







# Until We Kiss (Until We Novellas)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Six months ago, everything changed.

I was quarterback for IFU and heading to the NFL draft when a lineman slammed into me.

Before that last moment on the field, I knew who I was. I knew where I was heading. I had confidence, certainty, maybe some cockiness.

Now, I know nothing.

Only that I'm heading on a last spring Break with the guys—five days of sun and sand with my three best friends—and I'm determined to get back to myself.

And the way to do that? It might be unconventional, but theres one thing I've wanted to try, one thing I've never done.

Being with another guy wasn't on the forefront of my thoughts before, but now I just need anything to stop me from thinking about the remnants of my life.

The only other thing that helps? My best friend Carter. Big, excitable and always laughing, with his warm hazel eyes and dimpled grin. He takes me out of the dark holes my mind keeps pushing me into.

Hooking up with him never crossed my mind... not really...

But when I step into the shower with him, both of us shivering from a midnight dip in the ocean, my heart starts pummeling, and every part of me responds.

The steam is thick, the water glistening along his skin.

But we're friends. Bros. I can't—won't—risk that.

Except now that I'm looking at him, I can't stop.

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# Page 1

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recently

i think a soulmate

is someone

who will make you

be the most you

that you can possibly be.

~ frxgileveins

I'm so damn nervous .

And I can't stop fidgeting. It's my first airplane flight since my last knee surgery five months ago, and my doctor cleared me, but I didn't think I'd be so uneasy. Here I am though, my fingers drumming against my thigh, an inch above the scars hidden under an old pair of sweatpants with the IFU Football logo printed down the side, and a million thoughts are torpedoing through my brain. The plane banks right, a stretch of evening sun streaking through the window. It swells this pretty orange color, and I try to breathe and focus on that, but I'm still thinking.

A lot . Too much. Nerves popping, even though I don't fully know why.

To make matters worse, I'm cramped in this miniature-sized airplane seat, my ass locked in the middle, with my knees wedged against the tray table, and my shoulders squashed so I don't spread over the armrest onto the girl on my right.

Carter's on my other side, in the aisle seat, and he apparently has no problems taking up all the space. He never has a problem taking up all the space. His legs are spread, stretching into what is clearly my designated seat zone, his knee rubbing against mine at every bump and jolt. And he's talking, big and loud, twisted to chat with Dorian who's across the aisle. They're both laughing, Dorian at a more normal volume, but Carter belts out a laugh so loud that heads turn the entire length of the plane.

He doesn't seem to notice.

That's just Carter.

Big. Loud. Kinda chaotic.

I dunno why that makes me want to smile.

We hit another rumble of turbulence, another rub of his leg, and the soft blond hair on the side of his knee sticks out, picking up static electricity when it rasps against my sweatpants. Every time he knocks into me, the inseam grazes against my inner thigh, this little spark of lightning echoing in my balls. Is it weird I keep thinking about that?

I shift my leg an inch away, but he just closes the distance mindlessly again, still twisted back to talk to D. I don't even know what they're talking about—I'm too in my head. But D's nodding and in the seat next to him, Rory's sucked into his eReader, his hair a deep red under the cabin lights, and he's chewing on his bottom lip like he's reading something... interesting?

Suddenly Carter twists back around to look at me.

“I’m so fucking stoked ,” he says, amber eyes lighting like he’s just won a year of free hot wings. He’s said that at least twenty times since we got in the Uber this morning, and every single time he says it, his eyes shine brighter, that lopsided dimple he has on one cheek indenting with his smile. He’s all big energy in his bro-a-saurus t-shirt and with his dirty blonde, slightly curly hair swept back by his hand a million times. “It’s like we’re already there. Can’t you feel it?”

“Yeah,” I say, trying to sound convincing. I am trying to be excited. I’m just... thinking. “I’m pumped.”

His dimple disappears. “You don’t gotta lie, bro.”

“I’m not lying,” I say. “I am excited. Just ready to get off this plane.”

“Fair enough.” His eyes flick over me, and we lurch to the right, my knee banging into the seat in front of me, a jab of pain lacing deep into my thigh. I grit down on my molars, my hand tightening into a fist that I keep hidden by my side. Being cramped up like this isn’t helping.

“You shoulda sat here.” He tips his chin toward my knee. “I kept telling you that.”

“Nah. This is my assigned seat.” I release my clenched fingers as the pain switches to a dull throb.

His brows rise. “Are you? Because we could still switch. In fact, if you weren’t a giant ball of muscle, I’d probably try to pick you up and make you switch.”

I shrug. “I’m good, really.”

Why do I get the sense that he doesn't believe me?

I guess it wouldn't be much of a surprise if he didn't.

I've kinda been a mess recently. And that's an understatement.

Six months ago, everything in my life changed. In one second, one unexpected hit.

I used to be one guy. And I knew who that was too—quarterback for Indigo Falls University, heading to the NFL draft, solid and confident. Maybe edging on cocky sometimes, although I didn't know that then. I just thought that everything I'd worked for was coming straight at me, like it was meant to be. I was meant to be. I was sure, I was confident. I understood what the point of life was, and I was at the goddamn center of it.

Then at one of the first games of the season, Brody Hazlemacher slammed into me, and it all went to shit. Just like that. A broken tibia and fibula, ripped through my ACL, a complete fucking of my knee down to my ankle.

And then no more football. No more early morning practices, with all those endorphins bouncing around me. No more stepping onto the field, my cleats on the turf, that energy and excitement. No more playing for IFU, which I fucking loved . No more NFL draft. No more certainty, no more confidence.

No more me .

Now I'm just trying to sort out what happens next. What do you do after your entire life plan suddenly explodes? Everything you worked for is like a pebble tossed into the ocean and dragged out to sea—just gone .

And there's nothing. Just this weight of disappointment and these moments of

darkness, that come in waves. Where it just feels like everything is so bleak.

Fuck, I need to stop thinking.

I scrub at the side of my neck, breathing through the pressure that clumps in my chest. That pressure's been getting hotter and tighter lately, crawling up my throat, leaving this taste that.... Shit, I can't freak out here. Not trapped in this little seat with people all around me. I need to?—

Carter tips closer, his eyes moving around my face. "It's all gonna be fine, Theo. Just wait and see. I think you're gonna love it there." He softens that big voice of his, the way he does sometimes when it's just me and him. And I'm suddenly looking straight at him, my eyes on his, my heart thudding in my throat.

I swallow thickly. That spark of lightning is back, tickling around my shoulders and up the nape of my neck.

Is that weird? Should I be feeling that when my best friend's looking at me?

Probably not.

Ignore it.

His eyes stay on mine. The smell of the pretzel snack he ate earlier wafts toward me along with the beachy scent of his deodorant. I don't know why I kinda like that.

"Give me a fact, bro," he says.

I blink at him. It's this thing we do. I'm kinda obsessed with Naked Earth , this show about animals. I was just rewatching the one about African Elephants when we were waiting to board. I guess it relaxes me. I used to watch it before every game. And



then I watched it all the time after my surgeries.

Carter was there for a lot of the ‘after’. My parents were so fucking disappointed that it was impossible to be around them. They didn’t say anything, tried to be supportive, but I could see the disappointment in their expression every time they looked at me. I could feel it in me.

Carter never looked at me like that.

“Theo?” he asks, in that soft ‘just us’ voice.

Find a fact, Theo .

“Butterflies can taste with their feet,” I say. “That's how they know where to lay their eggs.”

“Really? That’s badass.” He glances at his left foot, shoved out into the aisle. “But now my feet seem ridiculously boring. How cool would it be to taste with your feet?”

“Are you sure you’d want to taste the flavor of the insides of your shoes?”

“Good point.” He looks back at me, then brightens. “Although, we’d probably have flavored shoe inserts if that was the case.”

My lips lift, despite everything else. Despite that big, black hole that feels like it’s edging right on the sides of my vision. “Flavored shoe inserts. That’s pretty brilliant, dude.”

“I know, right!” His dimple pops. “Like hazelnut.”

“Peppermint,” I offer.

He grins. “Birthday cake surprise!”

“Cookie dough.”

“Neapolitan ice cream.”

“Ohhh, yesss.” His lashes flutter, his head tipping back as he groans. “Or... Cinnamon roooolllls . It would be amazing. I’m so fucking jealous of butterflies now, you don’t even know.” He knocks his knee softly against mine. “Feel better?”

I look down at the hair on his leg again, still sticking out with static. “Yeah.”

There was a time I didn’t need to feel better. When I felt pretty fucking awesome all the time.

He grins as the plane banks again, a light roll of turbulence vibrating us. “I told you it’s gonna be fine. Just think about where we’re going.”

Clua .

I had to look it up when he first mentioned it, insisting that the four of us—him, Dorian, Rory, and I—head there instead of South Padre or Cancún. It’s this tiny island off the coast of Mexico. Beach and sun and sand.

Five days of being away from snow-covered Indigo Falls. It’s our last spring break together before graduation. The four of us have been friends since freshman year, getting placed in the same dorm, all of us coming from pretty different worlds. Real friends. Different majors, different activities—none of them into football. But it didn’t seem to matter.

And yeah, I’m trying to be excited. I’m trying to be happy, like I used to be. And in

order to do that, I have this... plan .

“We’re gonna do all the things.” Carter rattles activities off, a million different ones he’s researched, that big energy humming in his voice. I can’t keep up. I just watch him as he talks, his excitement billowing out, his words getting louder. All that big energy.

“Mangoes,” he’s saying, “I’m gonna eat alllll the mangoes.” His smile falls, his brows rising again as he looks at me. “And maybe get laid?”

My heart stops. “Uh, yeah. Sounds like that would probably be...” Shit, what do I say? “Nice.”

Nice ?

He grins. “It’s been a while for you?”

I clear my throat, rubbing at the side of my neck. “Yeah, sure.”

I play it off.

I always play it off.

Okay, so... technically it’s been longer than “a while.”

It’s been never .

None of the guys know that. On the outside, I’m this big, jocky guy, decently built from football with dark brown hair and some pretty intense blue eyes. I look like someone who would chase a ball bunny around every weekend. People assume that’s exactly what I do, and I never gave any impression otherwise. But the reality is very

different.

I'm a virgin. Completely.

In part because, well, the ball bunny I'd pick wouldn't be what's expected. I've known I'm gay for a while, but I've never acted on it.

I shift in the cramped seat, the back of my t-shirt getting sweaty. My grinning best friend is next to me. I want to keep him as my friend. Carter's a person I can't picture my life without. Like I really can't do it. And when you tell a friend you're gay, you really don't know what's going to happen.

And the plan...

I thought maybe... while we're in Clua, to try and get all this darkness out of my head, to try and get back to that easy, confident guy I used to be, I could...

I swallow, nerves popping.

But here goes.... I want to... suck a dick.

I've imagined it so many times. Every time I jack off. Sometimes in my dreams. What a big, beefy cock would feel like sliding into my mouth, along my tongue, warm and slippery with pre-cum. Do all guys taste the same? Would he grip his fingers into my hair?

Would I like it?

It's the ultimate fantasy for me. So much that I've jacked off while sucking on a dildo, shoving it to the very back of my throat, squeezing my eyes shut, pretending my moans were another man's. His enormous, brawny?—

Shit. Why am I thinking about this here?

I stifle a groan, my dick stirring and armpits heating. The cool air from the miniature air blower overhead isn't strong enough.

But here's the thing—thinking about it takes me out of my dark and depressing head. It gives me something to focus on. A goal. Just like I used to have with the NFL.

I sigh, my knee tightening again, that brace of pain shooting up and down the full length of my leg.

And I'm suddenly conscious that I'm sitting here, fantasizing about sucking cock and getting hard from it, while Carter is staring at me.

I glance over at him, licking my lips. "Who knows what's going to happen?"

"It's been a while for me too." He says, a little roughly, and I don't know—there's something distant in his eyes. Something slightly darker than usual. His square jaw is clenched, faintly covered by a trace of yesterday's stubble. Shit, he didn't notice anything, did he?

Little rivers of panic light down my back as I glance down at where I'm starting to sport a pretty obvious boner. I shift in my seat, trying to keep it hidden.

But his eyes are settled on my face, never glancing down. "You know what you need?"

Yes, a dick .

"No," I say.

He can't know the truth.

He'd freak the fuck out. That's what friends do when you spring stuff like that on them.

That's what happened last time, at least. And I'm never going through that shit again. No question. I will not lose Carter. If I tell him, then I'll plan it out. Be careful about it. Make sure that there's no way I would lose him.

His eyes narrow. "What are you thinking about?"

I snort an uneasy laugh. "Nothing, really."

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

I still. "No."

He clears his throat. "Are you sure?"

A beat passes, and I don't know. I mean... we're not thinking the same thing. He's clearly not thinking about a plan to suck dick.. But I'm not sure what he's thinking either. The whole moment is getting my brain in a twist.

"I'll give you a hint." He lowers his voice, rasping in the few inches between us. "It starts with a song."

"Oh, shit." I shake my head, but relief floods me. "No, Car?—?"

"Happy birthday," he whispers, then leans in and gives me a big, wet kiss on the cheek before he pulls himself up using the seat in front of him, the woman sitting there giving him a death glare. But he's vibrating with too much excitement to notice,

his arms spreading, his voice loud. “Hey, it’s my friend’s birthday. Think we could all sing to him? His name’s Theo.”

Dorian laughs. Rory closes his eReader. They know how this goes.

It’s not my fucking birthday.

This is Carter . This is all him, and he does stuff like this all sorts of different places that we go. But he somehow gets the entire plane into a rendition of “Happy Birthday”. And then onto “Blank Space,” telling everyone it’s my favorite freaking song. But of course, it’s Carter who knows all the words by heart.

Okay, I guess I know all the words too.

It’s probably twenty minutes later before the flight attendant tells everyone to sit, after Carter almost knocks over the drink cart with a wild swing of his arms, but by then, I’m laughing , in a way I haven't in a long time.

We used to laugh like this. I remember Carter and me—and Rory and Dorian—laughing so hard that we were crying, none of us able to get out words. Back in freshman year, we were high on nothing but energy drinks and video games and ourselves. Back when anything seemed possible.

And now the plane is loud with voices and energy, like Carter is spilling out everywhere. I don’t know how he does stuff like this.

Just by being himself, I guess. Sometimes he’s so fucking much . So big and energetic. But there’s something kinda amazing about him too.

So, I just say it, standing up, hunched over the bulkhead.

“You're kinda amazing,” I say, grabbing onto his shoulder halfway through another song, and he stops singing, blinking at me. Then he smiles one of those big dimple-inducing smiles and starts to say something when the plane intercom dings in the middle of the chaos.

We're about to land.

Five days in Clua with Carter. And the guys.

And I don't plan to come home in the virginified state I'm in now.

I need to take the jump. I need to get myself out of this fucked up darkness. We settle into our seats, Carter's elbow knocking against my funny bone as he roots around for his seatbelt.

I wonder what he'll be like .

That first guy, I mean. I don't think he'll be like me—not some jock-virgin who doesn't have a clue who he is anymore.

He'll be someone who gets himself. Who knows himself.

I still my thumb when I realize it's been tapping against my thigh and glance over at Carter.

He has a dick .

Ohhh shit, don't think that. I mean, it's true. I know it's true because we live together and there might have been a sighting here or there.

But this is not where my brain should be going.



Carter's eyes flick to my face after he finally gets his seatbelt clicked. His bottom lip is glossy, like he just licked it. Soft, pink lips that are already breaking into a smile.

Jesus, why am I looking ?

The plane tilts down, our descent starting.

Carter's chest moves. "Are you ready, bro?"

Am I?

No.

Maybe.

I want to be.

"Uh, sure," I say.

## Page 2

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“Did I tell you or what ?” Carter’s voice bellows over the waves.

The four of us stand with our bare feet in the warm sand, the moon streaking across the top of the water, the whites of our eyes and teeth glinting. I’ve got no clue what time it is. We snagged the last ferry to the island. The water is salty, the smell mixed with something flowery that must be coming from the fat-leaved trees behind us, white blooms glowing in the moonlight.

I drag in a deep inhale, squishing sand between my toes. There are thousands of animals hidden out there—fish and sea turtles and jellies and coral and rays and whales. All going about their business, knowing what they’re supposed to be doing.

And we’re here.

Five days.

Hopefully, one of those days will include a huge mouthful of dick for me. That’s what I’m supposed to be doing. Focus on goal. That’s how I got so good at football.

“We’re finally here!” Carter extends his arms, like he’s giving the ocean a hug. “This is so fucking golden .”

On the other side of him, Rory stoops to grab a handful of sand, letting it stream through his fingers. Dorian’s smiling, too, black hair tangling across his forehead.

This is the place I learn now to be me again. The place I can let go and...

And... fuck it .

I grab the back of my shirt and rip it over my head. Then I'm moving, toes sinking into the sand as I run, knee hurting like hell, pain aching down to my toes, but I keep going. Like I'm sprinting away from cold Indigo Falls. Away from empty days and rehab, from the guy I used to be, lost scholarships and those looks I get—the ones full of pity or disappointment.

I let out a whoop, echoing over the empty beach as I sprint into the water, the cold spray shocking me and dragging down my sweats.

A shout echoes behind me, and then Carter's bulk crashes in at my side. Of course he follows. He always follows, and I get that zip of lightning over my shoulders as he careens into me—shoulders only though, he never unbalances my knee. He laughs as I splash him, then he flips me off, and I leap onto him.

He shouts in my ear before we sink under the salt water, our legs tangling, a wave dragging us out. We sputter for air, finding our footing in the waist deep water, the sand being towed out from under our feet by the undercurrent.

Carter wipes off his face, then shakes off his hair. "Don't want to hurt your knee."

"I'm good."

Shit, I am.

For this moment, at least. Yeah, it hurts, but the water swirls around my hips, cooling my joints, cold relief.

Sand stretches out behind us, glowing in the moon. Dorian's shin-deep, his arms locked over his chest. "It's cold."

Carter splashes water toward him. "You're missing out, dude."

Rory's firmly on the shore too. "Matter of opinion."

"Your choice." Carter turns toward me. "Wanna?—?"

"Get ready." I jump on him, taking us both under the water.

We push, we splash, we dunk, we laugh like we used to. Carter's always careful of my knee, even after I tell him not to hold back. We keep going, playing, messing around until we're breathing hard and shivering, and then somehow, he's holding me up in a piggyback. My legs are around his hips, my hands gripping his shoulders. He's so big and solid, skin slick with salty water, heat everywhere he's against me, and cold where he isn't.

Shit, I don't know how we got like this.

"We should probably get out," I say.

But I don't move. I feel normal for a moment. It's the closest I've been to football-Theo in months.

"Alright." He twists his head, speaking closer to my ear. My heart thumps, my skin prickling awake.

I squeeze my eyes shut, willing every part of my body to relax, and focus on the lap of the water, not the soft press of my crotch against his lower back. Not the ebb of that darkness out there, hovering over the water, seeming to get closer and closer.

“Give me another,” he says.

I clear my throat. “A fact?”

“Yep.” He squeezes his forearms lightly against my thighs. He’s a pretty big dude, too. Not as focused on the gym as I was, but we’re nearly the same height.

“A blue whale's blowhole can spray water thirty feet in the air,” I say.

“That sounds like a challenge,” he says

I laugh. “I guess it kinda does.”

His arms grip me tighter. “I wanna see one.”

“Me too.”

We both shiver, and my heart gives out a thump—trying to get my body warm. Right?

“We should go,” I say. “My balls are pea sized.”

He laughs as he releases me. “Sounds cute. Come on. Our room’s probably waiting for us.”

Dorian was right, it’s way too fucking cold. Clua’s tropical, and the ocean is pretty warm, but there’s still a breeze and our bodies are all messed up from leaving the frigid cold, to the airplane, to here. Regardless, I’m shaking like a bowl of Jell-O while we check into our two rooms, Carter talking to the person behind the desk because he’s the one who organized all of this. Honestly, I didn’t do much.

I don't know why. I just couldn't get my head into it.

I'm still shivering as we walk down a pathway between sharp white flowers, incandescent in the moonlight, until we reach a building that's ours and step into an open air hallway.

Carter thumps behind me, his roll aboard somehow ramming into the walls—on both sides—his voice echoing as he shouts to Rory and Dorian before they head to their room across the way. I'm sure everyone in a half-mile radius can hear him. He's so damn much, sometimes.

I swing open the door, gripping my keycard.

The room is dark with just a trace of moonlight shining through the sliding door to my left. My teeth are chattering, my over-full duffle weighty on my shoulder, water dripping onto the floor.

I stop.

I stare at the room.

Wait... There's only one...

“Heyyyy,” Carter says as he muscled, taking up more than his share of the entryway. “This is fantastic!”

He flicks the light switch on, and I blink.

There's only one bed .

One.

King size, but still.... One. Singular. Bed.

Shit.

I can't...

“Are you sure this is our room?”

He grins, dimple popping, eyes lighting. “One-oh-six?” He dumps his suitcase on the floor. “Yep, totally us. Oh shit, look at that view!” He’s already halfway across the room, leaving a track of damp carpet behind him. “We can eat breakfast on that little patio thing out there.” He cranes his neck to see out the sliding glass door into the darkness beyond. Moonlight illuminates the big, leafy trees with more of those white flowers, like ghosts in the dark.

It’s a nice room. The entire villa is brand new. Smells new, feels new, looks new. New ivory-colored carpeting that Carter is currently breaking in. And a weirdly colored new pinkish-beige couch, with lots of wrinkles in the cushions.

The bed is probably new too. Mattress firm. Sheets crisp and clean.

Surely, they have rooms with two new beds.

“I was thinking more about...” I lick my shivering lips. “There’s only one bed, man.”

“Ohhh yassss.” He spins to me, rubbing at his biceps like he’s cold too. “Did I forget to mention that? It was way cheaper.” He nods toward the couch. “That sofa looks like a giant ballsack.”

I blink at it. “I guess it does.”

Maybe it's a pullout?

He passes by me and flings off his flip-flops, still trying to rub some heat into his arms. "I figured you wouldn't mind. Shit, I'm cold."

"Wouldn't mind," I repeat to no one because he's disappeared into the bathroom. The shower flips on, and he whoops at something in there.

I lick salt off my lips. "How much more were the rooms with two beds? Didn't I give you enough money?"

I'm getting weird about this, and I should be focused on other things with the way my teeth are rattling. But how am I going to sleep next to Carter? He already takes up all the space. I can't even imagine what he's going to do with the sheets and pillows. Right there, sleeping next to me, big and warm, and possibly even nak?—

"I spent the money on something else," Carter calls from the bathroom. A waft of warm steam wells out from the door, tinged with some kind of eucalyptus scent.

My teeth chatter. "What did you spend it on?"

"It's a surprise." Something wet slaps against the floor. "Don't worry, you'll love it."

"I'll love it?"

"Yep, totally, bro."

I stare at the door, then shake my head and sigh because it's so Carter. It's not a big deal. So we'll share a bed. Why is this fucking with me?

Travelling for football, I've shared rooms and beds and all sorts of spaces with other



guys. And this should be easier because it's Carter.

I don't know why it's fucking with my head so much.

I just need to go with it. Relax and get back to myself. Get out of my head, find a dick to suck, and get back to being football-Theo. I crouch to unzip my duffle, my fingers blue as I dig around for a clean pair of sweats.

"Ohhh, fuuuuck ." Carter's voice bellows from the bathroom, echoing off the walls.

"This feels so good . Get in here. Warm your pea-size balls."

My eyes settle on the door, and the steam billowing out.

"Uh..." I clutch onto the folded sweats. My shivers are getting stronger, but fuck... I can't...

"Brrroooo," Carter groans in this guttural, throaty rasp. "Are you coming or what? You need to warm up."

Steam's billowing out the door now. I do need to get warm. I step forward, pulled by the heat, stepping over the transition to gray bathroom tiles.

The bathroom's huge and modern. A shower spans most of the rear wall, half hidden by frosted glass.

I step on a floor towel that Carter must have laid down, the terry cloth wrinkling under my toes.

Fuck, the warmth . It soaks into me. I step over the low ledge into the shower, onto dark gray tile.

I'm still half clothed—wet sweats and soaked boxer briefs under that.

I was thinking Carter would be at least in his boxers.

I should have known better.

He's leaning forward, both hands on the tiled wall, bare ass out, shorts flopped in a pile by his feet. He's under a single rain-style shower head.

And fuck...

I pause.

I don't want to look. I shouldn't. But fuck if I can't stop myself.

Carter.

He's smooth skin, wide shoulders down to his ass. My eyes track over him and stop at a smattering of errant hair creeping down his crack.

A patch of hair.

Fuck.

Most guys would wax that off, but I just keep looking at it.

Steam thickens on my skin like paint, but I'm still shivering so hard that it's unbalancing my knee, making my hip ache with how I'm standing. My sweats are heavy.

"Theo?" Carter twists halfway to look at me, palms still on the wall, lower back

bowing, ass pushed out, his chest reddened from the water. “You good?”

“Yeah.” I inhale the dense, humid air, highly aware of where I’m looking.

At his face.

His forehead wrinkles. He pushes off the wall, turning toward me fully and...

Oh, shit. Say something.

“Elephants have a specific warning call that means ‘human’,” I blurt.

He blinks at me. “What?”

“Nothing. Sorry. Shit.”

He just keeps standing there, completely fucking naked, water spraying over one shoulder, his eyes narrowing as he takes me in.

“Elephants are smart,” he finally says. “They’re one of my favorite animals.”

“Yeah, me too.” I lick my lips, another shiver racking through me so hard that I swear my stomach shakes.

His brow furrows. “You gotta get in here.” He steps to the side, so the water is hitting his hip, those wrinkles in his forehead keep deepening until they look like little waves. “Seriously, get warm. I’m getting worried about you.”

He does look worried.

He’s always worried about me.

I suck in a breath and step forward, my throat tightening as I near him—a foot of steam-heavy air between us. He steps out of the water, letting me in.

The first drops of water hit my chest, stinging, and my mouth opens, letting out some kind of guttural noise.

I ache for warmth, my shoulders curling forward but head tipping back as I step under the spray. Water sears my raw skin, every muscle tensing, ass flexing, toes curling.

The noise fades, and for a moment, I forget he's there—that huge presence hovering, then he moves, sweeping a curl out of his eyes as a shiver races over his shoulders.

He's still cold.

He should be... in the water with me.

I step to the side. "Get in."

He nods, another shiver racing over him, trembling everything , and then he slides in next to me, his arm pressing against mine, our cold skin touching.

But we're too big to both fit under the spray of the single shower head. Side-by-side, at least.

I swear the world is out to get me.

I close my eyes. "Come closer."

He laughs. "Bear hug, bro!"

Oh God.

His arms wrap me, pulling me in, chest to chest.

“You’re so cut ,” he says. “I mean, I know that. It’s pretty obvious. But it’s different touching you.”

Oh Jesus.

“I don’t know if I am anymore,” I whisper. “Not like I used to be.”

“Nah, you’re the same. You haven’t changed.”

Haven’t changed .

I squeeze my eyes shut. I should step back, but I just... don’t .

Carter holds me, our shivers coming in fits and spurts, his hair brushing my shoulder as he tips his head down, water coursing over us, weighing down my sweats so the elastic slides low on my hips, my toes tingling.

His body—against mine, shivering, trembling, fucking palpating .

We stand there for a long moment, just shaking together, until the water finally starts to heat both of us. Steam is gathered so thick that I can taste it, the sound of the falling water echoing in my head.

I squeeze my eyes tighter and tighter until I see circles of white light.

I should step back. But he just hugs me tighter. And I don’t want to step back.

I don’t want to at all .

I just want to stay here, still faintly shivering against him. As big and loud as he is, he's just so Carter . Like he can't help being exactly who he is.

I was always so focused on myself before the accident. So focused on football. On me , and all those goals I had for my life.

My throat tightens, a swelter of some kind of emotion rising, pricking my eyes and puckering the back of my tongue. Like a weight, welling from somewhere inside. The last six months wash over me, everything tumbling. Hitting the turf. That first snap of pain. The darkness after.

It always comes back so fast. Out of nowhere.

Heat closes my throat, swells behind my eyes.

Fuck, I don't want to cry here. I've cried more in the last six months than I had for my entire life before that.

But it starts to well up, and maybe he senses it, because he pulls me closer, snug against him, chest to chest, his lips against my neck, the soft press of his package against mine.

And then the worst possible thing happens. Worse than almost crying in the shower with Carter. Worse than admitting how everything feels like it's falling apart. Blood rushes, hot in my slowly warming body, like it's on a mission, my dick thickening, my balls and thighs warming. An awareness of every bit of his skin pressed against mine. Of his breath. Of his size. Of the way he's hugging me.

Fuck, I need to get out of here.

"I'm good now." I step back, nearly stumbling over my own heels. My dick is

throbbing, my face flushing...

“Theo?” There’s a tightness in his voice, and I’m not meeting his eyes. I’m staring at the tile.

And I’m fucking hard.

Jesus, did he notice ?

I need to go. I turn, still shivering, and step around the frosted glass panel, snagging a towel off the rack.

My sweats are soaked. And I can’t pull them down without springing out like a fucking jack-in-the-box, so I do the only thing I can—I head out of the bathroom, dripping all over the new carpet.

I beeline for the sliding door and step out. I strip off and dry as fast as I can, glad for the fat palm fronds that act like a privacy screen around the sitting area. Glad there’s no one there to see the ugly-ass scars stretching down my leg. I wrap the towel around my hips, tucking my dick under the knot, tight to my abdomen where I can feel every twitch, and then toss my sweats over a chaise lounge.

I’ll deal with them tomorrow. Right now, I need this to be over.

I can’t do this to Carter. I know I’m messed up in my head.

I find a blanket in the closet, and still half wet, I curl into the ballsack couch, not even checking if it folds out, the wrinkly cushions sucking me in.

I close my eyes, trying to ignore the constant twitch of my dick, still warm against my abdomen. Trying not to imagine him—over and over—water slicking down his back,

that odd patch of hair at the top of his ass. How hard the tile would have felt as I kneeled, a bolt of pain shooting up my thigh, but it would have been worth it.

No.

I need to stop thinking.

I need to follow through on the original plan. Find a guy. Suck my first dick. If I'm lucky, some dude's cock edging down my throat will solve all of this. Organize my thoughts. Keep Carter in that lane where things are safe. Fix whatever's going haywire in my brain.

I just need something to bring me back to myself. To make the world make sense.

I'm not sure how long it is before the shower turns off. The toilet flushes and the sink runs, then soft footsteps approach. The floor creaks next to me, but for once in his life—probably the first time ever—he's silent. Then he turns and pads to the bed, the frame creaking as he crawls in.

My throat closes, my heart thunders. What will he do tomorrow?

Will he hate me? Will he sneer at me the way Jason did when I told him? Back in high school, that first time I thought that maybe, maybe there was someone I could see myself opening up to? But I learned pretty damn quickly that reality sucks sometimes.

I curl under the blanket, still shivering long after I'm warm, thinking thoughts that I don't want to think. Things aren't getting better in my head.

They're getting worse.



I've never felt so alone.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:59 am*

3

I wake in a white cloud. My contacts are stuck on my eyeballs, everything filmed in mist. I groan and roll over, trapped in the blanket. My memory of last night is like a drunken haze where you wake and scroll through your texts, pissing yourself when you realize what you'd typed.

Except I wasn't drinking. I did that shit all on my own.

And the things I dreamed. Jesus, I don't want to admit them.

I stretch onto my side, my spine stiff from the ballsack couch, then I freeze.

There's a to-go cup and a light blue pastry bag on the coffee table.

They sit auspiciously on the pale wooden surface, staring at me, next to a pile of brochures that Carter snagged from the villa's office. I snake a hand out from the blanket and brush my fingertips along the cup.

It's warm.

Carter .

My heart does this jumping thing. Like it plasters itself against my ribs before retreating in confusion.

I twist to see the bed. No Carter. Just a lump of unmade sheets, the fitted one torn off

at the corner, and the pillows in a chaotic mound.

I unwrap the blanket and settle my feet on the floor, spreading my toes into the carpet, my knee stiff and morning wood stiffer. Jesus, I need a release—

“I’m sorry.”

Carter’s voice comes from my right, and I flinch.

He’s sitting in front of the sliding door, a matching to-go cup in his hand and wearing the board shorts he’d bought for this trip, his bare chest moving steadily with his breath.

“About the bed,” he continues, tilting his head, eyes narrowing. “You’re uncomfortable. And I fucked it up. I’m sorry.”

I swallow, my throat dry. My voice is gonna crack, and it takes effort to push out a few words. “I’m not uncomfortable.”

“You don’t need to cover shit. I’d rather know. Just be straight with me. I can handle it.”

I still, my heart thumping, my mind churning.

Does he know? Does he really believe it was about the bed? Or is he giving me some kind of out? An excuse?

“I’m not uncomfortable.” I say. “I was just surprised.” And then I got hard for you in the shower.

And I dreamed. Wild dreams about you walking over here, bending down to grip my

jaw and demanding that I open my mouth for you. And then you ? —

The images come back. The things I dreamed. They were beyond anything I'd thought I'd be into. Straight out of some kind of porn fantasy. He'd bent over me, his amber eyes on my blue ones. Opening his mouth, he spat a single stream of saliva into mine, getting me ready for his cock. He gripped my hair roughly and shoved all the way to the back of my throat, telling me...

I shiver and grip the blanket harder.

I don't want to remember, but it all comes back anyway.

He was telling me... that I was perfect. That I was everything he wanted. That I was enough . Despite how fucked up everything is. How fucked up I am right now. That I'm still me .

And he did it all in that voice he uses when it's just the two of us, the softer one that's still somehow big, crowding out all the other errant thoughts so that there's only Carter left.

I'd woken after that first dream, choking on my spit and shivering. Dick leaking all over the blanket and aching to fist myself and dive headfirst back into the fantasy.

“You're so damn perfect, Theo. Everything is gonna be okay.”

And then when I fell onto my knees before him, he swept a hand into my hair, a strained whisper of, “ I love the way you tongue my cock.”

Holy fuck—I can't believe my dreams. Imaginary shit that will never happen.

Not from Carter. Not easygoing, cheerful Carter . I mean, he's sitting over there

wearing board shorts with big yellow bananas all over them. He's gonna be a kindergarten teacher for God's sake. He's not the guy who grabs your jaw and spits into your mouth, who tells you that you have the sexiest asshole he's ever licked.

I bite down on my molars. I need to stop these thoughts.

"If you're not uncomfortable..." He frowns thoughtfully. "Are you annoyed with me?"

"No." I run a hand through my hair, pulling at the tangles. My fingers are shaking. "I'm not annoyed with you."

He squeezes his thumb against his cup. "I just know that I can be kinda a lot sometimes. People get annoyed with me."

My shoulders soften. "I swear I'm good," I say. "You don't annoy me, Carter. Not ever. And I'm the one who should apologize if I made you think you did anything wrong. You planned this entire trip, and I appreciate it so much."

"You don't need to apologize." He hesitates, looking like he wants to say more. If he asks about the shower, I don't know what I'll say.

I reach for the cup. "Is this for me?"

He nods. "Yes."

"Thanks, man." I take a drink. "Oh, shit. You got me almond milk."

A smile flips to his face, that dimple finally making an appearance. "You know, when penguins are friends, they give each other pebbles."

“Uh, yeah.” Except that’s not entirely true. The penguins give rocks to their partners to help build a nest to protect the egg. It’s more than friendship. It’s courtship. And connection. And... love.

He nods at my cup. “But breakfast is so much freaking better.”

“Depends on if you’re a penguin or not.” I swallow another gulp, my forehead wrinkling. Where is he going with this? “Thanks.”

“Sure. Eat. I got you a donut. And then we’ll go find D n’ R.” He stands, stepping forward until he’s hovering over the couch, tremendous and ninety percent skin and smelling faintly of sunblock. “Hit the beach, yeah?”

“Okay.” I’m looking up at him, and... I don’t know... this light flits through his eyes. There one minute, gone the next. What does that mean? What’s he thinking?

He grabs the blue pastry bag and holds it out to me. “Pebble up, bro. The world awaits.”

I’m... lost. My breath sticks in my lungs, my thoughts churning.

He grins and tosses the bag in my lap, right over my aching dick, like it’s a fucking ring toss.

Then he laughs and heads toward the door, launching into some made-up song about penguins and pebbles, and I’m just sitting there, donut on my dick and so much on my brain that it hurts.

But I guess he’s right. The world awaits. And I really need to find it again, find me again.

So... I don't know how to pick up a guy.

Rory throws me the football, and I catch his uneven spiral.

And I especially can't figure out how to do this while hitting the beach with the guys.

To make it worse, Carter's yellow banana shorts hug his ass. Tight around the muscular curve of his cheeks, digging a touch into his crack—enough that he has to adjust occasionally—and coming down to about mid thigh. The waistband lies just underneath that dusting of odd hair.

And why am I noticing that now ? We've been friends since freshman year. And I've fantasized about sucking a cock long before that. The first time I got the dildo was in high school.

I mean, I like Carter. I really do. But we're friends.

I throw the ball a little harder than I should. Rory catches it with a grunt, then rubs at his chest.

"Sorry," I call. I don't look at Carter.

I already know what I'll see.

He's down the beach from us, a girl in a yellow bikini sitting on his shoulders, her slim legs hanging down his chest, her dark hair tumbling over his face in thick curls every time she looks down to talk to him.

It's some weird-ass game of volleyball that he's playing with Dorian—all these girls on the guys' shoulders, everyone laughing like it's the best time in the fucking world. Carter holds her knees to balance her when he runs for the ball, her thighs tightening

against the sides of his neck.

He's laughing too. Loud and happy.

My stomach tightens like a hard-shelled acorn is right in the middle of my abdomen. I guess that's called a pit in the stomach.

I catch the ball, palming it with both hands. My fingertips slip along the laces before I toss it back.

Carter high-fives Dorian after they score a point, and I try not to roll my eyes. He's so damn?—

A flash of brown zooms past. I stretch out, but the ball grazes my fingertips. My foot slips, a grunt shooting out as I slam, stomach first, into the sand.

Fuck. I push to my hands, then get to my feet, my knee screaming as I dust my legs off.

"You okay?" Rory jogs over, scanning me.

"Yeah." I scoop to grab the ball, rolling my thumb over a gap in the stitching before tossing it back to him. "I think I'm gonna grab a drink."

White temporary tents line the walkway on the far side of the beach. College kids are everywhere, going in and out, moving around. Hopefully, it's far enough from the beach that if I talk with anyone, I'm not in full view. Maybe I can figure out how to?—

"I'll go with you." Rory tosses the ball on our towels.



Okay... so... plan failed.

But I'm glad as Rory and I fall into step next to each other, chatting about an editing job offer he got for after graduation in New York. Dorian's heading back to California to work in his family's flower shop. Carter's looking for a teaching job.

All of us are going different ways, I guess.

Not that I know where I'm going.

We step under the first tent, and my eyes relax in the dim interior.

"What can I get you?" A guy behind the bar speaks in an accent I can't place. I still, my heart clattering to a halt, my feet following.

Tattoos decorate the backs of his hands and curve along his forearms, over his shoulders to color his neck.

I can't even sort out what I'm thinking. I just know that my eyes want to take all of him in, an inch at a time, all the way down to what's hidden behind the bar. Although I doubt he would have those thighs like Carter, sticking out from his banana shorts, that flick of a dimple whenever he?—

Why the fuck am I thinking about Carter ?

I shove Carter to the back of my head, except he doesn't go. He stays there in my thoughts, flinging out some jazz hands at the excitement of trying a new drink. Like how he is, I guess. Exuberant and loud and drawing all sorts of attention to himself.

"You good, mate?" The tattooed guy leans forward, his elbows falling on the bar, his voice with an edge of rasp.

“Ah...” I clear my throat. Rory’s talking to another bartender, ordering some kind of icy pink drink. I nod toward it. “One of those things, I guess.”

His brow arches. “A Pink Monstrosity?”

My mouth is dry. “That, ah, okay.”

“A’lrighty.” His eyes flick down, down, down. And then they linger. There is no fucking question what they’re lingering on. My cock twitches in response. He smiles. “One coming right up, handsome.”

He turns away from the bar, and I blink at his “Beach Hut” tank.

That was so fucking blatant .

Rory leans on the bar next to me.

Shit. Did he see ?

The bartender turns back and then sets a huge pink-filled cup in front of me. “This one’s on the house.”

“I can pay.” In my periphery, I’m hotly aware of Rory.

The bartender smiles, not seeming all that interested in helping anyone else or responding to my statement about paying. “Are you here on spring break?”

“Yep.”

“How long?”

“Four days.”

He tips his chin. “You should stop by again.”

“I should?” The dryness in my mouth is spreading to my throat.

“For sure.” He winks. “Ask for Maxim.”

I struggle to breathe. Struggle to realize that I’m still standing there.

I get a flash of images racing through my head. My fingers tugging at the tie of his shorts, his dark eyes on me, lips parting.

“You’re so damn perfect, Theo.”

Jesus, Carter . His voice is so damn cock-blocking loud in my head.

Rory’s hand lands on my shoulder, and I jump. Then we’re walking out, my toes sinking into the hot sand, the sweet taste of my pink monstrosity quenching my parched throat, the throb of my cock against the seam of my shorts. For the tattooed guy? For Carter?

“You’re so damn perfect, bro.”

Carter.

“That’s it. Take me to the back of your throat. Just like that.”

Carter.

“I love the way you tongue my cock.”

Carter.

“Everything’s gonna be okay, Theo.”

I can’t get his imaginary words out of my head. Even through the entire pink monstrosity. And the second one, where I talk with Maxim a little more. The fucking third, where I find out he’s from New Zealand.

I don’t know what I’m doing. I’m even more clueless when Carter jogs over later, those bananas tight against his thighs. He reaches down to adjust his junk casually as he stops in front of my towel, grinning down at me.

I... fuck...

He plops down on my towel. “How many of those have you had?”

I lift my cup. “This is my third.”

“I’ll catch up.” His shoulder hits mine, warm from the sun.

We’re so close I can feel granules of sand on his skin rubbing against my biceps, see his amber eyes darkening. They’re so pretty. They show every emotion he has.

“You gonna hook up with that girl?” I bumble out, and fuck... did I just ask that?

His lips part, his shoulder stiffening against mine, people all around us, spring break craziness. But I’m so fucking tipsy that the only thing I can notice is Carter. His eyes. The way he looks at me.

If you told me to suck your cock right here, I would. I’d crawl onto my knees, the sand rough and warm against my kneecaps, and I’d shimmy off those banana shorts

and lick along the full length of your shaft before swallowing you down. I'd do it in front of all these people, even though I have no clue what I'm doing. I'd do it for the first time. For you.

And if I told you that. If I let it out ? —

“Why would I?” His chest expands as he breathes.

I flinch, trying to sort out his meaning in my tipsy, not-sure-what-the-fuck-is-happening thoughts.

“I don't understand,” I mumble.

“I don't either.” His forehead wrinkles. “You're hot. And then you're cold. And then...”

“What?” Am I really so tipsy that I can't sort out this conversation?

He groans, then shakes head. “Nothing, bro.”

Bro .

It's a slap across the face. I know he doesn't mean it that way, but it still stings.

We're friends.

Friends.

Friends .

I shake my head, leaning away, when a shadow crosses over the top of us.

Yellow bikini girl is here. Perfect. And Carter's suddenly laughing loudly and standing, dusting off the sand on his arms. Dorian's there too, saying something about volleyball, and then Carter's asking about the pink monstrosities before heading off toward the tents.

He doesn't ask me to go.

I don't want to fucking go.

I don't know how to stop these thoughts. I can't handle those fucking bananas on his shorts. Can't handle that dimple. Can't handle myself.

I half-avoid him for the rest of the day. Like an asshole. More like the guy I used to be—too cocky, too focused on himself. The guy who didn't get what life was actually about.

But since he's Carter, I hear him everywhere he goes. It's impossible not to. He never once leaves my thoughts, no matter how many of those fucking drinks I suck down.

And when his arm loops over my shoulder later, smelling like sunblock and rum, and asks in my ear, "Are we good?"

I say, "Yes."

Because it's true.

No matter what I have to hide, or what I have to do, it'll always be true.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:59 am*

4

“Theeeoooo.” Carter’s voice is gravelly and low. Close.

My eyes flick open.

Shit, where are we?

A bed.

Specifically, I’m clinging to the edge of the mattress in our room, burrioted up in the sheet, skin clammy. My throat is dry, and I cough as I squint at him, contacts in again .

What happened last night?

My memories are annoyingly fuzzy.

Carter’s manspreading next to me, legs wide, one arm flung out, no sheet, and a sleepy grin on his face.

Why does he look so happy this early in the morning? At least that’s good—I must not have done anything weird.

Although... I slept in the bed with him. I dig through my memories, trying to latch onto last night. Fragments, drinks, stumbling. Laughing so loud someone yelled at us to be quiet. Carter tripping, and me helping him up.

Talking . His amber eyes as we laid here, white sheet between us, his toes brushing mine when he spread out his legs.

What did we talk about?

Why didn't I stumble over to the ballsack couch?

I swallow hard, blinking to clear my eyes.

Jesus, I hope I didn't?—

“You look cute bundled like that.” His smile extends—still sleepy but so sweet somehow. “Like a big pink worm. Except with blue eyes. Do worms have eyes?”

“Not really,” I say distractedly. “They have receptors.”

What did we talk about last night? It's all jumbled together. I remember... football. I remember... him listening. Jesus, I hope I didn't cry.

He blinks at me. “What are receptors?”

He seems normal. He's just looking across at me, hair sticking out everywhere, lines from the pillow crossing his cheek, a tiny hit of drool in the corner of his mouth that he wipes away with the back of his hand.

“They use them to tell if it's light or dark,” I say. “If they're underground or not.”

“Cool.”

“Yeah.”



He grins. “I wish I could tunnel underground.”

“You do?”

“For sure. Why not? I’d get to class that way.”

“Pop out in the Quad with dirt all over you?”

“Yep.”

“Okay, that would be kinda cool.” I take inventory of myself. I’m wearing some boxer briefs, but there’s no sand between my toes—or anywhere else. I must have showered?

Did I shower with him again? Seems like I would have remembered that. He’s still spread out next to me, dark green boxers twisted, and his... well, his dick is doing what dicks do in the morning.

I clear my throat. “Uhhh, do you remember much of last night?”

Say no. Please, for the love of God, say no . Don’t say I cried.

“Bits and pieces.” He flexes his thighs, then adjusts himself, stretching his dick to the side before letting it go. It lobs back to center, half hard and— “Yesterday was fun as shit. I don’t remember leaving the beach, but I remember dancing a bit. And something with D and—?” He shakes his head. “I mean, I don’t remember that. But I remember coming back here and talking.”

I am tense.

He smiles again. “It was cool, hanging out. I think we must have talked for hours .

That never happens to me. Most people don't...?" His smile fades, that usual light in his eyes disappearing with it.

There are about fourteen different points to what he just said that I need to unpack, and I'm attempting to do it all while forgetting the way his dick is pointed straight at me and being worried about whatever I said last night, but I'm stuck on the way he ended that sentence.

"Most people don't what?" I ask him.

His lips press, his cheeks tightening, and it's strange that it makes his dimple pop out too. I don't know if I've noticed that before. Or maybe I haven't seen him wearing this expression before? "I mean, it was hard stuff to talk about. Knowing the draft is coming next month and how you'd planned your whole life for this monumental moment. And now...?"

My chest compresses, my throat heating. Moisture wets my contacts.

"I didn't mean to say something wrong," he says in that quieter voice.

"You didn't. Finish what you were saying."

He blows out a breath, fanning my face. "Nah, we can just talk about you."

I frown. "We always talk about me." Way too much. As I think back, it's all been about me over the last six months. Maybe it was all about me before that too. So cocky and full of myself.

That makes me feel really shitty. It's not the reality either—I absolutely want to talk about Carter.

“Tell me,” I say, inching my sheet-burrito closer.

“I guess... I’m like...?” His forehead wrinkles. “I’m like a... wiener dog.”

“A wiener dog?” Holy shit, I bite back a laugh. “Shit, I’m sorry. I just didn’t expect that. How in the world are you like a wiener dog?”

He shrugs a shoulder. “You’ve seen how they walk, right? Ears waggling, tail straight up, body swaying side to side.” He sways his hips, dick bouncing.

“You don’t walk like a wiener dog, dude.”

“I know. It’s just... they’re kind of silly.” He ruffles his hair. “I think maybe a lot of people kinda look at me like that. Just... most people don’t take me seriously.” He pauses. “But you do.”

I stare at him. “Of course I do.” My skin is tight from all the sun and salt water yesterday, and I’m suddenly very aware of the space between us, the way his hand splays out, palm down, on the sheet.

“You’re exactly who you should be,” I say.

So easy with himself.

So sure and confident. Open and friendly. Happy. Brave. Energetic. Honest.

Carter is who he is. All the time.

And he’s staring across at me, his hand still flat between us, his chest moving with an inhale.

“Theo,” he puffs out my name softly.

My pulse echoes in my throat. This need flutters. To sneak a hand out and... touch him. Brush my fingertips up his chest. Along his jaw. Over the rise of his lips that are usually hitched in a smile but are softened right now.

I shake my head. I can't think about this. I twist around until I'm free of the sheet, then set my feet on the floor, my back to him, cool air grazing my clammy skin.

I'm screwing with something I never wanted to screw with again. Jesus, what am I doing? I scrub my hands through my hair, staring at where the carpet dead-ends into the wall.

The sheets rustle behind me. “You always make me feel good about myself.” His voice is rough, quiet.

“You should feel good about yourself.”

The bed creaks as he moves, the silence heavy. “I've got a surprise for all of you today.”

“Yeah?” I swallow hard.

“It'll be fun.”

I push off the bed. “I can't wait.” My knee aches, but I hide my reaction, knowing that he'll worry about it. “You're a good friend.”

I cross to the bathroom before he can respond, shutting the door behind me. I take a piss and then wash my hands. I deal with my contacts before setting my palms on the counter, fingers splayed out like his were on the sheets, and I drag my eyes to my

reflection.

Blue eyes.

He's right, my eyes look so blue in Clua.

"It's a surprise, dude." Carter tells Rory as we climb out of the Uber van. "Do you not understand the meaning of 'surprise'?"

"An unexpected event." Rory tugs up his sunglasses, settling them on top of his head, his hair bright copper in the sun, freckles running across his nose. "One that typically creates a rush of noradrenaline in the brain, heightening the experience of whatever causes the startling moment."

"Yes, exactly . We're gonna noradrenaline the shit out of ourselves!" Carter practically throbs as he flings his arms out toward the building behind us. "Look!"

I laugh.

Fuck yes .

"Waverrunners?" Dorian slaps Carter on the shoulder so loud it echoes. "My man."

"I know, right?" Carter's grin takes up his entire face, that dimple so deep that something could get lost in there. "Good for your knee?"

"For sure." Is that why he chose this? Something he knew I could do?

I mean, he paid for this by pooling all of our extra money from the one bed situation. Which reminds me that Rory and Dorian are sharing a bed too. I side-eye Dorian. I wonder how that's going.

But anyway, we'd talked about surfing and parasailing, and of course they should go, but I wasn't sure where I'd be at with my knee, and I have to admit I was putting on a brave face. Although it's not like Carter would have noticed and done this for me.

Right?

Carter's already bounding to the building, almost knocking over a postcard stand and catching it at the last minute. Inside, the guy behind the counter is talking and pointing out the window toward the twin two-seater Waverunners softly rocking by the dock.

Jesus, I can't be on that with Carter. My dick snuggling in his ass crack. Or him pressed against the back of me, his dick nestled in mine? All that vibration. Rocking on the waves. I feel a pang of heat just thinking about it.

No way.

I nudge Dorian. "Wanna ride together?"

He blinks and glances over at Rory. I suppose that I always pair off with Carter, and he goes with Rory, but there's nothing which says that has to happen.

Then Dorian smiles, slapping me on the back and seeming to warm to the idea. "We're gonna be scorched out there. So fast the hair's gonna strip off our balls."

I laugh. "Sounds slightly uncomfortable, but I'm game."

The guy shows us to lockers where we can keep anything we don't want to get wet. As I shove my phone into the locker, a text comes in from Maxim.

I work all day, but I'm off tonight.

I slam the locker shut without responding, an uneasy twist in my stomach.

Regardless, twenty minutes later, it all disappears as I crank the throttle. The Waverunner slams against the waves, and I forget my knee. Forget my life. Football. Maxim.

That thrill that I've rarely felt since football feeding the adrenaline through my entire body.

It's intense out here. The sun is bright overhead, the salt from the water drying on my reddened shoulders. Dorian whoops behind me, and I turn, glimpsing the other Waverunner.

Rory's driving with Carter on the back. Rory's more careful than me, but Carter is making up for it. He's standing, arms flung in the air, and laughing this big, mouth-wide-open laugh that bounces off the waves. There's no chance that he won't get bucked off, fuck if he seems to care.

He's all in. Loud and euphoric and over-the-top. Chaotic and big and way too much.

Exactly who he should be .

I'm grinning at him when a sudden play of silver light behind him catches my eye.

Wait—not light. A fin? I squint against the sun. There are hardly any sharks around Clua, but possibly dolphins and sunfish. And whales. And it's March—still close enough to winter for whales to be around here.

I slow and point toward it. Rory notices, turning them too.

We come to a stop, rolling on the waves. And all stare toward where I'd pointed, eyes

peeled.

“I see it!” Carter yells just as a slip of silvery gray crests, then disappears, a shadow underneath the water.

My mouth tips open. Holy fuck, I know what’s out there.

“A blue whale.” I stand on the rocking Waverunner. “That’s a fucking blue whale .”

“For real? Guys!” Dorian shouts to Rory and Carter.

We’re bobbing on the waves, holding our collective breaths because the thing is massive . Dark in the water and swimming toward us. My nerves ratchet, my pulse rocketing.

I glance over at Carter, and his eyes meet mine. A wave rolls between us. Our Waverunners suddenly seem tiny.

But I don’t want to stop looking at him.

I want to see his reaction to the whale. I want to see him break into that dimpled smile.

But he’s not looking at it. He’s looking right at me, sunlight glinting in his hair, sunglasses over his eyes.

The shadow moves under us, somehow graceful even at its size, silent under the water, and then Carter looks down and laughs.

It’s underneath us.



This behemoth of the ocean, more enormous than I'd ever imagined, swimming right below us, streamlined and silvery, almost like a mirage.

It passes silently, sliding over onto its back and then rotating onto its stomach as the tail passes underneath.

I'm not breathing. Not thinking, just spellbound.

This is life . I feel like I've forgotten that. I've been too consumed with what isn't to remember what is.

Sunlight ripples underneath the water, and then the whale changes speed, darting forward, that perfectly shaped tail rising, so damn close that?—

“Theo!” My name echoes from somewhere, and a split-second later, the force of the tail shifts the water, and we're under.

Salt water fills my mouth, shockingly cold. I can't tell which way is up, and I have this weird weightless moment before it clicks where I am. I swim, my head popping out of the water, kicking hard as I suck in air. Shit, where's everyone else?

Dorian's next to me, sputtering out water. Our Waverunner rocks a few feet away, toppled over.

I spin until I find the other Waverunner, upright, with Rory in the driver's seat and.... Where the fuck is Carter?

Jesus. “ Carter !” His name roars out of me, like every muscle I have is made of that word.

And then he's suddenly there, his hand latching onto my arm, water trickling down

his nose, sunglasses gone, and this look on his face—unlike I’ve ever seen.

His amber eyes are dark, flicking around my face, that dimple non-existent.

He’s not smiling. Not the Carter that I usually know.

My heart thumps like it’s hollow, my relief all encompassing, my hands trembling as I tread water around him.

He’s still clasping onto my arm, and I have to kick carefully so I don’t ram him in the shin.

“Carter,” I say, because he hasn’t spoken, and he’s still just looking at me like that.

I shiver, water tugging on my board shorts as I kick, cooling my armpits and drying on my lips.

“You guys okay?” Rory calls.

Carter’s eyes burn a path, a swath across my skin, as he looks from my face down to my chest and then back, and then he yanks me against him, his jaw brushing against mine, his fingers firming around my biceps.

I squeeze my eyes shut, bobbing in the water with him, feeling his chest moving, my mouth filled with the taste of seawater, my nose with the smell of his sunblock.

He grips onto me. “I need you to be okay.”

My heart stutters. A heat filling my throat.

“I need that too, Carter.” My arms keep treading automatically, my chest

compressing. Warmth bites at my eyes.

His eyes move around my face, his forehead wrinkling. What does he see? “We should get back.” He pauses. “Bro.”

Bro .

“Yeah.” I nod, glancing toward the overturned Waverunner.

I can’t look at him right now.

I swim to the Waverunner, a deep pain lacing into my knee as Dorian and I flip it upright and then crawl on.

For the rest of the day, Carter and I are two islands, with a gaping ocean between. And I think that later, when shit gets clearer, it’s gonna tear through me. It’s gonna hurt more than I ever guessed it would.

So, I try to get back into it—or at least part of me does—I laugh and I say the things I’m supposed to say.

I try to come back to myself.

But it’s like the person I come back to isn’t fully there. There’s a gap, and I’m tired of it. I need to fill it. I need to get back. Even if it’s only for a little while. Even if it’s temporary.

I came to Clua with a plan.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:59 am*

5

I can't look at Carter and do this.

I'm a selfish dick, so I avoid him. I keep Rory or Dorian between us. I look away from the faint shimmer of sand that dries on his shoulders. I ignore the pinch in my stomach when he calls me "bro."

We return to the beach at the cusp of evening, and it's like everything's on fire. Music echoes from a stage, people wrestle in giant sumo suits and fly down slip and slides full of whipped cream.

I could see Carter doing all of it. Six months ago, I would have too.

But right now, I can't.

I need to fill this fucking hole.

I head toward the Beach Hut. My toes curl into the sand as I go, my stomach heavy with that pit. I didn't tell the guys I was leaving, I just went.

People are everywhere, the sun edging to the horizon, leaving everything in half shadows, neon necklaces and bracelets popping on.

The Beach Hut tent glows in the dropping sun. A line jigsaws out, and I step into it, my nerves ratcheting to pre-game levels.

A hand brushes my shoulder. “I was hoping to catch you.”

That accent. I turn and am plastered with Maxim’s deep brown eyes.

“Hi,” I say, kinda foolishly.

And... he keeps looking at me. He doesn’t seem bothered by the stretch of silence, but I’m getting antsy.

I clear my throat. “You texted me earlier.”

I guess he already knows that.

His lips twitch. “I did.”

“Okay.” I glance around, feeling outside of myself.

He leans in closer, something sweet like grenadine filling my nose. “You’re cute.”

You look cute bundled like that. Like a big pink worm.

Stop, Carter.

Maxim’s eyes flirt over my face. “What are you looking for?”

“I...” I swallow. He’s so fucking direct . “I’m not looking to...?”

His brows rise, waiting for me to finish.

“I’m not looking for anything serious,” I say.

He laughs softly. “I didn’t think you were. Let me show you something.”

He sparks with this kind of confidence that’s bone deep. Like there’s no need to waffle around what he wants.

This is what I wanted . The hard thump of my heart confirms it, the tension along my shoulders, and the contractions of my abs as I let his fingers slip into mine. His hand is cool, mine clammy.

His brows rise halfway. “You can say no.”

“Yes.” I croak out the word. “I want to say yes .”

“A’lrighty.” His brown eyes crinkle at the corners, Adam’s apple moving under the tattoos on his throat.

He leads me out of the line toward the rear of the tent, and I follow.

I want this.

I want this.

I want this .

Right?

He leads me to a set of gated stairs behind the tents, and as we climb, I force my eyes to linger on the ink on his triceps—visible in his tank top—the hang of his board shorts on his hips, and the flip of his sandals.

“Where are we going?” I ask.

“Getting a better view.” He twists to look at me. “Don’t worry, I won’t lead you astray.”

A thrum settles low in my gut as I climb the stairs, my cock thickening in something like anticipation. And maybe a bit of confusion too.

We come out at the top of the stairs, into open air. A rooftop that overlooks the bars and the beach.

“Holy shit,” I murmur, stepping over to the railing and looking down. It’s just the two of us, the entire beach laid out below. Neon necklaces bob in the darkening light, bodies swirl in the shadows.

“Beautiful, innit?” His melodic accent warms his voice.

“Yeah, it kinda is.” I grip onto the railing.

“So...” Maxim’s voice is right next to my ear, and the tendons along my neck tighten. “What do you want, handsome?”

What do I want ? My dick is somewhat hard, shoved against the seam of my shorts, the back of my neck tickling with his breath.

I want this .

Don’t I?

I mean, it’s what I’ve?—

A voice echoes across the crowd.

I don't even know how I hear it, but I do. I always hear him. Above everything and everyone else.

Before I can stop myself, I search, and I see him. I can't fucking help it. Carter's laughing, loud and excited like he does, decked out in yellow neon, his arm slung over a girl next to him, whipped cream all over his chest.

I stare, my pulse stilling, my legs wooden, my knee so stiff that it aches.

He laughs again, and then she pushes to her toes and kisses him.

On the lips.

He flinches a little, but he doesn't break away.

He kisses her back.

He fucking kisses her back .

The world swims. Not from rocking on the waves or pink monstrosities or too much sun. It swims in a way that feels like it'll never be right again. Like it tumbled off its axis and is hanging there, fucked for all time.

He kissed her.

Kissed her.

A sob chokes in my throat. A full-out fucking sob.

I squeeze my eyes shut. "I just want this to be over."



My heart hurts . And the world isn't right.

It isn't fair. It isn't right. And I don't know how to fix it.

I don't know how to fix me .

My knee, my football career, I don't know if I can be fixed.

The only thing I can do is just keep moving ahead. Keep trying to get through this. I just need to?—

“Handsome,” Maxim breathes next to me. “Do you want this?”

I don't care.

I don't care. I don't fucking care.

I stand under the shower, water cascading over my head, my hands in fists against the tile.

I don't care.

Not that he kissed her. Not that he's somewhere back there, probably still doing it. Or maybe he went to her room. Maybe he's spreading her legs as we speak.

I don't care.

I don't care that I just turned and booked it down the stairs without saying anything to Maxim. I don't care that I couldn't go through it.

There's no way things can return to normal after this. I can't see how I can go back to

IFU, not playing football, living in the bedroom next to Carter, hearing his laugh through the wall, and not feeling like my guts are being ripped out. Every day there is this blanket that I don't know how to kick off. Like I'm burrioted. I'm drowning.

And I especially don't care that Carter's voice repeats in my head, over and over.

“You're so damn perfect, Theo. I love the way you tongue my cock.”

Love the way you taste.

The way you ? —

Love me.

Shower water pounds against my skull, it fills my ears, drags down my board shorts. I squeeze my fists harder, shoving them against the tile, my chest so tight that I can't breathe.

And the words that make me feel better—those fantasy words from Carter—they're all in my fucking head . They're imaginary. They aren't real.

I'm putting this on him. And it's not fair.

I need to cry—a messy, embarrassing cry like I'd never do in front of anyone else.

But the tears don't come. It's like they're rotting in me, clogged behind my eyes.

I'm so fucked up.

I'm hurt and I'm angry and I'm just so lost . I didn't realize how lost until today. I didn't realize what a tiny string I've been hanging onto.

And it's worse without Carter, how he laughs, how he looks at me, how I am with him. I miss just being around?—

“ Theo .”

I squeeze my eyes, another sob welling. His voice is so real, like he's standing right behind me. Like he's?—

“Bro.” It comes closer this time.

Fuck, no . Please no. He can't be here. He can't see me like this.

“Are you okay?”

I jump when his palm clasps my shoulder, my fists sliding down the tile.

Pull your shit together . Act like nothing's wrong. Act like two bros in the shower together over spring break.

I swipe the heels of my hands at my eyes. I swallow my tears. Then I straighten and turn.

He's right behind me, the spray of the water wetting his banana shorts, plastering the fabric against his skin.

He kissed her .

My throat closes. I want to fucking cry. I want to give up. I want this feeling to be over.

I drag in an uneven breath. “Hey, man.”

Somehow, I keep my voice from shaking.

His lips part slowly.

Silence.

A waft of steam rises between us, and I don't know how to deal with this. I don't know how to look at him.

I need to crawl into the ballsack couch and go to sleep. Forget all of this. Go back to Colorado and... what?

Pretend that you don't want him. That you're not thinking about him every single time he passes by your door. That you're not two seconds away from breaking the fuck down.

Yes, exactly that.

"I'm done with the shower," I say. "You can finish."

I go to step around him.

"Did he"—his jaw clenches—"do something to you?"

I freeze.

He knows . Holy shit, he knows.

I shake my head. "No."

"I saw you go up those stairs with him." His eyes are that dark amber, moving over

me, from face to chest to knee and back. “And now you seem kinda fucked up.”

My pulse hammers in my temples. The spray of the water suddenly seems louder, the steam denser.

“He wanted to show me something,” I say, hating myself for not really answering. But I don’t know what else to do. “That’s it.”

His lips press hard. And I can’t sort out the expression he’s giving me.

He knows.

A fracture starts in my chest, and it splits my throat, tearing right through me.

I squeeze my eyes shut. I need to swallow it all back, like I’ve been doing for the last six months. Pretend that?—

“Did you blow him?” His big voice echoes in the darkness.

My eyes flash open. I’m shaking, and I can’t seem to stop.

“Shit, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked.” He swipes at his mouth. “It’s none of my business. I’m sorry. I?—?”

“No, I decided not to blow him.” The words are out before I can stop them, this bubble rising in my chest, billowing and expanding, and I can’t hold it in anymore. “But you fucking kissed her. You kissed her, Carter.”

His Adam’s apple rolls with a swallow. “Because you went with him. You ignored me all fucking afternoon. You’re so hot and cold with me, and then you went with him . And I thought—?” He shakes his head. “Fuck me. Just fucking fuck me. I

CAN'T DO THIS ANYMORE .” He shouts so loud that it seems to fill every molecule of air, vibrating between us.

“Do what ?”

“Fucking want you.” His words seem to fracture all around us, falling hard in the shower.

My mouth opens, my heart smashing.

“I was ready to take on a whale for you.” He takes another step forward, and he’s right there—tremendous and overwhelming and emotions so strong that it makes my chest hurt. “Thirty-foot blow spout and all. And a slightly scary bartender. And the whole fucking world. I thought something was happening between us .”

I’m motionless. My heart, always so noisy, roots in my chest.

“I fucking hoped.” His voice cracks. “I hoped so hard. Needy, pebble-giving hope. And then you went up those stairs, and it all came crashing down. And I kissed her, but I didn’t mean it. I just wanted to forget. But I can’t.”

I drag in a shaky breath, but I can’t fill my lungs.

“ Fuck .” He bellows it out. He turns in a tight circle, bare feet slapping in the water. When he comes back to face me, he shakes his head. “This is messed up. You’re probably thinking that?—?”

“I hoped too.”

He blinks.

I blink.

He blinks again. “You did?”

“Yeah.”

His forehead wrinkles. “For... what exactly?”

The humidity clouds around us, hanging thick over our heads, the steady beat of the water over my shoulder, the slickness of the tiles under my feet.

I pause my fingers. “That maybe you’d”—just say it, say it, say it, say it —“want me.”

His eyes turn to saucers. “For real?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yeah.”

“ Really? ”

“Yeah.”

Jesus, the way he’s looking at me, eyes darkening, that bottom lip damp. Except... I have seen that look before. He looked at me like that on the plane. And when he brought me breakfast. So many times before that. Back at IFU, when he was helping me with my physical therapy or lifting at the gym.

He steps forward into arm's reach, and a chill of adrenaline shoots through me. Then he's closing the distance, and before I can think, his lips are on mine.

A full-body shudder racks through me, and then my mouth is full of him, his tongue, his taste, his groan, his lips slick with shower steam.

I grip his shoulders, yanking him closer. We shove into each other, moving backward. My shoulders slam into the tile, his weight settling against me, the wall cold against my ass. He squeezes the nape of my neck, his fingers digging in, and I moan.

This is what kissing's like .

I had no fucking idea.

He yanks back. "We just did that."

Steam lingers between us, moving in faint drifts as we breathe.

"It was"—I lick my lips—"my first."

"Seriously?" He blinks at me. "You're serious right now? Like your first kiss with a dude? Or...?"

"First kiss ever."

"How is that possible?" He pauses. "Your first kiss was me ?"

"Yep." I swallow hard. I'm still trembling, but a smile slips onto my face. I don't know where it comes from, or how it makes it through all the other shit in my head. But it does—like it always does with Carter.



I clear my throat. “Do you want to go again?”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:59 am*

6

Carter blinks, then his smile expands, his dimple popping.

And he knows . He fucking knows that I'm gay. And more than just accepting it—more than just letting me be me—he kissed me.

And he's still here, his eyes on mine, his feet sliding forward on the tile, hand coming up, his fingers brushing over my forearm, lightly, then his hand cups the side of my neck.

His thumb brushes along my jaw, and a shiver slips down my spine.

I groan before his lips are even on mine, hardly trusting my legs to keep me standing. My heart hammers like it's building to something, an expanding balloon. The moment is so clear, and the steam is thick around us. A drop of water beads on his top lip and slides onto mine as we kiss.

His thumb smooths along my neck, and then it's like we jump into some abyss. We crush together—chest, stomachs, hips, cocks, thighs, knees. My balls tighten, my dick pulses.

“Fuck .” I bite the word into his mouth, then lean away to catch my breath. My head thunks back against the tile, my eyes rolling. I dig my fingers into his shoulders, struggling to keep from busting a nut right in my shorts.

“You good?” he asks. “If you've never kissed, does that mean... you've never done

any of this?”

I squeeze my eyes tighter. “Never.”

His wet hair brushes my cheek. “Wanna change that?”

“Jesus , Carter.” I open my eyes to too bright light. He’s right there, and I feel his energy soaking into me. I slide my palm down over his warm biceps, his muscles flexing under my touch, to his elbow. Then his forearm. Blood beats in a vein across the back of his wrist so strongly that I can feel it under my thumb.

He lets out a fractured breath as I slide my nails across his stomach.

“Have you—?” I clear my throat, meeting his eyes again. My heart is pounding so hard it’s beating in my tongue . I mean, holy fuck. I didn’t know that was possible. “Have you ever done shit with a guy before?”

His lips press faintly. A flick of worry? “No.” His thumb tracks along the bottom of my jaw. “But you —?” He sucks in a sharp breath, looking like he’s debating what to say. “You are so fucking sexy that it hurts my eyes. Seriously. I’ve got to squint. Or get an eye patch, so it only hits me half as hard.”

A laugh belts out of me, my fingers playing along the waistband of his shorts. “An eyepatch?”

“I’d look cool in an eyepatch. Kinda dangerous, you know?”

“You could totally do an eyepatch.” I’m half-laughing, but I mostly just want to kiss him again.

Shit, can I? Just... lean forward and kiss him?

My smile fades, my attention flicking to his lips.

His eyes darken. “Go ahead.”

Shit, okay. I tug on the waistband of his shorts, drawing him closer.

I lead our kiss this time, slow at first, until his tongue slides along my bottom lip, and then we’re both grabbing for each other, wet hands on wet skin. I’m aware of every rasp of his breath, every sound, every drop of water sliding off his lips.

By the time we break away, I’m set to pop again already. Honestly, I thought it would be a little easier to control myself.

I lean back, biting on my molars. “I’m gonna bust in my shorts.”

“Then take ‘em off.” His teeth scrape over his bottom lip, his amber eyes so bright. “Or, if you want, I could? If that’s okay?”

I nod, not trusting my voice.

My board shorts are looser than his, sitting kinda low, my dick all cramped under the waistband. It only takes a light tug on the elastic for him to pull them down to my thighs. I kick them off the rest of the way.

So... I’m naked in the shower. With Carter. And... now I guess the next part is to—

“Your dick’s so pretty.” Carter’s eyes ping to my face. “Although I’m not surprised.”

I blink. “What?”

“I dunno.” He shrugs a shoulder. “You’re kinda astounding. It’s something I’ve had

to deal with for a while now.”

He grins, and I snort out a laugh, trying not to think about how my dick is waving madly between us, like a conductor on a hunt for an orchestra. Is this weird for him? Is it weird for me? “Astounding?”

His smile fades. “Totally.”

His honesty hits me right in the chest. A full onslaught.

“You are too,” I say, my voice thick. “Astounding, I mean. You know that, right? I think it all the time.”

His eyes slip closed, for just a moment, before they open again. “You always make me feel so good.”

You too, Carter.

I kiss him, not questioning it this time, my heart full out thundering as his fingers slide along my side, then halfway to my navel. He pauses there. Is he nervous? Shit, is he debating?

Then he fists me, in one fast motion. I struggle to keep kissing him, but it’s messy and all over the place, and the only thing I can focus on is the way he’s stroking me. I tear away, pressing my forehead onto his shoulder, his other arm partway looping around to hold me, my cockhead darkening as it appears and disappears into the crook of his hand. My knees—even the good one—are close to buckling.

Holy fuck .

He moans like he’s the one being stroked. We struggle with the rhythm at first, but he

laughs and says, “We’ll figure it out.” And we do.

Is it weird to say that I never imagined someone touching me? Not that I’m untouchable or anything—I’m a good-looking guy. I figured someone would want to. But it never connected in my fantasies. It was always me on my knees.

Until now. Until it became Carter.

Tightness laces across my stomach, burns in my thighs, and quivers in my balls. His shoulder is hard against my forehead, my fingers gripping onto his arms. My hips move desperately, ass flexing, jaw locking as my muscles start to shake. The haze keeps thickening, pulling us closer. His breath rasps against my ear.

“Fuck, bro.” He kisses me there, under the hollow of my ear, and I’m so far gone that I don’t even fully register the “bro” or the kiss. I just pump harder into his fist, gripping onto him for fucking life.

I tip my head back, wanting to see him. I feel like I’m in the ocean, moving with the waves. My eyes are half hooded. He’s fuzzy and close. My lips part—I need to tell him I’m going to cum. That’s what I’m supposed to do, right?

“Theo,” he whispers. Water drips from his hair and clusters on his lashes.

I moan, saying something about how good it feels. Or how good he feels? I dunno.

“Your eyes are so blue,” he whispers.

My throat tightens. His strokes falter.

“All those football muscles.” He licks his lips, continuing like it’s the most natural thing to say while he’s jacking me off in the shower. “So damn hot. And your chest

heaving and throat blushing. You're sexy as shit."

Jesus.

My release rockets out, plastering me, cursing as I come, releasing all over those banana shorts, pulsing in his fist, gripping onto his arms. I pull him to me, needy for his mouth. His lips are warm, my dick trembles against his shorts. My fingers tremble too.

I've never cum like that.

Not even close.

It takes me a few minutes to remember where I am, to understand that I'm still standing, that Carter is a fully separate person from me. I literally have this moment where it feels like we're part of each other. I don't know if that's normal, but at some point, I realize that the ties of his shorts are scraping against my softened junk, and that he's still hard. And that I want to suck his dick.

"Can I blow you?" My voice is rough, my stomach and thighs and balls still quivering from that cum.

And his response... it's so Carter that I laugh.

"Hell, yeah!" He beams.

His response does more than make me laugh. It makes me smile. Not just my lips, but my whole body as I grasp at those ties, my cum slick on them as I tug them loose, and then we both laugh as we fight to peel those too-tight bananas off.

The bananas squelch on the floor, and my heart thumps double-time as I'm looking at

his dick, perfectly arched, like a big, beautiful invitation.

This is it .

I mean, maybe. I don't want to get ahead of myself. He could stop me at any time. But he seems as ready to go as I am.

And, shit, here goes.

I start to slide to my knees when his hand catches my arm.

His forehead wrinkles. "Should we move?"

"Hung?"

"Should we move somewhere better?"

"Better?" I frown. "Are you done with the shower?"

"Nah, I like it here." He nods towards my knee. "But I don't want you to hurt."

He's worried about me. I lick my lips. "I'll be fine."

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

"You'll say something if not?"

"Of course."



“You promise?”

I laugh, settling my knees on the wet tile, a spark of pain there, but it’s just what’s normal now. “Yes, I promise.”

“Okay.” A flicker of concern crosses his face. “You’re getting that tension in your hands like you do when it’s hurting you, and?—?”

I swallow his cock. I don’t even think about it. I probably should have built it up more or something? Made it a little better for him? Licked his head a bit? But I just do it in one fast motion, sucking him past my lips, and?—

Holy shit, I’m sucking dick.

And his taste . I sweep my tongue around his head, feeling him out. I’ve watched porn, of course. But this is nothing like that.

He’s not panting and groaning and gritting his teeth and shoving into me. He’s just... looking at me, eyes dark and intense, breath coming hard, but it’s a softer moment. It’s slower.

“Holy shit.” His eyes widen like he’s never seen me before. “You’re so damn perfect , bro.”

I still.

My brain short circuits. My mouth forgets what to do.

He just said that.

He fucking said that.

It's not in the exact tone he used in my fantasies, but it's close enough.

Actually, it's better, because it's him . It's who he is, the way he says things. I hate that he thinks people don't take him seriously because in my eyes, there's no one on this earth as genuine as Carter. There's no one I've met who is as authentically real.

I'm hardly moving now, just kneeling before him with a tinge of pain in my knee, and his dick in my mouth, not doing what I should be doing regarding the sucking cock thing. Everything is still except for the patter of water and the chaos in my thoughts.

His brows pinch. "Did I say something wrong?" Panic laces through his eyes. "Shit, sorry. I?—?"

I pull off his cock and swallow the pool of saliva in my mouth. "You didn't say anything wrong. I just... I imagined you saying things while I...?"

He blinks. "You imagined this?"

"Um...?" Fuck. "Just things you'd say, I guess."

His grin starts slowly, spreading across his face until it's this huge, effervescent light. Dimple and all. "Like what?"

Oh, shit. Okay. Well... "Things like telling me I was doing a good job?"

"You are totally doing a good job. What else?"

I hesitate, heat flaring over my cheeks. "I don't know, man."

He's all excitement, and that releases something in my chest. I could just tell him. And he'll listen to me. He kinda always does.

I lick my lips. “You said good things about me. Like a lot. But... you don't have to do that. You don't need to make shit up.”

“I'd never made shit up.” He tilts his head, looking genuinely confused. “I'm always thinking good thoughts about you, so I'd just be saying what's already in my head.”

Jesus, Carter.

I close my eyes, drinking in the steam and the faint lingering scent of my cum and his sunblock, feeling every bit of my body—the pulse of my dick, the desire in my chest.

When I look at him again, he still seems worried, so I smile. “Cool if I blow you now, bro?”

I tag a “bro” on for him. I don't know why—it still makes me hesitate. But it gets him to laugh, so it's worth it. Then I take him again, deeper, filling my mouth, from roof to throat.

I feel him everywhere. Hear him. Taste him. I do my best—it's not perfect, but he keeps telling me it is. And what's more—I believe he thinks that. Everything around us feels like an oil painting, fuzzing into obscurity, and I'm latched onto his eyes, his face, his body, his words.

Fuck, his words .

They're right out of my fantasy. No, they're better. Because they're Carter .

“That feels so good, bro!”

“What the fuck did you just do with your tongue?”

“Shit, Theo.” His voice softens. “You are perfect. In every way.”

I inhale it all, my hand fisting around my cock as I harden again, tears streaming down my cheeks—that aren’t just from him nudging practically to my tonsils. It’s everything, coalescing together. The words that he spills, taking me somewhere I’ve never been before.

I ride through with him, my eyes trying to roll, but I keep locked on him as he flexes, shaking as he floods my mouth, cum dribbling on my chin, before my hand speeds inelegantly, chasing after him, needing that release, shooting out over his thighs and knees, choking on his release and my saliva.

I think he says my name. I think he tells me how perfect that was. I think he kisses my cheek as I stand, but it’s all muffled, coming from somewhere else.

Then I hear his voice right by my ear as I’m holding onto him for support. “Breathe.” His warm hand is on the side of my neck. “You’re choking.”

I am. I’m choking on his cum. And I was choking on his dick before that. I wonder how long it’s been since I took a full breath, but I do as he guides me out of the shower, the water flipping off, a towel closing around my shoulders, my contact case landing on the counter.

“I’ll take care of you,” he says.

And the only thing I think is I know .

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:59 am*

7

Carter's always moving. I roll over to tell him to calm it down at some god-awful time in the morning, but as soon as I see him, everything changes. My lips are on his, and my hands find his shoulders, his chest, his abs, his dick.

I can't get enough.

Then he's pushing me onto my back, and when he swallows me, I curse.

I've never been in someone's mouth before—didn't know how slick and warm—no idea how perfect it is. He pulls back so that his tongue dances at my tip, and just the act, the intention, makes something deep inside me ache to fuck his mouth.

He seems to get that, his hand sliding underneath me to grip my ass, my eyes rolling as I fuck into his mouth and?—

I can't hold on.

I try to tell him, but words don't come out. They're stuck too deep in my throat, strangled by the first wave of my release that he swallows, his lips curving like he enjoys it, until I'm softening in his mouth. Long past where I thought he'd stop. And when he finally does, he tips his forehead against my thigh for a lingering few seconds. And he kisses me.

He kisses my thigh.

Jesus, Carter. Why does that make me feel so fucking special? How does he fill that gaping hole in my head?

We try sixty-nining an hour later, and I think Carter's better at the dick stuff than I am because I keep cumming really fast. I'm learning quickly, but it's impossible not to cum with the way his lips look around my shaft, our eyes finding each other.

Afterward, he snuggles his arm over my chest, half-spread over me, the soft bulk of his package pressed against my hip.

I stare at the ceiling, listening to him breathe. For the first time in six months, I see the pattern. See all the things that brought me here. How everything folded together. This trip. The one bed. The whale. Carter taking care of me after my surgeries. Meeting him freshman year.

Even my knee. If Brody Hazlemacher hadn't slammed into me, I'd be prepping for the draft right now. I wouldn't be here, in this bed, with Carter. The thought of that hurts.

I've never believed the universe had any sort of plan—definitely not a dick sucking plan—but now something locks into place. Like it fits perfectly. I feel kinda perfect.

At least in Carter's eyes.

Carter even sleeps big. Stealing way more than his half of the bed, arms and legs everywhere, not quite snoring, but almost.

And he's a furnace. I wake clammy-warm, my hair tangled as I swipe a hand through it. I slide my bare ass towards the side of the bed and force myself to sit.

I ache in places I've never ached before. My mouth, my dick, my balls, my armpits.

My knee is stiff too. Carter was probably right about the shower, even though I'd never admit it. I grit my molars as I straighten my leg. It hurts, but it's livable. The Cluan humidity and warmth help a lot more than the snow-packed Colorado winter.

I get up and take a piss, then put my contacts in before snagging our discarded shorts from the shower floor, wringing them out, and hanging them on the towel rack, and shit... I stare at those bananas.

What now?

I'd spent all this time worrying about Carter's reaction. Thinking he was going to do the same thing as Jason.

And I was flat-out wrong.

I step into the room and drink in Carter.

His leg's thrown over my empty place now, his chest rising and falling, dick nestled quietly on his thigh. The blond hair looks soft on his shins, the faint stubble across his square jaw rougher, a cowlick sticking out on the right side of his head. He always smooths it down absentmindedly.

Do I owe him an apology for assuming he'd turn away from me with the truth? I dunno.

I head towards my suitcase and pull out a clean pair of shorts, tug them on, and root around for a tank top. The questions resume in my head. What now?

Should I play it off like no big deal?

That's probably the safest route.

But I don't want to.

I slide my feet into Carter's flip-flops and then reach for the room keycard and my wallet. One last look at him—solidly sleeping—before I slip out.

Downstairs there's a food truck, and I wait in line, rubbing at my neck.

What happens when he looks at me in the daylight? Will it still be in that same way?

Will he regret the things he said? The words he called me.

Perfect. Good. Sexy. Pretty . My name falling off his lips as he moaned into his release.

I need to stop thinking about it.

And be prepared for whatever happens. Maybe he'll go back to laughing and slapping me on the shoulder and calling me "bro."

Maybe it'll be easy for him.

I swallow whatever emotion is thick in my throat as I order a coffee with almond milk for myself and a Chai Tea for Carter. Then a carrot muffin because that sounds fucking fantastic for no reason at all, and I debate the options for him, finally settling on a churro.

I stop by the villa store, balancing the food and drinks and thinking I should have done that first. But, whatever—Carter had mentioned maybe doing a few other things last night. Things that would require supplies—like lube. And condoms. I remember both being at the villa shop before, but when I get there, I discover spring break apparently means a raid on lube and condoms.



Jesus, leave some for everyone, assholes.

Regardless, I'm a nervous wreck by the time I get to the room. I feel like I've been away from Carter for too long, and it's weird how some of those darker thoughts are already slipping into my head. I'm limping and balancing everything in one hand as I shove the keycard into the door. I slip in and immediately wrinkle my nose.

It smells like ass, so I flip the deadbolt and rest the door on it, leaving it cracked open for the fresh air, before rebalancing the tray and kicking Carter's flip-flops off, all while trying not to drop shit.

"Morning."

My heart jumps into my throat. Carter's voice fills the room behind me—loud and full as ever. And fuck if it doesn't send goosebumps smattering across my shoulders.

"Perfect, Theo. So good. I could spend the rest of my life in your mouth."

I trap a groan in my throat and turn around. "Morning."

Christ, fuck me.

He's still on the bed, lifted onto his elbows, legs apart and one knee bent, balls resting between his thighs, abs flexed with how he's half propped.

I hold the drink caddy and stand there, pretty much blatantly staring.

"Um... thirsty?" I ask.

He smiles—a full one that shows his dimple. "What'd you get me?"

He slides towards the side of the bed and then stands. My mouth dries. He stretches, his dick half tented, stomach and thighs and pecs all flexing.

I turn, trying not to notice out of the corner of my eye as he cups his balls, kinda wiggling them, then with his other hand, itches his chest.

I head for the sliding door. “We can eat on the patio.”

He mentioned doing that our first night here.

“Hell, yeah!” He crosses to his suitcase, then kneels to flip open the top. He rifles through, a faint birthmark that I hadn’t noticed before, like a mushroom, on his left ass cheek. It makes me smile.

I slide open the door to the happy titter of morning birds. Kiskadees and Orioles.

“What’d you get me?” Carter steps out in running shorts—tight on the thighs, but poofy around his dick—the shiny black fabric making his package look massive.

I set everything on the table, then hand him his bag.

He peeks inside. “Churro? Fucking sweet!”

He pulls it out, looking like a turtle just blessed with a strawberry, and a knot forms in the middle of my chest. He drops into one of the chaise lounges and takes a huge bite, grinning as he chews.

The churro’s about nine inches long, an inch in diameter, sticking straight out of his hand in a way that makes me... well...

I sit in the other seat and take a swig of coffee with almond milk.

“This is so goooood .” He swallows a first bite, then rips off another, his tongue darting out to lick at the corner of his mouth. “Hits the spot. All big and crispy on the outside, tender on the inside. You wanna try?”

“Nah.”

He tips it toward me. “I could give you a taste.”

“No, I’m okay.”

He waggles it before taking another bite.

Jesus, he’s not giving me any space to think here.

“Glad you like it,” I say. “I know you love cinnamon.”

“Totally.” He chews thoughtfully. “You rarely do stuff like this for me.” There’s no judgment in his tone, only a kind of curiosity, but it makes me stop and think. He’s always doing things for me. And like the cocky asshole I used to be, I took it all.

“I guess...” Do I go with honesty here? It feels wrong to lie. “Maybe partly I used to be a cocky dick. And maybe partly I was worried how you’d take it.”

He pushes his bite into his cheek. “You’re not a cocky dick.”

“I could’ve been a better friend,” I say quietly.

Carter’s chewing slows. The sunlight cuts across the table and highlights his hair, the amber in his eyes. They aren’t dark right now, just the usual light-colored Carter eyes.

“You’re the best kind of friend,” he says.

I open my mouth, searching for the words. Fear rises, thick and swampy.

That lost feeling—that hole—is suddenly hovering right there.

I don’t know how to start the conversation about last night. About friendship. About what we are. About our lives and the universe folding together into some perfect plan.

Carter sets what’s left of his churro on the table. “We should talk.”

Okay, that was an easy way to start it. “Yeah, we should.”

“I can start. I, uh...” He blinks, frowns slightly, then presses his lips.

Shit, what does that mean?

He looks uncomfortable, like he’s chewing on words he doesn’t want to say.

The breeze tugs at the tips of his hair. We’re both sweaty and crusty from last night. Hair mussed and lines under our eyes from the lack of sleep. He has faint impressions from his pillow stamped across his cheek, a bite mark on his chest from... oh, yeah. I remember that now.

Jesus, what if he dismisses all of this?

Thanks for the head, bro! Why don’t we pretend it never happened? What happens in Clua stays in Clua! You’re a good friend!

My chest aches.

“Carter, I?—?”

Before I even fully understand what’s happening, he’s moving toward me. He catches the back of my neck, and his lips glue to mine. Like full on consume .

He drags me closer, the chase lounge creaking. His tongue slips against mine, his hand squeezing the nape of my neck, and then he’s crawling on top of me, straddling me, our mouths not stopping, our hearts pounding.

We’re kissing in the brilliant light of the morning. Not hidden in the dark, not smothered by shower steam, but right here with palm fronds hanging all around us, birds chirping, the sun warm.

That doesn’t mean anything . It doesn’t mean that he actually?—

His hand slides down and finds my dick, and something wells in my throat. Not a groan or a moan, but some kind of aching sound that spills into his mouth.

I groan. “We’re supposed to be talking.”

He bends to kiss the side of my jaw. He doesn’t stop massaging me. “You started it, bro.”

My hips kick. “No, I didn’t.”

“You bought me a churro.”

“Good point.”

He climbs off me, then yanks down on my shorts, and I spring out eagerly. He’s on his knees in a flash, his tongue dancing across my tip, and I hiss in relief, vaguely

glad for the fat palm leaves keeping our area private.

He exhales warmly across my shaft, his hands just above my knees as he leans closer, his thumbs stroking the inside of my thighs.

“You have a body to die for. Every inch.” He twists to kiss above my knee. “Everything .”

My knee .

He just kissed my knee. A different kind of heat wells up behind my eyes, one I’m not sure I’ve ever felt before.

He parts my legs wider. “And it’s not even just your body and face. It’s what’s inside. It’s you .”

I whimper as he pushes my legs up, my thighs tensing, my cock twitching for his mouth. But he moves lower, his lips warm on my sack. I breathe shakily, my head tilted awkwardly as he sucks gently.

“Oh, fuck .” My head rolls, my eyes keep closing. I can’t tell where he’s sucking—it’s everywhere .

He groans and pushes my legs up more. I’m making noises I’ve never heard. I don’t even know what the fuck is happening down there, but I think he just brushed his tongue across my hole.

I’m shaking. I’m mewling. I want?—

“ Holy fuck .” The words echo, loud and sudden, and I can’t place it. Can’t sort out where it came from.

Was that me?

Carter?

I blink past Carter's head.

Dorian?

Jesus, Dorian's standing right there, paralyzed. His eyes are enormous.

Carter's head whips back, and he rams into the table. The cups spill, a carrot muffin bouncing on the stone pavers, but no one moves to fix it.

Carter wipes his hand across his mouth. My legs are still raised and spread, my ass and balls and everything exposed.

Jesus fucking Christ. I clamp my feet to the ground, then struggle to get out of the chaise lounge before grabbing my shorts and yanking them up. With shaking hands, I tuck my boner under the elastic waistband.

Dorian is still standing there, working his mouth like he's chewing on a fistful of gum.

He saw us.

He fucking saw us.

And there is no getting around what we were doing. There's no pretending—I was spread-eagle with Carter's tongue in my ass.

Dorian shakes his head. "The door was propped."

Oh, shit. Me . I did that.

I can't believe I forgot the fucking door.

Dorian clears his throat. "Well, um, Rory and I wanted to do this cliff bungee jump thing?" He looks everywhere except at us. "Do you guys want to go when you're... done?"

"Oh, heck yeah!" Carter grabs the cups, uprighting them. "Theo? Think you could with your knee?"

"Uh... sure?" What the fuck is happening right now?

"Cool, alright. Well...?" Dorian takes a step backward, turns, then hoofs it through the sliding door in record time.

"Fuck," I whisper as soon as he's gone. I feel nauseous. "He saw. What did he think?"

Carter glances towards the dark room. "Dunno. I'll go find out."

And then he's gone, bounding off after Dorian.

I rub at my neck, swallow my fear, then follow. I'm two steps away from the door when Carter crashes back in.

I blink at him. "What happened?"

He nods once. "He's good."

"He's good?"



“Yep.”

“You were gone for two seconds.”

He shrugs. “Which was long enough for him to say he’s good.”

“Uh...” I mean, he’s not technically wrong. “What did you say?”

“I asked him if we’re cool. And he said, ‘Yeah, good.’ Then I came back.”

“I...?” I lick my lips.

My face is hot, the room sweltering even with the morning breeze. For so long, I’ve been petrified of this happening.

“Hey.” Carter’s big voice is close to my ear. “It’s gonna be okay.” He wraps his arms around me. He’s so warm, but it’s different from the warmth of the sun. It’s Carter’s warmth, his muscles firm against mine, his biceps flexing as he hugs me hard. “Give me a fact.”

I close my eyes, and I let myself sink into his hug. “An octopus has three hearts.”

And I wonder if, when it’s with another octopus that it really cares about, all three of those hearts beat in unison.

“I think,” he whispers. “I’m okay with just having one big one.” He kisses my temple, and I’m pretty sure these little kisses he keeps giving me are going to live in my mind forever. “And I promise, it’s gonna be okay.”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:59 am*

8

On the rocky path to the bungee platform, Carter asks me all sorts of questions. Did I like my muffin? Were the carrots ground or shredded? Do I like cooked carrots? Maybe we can rent some bodyboards later today? Do I like beets? Is my knee okay on this path? Have I been bungee jumping before? Would it be cool if he ate my ass again later?

I swing my head over, blinking at him on the last question, and he laughs, dimple popping, bouncing onto his toes as we come to some stairs, that pain in my knee intensifying with each step.

“Uh, yeah,” I say. “Sounds cool. About the ass, I mean.”

“Nice.” He points over to our right. “Look at that view, bro!”

Bro.

Bro.

Bro.

How many times has he called me bro since this morning?

Every time he says it, my soul shrivels a little more. Am I being obtuse about this? I mean, he’s called me that for years now. I assume since we first met.

Actually, he used to call me “dude” or “man” a lot when we first met. I don’t know when “bro” started. But I’ve been called that thousands of times over the years, not just by Carter. The weight room is always a brofest.

We come to a stop on a platform high above the canyon. Rory leans against the railing, looking over into the depth, a wide slow river glittering blue below. Dorian reaches a hand out toward him nervously.

I’ve hardly said a word to Dorian. But I need to. I’m working up to it, I swear. It’s just hard to get some time alone. He and Rory are pretty much always together. And I guess, Carter and I are always together too. I could talk to him with Carter there, and of course that’s cool, but it feels like this conversation is about our friendship—Dorian and mine—and I want to dial into that.

“Oh shit, look down there.” Carter grabs my wrist, leaning over like Rory, and my heart gives a panicked lurch. We’re really high, densely green trees thick on both sides of the canyon, the breeze carrying that flowery scent I’m starting to think is unique to this island.

I’ve done this before, but it’s been a long time. Carter hasn’t. A bungee virgin.

“Oh shit!” Carter’s saying as a harnessed person before us launches off. He and Rory lean over the railing, talking to each other. My vagabond eyes slip helplessly over Carter, taking in his other new pair of board shorts.

These have avocados on them. Not all over. Just one half of an avocado on each ass cheek, the swell of his?—

“Hey, man.”

My head whips to the side. Dorian’s standing there, a faint smile on his face, black

hair curled over his forehead.

I lick my lips, my nerves popping into my throat.

My mouth seems to be frozen.

You've got to do this .

"So...?" I start, not really sure where I'm going. Just get to the point . "Sorry about my hole."

He belts out a surprised laugh. "Can't say it was something I'd expected to see."

"I bet. I just feel weird that?—?"

"It's cool." His brows rise. "It looked like you two were having... fun."

I blink at his word choice. "So, we're good?"

He grabs my shoulder, squeezing it. "Of course. You realize I'm bi, right?"

"Uh, yeah. You've mentioned that."

He blinks at me. "I know what it's like to be in your own head about shit. But seriously, everything is fine."

Relief . Big and warm and fuzzy. It hits me, swamps me, builds heat behind my eyes.

Why did I assume they'd look at me like Jason did?

Was it me being in my own head?

Kinda seems like it.

Dorian nods toward Carter. “You guys are together?”

“I don’t really know.”

His dark brown eyes meet mine. “Look, I don’t want to be a dick and say something out of line. And I love you both.” He pauses. “But don’t hurt him.”

I swallow. “Carter?”

He nods. “I mean, you gotta do you. But you know how he is. He’s like this giant golden retriever, just wide open, and I’d hate to see him get hurt. And...?”

He doesn’t finish, but I can guess what he was gonna say. Cocky Theo. Hot and cold Theo. Obsessed with himself, Theo.

Basically the opposite of Carter. Because guess who was always at my games? Every single one?

Carter.

Who sat with me after my surgeries and watched episode after episode of Naked Earth while chowing down on cinnamon popcorn?

Carter.

Who never once acted like it put him out?

Carter.

“You’re a good person,” Dorian says. “Always have been.”

“Thanks,” I say, voice rough. “Seems like a lot of people are having to assure me of that recently.”

The line moves, the guide calling down to us. And then Rory is getting harnessed, and he flags Dorian over. I guess they’re jumping together.

The guide takes Carter and me in. “Solo? Or together?”

Carter glances at me, brows rising.

“Together,” I’m already saying.

Carter smiles.

Five minutes later, tied so we’re facing each other, Carter’s dimple pops out as we stand on the platform waiting to take off. I can feel his heart racing nervously against mine.

He bounces on his toes, which bounces me, our arms wrapped around each other, sideways to the plunge below. I don’t fully register anyone else around us, just Carter, amber eyes on me.

“You ready?”

And then we’re off, weightless, both of us letting out a whoop, feeling like there’s nothing holding us back, rushing through the air, the water coming fast before we’re caught, pulled by the tether, laughing and hugging each other.

He kisses me. It’s so quick that I doubt anyone would see it, his lips brushing mine

right before we're yanked into the first big bounce, his eyes going wide as we snap back into weightlessness, his expression so damn happy.

Some of these moments in Clua might be the best of my life.

I don't want to come down from that bungee high.

I hold onto it as we take the stairs back down, tuck it next to my side like a football. Rory and Dorian went off somewhere, so I'm just with Carter, singing with him when he breaks into a song on the way. He stops in the middle of the crowded walkway and does a little stanky leg.

If I did that, people would stare at me in confusion and then hurry away awkwardly. When Carter does it, they stop and join in.

It reminds me of that morning with the stretch of white sheet between us. Most people don't take me seriously.

But they do. Maybe not in the way he sees, but he's got twenty people doing the stanky leg in the middle of a wooden walkway on a tropical island over spring break.

They see him. All that big, fun personality. All that energy.

An hour later, after Carter and I wander around the tents for a while, Dorian and Rory finally show up, and we head to the beach.

"You ready for that last game?" Dorian asks Carter as we toss down our towels.

Carter pauses, a dollop of sunblock on his palm. "That's today?"

Dorian frowns. "When else would it be? We're leaving tomorrow."

Carter slaps the sunblock on his shoulder, rubbing it absentmindedly. “I don’t know.”

“Why don’t you know?” Dorian asks.

“I...?” Carter keeps slathering sunblock on that one arm, and I feel him not looking at me. He’s got a few red spots on his shoulders where he missed yesterday, and I hold my hand out for the tube.

He hands it over. “Thanks.”

“No problem.” I squirt out some and move behind him, his shoulders warm under my palms.

“What’s with the game?” I ask quietly.

He twists to look at me over his shoulder. “You’re limping.”

“I’m good,” I say. “Gonna sit my ass here and soak in the sun.”

“You sure?”

“Yep.”

“Okay, but...?” He sucks in a sharp breath. “My partner’s Mindy.”

I didn’t know Mindy’s name, but I pull together that she’s the girl he kissed pretty fast. I squeeze out a bit too much sunblock and slide my hands down his back, my thumbs brushing over his spine, then that patch of soft hair.

Once I’m done, I click the sunblock closed and toss it on his towel. “Do you want to eat my ass or hers?”



“ Yours .” He turns to face me. “No question. And I want to spend the rest of the day with you.”

“Me too.” I lick my lips. “Of course, I do.”

He beams . Like genuinely beams. It’s like the damn sun coming out from behind the clouds.

“You should go,” I say. “Have fun. That’s why we’re here.”

His forehead wrinkles. “If you’re sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“Sure, sure?”

I laugh. “ Go .”

He leans in fast, plants a kiss on my cheek, and then he’s bounding off with Rory and Dorian, spreading his arms and booming out a shout. I watch him go, dragging a hand down to adjust myself so shit isn’t obvious.

I drop onto the sand, stretching out my knee, and wince at the stiffness.

A breeze gusts from the ocean. There are people all around me, but it feels... quiet. I stare out toward the water, the glint of sunlight on the waves.

I rub at the side of my neck.

And it occurs to me, not for the first time, that I’m not good at being alone.

When Carter's here, he fills all the space. Plugs that hole in my chest. So big and bright that I don't think of anything else.

I forget.

And now he's been gone hardly ten minutes, and everything washes back. Like getting thrown in cold water.

I swallow. I stave off the heat behind my eyes.

Something is wrong with me.

And I don't mean just being a little offset after the surgeries and losing football. Something is wrong with me. Like deep and insistent. And it's not getting better.

I think... it's getting worse.

Carter's laugh echoes across the sand, and he pops into view for a moment. It's not him making me feel this way.

It's me .

Warmth swells in my eyes, and I swallow hard.

I'm suddenly aware of everyone crowded around me, and I'm right back in that dark hole. And I don't get why .

Why can't I just think my way out of this?

Why can't I be stronger?

If I have Carter, that should be enough. Right?

Except I'm about to have a motherfucking breakdown.

I need... I don't fucking know . I'm a capable guy—I should be able to solve this. I stumble to my feet, my knee aching.

Jesus, I need to get out of here.

I turn from where Carter's dialed into the game, feeling like an asshole, but he'll just be worried about me if he sees me. He'll stop what he's doing. He'll come over.

He'll put his life on hold for me. Like he's done so many times before.

I walk, limping along.

I don't register where I go.

I just walk, down the boardwalk, seeing everything and nothing, my knee aching, my thoughts churning. Tears are trying to escape down my cheeks.

I can't break down every time Carter's away from me. It's not fair to him. It's not fair to me.

It's not who I want to be.

I cut through swimsuit clad bodies, sunburned skin and laughter, and I feel so distant from all of it. I'm a thousand miles away. Sucking into a black that no one else can see.

I'm a fucking mess. How did I get so bad?

I go past the stage and tents, past the buildings beyond. Until it's quieter, the noise from the beach muffled, and I'm finally able to take a breath.

I'm surrounded by white buildings with red roofs, planters filled with flowers. A shopping area with chalkboard signs and colorful awnings and a farmer's market displaying lemons and papayas and pomelos.

So far away from Colorado.

There's a bakery and a chalkboard sign that reads, "Best Mango Pie on The Island" with arrows pointing me inside.

Carter and his mangos.

Next door, there's a sign labeled Conserve Clua.

Carter had a brochure for this place, with all the others he'd gotten at the villa. It had been on top of the pile.

I don't know what I'm doing, but I tug the door open and step inside.

A woman straightens behind the desk. "Are you here to volunteer?"

"No, I leave tomorrow." I scrub at my neck, realizing that I probably look bizarre as fuck. Big jocky guy, eyes probably red, hair sticking out from the bungee jump, as he limps to the counter. "I just...?" I glance at the wall to the side of her desk. "Can I look at the photos?"

She taps a pencil against her chin, studying me dubiously. "Sure?"

I limp over to the wall, scanning the photos. The first one is people collecting trash on

the beach. Then one of people washing off a seagull covered in some kind of thick sludge. Next is helping a beached whale. A nighttime picture of baby turtles sprinting for the ocean, all their little flippers flinging sand.

That one nearly breaks me.

But I don't leave. I study each image. One after the other. Until my breathing becomes easier. Until I don't feel like I'm going to break the fuck down.

Give me a fact, bro .

I want to put my life back together.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:59 am*

9

I stop on the boardwalk, between the white tents, clutching Carter's triangular to-go box from the bakery, and pull in a nervous breath. Last night, I bailed on Maxim. Just turned around and booked it down the stairs without even a word.

It was a dick thing to do. A thing that cocky-Theo might have done without thinking about it if he'd somehow gotten into that situation before.

But I don't want to be that guy anymore.

I find Maxim pulling a dolly with two kegs over the rise to the boardwalk, a white bar towel over his shoulder, his inked arms straining with the weight. I set Carter's pie on the ledge and help him pull it the last few inches, my arms straining with the weight as I keep it off my knee. The kegs rattle as they hit the boardwalk.

"Good timing." Maxim raises an eyebrow. "I was in need of a man built like you."

"Uh, yeah." I pause, then reach out and grab Carter's pie off the ledge because I don't want it to fall.

Shit, what do I say?

He leans on the dolly. "Laia's."

"What?"

“Laia’s Pies.” He nods at the box. “Best pie on the island. You’ll enjoy it.”

“It’s for... he’s... Carter.”

Maxim’s lips lift faintly. “I’m sure he’ll enjoy it.”

“I, uh...?” Shit. “I’m sorry about last night.”

“Relax, handsome.” He tilts his head, dark eyes studying me. “Did you make the right choice for you?”

I nod. “Yes.”

“Then we’re all good.”

My thumb presses into the top of the pie box. “Thanks.”

He pushes off the dolly. “For what?”

“Opening my eyes, I guess.” I kinda want to hug the guy, although that might be weird.

He doesn’t understand what he did for me. I’m not sure if I understand. But it feels like he’s on the list of things that brought me to Carter, and that’s making my throat tighten.

So, I just... step forward and wrap my free arm around him.

I hug him, and he laughs softly as he hugs me back.

“You know,” he whispers, close to my ear, “when you’re buying pie for a man,

there's probably something worthwhile there."

"I hope so," I say as I step away.

"Good for you." He sets his foot on the bottom rung of the dolly and tips it. "And good luck, Theo."

"You too." I watch him push the dolly toward the tents, but I turn back before he goes inside. I want to get back to?—

Carter .

Jesus.

He's standing in the middle of the walkway, avocado shorts and a lei around his neck, white flowers against his tanned chest. He looks after Maxim and then back at me.

Twelve feet between us, and I can feel every inch of distance. Like that space across the white sheet, but this one feels cavernous.

And he's quiet. No words, no light in his eyes. No dimple. No smile.

He's just standing there, looking at me, the white petals on his chest moving faintly with each breath.

"I came to speak to him," I say, wanting so damn much to close that distance, but I don't know what he wants, so I move forward about three feet and then stop. "I needed to apologize. But nothing else happened."

"I know." His forehead wrinkles, his eyes heavy with thoughts. "But I'm so fucking jealous ." He presses his lips. "You were gone. I didn't know where you were, so I



got worried and went looking for you. Then when I saw you hugging him, right out here in front of everyone.”

I swallow. “You’re right.”

His eyes move around my face. “I don't know where I stand with you. You’re so hot and cold. So up and down.”

He’s right about that too.

“You deserve more.” I’m all over the place. Barely hanging onto who I am. Struggling to make sense of everything . And he absolutely deserves more. “You deserve a person who is there.” My voice cracks. “Who can go all in.”

Can I do that?

I want to. With everything I have—I want to be that guy.

Fuck, my throat closes, eyes heating in record time.

I don’t want to lose him.

I get this flash of what that would really feel like, and it’s that black hole but a thousand times bigger, a thousand times wider. It’s all-encompassing. It hurts more than losing football. I never thought anything could hurt that much.

“I’ve been so fucking confused.” My chest feels like it’s going to collapse, like it’s going to fold. “I don’t even know who I am anymore.” I step closer, enough that I can see the catch in his throat when he swallows. “But you, that shower, that kiss, just getting to be around you—it’s the only thing that’s made sense to me. With everything else, I feel?—?”

“Lost.” His voice softens. And fuck, his eyes fill, wetness hanging in them. “I see it in you. All the time. Every day since your surgery. How lost you are. And I don’t know what to do. I just keep hoping you’ll start to feel better. That I’ll...?” He swallows. “I’ll help you feel better. That a place like this would help.”

He blurs. He doesn’t move, but he blurs. Tears collect in my eyes. One falls. Another. “You planned this to help me?”

“Of course.” Then he’s there, warm palms on my biceps, amber eyes, a waft of sunblock. “When someone you love is hurting, you try to help them.”

“Jesus, Carter.” Everything fuzzes. Tears well over, wetting my cheeks and tasting like salt on my lips. “I love you.”

I didn’t plan to say it, but it’s right fucking there , spilled out in tears and words at Carter’s feet.

His lips part, his eyes widen for a brief second, and then his chest is against mine, pressing the flowers between us. His smell and his warmth surrounding me, his big body and bigger presence.

“ Theo .” He cups my neck, and then his lips are on mine, moving with me, pulling me closer.

And I’m kissing him, my heart pounding in my throat, the pie box pressed against his back.

There’s noise all around us, but it’s static. I just kiss him until he breaks away and we’re hugging, tucked against each other, tropical sun beating down on us, our skin clammy. His lips pressing underneath my ear in one of those little kisses that I love so much.

“I want you to be okay,” he whispers into my ear. “So fucking much . I think about you all the time. I’m going around, pretending to be normal, but the only thing I’m thinking about is you.” He leans back, catching my eyes. “You know I love you too, right? Pebbles and everything .”

I choke out a sob. But I’m smiling. “Shit.”

“I know, right?” He’s still got tears in his eyes, but they brighten behind them. “It’s like the hugest deal of my life . And I don’t want anyone else. This mythical person is bullshit. No one makes me feel the way you do. It’s you , bro.”

I close my eyes, breathing him in. “Why do you call me that?”

“What? Bro?” His thumb smooths along my neck. “Because it’s for you. I never call anyone else that. Not even some random dude on the street. You’re the one. You’re it.” He hesitates, leaning back so that he can look at me. “Do you want me to stop?”

A shiver races from where the rough edge of his thumb brushes my neck. “No.”

“Because if you do, then I can. It’s just?—?”

“No, I’m good with it.”

He grins, and I love that smile.

I make a silent promise.

I don’t know what it will take for me to be okay. For me to fix myself. I can’t even guess how that would look, but I’ll do it. Rehab, therapy, looking at life differently. Not just for him, not just for us, but for me too.

I won't fail this .

I lift the to-go box. "I brought you pie."

"You did?" He breaks into that big smile, dimples and glee and enthusiasm. "Holy shit, that's awesome . What kind?"

"Mango."

His eyes say so much.

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We spend the night pretty much like the one before. A few added activities. Rimming is definitely a go. Fisting ourselves together gets a standing ovation. Edging... we need to explore more. And we might have gotten close to a few other things.

But I can't stop smiling. Me . Theo. The guy who's been depression-incarnate for the last six months.

What does happiness feel like?

I never gave it much thought before, honestly. I just focused on the NFL. I thought that I'd be satisfied when I got there. That everything would shift into place once I was finally drafted.

But I never really thought about happiness .

Never thought that I would?—

“Wake up, Theo.” Carter's breath tickles my ear, his chest warms my arm.

I roll over. “My dick can't take anymore.”

“Don't need your dick.” He laughs, way too loud and jubilant, and then kisses my temple. “Just you. We're going somewhere.”

“You're fucking with me.” I mumble, squeezing my eyes shut.

A pillow knocks the side of my face. “Theeeeeoooo. I need you to get up.”

I groan. “Why?”

“I want to watch the sunrise with you.”

That gets me moving. I flop off the bed, then with my eyes barely open, I lurch to the bathroom to take a piss, wash my hands, and slip in my contacts.

We step outside, the early morning air cooling the sweat on my back. His hand slips into mine, our fingers lacing.

The sky’s still dark, the ocean the same color. It’s quiet—everything is clean, pristine again. I wonder if it’s because of those volunteers from Conserve Clua . I want to be part of something like that.

We walk along the beach, a foot away from the water, leaving footprints behind us.

It’s just us. Alone.

“Wanna sit?” Carter asks as the first streak of sunlight crests over the water.

We settle on the sand, flipping off our sandals and digging in our toes.

“I like it here,” I blurt out. Somehow, my head finds its way to Carter’s shoulder, his fingers squeezing mine tighter.

“Give me a fact,” he says.

“Vultures mate for life.” I lick my lips. “They’re partnership is cemented with a courtship ritual of strutting and head-bobbing.”

“I’m a fantastic strutter.” He wraps an arm around me. “Just in case you were curious.”

I smile. “I have no doubt.”

I dig my fingers under the sand, feeling the granules under my nails. The softness, the coolness below.

We watch the sunrise, streaking yellows and oranges across the sky. Lighting the tips of Carter’s hair and warming his eyes. We laugh. We talk about anything and everything. We appreciate being alive . Being together.

And I think about happiness.

The morning goes too fast. Shit needs to get packed, and the Uber needs to be ordered. We’re on a countdown to get back to IFU.

It feels like shoving myself into a straitjacket. Endless gray and mostly failed classes and people who look at me with pity in their eyes. And maybe coming out? I dunno. I want to, but I don’t feel equipped to handle much of anything right now.

I shove dirty, sandy clothes into my bag, trying not to think too much about it, and then force the zipper closed.

But Carter will be there.

That’s the only thing that matters.

I glance over at him. He’s sitting on the lid of his suitcase, bouncing to get the zipper pulled shut.

I smile. “You need help with that?”

He scoots to one side, and the other side pops open. “Come sit on this with me.”

I drop next to him, and together we tuck everything in and get it zipped.

“I bought so many damn Clua t-shirts.” He shoves his bag into the hallway before shouting for Rory and Dorian. “I’m gonna wear them nonstop.”

Then we’re suddenly at the checkout counter. Dorian orders an Uber to take us to the ferry, and it’s all going so fast.

But Rory and Dorian will be back in Colorado too.

I’ve got them.

I’ve got Carter.

I can look into therapy. Read some books. I dunno.

Regardless, it’ll be fine. All fine . I just need to?—

I reach a hand out, not sure what I’m doing, but then Carter is there, our fingers threading, his warm shoulder pressing against mine.

He tips closer. “I hope we sit next to each other on the plane.”

The ferry line is slammed, and I volunteer to wait, letting the guys wander around the shops along the pier. There are Clua trinkets and seashells, and farther down, an ice cream stand with a pink striped awning.



“Hey, Theo!” Carter’s voice booms from across the walkway. He waggles a silver keychain that looks like it has a whale on it.

“They have both our names, bro!” He’s so fucking exuberant. “I’m gonna buy this shit and give it to you! Like a penguin pebble. You can—?” He turns and his bag slams into the keychain stand. It wobbles, and in slow-mo fashion, it seesaws and then tips, taking him down with it, silver keychains clattering, the entire stand crashing to the ground while the man I’m ridiculously in love with bellows, “Holy fuck!”

Silence fills the pier. My heart launches into my chest. I’m halfway to him when he jumps to his feet.

“It’s okay, people!” He raises the keychain above his head. “I’ve still got it.”

And the only thing I can think is: that one . That’s the guy I want.

It’s a rush after that. I get the tickets and then help pick up the rest of the keychains, getting them all on their correct hooks. Before we know it, the ferry horn echoes.

Carter grabs all the gummy bears and Twizzlers he bought from the shop, and we head toward the ferry, nearly the last ones.

A breeze wells off the water, bringing with it that unique ocean scent. I can still feel granules of sand between my toes. The sun warms my shoulders.

I stop walking.

Rory and Dorian walk ahead, but Carter turns.

I’m just standing there.

I should be walking.

But I just... don't. I'm holding onto my luggage, my eyes roving over Carter and the ferry behind him. Rory and Dorian stop, turning to look at me in question.

"Theo?" Carter steps back.

Rory yells something, then they turn and head toward the ferry.

My throat tightens. My feet are stuck.

"You shouldn't always have to take care of me," I say.

Carter's forehead wrinkles. "You're just going through a hard time. You'd do it for me too."

"Yes." I nod. "But I should be able to do it for myself."

In a montage of seconds, I see the future spinning out. Returning to IFU. That weight on my shoulders, pulling me down, Carter having to constantly pick me back up.

He would too. He'd pick me up, and he'd keep smiling, and he'd never complain.

"I can't go." I say it on an exhale. A wash of relief.

And a cold snap of fear.

What am I doing?

No fucking clue.

“What?” Carter blinks.

“I can’t go.” My bag drops to the ground, and I breathe—a great big inhale.

The lines in his forehead deepen. “You want to stay here?”

“Yeah.” I swallow. “You need to graduate, get that teaching degree. And I... I need to heal.” My voice cracks.

I need to get back to me.

I don’t think I can do that in Colorado.

Jesus, that’s preposterous though. Stay here ? People don’t go on spring break and just decide to stay.

Carter hesitates. When his lips finally part, I’m ready for him to tell me that this is ridiculous. That it makes no sense. That there’s no way I can stay. That I need to?—

“ Good .” He takes another step forward, close enough that he could kiss me if he wanted.

I can’t believe I’m doing this. “You don’t have to wait or anything. I get that?—?”

“Of course I’m gonna wait.” He tosses down his bag, his hand cupping my neck, palm warm. “At the end of this story, I’m going to get the guy.”

Jesus, Carter.

“You already have him.”

Carter's thumb rasps along the rise of my cheek, like he doesn't hear the ferry horn blaring behind him. "I'm gonna miss you so much."

"I'll be there for your graduation," I say. "Two months."

"Two months." His eyes move around my face. "I'll text you when we land."

I nod, swallowing the lump in my throat. I don't want to be away from him.

I squeeze his biceps. "I love you, bro."

He laughs, so happily, and then leans into my ear, warm and big, surrounding me. "I love you too."

He presses something hard into my palm—the keychain—and then he's gone. Heading towards the ferry and Dorian and Rory. They ask him something as soon as he boards, but he shakes his head and turns to look at me.

I stand there, watching, until the ferry is a speck on the horizon.

I feel like crying. I feel like breaking apart.

But I don't because for the first time in six months, I might not have a plan, but I have a purpose.

My thumb rolls over the keychain and I glance down, expecting to see my name. I stop.

He didn't give me the one with my name. He gave me one with his.

Carter, written around a spouting, happy whale. And I'm guessing he has one with

my name.

We're both going to get the guy.

At the end of this story, we'll do whatever it takes.

Just wait and see.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:59 am*

One year ago today.

I can't believe it's been that long.

Fifty feet from where I'm standing is where I tore off my shirt and sprinted into the water that first night here. How Carter piggybacked me around his hips, the comfort of him. One year ago today.

Except it's not evening now—it's an hour after sunrise, and we're out in force on the beach, keeping Clua clean.

I'm at the edge of the cove, my rubber boot squelching on the craggy rock as I reach down, trying to avoid a black sea urchin, its spines wafting toward my hand.

This one is massive.

Sea urchins are cool as shit. They actually use hydraulic pressure to move, pushing water through their tube feet. And bonus fact—sand dollars are sea urchins, flattened from adapting to life on the shifting sand.

I grab a crushed aluminum can that's wedged in the rock a few inches away, pinching it with my fingers and tugging it out. Its sharp edge could snag the softer underside of the urchin.

I drop the trash in a bag and straighten, sweeping my damp hair back while taking one last look down at where those memories are so clear, then pick my way carefully to the beach, the sweet smell of flowers hitting my nose, and the morning sun heating

my shoulders.

“Theo.” Sheri, one of the volunteers, waves and heads over. “Hey, I think we’re done on that side.” She points to the area her group is canvassing along the tree line, the sun making the trees behind them a brilliant green. “Anything else today?”

“Nah.” I scan the length of the beach, noting the groups of volunteers who are all finishing around the same time. I planned that way, of course. I’ve been the volunteer coordinator at Conserve Clua for the last six months now.

I love it. Who knew I would fall in love with this island?

But every day it feels farther away from Colorado, which is where Carter landed his first teaching job.

What I haven’t told him yet is that I put in my two weeks’ notice yesterday.

I’ll miss this place, but I want to be where he is. I’ll admit this: I’m still a work in progress. Or as Cater calls it, a bro in progress , always grinning at me through our FaceTime calls. Lighting me up, in the way he always does, just by being there.

I always get this sense of belonging when I see him. It’s not that I belong to him or he belongs to me, more just this space that feels right. I’m not all fixed up yet, but I really am good with being me . And maybe I’ll always be a work in progress, that’s cool too.

“Thank you,” I say to Sheri, pointing at where to set the trash bags I’ll lug out later and then giving everyone in the group a fist bump before they head off. I close up with the next two groups that come by, the sun inching higher in the sky, warming the back of my neck and heating the sand so that I need to slide on some flip-flops from my bag after shrugging off my boots.

As everyone heads off, I grab my water bottle, then notice a missed call.

Shit, I'm smiling at his name.

I call him, FaceTime connecting, and then he's there .

I can't explain how it feels. The instant brightness, the way he fills both the screen and my thoughts. How everything locks into the place where it belongs.

I am head over heels in love with him. Butterflies and nerves and the whole deal. And none of that has quelled over the last year. If anything, it's more.

I miss him so fucking much, and it tightens my throat and then spills out before we even say hi.

"I love you," I say as soon as his eyes focus on me. I know people usually keep that for the end of the conversation, but fuck it. That's how I always open our calls. Unless he beats me to it.

He beams, face lighting like mine probably does.

His breath is quicker, like he's walking somewhere. There's blue sky behind him. Intensely bright blue, which is weird for Colorado this time of year.

"I love you, too," he says. "Sorry, I'm walking."

"I can tell." I swing the phone so that he can see the beach. "I'm close to our spot."

"Oh yeah?" A breeze whistles through the phone speaker. "Making it beautiful?"

"Yep." I'm grinning so widely at the phone that my cheeks hurt. "It's kinda our anniversary."



“I know.”

“I wish we were together for it.”

His brows rise. “Do you?”

I laugh. “Of course, dude. I actually... I have something to tell you. But before that, I’d be all over you. Sandy, sweaty guy pretty much suctioned to you like a giant octopus.”

“You promise?”

I blink, my smile falling slightly. There’s something in his tone I’m not picking up. And it feels like he’s waiting for me to understand. I squint at the image of him. He’s holding the phone close to his face, just edges of sky above his head.

Deep blue.

That’s not a Colorado sky. Even when it is blue, it’s rarely that color up there, not like it is on Clua, this close to the equator?—

Wait.

“Carter?” I lick my lip, holding the phone closer to my face, like that will help me sort it out, my heart pounding. I don’t want to get hopeful, but shit, I am .

He’s got stuff to take care of in Colorado though. He told me that...

But he keeps smiling.

I look towards the boardwalk along the rear of the beach, the phone warm in my palm, the sun hotter on my back.

There's a man standing on the boardwalk, holding up his phone, but he's not looking at it. He's looking at me. He's wearing a white t-shirt and board shorts with a roll aboard beside him, a sweatshirt drooped over the top, and one sleeve dangling on the ground.

Jesus. I know. I know. I fucking know.

I'm moving, phone tossed on my bag, flip-flops kicking up sand, that familiar pain in my knee complaining, but I ignore it and fucking run .

I launch into him, slamming against his chest, arms wrapping around him, heart pounding so hard that I'm sure he can feel it.

"Carter," I push out through my tight throat, heat already gathering in my eyes. I'm gonna fucking break down, and I don't give a shit.

"Hey." Then he's kissing me, backing me up to the rickety railing—kissing me like when we're alone, his hand palming my jaw, his breath synching with mine.

I've got no idea what's happening around us, the scruff of his shoes, the strain of the wood under our combined weight. We kiss until we can't breathe, until my jaw hurts, until there's a sheen of sweat between his palm and my jaw.

And still, it's not enough.

I used to think he was too much sometimes. And now all I think is I want more .

He sighs as we finally break the kiss, his thumb smoothing along my jaw as his hand slides down to my neck. "Fuck, I missed you."

We stay like that for a long minute, the heat building behind my eyes until a few tears spring out.

I'm just so happy to see him.

"What are you doing here?" I whisper, leaning in to kiss him again, lightly on his cheek, and he smiles.

"I got a last-minute flight." His thumb rolls over the side of my neck.

"What about those meetings you had about next year's curriculum?"

His hand slides down, tickling over my forearm before his fingers lace with mine. "I said, 'fuck it.'"

I blink. "It's your job."

"Well, it was ."

I lean back. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that I didn't renew for next year."

"What?"

He squeezes my fingers. "I thought that maybe I'd move here. I'd?—?"

"I put in my two weeks."

His brows launch up. "Really?"

"Yeah."

"So, we both quit?"

“Yep.”

“Shit.”

“Right?”

We stare at each other on that sun-warmed boardwalk, the beat of the waves steady, the echo of a gull calling as it swirls overhead, the sway of palm leaves, our fingers tangled.

“We could go anywhere,” I whisper. “We could do anything.” I know he still wants to teach, and I need to be doing something like I am here—but kids and conservation are all over the world.

I suddenly feel this... possibility. It’s seeping out everywhere, more than it ever has in my life before. Football had been one possibility, but it wasn’t the only possibility.

I squeeze his fingers. “You know, sea otters hold each other’s paws when they fall asleep so that they don’t drift apart.”

He smiles so widely that his dimple pops out. “I think that’s an excellent plan.”

“Me too.”

His teeth scrape across his bottom lip. “Are you ready?”

The same question he asked on the plane a year ago.

I tried to be ready then. I am ready now.

“Yes.”