

A DARK TABOO ROMANCE

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Neighbors of Sapphire Valley

M. L. BURNS

HOLLOW

NEIGHBOURS OF SAPPHIRE VALLEY

M. L. BURNS



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HOLLOW

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This book is intended for mature audiences 18+

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NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Welcome back to Sapphire Valley. I'm excited that you decided to return and meet Keoni and Ayden. Something I want to say before you dive in (*which isn't a spoiler or part of the trigger warnings, those come next*), is that their story is vastly different than Calista and Ronan's. Please do not go into their book with the hope it will be anywhere near the same. The dark themes you will find in this book **do not derive from the romance.**

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TRIGGER WARNINGS

For those of you that choose to go in blind, please remember that this is a dark taboo romance, where there are dark, heavy topics surrounding both MMCs. There are depictions of domestic violence, discussions of suicide and death throughout HOLLOW. This book is not to teach you how to handle or heal from your trauma or grief. Do not look to any of these characters to be moral in every aspect of life. Keoni shows characteristics of being *morally gray*.

From here, you may feel free to proceed to the prologue; however, this is a reminder to you that this book is dark in areas, and can be triggering to some.

Trigger Warnings include, but are not limited to: Violence, Assault, Death, Murder, Attempted Murder, Mental Health Topics, Severe Panic Attack(s), Gun Violence, Discussions Around Suicide, Attempted Suicide (*mention*), Domestic Violence (*not between MCs*), Sexual Assault (*eluded to, mention, not between the MCs*), Drowning, Gaslighting/Manipulation, Narcissism, Use of Drugs and Alcohol, Peer Pressure to Drink, Grief, Death of Parent(s) (*off page*), Car Accident, and lots of foul language.

Explicit sexual scenes include, but are not limited to: Heavy praise, light bondage, dom/sub dynamic, cum play, toy usage, spit play, snowballing, asphyxiophilia, somnophilia

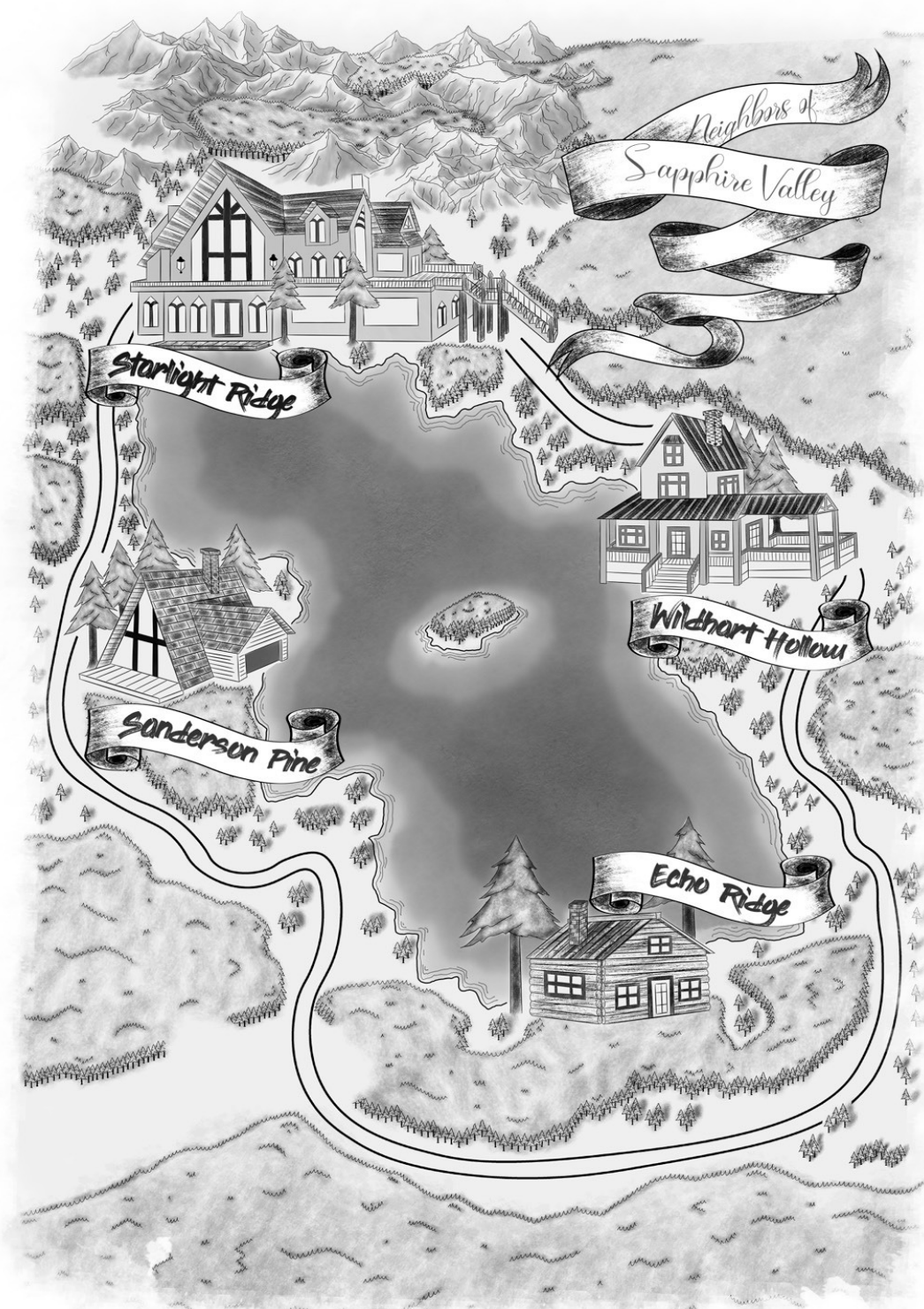
PLAYLIST

How Do I Say Goodbye - Dean Lewis
Eternity - Alex Warren
I'm Sorry - Besomorph
BIRDS OF A FEATHER- Billie Eilish
Gethsemane - Sleep Token
Delusional - John Michael Howell
Caramel - Sleep Token
Skin to Skin - Amira Elfeky
Forbidden Fruit - Tommee Profitt, Sam Tinnesz, Brooke
Night #45 - Starlight Version - Morgan Clae, PiPELLA
FOUND - Matt Hansen
Damocles - Sleep Token
You Put a Spell on Me - Austin Giorgio
Anchor - Novo Amor
The First Time - Damiano David
sun to me - mgk
The Wind - John Michael Howell
Stay with Me - In Flames
Once In A Lifetime - John Michael Howell
Provider - Sleep Token
We Go Down Together (with Khalid) - Dove Cameron, Khalid
Forever - Loreen
yellowstone (holding you) - Matt Hansen
No Place Like You - John Michael Howell

*To the survivors
I know how hard you fought, and I'm so proud of you.*

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PROLOGUE



And they said I wouldn't go to Heaven.
Wait, shit, never mind... wrong lights.

It's possible I could actually be dead, and this is that holy place. Every time I blink, it's like the bright white above me gets more intense.

But I know it isn't that place, because I can *feel* the pain resonating deep in my bones. Plus, let's be honest, it isn't just because I've taken a dick that any god won't allow me into their sanctuary. I'm pretty sure I pissed on a bible at one point during a college party a few years ago.

I'd prefer to dance down in Hell anyway.

Continuing my valiant effort to clear the film of haze over my eyes, I feel the familiar sensation of some form of opioids running through my system. I've always had a weird reaction to strong painkillers, they make me quite sick, but right now, all I can feel is an ache all over and a tingling in my toes.

I wiggle them and move my arms to my sides, which I'm relieved I'm still able to do. At least I'm not paralyzed.

A chill runs through me, and the scratchy sheets over me do little to warm my bones. When I push down on the mattress, worry leaks

into my already growing anxiety.

I'm in post-op.

For me, someone who's been around a hospital for several years now, I can tell that this is an ICU bed. They're distinctly different from stretchers or the ones in a general ward. These are actually comfortable, for good reason obviously.

The ceiling comes into focus—the square tiles and fluorescent lights all too familiar. I've spent nearly three-quarters of my time here, and not because I'm a frequent patient. I'm an ICU nurse at San Francisco General Hospital.

"Ayden?" A calm male voice cuts through the space, sounding far louder in a room filled only with soft beeps and gentle puffs of air.

I turn, which I find harder to do, the stiff weight of a neck brace resisting me, and spot a face I recognize. Worried hazel eyes, framed by light brown skin, meet mine. The distinct mole over his right brow confirms it's someone I'd call a close work friend, though not my best friend; the fraternization law could get him in trouble for that.

"Ugh." I don't need to check his work attire or glance at the ID badge I know reads *Markus Yadav, MD, Intensive Care Unit, Critical Care Medicine*, for embarrassment to wash over me. "They would bring me to my hospital." I pause. "Fuck me."

I'm not sure why I try to move, because I know with all these tubes and wires, I'm not going anywhere.

He presses a hand lightly to my forearm, and the concern in his expression has me preparing to panic. I mean, it shouldn't surprise me, I am in a neck brace.

But that's just precautionary, right? *Right?*

"Scared us for a second there."

Scared them? What's he talking about?

"Guess I didn't just have a bad fall." I've had those from time to time, but never bad enough to send me to the hospital. "What happened?"

I try to summon any memory that could explain how I ended up here, but my mind offers nothing. The last thing I remember is leaving the movie theater with Michael. He'd suggested we skip dinner out, head home, and order in instead. Everything after pulling out of the parking lot dissolves into a smear of nothingness.

"You were in a car accident, Ayden... You're lucky to be alive." He hesitates, then adds, "Apparently the vehicle was totaled."

My chest tightens, and it's as if I've been scraped hollow—everything gone except my mind, left to make sense of it. Fragments of memories flare and vanish like sparks, never forming into anything whole. None of it fits together, and my lungs claw for air that doesn't come fast enough.

"Where's Michael?" I frantically ask.

"He's fine." Markus grabs the arm of a chair to pull it over to him, then sits as he continues, never taking his hand away from me. "According to the intake form, most of the impact was on your side..."

I can't tell what's making me sick—the worry on his face, the medicine pumping through me, or the fact I could've died.

"Were you drinking?" he asks in a whisper.

"N-No..." I'm thinking so hard the room tilts. "I... I mean, yeah, but I only had one beer at the theater. Not enough to inebriate me." I squeeze my eyes shut and shake my head. "Besides, that shouldn't matter—Michael never lets me drive."

"Shit, Ayden." His voice is thick with concern. "You had a moderate-to-severe head injury. I'm not surprised you don't remember what happened, but losing memories from before? That's concerning."

"What?" My voice shakes.

"Michael wasn't driving, the police report says you were."

My heart rate spikes, and the quickening beeps of the monitor only feed my panic.

"No. I-I wasn't. I never drive. I don't... No, that's not right!"

My breathing quickens, a panic attack closing the distance to the calm I'm desperate to hold on to. It feels impossible, with thoughts of what this could mean for me. I'd finally landed the schedule I'd begged for, was on the brink of a promotion, and preparing to move. I **cannot** get a DUI.

"Relax, Ayden, it's going to be alright. I believe you. We'll get this figured out."

"Where's Mike? Ask him. He'll tell you."

His face falls, and dread, pain, and anguish wash over me like a wildfire no one, including myself, can contain. "He confirmed you

were driving. He's reached out to his dad, and said he'd be back when he can."

His dad's the chief of the SFPD, and truthfully, the last person I want helping in this situation.

"Was anyone else involved? Was it just us?" *Goddammit*, this cannot be happening.

"Just you guys. You swerved off the road"—my temples pulse painfully—"went over the curb, and smashed into a pole..." His voice trails off as darkness seeps in from the corners of my vision. Everything in front of me sharpens to a pinpoint—until all that's left are the backs of my eyelids.

I can't believe I'm this incapable of catching a break. What did I do to deserve not even a moment of peace in nearly eight years?

What the *fuck* am I going to do?

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Nine Months Later

The deep set of his eyes as he pulls away isn't from sadness or concern for me. He's upset I've decided to go, and he knows this time he can't fight me on it.

I know it's strange, but I love the smell of the airport—the cool, filtered air with its faint metallic tang, laced with jet fuel and cleaning products. It makes me think of anywhere but home.

Home. I haven't had one in what feels like forever, and now, more than ever, the absence aches; especially knowing where I'm heading.

"Sorry I can't come," Michael says as he places his hand onto my cheek. "They've wanted to up the force with all of the riots happening... You get it."

Nodding, I force a smile. I never wanted him to come with me, but he playacted otherwise until *yesterday*. I'm sure he was hoping I'd beg him to come, but I'm perfectly capable of traveling, and more importantly, of being without him.

The edge of his lip curls, lifting his deep ebony cheek. His dark brown eyes search mine, and I can't tell if he wants me to speak or stay silent. I'm not going to argue with him about coming, it's for the best.

Alysa will be meeting me at the airport in Colorado, anyways. And she *hates* Michael.

His gaze shifts between mine, and our silence makes me increasingly uncomfortable. I don't even register the announcements; it's like my ears are plugged.

"I understand," I finally say as several travelers begin to brush against us.

San Francisco International is one of the busiest airports in the United States, second to Newark. People have been bumping into us trying to get to the security line for the few minutes we've been standing here, but now they're beginning to crowd us.

"When you get back, we can talk about us. Alright?"

I nod again. "Sure. I'll call you once I land."

"Just text me, I'm sure you'll be tired."

He leans in toward me just as I pretend to reach down for my bag. I'm grateful when he stops and steps back, though I'm sure he'll comment on it later. I'm not in the mood for a public display of affection, and if I don't reciprocate, it'll spark a fight I want to avoid.

Plus, we aren't together right now or anything. I'm not entirely sure why he would even attempt to kiss me.

"See ya later, babe."

I shudder. "Bye, Mike."

Security doesn't take long, and I'm at my gate within twenty minutes of parting ways with my ex-boyfriend. Even if he wouldn't call himself that, I do.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. Sitting with my carry-on between my spread legs, I pull it out.

Lefty 👉

Hey, have you boarded yet?

Boarding starts in thirty minutes.

I just got to the airport. I won't make it in until tomorrow. Are you getting a rental?

No. I'm going to Uber to our hotel.

Red-eye?

Yeah. Upgraded to first class

I'm not a snob. My twin senses are tingling.

Ass

I wasn't even thinking anything.

😬 Whatever.

I don't respond, because I can see the dots popping up. They come and go. Then she finally says:

I've missed you, Ayden.

A soft laugh falls from my lips.

It's somber, and if it weren't for what Alysa always says—*"If I don't laugh, I'll cry"*—I think I'd be crying right here in Terminal A, Gate 14.

You were the one that moved to London.

I've missed you too, sis.

I just wish it weren't under these circumstances, but I'm glad I get to see you regardless.

Ten days ago, our dad, along with our stepmother, were killed in a head-on collision. They were driving back to their home in Colorado from Scottsdale, Arizona, when a wrong-way driver in a semi slammed into them.

Their deaths were instant; so said the officer that called and told me the news. To be honest, I'm surprised I remember the conversation as vividly as I do. I felt so numb the moment the words *"They're dead. I'm sorry for your loss"* slipped through the phone and into my ears.

My elbow presses down hard on my right leg in an attempt to stop the bouncing it's doing. An unconscious tick of mine.

I had to call Alysa and tell her, and after that, our mom. She told me *thanks*, and said she'd send flowers to the funeral. Bitter bitch. I'd done her the courtesy of calling, she could've done the same, and sounded even a little empathetic to us. That just solidified the reason we were raised by our dad.

Leaning back, I type out my final text before shutting off my phone.

Love you, lefty. See you when you get in tomorrow.

Shutting my eyes, I listen for them calling the first-class passengers to prepare for boarding first. It mixes in with the soft echoes of conversation around me and the hum of children getting out their energy.

Dragging my hand up through my short hair, I groan.

I hadn't seen my dad or stepmom since February, when I was finally starting to heal from the accident. If I'd told them sooner, I know they would have come to see me earlier... but I just couldn't find the strength to bring it up.

They were the epitome of ideal parents. I may not have known Leilani my whole life, but it felt like it. She filled the gap my alcoholic, biological mother made. Loving both Alysa and myself like we were *her* kids. It wasn't hard to say yes when she asked to adopt us just a year after marrying our dad.

As for him, he was the best father figure we could have asked for. I've definitely disappointed him at times, but he never showed it when we spoke or saw each other. Now, he'll probably watch me spiral from Heaven, and all the shame I've been hiding will be laid bare—bright as a blank canvas—for him to see.

Great.

I open my eyes and stare up at the ceiling, just as boarding for group one is called.

It feels like my life is stuck in low gear, but the world around me just keeps moving at full speed. I'd love to blame it on the accident that nearly took *my* life, but it's been this way for so long.

"Now boarding group two."

I'm hoping that this trip heals me in some way.

"Now boarding group three."

But knowing me, the moment I land, I'll just do as I have done: smile and pretend that everything's okay. It's what everyone expects of me. Plus, I can't show up like I've got all the problems in the world.

I'm going to a funeral, after all.

"Final boarding call."

I stand up and walk to the attendee who smiles at me. There's a hint of irritation in the small lines between her brows.

"Have a safe flight," she says as she scans my boarding pass.

The soft thump of my carry-on is muffled quickly by the hum of the airplane. The scent of asphalt and jet fuel assaults my senses before I step onto the plane, and turn down the singular aisle.

It's such a disassociating feeling. Time. I swear I'm too young to feel like this, at merely twenty-seven. As though I'm standing still while the clock rushes forward.

As I take my premium seat, 6A, with no one beside me because that seat was bought too, I prepare for takeoff.

He'd booked the flight, putting us at the bulkhead so that I could stretch out. Although I'm not super tall, standing at six-foot exactly, it's nice to be able to. Since the accident, my left leg needs to be stretched or my hip locks up. Physical therapy has helped tremendously, but there are just some things that haven't fully healed.

Just like my damn heart.

Pathetic.

I look at the empty seat beside me where Michael would've sat. It's void of a passenger as I hear the plane door close tight. I can hear his condescending voice. *"Think of it this way, now you'll have the full row to yourself. You're welcome."*

Right. Thanks soooo much.

I take out my headphones, place them into my ears, open the window shade, and lean against the cabin wall. No music plays, but I turn on the noise-cancelling and listen to what I'd call a noisy quiet.

There's still sound, but it's muted, as if silence is trying to break through.

It's quite poetic, really, even if that's the last thing I am.

Maybe it's more tragic.

I let out a sigh, one filled with contempt. I'll get through this. I have to. I can't be the twin who loses their mind—Alysa would never let me live it down.

The moment the plane begins to taxi backward, I take a deep breath.

See you soon, Dad. For the last time.



Alysa's arm is wrapped around my back, mine draped over her shoulder, her temple pressed to my chest. The service ended about fifteen minutes ago, and most of the guests have gone. A few stragglers remain, but they don't seem to mind us standing here, looking down into the two six-foot holes where our parents' caskets rest.

Everything was beautiful, and I'm grateful we didn't have to handle any of the arrangements ourselves. Our dad and stepmom had built a deeply loving family within the community of Maple Falls—the small town named in their wills as their final resting place.

"...to be laid to rest in Maple Falls Cemetery, surrounded by our true family, alongside one another."

There were far more people than I expected. Some were distant relatives who, like my sister and me, had traveled from out of town. But most were locals who spoke of my father and stepmother as though they were family—siblings, even parents. They said this loss would wound their community for a long time, and that even after the grief faded, the mark left by their love would last a lifetime.

Our dad was a doctor at the local hospital—nothing as grand as San Francisco General—but I remember asking him once why he

chose it. His answer was what pushed me to go into the medical field in the first place.

"Needing help isn't determined by the size of the hospital, Ayden. Regardless of who someone is, where they are, their social status... everyone needs help. In a small town or a metropolis."

I planned to do my residency at SF General and then move out of the big city. That had been the plan, until I met Michael...

Feeling my sister squeeze me, I look down at her. She's got a somber smile, accompanying the red cheeks and tear-filled hazel eyes that match mine.

"I couldn't have done this without you, righty."

"The feeling's mutual." I drag my palm across her cheek, taking away the tear that draws down it. "Do you want to skip the communal lunch and grab some bad fast food?"

That smile of hers turns to a toothy one. "It's like we are twins or something. You read my mind."

She and I are fraternal twins, but we share many of the same features, minus our height. Almond-shaped eyes, long lashes now clumped from tears, and bold eyebrows. Her sleek, straight nose is red, and I'd told her not to wear makeup, but it's bunched up just under where she's been dragging the back of her hand.

As she tucks her honey-gold hair behind her ear, she pulls away from me and walks toward the rental car. She'd berated herself earlier when she asked if I wanted to drive. It pained me to see her nearly get on her knees to apologize when I reminded her that my license was still suspended.

I'm circling the black sedan when I hear tires crunching behind us. The single stretch of dirt that winds through this part of the cemetery is nearly empty now; only our rental and two other cars remain.

That is until a mossy-green truck rolls to a stop. The sound of a car door closing behind me pulls my gaze back to Alysa, who is starting the engine. I make my way to the passenger door but pause, glancing toward the newcomer.

From the driver's side, thick, voluminous curls appear. I don't need to see the face to know who it is—Keoni, my stepbrother.

I haven't seen him since... god, my graduation party. We've both grown up, it seems, because holy shit, he's even bigger than he was back then.

We're a solid half-football field apart, and he doesn't look my way. His gaze stays fixed on the blue canopy that shaded the guests during the service.

I watch him clench and unclench his fists. His shoulder-length, curly hair, always his signature, is pulled into a bun on top of his head. The white button-up strains against his muscles, and even from here I can see the rise and fall of his chest caused by his heavy breathing.

The moment I'm moving into my first step toward him, I hear Alysa. "Ayden, come on, I'm hungry. Please."

I take a deep breath before slipping into the vehicle slowly.

Go to him...

Ignoring that idiotic idea, I grab the seatbelt and click it into place. Then, almost without thinking, I drop the visor and check the mirror. Adjusting it just enough to see the truck, I search for him—only to find he's gone.

I steal a glance at my sister as she moves to put the car in drive, then shift my gaze past her. That's when I see him, standing exactly where we'd been minutes ago. Alone.

Go to him...

My stomach tightens with indignation, directed at myself, for not telling Alysa to stop. Regardless of what happened the last time we saw one another, he's our stepbrother, and he, like us, just lost a parent.

Still, humiliation wins out over everything, and I rest back against the seat as we get moving. We will all have to find a way to cope with this, because once my twin goes back to London, I too, will be alone again.



"Righty, come on, you didn't even touch your damn waffles." A blueberry hits me square in the chest, and I stare at her in disbelief. I'm wearing a *white* button up. That could stain. "I get it, but you need to eat, you're looking awfully skinny."

I roll my eyes. "My weight is fine, says my doctor I saw a few weeks ago."

"Speaking of doctors. How's physical therapy?" She pokes her fork into the last of her syrup-drenched pancakes and rolls it to gather the rest of the scrambled eggs, before shoving it into her mouth.

"Going. I'm no longer limping, which is great. I can't run properly yet, but I don't need to." I shrug my shoulders. "Other than that, all my internal organs are back where they belong."

She scowls. "Not at the table, please."

"How you're so squeamish is so funny to me."

The astonishment across her face has me chuckling.

"You aren't allowed to give me shit. You're quite literally an ICU nurse, and Dad was an ED doctor. That career just wasn't for me, it's why I went into tech. I'm building us a better future and you're keeping our present alive." She grins. "Plus, I'd prefer to dissect a computer and read coding over a body, *any day*."

I grab my glass of orange juice and take a sip, giving her that '*whatever*' look we both have mastered.

After she finishes scooping up the remnants of her plate, she pushes it aside and grabs mine. All she does is pick at the bananas that're drenched in the sugary substance, leaving the one and a half waffles I just can't stomach to eat, be.

"Tell me." She adjusts herself back against the bench chair, just as the waitress strides by and grabs her plate. "How's Michael?" There's no hiding the disgust in her tone for my ex.

I hesitate, thinking about his response to my text last night when I let him know I made it and was in the hotel room. It was as expected:

Michael

Good. You said you're staying with your sister, right?

Yes. Just Alysa and I.

Glad to hear it. Get some rest, talk to you in the morning.

I'm grateful I haven't spoken with him since then. He'll give me some excuse why he hasn't called, like work got out of hand, and he

had to stay late. He's a police officer, just like his father, and works the shit-shift, or graveyard shift. Normally he is off at eight in the morning, which is when he would've reached out to me.

Again, I wasn't holding my breath, and am still not.

"Alright."

"He is still your ex, right?" she asks, tilting her head. I can hear her inner thoughts basically screaming that he fucking better be.

Nodding, I put my cup back down onto the table. "Yeah... or how he coins it, we're on a *break*."

"Wait. You told me three months ago you two were broken up. You got back together? What is a *break* if not a *break up*?"

I truly don't want to have this conversation. "I'm just struggling with how my life turned so abruptly. Michael has been—"

"A goddamn asshole, Ayden. You should've broken it off so fucking long ago! The car accident never would've happened." Now, whenever I think about that, I'll think of my dad instead of myself. Maybe it's life's way of telling me I could have had it so much worse. It could've killed me, instead of just ruining my life further. "Please make this a permanent split. You deserve so much better."

Bringing my hand up to the back of my neck, I rub at the nape and soon drag my fingers through my hair. "I know... It's just, his dad got the charges dropped. If it weren't for him, I likely would've spent time in jail. I'm lucky all I got slapped with was a suspended license for twenty-four months."

"And what does that have to do with this not being a permanent split? Him helping you doesn't mean he can—"

"Do we really have to do this..." My insides twist. The last thing I want is to think about him while I'm here.

She narrows her eyes and shakes her head. "Fine, but we're here for a week, and we *will* talk about it."

After adjusting her dress, she crosses her legs and folds her hands into her lap. I equally lean back and relax.

Alysa and I never had that phase where we disliked each other. From the moment we came out the sunroof, until now, we've had a great relationship.

I call her lefty because she's my better half, the one that has my heart. I'm her righty, because I had to give her my right kidney.

She was born with congenital nephrotic syndrome, and at ten, one of them failed while the other barely functioned. We were lucky

I was a perfect match, considering it was a fifty-fifty shot, since we are fraternal.

She's healthy as a horse now, and I think all we've gone through has made us stronger.

"Are you?"

I shake my head. "Sorry, what? What did you say?"

With an exhausted roll of her eyes, she taps her freshly manicured nails against the table. "Ready to meet the lawyer tomorrow?"

"Oh, right..."

"I wonder if Keoni will join us."

The moment his name leaves her mouth, I suck in a sharp breath. If I tell her I saw him as we were leaving, and didn't say anything, she'll be furious.

"When was the last time you saw him?"

About an hour ago.

"Eight years ago... high school graduation."

"Holy shit, seriously?" She props her elbow onto the back of the booth. "I saw him last year for Christmas. Didn't think he could look any fucking sexier."

"Alysa Pierce."

She quite literally giggles. "Oh please... it's just a fantasy. Plus, I don't know if *technically* we are still legally stepsiblings. That, and it wasn't like we all grew up together. Just a few years in the same house."

I have no idea who she's trying to convince, because it sure as hell isn't me. Honestly, it isn't that. Really. We were fourteen when my dad introduced us to his girlfriend, Keoni's mother, and they married a year later. We lived together from fourteen to sixteen, when Keoni moved out and went to college in Arizona.

"I found him hot before our parents started dating, so it doesn't count."

I roll my eyes. "Don't you have a boyfriend back home?"

Her mock gasp has us both laughing. "Don't tell him. It's basically like me flirting with a celebrity, even if Keoni isn't one. That's forbidden for me and he's *waaaaay* out of my league."

"You're hot, shut up."

She bites her bottom lip and tucks her hair behind her ear dramatically. "Thanks, bro..." There's a slight pause, before she

drops her hands into her lap. "Can I be honest with you?" Her sudden shift to seriousness tugs concern deep in my chest.

"Of course."

As she swings out of the booth, I scoot over and she comes to sit right beside me. Throwing my arm over her shoulder, she tucks herself into me. "I'm not ready for tomorrow."

I rest my cheek onto the top of her head. "I know, same."

"We didn't get to see them in the... you know..." There wasn't much left of our parents, according to reports, due to the severity of the accident. The only thing placed in their caskets were their ashes. They'd wanted to be buried beside each other for as long as there was soil to keep them together. "And maybe that's why it didn't feel like they were gone. But, tomorrow, hearing their will... having their stuff being given away, it'll make it real. That we won't see Dad again."

Releasing a sigh, I squeeze her tighter to me. "We will get through it together. Like we do with everything, lefty."

I've got to be strong for her. I can't suffocate her with my own problems. We'll get through this week together, and be stronger at the end.

She lets out a shaky breath, turning her face against my chest as she nods. She doesn't speak, and time drifts by with her beside me. The table is cleared, the check paid, yet we remain.

There is never a 'tomorrow' I'm ready for, and this one will be no different—but I'll be strong for her.

In the midst of our silence, my thoughts slowly drift from my sister.

Keo...



Two hours earlier

I've got the windows down, eyes fixed on the entrance to Sapphire Valley—a wooden archway stretched across the top of a security building, with metal gates on either side, standing wide open. It's been eight months since I last came here, though it feels far longer.

Shifting my truck into drive, I roll through, entering a place I never imagined would make me feel sick to my stomach to return to. At the split, I turn right, following the lush, solitary road. Tall blue spruce trees flank me on both sides as I round the southernmost point of Sapphire Lake.

The cabin, Echo Ridge, is under construction, but it's kept the old charm of its logwood exterior. Metal slabs and crates sit off to the right of the structure. It looks livable, though I'm not sure anyone has moved in; I don't remember seeing any lights last Christmas.

I only started coming to Wildhart Hollow—I'll call it just *Wildhart*—my stepfather's family cabin, a year after Ayden's high school graduation. He worked in town as a doctor, while my mom taught at the only elementary school in Maple Falls. Even at their age, I'd never imagined they would want to live so simply.

They were happy... suppose that's all that matters.

It takes about ten minutes to get from the entrance to Wildhart, and as the trees thin, the quiet home comes into view.

A hollow ache settles right in my chest as I take a deep breath.

The cabin is built primarily from round, natural log timbers, topped with a pitched metal gabled roof that was replaced just a year ago. A stone chimney rises near the front—one I'm used to seeing a trail of smoke come from, fleeting into the cold air.

Windows line both levels, with two flanking the solid-wood front door. The door sits beneath the overhanging porch roof, which wraps around the front and right side of the cabin. On the right side, beneath the shade, sits a seating area: four loungers, a small table, and a two-person swing that was used far more often than the living room inside.

I park the truck and turn my gaze toward the lake. A dock juts out from the grassy bank. The water, unlike my fucking head, is calm. I can feel the building of a migraine, causing me to groan and quickly get out before it can fester.

Slamming the truck door, I drag myself toward the cabin's entrance. A dozen mismatched chairs sit in a rough circle around the fire pit, positioned between the dock and the porch. From the steps to the water's edge can't be more than twenty feet—talk about waterfront property.

The porch boards creak under my weight, and I hear my mom's voice in my head, teasing Grant to reinforce the structure. All jokes, of course. It's not the fault of the wood. I'm just built like a bear—minus the fur. Aside from the curls on my head.

I was a linebacker for a reason.

I reach up to the lamp on the right, pull the spare key from its hiding spot, and unlock the door.

This place has always smelled like safety. Not an actual scent; more a feeling. A tingle in my nose, a warmth settling in my chest. I took it for granted, only coming once a year.

The living room opens straight ahead, a wall to my right lined with photos. Mine, my family's, and the Pierce's. I don't look at them, and instead, keep my eyes fixed on not one particular place.

The lights are off, but the curtainless windows let sunlight flood in. Dust motes drift through the beams, some hitting harder than others. One particularly bright ray falls across the kitchen table, where a half-eaten cake sits abandoned.

I move through the space, skirting the table at the center of the room. The air is thick with different smells—stale, unmoving, and *old*.

As if no one has been here for years, instead of weeks.

The bundt cake under its glass dome is furred with mold. I let out a heavy, painful sigh, but it does nothing to ease the pressure in my chest.

When I lift my head, my gaze catches on a stack of mail by the counter. Even from here, I spot the gray envelope I sent three weeks ago.

Circling the table, I thumb through the pile until I can slide it free. Grant's friend—kind enough to collect Clover after hearing the news—had also dropped off the mail. But the sight of the cake makes my jaw tighten.

Would it have killed him to throw it out? Bare *fucking* minimum.

Taking the envelope, I slide open the flap, and feel my pulse rise. A darker paper falls out from between the folded one I open up, but I read the letter first.

Mom,

You were right, as always.

There's a surprise folded in this. I hope you read this letter first.

Aloha wau iā 'oe

You and Grant will have to help me find a place, and how to adjust to the colder temperatures.

Keoni

I set the envelope down and unfold the paper inside. The creases resist, sharp from being folded too long.

It's my transfer paperwork. Maple Falls Fire Department. Effective August tenth.

Shutting my eyes, I crush the paper in my fist.

You were always right, Mom...

After taking a deep breath, I force back the dark thoughts not yet formed, before I reopen my eyes. Out the window, the forest stares back—still... endless. This place could be where I heal, or where I let myself rot.

Guilt thrashes at me, fast and hot. Like a wildfire, it's already too far gone for me to smother.

I glance at my watch. An hour until the funeral. Enough time to clean a bit, then make it for the service. Maybe the air will clear my head before I have to say goodbye for the last time.



I can't believe how much of an idiot I am.

How the hell did I forget the time change?

I've always visited in the winter. Arizona and Colorado share the same time zone until summer... I hadn't set my watch ahead an hour.

The damn funeral was over.

I went to the church where the procession had started, but they told me it was finished and everyone had gone to the burial site. I'm surprised I wasn't pulled over with how fast I was driving, even in my truck.

No one stands under the blue tent providing shade in the summer heat. The only people I can see are tending to the place where my mother now rests.

Or, well, her ashes.

I slam the car door, ignoring my surroundings, and head straight for the two rectangular holes.

The soft soil sinks beneath my shoes, the tips of them stopping an inch from the six-foot drop. My head shakes involuntarily, and it's like I can hear her disappointed voice.

"Auē, Keoni. What was so important you missed my funeral?"

I'm always too late... I'm so sorry...

A warm breeze pulls a strand of hair across my face.

"You alright, son?" I slowly look up at the man approaching me. My assumption would've been a worker, but to my dismay, it's a priest. "May I help you?"

Where's your God now? Where's any God now—

I bite my tongue not to curse out a holy man.

A few people are right behind him, and while he stops, they don't. One of them brushes past me, and I instinctively step back. They begin removing the lowering device and straps from the grave.

I swallow and look down at the man. He eyes me cautiously, as if I might cause trouble. I get it, I'm intimidating, but I really don't need problems right now.

Sighing while straightening my shoulders, I mutter, "No. I don't need any help."

I take another step back until one of the many chairs brushes against the back of my knees. Then I sit, resting my elbows on my spread legs.

For the next several hours, I just remain here while people take down the sitting area and close up the graves. They place a temporary marker between the two plots, and fuck... if I haven't read it hundreds of times.

Grant Robert Pierce and Leilani Ann Pierce

January 31, 1969 - July 31, 2026 and April 17, 1976 - July 31, 2026.

Section C, Plot 14 & 15.

They always say once you start listening to your parents, it's too late. I'm not saying all of them deserve that respect, but my mom absolutely did. Had I listened to her sooner, maybe she'd still be here.

I run my fingers through my hair, tugging at the roots and yanking it out of its bun.

"Bullshit..." I whisper. It's so soft, I know no one can hear it over those still shuffling their feet.

They don't come to ask me to get up so they can take the last of the chairs. I'm left here, alone with my thoughts—a place that's dangerous even on a good day. Though, I'll admit, they aren't leading me to a dark place, one that leads down highway 17 to

where my parents' accident was. Nor do they lead me back to my own selfish act, and self-loathing.

No, I'm tugged to thoughts of Ayden.

Not my stepsister, but my stepbrother.

I'm not even sure why I start asking myself where he is. I haven't seen him in nearly eight years. He wouldn't even come to Christmas—what makes me think he'd show up for a funeral? He obviously cared more about something else.

Something more *important* than his family...

I don't want to be included in that. We aren't family anymore...

Even if that thought stings.

Throwing myself back against the seat, I slump. My arms rest at my sides while I ball my hands into fists and release them. I'm bitter, and I **know** I shouldn't direct it at anyone but myself.

I should cancel my transfer, see if I can't get back with my original house in Phoenix. Being here may make me spiral, and I fear it will be too much—not just living in the space my mom spent her days in, but the constant reminder of how I've fucked up so many times.

I'm not sure anything can keep me from that ledge again.

Ayden...



“Wait, seriously?!”

Honestly, I’m just as surprised as she is, but the last thing I’m going to do is raise my voice to our *lawyer*. The man in front of us is handsome, sitting tall behind his desk, his blond hair neatly managed, and bright blue eyes watching us.

“Yes, Ms. Pierce. The home in Boulder will go to you, and Wildhart Hollow will be given to your brothers. Speaking of...” Travis shifts away from the two of us before flipping one of the papers. “Where is Keoni?”

The mention of his name has my heart doing stupid jumping jacks.

Looking at my sister, she shrugs her shoulders. “I’m not sure. He must’ve recently got a new number because I tried to call him but it was out of service.” She turns to look at me, a wink accompanying her smile. “I send him stupid memes from time to time.”

“Do you get them back?”

The hurt that crosses her eyes has me releasing a chuckle. She jerks away from me to address the lawyer. “He’s our stepbrother. That was another question I had...” *Oh, Alysa*. “Is he still that? Our stepbrother?”

He hums, and I roll my eyes. I can’t believe she would even go there.

"Technically, since your father and Keoni's mother have both passed, you guys aren't legally step-siblings anymore."

I clear my throat. "Need I remind you of Joshua, lefty?"

A literal *huff* escapes her. "I'm just asking, jerk. He'll always be my stepbrother." She gives Travis her biggest smile. "I'm happily in a relationship. I'd never pine over him, I swear."

Little liar.

That has the lawyer chuckling. "No judgement." He clears his throat. "Everything else was split three ways between their children. The estate has to go through probate, and if it's straightforward, which it seems to be, it shouldn't take more than six to nine months. Only longer if there's any hold up. Are you local?"

Both Alysa and I groan. "I'm only here for a few more days. I live in London."

"Lucky girl," he says before looking at me.

"No, San Fran."

He nods. "No problem. I'll make you the point of contact if that's alright with you, Ayden. It may be easier to get in touch."

"Will I have access to the cabin right away?" I ask quickly. "If I wanted to move in."

"You can stay in the home in Boulder, righty. Wildhart is isolated."

Perfect...

"I've got a few more months of leave from work, it may be nice to be... alone."

When our eyes meet, we have our silent-twin conversation. She knows exactly what I'm thinking without a word. I've been cooped up in a big city apartment with my ex and could really use some fresh air.

After she nods, we turn back to Travis, who wears a smile.

"Legally, it's yours, but unfortunately we don't have the keys."

"Yeah, no... I didn't expect—"

"You can have a locksmith go out there to get a set done. I'll provide you the paperwork to give to the company so they know you are lawfully allowed to enter." He gives me a sympathetic smile, one that holds understanding. "My girlfriend, Genevive, knows the couple across the lake; their cabin is being rebuilt after a house fire. If you find yourself wanting some company, I'll give you my number and I can talk to her to see if the girl in Sanderson Pine would want

to hang out.” A nervous chuckle comes from him as he rubs the back of his neck. “Just don’t drop by unannounced. From what Genevive has said, her boyfriend is extremely overprotective.”

When we first spoke with someone about going over the will, it was with a woman. So seeing him when we popped in was a surprise. I guess it makes sense now—he probably saw the cabin and asked to take it on. What a small world, but one I’m glad to be in. It would be nice to actually know a neighbor.

“Thanks. I’m not sure I’ll actually stay there but just wanted it as an option.”

“No pressure, just offering is all.”

After that, we spend the next hour signing documents and reviewing the details of what the coming months will entail. Alysa asks most of the questions; I just listen and absorb the information.

On our way out, my sister asks, “Does Keoni need to sign the documents for it all to be solidified?”

“Yes. We will continue to attempt to reach out to him. If you by chance get in contact with him, can you have him come up to get them signed?”

The two of us agree, bidding him a farewell, and hit the road. It’s an hour drive back to Maple Falls from Denver, and I’m mentally exhausted.

As we get on the highway, greasy food stuffed between the console, Alysa turns down the music. “That wasn’t so bad. I thought it would’ve been worse. Travis was really kind. I felt safe and heard. He was great.”

I nod and shove a fry into my mouth. “Agreed. Do we go to the cabin now?”

“No key. We can see when a locksmith can get out there.”

That’s right.

As she stumbles around the bag, I reach in and take out her burger. After prepping it, I hand it to her.

“Thanks,” she coos.

“Mhmm.” I pause, putting a french-fry into my mouth before speaking again. “I’ve... not been there, so we could just drive up and see it, if that works for you?”

“Oh, sure! Nothing really else to do. I think being left unattended to my thoughts I may start crying and I really, *really*, don’t want to.”

I’m unable to stop from chuckling. “I feel that.”

Maybe I'll see it and decide it isn't for me. The last time I went camping was when I was twelve, and that didn't go so well—we were attacked by bees right at the lake's edge. I don't mind bugs or the outdoors, but that definitely wasn't fun.

And the whole point of camping is for it to be enjoyable.

Anyway, I know that's not the only reason my stomach is twisting into knots at the thought of staying. I'd need to talk with Michael and convince him it's for the best.

But first, I'll have to persuade myself. It's still better than going back, I know that. My head just needs to catch up with my heart.

I don't want to move into the apartment in Boulder. It doesn't call to me the way the cabin is. It's hard to explain, but it feels like if I don't stay in Wildhart, I'd rather just go back to San Francisco.

I hate this restless, rootless feeling of not knowing where home is. I'm starting to annoy myself at this point.

The GPS announcing, "Starting route to Sapphire Valley" drags me out of my overthinking.

One thing at a time, Ayden. You'll be fine.



I'll admit, the drive here was absolutely breathtaking. The moment we left the highway, entering Maple Falls and venturing deeper into the forest, I barely breathed, too awestruck to do anything but stare.

California is beautiful, but something about Colorado feels freeing—especially this place.

We pass through the gates of Sapphire Valley, and a small curse escapes my sister. "What the?" At the fork in the road, the right side is blocked off. She groans and turns left instead.

As we make our way up the road, Alysa rolls the windows down. It's all trees, grass, dirt, and the lake. Wildlife is sparse—deer, rabbits—but that's it. This isn't a big city where people will just be wandering around. I love that it's gated too; it feels safer.

On our right, we pass an A-frame cabin mid-renovation. I think this is the one Travis mentioned. It looks like it's coming along nicely

—I'll have to look up information about the fire or ask the owners at some point.

About a mile up the road, we take a soft right turn and continue forward when once again to our right, is a cabin.

No. Not a cabin. A fucking *mansion*. "Holy shit," I say through a laugh. "That seems out of place."

"Dad and Leilani had said that the owner has been a recluse since his wife and daughter went missing last Thanksgiving..."

"What? Holy shit."

"Yeah..."

I just wanted to admire the massive two-story home, and not be sad—because that is *terribly* tragic.

The cabin-mansion isn't the kind of modernized house you'd see in a suburban neighborhood, but its size feels out of place compared to that A-frame—and from the photos I've seen of Wildhart. This place's stone structure is trimmed with dark wood, and is absolutely beautiful. I imagine the windows must offer a stunning view of the cascading mountains to our left.

I adjust my gaze forward as we turn down the road that will take us to our cabin.

It takes just over twenty minutes to drive all the way around the lake. Our family's two-story home comes into view, and a wave of peace washes over me. It's far nicer in person—Alysa's photos didn't do it justice.

We come to a stop, and there's zero hesitation to me jumping out. I don't expect to go inside, and as anticipated, no cars are parked around the cabin besides ours. I round the front and head straight to the dock.

The weather is perfect—not too hot, and not cold. It's August, and I know it will start to cool soon; before long, snow will blanket the area. I'm not particular about any season, though the sun does seem to lift my mood.

The sun equals happiness, right?

I take a deep breath, tuck my hands into the pockets of my shorts, and lean to one side. Dropping my head back, I smile. The wind lifts my hair and carries the scents of forest and the lake.

God, it's glorious, and for a fleeting moment, I feel like I might actually be okay.

This cements it: this is exactly where I need to be, at least temporarily. I can clear my head, and make some decisions about my life. Here, I can finally do what I couldn't back in San Francisco.

Be safe.

Even now, my dad and stepmom are taking care of me—as they always tried to do...

"You always have a place with us, Ayden. The spare bedroom here at the cabin is yours, all you need to do is say you need it. And don't forget about Keo. He'd help you with whatever you needed."

"Hey, righty, where's your phone?"

I take a breath before turning to look down at my sister who gives me a grin.

"Left it in the car, why—"

She takes me completely by surprise, and since I'm at the end of the dock, her tackle sends us tumbling straight into the water. My laughter muffles as I resurface, spitting out earthy, mineral-tasting water.

"Alysa!!" The moment she is above the surface, I thrust a wave of water at her. "We have *nothing* to dry off with!"

She giggles and simply shrugs her shoulders. "We will ride with the windows down. What happened to my not-so-uptight brother!?"

Yes... Indeed. What *did* happen to me?

I smile, and for the first time, it doesn't feel distant.

Swimming quickly toward her has her shrieking and attempting to get away.

"You've lost your mind if you think you won't pay for that."

"No, no, no—" She's cut off as I dunk her under. The sound of my laughter bouncing off the surface of the water and echoing around the lake.

For the next who knows how long, I lose myself to a place that feels like home. I know a big part of this feeling is because of her, but it's definitely being *here* as well.

Thanks, Dad... Thanks, Leilani.



This week with my sister went by way too quickly.

I'm not sure if it was me or Alysa who squeezed tighter before I left her to return to the cabin. Probably me—I didn't want to let her go. I'd definitely have cracked and never went back to San Francisco after coming here for Christmas. Goodbyes are the worst part of seeing someone you love temporarily.

After we finally pulled apart, I watched her walk into Denver International Airport before jumping into a taxi. Today was supposed to be my flight home too, but I'd already decided to stay.

Now, all I have to do is let Michael know I'm not coming back... temporarily. *Forever.*

The entire hour-long drive back to the cabin, I bounce back and forth on how to tell him. I still have until this afternoon—my flight was supposed to be the latest one out. On top of that, I'm supposed to meet the locksmith at the cabin in just a few minutes.

Too much is happening in my head all at once. Fucking Christ.

One thing at a time.

The taxi pulls to a stop in front of Wildhart, and I pay the absolutely outrageous fare for the trip. Transportation is going to cost me a fortune, along with a food delivery service...

Dragging my suitcase over the rocky terrain, I spot a white truck with a sign that tells me they're here to hand over my new key. As I

round the vehicle, I see a middle-aged woman leaning against it, smoking a cigarette.

Once she spots me, she pushes herself off, and puts it out against the car. "Ayden?"

"That's me," I say with a compulsory smile.

She opens the driver's side door and tosses the butt of her smoke into it, before leaning in. "I've got your key already made."

Aren't I supposed to verify this is my place?

Thankfully that lawyer, Travis, provided the proof so I could give it to the company, but it seems that was unnecessary.

"Thanks." I know I sound irritated, but whatever. "How much do I owe you?"

"No charge, but you'll take this off my hands." As she leans back out, she's carrying a small pet carrier. My eyes widen as she quite literally *thrusts* it straight into my arms.

I drop my suitcase, tightening my grip so I don't let go of the crate—my guess is a cat, judging by the long meow that echoes from inside.

Tripping over my "What the?" I stare at the woman incredulously.

"Clover. My husband picked her up for the Pierce's and has been looking after her." I'm not entirely sure why she's got such an attitude, and it's only amplified by her southern accent. "She's a menace to society."

Before I have a chance to look into the crate that's oddly large for a feline, the woman is pushing a set of keys in my face. "I made a spare."

The instant I take them from her, she's already in her car, slamming the door. I guess I can't assume everyone here is nice, but damn, it's like I pissed in her soup or something.

Given the chance, maybe I would.

"Thanks..."

I set the keys on top of the crate and step back as she pulls away. Her tires spit up rocks, and I have to move fast to avoid being pelted. Heaven forbid they hit the cat, who already sounds pretty agitated.

Well... that was a fun way to start my time here.

That's alright, I don't expect to have too many interactions with the locals anyway.

I turn and head to the cabin, setting the crate down so I can open the front door.

I'm surprised when the place smells not just clean, but laced with whisky and pine. Outdoors meets fresh, then add sexy-man flavor—that's the combination, and I don't hate it. Maybe someone's been coming in to tidy up.

Though, why'd someone not bring the cat back sooner? *Oh shit, the cat.*

Stopping myself from doing a full tour before letting out the very feisty-sounding feline, I grab the crate and carry it inside. I crouch, open the latch, and leave the door wide for it to come out if it wants.

My biological mom wasn't a pet person, but she was outvoted three to one, so we grew up with a dog and a snake. I've never had a cat before, though, and truthfully, I'm not sure I'm in a position to take care of one now.

I take a deep breath and glance around the space. To the left, a set of stairs is tucked behind a half wall, beside a large L-shaped couch that faces a stone fireplace stretching up through the wood-paneled ceiling. Across the room is an open kitchen, and I'm just stepping toward it when my phone buzzes.

My heart stutters when I see who's calling.

Deep breaths.

Hitting the green checkmark, I place it up to my ear and clear my throat. "Hey, Mike."

His deep voice comes through the line quickly. "Hey, babe." My neck prickles at the pet name, making me feel uncomfortably exposed. I wish he wouldn't call me that, especially since we *aren't* together. "You excited to come home?"

I wet my lips and slowly walk toward the couch. "Um, I was, yeah."

He chuckles. "You miss me?"

I'm preparing to sit when I realize that's probably not the best idea. Is pacing better? I'm not sure, but I do it anyway.

"Yeah." I know it doesn't sound convincing, so I force myself quickly to keep going. "I was thinking—"

He cuts me off with a laugh. "Uh oh. That's not good."

I bring my hand to the back of my neck and rub at the nape. "I've decided to stay a little longer."

For the rest of my life.

"What?" There's *zero* playfulness in his tone. "In Colorado?"

The loud meow has me turning toward the crate. She's still inside, but it's open, so I'm not sure *why* she sounds agitated.

"Yes. My parents left the cabin to me." I strategically leave out it was given to me and my stepbrother. "I think this will be good for me."

"Why?"

Deep breaths. I've got this.

"For my mental health, Michael. I've been struggling, and I think it's because I'm reminded every day of how I fucked up. It won't be forever."

Yes it will. I'm never coming back.

"Is it me that reminds you of it?" Fuck. Off. "You know that wasn't my fault, Ayden." He groans, and I can hear the grinding of his teeth. "You do this... all the time. You make me feel guilty for what isn't my fault. When are you going to move on? Is it the accident, or our stupid little fight?"

I squeeze my eyes together and shake my head. "No. It's not your fault. It's mine, and I need to figure it out myself."

There's silence from his end, and I've found myself leaning against a bare wall between the living room and the kitchen. I shift my hand from my neck, down to my forearm.

"We were supposed to work on us when you got back." His tone is softening, but I can still hear the resentment in it. "How long will you need?"

Forever.

"I'm unsure, a few months maybe?"

It's as though I can see the twitch in his right eye. It always happens when he's mad. It comes with a long exhale that feels aimed at me. I don't know why he's even trying to stay with me.

"I've been patient, Ayden. Now you're asking for another *couple of months*?" he hisses through his teeth.

I stare down at my tattoo. A pair of lion eyes set within a perfect rectangle. The design fills the entire space, black and white except for the eyes. Some see them as light brown, but to me, they're amber.

I take a deep breath to center myself, wet my lips, and say, "This is where I need to be, Michael. Wait, or don't, that's up to you."

Don't wait for me. Please move on...

"Are you seeing someone else? We've barely even been broken up!"

It's been months...

Shaking my head, I hold in the groan I truly want to release. "No. Just like I'm not seeing you... right now," I murmur, adding in that last bit because I really don't want to fight. It would spike my anxiety, which is already starting to sprout, and I don't have anyone here to stop me from falling. "I'm allowed to make my own decisions. Right?"

"Of course." He sighs. "I'm just worried about you, that's all." A loud hiss comes from the crate. "You need me. You've always needed me."

The cat's scratching at the plastic and I can't understand why it won't just, you know, *walk out*. It's open.

Is she stuck?

"Are you even fucking listening?"

I snap my attention back to our conversation.

"Yes, of course I am... but are you listening to me?" My tone stays very calm, without any hint of aggression. I'm trying to move this conversation along. "I've made my decision."

"Without really talking with me about it. Fine, whatever, Ayden. Selfish decision as always."

Then the line goes dead.

I squeeze my phone, double-checking that the call really ended. Then I toss it onto the couch, watching as it bounces off the cushion and hits the floor.

Fucking asshole.

The cat yowls, and I storm across the room toward her. Dropping to my knees, I thrust my hand into the crate.

"Get out of there."

She swats at me, but doesn't extend her nails to actually scratch me.

I scoot back onto all fours and peek into the carrier. Bright blue eyes stare right back at me, framed by fluffy gray fur. She tilts her head just as I do. From what I can see, she's really pretty, and *definitely* looks like a housecat.

"Come on... Clover? I'll get you some water."

The feline meows.

Leaning back, I grab the backside of the crate and lift it. They say cats always land on their paws, right? I shake it gently, and on the second try, she falls out—very gracefully, I might add. I’m not here to hurt her.

I’m surprised she doesn’t run, but instead sits right in front of me. I set the enclosure aside and sink back onto my calves.

“Hi, Clover.” She doesn’t meow, but I can hear soft purring. “You’ll have to forgive me. I’ve never taken care of a cat before.”

I slowly raise my hand and drag it down her head. Her ears flatten, but she doesn’t hiss. She’s probably just wary of me. I get it; I’d be cautious of someone I didn’t know, too.

“My name’s Ayden...” Is it weird to introduce yourself to a cat? Probably.

The sudden opening of the front door nearly makes me fall back—not just because of who it might be, but also because I’m only a couple of feet away. It slams against the wall, and bounces back slightly. I’m glad I didn’t have to dodge it. I definitely wouldn’t have been able to. Maybe I could’ve before, but my fight-or-flight reflex is fried after the phone call with Michael.

My eyes widen as they trace up, and up, and up, to a set of amber eyes staring down at me. A loud thump crashes beside him, but I don’t look; I’m too dumbstruck to tear my gaze away... because it’s Keoni that is now standing a mere foot from me.

He narrows his eyes, before looking to my right where the cat is, before turning back toward me.

I can’t believe how difficult it is for me to swallow right now.

“What are you doing here?”

“What are you doing here?!”

We speak at the same time, though his words come out far more aggressively.

As my gaze travels slightly south, I realize the position that I’m in. I’m only a foot or so from him, on all fours, eyes-to-crotch level.

Without lifting my chin, I meet his impenetrable stare. He tilts his head, shock riddling his extremely handsome face.

“Shit,” I spill out, and rapidly begin moving up to my feet. Instinctively, I step back and roll my shoulders.

Holy shit. I haven’t seen him in what feels like forever, and at the graveyard I wasn’t able to get a good look. Alysa sent some photos, but they were half-faced or too blurry—she was drunk most of the

time, and it felt like she was trying to make it as inconspicuous as possible. In the few she did get, it was as though he was doing his best to *not* be in them.

Keo has always been well-proportioned—broad shoulders, muscles I can see under the tight T-shirt he's wearing. A tattoo starts at his left shoulder, snakes under the fabric, and trails down his arm. The black ink on his warm brown skin looks like it was always meant to be there.

"Keoni. You're here... Why?"

I watch the veins in his arms twitch, and when our eyes meet, he shakes his head, like he's clearing something from his mind. "Is this your suitcase?" I look down, and sure enough, it's right beside him. "Ayden... What are you doing here?"

Hadn't I just asked *him* a question? I'm also entitled to an answer.

"Staying here?"

Anger and indignation ripple across his features. "No, you aren't."

A singular, unamused laugh escapes me. "Yes, I am." Honestly, I'm stunned by how visceral his reaction is to just seeing me. "We haven't seen each other in eight years and this is how you say hi?"

"*You* are the reason I haven't seen *you*." His chest expands as he shakes his head and brushes past me. "This can't be fucking happening!"

Shame curls tight in my chest as I watch his back tense with every step toward the kitchen. He grabs a glass, and fills it with water like I'm not standing here. Like I don't deserve his time of day.

Clover's meow pulls me from staring too long; she's weaving between my legs, her soft coat brushing against me before those bright blue eyes look up, expectant. I exhale slowly, closing my eyes against the weight of it all.

I just told Michael I wasn't coming back. Alysa has the keys to the Boulder apartment. While I know she'd ship them without question, that means I wouldn't get them for a week or two.

I could get a hotel...

But again, this place feels... right.

Even more so now.

And I own half of it, so fuck that, I'm not leaving.

"Keo, I—" I stop mid-sentence, because when I look for him, he's gone.

Shit. Does he really hate me that much for what happened?

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Age 14

“I’m so, SO freaking excited you decided to do cheer with me, Ayden.” I drape an arm over Mandy’s shoulder as she chatters away, words spilling faster than I can keep up with. “It’s going to be so fun traveling with the team together.”

“That’s if I’m good enough,” I murmur as we weave through the gym’s hallway, the rubber soles of our sneakers squeaking against the polished floor. Beyond the double metal doors in front of us is the football field, and our fate...

I’m being dramatic. I’m kidding. It’s not that serious.

“They’d be stupid not to pick you.”

“You’re supposed to say that as one of my best friends.”

She huffs. “I would never lie to you.”

I’m not really a sports person, but I’ve always had the upper body strength for it, and I make a solid base for the flyers. Years of spotting Alysa while she tumbled her way through gymnastics drilled that into me. Trying out just made sense—Dad says it’ll look good on my Stanford application, or whichever school I decided to aim for. Everyone says colleges eat up athletes, and although I know my grades will get me somewhere, another leg up won’t hurt.

The metal doors squeal as we push through, and suddenly it's like stepping into a sea of bodies. At least a hundred students are already scattered across the football field, buzzing with nerves and excitement. With nearly four thousand kids at our Denver high school, I shouldn't be surprised—but the sheer number still makes my stomach flip.

Glad I didn't have to perform in front of this many people.

We drift toward our crew: Ian, Alysa—strictly along for moral support—Roxanne, and Amber. A few other familiar faces linger at the edges, girls whose names slip my mind but whose smiles brighten as Mandy and I approach.

"Ayden!"

"Hey, guys."

"I swear you look cuter every dang day, Ayden."

I roll my eyes, but can't keep myself from grinning.

"Don't inflate his head," Alysa groans out.

I'm way too young for a relationship, and truthfully, everyone I've come to be around hasn't sparked any feelings other than friendship. Though, I won't tell Mandy that. I feel like that would hurt her feelings, and she'd probably stop hanging out with me. Regardless, she's not made any move other than pushing to sit beside me all the time. Which is fine. I won't lie, I enjoy the attention.

We plop down in a circle, Ian to my right and Mandy to my left. Though, Alysa does squeeze close enough she's basically sitting in the latter's lap.

"How's the first few weeks of high school been, Ayden?" one of the girls I don't know the name of, asks. I'm pretty sure she's a sophomore though.

I shrug one of my shoulders before leaning back onto my hands.

"Pretty cool, honestly."

"Of course it is." Ian jabs my side. "You're the poster child of perfection. The only thing you're missing is the blond hair."

Shaking my head, I prepare to bite back a comment about how he's the pretty boy here, when Alysa busts out laughing. "Poster child? Oh man, you should smell his—"

"Lefty, I'll end you right here, right now, if you finish that statement."

That has everyone doubled over with laughter, and I think we might all have started rolling around in the grass if the announcer

weren't blasting across the field at us.

"Alright, thank you everyone for being here after school hours, let's get into it! We will read off the JV team before moving into the Varsity team. Good luck, and don't be discouraged if you weren't selected this year."

Then, I swear it feels like we're at the races. Name after name is read, and as the JV roster fills up, I glance at Mandy. Our names are called as the last two, which feels strangely personal.

Of course, we just laugh it off, and I joke that someone had to be last.

Everyone's excited, and we spend most of the time talking about what our first year will be like. When the lights flicker on over the football field, Alysa slips her arm through mine.

"Let's go. Dad's parked out front."

I smile and nod, but before we can move, people erupt in screams of excitement. We both glance back at the field to see what's happening. It's no surprise when the football teams—JV and Varsity—come out from under the bleachers.

We drift off to the side, our twin mindset fully in sync. Neither of us care much about the team yet, though I'm sure as time goes on we'll find ourselves at every game, turning into die-hard fans for our school.

It feels inevitable.

Something makes me scan the crowd of players. They're not in full gear, just in jerseys and whatever pants they wore to class. My eyes lock onto one figure, and it isn't just my gaze that freezes—my feet do too.

He's massive, and not just tall, but powerfully built. For a high school student, it's almost shocking to see him towering over the others. The only person he doesn't overshadow is the coach, who walks up and places a hand on his shoulder.

"Holy moly," Alysa pants out. "He's hot."

I don't say anything, though it's strange how hard it is not to stare at him. He has to be popular—if the Varsity cheerleaders clustered around him are any indication.

He scoops up his curly black hair, pulling it back over his head. The hair tie clenched between his teeth does something unexpected to me. When he flashes a smile around it, it's like a punch straight to my stomach.

The breath I draw feels tight in my chest.

"Hey, hey!" Alysa pulls away from me but doesn't go far. "Kayla, who's that guy?"

As the boy removes the hair tie from his mouth and twists his hair into a bun, his gaze lifts. I'm at least ten yards away, but I swear he catches me staring.

"Oh, him? That's Keoni, Varsity linebacker. He's a junior this year."

His eyes narrow, and I suddenly realize I need to stop looking so intensely at him. I jerk my head down toward the girls beside me, my sister practically drooling and ogling him.

"He got a girlfriend?"

"Alysa," I scold her.

"Boyfriend?" She wiggles her eyebrows.

"Neither. He's shown no interest in anyone. Seems pretty focused on school and playing. He's got a ton of college recruiters lined up like the ladies for his attention. For good reason; he's our school's best player next to Tyler, the quarterback."

Biting my bottom lip, I dare to glance back at Keoni. I don't know what delusional part of me thought he'd still be staring, but I was wrong. His attention is fully on the brunette rubbing herself under his arm.

"I can change that." I love my sister's confidence, and I don't mean to laugh at her, but I can't help it. Her delusion is stronger than mine. "Give me three months."

"Sweetheart, you're a freshmen. You'll just embarrass yourself," Kayla scoffs.

Quickly, before Alysa can be hurt by the comment, I sling my arm over her shoulder and start dragging her toward the parking lot.

"Don't listen to her, lefty. If you want it, go for it. I support you ten-fold."

She giggles and wraps her arm around my back. "Thanks. See? This is why you're my best friend."

Before pressing my cheek to the top of her head, I glance back one more time.

It's now I catch him watching us walk away, but he quickly looks elsewhere. Maybe it won't be my sister who will be trying to change his relationship status.

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I'm up before the sun rises, grateful my stepbrother isn't in the living room when I walk out of the bedroom.

This has to be karma coming for me. How the hell does this even happen? I expected to see him at the funeral, but when I screwed up and showed up late, I figured that concern was long gone.

And now, all of a sudden, he's adamant about staying here?

Last night, he knocked on my door, wanting to talk, but I ignored him like some pissy teenager. I shoved in my earbuds and pretended I was anywhere but here. It wasn't until the ceiling fan started rattling that I took them out and listened to him pacing around upstairs.

There are three bedrooms: mine, the master across the hall, and the loft upstairs. Thank god he didn't take the room right next to mine—I haven't stepped foot in there for a reason. Glad he read the room, for once.

A soft meow nearly gives me away as I'm creeping out of the front door. No other sounds accompany it, so I assume Ayden is still asleep.

Clover pads down the last few steps to me, and I kneel to scratch her favorite spot before standing again. I'd already filled her bowl with the remaining cat food in the pantry when I woke up. I'll need to get more—plus treats.

I glance up at the loft and pause briefly before opening the front door and stepping into the brisk morning air. Jogging down the steps, I break into a sprint, heading south. Sapphire Valley is a little over four miles around, and while I won't take on the whole loop today, my goal is to start running it on the four days I'm off from work.

Yesterday, I met the captain at my station, along with my new team. Everyone seemed nice—and surprisingly young. Maybe that's why it stuck out to me; this town is small, and people my age usually chase the big city.

It's the reason I wasn't home, and the first time I'd been away from the cabin since the funeral.

What a surprise to come back to...

The first mile comes easily, sweat slicking my bare chest as the sun rises over the surrounding mountains. At the south point, I pass a cabin under renovation, piles of materials still scattered around. Strange, the amount of metal they're working into it—but not my place to judge someone's design choices.

Without lingering too long, I turn back up toward Wildhart.

I don't know what I'm going to do. I could kick him out, tell him he doesn't belong here. Maybe years ago he did, but not now. I don't care that it's his father's place—he didn't come when it mattered.

And now, suddenly, he wants to be here when they aren't?

My anger stops me mid-run, and I pace from the lake's edge, back toward the road.

Ungrateful brat.

*Don't forget what **you** did to said brat...*

I clench my hand into a fist, staring at a tree I'd love to punch—but that would be idiotic. Breaking my hand the day before I'm supposed to start work is the last thing I need.

No, scratch that. The last thing I want is to face my stepbrother and this conversation.

What pisses me off is even his sister—who lives in another fucking country—made the effort to come to see her dad and my mom.

To see me...

Ayden lives just a two-hour flight away and couldn't manage a once-a-year visit. Now, he shows up out of nowhere and declares

he's staying in the one place that was sacred to them? It feels so goddamn wrong.

The fucked-up part is I can already hear my mom's voice, telling me to hear him out. The same thing she said every single year.

"Still no Ayden?" I hate that I ask every Christmas, and get the same response.

"Maybe next year."

"What the fuck is his problem, Alysa?" I know her dad doesn't like cussing in his house, but come on, his own son won't even spend the holiday with him.

With us.

With me.

My stepsister groans. "It's not my place to air his dirty laundry."

"Whatever... I shouldn't even be surprised."

"Keoni..."

I'm out of the cabin before she can even try to console me. If he doesn't want to be here, then fine. Who am I, anyway? No one. Just the family he's turned into a second thought in his own life.

*No one... a fucking **no one**.*

I'm convinced it's because of what happened at his graduation party. He's been avoiding me ever since, and what a childish move that is. It's been eight years—how could something like that keep him from spending time with his family? Maybe for a little while, sure. But by now? We could've gotten past it. Talked about it like the adults we are.

I've moved on...

Pfft, fucking liar.

My head tilts back, body rigid, as I take a deep breath. The air is cool and sharp, filling my lungs that give me the steadiness I need.

I've got to end this, have this conversation and send him on to California, or simply, away from the cabin. Dealing with my own demons is enough; with him added into the mix, I might actually lose my mind.

Turning from the lake, I head back toward Wildhart. Within minutes, I'm there, glancing at my watch—only half an hour gone. Odds are, he's still asleep.

I climb the steps, and reach for the door when the smell of coffee hits me.

Wrong again.

My chest tightens as I brace myself to toss out my stepbrother. It feels like a cold, asshole thing to do, but it's no more than what he's done to his family, time and time again.

"Get off the table!" The moment the door cracks open, his voice hits my ears. "Clover, what the actual hell, cat? Do you have no manners?"

She meows loudly in protest.

I watch with curiosity as he swats at the cat perched on the wooden dining table, just like she did with his dad. She simply stares back at him. He'll learn soon enough that she is the real ruler here—no human can tell her what to do.

Wait.

No, he won't learn that. He's going to leave.

Stepping inside, I close the door loud enough to draw his attention. Sure enough, his gaze lifts to mine. His short brown hair is a little frazzled, and his hazel eyes—set beneath dark, expressive brows—are just a shade lighter than his sister's.

"Hey," he murmurs, slowly placing down the kitchen towel.

I haven't seen Ayden, not even in photos, since he was seventeen. I don't scroll social media much, but I do have a presence there, and I blocked him so I wouldn't come across him, or he I. If he was going to ignore me, then I was going to ignore him.

I know it's juvenile, but that reasoning is easier to explain than the *actual* one. It was already torture, living with those feelings. Seeing him would've just shoved the knife deeper and finished me off.

He's grown up, but that's to be expected after so many years. His face is angular, chiseled without being too harsh around the edges of his jawline. Tall, but still shorter than my six-and-a-half-foot frame. Although he's muscular, he's not built like a truck, like I am. He's more of a sports car sort of build, if that makes sense.

Lean without being skinny. Built without being stocky.

Pretty, but not girly. Symmetrical, and...

Another 'P' word comes to mind but, I stifle the thought.

"Hi."

I pinch off my sneakers with my toes and kick them to the side. The cabin doesn't have a mudroom, but the entryway has racks and ceramic tile underfoot for easy cleaning. My stepdad always said it worked better in the snow, which is why they switched it out. The tiles are heated, and when the system's off, they stay cool—a relief right now with the heat.

"Morning run?" He tries again to swat at Clover, but she just swipes back.

"Whatever gave you that idea?"

"I don't know," he says through a laugh. One hand comes to his hip, the other gesturing up and down *his* clothed torso. "All the sweat. Lack of shirt..." I watch his Adam's apple bob as his eyes venture down. "Basketball shorts."

I clear my throat. "Very observant."

"Thanks... You know I've always been that way."

His tone isn't deep but more so than it was as a teen. I absolutely *hate* how I remember everything about him from the last time I saw him.

Hasn't it been long **enough**?

"Anyway, I don't know if you drink coffee, but it wasn't expired, so I made us a pot. I'm lucky I knew how to use one of these things. I've got a single cup maker back in San Francisco." He turns his back to me and strolls over to the counter where the old machine is brewing up the Maui Mokka *his* dad was conscious enough to always get for my mom. "I made enough for two cups in the event you'd want one. Do you take it with milk?"

I slowly move through the living room.

"Take a guess."

A nervous laugh has his shoulders jumping. "Probably not." He turns and leans against the counter, releasing a sigh heavy with all sorts of remorse. His arms cross over his chest, tugging at his shirt. "I'm sorry."

I know this feeling too well, especially lately. Guilt. It's a suction right at the epicenter of my sternum; a hollow, empty sensation that swallows me entirely. Swiftly and without remorse for how it leaves me in its aftermath.

Angry.

Spiteful.

Fucking alone.

"You can't stay here, Ayden."

The hurt that crosses his face is quickly masked by a smile. "Come on, you can't kick me out." I'm about to argue that I can, when he continues, "Technically, I own half of this property."

Only half? To be honest, I was ready for him to tell me that Grant had signed over the entire cabin to him and Alysa. Truthfully, I'd hoped they wouldn't care about this place and would just leave it to me. I'd planned to ask my stepsister when I spoke to her again, but... shit, this actually complicates things a bit more.

"Fine. I'll stay here half the year and you can stay the other half—"

"Come on, Keo."

I swallow hard, feeling my pulse spike. That *damn* nickname.

"I... didn't want to stay away," he continues, his voice dropping along with his head. "I had no choice."

"No? Why?" I put my hands onto my hips. "Tell me, and I'll determine if you did or didn't have a choice."

"Wow, when did you become such a jerk?"

I roll my eyes but say nothing. Just keep my gaze on him until he flashes that fake smile. Does he think I'm stupid and can't see right through it? What the hell is he playing at?

"School. Work. Boyfriend. You know, all the standard things that keep someone busy."

I'm not entirely sure why I look around. I know no one else is here with us—unless he snuck someone in overnight, but I would've heard them. These walls aren't thick in the slightest, you aren't even safe farting in the bathroom with the door closed.

"I hope you don't plan to invite your boyfriend to stay with you." For more than one reason, that will *not* be happening.

He releases a huff. "Ex, and no. I'm here to try and get my life back in order."

That gives me pause. "Back in order? What do—"

"Anyway, I won't be much of a burden, and you can just ignore me."

Yeah fucking right.

"Do you even have a car?" Why am I getting so off track now. I was confident in myself that I'd get him out of this house. "It's miles from here to town. I can't play chauffeur."

He waves his hand as if dismissing me, the smile still disingenuous. "All good. I've got money, and I'll just order an Uber. They come out this far, right?" He laughs at himself. "Of course they do. I won't be a bother. Promise. Now, do you want—"

"Stop talking." I pinch the bridge of my nose.

"—to catch up..."

I shut my eyes, wondering exactly what I'm going to do. This isn't good.

Obviously. Why? Because my heart can't take it.

Even after eight shitty years, I haven't stopped thinking about him. And now he's going to be in the same goddamn cabin with me—less than a thousand square feet around us.

I'm so fucked... or he is. Or maybe we both are. Who goddamn knows.



He actually hates me, which is almost impossible to digest. This isn't the same Keoni I knew. Just like his body, his personality has changed.

Yesterday, he walked away from me again. He didn't sit for coffee, not even in silence. No talking, no catching up. Just him completely ignoring me.

I guess I'm fine staying here—I mean, of course I am. It's half my place. No matter how he feels, he can't legally kick me out.

Speaking of...

"Hey, wait." It's noon the next day. My plan was to let him go do whatever he's doing, but then I remember something. "You need to sign the documentation for the will."

His shoulders rise and fall with his heavy breath. He has his back to me, and when he glances over his shoulder, his eyes look tired.

I don't want to explain why I couldn't come during the holidays. Truthfully, I'm a little worried about what he'll do or say. It's embarrassing, and his look of disdain might sting, but his judgment? That might hurt even more.

"Do you have the contact information?"

I fight the urge to smile—it's ridiculous that I'm excited he actually responded.

"Yeah. I can text it to you."

He groans, drops his duffle bag, and turns to me. Fishing through his jeans pocket, he pulls out his phone, unlocks it, and hands it to me. I take a moment to study his wallpaper; it's a firepit, and judging by the backdrop, it's the one outside by the lake.

Without hesitation, I enter my contact information. I'm tempted to put something silly next to my name, but I think better of it and just type it out plainly.

Handing it back, I give him a small smile.

A look of agitation crosses his face before he rolls his eyes and turns away. "I'll see you Wednesday."

I suck a sharp breath in. "What? But, it's Monday."

Without responding, he bends over and grabs the bag he put down before walking out the wooden front door.

I'll admit, him leaving like this spikes my anxiety. After so many years of it from Michael, I was used to it—but with Keo? It hits a nerve that felt numb before now.

A soft purr draws my attention downward. Fluffy gray fur winds between my legs as Clover presses against me. Strangely, it's very calming.

"Alright, so what're we doing today?"

The day ended up consisting of absolutely nothing. There isn't much food, so I had to order groceries to the house—again, quite the pretty penny.

I'm currently on administrative leave, which I'm grateful for, since I'm still getting paid as if I were working my normal hours.

It does make me feel guilty, but Dr. Yadav assured me it's for the best, and I trust him. He's probably one of the only people, aside from my sister, I trust without question.

And, of course, Keoni.

Yes, even him—I trust him, even if he clearly detests me right now.

After taking a strangely cold shower in the upstairs bathroom and crawling into bed, which is horribly uncomfortable, my phone buzzes. I've been avoiding it, afraid it'll be Michael.

I debate leaving it alone until morning because I want to sleep, but the fear of ignoring him is stronger than the dread of responding.

I grab the cell from the side table, place it on the bed, and tap the screen. I'm surprised that the message is from an unknown number. Though, not entirely upset about it.

Unknown number

It's me

Me? Ominous

Unknown number

Keoni.

Ah, thanks for clarifying

Can't be talking with strangers out here

Keo 👑

May as well be

Send me the information, I'm going to call the lawyer tomorrow

Maybe I'm overthinking this, but he definitely could have texted me in the morning. I'm analyzing it, turning it over in my mind, but the thought that he might be thinking about me at a completely random time does something it shouldn't to my chest.

I quickly shoot him over Travis's information.

Keo 👑

Thanks.

What're you doing?

There are no bubbles that pop up, and while I hope for a response, none comes. I stare at my phone for a little longer before placing it back on the charger, switching on *Do Not Disturb*, and rolling onto my side.

Clover is already fast asleep on this twin-size bed.

I opted to take the upstairs room because the one next to Keoni's is our parents'. If he's not in there, I know I shouldn't be. One glance tells me he hasn't touched or moved anything. Inevitably, one of us will have to clean it at some point—maybe I'll take that burden off him. He's taken care of the rest of the cabin. It's the least I can do.

I can't be fucking useless like I have been lately...

Closing my eyes, I try to clear my mind. I miss real sleep more than I'll ever admit to anyone. It's been years since I've had a full night's rest, even if I'm perpetually tired.

I miss them so much. Dad. Leilani. This wouldn't be any different from the past eight years. I'd have gone another holiday without them, but yet it feels like they're unreachable—like there's nowhere I could go to find them.

Which is my reality. I can't call my dad or my stepmom for support.

Heat stings behind my eyes.

I even miss Keo, because although he's here with me... it's like he isn't. It honestly hurts worse.

Ugh. Fuck me.

KEONI

What am I doing?

Working. You?

Delete.

I hope you're in bed, you looked tired when I left.

Delete.

Give Clover warm milk before bed, you'll be her best friend.

Delete.

If you want, you can sleep in my bed while I'm not there. It's far more comfortable.

Delete.

Those are all the things my heart wants me to say, but my brain knows better.

Instead of starting a conversation that will never end, I toss my phone into my locker and head to the secured patio of Station 151. It's located furthest east in Maple Falls, about a fifteen-minute drive from the cabin.

Being a firefighter wasn't always the plan—I'd dreamed of one day playing in the NFL—but my gut told me to pursue a more meaningful career.

No offense to the players, but helping people over entertaining them felt more like my calling. I've been in this line of work since graduating from Arizona State University with a degree in Criminology and Criminal Justice. I'd initially thought about becoming a police officer, but firefighting fit me better.

Fire has always held a special place in my heart. Sure, my job is to put it out, but to me, it's still beautiful—warm and inviting when controlled, and I've always been that: Control.

Slipping through the sliding glass door, I see my company, one man and two women, sitting around, chatting.

"Pierce, glad you decided to join us," Corey says with a cheeky grin, leaning back in his chair.

"Robertson."

"Come on, guys," the redhead, Taylor, says while leaning back in her chair. "Leave the last names to the other companies to call us." She's got her hair air-drying, hanging over the metal railing and swaying in the light breeze.

Kali crosses her arms over her chest. "Tell us, Arizona, how was lugging all that gear in over a hundred-and-ten-degree weather?"

"A nightmare." I move to sit in the empty chair, right between her and Corey.

"I bet," he says while taking a long swig of his drink. "Why'd you move here? I hear Scottsdale's filled with rich, hot women."

"And men," Taylor says with a giggle.

"Guys, come the fuck on." Kali quite literally rolls her eyes back, her thick brows raised so high I'm surprised they don't jump from her forehead. "Let's use our brains."

"It's fine."

"No," she continues. "The last name Pierce. Ring any bells? There is only one family here by that name... and what just recently

happened.”

“Ah, shit.” Corey leans forward and slaps my arm. “I’m sorry, man.”

“Oh, I swear I’m not that slow. I’m a true redhead, this isn’t dye. I’m not a blonde.”

“Wait, didn’t your name start with an ‘A’ or something?” he hums in thought.

I swallow roughly. Fucking small towns. Do they know of Ayden? How?

“No, no,” Kali hums. “You’re thinking of Alysa. That was their daughter. You must be her stepbrother.”

Maybe they don’t know of Ayden...

“I remember Mrs. Grant talking about you. You look like her, now that I think about it. The nose and hair.”

“Don’t check out your co-worker, Taylor.”

We all fall into a small fit of laughter, and I cross my leg over one knee, and release a sigh. “I’d put in the transfer before the accident.” I move us on, but the same burning wave of guilt claws at my chest, sharp and insistent. It feels like acid eating at the edges of my composure, and I clear my throat, forcing it under control for the time being. “Maricopa County was nice, but I’ll take the cooler climate.”

“I’m glad you didn’t say less work. The wildfires these past couple of years have been insane. Thankfully, all manageable,” Corey hums. “My parents knew your dad. My mom has health issues, and spends a lot of time in the hospital. Grant was amazing.”

“So was Leilani,” Kali says somberly. “They were always volunteering for our food drives.” She smiles and it’s genuine. I give her one back while nodding.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Taylor adds.

“Thanks,” is all I offer. I’d figured anyone who knew me, or even just my last name, would shower me with sympathy, but I don’t want it. I don’t deserve it. Not from them, not from anyone.

Corey clears his throat. “Anyway... We should go to sleep, can’t be up too late.”

There’s a light pause just before the girls burst out laughing.

“Alright, guy who showers at two in the morning—for *what?!?*”

This is exactly why I love the job. It’s about keeping people safe, yes, but it’s also this camaraderie you don’t get in a corporate setting

—or really in most other careers. I'll be putting my life on the line with these three, and with our fire chief, Dom.

As the conversation drifts, I try to concentrate, but when it shifts away from my last station, my mind wanders. Not toward the dark parts, thankfully, but toward Ayden.

I glance over my shoulder through the glass doors at the lockers. He has to be asleep by now.

Sometimes I wonder what would've happened if Mom hadn't met Grant. Although I know there's no point in imagining an alternate story, it's possible things would've been different. Both Ayden and I were already in the same high school, and I was already drawn to him.

To be fair, I don't even know what I saw in him back then. I'm not the "instantly attracted" type. I wasn't interested in *anyone*, in *any* capacity beyond friendship.

Not with him, though. I remember how my heart felt when I saw him on that field.

Ayden was the complete opposite of me. Loud, chaotic—a pocket of sunshine and a pure conundrum. Straight-A student, yet constantly in trouble for silly things. I swore he did it all for attention, and at one point, I thought maybe it was mine he was seeking.

Alysa wasn't shy about her attraction to me, but she backed off once our parents married. I found it endearing, and honestly, a compliment.

However, with Ayden, it was different. It was impossible not to feel anything but need for him... even when it was too late for me.



Age 15

“Nice tackle there, 80!”
I tuck my helmet under my arm before running my fingers through my hair, scratching at my scalp. My hairband snapped taking it off, and because I’m the only player with hair that rivals the opposite gender, I’m out of luck.

Well, not entirely. We are just breaking for the third quarter, and I’m trudging my way down the sidelines toward our cheer squad.

“You’ve got to bring extras, my man,” my friend Tyler, who happens to be our starting quarterback, says while patting my back roughly enough I feel it through my gear. “Or have the girls braid it. Amber has been *dying* to get her hands on you.”

I roll my eyes as we pass by the water station. I’m not going to entertain the comment. Tyler has called me weird for not finding anyone attractive, or being interested in *anyone*. Male or female. I just don’t feel the urge to want something or need attention from them. Or, give it. I’m blaming it on my drive to be in the NFL, that anything and everything can be a distraction.

Speaking of a distraction.

"Ahhh!" Amber, head varsity cheerleader, belts out. "Keoni, no way you're blessing us during your break." She's funny. Not in the stand-up type of way, but the Regina George kind of way.

Mean Girls is my mom's favorite movie.

Her brunette hair sways back and forth as she rushes toward Tyler and I. "You're doing so freaking good out there, but that's no surprise."

"Hi to you too, Amber." Tyler doesn't sound annoyed; he can't stand her either but plays nice.

"Tylerrr," she drags out, and offers him a smile before looking back at me. "You never come over during the game. How are..."

Her voice trails off when a laugh catches in my ears. I've heard it a few times, but even still, it shouldn't capture me the way it does.

It has me shifting my attention over her head, right to the junior varsity cheerleaders.

That stupid, swelling sensation in my sternum hits again when I catch sight of him—the boy from a few weeks ago. I've seen him around school from time to time, and each time, I try to get a better look without staring like a crazy person.

His name is Ayden and he's a freshman on the JV cheer squad. That's all I know, and only because his twin sister, Alysa, is in my gym class. She's exuberant, and from the looks of him, he's equally so. He's animated, alive, laughing and moving in the conversation he's having with four of the girls who form a tight circle.

"Keoniii, why're you ignoring me?"

I shake my head and take a deep breath. "I need to borrow a hair tie. Preferably a strong one that doesn't need returning."

She grins and darts away from me, heading straight toward the duffle bags pushed against the wall to the stands. This is the first time I look out at them, parents and students alike chatting in the fifty-plus level bleachers.

"What are you doing?" My gaze trails back toward where Ayden and the group is sitting. It's their coach, hands on her hips bent over scolding them. "You are meant to be paying attention! These are pre-season games, and—"

"We deserve a break too, coach!" one of the girls says while getting up to her feet. "Everyone else is relaxing, why're you on us?"

I eye Ayden, and he slowly rises, grinning as though in agreeance with the girl. *Troublemaker, or rule-follower?* He seems to be the

former.

"Here ya go!" Amber thrusts her hand in front of my face. Looking at the tie, I inwardly groan. It's not going to hold.

The girl that is slowly getting to her feet with the assistance of Ayden has pretty thick hair.

Hmm.

Without saying a word to Amber, I weave through the throng of varsity cheerleaders and head straight for the JV group. Behind me, I hear the brunette calling my name, and Tyler bursting with laughter.

I reach them without a single distraction, and both the group and the coach spin around in shock.

"Oh, Keoni." She offers me a bright smile, that laden irritation for the five cheerleaders all but gone. "You're doing great out there tonight."

I nod. "Thanks, Coach Rapp." Turning my attention to the girl beside Ayden, I ask, "Do you happen to have an extra hair tie?"

Her eyes widen, and below her dark brown cheeks, I can see a hint of a blush. "Yes. Yes, of course. Do you need one?"

"Of course he does..." the girl opposite of Ayden says in a hushed voice.

"Mind if I have it?"

She nods sharply before turning toward the bags. That's when I catch Ayden's eyes—such a striking hazel that, honestly, I like looking at. They suit him perfectly, set against his light skin and flawless features.

"Hey."

His Adam's apple bobs. "Hi."

"Ayden, right?"

After a brief hesitation, it's as if he's snapped back from somewhere and returned fully to the present. "Yeah. How... do you know who *I* am?" I'm quite literally opening my mouth to respond but he just keeps going, "I mean, that isn't meant to be an insult like 'how could *you* know' just, I'm a freshman and a little caught off guard. Never mind, I didn't mean to interrupt, what were—"

"Here you go." *Damn it*, that was fast.

The thick black band in her palm is stretched out to me, and without contacting her skin, I grab it and gather my hair up.

Ayden stares at my mouth for some reason, maybe wanting me to say something?

"Thanks," I offer to the girl before continuing with him. "I met your sister." The last thing I need is for him to think something weird like I'm stalking him. "Third period PE."

"Ah. Right." He sounds disappointed.

I don't know why, but I like that.

We've only got a few minutes before I need to get back on the field. It's strange, but I have this urge to stay and chat—a feeling that's completely out of the ordinary, especially at a game, even if it's just pre-season and mostly practice.

"After the game, do you want to—"

"*Kaipo!*" Of course she would take advantage of this.

I glance toward the bleachers where my mom leans over the railing, her long, wavy black hair spilling forward as she waves.

It's our first game, but she's just as excited as she was last year—for the first, the second, and every single one after that. She's my biggest fan, and really the only one that matters. As much as I want to keep talking with Ayden, she comes first.

When I glance back at him, his gaze is already fixed on her.

"See you later?" That pulls his eyes back to me, and when he smiles, it's perfect. The kind that makes something shift in my chest before I can stop it.

"Yeah, see you... later." His hesitation is cute.

I catch myself grinning at it, which is peculiar. Stranger still is the sudden want to see him again, and again. I don't usually feel that, but with him, I do.

Rushing over to my mom, I lift just slightly up to press a kiss on her cheek she brings down to me.

"You're doing so good out there, Keo sweetheart. I'm surprised the coach put you in for the first game."

I shrug my shoulders. "Tyler and I will likely take the second game off, but it's important to show dominance." My tone is playful. Mom doesn't need reminding of how good we are, but it's always fun to tease her.

She swats my shoulder pad. "Silly... but, really quick, remember I told you about Grant?"

I nod just as my coach calls the sixty-second countdown to regroup.

"I brought him, hope that was okay."

Honestly, I can't help but grin. "Of course, Mom. Where is he?" I haven't met him yet. She wanted to put the feelers out first. They've been dating for about a year, so bringing him here means it's getting serious.

"See him in the red shirt?" She points off over toward the center of the bleachers. A man, pretty tall even while sitting, is staring off toward our direction. He isn't looking at us, but he's smiling. "He's amazing, Keo."

"Good catch."

"I know—"

"No, no, *he* got a good catch."

She swats once again at me. "*Auē, kāohi i kēlā!*"

I don't know much of my mother's native language because I grew up here on the mainland and not in Hawai'i, but that needs no translation.

Dropping down back to the field, I wave at her.

"Invite him to dinner," I say while walking backward.

"He's already invited us!" She smiles widely. "Is that a yes we can go?"

I wink at her. "Anything for you, Mom."



I've never been this nervous for a single day.

It's Wednesday, and Keo is due to come home. He hasn't texted me since that night, even though I've sent a few here and there—asking about his food preferences, whether the cat eats wet food, or if she'd just eaten dry.

Thankfully, Clover is pretty self-sufficient and content with the dry food. She keeps to herself and only comes to me at night, or oddly if I'm feeling sad. Her presence has made sleeping easier. I'm not entirely alone, even if the hollow space beside me is filled by a feline instead of...

Nope. I can't go there.

I just want him to talk with me, to listen and understand without judgment. I'm already embarrassed about why I couldn't come here. Even Alysa, who I'd given just a partial truth to, hated that I wasn't fully transparent. Telling Keo is going to be so much harder, and I don't want to give anything less than the full truth when I finally do. Regardless of how he reacts, I want him to understand why.

The sound of a car door slamming jerks me upright on the couch. I hadn't even noticed Clover resting on my chest—I was that zoned out. She doesn't hiss or bolt like I expect; she just looks up at me before getting up and padding toward the kitchen.

He has a key, so I'm surprised when a knock comes at the door.

I stand quickly and make my way over, leaving the screen closed to keep whoever it is and me separated, at least in some small way.

I'm taken aback to see a woman standing just on the other side. She's a striking blonde, surprise etched across her face.

"Oh..." She takes a step back and looks to the left of the cabin, then to the right. "Uh."

"Hi. Can I help you?" I ask as I open the screen door.

She tucks her short blonde hair behind her ear and smiles. "Hello. Is Keoni here?"

Not my hopeless heart wanting her to be here for our parents, not him.

"No."

She wraps one arm around her waist, resting her elbow on it, and taps her chin with her index finger. "I know I'm a little early... I didn't even think to check the other side for his truck."

My throat goes dry, and swallowing feels impossible. "I can let him know you came by if you'd like... What's your name?"

Play it cool, Ayden.

"Oh, no, that's fine. I'll wait for him in the car. But my name is Brittany." Her hand extends out toward me. "And you are?"

"Ayden." I take it and give it a gentle squeeze. Her well-manicured nails painted opal match her entire aesthetic; very clean and pristine.

"Ayden... Pierce?" She squeezes my hand a little tighter. When I nod, her green eyes gloss over slightly. "I'm so sorry for your loss. I attended church with your parents."

I force a smile. "Thank you."

"I didn't know you were in town." When she puts her hands in front of her, I see she's got a small notepad now clutched for dear life in one of them. "Are you here permanent—"

"Yeah. I moved in."

Her smile is relaxed, and I swear there's relief in her tone as she says, "That's amazing. I was telling Keoni that being alone at a time like this isn't ideal." She lets out a soft laugh. "I can't spend every day he's off work with him."

I'm surprised at how sick that statement makes me.

"Yes, well..." I clear my throat. "Who are you to him? Sorry, he hasn't mentioned you..."

The expression she gives me is akin to sympathy. "I'll let him tell you who I am. I think it's important, especially during this sensitive time, that he explains his needs and relationships himself."

She may as well have just fucking told me she's his girlfriend. What is so hard about that?

The moment I'm about to say something stupid, the sound of tires crunching on dirt has us both turning to see Keoni's moss-green truck pulling up right beside a really nice Jeep.

Of course, she has money.

Jealous is ugly, Ayden, stop it.

He gets out and slams the door shut. His eyes lock on us—no, on me—immediately. They narrow in confusion but never look away as he rounds the porch and heads for the stairs. Brittany steps aside, smiling at him.

"Afternoon, Keoni," she coos.

"Hey, Britt." He tosses his duffle bag to my left, and the moment it hits the wall of the house, I startle.

"Hey." I sound as defeated as I feel. *Shit.*

His eyes flick to mine. "Hey." There's a tinge of irritation as he shifts to gaze at the girl. "You're early."

She lets out a soft giggle. "Says the one always late."

"I'm not always late." He sounds offended by the statement. "Are you ready?"

I glance from her to him, hoping he's looking at me, but to my dismay, he's focused on her. Great.

The all-too-familiar hollow ache in my chest hits me so hard that I lean to the side, bracing myself against the door. I do my best to make it look like I'm just heading back inside.

"Yeah. Would you like Ayden to join us?"

I don't even look at Keo as I slip through the screen door.

"No. This is our time."

Where's the damn knife? There's absolutely no way I'm not bleeding.

"Nice to meet you, Ayden!" Brittany calls, but I shut the door and walk idly through the space to the stairs.

Suddenly, I'm exhausted. Fuck me. Maybe staying here wasn't a good idea.

I plop onto the bed, throwing my back against the terrible mattress, and groan. Resting my arm over my eyes, I sink into the

familiar sensation I've been swimming in for the past six years.

I'll just go back to San Francisco...

Maybe I'll move into the apartment in Boulder.

I should give this time—maybe Keoni will come around and talk with me...

Or maybe there's no solution to this destructive feeling, and everything is hopeless.

Soft purrs come with fur dragging across my arm. Her quiet meow accompanies my teeth gritting together.

"Damn you, Michael."

Damn him for making me into this person.

Damn him for breaking me down.

But most of all, damn *myself* for not getting out sooner.



AGE 14

I don't think I've ever seen Dad so nervous before. It's honestly kind of cute.

He's really trying to make an impression. We even went shopping at Trader Joes, and he *hates* that place. Says it's too overpriced, which, both Alysa and I agree. Though, they have the best chips: Chili & Lime Flavored Rolled Corn Tortilla Chips.

My twin giggles in the doorway as I'm coming down the stairs. She spots me and puts a finger to mouth to shush me.

"Yeah, it's the blue one halfway down the street. If you hit the cul-de-sac, you've gone too far."

He's been swooning over Leilani, his girlfriend, for over a year now. For as old as he is, I'm surprised he wanted to take things as slow as he did. I have to appreciate it, though—he wanted to make sure he wasn't bringing someone into our lives only to leave, just like our biological mother.

It's one of the many things I love about him. I can only imagine what it's like to be a single father, and not with one kid, but two?

Pfft. Do *not* sign me up.

I shuffle as quietly as possible to the hallway where I stand right beside my sister. She puts her arm onto my shoulder and leans against me.

"He's been bouncing up and down. Where have you been?"

Chuckling, I put my arm around her neck. "Had to get cleaned up. Cheer makes me sweaty."

"Yeah, you stink when you come home."

"Hey, that's so rude! I don't talk about your chemical smells."

That has her giggling.

"Ayden? Alysa?" our dad calls to us as if we are upstairs. As we come around the corner, he releases a sigh of relief. "You two are quiet."

We really weren't, but I understand he's nervous. I'm sure fireworks could go off in the backyard and he'd think it was a fart.

A knock at the door makes me suddenly anxious. I suppose it was bound to happen. She's important to him, but so are Alysa and I. Worlds colliding. I'm sure she wants to make as much of an impression on us as we want to make on her, for our dad's sake.

"He said she has a son?" My twin whispers the question into my ear. "Did he say how old?"

I shake my head.

Our dad's shoulders raise as he takes a deep breath, and opens the door, blocking it completely with his frame.

The gentle voice that comes through makes me relax. "Hey, Grant." She sounds so sweet.

He bends down and gives her a hug, and her black hair comes into view. I'm honestly glad not to see long, manicured nails pressing into his back—just natural, with an off-white color that complements her warm, light-brown skin. I've never thought of what a 'type' would be for my dad, but I'm glad it's not some flashy blonde, out for his money.

"Leilani, you didn't need to get dressed up," Dad says, placing a kiss on her cheek before he allows her past.

She lets out a soft *pfft*, waving her hand playfully. The moment she sees us standing here in the hallway, her smile grows.

"You must be the twins." Her bright brown eyes shift between Alysa and I, before she moves slowly toward us. "Hugs or handshakes? I'm good with either of them."

"You must be—" Dad is cut off by my sister's voice right in my ear.

"I love hugs." Alysa meets Leilani halfway and does just that. "It's lovely to meet you finally. Dad talks a *lot* about you."

Her cheeks darken as she pulls away and looks over to me. "Oh, well, hopefully all good things, and I live up to them." I don't hesitate to move to offer a hug as well.

I have to bend just a bit, but not much. She can't be more than five feet, if not just under.

"I'm happy to finally meet you," I say, which has her squeezing me just a bit tighter before letting me go.

"You too, Ayden."

"Ayden?" I recognize the male voice, and it isn't our dad's.

The moment my head lifts and I release Leilani, I internally curse whatever God there may be.

"Oh shit," my sister huffs.

"Alysa Pierce, watch your mouth."

My gaze locks on none other than Keoni. Is the universe serious? I can't even be allowed a daydream about the most beautiful guy at school for longer than a few months?

Maybe he's lost.

Maybe he's—

"This is my son, Keoni. I believe you all go to the same high school now."

I watch his throat bob with a hard swallow. His eyes shift from mine to my sister, before coming back to me.

"Yeah... we've met," he says before clearing his throat. "Alysa and I have PE together... Ayden's a point for the JV cheer team."

I look to his mom and her bright smile shines. "That's amazing! Does that mean you'll be traveling with the team?"

"He's JV, Mom." I can't tell if there is relief in his tone or disappointment. It's not happiness, that's for sure.

My dad comes beside Leilani and wraps his arm over her shoulder. "They usually play the same schools."

"Guess I'm throwing out my diary entries." I'm certain none of them hear my sister, but I jab my elbow into her just to keep her from being obnoxious. "It's good to see you, Keoni!" she says, loud enough the neighbors would hear.

It takes a second, but he smiles while looking at her. "You too..."
He takes a deep breath, his chest expanding as he looks at me.
"Good to see you, too, Ayden."

"You... too."

I practically hear my dad and Leilani laugh or giggle; however you'd classify it.

Cool.

This is all cool. No problem...

Who am I kidding?

This freaking sucks.

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I t's been two weeks, and nothing has changed. Our routine, or lack thereof, remains the same. Well, something has, but not between Keoni and me.

The weather has shifted; fall feeling like it arrived overnight. Temperatures dropped over the course of just a few days and have continued to get cooler.

The tension between my stepbrother and me has basically kept us apart. I no longer try to initiate conversation, and rarely even come downstairs when he's home—which isn't often. He works three days on, four days off, sometimes picking up an extra shift. I know it's his way of avoiding me, and he's been exceptionally good at it.

That girl, Brittany, shows up every Thursday at exactly five in the afternoon. On his other days off, I'm certain he goes out to meet her.

And this cat won't leave me alone. I can't tell if that's a comfort or an irritation. If I'm not the one putting out her food, she won't eat it, and I can tell it frustrates Keo just as much as it does me.

I didn't sign up to take care of a pet. I'm barely capable of taking care of *myself* for fuck sakes.

Speaking of the feline, she jumps from my bed and pads her way down the stairs as the front door opens.

It's Thursday evening, right when he and his *girlfriend* are done with their little walk.

Yes, I've watched them as they've strolled away from the cabin. I'm not sure what I was hoping for. Maybe to see them kiss so that it just solidified my thoughts, but they always stay a decent distance from one another.

She never comes in, that is, until now.

"Ayden?" We haven't talked since the first time we met, so this is surprising.

I suck in a deep breath through my nose and sit up in bed, making my way over to the loft to look down at her. She's wearing a bright smile, and right behind her is Keo. He brushes past her, disappearing under me.

"Do you want to go out tonight?" she asks.

"With you?" It's a genuine question, asked with nothing but curiosity.

"Us. Keoni's co-workers are meeting up at the local bar to watch the game. Broncos versus the Cardinals." She places a hand onto her hip and grins. "Cardinals are going to get their *asses* kicked."

I don't hear him say anything, even if it seems like Brittany is trying to get a rise out of him.

I'm not the biggest football fan, even if I cheered for my high school team for nearly three years—I've seen one too many concussions in my line of work. Saying I'm grateful Keoni didn't actually go play in the NFL would be an understatement. Not that being a firefighter is any less dangerous, but at least he's less likely to break his neck by tackling someone the wrong way.

"So, do you want to come?"

I haven't been out of this cabin except for short walks around it and to bring in the groceries that are delivered. It might not be the worst idea, but is that even what Keo wants? He isn't the one asking.

The part of my brain that wants to socialize screams at my body, fighting against the constant, never-ending gloom.

I release a heavy sigh and nod. "Yeah, I'll come. Give me a minute to get ready."

I'm honestly surprised she jumps up in excitement. Maybe she wants to get to know the rest of Keo's family. It's annoying... but sweet, which fucking sucks.

It takes me no more than ten minutes to brush my hair and teeth, throw on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, and head out the door to find the two of them waiting.

Keoni is angled away from me, and when he glances over his shoulder, he gives me a nod. I'm shrugging on my letterman, trying to fight the cold chill now that the sun has gone down.

His eyes never waver from looking at me.

"Want to drive together?" Brittany asks.

I have no preference, nor should I even have a say considering I don't have any options myself to offer. So, I just keep quiet.

Keo's gaze stays locked on mine, and I'm regretting the jacket already because I'm starting to get hot.

"I'll take Ayden. No need for you to go out of your way to come drop us off when we are done." He rolls up his sweater's sleeves to his elbows. "Plus, your driving scares me."

She gasps in mock horror. "Rude."

I don't wait for him to instruct me, and move over toward his truck.

"But regardless, thank god. I need a drink and don't want to drive these roads with even *one* in my system."

It's like her words were intentional, even though she has no idea what happened. She couldn't—Michael's dad made sure of that.

I nearly stumble, or maybe I do, because a strong hand grabs my upper arm to keep me steady. When I peer up, Keo's brows are pulled together, worry etched across his face.

Before he says anything, and I have an unnecessary anxiety attack, I force a smile. "Sorry. I'm apparently still not used to *not* living in a concrete jungle."

His eyes bore down at my lips, and his nose twitches. Is he... mad?

"Same," Brittany says as she walks past us toward her vehicle. "I had to start putting walking shoes in my car and changing after leaving the office. Thankfully, this is my last appointment of the day, so I don't have to try and slip sweaty feet into high heels."

Appointment?

"Brittany," Keo damn near barks out her name through his teeth, releasing me in the process.

"Anyway..." She hurries her pace. "See you two at the bar." She's at her car in an instant, sliding into the driver's seat and

backing out within seconds.

"I swear..." he grumbles under his breath.

Keo turns from me and heads to the driver's side, and after a moment of taking in a breath that isn't consumed with *him*, I move to the truck and settle into the passenger seat. The moment I'm clicking on the seatbelt, he's got us moving and heading down the dark road.

There's no light except for the headlights until we reach the entrance to Sapphire Valley, and I use the glow to study him. His expression is impassive as he waits for the gate to open.

Once it does, we are heading down the main road that leads into town—a drive of only about ten minutes—I clear my throat.

"So, your girlfriend has to make appointments to see you?"

Real subtle, Ayden. Fuck.

KEONI

"Girlfriend?" I ask incredulously.

Damn that woman. She *knows* I haven't told Ayden about our sessions. It's not that I'm embarrassed to tell him about needing therapy, I just know it will bring up the *why* I've required it. **That** I'm not particularly ready to discuss. Shit, I'm already having a hard time speaking with *her* about it.

I met Britt my first time coming to Maple Falls to visit my mom and Grant—a sweetheart, really—along with her brother who has since moved to New York. We'd sat together in church, hating it as much as the other. That was just to appease my mom. She never met Alysa; that girl would've rather plucked her eyeballs out than sit through a service.

It wasn't exactly ideal that my therapist was someone I knew, but I had no choice really.

At least Brittany is actually good at her job and does house calls. Being stuck in a small office wasn't for me, and she was willing to make the drive to where I felt most comfortable talking.

Still, the fact that we know each other personally makes her bold enough to be sly.

"Brittany. She's your girlfriend, right?"

I grip the steering wheel a bit. "Why do you assume that?"

"Isn't that what she is?"

Him asking follow up questions to mine is irking me. Yet, that little voice in my head reminds me I've been doing the same thing to him. Still, his reluctance to answer me is... frustrating.

"She's not my girlfriend."

My head slightly turns, *just* enough to get a glimpse of him. He actually has his face away from me, and I'm irritated at that. Not that I should be looking for something in his expression... but a guy can hope.

"Then who—"

"No one important," I cut him off. "Do you still hate watching sports?"

After I graduated high school, Ayden cheered for half his junior year and then stopped. I could tell he didn't particularly like it, but stayed for that girl, Ashley? Amber? Jessica? Shit, I don't remember.

Anyway, he enjoyed swimming, so he did that for the rest of high school. He liked watching baseball—until a ball, traveling nearly a hundred miles per hour, was hit back into the pitcher's face. After that, he never joined Grant and me at the games. I know it wasn't squeamishness; I'd watched him dissect a frog, and because he did so well, he even joined my senior class when we dissected a sheep's heart.

He can't stand seeing people get hurt, and understanding he was... is? An ICU nurse, I get his aversion to watching anything where grown men and women willingly put themselves out there for entertainment with the possibility of them being injured.

"Not particularly." He adjusts, turning back and facing forward.

I linger for only a second on him. His side profile is just... fuck me.

Stop. It.

"Then why'd you say yes to coming?"

I turn my gaze forward. God forbid I get us into an accident because I'm staring at my stepbrother.

Former stepbrother. **Former.**

"To get out. I'm sort of restricted since I don't have a car."

"Did you have one in San Francisco?"

As much as I fear getting close to him again, I want to understand him. I need to know why he never came for the

holidays, or why he didn't even try asking Alysa for my number to get in touch.

You could've gone to see him...

There's no excuse, but he was avoiding me for what I did. I couldn't force myself into his life if he didn't want me there...

Could've gotten his number and apologized. You could've tried.

That inner voice of mine drives me crazy. It's the sensible side that knows I messed up and keeps pulling the blame back where it belongs.

Right now, that's how I'm handling everything—not just with Ayden.

"Not anymore," he murmurs.

"I didn't see you as the kind that didn't drive, honestly. You were always so independent."

He clears his throat, and it's like the air around us goes thick. I can't explain it, but it's uncomfortable, especially as he begins to fidget.

"I saw the letter a few weeks ago." Of course he changes the subject. "You were planning to move here before the accident?"

I drop my head against the window behind me, roll my shoulders back, and drum my fingers along the steering wheel. "Yup. Mom was telling me I was working too much and should spend more time with *family*." Yes, there's an edge to my voice. "So, I put in a transfer and was actively looking for an apartment when everything happened."

His swallow is loud, and once again, I'm drawn to look at him. "That would've made them both so happy."

"Yes..." I take a deep breath and watch him force another smile before turning to me. "A little too late."

It's hard to miss the falter in his lips—the slight twitch at the corners before they press firmly together. I'm guessing he catches me staring at them, because he bites the bottom one, and *goddamn it*. My dick should not be jumping in my pants right now.

Please... fuck off with this attraction.

I shift, fixing my gaze forward for the rest of the drive. He doesn't speak, and I'm honestly surprised. He always has something to say, but I understand it's where he's most comfortable. *Not* in silence.

But, to be honest, I'm terrified that if the conversation turns anywhere but positive, I'll snap at him.

I don't want to argue. I don't want to get angry. That isn't me.

The last thing anyone has ever called me is grumpy, yet Brittany has labeled me that more than once in the past two weeks. She's blaming it on my self-imposed abstinence.

I appreciate her honesty, but if she tells me I need to get laid one more time, I'll lose my ever-loving shit. That isn't what I need.

Truth is, I don't even know what I need. An endless sleep? That sounds relaxing, because right now, I'm stuck in this constant state of trying to fill a hollowness that refuses to be filled.

Brittany says it'll take time, but how do I get over this guilt? How do I stop it from swallowing me whole?

I know it's making me unfairly cruel to Ayden. As much as part of me wants him to hurt for staying away until it was too late, I also know I need to give him grace.

It isn't his fault.

It's mine.

And that includes *our* falling out.

And until I can come to terms with that—until I can forgive myself—I'll never be able to offer forgiveness to anyone else.

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We pull up to the bar, the lot crammed with cars. The only open spot is across the street, and I have to wedge the truck in just to make it fit.

Ayden falls in step a few paces from me as we cross the road and power-walk toward the building. “The View House” is sprawled across the front in spray paint, the only real marker of the place besides the neon sign flashing “Bar”. It’s all old brick, no frills.

Inside, the place is alive, noise and movement crashing all at once. Standard tap house vibes; random movie posters, license plates bolted to the walls, a dozen TVs broadcasting the game. The crush of people is immediate. Bodies shoulder to shoulder.

Ayden ends up pressed against my side as we fight our way in. My eyes sweep the crowd until I spot Corey waving. Without thinking, my hand goes to the small of Ayden’s back, guiding him with me through the throng. He stiffens like he wants to resist, but I don’t let go. It’s just to cut through the mob, nothing more. He’s likely never been here, and you know, I don’t want... something happening.

Excuses. I know it, but whatever, I won’t bother to dig too deep into it.

We break free of the worst of the crowd gathered around the bar, all eyes glued to the opening kick.

Taylor spots me and shrieks, grinning wide. "Fuck yes! You came! We thought Britt was a filthy little liar."

At the table, Brittany is already seated, gaping at Taylor.

Corey drapes his arm over the bench seat and shifts from looking at me, to Ayden. "Didn't know you were bringing a friend. The more the merrier to watch the absolute hurt on your face when the Cardinals get destroyed."

"It's honestly hilarious you all think I'm a fan of them *just* because I lived there."

It isn't until Ayden shifts slightly that I realize my hand is still resting on his lower back. Heat prickles at my neck as I pull away, quick and casual, like it was nothing.

I clear my throat and gesture toward the table, introducing everyone, and then him to them.

"How do you know Keoni?" Kali asks as Ayden slips in beside Taylor, and I shift to take the spot next to Corey. There isn't enough room on that side anyway, and probably for the best. If I'm going to drink tonight, better not do it within arm's reach of him.

He looks up at me. "Um... I'm his—"

"Friend," I cut him off, before sending warning signals straight to Brittany. "I met him in high school."

Technically, *technically*—**technically**—we are no longer stepbrothers, so I shouldn't introduce him as such.

Not that it matters.

"Are you also from Arizona?" Kali continues.

My therapist friend gives me a probing look, but she can drown in her curiosity. I've no doubt she'll tuck it away for next week to discuss why I didn't introduce him as my stepbrother.

"Ah, I love San Francisco," Taylor coos. "I want to go back. Nothing compares to their clam chowder bread bowls."

"Have you never been to New England?" Corey slings his other arm across the back of the bench, not touching me, just letting it hang there. "*That's* pure perfection clam chowder."

"I've had both," Ayden says, and I catch his eyes zeroing in on something to my left. I peek over to see what it could be, and see Corey's hand. "I'd vote for the Bay's being better."

That has the redhead bellowing out a "HAH," causing the rest of the table to erupt into laughter.

We all fall into easy conversation, Corey and I splitting our attention between the game and each other's commentary. Brittany and Taylor chime in every so often, though they're clearly more interested in their own side chat.

I can't help but notice after a few rounds of beers for us, Ayden has simply stuck with water.

Taylor and Britt ask if he wanted something else, but he simply shook his head.

They don't pressure him further, but it does have me curious. Alysa mentioned he loved college parties and was one hell of a shot when it came to beer pong, even when completely wasted.

He's only twenty-seven, hardly old enough to swear off everything entirely, so I can't help but wonder. Maybe I'm overthinking it. Maybe he just doesn't want to embarrass himself the first time out with me and my friends, trying to make a good impression. Not that he needs to.

Ayden is easy to love being around.

Fucking hell, the beers are getting to my head.

By the time the game pushes into the fourth quarter, I've got a solid buzz going. Maybe it was smart he didn't drink—looks like I'm going to need him to drive us home. It's possible that's the reason he stuck to water all night. Always the smarter one between us.

I grin directly across the table at Brittany, who is slowly turning away from the TV.

"What was that about the Broncos, Britt?"

The score is thirteen to fifty-two with less than seven minutes left in the game. Cardinals winning.

"You biggity-bitch, don't look at me like that."

"Don't make me report you for your language, missy." I chuckle through my toothy grin.

"You cheated."

That has me tossing my head back with my mirth.

The sudden shift of the table has me looking around to see Ayden getting up out of the booth.

"Where are you going?"

He wets his lips. "Bathroom."

I press my hands to the table and stand, raising my hands up to stretch my back out.

"Oh. You don't have to come with me."

My brow pops. "I don't need to go, but I'm going to close out the tab."

"Oh, duh, right." He clears his throat, and it's now I look down at him fumbling around with his phone in hand.

"I'll show you where it's at, though. May as well."

"Thanks..."

"No problem."

After walking him to the bathroom—which, surprisingly, had no line despite the swarm of guys packed in here—I head back to the bar. I settle the tab and grab a water for the road. Not that Ayden really needs it, but I pick one up for him as well.

"You're lucky," Kali says through a hiccup. "You've got a DD. I'm gonna have to take an Uber."

"I can drop you off," Corey says as he slips from the booth. "I'm fine, and you're along the way. I definitely didn't have as much as you guys."

"Zero tolerance!" Brittany shouts over the screaming patrons. "Take an Uber. Do the ride share, all of you."

"Yes, mom. Who are you again?" The redhead gives her a catlike smirk.

"Don't give me that, Taylor. I've held your hair over your head before you were legal to hold a bottle of liquor to your lips!"

A soft chuckle flows from my lips before I take a sip of my water.

I catch Ayden out of the corner of my eye as he makes his way back toward us. He looks drained, and concern punches through me before I can stop it. I close the gap in a few quick steps, not caring if anyone overhears.

"What's wrong?"

His shoulders jerk, eyes going wide. "What?"

"You look..." I hesitate, not wanting to sound like an ass. It's barely been five minutes and it's as though he just stepped through a hurricane. "Disheveled. Did something happen in the bathroom?"

He shakes his head. "No... Are you ready to go?"

I don't need to have some weird sense to tell he's lying. Or, maybe he isn't and it's the liquor that's making me overthink just simply being tired.

After a second of a silent standoff between us, I turn and shout, "See you guys."

"Bye, Keoni! Byeeee, Aydennn!"

"See ya."

"Text us when you're home."

"Ayden, come back out with Keoni!"

When I look back at him, he's already making his way out of the bar. Something *had* to have happened.

A little wobbly, I follow him out. The game's still on inside, though people are already filtering out—it's a blowout, no suspense in who will win.

The cool night slaps my face, sobering me faster than I'd like to admit. I tug the tie from my bun and shake my hair out, only then realizing how much I'd been sweating. When I throw it back up, the cold air bites at the nape of my neck, sharp enough to make me shiver.

"Come on, the Uber is here."

Ayden? Is he talking to me?

I look to my right to see him standing beside a car, and I cock an eyebrow. Sure as shit, he opens the back door, and gestures for me to get in.

With a laugh that's far from humorous, I scoff. "Oh man, Sun—" I shake my head at him but also myself because the fact I nearly called him that is *stupid*. "You can drive my truck. We don't need this." I gesture toward the damn Prius idling beside him.

His throat bobs. "I've never driven it, and it's *really* dark. I don't want to accidentally hit something. It's fine, I'll pay for it."

"I'm not concerned about that." I'm honestly not even concerned about the truck. I'm more confused than anything. "I think you're lying. Just like that smile you keep giving me and everyone else. It's a lie. It's fucking weird. What's going on?"

He takes an unsteady breath and looks down at the inside of the vehicle. The driver doesn't say anything, which I guess I appreciate because I don't really want to get pissy with someone else.

When his hazel eyes return to mine, he *once again* plasters on a fake-ass smile.

"Nothing is going on. I'm serious, Keo." *Keo...* My goddamn heart. "I'll call the bar when we get home and let them know your truck has to stay overnight. It'll be fine. I'd feel terrible if I crashed it..."

I know this isn't real, this façade he's putting on. I should know because I watched him for two years straight, nearly every single

day. Something happened in the bathroom, and the fact he just won't tell me, actually pisses me off.

What have you done to let him in, for him to tell you shit?

"Don't worry, I'll get you an Uber back tomorrow, and—"

"Shut up," I grit out before pushing past him to the passenger side. "I don't give a fuck about the truck, Ayden."

Circling to the opposite side of the car, I open the back door, slip in, and slam it closed. I thrust my seatbelt on and rest my head against the top of the headrest.

It takes a few seconds, but he finally slides in. Only after the door closes, I shut everything out and disappear into that dark room with no windows or doors.

I'm done.

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Michael

Are you just going to ignore me now?

I don't understand what the fuck your problem is.

After all these years, you're going to ghost me?!

Ayden, I swear to god if you don't fucking respond to me.

I'd silenced my phone when we got to the bar, because I just wanted to focus on the present. I knew it was stupid to look at it while there.

Fucking idiot, Ayden.

Michael, I'm out right now. I'll text you later.

I shouldn't have texted him back in the bathroom. I should have left it alone until I got home because he immediately called me... and I ignored it.

Ignored him...

I'd quickly ordered the Uber from the bathroom and turned my phone off with shaky hands.

I know ignoring him like that is going to hurt me in the future. Still, the fear of not being able to hide whatever happened on that

call outweighed the consequences of ignoring him.

Didn't matter. Keoni may as well have physically punched me before we got into the Uber. I would've preferred it—at least bruises fade. Ice works on swelling. But the kind of blow he dealt me? It cracked something inside that can't be patched with bandages.

My mind feels shattered, and no amount of glue will ever make it whole again. I hope I'll be able to salvage the cracks into something worth keeping—or risk falling further into the hollow black hole I've carved for myself.

When the car rolls to a stop at the cabin, Keoni's out before I can even open my door, and storming into Wildhart without so much as a glance back. I don't follow. Instead, I veer left, walk straight to the lakeshore, and stop with my back to the water. For half a second, I wish something down there would reach up, drag me under, and replace this constant suffocating drama with a different kind of silence.

My hand trembles as I look down at the phone clenched in my palm.

Go inside. Deal with it in the morning.

I want to trust my inner voice, but it hasn't led me anywhere good in the last eight years.

Turning on the device, I wait for service to show me how many texts he fired at me. But... I'm met with nothing. No new messages.

This silence terrifies me more than anything else could.

I open the phone app, tap Michael's number, and hit dial.

My heart summersaults with every... single... ring.

On and on. No answer.

A chill rips through me, and it has nothing to do with the cold night air.

When the line finally clicks to voicemail, it's like a dam breaks—every conversation we've ever had comes rushing back at once, crashing over me in jagged, merciless waves.

Every **single** word.

"You bring this on yourself, Ayden."

"If you'd just fucking listen, it wouldn't have to be this way."

"Sometimes I wonder if you enjoy being talked to like this. Do you enjoy being degraded? It seems to be the only way you'll hear me. Some sorta kink with you?"

"Fucking useless!"

The beep echoes slowly in my ear.

"H-Hey... I... didn't mean to not answer. I-I'm sorry. Call me back?" I swallow, and I could swear my vision blurs. "I'm sorry. I'm not ignoring you. I... I'm not."

The phone auto-hangs after I let silence eat up the voicemail. I peel it from my face, stare at the screen, and hit dial again.

And again.

And again.

Each time, the same end. Voicemail.

By the fourth attempt, I can't breathe. My chest is hollow and heavy all at once, panic clawing its way inside me.

My knees slam into the damp ground. The cold bites through denim—sharper, crueler. I fold forward, clutching my shirt desperately, as if I can drag the air back into my lungs with my fists.

Stupid.

So *fucking* stupid.

I should've answered at the bar.

He's in California. He can't come here.

He won't. He doesn't know where I'm at.

He can look into county records. He's a cop, his dad's the chief. He's got connections.

The moment black dots scatter across my vision, a soft meow yanks me from the crater I've fallen into. Clover is padding toward me until she's curled across my thighs. The weight of her body forces me upright, and just like that, oxygen floods in. My lungs remembering how to work.

She all but hisses at me until I draw a shaky hand down her back. With each pass, the terror ebbs like it was never there, replaced by the low rumble of her purr.

Eyes shut, chin tucked, I let the night fill me instead; the push of water against shore, Clover's steady purring, and the faint thud of a screen door.

My chest jolts—Keo?

There are no accompanying footsteps that follow. I don't look. I don't want proof that no one's coming.

That *he's* not coming to help me.

I don't know how long I sit here, ten minutes or twenty, but when I stand with Clover in my arms, my heart is still caught in my throat.

If someone told me this cat was made of magic, I wouldn't even question it. Though, I do wonder how she even got out. Had she pushed the screen door open? Maybe Keo left the door open. That seems dangerous, considering I could swear she's a housecat.

When I step into the cabin, the living room is empty, but I can see the bathroom light glowing from down the hall toward Keo's room.

For a moment, I imagine telling him everything—that I never came because of Michael, that I've been chained in a place I've wanted to escape for years.

The fantasy I play in my head is that Keo is furious for me; books a flight to California to beat the shit out of my ex.

But in reality? I fear he'd just tell me to grow a backbone.

And maybe he's right. Because even free, I feel locked inside—no doors, no windows, no way out. I keep circling back, like the walls follow me wherever I go.

Mike should've just let me go to jail. He's basically built me one, threw me in it, and tossed away the key.



The groan that escapes my throat feels raw.

I clear it, but the clogging ache lingers. Something heavy and warm presses against my head, and it takes me a beat to realize it's Clover. She's turned me into her personal pillow.

Just as I've turned the couch into a bed.

The fireplace comes into focus, flames dancing beneath the TV hung above. The blaze surprises me almost as much as the blanket draped over my chest. Outside, the early morning light seeps weakly through the window. It's too early for how bone-deep tired I feel.

I shift just enough to tug the blanket up toward my chin. Clover doesn't move, and that's fine. I've got no plans to either.

I don't even remember closing my eyes last night, let alone lying down. I feel like I'm coming down from a hangover, even if I hadn't drank.

Another groan flows through my slightly parted lips. My body feels like I've been wrung out and hung to dry.

"Coffee?"

My eyes snap open at the husky voice. It takes everything in me not to jolt upright and send Clover flying. I move carefully instead, giving her time to leap down before I push myself up.

I spot Keo standing in the kitchen to my left. He's holding the pot of coffee—which smells phenomenal—and in his other, my mug. The chipped white ceramic with the crooked black letters: *Right Turn*.

It's silly, really, but I've been using the same one since I moved in. Dad had given Alysa and me the pair as a joke for our eighteenth birthday — '*Now that you'll be losing sleep, you'll need it,*' he'd said.

Hers says '*Left Turn*' and sits in the cupboard. I make an effort to put them beside each other when putting away the dishes.

Seeing mine in Keo's hand now feels oddly satisfying. There are at least seven other mugs, but he knew to grab that one.

"Did you hear me?"

"Yes," I quickly say. "Yes, please."

His chest expands on his intake of air. "No need to be so polite, jeez."

He pours the coffee into the cup before placing the pot back into its machine. After adding milk and sugar, he walks around the dining room table and into the living room.

He's wearing plaid pajama pants with a loose white T-shirt, and before I start checking him out, I take the mug he has outstretched to me.

"Thanks," I murmur, eyes on the cup. The color is perfect, just how I like it, and the aroma promises it's been sweetened just right.

"Mhmm."

I expect him to walk away, back into the kitchen or to his room to get ready for his morning jog. Except he doesn't—he sits on the sofa beside me.

He stays a foot or so away so we aren't touching, leans back, and drapes his left arm—the one furthest from me—over the back of the couch. His gaze stays fixed on the fireplace, and before he can catch me staring at him, I shift my eyes forward.

I don't say anything, just sip the warm beverage. It settles a heat in my chest that makes me sigh.

"Remember when Alysa got her SAT results?" Honestly, I'm shocked he's even talking to me. I slowly turn my head, eyes widening, as he continues, stoic and unreadable, "I think it was like, what, 1415?"

"1420," I correct softly. "Do you remember how she reacted?"

The corner of his mouth quirks upward, and oh my god—how had I forgotten how handsome his smile was? "It was like the end of the world."

A huff of a laugh escapes me. "Pretty sure she cried for a full twenty-four hours."

He looks at me, eyes flicking to my lips. The low hum he lets out before meeting my gaze sends a tight, warming sensation right to my stomach.

"It's sorta your dad's fault for allowing her to do it at sixteen, even if her score was incredible."

I nod, and take another drink of coffee. "She retook it, and got a worse score."

"Yeah, she told me one Christmas..." He trails off with a sigh, and of course I had to say the wrong thing. I part my lips to apologize, but he keeps going before I can, "What, 1400?"

The grip around my heart loosens, and I clear my throat. "1395."

Both corners of his mouth lift, revealing those perfect white teeth in full. "*Oh nooo.*"

I chuckle, and set the mug down between my thighs, staring down into it. "Yeah. Totally the end of the world."

Silence falls over us, but for the first time since coming back into each other's lives, it isn't awkward or forced. It's calm, steady, and oddly comforting. If this is how we were to spend our time together in the cabin, not ignoring each other's existence, I feel like I'd be okay with that.

Even if I'd take more... So much more.

The sound of Clover crunching her dry food might have ruined the moment, if not for Keo's quiet sigh.

"Thirty days, Ayden." Before fear, pain, and my overactive mind can race to the worst possible scenario, like I need to leave within that time, he continues, "I want you to find it in you to tell me why you never came here. I feel like thirty days is a good amount of time."

I turn back to him, and he has his eyes fixated on me. It has me licking my lips, drawing his attention to them. "I'll give you the time to trust me again."

"I-It's not that." My stomach ties into painful knots. "It's not you—"

He raises his hand and shakes his head. "It doesn't matter what it is." His sigh is filled with so many unspoken words. "I'm angry at you, but I don't want to be. This isn't how I want *us* to be... I can see you're struggling. You can't tell me what's going on with you, but you want to..."

I nod my head slowly. It's so minuscule, I'm surprised he can see it.

"Alright then." He releases a long breath. "I'm sorry for reacting like I did last night. It's why I'm in therapy." *That* shocks the hell out of me. "I'm working on it."

I want to ask why the sudden shift in his attitude toward me. He'd gone from completely ignoring me, completely shutting me out... to this? Making me coffee, laughing with me, to even telling me he's in therapy.

Then I think about last night—Clover being out. Had he actually seen me?

Embarrassment crashes over me, sudden and sharp, and because of it, I don't want confirmation that's the case.

To be honest, it doesn't matter the *why*. I'll take this change.

Because he's right, I want to tell him, but I'm just not ready. If he were the same Keo before my graduation party, I'd not hesitate to tell him what happened, but I fear what he'll do.

I want to see *my* Keo, even if I don't yet deserve that. To feel safe again with him... Because when I tell him the reason why I never came, the reason why I never saw him after that night, or lacked the ability to see our parents more than just a few times in the span of eight years, I need to know he won't just drop off the face of the Earth—*again*.

It's too late to have any relationship with my dad, or Leilani, but I don't want it to be with Keoni. Whether we stay as we are now, friends, or something more.

"What happens if I can't tell you within thirty days?" I ask, genuinely curious. Will he actually kick me out?

His deep chuckle accompanies him standing. “You’ll see. Part of me hopes you don’t so I can show you.”

A sudden rush of heat rises from my neck straight to my face. “What?”

“Going for my run. Don’t forget to eat.” He laughs. That deep, timbered mirth fading with him as he leaves, and for the first time in years, a weight presses down on me—in all the right ways. I don’t feel like I’m about to drift into space, but instead, am anchored to the ground. And it’s exactly where I want to stay.

Thirty days. I can do that... I *want* to do it.

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Age 14

I t's been four weeks since we found out that the woman our dad is dating is Keoni's mom. That same night, they told us he had proposed to her. While I was hurt, for a moment, that he hadn't asked Alysa and me for our blessing, I got over it quickly enough.

My sister went into crisis mode with her best friend, but now that she's come to terms with Keoni being *off the market*, she's far too excited about the idea of having a stepbrother.

Dad is so happy—and he absolutely deserves to be.

I think I'm more conflicted about the fact that today is move-in day for both of them. Leilani had been in the process of selling her townhouse here in Denver and renting out her apartment in Boulder. Moving into our home made the most sense. We have a spare room for Keoni, and far more space according to Dad.

After school, Alysa and I came home to a moving van and the white SUV that belongs to our soon-to-be stepmom. It all feels so fast, but for them, it's been over a year in the making.

I couldn't be happier for the two of them—even if part of me is sad that I can't explore whatever feelings I was having about Keoni.

Am having.

It's a strange ache in my chest knowing whatever could have happened, can't now.

Watching my soon-to-be-stepbrother jump down from the back of the truck with a box as wide as his shoulders, the fabric of his shirt straining across his defined back, has me swallowing down my self-pity.

The draw I have to him only solidified my earlier feelings on my sexuality. That I was into both boys and girls.

I confessed to Alysa a few weeks ago I felt attracted to both, and she quite literally said, "*Oh, I already knew that.*" As if it were so freaking obvious.

"Something caught your eye, Ayden?" Keoni asks with a deep chuckle.

I suck in a sharp breath that immediately turns into a coughing fit. Doubling over, I practically hack up an invisible ball of shame for being caught staring.

Feet approach and stop just inches from my own. Lifting my chin, I find Keoni, a gentle smile on his face. At least, I think that's what I'd call it. It's soft, almost out of place on someone who looks as big and powerful as he does. I don't think I've ever seen it anywhere but now.

At games or practice, his expression is either stoic or edged with that cocky grin that always seems to lace his lips.

"Need some water, righty?"

A loud *smack* lands square on my back, sending me stumbling forward with a yelp. Pain shoots through me, and before I can catch myself, I slam straight into Keoni. Our chests press together like we're hugging—though we definitely aren't.

He's at least four or five inches taller, maybe more, and I tip my head back to meet his gaze.

Before I can even process whatever's happening in our stare-down, Alysa leaps onto my back, forcing me even closer to him.

"Do you need help, Keoni?"

He smells so good...

Before I can make a fool of myself and say something like that inner thought out loud, I take a step back and thrust my sister off. She's graceful, landing on her feet and doing a twirl.

"I've got it. Plus, your dad paid for the movers."

"Ah, you'll be soon saying *our* dad."

I'm not sure how I keep the groan from slipping past my lips, but I do. *This is great... so great...*

Keoni hums. "Yeah, true. That'll take some getting used to."

Suddenly, a hand brushes through my hair. When I realize it's him fixing the mess Alysa made from her attack, I instinctively hold my breath.

"Coming to the game Saturday?" There's a Varsity only game against a junior college here in Denver. The JV team was offered to go watch, but the cheer team wasn't.

Now, I guess I could go as a friend... or family...

"I've got a big test on Tuesday," I groan. "I don't know why I tested into AP math."

"I'll help."

"I'll help!" Alysa says simultaneously with Keoni, but hers is extremely aggressive. "We should go!"

"Kids! Come on, you're in the way of the movers!" our dad says from inside the house.

I take a step away from him and smile. "Alright, well, if you two promise to help me study, I'm in."

"You got it."

My twin wraps one arm around him and I and lifts herself up. "Onward, brothers! We can show you to your new room."

I release a sigh and look past her to Keoni. The smile he holds on his face slips into a sad one with the curve of his thick eyebrows.

"Yeah... sounds good." His sad tone is how my heart feels.

Jeez. Why does this hurt *so* much?



AGE 14

"So, how's it feel to be God's favorite?" I can tell in Amber's tone she's agitated, but it isn't like *we* chose this.

I can promise I sure as heck didn't.

It barely took a week before rumors started to spread. The front of our school is where most people got dropped off, and suddenly, Alysa, Keoni, and I were showing up together. Real subtle.

"Wouldn't that make me, like, the devil's favorite? Forbidden fruit, *Amber*," my twin says through a frustrated groan. "I can't flirt with my soon to be stepbrother. It's freaking torture."

Mandy leans against my shoulder, staying quiet. She doesn't have interest in Keoni—or at least, not as much as she has in me. It's Amber who's been nonstop annoying about the whole thing. I think even the football team is sick of her; I've overheard a few complaints.

Crossing my legs, I lean forward to pack away my notes and textbooks. JV practice ended about thirty minutes ago and I'm exhausted. Not from that *exactly*—I've just been doing too much lately. My own practice and games, then staying late to watch the Varsity team, *for obvious reasons*. Both their practices and games, it's all starting to catch up to me.

But it isn't just physical exhaustion. There's this strange, emotional tiredness I'm not used to. It's hard to explain—as though I'm not being myself or maybe like I'm constantly pushing my feelings down. It's draining.

The sound of shuffling pulls me out of my head. When I look up, a group of JV players are breaking apart, their quarterback slamming a ball between his hands.

"Have you seen him naked?"

"Amber!! That is so wildly inappropriate!" I don't know who shouts at her, but it isn't Alysa or Mandy.

"What I wouldn't give—"

"Enough, you're being disgusting." Now *that's* my sister. "Keep that stuff locked in your head. Don't disrespect him like that..."

I narrow my gaze up at Jason, said quarterback. He's popping his head back and forth, eyes trained right at Amber. As they shout at one another, he aims the football *right* at the back of her head.

I really should just let it hit her. She deserves it.

But stupidly, I shout, "Get down!"

I'm just shifting to my knee when she does exactly as I say. The ball slams into the track turf in the middle of our circle. It hits tip-first and ricochets straight into my face.

At least, I think it does. The throbbing pulse in my nose and left eye tells me that's the case.

Noise *erupts*. From shouting to the shuffling around me, too many hands grabbing at me. I drag in a sharp breath, tasting asphalt and rubber from the track below.

"Get away from him!" Keoni's voice breaks through all the chaos.

"Ouch," I hiss through clenched teeth as I start to shift onto my elbow, finally getting some relief from the crowd pressing in on me.

"You're lucky, Jason." Keo's voice is getting closer, but no less angry.

"Watch it, Keoni! It was a fucking accident!"

"Yeah, and so will me breaking your arm."

The sound of a loud whistle blares and I suck in a sharp breath.

"Enough!" I'm certain that was the Varsity coach.

The taste of iron on my lips makes me shut my mouth, but it's too late, I've already tasted blood.

A strong, firm grip at the back of my head helps me sit up. My left eye struggles to open, but I can clearly see Keoni kneeling in front of me, Alysa to my right.

"Holy shit!" she screams before turning around. "What the hell, Jason?! You ASSHOLE!"

"I said it was an accident!!"

"I'm alright." I struggle through the obvious lie. I'm starting to feel a little dizzy.

"I wasn't aiming for him, I swear! I was trying to hit Amber!"

"And that makes it any better?!"

Everything just silences when Keoni pulls off his shirt, bunching it up into a ball, and places it over my nose. "Put your head back, Ayden."

I'm upset that I can't smell right now. I'd be lying if I said I didn't wish I could get even the hint of his bodywash. It's like coconut butter on a rainy day.

Doing as he says, I tilt my chin to the sky just as he helps me up. His arm wraps around my back, sliding under my arm, and he hoists me to my feet. I'm glad he doesn't try to carry me—I'm fully capable of walking.

But I'm not mad that he doesn't let me go. I drape my arm over his neck, keeping my head tilted back, yet from the corner of my eye, I glance at him.

"I'll take you to the nurse." He pulls me closer before shooting a look I can only describe as hateful over our shoulders. I don't know who it's directed toward, but if I had to venture a guess, it's probably Jason.

We walk quickly, though I can feel him easing the weight from my steps, which I suppose I appreciate. I don't feel faint, but since he hasn't asked, I'm not going to share that piece of information.

Selfishly, I like it right here. Leaned against him with his arm around me, his other holding his shirt against my face.

Instead of leading me to the school nurse's station, he guides me through the locker room to the sports doctor's office. At the sharp right, he pushes the door open.

"Oh crap, Keoni. Is that Ayden?" Dr. Johnson says. The sound of a clipboard being placed down on wood is accompanied by rushing feet. "What happened?"

"He got knocked with a football. His nose may be broken."

"*Naah*," I say, though the word fumbles out without much confidence.

I'm moved to sit, and as Keoni takes the back of my head, he slowly removes his shirt. It tugs slightly at my skin, and I bite back a groan.

Dr. Johnson leans forward toward my face, and that has Keoni stepping aside. "Looks like it got you in the eye too. That was a hard throw. Was it direct?"

"No, but Jason wasn't far, and it looked like he threw it at full power. Saw the entire thing, and I'll be making sure his coach knows exactly what happened."

My heart skyrockets at the irritation in his tone.

Johnson walks away as Keoni steps out of view. I want to ask him to stay, but I'm not about to voice that. It would sound too weird to ask him not to leave. Maybe even needy?

Hah... *ugh*...

A body suddenly reappears in front of me, causing me to jump on the soft cushion under me. "I said, head back," Keo murmurs. "It'll help stop the bleeding quicker." As he steps between my spread legs, his hand comes under my chin, and with a wet cloth starts cleaning off my lips.

"That could get him in trouble, maybe even suspended," Johnson says from somewhere else in the room. "Big game this weekend, that

could—”

“I don’t care.” He rises to his full height, and I keep my eyes locked on his amber ones. “I’m reporting it.”

When he takes the cool cloth away, he folds it in one hand while keeping my chin firm in his grip. Then he presses it gently against my nose, leans to the side, and grabs my wrist, guiding my hand up to hold it in place.

“Thanks...”

He offers a sad smile.

I don’t understand at first, that is, until he says, “What’re brothers for?”

Brothers...

Is it possible for a heart to break but still beat?

OceanofPDF.com



“Friend, huh?”

I don’t need to take this shit from her. She has to know that. I’m paying for her services—or technically, my job benefits are. Still, it’s the same thing.

“How does this help me?” I ask, tucking my hands into my cargo pants.

“Oh, come *on*, before we get started. It was very deliberate.”

I groan, the sound loud in the quiet forest around us.

Britt and I are walking north of Wildhart, heading toward Starlight, like we normally do on Thursdays. Therapy like this helps. I know I need these sessions, because every week the hollowness in me feels smaller and smaller.

Though, I could argue it’s Ayden doing that for me.

It’s been a week since that night at the bar, seeing his breakdown. Clover had been scratching at the door the second I closed it behind me. Her reaction wasn’t unfamiliar; she had been my mom’s therapy pet.

Cats aren’t usually considered sensory animals, but Clover’s previous owner suffered seizures, and she could sense them before they happened. When that owner passed, Clover was nearly sent to the humane society for euthanization, until my stepdad got the call. She ended up being the perfect gift for my mom, who struggled with

dangerously low blood pressure. It seems fate was on both of their sides, because the cat could sense that too.

So when Clover scratched and yowled at the door, I knew something was wrong.

I don't know what triggered his attack, but if I had to guess, it was me. The urge to go to him was almost unbearable, but I feared I would only make it worse. Clover was able to get him settled, and I took my ass into the bathroom to get cleaned up.

Blowing up on him as I did, acting like that, I wanted to blame the alcohol but that would be ignorant of me. It wasn't just that. It was everything that's built up since losing my mom. No matter what I do, it never seems to end.

The last thing I want is to hurt Ayden, even if I'm still so angry with him.

"Earth to Keoniiii."

"Legally, *Britt*, he no longer is my stepbrother. I hadn't lied. He is a friend."

"Uh... huh..." I watch as she tucks her hands into her sweater pocket and gives me a sheepish grin. "I've known you for several years, and I was watching you all night back at the bar. Don't lie to me."

"I'm not lying to you. That would be stupid considering you have some weird superpower to tell when people are being untruthful."

Her grin turns toothy. "Exactly, and you're lying."

"He's a friend. One I'm still very upset with."

"Okay, okay, let's segue." She steps back, hurries ahead a few paces, then turns to face me. "Do you think the animosity you feel toward him has amplified your inability to talk about what happened? You said in our last session his fake smiling was pissing you off, and said he won't tell you about anything, and that—"

"I thought we were moving on from the Ayden topic."

She shrugs her shoulders. "I'm certain there is some sort of connection here. Not between you two, since, you know... you're so adamant about there not being anything going on..."

We cut a little to the right to get on the road. I don't say anything, which has her aggressively groaning.

"Fine. Where did we leave off last week?"

"The transfer."

"Right, so, you were excited about it? To come move to Maple Falls."

I nod. "Surprisingly, yeah."

"You weren't upset about leaving the job, your friends, and... no significant other?"

Shaking my head, I sigh somberly. "I would obviously miss them, but it felt right to move here. I've never shied away from listening to my gut..." I slow my pace and suck in a deep breath. "Until I didn't."

Guilt is a power inhibitor. It's a punch right in the center of my chest and makes it feel as though someone tore out everything that should keep me alive—and yet, I still... live.

It's a hollow ache. I imagine it's what floating in space feels like without a tether to keep you from drifting away.

For a moment, I get lost as I stare ahead.

Had I made a different decision that night, they'd still be here.

"Keoni."

Britt's hand feels like fire against my bare arm, and I instinctively step away from her.

When I look at her, there's no sympathy in her green eyes. I see the understanding, and she's bypassing the fact whatever just happened to me hurt, but instead, sees me attempting to come to terms with it.

It's alright to hurt. That was what she first told me. I'd taken the hardest step, one that most can't do, which wasn't to jump and get the help I needed.

I won't let myself climb back onto that cliff. I won't stare into the void and lose myself to the permanent darkness waiting below.

"It was the best decision to be closer to her," I say, clearing my throat. "And yes, even to my stepdad."

"Alright then, so you sent them a letter just before they went on vacation."

I'm grateful she moves on. "Yeah, figured what better way to end a trip with great news. I knew that my mom would be ecstatic."

"She would've been. Honestly, she probably is seeing you here now."

Although I've not stepped foot into church to praise a God, I do believe in some form of higher being. I do know there's something

beyond this life, what that is, I've got no clue. All I can hope for is that she's at peace and happy with Grant.

She'd be disappointed in me for how I've treated Ayden, and for blaming myself for what happened. So, I hope she doesn't see me as I am right now.

A hui hou, Mother.

I close her car door as our session comes to an end. She asked us to come out again, but I told her no. I'm picking up a shift. The sudden temperature change has caused a lot of people to get sick, including two firefighters from another squad. I'll be going in tomorrow morning for two days with one day off before my own shift starts.

Stepping up to the cabin, I release a heavy breath, and go inside, the smell of stew hitting me almost immediately.

"You are the worst sous chef."

Clover meows loudly while sitting on the dining room table. Although she has full reign of the house, I don't like cat hair in my food. I wish he'd have more authority over the feline.

I take off my shoes, careful to stay quiet over the music blasting from his phone so he doesn't hear me.

"You can't use those claws of yours to cut up the carrots, but you sure as hell can to destroy my shirt."

Taking a silent breath to not start laughing, I lean off to the side and watch.

It's warm inside, so he's wearing thin sleep pants that hang just below his hips. One side of his shirt is tucked in, the other lazily draped out. His hair is frizzy, which is only like this after a shower, when he doesn't blow-dry it.

I really like this look. It reminds me of him—not the polished, put-together Ayden everyone else sees, but the real him.

The way I looked at him when we were no longer strangers, but family, would have my mother spinning in her grave. Even now, imagining him like this. Like what he would look like *without* his clothes on. Or under me...

Grant would've likely killed me for thinking about his son like I am.

I suck in a breath and shake my head.

It's why, even when I figure out how to forgive both of us, he'll just be my friend. I can't disrespect our parents—or *him*—like that. Regardless of how desperately I want to feel his lips on mine again.

Clover meows loudly, drawing Ayden's attention. He points a wooden spoon at her, then must catch me in the corner of his eye because he whirls around, wets his lips, and clears his throat.

"Thanks to whatever god is watching out for me I wasn't in full karaoke mode." His face is slightly flushed, and I can't tell if it's from the heat of the room or if he's blushing.

Either way, I like it.

I chuckle and stroll through the living room toward the kitchen. "It's not like I haven't heard your singing before."

"When I was a kid. I'm a full-blown adult now, Keo." He rolls his head back and turns away from me.

The cat meows and jumps down, crossing the space to rub against my ankles.

I pull out a dining table chair and slouch into it, letting Clover jump into my lap. My elbow rests on the table, my chin pressing into my palm. The urge to say, "*I'm sure it's just as pleasant as it was back then,*" pricks at me. But I force out instead, "Is that Grant's stew?"

"Yeah," he says while turning back to the stove. "There was a homemade cookbook, and I don't mind cooking—I kinda love it." He pauses for a moment, then lets out a soft laugh. "Just not baking. For some reason, I cannot make a cake to save my life."

"I can't do much of anything in the kitchen other than clean..." He looks over his shoulder while idly stirring the liquid in the pot. "The cookbook is Mom's."

"I could tell by the writing. Dad always had terrible handwriting."

"Alysa got that trait from him," I jest.

"Yeah, she sure did. She had me writing a lot of her handwritten reports in high school." He drags the back of his forearm across his forehead. "Is it hot in here?"

Truthfully, it's warm, but not unbearable. It's likely because he's standing over a hot stove.

Definitely just you...

"I'm good."

"Mind if I open the window?"

"Go for it."

He cracks the one right above the stove, and I watch as his shirt drags up, exposing his lower back. The divots that taper in and point toward his boxers has me taking a meaningful breath through my nose. Before he stands straight, he leans further forward, putting his face out into the brisk evening air. It showcases just a bit more of his skin for me, and it's now I see a scar, or, at least I think it is. He's standing back upright before I have a chance to inspect it further.

"That's better," he says before stepping to the side and grabbing two bowls from the cupboard. "Hungry-hungry? Or just hungry?"

"Fucking starved."

He nods and gets our food prepared, before setting it down and joining me. The moment I'm going for a bite, I realize that there's something missing.

Oh, that's right, he's vegetarian.

I don't make a fuss or comment. I just take a spoonful. The potatoes along with vegetables, hit my taste buds just like the original did. The absence of meat doesn't even register. If I hadn't looked beforehand, I probably wouldn't have noticed.

After taking a few more bites, he asks, "If you're open to talk about it, do you mind telling me why you're in therapy?"

I'm not entirely ready to tell him. The mere thought of the *why* is what has spiraled me into a very dark place, one I barely managed to get out of myself.

Ayden had Alysa, and she came right away for him. I didn't have anyone, because my biological dad couldn't be bothered to care about *me*. He made it all about himself, losing the woman he let get away.

But, if I want the man across from me to tell me his *why*, I should at least be honest with him.

"I'm open about the therapy. Everyone needs help, regardless of the circumstance." I catch something flash across his eyes—understanding, maybe... envy? No. I must be reading that wrong. "As for the why, I'm not particularly ready to discuss that, but when I can, I'll tell you if you still want to know by then."

He smiles.

Truly smiles at me. God, I wish I could tell him how fucking angry it makes me when he doesn't give me a genuine one, and that *this* is him.

Not that fake shit he's been plastering on his face.

"Yeah, I'd like that."

Clover continues to purr in my lap as I finish off my bowl. We stay relatively quiet, sharing only a little bit here and there. Nothing is brought up about why he didn't come once Grant and my mom moved here to Wildhart.

The only question that revolved around the subject that was answered, was when the last time he had come to the cabin was. He said that moving in was his first time coming.

That shocked me, but he explained it was his grandfather's, who didn't have the best relationship with his dad. He passed when Ayden was thirteen and it took several years for them to gain the property in Grant's name. By then, he had graduated from high school and... well, here we are.

Here we are indeed.

After he finishes his food, he reaches across the table to take my bowl. I scoff and take his wrist, which is hot under my touch.

"I've got it."

I know I've seen the tattoo before, but never up this close. Moving his arm slightly away, I turn it over so I can look at the very detailed piece.

It's a rectangular piece that spans most of his forearm, and inside it is a realistic portrait of a lion. It's just the forehead, down to its nose, the main focus being solely on the eyes.

They're a bright amber color, sitting with the rest of the black and white piece.

They sorta look like—

"You like it?" He sounds sheepish as he asks the question.

The edge of my lip quirks up. "Yeah. It's beautifully done. The detail, especially in the eyes, is insane. Did you get this done in San Francisco?"

"Yeah."

I lean slightly forward, looking at the fine detail, all the way down to the fur that looks realistic. My thumb drags across the bottom of the design as I hum.

"Is this your only one?" I lift my gaze to see his eyes are slightly dilated.

I shouldn't be touching him like this. So, reluctantly, I let him go and sit back before standing.

He roughly clears his throat. "Mhmm."

Taking his bowl and my own, I move to the sink. "I've been dying to get another one, and another piercing." Running the water, I rinse the dishes before popping open the dishwasher and putting them in.

Ayden doesn't say anything, and when I turn around, it's because he's walking toward the stairs.

My brows pinch as he gives me a weary look. "I didn't realize how tired I was." He laughs slightly. "Can we pick this conversation up tomorrow?"

I don't think he's being disingenuous, he genuinely looks like he's exhausted. "I actually picked up a shift."

The devastation on his face has both a knot forming in my stomach and my chest hurting. I'm actually glad he is upset about that, but at the same time, I don't want him to be.

"Oh... Then maybe next week."

"I can always text you." I wipe my hands on a kitchen towel. "Or call you during my downtime."

That's probably not the best idea. Not that it's against some rule at the station, but for my own self-preservation.

He offers a soft smile. "Yeah, that'd be great."

Clover darts across the living room just as he begins going up the stairs.

His mood swings are interesting. I hope that he is actually tired and hadn't just wanted to stop our conversation. I swore it was going well.

Turning from the stairs, I put the food away, my thoughts swarming with him. I wrestle with myself—should I fight to stop thinking about him, or just let myself suffer since it makes me happier to do so?



I t's definitely a cold.

I'm blaming it on the upstairs shower never getting warm, and the sudden drop in temperature my body clearly wasn't ready for.

Keoni hadn't helped either, even if he didn't realize what he was doing. The way he looked at me, touched me—it set my heart racing. I was getting lightheaded simply from cooking, but his proximity and touch amplified it. To be honest, I feared I was going to throw up on him.

So, I did the only thing I could think of—run.

Ugh.

I haven't really gotten out of bed since then, not even after Keoni left for work the next morning. I'm not sure how long it's been. I got up once for water from the upstairs sink, but otherwise, I've stayed buried under blankets. Clover curls at my side, shifting between my legs like she belongs there.

When my phone buzzes, I groggily reach for it. Relief washes over me when I see it isn't Michael. God, I hope he just tossed out my things and moved on. Stuff can be replaced, my mental health on the other hand? It's on the verge of completely shattering.

The text I received was from Alysia.

Lefty 🙌

I'm so sorry it's taken me so damn long, but I sent the keys to the Boulder apartment.

No problem. Not feeling good atm, talk later.

Oh shit. Please fucking tell me it isn't Michael.

I swear to Christ I'll kill him.

No. Pretty sure it's a cold.

And you're all alone out there... damn it, righty...

I'm shameful for not telling my sister that Keoni is living here with me. Or, more accurately, that I'm living here with him.

So, instead of correcting her, I continue with a partial lie. Technically, I am here alone... right now...

Food delivery service is a life saver.

Sending you all my love. Talk later.

Placing my phone down, I throw my arm over my eyes and release a throaty groan. I'm certain I have a fever, and my body is trying to sweat it all out. There was no medicine in the pantry up here, and I'm afraid I won't be able to get back upstairs if I crawl downstairs.

I could cuddle up on the couch... or maybe in Keoni's sheets. He won't be back for a few days. Sunday, I think is what he mentioned when he was leaving.

My pillow vibrates, and I fumble for my phone with heavy fingers.

Keo.

Even seeing his name makes me feel a little less sick.

Keo 👑

I was thinking about it, and I find it weird we never went camping together. You know, as a family.

Why is that weird?

I don't know.

What're you doing?

I cannot help but laugh, which I regret, because it makes my temples throb. Groaning, I close my eyes and turn to my side, causing the feline to scuttle away.

I wndlt have minded. Wr still cqn.

I let the phone slip from my hand, and shove it just out of reach. Another buzz vibrates against the pillow, but I only manage a ragged sigh before turning away. Sleep drags me down.

I'll respond to him when I wake up. Hopefully I'll feel better by then.

There's a strange weightlessness in my dream; a faint buzz in my ear that makes me think I'm on a plane. My feet don't touch the ground, and the air feels uncomfortable, like the temperature is as confused as I am.

I tremble as I inhale the smell of something familiar—nothing like a plane. That at least confirms I've not been whisked away onto an airplane and am thirty-thousand feet in the sky. That would be ridiculous. Still... why do I feel like I'm floating?

A groan catches in my throat as my eyes flutter open. Blue fills my vision as the aroma of the outdoors tangles with something achingly familiar. Keoni. He smells of some tropical blend of sweet fruits, along with hints of mint and the night air. I shift slightly, my cheek brushing against muscle. A mumble slips out, but no real words. Keo takes up my entire world. Above him, the cabin ceiling drifts by. At least that tells me we're still home, and I'm not at a hospital or somewhere I don't want to be.

The creak of a door opening is followed by his scent intensifying in the air. Doesn't take a genius, or non-sick person, to tell me he's carried me into his room. I should look around, take in this space I've never been in, but I can't stop staring at his face. He's so serious looking.

Don't laugh, Ayden.

I'm slowly lowered into gray sheets. The moment my body sinks down, he notices I'm awake, and his chest deflates with what sounds

like a sigh of relief.

"Hey," he whispers. "Have you taken any medicine?"

I shake my head, or, I think I do.

"Ayden?" Guess not. "Words, please."

"No."

The shuffling of feet away from me clears my view to take in the room. It's relatively bare. Directly in front of me is a five-drawer dresser with a small TV resting on top. To the left is a closed door, and to its right is the entrance to the bedroom, which is open.

Everything is wood-paneled, and a few photos hang on the walls within my line of sight. I'm not interested in moving my head—whatever cold this is has really hit me hard.

Keo comes back into the room, followed by a soft meow. I still can't believe how attached that cat is. It actually blows my mind.

He kneels beside the bed, and I finally take in his appearance.

Holy fuck, I'm glad I'm not capable of being hard. At least, I hope not. That would be extremely embarrassing.

He's wearing dark blue uniform pants, tight against his thighs, straining as he lowers onto one knee. His matching polo has all three buttons undone, and a symbol is stitched on the right chest. His hair is pulled back in his signature bun. His five o'clock shadow is the perfect length—which feels strange to notice, but this is the closest our faces have been since my graduation.

"Sit up for me," he commands while putting a hand behind my neck to assist me. "Fuck, you're so hot, Ayden."

I snort-laugh. "Thanks."

His groan just makes him hotter. Damn it. "I'm serious. Come on." He shifts to the bed just as I'm sat upright, his large hand holding the back of my neck in a grip that feels possessive. "Open and take this."

I look at his fingers. Pinched between his index finger and thumb are two white pills. I do as he says and stick my tongue out slightly. There's only a brief pause—just a second—before he presses the medicine into my mouth. Followed by a feeling of glass pushing against my lips.

"Drink."

There's no argument, no waiting, as I lean my head back and take a sip of the room temperature water.

The sound of the cup being set onto wood comes with his heavy sigh. "How long have you been feeling like this?"

He slowly helps me to lay back down, and once I'm there, he begins moving the blankets until I'm under them.

"What day is it?"

"You don't know? It's Saturday. Have you not been out of bed at all?"

I go to throw my arm over my face, when he grabs it. "Don't hide from me, it's alright. Just answer the question."

There's no shame in my answer, and I'm not doing what he's implying—it's just a comfortable position. "I got up to pee."

Suddenly, a cool sensation settles against my forehead.

"And you didn't think to take any medicine?"

I grumble, not wanting to explain that I'd feared I wouldn't be able to make it back up the stairs... or that I hadn't wanted to crawl into this bed because I worried I'd never want to get out of it.

"None was upstairs." Yeah, I'll go with that.

"Did you start feeling like this before I left for work?"

I nod.

"Why didn't you say anything?" He sounds hurt, and my stupid heart clings to it desperately.

Because I thought I was having heart palpitations over my attraction for you, not because I was sick.

"It didn't really hit me this hard until you were gone," I lie. "It's... I'm fine... Wait." Something hits me, and I really don't need to ask because it's pretty obvious, but I still do. "Did you leave work?"

I watch as he leans back from me, one hand resting on my side while the other runs through his hair. He pulls it free from the bun, letting it bounce past his collarbone. His head tilts back, and as his cheek brushes his shoulder and he looks at me, my heart somersaults.

"Your text was... concerning."

My lips part in surprise.

"I texted you back, then called you, but nothing." I don't need him to explicitly tell me he was worried, because I can see it in his eyes that shift between mine.

I let out a light, nervous laugh. "And you just ran over to save me, huh?"

"Yes." There's no playfulness in his tone, and it keeps me from retorting something witty.

He reaches up and flips the towel over my forehead, letting out a heavy sigh. It's one that screams of his own exhaustion, but before I can say anything, he asks, "Are you hungry?"

Honestly, everything hurts, including my stomach. It's in knots, and I can't tell if it's from this cold, from him resting over me like this, or if I'm actually hungry.

"I think there is some tomato soup, maybe some minestrone."

Turning my head, I look at the cup of water and reach for it. He doesn't try to help, surprisingly. I'm able to drink it and place it back down, before adjusting fully back to laying down.

"Maybe some soup... then I can go back upstairs to sleep."

He slowly gets to his feet as a soft laugh rumbles from his chest. "You think I squeezed us down those narrow stairs with you in my arms for me to just inevitably take you back upstairs? No, Ayden, you'll sleep here."

I swear I try to breathe, but it just locks up in my chest. He wants me to sleep in here? In his bed? With him?

Fear keeps me from asking, because I don't know what I hope the answer will be—whether he'll sleep beside me, or be a gentleman and take the couch, or another room. I'm a filthy liar to myself, because I absolutely know which one I want.

I must've zoned out because when I bring myself back to the present moment, he's out of the room and instead, I've got bright blue eyes and gray fur shoved in my face.

Her loud purring as she presses against my face has me smiling. I've never had any animal be attached to my hip like this one. It's quite strange, but I'll admit, because of her I do feel much better the moments when Keo isn't in the house.

"Hey, girl, thanks for staying by my side."

It was probably only a few minutes after I started stroking Clover's back that I fell asleep. Keo woke me to eat, though I didn't manage much. Only a few swallows in, then I was violently ill.

I've likely got the flu. *Great.* Just what I need.

I'm sort of glad the two of us are in professions where we see far worse things than vomit. He got me to the bathroom in just enough time for me to hurl into the toilet.

He made a joke about not needing to hold my hair back, which made me laugh.

Although he didn't help wash me up, which again I'm grateful for, he stood in the doorway just in case I needed anything.

While I understand that everyone needs help, I don't want to be treated like some delicate flower. Michael treated me like I was fragile. I hesitate to say, '*like a girl*,' but that's how it felt. He wanted us in specific roles, and it was obvious which one he had me in.

Him, the *alpha*, and me, the... submissive one.

I despise that, so while Keoni carrying me down the stairs would normally not sit right with me, I can tell it was for the best. He's letting me ask for help, which is exactly what I want.

No.

It's what I need.

Although he did everything right, in the end, he fucked up.

Alright, well, in *my* opinion he did. He went and slept on the couch, keeping the door open with clear instructions to call for him if I needed anything.

Is asking him to come back and be the big spoon too much?

I know it is. It's why I just thanked him and let him walk away. Now, I'm staring up at the ceiling, hot and cold all at once, feeling like shit... and *wanting* my damn stepbrother.

Ex-stepbrother.

Whatever. My stepmom would have drowned me in the lake if she knew how badly I wanted her son. I should just come to terms with this friendship and stop wanting what I can't have.

Fuck. Me.



There's something to be said for my restraint—just the fact that I didn't curl up behind him last night is an incredible feat.

I've already had my coffee; the TV has the news on very low, so I've been reading the subtitles. Something about a foreign politician being found dead here in Colorado. Apparently, the person was a big deal, even though I've never heard of him. Granted, I don't know much about 'politically exposed persons', as they termed him.

Soft footsteps on the wooden floor pull me from staring at the newscaster. Ayden wobbles down the hall, a blanket draped over his shoulders. He looks like absolute shit.

The urge to get up and help him tugs at me, but I settle it. He needs to learn to ask for help—just like he's going to learn to tell me what he promised before the thirty days are up.

He lifts his chin and forces a smile, one I'll allow this time. It's not meant to deceive me, but an attempt to appear strong. Which he doesn't have to be, especially around me.

"Mind if I cuddle up on the couch with you?"

I shake my head. "Not at all. Can I get you some water? Do you want some tea, or..."

As he shuffles onto the couch and curls up against the armrest, he takes a deep breath through his slightly stuffy nose. "Water would be nice."

I get to my feet far too quickly—there's literally zero hesitation.

"Do we have saltines?"

Rounding into the kitchen, I spot Clover stretching before she makes her way to the back door to scratch at it. I told Grant and my mom to get a cat door. They really worried she'd never come back, but I didn't. She definitely is a housecat, but I'd prefer her doing her business outside and not in a litterbox.

I crack open the door, and let her out, leaving it open for her to wade back in when she's ready.

Checking the cabinets, I groan. "No, but I'll run to the store to get you some."

"No, it's alright, you don't—"

"I want to. We are also running low on milk, and a few other things. Plus, I need to get some more medicine. There's a bunch we're nearly out of, and some that expired." I roll my eyes as I fill up a cup with water. "For a doctor, you'd think Grant wouldn't have had that."

Ayden laughs through a groan. "Probably never took them. Dad was always healthy as a horse."

I shrug, not commenting. My mom's medicine was in their room; one I still need to get cleaned out.

Moving back to him, I place the water directly into his outstretched hands. "Thanks."

"Mhmm." I sit in the middle of the couch, and drape my arm over the back.

"Are you going to go back into work?"

"No, thankfully Corey picked up for me. He says he hopes you feel better." He peers at me from the corner of his eye, and smiles. "I'll be going in for my shift tomorrow though." *Unfortunately*. I clear my throat. "So let's try and get you feeling as good as possible today. Rest, and I'll take care of you."

"Yes, sir."

I adjust in my seat. The way he says that, far too sultry and low, has my cock forgetting that, one, he's sick, and two... unavailable to it.

Very much *unavailable* to it.

"Thanks for last night, Keo." And there it goes again, jumping. "It's been a while since someone's taken care of me."

My brow rises. "Your ex didn't take care of you?"

I guess it's ignorant for me to assume. He's an ex for a reason, and I don't even know when or why they broke up. It must have been since last Christmas, because Alysa said he had a boyfriend at the time. She offered information no one asked for about Ayden... and while I was mad at him, I didn't hate that she tried to keep us updated. Even if the information she provided wasn't enough to settle my aching chest.

"Um, yeah, he did at times."

"When did you guys—"

"When was your last relationship?" he cuts in, drinking from his glass.

There's a light twitch under my eye, but instead of getting upset like I did that night at the bar, I just release a sigh. "Roughly two years ago."

"Girlfriend?"

"Both? I had a boyfriend and a girlfriend."

He literally spits the water out, and it dribbles down his chin onto his shirt.

I quirk a brow. "What happened?"

The bewilderment across his face accompanies him dragging his arm across his mouth. He misses some on his neck, and a line of liquid drips slowly down his Adam's apple.

Fuck me, the thought of licking it really shouldn't be top of mind right now.

"You just... casually told me you were... cheating?"

A thick, slightly offended laugh bursts from my chest. "Wow, what an assumption. No, Ayden, I was in a polyamorous relationship."

"Oh."

"It didn't last more than a few months. They were nice, but, uh, yeah." I'm not heartbroken about it, and while the sex was great, it wasn't what I wanted. "Before then, two years? I'm complicated to date."

He doesn't say anything right away but instead gives me a smile that's genuine, and begins scooting closer to me. "Not so complicated. You like what you like."

And that's only you... apparently...

I'm going to have a sad, lonely life it seems.

Before he can get too close—because I’m worried my restraint won’t be as good as it was last night—I start to stand. “I should get to the store. You need to eat something since you expelled everything last night.”

He looks disappointed, and I wish I could admit that I feel it too.

“I’ll be quick, and we can put on a movie to watch... if you want.”

A moment of hesitation occurs before that displeasure melts away, replaced by genuine joy.

“I’d love that.”



AGE 17

“*Auwe!* Keoni!”

“They’re grown, Mom, I don’t need to stay home and watch them.”

It isn’t that I have a problem hanging out with my stepsiblings. The past year and a half with them has been... great. Alysa is a spitfire who really wakes up the house every day. She’s also smart and enjoys board games on Saturdays with my... our mom.

But she’s also a troublemaker, just like her brother. They’ve both talked about sneaking out tonight to the same party I’m supposed to be going to. If I say I’m staying and she finds out I went, everyone’s in trouble.

“It’s just one missed party.”

“It’s the first of my senior year. Tyler and I are captains, it would be weird if...”

She’s giving me that pleading look. Her round brown eyes framed by her thick eyebrows tug so hard on my heartstrings.

Again, I don’t mind hanging out with them.

Them. Together.

I can’t be alone with Ayden. It doesn’t matter that we are now legally stepbrothers. It hasn’t stopped me from finding him

attractive, enjoying his company, and edging closer and closer into his space. I've been respectful, both out of fear of what our parents would do if they found out I was... thinking about him in any way other than I should about a family member.

Plus, I'm about to turn eighteen and he *just* turned sixteen over the summer.

And Mandy and him are basically a couple, even if he's adamant he's not actually seeing her. You don't just hang around someone like they do and are just *friends*.

Am I jealous?

Yes, yes I am.

Do I wish that he wasn't my stepbrother?

Yes, yes I do.

I'm not blind to the way he reacts when our eyes lock. It only makes things harder. I haven't confessed that I like him, and he hasn't said anything to suggest he feels the same. But is it strange to say I can just feel like there's something meant to be there between us? Something other than family...

God, it sucks so bad. I've never wanted anyone so badly in my short life.

"Keoni, honey?"

I shake my head, pushing away thoughts of my stepbrother I shouldn't be having.

"Sorry, Mom, what was that?"

Her sympathetic look tells me she *really* needs this from me. I understand the last minute change of plans. The play, the flight, all of it. I sigh, and give in.

"Alright, but you owe me." Her smile beams, and while I'm no mama's boy, *that* does make me happy. "I'm dialing Tyler right now and **you're** telling him I'm not coming."

After a solid few minutes of laughing with my best friend, he said he'd cover for me and everything was set. My mom and Grant were soon rushing out of the house to get to the airport two hours early for their redeye to New York.

The moment I close the front door, a body slams into my back. I can tell it's Alysa, her arms coming around my neck as she jumps piggyback-style onto me.

"Alright, well this couldn't be any more perfect! We are going, right?"

I groan, and bend to allow her to get a bit better of an angle, then wrap my arms behind her knees. "No, because there's really no cover. She's expecting me to stay home, and if it gets back to her that I went, odds are that'll bust us all."

Her cheek presses to my head. "But, *Keooo*. I have a date..."

"Heh, Alysa, please not the nickname."

"Oh right, sorry." Only two people can call me that. One is my mom, and the other is, well, Ayden.

Speaking of, I turn and see him standing at the foot of the stairs. He's already in his jeans and a tucked in T-shirt, looking far too good to be told we can't go.

"You're too young to date anyways," I say in an attempt to distract myself from checking him out.

"Uh." She makes a buzzer noise. "Wrong answer." Then she giggles so sweetly. "Alright, but maybe Ayden and I can go and you can still cover for us. If it makes it back to them, you can say we were home."

"That's not going to happen." I roll my eyes and stand straight, releasing her legs. She squeals and jumps from my back. "If I can't go, we all suffer."

Ayden hums. "Alysa, why don't you go?"

My skin zings, and goosebumps crawl the entirety of my six-foot frame.

"Wait, really?!"

"I know how badly you've wanted to spend time with the girls... and Kyle."

Ew, Kyle... Ugh. "No, please, Aly, don't tell me you fell for *that* tool."

She wiggles her arm around mine, and squeezes in close. "He puts on a show for everyone, but he's a super sweetheart."

"You're sixteen, and no offense, your judge of character hasn't developed yet."

Her mock gasp makes me shake my head and glance at Ayden. He isn't looking at her... but at me, telling me with his eyes that he's fine with her going.

I'm not, though.

I could text Tyler to make sure nothing happened to her, and he'd do everything to keep her safe. He understands how important these two are to me, so I know she'll be fine.

Besides, there's no alcohol or weed—we're not trying to get in trouble—and nothing bad has ever happened at one of these parties in the past.

No, what worries me is being left alone with Ayden.

"Then..." She slowly pulls away from me and steps back. "It's SETTLED!"

I look down at her, and she's got her phone in her hand typing away. "He's going to pick me up."

"Alysa, I don't—"

"Thanks! I have the best brothers!" she cuts me off, and turns quickly, rushing down the hall toward the kitchen.

A very heavy, irritated sigh escapes me. How do these two get away with all of this? I'm nearly two years older, and yet here they are, making up all the rules.

Ayden's presence beside me has me turning to look down at him. "So, Friday night... movie? Video games?"

He doesn't play them, and I only enjoy single players, but it does have me curious to ask, "You want to play?"

His hands move to tuck into his jeans, and he looks away—the blush across his cheeks has my stomach in knots. "No, but I'd be willing to watch you. The game you play, I've seen people on Twitch play it."

Rolling my lips together, I gaze down at my jersey and pants.

After a few seconds of thought, I laugh. "Sure, but let's get comfortable. I'm giving Alysa a curfew. If she's not back by midnight, we are going on a mission to recover her butt."

When our eyes lock, he gives me a cheeky smile. "Sounds like fun."

After getting changed, we settle into the living room where the PlayStation is set up. I wonder if he sat that far from me on purpose, the same way I did. It's a four-seater couch—we're not worlds apart, but it feels that way with all the space between us.

He tucks his legs up, and slouches against the side. "I've never seen you play shooters."

I sigh. "Not really into it, plus, it flares my migraines. All the flashing."

The end of my statement comes out bitter. I've had to take the 'could cause seizures' warning to heart. They don't trigger them in me, but they may as well. The migraines I have incapacitate me at times, including but not limited to, game days.

He doesn't say anything at first, just hums. Only after I've got the game loaded and beginning, does he comment, "I like these better anyway."

"You have a preference on something you don't enjoy?" I ask playfully, tucking a heel onto the couch and leaning an arm against my knee.

A laugh I'd say sounds slightly nervous is barely audible over the sounds of clashing swords from the TV.

"I do."

Smiling, I fall into the groove. We talk about random things—schoolwork, football, cheer, and what my plan is after high school. At one point, we even talk about our other parents, the ones absent from our lives.

I'd never asked about his mom before, but he said she was just a terrible mother, and Grant noticed early enough to get out. My dad was sort of the same, though more verbally abusive toward my mom. She always said she was lucky—unlike so many women—because she had the ability to leave. She told me that while it might seem hateful that he didn't want me, his son, I should look at it as a good thing.

I did. At least, I tried to.

An hour passed far too quickly, and maybe it was the trips back and forth—for the bathroom, for drinks—but somehow we ended up side by side on the same cushion, in the middle of the couch.

After dying three times to the same boss, I shut off the console and turned on a movie. We settled on one easily. I don't think he cared, just like I didn't.

Draping my arm over the back of the couch, on the side not closest to Ayden, I lean into my hand. "Has Alysa texted you?" I ask, just as the opening credits begin to roll.

He speaks through a yawn, "Yeah, she's having a great time and promises to be back before midnight."

I reach for the side table, scooting over to check for a message from Tyler. There are a few—one of them a photo, with a note that

says, ‘Don’t worry, I’ve got eyes on the twin you’re not attached at the hip to.’

Smiling, I drop it and scoot back toward the center. Now it’s obviously intentional. I could’ve stayed at the edge of the couch, but I don’t want to. Still, I watch Ayden’s expression, checking if he’s uncomfortable. There’s no hint of it, he simply sinks back into the cushion.

“She’s safe, Tyler’s got her.”

He nods his head and beams. “To be honest, I’m not worried about her. I’m worried for anyone who thinks they can get one over on her. I swear, she’d make as good a linebacker as you if they’d let her.”

I honestly cannot hold back my laugh, throwing my head back with its intensity.

“No argument from me. She’s *vicious*.”

“So true.” He melts into laughter with me, and the moment we fall out of it, he says, “Can I ask you something?”

I clear my throat. “Of course.”

“You’ve never told me not to call you Keo, yet you tell everyone else not to. Why?”

I pause briefly, before responding, “It just doesn’t feel right when anyone else says it but my mom... and you.”

A thoughtful hum escapes him before he leans against my arm. “Makes sense,” he murmurs.

I don’t breathe.

I sure as shit don’t move.

This is fine. Right? I’ve seen him and Alysa cuddle up on the couch before. I’ve never had siblings until now, so I can take a cue from them...

Except I’m certain his sister doesn’t get butterflies like this.

Maybe I’m just tired—or at least that’s what I’ll blame if this ever comes up—because instead of pulling away, I shift my arm to rest over his shoulder to *hold* him. He then leans into my chest, eyes still forward.

I’m glad he isn’t on my left. My heart would absolutely betray how calm I’m pretending to be.

This is my last year in this house before college. I’ve already signed with Arizona State, and soon I’ll be moving. I’ll only see

Ayden during summers, and maybe around the holidays. I can move on from these feelings I shouldn't have for my stepbrother.

Still, something tugs at the strings of my heart. I fear a life without Ayden will be hollow.

That thought hurts, but for now, I'll let myself enjoy this happiness I can't find anywhere else.

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I wasn't completely better by the time he went back to work, but I told him not to worry. I could walk up and down the stairs and keep food down, though I still felt weak. After a near fight, he finally left for his shift yesterday.

I'll admit, I haven't slept very well since. He told me to sleep in his bed, and that we'd reevaluate the arrangement when he was off.

To keep myself busy and not thinking about sleeping with him, I've been going through our parents' room. I made sure to ask Keo if it was alright first, texting him this morning to confirm. That's also when I saw his late-night messages from when he rushed home, making sure I wasn't dead. Or whatever worst-case scenario he'd imagined.

Keo 👑

What? Lol

Ayden, what did you mean?

Missed call from: Keo 👑

Answer the phone. Are you alright?

Was that code for something?

Missed call from: Keo 👑

This isn't funny.

Please be alright. I'm coming home.

God, he was so worried, and when I tell you my heart *needed* that, it really did.

Hey, is it alright that I start clearing out our parents' room?

Keo 👑

Yeah, but don't exert yourself. You should go for a walk.

Is that an order?

You need fresh air. I guarantee you'll feel better.

So yes, it is.

Yes, sir

😞 You should've heard my sigh

We are doing drills. I'll text you later, sunshine.

Sunshine?

He didn't respond after that, and honestly, it was probably for the better. I'm not entirely sure why him calling me that made my stomach ignite. I don't know if it's good or bad, but I'm choosing to lean into the former.

At least it isn't princess...

I spent most of the morning sorting and boxing things up in the master bedroom. Not going to lie... I broke down. Going through the photos, putting them away, had me hyperventilating.

It only took Clover's meows to calm me down and bring me back.

Leilani and my dad were taken too soon. They still had half their lives ahead of them, and being surrounded by their things reminded me I can't take for granted a single second that my heart still beats.

I'm going to find the courage to tell Keoni about Michael, and the real reasons I never came. I've seen how he's treated me these last two weeks, and I know he won't judge me. All he wants is for me to be honest and explain myself.

My dad would remind me of the courage I already have.

"I love you, Ayden. Just know you have a home here, no matter what."

After crying into Clover's gray, fluffy fur, I did as Keo had told me to and went for a walk.

It feels wonderful to get out; I haven't since I first started feeling sick. Without the ability to just jump in a car, get on a subway system, or easily flag down a taxi to go somewhere, it's been challenging.

That, and I've felt perpetually exhausted. Granted, not as much since Keo told me about the thirty-day thing, but still. It's why I haven't gone out.

Now that it's September, the air carries a chill, the breeze no longer warm.

I'm in jeans and an oversized sweater that definitely isn't mine. It had been hanging in Keoni's closet looking lonely—who was I to deny it some company?

I can't help but laugh at myself out loud.

Walking south, I reach the soft curve in the road that leads to the southern cabin. Last I saw, it was still mid-renovation.

To be honest, I've been itching to meet the neighbors of Sapphire Valley. Since I'm here so often, I wonder if they are too. From what Travis said, it sounded like his girlfriend's friend lived here year-round.

I weave in and out of the trees, drifting back to the road, until the sound of giggling makes me slip into the thicket. I'm not trying to sneak up on anyone, but I don't want to startle them either—especially since it sounds like two girls talking.

"Are you sure?"

I take the small distance toward the log, single-story, cabin. It's about twenty feet ahead, and standing just in front of the porch, are two women.

Holy shit.

I'm pansexual—or at least that's how I've classified myself—and that blonde is a bombshell. My god. So is the woman with warm brown skin wearing a hijab beside her. I can only see her side profile,

but still. Her headscarf is wrapped to mimic how hair would be pulled off to the side. It's really cool.

The Barbie-looking one puts her hands on her hips and turns to look at the other girl.

"Evelyn?"

The girl turns her head slightly, tilting her ear in my direction. There's no way she could have heard me.

Alright, she definitely heard me. The speed at which she pulls a knife from somewhere and throws it at me is unbelievable. It slams into the tree inches from my face, causing me to let out a startled shout and push off away from it.

Shuffling feet catch me off guard even more. The moment I take my eyes off the death dagger, I see light-brown eyes mere inches from mine.

Oh shit.

"Evelyn!"

I put my hands out just as she tackles me! *Holy fucking shit!* Her leg wraps around my neck, and I barely manage to slip an arm under it so it doesn't crush my throat.

Before I know it, I'm flat on my back, staring up at the lush canopy of trees above.

I'm certain I landed on a large rock—something is digging hard into my hip.

Rushing feet accompany my wheeze. I immediately try to pry the death grip her thighs have on me, but I'm still feeling the aftereffects of this cold I haven't fully recovered from, so my fight is incredibly weak.

"Oh my god!" The blonde is above me, and I think she's just as shocked as I am.

"Stop..." I cough out. "I come in p-peace!"

"Who are you?"

I sputter out, "Wildhart—" For a moment, I actually think she's going to kill me, or at a minimum, cause me to pass out. "N-Neighbor."

I haven't been able to take a proper breath, and just as my eyes start to roll back, the blonde shoves the crazy girl off me.

"Evelyn, get off and let's *talk* with him."

She gracefully shifts from kneeling to standing above me. My eyes are bugged out as I grab at my throat, struggling to swallow.

"Are you alright?" The nice one kneels down as I begin to sit up. Her lime-green eyes meet mine before glancing up at the other girl. "You've put him into a state of shock."

"That's... an understatement." I blow out a ragged breath. "I'll be okay, I think."

After helping me up, the blonde begins to dust me off.

"Why were you sneaking around?" Evelyn asks aggressively.

"I literally showed up two seconds before you attacked me."

"It was more like forty-five..."

The other girl sighs with a hint of exacerbation. "My name is Calista." The smile she directs at me eases any worry about her thinking I'm some pervert sneaking up on them.

"Ayden. It's nice to meet you." I reach up to rub my neck, wincing at how tender it feels. I hope it doesn't bruise—I really don't want to have to explain it to Keo. He'd probably freak out on the girl who's still eyeing me with indecision.

Or... at least, I hope he would.

"Wildhart, huh?" Calista says with a beaming smile. "I live over in Sanderson Pine."

My eyes widen. "Really?"

She nods.

I'm not sure why, but I'm relieved it's her and not the other girl who lives there. She seems genuinely nice, whereas Evelyn... well.

I dare a glance at her. She inches slightly closer to the blonde, her gaze narrowing on me. She's really pretty—light freckles across her warm brown nose, long lashes that look natural, and a subtle winged liner. None of it takes away from the fact that she looks angry.

"I've been meaning to come meet you, actually." I turn my attention back to Calista. "I moved in over a month ago, but I think I met your friend, Genevieve's, boyfriend."

The look of sadness crosses her eyes, before she shakes her head. "Oh yeah? What a small world... How?"

"He is our attorney for my parents' will."

"Oh no," she whispers while looking at the other woman, then back to me. "I'm so sorry."

I offer her a smile. "It's alright. Look—" I turn to Evelyn and sigh. "I didn't mean to sneak up on you two. I was just going for a

walk to get out of the cabin. I've been cooped up since getting a cold and just needed fresh air."

"Yeah, not an attack. Did you learn that while deployed? That was... impressive."

I nod. "Extremely."

That has the corner of the girl's lip jump, as if she's fighting the smile attempting to crawl from some far, forgotten place. "Yeah, you could say that."

"Eve, darling." A deep, sultry voice comes from the direction of the cabin. When I look, I can't help but wonder if this place is a breeding ground for beautiful people.

Because, once again, holy *shit*.

The man that approaches us is tall; more so than Keoni. His narrow eyes, short, silky black hair that frames his face, and chiseled jawline has me practically drooling.

He looks like a K-Pop idol I fawned over in college.

"I reacted the same way..." Calista murmurs softly. "Even if I'm happily in a relationship."

Evelyn groans. "Yes, Levi, *honey*." Well, that sounded extremely distasteful.

He approaches, one hand tucked into his suit pants pocket, his matching jacket slung back behind it. "Ah, Calista. It's a pleasure to see you again." His eyes then travel to mine, and it's like he understands the power his swagger has because he quirks a smile. "And, another friend?"

"Neighbor," Evelyn corrects. "I thought you were doing something."

He ignores her and reaches his hand out toward me. "Levi Black, and you are?"

I take it not to be rude. His grip is *strong*. Jesus. "Ayden Pierce. I live in Wildhart with my..." I lick my lips and fumble while finishing my sentence, "Stepbrother."

Stupid. What the fuck? *Couldn't say friend, could I?*

Not entirely sure what look Calista is giving me, but I swiftly turn back to Levi, who has a smile on his lips. "It's a pleasure. You must excuse my rudeness." He releases my hand and looks to Calista, before turning to Evelyn. "I must steal my wife. We have dinner plans, and she needs to get ready."

"Fuck off."

My mouth drops open.

"Such a pleasure." He doesn't seem offended, at least by his tone. "She's just a bit upset over a... disagreement of our last job together."

"Disagreement?"

Oh boy.

I steal another glance at Calista, who is laughing nervously and taking a step back. I follow her cue.

"You literally didn't listen to me and nearly lost us the contract! We were hit with a warning!"

"I'm not the one that was trying to show off, darling."

I'm not going to pretend to understand what's going on. "Well, this has been an eventful meeting." I look at the blonde who is giving me a sympathetic smile. "Would it be alright if I come by sometime? To Sanderson."

She beams. "Of course! I'll let my boyfriend know not to attack you on sight."

Again, I'm rendered shocked. She sounds so serious... but she's not, right?

She gives me a playful wink.

"Come on, wife," Levi says. I peek over to him as he reaches his hand to the small of Evelyn's back. "You don't want to come off as crazy now, do you?"

I'm not sure how I know it, but his tone toward her isn't patronizing. He's playful, and it's strange how I can just feel that. This isn't like how Michael treated me, though it does trigger a bit of anxiety for the girl.

Except... she did attack me—for really no reason.

So maybe she is crazy.

"Crazy for accepting this... partnership."

I really don't want to question anything that is happening, even if that statement is very weird.

"Alright. It was lovely meeting you, Mr. and Mrs. Black." I shift to look at Calista who giggles. "See you soon?"

She nods. "Yeah, I'd like that."

"See ya, Wildhart," Evelyn groans.

"Lovely to meet you, Ayden." Levi nods his head and I simply just turn and walk away. This was the strangest thing to happen, and I'm not sure how to process it.

At least Calista seems normal.

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Corey closes the door to my truck before leaning in through the passenger window. “We still good for Friday night?”

I nod, resting back and stretching my arms. “You bringing the missus?”

“Not this time. She’s got plans with her mom, but she told me I couldn’t get sloshed drunk because we have brunch with both her parents Saturday.”

“Agreed. I think I’m getting too old for it anyway.”

He scoffs, slapping his hand against the inside of the car door. “You haven’t even hit your thirties. Don’t give me that bullshit.”

“My knees and head feel like they’re retirement age.”

He rolls his eyes, but chuckles. “Whatever you say, brother. Tell Ayden I said what’s up. He’ll be hanging with us, right?”

My brow quirks up. “Yeah...”

“Taylor and Kali really like him. I do too. He’s chill.”

While they’ve only met him once, I have to agree: he is amazing. Honestly, more than that.

“We’re hanging at the cabin. I don’t know where else he’ll be.”

He hums. “Does he not work?”

I feel like this isn’t a conversation he and I should be having. “You can ask him—maybe he’ll open up to you...” I hate that it sounds bitter coming from my mouth. He’s trying. Just this morning,

when he texted me, he was saying that after he graduated college, if it hadn't been for immediately getting into SF General, he'd have tried to move back to Colorado.

It was the try that got me. Then I stupidly asked why it had to be a 'try' and not a 'have just done.'

He recoiled and didn't respond. Go figure.

"Alright, well, maybe I will." He taps the door again before stepping back. "Thanks again for the ride. See you later."

Only once he's at his front door and stepping inside do I drive off. He lives only a ten-minute drive down the main road from the entrance to Sapphire Valley. I'm a little earlier than normal for a Wednesday night. I hadn't told Ayden, but it's only like thirty minutes, so I figured it wouldn't make too much of a difference.

There were six calls back-to-back: someone stuck in a raft, Maple High School's smoke alarm malfunctioned, and so much more. The one that got me was the last—a man fell, and when his wife tried to help... Well, let's just say I regretted taking Kali with me and not Corey.

I'm ready for a hot shower and a solid ten hours of sleep.

Pulling up to the cabin, I throw the car into park and hurry inside. I don't even bother grabbing my bag. I can grab it in the morning.

It's quiet, surprisingly. I hear the soft padding of paws head down from the loft, and assume Ayden is asleep upstairs, even if it's just after seven. That is, until I reach my room and see the bathroom door cracked, steam billowing out of it.

My heart thunders against my chest. The sound of water hitting the floor in uneven rhythms makes me imagine the body it's brushing against. Why is he showering down here? He has one upstairs, and has been using it, at least when I'm home.

Clover brushes against my ankles, drawing my attention downward. That's when I realize I'd been fucking reaching for the door handle to the bathroom.

Withdrawing my hand, I suck in a sharp breath and glance through the slit of the door. I can't make anything out. The mirror is fogged, offering no glimpse of Ayden.

It's not something I should be angry about. Seeing him might make me do something irreversible and incredibly stupid.

I slowly step to the side, slipping quietly into my bedroom and closing the door. I release the breath I'd been holding and move to the dresser, pulling out clean boxers and some sweats.

It's fine, I'll wait until he's out, give him a hard time about using my shower, and then take one. If he isn't tired, we can chat before we go to bed.

In our own beds.

Alone.

Not together.

I need to get the image of him naked, merely on the other side of this wall, *out* of my head. My brain definitely understands it's something we can't be thinking about, but my throbbing cock has other plans for me.

Damn it.

For a moment—a *simple second*—I thought maybe I'd caught the end of his shower. That I'd be spared an agonizingly long session of him cleaning himself. But nope. I've definitely pissed off some god somewhere.

Because as I set my phone on the bedside table, I hear the slightest moan slip through.

Goddamn it.

These walls aren't thick in the slightest. I can hear him moving around upstairs even when he tries to be quiet. So, to say I'm not surprised to hear him groan, and what I imagine is his hand hitting the wall that separates us, is an understatement.

My cock jumps, and between the noises he's making, I step toward the wall that, just on the other side, holds the shower.

"Fuck," he grumbles, and I'm so fucking hard, it hurts.

I quickly undo my jeans and drop them, before pulling my cock out and gripping at the base. My muscles flex as I release a quiet sigh. If I can hear him, he will definitely hear me, and I *can't* have that.

He moans, and my god, does he sound incredible. I swear there's a moment he begins panting. The image of him down on his knees, head up, and mouth open waiting for my cock has me rubbing the pad of my thumb over my tip, spreading my precum around the head.

I close my eyes and listen to him. Although I can't hear his hand stroking his length, I just know he is. I've never seen him naked, at

least not below the waist, but I've felt it and can imagine clearly in my head that it's his cock in my hand, not mine.

My mind runs wild, imagining his lips around my dick while his hand strokes his lube-covered cock. I release myself to spit into my palm and go straight to stroking my full length. I feel my piercing brush against my fingers as I take my time, twisting my wrist and squeezing around the head as though it's his throat choking on it.

"That's it," Ayden grits through his teeth. "Fuck."

Imagining his eyes rolling back as he's ready to combust has me beating myself harder.

"I'm... I'm going to come."

As under my breath as possible, I croon, "Come for me, Ayden."

A strangled moan accompanies the vibration of the wall as he smacks it. "Fuck, Keo, please—"

I didn't anticipate to shoot my own load so quickly, but as my abdomen ties into knots, I'm not given even a second to do anything but direct my cock upward. I make quite the mess, my cum shooting up across my shirt.

I breathe through my release as quietly as possible, even if that's hard for me. I'm not a quiet man, but I can't give it away that Ayden just helped me get off by simply the sound of his own climax.

Fucking Christ. He's not the one fucked. I am.



AYDEN

Goddamn, I needed that.

This is the first time I've masturbated since moving in. I'm surprised I've held out this long, especially with Keo so close by. The smell of him alone is enough to drive me crazy, and seeing him return from his morning runs, sweaty and shirtless...

Fuck. Me.

However, it **was** risky to use his shower to do it, but the water upstairs just isn't getting warmer, and now that it's colder outside, I

don't want to risk getting sick again. I called someone to take a look, but the earliest opening isn't until next month. Should've guessed that, considering it's a small town.

I finish up my shower, grateful I didn't hear Keoni come home. I hadn't expected to be so vocal, but being in his space, smelling his body wash... it heightened the sensation. Especially as my imagination ran with it that it was his hand around my cock and not my own.

I'll quite literally never admit that out loud to anyone. I'd rather die.

Turning off the water and grabbing a towel, I step out. The bathroom is relatively up-to-date, with a jetted tub combined with a waterfall shower. It's interestingly shaped—I've never seen one this rectangular before. It's big enough to fit two people. Not that, of course, I'm imagining being in here with anyone. Definitely not wondering if it would fit Keo and me.

Passing the toilet on my way to the counter, I grab my toothbrush and brush my teeth. I towel-dry my hair until it's no longer dripping, moisturize my face, and wrap the cloth around my waist.

Pulling the door open a bit, I peek out. All the lights are still off. The fan in here isn't great, so I'd left the door cracked since I like to scald my skin with my showers.

Stepping out, I glance at Keoni's room—it's closed, just like before I got in.

I'm literally at the point of passing it when it opens...

Oh, **fuck me**. It opens.

My fight-or-flight response vanishes entirely, and I freeze as Keoni steps into the narrow hallway. He's shirtless, his hair down but pushed behind his shoulders, and he looks like a mix of tired and satisfied.

"Evening, Ayden," he says in a low, sultry tone. "When did you start showering down here?"

When he leans against the doorframe, I nearly pass out, my cock hardening when it absolutely shouldn't be after the load I just released.

"Um. Today... Sorry, the water upstairs has been running cold for weeks."

His eyebrow pops up. "Cold? You never said anything."

I laugh nervously. "I didn't want you to worry, but I've called and made an appointment to get it fixed."

A hum escapes his lips, which draws me to look at them. It's now I see something white on his chin.

"You can always use this bathroom, sunshine."

My stomach ties into knots at that nickname again. However, *hearing* him call me it versus reading it in a text solidifies I like it.

"You... have something here." I need a distraction from saying something stupid about the pet name. I point at the spot where—possibly lotion—is and he drops his head to follow.

He lifts his gaze and gives me an impish grin. "Oops. It's a good thing it's my turn to shower." He moves his thumb to his mouth, drags his tongue across the pad before running it along his chin, right where I'd been pointing.

My heart is definitely in my cock by the way it's pulsing right now.

"Thanks," he says, pushing up to stand. His thumb finds his mouth again and licks it clean. "Messy eater, I guess..."

Okay, not lotion then. "You had dinner already?"

He winks, then turns toward the bathroom. "No, just a snack."

"Save me some next time?" I blurt, awkward as hell. What spell am I under? Some kind of hocus-pocus shit, no doubt.

The laugh that rolls out of him is so deep it makes my balls vibrate. He glances back over his shoulder; a grin so sexy I'd not be surprised if I melted into a puddle. "You may become addicted, probably not a good idea."

He doesn't give me a chance to ask what it was before he closes the door, and seconds later, the water's running.

Alright well, now I'm horny, *yet again*, hungry, and confused.



Leaning back in the lounge, I bring the beer to my lips and take a sip. The crisp evening air mingles with the flames of the fire burning between the six of us, soon to be seven.

Corey is going on about something I've completely zoned out of with Dom, while Kali and Taylor giggle, and Brittany animatedly mocks him. I feel welcome in their family. Even though most of them went to school together, they've embraced not only me, but also Ayden, as part of their circle.

Speaking of him, he's currently wrapping up a call with Alysa. I really should call her—I still can't believe I missed her visit. When he told me she'd been here for an entire week for the funeral, I could've kicked myself.

I'd gotten a new phone as soon as I arrived, along with a new number. I had to, the phone I had before is down in a canyon somewhere. The new number was just a direct consequence of trying to avoid my biological father and start fresh.

To try and forget about the accident...

The sudden thought of it, and my mom, has me chugging the rest of the beer in my hand.

"Here ya go," Corey says, and when I look up, another drink is flying in my direction.

I catch it and pop off the cap with my hand. "Thanks."

"Ayden!" Taylor shrieks. "I was worried you'd stay in and not drink with us."

They all arrived in a rideshare—everyone here understands the importance of not drinking and driving.

"No alcohol for me, sadly," Corey grumbles while waving his hand weakly, defeated. "The Missus has plans for us in the early morning. Ugh."

Everyone laughs, including myself.

"Sit here, Ayden!" Brittany says while gesturing toward her lap. "I'm not allowing you to sit on the floor."

I narrow my eyes on her and take a very deep breath that's soon released with a near growl. She's already had two shots of tequila, saying her week of sessions has been brutal, and she wants to get blackout drunk.

The fact that Dom and I will probably be the ones carrying not only her, but also Taylor, into their ride home has me sighing inwardly.

But I'm not going to worry about that right now. What I am going to worry about is her trying to get Ayden to sit in her lap.

She eyes me with a cat-like smile, *taunting* me to tell her otherwise.

"I'd prefer the ground, Britt, but thank you."

Her gasp has Kali and Taylor bending over, laughing in their chairs.

"Is my lap not good enough?!"

He makes his way over toward me and tries to sit between Dom and I. I catch his forearm and pull him closer. He stumbles slightly but lands squarely on the armrest of the lounge.

"Don't sit in the sand."

His hands rest in his lap, and I can see him squirm slightly.

"It's probably because you're too forward," Kali says sheepishly before turning to Ayden. "Do you want a drink? Shot or beer? You seem like the Tequila Sunrise type of man. I can make you a mixed drink."

I purposefully move my drink to the hand closest to Ayden. It'll keep me from doing something stupid like touching him in front of all these people.

"I actually don't drink alcohol." He raises his reusable water bottle. "I've got the classic H2O to enjoy with you all this evening."

However, I'll indulge in some s'mores."

"Just one drink! Come on. It's alright, you're with friends," Kali says innocently. "If you're worried about saying or doing something stupid, I promise nothing can be worse than Taylor messaging an influencer for his number and him posting it to his story with the title: And they say men are desperate."

"Oh my GOD, you did NOT just tell him that! KALI!"

"That is so mean," Ayden says through a laugh. "What an asshole. I'd give you my number, Taylor."

No, you won't... I take a sip and square my shoulders, the itch to let my internal thoughts fly is painful.

"Thank you, Ayden. But seriously, one drink?"

He laughs nervously. "No, it's not that. I've got an allergy to most of them, so I just avoid them altogether."

My brows pinch in confusion. The only allergies I know he has are to bee stings and nickel. So, I know he's lying—but I'm not going to call him out. I wonder if the real reason behind it is embarrassing.

I look down at my beer and hum softly.

After barely a moment of thought, I place it down onto the ground beside me and turn to Corey. "Hey, toss me one of those seltzers. The blueberry pomegranate one, I know it's Britt's favorite."

"That's SO rude, Keoni," she says through a hiccup.

The moment I catch it, I notice Ayden looking at me quizzically. Shrugging, I pop it open, letting some of the bubbles spill over before taking a sip.

I don't understand how anyone can drink these things, but I guess the flavor makes it a bit more manageable. I'm not going to let him be sober alone. Hopefully, when I ask him later, he'll share why he doesn't drink anymore.

We fall into conversation, moving from how work seems to be getting busier, to the latest small-town gossip. They ask about Ayden, which is nice for me too—I'm getting to know him as though I hadn't spent years living across the hall from him.

He graduated college and says he was lucky to get a residency at San Francisco General. I don't think it was luck. He's brilliant. He didn't graduate high school with a 4.0 because of luck. Even though he hid his genius behind jokes and a contagious laugh, it never diminished how smart he is.

"So, are you single, Ayden?" Kali asks.

She'd asked me last week if it would be weird for her to hit on my friend. I told her he wasn't looking for a relationship... even though I have no idea if that's true. But I'll be damned if I ever set her—or anyone—up with Ayden.

Over my dead fucking body.

"I am." His voice sounds uncomfortable, and he shifts slightly on the armrest. At some point, I'd draped my arm behind him, careful not to touch. He's bumped into me a few times, murmuring apologies, but he hasn't gotten up to leave.

Good. That would've bothered me more than his ass brushing against my bicep.

"Honestly, that's surprising. Right, Britt?"

My therapist, and friend, is completely wasted, so when she waves her hand and nods, I'm confident she doesn't even know the question she's agreeing with.

"Why's that surprising?" he asks, leaning forward and crossing his legs. "Is it my riveting personality?"

She fucking giggles.

"And you're hot. Please don't act like you have no idea."

"Me? Hot? Pfft." He's playing along. He'd never call himself unattractive, but he's too humble to label himself handsome or sexy.

He doesn't need to—I'll do it for him. Kali might be stepping over *my* line, flirting with Ayden, but she's not wrong. He's flawless in the looks department. A jawline that's sharp yet relaxed, full lips that don't vanish when he smiles, like most white men's do, and a nose that's perfectly balanced to his face.

Don't even get me started on his eyes. As much as looking into them—knowing they're filled with lies—hurts and angers me, their hazel reminds me of sanctuary.

Too bad I can't have them, or the man they belong to.

And maybe it's selfish, but while he's here, if I can't have him, then no one can.

"Oh shit, Britt!" I'm yanked out of wherever my head had gone just in time to see the blonde topple into the dirt, rolling around while Taylor, also a little wasted, falls to her knees, laughing beside her.

A soft *ahem* pulls my attention upward. Ayden's staring at me, the firelight flickering across his face and catching the red in his cheeks.

"Keo..."

The way he says my name makes my stomach dip. For a second, I panic—did I just say my thoughts out loud?

No. That's not it. Because when I shift in my seat, I realize my hand is resting against his hip, holding onto him.

Well... that's possessive of me.

Shit.

I pull my arm back, slow but deliberately, and start to push myself up.

"No, it's fine."

Clearing my throat, I stay standing, too unsettled to sit back down. Did anyone see?

Thankfully, Britt's too wasted to make a comment about me touching my stepbrother in front of everyone. But sooner or later, they'll all find out who Ayden really is to me.

Who actually cares...

"I've got to use the restroom anyway, and I think maybe we should get Britt..." Both her and Taylor are rolling around together, cackling. "And maybe Taylor into a cab."

"Do you have a spare room, Pierce?" Dom asks as he follows me to his feet.

"No," I say.

"Yes," Ayden says at the same time.

Shit.

"Okay... Which is it?"

I look at my stepbrother with questioning eyes. We technically *don't*.

"I could lay down too, if you don't mind," Kali asks. "We all sleep together anyway at the station." She stretches her arms way over her head. "Plus, I think I'm full, drunk, and sleepy. The triple threat."

"We have three rooms." Ayden stands and takes a few steps toward the cabin. "And a couch. It should be enough."

"I get to bunk with *Ayden*nnnn?"

"No," I swiftly cut in before he can even joke about agreeing to that. After running through all the options for sleeping, I groan and rake my fingers through my loosely up-done hair. "Alright."

"Sleep *overrrrrr*," Taylor coos for so long, I've no doubt the echo reached clear across the lake to the other cabins.

I tilt my gaze down to Ayden, who wears a coy smile. I'm not going to question what that look is for, but instead, just roll my eyes and head into the cabin with him.

"Dom," I call over my shoulder. "You got the girls?"

"Yup."

"I gotta get going," Corey calls out. "I've already ordered my cab. The Missus will—"

"Kill you if you don't get home," all three girls say simultaneously. "We know."

I can't help but laugh, just as both Ayden and I begin climbing the stairs to the cabin.

We'd agreed quickly on the sleeping arrangements: Britt and Taylor would take his bed—without him in it, I made sure to clarify. Dom would crash on the couch, and Kali would take my bed. Ayden said he'd cleaned the bedding in our parents' room and warned it may smell like all-purpose cleaner. I remember them having an air mattress one year when the upstairs loft bed was getting replaced. I told him I'd take that if it was there.

His slight nod of agreement almost made me ask if he had other plans for where I'd sleep... but I didn't.

I ended up back outside, slinging Taylor over my shoulder after she and Britt nearly went skinny-dipping in the freezing lake.

Once they were finally settled in bed and Dom was comfortable on the couch, Ayden handed out cups of water to each of them before meeting me in the master bedroom.

The room feels empty, despite the king-sized bed against the far wall flanked by two nightstands. A closet door looms closed to my right, and a cabinet with a built-in electric fireplace sits opposite. No TV, though I'm sure that's what the space above it was meant for. And where there were family portraits, there's currently nothing.

"I took the photos down and just put them into the drawers in the closet," Ayden says as he closes the door behind us. "We can put them back up later."

I release a heavy sigh. "Thanks for doing that..."

Guilt is such an interesting sensation. One that is so difficult to find relief from. It's like a disease that's incurable but isn't visible on the outside. One that doesn't always show itself, but in the midst of the memory of it, crawls across my skin like little needles threatening to break into my muscle.

It's terrible.

Looking down at him staring at me, I press my lips together and move toward the closet. "The air mattress in here?"

He doesn't say anything, nor does he nod.

"Why'd you stop drinking tonight?" he asks, just as I'm opening the door to the wardrobe.

"Wasn't feeling it." It's an obvious lie. "Is it?" I flip the light on, seeing boxes stacked on top of one another at the opposite side of the walk-in. "In here."

"Keo."

I drop my chin and shrug my shoulders. "I didn't want you to feel pressured to drink, so I just... stopped. It's not a big deal."

He hums softly, and I turn to look in his direction. He has a genuine smile on his lips as he shakes his head. "The air mattress had a hole in it, so I tossed it out on trash collection day." He puts his hands into his low hanging sweats. "Sorry."

The groan I release is *definitely* filled with irritation. "I'm not crawling into bed with Kali, and Dom is basically my size. That couch won't do."

Ayden then chuckles and slowly gestures toward the bed.

Nope.

I cannot. I'm not *that* strong.

"It's huge, Keo." He grabs the hem of his shirt, turning toward the bed as he pulls it off slowly, revealing his back. "I'll put a pillow wall between us."

I'm not even sure he registers what he's just done. I've seen his chest plenty of times, but never his back. Which—unfortunately for me—is just as distracting.

"If that'll make you feel more comfortable," he adds.

And as much as I want to take in every inch of him, it's the scar that catches me instead. It runs from the middle of his spine all the way down to his tailbone.

"Ayden..."

"Hmm?" He gazes over his shoulder at me, and I think he clocks the shock written all over my face. "Shit."

"What the fuck happened?" I whisper-shout.

"Goddamn it." He turns toward me and drops quickly onto the bed, hands covering his face like he can hide from me. "It's nothing."

Bull-fucking-shit. He's not doing this right now. I'm not letting him shut me out *again*.

I cross the room in a heartbeat, grabbing his shoulder and forcing him onto his side.

"Keo!" he hisses through clenched teeth. Even as he squirms and kicks at me, I keep him pinned long enough to get a closer look. The scar, long and deep, is unmistakably medical.

"Why do you have this? Did someone do this to you?"

His sweats slip low on one side, revealing another scar slashed across his hip.

"Holy shit, Ayden, what—"

"I got into a car accident," he mumbles, swatting my hand away as he scrambles back until he's pressed against the headboard, his chest heaving. "Oh my god, you're strong."

Swallowing hard, the feeling of guilt already beginning to creep in, I mutter, "Sorry... I didn't hurt you, did I?"

He shakes his head. "No..." I'm not entirely sure I believe him.

"When was the accident, that scar looks... relatively new." I should know, I've seen plenty of them in my line of work.

"Last year." He pauses, as if wrestling with the words. I fight the urge to go to him, but the pain etched across his face begs me to take care of him. "I'd been drinking... and I drove my boyfriend and me home. I guess I lost control and wrapped the car around a pole."

Holy shit. My stomach drops.

"It was bad. I spent a long time recovering. I had surgery on my spine, my leg..." His eyes finally meet mine, and it's nearly instantly that he starts to hyperventilate. "Keo, I don't even remember drinking that much. I swore I only had one drink. The whole accident is a blur—I don't remember anything."

His words come faster and faster, my head spinning just trying to keep up. He shoots to his feet, pacing the narrow space between the wall and the bed.

"I would've never driven drunk. I wouldn't do that! I don't even know why—"

"Hey, hey..."

"—he let me drive. I swear I'd never put myself or anyone in danger like that. I'm so fucking stupid for—"

I cross the room in four long strides and cut him off, grabbing the back of his head and pulling him hard into my chest. "Breathe,

Ayden. Stop talking and just breathe for me.”

He drags in a shaky breath, his arms wrapping tight around my torso. I fold my other arm over his shoulders, holding him there.

“It’s alright.” I’m not going to press him with questions, but it’s clear now why he doesn’t drink. Why he fears driving. Why he called the Uber that night. Why he’ll likely *never* touch alcohol again. “I’ve got you. There’s nothing to worry about with me.”

He only shakes his head, staying silent.

I press my cheek lightly to his forehead and close my eyes for a brief moment, letting myself think.

He’s been so afraid to tell me anything real about *him*. I just want to understand.

Why he can’t let me in.

Why he stayed away until it was too late.

Why I care so fucking much that I’ll ruin everything if I’m not careful. Just like I did eight years ago.

“Come on,” I murmur, stepping back.

Without saying more, I guide him with a hand on his shoulder, turning him toward the bed. He drops his head, and I hate that it falls in shame.

He pulls back the blanket and crawls in, shifting all the way to the far side. I flick off the lamp on the nightstand, kick off my shoes, but keep every layer of clothing on. This isn’t the time to be anything but a friend to Ayden—I won’t risk having anything misconstrued.

Sliding onto the bed, I settle just close enough that I can reach out and touch him if I wanted.

“Tell me. Why are you so worried about letting me in, Ayden?”

His sigh carries the weight of indignation. “I’m afraid of what you’ll think of me. How you’ll... see me...”

Silence stretches between us, and I can’t help but wonder—if he only knew what I’ve done, how much he’d hate me. I’ve never let myself imagine how he’d react if he ever learned the truth of my actions, or the consequences they carried.

“I worry that you’ll be the one to disappear, and this time, not come back,” he murmurs. “Like I did.”

I slide one arm under my pillow, and with the other, I reach out, letting my hand rest at the center of his back.

“You’re wrong, sunshine... so fucking wrong.”

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We didn't speak after that. I simply laid on my side, feeling his warm fingertips trace up and down the scar on my spine.

I'm not sure how long I forced myself to stay awake, but I drifted off before his hand stopped moving. For the first time since that night on the couch when we were younger, I slept peacefully.

No thoughts of waking up to Michael.

No thoughts of the fight waiting for me when I did.

No nightmares of the accident—fleeting fragments, but never the full memory.

I don't blame what happened between us eight years ago on my fear of telling Keo about the abuse. It's the stigma, the embarrassment that it "couldn't happen to a man," that keeps me silent.

Telling him about the accident would open more questions, inevitably circling back to my relationship over the past six years.

Maybe I should follow his lead and actually seek therapy.

I'm a goddamn mess. But these past hours—the calm, the closeness—have been the most serene I've felt in a long time. I don't want to wake up, but as light spills through the curtains, I know I have to.

I squeeze my eyes tight before slowly peeling them open, letting out a half-groan, half-sigh. It's warm, the bed so comfortable it begs

me to stay.

Or maybe it isn't the mattress at all. Maybe it's the way I'm held possessively. I freeze completely, unwilling to move.

I can see the arm that's inked from wrist to chest in a tribal design. He's part Polynesian, and I know that each section carries meaning, though I'm not entirely sure what each one signifies. One consistent motif stands out though: Fire.

He's always had a strange obsession with it. Ironic, considering he became a firefighter.

I've wanted to study the ink more closely, and I could... if it weren't for the way he has me held.

One arm is under mine, stretching across my chest with his hand resting lightly at my throat. The other is tucked beneath me, wrapped around my midsection. His body is flush against my back, one knee positioned snugly between my thighs.

The hand at my neck alone is enough to make me painfully hard—but it's the control he exerts in this position that really does it.

I haven't breathed. Maybe I haven't even blinked.

A soft snore brushes the back of my head, barely audible. His breath glides over the nape of my neck, and I bite down hard on my bottom lip.

Don't wiggle your hips, Ayden. Don't...

It's like my brain said, *"Fuck you, I'll do what I want,"* and I do the exact opposite. I rub against him, and I'm not sure if I'm grateful I don't feel anything press against my ass or not.

Probably for the best. The thought of his cock should not be at the forefront of my mind.

Or how it would feel. Or taste.

A whimper escapes my throat, though I'm blaming it strictly on being thirsty.

For your former stepbrother.

Oh, fuck off, brain.

I take a deep breath, hold it, shift my leg, softly grab his hand, and literally roll out of bed. I land gracefully on all fours, careful not to thump too loudly.

Peeking over the edge of the bed, just enough to see Keoni still asleep, I release the air slowly and as quietly as possible. My eyes betray me as I cautiously take in every inch of his... clothed body. No wonder I couldn't feel anything—he's still in his jeans.

I stand, inching toward the door and grabbing my shirt from the night before. One last glance over my shoulder brings a pang of regret, then I step out. Pulling the shirt on in the hallway, I turn toward the kitchen, where Dom and Kali sit at the table.

Honestly, this couldn't be a better situation. I don't have to face the awkwardness of waking up in Keoni's arms. We have guests, so we won't have the ability to talk about it.

"Good morning, Ayden," Kali says with a smile, lifting her glass of water at me. "Couldn't find the coffee."

Shit. "Sorry about that. We are all out."

"Don't worry about it," she hums.

Dom grunts. "That couch sucked, and not waking up to coffee sucks more."

"You could've gone home, but you *loooooove* us and wanted to make sure we didn't die."

He rolls his eyes before looking at me. "Pierce up yet? We can all pile into the back of his truck, and he can drop us off at our cars."

I shake my head. "How about Brittany and Taylor?"

He mirrors my head shake. "But they're stirring. Pretty sure one of them farted."

Kali throws her head back with mirth.

This doesn't feel like Keoni's coworkers in our cabin—it feels more like a family. It was obvious last night, but even more so now. I like this... and I can't believe how stupid I was not to ask for help to get away from Michael sooner so I could have this.

Sapphire Valley is starting to feel more like home than ever, and I hope I can stay here until the day I die.

Footsteps approach from behind, and I swivel to see Keoni rubbing the back of his neck, striding toward me.

"Good morning," he says, his voice deeper than usual. *Yummy.*

"Morning. You're taking us to our cars." Dom doesn't ask—he demands it, which has Kali starting up her laughter again.

Keo steps up beside me, letting out a low grunt. "I'm not on the clock, no ordering me around in my own home. I could've used a few more hours of sleep."

"Good quality air mattress?" Kali asks. "I can't stand those. I'd rather camp outside on the grass."

"Sure, we can blame that." He chuckles, and I catch his gaze flick to mine. "It gave me the best sleep I've ever had."

Heart in dick. Immediately.

After dragging Brittany and Taylor out of bed, Keoni drove them back to their cars at the station. I told him I'd stay behind to clean up the mess outside. He argued for a moment, telling me to wait for him, but I didn't back down—what else am I going to do while I wait?

I'm already anxious as hell, considering it's obvious he knows how we slept last night. All my brain can do is remind me that I wiggled my ass against him to see if he had morning wood.

Ugh, Ayden.

An hour passes before he steps back through the door, two cups of coffee in hand.

Our eyes meet, and the moment I smile, he does too.

Goddamn it. A sense of euphoria rushes over me, and flutters of excitement swirl in my stomach. I've also noticed my heart races the same now as it had when we were living together as stepbrothers anytime I saw him.

I'm crushing so fucking hard.

He moves across the living room to the dining table that separates us, and sits. Setting my coffee cup down, he gestures to the seat across from him.

I take it without argument, knowing exactly where this is going.

He wants to talk.

Once he takes a sip, he says, "Talk to me about the accident. Slowly." He tilts his head, loose strands of hair falling to the side. "And don't worry about what I think. I don't matter."

I take a drink of my own coffee and sigh through my nose.

"It happened last year, around Christmas. We'd just seen a movie, and I swore I'd had only one drink." I focus on keeping my gaze on his. "It was bad. My memory of the entire day is jumbled and distorted. I don't even remember getting in the car."

When I pause, he prompts, "You said something about not driving, or not normally doing it?"

My chest tightens. As I feared it would, it's leaning into my relationship with Michael. That's going to take a lot more coffee and courage I *don't* have right now to talk about.

"I never liked driving in San Fran, so I rarely did it. I'm not entirely sure why I was going so fast. Apparently, I took us off the road right into a pole."

"Fuck, Ayden."

I wince and take another sip.

"At least I didn't kill anyone—"

"No. Thank whoever the fuck I have to that **you** survived." He exhales heavily, chest falling with the sigh. "Your ex?"

"He had a few scrapes and bruises but otherwise was uninjured. It's possible I made a last-second move to take the brunt of the impact..." I don't know if that's true, but judging from my injuries and Dr. Yadav's comments, only one side of the car took the hit. As sad as it sounds—and I won't say it aloud—I wish I'd made a less selfish decision and turned the car so Michael would have been hurt instead...

"You don't remember anything, then?"

I shake my head. "I get fragments here and there; nightmares sometimes, but it's like a scrambled puzzle I can't put together. Nothing makes sense—the perspective is always outside my body. I've seen myself being carried *into* the car, others stepping into it. I see myself in the passenger seat, out of control." I rest my elbow on the table and press my eye into the ball of my palm. "I barely remember the damn movie, *Keo*. I fucked up so badly, I nearly lost my job. Drinking and driving? I was lucky I had help. Otherwise, having my license suspended for two years would have been the least of my problems."

"Sunshine, look at me."

Before lifting my gaze to meet his, I rub my face in frustration.

All I see there is understanding. There's no hint of judgement, anger, or disappointment.

"It's alright."

I'm not entirely sure why, but those simple words fill me with warmth.

He smiles at me, his full five o'clock shadow doing nothing to hide the dimple on his right cheek. "What matters is that you're alive."

When he reaches across the table, I pause for a moment, then place my hand in his. "Thanks for telling me."

"Thanks... for listening."

His grip on me is just as possessive feeling as it was in bed earlier. "I'm pretty damn good at it, you know... listening. That being said, I expect you to tell me more, since we are closely approaching the thirty days."

I let out a nervous laugh. "Slow and steady."

He hums. "Very slow. Turtle pace."

"I was always a slow runner."

I don't bring attention to the fact his thumb is rubbing against the back of my hand.

"You should join me on my morning jogs." He leans against his elbow while bringing his coffee to his lips. His murmur into the mug is too low for me to hear, but I think he says something about stamina.

"Hmm?"

"Nothing. Do you want to go out tonight?"

Well, that was a shift. "Where?"

"I don't know. Dinner?" My fucking face heats. "We've eaten in every night I'm off, and I'm no cook, so let me treat you."

I'm surprised my swallow isn't audible.

"It's nothing, really. Look at it as a thank you. For cleaning out the master bedroom, cooking for us, and, you know, keeping the cat alive."

As if on cue, Clover meows.

"What do you say?"

I say hell fucking yes.

Even if he doesn't classify this as a date, my heart and brain are at war with one another about the classification of said "activity."

My smile shifts from small to completely rakish. "Sounds like fun. Do I get to pick?"

He barks out a laugh. "Not a chance. I've already got a place in mind."

The way my heart flips scares me. I can't get my hopes up. We're just friends. Just... former stepbrothers.

But that little voice in my head reminds me: no friend—or stepbrother—would hold me the way he did this morning. No one ever has. And I want to cling to the hope that maybe my life can get better. That it can have more meaning with him in it.

I'm far sadder about this day than I thought I would be.

We just had the most wonderful summer, and I'll admit—even though I spent it as Keoni's stepbrother, it will go down as some of the greatest moments of my life.

From white water rafting to a cross-country road trip, to spending a few days in Arizona to see where he'd be going to school—I've had the time of my life.

Stolen glances. Making sure we always sat beside one another. Playing footsies under tables. All things that feel wrong, considering we're related by marriage. Things I shouldn't want. But I can't help that I do.

And now, on August fifteenth, we're standing together as a family at the airport, saying goodbye. He's off to college, and I'm heartbroken.

Keo just finished hugging Alysa, who's practically glowing with excitement. Leilani is happy-crying into our dad's shoulder. And me? I'm holding onto the fragile, impossible hope that he'll suddenly change his mind and stay.

Stay with us.

Stay with *me*.

When he turns after releasing my sister, his stride toward me isn't hesitant. There's a soft glimmer of sadness in his amber eyes—one that has always reminded me of strength and courage, just like his name.

I don't trust my voice, so I say nothing.

He wraps his arms around my head and pulls me into his chest. I return the embrace instantly, almost clingy-like. This isn't the one-armed hug he gave my sister, or the brief squeeze he gave my dad. This one is closer to the one he gave his mom—full, heavy, desperate. And when he exhales against me, I hope it's because he's hurting just as much about leaving.

"I'll come back for the holidays," he murmurs, soft enough that I know no one else hears. "Keep your grades up—and don't let your sister influence you into more troublemaking."

A shaky laugh escapes me, and I give him one last squeeze before we both let go.

I'm proud of myself for not crying, though the ache in my chest tells me the tears will come later.

“See you soon...” He pauses, like he’s weighing every word.
“Ayden.”

Nodding, I step back. “Bye, Keo.”

As my sister moves to my side, we all turn toward the parking lot, away from the terminal.

My phone buzzes in my pocket no more than a few minutes later. When I pull it out, my heart skips—there’s already a text from Keo.

Keo 🦁

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Well, tonight hasn't gone exactly as planned.

This is what I get for trying to do something semi-romantic with my stepbrother. Because while I didn't say it was a date, I absolutely implied—and wanted—it to be one.

The restaurant was reservation-only. Should've expected that for a Saturday night.

We ended up sitting in the car for a while, both of us dressed for a fancy dinner neither of us was going to eat. But somehow, without saying a word, we knew what the other was thinking. Alysa used to say she and Ayden had those twin moments—silent exchanges that needed no explanation.

I'm glad Ayden and I aren't related by blood. Because one, that would be weird. And two, if we were, I'd probably have to move to another country with the way I'm attracted to him.

"The food was... okay," Ayden says, leaning back in the red leather booth of the diner we settled on. "But the ice cream seriously made up for it."

He runs his tongue along the swirl of caramel and vanilla, slow and unbothered, like he doesn't know what it's doing to me. My eyes lock on his mouth, and for the life of me, I don't know how I'm supposed to resist leaning across the table and tasting the sweetness off his lips.

We've spent the better part of the last half hour just laughing—not about the heavy stuff from the past eight years, but about high school. Stupid stories and little memories, the kind that still make us laugh until our sides hurt.

Only when the conversation drifted to me leaving for college did the mood shift back toward the present.

"I didn't mention this," Ayden says, licking a smudge of caramel off his thumb, "but I met the neighbors. Or, well, two cabins. Evelyn and Levi Black—they're the new residents in Echo Ridge. The girl from Sanderson Pine, Calista, was there as well."

His chuckle rolls out, light and easy, and damn, I love hearing it. Especially when it's genuine, and not forced. Lately, those fake flashes have been fewer, but they still creep in sometimes.

"I told you Clover jumped on my throat and caused that bruise? Yeah... that girl Evelyn is crazy."

I've never seen red so fast in my life.

"Excuse me?" I'm halfway out of my seat, to do what I have no idea, before he throws up a hand.

"It was a misunderstanding."

Christ, he should've led with that. "Did she hit you?"

"Mmm... more like put me into a headlock."

"What the fuck—"

"She thought I was peeping on them, I think."

My jaw tightens. I've never hit a woman before—and I hope to God it stays that way.

"Anyway," he goes on. "I think I'm going to hang out with Calista while you're at work. If you're good with that."

My brows knit together. "Uh... yeah?"

"Cool." He takes a bite of his ice cream cone, teeth crunching right through it, and I shudder.

"Don't do that." I reach over, wrapping my hand around his wrist and pulling it away from his face.

He blinks at me. "Do what?"

"Bite into it like some animal. Isn't it cold?"

His shoulders shake with mirth, his laughter bubbling out again.

The edge of my lip twitches upward, warmth pooling in my chest. I could get used to this.

A soft ding pulls my attention to the door. Two cops walk in—one on his phone, the other scanning the room. I don't recognize

either of them, but I've only met a handful on the force. The one looking around catches my eye, gives me a nod, and steps into line with his partner.

"Do you even like ice cream? I'm shocked you got a smoothie." Ayden's voice reels me back in to where I want all my attention anyway.

"Not the biggest fan." Slowly, I drag my hand away from his wrist before I get any reckless ideas, like pulling him across the table and tasting the ice cream off his lips.

"Why'd you want to come here then? We could've just done a drive-through and gone back to the cabin."

I lean forward on my elbows, resting my cheek in my palm while the other hand stirs my drink in lazy circles. "Couldn't let our outfits go to waste. Even if it's just a place like Dairy Queen."

"Fair point. You look really good." His voice drops, almost slips, like he didn't mean to say it out loud. He covers it fast with another bite of his cone.

Goosebumps ripple over my arms.

"You're the prince here, sunshine."

Color floods his face—cheeks, nose, even the tips of his ears. It's beautiful, that shade of red against his perfect features.

"What does that make you?" His voice has an edge to it now, like he's daring me.

"Your knight."

His eyes dip, his chin following, but not before I catch the press of his teeth against his bottom lip.

And fuck, if that action doesn't cause tingles to go straight to my balls.

Something snags his attention. Ayden's head jerks right, then back to me, then right again. The fear that flashes across his face is instant and it yanks me straight into fight mode.

I whip my head left, hands gripping the table, ready to swing at... I don't even know what.

Two cops. Just the same two guys in uniform stepping up toward the counter to order. Not even looking at us. My adrenaline, hot and sharp a second ago, slams into confusion like a deer caught in headlights.

What the hell?

When I snap back to Ayden, his face is pale. Something's wrong.

"Hey, you al—"

"We should go." His voice is clipped. He drops his cone, half eaten, onto the tray and slides out of the booth.

Something twists in my gut. He doesn't just want to leave. He needs to.

I fumble with the table edge, peeling myself out of the cramped booth. My size was never built for these damn things, and it takes me longer than I want to stand. My eyes flick back, one last look at the officers who are ordering their food, or ice cream.

Not a threat that I can tell.

Except Ayden thinks otherwise.

I rush after him, out the front door, the cold night air slapping my face.

"Ayden!"

He literally sprints to the truck and tries to open it. Although this town is safe, I don't just keep my shit unlocked. Turning to me, he looks absolutely petrified.

Had it been from the police?

I'm right in front of him and the moment he's about to say something, I cut in. "What's wrong?"

"Did you see them looking at us?"

Holy shit. Does this tie back to the accident? He said people helped him, but I never really understood what that meant. Helped him how? Covered for him? Got him out of something? Is he running from them now?

No. That's insane. Right?

He's talking fast—spilling words like a dam breaking—but I only catch fragments due to my head being too loud.

I have to play this carefully. The way he panicked at the idea of me judging him... I can't come at him like he's overreacting or broken. That'll just push him away.

If he's in trouble, yeah, the right thing to do is steer him toward fixing it legally. By the book.

Except, I'd rather walk naked in the woods with slabs of meat hanging all over me for a predator to have its next bite, than to be separated from him again. As stupid as that is, I can't send him back if that's what's going on.

"—I think they were taking my photo."

I place a hand gently on the curve of his shoulder, and that's enough to silence him.

"Listen to me." I sigh, and as he leans back against the truck, I step closer. Our bodies are so near that only the wind could slip between us. "You're safe. Whatever you think you saw, don't worry about it."

The moment his gaze starts drifting over my shoulder, I catch him. "Eyes here, Ayden. On me. Don't think about anything else."

His chest rises sharply, his Adam's apple bobbing with a hard swallow.

"Breathe. Tell me what you're afraid of."

A sudden shift in his expression tells me I've said the wrong thing.

"I'm not afraid."

"You clearly are, but it's fine, I'll—"

"It's not fine. Don't treat me like—" He tries to shove me, but I snatch both his wrists and step back. "I'm not scared. I'm just..."

I give him the moment, keeping his wrists in my grip but slowly lowering them between us. He doesn't pull away, but I can see the change in him—panic fading into anger, flickering back and forth as if he can't decide where to land.

Personally, I'd rather him stay angry. I don't want to see him afraid or upset.

I've been so focused on him, I don't hear the footsteps approaching.

"Everything alright out here?"

I suppress the groan rising in my chest.

Releasing one of Ayden's wrists, I turn to see the two officers from inside standing a few feet away. One's still eating his ice cream, the other—the one who must've spoken—has his hands tucked into his pants pockets.

"All good here, officers. Thanks for checking in."

I start to turn back when he asks, "And you?"

I assume he means Ayden. Stepping slightly to the side so they can see I'm not holding him, he mumbles, "I'm fine." He straightens, but keeps his chin low, avoiding eye contact.

Suspicious. Great.

Rather than wait for them to start questioning us, I sigh and go with honesty. "He's not comfortable around police—like a lot of

people these days. It's not just you guys. I'm with the Maple Falls firehouse, under Chief Easton."

The officer grins. "Ah, Dom. I always lose to that son of a bitch in fantasy football."

I force a smile. Truth is, if Ayden wants space from them, I'll respect it. Even if he's being cryptic as hell.

"I'll tell him to ease up."

"Nah, I've got a solid team this year. What's your name? I'll tell him I ran into you."

"Pierce."

The second I say my last name, Ayden squeezes my fingers tight. It's only then I realize my grip on him has shifted—from his wrist to his hand.

"Pierce. Got it. Alright, you two sure you're all good?"

"Yup. Thanks for your concern."

I don't turn away until they're nearly back at their vehicle. Then I release Ayden's hand and face him. "Get in. We can talk on the way home."

He shakes his head. "If it's alright with you, I'd rather not."

There he goes again, shutting down.

"I'm not judging you, if that's what you're worried about. You're not the only one uneasy around them."

"Keoni—" *Damn*, the full name. "—I'm not fucking afraid of them. Just unlock the door."

I pull the key from my pocket and pop the lock. He yanks the door open and throws himself inside, slamming it shut before I can speak.

I stare for a moment, then take the long walk around the back of the truck to the driver's side. I need to understand what's going on with him.

He's got a week left before his thirty days are up. I wonder if he'll tell me in time—or if I'll be forced to find out my own way.



Three Years Prior

“You’ve never been alone a single day of your adult life, Ayden. You need me.”

Anyone would ask what the hell I’m doing. How did Ayden Pierce end up back with his abusive ex—right here, in his apartment?

Even Alysa gives me grief. She swears it’s guilt, that I came back because I left him once before. She couldn’t be more wrong.

I’m terrified of him.

I don’t understand his obsession with me. It’s not like he couldn’t have someone else—he’s good-looking, charming when he wants to be. I’ve seen it. I saw him cheat, then heard the half-assed apology, the tiny flicker of responsibility, before he shoved the blame back on me.

That first time, I should’ve ended it. Maybe things would’ve been different.

Leaning against the closed front door, eyes cast down, I squeeze the lion tattoo inked on my left arm that dangles at my side.

“You know that, right?” he asks, stepping closer.

“Yeah,” I mutter.

“I just want to take care of you. Why fight that? You’re so fucking confusing.” His condescending tone blends with his laughter, tightening

every muscle in my back and chest. "If you'd been with me, this never would've happened."

No. This never would've happened if you'd just left me alone.

That's what I want to say. But instead, I swallow it down, because I know he sent that "mugger" after me in the hospital parking lot.

Do I have proof? No. But it was a little too convenient that he was the officer called to the scene.

He's not just a narcissist—he's got a hero complex, too.

It's not hard to put two and two together. I'm not stupid, even if he implies all the time I am.

"Why wouldn't it have happened, Michael?" I try to keep the petulance out of my voice.

His sigh is heavy with irritation as he closes the short distance between us. I don't want him touching me, but he's proven over and over that what I want doesn't matter.

He grips my chin roughly, forcing my gaze to his. "Because I'd have been there to pick you up from work. Like I always do."

I try to turn my head, but his hand holds me in place. So instead, I look past him into the apartment. "Sure."

His nails dig into my cheeks, sharp enough to sting. My hands fly up instinctively to push him away.

"We do this every couple of weeks, babe. It's getting old."

When I shove, he lets me—for a second—before coming right back, rougher than before. His hand clamps around my throat, pinning me to the door. I swing my fists, but he doesn't budge.

When he finally lets go after 'asserting his dominance', I grab at my own throat, coughing.

"I wasn't that rough. Stop being my dramatic princess."

I don't know which word I hate more—princess or babe.

Or maybe it's simpler than that. I just hate him.

But what can I do?

I can't call the cops. Even if one of them would help me, what are the odds I'd get a good one? There are advocacy hotlines, but he'd find out before anyone could actually reach me.

I could call Dad.

Maybe run to Keoni...

But they'd probably judge me. They'd see me the way Michael does—weak. A man broken down into exactly what he's made me.

A sudden grip on the back of my neck snaps me from my spiraling thoughts. Then his mouth's against mine. I claw at his shirt, trying to shove him back, but he overpowers me easily, his tongue forcing its way in.

"Stop!" I slam my elbow against his throat, desperate to push him off. "No, Mike! Stop!"

He tries again, and this time, I bite down hard on his lip. He grunts, stumbling back a step.

The smile he gives me—angry, amused—sends a shiver of pure terror down my spine.

"Ayden, you're testing my patience. Let's just fuck this out of our system. You'll get over it in the morning."

He advances on me again and I throw my hands up. "I don't want to. Don't fucking touch me. We need space!"

The laugh he produces has my mind prepping to separate itself from my body for protection from what's going to come. "We're together, Ayden. I can touch what's mine."

"This is me stating: I don't give you consent."

He tuts. "You're my boyfriend. That's consent, babe."

*I shake my head. "It's not. It's... **not**."*

His chest expands as he straightens. To anyone else, it might look like he's calming down—understanding, ready to let it go.

But I know better. I've seen this before, and I know what comes after.

The choices in front of me don't favor me. Each one hurts. But if I have to choose, I'll take the physical abuse over the mental.

At least bruises fade.



"Mr. Pierce?" The sweet woman at the counter calls my name, and I quickly get to my feet. "Dr. Alvarez will speak with you now."

*I'd thoroughly planned on seeing Calista this week, but Saturday night reminded me that I really need to figure out my life **here**. Regardless of what happens in a few days, if I find the strength to tell Keoni about my relationship with Michael or not, I'm not going anywhere.*

Whether that is me living in the cabin with him, or moving into an apartment in downtown Maple Falls, is still to be decided.

I walk through the single door to the right of the reception desk, and move into the small hall before turning right into a room that reads "Office."

The male with light brown skin and rimmed glasses stands. "Ayden." He rounds the table and extends his hand out to me. "It's so good to meet you. Your father spoke highly of you."

He... did?

Taking his hand when I'm close enough, I suppress the urge to ask that question.

"Thanks for seeing me, Dr. Alvarez."

"Of course, please—sit."

I do as he says, lowering myself into the plastic white chair across from his rolling one. He closes the laptop on the desk and offers me a smile. "When you called, I must say, I was surprised."

I force a smile back and clear my throat, cringing at how obvious it feels. "I'd meant to come sooner, but things have been..." I tilt my head side to side, weighing my word choice. "Difficult."

"There's no need to explain. You said on the phone you had something to discuss? We shipped your father's belongings to the cabin in Sapphire Valley."

Nodding, I cross one leg over the other. "Yes, we received them. It's not about that. I was wondering if you had any openings—for ICU nurses, general nurses, really anything. I'm registered in California, currently at SF General. I submitted my RN licensure application through DORA yesterday."

His smile widens. "You'd leave California for a small town like Maple Falls? Walk away from SF General? That's... surprising."

"I would," I answer without hesitation.

"That would've made your father very happy. Are you staying up at the cabin?"

"Yes, at least for now."

He hums softly but doesn't move to reopen the laptop. My stomach tightens. Maybe this was presumptuous. He doesn't know my work ethic, and maybe I've romanticized this small-town hospital thing. Maybe it's no different than the politics of a big city.

The silence thickens, stretching. For a moment, I consider standing up and walking out.

"From my understanding, the process of transferring your license takes four to six weeks. Have you gone through the background check?"

I knew that question was coming, so I don't flinch. "I'll be doing it next week. I've set up an appointment in Denver."

He nods once more, and grins, pulling out all the wrinkles in his face. "Once everything is set, and you're legal to work here in Colorado as a registered nurse, we would be lucky to have you. Do you have references from SF General?"

"I do."

As he pulls out a pen and paper, I say, "Dr. Markus Yadav."

"I'll get in contact with him once all the paperwork is submitted, you know, just so I'm not showing favoritism or anything." He winks at me and tucks his pen away. "Let me know once everything comes back, and you've got yourself a job."

After thanking him about a million times—and getting lots of 'don't mention it'—he gives me a quick tour of the main hospital in Maple Falls. It's nothing like SF General, but honestly, I think I like it more. I can already imagine myself bouncing between general nursing one day and the ICU the next. It feels like a place where my days won't be boring.

And the fire station where Keoni works is just down the street. I could bring him lunch, or dinner, whenever he is free.

Thinking about him drags me back to how we left things Saturday night. I'd gone straight inside, right upstairs, and shut myself off. Because I know what I saw—one of the officers definitely had his phone pointed at us. For what, I'm not sure, but I had a good enough idea of what it *could* mean.

That night, I texted Michael.

Michael

Please don't tell me you've had me followed here in Colorado,
Michael

It's gone unread, and it's Tuesday.

What else has gone unread, is my text to Keoni.

Keo 👑

Keo, I'm sorry I reacted that way

I'll start seeing a therapist, I think it'll be good for me

I'm sorry...

I know I don't deserve to ask, but please don't ignore me

Instead of sitting down for lunch, I grab a sub to go and call a cab back to the cabin. On the ride, I wonder if I'd shown up at the station, would Keo have talked to me? Kali or Taylor probably would've made him, or at least insisted I eat with them.

But I don't want to eat with them.

I want Keo.

As the cab winds through Sapphire Valley, I catch myself itching to tell the driver to turn left instead so I could see Calista. Then I remind myself—it's the middle of the week. Odds are, no one's home. And if she is, she's probably working.

Truth is, I have no idea what she even does. Maybe she's rich and doesn't have to work at all. Maybe her boyfriend works, and she just stays home.

I don't know, but I'll make a mental note to figure that out sometime this week. But, showing up at her cabin at two in the afternoon doesn't feel like the right thing to do.

The moment the trees break and Wildhart comes into view, my heart sinks.

There's a car parked out front. Not Keo's truck. Not a work van either, so the hope that the plumbers showed up weeks early is out.

As we roll closer, I see him. Standing on the patio.

Oh no.

His gaze cuts to the cab, and it's already too late to tell the driver to turn around. I could, sure—but he'd probably just get in his car and follow me.

Maybe I should have the driver head to the station instead. That's probably smarter.

But what if it's not?

Shit.

How the hell did he even know about this place?

The cab pulls to a stop beside the black sedan. My pulse spikes as I dig for my phone.

Keo 👑

Please come home. I need help

I make sure the text goes through before silencing my phone.

Grabbing the paper bag with my sandwich, I pay the driver and step out.

My walk toward the porch is slow, cautious. Michael leans against the wall, arms crossed over his broad chest, anger carved deep into his face. His wide nose flares, thick lips pressed into a hard frown.

I swallow, forcing out a shaky breath. "Michael. What're you doing here?"

He pushes off the wall, moving to stand right at the top of the steps, staring down at me. "No hi? No 'it's good to see you'?"

"Hi," I mutter, glancing at the taxi as it pulls away, vanishing down the road. "How'd you know where to find me?"

A groan rumbles from him. "How about you invite me in, and we talk inside? It's cold as fuck."

The last thing I want is to be trapped in an enclosed space with him. I shake my head. "I don't think that's a good idea. Why are you here?"

The moment he steps down, I retreat one step back.

"I'm just here to talk. Don't be so dramatic, Ayden. Come on, you'll get cold too."

My skin burns hot, my chest tight. Freezing out here is the last thing I'm worried about.

When I don't move, or answer, he shakes his head and digs into his pocket. "Fine."

He pulls out a single key. My brows lift, confusion sparking.

"You know, spare keys are dangerous," he seethes, angling toward the rounded lamp beside the front door. "Even out here in the middle of nowhere. Hiding it in the light? Couldn't be more obvious. But you're not living alone—"

My heart stops. "What?"

“—so what do you have to be afraid of? Now get inside, and let’s fucking talk.”

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I can't feel my legs as I follow Michael into the cabin. The loud meow is the only sound besides our footsteps.

He doesn't remove his shoes, and neither do I. I refuse to put myself at a disadvantage if I have to run.

The fact I have to even consider that as an option is sad.

He lifts his head and scans the room, releasing a frustrated grunt before saying, "What're you doing out here, Ayden?"

I swallow down my fear and let out a quiet breath. "What do you mean? I'm living here."

He scoffs. "In a piece of shit like this?"

It isn't that at all. Could it use some renovations? Sure. But it's not a piece of shit. And even if it were, I'd still prefer a cell in Hell over setting foot anywhere near him again. Now that I know freedom—how it feels to breathe—I'll never willingly go back to suffocating.

When he turns, I stay planted a few feet from the front door. I'm not going any farther inside—not with him here.

"I'm happy here," I say steadily.

He tilts his head, his left eye twitching. "Who're you living with?"

He already knows I'm not alone; he made that clear before stepping inside, so the question doesn't surprise me.

"Is he here?" His head jerks as he scans the room.

"No. He isn't here... he's my stepbrother, Michael. That's it." If we were anything other than that, I'd still classify him as that. The last thing I want to do is cause trouble for Keoni.

He scoffs. "You hold hands with your stepbrother?"

I goddamn *knew* it. "You *were* having me followed!"

"You fucking him, too?!" He raises his voice above mine. "Huh?!"

Shaking my head, I glare at him as though he's lost his damn mind. "I can't believe you... Why're you here? **How** are you here?"

He throws his hands up and paces further into the cabin. "Get away from the door, Ayden. Stop being such a scared bitch."

For the briefest moment, I consider snapping back—raising my voice and calling him the psychotic, narcissistic asshole he is, someone who desperately needs psychiatric help. But escalating won't end this conversation any faster.

It may look like I don't have a backbone when it comes to Mike, and suppose I don't, but I've been here before. I've fought back, and it only ever ended with me broken, mentally and physically.

I step a little farther into the cabin, just as Clover comes padding down the stairs toward me. Michael notices her but doesn't comment, instead scoffs at me.

"How'd you enjoy the silent treatment?" His attitude remains the same; a storm of anger and bitterness battling for dominance.

"I hadn't really noticed. It was for the best."

"For you!" He turns quickly, causing my shoulders to jump. "See? You're so selfish. All you think about is yourself!"

Blaming me. Surprise, surprise.

"You're right," I say while nodding. "I am, and from now on, I'll only think about myself."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. It's what's best for *me*."

I'm not surprised when he kicks the coffee table, sending it crashing into the fireplace. Clover hisses and scurries back upstairs. Good, I don't want her down here, especially around him.

"You have no idea what's best for you, Ayden." He takes an aggressive step toward me. "Need I remind you of what I did for you no longer than a year ago? I saved your fucking ass and you're going to just drop me for your stepbrother's cock?!"

I fight the urge to box myself in and force my arms to my sides. "I'm not fucking him, but even if I were, it wouldn't be any of your business. We **aren't** together."

"Like hell we aren't."

"Michael..." This argument won't get us anywhere, so I pivot. "How did you know where I was?"

I just want confirmation that he used his connections to find out where I've been living. At least then I could reach out to Travis and see if he'd help me sue whatever department was involved. I'm already planning to report those officers. The fact that Michael knew Keoni had grabbed my hand in the parking lot confirms those two were spying on me.

His jaw flexes, the muscle ticking, and I swallow hard.

Seconds drag into what feels like eternity as silence stretches between us.

Then—like a switch flipping—everything changes. His dark eyes soften, and his lips curl into a meek smile. It's terrifying how easily he does this, and it's exactly why none of my so-called friends in San Francisco ever saw the real him.

"Ayden, babe, you know all I want to do is protect you. You think I can just let you go anywhere without knowing where you are?" His hands raise, gesturing for me to come to him. "I'm sorry, look, I'm just jealous. You know how I can get."

"You aren't answering my question." I shake my head and glance over my shoulder, peering through the window beside the front door, hoping to see Keoni's truck. Nothing. Even if he'd taken a sports bike, he'd still not be here by now.

When I turn back, he's edged closer. Instinctively, I shuffle back, circling away from him as best I can. The wall behind me is lined with windows, all of them open to the lake outside.

"Were you on a date on Saturday night?"

I *hate* him.

"No."

"Are you sure? That restaurant you went to—or just sat outside of for fifteen minutes—seemed pretty fancy. A bit too much for dinner with your stepbrother, don't you think?" he patronizes. "Just tell me."

"Wait... how do you know that?"

"We can move past it. *I* can, if you're honest with me."

I run through every possibility and come up empty. How could he have known where I was? I can connect him to pulling my address from some database, but the restaurant? And those officers he clearly sent to—wait.

It's like a lightbulb sputters to life above my head.

"Michael. Are you tracking my phone?!"

He clicks his tongue against his teeth. "There ya go. You aren't as dumb as you play to be."

I suddenly feel violently sick. "Are you fucking kidding me?! You're actually insane!"

All he does is shrug his shoulders.

Shaking my head, I point at the door. "Get out."

The amused smile that crosses his face has every feeling I've had up until this point, shifting to rage.

"No."

"I said get out!" This time, I raise my voice. I wish it startled him, threw him off—but it only makes him laugh.

"Fine. I'll call the goddamn police." I reach for my phone, but he rushes at me before I can pull it out.

"Oh please," he says, grabbing me as I try to sidestep. "I'll just tell them you had one of those exaggerated panic attacks of yours and took it out on me. You did invite me over... remember? No forced entry. Pfft, no one would beli—"

I drive my knee up hard, connecting square between his thighs. His breath bursts out in a ragged gasp, and I shove him with everything I have.

"Fuck you."

He doesn't let go of my wrist. Instead, he yanks me forward a few steps and, using the momentum, hurls me behind him. I catch the back of the couch before I can go sprawling.

The moment I turn, hot pain explodes across my face. My right eye floods with black dots, vision scattering as I stumble backward and drop onto the very cushion I'd fought not to fall on. Being down with him looming above me is the last position I should be in.

"Act like a bitch, get slapped like one."

I raise my hand, touching my temple and feeling liquid on my fingertips. His ring cut me with that hit.

"Get out!" I shout, lifting my chin and trying to stand.

He hovers over me, pressing me back down. His hand pins me, his thumb digging sharply into the space under my collarbone.

"The only way I'm leaving," he grits through his teeth, "is with you, Ayden. If you don't want to work this out here, I'll drag your ass back to California."

I hear a hiss, then the door swings open, slamming hard against the wall.

Michael doesn't hesitate to release me. He stands upright, turning and blocking me from seeing the front door. But I don't need to see to know who just barged in.

"Who the fuck are you?!" Keoni's voice isn't just angry, it's pure beast. "Ayden?"

"Looks like you have a type, but at least I'm not his fucking family," Michael seethes.

The moment he shifts a fraction to the right, Keoni's eyes lock on me. I swear the color drains from his face; his amber eyes darken as if a shadow has passed over them. Anger and raw adrenaline consume him.

He doesn't ask what happened. He doesn't hesitate. He closes the distance between himself and Michael and punches him square in the face.



They say people black out with rage. Not me. I knew exactly what I was doing. I saw my target clearly—and I knew what I wanted.

I don't wonder who this bastard is in our house. I **know**. A dead man.

He doesn't drop from my first blow. I'm certain he saw it coming and tried to lessen it by leaning back. Still, I caught his jaw, and before he can retreat out of reach, I grab a fistful of his shirt.

"Motherfucker!" he spits, swinging wide.

A normal reaction would've been to dodge. Instead, I step in, letting the punch hit awkwardly above my ear. Then I drive my forehead into his and, with years of strength training behind me, hurl him into the wall to my left.

The impact rattles the windows. He's dazed, but it's clear he's had some sort of training, because he's back on his feet faster than he should be.

He pops his neck, then lunges. His frame matches mine—broad shoulders, solid torso—but the second he slams into me, it's obvious it's all for show. Intimidation without bite.

I scoff, hook an arm over the back of his head, force him forward, and drive my knee into his gut. He jabs my ribs, but adrenaline has me numb. All I feel is the rage—pure and consuming—for him daring to lay a hand on Ayden.

"Come on," I growl, dragging him toward the door. "Can't have *shit* in our home."

Kicking open the screen door, I angle us so I can hurl him straight toward the stairs. My boot slams into his chest before he can grab the pillars for support. The sound of his groan as he hits the ground and rolls is satisfying. Landing flat on his tailbone like that had to fucking hurt.

Only then do I glance behind me, seeing Ayden rushing toward the door.

"Stay inside."

I don't wait for a response and stride down the steps. I drive my composite-toed boot into his side, causing him to roll away—more than once—clearly trying to put distance between us.

As he scrambles to his feet, I crack my knuckles, popping each finger against my palms.

"I don't know who the hell you think you are, but you picked the wrong man to fuck with."

He stumbles back, nostrils flaring, his skin flushing darker with fury. "I'm his goddamn boyfriend!"

"I don't give a shit if you're the fucking Pope." I advance on him, forcing him to retreat toward the parked black sedan. My truck's parked tight behind it—on purpose—but in seconds I'm regretting not blocking the cabin instead.

He wrenches open the passenger-side door, digs into the seat, and pulls out a pistol.

"Michael!" Ayden screams.

Of course, he didn't listen and stay inside.

My eyes lock on the barrel aimed at me. I've never been shot, but in my line of work it's always been a possibility. I'd be a fool not to take it seriously. But backing down? Not happening.

"The second you flick that safety off, you'll have one chance," I warn, my voice low. "If you don't kill me, I'll take that gun and feed the soil your brain matter."

For a heartbeat, silence crushes us. No one speaks. The only proof of life is the rise of his chest—and the matching weight of my own breathing.

When his eyes shift from me to the cabin, rage burns away any trace of fear.

"Don't you fucking look at him."

Whether it's my words or something else, his demeanor changes—unhinged to eerily calm. He lowers the gun, lifts his other hand, and rakes it through his chopped, curly hair.

I dare a glance at Ayden—phone in hand, aimed at us both.

Michael's smile wavers. "What a story to tell when I get home; how you're fucking your stepbrother, Ayden. I always knew you had issues—"

I take a hard step toward him, but Ayden's voice cuts through. "Leave, Michael."

He tuts. "I'm reporting you to the medical board."

The comment is meaningless, I know Ayden's done nothing wrong, but the audacity makes my blood boil. If he weren't holding that gun, I might already have killed him. And maybe I'd like to believe I have some morals, that I couldn't go through with it... but he *touched* Ayden. Hurt him. I saw the blood. Saw him pinning him down. Heard him scream for this bastard to get out.

Boyfriend? Pfft. More like missing ex, if I have anything to say about it.

After another tense standoff, Michael steps back, circling around the car.

I stride to the vehicle and yank open the passenger door just as he slides into the driver's seat. He clutches the gun tight to his chest, eyes narrowing as I lean in.

"If you ever come here again, I'll kill you. Speak to him again, I will kill you. If I so much as suspect you're thinking about him? Guess what—I'll kill you. See a fucking trend here?"

"Threatening a police officer?" he snarls. "Guess you're both idiots."

"Do you understand?!" I shout.

"Get out." He jerks the gun toward me, eyes hard. "We're done here."

I want to smash my fist into his smug face one last time, but instead, I lean back and slam the car door shut.

He pulls forward, makes a hard U-turn, and peels off our property. Only when the sound of his tires fade do I turn and meet Ayden's gaze.

I can't quite place what's in his eyes.

Fear. Pain. A hollow distance between his body and his mind. He's falling, even while standing upright. His skin has gone pale—

paler even than when he was sick.

When he takes a step back, I fear he'll completely run away from me. His movement jolts me from my stillness, and I stride toward him.

The second his gaze starts to drift away, I say, "Ayden, wait." I take the three stairs in a single bound. He slips inside, but I'm right behind him before he can head for the staircase.

I don't touch him. Instead, I move in front of him, blocking the way. The blood streaking his temple makes my hands clench and unclench.

I'm opening my mouth to say *something*, when he speaks first.

"Are you okay?" His voice trembles. "I'm so—"

"Don't you dare apologize." I exhale, the tightness loosening in my chest. "Am *I* okay? Are *you* okay?"

I raise my hand toward his face, deliberately slow, watching for a reaction—a flinch, a recoil, anything that might show he's still shaken. But he doesn't move. He only looks at my hand, then back up at me.

"Physically, I'm fine. It doesn't hurt."

I'm calling bullshit. The bruise is already forming, and I'm close enough to see the pulse in his temple beating. I curl my fingers into a fist, fighting the urge to touch him.

"Can I clean you up?"

Saturday night taught me Ayden fears being treated as fragile. Like he's terrified of falling into some stereotype—that one of us has to be the masculine, and the other the feminine. I've never once seen him as the latter. Not ever. But something tells me he's been conditioned to feel that way.

When he doesn't answer, I soften my voice.

"Can I?"

I watch his throat bob before he nods.

I lead him into the kitchen, then head to the bathroom for the first aid kit, my phone balanced between my ear and shoulder as it starts to ring.

"Hello, Sapphire Valley security."

"Hi, this is Keoni Pierce from Wildhart. Did a black sedan with the license plate 728-RLD just leave?"

"Yes, Mr. Pierce."

"Good. Add it to the no-entry list. The individual's name is Michael. I'll give you his last name tomorrow. He is **not** allowed back on the property."

"Yes, sir. We'll pull the surveillance and add his photo to the wall for easy identification by all stationed guards."

"Thank you."

I hang up quickly and shove the phone into my pocket.

With the kit in hand and a damp washcloth ready, I return to the kitchen. Ayden is leaning against the dining table, his back to the living room, eyes fixed on the window above the sink. There's a distance in his gaze so stark it's almost visible, like a fog hanging over him.

I set the kit and cloth beside him, then turn to the cabinets for a glass. Neither of us speaks—me for too many reasons, him likely for just as many. My adrenaline still burns hot, my pulse racing, but I'm not shaking. Maybe my need to stay strong outweighs the fact that a gun was pointed at me minutes ago.

I down a swallow of water, refill the glass, then turn off the faucet.

When I face Ayden again, I hold it out to him. He lifts his head, meeting my gaze, and without breaking eye contact, takes the cup.

"Thanks..."

"Mhmm."

Only after a few sips does he rest it in his lap, holding his gaze on it.

I pick up the washcloth, step between his legs—he shifts, spreading them wider to make room—and begin cleaning him up.

"He isn't my boyfriend."

Drawing the damp towel along his jaw, wiping away the drying line of blood, I let out an unamused chuckle.

"As I told him, he could've been the Pope. I don't care."

My other hand settles against the curve of his neck as I continue carefully cleaning around the cut.

"Suppose this was one way to tell you." He sighs, and I can see he wants to turn away, but I've got him positioned so he can't. "I know you told me not to apologize, but I have to. I'm sorry, Keo—ouch!"

He hisses through his teeth when I brush too close to the cut. It isn't deep, but those always seem to hurt worse. The gash sits near

his eye, forcing it partly closed.

"You did that on purpose..." he mutters.

"Possibly... but what did you mean? One way to tell me, what?"

He shuts his eyes and tilts his head back. I set the cloth aside and rummage through the first aid kit for what I need.

"He's the reason I never came..."

My hand freezes over the box. A twitch jerks through my fingers, veins rising beneath my skin. Rage floods me at those simple words.

"I should've asked for help a long time ago. I wanted to."

"How long?"

He pauses, and I shift to peer down at him.

"Six years."

"Ayden..."

"I know... I know... Fuck, I know... Never in my life did I imagine being in this position, and until you are, you have *no* idea how hard it is to get out..." He shakes his head, teeth clenched.

"How embarrassing..."

That's when he begins to try and pull away, to retreat and close himself off as he has done this entire time. But I'm *done* letting him push me aside.

"Look at me. I need you to see what I'm saying, not just hear it."

The second his gaze locks back on mine, I go on.

"I'm going to help you—not because you can't help yourself, but because I want to. Because I *need* to."

The way his eyes search mine before he bites down on his lower lip nearly undoes me. The urge to kiss him is so strong it sparks through my senses, leaving an ache in my chest as I force it back.

"But that starts with you telling me everything, without worrying that I'll blame or judge you. Whatever you say, I'll believe you. I'll keep you safe, Ayden."

His eyes redden, and I can tell he's holding back tears, forcing in a deep breath to stop them from falling. He'll learn I don't care if he cries.

The only thing I care about is him.

And if that means living a miserable life alone because I can't have the one person I want, then so be it. But while he's here, he belongs to no one else—even if he doesn't realize that yet.



*Age 20
A week before Christmas*

My bags are packed, and I can't express how excited I am to be heading back to Colorado.

Alysa is coming home too; she says she's making it her mission to get out at least once a year. Since we're all congregating at the cabin for Christmas, this feels like the right time. My stepmom mentioned that Keoni will be there as well. I haven't seen him in two years, and if I'm honest with myself, I'm nervous with anticipation.

Yes, we'll probably have to talk about what happened, but we've had time apart. Time to build our own lives. And even if it's sick to admit, I've thought about him now and then.

I've got Michael now. Keo has probably found a nice girl to settle down with. I can't imagine someone like him staying single.

Checking my phone, I see a text: Alysa just landed in Denver.

The excitement inside my chest spikes. Even more than it had seconds before.

My flight leaves in a few hours. I like to get to the airport at least an hour early, maybe more sometimes, but I want to spend as much time with Mike as I can.

Speaking of... the front door opens to his apartment, and I slip through the bedroom door toward him. He smiles at me, and goddamn, he's handsome. We've been dating six months now—met in college, and moved in together a few weeks ago.

It's all moved so fast, but I have no complaints. I'm genuinely happy with him.

"Hey, you," he says, dropping his bag and wrapping me in a hug. "Holy shit, what a day."

"How's training going?" He's in the police academy now after graduating with his associate degree. I love that he's following in his father's footsteps, just like I want to.

"Long." He pulls me close again, pressing his lips to mine in a devastating kiss.

After he leans back, I tilt my head to keep our gazes locked.

"I'm going to miss you."

His eyebrow quirks. "You're going to miss me?"

His question is half-playful, half-serious.

"Yeah. For Christmas. I'll be gone for two weeks, remember?"

He steps out of our embrace, and I frown at the look on his face. "What?" he asks.

I literally told him about this weeks ago, how excited I was. Shit, I bought the tickets before we even started dating.

"I'm... going to Colorado. I told you about it."

Seeing the disappointment on his face makes my stomach twist.

"Ayden, I thought you canceled your plans. Shouldn't we spend our first Christmas together?"

The thought did cross my mind, but we'll have so many more. "No, I didn't. I'm really—"

"I already told my parents you'd be at dinner with us." There's a hint of agitation in his tone as he turns toward the bathroom. "But, alright, if that's what you want." The way he says it, I feel like it doesn't match how he truly feels.

"Mike... I haven't seen my family in two years."

"Yeah, but you can go anytime. It's just a few states over." He opens the bathroom door. "Whatever. It's fine. I get it. They're definitely more important."

My stomach twists, and despite having eaten not long ago, it feels like it's ready to cave in. I glance down at my phone, then up at the closing door.

It's fine.

*I can go next year. He's right — this is our first Christmas together.
I pull out my phone, shooting a quick text to my dad and Alysa that something came up, and that I'll see them next year.
"Mike, wait. I'll stay."*



AGE 21

TWO WEEKS BEFORE CHRISTMAS

"Why, Michael?" I slam the trunk of my car shut, bags stacked inside, as he suddenly appears at my side.

"Why do you always insist on going during the holidays? Why can't you go any other time?" His agitation is clear.

I don't understand why he is acting this way. It isn't like I've not told him about me leaving weeks ago. For months, in fact. Plus, it isn't just around the holidays... I planned a surprise trip to see Alysa in the summer, but conveniently, Michael booked us a trip to Los Angeles for the exact same week.

"I've told you; it's the only time I can see my sister. She lives in the UK."

He rolls his eyes. "You always use her as an excuse."

"It's not an excuse!" I raise my voice. The flash of rage on his face makes me instinctively step back. "Mike, why don't you just come with me?"

He shakes his head. "I don't know if I'm ready to meet your sister. The way she sounds when you're on the phone with her and I'm around gives me the impression she hates me."

"You don't know that." I know for a fact she can't stand him, but I hope once she meets him, things will change. He really is nice... when he isn't controlling, or tired, or...

"Next year. I promise."

I groan. "I don't want to wait another year to see my sister..." And Keoni. I saw my dad in February when he came with Leilani for a vacation.

It was nice showing them around San Francisco. They met Mike, and I could sense they weren't his biggest fans.

It was a rough time—he was still in the first couple months of being a beat cop, stationed in Oakland. He was exhausted all the time, and it showed in his attitude.

Not that I should be giving him excuses.

"Mike, please, I want—"

He cuts me off with a kiss, my back hitting the car as he sandwiches me against it. "M—" I can't get any argument out before he presses himself harder. We're together, he's my boyfriend, so it's fine—but this isn't about affection. It's about control.

His hand curls around the back of my neck, holding me in place as he grinds against me. "You've got me, Ayden," he breathes against my lips. Before I can respond, he dives back in.

I want to go see my family.

I don't... want this.

Fuck, why does it feel like I'm trapped?



AGE 24

THE WEEK OF CHRISTMAS

"You aren't going."

Every year...

It's the same fucking thing.

I honestly dread the Christmas season, because no matter what I want, I'm always stuck here in San Francisco—either in this apartment or with his family.

"Why?" I feel a flicker of fight, but the past two weeks have been nothing but arguments. I'm drained and just want to crawl back into bed. At this point, I don't care about going home anymore.

I don't care about anything.

"You'll tell them about what happened. Even if I've apologized for months, you're still holding it over our relationship."

The urge to snap back that it's hard to get over him cheating for the second time bites at my tongue. But I don't. I keep quiet, afraid this will escalate into a physical fight like so many times before.

I meet his gaze as he stops pacing in front of the door—the one that would be the fresh air I need and the escape I crave.

"Then just come with me—"

"They HATE me, Ayden!" His scream makes me flinch. "How fucking hard is it to get through your thick skull? They wouldn't welcome me there."

My dad and stepmom don't know why I've not come home for the past four years, but Alysa does. At least, that Michael always makes plans for us and guilt trips me into staying.

Not about the abuse.

Not about how fucking terrified I am.

She knew Michael had something to do with it, and was furious... It wasn't that part of the conversation that tore my heart in two. It was hearing Keo's name and knowing he still thought about me.

"Even Keoni? He asks every year where you are."

"Even him... I'll figure it out, I promise, lefty. Just don't tell them, please."

She sighed for so long and told me there are people out there who can help me get out. She doesn't understand the lengths Michael has already gone to control me. I just hope that one day he'll realize I'm not worth all this trouble. That he'll get tired of me and move on to someone who can match his strange energy.

"Every year. Every fucking year!" he shouts.

Yes... every year... I'm such an idiot.



AGE 25

CHRISTMAS

Beep. Beep.

I didn't tell my family about the car accident.

They shouldn't be surprised I didn't come. It's why when I texted Alysa I wouldn't be there, all she said was 'okay'.

Okay...

Beep. Beep.

Tears blanket down my temples as I stare up at the ceiling. I'm never getting out of this. I'm stuck, now more than ever.

I should just come to the realization that I'll never spend another holiday with anyone but Michael. No, not even just the holidays.

I'd tried to book a trip to Arizona early this year, where Alysa told me Keoni was. He would understand and protect me.

No, he wouldn't. He'd see you as a weak excuse for a man.

It didn't matter. Michael demanded to tag along, and even if I wanted to dare bring him with me, the thought of bringing that drama to Keo's doorstep had me canceling.

He then thought I was cheating because why wouldn't I still want to go... I wish I had the guts to do it. To cheat on him. Maybe the person I fucked around with would save me from him.

My life is not my own, and it feels more so that way now than it has ever before.

Beep. Beep.

Merry fucking Christmas to me.



PRESENT

I think I'd have preferred the look of judgment over what Keoni's giving me now. It's the face of defeat. I haven't seen it much—he rarely loses at anything—but when it spreads across his handsome features, it's unmistakable.

I don't know how many relationships Keoni has had, but he has a way of reading my discomfort.

For the past several weeks, all I wanted was for him to just say *fuck it* and kiss me. These past few hours, however? I haven't wanted it at all.

As I recounted the last six years with Michael, I think Keoni considered it. But every time I mentioned something traumatic or an argument with my ex and how he would use kissing and touching me as a lever to shut me down, Keoni simply paced the kitchen instead.

It's maddening how I could swear he was the person I was meant to be with. Like *he* was my soulmate and always had been, but fate had other plans, tying our parents together instead.

I've often wondered if they hadn't got together, would either of us have made the move on the other?

I think so. The thought lingers at the forefront of my mind. Had our parents never fallen in love, and allowed us to, I'd likely have never met Michael.

While I try not to let my crazy ex's words affect me, his comments about me being sick for pining over my stepbrother hit right in the heart. What would Alysa think? Our grandparents?

His friends? What would they think if they found out we are—*were*—stepbrothers?

This is a small town. People talk.

What about his job...

Life is so goddamn cruel.

We've been silent since I finished recounting the accident in as much detail as I could remember. How my recovery went. How I'd done it alone because Michael wanted to remind me I couldn't do anything without him.

How I ended up telling Alysa, and she told Dad. He came to see me but couldn't stay to take care of me. I imagine that during this year's holidays, they would have told Keoni.

I wonder if he'd have come to see me.

Suppose it's useless to ask—I'm here with him now.

"I wish you'd asked for my number from Alysa."

Keo sits in the chair beside me, while I'm perched on the table. Both his elbows press against the wood, face buried in his hands.

"At one point, he was monitoring who I was texting. Even if I put you down as my stepbrother, he'd have questioned it... especially since I never mentioned you."

He lifts his head but doesn't speak at first. He just looks at me, absolute heartbreak in his amber eyes.

"You need to get a restraining order against him, Ayden."

The moment I open my mouth, he cuts in, "I'll help. We'll report those cops who were watching you at the ice cream shop. I'll work on getting security cameras around the property."

For the first time, the urge to smile comes over me. I reach up and brush the hair from his temple, revealing the place where Michael had hit him.

"I don't want to be a burden on you, Keo." The sight of his tawny skin darkening to a bruise, tightens my chest. "He's dangerous. He pointed a gun at you. If he had shot you..."

Just the thought makes me sick.

"He didn't. And something tells me he's too much of a coward to do it."

I slowly move my hand across his ear, pushing his thick waves behind it.

"You think I can't take care of myself? Or you for that matter?"

"That isn't it," I huff. "It's just..." Meeting his impenetrable stare, I keep the 'you just shouldn't have to' from coming out.

"You have no idea what I'd do—" His nose twitches, like he wants to say more but stops himself behind a tut. "You're getting the restraining order, and I don't want to come off as controlling, but it's for your safety."

"I know. I'm... I'm not arguing with that. I'll get it. I just think I need to leave—"

"Are you out of your mind?" I appreciate that he doesn't scream.

"I need to get a new phone, then I'll move into the Boulder apartment. It's safer for you."

He stands, pushing the chair back and hovering over me. "What did I just tell you? I'm fully capable of taking care of myself—and you."

"But you shouldn't have to."

"Let me ask you something, sunshine."

Why is he calling me that? Even now. I'm the *opposite* of the sun. Of any light.

"Sure."

"Do you think I wouldn't just move into the Boulder apartment with you?"

My eyes widen. Honestly, I thought his question would've been something more along the lines of, "Do you think it's safer there?" or

"Do you think he wouldn't find you anywhere?" Not him following me.

He asks it as though it's an obvious answer. And he would be right, it is—but I don't want it to be. Answering would betray me, because I want to keep him out of this mess I'm in.

But... I need him.

I need to be close to him in any capacity, even if it's just platonically.

"You going to answer my question?" he urges gently.

"You would," I admit honestly, instead of pretending I don't know his feelings.

"You have some security here. With neighbors I'm sure that we could tell what's going on, and if they see anything suspicious, they'd let us know. See if they have security—Ayden." He sighs.

"You aren't leaving."

That hollow pit in my chest begins to fill.

"I'm going to do different shifts every week." I haven't shed a single tear while telling him everything, but now—with him finding every way to make me feel safe—a burning sensation flares behind my eyes. "You're here. With me. Let me do what I wasn't allowed to do before... please."

Rolling my lips together, I nod.

He steps between my legs and wraps his arms around my head, pulling me into a hug.

And then I just let go. I take breath after shaky breath, and cry.



One week later

🌲 Neighbors of Sapphire Valley 🌲

Calista 💚

How's the security system Ken installed?

Great, thanks, Cal

Calista 💚

You bet. I spoke with Gene. Boytoy is getting everything done on his end, she said just make sure to keep up with the paperwork

I will, thank you again...

I feel like I thank you a lot haha

Calista 💚

For this one, I'll thank you. It's been nice reconnecting with her.

Levi 🍎

Good morning, everyone.

Thanks for including us. We have security cameras already installed and will watch for him.

He would have to pass us or Sanderson Pine, and I think Ronan's security is as strong as ours

Just like his body

Calista ❤️

And I OOP. Levi...

He is in this chat, even if he doesn't respond

Levi 🍎

Oh, I know 🍍

Evelyn ❤️

You too, Cali. Yum.

Calista ❤️

🤔🤔🤔

Ronan 🍏

Look but don't touch

LOL

I have no idea what's happening

Keo 👑

Thanks everyone

Calista 💚

You're so welcome Keoni 😊

Levi 🍎

No problem 😊

Evelyn ❤️

Kinda our job

Levi 🍎

To look out for the community.

Unknown number added to the chat by Evelyn ❤️

Evelyn ❤️

This is Starlight Peak, found her snooping around the forest

Nearly put her in the same chokehold as Ayden

Keo 👑

Yeah, about that, don't do that again.

Starlight Peak 💙

I've let Mr. Devereux know of the situation

I'm jarred from the text conversation when my phone buzzes with a call. The screen flashes with my sister's face, and I release a shaky breath before answering.

"Hey, lefty."

"Hey, hey, righty-tighty."

"Please don't," I groan. "How are you?"

She sighs heavily. "Tired, but good. I'm so sorry, this week's been insane—I've barely been able to call, let alone text. Work, boyfriend, the time difference... It's no excuse, I know. How're you holding up?"

A soft laugh escapes me as I sink deeper into the couch. Clover is curled in my lap, sound asleep, without a care in the world. It's become her favorite spot this past week.

"I'm doing alright."

"So, tell me... what's up? Your text freaked me out, and the new number? If you hadn't explicitly said you were okay, I'd already be on the first flight to you."

For courage, I stroke down the cat's back. "Michael showed up at the cabin."

"What?!" she shouts. "You told him where you were?! Ayden!"

"No, no. I swear that's not how it happened. He was tracking my phone. It's why I got a new number."

The way her voice trembles ties my stomach into knots. "What happened? Did he hurt you? I swear to god, Ayden, I'll kill him."

That makes me smile, despite everything. "I'm fine, I..." My throat closes. Funny how the Michael stuff is easier to admit than this next part. "I had Keoni here to help."

"What?!" she practically shrieks. "Keoni? Like, our stepbrother Keoni?"

I wince. If I could go back in time and make sure Dad never met Leilani, I would.

"Yeah. Our Keoni."

My Keo. It's what I want to say, but can't.

"He just... showed up?"

"It's a long story..."

And it takes nearly an hour to tell her. How he found me in the cabin, how we've talked through why I stayed away, and how we have rekindled our... friendship. Especially these last few weeks. I

tell her about his work as a firefighter, about the idea of staying here long term, about the restraining order.

I don't tell her about the night we shared the same bed, or the way he held me like he didn't want to let go. I definitely don't confess how often I've thought about him in the shower, or how desperate I am for him in ways I shouldn't be.

But I do tell her about how he beat the hell out of Michael, and I swear she could've woken the neighbors with how loud she cheered.

By the time I'm done, I catch the sound of her sniffing.

"Oh, Ayden," she says, voice thick with tears. "I'm so fucking glad you two found each other again. My family, right where they're supposed to be—there for each other."

Sigh.

"Are you coming out for Christmas?" I completely move on. No point in being upset about what I already know to be my reality.

I can't have Keo the way I want him.

Speaking of the man himself, the front door opens. Keo steps in with grocery bags clenched tight in both hands, veins bulging up his forearms from the weight.

Something is definitely growing in my pants at the sight.

"I am. Please, please, tell me we're all going to be together," Alysa begs.

His eyes don't meet mine, but he turns slightly. I can just slightly see his half smile as he crosses the room.

I whisper, "Need help?"

He shakes his head, so I rush out, "Yes, we'll all be here."

Alysa squeals through the phone. "Is that Keoni you're whispering to? Put me on speaker."

I thumb the button and set the phone on the table. "Go for it."

"Keoni! How did I miss you at the funeral? I'm so upset."

He sets the bags down with a groan. His voice is low, rough. "I know, and I'm sorry, Aly. I thought neither of you came..."

"As if I'd ever miss that. You know me!"

When his eyes lift to mine, they're bloodshot, rimmed in red. My chest twists. *Oh shit.*

"I do," he says. "You coming for the holidays?"

"I wouldn't miss it for the world. Especially now. We all need to be together."

I feel it coming, and by the way he shifts his focus back to unpacking the bags, I think he feels it too.

"We're all we've got left. And the grandparents are too old to travel. Our other biological parents can eat shit."

That earns a laugh out of both of us—his weary, mine nervous.

"Family forever," she finishes somberly.

God? If you're listening, smite me now. This is cruel and unusual punishment.

"Family... right, Aly," Keo sighs, pressing his fingers to his temple. "Sorry. Running on low fuel. Migraine."

"Ah, *nooo*. You still get those?"

"Yup."

"Alright, drink lots of water. I'll let you two go. Talk soon, and I'll see you in a few months! Christmas will be here before we know it!"

"Bye, Alysa."

"Bye, sis."

I hang up and immediately get to my feet. "Let me put that away, Keo."

He scoffs playfully. "I did all the shopping, drove here, and walked up the stairs. I can put the stuff away."

"I'm sure you can," I say, bumping my hip against his as I sidle in. "But I'm here, and I've got it. Go lay down."

He drags in a breath, eyes catching mine for a long beat. "What're you going to do after?"

"We've still got a few hours before dinner." I pull items from the bags, one by one, lining them up on the counter. "Probably put something on TV and relax on the couch."

For a second, he just stands there, like he's weighing something invisible between us. Then he nods and disappears down the hall toward our rooms.

I've officially moved into the master, his suggestion—he said he wanted to be closer. God, I'd hoped he meant literally and would come crawl into my bed to hold me the way he did that night. But he hasn't, and I'm truly a heartbroken man because of it.

Since that night, I haven't slept the same.

It's crazy. He hasn't touched me in any way that *should* wreck me for anyone else. Yet, here I am, fucking ruined.

Once all the groceries are put away, I set aside my ingredients for dinner and drop onto the couch. My body sags into the cushions,

ready for background noise to drown the thoughts clawing at me.

That's when Keo walks out, a blanket folded under his arm, bare chest on display.

Only wearing sweats.

My lungs seize.

Gray ones.

Oh, fuck me.

In his other hand is that massive water bottle of his. I made fun of it before, but I guess for someone like him, it makes sense. He probably drinks my entire body weight in water every day. Other than coffee, I never see him drink anything else—well, not counting alcohol on a few occasions. Though, since that night we slept beside each other, he hasn't had any of that either.

"Mind if I join you?"

"N-No. Not at all."

As he tosses the blanket onto the couch, he turns toward the kitchen.

I'm a slut.

A simple whore.

Because how can I not stare at his back?

I'm surprised he doesn't have more tattoos—the left chest, across his shoulder and arm, are completely covered in that tribal-style design. It's beautiful against his warm brown skin, and man, as I've said a million times, life is so unfair.

He's got the gallon filled and is on his way back when I force myself to face the mounted TV above the fireplace.

"Any preference?" I ask as he sits just a bit away from me. I'd intentionally sat farthest to the right... you know, to avoid giving in to temptation.

And to give him space, of course.

"I'm not going to watch..."

I feel like he's about to keep going, so I just stay quiet and pull up Netflix. I'll throw on whatever the top movie is. I'm partial to rom-coms or even terrible reality shows, but I'm not about to subject him to that.

Mindlessly clicking play on what looks to be a thriller, I nearly miss the moment he lies down.

Right in my lap.

His temple presses against my thigh, and I instantly regret not taking a second to tuck myself in to hide my cock's natural reaction to *him*.

Watching someone like Keo curl his legs up, knees pressed against the back of the couch, and resting like this, has my heart doing somersaults. His ass hangs off the edge, and I just know this can't be comfortable.

Or maybe it is. His sigh of content tells me I may be wrong.

"Everyone in the squad decided to do rotating shifts to stay together."

I dare a peek at him. His eyes are shut, but his face is so, so close to my clothed dick that I begin sweating.

"Y-Yeah?" *Shit. I sound nervous. Alright, deep breaths, Ayden.* I clear my throat. "All of them?"

"Mhmm."

Before placing the remote onto the side table, I turn the volume down and pop on the subtitles.

"I didn't know that was possible, but also, how nice of them."

"Perks of a small town, I guess."

He's doing a good job of not moving higher in my lap, and I should do better, because I really shouldn't be thinking about his mouth anywhere near my cock.

Keo is absolutely a top. The kind of man who probably never gets on his knees for anyone. I'd be the one kneeling... and I'd gladly do it.

Oh no.

That thought has my dick twitching, and I immediately shift. My hand finds the back of his head as I do—not to push him away, but to make sure he knows I don't want him going anywhere. I just need to adjust myself, or else.

"Remember Corey had that brunch with his in-laws?"

"Yeah?" I'm glad his eyes are closed. I don't need him seeing me grab myself to move it away from his face.

"His wife is pregnant."

"Seriously?"

"Yup, six weeks. Fucker won't stop talking about it."

Once I'm done moving, I allow him to get comfortable again.

A light laugh escapes me. "That's amazing."

“And I’m pretty sure Taylor and Britt fucked in the bed upstairs that night.”

That gets a full-blown cackle out of me.

He chuckles, and I feel the vibration against my thigh. It pulls my eyes to him—and that’s when I realize my hand is still on his head.

When I pull away, he makes a small, displeased sound.

“Good for them...” I murmur before testing the waters.

I let my fingers drift across his temple and into his hair. His thick eyebrows soften, and he exhales a pleased sigh. Suddenly, a memory sparks.

One night, back in his junior year, I saw him lying in bed with his mom sitting at the edge. His head was in her lap. I’m not going to sing to him like she did, but I remember how soothing it was—her native language wrapping around the room as she brushed through his hair with her nails until he fell asleep.

He once told Alysa and me about his chronic migraines, and how they’d incapacitated him. The headaches even forced him out of a few games. His mom said that back in middle school, they ran CT scans, MRIs, all sorts of tests—nothing ever came up.

Either he’s grown accustomed to them, since he was able to drive home, or maybe they’ve just lightened over the years.

I sink further into the cushion and keep combing through his hair as best I can. It isn’t easy, with how thick and textured it is, but I focus near the scalp—right where he seems to like it most.

He practically groans with every pass of my fingers. The sound would be delicious if I weren’t so caught up in the relief of seeing him so relaxed.

“Next week,” I whisper. “Can we go see your mom and my dad?”

He nods, peeking up at me briefly before closing his eyes again. “Anything you want.”

Yeah. I’m screwed.

“Thanks. Same goes for you.”

His lips curve into the faintest smile, but he doesn’t say anything else.

Soon, he’s asleep, leaving me with the low hum of the TV, Clover purring softly in her bed in the corner, and soon, the gentle patter of rain against the cabin.

My heart wants him—and knowing it can't have him hurts so fucking much.

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Today sucked.

Yesterday sucked too.

It's like some curse has settled over this town, and now all the bad shit is happening at once. We haven't even had the first snowfall yet—which is strange, considering it's already the first week of October—and somehow we've hit the loony season early.

They say crazy things happen during the month of Halloween, but this is getting ridiculous.

Car fire.

Chimney fire.

Some idiot hit a power line and knocked out all electricity downtown. Thankfully, Sapphire Valley wasn't affected. I checked in on Ayden right away to make sure.

Then a drunk guy fell from his balcony... which just happened to overlook an embankment. We had to fish him out of the creek this morning. And right after that, a carbon monoxide alarm went off in the building nearest the police station.

Honestly, the cops could've handled that one themselves, but I think they're still pissed at Dom—and by extension, at us—for reporting those two officers. I couldn't care less. When the chief searched their devices, there it was: proof they'd been taking pictures of Ayden and me.

Whatever. They can lick the shit off my boots. No one fucks with him. Anyone who tries will understand why people used to fear me on the field.

Now, I'm showered and finally stretched out in my bunk, with Corey snoring above me. My calves, thighs, and ass ache. Sure, I work out daily—running, lifting, hitting the gym during my three-day shifts—but these back-to-back calls are wearing us all down. Dom's even considering bringing another body into the squad. Honestly? I'm all for it.

Arizona was always busy, but we had triple the people—if not more—depending on the time of year. You'd think I'd be used to it, but here I am, groaning as I sink back into the mattress.

The sudden thought of Ayden rubbing out every ache in my body has me reaching for my phone. He'd texted me before showering, and I had to wait until after so as to not be tempted to send a suggestive mirror photo.

Ayden 🔥

Tomorrow, see Dad and Mom? Then Saturday do you want to see a movie?

Outside of the cabin. You fall asleep too easily

Not my fault the couch is so comfortable

Uh huh. The couch.

Mhmm.

But yes, a movie sounds wonderful, sunshine

It takes him a few minutes to respond, and I know it's stupid, but it worries me. I'm confident we've taken enough precautions to keep Michael from getting anywhere near the cabin. From motion-sensor cameras to our unusually attentive neighbors, I know he's safe.

Still... he'd be even safer if I were always with him.

Ayden 🔥

Awesome

What're you doing?

Laying down, it's been a day

What about you?

Laying down.

gif attached

The gif plays of some guy speaking on the phone, and text that reads, *'So, whatcha wearing?'*.

I chuckle.

I'm not sure how far I want to take this, because I'm already battling how badly I want him. Lying in his lap the other night was a huge mistake. My dick was so hard I'm surprised my balls didn't revolt in protest from the ache.

But I know he's hurting too. We're both fighting it for the same reason: that image of it being wrong. The way he looked when Alysa called us family—his expression mirrored exactly how I felt.

Fucking defeated.

That said, no one is ever going to see my texts with him... or maybe I don't care as much as I think I do what other people think...

Maybe I'm fighting it because I'm afraid of hurting him, again.

Only if you tell me first.

The typing bubbles appear on his side, then vanish, then reappear. Just as they stop again, I'm about to type out that I was, of course, joking—when a photo comes through.

Fuck. Me.

Every which way to Hell.

It's a picture of his lower stomach, angled downward. He's wearing plaid sleep pants—the fabric thin enough to make out a subtle outline—and either he's holding up his shirt so I can see the slight flex of muscle before his boxers take over, or he isn't wearing one at all.

I pray he isn't, and in my mind, I picture him lying there on his back, half-naked in bed.

At least he spared me the view of any pronounced bulge in his pants. I don't know what I'd do—if just this simple photo has my cock pushing up my sweats, I'd probably come right in my briefs.

My phone buzzes, yanking me out of thoughts of dragging down his bottoms to have him completely bare.

Ayden 🔥

Your turn. You can't leave me hanging

Something is hung that's for sure.

I'm wearing your favorite sweats

Bold, I know, but really... I want him to beg for it. That's fucked up, considering he just offered what he's wearing. But hey, I did say tell, not show.

Not that I'm complaining in the slightest.

Ayden 🔥

Now that's mean

Please?

Imagining him say that really, *really*, has my abdomen tied into knots.

Please via text just doesn't have the same effect I'm afraid

But, you've seen them before. You know, the gray sweats I feel are your favorite. No shirt, of course

There are no typing bubbles this time—just a small microphone icon that pops up briefly. A short, two-second voice note comes through, and I let out a frustrated groan.

I don't hesitate to press play.

"Show me, Keo, please..." His breathless plea has me reaching down and squeezing my cock over my pants.

Since you asked so nicely, sunshine...

I move the phone to a good position to snap a photo, and make sure the flash is on. No, I don't hide my erection. I want him to see what he does to me, to know that I, too, yearn for him. Even if I think it's pretty obvious.

The moment the flash goes off, so does the alarm.

AYDEN

I think maybe I went too far.

It's been about twenty minutes, and I haven't received anything.

I'm an adult. I won't freak out—he's at work. The logical part of me knows he could be called to rescue a cat stuck in a tree or respond to a house fire at any moment. That, or he fell asleep. I mean, he made it seem like he had a rough day...

Sure, I'd hoped for a glimpse of whatever he's wearing, but my imagination is enough. I do love him in those sweats. Especially when he wears them low...

Is it too much to wish he'd left work because my picture worked him up so much he had to come home? Absolutely. Do I still hope that's why he hasn't responded? Also, yes.

The thought of him does everything right to my body, even if society would see it as wrong. Why can't I have my stepbrother—the one who no longer even holds that title? We've only been "family" for... like thirteen years.

Alright, that is a long time. That's half my life.

Son of a bitch...

It's so wrong. I get that. But honestly? I don't care. It's a small town, and I feel like once it got out there, over time, people would just move on.

Rolling over onto my stomach, I grab the pillow and groan loudly into it. Then, chuck it across the room, suffocating myself in the mattress.

Fuck this.

I don't care.

I'm going to tell him, and damn be the consequences. I've never felt this way with anyone.

No one has ever made me feel the way he has, not even close. I've never felt safer than when I do with him, and it isn't even just now. I care what he thinks and sees in me.

I just know there isn't anyone else out there for me. If I have to live with people judging me, then so be it. I'll never give myself to anyone **but** my *former* stepbrother.

I deserve to be happy, and I know Keo will make me that way. I'm already there, even with how we are now. If he tells me we can't, then that's that. I won't argue. I won't fight. I'd take this, *us*, however I can.

Platonically or not.

Releasing a sigh, I roll onto my back and stare up at the dark ceiling.

Great. Now I'm emotional and horny, what a combination.

I grab my phone in the hopes that maybe I missed his call.

Nothing.

So, I fire off a text.

You owe me. I'll remember this

Night, Keo

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“Engine 1 on scene, heavy smoke from the second floor of Maples Inn,” Dom shouts through the walkie as the truck screeches to a stop. “Assuming command.”

Corey jumps from the driver’s seat, and I quickly follow Kali and Taylor out.

“Call off-duty responders, now!” Dom barks, rounding the front of the truck. He stops short, muttering, “What the fuck?” before snapping his gaze back to the three of us.

I know the drill, but this is bad. The smoke is thick; not quite black, more of a heavy brown. And the way it’s pushing out of the blown windows tells me it’s hot.

“Kali, work with Corey!”

“Pumping to inch-and-three-quarter line. Pressure at 120 PSI,” she responds.

Dom’s eyes shift to me. “Check the back entry. Call came in that there are people inside.”

I nod and break off, radio in hand, while Dom keeps issuing orders to Taylor and the others.

Rounding the four-story hotel, I find the side door—metal, no windows to break, locked up tight.

A handful of people run toward me, coughing, faces streaked with soot. If they’re making it out, there’s got to be another opening.

“Get to the front and across the street!” I yell. “Medical personnel are on the way!”

I don’t stop to check them over. Compared to the ones still inside, they’re already better off.

Turning the next corner sharply, I spot a glass door, shattered. A family is crawling through it, pulling each other to safety.

I barrel past them and charge inside.

To my left is a stairway, a thin layer of smoke rolling down from it. Before heading up, I sweep through the ground floor. The first door opens easily, and when I step into the main hall, there’s no one in my direct line of sight.

“Fire Department! Call out!” I shout, moving toward the front of the building.

As the lobby comes into view, another hallway branching off to my right—completely swallowed in smoke. I can’t see more than three doors down.

“If you can hear me, shout or make noise!” I yell again, my voice bouncing against the walls.

That hall is a no-go. I turn and charge down the opposite side, calling out room by room. Nothing. Absolute silence, save for the sharp pops of fire crackling somewhere behind me.

I take the stairs up to the second floor. No one passes me on the way, which gives me a flicker of hope that the hotel’s already cleared, but I can’t afford to assume that.

“Keoni, it’s Corey.” I hear his voice crackle over the walkie. “I’m entering—south exit. Over.”

I tilt my head and click to reply. “Copy. I’m taking the east stairway. Be careful—full visibility on my side, zero on the west. No signs of life on the first floor. Check third and fourth. I’ve got the second. Over.”

“Copy that. Over.”

I pull up my mask and push through the second-floor door. Heat slams into me, and the hallway is blanketed in dark smoke.

“Fire Department! Call out!” I bellow. The heavy material muffles my voice, but I know anyone in the nearest rooms would hear it.

I repeat the call again and again as I creep forward, visibility dropping to almost nothing. By the time I reach the four-way intersection in the center, I can see flames licking through the haze.

There are muffled noises, but most belong to the fire—a low, rushing roar. I’ve always compared it to a distant freight train.

Pushing deeper into the thickening smoke, I shout, “If anyone is here, make some noise!”

Two doors ahead, the fire has already consumed the rooms. Paint blisters on their surfaces, scorched patches spidering outward from the furthest door. Thin, black wisps leak through the cracks and curl out from beneath.

I slam a fist against the wall to my right. “Anyone?!”

I’m seconds away from calling it when I hear the smallest cry.

“Hello?!” I bang again, heart jolting, and suddenly my body catches up to reality—the unbearable heat, the way my lungs fight, the way every instinct screams for me to retreat.

But I can’t. Not yet.

“Help!”

I click down on the walkie. “Search in progress. Victim heard, not located. Over.”

Forcing myself forward, I call out, “Bang on the wall!”

Two seconds later, a faint reply. “Help!”

Of fucking course it’s coming from the room right next to where the fire is raging.

I lower my shoulder and crash through the door. “Fire Department!”

The room isn’t filled with smoke—until it pours in behind me. I get one good look at the space before the haze thickens, visibility vanishing almost instantly.

I push into the bathroom first, braced for someone to be crouched in the tub. Empty.

Shit. Could it be another—

“Help!”

I spin back into the main room and drop low, sweeping past the beds. Nothing. The frames are solid, boxed in with wood paneling—no one could be hiding under there.

“Where are you?!” My voice cracks. Maybe the heat’s getting to me, but I swear I can hear someone—

“Help!”

I’m on my feet and rushing back into the hall.

“Keoni!”

I whip my head toward the sound. I can't see anything through the smoke, but I don't need to—Kali's voice is unmistakable.

"Structure compromised," Corey's voice crackles over the radio. "Exit the—"

And then it's like everything that could go wrong, does.

The room where the fire started detonates outward; loud pops, flames bursting through the doorway and flooding into the hall.

The ceiling above me groans, then caves.

I don't even know if I manage to move. All I feel is the sudden, impossible weightlessness before everything goes black.

No pain. No sensation at all. Just a creeping dread.

And memories. Regrets I wish I hadn't carved so deeply into my life.

It's him who floods my mind. The one face I could never—no, *would* never—want to escape. If this really is my last breath, then he's the only one I'd want to see.

Ayden.



AGE 19

"Keoni, I'm so glad you could make it!" my stepdad says as I step through the front door. He pulls me into a hug—one I return gratefully.

My last final for the semester had been this afternoon, and by the time it was over, my flight was barely an hour from leaving. I've never been the type to cut it close at the airport, so to say I was stressed would be an understatement.

I hated missing Alysa and Ayden's actual graduation, but at least I could make it to their party. Both of them did incredible; Alysa as Valedictorian, and no surprise, Ayden as Salutatorian. I'm grateful they never treated each other as rivals.

Their speeches were amazing, and thankfully my mom recorded them so I could watch on the plane. Of course, I rewatched Ayden's

several times. He dedicated the entire speech to the symbolism of a lion.

"I can't help but think of a lion—not just because it's bold or strong, but because of how it learns to lead. Lions aren't born kings or queens of the savannah. They start as clumsy cubs, curious and learning from every misstep... just like us four years ago."

The whole speech had me hooked, but it was his smile that wrecked me.

"You just need to walk like a lion. With purpose, with courage, and with the people who stood by your side. Your family."

I'm not sure what hit harder—his words, or seeing Mandy waiting with open arms when he stepped off the stage. God, it's terrible, but it should have been me there. Congratulating him.

Kissing him.

Thank fuck he didn't do that with her. I might've lost it right there in seat 12A. It's one thing for her to drape herself all over him when he insists they aren't together, but another to actually push that boundary.

Grant rests a hand on my shoulder and guides me through the packed house. A blur of faces—classmates, teammates, cheerleaders—fills the space.

"Ayden and Alysa are going to be so excited to see you," he says with a grin. "We kept it a secret that you were coming."

Tucking a hand into my pocket, I give him a cheeky grin. "Perfect—"

"OH MY GOD!" Speaking of my stepsister, there she is.

It's like the sea parts—no one daring to get in her way—as she barrels down the hall and collides with me.

I laugh, wrapping my arms around her waist and lifting her off the ground. "Hey, Aly."

"Oh, Kee, I've missed you! Ayden is going to freak when he sees you!"

"Where is he?" Grant asks from beside me as I set her down.

"I think outside." She squeezes me once more before darting off. "Go find him, I'll catch up later."

I head upstairs first, ducking into the bathroom to wash up and drop my bag before rejoining the chaos. By the time I return, the house feels even more packed. Music. Laughter. The smell of BBQ drifting in from the open doors. I thread my way through familiar

faces, exchanging rushed greetings and ignoring the ones who try to hold me in conversation. My chest buzzes with anticipation. I'm far too eager to find Ayden.

The backyard sprawls out in front of me, lit by string lights and the glow of rainbow LEDs rippling across the pool. A handful of teens swim while most cluster around the buffet tables and coolers. It's loud, it's alive, but... no Ayden.

I press further, weaving toward the far edge of the yard where the big fence cuts off the neighbor's property. That's when I hear it—soft, stifled. A sniffle.

Then Ayden's voice, low and steady. "Mandy, I wish you wouldn't cry."

Her reply cracks with emotion. "I don't understand why, though."

Rationally, I know this is a conversation I shouldn't walk in on. But selfishly? I've only got this weekend with him before summer training swallows my time. And I'll be damned if I'm giving *any* of it away, especially to Mandy.

So, I make myself known. Deliberately stepping across the rocks instead of the grass.

She gasps. "Shit."

Rounding my mom's she-shed, I finally see them—Ayden slouched against the siding, hands shoved in his pockets, and Mandy a few feet away, red-eyed and startled.

It only takes him a second to clock it's me. The frown melts right off his face, replaced with that blinding smile I've missed more than I'll ever admit.

"Holy shit, Keo!"

"Oh... hey, Keoni." Mandy's voice is pointed.

But Ayden doesn't hesitate. He pushes off the wall and barrels straight into me. His arms wrap tight around my middle at the exact same time mine lock around him, and fuck...

Yeah. *This*. This feels like home.

Unlike with Alysa, I don't let go quickly. I keep him there, pressed against me, for longer than any stepbrother really should.

"You came..." he mumbles into my shirt, and the way his voice catches makes him squeeze me even tighter.

"Yeah. Sorry I was late... finals."

"All good." He leans back, though not far enough to put any real distance between us. His hand lingers against my side, grabbing onto my shirt. "Leilani said you had finals... I didn't think you'd come at all."

I haven't smiled this hard since the last time I saw him. Goddamn, I've missed him.

"Ahem."

Mandy's still here, apparently. She's plastered on a brittle smile. "Can I have him back for a bit longer?"

I hum, pretending to consider it, then shake my head and pull Ayden even closer with an arm around his shoulder. "Sorry, Mandy. Family first."

Her lips twist, her foot stomps, and she storms off with a full-on pout.

Ayden watches her go and laughs, not making the slightest move to leave my side. "Thank god you showed up. I swear I don't know how to tell her we're never going to be a thing without breaking her poor heart."

"You shouldn't have led her on this long." I raise a brow. "That one's totally on you."

He jabs me lightly in the rib. "I told her I wasn't interested in anything but being friends."

I shrug my shoulders. "She's been pining over you since middle school. I'm not surprised."

"Alysa promised to take care of it if she didn't get the hint after graduation." Looking down at him, he's got his head tilted up, that sweet, unapologetic expression on his face. "I'm glad you're here."

My damn heart falls right into my stomach. "Me too..." Before I can do something stupid, I release him and take a step back.

"Have you eaten?" he asks, clearing his throat. "There's food, yard games, and a bunch of stuff to do."

I tuck my hands into my pockets. "I'm starved, and as long as you're my partner *or* my only opponent, I'm down for some gaming."

His laugh is infectious, like it always is. The kind that digs into your ribs and makes you laugh even when you don't mean to.

He leans into me as his mirth grows, shoulder brushing mine, and I let myself soak in the warmth for half a second too long before remembering—I'm not supposed to want this.

“Unless it’s in something like chess or mathematics, you’re going to beat me in everything. Partnering up is the only way we are playing tonight.”

And that we did. For the next several hours, we ate and played partner games. From alcohol-free beer pong, to cornhole. Everyone stopped challenging us, which became boring. So we settled on just talking with Ayden’s graduate classmates.

The entire time, I stayed as close to him as humanly possible without actually holding him.

To me, Ayden is the piece that makes this home feel whole. I’m here with my mom, with my family, but he’s what makes it complete. With him, I’m not hollow. I’m not so empty.

And that thought breaks my heart a little more each time—because it comes with the brutal realization that I can’t have him.

As people begin to trickle out, Ayden and I dodge Alysa as best we can. She’s been trying to sit us down for a board game, and we both know how competitive she is. With me in the mix, it would’ve been a *loooooong* night.

With our hasty escape, we find ourselves upstairs, slipping into my old room.

“That girl is relentless,” I whisper, letting out a soft laugh.

I glance up at him. He’s leaning against the door, that cheeky smile of his stretching wide enough to reveal both deep dimples.

The sudden realization of where we are—and that it’s just the two of us—makes my lungs tighten. I take a deep, shaky breath, and as our eyes lock, I worry I’ve forgotten who I am to him.

My heart races so fast that my breath comes out ragged.

“Relentless...” he murmurs, his voice low and sultry.

“Yeah...”

I lick my lips, and when he looks at them, I know I’m fucked.



I t's three in the morning, and I can't sleep.

This isn't unusual; most nights when Keo isn't here, I struggle to fall asleep. Instead of even trying, I've been scrolling through social media. I've got caught up in funny cat videos while Clover is curled against my head.

I'm convinced this cat is something supernatural.

I know that's crazy, but I've seen crazier.

I'm startled when my screen lights up with a call from my sister. Furrowing my brows, I swipe to answer.

"Hey, lefty."

"Oh my god, you're awake. Is he alright?!" Her voice is frantic, and my adrenaline spikes, shooting me upright in bed.

"What...?"

Her question comes out with a soft whimper. "Where's Keoni?!"

My heart feels like it's floating somewhere outside my body, searching for home. "He's... at work..." Goosebumps crawl across my left side, and numbness follows.

Especially when she says, "Ayden, there was a fire. A bad one."

"How do you know..." My voice barely comes out, drowned by my racing pulse and Alysa's frantic words.

"I've got the local news on my phone. For Dad. I never turned it off. Oh my god—"

I hang up and immediately call Keo. The tightness in my throat makes me turn and sit at the edge of the bed. Bending forward eases some of the sickness creeping up my stomach, though not all of it.

Except when he doesn't answer, I nearly vomit.

I call one more time, then slap my hand over my mouth as I shoot to my feet. No answer.

I grab one of his sweaters from the dresser and sprint out of the bedroom, sliding into my sneakers without socks and running straight out of the cabin.

Checking several ride-share apps, the soonest a car can get here is forty-five minutes.

No... no, no.

I pull up Calista's number and dial, running through the freezing night along the gravel road. When she doesn't answer, I scream in frustration before opening the group chat.

🌲 Neighbors of Sapphire Valley 🌲

Is anyone awake?!

Levi 🍎

Very good, early, morning, Ayden. Why are you awake?

I need a ride to the hospital now

Levi 🍎

Shit. We are in Switzerland.

What's wrong?

I damn near drop my phone. Fucking Switzerland?!

Suddenly, my screen lights up with Calista's name flashing across it.

I answer and keep running at full speed.

"Ayden?" Her sleepy voice tugs at me, but guilt never comes. It should, but right now, I just... don't care.

"Calista, please. Drive me to the hospital."

"What?!"

A deep, grumbly voice rumbles in the background. "This better be fucking good."

"I think something's wrong with Keoni."

"Where are you going?" Ronan, I assume, asks.

"Where are you, Ayden?" Cal asks.

"I'm running toward your cabin."

"I'll come get you."

"No." Ronan's voice is forceful, leaving no room for argument. Then, after a shriek from Calista, he says directly into the phone, "Where are you? We have two two-person vehicles. If anyone's going anywhere with you, it's me."

In less than ten minutes, I'm buckling into a red Mustang and fighting not to black out. I'm so sick with worry.

Ronan's squished in the driver's seat, and within seconds, we're out of Sapphire Valley, barreling toward the hospital.

I search news articles on my phone and quickly find reports: A fire at the only hotel in town. One critically hurt, two people missing. No details on who was injured or missing. My entire body shakes, and I'm silently grateful that Ronan isn't talking. If Calista had been driving, she would've tried to make conversation, and I just... can't.

Ronan drops me off at the hospital the reports say received the injured. Seeing a firetruck parked off to the side gives me a sliver of hope.

"I'll be back with Cal," Ronan says before speeding off.

I spin on my heels and rush into the bright-white waiting room. The oval desk in the center is what I slam into, bypassing the two people waiting in line.

"Hey!" one of them shouts.

"I'm looking for Keoni Pierce." The woman at the desk that has two other women and a man standing around her, peers up at me. "Please, is he here? Was he admitted?"

"Sir, I apologize but you'll need to wait like—"

"Just tell me if he was admitted. He's a firefighter—that's likely his squad's firetruck outside."

The devastated look on her face makes my legs shake.

"Go down the hall. There's a separate room on the left. C2. It's for the families."

I push off and rush through the metal doors that buzz open. One sharp turn, and I see the room.

Nothing in me is ready to see nearly ten people huddle over themselves, crying, or pacing back and forth.

I shove my phone into my pocket and step through the threshold. Heads turn, but any small relief vanishes when they see a man in pajama pants and an oversized sweater—not a doctor.

I don't recognize anyone. Instant anxiety grips me, and I step back. I'm going to demand they tell me where Keoni is. Fuck waiting.

"Hey."

A male voice pulls me from the brink of spiraling into a shadowy, numb place. I look up at brown eyes framed by wrinkles, and dark ebony skin contrasted by short, gray curls.

"Who're you looking for?"

Swallowing hard, I clutch to Keo's sweater like it's my lifeline.

"Keoni Pierce."

He nods. "You're in the right room, son."

"Is... is he okay? Are they all okay? Kali? T-Taylor? Corey?"

He gently leads me into the room and sets me beside a woman with tears streaming down her cheeks.

"There's no news. They just set us all in here. You're with family. We've got you."

Heat builds behind my eyes as I sit, my leg shaking uncontrollably. This feels wrong just sitting here. My gaze drifts around the room: mostly women, but a few men. They all look as I feel—dreadful.

"How long have you been here?" I ask, terrified of the answer.

"About an hour."

My chest tightens. If I lost him while lying in bed, scrolling on my fucking phone... I don't know how I'd live with myself.

"I'm Delilah." I turn to the woman with watery brown eyes.

"Corey's wife."

"Ayden. Keoni's..." The hesitation cuts deep. I don't want to lie but I don't want to introduce myself as his stepbrother either. I could say friend... but that's not what is true in my heart. "I'm..."

She places a hand on my back. "It's alright. I understand." Odds are she thinks I'm shy about my sexuality, which... I guess I don't mind leaving it at that.

I want to be his boyfriend. I want to be with him. I just... want him to be alright.

That night can't be the only time I felt his lips on mine.

It can't be the only time I've ever felt like I was exactly where I was meant to be.



AGE 17

The door at my back feels cold, but when Keoni licks his lips, my body warms.

"Ayden, I—"

I stride toward him so fast he barely catches a sharp breath before I slam my lips against his. The thump of his back hitting the wall is overshadowed by his groan into my mouth.

I grab onto his shirt just as he clasps the back of my head, tethering me to him.

It's like I've been lifted out of the boring, ordinary world, away from this entire plane and placed into the sky.

He turns his head, and I mirror him, pulling him closer, wanting this—needing this beyond anything I could've imagined.

He pushes me back, and I don't resist; tasting him makes me lose my damn mind. His tongue flicks into my mouth, and I think he's waiting for me to respond.

I don't hesitate, and as our tongues tangle, I fear I'll never want anything but this. My stepbrother. The one that was meant to be mine.

My back hits the bed, and without collapsing entirely on top of me, he follows.

One of his knees hugs my hip while the other presses between my thighs, and I can't help but moan.

"Fuck," he mutters, biting my bottom lip. "Ayden. I've waited so—"

"Oooh, brothers of mine."

Every bit of me snaps into anxiety mode. It isn't just her voice either, the bedroom door is opening.

I catch the panic in Keo's eyes as he immediately pushes himself off me. He scrambles so far away that his back slams into the dresser.

My gaze shoots to Alysa, who's walking backward into the room. "Could they be in here?" She turns, grins at me, then looks between us. "Yes, they are!"

And no more than a few heartbeats later, our dad and stepmom appear in the doorway.

"There you both are," my dad says.

"You going to say goodbye to your friends, dear?" my stepmom asks me, then looks at Keo. "Did I... miss something?"

I don't dare look at him.

"You guys have all weekend to play games. Come downstairs."

And I'm grateful I don't, because when he mutters, "This was a mistake," I could swear my teeth crack from how hard I clench them. "I should've never come back. Fuck!"

"Language!" Leilani shouts.

Without even glancing at me, Keoni brushes past our parents.

When I look at my sister, there's a deep frown on her face, yet I can't begin to understand why *she's* sad.

He said what just happened between us was a mistake... but it didn't feel like one. No. It felt right. And I fear I'll never feel that again.



I shake my head, trying to rid myself of the memory of our kiss. If that was the last time... the only time... I might be chasing another in whatever place waits for us after this.

Heaven? Hell? I wouldn't fucking care.

Footsteps echo through the room, and I look up. A doctor and a nurse stand there. It's Dr. Alvarez. The moment he spots me, I shoot to my feet.

His gaze slowly drifts down to my right, and the sigh I release feels broken.

"Mrs. Lewis?"

Delilah begins to stand. "Yes?"

"May we speak with you outside?"

Shivers run down my right side, and I release a shaky breath. Her chair rattles beneath her as the man who first spoke to me reaches her side, and I slide quickly out of the way.

"Is Corey okay?"

I'm pressed against the wall, watching Dr. Alvarez hesitate. My hands tremble, followed soon by my entire body. I clutch Keoni's sweater for support, but it doesn't help when Delilah screams in understanding.

We all feel it.

We... all know.

"No, no, please... PLEASE!"

Tears blur my vision as I stand in shock, watching her nearly fall from the chair. The older man grabs her, holding her up. She's clutching around her stomach, grasping for air as she begins to hyperventilate.

Then, a not-so-distant conversation erupts in my mind, and I slowly cover my mouth with my palm.

"His wife is pregnant... Yup, six weeks. Fucker won't stop talking about it."

"Anyone but him! Not him! Please, you're wrong! You're **wrong!**"

The doctor crosses the room and sits in the chair beside her. The nurses follow, and I shake my head before glancing at the door.

I slip out quickly, legs wobbling as I peer down the hall. There's more activity at the far end on my left, so I move that way. I'm not going to sit and wait for them to tell me he's gone. I can't.

I just... can't.

"Sir?" The nurse at their station makes an attempt to stop me. "You can't be back here. Only—"

"Ayden?" I look up to see Taylor coming around a corner. Her red hair is pulled into a high bun, eyes rimmed the same color.

Without hesitation, I sprint to her. When she opens her arms, I hug her, and she trembles in my grasp. A choked sob escapes as she says, "C-Corey... he... Oh my god..."

I tilt my head back and release an unsteady breath. "Keoni... where... where is he?"

She squeezes me, and fear ripples through me.

"Is he..." I pull back slightly and look at her, lips quivering. "Please don't—"

She shakes her head, struggling to speak. But I need her to. I need her to tell me he's alright.

"Taylor, where is—"

"Here."

In this moment, it feels like she's holding me up.

I turn my head, and Keoni is there, standing in the doorway of one of the hospital rooms. His shirt is streaked with blood, wires dangling from his arm.

Completely releasing her, I move toward him. Tears break free as realization washes over me—he's alive. He wasn't the one taken, and the guilt that I'd silently prayed it wasn't him, but someone else, has me crying even harder.



Although his movements are slow, they're purposeful. He wraps his arms around my head, and I circle mine around his torso. I don't squeeze—afraid of hurting him.

I breathe in through my stuffy nose, and the smell of fire is rooted so deeply in him it feels like I'm walking through the flames with him. My body heating to a painful burn as if I really were on fire.

He exhales shakily before lowering his face into the crook of my shoulder.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you," I whisper over and over. I keep saying it, because whoever I have to pray to for sparing him, I will.

He doesn't speak—just adjusts his hold to pull me closer.

"Keoni..." Kali's soft voice feels too intrusive, and selfishly, I don't want to let her in. "Are you okay?"

Keo sighs, lifting his head from my shoulder to look past me, and I tilt my gaze upward in response. His chin is scratched; surgical tape stretches across his forehead to hold the skin together, and stitches run just in front of the ear closest to me.

"I'm alive," he says at last, his tone somber.

The weight of losing a member of their team is so palpable it feels like a punch to my sternum. My heart already aches, but looking between the three of them, it feels like it could split into pieces. Two,

no—three. One for each of them, and the devastation carved into their faces.

“Mr. Pierce, please return to your room.”

I look up to see Dr. Alvarez striding toward us. The look he gives, glancing between Keo and me, is questioning. And I realize the position we’re in. This isn’t a hug stepbrothers would be giving one another. I’ve got every inch of me, other than my feet and calves curved against him.

But it’s nowhere near as *possessive* as the hold he has on me.

There’s no way Dr. Alvarez doesn’t know who Keoni is to me, but at this point, everyone can think I’m vile if they want. I don’t want to let go of him, and I *know* he feels the same.

“You’ve got second-degree burns, you inhaled enough smoke to affect your breathing and oxygen levels for weeks, and you’ve got fresh stitches. You need to lie down and rest while we monitor you.”

“I’m going to go check on Delilah,” Kali says. Before leaving, she steps toward us. I know she wants to hug Keo, and I’m not going to stand in the way, even though letting him go feels unbearable.

I move away, and both girls wrap their arms around him. Taylor cries openly, while Kali’s tears streak silently down her face. Keo looks completely hollowed out, pain swimming in his beautiful amber eyes.

“I-I’m going to f-find Dom,” Taylor stammers. “T-This hurts.”

Keo nods weakly. “I know...”

“It’s so unfair,” Kali whispers, stepping back.

My phone buzzes, and I pull it out to see several texts lighting up the Sapphire Valley group chat. I quickly type that I’m with Keo and that he’s alive. Then I shoot the same message to my sister.

By the time I slip my phone away, Keo is looking at me. Dr. Alvarez stands between us, his gaze fixed on me as well.

“Visiting hours begin at—”

“He’s staying,” Keo cuts him off, his voice rough. “Or I’ll leave.”

The doctor’s brows knit. “That wouldn’t be advised.”

“Then I’d advise you to make an exception. I just lost a friend and could’ve died myself”—my heart can’t take this—“I need Ayden here with me.”

There’s a subtle shift in Dr. Alvarez’s face—one I didn’t expect. Not judgment, not disapproval. It’s... acceptance. Understanding.

His brows crease, but the corners of his lips curve into the faintest smile.

“Exception made, now please, Keoni, go back to bed.”

After a soft scolding from the doctor, I help him back into the room. Calista had returned with Ronan, so while a nurse hooked Keo back up to the machines, I ran to the lobby to let her know he was alright.

The evidence of her own crying warmed my heart. She barely knows us, but the empathy she has is everything that makes me grateful for the neighbors we have. Even Ronan expressed relief that Keo was okay, though his emotions are hard to read. I’ll admit, he scares me, even when he’s kind.

Cal hugs me before they leave and I head back to the room.

Keoni is sitting slightly upright, arms resting at his sides, eyes closed. It looks like they had helped him change; the bloody shirt is gone, replaced with a hospital gown.

I shut the door behind me and move to his side. I don’t bother with the chair—I simply stand next to the bed.

Dragging my hand lightly across his forehead, careful to avoid the cuts and tape, I watch his eyes slowly open.

I don’t want to smile because it doesn’t feel like a happy ending, not really, but to me, this was the only outcome I could accept. Overwhelmed and shaken, I smile anyway, even if I can feel my lips trembling.

He lets out a sigh heavy with unspoken words.

“Keo, I...” I choke on an intake of air.

“Ayden.”

I bite the inside of my cheek, staring at my shaking hand as it cups his jaw.

“Let’s not talk,” he murmurs, scooting slightly over. “Just... lay here with me.”

The space is likely just enough for me to fit on my side, if that. I’m lean, but not that small. However, that isn’t going to stop me from at least trying.

With careful movements, I manage to climb onto the bed, careful to avoid putting pressure anywhere on Keo, and settle on my side against him. His arm wraps around my head, cautiously, though I heard the faint hiss of discomfort as he rests it across my collarbone.

My forehead presses just above his heart.

I want to ask where it hurts, to know where I shouldn't touch, but he asked me not to talk, and I won't. Even if blabbering is usually how I find relief.

I edge one knee across his thigh and place my hand over his sternum. His pulse spikes briefly, but then the rhythm steadies, strong against my palm.

Then his hand, wrapped in transparent dressing, the IV secured beneath layers of bandage, covers mine and holds it as tightly as he can. The simple gesture wrecks me, pulling a broken breath from my chest.

I close my eyes and settle into my *home*.

One that just nearly burned down.

And one I can't see myself living without.



The next three weeks pass in a blur—one I still can't believe has been our reality.

Keoni suffered second-degree burns across his shoulder blades and couldn't fully lie down until a few days after the incident. He ended up with more than eighty stitches, including a large gash in his side, others scattered across his body.

But he's alive. And after the first week, he was walking farther than just the hospital hall.

His birthday was spent there; a day that was hard to find cheerful. Britt and Calista came to spend a few hours with us, and Kali, though out of town, video-called in. Taylor showed up in the evening with cupcakes. To my surprise, Levi appeared as well, though Evelyn was absent. He said she wanted to come but was tied up with work. We even received a birthday message from Starlight.

Somebody in the group chat asks for updates every day or so. The love they pour over us, even without truly knowing us, is something I hadn't expected—but it was desperately needed. Especially with everything going on beyond just Keo's recovery.

The fire at the hotel is still under investigation. There was only one casualty: Corey. He'd fallen through the third floor straight into the blaze. I don't want to know if he suffered. I just hope he didn't.

According to reports, the ceiling collapsed on Keoni. It sounds like he lost consciousness immediately. When he woke briefly, all he remembered was the fire blazing around him, not that Dom found him and dragged him out.

Keo swears he heard someone screaming for help. I believe him, even though the reports say no one else was left in the building. He hasn't spoken of it since. Says dwelling on it will only drive him crazy because he knows what he heard.

I told him I believe him, that maybe the screams came from another floor. He shut the conversation down quickly, recoiling from me just as swiftly.

After that first night together, he's slept alone. He hasn't asked me to stay beside him again. While I've chalked it up to recovery, I know it's more than that.

He was discharged from the hospital today—the same day as Corey's funeral.

It feels like death has been a constant presence in our lives for far too long. Corey's plot lies only a few rows away from where our parents rest. This isn't how I'd wanted to visit them—fresh from burying someone else we were beginning to call family.

The rain started halfway through the service, driving most of the mourners to the church for the repast. Only Taylor, Kali, Brittany, Keoni, and I stayed behind. None of us cared about being drenched as we watched the casket lower into the earth.

Britt stands at my left, her hand gripping mine while she leans into Taylor for support. Keo is on my right, his arm wrapped around Kali as she whispers her goodbyes.

"It was an honor to protect and serve with you, Corey," she murmurs.

Taylor chokes on a sob, and Britt lets go of me completely to hold her. I shift instinctively closer to Keo, but he doesn't move, doesn't reach for me. I get it. Britt's here. And Britt knows he's my stepbrother.

When the rain grows heavier, the girls finally rush off, dresses clinging to their legs and hair plastered to their faces. I'm about to follow when Keoni stays rooted to the spot.

Blinking through the water streaking into my eyes, I glance around until I spot a worker in the distance with an umbrella. I hurry over, and he doesn't even wait for me to ask before pressing it into my hands.

I pop it open as I return to Keo's side, holding it over us both. I have to stand close to keep him from getting soaked, our shoulders brushing beneath the small canopy.

I hate the thought of dragging him away, but thunder rumbles low across the sky, and the rain's only getting worse.

"Hey." I set my hand carefully on his arm, bracing for him to pull away. Thankfully he doesn't, and relief loosens something tight in my chest. "Come on. We can sit in the truck until it stops."

Water runs down his face in thin rivulets, but his eyes don't see the ground in front of him. They're fixed somewhere else entirely, staring into a world that only exists inside his mind.

"Keo?" I watch his pupils dilate the second I say his name.

"It's my fault."

I take a slow, steady breath, and wrap my hand around his bicep. Beneath the double layers he's wearing, I can feel the muscle tense, locked with guilt. I stay quiet. Telling him it isn't his fault won't help—not now.

His head bows, eyes squeezed shut. "Always my fucking fault." The whisper scrapes raw from his throat, filled with so much anguish it makes my chest ache. "I sent him upstairs... It wasn't my call to make. I wasn't in command. Dom was. But I told Corey to check the third and fourth floors."

My teeth clamp down on my lip hard.

"I thought... it would've been safer," he breathes, voice breaking. "Since we knew the fire was on the second floor."

Then, all at once, he crumples. His knees hit the mud so fast I stumble forward with him, heart lurching into my throat. Somehow, I catch myself before I fall over him.

As he leans forward, I move to kneel beside him, feeling the damp soil seep through my pants.

"I can't... take anymore guilt... I can't."

"You aren't guilty of anything. This **isn't** your fault."

"Who's to blame, then?" He turns his head, red-rimmed eyes locking onto mine. They're so intense, a stark contrast to the gentle

tone in his voice. "If I hadn't made the call... he could still be here... If I had just been... home..."

I'm not entirely sure what he means. It was his night to work—shift changes or not, it happened on a Tuesday.

"Keo, it's... not okay. It won't be okay for a long time."

His shoulders drop, as if ready to defend or argue, but he doesn't. It's not alright. I feel this ache for everyone but no one more than him.

"It'll hurt, but I'm here for you... as you've been for me." I grip tightly to the umbrella and bring my opposite hand to his neck. "Let me be your anchor."

His hand is behind my neck, pulling me into a hug so quickly I drop the umbrella. The sudden downpour pelts us, cold and unrelenting, but his warmth blankets me like the sun. He presses his forehead to my shoulder and shifts, pulling me even closer.

My knees dig into the muddy ground between his spread thighs as I lean fully into his embrace.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be, not with me," I whisper.

"Don't let me push you away," he murmurs. "I can't lose you again."

I pull him tighter, gripping his jacket and shaking my head. "I'm here, Keo. No matter the obstacles we face. We'll do it together."

Just as he's physically here to protect me, I'll guard his mind. We'll fit together, even if our pieces have been misshaped and mishandled. Over time, they'll form a perfect picture—one that only he and I can create.



My head doesn't feel screwed on right. These past three weeks have slipped by in a blur, and the same guilt I carried for my mom and Grant has clawed its way back to the front of my mind.

Every *what if* plays on repeat.

Pushing Ayden away was never my intention, but how could anyone forgive me?

It's this fucked-up part of my brain; one side fighting to give up, the other clinging to survival. The war is constant, and exhausting. I'd rather charge into a burning building than face the broken battlefield of my own head.

However, now I have to, because I have him. Exactly what I've wanted since the first day I saw him on the football field in high school. The world keeps hurling every obstacle it can at us, and I wonder if we'd have gotten through any of them without each other.

A heavy weight presses down onto my chest, dragging me out of the haze. I blink a few times before realizing it isn't inside my head, but a real touch.

Ayden is leaning across the truck's bench seat toward me. His hand rests between my pecs, like he's trying to steady the heartbeat pounding beneath it.

I honestly don't even remember walking over here... holy shit.

His voice is soft as he says, "Let me drive."

My brows pull together, my head giving a weak, uncertain shake.

"You can't."

"I can. I'll get us home."

I glance over at him. There's a small, gentle smile tugging at his lips.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, trust me."

The pounding rain outside doesn't give me much confidence, but I know I'm in no state to be behind the wheel either. If I drive, I could take us off the road. If he drives, he could let fear get the best of him—which I'd totally understand.

Taking a deep breath, I nod. He scoots back to his side of the bench seat, hand reaching for the door handle.

"Just climb over." I catch his forearm, gently shifting it aside before tugging him to me. "Don't get re-drenched."

His soft nod accompanies him scooting across the seat, every movement deliberate yet clumsy in the narrow space. When he's finally close, he hesitates, shifting awkwardly.

The corner of my mouth betrays me, tugging upward. Smiling feels wrong here, but god—it's impossible not to when watching him wrestle with how to make this simple climb over me.

He decides on facing me, bracing his hands against the back of the seat. As I shift to make room, he slips between my knees. He suddenly pauses mere inches away, his breath ghosting mine.

I've never felt an urge this raw. It hurts not to reach for him, not to close the distance and finally claim the kiss I've been aching for.

My nails dig into the leather bench, desperate to ground myself. One more second, and I know my restraint will snap.

But then he scrambles the rest of the way across, breaking the moment like glass shattering.

"Sorry," he mutters, stumbling onto my left leg before rushing off me.

I don't say anything as his hands reach up to the wheel, gripping it like it might vanish if he lets go. "I haven't been in the driver's seat in what feels like forever."

I slide to the passenger side, buckle up, and lean against the door, watching him. He looks good there.

Then again, he looks good any day, any time.

In the mornings, when sleep still lingers in his eyes.

After three days without showering in the hospital, too afraid to leave my side.

When he's smiling.

When he isn't.

He's perfect for me. Always has been.

I don't even know why I'm still fighting this—fighting *us*. My heart stopped using the excuse of him being my stepbrother a long time ago. It's just my stubborn brain, still slow to catch up.

The engine hums to life, pulling me out of my stupor and back to reality.

The way he drives—cautious, almost too much so—has me settling further into my seat, oddly relaxed. When I catch him checking the mirrors three times over before even turning onto the main road, I feel the corner of my mouth twitch. He drives like a grandma, and it warms my soul in ways I can't explain.

Burying Corey so close to our parents wasn't anything I could ever be prepared for. But, somehow having Ayden stepping up to such a simple task, eases something in me I didn't realize was coiled tight.

The grief, the guilt, the ache, those things will keep coming in waves. But maybe I can let him pull me to shore when they hit, and I don't have to drown myself in the perpetual pain it brings me.

At least, not alone.

The fifteen-minute drive stretches to thirty, but I don't mind. By the time we roll into Sapphire Valley, it feels like I can finally breathe again. Three weeks in a hospital bed made me forget how perfect this place is—no matter what circumstances dragged me back here permanently.

He throws the truck into park right beside the cabin and lets out a long breath of relief.

"I've done my chauffeur duties for the year."

I release a winded laugh. "I've got us from here on. Thanks for taking the wheel."

"No problem..." He licks his lips and gives me a smile, pulling my focus straight to them. "This rain is relentless, Jesus."

My eyes flick up to his as he slowly undoes his seatbelt. "Yeah... relentless."

For a moment, I swear neither of us breathe. The rain pounds against the truck in heavy waves.

If I kissed him right now, would he think it was just a reaction to everything that's happened? Would it drag him back to thoughts of Michael? To the way he used physical touch as a distraction from the world around him?

It's anything but that. I wanted to kiss him at the cemetery we just left. At the hospital when he came looking for me. The night before I left for what could've been my last shift.

Every moment I've been in this cabin with him.

Back in high school.

Every goddamn day since meeting him.

I'm certain I'm about to crack when he leans away and goes for his door handle.

"It's getting worse. We should get inside."

As he opens the door, I clear my throat and mirror the action with mine. I'm immediately drenched, my white button-up clinging to my skin.

A warm shower sounds nice, but the thought of sharing it with Ayden sounds even better. But... he pulled away, and while I hadn't advanced, I think he sensed I was about to.

I'm only a few feet away from the truck when Ayden's voice cuts through the storm. "Was it a mistake?" He practically has to shout over the downpour.

I turn, looking back at him standing in front of the passenger-side door.

"Mistake?"

He takes a deep breath, lips parted as water runs down his face, his suit plastered to his body.

"Kissing me back that day."

I angle my body fully toward him and shake my head. "No."

"Then why did you say it was?"

I wonder if his heart is thrashing as hard as mine.

"Because, sunshine, you're the smart one. I'm the fucking idiot."

He shakes his head, then tilts it upward, eyes closing as he exhales a breath that makes his shoulders tremble. I can't tell if it's from the cold or because he's wrestling with the words he wants to throw at me. Maybe that I'm an asshole for what I said. Which he'd be right, I really am one.

A second passes—an eternity—before he looks back at me with a small smile tugging at his lips.

"The rain really is relentless..."

I exhale, a cloud of mist drifting in front of me.

Fuck my brain. Fuck what anyone thinks. Fuck the world if it dares call this wrong. Fuck everyone else but Ayden Pierce.

My Ayden.

Just—"Fuck it."

I'm on him before I second-guess the action, hands grabbing in his hair as I crash my mouth against his.

I push him against the truck, drinking in the sound he makes as he clutches me fiercely, arms locking around my body. Caging him here, I *devour* every inch he'll give me. He parts for me, and the moment my tongue slides against his, I groan.

I've never forgotten *this*. His weight beneath me, his mouth on mine, the taste of him. It's all etched into my memory, and I want to make more of them.

We break only long enough for him to breathe and for me to whisper, "The mistake wasn't kissing you—it was not making you mine sooner." My lips brush against his again. "The mistake was ever giving a fuck what anyone thought. Letting other's happiness come before mine. Before *ours*."

I claim him again, one hand sliding down to his throat, my thumb grazing the rise of his Adam's apple.

"You were always meant to be mine, and I should've been selfish."

"Keo..."

His arms move up and over my shoulders to encircle my neck, I think, but a fire burns across my back. I'm incapable of stopping the flinch and hiss of pain.

He jerks back instantly, hands flying off me. "Oh, fuck. Shit, I'm so sorry."

Damn these burns.

"It's fine." I still have him pinned against the truck, leaving him nowhere to go. His palms press against my chest, sliding slowly upward until they rest at my neck.

"I need you to promise me something."

I thread my fingers back through his soaked brown hair, gripping just enough to tilt his head back as I lean toward his throat.

"You need to. Because I can't do this with you if you don't."

His words catch me off guard, halting me mid-movement.

"I promise," I breathe. Whatever it is, I don't care. He could tell me to shit with the door open, walk naked through a church, or kill a man, and I'd swear to it.

There is *nothing* I wouldn't do for him.

"You'll never put anyone's life ahead of your own."

That wasn't what I was expecting. My brows knit as I lean back, searching his hazel eyes. They're alive with everything—the deep green of the forest, the rich brown of the earth. The beauty of a world I'd almost left but stayed because of some hope I'd see him again.

"You said you sent Corey to the third and fourth floor because it was safer." His voice softens, but it cuts like glass. "You matter. Your life matters. Promise me, because I can't lose you again, and I can't leave Alysa."

My eyes go wide. "Ayden—"

"Just promise me, Keoni. It's not that hard."

"I promise."

The only life that is worth more than mine, is Ayden's. And with the way he said it, the way he all but admitted he'd follow me into death, I know now my life has to hold the same impossible value as his.

His hand moves to the back of my neck, where he drags his fingers through my hair. "If I have to stay here, and live in this world that *sucks* sometimes, so do you."

I can't help but smirk. "Okay."

That handsome smile returns to his lips that I want to devour again and again. "Stay here with me."

I nod. "Together."

"Together."

My mouth crashes back onto his, the kiss deepening instantly. His tongue tangles up with mine, causing me to groan and suck on it before dragging him away from the truck.

"Let's go inside." My arm hooks around his midsection, pulling him flush against me as we stumble across the soggy ground. I've made this walk a thousand times and even doing it backward feels natural with him in my arms.

The moment we hit the stairs, he yanks me down into another kiss. I oblige, fumbling blindly for the door handle. The rain has soaked us through, and when the knob refuses to cooperate, I abandon it altogether and go for his shirt instead.

Buttons pop free as I rip it open—patience be damned. He helps me shrug it off, never once breaking our mouths apart.

That makes me grin. Seems we're both just as desperate for one another.

He works on my shirt next, but instead of tearing it open, he carefully undoes each button. Then his fingers brush my belt buckle, and for the first time, he hesitates.

"We can stop," I murmur, cupping his chin and tipping his face up to mine. "No expectations. There's no rush."

He shakes his head. "I know, but I want you. I'm not hesitating because of that." His smile tilts, sheepish and soft. "It's more like... anticipation that I'm finally getting what I've wanted."

A grin spreads across my face. "Good. Then everything comes off," I breathe against his mouth. "Can't trek water into the house."

I shift us, pressing his back against the cabin wall, my hands already working at his pants. The rain hammers against the patio overhang, but it does nothing to mask the sound of his ragged breathing.

"You need to tell me your limits, though, sunshine."

His face is already flushed, but I watch the red bleed everywhere, staining his neck.

The second I undo his button, he licks his bottom lip and shakes his head. "I don't have any limits."

I narrow my eyes, my fingers inching down to his zipper. "I don't ever want to risk reminding you of—"

"You never will, Keo. Never."

Leaning in, my hand creeps between his suit pants and boxers. "I don't just have sex, sunshine, I *fuck*. I mark. I restrain. I'm going to take you, *ruin* you, and enjoy you. Enjoy what's *mine*."

I circle his waistband before sliding down, grabbing his bare ass, and pulling his hips flush against mine.

That's when I feel him—hard and straining through the last barrier between us. My own cock jerks at the thought of nothing left in the way.

"Limits, Ayden."

"Don't... degrade me," he mutters, his voice breaking into a moan as my hips roll, grinding into him. "I don't like that."

I drag my hands down, shoving at his pants. He kicks out his feet, stumbling in the process, fighting with the fabric.

"I'm not into that anyway."

His hands find my belt, working it open with more urgency than finesse. Once my pants are undone, we strip everything else and toss it, all forgotten in a heap.

Then I'm back at his mouth, biting his lip, sucking his tongue. Devouring him like I've been starved for years.

"You deserve—" I nibble along his chin, tracing up to his ear and taking it gently between my teeth. "To be praised..."

My hand slides down his bare chest, fingertips brushing over his nipple, drawing a low, delectable moan from him. "You'll be my good boy. On your knees, back arched, face down in the pillow..." I venture further, feeling goosebumps rise along his skin. A sharp reminder: we're completely naked, exposed on the patio.

The instant my fingers drift across his hipbone, thunder cracks above us, causing him to jump in surprise.

"Maybe we should go inside," he whispers.

I nod once, leaning in to press a kiss to his neck. "Shower to warm up?"

"Fuck yes."



We stumble through the front door, clinging to each other with the same feverish need.

My hands tangle in his drenched hair, dragging him with me. He tastes just as phenomenal as when our lips met for the first time, but now there's no fear of someone walking in, no eyes to judge what we want. What we *need*.

And what I need is him. From this day until I'm buried a few feet away from him.

His tongue twists with mine as my bare ass bumps against the dining table. He jerks me back, walking us down the short hallway toward the main bathroom. His hand grips my ass, pinning my hips to his, our cocks grinding together, pulling a moan straight from my throat.

I want to touch and taste every inch of him. The frantic edge in his movements tells me he feels the same.

He slaps the bathroom light switch so hard I'm surprised it doesn't break. Then his arm locks around my waist, hauling me with him as he steps us into the shower.

The water blasts on, icy cold, shocking against my overheated skin.

"Fu—" I start, but he slams me against the tiled wall and devours my mouth instead.

My hands roam across his collarbone, down his chest, wrapping around his back. Every muscle under my fingertips radiates strength and power. He has always been that to me. And I've always been a desperate man for him, aching to touch what the world insisted I couldn't have.

He should've never been forbidden to me. Keoni was meant to be mine, just as I was meant to be his.

Steam curls through the shower, but it isn't that heat that sets me ablaze. It's the sudden grip of his hand wrapping around my cock that rips a gasp from my throat.

He groans into my mouth. "So hard for me."

I'm even beyond that; it's nearly painful. It feels as though I'm seconds from my release already. I could've come just from the friction he caused getting us in here, and now—with his finger dragging along the underside of my length—I have to count backward in my head to stop myself from blowing too soon.

His other hand slides up, his thumb brushing over my parted lips before pressing down. "How I resisted you this long is criminal." He leans in and bites across my jaw, tearing a moan from me.

I reach between us, wrapping my hand around the cock that's been pressing into my stomach. The moment I feel him, I forget how to breathe.

Oh, fuck.

My head drops, grateful he releases my chin, so I can actually look. Not only is he thick and heavy in my hand—he's pierced. A singular bar horizontally, right below the head.

"Just one for now," he croons, dragging his thumb across the head of my cock, smearing precum down the vein, all the way to my balls. "If you like it, I'll get more."

On instinct, my tongue darts across my lips. I've never had a man inside me with one, and the thought of it has my pulse hammering.

"You like that?" he teases.

"Mhmm," I hum, low in my throat.

He chuckles darkly. "Ayden? Being quiet? I'm going to have to change that."

Michael hated when I made noise. Said it ruined the mood, that it sounded like I was faking it. News flash: I was.

But with Keo? Nothing about the noises I've made or will be making will be fake.

As though pulled by gravity, I sink lower. He lets me go, taking a small step back as I drop to my knees. My hand wraps around the thick base of him, bringing me face-to-head with the part of him I've been aching to taste.

He's thick, and the veins along him have my mouth watering with the need to taste him. The only reason I hesitate is to take him in, because I want to etch every inch, every detail, into my brain before giving in to that hunger.

"Look at you," he says, his voice low and sultry enough to drag goosebumps across my arms. I glance up just as his hand comes to the back of my head, fingers threading through my hair. "Admiring my cock like a good boy. Now, open that delicious mouth of yours for me."

My dick twitches, eager, as I obey, parting my lips to welcome the defined head of his cock.

His groan hits immediately, deep and raw, the sound rumbling straight into my chest. I can't help but moan around him, the vibration making his grip in my hair tighten. But he doesn't force me. He lets me set the pace, slipping him deeper, savoring the salt and the faint sweetness coating my tongue.

It only makes me crave more.

A strangled sound leaves him as I take him to the back of my throat. When I pull away, my tongue drags along the underside, flicking against the piercing before sliding him back in with a steady, hungry rhythm.

"Ah, fuck, Ayden." Hearing my name break from his lips has my legs trembling beneath me.

I angle myself down slightly, so when I look up, I catch him staring at me. One arm braced against the wall, chest heaving, mouth parted in heavy breaths. When our eyes lock, he grins. There's admiration, *pride*, in those ember depths.

I definitely have a praise kink, because my body zings with just that look.

Maybe that's one reason why it was hell with my ex. He never gave me this. He was the opposite of what I craved, and I should've found a way to walk away sooner.

Keo doesn't even need words. The smirk, the groans, the way he touches me—it's all the worship I've ever wanted.

"Touch yourself." His hand slides to the back of my neck, holding me steady as he drives deep into my throat. "But don't come... *fuuuck*."

The second my hand wraps around my cock, my eyes roll back. I stroke myself as he buries every inch inside me, my nose brushing the trimmed patch of hair at his base.

I can't breathe, and the dizzy head-rush only makes my balls tighten harder with the need to release. I squeeze just under the head, desperate for control.

Air floods my lungs as he pulls me back. I'm ready to dive back in, but instead he bends down and crashes his mouth to mine. His hand circles my throat—not harsh, just enough pressure that when he straightens, he lifts me with him. I push to my feet, and in one seamless movement, he swings us under the spray.

A strained sound leaves him—pained, maybe—but before I can ask, his hand closes around my cock. Then I feel his piercing dragging along the underside of me as he grips us together.

That groan of discomfort twists into a raw grunt of lust.

The sensation of our cocks sliding, pressing, jerking against each other, has me thrusting desperately into his fist. My skin feels electric, every nerve lit as I pant and lock my arms around his neck. I don't dare pull him tighter, not when it might slow the perfect rhythm of his strokes.

"Don't stop," I moan.

"That's it..." His voice is that same grumbly as when he wakes in the morning, causing a chill to run down my spine. "Tell me what you want."

"I... I want to come. Please."

His hand works us with perfect precision, and with every greedy thrust, that piercing drags across my sensitive vein. My jaw clenches on instinct, the old urge to bite back my sounds. But Keo groans against my mouth, reminding me silence is the last thing he wants.

"Come with my name on your tongue, Ayden. Don't hold back. I want to fucking hear you." His free hand tightens around my throat, tilting my head as his whisper brushes my ear, heavy with his own unraveling. "Come for me."

“Fuck! Keoni, I’m—” My words collapse into a moan as my stomach knots tight, and I break, just like he ordered. “That’s it—please, please...”

My release tears through me, hot and relentless, spilling across my stomach in sync with his. His body shudders against mine, trembling with the same force as my own. Then his teeth sink into my shoulder, sharp enough to sting, and the pain makes the orgasm I’m still trembling from intensify.

He wastes no seconds and slides his hand up my stomach, gathering the mess before the water washes it away. When my haze finally clears, I watch him raise his cum-slicked fingers to his mouth. The sight alone has me biting the corner of my lip.

Catching my stare, he grips the back of my head and yanks me into him, crushing his mouth to mine. His tongue thrusts in as I open, and the moment I taste us on him, desperation rushes through me. I groan into him, sucking and biting, hungry for every last drop.

He chuckles, the sound vibrating my insides, and the sensation feels like possession itself.

“All fucking mine.” His amber eyes soften, shifting from raw lust to something that roots me in place. Nurturing. Passion. *Need*. That gentle glow has butterflies tearing through the place I’d thought was long dead.

My hands drift up his back, molding our bodies together. His fingers tangle in my hair, his arm wrapping protectively around my neck, as if anchoring me here with him.

Then he smiles, and it’s brilliant. It’s the kind of smile that makes me believe I’ll never be alone again.

Fucking Christ. It gives me life.

And knowing that I caused it? This look he gives me. I’ll become addicted to the high of it; I have no doubt.

“All mine,” I say just before he kisses me again. And again. And again.

For the first time in so long, I don’t feel hollow—I feel whole.



Ayden tugs his shirt over his head, and the moment his face is free, I lean in and claim his mouth.

He lets out a soft laugh as I loop my arm around his back, pulling him flush to me.

“So”—he attempts to lean back, but I don’t allow it—“insatiable.”

The second he dares open his mouth, I slide my tongue in. His smile curves against me, and I devour it. If he’s going to call me out for it, then I’ll show him just how greedy for him I really am.

We hadn’t lingered long in the shower, but the bath kept us. My burns still flare at heat, yet I wasn’t ready to let go of his body pressed naked against mine. The tub was cramped, but we didn’t care. For a while, he lay with his back against my chest, and later, he turned so he could kiss me.

It still wasn’t enough. It’ll never be, I just know it.

Dinner was made, and nearly forgotten because I couldn’t keep my hands off him, but we finally ate. We were ready to crash into bed when I remembered the medicine for my burns. In full nurse-mode, Ayden insisted on helping.

I only had one condition: no shirt—if I had to be bare, so did he.

“Keo.” He pulls back with a playful laugh, and points at the couch. “Sit.”

I roll my eyes, grinning. "Not my fault you're so damn tempting." I wink at him before dropping onto the cushions.

He grabs the ointment off the counter and trails after me. Just as he steps close, I set a hand on his hip. He's in my favorite kind of pants—none. Just boxers. He cooked like that too, shirt grudgingly on, muttering something about boiling water and me getting distracted.

I'm obsessed, and have been, but now that I've been given freedom to have what should've been mine from the beginning, I'm feral.

"Sit in my lap." I scoot back and lean forward.

He rolls his lips together and shakes his head. "I won't have a good angle."

I shift him to stand in front of my closed knees, then gesture for him to spread his legs. "You will."

The look he gives me is hesitant, almost questioning. I tilt my head. "Talk to me. What is it?"

"Are you asking me to straddle you?"

I nod. "Is that a problem?"

He exhales slowly, shoulders rising before he lets them drop. "No, I don't think so..."

As he steps closer, I lift a hand to pause him. "Don't do anything you're not comfortable with, sunshine."

"It's not about comfort," he assures me softly. "I promise. If there's anyone in this world I could be comfortable with, it's you."

That brings a cocky grin to my face. *Damn right.*

With a deep breath, he moves forward, placing one knee, then the other, to either side of my hips before lowering himself onto my thighs.

"Michael really fucked with my head," he admits, voice low. "It's going to take time to not allow the things he said and did affect me. He made me feel like a girl. And I'm not. Just because I was smaller than him didn't make me any less of a man."

"I agree." My hands settle gently on his thighs—not to advance, but to anchor him. To reassure him I've got him.

He squeezes ointment onto his fingers and begins working it carefully over the burns at the backs of my shoulders. His touch is steady, but his voice falters. "I'd rather not get into the details, not right now. I'll just say he never let me have any control, and this feels

like that. Being on top in any capacity was strictly a hard stop for him."

An irritated tut falls from my lips. "Which makes him a complete fucking idiot." Not that he already wasn't one. "Probably had *daddy* issues. *Mommy* didn't love him enough?"

He tries to hold back his laugh, but it simply comes in the form of a snort.

Ugh. Fuck me I'm a lost cause for this man.

The corner of my mouth lifts, bittersweetly. "Do you like being in my lap, sunshine?"

A slight red colors over his nose. "Maybe."

The way my cock instantly reacts to that, has me shifting.

I'm glad he isn't resting right on top of it, because honestly, I might throw out the ointment excuse and fuck him right here on this couch.

"I like you right here," I murmur, leaning forward to catch his nipple between my teeth and bite down.

His gasp tangles with my name. "Keo!"

Chuckling, I pull him closer. Fuck it. I want him to feel exactly what he does to me. His ass grinds against what I can't wait to bury inside him.

"Keep going, doc," I say with a wicked grin. "I'm not doing anything but giving you a better angle."

He shakes his head, and when I rest my forehead against his neck, he resumes, gently rubbing in the cream. The cool sting of medicine spreads across my skin, though his fingers feel like fire compared to the flames crackling in the fireplace behind him.

"Talk to me," I whisper. "Tell me what hurts you, what makes you feel good... and what you want from us."

His fingers still, causing my gaze to raise to meet his, and I catch the storm of questions flooding his forest-colored eyes. I've never been this close, never been able to study them with such clarity. They're primarily green, but from the iris, brown bleeds outward like paint, seeping into emerald, like it's trying to take over.

"I want... transparency." He pauses, but only for a split second. "And to just be yours, and for you to be just mine."

I can't stop myself from asking, "Are you worried I'd belong to someone else?"

"Your last relationship was poly. I just... I need you to know I don't want that. I refuse to share you."

I have no doubt the grin on my face is stupid. Leaning in, I press a kiss to his shoulder. "I'm all yours, sunshine. I don't plan on sharing you either. I'm a selfish, greedy man when it comes to you."

I'm not even going to comment on the jealousy thing—because I would be. The urge to break someone's limb just for touching him simmers at the back of my mind. It's insane, I know, so I keep it to myself.

His soft sigh of relief warms me, and he keeps working across my shoulders with gentle precision. "I think healthy arguments are necessary. We don't have to be perfect, but... don't walk out on me. Don't leave me angry. And don't be afraid to tell me when I'm wrong, or if I'm doing something you don't like. I'm not fragile, just a little broken."

My hand drifts up his side, the heat of his bare body searing into my palm. Ayden may feel broken, but he isn't. Not to me. I understand him. And I just hope when it's my turn to talk about my demons, he'll understand me too.

"I don't see you as anything but perfect." My finger traces the scar down his spine, slipping beneath his boxers to where smaller ones scatter. "A little guarded, maybe. But I'd be the same..."

He shifts, pressing his cheek to the top of my head as his hand slides across to the other shoulder. "I should've let that guard down the moment you walked through the door back into my life. But it terrified me. I'd rather you be mad at me for keeping my distance than judge me."

A frustrated groan rumbles out of me. "That would've been the last thing I'd ever do."

"I know... Learned behavior, I suppose..."

I press my lips to his collar and trail them up the curve of his neck. "Running out on you the way I did—saying what I said—I know it didn't help. I thought I was protecting you. Hoping maybe you'd hate me, move on to someone less... forbidden."

"Joke's on us both, all it did was—" he cuts himself off, his hands still. And when I lean back to catch his eyes, he shakes his head. "Never mind."

"Tell me." I cup his neck, his own hands hovering between us.

Another shake of his head. "You aren't the only one who pays attention, Keo. I was going to make a bad joke."

"Bad joke, huh?"

"Yeah, one that wasn't funny." He leans forward, brushing a kiss to my lips. "Let me wash my hands, you're all set."

As he shifts to stand, I help him up. As he turns, I scoot back against the couch, keeping my back straight so the ointment doesn't smear onto the cushions.

Joke's on us both, all it did was... The words loop in my head.

He's gone only a few minutes, but long enough for me to sit here, stewing over what he meant. When he comes back and settles on my lap again, straddling me just as before, relief washes through me.

"Can I answer your third question from earlier?" he asks.

It's obvious he wants to move on. As much as I want to pry, I let it go. Maybe that's all it was. *A bad joke.*

I drag my fingers slowly up his back and nod. "Yes. What makes you feel good, sunshine?"

His lips curve into a smile as he leans closer. "Cooking for you. That oddly protective cat." My chuckle earns me one from him. "You... Your praise of me... The way you enjoy hearing me."

The memory of him moaning my name, spilling across my hand, has my dick tingling.

My groan is feral, and I wrap my arms around him, holding him tight. "Yeah?"

He nods while giving me a mischievous smile.

"I want you screaming for me. Don't hold back. There's no one out here to hear you but me. And even if there were, I wouldn't give a single fuck." Leaning forward, I catch his bottom lip between my teeth, tugging, before rolling us hard to the side. His back sinks into the couch cushions, his cock sliding against my groin as I settle on top of him. "Now," I growl. "Let's talk a little filthier, hmm?"

He wets his lips, his hips rising to meet mine. "Yes, please."

I pin his wrists above his head, about to press him for his hard limits when something stops me—his tattoo.

"First," I murmur, gaze dropping. "Answer me something."

His head lifts, following my eyes. "Oh." His cheeks are beginning to flush the deepest red I've ever seen.

God. That blush. My heart drops straight into my cock, and suddenly there's no dividing line between passion and lust.

"Do you want to know about the tattoo?" he asks softly.

I nod, dragging my palm slowly down his forearm until it hovers over the ink. A bold rectangle filled with a lion's face—amber eyes, that look exactly like mine, burn against the black-and-gray fur.

"Your name," he whispers.

My heart kicks back into my chest, stumbling over itself, flipping and twisting in every direction.

"It means *God is gracious*; your mom shared it with me one night after you left for college. I think she could tell I was missing you. But..." His chin drops but he keeps his gaze locked on mine. "It also means powerful; a name tied to kings. A crown didn't fit you, not in the way I saw you, but a lion did." His voice falters, reverent. I can't believe the goosebumps that rise across my entire body. "My king... in a world as wild as the savannah. Every time I felt weak, I'd look at it. And you were there, giving me the strength I needed when I was alone."

Grabbing the back of his neck, I drop my mouth to his. Heat crawls across my temples as tears build behind my eyelids. With his free hand, he threads his fingers up through my hair and holds me to him.

I suddenly laugh and drop my forehead to his chest. "Goddamn..."

His breath shudders as he asks, "What?"

"Do you know what your name means, Ayden?"

"Um... no?"

I kiss my way up between his pecs, one of his legs curling tighter around my thigh as I reach his ear. In a whisper, I tell him, "It means *little flame*."

His chest rises sharply beneath me. The moment his hand clamps onto my arm—right over the ink there—I shake my head, grinning through the rush in my chest. "Unbelievable. My god..."

"Your tattoo..." His voice cracks, thick with disbelief. He brings his hand up my inked arm, dragging his fingers across the tribal design that I specifically had made. Every section meaningful, all of them integrated with fire. "Shut the fuck up."

Everyone thought it was about my career.

They were wrong.

It was about him—the flame in my life that burned so hot, eight years later I could still feel the scorch of it.

I sit up, hovering over him, smiling down at the shock painted across his face. "I'll regret it for the rest of my life never telling my mom how badly I liked you the day she introduced Grant to me. I should've been selfish. Because I knew then you were mine."

He lets out a laugh that's soaked in unshed tears. "We were supposed..." His breath hitches around the words. "Supposed to be talking filthy. Not fucking crying."

I can't help but laugh with him, the sound breaking through the heaviness of it all.

It doesn't last long. I brush my knuckles along his temple, catching the tear that slipped free. "I don't plan on letting you go anywhere, sunshine. We've got plenty of time for filth, for tears, for laughter..."

When his smile breaks wide and unguarded, pure joy lighting up his face, I hum softly. "Yeah. You're stuck with me."

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I hadn't realized I'd find such comfort in therapy.

They say stigma is a powerful weapon when wielded correctly. Michael was excellent at using it to keep me under his control—making getting help feel counterintuitive, as if the only thing wrong with me was that I didn't trust him, that I didn't *love* him, that he wasn't my everything like he swore I was to him.

Brittany recommended her group sessions but also suggested I speak with one of her colleagues one-on-one. She said it wasn't good for her to be my direct psychologist, considering she was Keo's. I agreed wholeheartedly.

The therapist I just finished with is incredible. We share a lot of the same interests, which makes talking to him incredibly easy.

"See you next week, Ayden," Don says as I step into the lobby of the small psychology section of the hospital. I feel like I've been here too often this past month, but at least this time it's for my own benefit.

Today was Keoni's first day back at work, and I had aligned my schedule so he could drop me off before heading in. These next three days are going to suck—royally. I haven't been without him twenty-four-seven in four weeks, and to say I'm anxious is a massive understatement.

This first session was meant to tackle what I wanted to get out of seeing my therapist. Instead, it was him easing my nerves about something happening to Keo while on the job.

Pulling out my phone, I open my messages. I've only got two; one from Alysa wishing me luck with therapy, and the other from Keo.

Keo 👑

I know I said it when I dropped you off, but I hope your session goes as you hope. You'll feel lighter afterward, and if you need to talk, just call me. I'll always answer.

I have to physically *stop* myself from showing my giddiness.

A few email notifications had popped up alongside the texts. I normally wouldn't check them immediately, but one is from Dr. Yadav. Before responding to my sister, I decide to see what it says.

Hi, Ayden,

This is Dr. Yadav. Can you please contact me? I've tried to call you, but it seems as though your phone has been turned off. My number is below.

Signed,
Dr. Markus Yadav
San Francisco General Hospital
ER/OR

I step between the two sliding doors to the outside, staying within the warmth but out of earshot of anyone passing by. Tapping the number at the bottom of the email, I press my phone to my ear and listen as it rings.

I've been sort of waiting for this call, so even with my heart thundering in my chest, I feel ready.

"This is Dr. Yadav."

"Hey, it's Ayden Pierce."

A sigh of relief filters through the speaker. "Ayden, it's so good to hear your voice. How're you doing?"

I lean against the wall, wrapping an arm around my waist. "Good... things have been a bit hectic, but I feel like I'm doing better. How're you? How're things?"

"I'm doing alright, busy as ever. Things here are... interesting."

"Suppose that's San Fran for you."

He lets out a short, pitched chuckle. "Yeah." As he takes a deep breath, I brace myself. "Did you put in your letter of resignation?"

There it is.

"I did. A few days ago. I'm sorry I didn't call and let you know in advance."

It's not really protocol—he isn't my boss—but I'd like to say he's a friend. I worked closely with him during my residency, and he was there for me during my recovery from the accident. He deserved to know; I just didn't know how to tell him.

"It's alright, you don't need to apologize. Does that mean you've moved, or are you still in San Francisco?"

"No, I moved into my family's cabin."

The sigh he lets out isn't one of relief... and I'm not sure what it is, but it makes my chest tighten. "Where exactly?"

"Colorado." I trust him, but even still, telling him where I am makes my stomach twist. "Why?"

He exhales sharply. "Ayden... Michael reported you to the hospital."

My chest caves in. He'd threatened that before, but I thought it was just an empty threat. I've done nothing wrong—I mean, at the time he was here, I hadn't. Honestly... I still haven't. Nothing, other than an image, about what I'm doing with Keoni is wrong.

And I'll die on that hill.

"What... did he report?"

He groans. "I'm not supposed to say anything, but I know it isn't true. To be frank, if you'd started looking for a job or found one here in California, I would've told you to wait."

"What did he say, Dr. Yadav?"

"That... you're... participating in incest—"

"What?!" My voice comes out too loud, echoing around the small space, and I know everyone heard me in the lobby. Heart racing, I rush through the second set of sliding doors and out into the freezing air, moving down the side of the building until I'm alone.

"That's not true! I would... never!"

"Ayden, I know. You don't have to convince me of anything."

"With who? I don't understand. Keoni isn't a blood relative."

Silence stretches over the line as I round the corner, pressing my back against the cold stone wall.

"He reported that you did it with your sister. Who's—"

I nearly drop my phone, but I can't stop my legs from giving out, causing me to collapse to the ground. Shaking overtakes me, so violent and uncontrollable.

"Ayden? Is Keoni your stepbrother?"

I'm going to be sick.

"Y-Yes..."

Dr. Yadav curses under his breath, then sighs heavily. "Listen, I'm already telling you more than I should. You need a lawyer—a good legal team. He claims you sent your stepbrother after him when he confronted you, and that he threatened to kill him."

"No... no, no! That's not what happened at all!"

"I know. I believe you."

My stomach twists into tight, fiery knots, acid burning up my throat. The breakfast I'd made this morning claws its way up, threatening to paint the icy grass beside me.

"I-I have a lawyer already. I'm... getting a restraining order. He came here. He attacked me!"

"Did you report it?"

"Yes. I had help."

"Good. Jesus Christ, I always knew that guy was a piece of shit." Another sigh, ragged this time. "Did Michael point a gun at him?"

"Yes..."

"Do you have evidence? Video?"

"I do."

"He reported that he was using the gun in self-defense, probably because he knew you had it." Maybe, technically, it was. But Keoni had every damn right to do what he did.

"How do you know this?"

He sighs. "I've got my resources. Did you get any more of the incident recorded?"

"No. I didn't..." I draw my knees up to my chest and bury my face into them. "Fuck... What's going to happen?"

"They were going to let you go from SF General, but take a deep breath, please." I do, and I'm so fucking glad to have someone like

Dr. Yadav on my side. Knowing he believes me lifts a weight I know would be too unbearable to keep from squashing me right now. "Because you put in your resignation, they've accepted it but made it immediate. You won't be able to stay on leave as you requested."

"That's fine..."

"Because these are just allegations, it's been decided to allow the legal system to take the appropriate actions. They won't be reporting it to the board... for now. It's why I said you need to get a *good* legal team, Ayden."

I nod, even if he can't see it. "I understand."

"I'm going to do what I can here for you. I've got resources, and friends that can help."

Dropping my head back against the wall, heat builds in my eyes. "Thank you..."

"I'm so sorry." The ache in his tone has tears falling across my temples.

I bite hard on the inside of my cheek, and only when I taste metal, do I stop.

"I want to tell you what's going on so you understand." With a shaky breath, I clear my throat. "I lost my dad and stepmom a few months ago... and after their funeral, I decided to stay here in Colorado. My stepbrother, Keoni, moved into the cabin before me..." I pause, and swallow down my fear. "You need to know that I am seeing him. Michael had police here in Colorado following me, he was tracking my phone. They saw me with Keoni, and that's what brought him here to me. We... we aren't doing anything wrong!"

He doesn't say anything. Complete and utter silence.

"I met him when I was fourteen, before our parents introduced us as soon to be step siblings. He... I wanted to be with him then, and because their love, their *happiness*, mattered more, I had to suffer for it. Please don't see me as fucked up, Markus, please it's not—"

"I would never. I understand the law, and I know you. There's zero judgement from me."

"Ayden?"

My head snaps up to see Brittany standing just a few feet away, her eyes wide.

"Oh my god, Ayden!"

I shake my head quickly and raise a hand, finger pointed at my phone. She nods but continues to rush over to me.

Markus's voice fills my ear. "Look, who you love isn't anyone's business as long as it's legal. Which this is. Michael is psychotic, but he has resources." His tone of sincerity reminds me I did have friends, and someone that could've helped me if I had spoken up... "Whoever just called your name sounds worried. I'm going to save your number. Am I okay to call when appropriate?"

"Yes... of course." My throat is raw, but I manage the words.

"Let's leave all of this out of texts."

"Probably for the best. Thank you... Dr. Yadav."

He lets out a soft laugh. "Call me Markus. We're friends. Take care of yourself, Ayden. Get that team together. We'll figure this out."

"I will. Speak soon."

"Bye."

The line clicks dead just as Brittany drops to her knees in front of me, pulling me into a hug so tight it knocks the air from my lungs.

"Are you alright? What happened? Should I call Keoni?"

I shove my phone into my pocket and fold my arms around her, giving her a strong hug.

"I don't know, Britt. I..." I release a heavy sigh. "He's the one I want to call when shit like this happens. But I can't keep fucking up his life and career. It's his first week back."

She leans back just enough to meet my eyes, her brows knitting together, a soft smile tugging at her lips. "Then let's go to him."

Britt helped gather me up and signed off for the rest of the day. Someone must've told my therapist about me screaming, and knowing how close Britt and I are, he likely relayed the message. I'm grateful she managed to ease the panic attack that I know I would've had once hanging up the phone with Markus.

Still, my anxiety spikes the moment we pull up to the fire station. The garage door—if that's what they call it—is wide open, the hulking nose of a fire truck filling the frame. Dom crosses in front of it with a clipboard in hand, disappearing around the other side without even glancing at us. For that, I'm oddly relieved.

I don't know why walking in here feels so damn hard. This isn't like the bar, or the cabin. This is their *office*. Their world.

Britt shifts the Jeep into park, and I peel off my seatbelt slowly, buying myself seconds. She's already out of the car by the time I

reach for my door.

"Dom!" Her voice carries, firm and familiar, like she's done this a hundred times before.

The burly man steps back into view and lifts his chin in a nod. Not angry. Not bothered. Just... Dom. It causes some of the weight to slide off my chest.

His gaze finally flicks to me climbing out of the Jeep. "Everything alright?"

"Yes and no," Britt answers before I can. "Where's Keoni?"

Dom wedges the clipboard into a slot on the side of the gleaming red truck. "They just wrapped briefing with the last squad. Head on in. I'll get him."

She turns to me and rushes to my side, looping her arm through mine before ushering me in. We pass the firetruck, another one parked just across from it, and between them a rack lined with their coats. Everything is pristine—clean, orderly, meticulous. I guess I shouldn't be surprised; from what I've gathered, they're an extremely organized group.

Britt pulls me up a flight of stairs and through a door that opens into a sprawling living space. A kitchen runs along the far wall, and across from it, a massive window stretches wall to wall with a door leading out to what looks like a patio. Several couches are clustered around a mounted television. But what really steals my attention is in the corner...

A pole. A real fire pole, shooting from the ceiling straight through an opening in the floor. That's... actually a thing?

We're barely there a minute when the sound of rushing feet snaps my attention toward the hallway. Two blurs come barreling out—Taylor and Kali.

"What're you guys doing here?"

I don't even have time to answer before they slam into me with tight, warm, hugs. It surprises me, because it doesn't feel like friendship. It feels like family.

Like I've come home.

Kali squeezes me just as hard as Taylor does, before the latter breaks away to wrap Brittany up in an embrace.

Another set of footsteps drags my gaze upward to see Keoni. He steps in alongside Dom, worry etched across his handsome face. His

hair is tied back in a bun, a black T-shirt pulled tight across his chest, uniform pants sitting comfortably low on his hips.

"They missed you," Dom says, voice flat and unreadable as always. Then he glances at the women. "Let's go, ladies. We've got tasks to finish. Brittany, make yourself useful."

Her gasp has the girls giggling. "I don't work here. I'm just a chauffeur."

"If you want to eat, you'll work." Dom deadpans.

I catch movement in my peripherals as everyone begins filtering toward the door I came through. Everyone except Keoni. He brushes past them, giving Britt a quick pat on the shoulder before making a beeline straight for me.

"Keo, I'm so sorry to show up un—" I'm swiftly cut off by his mouth on mine.

He doesn't hesitate for even a moment—not even to check if anyone has left. And I'm almost certain they are still here, because only now does the door click shut.

My shock lasts only a second before my arms wind around his back, pulling him in. One of his arms cinches possessively around my shoulders while the other settles at the back of my head.

He holds me tight, only pulling away enough to ask, "What's wrong?" The worry in his voice is unmistakable, heavy in just those two words.

I sigh and tuck my forehead against the curve of his neck. "I just wanted to see you..."

"Bullshit." He clicks his tongue while easing back enough to meet my gaze. "Don't lie to me, sunshine. Tell me what happened because I know you wouldn't be here unless something was wrong." He leans in to brush a quick kiss across my lips. "If it were just because you missed me, you wouldn't be shy about asking for a picture of my handsome face."

A soft laugh vibrates through my closed lips. "Handsome indeed." I move my hand up to drag my fingers along his five o'clock shadow. "Okay, you're right. But we can worry about it when you're off. I don't want to distract you while you're working. If something happens, you need to be focused on you."

He tuts. "Ayden, it's a little late for that. Now come on, talk to me."

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I've never really had an anger problem—or at least, I don't remember being this mad this often.

The name *Michael* sparks something ugly in me. It makes me want to be violent. The sheer number of illegal thoughts that flood my head could put me behind bars without question.

We've moved to sit on the couch, and though every part of me wanted him in my lap, I gave him space to sit beside me instead.

Ayden just finished telling me about the call with his doctor friend at SF General. The fact that Michael would report him for that makes me sick. He has no evidence of anything, and we're not even doing anything illegal.

"Have you told Alysa?" I ask, my thumb rubbing small circles behind his ear as I hold onto the back of his neck.

He shakes his head.

For some reason, him coming to me first makes me ache for him even more than I already do. It has me greedy. I want this—want him to turn to me, to talk to me, to hand me every piece of himself. To fill me with his wants and needs. To let me protect him.

"You should, tonight or tomorrow morning," I say. "I don't know what it might mean for her professionally, but probably not much, considering where she is. Still, she needs to know."

I place my hand onto his jaw and pull his attention back to me, away from the blank space he'd drifted into. The moment his eyes find mine, his pupils flare.

"We'll get this sorted. It's all lies. There's no evidence—"

"I'm honestly worried, Keo."

"Tell me why."

"For so many reasons." He attempts to shift away, but I follow, sliding closer.

"What're you doing..." The bashful way he tries to hide the smile tugging at his lips is so cute.

By the time he reaches the end of the couch, I've squeezed in right beside him. "Forcing you to talk to me. Up close."

He leans back, head sinking into the cushions. "It's just... nothing happened. But in the context of what was reported, and what I'm about to say, it sounds terrible."

I rest my arm along the back of the sofa, fingers slipping through his hair.

"Alysa was in a hotel here for a week after the funeral, and I stayed with her. Michael always told his friends he didn't trust me to go anywhere—said he thought I'd cheat. It was always a fight after we hung out with them..." He doesn't turn his head, but his eyes flick to mine. "I told him I was staying with her. If I'd had a key to the cabin, I would've stayed there. I'm worried he'll twist it, use that to lie. There's... no proof we...*didn't*..."

It makes me sick just thinking about the picture Michael might try to paint. Imagining Ayden and his sister in that way, it's unfathomable.

But, I get it. I'd imagine someone believing him, seeing him dating his stepbrother, and asking 'Why not cross the *other* line?'

"Sunshine, it's all hearsay. I'm no lawyer, but I know enough. We'll go after him for defamation against your name—and for assault, on both of us. We reported it but didn't press charges. That changes now." I lean in to brush a kiss against his cheek. "Alright? I promise nothing's going to come of this. It might get ugly for a while, but I've got you."

His chest rises with a long breath before his hand comes to my jaw, thumb dragging gently across my lips. "Thank you."

I smile. "No need to thank me."

He sits up and presses his mouth to mine. I love kissing him. If it weren't for where we are, I'd stay like this for hours. Tasting him, *devouring* him. But we've already been talking for nearly an hour, and I have things to get done.

Leaning back, I rest my forehead against his. "Stay here. Call your sister. There are snacks in the fridge. Dom mentioned food—so it looks like you and Britt are invited for dinner."

His fingers trail to the back of my neck as he nods. "Alright. I'm really sorry. I don't want to be a burden in your life."

I scoff. "Please, Ayden. Don't make me spank you." He sucks a sharp breath in, and I can't help but chuckle as I stand. "I've got a surprise for you *but* you'll have to wait."

"Wait! That's so mean. Why even say anything?"

I don't look back, just wave as I disappear down the hall to find Britt. She can keep him company while I handle what needs doing. I'm grateful to Dom for so much already, and I won't take his kindness for granted.



Several hours later, we've all eaten dinner and showered, and not a single call for assistance has disturbed the evening.

Before the incident at the hotel, it felt like everything in this town went wrong. Now, it's quiet. Almost like whatever god there is decided to give us a break—especially since we're all still mourning Corey.

A little after ten, Britt headed out, making sure Ayden was set to get home. I told her I'd take care of him. Although she gave me a coy, cat-like expression, she didn't question it.

I told her in our last session that he's my boyfriend, and, unsurprisingly, she wasn't shocked. She was supportive, exactly as I knew she'd be. She even apologized for pushing Kali to flirt with him, swearing it was only to get me out of my own ass and into his.

I didn't quite buy that. I'm positive she was trying to get a rise out of me.

Everyone has since drifted off toward their rooms to get ready for bed when Ayden stretches his arms over his head and begins to stand.

"I guess I should get going."

It's closing in on eleven now, and *that* is just not happening.

"You'll stay here tonight."

He freezes mid-motion, then slowly sinks back into his chair, eyes wide. "What?"

Propping my elbow on the armrest, I lean into my palm. "I didn't stutter. You're staying here. I've already cleared it with Dom and the girls."

God, he's so fucking cute when he's surprised. It's the same look he gave me when he found out my cock was pierced. Now that I think about it, I really regret not getting more piercings back when I wasn't having sex. The healing time is going to be a bitch—assuming he likes this one, that is.

"Is that allowed?"

I shake my head. "Technically, no, but... perks of a small town. It can't be a regular thing, but given the circumstances, Dom said it's fine."

"How can someone that scary-looking"—I throw my head back with a laugh—"be so damn nice?"

Hearing him join in on the laughter, I shake my head and grin. "He's a softie, he just has to keep the appearance up."

His soft nod accompanies his growing blush. The fact my dick *instantly* reacts to that, has me inwardly groaning.

"Where are we sleeping?"

I'm one second from calling him a good boy for knowing we'll be sharing a bed, but my cock can only take so much torture. "Men's common space. Dom has his own room, and the girls have theirs."

Slapping my hands onto my knees before standing, I get up and reach down to help him up. He grabs my wrist, and I pull him to his feet.

We walk down the hall to where I sleep: four bunk beds and a solo on the furthest wall. I've not moved from my spot, bottom left, even after what happened. All of them are custom double built for length.

But I think for tonight, we'll take the largest against the wall without the bed on top.

Kicking off my boots, I gesture toward it. He strides over slowly, removes his shoes, and tucks them under the frame.

"Forgot to ask," I say while undoing my pants, then move to the free hanging closet where my clothes are hung and folded. "How'd Alysa take it?"

"As you'd expect. She's furious and disgusted." In the dimly lit room, he starts to undress, pulling his shirt off first. "She even tried to joke... about how she'd fuck you before ever touching me. I had to force myself to laugh."

I let out a low "Yikes" before tugging off my own black tee.

"Pretty sure she noticed how uncomfortable I was, or something else, and quickly apologized. It's going to be so hard to tell her when she comes."

I'm not going to comment, I don't think it will be, personally, but I like to see him squirm a little.

"We'll address it when the time comes." Dropping my pants, I glance over my shoulder to find him staring. He quickly looks away, strips his jeans, and slips into bed. I'm pleased he doesn't ask for anything of mine to wear—him in just his boxers is both torturous and beautiful.

I reach for sweats but think better of it. Small space, warm bodies; I'll be hot enough.

Letting them drop, I switch off the last light and cross the room to the bed. Sliding in behind him, I wrap an arm around his stomach and pull him flush against me.

"Thanks," I whisper against his ear.

"For?" He shifts his hips, inadvertently rubbing his ass against my abdomen and cock that's slowly hardening.

"Not suggesting another bed."

A soft, almost moan-like sound escapes his throat. "Remember, I'm the smart one. Why the fuck wouldn't I want this?"

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, inhaling the scent of his shampoo—vanilla and honey. Sweet but not overpowering. I want that smell, *him*, everywhere I am. On the sheets, on my clothes, my truck—imprinted in my nose, etched in my brain.

Yes, I'm obsessed.

"Good..." I bite my tongue, not letting the *boy* slip out. It isn't just me who likes this. The small bumps rising on his skin tell me so.

"We should sleep." His voice is uncertain, unconvincing. I run my fingers up and down his stomach, tracing the line between his boxers and his belly button.

"Definitely... not..."

My fingers dip just under the elastic, the only barrier between me and what I want.

Then, he lets out a soft, broken whimper.

A *whimper*. Oh, fuck **me**.

"Sunshine," I croon. "You keep that noise up, I'll fuck you right here for our first time, and I don't know if you can be quiet enough for that."

In a hushed whisper, he says, "Keo, please... touch me."

I drop my mouth to the curve of his neck and suck on his pebbled skin. My hand slips beneath his boxers, wrapping around his already hard cock.

Quickly, I slide my other arm under his head and press my hand over his mouth. He moans into my palm, and goddamn, I can't help but grind my hips against his back. The friction of his ass against my clothed dick rips a groan from my throat.

He tilts his head back, and I drag my lips up to his ear, biting down on it. The moment he thrusts in my grip, I chuckle. "You want more?"

His nod makes me release both his mouth and his cock.

I shift over him, tossing the blanket aside before tugging at his boxers. The room isn't completely dark; a red light casts enough glow for me to catch his eyes widening in shock. The instant his length slaps against his abdomen, I no longer care to meet his gaze—I look down instead.

The thick vein at the base pulses as his cock twitches under my stare, and I can't help but lick my lips.

"W-What are you doing?" he whispers.

Without answering, I slide down his body, dragging my lips across his stomach to hips. My fingers graze along his thighs before attempting to push them apart. As I'm met with resistance, I snap my gaze up to see him looking at me like I've lost my damn mind.

"Are you stopping me?"

"No... Yes... What are you doing?"

"I'm going to suck your cock, Ayden." This time I don't give him a chance to fight me. I spread his legs wide and settle between them.

The moment he opens his mouth, I cover it with my hand. Without another word, I wrap my fingers around his dick and drag my tongue across his cum-covered tip. His muffled moan vibrates against my palm, and it pulls a groan from me.

I don't know why he questioned me, but the second I seal my lips around his head and take him deep, he stops resisting. His back arches off the bed, his panting hot against my hand.

Goddamn, he tastes just as good as when I licked us clean. He stretches my throat as I push down, trying to take every inch.

One knee jerks up, and I shift my grip from the base of his cock to the back of his thigh, throwing his leg across my chest so I can lean forward, allowing me to take him deeper. Then I start working him in and out of my mouth, steady and relentless.

I keep my hand pressed to his mouth as he lets out the sexiest moan, and fuck, I'd love to hear him scream for me. But not here. The concrete walls will block some of it, yet by the way he's writhing under me, I know someone would still hear.

His legs shake as I bob on his head, before taking him deep, my tongue pushing against that prominent vein on the underside. I can tell how sensitive it is, just based on how he reacted with my piercing brushing against it.

Feeling his fingers thread through my hair has me groaning, vibrating against him.

"Keo!" It's the first coherent word he's managed since I started taking him, even if it's muffled. "Oh, fuck."

Letting his cock slip from my mouth, I grin and release my hand from his face. He drags in a harsh breath as I flick my tongue across his tip, savoring every single drop of him.

"You taste phenomenal, sunshine." I rise onto my knees, his calf still hooked over my shoulder. He bends with me as I lean closer. Watching him struggle for steady breaths only makes my grin widen.

I grab my cock and press the tip against his cheek, leaving a streak of precum behind. His eyes widen, his teeth sinking into his bottom lip.

"Don't worry, you'll get this later. Right..." I tap against the crease of his ass. "Here. I'm going to fuck you, Ayden, and fill you with my cum. Shove a toy in to keep it where it belongs... inside of you. Fuck, just the thought has me making a goddamn mess."

He's panting and wetting his lips, which has me feeling *feral*. My gaze drops to his cock, where precum drips down his stomach. He's so hard, veins swollen and demanding I shut the fuck up and wrap my mouth around him again.

"Do you want to come in my mouth, sunshine?"

He hesitates, and I tilt my head, waiting him out. If he says no, he's only denying himself.

"Yes," he finally whispers after several agonizing seconds. "But I want you to come in mine. I want to swallow everything you give me."

My head falls back, eyes rolling. "*Fuuuck*." I grab his hip and thrust mine forward, the length of my cock pressing between his ass cheeks. The tip dragging up against his balls. "Why the fuck aren't we home?"

Dropping his leg, I move over him without crushing him under my weight, but enough to smash my mouth against his. Our cocks slide together, his whimper breaking into my groan.

Goddamn, he's so perfect. How the fuck I kept my hands off him for so long needs to be studied because *what was that restraint?!*

"Tell me again what you want," I breathe against his lips.

His fingers tangle in my hair again as he looks up at me. "Come in my mouth, Keo. *Please*."

Grinning, I drag my tongue across his lips. "That's my good fucking boy."

I shift us around, pulling him on top of me and guiding him down toward my throbbing cock. My hands clamp onto his hips as I move one of his knees past my head, then wrap my fingers around him and draw him back in.

Fuuuck. The second his lips close around the head of my dick, I nearly lose it. Him taking me into his mouth has my abs tighten, my thighs twitch, and I swear this might have been a mistake—because how the hell am I supposed to focus on anything else?

A groan rumbles from my chest as I reach down and thread my fingers through his hair. The risk of being here, the chance of someone hearing, maybe even seeing honestly makes the sensation stronger. I've never been one to crave that, but right now? Fuck, I love the thought.

But this is still my place of work.

Regardless, I want the world to know that he's mine. Just like earlier, I wasn't worried if my team caught a glimpse of me kissing him. It doesn't matter to me that they know or may find out he was my stepbrother. I just don't care what they'll think.

I'm ready to tell Alysa everything.

I'm ready for the entire world to know that Ayden Pierce is mine, *finally*.

Rolling us onto our sides, I grip the back of his head and bury myself until I hit resistance. I let him slip from my mouth, spit on my fingers, and slick them thoroughly.

He doesn't gag, not once, but the second I trail my fingers to his ass and press one inside, his throat tightens around me.

"Fuuuck," I whisper gruffly. "I'm going to make this mine, too. I can't wait to bury myself inside you."

Releasing the back of his head, he pulls back but doesn't let me go. He drags in a deep breath through his nose before sucking hard on the head of my cock.

I angle him back down, swallowing him again, my tongue coated with the salty tang of his cum. He tastes like a drug I'd never seek therapy to quit.

The moment he starts bobbing his head, I slide in another finger. The way his body clamps around them has my balls tightening, my own release threatening. He throws his head back, panting against my inner thigh as he lets me slip free.

I hook his leg higher, spit over my fingers, and drive into him harder, curving just right to find that spot I know will be his undoing.

"K-Keo. I'm, fuck... please, don't stop, right there," he whispers against my skin. He's being good, but the devil in me wants him loud and unrestrained.

Before I can order him, he's already back on my cock, working me sloppily, desperately. It feels so fucking good I can't help but thrust up into his mouth to meet his hunger.

"That's it, sunshine. So fucking good taking all of me."

My fingers tangle in his hair again, pushing him down, cutting off his breath. I drag my tongue across his length before taking him back into my mouth. He's close, I can feel it—the twitch in his cock, the way the sheets strain in his fists and curl beneath his toes.

I don't let him go, and as he begins to writhe, the first hot burst of cum rips my own release from me. He spills into my mouth, and mine crashes out of me just as strong.

He's struggling to stay quiet, just as I am, and my body spasms as I come hard.

I release the back of his head, but he only pulls away far enough to suck in a breath through his nose. I ease my fingers out of him, and after swallowing, I gradually let him slip free.

He rolls onto his back, chest heaving.

After a few seconds of stillness, he shifts beside me, grabbing the sheet first and tossing it over us.

I've never been one to sleep completely naked, always in boxers or sweats, but fuck, I might have to start. His still semi-hard cock rests against my hip as he slings a leg over me and settles his head on my chest. My arm slides around his shoulder, pulling him closer.

"I've never had a guy suck my dick before." His confession doesn't surprise me one bit. "I think it had to do with the power dynamic. I... never had any."

While that pisses me off, the fact that I was his first... well—wait.

"Has a woman? And if you tell me Mandy, Ayden, I swear to god—"

He laughs and shakes his head. "No. I should say... no one has. You're my first..."

"Mmm." Fuck *me*. Yup, I love that. "And? Did you enjoy it?"

He buries his face against me. "Wasn't it obvious?"

"Stroke my ego." I've done it before, but not enough to classify myself as an expert.

"It was fantastic. I hope you enjoyed yourself..." He moves his hand up my chest to my jaw, dragging his nails against my five o'clock shadow. "I'd hate for it to be the last time you do it."

"Definitely not." I tip his chin up, forcing his gaze back to mine. "Keep confessing what you love, sunshine, because it's my desire to give it all to you. And if sucking your cock is on that list, I'll tie you down and have you for breakfast, lunch, and dinner."

His soft hum comes with a nod. "Yes, please."

"That's my Ayden. Good night—"

"Wait!" His whisper-shout startles me. "You said you had a surprise for me."

"Oh." I chuckle. "That's right. After these three days, I'm changing my schedule. One on, two off."

He lifts entirely off me, resting on his elbow with widened eyes. "Wait... seriously?"

I nod, pulling him back down to kiss his parted lips. "Until all of this blows over with your ex, I'm spending every second by your side."

The red light doesn't dim that infectious, handsome smile of his. "Best surprise ever."

At least I didn't fuck up this one...

He lays back onto my chest, suctioning to me.

"Hopefully..." I brush the back of my hand down his neck, across the curve of his shoulder. "I can keep surprising you."

"I'd love that."

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“Listen, are we at this point in our relationship?” I glance at the blonde in the passenger seat, then at the other one in the back. How I ended up with these two driving me to Denver is beyond me.

“Oh, we absolutely are,” Britt says with a mischievous laugh.

“Totally. Plus, I’d like to pick up a few things too.” Calista’s cheeky smile makes me chuckle before I turn back around.

We just spent the last three hours going over paperwork with my legal team. Feels weird to say it like that, but there are about seven of them. Cal has been a divine being through it all—a fucking angel. I’m grateful for her connections, even if she admitted how hard it is to be back in that space after everything with her mom.

The events with her and Ronan? Shit, it was like something straight out of that show *CSI* or *Bones*. Absolutely insane.

I’m grateful I was able to get in front of a judge today—and that the temporary protection order against Michael was approved. It blocks all contact: in person, calls, social media, everything. They even issued an arrest warrant, so if he crosses into Colorado, he can be detained immediately.

It makes me feel safer than I have in weeks—and grateful for the people around me. I know this process usually drags on forever, but

Cal pulled every string she had, and the turnaround was lightning fast.

"I'm not a prude so don't take this as that, but I've never been into one of these stores with anyone. I usually come alone."

Britt gasps, turning to me as we stop at a red light. "Have you never had girl-friends?"

"I've had friends that were girls—the gays, the straights, the theys—but no one's ever offered to take me to a sex shop." That's not entirely true, but I don't want to say that even when someone had, I would decline.

Michael never thought it was appropriate. He saw this kind of thing as unfaithful.

Even if he was the cheater.

The fucking asshole.

"Well, you're in for a treat." Britt giggles.

At the next turn, we pull up in front of Bonny Bunny, which is exactly what I expect an adult store to look like—discreet but obvious, somehow managing both. It's honestly impressive.

A tan building on the corner, floor to roof black-out window with a neon light, and a sign that says 'Open 24 Hours'.

I chuckle to myself as I hop out of the Jeep. Cal falls in beside me from the back seat, and Britt joins us as we head inside.

The second we step through the door, it's sensory overload. Leather and silicone dominate the air, underscored by a faint hint of rose.

The bell above the door dings—and as if on cue, my phone buzzes in my pocket. My heart flips, kicking around my chest like it's grown feet, giddy and restless.

Keo 👑

How did it go? Sorry I didn't text sooner, had an incident to handle

Before you ask, I'm fine

Reading my mind, I like that

Don't apologize. It went great. Judge granted the temp order, no questions

Thank god. There was enough evidence against him.

How're you feeling?

It's supposed to snow tonight

I heard. Not surprising, it's fucking cold

I'm good 😊

I hold back from saying 'I miss you' because that's crazy. It's been two days, and I get to see him this evening. *Don't be weird, Ayden.*

I'm with Britt and Cal

We stopped at Bonny Bunny's adult store in Denver

Should I have asked permission to come here with them? I know that's just my anxiety talking, but for a second I can't shake the worry he's going to be upset.

Which is stupid because Keoni isn't Michael.

Keo 👑

Color me jealous, I'd love to see your face turn red while shopping. We should go back together.

Pick up some lube that's good for you

And whatever else you'd like to try out

Ugh, now I'm hard

Pics or it didn't happen

I'm thinking of rope since you talk about binding me

Fuck. Me.

picture attached

Sure enough, even over his thick fireman pants, I can see the outlining of his cock.

I bite on my cheek and hit save.

Keo 👑

Let Britt know that our therapy session is going to be quick

I'm fucking that ass of yours tonight

Promise?

Yeah, promise

See you tonight, sunshine

I'll see you tonight, baby

gif attached

I let out a light laugh at the image. It's Leonardo DiCaprio in *The Wolf of Wall Street*, biting his knuckle.

For some reason, I've been wanting to call him that. Baby. I just wasn't sure if he'd be into it. He calls me sunshine, yeah, but I didn't know if he would want to be called a pet name. Judging by that reaction, though, he likes it.

I'll test it out later.

"You done drooling over your stepbrother?"

My gaze snaps up to Britt, who's standing right beside Cal. "Brittany!"

Calista looks up from the glass butt plug in her hand and glances between us. I brace for disgust to cloud her soft expression—but it doesn't.

Instead, she lifts the toy and asks, "Have either of you used glass before? I've heard it's great for sensory play. You can freeze it or heat it in hot water."

I blink a few times, then shake my head. "No..."

"Me neither," Britt chimes in. "But all my boyfriends have been vanilla as fuck, so honestly not super surprising."

"Mine too, before Ronan."

"You don't care?" The question slips out before I can stop it, struck dumb by how easily she brushes it off.

Calista takes a deep breath and sets the glass plug down before shaking her head. "Technically, Ronan was my step-uncle when we started dating."

I must have missed that part in her retelling of what happened with her mom.

"It's not illegal. And you and Keoni aren't technically stepbrothers anymore." She glares over at the other blonde. "Britt, you and Genevieve would be best friends with how you tease him..."

with the step-family fucking and all.” She says it playfully, and we all burst out laughing. “Plus, Ayden, honey, I knew he was more than a ‘stepbrother’ the second you told me you were living with him.”

As we move down the aisle, I glance at the rows of lubricant. “How so?”

She giggles. “Because the day we met, when you said who you were living with... the way you answered was guilty, like you were ashamed of something. And you shouldn’t have been. Love is love.”

“Ugh, I’d just like for someone to like me,” Britt groans.

“What about Taylor? Are you two—”

“No... I mean, I don’t know.” She sighs, then blurts, “Yes, to answer your burning question—we fucked in your bed, Ayden. Sorry.”

I wasn’t even questioning that, but if she needs to get it off her chest, I’ll let her.

“I’ve just never dated a woman, and she’s great, but... I like dick.” Cal and I both start laughing as Britt adds, “Just not what they’re attached to.”

That sends us over the edge, bent double with the force of our laughter.

“No offense, Ayden.”

A strange mix of happiness and sadness swells inside me. The tears stinging my eyes are easy enough to disguise as laughter, but holy shit—I haven’t felt this good since high school.

Michael stole so many years of my life. If not for my father’s death, I’d still be trapped there. I shouldn’t even think about being grateful for that loss... but as I look at these two women laughing with me in a sex shop, holding toys like it’s the most natural thing in the world, I can’t help but be.

That has to make me a terrible person. Doesn’t it?



After taking our time down every aisle, we checked out and made the hour-long drive back to Maple Falls. We dropped Cal off before heading to Wildhart, where Britt and I stayed until Keoni got home.

I could tell he was tired. He tried to brush off his session with her, but Britt wouldn't let him. I'm glad she pushes him to do this. Both of us need this type of outlet, and we are going to do it together.

I'm scrolling through SF News on my phone when the door finally opens an hour later, the last of the setting sun spilling into the living room. Keo lets out a heavy sigh, kicks off his boots, and hangs up his coat.

It would be stupid to ask how it went. His face tells me enough to know it didn't go well.

I'm honestly terrified to broach the subject again as to why he's in therapy. I'm not entirely sure *why* I am, I just am. It couldn't be worse than my own reasons, but still. Hopefully one day, he'll just tell me.

When he catches me staring, he forces a lopsided smile.

I give him a full one, hoping to coax his into something more. It doesn't work.

"I may be breaking a promise tonight." His voice is low as he walks slowly toward me. It has me sitting up straighter. "Sorry."

I'm not sure what promise he means. "It's okay?" I ask my question carefully, hoping it's enough to make him explain without me having to press.

He moves directly in front of me and drops gracefully to his knees. For someone like Keoni—who seems like the very definition of strength—to look as if he's about to crumble into a million pieces, honestly stabs me right in the heart.

As he spreads my legs, he leans forward, resting his head on my stomach, causing me to lean back against the cushion. Both his arms wrap around me, and he just falls into holding me.

He doesn't say a word, and as I brush my fingers through his hair, he shuts his eyes.

We sit like that for some time, Clover joining us after a few minutes to curl up beside us. She licks Keoni's nose, as if reminding him she's there. As if either of us could forget that cat.

Only after the sun disappears and the cabin is shrouded in darkness does he shift.

"Life sucks sometimes."

I almost laugh. "It does."

"If I could turn my brain off... god, what a day that would be."

I hum and run my hand across the back of his neck, fingers rubbing at his hairline. The gentle drag of my nails across his scalp makes him let out a soft groan—not sexual, just contented.

"Do you... want to talk about it?" I ask cautiously.

He buries his face in my lower abdomen. "Not really."

Exhaling through my nose, I gather his hair into my hands and twist it into a loose bun, tucking the end to hold it. "Alright. Just know I'm here if you want to."

He lifts his amber gaze to meet mine. His full lips that are set in a frown, slowly begin to curl into a smile.

"Thanks, sunshine."

I really like that nickname.

"Do you want dinner?"

As he leans back, I can see the dread that had clung to him after his session with Britt begin to wash away. He slides his hands to my hips, slowly dragging me across the couch cushion. When our hips meet, his hand rests lightly at the side of my neck, his chin tilted down so his gaze stays locked on mine.

"Yes..." He pauses, and I narrow my eyes in question. "You'll be just okay eating and cuddling on the couch to watch a movie tonight?"

The question throws me off. "Uh... that sounds like a dream."

He shifts slightly, a flicker of discomfort passing across his features. "Nothing after that. Just... going to bed."

It takes me far longer than it should to process, and suddenly I feel like the dumb one.

I think back to our text exchange from earlier.

"I may be breaking a promise tonight."

Instead of making jokes—or anything that might make it seem like I want more—I just let my smile grow.

"Weren't you the one who said we have a lifetime together of filth, tears, and everything in between?"

That earns a wide grin from him. "I said plenty of time, but a lifetime..." He hums sweetly. "A lifetime sounds far better."

Heat floods my face, and I lean into his chest to hide the shame of literally saying out loud that I hope *this* lasts our lifetime.

He doesn't let me stay hidden. Pushing me back gently, he drags his thumb under my jaw and across my cheek. "Far better, Ayden." His lips brush mine in a fleeting kiss. "Thank you for helping me out of that."

"What?"

"The darkness. I'm glad I don't have to face it alone anymore."

I stretch up, pressing my mouth to his. I want to be that for him—the light he needs in that darkness of his. While he is my strength when I feel weak.

And yes... for our lifetime, and wherever we go after.

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I'll admit—I think I would've been fine, but knowing what I had to do today definitely played a role in why my depression spiked a few days ago.

The last thing I wanted was to walk into that cabin and show Ayden the ugly side of my mental health. I've definitely been getting better. My sessions with Britt are working, but we are closing in on the conversation about the accident. I know what's coming, and it feels like bracing for a crash I can't avoid.

I nearly ran—grabbed my keys, jumped in the truck, and just drove until the tank was dry. But I stayed. I kept it together and trusted myself to crawl out of that hollow guilt the way I've done for months.

This time, though, I hadn't needed to pull myself out. Ayden was everything I needed. The hopelessness that usually lingers for days disappeared far quicker than it ever has before.

Britt helps, but I think he will be the reason my symptoms don't spiral worse.

"Keoni Pierce?" The moment a woman calls my name, I straighten. "Detective Moors will see you now."

I've never dealt with anything like this in my career, though I was always told it could happen. It's the nature of what I do, yet it still knots my stomach.

A short, elderly woman with gray hair stands up beside me. Grace. She's my union's legal rep. She doesn't say much, but she's kind, reassuring me that I'll be fine and everything will be alright.

If I'm honest, I don't know exactly where the worry comes from. Maybe it's the thought of reliving that night again. Facing how I failed Corey. Failed his family. Regardless, it's just another piece of *guilt* that my brain forces me to carry.

Walking through the cramped office at the station, we're greeted by Detective Moors—a middle-aged man whose warm, hooded eyes nearly vanish behind the brightness of his smile.

"Mr. Pierce, thank you for coming."

"No problem."

As I take the seat on the left, Grace takes the one to my right. "Please remember his rights, Eduardo."

"Yes, ma'am, you got it." He leans forward, one forearm braced on the metal table, a pen poised in his fingers, ready to write. "If you're alright, I'll recap, and get right to the point of this interview."

I nod.

"On the night of September 29th, you and your unit entered Maples Inn to check if any persons were still inside. You cleared the first floor, then proceeded to the second, where the fire was reported to have started. Corey Robertson notified you that he was in the building, and you directed him to search the third and fourth floors. He took the west stairwell, while you took the east.

"When you were clearing the second floor, you heard calls for help coming from the room adjacent to the one the fire was blazing through. In your report, you stated you heard screaming, but no other sounds. Correct?"

"That's correct."

"You also stated the sound came from that room, and when asked if it could have been from another floor, you were adamant it wasn't."

"Correct. It was clear. If it had come from the first or third floor, I can't imagine I'd have heard it over the fire."

He nods, glances at Grace, then back at me. "As you know, there's no evidence anyone was left in the building. But I want you to understand there's no active investigation into your actions. Your supervising officer agrees there was no ill intent. He believes you heard something."

Good. The last thing I need right now is for someone to call me fucking crazy.

"Can you describe to us what the voice sounded like?"

"Woman, probably young, but not a child."

He writes something down before continuing, "Could it have come from a cell phone?"

I'm slightly taken aback by the question. "A cell phone?"

"Or... maybe a television?"

I drag myself back to that night. The fire's heat seeping into my suit, the pop of wires, the splintering wood, the structure groaning as it cracked. In that chaos, I still hear the voice, over and over, screaming.

"I can't be certain. It'd be impossible to really distinguish that. I'm sorry." I pause, then add, "But... is that a possibility?"

If it was a television, and that's what had me searching, nearly losing my life for, then maybe I should consider early retirement. Possibly even check myself into a mental institution for my own safety.

Ugh... Just the thought.

"We're exploring all possibilities, Mr. Pierce." He sighs and sets his pen down. "I can't speak too much on the investigation, but you've been cleared of any wrongdoing. It's been determined the fire was deliberately set, not caused by an electrical fault or any other accidental source. We'll keep you updated as much as we legally can."

I glance at Grace as she gathers her papers. She looks satisfied with that answer, but my head is swimming. Could I have been wrong? Was it just a television?

But another part of me can't let go of the other option. A cell phone. Why would he even suggest that?

"Thank you, detective." I stand and reach over the desk, giving him a handshake.

"I appreciate your cooperation, Mr. Pierce. Have a great rest of your day."

Exiting the station, I pull out my phone and immediately text Ayden.

Hey sunshine, what're you up to?

My Sunshine 🔥

Hey baby, I'm going over some paperwork from the lawyers

Britt dropped it off and is playing with Clover

I can help go through those with you tomorrow

You don't need to do it by yourself

I've got it 😊 Thank you though

It's a good distraction. I heard back from the Maple Falls Hospital about my application. It wasn't a no, but a "maybe later"

I understand why

Fuck no, I don't

I can't say what I want to do to that ex of yours, can't have evidence in the event I actually do the thing I want to

Kill Michael.

That's what I want to do. I want to kill that son of a bitch so goddamn bad.

My Sunshine 🔥

It's really hot when you do that

Get protective over me

You're mine to keep safe

Yup, that's hot.

How was the detective?

Good. All's settled. I'll tell you about it tonight when I get home

After a few minutes of silence, I head for my truck. I still need to get back to the station to finish my shift.

It isn't until I'm buckled in and the engine's running that my phone finally buzzes with a response.

My Sunshine 🔥

A bunch of police cars just drove through Sapphire Valley

Don't freak, it's not for me

Looks like they're heading to Starlight

I'm going to go investigate

I wish you wouldn't

Check with Calista. If Ronan lets her, go for it

I swear that guy shoots before speaking

Will do

See you tonight <3

Before you go.

Can I revisit that promise?

Gif attached

The gif is Brad Pitt from a movie I'm not familiar with, throwing his arms up screaming "*Fuck yeah!*".

Ayden makes me so fucking happy. It's slightly terrifying.

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“It’s beautiful, Cal. Congratulations,” Levi says, holding her hand far longer than he should.

I glance at Evelyn, arms crossed tight over her chest, her eyes locked on Ronan. “So this means things are off the table completely, huh?”

Ah. So that explains all the pineapples and the not-so-subtle advances from Evelyn and Levi.

“They were never on the table, Echo Ridge.” Ronan’s gruff voice carries that ‘I hate everyone but my fiancée’ vibe, and honestly? I love it. He’s so possessive of Cal, and it’s kind of hot.

And the tattoos don’t hurt either. Especially the one etched above his eye: *SIT*.

Really, he’s just hot in general.

Everyone circled here is ridiculously attractive, but Cal and Ronan are like model perfect. It’s why I wasn’t super shocked when she told me Ronan is basically a cam-guy, and they both ‘perform’ for a whopping one million users.

I’ll admit, it was hard to wrap my head around how he was alright showing her off like that, but the more time I spend around them, the more it makes sense. He’s got a strict no-touch policy.

When Ronan steps toward Levi as he goes in for a kiss on Cal’s knuckles, I can’t help but chuckle.

Leaning forward now that there's space, I admire the ring. "It's perfect. Congrats, you two."

"Thanks, Wildhart." Ronan hasn't called me Ayden since that first day. I have no idea why, but eh, it doesn't bother me. At least he doesn't give me the side-eye like he does Levi.

"Thank you, Ayden." Cal swoons as she leans into him.

About twenty minutes ago, police swarmed Starlight Ridge, and being the nosy neighbors we are, we all gathered to watch the show. Sanderson Pine has the best vantage point without getting too close.

Honestly, I feel a little weird doing this, but at the same time—it's kind of fun. I just wish Keoni were here. Of course, it had to happen on his workday.

"Any guesses?" Cal asks.

"They probably found his wife and daughter's body," Levi says.

I don't know much about the case, but a quick Google search told me Mr. Devereux's—reported billionaire, CEO of Devereux Industries—wife and daughter went missing last Thanksgiving. The search recently shifted from "missing" to "recovery." He's been a recluse ever since. Not even the media has caught sight of him.

Crazy... and so fucking sad.

"Have you texted... what was her name?" I ask.

"Jayde," Cal says confidently.

"That ain't her name. She's a little liar." I peek back at Evelyn, who's fiddling with her braided hijab. When she meets my gaze, then Calista's, she clears her throat. "She just seems... like she's lying, that's all."

Cal and I exchange a weary look. The more I interact with Evelyn, the more I feel there's something to her—and Levi, for that matter—beyond what meets the eye.

"Well... this was fun." Britt, who came with me to spy on the scene, steps up to Cal and gives her a sideways hug. "Congrats again, beautiful. I'm sure I'll be seeing you soon. I just subscribed. Did you guys see you hit one-point-five million subs?"

"Yes!" Calista's bright smile radiates genuine excitement as she jumps up and down. "You *have* to come to the live tonight. We've got something special planned."

"I'll be tuning in for sure," Evelyn croons.

Ronan grunts. "I'm going to get Ken to put an IP block on this place."

"Levi will just hack it."

The man chuckles.

"What do you two do again?" I ask.

She grins broadly. "Independent contracting."

"Uh huh..." I murmur, my expression as weary as my words.
"Right."

"Ayden, want a ride back to your place?"

I quickly lean in to give Cal a hug, aware of Ronan watching me. I promised him I wasn't interested in her—like Echo Ridge is—but it doesn't stop him from following my hands with his eyes.

"Congratulations again."

"Thank you, Ayden. Tell Keoni I said hi and to come by. And... can I put in a request for your homemade chicken noodle soup? It was so fucking good."

"You got it."

"Just no muffins this—" Ronan's comment cuts off with a loud *oof*.

"Ronan Byrne!"

I can't stop myself from laughing. "It's alright. I'm terrible at baking. I'm not ignorant to that."

"Honesty, baby girl. Have we learned nothing?"

I watch her cheeks flush as she tries to hide behind her scarf. It's adorable. I love it here, and I just know I wouldn't be happier anywhere else.



Hours later, in the dead of night, I see Keoni's headlights spill through the bedroom window.

I set my tablet down and throw the blanket off. I've been trying to get into reading since I've got so much free time. No one in the neighbors chat is very helpful, but at least Cal gave me a vampire book to try.

It's good, darker than anything I've ever indulged in. She warned me to read the trigger warnings first, which I'm glad I did. Prepared

me for... appendage feeding.

I'm already obsessing over the male main character, and the girl is badass, too.

I jump out of bed and make my way to the living room. I don't need to make him dinner, Keo already texted me that he ate, but I'm just eager to see him.

And yes... kiss him.

And touch him.

Ugh. I'm so needy.

We haven't used the things I bought at Bonny Bunny's, or really touched each other, other than cuddling these past few days. It's been nice, and I have no complaints—spending time with him in any capacity gives me pleasure.

That being said, I'm hopeful that *promise* is still on the table.

The moment I flip the light on in the living room, he's stepping through the front door.

"Evening, Keo."

"Good evening, sunshine..." He catches my gaze before letting his eyes slowly roam down my body, covered only in boxers.

A low, desire filled groan slips through his lips. "Fuck me."

"Are you asking?" I say, a slow grin forming on my lips.

I watch him slip off each boot with his toes, doing my best not to squirm where I stand. It's definitely cold. Under the blankets beside him, this attire would be fine. Standing here alone, less so.

His eyes catch something, and a slow, menacing smirk spreads across his lips. "Your nipples are hard." He shrugs off his coat, then the sweater underneath, leaving him in a T-shirt and pants.

Tilting his head, he drags his tongue across his upper lip.

Holy fuck. Why is that so hot?

"I can see your cock following suit. Mmm." The way he groans makes my skin zing. "How're you feeling?" He moves slowly across the space toward me, each step sending my body temperature up.

"Good... you? How was the rest of your day?"

"Day was okay. I'm amazing now that I'm home with you."

My heart hammers against my chest.

"And a full two days to follow," I breathe.

The instant he's inches from me, I tilt my head back to keep our eyes locked. "Please tell me we don't have plans."

He lifts his hand to my throat—his fingers fucking freezing, causing me to suck in a sharp breath.

“None...”

He leans in, grazing his lips across mine, down to my jawline, where he bites.

“Good. I want you all to myself.”

His arm snakes around my lower back, pressing our hips together. He sucks at my skin while lowering his mouth to the curve of my neck, nibbling and dragging his tongue toward my chest.

“No therapy. No neighbors. Just *my* Ayden and me.”

“Yes, please...” My head tilts back as he slides his hands under my boxers, gripping my ass, squeezing, and grinding me against him.

“I’ll be honest,” he breathes against my skin. “I’ve felt starved these last few days.”

The backs of my thighs hit the dining room table as he presses me against it. Even through his pants, I can feel his hard cock rutting against mine.

“*Baby.*”

“Mmm, fuck... even better sounding than I imagined.” He moves a hand down my torso, and the moment he’s an inch from my cock, he pauses. “Now—open those delicious lips and tell me what you want.”

I bite my lip to keep from panting. My god, he takes every need I have and sets it on fire. It isn’t just wanting him to fuck me—it’s needing it. I haven’t enjoyed sex in so long that I’m ready to beg for it.

“Fuck me.” I run one hand up through his hair, dispelling the ponytail so I can get a good grip. “I want you to fuck me, Keo.”

He stands to his full height, and the moment his lips meet mine, his fingers wrap around my sensitive cock. Just his grip at the base has my stomach twisting into knots, my legs trembling with need for friction.

His tongue invades my mouth, tangling with mine before he forcefully turns me. He pushes me forward, bending me over the table. The instant he grabs my hips and pulls me against him, I’m flat-out moaning.

“I don’t do safe words.” I can feel him through his pants, pressing into the crease of my ass and grinding against me. “Just tell

me to stop if I'm too much, and I will. Don't say it unless you actually want me to. Do you understand?"

I nod, exhaling. "Yes... yes. I want you so fucking bad."

He drags his hands over me, one grabbing my cock through my boxers, the other my balls. I swear I come a little from the dual contact. I can feel him rubbing his full length against the spot I'm desperate for him to fill, and I'm honestly ready to start begging.

"I want you too, sunshine, and I'm pleased to say we're both finally getting what we want."

His large hand moves to my throat, pulling me up and flush against his back. "Bed, or couch?"

"Bed." The moment the word leaves my lips, he takes my chin in his hand and directs me to meet his waiting mouth.

I turn in his grip and begin removing his shirt with haste. Feeling each ripple of his abs under my fingertips makes my skin tingle. His body is a masterpiece, and I just want to praise it the way he praises me.

He turns my back to the hall, guiding me backward but never breaking our kiss. The moment his shirt is discarded, I move to undo his belt. It clicks open, and the loud clatter of his jeans hitting the floor coincides with us pausing.

They're kicked aside, and my greed flares. The few feet to the bedroom feel impossibly long, so I drop to my knees, pulling his boxers down to his ankles in the process.

"I love that you are just as—" I've got my mouth around the head of his cock before he finishes, and through his groan he continues, "*—fuuuuck*. Needy as I am. Goddamn, Ayden."

His back hits the hallway wall, and his fingers thread through my hair. He doesn't push me deeper—I go on my own. Feeling the bar of his piercing against my tongue, then him stretching the back of my throat, has my own cock twitching.

I suck him down, tasting every inch, his groans driving me to take more each time.

"Fuck, you take my cock so good." He grips my hair tightly, pulling me back. "I want to watch your ass swallow it just like your mouth does."

He bends down, dragging his tongue along my chin up to my lips. "Drooling for me. You're such a good boy, sunshine."

Grabbing me, he pulls me to stand and crushes his mouth to mine before dragging us the rest of the way into the bedroom. He flips on the side table lights then nearly tosses me onto the bed.

He digs into one of the drawers, pulling out the lube I bought a week ago. I take in his body—warm, golden-brown skin glowing under the soft light. His chest flexes as he leans over, ripping down my boxers and leaving me completely bare.

"If I could have you naked in my bed every damn day, Ayden, I'd be the luckiest man in the world." The way he looks at me, like I'm the sweetest cake he's ready to devour, sends goosebumps crawling across my body. "You're making a mess for me."

I don't want to look away from him, but by the way he stares at my cock, I can't help it. I look just long enough to see my precum dripping across my stomach.

"Do you want me to clean you up?"

Lifting myself onto my elbows, I bite my lip and nod.

He drops instantly to his knees on the bed and leans over me. His warm tongue traces a line along my abs, teasing but never touching the tip, just cleaning off my precum. My body begs for him to use his mouth like he had before. I've never craved anything like this, but now it feels like sustenance—I need it to survive.

Keo never seemed like the kind of man to do this, but as he lifts his eyes to meet mine, he lowers just enough to drag his tongue along the underside of my length.

"How anyone wouldn't want to be right here is beyond me," he murmurs, moving further down. "I love seeing you—" He flicks his tongue across my balls, and I literally jump. "Twitch. Seeing you pleased is like a drug, Ayden."

When he presses his hands against my thighs, forcing me back, my eyes go wide. I've never been this vulnerable, and with the lights on no less. His gaze is locked on my cock, my balls... and wait, what is he—

He curls me forward and, without another word, spreads me wide for him to flick across my ass.

I don't recognize the sound that escapes me, grabbing the sheets for dear life as he goes back for more.

"Oh fuck, Keo!" My words come out choked as he circles my hole, before dragging his tongue across it. I'm honestly shocked at

how good it feels. The sensation shoots straight up my back, like electricity is moving up and down my spine.

I vaguely hear a pop, but when a sudden cold sensation crosses my dick, I glance down at him. The unmistakable coating of lube has me panting uncontrollably. My chest rises and falls so violently I worry I might pass out.

His dominant hand wraps around me, stroking in slow, deliberate motions.

"Please, holy fuck, baby." My moan comes out loud, and the grunt that follows has a vibrating sensation flowing through me.

He leans forward just enough to suck on my balls, sending my entire body into tense shudders. A finger brushes against my hole, and I mumble incoherent words.

He chuckles. "You better loosen up, sunshine. I definitely won't fit if you don't."

As if he pulls the strings, I become completely pliant.

He laughs softly, just before pressing a finger inside me. I shut my eyes as pleasure overtakes every other sensation.

He pumps it in, then adds another, stretching me and sending my mind spinning into a place far from where it had been seconds ago.

All the while, he strokes my cock so slowly that my insides tie themselves into knots.

"*Fuck, I'm addicted.*"

When I reopen my eyes, my vision is blurred. My mouth feels dry, though I swear I'm salivating over the sight of Keo kneeling between my legs.

"You on any day is glorious, but like this? Fuck me... you're a goddamn *masterpiece*, Ayden."

Alright. He needs to stop, or else I'll cry during sex, and that just cannot happen.

As he withdraws his fingers, he reaches back for the lube. "I've decided I want to see the look on your face when I take what's mine."

The cool liquid slides down my ass, causing me to jerk slightly. I'm expecting him to simply spread my legs to fuck me, but I'm wrong. He lifts one of them over his shoulder, just like he did at the fire station. My heel rests against the curve of his neck, my ass hovering above his thighs.

His tip presses against my entrance, and I breathe out, "Keo, please."

He grins—a glorious, possessive one that makes my chest tighten with want.

The stretch of him entering is nothing compared to feeling his piercing push in. I won't lie—I was a little nervous—but the moment he's fully inside me, dragging against my wall, my eyes roll back.

"Fuuuck, that's it. You're taking me so good, sunshine."

It feels like minutes before he fully settles inside me, and as my ass meets his thighs. I swear I'm floating.

He places one hand on the top of my shin and wraps the other around my dripping cock. Then he fucks me—pulling back and thrusting forward hard. My back, already arching off the bed, curves further with every forceful movement.

My hands grip the sheets as I watch him drive into me, our skin slapping together. Each thrust drags his tip against that sensitive spot inside me, making my mind spin.

The way he strokes and fucks me simultaneously has me already teetering on the edge.

"B-Baby, I'm... I'm going to come."

His jaw clenches as he grins. "That's my good boy. I want you to come for me and only me." He picks up his pace. "Make a mess while I fill you with my cum."

He pulls back only to slam forward again, his grip tightening just under the head of my cock. My legs shake uncontrollably. I shut my eyes so tight I see stars, and I come so hard that my release jets across my chest and face.

My moans are loud, but nothing overtakes the slapping of our skin and his grunts of pleasure.

"Thaaat's it, fuck, that's it." His vigor doesn't stop, and he continues stroking my sensitive cock, causing me to clench around him. "You feel fucking—" He groans, pulsing as he thrusts all the way forward, burying himself inside me. "—incredible, goddamn, Ayden."

The pressure inside me builds so fast, I feel like I'm coming again myself.

Keo turns his head and bites down on my calf, breathing heavily as he pumps short, shuddering thrusts into me. His shoulders twitch

with every movement, and the way he reacts to coming inside me... my god, I need to see it every single time.

Lights are staying on **indefinitely**.

After a few seconds of catching his breath, he slowly pulls out of me. I can feel his release beginning to follow, but then he shoves his fingers in.

He leans over me just as I moan, his mouth capturing mine. He drags his tongue across my lips, then traces every spot where my cum landed.

"All mine. Fucking all mine."

He continues licking every inch of me, and by the time he's done, my cock is hard again.

We spend the rest of the night lost in each other—making a mess, and cleaning it up.

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I feel like I'm living in a dream, one I definitely don't want to wake up from.

It's been four weeks, and my time with Keoni has been the best I've ever had. This is how my first—and last—relationship was meant to be. I know he would've been my high school sweetheart; we just... click.

Keo's mom would say two souls are born for one another, and I truly believe his was meant for mine. This isn't even a second-chance situation—we never got our first. I ache for the younger me who had to watch him walk away, but I'm so happy with how things have turned out.

Except, I think of the circumstances that brought us here, and I remember it was the deaths of our parents that led us back together. I shouldn't be wanting to thank them, but god, I do, and I wonder if they'd forgive me.

I love my dad, and some days I find myself rifling through old photos I'd stashed in boxes still piled in the closet. We'll convert the loft for storage once the weather warms up, but until then, the boxes stay where they are.

I never noticed how, in every high school photo, I was always closest to Keoni. Dinners—I sat beside him. Movie nights with our parents—I was beside him. There's a photo of us at *Star Wars: The*

Last Jedi; he had his arm around my shoulders, pulling us as close together as possible for the shot.

Then there are photos with all five us; Dad, Stepmom, Alysa, Keo and I. A surge of hate that shouldn't be there runs through me knowing that it's because of their love, ours didn't get a chance to exist.

I've crossed a narrow bridge with my feelings.

I miss my dad.

But... I'm happier now because I can finally have *my* happiness.

With a heavy sigh, I finish putting the dishes away and glance out the window. A light layer of snow rests on the ground—not enough to completely cover it. But soon, I've been told, it will be white as far as the eye can see.

Keoni left yesterday and was supposed to be home tonight, but Kali is sick with the flu. I completely understood, but I think he had a bit of anxiety about it. I'm not entirely sure why. It's just one day, and it's for a friend.

Still... he asked me not to go anywhere and to immediately call or text him if any issues came up. That it didn't matter what was happening, he'd come home.

I tried to brush it off, but there was no playful tone in his voice. So, I promised.

A knock at the door startles me and I nearly drop the plate I was putting away. I hurry over and peek through the window, spotting a man walking down the steps. He's wearing the standard USPS uniform, and I release a breath of relief.

A soft meow filters into my ears, and I glance back at Clover stretching across the sofa.

Once the mailman's van pulls away, I crack open the door and look down at the brown box sitting a foot or so away from me. My name is scrawled across the label with Wildhart's address beneath it.

No sender. No return address. Nothing else.

I crouch to pick it up, but something in my gut twists—sharp enough to freeze me in place.

Instead, I hurry back inside and grab my phone from the table. Keo's number glows on the screen, my thumb hovering.

He told me to call if anything was wrong, but is this one of those situations? It's just a package. Normal people don't panic over

cardboard. And I can't keep pulling him away from work. He's carrying us until the lawsuit against Michael is finished.

Still... the box sits just outside, silent and unsuspecting, but every part of me screams that something isn't right.

I decide to play slow, and smart.

Keo 👑

Baby, did you send me something?

As in?

You know, like send me something to the house

No, but that reminds me, I've not bought you anything

Do you like flowers?

I don't mind them

Don't laugh, but I love sunflowers

Why'd that make my dick hard?

Noted

Why did you ask?

No reason

Are you expecting a package?

No...

Suspicious. Everything okay?

Yeah, everything's fine. Have a wonderful rest of your day

Call me before you go to bed?

You got it, sunshine

I tap my phone against my palm, debating. It could be nothing. Maybe something from Britt. Or Kali. Or even Taylor. We're creeping into the holiday season, after all.

A strange ache tugs at my chest. Alysa... Would she have sent me something?

Instead of firing off a string of texts, I settle on one name. I'm not sure why he's the first to come to mind, but my fingers move before I

can second-guess it.

Less than ten minutes later, Levi is strolling up to our cabin. I'd slipped out the back and have been waiting, nerves prickling under my skin.

I tell myself there's no bomb in that package.

... But the fact I even have to remind myself of that says enough.

"Hey there, Ayden." He lifts a hand in a casual wave, the other buried in his pocket, his long coat pushed neatly behind it.

If suave could be defined by a single man, it would be Levi. Even in the snow, he moves with this graceful ease, polished and unbothered. Presentable doesn't even begin to cover it.

I swallow, giving him a weary smile. "Thanks so much for coming, Levi."

He shrugs, brushing it off like it's nothing. Which is strange—like I've done anything to deserve him being so attentive.

"What's up?"

I wet my lips, my eyes drifting to the porch where the brown box waits, silent, ordinary, but I swear it's anything but. "I had a delivery. Maybe I'm overthinking, but with everything going on, I just—"

He doesn't even let me finish before brushing past me, stepping up the stairs to the porch. He's standing before the package and my anxiety spikes.

"H-Hey! Be careful."

"Who dropped it off?" he asks, glancing back at me.

"Postal employee. USPS. He had the van, uniform, everything. I'm sure he was legit."

Levi nods, hitching up his pants before crouching. "Odds are it isn't a bomb then."

My chest caves in at the word. Sure I was thinking about it, but hearing it out loud? It hits different.

"Hard to time something like that with general delivery."

Suppose that makes sense. Not that I'd have ever thought of it that way.

He reaches down to his sock and slides out a switchblade. The knife spins between his fingers like it belongs there before he drags it cleanly under one flap of the box, then mirrors the motion on the other side.

"You weren't expecting anything?"

"No, and I reached out to Keo to see if maybe he'd had something sent to the house. He also wasn't expecting anything."

He pulls up the flaps, but it's still taped down the middle, so it doesn't open.

"Hmm. No covert poison mechanism." I swear my heart's pounding in my ears, and not in my chest.

Then he slices straight down the center as I step up to get a better look. He never touches the cardboard with his hands—only the blade, neat and precise, turning the box with precision. Inside sits what looks like a black leather bag. Or something like it.

"Do me a favor, Ayden."

He glances over his shoulder, offering a smile so smooth his eyes disappear.

"Sure."

"Please turn around for me."

My stomach sinks. To be honest, I don't want to know why he's requesting that. So, I do as he says. Giving him my back, I look out at the lake that has yet to freeze over.

I try to steady my breathing. My heart doesn't care, it's slamming against my ribs hard enough to hurt.

"Do you have a cat?"

The urge to look at him nearly cracks me in half. "Yes."

"Do you know where it is?"

"Yes... she's inside."

"You sure?"

I'd just seen her. I'm *positive*. But the way he asks makes my skin crawl. "Yes. She's probably waiting for me to come back in. Why?"

He releases a sigh, then comes the rough rubbing of cardboard as he closes the box.

"Can I turn around?"

"Mhmm."

I spin back to see him already on his feet, the box shut and tucked under his arm.

"So...?"

"Let me take care of this for you. It's nothing you want."

Terror slides deeper into my chest than before—worse than his questions about Clover. "Tell me. Please, Levi."

He rubs the back of his neck, fingers threading into his black, silky hair. For one split second, the gentleness I've come to know

vanishes. That saying when someone's eyes go dark, yeah, *this* is what that looks like.

Holy shit.

Before I can process any fear, that expression is gone. His lips curve into that easy smile again. "Don't worry about it. Do me another favor though, okay?"

I slowly nod my head.

"Just message me if you get anything else like this. In the event we are out of town, just take the box to Echo Ridge."

He begins to walk past me, and I try to look, even draw in a long breath, but don't see or smell anything. "But shouldn't I report it if it's something bad?"

"It's a scare tactic..."

"And? What if—"

"It won't do any good but give the sender what they wanted. To scare you. I know I've not done a lot to ask this, but, can you just trust me on this one? Let me, and Evelyn, take care of it."

I roll my lips together, thinking, before nodding to myself. "Okay. Thanks so much, Levi..."

He pauses mid step, his back to me, then takes a deep breath. "No problem. We want this community... quiet. We can't have anyone coming in and fucking that up."

My brows pinch. "Oh..." I really hope he isn't talking about me.

"You're smart, Ayden." He releases a low, sultry chuckle. "Listen to your gut, *always*."

My cell vibrates in my pocket, and I jump in surprise. I fumble for it before pulling it out to see a text in the Sapphire Valley chat.

🌲 Neighbors of Sapphire Valley 🌲

Jayde(?) 💙

Do we have a doctor in this valley?

I look up at Levi, who has since pulled out his phone and is shaking his head.

"That cabin needs to get its shit together. He's causing a lot of unwanted attention." He flicks his gaze to mine. "You're a nurse,

right?"

Turning back to my phone, I fire off a text in the group chat.

I'm a nurse, what's up?

My phone begins to ring, Jayde's name lighting up the screen.

"Let me know if you need anything else. Have a good day, Ayden."

Before I answer the call, I ask, "In the box... is something dead in there?"

He doesn't respond, just keeps walking away. His words, *You're smart, Ayden*, ringing loudly in my ear. Yeah, there was definitely something dead in there.

I press the phone to my ear, and say, "Hello?"

I'm completely thrown when it isn't a girl on the other end, but an extremely deep, burly voice. "Hi. What's your name?"

I swallow hard and turn toward the lake. From here, a small island rises in the middle, blocking the view of Starlight Peak, though I know it's just beyond, maybe a mile up.

"Ayden, from Wildhart."

"Ayden from Wildhart, are you familiar with stitching up wounds?"

Heat rushes through me. Remembering my search on him—his missing family—that question sends a chill straight to my core.

"I'm an ICU nurse. Of course I am. What... do you need sutured?"

"Thank fuck. You're lucky, sweetheart." I'm *positive* I hear mumbling in the background.

I wet my lips. "Excuse me?"

"Not talking to you. Can you come sew me up? We've had a mishap, and I'd rather not die today."

Oh shit.

I bolt up the stairs. "Call an ambulance! Why are you asking your neighbors?!" Even as I say it, I'm already grabbing our first aid kit.

"That's complicated. I hear you running. So you'll help?"

"Well... yes! Of course."

"Good. Because if I die, so does she."

My heart leaps into my throat. "Excuse me?"

"I'm not going to stab her, *like she did me*." Muffled screaming buzzes in the background. "Settle your ass down. This is on you."

He releases a very frustrated sigh. “Look. She’s tied up, and will stay that way until I’m not at risk of *dying*. If I die, she starves to death.”

I mumble because the urge to say ‘I’ll just call the police’ is at the tip of my tongue.

“And no. There will be no finding her.”

His wife and daughter...

“So come save my life, and I’ll save hers.”

What the fuck is wrong with these neighbors...

“Alright. I’m coming.”



The last twenty-four hours have completely knocked me out. From the moment I went over to help Mr. D—Ezra—until passing out the next day, it’s all a blur.

I told Keoni everything that happened, and saying he wasn’t pleased is an understatement. The box incident. Helping Starlight. He nearly left work, but I convinced him I was fine.

Stitching up Ezra wasn’t hard. He claimed Jayde accidentally tripped with a butcher knife and drove it straight into his thigh. Yeah, I’m not stupid—that wasn’t an accident. I would have called the police immediately, but he made me wait in his massive entryway while he brought out the woman, who is about my age, to prove he meant what he said about letting her go.

She seemed sheepish about the whole thing, even apologizing to both Ezra and me over and over. As I was leaving, she rushed out and begged me not to call the police.

Levi’s words—*We want this community quiet*—echoed in my head, and I agreed not to.

I shouldn’t be so calm about this, but here I am.

I fell asleep scrolling through social media and news articles about Ezra’s case. People are brutal. No wonder he’s a recluse. I would be too with how they’ve hung him out as the criminal.

Maybe he did do it, but, based on my one interaction with Ezra, my gut tells me he didn’t. Don’t ask me why, just, a feeling I guess.

I tried to stay awake until Keoni got home, but obviously failed—since I’m only just starting to come to now.

Though... why?

A soft groan drifts into my ear, warm breath brushing the nape of my neck. As my body slowly aligns with my waking mind, I register the sudden, unmistakable fullness inside me.

“Ayden,” Keo groans through my name. “Fuck, you feel so goddamn good.”

His hand finds my cock, sending a jolt of pleasure through my body. The sudden wave of euphoria makes me gasp and arch, heart racing and every nerve on fire.

We’d talked about this, and it was one of my fantasies I wanted to try.

“K-Keo...” My word comes out raspy, and I immediately try to swallow.

He suddenly bottoms out in me, and I choke on a moan. His arm wraps around my neck, and with my mouth wide open, he slides two fingers in.

“You like waking up to my cock inside you, sunshine?” he asks breathlessly.

I nod, and suck his digits. It causes me to drool around them.

His lips meet my shoulder before biting, sucking, and licking across my sensitive skin. He’s holding himself inside me without moving, but he never stops from stroking my full length that’s somehow soaked, twisting his wrist and feeling every inch of me.

“I’m so close. You’ve been taking my cock so fucking good. I don’t know how I lasted even a second inside you.”

Goosebumps cross every point of my body, and I’m a moaning, drooling mess.

He then pulls back and thrusts hard into me. I can feel the pulsing of his cock—it’s maddening, and I love every inch of it. When he releases a loud, unfiltered groan, he once again bottoms out. The pressure of his cum filling me, has me whimpering around his fingers I’m nearly biting on.

“Holy fuck,” he says breathlessly.

He releases me and turns away, but continues small, back-and-forth movements with his hips. He still stretches me, and I just want him to stay there forever, even after I’ve come.

When he moves back, he slides out, but I'm not empty for long. A cold object presses against me, and soon I'm filled again. It's not as wide as he is, but it maintains the sensation.

As he catches his breath, he rolls me onto my back. "I love when you're filled with me," he murmurs. The moment his lips wrap around my cock, the toy inside me begins to vibrate.

My back lifts from the bed, which causes me to thrust forward. I don't think he expected that, because he gags, his throat closing around me.

The vibration, combined with his fervent attention, sends my orgasm climbing to an unexpected peak.

"Oh f-fuck, I'm going to come. Keo—baby, please."

That only drives him to work harder, deeper, more deliberate strokes. In less than two passes, I'm a quivering mess. My climax hits so hard I watch it spill from the corners of his mouth.

My legs shake, my body soon too pliant to keep my knees up.

He moves over me, a devious smile on his face. I'm breathing heavily as his thumb hooks over my chin, tilting my mouth wider. He leans in, lips parting, and I watch as my cum drips from the tip of his tongue down onto mine.

The hunger in his eyes as he watches my cum slide toward the back of my throat, has chills of pleasure rippling down my spine.

He lets me go and demands, "Swallow." I don't even hesitate and immediately do as he says. "Good boy."

He leans forward, kissing me until we both yawn, wrapped in each other's arms, and drifting back to sleep.



One Week Before Christmas

How is it possible I'm this hot when there's four inches of snow on the ground?

I'm shirtless out here in below-zero weather, sweat running from my forehead all the way down my torso. It feels criminal—but at least Ayden is enjoying himself.

"I think we could go for... four more."

I glance over my shoulder at him, sitting in the replacement double swing we installed a few days ago on the side section of the patio. He's bundled up in a quilt, sipping hot cider.

Rolling my eyes, I rest the axe handle on my shoulder. "I expect payment for this show I'm putting on. Maybe an early Christmas gift."

He smiles, raising his mug before taking another sip.

Giving him a playful wink, I turn back to my endeavor.

There've been a few trees near the property I've wanted to cut down, and one of them just so happened to be the perfect size for our Christmas tree. I'll deal with the rest come spring.

Readjusting my grip on the axe, I swing down at an angle, striking the "V" mark I carved out.

Over the past couple of weeks, Ayden and I have grown closer—but it's still been a nightmare. His ex isn't pulling any punches.

It started with the box. The contents have still gone unconfirmed, but neither of us are stupid. Thankfully, no more showed up. I can't help but wonder if Levi thought that by not reporting it, Michael would stop, thinking we were unfazed by the attempt to scare us, or whatever.

The first week of December, police came to question Ayden—and me as well. They even showed up at my work to interview Dom and the girls. They attempted to talk with Britt, but in the most legal way possible, she told them to fuck off. According to Ayden's legal team, they didn't find it necessary to get a warrant to force her to speak.

Unfortunately, felony charges were filed against Ayden in Colorado, though the judge has paused signing any arrest warrant. Thanks to solid representation, they're still pushing for more probable cause documentation surrounding the incest allegation.

My own assault charge was dismissed after Ayden submitted the video of Michael pointing a gun in my face.

Our biggest fear right now—the one that feels too real—is Ayden being extradited back to California. With how quickly everything else has happened, we're just waiting for that letter.

The lawyer's confident he can prevent it, but it doesn't settle my mind. If they send him back, he'll be way too close to Michael. And I know he could blackmail Ayden into dropping the charges just to keep him there.

And then I'd be heading to prison.

Because I'll blow that mother—*swing*—fucker's—*swing*—head off.

Crack.

The thump of the tree hitting the ground yanks me out of my goddamn day-nightmare.

There's no daydreaming here.

Tossing the axe aside, I reach through the branches and grab the trunk. I've never really thought about killing anyone. I'm not a fucking psychopath. But I *have* imagined putting a few bullets in Michael's head and burying him so far away from civilization no one could find his DNA.

Turning toward the cabin, I drag the tree alongside me.

Ayden watches me with weary eyes. I don't bother to smile. His ex puts me in such a shit mood, and I haven't been able to see Britt these past three weeks because of the holidays. My mood swings have been unbearable.

Again, I don't blame myself for any of it. With Michael, the incident that took Corey, our parents' passing—it's a lot.

It feels like far too much for anyone my age to deal with in such a short span of time.

At the steps, I drop the tree and circle around the patio. Ayden has the blanket open, his feet planted to keep the swing from moving.

I slide in beside him, drape an arm over his shoulder, and he immediately snuggles against my side. Once we adjust the blanket, he lifts his legs, and I give us a push to start the swing.

"Mmm, nice and sweaty."

I laugh, then draw in a deep breath and let it out slow. He mirrors me with a softer sigh, then tilts his head up to look at me. "What do you want?"

Without glancing down, I hum in question.

"For Christmas."

"Hmm." I press a kiss to his forehead, rest my cheek against his head, and shut my eyes. "Peace and quiet."

"We'll get that..." I love how optimistic he's become. Over time, I've been the one stressed the fuck out—because, truly, I love him and can't imagine a life without him. There's so much uncertainty, and too much of it is out of my control...

"Until then," he continues. "Tell me."

"Nothing physical, sunshine. I'm not really into gifts. I was making sexual advances toward you earlier."

He lets out a soft laugh. "Oh, I know. And I also know you aren't a gift person. Do you want a special dinner for Christmas? I can make Kalua pig like your mom used to..."

The edge of my lip pops, and I squeeze him closer, even if that's physically impossible.

"We can do a *Home Alone* marathon."

I groan teasingly. "Please no."

His laugh shifts into a snicker. "Isn't it your favorite?"

"Okay, smartass. I'll put on *Die Hard* for you, if that's the case."

"Noooo." He drags out the word playfully. "Okay, okay... *It's a Wonderful Life*. Did you guys still watch that on Christmas Eve?"

The sadness in his voice hits hard, washing over me like the sweat had earlier.

"We did."

"Then *A Christmas Story* on Christmas Day?"

I slip my hand under his chin, gripping his jaw to lift his gaze to mine. "How about we start making our own traditions? We can keep those, sure... but let's add something new."

His smile shines with hope, and though sadness lingers in his watery eyes, he holds it back.

"I'd like that."

"And, sunshine, I hate to sound cliché here, you've given me the greatest gift. One I waited for over ten years to have."

A shaky breath escapes him, lips pressing together before speaking again. "You can't say sweet shit like that."

I shrug. "Better get used to it."

He brings his hand to my cheek, brushing over the light stubble.

We'll make traditions, write them down, photograph them, and leave them for whoever takes the cabin after us—whether that's Alysa's children, if she chooses, or the next buyers. Our life will fill these walls until our dying breaths, and I'm excited for every second of it.

"Thank you, Keo."

Really, I should be the one thanking him. He's the only one who can pull me back when I start to sink into a dark place.

God... I really love this man.

Humming softly, I nod. "Anything for you."

Meeting him halfway, I press my lips to his, pulling him closer, and holding him flush against me. I wish I'd had this from the moment I met Ayden, but I'm ready to make up for lost time.

He leans away, a weary smile greeting me. "Alysa comes tonight..."

"She does."

"You ready for this?" I should be asking *him* that.

"Yeah. I am."

I slide my hand through his short hair and rest my forehead against his. "A new start. Your sister will understand."

He lets out a shaky breath and nods. "Thanks."

"You got it, sunshine. Now, let's get the tree up—and me a shirt on."

"Mmm... yes to the first one. Keep the shirt off."

"Now who's *insatiable*?"



Ayden's pacing.

He's been at it for the past hour, ever since Alysa called to say she'd picked up her rental. Clover keeps trailing after him, trying to get his attention, but he's too wound up.

I let him be. No point in trying to ease him right now.

His eyes finally meet mine, finding me perched on the armrest of the couch. He takes a deep breath, but it doesn't stop him from bouncing on his toes.

"How're you so calm?"

I shrug. "I've seen her every year. Those nerves about seeing family went out the window a while ago."

"No, Keo. I mean... telling her about us."

Again, I play it off, acting nonchalant.

"I don't understand you—" he cuts himself off as headlights slice through the dark outside. His head jerks toward the door, and he immediately rushes for it.

"Shoes," I call after him. He retreats just long enough to slip on my boots, then bolts outside. A soft hum rumbles in my throat as I follow at a slower pace.

Those two have always been so close—which is just one of a million reasons the allegations against him involving her disgust me.

I step onto the porch just in time to see his twin climb out of the car and run around it. She throws herself into his arms, and my heart warms at how happy Ayden looks holding her.

"Lefty." His voice comes out somber.

"Oh, righty, thank god you're here."

"Where the hell else would I be?" He steps back and looks her up and down. "Come on, we'll get your bags in a minute."

There's no argument, and the two of them head toward the house. She looks up, and the moment she sees me, she squeals. "Kee!"

"Hey, Aly."

She tries to sprint up the stairs but slips, thankfully catching herself before face-planting on the wooden deck. Her momentum carries her toward me, and I catch her flying hug without hesitation.

"Mmm!!" Her arms tighten around my neck. "God, I've missed you."

I smile, watching as Ayden comes up right behind her. "I missed you, too. Let's get inside and out of this damn cold."

I step back and set her down past the threshold of the door. Immediately, the feline begins yowling. She moves quickly to Clover, petting her.

"It feels so good to be back here."

"All together," my sunshine says as he moves toward her. "I know I'm a bit late, but—"

"None of that." She stands, quickly wiping away tears that were about to fall. "Dad and Leilani wouldn't have wanted any sadness on our first Christmas back together."

Slowly, I move over to Ayden, who drops his head and nods. "Alright. How was the flight?"

"Good. How're you two? I'm happy to see you're... getting along?" There's insinuation to her tone, and one look at Ayden, I can tell he's completely lost to his panic.

She turns her attention to me, then to her brother.

"Yeah. We are. Totally getting along."

A soft "huh" escapes her, and she steps further into the living room. "Keoni, can I ask you? How're you two doing?" She places her hands behind her back and smiles.

I reach Ayden's side and drape an arm over his shoulder. "Better than ever."

Then I turn him and press my lips to his without a single moment of hesitation.



AGE 21
CHRISTMAS EVE

"I kissed Ayden." I rub my hands over my face. "Technically, I kissed him back, but that's not the point."

"What's the point, Keoni?" Alysa asks, scooting closer to me on the porch steps.

"That I want more of it. Of him..."

She rubs my back in small circles before resting her head against my arm. "I feel like you both have been dealt a shitty hand in the love department... I've known for a long time about your feelings for each other. Kinda hurts that you both hid it from me—or thought I wouldn't even notice."

I chuckle, pressing my forehead against my forearm. "Life fucking sucks."

"I know... I'm sorry, Kee..."

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My hands press against Keo's chest, shoving him back with such force I think even he's surprised. Not that I could tell by his face—the way my vision shakes terrifies even me. With a single step back, I nearly stumble.

Even though his actions almost made me fall, I shouldn't worry. He would never let me hit the ground if he had anything to say about it. His arm wraps around my midsection, pulling me back.

"Ayden." His other hand comes to rest against my face. "Please breathe. It's alright."

"W-Why would you... do that?!" I try to push him away again, but this time he doesn't allow me to separate us.

My gaze snaps to my sister.

To see the judgment.

To see the disgust.

To see... her fucking smiling?

Tears she'd held tightly moments before streak down her cheeks, her teeth bearing in her smile. Her happiness blooms into pure, unhindered joy. I swear, the way she looks at me brings heat to my eyes.

"Fucking finally." Her tearful words melt into a laugh.

I slowly turn my gaze back to Keo. His worried look matches his question. "Are you alright, sunshine? Please breathe, you're looking

pale."

He's so... calm. As if kissing me in front of his stepsister is completely natural.

Then his expression shifts to fear. "Say something."

My lips tremble, ready to speak, when Alysa wraps her arm around me. I look down to see her burying herself between us.

Now she's full-on sobbing.

"I'm so fucking happy for you guys," she chokes out, squeezing us tightly together. "I hoped for this. I prayed, and you know how I feel about praying." Her head lifts, and god, seeing her red, tear-streaked face sets my own to start building in my eyes. "I love you both so much, holy fuck."

Slowly, I wrap an arm around her, but glance up at Keo.

"You... told her already?"

He shakes his head softly. "No... but I did tell her about us kissing the night of your graduation."

My heart tumbles straight into my stomach.

"When?"

He sighs. "The first year I came to the cabin for Christmas..."

I swallow hard, then glance at my twin, feeling slightly betrayed. "You never said anything."

She goes from rubbing her snotty nose on Keo to doing the same to me. "What was I going to say? When I found out, you were dating that asshole, Michael."

His large fingers cup the side of my neck, and I watch as he gently guides Alysa aside with the other. "Ayden." He brings his free hand to press against my chest. "I wouldn't have kissed you in front of her if I wasn't certain it would turn out like this. You were working yourself up for nothing. Aly would support you in anything."

"Yeah, I'm a little offended," she murmurs.

"Why didn't you tell me... before she got here?"

He leans forward and presses a gentle kiss to my lips. "Because you would've been mad at her for not saying anything, and still a mess until she got here. Now you have both of us here to scold if you so choose. But, sunshine, I need you to breathe and not have a panic attack, please."

It takes a moment, but I finally get my anxiety under control. Holy shit, that scared the hell out of me.

He releases me so my sister can step in for a solo hug. I don't hesitate to embrace her.

"Oh, righty, I always saw you two..."

"But... our graduation night, you... barged in on us."

"Yeah." She leans away from me. "Because Dad and Lelani were searching for you. I knew exactly where you guys were. Imagine if they would've walked in."

I glance at Keo, brows furrowed, arms crossed.

"I walked in backwards because I didn't want to disrespect you two. Plus, if you were naked, I *did not* want to see that." She giggles before letting out a heavy sigh. "I didn't expect Keo to run out like that..."

My memory flashes back to that moment, her face of sorrow. It always struck me as weird, but now it makes sense.

"That's why you looked so sad..."

She nods. "I love you, Ayden. You're my twin. Why wouldn't I want you happy? It's all we've ever wanted for each other." Her smile forces a few tears to fall. "And... are you happy?"

I look from her back to Keo. "I am..." That brings a grin to his lips. "I'm sorry I pushed you like that."

"You can make it up to me later with some hot cider."

"Oh no, we *definitely* have to drink! Shots?"

Just as I'm about to reply, Keo cuts in, "We don't drink in this house. Sorry, Alysia."

"Damnit. No drunk stories? How depressy."

I release my sister and stride to him. He grabs the back of my head, pulling me to his chest. Wrapping my arms around him, I hold him like my damn life depends on it.

He kisses my head and murmurs, "I'm happy too, sunshine. So fucking happy."



I knew it would make her cry, and it breaks my fucking heart to see her like this.

Both her hands are covering her face, the smallest of vibrations coursing through her fingers builds the goosebumps I can see on her arms.

"Alysa..."

The soft tapping of glass on the coffee table draws me to look up at Keo. He wears a frown, eyeing me for a moment until I silently convey I've got her.

He nods, leaning in to kiss my temple, before heading back toward our bedroom.

It's the day after she arrived, and I sat her down to tell her everything. I'd told her when she came for Christmas I would explain the past few years with Michael. She'd pressed about it when I'd told her about the incest allegations.

From the mental to physical abuse, I didn't leave much out. She deserved to know, especially since Keoni did. Alysa was my other half and I hated keeping it from her.

"I..." Her voice breaks and I scootch closer to her on the couch. "I should've known. I should've felt it! I knew he was hurting you, I just..."

She pulls her hands away and leans back. Her face, splotchy with red, especially around the eyes, has my own tears building.

"Why didn't you tell me?" The agony in her voice hurts worse than any punch ever did. "I'd... have told Keoni. Dad. We would've... Did you not trust us to save you?"

I shake my head. "I would trust you with my life, lefty. It isn't that." Releasing a heavy sigh, I lean into her, bumping our shoulders. "I was drowning, and no matter how hard I swam, the surface kept getting further and further. Michael kept raising the water every time there was a sliver of a free breath I could get. He monitored everything... and the only reason he let me come to the funeral was because Dad wasn't here to convince me not to go back... and you lived in another country. There was no reason for me to *want* to stay."

More tears spill over her cheeks as she swings an arm around my midsection and pulls me into a hug. "He didn't" —she hiccups — "know about Keoni..."

"No... but to be fair, I didn't even know he'd show up."

She buries her face into my neck, and I adjust us so the positioning is more comfortable to hold onto her.

"I wish you would've said *anything*... I hate him. I hate him so fucking much!"

I hesitate but quickly go on because I know she deserves all the truth from me. "Even if I had a moment to tell you, I probably wouldn't have."

She pulls back so fast, I'm surprised she didn't get whiplash. "What?!"

"The stigma. I also feared you wouldn't believe me—and I know how stupid that sounds, Alysa, but it's how he wired me. '*No one would believe you.*' It may as well have been tattooed in my brain."

"I would've believed you—"

"I know—"

"Keoni would've believed you—"

"Alysa, I know..."

"Dad... Leilani. We would've... done anything to stop what he was doing..."

Tears well in my eyes, and I lean away, head tilting down. I can feel my heart beginning to rocket around in my chest, my skin beginning to tingle, when I hear his voice.

"He knows, Alysa."

I look up, and he's sheepishly standing at the cusp of the hall toward the bedrooms. He hadn't fully left, it would seem, and that makes the onslaught of panic that was ready to consume me disappear almost entirely.

"We can say 'he should've done something different' or 'I would've done this'... but we shouldn't. No one knows what they'd do until they're in that position. No one should tell someone else how *they* should've reacted." He shakes his head, eyes coming to hold mine. "You survived, Ayden, and that's what matters."

Survived.

"Y-You're right. I'm... I'm sorry. I shouldn't have."

"It's alright," I whisper and pull her back into a hug. "I know what you're trying to say."

"I just love you s-so much. I hate that motherfucker!"

"We can all agree on that," Keo mutters under his breath.

A soft meow fills the space before Clover jumps into my lap, then into Alysa's.

"And he's still trying to get you back—"

“Over my dead body,” Keoni damn near growls. “Michael will not win this bullshit case he’s trying to create, and Ayden will not be going back to him. No matter fucking what. I’ll kill that son of a bitch before that ever happens.”

Yeah, I really love when he gets all protective over me.

A snot-filled laugh comes from Alysa. “Best big brother ever.”

“Aly...” he groans.

That has me smiling for the first time this morning.

“Thank you for telling me,” she murmurs, causing me to look at her. She, too, has her lips curled into a gentle smile. “I hope that I can be as strong as you are, righty.”

My chest warms, and I suck in a deep breath through my nose. “You already are, sis. Thank you.”

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Christmas Eve

“It’s your fault for getting the tallest fucking tree,” Alysa says, swatting the back of my head. “We may be making new traditions, but I will forever put the star on the top. It’s my calling.”

“It seems nothing has changed,” Ayden says, reaching up and handing a large golden star to his sister.

I adjust her on my shoulder, and she shrieks. “Drop me, and I swear to god, Keoni Pierce!”

“Listen, you’re boney. Not my fault,” I tease.

That earns me another swat on the head, and I can’t stop laughing.

“I told you we have a ladder out back.”

“It’s snowing. I wasn’t going to make you go get that when you’re a *firefighter* and strong enough to hold me up.”

“Aly, I chopped down this tree in four inches of snow. I can sure as shit walk through a few flakes of it.”

Ayden moves to my other side, his hand sliding across my back as he does. I look down at him—chin tilted up, watching his twin place the final piece to complete the tree.

"It's perfect," he says, a bright, joyful grin spreading across his face.

I bend down to help Alysa off my shoulder. She sets her hands on her hips and smiles. "Perfect."

"I think it's a bit crooked."

"Motherfucker, I just got down!"

"Kidding, Aly. Relax."

As her feet rush away from us, I quickly wrap an arm around Ayden's neck and pull him against my side.

"Great job, sunshine."

"Thank you, baby."

He'd been the one to get the tree prepped and ready. It needed trimming, and neither of us had considered the number of bugs that would come with dragging in a fresh tree.

That was fun.

But now, lit up in yellow, orange, and red, with ornaments perfectly aligned to the aesthetic, it's all worth it. Alysa may disagree—she was bitten a few times—but everything has fallen into place.

I rest my head against his. "It's perfect."

He tightens his hold around my back and nods.

Alysa returns to my other side and wraps her arms around me, trying to grab onto her brother, even if it's useless. Her arms are far too short.

"I'm going to say the sad shit tonight," she murmurs, squeezing me tighter. "Then tomorrow, we'll focus on the positive—all together, with Mom and Dad."

I drag my hand up and down her arm.

"Grief fucking sucks. It's persistent, and just when I think it's done being a relentless asshole, it comes back. Leilani, you'd always say a star died when someone we loved left us, and that in time, others would come and help fill the hollow spot in the sky they left. But..." She pauses, taking a shaky breath. "It's felt like a starless sky without you and Dad."

She lifts her head to me, then to Ayden. "I see what she meant. Because until coming back here to be with you both, it's truly felt like that."

I release her as she tugs away and wraps her brother in a hug.

"It's why I've decided to move back."

"What?!" we both say simultaneously.

He pulls her away just to see the watery smile on her face. “What about Joshua?”

“He’s coming with me. Do you not want me back?”

“No, shut up. I do... but you aren’t actually going to move in here, into the cabin, are you?”

I let out a low chuckle. While I love Aly and am excited about this prospect, I share his sentiment; I’m enjoying just my time with him, and I know that won’t change in my lifetime.

“I’m going to sell the apartment in Boulder and buy a place around here—or in one of the neighboring communities.” She tilts her head to meet my gaze. “We all deserve to be together. For your mom and our dad.”

“I just know that would make them so happy,” I say, sighing in contentment.

She does a little “yippie” and rushes off toward the kitchen. “Alright, I’m telling Josh it’s official.”

Ayden moves in and rests his head against my arm. I turn and kiss his temple.

Every Christmas before this was great. I loved spending time with Alysa, my mom, and Grant. It was the single time of year I looked forward to—but also dreaded—because I knew I wouldn’t see the one person I truly needed in my life.

This year, although the space around us is emptier, it doesn’t feel that way.

He looks up at me with a smile. My heart thrusts hard against my chest, those words creeping right up my throat. “I—”

“Alright, let’s play some games!” Aly shouts, cutting me off.

She’s back at our side, joining in on an embrace I really didn’t want to share—but that’s fine. I have time to tell him I love him.

This probably isn’t the right place, anyhow.

“Monopoly?” she croons, and both Ayden and I groan.



AYDEN

CHRISTMAS DAY

We were all up early to visit our parents, leaving flowers even though the snow would cover them within the hour.

There weren't any other plans. When we got back, I cooked us breakfast and was planning to put on a movie—until my twin decided to pull out gifts for Keo and me.

"It isn't anything crazy." She watches as I open the gift bag and pull out a few snacks I don't recognize. "Just some of my favorites from the UK."

"Are there beans in there?" Keo's humor earns a laugh from me, though Alysa is less impressed. Her death glare has him holding his hands up in defense. "Kidding, kidding."

"Open yours, funny guy."

He rolls his eyes and opens an envelope. Pulling out what looks like tickets, he raises a brow at her.

"Football tickets?"

"Yup. Two." She wiggles her eyebrows. "I was determined to hook you two up if it hadn't happened naturally."

I don't say anything, just smile. Even if I don't particularly like watching the sport anymore, I'd go anywhere with Keo. The sudden thought of us showing up on the kiss cam has my neck and face heating up.

"Thanks, Aly." He leans over and hugs her. "Let me grab mine for you two."

As my sister rushes to hug me, my mouth drops open. "Wait... what? I swore we agreed on no presents!"

He ignores me and heads upstairs. My sister leans in, whispering in my ear, "It's so hard to shop for him. Also, there's a gift card in the bag. There's a place in Denver that does custom bookshelves, and you told me you're getting back into reading."

"Lefty, that's too much."

She shrugs. "Eh, maybe. But it's also kind of selfish. Imagine you turn the loft into a mini *Beauty and the Beast*-style library."

"It's not tall enough."

"Stop shooting down my dream and just do it."

Before I can list all the reasons that's ridiculous, Keo reappears. My sister instantly leans away from me. He's holding an envelope

for her and a small orange bag for me—my favorite color—with a handwritten note dangling from the handle.

Alysa starts reading her card, then groans, “Seriously? It’s *snowing*, Keoni.”

“Go, Aly.”

She throws her head back, stomps toward the front door, and wrestles on her shoes and coat.

I turn back to him as he says, “Go ahead, open it.”

The moment the screen door opens and closes I flip open the small card.

Sunshine,

“To growing a bright future with the person that makes this world worth living in.”

Keo

“I’m not poetic... hopefully it makes sense.”

I laugh lightly and pop open the bag to see smaller pouches inside. “Oh... Keo.” Grabbing one of them, I hold it in the light to make sure I’m seeing it right.

The soft chuckle he releases has me lifting my gaze to meet his.

“Not too corny?” He rubs his hand across his cheek before sliding it to the back of his neck, nerves written in the motion.

Shaking my head, I reach in and grab another packet of... Sunflower seeds. And I’m positive there are different varieties of flowers in the bag as well.

I laugh again, mostly to keep from crying. The heat building behind my eyes rushes forward, ready to spill over and show just how emotional this man makes me. He does it in all the right ways, and these are absolutely tears of happiness.

“We can plant them in the spring. Together. I’ve never had a green thumb, but I feel like we can figure it out.”

Wetting my lips, I put the packet back into the bag. “Thank you, baby.”

He lets out a low groan. "Please... these walls are too thin, and I'm suffering."

We'd already decided not to test the waters with Alysa's hearing. Kissing in front of her is one thing. Having her hear us fucking? No thanks.

"I didn't... get anything for you." I set the bag down and step into his waiting arms. "I'm the fucking worst."

"Not even, sunshine. You give me something every day... You have no idea what a gift you are to me." He pulls me tighter into his embrace, and I'm glad my face is hidden because the tears are definitely slipping free. "Receiving physical presents isn't my love language. It makes me uncomfortable, if I'm honest."

He lowers his head and presses a kiss right below my ear, then whispers. "Okay?"

I nod. "Okay... What did you get Alysa?"

As if sheepish about the answer, he clears his throat. "A card that says Merry Christmas, but it's at the end of three scavenger clues."

"Keo!"

"What? She hasn't left our fucking side, and I was nervous you'd hate the gift."

The sound of stomping feet on the patio indicates someone isn't happy by that revelation. I suppress a laugh because I shouldn't laugh at her... even if it's funny.

"I'd love anything you give me. Never worry about that."

He rubs up and down my back. "Good to know for the future." His gentle hum sends goosebumps crawling up my arms. "I've got one last thing, but it's for New Year's. Aly is going out with her friends, so I've got you to myself. Is that okay?"

"Pfft. As if you even have to ask."



There are very few things in life I can recall without thinking too hard. One was moving to Colorado when I was just ten years old—it felt like home after everything with my parents' divorce. Another was the first time I laid eyes on Ayden.

I've said it before, but it really was love at first sight. At that age, it might've felt like just a crush, but I know that if fate had been different, I'd already have a ring on his finger.

Now is about to be another one of those moments. He's simply sitting across from me, finishing up a bowl of ramen, but it's the way his eyes light up when they meet mine. Like my life does when I look at him, they brighten when our gazes collide.

I'm hopelessly love-sick for him. I've fallen, and fucking hard.

"You're staring," he says, slurping the last of his noodles. "I don't know why Xeraphine complained about Kai doing it. I fucking love it."

He's been on about that vampire book for days. I still can't believe the amount of consoling I had to do after he finished. It wrecked him.

Leaning back, I rest my elbow on the arm rest of my chair and press my cheek against my fist. "I'm making up for lost time. Plus, you're cute when you eat."

He rolls his eyes, wiping his mouth with a napkin. "You stare all the time."

"You're cute all the time," I say matter-of-fact.

He shakes his head, biting down on his bottom lip in the process. Fuck me—I'm starving for him.

It's New Year's, and this is our first night alone since Alysa came over a week ago. I'm thrilled she's here, but I'm also needy for my man.

"You ready to go?"

"Mhmm," he hums, waving down the waitress.

I pay, and we head out to the truck. We're about an hour from Maple Falls, in a town known for its outdoor activities. Downtown is packed tonight—they're holding a midnight parade with fireworks.

I'd have taken him, but I'm being possessive and want him all to myself. Tonight especially, but truthfully, that's how I feel every day. If I never had to share him again, I'd be happy. I know that isn't realistic—we can't lock ourselves in the cabin forever, tempting as that sounds.

"So, what's the plan?" he asks as I turn onto a one-way road lined with trees. String lights hang all the way up, so we aren't driving through the dark with just my headlights.

"You'll see." Pulling over, I flick on the cab light and reach under the bench seat. "Do you trust me?"

He nods without hesitation. "Always."

I pull out a length of rope and a folded cloth. Undoing my seatbelt, I slide closer to him. "Lean forward. Hands behind your back, eyes closed."

The way his neck flushes red, creeping up to his cheeks, has my cock stirring to life.

Slowly, he closes his eyes and tucks his hands behind him. I blindfold him first, then tie his wrists. "This is just to keep you from peeking. It'll take me a moment to set things up."

"I'd behave," he says, shifting into a more comfortable position.

"You'd be tempted, sunshine. Anyone would be."

I'm behind the wheel again, easing us back onto the road, driving farther down the path, past a small gate and a handful of campsites. The spot I've chosen is surrounded by mountains, trees pressing in, thick and endless. There's no lake, but a frozen pond gleams faintly

under the starlight. I remember reading on the website that people ice skate here, but we won't be indulging tonight.

Tonight, I've got filthier plans.

Rolling up to the spot I rented for the evening, I pull the truck in and park, but keep it running. "I'll leave the heater on and play some music so you can't hear what's happening."

"You're being *so* cryptic..." He pauses, then grins. "I love it."

I hum. "Hopefully you'll love what I'm about to do, too."

Tilting toward him, I take his chin and direct his face to mine. He leans in, already knowing what's coming. I smile into the kiss—brief, teasing—before turning on the radio and slipping quickly out of the truck.

Grabbing the large totes in the bed, I rush over to the small porch attached to the dome-shaped structure, then get to work.

Twenty minutes later—longer than I planned—I open Ayden's door. Warm air spills out, the sudden chill making him tense.

"Sorry about that, sunshine." I rest a hand on his shoulder, lean him forward, and undo the knot. Since I never buckled his seatbelt back in after tying him, I help guide him carefully out of the truck.

I reach across, kill the ignition, and shut his door.

"How close are we to midnight? I feel like I was in there for an hour." He laughs. "Just kidding."

"We've got about fifteen minutes. We're good."

After taking him to the back of the truck, I exhale a shaky breath.

He's going to love it. Stop stressing.

Sliding up behind him, I wrap my arms around his waist and tuck my hands into the pouch pocket of his sweater—well, my sweater that he stole. He pulls my hands fully in, threading his fingers with mine.

"It's simple."

"Simple is amazing."

I hum and nod my head. "Ready?"

"Yes, please."

Only removing one of my hands from the pocket, I pull off the blindfold.

I keep him held tightly to my front. I want to feel his reaction, not just see it. Aligning my head with his, I rest my chin on his shoulder as he sucks in a shocked breath through his open mouth.

"Oh, Keo..." A soft pillow of fog follows his breathless words.

I may not look like the romantic type, but I sure as shit try.

I'm grateful it didn't snow tonight, and the sky's relatively clear. Converting the truck bed the way I did would've been a nightmare if it had been filled with snow or rain.

Layers of comfort cover the six feet of the bed: a thin blow-up mattress that ate most of my time, two sets of blankets, another one for us to wrap ourselves in, and a line of pillows toward the cab. Battery-powered lights—Britt called them fairy lights, but fuck if I know—are strung around so we can see each other without drowning out the fireworks. One of the four sets don't work, but I saw it too late and wasn't going to waste more time fixing it. Hopefully he won't notice.

He squeezes my hand, and I turn my head, ear brushing his shoulder, to look at him. "You like it?"

"Like? Pfft. Love. It looks insanely cozy."

"I hope so. And before you ask, no. We aren't sleeping out here." I take his chin and turn him toward our right. "We'll be in that."

The dome tent sits there, plain on the outside, and anything but on the inside. I picked this place for that exact reason.

"I didn't think it could get any better."

I chuckle. "You said we needed to go camping together. Some might call this cheating, but to them I say—fuck off."

That has him laughing and wiggling out of my grip to face me. He wraps his arms around my neck and pulls me down for a kiss.

"I love it. Thank you."

I smile against his lips and bring him back for another, then grab his hips and spin him back around. "Come on."

We crawl onto the soft bedding, and I'm grateful it holds our weight. I'm not small, and neither is Ayden at six feet, but the blow-up mattress supports us without dipping.

I rest my back against the window lined with pillows and drape my arm over his shoulder. He leans against my chest and pulls the blanket over us.

He sighs as he snuggles in, and I hate to admit it—it sounds almost sad.

"What's up, sunshine?"

When he shakes his head, I grab his chin and tilt his face to mine.

"Talk to me."

He smiles, genuine and soft. "It's nothing you did... Sometimes a wave of sadness just hits me when I think about missing out on this. On us. How happy we could've been all this time."

I gaze down at his lips, letting my thumb drag across them. He places his hand over mine, slowly guiding it down to my wrist.

"I... wish I could redo a lot of things..." That night, not so long ago, flashes before my eyes, and I force myself to push it away. "Your graduation. I should've acted like an adult, stayed, and talked with you. Maybe we could've kept it a secret until we were older... then told our parents."

Shifting my gaze up, I meet his slightly furrowed eyes and immediately recognize my mistake. "I don't want to hide us, Ayden."

"I know, I know..."

"I want to take you out. Around Maple Falls, yes, and beyond it. I want people to know you're mine and I'm yours. Those who judge us... they can go fuck themselves."

His smile lights up *my* life.

"I feel the same. Fuck them if they judge us."

"Exactly."

He chuckles and sits up, letting me capture his mouth again. The moment he parts his lips, I slide my tongue in, and the sound of pleasure rolling from his throat has me groaning.

"Ayden, the fireworks."

His arm hooks around my neck while his other hand finds mine, guiding it down into his lap. "Your possessiveness," he breathes against my lips, "has me hard—and I'm not fucking sorry about it."

The second I feel the truth to that statement, I grab his cock through his jeans. He presses against me, damn near crawling into my lap.

"You want me to take your cock out?" I murmur, dragging him between my spread legs.

His forehead rests against mine. "Yes..."

Grinning, I guide him to turn and sit between my thighs. His back presses to my chest, my lips brushing against his ear.

"Do you feel what your need does to me?" I pull his hips tighter, grinding him against my own throbbing erection. My pants are a nuisance, keeping him, I'm sure, from feeling the full effect he has on me and just how badly I want him.

"Yes... please, Keo."

I nip at his neck, my fingers working his fly open with practiced ease. "Guess I can show you some fireworks before the show even starts."

He laughs at my stupid joke just as my hand slips under his waistband and wraps around him.

"Oh, fuck!"

"Mmm, so sensitive." I angle him up, just enough for the tip to peek over his briefs, and run my thumb across the head, smearing the precum already there. "Goddamn, sunshine, I love how eager you are for me."

I tug his boxers down, and he shifts just enough to give me full access. My strokes stay light, teasing. "I've got plans for us after the fireworks. Think you can go a few rounds for me?"

We've only tried twice before, and were successful, but he's not had a lot of practice coming multiple times. But by the way his breath hitches tells me he's game to keep going and try regardless.

"Y-Yes, Keo. Please."

Releasing him, I hold my hand out. "Spit."

He wraps his lips around three of my fingers and sucks them in deep.

Fuck. My cock pulses, jumping so hard I feel my zipper press against it through my briefs.

Drool slicks down my fingers, and when he finally pulls off, he spits into my palm.

I don't hesitate to slide my hand back under the blanket and wrap it around his length. His head falls against my shoulder, one arm looping up and over my neck.

"So hard for me."

The way he breathes through his moans has me wondering if I even give a shit about watching fireworks. He's tempting me to cart him off inside and fuck him until we are both a mess.

Twisting my wrist as I stroke him, I lean down to suck on his neck. I bite, then run my tongue over the spot that's already turning red.

I've been leaving love marks all over him, because I like seeing proof of me on his body when he walks around naked.

With my free hand, I pinch his nipple. He lets out a loud, filthy sound. Oh yeah, he likes that. He fists my hair, gripping at the roots

like he needs it to stay grounded.

"I remember..." I murmur, nibbling on his ear. "When you used to be quiet. Now listen to you—nearly screaming for me."

His chest heaves as he pants. "I-I'm... baby, please, I'm going to come."

I lean over, pulling my hand from his nipple to tap my phone and check the time. "No, not yet."

The pause in my stroke has him whimpering, and fuck. I love it. I'm addicted to it. I'm a goddamn dog, ready to heel at his smallest command.

He thinks I've got all the control, but he couldn't be more wrong. It's him who has me in a chokehold. He'd never ask, but if he wanted me to crawl to him, I would—without hesitation. Because hearing him like this, seeing him come undone and smiling... that's perfection.

I'd do anything for it. I'd kill for it. Getting on my knees for his happiness, his pleasure? Pfft. Just another fucking day.

"Please, god, Keo—"

"Shh..." I squeeze just under the head of his cock and drag a slow stroke down his length. His body shakes, and as I take his chin and turn him to face me, I smile.

"You'll come... right..." My movements return to a pleasurable pace, and just as his back arches, midnight hits. "Now."

This hadn't been my plan, but shit—if he wants to set it up like that, I'll make it happen. I'm just glad the fireworks aren't late, because honestly, that might've been embarrassing.

The first boom explodes in the distance the same moment his cock pulses. He calls out as he spills over my hand, down his length, across his thighs, and onto the blanket beneath us.

I don't give him a second to catch his breath. My mouth slams to his, and he shifts in my hold, arms winding tight around my head. His legs shake as he fumbles to kick off his pants, and I wrap an arm around his midsection, helping him strip until he's straddling my thighs.

I don't bother wiping away the mess of his release. Instead, I grab his ass with the same hand, spreading it across his skin. We're going to be a mess tonight anyway—no point in staying clean now.

He pulls back just an inch, breathless, and whispers, "Happy New Year, baby."

Sliding my dry hand up into his hair, I grin. “Happy New Year, sunshine.”

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He had to pry me off his lap to watch the rest of the fireworks, though he settled me right back down between his thighs, my back to his chest, and held me close as the sky burst overhead.

After the grand finale, we sat in the darkness, waiting for the smoke to slowly clear. Only once I pulled on my boxers did we climb out of the truck bed and head toward the entrance of our... tent? It looks more like something out of a safari, and even from outside, I can feel the heat spilling from it.

It's freezing out here. If not for the blankets and Keo's body heat, I'd have suffered through the show. I know these setups are for glamping—I've never done it before tonight, and honestly, I'll take the comfort. Especially since he hinted at more than just that hand job. I'm not exactly eager to fuck on the hard ground.

Keo reaches for the door handle but pauses.

"We've talked a lot about consent and our limits, Ayden."

My heart drops straight into my balls. "We have."

"That includes tonight. And the rest of our lives. Even old and gray—if I grab your balls too tight—" I snort before I can stop myself. "—you tell me to stop."

"I know... Why do you bring that up now?"

His chuckle is low, dark, and sexy as hell. It vibrates through me like a hum straight down my cock.

"This isn't just a normal camping trip, sunshine."

He pushes the door open, and heat immediately rolls over me. Not just from the fire glowing in the stove—definitely not wood-burning, since there's no smoke—but from what's *inside*.

Holy fuck.

There's a sturdy wooden bed frame, thick beams reinforced with metal railings, perfect for restraints. Chains and rings are attached to the upper frame, leaving no question about their purpose.

Beside the bed sits a dresser drawer, its surface covered in ropes, bottles of lube, and toys. I recognize one of them instantly, causing my pulse to spike.

Across the room hangs whips, floggers, and implements I can't even identify. They look intimidating... maybe even painful.

"You talked about wanting to try being bound, and that's all this is." Keo circles in front of me, his demeanor calm and grounding. I lift my chin, forcing myself to focus only on him. "Each tent has a different theme. Only one had bondage."

I swallow hard and glance up at the beams overhead. A metal chain dangles from the center of the ceiling, cuffs hanging at just the right height for wrists to slip through.

"Say something."

"Oh." I clear my throat quickly. "Wow. I didn't even know places like this existed."

"You'd be surprised what you find when you Google 'kink retreats'." His hand comes to my jaw, thumb dragging across my lips. His gaze doesn't waver. "We don't have to touch any of it. Totally up to you."

Wetting my lips, I smile. "I feel like you already know me... and what I like."

He nods steadily. "I do."

"And..." My chest tightens, anticipation replacing nerves. "I do want to try some of this."

"Mhmm." His fingers trail slowly down my neck, leaving goosebumps in their wake, before he presses a kiss right against the spot that makes my balls ache.

I stifle a moan as his hands move to my waist. "And I want to do it, just... no degradation. That will never change."

"Ayden," he murmurs against my skin, voice low and reverent. "I love watching you fold when I praise you." The filthy sound that

escapes me is impossible to contain when his hands slip under my boxers and grip my ass. "As I said before, you deserve to be treated like a prince. My *fucking* prince. Nothing but praise, sunshine."

"I like the sound of that."

He rises to his full height, grinning down at me. "Is that a yes?"

I nod. "Yes. I trust you."

The groan he lets out melts into my mouth as he kisses me, hard and deep. His passion leaves my stomach in knots, my chest on fire. Every part of me aches for what Keo is about to give, but beneath the heat, my heart feels safe and cherished. This isn't just about pleasure. It's so much more. It's about being seen, protected, wanted.

My shirt is tugged up, and we break apart just long enough for him to strip it off. I fumble at his belt, eager, but he catches my wrists.

"No, no. I've got it," he breathes against my lips.

My boxers drop to the floor with a tug of his fingers, and I kick them off. His hand curls around the back of my head, dragging me into another bruising kiss as he guides us further into the room.

We stop, and then gentle pressure lands on my shoulders. "On your knees for me."

I sink instantly. The cushioned floor surprises me, softer than I expected. It's almost like I'm kneeling on a thin mattress.

Keo strips—jacket, sweater, shirt—all discarded with deliberate ease. His body is everything. Broad shoulders, carved chest, muscles shifting under skin inked with tattoos. Even the flex of his veins when he works his belt buckle makes my throat dry.

He leaves his pants open, hanging low and teasing. It instantly has my mouth watering.

"The way you eye-fuck me, sunshine," he says, a dark amusement in his voice. "It's a wonder I have any patience to just admire you."

Praise kink: activated.

"Close your thighs," he commands softly, "and put your cock where I can see it. *Please*."

The moment I wrap my hand around myself, the ache spikes—every nerve screaming for friction, for release. I'm so turned on it's unbearable, doesn't matter I just came thirty or so minutes ago.

"Does my good boy want to suck my cock?"

I nod, and dare I say it's a desperate, eager one.

He toes off his shoes, kicks them aside, and peels down his pants and boxers in one motion. But instead of stepping toward me, he turns, walking to the dresser. My eyes lock onto the sculpt of his back, the dimples in his ass, the strong flex of his thighs. I bite down hard on my lip, helplessly drooling over every inch of him.

He stops, collecting a few things from the top of the dresser. The black coil of rope is obvious. The other smaller items glint in his hand, and I'm staring so hard at them, I don't even glance at his cock.

When he strides back, my head tilts up automatically. He pauses, staring at me with that heavy gaze before bending down. His voice is low and sultry. "The way you look at me has my dick so fucking hard. I hope I stare at you half as worshipfully as you do me."

"You do..." My words come out shaky with want.

The moment he's behind me, his hands are already pulling mine back, tying my wrists together with practiced precision. The rope bites just enough to remind me it's there; snug but safe. It winds up toward my elbow but doesn't go further than that. When he finishes, I hear the pop of a cap, then the wet sound of lube being squeezed out.

"Lean forward, sunshine."

I obey, lowering down as he steadies me, my cheek pressing to the cushioned floor.

"Again—fuck *me*. It's so hard not to just lather my cock and sink into your ass right now. I'm a desperate man."

Cool slickness spreads over my hole, his fingers working it in. The sound that rips from my throat is strained. The first push in of the butt plug makes me shiver, and when the pinch comes, I think it's all the way in. But oh am I wrong. A second stretch comes. Wider. Filling me deeper.

A moan spills past closed lips.

"O-Oh... Keo..."

The same thing happens again, thicker than before, stretching me wider until I'm gasping. One last push, deeper still, and I'm pretty sure I'm drooling.

He doesn't tell me to move. Instead, his arm hooks around my collar, dragging me upright and flush against his chest. My stomach knots tight, a lust-drenched sound tearing free before I can stop it.

The sensation of whatever toy is inside me has my thighs flexing and heat building up my face.

Cold liquid trails over my cock, and I shiver.

"I'm also a greedy, obsessed man for you." His hand, warm and slick, closes around me, stroking agonizingly slow. "As if you could have ever imagined I'd share you with anyone. Man or woman. If they touched what's mine, they'd better believe in a god, because they'd be meeting them."

If I hadn't come already tonight, that alone would've undone me. I fucking love his obsession.

I jerk forward with a sharp intake of air, not out of pain, but surprise. Another sensation—tight and unfamiliar—squeezes around the base of my cock. I glance down just as the pressure spreads, wrapping around my balls too. When his hand moves, I can see a silicone ring around me.

"You want to only be mine?"

"Y-Yes..." I pant.

His tongue flicks across my ear, teeth catching the lobe before dragging down my neck. "Good. There was never another option. Just wanted to hear you say it."

"And... you're only mine," I pant, my body twitching with each slow twist of his wrist around my head.

"Damn right I am."

He stands, leaving me trembling but not abandoned. When his hand takes my chin, I open my mouth without thought. His thumb draws down my lips, parting them wider.

"My good fucking boy," he croons.

Then he's sliding his cock into my mouth, the bar pressing against my tongue as precum coats my taste buds. I moan around him, feral to swallow every drop.

His fingers knot in my hair, guiding me as his hips roll forward, fucking my throat at a slow, deliberate pace.

For the first time, I tug at my bound wrists. I want to touch him, trace the hard lines of his thighs, and anchor myself to his strength. But the rope holds, and instead of frustration, it fills me with a dizzying sense of euphoria. My cock throbs, balls tight and aching.

I love this.

Suddenly, a vibration pulses deep in my ass. Another follows, snug and insistent, right around my cock. I choke on a moan,

swallowing around his head.

"Fuuuuck, Ayden. That's it." His grip tightens, his thrusts rougher now, more demanding.

Spit slicks my lips, trailing down my chin, down my throat. I steal breaths in the brief seconds he pulls back. That is until he drives forward and buries himself to the base, cutting off my air completely.

The lack of oxygen makes every sensation scream louder—his cock heavy on my tongue, the relentless vibrations, the burn in my chest. I squirm, hips thrusting forward on instinct.

"Eyes up." His voice is rough, commanding, and it sends a shiver down my spine.

I obey and look up at him through watery eyes, face flushing from the ache for breath. My shoulders jerk involuntarily, and only then does he relent, pulling back just enough to let me gasp, though his cock never leaves my mouth.

I haven't taken my eyes off him, and the way he smiles at me has my heart somersaulting. Admiration. Desire. My entire body floods with affection from just one look.

He draws his hand down my temple. *"Masterpiece."*

After another moment of me holding him in my mouth, he pulls away. He bends over, sliding his hands under my arms and lifting me to my feet. I'm lean but still tall, so the ease with which he picks me up is undeniably hot.

Our mouths meet in a passionate kiss, his tongue already seeking mine. He wraps his arms around my midsection and lifts me higher, which I'm grateful for—I definitely don't want to walk with this thing inside me.

Or maybe I do.

I have no idea, honestly. I'm already starting to feel blissed out.

He moves to lie me onto the bed, and I twitch with pleasure immediately. The toy inside me leaves me feeling full. I know it isn't as big as Keo, so I'm not sure why it feels like this. The sensation is overwhelming, but undeniably delicious.

I've never used toys before Keoni, and I hope to keep exploring all these new things with him.

He turns me onto my stomach, and hoists my knees up, angling my ass to the ceiling.

The vibration kicks back on and I release a moan only muffled by the mattress.

"Fuck, I'm jealous." Suddenly, the plug shifts, and I feel stretched as one of the thick balls slips out. "My cock is dripping to be inside you, Ayden."

He pushes it back in, and I bite down onto the sheets as he does it over, and over again.

"Ah—K-Keo, please, fuck t-that's it."

He then pushes it in, and I feel yet *another* ball stretch me open, but there's no pinch at the end.

"How's my cock feeling?" His fingers wrap around my throbbing length, and I whimper. "Mmm... you make the sexiest sounds for me, sunshine."

The vibration hasn't stopped, and I'm left wondering how I haven't come yet considering how incredible all these sensations feel together.

"I'm going to fuck you," he croons, slowly pulling out the plug. I try to relax, but the balls exiting make it impossible. My stomach twists into knots, begging for release. "I want to fill your ass with my cum, and then I'll clean up my mess before we take a break."

I expect him to go right in—I'm prepped and ready—but he doesn't.

Instead, he reaches around my throat and pulls me up onto my knees. His warm breath fans against my ear as he whispers, "Ayden, I want you to ride my cock... I want to see my man come apart and come all over us both."

It's a question. I can tell because he knows how I feel about perception. I've never done it, and he is checking on *me*, to not put me into a position without my consent.

I've never been tied up. Never had my dick sucked before him. Never felt safety like this.

He sees me—and my limits—more clearly than I do, and I truly trust him with my life. That trust extends to this: my pleasure, our sex life.

"I want to ride you, baby," I whisper confidently.

A hungry sound escapes his throat as he bites into my shoulder, sending lightning down my spine.

Without undoing my wrists, he moves from behind me and gets onto the bed. He aids me in crawling to him, settling me in front of

him before grabbing the lube and coating his *extremely* hard cock. The veins look angry and I'm glad he prepped me so well.

Once it's slick, he takes me by the hips, helping me straddle him. Our chests press together as he reaches between us, adjusting me so the head of his cock glides perfectly from the space between my balls to my ass.

The moment I feel it in place, I lower myself onto him.

As his head breaches, I throw my head back. He's not rushing me, letting me take this as slow, or fast, as I want. But I don't want any less than what he gives me.

As I adjust to his girth stretching me and his length filling me, I'm ready to have him fuck me like he always has—without restraint.

"Fuck, Ayden, you feel incredible."

That bar of his hits in a completely different place in this position, and I vibrate with ecstasy as I do my first lift on him. With my arms bound behind me, all I have is the strength in my thighs. That, and his hands which come to my hips. He begins moving me, up and down.

"You take me so good." His breathless words have me trembling.

"Yes, please, right there..." My own just as winded, as I feel every inch of him drag in and out of me.

When he falls onto his back, I look down at him.

Holy fuck—the look of absolute devastation on his glorious face makes me clench. He's sweating, that five o'clock shadow I've begged for, giving him a rugged, hungry edge that has me biting my lip.

"You belong right here, riding what's yours and yours alone."

He guides my movements, and with each thrust I feel him hitting that sensitive spot inside me. The piercing dragging against my walls sends a shiver down my spine every time.

"Baby, fuck, that's it, please... touch me," I beg.

"Oh god," he groans, his eyes rolling into the back of his head.

"I'm not going to last, you talking like that."

"I want you to come inside me," I continue. "Stroke my cock."

"Ayden..." he growls.

"Please."

I feel his legs shift, his knees lifting as he thrusts up, making my back arch.

One of his hands stays on my hip while the other wraps around my slick cock. I swear, the moment he strokes once, my balls tighten, my stomach clenches around my heart, and I'm coming.

"Fuck! Keo!"

"Goddamn it, that's it, Ayden. That's it. Come for me."

I sit fully onto him, but he keeps thrusting deep and hard. My cum flies across his stomach and chest. I make a mess—holy fuck, and I just keep coming.

His grunts accompany the pressure of his climax filling me, and I can't hold myself up. I collapse forward onto his chest, and he adjusts, spreading my ass with his hands as he continues pumping into me.

He slows after a few more thrusts, until he just holds himself inside me.

Both of us are breathing hard, and after a moment of stillness, Keo wraps his arms around my back and begins undoing the rope. As soon as I'm free, he rolls us so we're lying opposite each other, then slowly pulls himself out of me.

He settles over me, grinning as he draws in a deep breath through his nose. I don't hesitate to wrap my arms around his shoulders and pull him down to me. He kisses me and gently lets his weight rest on me.

Then he lifts his head, brushing back the strands of sweat-damp hair from my forehead. His grin softens into a tender, loving smile.

"Ayden..." The words that come out of his mouth surprise me so much it feels like shock rippling through me. "I love you."

My eyes widen, my lips parting, but no words come out. Did... I just hear him right?

I lose all sense of time, and before I realize it, I catch the flicker of worry crossing his face.

Did he just...

"You... going to say something?" he asks, and I can genuinely hear the concern in his voice. But why would he need to be? Oh my god.

"Keo... I love you, too." He has to know how equally obsessed I am with him. How much I love him. How I would *die* for him. Live *for* him. Right?

He releases a soft sigh. "Scared me for a second..."

I grab the sides of his neck and pull him back down into a deep kiss.

"As if I couldn't love you," I say between turning my head to deepen the passion between us.

He hums and slides his tongue into my mouth.

"That's what I love to hear," he says while pulling away. "Now, let's get you cleaned up."

I smile stupidly. "Where's the shower?"

"Outside."

"Great..."

"But that's not what I meant."

My eyes widen. "What... do you mean?"

He winks and moves down. Wait... Is he about to...

I gasp as his tongue crosses my ass.

Holy *fuck*. I need this for the rest of my life. I need him. I don't think I could live in a world where all of this, no, all of him... *Keoni Pierce*, didn't exist.



I've done my best not to think about it. Deep down, I know I should just be an adult and talk to him. But truthfully, I'm terrified of the worst-case scenario.

It hasn't affected anything between us; I'm sure Ayden can't even tell the difference. All it's done is stop me from saying it again. *I love you*. It's only been five days since New Year's, so it's not like it's been months. Still, I replay it in my head constantly.

The shock in his eyes.

That pause. That dreaded fucking silence...

God, it felt like it dragged on forever. I swear I fell into a black hole in that moment, and only talking brought me back. Who knows how long we'd have sat there otherwise.

It probably wasn't the best time.

Stupid. Stupid.

I lean forward, elbows on my thighs, face buried in my hands. I should've said it after the fireworks. No. On Christmas Day. That would've been perfect.

Not after fucking him.

My stomach drops at the memory. That's exactly why he hesitated. Who the hell drops that then?

Though... what if that's not the reason?

What if he doesn't feel the same, and seeing the devastation on my face forced him to say it back? It would've been fine. He doesn't need to love me right now. I could wait. I'd wait forever for him and his feelings.

He didn't have to lie...

No. I can't think that. I can't assume he lied.

Holy fucking shit. My head hurts—this migraine is a bitch with no mercy.

Normally, I'd curl up in Ayden's lap or shut myself away in a dark, silent room, but I can't do either right now.

Alysa left this morning, and it's just the two of us again. Silence isn't an option—if I sit in it, my mind will run too wild, and I don't want to lie to him about how I feel.

To be frank, I can see the benefits of therapy clearer than ever. Back when I had it every week—even in the hospital—my mind wasn't so clogged with these thoughts. Now it's been weeks without that outlet, and maybe... just maybe, that *major* in front of my diagnosis isn't exaggerated.

The sound of footsteps on the wood behind me keeps me from clawing at my temples in frustration.

I've been sitting on our dock for a long time. The sun was high when I said I just needed some air, and now it's close to setting.

He gave me space, lots of it, and I know he's worried.

How could I have ever doubted that he loves me?

His hand brushes my shoulder, and I sit up straight, tilting my chin to look at him standing over me.

"Can I join you?"

I nod, and he lowers himself to sit beside me. But only for a moment. Then, thinking better of it, he shifts into my lap instead.

He straddles my hips and settles onto my thighs. His fingers drag across my temples, through my hair, and against my scalp, before his elbows come to rest on my shoulders.

"Migraine worse, or better?"

I sigh. "Neither. It's all the same." Wrapping my arms around him, I pull him flush to me. My forehead drops against his shoulder, eyes closing. "How're you? Ya know, with Alysa leaving and all."

His hold shifts, the embrace tightening around my head.

"Sad," he admits softly. "But I'm glad she'll be coming back."

"Me too."

"Is her leaving the reason you're so aloof?"

I press my lips together, then nod. It's not exactly a lie. Her departure definitely feeds into this feeling, but it's nowhere near the main reason. While I want the title of stepbrother gone between me and Ayden, I still see Aly as my sister. It's complicated.

Maybe one day she'll be my sister-in-law. That would fix the problem.

Guess I just need to get over this hump—my stupid insecurity about the pause.

"You sure?"

I lean back slightly, resting my forehead against his. "There's a lot going on in my head..." I've never told him this, but I don't think there is any stigma around it—well, I hope not, anyway. "I suffer from diagnosed depression."

I leave out the *major* part. I don't want him to see me as unstable, even if... maybe I am at times. Like right now.

He leans back, surprise flickering across his face. "What? When?"

I chuckle, though it comes out strained. "Before I got here... Um..."

My chest tightens. This is a lot to dump on him. I've never told him how that night truly affected me—how I nearly didn't make it *here* at all. It's not that I don't want to, I do. I'm just working out how to.

I lift my hand, dragging my cold fingers across the warmth of his cheek. Goosebumps rise along his neck as I let my hand rest there.

"You can tell me," he says, giving me that devastatingly handsome smile. "You *should* tell me, actually. That's better."

But telling him everything would mean bringing up the reason for my diagnosis. The choice I made. The guilt I still carry.

My swallow is rough.

Just as I open my mouth—god knows what was about to come out—the crunch of tires on snow cuts me off. His gaze shifts past me, and I can't tell if the look in his eyes is relief, frustration, or both.

"It's Brittany."

He eases off my lap so I can stand, and together we walk toward her just as she's parking.

The moment she steps out, her grin consumes her entire face. "Well, hello, my favorite stepbrothers."

I groan. "Leave, Britt."

She mock-gasps. "I'm just messing with you. How about... my favorite couple?"

"I love that better," Ayden says, wrapping his arm around my back and leaning into me as we stop a few feet from her. "What's up? Didn't know you were coming by."

"Oh." She quickly pulls out her phone, glances at it, then looks back at me. "Holiday's over. Sessions are back on."

Shit. That's today?

"Can we restart them next week?" I ask. I know they're important—I know I need them—but between this migraine, everything with Ayden, and Alysa leaving today, it's too much.

"Nope. I didn't just drive out here for chit-chat. I've got a date too, so let's get this going."

"Ohhh? Please tell me it's Taylor," Ayden teases.

The way her cheeks light up is answer enough. She quickly changes the subject. "Let's go, Keoni. I'm not the one under interrogation here."

I tip my head back with a sigh.

"Go, and I'll get dinner started," he says.

Looking down at him smiling up at me, I return it—even if mine is weaker. "Okay."

"I hope you know I charge extra for these at-home visits when there's an inch of snow on the ground," Britt mutters.

"You complain a lot for doing your job," I say with a groan before leaning in and kissing my sunshine.

I'll be all right. We will be all right. I'll get this out of the way, and then we'll talk. He doesn't need to love me right now—I'll work for it. Every day if I have to.

That starts with me being honest about that night, what I could've done differently, and what I almost did.

"Have fun," he says as I fall into step beside Britt.

I shove my hands into my pockets. Hopefully this will be quick. I really don't feel good—mentally, or physically, thanks to this migraine.

"Alright," she says the moment we round the cabin. "Talk to me."

AYDEN

About thirty minutes in, halfway through roasting the chicken and mashing the potatoes, my phone goes off.

I quickly wash my hands and rush to the coffee table where it's resting. The familiar number makes me smile as I pick it up.

"Hey, Dr. Y—sorry, Markus."

He sighs through a chuckle. "Good evening, Ayden. Hope you had a good holiday."

"I did." Good doesn't even begin to cover the last few weeks. I honestly don't know how it could have been better. "How was yours?"

"Good. Got to spend it with my family. They came over from Delhi. They're leaving in a few days."

"I'm glad to hear that." I tuck the phone between my cheek and shoulder as I head back into the kitchen.

"While I called to check on you, I also... have an update of sorts."

I force myself to keep moving. Don't stop. Don't fidget. "Hopefully good news."

He clears his throat.

Well shit, that doesn't sound promising. "Because of the holidays, not much has been happening from a legal standpoint. But remember that friend I mentioned? Someone I was going to ask for help?"

"Yeah."

I reach for the oven, and that's when I notice how badly my hand is shaking. I swallow hard and turn it off instead. Right now, I'm more worried about dropping the pan or burning myself.

"He's a private investigator." My heart jumps in surprise. "Michael went on vacation with his family for the holidays, and I assumed the PI was doing the same. But I was wrong. He was looking into past reports filed by your ex—checking for any patterns."

I nod, even though he can't see me, and lean heavily against the counter.

"It brought him to the crash... Ayden, did you ever see pictures of the incident?"

"No... Michael said it would only traumatize me to see what I caused."

I've never heard Markus groan like this before. It's low, almost a growl, laced with anger.

"That's because there *is* none. No photos. No police reports. No... nothing."

My heart isn't slowing. It's racing faster and faster, climbing with every beat.

"Maybe that makes sense. Michael's dad is the chief of SFPD, and he said he was going to 'take care of it'."

"Maybe... but, Ayden, there's no reports of cars being turned into the impound. I can't imagine getting rid of all that evidence. Is it possible? Sure, but something tells me it wasn't done to protect you."

I've thought about that.

The idea has crossed my mind so many times—that maybe it wasn't me behind the wheel. That maybe it was Michael. Or, worse... What if there was *no* car accident at all?

"Keoni!" Britt's scream tears through the air from outside. "Stop!"

What the fuck?

"Markus, I... I have to go. What do I do? What's my next move?"

"Nothing," he says with a heavy sigh. "I just wanted to keep you updated. The PI's going to start tailing Michael again once he's back from holiday. Looks like he and his family went to Utah or something."

I don't have time to unpack that. They never left for the holidays. Not once in the six years I've known him. But maybe things changed after I wasn't around.

"Thank you." I don't wait for his reply, because Britt's scream cuts through the air again.

"Just stop and talk with me!"

I rush toward the back door, but before I reach it, it swings open. The glass in the four pane window rattles, I'm shocked, honestly, it didn't shatter.

I stumble back against the adjacent wall as Keoni barrels inside.

"Hey—" He brushes past me so fast I don't even get a glimpse of his face. "Keo?"

He snatches the truck keys hanging by the door and throws the front door open.

"Oh, fuck—Ayden, I didn't mean to," Britt stammers, her face stricken with horror. "Try to stop him. Please."

I don't hesitate. I tear through the house, not even bothering with shoes. The cool wood of the patio is nothing compared to the icy bite of the grass as I hit the yard.

"Keo, wait!"

He doesn't even flinch at my voice. He just keeps power-walking toward his truck. If he were sprinting, I'd never catch him—but I force myself into a run and manage to grab his arm.

"Stop, Keo. What's wr—"

He spins on me, causing me to cut myself off before I can finish.

I've never seen him cry before, and while he isn't now, I can tell he's either on the edge of it or just pulled himself back. His eyes are bloodshot, red splotches running across his temples and down his neck.

"What... what's going on?" My voice is lowered, trying to soothe whatever's happening.

He wets his lips, the keys in his hand jingling faintly, but I don't dare look away from his face.

"Talk to me. Keo, baby, what—"

"Just... stop."

I don't know if my heart can take this. Not all in one night.

Something shifts in his expression. Like he's finally seeing that it's *me*, and not just anyone standing in his way.

"Fuck, Ayden..." He drags a hand across his face, then shoves it up through his frazzled hair. "I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to apologize for." I step in front of him, keeping just enough space between us to let him decide what he needs. "Talk to me."

His chin falls to his chest as his eyes shut, breath shuddering out of him. "Christ. I'm a hypocrite. I demanded you tell me what was going on, *why* you never came here. Yet here I am... not... telling you what happened."

My smile is weak, but it's real. He really was forceful back then, and I wish I could be like that now—demand answers, have a commanding presence. But that's not me.

"Start now. No better time than the present."

His hardness falters, softening into something closer to fear, and it breaks me. He shakes his head, but I don't let up. I step closer, setting my hands on his arms.

"Keo, talk to me. Don't push me away."

"I'm not trying to, I just—"

"Remember what you said? Don't let you push me away."

"Ayden..."

"Don't shut me out. What are you afraid of?"

"Losing you," he blurts, so fast I know without a doubt he believes it. "I should've told you months ago... what I did..."

I hold his gaze, unwavering, hoping he sees that nothing he could ever say or do would make me leave.

"This guilt is... unbearable. I can't..."

"You can."

He groans, frustrated, the sound jagged. "If only it were that easy. These feelings—they come so suddenly, so violently. And I can't stop them. I can't beat the shit out of them, I can't... put a restraining order on it—" he cuts himself off, shaking his head. A sigh slips through, ragged and low. "I'm sorry..."

Without hesitation, I step into him, wrapping my arms around his body. My head rests against his shoulder, and for a moment, I brace myself for him to push me away.

But he doesn't.

"Stop apologizing to me. I understand..."

His hand finds the back of my head, the other anchoring around my back. He holds me like he's afraid the world will rip me out of his arms.

"I'm here. Talk with me," I whisper. "The only way I'd ever go anywhere is if you let me go."

"I don't want that." His voice cracks, and I swear it's impossible to hold him tighter—but I do.

"Then tell me. Let me help carry the weight of this guilt, Keo."

He swallows hard, like the words lodged in his throat are razor blades. His grip shifts, desperate now, like whatever he's about to confess could end the world. Maybe for him it feels that way. But not for me. The only way my world would ever end is if he wasn't in it.

"Wanting your forgiveness for this... feels so fucking selfish. I'm sorry, Ayden..."



July 31st, 2026

“Thanks for taking the extra days, Keoni,” Elijah, my fire chief, says as he slaps my shoulder. “You’re going to be missed.”

I nod. “No problem. It’ll be nice to spend more time with everyone. I’ll be moving up to Colorado officially next week.”

We start up the long walkway that circles inside the fire station.

“You tell your parents yet?” he asks.

“Nah, they’re on a road trip right now. But they’ll come home to a letter from me. A nice little surprise.”

He smiles genuinely at me. “You’ll be hard to replace, Pierce. Just know—”

My phone starts ringing, and I pull it out quickly. “Sorry about that.” I spot the caller ID, and it’s like I’ve summoned her to call me.

“No problem, need to take it?”

“Yeah, if you don’t mind. We can continue after.”

He nods, and I step back before placing my cell to my ear. “Good afternoon, Mom.”

“Keo, how’re you, honey?”

Leaning against the railing, I sigh. “Good, it’s hotter than Hades here.” She laughs. “How’s the trip going?”

"Wonderful. Where are you right now?"

My brows pinch. "At work."

"Oh..." She clears her throat, and away from the phone she asks, "What day is it?"

"Friday," Grant, my stepdad, says in the background.

"Did you change your shift around?" she asks me.

"No, I actually picked up a few more days. It's peak season for us right now."

"Oh. Guess I shouldn't be too surprised. My workaholic son."

A soft chuckle vibrates from my throat. "You know me... Why? What's up, Mom?"

"Grant and I are parked right outside your place."

My heart skips. "Wait, seriously? Why?"

Her soft giggle makes me chuckle. She may be in her fifties, but she still acts so young. "We decided to take the long route to come spend the day with you, and were hoping we could bunk up for the night."

Every part of me wants that. I haven't seen my mom and stepdad since last Christmas. But I agreed to these extra days, and I know how much they need the help. I'll see them in just over a week—even if they don't know it yet.

"Dang, Mom, I'm so sorry. This time of year is so bad for us, I wish I could."

The sad mumble of something in her native tongue has my stomach tying into knots.

"I understand, honey. Do you mind if we bunk up tonight at your place?"

Motherfucker, my entire place is packed up. If they go in and see that, they're going to have so many questions. I'll be forced to ruin the surprise.

Shit, shit, shit.

"My place is an absolute mess. Let me put you up in a hotel."

A moment of silence passes, before she says, "No, that's alright. We'd planned to just keep driving anyway, this would've just been a pleasant detour. Don't worry about it, Keo."

A wave of heat rolls down my right side, chased by a sudden chill. Goosebumps prickle across my skin, and I have to physically shake off the sensation.

"You sure, Mom?"

"I'm sure. We will see you in a few months for Christmas. Right?"

"You know I'd never miss it..."

"Hopefully we can get Ayden there this year," Grant grumbles.

The mention of him has my stomach opening up and swallowing my heart. "Yeah... I'm not going to get my hopes up."

"I'll fly to California to grab him, throw him in a suitcase, and drag his ass to the cabin," he says. "Tired of that boy not spending time with us."

My mom, once again, giggles.

"Aloha wau iā 'oe, Keo." She almost sings the endearment at me.

"Aloha wau iā 'oe, Mom." I try... I just have a hard time getting it down, but I at least know how to say I love you to her. "Love you too, Grant."

"Love you, son. See you in a few months."

"Bye, guys."

"Bye, honey."

The phone feels heavy, and even more so when I press the button to end the call.

I stare at the screen as it goes black, and after a second, take a deep breath. This feeling is probably from lying, but it's a small fib to get me through the next ten days. I'll see them so much sooner than they think, and I'm so excited.



AUGUST 1ST, 2026

"I'm so sorry, Keoni."

"I'm sorry for your loss."

"Keoni, how horrible, I just heard what happened."

Shut up. Shut up. SHUT UP!

It's nearly one hundred and twenty degrees, but I feel cold. So... fucking cold...

Wrapping my arms around my body, I scream. It's not loud enough, because I just know whatever god exists up there can't hear me.

So, I do it again. And again.

My entire body shakes as I stare down into the dirt. It's not orange or red, it's fucking black. I'm in an endless nightmare.

"They were in an accident..."

Shut up...

"Take solace in that they didn't suffer."

Shut up!!

I grab a handful of dirt and rocks, squeeze them so tight I feel the tears in my skin, before throwing everything.

I did this...

Turning my hands over, I watch the blood trickle down both palms and across my wrists.

I did this... If I'd just... let them in. If I hadn't tried to surprise them. If I had just been fucking better. Been a better son...

"Mom..." I shake my head. "Fuck..." Tears build around my eyes, some falling down my face as I try to keep myself from passing out.

I feel lightheaded.

I feel raw, empty. *In so much pain.*

Bending forward, I slam my head onto the ground and scream once more.

"Give me one more chance, please. Please... if a god exists, please don't let this happen." I hit the dirt over and over with my head. "I'll leave work. I'll spend every fucking second with them. Please, please give her back. I-I'm sorry... I-I'm sorry, Alysa... I'm so sorry, Ayden..."

It's all my fault.

All my fault.

My fault.

I... can't take anymore guilt...



It's not been as long as it's felt since he began telling me what happened. Sometime between the beginning and end, we let one another go.

I don't remember why it happened, but it felt like we both needed to see each other. He's staring at me as he finishes, and I stand here in silence, my mouth slowly parting.

What do I even say?

I can't hesitate—but the words won't come.

He's staring at me, almost pleading. For what? Forgiveness? He already has it. Even knowing one decision might have changed the fate of both our parents, it isn't his fault.

"Ayden... say something..."

When he says my name, I shake my head. "Keo... my god, you've—"

"You do that..." He takes a step *back*, and I swear my heart cracks. "Hesitate. I can never tell if it's because you're about to lie to me or not."

"No, no, no! I swear, that's not why I'm... hesitating. I'm not hesitating!" I move toward him, but he keeps the distance between us. Panic claws at me, and I know I need to fix this. "I don't blame you, if that's what you're worried about."

"Then why do I have to **drag** the words out of you?" His voice lifts, sharp enough to make my eyes widen. "You don't have to forgive me..."

"Keo! There is **nothing** to forgive."

"You don't even have to love me right now."

What...

"Just don't lie to me."

"What are you even talking about? I *do* love you."

I'm losing him. That look—it's the same one he had that night at the bar. As if the word *hollow* has taken shape in his eyes, turning them distant. It's no longer like I'm meeting his amber gaze, but staring through a fogged window, clouded with smoke from a fire burning too close to everything I love.

"I blame myself for so much..."

I shake my head. "Keo—"

"If I hadn't ran out on you that night... would you have ever met Michael?" A chill runs down my side. "Do you think of that?"

Swallowing, I once again shake my head. "No. Never."

"Jokes on us both... huh? It took me a long time to realize the *bad joke*." If it could, and I'd stay alive, my heart would've shattered right then. "I've **fucked up** so many lives. Unintentionally. But look at the connecting piece. It's me."

"What happened to me... What happened to our parents, none of that is your fault."

"Tell that to the fucked-up asshole in my head who won't let it go!" He rakes his fingers through his hair and turns away.

He's leaving.

"Keo, stop." I move quickly to step in front of him. "This is ridiculous, you did—"

"Ridiculous?" The way he narrows his eyes at me tells me I chose the wrong word. "Is that what this feeling is? My reactions? Why is it ridiculous, sunshine?"

"Because you've done nothing wrong. Absolutely nothing wrong."

He lets out a hollow chuckle.

"If I hadn't taken that extra shift... If I had just let them in... I see it from time to time, you know?"

He stands so still, unlike me, who's trembling. The pain in his voice is laced with defeat. *No...*

"If I had kept them on the phone for a few minutes. Forced them to a hotel... that semi would've hit someone else. They'd still be alive. I see the what-ifs. But you want to know the fucked-up part? What I realized?"

My fingertips spark with the need to touch him. To pull him close and show him just how much **I love him**. This feels like... he's trying to leave. Like he's preparing to say goodbye, and I can't bear that.

"I don't know if I'd change anything from that night now."

The ache in my chest is so sharp that tears spring into my eyes before I even realize it.

"I got you out of it. Finally..." His voice wavers. "How fucked up am I?! The guilt I feel comes from every goddamn corner of my brain! I drove you away. I didn't let them in. I don't want them back!"

I hesitate for only a moment before whispering, "Me... too, Keo. Me, too. Baby, I feel the same way. We can be fucked up together if that's what it means." Stepping closer, I press my trembling hands against his chest.

He looks slowly down at my hands. "Guilt is... lonely. It's different than loss, different than... physical pain. It's a place of darkness that seems endless, and the only thing present is the reason for it. It hangs there, in a room with no windows or doors. It doesn't let anyone in, and it sure as hell won't let you out."

"Then you should've screamed for me to break through. Let me sit in there with you. Don't be in this alone."

His hands move to my shoulders... and he slowly steps me back. "You deserve the sun, Ayden. I don't want to be in that darkness, so why the hell would I drag you into it?"

"Keo, please... We can get through this—" He pulls me to the side as he steps around me, and goes for his truck. "Don't walk away!" I go for his arm, but he jerks it away.

"Let me go—" I swear I nearly vomit. "I just need to be alone for a bit."

"No... we can—we can do this together, please."

Am I above begging? Nope. Absolutely not. I rush to the back of the truck and stand. He climbs in, starts it up, and adjusts the rearview so I can see his eyes.

"I'm not letting you go!"

Before I can react, he's out of the car, leaving it running, and pacing toward me. I square my shoulders, meeting his defiance with my own.

"Listen, we can—" He literally grabs me and slings me over his shoulder. "What the fuck!?"

I could seriously do damage if I kicked or hit him, but I don't want to hurt him... even if he's tearing me apart mentally and emotionally.

I don't knee or punch, but I try to wriggle free—shifting my hips, grabbing his jacket to get down.

Within less than a minute, the warmth of the cabin wraps around us, and I'm thrown onto the couch.

He says nothing.

Doesn't look at me.

He simply turns toward the front door.

"Keoni!" Brittany screams.

If he thinks I'm just going to sit here and watch him walk out, he's wrong. I'm back on my feet just as he grabs an umbrella and slams the door. No more than seconds later, I open it and go for the screen door but it won't budge.

The umbrella is jammed between the handle.

I spin around, brushing past a crying Britt, and head for the back door. I'm moving too slow, because the moment I see the red lights of his truck, he's nearly disappearing down the pathway.

Away from the cabin.

Away from *me*.

No...

My gaze flicks to Britt's jeep, then I'm plunged into full-blown adrenaline mode. I race back to the house, tossing the umbrella aside and yanking open the screen door.

"Britt, we have to go after him."

Her hands are clutched to her chest, and I can see the gleam of keys. I'm ready. She's ready... so why the hell isn't she moving?

"Brittany? We..."

The moment I get closer, I see the phone wedged between her and the keys she's holding onto for dear life.

"I'm not supposed to tell you this, but..." she releases a shaky breath. "Keoni didn't... have a choice for therapy."

I wet my lips. "What?"

"I urged him to tell you, Ayden." She drags the back of her hand across her eyes. Mine stinging as I stare, unblinking at her. "He drove to the site of the accident... When he confirmed it for himself, he didn't go back to Phoenix." Her throat strains as she swallows. "If it hadn't been for his fire chief calling the police in Coconino County, he would've jumped from the South Rim of the Grand Canyon."

I'm not sure how I stay on my feet.

"I'd called to see how he was doing, but when I couldn't get ahold of him, I tried the hospitals, hoping it wasn't the worst news imaginable... When I found him, he was sitting in jail. A judge was going to order involuntary treatment, but... I convinced him to come see me and to move here like he had planned."

Where are my words? It's like I've lost the ability to speak. I have so much I want to scream, but nothing comes out. It's... painful.

"I should call it directly in, but I can't." Tears sit in her eyes. "He's so different now, so *happy*, and doing so much better. I don't want to see him in a facility, away from you, it'll have the opposite effect."

She slowly moves to me, or at least I thought she was coming toward me. Instead, she turns toward the door.

"I need to go help them find him. I contacted a friend at the police department and he's going to put out a call to look for his truck. I won't let them take him in, I'll bring him right back to you. So, stay here—"

"No..." I finally find *something* worth spilling. "Take me with you."

"What happens if he comes back? If you aren't here... he may think you left. His mental state..." She pauses and takes a quick breath. "It's fragile."

"I never saw *any* of this."

"It just takes one small thing. A fire doesn't need much to catch, and even less for it to spread. I shouldn't have pushed. Especially not on our first session back from the holidays."

As she goes to brush past me, I quickly grab onto her arm. "You expect me to just sit here? Are you crazy?"

She drops her chin, before looking up at me. "I expect you to be here **when** he gets back."

When.

I'm not entirely sure if I let her go, or she jerks from my grip, because within the span of a blink, I'm alone. The walls of the cabin squeeze in tight, before they expand outward. My entire world spins, and it's as though gravity lifts, causing me to stumble a few steps back.

The feeling of dread comes over my entire body. I'm seeing the headlights coming right at me, and it's *me* that's about to be crushed.

My heart is running, trying to save itself from the death that's inevitably coming.

I try to see, but nothing makes sense, and I recognize far too late what's happening. My breath comes too sharp, and I can't catch it before I begin to hyperventilate.

Grabbing at my chest, I go to try and step, but the realization I'm on the floor hits me like the ache in my shoulder.

Keo... no, no. Please. Don't...

The air is thick, too thick, and it's like time itself has stopped around me, but I'm allowed to move through it. I wish I could pause. I don't want this ache. The chills. The numbness.

Oh god.

What... What's happening?!

"Ayden!" A loud scream breaks through the ringing in my ear.

"Oh my god, Ayden!"

A grip on the back of my neck pulls me upright, snapping me to reality.

"Ronan! Help him!"

I shut my eyes, because my vision returns only to shake so much that I'm immediately dizzy.

He groans. "That's reserved strictly for you, baby girl."

"Help him! Now!"

"Damn it." Thundering footsteps approach, and before I know it, I'm hoisted up into a seated position. "Open your eyes." His commanding voice tells me I *really* shouldn't fight it, even if I just want to sleep. I want to run away from opening them to anyone but Keo.

"Ayden. Now."

I do, but as it had been before, everything spins in a circle. I could swear I've gone cross-eyed.

"You're safe." The sudden shift in his voice has me blinking rapidly. "I'm here with you." When I finally have clarity in my

vision, it's Ronan's stoic face that takes up the majority of my view. I vaguely see Calista in my peripheral, but I stick to staring right into his blue gaze. "You aren't alone."

Heat floods my eyes.

"Let's breathe together. Alright? Nod for me."

I slowly do as he says.

"Good. In through your nose... four seconds, hold it..." Following his instructions, I begin to feel the weight on my chest coming off me. "Good, out through your mouth."

The hand that isn't holding me up presses against my stomach. "Breathe from here. Focus on pushing my hand up. Bring in air until you feel that last hard intake, then hold it."

After a few rounds of breathing, he nods.

"Now, name five things you see."

"You... Cal... the word SIT... the TV... wood..."

"Very good. Now, four things you feel."

Cal comes to sit beside me, and she brushes her hand across my forehead. "Cal, you... the fire... Clover?" I turn my head to the side and see the cat brushing against my arm that rests at my side.

"Focus, Ayden. Tell me three things you hear."

I shut my eyes briefly. "Your voice... the fire... and purring."

"Almost there. You're doing great. Two things you smell."

I take a breath through my nose. "Burning wood, and... cucumber lotion."

Cal lets out a somber chuckle.

"Last one. What do you taste?"

I run my tongue around in my mouth, before saying, "Nothing."

When I look back up to him, he's nodding. "This is going to pass. You aren't in any danger. Cal and I have you."

Watching as she presses a hand to his neck and leans in to kiss his cheek has my heart aching.

Once I've drawn enough oxygen into my lungs and my breathing steadies, they help me off the ground.

Seated on the couch, I watch Ronan disappear toward the kitchen. Cal sits beside me, taking my hand and rubbing a gentle circle into my palm.

"Why... are you here?" I ask. "How?"

"Britt texted me. What's going on? Where's Keo? Is he at work?"

I bite down on my bottom lip and shake my head.

"Okay. Let's just talk about something else—"

"I don't want to talk about anything else... sorry. Thank you, but... shit." I run my fingers through my hair. "Do you mind grabbing my phone?"

She nods and gets up from the couch just as Ronan returns. He hands me a glass of ice-cold water, and I take a slow sip.

"Don't cut her off again."

I lift my gaze, preparing to apologize again, when Cal interrupts.

"Ronan, it's fine. You know how I get after these."

He rolls his eyes and grunts. "Regardless."

"No harm done," she says softly, handing me my phone.

I'm swapping out the drink for it. I look and see no new messages or calls. It doesn't stop me from pulling up his number and calling.

Only for it to go directly to voicemail.

I do it again.

Voicemail.

Again.

Voicemail.

The moment I'm about to try again, Cal's hand covers the phone, and I look up at her. "Tell me what happened. We aren't going anywhere."

"What?"

She shoots her head up to Ronan. "We're staying..."

He grunts. "Haven't we done enough?"

When she looks back at me, she smiles. "Ignore him. Let's talk, Ayden. What's going on?"



I am a colossal idiot.

Why do I have to feel like this?

The farther I drove from Ayden, the heavier my chest became, the hollower my heart felt. I had to pull over—if I hadn't, I probably would've careened off the road. Even if Britt thinks that's where I was heading, *death*, it wasn't.

The floor had just collapsed beneath me, and there was no catching myself. I lost it in those few moments. I tried so hard to hold on, but I was sinking too fast.

I just need to breathe. And for a place filled with open skies and fresh greenery, I feel suffocated. The air is polluted, and it's like everything is against me.

For what I did.

For not telling him the moment we both stepped foot into that cabin.

I want to convince myself it's not my fault, but guilt doesn't let go because of *logic*. It clings to that singular moment I could've changed. It reminds me that if I had just...

Just...

If I had been a better son and come to see them more often, would they have felt the need to change their entire route to see me?

If I had just dropped the shift. Taken a dinner to be with them.
Talked with them a little longer.

If I had just let them in...

If I had moved a week sooner.

I slam my forehead against the steering wheel and scream, the sound bouncing around the enclosed truck bed. When it fades, my breathing fills the silence.

I didn't kill them, but my brain insists I'm the reason they're gone. Then it twists the knife, reminding me of the good that came from their death, that I got Ayden, and how utterly fucked up that makes me as a human being.

I drag my hands up my face and run my fingers through my hair. Staring at the gray ceiling, I wonder where I went wrong.

Back in high school, when I saw Ayden for the first time and felt that spark in my chest... Had I told my mom I had feelings for him, would things have been different?

Probably not.

That night at graduation. If I hadn't run away like a fucking coward, could I have saved him from a life of pain and suffering? From the things that man did to him, and still does... he wouldn't have had to endure any of it.

I could've saved him.

He would've been at Christmas every year with me, and I'd have told our parents I was madly in love with him. I would've told Grant that there was no one else for him but me, that I could protect him and take care of his son.

They would've never had to go to Arizona, because I would've moved anywhere Ayden was. I'd have been with him in California.

Or maybe... we would've been here, near Maple Falls.

Warm tears streak across my temples, filling my ears and drowning out my own breathing.

I fucked up. And all anyone will see is that it's *ridiculous*. That someone like me shouldn't break down over something that isn't my fault. I'm meant to be strong—the fearless one who runs into a burning building to save lives.

Except I still have these demons, ones that were only ever sedated by Ayden. Even before.

The only reason I hadn't jumped into that canyon, and ended my life, was because I saw him standing in front of me. I'd had every

opportunity to do it, especially when I heard the sirens.

But it was like I could hear him screaming for me...

Screaming into the dark room with no exit.

I've always had a strange relationship with religion. I'm not sure where I fit. Believing in a god isn't wrong, but thinking there's only one is ignorant. There's something out there, and that day... whomever it was clearly wanted me to know that someone was still alive for me.

I take a shaky breath and close my eyes, letting the weight of everything wash over me in silence. My legs feel numb, my heart heavy.

Ayden...

This is the hardest part. Telling him. Telling the one person I love and hoping that he'll understand. Not *hate* me as much as I hate myself.

Except, I'm not *that* stupid. I know he would never hate me. I just wish my brain would fuck off and stop trying to convince me otherwise.

I know Ayden loves me...

I do...

I... do know that.

A soft knock on my window makes me jump. I'm taken aback that light is spilling through into the cab as I open my eyes. The early morning sun is rising. *Holy shit*, I don't even remember passing out.

I glance over and see a ranger at my window. One quick sweep of my surroundings confirms I'm parked in front of a national park entrance. Honestly, I'm shocked that I even remembered to turn the truck off.

Starting the engine, I roll down the window. "Morning."

"Good morning, son," the elderly ranger says, his smile carefree. "There ain't no parking overnight."

"Sorry. I didn't intend to."

"Kinda gathered that," he says with a thick southern accent. "You good to drive ya' self back home, or do I need to call you a ride?"

I shake my head. "I'm alright, thank you."

"Have a great day now." He taps the top of the truck's hood, and I pop myself into reverse.

At least I woke up without that damned migraine.

Pulling onto the main road, I roll my head around my shoulders. It's barely seven in the morning. God, I didn't mean to be out all night. I'm such a fucking asshole. I just know Ayden's a mess, and probably Britt too.

I'm not far from the cabin. I'll get back to him, then give her a call.

My head feels a bit clearer. I'm ready to sit down, have an adult conversation with him, and start moving forward. Maybe I'll get on some medication, up my sessions with Britt, or even see multiple people. I don't want to be a burden on Ayden. I want to make his life better—and I can only do that if mine is stable.

Turning onto the road that leads to Sapphire Valley, I immediately spot an unmarked cop car pulled off to the right. They aren't as incognito as they think.

I'm not speeding, even if my foot has been itching to. So, to say I'm surprised when their lights flash from the dash at the sight of me is an understatement.

My brows pinch as I adjust the rearview mirror, noticing they pull out and get right behind me.

"What the fuck?"

I reach down into my pocket and pull out my phone just as I slow to a stop on the side of the road. I place it on the seat beside me and pull out my ID and insurance. The faster I get this over with, the quicker I can get going.

In my side mirror, I watch one of the officers approach my driver's side, head tilted toward the ground. I roll the window down and smile at him—but it doesn't last, because I recognize him immediately.

My memory flashes back to that night at the ice cream shop. One of the two police officers eating said sweet treat, the other giving me a wave of acknowledgment.

This is one of them. I have *zero* doubts about that.

"Good morning," he says.

"Morning. Why are you pulling me over?"

He sighs, as if irritated at my very rational question. "Go ahead and step out of the vehicle."

I know my rights. I've done nothing wrong, except for sleeping in my car in a restricted area, though it's clear the park ranger never

reported me or really seemed to care.

"What seems to be the problem?"

"Go ahead," he grits through his teeth, "and step out."

For a moment, I hesitate, but in the end, I do as he says. I open the door slowly as he steps toward the back of the truck.

"Come around and just keep your hands where we can see them."

I narrow my eyes. "Nothing to worry about from me, I don't have any weapons."

He doesn't offer a response, and I quickly close the door before stepping toward the back of the car.

The second I'm at the tailgate, his partner steps out of the police car. It's the same one from that night, and I instinctively brace myself for a fight. We weren't given any information about these officers or the outcome of our report, but I can't imagine they would've been left on payroll.

What if their car wasn't unmarked...

Fuck. Am I being set up?

"A code 6 was called out. Mentally unstable subject."

The way my nose twitches, I think is the cause of the man tensing. "I'm fine. I'm just going home. I'd ask if you need to see my ID or driver's license but, let's be honest, you seem to already know who I am."

His partner comes up beside him, one hand on his belt, the other lazily hanging at his side. "Just get into the back of the car." He gestures over his shoulder. "Let's not make this super difficult."

"For what?" I bite out.

"Because you are a danger to yourself." It's clear by the way he speaks that it's a lie. It might sound like a legitimate excuse, but I know it's bullshit.

They were waiting for me. This is definitely a set up.

"You can call my therapist; she can run a psych evaluation right here in front of you. I'm fine." I angle my shoulder, readying to get back into my truck. "How about I call her? Hmm?" My tone drips with anger.

"Fuck this shit." The second officer pulls something out so fast, my immediate thought is a gun. Then something pops, electricity rings in my ears, and an intense, full-body pain shoots through me.

My muscles contract involuntarily, and I know exactly what it is. Before I can lose full control, I grab the wires and tear the barbed darts of the taser free.

"Motherfuckers," I seethe through my teeth and charge.

Before the first asshole can react, I ram my shoulder into his chest, sending him a few feet back onto his ass. The second officer gets a face full of my fist. Blood spilling immediately. As he staggers, I move in for another hit—then pain hits again.

My spine stiffens as I yank the wires free from my hip. Wobbly, I step toward the officer on the ground, who fumbles with the spent cartridge, trying to reload.

Just as I'm about to stomp on him, a sharp sting hits the base of my spine and I go tumbling. All my muscles constrict, and I hit the ground so hard, not even the electrical shock coursing through me masks the pain.

"Fuck!" I scream through clenched teeth.

The second I regain feeling in my arm, a devastating blow slams into my face. The ache hits a moment later and my vision begins to go dark, a sudden sensation of floating takes over my head.

"Put him in the back. Fucking piece of shit broke my nose," one of them says.

My eyes feel heavy, but I can hear everything. The echo of a metallic click, the crunching of boots on gravel.

"This all better be worth it," the other says. "I'm sick of this small-ass town."

I'm dragged across gravel by my bound wrists. Trying to move my fingers only triggers another violent electrocution to my neck. My body goes numb, and I lose any and all control over my muscles.

"Be careful. He can't die like this. Gotta..."

Oh no... I'm losing consciousness.

"... appear to be suicide."

I'm levitating in my own body, barely catching the voices. The last words make my heart stop:

"Just gotta get the other one, then our job's done here."



I t's eight in the morning, and Keoni still hasn't returned home. His phone is off, and I'm a complete fucking mess. Thank god for the family we've made here. Honestly, I don't know where I'd be right now without them.

I've barely blinked since he left. Britt's called to give me updates, but none of them are what I need to hear—that they've found him and are bringing him back to me.

Cal and Ronan stayed the night. He'd insisted she sleep back at their cabin while he stayed here with me, but she was just as persistent.

They have an interesting relationship. That saying, 'soft for no one but her'—he embodies it.

I'd never talk back to him, and when she does, my anxiety spikes. But he just sighs and moves on. It's an unusual dynamic—opposite in almost every way—but somehow it works.

A cup of coffee is set in front of me. I look up to see my blonde, green-eyed friend smiling. "Drink up."

How she's so chipper after sleeping on the couch, is beyond me. She comes to sit beside me, her own mug in hand.

"Can I ask you something?" I ask, taking a sip.

"Of course."

"How'd Ronan know how to handle my panic attack last night?" I haven't had a full episode like that in years. I know Keo understands how to handle them, thanks to his first-aid training, and we've discussed what to do in length.

She rests her cup in her lap, her freshly manicured nails tapping against the ceramic. "I suffer from them too. Ever since the incident last year that nearly took Ronan's life, they've only gotten worse. So, he took classes to make sure he could take care of me."

To me, **that** is love spelled out in so many ways.

"He took me to get diagnosed with PTSD. I'd wake up in fits of panic, afraid they weren't able to save him." Her sigh is heavy, and I can *feel* how that affects her even now. "I still struggle, but every day is better. We help each other heal." She tilts her head and looks at me, then offers me a smile. "Everyone has their hard. It's all about finding the one worth working through it with."

Keo and I have our *hard*, but I swear we need each other to fill the empty spaces inside us—to embrace the dark together and bring in the light we've been needing for so long.

"Thank you." I try to smile, even knowing it isn't genuine. She deserves at least an attempt at gratitude.

"Ronan disappeared for a few days on me. I was worried, scared I'd fucked 'us' up before we got our chance..." She places a hand on my thigh. "He'll come back. I can see how much you love him, and I can't imagine he doesn't love you just the same."

I nod, though I worry he might feel differently. Why would he question that I love him as much as he loves me?

"You don't even have to love me right now."

I love him now. I loved him yesterday. And I will love him until my dying breath. I want him. I *need* him. I can't imagine breathing without him.

The thought of a life without him, aches.

The front door opens, and I shoot my gaze up—only to be disappointed to see Ronan walking through it. "We have unwanted company."

I'll admit, I appreciate his directness. Had he said, "*we have company*," my hopes would've soared... only to be shattered.

"I'm going to talk with them." His eyes lock on to me like lasers. "It's the police."

My hands tremble instantly, and the coffee slips from my grip. If it weren't for Cal snatching it from me, I'm almost certain it would've spilled all over my lap.

"Breathe, Ayden. Breathe."

"Is Ayden Pierce home?"

I drop my head, unwilling to look but unable to run. I need to hear what they have to say.

"This is his residence. How can I help you?"

"And you are?" He sounds familiar but I can't quite place it.

"A neighbor. Ronan Byrne. Have you found Keoni?"

"No, we haven't."

All the weight on my shoulders and in my heart lifts. Thank *god*. If they'd located him, Britt would've told me. I don't want the police to be the ones to tell me they've got the man I love.

"Then how can I help you, officers?"

One of them groans. "We are here to ask Ayden some questions."

"Nah. He's unavailable." Shit, he talks to them like he *hates* them. I've got complicated feelings about the police. Sure, it stems from Michael, but it isn't just him.

"Are you—"

"Same ol, same ol. *Are you impeding an investigation?*" The way he mocks them, nearly has me laughing and I really shouldn't right now. "Please just ask your fucking question. What do you want?"

The officer groans. "Fine." He pauses for a moment.

Ronan tuts. "Tick, tock."

"What was Keoni wearing?"

"Blue jeans. Black sweater, dark gray jacket over the sweater. Hair was down, but he throws it up when he drives," I mumble to Cal, who quickly gets up and makes her way over, relaying the information.

"Will you two be with him all day?"

"Why?" Ronan bites out.

The exhaustion is finally hitting me—or maybe it's this damn headache creeping across my temples. I wouldn't be surprised if my eyes rolled back and I passed out right now.

"We just want to make sure there will be support for him."

"Yeah... because you guys always have the kindest of fucking hearts."

“Ronan, baby.” Cal’s gentle tone is the opposite of the growing tension between him and the police. “Thank you, officers. We’ve got him.”

The sound of the door closing shortly after is all I register, then a hand resting on my shoulder. Somehow I’ve laid down on the couch. I don’t even remember the action, just the contact startling me from sadness.

I don’t bother shutting my eyes or looking at who’s touching me. Instead, I look through the weaved fabric of the couch.

Keo, please, baby... please come back. We will work this out. We will.



“I’m going to grab Levi.” Ronan’s voice spills into my sleepy mind. “I’m sure we can find him. Fucking police have no clue what they’re doing.”

“Okay. Keep your phone on,” Calista says softly.

I must’ve fallen asleep on the couch. I’d hoped I could stay awake, but a part of me didn’t mind shutting off my brain. The hope that I could wake up from this habitual nightmare I’m stuck in—maybe to open my eyes to Keo wrapped around me in that possessive way he does when we sleep together.

But no. I’m back in my fucked-up reality.

“I will. I love you, baby girl.”

“Love you too, Daddy.”

Daddy?

Moments later, the door opens and shuts, and I decide it’s time to move. Blinking a few times, I take in the couch I’d been staring at earlier.

I push myself up to a seated position and turn to look for Cal. She isn’t hard to find—TV remote in hand, flipping through channels, her back to me. Before I say anything, I glance out the window to see that night has fallen.

I’m not entirely surprised I slept all day.

“Hey,” I say softly.

She doesn't startle and simply angles herself toward me. "Hey. How're you feeling?"

I run my fingers up through my hair, scratching at my scalp before shifting to my feet. "I haven't processed how I'm feeling yet, but I definitely needed sleep."

She nods. "Yeah, you did. I'm glad you got some."

"Did I hear Ronan say he and Levi are going to go look for Keo?"

A somber smile tugs at her lips. "Yeah. Britt called. They still haven't found him. They've only been searching around Maple Falls. It's possible he went for a drive out of town. Without knowing which direction he could've gone, they're reaching out to highway patrol for any clues."

I simply nod.

"Do you want me to make you something to eat?" She sets the remote on the coffee table and starts toward the kitchen.

"No. I'm not hungry..." A strange disconnect washes over me, like my brain is slowly separating from my body. "I'm going to clean up. I'll be right back."

"Okay. I'm here if you need me."

I'm halfway through my step when I pause, releasing a shaky breath. Instead of heading to the bathroom, I turn to her. She opens her arms, welcoming the embrace.

I squeeze her as tightly as she grips me, then bend forward enough to rest my forehead into the crook of her neck.

"It's *going* to be okay, Ayden."

My eyes close and I nod. I'm desperate for that reassurance. I need to be told that things are going to be alright—that Keo will walk through our cabin door, ready to talk, and tell me we'll get through this together.

Because there's no other way.

"Thank you... for everything, Cal."

"What are neighbors for?"

"Sugar and milk."

She giggles. "We have that, too."

I lean back, and she tenderly places her hand against my cheek.

"Do me a favor though?" She nods before I continue, "Don't tell Ronan I hugged you."

That has her fully laughing, her eyes rolling as she turns her back to me. "I'm allowed to hug people."

"Yeah..." I slowly begin to move toward the hall. "You are allowed to. Maybe just mention you initiated it."

Her laughter fades as I make it to the bathroom, where I piss, run a comb through my hair, brush my teeth, and wash my face. I'm wiping a towel across my neck when a loud knock sounds at the front door.

"I've got it, looks like another police officer," Cal screams, and I fucking groan.

Goddamn it.

I don't even rush. At this point, I'd rather not hear what they have to say. I'm done answering questions, there's nothing else to tell.

I'm opening the bathroom door slowly when I hear her say, "Thank you, but he's a little distressed at the moment. I think it's just best any information is relayed through his friends and family."

"I understand."

My *entire* body freezes.

Nausea creeps up my throat, and the burn from the acid nearly has me choking. I have to be quiet, just in case I'm right, and that voice belongs to—

"Unfortunately, since his stepbrother has been missing for twenty-four hours, we are going to need more of his assistance."

Michael.

No... No fucking way. How'd he get past security?

"*Looks like another police officer.*" Oh fuck. They probably didn't even think to stop and ID him... or compare him to the photo they have.

I fumble through my pockets, searching for my phone, though I know it's probably on the couch, or maybe the coffee table.

Calista laughs nervously. I jerk my head from side to side. Left, the master bedroom. Right, the guest room. If I go out the back door, he will see me.

"He's in the shower, I think. I can drive him down to the police station when he gets out."

I can't leave her, and I know this man too well. When he chuckles, it isn't friendly. It's condescending, bleeding straight into his irritated words. "No, that won't do."

"Hey! I don't permit you to enter!"

If she stays, she'll be in danger, but I can't willingly give myself to him either.

Except, do I have much of a choice here?

I take a deep breath and close my eyes.

Keoni... What do I do?

When I open them again, my gaze falls to my forearm, right into the lion's eyes. The same eyes that look just like his, the ones I pray I haven't seen for the last time.

I do love you, Keo. I hope this works out and I can show it to you better...

I move quickly but quietly into the guest room and grab a piece of paper from the printer.

"Where is he?"

After writing down what I need, I walk calmly to the back door and open it. I know he can see me, but I angle my body just enough to tuck the note between the door and its frame, then close it.

I take one last breath of freedom from the man who has ruined my fucking life and turn to face him.

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“Cal,” I say, getting her attention from screaming at the back of Michael’s head. “I’ve got this.”

When I meet his dark brown eyes, my anxiety spikes. He has his officer uniform on but is strategically missing his name tag and badge. His hair hasn’t been shaved since the last I saw him; it’s grown a few inches from his head, uncombed, and the curls sprouting from several different places.

“Who’s your superior officer? I’m reporting you for this shit!” She rushes around toward me, her cellphone in hand.

It’s now I hear vibration and know by the rhythm that it’s my phone going off. Odds are it’s Britt updating me... *Fuck*.

I need to play this safe for Cal’s sake, so as badly as I want to go for it, I don’t.

“Hey, why don’t you head home? I’ll help this officer with whatever he needs, and then I’m going to shower.” Offering her a smile, I give her a nod. “You’ve done enough for me.”

Her brows pinch. “What? It’s fine. I’m not leaving.”

I place my hand over hers as she reaches to dial Ronan, stopping her before she can. “I’m fine. I’ll call you with any updates.”

“I’m just going to ask him some questions,” Michael says, breaking the conversation between us. “Then I’ll be on my way,

miss." I can hear him trying to hide his fury. For someone like Cal, she might not notice, but I can.

I've *always* been able to tell when he's on the verge of losing his temper.

He's seconds from it, if that.

"Are you sure?"

"Mhmm. Can you make sure the cat door is open for Clover to come back in? It's on the back door." I will thank whoever I need to another time that Keo decided to install one. "I just let her out. You can go out that way as well."

The entire time, I keep my gaze fixed on hers. I know my act will crumble if I even glance at Michael. He can break me, but I can't let him hurt Cal. I'm not sure I could live with myself if he did.

"Alright..." She places her hand onto my forearm and gives me a weary smile. "Please text me when he leaves."

"After I take a shower, I will."

Her head turns, eyes narrowing on the man I know I'll have to face alone any moment now. My heart races, thrashing against my chest as if it wants to escape with Calista.

As she walks away, I take a deep breath and release it slowly.

The instant I hear the door open, I fix my attention on Michael. He stands in the middle of the living room, hands at his sides, looking far angrier than the last time I saw him, and that's saying something. Keoni had just beaten his ass and literally thrown him out of the cabin.

As the door clicks shut, his nostrils flare. "You know..." I'm not sure what I expected this moment to feel like—him addressing me directly for the first time in months—but it's like ants crawling across my body. "I'm pretty upset with you."

An urge to be snarky rises, but I swallow it back down. I need to be strategic. "I'm sorry."

He snorts his irritation. "*Sure* the fuck you are."

"Michael, what's going on? You could get in a lot of trouble being here."

His anger seethes through his teeth as he spits out, "I don't give a fuck, Ayden! I didn't care a week ago when I arrived, and I don't now."

Sweat builds in my palms but the icy chill that rolls through me feels like I've been dipped into the lake outside.

“What?”

He begins pacing, between the couch and the fireplace, making sure to avoid hitting the coffee table. “All you had to do was come back home. None of this would’ve happened. I wouldn’t have had to do this!” He doesn’t quite scream, but his voice elevates slightly.

My guess is he’s worried that Calista might be standing outside, trying to listen. No. If she saw the note, which I know she would have, I’ve no doubt she’s far from this cabin, calling Ronan and Levi to come back.

“What do you want with me?” My words are more of a plea than a genuine question. “Why *me*? There are plenty of people out there for you...”

He throws his head back and lets out a ‘*pfft*’. “You don’t get to fucking tell **me** who I’m going to spend my life with.”

“I don’t want you. I never will.”

“You’d rather have your goddamn stepbrother. You’re sick in the head, Ayden.”

Shrugging my shoulders, I nod. “I am. Fine. But it doesn’t change anything.”

When he takes a step toward me, I take one back. His head tilts as he gives me a filthy, evil smile. “But with him out of the way, I can have you again.”

A sharp pain pierces my heart. “What do you mean? Out of the way?”

“He’s brainwashed you. You were happy with me before he started to mess with your fucking head. You’ll forget all about him in no—”

“What the **fuck** do you mean?!”

His nostrils flare in response to me screaming at him, but I don’t care. “I’ve taken care of our problem.”

No... Is that why he didn’t come home?

I shake my head. “You wouldn’t...”

“Oh, I did. I promise I’m capable of anything when it comes to getting you back, Ayden. You **are** mine, and I will not lose you to your *family*. Now. Let’s go. You can text your—”

“What did you do?!”

I’m not a violent person. It’s never been in my nature to swing first, but a sharp surge through my arms and legs has me doing exactly that.

Being **violent**.

I charge at him, swinging a closed fist into his face. The shock of the hit leaves him unprepared to stay upright. The instant he's on his ass, I kneel beside him and strike again. It takes only a second for him to fight back, and suddenly my wrists are in his grasp before I can land another good punch.

I shout through my rage. "You mother**fucker**, you better not have touched a *single* hair on his head or I'll kill—"

He throws himself up, and while I fight, I'm not trained to take anyone down. I'm not an officer, not a firefighter. I wasn't built for this life, to *physically* fight for a life that's supposed to be mine without question.

Mine to share with Keoni.

My back hits the wooden floor, and I cough violently. One of his knees drives into my stomach, and I open my mouth to scream, but he clamps his hand over it. The sheer intensity of my agony vibrates against his palm.

I swing and kick, but he overpowers me at every turn. Attempting a physical fight was stupid, but I lost control. The thought of him hurting Keo...

"Such a fucking bitch, Ayden," he breathes, pressing harder into my abdomen as he slides his knee across my hip to straddle me. The bruising pain sends a shudder through my entire body. "You're..." he grits out, struggling to grab my wrists. "A fighter now, huh?!"

"Get the hell off me!" I drive my knee into the base of his spine, causing him to curse through his teeth.

"Fucking..."

I see the hit coming, but there's little I can do. Blinding pain explodes through my head, and my body goes completely limp. Every muscle goes numb from the ache of that blow rattling through my skull.

My face feels tight, especially around my left eye, which refuses to open no matter how much I plead.

"There we go," he says through heavy breaths. "Here I thought your stepbrother would be the problem for me." He pauses; the clink of metal sounds deafening over the constant ringing in my ears.

As he lifts one of my wrists, he laughs. "I should've just killed you both at that fucking campsite." My heart stutters. "Broke in here

so when you or your sister came back, I could've just shot you both and been done with it. Blamed it on your sick stepbrother."

Cold metal clamps around my wrist. As he moves for the other, I slowly pull it away.

"No..."

"Ayden, babe, stop fighting. You'll make it worse for yourself."

I'm still reeling from that hit because it doesn't take long for him to get a grip on my other one and force it into the same metal binding.

The moment he throws my arms up over my head, my shoulders argue the movement. I try to separate my hands, but they're bound too tightly by the handcuffs.

Opening my right eye, I watch him place his hands right on my shoulder joint and with a sharp thrust, he pushes down *hard*. The sickening pops are drowned out by my scream. Hot pain flares like fire, radiating to my fingertips as every muscle in my arm spasms.

"Shut the fuck up." He grabs a folded blanket from a nearby basket and shoves it into my mouth. Before he can pull back his fingers, I bite down—little good it does. He just jerks them out.

Heat spikes in my temples as I push the fabric out with my tongue, but he covers my mouth with his palm.

"There we go. Quiet. Just like you used to be."

He rolls his head around his shoulders before roughly sitting on my stomach. I groan as more of his weight presses down on me.

"As I was saying, that would've been too messy. I hate cleaning up shit... You know..." He laughs. "I had to miss the holidays with my family because you were being a fucking brat—a little *princess*. This hadn't been the plan. The moment your stepbrother went to work, I was going to come and convince you to come home with me."

Fucking delusional!

"But then I found out you had a PI following me. Tsk, tsk, tsk, babe."

I jerk my hips, trying to buck him off, but just like all the times before, it's no use.

"What really sealed this outcome was seeing your sister accepting your relationship with your stepbrother. *Her stepbrother*. A sick fucking family. Is she fucking him, too?" His demonic grin as he leans in toward me has me shivering. "Just like she's fucking you?"

I scream through the gag and his palm, but he just tuts.

"I took photos of the three of you, planning to send them to my lawyer as proof..." He lets out a frustrated groan. "I had to hike through these fucking woods, Ayden. Pissing me off, yet again." His thumb and index finger pinch my nose, cutting off my oxygen. He then leans over me slowly, a sadistic smile playing on his lips. "I could kill you right now. It would be so fucking easy."

For the first few seconds, I don't react. He isn't here to end my life... that would ruin his life. There's evidence *somewhere* he is here in Colorado...

Right?

"You took advantage of me. Used me, and when you were *done*, you decided to leave." He's lost his fucking mind. "I put a roof over your head."

Wrong!

"Helped you in your career."

Liar.

"Gave you incredible sex. Yet you gave it all up for what? Family?! A relationship with someone that society won't accept?!"

Heat spreads across my face, and panic begins to settle in. He doesn't move his hand, and when I try to turn my head to the left, he keeps me pinned.

"It ends tonight. I've thrown out the problem, and now, you'll have nothing **but** me."

I can't stop thrashing my body at this point. My shoulder blades lift from the floor as I heave, trying to throw him off.

Only when my eyes roll back does his hand finally leave, letting me suck in a deep breath through my nose. Tears stream down my temples as I draw in oxygen desperately.

"You're going to come home with me."

I shake my head. I'll die before I ever go anywhere with him. The thought of death is less scary and permanent than stepping foot back into his life.

"Yes. Because, Ayden, if you don't, I'm going to kill you." I shake my head violently. "If I can't have you, no one else can. That's how this works."

No. The answer is no. It will always be no. I've lived a life without Keoni, and it isn't one I want. If it's not him, it's no one. If

choosing him means death, then I can only hope we've taken the same path in life, so we meet again in the next.

He sighs. "I should've let you die that day. You've been nothing but a burden on me, and a strain on my heart. I would've already moved on, yet you strung me along."

I open my good eye and watch him swipe something hard and black across my face. The hit is sharp, but I'm out cold before the pain even registers.

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“Hurry the fuck up.”
“You’re the one struggling!”

I can’t tell the difference between them without seeing their faces, but from their voices, I surmise it’s the same two officers from before.

I know I’ve got to get my body moving. They’re dragging me somewhere. My boots catch something on the ground, halting my momentum every few seconds.

My throat vibrates with a groan.

“Fuck, he’s waking up. Hurry!”

Flexing my hands, I begin opening my eyes. The floodlights from the vehicle in front of me are nearly blinding, forcing me to close them again. The sun is completely gone, causing worry to etch into me.

How long have I been unconscious?

Both my arms are up, used to pull me toward whatever destination they’ve chosen. In my peripheral, my truck comes into view on the left. To my right, a metal railing not more than ten feet away continues to pass as we move. Ahead of me, towering cliffs covered in snow; behind the vehicle, a road about twenty feet away.

“Get him in.”

I roll my ankles, feeling them pop, and the sensation in my legs sharpens. I'm mobile. My muscles no longer feel affected by the taser from before.

They stop, and one shifts to move under one of my arms. The instant I'm lifted, just enough to get my feet solid on the ground, I throw myself against him. His grunt is followed by a loud creak of metal as he hits the truck. I step back and drive an elbow into the second officer's nose.

I've never killed anyone, and it's never been in my nature to want to. I'm not afraid of violence, though, and while some have called me a gentle giant, I'm more than capable of proving the opposite.

With his step back, I thrust my boot into his chest and watch him stumble into the metal railing. Fear and regret flash across his face. I feel no sympathy as he screams and tumbles backward.

I've got no idea how far the drop is. Five feet? A thousand? I don't care either way, as long as it incapacitates him.

"Omar!!"

I turn, roll my shoulders, and drive a fist into the man standing before me. His head snaps back, hitting the metal of my truck.

Before he can fall, I grab his throat and shove him back against the car for good measure.

Blood spills from his nose in waves as his eyes dart around before crossing.

Damn... didn't mean to hit him that hard.

"What the fuck do you want?!"

He grumbles something, and I release his throat, before resting my entire forearm across his chest and pinning him up. I do a quick check on his person, grabbing his gun and tossing it aside, along with a baton and taser.

"Speak, or you'll join your friend."

"Y-You k-killed him."

"And you're next," I seethe. "What the fuck **do you want?!"**

As he shakes his head, I throw a punch into his side. His whimpering comes with, "N-Nothing! It's Michael Harris! Officer-fucking-Harris!"

My entire body rushes with chills.

"Just gotta get the other one, then our job's done here."

Were they talking about...

"Where is Ayden?!" I rush out. "You better not have fucking touched him."

His head shakes violently. "N-No, we couldn't. There were people at your place. Please. We just wanted a way out of this small-ass town."

"And you were going to what?!"

I finally look around. We're on a turnoff, but I don't recognize it at all. Not that I've driven every road in Maple Falls and the surrounding area, but judging by the unpaved surface, this isn't meant for public access.

To my left, where my truck is facing, there's a drop-off. No guardrail. My heart rate spikes.

"Were you going to have me drive the fuck off this cliff?"

Watching this grown-ass man start crying makes disgust churn in my stomach. Is he seriously acting like this, like what I'm questioning him about is somehow unjust?

"I'm sorry. Please."

Grabbing his shoulders, I smash my forehead against his and let him drop to the ground with a solid thunk. I kick his weakly moving body and lean into the driver's side of my truck. The keys are in the ignition, and I'm nearly out of gas. I don't remember how much I had before getting pulled over, so I can't gauge how far we've gone.

I do a quick search through the bed of the vehicle, but my phone isn't here or on me.

Dropping to my knees, I start rifling through the groaning officer's pockets, finding his car keys and a cell that isn't mine.

"Where is my phone?" I ask, not-so-nicely.

It takes him a second, but when he lifts his hand and points over toward the railing at which his partner fell from, I groan.

"Motherfucker."

I grab the keys and his phone and immediately dial Ayden. It rings. And rings. And rings.

Nausea churns from my stomach to my chest, the acidic sting rising in my throat. It goes to voicemail. Instead of hanging up and trying again, I let it beep.

"Ayden, it's me. Please answer the phone, love. I know you don't recognize the number, but it's me, Keo." I pause briefly. Through a shaky breath, I murmur, "I love you so goddamn much. Please be

okay. I'm coming home. I'm coming back to you, and we will work this out. I'm so fucking sorry."

I hang up and dial again, letting it ring over and over until voicemail picks up again.

Instead of going back in for another call, I send a text.

Sunshine, it's Keoni, please answer me. Or call me.

I slip the phone into my pocket and slap the officer who is attempting to get into a position to crawl away.

"Where the hell are we?"

He stammers, words spilling out, mixed with apologies.

Thankfully, we're in the Alpine Mountain range that partially surrounds Sapphire Valley, which means we aren't cities away.

His brown eyes, red-rimmed and wide, stare up at me. There's a plea in them, and for a brief second, I wonder if he has a family. If a partner would miss him if he didn't come home.

Then I remember he was ready to end my life. Ayden would've faced another funeral. He would've been the one to hear that the person he loved wasn't coming home.

In full clarity, I have no remorse for the actions I'm preparing to take. I grab him by the bicep and drag him around my truck's open door. He screams and thrashes, fingers digging into my wrist, but adrenaline has taken over—I feel no pain, even as he breaks my skin.

When he starts kicking, I turn and slam my boot onto his shin, breaking the bone instantly. His shrill scream echoes in my ears, hitting a void. I've never cared less about anything in my life than the thought of taking this man's life.

Once we reach the ledge, I drop him right at it.

He soils himself as he crawls away, dragging his injured leg behind him.

"Please—please, I beg of you."

My eyes fall to half-mast as I stare down at him. "Beg to your god, not me. They're more likely to answer your pleas."

I slam my heel into his shoulder, sending him tumbling backward.

His screams break up as he collides with rocks, but I know he hasn't reached the bottom by the time I turn my back. I don't wait for confirmation he's found his death. Instead, I move quickly to the black Dodge Charger.

As I'd suspected too late before, it's a civilian car. No police equipment in sight. There's more gas in this one, and as much as I hate leaving my truck—likely to be found later with two bodies at the bottom of a mountain—Ayden is more important. Getting back to him is all that matters.

Once inside, I navigate the windy, nerve-wracking road while trying to dial Britt's number from memory. Five-five-six-seven... or was it something else? Every attempt is met with a gruff old man answering instead.

I try two more numbers, when *finally*, it's her that picks up. "Hello?"

"Britt, it's Keoni."

"Oh my fucking god! You goddamn ASSHOLE!"

"Listen to me, I don't have a lot of time. Where is Ayden?"

She sighs. "He isn't the one I'm worried about—"

"I am. I fucking am! I was attacked by those same two police officers we reported for spying on Ayden. Something is **wrong**!" I shout, voice raw. "Three-way me to Calista. I know you have her number."

"O-Okay. One moment."

I hear a beep, and then the phone ringing. "Are you okay?" Britt asks.

"No," I answer curtly.

I'm not. I'm sure physically I'm hurting somewhere. I've got blood on my wrist, but I feel nothing. Mentally? I'm sure if I sat to think about it, I'm *definitely* not okay.

"Hello?! Britt?" Calista answers the phone frantically.

"Calista, it's Keoni."

"Oh my god, thank fuck!" Her words come out in a hushed panic. "You need to come back to Sapphire Valley, now!"

I groan as I navigate off the windy road and peel out onto a paved one. A red-and-white "DO NOT ENTER" sign lies broken as I keep driving down the mountain.

"What's happening?" I ask.

"Michael's at the cabin. I rushed to Starlight because Ronan and Levi are out looking for you. I called them but they're about thirty minutes away..."

I have to keep myself from shouting and punching the dash. "Did you call the police?"

She hesitates, before letting out a soft whimpered cry. “N-No... Michael came in an officer’s uniform. I didn’t know it was him. I-I had no idea, and I didn’t trust anyone. I’m worried who else could be—”

“You did the right thing. Britt?”

“Yes?”

“Can you call Dom?”

“I’ll call them now—”

“No!” Cal cuts her off. “No... Keoni, where are you?”

“I’m on my way. Why the fuck wouldn’t we want to call Dom?! He’s probably closer—”

“Levi said not to get anyone involved...”

“I don’t give a fuck! Ayden’s life is in danger.” My shout bounces around in the car. “Fuck! What about the goddamn billionaire?! Does he have a gun?” I swear my entire body is shaking, but I have to stay focused. The last thing I can afford is to lose it and careen off this road.

“He doesn’t have a gun...” She pauses, and I can hear footsteps, before she continues, “Ezra wants to help, but police were here again on Christmas, and if he gets involved... Jayde made him promise to stay out of it.”

I’m about to lose my goddamn mind. “Fine. Thank you, Cal. Call Ronan and get their ETA.”

The phone beeps without another word. “Britt?”

“I-I’m here.”

“I...” I pause. She’s my friend, but confessing to her that I just killed two people may be stupid. So, I divert. “I’m sorry.”

“Oh... Keoni, I—”

I hang up the phone and dial up Ayden again. As expected, no response.

I’m coming. Please, please, hold on.



"I know there's so much still to work on in our life." Keo's voice brushes against my neck. "But I'm glad we have each other to figure it out."

He holds me in that same possessive way he always does at night — the way that says 'I'm not going anywhere'. That I belong only to him, and the world would have to crack in half for us to be separated. Even then, I swear he'd dive into the very core of the planet to get me.

"I'm grateful we found our way back to each other." He kisses the back of my neck and nuzzles his growing beard against my skin.

"For as long as we both—"

"There's no end to this," he cuts me off while dragging one hand up to my jaw and turning me to look up at him. "I always thought it was stupid to say, 'As long as we both shall live'. Pfft. Our souls will find one another even in the life after we live this one together."

He smiles, the one I can see in the moonlight that leaks through the curtains.

I nod. "I can get behind that."

"Damn right you can."

Dragging my hand up to his neck, I pull him closer. "I wouldn't want to navigate this life, or any, without you."

He moves, turning me onto my back and hovering over me. "You die. I die." His hair falls over his shoulders, and I reach up to run my fingers through it. "Remember that, sunshine."

"You live, I live." I put my hands up to the back of his neck, and tug him closer. "I like that better."

His soft hum brushes against my mouth. "I'd rather it be that, but..." He places a kiss against my lips. "I can't go back to a life without you in it. I've found my happiness, my home. You've filled the space that has been empty for so long, and I refuse to feel hollow again."

My smile only grows.

"My place is right here with you, forever."

"Forever," I murmur before pulling him down to me, kissing the man that I love unconditionally.



They said I'd never go to Heaven, but I could swear I saw the light before the bitter cold woke me.

Not that I expected to go to a place of Paradise after this life, but I wanted to stay in that glimpse of safety forever. A place where I didn't have to worry, just be with Keo. To not wake to the shivering I can't control, and definitely not to the person standing a mere foot in front of me.

"There you are."

My body shakes, and no matter how badly I beg it to stop, it won't. Both my arms lie sprawled outward before me. Memories from before being knocked out remind me both were popped out of their joints. They don't hurt; I can't feel them, which is equally as scary.

I know I'm lying on the deck that's covered in a soft layer of snow. I'd recognize this place. Keo and I have sat out here so often, I swear we've imprinted our asses into the wood.

Michael moves closer and kneels. "I contemplated feeling my cock in your ass or mouth one last time, but I don't want to mix myself with your family. It's tainted, just like your brain."

I try to swallow, but my throat feels frozen over, just like the rest of my body. I'm certain all I have on is shorts.

"It didn't have to be this way, Ayden."

"J-Just..." My teeth chatter. "M-Move on." *Why is that so fucking difficult? Why? I don't understand!*

He sighs. "You don't get it. I think about you all the time. Think about how you're fucking your family. I can't... move on." His head tilts as he frowns. "Not until you're gone. Then I think I will. No more wondering if you'll come back to me."

I shut my eyes and try to shake my head.

"I did try to take care of him before this... just him." My heart drops to my stomach, and I heave on nothing. "I'd done everything right... set up the recording, timed it perfectly. So many fucking hours of watching him and his squad work. I had *everything* fucking **RIGHT**. He was supposed to die when that explosion went off. Yet, it's like God was protecting a brother-fucker. Crazy, huh?"

"Y-You..."

Michael killed Corey... and nearly Keoni...

"I'd say that was the worst thing I've done since being with you. But then that would make me a liar..."

His hand moves to my cheek, knuckles dragging down to my bare shoulder.

"Guess it doesn't hurt to confess this. At least I can get it off my chest. Not that I feel any sort of guilt, but who knows, maybe I'll feel *lighter*."

"Don't... touch me..." I clench my jaw to stop my chattering teeth.

"It was your own fault."

He pushes me slightly, and the slosh of snow as he does has me shivering further. It isn't colder, but it's like my brain was reminded I'm currently laying in snow.

Is he going to let me die of hypothermia? Cause that's where this is leading.

"You were going to leave me because, *once again*, you wanted to come to this fucking place for the holidays. You couldn't just be happy to be with me, could you?" His hand balls into a fist, and I close my eyes, preparing for him to hit me.

I'm surprised when he doesn't. Instead, he just continues talking, "The night of your so-called accident"—my skin heats, and my heart frantically begins to beat in my ears—"I nearly killed you."

Slowly, I refocus on his face, the image of him going in and out of a blur.

"You just... pissed me off."

An unknown memory of a fight I don't recall flickers in my mind.

"I'm leaving, Michael. I'm done."

*"You aren't fucking going **anywhere**!"*

"We had such a great night. We saw the movie *you* wanted to see. Ate dinner at the place *you* wanted to eat at. Yet you still weren't happy."

"If you touch that door, I swear to God, Ayden."

Flashes of his bloody apartment and his voice flood my head.

"I'd gone a little too far, I'll admit. The bat was a bit too much."

I think I actually stop shaking, or I simply can't register it anymore. *What...* is he saying?

"I'm honestly surprised you didn't die. I'd broken your back, and that hit to your head should've done the trick. All it did was knock you out. I think I realized then that I couldn't be reckless and commit murder in my own home." He drags his fingers along my shoulder and down my arm. "You just loved to push me to the edge. It was your fault, but what had been done, was done." A sigh vibrates from his throat. "I was going to fake a break-in, but that was too convenient. Plus, I know you told your sister I had hit you once before."

Several times before...

Even if flashes of that night surface, I don't... remember any of it. I don't even recall going to dinner. He said we were just heading home...

"She'd have told your dad, and that would've been messy. A car accident that you caused because you had been drinking? One I knew my dad would help me clean up to 'keep you safe'. Now that was... relatively easy. Still a fucking mess, and lots of strings to pull."

"I don't... understand. Why?"

He sighs and rolls his eyes, as if irritated by my questions. "Because you belong to me, Ayden. It's more than obsession. I can't allow you to be with anyone else. We built a life together and you can't just move on!" He scoffs. "You are meant to be **mine**. No one's allowed to leave me. Especially not you."

"P-Psychotic... asshole..."

"Anyway... You had completely forgot about the argument that night, thanks to the hit to your head. That was lucky. At least I didn't

need to threaten you to keep your tantalizing lips shut. I thought we'd only go up from there. I'd become your savior... but no. Because *nothing* could go my way.

"You were supposed to be hit with a DUI, but my dad did *too* good of a job and you were slapped on the wrist instead. Suspension. *Pfft*. Even so, SF General should've taken your reckless behavior into account and fired you. But since that doctor friend of yours pulled his strings, that didn't happen. You were supposed to become dependent on me, and I was going to take care of you... as long as you were my good boy."

I'm so tired... so cold...

"Michael... please... just let it go. Let *me* go."

"See? You aren't listening." He presses his hand against my face and presses down, using me to help him stand. "I can't let you go. Not to your fucking stepbrother. To absolutely *anyone*. It's why you have to die."

My chest constricts and I grind my teeth together.

"No."

"Yes, but don't worry, you and your stepbrother are going to Hell together. I'm sure you'll see him there."

His boot presses hard into my chest, and no matter how much I fight to find a way to stay put, I'm forced backward. The second the planks vanish from beneath me, weightlessness grips me. I attempt to kick my legs to hook around *something*, only to realize my legs are bound.

"I wish you could've seen how good you had it."

"M-Michael, p-please don't—" My plea ends in a gasp as I tumble off the dock's edge. "NO!"

The lake isn't fully frozen, but slushed over, and I hit it with a muffled thump before the ice gives way. The water swallows me, biting into my skin like a thousand needles. Above me, Michael leans over the edge, his shadow from the moonlit night stretching across the fractured ice.

"Don't do this!" My scream rips out with the shock of the cold, ragged and desperate.

"Beg me to save you. Beg me to take you home."

"FUCK YOU!"

I had stayed still, knowing thrashing would drag me down faster, but the instant my lower half sinks below, instinct takes over. I kick,

trying to fight the inevitable. The lake doesn't care. Within seconds, the water climbs past my ribs, then my shoulders, pulling me under.

"Goodbye, Ayden."

I suck in one last desperate breath before my head plunges beneath the surface.

I've never known a cold like this. It's as if a bullet tore through my brain, every nerve screaming, begging me to claw my way out. Ice crawls through my veins, and I can't tell if I'm moving or if my body only thinks it is.

My arms drift uselessly above me while my legs kick like a frantic fish. I force my eyes open through the burn, but the surface doesn't get any closer. The water swallows every effort.

I never understood helplessness until now. When my feet slam against something solid below, realization strikes like a blade—I'm not rising. I'm not escaping.

I squeeze my eyes shut and scream, bubbles ripping free, the last of my breath leaving me. The fight drains away.

No point in resisting the inevitable.

Holy shit. He really killed me.

Keo... If I die, would you?

I love you. I'm sorry.

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I make it to Sapphire Valley in twenty minutes. Honestly, it's a miracle I didn't get pulled over or crash considering I was pushing one-twenty everywhere but through this community.

The moment I pass Echo Ridge, a car blocks the road, cutting me off from driving straight up to the cabin. I slam the brakes, barely stopping in time before I'm out of the car and sprinting the rest of the distance.

I've never been a runner, it's why I was a linebacker, but when I hear a voice tear through the night — "FUCK YOU!" — my body moves like it's been trained for this moment.

That was Ayden.

No.

I push myself to run faster, because every second matters. All I can hope is that I don't hear a gunshot. Please, god—if one of you could listen—please don't let me be too late. Don't let me be this close only to fail.

Breaking through the tree line, I see the cabin's clearing lit by the moon. A lone figure stands at the end of the dock, leaning over the water. Goosebumps rip across my skin as I throw off my jacket, then my sweater.

Michael.

If he's staring into the lake, I don't care what he's looking at—I'd rather take the chance of being wrong than live with being too late.

The instant my boots slam against the dock, he jerks around, surprise flashing across his face. His hand darts behind him, reaching for whatever's tucked into his waistband, but he doesn't get the chance.

I slam into him shoulder-first, sending him flying off the dock to the right. Without hesitation, I dive straight off the edge, cutting through the snow-crustrated surface of the lake.

The water is a strike of lightning, shocking every nerve at once, threatening to paralyze me. I fight against the instinct to seize up. To let the cold win.

This part of the lake is only ten or twelve feet deep, so I swim hard, searching, until my hand slaps against flesh. Frantically reaching again, I find *him* and wrap my fingers tight.

When I try to pull, the weight resists. My muscles lock from the freezing water, but I push through. I just need to get him out.

I dive down, grabbing Ayden around what feels like his waist, plant my feet on the lake floor, and push. The burst of momentum carries us the last five feet upward.

The breath I drag in as we break the surface feels like swallowing knives, but there's no relief. I look at Ayden. His head lolls back and panic surges through me, so fierce it almost burns.

Grunting, I heave us up onto the dock that's about three feet above the water. The instant I can sling him over my shoulder without submerging him again, I do, then grip the slick wood with both hands.

This is what I've trained for, but the icy water and my drenched clothes make it three times harder. Still, I don't let myself think about that. If I don't hurry, I'll lose him.

My arms shake as I haul him high enough to jerk my shoulder and shove him onto the dock. He thumps against it as I nearly tumble back in, but thankfully I catch myself with my forearm, then drag my body up beside him.

I flip him onto his back and put my ear to his deep purple lips.

Nothing.

My fingers press against his neck, searching for a pulse.

Nothing.

In the moonlight, his pale face stares back at me, and dread coils tight around my chest. Guilt presses in so hard it makes me sick.

"Ayden, my love, please wake up." Tilting his head back, I place my folded hands right at the lower half of his sternum and start compressions. "Come on, I'm here."

They say time slows when fear takes over, but for me, it's racing. The first thirty compressions vanish in a blink. I suck in a breath, pinch his nose, and press my mouth to his. One steady blow, and I catch his chest rising in my peripheral. Another breath, then my fingers are back at his neck, searching desperately for a pulse.

Nothing.

"I'm here, Ayden, please don't give up. You cannot die. Remember? If I have to live in this fucked-up world, so do you."

I'm back to compressions.

"Come back to me. Come back."

Even when footsteps pound toward me from behind, I don't stop. I press harder, willing his heart to restart. Willing him to breathe. Willing him to come back to me.

"You just keep coming back from the dead."

Twenty-four, twenty-five, twenty-six.

"How fucking pathetic."

Twenty-nine, thirty.

I pinch his nose and breathe into him twice. When I pull back, nothing. His chest stays still. Heat stings my eyes, and my hand drifts through his hair, desperate for any sign of life.

"Come back to me, please. Please, sunshine, please."

I swear I can feel my heart beginning to crack. *No... please, Ayden. Please come back to me.*

The second my hands move back to his chest, something hard presses against the back of my head.

It doesn't stop me from starting my count.

"Guns are so messy, but I'm sure I can get it cleaned up before anyone even notices you are missing."

Ten, eleven, twelve.

"How about I wait until you've got him back, then splatter your brains across him before killing him again?"

Eighteen, nineteen, twenty.

"Yeah. Real Romeo and Juliet."

Fucking idiot. Twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty.

My mouth is back on his, pushing air into his mouth. My breath is swallowed instantly, and the sound of Ayden dragging in a lungful of air makes me choke on a laugh of relief.

"Thank god. Thank fucking god."

He coughs up water, and I turn his head so it spills out. His body trembles as I slip an arm behind his neck and pull him against my chest.

I know I shouldn't ignore the weapon pressing into the back of my skull. But the terror of almost losing the man I love has left me reckless. I know I need to save us both, but the adrenaline that carried me through saving him has drained away, leaving me useless to do anything but just holding him.

"I'm so fucking sorry. I'm so sorry."

He groans and tucks his head against my neck.

"I love you. I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have run away. I'm so sorry."

Michael tsks. "Ugh. Disgusting."

The click of metal has me pulling Ayden back to look at him. He'll be the last thing I see. Although his eyes are weak, seemingly having a difficult time focusing, they're full of life. His breathing is shallow, but at least he's doing it.

"Keo... move..."

I let out a breath and start to twist, reaching for Michael's wrist—when the click of the trigger snaps in my ear. My heart stutters. For a split second, I wonder how long I have left. If I could take Michael with me.

"Goddamn it!" Michael roars. He pulls the trigger again.

Nothing.

"Who the fuck is looking out for you?"

Click. Click. Click.

Then a gun actually goes off.

AYDEN

Warm liquid stings my eyes, making me blink hard. I'm still reeling from whatever just happened when I see Keo staring down at me in shock.

My gaze shifts past him to Michael. His hand is dropping slowly, the gun that had been pressed to Keo's head clattering onto the deck. As my eyes climb to his face, I see a line of blood running down his forehead, across the bridge of his nose, and over his lips.

I wet my own and taste metal.

His eye twitches, and the moment he takes a step, his head snaps violently to the side. Something bursts from his temple, too fast for me to process.

And then he's falling. Tumbling into the lake. The splash is swallowed by utter silence.

I swear I can hear my heart pounding outside my body.

Keo's hand finds my cheek, dragging gently before lifting my face back to his.

"A-Are you okay?" he asks, frantic.

Does he not care he almost got shot?

"Ayden, please, say something."

"I..."

Suddenly, I hear a dual set of footsteps. Keoni wraps his arms around me possessively and pivots, angling so he can see whoever is coming toward us.

Please let them be friendly...

"What the..." he mutters.

He slowly releases me, and I turn my head to see... What the hell? Levi? Evelyn?

And not only are they here, but Levi has a goddamn sniper rifle slung over his shoulder. Just who are these two?

"Fucking messy..." Evelyn mutters, almost too low for me to hear.

I'm not surprised Levi's grinning. "No comment on the shot? Please, wife, I do like a little praise." He's... so nonchalant about taking a life. A shitty life, sure, but still... *someone's* life.

She just grunts. It's now I catch the absolute rage in her eyes as she glares in our direction. "Get him inside, Keoni. We'll clean up this mess. If you called anyone, tell them you're fine."

My mouth opens, ready to protest. But before I can, I'm lifted off the ground.

Keo cradles me in his arms and rushes us toward the cabin. Levi's voice begins to fade behind us on the patio: "That was strike two..."

Evelyn sighs. "Yeah... Do you think it was worth it?"
"Yes," Levi replies without hesitation. "I think they are."
"I agree with you—for once."

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Keoni bursts through the front door, and the moment my body feels the warmer room, I nearly go into shock.

It's as if I'm thawing out all at once, every part of me screaming into overdrive. My heart pounds in my ears, my breathing refuses to steady, and random twitches ripple through my muscles, making Keo hold me tighter with every step.

He drops to his knees in front of the fire and sets me gently on the floor. My ankles feel tethered to something—I'm not sure what—but I'm grateful when he reaches down to free me. Flames flicker beside us, and I see him toss a coil of rope over the logs, steam rising from its damp surface.

"Where's your phone?" he asks.

"Coffee table," I stammer.

Without standing, he crawls across the floor, snatches it in seconds, and is back by my side. A few swipes later, the phone rests on the floor beside my head.

It begins to ring just as Keo drapes a piece of fabric over me, and I exhale in relief.

"Hello?! Ayden?" Britt's voice is frantic, echoing the panic I've felt all night.

"I've got him," Keoni replies, his voice so startlingly calm it catches me off guard. His demeanor doesn't match the chaos around

us. "I need you to act like the last two days never happened, and I had a small breakdown. Everything is fine."

"What? How're you so calm?! Where is Mich—"

"No one was here. Nothing happened. The last two days didn't happen as far as anyone outside of you, us, and the neighbors of Sapphire Valley are concerned. Do you hear me?"

He tries to move my arms and they go limp, causing his brows to furrow. "What's wrong with your arms?" he whispers.

"No fucking way," she snaps, her voice thick with fear and anger. "I won't accept that—"

"You need to, Britt!" he shouts. I'm staring at him in bewilderment. When he catches my gaze, he releases a shaky breath, and in a much lighter tone, says, "For me... please."

"But... I... What happened?"

My heart cracks as his face tilts toward the ground. "I... had a mental breakdown. You feared for my safety, so you called it in..." He pauses, and I can see the gears working. He says I'm the smart one, but he's tactical. "But, Levi picked up Ayden, and they found me driving away from a national park a few miles south of Sapphire Valley. A ranger saw me, he can attest to it. That's the story."

"No... No, that's all..."

"Britt," I whisper, my voice hoarse and my teeth beginning to chatter. "Listen to him."

I can hear the soft whimper, caused by tears I'm sure, come through before she says, "Can I come over?"

He looks up at me, sorrow etched across his beautiful face.

"Not right now. I need to take care of Ayden. Please make sure no one comes here."

"Okay..." There's a brief pause. "I love you guys so, so much. You're my family. Please don't forget that."

Heat stings my eyes as I catch the raw pain on Keo's face.

"We love you, too. I'll explain later. Okay?"

"Okay. Okay... talk soon."

She hangs up, and he hovers over me. "Did he break your fucking arms?"

I shake my head. "No," I grit out through my teeth. "Dislocated."

He places a hand on my shoulder and grabs my upper arm, rotating it until he feels the tension. "Breathe."

I suck in a breath and begin to say, "Call an amb—"

My vision spins as he roughly pops my arm back into place. Tears streak my temple as I scream through my clenched jaw. "K-Keo!"

"Ayden, I can't call an ambulance." His hand moves to the back of my neck, lifting me slightly. His forehead presses against mine, and the pain in his voice breaks me. "I killed two people tonight, and I nearly lost you. I... *did* lose you for nearly two minutes."

The breath he takes is filled with a sob, and I vibrate with need to hold onto him.

"I don't want them to come and take me from you before I can hold you. And as badly as I want to do that right now, I can't. I *have* to make sure you're alright. Your body is still in shock." He leans back, red rimming his eyes. "I need to make sure you're alright." He repeats it, almost like a mantra.

My lips tremble, and he shifts his hold to my face, his thumbs rubbing along my jawline in a gentle, massage-like motion. "You're still cold. Let me get the other arm in, and I'll get more blankets."

He does just that. He sets me down, and with the same careful precision, pops my other joint back into place. The moment I start choking out a scream, he has me sitting up in his arms.

Through the tight embrace, I lift my arms to hold him. His soaked shirt clings to him, not drying fast enough—I know he must be just as cold, if not more uncomfortable, than I am.

"Keo... I don't want you to let me go, but... your clothes."

He nods quickly and is on his feet in seconds, tossing his shirt aside and rushing toward the bedrooms. I don't miss the bruises and cuts along his side—and even some along his neck. The burn scars across his upper shoulders tighten my chest because now I know exactly who caused them.

Asking if he's alright is stupid. I know he isn't. "*I killed two people tonight.*"

Oh... Keo.

Minutes feel like seconds before he's back. He's in sweats and a fresh shirt, carrying the thick blanket from our bed.

Dropping to his knees, he pulls out a towel I hadn't noticed after he set down the comforter. He drags it gently across my face, then runs it through the top of my hair.

I can't miss how badly he's shaking.

"Baby..."

He doesn't stop taking care of me, and once he's satisfied with drying me, he's pulling down my boxers I'd thought were shorts. Along with the towel I missed, he has bottoms for me that he slides up my legs.

When he grabs my hips, it isn't to steady me, but himself. His shaking has only increased.

"Keo, stop. Look at me."

He chokes on a breath and meets my gaze. His eyes are dilated, unfocused, darting as if trying to find the right place to settle.

"I... I'm so sorry."

I sit forward with considerable effort, my hand brushing his jaw.

"Shh, it's alright."

I reach to pull him in, but he bends forward, pressing his forehead to my chest. "I'm so fucking sorry..."

Leaning forward, I press my cheek against his damp hair.

"Forgive me. I should've never run out on you like that."

I encircle his head, holding him just as he wraps his arms around my waist, pulling me so damn tight I fear even some higher power couldn't take me from him.

"There's nothing to forgive. Not for this... not for our parents... not for anything," I whisper. "None of this should've happened. The only person at fault is...was, Michael."

"I swear I won't walk out again." He leans back, cupping my face and meeting my gaze. "I'll get more help. Whatever it takes. I'll be better for you."

I shake my head. "You're everything I need, Keo. We all have problems. I choose yours to work through... as you've shown time and time again you choose mine."

He nods, tears streaming down his face. "I love you so fucking much. When I thought I lost you, Ayden... my world stopped spinning. Feeling your heart not beating? I've never felt so empty, so gone. Nothing mattered but bringing you back. And if you hadn't—"

"You die. I die," I murmur.

"It's dramatic." He laughs, and I follow soon after. It feels... good. "But my world doesn't exist without you."

My smile feels almost misplaced after everything that just happened, but I can't help it. "I love you, Keo. I've been in love with

you since I knew you existed in the same world I did. Don't ever think otherwise... You hear me?"

He matches my smile and whispers, "I hear you, sunshine," before leaning forward and pressing his mouth to mine.

We fall into comfortable silence as we rest on our sides, me wrapped in his arms. The fire, plus our body heat and the extra blankets, warming us. It's only after what feels like half the night has passed when Keo speaks again.

"I should put ice on your eye—it's swollen... and do a full body exam." He gently kisses across my face, toward it, careful not to cause any discomfort. "You're going to feel like shit in the morning..."

"In a bit." I don't want him to let me go. "You also need looking at. I saw your back..." I tilt my gaze to meet his. "Do you..." I curl tighter against him as his arms hold me close. "...want to tell me what happened?"

Using one of his legs, he hooks mine between his thighs. He sighs and nods. "I fell asleep in my truck. I wasn't planning on staying out all night, I swear. On my way back, police pulled me over, tased me, and threw me in their car."

"Holy shit."

"Yeah... It was those two officers from the ice cream shop. They took me—and my truck—up to some cliffside. I'm certain they wanted to make it look like a suicide... Like I'd driven off it."

My heart races at the thought, and the pain in my temple sharpens.

"I woke in time... Killed one almost immediately, but the other..." He pauses, and I slide my arm around his back, holding him closer. "I didn't have to kill him, but I needed to. He was going to take me from you, and while I swear I'm not a psychopath, I couldn't... let him live. I just couldn't."

"And I support you," I whisper.

He swallows audibly. "I don't know what that says about me, but that's all I worried about."

I nod.

"I took their car and drove here. Not fast enough, it seems... Any later..." A full-body tremor rolls through him. "I got here."

"You got to me."

“Thank fuck,” he says against my forehead before pressing a kiss to it.

I shut my eyes and rest against his bicep. “I’m worried about what tomorrow will bring.” My mind turns to Evelyn and Levi, and the military-grade sniper—something I’ve never seen outside of movies.

“Let’s worry about it then,” he murmurs.

A soft meow filters through, and I don’t even look up. Clover is over my back, settling in the tiny space between our hips.

With his possessive hold tightening one last time, I sigh into the sound of his heartbeat, the crackling fire, and the purring cat.

“I love you, Keo.”

He takes a deep breath through his nose. “I love you, too, Ayden.” The longing in his voice makes me tear up. “Thank you for coming back to me.”

There’s no one I’d run from the light for but this man. I’d fight anything that tries to keep me from him—even death.

I love him, and I just know everything will work out so I can keep him until we’re both old and gray.

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Although the wooden floor wasn't comfortable, after a short while of lying here, we both fell asleep.

I woke just as the sun streamed through the windows, Ayden and Clover still asleep against me. As strong as I'd been to get him cleaned up and inside the cabin, right now I feel like a pile of shit. Like my body had swum through a hurricane, reached land, and then had to survive an earthquake.

My calves are tight, my muscles burn, and on top of that, I have a goddamn migraine.

But this pain is bearable because Ayden is softly snoring against my chest. I'd never heard a more beautiful sound than his breathing—it's what I live for, and what I'll die to protect.

I shift to a seated position, taking him with me. Clover grumbles and jumps off, displeased at the disturbance. I slip my arms under Ayden's legs and shift to my knees, fighting through the protest of every muscle in my body.

Lifting him was far more difficult than last night. I've got no more adrenaline left, but somehow I manage to stumble to my feet and take a few steps to the couch. I'm not graceful putting him down, and he groans as he bounces on the cushions.

"Fuck, I'm sorry."

One of my knees hit the floor as I help adjust him to lie flat. His head turns to look at me, and my heart sinks. He looks worse than he did last night.

His left eye is completely black and blue, his temple matching the bruising color. He's paler than normal, and I fear a hospital is exactly where he should be. I'm not a doctor, even if I'm certified in first aid.

If I take him in like this, the police will be called, and everything that happened will come to light. My truck is still up on that hill, over two dead bodies.

Two dead *cops*.

I drag my knuckles across his cheek and give him a weak smile.

He returns it, shifting one hand to find mine. "You didn't have to..." His pause is broken by a groan of discomfort. "...put me here."

I take his hand, lifting it to kiss his fingers. There's nothing to say to that. I need to start caring for him, patching him up... or make the impossible decision to call an ambulance. To possibly have to let him go, because I truly cannot imagine getting away with what I did.

"Let me grab the blanket," I say instead. Leaning in, I press my lips to his and push myself to my feet. "I'll get you some water, and then I'm going to give you a full-body assessment."

"Sounds..." he says while taking a breath. "Like a dream."

I smile. "Yeah, it—" A knock on the door cuts me off.

Grabbing the thick comforter and draping it over him quickly, my eyes lock on the door like it might tell me who's outside.

"Keo, don't." Before I can move away, Ayden grabs my wrist, hissing discomfort through clenched teeth. "Don't answer it."

Another knock follows. It's gentle, cautious, as if whoever it is, is afraid of disturbing us. That is, until the next one comes—loud, urgent, completely opposite of the first.

It's the voices that have Ayden removing his hold on me.

"Eve, darling, they could be asleep."

"I don't give a fuck. They need to wake up."

I move swiftly and open the door without hesitation. Standing side by side, dressed in casual clothes, are our neighbors: Evelyn and Levi.

"You look absolutely terrible," she says. "Where's Ayden?"

I glance over my shoulder and see him slowly starting to sit up, holding the blanket to his chest, his bruised shoulders exposed.

That seems to be her cue—she brushes past me, barging into our cabin. “And you look like complete shit.”

“Thanks...” he mutters.

A gentle hand presses against my shoulder, and I peer up at Levi. Although I’m far bulkier than he is, he stands a few inches taller than I do. “Are either of you in any life threatening danger right now?”

I shrug and step aside, letting him enter. “I don’t know, honestly...” My gaze drifts to Evelyn, who’s kneeling in front of my sunshine. “I don’t think so, but I haven’t had a chance to examine him fully.”

“Lie down. Let me take a look at you.” She pulls the blanket from his grip.

He glances at me, and I give a small nod. At this point, it’s clear the last thing they want to do is hurt us.

Evelyn adjusts her hijab, quickly knotting it at the nape of her neck, then begins her careful inspection.

Levi slips his hands into his pockets and walks slowly around me, moving through the cabin in silence. None of us speak, but I can hear the sharp groans of pain escaping Ayden.

“We need to call Olivia,” Evelyn says. “Nothing external I can see, but I’d rather be safe than sorry.”

“Alright,” Levi agrees. He turns to me with that same casual smile. “Once we are done here, we will have our on-call medic, Liv, come take a look at both of you.”

What...

“This is really awkward,” he says, a nervous chuckle escaping him. “But you need to understand what happened last night can never be spoken about.”

“What exactly happened... last night?” Ayden asks.

Evelyn tsks. “Something that never should’ve happened. I told this tall asshole we should’ve killed that ex of yours before it ever got to this point.”

My eyes widen in complete shock. When I look at Ayden, he looks just as stunned.

“Keoni,” Levi says. “Before we get into it. Where were you last night? And do you need a cleanup? We didn’t see your truck, and the Charger parked beside Michael’s... it had some suspicious stuff inside.”

I glance at him, now joined by Evelyn. Quickly—and as accurately as I can—I recount being kidnapped by the two officers, along with everything that happened afterward. By the time I finish, I’m sitting beside Ayden, while Levi and Evelyn remain standing in front of the burned-out fireplace.

“Can you tell me exactly where you were?” Levi asks.

I nod and retrace the location for him.

He exhales slowly, then looks down at Evelyn, who has her eyes locked firmly on Ayden.

She’s the one who finally speaks. “We’re contract killers, basically. Usually it’s bad people... sometimes, not so bad.”

“Like... the CIA?” Ayden asks from beside me, one of his arms shakily wrapping around my midsection.

Levi chuckles. “Not quite. But they have hired our organization before. Look, it’s way more complicated than Eve’s making it sound.”

“Were you in Switzerland...” Ayden begins. “Because of a job?”

Levi nods. “Echo Ridge is owned by our employer. The couple before us moved on, and now it’s our home base.”

I’m not entirely sure I’ve taken a breath.

“This community is meant to be *quiet*,” Evelyn cuts in. “We aren’t meant to draw attention to this place. And here I thought we dodged a bullet by moving in after the fiasco with Cal and Ronan. Now, this? And that goddamn billionaire?”

I can feel Ayden tense, which has me immediately in defense mode. “This isn’t our fucking fault!”

“She’s not blaming you.”

“You sure? It sure as shit sounds like it.”

He sighs. “Yes, it does, but she isn’t. That’s just how she sounds.”

“Fuck you.”

He chuckles, unfazed. “For your safety, I can’t disclose any more than we’ve already shared. We’ve come to really like our neighbors—which, for two people who aren’t supposed to get attached to anything, is a pretty powerful thing.”

It’s in those words, his eyes slowly travel down to his wife, and I see a deep set of longing in them. Like a pain that’s constantly haunting him.

Does that statement apply to them? Are they not meant to get attached?

One look at her, and it's the complete opposite of Levi. There's detachment, a complete and utter void of emotion other than irritation.

"I specifically like Cal, and you, Ayden. Ronan is *meh*. Kind of hard to hate him other than for the fact he won't let me touch his soon-to-be-wife. I'm still getting the feelers on Starlight. They at least can follow instructions..." She looks over at me. "I've got no problem with you. You're neutral, but you're growing on me... especially now."

I don't need her to specifically say it. I know what she's implying. *A murderer*. Just like them.

"For all of these reasons, everything that happened over the course of the last forty-eight hours, didn't happen. We will clean up all the deaths"—my heart tumbles right into my stomach and I nearly lose it—"deal with any leaked information, and talk with Ronan and Cal."

"Even..." I turn to look at Ayden, who's wide eyed and mouth agape. "Even the two Keo..."

"Yes," Levi says. "Everything and everyone. But you two cannot say *anything* to *anyone* about what we've told you. Not even the neighbors."

"Cal?"

"Not even her. Not your therapists. Not doctors. Not your gods. The moment we leave this cabin, it's never to be mentioned **again**."

"W-What about Michael? He—"

"Let us handle it. It's what we do," Evelyn cuts off Ayden, but it's not aggressive. It's a mix between caring and assertiveness. Sorta like... a mother. "Do you guys understand?"

"Yes."

"I do, but..." I hesitate to ask but I must know. "What happens if we do? By accident. Entertain my question."

Levi sighs and shakes his head. "Civilians aren't meant to know people like us exist. We are supposed to be just another couple, blend into society... be simple *neighbors*. Being compromised doesn't mean anything for **you**, necessarily." He pauses, his intense look never wavering in my direction. "Do I need to specify more?"

"No," I say through a breath. "No, you don't."

It isn't us that would see consequences, but them... and for everything they've done for us, and are still to do, that is the last

thing I want to happen.

I nod and shift to wrap my arm around Ayden's shoulders gently. Paying mind not to put too much pressure on his wounds.

"We will have Olivia here this afternoon. She's a short girl, wears pink contacts with a matching wig, super sweet and very—"

"—Obnoxious," Evelyn groans. "But she's good at what she does, and is discreet."

"You two going to be alright for now?" he asks.

"Yeah..." I whisper.

"Thank you both," Ayden says. "Thank you for everything, and I'm sorry for all this."

Levi waves his hand and shrugs. "All good. What're neighbors for?"

"Sugar and milk..."

Evelyn rolls her eyes. "You'd do the same for us if you could, I'm sure."

I'd like to think I would, and I've got no question that Ayden would as well.

After our goodbyes, we are left to silence.

"Can we go back to bed?" my sunshine says against my arm. "Since now you don't have to take care of me?"

I let out a light laugh. "I'll always be taking care of you in some capacity. Let's try and get cleaned up before we get into bed."

"A hot bath, maybe?" He lifts his head.

"That sounds wonderful..." I lean in and press my mouth to his in a fleeting kiss. "Maybe the water will wash away the memory of what happened."

That gets a soft laugh from him. "Probably not. I'm just glad I've got you to share this secret with. It may have driven me madder to not be able to talk about it with *anyone*."

I smile against his lips. "No one I'd rather live in crazy-land with than you."

I kiss him again, and this feels like the beginning of our healing journey. We've got a lot to work on, but I know we can get through it together without question.

Soulmates aren't immune to hard times; we take them on together, because we know the person meant for us is someone worth the fight.

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Three months later

To say life has been easy wouldn't necessarily be a lie, but it'd be downplaying the feeling of anxiety we've had over the course of the last couple months.

As Levi and Evelyn alluded to, everything—and I mean *everything*—worked itself out. It felt too simple, which explains Keoni taking a few weeks' vacation, and us ordering anything we needed straight to the cabin. I'm pretty sure there was a two-week period we didn't step but ten feet from Wildhart.

Michael went 'missing'. All evidence of him being in Colorado had been wiped. The flight. The rental car. All of it changed to a completely different name, according to Levi who came by from time to time to check on us and let us know what was happening.

The two officers 'moved', and any family they had were given enough information that they hadn't questioned it. Apparently, Michael had promised a good word in with the SFPD for them both, which is what had them helping him in the first place.

I'm not entirely sure if he would've given them what they wanted, but suppose it doesn't matter now.

I don't know what was told to Keoni's squad and Dom, but they did come by and see us. We told them that we were working on our mental health, which wasn't a lie *per se*, and needed the time to work on us.

Britt spent several weekends with us, which distracted us from fear someone would show up to cart off Keo for killing two people.

This isn't normal. Neither I, nor the man I love, know how to cope with everything that's happened. We haven't been able to explain it to our therapists, so we've only had each other to get through the hardest nights.

I'm struggling with nightmares, haunted by the thought that Michael might somehow still be alive. Keo is battling his own demons, living with the weight of murder, even if we both agree they deserved it.

But despite all of that, he doesn't run, and I don't shut down. We hold each other close and figure it out, together.

He's still carrying the guilt associated with our parents' deaths, but we're working through it. There's no magic pill that takes the pain away, but we're determined to share the burden—every ache, every moment of grief, together.

We've found comfort in the little things around the cabin, slowly returning to something that resembles a normal life—well, as normal as life can be for us right now. He's back at work, and I'm getting close to landing a job at the hospital in Maple Falls.

Today, I should know if I'm able to go for it.

The sound of tires drags my gaze up from the dirt both Keo and I are patting down. It's the first day of spring, and with that, came us planting the sunflowers he gave me for Christmas. It's been a day I've looked forward to for more than just one reason.

Keo stands, and I do after dusting off my jeans.

The white car comes to a stop, and stepping out of it, is Dr. Yadav—Markus.

I take a deep breath and smile as he sees us. He shuts the car door and locks it, before heading in our direction.

"Ayden, it's so good to see you."

Tucking my gloves under my arm, I reach out and take his hand in a shake. "You too, Markus. You didn't have to come all the way out here."

He shakes his head. "Don't be silly, it's not like I can't afford it." His laugh blends in as he continues, "Just kidding. I also wanted to see you, and..." He looks over my shoulder. "Meet your boyfriend. Keoni, right?"

"Yes, sir. It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Markus."

They shake hands. "Pleasure is all mine." His smile doesn't falter as he looks up at the cabin, our home, then back to us. "All charges have been dropped."

The loud exhale of breath doesn't only come from me, but also Keo. His arm comes around my neck, pulling me tight to his side.

"With Michael's sudden disappearance, and no follow up on the charges against you from him, the case was dismissed."

Levi and Evelyn said that would happen, but it still didn't lessen my anxiety.

"I also wanted to apologize. My PI wasn't able to find out more information on your accident."

I can feel Keo's biceps flex. I'd told him what Michael had said about that night. He wasn't happy, and that's putting it lightly. I'm sure if my ex hadn't been dead, he would've killed a third man.

"I've asked that they look further—"

"Don't worry about it," I cut in. "I just... want to move on with my life. If he ever shows back up, then we can worry about it."

The concern in his expression has me giving him a nod of reassurance. "I'll keep the charges here in Colorado against him for the next nine months. I'll do all the follow ups, but if he doesn't show up... I'm going to officially let it all fall off."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah." I wrap my arm around Keo. "I'm sure."

Markus lets out a sigh. "I'd be worried he'd come do something crazy. I'm sure if he had a psych evaluation, he'd be admitted."

"Couldn't agree more," Keoni grits through his teeth. "But don't worry, I've got him, and we've got some incredible neighbors that have our backs."

Markus smiles, looking between us. "Alright."

"We've made—actually..." Keo laughs. "Ayden laid out stuff for lunch. Let's head inside. You aren't allergic to cats, right?"

He laughs and shakes his head. "I love them."

"Perfect. Her name is Clover, and she's pretty friendly," I chime in.

As he turns toward the cabin, Keo halts me from following. I lift my chin, catching his gaze on me. There's a smile playing on his lips, one I've seen appearing more frequently over the last three months.

It screams of freedom, longing, and *happiness*.

He turns to face me and cradles my jaw with his palm. "Congratulations, my love."

It does feel like a win, even if it was inevitable and came at a high price.

"Thank you."

His kiss isn't rushed, or hesitant. It's patient and filled with love.

In this moment, the hollowness I've carried since I was seventeen is finally gone. For the first time, I truly know what it feels like to be safe in the arms of a man who would do anything for me.

That puts my life before his.

My needs before anyone else's.

My pleasure before his own.

Keo embodies the type of possessiveness and obsessiveness I yearn for and will crave for the rest of our days.

I fucking love this man with every fiber of my being, and I'm excited to see where the rest of our lives take us, *together*.

EPILOGUE 1



9 Months Later

Sometimes I look back at the last year and realize everything I went through led to this happiness. I wouldn't go back and relive my early twenties, but I can appreciate what I have now more than ever.

That's not to say I *needed* the trauma to get here, I would've been strong regardless. I'm grateful it brought out my resilience—and for the man lying beside me, meeting my gaze as a woman walks along his bare back.

We're in a lodge high in the mountains, getting a couples massage. The room is bathed in a soft light, and everything is relatively bare, as to give the attention to the full wall window, showcasing the snowy trees outside.

It's the day after Cal and Ronan's wedding and what a day it had been. It snowed in the backdrop, like a scene out of a dream.

Their love deserves to be shared. If they ever have kids, I hope they pass the story down. Well... maybe not the part about chasing each other through the woods.

Ronan asked if we wanted to watch, but I'm not sure I *want* to see that. I love them both, but Cal feels like a sister to me—and with all

the twisted “incest” talk Michael had spewed, that’s the last association I want in my head.

Besides, she’s hinted at her degradation kink more than once, and... yeah. That’s not my thing.

Keo grunts as the woman’s steps move toward his shoulders. The masseur working on me is gentle—thankfully. I don’t need to be cracked or folded in half.

He gestures downward, and I let out a soft laugh before lowering my face into the cradle and closing my eyes.

I still can’t believe Ezra paid for all this. He rented out the entire lodge and fronted the *entire* bill.

Calista says he’s going to be apologizing for as long as everyone lives in Sapphire Valley. She wouldn’t tell me what for, and by the twinkle in her eye when she said it, I don’t see myself begging for her to tell me.

I’m sure if I asked Jayde, she’d tell me.

But do I really want to know?

Probably not.

The hands that had been rubbing my shoulders vanish, and I let out a sigh. Has it already been ninety minutes? Damn, that was good. Maybe I should’ve gone for the two-hour session instead.

Soft ambient music drifts through the room. The masseur hasn’t given the usual, “*I hope you enjoyed your massage.*” Instead, I catch the click of a door closing, followed by the quiet scrape of Keo’s table shifting.

“I may or may not have slipped a few bucks somewhere for an extra thirty minutes.” His voice is low, blending with the hush of the space around us. “Keep your head down, my love.”

Goddamn. Every time he says *my love*, I melt into a puddle.

“As you wish, baby.”

His warm fingers trace down my spine, lingering across the scar before finding the edge of the towel. Now I understand why he insisted we strip down completely, boxers and all. Because the moment he reaches that spot, he tugs away the only fabric left between us.

“Fucking hell.” The raw need in his voice sends goosebumps racing across my skin. “I’m supposed to be finishing your massage, but I’m a weak man.”

"You just had a woman walking on your back. *Weak* is the last word I'd use to describe you." I raise my voice just enough for him to hear.

He must, because his response comes as a sharp smack across my ass. My head snaps back, and I start to sit up, but his hand presses firmly against my shoulder. "Just a love tap, sunshine." His palm lingers, rubbing the spot he struck, fingers teasing dangerously close to where I ache for him to fill.

Then he moves away, circling to my other side. I watch as he picks up a candle, and my heartbeat quickens when his eyes meet mine.

"Safe word?"

I nod. "Fire."

As he steps closer to the table, my gaze drops, and there it is. His cock, thick and throbbing, veins straining with the force of his arousal.

The moment I lick my lips, a sudden drip of warm wax trickles onto my back, making me jolt. The sting melts instantly into pleasure, and my whole body trembles. He's done this once before, but only as a test—just a drop on my arm. That time, he'd been buried deep inside me, and I swear the sensation had burned twice as hot.

Now, the wax trails lower—down my ass, along my thigh—and I groan at the sheer rush of it.

"I love watching your body respond to everything I do," he murmurs. "That's why my favorite position is you riding me."

His free hand smooths over the wax, spreading it across my skin, and the pressure of his fingers massaging it in rips a moan straight from my chest—especially when he digs into the muscle beneath.

"Or on your back, eyes always on me." His tone is a purr, and the pressure of my cock grinding against the table is almost painful.

The heat returns as wax drips across my ass, then trails back up toward my shoulders.

"Keo..." I pant, fingers clawing into the blanket beneath me.

He steps away, only long enough to say, "Turn over."

There's no hesitation, I flip onto my back so fast it almost makes him laugh. By the time I'm settled, he's already there, a small bottle in hand. I know *that* oil.

"You really planned this out, didn't you?"

He gives a casual shrug. "I do try."

"And you succeed—" My words break into a gasp as he drizzles the sex oil across my stomach, the same one we'd picked out together weeks ago. It shocks cold on contact, then blooms into heat as it spreads—especially when he drags it straight over my throbbing cock.

He sets the bottle aside and begins to work it in with his hands, rubbing the slick warmth into my skin. I can't stop the noises spilling from me, each one pulling a low groan from his throat.

"Keo... what if someone walks in?"

His grin makes my chest tighten. "And how does that make you feel? Knowing someone could step inside and see me worshipping the man I love?"

Heat floods my face, nerves and excitement tangling together. We've never hidden our relationship, but this—this is slightly dangerous. Definitely inappropriate. And yet the thought of being caught, of showing the world how little we care what anyone thinks, makes me ache for him to keep going.

"Hmm, sunshine?"

"Excited," I answer honestly.

"So... keep going?"

"Yes, please, baby."

The moment his fingers wrap around my length, his other hand closes around my throat, cutting off my air.

I've always craved this. Asphyxiophilia has been my kink for as long as I can remember, but after literally drowning, it became harder to find the pleasure I used to draw from it. With Keo's patience—and the introduction of a safe word into our sex life—he's brought that euphoria back to me.

His strokes are slow, deliberate, and it has me twitching with every glide. Each pass from base to head leaves me squirming. When he twists his wrist on the way back up, I instinctively try to suck in a breath—but his grip makes it almost impossible.

My eyes roll back, heat surging into my face as my stomach coils into tight, unbearable knots.

"That's it. My good boy loves that, doesn't he?"

The instant my eyes squeeze shut, he releases my throat—and I come so hard it streaks across his chest before spraying over my

stomach. My mouth falls open, moans and gasps tumbling out as my body twitches through the waves of my release.

His hand keeps stroking me, dragging out every pulse until my back arches off the table. Then his mouth crashes onto mine, his tongue rough and insistent as it tangles with my own.

I clutch the back of his head, holding him to me, turning just enough to let him deepen the kiss. He devours me, groaning hungrily into my mouth.

His fingers thread through my hair, yanking my head back. His tongue drags down my chin, over my throat, where he sucks hard.

He *loves* marking me—bites, hickeys, whatever he wants, wherever he wants—and I *love* that he does.

When he finally releases my cock, his hand slides around my midsection. In one smooth pull, he hauls me up, pressing our chests together as his mouth claims mine all over again.

“Let me show you how perfect you look when you come apart for me,” he croons against my lips.

We walk past the wall to wall window, right to the corner where a bench seat rests. On its opposite side is a full body mirror.

“But first... Why don’t you get on your knees and suck my cock.”

My mouth waters, and I obey his command almost immediately.

“That’s my good fucking boy.”

I wrap my hand around him, feeling him pulse in my grip, which has a thunderous groan vibrating from his throat.

He threads his fingers through my hair, tugging me back from his length. My eyes catch my reflection in the mirror, and seeing myself like this—submissive, kneeling before him—sends an electric rush of pleasure straight through my sensitive cock.

Fuck, we look so good together.

“This is what I see. Fucking perfection.”

He tugs on my hair again, drawing me closer, and I open willingly. He slides across my tongue, and feeling the three rigid bars against me has me moaning. Those two months of healing were brutal—not because he denied me, but because I couldn’t touch him. He said I could fuck him if I wanted... but that’s not really my thing.

I like being the one fucked, and I’m okay with that.

Very okay with it.

He steps slightly to the right, aligning us with the mirror. The instant his thick head hits the back of my throat, I steal a glance at

our reflection. His chin is raised to the ceiling, bottom lip caught between his teeth, causing my chest to tighten.

I love making him feel good. God, do I love it.

His hips thrust forward, and I press my tongue against the base, feeling that prominent vein pulse while matching every move eagerly.

Drool mixed with his precum rolls down my chin as he fills my throat, holding himself there.

"Fuck me. That's it, Ayden."

I lift my gaze to him, and the way he smiles down at me has my praise kink fully activated.

"I love you blushing for me," he croons before pulling his hips back.

As I attempt to catch my breath, he takes my throat and brings me to my feet. I'm one large lung full in before he captures my mouth with his. His arm comes around my waist, dragging me forward as he steps back.

Feeling him begin to bend, I'm eager to straddle his waist, when he takes my hips, halting me. Against my lips, he breathes out, "Turn around."

I don't hesitate, turning my back to him. The mirror is directly in front of me, and I watch as he settles into the double-seater chair, legs spread wide. His cock falls between his thighs, and he reaches beneath it to his bag.

He knew exactly what he was going to do to me today, and I can't help but smirk.

He pulls out a bottle of lube and sets it down beside him. "Already hard again for me," he murmurs.

I wet my bottom lip, watching in the mirror as he pumps the dispenser, coating his fingers in the slick liquid. His arm snakes around my hips, tugging me back toward him.

"I want you to watch yourself come for me."

A sharp breath escapes me as his fingers slip between the crease of my ass. He rims my entrance, soaking me, before sliding two fingers deep inside. There's no pumping, just a single deliberate thrust that makes my abs tighten.

"Eyes on yourself, Ayden," he commands.

I open my eyes to see my own reflection—panting, flushed, trembling—as he moves his fingers in and out. Spreading my legs

slightly, I feel heat coil through me at the sight.

He adds another finger, and just as my body begins to shiver, he slowly pulls me down to sit in his lap. I'm not empty of him for long; the tip of his cock nudges inside. He moves slowly at first, letting each inch settle past his piercings, then, once fully seated, he thrusts his hips hard.

Leaning back against him, our legs intertwine—mine straddling over his while he closes his around me. I lift and sink onto him, matching his rhythm.

"Fucking hell, you feel incredible," he breathes against my neck, teeth grazing my skin.

My gaze shifts to the mirror. One of his hands moves to my jaw, two fingers slipping into my mouth. I suck on them as my body trembles, his slight shifts sending pulses of friction to the spot that drags me over the edge.

He found that right place to have me coming without my cock being stimulated, and *holy fuck*, it's just as euphoric as him fucking me with his mouth until I finish down his throat.

My second orgasm comes hard, and quick, just as my cum does. It may not be as strong as the first, but it shoots across the floor, nearing the mirror.

I feel him thickening inside me, stretching me just that much more to make me moan louder around his fingers.

"That's it, *fuuuck*, that's it." He holds me down as pressure builds deep inside of me, and I squeeze my eyes shut with how quickly I'm filled.

Breathing heavily, I slump back against him, my legs shaking as he slowly helps close them for me.

After a few seconds of him coming down from that high, I stand, and quickly turn around in his hold. Both our fingers lace through one another's hair, and our mouths meet in a devastating kiss.

Mine. All mine.

His touch is tender as he drags it across my shoulder. It turns the lustful moment we just had, into one of longing. One that I can feel all the way down to my core.

I pull away, staring down into his eyes.

"I'm ready for an entire life of this, Ayden. I hope you are too."

I'm not sure if my smile could be wider. "What? Sex?" I joke, drawing my hands down to either side of his neck.

“Us. In every capacity that there is. Sex. Trips to snow capped mountains. Summers in the Bahamas. Taking care of our cat...”

Heat builds in my eyes as I nod.

“Living a full life.”

“Together,” I murmur against his lips.

“Together.”

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EPILOGUE 2



2 Years Later

I've never been so nervous in my entire life.

It's our first year hosting Christmas with *everyone*. We've had some work done over the past couple of months to the cabin, but it still isn't enough space for **as many people that are here**.

Britt is basically in Taylor's lap—which I think is on purpose anyway. Dom and the guy that set up our security, Ken, are sitting on the stairs. Cal and Ronan, with Charlotte Jayde and Ezra, then Alysa and her boyfriend, are sitting at the dining room table playing with Sofia.

Ronan has made an incredible father, and if I do say so myself, Ayden and I are great uncles. Though, he'd still rather call us Wildhart or stepbrothers. And still shit talks Ayden's baking. Which really irks me. After everything we've been through?

I internally groan.

Over the past several years, it wasn't just our challenges we faced, but the one's we called family around us. From the incident with Jayde and Ezra, to the one that tested all of our willpower, Evelyn and Levi.

Ayden is hovering over Kali, who's chatting with Cal's best friend, who's overjoyed by the news she's a few weeks pregnant.

Today is a day to celebrate, and as I look around the room at these people, I truly couldn't have asked for a better group to call family.

Christmas has always been an incredibly painful time of year for us. It reminds us of those that aren't with us, and times where we could've done something more for one another.

It reminds me of the time without Ayden.

For him, it brings back memories of Michael.

This year is different than all the rest. We now have new people to celebrate with us, and make memories with.

I'm not usually the sappy type, but something about this season just gets me feeling... more emotional than normal. Britt tells me I need to not hold it back, and I'm doing my best to not bottle it up.

It feels good, honestly. Ayden likes it when I talk it out, and whatever he wants, he gets.

Suppose that's why I'm so nervous today.

A knock sounds at the front door, and I know it's our last guests. The door opens, and sheepishly, Evelyn steps inside, Levi trailing just behind her. His gaze finds mine immediately, and he grins, which lifts his scarred eye.

I give him a nod, just as he returns one to me.

"Yay, we are all here!" Alysa chants. "With the help of my twin, we've made quite the feast. Jayde has done us the honors of baking a few desserts, since that isn't my brother's strong suit."

"Alright, come on. Not you, too! Don't I get enough of that from Ronan?"

Snickers and laughter erupt around us. I shake my head and make my way over to him. He's already beginning to stand, meeting me right in front of the Christmas tree the three of us set up a few days ago, *together*.

"I can't get the measurements right..." he murmurs.

"Still waiting for that pineapple upside down cake," Levi croons as he wraps his arm around Evelyn's shoulder. Her hand appearing around his waist.

I'm not sure why, but *that* makes me happier than I already was. They deserve the ending they got, because I know it wasn't easy.

"Seriously?" Ronan groans. "Even now?"

Evelyn scoffs. "Nothing has changed. I still want your wife."

Draping my arm over Ayden, I tuck my opposite hand into my pocket. "Alright, alright. Before we either begin a food fight or an orgy, let me say a few sentimental words."

My eyes flick to Alysa who is grinning ear to ear, which doesn't help my nerves.

I take a deep breath, before saying, "Thank you all for coming to celebrate Christmas with us. As all of you know, this time of year is challenging for Alysa, Ayden, and myself." My partner wraps his arms around my center, holding me tight to his side. "But it's incredible what a group of friends can do for your mental wellbeing. Ayden and I aren't destined for kids, but it doesn't mean we haven't grown a family moving into Wildhart."

Meeting Britt's teary eyes, she smiles. "Cheers to that."

"That's also why, I couldn't imagine sharing this moment with anyone else but you all." My heart races as I step just slightly away from the man I love, who turns to look at me in utter confusion.

I take another deep breath. "Ayden."

"Keo?"

"I couldn't imagine my life with anyone else. Just as my soul was meant for yours, I believe yours was always meant for mine." Pulling out the small orange box in my pocket, I steadily open it while dropping down to one knee. "Ayden Pierce, will you make me the happiest man in the world—"

"Second happiest."

"Ronan! Shush!"

I roll my eyes, but seeing the teary laugh that lights up the man in front of me makes me chuckle. "*The* happiest man... and marry me?"

"Yes." There isn't a single bit of hesitation. He knows better at this point. "Without a shadow of a doubt, yes."

Standing to my full height, I grab the back of his neck and meet his mouth in a kiss that drowns out all the sounds around us.

"I love you, sunshine," I whisper against his lips.

"I love you so much, Keo." A laugh escapes him, carrying all his affection. "I think you and I... we're just too perfectly aligned."

"Why's that, my love?"

He grabs onto my hand, and drags it down to his pocket, where I feel something hard bulge from it.

Something square.

A throaty chuckle escapes me. "Wow."

"Wow is right... *fiancé*." His hands come to cradle my neck. "Will you marry me, Keoni Pierce?"

It doesn't seem physically possible to smile wider, but I try. "Fuck yes." I don't hesitate to draw him back in, our lips finding each other again.

I know I'm destined to live a full life, surrounded by incredible people. But more important than anything, with Ayden.

My Ayden.

The End.

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WHAT'S NEXT

Thank you for reading HOLLOW, the second book in the standalone series *Neighbors of Sapphire Valley*. Ayden and Keoni have such a special place in my heart, and I hope they do with you too.

What's next in the *Neighbors of Sapphire Valley* Series?

What happens when your best friend goes missing over Thanksgiving, and the main suspect is her hot dad? Charlotte, aka Jayde, is determined to find out what Mr. Devereux is hiding, even if that means getting *too* close to a possible killer.

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A NOTE

Everyone needs help sometimes. Grief and loss can feel isolating, but there is always someone out there that is willing to *help carry your heavy*. If you ever find yourself in any danger, or are feeling lost and in need of help, here are a few resources for you:

United States:

- Suicide Hotline: 1-800-985-5990 (or dial 988)

CANADA:

- Check out the CANADA.CA website for resources

United Kingdom:

- SHOUT: Text SHOUT to 85258
- Samaritans: Call 116 123
- National Suicide Prevention Helpline UK: Call 0800 689 5652

Australia:

- Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 13 11 14
- Check out www.beyondblue.org.au for resources

Spain:

- Dial 112

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M. L. Burns (Mel) started writing when she was thirteen and began her journey with short stories and text-based role-playing. Her genre focus is dark themes, ranging from romantasy, to paranormal romance, and taboo romance, with an emphasis on character development and low-fantasy world-building. Her debut novel, "The Hourglass Keeper," the first book in the Keeper Series, was released November 30th, 2023.

She lives in Spain with her husband and daughter. When she isn't working her day job or writing/reading, she enjoys exploring Europe as her new backyard, playing video games, and engaging with her readers.

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Neighbors of Sapphire Valley

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HOLLOW

The Filthy Duet

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All Your Deadly Truths

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The Dragons Keeper
The Keepers Moon (*Novella*)
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