



Up In Flames

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Category: Romance

Description: Oren Reid is on top of the world. He and his two best friends have just passed the bar, and he doesn't think life could get any better. What it could get, though, is a whole lot worse. Oren loses both of his friends in a car accident in which he is the sole survivor. After the accident, Oren is a mess, but he's a determined mess. Eventually, he finds himself back on his feet, going out and trying to live his life, and one night he spots someone he never expected to see again—the man who saved his life.

Will Dorsey's dreams have come true. The only thing he's ever wanted is to be a firefighter, and now that he is, he's never going to let go of his dream job. Then Oren literally—and figuratively—crashes into his life and changes everything. Working Oren's accident was a typical part of the job for Will, but when they meet again months later and Oren wants to be friends, Will doesn't have it in him to say no.

Oren is straight, so as their friendship develops, Will keeps his growing interest and attraction for the other man to himself. He isn't out, and he doesn't want to be. Only Oren isn't as straight as he always believed, and he's falling hard and fast for the man who pulled him from the smoking wreckage. Will feels the same, but if he comes out, he risks losing everything.

Oren and Will must decide if their future is worth walking through fire for... or if the new love between them will just go up in flames.

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PROLOGUE

“O ne more round,” Byron, or Ron as most people called him, said. He leaned heavily against me, his arm draped over my shoulders. I leaned right back against him, too drunk to sit up on my own... probably.

Before I could ask if we should, another drink appeared before me. I’d meant to ask, but I kept losing snatches of time. I’d blink and the conversation had moved on around me. I generally didn’t drink to excess, but after years of hard work, I deserved to tie one on. I shrugged and took a sip.

“A toast!” Rita said, clinking her glass against mine and then Ron’s. “To three badass bitches who passed the bar on their first try.”

Rita scored a 280. I’d barely scraped through, while Ron, my best friend since day one of college, passed his with a 300. I’d scored a full 29 points lower—271. A score of 266 was a pass.

The bar exam was brutal. Easily the hardest thing I’d ever done. We all had known Ron was going to pass, and I didn’t care that he’d clearly blown us all out of the water. The important thing was that I passed on the first try.

All the sacrifices I made. The fight with Tasha months ago that led to our breakup had been because I was unwilling to deviate from my study plan.

She’d wanted to go to parties and be taken out to dinner and dancing all the time, and in the beginning I’d tried to find a balance, but the more I compromised, the more she

wanted me to give up.

“Should I call Tasha?” I wondered out loud.

“No!” Ron gave me a shove, which nearly took me to the floor. Only Rita’s quick reflexes stopped me from falling over. With a gentle nudge, she pushed me back the other way.

“You absolutely should not call her,” she said, agreeing with Ron. Rita’s long hair had been braided, and she’d piled that braid on top of her head, holding it in place with bobby pins and magic. She took a few bobby pins out and let her hair down. “She never respected you.”

I didn’t want to call her. Not really. The thought had come into my head and fallen out of my mouth, and by the time it landed in my friend’s ears, I knew it wasn’t going to happen.

“Ignore me.” I took another sip. Whatever it was, it was stronger than my last drink. This was fruity and smooth, like the juice I used to drink as a kid, but way not child-friendly. “What is this?” I asked, thrusting my drink in Rita’s face.

“It’s a Bay Breeze cocktail.”

“I like it.”

Ron laughed and Rita rolled her eyes. “So you said, the first three times you had it.”

They laughed at me again and I leaned against Ron. My eyes blinked closed, and then I was on my feet, walking out of the bar. Though walking was a stretch. Ron’s arm was around my waist, and he had my arm held over his shoulder.

“You okay there, buddy?” he asked when he realized I’d come around.

“Fine. Are we going home?” God, I wanted that.

Home. Bed. Sleep. I blinked again, and Ron was dumping me into the back seat.

He stretched over me and buckled me in. The door closed, and then the next thing I knew, Ron was in the back seat next to me.

He was behind the driver’s seat, and I was on the passenger side.

I’d missed parts of their conversation, but I could tell Rita and Ron were bickering.

One day, the three of us were going to open our own law firm. It had been our plan since we all entered law school together. Now we were closer than ever.

“—still can’t believe you let him get this wasted. Is he okay?” Rita asked.

“I—” I tried to hold onto Ron’s reply, but it was a struggle to stay awake. “—you were there too.”

Horns blared. Tires screamed. Rita’s shrill voice was cut off, replaced with the sound of breaking glass and crumpling metal. The world spun. Over and over.

Everything went dark.

Everything hurt.

The car wasn’t moving anymore. I blinked, willing my eyes to open. The car was on its wheels, but that didn’t feel like a miracle. Not when the roof was smashed down and the driver’s side was—oh, God.

I fought the urge to be sick. My head fucking ached and the sound of sirens closing in comforted my soul but pierced my skull like a jackhammer. I reached up for my head and my hand came away sticky and red. Fuck.

“Ron...” I definitely had sobered up in the past thirty seconds. “Ron... Rita.” I tried to open my door, but it wouldn’t budge. Next to me, Ron was motionless. Asleep. He was asleep. Passed out. Probably knocked unconscious. I had to think that, in spite of suspecting the truth.

I looked for Rita, but she wasn’t in the passenger seat where she should have been. Where was Rita? Why wasn’t Ron waking up?

Someone came to the side of the car and started yanking at the doors.

Their screams hurt my head. I turned to the side and puked on the floor of the car.

The alcohol burned coming back out, and puking had been a mistake.

The action made my head feel like it was going to break in half and the stink made my stomach lurch.

Since when did puke smell like gas?

Since... puke didn’t smell like gas.

My booze-addled brain realized that I was in deep shit.

My puke didn’t smell like gas. The gas smelled like gas.

There was probably a leak. I unbuckled my seatbelt, but there was nowhere to go.

The door wasn't going to open. The window was busted out, but the car had flipped, and the roof was crushed, making an easy escape out the window impossible.

I couldn't make myself look at the other side of the car. Ron and Rita were both unconscious. My brain rejected the idea of anything else.

"Are you okay? Holy shit, you're bleeding."

I turned my head toward the sound of the voice. The kid couldn't have been older than eighteen, and all three of him were as white as a ghost. "I called 911. Help is coming. Are you okay? Are you hurt? Holy shit, man."

I tried to answer him, but when I opened my mouth, the only thing that came out was a keening moan.

Agony crawled through me, digging its claws into every nerve in my body.

I wasn't sure what hurt because everything hurt.

I took stock of my body and though it nearly made me scream, I could wiggle all ten toes.

I must have passed out again. Strobe lights of blue and red filled my vision. Sirens wailed up close and personal, splitting my skull open.

"Hey, hey, what's your name?"

I couldn't keep my eyes open. "Or—" I took a breath and tried again. "Oren. Reid. Oren Reid."

"Oren, my name is Will and I'm a firefighter. We have to get you out of this car, but

it's going to take us a minute or two to get the roof off. Stay with me, okay? Can you tell me where you're hurt? Any wounds besides your head?"

"Don't know." The booze was rapidly wearing off, being eaten up by all the adrenaline in my bloodstream, or maybe it was the absolute gravity of the situation that had me feeling far too sober to deal with this. I wanted to sleep. I wanted my bed. I wanted my friend to wake up and answer me.

"Ron?" I started to turn toward him, but the voice at the window called me back to him.

"Oren. Oren, can you look at me? We've almost got you out. Are you hurt anywhere else?"

Lights strobed. The world tilted whenever I moved too much, so turning back toward the firefighter at the window was easier than looking at Ron.

"There you are." The firefighter smiled at me. From ear to ear. "That's good. We've almost got you out, okay?"

"I can move my toes." It seemed important that he have this information. I didn't tell him that I was still pretty drunk. Or that my head felt like an anvil had fallen on it. Or that every muscle in my body throbbed like I'd been through the spin cycle on a washing machine.

"That's great news, Oren. We'll have you up and out of here in a minute."

The sounds were horrendous, and I closed my eyes to try and fight down the urge to puke again because of it.

The sky opened up and more lights pierced the small space.

The roof was off and then hands were on me.

Will wrapped my neck in a collar to stabilize it, he told me.

Just in case. He made me look at him, and he started to explain how they were going to get me out of the car when all hell broke loose.

Fire appeared out of nowhere. Dark smoke billowed out from under the car. More yelling, this time with intent. Then suddenly water, and strong arms hoisted me up like I weighed nothing, and I was pulled from the car.

I clung to Will. Even though there were two guys who pulled me out, Will was the one who had talked to me. Who saved me. Who kept me from looking at Ron. Will was the one who sat me down in the back of a waiting ambulance.

“Oren, look at me,” Will said, and my gaze drifted over to him. His eyes were the bluest things I’ve ever seen. When I looked at him, he smiled at me, wide and bright. “There you are. How are you feeling? Do you know what happened?”

I shook my head.

“Did you lose consciousness at all?” an EMT asked me as they shone a light in my eyes.

I hissed when someone pressed a bandage to the side of my head.

I couldn’t make myself talk. Even when an officer came over and tried to question me, I couldn’t make my mouth move.

Worry paralyzed me. He might have said something about catching up with me at the hospital.

Everything was out of focus like I was still drunk.

The throbbing in my skull increased with every beat of my heart but, I couldn't look away.

I watched the wreckage. Stared as more men pulled two unmoving figures from the car before it was fully engulfed in flames. Will moved and blocked my view after that. He stood by me as the EMTs worked on me. Examined my head. My body.

I didn't want to leave the scene. I wanted to know about Ron and Rita.

"He's going into shock." A faraway voice said. Everyone around me seemed to move at warp speed after that. I was loaded up into the back of the ambulance.

I didn't think I was in any grave danger, but the EMTs were worried enough to throw the siren on. It screamed all the way to the hospital.

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Oren

Seven Months Later

My first month at Preston and Sharpe Contracts had been successful, as far as I could tell. Currently, I was being given cases that took a lot of leg work the partners didn't want to do. Another lawyer at the firm called it busy work. I called it a lifeline.

Without Byron and Rita, my life had a gaping hole in it that had been impossible to fill.

My throat constricted whenever I thought about them, but at least now I could think about them.

For the first couple months after the accident, I spent a lot of time lying down and crying until my head split open and my brains leaked out my ears.

That's how it made me feel anyway. The concussion I'd suffered was a bitch, and even now I still got the odd headache if I pushed too hard.

The partners knew about the car accident and what it had cost me.

Rita wasn't supposed to drive and, for the life of me, I couldn't figure out why she hadn't called an Uber.

I was too drunk to stop her. So was Byron.

So, the partners gave me the so-called busy work, tasks that were necessary but irritating.

It was just what I needed. Before I landed the job, I'd been rotting away in my apartment, cycling between tidal waves of grief and dreams of a pair of kind blue eyes and the memory of a voice that belonged to an angel.

I hadn't been able to get that firefighter out of my head.

I'd even gone so far as to track down what firehouse had responded to the accident.

Sometimes, I thought of showing up there.

But why? I could never make myself answer that question.

What would I say after I said thank you?

Part of me knew that I didn't want the interaction to end there, but even my imagination couldn't conjure anything up.

In the months since the accident, I'd moved out of my former apartment and into something closer to the firm where I now worked.

It was a bit of a walk, and I could take the bus in bad weather, but I hadn't been able to convince myself to get behind the wheel of a car.

My therapist assured me that was normal.

A natural reaction to a traumatic event.

My best friend Liam had made the trip to help me move.

I had no siblings and my parents were out of the picture.

I'd been ready to hire movers, but Liam had shown up on my doorstep like he'd done after the accident first happened.

He helped me move, stayed for a night, and bought half the menu at the Thai restaurant around the corner, and was gone again in the morning, back to his life.

"Are you coming for drinks?" Hal, one of the other lawyers asked. He'd asked every Friday for the past month that I'd been working there. He was older and rounder around the middle, and everyone seemed to love him.

How could I tell him that I didn't drink? Not anymore.

"You don't have to drink, but we're going to Molly's this week instead, and they have burgers the size of your head. It's on Simon, the senior partner. It's his favorite place and he only takes us there when he wins a big one. You have to come. It'll do you good."

Hal had somehow crossed the room and closed the file folder I'd been staring at for the past thirty minutes. I was pretty sure that I couldn't tell you what was in the file if you put a gun to my head.

I'd heard people describe some men as golden retrievers, but Hal was more like a gentle sheepdog because suddenly I was on my feet, following him down the street to a local pub.

It didn't look like the kind of place a bunch of lawyers would hang out in from the outside.

There was a sandwich board on the sidewalk and a couple tables with cheap red and

white checkered tablecloths on them.

Umbrellas open to shield the tables from the sun.

“Everyone is already here.” I said as we walked in.

“Of course they are. They went on ahead while I went to pry you away from your desk. Simon wanted you here tonight.” Hal clapped me on the shoulder and steered me toward the crowd of slightly familiar faces.

Everyone was still dressed for court, but we’d all loosened our ties.

Except for Simon, who always looked like he was ready for a photo shoot.

Not a hair out of place. Not a single wrinkle in his shirt.

The chair next to him was empty, and I realized when he flicked his gaze to it, that he meant for me to sit there. Hal steered me there and abandoned me. The sheepdog had fed me to the wolf. I swallowed down a bundle of nerves.

“Thank you for inviting me, sir.” My gaze drifted quickly down the table and back.

“Order whatever you want; it’s on the firm today,” Simon told me. He lifted a glass of what looked like whiskey to his lips and took a sip.

A server came over to the table and asked what I’d like. I ordered a lemon-lime soda and a burger, and no one cared when my non-alcoholic beverage arrived. I hadn’t drank since that night, and I didn’t plan on ever drinking again. I was just thankful that no one batted an eye at my choice.

Being out in a pub made my skin crawl at first. The laughter from other tables

threatened to morph into the sound of shattering glass and screams. Then Simon leaned in.

His hair was a shocking silver color. Not a shred of youth remained in his hair, but his face was deceptively young.

I knew he was fifty, but truthfully he looked like a thirty-five year-old who'd gone grey early.

“Garrett tells me you’ve been working your ass off this month.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Simon.” He clinked his glass against mine then took a sip. “And how are you getting on?”

I’d been honest in the interview about the fact that I was in an accident and was in therapy every week because of it. Though Brett, my therapist, had recently graduated me down to once every two weeks. She was happy with my progress even if I wasn’t.

No matter how many times I talked about it in therapy or rehearsed at home, I still didn’t know how to answer questions like that.

I was alive, and that was more than Byron got to say.

Or Rita. Even though the accident was unequivocally her fault, she didn’t deserve what happened to her. Neither did Byron.

Don’t you think you should include yourself in that list?

Brett had asked and I’d answered why would I?

I lived, didn't I? Nothing happened to me.

Rita and Byron died, and I'd lost them. But I'd walked away with barely a scratch.

The head wound I'd suffered bled heavily, but that's what head wounds did.

The concussion I suffered still bothered me from time to time, but even that wasn't permanent.

The biggest change was the way I couldn't stop thinking about the firefighter. It had to be some kind of hero worship. He'd plucked me out of the fire. I still remembered the way he carried me like it was nothing. The way he took care of me during the worst moments of my life.

I still had a lot of feelings all tangled up inside me about the firefighter, and normally I'd talk to Byron about shit like that, but he wasn't around anymore.

And I didn't want to talk to my therapist about it.

Which was stupid because that's literally what therapists were for, but if I couldn't talk to Byron about it, I didn't want to talk to anyone about it.

"I'm getting better," I told Simon. I tried not to tell people I was fine because it always felt like a lie.

"That's good, because next week we're stepping up your workload." Simon turned his attention away from me after that.

Around me, drinks flowed. Realizing that this was the first time I'd been out since the accident was a punch to the gut.

My lemon lime soda threatened to come right back up, but I held it down through sheer willpower.

Byron would come back and kick my ass if I threw up on Simon Preston's lap.

Simon was the kind of lawyer you learned about in law school.

Chairs shuffled around and suddenly Hal was sitting next to me. He leaned close and spoke to me in a hushed voice. "We don't always meet up in a huge group like this. Mostly we have our own little cliques, but when Simon lands a big win, he likes to treat the whole office."

"That's because nothing happens in a vacuum. My wins are everyone's wins. I couldn't do half of what I did without a team of amazing people behind me."

Hal grinned at me. "And he has the hearing of a bat."

The conversation turned to other things, mostly law-related.

Stories from the courtroom were passed around, but I had nothing to add to that, not yet anyway.

The firm I worked with dealt with contracts, not criminals, but that didn't mean we didn't have trials and hearings.

Simon Preston was one of the top lawyers in his field.

He was halfway through a story about what happens when clients sign things he tells them not to sign when the front doors of the pub opened, and a group of men flooded in.

They all wore the same clothes. Jeans or cargo pants with dark blue shirts.

A logo over the left pectoral that I couldn't quite make out at a distance.

And then I knew. Firefighters. And among them a familiar face. I couldn't see the shade of his eyes from across the room, but I knew they looked like the Mediterranean on a sunny day. I knew they held compassion and strength.

A hand on my shoulder snapped me out of my stupor. I'd been openly gawking at Will, watching him grab a table with his friends.

"Are you okay, Oren?" Hal asked.

"I—excuse me for just a moment." I got to my feet without knowing what I was doing or what I was going to say, but I'd dreamed about Will since the accident.

There were so many details that I'd lost to trauma and alcohol, but I remembered everything about Will.

The color of his eyes. The cadence of his voice.

The feel of his arms around me. I didn't understand why I couldn't get him out of my head, but I needed to.

I wove through the crowd and suddenly I was at his table. He was sitting in a booth, sandwiched between a wall and another firefighter.

The table went silent and the one sitting next to Will looked up at me, greeting me with a friendly smile. But all I saw was Will.

"Can we help you?"

“You were there.” I couldn’t look away from Will if I tried. “You pulled me out of the car.”

My chest started to cave in on me. All at once I was aware of what an ass I was going to make of myself.

Then, as if by magic, Will was on his feet and the other firefighter moved to let him out of the booth. Will took my hand and shook it, and only then did I realize that I’d been holding it out to him.

His touch woke me up, and I blinked at him. I took a breath that felt like the first one I’d taken since they loaded me up into the ambulance.

“Do you remember me?” I didn’t know what I’d do if he said no. The idea of him not remembering me when he’d been on my mind every day for seven months was unfathomable to me.

“You look a lot better than the last time I saw you, Oren.” Will’s smile was so dazzling it made the universe shift beneath my feet.

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Will

I never forgot a face, and sometimes it made the inside of my head a messy place to be, but Oren's face was one I was thankful to remember.

Sometimes I thought under pressure was the only way I functioned, because telling Oren that he looked better than the last time I saw him made me die inside. However true it was, it was an unnecessary thing to say.

The last time I saw him, he was loaded. Stinking like vomit, booze, and terror, and the heavy coppery scent of fresh blood. I shoved that visual out of my head and tried not to ogle him.

Oren Reid topped out at five nine or so.

His hair had clearly been tidier that morning.

The dark blonde strands now looked like he'd been raking his fingers through them all day.

He wore a suit and a tie so green it was almost black.

A table of similarly dressed people across the bar had to have been where he'd come from.

Oren pulled his hand away. "I've thought about you—about tracking you down, to say thank you." He glanced back at the table.

“Friends of yours?”

Oren shook his head. “Colleagues.”

He looked like he still had things he wanted to say to me, but maybe didn’t want to in front of the whole firehouse and his colleagues.

Sometimes accident victims or people who’d been trapped in burning buildings had questions about what happened.

Their brains blocked things out due to trauma, and they came to me seeking answers.

I wondered if that was the case with Oren.

“Did you want to talk in private? If you have questions about that night... Briggs—ah, Carl—he was there too.”

Oren paled and shook his head. “No. That’s—I just wanted to say thank you.”

“If you change your mind, I’m at Station 860. Just ask for Dorsey. None of these assholes use my first name.” My comment earned a smile from Oren, but not a real one. A small, timid smile that hid away as soon as it poked out.

I watched Oren go back to his crowd of suits and I took a seat. Jonas had switched with me and took my place by the wall.

“Who was that?” he asked as he folded one of the napkins into a Bird of Paradise. It was one of his many useless talents, something he’d picked up from working in his family’s catering business growing up.

“Seven months ago, we tore the roof off a car, and I pulled him out of the back seat.

He was the only survivor at the scene. Two fatalities in the car with him, and the driver of the car they hit died too.”

Jonas let out a low whistle.

“I’m surprised he remembered me,” I told him. Oren was one of those people I’d thought about after the fact. Sometimes I tried not to think of what people’s lives were like, but when I did, I liked to imagine that they were happy. Oren didn’t look happy, but I didn’t know the first thing about him.

“Your admirer is a lawyer,” Briggs said. He was sitting across the table from me, and I looked up at him.

“How do you know?”

“Because I pay attention to shit, Dorsey. They’re in here every once in a while. The hot shot with the silver hair pays for everything. That’s Simon Preston. My cousin was a paralegal for his firm before she went back to school.”

“Let me guess. Law school?”

Briggs snorted. “Nah, she does nails now. Fancy ones. Charges like a grand for a set, but they’re super custom.”

“A grand. For fingernails. I’m in the wrong business.”

Briggs and Jonas laughed.

“No shit, right?” Briggs took a swig of his beer. “I’d do it, but I can’t draw for shit. I’m better off busting doors down.”

Briggs was our muscle. Everyone on the crew could knock a door in, but Briggs could do it faster than everyone on the crew. It was a point of pride for him.

“Think he’ll come back?” Jonas asked, motioning toward the group where Oren sat.

I wanted him to, but not when the whole crew was around.

There was something about Oren that made my insides wobble.

I’d noticed his full lips, his pouty mouth, the worried expression etched into his face.

I’d wanted to kiss him to see if it would bring another smile to his face.

But Oren didn’t set off my gaydar... and none of the guys knew I was gay.

It wasn’t like they were a bunch of homophobes.

Briggs’ little brother came out as trans last year.

Jonas volunteered at the local LGBT center in honor of his best friend who hadn’t survived the hellish teenage years.

I didn’t think I’d get any flak from them.

But my parents would care. They were card-carrying Catholics.

Confession every Sunday. Mass at Christmas.

Crucifixes as home decor level religious.

Every so often, they tried to get me to date, usually a nice church girl. And every so

often, I'd bite the bullet and take someone out just to say I'd been on a date recently, and it hadn't worked out. My parents were sweet and well-meaning, and lucky for me, easily fooled.

The older I got, the harder it was to keep up the charade, but it seemed pointless to come out when I didn't have a reason to upend my life.

I'd tried to date before, but I was closeted, and he was straight.

Turned out, I didn't like being a science experiment.

Keeping a secret was bad enough, but I didn't want to be a secret and an embarrassment or a mistake.

The old wounds still bled when I pressed on them. The words had been thrown at me like daggers, each one hitting the mark. When I did date, I only dated men who were comfortable with their sexuality. Whether they were gay, bi, or pan. Out or not out mattered less, because I wasn't out either.

Mostly I avoided the whole problem by not dating.

I hooked up now and then, and sometimes I'd even go for a repeat or two, but so far no one had stuck around once the thrill of fucking a fireman wore off or when I wouldn't bring them to the station for hookups.

Sorry, boys, I wasn't a wish-granting genie.

I was just a lonely gay boy who couldn't stop thinking about the most-likely-straight lawyer he'd pulled from a wreck over half a year ago.

The group of lawyers he was with trickled out one by one, and Oren was with the last

group to leave.

I sipped my beer as I watched him go. He'd removed his suit jacket, loosened his tie, and rolled up his sleeves.

He caught my eye as he walked out, but he looked away like he hadn't meant to be busted looking at me.

The guys from the station were thankfully unaware of whatever electricity had zapped between Oren and me.

Looks like the ones Oren gave me on his way out were dangerous.

They came with heat. And questions. His gaze had been haunted.

I hoped he'd come by the station someday to talk to me.

The wreck was the kind where we were certain we were going to pull nothing but bodies from the twisted metal.

Oren was a miracle that night. He was battered and bloody, but he'd come out of that car in one piece. The scent of gasoline was everywhere, and the only way to get him out had been to cut the roof off the car.

"What did that drink do to you, man?" Briggs asked, bumping his hand into mine to get my attention.

"What?" I blinked the table into focus. "Sorry. I got lost in thought."

"No shit. I keep telling you not to think so hard. You're going to hurt yourself." Jonas laughed and peeled a few bills out of his wallet. "Are we getting out of here? I'm off

for the next couple of days, and I have shit to do. I see enough of you ugly fuckers at work.”

“Who you callin’ ugly?” Briggs scowled at Jonas, but there was no heat in it.

“Don’t worry, Briggs. It’s what’s on the inside that matters” I added to the tip Jonas left and made my own excuse to leave.

Rush hour traffic had passed, and I was glad of it. And for the fact that Briggs and Jonas lived close to each other, meaning neither of them ever asked me for a lift.

Normally I wouldn’t have minded. Sometimes living alone bothered me, and I’d find myself missing the station. It often felt like more of a home to me than my shoebox of an apartment was. Most of the time, if I was honest.

I wasn’t looking forward to going back to my place.

Earlier in the day, I thought I might have tried to find a hookup, but the thought didn’t appeal now.

Seeing Oren had thrown me for a loop. He was just my type.

A little shorter, slimmer, and blonder than I was.

I liked his pouty mouth and his green-grey eyes.

Home greeted me with silence. I lived on the ground floor of an apartment building. I’d put out too many fires and evacuated too many people from higher floors that the idea of living anywhere above the second floor gave me nightmares.

I put my phone in the dock and filled my apartment with music to drown out the

silence.

After a shower, I cooked dinner for myself.

Truthfully, I preferred cooking at the station.

Cooking for just myself sucked, but I liked making food for all the guys.

They were an easy crowd to please. A few of the guys would even swing by if they were off-duty, and I was cooking.

Briggs was the worst offender for that. Jonas frequently sent me videos he saw online of different foods he wanted to eat, but didn't want to bother making.

When I'd first started cooking for the guys, it had been a way to expend some of my nervous energy during downtimes at the station.

Mom had never been much of a cook, so it was my dad who taught me how.

Mom could pour cereal and microwave things, but when it came to actually cooking, it was best if she didn't.

Dad taught me because he joked that though he loved my mom, he wasn't bound by any kind of religious law to love her cooking. Sometimes I wondered if Mom was bad at it on purpose, but if she was, that was between her and Dad.

Eventually, I'd taken over most of the cooking at home.

There wasn't a kitchen gadget I wanted that Dad wouldn't buy for me.

He kept a notepad on the fridge. A stubby pencil taped to a piece of string that was

used to write down things we needed, and every week he'd take the list to work with him.

Friday after work, he'd be late, but he'd come home with all the things on my list. When I went for dinner at their house, half the time I ended up helping Dad cook.

On a whim, I sent off a text inviting myself over for dinner the next night, if they were free. Dad's response gave me immediate regret.

Dad

What's the occasion? Are you bringing a friend?

His questions were followed by a series of emojis that I'm sure made sense to him. Or maybe they didn't, and he'd just smashed a bunch of random ones to throw me off.

No friend. Just me and my barbeque tongs. I'll grab steak on my way over.

I got another text a few minutes later.

Maybe next time then.

I didn't dignify that with a response. Telling my parents I didn't want kids had gone over like a lead balloon.

I was their only child, and I knew they hoped I'd have found a girl by now to pop out a bunch of babies with.

But I never wanted that. Even if I were straight, the idea had never appealed to me.

They pretended, of course, that all that would change when I met the right woman. I put my phone down and closed my eyes. That was never going to happen, but I was also starting to wonder if I'd ever meet the right man.

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Oren

By virtue of scheduling difficulties, Liam had been unable to come out that night to celebrate with me.

He'd felt bad at the time, and even after I could see the shadow that haunted his gaze when he thought I wasn't looking.

Eventually, I'd gotten him to open up, and he'd confessed that he felt like the night might have ended differently had he gone.

And I agreed. He might have also died, and then I really would have been all alone.

His friendship was a comfort to me, but there were things that I couldn't discuss with Liam. Or anyone for that matter. Like the way I couldn't stop thinking about Will. Running into him at the pub had seemed like a sign. Ever since then, old memories mixed with new ones in my head.

Will pulling me from the car had lived on a loop since that night.

It was inescapable. But now it had been replaced with Will at the pub, smiling and laughing.

His gaze sliding over to me, his eyes lighting up with recognition.

The man had to help countless people each year, and it had been months since the accident, but he remembered me.

That shred of knowledge was the first thing that felt good since that night. When I returned to the table, I'd had to explain my absence to Simon, who'd taken an interest in my sudden departure from the table.

Admitting who Will was had taken almost no effort.

But when other eyes flicked over to me as I mentioned the accident, my stomach clenched.

The last thing I wanted was to talk about the wreck.

It was finally getting easier, but as the layers of grief and trauma peeled away, they just revealed new ones underneath.

Hal swooped in and steered the conversation back to another story of Simon's brilliance, and the questions anyone might have had for me were easily forgotten.

Talking about the accident was hard enough, but then people sometimes asked questions I didn't have the answers for.

Because of the booze I'd consumed and the accident itself, I was missing blocks of memory from that night.

I didn't remember the crash itself. The only fragments that remained were the smell of gas.

Flashing lights. And Will like a fucking angel.

His eyes. The sound of his voice. Hell, I even remembered the ease with which he yanked me from that car.

But after that? Nothing. Snatches of me in the ambulance, but I hadn't felt like myself.

Everything seemed fuzzy, like I was watching things happen through someone else's eyes.

If there was one thing Will could help me with, it was putting the pieces together. Knowing what the wreck had been like wouldn't bring anyone back. It wouldn't ease the agony of losing Byron and Rita. And on that note, it seemed pointless to even ask. But knowing might make the nightmares stop.

It was hard to call them nightmares, though, because I wasn't scared. There was no fear, just exhaustion and sadness dragging me down day after day. Clawing at me, trying to cut me off at the knees. Some days still felt like I was walking through wet cement.

Even before Will told me what station he worked at, I'd known. It hadn't been too hard to track down, but I hadn't thought of a suitable reason to go there, and I hadn't known who to ask for. Until now. Will Dorsey.

Will Dorsey with the Mediterranean eyes who lived in my head like a fucking dream.

Maybe if he walked me through what the accident had looked like, what happened when he'd pulled up, maybe then I could get him off my mind.

My subconscious might leave me alone then.

It probably wanted to know what he knew, and then I'd be able to stop fixating on him.

After spending half my Saturday cycling through half my closet to find the perfect

outfit, I finally settled on jeans and a graphic tee.

I stuffed my feet into a pair of Chucks and mustered up a shred of gratitude that the accident had left my body mostly unchanged.

It was the rest of me that felt like it was wrecked and ruined.

The station was a bus ride away, but after chickening out and missing the stop, I'd gotten off the bus a few blocks away and had to backtrack.

I didn't even know if Will was at work that day.

Calling ahead might have been a good idea, but I figured I'd take my chances.

If he wasn't here, then I'd take it as a sign from the universe that I wasn't meant to know the things my brain refused to remember, and I'd never come back.

The fire station had three large bays for trucks, and one was open.

Laughter and noise drifted out as I approached, my sweaty hands tucked into my pockets.

Seeing a fire truck up close for the first time made my mouth go dry.

It was an intimidating piece of machinery.

My feet stopped of their own accord in front of the station, and I stared at the truck wondering if it was the same one that had come to the scene of the accident.

Not for the first time, I wondered why Rita had gotten behind the wheel. According to the accident report, she hadn't been grossly over the legal limit, but she'd still been

over. Maybe she thought she'd be fine. There was no way for me to know what she'd been thinking.

"Need a hand, friend?" My attention snapped to reality, and I stared at the man who approached. He was in the standard firefighter shirt with the station logo over the left pectoral, just like the guys back at the pub the other week had worn.

"I'm here to... uh... is Will working today?" Seeing the blank look on the man's face, I remembered to use his last name. "Dorsey?"

Recognition flared in the man's expression. "He's not working today, but yeah, he's here. Hang tight, I'll run up and get him."

"If he's busy, it's okay, I can come back." Or not.

"He's not busy. He just thinks the rest of us assholes can't fend for ourselves. He's not exactly wrong. Give me like two minutes, and I'll send him down." The guy turned and took two steps, then turned back. "What's your name?"

"Oren."

"Right. Two minutes."

Other firefighters milled around the firetruck taking care of various tasks, but they still managed to cast curious glances my way.

Tucking my hands back in my pockets, I wandered out of their view and off to the side of the station where I could watch for Will without feeling like I was being stared at.

Two minutes later, just as promised, Will appeared. He hurried out of the station and

looked around, his posture stiffening when he didn't spot me at first, prompting me to pull one hand out of my pocket and wave at him when his gaze drifted around, searching.

He smiled when he spotted me, and the tight knot in my stomach loosened.

I'd worried that I'd be disturbing him at work.

He could've been on a call, or training, or doing any number of things.

Stopping in here had been a risk and until he started toward me, I didn't realize how badly I'd needed it to pay off.

"Oren, it's good to see you." Will's greeting was warm and friendly. It was probably his standard demeanor.

"You're not working today?" I said in lieu of something normal, like hello.

"I just swung by because there was this recipe I saw that I wanted to try, but cooking for one isn't something I'm used to. I was just dropping off leftovers for the boys."

"I can come back if you're busy."

"Oren, it's fine. Did you want a tour?" Will motioned back to the station, and I shook my head. Anxiety took hold of my body, wrapping cold hands around my chest and squeezing.

Will nodded. "Let's walk then."

I followed him to the sidewalk, and we strolled away, passing a stationary store, an accountant, and a tattoo shop before I finally found my voice.

“I want to know about that night. I don’t—there’s gaps.”

“That’s common after traumatic events and head injuries. How are you, by the way?”

Will’s concern seemed genuine, and I wanted to kick myself for even being surprised by that. Of course, he’d be concerned. He was a firefighter because he cared about people. It was obvious to me, and I hardly knew him.

“I’m okay. I had a pretty bad concussion, but it’s mostly better. Sometimes, if I push too hard, I still get headaches, but nothing like before.”

“That’s good. I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Thanks to you.”

Will shook his head. “I was hardly the only person there.”

“Okay, then thanks to you and everyone else. I don’t remember anyone else being there. Just you... and then the ambulance.”

Will stopped in front of a cafe, the kind with a chalkboard sign on the sidewalk offering up a list of the day’s specials. A few customers sat near the front windows, but we must have arrived during a lull because they were the only ones inside.

“Did you want to sit and have a coffee while we talk?”

I didn’t particularly want coffee, but I didn’t think I could ask anything if I were strolling down the street like I didn’t have a care in the world. I needed to sit so I could focus.

“Yeah, uh, okay.”

I followed him inside and realized he was definitely a regular here when the guy behind the counter asked if he wanted the usual.

“Yeah, that’d be great.” Will said to him. “What do you want? It’s on me.”

I scanned the menu that was on the back wall. “Raspberry lemonade?”

“Raspberry lemonade for Oren.” Will turned to me. “Grab a table near the back, and I’ll be right over.”

I didn’t question why that table, or why Will wanted to pay for my drink.

It was like my brain was stuck in neutral, and I was just coasting along, doing what I was told.

Will came to the table and sat down across from me.

The raspberry lemonade looked delicious, but my throat was too tight to think about swallowing yet.

“Do you want me to just tell you what happened when I rolled up on the scene, or do you have specific questions you wanted to ask?”

Understanding flicked through my brain, waking it up. “You’ve done this kind of thing before.”

He nodded. “Sometimes people don’t remember things, and they go looking for answers. It’s natural to want to fill in those blanks.”

He looked like he was hesitant to say what was really on his mind.

“Are there gaps in my memory that I shouldn’t want filled? Because I don’t remember crashing. I remember...” I closed my eyes and took a deep breath hoping to undo the knot of dread in my stomach. “I remember you.”

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Will

Oren had his arms wrapped around himself like he was trying to keep himself in one, solid piece. While I didn't have all the answers for him, not having been there when the accident occurred, I could tell him what I knew.

"By the time I got there, you'd already been in and out of consciousness for a few minutes according to the witnesses.

" Talking to one of them might have given him more information, but it was also a tossup.

People didn't always remember things the way they happened.

Coming on an accident scene was different than watching something horrible happen in front of you.

When people witnessed something unexpected like that, they weren't always able to recall events accurately.

By the time you realized something awful was unfolding, it was already set in motion.

"Did you have specific questions, or did you want me to just walk you through it?"

Oren's skin had lost all color, leaving him a sickly shade of gray. "I—just tell me. Please."

His voice shook when he spoke. His eyes were glassy with tears, but he sat there, holding himself together the best he could to get the answers he needed.

I'd seen a lot of brave things in my line of work, but Oren's determination to face a devastating memory so he could fill in the missing pieces left me feeling awed by him.

"The car you were in was badly damaged. You'd rolled over several times." The smell of gasoline returned to me. The sound of glass crunching under my boots. "Somehow the car ended up on all four wheels, but with the damage, we couldn't get the doors open."

"I remember that. Being trapped." Oren reached for his lemonade and took a tentative sip, then drank half like he'd been dying of thirst.

"Once I got you talking, you still didn't make a lot of sense, but you stayed with me until we got you out of there."

"There was fire." Color hadn't returned to Oren's complexion, but his voice sounded steadier now. "You carried me out. Like they do in the movies."

I watched him suck in a deep breath.

"What about my friends? Byron was in the back seat. Rita drove. I didn't—I couldn't—everything was so quiet. Not quiet. That's the wrong word." Oren ran a hand over his face.

"How much do you know about how they died?" I'd still tell him the truth no matter what, but how I told him and what I said would depend on what he already knew about the accident. I wanted to help him, not harm him further.

“They died at the scene. I didn’t ask about their specific injuries. I don’t want to know.” He sounded almost frantic. “I can’t know that. Please. Just...”

Tears filled his eyes, and he dashed them away. His gaze swept through the café, and he curled in on himself, trying to hide from view. “Did they—do you think—” Oren sucked in another shaky breath. “Did they suffer?”

Even if they’d died slow and painfully, I’d have lied my ass off to spare Oren any further pain.

“No. They wouldn’t have felt anything. It was—they were gone when we arrived.”

He let out a long shuddering breath, and I realized that he was going to break apart right in front of me. Without thinking, I got up and moved my chair closer to his. His arms were still wound around his body, and I wrapped mine around him, pulling him into a hug.

At first, he went rigid, but then he exhaled, and a choked sob came out.

I heard him struggle to get himself under control.

His breath hitched, and he sniffled as he drew all his anguish back inside him and tucked it away again.

I wasn’t sure how long I hugged him for, but suddenly he wasn’t stiff anymore.

He went pliant against me and drew in a deep breath.

Slowly, he pulled away, and I released my hold on him. Though I didn’t want to.

Stupid attraction. Oren was exactly my type. Pretty hazel eyes and dirty blonde hair.

He had a strong jaw and sweet round cheekbones. Thick eyelashes fluttered, shedding salty tears that he swiped away.

“Shit. Sorry. That’s embarrassing.”

“It’s not,” I told him. “You went through hell, Oren.”

He sniffled and pulled further away. I watched him regain control of himself. Watched him take a few deep breaths and swipe the remaining moisture off his face. He threw walls up around himself, but they seemed unstable, like they were built on a foundation of sand.

After a moment, he lifted his gaze and met mine. “You didn’t tell me how lucky I was.”

His voice was cold and hard, like he was still trying to get his defenses back into place. “Everyone tells me that when they find out. But you didn’t.”

I took a sip of my coffee. It had started to get cold during our conversation and the time it had taken Oren to collect himself, but I’d drank plenty of cold coffee before.

“I’ve been a firefighter for long enough to know that not everyone who goes through hell feels lucky when they get to the other side.

You’re alive, and that matters. I’m glad you made it, but it can be hard to feel lucky when you lose things that are important. Friends. Family. Houses. Livelihoods.”

Oren dropped his gaze to his half-drunk lemonade. He traced a finger over the condensation on the outside of the glass. “I didn’t feel lucky. I still don’t.” He shrugged. “My therapist called it survivor’s guilt.”

“I’m glad you’re seeing someone.”

He took another sip of his lemonade. I couldn’t take my eyes off him, especially not when he licked his lips after. My dick twitched at the little sigh he let out. I bit the inside of my cheek and reminded myself that I didn’t do crushes on straight men. That was only asking for trouble.

“My therapist is the only person I see lately besides people in my office.” Oren winced. “Sorry, I’m trying not to dump all my shit on you. I should go.”

“No, it’s fine.”

He had started to stand, but I put my hand on his arm and motioned for him to take a seat.

“If you wanted, the guys at the station do this big fundraiser barbeque every year, and it’s next weekend.

We host it down at Wilbur Park. There’s games and prizes and even some face painting if that’s your thing. You should come.”

Oren’s mouth twitched. “Face painting?”

“Yeah. You’d make a good tiger.”

“Are you calling me a giant pussy?”

Shock rolled through me. “No, of course not. I—you’re fucking with me.”

“Possibly.” He hid his smile behind his glass as he took another sip of his drink.

For a fleeting moment, Oren seemed unencumbered by his past. The respite from his grief was brief, but for a moment he shone, like he'd forgotten about the sadness he wore like a cloak.

I wanted to see him like this again. Crushing on a straight man was dangerous, but I couldn't help my attraction to Oren or my bone-deep desire to make him smile again.

Even though nothing would ever become of my crush, I wanted to help him. Oren clearly needed friends. Maybe it was arrogant to think that he might need me in particular, but the idea had taken root in my brain. He'd sought me out at the pub and again at the station.

"Come to the barbeque."

Oren hesitated. "What if they ask why I'm there?"

"You say you're a friend of Dorsey's. But no one will ask. They'll sell you as many burgers as you can eat and con you into playing games. It's a lot of fun."

The fundraiser reminded me of some of the church functions my parents used to drag me to as a kid.

The community spirit had always been a draw for me.

As a kid, I was just happy to scarf down endless hot dogs.

I wasn't aware of the strings that came with being part of a church community until I got older.

Much to my parent's displeasure, I'd walked away from religion entirely. I still respected that they believed a certain way, but I didn't. It was another thing my

parents and I didn't talk about. If we didn't acknowledge uncomfortable things, they didn't exist.

"You said it's a fundraiser. Where does the money go?"

"We raise money to help people who've been displaced by fires.

There's a lot to worry about when you lose everything.

Sometimes people aren't insured. A lot of renters especially.

They've already lost everything, and they have plenty to worry about without stressing over money and getting their bills paid as they try to navigate the interruption in their life. "

"That's nice of you," Oren said as if I was directly responsible for any of it. All I did was show up and flip burgers.

"So you'll come. I'll make a batch of my famous chili this year if you do."

"Are you bribing me?"

"Only if it works."

Oren looked at me, then looked away, then looked back at me. "Can you text me the address and the times and stuff, and I'll think about it? I'm not exactly good company these days."

He pulled his phone out of his pocket and slid it across the table to me.

A secret thrill shot through me when I sent myself a text from his phone, connecting

us.

My stupid lizard brain didn't want to listen to the fact that Oren was straight and that I wasn't allowed to crush on him.

Clearly I'd sent the memo, but my brain crumpled it up and threw it in the trash at the first sight of Oren.

I slid his phone to him, then pulled out mine and sent Oren a text.

I introduced myself before texting him that he was cordially invited to come to Wilbur Park and stuff his face with hamburgers, chili, and whatever else the guys saw fit to bring.

"I'd really like it if you came." That level of honesty flayed my chest wide open.

I feared for a second that he'd look at me and know all my secrets.

I was gay. I'd turned my back on the religion I'd grown up in.

I had a crush on a straight guy and was pathetically trying to be his friend, not only because he needed one, but because all my friends were firefighters and it might be nice to have someone outside of the department to hang out with.

It also didn't hurt that Oren was easy on the eyes.

I'd glimpsed a sliver of who I imagined the old Oren was. Someone witty and sharp who gave as good as he got.

Oren met my gaze. I couldn't tell if he was particularly happy about his decision, but he accepted my invitation anyway.

“I’ll be there.” Oren glanced at the time. “I should get going. I didn’t mean to keep you so long. Thank you for this.” His voice cracked and he cleared his throat.

“I’m glad you’re okay, Oren. And I’m glad I’ll see you at the fundraiser.”

“Thanks. And, ah... yeah. I’ll be there.” He got up and it looked for a second like he was going to run straight out of the cafe, but he stopped at the counter long enough to shove a bill into the tip jar, then with a final look over his shoulder at me, he held my gaze for half a second before giving me a tight smile and then vanishing out into the street leaving me to wonder if I should’ve followed him.

Rational brain said no. Horny lizard brain said yes. I ignored horny lizard brain this time.

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Oren

It wasn't that I didn't want to be alone with Will, or that being at a park full of firefighters and other strangers was exactly the same thing as being alone with him, but conning half the office into going with me calmed my nerves.

Hal had been an easy sell. Once Simon got wind of where I was going and what it was benefitting, he declared that it would be good to get out into the community and show our support.

And that's how a casual invite to a barbeque had me milling about the park with a bunch of my coworkers.

Simon even ditched his suit. Well, his jacket and tie. He still wore the slacks and the button-up, but the sleeves were rolled up and the top two buttons left undone, making him look both relaxed and powerful.

Hal wore a plain green polo shirt and khakis, and I'd shown up in jeans and a graphic tee. How I managed to feel underdressed at a casual function was all on Simon and Hal.

Some of the other people from the office had arrived already and were spread about at various stations.

"Where's your firefighter?" Hal asked, scanning the crowd.

"He's not my firefighter." My stomach swooped at that, but I didn't know why. "And

he said something about chili, so I'm guessing he's near the food somewhere."

I dragged my gaze through the park. The weather had held out, and it was a nice day to be outside.

Comfortably warm with a gentle breeze blowing through now and then.

I managed to catch sight of Will and, as predicted, he was in the tent where the food was being served.

The event had been going for a while before we'd arrived, meaning there wasn't a huge line of people.

Looking around for Hal, I saw that he and Simon had wandered off to try their chances at some of the carnival games. That was probably Simon's idea. His competitive streak was no secret around the office. Most people seemed to avoid squaring off against him, but not much seemed to faze Hal.

When I turned my attention back to Will, he was looking at me.

The idea of him watching me had my body warming from head to toe.

Now that he'd noticed me, I forced my feet to move toward the tent where he was stationed.

Food was sold by donation, so I pulled a twenty out of my wallet and handed it over to the teenager they'd put in charge of the cash box.

They mumbled a thank you, tucked the money away, and I went down the line to where Will stood. He had his standard firefighter t-shirt on with an apron over top.

“Came for my famous chili, did you?” Will grabbed a Styrofoam bowl and scooped a generous helping of chili into it. “There’s garlic toast and cheese down the line if you want. Take a seat; I’m going to get someone to switch out, and I’ll join you.”

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to.” I took the bowl from him and hoped that he didn’t see the way I almost dropped it when our fingers brushed.

“I’ve been at this for hours now. I could use the break.” Will tugged at the apron strings and pulled it loose. “Give me two minutes.”

I nodded. For some reason, talking around Will made me self-conscious. Was I that sad and lonely and desperate for a friend that I was overthinking our every interaction? It felt that way. Like no matter how I acted, I cringed at myself.

I used the tongs provided and put some shredded cheese on top of my chili, then picked a piece of garlic bread from the tray.

On the other side of the tents where the food was being served were rows of tables and chairs.

I took a seat at an empty one and stirred the cheese into the chili while I waited for Will.

True to his word, he sat down a minute later with his own bowl of chili. He’d topped his with even more cheese and mixed it in.

“I’m glad you could make it.”

“Me and half the office.” I motioned to where Hal and Simon were battling it out over at the bean bag toss.

“It’s nice of them to come show their support.” Will seemed pleased that I’d brought so many people along with me. “I see you haven’t been by the face painting station yet.”

“Not sure I can fit that into my busy schedule.” I took a bite of the chili and bit back an obscene groan. “This is amazing.”

“Thanks.” Will beamed at me. “I’d say it’s an old family recipe, but that would be a lie.”

“You made this?” I took another bite. The chili was pleasantly spicy without being too much. It had been cooked to perfection, and it would be hard not to lick the bowl when I was done.

“I did. I’ve always liked to cook. My mom, you see...” Will leaned closer like he was about to tell a secret. “My mom is a terrible cook. Awful, really. Dad had to work, so if he couldn’t cook, Mom would.” Will shuddered.

“That bad?”

“She put peanut butter and raisins in rice pudding.”

I grimaced, remembering too late to try and school my features to hide my obvious disgust. Will was unbothered, however, and merely looked at me and smiled.

“Exactly,” he said. “I’ve been cooking since I was seven or eight. Dad taught me the basics, and after that it was just trial and error. Lots of error.”

“I’m sorry, but your mom must be a horrendous cook if a seven year-old’s cooking is preferable.”

“Mom can make a mean microwave meal. And she doesn’t always fuck up the frozen pizzas.” Will spoke of his parents with such an obvious fondness, even though he was slandering his mother’s cooking.

“Is your dad a good cook?”

Will nodded. “But I’m better. When they invite me for dinner, they ask what I feel like cooking, and they buy the ingredients for me.”

Dunking my garlic toast in my chili, I smiled at Will. “They invite you for dinner and make you cook it? That’s hilarious. Does anyone else invite you for dinner and then make you cook it?”

“Not counting the guys at the station, no one yet. But maybe one day I’ll be so lucky. That’s why I was at the station the other day when you stopped in. I hate cooking for just myself, so I often find myself down at the station cooking for everyone.”

I used the garlic toast to mop up the rest of the chili in the bottom of the bowl. “If all your cooking is like this, I might have to quit my job and become a firefighter. Do you have these fundraisers often? Say, like, every day?”

“Sorry, but no. Not as often as that.” He motioned to my empty bowl. “Did you want seconds?”

“I don’t think I could eat another bowl, as good as it was. I’m a bit stuffed.”

“Do you have room for dessert?”

“Dessert?”

“Sutton’s brother owns his own creamery, and he’s donated all the ice cream for

today's event."

"Is that a firefighter thing? Calling everyone by their last name?"

Will grinned at me and when he stood, I followed. We dumped our bowls in a trashcan. Shoving my hands in my pockets, I stuck to Will's side as he led me to an ice cream truck.

"I'd never thought of it before, but I think so. I've been Dorsey since my first day, and all the introductions were done with last names. Sometimes I forget their given names, so don't quiz me on them. Don't you lawyers have any weird habits that are exclusive to lawyers?"

"You mean besides ritual sacrifice and blood magic? Not really."

I hadn't thought it was that funny, but a laugh ripped out of Will, and he bumped his shoulder into mine as we waited for the line at the ice cream to move.

"You're a funny guy."

"Thanks. All of us at the office take turns with the sense of humor. Today was my turn."

Will laughed again, and this time he put his hand on my shoulder, giving it a squeeze.

My body tingled from the contact. How long had it been since I'd been touched so casually?

Will hadn't minded it when I fell apart at the cafe, and the longer I hung around him, the more I began to suspect that he was just a tactile person.

“What flavor do you want?” Will asked as the line inched forward.

“I’m a simple guy. Chocolate is fine.”

“Simple is good.” Will shot me a smile and fished a couple of bills out of his wallet. He passed them over to the person collecting donations and ordered two bowls of chocolate ice cream.

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m sure that the pistachio ice cream is amazing, but I can’t bring myself to eat something that looks radioactive.”

“Chocolate is a classic. It’s comfort food.”

“I bet you make your own ice cream.” I glanced at Will and saw him duck his head a little. “Oh, my God. You do, don’t you?”

“Not all the time. And not many flavors. But I have made it before. Sutton’s brother gave me a crash course at the creamery.”

“That’s so cool.” I scooped up a spoonful and ate it while I rolled the idea of Will making ice cream around in my head. “It must be nice to have a hobby like that where there’s always something new to learn. I haven’t had a hobby since I decided to be a lawyer.”

“It’s never too late, you know.”

“I wouldn’t know what to do. I’m not artistic or creative. I can draw a mean stick person. And last time I did karaoke, my friends paid me to stop. Although I was pretty loaded.”

“You don’t have to be good at something to enjoy doing it.”

“Says the man who is probably good at everything he tries.”

“I’d love a chance to prove you wrong. I can be bad at things.”

“So competitive, Dorsey.” Using his last name sent a little thrill through me. I hadn’t even meant to, but it seemed to fit the conversation. My mood was lighter today than it had been in months. Maybe even since before the accident.

“We’ll have to find something neither one of us has done before so I can prove it to you.”

“I’ve never met someone so eager to prove to someone else that they suck.”

“I’ll go to great lengths to prove a point.”

Maybe it was fate that the face painting tent appeared when we turned a corner.

Or maybe Will had been steering me there all along.

On a normal day, I definitely would not have even let the thought cross my mind but today wasn’t a normal day.

Today was the first day in forever that I’d been outside and noticed the sun on my skin and how alive I felt when the wind blew.

“What are you doing?” Will asked as I stepped into line behind a few little kids.

“Getting my face painted. What do you think? Tiger? Lion? Spiderman?”

“Butterfly. Purple with glitter.”

One of the stations cleared out a few minutes later. Will took my empty ice cream bowl for me and milled around waiting while I got my face painted. The lady doing it seemed amused to have an adult sit in her chair, but she didn't make fun of me. Not even when I told her what I wanted.

"William Dorsey, what are you doing?" the lady applying my face paint said.

I turned my head and saw "William" sitting at another station as someone else started to apply face paint for him.

"I can't let Oren have all the fun. Now turn around so she can finish. No peeking until we're done."

The paint wasn't the most pleasant thing I'd ever put on my skin.

It made my face feel dry and tight wherever she applied it, but it was washable and for a good cause.

Even though I'd done it willingly, I still felt a little silly when she held up the mirror.

The left half of my face was covered in orange and black Monarch butterfly wings.

Looking in the mirror at the finished result made some of the silly feelings go away.

As far as face paint went, she'd done a wonderful job.

Good enough that I didn't feel entirely ridiculous.

I pulled some more money out and dropped it in the donation box. "Are you beautiful yet, Dorsey?"

Will stood and turned around. He'd gone for the tiger look. Orange and black stripes covered his face. He even had whiskers and a pink kitty nose to complete the look.

"How do I look?" he asked, grinning like the Cheshire Cat.

Like someone who knew how to have fun. Like someone I needed. "Like a giant kitty," I said instead.

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Will

O ren was easy to be with. He still got quiet sometimes, but I let him have his moments without drawing attention to them.

I'd never been through anything close to the hell he'd been through, but it wasn't hard to reason that it was still fucking with his head.

Every so often, Oren would crack a joke, or deliver a snarky comment, and I was left with the impression I was seeing the authentic Oren.

The one not weighed down by grief and guilt.

"All you guys are missing is a Ferris Wheel." Oren walked with his hands tucked in his pockets. Our painted faces had garnered some attention from the other guys, and I noticed a few of them head off in the direction of the face painting tent.

"Rides are a hazard."

"Spoken like a guy who's probably had to rescue people from a Ferris Wheel."

"Not yet, thankfully. But I've been on the internet. I've seen how wrong carnival rides can go."

"Ferris Wheels only come off their frame and roll through the city in the movies. They're perfectly safe." Oren paused. "Probably."

“Probably is very reassuring, thank you. We might not have carnival rides, but we have a photo booth.”

Oren paused again for a half second, then shrugged. “Why not? Lead the way, Dorsey.”

It was stupid for me to like the sound of my name in his mouth.

Everyone called me Dorsey. There was nothing special about it.

But I liked hearing my name in his voice.

It meant that we were friends, that maybe I’d get to keep him around for a while.

My regular brain cautioned me to at least try to not crush on him so hard.

I ignored that bit of advice, of course, in favor of throwing my whole body right into full-blown Oren Obsession.

“It’s back this way.” We started toward the booth, and I caught sight of one of the guys he worked with. “Will you get in trouble for not hanging with your coworkers?”

“Nah. Attendance wasn’t mandatory or anything. Merely encouraged.”

When we reached the photo booth, we had to wait for a group of teenagers. They were taking turns ducking in and out of the booth in various combinations of people. More than a couple of them came out red-faced and smug. Oren caught my gaze, and we shared a knowing smile.

Oh, to be a young, horny teenager again. Except I was never out, so I’d never have wanted to duck into a photo booth with a group of my peers. I didn’t want to kiss the

girls, and I couldn't kiss the boys. My heart clenched at all the opportunities I'd lost out on growing up queer and closeted.

Two teenaged boys ducked into the booth together.

Well, one boy dragged another boy inside the booth, much to the amusement of their friends, who all cheered and whistled and made all kinds of comments outside the booth.

It healed something inside me to watch these two boys come out, obviously having kissed in the booth judging by the redness of the taller one's face, and the way the shorter guy clung to his hand, grinning from ear to ear.

I'd never had that as a teenager, but at least these kids got to have it.

The group of them moved on, and the booth was now available for Oren and me.

Oren approached the curtain, then looked back at me. "Are we sure it's sanitary? I can practically smell the lingering hormones."

"There's hand sanitizer around here somewhere, I'm sure."

"Good enough." Oren slipped inside the booth.

Sucking in a deep breath, I followed. I squished in next to him and grimaced.

"I didn't realize how small these things were on the inside."

"They're not small. You're just built like a firetruck." Oren fed a bill into the machine. "You ever done this before?"

“Nope.” I knew he meant the photo booth, but I’d never done any of it.

I’d never walked around a park with a guy I couldn’t help but be attracted to.

I’d never bought him ice cream and went face painting.

Logically, I knew it wasn’t a date, but the lonely teenager inside of me wanted desperately to pretend it was.

“Neither have I, but the instructions are pretty clear. We just have to decide if we want normal pictures or silly ones.”

“Why not both? We’ll do two sets.”

“Okay, then we’ll do regular pictures first.” Oren pressed a button to start the picture taking process, then flung an arm around my shoulders.

The heat from his body seared into me. My dick twitched, and I begged it not to get hard.

Popping wood just because a gorgeous man smiled at me, touched me in the most casual of ways, was mortifying.

I endured the fleeting mortification because Oren’s arm around me was too good to not enjoy. We took four normal enough pictures. The photo booth was small, and we were crammed together, which would make for good pictures.

The silly pictures were on me, and I fed my money into the machine.

The first picture was just us making faces. Oren had been adorable with his cross-eyed expression and his tongue sticking out. The next one, he held his hands up by

his head, making antlers. His hand ended up in my face and I pretended to bite him.

“Feisty.” Oren flashed me a smile and the camera went off again. “Shit, we’ve only have one picture left.”

We weren’t horny teenagers and Oren was straight, so there was no way I could haul him against me and crush my lips against his and capture that moment in time forever. It was a stupid thing to want so badly that I couldn’t breathe or move or think.

“Will?” Oren said my name, and the last picture was taken. “You okay?”

“Yeah, it’s just a tight fit in here.” It was a stupid excuse.

I wasn’t claustrophobic. I ran into burning buildings, for fuck sake.

Climbed ladders to rescue kittens and people and anyone that needed rescuing.

I pulled people from piles of mangled metal.

But I was terrified of Oren looking at me and realizing that I’d gone and developed a stupid crush on him.

Pulling the curtain back, I got out of the booth, sucked in a deep breath, and thanked my lucky stars that my fear of Oren seeing the truth of my feelings kept my dick from getting hard.

Sometimes I wanted to scream to the whole world and let them know who I really was and let the chips fall where they may.

But I didn’t want to lose the guys at the station.

Or my parents. It was a catch twenty-two.

I didn't have anyone that I was willing to come out for, and I had trouble finding someone because I wasn't out.

Oren slipped out of the booth, and he grabbed the photos from the slot as they developed.

"I make a pretty good butterfly." Oren passed me the first row of photos.

The serious ones. We looked like best friends.

If I didn't know the people in the photo, I'd say they were best friends.

Or lovers. Boyfriends even. Out on a date.

But the truth was it was two guys who were little more than strangers.

Tentative friends hanging out in public, surrounded by people who didn't know the guy with the tiger face paint wasn't half as brave as the butterfly.

"These are good pictures."

The next set dropped into the slot, and Oren snorted a laugh when he pulled them out.

"Oh, God. Look at us."

Oren held on to the pictures but moved closer so I could see too.

I'd never particularly liked having my picture taken, but I'd been willing to step foot in that booth to capture a bit of something I thought I'd missed out on growing up.

The first three pictures on the row were us being ridiculous.

Crossed eyes and scrunched faces. Tongues out or huge smiles.

All except for the last picture that was just us staring at each other.

Me, thinking that Oren might see how much I liked him.

Me, wishing I knew what he was thinking, but knowing it didn't matter.

"Which ones do you want?" Oren asked. "Silly or casual?"

"We could do half and half." I suggested, folding the row of pictures in half, sectioning off the top two and the bottom two.

Carefully, I tore down the crease I made.

It took a minute to get it done, but I passed one of the halves to Oren then repeated the process with the other set.

I kept the last picture for myself. It was stupid, but I felt like I needed to have that picture.

It represented all the things I never got to have—and might never get to have as long as I stayed in the closet.

To say I had always been okay with being in the closet was a lie, but it used to be easier. But as I got older and grew into who I was, all the things I was hiding from people had started to crowd my closet.

I tucked the pictures in my wallet and wished that one day I'd have a reason to be

brave.

Oren stuck around until the crowds began to dissipate and tents started coming down.

“I should get going.” Oren offered a crooked smile. His hands were tucked in his pockets again.

“Did you want a ride home?”

He furrowed his brow, looking uncertain. “Don’t you have to help dismantle everything?”

“Nah, I helped set it up. It’s like kitchen duty. Whoever cooks doesn’t have to clean. Whoever was here at the ass crack of dawn to help set up doesn’t have to take down.” Realizing how we met, I could have kicked myself. “It’s okay if you’re not comfortable with getting in my truck.”

Oren breathed a sigh of relief and raked his hand through his hair. He looked down at the ground, avoiding my gaze for a beat. “I know I’ll have to get over the whole thing eventually, but I’ve been walking everywhere or taking transit. Right now, I make a terrible passenger.”

“You could always drive.”

Oren shook his head. “Not yet.”

“It’s understandable.”

“Is it?” He exhaled and rocked back on his heels.

“Trauma is trauma. Sometimes it takes a while to overcome the bad things.”

“And what if we never do? What then?” Oren looked at me with shining eyes, like he was desperate for answers but feared what they might be.

“Then you find a way to live with it. I could go with you, if you wanted. When you feel ready to try driving again. The offer is open. I could meet you someplace and you can try it out, and if you can’t do it, you’re not stranded somewhere. We’ll stick close to home or something.”

Oren nodded. “I’ll think about it.”

“Want company for your walk home?” I hoped he wouldn’t say no. I wasn’t ready for our day to end. I had friends, but they were all people I worked with. It was nice to hang around with someone new, even if that someone made me want things I couldn’t have.

Oren looked at me and that lopsided smile of his that I’d immediately loved started to form.

“You have a sparkle...” He reached for me, his eyes focused on my cheek, mine focused on him.

His touch was so delicate it was like being caressed by the wind, but warm.

The brush of a fingertip against my cheek shouldn’t have made me hard.

But it did. It shouldn’t have made my breath catch, but it did.

I prayed for Oren not to notice, but he looked at me a split second after it happened. Sheepishly, he pulled his hand away. At that moment, I felt exposed. Like everything I was and everything I wanted were on display for him.

I was so fucked.

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Oren

Life had a way of catching up with me, no matter how hard I tried not to live it. At first, it was taking the job. I'd grown weary of being sad and alone and unproductive. The job meant I had to deal with people, an impossible task in the beginning, but it got better the more I had to do it.

Grief still clung to my bones most days. But lately I noticed that it was easier to move through the world, even though the loss hadn't lessened. The idea that I was moving on nearly made me vomit the first time it crossed my mind.

I ducked out of my building and headed down the street.

It was Saturday again, and it had been a week since I saw Will, but we'd managed to text every day since the park.

Sometimes my texts went unread for hours, and he'd pop in and answer them and tell me about the call he was on or the food he was making.

Will's love of food and cooking was what prompted me to get my ass to the grocery store. My fridge and freezer had been full of microwave meals and convenience foods. Will seemed to look after everyone around him, and shame had bloomed in me when I realized that I could barely look after myself.

I hadn't willingly slept in since before law school, so I was at the doors to the grocery store a minute after they opened. Shopping in the morning was a much more peaceful experience than shopping later in the day.

I grabbed a cart and set out for the produce section. Normally I made a beeline for the frozen foods or the premade offerings at the deli. With my usual plans dashed to smithereens, I quickly realized I didn't have the faintest idea what to buy.

Did I need avocados? Did I like avocados? Celery seemed like a good choice. And apples, Granny Smith. Byron had hated anything that wasn't a Red Delicious. Taking a deep breath, I forced myself to move away from the apples before I had a mental breakdown among the fruit.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I pulled it out to see a message from Will. In my phone he was Dorsey. I indulged myself with the delusion that we were close enough for me to call him the name that all his closest friends used.

It was a picture of a cat clinging to someone for dear life as they pulled it out of a tree.

Instead of answering him via text like a normal person, I called him. He answered on the first ring.

"I didn't know that firemen really rescued animals from trees. Way to live up to the stereotype."

Will's answering laugh was rich and deep. "It's because we have the ladders. That's why they call us. We also get to do fun things like snip people out of things they stick their head and other body parts through or in, and then can't get them out."

A store employee came over the PA system to call for a manager to the front.

"What was that?" Will asked.

"Oh, I'm shopping. Groceries." A weak laugh escaped me. "Well, I'm attempting to

shop, but I got here and realized I don't know what to buy."

"What do you have at home?"

I scoffed. "Take out containers and microwave meals. But after that chili last weekend, you have me wanting to have some real food again. But I've been wandering the produce section for fifteen minutes and so far I have celery."

"Is there anything specific you have in mind that you want to make?"

"Um... food?"

"Okay, so no meal plan. Gotcha. Okay, you need onions and garlic to go with that celery. Get a bag of onions and one of those packs of garlic with three heads in them. Or if you hate peeling garlic, you can get a jar of minced."

"Bag of onions, jar of garlic. Got it."

Will stayed on the line with me while I located both items. He chatted away to me about different things I could make with the same basic ingredients.

He had me grab a bunch of carrots and a couple green peppers.

It looked like way more food than I could eat before it all went bad, but I trusted Will to know what he was doing.

Next, he directed me to get some ground beef, or pork, or whatever other animal I liked to eat. I grabbed sausage while I was there without being told, and it felt like a victory.

When I'd walked into the store, everything had seemed overwhelming.

It wasn't that I used to do everything with Byron, or sometimes Byron and Rita.

Once upon a time, I was a perfectly well-adjusted, grown-assed man.

Sometimes I still caught glimpses of that person when my sense of humor would come out to play.

I'd crack a joke, and it was as if I was the Oren before the accident.

Happier, even if I wasn't carefree then either.

But those problems seemed far more trivial than the ones that plagued me now.

And also somehow less trivial. The Oren before wouldn't have nearly had an anxiety attack about a bag of apples.

By the time I got to the cashier to check out, I realized that I'd bought far too many things to easily carry home.

"I'm definitely going to have to call a cab. There's no way I can get this home myself."

I could if I drove, I told myself. My throat tightened and my skin felt hot, even though I shivered. It took me a minute to recognize that Will was trying to get my attention. Sucking in a deep breath, I let it out slowly. I refused to lose my shit at the checkout.

"Where are you?" he asked.

"The Megamart on fifth."

“Pay for your things. I’ll meet you out front in fifteen.”

“No, it’s fine—I?—”

Will cut me off, his tone firm and unbending, but also so full of kindness and understanding that it left no room for refusal. “Fifteen minutes, Oren. Out front. I’ll be there. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“See you soon. Get yourself a chocolate bar at the checkout.” He ended the call, and I tucked my phone away.

What had started out as a good morning had quickly turned to shit. Was I so broken that I couldn’t manage to grocery shop on my own? I should be able to do things like shop and drive like I used to. I should be able to function without someone holding my hand.

I made a note to talk to my therapist about all the feelings swamping me. The guilt. The self-hate. The worthlessness, thick and relentless that shoved me back every time I thought I’d taken a step forward.

The cashier was nice enough, probably. The fog had descended on me, and all I could focus on was paying for my stuff and getting the hell out of there.

The automatic doors whooshed open, and I hurried outside.

Fresh air helped. The sight of Will pulling up to the curb and putting his truck in park helped more.

He jumped out and came around. “Hey, man, good to see you.” He greeted me like

nothing was wrong.

Like it was a normal Saturday, and I wasn't falling apart outside a Megamart with a cart full of groceries.

He clapped me on the arm like we were old friends, and I watched, unmoving, as he loaded my bags into the back of the truck.

"I can just meet you back at your place if you'd rather walk." His expression was nothing but understanding. No judgement. No barely hidden smirk like he thought it was hilarious. It made me want to be brave. He made me want to be brave.

"If you can run into burning buildings, I can stand a five-minute drive."

"You sure?"

Not trusting myself to talk, I nodded instead and quickly returned my shopping cart to the rows of carts just inside the store. When I came back out, Will was in the driver's seat. Reaching across, he popped the passenger door open for me.

"We can switch places if you'd rather drive."

Shaking my head, I practically threw myself into the seat of Will's truck and yanked the door shut before I could change my mind.

My hands fumbled the seatbelt, and Will ended up helping me slot the buckle into place.

The sound of it locking made me flinch like it was a gunshot echoing in the silence.

I gripped the door handle and forced another deep breath into my lungs. "Can you roll

the window down?”

“Yeah, no problem.” The window started to roll down and then the truck began to move. The sudden motion made my stomach lurch, but I leaned toward the window and sucked in a lungful of fresh air.

“Where are we going?” Will asked as he slowly made his way through the parking lot toward the exit.

“557 Spalding Avenue.”

“I know that building.”

I felt a hand on my shoulder, and then it squeezed, reassuring me without words.

If I could have gotten away with it, I’d have clung to Will like a frightened child.

The comparison wasn’t far off. Avoiding vehicles since the accident hadn’t been the best move, but it had been necessary.

I’d made do, but eventually I knew I’d have to face things head-on.

The first few minutes of the drive I spent with my eyes closed. Bile rose up in my throat, and I concentrated on swallowing it down time and again even though it felt like I was drinking battery acid.

“Almost there,” he said, his voice calm and soothing. It was probably the voice he used on little kids who got their heads stuck in railings and other random places.

The truck came to a stop, and I peeled my eyes open when the engine cut out.

“You made it.” Will’s smile was blinding and earnest. It was a stupid thing for him to be so happy about, but at least that made one of us. “How do you feel?”

Like the world’s biggest loser. Like an idiot for being scared for so long without doing anything tangible about it. “I’m—” I took a breath and let it out slowly as I gathered myself and thought about how I wanted to answer. “I’m better than I thought I would be.”

Will yanked his keys from the ignition and unbuckled his seatbelt. “Come on. I’ll help you carry everything inside.”

I lived on the second floor of a three-story building.

It was an older structure that had recently gone through a renovation to update the security doors and replace the elevator.

It wasn’t anything fancy, and it was a bit on the pricey side, but the proximity to my new job had been a factor in deciding to move in.

The unit wasn’t anything special. Galley kitchen right at the front.

It opened up to the main living area next.

A decent-sized living room with a balcony.

Another hallway that led to the bedroom and bathroom doors.

It was an unremarkable place with an unremarkable view that looked out over the street.

I’d unpacked, but it still didn’t feel like home yet.

Will set the groceries on the counter and started pulling them out of the bags.

“You don’t have to help with that.” I tried to argue, but he just looked at me and shook his head.

“I know I don’t have to. I want to.”

I envied the way he moved through the world.

Confident in who he was and what he liked.

If I’d ever felt that way, it hadn’t been recently.

The accident had robbed me of my friends and my sense of self somehow.

It was like part of me had been lost in the wreckage, and I was only now realizing it.

But now that I knew, I could do something about it.

I slid in next to Will and helped him unload the bags onto the counter. “Thanks.”

He glanced at me and winked. An unexpected thrill shot through me at the gesture, and I couldn’t begin to understand why. Or why I liked it whenever our arms would brush up against each other.

“Are you off today?”

“I go to work tomorrow morning. Why?”

I stared at the piles of groceries on my counter. “Want to stay for breakfast? We’re having... whatever you help me cook.”

“I think I can do that.”

Knowing that Will was going to stick around for a while longer loosened a knot of tension in the pit of my stomach.

It wasn't until the groceries were put away and the coffee was done that I realized the reason I was lighter and less tense was that I wasn't as lonely.

I almost felt guilty for being grateful the loneliness was gone, even temporarily, but I was able to shake it off and just enjoy Will's company. It was nice to have a friend again.

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Will

A structure fire had us up at one in the morning battling flames and trying to stop it from spreading to other nearby buildings.

Attending a fire in the early morning hours always made me feel like I was in an alternate dimension.

People milled around the edges of the darkness, wanting to get a better view.

Onlookers were wrapped in blankets and thin jackets, and they all speculated about how it might have started.

The residents had been alerted by a neighbor that their house was on fire, likely the only thing that saved them. The family sat across the street and watched their home burn. And the most we could do now was make sure no one else's house was lost to the tragedy.

Sometime after dawn, we were able to start packing it up.

The distraught family left after the roof had collapsed, and it was clear that there'd be nothing to save.

At least there were no lives lost. I so often wished I could do more, like it wasn't enough to put out the fire.

I wanted there to be more I could do for people in the aftermath.

We returned to the station exhausted and filthy. The fire had come in the last few hours of my shift. We worked a standard rotation of twenty-four hours on, forty-eight hours off, and I was definitely looking forward to grabbing a nap.

“Where are you going looking all nice?” I asked Briggs, who’d showered off and dressed in a pair of new jeans and a button-up.

“I’ve got a brunch date. It was supposed to be a breakfast date, but the fire had other ideas.”

“It generally does.” My phone buzzed in my pocket, and secretly I hoped it was Oren.

I hadn’t been able to stop thinking about him since the fundraiser at the park a couple weeks ago.

He was always on my mind and I enjoyed how frequently we were texting back and forth.

I wanted to see him in person again, but his bosses had landed a fairly big client and Oren was picking up the slack in other areas.

I knew jack shit about being a lawyer, and I had no idea about any of the stuff Oren talked about, but he delivered every bit of knowledge with confidence.

He was clearly good at what he did, and he knew it.

It shouldn’t be hot, but it was. The firm he worked for didn’t do criminal trials, but I often thought about Oren up in front of a courtroom and how he’d have the judge and jury eating out of the palm of his hand.

Did I have a lawyer kink now?

Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I frowned at the screen when it wasn't Oren's number that appeared.

Mom

Are you free for dinner tonight?

I dropped down on the bench outside the lockers and let out a breath. I didn't want to be free, but I was. Briggs had his date, and I was trying not to smother Oren.

I'm free.

Don't worry about cooking. Dad is ordering in

.

"Thank fuck for small miracles."

I'll be there at six. I just got back from a call, going to nap.

Sleep well

I needed to get a better social life, and I knew it.

But I wasn't about to say that out loud.

Out loud, I pretended to be fine. My shit was together.

Everything in life was as it should be. On the inside, loneliness was my shadow.

It was with me wherever I went, clinging to me even when I was around other people.

As time dragged on, the closet I'd kept myself in had grown increasingly stifling.

I did a lot of things out of fear, and for everything I did out of fear, I avoided ten more for the same reasons.

The person I was laid awake at night and thought about the person I might be if I were out. What would I lose?

What might I gain?

I could never come up with an answer to that last question, but I had plenty of hypothetical answers for the first. Enough to keep me silent about who I was and what I wanted.

When I got home, I stretched out on the couch and grabbed a few hours of sleep. My phone hadn't woken me up, but there'd been plenty of missed messages. Some from Briggs. Some from Mom about some church function she was still trying to rope me into attending.

Outwardly, they'd been okay with me leaving the church, but I could tell it was a secret disappointment.

They were staunch in their beliefs, and they'd raised me in the church.

I'd never believed how they did, though.

Not even as a little kid. They didn't hold it against me, but I could tell that sometimes my lack of faith made Mom sad.

If Dad was disappointed, he hid it better.

Every so often, Mom tried to lure me back in with silly church social events.

I didn't often go. The people at their church were perfectly nice, but I couldn't help feeling like they could see me for the liar I was.

It was definitely a me problem, but I hated how being there made my skin itch.

It wasn't like I had a sign above my head that said "secretly homosexual" in hot pink neon or that I farted rainbows or anything.

It was that Mom would not-so-subtly introduce me to women she met.

Women who had been told all about me—handsome, single firefighter, pillar of the community type.

There was no stopping her either. Most of the time, the women got the hint within the first few minutes of strained, overly polite conversation that I wasn't interested in playing into my mother's matchmaking schemes.

Usually I could make up an excuse about why I couldn't attend.

Sometimes I resorted to outright lying. Mom didn't expect me to suddenly rediscover my faith or anything, but I think she hoped I would.

All I needed, in her eyes, was a nice church girl to settle down with.

Three point seven kids, two dogs, a white picket fence later, and Mom would be deliriously happy.

None of that appealed to me. Maybe the picket fence, but I was also happy with my ground-level apartment and my three cacti that rounded out my plant collection.

Hopefully, one day I'd have a boyfriend to wake up next to. But in order for that to happen, I'd have to come out.

Every day that went by, I swore I got closer to it.

I spent my life peeking out of the closet, trying to imagine what life would be like if I took the door off the hinges.

Fear always stopped me. I could run into burning buildings, scale ladders, and walk through fire, but I couldn't tell my parents I was gay.

Bravery didn't always appear when I needed it.

I showed up to Mom and Dad's a little before six. I'd stopped by the bakery on the way over and picked up a raspberry tart, Mom's favorite dessert. I'd tried to make it a few times, but after the last failed attempt, I decided that it was better left to the experts.

Pulling into the driveway, I took note of the length of the grass, especially around the edges of the lawn.

Mom and Dad didn't live in a huge house, but it was on a corner lot which meant there was extra land for them to take care of.

The grass was thick too. It could be a bitch to cut when it got too long.

Not bothering to knock, I went inside with the dessert.

I kicked my shoes off by the door and padded through to the kitchen.

Their house was an older style that hadn't been renovated to make everything open.

Dad brought it up once or twice, but Mom remained adamant that she liked having separate rooms for everything.

I pushed the kitchen door open and slipped inside. “Hey. Looks like the lawn is a bit long. I’ll—” I stopped in my tracks when I noticed another person in the kitchen.

“Honey, you’ve met Chrissy, right?”

Dread bubbled up in my stomach although I’d halfway expected something like this.

It had been a while since Mom’s last attempt.

I shot Dad a look, and he glanced away. Clearly he was on Mom’s side or at least not willing to get in the middle.

More than for myself, I felt bad for Chrissy.

Whatever my Mom had told her about me was obviously enough to get her over here for dinner.

“I think I’ve seen her around.” I tried to keep my voice even to hide how irritated I was. I’d asked Mom to stop trying to set me up with women, and she always listened. For a few months anyway. And then suddenly she’d orchestrate a reason to throw a woman into my path.

“Your mom has told me a lot about you.” Chrissy looked at me with a gaze that I could only describe as hungry. Her eyes traveled down my body, then back up again and her smile widened.

“I wish I could say the same.” I set the dessert box on the counter. “I brought your favorite.” Keeping my annoyance inside for the next couple hours was going to take

every bit of strength I had left. When Chrissy was gone, I was going to have another chat with Mom about my love life.

Dinner started off perfectly well, all things considered. Dad was on the quiet side, as was I. But Mom and Chrissy held the conversation up all by themselves.

“Will is an amazing cook. Too bad he doesn’t get it from me.” Mom laughed and looked at me with a hopeful expression, wanting me to join in. I managed a tight smile and then Mom was off on another tangent about me.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. Normally, I was a good son and stayed present during dinner and didn’t check my phone, but I’d had enough of the conversation around the table.

I knew it was partly my fault for not telling them the truth about me, but things like this only reinforced my decision not to tell them.

Clearly they loved a version of me that didn’t exist.

Oren’s name flashed up on the screen. He’d sent a meme, and I quickly saw the opportunity to get the hell out of there.

Call me.

Oren

??? Now?

Yes

okay...

Two seconds later the phone rang, and I frowned at the screen. “I have to take this.”

I stood up from the table and answered as I stepped away. “Hey, what’s up?”

Oren’s laughter made me feel instantly better about everything. “I don’t know. You tell me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Oh, I get it. I’m the decoy. How bad of an emergency do you need me to have so you can get out of whatever hell you’re stuck in?”

“That bad? Shit, yeah. I’ll be right there.”

“If you need an excuse to leave, tell them my hot water tank busted and flooded my house. Or maybe I was abducted by aliens. If you swing by my place when you’re done, I have a six pack in the fridge with your name on it.”

“Okay, see you soon.” I ended the call, flooded with guilt that I was using Oren to get out of dinner, but I couldn’t sit through another ten minutes of Mom talking up my every accomplishment like it was some kind of miracle I’d performed.

I wasn’t worth all the hype and the fuss, especially for someone I’d never be interested in.

“Sorry, a friend of mine has an emergency.” I stuffed my phone away like it could hide the lie I was telling. “I have to run, but the three of you can enjoy dessert for me. Thanks for dinner.”

I went back to the table and clapped Dad on the shoulder. I brushed a kiss against Mom’s cheek and gave a polite nod to Chrissy.

Three minutes later, I was out of the house, in my truck, and on my way to see Oren.

Part of me pretended that I was only going over there because Oren mentioned beer, but the bigger, stupider part of me knew I was going there because I still hadn't been able to shake my crush on him.

It didn't matter that he was straight; there was something about him that captivated me.

Truth be told, I wasn't trying especially hard to not crush on him.

It was harmless, so long as I didn't get my hopes up.

Oren

Will arrived looking out of sorts. It wasn't like I knew him well, but something was obviously bothering him. His hair was messy like he'd been running his fingers through it.

I liked the way he came into my space like he'd been there a million times before.

Like it was natural for him to make a beeline for my couch and sink down into the cushions.

His head tilted back, and he closed his eyes.

I let him have a few seconds to breathe before I went to the fridge and grabbed a beer for him.

I'd bought it a couple weeks ago intending to drink it, but I couldn't stomach the thought of touching the stuff anymore. I was fine to be around alcohol and other people who were drinking, but drinking alcohol myself made my stomach clench.

"Here. You look like you could use this."

Will cracked an eye open and took the beer from me. "Thanks."

"Long day?" I ignored the urge I had to sit next to him and sat in the recliner.

There was something about him that made me want to be close to him.

I chalked it up to the way we met. It wasn't every day I was pulled from a car wreck that could have killed me.

Maybe my brain had a bit of hero worship going on where Will was concerned.

It would explain the way I couldn't stop thinking about him.

"Some days just suck." Will opened the beer and took a long drink. He sucked in a deep breath when he was done. "God, I needed that."

"If you need to talk about it, I'm all ears."

"Let me preface this with the fact that I love my parents and any violence I might want to inflict on their persons is purely me blowing off steam, and I don't actually mean any of it."

"That bad, huh?"

He groaned. "I was at my parents' for dinner tonight, and Mom surprised me with a blind date. When I got there, some girl Mom knows from her church was there with fucking hearts in her eyes, man."

Will took another drink, and I couldn't help but watch his lips touch the can and the way his throat moved when he swallowed.

"Hence the weird phone call."

"Yeah, sorry about that, but I was fucking dying. Mom and—I don't even remember her name—were busy talking about me like I wasn't even there."

He closed his eyes again, and I realized how tired he looked. He should've gone

home, crawled into bed, and gotten some sleep, but he'd come here instead seeking comfort. Friendship.

I'd never been the guy who had a million friends.

I had Liam, and before the accident I'd had Byron and Rita.

Law school had weeded a lot of people out of my life.

I wasn't like Byron, whom everything had come easy to.

A lot of people who had been my friends had simply fallen off my radar because I was always studying.

If I wasn't studying, I was in class, and if I wasn't there, I was working shitty jobs to try and get by.

Things weren't much better now. I was still scraping by, but at least the law school part of my life was behind me. I had time for friends again. Even if my current friend pool was one singular firefighter, it was better than having no one at all.

My therapist would be proud that I'd made a friend. Even if it was kind of by accident.

"Do they often try to set you up with women?" The idea of Will going out with some woman who'd already been approved of by his parents made my stomach churn.

"Every once in a while, Mom forgets that I hate it when she meddles in my shit and she'll arrange for me to meet a nice girl from her church.

Even though I haven't gone since I was a teenager, I think Mom hopes that a nice

church girl will lure me back into the fold.

” He took another long drink of his beer.

Leaning forward, he set the empty on the coffee table.

“Another?”

“Nah, I’m good, thanks.” Will looked at me. There was a softness to his expression that made him look vulnerable. “Thanks for saving my ass today.”

“Anytime. I mean it.”

“I just wish Mom would stop dragging random women around hoping that I’ll just magically fall in love with them.”

“Are they not your type?”

His expression shuttered. “You could say that.”

“Well, if she doesn’t stop, you could always give her a set of guidelines. If she’s going to try to marry you off, the least she could do is try to match your taste a little better.”

Will scoffed in obvious defeat. “That’s not going to happen.”

His body language was suddenly different. He looked more rigid than he’d been, almost like he was bracing himself for something. But for what?

“I was mostly joking. It’s a terrible idea. No one really wants their mom to play matchmaker.”

“It wasn’t that bad of an idea, but mom will never find a girl that I’d want to settle down with.”

“Not into the religious ones?”

There was a long pause. I watched Will and the way he hunched forward.

His chest expanded with each deep breath he took.

“Not into women. Like, at all. Ever. I’m...

I’m gay.” He exhaled a shaky breath, and a half smile tried to form on his mouth, but it was like he didn’t know whether to be happy or to be sick. “I’ve never told anyone before.”

Will was gay. Will was gay and not out. To anyone but me apparently. I didn’t know what I’d done to become the one person on the planet he felt he could tell. Maybe because I wasn’t important the way his parents were, or the guys he worked with were.

Maybe he’d told me because he didn’t know me very long, and if he lost me, it wouldn’t be a big loss at all. But I chose to believe that he told me because he somehow knew that I was a safe person to tell.

“Well, I can see how that would make the blind dates with all those lovely church women extra awkward for you.” I didn’t ask why he didn’t just tell his parents or his coworkers.

People came out on their own time or not at all.

Whatever reasons he had, he’d either share them, or he wouldn’t.

The most I could do was let him know that I would be there for him.

I offered him a smile. “Just when I think you can’t get any more brave than you are, you go and surprise me.”

Will dragged his gaze up to meet mine. “Brave? How can I be brave when you’re the first person I’ve ever told that I was gay. I haven’t even said it to the guys I’ve hooked up with.”

“Well, I’m pretty sure you don’t have to say you’re at least a little bit not-straight if you’re getting frisky with another dude.”

“Frisky?” Will arched an eyebrow. “Frisky? Really?”

“There’s worse slang I could’ve used. Like bumping uglies. Who says that?”

“You just did.”

“Asshole.”

Will smiled at me, bright and not completely carefree, but he looked lighter than he had when he’d shown up. Warmth spread through me when I realized it was me who had given him that safe space to let go of some of the burden he carried.

I had a million questions for him, things like when did he know and had he ever had a boyfriend?

Why he wasn’t out was obvious if his parents were the church-going, super religious type.

Not that all church people weren’t accepting, but it often made things harder.

There could be more to it than that, but I didn't want to pry.

"If there's anything you want or need to talk about, I'm a pretty good listener."

"It's weird but just saying it out loud makes me feel like I've said enough for one day. Does that make sense?" Will wiped a hand down his face. "It was only two words."

I moved to the other end of the couch and put my hand on his shoulder. I wanted to wrap him up in a hug but kept from doing so. Still, I needed him to know that I was there for him.

"They were two important words. It can't be an easy thing to keep to yourself."

Will's next exhale looked like it deflated him. Like he breathed out every bit of angst he'd been holding on to. I felt the tension bleed out of him.

"Sometimes it's easy. Like I don't even think about it.

I just get up and do my job and it's not an issue.

But then other times, it's like I can't breathe.

Like I'm holding my breath waiting for someone to figure it out.

Sometimes I want them to. It would take the pressure off, you know. " Will scoffed. "You probably don't."

"I don't. But I can imagine how hard it is to keep something like that to yourself." I pulled my hand away and folded it neatly in my lap. "I'm glad you felt like you could tell me."

He leaned back. Resting his head against the back of the couch, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. When he opened them again, he turned his head to look at me.

“Thanks again for playing along with the phone call today. I think I’d have gone crazy if I had to sit there for another minute.”

“I know you had dinner, but if you wanted to stick around for a bit, we could order a pizza. I hooked up Byron’s Xbox the other day, but I haven’t gotten around to actually using it.”

“Byron?”

“He was...”

Will flinched. “Sorry.”

“Thanks, but it’s... it is what it is. His parents wanted me to have something of his, and we used to play Xbox when we were taking study breaks. I hooked it up the other week but haven’t been able to play it.” But if Will could be brave, then so could I.

For so long after the accident, I felt like I was living in a parallel world. One without air and sunlight. One where every step was like walking through waist-deep mud.

Since reconnecting with Will, things had started to look a little brighter.

I still had days when I couldn’t breathe.

Days when I didn’t want to get out of bed or wake up at all.

I still had days when I had to miss work because my headache came back.

I hated those days the most. They took every ounce of energy I had out of me.

Even when the headache was gone, I tended to feel shitty for a couple days after. Like it gave me a hangover.

“Are you sure?” Will asked.

I knew he wouldn’t hold it against me if I lost my shit mid-game or had a breakdown after. Or if I couldn’t do it at all. Knowing that made it easier to even think about it.

“Yeah. I think I am.”

Will grinned at me. “Great. Prepare to get your ass kicked.”

“You don’t even know what we’re playing yet.”

“Doesn’t matter because I don’t lose.”

“Oh, God, you’re one of those competitive players, aren’t you?”

He rubbed his hands together. “It’s not too late to back down.”

“In your dreams, fire boy.”

“Fire boy?” Will blinked at me. “What kind of nickname is that?”

“An appropriate one.”

“You’re going to pay for that.” He was confident that he was going to win, and he probably would.

“I haven’t played in months. Maybe you’d consider going easy on me.” I turned the console on and passed Will a controller.

“In your dreams.”

The screen came to life and for the first time in months, maybe I did too.

Will

Telling Oren that I was gay was easier—and harder—than I'd imagined coming out to be. I couldn't figure out why it had been so much easier to tell him than literally anyone else in my life. He could've rejected me just the same as everyone else still might, but deep down I knew he wouldn't.

I'd imagined coming out a million times, a million ways, to different people in my life. Briggs. The captain. My parents. But I'd never worked up the courage.

After that stupid disaster of a blind date, it felt like I was drowning. Like my closet was filling with water, and I was running out of air. I might not have blown the doors off the closet, but telling Oren had at least drained the water so I could breathe again.

Oren knowing my secret had unforeseen complications, though. After a few hours of video games, another beer, and some pizza, I'd come home feeling like I was on cloud nine. I navigated through my phone and opened Grindr. It should've been easy. Just like every other time I used the app.

This time, the minute I opened the app, a sinking feeling slithered into my guts.

Scrolling through profiles only made it worse.

Guilt nagged at me when I read back some of the conversations I'd had.

Because I feared discovery, I didn't have the most active sex life, but I'd been with a few different men lately.

The most recent was after I'd bumped into Oren again.

On a whim, I deleted the app and the sick feeling in my stomach went away.

My chest expanded, and I realized I'd been holding my breath.

Oren was a friend. An inconvenient crush at best. He was straight, as far as I could tell.

If he wasn't, then he'd had the perfect opening to tell me, and he hadn't.

Definitely straight. And I was an idiot for letting myself crush on him the way I was.

I might as well be fourteen all over again.

All pent up and halfway in love with someone I shouldn't be.

My best friend at the time had an older brother who was on the swim team, and we used to get dragged to his meets.

A bunch of guys in speedos definitely awoke my sexuality.

Giving up on my idea to find a nice celebratory fuck, I flopped down on my bed and stared up at the ceiling.

Telling Oren should've made things better not worse.

My inconvenient crush had my dick shriveling at the idea of touching anyone else.

It was all Oren's fault for being too gorgeous.

With his long, thick eyelashes and his full, pouty lips, he was pretty as hell.

My stupid dick decided to twitch at that.

At how Oren had looked earlier tonight. Not having known him before the accident, I had no basis for comparison, but he certainly seemed lighter than when we'd first reconnected.

Most of the time, Oren looked haunted. And who could blame him, having gone through what he had.

It wasn't a wonder to me why he often looked dour and deeply contemplative.

But tonight he'd smiled so wide his eyes lit up. The longer I knew him, the more like himself he seemed to be. He hadn't said as much, but he didn't have to. Anyone who had been through what he had would be changed by it. Bit by bit, Oren was coming back to life.

Perving on him would be wrong. He was straight and likely still vulnerable. But getting him out of my head wasn't possible. The harder I tried, the more I thought about him. My dick didn't care that he was straight. Not that it cared about much besides getting off.

The decision to slide my hand down my pants and grip my cock was a conscious one. I could've had a cold shower. Probably should have. Jerking off while thinking of Oren wasn't going to help the attraction go away faster. It was only going to condition me to think about him when I touched myself.

But I didn't stop. I gave my dick a couple of slow strokes, then stripped out of my clothes.

Grabbing the lube off the nightstand, I held it in one hand while I tucked an extra pillow behind my head.

I liked to see what I was doing. I'd always been a visual guy, even when it came to jerking off.

Growing up, there was a full-length mirror in the bathroom at home, and I'd spent many hours in front of it watching myself jerk off.

When you were a horny, closeted gay who didn't dare look at other guys' bodies, you learned to make do with your own.

Or maybe I was just weird.

A trail of lube drizzled from the bottle.

It landed on my cock and ran down the shaft.

The chilly lube always shocked me at first, even though I'd expected it.

Squeezing the bottle a little harder, I squirted more lube onto my dick.

It was going to be messy as hell, but coming out to Oren had energized me.

Not that he'd ever see me like this, but I could almost imagine his gaze on me.

If he did, the haunted look would be gone from his eyes, and there'd only be an inferno of lust inside him shining outward at me.

I knew I wasn't bad looking, and being a firefighter kept me in shape.

I even had a pretty decent dick. I wasn't hung, but I had a good six inches or so and a respectable amount of girth.

Enough to make a guy feel it, but not usually enough to break him.

My lube-free hand ran up my stomach and the light dusting of hair that led up to my chest. It was Oren's hand I pictured reaching for me, caressing me.

It was his touch I wanted instead of mine, but the familiarity of my own touch was comforting.

Pinching my nipples made my dick pulse. The room was silent except for the sound of my breathing and the slick squelch of lube as I fisted my cock, increasing the pace.

Spreading my legs, I reached down and cupped my sac, cradling it in the palm of my hand. Lube dribbled down from the base of my cock and trickled onto my balls. It was easy to imagine it was Oren's spit. Oren's hands. Oren's mouth on me.

My pace increased and the obscene sounds drowned out all the other noise in my head.

Reaching back, I teased my hole with the pad of my index finger.

The idea of Oren on top of me, pressing into me, spearing me open, was enough to make me come.

Release slammed into me, and I shot like a dam bursting.

My hips jerked up, fucking my fist. My greedy hole opened, yearning for something, someone, to fill me up.

My body trembled as I jerked, stroking my cock past the point of comfort.

Sucking in a deep breath, I let it out and eased my finger inside me.

The intrusion burned in a good way. In a way that reminded me what it was like to feel something.

To feel want so thick I could taste it. To feel like I might die if I didn't come again.

Jerking furiously, I came again despite the discomfort, or maybe because of it.

It was hard to tell. But by the time I pried my hand off my cock and removed my finger from my ass, I was shaking and breathless.

Spent. Covered in cum and lube and sweat.

Satisfied, but hollow at the same time. Empty in a way I hadn't felt before.

Throwing an arm over my face, I closed my eyes and laid in my own mess until my breathing returned to normal and my limbs stopped shaking. Once I thought I could stand without falling over, I got out of bed and had a quick shower. When I slept that night, I dreamed of Oren.

I was barely through my first cup of coffee when my phone buzzed to life. Seeing my mom's name on the screen made me groan, but if I didn't answer, she'd just worry.

"Good morning, Mom."

"Good morning, sweetie. How's your friend?"

I hated that I'd lied to her, but it was for the greater good.

“Everything is under control. No worries. Sorry I had to leave early.”

“That’s okay. Maybe you can meet up another time.”

Sucking in a deep breath, I pinched the bridge of my nose. If I let her keep doing this, she’d never stop, and I worried that eventually I’d go along with it just to appease her. The only thing that would accomplish would be to hurt everyone involved.

“Mom, please stop.”

“She was perfectly lovely. I’m sure you’d have liked her if you’d gotten to know her a bit better.”

“Mom.”

“She volunteers at church, helping with the little ones.”

“Mom, I’m interested in someone else.” The words rushed out of me before I could stop them. The phone was dead silent, and then Mom started talking.

“That’s wonderful. Tell me about her.”

“We’re just friends, but I’m not emotionally available to other people at the moment.

Even if it’s one-sided, I’m invested.” It was as close to the truth as I could get without telling her everything.

That the person I had feelings for was a straight man who would never look at me the way I wanted him to.

Digging my wallet out, I pulled out the pictures of us that we’d taken in the booth at

the park.

There was a shot of us being silly, then another where we were caught in what felt like a moment.

We paid no attention to the camera in that last shot, just each other.

It might have been all in my head, but it had felt like a lightning strike.

“I wasn’t aware you were interested in anyone.”

“Well, it’s kind of new. But even if I wasn’t, Mom, you’ve got to stop trying to set me up with nice church women. I’m sure they’re all perfectly lovely, but I don’t think it’s fair to them for you to talk me up and drag them around and pretend that they’re going to be the one who catches my eye.”

“I just worry about you being alone, Will.”

“I’m alone romantically, but that’s by choice for now. But I have you and Dad, and I have the guys I work with.”

And Oren. I had him too, but I left him out, partly to protect myself from her prying questions.

I didn’t know if I could talk about him without sounding like a love-sick teenager.

I could practically hear myself. Oren is so handsome.

Did you know Oren is a lawyer? Oren is so smart. She’d see through me in a minute flat.

“I didn’t know you minded.”

“Well, that’s my fault for not telling you. But now that I’ve told you, you need to promise to stop.”

“But—”

“Mom. Please.”

The longer the silence stretched, the tighter my chest felt, but after an eternity she let out a sigh.

“Okay. You win. I’ll stop. I only wanted to make sure you were happy.”

“I’m happy making my own decisions, but I appreciate your concern.”

We only talked for a few minutes after that. I could tell she was disappointed by the turn of events. Sometimes I wondered if Mom was trying to find herself a daughter more than she was trying to find me a wife.

The past twenty-four hours had been a trip. First, I came out to Oren. Then I’d had the best orgasm of my life. And now I’d finally convinced my mom to lay off with the matchmaking, and I didn’t have to lie to do it. I just omitted a few crucial truths. I could live with that.

Oren

“ And how are the nightmares?” Joanne asked.

At first I’d avoided the idea of having a therapist, but it didn’t take long for me to see the necessity of one. I’d had no one to talk to about anything. Least of all about the accident. The guilt. The way I’d felt crushed every morning simply for waking up.

Nightmares plagued me since the accident. I’d wake up sweating with the sound of screeching tires still ringing in my ears. Cold, clammy, drenched to the bone. It didn’t matter if it was midnight or five in the morning. The nightmares drove me out of bed and into the shower.

It was the lack of sleep that convinced me to see someone. Joanne specialized in dealing with people who’d been through a traumatic event. Attacks. Shootings. House fires. Car accidents.

“They don’t bother me the way they used to. Maybe they’re not as bad? I don’t know. But I’m sleeping better.”

“That’s good.” She smiled at me.

The thing I liked about her the most was that she seemed genuine. I wasn’t just a job to her. My problems weren’t just a puzzle for her to solve.

“And how’s work? Are you still taking the bus?”

Joanne was certain that if she could get me behind the wheel, my nightmares would stop.

That it would be a physical manifestation of me taking control of the situation or something.

I forgot her exact reasoning, but the idea of driving still made me cringe.

Though if Will was with me, I might manage it.

Will wouldn't let anything happen to me. He was my friend.

"I'm still taking the bus. I haven't—I'm not ready to drive yet."

"That's okay. One step at a time."

"I did make a friend, though." Thinking of Will made my hands sweat, and I wiped my palms down my thighs.

Ever since the accident, I'd been a little obsessed with him.

The obsession had started to fade, though, the better I got.

Until I'd met him in that pub. He was all I thought about now.

Morning, noon, and night. Was it normal to obsess about a friend? To think about them all the time?

"Is it a work friend? You've mentioned Hal, and your boss, Simon."

"It's not a work friend. He, um—he was there. At the scene." I held my breath

waiting for Joanne to disapprove. There had to be some fancy term about making friends with the person who saved your life. Trauma bonding? But I was the only traumatized one.

“What role did he play at the scene of the accident?” Joanne’s brow furrowed the way it did when she was thinking hard about something. Not necessarily with disapproval, but because she liked to have all the facts.

“He pulled me out of the car.”

It wasn’t that simple. He’d distracted me. Commanded my attention. Comforted me. And when he pulled me from the wreckage, he let me cling to him like he was the only thing in the world that could save me.

“He’s a fireman.” I elaborated for her. It seemed important that she knew. “I was at a work thing, one of the after-work dinners and drinks that you’ve encouraged me to join, and he was at the pub with his crew.”

He’d been easy to spot. I’d thought of his face so often in the days since.

It was easier to think about him than it was to think about Byron and Rita and the smell of smoke.

Burning rubber. Copper pennies. The gentle timbre of his voice comforted me to remember when all I could dream about was squealing tires and sirens.

The details of how the accident happened were still gone.

I doubted I’d remember exactly what happened, and I didn’t want to.

“How did you come to be friends?” Joanne wasn’t the take notes type of therapist

who spent the hour staring at a yellow legal pad, drawing doodles or writing down how damaged I was.

Instead she sat in an oversized chair with a giant cup of coffee and a water bottle that was big and heavy enough to use as a weapon should the need arise.

Part of me wished she'd use the yellow legal pad and quit looking at me, patiently waiting for me to untangle my thoughts and give her an answer.

"I saw him at the pub and said hello. I found out what station he works at, and I went there one day. He invited me out to a big fundraiser his station held. It was at the park. There was all kinds of food—he made chili. I'd mentioned it to Hal, who mentioned it to Simon, who thought it was a great idea to get the office out into the community.

Anyway, I went. We ate chili and just walked around for a while. "

I kept the details to myself. The face painting. The photo booth. The butterflies that had taken up residence in my stomach whenever I thought about him. About that day.

"I let him drive me home."

Her eyebrows wicked up to meet her hairline. "Really? And how was that?"

"Not as terrible as I thought, but not super great."

She nodded as though she expected that exact answer. "It makes sense that you'd feel safe with him, given your history."

As much as she was right, that Will did make me feel safe, like nothing bad would happen with him around, he also terrified me.

I couldn't breathe around him sometimes.

It was like there wasn't enough oxygen to fuel my body when he was near.

My skin got tight, and even my hair stood on end like it was reaching for him.

"What's your friendship with him like?"

"Easy. He gets that I'm still messed up because of the accident."

Joanne pinned me with a hard look, and I rolled my eyes at her.

"Fine. He understands that I've been through a traumatic event, and that I'm still working through it, and he doesn't hold it against me. Is that better?"

"Yes. How we talk to ourselves matters. You're not messed up. You went through something scary and tragic. Tragedy changes us. If you were unchanged, it wouldn't be trauma."

Heaving a sigh, I leaned back and glanced at the clock. "Looks like our time is up, Doc."

She didn't bat an eyelash at the clock. "You've made good progress, Oren.

I'm glad to see your quality of life improving.

I want you to work on the way you talk about yourself, especially in relation to what you've been through.

You're not messed up; you're working through a traumatic event.

You're not a bad person, you're a person something bad happened to.

You've come too far to participate in self-sabotage. ”

“You mean not only do I have to come back, but I have to be nice to myself in the meantime? Geez, Joanne, I thought you liked me.”

Joanne shook her head, but she had a smile at least. There had been sessions that ended with no one smiling.

“Do you have a therapist? Genuine question. Like, you sit here all day and listen to people who've all been through some shit. Doesn't that, like, get you down?”

Joanne's curious head tilt was my first cue that maybe I'd asked an inappropriate question. But then her lips stretched into a soft smile.

“You're kind to worry about me, Oren. Yes, I have a therapist. For more reasons than the job I do. But that's between me and my therapist.”

I pushed myself to my feet. “Fair enough. Same time next month?”

“You got it. I'll email you some more in-depth information on self-talk and the effects of it.”

Joanne and I discovered that I often did better if the bulk of the information I was supposed to take in came in written format. It was probably a throwback from all the studying I'd done in law school.

Especially to begin with, the therapy sessions had been too emotionally taxing for me to take in everything.

After a particularly hard session, I'd gone home and found myself googling things she'd said to me, eager to know more.

I'd brought my newfound knowledge with me to the next session.

Joanne had asked if it would be okay, if I thought it might be beneficial, for her to email me information relevant to our sessions.

Things got easier after that. I'd come to therapy and dump all my bullshit—sorry, work through my trauma with her in person, and then she'd send homework to my email.

I let myself out of her office and nodded at the person waiting for their session.

There was an unspoken rule of the waiting room in a therapist's office and that was if you saw me, no you didn't.

Our eyes might meet, but mostly we let our gazes slide over the other person.

People in Joanne's waiting room had been through enough shit without feeling like they were being gawked at by other patients.

And half the time the person leaving was a wreck.

I'd walked out of there with blotchy, tear-stained cheeks and red-rimmed eyes before. Hair wrecked from shoving my fingers through it. My body held together somehow, despite feeling like broken glass and dust inside.

Today was the best I'd felt after leaving an appointment. Joanne would want me to take credit, but I had to give some to Will. The longer I was around him, the more alive I felt. The more I wanted to live.

To begin with, I'd merely wanted to get through the day without breaking out into a cold sweat or flinching at the sound of a siren.

My goals had changed even before Will came into the picture, but the longer I was around him, the more I realized how much I'd missed out on before.

How much of myself I'd buried into books and studying.

I hadn't felt lost before, but now I knew that I was.

Other than law school and getting a job at a firm somewhere, I'd had no other goals.

No real relationships other than the ones I was forced to have in school. Except Byron and Rita.

Their absence was a gaping chest wound right after the accident. I'd struggled to breathe. To function. Just getting through each day was hell. Even eight months later—seven months, three weeks, and five days, but I tried not to keep track—I couldn't breathe through the loss sometimes.

I'd had to take things minute by minute at first. Then hour to hour.

Eventually I'd worked up to day to day. I never wanted to go back there, and until I met Will, I feared that I would.

That the grief would somehow get too big for me and eat me alive.

Even when I'd forced myself to get a job and go to therapy, I worried that I'd slide back down into the abyss and there'd be no one to throw me a lifeline.

Then I met Will. Knowing him didn't make the fear go away, but I knew if I needed

one, he'd be a lifeline for me.

But knowing him also made me feel like maybe I didn't need a lifeline.

Will saw horrible shit all the time, and he managed to be full of light and life in a way I'd never seen before.

My guess was that because he saw that shit, he was also in the unique position to witness miracles.

The people who jump out of windows and survive house fires.

The cats who fall out of trees but are unharmed when they land.

And the people like me who shouldn't have made it but somehow did.

I snapped a selfie and tagged it freshly-therapized , then sent it off to Will.

He sent a reply back a half second later.

Therapy looks good on you

Grinning, I tucked my phone away and strode toward my bus stop.

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Will

The first day back at work after my confession, I kept waiting for everyone to comment something to me.

About how I was different now, but the changes in me were only on the inside.

On the outside, I was the same Will Dorsey.

Nothing had changed, not that they could tell.

Inside, I felt different. Something me had shifted. It was subtle at first.

It started out as a warm, relieved feeling, like stepping into a cozy house and only then realizing how cold you'd been.

For the first time, someone knew me. Knew the thing I held closest to myself.

And he hadn't rejected me. I'd always feared that coming out meant rejection, meant not being accepted.

Oren accepting me didn't mean that everyone would, but someone had.

If I'd thought I was comfortable in my skin before, it was nothing compared to now.

I felt invincible. Oren knew I was gay, and he was fine with it.

I'd told him more than a week ago, and nothing between us had changed.

We talked every day. Less when I was on duty, but even when he was at work he found a spare minute now and then to shoot me a meme or a text about something he thought was interesting or funny.

His newest obsession was sending me pictures of food and asking me to cook it for him.

It was supposed to be all in fun, but I'd secretly been looking up Beef Wellington recipes after he sent me a few pictures in a row with drooling emojis.

It didn't matter to me that Oren was straight.

I wanted to make him happy. He was my friend, and after what he'd been through, he deserved a bit of happiness.

We didn't talk about the accident anymore.

He found out what he'd wanted to know and then we'd moved on from that subject.

There was a lot of unpacking he had to do about it, I guessed, anyway.

I'd never been through something like that, but I'd been there when lives were irrevocably changed.

It wasn't something most people could process in a single conversation.

Wellington, as it turned out, wasn't as hard as I feared.

My first attempt came out looking like the dog's dinner, but the second one had

turned out much better.

Instead of inviting Oren over for dinner and making him navigate public transit, I loaded everything into containers and tucked them into an insulated bag.

Twenty minutes and every red light in town later, Oren met me in the hallway outside his apartment.

He was dressed in sweats and a slightly too-tight tee, but clearly he'd been working as evidenced by one pen clipped to the collar of his shirt, another tucked behind his ear, and the ink marks on his hand.

"Well, this is a nice surprise." Oren's smile grew when he saw the insulated bag. "Dinner?"

"I've been working on a new recipe, and I need a guinea pig."

"Then you're in luck because I've been working all day and could use a break."

"It's Saturday."

I followed Oren into his apartment. The kitchen was right off the entrance, so after I toed my shoes off, I went to the counter and started unloading the food.

Oren grabbed plates and cutlery for us. "Is this a ketchup kind of meal?" he asked.

"God, I hope not. But I guess we'll find out. What are you doing working on a Saturday, though?"

"It might shock you to know that my firm is a very busy place. But also that I have zero social life. Making friends never was my strong suit, and in law school, not only

was I too busy for friends, I already had Byron and Rita. I didn't need anyone else."

"Well, if it makes you feel better, you're the only friend I have that I don't also work with."

Oren's smile disarmed me, and I nearly fumbled the container holding the Wellington.

"It actually does."

My stomach did a happy little flip. Making Oren happy made me happy.

My crush was officially out of control. I knew it before I came over.

I'd had crushes before, but none of them had inspired me to learn to make Beef fucking Wellington because of a couple drool emojis.

None of them had ever stolen my breath with a look or made my pulse race by simply brushing against me accidentally.

None of their approval had seemed necessary to my continued existence.

And as time wore on, my crushes faded away like a sun-bleached photograph.

Not Oren. The longer I knew him, the more I wanted to know him. The more I was around him, the deeper I cared. I was falling for him. Hard. It didn't matter that he was straight. My heart kept ignoring that fact. Much to my eventual detriment.

I hadn't yet figured out how I was going to handle being halfway in love with Oren and continuing to be his friend.

I couldn't even pursue getting laid because the only man I could think of was Oren.

My dating apps had sat untouched for weeks, and I didn't see myself going back to them anytime soon.

Not for as long as I was hung up on Oren.

"Is that..." His voice wavered. "Did you make me Beef Wellington?"

"Well, you sent enough drool emojis to drown my phone. So I took a crack at it. This is Wellington 2.0. The first one was more like Frankenstein than a Wellington."

"Frankenstein's monster, you mean. Frankenstein was the doctor."

"Fucking lawyers." I grinned and bumped my shoulder against Oren's. When we were together, it was like my body found different ways to seek out his touch. I tried not to be obvious about it, but sometimes it happened automatically, like my body sought him out without the permission of my brain.

"I still can't believe you made me a Wellington." Oren met my gaze then glanced away, suddenly looking sheepish. "Is it alright if I confess that I've never had it, so I don't even know if I'll like it.?"

A laugh tore out of me, and I plunked a piece of it onto his plate, then another onto mine. "That's fine. But, really, it's beef. What's not to like. And we never know what we like until we try it, right?"

"Right." Oren tugged his gaze away and cleared his throat. "Right. Ah, this looks amazing."

Opening the rest of the containers revealed mashed potatoes, gravy, and a side of

roasted carrots. We filled our plates, and Oren directed us to the living room. The dining room table was currently covered in lawyering stuff. Books and papers surrounded his laptop.

“What are you working on?” I asked, motioning to the sea of legal stuff.

“Oh, I’m trying to close a few legal loopholes. It’s not that thrilling, I promise. Not half as thrilling as spending the day making this. Holy shit, it smells unbelievable.”

“Thanks.” Balancing my plate on my lap, I slowly cut into my Wellington, and I waited for him to do the same. I watched, holding my breath as he cut off a piece and popped it into his mouth.

The moan he let out made my cock twitch to life. His eyes fluttered shut, and he let out another happy-sounding noise. It should be illegal to make sex sounds while eating. Or at least frowned upon more than it clearly was.

“Will... oh, my God. This is...”

The look on Oren’s face made it clear he was truly enjoying himself. It was hard not to picture him underneath me making those noises. That face. That open expression of rapture. It was obscene.

I was obscene.

“Try a piece,” he urged me, and I tore my eyes away from him and concentrated on getting a bite onto my fork. Did he notice that my hands trembled? That I could scarcely breathe around him sometimes because the want was so ferocious? I felt his stare on me while I tried my first bite.

“Holy shit,” I said through a mouthful of food.

“Right? You outdid yourself. This is amazing. If you ever want a career change, you should become a chef.”

I shook my head. “Nah. I like cooking too much to turn it into a job. You know what I mean.”

Oren laughed. “I don’t think I’ve ever had a hobby that I liked enough to worry about losing enjoyment if I turned it into a job.”

“Is working the weekend alone in your apartment your hobby, Oren?” I popped another bite into my mouth.

“That and jerking off.”

It was funny. Truly. And if Oren thought my sudden coughing fit was brought on by a laugh that made a piece of Wellington lodge in my throat, then he’d never know that it was the way I instantly pictured him naked and writhing under his own touch, then under mine.

And he’d never find out because I was going to die.

Coughing a couple times, I reached for a drink but realized there wasn’t anything handy to wash the food down with. Making a fist, I pounded on my chest and that’s when Oren’s laughter died.

“Will? Shit.” The plates disappeared from our laps, and then he was hauling me to my feet. His arms wrapped around me from behind. His grip tightened on me

and then I felt the first plunge of his entwined hands as he squeezed me. The first squeeze did nothing.

“Shit. Shit. Don’t worry, Will. I got you.”

Oren did it again. It hurt far more than I expected it to.

Especially because by this time I was getting no air.

Black spots swam in my vision. Then Oren did it a third time.

He squeezed me so hard and so sudden that the piece of food flew out of my throat and landed... somewhere. It didn’t matter where.

Breathing was a wonderful thing. I sucked in great lungfuls of air, gasping and coughing when I did. Oren was still swearing, but less frantic now.

“Sit down before you fall over.” He steered me to the couch, and I sat down gratefully, suddenly aware of how close to death I’d been. If I’d been alone, I wouldn’t have made it.

He appeared at my side a second after I’d had that terrible thought and pressed a drink into my shaking hand. “Take small sips.”

He rubbed a hand up and down my back. I loved that he didn’t mind touching me. I needed his touch. His presence reassured me that everything was okay when it had almost not been okay.

A few sips and some more coughing later, my appetite was thoroughly ruined, but Oren was still glued to my side.

“How do you feel?”

The furrows between his eyes had never been deeper. His eyes shone, and I saw my

own fear mirrored back at me. I'd been through a lot of shit, but usually it was me pulling people out of danger.

"Like I choked on the whole cow." My throat hurt and my voice came out raspy, which might have been sexy if it hadn't been so traumatizing.

"But you're okay? Right?"

I took a deep breath, slowly, just in case it triggered more coughing. But other than my sore throat, I seemed to be fine.

"Yeah. I think I'm okay."

"Good."

His gaze held mine and it was like I could see him think. Like his eyes were windows into what was going on inside him. Gears turned as his mind whirled at a million miles an hour.

His hands moved to my face. His fingers slid through my hair, thumbs against my cheekbones, and then his mouth was on mine. Soft, but urgent, like he needed to kiss me but feared breaking me... or feared doing it wrong.

He didn't have to worry about that. Nothing had ever felt so right. I only realized that I hadn't kissed him back when he pulled away. His eyes were wide, but he didn't let go of me.

"Oh—" A sound of wonder puffed out of him.

Oren was straight, but that didn't stop me from closing the distance between us and kissing him like he wasn't.

I slanted my mouth over his, relishing the way his breathing hitched, the way his fingers twitched in my hair, the way he gave himself over to the kiss.

Our tongues twined together, tentatively exploring. Savoring.

If nearly dying got me a kiss from Oren, I'd go through it a million times. It was worth it.

Oren

I 'd never thought of myself as anything but straight before.

To be honest, I hadn't thought about my sexuality at all.

Even as a teenager I'd been driven and hadn't made a lot of time for dating.

When I did, I usually ended up with the women who pursued me.

And then I went to law school, and I put school above everything.

With Byron and Rita around, I was never lonely enough to worry about trying to fill the romantic void in my life.

Logically, I knew that a car accident couldn't make someone change something as fundamental as their sexuality, but it had changed something.

A lot of things. My worldview for one. My perspective on my relationships and how I held myself apart from a lot of people.

Even ones I was supposed to be close to, like Liam.

I hadn't been able to hold myself apart from Will the way I did with everyone else.

Even if he hadn't been there that night, I think I'd have noticed him anyway.

Will Dorsey was sunshine. A refreshing breeze.

Fresh air. His presence calmed me. I felt more myself around him than I'd felt in a long time.

I thought about him all day long. Every day. Far more than I'd ever thought about Byron when he was alive. More than I'd thought about anyone. The highlights of my days were his calls and his text messages. I liked it best when we managed to hang out in person, like tonight.

He was a little quiet all day, and I hadn't expected him to come over.

Let alone with a fucking gourmet meal. And then he'd choked.

And I'd fucking saved him. And it felt like a sign from the universe, a warning or something.

I knew all too well how easy it was to lose someone, but the stark reminder of how fragile life was compelled me to act.

Up until I kissed him, I didn't realize how badly I'd wanted to. His mouth was soft but immobile in his surprise. I'd pulled away, but in the length of a blink he chased me down. The only thing better than kissing Will was being kissed by Will.

I hadn't kissed anyone in so long that I really had no frame of reference, only that it was the best kiss of my life. It still would have been if I'd kissed a thousand people before him. In reality, there was only a handful, but there might as well have been none.

I'd never questioned my sexuality before. Then I'd kissed him, and he'd kissed me back and my cock was harder than granite. His lips were firm, his mouth hot, the grip

he had on me was tight as if he was afraid I'd vanish into thin air. The tighter he held me, the harder I got.

Nothing mattered. Not my sexuality or the way I thought I'd die if he stopped kissing me.

The past was gone. The future didn't exist. For a brief moment, everything was blessedly silent in my brain.

It was like static, the way the world sounds when you're underwater and all you hear is your pulse roaring in your ears.

Will was the first to pull away, but he didn't let go.

He didn't let go and neither did I. I thought I might fall apart if I did.

"That was..." Will trailed off

His voice still sounded ruined, and I wondered if he was really okay after what had happened. I meant to ask, but my brain kept short-circuiting.

"Incredible." I finished the sentence for him. His grip tightened ever so slightly. If I wasn't aware of every atom where his body touched mine, I might have missed it.

"Oren..." He took a breath and shut his eyes.

I loved the way he said my name.

"Will, I?—"

"Are you straight?" His eyes opened and he stared into mine. He'd see the lies if I

were bold enough to tell any. I wasn't. I couldn't lie to him. Not ever. Not about this.

"I don't know. I don't—I've never been attracted to anyone the way I am to you. Is that a problem?"

Will was silent for so long that I feared the worst. Had I just fucked everything up between us with my foolish kiss? I'd wanted to do it, so I'd done it with little thought about what Will might want.

But he kissed me back.

He. Kissed. Me. Back.

Clearly I wasn't alone in my feelings. Whatever they were. Attraction? Infatuation? Obsession? Everything was suddenly tangled and complicated. Everything except how much I wanted to go back to kissing him. Life didn't make sense to me lately.

I ached when he pulled away from me. His eyes were twin storms. His lips were still a temptation.

My gaze flicked back and forth between his mouth and his eyes.

I'd never noticed a man's mouth before, but I had trouble looking away from Will's.

I knew the softness of his mouth on mine, and now I wanted to know what it would feel like on other parts of my body.

Heat surged through me, and I forced myself to take a slow, deep breath.

"I wouldn't be mad if we kissed again," I told him. "I don't think that makes me very straight, Will."

He ran a hand through his hair. The look he gave me made my heart stop.

“I don’t want to be an experiment, Oren.”

“That isn’t what that was.” The words rushed out of me as desperation demanded I state my case before I lost him completely.

“It wasn’t some kind of sexuality crisis where I just wanted to see what it was like to kiss a guy.

I wanted to kiss you, Will. Not because you’re a guy, but because... well... because you’re you.”

He’d kissed me back and it hadn’t taken long during that kiss for me to start wanting more. His touch on my skin. His mouth. I wanted his warmth against me. When he’d clung to me, the solid form of his body was reassuring. Kissing Will was wonderful. Amazing. I wanted to do it again and again.

“We don’t have to do anything you don’t want,” I blurted. “I should have asked permission or something before kissing you. But I just... you choked, and the thought entered my head that I almost missed my chance.”

The furrow in Will’s brow deepened. “Your chance?”

A laugh escaped me, small and weak, barely a sound at all.

I balled my hands into fists so I wouldn’t reach for him.

How could I convince him he wasn’t some kind of crisis of sexuality experiment?

I was too old and too alone to worry about what other people would think of me

kissing men. Not men. Me kissing Will.

“I’m afraid I’ve become rather obsessed with you.

” Reaching for my wallet, I pulled out my half of the pictures we’d taken in the photo booth at the fundraiser that day.

Will’s eyes flashed when he recognized the pictures.

“The more time I spend with you, the more I want to spend time with you. It’s a vicious circle, really.

I know you’re my friend, and if we can’t kiss and stay friends, then I’ll keep you as a friend. ”

He still didn’t say anything. Nodding, I tucked the photos back in my wallet and tucked it into my pants pocket. If I’d been in his apartment, I’d have made a run for it by now, but I couldn’t exactly run out and leave him here.

“Oren,” Will said, his voice full of regret. I could already tell he was trying to find a way to let me down easy. “Plenty of people develop feelings for someone who was there during a high stress or dangerous situation. But those feelings usually fade.”

Horried, I looked at Will. My heart clenched and crumbled. “You think this is some kind of hero worship crush? That my feelings couldn’t possibly be real because of how we met?”

“It’s happened before.”

“But did any of those people get to know you? Did they show up at a fundraiser and eat your chili and play stupid games with you? Did they exchange numbers and text

messages with you? Did you send them memes that made you think of them? Were any of them your friends?”

“Trauma can have a profound effect on us.” Will sounded robotic, like he was reciting things he’d read in a textbook or some shit.

“Don’t tell me about the profound effects trauma can have.”

Rage boiled up inside me. The room was too hot.

Too small. Too bright. My skin was too tight.

My breath too short. “I might have lost my friends, but I didn’t lose my fucking mind.

And I didn’t magically just bump my head and discover I like men.

Hell, I don’t like men. I like you. You, Will.

Not because of the wreck, because—forget it.

” I wasn’t about to pour my heart out any more than I already had.

Listing the reasons I liked him seemed pathetic.

Something a love-struck twelve year-old might do.

Sucking in a breath, I steeled myself. “I think you should leave.”

“Oren—”

“Excuse me.” Like a coward, I slipped into the bathroom and shut the door. I threw

the lock and turned the shower on, even though I wasn't about to get in it. I just needed to not hear him leave.

Fuck Will for thinking my feelings were nothing but trauma.

Fuck him for not thinking he was worth liking. Worth kissing. Fuck me for ruining everything. I put the lid down on the toilet and sat. Burying my face in my hands, I waited for the humiliation to subside. For the anger to ebb and leave only ice-cold regret behind.

Several minutes had gone by before I turned the shower off.

I strained to hear anything beyond the walls of the bathroom, but of course I wouldn't.

Will was gone, and it was my fault. I'd kissed him and driven him away.

I should've guessed that he wouldn't want to run around kissing every man he knew.

But I'd hoped he wanted to kiss me. Lesson learned.

I couldn't hide in the bathroom forever, as much as I'd like to. Standing, I went to the sink and splashed some water on my face. I dabbed my face dry with a hand towel and unlocked the bathroom door.

Taking a deep breath, I braced myself and opened the door, finally ready to face my empty apartment.

Will stood there, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest.

My mouth opened and then closed again. He pushed away from the wall and

unfolded his arms, letting them drop to his sides.

There were a million things I could say, but none of them felt like the right thing. So I said nothing at all.

Will took a step forward. Then another. I didn't know who moved first. Maybe it had been both of us colliding like magnets giving in to the pull between us. But suddenly Will's mouth was on mine again. His hand fisted my shirt. The other cupped my cheek and kept me close to him that way.

Did I know what was going on? Not anymore, but I couldn't find it in me to care.

I was kissing Will. He was kissing me, stealing my breath and my ability to think like a rational human being.

I should stop him and make sure this was what he really wanted, but my brain and my body weren't communicating.

My brain was caught between the joy of getting what I wanted and the fear of losing it, and my body was pressing itself against Will, seeking friction and closeness and companionship.

Seeking everything it knew it had been missing.

Later, my brain would have questions, but it was content in the moment to let my body lead. I put my arms around Will's waist and pulled him closer. When our dicks collided, I sucked in a breath.

He stopped kissing and pulled back. He stared into my eyes with a gaze hotter and more open than anything I'd ever seen. No one had ever looked at me the way Will was looking at me.

“Yes?” he asked, subtly grinding himself against me.

“Fuck, yes.” I no sooner got the words out and Will’s mouth was back on mine. He turned us and pressed me against the wall, caging me with his body. At some point, I’d want him to explain his sudden change of heart, but right now I wanted to see what it felt like to be happy.

Will

I 'd stood on the precipice of the biggest mistake of my life.

When Oren left the room and barricaded himself in the bathroom, I knew what an idiot I was.

My fear had made me stupid and unkind. There would always be the small chance that Oren had fixated on me because of what he'd been through and how we met, but I had to trust him to know his own mind.

Leaving wasn't an option. If I left, that would be the end of us.

Of whatever friendship we'd nurtured, of all the memes we sent.

If I left, I had a feeling he'd never let me back in.

As much as I didn't want to be an experiment for a straight boy, I had to believe that that wasn't what this was.

That Oren wasn't the kind of person who would throw himself at a man just to see what it was like.

As angry as he looked, he'd been far more hurt underneath. Behind the fire in his eyes, he was made of spun glass. If I left, he'd recover. He'd pick up his pieces like he did after the accident. But I wondered if I'd recover.

I'd come out to him, and that meant something to me. Oren was the one person I could be my whole authentic self with. I stood, and instead of my feet carrying me toward the exit, I went deeper into his apartment.

A new kind of fear bloomed in my chest. What might happen to my heart if I didn't turn and leave? Oren already had my heart, but the question was did I stay and risk him breaking it or leave and break it myself?

The bathroom door opened, and I knew at that moment there'd never be any leaving for me. Not unless he made me go.

As suddenly as he'd bolted for the bathroom, he was in my arms. His body warm and solid and perfect against mine.

Kissing Oren made the world go fuzzy around the edges.

Our dicks pressed against each other, and I had the presence of mind, only just barely, to pull back and check in with him.

Being ready to kiss a man didn't mean Oren was automatically ready for everything else that came with it.

"Yes?" My entire universe hinged on a single word. I'd meant to be more articulate, but all my thoughts were scattered, taking my words with them. And then came Oren's response, an enthusiastic "Fuck, yes," and I was breathing again.

And then we were kissing. Wild and frantic. I spun him and pinned him against the wall. And kissed him some more. Harder, with tongue. His hands mapped my body. Fingers dug into my back, my sides. Oren cupped my ass and pulled me in tighter, groaning into my mouth when our bodies meshed together.

His neck was a temptation I could no longer resist, and I broke away from his mouth and trailed kisses down his lightly stubbled jaw. The sounds that came out of Oren were sweeter than any symphony. One of his hands slid between us. Without hesitation, he cupped my dick through my pants.

I sucked in a breath and then playfully scraped my teeth against the flesh of his neck. Oren squeezed my cock in response, letting out a moan of his own when I did it again.

His touch wasn't that of some mildly curious straight boy who wanted to see what it was like to touch a dick that wasn't his. It was the touch of a curious new lover, exploring how to make the other person happy. Learning what they liked through trial and error.

"Is this okay?" His voice was weak and thready, hitching when my mouth moved against his skin.

"You can do whatever you want to me, Oren. If I don't like something, I'll stop you."

He angled for another kiss, and I gave it to him. Softer this time. More controlled. I put my hands on his waist and let him run the show. His touch vanished for a second, and he pulled his shirt up, breaking the kiss to yank it over his head.

Oren was thinner than I'd imagined him to be, but no less perfect than he'd been in my mind.

Every part of him was clearly defined and well-constructed.

Broad shoulders, narrow hips. Dips behind his collarbones that would be perfect for kissing.

A hint of abdominal muscles. Pretty pink nipples with a dusting of hair on his chest.

His fingers fumbled with my pants until he got the button open and the fly down. His touch was more certain than I'd expected, but still gentle and exploratory. Still full of wonder as he learned what I liked.

Everything. I liked everything.

When was the last time I'd made out with a man? Let alone fully clothed. Oren's hand snaked into my pants, and I groaned when his palm slid over the head of my cock. I was hard enough to hammer nails, and all it took for my cock to start leaking was Oren to pay it the smallest bit of attention.

"I don't know what I'm doing," he confessed, but he didn't move away from me. His other arm wrapped around me, and his hand slid up and under my shirt. I stopped and pulled it off, nearly desperate to feel more of his skin against mine.

"I promise you're doing just fine."

"I want to do better than fine." Oren pouted.

God, he was ridiculous. A little perfectionist probably. Couldn't do anything by half measures. Had to give his all to everything he did. He'd probably study me like I was a test he needed to pass.

"Just do what feels good when it's done to you."

Oren laughed, brushing his thumb over the head of my cock. Precum leaked and was absorbed by my briefs. "I haven't been touched in so long I'm shocked my dick didn't turn to dust."

“Did you want me to touch you, Oren?” I ground into him. Sliding a leg between his, I pressed my thigh into his dick and let him writhe against me.

“I’d do fucking anything for you to touch me.”

“Where’s your lube?”

Oren tilted his head toward a door. “In there. My bedroom.”

The last time I was with a guy, it had been a quick exchange of blowjobs in a less than sanitary bathroom at a gay club in the next town over. I’d gotten off, but it wasn’t satisfying. I wanted to be more than a means to an end for someone.

I wanted someone to look at me like I mattered. Like they wanted me for longer than an orgasm. Kind of like how Oren was looking at me now, eyes all hooded, his lower lip caged between his teeth.

Leaning in, I brushed my lips against his.

His body relaxed against mine, and I gathered him close again, wrapping my arms around him, deepening the kiss.

Our tongues tangled until I was short of breath.

The room spun when I pulled away. Oren’s fingers slid into my hair, making me shiver as he toyed with the short strands at the back of my neck.

He took initiative and towed me into his bedroom.

His room smelled of him, earthy and clean.

It was tidy, like the rest of his apartment.

A chair sat in the corner with a suit jacket and a tie draped over the back.

Polished black shoes were tucked underneath.

The laundry basket next to it sat overflowing.

The bed was unmade, and Oren flung the burgundy comforter onto the floor. A bottle of lube sat on the nightstand, and I tried not to obsess about the fact that it was identical to the one sitting on my nightstand at home.

Oren chuckled nervously. "I'm not sure what happens next. Is this where we have the whole who tops who conversation?"

I smirked at him. His lack of knowledge was both sobering and endearing.

"No one will be topping or bottoming today." Stepping forward, I crowded into his space again. I kept going until he took a step back. His legs hit the mattress, and he sat down.

He stared up at me for a moment, blinking with those round, doe eyes of his. We were roughly the same age, but his lack of experience with men made him seem younger and far more innocent than I had any business being with. Oren moved, stretching out on the bed.

"Will." A million questions were hidden in his voice, their existence given away by the slight tremor as he breathed out.

The only way I was stopping was if he asked me to.

Climbing onto the bed, I straddled him and planted my hands on either side of his head.

His hands skated up my thighs, and I watched the way his smile grew the more he touched me.

A breath puffed out of him when his hands slid up my chest. He paused at my neck and cradled it in both hands, his fingers twitching.

Then his hands slid upward, and he pulled me down to him.

I went willingly, sealing our mouths together. My tongue plunged into his mouth, and his tangled with mine. The grip he had on me tightened, and he writhed underneath me. The sounds he made had my cock leaking. Desperate, I ground against him.

“Oh, fuck,” Oren groaned. “How is that so good?” He laughed and kissed me again, a smile still on his lips as they met mine.

I had no answer for him, so I kissed him again.

And then we were both all hands as he shoved at my pants, and I fumbled with his fly.

After a hectic few seconds, he was half undressed, his pants down around his thighs.

I kicked my pants off the rest of the way.

Oren craned his head and reached for the lube, and I took advantage and mouthed his throat, his neck, below his ear.

“Holy fucking shit. You’re going to make me come and you haven’t even touched my

dick yet.” There was a desperation in Oren’s laugh that gave away the truth of his words.

I stopped kissing him and sat up. Oren’s gaze raked over my body.

I felt it like a caress, trailing down from my lips to my chest, down the line of dark hair that led to my cock.

I squirted lube into my hand and then gripped us both at once.

Oren’s whole body reacted, his back arching like a bow string.

With my other hand, I pressed him down against the mattress again.

He tipped his head back, elongating his neck.

I slid my hand up his chest and suppressed the urge to hold his throat in the palm of my hand so I could feel his pulse flutter against my skin.

Instead, I cupped his cheek. Tipping his head down, he met my gaze for a brief moment, then I started to stroke.

“Fuck my life, that’s so hot.” Oren blinked and looked down where our dicks were pressed against each other in the tight channel of my fist.

Touching Oren was the hottest thing I’d ever done.

I loved the way he fit in my hand, against my cock.

The way he shook and laughed in joy and maybe a little disbelief.

I wanted to join him, but I didn't have enough oxygen left over to use on a laugh.

Every bit of me was going into making him feel good.

He had an amazing dick. There was nothing painful about being average in this case. Average meant I could suck it down my throat and not die. I could take a dick like his ten times a day.

“Will—” He gripped my face and yanked me down to him.

He slanted his mouth against mine. Our tongues tangled.

Breath mingled. One of us moaned, and the other would answer, and then Oren was coming, using whatever he could as leverage so he could buck against me.

My name fell from his lips like it was a plea.

A prayer. Like he never wanted me to stop. Like he needed me to come too.

His cum made things slicker. Stickier. Hotter.

Better. And then I was coming, painting his stomach with my release.

Oren didn't stop kissing me. Not even when I stopped kissing him back so I could breathe.

He kissed the corner of my mouth, my cheek, my jaw.

And when I could breathe again, he kissed me on the mouth, long and deep.

The lingering kiss of a man who regretted nothing.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:33 am

Oren

The elevator lurched to a stop, and I held my breath as I stepped out into the parking garage.

My fist was clenched tight around my keys, and I only hesitated for a second before I turned and strode toward my parking space.

My car had sat untouched so long that a layer of dust had accumulated on it.

The urge to vomit hadn't appeared yet, which was progress.

After the accident first happened, the thought of getting behind the wheel made me wretch.

It didn't make sense to me. I wasn't the one driving, but after breaking out into a cold sweat every time I thought about it, I'd brought it up with my therapist and we'd done some unpacking.

The night of the accident. We'd passed the bar. We were going to celebrate. I'd offered to pick Rita and Byron up, but she said she wanted to drive. That for sure I'd never celebrate my success if I was the designated driver.

We were supposed to take a cab home. Byron and I wanted Rita to join in on the fun. I hadn't been behind the wheel, but in my head, I'd put Rita there. In my head, I should have been the one driving. I should be dead like them. Or we should all be alive. Breathing. Living.

Loving.

Will's smile flashed in my mind, and a knot of tension in my chest loosened. Not enough to convince me to unlock my car or get behind the wheel, but enough that I wanted to try. For him. For myself.

If I asked, Will would be here in a heartbeat. He'd offered to be there when I took my first spin around the block, but I knew there was no way I'd be able to drive so much as a foot with him in the passenger seat.

The sound of an engine starting nearby was enough to propel me forward, and I unlocked the driver's side door. I slipped into the seat and closed the door before I could change my mind. Like ripping off a Band-Aid.

My hand shook as I shoved the key into the ignition.

I yanked my hand away like the keys were on fire and clutched the steering wheel with an iron grip.

Breathing hurt. Thinking was agony. Memories assaulted me.

Rita. Byron. The smell of gasoline. Twisted metal.

Distant sirens. Tangy copper and flashing lights.

Survivor's guilt was a hell of a thing. Sometimes I thought it would crush me, squish me until I was flat, frozen in time like a pressed flower, plucked from the bouquet and saved when all the others were left to wilt and rot. But I wasn't a flower. I wasn't responsible for what happened.

And that was the problem. I was supposed to have been responsible.

“I’ll drive.”

“We’re already on our way to you, Oren.” Rita’s laughter rang in my ears, and I rolled my eyes.

“I don’t mind.”

“We do. You’re always the responsible one, Oren. You deserve to celebrate, and you won’t if you drive. I promise you can go back to being the designated driver after this.”

“There’s no arguing with us,” Byron said. “It’s two against one, man.”

And now it was just one. Just me. Alone with ghosts in a car I hadn’t driven since the day of the accident.

Exhaling a shaky breath, I wiped the sweat from my brow.

I wanted to do this. So many things in my life had been made more difficult by this roadblock.

Shopping. Getting to work. Going to therapy.

Everything I wanted to do now depended on the bus schedule.

Which was fine. Not entirely convenient, but doable.

There was just one thing I couldn’t do, something that I found mattered more to me than hiding away and not facing down this lingering fear.

I wanted to pick Will up and take him on a date.

He wasn't out, so no one would know it was a date but us.

Public transit was fine, but it was far more romantic to open the door for a date than it was to pay their bus fare.

In my head, I'd overcome this simply by wanting it enough, but it was clear to me after half an hour sitting in the car, my body cycling through hot and cold sweats, that it was something I'd need more work on.

Even if I managed to start the car and pull out of the parking space, I didn't feel like I'd be safe behind the wheel.

Taking the keys out of the ignition made my heart rate slow. After a few deep breaths, I put the keys back into the ignition. Then took them out. Then put them in again. I repeated this until my hands stopped shaking. Until I could do it without wanting to cry or puke.

Despite my victory, I still felt hollow when I left the car without so much as starting it.

My small win didn't feel like enough. Will dashed into burning buildings, and I couldn't start a fucking car.

Logically, I understood that progress was progress and that a month ago I wouldn't have even made it to the car before losing my lunch.

But now that I had a goal in mind, I despised myself for the stumbling block that stood in my way.

My mood hadn't improved by the next day.

Will was on shift, so our texts were sparse.

He'd explained there was a lot more to firefighting than fighting fires, and often they worked just as hard when they weren't on a call as they did when they were.

Conditioning and strength training were just the start.

I knew he had a million things to do, but knowing he was busy didn't help my mood at all.

Hal eventually noticed, because of course he did. Nothing got by Hal. Not much anyway. He sure didn't notice the way Simon looked at him. But that wasn't my business.

"Come on, thunder cloud, let's go for lunch."

Looking up from the document I absolutely hadn't been paying attention to, I furrowed my brow. "Thunder cloud?"

"Yeah. You're sitting there like a gloomy little storm cloud. Let's go for a nice long lunch." Hal tucked his hands into his pockets. "Come on. Simon already gave us the afternoon."

Flipping my document shut, I shoved it back in the file and dropped it into my desk drawer. "Oh, he did, did he?"

It wasn't a big surprise. Simon was a good guy, the kind of boss who cared about his employees. He always made sure I had time off for my therapy appointments. Sometimes I attended them from the office via a video call, but if we were doing a deeper dive, I generally went in to see her.

“Come on. We’ll walk down the block and grab a table at the pub. We don’t have to drink, but they have the best burgers.”

“I swear you’ve never met a burger you didn’t like.” I patted my pockets to make sure I had my phone. I could come back after lunch and get my laptop and stuff. Simon had given us the afternoon, but that didn’t mean I had to take it. Not necessarily.

“Burgers are life.” Hal patted his stomach. He was slightly round. The kind of physique one got from having a desk job. Hal was me in fifteen years. I hoped Will liked a bit of squish around the middle.

And there I was, marrying us off when neither one of us were out, and I was a fucking head case.

After my encounter with Will, my life-changing, universe-shattering, toe-curling, best-sex-ever encounter, I’d done a bit of soul searching.

I was definitely not straight. I wasn’t gay either.

Bisexual seemed the most likely candidate.

I liked women who were shorter than me, who had great legs and infectious laughter.

Hair color mattered less than personality, but I loved a brunette.

Apparently for men, I liked firefighters who were a little taller than I was and strong enough to lift me and fuck me against a wall and—I had to stop thinking about that before I popped a boner.

Hal didn’t talk until we were sitting in the pub. Both of us ordered sodas and bacon

cheese burgers with fries. Mayo for him, gravy for me.

“So what’s got you in such a mood today? We haven’t seen you this gloomy since you first started. Everything okay?”

“Did Simon tell you about the accident I was in?”

His eyebrows rose up and met his hairline. “No. When was this? Are you okay?”

“Sorry, I should’ve been more clear. It was months ago. Before I started working for Simon.”

Over lunch, I filled Hal in on the details of the accident. The night out. The drinks. The crash. And Will.

“We started hanging out. First at that fundraiser, but pretty often after that too.”

“I’m glad you made a friend. No offense, but you could use a few more.”

Instead of arguing with him, I dunked one of my fries into the gravy. “And if I wanted him to be more than a friend?”

Hal leaned closer. “Then you want him to be more than a friend. There’s nothing wrong with that. Is that why you’re so upset? Because you’re attracted to him or because you worry what people might think?”

“Neither, actually. I mean... I’ve never been attracted to another guy before, so it’s kind of thrown me to find out that I’m bisexual.” The confession took a weight off my chest. I took a deep breath and said it again, more for my benefit than Hal’s. “I’m bisexual. Wow, that’s...”

“It’s okay is what it is. So you’re all gloomy because you’re having an identity crisis?”

“Well, no, actually. I’m gloomy because I want to drive places, but I can’t. Like, physically can’t. I can barely get the keys in the ignition. I can’t even start the car, let alone take it anywhere.”

Telling Hal that I wanted to take Will out on a date would out Will. But my motivation didn’t matter to Hal. Only the end result.

“So you want to drive again, but you’re having some kind of mental block?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, what if I could take you somewhere that you could drive without worrying about shit like traffic?”

“You think that would help?”

“I think that if you’re worried about driving after being in an accident, that it’s not driving that scares you, it’s getting in another accident.

And I think that if you got behind the wheel where there was virtually no way to get in an accident, it might give you the confidence boost you need to get behind the wheel in other scenarios. ”

“And where is this mystical land with no traffic?”

“My cousin owns a farm outside of town. We can get you behind the wheel of one of his flatbeds, and we can drive around the property. There’s a million roads to go down, and the only traffic you might run into are some cows.”

“That is the craziest thing I’ve ever heard.” But I smiled anyway. I didn’t hate the idea.

“I can call him up and let him know we’re on our way if you want.”

“Oh, you meant today?”

Hal grinned at me. “No time like the present. Simon already gave us the afternoon. You’re already having a bad day. It’s the perfect time to go because your bad day will either improve, or it was already shit to begin with. So what’s a little more?”

“Your logic astounds me.”

He grinned at me. “You’re welcome.”

“Call your cousin. What have I got to lose?”

“That’s the spirit.” Hal looked happier than I’d ever seen him as he made the call to his cousin. It was like he’d tied his personal happiness to me in some twisted way. Like I’d made his day just by letting him help me.

It was an hour before I realized he had done exactly that, because I was his friend and he was grateful and relieved that I let him help me.

Hal was my friend. Liam was my friend. Will was my friend.

It might only be three, but it felt like three more than I deserved. Three more than I felt like I’d had that morning when I’d woken up in a bleak mood, feeling sorry for myself. Three suddenly felt like a fortune.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:33 am

Will

The day started off like shit, and it only got worse.

We'd no sooner got back from putting a car fire out, and we were called out again.

This time to a structure fire in a residential area.

House fires were the worst. I hated watching people lose so much so fast. It was part of the reason I became a firefighter, to help people on their worst days.

We arrived on scene and bailed out of the truck.

The house was already a goner. Fire had eaten its way through the roof already.

Flames poured out of the second story windows, and black smoke filled the sky.

House fires stank. The smell wasn't woodsy and nostalgic like campfire smoke, but full of toxic fumes.

Building materials. Plastic. All sorts of shit that wasn't meant to burn polluted the air.

A couple cops had been first on scene and had their work cut out for them dealing with the frantic family. Even over the roar of the fire and Brigg's baritone barking commands, I heard them crying and screaming.

Getting the hoses up and running was second nature even with the chaos around us.

We battled back the flames and tried to keep the fire from jumping to the next house.

Their vinyl siding was done for, though.

The heat from the blaze had melted it and left it hanging off the side of the house, but so far they'd been spared worse.

After a while of doing this job, it was easy to tell which houses were goners.

I'd known the roof was going to collapse when we pulled up, and it wasn't long before my guess came true.

Fires were loud events, but the moment before the roof gave in, it wobbled and it was as if the world held its breath.

A strange silence fell, and then the roof caved in, and all the sound came rushing back into the void. More crying. Briggs shouting orders at us. Cops keeping the looky-loos back and out of our way.

By the time the fire was out, it had burned down to the studs. The roof was gone, and the back wall had collapsed in on the structure soon after. All that was left was wet, smoldering rubble. Ash and soot and water-logged memories.

The homeowners clung to each other, huddled under a blanket on the side of the street in lawn chairs provided by kind neighbors. No one was hurt. They didn't have kids, and their family dog had been taken to the groomer that morning. They hadn't even been home when the blaze started.

It was still hard to look at the destruction of their lives and say shit like they were lucky. People didn't feel lucky when they were watching their world burn. They didn't feel lucky when you pulled them out of a car that their two best friends had

died in.

As it always happened lately, my thoughts circled back to Oren.

I felt lucky that I'd found him, but damned if I knew how to keep him.

He was newly... whatever he was. Newly not-straight.

And I was in the closet. Out to only him.

I'd stolen a few moments of happiness with him and called myself lucky.

But it was hard to hold on to that feeling when I knew it couldn't last.

He'd either wake up one day and realize that he wasn't into men after all.

Curiosity sated. Experiment over. Or he'd find someone who was out.

Someone who wasn't scared of losing everything.

The truth about my sexuality would rip my life apart like a house fire and it was hard to stare at the destruction of your world and say, wow, I sure am lucky .

After we finished mopping up, the crowds dispersed. Even the homeowners found a better place to be for the moment. I guess they couldn't stare at the end of their world any longer.

"Hell of a day," Briggs said, sliding in next to me in the rig. We were both covered in ash and soot. Sweat and dirt.

"Yeah." I couldn't muster up the energy to say anything more.

He arched an eyebrow. “You okay?”

“Fine. Just tired. The fire took a lot out of me, I guess.”

“Shit sain’t easy, that’s for sure. If it was easy, anyone could do it.” Briggs kicked my foot with his and closed his eyes.

It was hard for me to imagine telling him that I’m gay. Oren had taken it well, but he hadn’t known me that long. Briggs had known me for years. The captain had known me longer. He attended the same church as my parents. The same one I used to go to back when I tried to buy into all that stuff.

I heard the way people in the church talked about gay people.

There wasn’t any outright hate, but there was a lot of sympathy for their families as if they’d lost something by their kid being gay.

I never understood it. Jimmy didn’t die; he just likes dick.

He’s still Jimmy. But they whisper as though he’d passed.

Did you hear about Jimmy? His poor family.

Those whispers would be about me one day.

It would be my parents’ turn to be whispered about.

And I couldn’t even make myself think of their reaction.

They’d always dreamed of having a big family, and then there’d been just me.

I knew they weren't trying to pressure me or hurry me, but they still hoped that maybe I'd meet a nice girl and settle down.

Have a few kids for them to spoil. It was hard to know I was going to disappoint them.

Even if I stayed in the closet for the rest of my life, there weren't going to be any grandkids.

No white picket fence. No big, flashy church wedding.

Those weren't things I wanted, but I didn't know how to tell them that.

I wanted a quiet life with a good man. Maybe a dog or a cat.

It was hard not to wonder what Oren would prefer.

I almost texted him, but the rig pulled into the station and then it was time to strip out of our gear and look after the truck.

Get everything ready for the next call out.

I went about my business, aware of Briggs and the concerned way he kept looking at me.

Clearly I had to get my shit together. I couldn't stand to live under his scrutiny.

The man saw too much and what he didn't see, he guessed.

If I kept giving him reasons to worry about me, eventually he'd get to the bottom of what was really bothering me.

The thought of it made me break out in a cold sweat.

Maybe I should have left Oren's apartment when he'd told me to. Maybe I shouldn't have stuck around. Then I wouldn't know what he tasted like. What he felt like underneath me or how perfectly our bodies lined up.

When I did hook up with someone, I kept it quick.

It was a means to an end. Something to take the edge off.

But with Oren it was different. I wanted to savor him.

Each kiss was a memory I wanted to pin to my wall.

Now that we'd crossed those lines, there was no way I could put him back in the friend zone.

He was more than that to me. He'd been more than that all along.

There was something in Oren that understood something in me.

The aching loneliness I felt was felt by him too.

It was deeper than just needing a friend, or someone to talk to, or to get out more.

It was the kind of loneliness caused by an empty space inside, and Oren filled that empty space as if it had been made for him to slot into.

With twenty minutes left of my shift, Briggs tossed himself down on a chair next to me. I'd holed up in the kitchen, drank coffee, and stared at my phone without focusing on anything for the past hour.

“Let me take you for breakfast.” Briggs plucked my phone from my grasp and put it face down on the table.

“You’re bossy. Anyone ever tell you that?”

” I should’ve been annoyed, but it was too hard to be irritated with Briggs.

His intentions were always pure. He was the kind of guy who couldn’t stand to see the people around him hurting.

Part of me hated that he could so clearly see that I was struggling with something, but another part of me was secretly glad.

“I’m not bossy. I just happen to think people are better off if they listen to me.”

“Bossy,” I shot back and resisted the urge to look at my phone as it buzzed. Oren had taken up the habit of texting me when my shift was ending.

“Breakfast. My treat.”

“Hey, why does Dorsey get breakfast?” Jonas asked.

“He’s prettier than you. And he’s housebroken.”

“Pee on a table leg one time.” Jonas sold the joke with a protruding lip.

Laughter was contagious, and some of the worry lines faded from Briggs’ expression when I joined in. I’d have to work on compartmentalizing my angst in the future so it didn’t spill over into the everyday. If Briggs was noticing how tangled up I was, then something had to give.

“Come on. I’m fucking starved.” Briggs waited for me to get to my feet.

I swiped my phone off the table and put my coffee cup in the sink. “I don’t suppose this is optional. Like I can’t just say I’m tired.”

Briggs laughed and slung an arm around me, leading me toward his truck. “We’re all tired, Dorsey. You’ll have to do better than that.”

“I have to wash my hair.”

He gave me a gentle shove toward the passenger side of his truck. “Get in the truck, Dorsey. Don’t make me make you.”

I climbed into the passenger seat and tried to think of something I could tell Briggs. Honesty was out. There was no way in hell I was ready to tell him I was gay and seeing someone.

I put my seat belt on and then checked my phone. Oren sent me a text wishing me sweet dreams. And then another. All the air in my lungs was sucked out when I read the second text.

Oren had told Hal, a guy he was friends with at work, about his recent sexual awakening. He’d been not-straight for ten minutes and was already blowing the walls off his closet, and I was trying to find ways to stay buried inside.

It was easy to hate myself at that moment. Oren’s bravery wasn’t inspiring. It made me feel like a coward. All my adult life, I’d dodged and ducked and curled in on myself trying to keep that part of me hidden from people. And here was Oren, living his life the exact opposite as I’d lived mine.

“Ready to go?” Briggs hopped in the driver’s seat and turned the key before I had a

chance to say anything.

He pulled out of the parking lot and took a left, easing into the flow of traffic seamlessly.

“Look, I know the last thing you want to do is pour your guts out to me, but that’s exactly why you should.

Whatever is going on in your head is distracting you. ”

“I’m fine.” A lie. A big, fat, fucking lie.

Briggs scoffed because he knew bullshit when he smelled it. “You’re a terrible fucking liar, Dorsey.”

I begged to differ. I was a great liar. My whole life felt like a lie. It had never bothered me...

until now.

Until Oren.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:33 am

Oren

It wasn't like Will to give me the silent treatment. But he'd gone quiet after I texted him that I'd told Hal about my sudden sexual awakening. I'd also told my therapist, but that didn't count. I was supposed to tell her everything important.

Clearly, I'd fucked up somehow because it had been two days, and Will was barely talking to me. I hated to think of what happened between us as a mistake, but there was suddenly a hole in my life where Will used to be.

It was the weekend, and I was lying near my phone like a love-sick teenager, waiting for it to ring.

Disgusted with myself, I called Liam. No matter how busy he was, he always had time for me.

"What's up, asshole?" Liam answered, his usual cheerful voice a balm to my broken heart.

"Nothing much. Just thought I'd check in. See how you're doing."

A strange silence filled the void between us. "What's wrong?"

Wiping a hand down my face, I groaned. "Sometimes I fucking hate you."

"You don't, or you wouldn't have called. Now spill."

“Are you sure you have time for my bullshit?”

“I always have time for your bullshit. What kind of bullshit is it this time? More guilt? Because you’re supposed to be in therapy for that.”

“I am. I used to go a couple times a month for your information. Now it’s just once a month, and she thinks soon I’ll graduate to emergency sessions only. Not that I plan on having any of those.”

“No one plans on having an emergency. If they were scheduled, they’d be less...emergent? Urgent? Whatever. You’re getting me off topic.”

Liam waited for me to take a few deep breaths and gather my thoughts. Why had I called him again?

“I think therapy has me too used to spilling my guts to people,” I said morosely, remembering that the one person I most wanted to talk to wasn’t speaking to me for some reason.

“That’s not a bad thing, Oren. You just think it is because you’re too used to being the buttoned-up soon-to-be-lawyer.”

“Yes. Well, now I’m the unbuttoned, messy as hell, practicing lawyer.”

“What’s got you unbuttoned?”

“It’s not what . It’s who .”

“Oh?” I heard the sudden interest in Liam’s voice. He thought everyone should be as happily married as him and his shiny new wife. I didn’t want a shiny new wife, but I wouldn’t mind a hot firefighter with a killer smile.

“I think I’ve been ghosted, though.”

“You think you’ve been ghosted?”

“I think I messed up. We were friends, and I made a move, and then things happened, and things were good, but now they’re not.”

“Oren, I love you, but if you don’t stop being vague, I can’t help you.”

I took a deep breath. I’d already come out to Hal and nothing bad happened. Liam was my oldest friend, but the words were still hard to get past my teeth.

“We were at my place the other night, and I made a move, and at first it didn’t go well, but then it went really well.”

“Okay, so do you think she has regrets?”

The opportunity jumped out at me, and I took it.

“He. It’s... um... I’m bisexual. Probably. It’s new.”

Liam didn’t miss a beat. He didn’t stop to fawn about my new discovery of self. He got on with the show, which was what I loved about him.

“Okay, so he has regrets?”

“He didn’t at first. I don’t think.”

“So ask him.”

“He’s barely talking to me.” My voice came out whiny and petulant and, for added

dramatics, I flopped down onto my bed and stared at the ceiling. I put Liam on speakerphone and set the phone on my chest.

“So make him talk to you.”

“I can’t make someone talk to me, Liam.”

“Oren, for such a smart man, you sure are a dumbass sometimes. I don’t mean like kidnap him, tie him to a chair, and waterboard him until he tells you all his secrets.

But if he won’t answer your texts, show up in person.

Show him that he’s important enough that you’re willing to go out of your way to check in. ”

“And if he still won’t talk to me?”

“Then he’s not worth it.”

His words were a dagger in my chest. Will was worth it. He was worth so much more than I could ever offer him.

“He’s worth it.”

“Then if he won’t talk to you, you talk to him. I don’t know who this guy is, but he has to be pretty great if you’re all upside down over him.”

I couldn’t argue with Liam’s assessment.

Will did have me upside down and inside out.

Ever since I'd kissed him, or he'd kissed me—since we kissed—I'd been unable to think about anything else.

Even before that, my every waking thought had been filled with Will.

I couldn't walk through a supermarket without thinking about him.

Or scroll social media without seeing a meme to send him to make him smile.

Or lay in bed... or shower... or jerk off without thinking about his mouth.

His hands. The way he smiled at me, soft and sweet and almost shy, like it was meant just for me.

“You think I should just show up at his place? And like pour my heart out or whatever.”

Liam chuckled, his rich voice filling the line.

I could almost see the way his eyes would crinkle when he laughed.

“Yes, Oren. I think you should go to him and tell him all the shit you're not telling me, that I probably don't want to hear.

I think you should tell him that you're fucking miserable because he's blowing you off. ”

As bad as Will blowing me off made me feel, I somehow imagined that it made him feel worse. Will was a good guy. He tried hard to make everyone happy, and, for whatever reason, it was like he decided that he couldn't make me happy, so he'd cut me off instead.

“I’m going to go.”

“That’s the spirit.”

“Say hello to the missus for me.”

“Will do. Give me an update when you have one.”

Liam ended the call, and I spent a couple more minutes staring at the ceiling before rolling off the bed. I took a cold shower to stem my urge to luxuriate under the spray and jerk off. I’d only think about Will, and that didn’t seem like a great idea at the moment.

I dressed in a pair of jeans that I’d been told I filled out nicely and a shirt that had shrunk in the wash.

If Will was going to kick me to the curb, I was going to show him what he’d be missing.

I almost added a belt to the outfit, but decided that if things went well, it would just be one more thing to fumble with.

Even after my somewhat successful trip around the farm with Hal, I wasn’t ready to brave the city streets. The traffic. The people. I did, however, call a cab instead of taking the bus. It was one step closer to preparing myself to get behind the wheel again.

Hal had been a great moral support, and he was right.

It was much easier to navigate the giant vehicle on the farm.

There was nothing but grass and cows and fence for miles.

I hadn't even known a place like that existed so near the city.

When I told Hal as much, he laughed at me and said that it was easy to miss when your face was buried in law books.

The ride to Will's place was short even though I'd told the driver I wasn't in a hurry. Wiping my sweaty palms on my jeans, I snuck into the building as someone else was exiting. It wasn't the most secure thing to do, but I guessed that I didn't look very threatening.

I went down the hall and knocked on Will's door. I listened for any sound inside, but after a few minutes, it was clear that no one was home. That left me two choices. Go home or wait here.

I sank down to the floor and leaned against Will's door.

I knew he wasn't working today, but that didn't mean he just sat around at home all the time.

There was a lot to being a firefighter that wasn't just about fighting fires.

Will had taken all kinds of extra training to help him on the job.

Water rescue. Highway rescue. Endurance drills. First aid training.

The number of things Will knew how to do was awe-inspiring. Leaning my head against his door, I closed my eyes and contemplated getting up off the floor and leaving before he discovered I'd been here.

But then we'd be back at square one. Square-less-than-one, actually. Because Will had never ghosted me like this before. Was he okay? Had something happened at work? My mind churned up a million grisly possibilities, each one worse than the last.

By the time I heard footsteps approaching, I was a nervous wreck. I glanced up to see Will standing at the end of the hallway. His keys in one hand, what was clearly a doggie bag from a restaurant in the other.

Had he been on a date? He looked... good. But he always looked good to me. My stomach clenched as I got to my feet. Moving out of the way so Will could unlock his door, I suddenly felt stupid for coming over and ambushing him like this. He clearly didn't know what to say to me.

"Sorry for showing up like this." Holy awkward, Batman. Blowing out a breath, I ran my hand through my hair, barely resisting the urge to give it a yank in frustration.

"It's fine." His key rattled in the lock.

"Is it? You don't look happy to see me. And you've been ghosting me since—" I cut my sentence off. The middle of his hallway wasn't the place to have this conversation.

Will's gaze swam with regret.

I'd never been looked at like I was a mistake before, and up until now I wouldn't have known what that facial expression even looked like. But it was on his face as clear as day.

We'd been a mistake. But be damned if I was going to leave without figuring out why the sudden change of heart.

“Can I come in?”

He nodded and I followed him inside. I left my shoes on and lingered by the door as I watched Will store his leftovers in the fridge. Then he turned and leaned against the counter. Silence, thick and heartbreaking.

“Haven’t heard from you lately. I tried not to take it personally, but it’s hard not to when you’re looking at me like I shit in your cereal.”

“Oren...”

I waved him off. Maybe I didn’t need an explanation after all. “I’m going to go.”

I turned, but Will was there suddenly, his hand on my wrist. Pain lanced through his voice. “Oren, wait, dammit.” His breath shook when he exhaled. “Please.”

Turning to face him took every ounce of strength I had, but leaving would have taken more. His touch soothed me even when it confused me. He didn’t want me to go, but he didn’t want to talk to me. What was I supposed to do with that?

“Did you have a nice breakfast?” I asked instead.

“Not really, actually. Briggs has been on my ass because I’ve been fucking miserable lately.”

“Because of me?”

“Because of me.” Will pulled me closer. “I’m a mess, Oren. I don’t know which way is up.”

Will stepped closer. His free hand reached for me but stopped. I moved into the

space, meeting him halfway, putting my face in his palm. My heart in his hand.

“Because of me?”

“Because of a lot of things.”

“You can’t ignore me, Will. You can yell at me or write me ten-page text messages. You can do anything but ignore me.”

I ached to kiss him, but I didn’t know if he wanted that anymore. Or me. Or anything to do with me. He told me not to leave, but he hadn’t told me why I should stay.

The corner of his mouth quirked up. “No, I can’t ignore you.”

The breath whooshed out of me as he pushed me up against the wall and kissed me hard on the mouth. Whatever I’d hoped to say vanished in a single heartbeat. I tangled myself up in him body and soul and kissed him like we’d been apart for two years rather than two days.

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Will

I was fucking up my entire life. Briggs had been riding my ass the last few days, rarely letting me out of his sight.

He didn't ask what was wrong, but he kept me too busy to dwell on shit.

At least that's what he tried to do. It didn't work because every waking moment was spent obsessing about Oren and the taste of his mouth.

The curve of his smile. The ghost of his breath on my skin. I burned for him.

But I wasn't brave like him, and I didn't know how to tell him that. Words got all tangled up inside the scenarios I played in my head like bad B-rate horror flicks starring me as I scorched-earthed my life.

Pushing Oren up against the wall, I slanted my mouth over his and devoured him.

Ignoring him had been stupid. Childish. Senseless.

His hands slid up my sides, tugging my shirt up, slipping underneath.

Warm hands pressed against my back, pulled me closer even though you couldn't get a beam of light between us.

Oren moaned when I ground against him. It sounded like victory. Like forgiveness, and I kissed him deeper, clinging to him like I could keep him forever. Like I

deserved to when I knew that was a lie.

He spun me and pressed me against the wall. My pulse jumped when he licked a line up the side of my throat. Warm, wet breath washed over my skin, making me shiver.

“You think too much,” he purred in my ear, his hand sliding down my torso.

We kissed again, more clumsy this time as Oren fumbled with my fly. Then suddenly it was open, and his hand was snaking into my pants. He gripped me over my briefs and kissed me so hard I saw stars.

If I thought too much before, I wasn’t having that problem now. Now my brain had lurched to a stop, fixating on the steady grip of Oren’s hand around my dick. The way his mouth claimed mine, teeth nipping at my lower lip, not hard enough to hurt but enough to make my knees weak.

Caged up against the wall, I had no option but to stand there and let Oren have his way with me. Well, I could stop it, but I didn’t want to. Nothing and no one had felt this good before. His body against mine made me come alive in ways I didn’t know were possible.

A soft moan tore out of me when Oren slid his hand into my briefs.

“I love how thick you are,” he murmured in my ear. “And the way it curves. So hot.”

Over the years I’d heard a lot of comments about my anatomy, but even the nicest compliments paled in comparison to Oren’s assessment.

His words burrowed under my skin and made themselves at home.

His approval made my head swim, and then he was dropping to his knees and were it

not for the wall, I might have collapsed into a boneless heap. Well, not entirely boneless.

He looked up at me, his dark eyelashes a stark contrast against his pale skin.

His eyes round and somewhat doe-eyed. My cock sprang free as Oren tugged my pants down.

Seeing my cock so near his mouth sent me spinning.

As if he read my thoughts, as if he knew I'd die if he didn't get his mouth on me, he smiled and leaned in.

He didn't take my cock down his throat as my imagination hoped he would.

But he nuzzled his face against the base of my dick, his breath a whisper over my super-heated skin.

My head thumped against the wall when Oren opened his mouth and slid his tongue up the side of my cock.

His hands dug into my thighs, pinning me to the wall, holding me still, probably half afraid I'd buck forward and fuck his throat.

I wanted to. God, I wanted to so much it burned to stay still and let him explore me with his wickedly gentle mouth. I couldn't take my eyes off him if someone paid me. He was a fucking vision on his knees, and then he looked up at me and a smile curved his pretty mouth.

He held my gaze and flicked his tongue against the tip of my cock. My hips left the wall, but he shoved them back and his smile grew when I didn't struggle against him.

His mouth was on me suddenly, and I gasped in a breath.

My hands scrambled for something to hold on to, and I settled for sinking them into his hair.

I simply held him and savored the feeling of the silky strands of his hair between my fingers.

I made no move to control him. To pull him back or urge him deeper.

I didn't need to. Oren, as it turned out, was a fucking natural.

His tongue flattened against the underside of my cock when he took me deeper, a little deeper each time. His hands had left my thighs in favor of joining in on the fun. His explorations were achingly gentle. I bit my lip to keep some of my shamelessly needy sounds inside.

He looked up at me, grinning when he let my cock be free from his mouth.

I watched as he inserted a finger into his mouth and sucked it down to the knuckle.

There was ample time to stop him from what I knew he planned to do, but I spread my legs wider—as wide as they would go with my pants around my ankles—in a blatant invitation.

My eyes closed for the span of a heartbeat when Oren's mouth returned to my cock, taking it deeper than before. The gentle ministrations of his hands had my balls tightening even before that spit-slick finger found its way to my hole.

I held my breath until I realized he wasn't going to just ram it in there. He teased me with it instead, applying light pressure to the rim, circling it the way his tongue

circled the head of my cock.

Without meaning to, my grip in his hair tightened and Oren moaned; a sound of pure unadulterated satisfaction poured out of him, vibrating around my cock, making it leak into his mouth. I wondered what his mouth would taste like after. If my flavor would suit him.

His finger slipped inside me, and I bucked forward.

“Sorry.” The apology came out weak and thready and not at all convincing even though I meant it.

Oren responded by taking me deeper. His mouth was magical. He did things with his tongue that had me convinced he’d sucked cock before. His finger explored my hole, taking great care not to hurt me.

“You want to fuck me, Oren?” The question tumbled out of me. My hands tightened in his hair, and I was rewarded with another one of his deliciously needy moans. “I’d let you fuck me.”

I’d let him do anything to me. “I bet you’d be good at it too. Goddammit, Oren, your mouth is a fucking sin.”

He met my stare, and I could swear that I saw the smile in his eyes when he stroked his finger over my fucking prostate.

His other hand slid up my thigh and was now making its way up my shirt.

Nimble fingers brushed against my nipple.

There was no way I wasn’t going to come in the next three seconds if he didn’t stop.

“Oren—shit. Fuck. I’m so close.”

He didn’t stop. His eyes fluttered closed, dark lashes fanning against his cheeks. His finger continued to nail my prostate, gently stroking it in tandem with the motion of his mouth, the movements of his tongue.

Coming was inevitable. I’d warned him, but he hadn’t pulled away like I’d expected him to.

Instead, he gave himself over to me, which felt like a stupid thought when my dick was in his mouth, but he was on his knees for me like he belonged there.

Like he’d thought about all the places in the world that he could be and had chosen the space at my feet.

Maybe he was sucking my brains out of my cock because I was sure it wasn’t that profound. It was sex. But it was so much more. I’d ignored him and he’d chased me down, and I knew, deep in my bones, that if I did something stupid like that again that I’d lose him.

Oren moaned again, and my universe imploded.

Every muscle in my body clenched tight, and I unloaded down Oren’s throat.

I did my best not to choke him with my cock, but my body had a mind of its own.

My hips thrust and jerked as I spilled into his mouth.

He looked up at me, his gaze more intense than I’d ever seen it.

Intense, but unreadable. Had he hated it?

Had he loved it? Would he walk out of here and never look back?

The minute his finger slid free from my ass it was like the strength went out of my legs.

My knees wobbled. My cock slid from Oren's mouth, and I dropped to my knees in front of him, my hands still clinging to him with renewed desperation as I crashed my mouth into his and licked the residual cum off his tongue.

I wasn't a stranger to tasting myself on other people, but knowing it was Oren made my insides shiver and my cock twitch with renewed interest. I fumbled with his fly, my shaking hands bumping into his cock, straining against his pants.

He laughed into my mouth, finding my lack of coordination funny enough to break the kiss.

"Need help?" He batted my hands away and popped the button of his pants. "See, easy enough."

"Asshole," I said without malice. My gaze fell to Oren's long, slender fingers as he freed his erection then shoved his pants out of the way. His left hand reached for me, sinking into my hair as he pulled me into a ferocious kiss. Teeth scraped against my lip, and he consumed me again.

Then as abruptly as it started, he ended it, pulling away panting, his face flushed with lust. My own cock stirred when he looked at me like that. Like he wanted to ruin me for anyone else. As if he hadn't done that already.

Pressure had me leaning forward and Oren guided me down to his cock. His other hand was wrapped around the base, but he moved it when I reached for him.

Whereas I had simply held him while he sucked me, content to let him lead, he pushed me down onto his waiting cock. It wasn't forceful or harsh, but he did it like he'd somehow learned all the ways I wanted him like this.

Men had a habit of clocking me as a top. They saw the fit firefighter and slotted me firmly into a role that suited them best. For the most part, I was happy to let them have their way. Before now, hookups had been transactional. A means to an end.

Oren took what he wanted from me, but in return he gave me so much more than I'd thought to ask for. He looked down at me, and in that moment he was god-like. All powerful, benevolently letting me suck his cock. His gaze was as soft as his grip was rough. I melted like butter under his touch.

Every thought that had swirled around in my tornado of a brain vanished.

There was nothing but him. The sting of my scalp where he tugged at my hair.

The scent of him, sex and soap. The sound of his breathing as it sped up and the sudden jerking motion of his hips as he fucked my face.

I could've cried from the relief of it all, but crying during sex might put a damper on things so I let that urge fall away too.

Oren warned me that he was close, but I made no move to escape.

My cock was hard again, swinging heavy and eager underneath me, but I ignored that and let him take his pleasure from me.

He came and an abundance of tangy cum flooded my mouth.

I did my best to swallow it all, but some dribbled out, running down his cock.

He pulled me off him—I'd have been content to stay there longer—and I used my tongue to clean the cum from his cock.

His fingers carded through my hair, and he flopped down onto his ass.

I used his lap for a pillow, closing my eyes, not caring that my dick was out, and hard, or that my knees were going to kill me when I finally got up off the floor.

Nothing mattered other than the steady, but too fast, pounding of my heart and the gentle touch, ruffling through my hair. A fingertip traced the shell of my ear.

“I thought you were straight?” I asked. I wouldn't have, but my brain hadn't fully come back online yet. My ass, though not sore by any stretch, could still feel the phantom touch of his finger. My scalp tingled from where he'd pulled my hair.

Oren smoothed his fingers down my cheeks. “I'm a lawyer, Will. Research is my thing.”

I opened an eye to look up at him. “Research? What kind of research?”

“Porn. Lots and lots of porn. And some short stories. The internet is a wealth of information.”

“You did research? For sex? With me?”

Something uncomfortable skittered through his gaze. “I had two days to dedicate to it, after all. Which we need to talk about.”

I closed my eyes and barely prevented a sigh from erupting out of me. “I know.”

That's what I was afraid of.

Oren

Will lay in a spent and crumpled heap, half in my lap. I needed to move and right my clothing, put my cock away, and have a proper adult conversation. The problem was that Will looked so serene that I was loath to disturb him.

With a sigh, I poked him in the arm. “Up you get.”

He grumbled, but listened, groaning a bit when he straightened up and again when he got to his feet. I watched him tuck his cock back into his pants, and then he reached for me, offering me a hand up. I didn’t have to take it, but I did anyway.

“Can I get you something to drink? Coffee? Vitamin water? Protein shake.” The corner of his mouth quirked up, and I found myself stupidly smiling back at him.

“No thanks, I’m good.”

“Yes, you are,” Will purred. Fucking distracting asshole.

“As cute as you are, I think we need to clear the air.” I folded my arms over my chest then thought that might make me seem too angry and closed-off looking.

I unfolded them and tucked my hands in my pockets.

Now that the sex was out of the way, my nerves were flooding back in. He could still reject me.

Will ran his fingers through his hair and chewed at his bottom lip. “Yeah. I know. I’m sorry, Oren. I got twisted up in my own head.” He lifted his head and looked me in the eyes. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“I almost didn’t come.”

He nodded as though he’d expected that answer. It was an unexpected gut punch. He’d so quickly assumed that he was easy to give up on. Easy to forget about and discard. Nothing could be further from the truth.

“I didn’t like being ignored, but I hated missing you.

Don’t make me miss you again, okay? If you’re not comfortable with this”—I waved a hand between us—“then we can be friends.” Being friends would suck when I wanted so much more than that, but if that’s all he was willing to give me, then that’s all I’d ask.

Will scoffed. “I don’t want to be your friend, Oren.”

I nearly took offense at that, but he ate me alive with his heated gaze.

“Make me understand.” I stepped closer and put my hands on his hips.

More to keep us apart than to smash us together.

Will leaned forward and pressed his forehead to mine.

He closed his eyes, but even with them closed, I saw the strain in his face.

The lines around his eyes, the gentle furrow of his brow.

“It’s so easy for you. You just... decided one day that you liked me, and then you told that guy from work as if it was no big deal.

You kissed me and sucked my cock like you’d done it a million times, and everything is so effortless for you.

It made me...” He stopped and searched for the right word.

“Angry at first. Then jealous. Then I guess mostly just sorry for myself.”

“Come here.” Tugging at the belt loops of his pants, I led him to the living room. He sat down on the couch, and I followed suit, crowding into the space next to him.

“Do you want to know why it was easy for me?”

Will nodded but didn’t make eye contact. Not that it mattered. It was probably better if he didn’t.

“It was easy for me because I don’t have anything left to lose.”

His head snapped up, and he gaped at me. The puzzle pieces slotted into place.

“It’s easy to take risks when you’re not risking much.

I work for lawyers; they know better than to fire me for being bisexual.

And then there’s the fact that I’m ninety percent sure at least a third of the office is somewhere on the rainbow.

Simon is openly bi and pretends he’s not just one more fuck it away from dragging Hal into the nearest dark corner and having his way with him. ”

Looking down, I took Will's hand. Another first. Holding hands with a man.

His were stronger than mine. Thicker and calloused.

The truth was that he was all I had left to lose.

But I couldn't put that into words without sounding like a crazy person or like I was guiltning him into something he might not want.

"I had to lose a lot to get to a place where something like my sexuality doesn't matter to me. At least not in a way that's going to stop me from wanting to be with you."

"Oren. Fuck, I'm sorry. I?—"

My hand clamped over his mouth. "Don't be sorry for me. I'll never be okay with losing them, but I won't be okay with losing you either." The confession tumbled out of me without my permission, but it made Will's cheeks turn a deep rosy color. "Okay?"

Only when he nodded his agreement did I remove my hand from his mouth.

"I want to keep seeing you. As a friend. As more than that."

"I can't come out." Will's voice cracked and his chin quivered, but he sucked in a breath and got himself under control. "My parents. My job. The guys. I... I can't."

"I'm not asking you to come out."

He rolled his eyes. "You did."

"Because it was right for me. Because up until I met you, I hadn't thought of myself

as anything but straight. It's like you showed me that I didn't have to keep the original factory settings. Straight was a default. But I think we more than established that I swing both ways."

"So you came out... for me?"

I shrugged a shoulder. "I mean... I didn't want you to think that you were just an experiment. But I also came out for me." Leaning against the back of the couch, I shut my eyes, but I could still feel Will's gaze on me. He squeezed my hand, and I squeezed his back.

For a few minutes, we sat like that. Me gathering my thoughts, and Will content to sit and watch me. Eventually I felt him relax next to me.

"The accident took my friends from me, but it also took a chunk of me with them. For months after, I didn't know who I was anymore. It sounds dumb, I know."

"It doesn't." His voice was soft and full of understanding. "I watch people walk away from all kinds of shit, Oren. It's normal for events to change you."

"I don't know if it changed me or just showed me that I didn't really know who I was if I wasn't fulfilling specific roles.

No longer a student. No longer one part of a three-part friend group.

"I exhaled a deep breath. "I wanted to come out because I want to own all the pieces of myself. I don't want to deny things that are important to me or about me. "

"You're braver than I am."

I leaned close to Will and put my head on his shoulder. Now that I'd come, my

energy was flagging, and more than anything I wanted to curl up in his arms and have a nice long nap.

“You run into burning buildings, Will. You’re not exactly a shrinking violet. And it takes a lot of strength to stay in the closet. I came out because I’m too tired to keep myself hidden away. Most days, I still feel like I’m barely getting by.”

“You really don’t care that I’m not out? Even after I made a big deal about you being straight?”

“You’re allowed to have concerns. And so am I. But I’m not worried about you being in the closet. You’ll come out when you’re ready and if that’s never, then that’s okay too.”

Will’s thumb started to move. Back and forth against mine in rhythmic movements.

“I’ve never had a boyfriend before,” he said. His thumb kept stroking my skin, but the tension in him was obvious in the rigid way he held himself.

“Well, that makes two of us.” My heart thrashed around in my chest. It would flail if it could. “Is that what you want us to be?”

I couldn’t make myself look at him in case I’d misread the intention behind his statement.

“Would it be unfair of me to say yes?”

“I think it would be unfair of you to say no if you didn’t mean it and deprive me of the opportunity to make my own decision about it.”

Will laughed and the tension bled out of him. He turned to look at me, a smile

tugging at one side of his mouth. “Spoken like a true lawyer.”

“If you want to be with me, I want to be with you. I don’t care that you’re not out. I’m barely out. My big toe is out. Maybe my foot.”

“It doesn’t bother you now .”

“And if it does later, we can talk about it. Also spoken like a true lawyer.”

“I mostly deal with boring contracts. Lots of corporate mumbo jumbo. Lots of loopholes and closing the ones that don’t benefit our clients. That sort of thing. I’m used to dealing with people changing their mind about things.”

A strange look passed over Will’s face.

“What?” I asked, curious about the inner workings of Will Dorsey’s mind.

“I think I’d rather run into a burning building than be a lawyer. It sounds messy.”

“That’s why I didn’t go into family law. Every day in family court feels like walking into the seventh level of hell.”

“Spoken like someone with experience.”

I reached over and booped the end of his nose with my finger. “Very astute.”

He pretended to try and bite my finger, and I grinned at him. It was sweet the way he was playful with me. Unguarded and willing to be silly, to not take himself entirely seriously.

“I was a foster brat. Unfit parents. Court battles. That kind of thing. Eventually they

gave up trying to get me back. Or gave up looking like they were trying to get me back.”

“Shit. I’m sorry, Oren.”

“Eh, it is what it is. Walking away was the best decision they ever made for me, even if they didn’t make it for my benefit. I want to say that I became a lawyer so I could change the system from the inside or fight to help kids who were like me, but that’s a lie.”

“So tell me the truth.”

“The truth makes me sound like an asshole.”

“Your parents were assholes, Oren. Whatever your reason, it can’t be that bad.”

I closed my eyes and let my memories drift to the courthouse.

The staccato rap of shoes on the tiled floor.

The way everything gleamed made me uncomfortable with how clean and shiny it was.

How I was the contrast. I kept my dirty fingernails hidden by sitting on my hands and watched men with manicures and fancy watches, shiny shoes and crisp, clean suits pour in and out of those rooms.

“Money,” I said on an exhale, bringing myself out of the past and back into the present. “Lawyers looked like they had money.”

“People do a lot worse things for a lot worse reasons. Being a lawyer because you

wanted a better life for yourself doesn't make you an asshole."

"Yeah, but shouldn't I want to go into family law and be the hero to someone?

Fix the system, etc?" My other hand cut through the air, emphasizing my frustration with myself.

Sometimes I felt guilty that I hadn't gone into family law.

Not that it was too late or anything, but the mere thought of it had me wanting to peel my skin off my bones.

"If you don't want to do it, you'd be a shitty lawyer and those kids would be better off without you. You're not a bad person because you don't want to be the hero you never had."

It was the exact perfect thing to say. The ten year-old inside me with dirty fingernails and a hole in the sole of his shoe smiled at me and faded away.

"Thank you. I think I needed to hear that."

Will leaned in, his mouth dangerously close to mine. Our eyes met and his sparkled with something that looked a lot like happiness.

"What are boyfriends for?"

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Will

Boyfriends. The word rattled around in my head every day since we'd decided what we were to each other.

It was like a shiny object I'd only ever heard about but hadn't seen up close.

I kept picking it up, looking at it, and setting it down again.

I'd been a boyfriend before, but not a real one.

Not a boyfriend who had someone he wanted to be with. I'd been a fraud. A fake.

There was nothing fake about my feelings for Oren or my delight that he hadn't given up on me. It had been a couple of weeks since I found him sitting in my hallway, and every day since was better than the last.

The doorknob rattled, and Oren slipped inside my apartment. I'd buzzed him in a minute ago and unlocked the door for him, then went back to the stove.

"Holy crap, it smells delicious." He came into the kitchen, dressed for work, but with his tie hung loose and his jacket over his arm. He leaned in and kissed my cheek, his hand pressing into my lower back.

"I haven't made it before, so here's hoping it's not terrible."

"Nothing that smells this good could possibly taste bad." Oren slid past me and

draped his jacket on the back of a chair.

He slid the bag containing his laptop off his shoulder and set it on the seat of the chair.

He'd rolled up his sleeves already. The sight of his forearms shouldn't entice me half as much as it did, but he was just effortlessly attractive.

"Want a taste?"

Oren raked his gaze over me slowly, from head to toe and back again. The corner of his mouth twitched in amusement. "Absolutely, I do."

"Of the food."

"Oh. That. I guess." He rolled his eyes but stepped in close.

Grabbing a teaspoon from the drawer, I dipped it in the sauce and gently blew on it before offering it to Oren.

He looked me in the eyes, the heat between us always at a low simmer that could turn up to inferno levels in a blink.

Twin flames danced in his eyes as he opened his mouth and let me feed him the spoonful of sauce.

The moan he let out was sinful and sexy. My cock thickened in my pants. Uncomfortably hard, it ached where it pressed against my zipper.

"Well?" Tossing the spoon in the sink, I adjusted myself.

“I know I’ve said it before, but if you ever stop fighting fires, you could be a chef.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” I wouldn’t. Cooking was a pleasure to me. It gave me something to focus on. New recipes to challenge me. Old ones to comfort me. It let me take care of people because everyone needed to eat.

Oren tugged his tie a bit looser and pulled it off over his head. It joined the jacket and the computer bag at the table.

“How was work? Close any loopholes today?”

“Work was annoying. One of our clients is suing for breach of contract and it should be a slam dunk case, but there’s some archaic ass law that’s still on the books and they’re using it to try and get out of the contract without paying.

So it’s my job to dig through mountains of legal cases from eons ago to try and set a precedent. ”

“I’d rather fight a three-alarm fire. It sounds less tiring.”

“I’ll survive.” Oren opened the fridge. “Want anything while I’m in here?”

“A beer would be nice, thanks.”

He handed me a can of beer from a little craft brewery nearby.

For himself, he cracked open an orange soda.

Since the accident, he’d lost all appetite for drinking.

It didn’t bother him when other people did, but I think he didn’t like feeling like he

wasn't in control.

Or maybe it just brought too many ugly memories to the surface. Brains were weird like that.

"This is almost done if you want to freshen up."

"Mmm. Good plan." He leaned in and stole a kiss, the curve of his smile pressed against my mouth, an obvious sign of his happiness.

When Oren slipped into the bathroom, I hurried away from the stove.

Quickly moving his things off the chair and setting them in the living room, I gathered the candles I'd hidden and set them up in the middle of the table.

I'd prepared place settings ahead of time and pulled them out of the drawer I'd tucked them into.

Everything was bundled neatly and just needed to be rolled out onto the table and straightened up.

By the time Oren came out of the bathroom, the table had been set for a romantic dinner for two, complete with a flower I'd cut from the bushes out front and stuffed in a water glass. I'd thought of everything except a vase apparently.

"What's all this?" He looked at the table, then at me.

"It's dinner. Have a seat and I'll get it plated."

We could go out to eat together, but as friends. We could sit in restaurants as friends, and I'd have to try not to look at him like I wanted to eat him instead of anything on

the menu. I'd have to be causal when everything I felt was the exact opposite of that. Intense. Eclipsing.

I grabbed the garlic bread out of the oven and arranged it on a plate. Garlic on a date was bad unless both people ate it, then it cancelled itself out. Besides, there were certain advantages to staying in, such as the availability of toothpaste.

With everything else ready to go, I served each of us a plate and sat down at the table, only to get up again and turn off the lights. The candles flickered when I sat down again. Oren had already grabbed a slice of garlic bread and dunked the crust into the sauce.

"This is nice."

The compliment was genuine, but it still left me wishing I could give him more.

"You deserve nice."

The corners of his eyes wrinkled when he smiled, which was another sign I knew I wasn't completely sucking at this whole boyfriend thing. When Oren fake-smiled, it didn't reach his eyes. I'd seen him smile like that with other people, but never with me.

"Do you have a movie lined up for after?" Mischief danced in his expression.

"And if I did?"

"I'd say that I hoped it was one I'd already seen because I won't be paying much attention to it."

I'd never before seen someone use a fork so erotically, but Oren slid the utensil into

his mouth and held my gaze as he pulled it out slowly, his gaze heavy and full of promises, a glint of amusement appearing when I shifted in my seat.

He looked like he wanted to eat me alive.

I'd let him. I'd let him do anything to me, so long as it meant he kept looking at me like that.

Men had admired me before. I tried not to be vain, but I knew I was fit and decent looking.

Women liked me. Men liked me. But, for the first time, I felt I'd found someone who liked more than my smile, or my job, or how I looked in a pair of jeans, or out of them.

It might have been wishful thinking, but I didn't think so.

Oren had been straight until he met me, and that knowledge did something to me.

It twined around my insides like an affectionate cat winding itself around someone's legs.

All the men in the world that he'd met, and it was me he'd looked twice at.

The realization filled me with an effervescent joy.

When Oren looked at me, my insides felt like sunshine.

Maybe one day we could go on a proper date.

We could walk down the street holding hands and kiss in the back of a theater.

Eat dinner and play footsie under the table.

I'd been on dates before, but to begin with it was out of obligation.

You dated girls, you took them on dates.

You held their hands even when it felt weird and kissed them sometimes even though that was worse.

And you forgot to call them back and waited for them to break up with you.

When I got older, dates were things I went on to make my parents happy. It pleased them to think that I might find someone to settle down with. I stopped wanting to do it when I realized that I wasn't only leading the women on, but also my parents.

But a date with Oren would be different. My chest ached with the force of wanting. It curled up next to my heart and squeezed.

"Will?" Oren's brow furrowed. "Are you okay?"

Yes.

No.

Both? Could I be both okay and not in the same moment?

"I want to take you on a date. A real one... one out in public with people and food and maybe a movie."

His worry softened into something else, something I couldn't put my finger on.

“This is a real date. It’s you and me and food and maybe a movie.”

“But dates happen out there.” Panic? Don’t know her. All I knew was that I was suddenly sending this evening into a tailspin. But as always, Oren wasn’t spinning. Oren was solid and strong. Wise in ways he didn’t believe. Kind beyond words. Unfairly gorgeous.

He scooted his chair closer and put his hand on my leg.

“Dates happen where we say they happen. Yeah, maybe one day it would be nice to go see a movie with you and hold your hand in a dark theater. But it’s not a requirement.

I want to spend time with you, and I like being alone with you.

There’s a lot of things we can do when we’re alone that we can’t do in public. ”

I forced a deep breath into my lungs. “Like not watch a movie.”

“Like lay on your couch together and spend three hours just talking.”

It was what we did the last time Oren had come over. We’d made out after a while, of course. And then we freed our dicks from our pants and rutted against each other until we were breathless and sticky and not nearly satisfied enough to stop kissing and touching.

“I don’t want you to get bored of just hanging out here or at your place.”

“We can still be in public together, Will. Guys do shit together all the time. You play basketball at the firehouse with your little firefighter friends, and no one thinks you’re fucking them.

You and I hung out at the park that day.

We got our faces painted. No one cared then and no one will care now if we do things together. Friends do that.”

Friends didn’t ache when they weren’t touching. Friends didn’t look at each other the way Oren looked at me. The way I suspected that I looked at him. But sure. Friends did things together.

For the first time in my life, the closet started to suffocate me. Running out of oxygen. Out of space and time.

Oren leaned over, his hand sliding up my chest, making my heart skip a beat, my throat tighten, keeping all my emotions from spilling out.

And then he kissed me, soft but all consuming.

I hoped it would always be like this. That his kisses would always eclipse the world, make it vanish in his shadow.

Oren

Will was an easy man to read, at least he was for me.

I could see the panic in his eyes when he talked about us being out in public together.

A large part of me wished I'd discovered my bisexuality sooner so then maybe I could have known what it felt like to be in the closet.

I could have helped him through it better, perhaps, if I'd also been there.

But by the time I realized I was also into men, I was a full-grown man, out of law school, with nothing to lose by letting the world know what—who—I liked.

"It's okay if we mostly hang out alone, you know," I whispered in his ear then leaned back. His gaze followed my hand as it slid down my chest. His breath hitched when I squeezed my cock through my pants, highlighting how hard I was for him.

Maybe I wasn't into men. Maybe it was Will. That was a train of thought to be looked at later when my brain had more blood flow and I could think straight.

"I can't do this if we're in public." Stroking myself through my pants, I spread my legs wider.

He stared at my hand as if he'd never seen another man touch himself, but I looked at his face.

At the hunger in his expression. The parted lips and gentle way his tongue ran along his lower lip. I wanted that tongue on me. That mouth.

I reached for my fly, but Will surged forward, his mouth slanted over mine, his hand, bigger and stronger than mine, gripping my hands.

I pulled them away and slid my fingers into his hair instead, holding him still so I could kiss him deeper.

Our tongues battled, and he fumbled with my fly until he finally had success.

All at once he pulled back. He stared at me like he was in a daze and trying to come out of it so he could think. Or overthink, which was more likely.

“In public you can’t stick your hands down my pants and jerk me off.”

“Oren—” He licked his lips. It looked like his entire body was vibrating on an atomic level.

“In public you can’t carry me to your bed and fuck me senseless.”

Something in Will’s control snapped and he was on me again. This time his powerful arms snaked around me, and he hoisted me out of the chair like I weighed nothing. My world tilted upside so fast I felt like I was on a carnival ride, and then I was over his shoulder.

“Holy shit,” I breathed, staring at Will’s ass as he strode through his apartment to his bedroom. My world tilted again when he put me on the bed. I lay there like a starfish for half a second until lust returned full force, making my dick throb.

Will pulled his shirt off over his head, exposing his broad, slightly furry chest. The

sight of him, half-naked, dick straining at his zipper, made my mouth water.

“What else can’t I do in public?”

The question came in tandem with him undoing his fly. I’d never watched something so mundane, so everyday, become the most extraordinarily sexy thing. But he made unzipping his pants look like something miraculous and obscene.

“Put my cock in your mouth.” My brain was losing the battle and swiftly switching off. All its power was currently being funneled into not grabbing my dick and jerking myself to completion in two point two seconds.

“Is that all? Seems like the list should be longer. Can I be naked in public?”

I shook my head. “Definitely not. Probably get arrested.”

He smirked at me. “That’s not my kink.”

I lay there, unable to move or think as Will stripped his pants and underwear off.

His cock jutted out from his body, hard and leaking.

Tip flushed red. He reached for himself, wrapping his hand around his shaft.

I watched him stroke it slowly, just a few times.

Then he was kneeling on the bed, gently working my jeans down my legs.

Maybe he knew that I was in over my head but wanted him to be the one to save me. My bravado could only get me so far. Internet research—mostly watching a ton of porn—could only teach me so much. The rest was up to me to learn.

Will undressed me, then climbed into bed next to me, tugged me into his arms, sank his hand into my hair and kissed the breath out of me.

I touched him where I could, somewhat mindless at this point.

I'd meant to make him feel better about his need to see me in private, but it was the perfect opening to ask for what I wanted.

I'd dreamed of him on me and in me so often it had turned into a craving.

Something not dark, but needful. Insistent. Hungry.

Will devoured me. Licked his way into my mouth, tangled our tongues together, then all at once I had oxygen and his mouth on my neck. The hollow of my throat. The slope of my collarbone. His hands mapped my skin like I was a treasure.

I didn't know what I was doing, but I didn't have to tell him that. I might know how to get my dick sucked, but I didn't know how to get fucked. My body wanted it. I wanted it. Needed it.

Will's mouth found my nipple and the sensation was shockingly hot. My cock twitched and an ache low in my stomach tugged at my balls.

"I played with my ass in the shower, thinking of you."

He scraped his teeth over my nipple, pulling a surprised yelp out of me.

"Did you like it?" he asked as his hand slid up my leg, avoiding my cock, pressing against my hip instead, pushing me onto my back instead of on my side.

"I'd like it better if you did it."

He was kissing me again. Deeper and hungrier with a little growl that I doubted happened much. He didn't seem like the growly kind of person. But I liked that he'd let that tiny feral part of him slip out, even if he reined it in just as quickly.

He kissed the corner of my mouth then disappeared for a second. The mattress dipped as he stretched to the side of the bed and fumbled around in the nightstand for lube. A flash of light glinted off the shiny condom wrapper. My heart thrashed in my chest, wild with excitement.

He returned to me with soft kisses, gentle explorations of my body with his hand that still, frustratingly, would not touch my throbbing cock.

I loved the feel of his hands on me. He was strong, but safe.

Safe was a feeling that I hadn't known I was missing until I was hit with the force of it.

My breath left me in a rush, and Will pulled back and looked at me, concern furrowing his brow.

"You okay? We can stop?—"

"Don't stop. Please, don't stop." I stared up at him, unable to say more because words wouldn't come. Everything was too overwhelming to be articulated in this moment, so I looked him in the eyes and hoped he understood. He had to.

Will nodded and moved in, kissed me slow and sweet. Gently pressing his lips against mine, softly sliding his tongue between my lips to ease me open for him to slide inside. His hand smoothed down my body, applying gentle pressure. He kissed my chin, his hand on the inside of my leg.

“Open for me.”

I spread my legs for him and felt the way he smiled against my skin when I listened to him.

A thrill shot up my spine at how easy it was to please him.

At how easy it was to do what he wanted.

Of course it helped that it was also what I wanted, but it had made him happy.

Either because I listened so well or maybe because I hadn't hesitated.

It didn't matter which. Not when he was reaching for the lube, then kissing me again and putting his hand on me.

Will teased me with his touch, sliding his fingers behind my balls, across my taint, until he came to my hole. I held a breath, then let it out slowly as he swirled his fingers around my hole, slicking my skin with lube. Light pressure had me seeing stars.

“Breathe, sweetheart.”

The endearment wrapped itself around me like an embrace. Women called me babe or baby, sometimes honey or hun. I hated hun. But sweetheart—I definitely didn't hate that. The idea of being Will's sweetheart curled up in my heart and made itself at home.

I breathed and his finger slid inside me.

Everything was tight from the way I clenched around him to the way it felt like even

my scalp clenched, squeezing the follicles of every hair on my head.

Will kissed me, likely as a distraction.

But it worked. It was hard to remain wound up when his mouth moved against mine in a languid dance of tongue and breath.

Gentle nips on my bottom lip, a quiet sigh when my body went limp and his finger slid in and out of me far easier.

Winding my arms around him, I let my hands wander. I loved how big he was. How broad and strong. I'd never been with someone stronger than me before. Someone who could pick me up and toss me onto a bed, and pin me down and—I gasped when Will slid a second finger inside me.

“Okay?” He whispered the question against my cheek.

He was clean-shaven, but I half wished he'd have left some stubble.

I craved the rough texture against my skin, like proof I'd been with him.

The ache that I was sure to feel in my ass later would have to do as a reminder of where I'd been.

Of the man I was with and what we'd done.

As if I could forget. There was no way that a single moment of this would ever leave my memory.

My mouth opened and all that came out was a low moan, pleasure surging through me as Will's fingers stroked against that delicious bundle of nerves inside me.

“You’re so hot like this,” he said, kissing me again before I could ask like what?

My brain was overheating in my skull, melting down with every kiss, every stroke of his fingers inside me. My skin was too tight. My breaths not deep enough. I couldn’t stop moving, squirming under his touch because it was both too much and not enough.

“Will—please.” My chest heaved as I gulped in a breath of air.

“Shhh. I got you.” He pulled his fingers out. I didn’t expect to feel so empty, so deflated. Like his touch was the thing making me larger than life, bigger than my body could hold.

The condom wrapper crinkled, and I cracked my eyes open in time to see Will roll the condom onto his dick. God, he wasn’t huge, but he was bigger than a couple fingers. He glanced up at me and offered me a lopsided smile.

“We’ll go slow, and I’ll stop whenever you want.” As he spoke, he drizzled lube onto the condom and slicked it up.

“Which will be never.” I laughed, reaching for my dick to give it a couple tugs.

Fuck, he was hot as he moved to kneel between my spread legs.

I opened them wider for him, a silent invitation.

I’d beg if I had to. He had to know how wild I was for him, how desperately I needed him on me. Over me. Inside me.

“It might be easier if you roll over,” Will told me, but I was already shaking my head.

“I can’t kiss you that way.”

Will

Every time I was with Oren, he surprised me. Sometimes it was a small shock. A little nugget of himself that he'd reveal to me. And other times, like now, it shifted my world a few steps to the right.

Soft and pliant beneath me, a flush of pink spread down his body from the tips of his ears, trailing down the column of his throat and spreading across his shoulders.

His lip looked swollen from him biting it.

But it was his gaze that took my breath away.

The way he looked at me was nothing I'd experienced before.

I'd give up the universe if it meant his gaze would remain unchanged.

"Please, Will."

I loved the sound of my name on his lips. Inching closer, I put my free hand on his hip, stilling him, steadying myself as I lined up with his hole. His legs spread wider, falling open for me. He exhaled a shaky breath, his fingers sliding up the side of my knee.

Hurting him was the last thing I wanted to do, so I pressed in slowly, giving him time to breathe and stretch and get used to me before giving him more of myself.

His fingers dug into my flesh when I pushed in further, relaxed when he was ready for more.

By the time I was inside him, a sheen of sweat glistened on his forehead.

Once I knew he was okay, I lowered myself down and kissed him.

Oren moaned into my mouth and arched underneath me. Arms wound around my shoulders, fingers dug into my shoulder blades, danced down my spine. Carved grooves into me as I started to move.

I fucked him slow so I could kiss him. Devour his mouth. Swirl my tongue against his, bite his already abused bottom lip. Oren's arms trembled and he gripped me tighter.

"You're okay," I whispered, breaking the kiss so I could breathe, so I could hear the sounds he made. The gentle whimpers, the guttural groans when I thrust deeper, bottoming out inside him.

He tilted his head back, offering me his throat. He tasted of salt and skin.

"More. Harder," he begged. Beneath me, he writhed and tried to meet my thrusts. Already he was coming apart.

I leaned back and grabbed his right leg. Gently I moved it, lifting it up over my head. I kept myself inside him while I urged him to lay on his side. Moving his leg upward, bending it at the knee, I leaned down again, rocking my hips forward as I brushed my lips against his.

"Oh," Oren said, breathy and aroused. Shocked by the change in position that allowed a new, fun angle that should let my cock hit all the right places inside him.

“You like?” It was good that I didn’t expect an answer because the noise that came out of Oren wasn’t intelligible.

It was needy, and he reached for me as he made it, urging me to come closer.

Move. Thrust into him again. Part of me wanted to flip him onto his face and pin him down by his wrists, shove his face into the bed, and fuck him through it, but then I’d lose sight of those wide eyes, full of amazement. Lust. Affection. Wonder.

Sweat beaded on the back of my neck. Oren pulled me down to him. Our kiss was rough, and my body answered in kind, slamming into him with increasing force, driving us both up the bed. My fingers dug into the softness of his leg, just above the knee. His hand found mine, then slid up my arm.

“Will—I need. Need you to touch me.”

I let him roll onto his back. Lifting his leg, I rested it on my shoulder and kept it there. Oren stared up at me, wild-eyed as I wrapped a hand around his cock. He tipped his head back, making an offering of his throat as he moaned from my touch.

His hands didn’t seem to know what to do and eventually they ended up in the bedding, twisting handfuls until his knuckles were white. All taut skin and clenched muscle, beautiful in the way he trembled beneath me, he was the most gorgeous man I’d ever laid my eyes on.

“Will, please. Please—I—” Oren shattered. His body drew tighter in one second, every muscle contracting. He was origami folding in on itself only to explode outward a second later like a firecracker.

He came, cum splattering up his chest. It dripped down my fingers, coating them as I kept jerking him. Kept pulling those obscene sounds out of him.

I needed to come. Pulling out, I yanked the condom off. I rose up on my knees so Oren could see me jerk myself to completion with his cum on my cock.

My release streaked his chest. I fought the urge to rub it into his skin and instead pried my hand off my cock and kissed him again.

Out of breath, our kiss was open-mouthed, lips brushing against each other again and again.

I sucked in a breath and rested my forehead against his.

His leg had slid off my shoulder sometime between his orgasm and mine, and his legs were around me again.

He drew me down to him, arms wrapping around me again, urging me forward. Gathering me close, he kissed the curve of my neck and stroked his hands up and down my back in slow motion. Our cum dried between us, and we'd definitely need to shower.

When I finally caught my breath, I rolled off him, but didn't get out of bed. I lay on my side and Oren nestled into me. He tucked his head under my chin and let out a long, shaky breath.

"Oren?"

"I've never had sex that good before." He paused, then laughed, quiet and self-conscious. "My ass... it doesn't hurt, but I can definitely tell there was a dick in there."

"I could kiss it better if you wanted."

Oren pulled back and looked at me, aroused and incredulous. “I know that’s a thing that exists, but is that a thing you’re into?”

“I’m into you,” I answered simply. It went without saying that I was into him, but I didn’t think he was ready to hear just how much I cared about him. The level of affection I had for him scared me sometimes. If there ever was a person I’d risk it all to be with, it was Oren.

But he was the kind of man who would never expect that of me.

So far he’d gone out of his way to do things on my terms. To keep our relationship a secret in public.

It was asking a lot. I knew that. But I simply wasn’t ready to come out.

I wanted to be ready for that. I wanted to be brave enough to face whatever the fallout might be.

Oren scratched at his chest, grimacing when dried cum flaked off his skin. “Well, that’s unpleasant.” He looked up at me, eyes glimmering with mischief. “You know, if we got tested and stuff, we could skip the whole condom thing.”

“You want that with me?” I couldn’t banish the surprise from my voice.

“I want a lot of things with you. Stop looking so surprised.”

Oren brushed his mouth against mine. I let him in like I always did, always would. If I could do nothing but kiss him for the rest of my life, it would be more than enough. It would be perfect.

Unfortunately, as lovely as that thought was, it was highly impractical. He pulled

away and scrubbed at his chest again, this time with a frown.

“Shower time.” I rolled out of bed and stood, then held my hand out to him. “Come on, we can shower together and save water.”

Oren took my hand, and I tugged him into the bathroom.

It wasn't the largest bathroom in the world, and I'd never had someone here to shower with.

At first glance, the shower seemed big enough, until we were both inside and then suddenly it was very apparent how little room there was for two grown men to move around.

Oren took full advantage of this and stepped into my space and wrapped his arms around me. “Oh darn, we have to save space too. How tragic for us.”

Already we were hard again, but the urgency was gone now, and my lust was content to simmer.

Oren soaped my skin, indulging in touching me while he did so.

His touch was exploratory, and I found I enjoyed watching him examine me.

Oren looked at me with a mixture of awe and hunger, but when he'd lift his eyes to meet my gaze, they'd soften as though looking at me made him melt.

I wished I could say that I'd do anything to keep him, but I didn't know if that was true yet.

My insides still quaked when I thought of my parents and how they'd react when I

told them.

Or the guys at the station. Of the two groups, I expected the guys to have a better reaction, but better didn't equate good.

Not for the first time, I wished it were an easier decision.

People could spout all they wanted about not having to come out, and I used to think that was true.

Maybe for other people it was. But more and more lately, it was feeling like the biggest lie I ever told was one I told myself.

Oren pulled me down into a kiss, sliding his soapy hands up my back, then down again, dipping his fingers into the crease of my ass. Our conversation from earlier came back to me, making my cock twitch at the thought of going bare with him.

It wasn't something I'd ever done. I'd never had a steady partner to make it worth it before. My sexual history was nothing but a string of casual encounters meant to scratch the itch and nothing more. Oren made me want more.

He made me want things I'd never entertained before. Dating in the open. Taking him to meet my parents. Going bare. Waking up next to someone. All the things I never thought I could have and did my best to ignore. Casual had been enough before. It wasn't now.

"Can you stay the night?" I asked him.

"Not sick of me yet?" Oren dragged a kiss along my jaw.

Never.

“Not yet. But by nine am, all bets are off.”

“I’ll have to get up early then and leave before I wear out my welcome.”

Impossible.

“I could be persuaded to keep you around a bit longer.”

Forever.

“I didn’t bring my pajamas.”

“Pajamas are overrated.”

“Will, are you suggesting I run around your apartment naked?”

“I’ll close the curtains first.”

“Okay, you’ve convinced me to stay. Besides, I bet you make an amazing breakfast.”

“You only want me for my food.”

“There’s a joke about sausage in there that I’m not going to touch.”

“You could touch this sausage instead.” I wriggled my hips, even as I grimaced at my awful joke. “Sorry. That was terrible.”

Oren tipped his head back and laughed. “It was worse than the joke I was going to say.”

“Why didn’t you say it?”

“I didn’t want to be lame.”

“I like being lame with you.” Leaning in, I kissed him again, buzzing with the happiness I got from being lucky enough to be allowed to do so.

Oren

“Someone’s glowing.” Hal sidled up next to me at the counter in the kitchen slash lunchroom at the office. I was eyeball deep in case studies for a project Simon was working on, and I desperately needed a hit of caffeine to make it through the afternoon.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” The corner of my mouth twitched, and Hal snorted a laugh.

“Okay, keep your secrets. It’s fine. I’m happy for you, though. I wanted you to know that.” He held his coffee cup out, and I filled it when I was done filling mine.

Will wasn’t my secret, but I was his. I’d have told the universe if it was okay with him.

But he wasn’t ready yet. Yet. I hoped that one day he would be ready.

I didn’t want to rush him. I knew what it was like to lose people.

Would I be this open if I still had Byron and Rita around? The question plagued me sometimes.

It wasn’t like they were bad people. But the three of us had formed this kind of insular unit at law school.

We slept, ate, and breathed school. Me more so than them.

They'd always had an easier time with school than I had.

They'd been the ones to get me through. The bigger part of me knew that they'd have loved me no matter what, but there was always that one little kernel of doubt.

The knowledge that I'd never get to come out to them.

That they'd never get to meet Will. That he'd been there when?—

A hand touched my shoulder, and I jerked, sloshing hot coffee all over my hand. I hissed and gave it a shake.

“Shit.” Hal cursed and directed me to the sink, sticking my hand under cool water. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” I pulled my hand out of the water and took a breath. It didn’t hurt. It had been the shock of it more than the temperature of the coffee that made me react.

“Are you?” Hal grabbed paper towels and handed some to me to dry my hands. He used a few more squares to clean the coffee mess I’d made. “Because one minute you were glowing, and then it was like all the lights went out.”

“I was thinking about the accident.” My confession eased some of the tightness in my chest. The accident wasn’t a secret, and my therapist encouraged me to talk about it with people who were important to me.

When she’d first suggested that, I’d laughed at her for about three seconds before I burst into ugly tears because all the important people I’d known died in that car.

Of course, I was mistaken then. I’d had Liam.

He'd come to stay with me for a few weeks after the accident.

He'd have stayed longer, but I made him go home to his new wife.

The ink was barely dry on the marriage license when everything went down.

But his wife was a gem of a woman and understood that I needed a friend.

Hal steered us over to a table in the corner then retrieved our coffees. I was sure he didn't have time for this, and I said as much. Hal merely rolled his eyes.

"I was going to stay late anyway."

There was only one time Hal worked late.

"Simon working late?"

Hal scowled at me, but didn't dispute my assessment of the situation. "We're not talking about me. We're talking about you. How's the hand?"

I flexed my fingers. My thumb and part of the back of my hand was slightly pink, but it didn't hurt. Was it supposed to? Had the accident fucked up my pain receptors? I'd gotten out relatively unscathed. The migraines were a bitch, but I hadn't had one of those in months.

"I'm all right."

"Not sure I believe you, but okay. We'll go with that for now."

I lifted my gaze to find Hal regarding me with concern, but also an abundance of patience. He didn't mind that I wasn't spilling my guts all over him or that I was

quietly having a breakdown in my mind, missing my friends.

His gaze softened. “If you wanted to take the rest of the day, I’m sure Simon wouldn’t mind. You’ve stayed late every day this week.”

Will had been training hard this week. Apparently there was more to being a fireman than playing with hoses.

But all next week he was off, except for a twenty-four-hour shift in the middle of the week.

We still talked every night, but he trained late so I stayed late so I wouldn’t sit at home and stare at the wall and wait for him to call.

It felt a little less pathetic to be a workaholic than to be a sad, obsessed man waiting by the phone for his crush to call.

Crush was the wrong word. Will was my boyfriend. A secret, but still the most important person in my life.

“I’d rather work. If I go home I’m just going to sit there and stare at the wall.”

Hal nodded as though he understood exactly what I meant. I didn’t know that he didn’t. Maybe he knew how fucking shit it was to sit in a room and stare blankly at a wall so you wouldn’t think of unpleasant things. I hadn’t done that in months, and I didn’t want to start again.

“I get that.” Hal took a sip of his coffee, then frowned at the cup. “Why is this so bad? Have you tasted this?” With a grimace, he set his cup aside. “Don’t drink that.”

“Is it poison?”

“I doubt it, but it might as well be.” Hal shuddered. “Whoever made this pot of coffee should be sued.”

“Who are we suing?” Simon glided into the room and frowned at the empty coffee pot. “I just made a pot.”

I shared a look with Hal. He was already up and out of his chair, intercepting Simon who was getting ready to make another pot of coffee. He shouldered Simon out of the way and grabbed the empty coffee pot.

“Full offense intended, Simon, but that coffee was the worst thing I’ve ever tasted. I don’t want to know what you did.”

Simon leaned against the counter and watched Hal mutter at him about how to make a proper pot of coffee. The warmth in his expression gave me butterflies in my stomach. Will looked at me like that sometimes.

Suddenly, Simon’s attention was on me. “Oren. Good to see you taking a break.”

“I was trying to convince him to take an early day,” Hal said, throwing me under the bus.

“You do look like you could use one.” Simon managed to say things like that without them sounding mean, like he could tell that I felt like shit because I looked like shit.

“He’s been here late every day this week.”

“Snitch.” The urge to stick my tongue out at him was only trumped by the urge to not look like a child in front of my boss. “I’m nearly done with the project you asked me to take care of.”

“Perfect, then Hal can finish it up this afternoon, and you can go home.”

“It’s fine. I can stay.”

“Oren.” Simon sighed and pushed away from the counter. Moving across the room, he dropped into the seat across from me where Hal had been. He folded his long arms on the table in front of him and leaned forward, closing the distance between us. I had to force myself not to lean back.

“I can stay. I can do the work.”

“I know you can. You’ve done a great job so far.

And I want you to keep doing a great job for me, and that’s why I’m asking you very nicely to take the rest of the day off.

It’s already after lunch. It’s only a few hours, and you’ve more than worked those the rest of the week.

Hal and I can wrap it up for you, and you can come back tomorrow morning, and I’ll have a shiny new thing for you to obsess over, okay? Say okay, Simon .”

“Okay, Simon.” There was no point in arguing with him.

He grinned at me. “Good. Glad that’s settled. I’ll be back in ten minutes for a coffee.”

Simon got to his feet and gave Hal a nod before leaving the room. Hal looked like the cat that ate the canary.

“Are you happy now?” I asked him.

“Ecstatic,” he shot back, still entirely too pleased with himself. “You needed an intervention.”

“I needed no such thing. I needed something to do.”

“Go home, Oren. Sleep. Clean. Rest. Eat pizza and watch bad disaster flicks. Compose dirty text messages to a certain someone.”

“I wouldn’t even know where to start. I haven’t watched a movie in so long.”

“Have you seen Sharknado ?”

“Shark-what-o?”

“It’s like Snakes on a Plane , but you know... with sharks in a tornado.”

“You got me out of work so I could go home and watch Sharknado ?”

“Do you have a better plan? Clearly not, because you said you didn’t know where to start. I gave you a place to start.”

“You gave me sharks in tornados.”

“Well, if sharks aren’t your thing, you could always watch Snakes on a Plane. ”

“I can’t believe that’s a real thing.”

“It’s a classic.”

I scoffed. It was not. Maybe classically bad, but not a classic.

“Byron used to make me watch Tommy Lee Jones movies. He was obsessed with him. Men in Black. The Fugitive. Batman Forever .”

“I’m sorry you lost such an important person to you.”

“Thanks.” I stood and headed for the door, suddenly willing to get out of here when I had been reluctant only a few minutes ago.

Maybe I would go home and watch movies. Not Sharknado , but something.

“I’m going to go home.” I gave Hal a smile, the best one I could muster.

“Text me some more movie suggestions. Nothing with sharks.”

“How do you feel about piranhas?”

“As in the tiny fish that eats you? I’ll pass, thanks. On second thought, no ocean movies. Or movies with large bodies of water. Nothing aquatic.”

Hal sighed. “You’re no fun.”

“Maybe Simon will watch them with you. But I am not the one.”

Hal opened and closed his mouth, then narrowed his eyes at me. “I’m going to send you every oceanic horror movie I can find.”

“See you later, Hal.”

I was halfway out of the office before I realized I was smiling. Before I realized that Hal really was a friend and not just a guy I worked with who was nice to me. The concept of having a friend shouldn’t have shaken me, but I rode the elevator to the

ground floor feeling like my knees were jelly.

By the time I reached the front doors and stepped out into the fresh air, I felt better about it.

Leave it to me to have a little bit of a panic about making a friend.

I couldn't keep myself apart from people forever just to protect myself.

My therapist would be proud that I'd come to that conclusion all by myself.

The worst part of the accident had been losing Byron and Rita. And then the months of nothing and no one. A brief interlude when I'd had Liam around, but then I was too raw, my grief too fresh for me to process anything.

Liam. Hal. Will.

Three people. They'd never fill the space of the two I'd lost, but life was better with them around.

I waited at the bus stop and shot out a text to Will.

Movie night soon?

It was hours before Will got a chance to return my text, but it came with a bunch of happy face emojis.

Hell yes. Your place or mine?

I thought about it for three point two seconds.

My place.

I wanted the pleasure of having Will in my space. On my couch and in my bed. Plus, my shower was a little bigger.

I'll bring snacks.

Of course Will would bring the snacks.

Before I could stop myself I sent You are the snack.

In return I got a string of eggplant emojis.

Life was definitely better with Will in it.

Will

“Not drinking tonight, Dorsey?” It was just Briggs and me and a couple other guys from the station at the pub. We’d been killing ourselves in training this week, and Briggs suggested we deserved a night out to unwind. I’d rather have been home with Oren, but I couldn’t ignore my friends forever.

Not being around Oren made me realize how obsessed with him I was. How deeply I felt for him. This wasn’t a passing fling. At least not for me. I doubted it was for Oren either. When I wasn’t with him, I was thinking about him. I tried not to think about what that meant.

One thing that was often on my mind was the fact Oren had come out. Maybe not for me, but definitely because of me, and I couldn’t get that out of my head. Especially when he wasn’t even around me, and it still consumed my thoughts.

“Earth to Dorsey.” Briggs’ voice cut through my daze.

I shook my head and tried to pay attention to the conversation around me. Only there wasn’t one. Briggs looked at me expectantly.

“Sorry.” I raked my hand through my hair. “Guess I’m a bit tired. I didn’t mean to space out.”

“Awww, did Dorsey miss nap time?” Jonas said.

Briggs shot him a dirty look. Well, he tried, but the glimmer of amusement in his

eyes gave him away.

“Dorsey’s been busting ass all week. Unlike some other slackers around here. He had the best scores out of all of us.”

Jonas coughed, poorly covering the fact he was calling me a kiss ass. Or maybe it was aimed at Briggs.

“You’re just jealous because you couldn’t keep up if Dorsey had both feet tied together and one hand tied behind his back.”

“I wasn’t that good.” The protest came naturally, but Briggs shook his head.

“Don’t be humble, Dorsey. You kicked ass this week.”

“Dorsey kicks ass all the time,” Jonas said, changing his tune from teasing me about nap time to praising me.

It was nice to know that the other guys recognized the effort I put in to being the best I could be.

“Dorsey is tired, though.” I wasn’t. I just wanted to be home where I could call Oren to come over and we could be together. Because I wasn’t brave enough to invite him out.

I hadn’t been the only one working hard this week.

Whenever I had a packed schedule, Oren tended to put longer hours in at work.

A couple of times over the past month, his boss had sent him home early.

I'd encouraged Oren to go out with his friends, but he'd laughed and told me that I was his friend.

Me and Hal. He'd mentioned a guy named Liam now and then, but Liam wasn't local.

His social circle had always been small, but the accident had shrunk it even further.

As if I conjured him up by magic, my phone buzzed, Oren's name flashing up on the screen. I stuffed my normal reaction down inside me, hiding how pleased I was to see his message.

Want company? His text read.

I did. But I wasn't home. I was out with the guys.

I thought about inviting him and how that would go?

How would I even introduce him to everyone?

This is my friend, Oren. I pulled him out of a burning car once.

You were all there, remember? I'd never know if I could handle being around Oren and my friends unless I tried.

Out with the guys. We're at that pub near your office. You should stop in .

My fear that people would see Oren and me together and they'd know about me didn't go away once I sent the text.

The thought that they'd somehow know that I was head over heels in love with him

terrified me.

Would they be able to tell that I was sleeping with him?

Dreaming about him? It was stupid because most of the guys were as observant as a blind barn cat. But fear wasn't meant to be logical.

You sure? Oren asked with a string of emojis.

That's what I loved about him. He took things so well.

He was willing to roll with all my bullshit hang-ups about coming out.

Nothing seemed to bother him, and his understanding nature only made me want him more.

He never pushed or prodded. The subject of me coming out hadn't come up since we'd last discussed it, and true to his word, Oren had seemed perfectly happy to hang out at either my place or his.

It made our dates more intimate, but fairly routine, and I wondered if he'd ever get tired of that. Of never doing anything except hiding with me.

I sent him a text telling him I was absolutely certain then I tucked my phone away and did my best to immerse myself in the conversation around the table. I didn't know if Oren was going to show up or not, but the offer was out there now.

Briggs and Jonas were trading stories from different calls they'd been on. After his time working for the family catering company and before his firefighter days, Jonas had been an EMT. Some of the stories he'd told me turned my stomach.

“Why did you quit being an EMT?” I asked him.

He shrugged, but there was something not very nonchalant about it. “Fighting fire sounded more fun.”

Briggs snorted. “Yeah, burning buildings are a riot.”

Jonas shrugged again and took a sip of his drink. “They beat showing up to your fifth domestic in one night.”

Briggs let out a low whistle. “Fuck that.”

“My sentiments exactly. I wanted to help people, but that job was killing me. So I hung up my ambulance keys and traded them for keys to the shiny red fire truck. Pulling kittens out of storm drains is a lot better for my mental wellbeing.”

“I think we can all drink to that.” I raised my glass, and Briggs clinked his against it, shooting me a grin as he downed the rest of his beer.

“I’ll get us another round.” Briggs stood up and wandered to the bar. He leaned in, chatting with the bartender.

Jonas leaned close. “You okay, Dorsey?”

“Yeah.” I snapped my gaze away from Briggs and focused on Jonas. “Why?”

“No reason. You’re distracted today, that’s all.”

“It’s been a long week.”

When Jonas nodded, it gave me the impression that he didn’t believe me but couldn’t

call me on it because it had been a long week. Briggs came back with a pitcher of beer and set it down on the table.

Movement to my left caught my attention, and I turned my head to see Oren walk into the bar. Hal was by his side, which sent a shimmer of relief through me. I was glad Oren had more than just me to hang out with. Even if Hal was a coworker, they'd been spending more time together recently.

Oren walked over to me, Hal in tow. He did a good job of appearing as though we all just happened to be in the same place. A complete coincidence.

"Oren, hey. Good to see you."

"You too. Haven't seen you around in a while." Oren's delivery was smooth. Flawless. He let his gaze drag over the guys. "I can see that you're busy, but maybe I'll see you around."

"Why don't you sit with us?" Jonas said, saving me from having to figure out how to get the invitation past my teeth.

"We couldn't impose," Hal said.

"It's no imposition." Briggs beamed. "There's plenty of beer for everyone."

Next pitcher is on Dorsey, though." Briggs kicked my foot under the table.

It jerked me out of my panicked stupor, and I managed to smile at Oren and Hal.

I shoved over, smashing myself against the wall, leaving room for Oren to sit next to me in the booth.

Hal grabbed a chair from a nearby table and sat at the end.

“Are you sure we’re not interrupting?” Oren asked no one in particular.

“We were just discussing heroic deeds like fishing kittens out of storm drains,” Briggs supplied. “What do the two of you do?” He eyed their suits with interest. Oren had taken his jacket off and unbuttoned his cuffs. He rolled his sleeves up past his elbows and loosened his tie. He looked edible.

“We’re lawyers. Not very interesting compared to rescuing kittens.”

“Oh shit, you need drinks. I’ll go get a couple more glasses.” Jonas started to get to his feet, but Oren shook his head.

“Not for me, thanks,” he said.

“What about your friend?”

“Oh, sorry. Right. This is Hal. Hal, this is Will, and those are his friends.”

“Jonas.” Jonas pointed at Briggs. “And Briggs. There’s a few other guys around here, but they’re assholes. So, something non-boozy for Oren. What about you, Hal?”

“Beer is fine. Thanks,” Hal said agreeably.

I barely heard him through the roar in my ears as Oren pressed his foot against the side of mine under the table.

The closeness sent my heart racing, and my pulse roared in my ears.

I waited for Briggs to notice. Or Jonas.

But nothing happened. The conversation picked up again as Oren prodded Briggs and Jonas about rescuing kittens and other things firefighters were called to do.

Eventually my heart calmed and by the time I finished most of a beer, I'd relaxed.

The danger seemed to have passed, at least according to my brain.

There was nothing suspicious at all about Oren sitting next to me.

No one could tell that he was the most important person sitting at the table.

No one knew that we'd go home later and fall into bed.

Kissing. Touching. There was no way for them to know just by looking at me how much I wanted him. Needed him.

Hal knew, I realized. Oren had told him. The idea rolled around in my head, and I had to wonder if I minded sitting at a table with someone who knew the truth about me. Someone besides Oren.

It turns out that I didn't. I didn't know Hal and therefore wasn't invested in his opinion about me.

Now if I could switch that off for everyone else, I'd be set.

I could come out to my parents. The guys at work.

After that, it didn't matter. If the church my parents went to wouldn't accept me, then I simply wouldn't go.

It wasn't like I went often now anyway. Usually only when Mom or Dad was

volunteering and they needed my help.

“What’s the funniest call you’ve been to?” Oren asked me.

I took a sip of my beer to give myself a moment to think about it. “Probably the man who got stuck in the folding chairs,” I answered after a minute.

“How did that happen?”

Briggs was already laughing. Having been on the call with me, it had been one of the funnier days.

“Tequila,” Briggs answered with a grin. “Way too much tequila. A dash of bravado, and an absolute lack of brains.”

“It was a bachelor party, and the stripper didn’t show, right?”

So this guy decides that fuck it, he’s going to be the entertainment for all his friends.

Everyone is drunk and is cheering him on, and it’s all going exceedingly well, until he decides that since he’s now only wearing his boxers, he’ll wear the chair. ”

“Oh, no.” Oren grimaced in sympathy for the man.

“Oh, yes. There was a video too. Somehow he managed to get his head and his arms through it. The plan was to pull it down to his waist, I guess. But it got stuck around his ribs. Briggs here said he was going to get the jaws of life to pry the chair off him.”

“In my defense, I thought we might need them. Dude took one look at the saw, and I swear he shit himself.”

“Because the jaws of life are less intimidating.” Oren rolled his eyes, but I could see the tension in his body.

“Sorry,” I told him. It wasn’t that I forgot about the accident, how could I, but I hadn’t thought how a simple story could impact him in a bad way.

Oren took a deep breath. “It’s fine. Just brings back bad memories.”

“Did I ever tell you about the time I delivered a baby on the side of the road?” Jonas asked, rerouting the conversation, much to Oren’s relief.

“Which time?” I asked Jonas. Births on the side of the road were a right of a passage in the world of first responders.

“Which time?” Hal asked. “Does it happen a lot?”

“More often than you’d think,” Jonas replied. “Most of the time they happen because people always think they have more time. But life always has her own agenda.”

Oren’s face paled a little and I thought about the accident he’d been in that had nearly taken his life. No one knew better than him about people running out of time before they were ready.

Oren

Will wasn't completely comfortable with my presence among his friends. I tried not to take it personally. After all, I'd been the one to insist over and over again that it wouldn't bother me. Who knew I'd be such a liar?

His friends seemed like good people. Solid and steady people. They clearly cared enough about him to put their lives on the line with him and for him. But would coming out change that for him? I had my doubts.

Once the first pitcher of beer was gone, I took that as my cue to leave. I'd encroached on Will's fun enough for one evening.

"I should head out," I told them.

The conflict in Will's gaze was easy to see, for me at least. He wanted me there, but there was a certain relief to me leaving. Hal had drunk one beer, then ordered fries and wings, which he demolished.

"I'll give you a lift," Hal said. He peeled away a couple bills and tucked them under his plate for the waitress. The pub was starting to get busier, and he didn't have the greatest seat in the house. He stood and gave his chair back to the table he'd stolen it from.

"It was nice meeting you," I said to Briggs and Jonas. They both had that glassy-eyed, beer goggle look on their faces. Will wasn't too far behind. "Make sure you guys take a cab or something, okay?" I rubbed at a sudden ache in my sternum.

Understanding flashed in Will's gaze and he nodded. I'd have kissed him goodbye... except he wasn't out.

One day he would be. I had faith in that much at least.

The evening air was fresh and clean compared to the stifling atmosphere in the bar. Hal slid into step next to me as we made our way back to where he'd parked.

After a few minutes of silence, he spoke. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. It was just weirder than I expected it to be. Harder." I swiped my sweaty hands on the sides of my pants.

"I think that's normal."

"You do?" Hal was a few years older than I was, and I appreciated the way he gave me his perspective on things without ever treating me like an idiot kid the way some of the professors at law school had. Hell, like some of the other students had done too.

"Up until now, you've hung out with Will on a one-on-one basis. Adding other people into the mix changes the dynamic. Especially when the two of you can't carry on as you normally do. It'll level out and be less weird. You just need to give it more time."

More time. Right. I could do that. I had time. Will and I had just barely started dating. I'd come out because I had no one and nothing to lose by doing so. Things weren't the same for Will. I almost envied him. Friends. Family. Parents who gave a shit.

Will might be worried about losing people, but at least he had people to lose.

I had him. And Hal. Liam. Simon. Simon was my boss and not my friend, but I truly felt like he had my back.

I couldn't be upset at Will for not wanting to lose the people close to him.

From experience, I knew how much that sucked.

"It'll get better," Hal assured me as we climbed into his car.

"You know, Hal, for some reason, I think I believe you."

He shot me a wide smile, flashing his gold tooth at me. The one that only appeared when he smiled a certain way. "That's because I'm right, and you know it. I've been right about a lot of things. It's why Simon keeps me around."

"I thought he kept you around because the two of you are secretly hot for each other."

Hal's cheeks turned a ferocious shade of pink. "Between you and me, that ship sailed a long time ago."

I scoffed and buckled my seat belt. "Looks like SS Simon has circled back."

"We're not talking about that."

His tone was carefully nonchalant, so I did as asked and dropped the subject. The last thing I wanted to do was hurt him by poking at old wounds.

"Thanks for coming with me." I'd practically dragged Hal to the pub. I'd wanted to see Will, but I was terrified to go alone. I wanted some kind of a buffer between his friends and me.

“Simon will be pleased to know that his employees are bonding outside of office hours.”

“Too bad it won’t get us out of the next team building exercise,” I lamented.

“What, you don’t like escape rooms?” Hal laughed and eased the car out of the parking space and onto the street.

“I don’t like being trapped.”

His head whipped to the side and understanding made his eyes widen. “The accident?”

I nodded. After a block or two, I found my voice. “I don’t remember everything, but I remember being stuck. Trapped in that car.”

Copper. Gas. Smoke. Copper. Blood. Smoke. Blood.

My gut tightened at the memory. I cracked the window for some fresh air. “Will pulled me out. Then... flames.”

“I’ll talk to Simon.”

“I can do it. I just... I didn’t want to seem like a big baby. Like oh, no, don’t lock me in a room that’s perfectly safe and I’m not actually trapped in. But the idea makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up.”

“Then you won’t go. It’s that simple. You can be involved in the exercise some other way. Or you can sit this one out.”

“Are you sure Simon will be okay with that? And what about everyone else? I don’t

want them to think I'm getting special treatment."

"Everyone else hasn't gone through what you went through. It hasn't even been a year, has it?"

I shook my head. Ten months. Three weeks. Four days. But who was counting?

"Not yet."

"Simon will understand. I can talk to him if you'd prefer."

It was something I should be able to handle on my own, but I didn't know if I would. Chances were, if left up to me, I wouldn't say anything. Swallowing past a knot of emotion, I nodded. Hal gave me a gentle smile, a head nod, and changed the subject.

What I liked about Hal the most was his ability to read people. He was good at knowing what to say and when, and when to say nothing at all. The rest of the drive passed in silence. He dropped me off outside my building and promised to talk to Simon first thing.

My apartment felt emptier than it usually did, and I turned on the television just so I'd have some background noise.

Stripping out of my work clothes, I dressed in a pair of lounge pants and a shirt that Will had left at my place the week before.

Or had I taken it from his place? I couldn't remember now, but it didn't matter.

I liked wearing his stuff. I'd never been able to steal clothes from a significant other before.

I suddenly understood why women liked to “borrow” their boyfriend’s hoodies.

Wearing his shirt made me feel closer to him.

I was such a fucking goner for him. Maybe we shouldn’t hang out in public together. I’d been terrified that his friends would take one look at me and see the hearts in my eyes.

Dinner was a frozen pizza that tasted like disappointment after knowing what Will’s homemade pizza tasted like.

The man could make anything. He’d made the pizza dough from scratch and insisted that we do our own toppings.

I did note a distinct lack of pineapple among the options available and had called him on it.

He didn’t care. According to him, only heathens put pineapple on pizza.

My pizza was half gone, and I’d slumped further down into my couch.

Some kind of crime show played on the television, but I wasn’t paying much attention to it.

It wasn’t particularly late yet, but I wanted to go to bed anyway.

If I were sleeping, I wouldn’t be stupidly missing Will even though I’d seen him earlier on.

I turned the TV off and got up from the couch. I carried the pizza to the kitchen intending to put it away, but a knock at my door distracted me. Frowning, I padded to

the door and looked through the peephole.

Warmth spread through my chest at the sight of Will in my hallway, standing there casually with his hands tucked in his pockets.

I undid the security chain, unlocked the deadbolt, and yanked the door open.

“Hey,” I breathed out, suddenly feeling lighter than I’d felt all evening.

“Hey.” A smile tugged at his lips, and he stepped inside.

“Couldn’t stay away?” I asked as I shut the door.

Will came up behind me, and hands bracketed my hips. Lips brushed against the back of my neck.

“Something like that.” Will’s nose bumped against the shell of my ear, then he buried it in my hair.

“Did you just sniff me?”

He had me trapped between him and the door. I pressed into him, relishing the warmth of his body against mine. His grip on my hips tightened, and he ground his bulge against my ass.

“Tonight was torture,” Will admitted. He mouthed the shell of my ear and slid his hands under my shirt, giving me goosebumps.

“I wanted to kiss you so bad,” I confessed.

One of Will’s hands wandered around the front and slid down my lounge pants. He

let out a laugh, more a puff of air than an actual laugh, at the fact that I'd gone commando.

"Well, this is interesting." He took me in hand, his other arm snaking under the shirt and up until he was cradling me against him.

My back pressed to his chest, his hand on my chest keeping me there, as if I wanted to be anywhere else.

The dry slide of his hand on my dick shouldn't have felt as good as it did, but already I was close to coming undone.

"Will, please." I tilted my head, letting his mouth have more access to my neck.

I didn't have to ask him to kiss me there; he just did.

He knew the signs of my body, of what it was asking for.

His stubble scraped against my skin, reminding me how easy it would be for him to ruin me.

He could mark me everywhere with only his mouth.

He could leave me a wreck with only his lips, his teeth, and that infuriatingly hot five o'clock shadow.

"Please, what, Oren?" A thumb brushed against my nipple, making me gasp. "What do you need?"

As if he didn't know.

As if he was unaware that I needed him.

As if there was any doubt that I needed his body on my body. His cock in my ass. His mouth on mine. His fucking heart.

Oh, God. I loved him.

The realization slammed into me, leaving me breathless in a whole different way. I fucking loved Will Dorsey, and there was no way I could possibly share that revelation just yet.

“Will, please. I need you in me.”

His answering laugh told me he was only too happy to oblige.

Will

There was nothing in this world better than the feel of Oren's body against mine.

Slightly shorter, slimmer, it was like he'd been built just for me.

The perfect fit. And he was wearing my shirt.

Some kind of inner caveman inside me fucking loved that he was wearing it.

It felt like I'd claimed him or that he'd claimed himself on my behalf. Either way, Oren was mine.

I dragged my mouth down his neck, leaving a trail of heat and damp. Oren trembled against me, becoming needier with every passing second.

"As much as I'd love to fuck you against this door, we need a bed." I released his cock and pulled my hand out of his pants, much to his dismay. I pressed my mouth against his shoulder and stifled a laugh at the way he whimpered from the loss of my touch.

He turned, hands gripping my shirt, and he pulled me into a kiss.

Sudden and devastating, he swept his tongue into my mouth and kissed me like I'd wanted to kiss him all night.

With abandon. With every bit of passion inside me so everyone would know that I

belonged to him. That he was mine and I was his.

It would've been easy to press him against the door and slot our cocks together. To let lust and friction take over, but I wanted more than that. Ending the kiss took all my willpower, but it was worth it to see the look in Oren's eyes.

"Bed."

"Fuck yes," he agreed on an exhale.

Linking our hands together, I tugged him toward the bedroom, pausing at the sight of a frozen pizza on the counter. "You need a keeper. That's not food."

"Well, I beg to differ. It definitely is food. At least it had better be. I did eat it for dinner."

"I'll make you a better one."

"What if I want pineapple?" Oren asked as we entered the bedroom.

I turned to face him and put my hands on his hips. With a grin, I yanked his pants down to his ankles. Oren let out a startled yelp, followed by a laugh. He stepped out of the pants and kicked them aside.

He reached for the hem of the shirt, but I stilled his hands and leaned in close, brushing my lips against his. "The shirt stays on."

Understanding washed through his gaze, then he smirked at me. "This old thing?"

Grabbing him by the back of the neck, I hauled him against me, kissing him ferociously.

Deeply. I wanted to taste the need that poured out of him.

I wanted to feel his helpless moans against my tongue as I lowered him down onto the bed.

Oren underneath me was one of my favorite things.

The feel of his desperation as he pawed at me, yanking my shirt off was another.

But most of all, I loved the softness in his gaze when he looked at me.

I'd missed that when we were out at the pub.

He'd kept it carefully hidden away, but it was back now.

"Will."

My name sounded like a prayer when he said it like that. Like he attached all his wants and needs and secret hopes and dreams to it before breathing it into existence.

As much as I loved looking at him, it wasn't his face I was interested in at the moment. With a final kiss, I sat back and flicked the button of my pants open. "Roll over for me."

He let out a breath and his eyes went wide, but then a smile tugged at his mouth, and he did as he was told.

He propped himself up on his elbows so he could turn his head and watch me get undressed.

When I showed up, I was already hard, but the sight of him in my shirt did something

to me.

It made me feral for him. My dick stuck straight up, and I grabbed it, indulging myself with a few slow strokes to drive Oren nuts.

Climbing back onto the bed, I settled myself between Oren's legs, spreading them to make room for my body between them.

"Ass up, baby."

"Oh, God." Oren groaned as he got up onto his knees. His cock hung down, hard and heavy, leaking precum. I wrapped my hand around it and gently drew it back, licking the head before taking it into my mouth. Oren buried a moan into the bed and pressed himself closer to me.

I loved knowing that I was the first man to put my mouth on him. The first man to suck his cock and make him come. The first one to slide inside him and own a part of him that no one else had touched before.

Releasing the head of his cock from my mouth, I gave his dick a couple tugs. Oren moaned again when I licked a trail up, starting at his sac, sliding over his taint and teasing past his hole only to turn back and lave my tongue over it.

"Will." Oren's sharp voice broke the silence.

I licked him again and whatever else he might have wanted to say died.

"Oh. Oh, fuck me."

Gladly. But not yet. Kneeling behind him, I gripped a cheek in each hand and spread him open.

Working up a mouthful of saliva, I spit it directly onto his hole, earning a surprised gasp from him.

And then I dove in again. Circling his hole with my tongue, I kissed and licked until the muscle was soft and pliant, allowing me to work my tongue inside him.

Oren writhed, grinding his ass against my face. He seemed lost in the pleasure, but I wanted him beyond lost. I wanted him mindless. Boneless. Desperate and begging for me.

I speared my tongue inside him, and he groaned, long and low. His body shook, legs quaked as though he was being pulled apart at the seams. He writhed and wriggled until I had to circle an arm around him and pull him close, trapping him against my mouth.

“You’re going to make me come,” Oren whined.

While that was the objective, I didn’t want him to come until I was buried deep inside him.

I pulled back, working my jaw back and forth before relaxing it. Oren collapsed into a heap, spread out like a starfish. His body heaved as he sucked in deep breaths.

The bed dipped as I leaned over and grabbed the supplies off the nightstand.

“No condom,” Oren said. “We’re fine, right? I was negative. You were negative.”

He peeked at me over his shoulder and shot me a hopeful look.

I dropped the condom and straddled him. I pried his cheeks apart with one hand and drizzled lube onto his hole.

“That’s cold.” Oren laughed and wriggled. His wriggles suddenly had a rhythm, and I gave him a sharp slap on the ass.

“No humping the bed. At least not until I’m inside you.”

He buried his face in the bed and let out a mournful groan. “Then hurry up and get in me, Will. I’m fuckin’ dying here.”

“Bossy bottom.”

“Bossy boyfriend.” Oren wiggled his ass at me as if I needed more encouragement.

Touching my cock made me realize how fucking hot I was for him. My dick twitched in my hand, and I clamped down on the base, staving off my orgasm. I bit back a laugh and took a few deep breaths to steady myself.

With my cock slick with lube, I indulged in a little bit of teasing, working a finger in and out of Oren’s hole, spreading the lube, getting him ready for me. He was warm and loose from my tongue, slick from the lube.

“Will.” He dragged my name out with the last of his patience.

I pulled his cheeks apart with one hand and used the other to guide my cock to his hole. He took a deep breath, and I pressed inside.

Being inside him bare took my breath away.

It whooshed out of my lungs, and I stilled, sweat beading on my forehead.

The back of my neck. Oren inhaled deeply again, and I slid in slowly until I was fully seated.

Leaning forward, I pressed my mouth against the nape of his neck.

Oren arched up into me, his ass swallowing me further.

God .

I squeezed my eyes shut, took a few breaths, and tried not to fucking come in an embarrassingly short amount of time.

He reached for me, his hand finding my arm. Blindly, he slid his hand from my elbow down to my wrist. I twined our fingers together, then rocked my hips forward hard and fast, punching the air out of him. Oren gripped my hand and moaned my name.

No sound had ever been sweeter. No one had ever felt better. Oren was everything I'd always wanted but had known I'd never have. And yet somehow I had him. Hot and sweet and fucking perfect for me.

I lost myself in him. In the heat and the motion. He turned his head, and we shared a sloppy, imperfect kiss. Oren made the most delicious sounds. Whines and moans urged me on, made me thrust harder, sinking myself deeper.

“Harder, Will. Fucking—fucking harder,” Oren begged.

I sat up, digging my hands into his hips to drag him with me. He bent his knees and pressed his hands into the mattress. He tipped his head back, and I pulled him to me as I thrust forward, driving the air out of his lungs.

The sound of flesh slapping filled the room.

My heart beat so fast it threatened to burst, but I couldn't stop.

I drilled into Oren, fucking him so hard I saw stars.

He sat up, suddenly changing the angle of entry, and his ass gripped my cock tighter.

Wrapping my arms around him, I pressed kisses against his sweaty back.

“Can’t last.” Words were hard. All my brain power was being used to commit every moment of this to memory.

“Touch me. Will. Need you to touch me.”

I couldn't deny him anything. Unwilling to stop to get lube, I spit in my hand then gripped Oren's cock.

Saliva smeared together with precum. It was sticky and not enough, but after only a few tugs, every muscle in Oren's body snapped tight.

He threw his head back, pillowing it against my shoulder.

He turned his face toward me and pulled me into a kiss.

Then he came. Ribbons of cum shot out of his cock.

Oren trembled in my arms, writhing on my lap, driving me deeper than I thought possible.

Even if I'd wanted to stop, I wouldn't have been able to.

My release slammed into me like a freight train with no brakes.

Releasing my hold on Oren's cock, I slid my hands up his torso.

Gripping onto his shoulders, I drove him down as I fucked up into him.

It only took a few thrusts like that before I stopped breathing.

Before every atom in my body felt like it collapsed in on itself. Then released.

Air rushed into my lungs. My heart started beating again. And my hips jerked, fucking into Oren as I came so hard my vision swam.

“Holy fuck,” Oren breathed, melting into my embrace as we tried to catch our breath. “Love having you in me. Fuck, that was hot.”

I kissed the top of his shoulder. Smoothed my hands down his legs. Up again. Up his sides. “You feel okay? I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

Oren turned his head and caught my gaze with his own. “You could never hurt me.”

From his lips to the universe’s ears.

Oren

Simon was the kind of boss that had a door on his office, but it was never closed.

Well, almost never. It had closed about fifteen minutes ago when Hal was called in there, and it hadn't opened up again.

I tried not to pay too much attention to it, but it was strange for Simon's door to close.

He took most of his client meetings in the nearby conference room.

Probably because, even with the invention of technology, his office tended to quickly drown in stacks of files.

Waiting for Hal to reappear was like waiting for the teacher to come back into class after stepping out to talk to the principal. I did my best to keep myself on task, but after thirty minutes, I started to wonder if they were talking or if they had a secret office affair going on.

The door swung open and Hal, completely composed, not a hair out of place or a wrinkle in his clothes, came over to me.

"Simon wants to see you." There must have been something on my face that gave my apprehension away because Hal dropped a hand onto my shoulder and gave it a supportive squeeze. "It's fine. I promise."

"Famous last words." I stood and crossed the room, slipping into Simon's office with

a knock on the door frame.

“Come in, Oren. Shut the door if you wouldn’t mind.”

Oh, shit.

I closed the door and tried not to panic, but this felt an awful lot like being hauled into the principal’s office and being told you weren’t in trouble only for them to ask a million questions to try to get you in trouble.

I’d been a bit of an asshole as a kid, but there was no reason for me to be worried now.

I came to work, I did my job, I went home.

Most of the time, I went home. Sometimes I stayed late because Will was working late and working kept me from worrying too much about him.

“Have a seat.”

I lowered myself into one of the chairs that sat across from his desk and waited for Simon to drop the blade of the guillotine. Me, dramatic? Never.

He kept his gaze trained on his computer screen for a few moments as he clicked away on the keyboard. “You’ve been with us for how long now, Oren?”

“A few months. Maybe half a year.”

“That’s right.” Simon turned his attention to me, and I did my best not to shrink under the weight of his gaze. “I don’t want it to go to your head or anything, but you’ve exceeded our expectations.”

“I have?” The shred of approval allowed oxygen to enter my lungs again. The tension I’d carried in here unspooled and I was able to relax.

“You work hard. You put in extra hours. Hours that are strictly unnecessary but haven’t gone unnoticed. And the work you’ve done is top notch. I realize our branch of law isn’t always the most thrilling, and I’ve lost talent to other more exciting types of practice before.”

“I have no plans to leave, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Simon grinned at me. “I should hope not. But, nevertheless, I’m going to give you a raise just to ensure we don’t lose you.”

Simon gave me a number that made my head spin.

“Are you sure?”

He responded by arching an eyebrow.

“Right, of course you’re sure. Sorry. I just—back in law school, I had to work twice as hard as my friends to get the same results.

They’re gone now, but they’d have loved this.

” I cleared my throat and managed to push my emotions away before I succumbed to them and ended up a babbling mess on Simon’s floor.

“But for the record, Simon, I like contract law. I don’t want to jump ship to more exciting things like criminal trials or family court. I never wanted to be some kind of hot shot personal injury lawyer or anything.”

“What did you want?” Simon asked, obviously intrigued.

“I’m afraid the answer is simple. I wanted to not be dead fucking broke. I had nothing growing up, and after being paraded around in court for a few years because of shitty, no-show parents, I noticed the fancy lawyers never had holes in their shoes.”

“And yet you don’t want to go into family law?”

“Hell, no. Nope. No thank you. The system is broken, but they’re going to have to call on someone else to fix it. I barely made it out alive the first time.”

“For what it’s worth, I’m glad you don’t want to go into family law. That means I might keep you around for a while yet.”

“I plan to stay for as long as you’ll let me. I hope my admission to that fact won’t affect any future raises you might want to give me.”

Simon shook his head. Smirking, he motioned to the door.

“Get out of my office. Your raise will take effect retroactively to the beginning of the month. Now go close some loopholes or something. Oh, before you go, Klein brought in a few interns to work on his special project. I need you to do a favor for me.”

The firm’s senior partner, Adam Klein, wanted all their archived cases digitized.

They’d been in business together for decades and many of their old cases were stored in dusty boxes in the basement.

Even as organized as it was, having everything digitized would make searching for things easier. But it was going to be a hell of a job.

“Klein was going to show them the way to the records room, but he’s been called away. The interns are waiting in conference room B, which has been cleared for them to use. Can you show them the records room and get them started?”

“I’ll head down now and get them on it.”

“I appreciate that.”

“Thanks for the raise,” I said, then I slipped out of his office, leaving the door open.

I made a quick stop by my desk and grabbed my key card. The records room in the basement was kept secure with an electronic lock.

I led the three eager interns, first-year college students by the look of their fresh faces, on a quick office tour. Showing them where the lunchroom was, the bathrooms, Klein’s office, all the important places.

I took them down the stairs to the basement and buzzed us into the archives. The records room was a maze of boxes. The storage system was imperfect, but I knew I’d find the oldest records at the back.

“Are you working from oldest to most recent?” I asked, because that’s how I’d do it.

“We thought that would be fine,” the one named Shera said. She seemed to be the leader of their little pack, and the other two were willing to follow her. My chest constricted as I remembered Rita. She’d have liked Shera.

I grabbed a cart and loaded it full of boxes, sneezing at the amount of dust that billowed off of the boxes.

If not for the raise, I might have complained about the task.

It was below my pay grade, that was for sure, but who better for the shit job than the new guy.

The interns loaded up the other two carts.

“Will we need to get you every time we want to get into the records room?” Shera asked. “That seems like an inefficient use of your time.”

“I’ll talk to Simon and see about getting you an access card.” Anything to get me away from the dusty records room and away from the basement.

The basement was my least favorite place in the building.

It was used for storage, meaning no one was ever down here.

The lights were on, but every sound echoed down the empty hallways.

Instead of carpet, the floors were tile.

The click of my shoes on the floor reminded me of a horror movie.

The wheels of the cart added to the aesthetic, wobbling and squeaking all the way to the elevator.

The elevator that went to the basement was an old piece of machinery, dating back to when the building was first been constructed. I couldn’t say that I was entirely pleased to take it up a few floors, but it beat lugging a box at a time up and down the stairs.

“We’ll go up first with this cart and then you two follow. Remember, conference room B.”

I thought about taking the stairs back up to the fourth floor, but I didn't want to look foolish in front of a bunch of interns.

It was a short elevator ride. I could manage.

The doors of the small box whooshed open, and I pushed the cart in first. There wasn't a lot of room with the cart in the elevator with us, but at least I wasn't going to be in there with two carts.

I hit the button for my floor, then the button to close the doors. I kept my eyes on the number above the door, each floor that ticked away decreased my anxiety. Somewhere after the light flicked to indicate we were on the third floor, a terrible noise shook the elevator. It came to a stop.

"Fuck," Shera said.

And then nothing.

Nothing at all. I hit the buttons on the panel, desperate to get it to move, but it was useless. The elevator was fucking stuck. And I was stuck inside it.

Trapped.

Trapped without my cell phone because I'd left it on my desk up on the fourth floor.

I kept it in my desk to alleviate some of the temptation to constantly text Will.

We both tried to respect the other's work schedule, only sending the odd message when it was important.

From here on out, though, I was never going anywhere without my phone.

“My phone isn’t getting reception in here.” Shera raised her cell above her head, trying to find a signal. She quickly gave up. “I’m sending a text, hoping my phone will grab a signal and it can get out.”

All wasn’t lost, though. Despite the rock in my throat and the sudden tightness in my chest, I managed to keep my head long enough to press the button with a phone on it. The call was answered on the second ring, connecting me with building security.

“Hi, yes, this is Oren Reid. I work on the fourth floor. I’m stuck in elevator B between the third and fourth floors. Please tell me there’s a magic button I can press to get this thing moving again.”

“How many people are in the elevator with you, Mr. Reid?” On the other end of the phone I heard the telltale clack of fingers on a keyboard. Hopefully that meant help was on the way.

“Just me and one other.”

“Do you require medical attention?”

“No.” Not yet, I thought. But I kept that to myself. The last thing I wanted to do was cause undue alarm about my wellbeing. I might feel like I was going to die, but I was definitely safe. Maybe.

Hopefully.

“We’re okay,” I repeated, though I was suddenly breathless and light-headed. I leaned against the cart for support, not trusting my legs to keep me vertical.

“Mr. Reid, can you press the button to open the doors? Sometimes that’s all it takes to get the elevators moving again. Press and hold for at least five seconds.”

Each agonizing second was punctuated with me mentally chanting please in my head. Please fucking open. Please don't be fucking stuck. Please work.

Nothing.

“Nothing.”

“Okay. That's fine. I'll see if I can get them open from this end. Just be calm. You're safe.”

Safe. Sure. I was safe. There was no big deal about being stuck between floors in a tin can with no cell phone. It wasn't at all the same as being trapped in a—nope. I wasn't going to let myself go down that road. I needed a distraction.

“Mr. Reid?” the speaker said again. “I've tried to get you moving again remotely, but I'm afraid that nothing has worked.”

“There was a big sound right before it got stuck.” Panic pricked at my skin, making it erupt in goosebumps. My stomach cramped in a way that threatened my demise, like eating before swimming.

“I've alerted emergency services. Do you require medical attention?”

“No, I'm fine.” I looked to Shera and asked if she was okay, too.

She nodded her head, though she rocked back and forth on the balls of her feet.

“We're okay. We're fine.” I wasn't fine, but I wasn't hurt.

“I'm okay. Just a little claustrophobic.

” I sank down onto the floor, put my head between my knees and tried my best to breathe.

Will

It had been a quiet shift so far. Some days were like that. I'd made lunch for everyone, a huge tuna noodle casserole and garlic toast. The guys were all crowded around the table, shoveling food into their faces and talking amongst themselves.

I used the opportunity to shoot Oren a text.

He seldom messaged me when I was on shift.

He didn't want to be a distraction. The thought was nice, but I'd told him again and again that I was able to get texts at work.

His concern was sweet, so I didn't push him on it.

But usually if I sent a text, he sent one right back.

Most of his day was spent behind a desk, pushing paper, talking to clients, and finding and closing legal loopholes, or opening them, depending on the situation.

Ten minutes later, he still hadn't texted me back. He hadn't even seen my text, though. It said it had been delivered but not read so he must be busy. It was stupid to miss him when we talked all the time and saw each other as much as we could. But I couldn't get enough of him.

Envy wrapped itself around my heart and squeezed as one of the other guys gushed about a girl he'd been seeing.

Sometimes envy was a sharp instrument, slicing and stabbing me open from the inside.

I hated how hard it was for me to be who I was when other people seemed free to be who they were. Gay, straight, bisexual, or otherwise.

“Not like Dorsey over here.”

Jonas said my name, but I had no idea what anyone had been talking about. I lifted my gaze from my plate and glanced around. “What?”

The table erupted into laughter, like I’d said something funny, furthering my confusion.

“We were just telling Hank that he over-shares. And you, my friend, were called out for under-sharing. And I’m not sure which is worse.” Jonas bumped his shoulder against mine to let me know he was just ribbing me.

“Maybe I don’t share anything because I have nothing to share.”

A lie, of course. I had a lot to share, but something always stopped me, no matter how much I wanted to tell people.

That stupid fear of rejection had burrowed its way under my skin and into the fabric of my being.

It was woven through me like the thread of a tapestry.

If I pulled it loose, would I unravel completely?

Who would I be if I wasn’t closeted? Had it become such a part of my identity that I

didn't know who I was without hiding all the time?

Jonas and Briggs both looked at me skeptically, but I ignored them. If they wanted to know something, they could come out and ask. Maybe then I'd tell them. Maybe I wouldn't.

Most likely, I'd tell them nothing. That strategy had served me well so far. Up until I met Oren, I'd been happy with the status quo. A little lonely sometimes, but nothing I couldn't live with. Compared to some, I had it easy.

"Come on, Dorsey. Surely there's something you'd like to share? We know you've been seeing someone." Hank reached for another slice of garlic toast.

"And how do you know that?" Briggs challenged him.

"Easy. Up until recently, Dorsey was here a lot more often, cooking meals, or dropping meals by. Hanging out on his time off. And he doesn't do that anymore. Not as often."

"That doesn't prove anything, Hank. Maybe he's just sick of your ugly mug." Jonas lobbed a crust of bread at him. "Besides, even if he was, it's no one's business."

Before anyone could continue the third degree, the alarm went off and everyone shot to their feet. The radio crackled, dispatching us to a location several blocks away at a building with a jammed elevator, two occupants.

Stuck elevators were a pain in the ass more than anything.

But we still geared up to prepare for any turn of events.

We'd done drills for all kinds of situations.

Fires. Floods. Rescue operations. Elevators.

You name it, we trained for it. Still, every call out was different and there was always the potential for things to go horribly wrong.

We were on site in less than ten minutes. Briggs grabbed the pry bar that we used to wedge between the doors and force them open. I grabbed the first aid kit. Sometimes elevators did unpredictable shit when they got stuck, and sometimes people did unpredictable shit when elevators got stuck.

We were met at the front door by a pair of security guards.

“The elevator is stuck somewhere between the third and fourth floor. Maintenance is trying to lower the elevator to the third floor. Generally we’d wait to call you guys in until after maintenance exhausted their options, but the guard on the phone was a little overzealous.

” The security guard’s cheeks flushed, giving himself away that he was likely the over-eager one who’d answered the phone.

“You did the right thing,” Briggs assured him. “We’d rather be on site and not needed than be needed and not here.”

The guard led us up the stairs to the third floor.

“Any idea where exactly the elevator is stuck?” Briggs asked one of the security guards.

“Somewhere between three and four is all we know.”

“Any word from maintenance?” I asked.

The security guard radioed over for an update. “Nothing yet. They still have a couple things they can try.

“Dorsey, Jonas and I will head up to four and crack the door open and see where the elevator is. The rest of you stay here. Keep us updated about what maintenance says.”

“I’ll go with you.” The security guard, Joe Collins according to his name tag, said. He led Jonas and me up to the fourth floor. A few people were gathered around the elevator already. The news about the stuck elevator had obviously traveled.

“Can we get everyone to go back to your desks?” Joe started herding the onlookers away to give us room to work when one of them caught my eye.

“Hal?”

“Will.” Hal pushed his way past Joe Security. “Oh boy, is Oren going to be happy to see you.”

“Oren? He’s here? Of course he’s here. You work with him, so this is...”

“Oren’s in the elevator.”

My head whipped around to the elevator doors. Briggs had worked the pry bar between the doors. It took him and Jonas a few more seconds to manhandle the doors open while I stood there dumbstruck.

Oren was in the elevator, and it took every ounce of my training and my restraint not to flip the fuck out.

“Do we know if he’s okay?” I said to Hal while I watched Briggs and Jonas work the doors open. I’d hoped to see the elevator, but there was only an empty shaft.

“If they can’t lower it to the third floor, we can get them out through the top,” Jonas said, and I realized after a second that he was talking to me.

“Have they opened the door on the third floor yet?” Briggs asked Joe Security.

Logically, I knew there wasn’t anything to be afraid of.

I’d been on stuck elevator calls before, but never before had someone I loved been stuck inside.

This wasn’t some great epiphany for me. I knew I loved Oren.

I’d loved him for a while. Had I told him that?

Of course not. I was too afraid. Afraid of what it meant to love someone and hide them.

Afraid of what my parents would think if I told them about me.

It all seemed like such trivial shit now.

The night I met Oren flashed before my eyes.

The body in the back seat next to him was a stark reminder of how fragile life was.

The coppery scent of blood and then the sudden burst of fire.

Any number of things could’ve gone wrong that night, and Oren might have been lost to me before I found him.

Before I discovered what it was like to be loved the way I’d always craved.

I needed him.

“Maintenance has had zero luck getting the elevator to move. Apparently there was a concerning sound right before it came to a stop,” Joe security said. He then moved his attention to ushering the gathering crowd away from the elevators and back to their offices.

“So what’s the plan?” Ignoring Hal, who lingered just out of the way, I went to Briggs and Jonas. According to the boys downstairs, they couldn’t access the occupants from the third floor.

“Hank and Wells are bringing more gear up here. Ladders. Ropes. We’re going to get them out through the access panel at the top of the elevator.” Briggs gripped onto the wall with one hand and shone a flashlight into the shaft, first down at the top of the elevator, then up. “Shouldn’t take long.”

“Oren’s in there.” Through some miracle, my voice didn’t crack or waver.

But they had to know how desperate I was to get down there and help him.

My body screamed at me that I wasn’t doing enough, but I kept myself under control through sheer force of will.

It wouldn’t do Oren any good for me to lose my shit.

Joe Security’s radio crackled. “It’s maintenance. One of the occupants isn’t doing so hot. Panic attack. Pretty bad one.”

“That’s normal for a situation like this. Can someone stay on the line with them and assure them that we’re on our way down to them?” Jonas said as Hank and Wells burst through the door from the stairwell. I’d never been happier to see a ladder and a

bunch of rope in my life.

Joe nodded and stepped out of the way to let us work.

I had to shove the idea of Oren down there panicking, worried, trapped and scared, out of my head so I could get to work.

“Jonas is the lightest one. He should be the one to go down to the top of the elevator. We can tie him off and send him down on the ladder.” My thoughts were racing at a million miles an hour, calculating the distance between the top of the elevator and the opening.

“If we can hoist them up out of the elevator, they can climb up the ladder. And if they can’t climb, we can just keep pulling them up.

Easy peasy.” Jonas secured a line to himself then looked over at Joe Security.

“Please inform the occupants that help is coming and they’re going to hear noises, but not to worry. ”

I helped Hank lower the ladder down to the top of the elevator then I took a hold of Jonas’s line. He stepped onto the ladder and carefully, but quickly, descended to the top of the elevator car.

“Fire department.” Jonas’s voice echoed up through the shaft.

I gave him a little more slack to work with as Briggs and Wells readied rope harnesses for the occupants. For Oren and whoever was with him.

Metal clanged against metal, and I heard Jonas again announce his presence.

“Fire department. How are you folks doing? Sorry we couldn’t get you out the normal way, but I’ve got some friends with me who are eager to get you out of here.”

Oren’s voice nearly made me drop Jonas’s line.

“Send her out first.” His voice faded, but the sound of crying echoed up through the shaft.

Briggs tossed a line down.

I listened as Jonas handled the situation down there and all I could think was how badly I wanted Oren off that fucking elevator. How he wasn’t even the one panicking. The man was made of steel. He had more bravery in his pinkie toe than most people had in their whole existence. Including me.

“Okay, guys, she’s ready. Just hold on tight and we’ll lift you up through the hatch.”

Briggs and Wells slowly but steadily reeled her line in, and I watched Jonas reach down to grab her hand and help her the rest of the way up through the emergency access hatch.

“She’s going to need a lift, guys.” Jonas called up to us. Clearly the woman was in no shape to try and climb a ladder. She was shaking like a tree in a windstorm.

Briggs and Wells reeled her up, and I grabbed on to her hand and helped her through the doors and back onto solid ground.

Hank took her from me the minute she was up and spirited her away so we could rescue the other occupant.

Oren.

Oren

Being trapped in an elevator with a young woman who'd almost immediately devolved into a panic attack had kept my mind off my own.

I'd helped her focus on her breathing. I'd tried my best to be reassuring and calm, even though I was a mess inside.

But now that Shera was out of here, I could only focus on my own spiraling mental state.

Swallowing hard to keep the contents of my stomach where they belonged, I looked up at a familiar face.

Jonas. Which meant Will was here. Somewhere.

That knowledge eased my mind a little. I briefly wondered why Will wasn't the one down here because I wanted him to be.

I wanted to hear him assure me that everything was fine.

I didn't feel fine. The longer I was in the elevator, the more it started to feel like I was stuck in that car all over again.

"Are you ready to get out of there?" Jonas asked as he lowered a line down to me.

"More than." With trembling hands, I secured the line around myself the way I'd

helped with Shera. I tried to take a deep breath, but my chest was too tight to let much air in. I tried breathing through my nose.

The elevator smelled like copper.

It felt like fire. Like death.

My vision swam as I fought to keep the contents of my stomach down.

“Oren, buddy, look at me,” Jonas said. “Just a couple deep breaths. That’s all you need to do now. Okay?”

“Okay.” I sucked in a breath that was supposed to be deep but wasn’t. I could do this. Will was here. His friends were here. Logically, I knew I wasn’t in danger. Emotionally, I was a fucking wreck.

“We’re going to lift you up now. Hang on, okay?”

I nodded at Jonas because I didn’t trust myself to speak. I didn’t know if I could. When Shera had been in here, her panic had distracted me from mine. I’d helped her with all the techniques that I’d learned since the accident. Every trick that seemed beyond my ability at this moment.

Suddenly, solid ground slipped away, and I was swiftly and steadily pulled toward the hatch. The moment I could reach Jonas, I gripped onto him and let him help haul me the rest of the way out of the hatch.

“Think you can manage a ladder?”

“I think—” I shook my head. My head had started to swim a few minutes ago, and I didn’t trust my limbs to do as instructed.

“Okay, then just one more quick lift and you’re out of here. Reel him up, boys.”

I closed my eyes as I was again hoisted into the air. Jonas helped me from below, steadying my ascent and helping lift my legs.

Hands gripped on to me, and my eyes flew open.

Will. Will was here. I knew he would be, but there was a difference between knowing something and seeing it with your own two eyes.

“Will.” His name came out in a sigh of relief.

I wanted to sag against him but restrained myself.

Will wasn’t out. Would his fellow firefighters be able to tell how much I loved him if I let him hug me?

If I took that bit of comfort that my body and soul were screaming for, would they know about us?

“Oren, are you okay?”

I nodded. Then shook my head. Then shrugged. The truth was that a spot had appeared in my vision. One that was a telltale sign that I was about to be in a lot of fucking pain. I hadn’t had a migraine in months, but the stress of the situation must have triggered it.

I wished Will would pull me into his arms. But he was at work.

We were in public, and he was at work, and it wasn’t going to happen.

No matter how much I needed it. No matter how much it looked to me like he wanted it.

He looked like yearning had cracked him in half, and he was struggling to get his emotions under control.

“Oren.” Hal’s familiar voice penetrated my brain fog, and I found myself tugged into Hal’s embrace. “Are you okay?”

I felt Will’s gaze on me. I wished I knew what he was thinking. All we needed was ten minutes alone. Truthfully, I wanted the comfort of his arms. The safety I’d always felt there.

“Must be a Monday,” I mumbled.

“Are you hurt?” Hal asked and I shook my head.

“You should let Will have a look at you anyway. Make sure you’re okay.”

I nodded, accepting the suggestion. Hal steered me toward Will.

“How do you feel?” Will asked, his brow furrowed with concern. There was still plenty of activity going on around the elevators, but now that everyone was out, it was less urgent.

I took a deep breath and glanced at the elevator as Jonas hauled the ladder out of the shaft.

Maintenance shut the doors behind him, preventing any accidents that might happen.

The elevator was still stuck, but now at least the doors had been shut, and

maintenance was busy taping it off with signs that it was out of service.

“I feel okay.” I didn’t want Will to worry about me, but the visual aura was turning into a dull throb in the side of my head. I had to get the hell home to where my migraine meds were. I wanted to lie down in the dark and pretend today never happened.

Will took my pulse and asked me if I was sure I didn’t have any injuries.

“I’m fine. I think I’d really just like to go home, though”

Will motioned to Hal, who returned to my side like the faithful friend he was.

“Could you give Oren a lift home? I would, but I’m on shift until tomorrow morning,” he asked Hal, keeping his voice low.

“I’ve already cleared it with Simon. We can go whenever the nice fireman with the first aid training says he’s good to go.”

Will glanced at me. “Call me if you need anything. I don’t care that I’m on shift. Okay?”

“Okay.” I knew I wouldn’t call him. There wasn’t anything he could do for me. I needed quiet and rest and to forget today ever happened.

I gave him a final lingering look. “I’ll be okay. I promise.” God, I wanted to kiss him. He was right in front of me, but he might as well have been across the universe because I couldn’t touch him the way I wanted. Couldn’t look at him for too long or everyone would be able to tell.

“Take good care of him,” Will told Hal, who ushered me away and down a different

set of stairs. We took it slow down to the parking garage.

By the time I was in the passenger seat, the headache that I knew was coming had arrived in full force. I buckled myself in and rolled Hal's window down to give me air flow and mitigate the whole trapped-in-a-metal-box feeling before I closed my eyes and leaned against the headrest.

"You're really pale. Are you sure you're okay?"

"Headache. Probably the stress." The stress. The panic. The way I'd flashed back and was trapped in that car again with my two dead friends. The smell of copper pennies and gasoline made my stomach roll.

"Do you need anything?"

"Just home. I have medication there I can take."

"Do you get a lot of headaches?" Hal started the car and immediately flicked the radio off.

"After the accident I got them all the time. But as time went on, they went away. I haven't had one in so long I forgot how much they suck."

Hal seemed to sense my need for quiet, and he let me endure the drive without further chatter. Being the nice guy he was, he escorted me to my apartment and helped me up the stairs—I'd had enough elevators for one day, thank you.

Hal followed me into my apartment. "Get your meds and get into bed."

"Yes, boss."

Without turning any lights on, I made my way through my apartment. I stopped at the bathroom and took a piss just so I wouldn't have to get up for a while. Then I grabbed my meds, stripped down to my underwear, and crawled into bed.

I could hear Hal moving around. He might be robbing me blind for all I knew or cared, but then he crept into my room and pulled the curtains shut the rest of the way.

"I brought you a bottle of water and an ice pack for your head. Did you take your meds?"

"Yes, thank you." I let Hal fuss over me, tucking me in and gently placing the ice pack on my head.

"My mom used to get migraines. Did you want me to stick around?"

"No. I'm fine."

Hal made a thoughtful sound like he didn't quite believe me. Well, too bad for him. I was as fine as I was going to get until my meds kicked in, and I could sleep for twelve or thirteen hours. Days maybe.

"I put your phone on the nightstand. Is it set to silent?"

I managed a nod. I didn't often get sick anymore, but it had been a while since I had a headache this bad and the more I talked, the larger the lump in my throat felt.

It was stupid, but I wanted Will. But Will was at work doing important firefighter things like pulling people out of elevators and rescuing kittens from storm drains.

"You have my number. If you need anything, I want you to call me. I also expect an update as soon as you feel able."

“So bossy,” I whispered.

“Okay, I’ll get out of your hair. Rest well.”

I didn’t bother saying goodbye. Hal didn’t seem to expect it of me either. He left the room and closed the door. It wasn’t totally dark, but it was dark enough to suit me just fine. Dark enough that it eased some of the pain lancing through my skull.

I wished for sleep to take me, but my head still felt like it was imploding in on itself. I didn’t fucking miss this. And lying in bed, in the dark, alone, reminded me of how miserable I’d been after the accident and what a lifeline Liam had been for me.

And the fact that other than him, I’d had no one. Everyone had been taken from me. Those months were the worst of my life. And nothing had really changed. I thought it had. I thought I’d found someone, but if I had Will, he’d be here. And he wasn’t.

Migraine me easily devolved into depressed me. Was it the head injury talking? The pain? Elephants were still stampeding over my skull. Or was it just a product of having to lie still in the quiet darkness that got to me? That reminded me of all those months that I went through this alone.

The more things changed, the more they stayed the same.

Eventually, sleep took hold, and I drifted away in the comfort of oblivion.

I woke when it was dark out. My head still throbbed, but it was nothing like before.

I drank half the bottle of water and shot a text to Hal, telling him I was still alive.

It was almost dinner time, but I had no desire or energy for food.

With my proof of life text sent to Hal, I put my phone down, rolled over, and went back to sleep.

Will

WILL

Checking my phone seven hundred times didn't make a text magically appear.

I wished I'd been smart enough to get Hal's number so I could have texted him to see how Oren really was.

When he left the office, he was pale, and he looked like a strong wind would have knocked him over.

I would have liked a few minutes alone with him, but it hadn't been possible.

I texted him a few times throughout the day, but none of them had been read.

Was he mad at me? It was a stupid thought, but it wouldn't let go once it took hold.

Maybe Oren wanted to be with someone who wasn't too afraid to hug his boyfriend in public.

Especially after said boyfriend had been through something traumatic.

Pulling him out of that elevator shaft reminded me of pulling him out of that car.

It must have been worse for him, but I still hadn't been able to unfreeze myself.

Torn between giving him comfort and maybe being discovered, I'd chosen wrong.

The closet used to be a source of comfort and safety for me.

It was a barrier between the real me and the me I let everyone think I was.

What once was comforting was now abrasive.

As my world got larger, my closet got smaller, and it was hard to make everything fit in my life while I was in there. I hated it.

Hated that I'd let him down. Hated that I was a chicken shit. If I told people and I lost them, well at least I'd be losing people who didn't matter as much to me as Oren.

"Are you waiting for lottery results? You've been glued to your phone all day.

" Briggs flopped down on the chair next to mine.

Our shift was winding down, and it had stayed fairly quiet after we'd dealt with Oren's emergency.

I almost wished it had been a busy shift.

It would've gone by faster. I'd spent hours practicing knots and organizing my equipment before crashing for a few hours.

It was one of the longest shifts I'd ever worked.

"I'm worried about Oren." The honesty loosened a knot in my chest. Normally I'd have pretended that I was fine. That there was nothing to see here. Or I'd have made up a different lie. A sick parent or something. "He looked like shit yesterday and I

haven't been able to get ahold of him."

More honesty loosened more knots in my stomach. I'd been a little truthful, and nothing bad happened. Maybe I could risk a whole lot more.

"I'm sure he's fine." Briggs's response was usual for him. He was very unflappable, like a boulder in a windstorm. It took more than a little disturbance to break his calm.

I put my phone away but took it out again when it buzzed. It wasn't from Oren. It was just an app notification.

I'd be okay when I heard from Oren. I'd be okay when I stopped shutting everyone out. When I just came out and let the chips fall and if people hated me, they'd hate me but at least I'd have Oren.

"Not really. No." I tucked my phone away then leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees. Briggs copied my body language, and when I didn't say anything, he bumped his shoulder against mine.

"Spill."

Truth be told, I was tired of not telling people about me. It wasn't like I wanted everything to change, but I wanted Oren more than I wanted the status quo.

"I'm gay."

Briggs let out a low whistle. "Well, that's new."

"Not really, no." I let out a sharp, bitter laugh and I held my breath waiting for the shoe to drop.

“Well, shit, buddy. I’m glad you told me. You can tell me anything, and I’ll always have your back. You know that, right?” Briggs slung his arm around me, and when he gave me a friendly squeeze, it felt like he was holding me together, like he knew I was on the verge of falling apart.

“Oren... he’s more than my friend.” I glanced over at Briggs and found him smiling at me.

“Leave it to you to meet your boyfriend at a car wreck. Some guys have all the luck.” His gentle teasing settled my nerves.

If he was still touching me, teasing me, happy for me, then maybe his happiness and acceptance was genuine.

Maybe I’d spent all these years tangled up, hiding myself for no good reason.

Briggs sat quietly with me for a few minutes as I took some deep breaths and regained my shaky composure.

“Are you telling everyone or just me? The guys will all have your back. You know that too, right?”

I didn’t know that, though. That was the problem.

I’d seen and heard too many people get hated on when they came out.

Kids I went to high school with had been shunned by the church.

Kicked out by their family. Or not kicked out but not accepted.

Whispered about like being anything different was bad and gossip-worthy.

I was afraid, but I wasn't even brave enough to admit that.

"Will they?" I asked, hope dangerously close to the surface. Briggs knew the truth, and he hadn't done anything but accept me. "The idea of coming out to everyone is exhausting. I want them to know, but telling you was a lot for me. And I still have to tell my parents."

Briggs tightened his grip on me. "I can't help with the parents; you're on your own there. But I can tell all the assholes around here if you want. They'll be cool with it. And if they're not, you know I'll kick their sorry asses, but it won't come to that. Trust me?"

Briggs had followed me into burning buildings. He'd had my back in far more dire situations before, and he would again. I did trust him.

"What did you have in mind?"

"Well, I could just go tell them. Rip the Band-Aid off. Things are seldom as bad as we convince ourselves they are. But if the idea of coming out to all of them one at a time or to everyone in a group is too daunting, I've been told I have a big mouth.

It would be nice to put it to good use once in a while. "

"That's not fair to ask you."

"You didn't ask." Briggs finally let go of me, but even without his touch, I knew he had my back.

"You think it'll be okay?"

"Course it will." Briggs's smile was broad and bright. Confident. "Promise."

I should be the one to tell everyone. But I'd already told Briggs, and it had taken every ounce of strength in me to say it the first time. Now that he knew, it should be easier, but the thought of telling everyone all at once, all their eyes on me, staring, questioning, made my stomach turn.

And the thought of having to come out to them individually was equally draining.

"As long as you're sure you don't mind."

Briggs got to his feet and rubbed his hands together. "Sit tight."

He disappeared in search of everyone else. I'd been hiding in a corner for the past couple of hours, and the guys must have suspected something because no one had come near me. No one but Briggs.

Jonas was the first one through the door. He sat down in the chair Briggs had vacated and bumped his shoulder against mine.

"You're still gonna cook for us and shit, right? You're not going to hide away and only cook for the boyfriend now or anything, are you?"

I looked at Jonas and he looked back at me, blinking with his owlsh eyes.

"That's what you care about?"

His smile faltered a bit. "What else would I care about, Dorsey?"

I was too stunned to speak. Of all the scenarios I'd imagined when I thought about people finding out about me, I never imagined acceptance. Begrudging tolerance was as close to a positive reaction as I'd been able to picture.

Jonas threw an arm around me in a side hug and squeezed me tight, the way Briggs had done. “You big dork. We’re happy for you. You’ve seemed different lately. Lighter. Happier. I take it we have Oren to thank for this.”

I managed a nod.

“How is he?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t heard from him since he left the office yesterday.”

Jonas looked at me incredulously. “Why are you still here then? Go check on him. Our shift is basically done anyway, and Cap is here. I’ll tell him you had an emergency. Heck, we could hop in the rig and light it up, get you there faster if you’re worried.”

His concern made me feel a little better. “That would be a gross misuse of our position.”

“I like to think of it as a training run.”

Getting to my feet, I glanced at the time. There was still an hour left in my shift, but Jonas shoved me toward the lockers anyway. “Get. Morris is already here because he fucking loves us so much. We won’t be short if you take off.”

Jonas tailed me to the lockers, probably to make sure I was actually going to go.

Briggs must have done his job because I felt everyone’s eyes on me, but not in a bad way. I didn’t blame them for being curious. I’d worked with them for years. Trained with them every week. I cooked for them and drank with them, and never once had I mentioned that I was gay.

Wells gave me a nod. “That’s quite the secret you kept, Dorsey.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, so I opted for nothing. Wells took it as an invitation to continue.

“If anyone fucks with you, you let me know, okay.”

His show of support gave me a lump in my throat. Giving him a nod, I turned to my locker and pulled it open. Leaving before the end of my shift went against everything I’d ever done, but I needed to see Oren.

I grabbed my wallet from the top shelf and stuffed it in my back pocket.

Morris came past me and clapped me on the back.

Then Wells. And some of the other guys. It was more than I’d hoped to get, but not less than I needed.

I had two more people to tell, and then...

I didn’t know what came next, but I knew whatever it was, I wanted Oren by my side.

I drove straight to his building. An occupant saw my firefighter shirt and let me in as they slipped out to head to work. I took the stairs to Oren’s floor. Elevators didn’t generally bother me, but I didn’t want to tempt fate. I was too eager to see him. To make sure he was okay.

I knocked. I don’t know what I expected, but I was met with silence. After a minute or so, I knocked again, but louder. I pressed my ear against the door and listened for any sounds inside.

I gave it another few minutes in case he was in the shower or something, and then I knocked a third time. Impatience had me bouncing my weight from foot to foot.

“Come on, Oren. Open the door.” I said as I knocked a fourth time. “Don’t make me get someone with keys here.”

The doorknob rattled, and then it opened.

“Will?” Oren was pale as a ghost still. His features were pinched in pain.

“Oren, what’s wrong?”

“Migraine.” He turned and walked back into his apartment, leaving me to follow him. I slipped inside, toed out of my shoes, and shut the door. I found Oren in his bedroom. The blinds were shut tight, keeping the light out.

“How long have you been like this?” Keeping my voice low, I approached the bed. I didn’t want to sit in case the movement made his head hurt worse.

“Since Hal took me home.”

“Why didn’t you call me? I’ve been blowing up your phone.”

“Sorry.” Oren burrowed under the covers.

“No, it’s fine. Just tell me what I can do to help.”

In the dim light I saw Oren open his eyes and look up at me. His smile was faint, but present.

“You’re already helping.”

Oren

“Hey, are you with me?”

I blinked my eyes open and stared up at Will.

He was sitting in my bed, propped up against the headboard, reading something on his phone.

It came back to me slowly. The pounding I thought had been in my head but wasn't.

I'd dragged myself to my door, and I'd seen Will standing there.

A sight for sore eyes. I'd wanted to give him a proper greeting, but I had about ten seconds to make it back to bed before I fell over.

But when I'd curled up, I'd known Will was there. I slipped in and out of consciousness a few times, and each time Will was there guarding me, looking after me.

“Will?” My voice cracked from disuse, and my mouth was as dry as a desert.

“How's the head?”

He reached for me, brushing hair off my forehead. I closed my eyes and let myself enjoy his touch.

“Better. Sore, but better. I think I’ll live. How long have you been here?” Migraines stripped me of everything, including knowing how long I’d been down with one.

“All day. You weren’t coherent for most of it.” He put his phone down and reached for a bottle of water. “Do you think you can sit up? We need to get some more fluids into you.”

I nodded and then slowly worked my way into a sort of sitting position.

Will’s eyes crinkled when he smiled at me.

He thrust the bottle of water into my hands and then used his superhuman fireman strength to pull me close, manhandling me so I was laying half on top of him.

He took the cap off the bottle of water for me and watched me drink, encouraging me to take small sips until I shook my head.

I’d managed not quite half, but that appeased my caretaker, who put the cap back on.

“When did you get here?” I indulged in that hug I’d wanted when he helped pull me out of that elevator shaft.

“This morning. It’s almost dinner now. Do you think you could eat some soup for me?”

I blinked up at him. “You made me soup?”

“Of course I made you soup.”

He leaned down and brushed a kiss against my forehead. My eyes closed of their own accord, and I relaxed against him.

“No more sleep until we get some calories in you.”

“I could eat. Could I shower first, Doctor Dorsey?” My skin felt gross, and I didn’t want to think of what I must look like after spending a whole day in bed.

“I think a shower could be arranged.” Will climbed out of bed and waited for me to shift my way to the edge. I swung my legs off the bed and took a deep breath before attempting to stand.

“I might have to shower sitting down.” My laugh came out weak.

“Doctor Dorsey shouldn’t shower with his patients, but you’re in luck. You’re his favorite patient so he’s willing to make an exception.”

“I’m his only patient.”

Will took my hand and pulled me to my feet.

Even when I gave him most of my weight, he remained unmoved.

There wasn’t anything about him that I didn’t love, but in that moment, what I loved the most was how safe I felt.

He was willing to look after me and protect me, even protect my comfort and my dignity as we shuffled our way to the bathroom.

Once inside, Will started the shower, and I took advantage of having made it this far to take a piss and avoid looking at my reflection in the mirror.

He helped me out of my clothes, and once we were in the shower, he looped my arms around his neck. “Just hang on to me. I’ll get us cleaned up and then we can curl up

in bed and eat soup.”

“Not bed. Please.”

“Okay, then we’ll sit in the living room and eat.”

Will took my weight like it was nothing, even as he grabbed the loofah and worked it up into a soapy lather before scrubbing all the bits of skin he could reach with me clinging to him like a spider monkey.

I stepped away, taking my own weight again, but I didn’t reach for the loofah. I let Will continue his mission to look after me.

“I could get used to this,” I said as he started to wash between my legs. It was more clinical and less recreational than I’d have liked, but it felt nice to be taken care of.

“I’d be happy to do this for you anytime. You don’t even need to get a migraine first.”

For the first time since I woke up, I managed to get a look at Will. His expression was still pinched into a worried frown, and he looked exhausted.

“I’m okay, Will. I promise. I haven’t had one in months, and I’d hoped they’d gone away, but the stress of being in that elevator was too much.

I’m better now. Good as new. Well, maybe not new.

But... thank you for coming to look after me.

” I’d slept better after Will arrived. At first I thought I’d dreamed him up like my subconscious had wanted him with me so badly that it was willing to fuck with me

and make me think he'd shown up.

"We need to get you a set of keys, though. Just in case it happens again. I thought you were a hallucination at first."

"I'm real." Will paused. "Tip your head back."

Strong fingers sank into my hair, working shampoo into all the strands and massaging my skull. "I'd like to give you keys to my place too. Then next time you get one of these, you can sleep it off at my place."

"What makes your place superior?"

"Well, I'm on the ground floor, so no elevators."

"I'll move in tomorrow." I laughed, closing my eyes not only to keep the soap out, but to fully enjoy the experience of being pampered.

"My place also has better food, and I wouldn't have to order groceries so I could make you chicken soup."

"I already said I'd move in."

Will stopped moving. "Oren, I need you to look at me for a second."

He pulled his hands out of my hair. I opened my eyes and looked at him. Something was wrong. Or not wrong, but different.

"Will..."

"Oren, I want that more than anything. I want a life with you. One where I can look at

you the way I want in public, hold your hand, kiss you. Fucking hug you, for shit sake.”

“I don’t need any of that. I?—”

He put his hand over my mouth. A smile slowly appeared on his face.

“Maybe I do. Maybe I need that. Maybe I want that with you.” He took a deep breath, but he didn’t move his hand from my mouth.

“I told Briggs. About us. About us and I told him about me, and in all the scenarios I ran in my head when I imagined telling people, I never thought about them having my back.” Will moved his hand from my mouth and cradled the side of my face instead.

“Briggs knows? You came out to him? I’m so proud of you. I know how scared you were.”

“I’m still scared, but it’s getting better now that everyone knows. Almost everyone.”

“You came out to everyone ?”

“Well, technically I came out to Briggs, who—with my permission—told everyone we know. I still have to tell my parents. But what I guess I’m saying is that if you want to move in with me, I want you there.

I don’t care that it’s fast, in some ways it doesn’t feel like that to me.

Not when I’ve been waiting my whole life for you. ”

I tried to talk, but my mouth opened and closed, making no sound at all. Will had

rendered me speechless.

“I love you, Oren.”

“Will...” The air rushed out of my lungs in one breath.

I stepped closer, winding my arms around him again.

“You big, beautiful, brave, wonderful man. I think I’ve loved you since I met you.

And if not the first time, then definitely when I saw you in the pub that night.

I’m so fucking proud of you, but I want you to know that you didn’t have to come out for me.

I’d have loved you no matter what. In or out, it’s fine. ”

“I came out for myself, but I love how self-important you lawyer types are.” He brushed a kiss against the corner of my mouth.

I was still too worn out to get in the mood for anything, but my dick gave a valiant effort at twitching before it decided my body had been through too much in the past day to show up for entertainment.

“I came out,” he continued, “because I couldn’t breathe in there anymore. I still have to tell my parents, but all the other important people know.”

“You want to tell your parents about us?”

“Well, it’s either that or let them figure it out when they do the math and realize that I have a new roommate, but only one bedroom.”

“That’s what the history books would go with.

Just a couple of friends being pals. Roommates.

Definitely not the kissing kind. In case you’re not serious about the whole apartment-sharing thing, you better tell me now, because in my head I’ve already given notice and hired movers to get my shit out of here. ”

Will was smiling when he kissed me. His mouth was soft against mine, a kiss of pure affection. Maybe a smidge of lust simmering in the background, but that was always there.

“I want you with me. Always.”

“God, you’re smooth. It’s no wonder I love you as much as I do.”

Happiness flashed in his expression, then his face lit up. “I love hearing you say that.” His cheeks flashed pink with his confession.

“Well, you better get used to it because you’ve just landed yourself a live-in, Grade-A clinger of a boyfriend. I’m going to make you so fucking happy, Will Dorsey. Just you wait and see.”

“You already make me happy.”

“I’ll make you happier,” I looked down at my unenthused cock. “Maybe not today, but someday very soon.”

“I think we’ll live if we go a day without sex.”

“A day?” I feigned incredulousness. “A whole day? He’ll probably have recovered

after some soup and maybe a nap because, right now, all I can think about is that chicken soup and curling up in your arms.”

“We should go eat, get some food in you.”

“I can’t believe you ordered groceries so you could cook for me. Well, I can believe it, but it’s still amazing that you did that for me.”

“It’s just soup, Oren.”

“It’s not just soup. It’s—you give a shit about me.

I thought I’d run out of people who cared about me.

I’ve never had a huge circle of friends, Will.

And after the accident...” I stopped talking to clear my throat.

“You’ve saved me in more ways than one. In more ways than the car and the elevator.

You make me want to be brave, like you.”

Will slanted his mouth over mine and kissed me so suddenly that I lost my balance and had to grip onto him for support. He kissed me until we couldn’t breathe, until there wasn’t a section of my mouth that he hadn’t tasted. He pulled away but rested his forehead against mine.

“It’s not just soup, Will,” I rasped as I clung to him.

“I know.” Will brushed a kiss against my forehead, then turned off the water. “But

soup is a good place to start.”

Will

My life was a fever dream. I'd gone from being in the closet, single, achingly lonely, to moving my boyfriend into my apartment. Something I wanted to do after I'd told my parents about us. Oren understood my reasoning.

All my adult life, I'd hidden a fundamental part of myself from my parents. I'd lied and misdirected and done everything I could to keep my secret safe. But meeting Oren had changed all that. My secret had become an unbearable burden to me in the end.

At first, I kept my sexuality to myself as a form of protection. Self-care. Self-preservation. But as I got older and moved out of the house, gained my independence, made friends and built a career, I should have trusted in the people I surrounded myself with.

"Are you sure you want to go alone?" Oren asked me. He'd taken a few days off work to finish recovering from his migraine, and once he'd been feeling well enough to get out and about, he packed a bag, and we came to my apartment.

To my surprise, he'd started taking the elevator in his building again. His determination to conquer his fears endeared me to him even more. If Oren could do shit that scared him, so could I.

"This conversation is long overdue. I'm trying to keep a positive attitude, but I know not everyone will be like Briggs and Jonas."

“They’re your parents. They love you.” Oren wound his arms around my neck and kissed me. “I love you. It’ll be fine. I promise.”

I decided not to argue with him. “What are you going to do while I’m gone?”

“Sit by the phone and pine for you, mostly.” He shot me a cheeky grin. “I’m going to call Liam and catch up.”

Oren stole another kiss and untangled himself from me. “You’re going to be late.”

“I won’t be long.”

He shook his head. “You’ll be as long as you need to be. My head is fine, Doctor Dorsey. I’m going to hang out and call Liam and probably raid the fridge for leftovers in a bit. Now get going.” Oren escorted me to the front door and snagged another kiss. “I’ll meet the parents soon, okay?”

I kissed Oren one more time, wishing that I could bring him with me, but it was hardly fair to ask that of him.

They were my parents and if shit went sideways, I didn’t want him to get caught in the crossfire.

I also had to know that I could do it. That I could tell people.

Had Briggs been a one-off? A sudden, lone rush of bravery that allowed me to be open just one time?

The drive to my parents felt like it took forever, but yet still not long enough. Walking up the driveway felt like I was walking toward the gallows, but then the door swung open, and my mom was there, drying her hands on a dish towel.

“Will, darling, I thought I saw you pull up.”

Climbing up the steps, I pulled Mom into a hug, surprising us both. Hugs were generally reserved for Christmas and maybe a birthday now and then. We weren't the most physically affectionate family, but I wanted to have that memory.

Oren would kick my ass if he were here. I tried to be hopeful, but my brain kept dragging out the worst-case scenarios.

“Everything okay?” Mom asked when I let her go. Her smile was still present, but she had a hint of worry in her expression, a tightness around her eyes that gave her apprehension away.

“Everything's fine. Where's Dad?”

“Unboxing dinner, hiding the containers. He wants to see if he can fool you into thinking we cooked.” Mom whispered their secret to me.

“Well, whatever you cooked, it smells amazing.”

Mom patted my cheek. “You're a good boy. Your father has been planning this joke all week.”

“I'll be sure not to spoil his fun.”

“Thank you.” She waved me toward the kitchen. “Honey, Will is here.”

Dad poked his head out of the kitchen. “Will! Good to see you, kid.”

He exited the kitchen looking a little flushed. His mouth wore a permanent smirk that he was sure he could keep hidden from us, but after a lifetime of Dad trying to get

one over on me, it was easy to read the signs.

“It smells good in here.” I started for the kitchen, but Dad stepped into my path. “The kitchen is a bit of a disaster. How about you and your mother have a seat in the dining room, and I’ll bring dinner in a second.”

“I don’t mind helping.” I tried to step around him, but he blocked my path.

“You’re always doing stuff for us. Go sit, I’ve got this.”

“So long as you’re sure.”

“I’m sure.” Dad gently steered me toward Mom, who was a far better actor than he was. “Two minutes. I need two minutes.”

With my back to Dad, I shot Mom a grin, and we slipped into the dining room.

“You’re so mean,” Mom whispered. “Making him think you were going to ruin his fun.”

“I had to stay in character. Any other day, I’d have tried to help.”

Dad came into the dining room a moment later carrying a dish filled to the brim with fettuccini alfredo. He set it on the table with a shit-eating grin.

“I’ll be right back.”

I shared a look with Mom, who put her poker face back on, and waited for Dad to return. He returned with a tray loaded down with ribs and garlic bread. I don’t know who he was trying to fool, but even if I hadn’t been in on the joke, I knew that there was no way he’d have made all that.

“Wow, you really went all out. This must have cost a mint.” I started serving myself some of the pasta.

Dad puffed up his chest. “Actually, I cooked it.”

I paused in midair, tongs poised over the ribs. “Like... by yourself?”

“Yes, you... of course by myself. Did you see yourself in the kitchen helping me?”

“Well I’m sure it’s great.” I gave Dad a tight, polite smile. His lips twitched, but I kept myself from giving away the game.

“The ribs look so good.” I dropped a couple on my plate and took a slice of garlic bread to go with it.

I waited for Mom and Dad to serve themselves before I tucked in, taking a bite. Dad’s eyes were on me, watching me, waiting to see what I’d say.

“Wow. This is actually really good.” I made a show of stabbing my fork into my pile of noodles and twisting up another bite onto my fork. “Could you show me how you made the sauce for this? I can never get mine just right.”

“I—ah, well, I’m a disaster in the kitchen. You know this. I’m not even sure I know what I did.”

“We’ll have to figure it out together.” I shoveled another bite into my mouth. If I didn’t think moaning at the table would have given me away, I might have.

“You should try the ribs,” Mom prodded me. “They’re so tender.”

Setting my fork down, I grabbed a rib and took a bite. They were fall-off-the-bone

tender. The meat was so juicy I moaned around a bite. “Holy shit, Dad. You’re cooking every time now. I quit. Why am I eating my food when you cook like this?”

“I’m glad you like it, son.” Dad bit into a chunk of garlic bread to hide his satisfaction.

Everyone was in a good mood. It was the perfect chance to tell them. I set my rib bone on my plate when I was done with it and after wiping my hands on a napkin, I picked up my fork and twirled it around a bite of noodles I couldn’t force myself to take.

“There’s something I need to talk to both of you about.” The serious edge to my voice had my parents exchanging worried glances. “I don’t know how to say this, so I’m just going to blurt it out and then I’ll let you guys ask questions or whatever.”

“Will?” Mom set her fork down. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, just...” My leg bounced up and down and I had to put my hand on my knee to force it to quit. “I should have told you a long time ago.”

Silence. This was it. The last moment I’d have with them not knowing about me.

“Will, you’re scaring us.” Dad’s voice cut through my apprehension.

“Remember when I said I met someone? Well, it’s kind of serious.”

Their faces lit up and I tried not to picture what they must be thinking. Big church wedding and grandbabies. Two point five kids and a white picket fence. I raised my hand to still the questions I could see they were ready to rattle off to me.

“I haven’t told you the most important thing, though.

I haven't told you..." I sucked in a deep breath and forced myself to look them in the eyes.

"I'm gay. I've been gay my whole life. I—I'm sorry for lying to you about it, but I never knew how to tell you.

And then I figured if I wasn't with anyone, what did it matter?

I never meant to lie to you, and if I didn't love Oren so much, I might have just kept on not telling you, but I do.

I love him, and I love the both of you and?—"

"William." Dad cut in on my unhinged rambling. He reached across the table and put his hand on my hand. "Take a breath, son. Breathe in nice and deep for me. Nice and slow. Then let it out."

When my shoulders relaxed a bit, Dad smiled at me. "Better?" he asked.

"Yeah. Thanks."

"You said we could ask questions," Mom said, her voice small and her brow furrowed. Troubled.

I nodded because I couldn't speak. I had to save my words for the answers they wanted.

"Why didn't you tell us?"

"There are a million answers to that question. I never meant to hurt you by keeping it from you, but I had to protect myself. I know your church and stuff is important to

you, and I know it hurt you when I stopped going. I guess I didn't want to add to that."

"Is that why you stopped? Will, honey... Did someone there say something to make you feel unwelcome?" Anger flashed in her eyes, but not at me. Her anger was directed at other people.

"It's not—no. Not directly, but sometimes what people don't say can hurt just as much. I don't remember anyone being openly hateful, but enough were openly not accepting enough to make me feel like I didn't belong there."

"Honey, we—you're more important to us than anyone in that place. We can get a new church. We can find different friends. We only have one son."

"Tell us about this man of yours," Dad said. "What was his name again?"

"Oren." I exhaled. "Oren Reid."

"How'd the two of you meet?" Dad asked, taking control of the conversation to give Mom a chance to breathe and get her emotions under control. That she was mad for me and not at me made all the difference.

"I pulled him out of a car wreck."

Dad laughed. "Leave it to you to pick up someone at an accident."

The three of us shared a laugh, and I suddenly wished I'd told Oren to come. "I can't wait for you to meet him."

"So call him up. We can save him a plate."

“I don’t know that I want him eating your food. This makes my food look like cardboard.”

“You and I both know I didn’t make this.” Dad rolled his eyes at me. “Now are you going to invite him or not?”

“Dad, I think Oren’s had enough excitement this week. He was stuck in an elevator at work, which triggered a migraine from the stress. He’s finally back on his feet, but I don’t know how social he’d feel like being. I’ll bring him around soon, I promise. Just give him some time, okay?”

“I guess that will have to do. So long as we get to meet him.”

“You will. He’s, ah... he’s moving in.”

“Moving in? How long have you been together?” Mom asked, sounding more sad than concerned.

“Not long actually, but it feels right.”

“It must, if you were willing to take a huge risk for him. I’m sorry if we ever did or said anything to make you think you couldn’t tell us.” Dad’s eyes were unusually glassy.

I wished I could tell them that they hadn’t, but I didn’t know at this point if that would’ve been a lie.

Had I applied the whispers at their church to everyone around me?

Including my parents? It was a possibility.

But I was tired of living the way I had been.

Meeting Oren had made me want more for myself. Better for myself.

“I want you guys to meet him. He’s important to me. I’ll make it happen soon, okay?”

Dad smiled at me fondly. “Okay, son.”

Oren

I was at Will's when he was done having dinner with his parents. None of my stuff was here, except for a couple of bags of clothing and some toiletries but having Will walk through that door made the space feel like home.

"Hey, you. How was dinner?" What I really wanted to know was if he'd managed to tell them and what they thought. I doubted it had gone bad because Will looked too relaxed for anything catastrophic to have happened.

"Dinner was great." He tossed his keys on the counter and made a beeline for where I sat on the couch. I'd been doom scrolling and pretending that the evening wasn't going by at a crawl.

Will stretched out on the couch and put his head in my lap. A smile tugged at his mouth when my fingers started combing through his hair.

"Tell me everything." I wanted to know their reactions. I hadn't met his parents, and I didn't know if they wanted to meet me. Maybe they were sad about the whole gay thing. "How'd they take it?"

He sucked in a deep breath and let it all out at once. "They were surprised, but they were okay with it. They had some questions that were kind of tough to answer, but it went well."

He looked up at me, his eyes sparkled, and he looked more relaxed than I'd seen him in a while. "They want to meet you."

“Yeah?”

“Don’t look so surprised. Of course they want to meet you. You’re the first person I’ve ever wanted to bring home. You’re the first person who has been important enough to me to make me want to live a different life.”

Will’s proximity to my dick was doing things to me.

I tried to focus on the conversation, but knowing he was out now, that I could see him in public and not have to hide my affection for him, or make sure I didn’t look at him too long, or sit too close?

It had my blood roaring in my ears and rushing between my legs.

“What kind of life do you want?” Curiosity forced me to ask. I held my breath waiting for him to say something.

The corners of his eyes crinkled as he smiled. “One with you. One where I get to take you out on dates. Where I get to come home to you. Where I get to save your number in my phone under increasingly disgusting nicknames.”

“Like what?” I wanted that too, and I carded my fingers through his hair some more, marveling at how soft the strands were.

“Snookums. Honey bear. Sugar pie. Hot lips.”

“Okay, Honey bear I could live with. Snookums is a definite no.”

“What about pookie?”

“What about no.” I bent forward and kissed him, partly to shut him up, partly because

I wanted to. Because I could. Because he was mine now and that's what couples did. I let the kiss last, let it drag out. Savored the taste of him, the way he seemed to melt into me as we kissed.

His smile was still present when we parted. "What about cupcake or muffin?"

"Cupcake, no. But muffin might be okay, depending on the kind of muffin. It has to be a good kind, not like bran or something."

"What about chocolate chip?"

"Too basic."

"Okay, Oren, sunshine of my life, the beat of my heart, the shelter in my storm, what kind of muffin would you have me refer to you as?"

"Lemon Cranberry."

Will contemplated my selection. "Light, and a bit fruity. I see it."

In retaliation for his comment, I pinched his nipple. He yelped and batted my hand away.

"You did not just do that." Laughter made Will's voice waver, but his grin was feral. I was in big trouble.

"I might have gotten carried away." It might have been a more convincing line if I hadn't been grinning like an idiot the whole time.

Will sat up and turned toward me, his body coiled tight like a spring waiting to be released.

“Will, I’m sorry.” I wasn’t sorry. Not at all. Not even when I knew he was poised to strike at any moment. He was faster and stronger than I was, and he was in remarkable shape. I was... not. I walked a lot, but that wasn’t about to be of any use to me. “Will?—”

He launched himself at me, wrapped his arms around me and in one fluid move, lifted me, turned me, and trapped me underneath him on the couch. It happened so fast I barely had time to react before Will’s hands were on me, digging into my sides, tickling me.

Laughter was dragged out of me. Forced from my lungs and into the air by his familiar touch. He had me pinned under him, and I tried to twist away to no avail. Not that I really wanted to escape anyway. In the moment, my fight or flight instincts were firmly set on flight.

“Will, please—” I managed to get out, but he kept tickling me. My sides ached. My face hurt. But it was the good kind of pain. It was the price of joy. Happiness. Love. The pain was a welcome reminder that I was alive. Living. Breathing. Loving.

Will stopped. He must have seen something in my expression because like two magnets, I reached for him as he came to me. We collided, mouth to mouth. He held me down with his body, and I held his face with my hands, digging my fingers into his hair, his scalp. Grounding me. Keeping him.

What started off as a frenzied kiss, all tongue and ferocity, mellowed into something smoother.

Something more easygoing. My heart slammed into my ribs like a battering ram.

I finally let my hands travel Will’s body.

I dragged my hands down his sides, letting him feel my intention through my touch.

I wanted him so fucking bad. On me. In me. Around me.

Grabbing his ass, I pulled him into me as I writhed underneath him, grinding our cocks together.

If Will had asked me what kind of life I wanted, I'd have said this .

I wanted laughter. Sex. I wanted someone to look after me.

To choose me. To keep me and come home to me. And I wanted him to be that someone.

I wanted to take him on dates and meet his parents. I wanted things I hadn't thought of yet. The idea of forever was nebulous and untouchable, but I wanted that too.

“Will.” My lips moved against the corner of his mouth. “Will, please.”

“What do you need, honey pie sugar bum?”

I nearly choked on my laughter. “I need for you not to call me that when I'm trying so politely to ask you to pin me down and fuck me within an inch of my life.”

“As you wish.” Will brushed a kiss against my lips. “I'm going to grab the lube and when I come back, I want you naked, kneeling on the couch, arms over the back of it, ass out.”

He got off me, but he made it clear with how swiftly he was moving that I didn't have a lot of time to comply.

I stood and tore my shirt off over my head, then fumbled with my fly.

As I struggled out of my pants, I made a mental note to only wear easily removable attire when we were at home from now on.

I was just climbing onto the couch when Will returned, bare chest, his pants open and his cock already out. Pillowing my arms on the back of the couch, I stuck my ass out and let myself look at him.

Will paused to drizzle lube onto his dick.

I could feel him watching me as he prepared himself.

I watched him until he came up behind me, and then I closed my eyes and felt him.

My breath caught when Will squirted lube down my crack, then his powerful hands were on me.

One on my hip, holding me in place as the other delved between my cheeks and teased my entrance.

I parted my legs and leaned forward a little more, thrusting my ass out for him to use.

Emptiness throbbed inside me, begging for him to chase it away.

I needed him so bad I could hardly think or speak or breathe.

And then his fingers slid into me and the hand on my hip tightened, pinning me in place as I tried to fuck myself on his fingers.

“Greedy.” Will thrust his fingers into me, hard and fast with shallow movements that

didn't reach the place I most wanted them to. But every time I tried to ease back, to take him deeper, he pulled away.

"Will, please." Frustration made my throat burn.

"Soon." Will's reply was a lie because every second that his cock wasn't in me was a fucking eternity. I wasn't going to make it. My heart was climbing the walls, and my lust was eating me alive, making me antsy and unsatisfied.

And then Will thrust those two fingers in so deep I saw stars. His knuckles pressed into my ass, biting into the flesh as the fingers he buried inside me stroked, slowly and maddeningly lighting me up. Giving me what I needed. Almost.

Reduced to a throbbing, writhing, slippery mess, I let out a deep breath and relaxed and resigned myself to a life of torture. And that's when Will pulled his fingers out of me and before I could even begin to protest, he lined his cock up with my hole and slid inside.

I arched up, my back bending like a bow string. Will gathered me close, kissed my back. My shoulders. My spine. His hands mapped my body, leaving trails of goosebumps in his wake and I gripped the back of the couch in tight fists.

Will wrapped his arms around me, pressed his forehead between my shoulder blades, and fucked me.

Wet, open-mouthed kisses pressed against my skin.

Hands mapped my flesh. Held me tight. Caressed me.

He breathed my name, somehow tender despite the way his hips snapped, and he thrust up into me as hard and deep as he could drive himself.

He came first, fucking me at a relentless pace. I felt the moment the orgasm took hold. His muscles tensed and his rhythm stuttered. Instead of whispering sweet nothings in my ear, I heard a litany of curse words. But it had the same effect on me.

I fucking loved this man, and I loved that he fell apart for me. When he was done, he pulled out, which was a shame because I'd have loved if he'd fucked his cum right out of me.

“Turn around.” Will took a step back to give me room to move. I was a graceless, sweaty, horny mess, and Will still managed to look at me like I was the most exquisite piece in the exhibit.

Words were beyond me, so I did as I was told with a bit of a grunt and then a moan when Will dropped to his knees in front of me. I sat, legs spread wide, arms thrown across the back of the couch, feeling not unlike an emperor as Will held my gaze and lowered himself down.

One minute I was an emperor, the next I was at his mercy.

Will sucked me down to the root, probably because he knew it would make my ass levitate off the couch.

And he was right. Will had a wickedly talented mouth, and I wish I could say that I had more staying power than I did, but he brought me to the edge and sucked me over it in the matter of a few very well spent minutes.

When he was done, he released my cock and looked up at me, his eyes soft, and he had that little smile on his face that he had when he looked at me sometimes.

“I love you,” I told him, needing to say it as much as he needed to hear it.

He leaned forward, laid his head on my thigh, and wrapped his arms around me. “I love you too.”

I was sticky and spent and in need of a shower, or at least a wet cloth, but Will was comfortable where he was, and I hated to ask him to move.

The shower could wait, I decided, as I shoved a strand of hair off Wills’ face.

He looked peaceful. Happy. And I’d done that.

I’d given that to him. I hoped I was able to put that look on his face for a long time to come.

“I can hear you thinking,” Will said without opening his eyes.

“It’s a lawyer thing.”

He scoffed, a puff of air washing over my overheated skin. “What are you thinking about?”

I decided to entertain him and answered his question. “You. It’s always you. It’s always going to be you.”

Will cracked his eyes open and a smile so content and happy it was blinding greeted me. “It’s always going to be you too.”

Maybe forever wasn’t so nebulous after all.

EPILOGUE

Oren told me to wait for him outside our apartment, but he didn't say why. I knew we were going on a date. Oren had taken care of everything, he'd said. All I had to do was wait for him and look pretty.

When I'd mentioned doing something for our anniversary, Oren had grinned at me, kissed me sweetly on the mouth, and told me he'd already planned it. Was I worried? No. But curiosity was eating me alive.

Oren had moved his things into our apartment months ago and given up his other place.

It wasn't a hardship for him to move into a location that didn't require him to use an elevator.

He swore he was fine, though, and that he even took the elevator at work again.

Sometimes. Just not that specific elevator.

A vaguely familiar car turned the corner and pulled up to the curb. I watched as Oren stepped out from the driver's side and crossed the distance between us, his lanky legs carrying him swiftly to me.

"You drove? You're driving?" I took Oren into my arms and kissed him soundly. He hadn't driven since the accident that took his friends from him over a year ago.

“I’ve been working on it with Hal for months. I wanted to surprise you.” Oren’s happiness made him glow. “I’ve been dreaming of picking you up for a date for months.”

“Oren, I’m so proud of you. I would have helped you if I’d known you were wanting to get back behind the wheel.”

“I know you would have, but I wanted to do this my way. I wanted to see your face when I pulled up, and it was worth it.” He brushed his lips against mine, teasing me with a taste of him before pulling away.

Color rose in his cheeks and motioned to the car.

“Let’s go, because if you keep looking at me like that, we’re going to miss our reservation. ”

He walked me to the car, even opened the door for me before jogging around to the other side.

I watched him as we pulled away from the curb. His confidence behind the wheel had changed him in some not insignificant way. The accident had taken so much from him, but it was like he’d finally reclaimed all that he could in spite of his loss.

The way we’d met hadn’t been ideal, and more than anything I wished that we could have met some other way.

That his friends were still alive. That he didn’t still sometimes get migraines because of the accident.

I wished I could have known Byron and Rita, but Oren had started talking about them more often now.

“Are you going to stare at me the whole way?” he asked, a cheeky grin tugging at his mouth.

“You don’t seem to mind the attention.” I let my gaze drift down his form, taking in the dark gray Henley he wore, paired with slacks of a similar color.

He’d recently cut his hair, but I missed having something to run my fingers through.

Only the top was long now but, God, he looked amazing.

He looked happy, and my heart—and my ego—swelled because I knew I was a large part of that.

“I had to pull some strings, but I wanted some extra privacy for our date while still making sure it was going to be special.” Oren’s words didn’t confuse me until he pulled into the fire station where I worked.

“Oren? Um. I’m confused.”

He turned the engine off and looked at me, mischief dancing in his expression. “Trust me.”

Oren got out and jogged to my side of the car to open the door for me.

After coming out, the guys at the station had gone out of their way to do little things to show me that I was accepted.

The first step had been the rainbow flag that had mysteriously appeared outside the fire station one morning.

When I asked who put it up, no one confessed, but the captain had a certain sparkle in his eye that suggested he might have been the one.

Then the guys decided that our next community fundraiser would go to support a local LGBT organization dealing with youth homelessness. To further my surprise, when my parents heard about it, they rallied members of their new church and joined in on the cause.

Oren took my hand and tugged me forward and into the station. A few of the guys smirked at me, but it wasn't malicious. Mostly, they looked pleased that I likely looked so fucking befuddled.

Then Oren took me up the first flight of stairs to the second level where the living spaces were.

He led me down the hall to the last door, the one with the sign indicating it went to the roof.

Oren opened a door that should've been locked and he beamed at me, probably the hugest smile I'd ever seen on his face.

"I told you I know a guy." He dropped my hand and went up first. I followed, admiring the way he filled out a pair of slacks.

"Your ass is delicious in those pants."

Oren's laughter echoed in the stairwell. "Flattery will get you everywhere."

He twisted a second doorknob that also definitely should have been locked, and he stepped through, holding the door open for me. "Right this way, please."

The roof of the station had been transformed.

A table, with a white tablecloth, a centerpiece of roses, and two place settings sat off to the side.

The place settings had those silver domes over them to keep the food hot.

A bucket of ice sat to one side and there was a bottle of something chilling.

Oren didn't drink—he probably would never drink again.

It was one thing that he had no interest in resuming, but he never stopped me from doing it.

“Oren,” I said, finding my voice. “This is unbelievable. You did all this? For me?”

He tugged me over to the table and pulled out my chair. “I always imagined picking you up for a date, but everywhere I could think of to take you wasn't good enough. It wasn't special enough. I wanted to bring you somewhere we could also have a bit of privacy.”

I didn't have to wonder why Oren wanted privacy. Already I was as hard as a brick, and the way he looked at me certainly wasn't helping.

Oren leaned in and kissed me sweetly. “Sit, please. We need to eat before the food gets cold.”

I waited until he had taken his seat across from mine before lifting up the dome.

“Breaded pork cutlets, twice-baked potato, and corn ribs,” Oren supplied with a smile.

“Did you make this?”

He nodded. “Downstairs. The guys let me access the kitchen.”

Oren and I had started cooking together soon after he moved in. It was kind of our

thing now. I loved sharing that space with him, and he loved it when I taught him things. Like how to bread a pork cutlet and twice bake a potato, the sneaky bastard.

He reached for the bottle that was chilling in the ice and lifted it out. “Sparkling cider?” he asked, his smile dimmer and a little sheepish.

“That sounds perfect.” I didn’t care what we drank. I’d have happily sipped on tap water.

Oren filled our glasses and motioned for me to start eating.

Soft music started to play, and his shoulders relaxed a bit as he tucked his phone away. Clearly someone had a few tricks up his sleeve.

Everything was cooked to perfection, and I did my best to pay as much attention to the food as I could, considering all the trouble Oren went to cooking for us.

“You know, usually when I’m on a roof, I have to worry about it collapsing. This is much nicer. No open flame.”

He laughed, then balled up a napkin and threw it at me. “I don’t like to think of you on burning rooftops. Way to ruin the ambience.”

“The ambience is fine. The company is even better, though. I wonder if my date has planned a nice dessert, or if he is a nice dessert.”

Oren had clearly wanted privacy for some reason, and my lizard brain could only conjure up ones that involved us getting naked together. Or at least semi-naked.

He glanced away as though he were shy. “There might be plans for after dinner,” he hedged and delicately scooped out a bite of potato with his fork. The music in the background was some sort of love song playlist, each song was soft and sentimental.

“Thank you for this, Oren. For everything. It’s beautiful.”

“Have you been up here before? It has a great view.” He took another, smaller bite of potato.

“I haven’t, not that I can think of. It’s not like we have a lot of reasons to be on the roof.”

“The view from the other side is the best. Did you want to see?”

The firehouse was an old building, the kind with a wall that went around the roof’s edge. It wasn’t quite waist height, but it offered some kind of security against accidentally falling off.

Clearly Oren had something he wanted me to see.

“I’d love to.” I stood up from the table and followed him to the side of the building that he’d talked about. The city did look a bit different from up here, and it was rather nice to be on a roof that wasn’t burning underneath me.

I scanned the horizon, keenly aware of Oren’s gaze fixed on me and not on the view. And then I saw the fire truck pull out of the station and my gaze dropped down to see what was going on. Even up here, I’d have heard the alarm, but there hadn’t been one.

The truck made a wide turn, and I saw a banner with the words ‘say yes’ strung along the side of the vehicle.

“They insisted on being part of it.” Oren sounded apologetic and I turned as he lowered himself down on one knee. “It was the only way I could get their blessing. William Allan Dorsey, will you marry me? I had this whole big speech planned, but the only thing that matters is your answer.”

I'd dreamed of a moment like this my whole life and now that it had been given to me, my eyes burned, and my chest was so tight I could barely get the words out.

"Yes. Of course I will."

Oren nearly fumbled the ring getting it out of the box and slipping it onto my finger. Then there was a second ring that he pressed into my palm before giving me his hand. My hand shook as I put the ring on him.

"I never thought I'd get to have this," I told him.

Ever since I figured out I was gay, I'd all but abandoned the idea of having a forever with someone.

I'd thought all my dreams had gone up in flames, but then I met Oren.

He loved to tell people that I rescued him, but the truth was he rescued me right back. I'd been living half a life.

"You do, Will. You get to have anything you want. Everything. You deserve it." He grabbed a fistful of shirt and hauled me close, slanting his mouth over mine as shouts and whistles erupted from the ground below.

Our kiss was consuming, breathtaking, and maybe a bit too hot for the guys below who shouted at us to get a room.

Laughing, we broke apart and waved at our adoring fans.

We returned to the table, but didn't sit down. Oren pulled his wallet from his pocket and counted out a couple of bills. "I promised Briggs's nephew a tip for clean up."

As he pulled the money out, something caught my attention, and I reached for his

wallet.

“Is that...”

Oren pulled out the other half of the photo strip and showed it to me with a sheepish smile. “I keep it with me all the time.”

He watched, dumbstruck, as I retrieved my wallet and pulled out the other half of the photo strip. “Me too.”

Oren gently took my photos from me and tucked them in his wallet; he then gave me the photos he’d held on to. “We can trade back at our next anniversary.”

My voice was gruff when I managed a response. “I’d like that.” I pulled Oren close. “What’s next on the agenda?”

He looped his arms around me and gave me a sly grin.

“Well, I figured if you said no, we wouldn’t be in the mood for anything, and if you said yes, we wouldn’t be in the mood for anything we could do in public. So, nothing.”

I let my hands slide down to grip his ass and pull him closer.

“You’re so fucking perfect.”

“I try.” Oren wriggled a bit and pulled his keys from his pocket and handed them to me. “Take me home?”

“Always,” I promised.