



The Remarkable Lover

(Sweet Southern #3)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Jackson

Dreams collapse in the blink of an eye, I know that better than anyone after losing my career as an athlete. Now I spend my days giving people pleasure for pay and playing with stocks. Most of my friends have settled in Clay Springs, Florida. A sleepy little town that moves slower than molasses. Call it boredom or infatuation with the redhead who scowls at me every time I smile his way, but I think there's also something special for me in Clay Springs. If only Harper would let me show him.

Harper

If there's one thing I know for sure, it's that most people suck. Not in the fun way either. All my cousins are settling down with their boyfriends and I've got my service dog and a brain disorder. Cool. When Jackson shows interest in me, I figure it has to be a joke. But the big guy wants to be my friend. Then he wants to date me. And now ... well now I'm in too deep and it's only a matter of time until he leaves. After all, I'm always too much or too little, never just enough.

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PROLOGUE

JACKSON - SEPTEMBER - THE BARBECUE

Losing everything I've ever wanted with one single failure of my knee taught me that dreams change in the blink of an eye. Dreams reshape daily and sometimes into new, beautiful dreams that eclipse the old dream beyond measure.

I've watched my friends fall in love, and realize that life is about slowing down and appreciating those around us. And normally I'd be in agreement but why are my friends being so weird right now? Trevor won't get out of the car. Benji is sniping at me every chance he gets. Now Eli is head over heels in love with this big-ass blond guy that looks at Eli like he hung all the stars and moon in the sky.

At least Clay Springs is beautiful. The hills roll behind Colby's house, with only a few houses dotted on the horizon. It's the beginning of September and the air is still thick with humidity, sweat dotting the collar of my dress shirt.

"Why are you always so... you?" Benji asks through gritted teeth.

I roll my sleeves up on my forearms with a playful sneer. "You love me."

"Thin line between love and hate, buddy," Benji quips, lips curled up in a look somewhere between a frown and a grimace.

I grab some chips off of Benji's plate even as he dips to avoid me. Crunching the chips in my mouth with a grin, satisfaction rises inside me when Benji's cheeks flush

with annoyance. It's easier to steal his food than to get my own. I glance over the crowded barbecue hosted by Colby and Eli. Most people seem to be Colby's family, the only people here for Eli are me, Benji, Trevor being a weirdo out in the car, and Eli's scary Russian mother, who looks at me with a mix of hesitance and distrust.

My eyes land on a redhead standing in the corner next to a brunette woman with curly hair. Jesus. His hair is so long, it lies in waves over his thin shoulders. There's this curious, odd grin on his lips as he makes the brunette laugh. My gaze dips to the golden retriever at the redhead's feet wearing some type of medical alert vest.

"What's got you silent all of a sudden?" Benji asks around a mouthful of food, which is totally normal for him. Seemingly following my gaze to the redhead, Benji laughs, deep and low. "We're here to support Eli, not fish for fucks."

"Shut up," I demand.

"Touchy."

"Get him over here to talk to me."

Benji's eyebrows rise to his hairline. "What the fuck am I supposed to do? Whistle?"

"Jesus," I swear in frustration.

Either by fate, or just dumb luck, the woman notices us watching them. With a generous curve of her lips, she takes the redhead's hand and tugs him toward where we stand under the mossy oak.

As the redheaded stranger gets closer, I notice light freckles under gorgeous green eyes. They're an exact match for the darkest bits of foliage on the branches overhead. Christ, I've never seen hair so perfectly auburn before. The dog is beautiful too.

Takes all the willpower in my body to not get on my knees and shower her with love. I had a client once that had PTSD and used a service dog to alert for panic attacks, so I know the drill—ignore them when the vest is on.

“Hello,” the brunette says with sparkling eyes. “I’m Andy, and this is my cousin, Harper. You guys are Eli’s friends, right?”

“Coworkers,” Benji amends at the same time I say, “Best friends.”

Andy and Harper both stare at us for a moment, before Harper’s lips curve up in a smirk. “Well, which is it?”

“Both,” I reply, heart racing a little just from the proximity. Standing in the presence of a god among mortals has me feeling a little off-kilter. I’ve been with a lot of people, but Harper is so beautiful it takes my breath away.

Harper aims a sidelong glance at Andy. “Why did you drag me over here?”

Andy rolls her eyes affectionately. “Sorry about him. We don’t bring him out in public much,” she mumbles out of the side of her mouth.

Benji howls with laughter. “It’s okay, we don’t bring Jackson out much either.” Benji slaps the back of my head and I scowl. “Big guy doesn’t have any manners.”

A little divot appears between Harper’s eyebrows. “Why wouldn’t they bring you out much?”

“He’s bossy,” Benji answers for me.

I widen my eyes at him hoping he’ll get a fucking clue. He’s killing my chances. I’ve got to nail this. What’s the best way to be cool? Suave, hotter than sin? I grin broadly

at Harper, which only earns me a puzzled look in return.

“Do you follow sports?”

“Sure,” Harper says slowly with a sparkle in his eyes.

“Basketball?” I ask hopefully.

“Oh, Jesus,” Benji mumbles.

“Not really,” Harper admits, fluttering his hand across the deep scar over his left temple. “Football really, sometimes baseball.”

“Oh. Why?”

“Tighter pants,” Harper explains with a teasing lilt to his voice.

Well, that does make sense. “Best quarterback of all time?”

Harper looks thoughtful for a moment as Andy sighs mournfully from beside him. “Jimmy Garoppolo.”

What the fuck. “Are you serious?”

“Yes,” Harper replies as he reaches over to take a cookie off of Andy’s plate. I swallow hard as he chews thoughtfully on the cookie.

“You think the best quarterback of all time is... Jimmy Garoppolo?” I ask, voice a little high pitched because I’m truly astonished.

Benji’s laughter rattles through my bones and I shoot him a serious shut the fuck up

look, which he promptly ignores. The way he's looking at Harper has me weirdly uncomfortable, so I puff out my chest.

"He's hot," Harper answers with a shrug of his shoulders.

Well, yes. But I have profound issues with picking a quarterback solely based on their beauty. It's not... legal, and it's not fair.

"You can't rank quarterbacks solely on their hotness," I point out. Sweat is starting to prickle even more at the nape of my neck. Rubbing my hands over my forearms, I watch as Harper's eyes track the movement, his throat bobbing on a hard swallow. Got him.

Harper's eyes narrow. "Says who?"

An awkward laugh bubbles out of me just as Benji makes this weird explosion motion with his hands. I'm going to absolutely pummel him the moment we get into the car. The way Harper's eyes sparkle each time he gives me an answer has me wanting to step closer, makes me want to ask him if he wants to get a drink to keep arguing about the technicalities of ranking athletes on hotness.

"You rank all football players on hotness?"

Harper's grin is devilish, and warmth blooms in the pit of my belly at the sight. "I rank all athletes on hotness."

All athletes on hotness. Not skill. Jesus Christ.

"I think you've 404 errored Jackson," Benji notes with a mouthful of chips.

"Sounds like an accomplishment," Harper quips as he aims his gaze back toward the

crowd.

It is an accomplishment. No one unsettles me. But something about Harper... yeah, I want him. But I can't get the guy to even look twice at me. All my chances to get him alone are dashed when Trevor finally appears and has his huge romantic moment with Beau. Cool, happy for him, but Harper disappeared before I could get his number.

And that is the biggest travesty of the night.

Not even arguing with Benji fixes my mood.

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HARPER

Why are doctor's offices always freezing? The ugly fluorescent lights on the white tiled ceiling glare down at me while I lie flat on my back in the frigid office contemplating the state of my life. Honey sits directly beside my dangling feet, a steady comfort as usual. With each passing second, the urge to walk out claws at me.

If I leave the office before Dr. Whitman can share the results, then nothing can be wrong, right? If I don't hear the news, then everything's fine.

Nothing's wrong.

"Howdy, Harper." Dr. Whitman strides into the office with a happy-go-lucky smile.

Fuck him.

I stare blankly at him, unable to return an ounce of his enthusiastic excitement at my deteriorating health. Dr. Whitman sighs the heaviest of sighs and takes a seat on the annoying rolling chair. Pressing his wrinkled hands to his knees, he stares until I sit up on my elbows to meet his gaze. A decade of being his patient has gotten us a certain rapport. He gives me good news, I smile. He gives me bad news, I want to die. When he's overly cheery, I know the news is going to give me the urge to swim with sharks while bleeding out.

"So, the medicine is losing its efficacy."

“I’d say so considering I’ve had four seizures in the past six months,” I deadpan.

Dr. Whitman smiles placatingly at me. It’s infuriating. “Let’s try a new medicine. This happens sometimes, Harper. Your seizures were pretty well managed for a handful of years there. We’ll try this new one and see if it can stop the breakthrough seizures. How’s that sound?”

“How were my scans?”

Dr. Whitman blinks slowly at my question, then turns to scroll through my file on his laptop. My anxiety ramps up when he’s silent, but it settles again when he turns back to smile at me. Less of a bad news smile, and more of a nothing has changed smile. I’ll take that one.

“Normal. I don’t see anything abnormal to indicate the increase in your seizures, which again tells me it’s probably the medicine.” Dr. Whitman stands with a tired groan, knees popping as he shifts. Old geezer. Just kidding, he’s probably my father’s age. Still kind of old, though. “If the seizures increase, call for an emergency appointment. Otherwise, I’ll see you in three months to see how the new medicine is helping. And remember?—”

“No dangerous activities while the seizures are still happening,” I interrupt him with a deep roll of my eyes.

“Yes, well. Try to avoid your triggers.”

I salute him with a vicious smirk. The old guy leaves the room with a weary sigh, probably used to my antics at this point. Most people make a similar sound after dealing with me. Always too much. Usually too little. I’m never just the right amount for anyone. Honey and I plod out of the stuffy doctor’s office and into the bright sunlight of late fall Florida. If I was young, and able to make bad decisions, I’d spend

the afternoon in downtown Orlando getting drunk off my ass. Forgetting all about my problems. Forgetting about me .

But no. Instead, my mother idles in her expensive Beemer, waiting to drive me back to Clay Springs, with her strawberry-blond hair piled up high in a tight bun.

“So?” Mom asks as she pulls out of the parking lot, foregoing her blinker because she doesn’t care about traffic safety.

“Just changing my medicine.”

She hums softly. “All the scans were fine?”

Every ounce of restraint in my body stops me from rolling my eyes. “Yes, Mother.”

This is the way it goes. Doctor’s appointment, she asks how it went, I give her the report, and then she stays silent the entire drive home. Both of my parents are high-profile attorneys without much time for me. Having a kid with a medical issue was a little hiccup they never signed up for. Sometimes I’m not sure they even really wanted me, instead they were just checking off some list that they made up in their head to secure their successful status. But any time I’ve voiced that, my father gets this sad look in his eyes and says we wanted you so badly, Harp .

Crock of shit if I’ve ever heard one.

The prescription is ready, so we make a pit stop at the pharmacy. Mom makes idle chitchat with the pharmacist, but I keep my gaze firmly out the window. Everyone in this goddamn town knows about Harper , the redhead that needs to be watched. Makes me sick. I wish I could go somewhere without being known, be someone else, not worry about having a seizure and waking up covered in piss. Just once.

My little farmhouse looms on the horizon, settling all the aches and pains I'd gathered from enduring the doctor's visit. A few years ago my parents gave me an acre of their land, and I'd used savings, some of my trust fund, and the money I'd squirreled away from a few years of being a data analyst to build a small little bungalow. That had been the argument from hell and also how Honey came into the picture. If I wanted to live alone, there were stipulations to keep me safe.

A service dog was one of them.

One of those old-people monitors was the other.

Let's just say there's no old-people monitor in my house and Honey is really good at her job. She can even dial paramedics if she needs to because she's just a furry human.

Without a word to my mother, I hastily climb out of the car. Honey follows quietly along behind me. Just as I'm about to walk into the front door, my mother shouts, "Harper!" turning my attention back to her.

She leans across the console, eyes firmly on me. "You'll let me know if the medicine makes you sick?"

I bite back a grimace. "Sure, Mom. I'll see you at Sunday lunch."

A few beats pass, as if she's considering saying something else, before she waves stiffly and drives off towards their side of the property. Once I've turned the alarm system off, I pad slowly into the kitchen, staring blankly into my mostly empty fridge. Damn. I need to place another order for groceries.

The clock on the microwave reads early in the afternoon, so I should sit down and do more work... but I'd already taken time off for the afternoon. Alright, no more work.

Honey hops up on the couch beside me, resting her head sweetly on my lap as I pull up a grocery order on my phone. Once that's placed, I lie back on the comfortable sectional and open up a streaming service on my television. Despite my sour mood from the morning's activities, a smile tugs at my lips when my eyes fall onto my subscriptions list.

I click onto the familiar video of a skateboarder I've been following for years. He skates around business parks, only ending the video once he's been chased off property. The guy is cute, although woefully straight, if his social media and girlfriend is anything to be believed. But that's not the point.

The point is that he can do risky things, fearless things, and I live vicariously through him. My mind shuts off as I watch him do tricks on steep stairs. What feels like hours pass by, but it can't be that long because the doorbell goes off, alerting me to the arrival of my groceries. I give them just enough time to drop everything off. Once I'm sure they're gone, I open the front door, just barely catching their taillights as they exit my long driveway.

Another normal, boring night. Just me and Honey and the new medicine I picked up at the pharmacy. What a thrilling life.

I'm dialed in listening to nineties pop ballads and working at my desk when there's a heavy knock at my door. Honey perks up, on high alert just from the sound, but she doesn't leave my side. Not after I was up sick all night from the new meds.

I peek through the keyhole, then open the door with a scowl.

"What?"

Andy rolls her eyes, dark curls bouncing as she shoves her way bodily into my

house. I'm annoyed for a brief second, only until she pinches my cheeks with her nose scrunched up in clear delight. I hate her. Just kidding. She's my best friend and cousin and I adore her. But I'll never tell her that. Ever.

"Your mom told my mom about the new medicine. Figured I'd come check on you because I bet you've been sick but aren't telling anyone because you think you're a burden." She plops down on my sofa, all comfort and cockiness at her clearly correct statement, her gaze sweeping from my toes to tired eyes. "You look like shit, Harp."

"Yeah, well." I toss myself onto the sofa beside her with a heavy sigh. "Spent the night on the toilet. Every time I switch medicines, it fucks my stomach up for days."

"Think you'll make it to the first weekend of the autumn festival?"

I grimace at the reminder. The first week of the autumn festival is always a big deal. But I just don't know if I have the energy. Plus, what if I have a seizure in the middle of the crowd? Everyone pointing and staring at me... a shiver rolls through me just at the idea. High school was enough, I don't need it as an adult too.

"I'll feel fine by tomorrow... probably."

She hums in clear disagreement. "The guys from Eli and Colby's barbecue are here. That cute one, Jackson."

I blink slowly at her. "Okay?"

"He was hitting on you."

An absolutely maniacal snort escapes me before I realize she's serious. "You're a lunatic. Nobody flirts with me."

Andy leans forward with an awkward grunt and pinches my arm, hard. I yank my arm away with a deep frown. That actually hurt.

“What the fuck?”

“You’re an idiot,” Andy says seriously, with all the gravity of someone admitting to a grievous sin.

“Okay.”

“Do you want to watch your skateboarder?”

I roughly rub at my tired eyes. “I still have some more work to do.”

“I’ll cook you dinner while you finish up, then we can watch some TV and gossip. I heard that Mr. Travis drove another tractor through town while the cops tried to flag him down. He seriously needs to be stopped. That old man is going to kill someone!”

I nod as she prattles on about town gossip, returning to my room once she peters off. The sound of her messing around in the kitchen filters into my room as I wrap up work for the day. Something sweet floats in the air when I make my way back towards the kitchen. Pancakes with a side of scrambled eggs and blueberries I don’t remember buying.

“Did you?—”

“I used the griddle,” Andy says with a roll of her eyes.

“And the blueberries?”

“From my freezer at the house, last season’s,” Andy explains when she catches my

look toward the blueberries.

My stomach grumbles just at the sight of the delicious food. Andy is always taking care of me, because I take such bad care of myself. We eat silently together, then spend the evening doing just as Andy said. Watching my favorite videos, with her fingers carding gently through my hair. She's the only person that ever touches me like this and I never take it for granted. Around midnight, she hustles me into my bedroom, tucks me in, then gently kisses my forehead. The soft smell of her floral perfume wafts over me, a smell that reminds me of comfort and home and love.

"The festival is tomorrow, please try to come," Andy whispers against my forehead.

I grumble in annoyance, batting her hand away as she sweeps her fingers across my cheek. Her laughter is the last thing I hear before succumbing to sleep.

Despite my stomach feeling like it wants to rebel out of my body, I do end up attending the autumn festival. Bright early autumn sun, the smell of sunflowers in the air, and the laughter of children greets me as I climb out of my rideshare.

I look down at Honey, and our eyes meet as she stares up at me, both of us unsure if I should be in this crowd. She's probably right. I pat her head gently, then triple-check to make sure her vest is on securely. Andy texted me earlier to let me know she'd be working and that I should stop by to see her by the sunflower fields. I figure once I see her and prove to her that I actually left the house, then I can turn right back around and head home.

Making my way through the crowd wasn't as hard as I'd expected. At least not with Honey at my side. Most people give me a wide berth when they notice her. Catching sight of Colby has my speed increasing in that direction. But the closer I get, the more obvious it is that he isn't alone. Those guys from the barbecue are there, just like Andy said they'd be. The tall one, Jackson, looms over everyone else, even taller than

Colby, although only slightly.

With my nose scrunched in irritation, I approach them wearily. I feel a bit like I'm approaching wild lions on the hunt. Colby grins broadly at the sight of me, loosening all the anxiety and worry that ebbed up inside me on my slow approach.

Jackson pushes past Trevor to stand beside me. "Want a muffin? I have one left."

I blink up at him in confusion. What's wrong with this dude? "I ate breakfast already. Thank you though."

"Oh yeah, sure," Jackson says, a hint of dejection in his voice.

I tear my gaze from Jackson to survey the crowd. Good turnout this year. A couple of kids run around, screaming with joy in the pumpkin patch, tearing a rare smile from me. I love kids. Something so pure about them.

"Hey, Harper, isn't there a pie-eating contest? I bet Jackson could win it," Trevor asks, all blond hair and sweet smiles. Gross. I scowl at him for a second which only earns me the same sweet smile back.

My gaze pings back to Jackson when I don't get a reaction from Trevor. I take Jackson in, from the perfectly brand-new sneakers on his large feet, up his jean-clad mile-long legs, over the tight muscles of his forearms where a light dusting of black hair covers his dark brown skin and then finally to his smiling face, where there's an odd twinkle in his eye. Asshole knows what he looks like, but I won't give in.

I scrunch my nose up in indifference. "Yeah, maybe."

A while goes by as I stand, feeling out of place among the group of friends. Just when I'm about to head towards the sunflowers to check on Andy, Cindy comes barreling

towards us.

“Look at all you boys. Harper, your mama is in the office looking for you.”

Fuck. I ignored her calls this morning, plus the one from my dad, hoping if I ignored them, they’d just assume I felt fine. One look at me and Mom will know I had an adverse reaction to the medicine. Then she’ll want me to go back to the doctor. But I know my body, every time I start a new medicine, there’s an adjustment period. I just need time, some relaxation, and to be left the fuck alone.

Without a word, I head towards the office, head held high to face my mother.

“Wait! Harper!” a voice calls out from behind me.

Freezing in the middle of the crowd, I turn around to face Jackson running toward me. I glance behind me, thinking maybe he’s yelling at someone else with my name. But when I turn back, he’s stopped in front of me with that weird, oddly charming smile on his lips.

“Hi,” Jackson says, his grin now eating up his entire face.

“Can I help you?”

Jackson blinks at me, eyes carefully scanning my face. “I’m in town for a few more days. Do you want to get together maybe?”

The question takes me so by surprise that I don’t even know how to verbalize it. This has to be an elaborate joke. A prank. Maybe Eli and Trevor’s friends are assholes. Seems unlikely considering Eli and Trevor are basically angels on earth, but anything is possible.

“Get together?” I repeat, words having the same ring they would if I were to ask do you have time to kill a baby deer?

Jackson takes another step forward, and I take a careful step back. “Yeah, maybe we can hang out?”

Lead fills my stomach just at the idea. No fucking thanks. “No, sorry.” My heart starts to race and bile fills my throat. It’s just like when I was a teenager all over again. The butt of the joke. I lift my hand and run it through my hair, thumb lingering on the jagged scar near my eye.

“No?”

I shake my head violently. “I have severe allergies.” I fake a sneeze.

A furrow forms between his dark eyebrows. “Okay?”

I sneeze again. “I’m allergic to bullshit. That’s why I have Honey. She’s my bullshit detector.”

Because Honey is a good girl, she sneezes too, aiming her narrowed gaze up at Jackson. The man stares at us in what seems to be amused confusion. Assuming we’re done, I turn around, and keep making my way in the direction of the front office.

Honey presses against my side as we continue on our way through the crowd. I assume I’ve shaken Jackson off, considering the silence, but as I approach my destination, I realize that I have a shadow that’s not mine. I pause again, turning my now irritated gaze on him.

“Do you want to give me an anaphylactic reaction?”

Jackson's mouth opens and closes a few times, before he huffs, shoving his large hands into his pockets. The man sure is beautiful. If I had a type, if I could be with someone, the man might be an option. But I have no options and I cannot have a type.

"I'll be in town for a few days. Are you sure we can't hang out?"

I scowl at him, letting the entire weight of my ire for the question be aimed at him. "I don't need company. Go back to your friends."

His eye twitches as he stares down at me. I fight back a shiver at his assessing gaze. His eyes are so brown that I can hardly make out his pupil. The prettiest eyes I've ever seen, just like the rest of him. Disgusting. Finally, he seems to get it, and disappears back toward his friends. He glances over his shoulder once, and I flick him off with a smirk. Just before he turns around, a small smile tugs at his lips, making me feel less like I won, and more like maybe he did. Something about that rankles and excites me at the same time.

Mom's gaze slowly sweeps over me as I enter into the mostly silent front office. One second, two seconds, and then...

"The medicine made you sick, didn't it? I can't believe you came to this, Harper. When you get sick, it lowers your immune system, you could get sicker."

Stifling the urge to argue, I curl my fingers into my palms, letting the bite of pain steady my irritation at her treating me like a child. Still. At twenty-five.

"I'm fine. I feel great."

She rolls her eyes. "I'll give you a ride home."

"I'm staying."

Her stare turns even harder, foot tapping against the floor. “No. I’m taking you home. No arguments.”

All the fight bleeds out of me when my stomach rolls dangerously, sending nausea rippling through me. She must see it on my face, because victory seeps into her features, for only a moment, before she carefully fixes her face.

I was at the festival for like twenty minutes

feel sick, going home with my mom

Andy

I love you, Harp.

If you loved me, you’d kill me

THAT IS NOT FUNNY

Lol

JACKSON

I can see the appeal of what made Eli and Trevor decide to make a life in Clay Springs. The town is sickeningly sweet and absolutely everything moves slower here. It reminds me so much of home back in Georgia. Twangy southern accents, fresh air that isn't full of that city stink, and a redhead that has intrigued me for weeks.

“What's with the frown?” Trevor asks curiously.

The day has wound down at the festival, orange light casting over the property as the sun slowly sets. I love seeing my friends in love with good men. Curly-haired Eli has Colby so wrapped around his finger that it's laughable, but also sweet, heartwarming even. Then there's my best friend Trevor with the gentle giant, Beau. Everyone is pairing off, quitting the fake boyfriend game. Except Benji, my free-spirited, golden retriever best friend.

“I asked Harper out and he said he's allergic to bullshit,” I confess, voice a low murmur among the crowd of festival attendees.

Trevor's lips form a tight line as he tilts his head, assessing me. “What's the interest with Harper? You're usually...” He trails off, looking for the right word. “Not interested in people unless you're being paid.”

That's true. It happens rarely. But it's always someone who rebuffs my advances at first, someone who makes it hard, someone who makes me want to chase them.

Harper's eyes tell me yes , but his standoffish sarcastic attitude tells me no .

"Maybe I want to stay in town for a little while," I say, ignoring his statement altogether.

Trevor teasingly punches my arm. "If you fuck around with Harper, Colby and Beau will probably kill you. From everything I've seen so far, they're insanely protective of him. Despite him not really needing it. He did ask me to help him find a boyfriend..."

I stand up straighter. "When?"

Trevor's eyebrows furrow. "At the wedding last year. He's older than me, but not by much."

"I'm the perfect boyfriend."

"When you're being paid," Trevor argues like an asshole.

"Just because I don't date much outside of the fake boyfriend thing doesn't mean I can't do it."

Trevor groans. "Please don't make this a competitive thing. Don't you have to go back to Georgia by the end of the weekend anyway?"

"I don't have to do anything." I take a large bite out of the pumpkin scone I'd bought earlier. "I can be anywhere. I'm a free agent."

Trevor hums but doesn't comment. The two of us stand at the edge of the field, watching Eli and Benji dance among the sunflowers, glowing with the setting sun. Trevor and I have always been the more reserved boyfriends. Eli and Benji are the

free spirits, the ones who get the johns wrapped around their fingers.

The festival wraps up slowly, with Beau and Colby rejoining the group towards the end. Time turns syrupy-slow, especially as we make the ride back to Colby and Eli's place. I keep my eyes peeled for Harper as we make our way out of the crowd, but there's no sight of him. Benji kicks me in the heel as he settles into the back seat of Colby's Jeep. I aim a pointed glare at him, but Benji only rolls his eyes.

"Hey, so, Harper?" I ask into the silence of the car.

Colby's blue eyes fly up to the rearview mirror. "What about him?"

Eli turns around in the passenger seat, look penetrating. "Harper?"

"He's single, right?" I ask, gaze locked on Colby, hoping to see a hint of something on his face. But his gaze stays steely, carefully keeping Harper's secrets. The only sign my question got to him are his knuckles going white as his hands tighten on the wheel.

"Yes, he's single," Colby confirms, teeth gritted.

Eli's eyes flick from me to Colby, a frown inching across his face. "Is there something we should know?"

Colby's smile is tight as he glances over at Eli. "Nope. Harper's just really special to all of us. He's single and doesn't date much."

"The service dog?" I question, because I'm too fucking curious for my own good.

Colby's lip twitches at the corner. "Not my story to tell. Did Harper tell you why?"

I snort. “He said he has severe allergies, is allergic to bullshit, that Honey is his bullshit detector, and proceeded to sneeze and asked why I wanted to give him an anaphylactic reaction.”

Benji laughs loudly, hand gripping his stomach. “Oh my God, I’m in love with him. Do you think he’ll date me?”

I cut a glare his way. “Fuck off, Benji.”

A small chuckle escapes Colby as he pulls into the driveway of his property. I don’t miss the way Eli’s eyes twinkle at the sound of the laugh. They’re nauseatingly in love. Good for them. We’re all quiet as we climb out of the car, the gravel crackling underneath our feet as we head into Colby’s house. Benji and I have been crashing in the mother-in-law suite over the garage, and Eli’s been staying in the big house. Doesn’t seem like it’s much of a hardship for him.

The two of them should just get over it and live together already. But Eli is stubborn when he really wants to be. I glance over my shoulder in the direction of Beau’s house, sparing one final thought to Trevor for the night. We all gravitate to the back porch without a word.

I’d been a little hesitant about Colby when I’d first arrived. Eli is so pure, a bottle of sunshine, that I’d worried he’d been taken advantage of when he told us he fell in love with a john and promptly swept off his feet. But all I needed to see was the way Colby looks at him, like Eli is every wish he’s ever had fulfilled. Hard to deny love that looks like that.

“Beer?” Colby asks, blond head buried in the fridge.

Benji and Eli are already out on the porch, heads pressed together as they whisper about something on Benji’s phone. Curious.

“Sure.”

Colby pulls his head out of the fridge, hands me two beers, then tilts his head as he takes me in. I’m a little taller than Colby, but he’s got more bulk. My basketball days are long behind me. I don’t need the amount of muscle mass I used to require. But my height is something I can never escape.

“Harper is special to all of us,” Colby says, apropos of nothing.

“I get it.”

Colby’s finger trails through the condensation on the beer bottle, gaze firm on me as he carefully considers his next words. “I don’t know you too well yet, Jackson. But Eli speaks very highly of you. I remember Harper as a baby at family events. I held him in my arms before he even knew what life could be like. You’ve got to listen to him. If he says no, he means no. But I think Harper could always use another friend...”

My lips flatten into a line. “I can be friends with him.”

Colby clinks our beer bottles together. “Some love stories are a long game, you know?”

I snort. “Compared to you and Eli, yes, that’s true.”

Colby laughs because he’s a good sport. We join Benji and Eli out on the porch as the sky darkens with sunset, turning burnished orange with pinks and lavenders. I sit beside Benji on the outdoor couch, allowing Colby to take the coveted spot beside Eli on the smaller opposite couch. Eli immediately dips to burrow into Colby’s side, a contented smile tugging at his lips.

Benji pretends to gag. “Too much canoodling going on here.”

“You like it,” I tease, because he does. Benji might be a little shit, but he so desperately wants out of the game, wants to settle down, wants to be loved.

Benji waves his hand dismissively. “What time are we leaving tomorrow?”

I take a slow sip of my beer as Colby stares me down. “I think I’m going to stay.”

Eli sits up straight, eyes wide. “What?”

“I think I’m going to stay in Clay Springs for a while. Take a break from work, focus on my investments. Do you happen to know anywhere I can rent?” I aim the last question at Colby, pointedly ignoring Eli’s increasingly shocked face.

Colby’s smile is slow, but pleased. “I’ve got the perfect place.”

Benji scoffs in annoyance. “Jesus Christ. Now I’m all alone in Georgia?”

Eli’s head tilts. “You could take up the offer from Nolan...”

A furious flush dots Benji’s cheeks at the mention of Nolan. I look between Eli and Benji as they stare one another down, probably speaking telepathically to each other. Something only sunshine boys can do.

Benji finally shrugs. “I guess. I do love to travel...”

I hold my hand up. “Can you explain the details to me?”

A sheepish look crosses Benji’s face. “I’ve been contracting with Nolan.”

“What?” I almost shout, immediately terrified for Benji.

Nolan is a notoriously difficult client. I spent one night with him and still shudder at the memory. Pain play is not remotely my thing. Imagining Benji and Nolan together feels almost impossible, like a wasp and a golden retriever together.

Colby slaps his knees and stands. “I’m going to go get a snack so you boys can talk shop.” He bends down, presses a kiss to Eli’s curly head, then disappears into the house with a flurry. Avoidance if I’ve ever seen it.

“Spill it,” I say firmly, knowing it’ll rile Benji up.

But it seems to have the reverse effect. The man shrinks into the cushion, eyes on the darkening forest behind Eli.

“There’s nothing more to tell. I’ve been working with Nolan the past year. It’s fine. There’s not much left for me in Georgia now that...” He purses his lips as his gaze swings between me and Eli. “I’ll do it. I’ll keep you guys updated.”

“Does he hurt you?” I ask, because I spent one night with Nolan and have the scars to tell about it. Benji and I might snark at each other, but if someone ever hurt him, I’d go scorched earth for him. I’d do that for anyone I love, anyone in my life. Murder is defensible when it’s for a loved one, right?

Benji shakes his head, eyes distant. “No... he doesn’t hurt me.”

There’s something about his tone that unsettles me. His face is closed off and clearly says the conversation is over. Colby promptly returns with some freshly baked cookies, rejoining Eli on the couch. We finish the evening talking about sports, my favorite topic of conversation.

The next day I see Benji off at the airport.

“Please be careful,” I say softly.

Benji rolls his light blue eyes so hard they might get stuck. “I’m not useless, you know. I can take care of myself. And Nolan isn’t as difficult as you all make him out to be. Sure, he’s into pain, but he melts with me. I like him.”

That sends alarm bells off in my head. “You like him?”

Benji blushes and avoids my gaze. “Is that a crime?”

“Benji, he’s Nolan fucking Hastings. Most famous rockstar on the planet. He’s hiring you.”

Benji scowls as he jumps out of the car. “I can take care of myself, Jackson. And I can take care of Nolan too. You’ll see.”

My eyes track Benji fleeing into the airport until I pull away from the curb, losing him in the crowd of departures bustling through the sliding doors. Deciding to stay was an easy decision. A change of pace is exactly what I need. Something new, something different.

Colby has a friend in town with a few rentals, so it’s easy for me to hand over a stack of cash to get a decent apartment in downtown Clay Springs. Pre-furnished, there’s nothing to do but to settle in for a stay without a return ticket. The townhouse is brick with star jasmine crawling up the front, tucked between two other townhomes that are owned by rarely home businessmen, per my new landlord. Three bedrooms, two bathrooms, with a giant shower made for two in the large owner’s suite. The kitchen on the main floor is a chef’s kitchen, thankfully, considering I love to cook.

I lean against the kitchen island, surveying my new home. It's late at night now, otherwise I'd call my mom to update her. I'll have to do my best to remember in the morning.

Settling in for the night in my new large suite, I feel beyond lonely in the California king bed. I spread my legs and arms out as far as I can, almost able to reach the edges. My phone vibrates with a message where it lies on my stomach. I assume it's Claire responding to my text about a small hiatus and I'm proven right when I see her name flash across the screen.

Claire

Oh my God, I'm losing all my boys.

Not losing forever

Please. You're going to fall in love too and quit

:(

Enlist Davis

Pass

Maybe I need to find a new job

I would be a good realtor

Only if it's million-dollar listings

True

I'm just joking, you know... I'm glad you're taking some time off.

I need it

How's Trevor?

Come visit him yourself and see

Work was a good excuse, but not so much anymore... I'll think about it

Night, boss lady.

Fuck off

HARPER

Everything is perfect. The medicine isn't making me sick anymore. October has rolled in, signaling the start of one of my favorite seasons. Work is going great. I haven't had a seizure in a month. Naturally, that means everything is going to go to complete and utter shit as soon as possible. The law of the universe. If everything is going well for Harper, crank up the dial and let the shit fall.

The evidence of the prompt life going to shit is standing only a few feet in front of me. Sometimes on lunch during the week I like to head downtown with Honey, walk the streets, get a sweet treat, then return back home. I always look forward to our little midday walks. It breaks up the monotony of my life.

But today, I loathe every single choice I have ever made in my life.

Because why the hell is Jackson still in town?

Was no one going to tell me?

Jackson's so tall, so beautiful, so everything that my gaze can't help but land on him. The sun basically makes his rich brown skin glow, his teeth even shine pearly white as he laughs. My mood is instantly ruined. I pause in the middle of the sidewalk, looking for somewhere to hide until he's finished speaking to Mr. Randolph, the owner of the French bakery. Honey presses against my side, grounding me. The gazebo that splits the small two-lane downtown area beckons me, an extraordinarily

perfect place to hide.

“Let’s go, girl,” I tell Honey, immediately laughing at the inadvertent Shania Twain reference. Such an amazing song.

The weathered white gazebo has a few swinging benches inside, so I haphazardly toss myself down on one. Honey stays at my feet, patiently attuned to me, still in work mode. Taking a deep breath, I push my feet so that the swing moves just enough to avoid contact with Honey. Birds sit atop the gazebo, chirping away under the soft yellow October sun. Such a beautiful day, a shame I have to hide from the jerk-off invading my hometown.

I just barely resist the urge to pull out my phone to text Colby with demands of why I wasn’t told Jackson was still in town. It’s none of my business. I don’t care at all about the guy. I don’t even know him. We’ve had a handful of interactions that amount to absolutely nothing.

But I’m still nosy and don’t understand why I was left out of the loop.

“Fancy finding you here,” a disembodied voice says to my left. I jump ten feet in the air, heart racing, before turning my annoyed gaze on Jackson.

“I live here. Why are you here?”

Jackson’s lips twitch with restrained laughter. “I live here now too.”

“Pardon me?”

Jackson points over his shoulder towards the townhomes at the end of Main Street. “I’m renting one of the townhomes for a while. I thought I’d see what Eli and Trevor loved so much about the place.”

“It’s not the place.” I roll my eyes deeply. “It’s their sugar daddies.”

“Sugar daddy?” Jackson repeats teasingly as he tucks his giant hands into his pockets.

“Obviously.”

“Maybe they’re in love.”

I summon every ounce of my annoyance and aim it at him in the form of a glare. “I never said it wasn’t love. It’s not mutually exclusive. There can be two truths.” I tick off each one on my fingers as I keep pushing the swing. “One, they can be sugar babies. Two, they can be in love.”

“You’re a little cynical.”

“If you were me, you’d be too,” I mutter under my breath.

“What?” Jackson asks, clearly having missed what I said. Thankfully.

“Are you staying long?”

Jackson nods solemnly. “A little while.”

I stand from the swing, brushing off my jeans like I’m ridding myself of evil energy. “I wish you many great returns, blessings, whatever people say, yada yada.”

As I’m walking away, Jackson calls out, “You feel like getting a drink?”

Turning slowly, I stare blankly at him. “What?”

“A drink? Do you want to get one with me?”

I look down at Honey, who is already blinking up at me, probably having felt the shift in my mood. “It’s noon on a weekday.”

Jackson laughs, loudly, a little uncomfortably, and rubs at his head. “Not now. Later.”

This has to be an elaborate joke. I glance behind me, looking to see if someone else is standing by us, but there’s no one else. We’re alone. It’s just us. Me and Jackson.

“I don’t drink,” I admit quietly, feeling that odd feeling of failure that I hate so much.

“Oh,” Jackson says, sounding crestfallen. My fingers twitch restlessly at my side. Am I being an asshole? Andy always says sometimes I’m an asshole and I don’t realize it. I’m just blunt, tease too much, and don’t understand a lot of social cues.

“You can buy me a cupcake at Bee’s though. I have a little bit of time before I have to get back to work.”

Jackson’s grin is painfully blinding. His gorgeous brown eyes even crinkle at the corners. Maybe this is an elaborate joke, but I’m older now, and I can withstand anything. Also, I’m pretty sure Colby or Beau will kill him if he fucks around with me, so what’s the harm?

Jackson holds his hand out in an after you gesture that has my nose wrinkling in irritation. We leave the gazebo, heading down towards Bee’s Cupcakes, a short two-block walk along Main Street. My long hair blows in the breeze, and I tuck it behind my ears so it doesn’t obscure my view of Jackson out of the corner of my eye.

Friendship isn’t something I really have much experience with. There’s Andy, but sometimes I think she’s my friend out of obligation. We’re just barely cousins, but we’re also the only ones in our large family around our age, the babies. So we’d formed a sort of commiserating friendship from early on.

Trusting people isn't something that comes easy to me. Not after my epilepsy and my teenage years. There is a long list of things to not like about me, so I just try to make it easier on people by not making them feel like they have to be my friend.

Jackson opens the door to Bee's, elbow pressed to the door, long legs tucked in front of it. The sweet smell of baked goods floats in the air when I duck inside. Bee's has been an escape for me for as long as I can remember. In our teenage years Andy and I would come downtown after school, hide out in Bee's with our books to study before Andy wandered back to campus down the street for cheer practice. It was like a safe zone for me, where nothing bad could happen. The smell of vanilla settled all my nerves.

Trisha grins over the counter at the sight of me.

"Harper! It has been approximately"—she pretends to look down at her watch, then back up at me with a sly smile—"two days since you've been in the store. That's a world record."

A warm flush creeps across my cheeks and down my neck. So, I have a bit of a thing for sweets. Life is really short and I have to grab joy where I can.

"You don't have to tattle on me," I tease her.

Trisha grabs a lilac Bee's-branded box with a flourish and a smile. "What'll it be today?"

The selection of confections rotates every few days, but there are always a few staples. Double chocolate is usually my go-to favorite because it's too decadent to not love. But pumpkin spice is finally in stock and that's hard to pass up.

"One of each," Jackson says from beside me, bringing my shocked gaze to him. He

hands a startled Trisha his black credit card. “A latte too, please, ma’am.”

“What are you doing?” I ask, tone sharper than I intended.

Jackson turns his gaze to me. He shrugs, resting his forearm against the counter. “You wanted a cupcake.”

“Singular,” I point out through gritted teeth.

A small laugh escapes him, and he sucks on his bottom lip. “Now you’ll be good for a few days. Which one are you going to eat now?” Jackson gazes down at the cupcake display as Trisha continues to package up twelve various flavors of cupcakes. There’s no way I’ll eat them all in time before they go bad. A true tragedy.

“Here you go, love.” Trisha hands the latte and full box of cupcakes to Jackson with a starry-eyed look. Her eyes dart from me to Jackson, and I shake my head so she doesn’t get any ideas. Getting besotted with Jackson just screams complications for everyone.

“Let’s eat one now,” Jackson declares, sending a panty-melting smile to Trisha as he ushers me towards the door. That is not going to help with the don’t get besotted thing for Trisha.

Swept under the current of his direction, I actually listen, and head out the door. I blink slowly, and reach down to pat at Honey’s head to assure my heart is still beating. Maybe this is some fever dream. Or I died. That’s always possible.

There’s a little alley beside Bee’s full of metal tables, chairs, and fairy lights strung along the brick walls that glow bright at night. Since it’s still daytime, they’re not on, but the potted plants give the little alley a cozy effect. I plod over to the tables, hand still firmly on Honey’s head. We take a seat, Jackson folding his big body into the

chair across from me, and he lifts the lid off the confectionary box with a childish grin.

He glances up at me, eyes sparkling. “Which one do you want?”

Instead of answering, I reach forward and grab my favorite. Double chocolate. Cupcakes are always messy, but I do my best. Silence settles over us as we eat in the warm glow of early fall. Jackson heartily digs into the white chocolate raspberry cheesecake flavor. Not my favorite, so he can have it. I only eat half before I’m full. A serious sugar rush is impending. Placing the half-eaten cupcake back in the box, I lick errant frosting off my fingers.

Jackson makes a noise deep in his throat, dragging my attention back to him. He’s already devoured the cupcake and his attention is focused solely on me. Maybe there’s frosting on my face?

I hastily wipe my mouth with my thumb. “Is there frosting?”

Jackson shakes his head firmly. “No, no frosting. It’s good to see your allergies aren’t acting up today.”

I blink in surprise. “Allergies?”

A smirk tilts Jackson’s lips up, just in the right corner. “Your bullshit allergies? It seemed serious the other day. Do you have to carry an EpiPen?”

Slinking down in the chair, embarrassment floods through me. I honestly didn’t think I’d see him again so soon. Thought maybe he’d forget by the next time I saw him.

“Okay, I lied. I don’t have allergies.” I gently pat Honey’s head. “Honey is my canine parole officer. If I bite someone again, they’re going to send me away for life.”

Jackson tilts his head again, eyes tracking over my face. Self-consciously, I want to reach up and cover the scar across my temple. It's still gnarled years later and usually the first thing people look at. It goes like this: scar, long red hair, freckles, and then Honey. In high school they called me Chucky, which is why I wear my hair long now. I'm going for twink lumberjack, instead of a serial killer doll.

"How many people have you bitten?" Jackson asks conversationally.

"Too many to count."

"You seem reformed."

I point at Honey. "As I said, canine parole officer. If I bite one more person... life behind bars. Look at me. I can't be behind bars."

Jackson's lip twitches again. "No, no. A face like yours doesn't belong in jail."

I narrow my eyes. "What's that mean?"

"You're too pretty," Jackson mumbles around a mouthful of cupcake.

Something warm and unnamable unfurls in my stomach. No one has ever called me pretty. Most days, when I look into the mirror, that's not a word I'd used to describe myself. I decide to totally ignore the word, assuming he meant it to be kind.

"Why are you still here?" I ask bluntly.

Jackson doesn't seem shaken by my tone. His eyes slowly flick over my face, then land back on my eyes. He holds my gaze for so long that I start to squirm in my seat, unmoored by his ability to give such undivided attention.

“I told you that already.”

I huff and roll my eyes, barely containing my irritation. “Don’t you have a job? You can just... what? Up and decide to relocate to Florida? Which, by the way, no one willingly relocates here unless they’re escaping state income tax or they’re fine with exorbitant home insurance costs.”

Jackson laughs again, open and free. It infuriates me that I like the sound of his laugh. I hate him. Nobody should look like that and have such an amazing laugh. Was God handing out hotness, personality, and nice laughs at the same time when he made Jackson? Must be nice. God took one look at me and said make him Chucky and give him a brain disorder and also make his biological parents not want him .

“God, the way you view life is refreshing.”

I sniff delicately. “I just say it like it is.”

“You sure fucking do,” Jackson says gruffly. He leans back in the metal chair, arms crossed over his broad chest. The muscles in his biceps pop, and my eyes get stuck on his blemish-free skin for just a second too long. I have this brief, stupid thought of him holding me, wondering what those muscles would feel like around my thin frame.

Idiot.

I shake myself from stupid thoughts and stand abruptly.

“Thank you for the cupcake,” I say, a small tremor in my voice.

Jackson’s brows furrow again, but he stays sitting. His stare is calculating and I hate the weight of it on me. The man’s eyes should be illegal, especially when he looks at

me like that. Some type of way that I can't understand, that I'm not able to parse. Without another word, I turn from the table and head back towards home. Unfortunately, it's gotten a little warmer since I started my walk, so I'll have to call a rideshare to take me back home.

I can't risk getting overheated, then seizing on the side of the road. My mother would actually have a conniption and force me to move back home where she can hover over me indefinitely so I don't have the chance to embarrass her.

Just as I'm pulling out my phone, Honey walks in front of me to stop me. I pause, and glance up to find Jackson standing in front of us, blocking our way. The box of cupcakes is held in the tight grip of his large hands. I trace my gaze from the tips of his fingers, up his arm, across the hard dip of his collarbone under his tight V-neck, over his neck, then finally let my gaze meet his own.

"I bought these for you," Jackson says, voice pitched low.

A shiver tries to roll through my body, but I don't let it. I'm made of steel. No man will affect me unless I let them. "Okay."

"Where are you going?"

My fingers twitch against my phone. "Home."

Jackson's mouth twitches at the corner. "Were you walking?"

We stare at each other for a few tense seconds. The options are to lie or to tell him about the rideshare. Both options suck ass.

"I was going to fly home in my spaceship."

Jackson takes a slow breath. His grip on the box tightens enough that it looks borderline painful. I wonder what I need to do to snap his patience. Pushing Jackson's buttons is more fun than I've had in months. Maybe years.

"Can I give you a ride?" Jackson asks, voice clearly controlled.

I lean to the side to look around him, noting the absence of his own spaceship. "In what?"

"My car." Jackson abruptly turns around and heads in the opposite direction. I look down at Honey, exchanging a curious look with her. Well, there's nothing to lose, I guess. Plus this way I don't risk losing the cupcakes.

Of course, the man drives a Mercedes. Chrome wheels, matte exterior, and an interior with leather so supple that my brain short-circuits a little at the idea of having a seizure in his car. I don't think the man would take kindly to a piss stain on his leather seats. Oh well, his decision. He holds the door open for me as I climb into the passenger seat. Jackson patiently waits until I'm buckled in to gently close the door. Then the door behind me opens, and Jackson holds the door open for Honey to jump in.

Honey climbs onto the seat without a care in the world, tongue dangling out of her mouth. I watch in the rearview mirror as Jackson lays the box of cupcakes on the floor, then gently closes the door without paying Honey any attention. Most people would've tried to pet her by now but Jackson just blatantly ignores her.

Either he did research, or he knows that service dogs should be ignored unless they bring attention to themselves. I hope no one has told him about me. The idea of him finding me useless rankles me, turning my insides rotten at the thought. I squint at him when he climbs into the driver's seat. His forearms tighten as his hands grip the wheel, pulling us out of the spot in front of his townhome.

He's driving me ten minutes home, only to have to turn back around. What a waste of gas.

"You didn't need to drive me," I complain.

"I know. I wanted to. Plus, I rarely get the chance to have two beautiful things in my vehicle."

"Stop," I say softly, unable to stand it anymore. "Don't do that."

Jackson looks at me out of the corner of his eye. "Do what?"

"Call me pretty or beautiful. I don't like it."

Jackson nods tightly. "Alright. What do you do for work?"

"I'm a data analyst," I say, waiting for his confusion.

But he's not remotely confused. His eyes light up as he navigates us out of downtown onto the small county road that leads toward the Callahan and Smith properties. He lifts one finger in the direction of my house.

"I'm going the right way?"

"Yeah, I'll tell you when to turn."

Jackson nods in agreement. "So, data analyst. What company do you work for?"

"One of the largest marketing firms in the country. I analyze data for their campaigns and make forecasting recommendations. It's fun, and I get to work remotely despite headquarters being in Manhattan."

“Do you enjoy it?”

No one has ever asked me that before. Usually, they ask me how much money I make because that’s what people care about. I’m lucky that I make bank and like my job, seemingly a rare thing to find these days.

“I love it. Numbers make sense to me. People don’t.”

“Valid.”

I roll my eyes. “As if you have trouble understanding people. What do you do for a living?”

Jackson’s face closes off, his mood shifting in a way that oddly makes me feel a sense of sadness. “I play around with stocks here and there.”

I blink slowly. “You make a living by dabbling in the stock exchange?”

“Yes,” Jackson says slowly, his voice going up a little at the end as if he means the word like a question.

“Amazing.” I run my hand over the console between us. “You must do well. Nice car.”

Jackson just hums and returns his attention to the road. The rest of the way to my house is full of stilted silence. He turns when I direct him to, finally turning into my driveway with a small furrow between his brows again. The man is always thinking, but his thoughts are rarely said out loud. He has a better filter than me. Kudos to him.

I start to jump out of the vehicle the moment it stops in front of my house, but Jackson stops me with a hand held out in the universal sign for pause . Without a

word, he climbs out his side, then repeats the entire process from when we all got into the vehicle. Honey jumps out first and waits patiently for me when Jackson opens my door.

“What’s your angle here?” I ask him, confused about everything that’s happened in the last hour.

Jackson’s grip on the door tightens. I bite back a laugh because I seemingly have that effect on him. At least he takes my sarcastic biting remarks mostly in stride.

“Maybe I want to be friends with you.”

I snort. He’s got jokes. “Try again.”

Jackson has the gall to look befuddled by my statement. “You don’t think we could be friends?”

“I rank sports players on their level of hotness,” I remind him.

A smirk inches its way across his plush lips. He stays quiet, gaze still fixed on me, until I squirm against the soft leather of the passenger seat.

“Maybe I find that intriguing.”

My eyes almost get stuck deep in my brain. “Sure.”

Jackson swings the door all the way open and helps me out of the car with a firm hand on my elbow. Once my feet are safely back on the gravel, his grip disappears, his hand dangling awkwardly at his side. A few times his fingers flex before mindlessly tapping against his dark jeans. My eyes lift back to his, only to find him already staring at me. My body hates me, so a flush fills my cheeks, warming me

under the midday sun.

He holds his hand out to me, waiting for me to take it. I take his hand in my grip. It's warm, so rough against my own, and he grips mine tight for a few stilted moments before firmly shaking it.

"This is the start of a beautiful friendship," Jackson says seriously.

I can't help but laugh. Usually I make people laugh, not the other way around. My laughter makes the corners of his eyes crinkle as a grin breaks over his face.

"You're a weirdo," I say around my laughter.

"Maybe so."

Jackson dips back into the car and returns with the box of cupcakes. I gingerly accept the box into my arms, watching as his broad back disappears back into his car. The taillights slowly inch down the road. I get tired of waiting and return inside, when I peek through the window it's to find Jackson now speeding down the gravel road like he only sped up once realizing I was safely back inside the house. I grunt in annoyance before glancing back down at Honey.

"Well, Honey. That was weird, right?"

Honey shakes her body out in reply. My house feels startlingly empty once I'm inside, despite the noise of Honey's nails against the hardwood floors. I hurriedly take her out of her service vest so she can relax, because she deserves it. Placing the cupcakes on the counter, I open the box, taking another peek inside. All my favorite flavors. I close the box firmly shut, and push it into the center of the island. Too much sugar doesn't agree with me, so I'll have to be careful over the next few days.

But just the idea that the entire box was bought solely for me, just for my enjoyment, is almost more pleasing than the sweet taste of the confections themselves.

JACKSON

Every morning I have the exact same routine. An hour in bed selling or buying stocks, work out, eat breakfast, then take a long decadent shower to ease my aching muscles. But after that? Well, I don't have much else to take up the long minutes that stretch my day. The fake boyfriend thing was a fun distraction that got me out, got me laid, and got me money. Chump change in comparison to my day trading, but it was something.

I don't know what the hell to do with myself now. I think about calling my parents and checking in but it's still early. Mom will probably be puttering around her garden, while Dad will be inspecting the neighborhood for cans to exchange at the recycling center across town. A small surge of homesickness courses through me. Instead of calling, I shoot my parents a text just to tell them I love them. That's a good start to the day.

Guess it's time to bother my best friends.

The sun is just breaking over the trees as my G-Wagon rumbles down the gravel road leading to Trevor's house. Beau's house? At this point I'm not sure what to call it, but they're living together. I know how big of a deal that is for Trevor. As I pull up, it's easy to spot the two of them in the three-car garage attached to the idyllic farmhouse.

Trevor turns towards me with a curious hand shading his eyes. Concern flashes in his gaze, quickly disappearing when he notices my easy smile. Communicating with

Trevor has always been easy, mostly done through facial expressions, or singular words with a particular tone. The man is a walking lie detector test.

A grunt pulls my gaze to Beau who's leaned over an old truck, shirtless, covered in a slight sheen of sweat in the early October air. My eyes flick back over to Trevor. His blond hair is mucked up and there's fresh beard burn at the base of his throat. Trevor's eyes narrow when he notices my gaze. I hold my hands up in defense.

"What's up?" Trevor asks.

Beau's head turns slightly, then returns to the truck. "Stay too long and I'll put you to work."

"Yes, sir." I make myself at home on one of the metal barstools at the worktable.

Trevor's gaze returns to Beau, and when his boyfriend grunts again, Trevor wordlessly hands him a different tool from the lip of the truck. I watch enraptured for a little while as they silently work together. If someone had told me a few years ago that the young kid that helped Claire start the business would be at home helping his boyfriend fix a truck, I would've told them to get their head checked. Gone is the man who held everyone, even his friends, at a distance.

"So?" Trevor asks quietly while handing Beau a rag.

The two of them continue to work together to get Beau all cleaned up. Beau presses a soft kiss to Trevor's slightly stubbled cheek before turning to head into the house without a single word. The man is such an enigma, but Trevor worships the ground he walks on. That will always be enough. If Trevor loves someone, then they're in the inner circle for life.

"I'm bored." I kick my feet against the ground. "What do you do all day?"

Trevor's gaze swings towards the house for a second, then returns to me. "My reasons for being here are a little different than yours, Jackson."

"What's that mean?"

With a heavy sigh, Trevor leans his back against the truck. His golden hair is loose around his shoulders today, something I'm not used to seeing. Back in Georgia, it was up in a bun most of the time. Maybe that's another sign of what this place is doing for him.

"I'm thankful for the slow life for a change. Life with Beau, it's everything I've always wanted." Trevor points his finger at me with a calculating look. "Whereas, you've never been happy sitting still. You need something to do. Beau would gladly put you to work at the farm."

I grunt. "I have a bum knee."

Trevor rolls his eyes and pushes off of the truck. He crosses his arms over his chest while aiming his steely blue gaze at me. "You're restless."

I pinch my forefinger and thumb together. "Just a little."

Trevor's lips twitch as he tries not to laugh. "Your fingers aren't supposed to touch."

I gasp in feigned shock. "Really? Hey, so, what's the deal with Harper?"

Trevor's gaze turns shrewd. "Why?"

Swiveling in the chair, I keep my gaze as steady as I can. I want Trevor to know I'm serious, not fucking around. After the other day with Harper, I want to be the man's friend, but I also want to kiss the hell out of him. I've never had someone rile me up,

make me laugh, and activate my protective instincts all at once before. He's perfect. I've needed him since he told me he rated NFL players by hotness. Who does that? Just Harper.

I shrug in answer. "He's interesting."

"And Beau and Colby are very protective of him, for good reason," Trevor says matter-of-factly. He crosses the garage and places his hands on my knees to stop my swiveling. Our eyes lock as Trevor inspects my motivations solely through touch. "You can't fuck and run with him."

"I don't fuck and run," I say sourly.

Trevor hums in blatant disagreement. "Harper acts like a Sour Patch Kid but I'm pretty sure inside he's just melted marshmallow goodness."

"He has mile-high walls."

Trevor nods. "Yeah. If you break Harper's heart, I won't hold Beau back. That man is the most gentle teddy bear in the world, but he'd burn the world for those he loves. He reminds me of someone else I know."

My eyebrows furrow. "Who?"

"You, idiot."

Oh. Suddenly, I'm reminded of the times Trevor returned covered in bruises from a night with a john. One time, he had a split lip so fat that he couldn't even drink through a straw for a few days. Helping him hide from Claire had been one of the worst experiences of my life. I'd so badly wanted to hack into Claire's computer to find the name of the john that Trevor had spent the night with. He'd just smiled as

best he could, patted my arm with glassy eyes, and told me it'd been consensual. If I didn't want it, they wouldn't get the chance to do it . That had taught me a large lesson in trust. Wait for loved ones to ask for me to scorch the earth, instead of doing it without permission.

But now look at Trevor, happy as can be with a man who would never even have the urge to cause him pain. Sometimes, we all get what we need exactly when we need it.

“Coffee?” Beau calls out from the back porch.

The way Trevor's eyes soften and glow at the sight of Beau warms me to the very core. A contented smile tugs at the corner of Trevor's lips. We amble up towards the back porch and I take a seat at the weathered table. Trevor heads inside to help Beau with the coffee, and I spot them through the sliding glass doors, hugging and swaying in the kitchen as they gaze at each other with open, clear affection. I tear my gaze away before Trevor can notice I'm watching them.

Trevor walks through the sliding glass door with one of his easy, soft grins.

“I put some vanilla creamer in yours,” Trevor says while placing a steaming mug on the table.

“Thank you.” The coffee is the perfect temperature, well brewed with a hint of caramel.

Beau joins us at the table, placing his arm around the back of Trevor's chair like it's second nature by now. Trevor sips at the coffee to no doubt prevent a lovesick grin when Beau's thumb starts to trace lazy circles over his bicep. They're disgusting and I love it. I want that kind of love so badly, to be so in tune with someone that I know exactly what they need without a word. My parents always had that type of abundant love, no second-guessing, just knowing that at the end of the day they had one

another.

The problem is that I'm a possessive fuck. If I'm actually dating someone, usually they get sick of it fast. So at a certain point, I just stopped dating. Stopped bothering with love at all. But by the time my parents were my age, they'd had a toddler, were married, and owned a home. All I have is a fake boyfriend career because of a bad knee that ruled out any sort of career in the league.

"I could put you to work at the farm," Beau says a little while later.

I can't help but snort. "Trevor already offered."

Beau tilts his head as he sips from a dark blue coffee mug with a chip in the rim. "Offer stands."

"What are you doing today?" I aim my question at Trevor.

"Today's Beau's day off," Trevor says shyly.

I can take a hint. "Let me get out of your hair."

I quickly gulp down the rest of my coffee, firmly shake Beau's hand and lovingly pat Trevor's head. Trevor bats me away with a small smile. As I back out of the drive, I catch sight of Trevor standing and squeezing Beau's hand before heading inside the house. The way Beau stares in Trevor's direction tells me everything I need to know about the man. I'm going to get that sort of love if it's the last thing I do.

After some investigating, I've learned that Harper stops by the cupcake store a handful of times a week. The man has an absolutely unquenchable sweet tooth. Just before lunch on Friday, I dip into Bee's with a cheeky grin. The owner, Trisha, smiles conspiratorially as I take a seat at one of the small tables towards the back.

Yesterday I'd staked her out to find out when Harper frequents the store. She'd been a little too easy to get information out of really. I could be some kind of psychopathic stalker. I'm not, but I could be.

A little past noon, the bell above the door tinkles, and in strides Harper with Honey at his side. His hair is down today, flowing in soft waves past his shoulders. For one brief moment, I wonder what his hair would feel like between my fingers, tangled in my grip as I tug tight.

"Afternoon, Harp." Trisha leans on the counter with a motherly smile. "What do you want today?"

Harper's fingers twitch at his sides, before sweeping his hair off his neck. Immediately, Trisha's smile falters. I watch in confusion as she hustles to get a cold bottle of water and come around the counter. She guides him to a table while opening the bottle of water. Harper's eyes are distant, but he gratefully takes the cold water, sipping slowly at it with his eyes shut.

Trisha straightens, sending a weary look at me over her shoulder, subtly shaking her head in a clear indication that today isn't the day. Well, I'll just have to alter my plans. Harper seems to come back to himself in pieces, eyes gaining their normal vibrant forest-green shade. He blinks slowly a few times until finally his gaze lands on me.

An irritated scowl covers his face just at the sight of me. That won't do. Hoping to soften my presence, I send him a small wave. Harper immediately glances toward Trisha behind the counter. He rubs a hand over his face, pulls his hair up, and twists it into a bun. Honey sits at his feet, gaze firmly on him, tail woefully still on the floor.

His eyes are so lasered onto the table that he might start a fire. Coming to a stop just in front of him, I tap the table with my fingers to gain his attention. But he doesn't

even blink. A small drop of sweat rolls down his neck, disappearing under the back of his shirt. It's not that hot out today, at least it wasn't when I was outside earlier. Just a typical eighty-degree Florida day.

"Would you like a ride home?" I ask softly.

"No," Harper says firmly.

"Harper, sweetie," Trisha calls out, voice laced with concern.

When I turn to look at Trisha, her eyes all but beg me to drive him home.

"I'm heading that way anyway. I need to meet Trevor for something. I can drop you off on the way." I do my best to use the tone that usually gets me my way, firm, just slightly daddy.

Harper seemingly doesn't take the bait. A few stilted moments pass by before he lets out an annoyed breath.

"If you're going that way," Harper acquiesces with seemingly great reluctance and slowly stands from the table. The smell of his woodsy cologne reaches me, sandalwood. The scent smells sweet on him.

Trisha extends a small cupcake box over the counter as Harper passes by. With a sweet smile that I so badly want aimed my way, Harper gently takes the box from Trisha. Harper all but flees the store, but I take a moment to send Trisha an I've got this type of smile. It's only a minute walk to my car, but I walk slowly considering Harper still seems a little unsteady on his feet.

Just like last time, I open the doors to get Harper inside, then usher Honey into the back seat without touching her. Harper is alarmingly quiet. He stares listlessly out the

window the entire drive. I'm not sure if it's more annoyance with me or whatever medical condition he has that warrants Honey's presence in his life. Maybe it's a combination of both.

Harper tries to climb out of the car, but I stop him with a rough hand on his forearm. A little furrow forms between his brows as his gaze flits from my hand to my face.

"Let me help you inside? I'll worry all night if I don't make sure you're fine."

Harper takes a steadying breath, then swallows loudly. "Fine."

Thank God. Honey jumps out of the car like a good girl. She waits patiently for Harper to climb out of the car, and I stand at his side the entire time in case he missteps. His gait is slightly lopsided as he makes his way up the perfectly straight stairs of his house. A keypad on the front door unlocks with a soft beep after he presses his forefinger against it. Interesting.

The inside of his house is cool and dark, all the blinds shut tight against the sunlight. I'd expected something different, bright yellows, bright happy sunshine through the house. But the place is dark, even the furniture, although clearly modern, at odds with the exterior of the small sweet farmhouse. Harper turns around at the sound of me stepping inside. His eyes flash in the dark, nostrils flaring.

"Aren't you going to meet up with Trevor?" Harper asks, voice laced with venom.

I shrug nonchalantly. "He's busy. I can stay, and we can hang out?"

Harper pads into the kitchen and roughly slams the cupcake box on the island. "I don't need your pity."

"Good, because I don't pity you one bit," I say sternly.

Harper stands up straight, hackles raised. “Then why would you want to stay?”

“I told you that already. We’re friends. Would you leave a friend alone after they seemed to be having a small medical emergency?”

Harper visibly deflates. “I’m not having a medical emergency. I got overheated.”

I pretend to sneeze. “Sorry, I was recently diagnosed with a severe allergy to bullshit. Want to try again?”

Harper’s mouth parts in disbelief. “That’s my line.”

“Are you going to go back to work? If not, I’d love to hang out. I moved here and spend most of my days bored out of my mind.”

“No...” Harper trails off with a frown. “I’m not working for the rest of the day.”

I grin to ease his clear trepidation about letting me stay. My gaze sweeps around the house as Harper makes a decision. Once my gaze adjusts to the darkness, I can see that it’s not as dark inside as I had initially thought. The furniture is dark blues with dark yellow and gold accents scattered throughout. Harper clearly has good taste in decorating. Either that or someone with taste helped him. But the decoration oddly has a Harper touch as it’s eclectic but also homey.

Harper wanders into the living room wearing the perpetual scowl he seems to have mostly in my presence. I don’t even know what I did to him to have him so irritated with me from the start. Can I just ask him? Hi, Harper, I think you’re fucking beautiful, why are you so annoyed with me all the time? I get the feeling asking Harper anything remotely having to do with his feelings would incur a wrath I’ve never seen before. Problem is I might enjoy his wrath.

The cushion on the back of the sofa gives slightly under Harper's head when he tosses it back. He sits bonelessly on the sofa, all long, thin limbs. Sitting next to him, I carefully arrange myself into the least threatening presence possible. I'm larger than most people. I definitely don't want to intimidate Harper in any way.

His eyes blink open when I jostle him on the sofa. "I know you didn't have plans with Trevor."

I arch an eyebrow. "Oh yeah?"

He nods tiredly. "You made it up just to give me a ride home."

"And if that's true?"

Harper purses his lips in thought. His fingers play with a string at the edge of a throw blanket on the chaise section of his sofa.

"Still feels a lot like pity," Harper explains, face flushing. The blooms of red across his cheeks make me absolutely feral. I have to take a few calming breaths to keep calm.

"Not pity. You know, you're actually doing me a favor. I moved here and most days I'm bored out of my mind. Trevor's busy with Beau, Eli's in school... would you be interested in showing me around town? Helping to keep me entertained?"

It's obvious that angle works because Harper relaxes even further into the sofa.

"Sure. Honey has to come with us though."

"Of course."

Harper hums and closes his eyes. Honey still has her vest on, but she visibly relaxes when Harper clearly falls asleep. Carefully to avoid waking Harper, I slowly rise from the sofa, padding quietly into the kitchen. The light under the microwave is on, adding an orange glow to the dark room. Thankfully, the cupcakes are fine in their box. I'd worried maybe they'd gotten damaged in Harper's tight grip in the car.

I open his fridge to snoop, and find it loaded with premade meals, each clearly labeled. The freezer contains mostly ice cream, old Easter candy, and popsicles. The man has a serious sweet tooth. After my perusal of his fridge, I walk carefully down the hallway. The walls are mostly empty except for what appears to be a photo of Harper with his cousins. Harper is much younger in the photo, hair buzzed short, the scar on the side of his face less faded with time. But the grin on his lips is wide while tucked between a younger Colby, Beau, and Andy.

Leaning back on my heels, I check if Harper's still asleep on the sofa. Suddenly, snooping around feels more invasive than it did when I started. The man covets his privacy, and I can't invade it while he sleeps soundly. I carefully pull the throw blanket over Harper's sleeping body. He snuffles a little, then dips down to curl across the length of the sofa. Honey rests her head on Harper's extended arm, gazing up at me in obvious thanks.

"Take care of him?" I whisper to Honey.

She just yawns in reply.

I give one last lingering look at a peacefully sleeping Harper. Impulsively, I backtrack to the kitchen, and silently dig through the drawers for a paper and pen. A sticky note will have to do. I scrawl my phone number across the note along with my name, then stick it to the fridge. He probably won't call me, but at least he'll have my number. That comforting thought carries me all the way home.

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5

HARPER

The sticky note from Jackson is slowly losing its adhesiveness. It haunts me daily, just daring me to use the number each time I open the refrigerator. But I won't. Pretty boys like Jackson only ever cause pain to boys like me. Jocks and nerds only get together in the movies, not in real life.

My phone vibrates gently on my desk. Oh, it's Andy. Great.

Andy

Are you coming to movie night at the farm?

No

Whyyyyyyyyyy

I don't want to have to get a ride

Colby and Eli will bring you! You're on the way!

Can I throw popcorn at people?

..... if that will get you to come, then the answer is an unequivocal yes

Fine

don't sound too thrilled

YAY!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

far too many exclamation points

yay!

that's way better

Hate you

Might as well get dressed. The temperature outside has finally dipped with our first cold front of the year. I tug on a pair of black skinny jeans and a cream cable-knit sweater. Andy says it makes my eyes look poppin', whatever that means. The outfit says put together, but my beat-up all-black Chucks say otherwise.

Andy must've been in coordination with Colby or Eli because, literally moments later, there's a knock at my door. But when I open the door, Jackson is standing with one leg on a stair and the other on the porch. The odd position puts us almost at the same height.

"Hello," Jackson says, voice pitched low, smile on his lips.

Fuck this motherfucker, what the fuck?

"What are you doing here?"

Jackson gestures toward Trevor and Beau's. "I was visiting Trevor and found out you

need a ride to the movie tonight.”

“Andy just told me—” I stop myself. I grab my phone out of my pocket to find a text from Andy.

Andy

Actually, it’s going to be Jackson. He was in the area! Colby and Eli are already at the farm. Sorry, bestie!

Fuck you

:(He’s nice!

I hate you for real

“So?” Jackson asks.

“Whatever.” I pause at the doorway to slip on Honey’s vest.

We go about the same process as usual. Jackson loads us into the car and then makes his way down the gravel driveway. I avert my gaze from him to avoid getting caught staring. Today, he’s wearing a maroon henley and dark-wash jeans. Out of the corner of my eye, I watch him easily handle the wheel. A few times, his eyes lift to the rearview mirror to check on Honey and that does more for my heart than it should.

“Are you feeling better?” Jackson asks.

“Somewhat.”

“I don’t want to be a dick, but no one will betray your trust and tell me what’s up

with you. Then you go and spin some new story each time. How do I have to earn your trust to be added to the trusted circle of those with knowledge?"

I can't help but grimace. Here we go. Once someone knows, they pity me and look at me differently. Just like the entire town keenly watches me as if I'm going to drop to the ground with a seizure at any moment. For some reason, the idea of Jackson knowing settles in my stomach like bad takeout. I'm not ready.

"I told you already."

The edges of Jackson's lips tug up at the corners. "Allergies? Or the biting people?"

"Okay, I'll tell you the truth."

Jackson sends a hopeful look my way. "Yeah?"

"Yes," I say sadly. With a sigh, I turn towards him in the car. I give him the biggest puppy dog eyes I can muster, letting my lip tremble slightly. Jackson's fingers tighten on the wheel, enough to make the leather creak under his touch. "We're both in the witness protection program."

Jackson laughs in annoyance, his eyes sliding over to me before focusing back on the road. "I almost fucking believed you."

"I'm telling the truth!"

"Sure, punk."

My scowl deepens. "Punk?"

Jackson puts on his blinker to pull into the farm. "You're a goddamn punk. You lie,

you are sarcastic to the core, you refuse to let people help you, and you're clueless about just how goddamn beautiful you are. So yeah, punk. That's your nickname."

"You don't know me," I say, suddenly a little out of breath.

Jackson's lips curl up in a cruel smirk. "Pretend all you want, but I see right through your armor."

"You don't see shit." I hop out of the car, angry, ready to fight anyone in my path. I get one foot away before Jackson's in front of me, slowly walking me back toward the car. A gasp slips out of me when my back hits the cold metal of the door.

Honey barks in the car, clearly waiting to be let out. Jackson keeps his eyes on me, but reaches out with his left hand to open the door for Honey. With a shake of her body, Honey hops out and dutifully sits at my feet. My gaze lifts back to Jackson to find him staring intently at me, jaw tight.

"Harper," Jackson whispers, breath ghosting across my face. Fuck. "I'm trying to be really cool here."

"What?" I ask in confusion.

His fingers trace up my arm, leaving goose pimples in their wake, until finally, his large palm wraps around my neck, his touch exceedingly gentle. My mouth goes dry when his thumb presses under my chin, pushing my chin up to force me to meet his gaze head-on. Dark brown eyes eat me whole. His eyes are fathomless, looking into me, almost through me. For one terrifying second, I'm worried he might try to kiss me, especially when his gaze dips to my mouth. Nope.

But he doesn't try to kiss me. His thumb just rubs gently under my chin as I stand caged between him and the car. Caught. That's the word I'm thinking of.

“You can be better. Be good,” Jackson orders, tone low, washing over me in a gentle wave. Something inside me claws to the surface, demanding I fight, forcing my arms against his chest to push him away. He goes easily, stumbling back a little before catching himself.

“Don’t...” I trail off, unsure how to finish my sentence. I crouch down to get level with Honey.

She licks her lips and whines as I stare into her deep brown eyes. My heart calms slowly while I pet her, her warm golden fur easing the pounding of blood in my ears. Without a word to Jackson, I head towards the crowded area on the grassy incline. People are scattered around watching the movie, low murmurs go in one ear and out the other as I scan the crowd for my family.

Spotting Andy, Beau, and Trevor among the masses is easy. There’s always a reserved spot towards the front left for the family. My attitude dramatically improves when I notice little Savannah sitting in the middle of the large picnic blanket. Her grin when she spots me rivals a sunrise at the beach. I definitely made the right choice in coming tonight if only because she’s here.

“Harper!” Savannah screams excitedly, disrupting numerous moviegoers nearby.

I hold my finger to my lips to urge her to be quiet, slowly easing down onto the blanket beside her. “Hi.”

Her excited little hand grips mine tight. “I know Honey is working, so I’m not supposed to touch her, but can I tell her she’s a good girl?”

Savannah always asks before touching Honey. Even when her vest isn’t on. It’s endearing and sweet and reiterates why I think Savannah is the perfect child. No competition.

“Go on,” I say, giving her permission.

Savannah aims a gap-tooth grin my way, then dips around me to acknowledge Honey. “You’re the best girl. Thank you extra much for keeping Harper safe these past few weeks.”

Oh fuck, don’t cry. I dig my fingers into my palm, doing my best to keep all my emotions at bay. When Savannah sits back up and smiles with a little giggle, I know everything’s going to be fine.

I notice there’s only popcorn in front of her and frown. No candy? I’ll fix that.

“Joey, you didn’t get your kid any M&M’s to put in her popcorn?” I snipe at him.

Joey groans loudly. “They’re out of them at the concession stand!”

“Well, that just won’t do, will it, Miss Savannah?”

Savannah excitedly sits on her knees, looking from me to her father. Her light blonde curls jump as she excitedly bounces around. “No!”

“Harper...” Joey pinches the bridge of his nose, then aims a sidelong glance at a quiet Lee sitting beside him. “They had Sno-Caps but she didn’t want them.”

I mock gasp. “Savannah, Sno-Caps are just chocolate chips. That’s better than M&M’s. Let’s try adding those.”

Savannah claps her little hands. “Okay!”

I patiently make my way through the dark grounds crowded with people. A high school kid mans the stand, but he doesn’t blink at Honey, so that’s a plus. Sno-Caps

in hand, I slowly make my way back to the group. Jackson's gaze is hot on the side of my face as I sit, open the box of candies, and dump them into the small bag of popcorn for Savannah. Happy with the addition, she digs in with gusto, and a smile inches across my lips.

Savannah cuddles close to me as the night goes on. The breeze gets a little chillier each time it blows over us. Her hands get sticky with chocolate and popcorn, but I don't mind a bit. I convince her to wipe her dirty hands on the blanket instead of asking her father for a napkin, earning me a long-suffering look from Colby considering it's his blanket. I grin in the dark, knowing he'll just wash the blanket as soon as he gets home.

By the time the movie ends, Savannah is sound asleep with her head resting gently in my lap. I tenderly run my fingers through her soft blonde curls. I'd always wanted a sibling, someone to share secrets with, someone to make me laugh. Instead, I'd remained an only child, but luckily my extended family is large. I'd had enough cousins to make up for the lack of a sibling.

But the shining star is Savannah. Joey is family through love, not by blood, but watching Savannah grow up has been a shining spot in my often miserable life. Children see Honey and don't see a handicap, but a superhero sidekick. Spending time with Savannah makes me feel distinctly normal, less like an oddity. Adults often just try to avert their gaze, but children look at me head-on, and treat me like they would anyone else.

"She's conked out." Joey chuckles as he lovingly sweeps his fingers over his daughter's forehead. The tender movement has a knot forming in my throat.

"She still has chocolate on her face. Sorry."

Joey snorts softly. "No, you're not."

I bite my lip to contain my smirk. “You’re right, I’m not.”

With a small sigh, Joey dips down to easily cradle Savannah into his arms. She releases a small disappointed sound, but quiets when I let her squeeze my outstretched hand. I watch Joey, Savannah, and Lee disappear into the crowd, all while rubbing the chocolate from my hand onto the blanket.

“Seriously, Harper. We have napkins.” Colby frowns deeply while packing up the camping chairs.

Eli winks toward me. “We’ll wash it later, boyfriend.”

I easily ignored Jackson most of the movie, but now that we’re all standing up and preparing to leave, it’s almost impossible to ignore him. Doubly so when he moves to stand beside me, heat radiating off of him in the chilly night air.

“I’m giving you a ride back home,” Jackson says matter-of-factly.

“Andy can give me a ride home,” I argue, lifting my chin defiantly.

“No can do,” Andy calls out from where she’s helping Colby and Eli fold the now dirty picnic blanket. “I’m not heading your way.”

“Where are you going?” I ask her bluntly.

Andy arches one single eyebrow at me. “Not home.”

“Sorry, I forgot about your moonlighting at Coyote Ugly.”

Andy snorts and throws a piece of popcorn at me. “You’re so annoying. I’m going to Mom’s. I don’t feel like sleeping alone.”

“Stay with me,” I whisper softly so that only she can hear.

“I’m fine, Harp.” But her words bely her statement. I know Andy. Something’s up and she’s not telling me, which is rare.

“Alright.”

“Let Jackson give you a ride home,” Andy murmurs.

Everyone is out to get me. When everyone is looking away, I kiss Andy’s cheek, feeling the skin move beneath my lips as she grins widely. My girl.

We all silently climb into Jackson’s car. Irritatingly, Jackson flips the heated seat on, and it pleasantly warms my now freezing ass. The deep black sky twinkles with stars, spread out before us above the county road that takes me home. Without asking for permission, I reach up to slide open the cover of the sunroof. A surprised gasp rattles through me when Jackson opens the sunroof so that the cool night air blows through the interior of the car.

Tipping my head back against the headrest, I stare up at the pitch-dark sky, my hair whipping in the chilled breeze. An inexplicable joy courses through me, a freedom I haven’t felt in years. I turn my head to take in Jackson, the slope of his strong shoulders, the tightness of his forearms as he maneuvers the car onto the gravel lane towards my home. I’d snapped at him earlier, but the man was annoyingly correct.

I am sarcastic and do my best to push people away. At the end of the day, the only people I’ve ever let in are family. Probably mostly because I don’t feel like I have much of a choice but to let them in. What would happen if I let Jackson be my friend since he so badly desires my friendship? Nobody in this town will let him hurt me. Colby and Beau would kill him if he tried. He keeps showing up, keeps trying to be my friend, so I’ll let him. Because maybe then he’ll realize I’m nothing special and

he'll move on to something else. Something more worth his time.

"Okay, I give in," I whisper into the dark interior of the car.

Jackson's gaze slides to me for one long moment before returning to the road.
"What?"

"We can be friends."

A startled laugh escapes Jackson. "What changed your mind? You've been fighting me tooth and nail the entire way."

I look away from him and back out the window, unable to let him see my face even in the dark. "Just changed my mind."

Jackson hums thoughtfully just as he parks the car in front of my house. The front light I'd turned on prior to leaving glows brightly. Honey moves around in the back seat, jostling her vest and tag in a way that's always comforted me. The sound of her nearness always settles my nerves.

"I'm sorry for being rough with you earlier," Jackson apologizes, voice a low, sweet murmur. I suppress a shiver at his words.

I sniffle dramatically. "I accept your apology."

Jackson pinches my chin between his fingers and turns my face to him. "Do you have an apology for me by chance?"

Saliva pools in my mouth at his touch and at his words. Instead of arguing, instead of pulling from his grasp, I whisper, "Sorry for throwing a tantrum."

Jackson's lips lift in one corner as his thumb sweeps just below my lips. "Sour on the outside, sweet on the inside."

"What?" I ask, confused.

"A Sour Patch Kid."

I roll my eyes. "You've been talking to Beau."

"Trevor actually," Jackson amends.

"Of course. Beau's always called me Sour Patch or trouble."

"Good nicknames," Jackson comments idly, still madly sweeping the pad of his thumb under my lips. "I like punk better."

The motion of his thumb simultaneously drives me crazy and makes me melt. Who knew touch could be so magical. No one has ever touched me in such a tender way, nor has anyone ever looked at me like Jackson is now.

"I should go inside," I whisper softly.

"I'll walk you in." Jackson pulls away, hops out of the car, and comes around to the passenger side with a warm grin. He carefully helps Honey and me out of the vehicle, then walks with us up to the front door. "I'll see you tomorrow for cupcakes at Bee's. Do you need a ride into town?"

I actually do need a ride.

"It makes no sense for you to come pick me up, drive me into town, then bring me back."

Jackson nods in agreement. “You’re right. Do you have plans on Saturday? I could pick you up, we could spend the day hanging out, and end the day at Bee’s?”

My first instinct is to argue, as usual, but I don’t actually have any plans on Saturday. Well, no plans besides sitting in front of the television and binge-watching something.

“Alright.”

He slowly backs away from the front porch with a wide grin, eyes firmly on me. “I’ll pick you up at ten on Saturday. Dress comfortably.”

“I have to bring Honey!” I call after him.

“Of course!” he calls back and promptly climbs into his car.

I stand anxiously on the porch, a little cold, and extremely confused as he drives away into the night. Honey shakes her fur, clearly anxious to get out of her service vest. I don’t blame her. We go about our normal evening routine, then cuddle down into the fluffy blankets on my bed in the dark cover of night. Moonlight streams in through the crack in the curtains, slashing across Honey’s golden fur. The soft hoot of an owl outside is the last thing I hear before falling into a deep, contented sleep full of dreams of dark brown eyes and sweet smiles.

6

JACKSON

Finally, something worthwhile to spend my time on. Harper. I knock on his door, shifting from foot to foot as I patiently wait for him to answer. A few long moments pass before the familiar sound of Honey's nails clacking against the wood flooring reaches my ears. When the door opens, she's not yet wearing her vest. My eyes almost bug out of their sockets and my fingers twitch at my side.

"Is she off the clock?" I ask quietly, barely concealing my excitement.

Harper sighs heavily as if my eagerness is vile. "She's off the clock."

I slowly drop to my knees and rub my hands over Honey's sweet face. Her tail thumps hard against the wood as I excitedly pet her all over. God, she's the cutest thing. Dotting kisses all over her face, I hug her tight against me.

"Jesus, get a room, you two."

"Hush," I tell Harper without looking away from Honey. "We're having a moment."

Honey happily pushes against me until I fall over onto the porch floor. She wiggles on top of me, all joy and happy licks across my face. I fucking love dogs. But I especially love this one since she so keenly keeps Harper safe. Why does it matter so much to me? I have no idea, but it still matters more than I can say.

“Alright, girl. Harper’s getting jealous.”

Harper scoffs loudly as he heads back inside with a small huff. Honey whines as he leaves, but she dutifully follows him back inside. I watch, heart painfully tender, as Harper lovingly pats her head as if to clearly say it’s okay, I know I’m the most important man in your life . Harper’s dressed in dark jeans and another soft-as-sin-looking cable-knit sweater, but this time the sweater is a dark navy blue. He looks good enough to eat. His hair is down, loose and soft around his shoulders. Jesus.

“Where are we going?” Harper asks. He folds into the sofa to tug on a pair of maroon Converse.

“It’s a surprise.”

Harper raises one eyebrow at me. “I don’t like surprises.”

“Do you trust me?”

Harper pauses in putting on his shoe, carefully tilting his head as if to dissect me. “Surprisingly, I do.”

“I know you won’t tell me the medical condition, but I assume there are certain things you can’t do. Can you give me a list?”

A scowl appears quickly on Harper’s face. “The list is long.”

“Do you have a list of things you can’t do but wish you could? If it was safe?”

Harper finishes putting on his shoes, tugs a leg up and rests his chin thoughtfully on his knee. The pose is so soft, so sweet, that my already enamored heart falls just a little more for the sarcastic punk. After a few thoughtful moments, Harper lifts his

gaze back to mine.

“I’ve always wanted to go clubbing, ride a motorcycle, camp by myself in the middle of the woods, and well... there’s something else too but I’m not telling you that one.” He ticks off each wish on his thin fingers. Everything seems easy to make safe for him. I can’t force him to tell me what his condition is, but I can make his life joyful, and fun, until he feels safe confiding in me.

“You want to go camping?” Really, it’s the only wish that stands out to me because it seems so unlike him.

Harper turns to the side to help Honey put her service vest on, revealing the long line of his elegant throat. His skin is so creamy-pale, absolutely not a single blemish. I wonder what his skin tastes like, how it would feel under my palms, reddening after I’ve pinched him, or spanked him. Would he like that? Jesus, Jackson, get yourself together, man.

“It’s less about the camping, and more about being alone where I’m not nearby for medical help. It would be nice to just once in my life... just once...” Harper trails off and distractedly pats Honey on the head once the vest is secured. “It’s just a silly wish.”

I hate that he even for a moment thinks his wishes might be silly. Nothing he ever asks for is silly. With a clearly annoyed sigh, he unfurls from the sofa and strides toward me. My eyes get caught on the sway of his hips for a second, before trailing back up to his forest-green gaze.

“Shall we go?” Harper asks curiously, head tilted to the side.

“Yes,” I reply, voice just barely not cracking.

Once we're all safely loaded into the car, I point us in the direction of the city. If Harper is curious, he doesn't ask any questions, which seems at odds with what I know about him so far.

"Do you have a certain kind of music you prefer?" I scroll through the satellite radio stations, trying to land on something worth listening to.

"I like anything but country."

"Curious considering where you were raised."

Harper laughs bitterly. "That's probably why I hate it. I can only hear about someone thinking a tractor is sexy so many times before I want to throw myself off a cliff."

"Wait, that song is catchy," I point out.

Harper rolls his eyes so hard that I'm afraid they'll get stuck that way. "You can't be serious. Oh wait, I love this song!"

Quickly taking my hand off the radio, I almost laugh when I realize it landed on a romance ballad station. Harper softly hums along to the Celine Dion song, eyes trained on the scenery outside his window. He has no idea the power he has over me already. I stay quiet through the drive into the city just to listen to him. When he loves a particular song, he turns the dial up a little louder, but I can still hear his soft hums perfectly matching the melody.

When I park in front of the large event mall, Harper leans forward with a curious frown. "You brought me into touristville?"

"I sure did."

“Why?”

I don't answer him. Harper and Honey quietly follow me into the mall-like structure. Thankfully it's early enough that it's not busy yet, which is exactly why I chose to bring Harper at this time of day. I hold the door open for them both, then take Harper's hand in mine to guide us toward the rage room. Andy had told me about it when I'd asked her about fun things to do around town. If she'd known it was for me and Harper, she hadn't let on, but she'd been all too happy to help me out.

Surprisingly, Harper doesn't tug his hand from mine. He grips my hand tightly, clearly unsure about his surroundings. People pass by us, and I note a few looking quizzically at Honey, but I do my best to shelter them from stares. I want Harper to feel safe and have fun, but I don't want him to feel on display, which is exactly why I called ahead.

The sign is flipped to “closed” on the rage room door, but I knock on the door anyway.

Harper tugs on my hand. “It says closed, Jackson.”

I wink. “Closed for us.”

“What...” But Harper trails off when the door opens.

A sweet young woman grins at us. “Jackson and Harper?”

“That's us!” I enthusiastically shake her hand and follow her inside. The place has black-painted walls and dark wood accents. It's one of those places where people can rent a room to absolutely destroy everything inside. The cost to rent the entire place out for an hour had been nominal, at least in my eyes. Anything to make Harper feel safe.

“Welcome to The Rage Room. I’ve got you set up in the first room for an hour. As requested, the entire facility is yours for that time.” She slides a tablet across the counter to us. Her eyes flick from Harper to Honey, clearly curious. “I just need you both to sign waivers.”

I’d mentioned my friend had a medical condition that required a service dog. They’d assured me that Honey could safely come with us, she’d just have to sit outside while Harper goes apeshit in the room.

Harper scrolls through the waiver, reading diligently, a little furrow between his brows. He pauses on a particular section, taps it to blow it up, then slides it back to the store manager.

“Is it fine that I use the room despite having this listed condition?”

She looks down, smiles, then glances back up at Harper. “Absolutely, as long as you sign the waiver. We just ask if you start to feel unwell, that you cease raging.”

Harper pulls the tablet back towards himself with an understanding nod. He signs his waiver, I sign mine, then we hand the tablets back to her. She leads us back to the first room. Just beside the rage room sits a little cubby with white hazmat-looking suits, goggles, and boots for us to put on.

“You can destroy absolutely anything inside the room. There’s a countdown clock inside that’ll reflect how much time you have left.” She grins at us both, then points at a chair that faces the mirrored windows facing inside. “I put that chair there so your dog can view you. Will that work?”

Harper tries to smile, but it looks pained. “Perfect. Thank you so much.”

She leaves us alone, so I turn around to give Harper privacy. Once we’ve tugged on

everything, we make our way into the room. Harper is so fucking cute in the suit, he's so much smaller than me. I could easily toss him over my shoulder.

Hair up in a messy bun, goggles firmly on, he grabs a baseball bat from the weapon area. I watch entranced with my heart beating out of my chest as he slowly peruses the room, inspecting what he wants to destroy first. Settling on an old television, he lifts the bat and swings like he's been batting his entire life. The television screen shatters at his feet, and his laughter immediately follows the piercing noise of breaking glass.

He turns his head over his shoulder, grinning wickedly at me. A piece of hair falls from his bun, hanging loosely around his face. Jesus, I need to tuck it away, touch his creamy skin, tug on the loose hair.

“Are you going to join me or what, big guy?”

I'm going to marry him. He's mine. But of course, I don't say that. That would be ridiculous. Instead, I join him in breaking as many items as violently as we can. Mirrors shatter, plates break, anything we can reach gets destroyed. I've never had so much fun losing my shit with anyone.

By the time the hour's over, it hasn't felt like any time has passed at all. Harper's face is covered in a sheen of sweat, cheeks ruddy from exertion. For a split second, I worry that maybe this was a bad idea, especially after the last time he got overheated. But the look in his eyes reassures me that I did something right, something good, by bringing him here. Harper needed this just as much as I needed to spend time with him.

“Alright?” I ask, wiping sweat from my face.

Harper wiggles out of the gear, face flushed and happy. “Perfect.”

He leaves his hair up though, messy, effortless, and the look is really growing on me. Definitely prefer it down, but something about his hair up, showing off his neck, really does it for me. I want to fuck Harper, but I also kind of want to keep him. A new feeling for me, but it oddly doesn't scare me.

The grin on my face feels blinding when Harper lets me take his hand again on our way out of the rage room.

“So, final verdict?”

Harper makes a thoughtful face. Tapping his chin with his forefinger, he finally nods. “I definitely had no idea I had so much rage inside me.”

“Daddy Jackson knew.”

Harper swallows loudly and looks away. “You're ridiculous.”

“Are you hungry?”

“Always,” Harper replies quickly.

His hand is still snugly tucked in mine. Every now and then he sweeps his thumb across my knuckles, in an action I'm not sure he's even aware of. I try so hard to stay chill, to not let it mean more than it should, but it's just another reminder that I'm slowly getting this exquisite creature to trust me.

Since we're in the city, I steer us by this barbecue place Colby once mentioned to me. Harper seems to know it and gets overjoyed. He enthusiastically consumes more ribs than I thought possible. Honey watches on, still working, but I can see the twitch of her lips as Harper licks his fingers.

“That’s torture,” I tell him around a mouthful of sliced barbeque turkey.

“What?” Harper mumbles, thumb in his mouth.

I point towards a raptly staring Honey. “That dog would kill for a rib.”

Harper looks towards her, his face instantly dropping. “I didn’t bring her any treats. I’m sorry, Honey.”

“Can she have a pup cup from the coffee shop?”

Harper’s grin is blinding. My heart promptly skips ten beats just at the force of his grin. “She loves those!”

“We’ll get her one on the way home.”

Happy with the turn of events, Harper pushes the plate away, and leans his chin on his hand to finish watching me eat. My stomach does this strange dip and dive at the feeling of his gaze on me. His eyes are so vividly green, like the color of grass after it’s rained. The kind of eyes I could get lost in, if he’d let me.

“Thank you for today. It was fun... I don’t get out much.”

“Why?”

“Why don’t I get out much?” Harper clarifies.

Pushing my own plate away, I cross my arms over my chest. My foot knocks into his under the table, but I don’t pull it away. Instead, I settle my foot against his, and bite back a grin when he doesn’t pull his own foot away. Small wins.

“Yeah, you’re young, have a good job, you’re cute as hell... why would someone like you hide away in your dark house?”

Harper’s eye twitches at my words. He reaches up one elegant hand to rub at the corner of his eye, clearly irritated by my question. But I’m not going to let him think there’s nothing desirable about him. I don’t care whatever the fuck medical condition he has, the man is funny, pushes all the right buttons for me, and he’s absolutely adorable. Who wouldn’t want him?

“I like to be alone,” Harper finally says, tone devoid of all earlier joy.

Fuck. “I don’t think that’s true.”

Harper grunts and restlessly drums his fingers on the table. He stays silent as I settle up the bill, not even trying to argue me out of paying for our shared meal. I try to not let that go to my head either. But I’ve always liked taking care of people. I like taking care of Harper, as much as he’s currently letting me.

I count it as a win when he lets me hold his hand again.

My attitude is instantly shattered when he quietly announces, “Please take me home.”

“But cupcakes!” I try to convince him.

Harper shakes his head subtly. “I need to go home.”

He’s silent the entire drive back, no longer humming to the music. His fingers smooth across his jeans repeatedly, almost as if in an attempt to soothe himself. A couple of minutes from his house Honey whines from the back seat and leans forward over the console to insistently press her wet nose to Harper’s arm.

“Can you hurry, please?” Harper asks, voice low, slightly worried.

I step on the gas, uncaring about the gravel bouncing up and hitting my car. The car slides a little when I park in front of the house but it doesn't matter. Hopping out of the car, I race around the front to open the door for Harper. He climbs out, as elegant as usual, but Honey hops out and plasters herself to his side. His finger fumbles on the lock of the front door for a long moment, before a quiet beep sounds and he eagerly pushes inside.

“Harper,” I say softly.

He pauses with his back to me, his fingers restlessly tapping against his thigh. “Jackson. I'm going to go into my bedroom with Honey and have a seizure. You can sit in the living room and wait. If Honey frantically comes to get you, then please call 911. She knows what to do. I will see you in a little bit.” He takes a deep, painfully shaky breath and whispers, “Please don't tell anyone.”

With that final word, he flees down the hallway with Honey hot on his heels. A door closes softly, and then I'm left alone. Seizures. Fuck. I rub my forehead and pace the length of his living room. This is all my fault. I pushed him too hard. I shouldn't have forced him into the rage room. God. He was hesitant and a little worried, but I talked him into it.

The silence emanating from the other end of the house is terrifyingly loud. Ten minutes pass by as I pace, wearing down the carpet in front of Harper's television. But then, moments later, Honey's nails clip against the wood as she approaches me with her wide brown eyes. She doesn't seem panicked at all, but it's clear she wants my attention. As I approach the bedroom, the odd feeling that I don't belong, that I shouldn't be invading Harper's space overwhelms me.

Curled up on the bed is a painfully weeping Harper. My heart breaks into a million

pieces just at the sight of him. Honey jumps onto the bed, protectively lying down in front of Harper. Slowly, Harper curls his fingers into her soft blonde fur. Harper's knuckles go white as he clutches hard at her, a ragged sob breaking free.

"Harper," I murmur helplessly.

I half expect him to push me away or send me packing. But what I don't expect is him to hold his other arm out, tiredly wiggling his fingers in a silent plea for me to join him on the bed. I carefully lie down, curling around his back, until he's a sentence and I'm a parenthesis around him. His sobs shake his lithe body, but I do my best to comfort him. I wrap my arm around him, tugging until his back is flush against my chest.

Tucking my head into his neck, I breathe in the comforting scent of him. Sandalwood and spice. A relieved breath escapes him as his cries slowly ebb. He reaches back to tangle his hand in the front of my shirt, tugging me even closer, until my head rests underneath his trembling chin. Unable to stop myself, I softly kiss the hollow of his throat, letting my lips linger where his pulse pounds under his warm, pale skin.

Resting my palm over his slim hip, I rub my thumb along the sliver of skin peeking out between his sweatpants and t-shirt. He must've changed quickly before or after his seizure.

"Okay?" I whisper against his sweaty neck.

"Sorry," Harper murmurs tiredly.

"I didn't ask for an apology, punk. I asked if you're okay."

"Just tired," Harper finally says. His fingers untangle from my shirt, only to grab on to my forearm. I don't care; I just want him to keep touching me.

“Do you normally need anything afterward? Something to drink? Chocolate? Favorite food I can go buy? Anything, name it, and it’s yours.”

Harper sniffles pitifully. “Just lie with me. I hate being alone.”

His request is so earnest, his voice so sad that my heart crumbles all over again. I tuck my arm underneath him so his head rests on my bicep and tuck my head back into the crook of his neck. We lie there unmoving for so long that the sun stopped peeking through the drawn curtains around the bedroom windows. I picture the stars coming out above Harper’s little bungalow, protectively twinkling and shining over us.

After a while, I realize Harper’s fast asleep. At least I know he had a good lunch. I gingerly ease my arm out from underneath him and climb out of the bed. Honey lifts her head to watch me leave but drops it back down when she notices I’m only heading towards the kitchen. The fridge is still just full of premade meals. I want to make him something homemade, something hearty and nourishing.

I try to turn on the stovetop, but nothing happens. Is it broken? Every lesson my father taught me about home appliances comes rushing back. Finally, frustrated beyond relief, I tug the oven from behind the wall only to find it’s not even plugged in. The confusion disappears when I realize why it’s not plugged in. I push the oven back into place, deciding not to fuck with Harper’s appliances.

Maybe I can convince him to let me stay, let me care for him until he feels better. The lonely bottle of coconut water in the fridge will have to do. Armed with the coconut water and a bowl of dry cinnamon cereal, I head back into the dark bedroom.

Harper slowly rolls onto his back when I gingerly sit down on the bed. Blinking those big, green eyes up at me, he seems momentarily confused about my presence. Crimson blooms on his cheeks in obvious embarrassment. I want to swoop him into my arms and cradle him close, kiss his cheeks, bury my nose in his hair again. But

that time has passed, and if I try again, I'm not sure how well it will be received. Standoffish and skittish Harper has returned to the building.

"Don't you even try to apologize to me," I order him.

He averts his gaze from mine. "Okay."

"I'm not going to force you to talk to me now, but we'll talk at some point. Friends talk, right?"

Harper shrugs. "I guess. I've never been one for friends."

"Andy's your friend, right?"

Pressing the heel of his palm to his forehead, he sighs loudly. "She's my second cousin. We're family."

"Family can be friends," I easily point out.

"I guess. Is that for me?" Harper asks, shakily pointing at the coconut water.

I hurriedly remove the lid and hold it out for him. Sitting up, he carefully takes it from me, our fingers brushing as he does. He looks so exhausted; all the color on his face from earlier bled away.

"Can I acknowledge Honey?" My voice is deceptively calm, even to my own ears. But fuck, I want to show Honey how much she means to me. How thankful I am for her.

Harper makes a soft sound of permission and wiggles his fingers toward Honey in what I assume is permission. I lie down across the end of the bed, proceeding to

lovingly run my hand up and down Honey's flank. Her big brown eyes blink at me, seemingly also tired.

"Thank you," I whisper before kissing her wet nose.

She promptly sneezes in my face, earning a delighted, yet still tired laugh from Harper. Paying Harper no mind, I continue to love Honey, until she dozes off under my gentle ministrations. Her fur is so soft, I could pet her for ages and never get tired of it. I don't think she would either.

"She really likes you," Harper remarks, voice tainted by tiredness.

"I like her too. Mostly because she keeps you safe when I'm not here."

"You don't have to keep it up, you know." Harper keeps his gaze firmly on the bedroom wall. I have no idea what he means.

"What are you talking about?"

He sweeps a hand up and down his body. "Now that you know... you can run."

"What the fuck?" I say out loud, not exactly meaning to. I sit up on the bed, jostling Honey and waking her from her well-deserved nap. "Why would you having seizures make me not want you? Make me not want to be your friend?"

"Most people don't stick around," Harper points out, tone carefully neutral.

"I'm not most fucking people. We're friends. I don't care..." I trail off and gesture at him. "You could have leprosy and we'd still be friends. Do you understand?"

"You're a weirdo."

“I’m rubber and you’re glue,” I say childishly.

Harper laughs, tired, but he laughs all the same. “I didn’t have seizures for a few years. Everything was great.” Harper keeps his gaze averted while he speaks, voice low and tired. His fingers curl into the loose shirt at his abdomen, playing with the material over and over. A nervous habit I’ve noticed. “The manufacturers likely switched an ingredient in my medicine and I started having seizures again. We’ve tried a bunch of different new medicines but... they’re still happening. I’ve had epilepsy since I was a kid.”

“I want to make sure I get the terminology correct... is it a disease? Disorder? Condition?”

Harper looks at me oddly, before releasing a small stilted breath. “It’s a brain disorder. Most people can control it with medicine. I did for years. But it’s taking some figuring out to get my medicine adjusted again. I thought this new medicine was doing great... but then today happened.” He lets out a bitter, angry laugh. “I hate people seeing me after one. I feel so useless.” Harper presses his fingers to his temple hard, and squeezes his eyes shut. “I just for once want to be normal... want to not be this way.”

“Normal is boring,” I point out. “I played NCAA basketball. I had exactly one game in the NBA before I blew my knee out. We all have stories, adjustments we make to our life. But your adjustment is no worse than anyone else’s. So you can’t do certain things? I don’t care. I care more that you feel like there’s something wrong with you. You’re funny, beautiful, kind. I watched you with Savannah the other night and that little girl adores you. I don’t think one single person thinks you’re useless.”

Harper’s mouth parts on a silent gasp halfway through my monologue. His eyes glow in the dark, a bright, vivid green. He really is the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen. I’ve never wanted someone so badly.

“You really think I’m beautiful?”

I nod slowly, needing him to truly know. “Stunning.”

“I’m sorry about your knee,” Harper murmurs quietly.

“Eh.” I shrug with a smile, hoping to ease his worries a little further. “Dreams can change.”

“Yeah,” Harper agrees, eyes distant.

“Do you want me to stay the night?” I wish he’d say yes, but I know he won’t.

“No, I’m fine. Thank you for helping. For not leaving.”

Suddenly, I’m less concerned with how he feels, and more concerned with murdering whoever made him feel this way. Who ever left him? Who made him feel like such a damn burden?

“Do you still have my number?” I ask as I unfold from the bed.

Harper flushes bright crimson even in the shadowed bedroom. Interesting. “Yes, it’s in my phone.”

“I told you to text me. I’ll worry if you don’t. Alright?”

Harper nods instead of answering verbally. Impulsively, I lean over and press a dry kiss to his forehead. He leans into my touch with a dreamy sigh that goes straight to my rapidly falling heart. I press my cheek against the top of his head for just a moment, before leaving the room and Harper behind. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be able to tear myself away from him. Locking the front door behind me, I head home in the

late glow of dusk.

When I get home there's a text from a number I don't know.

Unknown

Thank you. BTW, your swing kind of sucks. You should work on it. Also, Honey says goodnight.

Attached is a photo of Honey curled tightly against Harper's side. A small, shy smile tilts Harper's lip up, and he's wearing a baggy hoodie. I've never wanted someone so much in my life. I instantly save the photo to my camera roll, even going as far as marking it as a favorite. Harper's such a little shit. He's perfect.

HARPER

Good thing I can't die from embarrassment. Close though. But it bled into some type of easy peace as Jackson tightly curled himself around me, as if it was possible for him to protect me from my own rotten brain. No one has ever made me feel so safe. Just for one single moment nothing else mattered except for the strength of Jackson's arms shielding me from the world. Everything was hush-quiet in the cage of his arms, even my usually constantly thumping anxiety.

But then he left, and loneliness again invaded every corner of my life.

Lonely and useless and why is the medicine not working anymore? Something has to give. I don't remember life before epilepsy. Sometimes it's just as part of me as breathing. Usually, I try to handle it with a level of grace, of levity, that people have the option to forget.

Maybe it was the sweet thing Jackson had done for me by thinking of the rage room. Maybe it was how time and time again he shows up, weirdly wanting to know me, be in my presence. No one else has ever bothered. This might all go to shit but wouldn't it be nice to just once have something for myself?

The next morning, Andy drops by with freshly baked muffins and a quiche from her mother.

Andy roughly pushes the full container of food into my arms. "She said that you

should tell your mom.”

I sigh heavily. Telling my mother is the last thing I want to do. She’ll drag me back to the doctor, make me go through more tests, when the doctor explicitly told me what to do already. If the uptick goes too high, then I go back. Otherwise, we will discuss everything at my next visit. Simple.

“I’m not telling her.”

Andy shrugs as she raids my freezer for candy. Munching on a frozen Reese’s, she eyes me critically. I squirm under her stare, finally giving up and digging into the muffins. They’re good. Pumpkin, my favorites.

My eyes narrow. “Joey baked these.”

Andy snorts around her candy. “You are weirdly good at that. Yes, Joey baked the muffins.”

“Andy,” I whine petulantly, just barely holding back from stomping my feet. “You promised. Only you or Cindy can know when I have a seizure. Not the cousins or the guys!”

“You’re such a baby. Everyone knows you have seizures. People want to help take care of you.”

“That’s the problem!” I shout. I pant in anger, then press my hand to my forehead. “I hate that people know. I hate it. You know that.”

“Harper,” Andy says my name like she says fuck . Like I’m the most annoying person on earth. I probably am actually. “We’re talking about family, Joey, and Lee. What about them makes you feel like they’re going to judge you for having fucking

epilepsy.”

“Just... just...” Grabbing at my hair, I tug hard, trying to center myself. “Don’t tell them anymore.”

Andy comes around the island to stand in front of me. She wipes her hands on her overalls, then grabs my cheeks between her palms. “I blame your mother for this. I truly do. You’re not a burden on any of us. Please, Harper. Let us take care of you.”

I huff out an annoyed breath, but don’t pull away. Andy tenderly sweeps her thumbs under my eyes, calming my rapidly beating heart.

“It’s not just Mom... it’s you too. I feel bad that you... That you worry about me.”

Andy rolls her eyes. “If you bring up high school again, I’m going to actually choke you out.”

“I—”

“Shut up.” Andy stares me down until I’m forced to listen. “Those guys were jerks and I don’t regret getting kicked off the cheer team for a moment. Anyone that loves you would feel the same way. Your mom makes you feel like some weird burden and those assholes made you think there’s something wrong with you. There’s nothing wrong with you.”

Taking a few deep breaths, I finally nod in her hold, earning a pleased sound from Andy.

“Now, tell me about Jackson.”

I groan loudly. “I have this odd feeling you guys are trying to get us together. We

aren't pandas. You can't just put us in a room together and expect us to... I don't know, mate or whatever."

"Fuck like bunnies?" Andy clarifies with a snicker.

"He's so big... do you think?"

Andy snorts and rolls her eyes. "My love, I have heard some stories. You better be ready."

"Stories," I repeat carefully. The muffin in my mouth suddenly tastes like ash.

Andy waves her hand dismissively. "Nothing bad. Calm down. I just think he'll be good for you. Sometimes, you need a firm hand. Jackson definitely has one of those."

"What the fuck does that mean?" I ask around a large mouthful of pumpkin muffin.

Andy makes a disgusted face, so I open my mouth wide, showing her my half-eaten food. Make the kids grow up, but the kids never leave us.

"Well, you're kind of a brat."

I blink slowly at her accusation. "I'm sarcastic and funny."

She tilts her head back and forth. "Bratty."

I just sigh, giving up on disagreeing with her. We eat our snacks in comfortable silence. Andy dips down to give Honey a few pats, kissing all over her face as she usually does. Everyone's in love with my dog. Rightfully so. Honey is perfect, the one plus side to this epilepsy stuff. One of my father's stipulations to living alone had been a service dog. At first it had pissed me off, but once I had Honey in my arms, I

was thrilled.

“How’s Ethan?” I ask after demolishing two pumpkin muffins.

Andy lifts her head with a frown. “Still in the Navy.”

Now, it’s my turn to be exasperated. “Andy.”

She stands after giving Honey one final kiss to her nose. “He’s still on tour. I think he’ll be back around Christmas. Hopefully.”

“What are the plans for when he gets back?”

“Make a baby probably.”

I wrinkle my nose and gag. “Gross.”

Andy punches my shoulder. “As if you wouldn’t love to hold a little Andy. Number one babysitter.”

Andy flits away to go about her day, once again leaving me alone with just Honey. Although, I guess I’m never alone if I have Honey. I curl up on the couch with a full stomach, warm mug of coffee, and Honey tucked against my side. Ready to spend the day binging reality television.

My phone lights up where it lies on my sofa. A smile forms on my lips just at the sight of Jackson’s name. Trouble, I’m in serious trouble.

Jackson

I assume you made it through the night?

Sorry to disappoint

Yourself?

I do have a death wish

Not when I'm around

throws up

Do you have plans next weekend?

Not as of right now

Well, now you do.

Seriously? You can't just tell me what to do.

asked if you had plans, you said no, so now I'm telling you that you have plans.
Simple as that, punk.

Fine

Don't sound so eager, calm down...

You are VERY annoying

You like me

Whoever said that

You didn't have to say it. I can see it in your eyes. I have BIG plans for Saturday. Big plans. You better be ready.

Should I bring a weapon? Running shoes? Prepared to commit a crime of some sort?

You are never planning our dates

Dates?

hangouts

Anyway, what level of criminal are we getting up to

No criming. Maybe some dancing. Look hot but comfortable. And wear your hair down.

... okay

:)

Jackson texts me throughout the week. Nothing major, just small texts to remind me he's thinking of me. Work keeps me plenty busy thankfully. Distractions are always welcome. In the middle of the week, I'm sitting at my desk, working diligently on a time-sensitive project, when my doorbell rings.

Not expecting anyone, I ignore it. Probably just a delivery I forgot about. Time passes by until suddenly, my phone rings and Jackson's name flashes across the screen. That's odd. We haven't progressed to calls yet.

"Yes?" I answer.

Jackson laughs into the phone. “That’s how you answer the phone?”

“When it’s you.”

“Go check your front door,” Jackson orders, tone low and firm. A shiver crawls down my spine.

“Is there a bomb?”

“Maybe.”

Curiosity piqued, I pad out of my office, and towards the front door. Honey peeks at me from where she lies on the sofa, curled up in a tight ball. Must be nice. I open the front door but there’s no one there.

“I thought you were going to be standing here,” I say, disappointment clear in my voice.

“Look down,” Jackson murmurs softly.

My gaze lands on a bouquet of burnt-orange roses, almost the exact shade of my hair. “You sent me flowers?”

“Absolutely. Do you like them?”

I carefully set the fragrant flowers down in the middle of the kitchen island. “No one has ever bought me flowers.”

Jackson gives a pleased hum. “So, I’m the first?”

I bark out a loud laugh. “Jesus, you’re ridiculous. Sure, you’re the first man to send

me flowers.”

“Good. Are you excited for this weekend?”

Honey wanders into the kitchen to inspect what’s going on. Her head tilts at the flowers, before she turns uncaring towards her water bowl. Sweet girl. She shakes once, rattling her collar and tag.

“Wait, is that Honey?”

“Yes, Jackson, I am beyond excited for this weekend. I cannot wait to spend time with you. The highlight of my weekend.”

“Yes, great. Honey?”

“Yes, sweetcheeks?”

Jackson growls into the phone. “Okay, fine, you’re being ridiculous. I just heard her moving around, okay. I miss her. Also, sweetcheeks is not going to be my pet name.”

“Snookums?”

“No.”

“Bubba.”

Jackson growls again. “Definitely not.”

“Daddy?”

The silence over the phone is stifling. Oh no. I like to joke, but I’m not an asshole.

“I was just?—”

“I like Daddy,” Jackson says quietly, even a little timidly.

Well, that’s a new one. “Oh.”

“That’s a discussion for another time.”

“Alright,” I say, just as eager to move on as Jackson. “The flowers are beautiful. I really do love them.”

The sound of movement rattles through from the other end of the phone, like maybe Jackson’s walking around his townhome. I can’t be sure. But it’s oddly relaxing in a way I can’t explain.

“Your house needed some color. I also just wanted to make you happy.”

A knot forms in my throat. Jesus. Who is this guy? “Thank you,” I say quietly.

“You’re welcome. I’ll pick you up on Saturday evening.”

I’ve never been more excited for a weekend. The week crawls by painfully slow. Sleep is hard to come by, but when I do sleep, I dream about Jackson. Dreams where I kiss him awake and burrow into his strong arms. The idea of kissing him plagues me. I wonder what he’d taste like? Probably something spicy, maybe even a little sweet. Cinnamon and orange.

I spend the majority of Saturday afternoon going through my closet like a man possessed. Half of my closet ends up strewn across the floor. Finally, I settle on the tightest dark-wash jeans I own, a form-fitting V-neck in dark green, and a leather jacket that Andy and I thrifted at an antique store in the panhandle one summer. Just

as Jackson asked, I leave my hair down in loose waves around my shoulders.

At seven on the dot, a soft knock rattles through my door.

I tear it open, way more eager than I've ever been in my life. "Hi."

Jackson grins, warm and wide. "Hi."

His eyes sweep over me, obviously pleased with my outfit choice. I stand there awkwardly for a moment until he tugs me into his arms to bury his face in the crook of my neck. Curling my arms around his big body, I allow him to hold me. Warmth builds in the pit of my belly when he takes a deep breath, burrowing into my neck a little more as if my body brings him comfort.

"You always smell good," Jackson mumbles against my neck.

I fight a shiver. "Cologne."

"Hmm." Jackson presses a kiss just under my ear. When he pulls away, his gaze meets mine just as his fingers curl around my hips under my shirt. His touch is burning hot and heavy, the weight of his touch coursing through me like hot lava. "You look good."

"You look better," I say, voice thick.

Jackson bites his lip in a way that sends my blood boiling. "Yeah?"

I nod, unable to utter a single word. Again, for one brief moment, I'm afraid he's going to kiss me. Maybe this man just has that sort of look. But the way his gaze dips to my mouth tells a different story. No one has ever looked at my mouth as much as Jackson.

Clearing his throat, Jackson pulls away. He puts a careful foot between us. Nodding towards Honey, he brushes some hair out of my face so he can stare deeply into my eyes.

“She’s coming with us.”

“She can stay behind.” She can, but I hate to leave her. She’s a security blanket as much as she’s my protector.

Jackson shakes his head. “Nope. She’s welcome where we’re going. I’ve worked it all out.”

Jackson takes my hand in his, whistling sharply in order for Honey to follow us. Like the absolute good girl she is, she promptly listens, shaking her service vest out as she walks. A pleased grin warms Jackson’s face, but per usual, he doesn’t even acknowledge Honey except to open the car door for her. Then of course he opens mine. This time he settles me into the seat and carefully reaches across me to fasten my seat belt. I tightly close my eyes as his forearm grazes across my stomach. Breathing in the smell of him, I hold it in my lungs until I’ve memorized the scent. No man has ever smelled so effortlessly sexy. The scent isn’t strong, but the way it blends with his skin makes me decidedly insane. It’s sweet, but rich, like how I’d imagine a businessman that runs a multimillion-dollar business would smell. Lovely.

Once we’re on the road, Jackson turns on the station I liked from the other day. Pure romance ballads. A flush creeps up my neck at the thought of being known. I try to ignore it, instead focusing on the music wafting from the speakers. The sky turns black as we drive away from Clay Springs and towards downtown. This time of year the sun sets later, until November when the time finally changes. Then the damn sun disappears before most people have even gotten home.

Time changes are stupid.

Give me the sun early, and keep it late.

“How was your week?” Jackson asks, mindlessly making conversation.

“Some guy sent me flowers. It was the highlight of my week.”

A smirk trembles at the corners of Jackson’s lips. “Oh, really?”

I nod slowly. “Mhmm. They smell wonderful.”

Jackson reaches over with his right hand to tangle his fingers with my own. God, his hand is so large. The width and breadth of his hand dwarfs my own small hand, fingers woefully thin in comparison. But instead of making me feel weak or small, Jackson’s hand makes me feel safe. I know for a fact he’d never hurt me, but maybe his hands can chase away all the pain that tries to constantly pour over me.

The car turns down a dark road downtown and he pulls into an empty parking lot. Curiously, I notice Colby’s Jeep and Beau’s work truck parked outside. Odd.

“Where are we? Why is my family here?”

Jackson promptly ignores me by climbing out of the car. He lets Honey out first, as is tradition, then opens the passenger side door for me. With a firm hand on my forearm, he assists me out of the car. My mind races as he guides me towards the dark building. Obviously, he can’t kill me if my family is here. So where the hell has he brought me?

After one single knock on a heavy metal door, it pushes open.

A tall guy covered in tattoos slaps hands with Jackson. “All yours for the night, bro. Text me when you leave so I can lock up.”

“Thanks, Trent. I owe you one.”

The guy shakes his shaved head. “Nah.” With a smirk towards me, the guy disappears out the door.

The inside is pitch black, with dark red walls and graffiti art all over the place. The only light emanates from the bar signs scattered around the hallway. Playful sayings are lit up in rainbows of colors. Tequila makes my clothes fall off. Whiskey is cheap, compared to me. The place is obviously a bar of some sort. Jackson leads me deeper until the hallway ends, and a large dance floor fills the room. A balcony wraps around above us, but we’re on the bottom floor.

Oh God. He rented out a nightclub to make one of my wishes come true.

This motherfucker.

“Jackson...” I trail off, suddenly overwhelmed at his thoughtfulness.

Jackson drops my hand to wrap his palm around the back of my neck. He squeezes once, hard, then releases me with a teasing wink. He gathers my hand back in his, and I let him, for once not pulling away. At the other end of the dance floor stands my family. This is such a huge step that my heart does a funny little flip in my chest.

“We’re all here,” Trevor tells Jackson with a raised eyebrow. “Care to share details?”

Jackson stands up as straight as possible. Either to look threatening or to show off to Colby and Beau. I’ve no clue. But I oddly like it.

“We’re having a nightclub night without the flashing lights or crowds. Perfect, huh?”

I shrink a little under everyone’s attention. Jackson tugs his hand out of mine, only to

wrap his thick arm around my shoulders. The grin on Eli's lips could power nuclear fission. Fuck.

"Well, we brought soda as requested, along with cupcakes from Bee's." Colby gestures towards the table littered with drinks and far too many cupcakes to count.

Beau wraps an arm around Trevor's waist, tugging him closer, before pressing a kiss to the side of Trevor's head. The warm smile on Trevor's face is sweet, almost innocent. Gross. They're all so besotted with each other. If I ever look at someone like that, take me out back and shoot me.

Jackson pulls out his phone and presses a few buttons. Moments later, dance music blares from the speakers overhead. The atmosphere of a nightclub without all the triggers that usually make it impossible for me to enjoy. The air is cool against my skin, there's nobody to trample me if I fall while dancing, and the lights are a soft muted blue with absolutely no flashing. Jackson thought of everything, just for me.

"Where's Andy?" I ask when I notice her absence.

"With Mom," Beau says carefully, eyes downcast.

"Bad day?" Eli asks, radiating sympathy.

"Bad few weeks." Beau shrugs, then aims a soft look at Trevor. "She'll get there with time. It's almost been a year."

"First year is the hardest," Colby points out.

Eli leans into Colby, earning a heartsick grin from my cousin. "Everything with time."

“The busiest season at the farm is winding down soon,” Colby says, mostly to Beau.
“Looking good?”

Beau shrugs as he grabs a vanilla cupcake. He carefully unwraps it, plates it, then cuts it in half with a fork. He proceeds to put the other half on a plate for Trevor. No asking, nothing, just plated him a damn cupcake. Trevor elbows Beau in the arm, but gratefully takes the cupcake.

“Farm is on autopilot these days,” Beau says around a mouthful of cupcake.

Colby scoffs. “Beau. Stop downplaying everything you do.”

Beau grins at Colby. “Never.”

“How’s school, kiddo?” Jackson questions Eli.

Eli cutely wrinkles his nose. “I’m so ready to be done.”

“Professor Eli,” Trevor teases before sweetly booping Eli’s nose.

Eli slaps Trevor’s hand away. “Fuck off.”

Jackson laughs at his friends, but doesn’t join in. I lift my head to look at him, feeling a smile tug at my lips. Jackson turns his head slightly to stare down at me, his thumb rubbing at the skin just under the neck of my sweater. My cheeks warm under his stare. I tear my gaze away to look anywhere but at him. When my gaze meets Trevor’s, his gaze is knowing and soft.

“Well, I guess we could dance,” Trevor says with a small shrug. He turns towards Beau to whisper something in his boyfriend’s ear. Whatever he said has Beau gripping Trevor’s hip tightly, mumbling something I can’t make out.

With a slightly evil laugh, Trevor pulls away from Beau's possessive grip. Trevor grabs Eli's hand and tugs him towards me, both of them radiating some low-level maniacal energy that has me a little concerned for myself.

"Dance with us," Trevor orders, eyes glowing with mischief.

"Maybe I want to watch you guys dance."

Eli tips up on his toes. "You definitely want to dance with us."

"Alright, Harp?" Colby asks as he takes a slow sip of soda.

I actively try not to cringe at the nickname. I hate it, always have. But I can't be a giant, huge, colossal dick by telling my family hey, stop calling me a musical instrument, I fucking hate it. Instead I suck it up and pretend it's fine. When I glance over at Jackson, he's staring at me, a little furrow between his brows. He's always trying to figure me out.

"I'm always fine," I say loudly, as much to convince myself as to convince them.

Beau snorts. "Go dance, then."

"This feels like a serious role switch," I mumble under my breath as Eli tugs me out onto the dance floor.

"Follow our lead," Trevor whispers to me.

Alright. Trevor manhandles me until my back is flush against his strong chest. Oh. And then Eli presses against my front, sandwiching me between their warm bodies. I'm distantly aware of Honey at my feet, probably wondering what the hell is going on. Trevor sways to the beat, his hands hard on my hips. One hand slowly trails up

my stomach, forcing a shocked gasp from my lips. Fuck. His warm palm tenderly cups my chin, carefully tipping my head back to rest against his shoulder.

“Jackson is one of my best friends,” Trevor murmurs in my ear, warm breath ghosting over my already flushed cheek. “And when I tell you I’ve never seen him want someone as much as he wants you... if you let him have you, he’ll never let go. It’s up to you, Harper.”

I squeeze my eyes shut tight against his words. Everything is too much. Eli’s hands ghost over my thighs as he slowly rises up to press against me again. Being caught between both of them has my system in overload at the dual sensations. Trevor at my back, pressing against me, moving me, with Eli at my front... I’m going to die.

“Hey, Harper,” Eli whispers sweetly against my ear at the same time Trevor slowly dances his hand up the inside of my thigh. Oh, fuck.

“I...”

“Just trust us, okay?” Eli softly kisses my cheek. “And trust Jackson.”

My eyes slowly blink open in the dark haze of the club to watch Eli move his hips in a sensual roll. Eli’s hands rise to grip my ribs so he can press himself hard against me, wiggling in a way that makes my head spin dangerously.

They’re going to kill me.

Before I can ever kiss Jackson.

Life is so cruel.

JACKSON

Trevor and Eli make eye contact and something passes between them, sending a terrifying sinking feeling into the pit of my stomach. Tipping onto his toes, Trevor whispers into Beau's ear, then presses a gentle-looking kiss to his boyfriend's stubbled cheek. I watch entranced as Trevor disappears into the empty dance floor to stand behind a confused-looking Harper. I have to lock my limbs to prevent myself from running onto the dance floor to tug Harper into my arms, to make him feel safe.

Trevor moves to stand behind Harper, looping an arm around his waist to tug Harper roughly against his front. Eli whispers something into Harper's ear, a devilish smirk on his face. Eli flashes a look at me, eyes sparkling with mischief. Eli proceeds to press tightly against Harper's front, all the while keeping his teasing eyes on me. Caught between the two men, Harper looks torn between being terrified, and slightly turned on. The turned-on part is what pisses me off.

"What are they doing?" I ask, pulse pounding in my ears.

Colby leans back against the wall, a smile tipping his lips up. "Giving us a show."

Beau snorts, but remains silent, which is everything I've come to expect from the man. The three of us grip our sodas tightly, gazes firmly set on the dance floor containing our men. No doubt about it. Harper is mine, he just doesn't know it yet. But he will know soon if I have anything to say about it.

Trevor slowly sways them back and forth with his firm grip on Harper's hips. My pulse pounds in my ears, in my neck, whooshing sounds filling my senses as Trevor leans down to whisper against the shell of Harper's ear. All the blood in my body boils when Harper leans hard against Trevor, trusting the other man to hold him up. That should be me. Not Trevor. I'm the only one who should ever touch Harper so possessively, so intimately.

My mouth goes as dry as the Sahara when Eli drops to a crouch, then slowly inches back up Harper's body in a sensuous crawl. Fuck. They're fucking with me. My best friends are fucking with me. Harper's lips part slightly as his chest rises and falls more quickly, obviously affected by the two men he's sandwiched between. The soda can in my hand gets torn from my grip, tearing my attention from the three men on the dance floor.

"You're going to bust the can, Jackson." Colby nods his head towards the dance floor. "Take back what's yours."

"He's not..."

Colby rolls his eyes. "Don't argue with us. It's written all over your face. Beau and I give you our blessing."

"Blessing?" I repeat slowly.

Beau grunts softly. "We trust Harper with you. Break his heart and I'll take a Louisville slugger to your precious Mercedes."

I gasp in fear. "You wouldn't."

A smirk twitches the corner of Beau's lips but doesn't fully break loose. "Test me."

“No can do, buddy,” I say loudly over the music. “That man is mine, and I’d rather die than ever break his heart.”

With that, I leave them behind. I’m going to get what’s mine. Trevor lifts his face from the crook of Harper’s neck with a wicked smirk. His eyes flit over my shoulder, no doubt landing on Beau. Eli disappears behind me just as I reach out to tug Harper from Trevor’s arms. Those gorgeous green eyes blink open, confusion warring in his gaze. But the moment it clicks into place that it’s me, a relieved smile flies across his plush lips. I need to kiss him. I have to kiss him. Right now.

Burying my fingers in Harper’s hair, I tug him against me until he gasps in shock.

“I’m going to kiss you now.” I tighten my fingers in his hair, until my knuckles pop. “Tell me no.”

Harper doesn’t utter a single word, instead he presses hard against my chest and leans up until his lips are only a breath from mine. The action dares me to kiss him, to make him mine. The world explodes into sensation when our lips finally touch. I lick into his mouth, needing the perfect taste of him on my tongue. God. He tastes sweet, just like I imagined. It’s the best damn kiss of my entire fucking life.

Harper melts against me with a dreamy sigh into my mouth. I loop my other arm around his waist, holding him steady, pulling him as tightly against my own body as I can. Everything but Harper stops existing. The sweet taste of him, the warmth of his skin against my palms, the tremble of his chest against my own as I steal the air from his lungs. All of it is mine. This man that infuriates me, makes me laugh. I’m going to keep him.

Harper’s hands tighten in my shirt until his nails bite painfully into my skin. Our kiss slows until finally Harper pulls free. His eyes are glazed as he stares up at me like a deer in headlights. Moments before he looked captivated, full of desire, but suddenly

he looks terrified.

“What’s wrong?”

Harper carefully extricates himself from my grip and runs a weary hand through his messy hair. He won’t meet my gaze. I can’t have him just to lose him. I can’t. Fear rolls through me that he’s about to tell me it was a mistake.

“Jackson...” Harper trails off, biting at his lip. Only I should bite that lip. I tuck my fingers into the back pockets of my jeans to keep myself from touching him. I don’t want to scare him away.

“Harper.”

He mumbles something that I can’t make out, the music drowning his words out. This Harper shifting restlessly on his feet before me isn’t my Harper. I step up to him, until he’s forced to lift his gaze to mine, and tightly pinch his chin between my fingers. His eyes darken as I swipe my thumb across his still-kiss-wet bottom lip, effectively stopping him from biting what’s mine.

“Tell me.”

“Jackson...”

“I gave you an order,” I say firmly.

His eyes darken as his fingers sneak under my shirt to find bare skin. I fight hard to keep my reaction internal, not wanting him to see how his curious touch could bring me to my knees.

“I’ve never... it would be just you,” Harper admits shyly. He won’t meet my gaze,

instead focusing on the center of my chest with an intensity I've never seen from him before. The words hit me like a slap once I realize what he was saying.

Jesus Christ. It shouldn't matter, but the caveman inside of me preens at the idea of Harper only ever being mine. I try to calm my suddenly racing heart with some slow, deep breaths. Harper's fingers dig harshly into the skin at the small of my back, making heat pool in my belly. First things first, I need to reassure him it's fine. Secondly, I need him to know he's mine.

"That doesn't matter to me," I promise him.

Harper snorts and drops his head against my chest. "It might. What if I'm bad?"

"Impossible. You'll be magnificent. Also, stop trying to end us before we've even begun."

Harper wraps his thin arms around me and hugs me tight. Running my fingers through his hair, I do my best to soothe him with my touch. Music blares around us, but when I glance to the outskirts of the empty dance floor, my friends are no longer there. We're alone, minus for a patiently sitting Honey by our feet.

"Harper?"

He makes a humming noise against the material of my shirt.

"Do you trust me?"

"Always."

I slide my hands down his back, cup his ass, and lift in one swoop. A shocked gasp leaves him, but he gets with it quickly by wrapping his legs firmly around my waist.

Instead of having to look up at me, now our faces are even.

“Hi,” I say quietly.

That familiar smirk that makes my heart beat faster inches across his face. “Hi.”

And then I kiss him again. His arms loop around my neck to tug himself closer against me. One hand grips my shoulder, while the other rests against the back of my head, as he kisses me with an intensity that could melt every bone in my body. Desire courses through me, just from his kiss alone. Time loses all meaning. Tasting his sweet moans, his hands roving across my skin, his touch leaves fire in its wake. Nothing but Harper matters anymore. Nothing.

I tear away from his mouth, only to tuck my head into the crook of his neck. The sweet scent of him wraps around me, intoxicating and borderline miraculous. Otherworldly even. Fucking sandalwood and something sweet that I can't name.

“We're dating. You know that, right?” I mumble the question against the flushed skin of his collarbone.

Harper's chuckle moves through me, until it feels like it's my own. “I assumed so after you just ravished me. I've never dated anyone before, you know.”

“Harper,” I say seriously. I pull just far enough away to meet his confused gaze. “We've been dating for weeks.”

He delicately runs his finger over the shell of my ear, then traces down my face to dip down to my neck, and I try not to shiver as goose bumps break over my skin. Sometimes, when he smiles, truly smiles, just one side of his mouth lifts, and a small tiny dimple appears. It's my favorite fucking thing. Number one on my bucket list, taste the dimple as I fuck the cum out of him. Yeah, number one.

Finally, I ever so slowly lower him back to the ground. The smile on my lips could split my face in two. Harper covers my face with his hand while groaning in annoyance.

“Don’t look at me like that.”

Kissing his palm, I wrap my fingers around his wrist and tug it away. A flush blooms across his cheeks, but he looks pleased, not even slightly irritated. A total win in my book.

“Can I take you home? I think the others left.”

Harper curiously looks behind his shoulder, finally noticing that we’re alone. Confusion visibly sweeps over him for a second, before finally settling on realization. If Colby and Beau left him with me, then it means I’ve been given their blessing. I do my best to not puff up with pride.

“Take me home,” Harper murmurs quietly, shifting his now heated gaze back to mine. “Stay the night?”

“I don’t have to.”

Harper smirks and a small puff of air escapes him. An almost laugh. “I’m very aware. I’m asking you to stay.”

“I’ll stay as long as you want. Every night. Forever. Whatever you want, name it.”

Harper stares up at me, something like wonder shining in his bright eyes. “You really mean that, don’t you?”

Taking his cheeks between my palms, I kiss him one more time. Only a firm press of

lips, but it's overwhelmingly sweet. Harper is beautifully starry-eyed when I pull away.

"Let me take you home."

Harper nods and lets me guide him out of the nightclub with a possessive hand at the small of his back. The air is slightly chilly outside, so I keep my arm around his waist, tugging him as tightly against my side as possible. I let Harper into the car first, then Honey, our new routine that we've all got down pat.

The drive back to Harper's house is quiet. I turn the music up so that Harper can't feel nervous even for a moment. I never want him to feel nervous around me ever again. Reaching across the console, I tangle our fingers together, rubbing my thumb over his knuckles. He hides his face from me, but not before I see the sweet curving of his lips.

I trail behind Harper through his house. Harper sweetly takes Honey out of her vest, so I dip down to give her a pat and a kiss to her wet nose. Harper slides the back door open with a whistle in a sign to Honey for her to use the restroom. She does her business like a lady as Harper fidgets restlessly with the hem of his cable-knit sweater.

I wish I knew what thoughts were racing through his head. Everything from here on out will have to be on his timeframe. No rushing. Nothing but me and him on a journey towards something I hope will be great. Something really long-lasting if I have my way. Once Honey rejoins us in the house to retire for the night, Harper slowly locks up the back door.

Honey pads down the hallway, probably looking for the bedroom she shares with Harper.

“You still want me to stay?” I ask, needing to give him an out.

Harper nods quickly, lip caught between his teeth. “Yes. I’m just nervous.”

“About what?”

Harper gestures towards me, eyes fixed beyond my shoulder. “Look at you.”

I look down at my body in confusion. “What about me?”

Harper huffs loudly. “You’re gorgeous.”

Crossing the few feet between us, I grasp Harper’s thin shoulders in my palms. I squeeze gently and shake him a little, forcing his slightly frantic gaze to meet mine.

“You’re a stunner, punk. I think you really underestimate just how badly I want to kiss you, hold you, even see you naked. Anything we do tonight is perfect. Kiss? Amazing. Cuddle? Perfect. Hand action? Ecstatic. Just lie in bed and stare at one another? Sign me up.”

Harper roughly shoves me away. “You’re ridiculous. We can make out as long as you shut up.”

I bite at my lip to hold back a grin. Darkness invades the hallway as I follow him towards his bedroom. Only a small lamp lights up Harper’s cozy bedroom. The walls are a midnight blue, the bed low to the ground covered with white fluffy blankets that I missed in the dark the last time I was in his room.

Honey’s tucked in the corner on a very comfortable dog bed. She slowly lifts her head to look at me, licks her lips, then lowers her head back down. Obviously, she’s not that surprised at my presence. The other day bonded us in some odd way. Canine

companion and boyfriend, an unbreakable bond.

“Well?” Harper asks, tearing me from my introspection.

When my gaze pings back to him, my entire body flushes with heat. At some point he’d torn his sweater off, leaving him only in his jeans. His auburn hair hangs loosely around his face, softly grazing his creamy shoulder. If he let me burn the world down for him, I would, just for one taste of his mouth. I’d even accept one nibble of his throat, as long as he was pressed against me, fingers curled tight into my shoulders to hold on to me as I wrung every ounce of pleasure from him.

Fuck. I’ve got to calm down. I stand frozen while Harper easily slides his jeans off, leaving him only in dark red boxer briefs that hug every single curve. He climbs under the blankets, then fixes me with a curious stare.

“Your turn,” Harper says softly, a small tremor in his voice.

I swallow hard. Deciding now isn’t the time for a show, I tug my shirt off, and wiggle carefully out of my own jeans. I keep my eyes firmly on Harper as I join him under the covers. Without a second thought, I reach for him, dragging him towards me under the heavy comforter.

Harper sighs against my shoulder once I’ve got him positioned just how I want. I run my fingers through his long hair, doing my best to get out some of the knots. He relaxes under my ministrations, happy sighs escaping him that I’m not even sure he’s aware he’s making.

Once he’s boneless against me, I roll over until I’m caging him between my elbows on the bed. A gasp startles out of him, but he stays relaxed.

“You said we could make out,” I point out. I trace his ear with the tip of my finger,

grinning when he shivers beneath me.

Letting my body lower down, I line us up tip to toe. My cock slides against his through our boxers and it takes every single ounce of restraint to keep from rutting against him. Slow. This is about Harper, not me.

“I did say that,” Harper replies, eyes firmly on my mouth. He licks his lips once, then his gaze flits back up to mine. “Kiss me.”

He doesn’t have to tell me twice. I dip down slowly, trailing my nose across his cheek, before settling my lips across his sweet mouth. His fingers dig into my ribs, tugging me closer, as his legs open wider to allow room for my hips.

I bury my fingers in his hair, using my grip to tug his head into the perfect position to lick into his mouth. A much safer move than allowing my hands to roam his body. I don’t want to overwhelm him in any way. Not tonight. Harper moans into my mouth when I bite his lip, only to dip my tongue between his lips, tangling our tongues together. His hands slip from my ribs to rest at the curve of my spine.

He presses against me until the friction of his cock against mine sends me reeling.

“Fuck, wait.” I pull away from his mouth and press my face into the crook of his neck.

“Did I do something... I did something wrong?” Harper pants out.

“The opposite,” I mumble, playfully nipping at the hollow of his throat. “You’re going to make me come in my pants.”

“Just from kissing?” Harper asks breathlessly, a hint of wonder in his voice.

I pull away from his neck to stare down at him. His pupils are blown with desire, a flush on his gorgeous cheeks. For the first time I notice a small freckle at the corner of his left eye. The single blemish that marks his face. I don't count the scar on his left temple because the scar is a part of him, something that adds to his beauty.

"Harper," I say gravelly. "Just looking at you could make me come."

"Oh." Harper bites his lip hard, then moves his hand to tenderly cup the back of my neck. "Could we do that?"

I tilt my head. "Do what?"

"Come in our pants?" Harper clarifies with a tiny, barely noticeable smirk.

Fuck. Jesus. Fuck. Fucking fuck.

"Harper..."

Harper smiles sweetly, just before rolling his hips. Oh God. Who exactly is the novice in this situation? Because right now it feels a lot like me. When our cocks slide together again, Harper's eyes go wide, just before closing on a deep, pleased moan. I can't take it. I reach back and remove his hands from my shoulders, easily tangling our fingers together. Pressing his hands into the mattress, I roll my hips against him.

Lightning zips down my spine at the feel of our cocks grinding together. Even through my boxers, I can feel how hard he is for me. My mouth fills with saliva at just the idea of having his cock heavy and hard on my tongue. Since I can't suck his dick, I dive down to suck on his tongue. The moan he lets out twists at the base of my spine, surging pleasure through me.

His fingers tighten around me when I press down hard, seeking enough pressure for us to come. Back arching, tongue pressing against mine, he comes with a moan so beautiful that my own orgasm crashes into me with all the force of a tsunami. White-hot pleasure overtakes me, short-circuiting my brain. Vision blacked out and head full of crackling sounds, I bury my face in Harper's perfect neck.

Harper keeps making these surprised, but pleased little huffs of pleasure as our hips continue to roll. The wetness from his cum seeps into my boxers, and while it should be gross, it's not to me. Because all I want to do is rip off his boxers and taste him. All of him. I need to hear him moan again. But tonight isn't the night, so I calm myself by untangling our hands only to then tangle my fingers in his sweaty hair. He sighs dreamily at the feel of my fingers tightening against his scalp.

"A-plus," Harper finally murmurs.

I chuckle because Jesus, this beautiful man. "Thank you. You are also an A student."

Harper lazily runs his hand up and down my spine. "Really?"

I drowsily nod against his neck. "You're fucking perfect."

Harper hums in obvious disbelief, but remains quiet. Lying in his arms is the most comfortable I've ever felt after any sort of intimacy. With fake boyfriends, my skin always crawls just a little after fucking them. It's solely getting off. Previous real boyfriends never lasted long enough for sleepovers to really be a thing. So in a lot of ways, Harper is new territory for me as well. We're both navigating new grounds. But I think we'll do just fine together.

As long as he doesn't fucking push me away.

His arms soften against me, as if he's fallen asleep. When I pull back, he blinks

sleepy, moss-green eyes peering up at me. I kiss his slack mouth softly, feeling like a king when he smiles sleepily against my lips. Can't let him fall asleep with cum in his boxers. That's not very boyfriend of me. Climbing out of the bed, I tuck my arms underneath him and lift him easily. He immediately wakes back up.

"Hey!" Harper squawks.

"You like it right now, but you won't like waking up with dried jizz in your pants."

Harper relaxes in my arms as I carry him into the bathroom. The light is low in the bathroom as well. There's a lightbulb out above his vanity, and I wonder if he even realizes it. I gently place him down on his feet, then kiss him again until the tension bleeds from his shoulders.

"I have bad news," I whisper against his mouth.

"Hmm?"

Lips sliding against his with each word. "I don't have a change of clothes and I know nothing of yours will fit me."

"Sleep naked." Harper just shrugs as he pulls away from me and lowers his own boxers. Fuck. He turns the shower on with a careful flick of his elegant wrist. My gaze travels down the expanse of his body, dropping to the generous curve of his ass. He has a serious bubble butt situation going on, which does not help my own current boxer predicament.

I have a wildly good refractory period. Sometimes I can come three to four times in an hour if my brain demands it. And my brain is definitely going to demand it with Harper. Just thinking about burying myself inside him could make me come again. Once the water is warm enough, he glances at me over his shoulder, all wickedness

and tease.

“Join me?” Harper asks, voice soft, and a tad shy.

I almost bust my brain against the tile hopping out of my boxers too quickly. His gaze falls to my cock and his mouth forms a little oh of surprise. Steam fills my vision as I join him in the shower, but I can still see him clearly. Crimson fills his cheeks, but I don't think it's from the heat of the water. It's because of me. The caveman inside me preens again because only I will ever get to affect Harper like this. Only me. I swear it.

I kiss him in the shower, sipping at his mouth like he's fine wine. Harper's better than the most expensive Shiraz, better than any food I've ever tasted. God. His lips are so soft, his tongue hesitantly teasing against my own. Who the fuck taught this man to kiss? A growl rumbles through my chest when his hands come up to cup the back of my head so he can kiss me deeper.

I press more firmly into him and my hard cock pushes against the creamy-soft skin of his stomach. He pulls away with a half-shocked and half-pleased gasp at the feel of me. With one eyebrow raised in question, he glances down between us.

“Again? Already?” His eyebrows furrow and he lifts his gaze to mine. “Is that normal?”

I shrug. “Sometimes. You just have that effect on me.”

He laughs sarcastically. “No way.”

Fuck. This man really has no idea. None at all. I run my fingers over his shoulders, down his arms, settling my hands on his hips to tug him against me until he feels just how much he affects me.

“Think you can come again?”

Harper stares up at me in absolute wonder. “I’ve never tried so soon before.”

I grin wickedly. “Let’s see.”

I back him up against the cold shower tiles with a grin that has him staring at me like I hung the stars in the sky. Pumping a handful of conditioner into my large palm, I take our night up one single level. When I grasp my cock and line it up with his, Harper’s eyes bug out, and a gorgeous moan floats from his parted lips. He slams his head back against the tile while wrapping his hand against the back of my neck.

“Jesus, Jackson...”

His cock is so hot in my grip. Not as big as mine, it’s still a good size. The perfect size for me to suck and lavish with attention at another time. But now, it feels perfect in my grip, sliding against my own cock. I roll my hips so that the head of my cock glides against the length of his with each thrust. Every other roll, I swipe my thumb across the head of his cock, wishing I could taste the pre-cum that’s no doubt gathering at the tip.

“You feel so fucking good,” I whisper into the steamy shower air.

Harper’s eyes blink open, condensation gathering on his long eyelashes. “You’re going to make me come again.”

“Good. You’re so good for me, Harper. Feel this?” I squeeze his cock against mine. “You make me so fucking hard, just for you. Come with me, okay? Come.”

His eyes slide closed on a breathy sigh, either trying to block out the sight of me or my words. I pump our cocks faster, needing to feel his cum sliding against my hand,

warm over my skin.

Fingers biting painfully into my neck, Harper comes for a second time this evening. His release is hot against my skin, but it's the blissed-out look on his face that punches my own orgasm out of me. My hips roll lazily as my pleasure fades and I slowly tug my hand away. Harper's eyes blink open just in time to watch me lift my hand to my mouth. I lick our mixed cum off my hand, feeling like a god now when Harper's eyes widen in shock.

"You..." Harper trails off, clearly surprised.

"Delicious," I declare with a wink.

"Oh my God." Harper covers his face with his hands to hide his embarrassment.

Okay, I pushed him too far. I rinse my hand off under the warm spray and grab the loofah hanging against the black marble tile. I pump soap into the loofah, then roughly rub it in my hands until it is full of foam. Harper stays good, heavily leaning against the tile as I swipe the soapy loofah over his skin. He even lets me lift his feet to wash the ticklish bottoms. Such a good boy when he wants to be.

I hurriedly wash my own body, then tug him to stand under the spray with me. Sleep is slowly claiming him, so I hurry us through rinsing off. Only one large fluffy towel hangs on the bar, so we'll have to share it tonight. Tenderly drying him off first, I focus on his back for just a tad longer than I need to, which earns me a small, pleased smirk from Harper.

Honey lazily lifts her head to watch us climb into the bed but then promptly goes back to sleep once she's no longer interested in us. Does he ever let Honey sleep in the bed? But tonight's not the night to ask because Harper is warm against my body under the covers. Within moments, he's zonked out, mouth slightly parted as he

sleeps deeply in my arms.

I fall asleep slowly, comforted by the weight of him in my arms. Pleased with the knowledge that now he's mine.

HARPER

Is it possible to lose my mind for only two hours? If so, that's definitely what happened last night. Momentary insanity. Twenty-five and I've just had my first kiss. My first orgasm with another person and it was with Jackson "perfect face" Harris. Jesus Christ.

Soft light of dawn filters in through the edges of my blackout curtains. Even in the darkness of the bedroom, I can easily trace Jackson's face with my eyes. His skin is the most beautiful shade of brown, adding to his unfairly beautiful face. I carefully trace one of his thick eyebrows with the tip of my fingers, pleased when he stays sound asleep despite my lingering touch.

He's the earth-stopping type of gorgeous, skin as soft as satin. When he'd kissed me in the dark of the club, my heart had shot off like a firework through my chest. Frozen, like an animal caught in a trap, all I could focus on was the silky softness of his lips moving gently against mine. Thinking about the kiss even now makes my skin flush with want.

It's terrifying, to want someone, but not know exactly how. Sure, I'm a virgin, but I've watched porn. I know what happens and I know what I want. Only the details get blurry when I think about it too hard. Being a fumbling virgin in bed with Jackson would be beyond humiliating.

I want to be everything he wants, everything he could ever dream of having. But at

the end of the day, I'm still just me.

Plain old Harper.

The seizure kid.

Adopted by parents who wish they'd gotten a healthy kid, not a fucked-up one.

Jackson will have me, get bored of me, and move on. There is no reason to want to keep me. But he's so convinced of his want that I don't have the energy to deny him anymore. So I'll give in. When I'm old and gray and lonely, I'll remember the hot guy who fucked me a few times before moving on to greener, prettier pastures. A morbid thought, but oddly comforting.

Honey huffs loudly in the corner, her signal that she's awake and wants to be let out. Leaving Jackson in the bed feels weird, but Honey will always come first. I have my priorities. Jackson proves just how sound of a sleeper he is as he keeps snoring softly while I get dressed, halfway falling over as I pull on a loose pair of sweatpants.

I impatiently rub at my arms while waiting for Honey to do her business. A chilly breeze blows past me, whipping my hair around my shoulders. Lifting my head into the cool wind, a smile curves my lips up. For just one moment in time, I'm free. I take these moments when I can, as they're so far and few between. My favorite moments are the ones where I forget even for just a moment about the seizures, about the medicine, about everything except just being alive.

A yip of joy from Honey startles me out of the blissful moment.

Her body shakes and wiggles as she bolts up the wood stairs of the porch, running right past me. Jackson fills the frame of the back door, all broad shoulders, wearing just his undone jeans from the night before. God. He belongs on the cover of a

romance novel. Except no, I'd hate that. No matter how many people have fucked him before me, while he's with me, he's mine. At least I can pretend so.

"Morning," Jackson says, eyes still squinted with sleep.

"Morning." I don't know what to do, so I settle on saluting him.

Jackson's lips tremble with a smile. "Your bed is extremely comfortable."

"It should be. It cost me a lot of money."

Jackson lifts his arms to grip the top of the doorframe, leaning out as he does so. My eyes automatically fall to the expanse of bare skin of his torso. The rippling muscle makes my mouth water. An embarrassing flush starts to creep up my neck, so I avert my gaze away.

"Do you have plans today?" Jackson asks, a smile in his voice.

I shake my head. "No. I mean yes. Yes. I have plans."

"Oh?" Jackson's tone is disbelieving. I hate him.

"I have very important things to do," I tell him haughtily, lifting my chin in the air.

Jackson lets go of the doorframe with a disbelieving sigh. He stalks toward me, stride purposeful. I swallow loudly once he comes to a stop in front of me. Fuck. I wish last night we'd been able to do more before sleep came for me. What does his skin taste like? I wonder if he'll let me sit in his lap as we make out. If I begged just right, would he be rough with me? Will his eyes darken if I call him Daddy?

His fingers gently grip my chin, turning my face up more until it slightly hurts to

swallow. Thumb dragging along the length of my throat, he leans down to suck at the spot where my pulse pounds. My knees go weak at the touch of his lips, wildfire igniting in my veins. I bring my hands up to cup the breadth of his ribs, feeling them contract with his breaths under my touch. Last night I had wrapped my legs around his hips, knees over his ribs. Our size difference didn't feel so insurmountable then, not like it does now.

Satisfied with sucking on my neck, Jackson nuzzles against my throat, then trails his nose up my face to bury in my hair. His fingers tighten in my hair, tugging my head just far enough back that it's slightly uncomfortable.

"Harper," Jackson says roughly.

The sound of his voice makes me melt in his grip. His other arm loops around my waist, tugging me even closer against the extreme heat of his body. Jesus. He's so warm. I'm constantly cold, fingers freezing. Jackson is a furnace compared to me.

This time, Jackson sighs loudly. "I thought we worked it out last night. Are you going to still fight me like a rabid animal every step of the way?"

My nose scrunches in annoyance. "Rabid?"

"Like a fucking coyote," Jackson declares. He lets go of me and takes a few steps back, then pivots on his feet to face me square on again. "I'll let you have the day. But next weekend I'm taking you out."

"As in kill me?" I ask, lips curling up in a smile.

Jackson rolls his eyes. "Regretfully, no."

Jackson disappears into the house without so much as a word. I assume the

conversation is done, that he's gone, so I dip down on the stairs to sit in the early morning air. Honey returns to sit beside me, a heavy, comforting weight at my side. I tilt my head against the wood railing of the stairs, suddenly overwhelmingly tired.

The sound of Jackson's footfalls makes my head pivot to the side, just in time for him to crouch low behind me. His fingers slide tenderly through my hair and his lip twitches at the corner, as if he's holding back a tender smile. My traitorous heart leaps and loops in my chest just at the thought of him smiling only for me. I wish his smile belonged to me, just to catch and hold when I most need it. Smiles shouldn't be that beautiful, that gut-wrenching.

"Please let me treat you good," Jackson begs, voice a soft whisper.

"I'm not used to it," I admit. I rarely let others see me vulnerable, taught too many times that vulnerability is weakness.

His thumb rubs at the edge of my jaw. "You need to learn."

He bends down further to kiss me, uncaring about both of our morning breaths. His lips are silk-soft still, even dry, as they move against my own. When he pulls away, I feel an odd sense of loss. Like losing a limb, his touch now just a phantom weight.

"I'll text you, punk." Jackson stands to his full height to tower over us.

Honey's tail thumps, and she whines as he disappears back into the house. I pat the top of her head, squeezing at her ears in the way she loves.

"He'll be back. Maybe. If he doesn't change his mind."

Honey whines again as if in disagreement with my assessment. Great. Now even my dog is sick of my shit.

Halfway through the week, Andy demands that I visit her at the farm on her lunch break. The twenty-minute rideshare costs me a pretty penny, mostly because there weren't any drivers in the area. I always have to pay a premium to get someone out in my neck of the woods. Annoying but it had to be done. Plus, the farm is one of my safe spaces when it's empty.

The driver speeds away in a plume of dirt. At least he was mostly silent. Andy's waiting for me just outside the office, a warm grin tilting her lips up. She looks the same as usual. Work jeans, tight curls in a messy bun, and weirdly happy just at the sight of me.

"Figured we could make Joey fix us lunch and have a little girly chat."

I groan. "You know I hate it when you call it that."

Andy lets out a long-suffering, pained sigh. "Fine. A bestie chat."

We amble together through the empty crowd, heading straight for Joey's food truck. Andy loops her arm through mine and the smell of her sweet, familiar perfume wafts over me. I look around for Beau, but don't see him. Odd. The man is usually somewhere on the farm.

"It's his day off," Andy supplies, noticing me looking for Beau.

"I forgot."

Andy takes my hand in hers, rubbing at the palm of my hand. "Joey has all the fixings for a blueberry and brie grilled cheese. Want it?"

My mouth instantly waters at my favorite sandwich, the one never on a menu. Joey only ever makes it for me. "Yes, please."

Tugging my hand, she pulls me the rest of the way towards the truck. Joey hangs out the window, an infectious grin on his wide lips.

“Sup, trouble one and trouble two.”

“Ha ha ha,” Andy fake laughs. “Regular for Harp, pork sliders for me. Chop chop, we’ve got things to do.”

Joey rolls his eyes dramatically before hurrying back into the truck. The sounds of Joey cooking filter out to us, metal on the stove, bags being opened. It’s a familiar and comforting sound to me now. Beau and Joey have been best friends for as long as I can remember, since before I was born. I actually had a small crush on Joey when he was a teenager and I was a little kid. Even back then he was hard to resist with his black curls, light blue eyes, and sweetness. He’s too sweet for me, but I think he’d be perfect for Lee. If they ever admitted what they are to each other. I have epilepsy, I’m not blind. Those two are madly in love, they just can’t see it.

Andy leads me towards one of the large picnic tables by a firm hand on my wrist. It’s pointless to tug away from Andy. She’s going to get what she wants and I’ll not even be that annoyed about it. We sit down opposite one another, with Honey curled under the table at my feet.

“So?”

I aim a confused look at her. “Yeah?”

She rolls her hand in a tell-me gesture. “How did it go with Jackson the other night?”

“Oh.”

Joey thankfully interrupts us by placing our plates down on the table. He holds up one

finger, returns to the truck, then jogs back to hand me a bowl of water for Honey and a few slices of cheese.

“I know she’s working, but for later. I’d hang out and pester you both, but there’s an event tonight, so I’m in the middle of food prep.” Joey reaches out one hand to ruffle my hair with a wink.

We both watch him disappear into the truck with dreamy sighs. I amend my earlier mention of a crush, we had a crush on Joey growing up. Pitiful. Andy won that one when Joey was clearly not gay. He’s got the whole DILF thing going on though since the birth of Savannah. But I still think him and Lee could be magic together if the man ever admitted to himself that he’s in love with one of his best friends. I read too many romance novels. Alas.

“Sooooo...” Andy takes a giant bite of a slider, a huge glob of barbecue sauce drips out the other end. Gross.

Taking a small bite of my grilled cheese, I try not to moan indecently at the flavor. Comfort and home. I wish I could hire Joey to make this for me every night. I’d never have a sad thought ever again.

“It was alright,” I finally say with a shrug.

Andy rolls her eyes and kicks me under the table. “You’re such a little shit. I heard he kissed you like they do at the end of a Hollywood blockbuster. All romantic and shit.”

I narrow my eyes in her direction. “Who told you that?”

Andy grimaces, silently returning to her pork slider like it’s suddenly the most interesting thing in the entire world. She mumbles something, but I can’t make it out.

“What was that?”

Andy sighs loudly. “Beau.”

A wince rolls through me. “Beau saw us kiss?”

“I mean, you kissed in front of all of them. They all saw.”

I carefully place my sandwich back on the plate. “Oh.”

“Harper, I am seriously begging here. So, first kiss? First, what else?”

“It was perfectly fine. He came back to my place after, but all we did was sleep.”

Andy slowly lowers her own sandwich onto her plate. Her eyes are full of fire as she stares me down. “All you did was sleep?”

I nod, hoping she won’t see through the lie. “Yes.”

“Bullshit!” Andy yells loud enough for metal to clink in the food truck. Joey’s head pops out the window, but Andy waves him away.

“I like him,” I say dejectedly. I push my plate away, suddenly no longer hungry, and tiredly rest my chin on my palm.

“What’s so bad about that? We can all see how he looks at you.”

With a roll of my eyes, I mumble, “For now.”

Andy chews her slider thoughtfully, eyes shrewd, gaze intense on me. Sometimes, I feel like a specimen under her stare as she tries to piece me together from bits of

information she's gathered over decades of friendship. But I've always been very careful to share just enough to keep people happy. The art of being mysterious.

"I wish I knew everything that's going on in that big wonderful brain of yours, but I won't even bother. Even if I did know, I bet none of it would make a lick of sense to me." Andy finishes her food, making a grab for the pickle on my plate. I gesture towards it since I hate pickles, it's been hers since we were kids. She takes a bite out of the crisp veggie, then waves it at me. "You think he's going to fuck and run."

I bristle at her correct guess. "No."

"Yes," Andy sings. "Well, I hope he proves you wrong. Trevor and Eli have been gifts to Beau and Colby. Maybe Jackson will be a gift to you too. You're a delight, Harper, any man would be lucky to have you."

I hum in answer, although I disagree. Once we're done with lunch, Andy drags me over to show me the sunflowers as if I haven't seen them a million times. Stupidly, and against every intelligent urge in my body, I pick a sunflower stalk to present to Jackson this coming weekend. He's not the only one who can give thoughtful gifts. I can do it, too, if I allow myself to do it.

For the remainder of the week, the sunflower taunts me from a vase in the center of my kitchen island. Jackson texts me throughout the week, but I keep my answers short. Maybe he will get the hint and finally move on. Nothing about me is easy, so why stick around? I'll let him have me, but I never said I'd make it easy. The man seems to enjoy the push and pull, so I'll give him what he wants. Until he gets tired of me.

Saturday morning, Jackson shows up on my front stoop looking good enough to eat. Dark jeans again, a henley, and a leather jacket over his broad shoulders. Devil may care. His grin is wide and sweet, almost bringing me to my knees. I want to hate him;

I do. But I focus on the sweet daisies held in his tight grip.

He holds the flowers out to me, eyes sparkling with some nauseating emotion I can't parse. "For you."

"Why?" I ask before I can censor myself.

Jackson quirks his head to the side. "'Cause I wanted to. Do I need a reason to bring you flowers?"

I bite back the urge to scoff. That's not very nice of me. Instead, I turn around and lead him into the kitchen. I gesture toward the still-blooming sunflower.

"That's for you."

Jackson grins, but his eyebrows furrow in confusion. "You picked a sunflower for me?"

"Don't let it go to your head."

Surprising me, as usual, Jackson puts the daisies in the vase so that they're surrounding the sunflower. It shouldn't work, but oddly it does. Kind of like me and Jackson. Again, this is another observation I'll never utter out loud. I don't need to go spouting nonsense about flowers representing us or some stupid, lovestruck word vomit.

Jackson finishes arranging the flowers with a triumphant grin. His gaze sweeps the room, obviously checking for Honey. Once he sees she's still asleep on the sofa, no vest, his smile blooms even larger. He'd asked if she could stay behind today, although I didn't quite understand why. Obviously, I can go places without her; I just prefer not to. She's my safety blanket.

His large palm wraps around my neck, his skin still a little chilly from the outside. He promptly and without words drags me in for a lazy hello kiss. My body melts against him, in total disagreement with my overly loud brain. Curling my arms around his broad chest, I dig my fingers into the expanse of his back. Jackson moans against my mouth, taking the kiss from chaste to sinful in one single millisecond.

As we kiss, he backs me up against the kitchen wall. My back hits it with a loud thud, but Jackson cushions my head with a gentle palm at the back of my head. I moan like a damn porn star right into his mouth, needing, wanting more of him. One hand is in my hair, the other beside my head; he kisses me with so much passion that my brain just turns right off. All I can focus on is the sweet, gentle slide of his lips against my own.

The taste of his mouth will be seared into my brain for eternity. God. He tastes like coffee and a hint of mint, as if he brushed his teeth and then downed a cup of coffee. Something about that is just so decidedly human that it somehow turns me on even more.

He tears away from my mouth with a pained moan. “You kiss like fucking sin, Harper. Jesus.”

I blink up at him in a horny daze. “Really?”

Jackson nods, gaze still a little glassy from our kiss. “Who taught you to kiss like that?”

I cock my head to the side in confusion. Doesn’t he know? “You.”

Jackson’s thumb pauses in its gentle rubbing of my jaw. “Me?”

“I told you...” I trail off, embarrassment burning through me.

“Fuck.” Jackson dips down to kiss me again, softer this time. This kiss is more of a flicker than a raging inferno, but it still sends my heart galloping. He pulls away to rain sweet kisses across my face, murmuring words I can’t decipher through the onslaught of his lips.

When he finally pulls away, his eyes are lit with joy, teeth glinting through his blinding grin. “You’re perfect for me. You really are.”

“Don’t be disgusting.” I shove him away while awkwardly clearing my throat. Jesus. He makes it hard to keep a grip on myself while he’s around. Something about him just makes me want to fall to my knees. I have no idea what I’d do then, but surely I’d figure it out. It can’t be that hard.

Jackson strides over to the couch to give Honey a sweet pat on her back. The dog has the gall to roll over, sweetly asking for belly rubs. Jackson acquiesces for a moment, then bends to press a kiss to her snout. A moment later, he’s hustling me out of the house, eagerness radiating off of him. My eyes immediately land on the gleaming motorcycle parked at the edge of my driveway. All the blood in my body rushes in my ears until I feel a little dizzy with it.

Jackson’s firm hand on my elbow holds me up when my knees threaten to buckle. “Harper, it’s okay.”

I gesture dramatically towards the motorcycle, gleaming in the sunlight. “I can’t get on that!”

“Says who?” Jackson presses.

“Every medical professional in the tri-county area.”

“I spoke to Beau and Colby, and they both said it would be fine if we take certain

precautions. Don't you think they have your best interests at heart?"

My brain gets caught on Beau and Colby. He spoke to them? I cover my eyes with my hands, hoping to stem the anxiety swirling inside me.

Jackson wraps his fingers around my wrists and gently tugs my hands from my eyes. His gaze is so soft, so tender, that again, my brain quiets when all I want to do is spiral out of control. I want to yank free from his grasp, snarl, spit, and cry at him, but before I can even muster an ounce of anger, he tugs me into his arms. His warmth bleeds through his clothes and right into me until all I can do is fall against him in a rare show of trust.

"I'll keep you safe, I promise," Jackson whispers into my hair, voice rough but low.

Fed up with being vulnerable, I push out of his arms with a stilted nod. Jackson seems to understand. He guides us to the bike and grabs a helmet off the handle. He places the helmet over my head with a small, pleased smile.

Watching Jackson put on his own helmet is borderline pornographic. I wonder if maybe one day he'll leave the helmet on while I get on my knees for him. I've got to rush these fantasies before he gets bored.

He slips one long leg over the bike, straddling it in a way that has my blood pumping dangerously throughout my body. Now is not the time for a hard-on. Patting the seat behind him, he flips the visor of his helmet up to leer at me.

"Climb on, punk."

I flush with annoyance at the nickname but decide against arguing. Climbing onto the bike behind his strong body, I lean heavily against the small backrest behind me. Jackson's palm lands heavily on my thigh, squeezing just once in reassurance. My

skin breaks out with goose pimples under his touch. I want to snuggle into his body while simultaneously shoving him away.

“Squeeze your thighs tight around me,” Jackson orders, voice gruff. I do as he says, then stare in confusion as he wraps what looks like a seat belt around us both. “Now wrap your arms around me and hold tight. If you loosen up at all, I’m stopping. We’ll ride as long as you hold on tight to me. Got it?”

There must be mics in our helmets because it’s easy to hear him as if he’s whispering right against my ears. Jackson’s voice is somehow simultaneously deep and soft. He always sounds like he’s speaking to a spooked animal when he’s talking to me. One would think that would piss me off, send me hissing his way. But it doesn’t matter as long as his voice curls around me like a blanket fresh out of the dryer. If he narrated my life, maybe it wouldn’t be total shit.

“Yes,” I say softly.

He pats my hands once in acknowledgment after I wrap them tight around his stomach. I can feel the muscles of his abdomen contract under my touch as he starts up the bike. The bike rumbles between my legs, forcing me to slide a little closer against his back. My groin presses flush to his ass, sending a rush of desire zipping through me.

A delighted laugh breaks free from me when the motorcycle jumps, only to rumble slowly down the gravel road. God. It’s just like I imagined. The wind whips against my body, giving me the feeling of flying. Jackson’s hands grip the handles tight, his gaze steady on the road before us. I tighten my arms around him in the imitation of a hug, hoping maybe he’ll understand the action for how I mean it.

“Good?” Jackson questions, just as he turns down the county road leading deeper into farm country.

“Great,” I reply honestly.

Jackson guides us through a maze of roads, until we’re on a small two-lane highway that rarely sees much traffic. Citrus groves line either side of the road, a familiar sight that keeps my anxious heart strangely calm. Jackson slows the bike slightly with no one behind us. The rumble of the engine is still loud, but I’ve gotten used to it. The gentle purr of the motorcycle is oddly comforting as the bike speeds along.

We ride for so long that I almost forget about anything else but the feel of Jackson strong between my thighs, the rumble of the engine, and the light yellow autumn sun in the cloudless sky. A perfect day. Surely things will go to shit soon.

“I’m going to let go, but I promise I’m fine. Okay?” I say into the helmet.

Jackson turns his head slightly to look at me through his visor, no doubt gauging the truth of my statement. He nods once, then says, “Alright, Harper.”

I untangle my arms from around him just in time for him to slow the bike to a crawl. Holding my arms out at my sides, I lean back against the backrest, pretending for one moment that I’m flying. Delirious with joy, my lips hurt from the large stretch of my smile. A delighted laugh bubbles through my chest until I could almost weep with happiness.

Looping my arms back around him, I hook my head over his shoulder to hold on for dear life. The bike winds and swerves through the backcountry of Clay Springs until we bleed deeper into the part of the county that I rarely visit. Large farmhouses dot the sprawling landscape beside us. Jackson comes to a slow stop beside a fence with a few horses grazing in the distance.

After unbuckling the belt, he hops off the bike in one single, easy motion, then gently picks me up by the ribs to help me off as well. A biting remark threatens to slip out of

me, but I hold it back when I see the tender look on his face when he rips his helmet off. Jackson rests the helmet on the handle, then sweetly helps take mine off. He's too nice, at least for me.

"Wanna pet a horse?" Jackson asks, grin wide and sweet.

I glance uneasily back at the house further up the road. "What if we get in trouble?"

"We won't," Jackson reassures me.

Jackson walks over to the side of the bike, dipping down to tug a bag of apples out of the compartment. A beaming grin covers his face as he eagerly leads me towards the weathered fence. The horses wearily wander over toward us, curiosity leading them to investigate the new outsiders.

Jackson makes a clicking noise with his mouth as the horses get closer. One's dark chestnut brown, and the other is white with brown spots. Their heads shake, and their manes whip in the wind on their approach. Slowly, Jackson lifts his hand to reveal the shiny red apple. The braver horse, the chestnut-colored one, sniffs at Jackson's hand before promptly taking the apple in his mouth. Juice flies all over, dripping down the horse's teeth.

Haphazardly dangling over the edge of the fence, I prompt the other horse to step closer with a wiggle of my fingers. Reaching my hand out slowly, I carefully touch the white horse's muzzle, focusing on the ridge of its nose. The softest skin on earth, even as the horse trembles and shakes underneath me.

Jackson gently nudges my side. "Want to feed them?"

I nod excitedly, lips aching from smiling. He gently places an apple in my unoccupied hand. Holding it out to the horse, a giggle erupts from me when it quickly

eats it up, lips grazing over my hand. Just like the other horse, juice makes a mess of the horse's lips. I let my head fall against the horse's, feeling all sorts of small beside the large, gentle creature. A little whine escapes the horse, but otherwise, it doesn't seem to mind my petting it. They must be someone's prized possession. I know they'd be mine.

We feed the horses a few more apples, then watch as they amble away, no longer interested in us due to lack of food. I stay standing on the fence, hands carefully gripping the weathered wood to keep from falling. Only when I look down do I realize that Jackson was carefully situated behind me, hands on either side, in case I fell.

He helps me down with a firm grip on my hips. I stumble a little when hitting the ground, but he steadies me.

I brush a hand over his shoulder, letting it rest gently against the warm nape of his neck. "Thank you."

Jackson dips down to kiss me, just a soft brush of lips. "You're welcome. You have a way with animals."

"I'm feral like them. We understand one another."

"Feral, huh?" Jackson teases, one eyebrow raised.

I bite my lip and nod. "Wild and free."

Jackson lightly brushes the pads of his fingers down my face, finally hooking his fingers under my chin. His gaze is fathomless, swallowing me whole in the depths of his eyes. I think I could stare at him forever, smell the sweet scent of his skin. Everything about Jackson is beautiful, almost painfully so. It's going to hurt so bad

when he moves on.

“Let’s sit for a minute.” Jackson scopes out the side of the road before settling on a small patch of wildflowers close to the fence. After checking for bugs or snakes or God knows what, he pats the ground beside him as he folds his legs underneath himself.

I collapse beside him in a gangly pile of limbs. Usually, I’d feel self-conscious, but his heavy gaze makes me feel anything but. Plus, he’s already seen me naked, so obviously, he at least likes what I’ve got going on.

The breeze is cool when it whips over us, sending the tall grass over the fence swaying. I tug my knees up to loop my arms around my legs, resting my cheek against my jean-clad knees. Jackson plays idly with a piece of grass between his long fingers. A seemingly nervous habit.

After a while, his gaze lifts back to mine.

“I used to be an escort,” Jackson announces, apropos of nothing.

“Oh,” I say like an idiot, absolutely not knowing how to reply.

Jackson shakes his head softly. “I really like you, and I want to see where this goes. But it didn’t feel right to go into this without being upfront. I quit when I moved here, mostly because, well, I’m kind of tired of it.”

“Why’d you do it at all?”

Jackson sighs heavily, flicking the blade of grass to the ground. “I told you about my knee and the NBA. I’d always had this dream of paying off my parents’ home for them, letting them retire early. I had a friend in college who did escorting on the side,

and I just kind of fell into it. It helped me stay sane, although I didn't really need the money. I do just fine with my stocks."

"So you've been with a lot of people, then?" I ask, unable to help myself. Jealousy curdles in my stomach, awful and angry.

"I've been with a lot of people, yes." Jackson reaches over to splay his hand across my thigh. The touch is comforting, although I don't want it to be. "But I don't think about them when I'm trying to fall asleep at night. Okay?"

I flush and look away from him, but I don't lash out. Progress. Instead, I keep my gaze focused on the hills behind us and gently tangle my fingers with his against my thigh.

"If you've been with so many people, why on earth would you want to be with me?"

Jackson's fingers squeeze mine. I keep my gaze averted, not wanting to see the expression on his face. Not yet, at least.

"You're a spitfire, Harper. You hiss, spit, and claw at every sweet advance I make on you. There's probably something wrong with me, but I find more joy in you than I've found in anyone in the past few years. Trust me when I tell you that, please."

When I turn back to look at him, his eyes are soft, expression painfully sincere. What a fucking speech. Unable to form a word myself, I opt to tell him just what I think without uttering a sound. I hurriedly crawl into his lap and slam my mouth against his own. His hand finds a home in my hair, as he loves to do. The kiss is soft, perfectly sweet, and I wonder again what the time limit for this whole shebang is going to be. But in the meantime, I'll take his kisses, and I'll take his attention, storing it away for a cloudy, lonely day. Today was the date of my dreams, so surely there's no way any of this could last.

His thumb sweeps over my scar and his eyes ask a million questions. “Will you tell me?” Jackson asks softly.

“It’s stupid,” I murmur.

Jackson smiles that smile of his that makes my heart want to leap out of my chest, do cartwheels around the room. “I want to know every part of you, even if you think it’s stupid.”

So sweet I might barf.

“I had my first seizure while in a treehouse with Andy, when I was eight years old. I fell to the ground.” I gesture helplessly at the scar that most of the time I forget about. “Hit my head and broke my leg. Andy screamed bloody murder until Beau showed up, he carried me home.” I laugh bitterly at the memory. “My mother was so annoyed. Until she realized we were describing a seizure. Treehouses and adventures ended after that.”

Jackson’s thumb sweeps across the scar again as his eyes devour me whole. “I’m glad Beau helped you.”

“That’s Beau, the helper.”

“You trust him.”

I feel heat crawl up my neck. “He and Andy are basically siblings.”

“Good.”

And then he kisses me again, soft and sweet and some weird part of me starts to knit itself back together as his lips softly glide over mine.

Sometime later, we climb back on the bike and ride for a few more hours, until the sun hangs low in the sky. Jackson guides us back to my house, along the gravel road. The sound of Honey's familiar barks float to us the moment I take my helmet off. Skipping towards my home, I'm so focused on Honey that I miss the boxes at the front door. Only when I open the door to let her out do I notice them.

Honey, the little slut, beelines right for Jackson as he climbs off the bike. Helmet off and held in his strong grip, he crouches down to lavish her with attention. Annoying, but also endlessly sweet. It's important to me that if I end up with someone, Honey adores them. Two large pieces of my life need to get along well.

"Ah, good, I was worried it might not be here before we got back." Jackson strides up the stairs and dips down to grab the boxes. He gestures inside with one finger. "In you go."

"Excuse me?"

Jackson nods his head this time. "Inside, punk."

Normally, I'd dig my heels in, I'd fight, or make some kind of biting comment about being bossed around. But something about Jackson relaxes all those urges, probably because he's not doing it because he doesn't think I'm capable, he's coming at me from an angle of kindness. He wants to take care of me for some odd, stupid reason. So, I head inside the house, even though every urge inside me says to flee.

I watch in confusion as Jackson settles boxes on the kitchen island. Wait, the one box is lilac. Oh my God. It's Bee's. He flips the lid open with a grin, showing off the four cupcakes inside. But I don't recognize any of them as flavors I know.

"What are these?" I ask, leaning over the island to peer inside.

Jackson chuckles in amusement at my antics. “Trisha’s testing some things out. Thought that we could try them for her.”

I turn my head in surprise. “Really?”

He nods softly. “Got a plate?”

“Hell yeah.” I skip around the kitchen to grab two plates from the cabinet, along with two forks.

Jackson carefully takes the cupcakes out one by one, then peels off their liners before setting them on a single plate. The final cupcake he does the same, but places it on the other plate. He chuckles at my look of confusion.

“For Honey.”

And my heart promptly skips ten million beats when he gently places the plate on the floor for Honey.

“What’s in hers?” I ask, voice thick with emotion.

Jackson calls Honey over with a few snaps of his fingers, grinning widely when she licks at the cupcake without a question. “Peanut butter based. All of it is safe for her, Trisha promised. Let’s try ours.”

So we stand around the kitchen sampling the new Bee’s flavors. One is a rich and velvety gingerbread flavor for the upcoming holidays, one a dark, spicy chocolate, and the final one a sweet orange. I love them all.

I point at the chocolate one. “My favorite.”

Jackson snorts, then licks the length of his fork. “Not surprised. Chocolate is your favorite, huh?”

I roll my eyes at his awful innuendo. “Yes, chocolate is my favorite flavor.”

“I’ve never liked it much myself.” He places his fork down, grabs my hips, and tugs me roughly against him. “Maybe that’ll be different now.”

Before I can even blink, his mouth descends on mine. His tongue delves into my mouth, searching out every ounce of the chocolate flavor remaining from the cupcake. I dig my fingers into his neck, needing an anchor for the decadent ride that’s his kiss. His hands cup my ass and lift, then he gently places me on the island. Wrapping my legs around his waist, I pull him in closer, until I’m pressed so tight against him that it’s borderline painful. The feel of his body against mine doesn’t scare me like I thought it would. Instead, my heart calms, and my brain fills with this delightful loud static.

His warm palm slips under my shirt, caressing the skin at the small of my back. As he kisses me, his fingers dip under the waistband of my pants, skimming against my skin until his hand presses against my stomach. I tremble under his touch, mind hyper-aware, but silent at the same time as he kisses me into behaving.

“Can I suck your dick?” Jackson asks fervently against my parted lips.

I pant hard, delirious at the idea of his mouth around me. “Fuck.”

Jackson chuckles darkly. “Is that a yes?”

Stay cool, Harper. Be cool. Chill. I unwind my legs and arms from around him, splaying my palms on the cold island behind me in a show of absolute chillness. Leaning back in the most effortless way I can, I nod my head towards my lap.

“I’m yours.”

Jackson swallows thickly, eyes firmly on mine. “Don’t say that unless you mean it, punk.”

I lie back against the cold kitchen island, dramatically splaying my arms out to my sides with a dreamy sigh. “Suck my dick, Daddy.”

Jackson growls and unleashes weeks of pent-up horniness on me. I gasp in shock when he all but rips my jeans off. He tugs me closer to the edge of the island, using his shoulders to hold up my thighs. Burying his head in my still-boxer-covered groin, he moans and mouths at me through my underwear. Oh, fuck. I definitely should not have goaded him. He’s going to kill me.

Fingers digging into my thighs, he goes at me like I’m the last meal he’ll ever have. The heat of his mouth bleeds through my boxers, straight into my skin. Fuck. My head spins with the ecstasy of his rough touch. Just when I’ve gotten used to his mouth on me over cloth, his fingers slip into the waistband to tug my boxers down. My cock slaps against my stomach and his gaze pings up to mine.

“I’m going to put my mouth on you now. Okay?”

My head taps against the granite as I nod rapidly, just wanting his mouth on me already. Jackson grins, feral and wicked, then sucks my cock down to the back of his throat. Oh my God. I claw at the island just for a moment, before giving in and laying my hands over Jackson’s head. His hair is short and prickly against my palms as I gently rub my hands over his head. He swallows around me, throat constricting against the head of my painfully hard cock. Stars explode in my vision at the glorious sensation. It’s like nothing I’ve ever felt before. Pure ecstasy.

Jackson’s fingers dig hard into the meat of my thighs, tugging me closer just to bury

his nose against my overheated skin. My thighs tremble around his head, squeezing tight when he pulls off to lick at the crown of my cock.

“Oh no. Jackson... if you don’t stop...”

His dark eyes flash at me. “You’ll come when I say you can.”

“What?” I gasp out, chest heaving.

Jackson swirls his tongue around the head, making my toes curl tight. His fingers curl tight around the base. “You’ll come when I say you can, understood?”

“And if I come when I want?”

Jackson licks a stripe up my cock with a devilish grin. “Well, you’d be a bad boy, then. And bad boys get punished.”

I lean up on my elbows, groaning when he sucks me back down again. “What will you do? Spank me?”

Swirling his tongue around the head of my cock, Jackson hums against the sensitive head, igniting sparks of pleasure in my veins.

“I think you’d like spanking too much. It would have to be something else.”

“Whatever, Daddy,” I mumble, mostly teasing but also a little serious.

Jackson dives back down on my cock, visibly hungry for me. My legs quake and shake around his shoulders until I can’t hold it back anymore. Punishment be damned, I’m just about to come when Jackson pulls off quickly to mumble, “Come, Harper.”

The best orgasm of my life rolls through me like waves in a violent ocean. My brain fills with static, and my limbs turn into jelly. Jackson swallows every ounce of my cum down, then proceeds to softly lick my cock until I'm a trembling mess underneath him.

Warm and satiated, I blink up at the ceiling in a liquified daze. Jackson carefully drags my boxers and jeans back up, placing a sweet kiss just underneath my belly button. The soft kiss tickles, startling a laugh out of me. Jackson leans against the island, elbows on either side of my head, and cocks his head to the side.

"Can I kiss you?" Jackson asks shyly, expecting me to say no.

Instead of answering him with useless words, I wrap my palm around the nape of his neck and tug him down to press our mouths together. He still tastes like Jackson, but he also tastes like me. It shouldn't work, it should probably gross me out. But I like the taste of myself on his tongue because just for a brief moment in time, he belongs to me.

"My turn?" I ask against his mouth, the words more of a mumble than a coherent sentence.

Jackson grins wide and broad, pressing the smile to my lips. "You wanna suck my dick?"

Yes, I do. But I'm also scared because what if I'm bad at it? What if I choke, literally? Jackson must see something in my eyes because he hovers over me, a considering, careful look in his eyes.

"Another time."

I'm oddly relieved but also a little annoyed. I settle for kissing him some more,

searching out the taste of myself on his tongue. Jackson slows our kiss with shushing noises as if I'm a wild cobra, and he's calming me from biting. Maybe, in a way, he is. By the time he pulls away, I've memorized the taste of him. And before he leaves through the front door, he presses one lingering kiss to my brow. I hold my hands to my lips to keep the taste of him there. Forever on my lips.

10

JACKSON

Now that I've got Harper in my grip, I will never let go. Proving that to Harper will probably be my entire life's work. The way his eyes had lit up at the sight of the horses still fills my chest with a pulsing, radiating warmth. Like there's a fucking supernova inside of me just from bringing him joy. Maybe his genuine smiles mean more because of how rarely they appear. But I want to see them a million times a day. I want to earn those smiles and be the main source of them.

Also, sucking his dick was an otherworldly experience. The slight flush of his skin, the taste of him, even the cloying, pretend confidence as he teased me into sucking him off... Whoever would've guessed that would be a turn-on for me?

After sucking him off, I had this possessive urge to hold him all night, keep him close to me. But Harper had jumped off the island with a nervous, almost terrified air and all but hustled me out of the house. I'm onto him, though. Being vulnerable terrifies him, and there's nothing more vulnerable than letting your new boyfriend suck you off for the very first time.

Every morning I send him a good morning text.

Every morning he replies with something snotty, sarcastic, or fussy.

Jesus, why does that turn me on?

We might be dating but I'm not an idiot. I know he's waiting for me to drop him like a sack of hot potatoes. But he's severely underestimated just how much I want him. I don't know how anyone could ever look at him and not want him with every ounce of their soul.

November starts with a sweet, cold front. Floridians act like snow is coming with their sweatshirts, jeans, and pumpkin spice lattes. Fall in the South has always been one of my favorites. The leaves stay green, but the weather cools, and everyone seems just a little happier.

I keep the windows open in the townhome as I mess with stocks, setting my income for the day. My phone buzzes on the kitchen island with an incoming call and the only person it could be is my mother. Part of me wishes it was Harper, but I think hell would freeze over before that man called me.

"Hi, Mama."

Mama laughs into the phone, easy and sweet. "Hi, honey. I was calling to see if you're planning to come home for Thanksgiving. Or are you staying in Florida with your friends?"

"I can come home if you and Dad want me to."

"Tell him to get his ass home!" Dad hollers from what sounds like the other end of the house.

"Well, you heard the man." Mama sighs a little, then whispers, "His blood sugar is still elevated. The man isn't taking care of himself and he doesn't want to listen to me."

I swallow loudly. "Got it, Mama. Also, can I bring someone?"

“Oh?” She sounds pleasantly surprised, considering I’ve never brought someone home.

“There’s this boy...”

“Good. Please give me grandchildren before I’m too old to dote on them.”

“I’ll try, but when two boys love one another...”

Mama shushes me; then we work out what days I’ll be coming home. A plan formulates itself in my head as we talk. I just wonder how amenable Harper would be to coming with me and having a few days’ stay in Georgia. It gives me a little over two weeks to plan something extravagant for him.

We have a date scheduled for the weekend, so I’ve decided to bring it up then. Especially since Harper ignores anything remotely serious in our messages. He’s always got a joke or pun for me, but when I get anything close to talking about feelings, he shuts down and disappears. Getting him to talk in person is going to be my only option.

By the time our date rolls around, I’m so eager to see Harper that I feel like a goddamn puppy. I’d planned to take Harper for a walk downtown and a dinner at a steakhouse, but there’s a car idling in the driveway when I pull in.

I park behind the car in the circular driveway, eyeing it suspiciously as I hop up the steps to Harper’s door. Just as I’m about to raise my hand to knock, a shout echoes through the door, loud and angry.

Instead of knocking, I opt to just walk in. Harper’s wrath be damned. The voices carry from the kitchen, and Harper’s voice is hushed as if calming an angry person. Honestly, I’m a little concerned I’m able to walk right in without Honey’s notice.

Doesn't exactly seem safe.

Harper stands in the kitchen, arms crossed, a look of absolute vitriol on his face. An older woman with strawberry-blonde hair stands across from him, a pinched, angry look on her face.

"I just think that I should've found out from you that you had another seizure, not from my cousin."

"I understand," Harper says slowly as if he's speaking to a rabid dog with no ability to reason. "Next time, I'll tell you the moment after I wake up covered in piss."

"Harper!" The woman shouts while throwing her hands in the air. "I'm your mother, I give a shit. Fuck me, right?"

"Sorry for interrupting," I say loudly, not sorry at all.

Relief colors Harper's face for one single moment before he steels himself again. The woman turns around to stare in obvious confusion at my presence in her son's kitchen. Her gaze pings from me to Harper, clearly waiting for an explanation that Harper is not going to give.

"We have a date tonight," I cautiously remind Harper.

Harper sighs loudly, then firmly pinches the bridge of his nose. "Thank you, Jackson."

"A date?" his mother asks softly, gaze steady on me.

I send her a shy wave, hoping to make myself seem likable. Should be pretty easy. I've been told I'm plenty likable. The tension breaks with a snap as she steps forward

with her hand extended. We shake hands briefly, her grip firm. She turns back to Harper with a tremulous smile.

“You could tell me things like this,” she says softly, then turns back to me. “I’m Olivia.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Jackson, Harper’s boyfriend.”

Harper blows a very loud raspberry. “Mother, we were going out. Can I see you out?”

Harper ushers Olivia out with a strong grip on her slim shoulders. A few whispers reach my ears, but I can’t make out the words. A moment later, Harper returns to the kitchen, a fake smile plastered on his face.

“Hi.” Harper leans up on his toes to kiss my jaw.

I cup his shoulders and tug him away to look into his tired eyes. “Did you have another seizure?”

Harper visibly rankles at my question. He shrugs out of my grip with a sneer.

“I’m not talking about this.”

“Who are you going to talk to, then?” I say loudly until he turns to face me again. “If not me, not your parents, then who?”

“Listen, I’ve got it all under control, Jackson. If this is how you’re going to be, then let’s end it right now.”

I snort with a roll of my eyes. “You’d love that, wouldn’t you.”

This time, Harper does sneer. “What does that mean?”

“You’re just waiting for me to run, so it’s easier if I do it now, right? Before you invest any more emotions or any more time, cut and run. I’m not fucking going anywhere, buttercup. You can either tell me what’s going on, or I’ll find out from the people you do tell. Andy? I know she knows.”

Harper screams at the top of his lungs, fists curled into tight balls at his sides. The action is so surprising that I startle just a little, but I stand unmoving, unafraid of whatever fury he can unleash on me. The scream stops, only to turn into a whimper of a cry. A tear tracks down his cheek, but he angrily wipes it away as if we both won’t notice it.

“Harper,” I whisper, worry about him choking me.

Harper holds out a trembling hand to prevent me from stepping close. I respect his wish and stay where I am, waiting for him to come to me. A few minutes slip by, but just as I thought, once the anger fades and the tears disappear, my Harper stands before me. He crosses the space between us and throws his entire weight against me. I fold my arms around him, cradling his head in the palm of my hand.

“It’s okay,” I murmur into his ear, lips caressing his skin.

“I didn’t have another seizure, not since our date,” Harper admits, fingers curling tightly into my sweater as if to anchor himself to me. “She’s just mad that she found out about that one from Cindy.”

“Please promise me you’ll tell me if you have one.” I press my cheek against the top of his head, inhaling the sweet smell of whatever shampoo he uses. “I care about you. Don’t punish me for that.”

“Okay,” Harper reluctantly agrees.

“How about we stay here tonight? We can make out and watch television.”

Harper pulls away to look up at me with his wide eyes. “I just have premade food.”

“We’ll order something.”

Harper grumbles. “Nothing delivers out here.”

“They will for the right amount of money. Do you like Italian?”

Harper tosses himself on the sofa with a large sigh. “Who doesn’t?”

Leaving Harper on the couch, I return to the kitchen to call the restaurant. A couple of hundred dollars later, our delivery order should be arriving in a little over an hour. Harper and Honey are curled around each other on the couch when I return to the living room. I slump onto the couch beside Harper, tucking my arm around his shoulders. It physically hurts to hold back my smile when Harper leans against my side with a contented sigh.

“I want to ask you something.” I twirl a piece of Harper’s hair around my fingers as he leans his head against my bicep to look up at me. “Will you come home with me for Thanksgiving?”

Harper’s mouth pinches, clearly wanting to lash out. He takes a few deep breaths and then nods in agreement. Wow. That was pretty easy. There must be a catch.

“I have to bring Honey,” Harper gently reminds me as if I’d tell him no as if she isn’t my best girl.

“Of course.”

Harper leans back against me with a happy sigh. All traces of his little explosion from earlier are gone, leaving the sweet version of Harper that I crave so much.

“Did you have a good week?”

Harper shrugs against me. “Mostly. Better now.”

Fuck. I tip his head up with a finger under his chin and kiss him. He sighs against my mouth, body relaxing heavier into my side, the ultimate sign of trust. Harper tastes like chocolate, as if he had some right before I arrived. But he also just tastes like Harper. A taste that I’m starting to recognize as familiar, as grounding, instead of something new.

“What was that for?” Harper asks when I finally pull away.

“I just missed you, is all.”

A smirk tilts just one side of Harper’s lips up. “Can I suck your dick now?”

I groan into his messy hair. He’s going to kill me. Only Harper would ask to suck my dick after I gave him a sweet, lingering, I’m so in like with you kind of kiss.

“How long have you been thinking about that?”

Harper pretends to think, eyes scrunched deeply at the corners. “Since you told me no last time.”

“Come here.” I manhandle Harper into my lap until I can tangle my hands in his hair to tug him down for a decadent kiss. The moan he lets out when my tongue caresses

his own sends my cock to full hardness. I roughly grab on to his hips and tug him down, letting him feel how hard I am just for him.

He tugs away with a gasp, eyes wide and blown with desire. Lips wet from our kiss, he licks the lingering wetness away as if to keep the flavor of us on his tongue. I curl my fingernails into my palm, hoping to stave off my orgasm as long as I can. Harper's big, green eyes hold my gaze as he slinks down my body, landing on his knees between my spread legs.

Harper licks his lips again while roughly rubbing his palms up and down my clothed thighs. I keep my hands hanging loosely at my sides, letting Harper take this at his own pace. My heart skips a beat when his fingers carefully unbutton my jeans. One look from him is all the direction I need to lift up slightly so that he can tug my jeans down just enough.

Unable to resist touching him any longer, I softly brush the pads of my fingers across his crimson cheek. "I'll like whatever you do, I promise. You're the sexiest thing that's ever knelt between my thighs. We're in this together. I'll walk you through it."

Surprisingly, Harper doesn't argue. With a quiet release of breath, he quickly tugs my boxers down and stares longingly at my cock when it slaps my stomach. A drop of pre-cum leaks from my tip under his heated stare. Harper tilts his head in wonder, lifts his hand, and gathers the pre-cum on his fingertip. I watch, frozen, fully entranced, as he closes his eyes, seemingly savoring the taste of me.

The next moment, Harper's leaning forward and taking my cock into his warm mouth. I dig my fingers into the softness of his sofa to prevent myself from grabbing on to his hair and fucking into his mouth. Not this time. I don't want to overwhelm him. A little choking noise escapes him when he sucks me down too deep, but instead of pulling off, it seems to spur him on further.

He swallows me down to the back of his throat with a loud moan that reverberates through me. With his nose buried in my groin, his hands grope for mine. I try to tangle our fingers together, but he shakes me off; instead, he raises my hands to his head and then pats my hands. Fucking Jesus shit. His eyes lift to mine, tears lining the rims.

“You want me to fuck your face?” I ask, voice breaking for the first time in over a decade. No one ever makes me feel unsure or off-footed during sex. Only Harper.

Harper nods as much as he can while holding my gaze. I brush my thumb along his cheek, feeling it hollow as I drag him up, then slide him back down. It takes every ounce of willpower for me to not tilt my head back, just go for the ride, and enjoy the sensations. Fucking into his mouth is divine. A few tears fall and splash against my wrists, spurring me to fuck his face faster.

His fingers dig into my thighs, all while he makes little moans of pleasure, slurping at my cock, fucking choking on it. My thighs tremble around his thin frame. Pleasure forms hot and terrifying at the base of my spine, demanding that I come as soon as I can. I try to drag him off, to give him a warning, but he only hollows his cheeks out more, sucking me so deeply that I bury myself in his throat and come.

My body slumps against the sofa, boneless with pleasure. Harper breathes heavily through his nose, swallowing rapidly to take every ounce of my cum down his throat. It's impossible he's never done this before. I refuse to believe it. Everything he's told me has been an elaborate ruse to gift me with the greatest fucking pleasures I've ever experienced.

Harper slowly releases me from his mouth, then wipes his lips with the back of his forearm. Cocking his head to the side, he dissects me with all the dedication of a hawk studying their prey.

“Good?”

“Harper, you have no fucking idea...” I trail off and drag him into my lap to lick the taste of myself from his mouth. He moans into my mouth, tongue sliding against my own. He’s so hot against me, a burning furnace of want, desire, and fucking mine. He’s mine.

I wiggle my hand between us, unbutton his jeans one-handed, and slip my hand into his boxers. He moans against my mouth when I curl my hand around the heavy length of him. It only takes a few tugs of my dry palm for Harper to go rigid against me, his cum splashing against my stomach and into my hand.

He pants against my lips, body loose and heavy from his orgasm. I lift my hand between us, slowly licking it clean as he watches me with wide eyes.

“That was...” Harper closes his eyes as if at a loss for words.

“Are you seriously telling me that was the first dick you’ve ever sucked?”

Harper hums and nods. “I must be a natural.”

“Are you interested in being fucked?” I ask just because I have to fucking know. If he’s not, it won’t matter. We’ll work it out regardless. But goddamn, the idea of burying myself inside him lights me up like nothing else.

“Yeah, Daddy.”

I bury my fingers in his hair and yank until he gasps. “Don’t be a little shit.”

“Sorry, Daddy.” But the twinkle in his eye tells me he’s not the least bit embarrassed.

I kiss him again until he melts against me. We clean up just in time for dinner to arrive. Harper helps plate the food so it feels less like we're eating delivery and more like we're eating a home-cooked meal.

Sitting at the kitchen island, we share the mixture of food that I ordered. Harper seems to prefer the shrimp Alfredo, so I focus on the gnocchi. Tearing into the garlic knots, Harper sends me a wicked grin.

"Good thing we fucked beforehand so we don't have to kiss each other with garlic breath."

"I'll kiss you, garlic breath or not."

Harper laughs loud and pleased, making me bite my lip to hold back a full-blown grin. "You're the most ridiculous man I've ever met."

I swipe a garlic knot through the red sauce on my plate. "You make me this way."

Harper hums in disbelief as he mimics me, swiping his garlic knot through my plate's red sauce. "So, should I request the entire week of Thanksgiving off?"

"Yes, please."

A small, pleased grin flirts at the corner of Harper's mouth before he suppresses it. "Alright, Daddy."

"One day, you're going to say that with a lot more pleasure on your lips."

Harper chews his garlic knot thoughtfully, all while eyeing me with a level of disdain that should be a turn-off but strangely riles me up all over again.

“We’ll see, Daddy.”

I kiss him because garlic breath be damned. When he chuckles against my lips, I know I’ve won.

Every year, the boys and I do Friendsgiving. We get together to celebrate our friendship, while also pigging out on our favorite foods. The day is one of my favorites. This year will be even better because now Harper will be there with me. Whether he likes it or not.

“Don’t kiss me in front of Beau and Colby,” Harper demands, all grumpy and hissing like a kitten.

We aren’t even in the house yet and already with the demands. Harper sits in the passenger seat, arms crossed, a pout on his perfect lips. Maybe I should’ve given him a warning that tonight’s date night was Friendsgiving, but I didn’t want to give him more time to figure out an excuse to not come.

“Can I hold your hand?” I ask sarcastically.

Harper’s lips twitch at the corners. “No.”

“Can I look at you at least?”

“Once every thirty minutes is fine.”

I nod in acceptance of his demand just as the car comes to a stop in front of Colby’s house. “I’ll set a timer on my phone.”

Harper sighs loudly, then pinches the bridge of his nose. “All right, let’s go.”

“Nope.” I cup the nape of his neck, letting my fingers curl into the soft hair there. My mouth is on Harper’s before he can even utter a word. It takes a few teasing swipes of my tongue, but finally, he opens for me, relaxing into my hold. When I pull away, he’s starry-eyed and quiet. “Better?”

“Yes,” Harper admits quietly, as if it’s a secret.

“If you get overwhelmed and want to sneak away to kiss me, just tug on your ear.”

Harper chuckles against my lips. “How will you see the sign if you’re not allowed to look at me?”

I mock gasp. “Oh no, maybe the don’t look at me order should be lifted.”

Harper drops his forehead to my chest, his fingers tightening against my stomach. Colby comes out of the house barefoot and waving when he spots us in the car. A little furrow forms between Colby’s eyes as he looks on. I hold a finger up in the universal sign for one more moment, watching as he returns inside.

“Okay, you can look at me,” Harper agrees with an air of giving up. “But no kissing.”

“Alright, punk. Time to go in.”

I kiss his cheek, grinning like a loon when he closes his eyes in bliss at the feel of my lips.

We walk into the warm farmhouse hand in hand despite Harper’s earlier reluctance for displays of affection in front of his family. Honey’s vest is off tonight, so she wiggles and pants when Whiskey comes into view. They huff and nuzzle at one another before disappearing into the living room to the right.

Everyone's gathered on the back porch under the glowing fairy lights. It's the perfect evening to be outside. The air has a slight chill, and the wind whips the cool, fresh smell of the trees behind Colby's house toward us. Eli stands whispering with Colby at the edge of the back porch, but he grins widely upon spotting us.

"There you two are! We thought maybe you weren't coming."

"Sorry, Jackson had a fashion snafu. We wore the same thing, and he had to change... it was all very dramatic." Harper drops my hand and heads towards the outdoor sofas, plopping down beside a grinning Trevor.

Everyone looks between me and Harper as if gauging the truth of the statement. But I can't stop thinking about Harper wearing my clothes, maybe just one of my shirts, nothing else at all. Oh no. That's not a conducive train of thought for right now at all. Harper smirks wickedly and murmurs something to Trevor, making my friend borderline cackle. I flick my gaze to Beau just in time to see him hide his grin at the sound of Trevor's laughter. We're all seriously lovesick.

"How's it been going?" Eli asks softly, his gaze also trained on Harper.

"Good, when he's not trying to push me away."

Eli places his hand on my forearm, squeezing in reassurance. "I'm pretty sure he's worth pushing through his sky-high barriers. I've never seen you so enamored with someone. I like it seeing you this way."

"Ditto." I dip down to kiss his cheek, earning myself a swat on the arm.

"Beer or wine?" Colby asks as he comes up behind Eli.

"Nothing for me, solidarity with Harper."

Colby smiles an approving little smile and hands Eli the wineglass he'd been holding. Satisfied that I passed some hidden test, I make my way over to the sofa. The spot beside Beau is empty, so I plop down beside him.

"Still bored?" Beau asks, obviously trying to make conversation.

"Much less now. You've missed the window to put me to work at the farm."

Beau laughs low in his throat. "The season is winding down at the farm now. Looks like we both missed our windows." Beau runs a hand through his hair, turning his gaze towards me. "How's he doing?"

Clearly, everyone is more comfortable asking me than asking Harper himself. I totally understand it, but I'm his boyfriend, not his keeper. I'm not going to set a precedent for reporting on his health.

"He's happy to be here tonight," I say in answer.

Beau's smile holds an air of approval. "Well, I doubt that's the truth. He'd much rather be planning world domination than at a dinner with friends."

"We're like Pinky and The Brain. If he plans it, I'll help him carry it out."

Beau's laugh this time is loud, gaining the attention of the men around us.

"What's so funny?" Eli asks, sipping slowly at his wine before he sits on the still-empty sofa beside Trevor.

"Jackson's hilarious," Beau replies seriously.

"I compared Harper and I to Pinky and The Brain," I admit with a grin.

Everyone chuckles except for Harper. He only studies me for a moment before turning his gaze towards Honey and Whiskey. The dogs are playing in the short grass, a toy tossed in the air between them every now and then.

Colby takes a seat beside Eli, dropping a proprietary hand to his boyfriend's thigh. "What're everyone's Thanksgiving plans?"

"We'll be with Mama and Andy," Beau announces, eyes on Trevor.

Trevor tilts his beer towards Beau with a smile. "What he said."

Colby shares a secret smile with Eli. "I think we're going to take a trip to the beach house."

"What about you two?" Eli asks as he turns back towards the rest of the group.

"I'm taking Harper home."

Harper flushes a bright, vivid red and slinks down in the sofa cushions as if hoping he can disappear.

"Oh, that's great!" Eli says excitedly, gaze flicking from me to Harper. "Jackson's mom is the best. She makes this sinful macaroni and cheese that I still think about to this day."

"You've met them?" Harper asks quietly.

"Yes, one time I spent Christmas with them. My mother was traveling, and Jackson invited me along. You'll have a great time, Harper. They're even sweeter than Jackson."

“How is that possible,” Harper mumbles in disbelief under his breath.

Trevor leans over to whisper something in Harper’s ear. Curiously, Harper flushes an even deeper shade of crimson. The night goes on around us, enjoying dinner outside under the stars. Harper sits beside me, but I give him the space he requested. Although it’s almost impossibly hard to keep my hands off of him. Eli gives everyone a hearty helping of pecan pie. Harper devours the pie at the speed of light despite only eating half of his dinner. The man’s sweet tooth is insane.

We all end up in Colby’s living room, sitting around the piano. Colby plays a few classical songs to a large round of applause from the group of us. The man blushes at the praise and waves everyone off.

“Any requests?” Colby asks with a grin.

“Hannah Montana,” Trevor says with an answering teasing grin.

Eli laughs so hard mid-sip of wine that half of it ends up dribbling down his chin. Colby loses it then and leans forward to wipe the wine away.

“Jesus, Eli, keep it in your mouth,” I tease.

Eli rolls his eyes deeply. “Hilarious. Anyway, yes, do you know any Hannah, Colby?”

Colby stares at Eli in obvious contempt. “No, sorry, I don’t know any Hannah Montana.”

Harper strides confidently over to the piano. He shoos Colby off the piano bench, and Colby goes with raised eyebrows and a small, knowing smile. Harper takes a seat at the bench, dancing his fingers so lightly over the keys that no sound happens.

Leaning back harder against the leather sofa, I watch as Harper finally starts to play the beginnings of “The Climb.” Probably not the song that Trevor was going for, but something in my heart goes just a little wonky at the familiar sound of the song.

A furrow of deep concentration forms between Harper’s brow. His auburn hair flows over his shoulders, but a few pieces escape to cover his face. I absolutely loathe those few strands of errant hair. I want to brush the strands away so I can have a clear picture of his face when he starts to sing. Trevor unfurls from the sofa and joins Harper at the bench, earning him a surprised look from Harper.

They sing the song together, voices just barely harmonizing. Trevor’s voice is low, while Harper’s is a little higher, but a small, private smile warms Harper’s face as they sing, and that’s what matters most.

“I didn’t know he could play,” I murmur helplessly, caught in another wave of desire.

“He was a bit of a prodigy as a kid,” Beau says like he’s sharing a state secret.

I raise one eyebrow. “What happened?”

Beau shrugs. “Nothing. He just lost the passion for it, I guess.”

Harper finishes playing the song, a warm, beautiful flush on the apples of his cheeks. Everyone claps as Harper does a small bow while seated. His eyes meet mine just as his hand slowly lifts to tug at his left ear. That’s my cue.

“On that note, we’ll be heading out.” I shake hands with Beau and Colby.

Harper’s just finishing hugging Trevor when I finally make my way over to him. I kiss both Trevor and Eli on the cheeks before guiding Harper out of the house without a single word. Honey streaks ahead of us and waits like a good girl for me to

open the back door up for her. Once she's settled in the back row, I help Harper into the passenger seat, then lean in to kiss him firmly on the mouth.

I pull away before I can get carried away. Harper's mouth has a way of short-circuiting my brain.

"I didn't know you could play piano," I admit into the quiet of the car.

Harper waves his hand dismissively. "I played as a kid; now it's mostly one of those fun little tidbits when there's an icebreaker somewhere."

"I thought you played beautifully."

"Colby has a baby grand. Anything I play on it will sound beautiful."

I huff in irritation. "Harper, take a damn compliment."

Harper's fingers dance across his thigh, and he turns his head away so that his face is hidden from me. Sometimes, the man makes no sense. He likes to be a little shit and make people laugh, but when attention is on him, he turns profoundly uncomfortable. He's a mystery inside a puzzle inside an enigma. How many years is it going to take for me to understand him? I don't fucking care because I'll wait, but it's infuriating.

I think Harper may need a heavier hand than I initially realized.

Harper keeps the lights off in the house, so only the glow of the under-cabinet kitchen lights breaks through the dark. I follow him into his bedroom like he's a planet, and I'm just a moon stuck in his orbit. Which is the truth of the matter. I've been circling him for months now. Harper lifts off his navy-blue sweater, dropping it to the ground without a care in the world.

He starts to unbuckle his pants just as he turns his head to peer at me over the creamy skin of his shoulder. “You should fuck me.”

Christ. He always wants to ruin my goddamn plans. Blood rushes in my ears at the sight of him wiggling out of his jeans. The sight of all that pale, creamy skin has saliva pooling in my mouth. I need to worship him with my lips, kissing every inch of his skin. Harper finally shimmies out of his boxers, leaving him gloriously nude. God, his ass. I want to bury my face between his cheeks and live there for the rest of my days. Giving him every ounce of pleasure he’s deserved his entire life.

“Harper,” I say his name like a swear.

He stretches his arms over his head, bunching up the slight muscles on his back. Dimples pop on each of his ass cheeks. I can hear my breath coming faster, somehow disconnected from my own body.

“Yes, Daddy?” Harper says, voice a low tease.

“Go take a shower and clean yourself for me. Thoroughly. I’ll be waiting here for you.”

Harper’s shoulders tense with the command, but he doesn’t argue. A sign that tells me he’s thankful not to be given an option. My Harper is a brat to his core, but when he wants something deep down, he doesn’t fight. He gives in so easily when it’s what his heart truly desires. And I know what he wants, truly even needs, is for me to be Daddy.

The shower turns on, and moments later the sound of water sluicing over Harper’s body echoes through the room, water hitting the tile walls. I take off my shoes, but that’s it, choosing to stay fully clothed for tonight. The nightstand beside Harper’s bed hides a curious amount of toys that I ignore for now, deciding that’s a question

for another time. Grabbing the bottle of lube, I toss it onto the comforter, then wait patiently at the foot of the bed for Harper to finish the shower.

When Harper finally exits the bathroom, a cloud of steam follows him. His skin is flushed with heat and his eyes sharpen at the sight of me still fully dressed.

“I thought you were going to fuck me?” Harper asks quietly, voice beautifully shy.

I point at the bed instead of answering. “Get on the bed, lie on your stomach.”

I can see the moment it all clicks, the moment he decides to push his chances. His nostrils flare slightly, fingers tensing and relaxing at his side.

“No.”

“Harper,” I say, voice low and deep. A shiver rolls through Harper, but he stares at me without flinching, a challenge in his deep green eyes. “For once in your life, be a good boy and listen without arguing. Good boys get rewarded with pleasure, and bad boys don’t. Be a good boy for me and get on the bed.”

Harper squeezes his eyes tightly shut as if at war with himself. I have to bite back a grin when he silently heads towards the bed; shoulders slumped in defeat. Once he lies down, I let my eyes trail over the expanse of his body, taking stock of every inch of beautiful skin. His skin pebbles beneath my touch as I slowly glide my fingers from his ankle to the back of his knee.

Only the sound of his deep breathing fills the room. I dance my fingers all along his skin until he’s trembling underneath me, begging me without words to give him more of my touch. His skin is soft beneath my lips when I kiss those two irresistible dimples of his perfectly round ass cheeks. Touching Harper is divine, as close to the pearly gates as I’ll ever get.

I nudge his legs apart more so he's on his stomach with his legs in the shape of a V. His arms are tucked under the pillow, out of sight, and his hair shields his face from my view. I can't have that. If I'm going to take care of him tonight, then I want to see all the fruits of my labor.

Harper shivers beneath my lips as I kiss up his spine, licking his skin to savor the taste of him. Roughly gathering his hair at the nape of his neck, I press my mouth to his ear.

"Tell me where you have a hair tie."

Harper's eyes are beautifully glassy when they flicker to me. Wordlessly, he removes his arm from under the pillow, holding his arm out for me so I can slip the tie off of his wrist. I comb my fingers through his slightly damp hair, fixing it in a messy braid so it lies down the gentle curve of his spine. I slip my hand under his head, turning his head toward me so I can kiss him senseless until he's a trembling mess beneath me.

"Do you trust me?" I ask against his parted lips.

"Always," Harper promises.

I trail my lips back down his spine, grabbing the bottle of lube as I go. A gasp rattles out of Harper when I part his cheeks, only to nuzzle my nose against him, inhaling the clean scent of him. When I gently lick his hole, his legs spasm, and he scrambles onto his elbows to look back at me.

"Jackson?" Harper asks, cheeks flushed, gaze weary.

"You said you trust me." I raise my hand to press him back down flat against the bed.

"Let me take care of you. Just let go."

When I lick him again, his thighs tense underneath me, and a deep, guttural moan floats from his parted lips. From this angle, I can lick into him and clearly see his face taut with pleasure.

“Jackson... oh my God...” Harper trails off with another moan.

Heaven is buried between Harper’s ass cheeks. His fingers curl tightly into the blanket as I lick into him, feeling him soften around my tongue each time I press in further. It would be so easy to just fuck him like this, but I have plans, so tonight, it’ll just have to be about his pleasure alone.

I pull away from him to generously coat my fingers with lube. He pants underneath me, gyrating his hips against the bed to seek friction. Normally, I’d punish him for that, but I know how on the edge he has to be. I roughly flip him over, settling between his splayed thighs so that they rest over my own. Pressing my finger against his entrance, I tap my finger against his hole a few times in a silent ask for him to let me in. His eyes squeeze shut, and he relaxes enough for me to slip in up to my knuckle. God, he’s so fucking hot.

His head tilts back as I search out his prostate, pressing against it once I find it. Harper claws at the bed, swallowing loudly over and over as if he’s trying to gulp down air. Taking pity on him, I take his cock in a tight grip, roughly pumping it in my hand.

The tendons in his neck pop with strain as he tightens around my finger. His cock is angry and red, begging for him to come. I realize with startling clarity that Harper is holding off his orgasm because I haven’t yet given him permission. He’s so fucking good, so perfect, and so very mine.

“Harper, love, you can come whenever you want.”

Harper mumbles an incoherent sentence before tensing up, back arching off the bed with the intensity of his orgasm. His release coats my fingers, and I stroke him through it, needing to bring him down gently from the volatile orgasm shaking through him. My cock is painfully hard, but I don't care about my pleasure, not when Harper is blinking at the ceiling in a daze like he just saw the face of God.

I lick my hand clean, holding back a feral grin when Harper's eyes firmly shut to blot out the sight. The taste of him is decadent on my tongue. Once I've cleaned my hand, I eagerly lick the cum off his stomach. I finally collapse onto the bed, letting my head rest against his still-trembling stomach.

His hand comes up to rest over my scalp, thumb drawing circles against the short, buzzed hairs on top of my head. His stomach trembles with each slow inhale. Resting my chin just below his belly button, I look up at him to find him already gazing down at me. Even in the low light of the lamp, the tears in his eyes are visible. I don't call attention to it, because I know that's the wrong way to go about it with Harper. Instead, I curl tighter against him, turning my head to rest my cheek against his stomach.

"Stay the night?" Harper asks quietly sometime later.

"Try to get me to leave."

Harper just snorts, but his body slumps in relief. I jump out of the bed to hurriedly tug off my clothes. The loopy smile on Harper's face is worth it when I trip while hopping out of my jeans. I climb into the bed with him, wearing only my boxers. He curls against me, all long limbs and tiredness. Burying my face in his hair, I breathe him in, needing him in my lungs before falling asleep.

This perfect man, everything I've ever wished for, everything I've so wanted to keep. He quickly falls asleep in my arms, lips parted as he snores softly. Honey pushes

through the bedroom door, eyes glinting in the darkness. I gently pat the bed in invitation for her to join us. She curls up against my back with a huff, pleased to finally be allowed in the bed with us. And that's how I fall asleep, between the two beings that are rapidly becoming the most important part of my life.

11

HARPER

“ I can’t believe you’re making me wake up at this hour,” I whine with an angry stomp of my feet.

Jackson just chuckles good-naturedly while loading our suitcases into the back of his G-Wagon. “You’ll be thankful when we arrive in Alpharetta by noon instead of in the evening because of the shitty traffic. Now climb into the passenger seat, punk.”

Despite the order directed at me, Jackson firmly closes the trunk, then gently guides me toward the passenger side with a warm hand at the small of my back. The car is already started, and the heated leather seats turned all the way up. I snuggle into the warmth of the seats, only to laugh when Jackson reappears, holding a cozy faux fur blanket. He tucks it around me until I’m in a blanket burrito.

I raise one eyebrow. “Thanks, Daddy.”

Jackson growls, then presses a hard kiss to my forehead. “You’re insufferable.”

“At this point, I’m starting to think you really like it.”

Jackson slams the door shut with a forced laugh. Honey whines in the back seat as she fights to get comfortable. Every drop of blood in my body sizzles when Jackson brings a blanket around for Honey, gently murmuring to her as he tucks it around her and promptly fucking buckles her into a safety harness. A seat belt for my dog.

Honey blinks up at Jackson, tongue lolling out of her mouth, just before she swipes it over his face. Jackson chuckles sweetly and pats her side.

When Jackson climbs into the driver's seat, I can't help but lean over to kiss him. Surprise freezes him for only a second until his fingers tangle in my hair to tug me closer. His tongue swipes into my mouth, sending heat rushing through my body. Jackson pulls away from me slightly, his breath ghosting over my face with each panting breath.

“What was that for?” Jackson asks, tone unbelievably low.

I nuzzle against his nose, pressing a lingering kiss to his lips. “Thank you for taking care of Honey.”

I can't thank him for taking care of me, so that'll have to be enough. Jackson seemingly understands because his eyes quickly flick to Honey, then right back to me. His eyes are always so warm, so impossibly understanding as if maybe he can see right into the deepest, darkest depths of me. If there's anyone on the earth who has a straight line to how my brain works and how my heart works, it's Jackson Harris.

“Let's get on the road. I have a surprise for you once we arrive in Alpharetta.”

“A surprise!” I mock gasp, snuggling back into the warm seat.

Jackson pulls out of the driveway, steering one-handed so he can rest the other on my thigh under the blanket. His touch calms me like always.

“I think you'll like it. You want the ballad station again?”

“Let's do pop hits.”

Jackson flicks his thumb on the wheel, landing on the pop-hit station. The drive rolls by as I sing loudly, mostly hoping to make Jackson laugh. A few times he joins in, his voice a low, sweet timbre. We hop out a few times for bathroom breaks at rest stops. At the final rest stop just an hour from Alpharetta, Jackson ushers Honey over to the grass for her to do her business. Once she's done, Jackson runs around with her to get some of her energy out.

And for one brief moment, I wonder what it would be like to keep him. Me and him in twenty years, a few kids, and another service dog to fill our home. But then I think about five seizures a year, feeling more and more like a burden with each one, and the beautiful fantasy vanishes into a plume of painful smoke.

Jackson ushers Honey back into the car, then jumps into the driver's seat with a wide grin. God, he's so fucking beautiful. Right now, he's mine; that's all I can focus on. For the moment, Jackson's mine to keep, to love, to kiss. That'll be enough.

Finally, after what feels like forever, we roll into Alpharetta. The city reminds me so much of home. Small-town vibes. Jackson turns into a gated community full of ostentatious houses. He pulls into the driveway of a light-stone-colored behemoth of a house. This is not remotely what I expected from his parents.

"Is this your parents' place?"

Jackson snorts. "That's my house, punk."

My jaw drops as Jackson slams his door shut. He lets Honey out the back, and she instantly has the zoomies in the front yard. Stuck in a daze at his words, I let him guide me inside, although my feet feel heavy. Nothing about this house says Jackson. The inside is impersonal, although decorated beautifully. It's just nothing like the sweet, warm Jackson I've come to know.

“Bedroom is this way,” Jackson calls over his shoulder.

I bundle the blanket from the car up tight in my arms and follow him up the stairs in a daze. Honey darts ahead of us, tail wagging as she patiently waits to follow Jackson to the correct room. His bedroom is at the end of a long marble hallway, and it’s just as impersonal as everything else in this large house.

A large, four-poster canopy bed sits against the wall with windows that overlook the wooded backyard. I wander over to the floor-to-ceiling windows, heart pounding out of my chest.

I’m in Jackson’s bedroom.

I’m going to meet his parents.

He’s definitely going to fuck me soon.

Jesus.

“Harper?” Jackson says from right behind me.

“You never call me Harp,” I point out, feeling a little dizzy with all the new developments.

“You don’t seem to like it.”

I sharply turn around to stare at him, taking in the width and breadth of him. Tension crackles in the air as he stares unblinking back at me, hands carefully tucked into the pockets of his jeans as if to stop himself from reaching out. Jackson always waits for me to give a signal that I want to be touched, always seemingly afraid to cross some boundary that I’ve unintentionally drawn.

“I don’t like the nickname Harp...” I admit quietly, a secret between us.

Jackson smiles softly, knowing in his gaze. “I know, Harper.”

“Why’d you bring me here?”

Jackson shrugs nonchalantly. “I have this vision of fucking you in my bed, then up against those windows.” He nods towards the windows as my mouth dries. “Maybe in the bathroom, too. I want to fuck you in every inch of this house. Then I’ll take you back home to your house in Clay Springs and fuck you in every room there too. Until you can’t lie to yourself anymore about what this means to both of us.”

My breath stutters painfully in my chest, caught between my ribs. Without even realizing it, I cross the space between us, until the tips of my toes line up with his. I have to tilt my head to hold his gaze, breath still not going into my lungs.

“What does this mean to both of us?” I ask, voice more confident than I expected.

A bittersweet smile inches across Jackson’s lips while he brushes the hair from my face. His fingers skim down the length of my hair, eyes lingering on where the strands get caught between his fingers.

“Harper, this means everything. Don’t you know?”

I close my eyes against the urge to weep, to scream, to bang my hands against his chest in rage. I’ve spent so long holding everyone at a distance, feeling like a burden, feeling like a useless waste of space. Now, here’s this man acting like the sun rises and sets with me. I’m supposed to deny myself this? Impossible. I can’t, and I won’t.

“I know, Jackson,” I say quietly. “I know. I’ve never had someone want me like you do before. I don’t know how to handle it, okay? You terrify me.”

Jackson wraps a steady arm around me. I lean against him, inhaling the strong scent, which is just so Jackson. The scent that I always pray lingers on my pillows when he's gone, the scent that reminds me of strength and hope and life. He makes me feel alive after a life spent going through the motions. The feelings inside me are inching closer and closer to a four-letter word that I'm absolutely terrified to say out loud.

"You're insane to want me," I murmur helplessly against his chest.

Jackson's answering chuckle vibrates right through me. He tangles his fingers in the hair at the nape of my neck, tugging to get me to look up at him. "I'm perfectly sane, and you're very easy to want. Are you tired from the drive? Need a nap?"

I wiggle my eyebrows. "You could fuck me."

Jackson tugs at my hair until my throat is bared for him. He dips down to nip at the sensitive skin, murmuring indecipherable words against my skin as he does.

"I'll fuck you tonight," Jackson finally says, words dripping with intent.

"Yeah?" I ask dreamily.

"Mhmm." Jackson pulls back to kiss me, eating at my mouth like I'm the best thing he's ever tasted. All I can do is hold on. Just when my dick gets interested, Jackson pulls away, tenderly swiping his thumb across my lower lip. "I'll fuck you tonight, and you'll finally learn what calling me Daddy means."

"Super sure of yourself there, bucko."

Jackson's eyes twinkle as if delighted with my inability to be serious. "I'm confident in at least that one skill."

The reminder of his experience rankles me for only a moment, until it burns into just a soft annoyance.

“When are we meeting your parents?”

“Thanksgiving. I want to spend a few days spoiling you, showing you around Atlanta, having my way with you.”

Warmth blooms in my belly, but I keep my face blank. “Provide some details. I might veto some of it.”

Jackson hums softly, the pads of his fingers massaging the nape of my neck. His fingers are magic, calming me when I’d normally be tensing up. The man is pure magic. Everything about him.

Jackson arches an eyebrow. “Ever been to a hockey game?”

I snort at the idea. “Do I look like I’ve seen a hockey game?”

“Appearances can be deceiving. I have a friend who plays for a team, and he has a game on Tuesday. Maybe we’ll go.”

“Well, if it’s after you fuck me, you better get the most comfortable seats in the world.”

Jackson’s laugh is so loud, so booming, that I have to turn my head to fight back my own answering grin. He shows me around his house, pointing out guest rooms and an office that’s covered with photos inside. He tries to lead me away, but I step inside because I’m nosy before I’m anything else. Photos of Jackson with young men in basketball gear dot the walls. In most of the photos, he’s dressed down in workout gear with a whistle around his neck.

I look over my shoulder at a seemingly shy Jackson. “Coach Daddy?”

Jackson scoffs. “Coach Harris.” He steps forward to stand beside me, gazing fondly at the photos. “After the injury, I took up volunteering in the city for kids who don’t have figures like me in their lives. Solid people that are there for them.”

“And you probably donate not just your time, but money as well, right?”

Jackson smiles softly as his gaze dips down to mine. “You know me too well already.”

“Maybe,” I say with a shrug. “You should be proud of this. It’s an important thing that you do for the people you help. It’s one of the reasons...” I clear my throat awkwardly. “One of the things I like best about you.”

“This kind of reminds me of something else I want to talk to you about.”

“Oh?”

Jackson turns serious, hands dipping into his pockets. “That feeling you get when you walk into a room and feel like everyone’s waiting for you to have a seizure? Like everyone is watching you? I know that feeling better than anyone else. I’m large and Black; sometimes, I walk into a room and feel like everyone is afraid of me just because I’m me . It’s different, but it’s the same.”

I swallow hard at the emotion his words carry. It’s so easy to look at Jackson and just see someone so perfectly together; no cares in the world. But I’m slowly learning that the depth inside Jackson is what is making me slowly, and all at once, fall for him. The kids he helps. The way he cares for me. He’s beautiful inside and out.

“Do you feel that way in Clay Springs?”

Jackson shakes his head slowly. “Not as much as I expected. But also, sometimes, Harper, people aren’t going to like us together. It’s a possibility. One you should be prepared for when the time comes. Okay?”

“Well, fuck them.”

Jackson’s eyebrows furrow for a moment, and he smiles softly, inching up his lips. He ducks down to kiss me, soft and slow, and I fight against the urge to tug him down closer so that I can kiss him the way I really want. When he pulls away, that odd look is back, almost as if I’ve surprised him again.

“Thank you, Harper.”

I blink slowly at him. “For what?”

“Being you.”

Jackson tangles his fingers with mine to continue showing me the rest of the house. There’s even a small basketball court on the first floor. Honey once again gets the zoomies after the hours spent in the car, but this time, she slips and slides all over the black linoleum floor.

I grab a basketball off the rack at the end of the court. “One-on-one?”

Jackson spins in the middle of the court with a dazed look in his eye. His eyes flit from the ball and up to my eyes. For a brief moment, there’s a flash of pain in his gaze that tears my heart up. Gym was a class I barely passed in high school. The seizure excuse got me out of playing most sports, but basketball was one I never minded. At least until the guys got so competitive and gross that having the redheaded seizure twink on the team was no longer a novelty and more of an annoyance.

Jackson holds his hands out, wiggling his fingers in a signal for me to give him the ball. Fat chance. I run past him and jump at the free-throw line, grinning wildly when the ball swoops easily through the net.

“Would you believe me if I said that was pure luck?” I say with a half grimace, half smile.

“Absolutely not.” Jackson’s shoulders tremble with a laugh. “Where did that come from?”

“I contain multitudes.”

“Sure you do, punk. Show me again.”

I grab the ball from the floor and jog over to stand at the free-throw line again. This time, I half-ass it, but still, the ball makes it through the hoop, even after hugging the rim for a second. Jackson comes to stand beside me, both hands on his hips.

“Do you miss it?” I ask softly, not wanting to upset him.

Jackson swallows, throat bobbing hard. “More than I can describe. I miss the dream too, but dreams change.”

“For what it’s worth... I totally would’ve bought your jersey.”

Jackson laughs lightly and spins to look down at me. “That’s an idea. I have a few jerseys left over; I could put you in one.”

I dip down to grab the ball that came to a stop at my feet. Tossing it back and forth in my hands, I grin up at Jackson. “Just a little one-on-one? Low impact on your knee. We can play horse!”

Jackson does a mix between a sigh and a laugh that I find absolutely adorable. I dribble the ball around him, trying to make him dizzy, until he swoops easily around me to steal the ball. I stand frozen in the middle of the court as he shoots and makes it, his hand still raised in the air for one singular second before slowly lowering back to his side.

Suddenly, my heart aches for him. Honey comes to a skidding halt in front of Jackson, yipping in request for him to play with her. Jackson falls softly to his knees and buries his face in her golden fur, the picture of a man defeated. Consoling people isn't something I have much experience with, but I need to learn if I want to love Jackson right.

Love.

Hell.

"Jackson," I say softly, running my hand along his slumped shoulders.

He keeps his head buried in Honey's fur for a long moment, then lifts his teary gaze to mine. "Sorry."

"Hey." I drop to my knees with an awkward laugh. Pressing a kiss to his forehead, I squeeze the nape of his neck with what I hope feels like reassurance. "New dreams, right?"

"Yeah," Jackson mumbles.

"Come on, Daddy. Let's see what food options there are around this place. I want to eat, get fucked, then sleep for a million years. Sound good?"

Vulnerability from Jackson is rare, but I'm going to hold on to him so he knows it's

fine. He's safe with me. I hold his hand tightly as I guide us back towards the kitchen. The fridge is full of food because Jackson thinks of everything, and he must've had someone stock the place before we arrived.

"Salmon?" I ask as I stare into the fully stocked fridge.

"Sure, I didn't know you could cook," Jackson says tiredly, folding himself into a chair at the island.

"I love to cook, but I just have to be practical, so I rarely do. Imagine if I'm cooking at the stove, have a seizure, and then the house burns down around me. Not practical at all."

"Don't you get warning signs for a seizure? Wouldn't you have enough time?"

My nose twitches at the thought. Yes, I tend to get an aura that's enough of a warning sign that I could theoretically keep the oven on and cook. But years of my mother helicopter parenting me, acting like I was one fuckup away from accidental death, well, it's hard to break the habit.

"I do, I get auras. But I just don't use the oven out of habit."

Jackson leans against the island, keenly watching me turn on the gas stove. "So, how'd you learn?"

"Cindy taught me. Beau's mom."

"Not your own?"

A laugh bubbles out of me. "No, not my mother. She's fine. My parents are perfectly fine people. But they're both attorneys who work extremely long hours. Sometimes,

I'm not sure why they even adopted me."

Jackson's head cocks to the side. "You're adopted?"

I spread some olive oil on a cookie sheet, delicately placing the salmon filets on it, then sprinkle it with spices and lemon. Grabbing rice pilaf from the pantry, I get it simmering on the stovetop.

"Yes, I was adopted," I admit around a lump in my throat.

"I didn't know that."

"I don't talk about it much. My biological mother was a teen when she had me, couldn't give me the future she wanted, so she gave me up in a private adoption to my parents."

"Do you know your mother?" Jackson asks, tone carefully neutral.

"We had a closed adoption. I only know the details my parents have shared with me. I don't know much about my father. Just that he was young, too."

I set a timer on the oven, then walk around the island to stand beside Jackson. He wraps an arm around me and tugs me between his thighs. Dancing my fingers across his shoulder, I press my thumb against the tense line of his neck until he moans at my touch.

"Feels good," Jackson slurs, eyes drifting closed.

I'm going to feed him and then put him to bed. Sex or no sex, I don't care. I just need to get him into a bed where he can relax, considering he made the eight-hour drive all by himself.

Jackson's skin is hot beneath my perpetually cold fingers, warming me from the outside in. His eyes close in bliss as I carefully work at the tension in his neck. I press a kiss against his cheek, needing to shower him with love like he always does me. A small, private smile, just for me, tips up the corners of his mouth.

Pulling away when the timer goes off is a form of torture. Jackson slumps against the island, idly patting at Honey's head, where she lovingly sits on her haunches at his side. We eat in comfortable silence. The soft, early light of dusk filters through the back windows, shining on all the beauty of Jackson's backyard. I try to imagine a life here with him, but can't picture it at all. Picturing him back at my house in Clay Springs, older, with crinkles at the edges of his eyes, is beyond easy. He'll have laugh lines that I put there because I'm so wildly witty.

Once we're both done with our meals, I hurriedly clean up the kitchen. Jackson lets me undress him without a word, then tuck him into the large bed. Honey curls up at his feet, and I join them without a word. Sleep takes a while to come for me; only when I tuck my face in the crook of Jackson's warm neck does sleep take me into her arms.

The absence of Jackson from the bed startles me awake. Even in sleep, my body is used to his calming presence. Honey has also disappeared from the bed, sending my heart racing through my chest. I scramble for my phone, slapping wildly at it to read the time. Just nine in the evening. We only got a handful of hours of restful sleep.

Just when I really start to get alarmed, Jackson strides out of the bathroom, skin dewy from a shower. His grin is devilish when he catches sight of me rumped in his bed.

"Hello," Jackson drawls, eyes intense and bright.

"Hi," I squeak.

“I believe we had a deal before I fell asleep.”

“Oh.” Real suave, Harper.

“Still up for it?”

I look around the room, seeking out Honey. “Where’s Honey?”

His head dips towards the door. “She’s on the first floor with a rawhide and last year's puppy bowl streaming.”

“Oh,” I repeat like a real loser.

Jackson puts one knee on the side of the bed to lean over me. I breathe in a lungful of his clean scent, allowing it to suffuse through me to settle my nerves. Jackson’s eyes flit between mine, seemingly searching for something in them. His fingers tip my chin up so that he can give me a soft, tender kiss. All my nerves melt away under the onslaught of his sweet lips, the tentative touch of his tongue against my own.

“I want to fuck you so bad, Harper.” The words are a poem against my mouth, sweet and sultry.

“I want that too.” I lean up so he’s forced to stand back up. “I need a few minutes in the bathroom.”

Jackson lets me go without an argument, for which I’m grateful. Nerves send anxious butterflies to flight in my chest. Deep breathing only works until I realize we’re really about to do this. I’m going to finish all the prep, walk through that door, and have penetrative sex for the first time.

Sex isn’t something I’ve been saving; it’s just something I never entertained doing

with someone. The thought never once crossed my mind. One-night stands are a hazard for someone with epilepsy. The list of things that could go wrong is a mile long. I've never let someone close enough to me to even entertain getting this far. Somehow, Jackson made it through, and here we are.

I stare at myself in the mirror, the freckles, the scar, the messy auburn hair. Jackson looks at me and wants me after all the experience he has. It's hard to believe that... he could want me. Maybe after tonight, he'll realize I'm not worth the pain. Not worth the trouble. I close my eyes tight to stop the thoughts of comparing myself to his previous lovers, his clients.

Soft music plays from speakers in the ceiling when I step through the bathroom. Naked as sin, Jackson lies back on the bed, hands tucked behind his head. At the sight of me naked, his head tilts to the side, tongue peeking out to lick at his lips. His lips curl in a wicked smirk, wiggling his fingers in a come-hither motion. I watch transfixed when he grips his cock tight, letting out a groan as I step closer. Jesus. I have that effect on him? Me?

Because I'm gangly and clumsy, I almost trip walking towards the bed. Jackson's not an asshole, so thankfully, he ignores it. I climb into bed with him, eternally grateful when he wraps a hand around my neck to bring me down for a firm kiss. His thumb tugs my jaw open so he can lick further into my mouth, his tongue searching out every morsel of me it can get. A violent shiver rolls through me, just from his lips sliding across mine.

"Come here," Jackson murmurs against my mouth.

His large hands splay over my hips, easily lifting me to straddle his lap. My heart pounds so violently in my chest it must be visible from space. Jackson shushes me softly and runs his hands up the expanse of my ribs, coming up to cup my face between his overheated palms.

“I was tested a few weeks ago. Your safety matters more to me than anything in this world. If you want a condom, that’s what we’ll do. If you don’t want one, then know you’re safe. Everything about tonight is up to you.”

Red-hot desire sweeps through me at the idea of him fucking me without a condom, his cum inside me. Jesus. My fingers dig into his chest, leaving half-moon indents from my nails. Jackson’s grin turns feral, teeth flashing in the soft light of his bedroom.

“Oh... Harper. You dirty boy. Do you want Daddy to fuck you without a condom? Fill you up with my cum until you’re bursting?”

A whimper escapes me, and I dive down to kiss him again, needing his words in my mouth. His arms wrap around me, easily flipping us over until he hovers over me, all the while kissing me like the world would end if he stopped for even a moment. Every swipe of his tongue against mine steals my breath, ratcheting up the desire slowly inching towards a crescendo inside me. How this beautiful man could want me will never make sense to my tiny little lizard brain.

Jackson slowly lowers his body until our cocks line up. The heat of him, the weight of him, just Jackson being Jackson about does me in. I hurriedly wrap my legs around his waist, arching up to meet him thrust for thrust as his tongue plunders my mouth. At the touch of his finger to my entrance, I keen wildly, breaking from his mouth to gasp for air.

“Fuck me,” I beg, voice strained even to my own ears. “Please, Jackson. I swear to God, I’ve never wanted anything more in my life. Just you, inside me.”

“Shhhhhh.” Jackson kisses me into silence again, the entire time working his finger inside. I bear down to make it easier for him to get lube into me. He kisses me the entire time, slowly moving his finger until my eyes are rolling with the ecstasy of his

touch. Only two fingers have me gasping and grabbing at his shoulders. I need more.

He pulls away from my mouth to stare deeply into my eyes, lips just a breath away from mine. “I’ll be inside you soon. I promise, Harper. Trust me, always.”

My legs tremble around his hips as he rubs relentlessly at my prostate. Pressure builds at the base of my spine in the telltale sign of an approaching orgasm. I press my hand against his head and shove him away roughly with a snarl.

“You’re going to make me come, you fucking asshole. If you don’t quit playing around and fuck me right now, this entire goddamn party is going to be over.”

Jackson chuckles and playfully nips at my fingers, but he listens all the same. Withdrawing his fingers from me, he bends my knees toward me. “Hold your legs here so you’re open for me. Do it.”

The ability to argue has suddenly fled my entire being. I do as he says and hold my legs up, hungrily watching as he strokes a generous amount of lube onto his scarily huge dick. Seriously. The thing is bigger than most of my toys. A brief moment of panic hits me at the idea of his cock not fitting or even alternatively causing me pain. But I trust in Jackson, and I know he’d never purposefully cause me pain.

Jackson grabs my thighs and roughly shoves them higher up until he can fit himself between them, hovering over me with one elbow beside my head. The head of his cock notches against my hole, stealing every molecule of air from my lungs. His hand tangles in my hair again, tugging until I lift my gaze to his.

“Watch me while I fuck you,” Jackson orders just as he presses into me.

For one brief moment, it hurts, but then I breathe and relax, bearing down against him. It might be my first time getting fucked by a person, but I’ve fucked myself

enough to remember how it goes. Jackson slowly slides home, holding my gaze the entire time. My world cracks into a splintered million pieces only to reform when he bottoms out inside me.

“Made for me,” Jackson murmurs just before kissing me again.

I loop my arms around his neck, using the leverage to thrust my hips up. Jackson slides deeper into me, and I grin against his mouth. Sucking his bottom lip between mine, I use my heels to spur him on faster.

“You can do better than this,” I point out with an air of disapproval.

“Do you have pointers?”

Tilting my head back against the pillows, I bite back a whimper when he rolls his hips. “Maybe you should...” I arch my back when he hits my prostate, sending tingles of pleasure rolling through my body. “You should...”

Oh God. I’m not going to ever finish a sentence while he’s fucking me. Jackson’s grin is wide and knowing as he leans up on his hands over me, rolling his hips so that he’s grinding inside instead of thrusting. My eyes roll back in my head at the feel of him, hot and hard inside me. He swivels his hips in a circle, pulling a deep moan from the very pit of my stomach.

“Jackson,” I whimper.

“We’re getting closer.”

“I want to ride you, roll over.”

Jackson pauses, his eyes wide as he stares down at me. “What?”

I slap his chest hard. “You heard me. Roll over.”

Jackson stares until I slap his chest again, spurring him into action. I yelp when he rolls over, still inside me. Straddling him sends him deeper, and I lean forward with my hands pressed to his chest, gasping at the intensity of the feeling. I can feel him in my throat, in my heart, fucking everywhere.

Jackson palms my hips. “I can teach you to ride.”

And then he does. Jackson squeezes my hips in his large palms and lifts me up, showing me how to ride him. The motion is unfamiliar and new, but it’s kind of like riding a bike. Once I get the motion down, it’s easy to repeat. I swivel my hips when his groin is flush against my ass, mostly grinding. His fingers dig hard into my hips, and his chest heaves as I repeat the movement.

This position feels great but not as earth-shattering as him hovering over me. I stop mid-roll of my hips and stare down at him.

“This is a lot of work,” I say with a pout.

Jackson flips us over again, his cock pressing hard against my prostate. Stars light up my vision, and I grip his shoulders tightly. He repeats the movement over and over until I’m a trembling, silent mess beneath him.

“Lick my hand,” Jackson orders, holding his hand in front of me.

Wordlessly, I comply. He groans at the feel of my tongue, then promptly wraps it around my cock. My eyes roll back into my head again as I move my hips to meet his hard thrusts, torn between delirious ecstasy and annoyance that this is going to be over far too soon. His hand grips my cock tight, thumb rolling across the head on each swipe up. I arch my back to take him deeper, needing him to be as far inside me

as he can when he comes. God, I wish I had a plug so I could keep his cum forever. Maybe he has one.

“Do you have a butt plug?” I ask against his shoulder, biting at the tense muscle under my lips.

“Fuck, Harper, Jesus Christ.” His hips stutter, and heat floods me as he comes. Oh. I wish I could feel that forever, the heat of him spreading through me, leaking out around his cock.

His mouth slams onto mine as he keeps thrusting despite his orgasm. That’s unexpected. His grip on my cock tightens, and his strokes speed up. The pleasure is insurmountable, blinding as it rolls through me. My orgasm slams into me, freezing every muscle and my brain.

“Jackson,” I whimper against his neck, legs trembling around his still-rolling hips. The intensity of the orgasm washes over me. Waves of pleasure keep coming as Jackson strokes my oversensitive cock.

Jackson pulls out just to crawl down my body. He shoves three fingers inside me, then swallows my cock down. What the fuck? There’s no way I can come again so fast. It’s impossible. Jackson seems to want to prove my body wrong, though, because he slides his mouth over my cock, moans of pleasure slipping out of him. He pegs my prostate over and over, making my toes tingle and stealing the breath from my lungs. Legs trembling around his shoulders, a second orgasm sneaks up on me. The air painfully catches in my lungs.

I grab his head between my hands and hold on as he wrings a second orgasm from me. Thrusting up into his warm, welcoming mouth, I blindly cup the back of his neck. Fuck. This time my orgasm is borderline violent, blackening my vision and tightening all my muscles.

“Daddy,” I cry out, unable to hold it back anymore.

Jackson hums long and low around my cock, swallowing down every ounce of my cum. My arms fall to my sides as I blink up at the ceiling in a post-orgasmic haze. Jackson flutters kisses across my thighs, my stomach, and up my chest as he comes up to kiss me.

His kiss returns air to my lungs, giving me life again. After a few minutes of lazy kissing, Jackson pulls away with a soft chuckle. He rolls over and brings me with him out of the wet spot on the right side of the bed.

“You’re extraordinary,” Jackson says, brushing my matted hair from my face.

“The best you’ve ever had,” I reply sarcastically.

Jackson stares deeply into my eyes with a small smile. “Harper, you’ve no idea. I’m going to keep you forever. Don’t you know?”

“Well, you can’t fuck and run now, so I guess it’s forever.”

Jackson sighs and pulls me tighter against him, sweetly tucking my head against his sweaty chest. “One day you’ll get it.”

“Maybe,” I whisper, not wanting him to hear me.

We lie there for a while, basking in the afterglow of our lovemaking, until the mess gets to be too much. Jackson hustles me like a man on a mission into the warm shower. He tenderly washes my body, lingering on every inch of skin he can find. The little kisses he leaves behind will be tattooed on my body for life. My body belongs to him forever, whether I want to admit it to myself or not.

Once we rinse off from the shower, Jackson uses a fluffy towel to dry both of us. I stand yawning at the edge of the bed as he quickly changes the sheets. When I finally lie back down, my eyes are heavy with tiredness and from the exhaustion of the orgasm. Jackson opens the bedroom door and whistles, inviting Honey back into the room. He climbs into the bed, tugging me into his arms, just in time for Honey to settle at the foot of the bed between our legs.

“Sometimes I think I dreamt you,” I whisper into Jackson’s still-shower-warm skin.

“I think the same thing,” Jackson admits.

“Maybe we dreamed each other up.”

Jackson presses a lingering kiss to my temple. “I believe it. You’re hard to explain otherwise.”

“Why would you dream up such a sassy twink?”

Jackson’s chest vibrates with his laughter, and I smirk against his skin, pressing a kiss just above his heart. We fall asleep that way, tangled up together, comfortable in the knowledge that we’re each other's dreams.

12

JACKSON

N o one has ever fucked me the way Harper did. I've said it before, and I'll say it again, he's mine forever. He hisses and claws at every ounce of love or attention I send his way, but then he blooms like a flower when we fuck. Sometimes, it's hard to believe I'm his first everything. The man fucks like a professional. He's eager to try anything, unabashed in his want, in his desires.

Then, when we'd woken up this morning, he'd been shy again, even demure. His eyes downcast and unable to meet my gaze when he'd stretched and held back a grimace. So I'd done the only thing a man can do. I'd rimmed him until his legs were squeezing my head tight, and he came with a gentle sigh. The perfect way to start the day, Harper's thighs pressed tight against my head.

I'd spent the day spoiling him. A bubble bath in the claw-foot tub in my bathroom. Massaging his shoulders as he sat in my lap while we watched a movie in the theater room. Kissing him senseless when he tried to argue his way out of being spoiled because, for some stupid reason, he feels undeserving of it.

"Excited for your first hockey game?" I ask as we find our way hand in hand up to the box I'd reserved.

Just Harper, me, and a box at the arena.

Harper's lips twitch at the corners in the ghost of a smile. "I'm excited to rank the

players on hotness alone.”

I love him, but I can’t say those words yet because he’ll flee like an injured bird that’s finally been set free.

“Many hot hockey players on this team,” I point out as I hurriedly usher him into the box.

Harper’s eyes flit over the entire room, inspecting the rows of leather seats as I check in with the concierge. Under my watchful eye, he grabs a cookie from the buffet and then tosses himself into a seat in the first row. Nibbling at the double chocolate cookie, his gaze lifts to mine when I finally join him.

“Seats are okay,” Harper mumbles around a mouthful of cookie.

“Just okay? How can I do better next time, my liege?”

Harper tilts his head, clearly thinking it over. Finally, he points his finger to the ice. “Down there so I can see their sweat up close. I could rest my palm against the glass and wait for one of them to fall in love with me. Like in romance novels. Our love story would be titled *Seize the Puck*. Get it? Because I have seizures.”

Over my dead body, will he ever sit closer than a box because absolutely no one but me is allowed to fall in love with him.

“I think I like having you in a box.”

Harper’s eyebrows dip in confusion. “Why?”

“Because I can do this.”

Harper grins against my lips when I kiss him, licking into his mouth to taste Harper and the cookie and perfection . His lips are so soft, so plush, and I can't help but suck his bottom lip into my mouth, softly biting down until he gasps. His eyes are starry and glassy when I pull away, making me grin with satisfaction.

“Still rather be sitting down there?”

Harper blinks slowly as if acclimating to a new world. “I think you're convincing me of the merits of box seats.”

I gently skim my fingers down his cheek, then use my thumb to gently tug down his bottom lip. “Don't worry, you'll be convinced by the end of the game.”

“Oh?” Harper's eyes sparkle with delight.

I nod slowly and dip down to kiss him again. Harper lets out a barely audible sigh as we kiss, working his way even deeper into my heart. When I pull away, a soft smile tilts Harper's lips up. Perfect.

“What do you know about hockey?” I ask.

Harper's look is skittish. “I know there is a puck.”

“Perfect, you're doing better than half the people in the crowd.”

I want to bottle Harper's laugh forever, to carry it around when I need it most. Every time he laughs, it feels like I won a championship ring. Like something I worked so hard to attain is finally mine, and it's so easy to make him laugh, just by being myself. Nothing has ever been so easy with someone before. Even when he's spitting and clawing at me, it's profoundly easy to be enamored by Harper.

Harper finishes his cookie with a smack of his lips, then tangles his fingers with mine. Throughout the game, he asks me questions that I happily answer. Hockey was never really my thing, but a close friend of mine played in college, so I did my best to learn. He came to my games, and I went to his games. Only fair.

The great thing about hockey is that it moves fast. Nonstop action for almost two hours. Harper makes numerous trips to the buffet, eating actual food instead of just dessert. Seeing Harper eat satisfies the caveman in me, like I've done something right to get him to eat. Especially considering how he lives off of premade meals and cupcakes. When we finally live together, that'll change. I'll cook him any meal he wants, every day, for the rest of our lives.

By the time the game is over, Harper is visibly flagging with tiredness. I worry because Honey isn't with us, and after all the research I did, I know that tiredness can sometimes lead to a seizure. If I ever told him that I did research, he'd probably go full feral kitten on me, but I honestly don't give a shit. His safety is now my number one concern for as long as he'll allow it.

"Can we say goodbye to my friend real quick? Then we can head home?" I ask Harper softly.

Harper tugs his jacket tighter against himself with a pasted-on smile. "Sure. That's why we're here."

"False," I say loudly, needing to combat his train of thought. "We're here so I can spoil you, make you feel special so that I can date you."

Harper's face turns ten shades of crimson. "Please, fuck off."

Chuckling, I press a kiss to his flushed cheek, biting my lip hard when he swats me away. I hold his hand as we navigate our way through the maze of the arena.

Thankfully, my name is on the list to get into the inner bowels that lead to the locker rooms. Shooting a text off to Liam, I tug Harper off to the side to wait for him.

“Who is this friend?” Harper asks curiously, bending around me to watch the stream of freshly showered hockey players leave the room.

“Liam Walsh.”

Harper’s eyes widen comically. “The one who’s on the cover of every sports magazine ever? The one who just married a guy?”

“Well, sure.” I shrug nonchalantly. “He’s just my friend Liam, though.”

“Absolutely bonkers,” Harper mutters, seemingly annoyed.

“Jackson!” My shouted name rents through the air, startling numerous people in the crowded hallway. Liam pushes through the scattered people and tugs me into his arms with a deep laugh. “It’s been years .”

“Sorry, dude, I’m kind of a busy guy.”

Liam pats my back hard, then pulls away with a wide grin. “I’d offer to hang out, but the team is on a flight in a few hours. We’ve got another game a few states away tomorrow. You look good!”

Liam has always been an overgrown puppy. His wide grin, disheveled dark hair, and one single dimple popping with his grin seemingly has Harper frozen beside me. All of this was worth it just for the starstruck look on Harper’s face. Actually, it’s less starstruck and more fanboy. I’m not sure how I feel about my future husband crushing on one of my college friends, who incidentally is one of the most famous queer hockey stars of all time.

I wrap my arm around Harper and tug him against my side. “This is my boyfriend, Harper.”

Liam grins again, holding out his hand to Harper. “Nice to meet you.”

Harper shakes his hand in a daze, mouth pinched in a straight line. I am going to give him shit about this forever.

“Walsh! Media time!” a coach shouts from down the hallway.

Liam impatiently looks over his shoulder, then aims a grimace towards us. “Sorry, man. Duty calls. But the next time you’re in Boston, let me know! The four of us can get dinner.”

Liam disappears in a blur down the hallway. Harper lets out a sound that’s a mix of a squawk and a whimper. He glances down at his hand; then his gaze pings back up to me.

“I think I’ll never wash my hand again,” Harper says reverently.

Liam Walsh is going to die by my hands. “Tonight, you’re definitely wearing one of my jerseys.”

Harper’s tinkling laugh follows us on our way out of the arena. The minute we get back to my house, I hustle a laughing Harper to the bedroom. Grabbing a jersey from my closet, I throw it at him, pointing at him in an order.

“Put that on while I take care of Honey.”

I disappear down the stairs before he can even attempt to argue. Honey, being the perfect girl she is, does her business in record time. After feeding her dinner and

giving her a few hard pats on the side, I take the stairs two by two to my bedroom. The sight that greets me is worth all the hustle. Harper in my jersey is worth everything, all my gold, all the breath in my lungs, and years of my life.

The jersey is three times too big for him, landing to mid-thigh, and the arm holes gape to show off the perfect creaminess of his skin. His hair is up in a messy bun with just a few tendrils framing his face. He is every single one of my teenage fantasies come true. I fall to my knees in front of him, holding back a wince as my knee aches with the force of the fall.

“Harper,” I whisper in awe.

“It’s just a jersey,” Harper murmurs, obviously a little self-conscious.

I reverently glide my hands up the back of his knees, up his thighs, finally coming to rest them on the warm, bare globes of his ass. A smirk tilts the corner of one lip up as he stares down at me in the soft light of the bedroom. I want to worship him and show him exactly what he means to me. Everything. I want to tell him I love him, scream it from the fucking rooftops of every skyscraper on the planet.

“Can you do me a favor?” My voice is low and gravelly.

“Depends,” Harper hedges, eyeing me warily.

“Turn around.”

Harper waffles for just a second but decides to not argue, shrugging his shoulders and turning around to show me his back. My name across his shoulder blades lights me up inside. If I don’t have him right now, I’m going to die. But I also know that last night was a lot for him, so he’s probably still tender. The last thing I’ll ever do is cause him pain. So, I’ll have to settle for eating his ass. It’s my burden to bear.

“I want to eat you out until you cry,” I whisper against the small of his back.

“Fuck,” Harper whimpers and clumsily reaches back to heavily rest the palm of his hand atop my head. “I took a shower while you were with Honey. That’s why my hair is up.”

That’s all the permission I need. I push him onto the bed and bend his legs until he’s in the perfect submissive pose. He rests his head on his folded arms with a contented sigh, eyes already hooded just from the idea of my mouth on him. I carefully push the jersey up to his mid-back so it’s perfectly bunched, still showing off my name across his shoulder blades.

I part his ass cheeks, proceeding to bury my face in the crease of his ass. God. The smell of him is intoxicating, clean, fresh, with just a little of Harper’s normal musk. My mouth instantly waters. I take that as a sign to dive in. Harper’s spine curves as I lick into him, using my tongue to fuck him until he softens against me. The moans that fall from his lips are divine, the sound an angel surely makes when they weep with joy.

I take mercy on him and lick my hand, pumping his painfully hard cock as I plunge my tongue inside him. His thighs tremble, and the pleasure-filled sounds from his mouth intensify.

“Jackson, oh my God.” Harper’s hand reaches back to hold my face tight against his ass.

I grin in success against him, roughly biting at a cheek until Harper squirms beneath me. The sound of my name on his lips is great, but I think Daddy would sound even better. I spear my tongue into his now loose hole and pump his cock hard, smearing the gathering wetness around the swollen head.

Harper lets out a decidedly pained whimper, just before he softly cries, “Daddy.” A moment later he’s coming all over my hand, his hole clenching around my tongue. My cock is so hard that I could cry myself. Just when he’s about to collapse with relief, I grab his hips between my palms and flip him over onto his back.

Harper stares up at me in some sort of wonder, maybe also a little bit of worship. I hurriedly undo my pants with my clean hand and shove them off until I’m naked. Straddling his slim hips, I use his cum to furiously pump my cock as I lean over him. His eyes are a liquid forest. I could easily fall into their depths forever.

“Say you’re mine,” I pant out, hand working furiously over my cock.

“I’m yours,” Harper repeats, like the good boy he is.

“Forever.”

Harper swallows loudly, gaze dipping to my cock, then back up to my eyes. “Come on me. Paint me with your cum until everyone knows I’m yours. And then tomorrow you’ll fuck me again and plug me up so I can walk around with your cum inside me. No one will ever question who I belong to ever again.”

I come with the force of a car crash, painting the concave creamy skin on his stomach. Like some sort of fucking caveman, I smear my cum into his skin, then lean down to kiss his sweet mouth. I’m not stupid, I know what he said, and what he didn’t say. It might take months, years, or decades, but one day Harper will know who he belongs to, and it’s going to be me in the end.

My parents are the best people in the world. I never wanted for anything growing up. Copious amounts of love, a safe home, whatever new toy I wanted they did their best to afford, and they both spent weekends shuttling me to basketball games. Just a few years ago, I surprised them by paying off my childhood home so that they could retire

a few years ahead of schedule.

Although retired, I don't think either of them has ever stopped working. My father was a principal in Atlanta for thirty years, and my mother was a kindergarten teacher for almost just as long. Now they spend their time helping at-risk youth in the city, instead of traveling as I'd hoped they would. But their love is plentiful and they want to share it, so I can't fault them for that.

Harper grips my hand tight as we walk up the three stairs that lead to the doorway of my parents' old brick three-bedroom house. One knock is all it takes before my mom opens the door with a flourish, a wide grin on her wrinkled face.

"Jackson!" Her warm arms envelop me before I can even blink. But I don't let go of Harper's hand, even when he tries to wiggle away.

Finished with me, she lets go of me to immediately take Harper in her arms. Harper stands straight as a stick, clearly stunned by my mother's welcoming embrace.

"You can call me Mila."

Harper swallows hard. "Yes, ma'am."

"Oh my lord, he's the cutest thing, Jackson. The absolute perfect shade of his hair. You're beautiful!"

Harper's skin goes roughly the shade of a tomato at my mother's compliment.

"He's the most gorgeous thing in the entire northern hemisphere," I readily agree.

I can practically feel the rage rolling off of Harper. But he bites it back in my mother's presence because, again, he's the perfect boy. My childhood home smells

like cinnamon, greens, and turkey when we walk through the door. A few years ago, I surprised my parents with a decent renovation. New wood floors, a new kitchen, and a new bathroom. My father had grumpily tried to refuse, but I'm great at convincing people to let me do nice things for them. Case in point, Harper.

My dad sits in the recliner at the end of the living room, glasses halfway down his nose, a tablet in his wrinkled hands. His face lights up at the sight of me. I'm so glad to be home.

"Hey, Dad." I press a greeting kiss on his forehead. "This is my boyfriend, Harper."

Harper waves shyly from where he stands beside my mother.

"Wow, you nabbed a stunner," Dad teases out of the corner of his mouth, only loud enough for me to hear.

"I'm going to marry him," I whisper back, a secret just between us.

Dad's answering grin is incandescent. My heart goes into overtime when Harper joins my mother in the kitchen, falling easily into step beside her to finish preparing for Thanksgiving dinner.

"The Falcons are looking good this year. That young new quarterback might get us somewhere for once."

I plop down on the sofa, gaze still firmly on Harper in the kitchen. "Hate to break it to you, Dad, but the Falcons aren't going for the Super Bowl this year."

Dad scowls. "Not with that attitude; they aren't."

"Will my optimism for them guarantee them a playoff spot?"

“We must manifest our own dreams, son.”

I chuckle softly. “I will think fondly of the Falcons.”

“Good.”

“So, about your blood sugar.”

If looks could kill, I’d surely be dead. Maybe that’s why Harper has no effect on me. I spent so much of my life on the other side of my father’s withering glare.

“I’ve got it under control,” Dad expertly promises.

“Really?”

Dad waves dismissively. “It’ll be fine. Give me grandkids soon, though, just in case. And I have some gold coins buried in the backyard underneath the azaleas.”

“Dad!”

“I’m just saying!”

“Am I interrupting?” Harper asks softly, gaze pinging between me and my father.

“No, son. Do you follow football?”

Harper plops down on the sofa beside me, easily tucking himself into the line of my side. “I know the hot quarterbacks.”

My father arches one single eyebrow. “Well, that is the important part. Did you play any sports as a kid?”

“I was sports averse.”

My father hums with curiosity, eyes sweeping over Harper. “Piano?”

Harper’s grin is wide. “Yes, sir.”

“And what do you do for a living?”

“I’m a data analyst.”

Dad laughs and slaps the sides of the recliner with barely contained joy. “Finally, someone who enjoys math. Harper, tell me, do you enjoy sudoku?”

And then I sit there for almost an hour as Harper and my father proceed to work on a sudoku book together. No amount of squeezing Harper’s thigh distracts him. Nothing. Finally, I give up with a kiss on his cheek and join my mother in the kitchen. She puts me to work helping with the sides, then finally lets me carve the turkey. My reward for my hard work is getting to snack on the best parts of the bird while plating it for dinner.

Food covers every inch of the table once we all take a seat. I let my hand rest on Harper’s thigh, trying to calm the nervous shaking of his leg. Harper shoots me a grateful smile when I plate his food for him.

“Before we eat, let’s say what we’re thankful for today.” Dad looks towards Mom, a soft, gentle smile on his face. “I’m thankful for Mila as always and the amazing home she’s created. But I’m also thankful for NFL RedZone.”

Mom laughs and slaps him on the arm. “Idiot. I’m thankful for the small garden out back we planted this summer. I’m also thankful for Jackson and his boyfriend, Harper. It’s nice to have a full table.”

Harper blushes hard, keeping his gaze on his full plate. To help not embarrass him, I decide it's my turn.

"I'm thankful for cupcakes," I say confidently, earning a confused look from both my parents.

Harper bites his lip to keep from laughing. "That's what I was going to say."

"Well, you can't copy me," I point out, squeezing his thigh. "You'll have to say something else."

"I'm thankful for hot athletes," Harper says, chin in the air.

My parents laugh at us both and dig into their food. I use their distraction to kiss Harper's cheek since I know he hates public displays of affection. Harper ever so slightly leans into the kiss, a relieved sigh falling from his lips. Perfect.

We eat dinner in relative silence. The pie is what makes Harper the most excited. My mother bakes the most amazing dark chocolate pecan pie. Harper must agree because he inhales it in only a handful of bites, staring forlornly down at his empty plate once it's gone.

"I'll send some home with you," Mom says with a hearty chuckle.

Harper's grin could power an entire city. "Thank you! It's the best dessert I've ever had."

"I can give you the recipe if you want?" Mom asks, not meaning anything by it.

Harper's face falls just a little, but he pastes that carefully practiced smile on his lips. "I'd love that, thank you."

By the time we're standing at the door saying goodbyes, Harper is visibly tired, and I know it's time to get him back home. Mom whispers something in Harper's ear as they hug. Harper's eyes quickly flick to me, then back to her. He nods once, and my mother's grin is ecstatic.

"Remember what I said about the Falcons," Dad says as he slaps my back hard.

"I'll think only good thoughts. I promise."

Back in the safety of the car once my parents have disappeared back into the house, I tug Harper towards me to kiss him senseless. Our tongues twist together as Harper meets me beat for beat. His fingers curl hard into the fabric of my shirt, tugging me closer as if he's momentarily forgotten we're parked in my car in front of my parents' house.

"Shhhh," I say against the warm skin of his cheek. "It's alright."

Harper whimpers once, then seemingly gathers himself, his fingers slowly falling from my shirt. He clears his throat awkwardly as he pulls away from me. I watch him settle back in his seat, fastening his seat belt with unsteady hands.

Once back home, Honey waits for us at the front door, little barks of joy escaping her as she wiggles around for attention. Usually, I'd take care of her, but Harper pats my cheek and walks her to the back door. I watch them play in the backyard through the French doors. After a while, Harper dips down into a low crouch and buries his face in Honey's fur as she sweetly licks his neck.

The bond between them is deep. Not only because Honey is Harper's savior in a way but also that deep, unshakable bond between a dog and their best friend. My mind wanders to a future I wish for so deeply with Harper. A future with children, more dogs, and a gentle life full of making Harper smile. He'd be a wonderful father, kind,

patient, and easily able to make our children laugh. It's a future I can so readily imagine if only Harper will stop fighting me every step of the damn way.

Like we talked about the other day, dreams change. A decade ago my dream had been superstardom, my name known around the country. But in one moment, that'd been ripped from me. I've spent the last decade trying to rebuild my dream, the future that I want for myself. All it took was Harper for me to realize what I wanted. I just want a soft life full of laughter, and I know that's what I'll get with Harper.

13

HARPER

Like I've always said, when things are too good, they always promptly go to shit. Thanksgiving was amazing. Jackson's parents are kind and sweet, just like him. Of course, my parents were less than thrilled that I went on a week-long holiday, which made them miss their annual chance to grill me during a turkey dinner.

Hence why my mother now stands in my living room in the early morning of Wednesday. Dressed in a pencil skirt, flowy blouse, and heels, she's the picture of a successful businesswoman. Even the pinched line of her mouth radiates I've got shit to do, and I'm not even remotely on her list.

"I just don't get why you didn't want to tell us," she complains, arms crossing over her chest.

"Maybe I wanted something for myself for once."

The microwave beeps to alert me that the water for my tea is done. I quietly fill a mug with the water and plop the peppermint tea bag into it so that it can steep as I argue with my mother. She looks on, unamused with my avoidance tactics after all these years.

"Please let me take you to your scan at the end of the week. We can..." Mother trails off, looking awkward for a moment, eyes avoiding mine. "I can take you out to lunch after."

“You hate having to explain Honey,” I point out because it’s true.

Her fingers tangle together as she lets out a little sigh. “I will get over it. Also, your father would really like to meet your boyfriend as well. Can’t we all get together for dinner soon?”

“You’ll have time for that sort of thing?”

Mother groans and tosses up her hands. “Harper, we’ll make time. We’re not as evil as you think. We do love you; you’re our son.”

“I’m your adopted son.”

Her nostrils flare at my words, as they usually do. The adoption is a sore spot and one that I know will easily end an argument. It’s like pushing on a nasty, barely healed bruise. I think they wanted a healthy kid without embarrassing seizures, and they know that’s what I think, no matter how often they argue against my supposedly irrational thought. As predicted, my painful jab ends the argument, and she promptly spins toward the front door.

Hand on the knob, she turns back to fix me with a hard stare. “I will pick you up Friday morning for your scan.”

“Fine.”

And then she’s gone.

Jackson texts me good morning, but I ignore it. My mood is sour, and I don’t want to pass it on to him. I easily distract myself with work, almost forgetting about the argument with my mother.

I keep Jackson at a careful distance through the week, only answering him enough to stop him from storming my house. I'm used to this by now. Keep people held carefully at arm's length, telling them just enough so they know I'm not dead or have run off to become a bookkeeper in a small beach town in South Carolina.

The ride downtown to the imaging center with my mother is silent and stilted. The normal order of things. Honey pants in the back seat of the Beemer, and I pray to God she doesn't accidentally rip the leather seats with a nail. A worry that I've never once had with Jackson because even if Honey did that accidentally, he wouldn't care. No matter how much he loves that damn car, he loves Honey more.

Suddenly, I wish I was in the car with him, heading to my appointment. I wish he was holding my hand as the nerves wash over me. I wish he was waiting right outside the door when the scan was over to hug me and take me out to lunch with teasing smiles. I wish, and I wish, and I wish .

"Honey could've stayed back at your house; she can't go into the scan with you," Mother reminds me.

I push open the car door with a huff. "Please just stay in the car with her. I'll be out in an hour. Maybe sooner."

I slam the door shut before she can argue. The workers at the imaging facility know me after all these years. Even when my seizures were under control, I came every six months. Dr. Whitman has always wanted a large overview of my health, checking to ensure that all the wires in my brain are still just a little crossed, not too crossed. Pathetic.

Thankfully, I always plan ahead for scans. Sweatpants and a T-shirt so that I don't have to add the embarrassment of a gown to the mix. The radiologist is a kind, older man named Tony that always feels bad for me when I cry during the scan. He never

says anything about it though because he's a consummate professional. God bless him.

Tony delivers the dose of contrast dye for the CT scan with a small smile. A warm, flushed feeling passes through me, along with the feeling of pissing myself, then finally, a metallic taste in my mouth. So pleasant. Always the best experience of my life. The whirl of the machine starts, and I stare blankly at the loud machine. At least thirty minutes alone with my thoughts.

What nightmares are made of.

Tony's voice comes over the speaker. "I'll start the music."

And then the gentle sounds of romance ballads from the '90s fill the speakers. I close my eyes and get lost in the songs, familiar with the humming of the machine over the words. Time ticks by, and I so badly try not to think of Jackson. But he pops into my brain unbidden because he takes up more space in my mind than he should. The man also takes up too much space in my fragile heart.

As usual, towards the end of the scan, the tears fall down my cheeks like silent rivers. Worries about if this will be the scan that finally says I'm not long for this world. Worries that they'll find something that has no explanation that'll add even more anxiety to my life. I worry that Dr. Whitman will have something terrible to tell me about at the next appointment. Worries that I'll have to break up with Jackson to spare him the pain of being with someone who has a lifelong, unpredictable brain disorder.

The CT scan ends with a small silent scream from me.

"See you again in a few months, Tony."

Tony grins. “Maybe it’ll go back to every six months soon.”

“Yeah, maybe,” I lie easily.

I rub angrily at my face as I make my way down the long hallway. Hopefully, no one can tell that I was crying. But the closer I get to the exit door, the more convinced I am that I’m hearing a very familiar voice.

When I push through the door, my mind shutters to a stop, static filling my brain.

Jackson stands at the check-in counter, elbows propped up, eyes filled with worry. He’s here. At the imaging facility. Terrified and looking for me. My throat itches, and my eyes well up with more tears.

“I don’t need your help anymore; I’ve found him,” Jackson says loudly, just before tugging me against the strong line of his body.

For the first time in my life, I don’t give a shit about the people watching me. I don’t care about the people scattered around the waiting room that are witness to my weakness, to my fucking need for this man. None of that matters as long as Jackson holds me in his arms. Without letting go of me, he hustles me outside. A sob breaks free from me once we’re no longer in front of a large audience.

“Why didn’t you tell me,” Jackson says, voice sad, even a little heartbroken.

“It’s embarrassing,” I cry into his chest.

Jackson’s hands spasm against my back, fingers tangling in my shirt to drag me closer against the strength of his body. He doesn’t reply; just keeps holding me. Finally, the tears slow, but I don’t wipe them away. Instead, Jackson tenderly reaches between us, using the pad of his thumb to wipe the lingering tears away.

“I want you to tell me these things. I want to be there for you, even if it scares you to allow me to see you vulnerable. Please, Harper. We can talk about it later. Do you want to go home?”

Leaning my weight against Jackson is the easiest thing I’ve ever done.

“Please take me home,” I beg, voice cracking on my plea.

Jackson guides me into the parking lot towards his waiting G-Wagon. My brain is so scrambled that I don’t remember my mother and Honey until he’s buckling me into the passenger seat. A moment later, my worried-looking mother appears at the door. Her perfectly manicured finger taps the window in a silent request for me to roll it down. Great. Awesome. Superb.

Jackson quietly places Honey into the back seat, busily buckling her into the seat harness under the pretense of not eavesdropping on our conversation. But I know he’s listening, and I honestly don’t care.

I roll the window down.

“Hello,” I say curtly.

Mom clears her throat awkwardly, eyes darting from the back seat to me. “Jackson is going to take you home. Maybe we can do lunch another day?”

“Sure,” I agree, not meaning it at all.

Her painted-on smile flickers, but she stands up straighter, preparing herself for war.

“I love you, Harp.” Her voice trembles just a little, making me feel like a total asshole. My eyes close tight when she leans into the window to press a barely there

kiss to my cheek.

She disappears out of sight, no doubt into her own vehicle to return to her fancy office downtown. Honey whines and licks her lips, just in time for Jackson to climb into the driver's seat with a pinched look on his beautiful face. As he pulls out of the parking lot, I reach across the console to tangle our fingers together. His are so warm against my own, a lifeblood when everything inside me is painfully cold. Sometimes, I feel like I'm rotting inside, but since Jackson came into my life, everything has gained color and life. He's brought life to me again, brought beauty, brought hope.

I'm in love with him. The realization is so startling, so terrifying, that I'm momentarily afraid I might go into cardiac arrest. Instead, my body grips his fingers tighter without any input from my own toxic brain. In the raging storm of my life, my abject misery, Jackson is an anchor that keeps me from floating away on the dangerous waves.

The house is silent as he helps me inside, as if knowing my body is weak with exhaustion. With his large palms on my thin shoulders, he guides me towards the sofa. I fall onto the cushions like a rag doll, letting him cover me with blankets. My eyes feel disconnected from my body as I watch him fill Honey's bowl with fresh water and then grab a rawhide from the bags of treats he brought over and left a few days ago.

For a moment, I worry he's mad at me because of the way his shoulders are tense, almost to his ears. But then he drops to a squat between my legs, places his hands on my forearms, and gently rubs my skin back to life. Shoulders tense, eyes boring into me, he's the picture of pure pain. Just the sight of him on his knees before me has my heart pounding in my ears, the tips of my fingers tingling with the urge to touch him.

"Why didn't you tell me about the brain scan?" Jackson asks firmly, not giving me a chance for an out.

“I don’t like you seeing me that way,” I admit, cringing at the shake in my voice.

“What way?”

I swallow hard. “Weak.”

“Harper,” Jackson says, out of breath. His fingers tug at my shirt roughly. “I have never wanted anyone as much as I want you. No, want is the wrong word. Need. Making you laugh, smile, even roll your eyes at me is my life’s fucking mission. Don’t you get it, punk? I’m fucking in love with you. Every goddamn thing about you. I worship the ground you walk on. My world doesn’t start spinning for the day until I taste your sweet mouth. You’re perfect to me. Do you get it now? Huh?”

All the blood rushes from my heart, leaving me dizzy. The world returns, in pieces, until I’m blinking Jackson back into vision. Concern radiates off of him in thick waves as his fingers slowly drift through my hair, eyes rapidly flicking between mine.

“Okay, punk?”

I clear my throat awkwardly. “I’m fine.”

Jackson hums in disbelief, thumb dragging along my lower lip. “Caught you by surprise, huh?”

“A little,” I admit. Butterflies wage a war in my stomach, rising up to my chest. “Did you mean it?”

“Yeah. Stop trying to break up with me for stupid reasons.”

Tossing my forearm over my eyes, I hold back a sob. “Jackson, they’re very good reasons. The seizures aren’t controlled. Sometimes I piss myself. It’s fucking

embarrassing. This could cause so many complications for the rest of my life. I can't... I can't saddle you with having to fucking take care of me."

Jackson carefully tugs my arm away from my eyes. "It's a part of life, part of you. I understand that more than anyone. But I'm not going anywhere. You can't get rid of me now. I'm in your bones, in your lungs, just like you are for me. I'd go to war for you, so stop asking me to go to war to keep you. It's not fair."

"I feel so useless. I don't want to need you to take care of me. I hate needing anyone."

Jackson shifts to his knees, takes my face in his hands, and stares deeply into my eyes. He lightly shakes my head, imploring me to listen to him. "You don't need me to take care of you. I want to take care of you. Just fucking get that through your head, Harper."

"I'll stop trying to break up with you," I say, grumpy as hell.

Jackson beams. "Good boy. Honey would be very displeased if she lost me."

I sigh dramatically. "You're her favorite now."

"I'm Daddy," Jackson says matter-of-factly. He tugs me up by my arms, pulling me against his warm, solid frame. Sweeping his thumb along my lower lip, he tugs it down, before dipping down to kiss me. Our lips slide together, soft and slow, until I melt against him in a puddle of want and need. The Jackson Effect.

"There you are," Jackson murmurs against my mouth.

"I love you, too." I press the words into his mouth, not letting him reply. His fingers tangle in my hair, yanking my head into the position he wants so he can kiss me more

deeply. My brain turns off as Jackson licks into my mouth, tasting me, making my mouth his own.

When he pulls away, it takes a solid few seconds for my brain to boot back online.

“God, that’s the fucking best.” Jackson tugs my hair hard, forcing me to open my eyes and gaze up at him in a daze. “The day you stop melting from my kiss is the day I’ll leave this earth.”

“You give good kisses,” I admit.

“I give great kisses. Give credit where credit is due.”

I softly punch his stomach, rolling my eyes when he laughs loudly. Honey bounds in from the kitchen, her eyes concerned for Jackson.

“You’re supposed to be my dog, Honey.”

Honey lets out a little yip, before coming to stand in front of me. Not in service mode, she lifts her head up for a pat. Once I’ve scratched her ears, Jackson scratches under her chin, then dips down to kiss her wet nose.

“Best girl ever,” Jackson coos, making Honey’s tail beat a rapid tattoo against the ground.

“Disgusting.”

Jackson pinches my thigh, making me yelp. “Be more respectful. This is the love of my life over here.”

“Not what you were saying a couple of minutes ago.” I exit the living room in a huff,

leaving them be.

A few moments later the soft sound of Jackson's feet padding against the wood floors alerts me to his presence. Fixing water for tea in the microwave, I wait for him to approach. Sure enough, a moment later his arm wraps around my shoulders from behind, the curve of the inside of his elbow resting just under my chin. His reflection greets me in the window, but his fond gaze is on the top of my head.

"Jackson..."

"Hush. I'm admiring you."

"You're being mushy again. You know I hate that."

Jackson covers my mouth with his hand. "Be quiet. I'm admiring the scenery."

My eyebrows furrow, but then a startled gasp escapes me when Jackson tugs my sweatpants and boxers down until the cold air slaps my bare ass. A pleased sigh filters from his lips, as his other hand gently caresses my ass cheek.

"One day I'll spank the hell out of you. Then I'll fuck you so deep that all you can feel, all you can think about, is me. Just the way you like it."

My body grows heavy against him. He uses his arm around my neck to pull me in closer until my back is pressed tight against the solid line of his chest. Every now and then his thumb and forefinger pinch my ass cheek. Drowsiness overtakes me. All I can see and feel is Jackson.

"Harper," Jackson calls my name, slowly waking me up from the daze his ministrations put me in.

“Jackson,” I echo, tongue thick in my mouth.

“Stay with me.” His palm leaves my mouth to drag along my shoulder, my forearm, finally tangling his fingers with mine. “I love you.”

Our gazes meet in the reflection of the window. A relieved smile slowly unfurls across my lips. Happiness, true and real, blooms to life inside me.

“I love you, too.”

And he does, and I do, and for at least this very moment, everything is perfect.

“I stopped at the store on the way over here, then I realized you weren’t here, and I called Beau, and then he called Andy, and well...” Jackson chuckles softly, his warm breath ghosting over my cheek. “I bought the ingredients to make my mama’s pie. I was thinking... maybe we can plug the oven in and bake it. Then maybe, if you wanted, we could leave the oven plugged in so that we can cook together when I come over.”

I know exactly what he’s doing. Two-months-ago Harper would’ve been pissed off, would’ve kicked and screamed, but current Harper sees Jackson’s point. Maybe I can loosen the reins a little and stop controlling every aspect of my life so carefully.

“Okay,” I agree.

Jackson spins me around with a wide, painful-looking grin. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” I pause and kiss him softly on the mouth. “You’re doing all the stirring, though.”

I’ve never seen Jackson move so fast.

14

JACKSON

I know that saying I love you to Harper isn't a magic fix nor is he saying it back to me a cure-all. The rest of my life will be spent proving to him that I love him, that I'm staying, that he's worth being kept by me. Maybe one day he'll get it, maybe he never will, but the pursuit of making him feel loved is enough.

Especially with the way he loves me back. It's the little things with Harper. The way he burrows into me when we cuddle in bed in the mornings, seeking my warmth when his body is still freezing cold. The tilt of his lips when I've said something funny but he loathes to laugh, giving me satisfaction. The way he listens raptly to me as I talk about some sports thing that I know he doesn't really care about, but he cares because it's a passion for me.

December in Florida isn't much different from October or November. The heat is a little less intense, but everything else remains the same. Green grass as far as the eye can see. Only the trees are a little more bare, but it's still so very alive.

The farm apparently throws holiday events every weekend, similar to the autumn festival where I realized I needed Harper with an intensity I'd never needed another person before.

The perfect date spot.

Plus I'll get to see all my best friends.

Minus Benji because he's still on a world tour with Nolan.

"Get in the car, loser!" I shout from the window of my car.

Eli wrinkles his nose but still happily skips towards the car. "That's very mean."

"You were dawdling."

Eli huffs in annoyance. "I was locking the front door."

"Are you living in the big house now?" I tease.

Eli slams the door shut and aims a glare at me. After dealing with Harper, Eli seems like a kitten. I just grin under his barely restrained fury at my gentle ribbing.

"Yes, I moved into Colby's house last weekend," Eli quietly admits, as if saying it out loud might curse it. Sweet boy.

"Big step! Everything is going well, I take it?"

The car rumbles down Beau and Trevor's gravel driveway, kicking up dust in the rearview mirror. I'm going to need a serious detail after this weekend between here and driving to the farm.

Eli hums while restlessly tapping his fingers against the window. "It's going great. Almost too good, you know?"

I nod in understanding as we come to a stop in front of Trevor's place. "I understand that."

Eli angles his body in the car so he can look at me, eyes squinted in the late afternoon

sun. “How about you?”

“Oh, I’m going to marry Harper one day. Absolutely no doubt.”

Trevor runs out of the house, tugging on a flannel over his thin T-shirt. His blond hair is up in a loose bun and his grin is soft as he climbs into the back seat.

“Sup, assholes?” Trevor sings.

“Excuse me.” I turn around to glare at him. “Is that how you speak to me?”

Trevor’s teeth flash between his lips. “I’m not afraid of you. Are we picking up Harper?”

My heart does a familiar dip and dive at the sound of Harper’s name.

“Obviously, we’re picking up my boyfriend.”

Trevor slaps his hands on the driver and passenger seat, leaning between the console to look at Eli. “I know something you don’t know.”

Eli turns confused eyes on Trevor. “What?”

Trevor pinches Eli’s cheek with a warm grin but doesn’t say anything else. When we pull up in front of Harper’s house, I leave the boys in the car to greet Harper in private. I type in the code that Harper assigned to me, pressing into the dark house. Honey greets me with wiggles just as Harper rounds the corner.

His hair is up in a bun, and a few tendrils are hanging loose around his face. Dressed in dark jeans, a maroon henley, and black Converse, he’s the hottest man on the earth. He arches an eyebrow in question as he slips on his leather jacket.

“What’s that look for?” Harper asks around a chuckle.

I back him up against the wall and kiss his smiling mouth. Carefully cradling his face in the palm of my hands, I tilt his head until I get the angle I want so that I can lick into his mouth to savor the taste of him. Harper’s fingers dig into my neck, holding me close, wanting me just as much as I want him.

When I pull away from his mouth, he chuckles darkly, and his warm breath floats across my cheekbone.

“Hello to you too,” Harper says, voice low, and decidedly sultry.

I softly nuzzle my nose against his cheek. “You are so beautiful.”

“So you’ve said.”

“Perfect.”

“Shut up.”

“I’d burn the world for you,” I dig the hole deeper.

“I’m going to murder you and no one will find your body.”

With a loud laugh, I tug Harper out of the house towards the car. Eli moved to the back seat with Trevor, leaving the passenger seat for Harper. As usual, I buckle Harper in, catching the slight flush across his cheekbones at my undivided attention in front of my friends. Honey hops into the back, happily sitting between Eli and Trevor with her service vest on. A flush of pride moves through my chest at the sight of my best friends dutifully ignoring Honey as she works.

The boys chat among themselves while I drive, but I'm too focused on Harper's warm hand on my thigh to pay attention to anything they say. It feels like such a huge step for him to show me any attention that others might see.

A decent crowd covers the farm as we make our way onto the property. Harper keeps his hand in mine, pointing out things that only someone who's been here a million times would know. The joy on his face brings me to life. I squeeze his hand hard enough for him to look over at me, a question on his face.

"You trust me, right?" I ask softly.

Harper frowns deeply. "Of course, Jackson."

"I have this idea for your Christmas present. But you'll have to trust me. Okay?"

"Alright," Harper agrees warily, looking around at the crowd. "Is it happening right now?"

Chuckling, I swing my arm around his shoulder to tug him against my side. He fits perfectly. "No, punk. It's not happening right now. Maybe next weekend. Is that fake snow?"

Harper grunts in confirmation. "It's soap, but the kids love it. Santa comes at night, or sometimes the Grinch."

The sky is a lovely pink and purple, and the Christmas lights twinkle as the air around us darkens. A screech from Eli pulls my attention towards him just in time to see him launch himself into Colby's arms. Colby grins wide, chuckling as he holds Eli tight to him. A moment later, Beau appears with a small smile and wave. Trevor tips up on his toes to kiss Beau, a much gentler reaction to the sight of his boyfriend than Eli.

Both men are dressed in Clay Road Farms work attire, meaning ratty jeans and brand-new T-shirts.

“Beau, in twenty years, are you going to be Santa?” Harper teases with a wicked smirk.

“Maybe, will you be my elf?”

Harper’s nose wrinkles in abject disgust. “Definitely not.”

“I’ll be your elf.” Trevor winks at Beau, making the taller man blush.

They’re all sickeningly cute. I love it.

“Are we working or flirting here?” Andy asks with a hand on her hip. She winks at Harper and presses a kiss to his cheek that he swats away. “Let me kiss you,” Andy hisses through her teeth.

“Fuck off,” Harper says with his teeth gritted.

“You love me,” Andy sings.

“Debatable.”

“There’s work to do, lover boys.” Andy points at her brother and then Colby. “Back to work.”

“Last I checked, I am the boss,” Beau says with a teasing lilt in his voice.

Andy salutes Beau with a wide grin. “Aye aye, captain.”

Colby, Beau, and Andy disappear back into the crowd. Eli looks forlornly at the disappearing back of his boyfriend, earning a dramatic gag from Harper.

Harper makes a barfing face. “Don’t look at my cousin like that in front of me, please.”

Eli shoots a glare towards Harper. “You’re one to talk. You’ve got my best friend looking at you like he wants to get you pregnant immediately.”

Harper’s eyes widen as he looks towards me. “Really?”

I shrug with a smirk. “He’s not wrong.”

“Huh,” Harper says softly.

“Maybe tonight we can give it a shot,” I murmur softly for only Harper to hear.

Instead of a biting comment or a swat to my arm, I’m rewarded with a warm red flush across Harper’s cheekbones. Interesting. He turns away from me to look towards the setting sun dipping below the horizon. My favorite thing about Harper is that there are so many layers for me to keep discovering, not just about his personality but what brings him pleasure. Who knew my sarcastic little punk might have a hidden breeding kink?

The four of us amble slowly towards the Christmas tree lot. Trevor and Eli are full of laughter as they judge the trees, but Harper is quiet beside me. Butterflies take flight in my chest when Trevor comes over to tug Harper away so that they can pose in front of some decorated trees for a picture. Eli tosses me his phone, which I easily catch, and I snap a few photos of them posing in front of the trees decorated in a beach theme.

When the sun sets all the way, the bubbles start in the center of the farm, eliciting squeals of joy from the kids present. Eli runs out into the bubbles and tilts his head towards the sky, while Trevor stands at the edge recording him. So typical.

Harper plants his feet firmly to prevent me from dragging him under the fake snow. Knowing Harper's limits is half of loving him. Getting cute under some fake snow is a hard limit that I'll definitely respect. But I hold his hand in mine, tucking it under my jacket as he watches Eli play in the fake snow.

"How's Benji doing on the tour?" I ask Trevor softly.

Trevor's face pinches with concern. "You should talk to him."

The very idea shocks me. "Me?"

Trevor nods quickly. "He's struggling, I think. Claire keeps thinking of convincing him to let the contract go. You know... Nolan can be a lot. It's a lot."

Nolan and I had one single night together before I realized it most definitely would not work between us. I might be a top, but pain play is not remotely my thing. I'm more of a service top than anything. Nolan is enough to make anyone's carefully built walls crack. And the more I think about Benji, the more I realize that he and Nolan are probably a perpetually awfully bad idea. I'm surprised Claire even arranged it.

"How long has that entire thing been going on?"

Trevor grimaces. "At least a year off and on. But the tour is nonstop for a few months. If he comes running to us, we'll know it's because Nolan sent him running."

I hum in agreement, making a mental note to call Benji to check in. Doubtful he'll share anything with me, but with Benji, sometimes it's nice just for him to know we

all think about him and love him still.

The boys return home with their men, so it's just me, Honey, and Harper on the ride home. Plus, the Christmas tree tied to the roof of my car. A year ago, it would've sent me into a nosedive of a conniption, but now, not so much. Mostly because Harper had smiled, a real, true smile, just at the very idea of buying a real tree. I can't deny him a single thing that brings him that amount of happiness.

It takes both of us to get the tree into the house. Harper helpfully disappears into his garage to find a tree stand and an old string of lights. I kiss him softly in thanks when he returns with both items in his hand. We wrangle the tree into the stand, then messily wrap the lights around the fluffy branches. Harper stands back to inspect, a thoughtful hand on his chin, head tilting this way and that.

"It looks perfect," Harper says sweetly, face lit up by the multicolored lights.

Throwing my arm over his shoulder, I bring him tight against me. Placing my mouth to his ear, I whisper, "Wanna explore that breeding kink you have?"

Harper's groan is so loud that I think I'll hear it for days.

Camping sounded fun in my brain. Now? I am not so sure. Renting an RV also sounded like a great idea until I had to drive it. Honestly, it's like driving a goddamn tank. The brakes squeak loudly when I slide into park in Harper's circular driveway.

Harper steps out onto his front porch in a daze, hand shading his eyes to see the RV in the bright light of dawn. Wearing jeans and one of my faded hoodies I left at his house, I consider just ushering him back inside to fuck him in his own bed all weekend. But I have plans, and I want to see this through, so I will push on.

"What the fuck is this?" Harper says loudly, eyes scarily wide.

I hold my arms out with what I hope is an excited face. “We’re going camping!”

Harper scowls. “Not safe.”

“It is! We’re only going to be thirty minutes away from a hospital! And my phone has an amazing signal; it would work in a remote jungle. Beau and Colby are on alert all weekend, so if I call, they’ll come running to help us. I swear, Harper, it’s safe.”

Harper’s fingers twitch restlessly at his side; his eyes glazed over as he stares blankly at the RV. Slowly, a small smile flickers at the edges of his lips.

“I’m not sure sleeping in that counts as camping, Jack.”

Oh. Oh, that’s nice. Stay chill, Jackson. I gesture towards the back of the RV with a grin. “I also have a tent for when you’re feeling frisky.”

Harper sighs dramatically, although I can tell he’s excited by the gleam in his emerald eyes. He disappears into the house only to return with two bags slung over his shoulders. I hurry up the stairs to take the bags from him, not wanting him to overdo himself so early on in the trip.

Harper doesn’t follow me into the RV, though; instead, he stands just outside, shuffling foot to foot as if he’s unsure.

“Punk?”

“Okay, so.” Harper pauses and takes a deep breath. “I did something for you for Christmas, but it’s a little out of my comfort zone, so just...”

He huffs and gives up on speaking, instead deciding to grab my hand and tug me around to the back of the house. Hanging against the side of the house is a basketball

hoop and my heart once again does this funny little dip and dive in my chest. Harper steps away for a moment only to return with a basketball cupped between his palms.

“I thought maybe sometimes you can come over, and we can play together,” Harper says softly, almost as if embarrassed. “I’m so naturally good at it, but maybe you can teach me a few things? We can... we can make it a weekly thing, maybe?”

I grab Harper around the neck and tug him to me to kiss all the air from his lungs. He drops the ball between us with a grunt, instead tangling his fingers at the nape of my neck. We kiss and kiss and kiss until it feels like maybe we could become one person if we wished. When I pull away, my lips tingle with the memory of his mouth against mine.

“Harper... I...”

Harper shakes his head roughly. “Just say thank you.”

“Thank you,” I say roughly, throat thick and tight with want.

Harper nods and stalks back toward the RV. I stand still for a moment, watching every bit of my future disappear. And I bite back a smile when Harper turns around with wide eyes and points toward the RV in clear demand for us to get going.

Honey makes herself at home on the sofa that lines the right side of the RV. I start it up and close the doors, grinning like a besotted fool when Harper takes the seat beside me up front. Always the little things with Harper. The park I’m taking us to is only an hour north of Clay Springs. Plus, I went a little wild and reserved all the spots available for this weekend to guarantee us total privacy.

The RV rumbles down the small one-way road that enters into the park. A tired-looking forest ranger stands at the guard house with an exhausted smile on his face.

“I assume you’re Jackson Harris?” the guard calls out.

I give him a salute. “Yes, sir. Will you be up here all night?”

The guard shakes his head. “Nope, at night, I stay in the ranger lodging. But you’ve reserved the entire park, which we’ve never seen before, by the way, so no one will come bothering you. I’ll drop the gates behind you so no one can get in.”

I watch in the rearview mirror as the guard does in fact drop the gates, locking us in and keeping other visitors out. Five minutes later, I’m parking the RV at the very end of the road, guaranteeing us total privacy.

The brine of ocean air slaps me in the face when I step out of the RV. I hold my hand out for Harper, helping him down as Honey whips past us to nose around. The sky is bright blue with only a few clouds dotting it. Harper tucks his hands in his hoodie while slowly ambling out toward the shore.

Freedom is what Harper needs most while he’s with me. I don’t want to smother him in this newfound experience. Busy with setting up the campsite, I get lost in the mundaneness of it all. Until Honey’s soft bark sends my heart skyrocketing, only for it to settle into peace when I spot the two of them playing in the waves. Harper’s shoes sit a few yards back from them; his jeans rolled up to his knees so he can dip his feet in the cold water.

His smile is easy and free, and mine . I know then that I made the right choice in bringing him here, in giving him this experience that he never thought he’d be able to have in his grip. Honey lowers onto her front feet, then pounces on attack mode as she happily bites at a foamy wave.

Harper’s tinkling laughter rises over the din of the water. Caught up in watching them, I forget about anything else but them. My two sweethearts. Harper bends down

to pick up a shell, then carefully washes it off in the saltwater at his feet. With a happy grin, he jogs towards me to present me with the shell.

But it's not a shell at all.

It's a dried-out seahorse.

"You know the male seahorses can get pregnant," Harper says with a gleam in his eye.

"You're insufferable."

Harper wiggles his eyebrows. "It's a sign. We should try tonight."

I nod towards Honey. "She's having the time of her life."

Harper lets out a delighted laugh. "She's happy to not be working for once."

Pinching his chin, I turn his gaze towards me. "She's happy because she's at the beach with her daddies."

Harper sighs, long and loud, then leans up on the tip of his toes to kiss me softly. He shivers slightly under my lips. I simply can't have that. I drag him towards the outdoor seating I set up, shoving him gently into the chair. Using a towel packed away just for the beach, I clean the sand from his feet and kiss the cold skin at the top of his foot.

"Jackson," Harper whispers, real emotion in his voice.

"Yeah?"

Harper tenderly skims his fingers across my forehead, down my cheek, finally letting them rest along the edge of my jaw. “Thank you. This is the best gift I’ve ever been given.”

My throat goes tight and my eyes burn at the genuine gratitude in his hoarse voice. Just to be given something so simple, has him beyond grateful. When really this is not a gift for him at all, but a gift for me. Because bringing Harper happiness is now my only goal in life. To bring him happiness, and joy, and to keep him forever, if he’ll let me.

15

HARPER

Lunch is sandwiches Jackson lovingly prepared in the RV kitchen. The bread is a soft flaky croissant with thick-cut deli meat, specialty cheese, and some spicy spread that shouldn't work but weirdly does. Maybe I should trick him into making my meals for me so I don't have to spend a fortune on a private chef. He'd probably do it if I only asked. Which is a power I have to carefully wield.

Honey tires herself by early evening, deciding to sleep on the sofa inside the RV that Jackson covered with towels just for her. Spoiled girl. Jackson and I put the tent up before it gets dark, miraculously getting through the process without arguing. It must be a good sign, considering I've always heard these types of tasks send couples into loud screaming matches. But I also just can't picture Jackson ever yelling at me. I'm sure we'll disagree like adults; maybe I'll stomp my feet, maybe I'll try to push him away, but at the end of the day, we love each other, so screaming doesn't seem conducive.

Captivated by the sight of Jackson's muscles moving under his shirt, I almost miss the screen of my phone lighting up to indicate Andy's call.

"Hello," I say into the phone.

Jackson turns his head to look at me. I mouth it's Andy and he turns back around, comfortable that everything is fine.

“How’s camping?” Andy asks, a hint of teasing in her voice.

“Fun so far but we haven’t hit night yet.”

“Yes,” Andy drawls. “The monsters come out at night at the shore.”

“Exactly,” I quickly agree. “What if Jackson brought me out here to kill me.”

Andy snorts inelegantly. “If he was going to kill you, I think he would’ve done it a few months ago when you were being a little shit without the sex on the side.”

My lips quirk with a smirk. A loud snort from Honey breaks through the sound of the waves and the sizzle of the grill.

“How are you doing? What’s your Christmas plan?”

Andy hums thoughtfully. “Probably just spending it with Mom, Beau, and Trevor. Will you be dropping by?”

Usually, I spend Christmas morning with my parents, then drop by Andy’s family’s place in the afternoon. Not sure what I’ll be doing this year with Jackson now in the mix.

“Most likely,” I say, swinging my feet in the camper chair.

“Good. You’re doing good?”

“No more seizures, Mom,” I reply sarcastically.

Andy audibly sighs. “I didn’t mean it that way... I meant more... you’re happy?”

For the first time in my life, the answer is easy. “Blissfully.”

“Awwwww,” Andy croons, no doubt resting her hand over her heart and grinning. “My little one is in love.”

“If you don’t up shut.”

Andy chuckles. “I’m so happy. Remember when I fell in love with Ethan, and you gagged every time I said something nice about him.”

“I also hate the military-industrial complex, so it was a mix of that and your disgusting droning of how much you loved him.”

“Never change, Harper.”

“Don’t plan on it,” I quip.

“Speak of the devil. My man is calling me. Anyway, I love you! I’ll see you at Christmas, loser!”

Slipping the phone into the pocket of my jeans, I sidle up to Jackson, wrapping my arms around his thick waist. He carefully flips the chicken, sweetly patting my hands where they rest over his stomach.

“Good call?”

I tenderly kiss the bare skin of his neck. “Just Andy.”

“Making sure you’re still alive?”

My grin actually hurts my face, so I hide it in Jackson’s shoulder. “Definitely. I told

her that you haven't sacrificed me to the sea gods yet."

"Still time," Jackson promises.

The crisp ocean air blows in as we eat dinner spread out on a blanket atop the cold sand. Everything feels otherworldly on the lonely beach with Jackson. Like we're in a world of our own, just us. Never in my life had I thought a wish of mine could come true, at least in a safe way. But with Jackson here with me, I know that my safety is beyond protected. No harm will come to me here.

"So?" Jackson asks with a mouthful of macaroni salad.

"Yes, you Neanderthal?"

"What's the star rating so far?"

"Out of five stars?"

Jackson nods eagerly. "Yeah."

"At least three."

Jackson's frown is deep. "How do I get it to a five?"

I wiggle my eyebrows and leer at him. "An hour in the tent will probably get us to five stars."

Jackson sighs as if put out by the idea of fucking me, but I know the opposite is true. He's been touching me all day, lingering, teasing touches to build the intensity for tonight. My man is a huge fan of foreplay, building it all throughout the day with gentle teasing. A kiss on the cheek that lingers a little too long. A slap on the rear that

cups my ass cheek instead of skirting across it. A hug that leaves no room for Jesus. Jackson's been playing me like a fiddle all day, so tonight will undoubtedly be beyond magical.

Instead of taking me into the tent to fuck me, Jackson starts a small fire. Once the warm flames are popping and casting out heat, he sets up camping chairs and pushes me down into one. I smile at him in a daze, only to grin wider when he hands me the makings for s'mores.

Jackson shoves two marshmallows onto a metal stick. "Can't forget about your sweet tooth."

"You are the perfect man," I say dreamily.

Jackson practically beams with pride. "I know."

Jackson carefully holds the marshmallows over the flame until they're perfectly crisp. Whistling while he works, he puts the marshmallows between two graham crackers with a large piece of chocolate. He hands it to me without looking, then sets about making one for himself.

"Jackson."

He turns his head towards me with a curious look. "Yeah?"

"I love you," I say softly, meaning every word.

Jackson's lips are soft against my own when he leans across the chairs to kiss me. He tastes like marshmallows. The stars come out as the sky darkens, and the fire tosses up light in front of us. Despite the loud waves, Honey's soft snores filter out of the RV, making warmth pool inside my chest, something warm and alive.

“I have a really serious question,” Jackson says sometime later after licking his fingers clean.

“I have a very serious answer for you.”

Jackson rolls his eyes. “Okay, but if you had to choose between me and Liam Walsh... who are you picking?”

I pretend to think, making the most thoughtful face I can. Only a few seconds tick by before Jackson groans loudly. “I know you’d pick me.”

I wiggle my hand back and forth. “Maybe. The jury’s out.”

Jackson grumbles something I can’t hear. I bite back a smile at his grumpiness. The only thing that can ever make Jackson irritated or blue is the idea of me finding another man attractive. The idea of me being intimate with another man would probably send him into a catatonic state. Good thing he’s the only one I really have eyes for.

“Come on, Daddy, tent time.”

I climb into the tent without a backward glance, knowing that Jackson will follow. A small cutout with netting lines the top of the tent so we can perfectly see the stars. The sky is a dark blue now with bright stars flickering in the sky. We’re so far from the city that stars usually only visible when away from civilization are glowing to life. The atmosphere is dreamy and romantic, probably exactly what Jackson was going for with this trip.

I lie back on the air mattress, pleasantly surprised at its softness. Although I don’t know why I’m surprised considering Jackson bought the most expensive and best air mattress available on the market. Faux fur blankets line the bed, and despite the chill

in the air outside, I feel warm inside the tent.

Jackson joins me a few moments later, hurriedly tugging off his shirt.

“Alright, I need to fuck you now or I’m going to die.”

I can’t help but laugh. “Romantic.”

“Please, my love, let me ravish you now before I die from not having you.”

Oh. I stare up at Jackson in wonder, watching hungrily as he shimmies out of his pants to reveal miles of leg. His body is perfect. Small tufts of hair on his thighs and legs, and just a tiny amount on his chest. The strong muscles are proof of how it’s so easy for him to manhandle me. Our bodies are so different, but together they feel so right.

He wastes no time unbuttoning my jeans, tugging them off of me in a hurry. The chilled air sends goose bumps popping along my skin. Once I’m naked, I shiver in the cool air, but it only lasts a moment before Jackson lies over me, instantly warming me with his own heat.

“Hi,” Jackson whispers from above me.

“Hello.”

“I can hear the waves.” Jackson lifts his head to look up at the stars. “And look at that view.”

“An amazing view,” I agree, but I’m not looking at the stars, I’m looking only at him.

Jackson lowers his body, his hard cock lined up perfectly with mine. I lift my legs up

to wrap around his waist as he rolls his hips, fucking his cock against mine. The taste of Jackson lingers on my lips even as he pulls away to bury his face in the crook of my neck. His hand tangles in my hair, only coming loose once he's removed my hair tie.

He pulls away to look down at me. "There you are. Fucking perfect."

"Please be quiet," I whisper, not needing flowery words tonight.

Jackson hums soft and low, rolling his hips hard against mine. My eyes roll back into my head as pleasure zips down my spine. His tongue licks down my neck, sending shockwaves of fire rolling through my body. When he bites down on the juncture of my neck and shoulder, a surprised gasp escapes my parted lips.

"Mhmm," Jackson hums again. "I wanna mark you up. Leave bites all over you so everyone knows you're mine. Mine to fuck, mine to love, mine to keep safe. You're mine, mine, mine."

"Yours," I vow.

Jackson presses open-mouthed kisses down my chest. He drags a sinful moan out of me when he eagerly swallows my cock down. He works me over slowly, lips spit-slick where they stretch over my cock. Everything goes molasses slow under his mouth. Being at the center of Jackson's sole focus is often too much. The man knows how to play my body like an instrument, plucking every string until I come apart at the seams for him.

I thrust up into his mouth when his lubed finger presses into me, immediately searching out my prostate. My fingers slide over his shoulders, digging into his muscled shoulder blades to hang on for the ride. He curls his tongue around the tip of my cock, sending pleasure careening through me. If he doesn't fuck me soon, I'll

come just like this, only by his mouth.

“Jack,” I whisper reverently, roughly squeezing the nape of his neck to spur him into action.

He pulls off my cock, eyes glazed, lips glazed with spit. A feral grin spreads across his face, just before he presses three fingers into me. My back arches off the bed and my toes curl into the furry blankets beneath me. I tangle my fingers in the blanket, desperately needing something to hang on to as he takes me apart.

I slide my hands down his shoulders, his ribs, landing them on his ass as he crawls up my body. Squeezing the perfect cheeks in my palms, I bring him down against my body until his hard cock slides against my own.

Leaning up, I whisper against his mouth, “Fuck me now, or don’t fuck me at all.”

“Demanding,” Jackson whispers back.

“Eager,” I correct him.

His grin sends a shiver down my spine. I wrap my arms around his neck when he presses into me. Jackson swallows down my gasp of pleasure, eating at my mouth like a man possessed. He carefully slips his arms underneath me, holding me to him as he bottoms out inside. Every time he fucks me is like the first time. I’m so full of him that all I can think about is Jackson. My entire existence narrows in on him.

He buries his face in my neck, breathing me in deeply like my scent drives him wild. My fingers claw at his back. I dig my nails into his skin when he roughly bites at my neck. Tomorrow, there will be a bite mark there, and I’ll love it. I will be undoubtedly heartbroken when it fades away, along with the proof of my belonging.

Jackson freezes inside me, cock pulsing like he was moments away from coming.

“Felt too good,” Jackson whispers against my sweat-slick skin. “Don’t want it to be over yet.”

“Okay,” I reply, out of words.

Jackson chuckles and flips us over so I’m straddling him. “You can do the work now. Put on a show for me.” Jackson slaps my ass hard, making it jiggle where it’s pressed flush against his groin. “Ride me, punk.”

Wiggling my hips, I set a slow pace, one that has Jackson holding on by just a thread. His perilous grip on his desire is easy to see from the sharpness of his eyes and the quick rise and fall of his chest that’s dotted with sweat. I firmly press my hands against his chest, grinning wickedly at the rapid beat of his heart beneath my palm.

His eyes flash when I lean back, pressing my hands against his thighs. The angle is deep and the pleasure is so intense that I could almost weep. Jackson’s nostrils flare as his hands roughly grab my hips, holding me still so I’m forced to stop grinding.

“You’ve learned too many tricks.”

My turn to grin down at him. “Daddy taught me.”

“Jesus.”

He’s so easy. Jackson rolls us over again, but this time he shoves me onto all fours, and pistons his cock back inside me. I rest my head on my arms, just barely hanging on for the ride of my life. His lubed hand reaches for my cock, gripping tight, pumping at the same pace he sets with his cock. My orgasm sneaks up on me, violent and wild.

My fingers curl into the blanket, and only a barely audible gasp leaves my parted lips. But Jackson hears it because he's so perfectly in tune with me. The feel of my cum on his hand turns him into a beast, using my body for his own pleasure until he comes inside me with a shout. I can feel him, inside me, everywhere, and it's so perfect that I can't help but smile in a delighted daze.

When he flips me over, his smile is just as wide. He grabs his T-shirt from the ground, using it to clean us both up, so we don't fall asleep in the tent covered in cum. I can't say I wouldn't mind that, though, despite its stickiness and all-out grossness. Having that piece of Jackson lingering on my skin, without anyone else knowing, well, it would make me feel sort of caveman-like. I think Jackson would also appreciate it but I'm too chickenshit to ask.

Jackson throws himself on the bed beside me, tucking me under his arm and tiredly dragging one of the furry blankets over us. Loopy with my orgasm, I slowly raise my hand to point at the stars.

"They're beautiful."

Jackson hums in agreement. "I'll love you as long as those stars blink in the sky. Infinite and forever."

Sweet, but silly. "Stars are dying, just so you know."

Jackson presses a kiss to my sweaty forehead. "My notion was extremely romantic, so please don't ruin it."

"How do you know?" I ask, suddenly feeling very vulnerable and serious.

Jackson's fingers curl into my hair, happily playing with the strands. "That my notion was romantic?"

“No... that you’ll love me forever?”

“Because you’re mine, Harper. I will never let you go because you belong to me. Forever.”

The words shouldn’t be romantic, but they are. Belonging to someone is a faraway wish that I never thought I’d see come true. Then comes Jackson, pushing through every boundary I toss up, fighting every demon that tries to end us before we even really begin. I fall asleep satiated in his arms, satisfied with the knowledge that I belong to Jackson and no one else.

Two magical nights at the beach later, and I’ve never been more pissed off to return home. Jackson, on the other hand, seems just fine. Probably all the orgasms. I should be feeling the same way, but oddly, I feel restless. I wish we could’ve stayed at the beach forever, in our tiny hidden bubble.

But when we return home, I can no longer ignore the fervent pleas from my mother for us to come over for dinner.

The plus side is that she’s at least including Jackson.

Maybe after the whole imaging center event, she’s realized for the first time someone besides family is sticking around for me.

Jackson’s unloading the RV when I decide to drop the bomb on him.

“My parents would like us to go over for dinner tonight.”

Jackson pauses with my suitcase in his hand. “Oh?”

“We don’t have to,” I hurry to explain. “I can tell her no.”

“Do you want to go?” Jackson asks, returning to grabbing my suitcases.

I think it over as I follow him inside the house. Do I want to go to dinner with my parents? No. Should we? Yes. It’s a thin line. Maybe with Jackson there, my mother will behave better and be less antagonistic towards me.

“It’s hard to explain.”

Jackson’s eyebrows are adorably furrowed when he finally faces me. “So we don’t go.”

“No,” I say firmly. “We should go.”

“Okay... so we’re going.”

“Yes?”

Jackson snorts and gathers me into his arms, swaying us back and forth in the kitchen. He kisses me softly. The anxiety bubbling inside of me melts away under the gentle onslaught of his mouth until my mind is a quiet babbling brook once he pulls away.

“Better?” Jackson asks, fingers rubbing at the tender tense spots on my neck.

I moan in relief. “Yes.”

“Good. We’ll go to dinner, then we’ll watch that skateboarder you have saved on your TV later.”

I squawk in indignation. “How do you know about that?”

Jackson's grin is devilish. "Should I grab a snapback and put on some Vans? Would that do it for you?"

Yes, but I absolutely will never admit that out loud. But Jackson knows just by my face because words aren't necessary with him. His laughter presses into my mouth and I swallow it down, always eager for more.

By the time we stand hand in hand in front of my parents' house, my anxiety is bubbling, instead of overflowing like usual. All thanks to Jackson. He squeezes my hand, thumb sweetly rubbing over my knuckles as I push through the front door.

The smell of lasagna and garlic bread filters through the house. My favorite. I lead Jackson through the house, finally coming to a stop in the kitchen. My dad stands at the oven, hand slowly stirring something on the stovetop. His grin is wide and familiar when he catches sight of me. My father is the most unassuming man ever, sweet and kind, and he was the one who kissed my bruises as a child. But he's also wildly busy, time with him is rare, leaving me in the usually incapable hands of my mother now as an adult.

"Hey, kiddo. We made your favorite."

I let go of Jackson's hand to walk over and give Dad a squeeze. "Thanks, Dad. Where's Mom?"

Dad's nose wrinkles in irritation. "Work call. High-profile client got arrested. For the third time."

"Will she be missing dinner?"

"No!" Mother shouts from the other room. I assume it's part of the phone call until she peeks her head around the corner. "I'm not missing dinner."

Damn. Dad narrows his eyes disapprovingly at me as if reading my thoughts. I shrug helplessly before returning to Jackson. We both take seats at the island, watching my father flit around the kitchen. Dad places a plate of fresh bruschetta on the table, gesturing towards it in a clear invitation for us to eat.

“Thanks, sir.”

Dad waves off the formal title. “Call me Billy.”

Jackson’s grin is blinding. “Will do.”

I grab a plate and fix Jackson a few bites of bruschetta, earning me a tender squeeze to my thigh under the cover of the island.

Dad takes the piping lasagna out of the oven, then comes to stand at the island with a glass of white wine in his hand. “So, Jackson, what do you do for a living?”

“I mess around with stocks,” Jackson explains carefully.

Dad raises one eyebrow. “You’re profitable?”

Jackson’s lips quirk up in one corner. “Very. I live a very comfortable life.”

Dad makes a sound of disbelief but still smiles at Jackson. “Good for you. Planning for retirement?”

“At the rate I’m going, I’ll be retired at forty.”

I have no idea what that means, but my father finds it absolutely marvelous. He leans forward on his elbows, eyes glistening with curiosity.

“Explain your methods to me.”

And then they talk about things that go right over my head for a full fifteen minutes. By the time my mother rounds the corner, I’m oddly thankful for her appearance. Dad straightens at the sight of her.

“Dinner’s ready,” Dad informs her.

Mom rubs at her temples but sends him a thankful smile. I stand from the chair, pressing a quick kiss to Jackson’s cheek when my parents are turned away, and help Dad plate the food. We all circle around the kitchen table to eat. My parents both have glasses of wine, but Jackson refused when offered, and it somehow made me love him even more.

“How was your camping trip?” Mom asks as she sips at her wine, ignoring her lasagna.

“It was good,” I reply around a mouthful of pasta.

“We went to the Atlantic Pines State Park.”

“Oh I haven’t been there in years,” Dad says aloud, tone wondrous. “Did you camp on the beach?”

Jackson grins widely. “Yes, for two nights. I had a fully stocked RV too, which we hid out in during one stray seaside shower.”

“Sounds lovely. Olivia, we should do that one day.”

Mom hums in thought, eyes firmly on me. “Have you had any more seizures since the last one?”

“Olivia,” Dad murmurs under his breath.

I carefully place my silverware back on the table, instantly irritated. “It’s none of your business.”

“It is because I care and I’m your mother,” Mom says, voice close to pleading. “You cut me out so much. I’m not tender and loving like my cousin but I love you and I just want to know what’s going on in your life.”

“No, you want to control it.”

She stares at me, mouth agape. “Harper, that’s not even remotely true.”

“Yes,” I say carefully, voice cold. “You think that if you can control my seizures, I’ll be normal. You’ll have a normal child.”

“Harp,” Dad says quietly, his hand landing heavily on my forearm.

I shake his hand off. “No. She always does this.”

“It’s because you’re both so similar,” Dad hisses, clearly at his breaking point. He turns worried eyes on Jackson, before letting his gaze return to me. “If you listened to the intention behind her words, you’d see how much she loves you but you’re both so pigheaded that you only see the worst in one another.”

Possible, although unlikely. Mom keeps her head downcast, a tear rolling down her cheek. She stands, hand trembling on the table, before quietly excusing herself. Suddenly, I don’t feel so much like I’ve won anymore. Dad stares worriedly after her.

I stand on shaky legs. Jackson looks towards me, his gaze offering support only if I need it. My smile is shaky, but he accepts it, not coming with me when I flee after my

mother. I find her in her office, a crumpled tissue caught between her thin fingers. She takes one look at me and sniffles deeply, embarrassed that I'm seeing her fall apart. I'm not sure I've ever seen my mother cry. She's made of steel, always, which is another reason why she joins me for every medical appointment. Dad would cry and fall apart, whereas Mom is perpetually put together.

"I have never once wished you were normal, Harper. Because there is nothing abnormal about you. The best day of my life was the day they placed you in my arms and told me you were mine. I swear it."

A rock forms in my throat, tears threatening to fall. "The way you show it is hard for me to understand. I've always thought..."

Mom scoffs loudly. "Just because you think something doesn't make it true. Sure, I'm not the most nurturing woman on the planet, but I've always taken care of you the best I can. Given you whatever you need to succeed. When I ask about the seizures it's because I'm terrified for you. Not because they anger me."

"I don't get it," I say slowly. "We speak different languages."

"I agree."

"The way you show your love..." I trail off and take a deep breath as I stare her down. "I interpret it as being a burden. That you don't want to be there for me, that I'm a bother."

"I never meant?—"

"I know that now," I interrupt her. "But it doesn't mean I haven't felt a certain way for most of my life. You can be short and sometimes cruel. I think maybe distance is better for us until you can finally accept I'm an adult and can take care of myself."

She releases a loud breath. “You’ll always be my baby, though. I wish... I’m sorry I don’t show you love the way you need.”

“Yes, well.” I shrug with my hands out. “Jackson shows me.”

Her chin trembles as she stares at me. “Really?”

“Yes. When I let him.”

Her eyes sweep to the side as she carefully wipes her tears away to avoid messing up her makeup. “Jackson is lovely. He’s going to marry you.”

“Maybe.”

“Would you say yes if he asked?”

“Yes.” It’s the only possible answer.

Mom aims a watery smile at me. “Good, good. Do you let him take care of you?”

I grimace. “As much as I can.”

“Well, that gets better with time too. I’m sorry; I’ll try to be better. I hope, well, I hope you know that I love you even if I show it badly.” She crosses the few feet between us, and we hug awkwardly. I try not to cringe. Her smile is just as awkward and pained when she pulls away. “I guess we should get back out there. I fear what your father is instilling in that young man's mind.”

“I worry more about Jackson than Dad.”

When we return to the kitchen, Dad and Jackson are huddled together around my

dad's laptop. Jackson turns his keen gaze on me, lips lifting at the corner when I smile at him. When Jackson looks at me, I know without a doubt that I'm wanted, that I'm loved in a way that's rare and beautiful. I take the seat beside him, leaning heavily against him when he wraps his strong arm around me.

"Alright?" Jackson whispers softly.

I turn my gaze to look up at him, smiling the smile only he'll ever see. "Alright."

Jackson beams and kisses my nose.

I'll always be fine as long as I have Jackson.

16

JACKSON

It should be illegal for a doctor's office to be so fucking cold. Harper sits on the exam table in sweatpants and my faded hoodie, Honey by his feet staring intently at the door. I know Harper is anxious, but I'm really not worried. His last seizure was almost three months ago now. From everything Harper has told me, that means the new medicine is finally working. I desperately hope the doctor agrees so Harper finally has a semblance of peace.

Dr. Whitman storms into the frigid room with a wide grin. His grin somehow doubles when he notices me. "Who's this?"

"My bodyguard," Harper says casually.

Dr. Whitman stares blankly at Harper in confusion. "What for?"

"I stole the Declaration of Independence and now black market thieves are after me."

Dr. Whitman scoffs with a deep roll of his eyes. "Really, Harper."

I stand with a smile and offer the doctor my hand. "I'm his boyfriend, Jackson Harris."

"Oh, lovely to meet you, son. Are you serious?"

“Quite,” I answer with a wide grin.

“Harper Harris has a nice ring,” the doctor points out as he sits on his rolling chair to study Harper’s scans.

Harper’s flush is beautiful and delightful. I move to stand beside him, sweetly taking his hand between both of mine. He aims a tremulous smile toward me, then returns his worried gaze to the doctor’s computer screen.

“Well, it’s good news, Harper.” Dr. Whitman points at the scans with a kind smile towards us. “I don’t see any negative changes in your scans. You’ve had no breakthrough seizures lately?”

Harper shakes his head. “None.”

“Good. I think we might be inching back towards maintenance mode. As always, it’s best to avoid your triggers to avoid a breakthrough seizure. But as long as we’re down to less than two a year, it’s looking up, kiddo. Do you need refills?”

Harper nods quietly, obviously at a loss for words. I smile at the kind doctor, shaking his hand again before he disappears out the door. I help Harper off the exam table and tightly hold his hand as we walk out into the bright winter sunshine. Taking a loud breath, Harper lets it out slowly through his mouth. The tension from this morning is gone, leaving him luminous. I have the inexplicable urge to hold him, kiss him, whisper love sonnets into his ear that would only piss him off.

“I hoped, but I didn’t expect it.”

“Happy?” I ask, tenderly kissing the knuckles of his hand.

“Ecstatic,” Harper replies seriously. His grin is so big and beautiful, that I have to

kiss him despite the few people milling around. His fingers tangle in my shirt, tugging me closer. “We should do something disgustingly wintery today. Look at Christmas lights tonight? We can take Honey with us.”

I swipe my finger along his bottom lip, my heart fluttering like hummingbird wings in my chest. If my heart could take flight, soar into the sky, I almost think it would.

“Whatever you want, punk.”

Harper lifts up onto his toes to kiss my nose. “Yay!”

I watch him skip towards the car with Honey hot on his heels. When he notices me lagging behind, he raises one eyebrow in question.

“You coming or what, big guy?”

I basically fly to join him in the car, feeling like forever isn’t that far away now.

Colby’s beach house belongs in architecture magazines. The place is stunning. Not as stunning as the man hopping out of my car, annoyance written all over his face, but it’s close. Harper slams the door behind him, probably hoping to rile me up. But it’s fruitless because Harper’s brand of riling me up usually ends up turning me on. I watch as he pushes into the house without a backward glance, Honey following along like the perfect girl she is.

I grab our shared suitcase from the back of the car with a sigh and trudge inside. The low murmur of voices leads me to the kitchen, where I find Trevor and Harper whispering intensely. Clearing my throat to announce my presence, Harper scowls my way, but a smirk tilts up Trevor’s lips.

“Which bedroom is ours?” I ask, uncaring about Harper’s annoyance.

Eli appears from outside, hair wind tousled. “I’ll show you!”

I leave Trevor and Harper to whisper amongst themselves in the kitchen and dutifully follow Eli up the stairs.

“Bad drive?” Eli asks curiously, fingers skimming along the shiplapped walls.

“Harper wanted to pull over for a quickie and I said no.”

Eli’s snort can probably be heard from space. “You’re diabolically evil.”

“Yes,” I agree, dropping our suitcase on the floor by the bed. “Harper would agree.”

The bedroom faces the ocean where turquoise waves roll against the shore. The light blue, cloud-free sky stretches beyond the horizon. One would almost think it’s still hot with the way the sun beats down on the fine white sand. But it’s been a cool December in Florida, meaning it’s perfect shorts weather without the oppressive humidity or sweltering heat. My mind drifts back to the last time I had Harper at the beach, those magical nights in the tent. Sweet and sassy, I’ll get Harper back in my good graces soon enough.

“Well, he’ll get over it.” Eli stands in front of the windows, hands on his hips. “Colby asked me to marry him.”

“Oh?” Clearly, Eli is oblivious if he thought that wasn’t coming.

“Yes.”

“Well?”

Eli turns towards me with a wide grin. “I said yes.”

“Of course.”

Eli wiggles his fingers towards the door. “When are you planning on nailing that down?”

“Harper is too wily to ask now and he’d probably say no anyway. Who am I kidding... he might say no in twenty years. I’m biding my time. When the time is right, I’ll know.”

“Jackson,” Eli says my name seriously, eyes squinted as he takes me in. “That man would never say no. It’s all in the approach.”

I grunt in agreement. Just as Eli leaves the bedroom, Harper wanders in, hands on his hips. Harper peruses the room for bombs, bugs, or something out of place that he can be annoyed with. Finding nothing, he heads over to the windows to stare out at the waves.

“Is the room to your liking, my liege?”

Harper aims a death glare at me over his shoulder. “Shut up.”

I chuckle darkly and move to join him at the window. My prickly prince. Harper sighs happily as I wrap him in my arms, pulling him as close to my body as possible. He turns his head to press a kiss to my jaw, his form of apology for the brattiness of the past hour. But he doesn’t need to apologize and he should know that by now. I love his brattiness, makes it feel so earned when he’s sweet in my arms.

“Sorry,” Harper whispers, almost low enough that I can’t hear the word.

“You’re fine.”

I gently wrap my fingers around his jaw, lifting him up so that I can plunder his mouth. Our tongues fight for dominance for one brief second before Harper gives in and allows me to lead, per usual. Harper melts back in my arms as I eat at his mouth, doing my best to calm his nerves about the weekend stay with his family. Riled up and annoyed, I know it's because he's nervous about the beach stay, nervous that something will go wrong.

"Okay?" I ask against his slack mouth.

Harper just hums and leans heavier against me, the clearest sign that I've succeeded in relaxing him. "The water's too cold to swim in."

"Yes, probably."

"Can you bring me to the beach at least once when I can swim?"

Swimming is on Harper's only if you're with me list. If he's asking, then I know it's a pretty big wish for him. I'll have to take him somewhere warm and tropical this upcoming summer. Some place where I have to put a lot of sunscreen on him to keep him from burning.

"Sure," I agree, already thinking up plans.

"Take a walk with me?"

The house is mostly empty as we leave, minus Joey and Lee standing in the kitchen, having what looks like a very intense conversation. Small dunes line the side of the pathway towards the water, impeding my ability to see down the beach until we reach the other side. Colby stands in the water up to his ankles with Eli clinging to his back like a barnacle. A little down the beach stands Trevor and Beau, looking intently down at the sand with twin curious faces. Seems like a better bet.

I tug Harper after me towards Trevor and Beau. As we approach, Beau crouches down with a very serious look on his face.

“Is it a shark?” Harper asks seriously.

“A microscopic shark?” Trevor replies, face devoid of humor.

“Yes, possibly.” Harper lifts his chin. “I heard about them on TikTok.”

“Oh brother,” I mutter under my breath. Harper elbows my ribs with a scowl.

“No, look.” Beau points at the sand, brushing some of it away to reveal the dried skeleton of a seahorse.

Harper howls with laughter, earning him a slightly startled look from Beau and Trevor. His fingers come up to cover his mouth as he holds in more laughter. The answering grin on my lips is borderline painful. Beau carefully brushes the remaining sand away from the seahorse as if it’s the most precious thing on earth. Standing to his full height, he presents it to Trevor with a shy smile.

“For you, sweetheart.”

Trevor takes the gift with a tender, tremulous smile. “Thank you, Beau.”

“Nauseating,” Harper mutters.

With a smile at Trevor and Beau, I tug Harper towards the empty beach in front of us. Harper sighs with pleasure when I wrap my arm around his shoulder, tugging him close against me as we walk. We leave footprints in the sand behind us, proof that we exist. Harper pulls away from me to dip his toes in the water. It lasts approximately one second before he comes running back.

“Water is freezing,” Harper says, tucking his arm around my waist, under my shirt.

“No shit.”

Harper pinches my side hard. “I had to see for myself.”

The world is hushed around us as we walk the length of the beach. Every now and then we dip down to pick up a shell, and Harper’s smile is so genuine that my heart aches at the sight of it. By the time we return back to the house, I’ve got twenty sandy shells stuffed in the pockets of my jeans.

Colby stands on the raised back porch, wearing an easy grin while grilling lunch for everyone. Through the windows Trevor and Beau are visible puttering around in the kitchen, probably preparing sides for our lunch. Weird, awkward tensions crackles through the air when we take a seat at the outdoor dining table.

Eli kicks my leg under the table, trying and succeeding to get my attention. “Benji called. That’s why Trevor went inside with Beau.”

Oh shit. I press a kiss to Harper’s cheek and power walk into the house. Trevor stands in the kitchen, face pinched, with his phone to his ear. At the sight of me, he relaxes just enough for me to know my presence is needed. Beau’s eyes glance at me as he chops lettuce, slowly dumping it into a large serving bowl.

“They’ve been talking for about fifteen minutes,” Beau tells me, lips downturned. “Only hearin’ one side of the conversation has me pretty concerned though.”

Trevor paces the length of the kitchen now, lip caught between his teeth as he tears dry skin from his lip. Oh, this isn’t good at all. Trevor is cool and calm, never riled up. When I reach my arm out, hand palm up, Trevor violently shakes his head.

“I hear you, Benji. But I also don’t think you’re capable of handling this by yourself. I really think you need to talk to Claire.” Trevor listens patiently, lip still caught between his teeth. His eyes go wide and he attempts to sidestep me, but I grab his forearm to stop him. “Jackson’s here. He wants to talk to you.”

The minute the phone is in my hand, I lift it to my ear. “Are you safe? Did he hurt you?”

“No, no, Jackson,” Benji whispers, voice barely audible. “I’m fine.”

“You’ve got Trevor pretty worried.”

Trevor makes a frantic cutting motion with his hand.

“Tell me what’s going on,” I demand, leaving no room for argument.

Benji blows out a shaky breath that rattles across the phone. “I’m fine. I promise. Tell Trevor to chill. I just needed... I needed someone to know.”

“Know what?”

“That I’m in way over my head.”

Benji hangs up just as the sound of a guitar filters through the phone.

“What did he tell you,” I ask Trevor, handing him back his phone.

Trevor’s worried gaze flits from me to Beau, then back to me. “He just knew I had the most experience with Nolan. Wanted to fill me in on a situation.”

“And that situation is...” I trail off, rolling my hand to indicate he needs to spill the

beans.

“Nolan has certain proclivities.”

I blink slowly. “I’m very aware.”

Trevor blinks back with an attitude. “Benji is just a little out of his depth. I think he should come home... to Clay Springs. He needs us. Nolan will just have to understand.”

The way Trevor speaks makes it clear that he’s done with the conversation. I don’t blame him. Trevor wanders over towards Beau to lean heavily against his side, needing the comfort of his boyfriend after the last few minutes. Beau smiles softly and presses a kiss to the top of Trevor’s head.

Something about Benji’s tone sets me on edge. After so many years around each other, it’s easy for us to read each other just by our tones. Trevor’s tone goes flat, devoid of all emotion when he’s worried or anxious. Eli gets this little divot between his brows that shows off his panic. Whereas Benji goes into I’m going to fix everything mode. I can’t worry about what I can’t control though. If Benji needs us, he knows where we are, and he’ll come to us. When he’s ready.

I return back outside to take my seat beside Harper. When he aims a questioning gaze towards me, I just slip my hand into his under the table, squeezing tight to reassure him all is fine. Because he’s perfect, because he’s mine, he takes it for what it is, not feeling the need to press me.

It ends up being the quietest New Year’s Eve of my life. No big party, nothing over the top. Just friends beside the ocean. Everyone is cuddled up in the living room as midnight approaches, but I have better plans.

“Hey, Harper?” I whisper against the shell of Harper’s ear.

Harper turns to me with a dramatic roll of his eyes. “Yes, Jackson?”

I wiggle my eyebrows at him. “Wanna start the new year in style?”

A few beats pass as Harper stares at me. “Are we going to play naked Twister?”

I dip my fingers into the neck of his sweater, trailing my fingers along the warm skin along the top of his spine. Because Harper’s perpetually a little shit, he shivers at my touch but does his best to stay cool, calm, and collected. But he’s a duck. Calm on the surface, paddling those little feet quickly beneath the still waters.

“I was thinking maybe we’d ring the New Year in with my face between your thighs.”

Spotches of crimson dot Harper’s cheeks, and he scowls. “My family is sitting right over there,” he hisses.

“They can’t hear me,” I reassure him because I checked that their attention was elsewhere. Embarrassing Harper is never in the cards with me.

“Well, you owe me now.”

I arch an eyebrow. “Oh, do I?”

He sniffs haughtily. “Yes.”

My eyes flit around the room, clocking the other occupants. Trevor and Beau sit at the kitchen table with a puzzle, close enough to be touching, but far enough apart to make their activity beyond innocent. Eli’s at the piano, Colby behind him teaching

him to play the keys softly, twin grins on their faces. And outside in the dark night watching the waves are Joey and Lee, curiously Joey has a hand splayed over the small of Lee's back. That's interesting and new. I don't have time to give a shit though.

I hurriedly stand from the sofa, grab Harper by the hips, and toss him over my shoulder in a fireman's carry.

"Jackson!" Harper screeches, laughter clear in his voice.

Everyone turns to look at us. Oops. "Bedtime for Harper. Happy New Year!"

Eli's laughter follows us as I stomp up the stairs, Harper hanging limply over my shoulder. Glancing at my watch, I gently pat Harper's ass as we enter the bedroom. Thirty minutes of edging before we ring in the New Year. Perfect.

A mouthful of fur on New Year's Day is not the way I imagined starting off the new year. Blinking my eyes open, I squint as I inspect the bed for Harper. One hand curled under the pillow, the other reaching out for my hand, his lips still parted with sleep. I'd edged him forever last night until he threatened to murder me if I didn't make him come at that exact moment.

Unafraid of his fury, I'd held off for a couple more minutes, earning me that coveted cry of Daddy when he finally came. As quietly as I can, I carry a still-half-asleep Honey out to the backyard of the beach house. She stares up at me in abject confusion for a moment, before yawning and doing her business. In the kitchen, I quietly make two cups of hot chocolate for me and Harper, then fill Honey's dog bowl with food. The entire house is quiet, everyone is sound asleep from a raucous night celebrating New Year's.

Satisfied we'll get a few dog-free moments now, I return to the bedroom with the

steaming mugs of hot chocolate. Harper is leaning up on his elbows, sleepy eyes blinking at me. He makes grabby hands for the steaming mug. I chuckle and hand him the mug, setting mine down on the nightstand to join him in the bed. He lets out a blissful sigh when he drinks a few sips, then also rests his mug on the nightstand.

I lie down on the bed, hands tucked under my face. Harper mimics me with a teasing grin.

“Happy New Year,” Harper says, voice still gravelly.

“I think we celebrated early this morning.”

Harper bites his lip. “That we did.”

I hook my finger in the band of his sweatpants, tugging him closer until we’re nose to nose. “I’ve got a question for you.”

Up close Harper’s eyes are sea-glass green, with little flecks of yellow around the edges. The most beautiful eyes I’ve ever seen. His fingers sneak under my shirt, cold against my overheated skin, but they warm the longer he rests them there.

“I might have an answer.”

Typical. I press a soft kiss to his jaw, hiding my grin in his hair. “What would you think about me moving in with you?”

Harper’s fingers pause in their restless exploration of the small of my back. His fingers tap against my back a few times, before picking back up where they left off. He lets out a little puff of air against my head.

“Did you just invite yourself to live with me?”

I kiss his ear and splay my hand against the curve of his ass. “Maybe.”

“I have some conditions.”

I pull back to look at him. “Let me hear it.”

He squints at me, seeing what he can get away with. “You’ll cook dinner every night.”

“Done.”

“And you’ll do the dishes.”

Easy. “Done.”

“We’ll play basketball whenever we want to argue.”

I swallow roughly. “Okay.”

Harper turns his head to kiss my bicep, fluttering his eyes at me. “You’ll take a bubble bath with me once a week.”

“Jeez, Harper. Do you have any tough requests?”

His chin trembles just a little, eyes going uncharacteristically misty. “You’ll love me forever?”

I roll us over so I hover over him, caging him between my arms. He relaxes under my kiss, still-sleep-warm mouth tasting like mine. When I pull away to kiss his brow, there’s a dreamy grin on his upturned lips. That’s also mine. Everything about Harper is mine.

“I’ll love you forever and a day, punk.”

Harper thoughtfully taps his chin with one elegant finger. “You can move in, then.”

I kiss him again until he’s laughing beneath me. When he tries to pull away, I refuse to let him. Instead, I hold him close because he’s mine to keep, mine to kiss, and just flat-out mine . He came out of nowhere and lit my life up. Forever never sounded so sweet.

JACKSON

“It’s a big decision, Jackson,” Harper says while angrily tying his hair up in a messy knot. He lets out an exasperated sigh when I stare blankly at him. “It’s a big deal!”

“Two dogs are not much different than one.”

“Yes, well, Honey is a service dog. She’s literally perfect. A regular old dog might be insane like Whiskey. That dog is always off the rails.”

I hum in disagreement. We’ve had this same argument daily for the past three months. Actually, every day since we put the deposit down for the German shepherd from a breeder a friend recommended. Honey wags her tail where she lies in her dog bed, probably hoping to distract Harper from arguing with me. Sometimes I think she understands us perfectly, but then other times I’m not so sure. She often seems keen to interrupt us right when I’m riling Harper up good for a hard fuck. Once Honey appears, Harper shuts down as if our child has walked into the room. Granted, she basically is our child.

“Are you listening to me?” Harper asks. He slumps down to the ground, tugging on a ratty pair of Converse.

“I’m always listening to you.”

“Ugh,” Harper groans and pretends to gag. “I think Honey peed on the Christmas tree.”

I gasp in shock. “Honey would never.”

“Well, why is the left side turning brown?”

“Harper, my love, my angel, the light of my life. That means the tree is dying. When did you last put water in the tree stand?”

Harper freezes while pulling on his jacket. “Uhm.”

“You said you’d water the tree. We talked about it.”

“About that...”

Laughing, I tug Harper to me by his belt loops, kissing away his frown. When I pull away, his lips are still parted, and his eyes are glazed over. “Not fair how you do that.”

“Stop arguing with me so that we can get in the car and go get our damn dog.”

Harper leans his weight against me for one brief second, before pushing away to head towards the front door. I snap my fingers and Honey follows us out.

It’s a thirty-minute drive into the city. Harper is oddly silent the entire way. His hand rests in mine, thumb skipping over my wrist every couple of minutes.

The breeder has the dog ready in a small crate along with all of the necessities. All I have to do is hand over the final check. With the package secured, we get back in the car to head home. Harper sits in the back seat with Honey, and our new dog on his lap. The moment we got in the car, Harper pulled her out, unable to bear the thought of her trapped in a box.

“You’re so sweet,” Harper murmurs as the puppy happily chews his fingers.

I watch them in the rearview mirror until the red light turns green.

“Yes, Honey, this is your sister. We have to pick out a name though. I think we should stick with food. Oh my God. Pepper!”

“Pepper is an adorable name,” I agree.

“Pepper,” Harper repeats, tone blissfully happy.

Instead of getting off on the exit that takes us home, I get off one exit later, looking for a very particular spot. Harper is either too distracted by Pepper to notice, or he just trusts me to not kill him at this point. Probably a mix of both. When I pull over on the side of the road, Harper turns his confused gaze on me.

“What the fuck, Jack?”

Climbing out of the car, I open his door with a flourish. “Come on.”

Harper looks around in fear but does as I ask. Good boy. He cradles Pepper to his chest, guarding her with his arms. Honey follows after us, clearly more trusting of me than her daddy.

“Wait...” Harper trails off when I drop to my knees. “Oh, fuck.”

“The last time I brought you here was on the back of a motorcycle. I fell in love with you that day. I fall more in love with you with every passing day. You hiss and spit still, but a lot less. Mostly for fun now, I think.” I hold the platinum ring out to him. “Will you marry me and make me the luckiest man on the planet? Be mine forever, Harper, please?”

Harper falls to his knees in the grass in front of me. His kiss is so hard that I topple over, and he lands on top of me with Pepper squished between us. The puppy lets out

a little whine, but quiets when Harper pulls away to pet at her head.

“Sorry, puppy.”

I grin up at him. “Can I get an answer maybe?”

Harper rolls his eyes. “You know my answer.”

“Doesn’t mean I don’t want to hear it!” I yell through laughter.

“Okay, okay.” Harper tugs me up to sit so he can straddle my lap. “Yes.”

Honey barks with joy when I woop. I gather Harper back into my arms, kissing him as sweetly as I can. His mouth curves against mine in a small smile. A cold breeze washes over us, making Harper snuggle harder against me, our new puppy caught between us. I grab Honey and tug her against my side, holding my entire world in my arms.

“Forever,” I whisper into Harper’s messy hair.

Harper laughs, free and beautiful. “Forever.”

Forever and a day.

The End