



# The Fostered Promise

## (Spencer Brothers #3)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** It was easy to make the promise but much harder to keep it.

Everyone knows Im in love with Drew...except Drew. I made a promise a long time ago, and if I break it, I will lose him, so Im keeping my lips sealed.

The problem is that someone else is more than willing to put their lips on Drew, and lets just say that green is not a good color on me.

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# Page 1

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DREW

I restacked the coasters for what had to be the fifth time, each one aligning with the last with precise neatness. Avoiding River's perceptive gaze was becoming a full-time job in itself.

Spoiler alert: having your boss as a friend is great when you're dishing out the advice. Not so much when you're on the receiving end.

I moved on to the precut fruit for the cocktails, inspecting each piece and ensuring they weren't cut too big or too small.

"So, Drew," River said, coming up to the bar as if he hadn't been staring at me from afar for the last half-hour. "How are the preparations going for tomorrow's fundraiser?"

The fundraiser for the Star Finders Foundation. The foundation I'd started with my best friend and foster brother, West. I remembered exactly when West had come out and said that kids in foster care deserved the same opportunities as all the kids with moms and dads. He would make sure it happened. It had been a big dream, but we'd done it together.

And now, our dream was no longer something we organized from the small kitchen in our apartment. We'd moved our headquarters to the old hospital building, where we were working to function as an emergency shelter and community center for kids

in foster care, kids from less privileged backgrounds, and anyone who needed a little help.

I exhaled slowly, finally meeting his eyes. “Honestly? I’m freaking out a little.”

River’s brow furrowed with concern. “What’s on your mind?”

“It’s just...” I paused, struggling to articulate the tangle of emotions. “The auction. Being up there on display like some piece of meat. What if no one bids? Or worse, what if someone does, and I have to go on some awkward date?”

River’s eyes widened. “I thought the auction was for skills. You’re doing cocktail classes, right?”

“Yeah, but...” I felt heat rise to my cheeks. “What if...?” I lowered my voice, leaning in. “What if West bids on me?”

Understanding dawned in River’s eyes. A few weeks ago, I’d unwittingly confessed to him how I felt about West. “Ah. And how would you feel about that?”

My heart raced at the mere thought. “Terrified. Elated. A jumbled mess of everything in between.” I ran a hand through my hair, mussing it further. “God, River, it’s getting harder and harder to pretend I don’t have anything but best-friend feelings for West.”

“You’re offering cocktail classes. How much trouble can you get into doing that?”

I raised a brow. “As much trouble as you can get into when your jilted best friend, and the man you have feelings for, moves into your place,” I said, referring to River’s best friend Adam, who he was totally in love with.

River raised his hands and chuckled softly. “Drew, have you considered that maybe West is struggling with similar feelings?”

I blinked, caught off guard. “What? No way. He’s always so... No, he’s never given me any hints.”

“Have you ever given him any hints?”

He had a point. I’d hidden my attraction to West from the moment I felt anything but brotherly love, and as my feelings grew, I’d become better at avoiding them.

“Maybe this auction is an opportunity for both of you to be honest about what you want,” River suggested.

I mulled over his words, a glimmer of hope flickering to life. “You really think so?”

He reached across the bar, giving my arm a reassuring squeeze. “Whatever happens tomorrow, just be yourself. That’s more than enough.”

I managed a small smile, feeling some of the weight lift from my shoulders. “Thanks, River. I guess it’s my turn to put my money where my mouth is.”

“What do you mean?”

“You and Adam. I said I’d tell West how I feel about him if you did the same with Adam.”

River’s eyebrows shot up, and his eyes widened.

I chuckled. “Don’t worry, your secret is safe with me, but the next time he comes here while you’re working, you might want to tell him to stop undressing you with

his eyes.”

It was his turn to laugh. “I’d appreciate it if you kept it to yourself. Adam and I...we’re still figuring things out.”

“I got your back, man.”

As we fell into easier conversation, I found myself wondering if maybe, just maybe, this auction would be the push West and I needed to finally take that leap.

By the time I went home, I was starting to look forward to the big event tomorrow instead of dreading it.

I pushed open the front door, the aroma of freshly-brewed coffee inviting me in. Typical. West was in full-on preparation mode.

“I’m home!” I called out. No response. I kicked off my shoes and padded toward the living room, following the trail of papers strewn across the floor.

There he was. Weston Hart in all his glory. Surrounded by a sea of donor lists, to-do lists, and lists of to-do lists, his curly brown hair sticking up in all directions as he hunched over his laptop. I smiled. He looked like a mad scientist—if mad scientists wore faded Star Wars T-shirts and had biceps that could crush walnuts.

“Earth to West,” I said, waving a hand in front of his face. “The mothership is trying to make contact.”

He blinked, his hazel eyes finally focusing on me. “Drew! When did you get here?”

“Oh, about a decade ago. I’ve aged considerably waiting for you to notice me.”

West grinned, running a hand through his hair—a gesture that never failed to make my heart do a little flip. “Sorry, I got caught up in the numbers. Did you know if we hit our target for the fundraiser, we can hire enough staffing to get the center running at one hundred percent capacity six months earlier than we expected? And that’s my conservative estimate. I don’t even want to think about the donations Noah’s mother-in-law can help us get from her friends.”

Noah was Adam’s older brother and one of our original Foundation volunteers. He’d been giving up his weekend free time to play basketball with us and a group of teenagers we mentored. Thanks to him and his new husband Lior, we’d gotten the lease on the old Cliffborough hospital building and Noah and his brothers had the idea for the fundraiser.

I plopped next to West, careful not to disturb his meticulous chaos. “That’s amazing, West. Though I’m pretty sure you could auction off a used tissue and people would still throw money at you.”

He laughed, nudging my shoulder. “Flattery will get you everywhere, Mr. Carter. But seriously, this could be huge for the Foundation. We could expand our mentorship program. Maybe even start that summer camp we’ve been dreaming about.”

I watched him, marveling at the passion in his voice, the way his eyes lit up when he talked about helping kids. Moments like these made me fall for him all over again.

“Well,” I said, picking up a nearby piece of paper with scribbles I couldn’t make out, “if anyone can pull this off, it’s you. Just don’t forget to breathe, okay? I don’t want to find you passed out in a pile of spreadsheets tomorrow morning.”

West’s expression softened. “Thanks, Drew. I don’t know what I’d do without you keeping me sane through all this.”

I swallowed hard, fighting the urge to say something I shouldn't...not yet. Instead, I opted for, "Probably forget to eat and turn into a caffeine-powered auction robot."

He chuckled, then glanced at his watch. "Speaking of eating, want to order in? I could use a break, and I haven't seen you much lately."

My heart did another of those annoying flips. "Chinese? I'm craving those dumplings from the new place that opened down the road."

"Read my mind." West grinned, reaching for his phone.

As he dialed, I found myself lost in thought, River's words from earlier echoing in my head. But the fear that West didn't feel the same way and would get grossed out by my advances had an iron grip around my chest.

As West placed our order, I studied his profile. The way his brow furrowed in concentration, the slight quirk of his lips as he recited our favorites—it all felt so achingly familiar. I wondered what it would be like to trace that jawline with my fingertips, to feel the stubble against my skin.

"Hellooo..." West's voice snapped me back to reality. "You okay there? You looked a million miles away."

I cleared my throat, hoping my face wasn't as red as it felt. "Yeah, just...thinking about tomorrow. You know, the auction and all."

His expression shifted, concern flooding his features. "Having second thoughts? It's okay if you are, you know. We can always find someone else to?—"

"No, no," I interrupted. "It's not that. Well, not entirely." I sighed, running a hand through my hair. "I guess I'm just nervous about being on display. What if no one

bids? Or worse, what if someone does, and I have to spend an evening making awkward small talk with a stranger?”

West’s eyes softened, and he moved closer, placing a reassuring hand on my shoulder. The warmth of his touch sent a shiver down my spine. “Drew, you’re going to be great. People would be lucky to spend time with you. And if you’re really uncomfortable, we can always have a safeword or something. You say ‘pineapple,’ and I’ll swoop in with some made-up emergency.”

I laughed. “Pineapple? Really?”

“Hey, it’s memorable.” He grinned, squeezing my shoulder gently before letting go. I immediately missed the contact. “But seriously, Drew. You’re doing an amazing thing for the Foundation. These kids need us, and your contribution could make a real difference.”

I nodded, feeling a mix of warmth at his words and a lingering anxiety about the auction. “I know, I know. It’s for a good cause. I just...I guess I’m not used to putting myself out there like that, you know?”

West’s expression turned thoughtful. “I get it. But remember, you’re not alone in this. We’re in it together, like we’ve always been. And I’ll be right there if you need me.”

His words wrapped around me like a warm blanket, and I leaned slightly closer to him. “Thanks, West.”

For a moment, the air between us felt charged, heavy with something I couldn’t name. West’s gaze lingered on mine, and I could have sworn I saw something flicker in his hazel eyes.

I cleared my throat, suddenly aware of how close we were sitting. “You know, it feels



like ages since we've had a chance to just hang out, doesn't it? Between the Foundation work and everything else..."

West nodded, a wistful smile playing on his lips. "Yeah, you're right. I've missed our movie nights and those ridiculous cooking experiments."

"Hey, my squid ink pasta was a culinary masterpiece," I protested, grinning despite myself.

"If by a masterpiece, you mean 'crime against Italian cuisine,' then sure," West teased, his eyes crinkling with laughter.

I felt a familiar warmth bloom in my chest. This easy banter, the way West could always make me smile—it was one of the things I cherished most about our friendship. And yet, lately, I'd felt like I needed more.

"We should make time for that stuff again," I said, my voice softer than I intended. "You know, after the fundraiser madness dies down."

West reached out, gently squeezing my arm. "Absolutely. How about we make it a regular thing? Weekly Drew and West time, no Foundation or work talk allowed."

My heart did a little flip at the suggestion. "Yeah?" I asked, trying not to sound too eager. "I'd really like that."

"It's a date," West said, then quickly added, "I mean, not a date-date, just a...brotherly quality time thing. You know what I mean."

I laughed, even though I died a little inside because I couldn't remember the last time I'd thought of West as a brother. When we were kids in foster care? Yeah, sure. But then we grew up, and I started popping boners whenever he was around. Hurrah for a

sexual awakening when you're sharing a room with other boys.

"I know what you mean, West. And it sounds perfect."

As we stood there, smiling at each other like a couple of idiots, I felt like something shifted between us. It was subtle, barely perceptible, but it was there.

After dinner, I retreated to my room, my mind buzzing with emotions I couldn't quite shake.

I stood by the window even though the only thing I could see in the dark was my own reflection. I replayed West's words in my head. "It's a date ." God, why did those three little words have to send my heart into overdrive?

I knew he didn't mean it like that. But part of me—a growing, insistent part—wished he had. I'd been dancing around my feelings for West for years now, trying to convince myself it was just a deep friendship. But who was I kidding? The way my stomach did backflips when he smiled at me, how I'd catch myself staring at his lips when he talked...this was way beyond buddy territory.

Suddenly restless, I walked over to our Jack-and-Jill bathroom. A hot shower was what I needed to relax.

As I stripped off my clothes and stepped under the warm spray, I let out a long sigh. The water cascaded over my shoulders, and I pressed my forehead against the cool tile, trying to clear my head.

But clarity wasn't what I found. Instead, my mind conjured potential auction outcomes. Me on stage, looking for West in the crowd. His hand shooting up to place the winning bid on me.

Soap slid over my skin as I imagined walking down the stage to him, my eyes laser-focused on his beautiful smile.

“I didn’t know you wanted to learn how to make cocktails.”

“I don’t. Not when I have my own bartender at home,” he says, pulling me out of the large room toward a closed part of the Botanical Gardens.

“What are you doing?” I ask, even though I already know.

West opens the door to a supply closet and locks us inside. In the dark, my back hits the door. His warm breath on my skin makes me shiver. When his lips press onto mine, I gasp. This can’t be happening.

Hungry lips part mine, tasting and teasing.

My hand moved to my aching cock, and I lost myself to the sensation and the fantasy. I was in that dark closet, taking my fill of the man I’d admired from so close but also from afar for so long.

“West,” I gasped as the strokes over my hard length sped up. It didn’t take long for the need to build from my core, and I cried out, spilling my orgasm all over the shower door.

I opened my eyes and took a gasping breath. I needed to stop giving in.

The thought of ruining my friendship with West, of losing him completely, made my chest tighten painfully. I rinsed my hair, letting the water wash away the suds and some of the shame I felt for using him in my fantasy.

But as I stood there, surrounded by steam and the faint scent of my body wash, I

couldn't help but wonder, what if? What if West felt the same way? What if all those lingering looks and casual touches meant something more?

I shook my head, reaching for the towel.

As I dried off, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. My hair stuck up in all directions, and my cheeks were flushed from the hot water. I looked exactly like what I was. A guy hopelessly crushing on his best friend.

Well, at least tomorrow's auction would be a good distraction. Nothing like being paraded around like a piece of meat to take your mind off unrequited love, right?

With a final, resigned sigh, I headed back to my room. Whatever these feelings were, whatever they meant, they'd have to wait. We had a fundraiser to pull off, and I wasn't about to let my messy emotions get in the way. West and the foundation we'd worked so hard to build from scratch deserved better.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:03 am*

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WEST

Too fidgety to sit down, I stood at the back of the large events room at the Botanical Gardens, praying for my heart to stop pounding so hard.

Tonight, everything was at stake—the help that the Star Finders Foundation so desperately needed and the possibility of a future I craved but didn’t know how to bring into existence.

The scent of peonies hung in the air, but the beautiful perfume did nothing to ease my nerves. My palms were sweaty as I gripped the auction paddle, debating whether I’d actually have the guts to use it.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome to the stage, Mr. Andrew Carter!”

The crowd erupted in applause as Drew bounded onto the stage, flashing his beautiful, bright smile that never failed to make my knees go weak. Damn, he looked good in his gray suit. He stood tall and confident, the suit hugging his lean frame perfectly.

“Okay, everyone!” The emcee’s voice boomed through the speakers. “Who’s ready to bid for a chance to learn how to make cocktails from the best bartender in the city?” More cheers and whistles. “But first, let’s have a word from the man himself.”

A smile tugged at my lips despite my nerves. Drew had a way of lighting up any

room—or, in this case, the Botanical Gardens. His enthusiasm was infectious, but I knew the real Drew beneath the facade.

As he launched into his spiel about the Foundation's work, I found myself hanging on his every word, entranced. It wasn't just his looks—though let's be real, the guy was unfairly gorgeous. It was his passion, his genuine desire to help kids who'd been through the same crap we had.

Then, the emcee took over to sell what was really being auctioned.

“All right, folks, let's start the bidding at five hundred. Do I hear five hundred?”

This was it. My moment of truth. Could I actually go through with this? Bid on my best friend like he was a prize to be won? But if I didn't, who knew who might snatch him up? And what if they really hit it off during the cocktail class and then wanted more?

I knew Drew dated occasionally, but I'd never met any of his boyfriends. He was a private person, so I assumed things had never become serious enough for him to bring a guy into our space. It was selfish, but I liked that.

I raised my paddle, heart in my throat. “Five hundred,” I called out, my voice shakier than I would've liked.

Drew's eyes found mine in the crowd, his smile giving me confidence that I was doing the right thing. Before I could count my wins, another voice rang out.

“One thousand!”

Crap. Game on, I guess.

A gentle nudge to my ribs made me jump. I turned to see Noah grinning at me, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

“Well, well, look who’s finally making a move,” he whispered, wagging his eyebrows. “About damn time, West. I was starting to think I’d have to auction off your backbone.”

I felt heat creep up my neck. “I’m not—it’s not like that,” I stammered, unwilling to admit it really was like that.

Noah snorted. “Sure, and I didn’t slip and fall on my husband’s dick when I saw him in the suit he’s wearing tonight. Come on, man. You’ve been pining after Drew for months. This is your chance!”

I shot Noah a glare, but my focus was pulled back when the bidding continued to climb. “Two thousand!” another voice called from the opposite side of the room. I scanned the crowd and spotted Patrick McMartin, smiling like he’d already won. My stomach twisted.

“Noah, what do I do?” I hissed under my breath, panic rising as the numbers soared far beyond what I could responsibly bid without dipping into savings meant for emergencies.

“You bid higher, you big idiot,” Noah said as if it were the simplest thing in the world. “You love him, right?”

I nodded slowly, tearing my eyes away from Drew reluctantly.

“Then show him. Show everyone here.” Noah’s tone softened. “West, you can’t let fear hold you back forever. Trust me, if you don’t step up now, you’ll regret it.”

His words hit home, mixing with the determination and hesitation in my gut. I swallowed hard, my gaze drawn back to Drew on stage.

The bidding escalated quickly, each raise of a paddle sending my heart rate skyrocketing. “Two thousand five hundred!” a voice called out. I countered immediately, “Three thousand!” My resolve strengthened with each bid, Drew’s encouraging smile fueling my determination.

“Four thousand.” Another challenger.

“Four thousand five hundred.” I gritted my teeth as I waited. I couldn’t go higher without serious financial consequences for me. If I could, that money would already be in the Foundation’s bank account, no auction required.

“Four thousand five hundred from the gentleman in the blue tie!” the auctioneer announced, pointing at me. “Can we round it up?”

I allowed myself a moment of hope. Was this it? Had I won?

Suddenly, a smooth, authoritative voice cut through the crowd. “Five thousand.”

The venue fell silent.

Patrick McMartin sat with his parents, his jet-black hair catching the light as his mom clapped proudly.

I clenched my fists, torn between upping my bid and the very real fear of antagonizing important patrons of the Foundation. Not to mention, Cara and John were decent people, on top of being some of the most generous I’d ever met. They’d adopted their three kids to stop them from being separated when they lost their parents.



It shouldn't surprise me that Patrick had the same philanthropist heart as his parents, especially knowing he could have easily gotten lost in the system all those years ago, just like Drew and I had.

But did Patrick have to be so...good-looking?

My throat constricted as I struggled to form words. The auctioneer's gaze swept over the crowd, lingering on me expectantly. I opened my mouth, but no sound came out. My mind raced, calculating the risks. Challenging Patrick could jeopardize the Foundation's relationship with its donors, but letting Drew go felt like a betrayal.

"Going once..." the auctioneer called.

I caught Drew's eye, saw a flicker of...disappointment? I couldn't tell.

"Going twice..."

Patrick turned to face me for the first time since bidding started. He gave me a courteous nod as the emcee announced, "Sold! To Dr. McMartin for five thousand dollars!"

The crowd erupted in applause, but it sounded distant, muffled. I watched, still, as Drew descended from the stage and walked around the tables. My chest tightened as Patrick met him halfway, greeting Drew with a warm embrace.

My bitter thought was that it should be me.

As I watched them walk away, heads bent close in conversation, I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd just lost something far more valuable than a charity auction.

My fingers twitched, itching to run through my hair, but I resisted. Instead, I clenched

my fists at my sides, nails digging into my palms.

“Well, that was...unexpected,” Noah’s voice cut through my spiraling thoughts.

I tried to muster a smile, but it felt more like a grimace.

Noah nudged me with his elbow. “Hey, cheer up. At least now you know Drew’s worth five grand. That’s gotta be flattering, right?”

I let out a small, bitter laugh. “Flattering for Drew. For me? Well, I’m in love with a gorgeous man who can have literally anyone else he wants.”

“Come on, West,” Noah said, his tone softening. “It’s not the end of the world. There’ll be other chances.”

I sighed, finally giving in to the urge to run my hand through my hair. “Will there though? You saw how Patrick looked at Drew. The McMartins are great, but I don’t know Patrick. What if he goes to Mommy and Daddy and convinces them to pull their donations. We can’t risk that.”

Noah’s brow furrowed. “You really think he’d do that?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted, my gaze drifting back to where Drew and Patrick had disappeared into the crowd. “But I can’t take that chance. There are too many kids counting on us.”

“All right, enough doom and gloom,” Noah declared, clapping me on the shoulder. “You know what you need? A drink. And lucky for you, I happen to know where we can find the second-best bartender in Cliffborough.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Second-best?”

Noah grinned. “Well, Drew’s obviously the best, but he’s a bit...occupied at the moment.”

I winced at the reminder but couldn’t help the genuine smile that tugged at my lips. “You’re terrible, you know that?”

“That’s why you love me,” Noah replied cheerfully. “Now come on, let’s drown your sorrows in overpriced champagne. Who knows? Maybe you’ll even catch the eye of some other eligible bachelor and make Drew jealous.”

I rolled my eyes but allowed Noah to steer me toward the bar. “Yeah, because that’s exactly what this situation needs—more complications.”

As we wove through the crowd, I couldn’t shake the weight settling on my chest. But Noah was right. A drink would at least keep me distracted long enough to stop thinking about Drew, or Patrick.

I doubted it would work, but I could try, right?

DREW

I trailed behind Patrick as he weaved through the crowded event room, my heart still racing from standing on that stage. God, I'd hated every second of it. The lights, the stares, the auctioneer's booming voice. But when West started bidding, something inside me had soared.

Could River be right? Did West see me as more than his foster brother and best friend? Or was I completely off track, and he just felt sorry for me? That thought left a bitter taste in my mouth.

As we reached a small table tucked between a couple of indoor trees, the awareness that Dr. Patrick McMartin was the son of our biggest benefactors made me a little nervous.

He waved down a passing server and snagged two flutes of champagne, handing one to me. "I'm Patrick, by the way. Figured we should properly introduce ourselves now that we're going to spend some time together."

I clinked my glass against his. "Drew. Nice to meet you, Patrick."

Patrick tilted his head. "It was touch and go out there with the other bidders. One in particular was hell-bent on separating me from my money."

My face heated when Patrick referenced West. "I'm sorry...I don't know what that

was about. West and I grew up together. Foster brothers.” I took a long sip of champagne, the bubbles tickling my throat. “I don’t know what he was thinking, bidding so much. But we both appreciate your donation. It’ll benefit a lot of the kids we help through the Foundation.”

“I’m happy to help, although I’m sure I’m getting the better end of the deal,” Patrick said softly.

I leaned back in my chair, knowing that my time with Patrick meant more than just his donation, and smiled. “Tell me about yourself. What made you decide to bid on a stranger tonight?”

Patrick’s eyes darted around nervously before he leaned in, lowering his voice. “I...I have a confession to make. While I have my shit together in my professional life, when it comes to dating...not so much. There’s someone I like. Someone really important to me, and I thought if I could impress him with some killer cocktail skills, maybe he’d finally notice me.”

I chuckled at his earnestness. “So you decided to buy a bartender at a charity auction? That’s pretty creative. I’ll give you that.”

Patrick’s cheeks flushed. “God, it sounds so ridiculous when you say it aloud. I’m sorry, this must be weird for you.”

“Hey, no judgment here,” I said, patting his arm. “We’ve all done crazy things for love. Or lust. Or whatever you want to call it.”

“Really?” Patrick perked up. “You don’t think I’m a total loser?”

I grinned, an idea forming. “Not at all. In fact, I think it’s kind of sweet. And you know what? I’m going to help you wow this crush of yours.”

“You are?” The hope in Patrick’s voice was palpable. He was a good guy.

“Absolutely. Tell me more about your friend.”

“He spent last summer in France on a work placement. When he came back, all he talked about was how sophisticated the French are, the amazing food, the wine...” He sighed, his shoulders sagging a little. “I’ve been to Europe, and I’ve seen all those things, but...my adoptive parents are the ones with money. I still remember what it was like to not have any before my biological parents died. My brothers were too little to remember. I guess...I still struggle with belonging in my parents’ world.”

I reached out and put my hand on his. “By the time we’re done with our cocktail lessons, your crush won’t even remember his summer trip to France. He’ll be too busy swooning over your perfect Old Fashioned.”

Patrick laughed, his shoulders visibly relaxing. “I don’t know about that. Oscar’s pretty obsessed with his French adventure.”

“Trust me,” I said, winking. “I’ve got a few tricks up my sleeve that’ll make France look like a snooze-fest.”

As Patrick’s eyes widened with excitement, a familiar warmth spread through my chest. This was what I loved about bartending—the chance to connect with people, to be a small part of their stories. And hey, if I could help someone else’s love life while figuring out my own mess with West, all the better.

“Drew, you’re a lifesaver.” Patrick beamed, his entire demeanor transformed. “I can’t wait to get started.”

I chuckled, giving him a playful salute. “Happy to be of service.”

As Patrick's laughter faded, I noticed the crowd thinning around us. The fundraiser was winding down, and a nagging thought tugged at my mind. West. I needed to find him.

"Listen, Patrick," I said, glancing around the room. "I've got to run, but I'll be in touch about the class, okay?"

Patrick nodded enthusiastically. "Absolutely. Thanks again, Drew. You've really turned my night around."

With a final smile and a wave, I set off through the dwindling crowd. I scanned the room, searching for that familiar mop of curly brown hair. Where the hell was West?

I weaved between small clusters of people, my mind racing. We had the help of Noah and his brothers, who hired an events company through their PR agency to manage the fundraiser and the event. All West had to do was network with potential donors while I talked about the project and was auctioned off.

Finally, I spotted him at the far end of the bar. My heart did a little flip, then immediately sank. West was hunched over, his usually pristine appearance decidedly rumpled.

As I got closer, I saw Noah standing nearby, concern etched on his face. West raised a glass to his lips with a slightly unsteady hand, and my stomach clenched. Oh, West. What have you done to yourself?

"Hey, guys," I said, trying to keep my voice light as I approached. "Quite a night, huh?"

Noah's relief was palpable. "Drew, thank God. I was just about to call you."

West's head swiveled toward me, his hazel eyes glassy. "Drew!" he slurred, a lopsided grin spreading across his face. "My knight in shining armor. Come to rescue me?"

I swallowed hard, pushing down the complicated mix of emotions his words stirred up. "Something like that," I said softly before turning to Noah. "I've got this. I'll get him home safe."

Noah nodded gratefully. "I know you will. Time to go find my own knight in a fitted suit and see if I can have another round on his horse." I laughed as Noah's brows furrowed. "That sounded a little weird, right? I meant his dick. I'm riding his dick."

"I got it the first time. Thanks for the visual," I said.

As Noah moved away, I gently touched West's shoulder. "Come on, big guy. Time to call it a night."

West grumbled something unintelligible but didn't resist as I carefully pried the glass from his fingers. His skin was warm under my touch, and I loved how perfectly his shoulder fit in my palm.

Focus, Drew. Now is not the time.

"Let's get you home," I said. "I think you've had enough excitement for one evening."

As I helped West to his feet, steadying him with an arm around his waist, I couldn't shake the feeling that this night was far from over.

Something must be eating at West to drive him to drink like this. He wasn't even a big drinker. A tiny part of me wondered if he was upset that he lost out on the



auction, but the devil on my shoulder told me to stop being deluded.

The drive home was filled with a tense silence, broken only by West's occasional sighs and the soft hum of the car's engine. I kept stealing glances at him slumped in the passenger seat, his curly hair a mess and his usually bright hazel eyes unfocused and distant.

"You okay over there, champ?" I asked, trying to keep my tone light despite the worry gnawing at my insides.

West grunted. "Just peachy."

I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel, searching for the right words. "You know, if something's bothering you?—"

"Nothing's bothering me," he snapped, then immediately deflated. "Sorry. I'm just...tired."

I nodded, not believing him for a second. "Right. Tired. That's why you decided to go toe-to-toe with Patrick's wallet and then drown your sorrows in expensive scotch."

West's head swiveled toward me, his eyes narrowing. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means I'm worried about you, you idiot," I said, softening my words with a small smile. "This isn't like you, West. What's really going on?"

He turned away again, staring out the window at the passing streetlights. I could almost see the gears turning in his head, weighing whether to open up or keep his walls firmly in place.

We stopped at a red light, and I studied his profile, illuminated by the harsh glow of a nearby streetlamp. God, he was beautiful, even in this disheveled state. My heart ached with the desire to reach out, to smooth away the furrow in his brow, to pull him close and never let go.

But I couldn't. Not now, maybe not ever. Whatever this thing was between us, whatever spark of possibility I thought I'd seen in his eyes earlier tonight, it was probably all in my head.

So, instead, I just waited, giving him the space to decide whether he wanted to let me in.

I pulled into my parking spot for our apartment. West stirred, blinking slowly as if coming out of a trance.

"Home sweet home," I announced, trying to inject some cheer into my voice. "Let's get you inside, big guy."

I hurried around to West's side of the car, opening the door and offering my hand. He stared at it for a moment, his brow furrowed.

"I can walk on my own, Drew," he grumbled, but his actions betrayed his words as he swayed slightly, gripping the car door for support.

I chuckled. "Sure you can, buddy. But humor me, okay?"

Reluctantly, West allowed me to slip an arm around his waist, leaning into me as we made our way up the path. The warmth of his body pressed against mine sent a shiver down my spine, one I desperately hoped he didn't notice.

"This isn't how it was supposed to go," West muttered as we navigated the hallway.

“The fundraiser, the auction...none of it.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Oh? And how was it supposed to go?”

West just shook his head, a ghost of a smile playing on his lips. “Doesn’t matter now. It’s all screwed up.”

My heart clenched at the defeat in his voice. This wasn’t the West I knew, the eternal optimist who always saw the silver lining. What had happened tonight to shake him so badly?

“Hey,” I said softly as we reached the front door. “Whatever it is, we’ll figure it out. That’s what we do, remember?”

West’s eyes met mine, a flicker of something passing through them before he looked away. “Yeah,” he mumbled. “I guess we do.”

Inside our apartment, we went straight to West's bedroom. I eased him onto his bed, kneeling to untie his shoes. He flopped back with a groan, one arm thrown over his eyes.

“You don’t have to do this, Drew,” he mumbled, making no moves to stop me.

“I know,” I replied, setting his shoes aside. “But I want to.”

I grabbed a glass of water from the kitchen and held it out. “Drink this. Doctor’s orders.”

West peeked out from under his arm with a faint smirk. “Since when are you a doctor?”

“Since you decided to get wasted at a charity auction,” I quipped, pressing the glass into his hand. “Come on, bottoms up.”

As West sipped the water, I found myself hovering uncertainly. The responsible thing would be to say goodnight and head to my own room. But something in West’s demeanor—the slump of his shoulders, the furrow in his brow—stopped me from leaving him alone.

“You okay?” I asked softly.

West set the empty glass down, avoiding my gaze. “Yeah, I’ll be fine. Just need to sleep it off.”

He removed his clothes until he was just in his underwear. It was something he’d done in front of me hundreds of times before, but now my eyes wouldn’t move from his perfect chest, the two pink buds that begged for my touch, the trail of dark curly hair that disappeared under his boxers...

“Mind if I crash in here tonight? You know, just in case you need anything.” I knew it would be a sleepless night if he said yes because that was the only way I could trust myself to not gravitate toward him.

West’s eyes snapped to mine, surprise evident in his gaze. “You don’t have to do that.”

“I know, but I want to.”

A beat of silence, then West turned and scooted over to make room for me. “Thanks, Drew.”

I went through the bathroom into my room to strip off my suit and put on the pajamas

I only wore when it was really cold.

When I returned to his bedroom and slid in next to him, he scooted closer.

My breath caught in my throat, and I willed my dick to stay soft.

Think of gross things. Think of gross things.

As West's breathing eventually evened out into sleep, I found myself watching the rise and fall of his chest, a familiar warmth blooming in my own. Whatever was bothering him, whatever had gone wrong tonight, I'd be here. Always.

4

WEST

The rhythmic tapping of my fingers on the keyboard filled the otherwise quiet office. Well, if you could call the reception desk area at the old hospital an office. Still, I liked working here because it meant I was within reach of the volunteers if they needed to talk.

Thankfully, no one else was around this morning because ever since I'd woken up a few days ago with Drew pressed to my side, snoring lightly, I hadn't been able to think straight.

I remembered him making me drink water and then saying he would look after me. I hated that I'd drank so much that he had to look after me. It made me wish for things I had no right wishing for—like waking up to him every day or being able to touch him any time I wanted.

It was unlikely I'd be in the same situation any time soon because I rarely drank and I was doing my very best to avoid Drew.

I was in the zone, crunching numbers for our latest fundraising report, when a gentle knock on the desk startled me out of my spreadsheet-induced trance.

"Mrs. McMartin," I said, quickly standing. "I wasn't expecting you. Is everything all right?"

Cara's warm smile immediately put me at ease. "Everything's wonderful, West. And please, call me Cara."

I nodded, gesturing for her to come around the reception desk and take a seat. As she settled into the chair across from me, I wondered about the reason for her visit. Had we forgotten something at the fundraiser? Was there an issue with her donation?

"I just wanted to stop by and tell you what an incredible job you did with the fundraiser," Cara said, her green eyes sparkling with genuine admiration. "It was a truly magical evening."

A flush of pride warmed my cheeks. "Thank you, that means a lot coming from you. But it was a team effort, really. I just?—"

"Now, now," Cara cut me off gently, "don't sell yourself short. Your passion for this foundation is evident in everything you do."

"I appreciate that," I said, meeting her gaze. "This place, these kids... They mean everything to me and Drew. We just want to give them the support we wish we'd had growing up."

Cara's expression softened, her eyes filled with compassion.

"Well," she said, leaning forward slightly, "your dedication shows. And it's inspiring others to get involved too."

I smiled at that. "That's the goal, isn't it? To create a ripple effect of change."

As Cara nodded in agreement, I thought about how far we'd come. From big dreams at the kitchen table to hosting successful fundraisers and garnering support from pillars of the community like the McMartins. It was more than Drew and I could have

ever hoped for when we started this journey.

“So,” I said, clasping my hands on the desk, “what can I do for you today? I’m sure you didn’t come all this way just to compliment me on the fundraiser.”

Cara’s eyes twinkled with amusement. “Can’t a person simply want to express their appreciation?”

I chuckled, feeling a little sheepish. “Of course. I’m just not used to impromptu visits from our donors. It usually means there’s something specific on their minds.”

“Well,” Cara said, her smile widening, “as it happens, there is something I wanted to discuss with you...”

Cara reached into her elegant handbag and pulled out a checkbook. My eyebrows shot up involuntarily as she began writing.

“I was so moved by the event,” she said, her pen gliding across the paper, “that I’ve decided to make an additional donation. I’ll be matching Patrick’s bid from the auction.”

My jaw nearly hit the floor. Patrick’s bid had been substantial, to say the least. This kind of generosity was...well, it was game-changing.

“Mrs. McMartin, I...that’s incredibly generous,” I stammered, my mind already racing with the possibilities this donation would open up. “Are you sure?”

She handed me the check with a warm smile. “Absolutely. The work you’re doing here is vital, West. And again, call me Cara.”

I accepted the check, still in a bit of a daze. “Cara, thank you. This will make such a



difference for so many kids.”

Cara’s expression shifted as I carefully tucked the check into a folder. “It’s no secret that John and I fostered our children while we went through the adoption process. We fell in love the moment we saw them, and I couldn’t have lived with myself if I’d seen those three boys separated.”

“You and John are the dream of every child in foster care, Cara. Many of us age out of the system with nothing. I’m one of the lucky ones because I came out of it with a family.”

She smiled. “You’re talking about Drew, aren’t you? He’s a lovely man. You both are. I can’t be certain, but I think my Patrick might have a little crush on him. I’ve never seen him more passionate about anything that isn’t his work.”

I tried to keep my expression as neutral as possible.

“Oh really?”

“Patrick was ten when we adopted him. His brothers were a lot younger, so they don’t remember much about their biological parents. Patrick has a very good moral compass. He’s always strived to be a strong student and a good son, a good doctor. Sometimes too good.”

I chuckled. “That sounds like a parent’s best dream.”

“It is, but sometimes I wish he would relax a little. Not focus so much on work. Have a social life. I’m so happy he’s finally doing something fun. Even if nothing more comes from his time with Drew, at least I’ll have a personal bartender at home.”

“That does have its advantages,” I said, trying to make light of it even as I felt the

crushing weight of what she was saying.

There was a possibility Drew and Patrick could end up dating, and unlike the other invisible boyfriends, this one had a face and was an actual decent person.

“How about you, my dear? Anyone special in your life other than Drew?”

“There’s a lot going on here, Cara. With the generous donations we’ve received, I’m going to spend the next few weeks hiring contractors, purchasing equipment, and interviewing people for permanent positions. No time to date or even think about dating.”

Cara’s eyes sparkled with warmth as she gathered her purse, preparing to leave.

“Forgive me for stepping out of line, but don’t let life pass you by. You are as important as the people you’re helping here.”

“Thank you.” That was all I could say before my throat threatened to close up. I’d never had a mother figure or special person who’d spoken to me like they truly cared. Only Drew.

She squeezed my arm gently. “You’re changing lives, you know? Never doubt the impact you’re making. Keep pushing forward, even when it gets tough. The world needs more people like you.”

Her words hit me right in the chest, leaving me momentarily speechless. I swallowed hard, nodding. “I...I will. Thank you for believing in us.”

As Cara’s heels clicked away down the hallway, I stood there, a sudden restlessness settling under my skin.

I paced the room, my fingers twitching at my sides. There was so much to do, so

many people we could help. I also needed to stop thinking about what might happen between Drew and Patrick. The energy coursing through me demanded an outlet, and I knew sitting behind a desk crunching numbers wouldn't cut it.

Screw it.

If I couldn't sit still, I might as well make myself useful. There were always repairs to be done, rooms to be prepped. My muscles ached for action, craving the satisfying burn of physical labor. I'd taken a couple of weeks away from my job as a paramedic to focus on the fundraiser, which meant I'd been sitting for far too many hours, and since I wasn't due back for a few days, that situation was unlikely to change.

I headed to one of the rooms that would eventually serve as a meeting room for our volunteer psychologists and therapists. The walls were a dingy off-white, begging for a fresh coat. After I bought paint a couple of months ago, I'd placed the desired color in each room.

A paint bucket and a set of brushes and rollers were in the corner waiting for me. As I dipped the brush into a can of warm, inviting beige, I felt the tension in my shoulders start to ease.

The first stroke was like a sigh of relief. I fell into a rhythm, and the steady swish-swish against the wall became almost meditative. My mind drifted, imagining how the room would look once we had furniture and some nice pictures on the walls.

Once I'd done the edges, I put the brush down and picked up the roller. That made it all go a lot quicker. In just over an hour, the first coat was done and waiting to dry before the next one.

One room down, about a million to go.

I wiped the sweat from my brow with the back of my hand. My T-shirt clung to me, and I could feel the pleasant burn in my arms. But I wasn't ready to be done yet.

I moved to the next room, eyeing the ratty old carpet with disdain. The low-pile carpet was long overdue for retirement, but hey, at least there were no suspicious-looking stains. I grabbed a pry bar and got to work. The rip of the carpet giving way under my hands was a satisfying sound.

My anxiety melted away with each pull. My muscles strained, and I grunted with effort, but damn if it didn't feel good. This was a real, tangible progress. Something I could see and touch.

After what felt like hours—probably closer to two—I finally paused, leaning against the wall to catch my breath. My chest heaved, and I could feel the ache settling into my muscles. It was a good kind of pain. It meant I'd accomplished something.

But even as my body screamed for a hot shower and bed, that restless energy still thrummed beneath my skin. The thought of going home and having to hear about Drew's plans for the cocktail class with Patrick made me antsy.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I pulled out my phone and dialed Noah's number. He picked up on the third ring.

"Dude. You came up from under the piles of cash."

I chuckled, realizing how rare it was for me to call this late. "Yeah. Feel like a good old Scrooge McDuck. Just wondering if you're up for grabbing a drink? I need to unwind a bit."

There was a pause, and I could practically hear Noah's eyebrows raising. "Unwind, huh? Like at the fundraiser?"

I groaned, my skin heating at the memory. “God, no. I’m too old for that. Only just shook off the hangover. I just...I don’t feel like going home, you know?”

Noah’s laugh was warm and understanding. “All right, all right. Meet you at Tanner’s in twenty?”

“Make it thirty. Thanks, man.” I ended the call, feeling some of the tension ease from my shoulders. A night out with Noah was exactly what I needed. Just enough distraction to quiet my restless thoughts without the risk of making an ass of myself...again. Now, I just needed a quick shower. Thank fuck I had a spare set of clothes in the car because I stunk.

As I made my way to Tanner’s, the refreshing night air helped me think more clearly. The familiar neon bar sign came into view, and I spotted Noah leaning against the brick wall outside.

We headed inside, the warm buzz of conversation and soft music enveloping us. As we settled into a booth, I noticed the concerned look Noah was giving me.

“So, what’s really going on, West? You’re not exactly the ‘spontaneous drinks on a weeknight’ type.”

I sighed, running a hand through my hair. “I don’t know, man. It’s just... There’s too much going on, and I feel like I’m at a crossroads right now.”

“Do you need a little push?”

“Fuck, I need a roadmap.”

He laughed. “I’m afraid I can’t help you with that.”

“I never thought I’d say this, but can you just help me get my mind off everything?”

“Dude, I’m married.”

It was my turn to laugh. “That was a good start.”

He raised his hand for the server to come over. “Have I told you about the time Lior came home to me fucking myself on a dildo, and instead of taking over, the fucker focused on the tiny little dog situation?”

And this was why I loved Noah. He didn’t even do it on purpose. He was just...Noah.

“Dude, there’s way too much to unpack here. I’m definitely going to need a drink for this.”

5

DREW

I swung open the heavy wooden door of Lusitana, revealing an eager Patrick practically bouncing on his toes. His eyes lit up as he followed me to the bar.

“This is so cool,” he gushed, clutching a leather-bound notebook. “Are you sure it’s okay for us to be here when you’re closed?”

I chuckled, stepping aside to let him in. “Absolutely. River is holed up in the office, probably drowning in paperwork, but otherwise, we’ve got the place to ourselves.”

Patrick’s grin widened as he set his notebook on the polished bar and fished out his phone. “Mind if I take some pictures as we go? For reference, you know.”

“Knock yourself out,” I said, moving behind the bar. The familiar weight of the cocktail shaker in my hand made me smile. “Ready to dive into the wonderful world of mixology?”

Patrick nodded enthusiastically, his fingers flying across his phone screen. “Born ready. Where do we start?”

I grabbed a highball glass, twirling it with a bit of flair. “Well, young grasshopper, the first rule of cocktail making is”—I paused for dramatic effect—“don’t spill the booze.”

Patrick snorted, scribbling furiously in his notebook. “Sage advice. I’ll make sure to write that down in all caps.”

As I lined up various bottles and ingredients, I felt a surge of pride. I’d struggled with anything academic from a young age until I was diagnosed as dyslexic. I’d overcompensated by being good at other things. After a short stint in a bar in my early twenties, I became hooked on the art of mixology and hadn’t looked for a different job since.

“All right, let’s start with a classic—the mojito. Simple, refreshing, and guaranteed to impress.”

Patrick leaned in, his eyes sparkling with curiosity. “Hit me with your mojito wisdom, cocktail sensei.”

I laughed, grabbing a handful of fresh mint leaves. “First, we muddle the mint to release those essential oils. It’s like giving the leaves a gentle massage—you want to coax the flavor, not beat it into submission.”

As I demonstrated, Patrick’s brow furrowed in concentration. “So, less Hulk smash and more...mint whisperer?”

“Exactly.” I grinned, adding a splash of simple syrup. “Now for the rum. Remember, measure with your heart.”

Patrick raised an eyebrow. “Is that bartender speak for ‘pour recklessly?’”

I winked, carefully measuring out the rum. “Only on special occasions. For now, we’ll stick to actual measurements. Your liver will thank me later.”

As we continued through the steps, I relaxed into the familiar rhythm of crafting



drinks. Patrick's enthusiasm was infectious, his questions ranging from insightful to hilariously off-base. It felt good to share my passion, to see the spark of understanding in someone else's eyes.

"And there you have it," I said, sliding the finished mojito across the bar. "One perfect mojito, ready to transport you to a Cuban beach."

Patrick eyed the drink appreciatively, then glanced back at his notes. "That is amazing, Drew. You make it look so easy."

"It's all about practice. And maybe a little bit of magic."

Patrick took a cautious sip, and his eyes widened. "Oh wow. This...this tastes incredible."

I beamed, already reaching for the next set of ingredients. "Just wait until you try a whiskey sour. Now that's where the real fun begins."

As I reached for the whiskey, Patrick set down his mojito and fixed me with a curious gaze. "So, Drew," he said, his tone suddenly casual, "I've got to ask—is there a special someone in your life?"

The question caught me off guard, and I nearly fumbled the bottle. "I, uh...what?"

Patrick's eyes twinkled mischievously. "Come on, a charming bartender like you? Surely, you've got admirers lining up around the block. Not to mention, you're gorgeous."

Heat crept up my neck. "Oh, you know...I keep busy with work and the Foundation..."

“Mm-hmm,” Patrick hummed, unconvinced.

There was a pause, and when I looked up, Patrick was studying me intently. “But there is someone, isn’t there?” he asked softly.

My heart skipped a beat. Was I that transparent? I swallowed hard, feeling suddenly exposed. Slowly, I nodded, unable to meet his eyes.

“That’s a good thing, Drew. Whoever they are, they’re lucky to have you.”

“Thanks,” I murmured, managing a small smile.

Patrick’s face lit up. “You had plenty of guys bidding on you at the fundraiser. Even your friend West, right?”

The memory of that night flooded back, bringing with it a whirlwind of emotions. “Yeah, he did,” I admitted, my stomach doing a little flip.

“That’s got to mean something, right?” Patrick pressed, leaning forward eagerly.

I shrugged, trying to keep my voice steady. “Maybe. I don’t know. It’s...complicated.”

As I spoke, I pictured West’s face, the way he’d looked at me that night. Hope and uncertainty warred within me, leaving me off-balance.

“Complicated how?” Patrick asked, his tone encouraging.

I sighed, absently wiping down the bar. “We work together, sort of. And he’s just... He’s West, you know? He’s a paramedic, so he literally saves people for a living. He’s charming and probably has his pick of anyone he wants.”

Patrick scoffed. “And you think you’re not in that league? Drew, trust me, you’re a catch. If he’s smart, he’ll see that too.”

Patrick’s words hung in the air, challenging my self-doubt. I let out a long breath.

“You really think so?” I asked, unable to keep the vulnerability out of my voice.

Patrick nodded emphatically. “Absolutely. Look, the guy bid on you at a charity auction. That’s not exactly subtle, Drew. He clearly wants to spend time with you.”

I chuckled. “When you put it like that...”

“Exactly.” Patrick grinned, raising his expertly mixed cocktail. “To taking chances?”

We clinked glasses. Maybe Patrick was right. Maybe I’d been too caught up in my insecurities to see what was right in front of me.

We worked on a few more cocktails and a couple of mocktails before we finished the lesson. Patrick’s satisfaction was palpable. “Thanks for this, Drew. I feel like a proper mixologist now.”

“Anytime, man. Seriously, if you need any more help or want another class, just give me a shout.”

“I might take you up on that. You’re a cool guy.” Patrick gathered his things, pausing at the door. “And, Drew? Go for it with West. Life’s too short for what-ifs. I mean, it’s not like I’m all that good at dating, but look at me. I’m trying, right? Maybe I’ll impress Oscar...or maybe he’ll like the drinks more than he’ll ever like me.”

With a final encouraging smile, he was gone.

I tidied up the bar, my mind racing with thoughts of West. Taking a deep breath, I headed toward the office to check on River.

The atmosphere shifted dramatically as I stepped into the quiet room. Gone was the lively banter and clinking of glasses, replaced by the soft hum of a computer and the rustle of papers.

River hunched over his desk, his usually bright eyes dulled with fatigue. Stacks of invoices and schedules surrounded him like a paper fortress.

“Hey,” I said softly, not wanting to startle him. “How’s it going in here?”

River looked up, blinking slowly as if emerging from a trance. “Hey, Drew,” he said, his voice carrying a weight I wasn’t used to hearing. “It’s going... Well, it’s going.”

I pulled up a chair. “You look like you’re about to face-plant into those invoices. When’s the last time you took a break?”

River ran a hand through his dark hair, mussing it further. “I don’t know. What time is it?”

“Time for you to spill,” I said gently. “What’s really going on?”

He sighed, leaning back in his chair. The tension in his shoulders was visible, even under his well-fitted shirt. “Adam is staying with his brother,” he admitted after a moment.

“Why? I thought everything was going well between you two.”

He sighed. “It is. He just needs some time to figure some things out for himself. It’s just hard returning to being alone after having him in my space for weeks, you

know?”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Was it worth it? Taking the risk with Adam, I mean.”

River leaned back in his chair and smiled. “He actually made the first move. I’m not sure I ever would’ve had the guts. He was straight, after all. But no. I don’t regret it. Even if we don’t work out, I’m glad I had him even for a short time.”

River looked at me, a spark of his usual perceptiveness returning to his eyes. “Are you finally going to talk to West about your feelings?”

“I want to, but I’m terrified.”

“Only one way to find out.”

I nodded at the words I’d heard for the second time in maybe ten minutes. “Thanks, River.”

River’s eyebrow quirked up, a hint of amusement breaking through his fatigue. “Glad my romantic woes could be of service. Now go get your man.”

I laughed, heading for the door. “I’m on it. And, River? Don’t worry. Adam will come back to you.”

As I stepped out of the office, my mind raced with possibilities. West’s favorite foods, the perfect wine, maybe some candles and a movie?

The drive home was a blur of planning and anticipation. By the time I unlocked my front door, I was practically vibrating with nervous energy.

I surveyed the kitchen, mentally cataloging ingredients. West loved my homemade pasta sauce, and I had some bread I could slather with garlic butter. As I started pulling out pots and pans, I hoped West would like my surprise. If nothing else, we'd agreed to spend more time together after the fundraiser, and so far, I'd barely seen him.

My hands trembled slightly as I chopped garlic.

Get it together, Drew. It's just dinner with your best friend. Who you happen to be in love with. No pressure.

Who was I kidding? This wasn't just dinner. This was me finally putting my heart on the line.

As the water started to boil, I hummed alongside the music playing from my phone, my earlier nerves giving way to excitement.

I nearly jumped when West leaned over me to look at the food.

"What are you cooking?"

God, he smelled nice, like he'd just had a shower. I knew that soap. I'd been tempted to use it so many times, but I always stopped myself because I didn't want things to get weird if he asked why I smelled like him.

"Drew?"

"Oh yes. Um...I'm cooking dinner. You up for your favorite pasta, wine, and a

movie?”

His eyes widened, and he looked away. “I was...actually going out.”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:03 am*

6

WEST

The moment I said the words, I wanted to take them back.

Drew's bright-blue eyes clouded over, his usual sunny smile dimming. "Oh. Right, of course." He turned back to the pot and stirred the bubbling sauce. "I just thought...never mind. I'll put the leftovers in a container so you can have it tomorrow. You know, if you want...for your lunch at work or something."

"Everything okay?" I asked, studying his face.

Drew shrugged, aiming for nonchalance and missing by a mile. "Yeah, totally. I should have asked you first. Off you go," he said, pushing me toward the door. "You don't want to leave your date waiting."

"Wait—what?"

"Your date. You have a date."

"I do?"

He stares at me. "You're wearing the jeans."

I look down at my legs. "I'm not sure what you mean."



“You always wear those jeans when you have a date. They make your ass look?—”

I smiled when he stopped himself by putting his hand over his mouth. He turned to face the stove, but I stopped him and flipped him back around.

“How do these jeans make my ass look, Drew?” I teased.

He rolled his eyes. “Squishable.”

I chuckled and leaned in close, my lips brushing against his ear as I whispered, “Noted.”

His body shook with an intake of breath before he pushed me away, his brows furrowing.

“I’m only joking. I actually ran out of clean jeans. I was on my way to the Foundation to do some work, but I think I’ve changed my mind.”

Drew’s head snapped up, hope lighting his features. “Yeah?”

I nodded, ignoring the voice in my head that screamed this was a terrible idea. “You know what keeps my ass looking squishable? Your pasta dishes.”

Drew’s face lit up. “Seriously? You’re staying?”

“Don’t get too excited. I’m tired, and you’re going to feed me carbs. I’ll be asleep on my plate before I finish it.”

He chuckled. “I promise I won’t let you drown in my special sauce.”

I raised an eyebrow before we both burst into laughter.

Seeing Drew like this brought all my feelings to the surface. The way his eyes closed all the way when he laughed. The almost-dimples on his cheeks, the perfectly-straight teeth, and just...him. My sweet, smart, beautiful Drew.

When I opened the cupboard to grab the plates, I saw a bottle of red we'd had for a while. It was a gift, so we'd saved it for a special occasion. Our first night at home together in weeks definitely counted as a special occasion.

We fell into an easy rhythm, moving around each other with the familiarity of longtime friends.

"You said you were going back to the Foundation," he said, taking a sip of wine. "How are things out there? I'm sorry I haven't been able to help you much since the fundraiser."

"Hey, it's fine. Nothing but spreadsheets and boring shit, but we're almost ready to start offering contracts." Which reminded me. "Actually, if you have some time, I could use some help with that."

His eyes bugged out.

"No, not the paperwork," I reassured him. "The calls. You're the one with the people skills."

Drew gave me a sheepish smile, but I was right. Together, we worked. I could do all the paperwork and was good with people when they needed fixing, but negotiating with contractors who tried to get the best of me? I hated it. I knew they were taking advantage of me, they knew I knew they were taking advantage, and in the middle of the battle, I usually ended up calling people unsavory names and moving on.

"You mean I'm the one born with the patience gene."

“Yeah, that one.”

As I launched into explaining our latest project idea, Drew leaned forward, completely engrossed. His enthusiasm was contagious, and soon, we were bouncing ideas back and forth as we devoured the delicious pasta.

“What if we partnered with local businesses for a mentorship program?” Drew suggested, gesturing excitedly with his fork.

I nodded, my mind racing. “That could work. We could focus on at-risk youth, give them real-world work experience.”

“Exactly! And maybe tie it into that summer camp idea you had?”

We continued like that until the food was gone and most of the wine too. Watching Drew’s face light up with each new idea, I felt a warmth in my chest that had nothing to do with alcohol. This, right here, was why we worked so well together. Our shared passion, our ability to build on each other’s thoughts—it was magical.

We settled on the couch to watch an episode of some series Drew was into. I barely paid attention to it because my focus was entirely on Drew sitting so close I could feel the warmth radiating from his body.

“These guys are so funny. I can’t wait for the next season.” Drew chuckled, stretching his arms overhead. His T-shirt rode up, revealing a sliver of tanned skin. I forced my gaze away, swallowing hard. He turned to me with a lazy smile. “Thanks for staying, West. It’s been a while since we’ve done this.”

I nodded, ignoring the pang in my chest. “Yeah, it’s been nice.”

As I shifted to reach for the remote, a sharp pain shot through my lower back, tearing

a groan from me.

“You okay?”

“Fine,” I lied, forcing a smile. But Drew knew me too well.

“Bullshit,” he said, his tone gentle but firm. “What’s going on?”

I sighed, running a hand through my hair. “It’s nothing, really. A little back strain from some stuff I’ve been working on at the Foundation. My back’s reminding me I’m not twenty anymore.”

Drew’s frown deepened. “West, you can’t keep pushing yourself like this. Your work can be physically demanding, and now you’re doing more than paperwork at the Foundation?”

I wanted to tell him I was fine, that he didn’t need to worry. But looking into those concerned blue eyes, I felt my resolve crumbling. “I know,” I admitted quietly. “It’s just... There’s always more to do, you know?”

Drew’s eyes softened, and he shifted on the couch, turning to face me fully. “I know, but you’re no good to anyone if you burn yourself out. Here, let me help.”

Before I could protest, Drew’s hands were on my shoulders, gently urging me to turn around. “Drew, you don’t have to?—”

“Shut up and let me take care of you for once,” he said, his voice a mix of exasperation and fondness.

I hesitated for a moment, then gave in, turning so my back was to him. Drew’s hands settled on my shoulders, and I had to bite back a groan at how good it felt.

“Jesus, West, you’re like one big knot,” Drew muttered, his thumbs digging into a particularly tense spot.

I let out a low moan. “Fuck, that feels good.”

Drew’s breath hitched slightly, but his hands didn’t falter. “Yeah? Good. Just relax, okay?”

I tried to do as he said, letting my eyes close as Drew’s strong hands worked their magic on my aching muscles. Each press of his fingers sent sparks of pleasure-pain through me, and I found myself melting under his touch.

“Lower,” I murmured. “To the left a bit.”

Drew complied, his hands sliding down my back. When he hit a particularly sensitive spot, I arched into his touch with a groan that was embarrassingly close to pornographic.

“There?” Drew asked, his voice sounding oddly strained.

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. Drew’s hands were doing incredible things to my body, and I was acutely aware of how easy it would be to lean back into him, to turn my head and capture his lips with mine...

As Drew’s hands continued their ministrations, kneading and stroking in all the right places, my body responded. Heat pooled in my groin, and I shifted uncomfortably, praying Drew wouldn’t ask me to turn around. There was no way I’d be able to hide my erection in these jeans.

“You okay?” Drew asked, his breath warm against my ear.

I swallowed hard, nodding. “Yeah, just... It feels really good.”

Drew’s hands stilled for a moment, and I held my breath, wondering if I’d said too much. But then he resumed his massage, his touch somehow even more intimate than before.

“Good,” he murmured so softly I almost didn’t hear it. “I want you to feel good, West.”

Drew’s hands suddenly stilled on my shoulders, and I felt him pull back. The loss of contact was like a bucket of cold water, snapping me out of my heated daze.

“I, uh...I should probably call it a night,” Drew said, his voice uncharacteristically hesitant. “Just remembered we’re taking inventory at the restaurant tomorrow, so I have to go in early.”

I turned to face him, holding a pillow over my lap and trying to ignore the way my body ached for his touch. “Right, of course. Thanks for...you know. The massage.”

Drew nodded, running a hand through his tousled hair. “No problem, man. What are friends for, right?”

Friends. Right.

“Yeah,” I managed, forcing a smile. “Get some rest. Knock ’em dead tomorrow.”

Drew flashed me a grin, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Always do. Night, West.”

As he disappeared down the hallway, I collapsed back onto the couch, my mind reeling. What the hell had just happened? One minute we were joking and relaxed, the next....

I groaned, burying my face in my hands. This was exactly why I'd kept my distance lately. Every moment with Drew felt charged, loaded with potential and unspoken feelings.

Another show played silently across the TV screen, casting a glow over the room. I stared at it, but I couldn't say what was on as I replayed the evening in my mind. The easy conversation over dinner, the way Drew's face had lit up when I'd decided to stay, the feeling of his hands on my skin...

I needed to get it together, even if I knew it was hopeless. Drew had wormed his way into my heart years ago, and try as I might, I couldn't shake him loose.

I sighed, a familiar ache of longing settling in my chest. When had things gotten so complicated between us?

As I finally turned off the TV and headed to my room, I knew sleep would be a long time coming. The memory of Drew's touch lingered on my skin, a bittersweet reminder of what I couldn't have.

DREW

I weaved through the packed dining room of Lusitana, balancing a tray of colorful cocktails as the buzz of laughter and clinking glasses filled the air. My eyes landed on Adam and River, wrapped in each other's arms, their faces glowing with pure joy.

"To the happy couple!" someone shouted, raising a glass.

A chorus of cheers erupted as Adam planted a kiss on River's lips. My heart swelled with happiness for my friends, even if a twinge of envy crept in. I wanted to be them.

"Thanks, Drew!" a regular patron said as they took a drink from my tray. "Hell of a declaration, huh?"

"You said it," I replied, my gaze drifting back to the lovebirds.

I patted my pocket, feeling for my phone. Where the hell was West? He should've been here an hour ago.

Ducking behind the bar, I pulled out my phone and checked for messages. Nothing. My stomach twisted with unease.

It wasn't like West to be late. He was always punctual, arriving at least five minutes early. Yet today, he had somehow missed the moment when Adam professed his love



for River in front of everyone. I was disappointed, but there was nothing I could do, so I pushed my thoughts aside and focused on work.

Over the next couple of hours or so, I tried but failed to stop my eyes from darting to the entrance every few seconds, hoping to see that familiar mop of curly brown hair appear.

River and Adam had disappeared an hour or so ago but the party was still going strong.

My phone buzzed in my pocket as I handed out mojitos. I nearly dropped the tray in my haste to check it, but it was just a spam email. Disappointment and frustration washed over me in equal measure.

As I pocketed my phone with a sigh, a familiar voice piped up behind me.

“Why the long face, Drewsicle? This is supposed to be a party!”

I turned to find Noah grinning at me, his blond hair artfully tousled and blue eyes twinkling with mischief. He slung an arm around my shoulders, leaning in conspiratorially. “We’re going to crash Adam and River’s little love nest. Wanna come?”

“I’ve heard the stories, and I’m not sure I want to be on the receiving end when they come back for revenge.”

Noah shrugged. “It’s only a possibility if any of us has your apartment keys. I’ve been practicing my lock-picking skills, but I’m not front-door trained yet.”

For a moment, I was tempted. It would be a much-needed distraction from my worry about West. But as quickly as the thought came, guilt followed.

“I don’t know, man.” I hesitated, glancing at my phone again. “West still isn’t here, and he’s not answering my texts. I’m getting kind of worried.”

Noah’s grin softened. “Aw, come on. He’s probably just caught up in work at the Foundation. You know how he gets when he’s in the zone.”

I nodded, but the knot in my stomach didn’t loosen. “Yeah, maybe. But it’s not like him to ghost me.”

“Tell you what,” Noah said, squeezing my shoulder. “You go find West. I’ve already got Lior, Lex, and Emery for Operation Love Nest Invasion. But you owe me one epic prank in the future, got it?”

I managed a small smile. “Deal. Thanks, Noah.”

He winked and sauntered off. As I watched him go, I couldn’t shake the feeling that something was seriously wrong.

Taking a deep breath, I made my decision. It was time to go find West, even if it meant leaving the party early. I just hoped I was overreacting and he’d have a perfectly reasonable explanation for all of this.

With the assistant manager’s permission, I slipped out of Lusitana, the sounds of laughter and clinking glasses fading behind me. The cool night air hit my face as I jogged to my car, my mind racing faster than my feet.

The drive home was a blur of streetlights and worst-case scenarios. By the time I pulled into our driveway, my hands were sweating on the steering wheel. I practically flew out of the car, hope and dread warring in my chest as I fumbled with the front-door lock.

“West?” I called out, flicking on the lights.

Silence.

Our living room stood empty, mockingly pristine. No rumpled West sprawled on the couch, no half-empty coffee mug on the side table. Just...nothing.

I checked his room, my room, the bathroom. No West.

“Shit,” I breathed, running a hand through my hair. The knot in my stomach tightened.

I paced the room, my footsteps loud in the quiet house. With each turn, I checked my phone, willing it to buzz with a message from West. Nothing. Nada. Zilch.

I flopped onto the couch, staring at my phone. Should I call him?

“Screw it,” I muttered, hitting the call button. It rang. And rang. And went to voicemail.

“Hey, it’s West. Leave a message!”

I ended the call without speaking.

That’s when I knew. Sitting there wasn’t going to cut it. I had to go to the Foundation, had to see for myself what was happening.

I jumped up, snagging my keys from where I’d dropped them on the coffee table. A mix of worry and frustration propelled me toward the door.

“If you’re nose-deep in paperwork and just forgot to charge your phone, West Hart, I

swear I'm going to kill you," I grumbled, even as my heart raced with concern. "Right after I kiss you senseless for scaring me like this."

As I rounded the corner to the Foundation parking lot, my heart nearly stopped. Flashing lights. Sirens wailing. Smoke billowing into the sky.

"No, no, no," I muttered, abandoning the car between two spaces and breaking into a run.

The Star Finders Foundation building loomed ahead, flames licking at the windows of the old maternity ward. It was the furthest from the main building, which gave me some hope. West was usually in the reception area, which he'd turned into a temporary office of sorts.

A crowd had gathered, held back by police tape. I shoved my way through, ignoring the protests.

"West!" I shouted, scanning faces frantically. "Has anyone seen Weston Hart?"

A burly firefighter turned toward me, his face streaked with soot. "Sir, you need to stay back?—"

"My...West works here," I interrupted, grabbing his arm. "Tall guy, curly hair. Have you seen him?"

He shook his head. "Did you say West Hart?"

"Yes! Have you seen him?"

"He's not on shift tonight."

I cut him off again, desperation clawing at my throat. “Please, you don’t understand. He always stays late. He could still be inside!”

The chaos around us intensified. Water hoses battled the inferno, and I heard the crackle of flames even over the sirens.

“Listen,” the firefighter said, his voice firm but not unkind. “We’re doing everything we can. But I need you to stay calm and?—”

“Calm?” I laughed, the sound bordering on hysterical. “The man I love might be trapped in there, and you want me to be calm?”

My mind raced. What if West was hurt? What if he was scared, wondering why I hadn’t found him yet?

“I should have come sooner,” I said, biting my nails. “I knew something was wrong. I should have...”

The firefighter’s radio crackled to life, and he turned away to respond. I stood there, helpless, watching the flames devour the place we’d worked so hard to get. The place West poured his heart into every day.

Please. Please, let him be okay.

Suddenly, a shout cut through the chaos. “We’ve got movement on the second floor!”

My heart leaped into my throat. “That’s got to be West!” I yelled, surging forward. A firefighter caught me around the waist, holding me back.

“Sir, you can’t?—”

“I heard a voice!” another firefighter called out, emerging from the building’s entrance. “Male, adult. Sounded like he was calling for help.”

“That’s him in there,” I insisted to anyone who would listen. “West always works late. He’s probably trying to save important files or something stupid like that.”

The fire chief barked orders, his voice steady amid the pandemonium. “Johnson, Rodriguez, gear up. One of ours may be inside. We’re going in.”

I watched, my entire body trembling, as two firefighters put on their masks with practiced speed. The heat from the blaze was intense, even from where I stood. Sweat trickled down my back, and the acrid smell of smoke burned my nostrils.

My mind conjured images of West, trapped and coughing, desperately searching for a way out. I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to banish the thoughts.

“Please,” I begged the firefighters as they prepared to enter. “Please find him.”

The chief turned to me, his expression grave but determined. “We’ll do everything we can, sir. But I need you to stay back and let us work.”

I nodded numbly, watching as the rescue team disappeared into the smoke-filled entrance. The wait was excruciating, every second feeling like an eternity.

“Come on, West,” I murmured, fists clenched at my sides. “You better be okay, you stubborn idiot. We’ve got way too much left to do together.”

My heart raced as I watched the firefighters vanish into the smoke-filled building.

The crackle of flames mixed with the shouts of firefighters, creating a hellish cacophony. I paced back and forth, unable to stand still, my eyes never leaving the

entrance where the rescue team had disappeared.

“Come on, come on,” I muttered, willing them to emerge with West.

Suddenly, a thunderous crack split the air. My head snapped up just in time to see a portion of the roof cave in, sending a shower of sparks and debris raining down.

“No!” I screamed, lunging forward instinctively. “West!”

Strong arms wrapped around me, holding me back. It was the fire chief, his face grim.

“Stay back, son,” he ordered, but I barely heard him over the ringing in my ears.

“But West—” I choked out, my vision blurring with tears. “He’s still in there!”

The chief’s radio crackled to life. “Chief, we’ve got a problem. The collapse has blocked our exit. We’ll have to find another way to get out, and we’ve got an unconscious victim with us.”

My world tilted on its axis. West. It had to be West. Trapped. Unconscious. Maybe worse.

“No, no, no,” I repeated, my voice breaking. “This can’t be happening. West!”

As chaos erupted around me, all I could think was: I can’t lose him. Not like this. Not when I’d never told him how I really felt.

8

WEST

The world came back in flashes of pain and confusion. My eyelids fluttered open to darkness, dust tickling my nose. Where the hell was I? A crushing weight pinned my leg, and my head throbbed with each heartbeat.

“Hello? Is anyone there?” I called out, my voice hoarse. Panic clawed at my chest as memories trickled back—the fire, the collapsing roof. Shit.

I strained my ears, catching faint voices in the distance. Firefighters. Thank God. I just had to hang on.

“Over here!” I shouted, coughing as smoke filled my lungs.

Footsteps drew closer, flashlight beams cutting through the haze. I squinted against the sudden brightness.

“Sir, can you hear me?” A firefighter’s face swam into view. “West, is that you?”

“Yeah,” I rasped. My training kicked in as I cataloged my injuries. “Left leg’s trapped. Probable concussion. No other major trauma that I can tell.”

“Good to know. We’ll get you out of here in no time.”

As they worked to free my leg, I focused on staying calm, pushing aside the creeping



fear. I'd seen plenty of rescues from the other side. Now, I just had to trust my fellow first responders to do their job.

"How's it looking down there, Rodriguez?" I asked, gritting my teeth against a fresh wave of pain.

"Almost got it. You're doing great, West. Just hang in there a little longer."

I nodded, taking shallow breaths to avoid the worst of the smoke. My thoughts drifted to Drew. God, he probably thought I ditched the party. There was so much left unsaid between us...

No. I shook my head, wincing. I couldn't go there right now. One step at a time. Get out alive first, deal with complicated feelings later.

"All right, we're almost ready," Johnson announced. "We'll have to move the beam."

I braced myself, determined to help however I could. Whatever happened next, I knew one thing for certain—I wasn't going down without a fight.

As the guys carefully maneuvered around me, I let my mind wander to Drew. His bright-blue eyes, that easy smile that could light up a room. God, what I wouldn't give to see that smile right now.

"You still with us, West?" Johnson called out, snapping me back to reality.

"Yeah, I'm here," I replied, my voice raspy from the smoke.

Just thinking about how I might never get the chance to tell Drew how I really feel. How his friendship had become so much more to me over the years. The way my heart raced every time he walked into a room.

“All right, we’re going to lift this beam now,” Rodriguez announced. “It might hurt, but we need you to stay as still as possible. Can you do that for us?”

I nodded, steeling myself. “I’ve got this. Let’s do it.”

“On three. One, two…”

As they began to lift, I bit back a groan. The pain was excruciating, but I forced myself to focus on helping them however I could.

“That’s it, just a little more,” I encouraged through gritted teeth. “I think I can wiggle my leg out if you can hold it there.”

Johnson looked at me skeptically. “You sure about that, buddy? We don’t want to risk further injury.”

I managed a weak chuckle. “Trust me, I know what I’m doing. Paramedic, remember?”

With their reluctant nod, I slowly began to extract my leg. Every movement sent shockwaves of pain through my body, but I pushed through. All I could think about was getting out of there, seeing Drew’s face again. Maybe this time, I’d finally have the courage to tell him how I felt.

“You’re doing great, West,” he encouraged. “Almost there.”

As I finally pulled my leg free, I let out a relieved laugh. “Well, that was fun. Let’s not do it again anytime soon, yeah?”

The guys chuckled, carefully helping me to my feet. As I tested my strength on my feet, I couldn’t shake the image of Drew from my mind. His worried face, those

expressive eyes filled with concern.

I made a silent promise to myself right then and there. If I made it out of this, I wouldn't waste another moment. Life was too short, too unpredictable. It was time to tell Drew exactly how I felt. Consequences be damned.

I gritted my teeth as I took my first step, the pain shooting through my leg like lightning. But I'd be damned if I was going to let a little discomfort stop me now.

"All right, boys," I said, forcing a grin. "Let's get out of here."

"The way we came from is blocked. Do you know another way out?"

I nodded. "I know this building like the back of my hand."

One of the firefighters, a burly guy with a bushy mustache, raised an eyebrow. "You sure you're up for this?"

I nodded, swallowing hard. "Absolutely. Consider me your personal GPS."

As we navigated the smoky corridors, I pushed aside thoughts of Drew, focusing instead on getting us all out safely.

"Watch out for that loose beam," I called out, wincing as I sidestepped some debris. "There's a back stairwell just around this corner that should still be intact."

We made slow but steady progress, the acrid smell of smoke growing stronger with each step. My lungs burned, and I could feel my breath becoming more labored. But the thought of Drew waiting outside kept me going.

Finally, we reached the exit. As the door swung open, the rush of fresh air hit me like

a punch to the gut. I stumbled forward, coughing violently, my eyes watering from the smoke and the sudden brightness of the rescue team's lights.

"Easy there, buddy," one of the firefighters said, supporting me as I gasped for air. He must be a new one because I didn't recognize his face.

Through my blurred vision, I could make out the chaos of the scene outside—flashing lights, concerned faces, and a flurry of activity. But all I could focus on was trying to breathe, each inhale feeling like sandpaper in my throat.

As I sat there gulping in sweet, clean air, a familiar figure came tearing through the crowd, his face a whirlwind of emotions.

"West!" Drew's voice cracked as he rushed toward me, his usually tousled blond hair wild with worry.

I tried to stand, ignoring the sharp pain in my leg. "Drew, I'm okay?—"

Before I could finish, Drew crashed into me, his arms wrapping around me so tightly I thought I might lose my breath all over again. But I didn't care. I buried my face in his neck, inhaling his scent—a mix of sandalwood and something uniquely Drew—as if it could purge the smoke from my lungs.

"Jesus, West," Drew mumbled into my hair, his voice thick with emotion. "I thought...I thought I'd lost you."

I pulled back slightly, meeting his tear-filled eyes. "Takes more than a little roof collapse to get rid of me," I quipped, trying to lighten the mood. But my attempt at humor fell flat as I saw the raw fear etched across Drew's face.

"Sir, we need to check him over," Johnny, a fellow paramedic, interrupted, gently

trying to separate us.

Drew's grip on me tightened. "I'm not leaving him," he said, his tone leaving no room for argument.

Warmth spread through my chest at his words. "It's okay. He can stay."

I was so ready to go home. My leg was likely bruised but definitely not broken or sprained. I just needed a shower and my bed because I was fucking tired.

As Johnny began assessing my injuries, Drew hovered nearby, his eyes never leaving me. "You're going to the hospital," he stated firmly.

I started to protest, "Drew, I don't think?—"

"No arguments, West," Drew cut me off, his voice softening as he added, "Please. I need to know you're okay."

"Your friend is right, West," the paramedic said. "I don't think anything is broken, and I could bandage your cuts, but you inhaled a lot of smoke. You don't need me to remind you of the drill, do you?"

Looking into Drew's pleading eyes, I felt my resolve crumble. I just wanted to go home, but how could I say no to him? "All right," I conceded. "But only if you promise to sneak me in some decent food. Hospital grub is the worst."

Drew's laugh was shaky but genuine. "Deal," he said, squeezing my hand.

As I was loaded into the ambulance, I wondered if it was just the adrenaline or if there was something more behind Drew's intense reaction? And more importantly, now that I had the opportunity to tell Drew about my feelings, would I?

The fluorescent lights of Cliffborough General Hospital's emergency room buzzed overhead, their harsh glow making everything look washed out and surreal. I blinked, trying to focus on the doctor's face as she examined my leg.

"Well, West, you're quite lucky," she said, her voice crisp and professional. "The injury to your leg isn't severe. However, the smoke inhalation is our primary concern right now."

I nodded, suppressing a cough. "Makes sense," I rasped. "Feels like I swallowed a campfire."

From his position beside my bed, Drew crossed and uncrossed his arms.

I turned to look at him, struck by the worry lines around his eyes. Even disheveled and exhausted, he was still unfairly handsome. "I'm okay, Drew."

As the medical team bustled around me, hooking up IVs, adjusting my oxygen, and running tests, Drew remained a constant presence. He fielded questions I was too tired to answer, his hand never straying far from mine. It was comforting but also confusing as hell. We'd always been close, but this felt...different.

"You don't have to stay, you know," I said softly once we were alone again. "I'm sure you've got better things to do than babysit me all night."

Drew's blue eyes flashed with something I couldn't quite decipher. "There's nowhere else I'd rather be," he said firmly, his fingers intertwining with mine. "You scared the shit out of me today, West. I'm not going anywhere."

I swallowed hard, overwhelmed by the intensity of his gaze. "Drew, I?—"

"Get some rest," he interrupted gently, giving my hand a squeeze. "I'll be right here

when you wake up.”

I drifted off, lulled by the steady beep of monitors and the warmth of Drew’s hand in mine. It felt unreal, so I held on to it as darkness took me.

The first thing I noticed as I blinked awake was the soft, golden light of dawn filtering through the hospital blinds. The second was the warm weight of Drew’s hand still firmly clasped in mine. I turned my head, wincing slightly at the stiffness in my neck, my breath catching in my throat.

Drew was slumped in the chair beside my bed, his usually perfectly styled hair a mess and his clothes rumpled. But it was the peaceful expression on his face that made my heart do a weird flip-flop in my chest. I’d never seen him look so...vulnerable.

“You’re staring,” Drew mumbled, his eyes still closed.

I let out a startled laugh. “I thought you were asleep.”

“I was,” he said, cracking one eye open and flashing a sleepy grin. “But I have a sixth sense for when people are checking me out.”

“I wasn’t—” I started to protest, but the words died in my throat as Drew’s thumb began tracing gentle circles on the back of my hand. The simple touch sent shivers down my spine, and I found myself wondering when exactly my best friend’s casual affection had started to feel so...electric.

“How are you feeling?” Drew asked, his voice still husky with sleep.

I opened my mouth to respond, but before I could, the door swung open and a tall, dark-haired man in a white coat strode in. It took me a moment to recognize him, but Drew stood up straight away.

“Patrick!” he said, going around the bed and hugging Patrick. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m doing my residency here. Started this week.” He looked at the chart in his hand and turned to me. “Nice to finally meet you, West. How are you feeling this morning?”

“Fine,” I said automatically, though my eyes were locked on Drew, who was smiling warmly at Patrick. I purposefully hadn’t asked about the cocktail class, but I didn’t need to ask now to know it had gone well.

“Glad to hear it,” Patrick said, moving to check my vitals.

“Have you made any cocktails since our class?” Drew asked.

“Just for my parents. I haven’t had the guts to?—”

“So, Doc,” I cut in, perhaps a bit more sharply than intended, “what’s the verdict? When can I get out of here?”

Patrick turned his attention back to me, his expression shifting to professional focus. “Let’s take a look, shall we?” He gently prodded my leg, watching my face for any signs of discomfort. “Any pain here?”

I winced slightly. “A bit, but nothing I can’t handle.”

“Tough guy, huh?” He chuckled, making a note on his clipboard. Then, he helped me into a sitting position so he could listen to my lungs. “Well, West, I’m pleased to say you’re in remarkably good shape, considering what you’ve been through. The leg injury is mostly superficial, and your lungs are clearing up nicely from the smoke inhalation.”



I felt a wave of relief wash over me. “So I can go home?”

“I don’t see why not.” He nodded. “Provided you take it easy for the next few days. No heroics, no heavy lifting, and definitely no running into burning buildings.” He winked at me, then turned to Drew. “Think you can keep an eye on him?”

Drew’s hand found mine again, squeezing gently. “Don’t worry, Patrick. I won’t let him out of my sight.”

Something in Drew’s tone made my heart skip a beat. I glanced at him, trying to read his expression, but he was looking at the doctor.

“Excellent,” Patrick said, scribbling on a prescription pad. “I’m writing you a script for some mild painkillers, just in case. But mostly, what you need is rest and TLC.” He handed the prescription to Drew with a smile. “I have a feeling you’re in good hands, West.”

As Patrick left the room, I turned to Drew, suddenly feeling vulnerable. “You don’t have to babysit me, you know. I can take care of myself.”

Drew’s eyes met mine, and the intensity I saw there took my breath away. “I know you can,” he said softly. “But I want to. Let me take care of you, West. Please?”

I swallowed hard, overwhelmed by the emotions swirling inside me. “Okay,” I whispered.

As Drew helped me out of bed, his arm around my waist for support, I couldn’t shake the feeling that something had shifted between us. The air felt charged with possibility, and for the first time, I allowed myself to hope that maybe, just maybe, Drew felt it too.

DREW

The acrid smell of smoke clung to us as I helped West out of the car, his body trembling slightly against mine. Our eyes met for a fleeting moment before darting away, the weight of unspoken words hanging heavy between us.

“You okay?” I asked softly as we approached our building.

West nodded, his jaw clenched. “Just need to get inside.”

I fumbled with the keys, hyperaware of West’s proximity. His warm breath tickled my neck as I finally got the door open. We shuffled into the elevator, and I pressed the button for our floor.

The silence stretched on, thick and suffocating. I desperately wanted to say something—anything—to break the tension, but the words stuck in my throat.

When we entered our apartment, West’s shoulders sagged with relief. “I need a shower. All I can smell is the smoke.”

“Of course,” I replied, guiding him toward his bedroom. “Do you need help with anything?”

He shook his head but didn’t pull away from my supportive arm around his waist. “I’ve got it from here. Thanks, Drew.”

I hovered uncertainly in the doorway as West disappeared into the bathroom. The sound of running water soon filled the air.

“I’ll make some coffee,” I called out. “And maybe some toast?”

“Sounds good,” West’s voice drifted back, muffled by the shower.

When I got to the kitchen, I held on to the sink and let the tension I’d been holding on to release. Tears ran unchecked down my face as the events of the night replayed on a loop—the panic when I’d seen the fire, the overwhelming relief when I saw West was okay. And underneath it all, the current of complicated feelings I’d been trying to ignore for far too long.

I shook my head and grabbed a towel to wipe my face. I hoped my eyes weren’t too red, but if West noticed anything I’d say it must be from the smoke.

West needed me right now—as a friend, nothing more. I’d push everything else aside and be there for him, just like always.

The familiar routine of making coffee steadied me. By the time the toast popped up, I felt more grounded. I arranged everything on a tray, taking a deep breath before returning to West’s room.

I pushed open West’s bedroom door with my hip, careful not to spill the coffee as I balanced the tray. The sight that greeted me made my heart clench. West was sprawled on his bed, eyes closed, looking utterly drained. The smell of soap clung to his damp skin, a stark contrast to the lingering scent of smoke in the air.

“Hey,” I said softly, setting the tray on the nightstand. “You awake?”

West’s eyes fluttered open, a weak smile tugging at his lips. “Yeah, just resting my

eyes.”

I adjusted the pillows behind his back, smoothing the wrinkles from his comforter. “Let’s get you comfortable,” I murmured, grabbing an extra blanket from the closet. “You must be freezing.”

As I draped the blanket over him, West caught my wrist. “Drew,” he said, his voice rough. “Thank you. For everything.”

I swallowed hard, trying to ignore the warmth of his touch. “Of course. That’s what friends are for, right?”

West’s grip tightened, his hazel eyes intense as they locked onto mine. “It’s more than that. I...I need to tell you something.”

My heart hammered. “What is it?”

“I’ve been... God, this is hard.” West took a shaky breath. “I’m sorry about my behavior with Patrick. I mean, Dr. McMartin. I guess...I’m a little jealous of the time you’re spending together. And scared that I’m losing you.”

My mind reeled, trying to process West’s words. Was this why he’d been acting so strange, working all the hours and avoiding me?

“West, I...” I began, my voice cracking. I cleared my throat and tried again. “Patrick’s just a friend. You know that, right? There’s no way he could ever take your place.”

West’s eyes searched mine, hope and uncertainty warring in his gaze. “Really?” he asked softly.

I sat on the edge of the bed, close enough that our knees almost touched. “Really,” I assured him. “You’re my family, West. That’s never going to change.”

The room fell silent. The only sound was our breathing. The air felt thick, electric with possibility. I was acutely aware of how close we were, of the warmth radiating from West’s body. My fingers itched to reach out and touch him, to offer comfort or...something more.

I licked my suddenly dry lips. “West, I?—”

But the words stuck in my throat. What if I was misreading things? What if this ruined everything?

West’s eyes flicked to my lips, then back to my eyes. He swallowed hard. “Drew...can you stay with me a little longer?” His voice was barely above a whisper, thick with vulnerability.

My heart skipped a beat. “Of course,” I murmured, unable to deny him anything in that moment. “Let me grab a quick shower, and I’ll be right back. You eat that toast and drink the coffee.”

“Yes, sir,” he joked.

When I returned, I carefully climbed onto the bed next to West. We lay facing each other, close but not quite touching. The tension between us was a living, breathing thing.

“Thanks,” West mumbled, his eyelids already drooping. The stress of last night’s events was clearly catching up to him.

I relaxed, drinking in the sight of him. His curls were mussed, his face soft with

exhaustion. Before I knew it, my own eyes were closing.

When I woke, moonlight was streaming through the window. West's face was inches from mine, so close I could feel his warm breath on my cheek. My arm had found its way around his waist.

I froze, not daring to move. West's eyes fluttered open, meeting mine. For a long moment, we just stared at each other. Even in the moonlight, I could have counted his eyelashes, mapped every fleck of gold in his hazel eyes.

"Hi," West murmured, making no move to pull away.

"Hi," I echoed, my voice rough with sleep. "How're you feeling?"

West's lips quirked in a small smile. "Better. Thanks to you."

We fell silent again, the air charged with unspoken words.

Finally, West spoke. "Remember that promise we made? Back when we were kids?"

I nodded, my throat tight. "Of course. That we'd always be there for each other, no matter what."

"That we'd always be family," West added softly.

I swallowed hard, my heart racing. "Yeah," I agreed, my voice barely above a whisper. "Foster brothers for life."

The words hung in the air between us, heavy with meaning. I felt West tense against me, his muscles going rigid under my arm. His eyes flickered with an emotion I couldn't quite place—disappointment? Frustration?—before he masked it with a tight

smile.

“Right,” he said, his voice strained. “Foster brothers.”

I watched as he pulled away, sitting up and running a hand through his tousled curls. The loss of his warmth left me feeling hollow, adrift. My mind was reeling, trying to process West’s reaction. Had I said something wrong?

As West stood and stretched, coughing slightly due to his smoke-irritated lungs, I found myself at a crossroads. The words I’d been holding back for so long were right there on the tip of my tongue. I opened my mouth, ready to let them spill, but nothing came.

West glanced back at me, his expression unreadable. “I’m gonna...need to take a leak,” he said, already heading for the door.

I nodded mutely, watching him go. As the bathroom door clicked shut, I flopped back onto the bed, staring at the ceiling.

“Shit,” I muttered to myself, rubbing my face with both hands. I’d screwed up somehow. But more than that, I’d missed my chance. Again.

The sound of running water filled the apartment, and with it came a sudden, crystal-clear realization. I couldn’t keep doing this—this dance of almost-confessions and near-misses. West had nearly died yesterday. Life was too short, too precious, to waste it on fear and hesitation.

I sat up, determination coursing through me. As soon as West came out of that bathroom, I would tell him. Everything. How I felt, how long I’d felt it, how terrified I was of losing him—not just to a fire, but to my own cowardice.

I took a deep breath, steeling myself for what was to come. One way or another, everything was about to change.



### WEST

I practically ran into the bathroom—as much as my injured leg and tired muscles allowed—shutting the door behind me. My heart was pounding so hard I thought it might explode out of my chest. What the hell just happened out there?

I did my business, but I wasn't ready to go out just yet. With shaking hands, I cranked the shower on full blast and stripped off my clothes. The steam quickly filled the small space as I stepped under the scalding spray, hoping it would clear my head.

But all I could think about was Drew. His lips so close to mine. The heat of his breath. The intensity in those bright-blue eyes.

“Fuck,” I muttered, pressing my forehead against the cool tile. My body was betraying me, responding to just the memory of our almost-kiss. I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to will my erection away.

But even as I tried, my traitorous mind conjured images of Drew's strong hands on my body, his lips trailing down my neck...

I groaned, turning to face the spray directly. The water pounded against my flushed skin as I tried to focus on anything else.

The foster brother label echoed in my mind, a cruel joke that had once been a lifeline. Now, it felt like a cage, trapping me in a role I was desperate to escape.

“Fuck,” I hissed, pressing my forehead against the cool tile.

My hand clenched into a fist, the urge to punch something overwhelming. But I couldn't. Couldn't risk Drew hearing, coming to check on me. Not when I was this raw, this exposed.

“It's not fair,” I whispered, my voice barely audible over the rush of water. “We're not even related.”

I turned, letting the water cascade down my back as I leaned against the wall. Unbidden, the memory of Drew's eyes flickered through my mind. The way they'd darkened just before our almost-kiss, pupils blown wide with what I could have sworn was desire.

“No,” I muttered, shaking my head. “Don't go there, West. You're seeing what you want to see.”

But what if I wasn't? What if that look, that touch, meant exactly what I thought it did?

Hope bloomed, fragile and terrifying. I tried to squash it, but it persisted, whispering tantalizing possibilities.

Even if he felt the same, it didn't change anything. We couldn't... I couldn't risk losing him.

The thought of Drew not being in my life, of awkward silences and avoided glances, was too painful to contemplate. But so was the idea of never knowing, of always wondering what might have been.

I groaned, running a hand through my wet hair. When did my life become a fucking

soap opera?

I stepped out of the shower, grabbing a towel and drying off with quick, purposeful motions. My mind was made up. I needed clarity, and there was only one person I could turn to for that.

As I tugged on a clean T-shirt and sweats, my eyes landed on my phone where I'd left it this morning with my dirty clothes. I snatched it up, my thumb hovering over Noah's contact. A tremor ran through my hand, and I took a deep breath.

The phone rang once, twice. I paced the small bathroom, my bare feet leaving damp prints on the tiles.

"West?" Noah's voice crackled through the speaker, tinged with worry. "Dude, I just saw the news. Are you okay? The fire?—"

"Relax, man. I'm fine. The fire's out. I was the only one in the building, and I'm fine."

"Thank God," Noah exhaled. "What do you need? Can we help with anything?"

I sighed. "I hope so. Just not exactly related to the Foundation."

"Oh?" Noah's tone shifted, a mix of curiosity and concern.

I leaned against the sink, staring at my reflection in the mirror. My hair was a mess, curls sticking up every which way. But it was the look in my eyes that made me pause with a mix of fear and determination I barely recognized.

"I..." I swallowed hard, forcing the words out. "I need your advice, Noah. It's about Drew."

There was a brief pause, and I could practically hear the gears turning in Noah's head. "Drew? What about him?"

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and dove in. "I'm going out of my mind. It's becoming harder to be with Drew and not tell him how I feel."

Noah's sharp intake of breath crackled through the phone. "Holy shit, West. You're ready to do something about it?"

"Yeah, I guess I am."

"What brought this on?"

I ran my fingers through my damp hair, remembering the electricity of Drew's touch. "We almost kissed," I admitted quietly. "And I swear, Noah, the way he looked at me... I think he might feel the same way."

"Of course he does!" Noah exclaimed, his enthusiasm infectious. "West, I've been trying to tell you this for ages. The guy lights up like a Christmas tree whenever you're around."

My heart skipped a beat. "Really?"

"Really," Noah confirmed. "You've just been too busy playing the 'foster brother' card to notice."

I groaned, leaning my forehead against the cool mirror. "God, I'm an idiot, aren't I?"

"Hey, no self-deprecation allowed," Noah scolded gently. "You're not an idiot. You're just...cautious. Given your history, it's understandable."

His words hit home, and I felt a lump form in my throat. “I just... I don’t want to mess this up, Noah. Drew means too much to me.”

“And that’s exactly why you won’t mess it up,” Noah said softly. “Trust me, West. The way you two care about each other? That’s something special.”

I took a deep breath, feeling a mix of anxiety and exhilaration course through me. “You’re right,” I said, my voice steadier than I felt. “I can’t keep running from this. It’s time I face these feelings head-on.”

“That’s my boy,” Noah cheered. “So, what’s the game plan?”

I chuckled, running a hand through my hair. “Game plan? I’m flying by the seat of my pants here, Noah. But I guess...I need to talk to him. Really talk to him.”

“Sounds like a solid start,” Noah agreed. “Just remember, West—honesty is key. And for God’s sake, use your words this time, not just those puppy-dog eyes of yours.”

“Hey!” I protested, laughing despite myself. “I do not have puppy-dog eyes.”

“Sure, keep telling yourself that, lover boy,” Noah teased. “Now go get your man.”

As I ended the call, I caught sight of my reflection again. This time, my cheeks were flushed, my eyes bright with a mixture of hope and terror.

You can do this. It’s just Drew. Your Drew.

The thought sent a shiver down my spine. I pushed away from the sink, squaring my shoulders. It was now or never.

With trembling fingers, I came out of the bedroom. The apartment was quiet, but I

could hear the faint sounds of Drew moving around in the kitchen. My heart pounded in my ears as I made my way down the hallway, each step bringing me closer to a moment that could change everything.

I paused at the kitchen entrance, watching Drew as he stood at the counter, his back to me. He was humming softly, completely unaware of my presence or the emotional turmoil raging inside me.

“Drew?” I called out, my voice barely above a whisper.

He turned, his blue eyes meeting mine, and just like that, all my carefully prepared words evaporated. But as I looked at him—really looked at him—I realized that maybe words weren’t what we needed right now.

DREW

I stared at West, my mouth suddenly dry. His hazel eyes met mine, and for a moment, I forgot how to breathe. God, what was wrong with me? We'd shared a bed countless times before, but last night had felt...different.

"So, uh, breakfast for dinner?" I blurted, breaking the silence. "I was thinking scrambled eggs and bacon. That okay with you?"

West's brow furrowed slightly, and I worried I'd said something wrong. But then he smiled, that gentle curve of his lips that always made my heart skip.

"Sounds perfect, Drew. Thanks."

I nodded, probably a bit too enthusiastically. "Great! Great. How's your leg?" I asked, my eyes dropping to his injured limb.

West shifted, his expression softening. "It's fine, really."

I knew that tone. It was his 'I'm in pain, but I don't want to burden you' voice. I'd heard it too many times over the years.

"Right," I said, not believing him for a second. "Well, let's get some food in you anyway. Can't have you wasting away on my watch."

We fell into our usual rhythm. I cracked eggs while West handled the bacon, his movements stiff but determined. The sizzle of the cooking bacon filled the air, along with the rich aroma of coffee brewing.

“Remember that time in foster care when we tried to make breakfast for everyone?” West asked, a hint of laughter in his voice.

I groaned, recalling the disaster. “How could I forget? We nearly burned down the kitchen.”

“Mrs. Hawkins was livid,” West chuckled, passing me the salt. Our fingers brushed, and I felt that same jolt of electricity I’d been trying to ignore for years.

“Yeah, well, we’ve come a long way since then,” I said, focusing on the eggs to hide the flush creeping up my neck.

We settled at the table, the familiar routine of passing condiments and refilling mugs a comforting dance. West’s leg bumped mine under the table, and I pretended not to notice how my heart raced at the contact.

“This is good,” West said between bites. “You’ve definitely improved since our foster care days.”

I grinned, warmth spreading through my chest at his praise. “Well, I had a good teacher,” I replied, thinking of all the nights West had patiently shown me how to cook when we first got our own place.

As we finished the last bites of our dinner, I stretched and glanced toward the living room.

“Hey, why don’t we move to the couch?” I suggested. “Since we slept all day, I doubt



we'll be tired soon, and it'll be more comfortable for your leg."

West's eyes met mine, a flicker of something I couldn't quite name passing through them. "Yeah, that sounds good," he replied, his voice slightly lower than usual. "My leg could use a break."

I stood, offering him a hand. "Come on, big guy. Let's get you settled."

As we made our way to the couch, I noticed West leaned into me slightly, his warmth seeping through my shirt. It felt right, having him close like this. Natural.

Once we were seated, I turned to him. "What do you want to do? Watch a movie?"

"Could I read to you?"

I almost lost my voice. "Like...we used to do on lazy Sundays?"

West's face softened, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "Yeah. I miss doing that with you," he said softly.

I grabbed the book he'd left on the coffee table weeks ago and opened it. It was a gay romantic-suspense novel written by A. Lawton, one of his favorite authors.

Clearing his throat, he began to read.

West relaxed beside me, his body sinking into the cushions.

I glanced at him, taking in his peaceful expression. God, I'd missed this. Just being with him, no pretenses, no walls. Just us.

As he continued reading, I heard the emotion in his voice, the love between the two

characters that was just like the one I tried so hard to keep hidden.

West shifted subtly closer, his thigh pressing against mine. I was still wearing my pajamas and he'd put on a pair of joggers after his shower.

My breath hitched, but I forced myself to pay attention to his words, even as my heart raced. The heat radiating from his body, so achingly close, was way too good.

"West," I murmured, my voice low and husky.

He paused mid-sentence, glancing up from the book. "Yeah?"

My hand brushed against his, sending electricity coursing through my veins. "I, uh...I've always loved your voice," I said, a slight tremor in my words.

I swallowed hard, hyperaware of every point of contact between us. "The way you do the voices. It's...um...so soothing."

God, could I sound more awkward? But West chuckled softly, his eyes crinkling at the corners in that way that always made my stomach flip.

"West," I said again, and this time, when our eyes met, I felt the world tilt on its axis.

The air between us crackled with tension, years of unspoken feelings suddenly pushing to the surface. I watched as West's gaze dropped to my lips, then back up to my eyes, a question burning in their hazel depths.

My heart pounded so hard he had to hear it. I wanted to kiss him—God, how I wanted to—but fear held me back. What if I was reading this all wrong? What if I ruined everything?

West leaned in slightly, his breath warm on my cheek. “Drew,” he whispered, “I...”

I held my breath, caught between hope and terror. This was it—the moment that could change everything.

I couldn’t take it anymore. The tension, the longing, the years of wondering what if all came crashing down in that moment. I closed the infinitesimal gap between us, pressing my lips to West’s with all the pent-up want I had in me.

The world exploded into sensation. West’s lips were soft yet insistent against mine, his stubble scratching deliciously at my skin. I tasted coffee and something uniquely him, and it was intoxicating. My hands found their way to his curls, fingers tangling in the silky strands like I’d dreamed of doing for so long.

West made a small noise in the back of his throat, somewhere between a groan and a whimper, and it sent shivers down my spine. His strong hands cupped my face, thumbs stroking my cheeks with a tenderness that made my heart ache.

When we finally broke apart, both panting slightly, I rested my forehead against his. “Wow,” I breathed, unable to stop the grin spreading across my face.

West chuckled, the sound low and warm. “Yeah,” he agreed, his eyes sparkling. “Wow is right.”

I didn’t want to move, didn’t want to break this bubble of perfection, but I had to know. “How long have you wanted to do that?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

West’s expression softened. “Years,” he admitted. “God, Drew, it feels like forever.”

My heart soared. I kissed him again, softer this time but no less passionate. My hands

slid down to the hem of his T-shirt, fingers ghosting over the strip of skin exposed there. “Can I...?” I murmured against his lips.

West nodded, lifting his arms to help me pull the shirt over his head. I took a moment to admire the planes of his chest, the definition of his abs. “You’re so beautiful,” I said, tracing a finger along his collarbone.

He blushed, a sight I found utterly charming. “So are you,” he replied, tugging at my shirt. “Your turn?”

I obliged, tossing my shirt aside. I always felt self-conscious over how skinny I was compared to West’s bulging muscles. I was just built differently. But now it didn’t matter because the feeling of skin on skin as West pulled me close was electric.

It wasn’t enough. I needed more, so I straddled him. With my increased height, I took his lips again, this time controlling the kiss and making sure I tasted every single corner of his mouth.

He put his hands on my ass and squeezed. I moaned, my ass clenching under his touch as I imagined what it would be like to have him inside me.

I’d always imagined that, but now? We were on the verge of that being a reality. My cock tented the light fabric of my underwear and pajama bottoms.

With his hands on my hips, he lowered me to sit on his legs.

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“The only thing that hurts right now, Drew, is my dick. Please rub against me.”

A soft gasp escaped me as West’s hand trailed down my stomach, fingers dipping just

below the waistband of my pants. The touch sent shivers through my body, igniting a fire I'd been trying to suppress for far too long.

"Is this okay?" West whispered, his breath hot against my ear.

"God, yes," I managed, my voice hoarse with desire. "Please, West."

His nimble fingers made quick work of the waistband, and I lifted my hips to help him slide the pants down until my cock was exposed. I was achingly hard, and being free from clothes didn't make it any easier when West looked like he was desperate to touch me.

I returned the favor, standing and then kneeling in front of him. My hands trembled as I pushed his joggers down. I palmed him through his boxers, and he let out a low groan that sent heat pooling in my core.

"Drew," he breathed, capturing my lips in another searing kiss. I wanted to get him naked, but he pulled me back onto his lap.

I slipped my hand beneath the fabric of his boxers, wrapping my fingers around his cock. The weight in my hand felt so right, like coming home after years of wandering. West's hips bucked involuntarily, and he broke the kiss with a gasp.

"Sorry," he mumbled, cheeks flushing.

I smiled, pressing a gentle kiss to the corner of his mouth. "Don't apologize. I want to make you feel good."

West's hand found my cock then, and I couldn't hold back a moan at his touch. We fell into a rhythm, stroking each other with increasing urgency.

“I can’t believe this is happening,” I said, resting my forehead against his shoulder.

West’s free hand cupped my cheek, tilting my face to meet his gaze. The tenderness in his eyes nearly undid me. “I know,” he said softly.

“All the times I imagined this...” I said before words got stuck in my throat.

He twisted his wrist on the upward movement, his thumb caressing my slit. “Fuck, West.”

“I know, Drew. It’s so good.”

I felt the familiar tightening in my gut. “West, I’m so?—”

“Me too,” he panted.

I nodded, increasing my pace. Our movements became more frantic, breaths mingling as we chased our release. When it hit, it was like a tidal wave of pleasure washing over me. West’s name fell from my lips and I thought I would jump out of my body from how good it was. He muffled his own cry against my neck before his release joined mine between us.

We held each other through the aftershocks, bodies trembling. As our breathing slowly returned to normal, I lifted my head to meet West’s eyes. The love I saw there made my heart swell.

“That was...” I trailed off, unable to find words adequate enough.

West smiled, pressing a soft kiss to my lips. “Yeah,” he agreed. “It really was.”

“Take me to bed, West.”

The way he looked at me was like he was at peace. He'd reconciled all the doubt in his mind and had found perfection. Or maybe I was projecting because that was what I was feeling.

Either way, our world had changed.

Finally.

### WEST

The late afternoon sunlight streamed through the curtains, casting a warm glow over the living room. I lay on the couch, my body pleasantly sore and thoroughly satisfied, with Drew draped over me, his arms wrapped around my back. Our legs were tangled together, skin on skin, as we basked in the afterglow.

We'd spent most of the night and day in each other's arms. I'd lost count of how many times we'd made each other come. I'd fallen asleep with Drew in my arms, only to wake up with him spooning me and grinding his hard cock over the ridge of my ass.

After that first kiss yesterday, it was like something had been unleashed. Something we couldn't control. I'd been so beyond needy for Drew it was a surprise we'd gotten up for breakfast or had showers in between the various rounds of sex.

Well, we'd had sex in the shower too. Another one of those moments I'd dreamed about and where reality had turned out to be so much better.

My laptop lay abandoned on the coffee table. We'd spent a few hours contacting the insurance company and figuring out the next steps for the Foundation. I'd worried the old part of the building wasn't up to code, but the insurance company reassured me it was all still covered. I wasn't ready to go back to the building, but I'd been informed it was secure and the main part hadn't been damaged. The fire department was still investigating the cause of the fire, but if I had to place a bet, I'd say it was old wiring.



When it had all felt too raw and upsetting, we'd lost ourselves in each other again and again.

But we hadn't talked. And that was bothering me.

I gazed into his blue eyes, mesmerized by the tiny flecks of green I'd never noticed before but now danced in the fading light. His light-brown hair was even more tousled than usual because I couldn't stop running my fingers through it. A soft smile played on his lips as he leaned into my touch.

God, he was beautiful.

The comfortable silence stretched between us, filled with unspoken words and lingering touches. I traced lazy patterns on his back, marveling at how right this felt. How perfectly we fit together. Just like I knew we would.

I cleared my throat, breaking the spell. "Drew, I..." I started, then paused.

There was a slight tremor in his body and a quickening of his heartbeat.

"What is it?" he asked, propping himself up on my chest with his hands under his chin.

I took a deep breath as his eyes searched mine.

"We need to talk about this. I've wanted you for so long," I confessed, my voice barely above a whisper. "You have no idea how many times I've dreamed of holding you like this."

"Me too. The first time I popped a boner when we were messing around in the park, I thought I was a freak. You were my brother," he said. "I hid it and never talked to

anyone about it. Then it happened around other boys, so I figured I was definitely gay, but it was different around you. I hated myself for it.”

I cupped his cheek, overwhelmed by the vulnerability in his admission. “Oh, baby,” I said, leaning in to press a soft kiss to his lips. “I felt the same way, and I was just as scared.” I pulled back slightly, my hand still resting on his cheek. “No, not scared. I was terrified,” I admitted, my voice low. “The thought of losing you, of ruining what we have...it paralyzed me.”

“I know. God, West, I was afraid I’d be taken away.”

I let out a shaky breath. “We’ve been through so much together. The foster system, all those nights wondering if we’d ever find a real home...” My voice cracked, and he rested his cheek on my chest.

“You became my home,” he murmured into my skin.

I nodded again and kissed his hair, fighting back tears. “Exactly. And the idea of jeopardizing that? It felt like the biggest risk in the world.”

“I hated your first boyfriend. I wasn’t that keen on the second one either. They had something I wanted even if I thought how I felt was wrong.”

I smiled. “We were just teenagers figuring ourselves out. I never felt for them an ounce of what I feel for you. The first blowjob I got, I closed my eyes and pretended it was you. When I came and opened my eyes and saw the other guy, I freaked out because I thought I’d cheated on you but also because wanting him to be you was wrong.”

“I lied about when I lost my virginity,” he chuckled, but it sounded like it was stuck in his throat. “I was twenty-one, and you had a boyfriend. The first one who sounded

serious. I went to a club and hooked up with a random guy that looked like you. Tall, strong, curly hair.”

I never had a boyfriend that was serious. Or a boyfriend. Period. They’d just been hookups. Bodies to take the edge off so I could function again around the person I really wanted. Maybe I’d made them out to be more to protect myself from acting on my feelings and losing my best friend.

Drew’s hand reached for mine, and he laced our fingers together under his chin.

I met his gaze. “A long time ago, I made you a promise.”

“Foster brothers forever.”

“I fucking hate those words. Not at the time I said them. They were true, and regardless of what happens between us, you’ll always be my family, but I unwittingly put us in a box. I feel like maybe that was my fault, you know?”

“It takes two, West. We held on to the only thing that was safe. I don’t know about you, but River has been pushing me to tell you how I feel for weeks.”

I laughed. “So has Noah.”

He raised his head. “Really?”

I nodded. “It seems the only people unaware of how we felt about each other...was us.”

“What a pair, huh?” Drew’s expression suddenly turned playful, though I could see a flicker of vulnerability beneath it.

“What do you say we make a new start and redefine what we are to each other?”

“Does this mean I get to upgrade from brother status?”

I laughed. “Definitely? What did you have in mind?”

He pretended to consider it, tapping his chin thoughtfully. “Well, devastatingly handsome lover has a nice ring to it.”

I snorted, swatting his butt lightly. “It’s not a lie. You are cataclysmically handsome. If only you knew how hard it’s been to keep my feelings to myself.”

Drew caught my hand, bringing it to his lips. “Hey, I’m just looking for a label that accurately reflects our new...situation.” His eyes danced with mischief, but I saw the genuine question lurking beneath.

“How about...?” I paused, my heart racing. “How about boyfriend? For starters, anyway.”

The smile that lit up Drew’s face was brighter than any sunrise I’d ever seen. “Boyfriend, huh?” he said, running his fingers through my hair. “I like the sound of that. Though I have to admit, I’ve got some bigger aspirations for us down the line.”

I grinned, feeling a flutter in my chest. “Oh yeah? Do tell, Mr. Ambitious. What’s next on your relationship checklist?”

Drew’s cheeks flushed slightly, but he held my gaze. “Well, you know...the usual. Boyfriend, husband, father. The whole package.”

My heart did somersaults. “That sounds absolutely perfect.”

Drew's arms tightened around me, his voice dropping to a husky whisper. He glanced toward the hallway. "Why don't we take this conversation somewhere a little more...roomy?"

My pulse quickened as I caught his meaning. "Lead the way, boyfriend."

We untangled ourselves from the couch, Drew's hand finding mine as we made our way to his bedroom. The air seemed to thicken with anticipation. We'd traded hand jobs and blowjobs, but we hadn't taken it further. Maybe we'd needed to have this conversation before we were ready to give the last piece of ourselves.

The atmosphere shifted as he closed the door behind us. The familiar space now held a charge of electricity, of possibilities.

He turned to face me, his expression a mix of desire and tenderness that made my breath catch.

"So," I said, aiming for casual but my voice coming out embarrassingly husky. "I'm new at this boyfriend thing. What is it exactly that boyfriends do?"

Drew's laugh was low and warm as he pulled me closer. "Oh, baby," he said, lifting onto his tiptoes until his lips brushed my ear. "Let me show you."

I shivered at the feel of his breath against my skin, my hands sliding up his slim chest. "Show me."

Drew's response was immediate and passionate. His lips crashed into mine, hungry and insistent. I didn't think touching him would ever be less intense. Our hands roamed eagerly, relearning familiar territory with a new purpose.

As we stumbled toward the bed, I winced slightly.

“Your leg okay?” he asked, breathless but concerned.

I nodded. “Never better,” I assured, pulling him onto the mattress. There was no way I’d let a little muscle pain get in the way of claiming his body.

I could tell he wanted to protest, to make sure I wasn’t pushing myself too hard, but when I put my mouth on his neck and sucked his perfect skin, his body sagged and his protests were lost.

“God, West,” he groaned, arching into me.

“Is it weird to say I want to live inside you forever? I want to always be touching you, kissing you?”

He chuckled. “If it is, then we can be weird together. After all the time I’ve wanted you from afar without being able to touch you, you can be mine now and I can be yours.”

I laughed, the sound turning into a gasp as his teeth grazed one of my nipples. He licked it and then did the same to the other.

My cock was painfully hard, as if I hadn’t had an orgasm only a couple of hours ago.

Drew paused, pulling back to look at me with such raw emotion that it took my breath away. “I love you,” he said simply, the words hanging between us like a promise.

I cupped his face in my hands. “I love you too,” I whispered, sealing the declaration with a kiss.

“I want you inside me, West.”

“You sure?”

“Yes. I want to ride you.”

I closed my eyes and swallowed. I was going to be so fucked.

What followed was a symphony of sensation—the slide of skin on skin, the harmony of sighs and moans, the crescendo of pleasure building between us.

Drew’s eyes gleamed with mischief and longing as he pulled back slightly, his breath ragged. “Let’s slow it down a bit,” he said, his voice rough with desire. “I want every moment to last.”

His fingers trailed down my torso as he reached for the nightstand drawer. He pulled out a condom and a bottle of lube, his movements deliberate, eyes never leaving mine.

I watched him intently, every motion charged with an erotic tension that made my skin tingle.

Impatient to feel him, I took the condom and rolled it down my length. I was so achingly hard I was glad when Drew covered his fingers with lube and reached behind himself, opening his hole for me.

“Next time, this is your job,” he promised through gritted teeth. His cock bounced against his abs, hard and leaking. I reached for it and wrapped my hand around his length. Drew gasped as he first fucked into my hand and then onto his fingers. “Fuck, feels so good.”

“You’re killing me, Drew.”

He scooted forward as he removed his hand from his ass and wiped the lube off on the sheets. With his hands on my shoulders, he lowered himself onto my cock. I held it until I was through the ring of muscles, and then I let him take over.

“God, you look so beautiful, Drew. The way you’re taking in my cock like you couldn’t possibly ever need anything else in your life?—”

“I don’t. You’re stretching me so good, baby. I’m going to ride you until you lose your mind.”

That wouldn’t take too long.

His hands gripped my shoulders and his blunt nails dug into my skin. I was pretty sure there would be marks on either side. I couldn’t wait to see them tomorrow.

As Drew settled onto me, every inch of him enveloping me, sparks of pleasure radiated through my entire body, making me shiver uncontrollably. He began to move his hips in a slow, deliberate rhythm, his eyes locked on mine.

“How does it feel, West?” Drew grinned down at me, his blue eyes sparking with a mixture of challenge and affection.

“So fucking good, baby.” Each downward thrust forced a shiver from me as he took me deeper, the heat between us building into something fiery and uncontrollable.

The room was thick with the heat of our bodies, the air pulsing with each thrust and retreat. Drew leaned down to kiss me fiercely.

“West,” he gasped, biting his lip as he threw his head back.

I wanted to take over, to flip him and go to town on his ass, but I knew there would



be plenty of chances, and watching Drew use me like this was the best show on earth.

“Take everything you need, baby. I want to see you come.”

He wrapped his hand around his cock, and with just a few strokes, he came, calling out my name. Before he came down from his high, I put my arm around his waist and flipped us.

A couple of thrusts were all I needed to unload into the condom. My shouts of pleasure were muted by the skin on his neck.

The world narrowed to just us—the warmth of his skin, the rapid beat of his heart against my chest, the trembling of his muscles as aftershocks rolled through us. I held him tight, riding out the waves of pleasure together.

As our breathing slowly returned to normal, I lifted my head from where it had been buried in his neck. His eyes were suspiciously bright, a soft smile playing at his lips.

“You okay?” I asked softly, brushing a lock of hair from his forehead.

He nodded, leaning into my touch. “More than okay.”

I pulled out of him slowly and went over to the bathroom to dispose of the condom and clean up. I wet a face cloth and returned to Drew’s bed, where he still lay with a sappy smile.

“I don’t think I’ll be able to move for a week.”

I chuckled. “Come here.” I pulled him into my arms and covered us with the blanket at the bottom of his bed.

“You’re really good at sex,” he said.

“You’re not so bad yourself.”

“I never had much of it before, you know? It didn’t feel right because it wasn’t you.”

I ran my hands over his back. “Me too, Drew.”

“I guess we can make up for all the lost time, right?”

A sharp knock on the door shattered our tender moment like a sledgehammer through glass.

“Hey, lovebirds, you decent?” Noah’s voice rang out, followed by the unmistakable sound of a doorknob turning.

“Shit!” I hissed, sitting up and grabbing the blanket. We barely managed to cover up properly before the door flew open.

Noah burst in, trademark grin plastered across his face, with Lex and Emery hot on his heels. “Surprise vis— Oh ho ho, what do we have here?”

My face burned hotter than the surface of the sun. Drew opened his mouth, but all that came out was a strangled squeak.

I recovered slightly faster. “Guys! What the hell?” I looked around for a piece of clothing—any piece of clothing—but we’d discarded them all over the bedroom and nothing was close enough to grab.

Emery, at least, had the decency to look embarrassed. “Sorry, we should’ve called first. We just wanted to?”

“To catch you in the act, apparently,” Lex chimed in, his blue eyes dancing with barely contained laughter. “Mission accomplished, I’d say.”

Drew groaned, burying his face in my shoulder. This could not be happening. Maybe if I closed my eyes, they’d all disappear.

No such luck. Noah’s voice cut through my mortification. “So...I take it the ‘just friends’ thing is officially out the window?”

I peeked up to see Drew’s face had turned an impressive shade of crimson. “You could say that,” he muttered.

“About damn time,” Noah said, a warm smile spreading across his face.

“Guys, as much as we...appreciate...the visit, do you think you could maybe give us a minute to, uh...”

“Put some pants on?” Emery supplied helpfully.

“Yes. That.” I nodded vigorously.

Noah’s grin widened impossibly farther. “Aw, but where’s the fun in that?”

I lobbed a pillow at his head with surprising accuracy. “Out!”

13

DREW

I stumbled out of the bedroom, fumbling with the buttons on my wrinkled shirt. West followed close behind, his curly hair even more disheveled than usual. I'd heard the stories of the Spencer brothers invading each other's places. Hearing about it? Funny. Experiencing it? Not so much. They'd cut into my cuddling time with West, dammit.

We'd barely made it three steps down the hallway when I froze, my eyes widening at the unexpected scene before me.

"Holy crap."

Lex, Emery, and Noah were on the couch while River and Adam sat on the floor around the coffee table. Which was piled high with...was that takeout from Lusitana?

What the actual hell?

"Uh, hey, guys," I managed to croak out. "This is...unexpected."

River's face scrunched in a sheepish grimace. "Sorry for the intrusion, Drew. We, uh, thought you might want some company."

I blinked rapidly. "Company. Right. Because nothing says 'I need company' like being holed up in my bedroom on a Saturday afternoon."

West's hand came to rest on the small of my back. I leaned into it, happy I could now do something as simple as that.

Adam cleared his throat. "We brought food," he offered, gesturing to the spread on the table. "Thought you guys might be hungry after...you know."

My cheeks flamed as they tried but failed to conceal their sniggers.

"That's, uh, very thoughtful," West said smoothly, saving me from having to formulate a coherent response. How was he so calm about this?

I took a deep breath, forcing a smile. "Well, since you're all here...who wants a drink?"

River chuckled, his blue eyes twinkling with mischief. "Actually, we helped ourselves to your beer already. Hope you don't mind. I used that spare key you gave me a few months back."

I groaned, running a hand through my disheveled hair. "Right. The spare key. For emergencies. Like, say, if I was trapped under a fallen bookcase or something."

"Hey, food cravings can be emergencies too," River quipped, taking a swig of his beer. "Besides, keeping up with your nutritional requirements is important when you're taking part in physical activities."

Noah snorted and Adam's face turned a very deep shade of red.

West squeezed my waist gently, his voice low and amused. "And they brought food."

"True," I conceded, leaning into him. "I suppose I can forgive the breaking and entering this time."

West's curiosity seemed to get the better of him as he addressed the group. "So, not that we don't appreciate the company, but what brings you all here? Did we miss a memo?"

The energy in the room suddenly shifted, an almost palpable excitement radiating from our friends. Adam sat up straighter, a grin spreading across his face. "Actually, we got some good news for you."

My heart skipped a beat. After the fire, I'd tried to avoid thinking about the building because it was too painful to remember that night. West missing. Knowing he was trapped. And then thinking about how much we could have lost. "What kind of good news?" I asked, hardly daring to hope.

Adam leaned forward, his eyes bright. "A few of the donors from the auction reached out to us when they couldn't get hold of you and they're upping their donation."

I felt my knees go weak with relief, and West's arm tightened around me. "Are you serious?" he asked.

The guys all nodded at the same time.

"That's...that's incredible news," I said, my voice thick with emotion.

"We thought you'd want to know right away," Adam chimed in, his smile matching mine. "As soon as we heard about what happened, we wanted to check in, but we thought West might want some time to recover."

I glanced at West, seeing my relief mirrored in his hazel eyes.

"You know what this means, baby?" he asked, leaning into me.

I nodded.

West glanced at the guys. “We were always uncertain about how to handle the older section of the building. I had a feeling it wasn’t up to code, which is why I went there that day. I was sorting through items and trying to come up with a plan.”

“You can knock down that part and rebuild it into something that works better for the Foundation,” Noah suggested.

“Like an events venue,” Lex said.

“Or a bookstore and coffee shop,” Emery continued. “Imagine going to a place that stocks your favorite authors’ books, and you can read and eat ice cream at the same time.” His face lit up as he described his idea. “We could take the kids from school on day trips.”

“An event venue? That could bring in some much-needed funds...” I said. “We could run a food bank too.”

“Exactly!” River exclaimed. “And you could use it for Foundation events. Win-win.”

I nodded, feeling a surge of warmth for my friends. Here they were, on a weekend night, to check in on us and show that they had our backs. “You guys are amazing, you know that?” I said, my voice softening. “I can’t believe you’ve put so much thought into this.”

“So,” he drawled, a mischievous glint in his eye, “speaking of caring... What’s the deal with you two, huh?” He waggled his eyebrows suggestively.

I felt heat rush to my face. “What do you mean?” I asked, trying to sound nonchalant and failing miserably. I glanced at West, feeling a mix of nervousness and

excitement. His hazel eyes met mine, a soft smile playing on his lips. “Baby, we were in bed naked when they invaded. I think they know. They just want us to say it aloud.”

“Well,” I began, looking at the guys, unable to keep the grin off my face, “I guess you could say West and I are...officially together.”

West’s hand found mine, our fingers intertwining.

The room erupted in cheers and excited chatter. River pumped his fist in the air. “I knew it! Pay up, Noah!”

Noah groaned good-naturedly, pulling out his wallet. “Damn, I thought it’d take you guys at least another month, especially with how busy you’ve been since the fundraiser.”

“Oh my God, you were betting on us?” I laughed, shaking my head. “I don’t know whether to be flattered or offended.”

Adam raised his beer. “To Drew and West! It’s about time, you two.”

I laughed. “Says the pot to the kettle.”

River pulled Adam closer and kissed his hair. Adam sighed, leaning into his boyfriend’s touch, “Falling in love with your best friend will never not be a good idea.”

Drew raised his own glass. “I’ll toast to that.”

The celebration gradually wound down as our friends started gathering their things. River stood first. “Well, guys, it’s been a blast, but I think we should let the lovebirds



have some privacy.”

“Yeah, I’m sure they have some...catching up to do,” Adam added with a wink.

I rolled my eyes but couldn’t stop the grin that spread across my face. “You’re telling me you’re not running home to catch up ?”

Adam’s face went red again as River said, “We do have a lot to catch up on. It’ll probably take us the rest of our lives.”

I felt exactly the same way.

When we closed the door behind our friends, the sudden quiet felt both strange and comforting. I turned to West, finding him already looking at me with that intense gaze that never failed to make my heart race.

“Alone at last,” he murmured, a mischievous glint in his eye. “You know, I seem to remember we were in the middle of something before we were so rudely interrupted.”

I arched an eyebrow, fighting to keep a straight face. “Oh really? I can’t seem to recall. Care to refresh my memory?”

West’s laugh was low and rich as he stepped closer, his hands finding my waist. “I’d be more than happy to, Mr. Carter. In fact, I think a thorough review might be in order. Shall we take this back to the bedroom?”

“Well, when you put it like that...” I grinned, already backing toward the hallway. “Race you there!”

Six months later

I squeezed West's hand as we stood at the entrance to the Star Finders Foundation building, my heart pounding. The late afternoon sun glinted off the restored brick facade, casting a warm glow that matched the nervous excitement bubbling in my chest.

"You ready for this?" I whispered, searching West's eyes.

He gave me a small nod, his curls flopping adorably. "As I'll ever be. You?"

"Terrified," I admitted with a shaky laugh. "But also kind of exhilarated?"

His lips quirked up. "Sounds about right."

Taking a deep breath, we pushed through the heavy fire doors together. The lobby was packed wall-to-wall with people. A sea of expectant faces turned our way. I recognized many—kids we'd mentored, fellow volunteers, and community leaders who'd supported us from the start. But there were plenty of new faces, too, which sent a thrill through me. Word was spreading.

A hush fell over the crowd as we made our way to the makeshift stage. I felt the weight of all those eyes on us, but West's solid presence beside me kept me grounded. This was it—the moment that would change everything.

We stepped onto the stage, and I couldn't hold back my grin as cheers and applause erupted. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw West's shoulders relax a fraction. The

energy in the room was electric, crackling with possibility.

“Thank you all for coming,” I began, my voice steadier than I felt. “West and I are overwhelmed by the incredible turnout...”

As I continued speaking, I scanned the diverse faces before us. There was Mrs. Chen, the older woman who baked cookies for every fundraiser. And Jamal, one of our first mentees, who was now a college freshman. My chest swelled with pride and affection for this beautiful patchwork community we’d built.

This was so much bigger than just West and me now. Whatever came next, I knew we’d face it together—surrounded by the family we’d chosen.

I took a deep breath, gripping the microphone a little tighter. “You know, when West and I first met in foster care, we were just two scared kids trying to survive. We never imagined we’d be standing here today, surrounded by all of you amazing people.”

My voice cracked slightly, but I pushed on, drawing strength from the attentive faces before me. “Our journey wasn’t easy. There were nights we went to bed hungry and days we felt invisible. But we had each other, and that made all the difference.”

I glanced at West, his eyes shining with pride and something deeper. My heart swelled.

“That’s why we started the Star Finders Foundation. Because every kid deserves to have someone in their corner, cheering them on.”

As I spoke, I noticed a young girl in the front row, hanging on my every word. Her wide eyes reminded me of myself at that age, desperate for hope. I smiled directly at her.

“To all the kids out there feeling lost or alone—we see you. We were you. And we’re

here to tell you that your story isn't over. It's just beginning."

With a final nod to the crowd, I turned to West, passing him the microphone. Our fingers brushed, sending a familiar spark through me. God, I loved this man.

West stepped forward, his presence immediately commanding attention. His voice, when he spoke, was low and warm, wrapping around the audience like a comforting blanket.

"Drew's right," he began, a hint of a smile playing at his lips. "We were those lost kids once. I remember the day I met Drew like it was yesterday. This scrawny kid with a chip on his shoulder and the biggest heart I'd ever seen."

A chuckle rippled through the crowd, and I felt my cheeks heat.

"But you know what?" West continued, his tone growing serious. "That day changed my life. Because for the first time, I wasn't alone anymore. And that's what we want for every child who comes through our doors..."

As West spoke, his eyes found mine, a silent conversation passing between us. I gave him a small nod, encouraging him to continue. His shoulders relaxed slightly, and I could see the tension easing from his jaw. It was a tiny gesture that probably went unnoticed by the crowd, but to me, it spoke volumes.

"We want every child to know they're not alone," West continued, his voice gaining strength. "That they have value, that they matter."

My heart swelled with pride and love. Without thinking, I reached out and squeezed his free hand. West's fingers intertwined with mine, and I felt him squeeze back.

A movement in the crowd caught my eye. A young boy, probably no more than twelve, was wiping his eyes. His friend beside him had an arm around his shoulders,

offering silent support. It hit me then, the weight of what we were doing, the lives we could change.

“We’re not just offering a place to stay,” I chimed in, unable to contain myself. “We’re offering a family, a home, a future.”

West shot me a grateful look, a silent thank you for jumping in. We’d always been in sync, anticipating each other’s needs.

“Exactly,” West nodded. “Because every child deserves a chance to shine, to discover their own star.” And with that, he raised the microphone as if making a toast.

As the applause died down, West’s hand found mine, giving it a gentle squeeze. “Hey,” he whispered, his hazel eyes twinkling, “come with me. I want to show you something.”

My heart did a little flip. “Now? But...everybody?—”

“Trust me,” he said, his crooked smile making my knees weak.

Before I knew it, we were slipping away from the crowd, West leading me through the hallways I now knew like the back of my hand. The excitement in his stride was palpable, giving me a mixture of curiosity and nervous anticipation.

“West, where are we—” I started, but my words caught in my throat as he pushed open a door, revealing a breathtaking rooftop garden.

The setting sun painted the sky in hues of pink and gold, casting a warm glow over a sea of vibrant flowers and lush greenery. Fairy lights twinkled among the foliage, creating a magical ambiance that took my breath away.

“Holy crap,” I breathed, taking it all in. “How long has this been here?”

West chuckled, pulling me farther into the garden. “It’s been a work in progress. I wanted it to be perfect before I showed you.”

As we walked, I noticed little touches that screamed West—a cozy reading nook tucked away in one corner, a small fountain that reminded me of the one at our first group home. Each detail held a memory, a piece of our shared history.

“This is incredible,” I said, unable to keep the awe from my voice. “But why all the secrecy?”

West’s hand tightened around mine as he led me around until we stopped by an arch made with what looked like succulents. There was a slight tremble in his touch, and when he turned to face me, his eyes were filled with an intensity that made my heart race.

“Drew,” he started, his voice husky with emotion, “I brought you up here because...”

His voice trailed off as he took a deep breath, his hazel eyes shimmering with vulnerability. My pulse quickened and a mix of anticipation and concern flooded through me.

“Because?” I prompted gently, giving his hand an encouraging squeeze.

He cleared his throat and began again, his words pouring out in a heartfelt rush. “Drew, you’ve been my rock, my home, my everything since we were kids. We’ve been through hell and back together, and there’s no one else I’d rather have by my side.”

My breath caught as West slowly lowered himself to one knee, fumbling in his pocket before producing a small velvet box. Holy shit, was this really happening?

“I love you more than I ever thought possible,” West continued, his voice cracking

slightly. “You make me want to be better, to do better, every single day. Will you marry me?”

I stood there frozen for a moment, my brain trying to catch up as I processed what was happening. West’s face began to fall, uncertainty creeping into his expression.

“Baby?” he said softly, a hint of worry in his tone.

That snapped me out of my stupor. “Yes!” I practically shouted, yanking him to his feet and crushing him in a bear hug. “God, yes, you big idiot. Of course I’ll marry you!”

West’s arms wrapped around me tightly. “You had me worried there for a second,” he murmured into my neck.

I pulled back just enough to look into his eyes, my vision blurring with happy tears. “Sorry, I was just...overwhelmed. In the best way possible.”

As West slipped the ring onto my finger—a simple yet elegant band that was perfectly us—I couldn’t help but laugh. “You know, for two guys who hate surprises, we sure do spring a lot of them on each other.”

West grinned, pressing his forehead against mine. “Yeah, well, you bring out the romantic fool in me, Drew Carter.”

“Soon to be Drew Hart,” I corrected, my heart swelling with love and happiness.

“I like the sound of that,” West whispered before capturing my lips in a kiss that felt like coming home and embarking on a new adventure all at once.

As we broke apart, breathless and giddy, I glanced over West’s shoulder at the glittering cityscape behind us. We stood there for a moment, basking in the glow of

our newfound engagement and the ethereal beauty of the city.

“You know,” I said, breaking the comfortable silence, “I always thought I’d be the one to propose. Guess you beat me to it, huh?”

West’s laugh rumbled through his chest. “Well, considering our track record of keeping things to ourselves, I wasn’t leaving it to chance.”

I pulled back slightly, meeting his hazel eyes with mock indignation. “Hey, I can take the initiative!”

“Says the guy who took years to ask me out on our first date,” West teased, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

“That’s...fair,” I conceded, unable to keep a straight face. “But in my defense, I was terrified of ruining our friendship.”

West’s expression softened, and he cupped my face in his hands. “And now look at us. Best friends and soon-to-be husbands. I’d say it worked out pretty well, wouldn’t you?”

My heart swelled with emotion, and I leaned in for another kiss. “I’d say it worked out perfectly.”

As our lips met, a cool breeze swept across the rooftop garden. In that moment, with the city sprawled out before us and the love of my life in my arms, I knew that whatever challenges lay ahead, we’d face them together. And that thought filled me with a sense of hope and excitement for the future that was brighter than any skyline.

Drew and West have been dancing around their feelings for each other for a while.