on celebrity behaviours. "They were in their own little world."

Adding fuel to the fire, Conway, previously known for his roles as the dashing lead in several blockbuster hits, has recently been the subject of a parting of ways with his current agent. As for what this means for Amore Blue , only time will tell. But one thing is certain, Cooper and Conway are the duo everyone will be watching this season.

Stay tuned to Page Six for more updates as this story develops.

There at the bottom of the article was a picture of Dylan in a black tuxedo. He was so handsome. My heart thumped in my chest as I stared longingly at the smile etched on his face. My eyes tried to block out the source of his apparent happiness.

"That Jax Conway is quite something," Mark almost drooled as he leaned across the table to take a look at the still-visible phone of Dylan and Jax on the tablet, "I mean, I think even straight men would have a go at that."

"Yeah, if you like them big, jacked on steroids and dumb as a box of rocks, then sure," I retorted, unable to mask my bitterness.

"I'm going to go out on a limb and say he does like them big and dumb." Patrick preened, bumping his shoulder with Mark. I started to apologize for my misstep, but Patrick waved me off playfully. "You got history with Jax Conway?"

"Now who's the gossip?" Mark laughed, bumping Patrick back.

I pointed to Dylan's in the picture and confessed, "No, but he was... no, is the love of my life."

"Crikey!" Mark exclaimed suddenly, looking at a delicate watch on his wrist, "I need to go run those invoices up to Phillip and Jeremy."

"I'll hold the fort down," Patrick smiled, placing a small kiss on his cheek.

"I want to hear all the gossip," Mark wailed before standing quickly from his seat and scurrying towards the reception. He stopped as if he had forgotten something and rushed back into the room. "Anything you find out, you tell me later or you won't be getting any for a while." Mark turned once more and rushed out of the room.

I looked on as Patrick's eyes tracked after his man out of the room, a warm smile on his face as he watched Mark fussing over an older lady stroking a Pomeranian on her lap. "You're a lucky man," I sighed wistfully.

"I really am." His face radiated happiness. He gathered himself before turning back to face me. "Forgive me for overstepping, but if you're in love with this Dylan, then why is he with someone else?"

"Because, and pardon my French," I shrugged, "I made the biggest fucking mistake of my life and gave up on him. On us."

I filled Patrick in on the CliffsNotes version of how I potentially clawed my way through a loving relationship to land myself the position of a lonely-as-fuck but famous actor. Patrick gave me that look that one might give to an old man propping up a bar lamenting about the one that got away. It wasn't the first time I had felt the cold tendrils of dread skating up my spine and the thought of that very possible future

for myself. It wasn't as if I hadn't tried to find that same spark with anyone else; I'd given it the old college try. My heart wasn't playing ball though. It had latched itself on to an image of Dylan and it was not letting go.

As I sat there in the dimly lit room of the quaint inn, my gaze drifted over the antique decorations without really seeing them. I turned to Patrick, who was giving me a look of genuine concern, clearly ready to listen. The weight of my regrets lay heavy on my chest, and it pushed the words out in a mixture of sorrow and bitterness.

"You know," I began, my voice low and heavy, "I made the biggest mistake of my life. I lost the one person in the world who truly mattered to me, but also the one person in the world to whom I truly mattered. He really saw me. He knew me more than anyone else in my life. He saw through all the bullshit. All because I chased fame in an industry that doesn't care about who you are or the heartache that it causes. It's all about how much money you can bring in, and how much you can make. And in the end, it just left me feeling empty." I paused, looking down at my clasped hands.

As he watched the sorrow pour from me, Patrick listened silently, his eyes thoughtful. I felt a warm hand resting on my shoulder, I turned to meet his gaze, his expression understanding. The warm glow of the inn's fireplace flickered across his face, casting gentle shadows that seemed to soften his thoughtful expression.

"Look Austin," Patrick began gently, his voice firm but kind, "I don't know the entire story, and it's not my place to interfere, but I believe you should never give up on love. if there's any chance of winning Dylan back, then you shouldn't let go without a fight." His gaze momentarily drifted toward the entrance of the inn where his husband stood.

There, by the door, Mark was still fussing over the elderly lady and her dog, helping her to adjust the dog's little sweater and laughing as the lady chatted animatedly. The sight filled Patrick with such visible warmth; his face lit up with the adoration of the

man he loved.

Unable to resist the affection obviously swelling within him, Patrick excused himself from our conversation with a smile. "Just give me a moment, Austin," he said, his voice carrying a hint of amusement and love. He walked over to Mark, and without a word, leaned in and gave him a tender, loving kiss, his actions speaking volumes about their depth of connection. Watching them, I felt a surge of hope and a reminder of what genuine affection looked like, wondering if maybe, just maybe, I could find that again myself.

Dylan

The opening of the next season of the show brought with it a familiar mixture of excitement and anxiety, palpable as the early morning mist that clung to the streets outside our studio in downtown Brooklyn as I navigated the corridors teeming with the hurried steps of the crew and cast members. A sense of anticipation built within me, punctuated by the sharp scent of coffee and the distant sound of dialogue rehearsals echoing off the walls.

Today marked the first table read of the season, a ritual that, despite its routine nature, always seemed to stir a nest of butterflies in my stomach. The script for the first episode lay heavy under my arm, its pages crisp and marked with occasional notes in the margins – reminders of changes I had mulled over the night before. The changes weren't the only reason I was particularly short of sleep from the night before. Today was the first time I would be coming face to face with Spencer since he had agreed to give me some space to work through my own chaotic mind what I wanted. I wasn't any closer to a decision, but the one thing I did know is that not one part of me wanted to let Spencer get away.

Walking into the room, the cool air felt sharper, every sound more pronounced – the shuffle of papers, the quiet murmur of my colleagues discussing their lines the soft tap of shoes against the wooden floor. All mundane, everyday sounds, yet they seemed to amplify the tension that thrummed through my veins with an almost electric intensity.

As I navigated the semi-familiar terrain of chairs and scattered scripts to find my usual spot at the table, my gaze inevitably, irresistibly swept the room for Spencer.



There he was, already seated, an island of calm in the bustling chaos of pre-read preparations. His composure, a stark contrast to the slight tremor of anticipation that ran through my veins, soothed yet unnerved me simultaneously. His eyes lifted to mine as I approached, and that simple act – the fleeting meeting of our gazes – struck a chord deep within my chest, a resonant note that vibrated intensely with raw, unfiltered connection.

The moment our eyes locked, the space between us became charged with the electricity of our past interactions, every secret shared, every silent promise, and every unresolved and untouched tension. It felt as though an invisible chord, taut with the gravity of our mutual history, pulled me towards him with an almost physical force. As I took my seat, the weight of his gaze enveloped me like a tangible force, igniting a warmth that radiated through my chest and settled deep in my stomach, a smouldering ember that weeks of separation had failed to extinguish.

Sitting so close to Spencer, feeling the heat of his presence envelop me, was both a torment and a solace. His proximity was a reminder of the profound connection that had sprung up between us, now tinged with the allure of the forbidden, drawing me in, inevitable as gravity. His eyes, deep pools brimming with complex emotions, pierced through the facade I struggled to maintain. Every breath I drew was heavy with our as-of-yet unfulfilled longing, each inhalation a bitter reminder of the time that we had let pass us by, each exhalation a silent yearning to bridge the chasm that time and circumstance had imposed between us.

Spender's gaze was not merely curious, it was charged with a piercing intensity that seemed to resonate with every pulse of the turmoil within me. His eyes, a deep, magnetic blue, spoke of understanding, of shared longing, and unspoken desire, communicating in a language that transcended mere words. Each look we shared knitted this tangible connection tighter, threading through the space between us with a silent acknowledgement of burgeoning feelings.

Natalie commenced the table read, her voice cutting through the thick tension. "Scene One, exterior night, the glint of the streetlamp catches the gleam of something sinister in the dark. Laura, distraught yet determined, watches as her husband leaves for the last time." The script unfolded, drawing us into a world of deceit and dark intentions. As the narrative progresses, Laura's plan to kill her husband for the insurance money, and her forbidden love for her sister-in-law, thickened the plot, adding layers of emotional complexity and moral ambiguity.

Spencer, embodying his character Nico, the detective assigned to unravel the mystery, read his lines with compelling authority that sent shivers down my spine and tightened my underwear. "According to the server logs, there's a series of encrypted emails." Spencer's voice deepened, his gaze intense as he flicked through the script. "Someone was planning to dispose of a large quantity of... organic material in several steel drums." The way he leaned into the word 'organic', his voice a seductive whisper, was ridiculously enticing.

I had it bad.

My lust-addled brain seemed to imbue each spoken word with a hidden dual meaning, his professional prowess mirroring the personal tension that simmered between us. His command of the script, and his effortless transition into Nico's investigative mindset, were utterly captivating. It wasn't just his appearance that ensnared me, it was the entirety of him. His mind, his soul, the way he could so effortlessly reach into the depth of his character, which mirrored how he reached into me.

As the scenes moved forward, detailing Nico's descent into the labyrinth of Laura's deceit, I found myself attention-locked to Spencer. I wish I could say it was in a totally professional and above-board way, but no. I watched his every nod, the way his lips moved silently along with lines not his own, the thoughtful furrow of his brow. It all completely enraptured me with an intensity that I feared bordered on

obsession. I pressed my thighs together, squeezing the ever-engorged cock that sneaked down the leg of my trousers as I watched that damn grin etched on his face, the subtle wink he would give a co-star when they fluffed a line or the sexy way his tongue would sneak out to wet his bottom lip. I imagined flinging my script behind me and mounting the table, crawling on my hands and knees towards him and gripping hold of that full lip between my own teeth, sucking his tongue into my mouth.

"You alright?" Natalie murmured, elbowing me in the side.

"Yeah, I'm good, why?" I pressed my thighs tighter together, caught like a naughty schoolboy.

"You were groaning underneath your breath," she smiled. "Thought you might be getting sick. Turns out you just have a fever ." The word dripped with innuendo.

"I'm fine," I scoffed, turning back to the room of actors still working through the lines.

"Whatever you say," she chirped before turning her own attention back.

I continued to watch Spencer dissect Nico's complex emotions, perfectly reflecting how we'd created his character to not only be the central core of the show, but also the heart and the moral compass of his colleagues. How Spencer interpreted the character showed me how he had come to understand and unravel my own guarded layers.

The script weaved through tense confrontations and whispered betrayals, each line resonating with the undercurrents of our own unresolved story. Spencer's voice, when he interrogated a suspect or pieced together clues, throbbed with an underlying passion that spoke directly to me. It was as if each phrase he spoke was filled with

invitation, a challenge not just to his fictional adversary but to me, a step closer, to breaching the divide.

"I believe Laura wasn't acting alone," Spencer asserted as Nico, his eyes flickering to mine with a piercing gaze that felt like it was peeling back every defence I ever had constructed around my heart. "She had someone else in the shadows, someone who shared her need to be rid of her husband. Someone who shared her same dark desires. They were done with watching and waiting. They hated the fact that they were so close, but they still couldn't just reach out and touch her." Spencer's voice was low, charged with an undercurrent of intensity that felt tailored just for me. The subtext crackled between us, electric and alive. Each phrase he uttered was precisely measured, resonating deeply and drawing me into Nico's complex web of deduction and seduction. "They were done with waiting. It was now or never. They couldn't help themselves. Every breath without Laura in their arms was a moment they were never getting back."

As he spoke, I caught the faintest tremor in his voice, a subtle but clear indication that he was just as affected by our proximity as I was. His eyes flickered to mine with a mix of professional focus and a deeper, more personal turmoil.

An amused huff sounded off to my left.

"Ouch!" Natalie yelped as I stamped firmly on her sneaker-covered foot.

The whole room stopped, their attention now focused on a grimacing Natalie. "Sorry, I stubbed my toe," she winced, casting me a quick glare. "Carry on," she waved to the room.

It was clear from the way his gaze lingered slightly too long, from the way his breath hitched when our eyes met, that the connection I felt wasn't one-sided. The room seemed to pulse with the energy of our mutual desire. The room felt hot and suddenly

too small.

The read continued, but beneath the surface of our professional exteriors, a storm of lust and longing raged. I realised with a sinking, exhilarating certainty that whatever this was between us, this deep, compelling, maddening connection, it was not something one-sided and definitely not something I could deny myself any longer. Not now, perhaps not ever. The realization wasn't just liberating, it was as inevitable as breathing and as elemental as coming home.

As the last lines of the read were delivered, and the room began to slowly clear, it felt as if the future, with all its uncertainties and possibilities hinged on the choices I was about to make. My heart pounded fiercely, each beat heaving a testament to the raw, unchecked desire that Spencer ignited within me. I watched with bated breath as each of the cast members sidled up to Spencer, shaking his hand, congratulating him on a script well-read. As he offered a slight smile or a nod of the head to each member of the cast or crew that presented themselves before him, his gaze never left my own. He tracked the movement of my hand as I brought it up to stroke the side of my neck, my skin overly sensitive. The warm breeze from the window was like flames licking on my tender flesh. The mere thought of touching him, of closing the distance that propriety and circumstance insisted on, was overwhelmingly tempting, a test of restraint I was not sure I could endure much longer.

"Hey, I'm heading out," a disembodied voice said from somewhere, as my eyes were still glued to the man across the room. I must have developed superpowers, because somehow I managed to drag my eyes away from him and latch them onto a now-smiling Natalie who stood just to my right. In her hands, she held a bunch of loose scripts, a messenger bag slung across her slender shoulders. "Earth to Dylan."

"What did you say?" I shook my head slightly.

"I said I was heading out, thought we might grab some lunch from that place around

the corner," she gestured behind her. "You know they have those cute as fuck waiters, so I just thought..."

"NO!" A deep baritone barked directly in front of me. My head snapped around to see a flustered-looking Spencer now only mere inches from me. My hands tingled at my sides. I curled my fingers into a fist and shoved them into my pockets before they did something like rub them down his dark hairy chest.

"Everything okay Jax?" Natalie smirked, her eyes darting between us both.

"Yeah sorry." His mouth formed into a wide awkward smile. "I asked Dylan here if he could help me with some lines from the script that I was struggling with a bit."

"Oh, I didn't see any request for additional support..." she gasped falsely, pressing the scripts to her chest.

"I... um..." he started.

"Cut it out Natalie," I chided, kicking her leg slightly.

"You're not fun," she mumbled. "Anyway, I thought it was a great read today, but I was reading over the scripts and the story arc for the season, and I think that I maybe have an idea for a new direction either later in the year after the mid-season finale or for next season."

"Not that I don't think we won't get picked up for next season, because I definitely do," Spencer held up his hands, "but is it smart to plan something for a reveal next season before we've even had the green light?"

"I agree," I smiled, laying my hand on his muscle-bound forearm, mostly to offer him gentle support, but mostly so I could just touch him, "but Natalie's right, I've been

having some thoughts of direction shift as well."

"Really?" She chuffed out a laugh. "What cogs have been spinning up here?" she smiled, tapping the side of my head.

Shoving her hands away, I gestured towards a large sofa near the edge of the room. I sat at the edge of the sofa, leaning my back against the arm. Before Natalie could move to take her usual space next to me, Spencer slid into the space directly by my side, leaving enough room for Natalie at the other end of the sofa. His body pressed subtly against mine, a silent statement of proximity that sent a jolt of awareness through me. I could feel the heat from his thigh against my leg, an innocent touch that felt anything but.

Natalie, anything but oblivious to the undercurrent flowing between Spencer and me, settled herself at the other end with a smile and sigh. "Alright, so what were you thinking?" She pulled out a notebook from her bag, flicking to a page littered with black ink scrawls and bullet points. As she started to talk about different character arcs for Nico during the season, I tried my best to pay attention, but it was no use. My entire focus was locked into the feeling of Spencer's body against mine. My cock started to thicken in my underwear, soon punching at the confines of the zipper of my jeans. My breath began to come in low, short pants. I knew that I needed to pull back just a little before I made a fool of myself.

As I started to move my leg slowly away from his, Spencer shifted, his arms stretching wide along the back of the sofa, his leg pressing firmly now against my own. I tried valiantly but was unable to claw back the small whimper that left my throat and seemed to reverberate around the room like a foghorn.

"Oh no!" Natalie dramatically smacked her forehead with her palm. "I forgot my other notes! I should run back to the office and pick them up before we go any further." She gathered all of her things quickly and shoved them into her messenger

bag.

"I'll catch up with you later." I pointed my eyes towards the door, hoping she would take her cue to get the hell out of there without me having to physically drag her out.

"Okay boys," she nodded, throwing a careless wink my way. "I can see Dylan has got you... sorry, I mean this , in hand." With that she swept out of the room, a small chuckle sounding as she left.

And just like that, we were alone. At that moment, we both paused, lingering in the now empty room, the air thick with unspoken promises and suppressed yearnings, I knew we were both contemplating that same forbidden step. I dared not turn my head to look at Spencer, both afraid and exhilarated by what I might find lurking behind his eyes.

Spencer's phone chimed in his pocket, breaking the tension. He slipped the small phone out of his pocket and flipped it open. He read for a moment before barking out a laugh. "Natalie messaged to say that she's found her other notes in her bag, but said she forgot she was meeting Hillary for drinks and not to expect her back any time soon."

"She isn't very subtle is she?" I laughed nervously as Spencer's fingers trailed like red hot pokers down the nape of my neck. I suppressed a shiver that threatened to wrack my entire body.

"So you were talking about your thoughts for the show?"

I turned to catch a heat that blazed in his stare, his eyes glued to my mouth.

He expected me to have coherent thoughts? Now?



"Well I was thinking that we need to look closer at your, well Nico's past, and I was thinking that as your character is generally quite closed off about his past it could be a good idea to introduce a rookie cop, your half-brother. Create some conflict and eventual bonding." I hoped that I was getting my points across clearly and not rambling.

"That sounds like it could be fun to play," Spencer murmured, pressing firmer on my neck now, trailing his fingertips down to my shoulders and kneading a spot there.

Caught in a torrent of nerves and the close proximity of Spencer, I began to ramble, my words tumbling out faster than I could organise them. "So yeah, regarding the new character I was thinking about, we have to ensure that they're not too, you know, hot. We wouldn't want them overshadowing... well, the established appeal of your character."

I paused, catching the amused twinkle in Spencer's eyes as he leaned in slightly, clearly intrigued by my flustered state. "I mean," I continued, fumbling over my words, "It's not like I'm calling you, well Nico, hot, but obviously, he is... because you play him and you bring this... intensity. Not that I'm saying that you're... uh..."

My voice trailed off, and I let out a frustrated sigh, my face flushing with embarrassment and the strain of holding back what I really wanted to say, or do.

"Oh, fuck it," I muttered, no longer able to contain the whirlwind of feelings Spencer stirred in me. In one bold move, driven by the compelling mix of frustration and attraction, I closed the distance between us. I reached for Spencer, my hands finding his shoulders as I manoeuvred myself to straddle his lap, bringing us face to face at last.

The room seemed to fall away as I looked into his eyes, seeing the shock, the desire mirroring my own. "Hi," I murmured.

"Hi, yourself," he smiled, his hands gripping my hips tightly.

"I can't do this, this dancing around each other," I brought my face close to his, his warm breath fanning across my face, "I can't be around you and not want you. It's driving me crazy not touching you. I feel like I'm going insane every second you're not kissing me."

With a final growl, he surged up until our lips crashed together, initiating a kiss that burned away any remaining pretence. The shock in Spencer's eyes gave way to raw desire as our lips moved firmly together in a way that ignited a firestorm of pent-up yearning. The kiss was ravenous, each movement and moan filled with weeks of our unspoken fantasies. My hands roved across his solid shoulders, down to the strong planes of his back, fuelled by an urgency that seemed to consume me to my core.

Spencer responded with equal fervour, his hands racing over my body with a wildness that was overstimulating and overpowering to all my senses. With a suddenness that had me gasping against his lips, he flipped us over, pressing me into the couch as he pushed his body flush against mine. He tugged at my shirt with eager, almost desperate pulls, our breaths mingling. His touch was like fire on my skin, every nerve singing with the need for more ... deeper ... closer .

"I've needed this," Spencer growled against my lips, "needed you." His voice was thick with desire. His hands mapped my skin with a possessiveness that left no room for doubt about his intentions.

The couch creaked under our combined weight, barely containing the passion that overflowed with every shift and grind of our bodies. I was coming undone, layer by layer, as Spencer seemed to take me apart, piece by piece. His heavy body ground down against me, my effect on him jabbing against my skin. Deeper and deeper he thrust and caressed, driving me further into a frenzy that threatened to engulf me entirely.

His scent enveloped me, a heady concoction of leather and vanilla that was so distinctly him, sweet, smooth and completely intoxicating. It filled my senses, threatening to drown me in his essence. Our chests heaved against each other, the rapid rise and fall syncing with the speed of our breaths.

The months of waiting, of watching without touching. All that time when he was mere feet from me, without his hands on my body suddenly became too much for me to bear for a moment longer. "Please," the primal moan that poured from my lips was almost alien to my own ears, "please Spencer!" I whined pathetically, pushing up against his powerful frame.

Spencer pulled back sharply, his hands caging me in against the softness of the couch underneath, his arms stretched and locked enough that the veins in his arms pulsed under his skin. What seemed like miles of skin and taut muscle waited for the tender feel of my tongue. Later I would marvel at my self-restraint, my ability to stop myself from doing just that to peer into his heated gaze as he regarded me beneath him like prey. "What do you need Dylan?" His voice was smooth like silk, caressing my ears. "Tell me."

"I need you inside me." The words tumbled from my lips. "Oh god, don't make me beg, because I will."

He chuckled for a moment before dipping down to press a kiss to my lips. "No begging necessary." Then another kiss that stole the breath from my lungs. "Are you sure?" he whispered against my mouth.

We had talked enough. We had talked for months. We had done nothing but talk for fucking months. Talking, when we could have been doing this the whole time. The time for talking had long since passed. Needing to show him how serious I was, I brought my hand up in the space between us, my palm hovering in front of my face as I swiped my tongue heel to fingertips, wetting the skin. Spencer eyed me curiously,

watching as my tongue lapped at the sensitive skin of my palm. "I'm very sure," I breathed as I pushed my hand down between us, sliding beneath the waistband of his dark jeans and underwear, grasping his thick engorged length for the very first time.

"Holy shit," he breathed, before crushing his mouth against mine. His tongue invaded my mouth and tasted all of me. He felt so good in my hand. The weight of him was hot and heavy. The silky skin of his cock slid smoothly up and down his shaft and I tried my best, given the awkward angle, to make him feel good.

"I need you," I panted against his mouth, my cock like steel, trapped behind the confines of my trousers as I thrust against him. Spencer had begun fucking the warm, wet heat of my hand. His cock, like a hot iron rod, shuttling through my fist. "I need you in me."

As the tension pulsed between us, Spencer and I moved with an urgency that had been months in the making. With a mutual, unspoken agreement, I pulled my hand from around his cock and almost in sync, we stood and hurriedly shed the barriers of clothing between us. Once again, later, I would congratulate myself on not busting a nut the moment Spencer stood in front of me in all his naked hotness.

He was a vision of masculine perfection, his physique sculpted in such a way that he might put the Greek gods to shame. His chest was broad and powerful, each muscle defined, rippling under the skin that seemed to glow with inner fire. Dark, black hair dusted his chest, trailing down in a line that led to a trim waist, where it thickened into a dark patch around his magnificent cock that bobbed hard and thick in front of him.

I reached forward and trailed my hand down his solid abs, which were a testament to his physical prowess. Each one was sharply defined, creating valleys and ridges that longed to be further explored. "You're so fucking beautiful," I murmured as I continued to explore his body. My fingertips grazed through the thick pubic hair,

scratching the skin beneath before finally once more trailing along the length of his shaft. He hissed in pleasure as I kneeled down and licked a small bead of precum that gathered at the tip of his fat cockhead.

"Me?" he breathed harshly, my eyes snapping up to meet his predatory gaze as his cock pulsed in my firm grip. "Have you seen you? I get to have you. I can't believe I'm so lucky."

Unable to hold back any longer, I surged forward and swallowed down the length of his meat. His sharp intake of breath was a symphony to my ears, each hiss a note that played along the edges of my consciousness, urging me on ever further. As my lips tasted skin, the flavour of him sparked a fire within me that threatened to consume all rational thought. My hands, guided by a mixture of desire and reverence, explored further, tracing the powerful lines of his hips and thighs, his muscles tensed under my touch as I trailed my digits around to grasp hold of the two thick powerful globes of his ass.

"If you keep that up I won't last much longer," he panted as I slurped and sucked along the veiny ridges of his cock, his heavy balls swinging back and forth, slapping against the underside of my chin.

I grinned around his cock as it thickened along my tongue, sucking hard one more time as I pulled off him, letting him fall out my mouth with a pop. "Don't worry old man, I'll take it slow for you."

"I'll show you old man," he growled, reaching down to hook his forearms under my armpits. Pulling me up to face him, his hot breath fanned across my face. "You drive me wild, Dylan," he whispered against me. I felt the tension coil tighter within him, a storm of need mirrored in the darkening of his eyes. He tugged me close until there was not a hair's breadth of space between us. His cock was like steel sandwiched between us, sliding gloriously against my belly. He ran his hands down the expanse

of my back, sliding his hands over my ass before his fingers crept between the cheeks of my butt. Gasping as a thick digit rubbed insistently over my hole, I let out a wanton moan, pushing back against his finger. I rested my cheek against his shoulder, my bottom lip catching on his skin. My tongue sneaked out to lick the salt from his taut muscle.

"Do you want me in here?" he growled, tapping against my hole.

"I... I just... I need... Please, Spencer," I pleaded, losing the ability to form coherent sentences.

Pushing me backwards with his strong thighs against my own, he manoeuvred us back towards the couch. The back of my knees made contact with the seat, as I sank backwards. I thought for a moment he would take the seat next to me, but he just stood in front of me, an imposing figure of masculinity and strength. He watched me, a hunter before an unsuspecting kill. He pressed a knee between my legs and pushed them apart until I was spread wide on the cushion beneath. I watched in awe as he sank down between my legs, which needed to stretch even wider to accommodate the width of his shoulders.

"I've got you." He pressed a kiss to the inside of my thigh, running his tongue along the tender flesh until he reached the intersection between my balls and my thigh. He pressed his nose into my groin and inhaled deeply. "I'm gonna take care of you." And just like that the spell was broken. Not in a bad way, but the raw desire of needing to get this hunk of a man inside me petered away. It was replaced with an aching need to give myself fully to Spencer. To have a part of him within me and to give myself to him. I realized that right up until that point, I'd been playing a role. The sad lonely guy, pining over something that once was, but that was no more. I gazed down at the sensitive, sweet, intoxicating and patient man between my legs who had waited for me to be ready, who'd never pushed, never wanted me to do something I wasn't ready for. I was so fucking ready right then though. It had been a long road to get there, and

there was no way in hell I was turning back.

His arms tensed as he dragged me towards the edge of the seat, pushing my legs backwards until my knees were around my ears. "Look how pretty you are," he sighed, dipping down to run the tip of his tongue around the rim of my hole. The gentle pressure of his tongue on my sensitive skin sent waves of pleasure radiating through me, each lap a promise of what was to come next.

I caught his gaze, those deep eyes that seemed to see right into me, understanding and answering all of those silent questions that had haunted me for so long. "I've got you," he reassured again, his hands firm on my thighs, holding me open to him, vulnerable yet safe. Stars exploded over my head as he speared his tongue into me. The warm wetness of his tongue worked me open as he explored deeper, each deliberate stroke against the most intimate parts of me feeling like a direct connection to every nerve in my body, sparking alive with pleasure.

The sensation of being so fully attended to, of being the sole focus of Spencer's intense concentration, heightened every touch to an almost unbearable intensity. The rhythmic dance of his tongue was meticulously designed to stretch and prepare, to soothe and excite and that job was completed in spades. He explored with reverence, his breath warming my skin against the contrast of the cool air of the room, each exhale a whisper against the tenderness he lavished upon the puckered flesh. My fingers tried in desperate vain to clutch against the material, of the couch for some type of purchase, something, anything to make sure I didn't float away.

Gradually he withdrew, leaving a cool absence that was immediately missed. I ground my hips down against the cushion in protest, whining like a bitch in heat. "Easy baby." He patted the skin above my cock. "I just need to grab something from my wallet."

His voice was a low murmur, laden with desire, as he leaned back to retrieve a small

foil packet and lube from his wallet. My eyes followed his every movement, captivated by how his muscles bunched up underneath his skin as he tensed and flexed. The momentary absence of his skin on mine was like a cold shadow passing over me, and I ached for his return.

Spencer positioned himself at my entrance, the tip of his hard meat pressing gently against me. His eyes met mine, a silent question lingering in the depths of his gaze, seeking permission in a moment so intimate it felt as if the world had narrowed down to the space we occupied together.

I nodded, unable to speak, my breath caught in the tightness of my throat. Understanding flashed in his eyes, and with a tender but firm push, his cock speared my entrance, the warm skin of his cock sliding along my slick flesh. The sensation was mind-blowing, a mixture of pain and pleasure so intense that I felt my consciousness waver for a moment. As he filled me, slowly, inexorably, the stretch and burn gave way to a deep, pulsing pleasure that radiated from my core outwards.

"Dylan, you feel so good wrapped around my cock. You're taking me so well," Spencer whispered as he slid himself almost all the way out, before sliding deep once more. I watched as the skin on his forearms puckered with goosebumps. The feelings currently taking over all my senses were obviously having a similar effect on him.

I hooked my arms beneath my knees and pulled myself open wider and higher. My hole stretched wider around him. I stared down in wonder as his thick, hard cock slid impossibly deep inside me. I could feel him in every cell of my being. With each thrust that pegged my prostate, I could feel him in the tingling of my nerve endings that were zapping across the planes of my skin.

His rhythm picked up, becoming more urgent, and desperate. The sound of flesh against flesh, the soft, slick noises of our bodies moving together filled the room, mingling with our staggered breaths and low groans. I started to feel the tell-tale



tingle low in my balls that told me that my orgasm would in moments be barreling towards me.

"I'm not going to last much longer Spencer," I whined, "I need you. Please cum in me."

"You're a fucking dream baby," he growled. He leaned forward, bracing himself with one arm beside my head, his other hand tracing up my side. His fingers explored thoroughly as if memorizing every detail. "Hold on tight," he winked.

My hand reached up, fingers tangling in his dark hair, pulling him down to me for a kiss that was both a moan and a sigh, lips meeting in a rush of passion. With my other free hand, I reached between us and grabbed hold of my cock, needing more than anything to cum whilst his dick tunnelled in and out of me. I'd barely got off one stroke before he battered my hand away. "Your orgasms are mine." His hand replaced mine as he jacked off my cock at the same punishing pace as he was treating my now likely gaping hole.

The crescendo of our movements built towards an inevitable peak, our bodies moving in perfect synchronisation, as if we were two parts of a whole, finding completion in each other. My balls tightened up and my stomach clenched. "Oh fuck I'm gonna cum," I cried as volley after volley of hot spunk sprayed across my chest and stomach.

"I'm there too baby," he groaned, and with one final powerful thrust, he filled the condom inside me. Even through the latex, I could feel the warmth of his release pressing against my soft inner walls. His body shuddered as his climax ebbed away from him. He collapsed on top of me, my still-warm cum now pressed between us. His weight was a comforting presence, grounding me as I floated back down to earth from wherever it was my mind traveled to when a truly life-altering orgasm blew it away.

"We made it," I whispered, a smile tugging at the corner of my lips.

"We did," he agreed, his voice hoarse with spent desire, but bright with something more – hope, perhaps, or maybe the beginning of something new, something real. I began to feel the hope of something new blossoming in my gut. In the warmth of our shared space, with traces of lust and desire still lingering on our skin, I knew I had crossed a threshold. There was no going back, not that I even wanted to. With Spencer, I hoped I had not just found pleasure, but the promise of tomorrow too.

Austin

Five Months Later

My baseball cap was pulled low as I exited the main doors at LAX. I wasn't sure whether or not to be relieved that there were no waiting paparazzi to take photos of me as I left the airport. I had been fairly sneaky in Heathrow, arriving only moments before the flight departed with my driver's car driving me directly on the tarmac, so it was only a couple of stairs into the aircraft, and safely seated on the plane without any of the London press being any the wiser. The thought occurred to me whether I even needed to be so sneaky. What if the press was truly bored of me and wouldn't have shown up whether they knew I was there or not?

Shaking the thoughts from my increasingly anxious brain, I looked down the row of black Mercedes cars that lined the edge of the pickup zone. Men and women held up signs with their clients' names either etched on a scrap of A4 paper in half-faded biro or, for the more professional approach, professionally printed stationary with embellished designs and decorative names. As Mitzy, my agent, was the one who had arranged my transport, I looked for the driver with the cheapest possible car. Sure enough, there, with a handwritten sign on what appeared to be the inside of an empty pizza box, was my name in black Sharpie. The man holding the sign looked as if someone had summoned him from the dead, with grey skin, hollow cheeks and pure white hair.

As I'd left a lot of my clothes in storage and any of the clothing that I wore in the UK would have made me cook in the LA heat, I'd opted only to bring a small mid-sized suitcase. I waved across to the driver, whose glassy faraway expression clued me in

pretty fast that his vision wasn't what one might call 20/20. The man was standing in front of a caramel-coloured Lincoln town car that had to have been from the mid-90s. There was rust along the wheel arches and the once-black trim of the car was now worn and chipped in too many places to count. The front headlight was secured in place by some black duct tape and from the looks of it, some malevolent black magic.

"Austin Ridge?" I announced as I got within five feet of the hunched-over kidney bean of a driver.

"Yes son, I'm here to pick up Mr. Ridge," the man smiled. His teeth were stained yellow, set behind thin crusted lips. "So if you wouldn't mind moving along, I don't want to miss him."

"No, I'm who you're here to pick up." I tried my best for a friendly smile, but the bumpy plane journey from Heathrow meant I'd gotten no sleep whatsoever, and my social battery was just about depleted.

"Nice try kid," the driver snorted, "but there are no free rides in this world."

"Yes, I know," I sighed through gritted teeth, "I'm fairly sure Mitzy has already factored the cost of this ride into my fee."

"You know my Mitzy?" The man immediately perked up. "How do you know my daughter?"

"You're Mitzy's father?" I gasped involuntarily before realizing how rude that had probably come across. I quickly schooled my features into something a bit more polite. "I'm sorry, I just haven't met any of Mitzy's family before." Also, Mitzy wouldn't be caught dead wearing anything from more than one season ago, and drove around LA in a hundred-thousand-dollar convertible. The old man standing in front of me appeared to be down on his luck with a car that could fall apart into a hundred

pieces at any given moment.

"So you're a client of my Mitzy?" he grinned.

"Yes, I'm Austin Ridge." I gestured towards the pizza box sign in his hand.

"Why didn't you say so!" he chuckled, snagging the luggage from my hand. I also didn't point out that I'd spent the last few infuriating minutes explaining to him that I was in fact, Austin Ridge. "Make yourself comfortable Mr. Ridge. I'll get you to Mitzy's office quick as a flash." He pulled the rear passenger door open and gestured for me to get in.

Whilst the car was in fact a relic of the early Bill Clinton presidency, Mitzy's dad didn't let that stop him from flooring the gas and burning rubber through the streets of Los Angeles. Forty minutes later, we pulled up outside Mitzy's offices. After dumping me and my luggage curbside, her dad sped away down the street like a low-rent Knight Rider.

West Hollywood stretched out around me, its streets a vibrant tapestry of modernity and old Hollywood charm. The buildings there, an eclectic mix of sleek, contemporary office blocks and charmingly weathered art deco apartments, reflected the dynamic and diverse spirit of the area. Just a block away, the legendary Sunset Strip buzzed with activity, its famed billboards and neon lights a stark contrast to the palm tree-lined residential area that offered a more subdued kind of beauty.

I could see the Hollywood Hills in the distance, their iconic signage peeking through an early evening haze, casting a dreamlike glow over the city. The energy of West Hollywood was palpable, a blend of high-octane glamour and laid-back Californian cool that somehow managed to be both exhilarating and daunting, both welcoming whilst being somewhere you could be surrounded by people and still be totally alone.

There was a sense of magic in these streets. This was the place where dreams were pursued, sometimes found, often lost, but always fervently chased with a relentless optimism that seemed uniquely Angeleno.

I took in a deep breath as I pushed through the double glass door and approached the receptionist's desk on the polished marble floor of the high-rise building.

"How can I help you today?" the young girl behind the reception desk sighed as if I had interrupted something of immense importance rather than the group chat on the phone I spied on the desk in front of her. "Rude!" she exclaimed, and a hand with talon-like red painted nails slammed over the screen of the device and slid it into a desk drawer.

"I'm here to see Mitzy Barrett," I announced loudly, hoping loud noises would distract her long enough to do her job.

"And you are?" she gestured toward me.

"I'm Austin Ridge," I bit out.

"Hold on a moment," she huffed, raising a finger in the air toward me. She plucked the handset from the phone on the desk next to her brightly decorated computer and tapped on the keys. "I have someone to see Mitzy," she sang as the other person on the line answered. "A Mr. Bridger." Omg it's her!

"It's Mr. Ridge, actually," I corrected her loudly.

"Then who is Mr. Bridger?" she snapped.

"No one! No one is Mr. Bridger! I don't think anyone has ever been Mr. Bridger! It's Austin Fucking Ridge." The plane ride, the turbulence, and the ride with Mitzy's dad

were all too much and now the she-devil on Mitzy's reception was just the last straw.

"Please mind your language, Mr. Bridger," she exclaimed, laying her claws over her heart.

"Mitzy! Mitzy!" I shouted at the top of my voice. I didn't have the mental fortitude to deal with her for a second longer.

"Austin, darling!" a voice cried out. I turned to see Mitzy walking towards me from a set of swinging double doors on the far side of the floor. "Shall we go into my office? Be a dear Rachel and bring Mr Ridge a coffee."

"Sure thing boss!" the she-devil smirked with feigned enthusiasm.

After walking through an office full of agents busy on phones or in meeting rooms with some famous faces that left even me star-struck, I followed Mitzy into her office.

Mitzy's office was an oasis of style and efficiency within the bustling environment of the agency. As I stepped through the doors following her, the space opened up into a large, sunlit room that exuded a blend of professionalism and personal flair. The walls were adorned with a collection of vibrant artworks ranging from classic Hollywood portraits to abstract modern paintings that seemed to pulsate with life. Each piece was carefully curated to reflect the dynamic, cutting edge and frankly, chaotic aspects of Mitzy's life that she brought directly to her work.

The office was dominated by a large, sleek desk made of polished chrome and glass, situated directly beneath a contemporary chandelier that cast a soft, ambient light over the surface. Behind the desk, floor-to-ceiling windows offered a panoramic view of West Hollywood, and the bustling streets below framed perfectly as if they were part of the décor. The skyline was a backdrop of inspiration, with the iconic

silhouettes of the city's architecture melding into the distant hills.

On one side of the room, a cosy sitting area was set up, featuring a plush velvet sofa flanked by two chic armchairs. A low coffee table sat in the middle, piled with the latest issues of industry magazines and scripts that seemed ready for review. Mitzy gestured to one of the armchairs as she slid into the other. We had barely sat down before a sharp bang on the door drew our attention.

"Come in!" Mitzy yelled as the door was thrust open by Rachel's thigh as she held a tray with two cups and a carafe of dark coffee. The smell wafted across the room, invading my nostrils, and making me crave the caffeine. After placing the tray onto the small coffee table, Rachel bowed almost reverentially before backing out of the room.

"So, how have you been Austin?" Mitzy smiled, reaching across to pour two cups of coffee, offering both milk and sugar. Declining them both, I took one of the cups offered.

"That's a very long story Mitzy." I chuffed out a laugh.

"Okay then," she nodded thoughtfully, "how's the wife?"

I stared at her dumbfounded. "Mitzy, you met my ex-boyfriend Dylan."

"Oh dear," she pressed her free hand to her chest, "did your wife find out about your boyfriend then?"

"Mitzy, I don't have a wife!" I exclaimed, exasperated, struggling to keep my tone light despite the mix-up and realization that Mitzy didn't have a single clue about anything other than my work.



"Oh dear, she went and divorced you, didn't she? I knew something like this was bound to happen!" She plucked a file from the table in front of her and began to leaf through it. "Did she take the kids as well?"

"Mitzy!" I snapped. "I don't have children!"

"Oh no! Full custody! How did she manage that?"

I reached across the space between us and rested a hand on her knee. "Mitzy, just so we are clear. I'm Austin Ridge. I'm super gay and I've never had a wife." I smiled hopefully.

"That's the spirit!" She snapped her fingers from side to side. "Like the bitch never even existed."

I lost the will to argue and as in actual fact the bitch had never actually existed, I didn't even have to pretend. "Anyway Mitzy, moving swiftly on!"

"Of course." She waved a manicured hand in the air briefly, before lifting a small rectangular tablet from a side table next to her chair. "So anyway Austin, it has been forever since we've managed to have one of our little catch-ups. Tell me, what have you been up to?"

I looked at her perplexed as she regarded with me what appeared to be genuine curiosity. Surely she of all people knew exactly what I'd been up to. She had arranged my travel from London to here. I considered this for a moment, taking in the expensive surroundings, the pale orange Birkin bag on the desk and the super expensive Louboutins clacking against the marble floor, before realizing that the she-devil on the front desk had obviously made all the arrangements. It explained a lot. It explained why on the flight, where I'd been placed in coach, the attendant had brought over my vegan and gluten-free meal, despite me not requesting either, and it

likely explained the white knuckle terror ride from Mitzy's father.

"Well Mitzy, as I hope you know," I started, "I'm just finishing up the last of the movies I'm shooting in London. You know? The three-picture deal you made for me at Graywood?"

"Oh of course!" she gasped, placing the tablet back down on the table. "Of course, that's why we haven't met for a while! Silly Mitzy." She made a show of rapping her knuckles on the side of her head. Oddly enough, this movement seemed to shake something loose in her brain. "Just to make sure, we did take our cut from that deal right?"

"Yes Mitzy," I rolled my eyes hard, "the giant chunks of out my check assured me you were definitely taking your fee."

"That's just darling, darling!" Mitzy exclaimed, her voice tinged with that theatrical flair that made every word she uttered sound like a stage direction. "Now, tell me, what do you want to do next Austin? What can Mitzy do to take you to that next level?"

I took a deep breath, my heart heavy with the weight of past losses and the pressing need to forge ahead. "Mitzy, I've played the 'straight role' for far too long, both professionally and personally," I began, my voice steady despite the tumult of emotions within me. "I'm tired of hiding who I really am. It's exhausting and dishonest. Losing Dy... losing a part of me was hard – devastating, actually – but I also need to work, to build something. I can't work to get back that piece of me empty-handed, with nothing but the remnants of a failed career I crafted under a facade."

Mitzy's gaze softened, the spark of her usual vivacity giving way to rare, sincere solemnity. "Darling, while Hollywood is a rainbow tapestry behind the scenes, it's

still a place where those who step out in front don't always play the roles that reflect their talent. There's a reason why none who are openly queer have landed leading roles in superhero films, straight romances, or as the face of big-ticket action movies. The public, or at least the studios, just aren't ready."

I leaned forward, fueled by a resolve sharpened by personal trials and the ache of lost love. "Maybe that's true, Mitzy, but I believe the public is more ready than we give them credit for. Change has to start somewhere. Why not with me? Why not now? I'm not just doing this for myself – I'm doing it for all the other Austins out there, and for the next generation who shouldn't have to choose between authenticity and ambition."

She studied me intently for a few moments, her features shifting as the seasoned business mogul surfaced once again. "Oh Austin," she sighed, her tone rich with both admiration and a hint of challenge. "You've certainly got guts. If you're really set on breaking barriers, you'll need more than just determination; you'll require a solid plan and a robust PR strategy."

Her smile then returned, more confident and infused with the sharp cunning that had cemented her status as a legend in the industry. "Alright, let's make it happen. We're going to carve out a place for you that's so impactful, it will be impossible to ignore. You're going to be the first gay man to land a role that doesn't just meet the diversity quotas but shatters all expectations. We'll present them with a superhero, a heartthrob, a maverick – someone real and unstoppable. I may have a little something that crossed my desk a few days ago, but let me think about that for a while. But first," she paused, her eyes twinkling with humour, "let's ensure that staff can at least remember your name correctly, and I love him to bits, but maybe a driver who isn't stuck in a 90's racing game?"

I couldn't help but laugh, the sound mingling with a newfound sense of purpose. This wasn't merely about reclaiming lost love or reshaping my career, it was about

redefining success and authenticity in an industry that thrived on appearances. With Mitzy on my side, ready to disrupt Hollywood, I was ready to embrace whatever came my way.

"But before we get ahead of ourselves," Mitzy added, her voice dropping to a more serious tone, "we should really talk with your publicist about this. Make sure everything aligns perfectly on all fronts before pulling any triggers. I'll sort everything, I'll arrange a meeting with them later today. You go get yourself acclimated back to Hollywood, let Mitzy handle everything."

Nodding, I felt a stir of anticipation coupled with a twinge of loneliness – a reminder of the personal costs these choices might entail.

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Later that week, I wandered along the Hollywood Boulevard, my steps aimless amidst the thrum of tourists. The glitter of the sidewalk stars did little to fog the solitude enveloping me. My attention was captured out of the corner of my eye by a newsstand on the edge of the sidewalk. I plucked a copy of a glitzy tabloid out of the metal stand, my fingers gripping the page hard.

"You break it, you buy it handsome," the red-haired middle-aged woman manning the stand chirped. "Also, this ain't a library honey. You buying that?"

"Huh?" Realizing she was talking to me, I nodded and tapped my phone against the card reader in her outstretched hand.

I glared at the front page of the magazine, a glossy gossip rag that after today, I vowed I would no longer buy. The front page featured an exclusive about Jax Conway from *Amore Blue*, stepping out with confirmed new beau and the show's head writer, Dylan Cooper.

New York's Hottest New Couple! Spotted cosyng up at the chic Le Petite Maison last night, Jax and Dylan, strongly rumoured to be Manhattan's new power couple, were later seen partying into the small hours with a group of friends and the who's who of the small screen. Sources close to the pair say they've been inseparable, working closely on and off set, turning their professional relationship into a romantic one that's set to be this year's most talked about courtship.

As my eyes scanned an accompanying photo of Dylan and Jax standing in the middle of a dance floor, Dylan's head thrown back in laughter as Jax pressed his mouth against my man's neck! , a hollow feeling settled in my gut. He wasn't my man. He wasn't my anything. I was his past. The image of them together, so happy, so unburdened, stirred a mix of longing and loneliness within me that was hard to dismiss. As I turned away, the echoes of my own past with Dylan whispered painfully through the crowded boulevard.

It was amidst the daze that two faces emerged from the crowd. Two faces whom, aside from within the pages of the very same gossip rag that was scrunched in my fist, I assumed I'd never see again. I watched, mesmerized, as Christina and Yiannis from my first TV gig emerged like specters from the crowd, and perused the stars outside Mann Chinese Theatre.

Our eyes met, and a tangible discomfort immediately set in. Christina's eyes flickered away almost instantly, seeking refuge anywhere but in my gaze, while Yiannis paused, his feet rooted to the spot as if grappling with the urge to flee. They exchanged a brief, tense look, a silent conversation passing between them – should they stay, should they go? I could almost hear the strained cogs of their minds clocking, the air thick with hesitancy.

After what felt like an eternity but in reality was only a few seconds, Yiannis linked his arm through Christina's and walked towards me. When only a few feet separated the distance between us, Yiannis regarded me with a wary expression. "Hey Austin."

"Um... hi," I ventured cautiously. I figured that caution was the best approach when having any type of dialogue with these two. For one thing, because I'd thought Christina was my friend. Instead, she'd detonated a bomb within our show and put a lot of people out of work. Luckily, me and the rest of the cast had been able to find other work, but it hadn't been so easy for the crew. I also maybe subconsciously was bitter towards them for finding love through the show, when I'd given up the only love I'd known before or since for the damned production.

Yiannis grimaced, looking down at the floor momentarily before a steely resolve seemed to settle over him. Taking a deep breath, his gaze snapped up to meet my own. "Austin, um, I'm really sorry about everything that went down with us and the network," he blurted out, the words tumbling out in a rush. "We honestly never meant to cause such chaos. We didn't know it would play out the way it did."

Christina, still not meeting my eyes, added in a murmur. "It was never intended to go so far. But things... things got out of control." Her voice was soft, filled with regret but underscored with the undeniable truth of their feelings. "Yiannis and I – we fell in love. We never planned it. Neither of us saw it coming."

Yiannis squeezed her hand, a gesture of his support and affirmation. A warm smile crossed his face as he looked at her, his feelings right there for all the world to see. "I've hurt people I care about," he continued, his tone earnest. I saw the remorse and the guilt simmer just under his surface, but his eyes showed defiance as if anyone should dare to question his love for Christina. "I hurt my ex-wife and... well, you all. But I can't regret the path that it led me on, not when it brought me here, to this place, with the love of my life."

"Babe," Christina sighed, laying a hand on his shoulder.

"Our careers might never fully recover," he shrugged, "but that seems insignificant when I think about our future, waking up next to her every morning, being there for

her when she is sick, bringing her soup and lying with her in bed till she gets better. The big moments like watching our child open presents from under the Christmas tree." His voice softened as Christina instinctively touched her belly, her actions revealing more than her words ever could.

Their admission reminded me of a Christmas, one where Dylan had donned a cheap Santa suit to surprise me with a gift. His playful shock the next morning, his whispered dreams of a future filled with laughter and children, echoed painfully in my heart. He had been so sure I'd make a great father.

Swallowing the knot of emotion in my throat, I managed a small smile. "I honestly wish you both the best," I said, my voice stronger than I felt. "Really, what is the point of holding grudges? Professionally, I am in a good place. We all find our own paths, and I hope yours brings you the happiness you deserve."

We said our goodbyes and closed a chapter in our lives. Turning away, the weight of their impending life contrasted sharply with my solitary existence. They had chosen each other, braving the storm for a love that promised them a future of shared moments and mutual support. Meanwhile, I had chosen safety, fame, solitude and shielding my heart and my mind from potential pain, but missing out on the very essence of what made life worth living.

My cell vibrated in my pocket. I flipped open my phone to see Mitzy's number flashing on the screen. "Hi Mitzy," I sighed, resting the cell to my ear, "what's up?"

"I might just have a job for you!" she gushed. "One I think you are going to love. Can you come into the office tomorrow while I run you through it?"

We arranged for me to meet her for lunch at her offices. She even promised that the front office super evil mega witch would be extra nice to me. I didn't believe her for a second.

As the voices of the street faded behind me, a resolution formed, full-fledged, in my head. Perhaps it was now time to redefine what I was truly seeking. Maybe it was time to chase a future not just filled with accolades, but with laughter, love and someone new to share it all with. Maybe, just maybe, it was time to find my own path to happiness.



Dylan

Two Months Later

I don't care if this is a dream or not, just please god don't stop.

That was the only coherent thought that could pass through my mind as I was roused from a deep sleep by the overwhelming sensation of a talented mouth, sucking and licking my hard-as-steel cock beneath the sheets. The filthy sounds of slurping and sucking served only to heighten my arousal. I slid my hands underneath the sheets and carded my fingers through Spencer's thick dark hair. He hummed. He loved to take control in the bedroom, heck actually, he liked to take control in any room that he found he just had to fuck me in, stairway, park, beach and in one instance, the bathroom of a service station we passed on the drive to go see my dad back home. However, I'd also learned that he also really got off on me taking my own pleasure from his body, whether that be using his mouth to fuck, or riding his thick cock to orgasm, it all was A-Okay in his books.

"Baby, fuck, you're so good at that," I moaned wantonly, stretching my legs until they shook a little. He moaned around my cock, almost purring at the endearment. I pulled his head up and down the length of my shaft, revelling in the velvety smooth texture of his tongue as it traversed the contours and veiny ridges of my dick. Out of habit, I quickly scanned the clock on my bedside table. We had a good hour until we had to be in the office. I did plan to get in a little early as it was the first table read of Season Three. Weighing up the options of leaving the bed, getting dressed and dealing with Manhattan traffic, or staying in bed for a little while longer, whilst my hot as fuck, movie and TV star boyfriend rocked my world. I would pick the blowjobs every time.

"Fuck, Spencer," I whined as he tugged on my balls. A zap of electricity shot through deep into my groin leaving me wanting. My orgasm was now held at bay for a few minutes longer. "I could get used to waking up to this every morning for the rest of my life," I grinned.

His mouth stalled around my cock, a hard pipe of flesh suspended in his motionless mouth. I quickly ran through what I'd said to cause the sudden all-out stop. For the rest of my life!!! Did I really just fucking say that?

I quickly reached down and grabbed hold of the base of my prick, sliding it free from his mouth. I tossed the sheets back and pushed up into a seated position, with my back against the headboard. His gaze snapped to mine, an unreadable expression on his face.

"Fuck, I'm so sorry!" A flush of embarrassment coloured my cheeks. "I didn't mean to come on that strong. I just meant you have a... very talented mouth! Yeah, that's what I meant!"

Spencer chuckled, his expression turning affectionate. The warm, deep sound of his laugh did little to lessen the heat in my cheeks. "Calm down," he soothed, pressing me back against the pillows with a thoughtful look. "I honestly didn't want to have this conversation only moments after your cock was pulled from my mouth, but from the looks of your face, I think I need you to hear what I have to say."

"Listen, I know... I'm sorry. I came on like a massive stage-five clinger. You don't have to ditch me over it!" The slightly manic edge to my voice only made me more anxious.

"Ditch you?" His face scrunched up in confusion for a moment. He shook his head before he surged forward and pressed a warm kiss to my lips. "Baby, you are nothing if not dramatic. Now shut your mouth for a moment."

"I'm not dramat..." was all I got out before he pressed his palm over my mouth, trapping the word vomit inside.

"If anyone came on strong, it was me all those months ago. Sitting around and waiting for you to be ready to give this ," he gestured between us, "a try. Now we have spent a hell of a lot of time together and I think I've met the most important people in your life by now. Every day that I spend with you just confirms something I've known since the first time we were alone on that rooftop."

"What's that?" I asked hopefully.

"That I'm one hundred per cent, head over heels in love with you." I waited for a 'but' that never came. He paused, his gaze intense and unwavering as he searched my eyes for a reaction. "I love you, Dylan. And I'm not just saying that because I got caught up in a moment or because it's convenient. I mean it." His voice softened, every word deliberate, weaving into the space between us like a vow. "Every laugh, every argument, every quiet moment we've shared has only deepened what I feel for you. You're not just someone I want temporarily. You're the person I want to wake up to, not just for a series of mornings, but I want to see things through and hopefully continue us for a lifetime."

My heart thumped wildly against my ribs, a mix of joy and sheer disbelief coursing through me. This was not how I'd expected this morning to go, but as I looked into Spencer's earnest eyes, everything seemed to click into place. The fear of coming on too strong, the awkward declarations – all of it melted away under the weight of his confession.

"Spencer," I began, my voice shaken with emotion, "I don't even know what to say. I've been so scared of screwing this up, of being too much or not enough. Hearing you say you love me – it's everything. I love you too, so much. More than I thought possible."

He smiled then, a genuine, heart-stopping smile that lit up his entire face. The strong masculine image of him dropped for a moment until all I could see was a young, handsome, excited man in love before me. Removing his hand from my mouth, he pulled me into a fierce embrace, our bodies aligning with an ease born of many shared nights. "I was maybe hoping, well I was praying to any god that would listen that you'd say it back," he murmured against my hair, his arms tightening around me. "And don't worry about being too much and never for a moment think that you're not enough. If anything, you're exactly what I need."

"Thank you," I whispered. He pulled back for a moment until I cast my eyes up to meet his.

"Thank you ." He smiled. "Now where was I?" he winked before sliding down the bed to take me back into his mouth. For the next fifteen minutes, I clawed at the sheets beneath me as he lapped and suckled on my cock until I emptied my balls into his throat. He groaned as I flooded his mouth, pulling off quickly, only to kneel up and cum all over my face. After a very quick shower, we fell back into bed and curled around each other.

As we lay there, wrapped in each other's arms, the world outside our little bubble seemed to pause. The upcoming table read, the stress of the new season, all of it faded into the background. At that moment, it was just us, and we were enough.

The peace was short-lived, however. The relentless march of time and responsibility called us back to reality. My cell buzzed insistently on the nightstand, a stark reminder of the world waiting outside. With a reluctant sigh, I reached for it, noticing multiple missed calls from Natalie and a text that read,

URGENT: Call me ASAP!

What a drama queen! It's just a table read! I made a promise to myself to tease the

ever-loving fuck out of her for being such a Karen about the first days. "Looks like we need to get moving," I said, a hint of regret colouring my tone as I climbed out of bed.

Spencer nodded, his expression turning serious. "Yeah, duty calls," he agreed, though his hand lingered on my arm as if reluctant to break the physical connection. "But this," he gestured between us with a significant look, "is what matters. We'll figure out the rest together."

Feeling buoyed by his words, I gave Spencer a nod and a playful shove. "Let's see what the day throws at us, huh?" I said with a grin. The world seemed a little less intimidating with him standing by my side.

We threw on our clothes and breezed out the door, hand in hand, feeling oddly invincible and ready to take on whatever New York threw at us. As we strolled towards the studio, the morning sun slanted through the city buildings, casting dramatic shadows that danced around our feet. Life could be a wild ride, unpredictable and downright messy at times, but it felt a whole lot less chaotic with Spencer's hand in mine.

"So, Mr. Writer Genius," Spencer hummed, squeezing my hand slightly, "what are your plans for this season? You always make changes last minute. What trick have you got hidden up your sleeve?"

"No tricks!" I laughed. "This season has to be really carefully executed to make it feel organic and authentic. Plus there are some elements to some of the episodes that I'm trying to handle delicately. I don't want standards and practices riding our asses all season long."

"Yeah," Spencer sighed, "the end of last season was pretty tough. I have to admit there were some days that were pretty hard. Especially the scenes with Sara."

Sara Peters was playing Gwen Amore, Nico's mother. Towards the end of the second season it had transpired, due to the careful machinations of myself and Natalie working until the wee hours trying to figure out how to pull it off, that Nico's dad had been having an affair with the current police commissioner twenty-two years earlier. They had vowed to keep it a secret and chalk it up to a giant mistake that had occurred when both of their marriages had been in trouble. The commissioner's husband had found out due to a medical emergency in which their son had needed a partial liver transplant after he had been shot in the line of duty. He had volunteered to live donate and was tested for a match. He not only was not a match but turned out not to be genetically related to his son. After confronting his wife, she admitted that she had been having an affair with her then-partner. The husband confronted Nico's dad at a charity function that he and his wife were attending, and the entire story unfolded. Not only did Nico have to deal with the fact that his dad had cheated on his mother, but also the second bombshell was that his half-brother would be joining the force as a junior homicide detective, working directly with him.

"You played it beautifully though," I smiled, squeezing his hand back in return, "and you know the critics loved it. I'm keeping my fingers crossed that we might just bag ourselves as Emmy for that last season, and if you don't get nominated for Lead Actor in a Drama Series, then the whole world is just rigged!" I sighed dramatically.

"Can I tell you a small concern I have and not have it be a big deal?" My heart dropped. Had he reconsidered telling me that he loved me and was trying to let me down easy? Had I in fact come on a bit too strong and he felt like he was strong-armed into a false declaration of love and affection? "Also, yes I still love you!" he laughed.

"Shit, did I say that out loud?" I stopped still in the street and turned to him, aghast.

"No, I can just read your face like an open book," he chuckled. "No, I just don't want to sound like a snob, but I'm slightly worried about working with Theo."

It was not an unrealistic concern. Theo Mason had started out his career as the lead singer of a boy band that had dominated the billboard charts for the better part of three years with their saccharine-sweet lyrics and washboard abs. The band, Heaven's Ladder, was a hit factory and the boys were on a rocket to mega stardom. Then as so many bands before, they had all fallen out and refused to speak to each other for a plethora of reasons. Theo had tried a solo music career, but it turned out not to be the best suit for him. In an interview with Empire magazine, he had told the reporter that he worked best when he was surrounded by a group of like-minded, artistic individuals. I'd be called into a meeting with Hillary who had told me that the network really wanted Theo to play the role of Virgil, Nico's half-brother. They believed that with his star power, the 18 – 24 demographic would be convinced to watch Amore Blue . I'd protested the decision, but at the end of the day, the network held the purse strings and if they really wanted to they could replace me on my own show with a flick of their pen, so I relented.

"I understand," I nodded slowly, "but the network insisted. The contracts have been signed for a while now and I haven't heard anything from him at all since then."

"Are you worried at all about that?" Spencer probed.

"No, I'm just keen to see what he can do," I answered honestly, "and the table read is the best time for that. It's raw and honest. No make-up, no markers on the floor. It's bringing life to the words, that you do so well."

"Aww, thanks, babe." Spencer preened, pulling me against his side for a moment.

Spencer and I briskly walked towards the studio, the urgency suddenly evident in our pace. Despite the beautiful morning we'd shared, a part of me couldn't shake a growing sense of foreboding that seemed to cast a shadow over my mood. It wasn't like me. Sure, I was always nervous on the first table read, but the sinking feeling that was currently sloshing back and forth in my gut was not normal. Checking my phone

again, I noticed another missed call from Natalie, and now one from Hillary too. I wondered whether Natalie was done with me ignoring her calls and had enlisted Hillary to scare me at a corporate level. Glancing at my watch, I realized with a start that unless we pulled our fingers out and shoved a rocket up there, then we could get seriously behind schedule. I usually prided myself on being the first to arrive, but today, given the particularly delightful morning, I hoped they'd understand our tardiness.

Just then, my phone rang again, startling me. It was Natalie. I answered quickly, bracing myself for the impending overly dramatic storm.

"Dylan! Where have you been? I've been trying to reach you all morning!" Natalie's voice was sharp, crackling through the line with barely concealed irritation.

"I know, I know, we're on our way now," I hurried to explain.

"I'm getting onto the elevator," she said, her voice laced with frustration. The line crackled more intensely, and I could barely make out what she was saying except for a few choice curse words lined up next to my name. "They didn't tell me about the whole Theo situation I swear. We need to – " Her voice cut off abruptly, and the call ended as the elevator doors likely closed, cutting off our signal.

What the hell has Theo done? It's the first day! He can't have pissed off the entire cast already! I imagined that the little diva was probably causing a scene due to something about his rider, or maybe his water wasn't shipped in from the Swiss Alps, or something else I would expect from a pampered teen popstar.

I pocketed my phone with a sigh and glanced at Spencer, who raised an eyebrow in silent question. "Just Natalie being Natalie I hope," I muttered. He must have felt my growing unease as he quickened his pace, forcing me to catch up with him. We really couldn't afford to be any later.



We'd barely made it through the door of the studio when the dark menacing shadow of Gretal crossed our paths. I mentally made the sign of the cross. I noticed even Spencer stood with his back a little stiffer when in the presence of her malevolent evil.

"Good morning Gretal!" I tried, my cheery voice sounding false in my ears. "Good morning so far?"

Her gaze traveled down to my shoes, then slowly up my entire body as if she was categorising which parts of me she would eat first and which parts she would store in the freezer to feed to her pet, which I assumed must be a crocodile. She handed me a stack of scripts, my own marked with sticky notes brimming with last-minute ideas and changes I'd forwarded to her to collate for me. She gave me a scowl and dusted off her hands as I plucked the scripts from her talons.

"I would have hoped that since we all had to be here on time, maybe the person in charge of this show would like to show up in time as well." She shrugged. "Silly me, maybe I just try to hold people to my own professional standards. We can't all be me."

"Thank the lord!" Spencer muttered, the small grin on his face fading away as her laser-beam gaze pinned him in place.

"Anyway, you both should get up there. Even the newbie managed to make it on time." So, Theo has shown up. Thank god!

"Thanks, Gretal!" I called after her as she muttered something about us cutting it close, before striding away in a cloud of Chanel No. 5.

Spencer and I headed straight for the lifts, and as we waited for one to arrive, I once again tried my best to shake off the slight unease settling in my chest. The elevator

doors opened, and we stepped inside, both of us silent as we were carried upwards towards the office floor.

The doors slid open, and immediately, Natalie's voice floated out from the conference room, unusually strained as she addressed the gathered cast and crew. "Unfortunately, there have been some last-minute unforeseen casting changes to the role of Virgil, Nico's brother, due to scheduling conflicts," she was saying, her tone carrying an odd, forced cheerfulness.

Spencer squeezed my hand, a silent gesture of support as we stepped into the corridor. We moved towards the conference room, the muffled sounds of Natalie's announcement growing clearer with each step.

I paused at the door, taking a deep breath before pushing it open. As we entered, the room fell into a hushed anticipation, all eyes turning towards us. I scanned the room quickly, catching varying expressions of curiosity and confusion.

Natalie stood at the front, her eyes meeting mine briefly with a look that I couldn't quite decipher. Then, she cleared her throat and continued, "And so, I am pleased to announce that the person playing the role of Virgil will be none other than Austin Ridge."

The door on the far side of the conference room opened, and standing there, with a wide smile on his face was none other than the previous love of my life.

Austin

The chill of the studio was a stark contrast to the warmth of the early morning sun that had bathed the city streets just an hour earlier. As I stepped through the doorways of the Amore Blue production studio, a familiar flutter of anticipation and dread settled in my stomach. This was my re-entry into the life I had left behind, not just the world of television, but also into the life of the man who had once meant everything to me and who I'd cast aside.

New York had always felt like our city, mine and Dylan's. It hadn't felt right to come back here at all in the time we'd been away. When I'd had to for industry events or meetings, I'd gotten out of the city as fast as my feet would carry me. However, now being back, the old familiar sense of home was creeping back beneath my skin. What I wouldn't give to be back in that little house of ours, with Dylan standing in his underwear, hair mussed up from sleep and whatever Olympian-level sex we'd had the night before. I would smile as I sidled up behind him, slipping my arms around his waist and pressing my lips where his neck met his shoulder...

I walked towards the reception desk of the building, intending to ask the man at security to call up for someone to come down and meet me. Before I could, however, thin fingers gripped my arm harshly and spun me around a hundred and eighty degrees.

"Mr. Ridge." The violent spin shook my head for a moment until my eyes focused on a slender woman in a form-fitting black pin-striped suit and heels. She regarded me coolly for a moment before glancing at the gold watch on her wrist. "A couple more minutes and you would have been officially late."

I shook my head slightly in disbelief before extending my hand out towards her. "Yes, I am Austin Ridge."

She glanced down at my hand as if it were personally offending her, before lightly gripping my fingertips and shaking them slightly. "I'm Gretal, an executive assistant here. If you need absolutely anything during your visit today, then I'm sure you will find someone to do that for you."

"Aaaaanyway," I began loudly, "I'm here to..."

"I'm going to cut you off right there Mr. Ridge." She held up a bony finger in the space between us. "I know exactly why you are here. It's my job to know every little thing that goes on in this building."

As I regained my bearings, Gretal's presence seemed to fill the space around us, her demeanour as rigid as the skyscrapers that lined the Manhattan skyline. She stood tall and unwavering, her eyes scanning me like a seasoned librarian assessing a misplaced book.

"I understand," I managed to say, smoothing down my jacket and trying to keep the bite out of my tone, a nervous gesture I hadn't realized I'd picked up. "I appreciate the efficiency. I'm here for the table read, first days and all that."

Gretal's eyes narrowed slightly, the ghost of a smirk playing at the corners of her lips. "Indeed, and we expect punctuality, Mr. Ridge. The team is very tight-knit and on a precise schedule. Granted it was a schedule I set out for them for the day, but you can't trust these people to think independently for themselves. Disruptions are... less than welcome."

The coolness of her tone was a clear reminder of the professional boundaries in the building, a hierarchy that was palpable in the air, and from the vibe that Gretal was

giving off, the head honcho had to be Satan, because she was definitely a she-devil. This building had the feel of a world where every minute was accounted for, every role had its place, and every action was monitored by their claw-fingered overseer. I was not just stepping into a new role on a popular TV show; I was entering a regime where the unspoken rules were as crucial as the lines I'd already learned.

"Of course," I replied, masking the unease that flickered inside me with a practised smile. "I have no intention of causing any disruptions."

Gretal's expression softened, just barely, as if she appreciated the acknowledgement of her unspoken warnings. "Very well, follow me, Mr. Ridge. I'll take you up to the conference room where the read-through will be held. The rest of the cast is already assembling."

As we approached the conference room, the murmur of voices grew louder, a tangible buzz of creative energy that seeped through the door. Gretal paused her hand on the handle and turned to me. Her look was inscrutable, but there was a hint of advice in her tone. "Make your mark, Mr. Ridge. First impressions are lasting ones here."

With a decisive turn, Gretal opened the door and gestured for me to enter. I stepped into a room alive with the dynamic flow of the show's cast and crew, all contributing to the palpable hum of pre-table read anticipation. My entry drew a few discreet glances and nods of acknowledgement; the undercurrent of curiosity was subtle but unmistakable. I found a spot near the edge of the table and settled in, ready to absorb the collaborative atmosphere of my first show read-through.

Before the session could start, I spotted a familiar face, dark as thunder as she marched towards me. "Natalie." I nodded in greeting. Natalie was known for her sharp wit and even within the industry, known for her even sharper management style. Her expression was tight, signalling urgency as she gestured for me to follow her into a small side room off the main area. "No worries everyone," she called to the

room. "Just want to make proper introductions once everyone has arrived. Exciting times," she muttered. The moment the door clicked shut behind us, the ambience of congenial professionalism vanished.

"What in the ever-loving-fuck do you think you're doing here?" Natalie hissed, her voice low but fierce. "I just heard this morning about the casting change, and Dylan is still in the dark. I've been trying to get in touch with him all morning."

I was taken aback, not just by her tone but by the implication. "Natalie, I was offered this role through the usual channels. My agent said it was urgent, and I..."

She cut me off with a sharp wave of her hand. "I don't care how you got here Austin. What matters is that you might not realize the situation you have charged into head first. Dylan is happy... finally. He and Jax have something solid, and if you're thinking of disrupting that because of past feelings or whatever the hell, then think again."

The threat was unmistakable in her clenched jaw and narrowed eyes. "I've worked too damn hard to let personal complications ruin this production. This is Dylan's baby and not one of us would be here without him. Jax is also key to this show's success. If I even smell trouble stirring up because of you, believe me, Austin, the rusty shears won't be far behind. And I'll personally smash your chances of getting into any type of spotlight ever again along with whatever else needs crushing under my boot."

Her words were a cold splash of reality, damping down the flickers of unresolved past emotions. Natalie's fierce loyalty to her cast and her show was to be expected, and her protective streak for her best friend and his personal well-being was as strong as it ever was.

"I understand Natalie," I responded, my voice steady despite the churning of emotions inside. "I'm here to work, that's all. You won't have any trouble from me."

"Good!" She glanced at her watch before dramatically sighing again. "Listen, Dylan and Jax are running late this morning, and we really need to get this show on the road, so I'm going to go announce you." And with that, she left the room and slammed the door behind her.

A few moments later, I heard her call my name, taking this as my cue to enter, I opened the double doors. Walking into the conference room felt like stepping onto a stage, the critical eyes of the cast and crew upon measuring, and assessing. They were curious about the newcomer, the last-minute addition to an already stellar lineup. Their gazes bore into me, each one with a reminder that here, in this room, I was an outsider. The room buzzed with a low murmur of industry chatter, punctuated by the rustling of scripts and the occasional clink of coffee cups.

As I made my entrance, I scanned the room for Dylan. There he was, looking every bit the successful showrunner, his demeanour calm and poised as he nodded towards an actress whose name escaped me, but who seemed to be in almost every show for the last few years. I also recognized her as a face from the previous season's cliff-hanger finale. The sight of him, so focused and in command, sent a wave of regret and need through me so heavy that I thought it might knock me to the floor. Our eyes met across the room, and for a moment, the years rolled away, leaving the raw ache of our past laid bare between us. His expression shifted subtly, a tightening around the corners of his eyes, a hardening of his jaw. The room's temperature seemed to drop a few more degrees.

Jax, standing close by to Dylan's side, turned to look at me. His greeting was polite, yet reserved, a guardedness in his eyes that was not entirely unfriendly but spoke volumes of his awareness of my history with Dylan. He whispered something in Dylan's ear. Dylan smiled and took a deep breath, taking a seat next to Natalie at the head of the table. Jax made his way around the table and stood before me. The handshake was brief, the contact minimal, a clear delineation of where we stood. It was a professionalism tinged with caution, and I couldn't blame him.

"Right, so I know you are all probably wondering what on earth Austin Ridge is doing here." Natalie smiled through clenched teeth. "I think it's a bit of a shock to us all." She glanced quickly at Dylan before schooling her face back into a grin aimed at the rest of the room. "It turns out that Theo, who should have been playing the role of Virgil, had a change of heart about being well and truly done with the pop industry and will be embarking on a tour with his band. So while we won't have him on our season, we do have a lot of new ' music ' to look forward to," she quoted with her fingertips. A smattering of laughter rose up around the room.

"And," I almost gasped as I heard Dylan's voice for the first time in what felt like forever, "we have Austin Ridge to come and take his place. All of you will have seen Austin's movies over the past year, so we are lucky to have some additional star power to draw in those demographics."

"I look forward to working with you," the older actress whose name I still couldn't remember purred at me.

"Easy there, Lynne," another actor laughed and nodded towards me, "he'll be playing your son. We don't want any mother and son romance scandals." He winked lasciviously.

"Aside from the fact I am a married woman, George," she held a hand over her chest dramatically, "I am fairly sure that Mr. Ridge would prefer someone more his own age." She smiled sweetly at me.

I laughed nervously, fiddling with the watch on my wrist. "Although you are a very beautiful woman, Lynne," I bit the inside of my cheek, "you're right, you aren't really my type."

"See?" She gestured towards me whilst addressing George.



Here goes. "What I meant was," I continued, raising my voice slightly so it carried across the room, "I'm gay." The words hung in the air, a definitive statement of identity. Across the table, I saw Dylan choke slightly on the water he was drinking, his reaction drawing a few concerned looks, including one from Jax who was quick to walk around the table and place a comforting hand on his back. The moment was fleeting but charged. Jax's gaze shifted to me with a protective sharpness that I hadn't quite anticipated.

The room's atmosphere tensed for a moment. Curiosity, surprise, and a hint of discomfort mingled in the air. Natalie quickly took control of the situation, her voice crisp as she redirected our focus. "Alright, let's settle down everyone. It's really great that you feel comfortable sharing that bit of brand-new information with the room, Austin." Natalie had on more than one occasion walked in on myself and Dylan in a number of sexually compromising situations, so the news was definitely not brand new to her. "Let's start the read-through. We've got a lot to cover today."

Taking a seat at the edge of the table, I unfolded my script, the pages crisp under my fingers – a stark reminder of why I was there. As the read-through began, I focused on the characters, and the story, immersing myself in the world Dylan had created. His talent was undeniable, each line of dialogue painting vivid pictures, each character arc woven seamlessly into the fabric of the plot.

Every glance across the table sent a pang of yearning through me. Memories of Dylan's lips, the taste of him, and the press of his body against mine flooded my senses, disrupting my focus. His laugh, which used to be my favourite sound, now echoed across the room, reminding me of what we once had and intensifying the ache of his absence in my life.

Natalie, ever-observant, caught the direction of my gaze and shot me a stern look, her eyes narrowing slightly in warning. It was clear she'd noticed my attention was more on Dylan than on the script in front of me. Jax, too, seemed aware of my lingering

looks. His eyes met mine for a brief moment, hard and unyielding, his stare a silent warning to maintain my distance. The message was clear: Dylan was off-limits, and any misplaced affection from my side would not be welcomed.

The atmosphere thickened with unspoken tensions, making the air around me feel heavier. I just wanted Dylan to look at me. I needed his eyes on me, and every time his soft smile aimed Jax's way it was like a knife in the gut. I forced myself to redirect my attention back to the script, to anchor myself in the reality of my character's life rather than dwell on the past that seemed to be out of reach.

As the read-through began, I threw myself into Virgil's character, channelling my tumultuous emotions into the lines on the page. Each new section was a release, and each interaction was a step forward toward reclaiming my place in Dylan's world. The other cast members responded, the energy in the room growing as we delved deeper into the season's complexities.

"Can you believe that those two are only recently an item?" George whispered in my ear, clearly authentic in his words. "I mean, we all thought that they would end up together at some point, but poor Dylan held out for as long as he could."

"What do you mean?" My interest was piqued.

"Well from what I hear," he whispered conspiratorially, "that Dylan was initially hesitant to get with Jax. Hillary, from Corporate, told me, that Jax had told him that he would wait until Dylan was ready to give him a shot. Poor Jax. Dylan kept him waiting for such a long time, but I guess with that giant hunk of a man waiting for you, you can't hold out forever."

"So Dylan didn't really want a relationship with him?" I knew I was being petty, but I couldn't help myself.

"I wouldn't say that," George shrugged. "For the longest time he always looked so sad, like his heart was breaking in slow motion. For the last few months though, he smiles so much more. He looks happy at last." I let that bullet to the heart sit with me for a moment as the final few scenes came to a close.

The cast dispersed for lunch, the previous intensity of the room dissipating as the conversations turned to lighter topics. I stood by the coffee station, trying to collect my thoughts, when Dylan approached to pour himself a coffee. Just as he reached the carafe, a phone buzzed from across the room. Jax, who had been speaking animatedly with a group of producers, plucked a cell from his pocket and read from the screen. He excused himself and quickly made his way to Dylan's side.

Whispering something into Dylan's ear, Jax's expression was serious, filled with concern. Dylan's features were clouded with sadness, his eyes flickering with emotions that I couldn't quite decipher from across the room. "Kiss me," I heard Jax murmur. Dylan stood up onto his tiptoes and kissed Jax deeply, an expression of affection that seemed to be both comfort and a proclamation.

The sight twisted something deep within me, a visceral punch to the gut. It was as if Dylan was cheating on me, despite the absurdity of the thought. We weren't together; we hadn't been together for a very long time. He was free to be with whomever he wanted, to find happiness where he could. Yet, watching him in Jax's arms, laughing softly as they parted, ignited a raw, almost primal sense of loss and jealousy within me.

Shaking off the nausea, I approached Dylan as he returned to the coffee station after Jax left with his cell phone pressed to his ear. "Dylan," I started, my voice steadier than I felt, trying to sound casual, "It's impressive, what you've built here. Really."

Dylan glanced up, his eyes guarded. "Thanks, Austin. A lot of blood, sweat and tears went into it. But it's a team effort." I knew what he wanted to say was that it was all

thanks to Jax for making the show the mammoth success that it was. But just like Dylan, I could read him like a book. He was trying to protect my feelings by not saying what he wanted to say.

"Jax is a terrific actor," I ventured, "I hate to admit it, but I am a bit of a fan. I watched the first two seasons between productions of the last two movies that I shot in Europe and was completely hooked."

"That's kind of you to say," he smiled shyly, "and yes, Spencer... sorry, Jax really is something." Dylan looked away quickly, his teeth worrying his bottom lip nervously as a pink blush spread from his neck upwards towards his cheeks. I knew that look. I'd been the cause of that look more times than I could count. Dylan was thinking of something sexual that he and Jax had done, and was trying to not get aroused whilst standing directly in front of me. What in the ever-loving fuck fresh hell is this?

The room seemed to grow quieter around us, the buzz of the other conversations dimming as the space between us charged with unspoken tension. "I know we didn't part under the best circumstances."

"You can say that again," he chuffed out a laugh.

I continued, each word weighted with the heaviness of the years together that hung between us. "But seeing all this... I hope we can move past that. Professionally, at least."

Dylan's gaze intensified, his patience thinning. "What are you really doing here, Austin?" His voice was low, a hint of frustration breaking through. "This isn't just about a job, is it?"

The question, so direct, slipped past my defences and stripped away any pretence I might have clung to. Swallowing hard, I met his stare, honesty pulling the truth from

me. "This is a great opportunity, and I'd be a fool to say otherwise. But part of the draw... is you, Dylan."

"What..."

"Even if it means watching you with someone else. Yes, it's killing me, watching his hands all over you." My eyes raked across his body. "Seeing your lips on his. The smile that you used to reserve only for me, is now given to him so freely." I placed a fist over my heart. "I understand, even if only a little, what you must have felt that night in the garden with Kevin."

"Austin..."

"I know I only have myself to blame," I interrupted. "Doesn't stop me from wanting you. I want you with every fiber of my being and I don't know how to stop."

Dylan's expression hardened the softness from a few moments ago now completely wiped away. "We're here to work, Austin. That's all this can ever be now. Remember that I'm your boss, not your... not whatever we used to be."

"Whatever we used to be?" My brain couldn't comprehend those words leaving his lips. "What you used to be, was my everything."

"Until I wasn't." he shrugged.

He didn't wait for my response, turning on his heel and walking away, leaving me staring after him, the finality of his words echoing in my mind. As I watched him go, a fierce resolve settled over me. Dylan was mine, had always been mine; he just didn't know it yet. And somehow, I had to find a way to show him. Even if from a painful distance.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:19 am*

Dylan

H oly Fuck!

To be continued in the final book of Echoes of us.