



Stray for You (Rainbow Rescue Cat Café #3)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: I've loved him since I met him. Can a not-so-chance reunion give us a second chance?

Julian

The second I met Cameron, I knew I loved him. But when our moms started dating, it complicated things. For a while, it looked like we might become step-brothers.

Years later, our moms have broken up, and Cameron has moved across the country. But when work sends me to his city, it serves as a harsh reminder that Cameron blames me for all his hardships in his younger years.

I've been living life as a carefree playboy, but I'd give it all up for Cam — if only he'd let me.

Cameron

Dad leaving was bad. Julian nearly becoming my step-brother was so, so much worse.

From the second we met, he's been a thorn in my side, a persistent pest. The absolute last thing I need is him showing up where I work now that I live three thousand miles away.

He hurt my mother's chance at happiness many years ago, and I've never forgiven him for that. Yet the Julian who strolls back into my life isn't the jerk I remember from my youth. Can I trust this change? Or will I open myself up only to experience the same old Julian all over again? There's only one way to find out, but I'm terrified to try.

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Chapter One

Cameron

DAD WALKING OUT was bad. Mom dating her is so, so much worse.

I don't make it two steps into the café before there's an arm around my shoulders and a shrill voice in my ears.

"Hey, bro."

I shove the man trying to tackle me to the floor away. Not gently.

"I am not your brother."

Julian dances away and puts his hands up, but that shit-eating grin of his suggests he's not sorry at all. "My bad. Step-brother?"

My nostrils flare. I ball my hands into fists. My teeth grind together too hard for me to squeeze a word out between them.

Ever since our moms started dating, Julian hasn't let me enjoy a single moment of peace. He was annoying in high school; he's at least twice as annoying now that we're at the same university. Couldn't he have enrolled anywhere else? Why oh why did he have to choose City University of Montridge? This dude infests every second of my life. Our moms are constantly together. We see each other around campus. And we both work here at the Boyfriend Café. The one thing I hoped to leave behind

when I moved out to go to college is stuck to me like dog shit on the soles of my shoes.

But I'll never tell Mom a word of this. When Dad up and left out of the blue, it almost broke her. It almost broke me too. I was thinking about my high school graduation. Then I arrived home one day to find my mother weeping on the couch. He'd simply packed up his stuff and left, abandoning both of us. He was never the warmest father, but his abrupt departure was a level of assholery I never suspected of him.

I did my best to help Mom pick up the pieces. I got a job so I could help with bills. I very nearly dropped out of school — college isn't cheap — but Mom insisted I go get my degree and said we'd figure it out. I'm working just about as much as I can while I try to get a music degree. I don't know what good that degree will do us, but it's the only thing I've ever been any good at, so I don't have much choice.

All of this would be so much more bearable if he wasn't here.

"Hey, we match," Julian says.

"We absolutely do not match," I grumble.

"We totally match. We're like twins. How cute!"

I grind my teeth. We couldn't look much more different if we tried. I have dark hair that I like to keep tidy and even darker eyes, while Julian is all blond mop and glittering blue eyes and flashy smiles. He's also a hell of a lot paler than me. Sure, we're both wearing gray vests and blue ties for work today, but that is where the similarities begin and end.

"Come on, admit it," Julian says. "You were thinking of my dazzling eyes when you

chose that tie. That's why we picked the same color. It's brother telepathy."

I roll my eyes almost to the back of my skull. "I don't make a habit of thinking about your eyes."

"Cam, I'm wounded!" Julian blinks at me like I could ever actually be charmed by him.

"Good," I drawl.

I extract myself from the conversation as swiftly as I can, heading to the back of the café to make myself tea and get ready for my shift. Our co-worker Henry, who's one year younger than us, is back there making his own tea. Our resident ray of sunshine smiles when he sees me, but the expression falters once he gets a closer look at my face.

"Are you okay?"

Julian is back on me, his arm around my shoulders. "Big bro is feeling grumpy today. Didn't get enough sleep? Up all night with a hot date? Come on, you can confide in me."

I shove Julian off of me nearly hard enough to send him into the tea supplies. "I am not your brother."

"But you could be if our moms get married."

I close my eyes and take deep breaths. It's only four years. And we've already completed one, so it's only three years. Three years. Then I can get out of here. Mom and I are all we have, and I'll do anything I have to to take care of us — even tolerate Julian Brooks.

“HEY, CAMERON.”

Part of me wants to flinch at that greeting, even five years and three thousand miles away from my former life in New Jersey.

“Hey, Henry,” I say as my former Boyfriend Café co-worker strides into the new café where we both work.

Henry got me this job when I reached out to him more than a little desperate. It’s a solid gig. Take care of the cats. Make some coffee. Be nice to customers. Henry said they really needed the help when they hired me. I get pretty much as many shifts as I want, which has improved my finances dramatically.

It hasn’t been easy moving all the way out to the West Coast, but Mom and I both wanted it. After her relationship with Julian’s mom broke up, there wasn’t much to keep us in New Jersey. Plus, Mom has some relatives out here, cousins and stuff that I never knew until we moved. They’re nice enough, and it’s good having family around. It doesn’t feel like we’re completely on our own anymore. I even have my own apartment these days. It’s nothing extravagant, but I have to admit, it’s nice having my own space. Being a twenty-seven-year-old man living with his mother wasn’t the most appealing possible option. It’s not that I don’t love her, but the guys who flirt with me after my shows aren’t exactly people I want to introduce her to.

Still, Seattle and the surrounding area certainly isn’t cheap. It’s great for music and culture, but not for affordability. I live north of the city, between Seattle itself and Tripp Lake, where Henry’s Rainbow Rescue Cat Café is located. That means a lot of time driving up and down I-5, but for the first time since Dad left, my life is sort of on track, so I can’t complain too much.

A cat butts his head against my ankle. I bend down to scoop up Tux, a big black and white fellow who’s almost too affectionate and sweet. He’ll get adopted out of here

way faster than the other rescue cats, and I'll miss him when he goes, but that's what we're here for. We aren't simply trying to sell coffee. All the cats here are rescues, and part of our mission is finding them good homes.

Henry joins me behind the coffee bar, petting the squirming cat in my arms. I set Tux down on the counter and let him scamper off to his next adventure.

"How's it been here so far today?" Henry asks.

His red-brown hair is its usual artistic mess. He's every bit as sunny and sweet as he was in college, just as I'm every bit as irritable and dour. Henry put in a good word for me here regardless, trusting me not to ruin his reputation with my crappy attitude. So far, it's been a pleasant arrangement. I can slap on a smile for customers, just as I did back in college, and things are better out here than they were in New Jersey. I don't have to fake it as much when I greet customers in the morning.

For one thing, Julian isn't here.

As far as I know, he stayed in New Jersey, but I never checked. There's nothing I want to do less than think about Julian Brooks now that I'm finally free of him.

"Quiet morning," I reply. "We had our usual coffee rush after I opened, but since then it's been pretty tame. I guess people don't want to come out on a rainy day."

I gesture at the front windows of the shop, where several cats lounge watching rain drops streak down the glass.

"Rain shouldn't scare away people around here," Henry says with a sigh. "It's not even cold yet."

It's true. It's only September, the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the Pacific

Northwest's infamously wet winters. The temperature is still plenty comfortable.

"They'll come back," I say. "They're still processing the shift into fall."

Henry smiles. "You're right. Pretty soon, they'll want their pumpkin spice lattes and cats. How much longer do I have you today?"

I glance at my phone to check the time. "Another hour or so. Then I have to get to a rehearsal. I need to leave before the traffic gets bad."

"Okay, no problem," Henry says. "I was hoping to check up on stock before things get busy. Chloe asked me to figure out if we're low on anything before she puts in the order."

Chloe is our boss, and she's a pretty good one at that. She gave me a shot, and she's pretty hands off. Sometimes she'll pop in at the café, but she trusts us all to do our thing. She doesn't come around simply to breathe down our necks.

"Don't worry," I say. "I've got you covered."

I wave at the nearly empty café, and Henry hurries off toward the backroom. I stay at the coffee bar, where Tux is lounging on the counter. I stroke his soft black fur. I even dare to touch the white spot on his belly that we named him for. He endures my attention patiently, flopping onto his back so I can give him belly rubs and rumbling like a jet engine.

If only people were as easy to deal with as Tux and the other cats. My whole life has been a series of disappointments when it comes to humans. First, my dad bailed on Mom and I without a word. Then, Julian made my college years a living hell. They were hardly the only people to let me down, but they're definitely the top of the list. I haven't seen my father even once since he left. He hasn't reached out, hasn't called,

hasn't emailed, hasn't sent a birthday card. Nothing. He was in my life for seventeen years, then he vanished like he never had a son in the first place.

It wasn't because I'm gay. I might be carrying around some baggage, but that is not among the luggage weighing me down. My parents both knew, and it never made a difference. In fact, how little it affected my father when I came out should have been my first clue that he was checked out. He didn't really react at all. Why should he? He didn't care. He probably already knew he was leaving by then.

I shake my head. Tux is getting irritable because of the way my hand has gone still on his belly. I resume my petting duties, trying to push depressing memories out of my head. It's hard, even with this much time and distance between me and the event that upended my life in high school. Mom and I are finally building something happy and secure for ourselves. Moving out here was great for both of us, even if it has proven difficult financially. But we're getting by. We will get by. We have help out here. Her cousins, Henry at the café, my bandmates. We aren't trying to do this alone anymore.

And, most importantly of all, Julian Brooks and his mother are completely, totally, finally out of our lives.

I cannot be farther from Julian than I am now. I have no contact with him whatsoever. I haven't seen him since we graduated from our university and he insisted on hugging his "big bro" goodbye at the ceremony. Life is a little rocky financially, but that's a small price to pay to escape Julian Brooks.

If fate is kind, I will never see him again.

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Chapter Two

Julian

THE MOMENT I SWAGGER into the office, co-workers raise their hands for high fives. I nod at a woman who winks at me. I accept a coffee from a guy who knows I like it with plenty of cream and sugar. By the time I drop into the chair in my cubicle I've got a little cluster of fellow sales reps gathered around me.

“So, how was Nashville?” one says. “Come on, give us the juicy details.”

I glance around like I actually care about our boss catching us. I don't. Mostly because I know our boss doesn't care about us swapping “war stories” this way. It happens every time one of us jets off to some sales conference somewhere. It's like a game — everyone knows what happens after hours at these conferences, and we compete to see who can come home with the wildest story.

Usually, I win.

“Well, I can tell you this much,” I say, “they certainly take the Southern hospitality seriously down there.”

This earns me a round of laughter. My eager crowd includes women as well as men, and all of them know I'm not picky about gender myself. This sort of thing used to be a boy's club, but these days, everyone's getting in on it. Look, we aren't sales reps because we're geniuses. We're sales reps because we're charming and easy to look at. No employer would put it on a job posting, but everyone knows it's part of the gig.

People buy more stuff from pretty people.

I smooth my perfectly shaggy blond hair as I launch into stories of my escapades. This hair gets me a long way, both on the work side and the play side. A sunny smile and blue eyes don't hurt either. I'm built for this shit, which is helpful, since I love doing it. I don't care about the pharmaceuticals I'm supposed to sell. I could be selling water to a river for all I care. This job is less about the product and more about the people buying and selling it.

Case in point, the reps clustered around me in my cubicle, hanging on my every word as my stories get wilder and more elaborate.

“Both of them said yes?” Cathy says.

“Both,” I confirm with a cocky grin.

“Shit, man,” Jacob breathes.

Someone fist bumps me.

“You should hold classes or something,” Brad says. “I seriously don't know how you do this every time you're out on a job.”

“Natural talent,” I say.

Everyone laughs again, but it rings hollow. They say these things every time. I tell them stories every time. It always goes more or less like this. The interactions could be a script we're all following, the laughter the hollow applause demanded of a studio audience.

I hold onto my placating smile as long as I can as the group drifts off, everyone

returning to their separate cubicles to pretend to work for the day. Honestly, if I'm not at a conference or in a doctor's office trying to sell him on some new drug, I don't really do all that much. What's the point of a sales rep when I'm not selling anything? But we're all supposed to come into the office in Manhattan and act like proper full-time employees.

I have some emails to answer, and I drag out the process as long as I can to keep myself busy and away from my thoughts. There's always a crash after the high of a conference. Coming down from being desirable and funny and interesting to a huge group of people often leaves me deflated. All that awaits me here in New York are these hollow interactions with my co-workers. At lunch, I'll tell the same stories I just recited to the same people I always talk to around here. The cycle will repeat, but it never leaves this building. We don't get drinks after work. We aren't friends outside of this setting. Their smiles are like mine — performances.

Sure, I get plenty of sex living life the way I do. I never struggle to find that, at least. But if I claimed the encounters were more than physically fulfilling, I'd be lying.

I have money. I have sex. I have a good job. I have my looks. But at the end of the day it's me alone in my sweatpants in an empty, though beautiful, apartment.

There's only been one relationship in my life that ever felt like more than that, though the other party would probably disagree.

Cameron Ortiz.

When our moms started dating, he was horrified, but I was thrilled. I grew up near him. Went to the same high school. Somehow ended up at the same university. Our lives followed parallel tracks. To me, our moms dating was fate. His dad had just left; I'd never known mine. Our families were supposed to come together this way.

Cameron hated every second of it, however. He hated me for every second of it. Yeah, I didn't exactly make things easier with how I liked to mess with him, but the guy was so damn uptight about the whole thing. If he could have relaxed for two minutes, he might have seen the potential there.

Was it the brother thing? It has to be the brother thing.

I liked calling him brother when our moms were together, but even if they'd gotten married, we wouldn't really be brothers. We had nothing in common. We grew up in separate families. We had separate lives. And we were both already adults when our moms got together. We wouldn't be brothers any more than any two strangers off the street.

He's in Seattle now, apparently. I heard about it from our former Boyfriend Café co-worker Henry. I guess Cameron wanted to get as far away from me as possible after our moms broke up.

I'm staring blankly at an email that I haven't managed to read a single word of in the past twenty minutes when someone knocks on the wall of my cubicle. My boss, Garret, leans his hip against the flimsy partition.

"Have a minute?"

It's not like I can say no to my boss, but I pretend to finish up an email and nod. I follow him through the office, winking at a co-worker here or there when they notice our passing.

Garret's office sits along a far wall of the floor we occupy. We have to navigate a field of squat gray cubicles to reach it, then he opens the door and gestures me inside. He closes the door behind us, but that doesn't mean much. Garret likes catching up with us after conferences and things, and he often keeps his door closed even when

he's alone.

"Have a seat," he says as he takes his own behind his desk. "How was Nashville?"

He gets a very different version of events than what I regaled my co-workers with. The x-rated version is no secret to Garret; he was a rep himself before ascending into management. Still, I focus on clients, sales, panels I attended, stuff like that. All the boring things. The stuff that's actually part of the job.

Garret nods along as I give him the run-down, interrupting with an occasional question. When I'm done, he sits back in his chair with a sigh and folds his hands on his desk.

"You're good at this, Julian," he says. "Really good at it. You always come back with the most leads of anyone in this office."

I smile crookedly. "Natural talent. What can I say?"

"Whatever you want to call it, it's working. Upper management has noticed."

My eyebrows flicker up involuntarily at this. I've never aspired to much in this company. I'm happy enough with my job and my pay. I certainly wouldn't want to be confined to the office all the time like Garret, so upper management has rarely crossed my mind.

"I'm ... grateful," I say.

Garret chuckles. "Relax. You're not getting stuck in the office any time soon. I told them as much myself. You're too good out in the field for us to lose to office work."

I relax into my chair, tension draining from my shoulders.

“But there is another conference coming up,” Garret says. “I know you just got home,” he adds quickly, “but this is a big one. It could open us up to a completely different market, and I want my best rep on it. That’s you, Julian. If you aren’t up for it because of your recent trip, I understand, but you’ll have earned yourself a big vacation and bonus if you pull this one off.”

I don’t really need the money, and I have no idea what I’d do with a vacation except visit my mom down in New Jersey. No, the actual reason I perk up from this offer is because I genuinely enjoy these stupid, degenerate trips. They’re my natural environment. Moreover, they cocoon me in the kind of energy and attention that insulates me from the loneliness of the empty apartment waiting for me in Manhattan.

“I could be convinced,” I say carefully.

“You know we’ve been looking at breaking into tech for a while now,” Garret says. “If we could sell to those guys, there’s potential for VC money. It could be huge. We get the right partnership with the right company, hell, even a startup, it could skyrocket our profits. Not just for the quarter, either. We’re looking at year over year growth. It’s a huge opportunity.”

“Uh huh, yeah, I remember.”

“So, Seattle.”

The word drops like a hammer. Seattle. Where Cameron lives. Of course it’s Seattle. Of course it’s not Silicon Valley. Why shouldn’t fate bend this way? The universe has some sense of humor.

“Seattle?” I say.

“It’s not Silicon Valley, but Facebook, Google, Amazon — they’re all out there. This

is going to be huge. I want you to get in there and make connections with anyone you can. Sell them on the merger of tech and health. It's the next big innovation. It's the thing both industries have been waiting for. All that shit. You know the script."

I do, but the script doesn't usually include being in proximity to the one person in my life who I've always felt like I let slip away before we had a chance.

The rest of Garret's instructions sail past me. My brain is churning over the possibilities. Where exactly does Cameron live? Seattle is a big place. What is he doing out there? Will Henry know? Maybe Cameron's not even there anymore. Maybe he's unreachable. I haven't texted him in years. Would he respond if I tried? Has he blocked my number? Maybe he's been waiting all these years for me to reach out to him, pining in silence, dreaming of the day we'd be together again. Okay, that one sounds far-fetched, but what can I say? I'm a bit of a romantic at heart.

There are too many possibilities to count, but by the time I leave Garret's office, I nearly skip back to my desk. My smile isn't plastered on this time around. This thing singing in my chest isn't the fake cheer I smear on to charm a client or co-worker. I'm going to be near Cameron again. Only for a week and only for work, but that's better than I've had in years. Surely, he can't be holding on to his hatred of me after all these years. It must have passed by now. Our moms aren't even together anymore. There's nothing to keep us from being best buds — and perhaps even more than that.

Yeah, definitely.

I don't bother to pretend I'm answering emails when I get back to my desk. I hunch over my personal (not work) phone and start texting Henry. If anyone will know where Cameron is, it's him.

If fate is kind, I'll be seeing my brother-not-brother again very, very soon.

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Chapter Three

Cameron

I STROKE TUX'S SLEEK black fur, which is nearly a match for my own hair. His back rises, his tail going up as he paces along the counter of the coffee bar. He dances back and forth before me, demanding extra pets.

I'm fine providing them. There's nothing else to do right now. Rainbow Rescue Cat Café lies quiet around me. One patron sips a coffee while typing on her laptop. Most of the cats are sleeping somewhere around the café, a few lounging in the window seats bathed in mid-day sunlight and others hanging off the big cat tree that dominates the center of the café. My single patron hasn't needed me since she got her drink. There isn't even a yoga class going on on the other side of the café. It's the peak of the lull, and I am happy to entertain Tux, and myself, during it.

He flops onto the counter, not caring about the hair he gets everywhere, and presents his soft white belly to me, the very same belly that earned him his name. He's all black except for this strip of belly fur, making him look like a little man in a fancy tuxedo.

"Mom would love you," I murmur at him as he rumbles.

We always said we'd get a pet after we moved out here and settled in, but "settling in" has taken longer than either of us assumed. We came here after I graduated from university. At first, we lived together, but it quickly got awkward for a man in his early twenties to be living with his mother. She moved in with Aunt Mary, and I

found a little one-bedroom apartment in the same town. We're still close together, and I still see her at least once a week for dinner, but I have my own space.

Not that I make much use of it. When I'm not at the café I'm usually at practice or a show with my band. My opportunities for dating are limited to people who watched me on stage and inexplicably want to buy me a drink. I won't say it never happens, but I also wouldn't call it dating. It gets the job done. Let's leave it at that.

Things are settling down now, however, so maybe it's a good time to bring up the pet thing. A cat like Tux could live with mom and Aunt Mary, or with me. Of course, if we got a cat, it wouldn't be Tux. He's far too friendly and sweet. Someone is going to adopt him away from the café before I can scoop him up.

I'll enjoy his company for now, while I'm bored as hell at the café during a lull. I pet him with one hand and tap at my phone with the other, pulling up the notes tab where I started jotting down song lyrics recently. I don't write many of our band's songs. Erin, the lead singer, mostly takes care of that, but it's been a while since we've had any new material, and I got struck with sudden inspiration the other day.

I met you at the...

No, that doesn't sound right. It's not very romantic to meet someone at the deli and fall for them. It needs to be bigger, better.

I met you in my dreams.

Gag. That's the lyric to half a dozen songs, and I can't stand any of them. Sure, I'm dialing up the emotions for the sake of building a fantasy, but it doesn't have to go so far it makes me want to vomit.

I sigh. I don't know what possessed me to start writing a love song, but since my

initial burst of inspiration, I've made almost zero progress on it. Maybe I was wrong to follow the muse this time. This kind of stuff isn't for me. I've never been a romantic guy. The couple times I've dated, it was nice and all, but I never believed I was going to be with the guy forever.

If fate is kind, she'll bring us back together.

That sounds like the kind of line I'd hear in a movie, but I don't hate it as much as I should. Maybe there's something there.

I'm still fussing with it when the doors of the café open. (Two doors separate us from an entry hall. It means that if a cat slips out of one door, we can catch them when they reach the second, still closed, door. None of them have outsmarted the system yet.)

I look up, pasting on a smile on reflex...

And instantly harden it into a scowl.

"What are you doing here?" I say before I can stop myself.

"Is that any way to greet a paying customer?"

The man who strides into the café is tall and blond, with dazzling blue eyes and a smile nearly as bright. He's trim and handsome in a perfectly tailored suit and shiny black shoes. His face is clean-shaven. He sweeps the café with a glance, and though his smile doesn't so much as flicker, I can feel him judging it as beneath him.

This time, I have to speak between clenched teeth. "Julian, what the hell are you doing here?"

Julian God damn Brooks steps toward the coffee bar like a shade stepping out of my

nightmares and into my life.

“Can a guy want a coffee?” he says.

“No. Not you. Not here.”

“I heard this place was great,” he says. “And the atmosphere can’t be beat.”

He strokes Tux, who, infuriatingly enough, soaks up the attention and purrs even louder.

“You aren’t supposed to be here,” I say. “You live on the East Coast. I was never supposed to see you again.”

Julian puts a hand to his chest in mock affront. “Is that any way to greet your long lost brother?”

“You are not my—”

“Details,” Julian says, batting aside my usual refrain with a casual wave. “Our moms aren’t dating, but family is forever, Cam.”

Cam. No one but him calls me that. I never liked it, always insisted on people using my full name. Not that he has ever heeded a single complaint or request I’ve made in all of our long, unfortunate acquaintance.

“We were never family,” I say. “We never will be family. Even if our moms actually got married, I would never be your family.”

“So hostile. I’m trying to be friendly, you know.”

“What are you doing here? How did you know I’d be here?”

Julian’s smile curls in a way I recognize all too well, even after all these years. “How do you know I’m here for you? Maybe I’m visiting Henry.”

Henry. Fuck. Of course it was Henry. Henry, who loves everyone, who never met a stranger who didn’t become a friend, who couldn’t hate someone even with a knife to his throat. Did Julian use Henry to find me? That’s absurd, and yet I wouldn’t put it past this guy. Since we met in high school, his favorite hobby, at least to my eyes, has been tormenting me. Whether it was calling me his brother or bothering me during class or, apparently, chasing me all the way across the country, Julian Brooks has never let up.

“Do not get Henry involved in this,” I say. “Besides, he isn’t even here. And if you’ve been talking to him, you had to know that.”

Julian shrugs, unconcerned. “He’ll be here soon enough. Why shouldn’t I arrive a little early to greet my favorite big brother?”

“I’m not—”

“You’re making it sound like I coerced Henry into something nefarious, but I assure you that’s not the case. I’ve kept in touch with him, which you’d know if you’d just asked him about it — or answered any of my texts.”

“You haven’t messaged me in years.”

“I didn’t want to bother you.”

“I don’t believe that for a second,” I snarl.

Julian acts like he doesn't hear me, even though we're leaning over the coffee bar toward each other. I straighten up when I notice myself doing it. The last thing I need is to get closer to Julian than absolutely necessary.

"Anyway, I'll take..." Julian says, "oh, how about your black cat mocha, to match this little guy?"

He pets Tux some more, even bending his head down so Tux can butt against him. It would almost be cute if I didn't despise this man down to my bones. He never did anything but make my — and my mother's — life harder. It's one thing to bother me, but you don't mess with my mom and get away with it. After Dad left us, things were hard, and the way Julian acted while our moms dated didn't help. It made everything awkward. I could see it in my mom's eyes. She tried to smooth it over, but I couldn't set my anger aside. All my mom wanted was a little bit of happiness after Dad shattered her life, and Julian couldn't let her have it.

I've never forgiven him for that.

And I'm definitely not letting him hurt her ever again.

I make his coffee. I have no choice in the matter. A paying customer is a paying customer. But I'd be lying if I said I don't think about spitting in the drink in the brief moment when my back is to Julian. I don't, mostly for fear that he'd somehow turn that into innuendo and I'd commit a first-degree murder here in the shop.

Julian pays and takes his drink. He lingers at the counter and sips it right in front of me, moaning way more than any coffee deserves.

"You have gotten really good at this," he says. "I'll have to come here every day during my trip. It's a bit of a hike from Seattle, but it's worth it for this top tier service."

“What trip? What are you talking about?” Do I sound frantic? I feel frantic.

“I’m here on business. I didn’t put on a suit to impress you, you know. There’s a sales conference downtown. Lots of vapid smiles on beautiful faces. Lots of tech guys. But we do get a break for lunch in the afternoon. Maybe I’ll spend it up here.”

“Don’t even think about it. Tripp Lake is not worth that drive.”

“It is when the company is paying for my rental car and gas,” Julian says. “Besides, how many more chances am I going to get to see you?”

“Hopefully none,” I say.

For half a second, something like actual hurt flashes across his face. It’s there and gone so quickly that I doubt I even saw it. Why would Julian care? I’ve never liked him. He knows I’ve never liked him. We’ve always been like this, bickering incessantly. It’s not like he actually cares about me, otherwise he would have treated me and Mom better when he had the chance.

He opens his mouth, presumably to say something shitty and snarky, but then the café doors open again. Henry barrels in, his smile as bright as Julian’s, except in that Henry’s is genuine and warm and Julian’s is the smile of a snake. Julian leaves his coffee forgotten on the bar in order to hug Henry, and I use the distraction to slip away. Technically, I’m on the clock and Henry’s shift doesn’t start for a few more minutes, but if I don’t leave now this is going to turn into a crime scene.

“I’ll see you soon, Cam,” Julian calls after me in a sing-song.

I don’t know what that means. Perhaps he really will come here every day. But the twist in my stomach suggests some more nefarious implications, implications I don’t want to think about right now.

If I have to see Julian Brooks again, I'm not sure what I'll do, but it won't be good.

Chapter Four

Julian

I KEEP RELIVING CAMERON'S meltdown in the café as I sit through boring lectures in stagnant conference rooms the next day. The rage twisting up his face does far more than my overpriced coffee to keep me alert through a morning of mind-numbing drudgery. It's important, I get that, but this stuff isn't the real reason Garret sent me here. He sent me here for the coffee breaks, the lunch meetings, the after-hours gatherings. That's where I truly shine; that's where the real business gets done.

None of that stuff happens until later, however, so I sit in the back of the room with my coffee and imagine the way Cam's face flushed when he saw me strolling into that café of his. His dark eyes could have burned a hole through me. His lips pressed so tightly together they paled to several shades lighter than his face. A muscle along his jaw jerked from how hard he clenched his teeth.

It was kind of cute, if I'm being honest.

He would hate being called cute, but that only makes his reaction more adorable, of course. Besides, that banter in the café sent me back to happier days. It was like we were in college again, arguing in Albert's basement before the start of our shift at the Boyfriend Café. We both worked there as servers, making tea for customers and chatting with them about their woes. Despite our extreme personality differences, we both found success too. Some people wanted bright and sunny and charming, but plenty of people found Cam's quiet nature calming.

I did too, though I never would have admitted it back then. I was too busy being the center of attention as much as possible. No wonder I annoyed him so much. I knew I should have stopped messing with him, even back then, but for some reason I just ... can't. The second I see him, I yearn for his attention at any cost, and the easiest way to get it is to make him angry.

It's better than being ignored.

I survive the morning, then head to lunch with some of the other reps. Every restaurant near the convention center in downtown Seattle contains good-looking salespeople in smart suits and tight skirts. They're beautiful, and I should probably be picking out my evening entertainment, but when one of the guys I'm eating lunch with laughs too hard at my jokes, I make no attempt to reel him in.

I'm thinking about someone else instead. I'm thinking about seeing him tonight. I'm thinking about the plans I made for this evening, plans that probably won't get me laid, but excite me all the same.

The rest of the day passes in a similar blur to the morning. The conference has just begun, so people are settling in, finding their targets, figuring out where they fit in the hierarchy. I don't mind hanging back and observing for now. My time will come. Besides, this evening is already booked.

"Hey, man, you hitting the bars tonight? A bunch of people are going out drinking," the guy from lunch says. The hope in his eyes is clear, and any other day at any other conference, I would spring on that, but today I ignore it.

"I have plans tonight, actually," I say.

"How do you have plans in Seattle? Aren't you from the East Coast?"

“I get around,” I say with a wink. “There’s a bar I want to check out. Heard it’s the hot place to be. Anyone is welcome to join.”

It doesn’t hurt to have backup, especially if tonight leaves me riled up and without an outlet.

Lunch Guy (Zane, perhaps?) brightens, and pretty soon there’s a small group of us who plan to meet in the lobby of the Sheraton after we change out of our suits and freshen up. Alone in my room, I shower, blow drying my hair so it falls around my face in little drifts of blond. That one almost always works for me. Then I throw on jeans and a sleek black jacket over a charcoal gray shirt. Nice, slick, attractive, but not trying too hard at any of those things.

When I head down to the lobby, Zane, a red-haired woman and one other man are waiting for me.

“Where are we headed?” the woman asks.

“There’s an area around here called Capitol Hill,” I say. “Hear that’s where all the good bars are.”

“Isn’t that...” Zane says.

Considering the way he eyed me up during lunch, I’m surprised he doesn’t finish the thought.

“The gay neighborhood?” I provide. “Yeah. So what? That a problem?”

Zane coughs and covers his mouth. The other guy shrugs, and the red-haired woman laughs.

“Good,” I say. “Let me get us a car and we can get out of here.”

I order a rideshare, which appears in three minutes, anticipating the convention traffic heading out for the night. The car takes us up a steep hill and away from the convention center. As we travel, the road narrows and twists. How people out here stop on these treacherous little roads for lights and stuff baffles me. On top of that, it’s Wednesday night, and post-work foot traffic frequently crosses our path, forcing the driver to slam on her brakes more than once.

Eventually, she lets us out on the side of a busy street. I thank her before checking my map on my phone.

“This way,” I say, leading my odd group down the street. A left turn takes us onto a connecting street where half the businesses fly Pride flags even though it’s October. The flags are bright among the gray skies and prematurely encroaching night. Music thumps out of some of the buildings we pass. Laughter and conversation spill out of others as people catch a late meal. The whole place hums with life, with excitement, with vibrancy. By the time we reach the bar I have in mind, I’m vibrating from all the energy around me.

We head into a tight bar crowded with bodies. A Pride flag hangs on the wall alongside framed pictures of fake taxidermy. The walls scream in garish greens and reds, some of them striped like a candy shop. Gaudy chandeliers cast a weak, yellowy glow through the bar, and a couple arcade machines chirp in a back corner. People cluster around the bar on one side of the room, but I take my group to one of the tables. Luckily, we got here early enough to claim a good spot. The stage lies only a few tables up from us.

“Okay, this place is wild,” Zane says. “I need a drink. What do you guys want?”

Zane heads off to grab the first round while the rest of us admire the ostentatious

décor.

“So, how’d you find this place?” the other guy, Marcus, asks, the sarcasm thick in his voice.

“Heard about it from a friend,” I say.

“You have friends here?”

“I have friends everywhere. Don’t worry about it.”

Marcus and the red-head, Shelia, laugh, and it’s not because of my razor-sharp wit. My reputation gets around nearly as much as I do.

“And this place is gonna be worth the trip?” Shelia says.

“Of course it will,” I say. “Besides, what the hell else are you doing tonight? Fucking Maggie from Anaheim?”

A flush washes through Shelia’s face. Clearly, she believes no one has noticed her and Maggie’s flirting.

Zane saves her by returning with our drinks. He and Marcus have beers, while Shelia has a Manhattan, but my beverage is bright pink, a fact I will not apologize for.

“You have no idea how embarrassing it was ordering that thing,” Zane says with a nod at my drink.

“What’s embarrassing about ordering something delicious?” I counter.

“It can’t be that good,” Zane says.

“It’s way better than beer. Here, I’ll prove it. Have a sip, if you’re man enough.”

The offer lights up Zane’s eyes, which I don’t mind one bit. He’s a handsome guy, if a little older than me. The salt-and-pepper thing is hot, as is the silver in his stubble. Later tonight, he’ll be a great way for me to forget about the sting of the rejection inevitably barreling toward me.

Zane sips at my drink. By the time I head to the bar for the next round, he’s replaced his beer with the cocktail I ordered for myself. I return to the table with an array of drinks that could have come out of a package of Skittles. Pink and green and blue. We share them around, trying out the weird concoctions while chatting.

All of this would be a fine enough night on its own, but I know the main attraction hasn’t yet begun. We’re mid-way through our second round when the lights in the bar dim, and a band starts setting up on the stage.

“Live music,” I say to my comrades’ questioning glances. “What? You didn’t think I chose this place for the drinks, did you?”

“Never knew you were such a music fan,” Zane says. He’s tipsy enough to bump his shoulder against mine as he speaks.

“Who doesn’t like music?” I say. “And this is a great city for it. I figured I should go at least once while I’m here.”

None of that is my actual motivation, but these people don’t need to know that. In a week, we’ll be distant work acquaintances. Zane might even have a wife and kids he’s returning to. He wouldn’t be the only guy doing that kind of thing at these conferences. So the less they know about my personal life, the better.

The band sets up, thanks the crowd, and launches into their first song. The lead

singer, a man with a shaved head, belts out some kind of folk song. He's not bad, nor are the drummer and guitarists backing him up. Their music blares through the bar, precluding further conversation throughout the set.

By the time it's over, our drinks are gone, but I'm buzzing enough that I don't go looking for another one. Besides, this is what I've been waiting for all day long.

The first band spends some time clearing their equipment off the stage. These aren't big acts with their own personal stage crews. For one thing, we got into this show for free. So it's no surprise that they have to clean up their own equipment after playing. It makes for a long and cumbersome transition between bands, a delay that frays my nerves. As confident and unaffected as I like to seem, there are some things in this world that make my heart race.

Or, rather, there's some one who does.

The other sales reps fade away around me. The crowd quiets to a blur at the edges of my vision. I focus on the stage in the breathless beats when it lies empty and dark, awaiting the next act. Awaiting him.

My fellow reps might be going for more drinks. I don't notice. I ignore Zane entirely. As figures disturb the darkness at either side of the stage, the bar goes perfectly silent, at least for me.

My heart throbs in my ears as Cameron takes the stage.

He doesn't notice me as he busies himself setting up his guitar. In fact, he doesn't look at the crowd at all. That suits him, the aloof, mysterious guitarist. Few people probably realize he's shy, not arrogant, but I keep that greedily to myself.

Finally, he slings his guitar across his chest and straightens up to face the crowd —

and that's when his eyes meet mine.

In an instant, he flashes from fear to anger to understanding. I can see him putting the pieces together and realizing that Henry must have told me about this. His jaw goes tight, and though I can't discern it from back here, I know that one muscle is jumping as he grinds his teeth.

I simply smile in response, my heart in my ears.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:10 pm

Chapter Five

Cameron

I FREEZE THE MOMENT I step on stage.

Julian watches me from the crowd.

Why is he here? How is he here? Even as I wonder, the scheme unfolds before me. He found the café because of Henry. He found me because of Henry. Sweet, innocent Henry, who never has a bad thought about anyone, who would think nothing of Julian asking about me. Henry must have told Julian about my show tonight.

I have to pull myself together. My bandmates are setting up around me, and they'll be relying on me as their lead guitarist.

I force myself to stop looking at Julian. I force myself to stop thinking about him. When our lead singer Erin shoots me a look, I nod at her. She steps up to the mic, her bracelets clinking on her wrist. Her purple dreads spill past her shoulders. The crowd leans toward her like flowers searching for the sun, sensing her magnetic energy. It's what makes her so powerful as a frontman.

Well, that and her voice.

The moment we launch into our first song, all thought of Julian flees my brain. Erin's voice pulls me out of my head. I follow her lead, fingers flying along the neck of my guitar. It's barely even conscious. I feel the music more than I focus deliberately on

it, my body repeating the notes I've practiced so many times. It's muscle memory that I've embedded into my very soul. I'm as caught up in the music as anyone who might be out there listening to us, but everything past the edge of the stage evaporates as we move into our next song with hardly a pause. It's as though my very heartbeat syncs with Erin's, our blood pulsing in time with the beats pounded out by our drummer Tim. Beneath it all, Kelsey's bass murmurs, vibrating in our chests. We're a single organism for a moment, a single mind, a single heart thumping in time.

I don't come back to myself until the final chord is shivering off my guitar strings. There's a beat of perfect silence as the crowd catches its breath. Then it all breaks at once.

The applause washes through me, a tether dragging me from the buoyant, weightless waters of the music back to firm, dry land. I come back to myself in waves to find myself standing on that stage with Erin and all the rest. I take my guitar off over my head while Erin talks. Fortunately, she's good with crowds and takes care of appeasing them so the rest of us can get off the stage.

I dare not look out at the bar, keeping my head down as I get myself and my equipment off that stage. I did what I came here for. There's no reason to linger and give Julian another chance to catch my eyes.

He shouldn't be here. He shouldn't be in this bar. He shouldn't be in Seattle. He shouldn't be on the West Coast. The cascade of improbability that has led to this moment leaves me dizzy, but at least I get to escape backstage to deal with it.

The bar allocated a small green room for the bands playing tonight. I drag my stuff there and all but throw my gear on the floor. Only my reverence for the musical instrument that has saved my sanity for my whole life stops me. I started playing when I was a little kid. I found my dad's guitar in the closet and started picking at it, and I haven't stopped since. Eventually, my parents got me my own guitar and some

proper lessons. I loved it, and for a while I actually believed it was getting me closer with my dad. Obviously, that couldn't be the case with the way he eventually walked out.

Too many troubling thoughts tonight. I almost want to go out there and play a second set to dispel them. Music is the only thing that's ever managed to clear my head that way. Well, that and really good sex, I guess, but I can play my guitar whenever I want. I can't exactly do that other thing on demand...

"You ran from that stage," Erin says when she joins me. "See an ex out there or something?"

I stiffen, no matter how hard I try to remain casual. "No, just tired," I say.

"I've heard you play tired. That wasn't tired," she says.

"I'm fine."

I put my head down and busy myself packing up my guitar. I also have to haul an amp out of here, but I parked right behind the bar, so I won't have to carry it far. At the moment, I feel like I could run a marathon while holding the thing if it'll get me away from this bar and Julian. It seems like my bandmates aren't going to give me that option, however.

Tim slaps me on the back almost hard enough to knock me over when he joins us backstage. Kelsey skips in with her bass and amp.

"Did you hear that crowd?" she says. "We crushed."

Tim raises his hand and an enthusiastic high five cracks through the room. Tim waves his hand afterward, but the pain doesn't deter him for long. Soon he's going for the

backpack he left here before we went on and dragging out a lukewarm six-pack. He starts passing the beers around, but I wave mine away. If I down one, I'll have to wait before driving home, and I want to get out of here as fast as I possibly can.

"Aw, come on, man," Tim whines. "Just take one. This was a great show. They loved us. We should celebrate. Plus, we have to wait around to move the drum equipment anyway. It'll wear off before you have to drive."

"Decent-sized crowd too," Kelsey says. "That bar was packed, and it's a freaking Wednesday."

I can't disagree, so I stay silent instead. We didn't expect to draw such a good crowd on a random weeknight. Usually we get a sparse crowd at best, but that bar did look packed from what little I saw of it. Not that I was standing there counting. I certainly wasn't going to do something like that when it would force me to lock eyes with Julian in the crowd again.

If Henry wasn't so sweet and kind, I would kill him for this. I'm sure he didn't know. I mean, he knows that Julian and I bicker any time we're in hearing range of each other, but he doesn't know why the guy gets under my skin so easily. No one does. I haven't ever explained it. To the outside world, it's aimless, feckless rage. To me, it's everything.

"Next time, it's going to be even bigger," Kelsey is saying while Tim enthusiastically agrees.

Erin steps in to temper them, ever our voice of reason. "We still haven't heard back from that festival we applied for. Playing bars like this is great and all, but we need a bigger stage — and new material — if we're going to get some actual attention."

I swear her dark eyes flicker toward me, but it's so quick it could be my imagination.

I made the mistake of telling her some lyrics had popped into my head the other day. She's been pushing me to keep writing ever since. Most of that stuff falls on her currently, and it's a lot to ask of her while she's also working full-time as a music teacher at a high school.

Suddenly, I wish I'd accepted that beer just so I could busy myself sipping it. Instead, I focus on packing up whatever I left backstage. I should help my bandmates with their gear, especially the drum kit, but I'm increasingly desperate to get out of here. Between Julian and the pressure from Erin to actually finish those lyrics, this bar is becoming downright claustrophobic. I don't write lyrics very often. I don't know if it'll be any good. I only have half an idea how to set it to music. All I've done is mess around in my apartment, strumming along while I murmur nonsense. It's nowhere near ready.

I don't bother telling Erin that. Everyone wants to celebrate a successful show, and I don't want to be the guy who kills the mood. Besides, she'll probably forget about it if I simply don't respond.

Already, everyone has moved on to reliving the show, rehashing every moment in excited voices. The next band is on, the echoes of their music thumping through the walls of the green room. This is the perfect moment to get out of here, and I make to do exactly that.

"Are you leaving?" Tim says before I can escape.

"I have to be at the café tomorrow," I say by way of apology. "I wish I could stay and help, but I'm opening. I'll be up early."

Tim rolls his eyes. "Call out or something."

"I can't," I say. "I just started there. It'll mess with my co-workers. There's only three

of us.”

“I thought you started back in summer.”

“It was the end of summer,” I say. “And that’s only a few months ago.”

“Whatever,” Tim says.

But Kelsey isn’t letting me slip away so easily. “You’re killing the vibe,” she complains.

“The vibe will be better without me, trust me,” I say.

It’s true. I’m in no fit state to celebrate with people tonight. My thoughts are tumbling around like socks in a dryer. I’ve been called a downer at the best of times; tonight, I am far from my best.

“I really have to get going,” I say.

Erin looks skeptical, but she doesn’t stop me, finally showing me mercy. Tim and Kelsey scowl at me, but that’s nothing new. I’m never the life of the party. If they hadn’t needed a guitarist so bad after their first one bailed on them, there’s no way I would have auditioned for and gotten into The Ten Hours (don’t ask me about the name. Something about how long Erin spent on her first song, I think).

I don’t take a real breath until I get out of the green room and into the hall with my gear. It’s heavy and awkward, but I drag it down the hall anyway. The glow of the exit sign is like the light of heaven beaming down on me. Once I get out of here, everything will be fine. I can get away from here, from my bandmates, from Julian, and go back to my safe, solitary apartment.

I throw my shoulder against the door in my haste to open it. My guitar is on my back. I haul the amp with me as I make a beeline for my car, which sits parked in the lot behind the bar, and pop the trunk to throw my stuff inside. My guitar and amp lie in a messy heap atop emergency blankets and assorted junk. My guitar deserves better than this, and normally I'd handle it with the utmost care, but my heart is beating too fast tonight. It's like a hungry tiger is tracking my steps, prowling after me through the jungle. My only hope is to get in my car and speed away.

"Cam."

His voice stops me. I don't turn to acknowledge him. I freeze while bent over arranging things in the trunk. I straighten slowly, but don't face him, even when I close the trunk. I clutch my keys in my hand. I could make a break for the door and start the engine, drive off before he can stop me, but it would be pointless. There's no escaping Julian Brooks. Hasn't been for most of my damn life.

Slowly, so slowly, I turn to face him.

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Chapter Six

Julian

I SPEND TEN MINUTES pacing the streets of Seattle before I find the parking lot behind the bar. Cam bursts out of an emergency exit as I watch, rushing toward his car with his gear in tow. He throws his stuff in the trunk in a way that seems a bit rough, but what would I know about music? Maybe this is normal, though I suspect his careless hurry has more to do with me than with efficiency.

From the moment we locked eyes, I felt him wanting to run. I thought he might really do it before his band started playing. Then he ... he shone . None of the lights in that bar were as bright as Cam when his fingers started moving along that guitar. The sound that erupted out of him swelled like hot air filling a balloon. It gave the music shape and form even as it occupied every corner of that bar.

I couldn't look away.

I'm not sure I even breathed until his band finished their set and left the stage. I knew in that moment I couldn't let this end with a quick glance across a bar. Cameron will hate me for this, more than he already hates me, but I had to find him; I couldn't let him run away.

So I rushed from the bar without offering the other sales reps even the thinnest excuse and ran outside to find him. I was pretty sure he'd try to leave. He looked about to bolt as soon as the music ended. If he wasn't escaping through the front door, he had only one choice: this parking lot around the back.

Sure enough, he's here, his back hunched as he arranges things in his trunk. I approach slowly, as though the crunch of my footsteps might scare him away like a startled squirrel.

"Cam," I say when I'm just out of arm's reach.

He flinches, almost knocking his head against the trunk. Slowly, he closes the trunk and faces me, and the fury burning in those dark eyes nearly sends me running for the hills.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" he says, voice low, like he had to force it out.

He clutches his keys in his hand like he might try to stab me with them. I know he finds me annoying, but what have I done to make this man murderous every time he sees me?

"Why were you at the show?" Cameron says. "Why are you following me around?"

I'm not sure how to answer that. I could explain that Henry told me about the show, but that will imply that I asked Henry for the information. I did, but that's beside the point. I don't want Cameron turning his rage on Henry as well. The guy did nothing but answer my questions. I'm the one who dug for information about Cameron instead of maintaining our silent truce.

The truth is ... I wanted to find him. As soon as I knew work was sending me to Seattle, I wanted to find Cameron. I didn't really care if it was at a café or during a show at a bar, I just wanted to see him. I guess I never really got over my first impression of him back in high school. He was a quiet, broody guy sitting alone in a corner, doodling in a notebook. Something drew me to him, something I couldn't shake. Something still draws me to him today. But it's not a feeling I have any name for. It's more than a silly crush, or I might have gotten over it by now.

When we were kids, I fell back on doing what I always do when I'm unsure: teasing. Poking. It always got a reaction, and negative attention still counted as attention, so I kept on doing it. It became almost routine to poke at Cameron's insecurities every time I saw him, but there was never any malice behind it. I simply wanted him to notice me.

It's childish, I know, and I should probably apologize and beg for forgiveness, but being sincere with Cameron is far scarier than being punched. He'd never accept a schoolboy crush as an excuse, especially because we're far from schoolboys. I should be upfront with the guy, repair whatever I can repair, try to earn his trust, but all of that sounds way less fun than pushing his buttons and watching those dark, piercing eyes laser focus on nothing in the world but me.

Perhaps that's why I answer him the way I do.

"Can a guy want to reunite with his brother?" I say.

Rage darkens his face. For a second, it looks like he might actually lash out and hit me, but he just grinds his teeth and says, "Cut it out, Julian. I'm not in the mood tonight."

"Come on, it's just a joke. Shouldn't you be with your band?"

"Shouldn't you be with your conference or whatever?"

"The conference is during the day," I say. "We do whatever we want at night. And I do mean whatever we want."

He rolls his eyes at the implications dripping off my words, but it would have been more gratifying to find a flash of jealousy instead. A man can dream.

I step closer, and Cameron's annoyance flickers into wariness. He can reach me now. He can punch me in the face if he really wants to. Yet he's the one who seems cornered, his hips against his trunk like it's a wall boxing him in.

"So, what, you guys sell shit all day then get shitty drunk all night?" Cameron says, clearly trying to sound pissed instead of anxious.

"That's about the shape of it," I say with a shrug.

"Thrilling."

"It can be, if you're getting drunk with the right people." Again, I let the implications hang between us.

"Then why aren't you inside getting drunk with the right people? Now's your chance," Cameron says.

"Ah, the vibe in there wasn't it," I say. "I thought I'd have more fun out here."

Cameron narrows his eyes as I inch a bit closer. His gaze flickers up and down me, so quick I'm not sure he even realizes he does it. He's probably busy telling himself he didn't look, but I'm under no such illusions. Whatever else has happened between us, I've always found him attractive, and I have no qualms about that. He's slightly taller than me, his dark hair messy in a way that's begging for fingers curling through it and tugging. And those eyes. When they blaze with anger as they do now, they're hot enough to scorch. I can only imagine what they'd look like boiling with passion. I've always wanted him, and I've always gone about it in the worst way possible. Just as I am tonight.

"There's nothing out here," Cameron says to rebuff me. "Nothing fun. You should go back inside." His protests grow weaker with every word.

“I don’t know,” I say easily. “You’re out here, aren’t you?”

“I’m not fun.”

I smirk up at him. “You’re selling yourself short, Cam. I bet you’re all kinds of fun when you let yourself be.”

He puts his hands on my shoulders, but doesn’t actually push me away. Something shifts between us, the thin pretext of this conversation dissolving in the warmth of his hands on me. He’s touched me plenty of times, usually to push me away or elbow me or shove me off of him, but this time is different. There’s more time behind us now. There’s more space between us. I shouldn’t be here, and I’m going to disappear again in a week when I return to the East Coast. Our moms aren’t dating. No one knows we’re behind this bar. The conditions are right to tear down the wall of resentment we’ve erected between us over the years.

“Go home,” Cameron says. “All the way home. Don’t come back here.”

The words should sting, but he’s speaking more quietly, the edge in his voice cooling.

“It’s only a week,” I say, quieting my voice as well. “Just one little week. Then I’ll disappear for good. How much harm can I do in a week?”

His eyes narrow a twitch, a gesture I only catch because I’m so close.

“I hate you,” he says. “I’ve hated you since the day we met.”

“I’m aware.” I glance at his hand on my shoulder. “But you aren’t pushing me away.”

“Shut up,” he says between his teeth.

Working in sales has honed my instincts when it comes to people. I've learned to sniff out the tipping point, the moment when they break, when they give in to something they might have been unsure about before. They might not even realize they're going to give me what I want, but I know. Pouncing on those opportunities has gotten me far in my career.

And tonight, it's going to get me Cameron.

He puts up no resistance when I close the scant space between us. His fingers tighten subtly on my shoulders as my hands go to his waist and tug him toward me. Our similar heights make it effortless to reach up and kiss him, his lips unsure but yielding all the same.

It starts soft and hesitant, a brush of lips, but when I breathe against him, he shudders in my grip. I turn my head and go in deeper, pressing our mouths more firmly together. Cameron's is every bit as warm as I always imagined. His kiss is firm and definitive; I'd expect nothing less. He could open me up with his tongue, but he doesn't, holding at least that much back as our mouths explore.

My head is light. I cling to him for balance as much as to touch him. How long have I wondered about this kiss, and here it is outside some bar in Seattle? It's the time, the distance, the strangeness of the circumstances. I know even as I kiss him that I could never have this outside of this bizarre setting, but I don't care. He tastes like that music that exploded out of him, shocking and overwhelming and stunningly beautiful. I could delve into him for the rest of the night learning every corner of him, discovering every piece of him, and suddenly I'm desperate to do just that. This is a fantasy I've carried since I was a stupid teenager, and now here it is in my hands, impossibly tangible.

I try to lean toward him, grabbing him harder, pressing not just our mouths but our bodies together. His chest is against mine; his hips meet mine. And I want even more.

I want all of it. A kiss isn't going to be enough, not when I've felt the potential lurking behind his lips. We could be something explosive, something incredible, if I can only get him to my hotel tonight.

That's when Cameron shoves me away.

I stumble back, nearly tripping over my feet in my shock. Cameron wipes at his mouth with the back of his hand like he can scrub away that long, lingering kiss. It brightens his blushing lips, leaving them swollen. God, how I want to kiss him again.

"What the fuck, man?" he says. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

As though he didn't participate in that. As though he didn't kiss me back. As though this game we've been playing since high school hasn't always gone both ways.

When I don't respond, Cameron shakes his head at himself. "Not you. No way. Anyone but you."

The sting of his words is still stabbing through my chest when he turns for his driver-side door.

"I'll be here all week," I call after him as he slides into his car and slams the door shut.

Because the one constant in me and Cameron's lives has always been me opening my big, stupid mouth when I should keep it shut.

He responds by starting the engine and narrowly missing me when he pulls out of the parking lot. I watch him go, touching the spot on my lips where the memory of his kiss lingers.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:10 pm

Chapter Seven

Cameron

I DRIVE TO AUNT Mary's place after finishing up work at the café. I wasn't lying to Erin and the others about that, even if I did maybe lie about how early I had to start my shift today. That's hardly the worst sin I committed last night, however.

Why the hell did I let Julian kiss me like that?

I spent my entire drive home trying to scrub it off my lips, then brushed my teeth twice before going to bed. It didn't work. The memory of his mouth warmed my lips as I fell asleep. My morning coffee didn't wash it away either, nor did an eight-hour shift at the café. My weekly dinner with Mom and Aunt Mary is my last hope.

"Cameron, is that you?" Mom calls from the kitchen.

"Yeah, Mom. Sorry I'm late."

"Help set the table. Everything's ready."

I toe off my shoes and pad through the living room to the kitchen at the back. Mom and Aunt Mary dodge around each other pulling things off the stove and out of the oven. I skirt around the edge of the chaos, collecting plates and cups from the cupboards to set them on the table in the dining room. When I go back for the cutlery, Mom scoots past me carrying a dish. Aunt Mary follows her, and by the time I return with cutlery, a big steaming platter of lasagna sits on the table accompanied by green

beans slathered in salt, pepper and butter.

My stomach grumbles at the sight.

“Hungry, are we?” Aunt Mary says.

She doesn’t look much like me and Mom. We’re both dark-haired and dark-eyed and a little on the taller side, but Aunt Mary is a short woman with a mop of curly brown hair and green eyes. She smiles warmly at me as I take a seat across from her and Mom and immediately start heaping lasagna onto my plate.

“Are you eating enough?” Mom says. “If you need me to drop off groceries...”

“Mom, you aren’t going to buy my groceries for me,” I say. “I’m an adult.”

“That doesn’t mean your mother can’t help you. You’re getting skinny.”

“I’m fine, Mom. It’s just been a long day. I was at the café all day, and I had a show last night.”

Mom and Aunt Mary’s eyes light up at the mention of the show, and I immediately regret bringing it up. Normally, I treasure their support for my attempt at a career in music, but this is one time I’d prefer they forget all about The Ten Hours.

“You had a show last night?” Aunt Mary says around a mouthful of lasagna.

I take a big bite, but only partially because I’m starving. Chewing saves me from having to respond. The last thing I want to do is relive last night ... not that I haven’t been doing that all day.

I swallow, and there’s nowhere left to run. They’re both waiting on me.

“Yeah,” I say. “Downtown.”

“And?” Mom prompts.

“It went pretty well,” I say.

“That’s it?”

“I don’t know what to say. It was just our usual thing. We’ve been playing the same material for two years. It was fine, I guess.”

Mom sighs, but doesn’t actually look upset.

“You downplay your talent too much, Cameron,” Aunt Mary says. “You’re extraordinary with that guitar of yours. You should be proud of it.”

“Thanks,” I mutter, looking down at my dinner instead of up at them.

They’re both so supportive of me. Moving out here and getting Mom set up with Aunt Mary has been great for all three of us. We might not be a super conventional family, but this feels more like family than anything I experienced back in New Jersey. Even before Dad left, he was checked out. Walking out the door only made it official.

So I’d love to tell them all about the show. I’d love to gush about what the band is working on, the festival we applied for, the song I’m attempting to write. But all of that comes tainted with the memory of Julian cornering me in the parking lot. Once again, he’s barged into my life uninvited and smudged what should be a purely happy memory.

I stab at my lasagna with unnecessary force. He messed with me and Mom’s lives

enough in New Jersey. No way in hell am I letting him do that to us again while he's out here for his stupid work conference. Why? Why did he have to go and kiss me like that? I was about to shove him away and he just lunged . I froze up, unsure what to do.

At least, that's what I've been telling myself.

Even as I repeat the script in my head, warmth drips into my belly, a heat that has no place seeping into me alongside the name "Julian Brooks." He stayed against my mouth way too long. I should have pushed him away, but I was too shocked to respond at first.

I mean, I guess my mouth responded. A little. Kind of. But that's an involuntary reaction, an instinct. What was I going to do? Bite him? No way. He'd probably like that way too much and get all weird about it. In fact, he should be thanking me for not shoving him away immediately. I had every right to kick him in the balls in that parking lot, but I didn't.

Because part of me didn't want to.

I almost choke on my lasagna. Mom and Aunt Mary are talking about the new sauce they used in the dish, but I haven't heard a word of their conversation since my thoughts started spiraling out. I shouldn't be thinking about Julian at all, let alone about that kiss. The idea that I didn't push him away because I liked it is enough to make my stomach churn.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, and I take the excuse to check out for a moment. It's probably Henry or Sebastian at the café asking me to cover a shift for them. Normally, I'd dread that, but I could use the distraction. Hopefully they'll need me for a nice, long, busy shift tomorrow.

I dig my phone out and check it surreptitiously under the table, but the name on the screen isn't either of my co-workers. It's Julian.

My dinner sits like a stone in my stomach. Of course he still has my number. Why wouldn't he? I should have blocked his ages ago, but after Mom and I moved out here, I kind of forgot about it. We haven't been in touch in years, so it didn't cross my mind to bother blocking him. It's far from my first mistake when it comes to Julian.

Hey , the text says, about yesterday, I want to apologize.

I scoff at the screen, drawing Mom and Aunt Mary's attention.

"Everything okay?" Mom says.

"Yeah, sorry, work stuff," I say.

I'm not sure why I lie to her. Normally I wouldn't, but admitting to her of all people that I'm getting texts from Julian is something I simply can't bring myself to do. How could I admit to her that I'm talking to a guy connected to one of the worst times of her life? It wasn't Julian's fault that Dad left, but he sure as hell didn't make that time period any easier on me and Mom.

Don't care , I text back.

The response comes quickly. You don't, but I do. Seriously, Cam, I want to apologize. I shouldn't have gone for it like that.

I stare at my phone screen. Is Julian being sincere? Is this actually happening? I can't handle this. I don't want to handle this. There are too many conflicting feelings caught up in this, too much history. Julian was an annoyance when we were in high

school; he was an ass when we were in college and our moms were dating and he wouldn't stop harping on me about it. I don't know what to do with this new adult version of him who kisses me without warning but issues a credible apology for it.

Okay, fine , I say. Apology accepted. Leave me alone.

I shoot off the text and stuff my phone back in my pocket. The quickest way to be rid of Julian is to give him what he wants. I do my best to tune back into the sauce conversation, but all I have to offer is my bland agreement that it's good.

"Come on, Cameron," Aunt Mary says. "Good? That's all you've got?"

I shrug with my mouth full. I don't know how to describe sauce other than "good" or "not good." It's not like it's all that important. It tastes decent enough, and I honestly can't tell the difference between this and whatever she used last week.

"The boy has never been a foodie," Mom says. "I used to have to give him plain toast. Nothing on it. Literally just toasted bread. He wouldn't accept anything else for breakfast for an entire year when he was about five."

Aunt Mary is laughing, and I'm trying not to flush with embarrassment.

"I was a kid," I complain.

"I know," Mom says fondly. "You were my baby boy. You still are."

I am. No matter how old I get, a piece of me will always be her baby boy. That's why having Julian appear is messing with me so bad. I don't want anything or anyone who could hurt her to get within a twenty mile radius of my mom. She's always taken care of me. The least I can do is not make out with the guy connected to such a hard time in our lives.

As though on cue, my phone vibrates in my pocket. I pull it out, prepared to tell Julian to screw off, but the message I get isn't some snide remark like I'd expect.

I want to take you out to dinner , he writes.

I must have missed the message because several more follow.

Please, Cam.

Just this once.

Let me be a decent guy to you one time.

Then I'll leave Seattle and it won't even matter anymore.

I'll never bother you again.

Even in text form, desperation undercuts the messages. I can hear his voice in my ears, pleading with me to give him this one opportunity to prove he's not everything I assume he is, he's not that guy who made my life hell when our moms were dating. He isn't here to hurt me — or her.

I struggle to reconcile the man texting me with the person I knew back in New Jersey. My lips hum with the memory of that kiss, a kiss I didn't pull away from the way I should have. Is there any possibility that Julian Brooks isn't exactly the man he's always been? Is there any chance he's changed?

I shouldn't want to find out, but when I start tapping at my phone, I don't tell him to jump off a bridge like I should.

Fine , I write. Friday night. That's the only time I'm free.

It's a lie, but setting guardrails around this gives me something sturdy to cling to while my heart races around my chest like it's on fire. Julian responds instantly with the name of a really nice place downtown, a place I could never afford.

If he insists on inserting himself back into my life, at least I'll get a free meal out of it.

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Chapter Eight

Julian

“WINE, SIR?”

I jerk my head up too quickly. I didn’t hear the server approach, too busy anxiously scrolling through my phone hoping for a message from Cameron. It takes me a moment to parse the woman’s words.

“Yes, actually, whatever your best is,” I say. “Bring the whole bottle.”

“Right away, sir,” she says before retreating.

I sit at the nicest table in the nicest restaurant I could find in downtown Seattle. Conversation occurs at a sedate murmur. Chandeliers cast a warm, pale glow through a large dining room decorated in shades of white. The servers wear impeccable black head to toe.

I’m only a block from my hotel, but I arrived here a full half an hour early, my frayed nerves turning my room into a prison that I paced like a captive tiger. Part of me believes I’ll sit here and drink this overpriced bottle of wine alone, the same part of me that keeps re-reading the message Cameron sent in which he agreed to this meeting. Surely, that wasn’t real. Surely, I made that up. Surely, he isn’t actually going to show up. The guy hates me. He’s hated me for a long time. The attraction and fun only goes one direction here.

But that kiss...

The memory of him kissing me back in that parking lot the other night wars with the empty seat across from me in this restaurant. I never did understand Cameron. Was his anger real? But then what is that crackle that's always existed between us? It can't just be me who feels the shift in energy whenever we're around each other. For as much as Cameron holds himself back, that kiss was real. I know what I felt. That wasn't a guy running away from me. Quite the opposite.

A flicker of black passes the windows outside. My gaze snaps in that direction. Cameron didn't say a word, didn't look at me, but my eyes flew to him regardless. I watch him walk along the side of the building, check his phone, then enter the restaurant at last. He approaches the host cautiously, scanning the dining room as he does.

I shouldn't, but I rise regardless, striding over to the host before Cameron can run away. I'm in the suit I wore for the conference today, my blond hair swept back, my face freshly shaved, but Cameron sports a bit of five o'clock shadow as he shifts awkwardly in his black jeans and T-shirt.

"There you are," I say, flashing the smile that has won me more than a few new contacts and fun adventures during these stupid conferences.

It doesn't work as well on Cameron.

"You didn't tell me I had to dress up," he grumbles.

"You don't. Relax. You look great. Come on."

I'm not sure if he believes me, but I do mean it. He's like some classic Seattle grunge musician, complete with the perpetual scowl on his pouty lips. He suits the gray skies

outside, though I'll admit he stands out a little in this glittering, aggressively cream-colored restaurant.

He sits across from me at our table, eyes still darting around like he expects the staff to kick him out any moment. When the server approaches, he flinches, but she simply pours us each a glass of rich red wine from a decanter.

"You ordered wine," he says.

"Yes, do you like it?"

"I don't know. I don't drink stuff like this."

"Well, try it," I say, waving at his glass. "I'm told it's their best."

I sip from my own glass. The wine is thick but not overwhelming, with a pleasantly sweet aftertaste that lingers on my tongue after I swallow.

"This is ... actually okay," Cameron says.

"I'm so glad their best wine ranks as 'okay' in your estimation," I say.

Cameron rolls his dark eyes at me, but that moment dispels some of the tension. We're back to being us, back to teasing and poking. Sure, there's been times when it turned heated, especially when our moms were dating, but the banter always felt more playful than sincere. To me at least. Is the same true for him?

The server returns and refills our glasses. When she asks for our orders, I step in, swiftly ordering for both of us while Cameron fumbles with the menu.

"Is that really okay?" Cameron says when the server leaves.

“What? Ordering? It is what one does at a restaurant, you know.”

“I mean you ordering all that stuff,” Cameron says. “I don’t even know how much it costs.”

“Don’t worry about what it costs. It’s all going on the company card.”

I try a smile, but Cameron’s scowl deepens. Of course. I should have known. A play like that works great on other sales reps, but Cameron isn’t like those people. He isn’t here to dance with me. He doesn’t care how much money my bosses let me throw around. I attempted to do something nice, but in my arrogance all I really did was annoy him even more.

This night is going great.

I shift tactics.

“Anyway,” I say, “what have you been up to since leaving New Jersey?”

Cameron shrugs. “Living.”

“Come on. We haven’t spoken in years. When was the last time we talked — graduation? You definitely weren’t in a band the last time I saw you. You’re incredible, by the way.”

Cameron’s mouth pulls taut for a moment, but I don’t get the sense that it’s anger. It’s more likely he’s fighting off a smile. How dare I of all people pay him a simple compliment? God, this man is infuriating, yet my eyes don’t leave his lips as he tip toes through a response.

“Okay, fine, sure, I joined a band. I was studying music in college. It’s not that much

of a surprise, is it?"

"I guess not, but I thought you might become a teacher or something."

"I don't have the temperament for teaching," he grumbles.

And it's just so him that I can't stop the laugh that bursts out of my mouth. His scowl deepens, but before he can yell at me, two perfectly cooked Pacific halibuts arrive at our table. His anger widens to surprise as he gapes at the meal.

"I'm told Seattle has some of the best seafood in the country," I say. "It's not quite the right season for halibut, but I'm willing to make that sacrifice. Do you like it?"

Cameron shakes his head at his dinner. "I don't think I've ever had anything like this. It's expensive."

"Company card," I remind him, though the truth is that I could treat him to this meal myself even without the company card.

"They let you buy fancy meals for your enemies with company funds?"

"Cam, I'm injured. You aren't an enemy. You're my long lost almost-brother."

He screws up his face like he wants to yell at me, then glances around the restaurant and apparently thinks better of it.

"Not your brother," he says, spearing his fork into his fish.

I hide my smirk by cutting into my own meal. The halibut melts the moment it's in my mouth. The seasoning is delicate and light, allowing the freshness of the fish to shine through. And the wine serves as a perfect complement, adding a dash of

sweetness as I sip every few bites. Within moments, even Cameron's constant complaints have fallen away in the face of this exquisite meal.

"I wish I could take Mom here," Cameron says, almost to himself. "She loves fish."

I take my opening. "How is she doing these days? I obviously haven't seen her at all since college."

Our moms broke up shortly before graduation, but everyone attended the ceremony, so I had an opportunity to see her there. Cameron looked ready to leap through the aisles and murder me back then, and it seems the mention of his mother has rekindled that desire. He glares up at me, his cutlery frozen.

"She's fine," he says curtly.

"Do you two still live together?"

"No."

"Nearby?"

"Yes."

"How is she? Doing well and everything?"

"Yes."

I'm clearly not going to get more than a single syllable at a time, so I let the matter drop. I know Cameron is protective of his mother, but this is above and beyond, even for him. I'd face less resistance questioning the Secret Service about the president. Does it still bother him that our mothers dated for a few years? They were in a serious

relationship, but it seemed to end amicably enough. What more does he want?

“What about your band?” I say, attempting to change the subject. “How’d you meet them? When’s your next show?”

He heaves a sigh. “They had a guitarist, but he flaked on them. They were desperate when they put up the ad. I auditioned and the vibe was right so they brought me on.”

“I’d guess it was more than a vibe,” I say. “You’re really incredible. I mean it. That bar the other night went silent when you started playing. I don’t know if they even breathed until you were done.”

Cameron’s throat bobs. He casts his eyes down, pushing a bit of fish around his plate, and my heart clenches at this accidentally charming display. I can turn on the charisma as needed for my job, but with Cameron, it’s all natural. He couldn’t fake it even if he wanted to, and I’m sure he doesn’t want to when the person across from him is me.

My chest is so tight I could be back in that bar struggling to breathe as his fingers fly along the neck of his guitar. I need a moment to gather myself before I can speak again.

“You guys are going to be famous some day.”

He shakes his head. “We can barely get a gig at a festival. It’s just for fun.”

“You say that, but people notice talent like that,” I say. “Some day, the right person will be in the crowd, and then you’ll be destined for the big time.”

Cameron scoffs, but he doesn’t actually argue with me. He’s studying his plate, his dark eyelashes hiding his eyes from me. I want to peer closer at him. I want to brush

his hair off his forehead for a better look. But I've already made enough missteps tonight.

The server returns and collects our plates. I send her away with the company credit card, but the realization that this night is coming to an end settles heavy as lead in my chest. I still know so little about Cameron's life out here. He's barely allowed me to scratch the surface, and my stomach is rumbling from the crumbs he offered me tonight.

The server comes back way too quickly. I sign the check. Cameron and I sit awkwardly at the table, the obvious end of the meal weighing on us. This should be the moment when I make some kind of offer or swing in with a smooth line, and normally that would be no problem at all for me, but tonight my tongue glues itself to my mouth. Cameron stands, and I jerk up like I might have to chase after him. He seems ready to leave, but loiters at the table. Maybe he's being polite, but when his eyes meet mine, a wild hope swirls in my chest.

"My hotel room is right down the block," I say. "If you wanted a nightcap."

My mouth is numb. My legs are numb. My heart stops beating as I wait for his response.

At first, Cameron stands there looking at me, his dark eyes as inscrutable as ever. This night was miracle enough already; I'm greedy to ask for more.

But then he nods.

I don't know if he doesn't want to hear himself say yes or if he can't bring himself to speak, but either way, when I head out of the restaurant, Cameron follows me — to my hotel.

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Chapter Nine

Cameron

I MUST BE SOME sort of idiot to find this dinner charming. The wine was incredible. The fish was perfect. Even the conversation was good. I mean, it was okay, but at times it was sort of good. Julian threw his money around, or his company's money, I guess, but he was a little less annoying than I expected. Only a little.

None of that explains why I'm following him to his hotel.

He walks half a step ahead of me, his shoulders broad in his tailored suit. Everything about him is calculated and clean, from his tidy hair to the way his belt matches his shoes. He's always been this way, even before it was his job. The Julian I grew up hating always knew what to say, when to smile, how to bullshit his way out of any situation. That slickness stuck to my skin like oil, a film I couldn't wash off.

Tonight was ... different. He was different. I almost cracked and actually answered his questions about me and Mom, but that's not information I'm willing to put in his hands. Even if this is a new and improved Julian Brooks, I'm not ready to trust him. That guy who badgered me relentlessly when our moms were dating is still in there somewhere.

Which Julian is leading me toward this nice hotel downtown? He holds the door for me when we reach the entrance, his hand grazing my back for a moment to steer me toward the elevator bank. That fleeting touch sizzles through me, as powerful as that

kiss outside the bar the other night. Maybe this is how he acts when he wants something. Maybe this is that charisma that's gotten him so far in his career. Anyone could step into this elevator with him, and he'd turn the very same smile on them.

We stand at opposite sides of the elevator as it shudders upward. Julian holds the bar behind him, leaning back, open and easy, his suit jacket unbuttoned. He loosens his tie and unbuttons his shirt, and my traitorous eyes go right to that chaste little V of skin below his neck.

He must catch me at it. When the elevator stops, he's wearing an irritating smirk as he pushes away from the wall and leads me out of the elevator and down the hall.

Our footsteps thud through the hall, amplified by the thumping of my heart. My opportunities to run from this are shrinking, especially when Julian stops before a door and pulls out a key card. He glances back at me, uncertainty dancing in his blue eyes. Is he as weirded out by this as I am? That kiss was one thing, but this ... this would be...

"Are you going to open it or not?" I say.

It's like the words come from someone else, someone who isn't terrified of this before it's even started. Julian startles back into motion, finally opening his door.

I'm on him before it shuts.

Fuck it. If this is going to happen, then let's cut the bullshit and do it. I don't know what this temporary madness is, but it has me throwing Julian against the wall before the door has even shut. Maybe it's because this is temporary. He's leaving. In less than a week, he'll be three thousand miles away. For now, letting years and years of pent up frustration boil over feels too damn good to deny.

He hits the wall with a grunt that turns into a sigh when I seal my lips against the side of his neck. I kiss my way down to the place where he loosened his tie, that V of skin that taunted me in the elevator. His hands roam as I kiss and suck. He groans when I nip at him, his hips lurching at me.

“Fuck, Cam,” he moans.

I pull away, leaving a red mark behind. We’re close enough in height that the moment I lean back, we’re basically eye to eye, which makes it trivial for me to take him by the jaw and force him to look at me.

“For once in your God damn life, Julian, shut the fuck up.”

I smash my mouth against his before he can reply. He moans and whimpers and whines into my mouth. It’s far from silence, but at least he can’t talk anymore this way. He’s just lips and tongue now. That warmth trickling down my throat could be because of anyone; it doesn’t need to be him I’m kissing. Those hands roaming down to squeeze my ass and pull me against him could be anyone’s hands. The hard cock trapped against my hip doesn’t need to be his; it could be any cock.

I keep my eyes closed, keep kissing him, keep urging myself on with these tiny, comforting lies. Anonymous hands slip around my waist to work my jeans loose. I follow their lead, undoing a belt and then the trousers beneath.

Our mouths fumble, sliding apart as our focus dives lower. The hand on my cock is strong and sure, no hesitation, no stumbling or dallying. I try to mirror it, fishing a cock out of trouser pants and stroking hard. A voice rasps in rapture above me, but these dry, urgent hands will begin to burn if we barrel on this way. The alternative is addressing the man I’m touching, acknowledging him, looking him in the eye, giving him a name.

Hell no. I've come too far to get derailed by something like that. The threat of personalizing this repels me like a cold wind buffeting me. Instead, I grab the hand stroking my cock and yank it up to my mouth, shoving the fingers inside to lick and suck on them.

"God, that's fucking hot."

His voice cuts through the veil of self-deception cloaking this whole experience. I can't afford to let that happen. This has already gone too far for regrets.

I release his cock and shove my fingers in his mouth. He doesn't object, moaning around the intrusion, dutifully sucking on anything I give him.

I should have learned to shut him up this way ages ago.

I pull my fingers free, but hold my hand up in front of him. He takes the hint, licking my palm, laving his tongue all over my hand. I do the same to his hand, indulging well beyond practicality.

The next time I grab his cock, my hand is slick with spit. It's not the greatest lubricant in the world, but it barely matters. All that licking did more than make my hand wet. He's desperately hard in my grasp, and I'm doing no better when he reaches down for me. Heat and tension build up like a cresting wave as we stroke, Julian groaning out pathetic little noises when I thumb over his head or squeeze him for a beat.

He seems liable to speak more, so I kiss him before he can. At least, that's what I tell myself. I don't know what Julian sounds like in a moment like this. I've never seen him like this; I was never supposed to see him like this. He could be the type who starts babbling, he certainly has the personality for it, but that's not a risk I can take. I'm way too worked up to have this idiot go and ruin it by saying something stupid

the way he always does.

Just keep not thinking about it. Just keep focusing on the moment.

He moans against my mouth, reciprocating the kiss as our hands keep working. His free hand slides up into my hair, fingers tangling between the dark strands and pulling until a pleasant tingle shivers down the back of my neck. I press my hips at his diligent hand, working myself in his grasp while his tongue invades my mouth. My free hand clings to his suit jacket, crushing the expensive fabric in my increasingly desperate fingers.

He thumbs over me. His hand twists as he rides down my shaft. His tongue forces my mouth open, and a moan surprises me as it crawls out of my throat.

I snarl, searching for control. I find it in the plushness of his bottom lip, which I seize between my teeth. I tug until he groans, then let go only to press our lips immediately back together. I'm focusing on my mouth almost as much as my cock, which should not be the case when I'm on the verge of exploding, but just like with that kiss in the parking lot, there's something about Julian's mouth that commands my full attention.

No. Not Julian's mouth. Just a mouth. Any mouth. Any mouth that may so happen to be extraordinarily good at kissing.

I squeeze my eyes more tightly shut, banishing all thought from my brain. This isn't about thought. It's raw physicality, raw sensation, two bodies crashing toward each other with animalistic need. We are satisfying a physical condition, nothing more. There's no need to worry about little details like who is satisfying that physical condition.

I stroke harder and faster, heedless of the burn. If it hurts him, he doesn't show it. He simply follows my lead, lips sloppy as he tries to keep up with me. This frantic

mistake is coming to an end, and my mind is blissfully blank at last. There's no space to worry about consequences or regrets as my body barrels toward what it so imminently needs. Whatever this is, it definitely isn't something as pretty as fate. What our hands and mouths are doing to each other is far too raw and ugly for such delicate sentimentality.

Sure enough, the end arrives in a messy, crashing clamor. I groan as I spill over his hand. Julian moans higher and higher, short bursts of desire eventually punctuated by a shout. He tries to throw his head back and hits the wall with a thud I'm sure his neighbors can hear. Hot cum spurts over my fist. I catch as much of it as I can, mostly so it doesn't get on my clothes. He can probably get a new suit on the company card, but I enjoy no such luxury on my barista and musician salary.

Fuck, I'm thinking about it again, even as the release shatters my body and leaves me leaning shakily against him, his mess in and all over my hand. I keep my eyes shut and lean forward to press my forehead against the wall. His mouth is beside my ear, his panting tickling my neck.

"Cam," he whispers.

My name breaks the spell. I lurch away, ignoring the cold that hits me as soon as I stumble away from him in search of the bathroom. It's directly to my back, and I escape into it to busy myself with washing my hand and fixing my pants. I catch a quick glimpse of myself in the mirror. I'm a disheveled mess, my lips bright, my hair askew, my eyes wild with lust.

Julian slides up carefully beside me, silently cleaning off his hand. He ditched the suit jacket, but the rest is still there, the expensive slacks, the loose tie, all those markers of the differences between our worlds.

He follows me in a rush when I leave the bathroom, but I kick off my shoes and

collapse onto the edge of his bed. Julian watches me, wary, as I pull off my shirt and throw it on the floor.

“I’m not driving right now,” I say, looking at the floor instead of at him. “Don’t even think about touching me while I’m asleep.”

He puts up his hands. “Far be it from me.”

It’s good enough. I don’t want to think about this night anymore. I don’t want to think about why my legs are so shaky I don’t trust myself to get all the way home. I’ll sleep it off for a couple hours then get the hell out of here and try my hardest to never think about Julian Brooks again.

Chapter Ten

Julian

I WAKE WITH A START. The previous night hangs around me like fog bound to dissipate the moment the sunlight strikes it. But when I sit up in bed in my hotel room, someone groans beside me.

I sit frozen, my chest bare, the sheets covering the lower half of my body. A lump disturbs the blankets beside me, a Cameron-sized lump crowned by his messy, dark hair sprawled across a pillow.

He's still here. Last night wasn't a dream. It actually happened.

My body stirs as the memory hits me. It isn't fog. The more alert I become, the more clearly it returns to me. Cameron throwing me against the wall with surprising aggression, his mouth on mine, his hand grabbing my cock, my fingers in his mouth, his teeth seizing my lip. I was still in a daze when he announced he was going to sleep here in my bed. I stripped out of my suit, leaving it in a heap on the floor, then crawled into bed next to him, careful not to touch him even accidentally.

And here he is. Somehow. Miraculously. The guy I've chased since high school is in my bed, and I have no idea how or why things changed. Is it the distance? The time? I wish I knew what I did during that dinner to make him say yes because I already want to repeat it.

Cameron groans and rolls onto his back, rubbing at his eyes. His blinks, his gaze

unfocused. Warmth lingers in his cheeks. His hair juts out in all directions. For a heartbeat, he's soft and unguarded and completely relaxed as he lies beside me.

His gaze sharpens. He sits up, unfortunately combing his fingers through his hair to tame it.

"Why are you staring at me?" he grumbles.

It's stupid, but I say the first thing that comes to mind, and it's the truth. "You look cute in the morning."

One dark eyebrow rises, and I brace for anger. It seems I can't do anything but screw up in his eyes. But then his mouth twists and he looks down, and I realize that against all odds, Cameron is trying not to smile. My heart lurches like he just pushed it off a cliff. If he keeps feeding me these little glimpses this is going to be so much worse than an ill-advised hookup. How am I supposed to walk away and forget about early-morning Cameron holding back a smile because I called him cute? I thought I liked messing with him. I thought I could survive off of sips of banter. But last night and this morning has me questioning everything I thought I felt about Cameron.

Oh no.

Now I'm the one looking away and trying to collect myself. I steady myself as much as I can, but when I turn back to Cameron, he's watching me with something strange in his face. I'd expected him to bolt the moment he woke up. I'd expected to wake up and find the bed empty, in all honesty. It would not have come as a shock if he'd crept away in the middle of the night. But what I find beside me is a dark, steady gaze and slightly parted lips.

I can't resist. I lean toward him, not caring what our breath might be like first thing in the morning. All that matters is pressing my mouth to his, feeling him real and solid

against me. And he is. He greets my lips with his own, and they're as warm and wonderful as I remember. Softened by sleep, they cushion me when I fall against him.

Cameron takes me by the shoulders before I can topple us into the bed.

"I need to drive home," he says. "They'll ticket my car for being parked too long."

Reality crashes back in, but this isn't the rejection I might have expected. It doesn't feel like a rejection at all. I climb out of bed with him and throw on pants while he dresses in what he wore last night. When he heads to the door, I follow, and he pauses before he leaves. This time, it's him initiating the kiss, but I'm not sure if it's a promise of more or a goodbye.

"Stay," I say impulsively. "I'll pay for your parking. Use the hotel's garage. Whatever it costs, I don't care."

He smirks even as he shakes his head. "I need to get home. I have work later, and I assume you do too."

"It's Saturday."

"As though that's going to stop any of you from doing your creepy sales things."

I can't argue with him, so I don't. I'm supposed to go to some kind of lunch thing today. Supposedly it's casual, but we all know that's where deals happen, that's where palms are greased, that's where the real work goes down. If anything, today is even more important than the official conference days.

"Can I see you again?" I try instead.

Cameron's face tenses. His throat bobs as he swallows. "I don't know," he says.

I want to ask why. What's the problem here? Clearly we can have fun together. Was I really so awful to him when we were kids that he won't see me now?

I hold all that back. Whatever bothers him about me, I'll only make it worse by pushing. I'm trying to be a different me for him, a better me. I'm trying to show him that I can be something other than that guy he remembers. It worked last night. Maybe, if I'm patient, it can work again before I leave.

Suddenly, the flight home on Wednesday feels horribly close. A week sounded like a lot when I landed, but now it seems like no time at all. Do I have time to convince Cameron to give me a second chance?

"Can I text you?" I ask. It's my lowest bid, the kind of deal you make when everything else is off the table and you're scrambling for any win at all.

Cameron nods, and even that sends my heart soaring. I let him go with one final kiss, but linger at my door until his footsteps fade away down the hall. Then I turn around, throwing my back against the door and sighing out every emotion I held back during that exchange. I don't know what's happening between us, what this back and forth means. It's not like when we were in high school or college. I'm not messing with him because I'm desperate for his attention. Adulthood has changed something between us, but my roadmap for Cameron has always been "poke until you get a reaction." What do I do with this? Act sweet instead?

I drag myself through a shower, but the hot water doesn't help as much as I wish it would. I can't wear last night's suit for the rest of the trip, but fortunately I brought plenty with me and today is allegedly casual. Even the slacks and button-down I choose are part of the performance, however. This isn't truly casual, and I'm not dressed like it is. It's simply casual enough for plausible deniability.

Normally, this would be where I thrive. These blurry, in between spaces are where I've made my biggest deals, and Garret knows it. It's why he sends me to stuff like this. But today I pace my room like a man waiting for the gallows, restless and anxious. Even when I go downstairs, the unofficial conference doesn't feel like my home turf the way it should. The smiles are strained, the laughter forced, the handshakes awkward. It's all so different from interacting with Cameron. He's never anyone but himself. He couldn't fake a smile with a gun to his head, which makes the ones he shares all the more precious. Like that smile he tried to hide this morning in bed. That was real, I know it was real, because Cameron doesn't fake a single thing about himself.

Someone elbows me. I blink, and find myself sitting around a table in a restaurant. The lunch thing. Of course. I went through my day in such a daze that I don't even really remember getting here. I must have made all the appropriate noises, however, because I'm sitting here with the people I should be eating lunch with and they're all laughing and drinking like they're supposed to.

I have a mimosa before me, and I sip from it to hide how far away my thoughts strayed from this table.

"I was just saying that Julian had some really interesting proposals he shared earlier in the week," a woman, I think her name is Jessica, says.

She smiles at me from across the table, her painted nails clicking against her glass. She's stunning, with chestnut hair that spills in artful curls past her shoulders and onto a chest with just the right amount of cleavage exposed. She would never wear something inappropriate, but she clearly took advantage of the "casual" day to design a look that's every bit as calculated as my smiles and hair and slightly unbuttoned shirt. She's an expert at this dance, as I am, and we both know how much even a single button can count.

Which means she expects me to play along.

I smile. At least I'm still good at that, even with my mind elsewhere. "Well, this is early days yet," I say, "but there are definitely partnership opportunities on the horizon."

I watch the smiles around me shifting, watch the eyes around me gleam with greed. This is what Garret sent me here to do. He wants a partner for the company, a big tech partner who can take our pharmaceuticals and rebrand them. They'll get fresh life in the market, allowing the company to double down on profits.

I should go in for the kill. The others at the table lean toward me. Only Jessica sits back, but the satisfied smile on her red lips tells me everything I need to know. All I have to do is nudge, and I'll get what Garret and the company wants before the conference is even over.

"I know this bar downtown," a guy next to me says. "Have you ever been, Julian?"

"No, this is my first time in the city, actually."

"Fantastic." He slaps me on the shoulder. "I could show you around tonight."

"And miss the outing?" Jessica speaks up. "I thought everyone was going out tonight since we don't need to be up tomorrow. Julian, you can't possibly miss it."

And there it is, an offer within an offer. She lobbed this softball win to me, and she wants something in return. She wants me in return. Maybe she's actually attracted to me; maybe I can do something for her bosses. Either way, the result will be the same, and normally I'd be enjoying that result as soon as this lunch ended, as well as later tonight.

Strangely, today I struggle not to grimace. Everything I should want is dropping into my lap, yet I yearn to tell them all no. No. Get away. Stop smiling at me. Stop expecting things from me. Stop assuming you'll be in my bed tonight. It should feel like a golden opportunity, but instead I could swear I'm being circled by sharks. They all want a piece of me, and I can't swim fast enough to escape.

The truth is, I'm not thinking about any of these people. I'm not thinking about the conference, about deals, about potential tech partnerships.

From the moment I woke up today, I've thought of nothing but Cameron.

Chapter Eleven

Cameron

Six years ago...

“HEY, MOM!”

I resist laying Julian flat out on the floor as he skips into me and Mom’s apartment and greets her with a hug. His mother is only a step behind him. As our mothers embrace, I carefully look away, but that leaves me with a perfect view of the shit-eating grin on Julian’s face.

“Dearest brother, why so glum? It’s family dinner night.”

He slings his arm around my shoulders, but I immediately push him off. This “family dinner” thing was our moms’ idea, which is the only reason I’m not committing violence, but I’m far from sold on this. I don’t need Julian as part of my family. I have a family: My mother. That’s all the family I need. This interloper doesn’t belong in our apartment or our lives. Things are hard enough without him being here.

We gather around the table and do our best to have a normal meal, but how can eating dinner with Julian possibly feel normal?

Mom doesn’t seem to notice that I’m pushing my food around my plate and letting the conversation wash over me. Call it sulking if you must, but I’m not throwing my knife at Julian sitting across from me, so I consider it a feat of self-control.

He's not even doing anything at the moment. His mere presence annoys me, as it has since we were in high school and I became the target of all his "jokes." But I will do this for Mom. I'll do this because she's holding Miss Brooks' hand and smiling and looking happier than I've seen her in years.

Julian leaps up at the end of the meal to clear off the table. He even does the dishes, and Mom shoots me a little smile. She knows I don't exactly get along with him, but I do my best to smile back before retreating to my room. It's the only safe place away from Julian in this apartment, and I don't want to ruin this night for Mom by being pissed off.

Naturally, Julian eventually follows me.

I'm lying on my bed looking at a music book when he struts in, taking in my room like it belongs to him. I sit up, teeth grinding together when I tell him to "get the hell out."

"Relax," he says with a roll of his eyes. "Our moms are busy being cute. They need some space. Where else am I gonna go?"

"Home," I suggest.

He ignores me, flopping onto my bed beside me. His blond hair fans out around him as he lies there looking at the posters I tacked to the ceiling.

"Why there?" he says.

"What?"

"Why'd you put your stuff on the ceiling instead of the walls? Kind of hard to see it this way."

I'm crushing the music book in my hands. I stare at the carpet between my feet instead of looking at him. "So I see it before I fall asleep."

I hear him sit up beside me. "Seriously?"

"Why would I bother lying?"

"Damn," he says. "That's some kind of hardcore genius stuff."

"The hell are you talking about?"

When I glance over, Julian is smiling at me, and it's not as unpleasant as it should be. "Geniuses are always weird about their genius thing, you know? Tesla barely slept. Einstein hated socks. Marie Curie had a radioactive night light."

"None of that is true, is it?"

"Who knows?" Julian shrugs. "But this is your genius thing." He waves at the posters on the ceiling. "Falling asleep thinking about your heroes."

I don't know what to say to all this, so instead I keep quiet and look back down at the floor. Julian shuffles a little closer, close enough for our thighs to meet.

"I'm gonna have a genius brother soon," Julian says.

The knee-jerk "I'm not your brother" response springs to my tongue, but I never get it out. Julian's hand lands on my thigh. He squeezes, and I look up to find his face way too close to mine. Those pretty blue eyes fill my vision, but for once they're not laughing. They're deadly serious.

My lips part around a gasp of surprise. Julian leans in. I have half a heartbeat before

this starts becoming something way, way different than our usual bickering—

And that's when someone knocks on my bedroom door.

I shove Julian so hard he falls off the edge of the bed with a thump. My heart jolts back to life, pounding so hard I can feel it my throat.

“What the fuck?” I snarl at him.

“Cameron?”

My mother stands in the doorway, her face ashen. Julian's mom is only a step behind her, and she takes in the scene — my face flushed with rage, Julian on the floor, the crumpled music book — and her expression hardens.

Just like that, this happy family dinner crumbles between my fingers.

“We should get going,” Miss Brooks says.

Mom looks devastated before she can stop herself. “We haven't had dessert.”

Miss Brooks leans over to kiss her. “Let's save it for next time, okay?”

But there never is a next time. There never is another attempt at bringing both families together. Mom and Miss Brooks see each other less after that, growing more and more distant until the relationship finally ends. I ask Mom once if it's because of what happened that night, if it's because they found their sons about to make out, but Mom always denies it.

I don't buy it. Julian crossed the line that night. Our moms were trying to find some happiness, and of course he had to go and make it about himself. Of course he had to

put all of us in an untenable situation. He took my mother's happiness away that night, squandered it in service of his own selfishness. And I've never forgiven him since.

BUT I HAVE SLEPT with him.

The memory sticks to me like gum on the bottom of my shoe all day. I leave his hotel first thing in the morning and go home to shower and collect myself, but when I get to the café in the afternoon, I'm still thinking about it.

My co-worker Sebastian is at the café when I arrive. We have a small overlap in shifts. He's bouncing around behind the counter, dancing to whatever pop song is playing in the café. He's way too chipper for my liking when my own life is such a conflicted, confusing mess, but he's also a professional dancer, so coming in to find him skipping around the café isn't all that unusual. His long ponytail sways as he sweeps while bopping his hips.

I take my place behind the coffee bar and check on supplies and stuff before the shift begins. Tux is in his usual spot on the stool behind me, purring away at the sight of me. I pet him, and when I turn around, Sebastian is leaning on the counter, his ponytail spilling over his shoulder.

"I think I got everything. You good to take over?" he asks.

"Yeah, I've got it," I say.

He reaches over the counter to ruffle my already messy hair. "Look at you, soaring on your own."

I would complain, but he trained me for this job, so he knows of all my little stumbles while I was learning. I thought Henry might train me since I knew him from college,

but my shifts aligned better with Sebastian's. It worked out fine. With him being a dancer and me being a guitarist, we have music in common, and that point of connection helped me settle in even if our personalities are so disparate.

Sebastian checks his phone. "Shit. I've been here too long. I want to make it home before Luke and get a couple things ready."

He winks at me, and I roll my eyes. His boyfriend Luke would be mortified to have personal details come up at the café. The two of them couldn't be much more different, but apparently it's working because ever since they got together a few months back Sebastian has been relentlessly happy.

I see him off. He leaves the café and nearly skips down the street. He waves as he passes the windows, and I give him a curt wave in return, but it's a bit of a relief to have the café to myself.

At least, it is until the silence hits me.

We change shifts at this time of day because it's usually quiet. There's all of one customer here and the cats are mostly sleeping. So almost the moment Sebastian leaves, I have little to do but replay last night. I scrub the coffee machine and recheck the supplies to try to take my mind off it, but it's difficult when I was in Julian's hotel room kissing him goodbye mere hours ago.

Kissing him goodbye. Jesus, what came over me? Why did I allow a thing like that? He was just so ... nice at dinner. It was normal. If we didn't have the history we have, it would have been a nice date followed by a fun night. But we do have our history, and that knowledge weighs on my mind, muddying what should be a pleasant memory.

I make the mistake of checking my phone. I thought Julian would be busy with his

sales guy stuff today, but I have several texts from him.

Good morning.

Okay, good afternoon, I guess.

I'm having my coffee and wondering if you still put too much creamer in yours.

I was on the way to a lunch meeting and saw a sign for an underground tour. Seattle has an underground? How does that even work?

His one-sided conversation rambled on all morning, apparently, but I was too busy driving and getting ready for work to notice it. I type out a response. Yes, I still put creamer in my coffee, but it's a normal amount. Yes, Seattle has an underground. No, I don't know anything more about it.

Part of me wonders why I'm responding at all, why I keep giving in to this pull. In New Jersey, I pushed him away easily. It wasn't even a thought outside of that one weird moment in my bedroom. I told Mom that, too. After that incident, I tried explaining to her that it was all Julian. I didn't start that shit. I wasn't into him at all.

I suppose I can't go on claiming I'm not into him. I pounced on him eagerly enough last night. Surely, it was only physical, though. He's a good-looking guy; anyone could see that. Since he's headed home in a few days, it shouldn't matter how I do or don't feel about him. He's hot. We hooked up. The end.

Except I don't typically spend the whole next day texting with a hookup, and Julian's messages are still pouring in. The moment I replied, he apparently started typing. I'm getting a slew of updates on how his day is going. It's as overwhelming as talking to the guy in person, yet here I am standing at the coffee bar diligently reading every message, and even sending back a few of my own.

“Well, look at that. You’re smiling.”

I startle at the voice, nearly dropping my phone, but it’s just my final co-worker, River. He has a yoga mat tucked under his arm. His dyed blue hair sits in a tight bun at the back of his head. He’s not shirtless yet, but if I’ve come to learn anything while working here, it’s that River never stays fully clothed for long. I suspect it’s part of the appeal of his yoga classes. The cats that climb all over his students are fun, but River being topless is an even bigger draw for many of his clients.

“I’m not smiling,” I say. “Do you have a class today?”

“Yup, starts in about half an hour. Thought I’d arrive early and get into my flow.”

“Cool.”

I wait for him to leave, but he lingers at the coffee bar, his slate gray eyes narrowing. There’s something unsettling about those eyes. They’re so pale that they’re downright eerie in certain lighting, and right now they’re boring directly through me.

“Your aura is different today,” River says. He cocks his head to the side. “There’s more yellow than I usually see in you.”

“My aura is fine,” I say.

This is far from the first time River has diagnosed my aura. Usually he proclaims me “black with orange undertones.” I suppose that’s a bad thing, but I wouldn’t know. He’s never declared me “yellow” before.

River shakes his head at me. “Something happened. You’re never yellow, but today it’s like the sun trying to break through stormclouds. Some day you’re going to let it out, man, and everyone will see how creative and kind you are under that cloud you

hide yourself behind.”

I’m not going to get out of this by arguing with him about the validity of aura colors, so I hold back a grimace and shrug at him instead.

“I’ll keep it in mind,” I offer.

“I hope you do,” River says. “Namaste.”

With that, he finally wanders off to set up for his class. I would breathe a sigh of relief, but for some reason River’s prognosis sticks with me today. What if he’s right? Not literally, of course, but what if he’s sensing what I’ve been worrying about? What if something has changed with me? What if giving Julian a chance even temporarily is a sign of some deeper malady?

I shouldn’t have slept with him, but if I was going to do it, I at least should have put some distance between us afterward. Staying the night and texting with him today is too ... too familiar. And sure, Julian is familiar, I’ve known him for half my life, but everything was simpler when I kept him at arm’s length. Now I know how his lips taste, how softly his sighs of pleasure can brush against my neck, what his cock feels like in my hand. That’s information I never should have learned.

A pang of guilt nearly doubles me over. I lean against the coffee bar and ignore my buzzing phone while I attempt to catch my breath.

Last night felt good. Really good. This morning felt good. But as my everyday life intrudes on those moments of temporary madness, I can’t help wondering how colossal a mistake I’ve made. Julian messed with my life enough when I lived in New Jersey. I should never have given him a chance to do it again three thousand miles and five years away.

Chapter Twelve

Julian

IT HAS BEEN TWO full days since I've seen Cameron. Not that I'm counting. Monday arrives with the bleak news that I'm going to be stuck in the convention center listening to lectures all day instead of somehow luring Cameron back to my hotel. We've been texting all weekend, which is a minor miracle in my book, but I've tip toed around asking to see him again. Though, at this point, what do I really have to lose? I fly out on Wednesday afternoon. I have two nights left.

An elbow to my side jolts me from my thoughts. Jessica, the tech company rep and my current best lead, leans close, her cherry red lips nearly against my ear when she says, "We're all going out for drinks after this. Join us?"

She's holding out her phone. I glance down, catch the name and address of some sports bar kind of restaurant a couple blocks away. Crazy, I want to say no. I riffle through my brain for an excuse, but this is literally what I flew three thousand miles for. I'm supposed to smile and go out for drinks and flirt and secure some sort of handshake agreement that makes my bosses a bunch of money and boosts the company's stock price half a percentage point.

I nod, using the ongoing lecture as an excuse not to speak my answer aloud. Jessica seems placated. She leans away so we can pretend to listen to a speaker talking about ethics in contract negotiations — as though anyone here gives a shit about ethics. They stuck a bunch of beautiful people in suits so we could flirt our way into multi-million dollar contracts; ethics has nothing to do with it.

Normally, it'd be a weird sort of thrill for me. I know the steps to this dance better than anyone. But today I look down at my phone, hoping against hope I'll have a text from Cameron.

I don't, and for the rest of the lecture I have no choice but to pretend to listen. A couple times, Jessica bumps her shoulder against mine and smirks at something the speaker says that could be construed to be vaguely suggestive. I slap on the smile she expects and wonder why the hell I'm not trying to sleep with the gorgeous and eager woman beside me, but the answer is obvious.

I shake off the thought. Things will go back to normal when I return to the East Coast. I mean, they have to go back to normal, right? I can't pine after Cameron from so far away. We have to return to our silent stalemate and forget about each other.

That might be simple for him, but I'm beginning to fear it won't be quite so easy for me.

The lecture ends, and I have no choice but to follow Jessica out of the convention center. We chat as we follow the flow of foot traffic tangling on Seattle's downtown streets. Cars bump along in traffic. Buskers play music on street corners, instrument cases open before them. I throw in a couple bucks as we pass a man playing a violin, but the way his hands move along the neck remind me instantly of Cameron with his guitar.

I shiver and keep following Jessica. Noise spills from the open doors of the sports bar she leads me to. A table of people in suits like mine wave at us when we enter. They already have drinks in front of them as they cluster around a chest high round table and shout over the music blasting through the place. Baseball plays on the televisions while arcade games clamor in the back of the establishment.

I want to run instantly.

What is happening to me? This isn't me. I'm the guy who sets up these gatherings. I'm the guy who thrives in social settings. I'm the guy who makes everyone in the room fall in love with him with little more than a wink. Yet here I am fading into the background, losing the thread of the conversation, wilting against the edge of the table like a flower without water.

I escape to the bar with the excuse of needing a drink. I suppose it's not really an excuse when I genuinely need some sort of liquor to boost me through this experience. Jessica, the only other person without a beverage, follows me. She stands so close our shoulders touch as we flag down the bartender and order wacky slushy concoctions.

"I haven't had a boozy slushy since college," she says.

"Me neither, but it sounds fun," I say.

She smiles over at me, and some part of my brain manages to register that she truly is stunning and that I'd be a lucky bastard punching way above my weight if I made good on the proposition glinting in her eyes. This isn't even about work. We're simply two attractive people almost guaranteed to have a good time if I could only get out of my own damn way. But when our drinks arrive and we clink them together in a toast, I quickly go for the straw so I don't have to say anything to her. It isn't anything she's done. I'm just a wreck tonight.

We rejoin our comrades at the table. They promptly make fun of my drink.

"I'm not choking down that crap you drink so you can judge me sufficiently masculine," I shoot back.

"Yeah, yeah," a guy named Dom says, "but a slushy? Come on, man."

“Slushies taste good,” I say, sipping shamelessly from my straw.

I suck down the sugar a little too fast, giving myself a brain freeze that amuses the entire table. The booze hits my brain next, soothing my turbulent thoughts. As the focus of the conversation shifts away from me, I sneak a look at my phone. Still no messages, so I scroll through the ones from over the weekend. A lot of dumb banter. A lot of casual flirting. The kind of stuff I should be doing with the sales reps around me; the kind of stuff I should be doing with Jessica. I scroll up high enough to find a message from Saturday afternoon about the Seattle Underground. Cameron didn’t know anything about it, and I let the matter drop, but now the thought sticks in my head. I do a quick search on my phone, but the website could have come straight out of the nineties, and it doesn’t tell me all that much.

“Got a work thing or something?”

Jessica’s voice interrupts my scrolling. I jerk my head up to find everyone else watching me as well. A couple of them look confused. They know me from other conferences and expect a very different Julian than the one they’re getting today.

I stuff my phone into my pocket. “No, it’s nothing,” I say.

Thankfully, the conversation turns away from me. I get myself a second slushy, and when I return to the table, everyone’s talking about the ethics lecture from today and laughing openly at the very notion of giving a shit.

“I get that they have to say that stuff, but do they have to force us all to listen to it?” Dom says.

Everyone laughs in agreement.

“Would have been more interesting if that one chick was leading the panel. The

redhead?”

“Marcie? Marie? What was her name?”

“Mikela, I think.”

“Yeah, that one. She could read me the phone book.”

“That chick Betty was even better. You see her?”

“You’re crazy, man. No shot.”

“Excuse me, can we be equal opportunity here at least?” Jessica cuts in. She’s not the only woman at the table, but she’s definitely the boldest. “Eric wears the tightest pants I’ve ever seen a man try to get away with, and he does get away with it, thank God.”

Dom smirks. “See, this is why I always say women are just as nasty as guys. Sick minds, all of you. You’re just good at hiding it.”

Jessica flips her hair over her shoulder. “It’s called poise. Sorry you neanderthals never figured it out.”

Dom gives a mocking little bow. “I defer to the master. Maybe some day I’ll learn from your example. But what about you, man? Our resident bisexual needs to weigh in and settle this for us.”

All eyes turn to me. I make no secret of my sexuality. In fact, I usually flaunt it at these kinds of conferences. It can often play to my advantage. What’s better than flirting with some people? Flirting with everyone and having them all believe it’s sincere. Naturally, it doesn’t always work. There’s always a few men you have to be

careful around in these situations. But I've learned how to dance between those lines and give everyone what they want, especially myself.

"I was ... kind of zoned out, to be honest," I reply.

Dom wags his eyebrows. "Good weekend? You seem zonked today."

I accept the easy out. "Yeah, you could say that."

Knowing smirks and looks pass around the table. A few eyes even go to Jessica beside me, but I stay as neutral as possible.

I can see them wanting to dig deeper, wanting to press me for juicy details and gossip they can trade around for other gossip, but I'm not in the mood. Normally, I spin them some sort of story consisting of just enough truth to be unassailable, but today I want to steer them as far from the subject as I can.

An idea strikes me.

"Hey, have any of you heard of the Seattle Underground?"

Confusion flickers through every face. The conversation dies for a beat, until Pete, a guy who's actually from Seattle, speaks up.

"I've heard of it," he says. "It's a tour or something."

"Is it any good?"

He shrugs. "I mean, I guess. I've never bothered doing it, but I have some friends who have and they seemed to like it. Said it was better than they expected."

“You escaping to the underground on us?” Dom jokes.

Laughter resumes, and I try to join in, but my mind is whirling. I wait just long enough, then escape to the bathroom. I ignore the urinals and shut myself in a stall, immediately going for my phone. Within minutes, I have two tickets for a tour tomorrow night. Pete’s friends better be right about this.

I got us tickets , I text.

What??? Cameron replies.

Seattle Underground. It’s a tour. It’s supposed to be good. I got us tickets for tomorrow night at six.

You could have asked if I was free.

I’m asking now. Come with me. It’s my last night in Seattle.

And that’s seriously how you want to spend it?

No, I want to spend it exploring every inch of him. I want to spend it with him in my bed. I want to spend it memorizing each one of his eyelashes, every crease in his lips, every blemish on his skin. But I don’t think I can say it to him that way, so instead I say, Yes, that’s how I want to spend it.

Did all your weird co-workers turn you down or something? he texts back.

You’re my first choice.

Yeah, sure. Whatever. You’re lucky I don’t have work or band practice.

Is that a yes? My heart thumps in my throat, my fingers shaky as dots appear to let me know he's typing a response.

Fine. Yes. I'll see you there.

I all but float back to that table full of beautiful sales reps. I think they talk to me, but whatever they say slides off my brain. I have one more date with Cameron before this is over, one more chance to change the trajectory of our acquaintance. And I plan to make the most of it.

Chapter Thirteen

Cameron

JULIAN ISN'T WEARING A suit this time. A plain black jacket hangs open around a T-shirt with a movie poster on it. It's casual, accidental. His hair falls naturally around his face rather than lying swept back and glued in place with hair products. The faintest hint of golden stubble roughens his jaw.

"You look nice," I say when I approach him on the street.

A look of genuine surprise opens Julian's face. "Thanks?"

"Is that a question?"

"Kind of," he says. "I mean, this is just whatever's left over in my suitcase. You've seen me all done up for work and jeans and a T-shirt is what earns a compliment?"

"You look more normal this way," I say.

"I'm not normal when I'm working?"

"Not really. You're ... you're trying too hard. You're doing that performing thing you do. But like this, I don't know, you seem more like a person."

For some reason, this explanation spreads a smile across Julian's face. He actually glances down at his feet for a moment, uncharacteristically shy before he collects

himself and looks back up at me.

“Come on,” he says. “It’s right in here.”

He looks like he might take my hand but thinks better of it at the last moment. He leads me into a storefront that’s painted black and says “UNDERGROUND TOUR” in big gold letters. Part of me can’t believe I’m actually doing this. It’s one of those touristy Seattle things that people who live here often skip. It’s even located near all the tourist stuff that people flood every time a cruise ship pulls into the port.

A small group of us shuffle our feet and wait awkwardly for the tour. Julian smiles over at me, standing close enough that our fingers could brush together if he so much as flinched. But again he doesn’t take my hand, and again I feel like he kind of wants to.

The tour takes us, predictably, underground. They aren’t lying about that part of it. We descend below the bustling city, into dank tunnels lit gracelessly with harsh modern lights. We often have to stick to designated walkways. The stuff down here truly is old, as our tour guide informs us. For some reason there are a lot of toilets. One is intricately painted and sits on a little pedestal.

Thankfully, not all of the architectural flourishes belong in a bathroom. We pass brick archways and head down stone tunnels, glimpse drawings of old Seattle and examine antique devices. It’s half museum and half history lesson, with the tour guide giving us deep dives into everything around us.

“This is kind of amazing,” I admit as we take in framed black and white photographs of Seattle while it was being built.

“You like it?” Julian says.

He's smiling at me, all those perfect white teeth on display. Does me enjoying a silly tour really make him that happy? It seems strange, yet he hasn't stopped grinning this whole time.

"Yeah, I do," I say. "Thanks for suggesting it. I don't think I would have done it on my own."

"Really? But you live around here."

"Yeah, but you never do the tourist stuff in the place where you live. It would have been easy to miss this."

"I guess that's true. I've never gone up the Empire State Building even though I pass it five days a week."

"Maybe you should sometime," I say.

"Have you gone up the Space Needle?" he counters.

"No, but that's not nearly as tall, and half the time it's cloudy and you can't even see anything."

"Whatever," Julian says with a playful roll of his eyes. "My point stands. How about this — I'll do the Empire State Building when I go home and you'll do the Space Needle. We'll send each other pictures from the top."

My stomach clenches around the suggestion. I assumed that once he went home that would be it for this strange reunion. We'd go back to silence. I could be done with all this confusion and mess in my mind and forget about him. Yet the moment Julian insinuates that we'll keep chatting even after he leaves, some piece of me wants to agree.

“We’ll see,” I say noncommittally.

He lets it drop as the tour continues. We stop under a grate that looks up at the city above our heads and the tour guide explains how Seattle’s city planning unfolded over the years. I barely hear her, my ears full of static as I replay that interaction back in front of the black and white photos. Can I let this continue? I should have shot him down, made it clear that this ends tonight. I agreed to go on this tour, but afterward, I have every intention of saying goodbye and going home.

At least, that’s what I’ve been telling myself. Yet I didn’t park on the street this time. I parked in a garage, somewhere I could safely leave my car overnight if I had to. At the time, I rationalized it as parking in the closest, most convenient location, even if it costs a little extra, but my excuses are starting to sound hollow even to myself.

I miss the tour guide’s explanation, following the group in a daze. I hope I look interested when we stop in front of some ancient bit of machinery I can’t identify. My head is whirling, but Julian seems calm beside me. If he has any expectations for how this night might go, he’s masking them incredibly well. I suppose that’s what he does, though. That’s why he’s here. Because he’s good at charming people, at luring them in, at showing them only what he means for them to see. Am I another sucker roped in by his games? Is this an elaborate trick like when he touched my knee and leaned in like he wanted to kiss me back in college? I don’t know what he stands to gain by interfering in my life anymore. Maybe it’s fun for him. It’s always seemed fun for him.

My uncharitable appraisal sits in my stomach like a stone, dragging me down, but as I watch Julian delight in every bit of trivia, every weird gadget and strange photo, I struggle to truly believe my own pessimism. I’m not good at people like he is, but this Julian, the guy in jeans and a T-shirt who invited me on a cute tour, doesn’t feel like a guy hiding some sinister alternative motivation.

God, I hope I'm right about that.

The tour ends in a gift shop. Julian is entranced by all of it, every silly little trinket and corny T-shirt and cheap piece of junk. I humor him, tagging along. Am I doing this to hang around him longer? The tour is over. We could eat. We could go our separate ways. The thing I came here for is done. There's no reason to hang around except ... except wanting to. Do I want to?

"Hey, you alright?" Julian asks.

I blink. A rotating stand of keychains greets me when I come back to the world. I finger one idly, not really caring what it is.

"I'm fine," I say. "It was a long tour."

"Over an hour," Julian agrees, "but it was really good. Thank you for doing this with me, Cam. It was nice."

I don't dare look at him, not when there's so much sincerity in his voice. "It was," I say.

"Do you like that one?" he says, nodding at the keychain stand. "You keep going back to it."

In truth, I didn't even notice which keychain I was fondling. It's a miniature Space Needle with "SEATTLE" written across the base. It's the sort of thing you buy if you're a visitor to the city and want a cheap memento of your trip. I'd die from shame if I had something like this hanging on my keychain.

"It's fine," I say.

Julian reaches past me to snatch it. His arm brushes against me as he moves, and electricity prickles my skin even through our shirts and jackets. As soon as he has the keychain in hand, he makes for the checkout counter.

I catch him in the line before the counter. “What are you doing?”

“Buying this for you,” he says simply.

“I don’t need a keychain of my own city.”

“Sure, but this way you won’t forget our deal. I’ll get myself an Empire State Building when I get home.”

He winks at me, like this is some hilarious, marvelous joke we share and not the corniest promise of all time. Yet I don’t stop him from buying the trinket, and when he hands it to me, I put it immediately on my keychain. I hold the whole thing up for him.

“Happy?” I ask.

“Yes, actually. Now you’ll have to remember me even after I leave.”

Normally, this would land like a joke. He would wield his words to jab at how much I don’t intend to remember or miss him. But the laughter is missing from his tone, and when he meets my eyes, something desperate lingers behind them.

This can’t be real. It simply can’t be real. This guy has been messing with me since high school. He hit on me in front of our moms simply to upset me. His interest wasn’t even sincere the one time we mistakenly hooked up here. He just likes to get a rise out of me, whether that’s by calling me his brother or, well, actually getting a physical rise out of me. It’s all one big game for Julian, and it always has been.

But I'm struggling to figure out what his angle is tonight. The tour was nice. The gift is cute in a dorky way. That look he levels at me lacks even a twinge of mockery or mirth. If I didn't know better, I'd think Julian was being sincere.

When we leave the gift shop, a hazy gray mist has begun to fall. It's not enough to do more than dampen the sidewalk and our exposed faces. Without a word, Julian and I start walking the same direction, which happens to be the direction of his hotel.

"I parked in a garage up the street," I eventually offer by way of explanation.

"Oh, I see. Do you want me to pay for it? My company wouldn't notice."

I wave his words away. "It's under two hours. It won't be bad."

"Right, yeah."

His words droop like rain-drenched leaves. He hoped I'd say something different, I'm sure, but he doesn't push, doesn't comment on it.

My throat is tight when we reach the garage. I halt, and Julian stops a step past me, eyes a bit wider than normal as he takes in the concrete structure that marks the end of our strange reunion. He opens his mouth, closes it, shakes his head at himself.

Is this really the Julian I've known all my life? If he wants something, why isn't he spinning some slimy, slick line? Why isn't he goading me until I give in? Why is he just standing there ?

Why do I want to fix this?

"Are you going to invite me up?" I grumble.

His eyes brighten like they're the only thing in this gray city that the sun can actually reach. He straightens, a smile flickering over his lips.

"I wasn't sure if you wanted me to," he says.

"Christ," I mutter, pinching the bridge of my nose. "Just do it quickly before I change my mind."

His grin is all teeth. "Cam, do you want to come up?"

I heave a sigh. The answer should be no, but I started this mess, so I suppose I should finish it. It's only one more night, anyway. Then this ends once and for all, stupidly charming keychain promise or not.

"Let's go already."

Chapter Fourteen

Julian

MY HEART IS BURSTING like a box of fireworks going off inside my chest. I can't believe I was ready to let him go only moments ago. Now Cameron is following me to my hotel for the second time.

I make myself a vow as we stand silently in opposite corners of the elevator. For two people about to get naked together, we could not leave more space between us in public. All the more reason for the promise I silently make to myself.

I put it into action the second we reach my room.

Cameron shoves me against the wall before the door even closes, just as he did last time, but I get my hands on his shoulders and stop him when he dives at my neck. He hesitates, confusion drawing his brows down over his dark eyes.

"Not like that," I say.

The confusion deepens, and I slide away from the wall and grab his wrist before this night can slip between my fingers. I walk backward toward the bed, towing him along, trying to make my smile reassuring. Cameron goes along with all of it, even lets me push him onto the bed and sit on his hips. I plant my hands on either side of his head, caging him in with my arms.

"We're going to do it my way this time," I say.

“Your way better—”

“Shh,” I cut in before he can grumble.

I throw my jacket aside, then fling my shirt after it. I help Cameron struggle out of his own jacket and shirt, but when he goes for his pants, I stop him again.

“Relax,” I say. “Slow down.”

“You have a lot of demands tonight.”

“Yeah, so? This is my last shot. I’m going to make the most of it, Cam.”

Something crosses his face. Usually, I can read people pretty easily, but Cameron has always been a bit of a mystery to me. Whatever that look is, it disappears so swiftly that I don’t have time to parse it.

I don’t worry about it, lowering to his mouth instead, attempting to distract both of us. Even I don’t want to keep talking, not when this night is so horrifically finite, not when every second that slips between my fingers is a second with him that I’ve lost forever. I didn’t plan on this night going this way, but as soon as he said yes to me outside that parking garage, my purpose struck me with perfect clarity.

I dive to that purpose now, trailing from his lips and along his jaw, all the way over to his ear. Our bare chests press together as Cameron sucks down a deeper breath. I flick out my tongue, running it along the underside of his ear before taking the lobe in my mouth and tugging.

Cameron shudders beneath me, his reaction raw and involuntary. A hand flies to my arm. Cameron clings to me, holding on like he might lose his balance even while lying down.

The smile that sweeps over my mouth forces me to release his ear. I kiss my way down his neck instead, not stopping my assault, but taking my sweet time with it as well. Cameron keeps holding onto me, his deep breaths gusting against the top of my head as I work my way down to his collar and suck at the joint where neck meets shoulder. The sheets shuffle as he plants one foot, caging me in with his knee.

Don't worry. I'm not going anywhere, not until I've had every last inch of you.

I trickle over his chest, my kisses on his firm pecs like water dribbling over rocks. I pause at the soft divot of a nipple, swirling my tongue around and sucking until he whimpers for me. Lord, what a sound, especially coming from him. With my head lowered, I can't see his expression, but the noise arrives strangled between clenched teeth, and I can imagine well enough the way he must grit them, his eyes screwed just as tightly shut. Even now, he doesn't want to give me his full, unfiltered self, but that's okay. I'll take whatever he offers me, whatever scraps he deigns to throw me.

Instead of immediately trailing downward, I divert to the side, lifting one arm and dragging my nose along him. He startles, but I keep going, breathing deeply to inhale the scent of his deodorant and, beneath that, Cameron himself. Even here, I kiss and lick, making it all the way up to the underside of his bicep.

I rush on, invigorated by that intimate taste of him. I follow the trail of hair that starts on his chest and trickles down his torso, tasting every ridge of his abs along my way, fitting my tongue into the grooves, kissing the unexpected freckle hidden on his side. He jerks, perhaps ticklish, and that hand on my arm seizes me tighter for a moment.

He won't be able to hang on like that much longer. I'm not stopping. When I say all of him, I mean all of him, every last bit, and that includes everything below the waist.

He releases my arm and scoots backward on the bed when I reach the waistband of his jeans. I shuffle down to fit between his legs, marking my way in kisses left behind

like warm stones along a pathway. Perhaps some day they'll guide me along his body again, but if they don't, at least I'll have left my mark on him.

I look up, checking in with him for the first time since I declared my intentions. Cameron is craning his neck to look down at me, his lips parted, those dark eyes vibrant with lust.

He's never looked so damn good.

That glance is all I need. I undo his jeans, pulling them down along with the briefs beneath them. In our haste, we neglected our shoes, so I have to pry those off before I can get him completely naked at long last, but God, is it ever worth it. The man lying in my temporary bed is like something out of those classic paintings, tan and toned and brushed with dark hair. His beautiful cock curves up at his belly, and I haven't even touched it — and don't mean to quite yet.

This seems to surprise Cameron. His eyebrows jerk upward when I reach for his leg instead of diving onto his cock, but when I said all of him, I meant all of him. I keep my eyes locked on his as I rest his foot on my thigh, kneading my thumbs into the arch. His throat bobs.

"That alright?" I say.

He nods. "It feels good, but..."

"Shh." I lift his foot, kissing the underside. "I told you I was making the most of this."

He blinks rapidly, so I'm assuming no one has ever done this for him, but I charge on anyway, fitting my lips over his largest toe. He makes no sound, but his eyes never leave me, even when I swirl my tongue around that toe, then move to the rest. I take

each into my mouth in turn, then lick the top of his foot before I set it back down on the bed and focus on working my way up his shin.

Cameron's eyes are locked on me. Even when I lower my head, I feel them prickling my scalp. Whatever he expected of me, he didn't expect this .

I make it to his knee, but merely kiss the side of it before I go for his other foot. It isn't a fetish for me or anything, but if dragging my tongue along his arch can make Cameron shudder like that, it doesn't have to be. All of him is my fetish; all of him is an obsession I've never managed to shake. So it doesn't matter if it's his foot or his chest or his mouth or his cock. I want all of it. I want any part of him he'll show me. I want any part of him that I can use to make him feel good.

By the time I climb up his other shin and reach that knee, a tremble rattles through his legs. It's faint, but I can feel it with my lips pressed to his skin. I continue, tracing my way up the inside of his thigh, toward all the places he probably expected initially. When I reach them, Cameron is so sensitive that a slick bead of pre-cum waits at his tip.

I could do more to him. Oh Lord, I could do so much more. I haven't even gotten to rim him. But Cameron grabs me by the hair once I'm in reach, his fingers tugging hard.

A promise for next time. Something to explore in the future, perhaps. That future feels unlikely, but I leave one place unexplored as a pact with myself: I will find my way back to this man somehow, even when this is over.

When I finally turn my attention to Cameron's cock, I force myself to keep going slow. Instead of swallowing him whole, I lick along his shaft. Cameron groans, hand yanking at my hair. When I reach the tip, however, I leave him wanting, ignoring that for now so I can blow softly along the path my tongue painted.

“Christ,” Cameron rasps. “Why ... why does that feel so good? Julian, I’m...”

He doesn’t finish, mostly because I do, at last, swallow him. Hearing my name tripping off his tongue like that, mangled and warped by desire, dripping out of his mouth as hot as melted wax — it breaks something inside me. I thought I was in control of this and could take it slow the whole way through, but the moment he uses my name I’m done. I seal my lips around him, tasting that bright bead of pre-cum in the instant before I plunge down his cock. He moans, writhing under me, his hand tangling up my hair. He can rip it out for all I care. I grab his sac, applying firm, careful pressure as I bob my head. My tongue is never still, even as I suck him. His hips start to move along with me as Cameron cracks, shoving his need at me while he groans and grabs.

“I’m gonna ... fucking...” he chokes.

I don’t relent. Maybe he notices my determination. Maybe he’s too far gone for that. I drag him up to the edge and keep him there for so long that he’s wild with unleashed need.

“Juliaaannnn,” he groans one more time. Then his hips jam up at me. I almost choke on his cock, but force the reaction down so he can explode down my throat in a glorious burst that I happily swallow.

I ride him down, not really wanting to remove my mouth from him but finally conceding to do it when he shifts under me. I come up wiping at my mouth, which tastes all of him. It makes me want to never brush my teeth, even though I know he’d fade from my mouth either way before my plane landed back in Newark International Airport. I’ll have to settle for drenching my senses in him now: His taste lingering in my mouth, the sound of my name ringing in my ears, the sight of him breathing raggedly under me as he tries to calm himself, the feel of his flushed skin, the scent of his body sticking to my lungs.

He sits up after a few more deep breaths, and cold panic strikes at my chest, even with my cock rock hard inside my jeans. Will he run away? Is this how it ends?

I open my mouth, perhaps meaning to beg him to stay a little longer, but I don't manage a single word before he throws me onto my back on the bed. I hit the mattress and blink up at him, limp with surprise.

"What?" he says. "You don't think I'm not going to take care of you too, do you?"

"I..."

"Be quiet. I know what I'm doing."

I can't argue with that. He strips me down far more swiftly than I stripped him. He doesn't even pretend to mimic anything I did, going straight for my cock instead. His brusque efficiency is no less effective than my meandering indulgence, however. I was already hard. The addition of his hand and mouth on me tip me toward the edge in mere heartbeats.

I grab Cameron's dark hair as he bobs along me, following the swift, hard, merciless motion of his body. Quickly, it's too difficult to try to keep my eyes open and watch him. I snap them shut, falling back into fantasy, clinging to him as his hot mouth takes me deep.

Surprisingly, it's his hand that betrays him. His mouth might be all cold efficiency, but his fingers feel along the delicate skin of my sac, then explore lower, touching timidly at my rim like it might be too much. Nothing is too much when it comes to him. Or maybe it's more accurate to say that everything is too much, but I savor the experience of being overwhelmed and overcome by him. His touch sets off sparks that crackle through my entire body, until I'm whining his name and yanking at his hair and rolling my hips at him in a pathetic plea for release.

I come crashing past the precipice in a thunderous roar. It's an avalanche burying me alive, drowning out all my senses until there's nothing but heat and pleasure and him. If I thought he had command of my senses before, it's so much worse now. My very soul belongs to him in those blissful moments when he grants me relief and strips me down to nothing but a quivering mess.

Eventually, the mattress groans as Cameron flops onto his back beside me. I pry my eyes open and find him naked and panting. He stares up at the ceiling instead of looking at me.

"I think the garage is closed for the night," he says.

It's a lie. Those garages don't close this early. But if that's the truth Cameron needs to believe in order to stay here, I'm damn sure not going to dispel it.

"You can crash here," I say, as though this is all so perfectly accidental. "I'll get you brunch in the morning to compensate you for the parking."

"Brunch," he says.

"Brunch. It's between breakfast and lunch."

"Why not breakfast?"

I roll onto my side, sliding my arm across his belly, taking a chance. He flinches, but doesn't push me away. He finally settles those dark eyes on me.

"Because I plan to stay in bed with you for as long as I can," I say. "So we're going to miss breakfast."

I swear that the faintest of smiles twitches along his lips, if only for a heartbeat.

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Chapter Fifteen

Cameron

I FALL ASLEEP WITH Julian on my chest. I keep expecting him to shift and squirm, but he stays there, getting heavier as his breathing goes deep and even.

For some reason, I never move him. I let him sleep on me, and soon enough my eyes are heavy and my body is warm and I drift off as well.

We must move at some point in the night. When I wake, we've shifted, but we haven't drifted very far. Julian is on his back, and I'm ... I've rolled onto my side, and I wake with his hair tickling the tip of my nose. My first breath is him, and as my eyes clear, my first sight is the blurry shell of his shoulder.

I very nearly kiss it.

Julian stirs. He twists onto his side, smiling before his eyes clear when he finds me beside him. I may have held back, but he doesn't. He tips forward, kissing the tip of my nose before I can object.

He covers his mouth with his hand. "I'll brush before I demand more."

My brain is still booting up when he hops out of bed and practically skips to the bathroom. Of course he's a morning person. Somehow that fits his whole irritating ... thing . Though how irritating can it really be when I'm waking up next to him for the second time? Shit.

I drag myself out of bed. I put on briefs, but don't bother with anything else. There wasn't much of me he didn't see ... and touch ... and taste last night, so what's the point in putting on uncomfortable jeans? Still, when I join him in the bathroom, his eyes immediately crawl up and down me, and I almost regret my choice ... until I realize he's completely naked.

I turn to the mirror, keeping my eyes on my face as I splash some water on it.

"Toothbrush?" Julian says as he pulls it out of his mouth and spits into the sink.

"That's disgusting."

He rolls his eyes. "You swallowed my cum last night. My toothbrush will not kill you. Here, I'll clean it."

He rinses it in the sink, then pats it dry on a towel before applying a fresh dollop of toothpaste. I stare for a moment before finally accepting it and shoving it in my mouth before I can think too hard about it. It's better than feeling gross all morning, or so I tell myself as I scrub out my mouth and spit the toothpaste into the sink.

By the time I finish, a different faucet is running. I set the toothbrush aside and take in the bathroom for the first time. It's massive. I could fit half my apartment in here. It has two sinks along the countertop, as well as a separate area with a dedicated mirror for makeup and shaving. A door leads to a tiny little room exclusively for the toilet. I could probably fit every single article of clothing I've ever owned in there. The shower occupies the far back corner, but across from it sits the tub, a massive basin with a rounded lip and an array of products sitting on a ledge above it. Julian is leaning over to feel the water temperature as the basin fills, and I have to look away quickly before he catches me ogling his ass.

He straightens and sets his hands on his hips. "Join me?"

“In there?” I say, nodding at the tub.

“Well, we could squeeze into the shower, but I figure this is more comfortable.”

I blink, pausing. “You want to ... take a bath with me?”

“I prefer to clean up before a long flight,” Julian says like it’s the simplest thing in the world. “We can wash up, eat, then...”

Then he’ll head to the airport, he doesn’t add. Then this ends.

I sigh and shove my briefs down, kicking myself free of them. I may have offered Julian some privacy when he bent over the tub, but he affords me no such courtesy. He eyes me shamelessly, and I hurry past him and sink into the water before I can regret this.

Julian hops in after me, sloshing water over the side in his excitement. We sit on opposite ends of the tub, our legs overlapping. Julian swiftly isn’t satisfied with this arrangement. He drapes his legs over mine and scoots forward until he’s almost sitting in my lap.

“Let me wash you,” he says.

“I’m an adult. I can wash myself.”

“Well, yeah, obviously. That’s not why I asked.” When I hesitate, he pushes. “Stop being obtuse and grab the soap.”

“I don’t remember you being this bossy.”

“You don’t really know me. There’s a lot about me that would probably surprise

you.”

If this wasn’t ending. If we had more time.

The words hang between us unspoken. Maybe he would keep surprising me, but the timer has run out on this. He’s going home, and I’m going back to my normal, Julian-free life.

I reach up to grab the soap on the shelf above us. It’s not really soap, but some bottle of fragrant goop that suds up when Julian squirts it into his hands and lathers it up. Once it’s ready, he rubs it onto my chest, squeezing as he goes, spending way more time than my chest has ever required for cleanliness.

“I think you got it,” I drawl.

Julian looks directly up at me under his eyebrows. “This is not a practical operation.”

“I thought we were getting clean so we could go to ‘brunch,’” I counter.

“That’s the pretext, yes. God, you don’t have an insincere bone in your body, do you? The people I spent the past week with would eat your earnest ass alive.”

“I don’t disagree.” I grimace even thinking of a building full of people speaking exclusively in riddles. That’s his world, not mine, and I’ll never claim to understand it.

Julian rises up on his knees, water sloshing. He leans forward to kiss me, soapy hands braced on my chest.

“You’re pouting, but it’s adorable,” he says. “And refreshing. I like it.”

I swallow, suddenly incapable of speech. He sounds sincere, incredibly sincere, but I've never known this man to be sincere, not in my entire life. The Julian I've experienced this weekend has been more than a little shocking, and I'm still trying to work out how much of it I should believe. If he was some guy I just met, sure, I'd buy it. I'd fall head over heels for it. But Julian Brooks is not some guy I just met, and a piece of me quavers at the notion of taking this sweet, unassuming, complimentary version of him at face value.

"Turn around," he says, and I do, grateful for a reason to look away and catch my breath.

He settles back down in the water and starts "cleaning" my back. Mostly, his hands wander around, thumbs kneading into the muscles. They dig in at my low back, sending a pleasant jolt through my body that threatens to do more than merely relax me. He even massages my shoulders, and when a tiny, unintentional noise of pleasure slips from my mouth, he leans forward, his chest against my back and lips beside my ear.

"You're so tense," he says, his voice lower. "Maybe I should help you with that."

His hands slide around me, groping my pecs once more before they dive shamelessly downward. He makes it to my hips, fingertips brushing the crease that angles toward toward my groin ... and my rapidly awakening cock.

"What about brunch?" I grumble.

"I can find something to eat at the airport," he says, and without missing a beat, he leans against my back so he can reach my cock with his soapy hand.

The water sloshes as he pumps me under it. Between the soap and the water, it's a weird feeling. I want to rise up so I'm not submerged, but it doesn't seem to matter

all that much. Somehow, Julian's hand is every bit as effective this way as it would be if we were in bed.

He wraps his free arm around my chest, and I lay my hand atop his. Maybe I want a steady anchor amid the storm we're brewing in this bathtub. My fingers end up laced between his, and he hangs onto me like he's the one being groped.

I close my eyes and tip my head back against his shoulder, giving in to the sensation.

"Damn it, Julian," I rasp. "I thought ... we were going to be normal this morning."

"We've never been normal," he says at my ear. "Isn't that right, nearly step-brother?"

"Shut up," I grit out, but there's nothing behind it this time. I can't muster the usual heat I'd inject into that denial. My snapping loses its bite when Julian is pumping me hard and fast in the tub, and my cock is aching to respond. This shouldn't feel so good. The water or something should mess it up. I tried to jerk off in the tub once and I finally gave up and stood to get the job done. Yet Julian has me grinding my teeth and struggling to hold back.

"I'm going to ... to ruin the bath," I say.

"It doesn't matter," Julian says. "Come for me, Cam. I want to see you do it. You're so damn hot."

His encouragement works, for some reason. I give up my resistance, jerking my hips at his hand in search of that final push over the edge. I grunt as it hits me and I dirty the water with spend.

Julian peppers my neck with kisses as I sag heavily against him. "Yeah, baby, just like that. You're so good."

Dimly, I register the desire in his voice. Before I can worry about the mess in the tub, I free myself from his grasp and turn around, shoving him against the side. He hits it with a grunt. I pin him there with a hand on his chest, then grab his cock and pump him. He's underwater like me, so I go hard, even harder than I normally would. Julian yelps, but it's surprise, not pain. He grabs at the arm pressing him against the side of the tub, clinging to me as he jerks his hips under the water.

I look up this time, look right into his eyes. They're an even brighter blue than usual as pleasure overcomes him. His mouth hangs open, eyebrows curling with agonizing desire.

"Kiss me," he gasps.

I slam my mouth against his. He moans pitifully, sweetly, pathetically, then adds to the filth in the tub.

We sit there panting for a moment, but only a moment. We get out of the tub quickly thanks to what we just did to it, but even as we towel off, this feels like a dream, like a hazy, half-forgotten memory. There's no way this past week has been real.

We dry off and get dressed, then Julian announces that it's time.

"I'll walk you downstairs," he says. "My taxi is waiting."

"Sure."

I feel like I should say more, but nothing else comes to mind. When we reach the lobby, we stare at each other, feet shuffling, but I don't kiss him goodbye. I don't even hug him. Whatever happened between us this week belongs to hotel rooms and underground tours. It has no business in the light.

We stand on the curb for a beat longer than we should, and Julian says, “Stay in touch.”

That isn’t as ridiculous a notion as it once was. I nod. “Sure. You too.”

It’s not goodbye, but it sure feels like it.

Chapter Sixteen

Julian

FOR ONCE, I'M NOT the conquering hero. I slouch in my seat as the stewardess rattles off the usual airline safety instructions. No one listens, and I'm the only one even looking at her, though her words wash over me.

Mere hours ago, I was in that tub with Cameron. I was touching him, and he was responding. It's such a delightful memory I can't help but wonder if it was a dream. Not only did I have him last night, but he gave me one final taste in the morning. I could have touched him all day. I could have canceled this flight, quit my job and remained holed up in that hotel room with him until they kicked down the door and dragged us out. I doubt Cameron would have been as excited by that plan as me, however, so I packed up my stuff and left.

I barely remember the trip to the airport. I bumped through security in a daze, then flopped into my seat and stared at the runway until the plane took off and clouds swallowed up my final fleeting glimpses of Seattle.

We're passing over a mountain range now. The snowy peaks poke up through the clouds hanging low over Washington State, like nosy neighbors watching us over a fence. We're probably well beyond the city limits, but I scan the churning field of clouds below us, searching for some final glimpse of the place where Cameron lives.

The stewardess finishes her safety briefing. The plane levels out. Everyone breaks out computers, phones, books, gaming consoles, whatever they've brought with them to

help pass an uncomfortable six hours. I could have asked the company to send me home first class, but I didn't want to push it, so I'm stashed away in business class like everyone else. It doesn't matter. I doubt a bit of extra leg room would make any difference.

When I asked Henry to get me in contact with Cameron, my expectations were low. I'd simply wanted to see him again; I couldn't help myself. I thought I'd poke at him, get a reaction, have a bit of fun. I never expected those two incredible nights, and one morning, we spent together. It felt like something changed between us, some barrier crumbled, but I fear that's a one-sided appraisal. If I text when I get home, will Cameron answer? If I want to see him again, would he say yes? The guy is like a bank vault, and I possess neither the code nor the safe-cracking skills to get inside. My usual charm doesn't work on him. My usual perceptiveness proves worthless against those inscrutable black eyes.

For most of our lives, he was someone I enjoyed messing with. I don't know exactly when I became more desperate for his attention, but it didn't change my methods. I kept poking because it always got a response, and getting something was preferable to getting nothing.

What if I pushed too hard? What if I did something back then that he's still holding onto? I rack my brain to figure out what it could be, but nothing stands out. Maybe he got sick of all of me, the whole package. Maybe he's only willing to tolerate me if I'm temporary.

An elbow nudges into my ribs, drawing my attention away from the clouds boiling outside the window.

"Hey, man, what was your score this time?"

Through some quirk of fate, my seat is next to Dom from the conference. He

considers it good luck to end up next to me when he's stuck with a middle seat, but I would prefer to fly home beside a stranger who has no intention of talking to me. For once, I just want to be left alone.

I paste on a smile anyway. "Not sure."

"Oh, come on," he says. "You? I don't buy it."

"Really," I say. "I was on my best behavior this time. I do also have to work sometimes."

Dom rolls his eyes. It seems my reputation precedes me. Like a lot of fellow reps, he suspects I racked up quite the body count in the past week, adding to my "score" of escapades. I can't possibly tell him that the only person I slept with, the only person I even wanted to sleep with, was Cameron.

"You definitely hooked up with Jessica," he says. "Everyone knows that. And maybe that dude Zane? You guys went out to some bar, didn't you?"

"There was a group of us that time," I say. Besides, the person I kissed that night at the bar was Cameron, not Zane. Any other lips were far from my mind once I tasted Cam's.

Dom shakes his head. "Come on, man. It's a long flight. You're really not going to tell me?"

"I wouldn't be a gentleman if I did," I say, trying to find a playful tone. I don't feel like I succeed, but Dom chuckles anyway.

"Yeah, such a gentleman," Dom says. "I'm sure. Well, fine, whatever. You know that chick Sheila, though? Definitely had her up for a nightcap on Saturday."

He waggles his eyebrows at me. I really don't want to hear his likely exaggerated story, but I encourage him anyway, if only because it takes the heat off of me. Dom is more than happy to brag about Sheila, regardless of how she might feel about the story. Hopefully, she doesn't care because Dom is plenty forthcoming with the details.

Cameron would throttle me if I ever discussed what we did in this much detail with some random rep. Fortunately, he doesn't need to worry about that. The second I even consider it, I want to hug myself as though I can lock up those memories inside me for safe keeping. Those stolen moments don't belong to anyone else, and I intend to guard them like Fort Knox. They're certainly not for the likes of Dom and his ilk.

When Dom finally finishes, I offer a fist bump.

"Nice, man," I say.

He preens like a peacock. I cut in before I can get stuck listening to another harrowing story or pushed for details about my own adventures.

"Listen, I'm really tired," I say. "Up late every night and all that."

"Yeah you were," Dom throws in with a leering smile.

"So I'm going to put on some headphones and try to conk out," I say, ignoring him.

"That cool?"

"Sure, man, totally. I'll catch up with you another time."

I hope not, but I don't say that, instead diving for the backpack I shoved under the seat in front of me so I can dig out headphones. I lower the tray and set up my phone. I downloaded some movies for the trip and choose one at random to play. I don't

actually care what it is. I just want noise in my ears that isn't Dom's voice. I lean against the window at my side and pretend to stare at the phone screen, barely focusing on the people playing out the drama on the device.

Then someone on the screen breaks out a guitar, and my heart jumps into my throat. The guy is doing it for comedic effect. His playing is terrible and the other people in the scene cover their ears and scream in despair, eventually pushing him out of the room, but the damage is done. One glimpse of a man with a guitar and I'm getting flashbacks of that bar, flashbacks of Cameron's deft fingers flying up and down the neck of his instrument until the sound seems to pour out of the very walls. My heart races like I'm back in my seat in the crowd watching him play, my mouth hanging open as I glimpse a piece of his soul I never knew existed until that moment.

How much more of him could I discover if he gave me the chance?

The man who nearly became my step-brother lies perpetually out of reach. I never got close to him back then, and I'm not making as much progress as I'd like now. If our mothers had gotten married, would it be different? Would we actually be like brothers? Or would my ever-present attraction to him have complicated things beyond repair? It's hard to imagine that alternative future when I spent the past week getting as close to him as possible. When we were kids, I knew he liked music, but I never guessed how much. I never heard or saw him play. I was too busy being preoccupied by other, less important things.

What I'd give to hear him play again. I'd fly out here on my own dime to listen to him tune his guitar. It's not about the music as much as it's about him. When he played on that stage, I witnessed a hidden side of him. He was unleashed for a moment, the sound bursting out of him like water punching through a broken dam. All those things he keeps bottled up so tightly exploded free for a moment.

I hastily switch what I'm watching to something, anything else. I think I end up on a

reality show, but I'm paying even less attention now than I was before. With any luck, no one on the show will turn out to be a musician.

I can't keep going like this. I've survived since high school on scraps, but I guess a piece of me took it for granted that Cameron would always be around. When he and his mother moved all the way across the country, it knocked me off-balance. I suppose that's why I grasped so eagerly at this opportunity to see him again, why I acted so rashly, why I took so many chances. I couldn't help myself after all that time apart.

Now, I'm jetting away from him, every minute separating us by untold miles. The entirety of the country is wedging itself between us, and I don't know what I'm going to do when I'm back on solid ground and that unfathomable chasm of space separates us. Maybe Cameron can move on without any issue, but as I sit here trapped in a metal tube with my turbulent thoughts, I'm increasingly sure I can't.

I've finally had a taste, and I'd do anything for more.

I'll text him, I resolve. I can start there, see if he responds. Maybe there's some future where he'll want to visit New Jersey. He and his mother must have some friends and relatives back east. Maybe he wants to see our old co-workers from the Boyfriend Café, though many of them have scattered to the wind since graduating. There's gotta be something I can use to see him again, I simply have to figure out what.

Dom doesn't bother me for the rest of the journey across the continent, which leaves me ample time to muse and plot and plan. A reunion. A birthday. A work trip. I've got to cobble together some kind of plausible excuse. The truth is, as nice as the past week was, I'm not confident Cameron would agree to see me just for the sake of it. I'll need to construct some sort of excuse.

Is this starting to sound desperate? Maybe it is. I've always been desperate when it

comes to him. I simply used to have the excuse of being a shitty teenager. All that teasing and prodding has turned into more than I ever could have dreamed of, but my old methods aren't going to work anymore.

If I want to win Cameron over, I'm going to have to do things differently.

Only one thing feels certain in this moment: Things changed between us in Seattle, and from this point on, there's no going back.

Chapter Seventeen

Cameron

LIFE RETURNS TO NORMAL. My normal routine. My normal co-workers. My normal Julian-free life.

It should come as a relief, but for some reason I float through work and band practice and dinner with Mom and Aunt Mary like a sleep walker. I'm only ever half-present, half-awake. My mind is like a puzzle dumped directly out of the box; all the pieces are there, but they're upside down and backwards and heaped in a messy pile I can't seem to organize into anything coherent. Do I miss Julian? Is that what this feeling is? Or am I wallowing in guilt for spending so much time with a guy who should be my enemy? I wrote him off years ago because of the way he interfered with Mom's happiness. What was I thinking letting him back in?

If this is guilt, it wasn't potent enough to stop me from going to that hotel room.

Twice.

The experiences replay involuntarily in my head, and a confusing mix of hot and cold batters at my chest. Even when I've dated a guy for months and months, none of them treated me the way Julian did that one night. It was like every single individual hair on my body, every flake of skin, every breath was so precious to him that he meant to imprint them on his lips.

I shiver and only then realize all of my bandmates are staring at me.

“You alright, man?” Tim says.

“Huh? Yeah,” I say.

“You’re kinda spacing out on us,” Kelsey says.

I look to Erin, the unofficial leader of the group, but she offers me no help whatsoever.

“If you’re tired from work or something...” she says.

“I’m fine,” I insist with a bit too much bite. “Let’s do the next song.”

My bandmates share a glance, but none of them protest. I make sure I’m on my game when we launch into the next song. It’s the chorus of something Erin is still hammering out, but the skeleton is solid. I already have the music in my fingers, and I make sure I hit every note so that by the time Erin waves us off, no one can complain about my playing.

Erin grabs a notebook off a table. We’re in her parents’ basement in a suburb of Seattle. Studio space is way too expensive for us to waste the cash on practice, and fortunately her parents have a recurring date on Tuesday nights. It gives us an opportunity to practice for free without disturbing a whole apartment complex.

Still, a basement is a basement. Tim quiets his drums with pads. Kelsey and I aren’t using amps. Erin sings without a microphone. The sound isn’t quite right. It’s not close to what it would be if this was “real,” but it’s the best a struggling band like us can do. We all know we can step up if we get a chance, that nice equipment and a nice space won’t change the fundamentals that we’re hammering out here today.

Erin nods and smiles as she jots something down in her notebook. “Yeah,” she says.

“Yeah, I think that’s coming along.”

She speaks half to herself, but the rest of us are used to her creative process by now. This is how Erin molds the shapeless putty of an idea into an actual song. She’s written most of what we’ve played, with the rest of us contributing our knowledge of our instruments. I’ve thrown in bits and pieces now and then, but Erin usually does the writing when it comes to lyrics. She’s our leader for a reason — she’s good at the ideas, at the logistics, at seeing the big-picture vision. When she talks about The Ten Hours, we sound like a real band and not some dopes in a basement.

“Let’s do it one more time,” she says. “I need to see how the bridge connects to that last verse. That okay with you guys?”

We all nod, more than happy to follow her vision. I’m especially grateful, I suspect. Working on something new requires more concentration than replaying the stuff we’ve performed dozens of times. Those songs are imprinted into my fingers; the new stuff hasn’t transformed into muscle memory quite yet.

We go through the section a few times before Erin calls us off. She grabs her notebook and flops onto the beat up on couch in her parents’ basement to start scribbling. There’s not much down here with us besides that couch and the coffee table. We cleared out the storage area of the basement to make space for Tim’s drum kit. The floor is cold concrete. Cobwebs cling to the exposed wood of the unfinished ceiling. A single bald lightbulb hangs down, accompanied by a chain for turning it on and off.

Despite that, this has become a cozy space for all of us, a place where we’re free to do our music however we want. Honestly, I kind of prefer it to a bar or stage. Here, it’s just about the music. It’s raw; it’s real. We’re not performing for anyone but ourselves, even if we do plan to take our art out into the world eventually.

Erin is still furiously scrawling notes. Idle and awkward, I pluck at my guitar. Without intending to, I pick at the chords of my own song, humming the few lines I've managed to write.

For the second time this evening, I look up to find my entire band staring at me.

"That's not a bad idea," Erin says.

"What is?" I ask, already suspicious.

"That was your song, right?" she says. "We should work on that a little."

I flush with cold dread. "It's ... it's not even done. We... I can't. I haven't even..."

"There's something there, though," Erin says. "I heard you just now."

"It's a couple chords and a few lines," I say. "It's nothing. You guys would hate it."

"We won't," Erin says. "And besides, we're a band. We're here to help each other with stuff like this."

"But it's..."

Erin tosses her notebook aside and stands, planting her hands on her hips. "We never make lyrics alone. These are our songs, Cameron. You've written for us before. It's a good thing. It brings some fresh ideas and a new voice to our songs. I can't write everything. It'll sound like me all the time."

"But..."

I look to Tim and Kelsey, seeking any safe harbor, but Tim shrugs and Kelsey smiles

wickedly. I back up a step, but there's nothing behind me except cold concrete. I'm not escaping this basement so easily.

"Fuck," I finally mutter at myself. "Fine," I say louder. "But it's really not done. It's not even kind of done. It sucks. You're going to hate it and it's going to be a huge waste of time."

"It won't," Erin says. "Let's go, Cameron. We don't have all night."

I grumble as I dig into my bag and pull out a battered notebook. I prefer to write by hand when I'm actually focusing on something. My hands tremble as I flip through pages of scrawled lines and crossed out choruses in search of the smattering of lyrics I've jotted down so far.

"Here," I say, shoving the open notebook at Erin. "If you want to try to make something out of that, be my guest."

Erin is immune to my moodiness. She takes the notebook and reads over the lyrics, nodding her head and humming to herself as she goes. She picks up strength on a re-read, singing a few lines.

"Like that?" she says.

"Yeah," I admit while studying my shoes. "I guess."

"Okay, let's try it that way. You two got that?"

She checks in with Kelsey and Tim, who nod.

"I think I can put something behind that," Tim says, already testing out some tentative beats.

“I’ll follow along,” Kelsey says. “Don’t worry about me.”

Just like that, I’m playing my half-written song, and it’s damn near the most mortifying ordeal of my life, especially that line I wrote at the café one day.

If fate is kind, she’ll bring us back together.

We work around that line, the clearest one in my scrawled notes, building music and lyrics like a scaffolding supporting it. After a few repetitions, Erin is belting it out at full volume, and her voice is as powerful and captivating as ever but ... but something about it isn’t quite right.

I try to shake off the sensation, but it sticks with me even when we go back through the song another time, propping up the lines around that one like we’re building a house around a central pillar that’s supporting most of the weight. That line is impactful enough to carry the chorus, but Erin’s voice, while as stunning as ever, somehow sounds wrong . I’d never dare utter that out loud. She’s not doing anything wrong. In fact, her singing is stunning. It fills that tiny basement, warming the cold, barren concrete.

No, this has nothing to do with Erin’s ability. It’s ... it’s just that...

When I wrote that line, I think I was imagining it in my voice.

I don’t sing for our band. I can. I’ve taken lessons and all of that. I’m passable enough, but I’m clearly not a frontman. I don’t have the kind of pipes that can rival Erin’s. There’s no compelling reason for me to be the one belting out the lyrics when I’m far more useful and comfortable on lead guitar. Even when I sketched out some lyrics in the past, I always heard them in her voice. I’ve never wanted to sing, never requested to sing, not even as backup. Tim and Kelsey do that stuff on the rare occasions when we need it, but for the most part it’s all Erin.

So why can't I shake the sensation that this song sounds wrong in any voice but my own?

It's gotta be because I messed around with it by myself back at my apartment. Some nights, I like to get out my guitar and play and sing softly, chipping away at these lyrics that won't seem to leave me alone. Of course, I didn't have much time for that last week, what with Julian being here and me being ... with him. But the point stands. It's probably habit, nothing more. Erin is our singer, and that's how it should be.

"I like this," Erin says after we play it once more. "I like it a lot. This is good stuff, Cameron. Are you going to keep working on it?"

I shrug, suddenly shy, like they're seeing my baby photos or something. "I guess. I don't know. I've just been messing around in my free time. It's nothing serious."

"Don't downplay it," Erin says. "We need fresh material. We need a fresh perspective. If we make it to that festival, we'll want to bring something new with us. This could be the perfect song to debut at a place like that."

I scrub a hand through my hair. The thought of revealing this song in front of a big festival crowd feels like walking on stage naked, my chest ripped open for all to see. We haven't officially secured a spot, yet the thought of playing this song makes me want to crawl under the couch and hide.

"I don't know," I say. "If you think so, then I guess it's fine."

"It's better than fine," Erin says. "This is going to be it, our big show stopper. Keep working on it, alright? I'll help if you want."

I nod, but I'm biting back a grimace. That song that sounds so wrong in her voice

instead of mine, especially that line about fate bringing two people back together...

I'm scared to face what those lyrics really mean to me, but it seems I may not get a choice.

Chapter Eighteen

Julian

LIFE SETTLES BACK INTO a familiar rhythm. Routine asserts itself, demanding I return to work in Manhattan. When it's time to report to Garret about the conference, I tease Cameron carefully out of the story, but it's like plucking the color out of a box of crayons and leaving behind only gray, white and black. Regardless, Garret accepts my report, just as my co-workers accept my little hints that I, as usual, had a good time racking up escapades and salacious stories. I feed them the tidbits I know they want, leaving the end of those stories open-ended so they can fill in the blanks themselves. I don't tell them the truth, of course. The time I spent with Cameron is not for their dissection.

Somehow, I maintain the facade until the weekend, when I thankfully have plans to head to my mom's house for dinner.

We try to get together at least once a month. It can be hard with the amount I travel for work, but she lives right across the water in New Jersey, so I really don't have an excuse not to see her.

I don't bother knocking before entering the home I grew up in. Whistles and football announcers greet me before my mother or her boyfriend realize I've arrived. I pry off my shoes and head down the hall to the living room at the back of the house, where Mom sits cuddled up with Dave on the same sagging tan couch that was here when I was kid.

For some reason, the sight makes my chest feel too tight, like someone is squeezing the air out of my lungs. Mom reclines against her boyfriend. He has an arm around her, and it's so casual, so easy, that they barely seem to notice they're touching each other. I can't fathom Cameron ever letting me touch him that way, but when I enter the living room, that image flashes in my mind before I can banish it, burned there like a brand. Even as the ache fades, the mark remains.

Mom sits up when she notices me. "Julian, you're here."

She gets up to fuss over me, and Dave follows her off the couch, leaving the football game droning on the television. I know enough about the sport to know we're rooting for the guys in green and not the guys in red, but that's about where my knowledge of football ends. My mom has always been a big fan, however. Today, she's got her Sunday spread all laid out; enough chips and dip and beer sits on the coffee table to supply the whole neighborhood.

Mom wraps me up in a hug. "It's been too long. How was your trip? This was Nashville? No, this was Seattle, right?"

She's going rapid-fire, but I know it's just excitement. In the meantime, Dave offers his hand. I shake it. I don't know the guy well, but he seems nice enough. Him and Mom have been dating for a few months, and she seems happy. If she ever isn't happy with him, we'll have a problem, but until then, the man seems mild-mannered, quiet and eager to please, and that's good enough for me. I liked Miss Ortiz better, but obviously that didn't work out ... and maybe that wasn't about my mom as much as it was about me. I never thought about it much before, but perhaps the memory of my mother dating Cameron's mom carries positive connotations simply because it put me in Cameron's proximity so often.

I shake that off and try to answer my mother's questions. "It was Seattle," I say. "And I'm still kind of exhausted."

“Oh God, yes, sit, sit,” she says. “We have chips and beer and whatever you want. Do you like that brand? I can run out and get something else.”

I sink into the arm chair beside the couch and take a lukewarm beer without even looking at it. “It’s great.”

I struggle to get it open, and Dave reaches over to pop off the top with a bottle opener attached to his keyring. Okay, one more point for Dave.

Mom and Dave settle back on the couch, sitting closer to the edge to be near me. The game is still unfolding on the television, but only Dave pays any attention to it. My mother’s eyes never leave me now that she’s got me back in her house, and I silently promise myself I won’t go so long without seeing her next time. It’s been a busy couple months with work and traveling.

“Tell me everything about Seattle,” she says. “I’ve never been there. What is the city like? Did you see the fish market?”

I nod. “I stayed a few blocks from the fish market.”

I tell her about Pike Place Market, where they’ll toss fish around if you buy one, and the Ferris wheel that you can see from the pier, but I didn’t spend much time on those things. Instead, I recount the Underground Tour, the one super touristy thing I indulged in while in Seattle. It wasn’t about the tour, of course, but I dance around that, carefully excluding Cameron from the story. I’m not sure what my mother would think about his presence. Does she hold any guilt or pain or regret about the breakup with Miss Ortiz? It never seemed that way to me, but it’s one thing to have an amicable breakup and it’s a whole ‘nother thing to find out your kid is hooking up with your ex-girlfriend’s kid.

Unfortunately, I got my brains and my good looks from my mother, and she easily

senses that there's something missing from my story.

"Did your co-workers go with you?" she says. "Who were you on the tour with?"

Normally, I'm pretty quick on my feet, ready to spin a lie or half-truth to dodge a sticky situation, but when it comes to my mother, I've never had the heart to pull that shit. It was always the two of us; unlike Cameron, I never even knew my dad. So lying to her never sat right with me, no matter what outrageous tales I would tell anyone else.

"Julian?" she prompts.

Shit. I've waited so long that it's obvious I'm holding something back. Even if I had the heart to lie to her, she'd hear it.

I let out a breath.

"It was actually, um, Cameron. Cameron Ortiz," I say.

Her eyebrows rise. She sits up straighter, the football game entirely forgotten. Even Dave shoots a quick glance in my direction.

"Oh," Mom says, clearly trying to sound casual. "How is he?"

"He's, um, yeah, he seems to be doing well," I say.

I mean, it's true. He did seem to be doing well, especially when he was in that hotel room moaning so beautifully for me.

"How is his mother doing?" Mom asks.

An unexpected pang strikes my chest. It socks me out of nowhere, like a bully hiding around a corner, waiting for me to let my guard down. I didn't see Miss Ortiz. It never even crossed my mind to see her. Cameron never suggested going to his apartment or somewhere more personal like that. Everything happened in a public place or my hotel room, anonymous, impersonal locations. Was that a coincidence, or did Cameron shield his "real" life by ensuring I never encountered it?

I gather myself before answering Mom. "I didn't actually see her," I say. "There wasn't time. I was downtown for the conference and everything, and I think she lives somewhere north of the city."

"I see," Mom says slowly. I only realize my mistake when she continues. "So Cameron came down to see you?"

Sometimes I really wish my mother wasn't as smart as she is.

"We happened to be in the city at the same time," I say. "We ran into each other and caught up."

God, is that ever glossing over things. I was not in that bar where his band played by accident; I asked Henry about it in order to ensure I saw Cameron that night. He had no desire to see me, and I still don't know why he took me up on my offer of dinner after that.

My mother's hand lands on my knee, calling me out of my thoughts. "Julian, is everything okay? You can tell me. It's not going to be an issue because of whatever happened in the past."

She means her and Cameron's mom dating. She means that that might be an issue because she suspects Cameron and I did more than catch up.

I look straight into her eyes, eyes as blue as mine. They're so clear and steady, and I've always found strength in her gaze, no matter how hard things were for us at times. Behind her, Dave is carefully looking away, giving us whatever privacy he can without making this even weirder.

Fuck it. She's my mother and I love her and I've never managed to keep anything important from her in my life. And this? Yeah, this feels important.

"Okay, fine," I say in a rush. "It happened. Yeah. Cameron and I... Some stuff happened between us. I didn't expect it. I was hoping to see him and maybe catch up or something, but, um, I guess things ... went a different way."

Mom squeezes my knee before sitting back. She's wearing a playful little hint of a smile that suggests this revelation is not as shocking to her as it should be.

"When are you seeing him again?"

I jerk my head up. I might be in my mid-twenties, but I still manage to flush when my mother hits me out of nowhere with an observation that dredges up every hope and insecurity I've been suppressing this past week.

"I-I don't know," I say. "I don't know if he wants to. Maybe it was a fluke."

"Does his mother know?" Mom asks.

"No, I doubt it. He was ... a little secretive about things."

She nods. "I see. Well, he never did keep things from Elena. I imagine she'll know soon enough."

That casual observation does absolutely nothing helpful for my quickening pulse. Is

his mom knowing a good thing or a bad thing?

“It probably doesn’t matter,” I say, hoping to diffuse this conversation. “I mean, I have my job in Manhattan and he’s working somewhere way north of Seattle. We live so far apart. It was nothing.”

Mom takes my hand in hers, scooting to the edge of the couch so her knees are almost touching mine. Dave busies himself gathering up empty beer bottles and taking them to the kitchen, affording us a moment of privacy.

“Julian,” Mom says, and her voice is soft in that way that makes me want to break down like a little kid crying over a scraped knee. “You shouldn’t let the distance stop you if you really like him.”

I blink at her, my eyes widening. “I don’t... I just...”

Mom chuckles, squeezing my hand. “Did you think we didn’t know? You boys had to be around each other a lot when we were dating and let me tell you, you weren’t exactly subtle.”

“Oh God. Don’t tell me that’s why you broke up.”

“Of course not, but it was something Elena and I were aware of, certainly. Back then it might have been complicated, but now there’s nothing holding you back. Tell him how you feel.”

“I ... I don’t think he feels that way about me.”

“There’s only one way you’re going to know for sure,” Mom says, “and don’t you want to know for sure? Don’t you want to hear it from him?”

It's hard to fathom Cameron ever feeling anything positive toward me, but I nod anyway. I do want to know. Even if all I get is hard, cold rejection, I need to be sure. I need to know there's absolutely no chance.

Because if there's even the slightest hope...

Chapter Nineteen

Cameron

I HOLD UP MY keychain and take a photo as the Space Needle continues its glacial rotation.

The picture is blurry as shit, with only the keychain remaining in focus, but you can kind of tell the vague mass of blue in the background is Seattle's hazy skyline. It's a typical gray fall day, and a weekday on top of that, so there's no one around to notice me doing something as corny as taking photos of a keychain. Still, I stuff the keychain away swiftly and text the photo without bothering with a caption.

There. I did my part. I kept my promise. He can't ask me for more.

I could leave, but I loiter instead, hanging out at one of the big clear windows to watch the city rotate into view. Thick gray clouds obscure anything farther away than the other end of the city, like someone ringed Seattle in dollops of whipped cream. The sun breaks through here and there, glittering on the sound or glinting off a skyscraper.

Okay, fine, it's kind of worth it. It's a little beautiful. Not that I'm going to admit that.

I have work today, so I leave after only a few more minutes of gawking and return to the ground. Bundled in my hoodie, I make my way to my car, praying I don't have a ticket for stretching the definition of "one hour." I've dodged rush hour, so I escape the city relatively easily and hit the highway so I can hurry back up to Tripp Lake and

get to the café to relieve Henry at the end of his shift.

Henry hasn't said anything to me about Julian. Why would he, I suppose? In Henry's mind, giving Julian those tips about me was probably inconsequential. Julian asked about me; Henry answered. Simple as that. Sweet, unassuming Henry probably hasn't ever paused to ponder what his information led to.

I've been trying not to ponder it either.

Life went back to normal as soon as Julian left. This little diversion to the Space Needle to make good on that stupid promise is the only time I've thought about him. Okay, it's the only time I've let myself think about him. Every now and then, he's snuck into my head. And there were the texts. And that one dream.

But overall I've dismissed whatever happened between us as a bout of temporary madness and done an admirable job of restoring normalcy. I've got plenty to do with the café and the band. I don't need to wonder about a guy who lives on the other side of the country on top of that.

Henry is helping a customer fill out adoption paperwork when I reach the café. I set my stuff aside and head to the coffee bar, checking on supplies and cleaning mugs and frothers and coffee machines in anticipation of a caffeine rush later in the day. It's usually the first task I have to deal with here, though if I get a lull I'll check on the cats' litter boxes in the back.

Henry finishes up with his customer and joins me at the coffee bar. He fills me in on the news from the morning, which is all the standard stuff. The cats got their breakfast. He did the morning cleaning. Coffee rush was intense but things have quieted down since then. There's a yoga class later in the evening that I'll need to contend with, but aside from that, all is quiet and calm at Rainbow Rescue Cat Café.

“There’s also a class finishing up now,” Henry says, “so you got here just in time.”

In truth, I’m a little late thanks to my random trip to downtown Seattle this morning, but Henry is too nice to say it that way.

His warning proves prescient. We have only a few minutes to catch up before River’s yoga class ends and a rush of customers heads our way. We fall into the swing of fulfilling coffee and snack orders, the two of us dodging around each other to get everything done. Henry and Sebastian have proven really easy to work with. When it’s any combination of the three of us, we can get everything done without a word passing between us. All in all, they’re fantastic co-workers. I can’t say the same for some of the part-timers, but the flakier members of the staff are the entire reason I got this job, so I can’t be too upset with them.

The flurry of orders passes in a blur. I’m grateful to stay busy and distracted throughout it. I sent that photo to Julian shortly after taking it, but I haven’t had a chance to check for a reply. Nor do I want to. He’ll probably say something corny and tooth-rotting, something that would be charming coming from anyone but him.

“Just in time,” Henry says when it looks like we’re in the clear. “I need to get going. Alex has some sort of surprise in store tonight.”

“No problem. I’ve got things covered here.”

I smile at him, but a tiny ache settles beside my heart. Henry and his fiancé are hopelessly cute with each other. Henry was always an upbeat guy, but I’ve never seen him quite as happy as he is with Alex. It’s like the final missing piece in his life slotted into place when he met that guy. I can’t imagine another person doing that for me. My life has always consisted of jagged edges. Even before Dad left, I wasn’t that great at dating or even making friends my own age. When I’ve dated, it’s been fun, but it hasn’t completed my life the way Alex seems to complete Henry’s. Anyone I

felt that serious about would have to meet my mother anyway, and I can't fathom introducing her to the type of people I've been with recently.

Least of all Julian.

Hell no. He's not getting anywhere near my mom ever again. His thoughtless, careless, stupid actions when we were in college screwed up a good thing for her. If it weren't for him making a move on me where she could see, she would probably still be dating Miss Brooks. She'd still be happy. She wouldn't be alone. No one gets two chances to hurt my mother like that.

After Henry heads out, I try to keep myself busy, but there isn't all that much to do. River's class has left and it's too early for the afternoon customers. After wiping down the whole coffee bar for a second time, I pop a sign on the counter saying I'll be back in a few minutes and head for the staff room. Scooping out litter boxes isn't the most glamorous work on the planet, but it's a hell of a lot better than standing out there thinking about Julian.

I rise from the litter boxes holding a paper bag full of cat turd, meaning to throw it out in the dumpsters around the back, when I come face to face with River. The blue-haired yoga instructor is shirtless even though his class ended ages ago. This guy seems to live most of his life without clothes on, even when he's chugging a smoothie in the café's backroom.

Unfortunately, I can't get around him without confronting him. The backroom is a tight space mostly taken up with litter boxes and supplies for the cats, which makes it a particularly weird spot to stop and enjoy a smoothie.

"Need to take this out," I say, holding up the paper bag.

"Hey, man, you're looking different today," River says, completely ignoring my

implication that he should move.

I roll my eyes. Not this again. He hasn't stopped with this shit since that whole bit about me being yellow or orange or whatever color it was.

"Sure, whatever," I say. "Just move so I can throw this out. You can drink that in the café, you know."

"Bad vibes out there," River says. "Too much residual energy all over the place. It needs time to dissipate back into the ether."

"And drinking a smoothie next to five litter boxes is better?"

"Yes," he answers simply, as though oblivious to my sarcasm. Maybe he is. I've never been able to read this guy. "Anyway, want to tell me what's going on with that aura of yours?"

"No, I do not."

"You can pretend it isn't happening, but I know you feel it," he persists. "Aura changes like that aren't things we can ignore, even if we don't believe."

"As it so happens, I don't believe. Now move unless you want cat turd in that smoothie."

River glances down at his smoothie, finishes it in one big gulp, and sets his empty water bottle on a counter beside flea and tick medication.

"Something good happened," he says. "I get it. You don't believe. I'm just a wacko. You're going to keep on living your gray life. It's fine, man. You don't have to believe. The energy is out there either way, and your energy is reading yellow,

yellow, yellow. I'm happy for you."

"Even if that's true, which it's not, you wouldn't know what you're happy about."

"I'm happy you're happy," River says as though it's the most obvious thing in the world. "Whatever's making you yellow, it's the good stuff, that good life stuff. So congratulations."

I roll my eyes again. "Fine. Whatever. Thank you," I say.

I don't mean it, but there doesn't seem to be any other way to get him out of my way. The "thank you" works. River steps aside, gesturing to the staff door like a chauffeur showing me to a limo. Sadly, I'm not headed toward luxury, but straight out of the back of the shop to the smelly dumpsters in the alley behind it. I dump my paper bag of litter and return inside to wash my hands and get back to the coffee bar.

The counter with its mugs and pastries and coffee machines feels like safety after encountering River in the backroom. I wish he'd stop with the aura thing. My head is already a scrambled mess. I don't need his woo-woo hippie nonsense messing me up even more.

Besides, what the hell does that even mean, "my aura is yellow?" It's total nonsense. Even if auras were real, which they're not, there is nothing that would make mine a happier color than it used to be. Nothing in my life has changed. I go to work. I go to band practice. I see Mom and Aunt Mary for dinner once in a while. Same old, same old.

The only thing that has disturbed my routine in a long, long time has been...

Julian.

I scrub a hand through my hair. There is absolutely no way I'm bringing auras into this mess with Julian. It wouldn't matter anyway. Julian is back on the East Coast. I'm sure he's got his next thrilling sales conference all lined up. He'll fly to Houston or Sacramento or Cleveland and fuck every rep in a ten-mile radius.

Whatever. I don't care. It's not my life. I made questionable choices for one week, and now everything is back to normal. No auras. No Julian.

Except when I look at my phone, there's a reply from Julian, and my heart skips at the sight.

We must be sharing a braincell today , the message says.

I open the text. A photo greets me. In the background sprawls the vague monochrome haze of New York City, a field of blocky gray like a talus field on a mountainside. And there in the foreground, the only thing in focus: A keychain of the Empire State Building with the words "I Love New York" written under it. I can just make out Julian's fingers holding up the trinket.

Chapter Twenty

Julian

I CAN'T STOP GRINNING at my phone.

I spent yesterday evening hunting for keychains and taking a trip up the Empire State Building. After the conversation with Mom on Sunday, I was buzzing with too much energy, too many thoughts. Expelling it by keeping that promise to Cam helped preserve my sanity. I never expected him to make good on our vow.

I sit in my cubicle smiling at my phone like an idiot. Cameron's hand obscures one side of the image, his Space Needle keychain the only thing in focus. Behind it stretches a gray Seattle day, the clouds hanging low and making the blurry landscape even harder to discern.

He actually did it. I don't know why it makes me so happy that he kept that stupid promise. It's so small, so insignificant. A keychain and an elevator ride, that's all it really is, but my heart is going nuts even as I recline in an ergonomic office chair.

A knock startles me from my thoughts. Brad leans a hip against the wall of my cubicle, arms crossed over his chest and a cocky grin on his face.

"What are you smiling about, Brooks? I didn't think you kept in touch with your conquests once you got back home."

I roll my eyes at him. "And how do you know this is a 'conquest?'"

“Because you don’t smile like that unless there’s sex involved.”

Sometimes I forget how casually inappropriate this place is. Brad has no fear of being overheard asking me about my escapades, and why should he? Even our boss Garret would probably ignore him at worst.

“It’s just a friend,” I say.

“A friend with benefits,” Brad says, wagging his eyebrows.

I know I’m supposed to lean into this, play along. That’s who I am in this place. That’s what I do. That’s why I get sent to Seattle or Nashville or Houston. But today it feels wrong. Cameron isn’t some fling at a conference. He isn’t a fellow sales rep who already knows the score. And the image on my screen isn’t even sexual. I can’t see anything but the tips of his fingers. I might imagine all the places those fingers have gone and could go, but the picture itself is innocent enough. I’m not smiling at a potential conquest. I’m smiling at ... at Cam. Cam interacting with me, keeping the silly promise we made, talking to me for no good reason. Crazy, that’s almost as thrilling as him sending me something far more explicit.

Brad cannot know any of this, of course.

“What do you want, asshole?” I say, trying to change the subject. “I do have actual work to do if all you’re going to do is fantasize about my sex life.”

Brad shifts and uncrosses his arms, and I know I’ve struck true. It’s so easy to make straight guys uncomfortable.

“I need to get you up to date on the contract with Vil-Tech,” he says, suddenly all business. “A couple things changed while you were out. We gotta get shit aligned before the next time we meet with them. Have time for a quick chat?”

I turn to my computer to hide my smile at his discomfort. I scan the calendar for an open meeting room, locate one, and swiftly book it.

“Sure,” I say. “Looks like Alpen 3 is open.”

I bundle up my laptop and follow Brad to the meeting room. This Vil-Tech thing is a contract we’ve been working together. They’re big enough to warrant multiple reps to handle the account, though Brad has been taking the lead on all of it. That’s lucky for me because my head and heart really aren’t in it today. When Brad and I set up our laptops in Alpen 3 and start going through what’s changed while I was out, I have to ask him to repeat himself far too many times.

In truth, my mind is on my phone. I’m far, far away from this office building in Manhattan. A piece of me is stuck in that hotel in downtown Seattle. I’m in the entryway where Cam threw me against a wall. I’m in the bed where we slept wrapped around each other. I’m in the tub where I touched him for the last time.

“That sound good?”

Brad interrupts my daydreaming, and I scramble to recover.

“Uh, yeah, for sure, man. Whatever you think,” I say.

Brad heaves a mighty sigh. “I suggested we reply to their proposal with porn. You are really not here today, dude. Something happened to you back in Seattle.”

Something certainly did, and Brad doesn’t even know the half of it.

“It’s nothing,” I say. “Jet lag. Sorry. I’m paying attention now.”

“I’ve never seen someone actually get their hooks in you,” Brad says. “Is the mighty

Julian about to fall? Don't tell me you're going to become a proper family man all of a sudden."

An image springs to life in my mind, Cameron and I around a dinner table with our moms. We had that briefly. We were a weird little family for a short time. It seemed like he hated it, but I didn't. I didn't hate him being my family. Not at all.

I stuff it down, slapping on the persona I have to wear for work.

"Can a guy be tired once in a while?" I say. "I had a busy weekend."

I leer at Brad, and he thankfully takes the bait, laughing but not digging deeper now that I've finally suggested the version of events he wants to believe. It's easier to see me as the jet-setting playboy than a guy with someone weighing on his heart. I don't want people here to glimpse that other version of me. I prefer for them to see me as adventurous, fun-loving, no scruples Julian, a guy with no ties, no connections, no romance in his life.

I've always shielded myself this way. When I was in high school, I latched onto Cameron immediately, but it was always a joke. I chose to be an annoyance because it got his attention while keeping me safe, but I'm starting to worry that I caused damage back then that I can't repair now. I was a scared, stupid kid with no one to rely on but my mother. I didn't trust anyone else, especially not someone who could crush me as easily as Cameron could.

I force myself to focus on the Vil-Tech account. Brad and I go through the updates from the week when I was out, and I'm pretty sure I sound passably human and intelligible throughout it.

It's a relief to escape that meeting room, however. I dig for my phone the moment I'm free, urgency battering at my chest as I fumble to find my text chain with Cameron.

We've exchanged those two photos and a few bland words of conversation, but that isn't nearly enough. I can feel him slipping away between my fingers, and something has me grasping after him, unwilling to let him go. Maybe it's that I saw a real side to him last week. The Cameron in that hotel room was a little less spiky and hard than the Cameron I'm used to outside of it. He let me in, even if only a little, and I don't want to fuck that up by continuing to play at being aloof and detached.

When it comes to him, I'm anything but aloof and detached.

I start typing before I can think better of it, my fingers frantic.

Hey, crazy idea, but what if I came to visit? Not for a work thing. Just to visit. Just us.

I hit send with my heart pounding in my ears and nearly trip over my own desk chair in the process. I'm shaky when I sit back down at my desk and set my phone aside — face down. I can't bear to look at it while I wait for Cameron to reply. When I was in Seattle, there was a time limit, an expiration date, and I think those boundaries pushed us both out of our comfort zones. It's less scary to be vulnerable when you're running out of time.

What I just proposed would be something very different. I wouldn't have the excuse of being there for work. I wouldn't be distant and busy, available only in brief, self-contained moments. This would be uninterrupted contact, just the two of us together every moment of every day.

Heat pools inside me like wax gathering around a lit candle wick. The flame at the center is Cameron, always burning hot and bright inside me, a fire I've never managed to snuff out even when it looked like we might become brothers. Now that that danger has passed, would he ever give me a chance? Not a weekend in a hotel, but a real, honest chance?

I realize while pretending to read emails that that's what I want from him. I want more than a week-long fling. I want that dinner date where he talked about his music and his life. I want silly, stupid outings like the Underground Tour. I want that morning in the tub, but even longer and lazier, nowhere to go and nothing to do but touch each other. I want things I've never really cared about finding with another person, not until Cameron and I crashed back into each other's lives.

The truth is, it's always been him.

From the second I met him in high school, he's drawn me in in a way no one else does. The harder he pushed me away, the harder I was willing to try. Potentially becoming step-brothers probably wouldn't have stopped me. Three thousand miles of distance and five years hasn't stopped me. There is one person in this world who has captivated me from the moment we met, and it's Cameron Ortiz.

I glance at my phone, but resist the urge to flip it over and check it for a response. Did it vibrate earlier? I can't tell. Maybe that was in my head. No, it had to be in my head.

I turn back to my computer, but I don't have that much to do today, and the hours crawl by agonizingly slowly. Maybe I went too far by asking him for a visit. Maybe he's going to block my number at last. There's still Henry. I can ask Henry. Wait, is that kind of stalkery?

My head is so twisted up that I don't realize it at first when my phone actually does vibrate. The sound of the device rattling on my desk takes an extra beat or two to register, then I nearly dive out of my seat to scoop it up. There's one message waiting for me.

Sure.

That's it. A single word. But a single word that means everything to me.

My heart punches at my chest in a bid for freedom. I'm instantly sweaty despite the air conditioning. Yes. He said yes. He said yes !

I abandon any pretense of working today, instantly searching for flights to Seattle instead. I should care about the cost, but this place pays me well. I can afford it. Besides, I don't think I can wait.

There are a few promising flights that head out next week. That would give me time to put in a vacation request with Garret. If I can crash with Cameron rather than getting a hotel room I wouldn't need to do much more than book a ticket...

I start texting like mad, suggesting some flights and dates, all of them occurring as soon as possible. To my utter shock, Cameron continues saying yes, playing along with my plans.

I guess I'll see you next week then , I text when we've hammered out the details.

Yeah , Cameron says. See you then.

I wish I could see his face, hear his voice. I don't know if it's excitement or resignation behind those words, but I won't let him regret this.

It's going to be the greatest week of his life.

Chapter Twenty-One

Cameron

WHAT HAVE I DONE?

Even days later, I don't know what possessed me to say yes to Julian coming back to Seattle for a visit. He was here a couple weeks ago. It doesn't even make sense for him to fly all the way back so soon. Yet according to his texts, he's booked his ticket and gotten his time off approved. The trip is happening — and this time he won't have work to distract him.

I will, but I plan to take off about as many days as I can. Even now, I stand outside the office my boss Chloe uses occasionally. It's more like a closet than a real office, but it has enough space for a desk so she can do some manager ... boss ... stuff when she's here.

She rarely ever closes the door, so I knock on the frame to get her attention. She smiles when she sees me and beckons me inside.

I slink into her office, hands clenching and unclenching as I prepare to make my request. Seriously, what the hell am I doing? I don't have some fancy job like Julian. I need this cash. Yet I'm going to miss out on it to ... to spend time with him.

Oh God. I need to do this before I lose my nerve.

"So, I was wondering if I could have some time off next week," I say. "I have a

friend coming to town, and he doesn't really have anywhere else to stay, so I was going to show him around and stuff, but if you need me to be here I can totally make it work, I just might need to do fewer hours or something or..."

My rambling trails off into silence as I run through the excuses and explanations I planned out in my head.

"That's no problem," Chloe says simply, completely unperturbed by the request.

"Are you sure?" I say. "Will Henry and Sebastian be okay?"

"Sebastian might take on a few more hours, but since it's fall, that shouldn't be too big of a problem. And I can cover a coffee bar shift if we're really in trouble. It should be okay. Thanks for letting me know. Do you mind putting it on the calendar in the staff room?"

"Uh, yeah, sure. I'll ... I'll go do that."

I slink away, retreating to the staff-only area with the litter boxes and cat medication. A calendar hangs on the wall, and I shakily mark off the days when Julian will be here as "Cameron out." At the last minute, I cross one of them out. I tell myself it's because I'll need the cash from the shift, but the self-deception falls flat. Really, I want an excuse to be away from Julian if the need arises.

Holy shit, I'm really doing this.

It was one thing to say yes when he texted me the idea, but taking days off from work gives the whole thing a tangibility I wasn't prepared for. I keep replaying the sequence of events in my head for the rest of the day, and I'm still wondering how this happened when I head to Aunt Mary's house after work for my weekly family dinner.

Aunt Mary lounges in the living room when I enter the cozy one-story house. The couch sags under her, the springs so old they barely bounce back anymore. I helped them upgrade to a flat screen TV at least, but everything else in the house feels like a relic that belongs in a museum, from the wooden coffee table with glass inserts to the cheesy landscape print framed on the wall.

I head through the living room to the kitchen in the back and find Mom stirring something bubbling in a big pot atop the stove.

“Hey, Mom,” I say, kissing her on the cheek.

“Cameron, you’re early. Or are you on time? Oh my goodness, I can’t believe it’s already almost six.”

“It’s fine, Mom,” I say. “We can eat whenever. What can I help with?”

She sets me to work chopping up vegetables that end up in the pot. I’m grateful to have a task to perform. It keeps my mind in the present and off of my phone. Julian has been texting non-stop since we made this insane plan to see each other again. I feel like I’ve given catnip to one of the café cats and set them loose sprinting and jumping all over the shop. Is that what I am to him? Catnip? I figured he had a bunch of hookups all over the country because of his job and all, so why would he bother flying all this way to see me in particular?

I shake my head at myself, and don’t realize I’m doing it until I catch Mom watching me.

“Everything alright?” she says.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“You were shaking your head at the peppers.”

“I just ... I think I cut them wrong. Is this okay?”

I display a cutting board worth of chopped up vegetables, but Mom keeps her eyes on me.

“You can’t mess up cutting them,” she says. “They’re just going in the pot. Cameron, is there something on your mind?”

For a crazy moment, I actually consider telling her, but I almost instantly think better of it. How could I possibly tell her that it’s Julian who has my head all twisted? Hey, Mom, remember that guy you found hitting on me while you were dating his mom? Remember the guy who fucked up the best relationship you ever had after Dad left? No way. I’m not going to openly admit that I’m doing something that will probably hurt her. Julian and I weren’t supposed to be into each other back in college when our moms dated, and we probably should have continued not being into each other now.

I put my head down and focus on an onion as guilt chews its way through me. I know how messed up this is, and I’m still doing it. This little trip of his has to be the end of it. I already said yes and took the time off of work. There’s no going back. I’ll get Julian out of my system and move on with my life, and hopefully Mom will never realize I betrayed her.

I help her get dinner ready. Aunt Mary pops in to retrieve cutlery and plates for the table. Mom dishes out huge portions of mac ‘n’ cheese with peppers, onions and even a bit of pulled pork worked in. It’s one of her homemade specialties, and I’m grateful to sit down and dig in once we’re all around the table for our weekly meal. I haven’t worked out how I’m going to dodge around this situation next week. Maybe I can leave Julian in my apartment. He’s an adult. He can find a way to occupy himself. I certainly can’t bring him here. I’d sooner die.

“Everything okay, Cameron?”

This time it’s Aunt Mary picking up on my anxiety.

I shake myself out of my head. “Sorry, yeah, I’m distracted today.”

My mother and her cousin share a look.

“You know you can always talk to us,” Aunt Mary says.

“You were so happy last week. Did something happen?” Mom asks.

Last week. Last week when Julian was here. I seemed happy to them? That’s... I’m not sure I’m ready to contemplate that, so I set it aside on the heap of other problems I’m doing my best to ignore.

“You know,” Mom says, pronouncing each word strangely slowly, “Miss Brooks gave me a call the other day.”

I freeze, my fork halfway to my mouth with a bite of mac ‘n’ cheese dripping off it. Miss Brooks, as in Julian’s mom.

“I thought you two hadn’t talked in a while,” I say.

“We haven’t,” Mom says.

“Is that ... something you’re okay with?” I say. “Is she bothering you?”

Mom laughs. “She’s not bothering me. It’s been years, but it was nice hearing from her. We spent a long time catching up. It was good.”

I force myself to go through with my bite of mac 'n' cheese, buying myself some time by chewing. "That's good," I say mildly.

"She mentioned that Julian was in Seattle a couple weeks ago," Mom says.

My blood goes cold. I nearly choke on my over-chewed mac 'n' cheese. I swallow so hard the meal goes down my throat like a stone.

"Oh," I manage.

"Did you realize he was in town?" Mom says. "Apparently he travels a lot for work and just happened to get sent to Seattle. Isn't that a crazy coincidence?"

Yeah. Crazy. Almost as crazy as me letting him fly right back out here next week.

"Weird," I say. Apparently I've been reduced to single syllables. I'm not sure I could manage a whole sentence at the moment.

"Have you been in contact with him at all?"

"Why would you think that?" I say, a bit more sharply than I intend. "I mean, I just, we never really got along."

Her lips stretch, half a smile, half a grimace. "I know. It was something Stacy and I discussed when things got more serious. We always worried about you boys having to get along."

The guilt threatens to claw straight through me. I knew she worried about it. Of course I knew she worried about it. Back then Julian was relentless with how he pestered me. No matter my resolve, he would push and push until I finally snapped. Then he went and made it even worse by trying to make out with me right there in my

Mom's apartment.

I must be some sort of idiot for letting a guy like that back into my life. The pain from that time period is still written plainly all over my mother's face, and here I am inviting the source of it into my apartment for a whole week. How can I betray the only person who's ever really cared about me? I almost grab my phone right then and there and tell Julian to cancel his flight.

"We were stupid kids," I say, trying to reassure her.

"I know," Mom says, "but if things had gone differently..." She shrugs. "Well, we just didn't want to upend your lives too much."

"You wouldn't have," I say. "It was nothing. We were idiot teenage boys. I'm sure Julian is... Whatever he's doing, I'm sure he's different now."

Am I? Am I sure about that? I convinced myself of it last week when I agreed to hop into bed with him, but maybe that was self-delusion. I saw a good-looking guy and justified hooking up with him any way I could, all while knowing it was the dumbest decision I could possibly make.

"It's alright," Mom says, and I must have a look on my face because she's doing her soothing Mom voice. "It was just a funny coincidence."

"Yeah," I agree, trying to sound normal, "it's weird."

Weird doesn't begin to describe the feeling of having Julian Brooks back in my life. I never wanted to see him again once I was finally free of him. Now I'm covertly spending entire weeks with him. And the worst part is that I know the second those bright blue eyes and that unfairly dashing smile settle on me, my resolve will crumble like wet sand. The second I have an opportunity to shove him against a wall and

make him whine out my name again, I'll do it. It's getting me itchy and uncomfortable just thinking about it at the dinner table where I sit eating my mother's food while lying to her face.

If she ever finds out that I've willingly brought Julian Brooks back into our lives, I'll never live it down. But I know even that won't stop me from getting my hands on him the moment he's in reach.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Julian

“SORRY, MY PLACE IS kind of...”

It’s perfect.

I step into a one-bedroom apartment in a small town somewhere north of Seattle and south of Tripp Lake. The entrance reveals nearly the entire space. To my left sits a kitchen where the refrigerator squeezes in beside a countertop and stove. A table separates the kitchen from a living room containing a couch, a coffee table and a TV mounted on the wall. A potted plant basks in the sunlight filtering in through the glass doors that lead to the balcony. Cameron’s guitar rests on a stand in the other corner. A sweater lies on the couch, and used dishes litter the table. I stand amid a pile of mismatched shoes scattered atop a welcome mat.

Cameron bustles past me, sweeping up the dishes and putting them in the sink. He snatches the sweater on the couch and tosses it to the right, presumably into his bedroom.

“I meant to clean,” Cameron says. “I just ran out of time.”

“I love it,” I say, beaming.

He looks skeptical, but I can’t stop grinning. The guitar. The notebooks on the coffee table. The band posters on the wall behind the couch. This whole place positively

reeks of Cameron. It looks like him, it smells like him. Every nook and cranny is him, his space, his love for music, his haphazard clutter.

I drop my bag on the floor beside the pile of shoes and stride to Cameron, cupping his face before he has time to try to tidy up anything else. I seize his mouth, holding him against me for a long, deep kiss.

“God, I’ve missed you so fucking much,” I say when we part.

Cameron doesn’t respond, but I don’t care about playing coy anymore. My usual games pushed him away for most of our lives; only when I treated this with sincerity during that conference did Cameron open up and give me a chance. I’m not going to make the same mistake twice.

I go in to kiss him again, but Cameron halts us after only a moment. “You must be hungry after your flight.”

“I’m okay,” I lie, before my stomach grumbles and gives me up.

“You’re hungry,” Cameron says more firmly. “Come on. We can walk to the store.”

I couldn’t care less about food, but Cameron takes my hand and tugs me toward the entrance and out into the hall. I remind myself that I have a whole week with him, no conference, no other obligations, just him. I can wait until we eat. Probably.

Cameron doesn’t release my hand as we head down the stairs and out of the apartment complex. The big, blocky structure lets us out onto a sidewalk beside a busy two-lane road. We hike uphill, which serves as a stark reminder of how far I am from flat, open New Jersey. The grocery store is only a few blocks from the complex, which is convenient except in that Cameron finally drops my hand in order to grab a basket when we enter the store.

I remind myself to calm down, but it's difficult. He's being so calm. Is this sort of thing ordinary for him? Has he dated so many people that this is yet another notch on his belt? Despite my colorful past, that stings. A piece of me wants to be special to him. A piece of me wants to stand out in his life.

We weave through the aisles, but the rows of boxed pasta and bags of chips and cans of vegetables blur. I mostly watch Cameron, occasionally lobbing out some sort of tepid agreement when he asks if I like the curly noodles or the bow ties.

"Hey, hold up," I say as we head down the frozen aisle. I open a cabinet and pull out a huge tub of rocky road ice cream. "This was your favorite flavor, right? Let's grab it."

Cameron doesn't respond at first. His face does that thing where it goes very still and blank and I can't read anything on it.

"Yeah," he says, and adds it to the basket.

We leave the store with the tub of ice cream, as well as enough pasta and shredded cheese to open our own Italian restaurant. Only when we return to Cameron's place and kick off our shoes again does Cam reveal the plan.

"I learned about it on Reddit," he says. "It's surprising how many decent recipes you can get there. First, we cook the noodles. Then, we add in some canned veggies and top it off with the cheese."

He works on the noodles while I open cans of corn and vegetables and drain out the water. Once the pasta is ready, he has me dump out the canned stuff into a pan. As it begins sizzling, Cameron tosses the noodles in and stirs it all up along with seasonings.

“Okay, here’s the part that actually makes it taste good,” he says. “Can you open that bag?”

I tear open the bag of shredded cheese, and Cameron pours a terrifying amount onto the mixture on the stove. He lets it sit, and, when it’s all melted, starts doling everything out into bowls.

“Mac ‘n’ cheese?” I ask.

“Sort of. I find this more filling because of the veggies. It’s good. Try it.”

He holds up his fork, a gooey mass of corn and cheese and noodle dripping off it. It takes a moment before I realize he means for me to eat right off his fork, but when I do, he could be feeding me the dirt on the bottom of his shoes and I’d lunge at it with just as much enthusiasm as I spare for the mac ‘n’ cheese. I barely even taste it, my mind stuck on the casual intimacy of this simple gesture.

“Good?” Cameron says, a note of anxiety tightening his voice.

Right. Of course. He hates failing at things, and me hating this meal would definitely be a failure in his eyes.

“It’s great,” I say.

I mean it, but the meal is even better when we sit snuggled up on the couch and Cameron puts on a show about detectives with psychic abilities. The cheese is warm and filling, but letting my shoulder casually rest against Cameron’s while we eat is what really leaves me warm and satiated.

“Did you want to watch something else?” Cameron asks when the first episode ends.

At least, I think it was the first episode. Cameron turns his head and catches me staring at him, and I realize I haven't watched more than a couple minutes of the detective show. I've been busy sneaking glances at him, like I'm trying to fill up a reserve for the long, dry days I'll face when I return to New Jersey.

Normally, I'm quick on my feet, but Cameron's dark eyes leave me disarmed.

"Oh, um, yeah, I don't mind," I say.

"Don't mind what? Watching more of this? Or changing it?"

"Um, this show is fine," I say. "It's, uh, maybe I should get the ice cream."

I take our empty bowls and hurry to the kitchen, eager to cover my stumble. How is this so damn easy for Cameron? I'm the one with the silver tongue, and I can barely manage a coherent sentence in his presence. Meanwhile, he's as cool and calm as ever.

I deposit the mac 'n' cheese bowls in the sink and grab the ice cream out of the freezer. I don't bother with more bowls, just snag a couple spoons and bring the whole thing back to the coffee table. Cameron has fortunately started the next episode of detective shenanigans. We dig into the ice cream as we watch it, and this time I do my best to actually pay attention. It's hard when the only investigation I care about is how deep down my throat I can fit Cameron's—

No. Julian, be good. We've got to be good.

This isn't the hasty, meaningless hookups I usually engage in. This is way too important to treat like a fling. I'm not here merely to have sex with him, though, boy, do I ever want to have sex with him. This is a whole week in each other's space, and the tension is already so high that the air in his apartment feels hot enough to melt the

ice cream into soup.

I sneak a look at Cameron. He opens his mouth for a spoonful of ice cream, and I watch his lips as he cleans off the spoon. His tongue flickers out, catching a bit of ice cream on his lips, and my thoughts burn away in a haze of lust.

My spoon clatters onto the coffee table.

I startle, and so does Cameron. I didn't even feel the spoon slipping out of my fingers. I didn't notice at all, too transfixed by Cameron beside me.

"You okay?" Cameron asks, dark brows drawing down.

"Yeah, sorry, yes. Just the ... time difference or something."

It's a blatant lie. Cameron saw me during that conference. He saw how easily I adjusted to a new timezone. That sort of thing is a matter of survival for someone in my line of work. Still, he doesn't comment on it, and I breathe a tiny sigh of relief.

It is going to be so hard to act normal this week.

Surely, he knows I've wanted him since the second we met in high school. Surely, he realizes I'm helpless around him. I mean, I couldn't even hold back when it looked like our parents were going to get married. If that doesn't scream desperation, I don't know what does. It was kind of messed up how I acted back then, but I was caught between wanting him so bad it hurt and wanting my mom to be happy. I was going to slip up eventually. It's unfortunate it happened when our moms were in the next room over and could catch me, but Mom always assured me that wasn't a factor in the breakup, that things were heading that direction anyway.

Now, I don't need to exercise any such caution. Cameron has let me into the most

intimate parts of his life. He's mine for this next week, and I don't need to pretend anymore that that's anything less than my every fantasy come to life.

"Hey," I say, "let's go to bed."

Cameron quirks an eyebrow, but that's the biggest reaction I get. "The episode isn't done," he says.

I tug his spoon out of his hand, put the lid back on the ice cream, and set our dessert aside on the coffee table. I take his hand in mine, my other hand sliding around his waist as I lean close to his ear.

"I don't really care about the show, Cam," I say.

This time, I get a shiver, a delicious little shiver that trembles against my lips. I take my chance, kissing his exposed neck, trailing down to where his shirt covers his shoulders. I start tugging at the collar, trying to reach more of him, and Cameron squeezes my hand tighter for a moment.

"Couldn't even last a day," he says, but the grumbling is pure affect.

"No, I couldn't," I admit freely.

Cameron huffs, but with far less genuine annoyance than I might have expected. "That's kind of pathetic."

"Mhm," I agree, nuzzling against his neck, kissing my way back up it. I find his earlobe and tug it between my teeth, and Cameron sucks in a deep, full breath.

"Fuck," he says. "Fine. Come on. Let's go."

He rises from the couch, and I hop up after him like a happy puppy. He keeps a hold of my hand and heads for his bedroom, the one room in this apartment I haven't seen yet. The one room I'm never going to want to leave.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Cameron

WE BARELY PASS THE threshold before Julian is on me. He uses the hand I'm holding to yank me to him and kiss me as we keep stumbling into the room. I don't get a chance to turn on the lights, but it doesn't seem like it matters. Julian clearly isn't interested in my messy IKEA shelf unit where I keep my clothes or the nightstand beside the bed or the laundry I left out on the floor. He parts long enough to note the location of the bed against the wall, and then he gets his mouth right back on mine.

I should complain about this, but all I've done since he showed up today is give in. I picked him up at the airport, and we haven't stopped touching each other since. Even the pretense of making and eating dinner only really delayed the inevitable, and I have no choice but to admit it to myself: I want him.

I want Julian Brooks.

I can't stop wanting him.

I awaited this trip nervously, unsure if something might have changed between us, unsure if I'd feel nervous or awkward because of our strange history with each other. All of that melted away the moment Julian hopped into my car. Something changes when we're near each other, like gravity itself has gone strange. Nothing has the right weight. Colors are too bright. Music is too sweet. Everything is more , but in the most wonderful way imaginable.

He gets me to the edge of the bed and sits me down, then climbs into my lap. It's a bit awkward with us being a similar size, but Julian doesn't seem to care. He keeps on kissing me, sometimes wandering along my jaw or gnawing at my earlobe, but always returning religiously to my lips.

I tip back, letting his weight fall on top of me. We grind on each other, still fully clothed but obviously hard, and a thrilling, terrifying instinct overtakes me. I roll us over so we're fully on the bed and he's on his back. Then, while looking down at him, I palm over his jeans and watch his face contort with desire. He grabs at my jeans as well and attempts to undo them, but I stop him. I have to admit, the beat of confusion that washes over his face brings a particular sort of satisfaction. Since I met him, Julian has always seemed like he had the upper hand on me. He made the rules in high school. He was in charge when he'd tease and push and wait for my inevitable reaction. But here he is on his back in my bed, and for the first time, I feel like the one in control.

I don't hate it.

I rub over him again, and the look that passes through his face is as much pain as pleasure.

"Are you going to be good?" I say.

It takes a moment before realization dawns. "Yes?" he says.

"Yes, you are," I say. "Because you want something from me. And I get to decide if you get it."

The confusion shifts to something warmer and darker, something that melts in his light eyes and blows out his pupils, darkening his gaze.

“That works for me,” he says.

“Does it?” I ask. “Or are you going to be a shithead like you were in high school?”

He chuckles, but it somehow doesn’t ruin the effect.

“Scout’s honor, Cam. Tie my hands up. I don’t care. I’m yours.”

Something about the way he says I’m yours does things to me that no other sentence has ever done to me. I’ve encountered dirty talkers, but no filthy promise they’ve ever devised compares to Julian putting himself entirely in my hands.

And I kind of like his suggestion about tying him up...

“Stay there,” I say.

Partially, it’s a test. Partially, I’m realizing I’m going to need a couple things if this is going to happen this way. I leave him lying on my bed. Miraculously, he hardly even squirms as I rush around my room grabbing the lube under the bed and the one tie I happen to own, which hangs in the closet. Julian’s eyes go right to the tie when I return.

“I hope you were serious,” I say.

He licks his lips. “I was.”

His voice has lowered and roughened, and it stirs me up all over again. I pull off my shirt, already sweltering within it, then free Julian of his as well. He puts up no resistance when I direct his arms over his head and tie his wrists together. He could lower his arms if he wanted to, but he leaves them that way, lying stretched out on my bed, his lean, toned chest heaving with excitement.

“I like you like this,” I say, looking up at him from under my eyebrows. “You’re much more tolerable.”

“If you want me tolerable, you should have found a sock to stuff in my mouth.”

“But then I wouldn’t get to hear you beg.” I lower down him, kissing his bare torso, stopping at his hips and the erection straining his jeans. “And trust me, you will beg.”

Julian draws a shuddery breath and worries his bottom lip. For once, he has no snappy comeback, no comeback at all. I have silenced the Julian Brooks, and all it took was a promise of sexual torment.

It’s a promise I intend to keep.

I mouth over his jeans, still not taking them off. Julian dumps his head back and groans, his body swaying toward me. I have the advantage here, however; I push on his hips to force him down and continue my slow, teasing exploration. I nose along him, giving him pressure but no skin-to-skin contact, a ghost of what he actually craves. Julian groans above me, shifting his hips as much as he can while I have control of them.

“Fuck, you weren’t kidding,” he says, vastly breathier than he was only a moment ago.

I pause to look up at him. “I wasn’t, and I also wasn’t kidding that you’re going to behave. I can and will stop and leave you suffering.”

“I believe you.” He assents too quickly, a frantic note in his voice. “I’m yours, Cam. Whatever you want.”

Christ, this is addicting. That grinning, smug bastard I’ve known since high school is

gone, replaced by this groveling, compliant version of Julian. Yet it's still him, undeniably him. And suddenly it hits me: All of that teasing meant to provoke a response. All these years he was just waiting for me to push him back.

I chuckle, and Julian cranes his head to look up at me.

“What? What is it?” he asks.

I put my hand over his cock where it's trying to punch through his jeans. Then I squeeze.

Julian's head drops back down. He groans through gritted teeth, any thought of questioning me swiftly forgotten.

“Darn,” I say. “You were doing so well, but I guess you need to wait a bit longer after all.”

I stop touching him entirely and sit back. Julian's head pops back up, his lips opening around a complaint he thinks better of voicing. Instead, he merely watches as I undo my own jeans and shimmy them off, then send my briefs to the floor after them. My cock is as hard as his, but unlike him, I can touch myself — and I do. I sit there between his spread legs and languidly stroke myself while Julian's eyes trace every movement. He looks like a thirsty man watching someone else drink water. His lips part. His breathing deepens. But he doesn't utter a word.

I thumb the head of my cock and the pre-cum beaded there. I'm every bit as turned on as him, but I'm not going to show it. I simply keep stroking, acting like I would be content to do nothing else for the rest of the night.

Then, at last, it happens.

“Please, Cam,” he gasps. “Holy fuck, you’re going to drive me insane.”

I bite back as much of my smirk as I can, but it’s a losing battle.

“That easy?” I say.

“Yes, God, yes, I’m that easy. I’m so easy. Anything you want, Cam, just please , for the love of Christ, touch me.”

He’s verging toward actual pain, it seems, and I started this whole thing on a whim. It’s not like I have a ton of experience bossing guys around in the bedroom or anything. It just felt right. But I show him mercy, finally peeling his jeans and briefs off and sitting on his thighs while squeezing lube into my palm.

Julian keeps his arms overhead, but when I lean toward him, he loops his bound wrists over my head and pulls me the rest of the way to his mouth. I grab our cocks in my fist as I give him my mouth. He whimpers pathetically, a noise I find especially delicious after spending so long teasing it out of him.

I’m not ready to give up on this yet. I stroke him more slowly than I could, even though that means I’m stroking myself that slowly too. I want harder and faster, but even more than that, I want Julian to writhe and whimper. And he certainly writhes and whimpers. Somewhat freer to move, he rolls his body up against mine, his kisses interrupted by groans. He pushes himself at my hand as much as he can, even with my body pinning him down.

I’m starting to give in. I can feel it in the way my hips move with his, in the way I sway with his body, searching for friction. I pump us harder, my hand trapped between our bodies as we abandon everything but this need that has driven us together against all odds. The fact that this thing overflowing inside me is happening because of Julian, that Julian, barely registers as my body screams for the final push it

needs.

I teased Julian for too long. He goes well before me, crying out into my mouth and bucking his body up at me so hard he almost knocks me free. I nestle my head down in the crook of his shoulder and keep on pumping, going fast, trying not to touch him so long it turns painful, chasing after him with blind urgency.

At last it hits, and warmth splatters our torsos, adding to the mess Julian already made. Our bodies are slick with sweat and cum, but for a few moments all we can do is pant and groan and roll our hips at each other as the waning dregs of the high drain out of us.

Finally, I flop atop Julian, limp with pleasure. His bound wrists remain looped behind my head, and he rests his hands on my back. I pant against his neck while holding our softening cocks, enjoying the way our chests press together with every ragged breath.

“Where did you learn that?” Julian says.

“I have no idea.” I’m in no position to lie at a moment like this. “I just ... thought of it.”

“Well, I’m damn glad you did. Seeing you like that was hot.”

I shouldn’t like it so much when he says that, but I do. Hell, I shouldn’t have him in my bed for the next week, but I do. None of this should be happening, but it sure is.

I climb out of bed, focusing on getting us cleaned up rather than the confusing mess I’ve created for myself. My thoughts will work themselves out over the next week, I’m sure. Besides, I don’t have much of a choice. When Julian’s involved, it seems like I’m going to do it whether it’s a good idea or not.

“Come to bed,” Julian says, holding out his unbound arms to me.

I go. Because it feels too damn good for me to say no. And for right now, I don’t want to.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Julian

“STAY,” I WHINE, pulling Cameron back down into bed with me.

He chuckles but doesn't shove me away, which is a dream come true in and of itself. I'm sure I'm awake, however, if only because of the light spearing into Cameron's bedroom and searing my eyes. The sunlight slashes across his bed. The sheets ensnare us like grasping vines, twisted and tangled from how we rolled around in them last night. I hug Cameron against my chest, burying my face against the back of his neck and breathing him in.

“I can't stay in bed all day,” he says, but he doesn't try to free himself from my grasp.

“Why not?” I retort like a petulant child.

“Because it's nearly noon and I have band practice in Seattle at one,” he says.

“Nnnnn.”

“Your disagreement is noted, but it's not going to stop me.”

Cameron turns in my arms, his face suddenly close to mine. Then the most miraculous thing happens. Cameron smooths my hair away from my face and leans forward to kiss me, morning breath and all.

“I won’t be gone that long,” he says. “Do you want food before I go? We can watch a movie or something when I get home. It won’t even be dinner time yet.”

“Why don’t I come with you?” I say.

From this close, there’s no way I could miss his wince.

“We don’t let people come to our practices,” he says. “It makes it weird. We need to play without worrying about an audience. It’s the only way it works.”

There’s something about the set of his mouth that makes me think there’s more to this than the band’s policy on practicing alone, but I don’t push it. I’ve already been luckier than I ever dared hope for, and I have the entire rest of the week to look forward to. Much as I don’t want to, I let him go, and Cameron slinks out of bed and pads to his bathroom.

I flop onto my back and listen to him brushing his teeth and getting ready for the day. It doesn’t take him long. He throws on clothes, combs his fingers through his hair, and stuffs his phone, wallet and keys into his pockets. He disappears for a bit, and a few minutes later he returns with half a bagel covered in cream cheese, which he sets on the nightstand. He holds the other half.

“Breakfast,” he says. “Or lunch, I guess. I haven’t slept this late in a while.”

“I guess your body needed some rest after all that late-night exercise,” I say with a waggle of eyebrows.

Cameron sighs and rolls his eyes, but he doesn’t seem genuinely upset, and trust me, I’ve seen him genuinely upset plenty of times.

He sits on the edge of the bed and scarfs down his bagel. I sit beside him, but only

pick at the half he brought for me. He brushes the crumbs off his jeans, then kisses me swiftly.

“Don’t burn down my apartment,” he says. “I left a key on the kitchen table so you can let yourself in and out if you want. There’s not really anything to do around here, but the weather is weirdly nice today if you want to walk down to the park or something.”

“Maybe I’ll just raid your underwear drawer,” I say.

He shoves my shoulder. “You’ve seen my underwear. It’s not interesting.”

He rises from where he sits on the edge of the bed.

“I really have to go now,” he says. “Please don’t do anything crazy.”

I put up my hands in a placating gesture. “I probably won’t even bother getting out of bed.”

“Typical,” he grumbles. Yet he smiles and kisses me one last time before grabbing his guitar and finally heading out of the apartment.

I hold in my sigh until I hear the door click shut behind him. I lay spread out on his bed, arms wide, the sheets messy around me, the whole space smelling like him, like us, and I can’t imagine feeling more content for the rest of my life. What I’d give for things to stay this way forever. I want to see him off in the morning. I want to eat half his bagel for breakfast. I want to wait eagerly for him to come home. I want to do all that boring domestic stuff that never interested me before. Until now, I thought I’d want to keep living my playboy lifestyle indefinitely. It never crossed my mind to imagine a real future with Cameron of all people, yet it’s hard to swat away the fantasy when I’m enveloped in his space.

I leap out of bed, too restless to lie there waiting for the minutes to tick by. I brush my teeth and freshen up a little before throwing on clothes. Then I make the bed. But I don't simply make the bed, I also clean up the clothes strewn about it. I straighten the clutter on the nightstand. I tidy up what I can in Cameron's room, so that when he comes home he gets an instant physical reminder that I was thinking about him all day.

It doesn't take very long, however, and soon I'm right back where I was — bored and restless. I wander through the tiny apartment, mentally collecting all the miscellaneous detritus that makes up Cameron. I feel like a character in a detective game. Every picture frame, every book, every shirt in his laundry, every dirty coffee mug in his sink — they're pieces of the full picture. He has a weird and random collection of mugs. Some must be gifts. He reads a lot of biographies about musicians, apparently, but there's also a few fantasy novels thrown into the mix, which is an interest of his I never knew about.

And then there are the photos of his mom.

He keeps one on the IKEA shelf in his bedroom, a photo of him and his mother at Mount Rushmore, presumably when they drove out here for their big move. There's another in the living room, however, and this one is old enough that it's faded around the edges. Cameron is a little kid holding a guitar way too large for his tiny frame, and his mother is showing him how to pluck the strings.

My heart swells like it might burst my chest open. If there's one thing we've always had in common, it's being mama's boys. I understand this love, this connection. Even when we were younger, I understood why he regarded me with such suspicion. I never knew my dad, but he knew his, and the guy left in a really shitty way. He wanted to make sure his mom didn't get hurt again so soon after that whole mess, and I was a wild factor. At least I've started to earn my way into his good graces.

There isn't much else to find in Cameron's apartment, and I'm going to go crazy if I keep myself cooped up all day, so I scoop up the key he left out for me on the counter, throw on my shoes and head down the stairs and outside.

Cameron was right. It's a gorgeous day. Despite Seattle settling firmly into fall, it isn't raining. It isn't even gray. Someone alert the press. It's October and the sun is shining. A mild breeze kicks up, stirring my hair and keeping me cool in my hoodie as I walk up the road and toward that grocery store we went to yesterday. I figure if I have nothing better to do, I might as well buy some stuff for dinner and see if I can surprise him with a meal. That would be a thing he liked, right? Plus, he cooked for me yesterday. It's only fair I try to return the favor when I've got nothing better to do.

I grab a basket by the entrance to the supermarket and wander around aimlessly. I'm not sure what I want to make, but I'll let inspiration strike as and when it will.

I'm in the pasta aisle staring at the boxes and wondering if I could make a noodle dish that's significantly different from what we ate yesterday when someone calls my name.

I spin around, nearly jumping out of my skin — because who the hell in Nowhere, Washington, could possibly know me? Then a huge smile cracks my face open.

"Miss Ortiz?" I say.

Cameron's mom strides up to me with her grocery basket dangling from her arm. "Oh my God. Julian. It really is you. I can't believe it. What are you doing here?"

I have no idea what to tell her. I can't be here for a conference. I'm too far from Seattle. I settle for a half-truth. "Just visiting."

She shakes her head, but luckily she seems too surprised to bother digging into my

insufficient response.

“That’s amazing. I can’t believe we’re running into each other in a little town like this. What are the odds?” she says.

Heh. Yeah. What are the odds, indeed?

“You live here?” I ask, trying to shift the focus onto her.

“Yes, right down the road,” she says. “My cousin has a house here, and when Cameron and I moved out here, we stayed with her at first. Then Cameron moved out on his own. Does he know you’re in town? You should reach out. Or I could let him know.”

A pang strikes my chest. I was dancing around this topic because I wasn’t sure, but of course Cameron didn’t tell her about me being here. Of course he kept it a secret from his mother, whom he’s so close to and so protective over. I might understand his reasons, but that doesn’t make it hurt any less. Does he really believe I’m some kind of threat to this woman’s happiness? Does he think she’d be angry if she found out we were spending the week together?

“Is everything alright?” Miss Ortiz asks.

I shake myself, slapping on a smile. Luckily, I’ve got plenty of practice at being charming regardless of my true feelings.

“Yeah, of course,” I say. “Jet lag. I only got here yesterday. I’m trying to make myself eat, but the time difference has my stomach all messed up.”

I lift my empty shopping basket as though in explanation.

“It’s a big trip,” Miss Ortiz says. “You should join us for dinner while you’re here. I make Cameron come over once a week for a family meal. I’m sure you’d be welcome to join us. You boys were always friends, even back in high school.”

Even with all my practice at faking it, it’s getting harder and harder to cling to the smile that wants to drop off my lips. Friends. Right. If only she knew the half of it.

Actually, Miss Ortiz, I’ve been hopelessly pining after your son since the day I met him, but I seem to inspire nothing but hatred in him, which I guess is why he’s hiding me from you.

What would Cameron think if he knew about this chance encounter? I have to make sure he doesn’t find out, but that requires Miss Ortiz not saying anything to him.

“Actually, I’m only here for a couple days,” I lie smoothly. “It’s a work acquaintance kind of thing, so I can’t stay long. In and out, you know how it is.”

“That’s a shame,” Miss Ortiz says, and holy shit, I think she actually means that. “Well, if you find yourself in the area again, let me or Cameron know. I bet he’d even give you a place to stay if you asked.”

“Yeah, I’ll ... I’ll ask him about crashing on his couch next time. Save on the hotel fees.”

Miss Ortiz wishes me well and heads off, but I have to stand there in the pasta aisle for several minutes after that, replaying the lies I sold her to avoid telling her that I’m spending the week in her son’s bed. Lies I sold her because evidently Cameron is ashamed of this.

No matter how many sweet good morning kisses we share, at the end of the day, I’m a secret he prefers to keep tucked away in the dark.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Cameron

YOU WERE NEVER mine.

Always someone else's.

Always in demand.

And I, I stayed behind.

But if fate is kind...

She'll bring us back together.

I sing the lyrics to myself as I drive home from band practice. Today went well, way better than I thought it would. I gave the band a bit more of the song I've been working on, and Erin was into it immediately. When she sang my words, it brought them to life in a way I never imagined. They felt so strong, so big, so real.

The lyrics have been coming to me easier lately. That one line about fate bringing two people back together has grown into an entire chorus. Verses sprang up around it. With a little more tweaking, I think the song will be ready. And that festival we auditioned for could provide the perfect opportunity to take it on its maiden voyage and see how a real crowd reacts.

My hands are sweaty on the steering wheel as I race up I-5 contemplating hearing my words belted out in front of a huge crowd. The festival would be the biggest show The Ten Hours have ever booked, but getting a spot is certainly not a guarantee. These kinds of things are highly competitive, and we're a tiny local band. We don't even have a manager. It's mostly Erin holding shit together and making sure we have demo tapes to send out and stuff like that. But if we could play a festival like that, we'd have to seriously consider our future as a band. And my stupid little song might be one of the things that gets us there.

Something still nags me about the song, but I don't dare bring it up in front of the group. It sounds slightly wrong in Erin's voice. Maybe it's because I wrote those lyrics, and I've heard them in my own head and in my own voice so many times thanks to that. Yet as I sing the words to myself in the car, there's a certain ... rightness to it. Some of those lines ... they're me. They came straight from my life. They're not simply there to sound pretty. They exist because they matter to me.

I could sing the lyrics passably enough, but I don't think I could ever do it in front of a crowd. There's a reason that Erin is our frontman. Her charisma is off the charts, and she soaks up the energy that crowds give her, rather than cowering away from it like I would. Without my guitar to shield me, I wouldn't know what to do with myself on a stage.

So suggesting I be the one to sing that song is completely ridiculous. Erin is the one with the stage presence and the pipes. I should stick to my guitar.

In any case, the song is complete enough that I can tell Mom about it next time I see her. Tonight, I'm eager to tell Julian about it, which is a strange feeling. I can't deny it, however; I'm excited to get home and tell him all about the practice and my song and our hopes for the festival. It's ... it's kind of nice having someone to go home to, feeling that buzz of eagerness to see them again, hoping to find them waiting and just as excited to see me.

Too bad it's only temporary, but I should enjoy it while it lasts. There's no point in dwelling on something that's inevitable. I'm not going back to New Jersey, and Julian has his big important East Coast job, so I'm sure he's not moving either. This week will be a strange, potentially wonderful blip in our lives, but only a blip.

That doesn't make it less confusing.

I almost miss my exit while I'm busy trying to untangle my feelings. They're like a ball of yarn knotted up in my gut. Julian and I are too different to ever work as a couple, thanks to both our personalities and our lifestyles. Sure, last night was great and this morning was wonderful, but that stuff can't last. It's a fake honeymoon period for a relationship that doesn't exist. Hence why I didn't bother telling Mom that he's in town.

Well, that and the shame.

There's no way I could tell her he's here, let alone that he's here for me. I don't want to bring up all that old crap. We're both doing great out here. There's absolutely no reason to ruin it by dredging up hurtful memories. I mean, she was just getting back on her feet when she caught Julian making a move on me right there in front of her. How could I possibly tell her that I was seeing that guy?

I don't want it to sour my mood, so I shove it aside as I pull into my designated parking space at the apartment complex. The sun has already set, which is typical for Seattle this time of year, but band practice did, admittedly, run longer than I thought it would. We fell into a good rhythm and we didn't want to stop, especially when we started working on the new song. Sometimes, you have to go with the flow of the music if the vibes are right, and today the vibes were so, so right.

I grab my guitar out of the back seat and head for the entrance of the apartment complex. I push every thought aside that isn't how good that practice was or how

eager I am to see Julian. I have big plans tonight, and I'm not going to let future regrets sour them. In fact, I have such big plans that my stomach flutters with nerves. I intend to take a leap with him tonight, a leap I don't take all that often. But something about being with him... I've known since the first time we got together that I wanted to offer this some day, offer it specifically to him. Maybe that's crazy of me, but I planned it all out in my head, and this is the perfect night for it. I just have to keep my head in the game and get to my apartment without thinking about anything but the present.

Julian is waiting for me when I open my apartment door. I don't even manage to unlock it myself before he throws it open. He's wearing nothing but his briefs and an apron he must have stolen out of my closet.

I blink, too stunned to cross the threshold before he physically drags me into my own apartment.

"Don't leave the door open," he says. "I'm practically naked under this thing."

"What ... what the hell are you doing?" I ask.

"I went to the store while you were gone, and I want to make you dinner, but I thought I should look the part too."

"But it's only four o'clock. You're going to dress like that for the next several hours?"

"Okay, I may not have planned that part out," Julian says. "I saw your car pull up and threw this on as quickly as I could, but it's getting kind of chilly."

"Yeah, I bet it is. It's October and my heating isn't that good."

“My nipples could cut glass.”

I can't help chuckling. “Put on some damn clothes. You can put the apron back on and cook in it later if you want to, but it's not going to do you any good if you freeze first.”

“But you're surprised right?” Julian says, even as he slips off the apron and I get a glimpse of his bare chest and abs before he covers them in a sweater. “Like, good surprised?”

“Yes, I can definitely say I'm surprised.”

I cross the living room and set my guitar on its stand. Julian follows, and the moment I turn, he has his hands on my hips and he's leaning in for a kiss. I indulge him, and myself, and let him tip toward me. We stand by the window making out until I finally push him away.

“Doesn't seem like you're thinking about dinner,” I say.

“It's like you said, it's only four o'clock.” His eyes flicker down, though I'm dressed normally. “We've got plenty of time if we want to.”

Nerves batter my stomach. It's now or never. He's given me the perfect opening, and if I don't take it, I probably won't get a second chance tonight.

“Let me at least shower first,” I say. “I left this morning without doing that because someone didn't let me get out of bed.”

“Did your band comment on you smelling like hot, sweaty sex?”

“No,” I drawl. “And I didn't.”

“I could fix that, you know. When’s the next practice?”

“Not for a few days,” I say.

“Then I guess I have time to work my magic.”

I can’t believe I’m laughing at this corny shit. Maybe it’s the nerves. Julian lays it on thick, wagging his eyebrows at me.

I turn us around and set him down on the sofa. He sits under me, his eyes flickering to my crotch, which is now at eye-level.

“Can you relax and let me shower?” I say. “I won’t be that long.”

“Is there any point when I’m going to mess it up as soon as possible?” he says.

“Yes, there is.”

He isn’t listening to me. He leans forward, nuzzling at my crotch through my jeans, and it takes all of my willpower to push him away and step out of range. I know he’d suck me off right there without a word of complaint, but that will derail my plans for the evening, and I’m not letting anything come between me and what might be my only shot at this.

“Stay there, Julian,” I say. “I’m going to shower. It’ll be worth it, I promise.”

“I don’t care what you smell like,” he says.

“Well, I do. Do you want me to be distracted because I’m thinking about how badly I wish I’d taken a shower?”

He huffs, but flops back on the couch. “Fine, but I’m telling you, it’s going to be pointless. I’m going to ruin it the second you’re out of the water. On second thought, can I come with you?” He perks right back up.

“No,” I say sternly. “A man needs ten minutes alone once in a while.”

His pout returns, fiercer than ever before. He crosses his arms as he sinks back on the couch. “You’re a cruel man, Cam.”

“Only because you like it so much.”

That shuts him up. His lips flap, but after last night, he doesn’t have a good way to refute that.

I turn away while I have a chance and stalk into my bedroom. I don’t take much into the bathroom with me, hopping into the shower while my resolve holds. Damn, but it was hard to walk away from him when he was looking at me like that. This hold he has on me better fade by the end of the week or I’ll be in serious trouble when he leaves. I can’t spend the rest of my life pining after a guy who lives three thousand miles away, a guy I feel I need to keep secret from my mother. What kind of pathetic life would that be?

Hopefully, what I have in mind for tonight will help get him out of my system once and for all.

But first, I need to get him into my system.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Julian

I TRY TO WATCH something while Cam showers, but eventually the anticipation makes me itchy, and I flop onto his bed instead. I listen to the water run while staring at the ceiling. Does he really need to get that clean when we both know I have every intention of messing it up the second I can?

I bolt upright when the water stops. My heart beats far too hard. Maybe that's why my head is so light. Yeah, definitely. That's the reason...

Cameron emerges from the bathroom attached to his bedroom wearing nothing but a towel around his waist, and my mouth goes dry.

"Feeling better?" I manage to ask.

"Yeah. Needed that," Cameron says, but his voice is weirdly quiet. His throat bobs. "So, um, anyway, I was thinking..."

If this is about dinner, I'm going to fucking explode.

He paces toward where I sit on the bed, pausing at the edge just out of reach. My hands tingle with the urge to grab him and toss him onto the mattress.

For a moment, Cameron looks at the carpet under his bare feet. Then he brings his eyes up to mine, his gaze determined.

“I want you,” he says, the words bursting out of him.

“I want you too, Cam. That’s why—”

“No,” he cuts in. “I want you a specific way. I want ... all of it.”

The only reason I understand what he means is because I’ve known him so long. Cameron wouldn’t ask for “all of it” unless he really meant “all of it.” As far as we can go.

“I don’t do this that often,” he says. “But I’d like to do it tonight. If you want to.”

How could I not? I blink at him, too stunned to speak, then give in to the urges buzzing inside me. I grab him, throwing him to the mattress beside me. It dislodges his towel, but I get my mouth on his before I have a chance to appreciate that. He grabs for my shoulders and murmurs with surprise, but lets me keep kissing him, lets me drink in the taste of him.

I pull away breathless. Cameron swallows again, clearly nervous. Is that why he took such a long shower? It’s just like him to feel like he needs to be perfect when I couldn’t care any less. I don’t care if he’s sweaty from practice. I want as much of him as I can get my hands, and my mouth, on.

That thought sparks a bolt of inspiration. I flash back to the tub in that hotel room, to what I left undone when I flew back to New Jersey. No longer. After this night, there will be nothing left between us.

I flip him onto his stomach so abruptly that he gasps. I shuffle downward, grabbing his ass and spreading him open. Cameron is still grumbling with confusion when I dive down and finally get my mouth on him.

The complaints instantly wither into moans — but Cameron’s voice isn’t the only one filling up this heated bedroom. I’ve waited so long to have him this way, and I groan the moment I lick the tight ring of his entrance. Every shiver, every shift echoes on my tongue, unbearably delicious. I use the tip of my tongue to torment him, delighting in how he squirms with arousal under my hands.

“This isn’t ... isn’t what I meant,” Cameron pants.

I pull up with a deliberately wet and filthy pop. “I know,” I say, “but I’m greedy. And this will make it better anyway.”

Cameron’s laugh is breathy. “You’re greedy? I’m the one just lying here.”

“And that’s how you’re going to stay. You’re mine tonight, Cam. You said so yourself.”

He doesn’t respond, but I can hear his every breath, and that’s response enough. I lower my head again, impatient with talking, impatient with anything that isn’t the feast awaiting me. I meant absolutely every word I said. I’m going to drown myself in him tonight. I’m going to know every intimate inch of him. I’m going to erase that distance of time and hurt and whatever the hell else is standing between us. If that encounter in the grocery store showed me anything, it’s that I don’t have much time to reach him, to convince him this is real.

When I get my tongue inside him, Cameron lifts his hips up at me. The first crack in his cool, icy exterior. His body betrays his desire as I prod inside, his hips pushing at me and his muscles relaxing under my attention.

I mouth over him, tongue and lips lavishing everything I can reach. My cock is going to punch a hole in my briefs, but it takes a few more licks before I finally pull away.

The sight that greets me almost ends the whole affair then and there.

Cam lies facedown on the bed, his cheek against the mattress to reveal panting lips and a glassy eye. He grips the comforter beneath him. His hips remain lifted, his perfect ass waiting for me.

“God damn,” I rasp at myself.

Then I’m flying out of my clothes, hands shaky and fumbling like I haven’t done this plenty of times before. It’s different when it’s him. It’s different when the person in bed with me is someone I care about this much.

I get myself ready at superhuman speed. Cameron shifts his hips with impatience, which nearly makes me fumble the lube. I swear I only manage this simple operation because it means I get to touch him and listen to how he sucks in a sharp, needy breath.

I almost get lost fingering at his hole. I could sit back and simply watch his reactions for the rest of the night, but my finger is sliding easily into him, and Cameron is rocking himself on the digit in a clear request for more.

Slow , I remind myself. He says he doesn’t do this often.

My heart somersaults. If he doesn’t bottom very much, why do it for me? My heart wants to believe it’s because he trusts me, because he perhaps even likes me, but that runs up against the fact that he’s hiding me while I’m here, that he’s ashamed to tell his mother I’m in town, that he’s keeping me at arm’s length.

I can’t focus on that. My cock is throbbing for attention, and so is Cameron, apparently.

I stand up on my knees behind him, lining my cock up against him. I let it drag over him a few times, the head catching at his hole but not pressing inside quite yet. Then he lets out the sweetest, most desperate mangling of my name I've ever heard, and I lose my tenuous grip on restraint.

Sinking into him is like enveloping myself in warm velvet. He squeezes my head so tightly stars burst behind my suddenly closed eyes. I resist the urge to delve in fast and deep, taking it slow in case Cameron isn't ready. But I can only hold back so long. I push deeper, searching for more, holding him by the hips to feel for his slightest negative reaction.

"Fuck, Cam," I groan. "You feel incredible."

He doesn't respond, and I pry my eyes open. He's fully facedown in the mattress, his back curling to push his hips at me. His knuckles are white on the comforter, and every deep breath shifts the muscles corded in his back.

"Tell me, Cam," I urge. "Tell me how you like it."

He seemed to enjoy bossing me around last night, but two can play at that game. And I really do want to know what's going through his head. He's hard to read even when speared on my cock.

I drag back when he doesn't answer, pulling all the way out even though my balls throb as I do.

"Cam, I'm not continuing until you talk to me."

At last, he turns his head, and I've never seen that perfect tan skin of his so beautifully flushed.

“Fuck you,” he snarls breathlessly. “Are you going to fuck me or not?”

My cock screams. His words stab deep into my gut, tangling my insides like someone is trying to twist my innards into balloon animals. I can’t stand another word. I fit myself against him, pushing in faster this time. Cameron’s cheek is against the mattress, and I get to watch pleasure contort his face into a gorgeous disaster as I bottom out.

No more hesitation. I grip his hips hard and let myself go, pulling back to plunge right back in. He’s tight and hot around me, his ass squeezing me every time I thrust. Groans trip past his lips as I jam into him. Cameron even starts working himself onto me, shifting his body to match the pace of my hips as I throw myself into him.

I lose myself in our rhythm. I only feel half responsible for what’s going on here. Cameron’s rocking contributes just as much as anything I’m doing, until I can barely tell who’s propelling us through this frenzy of sweat and breath and desire.

Cameron wriggles a hand under himself, clearly reaching for his cock. I want to do it for him, but the sight of him pumping desperately as I fuck him is a temptation I’m too fragile to resist. He squeezes his eyes shut, his whole face tense with overwhelming need. And I want nothing but to pour more into him. I want nothing but to make him overflow, make him burst with how much he needs this. How much he needs me .

I dig my fingers in as I slam into him. The bed creaks in protest, but even if it collapsed beneath us I’m not sure I’d stop. Cameron is crying out uninhibited, his hand stroking frantically, his face crushed against the mattress as he throws himself toward and away from the pleasure I give him.

Let yourself have this, Cam. Just once, let yourself take what you want.

I infuse that wish into every snap of my hips, losing myself somewhere along the way. My body lies outside me, screaming for attention, but I'm transfixed by Cameron. Only when he clenches around me am I jolted back into myself.

I grunt with surprise, eyes snapping shut. My head tilts back as I delve into the intensified pressure inside him.

"Holy shit, just like that," I moan. "God, that's good."

I don't know if Cameron hears me or if he's too lost for that, but he squeezes me either way, and fireworks pop behind my closed eyes. My body slaps against his as I claw after the edge and the sweet release awaiting us there. Cameron is crying out beneath me, so I dare not change a single thing as I seek out the peak.

It hits me like the sun appearing suddenly over the horizon. One moment, it's all darkness behind my closed eyes. Then release explodes before me in a blinding white wave.

I feel like I scream, but it's probably closer to a moan. I'm lost inside Cameron, delirious with more than mere orgasm. Even in a mindless moment of pure pleasure, I'm keenly aware that it's Cameron who did this to me. Cameron, a guy I've longed to share this with since nearly the moment I met him.

I come back to Cameron moaning into the sheets as he spills over his own hand. Is it the same for him? Is that bliss etched into his slackening features because of an orgasm like any orgasm? Does it matter to him that it's me?

My body is loose and light, but the relief doesn't quite reach my head or heart. They remain heavy as I ease myself out of the beautiful man lying exhausted on the bed beneath me.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Cameron

JULIAN INSISTS ON cleaning both of us up. I submit to his fussing mostly because I'm too fucked out to want to move. It's been a while since I've bottomed, and I don't remember it feeling quite that good.

I'm never, ever admitting that to him.

The last thing the world needs is a Julian Brooks with a swollen head because of his topping prowess. Nope, this one is going with me to the grave.

It's not even dinner time, but Julian climbs into bed with me regardless, snuggling up against my back as we lie naked under the sheets. The sun went down early, leaving my room dark enough to make falling asleep like this before eight p.m. powerfully tempting. Lord, what am I becoming? I barely got out of bed with him this morning, dragged myself to band practice, then came home and ended up right back where I started the day. Good thing this is temporary or I'd never be a functioning adult again.

Is that how adulthood works? You go to your job and you cook dinner and that's it? Part of me always hoped it was more like ... well, more like this. I never wanted a life where I tended to hobbies and responsibilities at the expense of passion. With Julian, it almost feels like I could have both, but that's probably the endorphins speaking.

Julian nuzzles against my back. “How do you feel?” he asks.

“That is such a lame question,” I grumble.

“I see the high has worn off,” Julian says. “I guess I should have worked harder.”

I don’t respond, mostly because I can’t fathom what “working harder” might entail. I’m so thoroughly done over that anything more sounds as much like a threat as an enticement. Yet heat tickles my belly, suggesting perhaps there are greater heights I’d be willing to explore with him.

Yeah, that’s definitely the endorphins talking.

Julian sighs, warm breath blowing against my back. Contentment wafts off his body and laps against my skin with his every exhale.

“I’ve been thinking about getting my tongue in you since we got in that tub in my hotel room,” Julian says. “I can’t get enough of you, Cam. Christ, I could do it all again right now.”

There’s enough heat in his voice that I set a hand on the arm he has wrapped around my chest in an attempt to calm him.

“You could, but I couldn’t,” I say. “I haven’t done that in a while.”

Incredible as it was, my body is reeling from the experience. I stood under the hot water in that shower delaying things due to nerves for longer than I care to admit. In the end, it didn’t even matter. Julian was so ridiculously ... devoted that it short-circuited any anxiety trying to inhabit my brain.

“I’m surprised,” Julian says slowly, carefully. “Surprised you’d, you know, do that

with me. If it's been a while and all."

His stilted speech reveals his nerves. The hell is he nervous about though? I just let him top me, and I might do it again before he leaves.

"We can do it the other way too if you want," he says. "I mean, apparently we're both at least a little vers, so fair play and all that."

"Fair play?"

"Well, that and I really want your dick in me."

I snort a laugh. "My dick isn't going to work anymore by the time you leave if we keep going like this."

I expect him to chuckle or retort. His silence sets off a warning in the back of my mind. Is it the mention of the inevitable future barreling toward us? It's not a secret that this is going to end. He bought a round trip ticket. In a few days, he'll get on a plane and return to New Jersey, and both our lives will return to normal. They have to.

"You know," I say, trying to lighten the mood, "we can keep visiting after this. I mean, it's been fine and all, so there's no reason not to do it again except for the cost of the flights, but if we look for windows where the tickets are cheaper, we could work it out."

"Yeah, we could do that," he says, but it sounds half-hearted at best.

Maybe the travel isn't worth it to him. He can afford the tickets way more easily than a barista and musician, so maybe it sounds like an unfair burden. Maybe he's having so much fun jetting around for his conferences that it wouldn't be worth the trouble to

see only me, but then why come here at all?

“We don’t have to,” I say.

“No, no,” he says quickly. “No, it’s fine. We can do it that way.”

I shimmy out of his grasp and turn over to face him in the bed, staying far enough away that I can see his face. I expected satiation, peace, contentment, but tension tightens the skin around his eyes and mouth.

“If you don’t want to, you can say so,” I say. “It won’t hurt my feelings. This is just a visit. If it’s done after this week, that’s alright.”

The tension pulling his face taut cinches. From this close, it would be impossible to miss the flinch that flickers through his features.

“Is something wrong?” I ask.

“No,” he says, “just...”

“Just what?”

Julian seems to gather himself, collecting words in one big jumble that bunches up behind his tongue.

“Do we need to keep doing it this way?” he asks. He rushes on before I can squeeze in a question. “I mean, if it’s working for both of us, does it need to stay this way? The distance is a lot, but I’m sure we could figure something out. I have money. I can travel back and forth as much as we need. Maybe I could see if my company has a West Coast office or something. I don’t know. I’m just saying that the possibility is out there if we wanted to ... to take this seriously, you know?”

Silence drops between us like a stone plunking into a still pond. Every ripple makes his words echo in my head and washes away all that languid contentment.

“Julian, I’m not sure we could... I mean, the distance is so much. You can afford it, but I can’t, and that’s not really fair.”

“I don’t care,” he says. He scoops up my hands, squeezing them between our chests. “I’ll pay for it. My money isn’t good for anything back in New York anyway. All I do is work and pay for my overpriced apartment.”

I shake my head. “I couldn’t let you do that. It’s not fair.”

“I don’t care about fair.”

“Well, I do. It would feel like we aren’t equal partners if you had to carry the cost of everything on your back.”

“We can solve that,” Julian says. “We can sort it out. When you’re a famous musician you can pay me back.”

He attempts a smile, but it lacks its usual dazzling intensity. I keep trying to deflect and watch his frustration grow with every counter.

Finally, his patience snaps.

“What is this really about?” he says.

“What?”

“Cam, come on,” he says. “What’s the real problem here? I know you’re holding back. You’ve been holding back this whole time. I thought this week might change

things, but I'm starting to doubt that. So what's the actual issue? Please, I need to know. I need to know why I'm ... why I can't have you."

I swallow, throat suddenly dry. I wasn't planning to tell him this ever, least of all after a night like this. Then he continues.

"I ran into your mom at the supermarket today," he says quietly, like a confession. "She was surprised to see me."

"You ran into Mom?"

Fuck, that definitely wasn't part of the plan. In fact, I intended to keep the two of them as far apart as possible.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I didn't know she'd be there. She actually spotted me first. I ... I didn't tell her. I gave her some vague excuse instead. It seemed like ... like you didn't want her to know that I'm here. Is that true?"

My worlds collide all at once. I thought I could keep these two spheres separate, thought I could live out a stupid fantasy for a week then go on like it never happened, but it seems fate conspired against me.

If fate is kind...

The walls of my little apartment close in around me. There's no more deflecting this, no more pretending I can maintain the partition between Julian and my life. He's here. He's all over my apartment, my body. It's a matter of time before that spills out to touch my real life.

Why did it have to be my mother, though?

“Fine,” I say in a burst. “Fine. Yes. It’s... Yes, I didn’t want her to know.”

“But why?” he pleads.

“Because... Damn it, Julian. Because... Because you hurt her, and I can’t let someone who’s hurt her anywhere near her. I don’t want to tell her what we’re doing because it feels like a betrayal, okay? It feels like stabbing her in the back.”

Confusion knots his eyebrows. He’s still gripping my hands.

“I would never hurt your mother, Cam. Never,” he says.

“Not now, but back then...”

The confusion only thickens, and I take a breath before attempting to explain.

“Back when our moms were dating,” I say, “there was that one time when they wanted us all to have dinner together. We were kind of at each other’s throats back then, but we got through dinner. Then ... then you followed me to my room. When they found us, you had your hand on my thigh, and you were leaning in like you were about to kiss me.”

Understanding opens his expression. “That’s what this is about? But...”

“They stayed together for a while, but I saw the look in Mom’s eyes that night,” I cut in. “I know my mother. If she thought there was something between us, she’d sacrifice her happiness for mine. So ... so I hated you for that. I hated you for their breakup. Dating your mom was the first time mine seemed happy since Dad abandoned us, and she lost that because of some stupid flirting that wasn’t going to go anywhere.”

He stares at me in mute horror.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I know it’s unfair, but I ... I’ve always felt guilty about it. If I told Mom that we were dating, maybe she’d think she made the right choice back then. I don’t want that for her. She deserved happiness, and we took it away from her. How could I tell her that she was right?”

“That was so long ago. We were kids,” Julian says. “Everyone has moved on, Cameron.”

“Maybe I haven’t. Not completely. Every time I look at you I think about it. Every time we talk about the future, I think about how she’ll react. I ... I just can’t right now, Julian. I’m sorry. Maybe some day, but for now ... you appeared in my life again out of nowhere, and I don’t know what to do with this. I don’t know what to do with our pasts. I don’t know what to tell Mom. I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to feel ... completely safe around you. What if we broke up and it was all for nothing? Again. What if it dredges up a past my mother moved three thousand miles to forget?”

“I think she should get to make that decision, Cam,” Julian says. “You can’t make it for her.”

“I don’t know,” I say, voice dropping to a whisper, eyes dropping to the sheets.

Silence wedges itself between us. Julian lets go of my hand.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Julian

THAT CAN'T BE IT. That cannot be what's behind all this.

I sit up in the bed, heedless of the sheets falling to my hips and the chill against my bare skin. All of these years, all of this resentment — it can't stem from one stupid, simple moment in Cameron's bedroom years ago. I was only half-serious. Sure, I leaned in to kiss him, but it was nothing. It was silly nonsense. Has Cameron seriously held onto that moment all this time? How can he believe that that is why our mothers broke up? It had nothing to do with us. They were adults. Sure, they wanted us to get along, but we could not have possibly precipitated their breakup with a silly, meaningless moment of harmless flirtation.

Cameron sits up beside me. "Are you okay?"

For once, I'm speechless. I flounder for words, but my lips flap uselessly before I manage to find them.

In the end, all I manage is, "You really think..."

"I don't know," Cameron says. "I can't ever know for sure. But you asked why I hesitate around you, and that's the reason. I can't forget about it. I can't help wondering."

I chance a look at him. "Have you ever asked your mom if we had anything to do

with the breakup?”

Cameron shifts beside me. “Well, no, but...”

Christ, he hasn’t even asked her. He doesn’t even know. He’s simply held on to this assumption, and his anger around it, for so long that it’s become settled fact for him. And it might well ruin the best thing either us ever have.

“Would you ask her?” I try.

The skin around his eyes tightens in a flinch.

“I don’t know,” he says, but what I hear is “no.” “What if it’s painful for her?” he continues. “I don’t want to bring it up if she doesn’t want to think about it.”

“It’s been years, Cam. Give your mother a little credit. She always seemed strong and capable to me. I think she can handle it.”

He’s staring down at the sheets as he twists them between his hands. I therefore only catch the edge of his grimace.

“But—”

“I’m not asking her, Julian,” he snaps.

When he looks up, those dark eyes of his blaze. It isn’t anger. That would be too simple, too obvious. What shimmers in those inky depths is raw, unfiltered fear.

All my objections die on my tongue. This topic clearly triggers something in him. He might be overreacting, but his response is entirely genuine. This is the first time I’ve glimpsed the scars his father left when he walked out of Cameron’s life. It’s a pain I

don't carry myself. How can I mourn a man I never knew? But as I stare into Cameron's eyes, I watch him relive the day his father left like it happened this very morning. Fair or not, what happened with our moms after that got all tangled up in that memory, to the point that the breakup brings him right back to the most traumatic day of his life. No wonder he refuses to go near it.

I want to hug him. I want to touch him and tell him it's going to be okay. I want to show him that this is different, that he's throwing away something that could be so good because of a phantom that can't hurt him anymore. He's okay. His mom is okay. My mom is okay. Everyone only wants him to be happy, but I don't know how to convince Cameron of that.

He's trapped in a past I got sucked into by chance, and I have no idea how to free him from it.

WE GET TAKE OUT for dinner and eat it awkwardly on the couch. We'll use my groceries tomorrow, Cameron promises, but the food can rot there on the counter for all I care. The tension between us never dissipates, but it fades enough that we can pretend everything's fine long enough to eat and go to bed. I don't touch him, just roll over onto my side and try to sleep.

My mind never quite settles. I toss and turn, replaying our conversation all night long. When morning creeps into Cameron's room, I feel more exhausted than when we laid down last night.

"I need to work," Cameron says. "I wasn't able to get anyone to cover this shift, sorry."

He doesn't seem sorry, and I'm not sure I feel sorry either. Is this even true or did he just want an excuse to get away from me today? I kiss him goodbye, but a tiny kernel of relief wriggles into my chest when the apartment door closes behind him.

Then the pacing begins.

I can't stay still, but I have nowhere to go. I don't know this little town he lives in. I'm only here to see Cameron, who will apparently never feel the way I do about him because of a whole fucked up web of memories I play only a small part in. I didn't think I came here with any expectations, but maybe I was kidding myself by thinking that. That conversation from last night still weighs on me. It perches on my shoulders like birds digging their talons into my skin and squawking in my ears. No matter how many laps I make around Cameron's apartment, I can't drive them off.

I just don't get it. How can he keep himself so trapped in the past, and such a ridiculous past at that? I used to call him brother because I liked getting a rise out of him, but maybe I pushed it too far. I didn't realize he was hurting this way. I didn't realize how deep the scars went. Maybe all my harmless jokes cut more keenly than I assumed. I just wanted his attention. I was young and stupid and hopelessly enamored with him, and I didn't know how to make him look at me except by teasing him. All that time, all I wanted was this, a chance to be close to him, a chance to be myself around him.

I guess he didn't like what he found. Not enough to give me a shot, anyway.

Eventually, I give up and leave the apartment complex. I have no reason to return to the grocery store for the third day in a row, but I don't know where else to go. If we were in Seattle, I could keep myself busy, but Cameron lives in some random suburb that's mostly apartments and houses and grocery stores. I wander aimlessly around the block, pounding my frustration out into each step on the sidewalk. When I loop back around and find myself at Cameron's apartment again, my mindset hasn't improved.

Defeated, I head back inside. I try to watch something, but I go down almost the moment I sit on the couch. My night of anxious, spiraling worry left me exhausted,

and before I even realize that I fell asleep, I'm startling awake on the couch. The streaming service paused at some point. It's asking me if I'm planning to continue or not. I click a button on the remote, not because I care about whatever's on, but because without the noise, the silence leaves too much space in my head for thoughts.

I can't go on like this. I still have days left with Cameron here. This trip is supposed to be fun. I hoped for a little more than fun, but if all Cameron has to offer is fun, I shouldn't have a problem with that. "Just fun" has been my whole life until now. Maybe I'm out of my depth here. Maybe someone else would know how to handle this. Maybe they would understand Cameron's reaction better than I do.

I need help, I concede. Whatever this is, however it's going to play out, I can't figure this out on my own. And there is only one person who can save me.

I start texting my mother, fingers fumbling. Thankfully, she's available and responds quickly with the information I need. The moment she sends the phone number through, I click it, not trusting myself if I let it sit for too long. I need to do this now, while I still have the nerve to go through with it.

I swallow hard as I watch the number flash on my phone and hear the trill of the ring.

The phone rings once, twice. My heart slams at my chest. I nearly hang up, but on the third ring, she answers.

"Hello?"

"Miss Ortiz?" I say.

"Yes, who's calling?"

"This is ... this is Julian Brooks. We ran into each other in the grocery store

yesterday. I'm sorry, I asked my mother for your number. I..."

Holy shit, this is weird. I never spoke to Miss Ortiz one-on-one in all the time she dated my mom. I was polite enough to her. I'd hug her hello. I'd get her a Christmas gift. But I was just being friendly for my mother's sake.

"Julian," she says. "It's ... nice to hear from you. Is everything okay?"

I can't blame her for the skepticism in her voice. She hasn't been with my mom in five years and now lives on the other side of the country. This must seem incredibly strange. It is incredibly strange. But I didn't know who else to reach out to for help.

"Miss Ortiz, I..." I stumble, and have to pause in order to gather myself. I've never felt so unsure. "Miss Ortiz, I've been seeing Cameron. That's actually... He's why I'm here. I was in town for a conference a couple weeks ago, and we met up, and... Well, anyway, I came back to see him again. And ... and I think I love him."

Silence greets my fumbling speech. I didn't have a plan going into this conversation, and my heart is fluttering like a hummingbird as what I just said sinks in. Love him. I love him. Of course I do.

"Julian, are you still there?"

"Y-yes, yes, I'm here."

"Are you alright? You sound panicky."

I laugh dryly. "I don't know."

"Okay," Miss Ortiz says slowly, "well, I appreciate you calling and telling me this, but I do have to ask what this has to do with me. Does Cameron know how you feel?"

“Maybe? I’m not sure. I thought so, but last night we... We started talking, and I asked him if we could keep seeing each other. He seemed reluctant. He said ... something about me hurting you.”

This time, the silence comes from Miss Ortiz’s end of the line.

“I see,” she says eventually.

“This doesn’t sound like it’s news to you.”

“No, I’m afraid it’s not.”

Her sigh turns the connection into static for a moment. Her exasperation offers the first shred of hope I have felt since last night.

“Cameron ... struggled with his father leaving,” she says. “We both did, but I think it hit him harder than me. I knew Ken was an asshole, but I tried to hide it from Cameron. I thought we could work it out. At worst, I never thought he’d up and leave his own son that way. Cameron was completely blind-sided. We were always close, but ever since then... I think he’s just scared.”

“I know,” I say softly. “But what if his fear holds him back? What if it keeps him from having a life?”

“Oh, honey,” Miss Ortiz says. “You really do love him, don’t you?”

Emotion closes up my throat. “I think I do, but I don’t know how to get him to trust me. He blames me for whatever happened between you and my mom, and I can’t seem to convince him otherwise.”

For a while, Miss Ortiz is quiet. I hang my head, fearing even she doesn’t see a way

through this. Then at last she speaks again:

“I have an idea.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Cameron

THE TEXT COMES IN near the end of my café shift.

Are you free tonight? I need help with something.

I sigh at my phone. Mom's timing could not be much worse. Things have turned horrifically awkward between Julian and I ever since that conversation last night. He says he's fine, but I heard him tossing and turning all night. I've been anxious all day, sure there's an uncomfortable conversation waiting for me at home, and Mom's request is only going to make it worse. I'm sure the last thing Julian wants to hear is that I have another obligation tonight. It might even sound to him like I'm stalling.

There isn't much I can do about it. I'm not going to tell my mother no. I haven't told her that Julian is here, so as far as she knows, this is any other week for me. I have no credible excuse.

I text back to tell her I can swing by after work. Before I lose my nerve, I quickly send Julian a similar text explaining that my mom needs help with something and I'll be home a little later than I thought. Several minutes pass, and he doesn't respond.

My stomach twists itself into knots. This whole trip is getting worse and worse. At first, this felt like a dream. I couldn't believe how easy it was being with him, playing house for a week. Things slid off course so quickly I didn't have time to fix it before it crumbled.

I go to rub at the headache burgeoning in my temples when a warm, furry presence butts against my arm. I look down to find Tux strutting brazenly across the counter of the coffee bar. He rumbles as he butts into my arm again, his little black head rubbing against me.

I give into his entreaties and pet him. I pet all the way from his head down his back to the white tip on his black tail. The rumbles deepen, an occasional higher pitched chirp breaking through. He even flops onto his side and offers me his soft, white belly.

“You’ve got a spirit animal,” River comments as he emerges from the backroom. His yoga class finished a few minutes ago and he disappeared back there to change before leaving.

“He’s just friendly,” I reply. “I’m actually kind of surprised he hasn’t gotten adopted yet. He’s young and loves people.”

“He loves you ,” River says.

Indeed, when River attempts to pet the cat, Tux abruptly jumps back to his feet, hiding his belly. He struts away, annoyed.

“See?” River says. “You should adopt him.”

“I don’t know,” I say. “I don’t know anything about taking care of a cat. And I live alone in a little apartment. He might be lonely.”

“He won’t. He’s your soul animal, man. He’ll be happy just being in your space, trust me. You’re his human. He doesn’t want anyone else.”

I want to refute him, but when I think about it, I struggle to find the words to do it. The longer I search my memory, the harder it becomes to think of a time when Tux

was friendly with a customer. He mostly hides behind the coffee bar. Often, he'll sneak out after a crowd or class leaves and demand my attention.

I rub at my temple. I can't worry about a cat right now. I have enough to worry about with humans.

"Maybe. I'll think about it," I say in an attempt to placate River.

He shrugs, but lets it go, likely because he's eager to leave as well. I'm with him on that. I clean as quickly as I can after I close up the café for the evening, then rush out of there. I need to figure out what Mom needs, then go home and deal with the whole Julian ... thing.

He can't be serious about us being together. We've been at each other's throats for most of our lives. Plus there's the whole thing with our moms dating. It's ludicrous to think it could work, even if this week has been kind of fun. Things would be different if it wasn't a vacation, if it was real life.

I'm a bundle of nerves as I drive to Aunt Mary's place. I pull up beside the curb and hurry inside before I can spend too long hesitating. Immediately, the smell of something mouth-watering hits my nose and stomach.

I follow the scent toward the kitchen, but hit the living room first. I stop short when I spot Mom relaxing on the couch.

"Oh, you're out here," I say. "I thought you were cooking. Whatever it is, it smells amazing."

She rises from the couch and rounds it to hug me. The moment before she reaches me, I notice a slanted smile on her lips, but I don't have time to wonder about it before she's squeezing me tight.

“How have you been, Cameron?” she says.

“Since a few days ago? I mean, pretty much the same.”

She studies me with the only eyes in the world that perfectly mirror my own. Something in her gaze sets off an alarm in the back of my brain.

“Where’s Aunt Mary?” I say. “Is she cooking?”

“No, she’s out today.”

“Then...”

Maybe Mom left something to simmer on its own in a pot. I almost believe that, but then something clatters in the kitchen, and I go stiff with tension. There is someone here besides her, and she hasn’t told me who it is beforehand. What the hell is going on?

“What did you need help with?” I ask slowly.

“It’s in the kitchen,” she says.

My suspicion only deepens. Whatever she brought me here for has to do with a stranger in the kitchen, a stranger she kept hidden as long as possible.

“Mom...”

“Oh, just go already,” she says.

Then she shoves me toward the kitchen. I stumble forward a couple steps. She doesn’t follow, just stands in the living room with her arms crossed under her chest,

scowling at me in a way that brooks no argument.

I hesitate as I near the kitchen, unsure what I might find inside. For half a heartbeat, I think it could even be my father, but that's ridiculous. The bastard hasn't contacted us in years. He's not going to start now.

What I find instead drops my jaw to the floor.

Julian bustles about the kitchen. He lifts a lid off a big pot on the stove and peers through a cloud of steam into the boiling water below. Replacing the lid, he flicks on the oven light and crouches down to check in there as well. The smell of chicken and something savory and rich overwhelms my nose from this close, but that isn't the only reason I swoon when Julian pops back up to his feet and notices me at last.

He freezes. I freeze. The whole world seems to rush past us while we stand trapped in our own private moment of startled confusion. We're like stones in the middle of a raging river, letting the water gush past while we hold still.

"What are you doing here?" I finally say. "How did you even get here? How do you know where my mother lives? How... How did any of this happen?"

A smile warms his face. It isn't his usual teasing smile, however. This is soft and cautious, almost nervous, if I believed Julian was capable of nerves. He's always been aggressively confident in everything he does, especially when it comes to people.

"Okay, slow down," he says. "First of all, your mom gave me the address. She picked me up so I could start dinner while you were at work."

His answer only leaves me more confused.

“My mother drove you here? Why were you talking to my mother? There are several pieces missing here, Julian. You need to start explaining.”

He shifts from foot to foot, starting and stopping several times before he finally manages words. Seriously, what is this? Julian isn't nervous and anxious. That's my job.

“Okay, Cam, listen,” he says at last. “Things got kind of weird last night. Then you had work today, and I couldn't do anything but sit around and wonder where it all went wrong. So I asked my mom for your mom's number and...”

“You what ?”

He flinches at the heat in my voice.

“I was desperate!” he blurts.

“Desperate? Desperate for what?”

“For you, idiot,” he says. “I was desperate not to mess this up with you. Because I love you. ...Oh, shit.”

He clamps his teeth together instantly, but no amount of grinding will cage the words that slipped out of him. They hang between us, as thick as that silence that enveloped us last night.

He loves me? He loves me? Julian Brooks cannot love me. Julian Brooks is a nuisance who nearly became my step-brother until he went and ruined it for our moms. He's a mistake I should be fixing, a temptation I should be resisting. I haven't, and now he's in my mother's house saying he loves me.

As I stand there stunned, Julian steps closer and scoops my hands up in his.

“Cam, I love you,” he repeats. “I have for a long damn time.”

“You were such an asshole.”

“I was a kid,” he says. “A kid desperate for your attention. If the only way I could get it was by annoying you, that seemed better than nothing. Then you moved out here and I thought I’d lost you forever. I never dreamed of getting a second chance, but I got so much more than that. It’s only been a few days, but I’m addicted to this, Cam. I’m not ready to let it go. I’m not ready for it to be a fling we forget about. And I kind of think you aren’t either.”

He peers into my eyes, his a glassy, almost iridescent blue as he searches for something in my gaze. He looks like he could blow away on the breeze, as fragile as dandelion fluff.

“Julian, you shouldn’t even be here,” I say. “This is crazy.”

“Yeah, it is. It’s completely crazy. It’s crazy. I don’t care, though. I’m insane about you, and I’m not going to keep pretending otherwise.”

I watch the rise and fall of his chest, the uncertain flicker of his lips, the curl of his eyebrows. My throat is dry, my hands sweaty in his. This whole thing is completely unhinged. He’s suggesting we be together, and not for a weekend or a week. Like, really be together. Just last night I explained to him why that can’t be, but it doesn’t seem to matter to him.

I startle when hands land on my shoulders.

“Mom,” I gasp.

“Cameron, don’t be cruel,” she says. “Tell him you like him.”

“Mom, I...” My heart drops as I crane to look at her beside me. “But he hurt you. You caught him trying to kiss me, and it ruined your whole relationship. You were happy, and we took it away from you.”

She’s shaking her head before I even finish. “Cameron, even if that was true, it was ages ago. Stacy and I are friends.” Her voice softens. She squeezes my shoulders. “And I don’t think our relationship is what this is really about, sweetie.”

Instantly, emotion corks my throat.

“You can’t stop living your life because of me,” she says quietly. “There’s nothing that hurts a mother more than watching her baby let his life pass him by.”

“But doesn’t it bother you? After all that happened?”

“No, Cameron. That part of my life is over. I let it go a long time ago. I wish you would too.”

For a moment, we all stand there frozen. Then water hisses and Julian curses and lunges for the pot overflowing on the stove. My mother laughs behind her hand and puts her arm around my shoulders.

“Let’s sit down and have dinner,” she says. “Things tend to make more sense on a full stomach.”

Chapter Thirty

Julian

THIS HAS GOT TO be the strangest meal of my life, but Miss Ortiz is right. It's probably the best chance I've got of getting through to Cameron.

He looks numb when he lets his mother lead him away to the table. I fly around the kitchen as timers beep and water boils. I get the potatoes off the stove and drain them in the sink, then rush back to the oven to pull out the chicken. The smell that hits me when I set the baking dish on the stovetop instantly calms my nerves. This is my mom's chicken and potatoes recipe, a real classic, a meal that has always been synonymous with comfort.

Eventually, I emerge from the kitchen balancing three plates, each bearing a piece of chicken and a heap of soft, fluffy mashed potatoes seasoned with butter and salt. I set a plate down for Miss Ortiz, then Cameron, but I hesitate with the last plate until Miss Ortiz nods her head pointedly at the seat beside her son. Right. Yeah. I should probably sit with him if we're going to do this.

A thick silence drapes itself over the dinner, like a second table cloth dropped on our heads. Cameron is looking down at his food, Miss Ortiz is frowning at him from across the table, and I'm trying not to jump out of my own skin with nerves. I still can't tell if his mother's words got through to him, if my words got through to him, but the fact that Cameron hasn't stormed out of the house should be a positive sign at least. I made my case, ripped out my heart for all to see. All I can do now is hope it was enough.

“Let’s eat,” Miss Ortiz says to break the tension.

The clatter of silverware is not much better than the silence that preceded it. I cut off a bit of chicken and attempt to eat it, but my throat is so tight that I have to chew it for way too long to make any progress.

“Julian, this is wonderful,” Miss Ortiz says.

I brighten a little. “Thanks. It’s my mom’s recipe.”

“I thought it seemed familiar. I’ll have to text her and see if she’ll share it with me.”

“I’m sure she wouldn’t mind. I can write it down for you if you want.”

“It’s alright,” Miss Ortiz says. “It’ll be nice to have an excuse to contact her. I haven’t been very good about that. At first I blamed it on the move, but we’ve been out here long enough that I can’t really fall back on that excuse anymore.”

Her casual tone finally manages to set me somewhat at ease. And Cameron notices it too. From the corner of my eye, I catch him watching the exchange as though he’s searching it for any sign of trouble.

“You know,” Miss Ortiz says, “Stacy and I always wanted to do things like this when we were together, but you boys never seemed to stop fighting.”

I run a nervous hand through my hair. “That was kind of my fault. I couldn’t help myself around him. I knew if I teased Cam he’d pay attention to me, and I was a dumb kid who wanted his attention, so…”

Miss Ortiz chuckles. “Is that what that was all about? I should have known.”

Heat washes into my cheeks.

“It wasn’t only his fault.”

The quiet voice beside me draws my attention instantly. Cameron is playing with a bit of chicken, pushing it around his plate, but his shoulders aren’t bunched up by his ears anymore. Progress?

“I mean, I’m the one who always took the bait,” he says. “I didn’t make things better.”

Miss Ortiz heaves a motherly sigh. “You certainly did take the bait. Sometimes I worried about that temper of yours.”

“I didn’t mind,” I throw in. “I mean, it was kind of fun, bantering like brothers.”

Only because I’m watching Cameron so closely do I catch the hint of a smile that glances along his lips. My chest seizes around it, clinging to it as I totter on this cliffedge of uncertainty.

The mood tangibly lightens after that. We talk about what we’ve been doing since college. I get to tell Miss Ortiz about my job, though I leave out the part where I used to sleep around at conferences. She seems a little too smart to miss the implications, but she doesn’t pronounce any judgments about my playboy lifestyle. She’s actually ... kinda cool. This is the first time I’ve really spoken to her. When she was dating my mom, my focus was entirely on Cameron. I never spent any time getting to know her.

“And then he ran all the way back to me — ran back to me — to tell me his foot was definitely broken.”

“Mom, please,” Cameron groans as his mother finishes another embarrassing childhood story.

Miss Ortiz and I are too busy laughing to heed his pleas.

“What a drama queen,” I say.

“Oh, you don’t know the half of it,” Miss Ortiz says. “He was always a good kid, but when he decided to get up to something, that made him even more dangerous.”

I try not to grin too broadly at the image of baby Cameron running around pretending he broke his foot in order to get extra candy, but it’s too adorable. I have to bite my lip to keep the smile from taking up my whole face.

Then I hear the craziest thing beside me. Laughter. Cam’s laughter. I look over and he’s shaking his head as he chuckles at himself.

“Mom, come on, he’s going to head directly to the airport if you keep telling him all this embarrassing stuff,” Cameron says.

My heart flips. I don’t want to presume too much, but that statement really makes it sound like Cameron is hoping for the opposite, hoping I’ll stay, hoping this isn’t over.

I all but float through the rest of the dinner. The conversation remains light, even when Miss Ortiz dredges up the past. I can tell little pieces of it are painful for Cameron. Every once in a while his lips pull taut in a grimace. But he doesn’t stop her from talking and even joins in, and by the time our plates are clear, Cameron is reclining easily in his chair and nodding along to his mother’s stories.

Miss Ortiz sighs during a lull in the conversation. “Let me get these plates,” she says.

Instantly, I leap up to help her, even though there's only three plates and some forks. We stack the dishes in the sink, along with the baking pan and pot I used.

"I can do the dishes before we head out," I offer.

She's shaking her head before I even finish. "I think you have something more important to do tonight."

My heart could burst for this woman. "Are you sure? I made all this mess."

"And I'm happy to clean it up. Now go."

I suspect she means more than the dirty dishes, and in both cases, I'm more than happy to accept her help.

Cameron hugs his mother goodbye, then we pile into his car so he can get us back to his apartment. It's an awkward drive. We both know there's a conversation waiting for us on the other end of it, and we both know the car isn't the right place for it to begin. But at some point in the drive, Cameron takes my hand in his, and that tiny bit of reassurance gives me the strength to get back to his place without fainting from nerves.

We go right to his bed. His room feels like the right place for this. Even with him living alone, this conversation should happen in a secluded, private location.

The dark drapes over us, obscuring our faces as we sit on the edge of the bed half-turned toward each other. Neither of us make any move to flick on a light. Cameron clasps my hand, and I feel his eyes on me, two darker pools of night in the gloomy bedroom.

"That was nice," he says. "I wasn't expecting it, but it was nice."

“Yeah,” I say, “it was.”

We’re both speaking in hushed tones, like we’re in a library. Something about this moment carries the same weight of solemnity.

“So, look, I still have a lot to think about,” Cameron says, diving straight for the heart of the matter. “I mean, obviously I do. This all happened so suddenly. I didn’t plan on any of it. My head is kind of a mess, to be honest.”

“I know,” I say. “That’s okay. I’m not asking you to have everything figured out instantly.”

“Then what are you asking for?”

Those dark eyes fix on me, and I nearly lose my nerve. I want to skirt around this with a joke or by turning things physical. That’s what I would normally do. I’ve avoided anything serious or real for my entire life by being the funny guy, the guy who only does hookups, the guy you never need to take seriously.

My old antics aren’t going to save me this time. Cameron is too important to me, as I’ve blurted out quite bluntly tonight. I can’t hide behind a clown mask, not with those piercing eyes looking straight through me.

I suck in a shaky breath.

“I’m asking for you,” I say. “I wasn’t lying before. I love you, Cam. I have for a really freaking long time. This is what I want, and I’ll do whatever I have to to make it work.”

He’s so still. I wish he wasn’t so good at going completely blank and leaving me in agonized suspense.

“I still have things I need to work through,” he says, slow and deliberate. I can feel him choosing each word like the wrong ones might explode. “This all happened out of nowhere.”

“It’s not out of nowhere, Cam.”

He holds my gaze. “No, I guess it’s not.”

That tiny admission gives me strength. “I don’t think I can walk away from this. I don’t think I can get on a plane in a few days and go back to my life the way it was before. This is too important to me. No matter what happens in my life, you keep pulling me back. It doesn’t matter if our moms are dating or we live three thousand miles apart. Somehow, I always come back to you. I don’t know how else to live my life except with you.”

Even in the dark, I catch the way his Adam’s apple bobs.

“Julian,” he says, “you scare the shit out of me.” I nearly speak, but he hurries on. “But you’re right. No matter which direction our lives go, we always end up here. I think I’d be a fool to believe that was an accident. And ... and Mom’s right. I can’t live only for the past. Part of me is trapped back there. Part of me can’t let it go. But I’ll try. If you want to. If you can be patient with me.”

I bundle him into my arms. “Cameron. Of course I can. I’ve waited my whole life for you. Do you really think I couldn’t be patient a little longer if you were mine?”

He chuckles against me, his arms slowly sliding around me. “Yours,” he says, like he’s testing the word out, seeing how it tastes.

I ease away so I can look at him. I drag a finger along his cheek, tucking dark hair behind his ear. “Mine,” I say. “If you want to be.”

He simply looks at me for a moment, then he mutters softly, as though speaking only to himself, “If fate is kind...”

Confusion bunches in my face, but then Cameron smiles.

“Yes,” he says. “Yeah. I want that. I want to try. With you, Julian.”

A rush floods my ears, and I sweep down to kiss him. We topple sideways onto the bed, and I don’t bother thinking about anything else for the rest of the night.

Chapter Thirty-One

Cameron

I FLING CLOTHING FRANTICALLY out of my closet and onto the bedroom floor. Why the hell do I own so many hoodies? It's probably a consequence of living in Seattle, hoodie capital of the world, but that doesn't excuse the truly excessive amount of the things piling up on my floor.

I stand back to observe my handiwork. Along with the pile of hoodies, I've amassed a collection of T-shirts and a couple pairs of pants that can all go to the Goodwill. Plus, I found enough socks with holes in them that I could combine the remaining socks with my underwear and free up a whole drawer in my IKEA stand. Even with all that, I haven't cleared out all that much space. I still claim the majority of the shelf, but Julian assured me he's not worried about it.

"We'll buy a second one," he said on the phone a couple days ago.

"I don't think they make them anymore," I said.

"What? Why not? Everyone loves those things."

"I don't know. Contact IKEA management, I guess. I'm just saying—"

"It's going to be fine, Cam. Relax. It's just some clothes."

I can hear that soothing tone even now. It's the tone he's been using with me for

weeks. While I've run around anxiously preparing, he's seemed nothing but calm and cool about the prospect of moving himself across the country. He didn't bat an eye at any of it — the distance, the downsizing from his apartment in Manhattan, the prospect of finding a new job out here. None of it fazed him. He kept saying that it'll be worth it when he gets to be with me.

My heart does a weird flippy thing every time those words echo in my head in his voice. He's uprooting his whole life for me, and I'd be lying if I said that didn't freak me out. What if it isn't worth it? What if something happens? What if it all falls apart the moment we're crammed into my little apartment together?

I look around the bedroom. Julian already has some things he keeps here. In the months since his first visit out here, he's come back a couple times, always bringing whatever he could. We went out and got a bookshelf for the bedroom, and his favorite mystery novels sit neatly on the shelves. We also got a second nightstand for the other side of the bed, and the bathroom connected to my room is full of his toiletries. The guy has an insane personal hygiene and skincare routine that he's threatening to impose on me.

A knock sounds at the door. I yelp, but thankfully no one is here to hear me. Well, almost no one.

Tux butts his head against my ankles. I scoop up the little guy, hugging him to my chest for comfort as I head toward the door. He was Julian's idea too. As soon as he heard about how the cat follows me around the café and won't tolerate anyone else, he insisted that we adopt him.

"You're his person, Cam!" he said, and part of me suspected he wasn't only talking about the cat.

Either way, my apartment has rapidly gone from a solitary abode to a packed home

where I'm going to live with my cat and my ... my boyfriend. Julian Brooks, my boyfriend.

The words make my head light, but when I open my door, there he is, bags in tow, and this all gets very, very real. He hugs me, ignoring Tux's struggling when the cat gets sandwiched between us. His mother follows him in, carrying a few bags of her own. Together, the three of us make several trips between my apartment and Julian's car parked on the street below, carrying up all the worldly possessions he could cram into a Honda Civic. His mother drove it out here with him. The two of them decided that a five-day roadtrip was the perfect way to spend some time together before Julian lived three thousand miles from her. I got a lot of pictures from their travels: deep dish pizza in Chicago, the scorched landscape of the Badlands, and, of course, the riotous junk of Wall Drug. All the classics for a cross-country road trip.

Eventually, the three of us sit among bags and boxes containing Julian's things and a large pizza. We didn't even bother with plates, simply set the pizza on the coffee table and started digging in ravenously. Tux yowls for a bite, and we have to fend off his desire for cheese while we attempt to stuff ourselves.

It's only noon when we finish the pizza, so we set in on the boxes and bags, trying to get things organized. My heaps of Goodwill donations and socks destined for the trash don't help matters, but eventually we manage to find a sorting system that works.

My mother even shows up at some point to help with the organizing. At first, I wasn't thrilled with that part of the plan. Would it be weird to have her and Miss Brooks in the same room at the same time after all of these years? But Julian assured me it was not only for the best, but a potential step on my own road to recovering from my past.

"You need to see that everyone is okay," he said. "You need to experience it for yourself. I know you, Cam. It's the only way you'll believe it."

Turns out he was right. I did need to see and experience it for myself. The moment my mother arrives, she hugs Miss Brooks like it's no big deal at all. She claims a bit of leftover pizza that none of us want after our feast, and soon we're all working on combining my and Julian's lives. His books go on the shelves. His clothes go into the IKEA shelf. His additional toiletries find homes on the shelves and in the cabinets in the bathroom. My mom and Miss Brooks help break down some of the cardboard boxes toward the end, when we start getting into possessions two grown men might not want their mothers seeing. I can hear them chatting in the living room while Julian and I work.

It's the first time all day that things truly slow down. We've all been at this for hours and hours. In the depth of Seattle's fall, the sun is sinking toward the horizon.

Julian pauses me while I'm scowling at a device I can only guess the use of. He takes my hands, clasping them in his while we sit on the floor of my bedroom with our joyous mess scattered all around us.

"I told you it would be okay, right?" he says.

"What?"

"Listen."

I do, and for the first time I notice that my mom and Miss Brooks are out in the living room chatting like old friends. I mean, I suppose they are old friends, but they're also far more than that. You wouldn't know it by listening to them though. If there is any lingering hurt there, neither of them display an ounce of it.

My shoulders slide away from my ears. I didn't even realize I was hunching.

"I don't think we're going to see much of them after today," Julian says. "It sounds

like they have a lot of catching up to do.”

I manage to smile, which is not something I thought I would do in this circumstance. I never imagined having Julian and his mom so intimately entangled in my life could be such a joyful thing, yet here we all are.

“I guess they do,” I say. “But so do we.”

I don’t disguise my intentions at all, and Julian smiles crookedly at me.

“Yeah, we really, really do,” he says. “You have no idea.”

I imagine I have some idea. We haven’t really had time for more than painfully fleeting visits since that first week we spent together in this apartment. Julian had a lot to do to prepare for a cross-country move. Even I had a lot to do to prepare for it. Plus, I adopted Tux in the meantime. My whole life has been changing in dramatic ways, which, as it turns out, is a pretty freaking exhausting process. With both of us running around trying to make this work, we haven’t had a moment to sit down and be together.

That changes tonight.

Suddenly, I can’t wait for our mothers to get out of here, but I’m not going to rush them. Miss Brooks came all this way to help us out with the move. And my mom has better things to do on a Saturday afternoon than break down cardboard boxes.

Still, it’s a little nerve-racking trying to wait out the natural conclusion of all the unpacking. Julian and I rejoin our mothers in the living room and sort out the recyclables from the trash. It takes a couple trips to get all of it down to the dumpsters in the parking garage.

When we manage it, we stand in my suddenly quiet yet full apartment, surveying the space. It has changed radically in the course of this single day. I can barely recognize the place. Tux is winding between my ankles, asking for comfort now that his home has shifted around him. This time, it's Julian who scoops him up and nuzzles him.

"Well, I suppose that's everything," Miss Brooks says. She glances at her phone. "It's only four, but personally, I'm exhausted. And kind of starving."

"It's seven back home," Julian points out.

"That would explain the starving."

"You know, there's a really good Indian place right down the street," Mom says.

"That sounds heavenly," Miss Brooks says. "You boys hungry?"

I am a little, but I shake my head. I can tell Julian is thinking the same thing I am because he shakes his head as well.

"Right, well, you probably want a few minutes to yourselves," Miss Brooks says. "But don't forget brunch tomorrow, Jules. You promised me."

"Of course, Mom," he says. "I wouldn't. I just need a breather."

She nods, but sweeps him into a crushing hug. Tux gets trapped between them, but doesn't seem to mind the attention. Then Miss Brooks leaves my apartment to get dinner with my mom.

God, this is a weird day.

Once they leave, Julian and I collapse on the couch. Tux skitters away, fed up with

human attention for the day. I can't blame him. It's been a whirlwind. I'm tired down to my bones and immensely grateful to have a space of quiet filled only by Julian's presence.

He takes my hand while we sit on the couch, leaning into me to rest his head on my shoulder. I stroke his hair while we enjoy the quiet. I could throw on that detective show we've been working our way through, but I think right now we both want nothing but each other. No other sounds. No other people. Just us in our new life in my apartment.

It still gives me vertigo to realize this is real.

Julian sighs as he sits up. "I feel gross from being in the car. I'm going to take a quick shower."

I don't want to let him go, but I do. I nearly fall asleep on the couch while he's gone, only opening my eyes again when I hear him returning from the bathroom.

"Hey, Cam."

I blink, and find him standing in the bedroom doorway in nothing but a towel. Not unlike the way I approached him a few months ago.

"Let's head to bed, Cam," he says.

Meaning strikes my brain like a bolt of lightning. Suddenly, all my exhaustion evaporates, and I lurch to my feet.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Julian

ALL OF CAM'S EXHAUSTION dissipates in a flash. His dark eyes sharpen as he jerks to his feet. I have to bite the insides of my cheeks to hold off a smile as I back into his bedroom, our bedroom, and let that towel around my waist drop to the floor.

Cameron peels off his shirt as he pursues me. He hops on one leg to wrench off one sock, then the other. By the time he reaches me, his belt is undone, his top button open. He cups my face in his hands and yanks me to his mouth while we're still stumbling toward the bed. Our ravenous mouths don't relent until I bump against the edge of the mattress.

"I missed you," Cameron says.

My heart seizes in my chest. As far as we've come over these past months, that's the first time I've heard him admit that out loud.

"I missed you too," I say. "So fucking much. I couldn't stand it some days."

Cameron is kissing along my neck, his hands roaming my body. He responds with a groan.

"I thought I'd go crazy waiting for the moving day," I say. "You have no idea how long that drive across the country felt."

Cameron pulls away at last, looking straight into my eyes as he says, “But you’re here now.”

I smile as warmth washes through me. “I’m here. I’m not leaving ever again.”

This time, I’m the one doing the pulling. I yank Cameron with me onto the mattress. We tumble onto the sheets in a messy heap. Cameron kisses along my chest while I thread a hand through his hair. I cling to him while his mouth drops dollops of warmth all over my naked body, suffusing me with a heat that builds and builds from every kiss. I end up on my back, my legs spread around him so I can fit him closer against my body.

“Those jeans need to go,” I groan. They’re starting to pose a hazard as I instinctively yearn to grind myself against him, incapable of resisting the desire blooming inside me from his every touch and kiss.

Cameron grumbles, but sits back to all but tear his jeans off. I prop myself up on my elbows and shamelessly bite my lip as I watch him get undressed. He isn’t even aware of me watching his body flex or tracing the trail of dark hair that carves a path down his abs. My head swims with vertigo as I contemplate that this beautiful man is fully, truly mine at last. No more hesitation. No more barriers between us. We belong to each other now.

Cameron finally notices my staring after he flings his pants and briefs aside to join the scattered clothing on the floor. “What?” he says.

I don’t bother responding, just push myself up to wrap a hand around the back of his neck and pull him down to the mattress with me, kissing him the whole way. This time, I let my hips grind when the urge overwhelms me. The friction that awaits me leaves us groaning into each other’s mouths.

Cameron pulls away with a frustrated noise. Before I can complain, he tosses me onto my side, immediately dropping down to place himself between my legs. I can only gasp as his tongue suddenly licks along me. Cameron holds me open to his attention as he bends down to glide his tongue over my hole.

I squeeze my eyes shut as a flash of sensation barrels into me. When I recover, I reach for myself, grabbing my own cheek to open myself to more of his merciless exploration. Freed, Cameron dives in even more ardently, his tongue trailing along me. He swirls and prods, everything inside me lighting up like his tongue is leaving stars in its wake.

My breath shreds to ragged panting. I grip myself tighter as desire swells inside me. I want to grab my aching cock, but I'm here for more than that tonight, and with how Cameron is devouring me, I'm scared even one touch could rocket me toward the peak too quickly. His tongue seems to map my every weakness, returning to torment all the places that leave me crying out as I writhe on the mattress.

"Cam," I groan, mangling his name between my teeth.

He gives my ass a hard slap as he comes up for air. The sensation tingles through my body, my skin prickling pleasantly in the aftermath. I know he'll go right back down if I ask, but I drag my brain out of the haze of lust shrouding it and force myself to focus on my goal.

"Cam," I pant, "fuck me, Cam. Shit. Hurry up and fuck me."

He launches into action like he was merely waiting for those words to release him before he moved. I remain on my side, panting for breath as Cameron rummages around in his nightstand. I don't watch, but the sound of a cap popping open is sweet torment as my imagination readily fills in the gaps.

Rather than rolling me over one direction or the other, Cameron straddles my bottom leg, grabbing the other and pushing my knee back. I end up almost on my back, but turned on my side enough that he can line his slick cock up against me — and look straight down into my eyes as he does it.

We don't say a word. We barely even breathe. We simply maintain that eye contact as his cock breaches me. Cameron watches my face change, watches as the stretch hits me and I will myself to relax around him. He doesn't need my words to know to give me more, and he keeps watching me the entire way, observing every flicker and twitch on my face. With him inside me and holding one leg up, I'm entirely his to command, a duty he regards with typical Cam-like seriousness. I would laugh, but I'm too busy burning around his encroaching cock as it ignites everything inside me. Stretching turns into pressure, and pressure turns into pleasure, a pulsing awareness that that thing aching inside of me is getting exactly what it needs.

Cameron pauses when he bottoms out. We hang in this moment of connection, our bodies slotted as close together as possible, his hips against me. I stare up at him in awe. His dark hair hangs in a messy tumble around his face. His eyes are so dark I can't tell how much is the blown out pupils. Warmth deepens the smooth brown of his cheeks under their customary smattering of stubble.

“Cam.” I can't help it. I keep wanting to say his name. It sounds so different when it's mine to say, when he's mine.

I might say it again, but Cameron punches the words, and breath, right out of my throat by dragging his cock back. I groan and drop my head back on the pillow beneath me as the drag sets my body alight. He pushes back in slowly, but it doesn't matter. Fast or slow, I'm already going crazy for him. I knew while driving over here that I wanted to make this our first night in our apartment. I've been anticipating it for so long that the blunt fact of it fries something in my brain. Fantasy overlays reality, like tinted sunglasses painting the whole world a brighter shade. Color flashes in my

vision, or maybe that's just the sparks shooting through my body every time Cameron pushes into me again.

He's picking up speed, gripping my lifted leg harder while almost riding my bottom leg. He uses my body for leverage, his breathing going harsh as he finds a rhythm that involves him slamming into me hard enough to knock little grunts of pleasure from my throat. I can't do much but lie beneath him, but Cameron doesn't seem to care. He takes control, setting a pace that has my body screaming.

At last, I let myself grab at myself. My cock is aching for touch. It only takes a couple pumps to get me completely hard. I try to time my strokes to Cameron's, matching his intensity, his flow, so we can move together, a heap of limbs searching for relief.

I struggle to keep watching him, even as I yearn to observe the strain of the desire crashing over him. I can feel that same strain in his thrusts. He dives into me harder and faster, pummeling me into the mattress, his need a tangible force rocking me back and forth. His fingers dig into the skin of my leg as his head drops.

I can't see his eyes anymore. He's a furious shadow above me, slamming into me hard, grunting with effort and need. My body squeezes tight around his cock, howling for more even as the burn wells up. I'm full all the way to my throat, my whole body clenching around him to seek the friction and connection it craves.

Finally, my eyes drop closed as well. I can't fight the desire to slam them shut and give in. The moment I close them, I flop back against the mattress, leaving my entire body at Cam's mercy. The only control I retain is my fumbling stroking of my own cock, but even that has become a furious mess as my mind goes blank under the roar of the desire building to a peak inside me.

I say his name one more time, and when I do, it comes out as a scream.

“Cam,” I wail at the ceiling of his, our bedroom as I explode over my own hand and arch onto my shoulders.

He keeps driving into me as my ass clenches even harder around him, my whole body pulsing around beat after beat of delirious release. Then I feel him going too, holding deep inside me as the pleasure grips him in its crushing fist. He moans senselessly, and I think I might join him, but it’s hard to tell while I’m contorting into the pleasure, my body rigid with ecstasy.

When it passes, I crash back down to the mattress. I may have lifted myself up a mere inch or two, but it feels like falling off a skyscraper when everything goes limp and I careen back to Earth.

Cameron crashes with me, lying atop me panting for a moment before he can collect himself enough to pull out of me and flop onto the bed beside me. I roll over to lie on my side facing him, watching that rosy glow in his cheeks, the rise and fall of his chest, the smile that flickers on his lips even as he pants.

After a few breaths, he manages to open his eyes. When he does, he tilts himself on his side to kiss me, a warm, languid, lazy kiss brimming with satisfaction. Then he flops back down, and I shuffle closer to set my head on his shoulder.

“I love you,” I say. I’ve said it before, said it many times before, but the feeling is so big in this moment that it has to come out again.

“I love you too,” Cameron says.

Those words haven’t been as easy for him as for me. At first, they would come out quiet, afraid, but that has gradually fallen away. I mean to make it my business to show him each and every day that his decision to trust me, to let me in, was the right one. This is only our first day of many more together, and I’m not going to waste a

second of them on doubt and uncertainty. I finally caught up with the man of my dreams, and I'm going to spend the rest of my life making sure I'm the man of his dreams too.

Cameron deserves a happy ending to his story. And I'm going to be the one to provide it. Today and forever.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:10 pm

Cameron

A year and a half later...

ERIN SLAPS A HAND onto my shoulder.

“You’re going to be great,” she says softly. Kelsey nods in agreement.

Tim twirls a drumstick between his fingers. He steps closer, slapping me on the chest.

“You’ve got this, man,” he says.

Of everyone in the band, he’s worked with me the most on this. He volunteered when he heard my reasons, which surprised me a little. I thought Tim was straight. Maybe he is. I’ve never actually asked or inquired, figuring it was none of my business. Maybe he’s just a really nice guy who wants to help out his bandmate, but it wasn’t until Julian was in the picture that Tim suddenly swept in hoping to help me pull this off.

“Thanks,” I say. “You really helped a lot. I don’t know if I could have done this without you.”

He smiles. “Just get out there and knock your man off his feet, okay?”

He hugs me, and I accept the gesture, drawing strength from his confidence in me, in our practices. We’ve been working on this ever since we found out the band inexplicably got into this big festival. We missed out the first year we applied, spent

time working on our stuff, and applied again the next year. When we got in, Erin screamed so loud I thought she'd ruin her trademark voice, but after the initial wave of excitement passed, we got to work refining our music, writing new songs, ensuring we knew every note like we know our own names.

Now it's time to perform.

I'm opening for my own band. They all insisted I go first, that I seize this moment when I have the spotlight to myself to put my plan into motion. Then they'll join me and we'll play out our set.

First, I have to remember how to walk.

The emcee announces us, and my legs turn to jelly. Tim has to give me a push to send me stumbling toward the stage with my guitar. I have nothing else with me. The drum kit and amps and mic are already set up and waiting for us, and I focus on plugging in my guitar and ensuring everything is set up how I like it.

Then I can't delay any longer. I turn and face the largest crowd of my life.

The stage stands tall over a literal field of people. They chose the Gorge Amphitheatre for this festival, a massive valley in Washington that offers nearly boundless open space. The stage is just about the only structure around that isn't the tents where festival goers are sleeping for the weekend. And those festival goers are all clustered here, right in front of me, a quilt of indistinguishable faces that spreads out as far as I can see. The sun washes them out, the sky overhead scuffed with a sparse scattering of clouds on a hot summer afternoon. Or maybe it feels even hotter to me because of how hard I'm sweating over this.

There at the front of the crowd, a couple faces break up the sea of anonymous spectators. I lock eyes with Julian, who stands against the railing beside our mothers. The moment his cool gaze meets mine, the liquid fear inside me hardens to steel. I

approach the mic with my guitar slung across my chest.

“This is a song I wrote for someone I care about,” I say.

The crowd isn’t sure how to react, but I luckily I don’t need them to do anything but listen. As I pick out the first lilting notes of the song, the music swells to fill the gorge. I close my eyes and fall into the music, and there’s nothing behind my eyelids except that image of Julian staring up at me from the crowd. By the time I reach the chorus, my voice is booming out strong and sure.

You were never mine.

Always someone else’s.

Always in demand.

And I, I stayed behind.

But if fate is kind...

She’ll bring us back together.

I can’t hear myself anymore. I can’t feel my fingers on my guitar strings. My body moves automatically, every note drilled into me over months and months of practice. It’s almost an out of body experience. I drift away from myself, watch myself perform something so deeply personal before a crowd of thousands and thousands of strangers — and the three people who aren’t strangers, the three most important people in that entire valley.

Then the last note wavers off my guitar and out of my mouth, and I slowly come back to myself, like a dreamer waking after a long, restful sleep. I open my eyes, find that anonymous crowd still and breathless before me. My eyes fall to the man against the

railing, and even from this distance, I can see tears shining on Julian's cheeks. We gaze at each other for a moment, my song bridging the space between us, tethering us to each other regardless of how many other people are around. I know he heard me. I know he heard every intention behind those lyrics.

Then the crowd erupts, and a wave of sound disrupts our connection.

In seconds, my band is joining me on the stage, slapping my shoulders and congratulating me as they take up their places and their instruments.

It's easy after that, almost trivial. Playing with Erin and Kelsey and Tim is as simple as breathing. With them around me, I'm not the sole point of focus, which allows me to relax and settle into the music. As we whip through our set list, I forget all about the crowd, even smiling as I do what I do best. Maybe someday music could be my life, but even if it can't, this moment will always occupy a sacred place in my heart. We made it. The Ten Hours actually made it to a real stage and a real show. There are thousands of people listening to our music, and from the glimpses I get of the crowd, they're feeling it. Erin's voice seems to fill the entire gorge, so big the sky itself can't contain her. Kelsey keeps us on pace with her bass. Tim adds a flourish with dramatic drum beats. I play my part as well, stepping up for my solos, letting my fingers fly freely across the neck of my guitar.

I don't know how long the set lasts. I know how long it was supposed to last, but the whole thing passes in a blur. My heart never stops racing. My blood is pounding in my ears the whole time. I never want it to end, but before I can blink we're taking a bow before a screaming crowd and hauling our instruments off the stage as the crew sweeps in to switch us out for the next act.

At first, all we can do is scream and jump around and hug each other. The crew ushers us backstage, which is really just the grassy area behind the stage, but none of us care. Tim nearly tackles me to the ground from hugging me so hard.

“If you weren’t basically married, I would kiss you right now, dude,” Tim says.

Seriously, what is this guy’s deal? He never talks about his personal life or his sexuality, so I genuinely can’t tell if these are jokes or if he’s trying to relate to me as a fellow queer man.

It’s a mystery that will have to wait for another time. My mother is rounding the stage, and her smile is so big it outshines the sun beating down on the gorge. I run to her, accepting a crushing hug and many kisses on the cheek.

“Oh, Cameron, you were amazing, baby,” she says.

I could weep. She’s seen me play, but having her here at the biggest show of my life is on a whole different level. Mom got me my first guitar. She drove me to all my lessons. She went to every single recital and performance she could.

“I couldn’t have done this without you,” I say, and I mean that very literally. I would not be here without her.

But there is one other person I owe this moment to.

I ease out of her hug. Miss Brooks stands behind her. And next to her, barely restraining a face-splitting smile, is Julian.

The moment we lock eyes he dives at me, nearly knocking me to the ground. He clasps my face, kissing the breath out of my lungs, peppering my lips and cheeks, whatever he can reach.

“Cam, that was amazing. That was fucking amazing.”

Before I can respond, he’s kissing me again, over and over, like he’ll never get enough. The past year and a half has included plenty of kisses while we’ve lived

together in the apartment. Julian has started a new job downtown in Seattle, one he likes a lot more than his old sales job. It's not quite as lucrative, but he's having a lot more fun working for the Seattle Center and charming tourists instead of sales reps. Plus, we get free admission to the Museum of Pop Culture, which often has music exhibits.

I finally push him away, but gently.

Even after all that, my voice comes out timid when I ask, "So, you liked it?"

"Cam."

He cups my face, forcing me to look into his eyes, eyes shining with fresh tears. He lowers his voice, speaking as though we're alone in our bedroom, no one in the world to interrupt us.

"I loved it," he says. "I can't believe you did that for me. It was perfect."

It might sound like empty praise from anyone else, but I hear the truth in his words. This time, it's me grabbing Julian and yanking him in for a kiss.

Someone clears their throat behind us.

We break apart abruptly, swiveling toward where my bandmates stand with their own families. And one extra person, a woman I don't recognize. She's out of place in her crisp pencil skirt and suit jacket.

"Which one is the guitarist?" she says.

"Dark hair," Erin supplies.

The woman breaks into a broad grin. "Well, Mr. Cameron Ortiz. I'm sorry to

interrupt, but I was speaking with your band here. I'm with Rainier Talent Management and..."

The rest of her words slide away into static. I look to Erin and Kelsey and Tim, who must be hearing the same mind-bending words I am. Their faces reflect just as much shock as mine.

The woman holds out a business card toward Erin. "We should keep in touch. You guys are too good not to get scooped up by someone, and I mean to be that someone. When other managers come knocking, remember that I got here first, alright?"

She winks at us, then strides away, leaving us astonished and gaping.

"Was that..."

"Is she..."

"A real band manager?"

"Who wants us?"

We're too stunned to finish our sentences without each other's help. At the end, we all look at each other, the same thought flickering through our heads.

We just got our break.

My life has taken a lot of twists and turns this past year or so. I never thought my band would get approached by a manager wanting to rep us. I never thought I'd be with Julian Brooks. But if I've learned anything in the course of this strange, strange journey, it's that sometimes you have to let fate take the wheel.

She can be unexpectedly kind.